

Paul's Justification by Faith: Reformers' Perspective and Implication for Theological Learning

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Abstract

Since the Fall, man is totally depraved. Therefore, Paul insists that “*a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ.*” The doctrine of *Justification by Faith* is one of the most important doctrines of Protestantism. Justification is the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners who have believed. However, the teaching of this doctrine is largely neglected today when churches do not support the three basic presuppositions in which the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* rests: the divine authority of Holy Scripture, the divine wrath against sin and the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ. When these truths are not supported and taught, inevitably the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* will be neglected. The doctrine of *Justification by Faith* determines whether the church stands or falls. When this doctrine is understood, believed, preached and taught, the church stands in the grace of God and is alive. On the other hand, when this doctrine is neglected, the church will fall from grace and will be in a state of darkness and death. The writer would like to reinstate the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* to its rightful and central place by giving an overview of Paul's, Patristic Fathers' and Reformers' perspectives of justification. The doctrine of *Justification by Faith* must be taught in its biblical setting and its presuppositions re-established. Qualitative methods will be used in this study in the form of library research and journals.

Keywords: Justification, Faith, Imputation, Substitutionary Satisfaction

Abstrak

Sejak kejatuhan manusia dalam dosa, manusia mengalami kerusakan total. Oleh itu, Paulus bersikeras bahwa “*tidak seorang pun yang dibenarkan oleh karena melakukan hukum Taurat, tetapi hanya oleh karena iman dalam Kristus Yesus.*” Doktrin Pembetulan oleh Iman adalah salah satu doktrin yang paling penting dalam doktrin Protestanisme. Pembetulan adalah pengampunan dosa dan kebenaran Kristus yang diperhitungkan kepada orang-orang berdosa yang telah percaya. Tetapi

hari ini, doktrin ini telah diabaikan ketika gereja tidak mendukung tiga presupposisi dasar di mana doktrin *Pembenaran oleh Iman* bersandar: otoritas ilahi dari Kitab Suci, murka ilahi terhadap dosa, dan Kristus sebagai pengganti yang memuaskan tuntutan keadilan. Ketika kebenaran-kebenaran ini tidak didukung dan diajarkan, doktrin *Pembenaran oleh Iman* akan diabaikan. Doktrin *Pembenaran oleh Iman* adalah doktrin yang menentukan apakah gereja berdiri atau jatuh. Ketika doktrin ini dipahami, diimani, dikhotbahkan dan diajarkan, gereja akan berdiri dalam anugerah Allah dan menjadi hidup. Sebaliknya, jikalau doktrin ini diabaikan, gereja akan jatuh dari kasih karunia dan akan berada dalam keadaan kegelapan dan kematian. Penulis ingin mengembalikan doktrin *Pembenaran oleh Iman* ke posisinya yang sentral dengan memberikan perspektif-perspektif Paulus, bapak-bapak Patristik dan para Reformators tentang pembenaran. Doktrin *Pembenaran oleh Iman* harus diajarkan dalam latar belakang yang beralkitabiah dan presupposisinya ditegakkan kembali. Metode kualitatif dalam bentuk riset perpustakaan dan jurnal digunakan dalam studi ini.

Kata-kata Kunci: iman, imputasi/diperhitungkan, pembenaran, pengganti yang memuaskan tuntutan keadilan

Introduction

The writer is from the Reformed tradition and has served in West Kalimantan since 2006. He is currently the pastor of MCP. A few years ago, the writer's Missions Pastor wrote an article about a Christian organization that has existed more than a century. He asked the writer, "Can MCP survive one hundred years?" The writer gave a resounding "Yes" provided we can inculcate our church members the sense of identity. Members must be aware of their root which can be traced not only to its mother church in Singapore but also to the Reformation and also their identity which is associated with the doctrines expounded by Apostle Paul and the Reformers.

One of the central Reformed doctrines is "Justification by Faith". In the Westminster Shorter Catechism, "Justification is an act of God's free grace, wherein he pardoneth all our sins, and accepteth us as righteous in his sight, only for the righteousness of Christ imputed to us, and received by faith alone."¹ Justification is a declaration whereby God pronounces a particular person not guilty in His sight. He is therefore not under any condemnation.

¹ G. I. Williamson, *The Shorter Catechism*. Volume 1. (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1970), 130.

Martin Luther's states that in article, *Justification by Faith*, a church stands or falls, John Calvin's statement that *Justification by Faith* is "the principal ground on which religion must be supported", and Zacharias Ursinus' statement, "if [this doctrine] is overthrown, the other parts of our faith easily fall to pieces"², further emphasize the importance of this doctrine. According to John Owen, "the doctrine of justification gave the first occasion to the whole work of reformation, and was the main hinge whereon it turned."³ For Owen, justification by faith was the centre of the Protestant Reformation. Justification as understood by Owen is the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer and the corresponding obedience of the believer to Christ's commands.

