

Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification

Thomas R. Schreiner

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A Brief Book Summary from Books At a Glance

About the Author

Thomas R. Schreiner (PhD, Fuller Theological Seminary) is James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament and associate dean of Scripture and Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. The author of numerous books, he is a preaching pastor at Clifton Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky.

Introduction

This book is part of *The Five Solas Series* that investigates the *solas* of the Reformation. Schreiner provides a theological, historical, and exegetical survey of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He argues that the traditional, Reformed interpretation of justification is fundamentally accurate and vitally important. Schreiner interacts with contemporary Roman Catholic and Protestant views that differ from the Reformed understanding. This work is irenic but firm in its articulation of *sola fide*.

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Summary

Chapters 1 -3

Sola Fide in the Early Church

Martin Luther on Justification by Faith Alone

John Calvin on Justification by Faith Alone

There is a debate about how accurately the church fathers comprehended Paul's teaching on salvation by grace through faith alone. They knew that salvation was from the Lord, but their concerns were often with antinomianism and the necessity of obedience and good works. Until the time of Augustine, theologians didn't wrestle with the relationship between faith and works. The term *justification* refers to being right with God, or how we attain righteousness. Most early church fathers understood justification forensically. For Clement, good works flowed from faith but were not the foundation for justification. Ignatius urged his readers to do good works and endure, but salvation came through faith. The *Epistle to Diognetus* and the *Odes of Solomon* likewise teach that salvation is by God's grace and righteousness is by faith. The doctrine of justification by faith was not spelled out with precision at this stage in the life of the church, and there was a strong emphasis on the necessity of works. Augustine's view was that salvation is entirely by grace, but he believed that justification involved making someone righteous rather than declaring them righteous. He held that justification was a process (collapsing justification and sanctification into the same process). Works did not save but faith would produce the works of love. Although none of the church fathers spoke with the precision of the Reformers on the subject of justification by faith alone, they did not deny the doctrine, and there is good evidence that they held to it in an inchoate form.

Because of Augustine, medieval theologians understood justification to refer to believers being made righteous. Luther and the Protestants came to understand justification as a forensic declaration, a status. It was distinguished from sanctification, and it was based on the imputation of the alien righteousness of Christ. Luther believed that justification by faith was essential. Sinners cannot be right in the sight of God on the basis of works since they can't keep the law. Sinners can only be right with God by receiving an extrinsic righteousness—the righteousness of Christ. Faith is the necessary instrument to appropriate Christ. Christ takes our sins and by faith—which is the gift of God—we receive his righteousness. Believers are justified and yet still sinners. Good works are not the grounds for our justification but they are the necessary evidence of saving faith. In contemporary thought, the Finnish school is attempting a reinterpretation of Luther's view of justification, but so far their work has fallen short. The traditional interpretation of Luther is still the most accurate.

Justification was also of central importance in the thought of John Calvin. He argued that our sins made it impossible for us to ever make ourselves right before a God who is infinitely holy and who demands perfect conformity to his moral will. Since we can't stand before God on the basis of our works, we can only stand by faith. Faith is the instrument by which we receive the merits of Christ and are united to him. Justification is forensic. Believers are given the righteousness of God and are therefore acquitted. God supplies this righteousness to us by his grace—it is the righteousness of Christ imputed to us. Justification and sanctification are not the same thing, but both come through our union with Christ.

Chapters 4-6

***Sola Fide* and the Council of Trent**

Further Reformed Discussions on *Sola Fide*

***Sola Fide* in the Thought of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley**

The Council of Trent directly and explicitly rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Good works and faith together were said to be the basis for justification. In response to the Reformers, justification and sanctification were conflated. Human beings could not save themselves by their own wills, but the will had to cooperate synergistically with God's grace. Justification was a process, not a forensic declaration and status.

After the Reformation, Protestants continued to develop their thinking about justification. John Owen produced significant work on justification and imputation. He noted that many people may be justified by the imputed righteousness of Christ, even if they misunderstand justification and imputation. Believers may be confused theologically, but in their prayers and in their hearts they know that they can only come to God on the basis of his grace. Faith looks to Christ's accomplished work and trusts in him for the forgiveness of sins. Faith comes from God and obedience and works flow out of it. Owen argued that justification by its nature must be forensic and our works can never make us justified. The imputation of Christ's righteousness is necessary for justification. Our sins were imputed to Christ and his righteousness is imputed to us. Richard Baxter departed from the Reformed view and disagreed with Owen about the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Baxter believed that the forgiveness of sin is found in Christ, but he did not believe that Christ's righteousness is credited to the believer. Faith and works together form the ground for justification on the last day. Francis Turretin represents a mature Reformed view. He held to the Reformed position on justification by faith alone and the imputation of Christ's righteousness. Turretin carefully articulated that works are necessary, but only as the inevitable evidence of saving faith. Therefore nobody can be justified without works, but works are not the grounds for justification.

