## Chapter 9: Forgiveness and Justification

### А. Terminology

The Bible contains various terms that refer to forgiveness and justification. The primary Greek terms denoting forgiveness are ἄφεσις (*aphesis*), i.е., “forgiveness,” καταλλαγή (*katallage*)*,* i.е., “reconciliation,” and ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*), i.е., “propitiation.” Justification is expressed by the Hebrew צָדַק (*tsadak*) and the Greek δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*).

The word ἄφεσις (*aphesis*) has several connotations. It could indicate “liberation,” “release,” “forgiveness,” or “cancellation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) It occurs in the sense of “liberation” in Luke 4:18: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me… to proclaim release (ἄφεσις) to the captives… to set free (ἄφεσις) those who are oppressed.” Acts 10:43 provides an example of the sense “forgiveness”: “Everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness (ἄφεσις) of sins.” The connection between these meanings is that forgiveness is “liberation” or “release” from the guilt and consequences of sin.

According to God’s Word, the shedding of blood is necessary for granting forgiveness. Several biblical texts bring this out, such as Revelation 1:5 and Hebrews 9:22. What is the connection here? We must recall that the punishment for sin is death (see Ezek 18:4 and Rom 6:23). Leviticus 17 also provides insight:

Any man from the house of Israel, or from the aliens who sojourn among them, who eats any blood, I will set My face against that person who eats blood and will cut him off from among his people. For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you on the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood by reason of the life that makes atonement (Lev 17:10-11).

Blood symbolizes death, i.e., life poured out. Therefore, through the shedding of blood, God’s punishment for sin, that is, “death,” is satisfied.

The term καταλλαγή (*katallage*) denotes “reconciliation” and is found three times in Romans 5:10-11 – both in verbal and nominal forms.[[2]](#footnote-2) We read, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation.” The association between justification and reconciliation is plain – justification, which is a right standing before God, leads to peace with God.

The passage in 2 Corinthians 5:18-20 is key as well:

Now all {these} things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and He has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

An important point to notice here is that in Christ, God has already reconciled the world to Himself, that is, He has already accomplished everything necessary for justifying sinners. However, at the conclusion of this passage, Paul summons the readers to “be reconciled to God.” This indicates that persons must respond to God’s initiative and come to Him in repentance and faith to obtain forgiveness of sins and justification before Him.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The Greek term ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) is rendered “propitiation,” implying “satisfaction.” The question, then, arises, “Why does God need to be propitiated?”[[4]](#footnote-4) Some answer that propitiation is necessary because God’s law has been broken and, therefore, He must receive full retribution for the transgressions. Others add that propitiation also includes satisfying God’s wrath for sin. Both ideas enjoy biblical support.

The mercy seat on the ark of the covenant is an excellent example of the idea of propitiation. The mercy seat was the place where the blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled to secure Israel’s forgiveness before God. It is significant to note that in Hebrews 9:5, the word ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*) is used in reference to the mercy seat. In addition, the verbal form of ἱλαστήριον (*hilasterion*)is found in Luke 18:13 and translated there “be merciful.” In that text as well, the emphasis is on propitiation for the sinner before God.

Although the Old Testament speaks of propitiation only metaphorically, the New Testament reveals that true propitiation has come in the person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. He is both the propitiatory sacrifice for sins, and the priest who offers the sacrifice. Finally, this term appears in the writings of Paul (Rom 3:25) and John (1 Jn 2:2; 4:10), where it refers to the propitiation made by the shed blood of Jesus.

The most recognized term for righteousness in the Old Testament is צָדַק (*tsadak*)*.* Its original meaning was “straight.”[[5]](#footnote-5) It describes a standard that serves to measure items. For example: “You shall have just balances, just weights, a just ephah, and a just hin” (Lev 19:36). The word “just” translates the Hebrew צָדַק (*tsadak*).

The Greek term for righteousness, δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*), derives from the word δίκη (*dike*) meaning “punishment.”[[6]](#footnote-6) The Greeks personified this idea in one of their gods – Dike, who represented the principle of law and order.

Often, δίκη (*dike*) implied observance of the customs of Greek society, but it could also connote virtuous living in general.[[7]](#footnote-7) The idea of δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*) differed from the Hebrew צָדַק (*tsadak*) in that the Old Testament required conformity not to societal expectations, but to the will of God. In Old Testament thought, righteousness was a standard based not on human tradition, but on God’s commandments. Therefore, when in the New Testament or the Septuagint we meet up with the term δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*), it draws its meaning from the Hebrew term צָדַק (*tsadak*), i.е., conformity to Yahweh’s laws.

### B. Biblical Survey and the Intertestamental Period

**1. Old Testament**

In the Old Testament, righteousness was closely connected with keeping the Mosaic Law. Yahweh spoke through Moses, “So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them” (Lev 18:5). God repeated this principle later in Israel’s history: “I gave them My statutes and informed them of My ordinances, by which, if a man observes them, he will live” (Ezek 20:11, сf. 20:13, 21). Nehemiah repeats it again in his day “(Israel) did not listen to Your commandments but sinned against Your ordinances, by which if a man observes them he shall live” (Neh 9:29).

The Old Testament also reveals, however, that people are incapable of attaining to perfect righteousness through the Law: “Indeed, there is not a righteous man on earth who {continually} does good and who never sins” (Ecc 7:20). The psalmist laments, “They have all turned aside, together they have become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one” (Ps 14:3), and, “Do not enter into judgment with Your servant, for in Your sight no man living is righteous” (Ps 143:2). Therefore, the Lord, who desires to save people (Ezek 18:32; 33:11), must provide humanity with another way to find acceptance with Him.

It is interesting to note that from the very beginning of human history, worshipers of God practiced animal sacrifice. God received such offerings from Abel (Gen 4:4), Noah (Gen 8:20), and Job (Job 42:7-9). Sacrifices were offered not only in thanksgiving, but also for propitiation. In addition, through the offering of the Passover Lamb, Israel was spared from the hand of the “destroyer” (Ex 12:23). Each generation in Israel was obligated to observe the Passover and refrain from work during that time (Lev 23:4-8).

Eventually, Yahweh established a very comprehensive sacrificial system (Lev 1-6) and appointed priests and articles for performance of the rites (Ex 25-40). All sacrifices offered to the Lord must be without defect (Lev 3:1; 4:3; 4:32; 6:6; 14:10). Through the sacrificial system, Yahweh provided forgiveness for His people (Lev 9:7).

Within the ark of the covenant lay the Mosaic Law, and the mercy seat, which served as the place of propitiation, was placed over it (Ex 25:17-22). This meant that the symbol of redemption from sin lay between the Law, which condemned the people, and the presence of Yahweh. The cover of the ark, that is, the mercy seat, was sprinkled with blood once a year by the high priest on the Day of Atonement (Lev 16:29-34). Work was strictly forbidden on that day (Lev 23:26-32).

Nevertheless, the most direct reference to obtaining righteousness before God is found before the giving of the Law or the institution of the sacrificial system. In Genesis 15:6, Abraham responded to God’s promise to give him offspring: “Then he believed in Yahweh; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Here, righteousness came not through observance of law, but by an act of faith.

The Psalms present us with many examples of crying to the Lord for forgiveness: “Forgive our sins for Your name's sake” (Ps 79:9; сf. Ps 25:7, 11; 41:4). The psalmist also relates that God indeed forgave sin (Ps 84:3) and continues to do so: “Who pardons all your iniquities…. As far as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us” (Ps 103:3, 12). In light of God’s mercy, the psalmist exclaims, “How blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered! How blessed is the man to whom Yahweh does not impute iniquity” (Ps 32:1-2).

In the writings of the prophets, we again see God’s willingness to forgive the sin of His people: “I, even I, am the one who wipes out your transgressions for My own sake, and I will not remember your sins” (Isa 43:25). Forgiveness of sins is part of the new covenant that Yahweh will make with Israel “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jer 31:34, ср. Jer 33:8; Isa 33:24). The Old Testament presents forgiveness in pictorial fashion: God has “cast all my sins behind (His) back” (Isa 38:17), and, “He will tread our iniquities under foot. Yes, You will cast all their sins into the depths of the sea” (Mic 7:19).

