

Essays
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Matthias
Flacius
Illyricus

1520 - 1575

**Theologian of the
Reformation Era**

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Matthias Flacius Illyricus

Essay presented by Dr. Paul E. Kretzmann to
the Pastoral Conference, August 21, 1953.

I. His Life

This illustrious theologian of the Reformation era was born on March 3, 1520, at Albona, some forty miles from Trieste, in Istria or Illyria. He was the son of a prominent citizen of the town, his name being Vlacich, or Francovich. The son, Matthias, used the Latin form of the family name, that is, Flacius,, and was given the surname Illyricus from his birthplace, so that he was known as *Matthias Flacius Illyricus* . Since the elder Flacius had been a notable student, he was very anxious to have his son lay a good foundation in letters and sciences and therefore personally supervised his studies. Unfortunately, however, the father died while his son was a mere lad, and the learned studies were neglected for some time. However, his own thirst for knowledge caused him to enroll in the school of a learned man in Milan, one Franciscus Ascerius. From Milan he proceeded to Venice, where he enjoyed the instruction of the celebrated humanist Johannes Baptista Egnatius. Having laid a good foundation of learning he decided, at the age of seventeen, to study theology and therefore begged a relative, Baldo Lupetino, provincial of the Franciscan Minorites, to arrange for his reception into the order. Strangely enough, this man advised him to go to Germany and join the Reformers. He made the journey with a minimum of food, in 1539, directing his steps first to Basel, where Simon Grynaeus received him into his home and gave him some good instruction in theology But after only a short interval he went to Tuebingen, where Garbitius, also an Illyrian, gave him instruction in Greek and Joachim Camerarius showed him much love. In the year 1541 he traveled to Wittenberg by way of Regensburg, where he was received into the home of a preacher by the name of Friedrich Backofen and attended the university. He heard lectures by Luther, Melanchthon, and Winshemius, the last-named being an able Greek scholar. At this time he experienced some severe afflic-

tions, which caused him to turn first to Bugenhagen and then to Luther, and it was through him that Flacius attained peace of soul by accepting the grace of God. He was so thoroughly grounded in the doctrine of justification by faith alone that it became the guiding star of his life.

Having completed his studies at the Wittenberg school he was given the Master's degree. Already in 1544 he accepted the chair of Hebrew at the university and he was married the next year. His extraordinary gifts gave Luther and Melancthon great hopes for his future usefulness in the Church. He lectured on the Old Testament, on the epistles of Paul, and on Aristotle. At the outbreak of the Schmalkald War he followed a suggestion of Medler and went to Braunschweig, where he was very successful as a teacher. At the close of the war he returned to Wittenberg, with the permission of Elector of Saxony and resumed his work. However, after the Augsburg Interim in when the Elector entered into negotiations with the theologians which finally resulted in the Leipzig Interim, Flacius, as a strict Lutheran, protested against the concessions of Melancthon and others, for he refused to make any concessions to the papal party. At this time Nicolaus Gallus came to Wittenberg from Regensburg, and he and Flacius became close friends. Since the two men no longer felt at home in Wittenberg, they went to Magdeburg via Hamburg, where Flacius settled in 1549, being associated with a publishing house and producing a number of notable polemical writings, which we shall presently discuss.

In 1557 he was called as professor at the newly established university of Jena, where he remained, however, only till 1562, chiefly on account of the position taken by Victorin Strigel. Meanwhile Flacius had attended the Colloquy of Worms and had opposed the so-called Frankfort Recess, which had been convoked in 1558 by the leading Evangelical princes. He also favored the publication of the *Book of Confutation* of Weimar against all errors which were found among Lutheran theologians." In 1566 he, with Cyriacus Spangenberg, Vorstius, and Hamelmann, he was commissioned to give counsel to the Lutherans of Antwerp. This attempt was a failure, partly because of his ene-

mies in that city and partly because of the approach of the Spanish army. He then attempted to settle at Frankfort-on-the-Main and subsequently at Straszburg, where he succeeded in publishing his notes on the New Testament. The hatred of the Elector Augustus pursued him even here, for in 1569 an envoy was sent to Straszburg with the commission to capture Flacius. So the latter fled to Basel, but was not allowed to remain, so he returned to Straszburg; where he was tolerated for a while. But in 1573 the Council of Straszburg ordered his expulsion, chiefly on account of his opposition to Jacob Andreae and by his aberration in the doctrine of original sin. He finally moved to Frankfort, where he enjoyed the protection of Catharina von Meerfeld, Prioress of the nunnery *Zu den weissen Frauen* so that even the opposition of the city council did not succeed in ousting him. Thanks to entreatises and intercessions the order to banish him did not go into effect, but was deferred from time to time. But he did not enjoy the respite very long, for he died on March 11, 1575, at the age of only 55 years. Thus ended a career of great brilliance and of courageous battling for the truth.

