

Anglican Reflections on Justification by Faith

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This article reexamines the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone in the light of traditional criticisms and misunderstandings, but also of recent developments such as agreed ecumenical statements and the “New Perspective” on Paul. Focusing on formulations of justification found in Anglican reformers such as Thomas Cranmer and Richard Hooker, the author argues that justification by grace through faith is a summary way of saying that salvation from sin is the work of Jesus Christ alone. Union with Christ takes place through faith, and, through this union, Christ’s atoning work has two dimensions: forgiveness of sins (justification) and transformation (sanctification). Union with Christ is sacramentally mediated (through baptism and the eucharist), and has corporate and ecclesial implications, as union with Christ is also union with Christ’s body, the church.

The Reformation doctrine of justification by faith is much misunderstood. Among Roman Catholics, there is the caricature of justification by faith as a “legal fiction,” as if there were no such thing as a Protestant theology of either creation or sanctification. Similar to the accusation of “legal fiction” was the older criticism that justification by faith was an example of the tendency of late medieval Nominalism to reduce salvation to a matter of a divine voluntarist command, with no correlation to any notion of inherent goodness. For Luther, it was said, the Nominalist God could declare to be righteous someone who

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was actually sinful.¹ That is, the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith was interpreted to mean that God declares to be good that which is really evil. However, the traditional Protestant doctrine is not that God declares evil to be good but that, on the basis of Jesus Christ's atoning work, God acquits the evildoer (whose actions are genuinely evil) because of the saving deeds of Christ (whose deeds are genuinely good). God does not declare the evildoer to be good, but rather to be acquitted (not guilty).

There have also been Catholic apologists who interpret Paul's doctrine of justification through the affirmation in the epistle of James that "a person is justified by works and not by faith alone" (James 2:24).² Since Paul never uses the expression "by faith alone," Paul could not have been in agreement with the reformers without contradicting James.³ Catholics have pointed to Jesus' demand for good deeds (Matt. 5:20) and to biblical statements affirming the importance of love (1 Cor. 13) as evidence that justification cannot be by faith alone, but also demands virtue.

In contrast, ecumenically-minded Roman Catholics make the opposite claim: that there really is no essential difference between the Catholic position on justification and the Reformation position, that the Council of Trent did not condemn Luther's theology, but only distortions of it. In his book *Justification*,⁴ Hans Küng argued that Karl Barth's position was not incompatible with that put forward at Trent. In a foreword to the book, Barth acknowledged that Küng had gotten his position right, but was not sure whether Küng had gotten Trent right! Ecumenical Catholics and Protestants point to the agreed Roman Catholic/Lutheran "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification"⁵ as evidence that there are no longer substantial disagreements between Protestants and Catholics on justification.

¹ R. W. Gleason, S.J., *Grace* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1962), 194. Gleason's book is a superb example of the Tridentine understanding of justification and the Roman Catholic understanding of the Protestant position that prevailed before Vatican II.

² Scripture passages are from the English Standard Version.

³ Robert A. Sungen, *Not by Faith Alone: The Biblical Evidence for the Catholic Doctrine of Justification* (Goleta, Calif.: Queenship Publishing Company, 1997).

⁴ Hans Küng, *Justification: The Doctrine of Karl Barth and a Catholic Reflection* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004).

⁵ Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church, "Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification"; found at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/

Similarly, Catholic biblical scholars now recognize that Paul taught that justification is a forensic declaration, not an infused righteousness (or a “making righteous”), and that Paul taught that justification is by faith alone.⁶ Still, the modern *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is ambiguous on these matters, speaking of justification on the one hand as “the acceptance of God’s righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ,” but also saying that justification “makes us inwardly just by the power of [God’s] mercy.”⁷ Is the *Catechism* teaching that justification is divine “acceptance,” which is fully in accord with the reformers, or does it equate justification with “making inwardly just”—the position the reformers rejected?

There are also Protestant contributions to the confusion. Radical Lutherans have embraced a version of the “law/gospel” hermeneutic that seems to confirm Catholic concerns about “legal fiction.” This view interprets Luther as teaching that justification is indeed merely forensic, and results in no intrinsic change whatsoever. This reading of Luther tends to see Romans 7:14–25 not as a description of someone who lives under the law rather than under grace, but as a normative account of Christian anthropology. Justification by faith does not lead to good works, but is the constantly needed proclamation of forgiveness for those who do not do good works, and are not expected to do them. The suggestion that there is an inherent connection between justification and sanctification is resisted as an “imposition of law,” a return to “works righteousness.” The “Third Use of the Law,” found not only in John Calvin but endorsed by the Lutheran *Book of Concord*, is viewed by radical Lutherans as a falling away from the gospel.⁸ Lutheran theologian Gilbert Meilaender refers to this position as “dialectical Lutheranism.”⁹

pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html.

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, eds., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 839–844, 1397–1398, 1407–1408.

⁷ Vatican City, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, second edition (New York: Doubleday, 2003), nos. 1991 and 1992, 536.

⁸ “The Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord,” in *The Book of Concord*, VI. “The Third Use of the Law,” <http://bookofconcord.org/sd-thirduse.php>; John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, chaps. 7, 12.

⁹ Gilbert Meilaender, “Hearts Set to Obey,” in *I Am the Lord Your God: Christian Reflections on the Ten Commandments*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Carl E. Braaten (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 253–275.

In the Pietist/revivalist church in which I grew up, the doctrine of justification by faith was conflated with Jesus' statement in John 3:7 that "You must be born again" to equate justification with being "born again," and being "born again" with a specific experience of conversion that took place at a particular moment in time. Those who "asked Jesus to come into their hearts" were "born again" and thus justified. Those who could not remember ever having undergone such a conversion experience were often assumed not to be "real Christians," and there was corresponding anxiety about the authenticity of one's own conversion experience among those who doubted its sincerity.