The prophets also speak of righteousness as a gift from God. Isaiah especially emphasizes this truth: “In Yahweh all the offspring of Israel will be justified and will glory” (Isa 45:25), “’Their vindication is from Me,’ declares Yahweh” (Isa 54:17), and, “He has clothed me with garments of salvation, He has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness” (Isa 61:10). Wrapping someone in a robe of righteousness is dramatized in Zechariah 3:3-5, where Joshua the priest is stripped of his “filthy garments,” and clothed in “festal robes.”

Also important to note is that God Himself became the righteousness of His people. Jeremiah declares, “Yahweh our righteousness” (Jer 23:6; сf. Jer 33:16). Moreover, Daniel writes that with the advent of Messiah, the time will come “to finish the transgression, to make an end of sin, to make atonement for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness” (Dan 9:24-25).

Under the figure of the “Suffering Servant of Yahweh,” Isaiah describes how Messiah will accomplish His work of justification. He will bring both Jews and Gentiles to God (Isa 49:5-7; 52:15). He will suffer (Isa 50:6) and by means of His suffering, will provide justification: “By His knowledge the Righteous One, My Servant, will justify the many, as He will bear their iniquities” (Isa 53:11).

The prophet Habakkuk picks up on the theme of Genesis 15:6 – that righteousness comes by faith: “The righteous will live by his faith (אְֶמוּנָה)” (Hab 2:4). The term אְֶמוּנָה (*amunah*) typically denotes “faithfulness” and usually refers to God’s faithfulness (see Deut 32:4), but sometimes to a person’s faithfulness as well (Prov 12:22).[[8]](#footnote-8) Therefore, it would also be proper to translate Habakkuk 2:4 as follows: The righteous will live by his faithfulness (אְֶמוּנָה). This latter translation, though, differs from Paul’s quotation of Habakkuk 2:4 in Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11.

**2. Intertestamental Period**

After the destruction of the temple and discontinuation of the sacrificial system, the Jews needed to find another means for obtaining forgiveness of sins and justification before God.[[9]](#footnote-9) Several methods were employed.

Some saw redemption through personal suffering. For example: “Happy is the man whom the Lord remembereth with reproving, and whom He restraineth from the way of evil with strokes, that he may be cleansed from sin, that it may not be multiplied (*Ps Sol,* 10.1), and, “Then therefore were they chastened that they might be sanctified (*2 Baruch,* 13.10, сf. *Tobit,* 1.5; 13.2-9; *2 Macc,* 6.12-17).

Another method was by the vicarious suffering of the martyrs: “Our country was purified, they having as it were become a ransom for our nation’s sin; and through the blood of these righteous men and the propitiation of their death, the divine Providence delivered Israel that before was evil entreated” (*4 Macc,* 17.22).

Often, it was supposed that good works would justify one before the Lord. In the *Psalms of Solomon*, we read, “He maketh atonement for (sins of) ignorance by fasting and afflicting his soul, and the Lord counteth guiltless every pious man and his house” (*Ps Sol,* 3.9-10). Furthermore, the book of *Sirach* regards obedience as a substitute for sacrifice: “He that keepeth the law multiplieth offerings; he sacrificeth a peace-offering that heedeth the commandments” (*Sirach,* 35.1-2). Other alternatives were confession of sin before God (*Baruch,* 1.15-3:8; *The Prayer of Azariah*), obtaining wisdom (*1 Enoch,* 81.5-82.3; *Sirach,* 24.23-24) or awaiting God’s eschatological cleansing (*1 Enoch,* 10.20; *1QS*, 4.20-22).

The intertestamental writers also debated the question of who would be Yahweh’s instrument of bringing salvation to His people.[[10]](#footnote-10) We hasten to mention, though, that they were expecting a political deliverance more than a spiritual salvation. Among those expected to deliver Israel were: King David (*Ps Sol,* 17), i.е., the Messiah (*4 Ezra, 2 Baruch*), a coming priest (*Testament of Levi,* 14-18; *Ps Sol* 2.3; 8.11-13) or both together (*1QS*, 9.11; *CD*, 20.1; *1QSa*, 2.11-21; *Sirach,* 45.23-26; 47.1-11). Along with these, some expected the appearance of a coming prophet (*1QS*, 9.11; *4QTestimonia*).

Finally, in the first book of Enoch, we often encounter a heavenly Son of Man, who will be an eschatological judge and deliverer for Israel (*1 Enoch,* 46.1-3; 47; 48.8-10; 49.3-4; 62.2-3). Sometimes he is identified with the Suffering Servant (*1 Enoch*), but at times he is the Servant’s savior (*Wisdom Sol,* 2, 5).

In conclusion, we will draw on the research of Donald Carson, who seeks to discover whether in the intertestamental period the Jews sought salvation through their covenant relationship with Yahweh, or through personal obedience.[[11]](#footnote-11) He concluded that, as a rule, the Jews leaned toward the second option. The Qumran community, for example, taught that God accepts people based on their personal dedication to Him. We see the same in the books: *Joseph and Aseneth*, *The Lives of Adam and Eve*, *Tobit*, *Judith*, and the additions to Daniel and Esther. The following writings speak more of salvation through the covenant: *4 Ezra*, *Jubilees*, *2 Baruch*, and the *Apocalypse of Zechariah*, yet even in these books, one may forfeit his or her place in the covenant through personal disobedience.

**3. New Testament**

At the beginning of the New Testament era, most first-century Jews believed that salvation came through good works. Therefore, when Jesus arrived He saw the need to correct this misconception. He taught His disciples that if one seeks justification through the Law, one must perfectly observe the Law: “For I say to you that unless your righteousness surpasses {that} of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matt 5:20).

However, just as the Old Testament asserted, Jesus also affirmed that no one can perfectly keep God’s commands, but all stand in need of God’s mercy. He addresses those “who trusted in themselves that they were righteous” in the following parable:

Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: “God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.” But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me, the sinner!” I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other (Lk 18:10-14).

We must underscore another instance where Jesus showed that justification by the Law was unattainable. A certain one approached Him with the question: “Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?” (Matt 19:16). Jesus responded that he must not only keep the whole Law, but also sell all his possessions and follow Him. When this individual went away crestfallen, Jesus shocked His disciples with the following statement:

When the disciples heard {this,} they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” And looking at {them} Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt 19:25-26).

From the very beginning of His earthly life, Jesus was declared the Savior from sins (Matt 1:21). He announced that He would give His life “a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). During the first Lord’s Supper, Jesus revealed that He was establishing a new covenant with His disciples through His shed blood (Lk 22:20).

On the cross of Calvary, Jesus accomplished our redemption when He gave His life for the sins of the world. At the moment of His death, the Father confirmed that the sin debt was fully paid and that the way to His presence was now open: “Behold, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt 27:51). The Good News of salvation through the redemptive work of God’s Son was proclaimed by the apostolic church (Acts 10:43; 20:28).

In the General Epistles, we learn more about Jesus’ sacrifice. James begins by implying that justification by the Law is unattainable: “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles in one {point,} he has become guilty of all” (Jam. 2:10). Consequently, the way to righteousness must be independent of the Law. On the other hand, James insists that justifying faith must manifest itself in good works. He appeals to the histories of Rahab and Abraham in support (Jam 2:14-26).

Peter affirms that Jesus, the Lamb of God, redeemed us by His blood (1 Pet 1:19). This was God’s plan “from the foundation of the world” (1 Pet 1:20). The Holy Spirit set us apart to be sprinkled with Christ’s blood (1 Pet 1:2). The work of redemption was accomplished at Calvary: “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross” (1 Pet 2:24), and, “Christ also died for sins once for all, {the} just for {the} unjust, so that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet 3:18).

The themes of redemption and justification through Jesus’ sacrifice are central in the epistle to the Hebrews. The epistle presents Jesus as a high priest who offers a propitiatory sacrifice for the sins of all people (Heb 3:1; 8:1). Yet, Jesus is not only the priest, but also the sacrifice (Heb 7:27; 13:10-12). His blood cleanses from sin (Heb 1:3) and cleanses the conscience (Heb 9:13-14). His sacrifice is sufficient “once and for all” (Heb 7:27; 9:26-28).

We rejoice not only that Jesus offered His life as a sacrifice, but also that the Father received His sacrifice: “By the grace of God He might taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9). Through the blood of the Lamb, God shows mercy and forgives sins (Heb 9:12-15; 12:24). He no longer remembers ours sins and transgressions (Heb 10:17). Consequently, we have boldness to approach the Father in virtue of the new covenant in the blood of His Son, Jesus Christ (Heb 7:19; 10:19-22).

