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Justification

Matthew J. Thomas

Within Christian theology, justification refers to the act whereby human beings are established as righteous before God. The doctrine of justification is distinct within the history of theology both for the importance ascribed to it – Martin Luther, as one prominent example, asserts that the church is built by this doctrine alone (*Luther's Works* [*LW*] 26.10) – and for the large number of questions and controversies surrounding it. To take a few examples: is justification essentially a legal action in which humans are forgiven, or an effective one in which they are transformed? Does justification refer to a present reality, a future one, or both? How does justification – a doctrine normally associated with the writings of the apostle Paul – cohere or conflict with teachings found elsewhere in the Christian scriptures? While such questions have not proved contentious in every age, conflicts surrounding them at key points in the history of theology have contributed to divisions between churches and denominations, many of which persist to the present day.

This article will offer an overview of the Christian doctrine of justification in five sections. Following (1) the introduction, it will present overviews of (2) justification in the Old and New Testaments; (3) disputed questions on the doctrine of justification; (4) justification in the history of Christian theology; and (5) justification in contemporary theology.

Keywords: Faith, Salvation, Early Christianity, Justification, Reformation, History of Doctrine, Causality

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1 Introduction

Two caveats are in order by way of introduction. First, the contemporary English language is an imperfect instrument for discussions on the biblical concept of justification, as ideas that are typically denoted by a single word family in the original languages (the Hebrew *zedek* and Greek *dikaios*) are regularly broken into two different counterparts in English: 'just' and 'righteous'. Further complicating this situation is the fact that English alternates between these roots when translating the underlying Hebrew or Greek terms. For example, words with the *dikaios* root occur ten times in Rom 3:20–30, which the NRSV translates five times each using the 'just' and 'righteous' word families, even alternating between them in the same sentence (i.e. 3:26: 'so that he is righteous (*dikaion*) and he justifies (*dikaiounta*) the one who has the faith of Jesus'). The practical effect for English readers is that the logical tie between Paul's words and the flow of his argument can be obscured or lost in the variability between word families; the German language, as one counter-example, has no such difficulty in translating *dikaios* and its cognates with the single *gerecht* root.

One possible solution to this problem is to strictly adhere to one English set or the other: i.e. so that those 'justified' by God's 'justice' are 'just', or those 'rectified' by God's 'righteousness' are 'righteous'. This solution produces two new problems. First, 'justice' and 'righteousness' are not strictly synonymous in English and tend respectively to refer to either the external or internal aspect of what is right, so that simply adhering to one set or the other can produce a narrower conception than what biblical authors meant by *dikaiosunē*. Second, certain word forms are less common in contemporary English: one rarely hears a person described as 'just' outside of older literature, and 'rectification by faith' seems only partially intelligible to the modern English ear. As such, this article will follow the typical English practice of alternating between 'just' and 'righteous' word families, alerting the reader in advance that in each case a single Hebrew or Greek counterpart that includes both ideas is in view.

Second, readers discouraged by historic disagreements on the doctrine of justification may draw solace from C. S. Lewis' observations regarding the related doctrine of the atonement. As Lewis writes: 'A good many different theories have been held as to how it works; what all Christians are agreed on is that it does work' (Lewis 1952: 42). To adapt and paraphrase Lewis, a precise understanding of how justification works is not a prerequisite for being justified, just as one can benefit from a meal without a precise theory of how digestion works. Indeed, even those historic interpreters most committed to a specific conception of justification have generally refrained from claiming that their understanding of justification – however essential for rightly understanding the gospel – is necessary for one to be justified (so rightly Heckel 2004).

2 Justification in the Old and New Testaments

2.1 Old Testament

While justification is typically considered to be a doctrine based in the New Testament, it is important to recognize that the New Testament writings themselves are influenced by the language and examples found in the Old Testament. Within the Hebrew scriptures, the verb *zadak* carries a wide range of possible meanings that are related to the concept of 'righteousness', with the primary sense in many individual instances being open to multiple interpretations. For example, *zadak* in the *Qal* stem typically means to be righteous or in the right, while in the *Hiphil* stem the verb can describe the action of doing what is right for someone (such as the widow or orphan), or to make, consider, or declare someone righteous (Brown 1981: 842–843; Harris 1980: 752–755; Lagrange 1914).

Within this broad context of Old Testament usage, there are key passages which are drawn upon in the New Testament writings as foundational for the Christian understanding of justification. The most influential example of justification in the Old Testament is that of Abraham in Genesis 15, to which the New Testament frequently appeals as paradigmatic (Rom 4:3–25; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23; cf. Heb 11:8–12). Following God's promise to Abraham regarding his innumerable future descendants, the text states that Abraham trusted in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. While much is debated about the precise meaning of this act in the context of Genesis, the essential point is that Abraham arrived at righteousness through his faith in God and God's promise. Another key text which is similarly restated in a number of New Testament passages is Hab 2:4, 'the righteous will live by faith' (cf. Rom 1:17; Gal 3:11; Heb 10:38). This text – which interestingly was also discussed in Rabbinic Judaism as a foundation for all the Torah's commandments (*Makkot* 24a) – is used by Paul to demonstrate that faith in God has always been the source of righteousness, and thus to show the continuity between earlier figures and Christians in his time. A third key passage is Isaiah 53 (the fourth of the so-called 'servant songs'), which is arguably as influential as any Old Testament text within the New Testament writings (see e.g. Matt 8:17; John 12:38; Acts 8:32–33; Rom 10:16; 1 Pet 2:22–25). In this key chapter, the prophet speaks of many being justified through the redemptive act of the suffering servant (Isa 53:11), whose wounds are said to be their source of healing (53:5) and who bears the iniquity of all who have gone astray (53:6).

The centuries before Christ saw the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek in what came to be known as the Septuagint translation (or LXX), which made these texts available to a much wider audience within the Graeco-Roman world. Like the Hebrew verb *zadak*, the Greek counterpart *dikaioō* similarly carried a wide range of possible meanings in relation to the concept of righteousness. The Liddell-Scott-Jones lexicon, for example, summarizes three primary senses of *dikaioō* that are found in ancient Greek writings:

‘set right’, ‘hold or deem right’, and ‘do a man right or justice’ (Liddell, Scott and Jones 1968: 429). While such usages cannot definitively establish the meaning of a later New Testament author (since each writer’s sense must be determined within the context of their own argument), they are helpful for establishing a range of meaning and possible overtones that would have been understood by early audiences.

2.2 New Testament

Within the New Testament, the term ‘justification’ (*dikaiōsis*) occurs on only two occasions: Rom 4:25, where Christ is described as raised for our justification, and Rom 5:18, where the effect of Christ’s righteous action is the justification of life. However, the Christian doctrine of justification likewise draws upon the cognate verb (*dikaioō*), noun (*dikaiosunē*), and adjective (*dikaios*), for which our material is extensive.

The language of justification is not particularly frequent in the Gospels, and not every usage of the verb *dikaioō* relates directly to the justification of humanity. For example, wisdom is described as being justified by her works in Matt 11:19 (cf. Luke 7:35), which in context carries an evident sense of ‘shown to be right’ or ‘vindicated’. In Matt 12:37, Christ states that a person will be justified or condemned by their words, and in Luke 10:29 it is written that the scribe who asks Christ who is his neighbour wishes to ‘justify himself’. Another example is Luke 18:14, in which the humble tax collector in Christ’s parable is said to have returned home ‘justified’ in contrast to the proud Pharisee.

In the book of Acts, Luke narrates the conversion of the centurion Cornelius, regarding whose precedent Peter states that those of every nation who fear God and work righteousness (*dikaiosunē*) are acceptable to him (Acts 10:35). Acts also recounts Paul’s preaching regarding the forgiveness of sins that is proclaimed through Jesus, with Paul stating that ‘from all things which you were not able to be justified in the law of Moses, in this one all who have faith are justified’ (Acts 13:39).

Justification as a doctrine comes into full view in the writings of the apostle Paul, and is especially prominent in his epistle to the Romans. Paul begins the letter by announcing that God’s righteousness (*dikaiosunē*) is revealed in the gospel, a theme which he establishes by quoting from Hab 2:4, ‘the righteous will live by faith’ (Rom 1:17). After noting that the doers of the law will be justified rather than its hearers (Rom 2:13), Paul concludes that the Jews’ enduring sinfulness shows that none will be justified by works of the law (3:20). Rather, Christians are freely justified by God’s grace, so that he is shown to be righteous in fulfilling his promises, simultaneously just and justifying those of the faith of Jesus (3:24–26). This ‘justifying’ takes place independently of the works of the law, and is thus available to Jew and Gentile alike (3:28–30; see Law in the New Testament).

In Romans 4, Paul illustrates these principles by the example of Abraham, who was likewise justified by faith prior to any practices or the giving of the law (cf. Gen 15:6), and David, who received the blessing of the forgiveness of sins (Ps 32:1–2). Paul concludes that this blessing is intended for both Jews and Gentiles, and recounts the steps of faith taken by Abraham, who is the father of all who follow in his path. Paul discusses the effects of justification in Romans 5 –such as peace and reconciliation with God, the love of God poured into believers' hearts, and receiving the gift of righteousness (5:1–17) – and writes that just as many had been established as sinners by Adam's transgression, so too will many be established as righteous by Christ (5:19). Paul next describes how this justification takes place in baptism in Romans 6. Christians participate in Christ's death through baptism, through which those who die have been justified from sin (6:7), and are set free to live lives as slaves of righteousness instead of sin. Having been liberated by the Spirit, Christians thus become those in whom the law's righteous requirement (*to dikaiōma*) is fulfilled (8:2–4).

In Galatians, Paul confronts his audience over their misguided turn to circumcision and the law's practices, and recounts his clash with Peter at Antioch over his separation from the Gentiles. Paul accuses Peter of compelling the Gentiles to Judaize, even though both men as native Jews know that it is the faith of Christ that justifies rather than the works of the law (Gal 2:15–16). Paul then appeals in Galatians 3 to the experience of the Gentiles in receiving the Holy Spirit without the law's practices, and the example of Abraham, who was justified by faith 430 years before the law's delivery by Moses (3:17). While this law served a subservient role to guide towards justification by faith (3:23), it is faithful Abraham who offers the paradigm of justification for Gentiles, who are the 'many nations' the scriptures foresaw that God would justify and bless (3:6–9; cf. Gen 17:5). Those who re-adopt and seek justification in Moses' law are thus cut off from Christ, since in Christ neither circumcision nor uncircumcision are of any avail, but only faith working through love (*pistis di' agapēs energoumenē*, Gal 5:4–6).

