

PROTESTANT TRADITION AND THE CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Bid me to live, and I will live
Thy Protestant to be.

H. M. Herrick

FOR THE PROTESTANT mind, any serious dialogue about the Christian tradition must address the way in which a believer is made righteous by faith. The doctrinal hallmark of the sixteenth-century Reformation, that God's righteousness is bestowed upon sinners only by faith through the unmerited grace of Christ, has operated as the very linchpin of orthodox Christian teaching. "Nothing in this article," Luther once declared, "can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth should be destroyed,"¹ a conviction articulated in the Augsburg Confes-

1. Martin Luther, *Exposition of Psalm 117*, in *Luther's Works*, ed. T. G. Tapert and H. T. Lehmann (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955), 14.37. Cf. Smalcald Articles II.1 (1537): It is the "first and chief article" of the church.

sion (1530) with the more famous words "justification by grace through faith alone" (*sola fide*). Since then, these words have been echoed by Lutheran, Reformed, and many other Protestant communions as the primary hermeneutic for rightly comprehending the whole of the Bible.

This teaching has not simply stood still as a Protestant memorial frozen in time, however. Taking a developmental approach toward doctrine, theologians have sought to articulate the main factors for its emergence in the sixteenth century. Considerable strides have been made between Lutherans and Roman Catholics during the last decade in determining the negotiable and non-negotiable aspects of justification by faith. Following a visit of Pope John Paul II to Munich in 1980, a joint ecumenical commission formed of Roman Catholic and Protestant (Lutheran, Reformed, and United) church leaders in Germany undertook an exploration of factors that had led to the doctrinal condemnations in the sixteenth century and inquired whether these factors still applied.² It was generally agreed that the doctrine of justification "remains the central task in all attempts to arrive at an understanding between the Roman Catholic church and the churches of the Reformation."³ Meanwhile, ecumenical study sessions were held between the Vatican and the World Federation of Lutherans throughout the 1970s and 1980s, producing a number of theological position papers.⁴

An ecumenical landmark was achieved on October 31, 1999, when subscribing Lutheran churches and the Roman Catholic Church signed "The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" in Augsburg, agreeing on a common articulation of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ. The declaration was not intended to cover all the points that either church teaches about justification. Rather, the declaration presented a "consensus on the basic truths of the doctrine of justification"

2. The results of this commission were published in German in 1986. See also the English version: Karl Lehmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg, eds., *The Condemnations of the Reformation Era: Do They Still Divide?* trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989).

3. *Ibid.*, 36.

4. H. G. Anderson et al., *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue VII* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985). In 1989 and 1990, two volumes of essays supporting this endeavor were published, though papers from this collection did not appear in English for another decade.

and showed that the remaining differences "are no longer the occasion for doctrinal condemnations." Issued under the authority of the Lutheran World Federation and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, the declaration proclaimed the following:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father. 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.⁵

As a result of the common consensus, the teaching of Lutheran churches and the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church no longer stand in condemnation of each other (*JD*, 26). This is indeed a monumental step in the saga of twentieth-century ecumenism and should be welcomed by all Protestants who value catholicity. On this most pivotal point of Christian doctrine, these longtime adversaries no longer have to regard each other's position as the diametrical "other." As Avery Dulles has observed, the declaration dispels some false stereotypes: Lutherans cannot charge Roman Catholics with holding that justification is a human achievement rather than a divine gift, and Roman Catholics cannot accuse Lutherans of believing that justification by faith does not involve inner renewal or good works.⁶

At the same time, the declaration is not an initiative that leads to full communion between both churches, nor does it annul the existence of differences over other doctrines related to justification by faith (the Word of God, the church, ministry, and the sacraments). The two church partners, rather, are committed to continued and deepened study of the biblical foundations of

5. *Gemeinsame Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre* (Frankfurt am Main: Otto Lembeck, 1999); and *The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 15, hereafter *JD*.

6. Avery Dulles, "Two Languages of Salvation," *First Things* 98 (1999): 26.

justification, sharing a unity in diversity and a common witness in the interpretation of the message of justification for all people (JD, 42). Other dialogues of a similar nature are also continuing.⁷ In the United States, informal agreements have been reached between evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Most notable is the statement on salvation by Evangelicals and Catholics Together titled "The Gift of Salvation."⁸ Of the seven paragraphs that specifically address justification, the following affirmations are especially noteworthy for the way in which Protestant language has been preserved in an ecumenical statement.

We agree that justification is not earned by any good works or merits of our own; it is entirely God's gift. . . . In justification, God, on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so.

We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*).

Still, not enough has been said for those who harbor a deep concern that the current dialogues with Roman Catholicism threaten to undermine the historic distinctives of the Reformation's assertion of justifying faith.⁹ A renewed defense of the Lutheran position has been given by Eberhard Jüngel, who claims that the "Joint Declaration" reconstructs only a superficial agreement between the Reformation churches and the Roman Catholic Church. Whatever doctrinal rapprochement has been fashioned between the

7. A consultation that convened from November 26–December 1, 2003, between the Lutheran World Federation, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the World Methodist Council, and Roman Catholics is ongoing.

8. *Christianity Today* (December 8, 1997): 34. The same working group published "Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," *First Things* 43 (1994): 15–22.

9. A sense of betrayal of the Reformation principles by the evangelicals who signed the latter is illustrated in R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), for whom "the Reformation" is defined by the theology of Luther and Calvin, more or less equating their theology with "the biblical gospel" (e.g., 43–44). It is quite striking that Sproul nowhere addresses the meticulous dialogues on justification by faith between the Lutherans and Roman Catholics that have been published since 1983. A more balanced and historically informed defense of the same issues can be found in Carl Braaten, *Justification: The Article by Which the Church Stands or Falls* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

two churches, the theological deficiencies of the Roman Church as defined by the Council of Trent cannot be sidestepped. The sixteenth-century definition of justification by faith alone is absolutely central to maintaining the integrity of the Christian message of grace.¹⁰ Some Protestant apologists from the ranks of evangelicals more forcefully proclaim justification by faith in the terms of the Augsburg Confession as the only legitimate form of expressing the gospel. Justification by faith is the doctrinal axis around which all other Christian doctrines turn.

In reaction to the Evangelicals and Catholics Together statement, a paper was recently produced by evangelical scholars and activists called "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration." It declared that the "doctrine of imputation (reckoning or counting) both our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us . . . is essential to the biblical Gospel" (art. 12). It is not sufficient that one accept the theological necessity that a sinner is justified by faith. A specific theory of how justification works—a forensic declaration of God's righteousness and that justification and sanctification are two entirely distinguishable acts in salvation—must be adopted as the only faithful biblical understanding. Inherent to this understanding is the reaffirmation of Luther's establishment of Pauline theology as a *sine qua non* of the Christian message. In effect, justification by faith as articulated in Paul's letters (or at least how Luther and his successors interpreted it) is *the* teaching of the New Testament and of the gospel.¹¹ These are strong statements that place particular Reformation perspectives about justification on par with biblical teaching. It is one thing to insist

10. Eberhard Jüngel, *Justification: The Heart of the Christian Faith*, trans. J. F. Cayzer (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2001). In particular, he says that the Roman and Lutheran positions about the ability of the fallen human free will (*imago Dei*) to choose the good as it is related to justification are incompatible. Any "active participation" on the part of sinners for their justification by means of a prevenient grace must be excluded by a view true to the intent of the Reformation.

