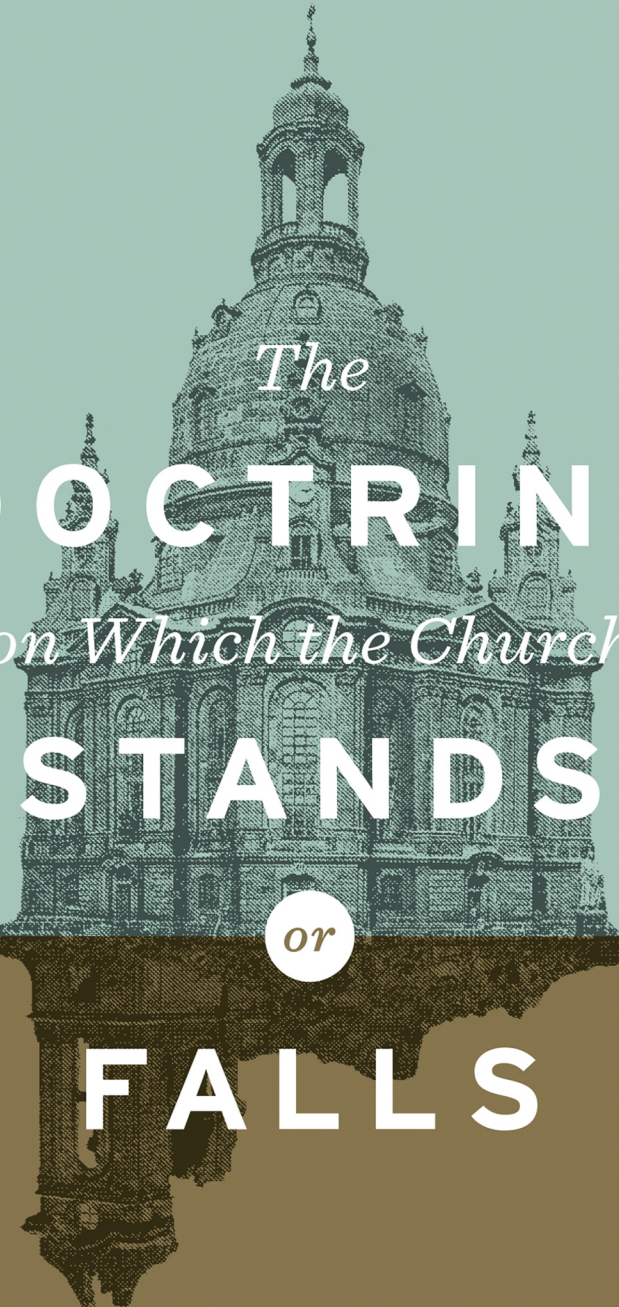


Foreword by D. A. Carson

EDITED BY MATTHEW BARRETT



The
DOCTRINE
on Which the Church
STANDS
or
FALLS

JUSTIFICATION IN BIBLICAL, THEOLOGICAL,
HISTORICAL, AND PASTORAL PERSPECTIVE

“The tide is definitely turning. No longer can it be taken for granted that the New Perspective has the last word on the ‘chief article.’ With essays by specialists in various fields, this volume is a wonderful defense of the gospel, and I heartily recommend it.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Justification* (New Studies in Dogmatics)

“A thoughtful, thorough, and important set of essays on the current ‘state of the union’ on the perennial issue of justification by faith. The introductory essay by Matthew Barrett is worth the price of admission itself—outlining in detail the wide range of biblical-theological issues at stake in the current discussions about the nature of justification, now forty years on from the advent of the New Perspective on Paul. It is hard to imagine a single volume covering virtually every single aspect of the controversy surrounding Protestant—and, to a lesser extent, Roman Catholic—scholarship on the doctrine, but this large collection of essays comes very close. This volume reflects well a core conviction throughout Reformed Protestantism that the Word must be heard afresh in every generation, most especially because it is the Word of Life. This book takes seriously and graciously the voices of opposition. If you want to dive deep into the doctrine of justification, this volume ought to be at the top of your list.”

Richard Lints, Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“*The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* is a sterling contribution to a biblically informed, theologically deep, historically sensitive, and pastorally astute engagement with the doctrine of justification by faith alone—*sola fide*. Controversies past and present relating to the doctrine are deftly explored, whether it is the Council of Trent on view or the New Perspective on Paul or the apocalyptic reading of Paul. An invaluable resource and stimulus to careful thought about a crucial doctrine provided by a galaxy of eminently able scholars.”

Graham A. Cole, Dean, Senior Vice President for Education, and Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Into a world literally hell-bent on self-justification through better performance, the biblical doctrine of justification of sinners through faith in Jesus Christ brings a refreshing, ever re-creating breeze. In this volume, twenty-seven essays examine this doctrine from exegetical, systematic, historical, and practical perspectives. The authors stimulate readers to return to the rich resources of Scripture and enable them to proclaim God’s way of restoring sinners to their God-given relationship with their Creator. This volume provides readers with insights mined from the Bible and from the pastoral needs of people today, aiding personal reflection and material for bringing the saving presence of Christ into everyday life.”

Robert Kolb, Emeritus Professor of Systematic Theology, Concordia Seminary

“The breadth and depth of this new work on justification is quite astonishing. An array of scholars from various backgrounds assess the biblical witness, the theological profile, the historical backdrop, and the pastoral application of justification. A most impressive achievement.”

Thomas R. Schreiner, James Buchanan Harrison Professor of New Testament Interpretation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“We’ve just celebrated the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and at the same time have passed through about fifty years of questioning (and reformulation) of the classic Reformation doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This makes *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* timely indeed. As someone who has been engaged in both the academic and ecclesiastical defense of the historic Reformation doctrine, I welcome this sturdy volume. I have already learned much from the authors and will return to this book again as a resource as I continue to explain and address this crucial topic.”

J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellor, CEO, and John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

“With a distinguished cast of scholars representing a wide range of competencies and traditions, this book ices the cake of the five hundredth anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. Not only are the biblical data (Old and New Testaments) and Second Temple writings thoroughly covered, topics like the New Perspective, justification in Patristic writings, the Reformation, Roman Catholic teaching on justification, and justification since the rise of the Enlightenment all come under careful scrutiny. No new book can be declared a classic. Yet in an era when post-Christian Westerners—even in the church—have tended to devalue doctrine in exchange for the worship of experience, this book’s timely and skilled affirmations of doctrine generally and justification in particular make it a contender for classic status in coming years. It will not only inform but reinvigorate all careful readers desiring to plumb the depths of justification’s priceless truth.”

Robert W. Yarbrough, Professor of New Testament, Covenant Theological Seminary

“Thoroughly rooted in Scripture and classical Protestant theology, the essayists in *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* passionately and accessibly demonstrate the truth manifest in the classical Reformers’ commendation of the doctrine of justification by grace alone: God imputes Christ’s righteousness to sinners for Jesus’s sake. In light of current obfuscations of this doctrine from so many quarters—misplaced ecumenism, liberal Protestantism, and faulty exegesis—this book is a welcome, indeed vital, resource for all gospel preachers and teachers. This volume promises to carry forward the achievements of the Reformers beyond the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation to future generations.”

Mark Mattes, Department Chair and Professor of Theology and Philosophy, Grand View University

“Justification is ‘the heart of the matter,’ as Luther called it in his debate with Erasmus. Faith, church, and theology all depend on this doctrine. This topic thus needs attention and—although it sounds odd—deserves a great book like this one edited by Matthew Barrett. The wide spectrum of issues surrounding justification is opened up by a team of top scholars and is written down in a clear and sound biblical style. This book is a very helpful guide for students and pastors but will also help the Christian church rediscover why there is a church and what her core business is all about.”

Herman Selderhuis, Professor of Church History, Theological University Apeldoorn; Director, Refo500

“The doctrine of justification by faith alone was not invented by the Reformers of the sixteenth century, but it was the centerpiece of their program to renew the church on the basis of the Word of God. It remains no less crucial today. I welcome this new collection of essays—scholarly, substantial, engaging—which moves the discussion forward in a helpful way.”

Timothy George, Dean, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University; general editor, Reformation Commentary on Scripture

“*The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* is a robust survey of the doctrine of justification. Assembled is an outstanding team of scholars and pastors whose research and reflection afford rich fare to readers hungering to know more of the grace of justification. Whether you want to know more of the doctrine’s foundations in biblical teaching, the relationship of justification to other theological doctrines, the ways in which the doctrine has been formulated throughout the history of the church, the ancient and modern controversies and disagreements concerning the doctrine, or justification’s implications for Christian life and ministry, you will find yourself informed and challenged by the servings of this volume. *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* is nothing less than a full-course meal, well served. *Bon appétit!*”

Guy Prentiss Waters, James M. Baird Jr. Professor of New Testament, Reformed Theological Seminary

“How can a person be right with God? In this stellar, well-conceived volume, the contributors’ collective answer to this question is, ‘One is right with God only by trusting in the righteousness of another, namely, in the sinless substitute, Christ Jesus, alone’—the ‘great exchange.’ In this, they stand in a powerful biblical and historical tradition, as the volume amply demonstrates. Highly recommended!”