II. His Labors

Our brief survey of the biography of Flacius already indicates that this highly gifted man went through, experiences which remind one strongly of the *errores Ulyssis* which Homer described in his great epic. When one considers what enmity this great instrument of divine truth endured even during his life, it is not surprising that aspersions of the vilest kind were heaped upon his memory for more than a century. But a more careful study of the era of the Reformation on the part of Preger and others has resulted in the complete vindication of Flacius in all but one or two points, so that, as one historian puts it, a just estimation of his personality and of his merits in the field of theology has placed him in the foremost rank of the later theologians of the Reformation. Let us briefly review some of his meritorious achievements.

Flacius was, first of all, a most prolific writer, and he used his comprehensive learning to the best advantage especially in the

field of church history and of Bible exposition. While living in Magdeburg he conceived the ambitious plan of publishing two great historical works, which would be aimed chiefly at Romanism. The first one was a descriptive list or catalog of all those who before Luther had combated the heresies of the papacy, called *Catalogue testium veritatis, qui ante nostram aetatem reclamarunt Papae*, issued at Easel in 1556. Its companion work was issued the next year and bore the name *Varia doctorum piorumque virorum de corrupto ecclesiae statu poemata*, which contained the *De contemptu mundi* by Bernard of Cluny. But more important than these works was the publication of a comprehensive church history, which was to show how the Western Church as a corporate body, under the leadership of Rome, had gradually drifted away from the course established by Christ and the apostles. The history was to include an account of antichristianity from its rise to the development of its highest power, followed by the restitution of true religion in its purity by Luther. This great historical *opus* was the so-called “*Magdeburg Centuries*,” since it was divided into sections according to centuries. It was notable on account of its extensive tracing of the sources and on account of its apparent anti-Rome tendency, a fact which called out the reply by Baronius in his “*Annals*.” The history of the first three centuries was issued in 1557, with the assistance of Wigand, Judex, Silfeld, the general arrangement being under the headings: Propagation, persecutions, doctrine of the Church, heresies, ceremonies, church polity, schisms and aberrations, councils, leading personalities, heretics, martyrs, miracles, the Jews, religions outside of the Church, political changes. The work progressed steadily, and the last century appeared in 1574. While the “*Catalog*” had proposed to prove that the light of divine Truth, although removed from the center and considerably darkened, was nonetheless never fully extinguished, the “*Centuries*,” on the other hand, attempted to show that the darkness of antichristianism became worse from one century to the next until the height of the papal power had been reached and enclosed everything with the shadow of spiritual death. It may be said, incidentally, that, whereas the “*Annals*” of Baronius showed a more comprehensive use of source material, its critical value falls far short of

the “*Centuries*.” Works of Flacius in the same field never became so well known, namely *De sectis, dissensionibus, contradictionibus et confusionibus doctrinae, religionis, scriptorum et doctorum pontificorum* (Magdeburg, 1550; Basel, 1565) and *Historia certaminum inter Rom. Episcopo. et sextam Carthaginiensem synodum, Africanasque ecclesias de primatu sey potestate papae* .

In the sphere of Biblical studies Flacius produced two works of importance, namely his *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae seu de sermone sacrarum literarum* (1567), and his *Glossacompendiaria in Novum Testamentum* (1570). In these two works he practically laid the foundation on which later scholars built.

However, the chief distinction of Flacius, the activity for which he became best known, is in the field of polemics. It was not that he was naturally quarrelsome, but that he had a wholesome and ineradicable horror of falsehood, hypocrisy, appeasement, and compromise in the field of God’s revealed Word. He could not brook even the slightest yielding concerning any teaching of Holy Writ. When, after the unfortunate ending of the Smalcald War, the Romanists felt themselves strong enough to regain some lost ground, they managed to have the *Augsburg Interim* imposed upon the Church, a document of which even Johann Agricola was co-author. This first *Interim* throughout represented a weakening and a denial of some of the chief principles of the Reformation, as set forth in the *Augsburg Confession* It was published on May 15, 1548, and was the cause of heartaches and even of persecutions in various parts of Germany, as when Wolfgang Muskulus was driven out of Augsburg, as was Johannes Parsimnonius. Elector John Frederick of Saxony rejected the *Interim*, also the city of Magdeburg, and even Melanchthon. This rejection was dated June 16, 1548. As a result of the agitation against the document a second paper was drawn up, known as the *Leipzig Interim*, because it was accepted by representative rulers and theologians at Leipzig on December 21, 1548. Unfortunately this document was, in some respects, even more dangerous than the first, because its language in many instances veiled the dangerous concessions by the use of ambiguous terms Holy Baptism was to be administered

