

Introduction

The present study is an extended exploration of the manner in which the western church developed the Pauline concept of ‘justification’ throughout two thousand years of reflection and debate. It reflects my own interest over four decades in a number of areas of scholarship, especially the intellectual origins of the European Reformation of the sixteenth century, and the nature of doctrinal development within the Christian tradition. It can be seen as both a celebration and criticism of the pioneering work of Albrecht Benjamin Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung* (1870). While this earlier work remains a landmark of scholarship in the field, its clear theological precommitments and prejudices undermine the reliability of its scholarship, and thus reduce its value to the theological community. In writing this book, I have tried to set my own confessional partialities and theological commitments to one side, aiming to present a scholarly and unbiased account of the history of this important doctrine.

Justification is one of a number of concepts that have been used within Scripture and the Christian tradition to capture the nature and implications of God’s redemption of the world through Christ. As will become clear, at certain points during the development of Christian theology – especially during the sixteenth century – this concept came to assume a particularly significant role. A good example of this is found in the sixteenth-century Protestant declaration that the doctrine of justification was ‘the article by which the church stands or falls (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*)’,¹ which reflects a belief within the emerging Protestant

¹ Loofs, ‘Der articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae’; Schwarz, ‘Luthers Rechtfertigungslehre als Eckstein der christlichen Theologie und Kirche’; Jüngel, *Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens*. It is necessary to challenge Loofs at multiple points in his analysis of the history of the doctrine of justification, particularly his puzzling suggestion that the phrase ‘articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae’ was first used in the eighteenth century by the Lutheran theologian Valentin Löscher in his anti-Pietist diatribe *Vollständiger Timotheus Verinus* (1718–21), and that this phrase was used only within the Lutheran constituency within Protestantism.

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churches that the upholding of this specific doctrine – rather than of any others – was of critical importance. At other times, however, the concept has played a much less prominent part in theological reflection on either the foundations of salvation, or on the distinctive shape of the Christian life. The present study is offered as a resource to stimulate and inform this theological reflection on the ongoing place of the concept of justification in the church’s self-understanding of its identity and mission.

The Significance of This Study

Four main reasons may be given for exploring the history of the doctrine of justification within the Christian tradition at such length.

- 1 The historical study of the development of any Christian doctrine from its origins to the present day is inherently significant, in that it offers a means of identifying and evaluating the factors which have influenced doctrinal development in general, and thus inform theological reflection on the phenomenon of the development of doctrine.
- 2 Such a study is of intrinsic interest to contemporary Christian theology, in that it allows insights about how the doctrine of justification might be retrieved or reframed in today’s context.² The essential starting point for any attempt to interpret, reinterpret or restate that doctrine is a proper appreciation of the historical origins and subsequent development of the concept, particularly how it related to the changing social and cultural contexts of Christian communities of discourse.
- 3 The historical analysis presented in this volume illustrates the way in which theological discussion often becomes entangled with issues of language – a problem that Robert Jenson described, with particular reference to the doctrine of justification, as the ‘bewitchment of

This is clearly incorrect. The *Reformed* theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted uses the phrase a century earlier, opening his discussion of the justification of humanity *coram Deo* as follows: ‘articulus iustificationis dicitur articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae’ (*Theologia scholastica didacta*, 711). Precursors of the phrase may, of course, be found in the writings of Luther himself – e.g., ‘quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia’ (WA 40/3.352.3). See further Mahlmann, ‘Zur Geschichte der Formel “Articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae”’.

² This was certainly Ritschl’s intention in undertaking his substantial historical analysis of the concept: Werner, *Der protestantische Weg des Glaubens*, 799–815. Few have chosen to follow his lead subsequently, with the notable exception of Martin Kähler’s important essay *Zur Lehre von der Versöhnung* (1898); see Schäfer, ‘Die Rechtfertigungslehre bei Ritschl und Kähler’. For more recent reflections, see Jenson, ‘Rechtfertigung und Ekklesiologie’.

intelligence by language'.³ Theological identity often takes the form of commitment to certain verbal formulations which become totemic for some religious communities, and can thus force discussion of certain issues into predetermined categories.