Andreas J. Köstenberger, Director of the Center for Biblical Studies and Research Professor of New Testament and Biblical Theology, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Founder, Biblical Foundations

“Obscuring the doctrine of justification has been one of the devil’s most effective weapons against the church. This landmark study calls us back to a God-glorifying, loving, missional faith in the God who justifies. As justification depends on and determines so much of life and theology, it is only fitting that this book so ably incorporates wide-ranging exegesis, church history, doctrine, and pastoralia. I warmly commend it to all who wish to be better equipped for life and ministry.”

Peter Sanlon, Director of Training, The Free Church of England

“Intrinsic to the heart of the Protestant tradition is the confession of justification by faith alone. Rooted in the Reformation response to the faith-and-works orientation of the basis of salvation, this doctrine has been rightly seen as utterly biblical. Matthew Barrett also knows that this core doctrine of true Christianity can never be taken for granted—hence this excellent treatment of what this doctrine entails and how it relates to other areas of the Christian life. Warmly recommended.”

Michael A. G. Haykin, Professor of Church History and Biblical Spirituality, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“In *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls*, Matthew Barrett and more than twenty other capable and gifted thinkers have offered a thorough and persuasive case for the doctrine of justification by grace through faith. Exploring this vital theological concept from the perspective of the Hebrew Scriptures, the teaching of the New Testament, and the history of Christian doctrine, as well as from the vantage point of systematic and pastoral theology, the authors offer a comprehensive and symphonic chorus for readers of this outstanding volume. The exposition, explication, and application of this essential Christian teaching found in this impressive book should become essential reading for theologians, biblical scholars, pastors, students, and interested laypersons. Barrett is to be commended and congratulated for putting together this much-needed work at this important time.”

David S. Dockery, President, Trinity International University / Trinity Evangelical Divinity School

“Since justification by grace alone through faith alone on account of Christ alone is truly that doctrine on which Christ’s church stands or falls, this wonderful doctrine cannot be studied enough or too deeply. Barrett has assembled a solid group of faithful and first-rate scholars to tackle this subject from biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral perspectives. While some ask the question, ‘Why the Reformation?’ this volume provides the answer. This is the doctrine by which the church stands or falls because this doctrine is the gospel! A feast awaits the reader.”

Kim Riddlebarger, Senior Pastor, Christ Reformed Church, Anaheim, California

“Looking at this substantial work, the expression ‘kid in a candy store’ comes to mind—at least if the candy you seek is a thorough, in-depth, sophisticated, and biblically faithful treatment of the doctrine of justification. I commend Matthew Barrett for assembling a team of exceedingly competent biblical scholars, church historians, and theologians who have canvassed this enormously important doctrine from multiple angles, theoretical and practical. I highly recommend this book to scholars and pastors alike who are looking for the latest thinking on justification from an orthodox Protestant perspective. This book has it all!”

Alan W. Gomes, Professor of Theology, Talbot School of Theology; Senior Research Fellow,
Phoenix Seminary

The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls

Justification in Biblical, Theological,
Historical, and Pastoral Perspective

Edited by Matthew Barrett

Foreword by D. A. Carson

The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls: Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective

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Note on the cover: The cover depicts the Frauenkirche in Dresden, once rooted in the Reformation theology of Luther but later compromised by its defense of Nazi Germany. The top image portrays the church as it stood before World War II and the bottom image, after it had fallen during the Allied offensive on the city.

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Foreword

D. A. CARSON

The title of this book, *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls*, referring to justification, has been an axiom in Protestant circles since the time of Luther; the subtitle, *Justification in Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Pastoral Perspective*, indicates the scope of the project, fully justifying (that word again!) its nine-hundred-page heft.

Many, of course, have vigorously challenged the claim that justification is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. After all, they say, justification is primarily a Pauline notion, and even then, it is very unevenly distributed in the Pauline corpus. Some argue that reconciliation is more central to Paul than is justification. Moreover, justification is not central to the Synoptics or to the Johannine corpus. Hebrews is more interested in priestly notions of sacrifice than in the forensic categories of justification. What about the Old Testament? A large part of it is made up (it is alleged) of Deuteronomistic theology, which is certainly not pulsing to vindicate justification by grace alone through faith alone. Even if one could make a case for the centrality of justification at the time of the Protestant Reformation, isn't that because of the particular focus of the most contested points in the sixteenth century? But in the fourth century the focus of debate was Christology; in the eighteenth century it was the nature and locus of revelation. So doesn't it follow, then, that a fixation on justification betrays both a misunderstanding of Scripture and a hopelessly naive and reductionistic reading of historical theology?

So the first place to reenter the debate, then, is to review afresh what Scripture says. Here it is important not to focus undue attention on "righteousness" words (as important as they are): the central question is how human beings this side of Genesis 3 can be brought back to the holy God who is their Maker, Redeemer, and Judge. Not surprisingly, then, this book devotes several substantial chapters to probing this theme in the Old and New Testaments, beginning with the Pentateuch, the Psalms and Wisdom Literature, and the Prophets. Words have not been ignored: one writer unpacks Romans by arguing that in this epistle "the righteous God righteously righteouses the unrighteous," thereby indicating his understanding of Romans 3:21–26 while hinting at the challenges of translation (and not leaving much scope for Ernst Käsemann either).

Competent probes examine the justification theme in the Gospels and in James; two chapters evaluate the “New Perspective” and its aftermath. One could wish for more; nevertheless, one must applaud the choices that were made.

Part of the problem with the debates over the significance of justification is that they have often been conducted in atomistic fashion—that is, various doctrines have been enumerated, and then several questions are posed: Which individual doctrines surface most frequently in the biblical texts? Comparing them two or three at a time, which one is the most important, once all the comparisons have been made? This approach is fundamentally misguided. The Bible is not to be treated like a theological smorgasbord, where all the offerings are presented on separate platters, each dish inviting individual evaluation. The Bible invites—indeed, it demands—appropriate theological integration. How is justification tied to the atonement and to the resurrection of Jesus (“raised for our justification,” Paul says)? What other Christological emphases, apart from Jesus’s death and resurrection, are tied to justification? Can one sustain a robust grasp of justification without a reflective grasp of the active and passive obedience of Christ? How are justification and faith properly tied together? Justification and sanctification? (And in this case, one must specify whether one means “sanctification” in the dominant Pauline sense or in the dominant confessional sense: the latter is narrower than the former.) How is justification related to the law, to the new covenant, to union with Christ, to eschatology? What ties these doctrines together? Does any other doctrinal element tie together such disparate theological loci in quite the way justification does? Don’t such realities expose the artificiality of arguments that deploy mere counting techniques to relegate justification to some inferior role in the constellation of biblical theology?

Indeed, there is a bigger theological issue at stake, a worldview issue, one that is hinted at in two of the essays in this book. Consider the various forms of Buddhism. Strictly speaking, Buddhism does not confess a personal, transcendent God with whom one must be reconciled. The notion of justification is entirely alien to it. Hinduism does not envisage a *telos* to which history is rushing. It depicts cyclical patterns in which individuals hop on and off the eternal spiral (“up” or “down”). Neither of these perspectives envisages the *summum bonum*, the supreme good, to be the deep knowledge of the holy and transcendent God, personally knowing him and being known by him, both in time and in eternity, which anticipation drives the question, How can a man be just before God? Nor does the contemporary Western passion for self-definition and self-chosen identity fuss very much about whether there is a God to whom we must render account. But if we are dealing with the God of the Bible, to know this God who is there and to enjoy him forever depend utterly on whether or not this God declares us *just* before him. If he does not, we are damned. If he does, we are saved. In other words, justification is a category that is tied to a particular worldview, the biblical worldview. We claim that this worldview, in which the biblical content explains how God’s rebellious image bearers may be reconciled to their Maker by means of the sacrifice God himself has provided through the death and resurrection of his Son, is not merely “true

for us” because we have accepted it as true but is *true*, and therefore hugely important. We cannot dismiss it without breaking ourselves on it: we will give an answer to this God. Thus our status before God, our justification, is of fundamental significance; it is the “ground of religion” (as one writer in this book has put it); it is the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. It is a worldview question.

As for the historical argument that justification has not always had the controlling importance it had in the sixteenth century, well, that much at least is true. But that’s a different matter from deciding whether it *should* have had greater importance in any particular age. The existential importance of a doctrine in a particular century often turns on what is most disputed, what is most denied (and therefore affirmed by others)—not by the fundamentally systemic question about whether the church lives and dies, stands or falls, by a particular complex theological construction. The essays in the historical section of this volume helpfully explore what was understood about justification in the Patristic era, how that understanding evolved in the medieval traditions, and how it broke out in the Reformation and beyond. Precisely *because* it was most heavily disputed at the time of the Reformation, more clarifying attention was devoted to it.

