

# Justification: *An Introduction*

THOMAS R. SCHREINER



SHORT STUDIES *in*  
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

*Edited by Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin*

“This book is a comprehensive and important introduction to the subject of justification by faith alone, which is one of the most important Christian doctrines and key to understanding the true nature of Protestantism. Schreiner’s presentation is informative and lucid, making it one of the best ways for students and others to grasp what justification is and why it matters today as much as ever.”

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“There is no doctrine more important to the Christian faith than the doctrine of justification. There is no biblical scholar I’d rather learn this doctrine from than Tom Schreiner. This short book features one of our era’s most prominent theologians concisely explaining the very doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. That is more than enough reason to read this book and benefit from it.”

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“This wonderfully rich and concise study models how to grasp and explain a central Christian doctrine. Schreiner unfolds the Bible’s understanding of justification, the struggle for its preservation through the centuries, and its rediscovery at the Reformation. Rich in exegetical detail and interaction with alternate understandings, this study succeeds magnificently at presenting just what justification is and why it is central to Christian life and thought. In Schreiner’s words, ‘it gives us assurance, frees us from fear, and awakens praise in our hearts.’ A profound yet practical book to study and to treasure!”

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“With his characteristic clarity, Schreiner harvests the fruits of his many faithful labors as a New Testament scholar and Christian minister in this introduction to the doctrine of justification. The book ranges widely—covering church history, the biblical material, contemporary challenges, theological formulation, and practical application—but it remains succinct and accessible. Foundational to this brief account is Schreiner’s career of careful exegetical and theological study and meditation. He reminds his readers that justification by faith alone is no mere theological quarrel. It is the source of the Christian’s assurance, freedom, and joy!”

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# Justification

*An Introduction*

Thomas R. Schreiner

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## Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in each of these studies, a theologian addresses the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what John Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called “lucid brevity.”

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus varies, each volume (1) introduces the doctrine, (2) sets it in context, (3) develops it from Scripture, (4) draws the various threads together, and (5) brings it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

## Preface

I am grateful to Oren Martin and Graham Cole for inviting me to write this book, and especially to Oren Martin who is my next-door neighbor and a precious friend! My thanks to Drs. Martin and Cole for editing my manuscript and for suggestions for improvement. I am also very grateful for my longtime friend Chris Cowan who did the editing for Crossway and for his keen eye and excellent editing skills. I should add my thanks to Crossway for also publishing this piece and for its faithful ministry in publishing books that are trustworthy and edifying.

I have written often about justification over the years, but I never tire of the topic since it addresses one of the most important issues in life: how can I be free from guilt when I stand before a holy God? This book is not a technical treatment of the doctrine of justification, but I hope readers see the biblical and historical underpinnings for the doctrine of justification. The doctrine should not only be presented, explicated, and defended in longer books but also in sermons, home Bible studies, college and seminary classes, and in books that summarize the main teaching. Many luminaries have preceded me in writing about justification, and I acknowledge my debt and my thanks to all who have taught me about this precious truth both in person and in their writings. Martin Luther was right in claiming that this truth must be regularly taught for the life and health of the

church, for once justification by faith alone is assumed, it is quickly forgotten. If we take justification by faith for granted, our eyes will move away from the grace of God and begin to focus on what we do and what we accomplish. Justification reminds us that salvation is God's work, that we have been favored by his love, and that our hope doesn't lie in ourselves but in Christ crucified and risen.

# Introduction

Justification isn't merely a doctrinal question but speaks to our relationship with the one true God, concerning how we can stand in the right before him. Hence, it is one of the most important questions in life. The question becomes particularly acute when we realize that we are sinners before a holy God, that our unrighteousness means that there is no reason God should count us as righteous before him. Since we have not obeyed the Lord, we deserve judgment rather than vindication. The Christian gospel, however, proclaims that we can be justified before the Holy One of Israel. The ungodly are declared to be in the right before the divine Judge if they put their faith in Jesus as the crucified and risen one.