While less prominent as a theme in the other Pauline writings, a number of passages from those epistles shed further light on his understanding of justification. In 1 Corinthians, Paul comments that though he knows of no charge against himself, he has not been justified by this, since his examiner is God (1 Cor 4:4), and later describes how the previously unrighteous Corinthians were washed, sanctified, and justified by Christ and the Spirit (6:11). Paul further describes Christ's reconciling work in 2 Corinthians, writing that God made him to be sin on our behalf, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (5:21). The warning against Judaizers in Philippians 3 shares themes found in Romans and Galatians, with Paul recounting how he renounced the righteousness from the Mosaic law for the righteousness that comes from God by faith in Christ (Phil 3:7–9). Interestingly, some early witnesses preserve a longer version of Paul's statement in

Phil 3:12 that he has not yet been perfected, adding ‘or have been already justified’ (cf. Giffin 2020; Prothro 2023: 133–135). In the pastoral epistles, 1 Timothy describes Christ as ‘justified in the Spirit’ (1 Tim 3:16), and Titus refers to how believers were saved not by their own works of righteousness but by God’s mercy through the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, which is collectively identified as ‘being justified by his grace’ (Tit 3:4–7; cf. Rom 3:24). While employing the language of salvation rather than justification, the epistle to the Ephesians likewise shares similar themes with Romans, Galatians, and Titus, recounting how the Ephesians were saved by God’s grace, a salvation not sourced in their works, but which has good works as its goal (Eph 2:4–10; cf. similarly 2 Tim 1:9; Tit 3:8).

Paul’s importance does not make him the only apostolic witness on this doctrine, which is likewise based upon the testimony of the epistles of James and 1 Peter. James 2:14–16 considers whether one who claims to have faith but does not have corresponding works can be saved, and concludes that such faith without works is dead (2:17). Appealing to the familiar example of Abraham, James recounts how the patriarch was justified by works when he offered Isaac his son, perfecting his faith through works and fulfilling God’s reckoning of righteousness in Gen 15:6 (2:21–23). A person is thus justified through works and not faith alone (2:24), as the example of Rahab similarly demonstrates (2:25; cf. Jos 2). Finally, 1 Peter 2 draws upon the familiar text of Isaiah 53, describing how Christ fulfils the servant’s role in bearing our sins and healing us by his wounds, so that we might live in righteousness (1 Pet 2:22–25).

3 Introduction to interpretative questions on justification

3.1 The nature of justification

What does it mean to be ‘justified’ by God? While it is not necessary to assume that there is only one answer to this question, given the range of usage witnessed in the biblical texts above, interpretative traditions have often placed emphasis on one aspect or another in their understanding of the doctrine.

Historically, discussion has focused on three suggested categories of meaning. The first category is often identified as forensic, legal, or declarative, and identifies justification as consisting in the forgiveness of sins. There are clear passages that suggest such a reading of justification. For example, in Romans, Paul speaks of justification as bringing about ‘the forgiveness of sins previously committed’ (3:25), which he connects with David’s blessing of those whose transgressions are forgiven (4:7–8; cf. Ps 32:1–2). For those that regard justification as carrying a future aspect at the last judgment, this forensic sense can also be understood to mean not necessarily the initial act of forgiveness but the confirmation of this verdict by the declaration of righteousness at the last day. A

forensic understanding of justification sometimes corresponds with an external location of justification: this is to say, rather than justification being a change that takes place inside an individual, the change is understood to have an external referent (typically the believer's status or account before God).

Another suggested category of justification is the effective (also called the ethical, transformative, or factitive) aspect, which understands justification to be an action whereby God changes an unjust person into a just one. Interpreters who hold to such an aspect point to passages such as Romans 5, where Paul speaks of those who have received the gift of righteousness being established as righteous (*dikaioi katastathēsontai*, 5:19). Just as Paul believes Adam's sin to not simply have been a matter of legal guilt but rather one that implicated his descendants in a real condition of enduring sin, so too does Christ's work rescue humanity and place it in a condition of righteousness. Further arguments include the nature of the verb *dikaioō* (which belongs to a verb pattern that is typically causative in Greek), and advantages in interpreting passages like Rom 4:5, where the idea of 'making the ungodly just' would appear to carry less scriptural tension than God 'acquitting the ungodly' (cf. Prov 24:24; Exod 23:7; Isa 5:23). As may be expected, those holding to an effective understanding typically regard justification as taking place inside the believer, rather than simply externally.

For readers who argue for both forensic and effective aspects to justification, one model for understanding the relation between them is God's act of creation in Genesis 1. In this passage, God's word is a creative agent, so that whatever it declares, it effects by this declaration (i.e. 'and God said, 'let there be light', and there was light'). By this logic, the same principle holds true in God's act of new creation, so that those who are declared righteous are indeed made so by the agency of God's word. Another model is to use as a paradigm Paul's description of Christ's twofold justifying work in Rom 4:25 ('he was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification'), with Christ's death corresponding with the forensic remission of sins, and Christ's resurrection with the effective gift of new life in justification.

Another suggested category of justification is incorporative, whereby justification unites one with Christ's body, the church. This interpretation draws upon the frequent connections between justification and baptism in the New Testament (cf. Despotis 2017). Baptism, of course, is the new covenant counterpart to circumcision (Col 2:11–12), which in the Mosaic covenant had the effect of incorporating one into the Jewish nation (in Old Testament and later Jewish texts, see for example Exod 12:48; Esther 8:17 LXX; Judith 14:10; cf. Josephus, *Antiquities* 13.9, 11; 20.2; *War* 2.17). If baptism is the definitive act of justification, then it is intelligible that justification could be used to describe this incorporation as well.

3.2 The timing of justification

When does justification take place? Here as well, it is not strictly necessary to limit the biblical material to one answer, but interpretative traditions have often placed emphasis on one moment or another in their understanding of justification. First, justification is often understood as an *initial* act, taking place at the profession of faith and reception of baptism. Texts taken to support this reading include 1 Cor 6:11, where Paul recounts how the Corinthians were justified at their baptism, and Paul's description of the effects of having been justified by faith in Rom 5:1–9. Second, justification can be understood as a *future* act, which often corresponds with vindication before God at the last judgment. For example, Paul writes in Romans 2:13 of how the doers of the law will be justified, and in Gal 5:4–5 describes how those with the Spirit await the hope of righteousness by faith. Finally, some readers also interpret justification as an *ongoing* act, which is particularly the case for those who understand justification as equivalent with sanctification. A passage noted in this respect is Jas 2:21–23, which describes Abraham's subsequent justification by offering Isaac in Genesis 22 after his justification by faith in Genesis 15, so that his faith was brought to completion by his works.

3.3 The means of justification

The most influential passages on justification in the history of Christian theology have been those in which Paul identifies justification as taking place by faith, apart from works of the law. But what precisely does Paul mean to commend and exclude by this dichotomy?

The first aspect touches on the voluminous 'faith of Christ' debate, which asks whether the primary sense of *pistis Christou* in Paul is objective (i.e. 'faith in Christ'), subjective ('faith of Christ'), or substantive ('Christian faith'). Regardless of what one identifies as Paul's primary sense, it is clear that the believer's own faith plays some role in justification (see paradigmatically Abraham in Gen 15:6; cf. 'for all who have faith' in Rom 3:22, and 'we had faith in Christ' in Gal 2:16). But what is the nature of this faith? The fact that the Greek word *pistis* means both 'faith' and 'faithfulness' has led nearly all interpreters to regard 'faith' here as more than a mere cognitive assent, and instead see it as in some way an active entrusting of one's self to God. Additional weight is given to this by the way Paul identifies the goal of his ministry as 'the obedience of faith' in Rom 1:5 and 16:26, and appears to use 'faith' and 'obedience' interchangeably in the epistle (see Rom 1:8/16:19, 3:22/5:18, 4:5/6:16, 10:16). At the same time, readers with an expansive view of 'works of the law' have also been hesitant to offer too broad a view of 'faith', and still wish to regard it as essentially receptive and passive rather than active.

Turning to this other side of the Pauline dichotomy, what does Paul mean to exclude from justification by his term 'works of the law'? Here too one can identify three major interpretative options. The first reading sees Paul's emphasis as being on the law –

the Torah – and specifically its distinctive practices, like circumcision, which identified one with the Jewish nation. A common passage which suggests this reading is Rom 3:28–29, where the implication is that justification by works of the law would limit God to the Jewish people alone. A second interpretation is to regard 'works of the law' as any works that are done apart from God's grace, which would then be contrasted with Spirit-empowered works. In this reading, passages from Romans 4 which discuss the justification of Abraham and David apart from works in general are often mentioned. A third reading is to interpret 'works of the law' even more expansively as also including works empowered by the Spirit, which for some readers sets up a more absolute contrast between 'faith' and 'works' in Paul's writings. One passage read in support of such an interpretation is Rom 11:5–6, in which Paul contrasts works with the election of grace.

It is important to recognize that readers may also see Paul's terminology as applying differently depending on which moment of justification is under discussion. For example, a reader may see the initial act of justification as taking place apart from works of any sort, while also regarding grace-empowered works as playing a role in either continued justification (or sanctification) or at the last judgment.

3.4 Justification in canonical context

Of course, despite the historical importance of the Pauline dichotomy, it is not the only New Testament statement on faith, works, and justification. To take the most prominent non-Pauline example, how does one understand the relation between Paul's statements and the assertions of James that justification is also by works, and not faith alone?

Most ways of understanding the relation between Paul and James on justification operate under the assumption that the church's inclusion of their epistles next to one another in the canon suggests that their teachings are compatible rather than contradictory. One proposal is that the difference is a matter of timing: while Paul is speaking about the initial reception of justifying grace apart from works, James is talking about the verdict of final justification at the last day, for which works as evidence of faith are essential. Another possibility is that the difference is the kind of works under discussion: while Paul denies that the Torah's observances can be made a requirement for justification, it is less clear that the good works prescribed by James are also a target of Paul's objections (cf. Rom 2:7–10). A third possibility focuses on the nature of faith, which may be more notional in James (a faith such as the demons can have, cf. Jas 2:19), while Paul's use of the term is more relational and entails fidelity as well (cf. 'the obedience of faith' in Rom 1:5, 16:26). Finally, an interpreter that reads Paul's objections to 'works' in the most absolute sense may ultimately conclude that James is simply contradicting Paul, or vice versa, notwithstanding the canon's implicit suggestion to the contrary.