The issues treated in this important volume are not only confessional, then, but have to do with our well-being both in this life and in the life to come. They have to do with God and our relationship to him; they turn on what the gospel is, how human beings may be right with God. Nothing, nothing at all, is more important than such matters.

Abbreviations

AB	Anchor Bible
ABR	<i>Australian Biblical Review</i>
ACT	Ancient Christian Texts
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AnBib	Analecta Biblica
ANF	<i>Ante-Nicene Fathers</i> . Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. 1885–1896. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985–1987.
ARG	<i>Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte</i>
ASBT	Acadia Studies in Bible and Theology
ATDan	Acta Theologica Danica
AThR	<i>Anglican Theological Review</i>
BBM	Baker Biblical Monograph
BCCT	Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition
BCR	Biblioteca di cultura religiosa
BDAG	Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.
BDF	Blass, Friedrich, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk. <i>A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature</i> . Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
BHR	Bibliotheca Humanistica et Reformatorica
BJRL	<i>Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester</i>
BNTC	Black's New Testament Commentaries
BOC	<i>The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church</i> . Edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000.
BRS	Biblical Resource Series
BSCH	Brill's Series in Church History

BTCP	Biblical Theology for Christian Proclamation
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
BZNW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBET	Contributions to Biblical Exegesis and Theology
CCR	Cambridge Companions to Religion
CCT	Contours of Christian Theology
CGTC	Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary
<i>Chm</i>	<i>Churchman</i>
CLRC	Courtenay Library of Reformation Classics
ConBOT	Coniectanea Biblica: Old Testament Series
COQG	Christian Origins and the Question of God
CR	<i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> . Edited by C. G. Bretschneider and H. E. Bindseil. Halle and Brunswick: Schwetschke, 1834–1860.
CS	<i>Christianity and Society</i>
CSMLT	Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought
CTHP	Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CTQ	<i>Concordia Theological Quarterly</i>
CurTM	<i>Currents in Theology and Mission</i>
CV	<i>Communio Viatorum</i>
DBSJ	<i>Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal</i>
DHWC	Documentary History of Western Civilization
DSD	<i>Dead Sea Discoveries</i>
EC	<i>Early Christianity</i>
EJL	Early Judaism and Its Literature
Eng.	English
ERT	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>
<i>EuroJTh</i>	<i>European Journal of Theology</i>
EUSLR	Emory University Studies in Law and Religion
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>EvT</i>	<i>Evangelische Theologie</i>
FAT	Forschungen zum Alten Testament
FR	<i>Fac-Réflexions</i>
FRLANT	Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments
GH	Gorgias Handbooks
HBT	<i>Horizons in Biblical Theology</i>
HS	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>

HThKNT	Herders Theologischer Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IJST	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
Int	<i>Interpretation</i>
ITQ	<i>Irish Theological Quarterly</i>
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JBQ	<i>Jewish Bible Quarterly</i>
JES	<i>Jonathan Edwards Studies</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JR	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
JSJ	<i>Journal for the Study of Judaism</i>
JSJSup	Supplements to the Journal for the Study of Judaism
JSNT	<i>Journal for the Study of the New Testament</i>
JSNTSup	Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series
JTISup	Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplements
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
KEK	Kritisch-exegetischer Kommentar über das Neue Testament
KNTTM	Kommentar zum Neuen Testament aus Talmud und Midrasch
LCC	Library of Christian Classics
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
LEH	Library of Ecclesiastical History
LF	<i>Lutheran Forum</i>
LHBOTS	The Library of Hebrew Bible / Old Testament Studies
LNTS	Library of New Testament Studies
LQ	<i>Lutheran Quarterly</i>
LSJ	Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> . 9th ed. with revised supplement. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996.
LW	Luther, Martin. <i>Luther's Works</i> . Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan, Helmut T. Lehmann, and Christopher Brown. American ed. 82 vols. (projected). Philadelphia: Fortress; Saint Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–.
LXX	Septuagint
MAS	Middle Ages Series
MJT	<i>Mid-America Journal of Theology</i>
MNTC	Moffatt New Testament Commentary
MST	Mediaeval Sources in Translation
MT	Masoretic Text

NAC	New American Commentary
NACSBT	NAC Studies in Bible and Theology
NIBC	New International Biblical Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
<i>NIDNTT</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology</i> . Edited by Colin Brown. 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1975–1978.
<i>NIDOTTE</i>	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i> . Edited by Willem A. VanGemeren. 5 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1997.
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NIVAC	NIV Application Commentary
<i>NovT</i>	<i>Novum Testamentum</i>
<i>NPNF1</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . 1st ser. Edited by Philip Schaff. 1886–1890. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1956.
<i>NPNF2</i>	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> . 2nd ser. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. 1890–1900. Reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987.
NPP	New Perspective on Paul
NSBT	New Studies in Biblical Theology
NSD	New Studies in Dogmatics
NTOA	Novum Testamentum et Orbis Antiquus
<i>NTS</i>	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
NTSI	New Testament and the Scriptures of Israel
OBT	Overtures to Biblical Theology
OSHT	Oxford Studies in Historical Theology
ÖTKNT	Ökumenischer Taschenbuch-Kommentar zum Neuen Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTM	Oxford Theological Monographs
PBM	Paternoster Biblical Monographs
PBT	Piccola biblioteca teologica
<i>PE</i>	<i>Pro Ecclesia</i>
PL	Patrologia Latina (or Patrologiae Cursus Completus: Series Latina). Edited by Jacques-Paul Migne. 217 vols. Paris, 1844–1864.
PNTC	Pillar New Testament Commentary
PPS	Popular Patristics Series
QD	Quaestiones Disputatae

RAS	Refo500 Academic Studies
RD	Religions and Discourse
REC	Reformed Expository Commentary
REDS	Reformed, Exegetical and Doctrinal Studies
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>
RFN	Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit
RHT	Reformed Historical Theology
RHTS	Reformed Historical-Theological Studies
<i>RRef</i>	<i>La Revue Réformée</i>
<i>RRJ</i>	<i>Reformation and Revival Journal</i>
<i>RRR</i>	<i>Reformation and Renaissance Review</i>
<i>RTR</i>	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
RTRSup	Reformed Theological Review, Supplement Series
<i>SBJT</i>	<i>Southern Baptist Journal of Theology</i>
SBLMS	Society of Biblical Literature Monograph Series
SBLSS	Society of Biblical Literature Symposium Series
SCBC	<i>Sources and Contexts of the Book of Concord</i> . Edited by Robert Kolb and James A. Nestingen. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001.
SCES	Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies
SCHT	Studies in Christian History and Thought
<i>SCJ</i>	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
<i>SdT</i>	<i>Studi di teologia</i>
SFSHJ	South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism
SHCT	Studies in the History of Christian Thought
SHCTr	Studies in the History of Christian Traditions
<i>SJT</i>	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
SMRT	Studies in Medieval and Reformation Thought
SNTSMS	Society for New Testament Studies Monograph Series
SP	Sacra Pagina
SSBT	Short Studies in Biblical Theology
STR	Studies in Theology and Religion
SubBi	Subsidia Biblica
SUNT	Studien zur Umwelt des Neuen Testaments
TB	Theologische Bücherei: Neudrucke und Berichte aus dem 20. Jahrhundert
<i>TDNT</i>	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i> . Edited by Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964–1976.
TGST	Tesi Gregoriana, Serie Teologia

<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
THR	Travaux d'humanisme et Renaissance
<i>TJ</i>	<i>Trinity Journal</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
TOTC	Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries
TSRPRT	Texts and Studies in Reformation and Post-Reformation Thought
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
UT	Universo teologia
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Supplements to <i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
WA	<i>D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe</i> . 73 vols. Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1883–2009.
WABr	<i>D. Martin Luthers Werke, Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Briefwechsel</i> . 18 vols. Weimar: Hermann Böhlhaus Nachfolger, 1930–1983.
WARF	Westminster Assembly and the Reformed Faith
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament
WSAMA	Walberberger Studien der Albertus-Magnus-Akademie
<i>WTJ</i>	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>
WUNT	Wissenschaftliche Untersuchungen zum Neuen Testament
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
ZNW	<i>Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche</i>

Introduction

The Foolishness of Justification

MATTHEW BARRETT

How can a person be right with God? Few questions have so vigorously arrested the attention of the Protestant church. From this one question was birthed the Reformation itself, forever changing the way Christians interpreted Scripture, perceived a holy God, and applied the mediating work of Christ. From this one question, evangelicals—as the Reformers were first called—were forced to reconsider the relationship between redemption accomplished and redemption applied. If the obedience and sacrifice of Christ was sufficient, then no longer could one’s merits in any way contribute to one’s right standing with God. One is right with God only by trusting (*sola fide*) in the righteousness of another, namely, in the sinless substitute, Christ Jesus, alone (*solus Christus*).

