

Justification by Faith: Historical Theology

Scotty Williams

Augusta 02, 2025

The Bible tells of a disastrously beautiful story about love, rebellion, separation, compassion, restoration, and unification. From the opening words to the last pages, God's story centers on a personal, restored union and relationship with His creation. After God created humans to live in abiding oneness with Himself, humanity rebelled. Left up to themselves they proved there was no way to be restored to a right relationship with God. So, God become human in the man of Jesus and came to His creation. He lived in a perfectly right relationship with the Father and others. And through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus defeated death and sin. He offers complete forgiveness and cleansing to all who are found in Him, spiritually restoring the relationship and union between God and His people. While this is essential to the Christian faith, what has taken shape throughout church history is how one comes to be a participant, justified and righteous, in the forgiving and cleansing blood of Jesus.

Two contrasting models of justification have emerged. One teaches that all who believe in Jesus are accepted as righteous because Jesus' righteousness is reckoned or imputed to their account. They are acceptable to God not because of anything they have done, not even because of the change that God brings about within them, but because of what Jesus has done for them on the cross. By contrast the other teaching claims that at baptism, conversion, those who believe are transformed from within by the grace of God, and brings about within them an inherent righteousness through continued commendable acts of their own.

The difference hinges on the conviction of either an imputed righteousness- the righteousness of Jesus reckoned to their account- or an imparted righteousness- Jesus' righteousness infused in them so they can perform purifying deeds. Is it truly only faith and belief in Jesus and what He did, called justification by faith, or is it something human works contribute to, called justification by works? In this paper, I will identity the various positions that

the church has held on this topic throughout its history. I will then share my personal reflection as I navigated the bumpy and winding terrain of justification by faith in church history. Lastly, I will assess my current church's commitment and practice with regard to the doctrine of justification.

AD 0-325: Pre-Nicea

The trajectory of mankind was forever changed when Jesus came on the scene. Jesus was the full revelation of God revealed to mankind.¹ He showed what it looked like to be a true human, to walk and live in a right relationship with the Father and others, and how to be restored back to complete relationship with the Father. Jesus taught that the works God desires for all people to be saved, is to believe in the One He has sent.² Said differently, Jesus taught that “God so loved the world that He sent His one and only Son, and whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”³ Then in the early AD 30s, roughly three years after His ministry began, Jesus saw that His time had come. He allowed the enemy to murder Him upon a tree. A tree that became His sign that He reigned victorious over death because three days later He walked out of that tomb proving He was the Messiah, conquering sin and the evil one through a Calvary type love. And what did He ask of His followers? Belief.⁴

After His death, His closest followers, the Apostles, heeded the call to bear witness of His Truth. The first century A.D. is filled with stories, proclamation, letters, and warnings to the rest of the world concerning the Way of Jesus. John, one of Jesus closest disciples, closes his narrative story about the life of Jesus, stating he wrote his gospel “so that [the reader] may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing [they] may have life in His

¹ Hebrews 1:5; Colossians 1:19

² John 6:29

³ John 3:16

⁴ John 6:29; John 3:16

name”⁵ The Apostle Paul reminded his protégé and pastor, Timothy, that Jesus was the one who saved them and called them with a holy calling, not according to their works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to them in Jesus.⁶ To another young pastor, Titus, Paul reminds that it was not by works of righteousness, which they had done, that they were saved, but according to God’s mercy displayed and accomplished through Jesus.⁷ To whole communities, Paul writes that it was “by grace [they] have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is a gift of God.”⁸

Nothing was more clear than Paul’s letter to the churches meeting Rome. A community comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, the churches in Rome had an issue with those who were still living by the old way of relating to God (pre-Jesus’ completed work on the cross) opposing, coercing, and rejecting those who were finding their newfound life in Jesus. Repeatedly, Paul reminds them they have been justified before God by faith in Jesus.⁹ That it is through the confession of one’s mouth that Jesus is Lord, and belief in their heart that God raised Jesus from the dead that they will be saved.¹⁰ In one specific circumstance, it seemed that some of the Jews were making it a requirement for some Gentiles to be circumcised in order to follow the way of Jesus. Responding to this, Paul writes:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness...Is this blessing then on the circumcised, or on the uncircumcised also? For we say, “Faith was credited to Abraham as righteousness.” How then was it credited? While he was circumcised, or

⁵ John 20:31

⁶ 2 Timothy 1:9

⁷ Titus 3:5

⁸ Ephesians. 2:8

⁹ Romans 5:1-3

¹⁰ Romans 10:9

uncircumcised? Not while circumcised, but while uncircumcised; and he received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had while uncircumcised, so that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be credited to them, and the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of the faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised.¹¹