In the mid-twentieth century, for those influenced by Rudolf Bultmann or Paul Tillich, justification by faith was reduced to an existential act of decision or authenticity of "experience," "faith" being equated with "authenticity." This seems to be a development of the Pietist equation of faith with a moment of conversion, which substitutes existential authenticity for the conversion experience.¹⁰ For both Pietists and liberal Protestants, one is justified not so much by placing one's trust in Christ's alien righteousness, as by having an authentic subjective experience.

Among contemporary liberal Protestants, a sympathetic interpretation of justification views it in terms of "inclusiveness." Justification by faith means that God accepts you just as you are, so you do not need to change, and it is wrong to insist that external standards of moral behavior or doctrinal orthodoxy or church discipline should be conditions for church membership. For some, justification by faith becomes the doctrine that there are no doctrines, except, of course, for the postmodern doctrines of "inclusiveness," "diversity," and "tolerance."

In recent years, Protestant New Testament scholars have initiated a new discussion about Paul's understanding of justification. "The New Perspective on Paul," associated with the work of E. P. Sanders, James Dunn, N. T. Wright, and others, challenges the reformers' interpretation. The New Perspective argues that Paul is not arguing against a Jewish "works righteousness," but against badges of "Torah covenant membership"—like circumcision and dietary laws—that separated Jews and Gentiles. New Perspective advocates also emphasize the corporate nature of justification, claiming that Paul is not concerned with

¹⁰ Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," *The Shaking of the Foundations* (New York: Scribners, 1948), 153–163.

individual righteousness, but with the question of how to identify those who are members of the covenant people of God. The Jewish claim was that God's covenant people are identified by the external marks of circumcision and kosher diet. Paul's claim to the contrary was that God's covenant people are identified by faith in Jesus Christ, or, perhaps better, the covenant faithfulness of Jesus Christ. New Perspective advocates also place a strong emphasis on Paul's speaking of a final judgment, based on works.

In light of the above, it is not surprising that some have trouble sorting out the Reformation doctrine of justification. The following is an attempt at clarification. What did the reformers mean by "justification by grace alone through faith alone"?

(1) All Reformation theologians (including Anglican reformers Thomas Cranmer, John Jewel, and Richard Hooker) would have agreed that justification is a "meritorious" work, but that it is entirely a meritorious work that is done by Jesus Christ. Sinners are justified by the atoning, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and they can do nothing to contribute to that work. This is why Luther refers to justification as an "alien righteousness." It is not that Christ's atoning work does not affect me, or that I do not have to make it my own, but that Christ's work is entirely his own, and not mine. The doctrine is that Christ died and rose again for my salvation. I did not.

Justification by faith alone is another way of saying justification by Christ alone.¹¹ It is therefore more proper to speak not of justification by faith, but of justification by grace alone through faith alone. When we exercise faith in Christ, we look away from ourselves and any good we have done, and depend entirely on Christ for our salvation. It is because Christ alone saves that we can say of any good works or virtues that appear in our lives that these also are simply the gifts of Christ who justifies us, and not something we can do to earn his favor or our salvation. He saves us entirely freely and graciously, out of a love that we do not earn, and toward which we cannot contribute in any way.

Although Luther, Calvin, and Cranmer were not scholastics, the distinctions used by scholastic theologians like Richard Hooker cast light on the discussion. The scholastics put the question of justification

¹¹ Thomas F. Torrance, "Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life," in *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1965), 150–164, at 161.

in terms of what is called “formal cause.”¹² The “formal cause” is that which makes something what it is, in the sense that it is “heat” that makes something hot. The reformers claimed that the “formal cause” of justification is entirely the work of Christ “outside us,” apart from our efforts or good works. The Roman Catholic position at the Council of Trent was that the “formal cause” of justification is “infused righteousness,” that is, something inside us.¹³ Practically speaking, the question resolves to: Is my right standing before God a matter of looking entirely outside myself and my own moral efforts, depending only on what Jesus Christ has done for me in his atoning work? Or do I hope to be righteous before God by looking to how well I have cooperated with Christ, looking inside myself for evidence of good works and basing my standing on the quality of those good works? In this regard, the distinction sometimes made between good works done through the power of grace and good works done without grace does not really matter. The key difference for the reformers is that the ground of my standing before God is entirely the work of Christ, done apart from me, and without my assistance. For Tridentine Catholics, the ground of my standing before God is the quality of my own good works, done with the assistance of indwelling grace, certainly, but still my own work.

(2) That the “formal cause” of justification is the finished work of Jesus Christ does not mean that justification has no conditions. “Formal causes” are not the only causes that exist. Reformation Christianity considers faith to be the “instrumental cause” of justification on the part of the one believing. An instrumental cause is the “means by which” something takes place. It is not the “formal cause” in the sense of that which accomplishes the work of our justification—that is Christ’s work alone. However, faith is an instrumental cause as a necessary condition on the part of the one being justified. To provide an example: An architect designs a house, and carpenters build it. The formal cause of the existence of the house would be the architect and the carpenters who put the house together. There are other causes as well. The bricks and mortar are material causes, without which there could be no house. The owner of the house is an instrumental cause in the sense that if no people exist to live in houses, no houses will be built.

¹² C. Fitzsimons Allison, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter* (Vancouver, B.C.: Regent College Publishing, 2003).

¹³ Gleason, *Grace*, 67.

