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The Significance of Luther's Term *Pure Passive* as Quoted in Article II of the Formula of Concord

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THE Lutheran doctrine of conversion, standing as it does between Calvinism and synergism, is always a difficult position to maintain and defend; for it is built on a paradox, a paradox of exclusive divine action and complete human participation. Faith is at the same time passive and active: passive in that man, blind and dead spiritually, in coming to faith only suffers God to work this change in his heart, active in that man himself believes and is in no way coerced in this nor divested of any of his faculties. This position is stated by the Formula of Concord:

It is nevertheless true that a man before his conversion is still a rational creature that has an intellect and will, although not an intellect in divine things, or a will to will something good and salutary. Yet he can do absolutely nothing toward his conversion (as has been said above), and in this case he is much worse than a stone or a log, because he resists the Word and the will of God, until God raises him from the death of sin, enlightens him and renews him. And although God does not force a person to be converted (for those who always resist the Holy Ghost and who continually put themselves into opposition to the truth even after they have recognized it, as Stephen says of the hardened Jews, Acts 7 [51], are not going to be converted), yet God the Lord draws the person whom He wills to convert and draws him in such a way that a darkened intellect becomes an enlightened

intellect, and a perverse will becomes an obedient will. And this Scripture calls creating a new heart.¹

It is significant in this regard that the first two heresies to be condemned by the Epitome of Article II of the Formula of Concord are deterministic Stoicism (and Manichaeism), which would have all things happen by necessity, even robbery and murder, and Pelagianism, which denies the necessity of grace. All other errors come under the heading of one or the other of these heresies. However, not determinism but synergism has since the Reformation been the bane of this Lutheran doctrine. Striving to find some place for human responsibility in conversion, the synergist brings against every statement which speaks of the passivity of faith the charge of irresistible grace, compulsion, Calvinism, Manichaeism. This is of course unfair and is to misunderstand completely the paradoxical nature of the Lutheran doctrine. It is also a denial of the Scripture principle and a rationalizing, just as clearly as Calvinism is.

The term *pure passive*, applied to the will of man in conversion, occurs three times in the Formula of Concord.² The cognate expression *capacitas passiva* occurs in the Latin version;³ its omission from the German original occasioned a good deal of criticism. Again it is said that the intellect and heart and will of man are only *subiectum patiens* and *subiectum convertendum* in conversion, that God does the converting and that man only suffers conversion.⁴ All these expressions are taken from the writings and teachings of Luther and by their inclusion in the Formula of Concord achieve symbolical status.

The idea of the passivity of faith, taken from the church fathers and the medieval scholastics, is not very often voiced by Luther, but it is intrinsic in all his writings on free will; and when he does speak of this passivity, it is in strong terms. Luther speaks of a capacity inhering in the natural man, but it is only a passive capacity, meaning that man is able to be converted, as distinguished from animals and inanimate things. "When the fathers defend free

¹ F[ormula of] C[oncord,] S[olid] D[eclaration,] II 59, 60.

² FC Ep II 18; SD II 73, 89.

³ FC SD II 73.

⁴ FC SD II 89, 90.

will, they mean that it is capable of being free, that it can be turned to good by the grace of God and be made truly free, to which end it was created."⁵ Again Luther states his position even more clearly in a parallel utterance from *De servo arbitrio* (1525): "If we call the power of free will that by which man is capable of being caught by the Holy Spirit and touched by God's grace, as one created unto eternal life or eternal death, that is perfectly all right; for this power, or aptitude, or as the sophists call it, disposition-quality and passive aptitude, I, too, confess. And who does not know that this is not in trees or animals? For heaven, as they say, is not made for geese."⁶ These statements should be sufficient to show what Luther is driving at in speaking of capacity or the power of free will in the natural man and that it is far from his mind to imply that God deals with man as with a brute or an inanimate thing. That Luther employs the term *passivity* only for the purpose of ruling out all synergism is clearly shown by another statement: "We conclude that the free will is purely passive (*esse mere passivum*) in every act in which it is said to will something; and the sophists prattle in vain about the distinction that an entire good act is from God (*totum a deo*) but not from God entirely (*totaliter*). For what is entire from God is also entirely from God, because the will is seized and borne and moved only by grace; and this movement of the will, bringing its influence upon the members and powers of either mind or body, this and nothing else is its activity; just as the movement of a saw sawing wood is a merely passive movement of the saw by the one sawing, for the saw does not co-operate in this moving in any way, but it moves on the wood by being moved and not by itself moving. And this sawing is said to be the saw's work along with the one who

⁵ *Contra malignum Ioannis Eccii iudicium defensio* (1519), Article IX (W II 647, 28—31). Luther quotes exclusively from St. Augustine in this article.