Paul proved that it is by faith that righteousness was credited to Abraham before any acts or works were asked. In fact, this belief was not just held by a select few Apostles in a very specific region of the world, but was widely accepted throughout the first four centuries of the early Christian movement. While preaching on Romans Four, second century church father, Clement of Alexandria, taught that “Abraham was not justified by works, but by faith. It is therefore of no advantage to persons after the end of life, even if they do good works now, if they do have faith.” He went on later to say “Faith is power for salvation and strength to eternal life... The apostle exhorts, your faith should not be in the wisdom of mine, who profess to persuade, ‘but in the power of God,’ who alone is able to save without proofs, but by mere faith.”¹²

There was another second century church father, Irenaeus, whose lifetime work on Christian identity was thought to have “shaped the Scriptures, the exegesis, the theology, the institutions, and the spirituality of nascent Christianity to such an extent that his imprint is discernable almost two thousand years later” who is also in agreement with the others.¹³ He was strongly in favor of faith in Jesus as the means for justification and salvation, saying “No one, indeed, while placed out of reach of the Lord’s benefits, has power to procure for himself the means of salvation. So the more we receive His grace, the more we should love Him.”¹⁴

¹¹ Romans 4:1-4, 9-12

¹² David W. Bercot, *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2025), 575.

¹³ Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus*, 3.

¹⁴ David W. Bercot, 576.

But not everyone in the Pre Nicea area believed in justification by faith. The Jews, even some who believed Jesus was the Messiah, clung on to a works-based righteousness. The Gospels clearly portray this clash between the Jewish leader's justification by works mentality and Jesus' living by faith lifestyle. For example, Jesus ate with sinners, touched and loved on the unclean and lepers, healed on the Sabbath, defied the concept of a tithe. Each one of these actions seemed to be in complete contradiction to the way one is supposed to live as Jew. Their long history of rebellious hearts, mixed with God's torah, left them in fear of their salvation, being rejected by God, and sent back into exile. What Jesus taught and represented, the actual heart of God and restoration of mankind through a completely internalized faith, was jeopardizing the Jews very own works-based justification.

The Apostles also saw this heresy sweep through the early throughout the world, causing divide between followers of Jesus. The Judaizers cultural and ethnic pride shown in their dogmatic emphasis on circumcision and dietary regulations prevented Gentile believers from enjoying full membership in the church. For this reason, Paul's letters to the churches place a strong, and at times, abrasive emphasis, on the rejection of those rituals.¹⁵ Even throughout the second and third centuries it still continued. This is evident in the life work early church father, Ignatius, who become a crucial player in the fight against heresy in the early church as he openly opposed Judaizers (and Docetism). He opposed their practices with a Gospel of justification on the basis of faith. In his letter, *Philadelphians*, he proved that that faith in the person and work of Chris is the only appropriate response to the Gospel. Not only did Ignatius repudiate Judaizers on

¹⁵ Dongsun Cho, "Ambrosiaster on Justification by Faith Alone in His Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles," *The Westminster Theological Journal* 74, no. 2 (2012): 277–290.

many other fronts as well, but he repeatedly emphasized Gospel message of justification by faith in the person of Jesus Christ.¹⁶

While it crystal clear that the pre Nicea church clung tight to Jesus' teachings of justification by faith alone, no early church father believed that faith was ever manifested without works proceeding. James, one of Jesus' disciples, makes this point, saying "If someone says he has faith, but he has no works? Can that faith save him?" And then immediately answers his own question, he says "Faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself."¹⁷ Again, Clement of Alexandria provides us with great insight, proclaiming "When we hear, 'you faith has saved you,' we do not understand Him to say absolutely that those who have believed in any way whatever will be saved. For works must also follow."¹⁸ A principal apologist of the second century, Justin Martyr, confidently boasted that we, like Abraham, are "declared by God to be righteous, not on account of [works], but on account of faith" while also proclaiming that "Each man goes to everlasting punishment or salvation according to the value of his actions."¹⁹ In other words, the pre Nicea church clung to the idea that faith alone saves, but that faith that saves is not alone. As Irenaeus put it, "To believe in Him is to do His will."²⁰ Although the doctrines of the Person of Jesus and Trinity took the spotlight through the first four centuries, as well as the canonization of Scripture, the theme of justification by faith remained prevalent on everyone's mind.²¹

AD 325-800: Post-Nicea

¹⁶ Brian J Arnold, *Justification in the Second Century* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2018).

¹⁷ James 2:14,17

¹⁸ David W. Bercot, 576.

¹⁹ Ibid., 575-576.

²⁰ Ibid., 576.

²¹ David Streater, "Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today," *Churchman* 113, no. 2 (1999): 147–157.

The second half of the fourth century to AD 800 is known as the post Nicea era. In AD 381, Christianity became the official religion of the empire, changing the trajectory of the faith as they knew it. From persecuted to highly revered, the Christian church was thrust upon the world. Christians no longer needed to be willing to die for their faith, but rather, with the emperor taking lead role in the proclamation, anyone and everyone was forced to join the movement. Just one year later, in AD 382, the Church killed its first non-Christian.²² The Christian faith went from being martyred to martyring others who did not adopt it as their own.

