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CHAPTER ONE

AN INVENTION OR A RECOVERY?



The doctrine of justification by grace through “faith alone” (expressed by the Latin phrase *sola fide*) is central to a right understanding of the gospel. Stated negatively, it denies any notion that forgiveness for sin and a right standing before God can be attained through human effort or moral virtue on the part of the sinner. Stated positively, it affirms that God’s gift of salvation is based completely on the finished work of Christ, which is received solely by grace through faith in Him. Salvation is not predicated, even in part, on the sinner’s good works. That is why when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I *do* to be saved,” the appropriate response was simply, “*Believe* in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (Acts 16:30–31, emphasis added).

“Faith alone” was one of the main rallying cries of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers recognized that it stands at the heart of the gospel, which is why Martin Luther famously said of this doctrine, “If this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church

collapses.”¹ Along with “grace alone” (*sola gratia*), “Christ alone” (*solus Christus*), and “for the glory of God alone” (*solī Deo Gloria*), *sola fide* expressed the Reformers’ conviction that salvation is entirely by God’s grace through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Through faith in Him, believers receive both pardon from sin (because He bore their punishment on the cross) and justifying righteousness (because His righteousness is credited to their account). As a result, they can take no credit for their salvation. All the glory goes to God.

It is important to note that in their emphasis on “faith alone,” the Reformers did not deny the importance of good works in the lives of believers. They taught that saving faith is a repentant faith and they stressed obedience to the commands of Christ. Nonetheless, they insisted that good works ought to be viewed only as the *fruit* or *consequence* of salvation, rather than the *root* or *cause* of it. Thus, they could assert that although believers are saved by grace through faith alone, saving faith is never alone. True faith always gives evidence of itself through fruits of repentance and obedience.²

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant understanding of *sola fide* stood in contrast to the Roman Catholic emphasis on sacramental works and good deeds as being necessary for justification. Catholicism viewed justification as a life-long process that depended, at least in part, on how a person lived. Reformers like Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin rejected the Catholic view, teaching instead that justification was the sole work of God in which He declared believers to be instantly righteous, not because of their good deeds, but because they were clothed with the perfect righteousness of Christ.

In response to the Reformers' teaching, Roman Catholics in the sixteenth century accused Protestant theologians of inventing a new version of the gospel. The Council of Trent (1545–1563) anathematized any who taught justification through faith alone. Since that time, numerous Roman Catholic writers have denounced *sola fide* as a heretical novelty.³ Popular Roman Catholic apologist Dave Armstrong provides one such example. He writes, “Distinctively Protestant tenets such as *sola fide* (‘faith alone’) . . . were virtually nonexistent through Church history.”⁴ He goes on to assert, “Protestantism per se didn’t exist until 1517 A.D.”⁵ Further, “Radically new doctrines such as *sola fide* . . . were sheer novelties, rather than reforms, supposedly harkening back to the alleged state of affairs in the early Church. But they simply cannot be found in the early Church.”⁶

By contrast, Protestant scholars have defended *sola fide* as representing a return to both biblical and historic Christian orthodoxy. The doctrine of justification by faith, then, was not an *invention* but a *recovery* of theological truth that had been obscured. R. C. Sproul summarizes the traditional Protestant view: “The sixteenth-century Reformers were not interested in creating a new religion. They were interested, not in innovation, but in renovation. They were reformers, not revolutionaries.”⁷ The Reformers themselves would have agreed with Sproul’s assessment.⁸ The sole authoritative basis for their teachings was the Word of God (the idea captured by the phrase “Scripture alone”). Yet, they also appealed in a secondary sense to the church fathers—the Christian leaders of earlier centuries—to demonstrate historical affirmation for their views. As John Calvin (1509–1564) explains in the 1536

preface to his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, “We do not despise the fathers; in fact, if it were to our present purpose, I could with no trouble at all prove that the greater part of what we are saying today meets their approval.”⁹ Martin Luther’s colleague, Philip Melancthon (1497–1560), likewise argued that the Reformation represented a return to the pure teachings of earlier generations. He denied any allegation that he and his fellow Reformers had departed from the teachings of the early church, insisting instead that he was defending “just that which Ambrose and Augustine have taught.”¹⁰