The pastoral urgency of justification is evident since it speaks to our relationship with God, but the doctrine of justification raises serious academic and theological questions since it played a fundamental role in the division of the Western church in the sixteenth century. Jesus prayed that the church would be united, that the church would be one (John 17:21, 23), and yet this doctrine caused a great severing in the church, a separation that has continued to this day. Was such a separation worth it? Was it warranted, or did our ancestors, particularly our Reformed ancestors, go astray? One's answer depends on how one understands justification and how important the doctrine is

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deemed to be. The fracturing of the church is always a tragedy; nevertheless, Jesus didn't merely pray for unity but a unity that is rooted in the truth (John 17:17, 19). I will argue in this book that the division over justification was justified (pun intended!) since justification is integral to the gospel message we proclaim.

A brief sketch of what is to come in the ensuing chapters will assist readers in navigating this short study. We begin in chapter 1 by considering the history of the church. We aren't the first persons to consider what the Scriptures teach on justification, and thus a brief survey of how the doctrine was understood in church history is fitting. We are shaped and formed by those who have preceded us even if we are unaware of their influence, and thus traversing the historical landscape is imperative to gain a sharper profile in our own conception of the doctrine. Chapter 2 moves on to the Old Testament teaching on justification. Often people run to Paul, and to Paul only, on this matter, but such a perspective is truncated and even distorting. Sometimes Paul is portrayed as the lonely hero who trumpeted justification against all others. Even though Paul played a distinctive and formative role and presented the teaching on justification with a unique sharpness and clarity, his teaching was rooted in the Old Testament; it accorded with previous revelation.

Chapter 3 surveys what we learn from the Gospels, what we learn from Jesus of Nazareth on justification. A segment of scholarship has claimed that Paul reinvented Christianity, that his teaching was fundamentally opposed to the teaching of Jesus. Such objections have been raised particularly about justification as some have claimed that Jesus did not share Paul's understanding of justification. I will attempt to show that this objection misses the mark, that Jesus's teaching is the fountain from which Paul drinks. Paul didn't reinvent Christianity but, as one who lived in the time period after Christ's death and

resurrection, faithfully unpacked the message of the Messiah. Chapter 4 brings us to Paul, and most would assent to the notion that Paul explained and expounded justification in the midst of controversy, giving the doctrine a sharper edge, a clarity that naturally emerges when debate rages.

The remainder of the New Testament is surveyed in chapter 5. Justification certainly isn't addressed with the same focus in Acts, the General Epistles, and Revelation as it is in Paul. In fact, some of these writings don't speak to the issue at all. James has been considered particularly troublesome, leading some to think that we have an outright contradiction between Paul and James. I will contend that the teaching of justification is present in this literature more than we might expect and that Paul and James should be considered allies and friends in the same gospel. Some contemporary challenges to justification by faith alone will be the subject of chapter 6. We will concentrate on the new perspective on Paul (admittedly not very new anymore!) and the apocalyptic reading of Paul.

Chapter 7 will move in a new direction as we reflect on justification and systematic theology. Here we will explore the relationship of justification to other salvific realities, such as redemption, reconciliation, adoption, sanctification, and others. I will suggest that union with Christ is the overarching category into which these other soteric realities should be placed. Can we come to any conclusions about how justification should be integrated with these doctrines? Are there any theological judgments to be made about how the various dimensions of salvation should be assessed in relation to justification? I will argue that such systematic questions aren't alien to the biblical witness but foster a greater understanding, and I will make a couple of suggestions along these lines. The book will conclude with a brief epilogue reflecting on the path traveled and what it means for us today.





## Justification in Church History

The topic under consideration in this chapter—justification in church history—doesn't include the Old Testament and New Testament. Certainly, the scriptural witness is the most important history relative to justification, and most of this book will be devoted to the scriptural portrait of the doctrine. But in this chapter—before considering the biblical understanding—we consider briefly justification in the history of the church. It has often been said that we stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before us, and it would indeed be foolish to dive into justification without exploring what Christians in the previous centuries have said.

Some (perhaps only a few) Protestants have had the strange idea that most of what was written before our time or before the Reformation is useless or even harmful. A moment's reflection should shake us out of such a mistaken notion. Many godly and learned Christians have studied the Bible over the centuries, and their intent in studying wasn't to distort the biblical teachings so

as to advance their own prejudices. Of course, they made mistakes and had blind spots, but the same is true of us. We aren't free of presuppositions and prejudices either. We don't venerate our ancestors in the faith, as if they are infallible guides to the meaning of the Scriptures and of justification in particular. Neither do we ignore them, as if they had nothing to say, as if they were all captured by alien ideologies. The Scriptures are the final authority, but the many godly believers who have walked the road of discipleship before us are also honored as our teachers.