While the landscape of Christianity had changed, those dedicated to the early Apostles, Apologists, and Polemicists continued steadfast in their teaching of justification by faith. The famous politician and theologian, Ambrose, who mentored one of most influential theologian of the early church, Augustine of Hippo, lead the charge. Ambrose said that “It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved freely receiving.” In Ambrose’s logic, good works were necessary in order to accomplish sanctification, which was distinct from justification. After reminding his readers that “by God they were freely justified from wickedness,” Ambrose pointed to sanctification as the ultimate purpose of justification by faith and as a proof of genuine salvation, saying:

For this purpose [sanctification], we are washed by the gift of God, so that from henceforth we should provoke the love of God in us, while living pure life, not making the work of grace in vain Since by the gift of God men have been purified and liberated from the second death, they ought to offer a living sacrifice so that it may be a proof of eternal life.²³

But not everyone saw it like this. The one universal church, now with the power and backing from the emperor, began to teach something different. They adopted a believe that went

²² Gregory Boyd. “Taking America Back for God?” Presented at the Woodland Hills Church, 2004.

²³ Dongsun Cho, “Ambrosiaster on Justification by Faith Alone in His Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 74, no. 2 (2012): 277–290.

like this: At baptism, all sin is forgiven, so that nothing remains which would impede entrance into heaven (hence, pedit-baptism). If one were to die in this state, they would immediately go to heaven since there was no sin to their account. When they were old enough, faith through Jesus would bring sanctifying grace, giving them the power to grow in goodness. This growth would be assisted by the sacraments of the Church, especially the Holy Eucharist.

However, sin interferes with this growth, “corroding” their purity. If this sin is mortal, that is, a grave matter committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent, it would result in the loss of their baptismal grace. Because mortal sin causes exclusion from Christ’s kingdom, death would result in eternal death in hell if it were not repented of. But if this sin was venial, a less serious matter or done without knowledge or full consent, it would result in a hindering of their progress of virtue. In this case, death would mean they must be cleansed through temporal punishment paid in purgatory. In life, this “corrosion” of sin is removed through the sacrament of penance and reconciliation, including contrition, confession and satisfaction.

Now, contrition is sorrow of the soul and detestation for the sin committed. Confession is an admission in which one looks squarely at the sins they are guilty of, takes responsibility for them, and thereby opens themselves again to God and to the communion of the Church in order to make a new future possible. In satisfaction, one must do what is possible in order to make amends for their sin. This would lead them to penance, which consists of doing things like prayer, offerings, works of mercy, service to neighbors, voluntary self-denial, sacrifices, and above all the patient acceptance of the cross we must bear. Doing these works results in the cleansing of sin and restoring to them the power to grow in goodness in communion with the body of Christ. Justification, being declared righteous, happens at the Final Judgment, after death. It only happens when the person is actually pure, which is true only for saints. For most folks, who still

have some venial sin remaining, it follows cleansing in purgatory. But in order to keep in step with Paul's writings of a present tense verb (as opposed to their understanding that justification only happens Final Judgment), justification become a "catch-all." It began to cover all the effects of baptism, as taught by the Roman Church, as well as regeneration, quickening, forgiveness and renewal as well as sanctification which was something to be infused into the sinner so that he might become righteous.²⁴

Additionally, through the rise of the papacy and belief that the Roman Church held the keys to the gates of heaven, Roman justification involved a hierarchy of mediatorial institutions under the rule and supervision of their invested rule. The function of state, school, art, literature, economics, law, and principles of the Church and its hierarchy were mediatorial instruments in the great task of bringing on justification. Thus, Roman sociology saw all humanity in at least a life-long process of justification, with the involvement of purgatory.²⁵

AD 800-1500: The Middle Ages

With the universal church under the growing power and reign of the papacy and their political ties, the Middle Ages saw the rise of monks. Monks were men, devoted followers of Jesus, who wanted to leave the corruptions of society and the church, and commit themselves to a life of simpleness, scholastics, obedience, and devotion to God. None was more influential than Bernard of Clairvaux, who lived from AD 1090-1153. For the majority of his life, Bernard was the counselor and adviser of the papacy, as well as an eloquent preacher. He championed the papacy as the highest authority in the Church, exalted monasticism as the highest ideal of

²⁴ David Streater, "Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today," *Churchman* 113, no. 2 (1999): 147–157.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

Christianity, and often wandered into an enthusiastic mysticism. Eventually, Bernard became a monk at Clairvaux.²⁶

Bernard, influenced by the Catholic idea of merit, recommended fasting as a means of averting eternal punishment, saying "It not only obtains forgiveness, but also earns grace; it does not only blot out sin which we have committed, but also repels future sins, which we could commit."²⁷ In the same vein, Bernard unashamedly proclaimed, "What could man, the slave of sin, fast bound by the devil, do of himself to cover from righteousness which he had formerly lost? Therefore, he who lacked righteousness had another's imputed to him." Similarly, we read in one of his sermons "Oh, truly blesses and indeed the only blessed one is he unto whom the Lord will not impute iniquity." Famously, Bernard taught that the subjective justification was by faith alone, stating:

Wherefore let' whosoever is touched with sincere sorrow for his sins, who hungers and thirsts after righteousness, believe without hesitation in Thee, who justifies the ungodly; and being justified by faith alone, he shall have peace with God. We may call faith the root of the vine; the various virtues, the branches; good works, the bunch, or cluster, of grapes which it bears; and devotion, the wine they yield. For as there can be no branch without the root, without faith there is no virtue.²⁸

At times throughout history, the lines of faith and works seemed more blurry than others, with the Middle Ages being one of these times.