11. Luther was consistent with his doctrinal position in declaring that the New Testament documents are not all equal in their authority. In the preface to his German translation of the New Testament, he ranks the importance of New Testament books, arguing that the "true essence of the gospel" is found in John's Gospel and first epistle, Paul's epistles (especially Romans, Galatians, and Ephesians), and 1 Peter. These are said to be superior and much preferred over the three other Gospels and other books of the New Testament. Thus, the "tradition" of justification by faith as stated by Luther was the determination of a biblical canon within a canon, an outcome that many evangelicals today have ignored in their stress on the centrality of the justification by faith doctrine.

that justification by faith is a major aspect of the gospel, but it is quite another to equate it with the gospel. Jüngel goes so far as to state that Paul's opposition to Peter's legalism in Galatians 2 is "after a fashion, the birth of Protestant theology."¹²

How should we regard the teaching of justification by faith in light of the great tradition? Does it see justification by faith alone as the single most important criterion for interpreting the Christian faith? This chapter invites readers to consider some interpretative issues as they pertain to the role of justifying faith in the early tradition and their implications for an evangelical understanding of doctrinal authority. Just as we discussed the way in which the Protestant principle of Scripture alone (*sola scriptura*) has been related to the historic tradition, here we consider the same as it concerns justification by faith (*sola fide*). For most Protestants, *sola fide* is inextricably connected to *sola scriptura* in that the former is the theological outcome of the latter. Assuming this is true, it is no less important to look at the teaching of justification in light of its roots in the early church and to see how grace, as an undeserved gift of God, granted through the Son and imparted by the Spirit into the lives of believers, fits into the larger scheme of Christian faith. Thus, the next few pages show that justification has precedents in the patristic church and that, more significantly, the early fathers have much to tell us about understanding the doctrine of justifying faith within the whole counsel of biblical and Christian teaching.

The Reformers and the Past

There is no question that the early Reformers believed they were seeking to restore the faith of the early church. The basic thrust of their mission was to point not to themselves as the begetters of a new "protestantism" but to the establishment of a proper catholicism—anti-Roman perhaps but not anti-catholic. The guiding theological precedent was the fifteenth-century martyr Jan Hus, who had declared that the work of the Spirit was realized in the activity of the early church, apostolic and patristic. "We do not intend to explain Scripture otherwise than the Holy Spirit

12. Jüngel, *Justification*, 2.

requires and than it is explained by the holy doctors to whom the Holy Spirit gave understanding."

Christ and his law [of redemption] did not fail for governing the church, seeing devoted priests ministered this law unto the people, who followed the judgment of holy doctors, which judgment they issued by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as is clear from the cases of St. Augustine, St. Jerome, St. Gregory and St. Ambrose, who were given after the apostles' death to the church to teach her.¹³

In matters of historical continuity, the fathers were truly the successors of Peter and Paul. In fact, Hus declared, whatever doctrinal matters the early fathers agreed upon, the Roman hierarchy may not lawfully declare the opposite.

While it is not exactly clear how much Luther was indebted to Hus's ideas, Luther did perceive himself walking in Hus's footsteps, averring in 1520 that "we are all Hussites—even Paul and Augustine are literally Hussites."¹⁴ Hus represented for him a genuine image of the early faith that had to be reclaimed. Although Luther did not emphasize the Spirit's working through the fathers, as did his hero, he did make a distinction between the normative tradition laid down in the early church and the practices espoused by the Roman Catholic Church in the name of tradition.

Exemplifying this distinction, Luther wrote in a letter to the Christians at Halle:

I shall not cite here the sayings of the other saintly fathers, such as Cyprian . . . or Irenaeus, Tertullian, Chrysostom, etc. Rather I wish to confine myself solely to the canon law of popes and the Roman church, upon whose ordinances, usages, and tradition they so mightily depend and insist. They have to admit that they stand in contradiction to God's word, Christ's ordinances, Paul's teachings, and the usages of earlier popes and the usages of the early Roman church, and all the holy fathers and teachers.¹⁵

13. Jan Hus, *The Church by John Hus*, trans. David Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1915), 149.

14. Scott Hendrix, "We Are All Hussites? Hus and Luther Revisited," *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 65 (1974): 134.

15. Martin Luther, "A Letter of Consolation to the Christians at Halle," in *Luther's Works*, 43.1156.

Scholars have justly proposed that the Reformation was essentially about reclaiming sacred history, as the church had repeatedly fallen away from its original foundations and stood in need of correction.¹⁶ For some reforming movements, such as many Anabaptist groups, the utter corruption of the church required a radical revision of history that nullified the relevance of most of it. But given the Roman charge of innovation against the Reformers—that they were inventing a new church (no more defamatory charge could be cast at one's opponents in the medieval ages)—the latter could not afford to jettison church history and maintain a credible ecclesiology.

In Luther's mind, the church's past was the vital "stuff" of Reformation. Addressing the corruption of the present church meant that a tangible means of showing continuity with the early church was necessary, though it could not be done without discernment. On the matter of justification by faith, he was not afraid to criticize the fathers when he thought some of them had not attained a proper understanding of it. Luther once declared that it is hard to find in the writings of Origen and Jerome even three lines that teach the doctrine of justification. The same problem would have befallen Augustine "if the Pelagians had not eventually exercised his full attention and driven him to the righteousness that is of faith."¹⁷ Yet Luther admitted in the beginning of his lecture on Genesis (1535) that he learned of justification by faith through Scripture and also found it in Augustine, Hilary, Cyril, and Ambrose. Augustine, most of all, was to be regarded as the most faithful expositor of St. Paul. Throughout his life, Luther maintained the view that Augustine's late theology was an irreducibly valid theology to which the church needed to conform.¹⁸ It was Augustine's anti-Pelagian works that Luther read so closely and with which he identified his own struggles. Whenever forces in the church trust in the power of human beings to save themselves and do not cast themselves utterly upon God's merciful grace, the

16. Bruce Gordon, "The Changing Face of Protestant History in the Sixteenth Century," in *Protestant History and Identity in Sixteenth-Century Europe*, vol. 1, ed. B. Gordon (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1996), 3-4.

17. Martin Luther, *Exposition on the Prophet Amos*, in *Luther's Works*, 18.64.

18. Manfred Schulze, "Martin Luther and the Church Fathers," in *The Reception of the Church Fathers in the West: From the Carolingians to the Maurists*, vol. 2, ed. Irena Backus (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1997), 578.

"Pelagianism" of Augustine's day is reborn. For Luther, this was the primary issue that faced the church in every age. The witness of the fathers was most useful in combating this heresy and providing the authority for opposing Roman dominance.