In his epistles, Paul speaks much of the gift of righteousness. He boldly states the impossibility of obtaining right standing before God except by means of receiving the gift of righteousness: “A man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus” (Gal 2:16). In the third and fourth chapters of Galatians, Paul insists and proves that good works and observance of the Law do not result in salvation, but only faith in Jesus Christ attains this goal. The Law was given not to justify, but to condemn (Gal 3:22).

Paul even strictly warns that those who return to the Law for justification forfeit God’s grace for salvation. (Gal 5:4). Commenting on Galatians 1:8-9, Horton stresses how important this doctrine was for Paul: “Paul considered this doctrine to be so central that he regarded its explicit denial as ‘anathema’ – that is, an act of heresy that the Galatian church was on the verge of committing.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Similar to what Paul wrote to the Galatians, he reminds Titus that salvation is by faith apart from works:

He 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 (Tit 3:5-7).

In 2 Corinthians 5:21, Paul reveals to what degree the Father considers us righteous: “He made Him who knew no sin {to be} sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Moreover, in 1 Corinthians 1:30, the Bible teaches, “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” In Him, believers “were washed,” “were sanctified,” and “were justified” (1 Cor 6:11).

The Word of God reveals that the degree of righteousness that the believer receives from God is the same degree of righteousness that God the Son Himself possesses. We receive His righteousness.[[13]](#footnote-13) We are participants is a “great exchange”: Jesus takes upon Himself our sin, and we receive His righteousness. Paul speaks of this in 2 Corinthians 8:9, “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.”

Paul considered the death of Christ the heart of the gospel: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3). Redemption was accomplished by His shed blood (1 Cor 6:20; Eph 1:7; Col 1:13-14, 20-22). He died for all (1 Tim 2:6; Tit 2:11; Eph 2:14-16). His death delivers us from future wrath (1 Thes 1:10; Eph 5:2). In Christ, the believer is blameless before God (Eph 1:4).

The fact that Paul so frequently addresses the question of justification demonstrates its importance in God’s salvation plan. Seifrid claims, “The repetition of an idea in varying contexts, which we have seen is the case with the theme of forensic justification, commends it as being of theological importance to Paul.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The most convincing case for justification by faith comes from Paul’s epistle to the Romans. In chapter 1 of that correspondence, he boldly claims, “For in (the gospel) the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘but the righteous {man} shall live by faith’” (Rom 1:17).

Furthermore, after Paul advances proof for the fallen and hopeless state of humanity in general, he reveals that God justifies people on the basis of the redemptive work of Christ, which is received by faith:

…being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, {I say,} of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:24-26).

Paul concludes that both Jews and Gentiles are justified by faith and that the Law cannot justify either group. The Law plays no role in the justification of the sinner. In this way, God accomplishes His goal of eliminating human boasting and undermining human pride.[[15]](#footnote-15)

In Romans chapter 5, Paul associates the imputation of righteousness to believers with their union with Christ. Similar to how people, in union with Adam, inherit the consequences of his disobedience, believers in Jesus receive the gift of righteousness in virtue of their union with Him.[[16]](#footnote-16) In this context, Paul contrasts the righteousness received through Christ with the condemnation received through Adam. This means that Paul is speaking here not about righteousness in the sense of proper behavior, but in the sense of right standing with God.[[17]](#footnote-17)

In chapter 5, we also learn that as a result of the forgiveness of sins, believers now have peace with God (Rom 5:1), that is, “reconciliation.” Paul declares, “For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only this, but we also exult in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation” (Rom 5:10-11). He writes a similar message to the Corinthians: “Now all {these} things are from God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ” (2 Cor 5:18).

However, in his teaching Paul reserves a place for understanding righteousness as right behavior: “Having been freed from sin, you became slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness, resulting in {further} lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness, resulting in sanctification” (Rom 6:18-19). Therefore, for Paul, righteousness is both a legal status before God and a lifestyle or pattern of behavior.

Nevertheless, Paul clarifies that one can live righteously only with the help of the Holy Spirit: “…so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:4). Therefore, we may delineate two aspects of righteousness. On the one hand, we are “in Christ,” clothed in His righteousness. On the other hand, we receive the Holy Spirit, who lives in us and directs us into holy living.

We observe an interesting fact in comparing the terms “justification” and “righteousness” in the Greek text. Typically, we understand the English term “justification” to describe our position before God, while “righteousness" concerns our behavior. Yet, the same Greek term denotes both aspects – δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*).[[18]](#footnote-18) Nonetheless, it is critical to distinguish these two senses of the word. Paul makes this clear in his letter to the Romans. In chapters 3-5, δικαιοσύνη(*dikaiosune*) refers to our forensic status before God, i.e., justification. In chapters 6-8, though, δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*) refers to right behavior.

This shows that God justifies us prior to our manifesting proper behavior in our practical lives. Right living is not the means to attain peace with God, but rather the result or consequence of justification received by faith. Schrenk summarizes,

Thus, without any sense of difficulty or contradiction, the thought of pardoning and forensic righteousness passes over into that of righteousness as the living power which overcomes sin.... In Paul, therefore, δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*) can denote both the righteousness which acquits and the living power which breaks the bondage of sin.[[19]](#footnote-19)

In Philippians chapter 3, Paul points out two false views of righteousness. In the initial nine verses, he addresses the issue of legalism, where persons seek justification before God on the basis of good deeds or religious rites. In this context, Paul describes his own journey and the prestigious position he previously held in Judaism. However, he now rejects this as a means to be justified before God. The chapter ends, though, with a rebuke of a second false view – a casual attitude toward righteous living among those claiming justification by faith.

Between these opposite poles, in verses 9-16, Paul defines the proper attitude toward righteousness. He categorically insists that a person is justified by faith in Christ alone. Paul seeks to “be found in Him, 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 3:9). At the same time, he strives in practice to be like Christ: “…that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death;” (Phil 3:10).

So then, Paul includes in his approach both aspects of righteousness – his position before God by faith and his conduct before God in life. At the same time, he maintains these aspects in proper order – first, the reception of the gift of righteousness, then displaying righteousness in practical living.

We will conclude our biblical survey by reviewing the teaching of the apostle John, who affirms together with other New Testament writers that salvation is not by keeping the Law since “none of you carries out the Law” (Jn 7:19). However, Jesus came not to condemn the world, but to save it (Jn 3:16-17; 12:47). “He who believes in Him is not judged” (Jn 3:18). John the Baptist called Jesus “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Christ is also the Good Shepherd, who “lays down His life for the sheep” (Jn 10:11).

In his epistles and in the book of Revelation, John continues to speak of forgiveness and redemption in Christ, who is our “Advocate with the Father” and “is the propitiation for our sins” (1 Jn 2:1-2). He came to “to take away sins” (1 Jn 3:5), and sins “have been forgiven you for His name's sake” (1 Jn 2:12). God the Father sent His Son to lay down His life for the salvation of the world (1 Jn 4:9-14). Believers are recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Rev 13:8; 20:12, 15). “Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter by the gates into the city” (Rev 22:14).[[20]](#footnote-20)

**4. Conclusions**

The most significant aspects of our salvation, the ones that determine our eternal destiny, are the forgiveness of sins and justification. Without them, a person can have no basis for expecting to participate in the kingdom of God. We recall that our redemption from sin is directly related to the representative role of our Savior. One of the roles of a representative is to take the place of another. The Bible plainly teaches that the Son of God took our place of punishment on the cross, so that believers could receive forgiveness of sins.

Christ’s representation also results in the believer being counted righteous before God *in Him*. This is God’s act of “justification.” In light of the biblical evidence we have examined, we concur with Erickson’s definition: “Justification is God’s action pronouncing sinners righteous in his sight.”[[21]](#footnote-21) We note here that justification is God’s pronouncement that the sinner is justified before Him. Justification, then, concerns one’s status before God.

We will revisit several thoughts mentioned above to clarify the mechanism of justification, that is, exactly how God justifies the sinner. The key passage in this regard is Romans 3:24-26, where the basis for God’s justifying act is revealed:

…being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. {This was} to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; for the demonstration, {I say,} of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Rom 3:24-26).