Still, Bernard of Clairvaux's theology on justification by faith represented only the minority of society. Thomas Aquinas, known as the "Prince of Scholastics," was a famous theologian in the thirteenth century. He had studied under Aristotle and led the age in proving God's existence through reason. His studies gained a wide range of recognition and devotees. Thomas Aquinas' view on justification by merit fell in line with the universal church's

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

understanding on the subject. For Aquinas all emphasis was placed on what man must do in order to gain merit. His reasoning was founded on the logic that one's instincts only provided externalist justification for a convert's beliefs, while internalist justification is provided solely by "signs."²⁹ While the Middle Ages were defined by steep, dogmatic theologies, as well as the rise of papal power, growing corruption, and political instability, there were growing signs of change, both doctrinally and politically.

AD 1500-1700: The Reformation

The sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries experienced a shift, volcanic eruption, known as the Protestant Reformation, that theologically and politically changed the landscape of the world. While historians believe "the Reformation was essentially a religious event; its deepest concerns, theological," it no less caused both a doctrinal and political upheaval to the systems.³⁰ In 1648, the theological and political wars were concluded, to some degree, by the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, which recognized, for the first time in church history, various, autonomously organized and run religions. To this day, the success of the Reformation has been credited to many brave, fed up, and virtuous patristics, but few are more notable than Martin Luther and John Calvin.

Martin Luther's life work of the doctrine of justification by faith is associated with early church father, Anselm, and his work on the doctrine of the Atonement and the doctrine of man. Tradition has it that it was on the steps of Scala Santa in Rome, while ascending on his knees, reciting the paternoster for the release of his grandfather's soul from purgatory, that Luther heard

²⁹ Gregory R. P. Stacey, "Aquinas, Instinct and the 'Internalist' Justification of Faith," *New Blackfriars* 102, no. 1098 (October 22, 2019): 205–224.

³⁰ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers : 25th Anniversary* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2013), 18.

a voice from heaven: “The just shall live by faith.”³¹ Article IV of Melancthon’s Augsburg Confession best defines what Luther meant by justification by faith, stating, “Men can be justified freely on account of Christ through faith, when they believe that they are received into grace and that their sins are remitted on account of Christ who made satisfaction for sins on our behalf by his death. God imputes this faith for righteousness in his own sight.”³² Unfortunately, throughout his studies, Luther became convinced that the Epistle of James was opposed to Paul’s doctrine of justification by faith alone and thus dismissed the epistle as non-canonical. While most theologians would agree that Luther erred with respect to James, Luther was clearly a “solafideian”, even without recognizing that James was also.³³

For John Calvin, justification was not by works, intelligence or institution, nor in one’s own faith, but of God by faith. Calvin believed God ultimately and immediately justifies a person, and predestination is the corollary of justification. Therefore, salvation is wholly the work of God. This, of course, is offensive to man, who insists on finding the grounds of salvation in his own activity, thinking, or faith and credits God with assistance at best. Calvin’s understanding of the depravity of man stands in complete opposition to justification by works. The more deprived a person is, the more it proved that works have no merit.³⁴ With two vocal and influential preachers, leaders, and reformers leading the way for the doctrinal exposition of justification by faith, the western world of the late 1,000s began to adopt a new (original) understanding of God’s justification through faith in Jesus.

³¹ David Streater, “Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today,” *Churchman* 113, no. 2 (1999): 147–157.

³² *The Augsburg Confession*, n.d.

³³ David Streater, “Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today,” *Churchman* 113, no. 2 (1999): 147–157.

³⁴ Rousas J. Rushdoony, “Calvin in Geneva: The Sociology of Justification by Faith,” *The Westminster Theological Journal* 15, no. 1 (November 1, 1952): 11–39.

