

**Entrust Church History Justification by Faith & the Early Church 2/24/22**

Introduction:

- If we had to narrow it down, what would be the most important doctrine of the faith?
- Rome on justification (Peter Kreeft): “But when Trent said we are saved by good works as well as faith, they meant by salvation the whole process by which God brings us to our eternal destiny and that process includes repentance, faith, hope, and charity, the works of love. The word faith was also used in two different senses. Luther used it in the broad sense of the person's acceptance of God's offer of salvation. It included repentance, faith, hope, and charity.”
- Kreeft: “This ‘faith,’ though prompted by the will, is an act of the intellect. Though necessary for salvation, it is not sufficient. Even the devils have this faith, as Saint James writes: ‘Do you believe that there is only one God? Good! The demons also believe – and tremble with fear” (James 2: 19). That is why James says, ‘it is by his actions that a person is put right with God, and not by his faith alone’ (James 2:24).”<sup>1</sup>
- Kreeft: “The split of the Protestant Reformation began when a Catholic discovered a Catholic doctrine in a Catholic book. It can end only when both Protestants and Catholics do the same thing today and understand what they are doing: discovering a Catholic doctrine in a Catholic book.”
- Central to Rome’s error is the fact that grace and works (e.g. “charity,” “the works of love”) are entirely opposed to one another:

Romans 11:6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace.

- The doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone is considered the most important truth of the Christian faith (“the heart of the heart of the gospel,” Luther: “the doctrine by which the church stands or falls”).
- Justification by faith alone:

Romans 3:24–28 being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; <sup>25</sup> whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Kreeft, <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/religion-and-philosophy/apologetics/justification-by-faith.html>.

blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; <sup>26</sup> 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. <sup>27</sup> Where then is boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? Of works? No, but by a law of faith. <sup>28</sup> For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the Law.

Romans 5:1 Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,

- Justification by faith alone in Christ alone: God declares the sinner instantaneously and irreversibly righteous before him, having imputed the righteousness of Christ to the sinner, and the sinner's sin to Christ at the cross, on the basis of the sinner's faith in Christ, not works.
- Often this doctrine is thought to have arisen during the Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- However, it was rediscovered, not invented. By it, the Reformers understood that Christ's finished work liberates sinners from the bondage of guilt and the system of works righteousness and traditional sacramentalism in which they had been trapped.
- **But what about the early leaders of Christianity *who lived in the centuries after the apostles?***
- Did they also understand justification to be by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone?
- In his *Institutes*, John Calvin (1509-1564) writes the following:

**John Calvin:** "Moreover, (the Roman church) unjustly set the ancient fathers against us (I mean the ancient writers of a better age of the church) as if in them they had supporters of their own impiety. If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory — to put it very modestly — would turn to our side. Now, these fathers have written many wise and excellent things. . . . [Yet] the good things that these fathers have written they [the Roman Catholics] either do not notice, or misrepresent or pervert. . . . But we do not despise them [the church fathers]; in fact, if it were to our present purpose, I could with no trouble at all prove that the greater part of what we are saying today meets their approval." ("Dedicatory Letter to Francis I," *Institutes*, section 4)

- When we survey the early patristic literature, we find that the church fathers embraced the same gospel as the Apostles at the Jerusalem Council and as the Reformers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- Therefore, the Reformation was not the invention of something new; rather it was the recovery of something very old.
- A survey of history finds that the early church and the Reformers believed:
  - The root of justification is grace alone through faith alone in the Person and finished work of Christ alone
  - The fruit of justification is the consequent transformed life.

1. **Augustine (354–430)**

“If Abraham was not justified by works, how was he justified?” The apostle goes on to tell us how: What does scripture say? (that is, about how Abraham was justified). Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6).

Abraham, then, was justified by faith. Paul and James do not contradict each other: good works follow justification. . . . The two apostles are not contradicting each other.

James dwells on an action performed by Abraham that we all know about: he offered his son to God as a sacrifice. That is a great work, but it proceeded from faith.