The writer agrees that the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* determines whether a church stands or falls. If a church teaches this doctrine faithfully, it is worthy to be called a true Church of Christ. Vice versa, if a church fails to maintain this doctrine faithfully, it can no longer be considered a true church.

Today, the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* has been much neglected by the church. Furthermore, with the emergence of new perspectives on *Justification by Faith*, we must evaluate those new thoughts against the thoughts of Paul and the Reformers. Therefore, the writer believes that the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* should be taught in the church and wider community.

Method

In this study, the method used is qualitative method. The type of research is library research which collect data or scientific writings from relevant library materials. These include books and journals on the topic of this study. Research will not only be limited to the Reformers but will also include the Patristic Fathers.

Result and Discussion

² J. Wesley White, "Saying "Justification By Faith Alone" Isn't Enough," *Mid-America Journal of Theology* 17 (2006): 239, <https://www.midamerica.edu/uploads/files/pdf/journal/17-white.pdf>.

³ Shawn D. Wright, "Justification by Faith Alone: The Perspectives of William Kiffin and John Owen." *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 20.4 (2016): 37.

Paul's Justification by Faith

Romans 10: 5-6, Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them." But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down).'"

In these two verses, Paul describes two types of righteousness, righteousness by the law and righteousness by faith. Righteousness by the law is supported in Romans 2: 13, "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law who will be declared righteous." Righteousness by faith is supported in Romans 4:5, "However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness."

Righteousness by the law is not the same as righteousness by faith. Righteousness by the law is because of the works or efforts of man to obtain salvation. Righteousness by faith is salvation in Christ. God justifies the wicked because of "righteousness" in Christ. This is because of what Christ has achieved in his death and resurrection as well as the incorporation of God's people in Christ.⁴

The problem with obtaining righteousness by the law is that it is not achievable for fallen man who has inherited Original Sin and has the inclination to sin since birth. No man is perfect and no man can totally keep the law. Therefore, Paul insists that "a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ," (Gal. 2: 16).

According to Tom Jacobs, all the teachings of Paul concerning justification must be put in the right place within his salvation frame.⁵ The foundation of God's plan for salvation for mankind is fulfilled by the works of Jesus Christ in the cross. Paul's soteriology is based on the principle of solidarity. The unity of Christ with us in his death is the foundation for our unity with Christ in his resurrection. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4: 14, "we know that the one who raised the Lord Jesus from the dead will also raise us with Jesus". Tom Jacob says that the basic theology concerning justification is Christ's solidarity with man. Paul describes the process of salvation with three metaphors, reconciliation

⁴ Herman Ridderbos, *Paulus: Pemikiran Utama Theologianya*. (Surabaya: Momentum, 2010), 178.

⁵ Tom Jacobs, *Paulus: Hidup, Karya Dan Teologianya*. (Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1983), 166.

(2Cor. 5: 18-19), justification (Rm. 3:26) and redemption (1 Cor. 1: 30). What is interesting is that all these three metaphors point to God's actions in His plan of salvation for man.

Iswahyudi and Kuniawan Putrawan point out that for Paul, the word justification goes beyond ethical qualities.⁶ His emphasis is on the relationship of right position with God. Dane Ortlund⁷ says that for Paul, justification is a single eschatological event of a declaration of forensic acquittal and right standing with God. It is nonsense to say that a person can be justified here and now but fail to receive final acquittal.

Ridderbos gives a summary of Paul's *Justification by Faith*.⁸ In this doctrine, we can see the beauty of unity in several aspects of Paul's concepts of justification such as Christology, history of redemption, as well as its forensic and imputation character. God's righteousness is an eschatological grace that redeems and is the condition and access to the peace of God and eternal life. Now, this is revealed in the death and resurrection of Christ that redeems. His righteousness is given to those who are in Christ by faith. This is freely given and not because of their works. In this sense, faith is credited as righteousness. Faith is the means that gives eternal life and peace with God through the Lord Jesus Christ. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ," (Rm 5:1).

Patristic Fathers' Perspective of Justification by Faith

It is widely believed that the Reformers rediscovered the principle of *Justification by Faith*. This implies that Paul's principle of *Justification by Faith* was overlooked or misunderstood by the early and medieval Church. The prevalent idea among the Roman Catholics then was that forgiveness was based on the religious activity of the believer as a means of obtaining righteousness.

⁶Iswahyudi and Putrawan, Bobby Kurnia. "Justification by Faith: A Biblical Theological Approach." *International Journal of Social Science Research and Review* 5 (May 2022): 62.

⁷Dane C. Ortlund, "Justified by Faith, Judged According too Works: Another Look at A Pauline Paradox." *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 52, no. 2 (June 2009): 336.

⁸Herman Ridderbos, *Paulus: Pemikiran Utama Theologianya* (Surabaya: Momentum, 2010), 181.