In order for the Lord to remain just Himself while justifying the sinner, He must somehow fully punish the sins committed by people. This He did by offering His Son as a propitiatory sacrifice. Now God, having punished sin entirely, can forgive and justify the sinner.

The mechanism of the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ is clearly depicted in 2 Corinthians 5:21, where we read, “He made Him who knew no sin {to be} sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” Here, we see described the great spiritual exchange of sin for righteousness. Jesus took upon Himself our transgressions and their consequences, and we receive in exchange His perfect righteousness. This is how God can declare or consider sinners righteous – they are granted the righteousness of Christ.

Thiessen comments on this “great exchange”: “The results of this union with Christ are the imputation of our sins to Him and of His righteousness to us.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Mueller echoes this thought – justification is “the act of God by which He removes from the believer the sentence of condemnation to which he is subject because of his sin, releases him from guilt, and ascribes to him the merit of Christ.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

We are all born in sin and under threat of condemnation. Yet, Jesus removed our guilt, taking upon Himself our sins. Because of the substitutionary and redemptive work of Christ, God issues to us a verdict of justified. In addition to that, He imputes to us the perfect righteousness of Christ. Now, we stand before God with the same measure of righteousness that His Son possesses.

Justification differs from forgiveness of sins in the following way. Forgiveness simply removes the guilt of the sinner, which does, of course, provide a type of justification resulting from the removal of guilt. However, God provides us in Christ a better foundation for a right standing before Him – the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ to the believer. Therefore, the justification of the Christian includes not only the removal of guilt, but also the acquisition of Christ’s righteousness. This means that believers’ right standing with God does not depend on or is sustained by their perfect obedience to Him in the future. The still imperfect Christian who is going through the process of sanctification is still considered perfectly righteous before God in Christ.

According to the Bible, righteous living follows after receiving the gift of righteousness. We discuss this progressive transformation of the believing individual in the chapter “Sanctification.” Nonetheless, those who turn to the Lord in repentance and faith immediately receive justification and enjoy right standing with God. As in the case of Abraham, faith is credited to us as righteousness (Rom 4:22-25).

At the same time that justification occurs, the Holy Spirit enters the heart of believers to regenerate them. Thanks to the presence of the Spirit, the Christian begins to do good works, not to merit justification, but as a result of the gift of righteousness already imputed. The process of sanctification continues throughout life and will eventually lead to perfection. Yet, even before one attains that level, the believer in Jesus is already considered a righteous person before God through faith.

So then, we must understand that good works themselves do not justify a person, but rather serve as evidence that true saving faith is present in the heart. Scripture conclusively affirms that justification comes exclusively through faith in Jesus Christ. We will further discuss the nature of saving faith in chapter 20 of this volume.

### C. Historical Development

**1. Early Church**

Although the biblical teaching on justification by faith is sufficiently clear, especially in the writings of the apostle Paul, the Church Fathers poorly grasped this vital concept. We will attempt to trace the development of this departure from the biblical standard.

On the one hand, in the writings of the Church Fathers we do see frequent references to the New Testament understanding of justification by faith.[[24]](#footnote-24) John Chrysostom (4th c.), for example, wrote, “(He) hath suffered Him that did no wrong to be punished for those who had done wrong… thereby freely bestoweth upon us those great goods which we never looked for; (for he says, that ‘we might become the righteousness of God in Him’)” (*Homily on 2 Corinthians,* 11.5).

We can cite Jerome (4th-5th c.) as well: “We are then righteous when we confess that we are sinners, and our righteousness depends not upon our own merits, but on the mercy of God” (*Against the Pelagians*, 1.13). Tertullian claims that faith, “should impute righteousness to those who believe in him” (*Against Marcion*, 5:3). Irenaeus concurs, “Faith towards God justifies a man” (*Against Heresies*, 4.5.5). According to Ambrose, “We are not justified by works but by faith” (*De Jacob et vita beata*, 2.2).

The earliest of Christian writers, Clement of Rome (1st c.) also expounds this view:

And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory for ever and ever (*1 Clement,* 32).

Another early thinker sharing this opinion was Justin Martyr: “For the goodness and the loving-kindness of God, and His boundless riches, hold righteous and sinless the man who, as Ezekiel tells, repents of sins” (*Dialogue*, 47). In Origen’s words, “The righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ reaches all who believe… it supplies this glory not for the sake of their merits nor for the sake of works, but freely to those who believe” (*Commentary on Romans*, 3.7.13).

Several Eastern Fathers share their views. Cyril of Jerusalem writes, “For if thou shalt believe that Jesus Christ is Lord, and that God raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (*Catechetical Lectures*, 5.10). Basil the Great adds, “For this is the true and perfect glorying in God, when a man is not lifted up on account of his own righteousness, but has known himself to be wanting in true righteousness and to be justified by faith alone in Christ” (*On Humility,* 22). According to Gregory Nazianzen, “He was in His own Person representing us…. He makes His own our folly and our transgressions”(*Orations,* 30.5-6).

On the other hand, from the earliest years of church history, some errant views crept into Christian theology which undermined the New Testament doctrine of justification. First, the Fathers began to require water baptism for salvation and justification.[[25]](#footnote-25) Thus, justification was no longer by faith alone.

Second, a shift occurred in the Church’s understanding of redemption’s goal – not justification before God, but the attainment of immortality. Franks explains this trend: “The tendency to lay the chief stress on the gift of incorruption rather than on the gifts of righteousness or of faith (trust in God) marks the change experienced by Christianity in passing over from a Jewish to a Greek soil. From the very beginning of the Greek religion death is the object of supreme fear.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

Third, Franks notes a move in the direction of moralism, especially in the works of Irenaeus. Franks claims that among the Gentiles in the Early Church, “Christianity was regarded as the knowledge of God and the law and the promise of immortality,” and, “Baptism was held to assure or communicate the gift of immortality with the forgiveness of pre-baptismal sin: for the rest of his life the Christian was under the law.”[[27]](#footnote-27) Commenting on Werner’s critique of Irenaeus, Franks continues, “On the whole, the practical Christianity of Irenaeus, like that of the Apologists, is a moralism very different from the Pauline Christianity.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

Scheck connects the moralism of the Fathers with Marcion’s rejection of the Old Testament as God’s Word and the God of the Old Testament as the God of Christianity. The Fathers may have felt compelled to resist this threat by stressing the moral aspects of the Christian faith.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Horton suggests that an improper translation in the Vulgate may have misled Western Fathers in their understanding of justification. They translated the word δικαιͅόω (*dikaioo*), i.е., “consider or pronounce righteous,” by the Latin term *justificare*, i.е., “make righteous.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

In addition, Needham further clarifies the effect of moralism on the Fathers as follows.[[31]](#footnote-31) He perceives in the teachings of many early Christian writers the concept of “double justification.” Water baptism supplies only an “initial” justification, while the “final” justification is based on the believers’ behavior – did they perform the works of faith? Examine the following quotes:

Faith is effective for this, that it justifies those who approach God in their initial believing, if afterwards they remain in justification: however, without works of faith (not works of law) faith is dead (Jerome, *Commentary of the Epistle to the Galatians*).

Therefore, beloved, let not us either expect that faith is sufficient to us for salvation; for if we do not show forth a pure life… (John Chrysostom, *Homily on the Gospel of John,* 10.3).

I do not deny that sins may be diminished by liberal gifts to the poor, but only if faith commend what is spent (Ambrose, *On Repentance,* 2.9.83).

There is need of righteousness, that one may deserve well of God the Judge; we must obey His precepts and warnings, that our merits may receive their reward (Cyprian, *On the Unity of the Church,* 15).

Eddy confirms our suspicion:

What does seem clear is that when the pre-Augustinian fathers wrote of the gracious, works-free nature of salvation/justification, many of them indexed this to initial justification, which itself was connected to conversion and/or baptism. Once initial justification had taken place, believers were expected to be caught up in a transformative process of growth in grace, virtue and good works.[[32]](#footnote-32)

Augustine further developed this idea of “double justification.”[[33]](#footnote-33) Although he affirmed that people are justified by grace through faith (*Letters,* 194.3.7; *On Rebuke and Grace,* 15.46), he did not have in mind so much a permanent forensic status before God, but forgiveness of sins and the impartation of a new nature. By means of an “imparted grace,” people can do good works that lead to their final justification. For Augustine, righteousness has more to do with people’s behavior than their status before God.

