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Melanchthon's Use of Augustine in Apology Article IV

ALBERT B. COLLVER III



THE LUTHERAN SHIBBOLETH¹ of *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *sola scriptura* was not entirely rejected by Rome during the Reformation. In fact, Rome attempted to demonstrate that it too could confess this in part. *Sola gratia* was not a problem, because Augustine had defended the doctrine of grace against the false teaching of Pelagius. On account of this, Rome affirmed that man was saved by God's grace alone. *Sola fide*, on the other hand, was a stumbling block. The fact that Apology Article IV is entirely devoted to *sola fide* is a responsive echo to Rome's inability to confess it. "By faith alone" is, perhaps, the crux of the Reformation. On the other hand, Rome did not have a great deal of difficulty with *sola scriptura*, perhaps because "for some time certain Catholic writers,"² such as the Brethren of the Common Life, had stressed it. In fact, the *Confutation* was "an accumulation of Bible-texts"³ that attempted to answer the Augsburg Confession from Scripture alone.

In light of this, it is perhaps surprising that the Lutheran Symbols, which confess that all doctrine is derived from Scripture alone, make free use of patristic quotations in support of their argument. On the surface, this may appear to contradict *sola scriptura*, or at least lead one to ask why the fathers are used. Furthermore, quotations from the fathers are not limited to the Confessions, but appear in the private writings of both Melanchthon and Luther, and in the writings of their disciples such as Martin Chemnitz. It should therefore not be surprising that Melanchthon would also make extensive use of the fathers throughout the Apology, although in Article IV he almost exclusively uses Augustine and his anti-Pelagian writings.

Melanchthon quotes four fathers in Apology Article IV: Ambrose, Augustine, Cyprian, and Jerome. None is quoted more than once, except Ambrose and Augustine, who are quoted two times and nine times respectively. Half of the Augustine quotations and a fourth of the patristic quotations in the Apology occur in Article IV. This is also the longest article and the center of the controversy between Rome and the Lutherans about how justification takes place. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession clearly confesses that "men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for

Christ's sake, through faith."⁴ This article also condemned the Pelagian heresy, which taught that men were justified by their works. The *Confutation* agreed that the Pelagians were in error for teaching that man could "merit eternal life by his own powers without the grace of God."⁵ It countered the Augustana, however, by saying that "it is entirely contrary to Holy Scripture to deny that our works are meritorious."⁶ The issue at stake is not grace alone, but faith alone.

Considering the issue, it may at first seem strange that Melanchthon makes use of Augustine, the doctor of *sola gratia*. Melanchthon first quotes Augustine in Ap IV, 29–30.⁷ Immediately preceding this quotation, he lists four falsehoods that this article will refute.⁸ The first falsehood to be refuted is "that we merit the remission of sins by means of our works."⁹ The remaining three falsehoods are derived from the first. Next he presents evidence proving that the four preceding statements are false. Melanchthon writes, "We have testimonies for this our belief, not only from the Scriptures, but also from the Fathers. For in opposition to the Pelagians, Augustine contends at great length that grace is not given because of our merits."¹⁰ Then he quotes Augustine's *On Nature and Grace*:¹¹

If natural ability by means of free choice and by learning, in what way he is obligated to live, and by a good life he is capable himself, then Christ has died for nothing, then the scandal of the cross is empty. For what reason do I not yet here cry out? On the contrary, I will cry out and I will reprove that of yours with Christian grief: Christ has become empty, you who are justified by nature; you have fallen from grace. For being ignorant of the righteousness of God and wishing to establish your own righteousness that is not subject to God. In the same way, indeed the end of the law, so actually Christ is the savior of a corrupt human nature for the righteousness of all who believe.¹²

The first thing to note is that the quotation is taken from Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings. In fact, all the quotations except one are taken from these writings. Augustine is saying that the law does not work righteousness. For Melanchthon, this quotation from Augustine is a "testimony" affirming the Lutheran teaching. This teaching is not derived from Augustine, only affirmed by him. In this first quotation Melanchthon has established that the fathers are witnesses to doctrine. If Rome can con-

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demn the Lutherans for their teaching, they must also condemn the father who testifies to it.