Faith is an instrumental (not formal) cause of justification but, by definition, faith is a cause or condition that looks away from itself toward another. To “have faith” in someone is precisely not to trust in one’s own efforts. If I am a homeowner who is asking the architect to build me a home, I *have faith* in the architect and the carpenters to build the house, because *I am not the one building it*. So, faith, by definition, is a “condition” of justification, but not a work. I am not saved by the sincerity of my faith, but by the total sufficiency of Christ’s work, in the same way that the integrity of the house depends not on the sincerity of the homeowner, but on the integrity and hard work of the architect and carpenters.

(3) The Reformation understanding is that faith is also a gift of God, but a gift that God gives me that enables me freely to act, and to respond to God’s gift of salvation in Christ. The scholastics used the term “concurrent causality” to describe the way that God’s work within me enables me to respond to grace. More contemporary theologians speak of “double agency.”¹⁴ “Double agency” means that God’s agency enables me to be an agent who truly acts. We make a mistake if we think of the relation between divine and human action as a “zero sum” game—where God acts, I do not, and vice versa. To the contrary, because I exist only insofar as I am at every moment created by God, the more God acts within me, the more freedom I have, and the more that act becomes truly my own. It is only by sinning that I can exercise “independence” from God, and sin, far from being an act of freedom, actually enslaves. Faith is a gift that enables me freely to receive the gift of justification. Faith takes place through the work of the indwelling Holy Spirit, sent by the risen Christ to unite those who have faith in Christ’s atoning work to himself, and thus both to justify them and to share his risen life with them.

(4) While justification is the “alien work” of Christ, whereby our salvation is effected, and we are thus justified by faith alone (in the sense that we contribute nothing to Christ’s work of atonement), the faith by which we are justified is never alone (in the sense that justification would have no consequences in our own lives). Justification is effective. God accomplishes in our lives what he declares to be so, and therefore sanctification necessarily accompanies justification,

¹⁴ Austin Farrer, *Faith and Speculation* (New York: New York University Press, 1967), 52–67; George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of his Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185–224.

not as a condition of justification (which is what Trent meant by saying that “infusion” is the formal cause of salvation), but as a consequence or effect of justification.

Human sin produces two negative consequences: guilt (for sins committed) and the enslavement to sin (by which sin continues to be committed). Sinful human beings need not only forgiveness and pardon for the guilt of sin (justification), but also transformation, change, and a life that results in a new kind of holiness. Both occur by means of the union with the crucified and risen Christ that takes place through the instrumental (not formal) cause of faith. As I have faith in the finished atoning work of Christ done entirely without my cooperation or contribution, I am forgiven. At the same time, as I place my faith in the risen Christ, I am indwelt by the Holy Spirit, who unites me to the risen Christ, who shares his life with me, and who gradually conforms me to Christ’s image. Sanctification is not a condition, but rather a consequence or corollary of justification. I am not justified because I am holy; rather, I become holy because I am justified. At the same time, sanctification is a necessary consequence of justification because both justification and sanctification take place through union with the risen Christ.

(5) It is sometimes said that Roman Catholics believe that baptism is the instrumental cause of justification, while Protestants believe that faith is the instrumental cause.¹⁵ Rather, both faith and baptism are instrumental causes, but in different ways. The sacraments are instrumental causes in the sense of being material causes by which God mediates that union with the risen Christ in which both justification and sanctification exist. Baptism is the material instrumental cause by which one is initiated into salvation; it is the sacrament of justification by faith. The eucharist is the material instrumental cause of growth or nourishment in the Christian life. Faith is the subjective internal cause in the sense of the corresponding subjective action on the part of the Christian to the external action of the sacrament. In the traditional Anglican definition, a sacrament is an external (efficacious) sign of an internal grace (faith). Both faith and the sacrament are necessary: faith as the internal consent of the one looking to Christ, baptism and eucharist as the external means of communicating Christ’s

¹⁵ John Henry Newman, *Lectures on the Doctrine of Justification* (London: Rivingtons, 1874), 4. Newman was actually contrasting not the Catholic and Protestant, but the Anglican and Lutheran positions.

resurrection life to the one who has faith. While Anglicans (as sacramental Christians) do believe that baptism is the mediating material cause of justification, as the eucharist is the mediating material cause of sanctification, neither are effective unless there is accompanying faith. In the case of infant baptism, the understanding is that it is the church that exercises faith on behalf of the infants, who must eventually exercise faith on their own, without which faith the grace of the sacrament will be ineffective.

Justification by faith alone does not mean justification without the sacraments. What it does mean is that any righteous standing I might have before God depends entirely on Christ's righteousness as the finished work of Christ outside of me, and not at all my own good works or moral efforts, which are nonetheless the necessary and inevitable consequence of Christ's work as the Holy Spirit dwells within me and unites me to the risen Christ. Faith is not a "good work" in the sense of a meritorious act by which I earn my salvation; it is the subjective instrumental means to receive the gift of justification, which always remains a gift. The sacraments are not "good works" either, but are the material instrumental causes by which God communicates to me the life of the risen Christ as I am united to him by faith through the presence of the Holy Spirit.

(6) What did Thomas Cranmer mean then when he said that the faith by which we are justified is a "lively faith"?¹⁶ By claiming that faith must be "lively," did Cranmer turn faith into a work? In Greek, the same word, *pistis*, is translated as both "faith" and "belief" in English. The English language distinguishes between "belief" and "trust," with "faith" being the equivalent of "trust" and "belief" meaning simply an intellectual assent that something is true without any corresponding decision to act on that belief. So resolving the so-called contradiction between James and Paul on justification by faith depends on keeping clear two meanings of the Greek word *pistis*. When James says that "the devils also believe, and tremble" (James 2:19, KJV), he certainly does not mean that the devils have trust in or confidence in God, but rather that they have a cognitive knowledge that God exists, with no corresponding trust. When Paul speaks of justification by faith, he is not referring to a mere intellectual conviction that certain things are

¹⁶ Thomas Cranmer, "A Short Declaration of the True, Lively, and Christian Faith," *Miscellaneous Writings and Letters of Thomas Cranmer*, ed. John E. Cox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1846), 135–141.

true, but to a trust in Christ's atoning work. We sometimes use the English expression "believe in," in distinction from "believe that," to mean the same thing as "faith," and we speak of fidelity and "faithfulness" to mean "loyal." The husband who knows his wife's character responds to the suggestion that his wife has cheated on him with, "I believe in my wife. She's faithful to me."