Later Protestant works on justification by theologians like Martin Chemnitz (1522–1586),¹¹ John Owen (1616–1683),¹² Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758),¹³ George Stanley Faber (1773–1854),¹⁴ and James Buchanan (1804–1870)¹⁵ echoed those same Reformation claims. Of these, Buchanan is perhaps the most dogmatic in his assertions “that the Protestant doctrine of Justification was not a ‘novelty’ introduced for the first time by Luther and Calvin,—it was held and taught, more or less explicitly, by some in every successive age,—and that there is no truth in the allegation that it had been unknown for fourteen hundred years before the Reformation.”¹⁶

Some modern Protestant scholars, however, have challenged such claims made by previous generations. In response to Buchanan, Anthony Lane objects that “no historically qualified writer would make any such claim today.”¹⁷ Others, like Matthew C. Heckel, are far more dogmatic. He writes, “The Reformation understanding of justification *sola fide* was unheard of in the pre-Reformation church and thus not believed until Luther.”¹⁸ He continues, “Luther’s doctrine of justification *sola fide* was not a recovery but an innovation

within the Western theological tradition.”¹⁹ Those kinds of statements bring us back to the question at hand: was the Reformation understanding of justification through faith alone an invention or a recovery?

ALISTER MCGRATH AND FAITH ALONE

Alistair McGrath is one of broader evangelicalism’s foremost thinkers. The Oxford professor and Anglican priest is perhaps most well known for his robust defense of Christian theism against the attacks of atheists such as Richard Dawkins. Having taught historical theology at Oxford, McGrath is certainly qualified to trace the history of doctrinal discussions throughout the centuries. His book on the history of justification—entitled *Iustitia Dei*, which means “The Righteousness of God”—is widely regarded as one of the most comprehensive treatments of the subject. Yet it is McGrath’s distinguished pedigree and theological acumen that make his assertions about the Reformers’ understanding of justification so disappointing. In a number of his books, including *Iustitia Dei*, McGrath claims the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone was a sixteenth century novelty unknown in the prior 1,500 years of Christian thought.²⁰ McGrath is arguably the most distinguished Protestant to affirm the basic charge that Roman Catholics have leveled against Protestantism for the past 500 years—that Luther and his fellow Reformers invented a new understanding of justification. Because the doctrine of justification lies at the heart of the gospel, the implications of this charge are serious (see Gal. 1:6–9).

In making his case, McGrath identifies three primary characteristics of the Reformation doctrine of justification.²¹

1. *Forensic Justification*

First, the Reformers taught that justification was *forensic* rather than *formative*. In other words, they understood justification in terms of a divine declaration of righteousness, like a judge issuing a full pardon to a defendant in a courtroom. This was different from the medieval Roman Catholic understanding in which justification was viewed as a process by which sinners would become righteous over an extended period of time.

2. *Justification Distinguished from Regeneration*

Second, the Reformers distinguished the doctrine of justification from the doctrines of regeneration and progressive sanctification. In justification, God declares sinners to be *positionally* righteous, because they have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ. In regeneration, God renews sinners so that they can begin to grow in *practical* holiness. This distinction had been lost in medieval Catholicism. As a result, people confused justification with sanctification, which is why they thought their justification before God was dependent, at least in part, on their own personal holiness.

3. *The Imputed Righteousness of Christ*

Third, the Reformers insisted on the *imputed righteousness of Christ* rather than some sort of *infused righteousness*. Roman Catholicism taught that believers were infused with righteousness from God, which enabled them to live holy lives and then be progressively justified. By contrast, the Re-

formers taught that good works contribute nothing to one's justification before God. Instead, He justifies sinners solely on the basis of Christ's perfect righteousness, which is credited to them. Thus, salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, apart from any good works that believers might perform (see Eph. 2:8–9).

Up to this point, McGrath's analysis is helpful—since these three distinctives enable us to think more precisely about what the Reformers taught. In fact, we will return to these characteristics throughout this book. But problems arise when McGrath asks whether any pre-Reformation Christians taught these same doctrines.²² In his survey of the first fifteen centuries of church history, McGrath claims no such theologian or writer can be found who taught these distinctives. On that basis, he concludes that no one, either in the patristic age (the era of the church fathers) or the medieval age, anticipated the Reformers' understanding of justification. According to McGrath, the Reformation doctrine of *sola fide* was a theological innovation introduced in the sixteenth century.

THE IMPLICATIONS OF MCGRATH'S POSITION

McGrath is aware that his conclusions raise troubling questions about the historical orthodoxy of the Protestant teaching on justification.²³ Yet he ultimately dismisses such questions as having “little relevance today.”²⁴ However, we cannot dismiss this issue easily. The Reformers recognized the critical importance of what was at stake, because they understood that the doctrine of *sola fide* stands at the heart of the gospel. As a result, when their Roman Catholic opponents

charged them with heretical innovation, they treated those allegations seriously and took time to respond carefully.

