

The Problem of Justification Before the Reformation

I. The “Problem” of Justification

A. Importance of the doctrine—and its apparent absence

1. Other essentials (deity of Christ, etc.) trace back to early church
2. Justification by faith alone—central to the gospel—apparently missing or misunderstood
3. Only question of atonement traces clearly to early church (cf. Shedd)

B. Nature of Protestant Teaching

1. Justification by faith alone through grace alone
2. Forensic justification—act of imputing Christ’s righteousness so that the sinner stands righteous in God’s eyes
 - a. Passive: His death (passion)
 - b. Active: His obedience to the law
3. Change in legal standing not inner moral change (not “infusing”)
4. Protestants stress separation of justification from regeneration & sanctification

C. Standard Interpretation of Pre-Reformation Teaching

1. Pre-Reformation confuses justification w/ sanctification
2. Often justification, sanctification, & regeneration lumped together
3. Righteousness “infused” in the believer—made more righteous
4. Faith is necessary for salvation but not sufficient of itself
5. In practical effect, often a works salvation

D. Approaching the Problem

1. Absence of the teaching before the Reformation does not mean that no one was actually justified by faith
2. Matter of Terminology: “Justification” to pre-Reformation is like “salvation” to moderns, an all-encompassing term
3. One should not ignore the factor that the Reformers cited the Fathers—they saw some continuity

II. Surveying Pre-Reformation History

A. General Historical Considerations

1. Some foreshadowing in points
 - a. e.g., John Duns Scotus’ willingness to see forgiveness of sins and infusion of grace as separate
 - b. Predestination as a foreshadowing
 - 1) Predestination stresses God’s grace and downplays external factors (the church, the sacraments, etc.)
 - 2) Examples: Augustine, Gottschalk of Orbais, John Wycliffe
2. Points in pre-Reformation discussions of justification
 - a. Nature of faith, grace, & good works
 - b. Rejection of Pelagianism
 - c. Medieval consensus: Begin w/ infusion of grace & end w/ remission of sin
 - d. *Merit* places God under obligation
 - e. Protestant “innovation”: Separating justification from regeneration (moral change)
3. Standard Catholic view *seems* to have hardened by time of Scholastics

B. Second Century

1. Clement of Rome

- a. Earliest statement outside the NT
 - b. Marked by cumulative superlatives (“not for their own sake, or for their own works, or for the righteousness which they wrought”) & stress on “operation of His will”
 - c. “Faith through which, from the beginning, God has justified all men”: Stress that all believers in history saved through God’s will & not their own works
 - d. Kind of the works excluded
 - 1) Not just Jewish legalism: Qualities of wisdom, understanding, godliness
 - 2) Not “works which we have wrought in holiness of heart”
 - a) Language excludes any idea of justification by works (Shedd)
 - b) Allows no separation of “legal works” from “works of love” (Shedd)
 - e. Problem: “Let us clothe ourselves in concord, being lowlyminded and temperate, holding ourselves aloof from all back biting and evil speaking, **being justified by works and not by words.**” (30:3, Lightfoot trans.)
2. Epistle to Diognetus
- a. One of most explicit statements in early fathers
 - b. Protestant Parallels
 - 1) Substitution: strongly suggested in 9:2 (e.g., “the just for the unjust,” I Pet. 3:18)
 - 2) Atonement: Covering of sins through His righteousness (9:3)
 - 3) Justification of the ungodly: “Lawless and ungodly” (9:4)—hints at *simul justus et peccator*, “simultaneously righteous and a sinner” (the sinner does not become more righteous to be saved) cf. Rom. 4:5 “to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness”
 - 4) Sufficiency of Christ’ work: “The righteousness of One should justify many that are iniquitous” (9:5) cf. Rom. 5:15-21, e.g., “for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences to justification” (v. 16)
 - 5) Human helplessness: Mention of “inability” (9:6) cf. Rom. 5:6 “For when we were without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly”
3. Irenaeus
- a. Explicitly teaches justification of both Abraham and “his seed,” the Gentiles, through faith
 - b. Excludes justification by the law
 - c. “The law is not made for the just man” (cf. I Tim. 1:9)—apparently implying that the law does not make one just
 - d. Translated from Armenian translation—loss of precision?
4. Second Century Summary
- a. Clement & Diognetus, e.g., indicate some evidence for elements of Protestant view
 - b. But lack a full body of work for comparison
- C. Later Fathers
1. Origen
- a. Unquestionably teaches justification by faith alone—works either before or after specifically excluded
 - b. “Justified traveling companion” of Christ—regarded as a saint, St. Dismas, by Catholics
 - c. Does not exclude the possibility of others being otherwise justified
 - d. Does faith earn merit?