John Calvin's training as a humanist made him particularly sensitive to the historical connection between the apostolic and patristic roots of the church and its reform. He was well read in ancient Christian texts and convinced that the Reformation movement was in line with the doctrines of the early church. To the Roman cardinal Sadoletto he wrote:

You teach that all which has been approved for fifteen hundred years or more, by the uniform consent of the faithful, is, by our headstrong rashness, torn up and destroyed. . . . You know . . . that our agreement with antiquity is far closer than yours, but that all we have attempted has been to renew that ancient form of the church.¹⁹

The true church that the apostles instituted was commensurate with the ancient form of the church exhibited in the writings of Chrysostom and Basil, among the Greek writers, and Cyprian, Ambrose, and Augustine among the Latins, which is in stark contrast to "the ruins of that church, as now surviving among yourselves."²⁰

When it came to the doctrine that we are made righteous by faith and not through our works, Calvin claimed Ambrose,²¹ although he more often cited Augustine. Augustine's views on sin, grace, and free will were sufficiently in harmony with Calvin's, such that the Reformer sometimes preferred to express himself with Augustine's words rather than his own. Typically, Calvin was critical of Augustine's (and Origen's) exegetical works and his use of allegory in the interpretation of Scripture. Moreover, Augustine did not sufficiently distinguish between justification and sanctification.²² But concerning the main doctrines, Calvin saw himself as a legitimate successor of Augustine's teaching.

19. John Calvin, *Reply to Cardinal Sadoletto*, in *A Reformation Debate*, ed. J. C. Olin (New York: Harper, 1966), 62.

20. *Ibid.*

21. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. J. T. McNeill, trans. F. L. Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), III.22.8.

22. *Ibid.*, III.11.15.

At the same time, it is not accurate to say that the Reformers were merely interested in reprinting patristic theology. Nor did they see themselves as limited to the authority of the early fathers. The development of theological principles (*sola fide*, etc.), however, was believed to be an extension of apostolic teaching vindicated by the texts of the early fathers and therefore the basis of reforming catholicity. Though not equal to the authority of Scripture, the patristic testimonies demonstrated that the Reformers shared a continuity with the ancient church that Rome did not. For this reason, the Augsburg Confession in 1530 stated that "this whole cause" (*tota haec causa*) of the Reformation "is sustained by the testimonies of the Fathers."²³ Later Lutheran reformers after Trent would make the same claim. One of the authors of the Formula of Concord (1577), Andreas Musculus, wrote a theological textbook, a catechism, and a prayer book composed of citations from the fathers. Likewise, Jakob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz assembled a host of patristic quotations in reference to the doctrine of Christ, lest any Roman critic should allege that the Formula of Concord was not supported, as "the ancient pure church, its fathers and councils, have spoken."²⁴ When the various works of Luther and Melancthon and other confessional documents were compiled in 1580 as the *Book of Concord*, its opening essay was a brief commentary on the three ecumenical creeds: the Apostles', the Nicene, and the Athanasian. It was an intentional move to underscore the deep conviction among evangelical theologians that the Reformation upheld and recovered the chief teachings of the ancient church.²⁵

Protestant Tradition

Related to *sola fide* are two preparatory components, *solus Christus* (Christ alone) and *sola gratia* (by grace alone), that are

23. Art. XX. "This is the sum of doctrine . . . nothing which is discrepant with Scripture or with the church catholic or even with the Roman church as far as that church is known from the writings of the Fathers" (art. I.22). Augustine and Ambrose, among others, cited as defenders grace and the righteousness of faith against the merit of works.

24. Jakob Andreae and Martin Chemnitz, *Catalog of Testimonies* (1578), trans. T. Man-teufel, in *Sources and Contexts in the Book of Concord*, ed. R. Kolb and J. A. Nestigen (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 221.

25. R. Kolb and T. J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 19.

perceived (with *sola scriptura*) as the enduring bastions of evangelicalism in particular and Protestantism in general. Use of the adjective *sola* or *solus* ("alone" or "sole") excludes human participation in humankind's redemption. Although none of the sixteenth-century Reformers ever spoke of the Christian faith using these phrases together, contemporary Protestant writers, nonetheless, frequently employ them as foundational for describing an orthodox interpretation of Christianity. These terms operate much like traditions.

The principle of *sola Christus* is really the basis for the rest. The beginning and the end of the Christian faith is found in our justification in Jesus Christ alone. For Luther, Christ's death and resurrection made the gifts of grace and faith possible. The definitive text for this understanding is John 14:6: Christ is the way, the truth, and the life. "No one comes to the Father except through me." Central to the New Testament proclamation is the absolute uniqueness of Christ, also expressed in Acts 4:12: "Salvation is found in no one else." *Sola gratia* emphasizes that the God who justifies is a gracious God. Just as righteousness is made possible by Christ alone, so sinners are made righteous by God's grace alone.

Without these principles, according to various Protestant theologians, Protestantism would not be itself. The *sola* statements have served functionally, if not in name, as traditions of Protestantism, at least in Lutheran and Reformed circles. Even for those Protestants who declare that they do not acknowledge any traditions or creeds, the *solas* have acted as nothing less than theological norms for interpreting the Bible. Any mitigation of these "traditions," therefore, is tantamount to a denial of biblical faith.²⁶

Of course, not all Protestants have maintained the ultimate importance of this side of Protestant tradition. A little-observed fact is that various sixteenth-century Anabaptist and free church groups, from whom the majority of evangelical churches today trace their ancestry, rejected or significantly modified Luther's

26. It is noteworthy that the Formula of Concord (1576), after establishing the unequivocal authority of the Bible and the importance of the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian creeds for doctrinal matters, makes appeal to the "Creed of our own age, called the first, unaltered Augsburg Confession [1530] . . . and likewise the Apology [of the Augsburg Confession] and the Smalcald Articles drawn up in the year 1537 and approved by subscription by the theological leaders of that time."

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articulation of justification by faith. In their eyes, the teaching of *sola fide* failed to instruct believers about the need for good works. Luther's separation of justification from sanctification seemed to be a perilous move that failed to convince Christians of the centrality of holiness. Anabaptists understood the relationship between justification and sanctification in a manner that put them, ironically, closer to medieval Catholicism than to Luther.²⁷ These communions did not accept justification by faith as the sole criterion for measuring fidelity to the gospel. In fact, they seem to have suspected it of being an excuse for permitting a lax, comprehensive state church.²⁸ While later free church movements (Baptist, Pentecostal, Disciples of Christ, etc.) accept justification by faith alone as an important part of their theology, they tend to give as great an importance to the need for believers to appropriate the faith. The concern for repentance and conversion has generally led to an emphasis on faith as the human response to God's initiative.²⁹

One of the historical fallacies of modern presentations of *sola fide* is that it was more or less uniformly accepted by the various reforming movements of the sixteenth century. The "traditional" aspect of *sola fide* is nowhere more apparent than in its monolithic-like appeal to represent the whole mind of Protestantism. It is especially distressing that some evangelicals demand that the *solas* are the epitome of evangelicalism and should be regarded as the only orthodoxy for evangelicals. While Luther was a dominant voice in his time, he was nevertheless one voice among many who were proclaiming the church's need for reformation. Not all reformers saw *sola fide* as being at the very heart of the gospel; nor did they all entirely embrace Luther's manner of expressing it.³⁰ Melancthon, Luther's close aide and intellectual defender, was ill at ease with Luther's insistence on humanity's total passivity in God's work of justification. In distinction to the idea that a person no longer

27. David Dunbar, "Martin Luther and the Early Free Church Tradition," *Evangelical Journal of Theology* 8 (1986): 53.

28. A. N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2002), 135.

29. See Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, "The Apostolicity of Free Churches," *Pro Ecclesia* 10 (2001): 475-86.

30. Even Luther, in his debate with Erasmus, identified the theological center as the incarnation and suffering of the Son of God and that God is three and one. See D. Yeago, "Ecclesia Sancta, Ecclesia Peccatrix," *Pro Ecclesia* 9 (2000): 332.

