

# 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