Wright comments on Augustine’s position: “Faith that fails to issue in good works is barren or dead and does not enjoy justification,” and, “Faith, which justifies without prior merit, always entails ensuring merit – the merit of good works done from faith.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

The danger of such a teaching is that it creates the impression that one merits salvation by the “works of faith,” and that works somehow complete faith and makes one worthy of justification. On the one hand, Augustine himself recognized this danger: “For a man worketh not righteousness save he be justified: but by ‘believing on Him that justifieth the ungodly,’ he beginneth with faith; that good may not by preceding show what he hath deserved, but by following what he hath received” (*Commentary on the Psalms,* 111.3). On the other hand, he did nonetheless speak of double justification: “We have been justified, but *justitia* itself grows as we progress” (*Sermons,* 158.4.4; 158.5.5).[[35]](#footnote-35)

Augustine exerted an enormous influence on future generations of the Church. McGrath affirms, “From the time of Augustine onward, justification had always been understood to refer to both the event of being declared righteous and the process of being made righteous.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

In assessing the teaching of the Church Fathers on justification, we should note that this movement away from New Testament teaching began from the very beginning of the post-apostolic period. McGrath blames this departure on “inexactitude and occasional apparent naivety.”[[37]](#footnote-37) In particular, in concord with the Greek worldview, emphasis fell on obtaining immortality more than on a right legal standing before the Lord. Furthermore, a strong emphasis on moralism crept into Christian teaching, which minimized the significance of God’s grace in our receiving the unmerited gift of eternal life. McGrath confirms that in the works of the Fathers, we witness a “works-righteousness approach to justification.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

The most serious deviation, though, is that the Fathers lost (or maybe never really understood) the idea that justification was a permanent forensic position before God obtained by faith alone apart from works. They correctly taught that works indeed have a place in the Christian life. Yet, instead of teaching that faith *expresses itself* in works, they proposed that faith is *completed* by works (see chapter 20). Consequently, the Early Church reached the conclusion that until faith produces its corresponding fruit, even true faith is insufficient for salvation. This conviction led to the false teaching of double justification, which claims that our initial justification is not final.

The Church Fathers also erred in their understanding of the role of water baptism in salvation. Since baptism supposedly washed sins away, salvation was consequently understood as forgiveness of sins without the accompanying permanent right standing before God through faith. This forced the Early Fathers to come up with a method to restore one who sinned after receiving baptism – the system of confession and penance (see chapter 19).

**2. Eastern Orthodoxy**

For Catholics and Protestants, justification occupies the place of central importance among Christian dogmas. Among Eastern Orthodox, however, this doctrine is minimized and regarded only of secondary importance.

Let us listen to some leading Orthodox theologians concerning justification. Meyendorff, for example, writes, “Byzantine theology did not produce any significant elaboration of the Pauline doctrine of justification… (but) generally interpret the idea of redemption by substitution in the wider context of victory over death and of sanctification.”[[39]](#footnote-39) From the passage, we see that Byzantine and Orthodox theology do not regard justification of primary importance. For them, salvation consists not in right legal standing with God, but in victory over death and sanctification.

Moreover, Meyendorff states, “Just as original sin did not consist in an inherited guilt, so redemption was not primarily a justficiation, but a victory over death.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Here again, we see a digression from the biblical revelation. Orthodoxy does not appear to value the need to satisfy God’s justice. Lossky echoes this idea: “The error of Anselm (i.e., Catholic theology)… is that he desired to see in forensic relationships, contained in the term ‘redemption,’ an appropriate expression of the mystery of our salvation. He thought that he discovered in a forensic figure – the figure of redemption – the essence of truth,… evidence of the necessity that God must die for our salvation.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Here, Lossky mistakenly ascribes to Anselm the idea of a forensic redemption, when the source of that truth is actually the New Testament. Lossky is even ready to reject the salvific necessity of Jesus’ redemptive death. Again, he claims, “Is it not obvious that the Father received the sacrifice not because he required or needed it.”[[42]](#footnote-42) Along with rejecting the redemptive value of Christ’s blood, Lossky also dismisses the necessity to satisfy God’s retributive justice: “The idea of redemption in no way implies the necessity of satisfying justice through punishment.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Florovsky affirms the same. Although he states, “Christ did indeed take upon Himself the sin of the world,” he continues by qualifying this position: “…but this is not to be explained by the idea of a substitutional sacrifice.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Kuraev also supports this opinion: “For Orthodoxy, sin is not so much guilt as it is sickness. God does not punish the sinner as a judge punishes a criminal. Here, we most likely have the relationship between a physician and a patient.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Again, we witness a denial of the need to satisfy God’s justice. Kuraev also dismisses the redeeming power of Jesus’ blood: “Christ did not take upon Himself the legal or moral responsibility for the sins of people,” but rather “the aura of death.”[[46]](#footnote-46)

Kuraev employs the following argument to defend his position. The prayer “Lord, have mercy” in Greek is Κύριε ἐλέισον (*Kurie eleison*). The word ἐλέισον *(eleison*)*,* i.е., “mercy,” sounds similar to the word ἐλαίον (*elaion*), i.е., “oil,” which in antiquity served as a medicinal ointment. This allegedly shows that salvation consists not in forgiveness, but in healing.[[47]](#footnote-47)

Finally, we cite Tubetsky on the Orthodox view: “Human nature, which has been internally damaged, can only be saved from within and not by an external act of redemption or sorcery…. A bank transaction of the ‘merit’ of Christ is unacceptable.”[[48]](#footnote-48)

Mantzaridis explains the position of Gregory Palamas regarding Christ’s sacrifice.[[49]](#footnote-49) From Palamas’ point of view, the death of Jesus plays an irreplaceable role in the process of deification. As noted earlier in chapter 8, according to the teaching of theosis, God’s plan is to communicate the deified human nature of Christ to His followers so that they could attain deification. Lossky agrees, “We must not separate redemption… from the entirety of the Divine plan – deification.”[[50]](#footnote-50)

However, in order for Jesus to renew and deify humanity, He must pass through every stage of human life – from birth to death and resurrection. People’s sins, which were characteristic of their old nature, were annihilated by the death of the One who took upon Himself a “general human nature.” By means of Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, humanity was glorified in the glorified humanity of Christ.

Working off the Orthodox conception of human mortality as the root of sin (see chapter 5), Rommen defends the idea that Jesus’ sacrifice was not to secure propitiation before God, but rather to provide deliverance from death. This would, in turn, lead to victory over sin and the healing of human nature.

Rather than seeing the sacrifice as an attempt to assuage the offended honor of God or to silence his anger, the sacrifice is aimed at the root problem, which is the corruption of man’s very nature and the inevitable result – death. Using the curse of death itself to defeat that which held humanity in its grip, Christ atones for our sins – but not by providing a payment of human debt owed to God but by assuming the consequence of our sin, namely death itself.[[51]](#footnote-51)

Eastern Orthodox thinkers justify their neglect of the doctrine of justification by considering it only one aspect of the multifactorial biblical portrait of salvation. Lossky explains is this way:

We should not… create between God and humanity an unacceptable forensic relationship. It would be more correct to include these images into the nearly unlimited number of different images, each one of which is one aspect of an event that is inexpressible.[[52]](#footnote-52)

We can find, then, in Eastern writings references to Christ’s redemption in legal terms. For example, Athanasius writes, “But since it was necessary also that the debt owing from all should be paid again…”[[53]](#footnote-53) Maximus the Confessor relates, “Innocent and sinless, he paid the whole debt for mankind, as if he himself were guilty,” and Florovsky summarizes Maximus’ thought: (In love) the Savior accepted sin and man’s guilt.”[[54]](#footnote-54) We may also cite the Greek Orthodox Catechism:

For that reason our Savior offered himself in the atonement on the cross. By his human nature, he stood as the representative of the guilty; by his divine nature, he offered the ransom due to God; and being crucified for us, he satisfied the divine justice.[[55]](#footnote-55)

All things considered, though, Clendenin correctly concludes, “In the history of Orthodox theology, on the other hand, it is startling to observe the near total absence of any mention of the idea of justification by faith. Justification by faith has received short shrift in Orthodoxy, and the most important text of Orthodox theology, John of Damascus’ *The Orthodox Faith*, never even mentions the idea.”[[56]](#footnote-56) Other writers share this concern. According to Zaitsev, “The Orthodox Church teaches that salvation in essence cannot be compared to a judicial investigation.”[[57]](#footnote-57) Zankov writes in this regard:

Contemporary Russian theologians almost always firmly reject a forensic, formal theory of salvation, and they cannot understand how one can ascribe to God such an anthropomorphism and attempt to represent the majestic and mysterious work of salvation in the form of a judicial process.”[[58]](#footnote-58)

Finally, Orthodoxy shares with Roman Catholicism the understanding that only the faith that produces fruit (i.e., good works) can save a person. When the Lutheran Melanchthon appealed to Jeremiah, the Patriarch of Constantinople, the latter rejected the Protestant understanding of faith, stating, “The catholic church demands a living faith, one that give witness of itself through good works.”[[59]](#footnote-59)

The Synod of Jerusalem (1672) defined saving faith as follows:

We believe no one to be saved without faith. And by faith we mean the right notion that is in us concerning God and divine things, which, working by love, that is to say, by (observing) the Divine commandments, justifieth us with Christ.[[60]](#footnote-60)

We also draw from the Greek Orthodox Catechism:

Faith in Christ without good works in not enough to save us. Good works by themselves are also not sufficient. Our salvation will be the outcome of a virtuous life permeated and sealed by the inestimable blood of the Only-begotten Son of God.[[61]](#footnote-61)

In evaluating the Orthodox view, we agree with Zaitsev’s critique of this teaching. First, he claims that Orthodoxy neglects the most essential feature of our salvation – our justification before God: “The theologian must ask the question whether he actually emphasizes the most significant biblical themes, or ignores that to which the biblical authors devote their attention.”[[62]](#footnote-62)

Mueller echoes this objection: “To justification *sola fide* all other doctrines of Scripture stand in relation of *cause* and *effect*, of *antecedens et consequen*s.”[[63]](#footnote-63) Luther said, “If we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose simply everything. Hence the most necessary and important thing is that we teach and repeat this doctrine daily.”[[64]](#footnote-64)

We acknowledge that the Bible presents the concept of salvation in various forms and with different expressions. Yet, among them all justification stands supreme. Without it, no one can enter God’s kingdom. Additionally, Orthodoxy fails even to place justification on the same level with other biblical representations of salvation. Instead, they minimize or even dismiss this doctrine. For Orthodoxy, the primary concern of salvation is “deification,” which we discussed and refuted in chapter 7.

Second, Zaitsev correctly notes that in the Orthodox system, justification is confused with sanctification, even eclipsed by it: “In such a perspective no distinction is made between justification and sanctification…. It is one single movement, one uninterrupted process.”[[65]](#footnote-65) The Bible, however, makes a clear distinction between them.

**3. Roman Catholicism**

The Catholic understanding of justification consists of the following features. When a candidate receives water baptism, God imparts righteousness, which is understood as spiritual strength, to the soul of the recipient. This impartation enables the candidate to perform good works and lead a moral life.[[66]](#footnote-66) Therefore, “Justification is not only the remission of sins, but also the sanctification and renewal of the interior man.”[[67]](#footnote-67) Justification “conforms us to the righteousness of God, who makes us inwardly just by the power of his mercy.”[[68]](#footnote-68) In addition, “With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts, and obedience to the divine will is granted us.”[[69]](#footnote-69) From what has been said above, it is plain that for Catholics justification is not so much a judicial position before God as the impartation of a righteous nature to the recipient.

Moreover, for the good works performed in the strength of this imparted righteousness, a person receives merit from God which leads to justification in the sense of acceptance by God. At the same time, Catholics do not deny that salvation comes by “grace,” since this righteousness is imparted to them as God’s gift. God is the one who took the initiative to communicate this grace to them.

When someone performs good works by virtue of this imparted righteousness, he or she actually merits acceptance with God:

The merit of good works is to be attributed in the first place to the grace of God, then to the faithful.[[70]](#footnote-70)

Filial adoption, in making us partakers by grace in the divine nature, can bestow true merit on us as a result of God's gratuitous justice. This is our right by grace, the full right of love, making us "co-heirs" with Christ and worthy of obtaining "the promised inheritance of eternal life.”[[71]](#footnote-71)

No one can merit the initial grace which is at the origin of conversion. Moved by the Holy Spirit, we can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life, as well as necessary temporal goods.[[72]](#footnote-72)

O'Collins and Rafferty add that even though “imparted righteousness” is God’s righteousness in the believer, it nonetheless remains in some sense our personal righteousness as well. Good works done by us in the strength of this imparted righteousness, not only brings God glory, but also earns us merit.[[73]](#footnote-73)

Furthermore, this imparted righteousness does not result in justification before the Lord in a legal sense until it is manifest in a person’s life. Therefore, salvation is, in fact, attained by the works performed with the aid of imparted righteousness.[[74]](#footnote-74) We recognize here the influence of Augustine’s teaching on “initial” and “final” justification. “Initial” justification is God’s gift given at water baptism, while “final” justification is merited through bearing the fruit of faith, that is, good works.[[75]](#footnote-75)

The Council of Trent, which was convened to oppose the Protestant Reformation, issued the following statement on justification: Justification is “a translation from that state in which a human being is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Savior.”[[76]](#footnote-76) Again, we see that for Catholics, justification is not defined in forensic terms, but in terms of a spiritual condition, that is, “imparted righteousness,” which results in the performance of justifying works.

In the Catholic system, then, faith alone does not save. Only faith that has produced good works is considered true, saving faith. The Catholic writers, O'Collins and Rafferty, commenting on Trent, write, “While faith is necessary, it is not sufficient for justification, since faith must be united to love.”[[77]](#footnote-77)

“In the *gratia infusa* man receives the supernatural strength to do such works, and thus to merit with a merit of condignity all following grace and everlasting life.”[[78]](#footnote-78) Horton provides even more detail to the description of this view:

The first justification occurs at baptism, which eradicates both the guilt and corruption of original sin. Due entirely to God’s grace, this initial justification infuses the habit (or principle) of grace into the recipient. By cooperating with this inherent grace, one merits an increase in grace and, one hopes, final justification. So while initial justification is by grace alone, final justification depends also on the works of the believer, which God graciously accepts as meritorious.[[79]](#footnote-79)

The Catholic teaching, though, contradicts Scripture, which teaches justification by faith alone (see Gal 2:16; 3:10, Rom 3:20; 4:1-3; Lk 18:14 and others). In particular, Romans 4:22-24 specifically indicates that in justification, righteousness is not imparted to believers, but “imputed” to them. The Greek verb λογίζομαι (*logidzomai*) is used here, which means “to consider,” and carries that meaning in other New Testament texts as well (see Rom 2:26; 9:8: 2 Cor 12:6; Acts 19:27; Jam 2:23).[[80]](#footnote-80)

The works done by virtue of “imparted righteousness” are nonetheless works. Yet, Scripture affirms that works have no place in our salvation. God justifies before a person begins to do good works. Works are not the means to attain the status of righteousness before the Lord, but merely the result or consequence of receiving justification by faith.

In support of the idea of justification as a right status before God and in refutation of justification as “imparted righteousness,” Horton appeals to the Scriptural metaphor of “clothing.” God “clothes” us in righteousness, which shows that justification is not an inner process, but an outer “covering” in the eyes of God (see Gen 3:21; Zech 3:3-5; Isa 61:10-11; Rev 21:2; Lk 15:22). On the other hand, those clothed in their own righteousness are cast out (Matt 22:1-14).[[81]](#footnote-81)

The Lutheran theologian Mueller also repudiates the Catholic doctrine of good works leading to salvation: “Good works done for this purpose insult and mock God, who in His Word offers to all sinners through faith the entire, perfect righteousness which His beloved Son has secured for the world by His vicarious satisfaction.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

In response to the Protestant position, the Council of Trent issued the following canons, which have never been revoked to this day:[[83]](#footnote-83)

If anyone says that men are justified either by the sole imputation of the justice of Christ or by the sole remission of sins, to the exclusion of the grace and the charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Ghost and remains in them, or also that the grace by which we are justified is only the good will of God, let him be anathema (*Canon 11*).[[84]](#footnote-84)

If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing more than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema (*Canon 12*).[[85]](#footnote-85)

Let us compare and contrast the two views on justification: Catholic and biblical.[[86]](#footnote-86) According to Catholicism, in justification God *makes* the sinner righteous. According to Scripture, God *considers* or *declares* the sinner righteous as a legal standing. In Catholicism, good works are an inseparable part of the *process* of justification. In the Bible, though, good works are the *result* of a justification already received by faith. In Roman Catholic theology, justification and sanctification are *confused* and *overlapping*. Sanctification leads to final justification. Scripture teaches, however, that justification and sanctification are *distinct* from one another. A person first receives justification (the status of righteousness) as a gift from God, then the process of sanctification commences.