Some people think that Jonathan Edwards wandered from the Reformed position on justification by faith, but this interpretation is not persuasive. There are passages where Edwards makes it sound as if faith is our righteousness rather than merely instrumental. Edwards does explicitly

assert, however, that our justification is on the basis of Christ's imputed righteousness and not on the basis of our inherent righteousness. In agreement with the Reformation tradition, Edwards argued that faith and good works are inseparably connected. Love is the necessary fruit of faith. Edwards does write that works are necessary for justification, but in context—and in harmony with his other clear statements—it seems that he is asserting that good works are necessary for salvation even though they are not the basis for salvation. Edwards is not precise about the sense in which works are necessary. The same is true of his statements about the necessity of perseverance. There is no justification without perseverance, but perseverance is not the ground for justification. Like Edwards, John Wesley has been interpreted in different ways. Wesley did, though, make many clear statements about his belief in justification by faith alone. Where he was inconsistent was in his view of the imputation of Christ's righteousness. In the final analysis it seems that Wesley did hold to imputation, but he didn't insist on the term, and he spoke against abuses of the doctrine that rendered good works and personal holiness unnecessary.

Chapters 7-9

Human Sin

Faith Alone

Faith in Jesus Christ

The Reformers believed that the “works of the law” were not restricted to the ceremonial law, but the Roman Catholics disagreed. In contemporary theology, the new perspective on Paul is similarly restricting the “works of the law” to the laws that segregated Jews from Gentiles. In other words, Paul is arguing that someone doesn't need to become a Jew in order to be justified. The new perspective is right that Paul rejects the boundary markers of the law that made the Jewish people distinct, but they are unconvincing in their insistence that “works of the law” does not refer to everything in the Mosaic law (which of course includes the boundary markers). Paul in Romans and Galatians shows that the human problem is disobedience to the entire law of God. The law reveals our sin through our disobedience. Paul shows that justification can't be on the basis of our works because we all fall short. Galatians 3:10 explicitly states that those who try to be justified on the basis of the works of the law will be cursed, since relying on the works of the law requires obedience to *everything* in the law. This means that justification can only be by faith in Christ. The Galatians want to be under the entire law, and Paul is objecting that because of our sin, being under the law can't bring salvation. Justification is by faith alone.

We are not saved by the “works of the law” nor are we saved through “works” in general. In Romans, Paul notes that Abraham lived before the law was given, and he was justified by faith rather than works. A sinner like David could never be justified by works. It is the sinful human condition that precludes justification from being based on works. In Philippians 3:2-9 Paul responds to Jewish opponents who are insisting that submission to the law is necessary. He argues that he was as righteous as any under the law (and more than most). Before his conversion he was proud of his ethnic heritage and his moral achievements. As a Christian, however, he could look back and see that his attainments were garbage, filth. His righteousness failed, but

now he was given a righteousness that was apart from the law. Ephesians 2:8-10 clearly teaches that salvation is by grace through faith rather than by works.

The NT teaches that we can't be justified on the basis of works and it just as clearly teaches that we can only be justified by faith. In the Synoptics, physical and spiritual healing comes through faith. Faith is always required for a right relationship with God. It is not works but faith that Jesus teaches is necessary. In the Gospel of John "believing" is pervasive and essential. It is believing in Christ and is necessary for eternal life. Those who do not believe are condemned. Acts makes it clear that Christians are believers and that belief is the only appropriate response to the gospel. Acts also contrasts works and law with faith and grace—the former can't bring salvation but the latter does. In the Pauline corpus, salvation by works is always rejected, and the necessity of grace and faith are put forward as the grounds for justification. The vocabulary of faith and belief is used extensively. Faith looks to God—faith must be in the right object in order to be effective. Saving faith is never alone: it produces obedience.

There is currently a large debate around how to understand the expression "faith of Jesus Christ." Some interpreters favor "the faithfulness of Christ" whereas others favor "faith in Christ." The latter interpretation is correct, but even if the former were accepted, there are so many other passages where the grammar is unambiguous that "faith in Christ" would still be theologically established. Grammatically both renderings are possible and there are arguments in support of each position. The rendering "faith in Christ," however, is consistent with Paul's thought and it also makes the most sense in the contexts in which it is found.

Chapters 10-12

The Importance of Justification in Paul

God's Saving Righteousness

Righteousness is Eschatological

Some scholars are arguing that justification is not central to the thought of Paul. They note that Paul deals with justification in polemical contexts like Romans and Galatians. But Paul is often writing in polemical contexts, and it is inaccurate to suppose that his fullest theological expression in Romans is merely polemical. Furthermore, Paul turns to justification in non-polemical contexts, too. N. T. Wright maintains that justification is not about how someone becomes a Christian, but is rather the declaration that they are a Christian, that they are part of the community of the saved. Some people have made the mistake of making justification the controlling idea of Paul, but nonetheless it is a crucial doctrine. Justification is soteriological, but this of course has ecclesiological implications. It is important to remember that the concept of justification can be present even when the word is not—when we bear this in mind, we can identify many passages where justification is central to Paul's thinking.