### **The Early Church**

Some scholars have maintained that the early church writers didn't understand Paul's teaching on justification, and thus the truth was lost in the early history of the church.<sup>1</sup> It seems that the situation was more complicated than this. When we actually look at the evidence, we have a number of affirmations of justification by faith and, in some cases, even of justification by faith alone.<sup>2</sup> The epistle 1 Clement was probably written ca. AD 96, and he clearly affirms that justification does not come from piety or works but by faith (1 Clem. 32:3–4). Similarly, the letters of Ignatius were written early in the second century. He doesn't feature the word "justification," but the concept is present, as he emphasizes the grace of Christ in his death and resurrection, finding his hope in God's mercy (*Magn.* 8:1; *Phld.* 5:1–2; 8:2; 9:2; *Smyrn.* 6:1–2; 11:1).

The most beautiful statement about justification stems from the Epistle to Diognetus 9:2–5, which was written in the second century. It is worth reproducing here in full.

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1. E.g., Thomas F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1948).

2. For a defense of this view, see Brian J. Arnold, *Justification in the Second Century* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018). See also the excellent survey from Michael Horton, *Justification*, New Studies in Dogmatics, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2018), 1:39–91. This chapter draws especially on these two sources.

But when our unrighteousness was fulfilled, and it had been made perfectly clear that its wages—punishment and death—were to be expected, then the season arrived during which God had decided to reveal at last his goodness and power (oh, the surpassing kindness and love of God!). He did not hate us, or reject us, or bear a grudge against us; instead he was patient and forbearing; in his mercy he took upon himself our sins; he himself gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the guiltless for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!<sup>3</sup>

The majesty and beauty of this text are striking, and we can scarcely say that no one in the early church understood justification by faith! Sinners are justified by God's grace as the Son of God took upon himself the guilt we deserved.

The Odes of Solomon were written in the second century and are relatively unknown, but they clearly teach that justification is rooted in God's kindness and grace instead of human merit (Odes Sol. 25:4), emphasizing God's gracious election (Odes Sol. 4:7; 8:13; 10:3; 12:3; 23:2–3; 41:9). It is also interesting to note that justification is understood to be forensic and not transformative (Odes Sol. 25:8, 10; 33:12), and in this respect the Odes anticipate the Reformed understanding.

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3. "The Epistle to Diognetus," in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations of Their Writings*, ed. and trans. Michael W. Holmes, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 709, 711.

Justin Martyr engaged in a famous debate with Trypho (see *Dialogue with Trypho*) who was a Jewish opponent, and the debate between them reminds us in many respects of Paul's controversy with the Galatian false teachers. Trypho emphasized that one should be circumcised and keep the law to be saved, echoing Paul's opponents in Galatia. Justin affirms that justification is by faith, insisting that circumcision is unnecessary for salvation (*Dial.* 23.3–4; 92.2). Any works-righteousness (*Dial.* 137.1–2) is rejected since salvation comes through Jesus's work on the cross instead of performing of the law (*Dial.* 11:4–5; 137.1). Believers are righteous through Jesus's death since he died in the place of believers, taking on himself the curse believers deserve (*Dial.* 95:1–3).

Another great thinker in the early church, one who could even be described as the first to engage in biblical theology, was Irenaeus (ca. 130–202). Irenaeus doesn't work out the meaning of justification specifically, but he is famous for teaching that Jesus recapitulated human experience and that he reconciled sinners to himself in his death so that victory over sin and death is achieved in the cross of Christ.