According to McGrath, the Greek writers had a positive view of the human capacity for the exercise of free will. Rather than recognizing the limitations of man's free will, the patristic theologians proclaimed the complete freedom of will. By the end of the fourth century, Greek Fathers "formulated a teaching on human free will based on philosophical rather than biblical foundations". Torrance charges the Apostolic Fathers with directly contradicting Paul and promoting a theology of works.⁹ Therefore, a view of "works-righteousness" prevailed in the period before Augustine.

The writer would like to point out that some of the early church fathers did have the concept of justification by faith. "The early fathers often recognized what the NT said about justification by faith and proclaimed its truth in their teaching and preaching. Hence, the doctrine wasn't denied as we see in later Roman Catholicism."¹⁰ There were indications that *Justification by Faith* was embraced but the implications of the doctrine were not fully worked out.

According to Clement (AD 35-99), justification is God's work. It is given to those who exercise faith. "And so we, having been called through his will in Christ Jesus, are not justified through ourselves or through our wisdom or understanding or piety or works, which we have done in holiness of heart, but through faith, by which the almighty God has justified all who have existed from the beginning, to whom be the glory for ever and ever. Amen."¹¹ For Clement, good works are not the ground of justification but flow from faith. Clement's *Justification by Faith* is an early example of what would become known as *sola fide*.

In the Odes of Solomon, we can see a Pauline view of grace and faith.¹² Justification is not based on human merit but rooted in God's

⁹ D. H. Williams, "Justification by Faith: A Patristic Doctrine." *The Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 57, no.4 (October 2006): 651, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046906008207>.

¹⁰ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 36.

¹¹ Ibid., 32. Also quoted in Heikki Raisanen, *Righteousness by Works: An Early Catholic Doctrine? Thoughts on 1 Clement in Jesus, Paul and Torah: Collected Essays* (trans. David E. Orton; Sheffield Academic, 1992), 202-24.

¹² The Odes of Solomon is a collection of 42 odes attributed to Solomon. The odes are believed to be written either in the first or second century. Some have suggested a later date. Majority of scholars believe that the odes are written by Christians, probably a convert from the Essene community to Christianity.

kindness and grace. Justification is forensic and not transformative. “For the Odist, imputation of the Spirit necessary means the imputation of righteousness.”¹³ The alignment of the Odist’ views of grace, election, and imputation leads to the suggestion that justification is by faith alone.

Origen (AD 185–254) sees *Justification by Faith* in the thief on the cross. The thief was saved because of his faith in Christ and not because of his works. Our works and our obedience cannot justify as righteousness is by faith. He often emphasizes that faith will lead to good works. Thus, his teachings reflect a Pauline theme.

Chrysostom teaches that justification cannot be given through works.¹⁴ This is because God demand perfect obedience. Therefore, the only way to be justified is through grace. Meritorious work is denied and good works are seen as a consequence of faith. Ambrosiaster teaches justification by faith alone.¹⁵ “By faith alone one is freely forgiven of all sins and the believer is no longer burdened by the Law for meriting good works. Our works, however, are demonstrative of our faith and will determine whether we are ultimately justified.”¹⁶

Historically, Hilary of Poitiers (fourth century) was the first Christian theologian to formulate explicitly what Paul has left implicit by referring to God’s work of grace. He declares that justification is by faith alone. “Because faith alone justifies publicans and prostitutes will be first in the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁷ Hilary’s commentary sparked the revival of interests in Pauline’s studies in the later part of the fourth century.

Augustine’s *Justification by Faith* was in response to Pelagius’ teaching that one has the innate resources not to sin. Augustine stressed on the total inability of the natural man and God’s sovereignty. He affirmed the absolute priority of grace. Man’s will without the assistance of saving grace will never want to seek any good except its own. For Augustine,

¹³ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 35. Also cited in Arnold, “*Justification One Hundred Years after Paul*”, 197-230.

¹⁴ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 37.

¹⁵ Ambrosiaster is the name given to an unknown author who wrote commentary on the epistles of Paul, sometime between 366 and 384 AD..

¹⁶ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 37. Also cited in Williams, *Justification by Faith: A Patristic Doctrine*, 662.

¹⁷ Ibid. 37. Also cited in Williams, *Justification by Faith: A Patristic Doctrine*, 658-60.

"justification is without antecedent merits and that works before faith are useless."¹⁸ In addition, "we are made acceptable in God's sight not through holiness of life but by faith in Christ as our redeemer."¹⁹ In his anti-Pelagian writings, believers are saved by grace and not by works. It is not surprising to find Luther and Calvin often quote from Augustine.

The writer would like to point out that Augustine's understanding of justification differs from the Reformers. For Augustine, "justify" means "make righteous". Justification is not merely an event. It is a process. Believers continue to be transformed and perfected (Augustine does not distinguish between sanctification and justification). Therefore, justification for Augustine is inherent righteousness and not imputed righteousness. On the other hand, for the Reformers, "justify" means "to be declared righteous". The righteousness of Christ is imputed to the believers.

The earliest church fathers understood Paul's justification by faith and rejected works as a basis for justification. However, their understandings of justification were not stated as clearly as in the Reformation until controversy forced a full discussion of the issue upon the church.