⁶ W XVIII 636, 16—22. See also John Andrew Quenstedt, *Theologia didactico-polemica, seu systema theologicum*, Pars secunda, caput III (*De libero arbitrio hominis post lapsum*), sectio II, quaestio II, observatio VII (Leipzig: Thomas Fritsch, 1715), I, 1099: "If by free will one understands a capacity or passive potentiality that the mind and will of man can be converted through the ordinary grace of God, then we grant that in this sense free will has not been destroyed. For in man there is given a certain capacity by which he cannot indeed convert himself but can be converted by God, provided he uses the divinely appointed means."

saws, although it merely undergoes the movement.”⁷ That this passivity is only spiritual and obtains only in the spiritual realm is also clearly taught in Caspar Cruciger's (1544) edition of Luther's lectures on Genesis: “In a certain sense we have free will in those things which are beneath us. By divine mandate we have been made lords over the fish of the sea, the birds of the heavens, and the beasts of the field. These we kill when it pleases us. We enjoy the food and other advantages which they supply. But in those things which pertain to God, which are above us, man has no free will, but he is truly like clay in the hand of a potter, being in a position of mere potentiality which is not active but only passive. For in such matters we do not choose, we do not do anything, but we are chosen, we are prepared, we are reborn, we are received, as Isaiah says [64:8]: ‘Thou art the potter and we Thy clay.’”⁸ One more statement of Luther might be quoted. Commenting on John 1:12, which Erasmus had used in defense of free will, he says in *De servo arbitrio*: “John is not speaking of any work of man, either great or small, but he speaks of that renewal or change of the old man, who is a child of the devil, into the new man, who is the child of God. Here man behaves in a purely passive way (*mere passive sese habet*), as they say, nor does he do anything, but is wholly acted upon.”⁹

In all these statements Luther's meaning is clear, and it would be unfair to press his words beyond the point of comparison. His adversaries, however, chose to misunderstand him. The expression *pure passive* as Luther used it was attacked first by John Eck as early as 1525,¹⁰ and finally in unmistakable terms by the Council

⁷ Cf. *Resolutiones Lutherianae super propositionibus suis Lipsiae disputatis* (1519). W II 421, 7—15. See also Franz Hermann Reinhold von Frank, *Die Theologie der Concordienformel*, I (Erlangen: Theodor Blaesing, 1858), 141.

⁸ W XLII 64, 28—36.

⁹ W XVIII 697, 25—28.

¹⁰ *Enchiridion locorum communium adversus Lutherum et alios hostes ecclesiae* (Landshut: 1525) caput 31. Melancthon also seemed to misunderstand the point that the *pure passive* wished to bring out; and consequently we find him attacking a sort of Manichaean caricature of Luther's doctrine, e. g., CR 21, 658—659: “Praeterea si nihil agit liberum arbitrium, interea, donec sensero fieri illam regenerationem, de qua dicitis, indulgebo diffidentiae et aliis vitiosis affectibus. Haec Manichaea imaginatio horribile mendacium est, et ab hoc errore mentes abducendae sunt et docendae agere aliquid liberum

of Trent, which said: "If any should say that man's free will, moved and aroused by God, by assenting to God's action and call, does not cooperate toward disposing and preparing itself to obtain the grace of justification, that it cannot resist if it wishes, but like some inanimate thing does nothing and is merely passive, let him be damned."¹¹ It is apparent that Luther has been grossly and purposely misunderstood and his teaching misrepresented.

This being the case, it became a matter of confession to defend not only Luther's doctrine but also his very terminology. To change terminology would have implied a yielding to the attacks of the adversaries. A clear explanation of the usage of the expression and defense of the same was therefore offered in the Formula of Concord: "When Luther says that man relates himself to his conversion in a purely passive way, that is, he does nothing but only suffers God to work in him, he does not mean that conversion is brought about without the preaching and hearing of God's word, nor does he wish it to be understood that in conversion no new movements within us are evoked by the Holy Spirit and no new spiritual changes are begun in us. But he means this, that man of himself and of his own natural powers cannot do anything or help in any way toward his conversion and that conversion is not only in part but entirely an operation, gift, and work of the Holy Spirit alone who works it and brings it about by his power and might through the word in the intellect, will, and heart of man, *tamquam in subiecto patiente*, that is, where man does and works nothing but only suffers. But it does not occur in the same way as a statue is chiseled from a stone or a seal impressed on wax, which knows nothing about it and neither feels nor wants it. But it takes place in the manner and way that we have set forth and explained briefly above."¹² Even more in detail Chemnitz interprets the expression of Luther and the Formula in his *Examen Concilii Tridentini*. He says: "They [the Romanists] get very ex-

arbitrium." CR 23, 280: "Sed excruciat mentes haec quaestio, Cum sine Spiritu sancto nulla virtus inchoetur, aut placeat, otiosine expectabimus consolationem, donec rapi nos novis motibus sentiemus, sicut Enthusiastae et Manichaei imaginati sunt?"