4 Justification in the history of Christian theology

The history of the interpretation of justification can easily fill multiple volumes, and to study it is to see all of Christian theology from one particular angle. The survey that follows is thus necessarily selective rather than comprehensive, and focuses on major interpreters and traditions, with special attention given to the distinguishing characteristics of each in their understanding of justification. We will begin with an overview of early reception on the doctrine of justification, with a closer look given to two influential and ecumenically significant interpreters: John Chrysostom and Augustine of Hippo.

4.1 Early patristic interpretation

For those familiar with the controversies concerning justification in the sixteenth century, it may come as a surprise that the doctrine of justification is not attested to have been an occasion for serious controversy in the early church. As such, it is possible to speak of an early Christian perspective on justification without doing injustice to dissenting views.

4.1.1 The nature of justification

The earliest Christian writings outside the New Testament bear witness to an understanding of justification as both a forensic and an effective action, and, while a given source may emphasize either aspect (i.e. the forgiveness of sins or being made righteous), these often seem to be understood as two sides of a single coin. For example, in the *Epistle to Diognetus* (c.125 CE) both effective and forensic senses are found, in a passage that is clearly reminiscent of the Pauline writings. The author begins by describing God's effective work, by which

> we who in the former time were convicted by our own deeds as unworthy of life might now by the goodness of God be made worthy, and, having clearly demonstrated our inability to enter the kingdom of God on our own, might be enabled to do so by God's power. (*Epistle to Diognetus* 9.1; Holmes 2007)

The text then powerfully describes the forgiveness of sins, using language often read as primarily forensic:

> For what else but his righteousness could have covered our sins? In whom was it possible for us, the lawless and ungodly, to be justified, except in the Son of God alone? O the sweet exchange, O the incomprehensible work of God, O the unexpected blessings, that the sinfulness of many should be hidden in one righteous person, while the righteousness

> of one should justify many sinners! (*Epistle to Diognetus* 9.3–5, Holmes 2007; cf. similarly *Barnabas* 16.6–10)

For interpreters who see an effective aspect as either subordinate or absent within the New Testament texts themselves (see, for example, the influential study of Torrance 1948), it may be striking how frequently patristic readers understand justification in terms of either being or becoming righteous. Along with the instances from the apostolic fathers noted by Torrance – including 1 Clement, Ignatius, Barnabas, and Hermas (Torrance 1948: 50, 67, 106, 117) – one may add Irenaeus (c.180 CE), whose restatements of Pauline justification passages similarly focus on the effective sense. Irenaeus describes how Christians, like Abraham, have been made righteous by faith (cf. Gen 15:6, Rom 4:3), so that they too are free from any requirement to follow the Mosaic law, which Paul says was not established for the righteous (1 Tim 1:9; *Demonstration* 35, 87; *Against Heresies* 4.16.2–3; cf. also Justin, *Dialogue* 23, 92, 119). Similarly, Clement of Alexandria (c.190 CE) identifies Paul's sense of justification as effective in commenting on 1 Cor 6:11 ('You were justified in the name of the Lord'): 'Ye are made, so to speak, by Him to be righteous as He is, and are blended as far as possible with the Holy Spirit' (*Miscellanies* 7.14, Roberts and Donaldson 1994; see also Origen, *Against Celsus* 4.7; Eusebius, *Demonstration* 1.6).

This effective sense is what explains how early patristic sources simultaneously speak of justification as an entirely gracious gift from God, which is impossible for humanity to attain on its own, and also one that involves a heightened degree of accountability for the believer, who will be judged in accordance with their works (see e.g. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.27, *Demonstration* 56). While these points seem contradictory for readers who understand justification in a strictly forensic sense (see again Torrance 1948), the patristic conception is intelligible when it is recognized that justification is understood to be transformative in nature, so that the believer is enabled to live in a way that will be judged favourably at the last day.

Fewer patristic texts provide evidence for an incorporative sense of justification, with a noteworthy early exception. The first epistle of Clement (c.69–96 CE) describes how – like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the rest of Israel's descendants – Christians are justified by the faith that arises from God's will and calling rather than their own works or piety (1 Clem 31–32). While forensic or effective interpretations of this passage are possible, the likeliest sense here may indeed be that of incorporation, since it is participation in Abraham's heritage that is the blessing under discussion (rather than forgiveness of sins or becoming righteous; cf. Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 93).

4.1.2 The means of justification

Patristic sources frequently restate the principle of justification by faith, which is closely linked with baptism (cf. Tit 3:4–7) and tends to be understood in terms of an active fidelity which is paired with other biblical virtues. For example, 1 Clement recounts the justification of Abraham by commending his faith, hospitality, and obedience (1 Clem 10), and similarly describes Rahab as saved by faith and hospitality (1 Clem 12; cf. Jas 2:25, Origen, *Romans* 4.1.12). Irenaeus sees justification by faith as closely linked with obeying the 'natural' precepts of the law which the righteous patriarchs observed, such as to love God and one's neighbour, which Christ fulfils and extends in the new covenant (*Against Heresies* 4.13.1, 4.17.1; cf. similarly Justin, *Dialogue* 43–46; Tertullian, *Answer* 2). Indeed, for Irenaeus faith and obedience to God are practically equated, as he writes succinctly: 'To believe in him is to do his will' (*Against Heresies* 4.6.5, Roberts and Donaldson 1994; cf. similarly 2 Clem 3:4). Faith is thus understood to be both the means by which God's gracious gift is received *and* the fidelity which holds on to this gift in subsequent obedience. The close coordination of faith and works in patristic sources also means that little commentary (much less controversy) is to be found on James' rejection of 'faith alone' within this early period (Mooney 2020).

Interestingly, early fathers such as Origen, who describe faith and works as closely linked (see e.g. *Romans*, 2.13.23, 4.1.6), can also use the phrase 'faith alone' to describe the basis on which this justifying gift is received (see *Romans* 3.9.2–3, 3.10.10). In some instances, the phrase appears to function as a synecdoche for faith, hope, and love (with 'alone' used to negate either the law or prior works; cf. Scheck 2001: 39–42). In others, faith alone can be referred to as the foundation of all other theological virtues, and the root from which the fruit of good works is borne. As Origen explains:

> For faith which believes in the one who justifies is the beginning of being justified by God. And this faith, when it has been justified, is firmly embedded in the soil of the soul like a root that has received rain, so that when it begins to be cultivated by God's law, branches arise from it, which bring forth the fruit of works. The root of righteousness, therefore, does not grow out of the works, but rather the fruit of works grows out of the root of righteousness, that root, of course, of righteousness which God also credits even apart from works. (*Romans* 4.1.18, Scheck 2001; cf. similarly Ignatius, *Ephesians* 14.1–2)

With respect to the other side of the Pauline dichotomy, early patristic sources consistently interpret 'works of the law' as referring to the prescriptions of the Torah, with circumcision, Sabbath, food laws, and sacrifices frequently noted (Thomas 2020; cf. Wiles 1967: 66–69; Calvin, *Com. Rom.* 3.20). These practices are regarded as identifying one with the Jewish nation and covenant, which they attest to now have been superseded by Christ and his

empowering grace in the new covenant (see especially Justin, *Dialogue* 11.5; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 4.16; Origen, *Romans* 8.7.6).

As noted above, such an understanding of works of the law does not mean that any other works are the source of justifying grace, which has as its only origin the mercy of God alone (see e.g. 2 Clem 1; Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.18.2, 3.20.3, 5.21.3). Further, to insist upon the reality of judgment according to works for Christians – a frequent theme in patristic texts – does not mean that such works should serve as a basis for confidence or boasting: even for those who have done all they have been commanded, Christians should continue to recognize themselves as unworthy servants, since it is God's power which makes such works possible (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.22.2; Origen, *Romans* 3.9.6).

4.1.3 Location and timing of justification

With respect to the location of justification, the effective emphasis witnessed in many patristic writings naturally corresponds with an internal understanding of justification's activity, which is stated explicitly in a handful of sources. For example, the *Shepherd of Hermas* (c. late first–mid-second century CE) speaks of God's action of instilling righteousness in his people so that they might be justified (*eph' humas staxantos tēn dikaiosunēn, hina dikaiōthēte*, 17.1). Irenaeus similarly speaks of righteousness as being set within the individual to preserve the body and soul for immortality, and of Christ implanting the righteousness of the law in believers (*Against Heresies* 2.29, 4.13). However, it must be remembered that these sources did not write with the questions of later centuries in mind, and this period does not show evidence of disputes regarding the location of justification.

The timing of justification in patristic sources shows greater variability, which is unsurprising given that the term can be functionally equivalent to sanctification in this period. Justification is often referred to as an initial act that takes place at baptism, though it can also be used to refer to the final vindication that will take place at the last day (see e.g. Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 3; Tertullian, *Resurrection* 23). Sources can sometimes speak of justification as a process as well, such as Clement of Alexandria's remarks on the partial justification that came by philosophy and the law (*Miscellanies* 1.4–5, 1.20; cf. Gal 3:24), and Tertullian's comments on how Christians 'by believing God are the more thereby justified' (*magis proinde iustificamur*) like their forefather Abraham (*Against Marcion* 5.3, Evans 1972).

4.1.4 Dissenting views

The stability of early patristic interpretation on justification does not mean the period was without dissenting views. One such dissent is attested to have come from the Ebionites, whom Tertullian identifies as holding to the positions of Paul's opponents in Galatians, and who continued in observing and defending circumcision and the law (*Prescription*

33.5). Hippolytus attests that the Ebionites claimed to be justified by the law of Moses, which they regarded as the source of Christ's own justification (*Refutation* 7.34.2). Rather than rejecting the Mosaic law, then, the Ebionites rejected Paul instead, and held him to be an apostate (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.26.2). A quite different controversy arose in the mid-second century with Marcion, who sought to eradicate the Jewish elements from Christianity by use of his redacted ten-letter Pauline collection. Marcion is sometimes regarded as a precursor to Luther, due to his rejection of the idea of Christ as a judge and his 'law-gospel' distinction (see famously Harnack 1924; cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1.19). However, this connection is easily overstated, as Marcion's fundamental objection is to the God worshipped by the Hebrews rather than law or works (cf. Rensberger 1981: 154–55). The fragments of Marcion's remaining works thus leave us little by way of a distinct theology of justification.