The challenges created by McGrath's claim can be seen in the way he is favorably cited by critics of the Reformation. Contemporary Roman Catholic apologists often point to McGrath's work as an example of a Protestant scholar who acknowledges the novelty, and nonhistorical nature, of *sola fide*.²⁵ Francis Beckwith, for example, notes that the writings of Alister McGrath featured prominently in convincing him that the Reformation understanding of justification lacked authentic historical roots. As Beckwith recounts, "The idea, that the Reformation's view of forensic justification was a virtual theological innovation, is put forth even more strongly by none other than the great theologian and Oxford professor, Alister McGrath."²⁶ Convinced that the Reformers introduced a new understanding of justification into church history, Beckwith rejected Protestantism in favor of a Roman Catholic position that, he claims, better fits the writings and teachings of the pre-Reformation church.²⁷ Though Beckwith's reasons for returning to Rome were broader than just a rejection of justification by faith alone, it is evident that McGrath's arguments served as an important catalyst in his thinking.

LOOKING FOR THE GOSPEL BEFORE THE REFORMATION

The notion that "faith alone" is a sixteenth-century innovation raises significant questions, especially for those who embrace the Reformation principle of *sola fide*. If the evangelical understanding of the gospel is only 500 years old, on what grounds

can Protestants defend their belief in forensic justification, the distinction between justification and regeneration, or the imputed righteousness of Christ? Further, what are Protestants to conclude about those who lived during the first 1,500 years of church history, before the Reformation? Answering such questions becomes difficult if the Protestant understanding of the gospel only dates back to the sixteenth century.

However, if it can be shown that the Reformation understanding of justification was in fact *articulated* by the biblical authors and subsequently *anticipated* by pre-Reformation church leaders, the challenges raised by various opponents quickly evaporate. McGrath has boldly asserted that, in church history, there are no forerunners to the Reformation—not even a single theologian “who can be shown to have anticipated one or more of the characteristic and distinctive features of the Reformation doctrines of justification.”²⁸ It is our goal to investigate that claim, using the very criteria he provides regarding the primary doctrinal distinctives of *sola fide*: forensic justification, a distinction between justification and sanctification, and the imputed righteousness of Christ.



CHAPTER TWO

REGAINING BIBLICAL CLARITY



The year was 1505 when a young Martin Luther, then a student in law school, was nearly struck by lightning while walking through the German countryside. Panicked, he cried out, “Saint Anne, spare me and I will become a monk.” True to his word, Luther left his pursuit of law and joined the Augustinian monastery in Erfurt.

The fear of death had prompted Luther to become a monk, and for the next decade, the fear of divine judgment would continue to haunt him. In an attempt to calm those fears, Luther tried fervently to earn God’s favor through good works and acts of penance. Yet the harder he worked, the more frustrated he became because he recognized he could never be good enough to atone for his sin and appease God’s wrath. He later recounted that he came to hate the phrase “the righteousness of God” because in it he saw nothing but his own condemnation. Luther understood that God’s righteous standard is perfection (see Matt. 5:48), and he knew that he fell far short of it (see Rom. 3:23).

It wasn't until a number of years later, as he lectured through the books of Psalms, Romans, and Galatians, that Luther's eyes were opened to the truth of the gospel. He came to understand that the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel (Rom. 1:16–17) speaks not only of God's perfect standard, but also of His righteous provision—in which the righteousness of Christ is accounted to those who embrace Him in saving faith (Rom. 3:21–4:5). For the first time in his life, this desperate monk realized that forgiveness for sin and a right standing before God depended not on his own self-effort, but solely on the finished work of Christ. In that moment, through the working of the Holy Spirit, Luther experienced the glorious truth and transforming power of God's saving grace.

Luther's testimony vividly illustrates the reality that for him and his fellow Protestants, the Reformation was deeply personal. It was not an esoteric discussion about irrelevant philosophical musings. Rather, it concerned the means by which sinners might be reconciled to God by grace through faith in Christ. The heart of gospel itself was at stake (see Gal. 2:5). Having been personally transformed by the truth of the gospel, the Reformers took a bold stand to defend the good news and preach it to others.

THE BIBLE: THE REFORMERS' STARTING POINT

More than anything else, the Reformers¹ wanted their teachings to be grounded in the Bible. Their theological conclusions were driven by an unwavering commitment to the authority of Christ and His Word above any other authority.

