

THE EXTERNALIZATION OF RIGHTEOUSNESS: JUSTIFICATION IN THE LUTHERAN TRADITION

Martin Luther (d. 1546) was indisputably the leading personality of the Protestant Reformation, but he was not alone in the work of reform. Luther was surrounded by several co-workers, who adopted and developed this or that strand in Luther's teaching, making it the prominent feature of their competing accounts of justification. Through a series of confessional documents, authored not only by Luther but also by various of his co-workers, a distinctively Lutheran account of justification emerged, which differs from Luther's view in a number of important respects.

Luther's understanding of justification is, of course, an important contribution to the Lutheran view, but among the confessional documents that are now constitutive of Lutheran identity, Luther's written contribution is the shortest and the least prominent. The earliest confessional document of the Lutheran Church that addresses justification directly was written not by Luther but by Philipp Melancthon (d. 1560), perhaps Luther's closest co-worker. The emperor Charles V had summoned the Lutherans to defend their call for reform at an imperial assembly in the city of Augsburg in 1530, and because Luther had been declared an outlaw ten years prior, Melancthon was the primary Lutheran representative at the diet. Prepared primarily to defend their proposals for church reform, Melancthon and those with him were greeted with an assault on Lutheran teaching. Melancthon responded with a defense of those teachings in his 1530 Augsburg Confession. Catholics countered with their Confutation, and Melancthon replied in turn with his substantial 1531 Apology of the Augsburg Confession, which includes by far the longest treatment of justification in the Lutheran confessional documents. In 1536 Pope Paul III called for a general council, insisting that Protestant representatives attend. In preparation for the council (which never took place as such), John Frederick I, Elector of Saxony, commissioned Luther to compose a final and definitive account of his own teaching. Luther offered such an account in the 1537 Smalcald Articles, which include no more than a short paragraph on justification by faith. After Luther's death in 1546, hidden rifts among his co-workers came to the surface, and open conflict broke out regarding justification and several other

important truths. Andreas Osiander (d. 1552), who claimed that Melancthon and others had strayed from Luther's teaching, was at the heart of the earliest controversy concerning justification and became the target of nearly every one of Luther's other co-workers. The factiousness of this and other debates among Luther's co-workers before and after Luther's death threatened to tear the Lutheran Reformation to pieces. A variety of efforts to unite the Protestant churches in Germany finally culminated in the 1577 Formula of Concord, which includes a substantial treatment of justification by faith and a final resolution of the Osiandrian controversy. In 1580 the Formula of Concord was combined with three of Melancthon's works (including the Augsburg Confession and its Apology), three of Luther's works (including his Smalcald Articles), and three creeds of the early church to become the Book of Concord. This Book of Concord was to become the doctrinal standard of the Lutheran Church and remains such to this day. To be a Lutheran does not necessarily mean to agree with Luther; to be a Lutheran means to subscribe to the Book of Concord (Campbell et al. 2:1-3).

The Augsburg Confession

Here we can only consider the Augsburg Confession, a somewhat all-inclusive document that began to serve and still serves as the basic statement of Lutheran belief. It consists of twenty-one "Articles on Faith and Doctrine" and another seventeen articles on church abuses that the Lutherans wished to correct. For our purposes here we will consider primarily Article IV, on justification, which reads:

Likewise, they [i.e., the Lutheran churches] teach that human beings cannot be justified before God by their own powers, merits, or works. But they are justified as a gift on account of Christ through faith when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. God reckons this faith as righteousness (Rom. 3[:21-26] and 4[:5]). (Kolb-Wengert 39, 41)

While the statement is brief, the main points concerning