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acts once Christ lives in him or her, Melancthon explained that justification must make reference to three contributing factors: the Word of God, the Holy Spirit, and the faculty of the human will. The latter he called the "capacity for applying oneself to grace, a way of speaking that would have not been acceptable to Luther."³¹ Among those who accepted the principle of *sola fide*, there were differing applications of the concept. One of Luther's disciples, Andreas Osiander, utterly rejected the notion that justification was external to the believer, as Luther and Melancthon had taught. Instead, Osiander claimed that saving righteousness was infused into the soul,³² much as Augustine had claimed.

Justification and Church History

Undoubtedly, the theological concepts of unmerited grace and faith that justifies the sinner received a deserved and extensive reworking in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, which they had previously never received. After objecting to abuses within the sacramental structure of the medieval church, the Reformers needed to identify more precisely the necessary "hinge" on which Christian salvation swings. Part of the unspoken historical perspective behind the post-Reformation insistence that there is only one acceptable doctrinal formulation of justification by faith is the older and broader narrative that the church had lost its way about the true course of salvation until it was found by the Reformers.³³ Just as the notions of penance, tradition, and sacraments represented a series of corruptions from the simple and straightforward biblical message of the church, so the original apostolic intentions as expounded in the Pauline Epistles had become overlaid with the paraphernalia of alien teachings and practices sometime after the first century. During this time, the church allegedly imported the idea that divine forgiveness was also grounded in the righteous activity of a believer. The church's

31. Paul O'Callaghan, *Fides Christi: The Justification Debate* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 46-47.

32. *Ibid.*, 54.

33. For a detailed look at the pervasiveness of the church's "fall" paradigm, see D. H. Williams, *Retrieving the Tradition and Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), chap. 4.

corruption implied that its history was a history of discontinuity between the apostolic era and what followed. The only bright spot in the obfuscation of the faith's true meaning was Augustine's teaching on sin, grace, and election. His explanations on these subjects came the closest to mirroring Paul's teaching. Otherwise, the theology of the patristic and medieval periods generally suffered from distortions of biblical faith and stood in dire need of correction. It was not until the sixteenth century that the implications of Paul's teaching about justification by faith were properly interpreted and integrated into the Christian faith.

Where does such a view leave the church for its first fifteen hundred years? As A. N. S. Lane observes, the pre-Reformation church may have understood the doctrine of justifying faith, but not in terms of sixteenth-century Protestantism.³⁴ As long as the sixteenth-century Reformation is viewed as the restoration of apostolic Christianity and the bar by which the rest of church history is judged, then patristic and medieval Christianity are incomplete or inadequate attempts at expressing the gospel.

No less remarkable than the myth of the church's fall is its sudden recovery with Luther's discovery of the Pauline phrase "a righteousness from God" in Romans 1:17. It is debatable how much veracity should be placed on Luther's autobiographical statement of 1545 in which he recalls the events of his conversion sometime before 1518.³⁵ But more problematic than depicting Luther as one radically transformed from a medieval monk to an evangelical Reformer is that it fails to take seriously the purposes of the early Reformation as a restoration of catholicism.³⁶ It also leads to the impression that Protestant Christianity was a development independent of, or even despite, the patristic and medieval church. This view does not take into account the complexity of sources that influenced Luther's thinking on justification. Determining these sources and their precise impact on his thought continues to be a matter of scholarly investigation.³⁷ Still, it seems axiomatic to

34. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, 146.
35. "Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther's Latin Writings" (1545), in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. J. Dillenberger (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1961), 3-12.

36. As David Yeago argues in "The Catholic Luther," in *The Catholicity of the Reformation*, ed. C. E. Braaten and R. W. Jenson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 15-17.

37. See Eric Gritsch, "The Origins of the Lutheran Teaching on Justification," in *Justification by Faith*, 162-71; B. Hägglund, "The Background of Luther's Doctrine of Justification

some modern Protestant writers that the principle of justification by faith was "discovered" or "rediscovered" by the Reformers,³⁸ by which is meant that the important principles expounded by Paul about the truth of salvation had been overlooked or misunderstood by most of the early and medieval church.

Such a caricature is fraught with problems. Most obvious is the fact that this caricature fails to do justice to fifteen hundred years of church history. It renders the Protestant legacy ahistorical, not concerned with its place in a larger and longer Christian story, while asserting that it is the restoration of that story. This is either ignorance or arrogance, neither one befitting what Protestantism was originally intended to be.

The doctrine of justification by faith did not originate in the period of the Reformation, nor is the teaching a unique emblem of Protestantism. Evangelical scholars Timothy George and Thomas Oden have rightly observed that justification by faith was not a new teaching invented by the Reformers.³⁹ Apart from New Testament documents, justification by faith finds its roots in the early church. Stated positively, the exegesis of justification by faith is a catholic and pre-Reformation teaching, and the Reformers themselves found precedents for this teaching in the early fathers, even as they went in new directions with these ideas.

Paul, Justification, and the Early Tradition

While the observation that the salvific concept of justification was recognized by patristic writers is nothing new, it is not easy to find reputable studies that address this issue, and most of these (not unjustly) concern themselves with Augustine's landmark contributions. There is no question that the "later" Augustine brings the issue of justification into the mainstream of Christian doctrine, concomitantly with the notions of grace and election, permanently

in Late Medieval Theology," *Lutheran World* 8 (1961): 24-46; and David Steinmetz, *Luther and Staupitz: An Essay in the Intellectual Origins of the Protestant Reformation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1980).

38. E.g., F. Hildebrandt, *Christianity according to the Wesleys* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 18.

39. Timothy George, "Evangelicals and the Rule of Faith," *First Things* 106 (2000): 75; and Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002).

putting his stamp on the theological development of the West.⁴⁰ But the status of the teaching of justification prior to Augustine seems to be largely ignored by scholars. The problem is partially due to the difficulties in locating exact theological antecedents to Augustine's mature theology, difficulties compounded by the fact that the development of a *doctrine* of justification was not a priority for early Christian thinkers. This, in turn, has fueled the conclusion that there was in the early church an overall disinterest in and misconstrual of Pauline theology until Augustine. One is reminded of T. F. Torrance's verdict against Clement and the apostolic fathers, charging them with directly contradicting Paul and promoting a theology of "works."⁴¹ This is the implicit message in the entry "Justification" in *The Encyclopedia of the Early Church*. No writers earlier than Augustine and Pelagius are mentioned as having relevance to the patristic development of soteriology, which leaves the reader to assume that nothing of importance was written on the subject during the first four centuries of the church except, of course, for the Pauline letters.⁴²

In his impressive historical survey of justification by faith, Alister McGrath dismisses what writers before Augustine had to say about the subject on the grounds that patristic Christianity suffered from an acute case of dependency on Greek philosophy rather than the Bible. McGrath concludes that in terms of a theological understanding of justification, "early theologians of the western church . . . approached their text [Latin Bible] and their subject with a set of presuppositions which owed more to the Latin language and culture than to Christianity itself."⁴³ Just as problematic were the Greek writers who maintained a positive estimation of the human capacity for the exercise of free will,

40. Augustine's writings overall do not present a uniform picture about sin, grace, and election, as they do not offer a uniform view about any major doctrine. A comparison of Augustine's *On Free Will*, books I-II with *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin* and other later works demonstrates clear differences in his perspective on the relationship between human ability and God's omnipotence.