I have nothing but praise for the superstructure of action, but I see the foundation of faith; I admire the good work as a fruit, but I recognize that it springs from the root of faith.” (John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed., WSA, Part 3, Vol. 15, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., Expositions of the Psalms 1–32, Exposition 2 of Psalm 31, 2–4 [Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000], pp. 364–365)

- In other words, Augustine taught that justification is by grace alone through *faith alone*, but saving faith is never alone. The root of salvation by grace through faith will always produce the fruit of a changed life. That was precisely how Luther, Calvin, and the other Reformers understood the gospel. It is how we, as evangelicals today, understand the gospel as well.
- Was Augustine alone in that understanding?

2. **Clement of Rome (c. 35-99)**

- a. Clement was the pastor of the church in Rome from about 90 to 100 AD. That means he was a contemporary of the apostle John. He was also a disciple of the apostle Paul, and he is even mentioned by Paul in Philippians 4:3.
- b. Because he was a pastor in Rome, Roman Catholicism considers him to be the 4<sup>th</sup> pope.
- c. We must look at what we wrote. In one of the earliest Christian documents that we have outside of the New Testament, in chapter 32 of his epistle, he writes:

“And we [Christians], 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 forever and ever. Amen.” (*First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 32.4).

➤ According to Clement, sinners are justified by faith alone in Christ.

3. **Polycarp (c. 69-160)**

“I rejoice that the secure root of your faith, proclaimed from ancient times, even now continues to abide and bear fruit in our Lord Jesus Christ. He persevered to the point of death on behalf of our sins; and God raised him up after loosing the labor pains of Hades. Even without seeing him, you believe in him with an inexpressible and glorious joy that many long to experience. For you know that you have been saved by a gracious gift – not from works but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.” (Epistle to the Philippians 1.2-3; trans. by Bart D. Ehrman, *The Apostolic Fathers*, Loeb, 333-335)

4. **Ignatius of Antioch (c. 50-c. 110)**

“But to me Jesus Christ is in the place of all that is ancient: His cross, and death, and resurrection, and the faith which is by Him, are undefiled monuments of antiquity; by which I desire, through your prayers, to be justified.” (Epistle to Philadelphians, VIII).

5. Epistle to Diognetus (2<sup>nd</sup> century)

- a. “He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal.
- b. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!” (Epistle to Diognetus 9, 2-5; ANF 1:28; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 65)

6. Justin Martyr (100-165)

Justin speaks of “those who repented, and who no longer were purified by the blood of goats and of sheep, or by the ashes of an heifer, or by the offerings of fine flour, but by faith through the blood of Christ, and through His death.” (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 13)

7. Origen (185-254)

- a. “A man is justified by faith. The works of the law can make no contribution to this. Where there is no faith which might justify the believer, even if there are works of the law these are not based on the foundation of faith. Even if they are good in themselves they cannot justify the one who does them, because faith is lacking, and faith is the mark of those who are justified by God.” (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans; CER 2:136; ACCS NT 6:104; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 45)
- b. “For God is just, and therefore he could not justify the unjust. Therefore he required the intervention of a propitiator, so that by having faith in him those who could not be justified by their own works might be justified.” (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 2:112; ACCS NT 6:102-3; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 63)
- c. Regarding the Thief on the Cross: “Who has been justified by faith alone without works of the law? Thus in my opinion that thief was crucified

with Christ should suffice for a suitable example. He called out to him from the cross, 'Lord Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom!' In the Gospels, nothing else is recorded about his good works, but for the sake of this faith alone Jesus said to him, 'Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.'" (Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans 3.9.3; Cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 99)

8. **Didymus the Blind (c. 313-398)**

"A person is saved by grace, not by works but by faith. There should be no doubt but that faith saves and then lives by doing its own works, so that the works which are added to salvation by faith are not those of the law but a different kind of thing altogether." (Commentary on James, 2:26b.)