Origen (185–254) is a rather mixed figure theologically, but he rightly discerns in the story of the thief on the cross that we are justified by faith.<sup>4</sup> Righteousness doesn't come, says Origen, from works of the law but is founded on our faith. At the same time, Origen emphasizes that those who exercise faith will do good works, and in this he is thoroughly biblical. Origen wasn't completely consistent, however, and also said some things that indicate a belief in merit. He anticipates the new perspective in identifying the works of the law as referring to Jewish practices. Also, Origen's notion that justification secures forgiveness only for past sins is inadequate, and it seems

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4. For the view on Origen summarized here, see Horton, *Justification*, 1:54–66.

that he sees justification as a process instead of a declaration. Nick Needham has argued, however, that most of the early fathers believed justification was forensic and declarative instead of being transformative and a process.<sup>5</sup> Those who are Reformed recognize deficiencies in Origen, but it is also important to recognize that justification hadn't been debated and worked out thoroughly in the early church, and thus we should not be surprised by lack of precision and even some missteps along the way.

Many other testimonies could be mentioned. The fourth-century writer Theodoret of Cyrhuss comments on Ephesians 2:8: "It is not of our own accord that we have believed, . . . and even when we had come to believe, He did not require of us purity of life, but approving mere faith, God bestowed on us forgiveness of sins."<sup>6</sup> We see here an early and faithful commentary on Ephesians 2:8, and it is fair to say that forgiveness of sins is another way of talking about justification. Chrysostom, known as one of the greatest preachers in the early church, interpreted Ephesians 2:8 similarly. He differed from some of the Reformers, however, in his understanding of free will.<sup>7</sup> In any case, Chrysostom believed that one was required to obey the law perfectly to be justified, and thus human beings can't be justified by their works. Chrysostom's understanding of the works of the law matches what we see in the Reformers. Thus, justification isn't through human merit but divine grace, and the good works human beings do are a result of God's grace.

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5. Nick Needham, "Justification in the Early Church Fathers," in *Justification in Perspective: Historical Developments and Contemporary Challenges*, ed. Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 27–37.

6. Cited from Thomas C. Oden, *The Justification Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002), 45.

7. On Chrysostom, see Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 44–45; John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Second Corinthians*, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, First Series, ed. Philip Schaff, 14 vols. (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1889), 12:334.

Marius Victorinus wrote in the mid-fourth century, teaching that we aren't saved by our virtue nor our merits and that we can't stand in the right before God by the works of the law.<sup>8</sup> Salvation is by God's grace, and the good works that follow are also enabled by his grace. Hilary of Poitiers also wrote in the fourth century, affirming that justification cannot come via the law since human beings are sinners.<sup>9</sup> He repeatedly emphasizes that salvation is by faith. He remarks that Abraham, the thief on the cross, and the eleventh-hour workers in the vineyard (Matt. 20:1–16) are all justified by faith. Interestingly, Hilary says that justification is by faith alone: "Because faith alone justifies . . . publicans and prostitutes will be the first in the kingdom of heaven." Ambrosiaster, the name given to an unknown writer in the early church, also taught that justification was by faith alone.<sup>10</sup> The precision of the Reformed view is missing since he spoke about meriting a final reward. The word "merit" is unfortunate, but we may assign a meaning to the word from our post-Reformation perspective that wasn't intended by Ambrosiaster, and the latter concurred with the mainstream view in emphasizing the importance of good works.

Augustine (354–430) was a towering figure, and we can rightly say that no theologian influenced all of Christendom more than he.<sup>11</sup> Augustine's understanding of grace anticipated and influenced the Reformers. His doctrine of predestination should be placed within his theology of grace, and since God's electing grace brings us to faith, it follows that justification is God's gift. In Augustine's anti-Pelagian writings he regularly sounds the note that believers are saved by grace instead of

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8. See D. E. H. Williams, "Justification by Faith: A Patristic Doctrine," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57 (2006): 655–56.

9. For Hilary's view, including the citation here, see Williams, "Justification by Faith," 657–60.

10. See again Williams, "Justification by Faith," 662.

11. On Augustine, see Horton, *Justification*, 1:84–91.

by works, emphasizing that everything we do that is pleasing to God depends on God's gift. Every good thing in us is given graciously by God himself (1 Cor. 4:7). The works of the law aren't limited to the ceremonial law for Augustine but include the entirety of the law so that no human being may be justified before God by virtue of his goodness.