Martin Luther's Perspective of Justification by Faith

In medieval time, Augustine's definition of justification had triumphed in the Roman Catholic Church. Justification means that believers are made righteous and not declared right before God. Justification denotes the continuous change and transformation in the lives of believers. It is in this context that the Reformation understanding of justification is born.

In "Saved by Grace", Hoekema²⁰ describes the spiritual struggle of Martin Luther. He had tried every means to obtain peace such as prayer, fasting, and other ascetic practices. All these efforts did not give him any peace. Why would Luther go to such extreme measure to achieve peace with God? This could be attributed to the theological education he

¹⁸ Bammel, C. P. "Justification by Faith in Augustine and Origen." *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 47, no. 2, (April 1996), 231.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022046900077770>.

¹⁹ Mullet, Micheal A. *John Calvin*. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 34.

²⁰ Hoekema, Anthony A. *Diselamatkan oleh Anugerah*. (Surabaya: Momentum, 2006), 201.

received while he was an Augustine monk at Erfurt. He was under the influence of teachers who taught theology *via moderna*. Among the most influential theologians *via moderna* in Germany was Gabriel Biel. “He emphasized that human beings must meet the conditions of the covenant to be in a right relationship with God.”²¹ God has established a covenant with man. Through this covenant, God is obligated to justify those who can meet certain minimal conditions.²² In other words, it is sinners who take the initiative to come to God. The effort of man is needed to put God under obligation to give rewards to sinners in the form of grace.

Luther was very aware of his sins. In the Book of Psalms, the Psalmists mentioned the righteousness of God and Luther was terrified. For Luther, the righteousness of God means the avenging justice of God which brings judgment and retribution on the sinners. The phrase, “justice of God” in Romans 1: 17 struck fears in Luther’s soul and all of his attempts to satisfy God left him with a wholly disquieted conscience.

Why would Luther have such negative and fearful thoughts of God? This was attributed to the teaching of the infusion of grace through the sacramental-penitential system of the church. This continued the process of justification that began in baptism. Therefore, in this life, a Christian will always be a pilgrim, suspended between God’s grace (mediated through the sacraments) and God’s judgment hanging over one’s head.

Scholastic theology made a distinction between “actual grace” and “habitual grace”. In actual grace, the forgiveness of actual sins occurred provided they were made known in confession. However, the actual grace could not remove the guilt of original sin. Neither could it transform the sinner ontologically. Therefore, infusion of habitual grace was needed which imparted a divine quality to the soul. This habitual grace enabled one to perform righteous acts. Habitual grace was pure grace. It was not the result of merit. One was declared righteous because he had already been made righteous by the infusion of a supernatural quality.

Luther’s problem was that he believed that only actual sins admitted in confession were forgiven. He was worried that he might have overlooked some sins. Therefore, he would repeatedly confess his sins for

²¹ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 48.

²² Alister E. McGrath, *Sejarah Pemikiran Reformasi* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2019), 118.

hours. He would also question his motivation for confession whether it was driven merely by fear and thus to the abyss of despair or depression.

When Luther read Romans 1: 17, "For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: 'The righteous will live by faith,'" it dawned on him that a righteousness from God meant by apostle Paul is not the justice of God that is meted out as punishment to sinners. Instead, it is the righteousness of God that is given to sinners who need it. They receive the righteousness of God by faith. This is the perfect righteousness which is obtained in Christ and is given freely by grace to everyone who believes.²³ It is at this moment that Protestant Reformation is born.

The writer would like to point out that Luther's understanding of "Justification by Faith Alone" comes from a combination of factors which include his personal struggles, his conversion experience,²⁴ his academic assignment and theological reflection at the University of Wittenberg,²⁵ as well as his Tower Experience.²⁶

In this section, the writer will provide Luther's views on sin and law, imputation, faith alone justifies, believers are justified and at the same time sinners, as well as the role of good works.

Sin and Law

The fundamental issue in Luther's theology is about one's relationship with God. We cannot enjoy a relationship with the Holy God apart from the radical grace of God. In "The Bondage of Will", Luther teaches that we are captives to sin. We do have freedom but our wills are bent to do what is evil. The law given by God is to expose human sin. The law reveals our rebellion, our idolatry and our unbelief. The law is given

²³ Anthony A. Hoekema, *Diselamatkan oleh Anugerah* (Surabaya: Momentum, 2006), 202.

²⁴ On 2nd July 1505, Martin Luther was returning from his family's home in Mansfeld to Erfurt. He was caught in a storm and lightning nearly struck him. He begged St. Anne to save his life, vowing to become a monk if he survived. He survived and entered St. Augustine's Monastery in Erfurt. This incident changed the course of history.

²⁵ At the University of Wittenberg, Luther gave a series of lectures on Psalms and extensive exegesis of Paul on Romans, Galatians and Hebrews.