In this regard, the *Geneva Confession* of 1536 is representative: “We affirm that we desire to follow Scripture alone as the rule of faith and religion.”² Though they appreciated and used the writings of the church fathers, the Reformers viewed the Bible as their final authority. As Luther explained in 1519 to his Catholic opponent Johann Eck, all nonbiblical writers must be evaluated “by the authority of the canonical books” of Scripture.³

It was the Reformers’ commitment to Scripture as the ultimate authority that compelled them to teach the doctrine of *sola fide*. In other words, they taught justification by faith alone because they were convinced it was revealed clearly in Scripture. After providing an extensive survey of biblical passages regarding justification, Martin Chemnitz—known as the second “Martin” of Lutheranism—declares, “The doctrine of justification itself will be plain and clear, if only we are allowed to seek and judge it from the divine oracles and not from the philosophical opinions of reason.”⁴ John Calvin similarly addresses the topic by amassing “many clear testimonies of Scripture to confirm” his assertions in his *Institutes*.⁵

Although the Reformers sought secondary affirmation from the writings of the church fathers, it was Scripture that served as the ultimate foundation for their theological claims.⁶ Convinced that the purity of the church was at stake,⁷ and that the gospel they preached was overwhelmingly supported by the biblical text, they proclaimed it with bold confidence, regardless of whether it departed from medieval Roman Catholic tradition. Commenting on Galatians 1:6–9, for instance, Luther noted that “everyone must obey, and be subject to” the Scriptures. He stated further,

The pope, Luther, Augustine, [or even] an angel from heaven—these should not be masters, judges or arbiters, but only witnesses, disciples, and confessors of Scripture. Nor should any doctrine be taught or heard in the church except the pure Word of God. Otherwise, let the teachers and the hearers be accursed along with their doctrine.⁸

It was to Scripture that the Reformers repeatedly turned in defending their understanding of justification, and it is there that we must begin.

SALVATION BY GRACE THROUGH FAITH

The fact that believers are saved by grace through faith apart from works is reiterated in many places throughout the New Testament. Near the beginning of His ministry, Jesus says of Himself that “whoever believes will in Him have eternal life” (John 3:15; see also 20:31). Later, He tells a story about a Pharisee and a tax collector to demonstrate that the grace of justification is given not to those who look religious on the outside but to those who recognize their utter unworthiness and cry out to God for mercy (Luke 18:10–14). The fact that salvation is not contingent upon good works is seen perhaps most vividly at the cross, when Jesus tells the thief who believed, “Today you shall be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). The thief on the cross was saved even though he had no opportunity to perform good deeds.

If good works were the basis for justification, the apostle Paul would have had much to boast about (Phil. 3:4–6). Yet, he recognized that his self-righteous efforts were all worthless

and that the only righteousness that mattered was that given to him through faith in Christ. As he explains to the believers in Philippi, “I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord . . . not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith” (Phil. 3:8–9).

In his missionary journeys, Paul boldly preached the good news of divine forgiveness freely extended to sinners by grace through faith in Christ. To an audience at the synagogue in Psidian Antioch, he declares, “Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man [Jesus] is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38–39 NKJV). When false teachers threatened the purity of that gospel message, by insisting that certain religious works were necessary for salvation (Acts 15:1, 5), Paul refused to yield to them for even a moment (Gal. 2:5). The issue came to a head at the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, where the apostle Peter defended Paul by publicly affirming that the hearts of sinners are cleansed “by faith” and that believers are saved solely “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:9–11).

For the rest of Paul’s missionary career, the gospel of grace through faith alone, apart from works, was a repeated theme. The former Pharisee was clear in his teaching: those seeking to add legalistic works to the gospel were guilty of frustrating grace (Gal. 2:21; Rom. 11:6) and preaching another gospel (Gal. 1:6–9). Conversely, salvation is God’s free gift to those who believe. As Paul tells the Ephesians, “For by grace you have

been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). He similarly explains to the church in Rome, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law. . . . To the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 3:28; 4:5). Near the end of his life, Paul reiterates these truths to Titus, who was ministering on the island of Crete, “[God] saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5–7).

As these and similar passages demonstrate, the New Testament presents salvation as being freely given to those who embrace the Lord Jesus in saving faith. Their sins are forgiven not on account of their good deeds, but solely on the basis of Christ’s redemptive work. It was from these texts, and others like them, that the Reformers derived their commitment to preach the good news of salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone, so that all glory may be given to God alone.

