

A HISTORICAL SURVEY OF THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH ALONE
by Pastor Steve Weaver

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the historical development of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Justification is the “declaring of a person to be just or righteous.”¹ This doctrine will be surveyed by the examination of four major periods in the history of the church: the pre-Reformation era; the Reformation era; the post-Reformation era; and, the Modern era. In the sections on the first three periods, the views of two prominent theologians will be examined in an attempt to understand the doctrine in their era. In the section on the last period, the Modern era, three recent attacks against the traditional understanding of justification will be examined.

**The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone
in the Pre-Reformation Era**

The two most prominent theologians in the pre-Reformation era were Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. These men continue to be regarded as two of the greatest theologians who have ever lived. Their contribution to the doctrine of justification by faith alone should not be ignored. The difficulty of examining both Augustine’s and Aquinas’ views of justification is that their views were not as well developed as the reformer’s who came later. However, there is enough material in the writings of these men to investigate their positions.

¹Leon Morris, “Justification,” in *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. Walter A. Elwell. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996), 441.

Augustine

Augustine (354-430), the bishop of Hippo, was the first towering figure in the history of the church who addressed with any kind of clarity the doctrine of justification by faith alone. His treatment of this doctrine was in the context of the Pelagian controversy which was brought about by Pelagius' reaction to a prayer by Augustine. The line which disturbed Pelagius was: "Grant what you command and command what you will."² Pelagius did not believe God would ever command anything of His creatures of which they were incapable. Therefore, the request to "Grant what you command . . ." was unnecessary in Pelagius' opinion. This disagreement created the context in which Augustine would discuss the basis of justification. By examining the arguments by Augustine against Pelagius, a clear doctrine of justification is observable.

Pelagius' belief that humans are born "with a capacity for good and evil" led to the idea that humans could perform meritorious acts which would cause them to be accepted by God.³ It was against this belief that Augustine stated, "The righteousness of the saints in this world consists more in the forgiveness of sins than in perfection of virtues."⁴ For Augustine, the basis for our forgiveness was not in man's "virtues," but only in the embracing of the work of Christ. He made this clear by saying that forgiveness comes, "when forgetting our own merits, we embrace Christ's gifts."⁵

²Augustine, *Confessions*, X, 40; in *St Augustine's Confessions*, Loeb Classical Library, ed. W. Watts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), 150.

³Pelagius, *pro libero arbitrio*, as reported by Augustine, *de peccato originale*, XIII, 14; in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum*, vol. 42, ed. C.F. Urba and J. Zycha (Vienna: Tempsky, 1902), 175.22-7.

⁴Augustine, *City of God* XIX. xxvii (MPL 41. 657; tr. NPNF II. 419).

⁵Augustine, *Sermons* .clxxiv. 2 (MPL 38. 941; tr. LF *Sermons* II. 891 f.).

What is implied in the above statements is explicitly stated in a letter written against the Pelagians. In it he states, “Our religion distinguishes the just from the unjust not by the law of works but by that of faith.”⁶ Although Augustine never uses the phrase “justification by faith alone,” it is clear from his writings that he believed in a righteousness given by faith and based on the work of Christ. His statement that the just are just “not by the law of works but by that of faith,” is equivalent to saying men are justified by faith alone.

Thomas Aquinas

The most famous and influential theologian of the Middle Ages was probably Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-74). His *Summa Theologica* is widely regarded as the greatest work of medieval theology.⁷ Despite the enormity of his work of six volumes, there is relatively little concerning the doctrine of justification by faith. Aquinas’ vacuity upon this topic is noteworthy. It indicates that he did not consider the doctrine to be as important as the Reformers later would. Undoubtedly, the lack of emphasis which justification by faith alone receives in the *Summa* heavily influenced the Medieval church’s faulty understanding concerning justification.