The Covenant of Creation and Federal Headship

To articulate the doctrine of justification, one naturally must move from drama to doctrine. Justification is positioned within the Spirit’s variegated application of redemption, the order of salvation (*ordo salutis*), yet it stems from and is inseparably tied to the objective and historic work of Jesus Christ (*historia salutis*). In the beginning, our triune God created the world good, a goodness that reflected his inherent, immutable, eternal, and ethical holiness. The unstained beauty of his righteousness was manifested in the original state of the created order, which he declared good from the start.

Nowhere did such goodness reside with conspicuous radiance than in man and woman, for they alone were made in the image of their Creator (Gen. 1:27). While they were created to enjoy communion with their Creator, that *imago Dei* and the communion it promised were put to the test when God presented Adam and Eve with certain covenant stipulations that would define his loving, personal relationship with them

(2:16–17). This covenant at creation placed before the first couple life eternal if they would listen, trust, and obey.¹ Never would the tree of life be far from their lips if they would not stray from the benevolence of their covenant Maker.

Yet such covenant stipulations also threatened death, physical as well as spiritual, should they defy their Maker, rebel against his commands, defile the purity of his Edenic temple, and elevate their autonomy in the treason of idolatry. The tragedy of Genesis 3 is just such a transgression. Yet such a transgression was disastrous not for them alone but for the entire human race to come. As Paul tells the church in Rome (Rom. 5:12–21), Adam represented mankind, so that his transgression against the covenant of creation resulted in his guilt and corruption being imputed to his progeny. Adam’s federal headship was legal in every sense of the word, so that all his children stood condemned in him. His guilt and condemnation thus resulted in a nature polluted by sin, so that no one after him was exempt from those sinful inclinations rooted deep within human nature. The fall of Adam was the fall of humanity because all people share covenant solidarity with their first father. Physical death was the most immediate consequence: “In Adam all die” (1 Cor. 15:22). However, death goes beyond the flesh, a visual parallel to the spiritual death within: “You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked” (Eph. 2:1–2).

Theologians of Glory or the Crucified Lord of Glory?

Although it may seem odd that Adam is rarely mentioned in the drama that unfolds, humanity’s solidarity with him is glaringly present with each new Adam. God’s promise to raise up an offspring of the woman that would redeem the children of Adam became increasingly urgent with each new misstep east of Eden. The depravity rooted in man’s nature was so pervasive that it took little time at all for humanity collectively to hold up its fist in the air, screaming out in defiance against God. From Adam to Cain, from the flood to Babel, and from Sodom to Israel’s exile, the history of humanity can be summed up concisely: in Adam, man strives to justify himself. Theologians of glory, to borrow from Martin Luther, will always build a tower into the heavens as if they can climb their way up into glory and claim the throne of the one who made them. “Let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4) is their battle cry, and the history of mankind from Adam to Israel is full of judicial bloodshed since no man stands righteous before him whose justice knows no imperfection: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men” (Rom. 1:18).

Israel should be the exception to this tragedy, but unfortunately, she is the exemplar. God’s special, called-out covenant people were even given the law, the constitution of the covenant written on tablets of stone by the very finger of God, revealing to them exactly how they could live in communion with him. As perfect as that law was, the children

1. For a more detailed description of the covenant of creation, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, “The Covenant with Creation in Genesis 1–3,” chap. 6 in *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

of Abraham were still children of Adam, plagued by the same evil desires. Not even supernatural liberation from Egypt could keep this people from prostituting themselves in idolatry. As long as Israel remained in Adam, it would jump at the first opportunity to act on the corruption within and break the covenant its God had so graciously made in the first place. Such idolatry resulted in physical death but also, worse still, spiritual condemnation. No Israelite could obey the law perfectly; no Israelite would obey the law flawlessly. Under the law came judgment. In that sense, “all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one’” (Rom. 3:9–10; cf. Ps. 14:1–3). Naturally, Paul could conclude, “For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

Yet when all the world had gone astray, divine light shined bright into a dark madness. That light was none other than Jesus Christ (John 1:9; 8:12; 2 Cor. 4:3–6). Predicted by the prophets, foreshadowed in Israel’s array of types, the offspring of the woman had at long last arrived to redeem Adam’s fallen race. Finally, those in Adam could find redemption—in Christ, the last Adam. As announced at his birth, his name is Jesus, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matt. 1:21). Clarifying the single passion of his divinely ordained mission, Jesus declared, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10). Or as Matthew’s Gospel stresses, the Son of God himself had become incarnate and tabernacled among his people (Matt. 1:23), fully intending in the end to give his life as “a ransom for many” (20:28). “I have not come to call the righteous,” Jesus proclaimed, “but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32).

Unthinkable, however, was the *means* by which the Son of Man would accomplish such a salvation. The Lord of glory would be crucified (1 Cor. 2:8). He did not climb Babel into the heavens but descended from the heavens to endure the death Babel’s citizens deserved. To succeed in his Father’s eyes, he would have to fail in the eyes of the world.

From Eternal Son to Last Adam: Covenant of Redemption, Recapitulation, and Active Obedience

Jesus did not believe, however, that his mission was accidental; rather, his mission was from his Father. Turning to the Gospel of John, theologians have long observed that the Son’s salvific mission stemmed from an eternal, intra-Trinitarian covenant, one that defines the soteriological intentions of the economic Trinity.² As the one eternally generated by the Father, the Son voluntarily accepted the Father’s plan of redemption. The Son became the surety of this *pactum salutis*, a *pactum* that commissioned the Son to secure the eternal destiny of God’s elect.

2. See John Owen, *The Mystery of the Gospel Vindicated*, in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold, vol. 12, *The Gospel Defended* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991), 497; J. V. Fesko, *The Covenant of Redemption: Origins, Development, and Reception*, RHT 35 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2015), 15; Fesko, *The Trinity and the Covenant of Redemption* (Fearn, Ross-Shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2016); Matthew Barrett, *40 Questions about Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2018), 68–70; Scott R. Swain, “Covenant of Redemption,” in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 107–25.

In the economy of salvation, this *pactum salutis* is assumed in the many ways Jesus reveals that his mission is not his own but comes directly from his Father: “For the works that the Father has given me to accomplish, the very works that I am doing, bear witness about me that the Father has sent me” (John 5:36). Again, Jesus says,

For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. (6:38–40)

As Jesus approaches the cross, his High Priestly Prayer to his Father reveals the same:

I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do. . . .

I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you. For I have given them the words that you gave me, and they have received them and have come to know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you sent me. (17:4–8)

What are these “works” (5:36) that the Father has sent his Son to accomplish? Evangelicals have been quick to answer that question by turning to the cross. That is a biblical instinct yet one that needs some nuance lest the whole life of Christ be considered irrelevant to the Son’s mission. If Jesus is the second Adam (Romans 5), then it is not only his death but also his whole life that is redemptive in nature. Here the church father Irenaeus is insightful, reminding Gospel readers that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, in all their diverse emphases, agree that the Son recapitulates the work of Adam and Israel but with an entirely different outcome than what Adam and Israel achieved. His mission is not only to die on behalf of sinners but to live on their behalf as well. Adam failed to obey, to fulfill the stipulations of the covenant at creation, but the Son listens to his Father, fulfilling every covenant stipulation so that those in Christ will eat from the tree of life eternally. If the first Adam failed to uphold the covenant of creation, the second Adam will establish a new covenant ratified not only by his sacrificial blood but in and through his obedience. Not only has he come to suffer and pay Adam’s debt, but as Jesus reveals at his own baptism, he has also come to “fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). Such righteousness by the last Adam matches the state of the first Adam even before the fall. Prior to Genesis 3, Adam was not only characterized by the absence of sin but was simultaneously defined by the presence of an original righteousness.³ The fall, therefore, not only introduced the presence of sin, and with it sin’s penalty (death), but also resulted in the loss of that original righteousness. Nevertheless, in Christ not only is such a penalty paid, but also righteousness is gained.

3. J. V. Fesko, *Justification: Understanding the Classic Reformed Doctrine* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2008), 152.

Adam is not the only one Christ recapitulates in his obedience. Israel could not, and indeed would not, keep the law at Sinai, but Jesus enters the scene as the true Israel, an obedient son, born under the law, so that he might fulfill the law for all those to be adopted into the family of Abraham (Gal. 4:3–5). Jesus recapitulates the history of Israel when he is driven into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil (Matt. 4:1). Israel's forty years of wandering are pictured in Jesus fasting forty days and nights (4:2). But this time, when the tempter comes, the true Israel does not fall down to worship the devil in exchange for the world's glory; instead, he rebukes Satan—"Be gone, Satan!" He knows what "is written" by his Father, and in every temptation, he stands by his Father's word (4:10). Yet such temptations are necessary. Only if Christ is "tempted as we are" but is "without sin" can Adam's children "with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (Heb. 4:15–16). Throughout the ministry of Jesus, then, it would prove necessary for Christ to learn "obedience through what he suffered" so that he might become "the source of eternal salvation" (5:8–9).