41. T. F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1948), 44-45.

42. *The Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, s.v. "Justification," acknowledges Origen's commentary on Romans but states that "the only patristic author who seems to appreciate the distinctively Pauline teaching was Augustine."

43. Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 1.15.

with which they associated the importance of obedience and of achieving purity. It is no wonder, therefore, that writers before Augustine all sound like Pelagians.

But was the early church before Augustine so ignorant of Paul's Epistles and misguided as to their teaching? Several indications demonstrate that the concept of justifying faith was initially developed in the patristic era and well before the Pelagian controversy broke out (i.e., c. 411-12).

Early church historians generally agree that the theological emphases during the patristic era were centered around ontological issues of the divine nature as it relates to a trinitarian understanding of God and the being and work of Christ as God incarnate. As the early church sought to define its identity in light of its Jewish roots and as the tensions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians continued well into the second century, debate about the relationship between law and gospel often impinged on the Christian idea of salvation.

Against the perceived imbalances among certain Jewish Christians, Polycarp's letter to the Smyrnaeans cites Ephesians 2:8: "By grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast." Polycarp may have seen in his own mid-second-century situation a continuation of the struggle Paul waged against a Jewish-Christian doctrine of legalism, which he too wished to correct as inconsistent with the gospel. The letters of Ignatius and the *Epistle of Barnabas* clearly show that severe conflicts took place between Christians and Jewish Christians over the relevance of the law in the interpretation of the Christian message. The extremes of Judaizing Christians who mandated a literal reading of the Mosaic covenant, on the one hand, and Marcion's complete rejection of the historical relevance of the Old Testament for Christianity, on the other hand, were already coming into expression by this time. But concern with such extremes was not the sole occasion for echoing Pauline theology. The late-first-century letter known as *1 Clement* contains almost solely quotations from the Hebrew Bible yet exhibits a predominance of Pauline themes, such as frequent reference to believers as God's elect, the use of doxologies, and contentions that God's faithful are made just by faith.⁴⁴

44. See *1 Clement* 2.5; 32.4; 58.3.

Also among the Apostolic Fathers corpus, the anonymous *Epistle to Diognetus*, written about the same time as Polycarp's letter, manifests theological sensitivity to the relationship between the sinfulness and powerlessness of the human condition before God and our need for the righteousness of God. This text contains no direct quotations from the Pauline Epistles. Still, the writer speaks plainly of an inability to enter the kingdom of God according to one's own worthiness or goodness. Hope of salvation lies only in the saving power of God, which was demonstrated by the ransoming of his righteous Son for humanity's unrighteousness.

In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous man, while the righteousness of one should justify many sinners!⁴⁵

None of these instances reveals the initial expounding of a doctrine of justification by faith. It is accurate to say only that there are occasional moments of direct reflection on Pauline theology during the first three centuries, and when these instances do occur, there is often recognition that the righteous are made righteous by faith. Of course, one can also find very un-Pauline perspectives, such as the injunction in the *Didache* (19:10) for one to work to ransom one's sins (though the writer is not propounding a soteriology). The *Shepherd of Hermas*, likewise, presents the Christian faith in terms that demonstrate almost a complete ignorance of God's gracious act of redemption in Christ.⁴⁶ Despite these cases, however, there is no need to think that patristic writers had become so philosophically and culturally intoxicated that they were no longer concerned with establishing clarity regarding the way of salvation based on Scripture and the church's tradition.

The biblical commentaries written by Origen of Alexandria in the middle of the third century reveal what early Greek Christianity thought of the books of Romans and Ephesians. Clement of Alexandria is said to have made brief comments on Paul's

45. *Epistle to Diognetus* 9.4-5.

46. *Shepherd*, *Vision* 2.2: "If this sin is recorded against me, how can I be saved? Or how will I propitiate God for my conscious sins?" Cf. *Shepherd*, *Vision* 3.10; and *Mandate* 3.28.

Epistles,⁴⁷ but other than a few fragments, this work is not extant. Even so, Origen's efforts represent the first known large-scale commentary on select Pauline letters among Latin or Greek writers. His work demonstrates clearly that he insisted on the absolute necessity of faith and good works; the two are organically linked in such a way that Origen rarely articulates the one without the other. In his commentary on Romans, Origen presents faith as a truly personal relationship with Christ grounded solely on receiving faith, just as it had happened for the thief on the cross or the woman who was a sinner (Luke 7). At the same time, he safeguards the idea from any approach that interprets God's justifying faith as an excuse for the absence of pursuing personal righteousness. Origen was chiefly concerned about those who used faith to escape moral culpability because their nature had predetermined by God or the stars or because their nature had preordained them to a course of action.⁴⁸ Belief that does not yield the fruit of good works is therefore in vain. The efficacy of saving faith, as Paul expresses it in unqualified and all-embracing terms, appears in Origen, though in brief and restricted ways.

Thanks to the postmortem popularity of Origen in the later fourth and early fifth century, Greek writers, most notably John Chrysostom, similarly espoused the coordinating efforts of divine grace and human response.⁴⁹ Furthermore, the translation of many of Origen's works by Rufinus, Jerome, and others meant that the commentary on Romans was available to Latin readers and would have its most enduring effect in the West. Pelagius certainly knew of it and used it. A convincing case has also been made by the late C. P. Bammel that Augustine was indebted to Origen's commentary as the African

47. The work is called *Hypotyposes* by Eusebius of Caesarea, *HE* VI.14, 1.

48. Origen, *Commentary on Romans* II.4, 7.

49. E.g., John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Gospel of Matthew* 82: "From this we learn an important doctrine, that people's good will is not enough if they are not in receipt of grace from on high, and correlatively that we profit nothing from grace from on high if good will is lacking. Both these truths Judas and Peter demonstrate: though one enjoyed much assistance, it did him no good because he lacked good will and contributed nothing of his own, whereas the latter, though full of good will, came to grief because he received no assistance. Virtue, you see, is woven from these two things. Hence I urge you not to leave it all up to God and fall asleep, nor in a flurry of zeal to think you achieve the whole thing by your own efforts. In fact, God does not want us to be lethargic—hence his not doing everything himself; nor to be presumptuous—hence his not leaving it all up to us; instead, he removed the harmful element in each option, and left to us the beneficial part."

bishop struggled with the Pauline emphasis on justification by faith and the necessity of good works after baptism.⁵⁰

Justification in the Fourth Century

In the Latin literature, it was not until the mid-fourth century with the commentaries on Galatians, Ephesians, and Titus by Marius Victorinus that Western theology began to make a more thorough inquiry into the implications of Pauline theology. One of the few scholarly examinations of the early Latin patristic use of Paul's thought focused on these commentaries, and results of this work make it clear that Victorinus taught salvation by grace through faith,⁵¹ though he does not seek to investigate beyond the Pauline wording. We are freed from our sins by belief in Christ, but good works are expected to follow this forgiveness in a reciprocal fashion.

While Victorinus may have produced the first exegetical treatments of the Pauline Epistles, he was not the first to integrate the teaching of justification by faith into Christian theology. Virtually ignored among the treatments of early Christian thought is Hilary of Poitiers, a bishop and theologian whose contributions were seminal for the establishment of trinitarian and christological theology in the West before Augustine. But just as noteworthy was Hilary's commentary on the Gospel of Matthew. This is a remarkable work in several ways, not least in that it is the first Latin biblical commentary to be preserved almost completely intact.⁵² It also reveals the prominence of the Pauline theme of justifying faith a half century before Augustine. Given the centrality of justifying faith in the commentary, it is fitting that we examine it more closely.