9. **Basil of Caesarea (329-379)**

"Let one who boasts boast in the Lord, that Christ has been made by God for us righteousness, wisdom, justification, redemption. This is perfect and pure boasting in God, when one is not proud on account of his own righteousness but knows that he is indeed unworthy of the true righteousness and is justified solely by faith in Christ. And Paul boasts that he despises his own righteousness, seeking that righteousness that is on account of Christ, which is the righteousness of God by faith." (Sermon on Humility, 22; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98)

"An eternal rest awaits those who have rightly contended in this life; not because of the merits of their works but from the grace of a most bountiful God, in which they have hoped." (Homily on Psalm 114; Cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 99)

10. **Athanasius (c. 296-373)**

"For naturally, since the Logos of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled by death all that was required." (On the Incarnation of the Logos, 6-7, 9.)

11. **Hilary of Poitiers (300–368)**

- a. Hilary notes that “faith justifies” some twenty times in his thirty-three chapter commentary on Matthew’s gospel.
- b. “Wages cannot be considered as a gift, because they are due to work, but God has given free grace to all men by the justification of faith.” (Commentary on Matthew 20:7)

12. **Ambrose (339–397)**

- a. “I have nothing, therefore, whereby I may glory in my works; I have nothing to boast of, and, therefore, I will glory in Christ. I will not glory because I am righteous, but because I am redeemed. I will not glory because I am free from sin, but because my sins are pardoned. I will not glory because I have done good to any one, or any one has done good to me, but because Christ is my advocate with the Father, and because Christ’s blood was shed for me.” (*Concerning Jacob and a Happy Life*, 1.6; cited from G. Finch, *A Sketch of the Romish Controversy*, 220).
- b. “Therefore let no one boast of his works, because no one can be justified by his works; but he who is just receives it as a gift, because he is justified by the washing of regeneration. It is faith, therefore, which delivers us by the blood of Christ, because blessed is he whose sins are forgiven, and to whom pardon is granted.” (*Letter 73*; cited from G. Finch, *A Sketch of the Romish Controversy*, 220)
- c. “Ye behold the mysteries, ye behold the grace of Christ, and the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is conferred in some sort fortuitously; forasmuch as every one is not justified by the Lord by reason of his works, but by reason of his faith.” (*An Exhortation to Virginity*; cited from George Finch, *A Sketch of the Romish Controversy*, 220).

13. **John Chrysostom (347–407)**

- a. “Even faith, [Paul] says, is not from us. For if the Lord had not come, if he had not called us, how should we have been able to believe? “For how,” [Paul] says, “shall they believe if they have not heard?” (Rom. 10:14). So even the act of faith is not self-initiated. It is, he says, “the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8c).” (Homily on Ephesians 2:8; IOEP 2:160; ACCS NT 8:134; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 44)

- b. “God allowed his Son to suffer as if a condemned sinner, so that we might be delivered from the penalty of our sins. This is God’s righteousness, that we are not justified by works (for then they would have to be perfect, which is impossible), but by grace, in which case all our sin is removed” (Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians 11:5; NPNF 1 12:334; ACCS NT 7:252; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 61).
  
- c. “For as people, on receiving some great good, ask themselves if it is not a dream, as not believing it; so it is with respect to the gifts of God. What then was it that was thought incredible? That those who were enemies and sinners, justified by neither the law nor works, should immediately through faith alone be advanced to the highest favor. On this head [topic] accordingly Paul has discoursed at length in his Epistle to the Romans, and here again at length.”
  
- d. “For it seemed to them [the Jews] incredible that a person who had misspent all his former life in vain and wicked actions should afterwards be saved by his faith alone. On this account he says, “It is a saying to be believed.” (Homilies on 1 Timothy 1.15-16; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98).
  