For Christ, the covenant of redemption and the covenant of creation are not unrelated in his act of recapitulation. "When we place the person and work of Christ in the context of the covenant of redemption (*pactum salutis*)," says Michael Horton, "we underscore his identity as the eternal Son, and in the context of the covenant of creation, his identity as the second Adam."⁴ We might also add that it is only because he is the eternal Son that he can be sent by the Father to fulfill the covenant of creation as the second Adam. How necessary, too, since Adam's children need not only forgiveness, for breaking the law, but also righteousness, for failing to uphold the law. Apart from the eternal Son of God's incarnational active obedience as the last Adam, the justification of the ungodly is an impossibility; the covenant of redemption is void.⁵

The Form of a Servant and the Price of Liberation

As critical as recapitulation is for the fulfillment of the covenant of redemption and the justification of the ungodly, such recapitulation is designed to accompany the passive obedience that Christ endures by his suffering. His suffering does not start at the cross, however, but pervades his entire life. "From the time he took on the form of a servant," Calvin asserts, "he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us."⁶

Nevertheless, it is at the cross that his whole life of suffering is brought to its culmination. At the cross Christ dies to make atonement, and such an atonement is penal to the core. The eternal Son of God has become incarnate not only to fulfill all righteousness as the last Adam but also to endure Adam's penalty for breaking the commands of his covenant Maker. Such a penalty is deserved by all those in Adam. For not only has the guilt of Adam's sin been imputed to his progeny, but also, because of the corrupt

4. Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 171–72.

5. For a full presentation of active obedience, see chap. 14, by Brandon Crowe, in this volume. Also see his book *The Last Adam: A Theology of the Obedient Life of Jesus in the Gospels* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017).

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1957), 2.16.5.

nature that every child of Adam has received as a result, every person has acted corruptly, defying his or her Creator. Since we are curved in, entertaining the idols of our adulterous hearts, our guilt and condemnation increase. But even one transgression against the loving and personal God who made us would justify his wrath for eternity. Those outside Christ disagree, believing their sin to be of little consequence. Yet that is only because they compare their sin with that of other transgressors, as if the scales of justice turned on the horizontal plane. In Scripture, justice hangs vertically. On the last day, God will not divide the righteous from the wicked by contrasting whether one is as wicked as his or her neighbor; rather, each person will stand trial before God's infinite holiness and the beauty of his impeccable righteousness.

Positioned against God himself, no one will be able to excuse himself or herself but will realize that every single idolatrous thought deserves the unending wrath of retributive justice. Nevertheless, those in Christ fear no such wrath. For the Son of God himself has stepped down from the heavens and become incarnate, and "being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8). As much as the cross showcases the penal nature of Christ's suffering, even there Christ is active in his obedience to the Father. As Jesus prays after agonizing over the cup he is to drink, "Not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42).

Drinking the cup was, as Jesus himself testifies, to fulfill the Scriptures. As foretold by Isaiah, the suffering servant is a "man of sorrows" (Isa. 53:3):

Surely he has borne our griefs
 and carried our sorrows;
 yet we esteemed him stricken,
 smitten by God, and afflicted.
 But he was pierced for our transgressions;
 he was crushed for our iniquities;
 upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace,
 and with his wounds we are healed. (53:4–5)

Isaiah has no hesitation interpreting such suffering in forensic categories. Transgressions, iniquities—these are the legal barriers that make justification an impossibility, that is, unless this man of sorrows is qualified and willing to be pierced for our lawbreaking, crushed for our hideous injustices.

The representation evident in this wrath-bearing substitute is foreshadowed by the prophets but brought into full view by the apostles. John, who is no stranger to the priestly, sacrificial language Jesus used in his Gospel, writes in his first letter, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10; cf. 2:2). The author of Hebrews, whose entire letter revolves around the priestly office of Christ, can similarly say, "Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17). As one would expect,

such vernacular is not foreign to Paul either, who confesses Jesus to be the one “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Rom. 3:25). In case one doubts that Paul’s use of “propitiation” is rooted in the justice of God, Paul then concludes, “This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins” (3:25).

Despite ongoing controversy over the atonement, the New Testament is clear, especially in its use of the Old Testament, that Christ redeems by substituting himself for sinners and absorbing the wrath they deserve as a punishment for their sins. That affirmation does not preclude other biblical atonement motifs but makes them possible in the first place. The reason, for example, that Christ is victorious over the evil powers is because he has taken away the power Satan has over man, namely, the penalty of sin itself. By paying the sinner’s debt, Christ liberates the sinner from Satan’s accusation. Only by Christ’s suffering the penalty of divine judgment is Satan stripped of his weapons of mass destruction; only by Christ’s drinking the cup of wrath in full in our place is Satan relinquished of his condemning power. Even the resurrection, which is the ultimate signal of Satan’s demise, is grounded in the payment for sin. By raising Christ from the dead, the Father is essentially announcing to the whole world that he is fully satisfied with the payment offered at the cross by his own Son. Jesus cries, “It is finished,” as he breathes his last, but when he breathes resurrection air on the third day, it is the Father, now, who shouts, “It is finished.” The resurrection is the vindication of Christ, and his empty tomb announces justification for all those in Christ. Undoubtedly, he “was delivered up for our trespasses,” says Paul, but he was also “raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).⁷

A Marvelous Exchange

Justification, then, is grounded on the work of Christ *in toto*. Neither good merits nor faith itself can be the *basis* of right standing with God if Christ’s obedience and sacrifice are sufficient. The believer’s assurance rests not in himself but in an alien righteousness, one that is *extra nos*. Theologians of glory seek a righteousness within, by works of the law, but theologians of the cross turn entirely to the righteousness God gives *sola gratia*. They understand that “the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law” because it is a “righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (Rom. 3:22). Relying on works is a fool’s errand since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (3:23). Condemnation alone awaits those exposed by divine glory. However, justification awaits anyone who looks outside himself to Christ. He is “justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (3:24–25; cf. 4:2–6).

A great, marvelous exchange has taken place: our guilt and with it the penalty our transgressions deserve have been transferred to Christ and paid in full; his obedience,

7. See chap. 12 in this volume, where I discuss further implications of resurrection and justification.

that is, his impeccable righteousness, has been imputed to us. As a result, we stand not only forgiven in the sight of a holy God but righteous: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). That righteousness is not inherent in us but is none other than the righteousness of our Savior credited to our account. Paul confesses that he does not have “a righteousness of [his] own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith” (Phil. 3:9). On that basis, the righteous Judge of all the earth declares us righteous in his sight.

This great exchange is legal—“There is therefore now no *condemnation* for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1)—but it could not be more personal. Far from some abstract transaction, the Father has so loved the sinner that he gave up his own Son, who himself weeps over Jerusalem before he brings his righteous obedience to its consummation at the cross. In Adam, “one trespass led to condemnation for all men,” but Christ’s “one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men” (5:18). Such righteousness is ours only through the obedience of our Lord: “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (5:19). Rather than reading 5:19 restrictively, as if only the penal nature of Christ’s suffering is in view, one should instead understand Paul to say that the cross is “the *climax* of a course of obedience extending throughout [Christ’s] entire earthly life and encompassing his fulfillment of every aspect of the law.”⁸

Again, we are reminded of Paul’s letter to the Philippians: “And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (Phil. 2:8). The cross, therefore, is not where the obedience of Christ ends and his suffering begins; rather, the whole life of obedience Christ lived is brought to its defining moment as Jesus obeys the will of his Father in all its bitterness. Apart from the active obedience of Christ reaching its culmination at the cross and finding its judicial confirmation in the resurrection, Paul could not then rejoice in Christ’s exaltation to the right hand of the Father. But he does, as indicated by his emphatic διὸ: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (2:9–11).⁹ Apart from the obedience of Christ, the exaltation of Christ is unjustified, and consequently, so are we guilty sinners.

8. David VanDrunen, “To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice: A Defense of the Active Obedience of Christ in the Light of Recent Criticism,” in *By Faith Alone: Answering the Challenges to the Doctrine of Justification*, ed. Gary L. W. Johnson and Guy P. Waters (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2006), 145. See VanDrunen’s extended exegetical discussion listing many reasons why this is the case.

9. VanDrunen explains, “Crucial for the present discussion is that Paul makes the exaltation the consequence of the obedience and the obedience the cause of the exaltation. Paul does this by connecting the conclusion of his description of Christ’s obedience in [Phil.] 2:8 and the beginning of his description of Christ’s exaltation with the strong causal conjunction διὸ: Christ ‘was obedient unto death, even the death of the cross, *therefore* God exalted him’ (AT). God exalted Christ on the basis of his obedience.” VanDrunen, “To Obey Is Better Than Sacrifice,” 146. Also see R. Scott Clark, “Do This and Live: Christ’s Active Obedience as the Ground of Justification,” in *Covenant, Justification, and Pastoral Ministry: Essays by the Faculty of Westminster Seminary California*, ed. R. Scott Clark (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 230.