4.2 Chrysostom

Among patristic interpreters, few can match the influence of John Chrysostom and Augustine, who have been the most prominent Pauline commentators within the Eastern Orthodox and Catholic traditions respectively. Both are widely valued among Protestants as well: Luther identifies Augustine as the singularly valuable doctor of the church (*LW* 54.340), and Calvin credits Chrysostom and Augustine as his own leading patristic influences (Hartog 2019).

Chrysostom's *Homilies on Romans* provide excellent examples of how forensic and effective senses of justification are held together in patristic theology. In explaining the declaration of God's righteousness in Rom 3:25, Chrysostom focuses on the effective nature of this declaration, which means 'not only that [God] is Himself righteous, but that He doth also make them that are filled with the putrefying sores of sin suddenly righteous' (*Homily 7*, 3.25, Schaff 1889).

For Chrysostom, the transformative nature of justification is what explains Paul's statement that Christians 'establish the law' in Rom 3:31:

> What was the object of the Law and what the scope of all its enactments? Why, to make man righteous. But this it had no power to do. 'For all', it says, 'have sinned:' but faith when it came accomplished it. For when a man is once a believer, he is straightway justified. (*Homily 7*)

The fact of becoming righteous is likewise the main focus of Chrysostom's retelling of Abraham and David's justification. According to Chrysostom, in Romans 4 Paul 'enquires how Abraham came to be righteous', and writes of David that 'if he be blessed that

by grace received forgiveness, much more is he that is made just, and that exhibits faith' (*Homily 8*, 4:7; similarly 4:1–2, *Homily 10*, 5:16; *Homily 15*, 8:34; *Homily 17*, 10:4).

Chrysostom typically speaks of justification as an initial act which takes place at baptism (see for example, his comments on Rom 8:30: 'Now He justified them by the regeneration of the laver'). For Chrysostom, justification can also be used to describe the ongoing reconciliation of the Christian who sins and repents, which is likewise regarded as a gift from God. As Chrysostom asks his audience:

> Gave He thee not the laver of Regeneration, and forgave He not all thy former sins? Hath He not after this forgiveness, and the laver, also given thee the succour of repentance if thou sin?. (*Homily 25*; cf. Origen, *Romans* 7.10.3)

Chrysostom identifies this subsequent reconciliation as 'justification' by citing Isa 43:26 (LXX) – 'Tell thy sins, that thou mayest be justified' – and the example of the tax collector who confessed his sins and went home justified (Luke 18:13–14). This subsequent justification is similarly both forensic and effective, as Chrysostom's comments on the tax collector's justification illustrate: 'For the Pharisee spake evil of the Publican [tax collector], and with truth, still instead of a Publican he [God] made him a righteous man' (*Homily 10*).

Chrysostom illustrates how faith, baptism, and judgment relate to one another in commenting on Rom 8:4 ('that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us'), showing both the gratuitous nature of justification and the role humanity plays in receiving and preserving it. As Chrysostom writes:

> To give thee the crown is His; but it is thine to hold it fast when given. For the righteousness of the Law, that one should not become liable to its curse, Christ has accomplished for thee. Be not a traitor then to so great a gift, but keep guarding this goodly treasure. For in this passage he shows that the [baptismal] Font will not suffice to save us, unless, after coming from it, we display a life worthy of the Gift. And so he again advocates the Law in saying what he does. For when we have once become obedient to Christ, we must use all ways and plans so that its righteousness, which Christ fulfilled, may abide in us, and not come to naught. (*Homily 13*)

Interestingly, while emphasizing humanity's responsibility with God's gift, Chrysostom also locates the power of subsequent repentance in baptism, as he states on Rom 6:5:

> Here then he says there are two mortifyings, and two deaths, and that one is done by Christ in Baptism, and the other it is our duty to effect by earnestness afterwards. For

> that our former sin were buried, came of His gift. But the remaining dead to sin after baptism must be the work of our own earnestness, however much we find God here also giving us large help. For this is not the only thing Baptism has the power to do, to obliterate our former transgressions; for it also secures against subsequent ones. (*Homily 11*)

4.3 Augustine

It is often noted that reflection on the doctrine of justification enters a new phase with Augustine of Hippo, particularly with the Pelagian controversy towards the end of his career, and it is true that this new challenge inspires fresh readings of several biblical texts. At the same time, Augustine's understanding of justification remains in essential continuity with the tradition that precedes him, and he often appeals to his agreement with earlier fathers like Irenaeus and Chrysostom in countering what he regards as the innovations of Pelagius and his followers (see especially his repeated appeals in *Against Julian*; cf. *Grace and Free Will* 6). According to Augustine, Pelagius' novel doctrine with respect to justification was that it limited the grace of justification to the forgiveness of sins and Christ's teaching and example, and did not include the inward transformation by the Holy Spirit which, for Pelagius, was unnecessary due to the powers of free will (see *Grace and Free Will* 26; *On the Grace of Christ and Original Sin* I.2, I.31, I.38, I.43). In contrast, Augustine follows the earlier tradition by emphasizing the effective nature of justification, which can be seen in the definition he offers in *On the Spirit and the Letter* [*Spir.*]: 'For what else does the phrase being justified signify than being made righteous – by Him, of course, who justifies the ungodly man, that he may become a godly one instead?' (*Spir.* 45, Schaff 1887; cf. similarly *Spir.* 16).

Like earlier fathers, Augustine speaks of justifying faith as that which works by love (Gal 5:6): while meritorious works do not precede justification, faith and works are closely linked after receiving justifying grace (cf. *Spir.* 45, *On Faith and Works* 14.21, 16.27; *Grace and Free Will* 18). This perspective allows Augustine to easily reconcile Paul's views on faith and works with those of James, as 'the former is speaking of the works which precede faith, whereas the latter, of those which follow on faith' (*Eighty-three Different Questions*, Q. 76, Mosher 1982). Indeed, for Augustine, those who interpret Paul otherwise simply throw themselves into confusion when Paul insists elsewhere that the doers of the law will be justified (citing Rom 2:13, 8:13; Gal 2:16, 5:19–21; 1 Cor 6:9). As Augustine summarizes in his treatise *On Faith and Works*, 'a good life is inseparable from faith which works through love; indeed, rather faith itself is a good life' (23.42).

Augustine also follows the traditional perspective that the need for divine grace to be justified is compatible with humanity holding free will. In his treatise *On Grace and Free Will*, Augustine offers the example of Paul in 1 Cor 15:10 ('Yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me'), which he explains as follows: 'And thus, neither was it the grace of

God alone, nor was it he himself alone, but it was the grace of God with him' (Schaff 1887: 12). According to Augustine, free will remains operative even in cases like that of Pharaoh:

> Nor should you take away from Pharaoh free will, because in several passages God says, I have hardened Pharaoh; or, I have hardened or I will harden Pharaoh's heart; for it does not by any means follow that Pharaoh did not, on this account, harden his own heart. (Schaff 1887: 23)

Divine and human action are thus understood to exist in what we may call a compatibilist or non-competitive relationship, where the free action of one does not take away from the full agency of the other, so that one should say 'both God hardened him by His just judgment, and Pharaoh by his own free will' (Schaff 1887: 45). It is precisely for the strengthening of free will that divine grace is given, as Augustine writes in *On the Spirit and the Letter*: 'free will is not made void through grace, but is established, since grace cures the will whereby righteousness is freely loved' (1887: 52). Justification thus necessarily incorporates the free response of humanity, as Augustine comments on Rom 4:25: 'while [God] made you without you, he does not justify you without you' (*Sermon 169*, Hill 1993).

Augustine's continuity with the prior tradition does not mean that no interpretative developments can be identified in his writings. For example, while earlier patristic perspectives (and indeed Augustine himself) had identified Pauline 'works of the law' with the distinctive practices of the Torah, Augustine counters his Pelagian opponents by arguing that these are all works done apart from God's grace, which he contrasts with the meritorious works that grace empowers (cf. *Spir.* 45).

On the one hand, with the transposition of the debate from the original Jew/Gentile controversy to an intra-Christian soteriological dispute, Augustine's interpretative move is indeed distinctive in relation to the prior commentary tradition (so Wiles 1967: 68). On the other hand, the move itself has clear theological precedent in the way earlier patristic (and indeed biblical) sources speak about the gratuity of justifying grace apart from works of any sort, even if these are not explicitly identified as works of the law (2 Tim 1:9, Tit 3:5, 1 Clem 32:4, to name only a few; cf. similarly Chrysostom, *Against the Jews*, *Homily* 2.2.1). It is also important that Augustine seems to view these two interpretations as compatible, since he himself continues articulating the 'early' interpretation in his later writings in dispute with Jewish parties (see *An Answer to the Jews*, c.428–429 CE).

Another distinctive feature of Augustine's later writings on justification are his reflections on how humanity comes to receive the faith that justifies. While remaining a consistent defender of free will, Augustine's reflections on 1 Cor 4:7 ('What do you have that you did not receive?') caused him to change his view on how one first receives the gift of

faith. While previously holding that God gave faith based on his foreknowledge of an individual's response, after 397 CE Augustine became persuaded that faith was a gift given only to some by election, which then led into new and controversial inquiries regarding predestination (see *On the Predestination of the Saints* [*Predest.*] I.7–8). Here Augustine acknowledges that, while he explains predestination in a way that others had not before (and which some regarded as fatalistic; cf. *Predest.* II.29, 55), he believes his teaching to explicitly state what had been implicitly held by others in the preceding tradition, which had not required a clear statement before the challenge from Pelagius (*Predest.* I.27, II.52–53). While Augustine presents his views with some reserve, counselling the reader to only follow his explanations if they find them to be not in error (*Predest.* II.55), these reflections on faith and election would prove highly influential in controversies over justification in the Reformation era.