- e. “To have brought humanity, more senseless than stones, to the dignity of angels simply through bare words, and faith alone, without any hard work, is indeed a rich and glorious mystery. It is just as if one were to take a dog, quite consumed with hunger and the mange, foul and loathsome to see, and not so much as able to move but lying passed out, and make him all at once into a human being and to display him upon the royal throne.” (Homilies on Colossians 1:26-28; Cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98)
  
- f. “Now since the Jews kept turning over and over the fact, that the Patriarch, and friend of God, was the first to receive circumcision, he wishes to show, that it was by faith that he too was justified. And this was quite a vantage ground to insist upon. For a person who had no works, to be justified by faith, was nothing unlikely. But for a person richly adorned with good deeds, not to be made just from hence, but from faith, this is the thing to cause wonder, and to set the power of faith in a strong light. NPNF1: Vol. XI, Homilies on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans, Homily 8, Romans 4:1-2, first paragraph.
  
- g. And this he removes, with great skill and prudence, turning their argument against themselves, and showing that those who relinquish the Law are not only not cursed, but blessed; and they who keep it, not only



not blessed but cursed. They said that he who kept not the Law was cursed, but he proves that he who kept it was cursed, and he who kept it not, blessed. Again, they said that he who adhered to Faith alone was cursed, but he shows that he who adhered to Faith alone, is blessed. And how does he prove all this? for it is no common thing which we have promised; wherefore it is necessary to give close attention to what follows. He had already shown this, by referring to the words spoken to the Patriarch, 'In thee shall all nations be blessed,' (Genesis 12:4.) at a time, that is, when Faith existed, not the Law. NPNF1: Vol. XIII, Commentary on Galatians, 3:8.

- h. "God's mission was not to save people in order that they may remain barren or inert. For Scripture says that faith has saved us. Put better: Since God willed it, faith has saved us. Now in what case, tell me, does faith save without itself doing anything at all? Faith's workings themselves are a gift of God, lest anyone should boast. What then is Paul saying? Not that God has forbidden works but that he has forbidden us to be justified by works. No one, Paul says, is justified by works, precisely in order that the grace and benevolence of God may become apparent." Homily on Ephesians 4.2.9. Mark J. Edwards, ed., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI: Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 134. See also John Chrysostom. F. Field, ed., Interpretatio omnium Epistolarum Paulinarum per Homilias Facta (Oxford J. H. Parker, 1845-1862), 2:160.
- i. "The patriarch Abraham himself before receiving circumcision had been declared righteous on the score of faith alone: before circumcision, the text says, 'Abraham believed God, and credit for it brought him to righteousness.'" Fathers of the Church, Vol. 82, Homilies on Genesis 18-45, 27.7 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), p. 167.

**14. Augustine (354-430)**

- a. "When someone believes in him who justifies the impious, that faith is reckoned as justice to the believer, as David too declares that person blessed whom God has accepted and endowed with righteousness, independently of any righteous actions (Rom 4:5-6). What righteousness is this? The righteousness of faith, preceded by no good works, but with good works as its consequence." (John E. Rotelle, O.S.A., ed., WSA, Part 1, Vol. 11, trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B., Expositions of the Psalms 1-32, Exposition 2 of Psalm 31, 7 [Hyde Park: New City Press, 2000], 370)

- b. “What is grace? That which is freely given. What is “freely given”? Given, not paid. If it was due, wages would be given, but grace would not be bestowed. But if it was really due, then you were good. But if, as is true, you were evil but believed on him who justifies the ungodly (What is, “who justifies the ungodly”? the ungodly is made righteous), consider what by right hung over you by the law and you have obtained by grace. But having obtained that grace by faith, you will be just by faith – “for the just lives by faith.” (*Tractates on the Gospel of John*, John 1:15–18, Tractate 3.9 in *NPNE*, 7:21; cited from Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 501)

**15. Jerome (347–420)**

- a. Jerome uses the phrase “sola fide” some 15 times in volume 30 of the PL alone. (cf. Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98).
- b. “We are saved by grace rather than works, for we can give God nothing in return for what he has bestowed on us.” (Epistle to the Ephesians 1.2.1; PL 26:468B [574]; ACCS NT 8:132; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 48).
- c. “God proposed to save by faith alone those whom he foreknew would believe.” (Commentary on the Pauline Epistles, Romans 8.28–29; Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98).

