HOW DID WE GET HERE?

Tracing Christian Doctrine Through Church History

JUSTIFICATION

How is a person made right with God?

Reading Packet

Reading 1 - Augustine: Grace Makes the Ungodly Righteous

Augustine, On the Spirit and the Letter (early 5th century) - condensed reading

Augustine reads Paul's contrast between law and grace as a contrast between an external command and the inward gift of the Holy Spirit. God's law can tell sinners what righteousness requires, but fallen human beings need more than instruction. Grace changes the heart so that the person begins to love and do what God commands.

Accordingly, Augustine often uses justification language to include God's work of making a sinner righteous, not only a judicial declaration. Forgiveness and renewal belong together. Even the first movement of faith is a gift of grace rather than a self-generated achievement that earns God's favor.

This account deeply shaped medieval Western theology. The later Reformation dispute would ask whether justification itself is the transformation of the person by infused grace or God's forensic declaration that the believer is righteous in Christ, with renewal following as a distinct but inseparable work.

Reading 2 - Thomas Aquinas: The Movement from Sin to Righteousness

Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, First Part of the Second Part, Question 113 (13th century) - condensed reading

Aquinas describes the justification of the ungodly as a movement produced by God. The sinner is moved from a state of sin toward righteousness through the infusion of grace. Because human beings are rational creatures, this movement ordinarily includes acts of the will: faith, turning toward God, and turning away from sin.

God remains the first cause of the entire process. Human movement does not precede grace as an independent contribution that forces God to respond. Rather, grace enables and produces the willing response of the person. The remission of sins and the inward gift of righteousness belong to one divinely caused transition.

Aquinas therefore gives a carefully developed version of the Augustinian tradition. Justification is gracious from beginning to end, yet the righteousness given is also a real quality in the believer. This becomes one of the main points challenged by the Reformers.

Reading 3 - Martin Luther: An Alien Righteousness Received by Faith

Martin Luther, writings on Romans and Galatians and sermons on the two kinds of righteousness - condensed reading

Luther's breakthrough is the claim that the righteousness by which a sinner stands accepted before God is fundamentally Christ's righteousness, not the moral quality of the believer. It is 'alien' because it comes from outside the sinner. God gives Christ and his benefits to the believer, and faith receives what God promises.

Faith is not treated as a virtuous work that earns justification. Its significance lies in its object. Faith clings to Christ, and the believer is counted righteous because of Christ. Good works necessarily follow living faith, but they are the fruit and evidence of acceptance rather than the basis of the verdict.

Luther does not oppose justification to transformation. He expects the justified believer to be renewed in love and good works. His decisive ordering, however, is that God's favorable verdict and gift in Christ come before the believer's moral improvement and provide its foundation.

Reading 4 - The Council of Trent: Catholic Justification at the Reformation

Council of Trent, Session VI, Decree on Justification (1547) - condensed reading

Trent rejects both human self-salvation and the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone as the council understood it. The beginning of justification is entirely dependent on God's prevenient grace through Christ. No natural work performed before grace can merit the grace of justification.

Justification includes both remission of sins and the sanctification and renewal of the inner person. Faith is necessary, but it is not alone. The person, enabled by grace, receives and cooperates with God's transforming gift through faith, hope, love, repentance, and baptism.

Trent also speaks of growth in the righteousness received and of good works performed in grace as truly pleasing to God. Yet it insists that Christian merit itself depends on Christ and on grace. The debate with Protestants is therefore not grace versus works in a simple sense, but the nature of justification, the role of faith, and whether the righteousness that grounds acceptance is imputed or inwardly infused.

Reading 5 - John Calvin: Justification as God's Gracious Verdict

John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, Book III, chapters 11-18 (1559) - condensed reading

Calvin defines justification as God's acceptance of the sinner as righteous by forgiveness and by the righteousness of Christ. The believer does not bring an adequate righteousness to God. Christ's obedience is the basis of the verdict, and faith is the means by which the believer receives Christ.

Calvin repeatedly insists that justification and sanctification must not be separated in Christian life. The same Christ who justifies also renews. Yet they must be distinguished in doctrine so that the believer's imperfect renewal is never made the ground of peace with God.

This distinction protects assurance. If acceptance rests on the quality of one's present obedience, the conscience can never find a stable verdict. If acceptance rests on Christ, the believer can pursue holiness as a response to grace rather than as an attempt to complete the basis of justification.

Reading 6 - Westminster: Justification by Christ's Righteousness

Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter 11 (1646) - condensed reading

Westminster says that God justifies those he calls, not by making their works the ground of acceptance, but by pardoning sin and accounting them righteous. The righteousness credited to believers is Christ's obedience and satisfaction, received by faith.

Faith is the alone instrument of justification, but the faith that justifies is never alone in the justified person. It is accompanied by the other saving graces and is not dead faith. The confession therefore rejects both meritorious works as the basis of justification and an empty profession that produces no transformed life.

The confession also locates justification within union with Christ and God's eternal purpose. Yet the verdict is applied in time when the Spirit enables the person to believe. The result is a classic Reformed statement of forensic justification joined inseparably to sanctification.

Reading 7 - Jonathan Edwards: Faith Alone, Yet Faith Unites to Christ

Jonathan Edwards, Justification by Faith Alone (1738) - condensed reading

Edwards defends the Reformation doctrine that sinners are justified by faith apart from the merit of their own obedience. At the same time, he wants to explain why Scripture so often connects salvation with perseverance, love, and evangelical obedience.

His answer centers on union with Christ. Faith does not justify because the act of believing has moral worth sufficient to purchase God's favor. Faith is the means by which the sinner is united to Christ, and therefore comes to possess an interest in Christ's righteousness and saving benefits.

Edwards can consequently speak strongly about the necessity of a living, persevering faith without making later obedience the price paid for justification. The believer's new life demonstrates the reality of union with Christ; it does not replace Christ as the ground of acceptance.

Reading 8 - John Stott: The Cross and the Verdict of Justification

John R. W. Stott, The Cross of Christ - summary of copyrighted material

Stott presents justification within the larger logic of the cross. God does not simply ignore guilt or lower the moral seriousness of sin. In Christ, God acts to deal with sin justly and graciously, so that forgiveness is grounded in Christ's saving work rather than divine indifference.

Stott emphasizes substitution: Christ stands in the place of sinners, bears judgment, and provides the basis on which God can justify the ungodly. The Christian verdict is therefore not a declaration that believers have already become morally perfect. It is God's gracious judgment concerning those who are in Christ.

That verdict then creates a new life of gratitude and obedience. Justification and sanctification are not competitors. The distinction protects the gospel's order: acceptance rests on Christ, and transformed living follows from acceptance.