Faith as Instrumental

If Christ alone is the basis for justification, then his active and passive obedience are the object of saving faith. Faith itself is not the basis of justification, but it is the instrumental cause of justification. Paul articulates such theological nuance when he not only stresses that the “righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law” (Rom. 3:21), eliminating works from justification entirely, but then adds that such righteousness comes “*through faith* in Jesus Christ for all who believe” (3:22). God is “just and the justifier of the *one who has faith* in Jesus” (3:26).

If justification occurs through faith in the redemptive work of Christ alone, then faith and works in the justification event are entirely antithetical to one another. To attempt, as so many have, to insert works, even Spirit-wrought works, into this forensic declaration would undermine the sufficiency and efficacy of Christ’s propitiation. As Paul tells the Galatians, “If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose” (Gal. 2:21). Additionally, the incorporation of works into justification would give the believer something to boast about. Even if the smallest contribution is added to Christ’s finished work, justification would no longer be by *grace alone* through *faith alone*. But if faith alone is the channel through which our justification is pronounced, then boasting is an impossibility: “Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:27–28).

In Paul’s context, *sola fide* is the hinge on which his mission endeavor turns. For Jew and Gentile are accepted by God just the same: through faith in the crucified and risen Lord:

We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. (Gal. 2:15–16)

Those righteous in God’s sight, then, are not those who “rely on works of the law” (3:10) but those who “live by faith” (3:11; cf. Hab. 2:4).

The Revolution Caused by Justification

Like the apostle Paul, Martin Luther put forward his doctrine of justification, but it was not long until the antinomian objection surfaced. If the basis of justification excluded good works, how would the Christian life not be emptied of sanctifying transformation? If faith relied not on works but on Christ alone, how could faith not be severed entirely from the renewal that holiness brings?

Such an objection, however, fails to distinguish justification from sanctification. Justification is an instantaneous declaration by God that is possible due to the imputation

(not infusion) of Christ's righteousness, whereas sanctification is a process that spans the Christian life in which the Spirit works internally to conform one to the image of Christ. The former is judicial, but the latter is sanative. This distinction Rome could neither conceive nor accept.

Yet such an objection also fails to see that justification and sanctification, distinguishable as they may be, are nevertheless inseparable. They are a double grace, a *duplex gratia*, which stems from union with Christ. In Calvin's words, "By partaking of him, we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life."¹⁰ For the Reformers, as for the apostles, the sinner is justified by faith alone, but that faith is never alone.

The twofold gifts that stem from union with Christ, however, are not arbitrarily related or unrelated, which would only give the antinomian objection legitimacy.¹¹ For those in Christ, the forensic gives birth to the transformative; the legal grounds the relational (Rom. 5:16; 8:1–17; Gal. 3:14). One is not justified because he is sanctified, but he is sanctified because he is justified.¹² The new life the Spirit imparts is an impossibility if not grounded in the righteous status the Father imputes from his Son. Imitation of Christ turns Pelagian if not established by the imputation of Christ's righteousness. We dare not base the indicative of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ on the imperatives of the Christian life.¹³ Geerhardus Vos writes, "The mystical is based on the forensic, not the forensic on the mystical."¹⁴ Calvin before him says something similar: "For since we are clothed with the righteousness of the Son, we are reconciled to God, and renewed by the power of the Spirit to holiness."¹⁵ The word "since" is critical, grounding the Spirit's work of renewal (holiness) on the righteousness of the Son (imputation).

Hence Paul can say that there is "no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" and then turn to confidently assert that "if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:1, 10). With a new legal status in hand, the believer is no longer under the law; liberated from its power, he now sets his mind on the things of the Spirit. Paul could not more strongly

10. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

11. We should never set union with Christ over against the benefits of the *ordo salutis*. Such a false dichotomy is unnecessary and dangerous: "Reformed theologians have never felt any sense of self-contradiction in saying that justification and sanctification are twin benefits of union with Christ and that within the *ordo* sanctification depends on justification. The very notion of an *ordo* requires logical dependence." Michael Horton, *Justification*, NSD (Grand Rapids, MI; Zondervan Academic, 2018), 2:469.

12. J. V. Fesko, *Beyond Calvin: Union with Christ and Justification in Early Modern Reformed Theology (1517–1700)*, RHT 20 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012), 29–30.

13. On this point, see chap. 15, by David VanDrunen, in this volume.

14. And again: "Paul consciously and consistently subordinated the mystical aspect of the relation to Christ to the forensic one. . . . Paul's mind was to such an extent forensically oriented that he regarded the entire complex of subjective spiritual changes that take place in the believer and of subjective spiritual blessings enjoyed by the believer as the direct outcome of the forensic work of Christ applied in justification." Geerhardus Vos, "The Alleged Legalism in Paul's Doctrine of Justification," in *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin Jr. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1980), 384.

15. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.17. See Michael Horton, "Calvin's Theology of Union with Christ and the Double Grace: Modern Reception and Contemporary Possibilities," in *Calvin's Theology and Its Reception: Disputes, Developments, and New Possibilities*, ed. J. Todd Billings and I. John Hesselink (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2012), 72–96.

ground the Spirit's work in sanctification on the foundation of justification than when he transitions from the objective to the subjective in Romans 8:3–6:

For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace.

If these two graces are inseparable, justification grounding and causing sanctification, then it should be little surprise to discover in the Scriptures that the doctrine of justification leads to authentic, sanctifying change in people, reorienting their personal identity, reconstituting the purpose for which they live. Called to a land he had not seen, promised an heir born from a body long expired, Abraham was told to number the stars, for that was how numerous his offspring would be. “And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Counted righteous, Abraham became the patriarch of God's covenant people. Not only was *sola fide* instrumental to receiving a new status (righteousness), but Abraham's faith in the promises of God would be exemplary for the true spiritual heirs to come, as the apostle Paul demonstrates in his letter to the Romans (4:1–25).

But Abraham never saw those covenant promises fulfilled. That privilege would be for his offspring instead. Nevertheless, justification by faith alone not only generated a new forensic identity for the patriarch but from that moment forward reconfigured the way he perceived his God-given mission. Submitting to circumcision (Gen. 17:1–14), interceding for Sodom (18:22–33), sacrificing Isaac (22:1–19), recruiting a wife for the heir of the promise (24:1–28)—these are not the works of a man seeking a justification otherwise uncertain; rather, these are the works that stem from faith. Here is the fruit of a sinner already declared righteous; on display are the sanctifying deeds of a man justified and reconciled with God.

The apostle Paul was no stranger to the revolution that justification could effect. The persecutor of Christ's church believed himself to be entirely secure, asserting the credentials of his Judaic zeal, with every reason to take pride in the national identity he inherited and the works of the law that gave him confidence in the flesh:

If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. (Phil. 3:4–6)

However, when confronted by the risen, vindicated, justified Christ, Paul abandoned any trust in himself, looking instead to a righteousness alien to himself, that is, a righteousness found in Christ:

But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith. (3:7–9)

For the apostle, the “righteousness from God that depends on faith” is Abrahamic through and through. Like Abraham, Paul was declared righteous through faith *alone*, and the righteous status reckoned to him was not his own. While Abraham trusted in God’s promise to give him an heir, that heir had come in and through Christ, so that “if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Gal. 3:29; cf. 3:9). After the Damascus road, there was no question that Paul was Christ’s.

Also, as with Abraham, Paul’s new judicial status—being clothed in the righteousness of Christ—resulted in, produced, and caused a lifelong transformation. He counted “everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ,” so that he “may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,” so that “by any means possible” Paul “may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil. 3:8, 10–11). And know Christ’s sufferings he did, imprisoned repeatedly until he suffered the same fate as his Savior.

The Organic Connection between the *Historia Salutis* and *Ordo Salutis*

Yet we would be mistaken to think that Paul somehow moved past the imputed righteousness of Christ he claimed in his letter to the Philippians. While we might overreach to conclude that it was the center of his thought, there can be no denying that it was essential to Paul’s understanding of “the Way” (Acts 9:2). As Romans, 2 Corinthians, and Galatians demonstrate, Paul found it impossible to define union with Christ apart from the believer’s new forensic identity, an identity (status) grounded in the perfect obedience of the crucified, risen, and righteous one himself (e.g., Rom. 3:21–26; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:10–14). Today many are persuaded by those who claim that the gospel is to be kept away from the domain of justification. While Paul refused to confuse the two, nevertheless, his rebuke of the Galatians assumes an organic and necessary connection between the two. To abandon justification *sola fide* and the free imputation of Christ’s righteousness to those who believe is to forfeit the gospel itself (Gal. 1:6–9).

Paul undoubtedly knew the difference between the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis*, a distinction that pervades Romans. Yet it was precisely because Paul understood the difference between redemption accomplished and redemption applied that he found it inconceivable to consider one without the other. God has “put forward” Christ “as a propitiation” so that he would be “received by faith” and we would be “justified by his grace as a gift” (Rom. 3:24–25). “For our sake” God “made him [Christ] to be sin”—why?—“so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

The inseparable link between the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis* is not uniquely Pauline either but permeates Johannine thought as well:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (John 3:16–18)

Apparently, forensic categories are not only vital to Paul's gospel (Gal. 1:6–9; 2:15–3:29) but are also just as critical to John's gospel (see also 1 John 1:1–9; 2:2; 4:9–10).