²⁶ Luther's Tower Experience refers to the moment of illumination at which he came to his new understanding of Romans 1: 17.

so that we could see the seriousness of our sin and makes us realize that we need Christ as our Savior.

For Luther, God uses the law as a hammer. “Human beings are convinced of their righteousness, and God needs a mighty tool to crush our self-righteous presumption. Therefore, this presumption of righteousness is a huge and horrible monster. To break and crush it, God needs a large and powerful hammer, that is, the Law, which is the hammer of death, the thunder of hell, and the lightning of divine wrath. To what purpose? To attack the presumption of righteousness, which is a rebellious, stubborn, and stiff-necked beast. God shatters our self-confidence and self-righteousness, so that we will put our faith in Jesus Christ.”²⁷

Imputation

According to Luther, righteousness is imputed to us rather than imparted. It is extrinsic and not intrinsic. It is declared instead of being inherent. However, we must understand that the early Luther understood justification in terms of a process and growing in righteousness as taught in the Roman Catholic Church. It is only the mature Luther who later came to the conviction that justification is about one’s status and relationship before God.

Righteousness is fundamentally a gift. It is extrinsic. Our righteousness is considered passive because we do not do anything to prepare for it. We do not have it of ourselves. Our righteousness is an alien righteousness. Through faith in Christ, Christ’s righteousness becomes our righteousness because Christ is the bridegroom and the church is the bride. The believers are righteous because they belong to Christ and are married to Christ.

Faith-alone Justifies

Luther famously adds the word “alone” to the text of Roman 3: 28, “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.” Luther’s “Justified by Faith Alone” is meant to emphasize that faith alone justifies which represents the meaning of the verse in context.

1) By faith, one lays hold of Christ, who is our righteousness.

²⁷ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 51-51.

- 2) By faith alone, one is justified.
- 3) By faith, one is saved because in Christ, there is forgiveness of sin.
- 4) By faith, one has union with Christ.

Luther teaches that we could not become righteous through our works alone but only through faith in God, we are accepted as righteous. According to Luther, righteousness is received through faith, and only in the form of faith. It is faith that holds Christ tightly and faith justifies because of the richness of the treasure in Christ through His presence. In other words, through faith, Christ is present. It is the justification that determines and transforms a believer.

“Justification is by faith alone, because it looks to Christ alone for forgiveness of sins and salvation. Faith itself doesn’t save, but faith saves because we receive Christ by faith, because we possess and grasp Christ by faith.”²⁸ For Luther, faith is God’s gift to us and faith alone (*Sola Fide*) is an essential part of the gospel. It ascribes salvation to Christ alone (*Solus Christus*). It also ascribes glory to God alone (*Soli Deo Gloria*).

Believers are Justified and at the Same Time Sinners

Faith does not bring us immediately to paradise as we still struggle with sin. “Thus, a Christian man is righteous and sinner at the same time, holy and profane, an enemy of God and a child of God.”²⁹

Luther’s teaching on the Epistle of Romans is still applicable today. A person who is justified is a righteous person but at the same time is still a sinner. A person becomes righteous because of the righteousness of Christ which is imputed to him but that person in himself is still a sinner.

The paradoxical reality of Christian existence helps us to stay humble. In addition, we have assurance of our salvation because our righteousness comes from Christ and not of our own. We take hold of Christ who is our righteousness in faith.

Role of Good Works

In “Disputation Concerning Justification”, Luther says that genuine faith does not fold one’s arm. We can be sure and know who have genuine faith from the results or from works that follow it. Good works are

²⁸ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 54. Also cited in Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology*, 260-263.

²⁹ Ibid., 55. Also cited in Luther, *Galatians 1-4*, 377-78.

evidence of a genuine faith. Luther was worried that Roman Catholics had exalted love over faith. If we concentrate on our works, our focus would easily shift from Christ and his sacrifice to our acts of love.

Galatians 5: 6, “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.” The question is whether faith is formed by love or love is the result of faith. Luther believed the latter. He says that works flow from faith and lead to love. Love is not the basis of our justification. The order must be reversed. Faith expresses itself through love.

“It is true that faith alone justifies, without works; but I am speaking about genuine faith, which after it has justified, will not go to sleep but is active through love.”³⁰

John Calvin’s Perspective of Justification by Faith

In his 1536 Institutes, Calvin devoted a brief chapter on faith. By faith only, sinners are made righteous in God’s sight. We are justified by faith. The righteousness is not ours but Christ’s righteousness imputed to us when we believe in Him.

Calvin believes that justification is necessary for a saving relationship with God. “Justification is the main hinge upon which religion turns.”³¹ Calvin’s teaching on justification can be categorized under five headings:³²

Why We Need justification?

Calvin believes that justification is very crucial and important because apart from justification, man cannot be right with God. God requires perfect obedience. Sin is pervasive in man. Romans 3: 23, “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” Righteousness cannot be obtained by works.