Augustine differs from the Reformers in an important respect, in that he defines the word "justify" so that it means "make righteous" instead of "declare righteous," though there are places in his writings where the declarative sense is present. Thus, for Augustine justification isn't only imputed but also inherent; it isn't a once-for-all declaration but a process, and thus justification doesn't describe a legal verdict only but also the ongoing transformation of believers. What this means is that the distinction between justification and sanctification that is well-known to those nurtured in Reformed theology doesn't represent the Augustinian perspective. In Augustine's theology sanctification and justification are two different metaphors for the progressive work of God in Christ. What stands out in his theology, however, is the efficacy of grace since God's grace grants faith and love to those whom he has elected from the foundation of the world.

### **Thomas Aquinas**

We are skipping over a large period of time here, but the perspective of Augustine and other early writers dominated the medieval period. The next person we should consider is Thomas Aquinas (1225–74), whose thinking has influenced Roman Catholicism dramatically down to the present day.<sup>12</sup> The mature work of Aquinas shows that he was an Augustinian in his understanding of grace and predestination, and thus Aquinas

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12. For this section, see esp. Horton, *Justification*, 1:93–129.



doesn't ground justification in the work of human beings. He rejects the idea that justification comes from obeying either the ceremonial or moral law, and thus he differs from Origen and from the Council of Trent on this score. Aquinas sees faith as a gift, but he also thinks that faith is formed by love, which was a common medieval reading of the relationship between faith and love. He says, "The movement of faith is not perfect unless it is quickened by charity; hence in the justification of the ungodly, a movement of charity is infused together with the movement of faith."<sup>13</sup> Endorsing the idea that faith is formed by love smuggles good works into justification, and this isn't entirely surprising since Aquinas follows Augustine in understanding justification as renovative and transformative instead of being declarative and forensic.<sup>14</sup> Justification is a process by which the soul is healed and changed. Faith since it is formed by love is virtuous, and thus merit plays a role in justification. Still, Aquinas assigns all merit to God's electing and predestinating grace, and thus the good human beings do comes from God himself.

## Reformation

The Reformation dawned in a world where justification was understood in terms of inner renewal and transformation, following the theology of Augustine and Aquinas among others. Nevertheless, the particular conception of grace found in Augustine and Aquinas wasn't accepted by all. Gabriel Biel (ca. 1420–95) represented a common Catholic conception of the day in claiming that God helps those who do their best. In

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13. See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1–2.113.4. I used the following text for Aquinas: *Summa Theologiae Prima Secundae*, 71–114, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, vol. 16 of *Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012).

14. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 1–2.113.1.

Biel's mind this understanding was still gracious since God had set up this arrangement covenantally. The emphasis was on preparing ourselves to receive the grace of God, and this was compared to putting up the sails of a ship to catch the wind or to opening the shutters of one's house to let the light stream in.<sup>15</sup> According to this view, human beings take the first step in their relationship with God, and the onus is on human beings to prepare themselves to receive God's grace.

A response to such teaching—a response that changed the course of history—emerged as Martin Luther (1483–1546) burst on the scene. Luther didn't use the exact words that “the church stands and falls” with respect to justification, but he clearly assents to this notion: “Because if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses.”<sup>16</sup> Luther counters the Augustinian tradition with respect to justification in arguing that justification is forensic—people are declared righteous, not made righteous. Such a reading represented a dramatic shift away from the majority view. Righteousness is no longer located fundamentally in the human subject. It is a legal declaration based on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Second, justification, according to Luther, should be distinguished from sanctification. Often these two were conflated and confused as if they signified the same reality. In sanctification we have a combination of faith and works, though many emphasized that all works flow from faith. Luther famously emphasized that we are justified by faith alone (German: *allein*). “We are pronounced righteous solely by faith in Christ, not by

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15. For these illustrations, see Alister E. McGrath, *From the Beginnings to 1500*, vol. 1 of *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 84–85, 90.

16. See Justin Taylor, “Luther’s Saying: ‘Justification is the Article by Which the Church Stands and Falls,’” *The Gospel Coalition*, August 31, 2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org>.

the works of the Law or by love.”<sup>17</sup> Faith alone justifies “because faith brings us the spirit gained by the merits of Christ.”<sup>18</sup> Faith saves because it “takes hold of Christ and believes that my sin and death are damned and abolished in the sin and death of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> Luther affirms that the life of faith isn’t easy, expressing this truth powerfully. He remarks, “The words ‘freedom from the wrath of God, from the Law, sin, death, etc.,’ are easy to say, but to feel the greatness of the freedom and to apply its results to oneself in a struggle, in the agony of conscience, and in practice—this is more difficult than anyone can say.”<sup>20</sup> Luther recognized that we can affirm a doctrine in our heads and find, at the same time, that it is difficult to live out in our daily lives.