¹¹ Sess. VI, can. 4.

¹² FC SD II 89; cf. 80.

cited over the fact that Luther has said that in regeneration, renewal, or conversion man behaves in a merely passive way. If one were not acquainted with the terminology of the scholastic writers, one might understandably be offended at this expression, as if it were meant that the Holy Spirit works conversion in such a way that absolutely no new emotion is experienced by the will which is being renewed, and that the will is entirely inactive and idle and simply overcome and driven by brute force. But such a thought never occurred to Luther. However, there is no doubt that the theologians who were consulted in the Council of Trent, indoctrinated as they were and accustomed to the manner of speaking which the scholastic writers employed, knew very well what was meant by behaving in a purely passive way (but they could not conceal their desire of caviling), especially since they felt the term could be not wrongly applied to men when it concerned the natural powers of free will, if not entirely, then in part, in renewal, or conversion. Now this was the argument set forth by the scholastics: A subject in assuming some form, quality, condition, action, or what have you, insofar as it receives, behaves passively. True, there are some subjects which, besides being passive in receiving, have in themselves a certain activity which they bring to bear and with which they co-operate, so that form, quality, action, or condition are brought about in the subject. Such a subject does not behave in a purely passive way in producing a form, but partly passively and partly actively. But there are certain subjects which have no power in themselves to produce a form, they merely receive a form. These are said to behave in a purely passive manner. Such manner of speaking of the scholastics, at one time much used and well known in the schools, Luther accommodated to his doctrine of free will. Now insofar as the mind and will are the subject in which the Holy Spirit works conversion or renewal, this subject behaves in a purely passive manner, according to the phrase of the scholastics. But this is the question: Whether the mind and will, corrupt from birth through sin, has any activity, any power, or efficacy which it exerts and by which it co-operates with the Holy Spirit in engendering conversion, pious thoughts, good intentions, desires, endeavors, struggles, etc., in spiritual movements and actions; in other words, whether the unregenerate will in spiritual

conversion behaves partly actively and partly passively (as the scholastics put it). Now, because Scripture records that this power in spiritual matters has been lost through sin, so that the will can do nothing of itself; and because Augustine also does not wish to call grace through which God works in us to will a co-operating grace, Luther therefore employed this term of the scholastics and in such a way explained his thoughts that man behaves in a purely passive manner. But he never taught that conversion happens without the reflection of the mind and the agreement of the will. He wished to say only this, that God draws by their wills those whom he converts."¹³ So important was the proper understanding and defense of this point that Chemnitz chose in his *Loci theologici* to discuss the entire matter of synergism under the question whether the will is purely passive in conversion, for everything revolved around this point.¹⁴ The term *pure passive* to Chemnitz applied only in the case of man's spiritual powers, in a contributory sense, not in a psychological sense. This had to be explained again and again by him and the other orthodox Lutherans. A synergist is blind to the difference between Manichaeism and monergism, between coercion and a gracious drawing of man's will by God, blind to the fact that it is the will of man that is acted upon in conversion. Therefore the synergist insists that the monergistic doctrine violates the personality and will of man and that God forces man to become a Christian against his will. This was precisely the position the Jesuit Robert Bellarmine took. Even the crystal clear explanation of Chemnitz could not satisfy him, and he violently attacked Chemnitz' presentation of the matter.¹⁵ So again the Lutheran position was patiently and clearly defined, this time by John Gerhard: "Luther did not teach that conversion is brought about without the reflection of the mind and agreement

¹³ Martin Chemnitz, *Examen Concilii Tridentini*, Prima pars, locus VII (*De libero arbitrio*), sectio V, par. 8, ed. Eduard Preuss (Berlin: Gustav Schlawitz, 1861), p. 144. Chemnitz was closely followed by Leonhard Hütter, *Loci communes theologici* (Wittenberg: Ioannes Matthaei, 1619), 283.

¹⁴ Martin Chemnitz, *Loci theologici*, ed. Polycarp Leyser (Frankfurt am Main: Heirs of Dr. Tobias Mevius and Elert Schumacher, 1653). I, 183—186.

