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THEOLOGIAN OF SIN AND GRACE

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THEOLOGIAN OF SIN AND GRACE: The Process of Radicalization in the Theology of Matthias Flacius Illyricus. By Luka Ilić. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014. 304 pages. Hardcover \$88.00.

Matthias Flacius Illyricus contributed much to the intellectual progress of early modern Europe and to the development of the theology formed by Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, whose student and colleague he was. Yet Flacius has commanded relatively little attention from scholars compared to his significance in the shaping of modern hermeneutical theory, church history, biblical exegesis, as well as the formulation of the Wittenberg theological legacy. Luka Ilić compensates for this neglect in a substantial way with this meticulously documented biographical study, which traces the “radicalization” of his thought and the ecclesiastical-political efforts driven by his theology. Ilić is able to weave together succinct but penetrating assessments of how Flacius’s public teaching functioned, integrating it into the biographical details in such a way that both the thinker and the thinking come alive for the reader.

Born in Croatia, the author takes seriously the impact of the family life and early environment of the young Italo-Croatian Flacius, including the death of his father while Matthias was quite young, as well as the influence of the lively humanistic learning milieu of his native “Illyria” and the persecution of Evangelicals there throughout his life. Ilić traces Flacius’s trek into German-speaking lands, as he began building the networks of influential intellectuals, political figures, and theologians

that served him well throughout his life, with short stays in Augsburg, Basel, and Tübingen. He arrived at his goal, Wittenberg, in 1541, performed impressively as a student, experienced the power of Luther's pastoral care as the young foreigner underwent a spiritual crisis akin to Luther's own *Anfechtungen*, and finally won appointment as the university's instructor in Hebrew.

This world collapsed as Flacius felt betrayed by Melancthon's attempt to save Lutheran pulpits for Lutheran preachers by aiding in the composition of the Leipzig Proposal or "Interim" of 1548; Melancthon felt betrayed by Flacius's lack of understanding for, and bitter critique of, his best efforts to preserve Lutheran preaching in that political move. The two descended into an ever more rancorous bitterness that led to the formation of parties within the Wittenberg circle which shaped a generation of Luther's and Melancthon's followers. Ilić traces the first stage in Flacius's radicalization as he was propelled into leadership of the Gnesio-Lutheran movement that centered primarily in Magdeburg. Flacius contributed many brief treatises to the critique of the "Adiaphorists" of the Leipzig Proposal as well as Georg Major's insistence that good works are necessary for salvation and interpretations of the role of the human will in conversion or repentance that seemed to him and his comrades to diminish God's grace.

Flacius's call to the University of Jena and the superintendency of the churches of ducal Saxony in 1557 led him to the highest point of his personal power and influence and into a cauldron that ended less than five years later with his being sent into exile. This relatively non-

productive period for the writer Flacius radicalized his temperament and his theological position more deeply. That process continued into the third stage of his life, his last thirteen years, from 1562 to his death in 1575, years spent wandering without a fixed position. Ilić demonstrates how Flacius's chief concern, defending God's unconditional grace in Christ through the assertion of his definition of original sin as the substance of the fallen human creature, grew sharper and sharper over the years, alienating not only those who had earlier opposed him but also former friends.

Ilić's summaries of Flacius's arguments for his defense of the substantial nature of original sin in the sinner clarify for readers precisely how Flacius constructed his argument out of Luther's thinking. Ilić also concisely sketches Flacius's positions on good works, the freedom of the will, and the true presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper, a topic to which Flacius returned in successive local controversies over the sacrament but which has won little attention from modern scholarship.

Ilić has provided English-language readers a clear and sober analysis of the course of this turbulent life and the greater dimensions of Flacius's thinking while pointing out the many contributions of the man that need further exploration. This volume is a must for anyone seeking an understanding of the transition from the Wittenberg Reformation to seventeenth-century Lutheran theology as well as the developments in hermeneutics, history, and biblical exegesis shaped by this unique figure, Matthias Flacius, the Illyrian.

Robert Kolb