**16. Ambrosiaster (4<sup>th</sup> century)**

- a. “All thanksgiving for our salvation is to be given only to God. He extends his mercy to us so as to recall us to life precisely while we are straying, without looking for the right road. And thus we are not to glory in ourselves but in God, who has regenerated us by a heavenly birth through faith in Christ” (Epistle to the Ephesians, ACCS NT 8:134; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 47).
- b. “These are the true riches of God’s mercy, that even when we did not seek it mercy was made known through his own initiative.” (Epistle to the Ephesians 2.4; CSEL 81.3:80; ACCS NT 8:131; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 48)
- c. “They are justified freely because, while doing nothing or providing any repayment, they are justified by faith alone as a gift of God.” (Commentary on Romans 3.24; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 98)

- d. “It is determined by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved and have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.” (Commentary on 1 Corinthians 1.4; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 97).
  - e. “How then can the Jews think that they have been justified by the works of the law in the same way as Abraham, when they see that Abraham was not justified by the works of the law but by faith alone? Therefore there is no need of the law when the ungodly is justified before God by faith alone.” Ambrosiaster (fl. c. 366-384), on Rom. 4:5 – Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI: Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 112.
  - f. “[On Rom. 3:27] Paul tells those who live under the law that they have no reason to boast basing themselves on the law and claiming to be of the race of Abraham, seeing that no one is justified before God except by faith.” Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament VI: Romans* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1998), p. 103.
17. **Marius Victorinus (4<sup>th</sup> century)**
- a. “The fact that you Ephesians are saved is not something that comes from yourselves. It is the gift of God. It is not from your works, but it is God’s grace and God’s gift, not from anything you have deserved” (Epistle to the Ephesians 1.2.9; BT 1972:152 (1256 A-B); ACCS NT 8:134; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 48).
  - b. “He did not make us deserving, since we did not receive things by our own merit but by the grace and goodness of God” (Epistle to the Ephesians 1.2.7; BT 1972:152 (1255C); ACCS NT 8:132; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 48).
18. **Prosper of Aquitaine (390–455)**
- a. “And just as there are no crimes so detestable that they can prevent the gift of grace, so too there can be no works so eminent that they are owed in condign [deserved] judgment that which is given freely. Would it not be a debasement of redemption in Christ’s blood, and would not God’s mercy be made secondary to human works, if justification, which is through grace, were owed in view of preceding merits, so that it were not the gift of a Donor, but the wages of a laborer?” (Call of All Nations, 1.17; FEF 3:195, sec. 2044; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 46).

- b. “Faith that justifies a sinner cannot be had except for God’s gift, and it is not a reward for previous merits.” (The Call of All Nations, 1.24; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 97)
19. **Theodoret of Cyrrhus (393–457)**
- a. “All we bring to grace is our faith. But even in this faith, divine grace itself has become our enabler. For [Paul] adds, “And this is not of yourselves but it is a gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). It is not of our own accord that we have believed, but we have come to belief after having been called; and even when we had come to believe, He did not require of us purity of life, but approving mere faith, God bestowed on us forgiveness of sins.” (Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul; FEF 3:248–49, sec. 2163; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 44)
- b. “The Lord Christ is both God and the mercy seat, both the priest and the lamb, and he performed the work of our salvation by his blood, demanding only faith from us.” (Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans; PG 82 ad loc.; ACCS NT 6:102; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 62)
- c. “I consider myself as wretched – in fact, wretched three times over. I am guilty of all kinds of errors.” Through faith alone I look for finding some mercy in the day of the Lord’s appearing. (Letter 83; Cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 99)
20. **Cyril of Alexandria (412-444)**
- a. “For we are justified by faith, not by works of the law, as Scripture says (Gal. 2:16). By faith in whom, then, are we justified? Is it not in him who suffered death according to the flesh for our sake? It is not in one Lord Jesus Christ? Have we not been redeemed by proclaiming his death and confessing his resurrection?” (*Against Nestorius, “The Dispensation of the Incarnation,”* 61; Cited from Norman Russell, *Cyril of Alexandria*, 165).
- b. “For truly the compassion from beside the Father is Christ, as he takes away the sins, dismisses the charges and justifies by faith, and recovers the lost and makes [them] stronger than death. . . . For by him and in him we have known the Father, and we have become rich in the justification