At this point, we are ready to dig deeper into the writings of some of the leading Reformers, to learn more about their understanding of the doctrine of justification. In the previous chapter, we learned about three characteristics of their position: (1) forensic justification, (2) a distinction between justification and sanctification (or regeneration), and (3) the imputed righteousness of Christ. In the remainder of this

chapter, we will consider the writings of men like Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin to see how they defined and defended these three aspects of Protestant doctrine. In particular, we will pay close attention to the biblical arguments they used to make the case that sinners are justified by grace through faith alone.

THE FORENSIC NATURE OF JUSTIFICATION

When we consider the writings of these leading Reformers, we see that they understood justification to be the forensic declaration of God in which He, as the supreme Judge, pardons sinners by forgiving their sin and declaring them to be righteous. The assertion that “to be justified” means “to be declared righteous” stood in sharp contrast to the prevailing Roman Catholic teaching of the sixteenth century. Most Roman Catholics viewed justification as a formative process that involved sinners being “made righteous” over the course of their entire lives. Consequently, in the Roman Catholic view, believers contributed to their justification through the acts of penance and good works they performed. The Reformers rejected that notion, arguing instead that justification is an immediate change in the sinner’s status before God, to which believers contribute nothing. It is entirely a work of God.

The term *forensic* refers to the law court. God as Judge declares sinners to be righteous because Jesus’ righteousness has been credited, or imputed, to them. Though they deserve condemnation on account of their guilt, God views them as righteous because they are clothed in the perfect righteousness of His Son. They receive this righteousness not because

of anything they have done, but because they have been united to Christ through faith in Him.

A forensic understanding of justification is particularly clear in the writings of Philip Melanchthon and John Calvin. Melanchthon pictured the sinner standing before a divine tribunal. He writes, “Certainly no man in God’s court is without sin. . . . All men must come before God through the Mediator Jesus Christ, and must first receive forgiveness of sins and acceptance for the sake of the Lord Christ.”⁹ Although worthy of condemnation on account of their own works, believers are forgiven by the divine Judge and declared to be righteous. This is possible because they are “accounted just by God on account of Christ when [they] believe.”¹⁰

In his *Institutes*, Calvin also used law court imagery to describe justification. He writes, “Our discourse is concerned with the justice not of a human court but of a heavenly tribunal, lest we measure by our own small measure the integrity of works needed to satisfy the divine judgment.”¹¹ He later adds that everyone must admit their guilt before “the Heavenly Judge.”¹² Like Melanchthon, Calvin understood that, in themselves, sinners can do nothing to earn God’s favor or appease His wrath. For believers, their righteous standing before the divine Judge is possible only because they are covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ. As Calvin explains, “Justified by faith is he who, excluded from the righteousness of works, grasps the righteousness of Christ through faith, and clothed in it, appears in God’s sight not as a sinner but as a righteous man.”¹³

Melanchthon and Calvin give us two clear examples of a Reformation understanding of the forensic nature of justification.¹⁴ In the court of heaven, sinners are guilty and worthy

of condemnation. Even their self-righteous works are like filthy rags in the sight of a holy God (see Isa. 64:6). Yet by grace through faith in Christ, sinners are pardoned by the heavenly Judge and declared to be righteous. Being justified, therefore, means to be acquitted of sin and accepted by God as if we were righteous, because we are clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ.¹⁵

DEFENDING FORENSIC JUSTIFICATION

Now that we understand that the Reformers saw justification as a forensic declaration of righteousness, we are ready to explore the biblical underpinnings of their teachings. The Reformers insisted that “to be justified” meant “to be declared righteous” in terms of a person’s status before God. In order to support their doctrinal position, they put forward a number of Scripture-based arguments. Let’s consider several of them briefly.

First, the Reformers looked to the Old Testament, asserting that the New Testament authors based their understanding of justification on what was previously revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures. They noted the forensic nature of the justification language in the Old Testament, where forms of the word *šādaq* (meaning “to be just” or “righteous”), refer to a declaration of righteousness. As Melancthon explains, “According to the Hebrew usage of the term, *to justify* is *to pronounce* or *to consider just*.”¹⁶ Calvin similarly notes that the phrase “to be justified” derives its meaning “from legal usage” in the Old Testament.¹⁷ Chemnitz uses the same argument by appealing to the Septuagint—the ancient Greek translation