2. John Chrysostom
 - a. *Language* of imputed righteousness
 - 1) “Righteousness, not thine own, but that of God” and not from works but through a gift
 - 2) Vilest sinners (adulterers, homosexuals, grave robbers, magicians) not only “freed from punishment” but “become just, and just too with the highest righteousness”
 - b. “From faith to faith”: a whole history of those justified by faith, notably Rahab who believed & was saved, and the children of Israel who doubted God and were judged in the wilderness
 - c. Chrysostom often cited on justification, yet in other places he holds doctrines that would qualify this
 - 1) “Our good deeds, whether they be great or small [will] be reckoned to our credit at that day” (Letter to Theodore, Letter 1, sect. 9)
 - 2) “Fasting brings to us some, and that not small[,] comfort and release from sins committed” (Homilies on John, Homily 7)
 - 3) “For these two things most of all declare His unspeakable love, that He both suffered for His enemies, and that having died for His enemies, He freely gave to them by baptism entire remission of sins” (*Homilies on John* 27)
3. Origen & Chrysostom show how full information reveal other views in addition (cf. Clement & Diognetus)
4. Augustine
 - a. Strengths
 - 1) Stress on faith as a gift of God
 - 2) Stress that salvation depends entirely on God’s grace
 - b. Questions—“merits”
 - 1) Speaks faith having merit (albeit a gift from God)
 - 2) Grace itself provides merit
 - c. Augustine believed in inherent righteousness not works righteousness but it is not imputed righteousness
 - d. Does say the works *follow* justification
5. Ambrosiaster
 - a. “Pseudo-Ambrose” wrote one of earliest set of commentaries on Paul’s epistles
 - b. Saved by faith apart from works?
 - 1) On Rom. 3:24, “They are justified freely, because they have not done anything nor given anything in return, but by faith alone they have been made holy by the gift of God.”
 - 2) On Rom. 4:5, “How then can the Jews think that they have been justified by the works of the law in the same way as Abraham, when they see that Abraham was not justified by the works of the law, but by faith alone? Therefore, there is no need of the law, when the ungodly person is justified before God by faith alone.”
 - c. Saved by faith apart from *legal* works? (usual interpretation of those who do not see justification by faith alone) On Rom. 9:28, “The Lord promises that those whom he calls the remnant will be saved by the just execution of the sentence on the earth ... that is, by faith, because now that new moons, the sabbath, circumcision, the food laws and animal sacrifices have all been abolished, it is

faith alone which is given for salvation.” (all from Ambrosiaster, *Commentaries on Romans and 1-2 Corinthians*, Ancient Christian Texts, IVP 2009)

D. Medieval Footnote

1. “Heretical” Justification: Are groups outside the “mainline” better?
2. Petrobrusians
 - a. Twelfth-century reform movement
 - b. Teach “one is saved by his own faith and baptism, not by another’s”
 - c. Problems
 - 1) Tying of faith to baptism
 - 2) Account by a critic

III. Solving the Problem

A. Proposed Solutions

1. Catholics: Justification by faith alone an innovation
2. Protestant Views
 - a. “Suppressed”: Existed but was repressed and evidence vanished
 - b. A biblical teaching w/ some historical witnesses
3. Revisionist Approaches—Claims that Protestant and Catholic viewpoints do not differ greatly
 - a. Evangelicals and Catholics Together: “Gift of Salvation”
 - b. Thomas Oden

B. Considerations

1. Evidence does not support the clear existence of the Protestant view before the Reformation
2. Justification by faith alone is *possible* in pre-Reformation teaching
3. Pre-Reformation theologians did not speak in Reformation categories and terminology
4. Council of Trent doctrine *also* innovative, move toward precision

C. Suggested Solutions

1. Fathers may show anticipation of parts of Reformers’ views (Oden)
2. “Components” of teaching present before Reformation systematization
3. Statement and systematization takes place in Reformation
 - a. In reaction to medieval Catholic teaching (challenge & response)
 - b. Under illumination of the Spirit