A pivotal momentum gain for the reformers was when the Church of England, from both Wittenberg and Geneva, through Luther, Tyndale and Calvin, accepted the biblical doctrine of justification by grace through faith. The Church of England was so convinced of the doctrine that it became one of the pillars on which Cranmer prepared the 1552 Book of Common Prayer, emphasized in Articles 9-14 of the Thirty-Nine Articles. Yet, the Church of England had a little different take on the doctrine. Thanks to John Tillotson, Samuel Clarke, and some other Anglicans leaders, Tridentine thinking was added into the doctrine of justification by faith that was accepted Church of England, confusing the inseparability of faith and works with the meritoriousness of each other.³⁵

The Reformation caused a shakeup in the Catholic Church. Whether one wants to call it a “Counter-Reformation” or their own internal “Catholic Reformation”, there needed to be change in the institution. The Council of Trent concluded this process for the Catholic church. The Council led to a nearly complete overhaul of its administration, as well as a tightening of Church oversight. In setting the record straight with Protestantism, the Catholic Church became less inclusive, more dogmatic, polemical, and anti-Protestant in regard to doctrine. As a result, the leaders of the council reported to Rome that “the significance of this Council in the theological sphere lies chiefly in the article on justification, in fact this is the most important item the Council has to deal with.”³⁶ In other words, the Roman Catholic Church did not change its stance on justification by works.

In 1541 there was an attempt to find unity between the Reformers and the Catholics. There was a colloquy held between three Catholic and three Protestant debaters/negotiators

³⁵ David Streater, “Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today,” *Churchman* 113, no. 2 (1999): 147–157.

³⁶ Anthony N. S. Lane, “Justification by Faith 1517–2017: What Has Changed?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 69, no. 2 (November 1, 2018).

known as the Diet of Regensburg. They met with the aim of drawing up a common agreement on an array of doctrinal divergences, including justification by faith. Their agreements were drafted in a document called the Regensburg Book (more accurately called the Worms Book), which contained twenty-three articles of similar length to biblical chapters, covering a range of topics.³⁷

On May 2, 1541, a version was produced to which all the parties gave their consent. The initial response was predominantly positive and there was great optimism. Concerning the doctrine of justification, the colloquy agreed that with conversion, a person receives both inherent and imputed righteousness. While the terminology was new, imputed and inherent righteousness are essentially what Protestants call justification and sanctification. Article 5 crucially taught that we can have confidence before God not because of our inherent righteousness, which remains imperfect, but because Christ's righteousness is imputed to us.³⁸

But before the council had conferenced, they had hit an unmovable roadblock. The debaters were unable to remedy their differences, not over the doctrine of justification, but in regard to authority. For the Protestants, the test of all doctrine was Scripture, and they could not accept anything that in their view contradicted Scripture. For the Catholics, the test of all doctrine was the teaching authority of the church, and they could not accept anything contrary to the established teachings of the papacy. The council concluded with no work to show for it, ending the Reformation period in a world separated by multiple denominations.

AD 1700-1900: The Enlightenment

While it was by and large uncritically assumed in the sixteenth century that each region should have a single unifying church, with the church's influence extending throughout all of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

society, the eighteenth century saw a growing support toward the belief that regimes could tolerate minority religions. In the New World, it became accepted to have several churches co-existing with equal rights in the same region. Christendom become a criticized concept in the Enlightenment period gave and took on stances in order for there to be civil peace. But nonetheless, there was a great awakening in the New World, a revival of the Christian faith.

One of the most renowned contributors of this movement was, Jonathan Edwards. Besides his involvement in the Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards is also renowned for being “the greatest philosopher-theologian yet to grace the American scene” and the author of the most famous sermon ever preached in American history.³⁹ In 1734, Edwards delivered his “Justification by Faith Alone” sermon series that has been credited in preparing the way for revival. The peoples’ responses to the sermon series was electric, as they thronged to the Northampton church and clamored for assurance of salvation through a newfound faith in Jesus.

The "doctrine" of Edwards' discourse is unequivocal enough, stating, "We are justified only by faith in Christ, and not by any manner of virtue or goodness of our own." According to Edwards, the justified man 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." He repeatedly insisted that "God don't justify on account of anything we do but only on account of what the Savior did.” When Edwards saw God rewards believers' good works, he concluded it as only because of the relation of those works to Christ. In themselves the works performed by the people were not worthy of reward, pointing out "the friendliness and favor [which God shows to believers] shall not be to them in their own name, but it shall all be to Christ.”⁴⁰

³⁹ Perry Miller, *Perry Miller and the American Mind : A Memorial Issue ; Featuring Perry Miller, a Previously Unpublished Essay on John Greenleaf Whittier and Protestant Churches in Colonial America*, 1964.

⁴⁰ Michael McClenahan, *Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith* (Routledge, 2012).

Still, Edwards diverged slightly from Luther in his understanding of justification. Luther, for example, was "reluctant to admit that man becomes righteous in justification." Although Luther frequently referred to the righteousness of believers, he made it clear that he was not "referring to the morality of believers, but to the real and redeeming presence of Christ."⁴¹ On the other hand, Edwards had no such reluctance. He spoke openly and often of believers partaking of God's own holiness, goodness, and beauty. God is the author and cause of everything, "but he also lets created beings participate in his own life" such that they really share in his moral goodness. By God's grace we "do all" and are "proper actors." His moral goodness becomes ours, by increasing degrees.⁴²

Another area of difference between Edwards and Luther's views was that Luther held on to a tension between his insistence on the alien and external nature of Christ's justifying righteousness and the real presence of Christ within the believer. Edwards avoided this tension by speaking of grace not only as God's favor toward individuals, like Luther, but also as the real presence within the believer of the Holy Spirit, who becomes a new disposition. The Holy Spirit is not "domesticated" or given over to "human possession," but acts as a new principle of action through the believer's natural faculties. Hence there is no ambiguity about the relation between Christ's righteousness and the believer himself.⁴³ While this has less to do with the role of faith in justification and more to do with the mechanics, it is still important to note interpretive differences from what took shape, doctrinally, during the Reformation and centuries later.