- 4 This study will be a useful point of reference for the continuing dialogue between Christians of different traditions, most notably those whose present identities have been shaped decisively by the European Reformation of the sixteenth century. The doctrine of justification came to assume a major, possibly pivotal, role at that time, with debates over the issue contributing significantly to the emergence of divisions within western Christianity. As pressure grows for Christians to attempt to settle their differences (or at least to understand one another better), it is clearly important to have an informed understanding of the sixteenth-century debates over the doctrine of justification and their backgrounds.

The Structure of This Work

Iustitia Dei is divided into five major parts. The first part lays the groundwork for reflection on the issues that emerged as significant during the extended Christian theological reflection on the notion of 'justification'. After consideration of some semantic issues, discussion moves on to deal with an overview of the biblical material on which subsequent theological reflection would be based, leading into consideration of the interpretation of the notion in the early church, with an extended engagement with the approach of Augustine of Hippo, which proved to be of foundational importance to the theologians of the Middle Ages.

This leads into the second and largest part of the work, which focuses on the discussion of the doctrine of justification in the Middle Ages. During this period of extended reflection, many of the major themes to be debated by the Protestant reformers and at the Council of Trent assumed their traditional form. Yet the Middle Ages cannot be seen simply as a period of preparation for the momentous events of the sixteenth century, when the doctrine of justification took centre stage in debates about the nature of the gospel and the identity of the church. The medieval period often displayed an extraordinary theological creativity and merits close attention as an exercise in remaining anchored to the insights of core biblical texts, being duly attentive to the theological

³ Jenson, 'Justification as a Triune Event', 427. Jenson here draws on an aphorism from Wittgenstein: 'Die Philosophie ist ein Kampf gegen die Verhexung unseres Verstandes durch die Mittel unserer Sprache' (*Philosophische Untersuchungen*, §109.)

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legacy of Augustine of Hippo, and engaging the pastoral and homiletical tasks of the church. The concept of justification was particularly valued by medieval biblical exegetes and theologians on account of its utility in framing a range of questions, such as the relation of Christianity and Judaism, the nature of grace, and the connection of the life of faith and the sacramental economy of the church. It is impossible to make sense of some of the debates of the sixteenth century without a good knowledge of the theological history of the previous five centuries.

The third part of this work explores the origins and significance of the evangelical movements of the early sixteenth century, which eventually came to be known collectively as ‘Protestantism’. The historical analysis here presented attempts to capture something of the fine detail of the period, noting the initial diversity of reforming movements in Germany and Switzerland, which eventually began to converge on certain ways of framing their emerging insights on how sinners were accepted by God. It also considers how these insights were given more formal expression in Lutheran and Reformed Orthodoxy, before considering further developments of these approaches in the English Reformation, Puritanism and Pietism.

Justification became an important theme in the late 1530s for the Catholic church, as it attempted to understand and respond to the religious controversies centring on the question of justification, which increasingly seemed likely to fracture the unity of western Christendom. The fourth part of this book deals with Catholicism’s increasingly focused engagement with the doctrine of justification, which can be traced back to evangelical renewal movements within the churches in Spain, Italy and France. It deals with early Catholic efforts to understand and respond to Protestant formulations of the doctrine, including attempts at rapprochement, before offering an extensive account of the discussion of the doctrine at the Council of Trent, and its final ‘Decree on Justification’ (1546). Although the concept of justification came to be central to Catholic reflections on grace and salvation for the remainder of the sixteenth century, this proved to be a temporary development. By the end of the seventeenth century, Catholicism had reverted to using a range of soteriological metaphors, moving away from what proved to have been a temporary focus on the single image of justification.

The fifth part deals with the discussion of the doctrine of justification in the modern period, when a growing tendency towards rationalism, evident in some sections of the radical Reformation and English Deism, led to a growing suspicion of the plausibility of some core Christian ideas associated with justification by faith – such as the notion of human sin, or the idea of Christ’s death on the cross as a sacrifice for such sin.

The geographical overlap of the domains of the Enlightenment with those of Protestantism meant that Protestant writers in England and Germany found themselves having to demonstrate the plausibility of the theological structure within which the doctrine of justification was embedded, and not merely the doctrine itself.