In the OT, God's "righteous acts" bring about salvation and deliverance for his people. In some passages, God's "righteousness" is parallel to salvation, faithful love, truth, and justice. God's

righteousness is often tied to salvation. Righteousness is also sometimes used in forensic contexts. God's saving righteousness, then, refers to God vindicating his people and putting them right before the judge. God's saving righteousness is connected to his covenant promises. Righteousness conforms to a moral norm that is established by God on the basis of his character. Failure to meet God's standard brings judgment—God's righteousness is not just salvific, it also stands behind judgment and punishment.

In Paul's thinking, justification is fundamentally eschatological. Future justification is explicit in some texts, but so is past justification. Paul looks forward to the eschatological day of judgment and expects that believers will be in the right on that day in the sight of God. Believers are now justified by faith because they share in Christ's death and resurrection, the latter of which represents God's eschatological verdict on Christ. We are justified when we believe because our faith unites us to an end-times declaration that has already been given. Still, God's public announcement about our status awaits the final day.

Chapters 13-16

Righteousness is Forensic

The Righteousness of God

Imputation of Righteousness

The Role of Good Works in Justification

Although arguments can be adduced in support of the idea that justification is transformative, a forensic interpretation is more persuasive. Judges do not make someone righteous (i.e. transform them) but they declare someone to be righteous. Judges do not make someone guilty or innocent, but they pronounce their legal status. In Job, the forensic meaning is clear, as it is in many passages in the prophets. The OT is the theological matrix in which Paul thinks, and so we are prepared for a forensic meaning in Paul. Not surprisingly, this is what we find in various texts. The verb "justify" is undoubtedly forensic. Sinners are declared righteous not on the basis of keeping the law but rather through faith. Believers are counted righteous because of their faith, through which they receive something that does not belong to them inherently. Being justified connotes a status, not a transformation. This righteous standing is not earned by works. When God condemns people he does not make them wicked—when he justifies them he does not make them righteous.

"The righteousness of God" is one of Paul's most important phrases. Sometimes God's righteousness is simply one of his attributes. His righteousness is seen in both judgment and salvation. God's righteousness is given to believers as a gift—believers receive a righteousness from God, by faith alone. In Romans 1:17, 3:21-22, and 10:3, the phrase refers to the righteousness from God that is given as a free gift. This righteousness is the righteousness of Christ that is imputed to us because of our union with him. N. T. Wright denies that believers have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them. Wright argues that judges do not impart righteousness (or anything else) to those that are on trial. He also notes that the Scriptures never

say that we receive the righteousness of Christ. Wright is joined by Robert Gundry in accepting that our sins are forgiven because of Christ, but in denying that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. The debate about imputation is very nuanced and complex. One key passage is Romans 5:12-19, where we are told that people are sinners because of their union with Adam, and righteous on the basis of their union with Christ. They are righteous because they are in Christ and his righteousness is theirs. Faith is not our righteousness, but it connects us to Christ who is righteous. Faith doesn't save us—Christ, the object of our faith saves us. 2 Corinthians 5:21 teaches that Christ became sin for us so that we could become the righteousness of God. The righteousness of God that we receive is in Christ. In terms of Wright's courtroom objection, it is worth noting that analogies between human courts and God's court can't be pushed to the limit. No other acquittal is based on God's redemptive plan and Christ's vicarious atonement!

The NT teaches that good works are required for final salvation, but this teaching is in harmony with the doctrine of faith alone. James teaches us that a bare faith (i.e. intellectual assent to certain theological propositions) is not enough to save. The demons have this kind of faith. James makes it very clear that real faith is an active, works-producing faith that will be accompanied by fruit. The Parable of the Sower shows that only hearts that receive the word and produce a lasting harvest have genuine faith. The Gospel of John reveals that some people have pseudo-belief that attracts them to Jesus' miracles and power, but they will not receive his teachings and be saved. John's first epistle claims that perseverance is a mark of saving faith. Paul agrees that those who do not persevere do not have genuine faith. John says that faith receives Jesus, obeys Jesus, and abides in Jesus. Those who belong to Christ love him and produce fruit. Salvation is by faith alone, but faith is a life-changing reality. Matthew's Gospel shows that we are judged by our works, but these works issue from faith and are the evidence of it. John maintains that where there is no obedience, love, and righteousness, there is no faith. Paul—who so clearly articulates salvation by grace through faith—clearly states that we are judged by our works. For Paul, without good works one will be condemned, but our good works and love flow from our faith. James and Paul are in fundamental agreement: without works we are not justified, but the works are evidential while our faith is the grounds.