Calvin and Luther share a similar position on the exposition of Paul’s Epistle to Romans. “For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law,” (Rm. 3:28). The law reveals the depth and

³⁰ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 57.

³¹ Ibid., 69. Also cited in John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. John T. McNeil; trans. and indexed by Ford Lewis Battles; LCC 20; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 3.11.1.

³² Ibid., 69-77.

power of sin in our lives and drives us to Christ. For Calvin, the works of the law refer to the entire law and not just the ceremonial law.

Justification by Faith Alone

Like Luther, Calvin stresses that justification is by faith alone. Since we are sinners, we cannot obtain a right relationship with God through works. Faith is the only path to salvation. However, Calvin clarifies that faith should not be construed as a work as if faith justifies us. Faith by itself does not justify but justifies as an instrument through which we receive Christ's righteousness. Faith is the instrument that joins us to Christ.

Calvin does not agree with the term implicit faith that refers to a kind of pious submission to the collective judgment of the church as taught by the Roman theologians. For Calvin, true faith rests not on ignorance but on knowledge. However, we must go further and have a personal knowledge of God through Jesus Christ. True faith is an experiential hope, trust and confidence grounded in Scripture. For Calvin, true faith is living, active and vital.

Calvin defines faith as "a firm and certain knowledge of God's benevolence toward us, founded upon the truth of the freely given promise in Christ, both revealed to our minds and sealed upon our hearts through the Holy Spirit."³³ Faith is a supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit. In referring to faith as knowledge, it must not be understood that salvation is an intellectual exercise. By calling it "knowledge", Calvin means that faith is a lively awareness whereby we grasp the grace of our adoption, the newness of life and other spiritual gifts of the Holy Spirit.

There are two aspects to faith. It is the work of the Holy Spirit and it is also the genuine human response by which those who are elected enter into new life in Christ. Calvin does not believe in the type of evangelism that preaches an easy to believe approach. Just believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved without the need for radical, life-changing consequences. Calvin rejects "easy believism."³⁴ Mortification (the acts of subduing or put to death one's bodily desires) and vivification

³³ Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers*. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishing Group, 2013), 238.

³⁴ Easy believism is a derogatory term used by opponents of the view that one needs only to believe in Jesus in order to be saved. They misunderstand *solo fide*.

(make alive) are not limited to the initial moment of conversion. They persist throughout the whole of Christian life.

Justification and Assurance

When we are justified by faith in Christ, we can have a sure and certain knowledge of our salvation. In this life, we will experience “storms of life” with all the ups and downs. It is only natural that during those difficult times, we have doubts. Calvin affirms that believers do struggle with doubts but he says that the characteristic of a genuine faith is that it perseveres to the end.

The life of faith is a fight. It is not simple and easy. It is difficult but true faith endures and emerges victorious in the struggle. Both Calvin and Luther teach justification by faith alone and the assurance of faith. They do not support a simplistic conception of faith. “They recognized the anguish and doubts that beset believers. Still, genuine faith persists and lasts, making it through every storm. Faith may be battered and even quenched for a time but at the end of the day it arises victorious.”³⁵

Justification as Imputation

Righteousness cannot come from ourselves as we all are stained by sin. As God demands perfect obedience, our works cannot bring us into right standing with God as we all for short.

How can God then justify a sinner? It started with the love of God and the incarnation of His Son two thousand years ago. Through His active obedience, Jesus Christ lived a perfect life without sin and obtained righteousness for us which the first Adam had failed. Through His passive obedience, the sinless Christ met the demand of the holiness of God against sin. Christ died as our substitute. So, when a sinner believes in Christ, there is a double imputation. The imputation of our guilt and condemnation to Jesus Christ and the imputation of His righteousness to us. Put it simply in layman term, I take off my clothes which are soiled with all my dirt, sins and guilts and give them to Jesus. I then put on Jesus’ robe of righteousness given freely by grace through faith in Him. Now God sees in me, not my sins, but the perfect righteousness of Christ.

³⁵ Thomas Schreiner, *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 73.

Justification is forensic. We are declared righteous and put in the right standing with God. Calvin does not teach that we are made righteous but we are counted as righteous. We are not transformed in justification but forgiven. We do not become more justified in the process of sanctification. This is because justification does not mean inner renewal but a declaration from God that we are acquitted and not guilty before Him. Justification is not intrinsic but extrinsic.

Even after our conversion, we are still beset with sin. The continuous presence of sin shows that righteousness has to be forensic for we cannot claim to be right with God when we are still stained with sin. Therefore, we need the righteousness of Christ to be imputed to us.

The concept of imputation is very important in Calvin's theology. Our assurance of eternal life rests on the truth that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us. We cannot find righteousness in ourselves but we are righteous because Christ's righteousness is reckoned to us.