The discussion of justification in this final part of the work opens by considering the shift in intellectual culture of the eighteenth century, focussing particularly on Deism and leading representatives (and critics) of the German *Aufklärung*. After considering the development of the doctrine within German liberal Protestantism, the analysis shifts to the period of theological recovery in the aftermath of the First World War. This analysis includes reflections on the importance of shifting paradigms of Pauline interpretation for theological reflection on the doctrine of justification, and the ecumenical endeavours to achieve some degree of mutual understanding across denominational divides concerning the doctrine that had proved so divisive in the sixteenth century.

The work concludes with some reflections on the significance of the history of the doctrine of justification for the study of doctrinal development in general, along with thoughts on its place within and significance for contemporary Christian theology.

PART I

Justification

The Emergence of a Concept

This volume deals with a Christian idea, particularly associated with Paul's New Testament letters, that played a central role in precipitating the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century – the doctrine of justification by faith. It explores the ways in which Christian theologians found the Pauline notion of justification to be helpful in framing their understanding of the relation of Christianity to its original roots in the history of Israel, as well as a means of articulating the central Christian notion of a gracious God who accepts and transforms sinners.¹ During the sixteenth century, Protestant and Catholic writers came to reconceive and reformulate the rich Christian vocabulary of salvation primarily – if not exclusively – in terms the Pauline image of justification.² Up to this point, the western theological tradition, while finding the category of justification useful in exploring *heilsgeschichtlich*³ questions such as the relation of Abrahamic and Christian faith, had developed its thinking about how humanity is reconciled to God primarily in terms of 'salvation by grace' (Ephesians 2:8).⁴ One of the defining characteristics of the Protestant Reformation is a decisive shift in both the conceptualities and the vocabulary of the Christian theological tradition. For a relatively short yet theologically significant period, the reconciliation of humanity

¹ For the range of New Testament images of salvation and their theological implications, see van der Watt, *Salvation in the New Testament*; Wenz, *Versöhnung*.

² Subilia, *La giustificazione per fede*, 117–27.

³ This German term is widely used in this study, meaning 'relating to the history of salvation'. It summarises the basic conviction that salvation has a history, originating within God's dealings with Abraham and the people of Israel, and continuing – though in modified forms – in the history of the Christian church. For a more extended exploration of the theme, see Schütz, 'Anmerkungen zu einer Theologie der Heilsgeschichte'. For its application to the relation of the faith of Abraham and Christians, see Tuor-Kurth, 'Abraham: Vater aller Glaubenden?'

⁴ Hamm, 'Was ist reformatorische Rechtfertigungslehre?'; Wenz, *Versöhnung*, 295–317. Aquinas, commenting on Ephesians 2:8, remarked that 'being saved' and 'being justified' may be treated as equivalent: *idem enim est salvari et iustificari*. Aquinas, *Lectura super Epistolam ad Ephesios*, Lectio 3, 93. See further Keating, 'Justification, Sanctification and Divinization in Thomas Aquinas'.

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would be discussed within the entire western theological tradition primarily in terms of ‘justification by faith’ (Romans 5:1).⁵

The sociological aspects of this crystallisation of the emerging evangelical movements within Germany and Switzerland around the concept of justification are imperfectly understood.⁶ A process of reflection, negotiation and reception within the various evangelical groupings, stimulated in part by a shared hostility towards Catholicism, appears to have led to an early diversity on the nature and scope of justification (including the question of justifying righteousness) gradually being displaced by a confessional culture which affirmed a fundamental theological unity on this identity-giving and identity-sustaining issue.

Yet while the most significant Catholic response to the Reformation – the sixth session of the Council of Trent and its ‘Decree on Justification’ – initially echoed this shift in emphasis and vocabulary, the Catholic tradition gradually reverted to more traditional ways of speaking and thinking about the transformation of the human situation through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The highly influential and authoritative *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992), for example, acknowledges the due place of justification, while making full use of other Pauline metaphors in its discussion of human salvation.

Alongside this new emphasis on the notion of justification in the early sixteenth century, we must note a significant bifurcation within the western theological tradition which also emerged at this time. As we shall see, until the sixteenth century, the western theological tradition understood justification primarily as a ‘making righteous’ through the impartation of an inherent righteousness to a believer. Although some early Protestant writers retained this understanding of ‘justification’, Protestantism as a whole coalesced around the notion of justification as a forensic or judicial event in which the believer is ‘reckoned as righteous’ or ‘accounted righteous’, tending to conceptualise the process of becoming righteous as ‘regeneration’ or ‘sanctification’.