In sanctification human beings are slowly transformed by the grace of God, but in justification we are declared righteous on the basis of God’s work in Christ alone. As believers we are justified and at the same time sinners (Latin: *simul iustus et peccator*). Luther doesn’t deny the importance of good works, and he regularly wrote about this matter. “It is true that faith alone justifies, without works; but I am speaking about genuine faith, which after it has justified, will not go to sleep but is active through love.”<sup>21</sup> Still, justification and sanctification should not be melded together and confused, and the fundamental character of justification must be recognized.

Along the same lines and thirdly, justification is imputed, not imparted. Believers who are united to Christ receive an alien

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17. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 1–4*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, vol. 26 of *Luther’s Works* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 137.

18. Martin Luther, “Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans,” in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 22.

19. Luther, *Galatians 1–4*, 160.

20. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1535: Chapters 5–6*, vol. 27 of *Luther’s Works*, 5.

21. Luther, *Galatians 5–6*, 30.

righteousness.<sup>22</sup> The implications of this teaching are dramatic. Imputation may sound cold and legalistic, but for Luther justification becomes ours as we are married to Christ, united to him by faith. Jesus is our bridegroom, and we are his bride. We are justified because we belong to him. Justification isn't located in the human subject but is ascribed solely and completely to the grace of God.

Another interpretation of Luther's understanding of justification has surfaced today, and it is commonly labeled the Finnish view of Luther.<sup>23</sup> According to this reading, believers participate with Christ and are granted attributes of his divine presence. In the Finnish reading, justification is closely related to the Greek notion of *theosis*, which means believers are deified. Deification, according to this understanding, should not be read to say that believers are gods, but it emphasizes human transformation so that on this reading justification isn't forensic only. For those who accept the Finnish reading, justification and sanctification for Luther should not be distinguished since both involve moral transformation. The Finnish reading has stirred up much discussion because it represents a radically different view of Luther. It is certainly intriguing and fascinating, but it should be rejected as unconvincing.<sup>24</sup>

At least three reasons show the inadequacy of the Finnish interpretation of Luther. First, Luther endorsed Melancthon's forensic and legal explanation of justification in 1531. Such an endorsement doesn't make sense if Luther believed that justification should be understood in terms of deification since

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22. See Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans," 86–88.

23. See especially Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification*, ed. K. Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005).

24. See especially Carl R. Trueman, "Is the Finnish Line a New Beginning? A Critical Assessment of the Reading of Luther Offered by the Helsinki Circle," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 231–44; William W. Schumacher, *Who Do I Say That You Are? Anthropology and the Theology of Theosis in the Finnish School of Tuomo Mannermaa* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2010).

Melanchthon's reading is almost the exact opposite of such an interpretation. Second, and related to the first, the Finnish interpretation concentrates on the early Luther instead of the later and mature Luther. Luther wrote and said some things early in his ministry that he qualified or even rejected as the years passed. When we study a scholar, his entire career and body of work should be considered. It makes sense, though, that the later and mature work of a scholar should be the most important. This is particularly the case with Luther who hammered out his theology in controversy, sharpening and defining his positions as time passed. Third, the credibility of the Finnish view is undermined by Luther's rejection of the teaching of Andreas Osiander (1498–1552). This isn't the place to delve into the complexities of Osiander's view, but in many respects it is quite similar to the Finnish interpretation of Luther. Luther's firm rejection of Osiander, then, is hard to understand if he endorsed the Finnish understanding. It is safe to conclude, then, that Luther's reading of justification was forensic instead of transformative and that he did not understand justification in terms of deification.