The next quotation is found in paragraph 87,¹³ whose confession is clearer than the first. The point at issue concerns what deeds of the law Christ abrogated. Melanchthon reports that "the adversaries interpret that this refers to Levitical ceremonies."¹⁴ He counters that Paul means *tota lege* ("the entire law"). Melanchthon, in interpreting Romans, calls on Augustine to be his witness. "But Augustine teaches correctly that Paul speaks of the entire law, as he discusses at length in his book *Of the Spirit and Letter*, where he finally says":¹⁵

This, therefore, having been considered and discussed according to the resources that the Lord deemed worthy to give, we conclude man is not justified by the precepts of a good life, except through faith in Jesus Christ.¹⁶

Here Augustine confesses that a good life cannot justify. Jewish ceremonial laws are not about living a good life but about types of food and the like. Augustine is referring to the Decalogue. It cannot justify a man; only faith in Jesus Christ is able to justify. His testimony is damning, either for himself and the Lutherans or for Rome. The very position that Augustine testifies to as truth is being condemned by Rome. If the Lutherans are wrong in their interpretation of Romans, so is Augustine. Either way, Augustine cannot be claimed by Rome because he is not their father. Therefore, Rome cannot be catholic.

***If Rome can condemn the Lutherans
for their teaching, they must also
condemn the father who testifies to it.***

Not only does Melanchthon demonstrate that Rome lacks a claim to catholicity, but in the next quotation he also demonstrates that Rome's situation is much worse. His usual practice in quoting a father is not to provide commentary on the quotation; however, in paragraph 106 he does provide commentary on Augustine.¹⁷ For this reason, paragraph 106 is given in its entirety:

According to the same thought, Augustine writes many things against the Pelagians. In *On Spirit and Letter* thus he says, "Therefore, naturally, the justice of the law puts forward, that whoever accomplishes it, he will live in it, so that everybody who recognizes his own infirmity, not by his strength nor by the letter of the law itself, that is not able to take place, but by faith which brings together the justified and will accomplish it and he will live in it. A work by rule which whoever does it, he lives in it, it will happen only in one justified. On the other hand, justification is achieved out of faith." Here he clearly says that the justifier is conciliated by faith and that justification is obtained by faith. A little later, "Out of the law we fear God, by faith we hope in

God. But to those fearing retribution, grace is hidden, the laboring soul under such fear, etc., flee by faith to the mercy of God, so that he may offer what he commands." Here he teaches that the soul is frightened by the law, but consolation is received by faith. And he teaches first to apprehend mercy by faith, when we undertake to do the law. A little later we shall cite other things.¹⁸

Melanchthon begins this quotation by referring to the topic at issue, which is found in paragraph 102.¹⁹ It says that Scripture is full of testimonies proclaiming we are justified by faith in Christ Jesus. The beginning of paragraph 103 reads, "Here and there among the holy fathers similar testimonies are extant,"²⁰ which then leads to the Augustine quotation. Note that Melanchthon identifies the quotation as one of many from Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings—in this case, *Spirit and Letter*, 29, 51. With this introduction Melanchthon demonstrates that he is not limited to one or two quotations from Augustine, but has many to draw from. Thus he is not putting words into Augustine's mouth. It is also important to note that Melanchthon quotes from the anti-Pelagian writings, thereby implying Rome is Pelagian. If Rome is Pelagian, her teaching is in error and she cannot be catholic.

The most important portion of the Augustine quotation is this: "Justification, on the other hand, is achieved by faith"²¹—the same teaching confessed by the Lutherans in Augustana iv and Apology iv. Thus the Lutherans are no more innovators in doctrine than Augustine. In fact, both are simply confessing what Scripture teaches.

Unfortunately, Augustine is not usually recognized for his teaching of *sola fide*. Robert Eno writes that Augustine, the most influential western father, "holds a very special place of honor in this area of grace and justification."²² He seems to be recognized more for his teaching on grace than on faith, however. Eno later says of Augustine's teaching, "Our sins are forgiven by grace through faith. But Augustine, verbally at least, puts more emphasis on grace than on faith."²³ We should note that the Pelagians were fond of the phrase *fides sola*,²⁴ which may have caused Augustine to emphasize grace more than faith.