During the Enlightenment period, philosophy became more separated from theology. Science played a prominent role through the conclusions offered by Copernicus, Galileo,

⁴¹ Alister E McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 205.

⁴² Michael McClenahan.

⁴³ Anri Morimoto, *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation* (University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 406.

Descartes, Newton. The age of reason, along with scientific discovers such as the “fixed laws” by which the universe operated, saw a rise in religions that distanced themselves from God. As a result, Deism rose in popularity. The writings of Henry More, John Locke, Immanuel Kant, David Hume and Voltaire began to challenge traditional notions of knowledge, ethics and miracles by exalting the role of reason and sense perception over revelation. One of these Deist leaders, Thomas Chubb, led the charge in arguing that God could have forgiven sins without the cross or any other means. Which meant there was no rational or necessary connection between justification and the means God used to procure it. God's arbitrary power and decision alone were responsible.⁴⁴ The deist’s viewpoint not only dismissed the necessity of faith, combatting a Protestants understanding, but also the need for works which warred against a Catholic interpretation.

AD 1900-Present: Modern to Contemporary Times

The last century has seen much progress in unity. In 1999 there was a Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification together signed by the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church. The Joint Declaration sets out a “Common Understanding of Justification” expressing shared convictions. It states, “Together we confess: By grace alone, in faith in Christ’s saving work and not because of any merit on our part, we are accepted by God and receive the Holy Spirit, who renews our hearts while equipping and calling us to good works.” The bulk of the declaration is found in the fourth section, “Explicating the Common Understanding of Justification,” which focuses on seven issues: human powerlessness and sin in relation to justification; justification as forgiveness of sins and making righteous; justification by

⁴⁴ Michael McClenahan.

faith and through grace; the justified as sinner; law and gospel; assurance of salvation; and the good works of the justified.⁴⁵

The Joint Declaration tackled these issues one by one, using a helpful method. For each issue, a preliminary paragraph of “joint confession” (“We confess together”) sets out their shared convictions. This was then followed by separate paragraphs stating how Lutherans and Catholics each understand this joint confession. Therefore, there was affirmed a common core of joint confession without pretending there are no remaining differences. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century the goal was for complete agreement. Now, through experience, most Christians have accepted that fellowship does not need to be based upon joint subscription to a book length confession, but rather, by a common affirmation.⁴⁶

This past century has also seen the rise in scholasticism. With more artifacts being excavated, found, and dug up, the knowledge into the culture and life of Ancient Near Eastern civilizations has led scholars to critically rethink what church history has always accepted. For example, recently, New Testament and Pauline scholar, N.T. Wright, along with Alister McGrath, lead the way in a New Perspective theology on the Apostle Paul. In this, they argue that Pauline doctrine of justification by faith has been misunderstood for much of church history, claiming "The church has chosen to subsume its discussion of the reconciliation of man to God under the aegis of justification, thereby giving the concept an emphasis quite absent from the New Testament."⁴⁷

They argue that justification has taken on meanings different from what Paul originally meant because in the first fifteen hundred years the church relied principally on Latin translations

⁴⁵ Anthony N. S. Lane, “Justification by Faith 1517–2017: What Has Changed?,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 69, no. 2 (November 1, 2018).

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Alister E McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1-15.

in which justification took on juristic connotations. As a result, in post Reformation debates, "imputation" became more significant than it was for Paul. McGrath explains that Protestant emphasis on forensic imputation derived, ironically, from the Catholic monk Erasmus, whose 1516 translation of the New Testament at Romans 4:3 changed the Vulgate's translation, and thus Paul's intended meaning, altogether. According to McGrath, this new word meaning for justification, with Luther's concept of extrinsic justifying righteousness, explains why Reformers subsumed all of justification under forensic imputation.⁴⁸

Write and McGrath argue that justification was abstracted from its biblical context, where it found meaning only as part of God's covenant with Israel, and principally indicated God's saving acts on behalf of His people. By this interpretation, Paul's doctrine of justification helps describe God's action in history to fulfill His covenantal promises to work through Abraham's seed to undo the evil unleashed by Adam's sin. Paul's court of law language is necessary to help explain how God reconciled sinful humanity, but it cannot be understood apart from the covenant and eschatology. By itself, legal language can appear to be "a cold piece of business, almost a trick of thought performed by a God who is logical and correct" rather than a God of love who rights "the wrongs of his suffering by taking their weight upon himself."⁴⁹

But when justification is taken in the context of the covenant, it means believers are declared now to be what they will be seen to be in the future, the true people of God. It takes seriously not only the past and present dimensions of justification but also its future.⁵⁰ Wright and McGrath give a more accurate, fuller rendering of justification from Paul's writing, stating "Present justification declares, on the basis of faith, what future justification will affirm publicly,

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ N T Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said : Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014).