There were many luminaries in the Reformation, but in a brief survey like this we concentrate on the other great Reformer, John Calvin (1509–64), who still stands out today for his exposition and defense of the Reformed faith. Like Luther, he insisted that justification was by faith alone. Faith isn't a virtue that justifies us, but instead faith is the instrument or vehicle that unites us with Christ, confirming that we are justified by the crucified and risen one. Faith, according to Calvin, is a gift of God. We experience the sweetness of God's love and are ravished by his love, and as a consequence we put our trust in the Lord. Calvin's definition of faith is well-known. "Now we shall possess a right definition of faith if we call it a firm and certain

knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."<sup>25</sup> Justification plays a vital pastoral role since those who are justified gain assurance and confidence as they look toward the day of judgment. Some have misunderstood Calvin's view of assurance as if he believed that believers were always full of assurance and boldness, but he recognized that believers suffer ups and downs in the life of faith and that clouds could obscure the boldness we have as believers. At the end of the day faith means that we look away from ourselves and trust in Jesus Christ, that our faith grows as we consider Christ and his benefits.

Calvin also stresses that justification involves imputation. Those who put their trust in Christ are forgiven of their sins, and their righteousness is extrinsic instead of intrinsic. Justification, according to Calvin, then, is not transformative or an infusion of righteousness. Justification is a law court reality, and those who are united to Christ by faith are counted as righteous before God; they are declared righteous rather than being made righteous. Since this is the case, our justification doesn't improve or grow. We are perfect from the beginning. Calvin puts it this way, "Therefore, we explain justification simply as the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sin and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."<sup>26</sup> According to Calvin, "We do not, therefore, contemplate him outside ourselves from afar in order that his righteousness may be imputed to us but because we put on Christ and are engrafted into his body—in short, because he deigns to make us one with him."<sup>27</sup>

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25. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.2.7 (1:551).

26. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.2 (1:727).

27. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.11 (1:737).

Sanctification should not be confused with justification. Calvin puts this memorably: “It is therefore faith alone which justifies, and yet the faith which justifies is not alone: just as the heat alone of the sun which warms the earth, and yet in the sun it is not alone, because it is constantly conjoined with light.”<sup>28</sup> Calvin distinguishes between justification and sanctification, but he is clear about the importance of good works, seeing them as the fruit of faith.

### **Roman Catholic Response: Council of Trent**

It wasn't as if the church at large had come to universal agreement regarding the meaning of justification before the time of the Reformation. We saw from the earliest days of the church that there were various understandings disseminated. The Reformation understanding, however, set alarms ringing in the Catholic hierarchy. This response was formalized in the Council of Trent, which consisted of many meetings where Roman Catholic doctrine was hammered out between 1545 and 1563. Still, before the Council of Trent, there was a surprising attempt to bring a rapprochement between Roman Catholics and Protestants at the Regensburg Colloquy in 1541. Amazingly enough, the statement on justification generated significant agreement, and Calvin himself was sympathetic. Luther, on the other hand, was suspicious from the outset and felt that the statement on justification was an attempt to stitch together Protestant and Catholic views that were fundamentally contradictory. At the end of the day, the statement at Regensburg was ambiguous, and sadly the colloquy dissolved without reaching an agreement.

The controversy over justification was intense, and predictably, although unfortunately, the Council of Trent almost

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28. The citation is taken from Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 181.

completely repudiated the Protestant view of justification. The notion that Christians are justified by faith alone was rejected.<sup>29</sup> Instead, it was argued that faith and works cooperate together, and thus a progressive view of justification was endorsed.<sup>30</sup> Good works aren't merely the fruit of justification but were considered to be one of the causes and grounds of such.<sup>31</sup> All of this means that justification was understood to be inherent and infused, and thus the formula *sola fide* was rejected. According to Trent, faith cooperates with good works and increases our justification. The relationship between faith and works enunciated at Trent indicates that justification wasn't considered to be forensic and declarative but transformative and inherent. Righteousness is imparted and infused; it is not imputed. We are not surprised, then, to find that sanctification is merged together with justification. If justification is progressive and infused, then salvation that is given to sinners when they believe can also be lost if believers cease to cooperate with God's grace. The Roman Catholic Church clarified its understanding of justification at Trent. Righteousness is inherent and not forensic, a process and not a declaration. Justification isn't by faith alone, but faith and works together constitute justification. We see, then, the sharp disjunctives that emerged over justification. For the Reformed, justification was imputed and gave assurance of salvation, but Roman Catholics rejected imputation and the notion that believers could be confident of final salvation based on Christ's imputed righteousness.