So Cranmer's "true and lively faith" is not a meritorious work that earns justification, anymore than the husband's "belief in" his wife is a meritorious work that earns his wife's faithfulness. Rather, the husband's "belief in" his wife depends entirely on her character, not on his. He may or may not deserve it. When Cranmer speaks of a "lively faith," he is contrasting "faith" in the sense of genuine "trust" in Christ, with belief that is merely a cognitive conviction ("Sure, I believe that a God exists, but I'm not a religious fanatic or anything"), or the hypocritical faith of the person who claims to trust in Christ, but who demonstrates by his or her actions that such a claim is fraudulent.

How does the above summary address the questions and misunderstandings of justification raised at the beginning of this discussion? What about the Roman Catholic understanding of justification? Do the agreed statements between Lutherans and Roman Catholics now mean that former disagreements have disappeared? What about the Pietist/revivalist tendency to equate justification by faith with "making a decision" for Christ? Or the liberal Protestant attempt to identify justification with inclusiveness? To what extent does the New Perspective on Paul challenge the Reformation understanding of justification by faith? We will address each of these questions in turn.

1. *Is justification by faith a "legal fiction" which simply leaves me as I was before, a depraved sinner, but now a sinner whose sin God overlooks?*

This misunderstanding ignores the crucial distinction that Reformation theology makes between justification and sanctification. In classic Protestant theology, justification is indeed an external and forensic declaration by which Christ's righteousness is imputed to the sinner. Sanctification, on the other hand, is the internal work of the Holy Spirit in the justified by which they actually and progressively become righteous, a real and intrinsic transformation. Trent did not consider sanctification separately, and many of the characteristics

which the reformers denied (and Trent affirmed) of justification, the reformers attributed to sanctification instead.¹⁷

Exegetically, this distinction rises out of two kinds of language Paul uses. On the one hand, he uses the word *dikaiosune*, translated “justification” or “righteousness.” On the other hand, Paul also uses the word *hagiosmos*, translated “holiness” or “sanctification.” Modern biblical scholars (including Roman Catholics) recognize that “justification” has a forensic or courtroom meaning. It does not mean “to make righteous,” but to “declare righteous.”¹⁸ “Holiness” refers to a moral quality or character, and Paul insists not only that Christians have been “justified” (declared righteous) by faith in Christ, but also that they have been called to “holiness.” Holiness is so important for Paul that he uses the language of holiness twice as often as the four gospels combined.¹⁹

Theologically, the question is how to relate these two notions of “righteousness/justification” and “holiness/sanctification.” Historically, the distinction was not recognized in Western theology before the Reformation, largely because the Latin word *iustificare*, used to translate *dikaion* in the Latin Vulgate, means not to declare righteous, but to “make righteous.” The Council of Trent continued to speak of justification as a process of being “made” or “becoming” righteous.²⁰ At the same time, despite its use of the Greek New Testament, the Eastern Church did not seem to have recognized the significance of Paul’s use of forensic language when speaking of justification. This is perhaps, first, because the question of justification became an issue only in Western theology with Augustine’s opposition to the Pelagian heresy, and, second, because of the Eastern tendency to understand salvation primarily in terms of *theosis* or “deification.”

The recognition of a distinction between a kind of righteousness which has to do with a legal declaration (justification) and another kind of righteousness which involves a genuine transformation and

¹⁷ C. Moeller and G. Phillips, *The Theology of Grace and the Oecumenical Movement*, trans. R. A. Wilson (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., 1961).

¹⁸ Brown, Fitzmyer, and Murphy, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 1397.

¹⁹ Markus Bockmuehl, “‘Keeping It Holy’: Old Testament Commandment and New Testament Faith,” in Braaten and Seitz, *I Am the Lord Your God*, 95–126.

²⁰ *The Council of Trent*, “The Sixth Session: Decree on Justification,” trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), chap. 7, 30–53; <http://history.hanover.edu/texts/trent/ct06.html>.

holiness (sanctification) seems to be a unique contribution of the Protestant Reformation. I would suggest that it is a genuine development of doctrine—a necessary implication of a distinction made by Paul, but not noticed previously.

This distinction appears almost from the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther distinguished between “two kinds of Christian righteousness.” There is first an “alien righteousness, that is the righteousness of another, instilled from without. This is the righteousness of Christ by which he justifies through faith.”²¹ In contrast, Luther says:

The second kind of righteousness is our proper righteousness, not because we alone work it, but because we work with that first and alien righteousness. This is that manner of life spent profitably in good works. . . . This righteousness consists in love to one’s neighbor, and . . . in meekness and fear towards God. . . . This righteousness is the product of the righteousness of the first type, actually its fruit and consequence.²²

John Calvin was the first clearly to use the distinct terminology of justification and sanctification: “Why, then, are we justified by faith? Because by faith we grasp Christ’s righteousness, by which alone we are reconciled to God. Yet you could not grasp this without at the same time grasping sanctification also. . . . Therefore Christ justifies no one whom he does not at the same time sanctify.”²³

In Anglican circles, the distinction is evident in Thomas Cranmer’s use of the language of “lively faith.” On the one hand, Cranmer writes:

We must renounce the merit of all our said virtues, of faith, hope, charity, and all our other virtues and good deeds, which we either have done, shall do, or can do, as things that be far too weak and insufficient and imperfect, to deserve remission of our sins, and our justification; and therefore we must trust only in God’s mercy, and in that sacrifice which our High Priest and Saviour Christ Jesus, the Son of God, once offered for us upon the cross, to obtain thereby God’s grace, and remission, as well of our original sin in

²¹ Martin Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” §1; <http://www.mcm.edu/~eppleyd/luther.html>.