Witnessing the corrosion of justification and imputation, the Reformers grieved that the gospel of free judicial grace had been so corrupted in their day. Like Paul's tone with the Galatians, Martin Luther, Philipp Melancthon, John Calvin, and others were outraged at doctrinal infidelity in the church, especially on something as central as soteriology. Like Paul (and John), the Reformers saw no disconnect between the cross and faith. To segregate redemption accomplished from redemption applied would have undermined the intrinsic connection between *solus Christus* and *sola fide*. Misconstruing one leads to the fatality of the other, a reality by no means hypothetical to the Reformers, who were products of Rome's soteriological misconception.

Justification Centrality

When the Reformers were enlightened by the Scriptures, their eyes having been opened to the forensic nature of justification and imputation over against Rome's sanative view of infused grace, they were unembarrassed to stress that justification is central not only to a biblical view of the gospel but also to the entire Christian faith. Luther labeled the evangelical doctrine of justification "the first and chief article" in the Smalcald Articles.¹⁶ Calvin said that justification "is the ground on which religion must be supported," warning that "unless you understand first of all what your position is before God, and what the judgment which he passes upon you, you have no foundation on which your salvation can be laid, or on which piety towards God can be reared."¹⁷ Peter Martyr Vermigli was convinced that justification is "the head, fountain, and mainstay of all religion."¹⁸ And though it was not the Reformers but Johann Heinrich Alsted (1618) who said that justification is "the doctrine on which the church stands or falls," nevertheless, the Reformers would certainly have agreed.¹⁹

Yet again, the revolution justification would cause was not foreign to the Reformers. As with Abraham and Paul, so too did the Reformers believe that the divine declaration

16. "Smalcald Articles," 2, in *BOC*, 301.

17. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1.

18. Peter Martyr Vermigli, *Predestination and Justification: Two Theological Loci*, trans. and ed. Frank A. James III, Peter Martyr Library 8 (Kirksville, MO: Thomas Jefferson University Press, 2003), 96.

19. See Alistair E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 448n3.

of new forensic status in Christ would acutely produce the fruits of sanctification, contrary to popular antinomian accusations. For example, at the start of his 1535 *Lectures on Galatians*, Luther accentuated not only what's at stake in the doctrine ("If it is lost and perishes, the whole knowledge of truth, life, and salvation is lost and perishes at the same time") but also what is gained:

But it is because, as I often warn you, there is a clear and present danger that the devil may take away from us the pure doctrine of faith and may substitute for it the doctrine of works and of human traditions. It is very necessary, therefore, that this doctrine of faith be continually read and heard in public. No matter how well known it may be or how carefully learned, the devil, our adversary, who prowls around and seeks to devour us (1 Peter 5:8), is not dead. Our flesh also goes on living. Besides, temptations of every sort attack and oppress us on every side. Therefore this doctrine can never be discussed and taught enough. If it is lost and perishes, the whole knowledge of truth, life, and salvation is lost and perishes at the same time. But if it flourishes, everything good flourishes—religion, true worship, the glory of God, and the right knowledge of all things and of all social conditions.²⁰

In Luther's mind, as in Paul's, everything flourishes if justification is rightly understood, including worship and society itself. The Reformers not only feared what would be lost if justification *sola fide* vanished but rejoiced at the prospects of what might be gained should it be embraced.

The Foolishness of Justification

Understandably, heirs of the Reformation today envy the task of the sixteenth century. What appeared to be chaos to the Reformers—facing as they did opposition from Rome and certain radicals—was but bijou compared to the onslaught of ambiguity over justification that would circulate the modern and postmodern eras. This side of the sixteenth century, the evangelical doctrine faces challenges not only from Rome but also from movements as influential, variegated, and evolving as Protestant liberalism, neoorthodoxy, New Finnish Lutheranism, post-Vatican II Catholicism, Newman's *via media*, the Federal Vision, and the New Perspective on Paul. In the eyes of many, the material principle of the Reformation, and the doctrine of imputation it brings with it, is considered foolishness. So normal is it to criticize the Reformation doctrine that it takes courage to be Protestant in the twenty-first century.

The contributors to this volume, however, welcome the opportunity to be named fools if it means being identified with the "foolishness of God" (1 Cor. 1:25). Such foolishness is wiser than the cleverness of humanity's most *en vogue* justification theories. If "Christ crucified" continues to be a "stumbling block" (1 Cor. 1:23) today, as it was in Paul's day, then it should not surprise us that the justification secured at the cross and

20. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians* (1535), LW 26:3.

resurrection (Rom. 4:25) would be a stumbling block in our own day, “folly” (1 Cor. 1:23) to its critics and revisionaries.

That justification and imputation are considered folly to many today might lead some evangelicals to put their heads in the sand—along with their doctrine of justification. Paul took a different approach. Being named a fool did not lead him to retreat into intellectual isolationism but emboldened him to rearticulate his justification theology for a brave new theological world. He was impelled to stand in the Areopagus and converse with the philosophers, all in order to explain, clarify, and defend the faith. He was pressed to rebuke the Galatians—or even Peter himself—whenever he saw the gospel being tarnished by modifications or revisions of justification *sola gratia* and *sola fide*. No one can accuse Paul of not understanding just what was at stake, nor of forgetting just what might be gained.

So, too, does this volume wade into the deep waters of the doctrine of justification sensing the weightiness of what is at stake. In the twenty-first century, challenges to justification are legion. No longer do they surface from one or two disciplines, but they can be seen in nearly every field of study. For any treatment of justification to be taken seriously, therefore, it must provide a robust articulation, explanation, and defense of justification within the contours of biblical, theological, historical, and pastoral studies. To meet that challenge, *The Doctrine on Which the Church Stands or Falls* brings together a community of scholars, some of the most outstanding evangelical thinkers in their respective disciplines, so that the next generation of evangelicals will remain faithful, equipped to contend for the faith once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3). Our hope, indeed, our prayer, is not merely that such a doctrine might reconfigure the believer’s personal identity in union with the risen Christ but that this material principle might reconstitute the purpose for which the Christian and the church exist, recognizing that only in a God who justifies the ungodly will it live, move, and have its being.

PART ONE



**JUSTIFICATION IN
BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE**

“He Believed the LORD”

The Pedigree of Justification in the Pentateuch

STEPHEN DEMPSTER

It is indisputable that the Pauline doctrine of justification is grounded in a reading of the Old Testament.¹ The apostle did not create the doctrine *ex nihilo*. As with other doctrines formulated by New Testament authors, they have their start in Genesis if not in other parts of Israel’s Scriptures. These sacred writings gave Paul common ground with his theological opponents. They never argued over the fact of their authority or their extent, but they did argue about their interpretation.

Paul uses a number of texts in seeking to prove his doctrine that God justifies the wicked through faith in Christ. But the most important for him is Genesis 15:6, where we read these words: “He [Abram] believed in the LORD, and he reckoned/credited it to him for righteousness.”² Paul cites this verse three times (Rom. 4:3, 22; Gal. 3:6; cf. Rom. 4:9), and it provides the conceptual substructure for his discussion of faith, grace, works, and law. In fact, one commentator’s statement could be viewed as representative of many: “For Paul this Old Testament verse is the classic passage for justification by faith alone apart from the works of the law.”³ And another is not far off the same mark: “Genesis 15:6 is the hermeneutical key for Paul’s reading of Abraham’s story, and the

1. I would like to thank the following scholars for reading this essay and supplying helpful insight: Craig Carter, Stan Fowler, Peter Gentry, Steven Kempf, Byron Wheaton, and Walter Moberly. While we may have disagreements, I deeply appreciate their interaction. I would also like to dedicate this essay to one of my former students, Daniel Cooper, who presented a memorable paper on this topic in a class presentation.

2. Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations in this chapter are my own translations.

