

ABIDING IN ANCIENT SHORTCOMINGS: JUSTIFICATION IN EASTERN ORTHODOXY

The consideration of justification is a watershed in church history and more importantly in the progressive development of the understanding of the divine revelation in the Scriptures. In the West it defined Protestantism and caused Roman Catholicism to refine its own stand on faith, grace, and works. No one in the West was left unaffected by the deep consideration of justification. In the East, however, there is a different story. Eastern Orthodoxy offers only a response to Lutheran and Reformed understandings of justification, and its response is far less robust than the one offered by the Roman Catholic Church.

In Eastern Orthodoxy, justification is not a pressing issue but more of a minor feature in a larger view of God's salvation. By the time that the issue became prominent in the Latin West, through the careful attention to it by Augustine, the Greek East was already out of the room and away from earshot of the discussion. The West continued to discuss for another thousand years before the East reentered the room, and by then justification by faith had become a major tenet that distinguished parties and divided the West. Certainly, Luther's insistence that justification is the central article of the faith, by which the church either stands or falls, would have seemed completely alien to the East, and indeed the development in the Lutheran understanding of justification was met with suspicion and incredulity.

To this day objective justification by faith alone is viewed in Eastern Orthodoxy as something outside the purview of their authorities and thus alien to their understanding of God's salvation. This is not to say that justification by faith has been altogether ignored in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. Some medieval writers in the East and even prior to the Reformation in the West attest to this. For instance, Symeon, called the New Theologian (d. 1022), writes in one of his hymns of a faith that suffices to justify in place of all things, including works, and that the faith that justifies assures that the justified will be a partaker of God's eternal glory. Regrettably, later Orthodox writers seem to ignore the small but revealing contributions of writers such as Symeon to an understanding of justification by faith alone. Thus, at best, we can say that justification has traditionally taken a minor role in the whole purview of Eastern Christianity (Campbell et al. 2:167-171).

In his polemics against the papal church, Martin Luther (d. 1546) often appealed to the beliefs and practices of the Greek church. He was under the impression that the Orthodox East preserved the teachings of the apostles, the definitive councils, and the writers of the early centuries without the corruptions of subsequent centuries. This hopeful but inaccurate impression was inherited by the generation of theologians after Luther. Having broken away from Rome, and now engaged in a polemic struggle with the teachings of Catholicism, the followers of Luther, including Philipp Melanchthon (d. 1560), thought that in Constantinople they would find a common ally.

Melanchthon, with the help of an Orthodox scholar, translated into Greek the Augsburg Confession, the statement of faith of the Lutheran churches prepared for Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1530. The resulting document, known as the *Augustana Graeca*, is a free translation of the original, often a paraphrasing, containing emendations and additions that use Byzantine liturgical language in order to accommodate the Orthodox reader. In 1559 Melanchthon sent the *Augustana* to Patriarch Joasaph II of Constantinople but never received a reply. Later, in 1575, another copy was presented to the new patriarch, Jeremias II (d. 1595), and his theological advisers, with a letter from Jacob Andreae and Martin Crusius of the University of Tübingen. The patriarch's answer of May 1576 so fully embodies Orthodox teaching that the East regards it as a *de facto* confession of faith and has given it a place in the "symbolical books," the highly authoritative statements of dogma that are second only to the seven ecumenical councils.

The patriarch's answers to the Lutheran theologians were sincere and irenic but ultimately disappointing to them. Of the twenty-one articles in the *Augustana*, justification was one of the primary subjects of disagreement, and the main question of concern to Jeremias was whether justification is by faith alone or by faith and works. He responded to the Protestant account of initial justification by saying that there is no initial justification whatsoever. Justification is only an ongoing process, and its consequences are entirely future. In essence, this is the position that Luther reacted to some years before, the position that prevailed in late medieval Catholic

theology; and the problems that motivated Luther to react to this position should be brought to bear on Jeremias's response to the Augustana Graeca. Without the recognition that God initially justifies in a real and unconditional sense, there will always be the specter of doubt, fear, and condemnation, and the very race that we are to run is undermined from the start. Certainly there is the reward for the subjective righteousness that is to be lived out by us, but without the solid beginning, without the initial, genuine, and unconditional righteousness, which is Christ given to us by God for this very purpose and grasped by us in an organic union through faith, there can hardly be any boldness to race in the long run. While we are certainly meant to arrive at subjective righteousness, and this indeed takes a lifetime to reach, we are first set on the path by God in a solid and real way with Christ as our initial and objective righteousness unconditionally, and the path is, in fact, the growth in our experience and expression of Christ as righteousness through faith. But we should not ignore the unconditional and objective beginning or confuse it with the subjective process and goal. If we do, we will be greatly hindered in our progress in the faith, and evidence for this abounds in both East and West.