²² Luther, “Two Kinds of Righteousness,” §7.

²³ Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.16.1.

baptism, as of all actual sin committed by us after our baptism, if we truly repent, and convert unfeignedly to him again.²⁴

At the same time, Cranmer insists that the “lively faith” by which we are justified inevitably produces the fruit of holiness:

This is the true, lively, and unfeigned christian faith, and is not in the mouth and outward profession only, but it liveth and stirreth inwardly in the heart. And this faith is not without hope and trust in God, nor without the love of God and of our neighbours, nor without the fear of God, nor without the desire to hear God’s word, and to follow the same, in eschewing evil and doing gladly all good works.²⁵

The distinction between justification and sanctification is clear in Richard Hooker’s “Learned Discourse of Justification”:

There is a glorifying righteousness of men in the world to come, and there is a justifying and a sanctifying righteousness here. The righteousness wherewith we shall be clothed in the world to come, is both perfect and inherent: that whereby here we are justified is perfect but not inherent, that whereby we are sanctified, inherent but not perfect.²⁶

Hooker is willing to use the language of “infusion,” but in relation to sanctification, not justification.²⁷

In more recent Protestant discussions of justification by faith, there have been several helpful moves. First, there is an emphasis on “union with Christ” and the significance of “in Christ” language in Paul. Both justification and sanctification are understood as consequences of this union. Reformed scholars note that “union with Christ”

²⁴ Thomas Cranmer, “Homily of Salvation,” in Cox, *Miscellaneous Writings*, 132.

²⁵ Cranmer, “Short Declaration of the True, Lively, and Christian Faith,” in Cox, *Miscellaneous Writings*, 136.

²⁶ Richard Hooker, “A Learned Discourse of Justification, Works, and How the Foundation of Faith Is Overthrown,” *The Folger Library Edition of the Works of Richard Hooker, Volume Five: Tractates and Sermons*, ed. W. Speed Hill (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 109 (spelling modernized).

²⁷ Richard Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5.56.ii.

is a central theme in Calvin's theology.²⁸ Anglicans can look to Richard Hooker, whose sacramental theology centers on union with Christ, for a similar emphasis. Anglican reformers like Thomas Cranmer and John Jewel closely link the sacrament of baptism with justification as the sacrament of new birth, and the eucharist with sanctification as the sacrament of nourishment or "spiritual feeding" on Christ.²⁹ Cranmer's "Prayer of Humble Access," in the Communion Service of the 1549 *Book of Common Prayer*, ties together the interrelated themes of justification, sanctification, and union with Christ:

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord, trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies: we be not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table: but thou art the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy: Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of thy dear Son Jesus Christ, and to drink his blood in these holy Mysteries, that we may continually dwell in him, and he in us, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body, and our souls washed through his most precious blood. Amen.

The second helpful move has been the twentieth-century discovery of the significance of the centrality of the kingdom of God in Jesus' preaching and of eschatology in all the writings of the New Testament. This bears on the theology of justification, in that justification is seen as an anticipation of the eschatological judgment of the last day. The pardon of justification anticipates God's gracious judgment on the sinner as a promise that is "already but not yet" actualized. Similarly, sanctification is the process in which the justified sinner, indwelt by the Holy Spirit who unites him or her to the risen Christ, becomes conformed to the image of the risen Lord, awaiting the final redemption of the last day.

²⁸ Torrance, "Justification," in *Theology in Reconstruction*; Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Wrighting the Wrongs of the Reformation? The State of the Union with Christ in St. Paul and Protestant Soteriology," in *Jesus, Paul and the People of God: A Theological Dialogue with N. T. Wright*, ed. Nicholas Perrin and Richard B. Hays (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 235–261.

²⁹ Hooker, *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 5.51–56; Thomas Cranmer, "Against Stephen Gardiner," in *Writings and Disputations of Thomas Cranmer Relative to the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper*, ed. John E. Cox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1844), 25. John Jewel, *The Apology of the Church of England* (London: 1719).

Third, recent evangelical theology has explored the significance of “Speech-Act Theory,”³⁰ which focuses on uses of language that do not merely describe a state of affairs, but also perform an action. Thus, Scripture is not merely a communicative account of information, but also a divine communicative action that addresses the reader in a manner that demands a response. Kevin Vanhoozer proposes a notion of justification along these lines: “To declare someone righteous is to declare that person *incorporated* into Christ’s righteousness: ‘I now pronounce you man in Christ.’” Vanhoozer claims that justification and union with Christ need to be thought of together: “Both justification and sanctification flow from our union with Christ.” Vanhoozer suggests that justification also includes “adoption”—justification is “a trinitarian communication of righteousness: the Father adopts strangers by uniting them to Christ by the Spirit through faith. The Father declares, the Son enables, and the Spirit effects the sinner’s right standing.”³¹

2. *Does justification by faith reflect Nominalist influence on Luther’s theology?*³²

There are numerous areas of Luther’s theology that show Nominalist influence. Luther’s understanding of justification, however, came out of a recognition that the language in which Paul talked about righteousness is forensic. Luther’s understanding of justification by faith alone was his interpretation of Paul’s contrast between faith and works of the law. The appropriate questions here are exegetical questions, not those of philosophical theology: Did Paul understand justification to mean “make righteous” or “declare righteous”? What did Paul mean by “works of the law”?