Twenty occurrences of the phrase "justification by faith" are mentioned throughout the thirty-three-chapter work, demonstrating its importance in Hilary's understanding of the gospel. Clearly, Hilary's

interest involves much more than mere restatements of Pauline passages. The fact that this author, writing a commentary on Matthew, utilizes Paul's language and concepts so frequently demonstrates that they are for him an indispensable factor in achieving an adequate understanding of how a sinner is made righteous.

Fundamental to Hilary's description of the message of salvation is the idea that the bonds of the law, chained by its acknowledgment of sin, are loosed "through an understanding of evangelical freedom."⁵³ Even though the same law proclaimed Christ and his coming (cf. Luke 24:44-47) and was established for the realization of the need for faith (XVI.3), it became a liability when used as an end in itself, effectively preventing many Jews from appropriating Christ. The problem with trying to keep the law is that one is not able to follow it and accept God's justifying grace. By not having faith, those who follow the law lose what they have of the law (XIII.2). Hilary often contrasts the legalism of unbelief and unworthiness with salvific faith. The former is a salvation of works that leads to unbelief and even animosity toward faith, whereas those who have no achievement to their credit are prepared to realize that "salvation is entirely by faith" (XI.10).⁵⁴

The model of obedience for the Jews was Abraham, who was worthy as one justified by faith, so that "through faith believers are the descendants of Abraham" (II.3). Of course, if justice had come from the law, forgiveness through grace would not have been necessary (IX.2). Only an abuse of the law, as seen in the Pharisees, brings about an opposition to the necessity of faith. Before and after the coming of Christ, the means of righteousness was the same: that which comes only "through grace of the gospels' justification" (XXVII.7). This fact was vividly demonstrated, just as Origen had acknowledged, by the thief on the cross who was saved only by justification by faith. Salvation lies only in the goodness of God, a goodness that Hilary calls "the perfect gift" (XII.5; XIII.2): We are

53. Hilary, *On Matthew* XI.2. This is more than a passing theme for Hilary. Cf. XI.8 ("freedom of life in Christ"), XIX.10 ("freedom of the gospel"), and XXX.11 ("liberty of the gospel").

54. The withered fig tree in Matt. 21 is said to be a figure of the chief priests and Pharisees who "have not been justified by faith, nor have they returned through repentance to salvation" (ibid., XXI.14). The pagans, on the other hand, are justified by the entry of salvation and it is "for their sakes [the Lord] is come" (ibid., XXI.2). Not all is lost for the Jews, however, since "just as some believed through the apostles, so it is through Elijah that others will believe and be justified by faith" (ibid., XXVI.5).

50. C. P. Bammel, "Justification by Faith in Augustine and Origen," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47 (1996): 223-35.

51. Robert Eno, "Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification," *Recherches Augustiniennes* 19 (1984): 3-27. A shorter version of the same title is found in Anderson, *Justification by Faith*, 111-30.

52. Jean Doignon produced a new critical edition for the commentary in 1978 (*Sources chrétiennes*, vols. 254, 258). The first English translation of the work will appear in the near future in the Fathers of the Church series.

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"made alive through the grace of the Spirit whose gift comes . . . through faith" (XV.10).

The parable of the workers in the vineyard illustrates for Hilary that salvation is completely God's gift (Matt. 20:1-16). The workers hired at the eleventh hour of the day received the same wages as those hired in the morning. The remuneration for the former demonstrates that it was not based on the merit of their labor. Rather, "God has freely granted his grace to all through justification by faith" (XX.7). This was the only means, Hilary says, by which the pagans (Gentiles) were saved. They were the last ones "hired" by the owner of the vineyard yet the first to receive remuneration.

When it began to get late, the workers of the evening hour were the first to obtain the payment of the resurrection determined for an entire day's work. The resurrection is in no way based on the payment, because it was owed for work rendered, but God has freely granted his grace to everyone by the justification of faith. . . . God bestows the gift of grace by faith on those who believe, either first or last."⁵⁵

Hilary was the first Christian theologian to formulate explicitly what Paul left implicit by referring to God's work of grace as "*fides sola iustificat*": Because "faith alone justifies . . . publicans and proselitutes will be first in the kingdom of heaven" (XXI.14). Yet it was not his intention to elaborate on an overall scheme of salvation but to explain how the pagans came to share legitimately in the covenant originally given only to Israel.

While Hilary does not articulate a concept of original sin, he anticipates the mature views of Augustine through his reading of Paul. He declares that all humanity is implicated in Adam's downfall, that no person is without sin and no one by his own merits can free himself from that sin. Because of the sin of one, the sentence of condemnation is passed on all.⁵⁶ Not only does he espouse this doctrine, but he also comes as close as any writer before Augustine to formulating the term "original sin."

When therefore, we are renewed in the laver of baptism through the power of the Word, we are separated from the sin and source of our

55. *Ibid.*, XX.7. In this one section, Hilary emphasizes three times the unmerited gift of grace by the justification of faith.

56. *Ibid.*, XVIII.6; Augustine, *The Trinity* VI.21.

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origin [*ab originis nostrae peccatis atque auctoribus*], and when we have endured a sort of excision from the sword of God, we differ from the dispositions of our father and mother [e.g., Adam and Eve].⁵⁷

Only by regeneration does the free gift of God avail the human condition. Moreover, the grace by which a believer is transformed is God's spontaneous, unconditional, and free gift. Despite the fact that sin entered the world through one man, the gift of grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, brings forgiveness. Like his Latin predecessors, however, Hilary does not view human nature as completely helpless and moribund in the exercise of its moral will. God authorized humanity to exercise free will in the practice of good or evil as well as in responding freely to the gospel.

The Generation of St. Paul

The importance of Pauline theology in Hilary's writing was not an isolated case. There is a strong likelihood that Hilary's commentary sparked or fueled the revival of Pauline studies in the West during the last decades of the fourth century and the early fifth century. Hilary's writings appear to have been copied and made widely available soon after his death,⁵⁸ and within a decade, a common interest in Pauline texts and themes is evident among such widely divergent thinkers as Augustine, Tyconius (a North African Donatist who was well known to Augustine), the monk Pelagius, and Priscillian of Barcelona, a reputed neo-Manichaean. This revival of Pauline biblical texts within the Latin church was dubbed by Peter Brown as the generation of St. Paul.⁵⁹ Correspondingly, the second half of the fourth century saw a rapid increase in the number of biblical commentaries published in the West. Such commentaries became the all-important medium of transmitting theology, which

57. Hilary, *On Matthew* X.24.

58. C. Kannengiesser, "L'Héritage d'Hilaire de Poitiers," *Recherches de science religieuse* 56 (1968): 435-56; and P. Smulders, "Remarks on the Manuscript Tradition of the *De Trinitate* of Saint Hilary of Poitiers," *Texte und Untersuchungen* 78 (1961): 129-38. Already by 430, the same year Augustine died, a dossier or florilegium of Hilarian texts was circulating in the West and was being used by Arnobius the Younger, Leo of Rome, John Cassian, and Celestine of Rome.