¹⁵ Robert Bellarmine, *De gratia et libero arbitrio*, VI, cap. 9, in *Disputationes de controversiis Christianae fidei adversus huius temporis haereticos* (Venice: 1596), IV, Part three.

of the will, but he denied that the will concurs with these activities of its own natural powers; that is to say, he denied that in the mind and will there remained any working power which could reach out when grace was offered and for that reason co-operate with the Holy Spirit. And the analogy of the clay in the hand of a potter — which he uses — must not be pressed beyond its point of application.”¹⁶

But the doctrine of the passivity of the will in conversion was not settled even in the Lutheran Church by Chemnitz and the Formula of Concord. Synergism cropped up again within the Church of the Augsburg Confession, this time in the school of the “syncretists” of the 17th century, e. g., Lattermann, Dreier, Calixt.¹⁷ Again the *pure passive* was attacked and on the same old psychological, rationalistic grounds. In answering these objections the later orthodox dogmatists did not go beyond Chemnitz. No more really could be said. But again they admirably upheld the old Lutheran position, as may be illustrated from the following quotation from Quenstedt: “It is one thing to concur in one’s conversion contributively, actively, and as an efficient cause of the same, another thing to be receptive in conversion, passive, and the subject to be converted. Not the former but the latter we hold in respect to the unregenerate man. For the unregenerate man, because of the corruption of his nature, has no activity, power, or faculty which he can direct toward his conversion and by which he can co-operate with the Holy Spirit in his conversion.

¹⁶ John Gerhard, *Loci theologici*, locus XII, caput VI, sectio VI, par. 81, ed. Johann Friedrich Cotta, V (Tübingen: Johann Georg Cotta, 1766), 172.

¹⁷ Johann Lat(t)ermann (1620—1662), educated at Helmstedt, Königsberg and Rostock; in 1647 professor extraordinarius of theology at Königsberg, in 1649 second court preacher at Rostock, in 1652 general superintendent at Halberstadt; died while serving as a military chaplain; author, among other works, of *De gratia et libero arbitrio*; opponent of Abraham Calov and Celestine Myslenta. — Christian Dreier (Dreyer) (1610—1688), educated at Jena, Wittenberg, Rostock, Copenhagen, and Königsberg, where he became professor extraordinarius of theology in 1644, ordinarius in 1652, and primarius in 1657; partisan of Michael Behm and his colleague Latermann versus Calov and Myslenta. — George Calixt (Kallison) (1586—1656), educated at Helmstedt, Jena, Giessen, Tübingen, and Heidelberg; in 1614 professor of theology at Helmstedt, in 1625 senior of the theological faculty, and in 1636 absentee abbot of Königsblutter Abbey, in addition to his professorship; prolific and influential author.

"We note that man does not concur in his conversion by doing but by receiving. Still he is not converted without means but mediately, through Word and Sacraments, not violently but by persuasion, not by force but by being instructed, not by divine inspiration but by hearing, not through any physical necessity but through the free use of means.

"We must distinguish between an active and a passive capacity. We deny that man can co-operate in conversion and with the grace of God by his own natural and active strength or by his own efficacious ability, aptitude, or capacity. But we do maintain that in man there is a passive capacity which cannot be ascribed to a stone or block; for the unregenerate man is endowed with a mind and a will, and thus in man is to be found a subject already existing in whom enlightenment and conversion by the power of the divine Spirit can be brought about, whereas in a stone or block there is neither mind nor will and hence no subject which can in any way be capable of enlightenment or conversion."¹⁸ If Quenstedt and the other later orthodox teachers said nothing which was not already stated by Luther and the Formula, they served one important purpose by their definitive discussion of the Lutheran position regarding the *pure passive*: They established the term as something so sacrosanct to orthodox Lutheranism that it was no longer openly rejected.

But the indirect attacks by modern enemies of this doctrine are really just as aggressive and ingenious as the older frontal attacks. If, for instance, this passivity, this refraining from willful resistance (considered as something residing in some men or given to some men), this "suffering" what God works in man, is made to account even to some small degree for man's conversion, then clearly the *pure passive* has been abandoned. Then man is somehow conceived of as acting in that he "suffers," and passivity becomes activity, even though it is obviously impossible in a contributory sense to be simultaneously active and passive with reference to the same process. As Sebastian Schmidt put it, "How can it be said that one behaves himself actively when he does not in any manner aid the

¹⁸ Quenstedt, op. cit., Pars tertia, caput VII (*De conversione*), sectio I, quaestio II, observationes XX I, II, VII, Vol. II, 727—728.

Holy Spirit who works in him, but must be overcome by Him?"¹⁹ Precisely here, in the passivity of man in his conversion, is the crux of the continuing controversy between synergism and monergism, and all the Lutheran teachers from Chemnitz to Quenstedt were correct in emphasizing this point. As long as theologians refuse to accept the paradox of exclusive divine action and at the same time full human experience in conversion, the issue will not die. But as long as the monergist retains the *pure passive* in the sense in which Luther first used it and the Formula of Concord adopts it, he knows he is on solid ground.

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¹⁹ Sebastian Schmidt, *Articulorum Formulae Concordiae repetitio, Disputatio IV in Formulam Concordiae de libero arbitrio posterior*, par. 38 (Strasbourg: Josiah Staedelius, 1696), 128.

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