Later reformers (like Hooker) were able to affirm justification by faith while reappropriating the teleological and euadaemonistic aspects of Augustine’s and Aquinas’s theology of grace, showing that there is no inherent connection between the Reformation understanding of justification and Nominalism.

³⁰ Richard S. Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 763–766.

³¹ Vanhoozer, “Wrighting the Wrongs,” in Perrin and Hays, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, 250–251, 256–257.

³² Gleason, *Grace*, 194.

3. *What about the Lutheran and Roman Catholic agreements on justification by faith?*

There is continuing uncertainty about the implications of the Lutheran/Roman Catholic agreements about justification. The most substantive agreement between Catholics and Protestants seems to have taken place in the area of Pauline exegesis. Roman Catholic biblical commentaries now recognize that *dikaiosisune* is courtroom language and so justification, for Paul, is forensic, not a matter of “making righteous.” There is also recognition that Paul is referring to justification by faith in Christ, apart from merit, and thus justification is entirely gratuitous.

The official “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Lutheran World Federation and the Catholic Church” states that “a consensus in basic truths of the doctrine of justification exists between Lutherans and Catholics,” and that the teachings of neither church falls under the condemnations of either the Council of Trent or the Lutheran Confessions.³³ Nonetheless, Tony Lane points out that the document ignores certain key issues, such as the “alien imputed righteousness of Christ.” The agreement does not address the crucial area of Reformation disagreement, the “formal cause” of justification. The consensus is really more that of a common Western Trinitarian Christological Augustinian theology than a resolution of the Reformation difficulties. Lane suggests that the consensus has been achieved primarily by compromise on the part of Roman Catholics, who have been willing to “move beyond the positions of the sixteenth century.”³⁴

At the same time, Lane notes that there has been little evidence of this new consensus in everyday Roman Catholic life or theology. For example, justification is barely discussed in the Catholic *Catechism*, which still speaks of justification as being “made righteous.” Judged by the *Catechism*, it would seem that the Lutheran–Roman Catholic dialogues had never taken place. Unfortunately, there are also still examples of traditional anti-Protestant polemics by Roman Catholic apologists. There is a long way to go.

4. *What about the radical Lutheran position and the law/gospel hermeneutic?*

³³ “Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification,” 5.40.

³⁴ Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue: An Evangelical Assessment* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 223–231.

In any theological tradition, there will inevitably be successors who take the founder's views to logical extremes that he or she did not embrace. There have been Lutherans who are more Lutheran than Luther! Lutheran antinomianism is characterized by a rejection of the so-called "Third Use of the Law." However, the mainstream of the Lutheran tradition has rejected this view as a distortion of Lutheran theology. Thus the *Book of Concord*, whose theology is understood by Lutheran theologians to provide an authentic interpretation of Lutheranism, affirms the Third Use. Most Lutheran scholars recognize that, while not using the language of Third Use, Luther affirmed its basic principle,³⁵ as can be seen in his "Two Kinds of Righteousness" and "The Freedom of a Christian," Luther's discussion of the Ten Commandments in his *Small Catechism*, and his *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*.

As for the law/gospel hermeneutic, while the distinction between law and gospel has some basis in Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans, it is not a central theme in Paul's writings, but rather is used to illustrate certain aspects of his theology of justification.³⁶ Other Reformation traditions have been able to embrace the theology of justification by faith without embracing this narrow hermeneutic. The Reformed have focused on the significance of the covenant. Historically, Anglicans have often pursued the more positive Thomist-influenced notion of law (Hooker, for example) and union with Christ as a hermeneutical lens through which to view grace, justification, and sanctification.

5. *What about the Pietist and liberal Protestant understandings of justification by faith?*

The crucial logic of justification by faith is that one depends on Christ's work alone for salvation, and faith means looking away from one's own good works to depend entirely on what Christ has done in his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. However, human beings are incredibly resourceful, and there have been plenty in the

³⁵ Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia, Pa.: Fortress Press, 1966), 273.

³⁶ Brevard Childs suggests that the radical Lutheran understanding of "law" in Romans 7, crucial to the law/gospel hermeneutic, is mistaken: "Paul is not concerned in Romans 7 with the malevolent power of the law, but rather with that of sin." Brevard S. Childs, *The Church's Guide for Reading Paul: The Canonical Shaping of the Pauline Corpus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 105.

Reformation churches who have forgotten the significance of “alien righteousness,” and have instead turned justification by faith into its opposite, focusing on the significance of the faith that is the condition of justification, as if faith was not simply an instrumental means of justification, but was instead (in terms of the Reformation language) the “formal cause” of justification. The dispute then is about whether God accepts us on the basis of our good works or on the sincerity of our faith.³⁷

Against what was perceived as the “dead orthodoxy” of a rationalist Protestant Scholasticism, Lutheran Pietism insisted that genuine faith demanded a sincere conversion and not simply a commitment to a correct doctrinal position concerning justification by faith. This legitimate insistence on genuine conversion parallels Cranmer’s language of “lively faith,” but nonetheless led to the Pietist equation of conversion with the “new birth” and of “new birth” with justification. This equation of justification with a moment of conversion tended to forget the significance of “alien righteousness,” focusing instead on the sincerity of conversion, thus replacing Luther’s focus on objectivity with an appeal to a subjective emotional experience that had affinities to the late medieval subjectivist introspection against which Luther’s theology was supposed to be a corrective; thus, justification by faith alone was turned into something like its opposite—justification by sincerity.