Philip Schaff in his *Church History* claims that all of Lutheran doctrine is based on a faulty understanding of Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings. He writes:

In Augustine the anti-Pelagian system was checked and moderated by his churchly and sacramental views, and we cannot understand him without keeping both in view. The same apparent contradictions we find in Luther, but he broke entirely with the sacerdotal system of Rome, and made the doctrine of justification by faith the chief article of his creed, which Augustine never could have done.²⁵

Perhaps it is true that Augustine could not have gone as far as Luther, but then he was not in the same situation as Luther. The Pelagians denied grace. Rome did not deny grace but faith. Also, Melanchthon would not have been afraid to critique Augustine by saying that he should have gone further than he did. It should also be noted that later on Augustine more clearly confessed *sola fide* than he had done in his early writings. His anti-Pelagian

writings ranged in date from 412 to 429 A.D. His Donatist writings, which form the basis of his doctrine on the church, were written between 393 and 420. Schaff would have us pit his Donatist writings against his anti-Pelagian writings, rather than let us see him emerge a theologically more mature Augustine toward the end of his life.

The next question to answer is, What did Augustine understand the phrase "by faith" to mean? C. P. Bammel, in his article "Justification in Augustine and Origen," answers, "By the words 'by faith' they understand 'by faith alone without works.' Augustine is particularly keen to emphasize [*sic*] that justification is without antecedent merits and that works before faith are useless."²⁶ Bammel recognizes the same teaching in Augustine that Melanchthon does—justification by faith apart from works.

If Augustine's confession is the same as that of the Lutherans, Rome's condemnation and rejection of the Lutherans constitutes a rejection of Augustine.

These modern authors are helpful in defending Melanchthon against the charge of placing words into Augustine's mouth. Augustine indeed taught justification by faith, and Melanchthon quotes clear statements of his to show that the Lutherans are not innovators of doctrine. Rather, he shows, it is Rome who has become the innovator in straying from the common confession of the church regarding justification by faith. Once again, by citing Augustine, Melanchthon testifies against the catholicity of Rome.

There are two more quotations to be considered before some concluding comments can be made. In paragraph 172, Melanchthon quotes from Augustine's *Retractions*, one of his latest works.²⁷ Here Melanchthon calls on Augustine to testify that good works cannot be done apart from faith: "All the mandates of God are completed when whatever is not done is forgiven."²⁸ Thus it is forgiveness on account of Christ that completes the law. Man cannot totally do the law. If the law cannot be fulfilled in its totality, it is of no use. Here, while Augustine does not use the phrase *sola fide*, he nevertheless teaches it. This is the point Melanchthon demonstrates. Faith alone was not the major point

of contention when Augustine wrote against the Pelagians, but in a clear way he proclaims grace alone while assuming faith alone. He does not always state faith alone explicitly, but the teaching is nonetheless present. Perhaps Rome missed *sola fide* because Augustine did not proclaim it more clearly. This is where the Apology clarifies and corrects Augustine with Scripture, which is precisely what Augustine would have desired.

The final quotation of Augustine used by Melanchthon is the only one not to come from the anti-Pelagian writings. Instead, it comes from the Donatist writings. This quotation and following explanation from paragraph 400 perhaps clarifies best why the fathers are used in Article iv.²⁹

And Augustine says: "The question is, Where is the church? What, therefore, are we to do? Are we to search for it in our words, or in the words of its head, our Lord Jesus Christ? I reckon that we have to search in his words, who is true and best acquainted with his own body." Therefore, the judgments of our adversaries do not upset us, since they defend human opinions opposed to the gospel, opposed to the authority of the holy fathers who wrote in the church, opposed to the testimony of pious minds.³⁰

Augustine would call us back to the words of Christ, not to his words. Melanchthon concludes that the charges leveled against the Lutherans by Rome are spurious because the Lutherans heed the voice of Christ and confess in unison with the voice of the church fathers—both of which Rome ignores.

The use of Augustine in Apology Article iv may be summed up as demonstrating continuity with the church through the ages. Several conclusions may be drawn from this. As already stated, if Augustine's confession is the same as that of the Lutherans, Rome's condemnation and rejection of the Lutherans constitutes a rejection of Augustine. This effectively takes Augustine away from Rome. He is not their father, because they have rejected his teaching as he received it from Christ. If Augustine is catholic, then Rome is not. Also, by using quotations from Augustine that are written against the Pelagians, Melanchthon essentially shows that Rome is Pelagian. Further, Augustine has said that the Pelagian heresy was a novelty.³¹ Thus Melanchthon shows that Rome has innovated by not holding to the ancient doctrine of justification by faith. Finally, Augustine is not used to prove or to invent doctrine. He simply is a witness for the Lutheran (catholic) teaching and serves as a testimony against Rome. **LOGIA**

NOTES

1. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 3: v.
2. E. G. Schwiebert, *Luther and His Times* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950), 9.
3. F. Bente, Introduction to *Concordia Triglotta* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921; reprint, Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House), 85.
4. *Triglotta*, 45.
5. Johann Michael Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of*

6. Reu, 351.
7. *BSLK*, 165.
8. Ap iv, 25–28.
9. *BSLK*, 165: "quod per opera nostra mereamur remissionem peccatorum."
10. *Triglotta*, 129.
11. *De Natura et Gratia* 40, 47. Text from *BSLK*, 165.