59. Peter Brown, *Augustine: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 151.

had previously been conveyed mainly by polemical treatises. Given the fact that Hilary's trinitarian and christological theology is often cited by later writers, it stands to reason that Hilary's Matthew commentary would have exerted no less influence on subsequent Latin literature.⁶⁰

Augustine's experiences and theology show that he was a benefactor of the renewed interest in Paul's letters and that he stood in a succession of writers who benefited from the repercussions of Pauline theology shaping Latin hermeneutics. In addition to the works of Marius Victorinus, those of the Italian writer called "Ambrosiaster" by modern scholars suggest that the renewed interest in Pauline theology was already underway by the late 370s.⁶¹ The latter's complete set of commentaries on the Pauline Epistles reveals the exegetical enthusiasm present at the time, as do Jerome's commentaries on Galatians, Ephesians, and Philemon. The tight focus on justifying faith is not exhibited in these writings to the same degree as in Hilary's commentary, but the emphasis on unmerited grace is certainly present.

Pelagius, writing on the same scale as Ambrosiaster and perhaps in opposition to his conclusions, published brief commentaries on all Paul's letters.⁶² During the late fourth century, Augustine and Pelagius were similar in juxtaposing faith and good works. Indeed, Augustine treated Pelagius with deference and with an irenic spirit before A.D. 411–12. Of course, Pelagius had not denied the central place of grace but had affirmed the perseverance of *natural* grace, which meant that one did not have to sin. Augustine evolved in ways that set him apart from his earlier perspectives by stressing (1) the inability of the "natural man" to choose and do the good, and (2) God's sovereignty and his affirmation of the absolute priority of grace. In no way can God's purposes of redemption be thwarted or assisted by human choices—an axiom that Luther later espoused as central to his theology. A sinner is completely justified by faith

60. P. Smulders, "Hilarius van Poitiers als Exegeet van Mattheüs" (Hilary of Poitiers as an Exegete of St. Matthew), *Bijdragen* 44 (1983): 75.

61. In the 370s, Ambrosiaster emphasized the effect of original sin inherited by all humanity. We thus all sinned en masse in Adam and stand guilty before God. See A. Pollastri, *Ambrosiaster: Commento alla Lettera ai Romani* (Aquila: L. U. Japadre, 1996), 106–15.

62. A. Souter, "The Earliest Latin Commentaries on the Epistles of St. Paul," *Texts and Studies* 9 (1926): 39–95; *Patrologiae cursus completus, series latina, supplementum* I, 1110–374; and T. De Bruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1993).

because nothing on the part of a sinner can promote or stall God's salvific action on his behalf. Put in this way, one may say that Augustine was not propounding a doctrine of soteriology as much as he was defending a theology proper to the statement "I believe in God the Father Almighty."

Justifying Faith within the Tradition

It should go without saying that the theologians of the early church did not articulate soteriology in the same way as the sixteenth-century Reformers, nor should we expect them to have done so. It is entirely anachronistic to judge the merits of the former solely in light of the latter. Of course, the early fathers did not directly address many of the issues that would vex theologians a millennium later. While patristic texts used a certain form of words such as "faith alone" or "grace alone," it is quite another matter to show that the meaning of the one coincides with the other.

Allowing it to speak on its own terms, early Christian thought calls us to reconsider the divine richness out of which emerged Christian perspectives of salvation in general and justification in particular, a point that is emphatically reiterated by the vast knowledge and use of the early fathers by the majority of the Reformers.⁶³ Instead of mitigating the contributions of the early church, we may rather observe the ways in which the early church serves to balance the Protestant tradition of declaring that justification is only an alien or external righteousness or that justification must be imputed in order to have saving efficacy. On this point, Erasmus complained to Luther that his reforms too easily rejected ancient theologians' interpretation of the Bible.

And even though Christ's Spirit might permit His people to be in error over an unimportant question on which man's salvation does not depend, how credible is it that He should have overlooked error

63. The years between 1527 and 1565—the time before the Council of Trent and when Protestantism became much more theologically defensive—saw the publication of twenty-three anthologies of patristic writings partly or totally devoted to the doctrine of justification. A. N. S. Lane, "Justification in Sixteenth-Century Patristic Anthologies," in *Auctoritas Patrum: Contributions on the Reception of the Church Fathers in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Century*, ed. L. Grane, A. Schindler, and M. Wriedt, 69–95 (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993).

in His Church for more than thirteen hundred years, and have found not a single one of those saintly people worthy of being inspired with what my opponents [Luther and his followers] claim is the most important teaching of the entire gospel?⁶⁴

In general, the fathers maintained the free and unmerited character of God's grace toward us, expressing it sometimes in the terms of justification by faith, although they saw ongoing justification in a different light.⁶⁵ Making firm differentiations between justification and sanctification was not the essence of doctrinal discourse for them. More pertinent to the early church's thinking as it concerned faith and justification was how a believer was purified. Ultimately, salvation was a spirituality that stressed the goal of the Christian life as the purification of the soul, in accordance with the principles implied in Titus 2:11-14. As we have seen, a definitive conversion was important, but the majority of early fathers stressed that God's work in the life of a Christian was more a process than a point. Only through purification could a believer hope to apprehend God in this life and the next. Whereas later theology assigned purification to the sanctification of a believer, patristic theology made no functional difference between the two. Purification and justification are joint acts of the Spirit, operating in the life of a believer and enabling him or her to "see" God.

Unlike the trivial sort of gospel preaching that one encounters in too many churches today where the goal of "accepting" Christ is so that one will go to heaven, the early fathers believed that God's salvation through the life, death, and resurrection of Christ meant providing a believer with the means to perceive God and thereby share in his divine life. That is, salvation was supposed to culminate in divine *theosis* or deification—becoming transformed according to God—a seminal part of the teaching of early fathers such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa. The point is that faith is a divine work of salvation "in us" as well as "for us" in order to change us, that we may behold God. Protestants seeking to learn about the entire heritage of their faith should ponder seriously the way in which the earlier centuries of the Christian story

64. Erasmus, *De Libero arbitrio diatribe*, in *Collected Works of Erasmus*, ed. C. Trinkus, trans. P. Macardle and C. H. Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999), 20.
 65. R. B. Eno, "Some Patristic Views on the Relationship of Faith and Works in Justification," in *Justification by Faith*, 111-30.

and other parts of the Christian family, such as Eastern Orthodox, have expressed the wonder of God's salvation.

Various patristic witnesses to Scripture do not always use Pauline theology as the grid by which all other scriptural testimonies are evaluated, nor do they share Luther's idea of a canon within a canon. Rather, one finds among the developing views of soteriology in early Christianity that justification is integral to the whole work of the Trinity that flows out of the life of God, manifested in a believer by faith and good works leading toward virtue. However we choose to define the righteousness of God that comes by faith, this doctrine must be indissolubly linked to the doctrine of the Trinity, for the righteousness of God—a central point in the justification event—cannot be understood apart from the life of the Triune God.⁶⁶

"The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification" signed by Roman Catholic and Lutheran representatives more accurately reflects the kind of emphasis found in the early church. It states in paragraph 15:

In faith we together hold the conviction that justification is the work of the triune God. The Father sent his Son into the world to save sinners. The foundation and presupposition of justification is the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ. Justification thus means that Christ himself is our righteousness, in which we share through the Holy Spirit in accord with the will of the Father.