Notwithstanding the small amount of attention which Aquinas gives to the doctrine of justification, he does address it in his “Treatise on Grace” in Vol. 2 of the *Summa Theologica*. Aquinas affirms that justification originates with God’s grace. He wrote, “The entire justification of the ungodly consists as to its origin in the infusion of grace. For it is by grace that free-will is moved and sin is remitted.”⁸ In another place Aquinas acknowledged the necessity of faith in

⁶Augustine, *Against Two Letters of the Pelagians* III. v. 14 (MPL 44. 597 f.; tr. NPNF V. 404).

⁷Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), 136.

⁸Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (Benziger Bros.1947) II. 113.7.

justification by saying, “It is clear that in the justification of the ungodly an act of faith is required in order that a man may believe that God justifies man through the mystery of Christ.”⁹

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone in the Reformation Era

The obscurity concerning the doctrine of justification in the pre-Reformation era was removed by the dawn of the Reformation era. R.C. Sproul, author of *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* writes about the importance of the Reformation:

In the old city of Geneva, Switzerland, there is a lovely park adjacent to the University of Geneva, close to the church where John Calvin preached and taught daily. The park contains a lasting memorial to the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. The central feature is a magnificent wall adorned with statues of John Calvin, John Knox, Huldrych Zwingli, Theodore Beza, and others. Chiseled into the stone are the Latin words *Post tenebras lux* (After darkness, light).

These words capture the driving force of the Reformation. The darkness referred to is the eclipse of the gospel that occurred in the late Middle Ages. A gradual darkening of the gospel reached its nadir, and the light of the New Testament doctrine of justification by faith alone was all but extinguished.¹⁰

But the Reformation reignited “the light of the New Testament doctrine of justification by faith alone” and the flame continues to burn up to this present day. Two men tower above all others during this period: Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Martin Luther

Martin Luther (1483-1546) called the doctrine of justification by faith alone “the

⁹Ibid., II. 113.4.

¹⁰R.C. Sproul. *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), 17.

article upon which the church stands or falls” (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).¹¹

Biographer Roland Bainton recorded Luther’s own description of his discovery of this truth:

I greatly longed to understand Paul’s Epistle to the Romans and nothing stood in the way but that one expression, “the justice of God,” because I took it to mean that justice whereby God is just and deals justly in punishing the unjust. My situation was that, although an impeccable monk, I stood before God as a sinner troubled in conscience, and I had no confidence that my merit would assuage him. Therefore I did not love a just and angry God, but rather hated and murmured against him. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant.

Night and day I pondered until I saw the connection between the justice of God and the statement that “the just shall live by his faith.” Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open doors into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the “justice of God” had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gate to heaven. . . .¹²

Luther’s commitment to the absolute necessity of faith alone for justification is evident in all of his writings. No one in the history of the church was more captivated by this doctrine than was he. But while Luther understood faith as the means of justification, he also understood the ground of justification to be nothing more than the grace and mercy of God shown to sinners because of the perfect life and work of Christ. He said it this way:

[A Christian] is righteous and holy by an alien or foreign holiness – I call it this for the sake of instruction – that is, he is righteous by the mercy and grace of God. This mercy and grace is not something human; it is not some sort of disposition or quality in the heart. It is a divine blessing, given us through the true knowledge of the Gospel, when we know or believe that our sin has been forgiven through the grace and merit of Christ. . . . Is not this righteousness an alien righteousness? It consists completely in the indulgence of another and is a pure gift of God, who shows mercy and favor for Christ’s sake. . . .¹³

¹¹Ibid., 67.

¹²Roland H. Bainton, *Here I Stand: A Life of Martin Luther* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1950), 65.

¹³Sproul, *Faith Alone*, 73.