4.4 Medieval

While the medieval period is replete with valuable reflection on the doctrine of justification, the nature of medieval theology as fundamentally concerned with synthesizing earlier authorities means that there is little to be identified as distinct from the preceding patristic tradition. We will briefly examine how this biblical and patristic doctrine is understood in two influential sources, the *Glossa Ordinaria* and Thomas Aquinas, and conclude with some relevant late-medieval developments related to the doctrine.

The *Glossa Ordinaria* (hereafter *Gloss*) is a synthesis of patristic and early medieval commentary which was assembled in the first half of the twelfth century, and which would become widely influential as 'the standard biblical commentary of the later medieval and early modern periods' (Woodward 2011: ix). In the *Gloss* on Romans, justification is identified with the righteousness that comes from God, which continues to be described in both forensic and effective terms. Many individual passages can correspond with more than one sense – such as the description on Rom 3:22 of God's justice which 'clothes an ungodly person, when he mercifully changes him from unfaithful to faithful' (Woodward 2011: 56; cf. 4:22, 5:16, 8:10) – with incorporation noted in passing as well at Rom 4:5. On faith and works in justification, the *Gloss* preserves and synthesizes both the early patristic and Augustinian emphases. Like the early fathers, the *Gloss* interprets 'works of the law' at Rom 3:20 as the ceremonial and figural aspects of the Jewish law, which are distinguished from 'the moral laws, which certainly justify and are perfected in the Gospel' (Woodward 2011: 55; cf. Rom 2:13, Jas 2:24). The following verses then add the Augustinian emphasis, commenting that, while justification does not happen wholly without the will, 'no merits precede the reception of this grace' (Woodward 2011: 57, at 3:24). With respect to this initial reception of grace, the *Gloss* comments that a person is 'made just by faith alone without preceding works', since 'good works done before faith are empty: like runners who seem to have great strength and a fast pace, yet are running outside the

track. For intention makes a work good, and faith directs intention'. At the same time, the believer is bound to work subsequently through love, without which 'faith would be empty, as James says: 'Faith without works is dead' (Jas 2:17, 26); and Paul himself: 'If I should have all faith so as to move mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing' (1 Cor 13:2; Woodward 2011: 59, at 3:26; see the similar synthesis at 9:10).

Perhaps the greatest mind of the medieval period was the thirteenth-century Dominican friar Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who identifies in his *Summa Theologiae* (*ST*) the justification of the ungodly as the greatest of all God's works (*ST* 2a Q 113 A 9). Like the *Gloss*, Thomas' understanding of justification remains in line with the patristic tradition: for example, justification is effective and forensic, consisting in both the infusion of grace and remission of sins (*ST* I–II Q 113 A 1, 6); justifying faith is that which works through love (*ST* III Q 68 A 4 RO 3); excluding works of the law can be understood as excluding either the Torah's prescriptions or works that precede grace (*Com. Gal.* 2:16, 3:10); God's justifying work is compatible with humanity's free will (*ST* I–II, 113, 3, c), and is both event and process (though with much greater emphasis on the former; *ST* I–II Q 113 A 7; cf. McGrath 2020: 73–76). While Aquinas' work constructively develops Augustine's thought on predestination and provides helpful taxonomy on the nature and function of grace (*ST* I Q 23–24; I–II Q 109–14), his understanding of justification as the pinnacle of God's creation is not connected with a new perspective on the doctrine.

The major exception to this medieval stability comes not from theologians who focused directly on the doctrine of justification, but rather those whose philosophical inquiries led them into new conceptions of the relation between divine and human causality. Within the late medieval period, scholars within the philosophical tradition of John Duns Scotus (c.1265–1308) and William of Ockham (c.1287–1347) began conceiving of human activity as a power independent of God's action, so that one could portray the relation between them in competitive rather than compatibilist terms. Traditionally, the operations of God and humanity had been understood to function on distinct planes, so that God's free action was what enabled humanity's secondary agency with no logical contradiction between the two. As one example, Aquinas writes that while 'one action does not proceed from two agents of the same order', 'nothing hinders the same action from proceeding from a primary and a secondary agent' (*ST* I, 105, 5, RO2). By contrast, this newer model – often identified as 'nominalist' – conceived of language as applying to God and humans in a univocal sense, so that one could speak of an action as done either by God *or* humanity (and only in a partial sense by both). A figure often noted as exemplifying this tendency is Gabriel Biel (c. 1420–1495), a frequent target of Luther's later objections, whose theology operates under the assumption that 'divine and created agencies are included within a single linear order of predication' (Tanner 2005: 135). When applied to questions of justification, this produced a model that divided the work of justification between humanity, an independent agent whose responsibility was 'to do what is in them' (*facere quod in se*

est), and God, whose work was contingent upon humanity's action and who 'saves only when the creature meets the conditions God sets' (Tanner 2005: 136). As we will see, much Reformation-era theology would reject these conclusions while still retaining this newer philosophical framework, leading to distinct ways of reconstructing how God and humanity operated in justification.

4.5 Reformation era

In a 1531 letter to his fellow Lutheran Johannes Brenz, who was struggling to understand differences between Luther's and Augustine's understanding of justification, Philip Melanchthon wrote candidly: 'Believe me, my Brenz, the controversy about the righteousness of faith is great and obscure' (Fink 2016: 232). What was the case in Melanchthon's day is no less true today, and pitfalls surround the historian who seeks to write an account of the interpretation of justification as it relates to the controversies of the sixteenth century. Some reasons are as follows:

(1) Negative before positive: The Reformation statements regarding the doctrine of justification are historically *negative* against the received practices and beliefs of the late medieval church before they are positively developed in their enduring forms. We can see this with the example of Luther: while the beginning of the Reformation is tied to the posting of his *95 Theses* in 1517, in response to abuses around the sale of indulgences within the church, it is not until 1532 that Melanchthon's *Romans* commentary clearly expresses the 'Lutheran' doctrine of forensic justification as it would be known in subsequent centuries (Fink 2010; McGrath 2020: 208–211). Further, when these alternative doctrinal formulations are eventually worked out, they often serve to divide as much as unite. Here one may take the example of Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), a lifelong committed Lutheran theologian who likewise protested against the original abuses identified by Luther, but who disagreed with Luther and Melanchthon's separation of justification and sanctification when these views were eventually given formal definition (McGrath 2020: 212).

(2) Fluidity of figures: Correlated with this is the fluidity of individual figures within this period, and here again Luther offers a helpful example. Even after the so-called 'Tower Experience' of 1519 in which he arrived at a new understanding of justification, Luther continues to think of justification in terms of transformation until the early 1530s, and only with his 1535 *Galatians* commentary clearly presents a non-transformative understanding of the term (McGrath 2020: 193–213).

(3) Polemical context: A further complication is the polemical context of many sources in this period, which means that any given idea may be emphasized at the expense of others in the heat of battle. Competing ideas are often described without charity or precision, and claims are sometimes made more for the sake of

winning arguments than accuracy. A classic example of this is the aforementioned letter from Melanchthon to Brenz, in which he concedes to Brenz that he publicly appeals to Augustine as agreeing with the Lutheran view on justification even though he does not; a practice which, to Melanchthon's credit, diminishes after 1532 (Fink 2016: 234).

(4) Variability within traditions: A final complication is variability within traditions. Granting the plurality of Reformation-era perspectives, it would be hoped that figures within each tradition held to the same essential points of doctrine on justification, but here too the historian is thwarted. To take one prominent example, confessional Lutheranism itself eventually diverges from the theology of Martin Luther in important areas, such as on predestination and free will. On the Reformed side, one might take the figure of Martin Bucer, Calvin's own mentor in Strasbourg: while Calvin extols Bucer's 1536 *Romans* commentary at the beginning of his own in 1539 (Calvin 1995), on the question of justification Bucer much more closely resembles Augustine and Aquinas than the mainstream Reformed tradition.

4.5.1 Lutheran

The first thing to be noted about Luther and the subsequent tradition that followed from him is the degree to which it rests in continuity with its medieval Catholic (and ultimately Augustinian) theological heritage, with particular inspiration drawn from the teachings on grace and predestination in Augustine's later writings. Nevertheless, while sometimes based on seemingly minor theological distinctions, Luther's areas of divergence from his prior tradition – and especially from Augustine – led to a distinct understanding of justification that still proves influential today. We can examine these Lutheran features under three headings: (1) the nature of justification, (2) the place of justification, and (3) the means of justification.

Luther's distinct emphases are most intelligible when understood as a reaction against the aforementioned late-medieval conceptions of justification – exemplified by Gabriel Biel, whose theology the early Luther at first imbibed, then fully rejected – in which a competitive understanding of divine and human action led to the work of justification being thought of as divided between God and the autonomous individual. For Luther, such conceptions seemed particularly objectionable when humanity's contribution could be subject to manipulation, such as with the purchase of indulgences to reduce time in purgatory for one's self or others. It is essential to note that Luther's response shares his opponents' philosophical presupposition that human and divine agency function on the same plane, and this underlying framework would prove to be a source of contention in later disputes with other Christian bodies. Nevertheless, it is clear that Luther's objections are rooted in Catholic and biblical instincts: the notion that humanity's justification was somehow only partially affected by God simply seemed a sub-Christian idea, and Luther

powerfully exposed it as such. At the risk of oversimplification, one can say that the distinctive Lutheran perspective on justification emerges from this traditional conviction of God's complete action for the individual's salvation, combined with the more recent nominalist philosophical framework which conceived human and divine action as an either-or proposition.

We can see this new perspective illustrated in how Luther conceives of humanity's striving for righteousness. While the preceding tradition had cautioned that even grace-empowered works should not be a source for boasting or confidence, to seek righteousness was not itself problematized. For Luther, such striving is not only a sin, but the epitome of all human sin: since justification can only be received as a gift from God, human efforts to attain righteousness are attempts to rob God of his role as saviour. Those who strive to achieve salvation thus become self-idolaters and anti-Christs, denying God and setting themselves up in his place (see especially *Lectures on Galatians*, *LW* 26.257–259).

This either/or understanding of divine and human action explains Luther's more radical statements like 'sin doesn't harm us as much as our own righteousness' (*LW* 54.34): since righteousness can only be received as a gift from God, any apparent righteousness in humanity will take away from the true source of justification, and thus ultimately harm even more than sin. This framework also explains Luther's various comments against free will, which radicalizes Augustine's teaching on predestination in a way that seems perplexing to many readers. As Luther writes in his seminal *Bondage of the Will*, while free will is a pernicious myth, even if it were real he would not want it (*LW* 33.288–289). What can explain such a statement? It rises, again, from the conviction that to add anything of our own to justification is necessarily to arrogate it from God, which would constitute an unthinkable kind of divine robbery, with salvation itself invariably being lost in the hands of fallible humanity.