of the Hebrew Old Testament—looking specifically at instances where the translators used the Greek word *dikaioō* (“to justify”) to translate *šādaq* in terms of a forensic declaration of righteousness (in passages like Gen. 44:16; Deut. 25:1; 2 Sam. 15:4; 1 Kings 8:32; Job 13:18; 27:5; 32:2; 40:8; Ps. 51:4; Prov. 17:15; and Isa. 5:23; 43:9, 26).¹⁸ Chemnitz observed in the New Testament the “earnest care the apostles bestowed, lest the Hebrew character of the word ‘justify’ which is less well known in other languages, should either disturb or obscure the doctrine.”¹⁹ He also cited examples from Acts 13:38–39; 15:11; Romans 3:24; 4; 5:10–11, 19; Galatians 2:16; and Ephesians 2:5 to demonstrate that the New Testament writers fully understood—and preserved—the forensic quality of the Hebrew terms.²⁰ According to the Reformers, the apostles’ use of the verb “to justify” in the New Testament reflected their understanding of the parallel concept from the Hebrew Old Testament.

Second, the Reformers defended a forensic understanding of justification by noting places in the New Testament where *justification* is directly contrasted with *condemnation*. In Romans 8:33–34, for example, Paul asks rhetorically, “Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns?” Paul’s use of the courtroom metaphor here is evident, with an imaginary accuser bringing legal charges against God’s elect. Yet the accusations carry no weight because no one can condemn those whom God has justified. The direct contrast between the terms *justifies* and *condemns* indicates that both should be understood as legal declarations.

In his *Institutes*, Calvin uses this Pauline antithesis to

argue that justification is forensic since the apostle contrasts acquittal with accusation.²¹ Commenting on Romans 5:17, Luther states, “As the sin of the one [Adam] becomes known through our condemnation without any actual sin of our own, so the grace of the other is made known by this that His [Christ’s] righteousness is granted to us without our merit.”²² As sinners are condemned (declared guilty) through Adam, believers are justified (declared righteous) through Christ. In this way, justification (acquittal) is accurately defined in light of its opposite (condemnation).

Third, the Reformers supported their understanding that “to justify” means “to declare righteous” and not “to make righteous” by pointing to places in Scripture where God is said to be justified. Clearly, God cannot be “made righteous,” since He is already morally perfect. But He can be “declared righteous” by those who recognize and praise Him for His absolute holiness. In 1 Timothy 3:16, Paul applies the language of justification to the Lord Jesus: “Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory” (NKJV). Calvin understood that here the point is that Jesus was *shown* or *declared* to be righteous, not *made* righteous.²³ Luke 7:29 communicates something similar. Luke writes, “And when all the people heard Him, even the tax collectors justified God, having been baptized with the baptism of John” (NKJV). Calvin points out that the tax collectors did not make God righteous, but rather declared His righteousness.²⁴

Fourth, the Reformers pointed to 1 Corinthians 4:3–4 for further evidence of the declarative, forensic nature of

justification. In that passage, Paul writes, “But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord” (NKJV). Paul can declare himself to be righteous and even seek to be vindicated by a human court, but the only declaration of righteousness that truly matters is that which comes from God on the behalf of sinners. That Paul will be “examined” by the divine Judge, and “justified” by Him, indicates that he understood justification in forensic terms.²⁵ Rather than basing his confidence in the opinions of men, he appeals to the only opinion that matters: God’s verdict.

Fifth, the Reformers believed the whole of Paul’s teaching in the book of Romans necessitates a forensic understanding of justification.²⁶ As the epistle of Romans explains, both Jews and Gentiles stand condemned before the law of God, the standard of which is perfection.²⁷ If sinners are to avoid the punishment they rightly deserve, they must seek His pardon. Such assumes a forensic understanding of justification in which sins are forgiven and the guilty acquitted by the divine Judge. Paul’s argument hinges on the fact that justification is granted by faith apart from works. But that is incompatible with the notion that justification consists of a gradual moral transformation that includes works.²⁸

Based on these lines of evidence, the Reformers built a biblical case for a forensic understanding of justification, asserting that it must be understood as *declarative* rather than *transformative*.²⁹ Their appeal to history (addressed in the next chapter) was secondary to the arguments they derived from the Word of God. Whether or not their position was

in agreement with the church fathers (a point they debated with their Roman Catholic opponents), their primary concern was to set their interpretations squarely in line with the teachings of Paul and the rest of Scripture.

But what about the distinction they made between justification and sanctification, and about the imputed righteousness of Christ? What passages of Scripture did the Reformers use to define and defend these doctrines? Turn the page, and we will continue our exploration.