In 1999, a remarkable event occurred, when Catholic and Protestant leaders signed the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*.[[87]](#footnote-87) Both similarities and differences between the views were highlighted in this document. For example, both sides found common ground in affirming justification by grace through faith (№ 9), that Christ is our righteousness (№ 10), and that Christ’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all (№ 12).

On the other hand, one must keep in mind that the meanings of key words in these statements differ between the two parties. As we noted earlier, Catholics have their own unique understanding of “grace,” “justification,” and “faith.”[[88]](#footnote-88) Consequently, the Declaration brought no firm resolution to the issue.

We see, then, in the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* simply a repetition of the traditional Catholic position. Justification is defined as “forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace” (№ 27). It provides us acceptance by and fellowship with God “already now, but then fully in God’s coming kingdom” (№ 11). Justification requires doing good works (№ 37) “so that the righteousness that comes from God is preserved” (№ 38).

Blocher brings to our attention that the Declaration never speaks of justification by faith *alone*. In addition, it does not recant from certain dogmas that contradict justification by faith alone, such as redemption from sin through penance, punishment in purgatory, or use of indulgences. Moreover, not all Lutheran confessions endorsed this Declaration. One Lutheran group accused its participants of “betrayal of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”[[89]](#footnote-89)

Some points in the Declaration, though, may show a positive change. First, in point 10, discussing the faith of Abraham, we see mention of righteousness being imputed. Second, in point 38, we read, “justification always remains the unmerited gift of grace.” Finally, according to point 25, good works, performed by a justified individual, are “neither the basis of justification nor merits it.”

When this declaration was released, the Vatican admitted that it did not eliminate all the differences between Catholicism and Protestantism. The Vatican declared, “Eternal life is, at one and the same time, grace and the reward given by God for good works.”[[90]](#footnote-90)

In 1997, before the publication of the Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification, another meeting was held in New York between Catholic and Evangelical theologians to discuss the doctrine of justification, called “Evangelicals and Catholics Together.” The results of this meeting were published in the document *Gift of Salvation*, which seemed to indicate a movement by Catholics closer to the Protestant understanding. We will cite the most key excerpts.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Justification is central to the scriptural account of salvation, and its meaning has been much debated between Protestants and Catholics. We agree that justification is not earned by any good works or merits of our own; it is entirely God's gift, conferred through the Father's sheer graciousness, out of the love that he bears us in his Son, who suffered on our behalf and rose from the dead for our justification. Jesus was “put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:25). In justification, God, on the basis of Christ's righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so.

The New Testament makes it clear that the gift of justification is received through faith.

We understand that what we here affirm is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (soda fide).

On the other hand, this document did not renounce such doctrines as salvation through the sacraments, the mediatorial role of the priesthood, or punishment in purgatory.[[92]](#footnote-92)

**4. Protestantism**

The Reformation introduced a fundamental alteration in the Church’s understanding of justification. The main impetus for this change came from Martin Luther.[[93]](#footnote-93) He defended the position that justification does not concern the inner condition of the believer or communicate “imparted righteousness,” but has to do with the individual’s legal status before God.

Luther made famous several key ideas. He termed the righteousness that we receive from God “foreign” and “passive.” “Foreign righteousness” means that this righteousness is not ours, but God’s. It is imputed to us, or reckoned to our account, through faith in Jesus. Christ confers on us His own righteousness. The idea of “passive righteousness” refers to the fact that a person does nothing to acquire this gift except to believe in Jesus. Attaining righteousness is not the result of personal effort, even with the aid of “imparted righteousness.” It comes exclusively as God’s gift in Christ.

At the same time, we make the qualification that Reformation theology does not deny that God imparts a righteous nature to the believer. Yet, this “internal righteousness” is not equated with “justification,” which is purely a forensic status before God. “Imparted righteousness” belongs to the process of sanctification, not justification.

Another famous formulation from Luther reflecting his view of justification is that believing individuals are *simul peccator et justus*, i.е., “at the same time both sinners and righteous.” In their behavior, they still sin, yet in respect to their position before God, they are righteous in Christ. Likely the most well known of Luther’s expressions are *sola scriptura* (only Scripture), *sola gratia* (only grace), *sola fide* (only faith), and *solus Chistus* (only Christ). These phrases define the guiding principles of Reformation faith. Justification comes exclusively by grace without any human merit and is received by faith in Christ alone apart from good works.

Nevertheless, Luther stressed the need for good works, yet insisted that they are not necessary for justification and do not serve as its basis. Since believers are in Christ, they are partakers of God’s nature, which will find expression in good deeds. Believers are motivated to obey God by love for Him.[[94]](#footnote-94)

Finally, we note that Luther’s sacramental views complicate his views on justification. If people are justified by faith alone, that what role can sacraments play in attaining salvation? Unfortunately, Luther never really reconciled this inconsistency in his theology.

McKelway points out certain departures from Reformation principles in the teachings of Melanchthon, Luther’s follower and successor. He taught that justifying faith is perfected by works, which approaches the Catholic position. As a result of Melanchthon views, debates ensued among Lutheran theologians as to the nature of saving faith.[[95]](#footnote-95)

John Calvin, of course, also embraced Reformation faith, but like Melanchthon, at times seemed to divert from it.[[96]](#footnote-96) On the positive side, Calvin taught that God imputes or credits to believers righteousness as a gift of His grace through faith. He insisted that justification before God is not based on works.[[97]](#footnote-97) He furthermore clarified that true faith is accompanied by good works. He aptly states, “It is faith alone which justifies, but the faith which justifies is not alone.”[[98]](#footnote-98) On the negative side, Calvin claimed that even though justification and sanctification are separate acts of God, sanctification takes place “in the context of justification.”[[99]](#footnote-99) In addition, he speaks not only of imputed righteousness, but also of imparted righteousness.

Consequently, Calvin was ready to allow, along with Augustine, the idea of a “double justification.” The initial justification comes by faith, while the final one is based on the life record of the believer. McKelway comments on Calvin’s views:

Sanctification is not only a state, it is a process in which life is rendered, by divine assistance, more and more consistent with the righteousness imputed to it in Christ. Such a life can be judged by God as righteous – it is justified.[[100]](#footnote-100)

In spite of the inconsistencies and digressions in the early reformers’ teachings, Luther’s sacramentalism, Melanchthon’s misunderstanding of the nature of faith, and Calvin’s “double justification,” these great men of God recovered for the Church the basic elements of the biblical doctrine of justification. McGrath summarized the major premises of a “mature” protestant understanding of justification:[[101]](#footnote-101)

(1) Justification involves a *forensic* *declaration* of righteousness that effects a change in *legal status before God*, as opposed to a process that actually makes one righteous.

(2) There is a clear conceptual difference between justification (“the act by which God declares the sinner to be righteous”) and either regeneration or sanctification (the actual “internal process of renewal by the Holy Spirit”).

(3) Justifying righteousness is understood as an external, ‘alien’ righteousness, graciously *imputed* to the Christian through the act of faith.

We can briefly survey views on justification by several other thinkers.[[102]](#footnote-102) John Wesley held to the Reformation teaching of imputed, forensic righteousness and the distinction between justification and sanctification. A unique feature of his teaching, though, was that justification is based on two factors. First, God looks on believers as being in Christ and clothed with His righteousness. Second, He looks within believers to see the righteous nature that is in them by virtue of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So then, God considers the believer in Jesus righteous on the basis of these two factors taken together.

Anabaptists rejected the teaching of justification as a forensic status received by faith, fearing that it would lead to a neglect of moral living. Liberal theologians completely lost the concept of the need for propitiation before the Lord. They feel that we simply need to develop our human potential.