⁵⁰ Romans 2:13

according to Romans 2:14-16 and 8:9-11, on the basis of the entire life."⁵¹ This is not to say that church history, specifically what the pre-Nicea patristics and post Reformation Protestant patristics have said is necessarily wrong, it just is incomplete.

My Reflection and Church Assessment

As I reflect over the course of two thousand years, I first acknowledge that what has been recorded in the Bible, Protestant (or Catholic, for this topic of justification by faith, it does not make a difference), as the authoritative, inspired Word of God. My due diligence as a disciple of Jesus must always be to seek Scripture and the revelation that Holy Spirit offers (in alignment with hermetical soundness), before adventuring over to what the patristics believed. With that, I would be naive to completely dismiss the wisdom and knowledge of those who have dedicated their entire lives to learning. I recognize that, generally, each time period is responding in and to their cultural biases, needs, and issues. Admittedly, I first must confess that I am unconvinced of the Catholic rendering of justification and their long-held conviction of what takes place at Final Judgement, which explains why I lovingly reject their premises for works, purification, pedobaptism, indulgences, and more.

While I appreciate, respect, and am grateful for all that the Protestant Reformation stood for, did, and provided for the world, I see their doctrine of justification by faith that is very affluent in the cultural time period of the late Middle Ages. Meaning, Luther, Calvin and a lot of other patristics who fought gallantly for the religious diversity we experience today, worked through their doctrines, specifically justification by faith, through a filtered lens of what they were experiencing and battling against the Roman Catholic Church (universal church of that

⁵¹ N T Wright.

day). This does not mean I must “throw the baby out with the bathwater”, but it does mean their doctrine of justification by faith may be biased in their convictions derived from their cultural setting. For this reason, I find myself most convinced by the pre-Nicea patristics, those who were the disciples of the Apostles, as well as some modern theologians who have taken the time to investigate all the new findings of the past hundred or so years, re-examined their understanding of the doctrine at hand through a bettered understood culture of the biblical authors, and given a more thorough conclusion.

In my personal opinion, theologian and church historian, David Bercot, leads the way in Ante-Nicea literature. He provided sermons, commentaries, and doctrines of over forty-five Ante-Nicea church fathers on over three hundred themes, topics, and doctrines. This is important “because the early Christian testimony holds that many, such as Clement of Rome and Polycarp, personally knew the apostles of Jesus.”⁵² These were the early church leaders who were approved and appointed by the apostles, Jesus own followers. To be sure, none of these early church fathers claimed divine inspiration, nor did they equate their own writing to that of Scripture, but they did claim they were faithfully passing along the teaching of the Jesus via the Apostles. Although, some of the Ante-Nicea patristics were still removed from the cultural setting of Jesus and Paul, the personal teachings, questions answered, in-depth conversations (the ones we always wish we could have after reading the Bible for an hour) these patristics would have had with the Apostles and disciples of the Apostles, would have attributed to a better rendering of Scripture than most.

Alternatively, some theologians over the past decades have caught my attention with their willingness to take new findings, over six million artifacts and writing collected from the Ancient

⁵² David Bercot.

Near Eastern culture in the past hundred years, and examine their views in light of what they are discovering. For example, Old Testament Theologian, Dr. John Walton, has taken the millions of findings of other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, such as Egyptians, Babylonians, Mesopotamians, Hittites, neighbors to the Israelites who share in the same cultural biases, and examined their creation narratives to see if it can shed any insight to the mindset and culture of the early biblical authors. To his surprise he found that to an Ancient Near Eastern culture, language around existence and creation is less about the material origin, going from nothing to something, and about something/someone being given purpose, function and order.⁵³ That is not to say that one could only have learned this through finding Ancient Near Eastern cultural artifacts, because the Bible is saturated with similar language, but it does confirm what one may have hypothesized.⁵⁴

In regards to justification by faith, N.T. Wright has done splendid work. Sifting and studying through thousands of Hellenistic and Greco-Roman writings, Wright has sought to discover the cultural mindset that Paul would have had and been immersed in while living as a Jew in covenant relationship with Yahweh in a first century, Greco-Roman society. In doing so, Wright has discovered that the premises and framework that Paul has about justification is quite different than what those in Middle Ages, Reformation, and Enlightenment time period had thought. Although, what Wright has concluded is not drastically different from what Protestant tradition have clung tight to over the centuries, it does offer some distinctive characteristics, fuller biblical insights, of how justification by faith fit into God's redemptive plan in Paul's understanding. I conclude my personal reflection on justification by faith throughout church

⁵³ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis One : Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009).