Still, Trent was over five hundred years ago, and there is a remarkable diversity in Roman Catholicism today. The conception articulated at Trent doesn't represent the view of all

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29. Council of Trent, Session 6, "On Justification," January 13, 1547, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net>, canon 9.

30. Council of Trent, "On Justification," canon 7, 16.

31. Council of Trent, "On Justification," canon 24.



Catholics today. At the same time, we must also recognize that the *official* position of the Roman Catholic Church hasn't changed substantially since Trent, and this is seen quite clearly in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. For instance, the *Catechism* rightly sees that justification involves the forgiveness of sins, but it follows Trent in defining justification as "the sanctification and renewal of the inner man."<sup>32</sup> The influence of Augustine and his heirs is evident since justification means not only to declare righteous but also to make righteous. We read that justification "frees from the enslavement to sin" and "heals."<sup>33</sup> Baptism, instead of personal faith, confers the grace of justification since infants are justified when they are baptized.<sup>34</sup> Justification is envisioned as a cooperative project involving God and the human person<sup>35</sup> where both do their part. Justification and sanctification aren't distinguished since the former is described as a process that entails "the *sanctification* of his whole being."<sup>36</sup> The cooperation necessary in Roman Catholic theology manifests itself particularly in the role that the sacraments play in final salvation. Catholic theology recognizes that human beings can't merit God's approval in a strict sense.<sup>37</sup> The merit granted to human beings comes as a gracious gift from God's hand,<sup>38</sup> but that is not the final word since merit is also attributed "to man's collaboration."<sup>39</sup> The *Catechism* states, "No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain

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32. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, rev. ed. (New York: Random House, 2012), 1989; cf. 2019. The preceding numbers represent the *Catechism* paragraph numbers. So also in the following notes.

33. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1990.

34. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1992.

35. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2002.

36. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1995 (emphasis in original).

37. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2007.

38. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2008–2009, 2011.

39. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2025.

eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods.”<sup>40</sup> Officially, then, Roman Catholicism has not changed its mind since Trent: justification and sanctification still portray the same state of affairs. Justification is transformative and a process, fitting with the sacramental theology of the Catholic Church.<sup>41</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Our tour of history has taken us from the early church until modern Catholicism. We saw that in the early church a number of writers claimed that justification was by faith instead of works, and some even said that justification was by faith alone. At the same time, most writers also affirmed the importance of good works for salvation. Both of these themes are scarcely surprising since they are both in the Bible. The early church did not work out theologically or in a nuanced way the meaning of justification. Many conceived of justification forensically, but under the influence of Augustine the transformative understanding of justification was dominant in the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the Augustinian understanding of grace was such that many ascribed justification to God’s electing grace. And yet as time passed, notions of preparing oneself to receive God’s grace that emphasized the role of human choice became prominent.

The Magisterial Reformers struck out against these conceptions, articulating justification in a new and fresh way, emphasizing that justification was declarative instead of transformative, imputed instead of imparted, and extrinsic instead of intrinsic. Justification was by faith alone through grace alone to the glory of God alone. Roman Catholics at the Council of Trent and

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40. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2027.

41. See the important works by Gregg R. Allison, *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice: An Evangelical Assessment* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014) and *40 Questions about Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2021).

in the Catholic catechism of the twentieth century responded in turn against such Protestant understandings, affirming that human beings cooperate with God's grace in justification. They saw justification as a process where God's grace could be lost. Reformed and Lutheran orthodoxy after the Reformation consolidated and sharpened the insights of the Reformation relative to justification in the years after the dawn of the Reformation. When we look at catechisms and confessions among Catholics and orthodox Protestants, the differences between Protestants and Roman Catholics haven't changed fundamentally since the time of the Reformation, though we can find plenty of individual Protestants and Roman Catholics today who dissent from the official teaching of their church constituencies. This is not to say that new views weren't being disseminated in succeeding centuries as historical critical study began to wield its influence among biblical scholars. It isn't the purpose of this book to discuss justification in historical-critical scholarship, though some contemporary challenges to the historic Reformed position will be considered further in chapter 6.