Calvin teaches that Christ's righteousness is imputed to us because of our union with Christ. We become members of his body on our repentance and faith in Him. For Calvin, justification is the "remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."³⁶

Justification and Sanctification

The justification which we received by faith is not a naked faith by itself but a faith that leads to repentance and baptism. As Paul says, "*The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love.*" (Galatians 5: 6) Justification is the automatic union of believers with Christ when they experienced new birth which will eventually produce the right fruit.³⁷ Calvin says that our good works have nothing to do with God's reconciliation of ourselves to him but when man is reconciled, there will also be good works.³⁸

³⁶ William M. Thompson, "Viewing Justification Through Calvin's Eyes: An Ecumenical Experiment," *Theological Studies* 57 (1996), 448, <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/57/57.3/57.3.3.pdf>.

³⁷ Fergindo Reza Kaligis, and Ridwanta Manogu, "Analisis Teologis Konsep Pembetulan Berdasarkan Pengakuan Iman Westminster dan Kekismus Heidelberg." *Diligentia: Journal of Theology and Christian Education* 2, no. 1 (January 2020): 106. <http://doi.org/10.19166/dil.v2i1.2285>.

³⁸ Natalia M. Belting, "Calvin and Justification by Faith," *The Christian Scholar* 45, no. 3 (Fall, 1962): 203. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41177295>.

Calvin distinguished between justification and sanctification but he does not separate the two realities.³⁹ “All those who belong to Christ are also transformed. Those who are united to Christ are both justified and sanctified in him. But even though sanctification and justification are inseparable, they must be distinguished. For instance, the sun both illumines with its light and warms with its heat, and yet heat and light are not the same thing.”

One of the regular themes in Calvin’s theology is the close relationship between justification and sanctification which are derived in union with Christ. According to Alister McGrath,⁴⁰ the union with Christ has two impacts which Calvin calls double grace. Firstly, the union of believers with Christ will lead to immediate justification of oneself. Through Christ and in Christ, a believer is declared righteous before God. Secondly, through new birth, a believer will begin the process of becoming like Christ. Calvin says that justification and new birth are both the results of the union of believers with Christ through faith.

Other Reformers’ Perspective of Justification by Faith

Unlike Luther, whose theology of justification by faith came like a flash of lightning, Zwingli’s discovery of Pauline’s doctrine of justification developed slowly through hours of study and in the pulpit. Zwingli was a priest. Two events caused his break from the Roman Catholic Church and to his public adherence of the Protestant cause. In late 1520, he renounced the papal pension he had been receiving. On 10th October 1522, he resigned as the “people priest” of Zurich. After breaking totally from the Roman Catholic Church, he was in a position to push for reformation in Zurich. Zwingli teaches *Justification by Faith*. However, he carefully points out that the man of true faith by his inner compulsion will keep the works of the law.

Martin Bucer was a German Protestant reformer who was based in Strasbourg whose teachings influenced Lutheran, Calvinist, and Anglican doctrines and practices. He teaches “double justification”. There are two

³⁹ William M. Thompson, “Viewing Justification Through Calvin’s Eyes: An Ecumenical Experiment,” *Theological Studies* 57 (1996): 448, <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/57/57.3/57.3.3.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Sejarah Pemikiran Reformasi* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2019), 146.

stages in justification.⁴¹ The first stage is the justification of the unbelievers. This consists of forgiveness from God who is full of mercy towards sinners (Protestant theology later calls it justification). The second stage is the justification of sinners which consist of the obedience of man towards the moral demands of the Gospel (Protestant theology later calls it new birth or sanctification).

For the Anabaptists, "The just shall live by faith" is a vital truth. Faith is the means of a new life in Christ. The new birth is the result of the works of the Holy Spirit. From his eighteen articles on doctrinal basis of Reformation in Waldshut, Hubmaier devoted the first three articles to the doctrine of *Justification by Faith*.

1) Faith alone makes us holy before God; 2) This faith is the acknowledgement of the mercy of God which he has shown us in the offering of his only begotten son. This excludes all sham Christians, who have nothing more than a historical faith in God; 3) Such faith cannot remain passive but must break out to God in thanksgiving and to mankind in all kinds of works of brotherly love. Hence all vain religious acts, such as candles, palm branches, and holy water will be rejected."⁴²

Implication for Theological Learning

Today, the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* is largely neglected in the church. The doctrine of *Justification by Faith* rests on three basic presuppositions: the divine authority of Holy Scripture, the divine wrath against sin and the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ. When the church does not support these truths, inevitably the doctrine of justification will be neglected. This is what has happened in many Protestant churches today.

The Divine Authority of the Bible

The Reformation theologians believed that what Scripture said, God said. They understood the biblical doctrine of sin and salvation exactly as it stood. They found that the heart of the gospel as revealed in

⁴¹ Alister E. McGrath, *Sejarah Pemikiran Reformasi* (Jakarta: BPK Gunung Mulia, 2019), 145.

⁴² William R. Estep, *The Anabaptist Story: An Introduction to Sixteenth-Century Anabaptism*. (Grand Rapids: William Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), 200-201.

the New Testament is the doctrine of justification and forgiveness of sins. This is the only way to get right with God's law.