While such an interpretation of humanity's role in justification appears quite distinct in relation to the prior Christian theological tradition, it must be said that this conception (1) draws upon and powerfully restates traditional theological ideas for its affirmations, and (2) is a logically consistent interpretation if one holds to the nominalist philosophical presuppositions regarding divine and human agency.

The distinctions between Luther's conception of justification and the prior tradition were frequently noted by Luther's opponents, and also acknowledged by Luther himself, which would hold true even with his beloved Augustine (*LW* 54.49; cf. McGrath 1982). Nevertheless, Luther's consistent reply to charges of innovation is that Augustine and other church fathers themselves recognized scripture as the authority to which they were subject, and so if his understanding of justification in Paul is indeed correct, then

the fathers would agree this right understanding must take precedence even over their tradition of interpretation (e.g. *LW* 41.25–27, 35.150).

The conviction that justification is entirely the work of God apart from humanity's response leads to new ways of understanding the nature of justification within Luther's thought. While initially continuing to conceive of justification in ways that included transformation, after 1532 Luther interprets justification as a strictly forensic act which refers only to the forgiveness of sins. (It should be noted that the degree of development in Luther's thought is the subject of ongoing debate; see e.g. Trueman 2003; Vainio 2008.) The effect of Luther's limitation is to eliminate participatory or contingent elements of justification: to be justified by Christ is independent of the work of sanctification, so that no part of justification can be understood as reliant upon man's response rather than God's action. Correlated with this is a distinct understanding of the location of justification: rather than representing a change that takes place inside the believer, justification is now understood to be 'outside us, solely in the grace of God and in His imputation' (*LW* 26.234; cf. McGrath 1982). This interpretation also tends to narrow justification to an initial act which subsumes both future and ongoing aspects: final judgment (or final justification) does not involve the Christian, and purgatory – together with its accompanying system of indulgences – is made irrelevant (*LW* 22.380, though cf. *LW* 34.167).

These ideas lead to a distinct understanding of the means of justification and the relationship between faith and works. Since humanity is unable to contribute in any way to its justification (and indeed to do so would be robbery from God), the righteousness of faith is understood to be entirely passive, whereby 'we work nothing, render nothing to God; we only receive and permit someone else to work in us, namely, God' (*LW* 26.4–5). Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* particularly target the traditional idea that justifying faith is 'faith formed by love' (Gal 5:6), an idea he identifies as 'a trick of Satan' designed to establish a righteousness of works in place of faith in Christ (*LW* 26.168, 273). Luther counters that a person is justified by faith alone apart from love or any other human condition, and insists that in Gal 5:6 Paul 'is not discussing justification' (*LW* 27.29).

On the other side, Luther rejects both the early patristic and Augustinian interpretations of 'works of the law': rather than the Mosaic law's prescriptions or all works done apart from God's grace, Luther insists that the exclusion of works of the law must be understood to exclude works empowered by God's grace as well, since these too can be seen as compromising God's full agency in salvation and arrogating something to humanity (*LW* 26.122–24; cf. *LW* 54.10). On matters of justification, the dichotomy between faith and works must therefore be absolute; as he writes in his *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), 'we do not confuse the Law and grace, or faith and works; but we separate them as far as possible (*LW* 26.152; cf. 26.137).

Luther's understanding of this absolute contrast between faith and works would set him in distinction with both Catholics and other Protestants, as Luther explains in refuting 'the papists, the Zwinglians, the Anabaptists', and all others in error:

> For this is what they teach: 'Faith in Christ does indeed justify, but at the same time observance of the Commandments of God is necessary; for it is written (Matt 19:17): 'If you would enter life, keep the Commandments'. Here immediately Christ is denied and faith is abolished, because what belongs to Christ alone is attributed to the Commandments of God or to the Law. (*LW* 26.143)

Luther is also candid that such an understanding is difficult to reconcile with the teaching of James on justification by works, which for him means that James is not to be regarded as a canonical authority (*LW* 34.317; 35.395–397; 54.424–425). While such a judgment appears quite radical, for Luther the doctrine of justification provides a standard whereby even the relative value of canonical writings can be measured, with some preserving it more faithfully than others (*LW* 35.361–362).

While Luther was especially concerned to preserve a clear distinction between faith and works in relation to justification, the same should not be said for the role of the sacraments, and particularly baptism, which he understands to confer faith. Indeed, it is often striking to modern readers how closely Luther links faith and baptism, such that the two terms sometimes seem indistinguishable in his theology. As Luther writes:

> If anyone denies here, as the fanatical spirits do today, that righteousness and salvation are granted to an infant as soon as he is baptized […] such a person utterly deprives Baptism of salvation and attributes salvation to works. (*LW* 26.241–242)

Another feature of the Lutheran perspective which can appear paradoxical, especially given Luther's emphasis on predestination, is that justification can be lost. The Augsburg Confession, written primarily by Melanchthon 1530 under Luther's auspices, condemns the (allegedly Anabaptist) teaching which denied that the justified can lose the Holy Spirit (Article 12), and Luther's sermons often speak of those who fall away into unbelief (e.g. *LW* 20.137; 23.397–399; 24.234, 256; 30.190). While difficult to reconcile with Luther's statements elsewhere, it appears for him that while justifying faith can only be received unilaterally (and passively) as a gift from God, it is nevertheless a gift that can be rejected – not by works, but by unbelief.

While Luther's presentation of God's action in justification was widely influential, his precise views on each of these issues proved difficult to maintain within subsequent

Lutheranism, which was to receive its enduring form under the influence of Philip Melanchthon. While initially agreeing with Luther on predestination and the complete bondage of the human will, Melanchthon's views on these questions shifted towards the end of Luther's life, which led him to eventually affirm an understanding of justification which more closely coordinated faith and works (cf. Pelikan 1985: 143–144). It is ecumenically significant that the final breakdown in official Lutheran/Catholic dialogue on justification at the 1557 Colloquy of Worms was caused not by conflict between the official disputants but by the fracturing of the Lutheran party into dissenting factions on this doctrine, with the 'Gnesio' ('genuine') Lutheran party led by Matthias Flacius accusing Melanchthon and his followers of betraying Luther over the questions of free will and whether good works were necessary evidence for salvation (cf. Dingel 2012: 126–129).

4.5.2 Reformed

The Reformed Protestant perspective on justification, exemplified most prominently by the writings of John Calvin, can be said to be summarized with two general tendencies: (1) a preservation of the distinctive features of Luther's perspective on justification, including a strong emphasis on predestination and a competitive understanding of divine/human agency (see e.g. *Institutes of the Christian Religion* [*Institutes*] 3.11.13); and (2) a closer coordination of justification and sanctification, which would prove to be an enduring distinction between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions.

The mainstream Reformed tradition is very close to the Lutheran regarding two of the three major features that set Luther apart from the preceding tradition on justification. First, justification is strictly a forensic act entailing the forgiveness of sins (which is often presented as both the non-imputation of sins and the positive imputation of Christ's righteousness, a point of emphasis within much Reformed thought; cf. *Institutes* 3.11.2). Second, justification takes place outside of the believer, so that in justification the Christian is accepted 'as if we were righteous' apart from any internal transformation (*Institutes* 3.11.2, 6). Calvin memorably illustrates this conception with an analogy (repurposed from Ambrose): Christians are like Jacob wearing the garments of Esau, who, while not internally changed, nevertheless receives the blessing of Isaac (*Institutes* 3.11.23).

The distinction between Lutheran and Reformed perspectives on justification can be well illustrated by Luther and Calvin's divergent responses to the 1541 Colloquy of Regensburg (Ratisbon). This attempt at Protestant/Catholic reconciliation produced Article 5 on justification, which Calvin, himself an attendee at the colloquy, praised as containing 'the substance of our true doctrine', so that 'nothing can be comprehended within it which is not to be found in our writings' (cf. Lane 2006: 56). Luther, however, inveighed against the colloquy's statement on justifying faith being that which works by love (*Colloquy*

4.5, cf. Gal 5:6), and judged that ‘no more harmful writing had been directed against the Reformers since the beginning of their gospel’ (WA Br 9:486, cited in Lane 2020: 4).

While insisting with Luther that justification is distinct from sanctification, for Calvin faith and works are not separable: as he writes in his commentary on Ezekiel, ‘faith can be no more separated from works than the sun from his heat: yet faith justifies without works, because works form no reason for our justification’ (*Commentary on Ezekiel* 18:14–17; cf. *Institutes* 3.11.6). The closer coordination of faith and works in the Reformed tradition can also be witnessed in the *Westminster Confession*’s (1646) teaching on justification: while stating that faith is ‘the alone instrument of justification’, it specifies that such faith ‘is ever accompanied with all other saving graces’ and ‘works by love’ (11.2; cf. Gal 5:6, *Institutes* 3.11.20). This inseparability is also what helps Reformed interpreters to avoid direct conflict between Paul and James (see, as one example, *Institutes* 3.17.11–12). Speaking generally, it can be said that, while the Lutheran tradition holds more closely to the preceding tradition on the role of the sacraments within justification, the Reformed holds more closely on the role of evangelical obedience.

Given the closer coordination of justification and sanctification within the Reformed tradition, one topic of enduring discussion has been precisely how works and the final judgment relate to justification by faith. One solution, which is (controversially) attributed to Calvin and explicitly stated by other Reformers like Bucer, has been a doctrine of ‘twofold’ or ‘double’ justification. This teaching holds that primary justification, consisting in the forgiveness of sins, is confirmed by a subordinate or secondary justification, which has as its requirement works that are necessary evidence of faith (see e.g. *Institutes*, 3.17.3, 8–10; cf. Coxhead 2008; Lugioyo 2010: 177–178). Such a view (with variations) has been held by Reformed theologians such as Peter Martyr Vermigli (1499–1562; Castaldo 2017), Richard Baxter (1615–1691; Boersma 2003), and Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758; McDermott 2007), among others. However, it should be said that such a paradigm is not universally affirmed, as critics have objected that this introduces an element of conditionality into justification, which proves to be too similar to the Catholic paradigm to which the Reformed is to be a corrective.