Liberal Protestantism began in the nineteenth century with the writings of Friedrich Schleiermacher, a son of Lutheran Pietists, who combined the Pietist understanding of faith primarily as an emotional experience with a Kantian epistemological dualism that forbade knowing anything of God in himself. Schleiermacher reinterpreted justification by faith in terms of *Gefühl*, the subjective awareness or “feeling” of absolute dependence on God. There is a more or less direct line from Schleiermacher to later liberal Protestants like Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich and their own equation of justification by faith with existential authenticity, to more recent postmodern liberal Protestant equations of justification by faith with “inclusion” and “tolerance.”

However, justification by faith does not mean that we are justified by the authenticity of our faith, whether understood in the Pietist

³⁷ Allison’s *The Rise of Moralism* documents the rise of this theology of justification by good intentions in the work of some post-Reformation Anglicans.

sense as sincere conversion or the liberal Protestant sense as an awareness of absolute dependence on God, the mid-twentieth century sense of existentialist authenticity, or the twenty-first-century sense of “tolerance” as inclusiveness. Theologically, the underlying error is forgetting that justification is not about the sincerity of one’s faith as a psychological achievement, but rather about the sufficiency of Christ’s atoning work performed apart from and without the assistance of the human being’s subjective psychological contribution.

6. *What about the New Perspective on Paul? Does it undermine the Reformation position?*

The New Perspective on Paul has become pivotal in recent discussions of justification by faith because of its challenge of traditional Reformation exegesis, especially that of Luther. Some Catholic apologists suggest that the New Perspective proves that the Council of Trent was right after all. More frequently, traditional Protestants vigorously attack the New Perspective (notably N. T. Wright) as not only a betrayal of the Reformation, but a distortion of Paul’s theology.³⁸

In spite of the exaggerated rhetoric of both advocates and critics, the New Perspective does not amount to a simple rejection of the Reformation understanding of justification. For example, New Perspective scholars are clear that justification language in Paul is the language of the courtroom, and is thus forensic. Some tend to emphasize the relational character of the language in light of its Old Testament use, but (contrary to Trent and Catholic apologists) none of the New Perspective scholars is claiming that justification means to “make righteous.” Also, New Perspective scholars continue to affirm that justification in Paul is “by faith alone.”

There are some mildly controversial readings of Paul by New Perspective scholars that, while interesting, do not really alter the traditional playing field. For example, many New Perspective scholars interpret Romans 10:4—“Christ is the end of the law”—to mean not that Christ has done away with the law, but that Christ is the *goal* of the law. (As in English, the Greek word *telos* can mean “end” in either sense.) A significant area of disagreement is whether Paul’s expression *pistis Christou* should be translated “faith [or faithfulness] of Christ”

³⁸ John Piper, *The Future of Justification: A Response to N. T. Wright* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007).

or “faith in Christ.” Richard Hays, N. T. Wright, and Brevard Childs (who does not endorse the New Perspective) argue for “faith of Christ.” James Dunn, to the contrary, argues that parallels in Paul’s antitheses between “works of the law” and “faith” points to “faith” as an antithesis to “works,” and thus *pistis Christou* must be translated in the traditional way as “faith in Christ.”³⁹

A more important realization of the New Perspective is that Paul’s doctrine of Israel and the church is central to his discussion of justification, specifically the identity of Gentile Christians in relation to Israel as God’s covenant people. Romans 9–11 is understood to be central to Paul’s argument about justification, not a peripheral discussion. The crucial question of justification is, then, a question about the identity of the people of God, and how one becomes a member of God’s covenant community. This is significant, and a helpful corrective to earlier Western understandings that tended to view justification as entirely a question of individual salvation, frequently overlooking the significance of the Old Testament (and of Israel) for New Testament theology. Even more of a distortion was the radical Lutheran tendency to view the Old Testament law (Torah) in exclusively negative terms; biblical scholars recognize that the law is itself a gift of grace. Similarly, the observation of New Perspective scholars that Second Temple Judaism was not characterized by a legalistic “works righteousness” is a corrective to earlier misunderstandings.

Two new readings are more significant. In a discussion with N. T. Wright, Vanhoozer points out that a fundamental area of disagreement is whether the courtroom imagined in Paul’s forensic understanding is a criminal courtroom, or a civil courtroom: “Is God prosecuting a civil case between Israel and the nations over who has legitimate right to the title ‘people of God,’ or a criminal case in which all humanity have been charged with ‘crimes against divinity?’”⁴⁰ Vanhoozer points to the early chapters of Romans to suggest that the latter is the case, although Wright seems to think in terms of the former. I think a plain sense reading of the logical structure of Paul’s argument shows that Vanhoozer (and the traditional Reformation reading) has it right. Paul’s argument in the early chapters of Romans establishes that all

³⁹ N. T. Wright, *Justification: God’s Plan and Paul’s Vision* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 117–121; James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998) 379–385.

⁴⁰ Vanhoozer, “Wrighting the Wrongs,” in Perrin and Hays, *Jesus, Paul and the People of God*, 249.

stand guilty before the divine tribunal, and the judicial verdict of justification is “acquitted,” or “not guilty” (Rom. 3:23–26).