by faith.” (Commentary on Hosea. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, p. 29).

21. **Leo the Great (400–461)**

“The devil sees himself robbed of all his tyrannical power and driven from the hearts of those he once possessed, while from either sex thousands of the old, the young, the middle-aged are snatched away from him, and no one is debarred by sin – either because of his own sin or original sin – where justification is not paid for [by] merits but simply given as a free gift.” (Sermon 49.3; cited from Joel C. Elowsky, *We Believe in the Holy Spirit*, 97)

22. **Fulgentius (462–533)**

“The blessed Paul argues that we are saved by faith, which he declares to be not from us but a gift from God. Thus there cannot possibly be true salvation where there is no true faith, and, since this faith is divinely enabled, it is without doubt bestowed by his free generosity. Where there is true belief through true faith, true salvation certainly accompanies it. Anyone who departs from true faith will not possess the grace of true salvation.” (Eph. 2:7; Fulgentius, *On the Incarnation* 1; CCL 91:313; ACCS NT 8:133-34; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 48)

23. **Oecumenius (6th century)**

“Abraham is the image of someone who is justified by faith alone, since what he believed was credited to him as righteousness. But he is also approved because of his works, since he offered up his son Isaac on the altar. Of course he did not do this work by itself; in doing it, he remained firmly anchored in his faith, believing that through Isaac his seed would be multiplied until it was as numerous as the stars.” (Commentary on James 2:23; Gerald Bray, ed., *James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, 33)

24. **Ildefonsus of Toledo (d. 657)**

- a. “The beginning of salvation comes from faith, which, when it is in Christ, is justification for the believer.” (*Journey through the Desert*, 89 in Pelikan 3:27; cited from Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 504)
- b. “God, who makes the unclean clean and removes sins, justifies the sinner apart from works.” (*The Virginity of Mary*, in Pelikan, 3:27; cited from Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 504)

*On the fact that good works are the fruit of salvation:*

- c. Faith unadorned with works is not only lacking in beauty, but is in fact dead. (*Journey through the Desert*, 83, in Pelikan, 3:27; cited from Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 504)

25. **Julian of Toledo (642–690)**

“The righteousness of faith, by which we are justified. This faith is that we believe in him whom we cannot see, and that, being cleansed by faith, we will eventually see him in whom we now believe.” (*The Sixth Age*, 2.14, in Pelikan, 3:27; cited from Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology*, 504)

26. **Bede (673–735)**

“Although the apostle Paul preached that we are justified by faith without works, those who understand by this that it does not matter whether they live evil lives or do wicked and terrible things, as long as they believe in Christ, because salvation is through faith, have made a great mistake. James here expounds how Paul’s words ought to be understood. This is why he uses the example of Abraham, whom Paul also used as an example of faith, to show that the patriarch also performed good works in the light of his faith. It is therefore wrong to interpret Paul in such a way as to suggest that it did not matter whether Abraham put his faith into practice or not. What Paul meant was that no one obtains the gift of justification on the basis of merits derived from works performed beforehand, because the gift of justification comes only from faith.” Bede (673–735), on Paul and James – Gerald Bray, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament XI: James, 1-2Peter, 1-3 John, Jude* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), p. 31.