For the most part, Jeremias's response to the Augustana Graeca ended the discussion concerning justification in the East for the time being. The East, through their patriarch, desired no more consideration, no more grief, and no more writing on this same subject from the Protestant West. But in the seventeenth century a number of Eastern scholars came into contact with and were influenced by the teachings of the Protestant and Catholic West. Some of these Eastern scholars found what they learned in the West convincing and sought to adjust Eastern teaching in accordance with it. Of all such instances, the most striking and instructive is that of Cyril Lucar (d. 1638). Lucar studied in western Europe, and as patriarch of Alexandria he continued to correspond with writers in the West. In this way he became acquainted with, and convinced by, the teachings of the Reformation.

Lucar's *Eastern Confession of the Christian Faith* reflects the Reformed convictions he had come to embrace. The brief chapters of his *Confession* deal with a number of major subjects, including original sin, predestination, and the sacraments, and most notably, chapters 13, 14, and 16 deal with free will, grace, and justification. In chapter 13 Lucar's clear statement of objective justification for a believer's salvation differs very much from the response of Jeremias. Had the East embraced this confession, the response of Jeremias to the Western account of justification might have been annulled, and the West's advance in this truth might have come to benefit the eastern half of Christendom. Regrettably, the East as a whole did not approve of Lucar's embrace of the West's help. Lucar was anathematized only three months after his death, and his *Confession* was repudiated by six successive synods. In addition to condemning Lucar's *Confession* (and Lucar himself), the East approved two other confessions, each of which responds to the *Confession* of Lucar with an alternative account of justification in line with that of Jeremias (Campbell et al. 2:172-179).

The basic response of the East is that there is no initial justification; justification is only an ongoing endeavor. But on occasion, some in the East have been willing to affirm two justifications, though these do not seem to correspond to objective and subjective justification as we have described them in the biblical presentation article (3-17 in this issue). We applaud these attempts by a minority of Eastern thinkers to affirm a double justification, one at the initiation of the Christian life and one continuing throughout the Christian life. But even though these Eastern thinkers affirm an initial justification, we note that this justification is not, in fact, a purely objective justification. It is, rather, simply the beginning of subjective justification. In this respect, even these few Orthodox thinkers willing to grant an initial justification hold accounts of justification that are Catholic at best. The Catholic tradition insists that the essence of justification is the renewal of the inner being of the believer in righteousness. Here we see that even when the East grants an initial justification, it is the Catholic rather than the Protestant version that they allow. For most in the East, there is no sense in which the believer can boldly declare, "I have been justified!" For the small few who grant an initial justification, this declaration amounts to no more than "I have begun to be justified!" (Campbell et al. 2:180-183).

The position of the East is not simply a relic of the controversies of bygone centuries. It continues to animate Eastern responses to the West to this day. Kallistos Ware (d. 2022) rejects the notion that the believers can say, in any sense, that they *have been* saved. He remarks, "The question to be asked is not, 'Have I completed the journey of salvation?' The true question is 'Have I even begun?'" (131). This latter question is more than mere pious humility; it sums up the Orthodox rejection of any initial and objective component of justification. Even though we must respect the Orthodox for their deeper understanding of full salvation as deification, we cannot deny that their rejection of initial justification is against the truth of the Scriptures. Have we even begun? The Scriptures say that we have begun by the Spirit and that God Himself is the One who has begun this good work in us (Gal. 3:3; Phil. 1:6), and the Scriptures encourage us to "hold fast the beginning of the assurance firm to the end" (Heb. 3:14). With this we must stand, and in this we should even boast. If the true question is indeed "Have we even begun?" we must say absolutely yes, and we must point back, at least, to justification by faith alone as that true beginning (Campbell et al. 2:179).

Works Cited

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