The second, more serious controversial reading of the New Perspective has to do with the interpretation of Paul’s expression “works of the law” (*ergon nomou*):

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in [or the “faithfulness of”] Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in [or the “faithfulness of”] Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:15–17; compare Rom. 3:20, 28)

Advocates of the New Perspective interpret “works of the law” in terms of “boundary markers,” the distinctions of Second Temple Judaism that set Jews apart from Gentiles: circumcision, kosher diet, and sabbath keeping. Wright states: “[Works of the law] are not . . . the moral ‘good works’ which the Reformation tradition loves to hate. They are the things that divide Jew from Gentile . . . [such as] that ‘Jews do not eat with Gentiles.’”⁴¹

While I agree with Wright that circumcision and “eating with Gentiles” provided the occasion that led to Paul’s theology of justification, I am not convinced that this is the heart of his logic of justification. Paul’s discussion of “law” in the early chapters of Romans argues against the narrow interpretation of “works of the law” as boundary markers. The logical structure of Romans 1–3 shows that both Gentiles and Jews stand in need of the righteousness that God brings about through Christ’s life, death, and resurrection because all have sinned, and thus violated not only the boundary markers of circumcision and kosher diet, but the moral dimensions of the law. Romans 1 speaks of God’s wrath against those (Gentiles) who “by their unrighteousness suppress the truth” (Rom. 1:18). Romans 2 introduces the notion of “law” for the first time when Paul says, “For all who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law” (v. 12). In what follows, Paul addresses the Jews who “rely on the law” (v. 17). He then summarizes the *moral* failings of those who live under the law: stealing, adultery,

⁴¹ Wright, *Justification*, 117. See also Dunn, *Theology of Paul*, 354–371.

idolatry (vv. 21–22). Paul identifies “breaking the law” here with moral violations of the Ten Commandments. He does refer to the specific “boundary marker” of circumcision, but identifies “law” not in terms of the boundary marker, but rather in terms of its moral content: “For circumcision indeed is of value if you obey the law, but if you break the law, your circumcision becomes uncircumcision” (v. 25). Paul refers to the Gentile who, though uncircumcised, “keeps the precepts of the law” (v. 26). In verses 14–15, Paul speaks of “Gentiles, who do not have the law, [but] by nature do what the law requires,” and thus “show that the work of the law (*ergon tou nomou*) is written on their hearts.” If “law” or “work of the law” in this context meant “boundary markers,” Paul’s argument would make little sense because the Jews who practiced circumcision would not be in violation, while the uncircumcised Gentiles could not (by definition) “keep the precepts of the law” or have the “work of the law” written in their hearts. In Romans 3:9, Paul pronounces the same verdict on both Jews and Gentiles: “For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin.” And it is precisely this condemnation of sin that provides the context for Paul’s conclusion that no one is justified by “works of the law” in Romans 3:20–21. Why is no one justified by “works of the law”? Because, writes Paul, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (3:23–24).

The logical flow of Paul’s argument is to move from circumcision as one element of “works of the law” (the New Perspective’s emphasis) to the greater moral demands of the law as expressed in the Ten Commandments. On that basis, Paul claims that unless one keeps fully the moral requirements of the law as well, circumcision and kosher will do one no good. Since both Jews and Gentiles are guilty of idolatry, theft, lying, and adultery, all stand condemned before the moral requirements of the law, and can only be justified by God’s free gracious gift in Christ. As I read it, then, Paul uses “law” language to push beyond mere boundary markers to focus on the violation of the moral dimension of the law. Further confirmation comes from Paul’s language in Romans 6:19, where he identifies sin with “lawlessness”; Romans 7:7, where he identifies the law with the Ten Commandments’ forbidding of covetousness; and Romans 8:4, where the “requirement of the law” is fulfilled in those who “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.” It seems that the justification “apart from works of the law” to which Paul refers is justification apart from moral good works,

not merely justification apart from the boundary markers of circumcision and kosher diet.

Concluding Thoughts

Justification by grace alone through faith alone is a summary way of saying that Jesus Christ saves. The point of Paul's forensic language of justification and Luther's language of "alien righteousness" is not to affirm that justification is a "legal fiction" or that justification is "mere imputation" without any effect or change in the justified, but that our moral standing before God is based entirely on the saving work of Jesus Christ alone: his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection. For the same reason, the point of using the language of justification by faith is not to focus on the act of faith, as if sinful human beings were saved by good intentions, but to note again that justification is Christ's work, not ours. In faith, we look away from ourselves and our own moral efforts, to receive a salvation that is entirely a gift of the triune God.

At the same time, God's justifying gift in Christ is effective. Christ's atoning work does not leave us in our sins. As those who have faith are united to the risen Christ through the presence of the Holy Spirit, their lives are transformed as they share in the vicarious life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Justification and sanctification are parallel aspects of union with Christ, justification dealing with the objective reality of guilt through forgiveness and acquittal, sanctification dealing with the ongoing presence of sin through transformation to holiness.

This union with Christ is sacramentally mediated. Baptism is the sacrament by which those who have faith in Christ "are ingrafted into Christ, . . . made partakers of his justice," and become members of his body, the church. In the eucharist, the sanctified are nourished through sharing in Christ's resurrected life.⁴²

The eschatological implications of union with Christ also bear on justification and sanctification. Justification is the eschatological anticipation of that last judgment when sinners will be acquitted because Christ has been judged in their place. Sanctification is the ongoing transformation in which those who have faith in Christ are conformed to Christ's image in the "already but not yet" tension between the time of this fallen yet redeemed world and its final glorification.

⁴² Torrance, "Justification," in *Theology in Reconstruction*, 152.

Finally, justification has ecclesial implications. As the New Perspective on Paul has rightly discerned, justification is not simply about an individual relationship with God and Christ. Justification concerns the question of how one enters into the covenant people of God, whether through keeping “works of the law” (including, I would suggest, its moral dimensions) or through faith in Christ and being conformed to the faithfulness of his cruciform life, death, and resurrection. Union with Christ is union with his church, and this has implications for relations between Jews and Christians, but also for those Christians who live this side of the Reformation, and have been divided, among other things, by differing understandings of justification.