Chapters 17-18

***Sola Fide* and the Roman Catholic Church**

Frank Beckwith's Return to Rome

The Catholic Catechism defines justification as the forgiveness of sins and also as the sanctification of the individual. This position is transformative—justification is making someone righteous rather than declaring them righteous. Human beings cooperate with the grace of God and their merit plays a role in their justification. Justification is a process. The main position taken at Trent has not been changed. In 1999 a joint declaration was issued between the Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. This document does not have binding power in Catholic theology and is subject to revision. It does state that justification is by grace alone and not by our merits, and it also affirms it is by

faith alone. Justification, however, is still taken as a process that makes righteous. Good works are meritorious but they come from God's grace. This declaration shows that some progress has been made, but it is also very ambiguous and capable of different interpretations. Imputation isn't addressed at all, meaning that some can believe that justification is based on an infused righteousness, while others believe it is an imputed, alien righteousness.

Another joint declaration was entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. It affirmed (amongst other things) that justification was by grace through faith in Christ. The Catholic position is that justifying grace is granted at baptism and continues in a sacramental process. J. I. Packer was a prominent evangelical participant in ECT. He acknowledged that there are still significant differences—he says he could never become a Roman Catholic—but that we need wider cooperation. Packer rightly points out that we can be justified even if we misunderstand justification. Nevertheless, the ECT document is much closer to the Catholic than the Reformed position. It is significant that ECT does not state that justification is by faith *alone*. Richard John Neuhaus speaks from the Catholic side and says that the omission of faith alone was intentional and that not all Protestant groups put the same emphasis on that formulation. But the real issue is whether or not the Scriptures teach that justification is by faith alone. Neuhaus sees the doctrine as relatively unimportant and sectarian, but that view just shows how wide the divide really is.

In 2007 Francis Beckwith, an evangelical scholar and president of the Evangelical Theological Society, announced that he was returning to the Roman Catholic Church in which he had been brought up. Beckwith says that the understanding of justification in the Reformers was not the same as in the church fathers, that righteousness is not imputed but infused, and that we are judged based on works (and nowhere are these works said to be merely evidential). Works done by faith contribute to our transformation and future justification. He rejects the Reformed distinction between justification and sanctification. Already in this book the exegetical and theological arguments have been given that answer Beckwith. It is also the case that he is overly simplistic in his reading of church history and that he fails to make proper distinctions between related but separate theological terms.

Chapters 19-21

N.T. Wright and the New Perspective on Paul

New Perspective on Paul: The Sin of Israel and the Rejection of Imputation

A Concluding Word

N. T. Wright is the leading advocate of the new perspective on Paul. He and the new perspective have already been mentioned and critiqued in this book, but we focus on them here. The new perspective maintains that Paul is not dealing with Jewish legalism but rather with Jewish ethnocentrism. Paul teaches that Gentiles do not need to observe Jewish boundary markers in order to belong to the covenant community of the redeemed. Wright argues that good works are part of the final basis for our justification, but what he means by "basis" is vague. He mistakenly

maintains that justification is not as much concerned with soteriology as it is with ecclesiology—it is not about becoming a Christian but about seeing who is a member of the covenant community. Yet multiple passages teach that justification is about being right with God (meaning they are soteriological). Salvation and righteousness have different meanings but they are closely related and are brought together in soteriological contexts. Justification does refer to how we are saved. Wright poses a false dichotomy in his interpretation of Galatians—the truth is that the ecclesiological issues in Galatia were founded on misunderstandings about the soteriology that formed the community. Paul argues that Jews are condemned not for their failure to include Gentiles but for their failure to keep the law of God.

Wright suggests that Israel's primary failure was in regards to its mission to be a blessing to the world. But the OT prophets do not focus on this failure—they focus on Israel's idolatry and sins against God. Israel's primary problem is not that they fail to bless the nations, it is that they are inherently sinful and need the same salvation as the Gentiles. Wright further contends that God does not give us his righteousness in and through Christ. The main points for imputation have already been canvassed in this book, but the highlights are reiterated here. It is critical to see that we are declared righteous because we share in Christ's actual righteousness.

Saving faith is not less than mental assent—it is more. It trusts fully in Christ and totally depends on him. Justification is by faith alone because we can only rely on what God has done for us in Christ. God gives us new power to live a transformed life, but we continue to sin and fall short. Continuing in sin shows us the necessity and wonder of being able to trust fully and only in the righteousness of Christ. The church in history and today, our Christian friends and colleagues, and our own individual struggles with sin show that although God is at work transforming lives, we are still great sinners who can only stand by grace through faith. “I am justified by faith alone, in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone.”

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