12. "Si possibilitas naturalis per liberum arbitrium et ad cognoscendum, quomodo vivere debeat, et ad bene vivendum sufficit sibi, ergo Christus gratis mortuus est, ergo evacuatum est scandalum crucis. Cur non etiam ego hic exclamen? Imo exclamabo et istos increpabo dolore christiano: Evacuati estis a Christo, qui in natura iustificamini; a gratia excidistis. Ignorantes enim iustitiam Dei et vetram volentes constituere iustitiae Dei non estis subiecti. Sicut enim finis legis, ita etiam naturae humanae vitiosae salvator Christus est ad iustitiam omni credenti."

13. BSLK, 178-179.

14. *Triglotta*, 147.

15. *Triglotta*, 147.

16. *De spiritu et litera* 13, 22. Text from BSLK, 179. "His igitur consideratis pertractatisque pro viribus, quas Dominus donare dignatur, colligimus non iustificari hominem praeceptis bonae vitae, nisi per fidem Iesu Christi."

17. BSLK, 182.

18. "In eandem sententiam multa contra Pelagianos scribit Augustinus. *De spiritu et litera* sic ait: 'Ideo quippe proponitur iustitia legis, quod qui fecerit eam, vivet in illa, ut cum quisque infirmitatem suam cognoverit, non per suas vires neque per literam ipsius legis, quod fieri non potest, sed per fidem concilians iustificatorem perveniat et faciat et vivat in ea. Opus rectum, quod qui fecerit, vivet in eo, non fit nisi in iustificato. Iustificatio autem ex fide impetratur.' Hic clare dicit iustificatorem fide conciliari et iustificationem fide conciliari et iustificationem fide impetrari. Et paulo post: 'Ex lege timemus Deum, ex fide speramus in Deum. Sed timentibus poenam absconditur gratia, sub quo timore anima laborans etc. per fidem confugiat ad misericordiam Dei, ut det, quod iubet.' Hic docet lege terri corda, fide autem consolationem capere, et docet prius fide apprehendere misericordiam, quam legem facere conemur. Recitabimus paulo post et alia quaedam."

19. BSLK, 181.

20. "Exstant et apud sanctos patres sparsim similia testimonia."

21. "Iustificatio autem ex fide impetratur."

22. Robert B. Eno, "Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification," in *Justification by Faith*, ed. H. Anderson, T. Murphy, and J. Burgess (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 122.

23. Eno, 122.

24. *Ibid.*, 117.

25. Philip Schaff, "Saint Augustine's Life and Work," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series* (Christian Literature Publishing Company, 1890-1900; reprint Albany, NY: Sage Digital Library, 1996), 1: 34-35.

26. C. P. Bammel, "Justification by Faith in Augustine and Origen," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47 (April 1996): 231.

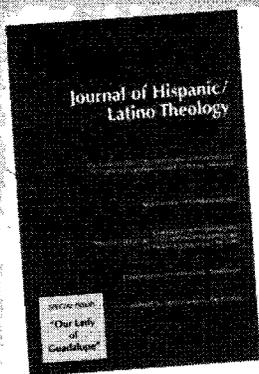
27. BSLK, 195.

28. "Omnia mandata Dei implentur, quando, quidquid non fit, ignoscitur."

29. BSLK, 233.

30. "Et Augustinus ait: Quaestio est, ubi sit ecclesia? Quid ergo futuri sumus? In verbis nostris eam quaesituri sumus, an in verbis capitis sui, Domini nostri Iesu Christi? Puto, quod in illius verbis quaerere debemus, qui veritas est et optime novit corpus suum. Proinde non perturbent nos iudicia adversariorum, cum humanas opiniones contra evangelium, contra auctoritatem sanctorum patrum, qui in ecclesia scripserunt, contra piarum mentium testimonia defendunt."

31. Augustine, *Grace and Free Will*, 1, 6, 8. "Of this character is the Pelagian heresy, which is not an ancient one, but has only lately come into existence." *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series*, 5: 1104.



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