⁵⁴ Psalms 102:19; Ezekiel 21:35; Isaiah 65:18; Colossians 1:16-17.

history with the words of Clement of Rome, one of the earliest church fathers, and his rendering of the Hebrews Eleven hall of faith passage, commenting, “All of these persons, therefore, were highly honored, and were made great. This was not for their own sake, or for their own works, or for the righteousness which they wrought, but through the operation of His will. And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves. Nor are we justified by our own wisdom, understanding, godliness, or works that we have done in holiness of heart. Rather, we are justified by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men.”⁵⁵

I planted my church eight weeks ago, and already there is great reassurance as to why I have gone into vocational ministry. As I have spent the better portion of two years working through the DNA of Harvest City Church, our mission and vision statement, and uncompromising values, I have always remained steadfast that Jesus has the right to transform any person that steps through our doors. I do not need to check their “theology” at the door, or ensure their past records are clean in order for people to join us. I actually gravitate toward sitting at the lunch table (we share a meal together every Sunday after service) with someone who is willing to let Jesus completely transform them from the inside out. As a result, justification by faith, believing that Jesus has restored us back into covenant and relationship with the Father, and entrusting His Spirit to work in and through our faith to put to death the old so that Jesus’ life may be made alive is the foundation (cornerstone) that our church is built on.

While this is engrained in our pastors, values, the DNA of Harvest City Church, there are still people who proclaim Christianity who show up every Sunday yet reject this. If you asked them, they would say they would never reject the idea of justification by faith. But when you

⁵⁵ David Bercot, 575.

peel back the layers, the words say the opposite. These few are the same people who are so thankful that Jesus has shown grace on them throughout their life, yet are the first to not eat with someone who is still figuring out life, a “sinner”, as they call them. These members love the faith that calls them righteous but are the first one to separate from others whose faith has not produced “Christian works” in all areas of their life. I wish I were making this up, but I see it every time I interact with some of these individuals.

Knowing this, I have been very intentional to preach, teach, and proclaim God’s life transforming love demonstrated and lived out through Jesus. My prayer is that they are reminded and shown Jesus’ calvary love every Sunday as we spend time in His Word together. I also pray that they personally experience Jesus’ “eating with prostitutes and tax collectors and touching the leppers and impure people” kind of love every day throughout the week as they spend time communing with the Father. I know that when they actually experience and intimately know God, that He will bring their hearts to life, to live as lights, a city on a hill, for the entire world to see and experience Jesus through them, rather than hide His love under a lamp, or worse, have a heart of a pharisee. In conclusion, my church’s current culture on the theme of justification by faith is mixed. Those who are committed to the heart and mission of Harvest City Church live and reflect an abiding life with the Father, made righteous and justified in covenant relationship through their faith in Jesus. Those who, on the surface, love the idea of justification by faith, are the first not to allow others who have not proven (through works) their worth to sit at their dinner table.

Bibliography

- Anri Morimoto. *Jonathan Edwards and the Catholic Vision of Salvation*. University Park, Pa.: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995.
- Arnold, Brian J. *Justification in the Second Century*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2018.
- Bercot, David W. *A Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs*. Hendrickson Publishers, 2025.
- Boyd, Gregory. "Taking America Back for God?" Presented at the Woodland Hills Church, 2004. Accessed December. <https://whchurch.org/sermon/taking-america-back-for-god/>.
- Cho, Dongsun. "Ambrosiaster on Justification by Faith Alone in His Commentaries on the Pauline Epistles." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 74, no. 2 (2012): 277–290.
- George, Timothy. *Theology of the Reformers : 25th Anniversary*. Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2013.
- Lane, Anthony N. S. "Justification by Faith 1517–2017: What Has Changed?" *Tyndale Bulletin* 69, no. 2 (November 1, 2018).
- McClenahan, Michael. *Jonathan Edwards and Justification by Faith*. Routledge, 2012.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Iustitia Dei*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Miller, Perry. *Perry Miller and the American Mind : A Memorial Issue ; Featuring Perry Miller, a Previously Unpublished Essay on John Greenleaf Whittier and Protestant Churches in Colonial America*, 1964.
- Rushdoony, Rousas J. "Calvin in Geneva: The Sociology of Justification by Faith." *The Westminster Theological Journal* 15, no. 1 (November 1, 1952): 11–39.
- Stacey, Gregory R. P. "Aquinas, Instinct and the 'Internalist' Justification of Faith." *New Blackfriars* 102, no. 1098 (October 22, 2019): 205–224.
- Streater, David. "Justification by Faith Yesterday and Today." *Churchman* 113, no. 2 (1999): 147–157.
- The Augsburg Confession*, n.d.
- Walton, John H. *The Lost World of Genesis One : Ancient Cosmology and the Origins Debate*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2009.

Wright, N T. *What Saint Paul Really Said : Was Paul of Tarsus the Real Founder of Christianity?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014.