Finally, we must mention the view of E. P. Sanders, author of *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*.[[103]](#footnote-103) Sanders advanced the thesis that salvation begins by faith, but is preserved by works. In other words, after believing in Jesus, believers are made right with God. However, in order to maintain that status, they must perform good works. James Dunn and N. T. Wright also support this view. This teaching is known as “covenantal nomism.”[[104]](#footnote-104)

Sanders’ theory works off the model of Israel’s experience. According to Sanders, Abraham initially received from God the gift of righteousness. Later, though, God gave Israel the Law as a means to stay in covenant with Him. He required obedience as a condition to remain in covenant relationship. Similarly, faith in the redemptive work of Christ only provides an initiation into relationship with the Lord and the experience of salvation. In order to continue in that relationship and experience full justification, believers must obey God and perform good works.

Adherents of covenantal nomism posit that the problem with first-century Judaism was not that they misunderstood the relationship between faith and works, but rather that: (1) they rejected Messiah, (2) they boasted in their status as Jews, and (3) they required the Gentiles to keep the ceremonial Law of Moses. Therefore, Paul’s goal in his teaching on justification was not to insist on justification by faith alone, but rather to correct these distortions. Exponents of this view even deny that justification plays a central role in Paul’s theology.

Dunn accepts the concept of “double justification,” according to which believers will stand judgment based on the works they have done through faith. The question of their final justification will be settled only at the judgement. Dunn writes, “For Paul, full/final salvation is in some degree conditional on faithfulness.”[[105]](#footnote-105) Bird concurs, “We must highlight that good works really are good and are necessary for salvation.”[[106]](#footnote-106)

Teachers in this movement at times ascribe a unique definition to the word “righteousness.” For them, it can denote faithfulness to one’s covenant with God, rather than a right standing with Him in a legal sense. So then, the concepts “righteousness” or “justification” mean observing the requirements of the covenant. In addition, they understand the phrase “the righteousness of God” in Romans 1:17 to mean God’s attribute of righteousness expressed in His deeds and covenant, and not as the gift of righteousness that believers receive by grace.[[107]](#footnote-107)

However, a closer examination of this theory reveals some serious distortions and deviations from biblical revelation. First, Paul affirms that works play no role in a person’s justification. From the book of Galatians, we learn that the Law does not justify: neither before conversion (2:16), nor after conversion (5:4; 3:3). Paul teaches in Romans 1:17 and 11:19-20 that justification comes exclusively by faith.

We also challenge covenantal nomism’s interpretation of Romans 1:17. The phrase “the righteousness of God” refers not to God’s attribute of righteousness (requiring a subjective genitive), but God’s gift of imputed righteousness (employing a genitive of source). Horton advances several convincing arguments in support of this claim.[[108]](#footnote-108) First, in the same verse we read, “The righteous {man} shall live by faith.” This shows that God’s righteousness is not in view, but the believer’s righteousness received by faith. Second, verse 17 describes the essence of the gospel, the “good news.” The gospel is “good news” because through it God grants the gift of righteousness.

Furthermore, in his letter to the Galatian congregations, Paul clearly explains the purpose of the Law. It was not given to maintain right relationship with the Lord, as Sanders suggests, but to demonstrate human sinfulness and inability to obey God. The goal of the Law was to lead persons to the righteousness of faith, of which Paul speaks in Galatians 3:17-24.

Romans 2:13 is also a key verse in this discussion. Defenders of covenantal nomism claim that Gentile believers were keeping the Law and thereby meriting their salvation.[[109]](#footnote-109) Yet, if one examines the context of this verse, it becomes plain that Paul’s goal here is not to show that Gentiles are justified by the Law, but to show that the Law condemns everyone as sinners, so that all will turn to Christ to receive mercy and redemption.

Moreover, Paul’s teaching directly contradicts the covenantal nomism position that Abraham received only an initial justification through faith, but that final justification comes from obedience. Romans 4:1-6 reveals that Abraham received full justification by faith alone apart from works:

What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due. But to the one who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Additionally, Paul addresses this issue in Galatians 3:17-18 as well. Here, he specifically rejects the suggestion that God’s covenant with Abraham is somehow continued with observance of the Mosaic Law.[[110]](#footnote-110) We read,

What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise. For if the inheritance is based on law, it is no longer based on a promise; but God has granted it to Abraham by means of a promise.

It is also worth mentioning that in Paul’s day, some were concerned that his teaching might lead to neglect of morals (see Rom 3:7-8; 6:1-2; Acts 21:21). If, as it is supposed, Paul taught “covenantal nomism,” then no one would have accused him of this.[[111]](#footnote-111) We also note that Paul reproved the Jews of his day not only for ethnic pride, but also for their inflated self-confidence of being able to keep God’s Law (see Rom chps. 2, 3, 7).

The system of covenantal nomism reminds one of the Catholic teaching in the Middle Ages that the Reformers so vigorously opposed and which prompted the Reformation. Thus, this teaching is clearly at odds with Reformation and Protestant faith.

Similarly, Gundry “sees much greater discontinuity between Paul and Judaism. In his estimation, for Palestinian Judaism, works are both a sign of and a condition for staying in; whereas for Paul, works are only evidential of, not instrumental for staying in, with faith being the necessary and sufficient condition of staying in as well as getting in.”[[112]](#footnote-112) The Lutheran Piper also gives a firm response. He feels that we must “treat the necessity of obedience not as any part of the basis of justification, but strictly as the evidence and confirmation of our faith in Christ, whose blood and righteousness is the sole basis for justification.[[113]](#footnote-113)

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15. Ibid., p. 253, 256. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Horton, Traditional Reformed View, 920-923. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., 1721-1722. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Schrenk notes that outside of Paul’s writings, the term δικαιοσύνη (*dikaiosune*) is nearly always used in the New Testament to indicate proper behavior (see Schrenk, v. 2, p. 198). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., v. 2, p. 209-210. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. The King James Versions reads not “those who wash their robes” (πλύνοντες τὰς στολὰς αὐτῶν), but “they that do His commandments” (ποιοῦντες τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτου). Yet, the reading “those who wash their robes” boasts better textual support. The King James variant is also ruled out by comparison with Revelation 12:17 and 14:12, where John does not use the expression ποιοῦντες τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτου (“they that do His commandments”), but employs the phrase τηρεῖν τὰς ἐντολάς (“keep His commandments”). One would expect to see this latter phrase in Revelation 22:14 if John truly wrote these words (see Metzger B. M. A Тextual Сommentary on the Greek New Testament. – London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994. – P. 690). [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
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31. Needham, p. 38-47, who also mentions Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.20; 4.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
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35. Ibid., p. 66, 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
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84. Ankerberg, p. 47. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
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95. McKelway A. J. The Systematic Theology of Faith: A Protestant Perspective // Lee J. M. Handbook of Faith. – Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1990. – P. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
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99. Wübbernhost, p. 114. [↑](#footnote-ref-99)
100. McKelway, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-100)
101. Noted in Eddy, Justification in Historical Perspective, 176-181. [↑](#footnote-ref-101)
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103. Eddy P. R., Beilby J. K., Enderlein S. E. Justification in the Contemporary Debate // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein S. E. Justification: Five Views. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – Kindle ed. 526-767. [↑](#footnote-ref-103)
104. “Nomism” comes from the Greek word νόμος (*nomos*), i.е., “law.” The phrase “covenantal nomism” means observing the Law in the context of the covenant. [↑](#footnote-ref-104)
105. Dunn J. D. G. New Perspective View // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein S. E. Justification: Five Views. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – P. 200. [↑](#footnote-ref-105)
106. Bird M. F. Progressive Reformed View // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein S. E. Justification: Five Views. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – Kindle ed. 1623-1627. [↑](#footnote-ref-106)
107. Bird defends this position by appealing to other features of God’s character mentioned in this context: His power (1:16), wrath (1:18; 3:5), judgment (2:2-3, 5), kindness (2:4), truth (3:7), and faithfulness (3:3). See Bird, 476-478. [↑](#footnote-ref-107)
108. Horton, Traditional Reformed View, 923-939. [↑](#footnote-ref-108)
109. Bird, 1499-1524. [↑](#footnote-ref-109)
110. Horton, Traditional Reformed View, p. 204-206. [↑](#footnote-ref-110)
111. Bird, 1129-1130. [↑](#footnote-ref-111)
112. Noted in Eddy, Justification in the Contemporary Debate, 622. [↑](#footnote-ref-112)
113. Piper F. Future of Justification, p. 110, noted in Eddy, Justification in the Contemporary Debate, 644. [↑](#footnote-ref-113)