according to the ancient Christian ceremonies, extreme unction and the celebration of the *Corpus Christi* festival were to be reintroduced, and the ordinances concerning fasting were to be enforced under imperial supervision. The claim was made that these articles “could be accepted and observed without endangering consciences.” But the way to settle such differences is not indifferently to ignore them, nor unionistically to compromise them by adopting ambiguous formulas. And this fact was soon brought out and emphasized by Wigand, Gallus, and above all by Flacius. The last-named theologian in particular issued more than a score of pamphlets against the *Interim* in the so-called *Adiaphoristic Controversy*, among them such titles as “*A Brief Report on the Interim from Which One May Easily Learn the Doctrine and the Spirit of That Book*,” “*Against the Interim, Papal Mass, Canon,, and Master Eisleben*,” “*Against the Vile Devil, Who Now Again Transforms Himself into an Angel of Light, i.e., Against the New Interim*,” and especially “*Book Concerning True and False Adiaphora, in Which the Adiaphoristic Controversy Is Explained Almost in Its Entirety*.” Flacius explained that the ultimate purpose of the *Interim* was none other than the reestablishment of popery, of which even such seemingly trifling matters as the reintroduction of the *Chorrock* (cassock) were but the beginning, as it were, the breach in the dam which was bound ultimately to result in a complete submersion of Lutheranism. In one of his releases, entitled “*Apology Addressed to the University of Wittenberg Regarding the Adiaphora*,” Flacius declares: “The upshot (of the *Interim*) is the establishment of the papacy and the installation of the Antichrist in the temple of Christ, the encouragement of the wicked to flaunt their victory over the Church of Christ and to grieve the godly, likewise weakening, leading into doubt, separation, and innumerable offenses.”

Since time will not permit us to take up all the other controversies in which Flacius took part in the same comprehensive manner, we shall list and briefly characterize some of the others.

Against Georg Major, who repeated and expanded an aberration introduced by Melancthon, who had asserted that justification

cannot occur without the presence of good works, which Major put into the form: Good works are necessary for salvation. In the heat of this controversy Amsdorf lapsed into the opposite error: Good works are detrimental to salvation. When Flacius took up the defense of the full truth, he showed that Major's proposition, taken as it reads, can "be interpreted only in a papistical sense, and that no amount of explanations is able to cure it of its ingrained falsity.

Against Caspar Schwenckfeld (1553), who made a distinction between an inner word of God and the letter in Holy Scripture, and here also Flacius prepared the way for Lutheran orthodoxy as later laid down in the *Formula of Concord*.

Lest we gain the idea that Flacius was an incurable belligerent, we must take note of the fact that even in 1553 Flacius, with Gal-lus, tried to have a committee of arbitration appointed, in order to effect a reconciliation. But even when Flacius published his treatise "*On Christian Unity*" in which he addressed himself to the entire Church, Melancthon and others rejected the articles of peace. So Flacius, for conscience' sake continued to battle against aberrations and heresies.

Against Pfeffinger and others in the so-called Synergistic Controversy, between 1555 and 1560, since Synergists asserted: Man, too, must do his bit and cooperate with the Holy Spirit if he desires to be saved. Thus conversion and salvation would depend, at least to some extent, on man's conduct toward converting grace, and he would be justified and saved, not by grace alone, but by a faith which to a certain extent is a work of his own. With Pfeffinger's synergism was associated Strigel's Semi-Pelagianism, which maintained that a remnant of spiritual ability still remains in natural man. Over against both aberrations Flacius declared that they were Pelagian in nature and promoted synergism, chiefly by quoting Luther in his *De Servo Arbitrio* : "For it is not we, but God alone, who works salvation in us." At the same time he rejected the idea of irresistible grace.

Against the Antinomians, such as Andrew Poach, Anton Otto, Andrew Musculus, and Michael Neander (1527 to 1556), who denied the third use of the Law in the life of Christians and taught that genuine contrition is wrought, not by the Law, but by the Gospel, a declaration which was criticized and rejected by Flacius.

Against Osiander and Stancarus (1549–1566), who abandoned the forensic conception of justification and practically returned to the Roman view of justification by infusion, *i.e.*, by infusion of the eternal essential righteousness of the divine nature of Christ. Here Flacius was also the leader in the battle for the truth.

Against the *Variata* of Melanchthon at Weimar in 1560; against further concessions and compromises in the Colloquy of Worms in 1557, especially as to the Interim, Adiaphorism, Majorism, Osiandricism, and Zwinglianism; against the *Frankfort Recess*, also known as the *Frankfort Interim*, which also made concessions to the Romanists—in this instance Flacius wrote two books in defense of the truth. The *Book of Confutation* of 1558 summarizes the objections against the entire Interim movement.

Unfortunately Flacius, in one instance, permitted his zeal to carry him beyond the Scriptural truth, namely when he, with others, maintained that original sin is not an accident, but the very substance of fallen man (1560–1575). Although Flacius tried to uphold his orthodoxy by assuming a twofold concept of the word *substantia*, he never quite cleared himself of the charge of errorism made against him, and this fact marred an otherwise perfect record. Let us learn to emulate his zeal for the truth and avoid even the slightest aberration.

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