John Calvin

Like Martin Luther, John Calvin (1509-64) insisted that justification is essential to true Christianity. Calvin deals extensively with this subject in his writings. He began the chapter in the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* on justification by faith with these words which underscore the importance he believed this doctrine held. He wrote:

Therefore we must now address these matters thoroughly. And we must so discuss them as to bear in mind that this is the main hinge on which religion turns, so that we devote the greater attention and care to it. For unless you first of all grasp what your relationship to God is, and the nature of his judgment concerning you, you have neither a foundation on which to establish your salvation nor one on which to build piety toward God.¹⁴

For Calvin, the “main hinge on which religion turns” is the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Later, in the same chapter, Calvin explained his understanding of justification:

He is said to be justified in God’s sight who is both reckoned righteous in God’s judgment and has been accepted on account of his righteousness. . . . Thus, justified before God is the man who, freed from the company of sinners, has God to witness and affirm his righteousness. In the same way, therefore, he in whose life that purity and holiness will be found which deserves a testimony of righteousness before God’s throne will be said to be justified by works or else he who, by the wholeness of his works, can meet and satisfy God’s judgment. On the contrary, justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.

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 sins and the imputation of Christ’s righteousness.¹⁵

Calvin uses the biblical metaphor of clothing to convey the idea of imputation. God credits Christ’s righteousness, which is foreign to us, to ones’ account by faith and he is “clothed in it.” This clothing makes one acceptable to God and enables Him to receive sinners as righteous ones.

¹⁴John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:726 (3.11.1).

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 1:726-27 (3.11.2).

Calvin makes it very clear that our justification does not rest upon our own merit but on the merit of Christ. This merit is given to the believer because of his union with Christ.

Calvin explained this by stating that the believer is a partaker in Christ and possess all His riches:

From this it is also evident that we are justified before God solely by the intercession of Christ's righteousness. This is equivalent to saying that man is not righteous in himself but because the righteousness of Christ is communicated to him by imputation – something worth carefully noting. . . .

You see that our righteousness is not in us but in Christ, that we possess it only because we are partakers in Christ; indeed, with him we possess all its riches.¹⁶

Calvin, like Luther and Augustine, saw a vital link between our righteousness before God and the righteousness of Christ.

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone in the Post-Reformation Era

During the post-Reformation era there was an explosion in the development of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Many of the Puritans of the seventeenth century wrote about this subject and their followers in the succeeding years have hardly been silent concerning the doctrine of justification by faith alone. However, there are two men whose prominence during this period is acknowledged by all: Jonathan Edwards and Charles Hodge. Their treatment of this matter will suffice to provide the development of this doctrine during this period.

Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) was the leading exponent of Puritanism in North America during the eighteenth century. He is considered by many to be the greatest thinker which this continent has ever produced. His views on this subject are important to all who seek

¹⁶Calvin, *Institutes*, 1:753 (3.11.23).

to understand the historical development of this doctrine.

In a discourse titled “Justification by Faith Alone,” he defined justification in the following way:

A Person is said to be justified, when he is approved of God as free from the guilt of sin and its deserved punishment, and as having that righteousness belonging to him that entitles to the reward of life. That we should take the word in such a sense, and understand it as the judge’s accepting a person as having both a negative and positive righteousness belonging to him, and looking on him therefore as not only free from any obligation to punishment, but also as just and righteous, and so entitled to a positive reward, is not only most agreeable to the etymology and natural import of the word, which signifies to pass one for righteous in judgment, but also manifestly agreeable to the force of the word as used in Scripture.¹⁷

Edwards’ definition includes not only the forgiveness of sins, but also emphasizes the legal pronouncement of righteousness. Edwards understood justification as more than freedom from the punishment of sin, but also the crediting of righteousness that entitles one to a positive reward.

The source of the positive righteousness which Edwards sees as an important part of justification is Jesus Christ’s righteousness which is imputed to the believer. Edwards explains:

And by that righteousness being imputed to us, is meant no other than this, that the righteousness of Christ is accepted for us, and admitted instead of that perfect inherent righteousness which ought to be in ourselves. Christ’s perfect obedience shall be reckoned to our account, so that we shall have the benefit of it, as though we had performed it ourselves. And so we suppose that a title to eternal life is given us as the reward of this righteousness. . . .¹⁸

Clearly, Edwards was in the line of Augustine, Luther and Calvin in regards to the source of the righteousness that is imputed to the believer in justification. Each saw a indispensable link

¹⁷Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc. 1998), 1:623.

