

## Osiander vs. Calvin and the Formula of Concord

Andreas Osiander (1496-1552) was a German theologian and pastor who lived during the same time period as John Calvin. He is not very well known today and was not what we call a “major player” in the history of the Reformation. What we do know of Osiander is that he was controversial and was condemned by John Calvin and Lutherans alike. He was ordained as a priest at Eichstatt in 1520 and two years later joined the Lutherans. He was the principal Lutheran pastor in Nuremburg and he later became first professor at Konigsberg.<sup>1</sup> There he published his treatise on the doctrine of justification – *De Justificatione*.<sup>2</sup> The interesting thing about Osiander was that he was a strong proponent of the Reformation in Germany and yet was an enemy of Luther and Calvin’s doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone. Osiander took part in the Augsburg Diet in 1530 and yet his views expressed later would be condemned by the Formula of Concord. Known to be “proud, overbearing and passionate”<sup>3</sup>, his arrogance brought close scrutiny from colleagues that disliked him.

It is perhaps easy to see why Lutherans would have put forth the effort to dispute with Osiander and attempt to correct his views since he was one of them and his error was a serious threat to the peace and purity of the Lutheran church. It is more difficult to discern why John Calvin chose to deal at length with Osiander’s teaching on justification in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, when there were many other errant teachers he could have chosen to confront. I would venture a guess at this point as to why Calvin gave so much ink to refute the error of this man. Part of Calvin’s purpose for writing the *Institutes* was to promote the unity of the church. Calvin says that in publishing the *Institutes* he sought “to carry out this task for

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<sup>1</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, p. 89

<sup>2</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 1014

<sup>3</sup> Willard D. Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, p. 271

God's church. I have had no other purpose than to benefit the church by maintaining the pure doctrine of godliness."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, in condemning Osiander, Calvin would have won the approval of the majority of Lutherans in Germany and elsewhere, thus promoting the unity of the church. Another possible reason that Calvin devoted so many pages to Osiander is that Calvin had himself been accused of teaching a theology similar to Osiander's.<sup>5</sup> Thus Calvin's condemnation of Osiander's teaching would lay to rest this accusation.

The rest of this paper will attempt first, to understand Osiander's teaching on the doctrine of justification. Second, it will show the connection of Osiander's view with the Formula of Concord. Third, it will give an overview of Calvin's refutation of his errors. First, what was Osiander's doctrine of justification? Osiander did not deny the doctrine outright. However, he believed that justification was not a mere declaration that a person was righteous by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. To him this forensic view was a verbal pronouncement with no basis in reality. He believed that "God is not indeed so unjust as to regard him as righteous in whom there is really nothing of true righteousness." Osiander considered the doctrine of justification held by Melancthon and others to be, "...colder than ice", and thought it wrong "that we are accounted righteous only on account of the remission of sins, and not also on account of the righteousness of the Christ dwelling in us by faith." Osiander taught that justification involved "a substantial transference of Christ's righteousness to the believer."<sup>6</sup> He defined justification as "the indwelling of Christ in the believer. Christ enters the heart of heart of believers and makes them righteous."<sup>7</sup> He "interpreted the doctrine of justification as

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<sup>4</sup> *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, preface to the reader, 1559 edition.

<sup>5</sup> Julie Canlis, *Calvin, Osiander and Participation in God*, p. 169

<sup>6</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, p. 1014

<sup>7</sup> Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, p. 89-90

involving only the divine nature of Christ and his union with the believer.”<sup>8</sup> Alister McGrath concludes that according to Osiander’s view, “Justification must therefore be understood to consist of the infusion of the essential righteousness of Christ. We see here an unequivocal reassertion of a fundamentally Augustinian understanding of the *nature* of justification, especially in relation to the real interior transformation of an individual through the indwelling of God.”<sup>9</sup>

It was often said by Martin Luther that “This doctrine [of justification] will be obscured again after my death.” According to F. Bente, “Andrew Osiander was the first to fulfill Luther’s prophecy.”<sup>10</sup> Osiander was the originator of the controversy addressed in Article III of the *Formula of Concord*, “Concerning the Righteousness of Faith before God”. The *Formula of Concord* was produced as the result of this and several controversies that had been brewing among Lutherans after Luther’s death. The cause of the reformation in Germany was at that time imperiled due to division and discord. The *Formula* was published in 1577 and it united almost all Lutherans in Germany as a faithful explanation of the previously published *Augsburg Confession*. The *Formula* contains twelve articles of faith which each address a particular controversy by a series of denials and affirmations. Article III (Righteousness of Faith before God) actually addresses the error of both Osiander and a theologian named Stancaró. Osiander said that man was justified only through the divine nature of Christ and Stancaró taught that Christ is our righteousness according to His human nature only. The formula states in section 2 that “Against both the errors just recounted, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess that

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<sup>8</sup> Willard D. Allbeck, *Studies in the Lutheran Confessions*, p. 250

<sup>9</sup> Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p. 242

<sup>10</sup> F. Bente, *Historical Introductions to the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, p. 168

Christ is our Righteousness neither according to the divine nature alone nor according to the human nature alone, but that it is the entire Christ according to both natures.”

Osiander’s strange teaching struck at the heart of the Lutheran doctrine of justification. Osiander’s position was that, “The one and only righteousness availing before God is God Himself. Christ is the Word which we apprehend by faith, and thus Christ in us, God Himself, is our Righteousness which avails before God.”<sup>11</sup> Contrary to Osiander the *Formula* states that God forgives our sins and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ’s obedience. On account of this righteousness of Christ believers are regarded as righteous. The *Formula* denies “that faith looks... to His divine nature as it dwells and works in us, and that by this indwelling our sins are covered.” (III, 16) Osiander had said that Christ’s divine righteousness overwhelmed the sin within us and “our sins are diluted, as it were, and lost, as an impure drop disappears when poured into an ocean of liquid purity.”<sup>12</sup> Osiander’s doctrine also robbed Christians of the comfort of assurance since justification was based upon a subjective quality in the heart and not the objective work of Christ outside the believer. Although Osiander denied that justification is merited by works, he held that righteousness was inherent in the believer. Thus his doctrine was renounced in the *Formula of Concord*, since it was more closely related to Roman Catholic doctrine than it was to standard Lutheran teaching. Osiander and Rome both end up placing sanctification as the ground of justification.<sup>13</sup>

John Calvin deals with Osiander’s heresy in Book III of the *Institutes* beginning in chapter 11, section 5. He immediately criticizes Osiander who “has introduced a kind of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 355

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 171

<sup>13</sup> G.C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification*, p. 98

monstrosity termed essential righteousness.” (III, 11, 5) Calvin believed that Osiander did not intend to do away with unmerited justification but that nonetheless “he involves it in darkness, and by that darkness deprives pious minds of a serious sense of divine grace.” (III, 11, 5) Osiander taught that “we are one with Christ.” Calvin agrees but says that Osiander confounds the essence of Christ with ours. It should be noted that Osiander objected to Melancthon’s strictly forensic view of justification because there seemed to be no room for a vital union of Christ and the believer as had been stressed by Luther. Osiander of course went too far in his conception of this union. Osiander’s error became the occasion for Calvin’s masterful exposition of the doctrine of union with Christ all the while remaining within the bounds of orthodoxy. Calvin expands on the doctrine of a personal relationship with Christ that Luther embrace, while still preserving the technical clarity of Melancthon on the doctrine of justification. For Calvin, faith is the means by which the believer is united to Christ, and thereby partakes of all of his benefits, which include justification. McGrath holds that, “Calvin is actually concerned not so much with justification, as with incorporation into Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p.225