As per the "Joint Declaration," justification is not the supreme touchstone of Christian doctrine. It asserts, on the contrary, that justification must be integrated within the church's "rule of faith," which is centered on the Triune God and the incarnation.⁶⁷ Not making the doctrine of justification the supreme touchstone does not undermine its theological efficacy and importance for evangelicalism and Protestantism. To place it within the larger scheme of the Christian

66. What makes Jünger's book more compelling than other twentieth-century Protestant defenses of justification is that he shows how a trinitarian conception is integral to it, though only a few pages are spent on this important connection (*Justification*, 82-85). The author vitiates the theological benefit accrued by this point when he demands simultaneously that justification hold the absolutely privileged position by which all other Christian doctrines are to be judged (47).

67. Avery Dulles, "Two Languages of Salvation: The Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration," *First Things* 98 (1999): 28.

story and message is to rediscover how Christ as "God with us," not a scheme of soteriology, is the basis of our salvation.

The Wholeness of the Biblical Testimony

It is not extraordinary that the patristic interpreters of Scripture did not use Pauline theology as the template by which all other scriptural testimonies were understood. In various parts of the New Testament corpus, the gospel is expressed in completely different terms. While there is a discernible unity to the Gospels and the Epistles, there is not the uniformity of proclamation that the platform of *solus fide* would suggest. The fact that justification is rarely mentioned outside of Romans and Galatians (cf. 1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:7) does little to support the use of justification as *the* biblical criterion. Above all, when Paul does single out some doctrines (plural) "as of first importance" (1 Cor. 15:3), he focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ, as also seen in the common confession (1 Tim. 3:16). It is noteworthy that these do not include justification by faith.⁶⁸ The New Testament cannot and should not be reduced to the teaching of justification by faith alone.

To insist that justification by faith is the pivotal point around which the biblical message turns necessitates the acknowledgment of a doctrinal canon (justification principle) within the canon (Scripture). This is what Luther did and what some contemporary Protestant theologians are doing,⁶⁹ but very few evangelicals are willing to go this far formally and materially when it comes to treating Scripture. Among Lutherans, discussion continues about how the doctrine of justification ought not stand alone from the totality of the rest of Scripture and the trinitarian and christological truths of the historic faith.⁷⁰

Ancient notions of God's grace and human ability were derived from a governing perspective of the Bible's wholeness. Basic to

68. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, 143–44.

69. McGrath writes that "there never was, and there never can be, any true Christian church without the doctrine of justification" (as presented by Luther) (McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 1.1).

70. Eero Huovinen, "How Do We Continue? The Ecumenical Commitments and Possibilities of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification," *Pro Ecclesia* 11 (2001): 170. Huovinen is the bishop of Helsinki, Evangelical Lutheran Church of Finland.

this hermeneutical perspective was that any one text of Scripture had to be interpreted in light of all of Scripture, both Old and New Testaments. There was nothing accidental about this perspective. It emerged out of three centuries of doubt about and dispute over the relevance of various biblical texts among the new people of God. Scripture shares an inner coherence and design because of its divine origins, which means that the act of interpretation is in reality a task of unveiling and clarifying the pattern of truths already present in the structure. A theology gained from one text can and should inform the construal of other texts. It was automatic, therefore, for patristic writers to find Pauline perspectives in their reading of the gospel and vice versa.⁷¹ They would not have shared the antagonistic exegesis of the early twentieth-century New Testament scholars who pitted Matthew's Jewish rendering of the gospel against the apostle to the Gentiles. For Hilary, as we have seen, the Gospel of Matthew itself taught and illustrated the teaching of justification by faith. He was not blind to the differences that existed between Pauline and Matthean texts, but, like earlier Latin commentators, he read them as parts of the same divine continuum, and they therefore shared the same purposes.

This holistic approach to the Bible is also related to a basic conviction of the early church that the work of justification is integral to the whole work of the Trinity, from whom flows the life of God, experienced by a believer through faith and in good works leading toward virtue. Any theory of salvation is only as potent as its theory about the God who provides it. For this reason, Karl Barth refused to accept the doctrine of justification by faith as, in Luther's words, "the teacher, chief, lord, rule and judge over all other doctrines" of the evangelical message. While the necessity and importance of the particular function of the justification article cannot be denied, it is just that: a particular aspect of the Christian message of reconciliation. It is not *the* theological truth on which everything else is based. Barth rightly contended that this doctrine had not always been *the* Word of the gospel and that it would be "an act of narrowing and unjust exclusiveness" in the church's theological history were we to treat it as such.⁷² Rather, the being and activity of Jesus

71. E.g., Origen, *Commentarii in evangelium Joannis* I.5, 10; I.4, 23; II.9, 21; and idem, *Commentarium series in evangelium Matthaei* X.2, 5, 9; XI.3.

72. Karl Barth, *Christian Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936), IV/1.523.

Christ for us are the center of Christian theology and provide cohesiveness for drawing all its doctrinal aspects together.⁷³ We would expect Barth to say this, of course, but his point about the priority of God's revelation of himself is nevertheless well taken. The basis and culmination of the doctrine of justification are in the church's confession of the life of God imparted to us in Christ.

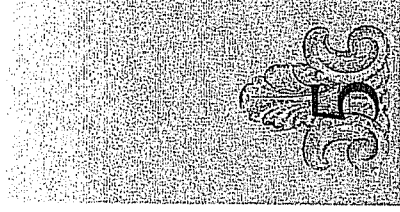
In the end, skepticism about the value of saving faith and unmerited grace in the patristic period is not warranted. Virtually every early church writer would have wholeheartedly agreed with Paul's words: "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old has gone, the new has come! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ" (2 Cor. 5:17-18). It was all but universally accepted that the work of salvation is completely God's work on our behalf. We are not saved by our good deeds. Part of the corrective that may be necessary as contemporary Protestantism seeks to understand itself in light of the entire inheritance of the historic faith is that we must see that the Reformation in the West, valuable as it was, obscured earlier voices that also spoke for orthodoxy and the church, voices that can again contribute to discussions about the theological roots of justification by faith.

The Protestant principles of *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* do not themselves constitute orthodox Christianity, nor do they constitute the very heart of the historic Christian faith. These were originally intended to subsist under the umbrella of the ancient tradition. The purpose here is not to mitigate their place or force within Protestant Christianity; it is to insist that the proper way to assess their value is to situate them within the broader contours of catholicity. The ancient rule of the church's faith is better suited to designate the central identity of historic Christianity than the Protestant *solae*, just as *the* tradition remains the foundation on which these later Protestant "traditions" build.

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GLIMPSES AT THE RESOURCES OF THE ANCIENT TRADITION

Those who study and translate the Fathers are giving up the best years of their lives . . . to the most laborious drudgery and most thankless of all tasks.

Thomas Mozley (John Henry Newman's brother-in-law),
Reminiscences Chiefly of Oriiel College
and the *Oxford Movement* (1882)

I HAVE OFTEN A strange feeling," the Greek Orthodox theologian George Florovsky once wrote, "when I read the ancient classics of Christian theology, the fathers of the church, I find them more relevant to the troubles and problems of my own time than the production of modern theologians."¹ Within his Greek Orthodoxy, Florovsky had been exposed to the early fathers and their perennial relevance, but this is not the case with many

1. George Florovsky, *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View* (Belmont, Mass.: Nordland, 1972), 16.

73. *Ibid.*, IV/1.527-28.