3. Manfred Oeming, “Ist Genesis 15:6 ein Beleg für die Anrechnung des Glaubens zur Gerechtigkeit,” ZAW 95, no. 2 (1983): 182. The original reads, “Für Paulus ist dieser Vers der alttestamentliche locus classicus für die Rechtfertigung allein aus Glauben ohne Werke des Gesetzes.”

one act of Abraham that Paul ever emphasizes is Abraham's faith."⁴ Still another scholar in no way understates the significance of this verse: "No other Old Testament text has exercised such a compelling influence on the New Testament."⁵

It is often mentioned in this discussion that James uses the same text to prove that with God justification is by works, not by faith (James 2:23), a distinctive early Christian perspective that seems to directly contradict Paul's view. A significant number of modern scholars would agree that Paul has essentially distorted the meaning of Genesis 15:6 in the interest of his view of justification by faith. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann write in their magisterial *God of the Living*, "Neither does God make Abraham just, nor does Abraham effect anything for other people through his faith."⁶ Another commentator states explicitly, "The verse [Gen. 15:6] has no relation to the dogma of 'justification by faith.'"⁷ Paul thus reads this verse "through Christian glasses."⁸ James Barr, ever the contrarian, argues that

the most prominent example of Christianizing [the Old Testament] . . . lies in the conception of justification by faith. . . . Justification by faith is, among the convictions that Christian Old Testament theologians have most often held, the one where they have been most reluctant to give up the "Christianizing" of the Hebrew Bible.⁹

Part of Barr's argument is that the entire doctrine may be based on a mistranslation of the Hebrew of Genesis 15:6¹⁰ and that another "correct" translation has developed somewhat of a following and provides "a new perspective" on this Old Testament text.¹¹

Along with Barr's criticism coming from a Christian direction in Old Testament studies, another comes from a more Jewish angle. In an important essay, Jon Levenson criticizes the traditional Christian reading as exemplified in Gerhard von Rad's exegesis of Genesis 15:6.¹² He argues that such a reading privileges a part of the narrative and is essentially in conflict with another part, Genesis 26:5, where it states that Abraham kept the law—that is, Abraham had established a reservoir of merit through his good deeds and was therefore justified in God's sight. Von Rad thus is accused of taking 15:6 in "isolation from the rest of the Abraham material in the Hebrew Bible and indeed

4. Orrey McFarland, "Whose Abraham, Which Promise? Genesis 15.6 in Philo's *De Virtutibus* and Romans 4," *JSNT* 35, no. 2 (2012): 119.

5. Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis*, IBC (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 146.

6. Reinhard Feldmeier and Hermann Spieckermann, *God of the Living: A Biblical Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011), 293.

7. Benno Jacob, *The First Book of the Bible: Genesis*, ed. Ernest I. Jacob and Walter Jacob (Jerusalem: KTAV, 2007), 100.

8. Lloyd Gaston, "Abraham and the Righteousness of God," *HBT* 2, no. 1 (1980): 40.

9. James Barr, *The Concept of Biblical Theology: An Old Testament Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 261–62.

10. Similarly, for example, Thomas Römer remarks, "If this understanding is right, Genesis 15:6 has nothing to do with 'justification by faith.'" "Abraham's Righteousness and Sacrifice: How to Understand (and Translate) Genesis 15 and 22," *CV* 54, no. 1 (2012): 14.

11. This is, of course, a wordplay on the New Perspective in Pauline theology and not to be confused with it. See Benjamin Schliesser, *Abraham's Faith in Romans 4: Paul's Concept of Faith in Light of the History of Reception of Genesis 15:6*, WUNT, 2nd ser., vol. 224 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 115.

12. Gerhard von Rad, "Faith Reckoned as Righteousness," in *The Problem of the Hexateuch and Other Essays*, trans. E. W. Trueman Dicken (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1966), 125–30.

from the Hebrew Bible itself.”¹³ Thus, we have two types of interpretation, “a Pauline type which takes the verse in isolation and insists on the autonomy of faith and a Philonic type, in which faith and the observance of commandments are each predicated of Abraham on the basis of texts in Genesis.”¹⁴ Indeed, this “rabbinic”¹⁵ view has received further support from Walter Moberly, who argues that, contrary to von Rad, the best way to interpret Genesis 15 is through the lens of another text, Psalm 106:30–31, where Phinehas is credited with righteousness as a reward for his act of zeal on behalf of Yahweh.¹⁶ Thus, Abram’s faith is more about his faithfulness than his faith, more about obedience than any one act of faith, and this provides a solid basis for this text to be understood in line with the rabbinic doctrine of merit. Thus, Moberly accounts for a significant Jewish strand of interpretation that connects Abram’s faith in Genesis 15 with his act of obedience in Genesis 22.¹⁷ While Moberly still believes that the Pauline understanding has a place at the interpretive table, it is only one option.

In light of these concerns, this essay seeks to examine the evidence afresh and explore this influential text to determine its meaning and significance *within the Pentateuch*.

The Significance of Genesis 15

Genesis 15 is a pivotal text in the Abraham story, and of course, the Abraham narrative is crucial for the book of Genesis and the Torah as a whole, because it is the first of the so-called patriarchal narratives, which describe the beginning of the nation of Israel. This chapter contains the first account that formalizes the divine-human relationship between Abram and God in the form of a covenant, it is the first major dialogue that takes place between these two “partners,”¹⁸ and it is in this text that Abram for the first time speaks directly with God.¹⁹ Before this time, he has heard the word of God and simply obeyed, but now for the first time he actually addresses God. From a narrative point of view, the first time that a speaker talks in a story is often considered revelatory of the person and his or her state of mind and is extremely significant for the events as they unfold.²⁰ God is the first speaker in Genesis, and his words are “Let there be light!”

13. Jon D. Levenson, *The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism: Jews and Christians in Biblical Studies* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993), 60.

14. Levenson, *Hebrew Bible*, 59.

15. It is not completely accurate to call this a Jewish view, since Paul, for example, was definitely a Jew, and so were most of the first Christians.

16. R. W. L. Moberly, “Abraham’s Righteousness (Genesis Xv 6),” in *Studies in the Pentateuch*, ed. J. A. Emerton, VTSup 41 (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 103–30.

17. E.g., see 1 Macc. 2:52: “Was not Abraham found faithful in testing [Genesis 22] and it was credited to him for righteousness [Genesis 15]”; Sir. 44:19–20: “Abraham was a great father of many people . . . who kept the law of the most High, and was in covenant with him: he established the covenant in his flesh; and when he was proved [Genesis 22], he was found faithful [Genesis 15].”

18. So also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 1–17*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 334.

19. John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative: A Biblical-Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 127. It can be assumed that Abram speaks with God before this time, but no explicit words of his are recorded. See Gen. 12:8 and 13:18, where one could assume that Abram spoke to God.

20. As Robert Alter notes, “In any given narrative event, and especially at the beginning of any new story, the point at which dialogue first emerges will be worthy of special attention, and in most instances, the initial words spoken by a personage will be revelatory, perhaps more in manner than in matter, constituting an important moment in the expression of character.” *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 94.

(1:3). The serpent's first words are "Has God really said . . . ?" (3:1). Cain's first words are "Am I my brother's keeper?" (4:9). In this text, Abram, the prospective father of the nation of Israel, speaks his first words to God, and they reveal an anxious state of mind that has been bothering him for some time (15:2–3), and his second word to God, a year before Isaac will be born, amplifies this anxiety (17:17–18). So, obviously, this text is a critical one in the Abraham story.

Moreover, in this text there are some significant differences from the surrounding context. It is the first example in the Abraham narrative where the author uses asyndeton to indicate a major break in the flow (15:1 begins without a conjunction), and the text contains another example at the ending of the episode (15:18), which functions to explain what happened in this particular section.²¹ This text in a sense functions as an important transition marker in the narrative. Before this time, the narrative has focused explicitly on the promise of land. This text formalizes that promise with a covenant and a divine oath that secures the future land for Abraham's descendants, but it also introduces the theme of the next chapters that focus on seed and concludes with another divine oath securing the future for the seed.²² Unlike many of the narratives in Genesis, chapter 15 contains explicit theological reflection, or narrative explanation. The events in the story are not just left to explain themselves, as one finds in many of the stories of the patriarchs; the narrator provides commentary: "This means that . . ." ²³ Moreover, here appear the only reference to faith and righteousness in the Torah and the first mention of the Abrahamic covenant, both of which become important themes in the Scriptures. Furthermore, in this text the writer is aware of the remainder of the Pentateuch, as there is a prophecy of the nascent Israel's descent into Egypt, an allusion to the burning bush, and predictions of the liberation from Egypt and even the conquest of Canaan (Gen. 15:13–16)!²⁴ Moberly's comments in no way understate the significance of Genesis 15: "Genesis xv gives the impression of being the fullest and most formal portrayal of Yahweh's commitment to Israel (both people and land) in the whole Abraham cycle, a portrayal of unusual and imaginatively suggestive character."²⁵

The Abraham Narrative in the Torah

In the larger story of the Torah, the patriarchal narratives, of which the Abraham story is the first, "are set within the framework of the primaeval history on the one side (Gen 1–11), and the establishment of the nation [of Israel] on the other [Ex–Deut]."²⁶ Abram

21. These represent the two major functions of asyndeton within Hebrew *narrative*: a new start and an explanation. See Stephen G. Dempster, "Linguistic Features of Hebrew Narrative: A Discourse Analysis of Narrative from the Classical Period" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 1985), 40–47.

22. That second oath is found in Gen. 22:16–18. For an insightful analysis, see Byron Wheaton, "Focus and Structure in the Abraham Narratives," *TJ*, n.s., 27, no. 1 (2006): 143–62.

23. Cf. esp. Gen. 15:6, 18–21. See also 22:1, 18–19.

24. See also the work of John Ha, *Genesis 15: A Theological Compendium of Pentateuchal History*, BZAW 181 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1989).

25. Moberly, "Abraham's Righteousness," 119.

26. Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1985), 218.