As noted above, the Reformed theologian Martin Bucer (1491–1551) represents a significant minority report on the nature of justification: while acknowledging the strictly forensic interpretation of Melanchthon and the Lutheran party, Bucer nevertheless concludes that justification includes an effective aspect, which he bases on the weight of the history of interpretation and on the context of Paul’s own argument in Romans 3 (cf. Fink 2007: 512–513; McGrath 2020: 218–220). The distinction between Calvin and Bucer on this question can be witnessed by their varying interpretations of Rom 8:4: while Calvin (as with Luther) insists that the law’s righteous requirement is only fulfilled for believers by

Christ extrinsically (*Institutes* 3.11.23), Bucer follows earlier readers like Chrysostom by maintaining that this righteousness is indeed brought to fulfilment in Christians.

4.5.3 Catholic

Given the deeply polemical nature of the sixteenth century conflicts between Protestants and Catholics, it may come as a surprise to the contemporary reader how much the official Catholic response to Protestant developments – the Council of Trent's 1547 decree on justification – shares in common with Lutheran and Reformed perspectives. For example, the council states that humanity cannot be justified by free will without the prevenient grace of God (chapter 5), and declares as follows in its first Canon: 'If any one saith, that man may be justified before God by his own works, whether done through the teaching of human nature, or that of the law, without the grace of God through Jesus Christ; let him be anathema'. The council's decree restates traditional perspectives on justification in light of the new questions of the era (McGrath 2020: 277–339) and establishes clear areas of distinction which can be summarized under the following headings:

(1) Whereas the Protestant tendency is to emphasize one part of the Augustinian heritage at the expense of others (such as his views on the pervasive influence of sin, but not the nature of justification), Trent offers a more straightforward restatement of Augustine's theology of justification without the amendments made by Lutheran and Reformed perspectives, though without passing judgment on his more controversial statements on predestination (cf. McGrath 2020: 320–332).

(2) A rejection of perceived Protestant errors, many of which have roots in the late-medieval nominalist tradition. For example, Canon IV rejects a competitive view of divine and human action which would prevent the will's consent and cooperation with grace in justification, and Canon V rejects the idea that free will is completely lost in unregenerate humanity.

(3) Continued variability in the meaning ascribed to terms by various parties, which in the long term contributes to theological misunderstandings between them. Here we may take the example of 'justification', which is employed not just for initial forgiveness or final judgment, but also the continuing process of renewal (i.e. 'becoming just'). This definition makes discussion of 'increase of justification' intelligible and even appropriate (chapter 10), but opaque to a Protestant who understands justification to pertain either to the initial forgiveness of sins or vindication at the final judgment, neither of which seem intelligibly subject to increase.

4.5.4 Anabaptist

The early Anabaptist understanding of justification is attested by Luther to be identical to the prior Catholic doctrine. Luther charged the Anabaptists with being 'new monks' who corrupted the doctrine like their Catholic forebears (*LW* 21.258–259; 26.28), explaining that

– by making justification in some way contingent on humanity's response – Anabaptists and Catholics were collectively 'wolves joined at the tail' (*LW* 27.150).

While the accuracy of these statements is difficult to assess precisely, since Anabaptism itself was a diverse movement with no single official doctrine, it is true that the Anabaptist objections to the medieval church were not fundamentally based on the doctrine of justification. A further challenge to assessing these claims is that Anabaptism's focus on right practice was such that confessional statements themselves were regarded with some suspicion (which, ironically, did not prevent a great number of them from being written). One confession which found enduring influence as representative of Anabaptist thought was the *Short Confession* of Hans de Ries (1610/1618), which was 'unique in being the first Anabaptist-Mennonite confession which systematically treats all of the major doctrines of the faith' (Dyck 1964: 6). The confession is also significant in that it was drafted during the period of collaboration between the Anabaptists and the early Baptist leader John Smyth, whose congregation also signed the confession (Koop 2019: 135–136; Lee 2003: 87).

The *Confession*'s comments on justification provide clear examples of what drew Luther's ire. Indeed, it is remarkable that, while making no explicit appeal to church history, the confession represents a preservation of traditional pre-Lutheran views on many disputed questions. For example, God's justifying action is regarded as compatible with humanity's free will and not determined by predestination (Article 7); justifying ('living') faith is that which works through love (Article 20); justification is both the forgiveness of sins and the transformation from unrighteousness to righteousness (Article 21). While specifying that children are not to be baptized, since faith must precede baptism (Article 31), it is noteworthy that justification is described as being brought about by baptism, which is itself a sign of Christ's work in purifying the believer's soul (Article 30, 32).

4.5.5 Anglican

As with many areas of theology, Anglican conceptions of justification have historically played an important role in charting a middle course between various Protestant and Catholic perspectives, which have made them particularly significant as ecumenical resources in subsequent centuries. The foundational texts for the Anglican church on justification are the *Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion* (1563), which – as is common for Anglican sources – can admit of more than one interpretation, but which show greatest affinity with the Reformed tradition. This reading is confirmed by Thomas Cranmer's *Homily of Justification* to which the articles refer, though even here Cranmer's conception of the nature of justification as 'making righteous' is strikingly Augustinian (cf. McGrath 2020: 232–233). Many early Anglican perspectives on justification are reminiscent of Reformed figures who themselves defy easy categorization, such as Martin Bucer, who spent the last two years of his life teaching in England at Cranmer's invitation. A

prominent example is Richard Hooker (1554–1600), who simultaneously insists upon (1) forensic justification by the imputation of Christ's righteousness, which grants 'the right of inheriting', (2) an internal sanctifying righteousness (also called 'justification'), which grants 'the actual possessing of eternal bliss', and (3) participation in Christ via baptism and the Eucharist as the means by which both kinds of justification are attained (Hooker 1888; cf. Foord 2000; McGrath 2020: 235–236).

One common tendency among Anglicans has been to give sustained attention to patristic conceptions of justification, rather than to be strictly constrained by either distinctly Protestant ideas or the Catholic reactions against them at Trent. Two important examples are John Wesley (1703–1791) and John Henry Newman (1801–1890), who, while typically associated with Methodism and Catholicism, both wrote on the doctrine as priests of the Church of England. Wesley's reliance upon patristic writers caused him to diverge from certain Lutheran teachings on the doctrine, such as the denial of free will and strictly forensic justification, and his own story reflects the complex relationship between Anglicans and Reformation sources in this area. (McGrath 2020: 270–274; Weeter 2007: 37–56). On the one hand, Wesley's 1738 Aldersgate experience – the climactic deepening of his conversion in which he felt his heart 'strangely warmed' – took place during a reading of Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*, and Wesley would follow Luther in preaching the centrality of justification by faith for the rest of his ministry. On the other hand, Wesley came to object quite strongly to Luther's distinctive separation of justification from sanctification after reading Luther's *Lectures on Galatians* in 1741, as Wesley expressed in a sermon: 'Who has wrote more ably than Martin Luther on justification by faith alone? And who was more ignorant of the doctrine of sanctification, or more confused in his conception of it?' (Cox 1964: 88).

Like Wesley, John Henry Newman's influential 1838 *Lectures on Justification* make use of the church fathers to guide a path between the polarities represented by Luther and Trent. It is characteristic of the Anglican *via media* that Newman's study is able to affirm central claims of each side, agreeing with Protestants that justification is primarily a declaration of God, and with Catholics that as God's word it necessarily effects what it declares (Newman 1908: 62–103).

4.5.6 Orthodox

The Orthodox perspective on justification has focused on restating the earlier patristic consensus, and, with one notable exception, the response of the Eastern churches to the Protestant developments on the doctrine of justification has been a negative one. This should not be attributed to lack of engagement, as Lutherans made a number of early appeals to the Eastern churches, which was logical given that both parties found

themselves in opposition to the papacy. However, a theological alliance, whether on justification or elsewhere, was never to gain traction.

Two events in particular are noteworthy for the Orthodox response on justification. The first is the correspondence regarding the Augsburg Confession between the Lutheran theologians of Tübingen and Patriarch Jeremiah II of Constantinople from 1574 to 1581 (Mastrantonis 1982). The correspondence consists of three cycles of letters in which the Lutherans present their understanding of the faith and the Patriarch responds with the Orthodox view, which on each subject contains varying degrees of approval and correction. Given Luther's disagreement with the church fathers on justification, and the authority accorded to their interpretation in the Orthodox tradition, it is unsurprising that the correspondence ended without convergence on this doctrine. The patriarch expresses particular concern with how good works, alms, and penances are problematized within the Lutheran confession, and frequently appeals to the testimony of church fathers like Chrysostom and Basil to redirect their interpretation of scripture. The Patriarch is especially pointed in responding to the Augsburg Confession's article on faith and good works:

> The twentieth article says that you do not forbid good works. Yet you characterize feasts, ceremonies, fixed fasts, brotherhoods, monastic life, and other similar works as useless. This is not good, nor does it agree with the Holy Fathers. For if you love all good works, as you say you do, you should love these also because they are good works. (Mastrantonis 1982: 83)

It is also evident that divergent understandings of how human and divine action relate to one another underlie their differences as well, with the Patriarch citing Chrysostom to show that they are compatible rather than competitive in humanity's salvation: 'What then? Does nothing depend on God? Indeed, everything depends on God, but not so that our free will is violated' (Mastrantonis 1982: 78; cf. 42; see *Homilies on Hebrews* 12.5).

The Lutheran reply rejects such compatibilism as tending towards idolatry:

> [I]t is a matter lacking merit that our salvation be divided between us and Christ, as if we are able to absolve our own sins together with God in such a manner that a part of the achievement of the Mediator Christ would be attributed to us, also, and that it might happen to be said that we would in some way also be saviours, which would be an extreme absurdity. For the honour is owed *only* to the Mediator Christ and absolutely to no one else. (Mastrantonis 1982: 254, original emphasis)

The second major event is the publication of the Confession of Patriarch Cyril Lucaris in 1629, which was eventually refuted by the Confession of Dosethius at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672 (Pelikan 1977: 282–293). Cyril's Confession purported to have been written by the Orthodox Patriarch, and espoused Calvinist teachings, including on justification, such as an external location of justification, faith alone justifying, and a denial of free will in the unregenerate (Robertson 1899: 197–199). The Confession caused an uproar within Orthodoxy and was condemned by several regional councils (with many refusing to acknowledge it as a genuine production), before being rejected formally at the Synod of Jerusalem in 1672. The Synod states that it is faith formed by love which justifies rather than faith alone, and specifies that justification takes place inside the faithful, rather than by taking hold and applying Christ's righteousness externally (Decree 9, 13; Robertson 1899: 122, 132).