Today, the evangelicals agree with the Reformation theologians that the Bible is the Word of God. They believe in the inspiration, infallibility, and inerrancy of the Bible. They hold to *sola Scriptura* that the Bible alone is authoritative.⁴³

However, modern Protestants such as the liberals (they believe that the Bible contains the Word of God) and the Neo-Orthodox (they believe that the Bible becomes the Word of God when God speaks through a personal encounter) do not agree with the historic understanding of the inspiration and authority of Holy Scripture. They deny the authority of the Scripture. They deny the validity of all the forensic terms in which the Bible explains our relationship with God.

The Divine Wrath against Human Sin

Many Christians today like to see themselves as the prodigal son who is returning home to the embracing arms of the heavenly Father. They do not see themselves as sinners who deserve the wrath of God. They do not see God as the Holy God who hates sin. They do not see God as the Judge who will exact punishment for their sins, "*for the wages of sin is death*".

Karl Menninger's "Whatever Became of Sin?" shows that society today no longer recognizes sin as sin. The doctrine of justification is actually about getting right with God's law. How can one be just with God? For those who refuse to see their situation in these terms will not be interested in the doctrine of *Justification by Faith*. When we do not want to think of our relationship with God in basic biblical terms, we have in fact done away with the foundation of the gospel of justification. When we do so, the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* becomes irrelevant to man's basic need.

The Substitutionary Satisfaction of Christ

The Reformation theologians believed that the penal substitutionary character of the death of Christ and the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* are inseparable and they belong together. Justification

⁴³ Shawn Nelson, *A Voice from a New Generation: What's at Stake?* Cited in Farnell, E. David (ed.). *Vital Issues in the Inerrancy Debate*. (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2015), 31.

is based on the sin-bearing work of Christ. Salvation is by substitution and exchange. Men's sins are imputed to Christ and then Christ's righteousness is imputed to sinners. By this means, God's holy law is satisfied and believing sinners are freed from eternal death.

Little says that some theologians reject penal substitution. They say that Paul added this doctrine to the teachings of Christ.⁴⁴ One of the wrong views against the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ is the moral influence theory which teaches that sinners need only to repent and improve themselves morally to reconcile with God. Christ's death is not substitutionary but as a model. We are saved when we allowed Christ's example to have a decisive influence in our efforts to improve morally. When we reject penal substitutionary satisfaction of Christ, we are actually undermining the gospel of justification.

What can we do to reinstate the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* to its central place in the Gospel? We must teach it in its biblical setting and re-establish its presuppositions.

The writer would like to suggest several ways we could do so.

1. The "Reformation Month" of October is a perfect setting for justification to be preached and taught in the pulpit. We could deliver a series of sermons consisting of the divine authority of the Bible, the divine wrath against sin, the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ, and culminating with the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* on the last Sunday of October or even on the day of 31st October itself.
2. We could teach *Justification by Faith* in Adult Christian Education or Sunday School. A series of lessons could be developed starting with Paul's justification by faith, the perspectives of the Patristic Fathers, the perspectives of the Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, etc.
3. We could take advantage of the digital technology and develop a series of podcast⁴⁵ concerning *Justification by Faith* for the benefit of the wider community.

⁴⁴ Paul E. Little, *Kutahu yang Kupercaya* (Bandung: Yayasan Kalam Hidup, 2000), 63-64.

⁴⁵ A podcast is a digital file made available on the internet. It can be downloaded to a computer or mobile device. It is available as a series. People can access to it according to their convenience with regards to when and where.

Conclusion

The Reformers teach the doctrine of justification in a new light. There are three main features in the Protestant doctrine of justification.⁴⁶

1. Justification is forensic and not transformative. This indicates a change in status and not a change in nature.
2. Justification is distinguished from sanctification. In justification, one is declared having the right standing before God. Sanctification refers to the ongoing renewal and transformation in a believer's life.
3. Justification indicates alien righteousness. Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers. Therefore, believers are not righteous because of a righteousness that is inherent in them.

Justification by Faith has always been the central doctrine of Protestant Christians. When Martin Luther says that the doctrine of Justification by Faith determines whether the church stands or falls, what he means is that when the doctrine of Justification by Faith is understood, believed, preached and taught, the church stands in the grace of God and is alive. On the other hand, when this doctrine is neglected, the church will fall from grace and will be in a state of darkness and death.

The writer believes that the doctrine of Justification by Faith must regain its rightful and central place in the Gospel. It must be taught in the church and included in theological learning. We must go back to the biblical truth of *Justification by Faith* as expounded by Apostle Paul. We must rediscover the principle of *Justification by Faith* as taught by the Reformers. Failing to do so will encourage easy believism. The writer believes that when the doctrine of *Justification by Faith* is neglected, Christianity may find itself in a slippery slope and back to the "dark ages" of the medieval Church.

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⁴⁶ Schreiner, Thomas. *Faith Alone: The Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2015), 49.

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