27. **Anselm (1033–1109)**

“[If God] shall say that you are a sinner, you say: ‘Lord, I interpose the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between my sins and you.’” (*Liber meditationum, Consolatio*, PL 158:687; cited from Thomas Oden, *The Justification Reader*, 58)

## **Conclusion**

- 1) The overwhelming testimony of the early church fathers is that, in keeping with the inspired apostolic writing of the New Testament, they rejected any idea that sinners can enter into right standing with God through works.

- 2) Instead, the early church observed and affirmed the biblical doctrine of justification by faith alone in the Person and finished work of Christ alone.
- 3) This overwhelming testimony is catastrophic to any assertion that the doctrine of justification by faith is an invention of the Reformers, or any other church leader subsequent to the apostolic era.
- 4) In light of this immense testimony, it is utterly impossible for anyone to claim that the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone is without historical warrant, or arose in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.
- 5) Justification was not a Reformation invention. Rather, it was the clear teaching of the apostles in the New Testament; it was a conviction that was championed by many in the early church; and it was a principle that was recovered during the Reformation.
- 6) Therefore, we must ask: When did Roman Catholic soteriology began to become synergistic – such that God’s grace *plus* human works were deemed necessary for justification?
- 7) In some ways, the answer to that question seems to be that it was a gradual process. Apostasy always is; it takes place slowly over time as the traditions of men become elevated to a place where they obscure the clear teaching of God’s word.
- 8) If we focus the question further and ask when did the gospel become so obscured in Western Christianity that it was lost? The answer may be at Fourth Lateran Council of 1215.
- 9) In, *Is Rome the True Church?*, **Norm Geisler** and **Josh Betancourt** write:

“While the development of Roman Catholicism from the original church was gradual, beginning in early centuries, one of the most significant turning points came in 1215, when one can see the beginning of Roman Catholicism as it is subsequently known. It is here that the seeds of what distinguishes Roman Catholicism were first pronounced as dogma. It is here that they pronounced the doctrine of transubstantiation, the primacy of the bishop of Rome, and seven sacraments. Many consider this a key turning point in the development of Roman Catholicism in distinction from non-Catholic forms of Christianity. ([Crossway, 2008], 53–54)

- 10) **Thomas Aquinas** (1225–1274) is considered a Doctor of the Roman Church. He was born ten years after the Fourth Lateran Council and contributed greatly to confusion on the true nature of the gospel.

As **Gregg R. Allison** explains:

“More than anyone else, Thomas Aquinas set down the medieval Catholic notion of justification and its corollaries of grace, human effort, and merit. Although a substantial departure from Augustine and the Augustinians of the Middle Ages, his theology became determinative for the Roman Catholic Church. . . . [He] emphasized the grace of God yet prescribed an important role for human cooperation in obtaining salvation. Certainly, God exercises the primary role in achieving and applying salvation, but people have their part to play as well. God moves by initiating grace in a person’s life; then that person moves toward God and moves away from sin, resulting in the forgiveness of sins. Thus, Aquinas believed in a synergy, or cooperative effort, between God and people in justification.” (*Historical Theology*, 505)

- 11) By the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the corrupt doctrines of Roman Catholicism were fully developed.
- 12) This brings us back to the pre-Reformers. By the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the Waldensians were questioning certain errors that they saw in the Roman Catholic Church. In the 14<sup>th</sup>-century, John Wycliffe; in the 15<sup>th</sup>-century, John Huss. And then in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Martin Luther and others.
- 13) Martin Luther studied the Fathers during his time at the monastery in Erfurt; Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) was well-known for his knowledge and use of the Fathers; John Calvin cited the Fathers often.
- 14) Thus, it is clear that the Reformers were not in disagreement with the church Fathers regarding the gospel. Rather, they were trying to recover the very same Gospel that the both the Apostles and the early church Fathers cherished and taught. The evangelical principles of *sola fide* and *sola gratia*, which were so essential during the Reformation, were the same principles upheld by the early church.
- And that should be very encouraging for those of us who teach and preach that very gospel today.