¹⁸Ibid., 1:635.

between the believer's righteousness and the righteousness of Christ.

Charles Hodge

The great Princeton theologian, Charles Hodge (1797-1878) was the most influential Presbyterian theologian of the nineteenth century. In his *Systematic Theology*, he wrote extensively about the doctrine of justification. In this work there is an excellent definition of the doctrine which is representative of the thought of his day. Hodge asserted that justification is:

1. An act, and not, as sanctification, a continued and progressive work.
2. It is an act of grace to the sinner. In himself he deserves condemnation when God justifies him.
3. As to the nature of the act, it is, in the first place, not an efficient act, or an act of power. It does not produce any subjective change in the person justified. It does not effect a change of character, making those good who were bad, those holy who were unholy. That is done in regeneration and sanctification. That second place, it is not a mere executive act, as when a sovereign pardons a criminal, and thereby restores him to his civil rights, or to his former status in the commonwealth. In the third place, it is a forensic, or judicial act, the act of a judge, not of a sovereign. That is, in the case of the sinner, or, *in foro Dei*, it is an act of God not in his character of sovereign, but in his character of judge. It is a declarative act in which God pronounces the sinner just or righteous, that is, declares that the claims of justice, so far as he is concerned, are satisfied, so that he cannot be justly condemned, but is in justice entitled to the reward promised or due to perfect righteousness.
4. The meritorious ground of justification is not faith; we are not justified on account of our faith, considered as a virtuous or holy act or state of mind. Nor are our works of any kind the ground of justification. Nothing done by us or wrought in us satisfies the demands of justice, or can be the ground or reason of the declaration that justice as far as it concerns us is satisfied. The ground of justification is the righteousness of Christ, active and passive, *i.e.*, including his perfect obedience to the law as a covenant, and his enduring the penalty of the law in our stead and on our behalf.
5. The righteousness of Christ is in justification imputed to the believer. That is, is set to his account, so that he is entitled to plead it at the bar of God, as though it were personally and inherently his own.
6. Faith is the condition of justification. That is, so far as adults are concerned, God does not impute the righteousness of Christ to the sinner, until and unless, he (through

grace), receives and rests on Christ alone for his salvation.¹⁹

Hodge's definition covers all the main points from Augustine, Luther, Calvin and Edwards.

Justification is an instantaneous act of grace whereby the sinner is counted righteous on the basis of the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to the believer in response to the individual's faith. This is the historic Protestant definition of justification.

The Doctrine of Justification by Faith Alone in the Modern Era

The doctrine of justification remains important in the Modern era. Over twenty years ago, Gerhard O. Forde explained why:

If the article of justification is removed from the center we will very soon no longer know why we are and must remain evangelical Christians. Then we will strive for the unity of the church and sacrifice the purity of the gospel. . . . One will flatter piety and despise doctrine; one will run the risk of becoming tolerant where one should be radical and radical where one should be tolerant. . . .²⁰

Time has proven Forde to be correct in his prediction of the consequences of the church's lack of focus on the doctrine of justification. The result has been three modern day attacks upon justification.

The New Perspective

First, Forde predicted that "we will soon no longer know why we are and must remain evangelical Christians." That is exactly what has occurred with the rise of "The New Perspective." Richard Gaffin, professor of biblical and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), described the effect of this new perspective:

¹⁹Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), III:117-18.

²⁰Gerhard O. Forde. "The exodus from virtue to grace: Justification by faith today," *Interpretation* 34 (1980): 32.