5 Justification in contemporary theology

5.1 New Perspective

The 'new perspective on Paul' is a broad term used to identify a movement within late twentieth-century Pauline scholarship which re-evaluated the traditional Protestant (and particularly Lutheran) readings of Paul which had dominated academic study in previous centuries. The movement is usually identified as having its beginnings with the publication of E. P. Sanders' (1937–2022) *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* in 1977 (though with important precursors in the works of figures like W. D. Davies, Krister Stendahl, and George Howard; see Davies 1948; Stendahl 1963; Howard 1970). Sanders' study of Jewish sources in Paul's time concluded that the Lutheran framework for reading Paul (exemplified in Sanders' day by figures like Rudolph Bultmann) was clouded by the tendency to project Luther's critiques of the late-medieval Catholic church onto Paul's Jewish interlocutors. Sanders' work was soon joined by that of James Dunn (1939–2020) and N. T. Wright (1948–) and coined as the 'new perspective on Paul', and has proven widely influential in discussions on justification, the relation between faith and works, and the continuities and distinctions between Judaism and early Christianity.

With respect to the doctrine of justification, the 'new perspective' does not present a single unified view in comparison to Reformation-era theologies. For example, on the question of the nature of justification, Sanders' exegesis of Paul emphasizes the effective aspect (i.e. 'being made righteous'; Sanders 1977: 461), while Wright's work foregrounds an incorporative sense of justification, arguing from the immediate conflict over table fellowship in Galatians 2 that by 'justify' Paul means 'to be reckoned by God to be a true member of his family' (Wright 2009: 96; cf. Wright 2013: 958–959). The 'new perspective' also represents in many respects a return to earlier readings of Paul, though this correspondence is often unnoticed and largely unintentional, with traditional ideas

expressed with logic that sometimes reflects modern emphases. For example, ‘new perspective’ exegetes tend to identify Pauline ‘works of the law’ with the Torah’s practices like circumcision and Sabbath-keeping much like early patristic readers. However, while patristic interpreters regard Paul’s objections to these practices as being rooted in the arrival of the new covenant with Christ’s advent, Sanders explains Paul’s objections in terms of his own individual experience of being called as the apostle to the Gentiles (1977: 496), while Dunn sees Paul as rejecting a broader attitude of exclusivity which these practices fostered (2008: 418).

Debates between ‘old’ and ‘new’ perspectives have continued unabated since the publication of Sanders’ work, with no shortage of defenders of Reformation-era perspectives or ‘newer’ perspectives which reassess earlier views in new directions. One general observation on the post-’new perspective’ landscape is that many major works by contemporary Pauline exegetes – such as those by John Barclay (2015; 2020), David DeSilva (2018), and Michael Gorman (2016) – offer interpretations of justification which are more compatible with pre-Reformation understandings of the doctrine than had been the case in previous generations of Protestant scholarship (as one assessment, see Eubank 2020).

5.2 Recent ecumenical developments on justification

5.2.1 Lutheran-Catholic convergence

The most significant ecumenical development on the doctrine of justification in recent decades – and indeed perhaps since the Reformation era – has been the 1999 Lutheran/Catholic *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (*JDDJ*). Culminating a long process of ecumenical dialogue (see Lane 2006), the *JDDJ* statement represents ‘a consensus on basic truths concerning the doctrine of justification’ (section 13), according to which both sides are free from condemnation by either the Council of Trent or the sixteenth-century Lutheran Confessions. Acknowledging that the two sides have historically used similar language in different ways and with varying emphases, the *JDDJ* presents distinctive Lutheran and Catholic conceptions on various questions on justification and shows how they can be understood in mutually intelligible ways. With respect to content, the *JDDJ* describes justification as both forensic and effective, taking place at baptism and incorporation into Christ’s body (section 11), with the means of justification described as follows:

> 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. (Section 15)

In general, the Lutheran contribution tends to reflect Melanchthon's moderating tendencies more than Luther's sharper edges (such as with the identification of justifying faith as active through love, section 12; Gal 5:6), which has contributed to the statement's rejection by some confessional Lutherans. The *Joint Declaration* has nevertheless been adopted and affirmed by other Protestant bodies (such as the Church of England, the World Methodist Council, and the World Communion of Reformed Churches) and has spurred further Lutheran/Catholic collaborative research, most notably *From Conflict to Communion* in 2013. While the *JDDJ* has been subject to critique on both Lutheran and Catholic sides for using verbal ambiguity to cover over enduring doctrinal differences (see e.g. Lutheran Church - Missouri Synod 1999; Malloy 2005), it is nevertheless true that both with respect to tone and content, the *JDDJ* represents an important convergence between these historically adverse parties.

5.2.2 Divine and human agency

A related development has been the recognition that disputes over justification have often been conditioned by underlying philosophical presuppositions regarding divine and human action, which has likewise contributed to increasingly constructive dialogue between various perspectives. On the Catholic side, one may take the example of Louis Bouyer (1913–2004), whose work insists on the genuine catholicity of Luther and Calvin's central assertions with respect to God's action in justification, with critique reserved instead for the philosophical system that forced them into untenable positions regarding humanity's response to divine action (Bouyer 1956). On the other side, Lutheran theologian Robert Jenson offers a re-evaluation of the nominalist framework as it applied to the early Lutheran conflicts between the followers of Philip Melanchthon and the stricter 'Gnesio-Lutherans':

> Both sides assumed the basic question, what can man in and of himself do about fulfilment? The Philippists answered: 'A little bit'; and the Gnesio-Lutherans answered: 'Nothing'. But the trouble was the interpretation hidden in the question, that there is any such reality as man-in-himself. (Quoted in Tanner 2005: 142, note 49)

It is noteworthy from an ecumenical standpoint that it is now Protestants who represent many of the leading proponents of compatibilism, such as the aforementioned John Barclay, who argues that Paul's language of 'energism' necessarily incorporates the full participation of divine and human agency (see e.g. Phil 2:12–13, where Paul enjoins the Philippians to 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for God is the one working in [*energōn*] you both to will and to work [*energein*] for his good pleasure'; Barclay 2015: 441–442; cf. similarly Wright 2013: 940, 955–956). Though a turn to such a non-competitive framework among Protestants has not been unanimous, contemporary critics

of compatibilism nevertheless acknowledge that the view now represents ‘something of a standard view for academic theologians across confessions’ (Zahl 2019: 200).

5.2.3 Union with Christ

Finally, another trend across confessional lines has been to see justification as inextricably linked with union with Christ, the reality to which Paul appeals in his explanation of justification in Gal 2:19–21. This approach is often associated with the so-called ‘Finnish School’ of Lutheranism, which draws attention to the prominence of this theme in Luther’s writings on justification, which they assert has been obscured by a later over-emphasis on forensic categories (Mannermaa 2005; Vainio 2017). While not necessarily resolving significant matters of detail, understanding justification as a function of union with Christ can be a way of accounting for both forensic and effective aspects of justification, as well as an incorporative sense, since Paul also identifies the church itself with Christ’s own body (1 Cor 12:7; cf. Rom 12:5, Col 1:18, 24; Eph 1:22–23). This ecumenical convergence can be witnessed in Benedict XVI’s comments on union with Christ, which for him offers a framework for understanding and affirming Luther’s sense of justification:

> ‘Being just’ simply means being with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Further observances are no longer necessary. For this reason Luther’s phrase: ‘*faith alone*’ is true, if it is not opposed to faith in charity, in love. Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence to believe is to conform to Christ and enter into his love. (Benedict XVI 2012: 82; quotation marks added)

While it may be asked whether this statement would overcome Luther’s objections to coordinating faith and love in justification, it is nonetheless true that such a formulation is closely reminiscent of Luther and Calvin’s own ideas. We can see this stated by Calvin in his *Institutes*: ‘For how does true faith justify unless by uniting us to Christ, so that being made one with him, we may be admitted to a participation in his righteousness?’ (3.17.11; cf. 3.11.10) The justifying union with Christ is described in similar terms in Luther’s *Lectures on Galatians*:

> So far as justification is concerned, Christ and I must be so closely attached that He lives in me and I in Him. What a marvellous way of speaking! Because He lives in me, whatever grace, righteousness, life, peace, and salvation there is in me is all Christ’s; nevertheless, it is mine as well, by the cementing and attachment that are through faith, by which we become as one body in the Spirit. (*LW* 26.167)

6 Conclusion

It can be seen that these perspectives on justification, while indeed carrying distinct emphases, are often not a great distance from one another theologically: the most committed Lutheran still regards it as important that justifying faith actively bears fruit in one's works, while the Tridentine Catholic regards all efforts to earn God's favour apart from his justifying gift as ultimately doomed. While justification may indeed be the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, to borrow the line paraphrased from Luther, the theological historian is ultimately reticent to identify it as the key fault line between various groups in the Reformation period, or indeed today. Rather, it seems that the question underlying and animating the various controversies regarding justification is that of authority: even when these various formulations seem close enough to one another to be mutually acceptable, the question remains of who decides what is the precise interpretation, on what terms, etc. Further, it must be remembered that Luther's original protest against the abuses related to the sale of indulgences was ultimately not based on an abstract theory of justification, but rather the more direct question of the church's authority to forgive the penalties from sins. It was this underlying issue that moved Luther to re-evaluate his Augustinian theological heritage on justification, and it can be suggested without great controversy that such underlying questions of authority remain at the foundation of disputes over justification today (cf. similarly Lane 2006: 5, 231).

To examine the question from a contemporary lens, if the doctrine of justification were indeed the fundamental distinction between various parties within Western Christianity, then the 1999 Joint Declaration should have resulted in tectonic ecumenical shifts within Western Christianity. The fact that such shifts have been less pronounced seems to confirm that justification is not the essential contention between these parties, who now disagree on a whole host of other questions, and who hold to divergent perspectives as to the authority that can decide them.

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