The New Perspective on Paul, as it has been called, raises serious questions for Protestants committed to the doctrine of justification by faith. This school of thought does so in two ways. On the one hand, it questions the Apostle Paul's relationship to – and understanding of – Judaism. On the other hand, it undermines the Reformation's understanding of Pauline theology. To put it bluntly, this reassessment narrows the distance between Paul and the Judaism of his day while it widens the gap between Paul and the Reformation.²¹

In short, this perspective calls into question the traditional Protestant understanding of the meaning of justification in the writings of the apostle Paul. The reformers are characterized as misapplying the content of Paul's teaching against the Judaizers to the Roman Catholic Church. Nothing short of the Reformation is on trial by this "New Perspective" and the result is that many evangelicals "no longer know why we are and must remain evangelical Christians."

Ecumenicalism

Next, Forde said, "We will strive for the unity of the church and sacrifice the purity of the gospel." Roman Catholic theologian Ludwig Ott defined justification this way:

Justification is the declaration of the righteousness of the believer before the judgment seat of Christ. . . The Council of Trent teaches that for the justified eternal life is both a gift or grace promised by God and a reward for his own good works and merits . . . According to Holy Writ, eternal blessedness in heaven is the reward . . . for good works performed on this earth, and rewards and merit are correlative concepts.²²

Obviously, Roman Catholics and Protestant are miles apart in regards to their understanding of justification. Yet, many are calling for unity among the same. But the true student of the historical Protestant doctrine of justification must concur with Russell Moore, Executive Director of the Carl F. H. Henry Institute for Evangelical Engagement, who wrote:

If evangelicals believe what they claim to affirm about the gospel, they must recognize the implications of their soteriology. If salvation means that the sinner must abandon all hope of being found righteous through anything within himself, and must cling solely to an external righteousness accomplished by the one Mediator between God and humanity, then

²¹Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. "Paul the Theologian," *WTJ* 62 (2000): 121.

²²Ludwig Ott. *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma* (Rockford: Tan, 1974), 254, 264.

evangelicals must sadly conclude that the official teaching of the Catholic Church teaches another way of salvation.²³

Evangelical Apathy

Forde also predicted that with the loss of emphasis on the doctrine of justification by faith alone “One will flatter piety and despise doctrine.” This is precisely what is occurring in many evangelical churches today. Michael Horton, who chairs the Council of the Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals, notes:

Much of the preaching one encounters in evangelical churches . . . is a steady diet of “practical” moralism. Instead of energizing believers with the triumphant indicative – that God in Christ has reconciled us to himself – many pastors weigh them down with bare imperatives. Their preaching is chiefly exhortation and uplift rather than a startling announcement of God’s work. . . . Whether in its harsher or milder forms, therapeutic moralism shares with all synergistic efforts an emphasis on self-improvement to the practical neglect of being right with a holy God.²⁴

The content of the messages streaming from today’s pulpit testifies to the triumph of moralism over justification in the minds of many evangelical pastors.

Conclusion

J. A. O. Preus in an article on the doctrine of justification summarizes well both his own article and the content of this paper by saying:

We have seen that the doctrine of justification by grace on account of Christ through faith is an essential. It is the hinge upon which it all hangs and the foundation upon which it all stands. The reason it’s so important is that bound up with it are such central Christian and biblical truths as Scripture alone, grace alone, Christ alone, and faith alone.²⁵

²³Russell D. Moore. “Of Sacraments and Sawdust: ECT, The Culture Wars, and The Quandry of Evangelical Identity,” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 4 (2001): 45-46.

²⁴Michael Horton, “What’s All the Fuss About? The Status of the Justification Debate,” *Modern Reformation* 2 (2002): 20.

²⁵J. A. O. Preus, “The Doctrine of Justification: The Article on which the Church Stands and Falls,” *Modern Reformation* 2 (2002): 16.

The importance of this great doctrine should lead inevitably to worship. As James White wrote in his extensive work on justification, *The God Who Justifies*:

Justification. The word *should* bring to mind “the gracious act of God the Father through the perfect work of Jesus Christ whereby *I have been pardoned and made right before God!*” It should be a *personal* word, a *thrilling* word, a word filled with rich meaning. For many, by God’s grace, it is. And by that same grace, it always will be.²⁶

Amen!

²⁶James White, *The God Who Justifies*, (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2001), 31.

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