The history of the doctrine of justification primarily concerns the western, Latin-based theological tradition. The Orthodox emphasis upon the incarnation of the Son of God leading to humanity’s participation in the divine being is generally expressed in the concept of deification

⁵ Söding, ‘Der Skopos der paulinischen Rechtfertigungslehre’.

⁶ Full discussion of this question must include how Protestants tolerated divergence on points of detail on this article of faith. See, for example, Flogaus, ‘Luther versus Melanchthon?’ As Elizabeth Clark observed with relation to the Origenist controversy, this involves identifying the contours of a theological culture which shaped such discussions: Clark, *The Origenist Controversy*.

(*theosis* or *theopoiesis*) rather than justification.⁷ This is not to suggest that Orthodoxy neglected the Pauline image of justification in its theological reflections, nor that the western church overlooked the New Testament's hints at believers somehow sharing in the divine nature. Indeed, recent scholarship has indicated how the notion of *theosis* plays a hitherto unnoticed – and possibly even suppressed – role in Protestant writers of the sixteenth century and beyond, such as Luther, Calvin and Jonathan Edwards.⁸ It is becoming clear that an explanation is required for the rise in prominence, even predominance, of the vocabulary and associated conceptualities of justification during the Reformation era.

As the Reformation and its attendant authority figures slowly receded into the past, the difficulties associated with this way of speaking became increasingly apparent. From the late nineteenth century onwards, growing doubts were expressed as to whether the New Testament, including the Pauline epistles, placed anything even approaching such an emphasis upon the concept of justification.⁹ Influential New Testament scholars such as William Wrede and Albert Schweitzer argued that the origins of the concept were polemical, relating to the early tensions between Christianity and Judaism. Wrede insisted that the heart of Paul's thought actually lay in the concept of redemption.¹⁰ For Schweitzer, the real focus of Paul's positive thought lay in the mystical idea of 'being in Christ', not in this 'lateral crater (*Nebenkrater*)'.¹¹ These ideas were developed further later in the twentieth century within the 'New Perspective' on Paul. With the publication of W. D. Davies's *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism* (1948), a new challenge to the predominant western reading of Paul emerged. 'The gospel for Paul was not the annulling of Judaism, but its completion, and as such it took up into itself the essential genius of Judaism.'¹² The emergence of this 'new perspective' on Paul was given a decisive new impetus in 1977 with the publication of E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Sanders argued that Second Temple Judaism was consistently and thoroughly a religion of grace, thus challenging the plausibility of many traditional Protestant formulations of the doctrine of justification, especially those grounded in Luther's antithesis of law and gospel.¹³

⁷ Edwards, *Visions of God and Ideas on Deification in Patristic Thought*.

⁸ Christensen and Wittung, *Partakers of the Divine Nature*; Peura, *Luther und Theosis*; Flogaus, *Theosis bei Palamas und Luther*.

⁹ Flückiger, *Ursprung des christlichen Dogmas*, 52. ¹⁰ Wrede, *Paulus*, 90–100.

¹¹ Schweitzer, *Die Mystik des Apostels Paulus*, 216–20.

¹² Davies, *Paul and Rabbinic Judaism*, 323.

¹³ Westerholm, *Perspectives Old and New on Paul*.

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The rise to prominence of this new paradigm generated significant research questions, such as the way in which key biblical phrases – for example, the ‘works of the law’ – were interpreted in the pre-Reformation traditions. Did earlier Christian writers understand such works as general human achievements, or as more specifically cultic actions or obligations? This debate created an increased awareness of the need to confirm what early Christian writers understood by this phrase, rather than assimilating it to prevailing assumptions. Second-century writers, for example, tended to understand the ‘works of the law’ to refer to issues such as circumcision, the observation of the Sabbath, and regulations concerning food and sacrifices.¹⁴ So when Augustine speaks of ‘works of the law by which nobody is justified (*legis opera quibus homo non justificatur*)’,¹⁵ it is clearly important to identify whether he is referring to a generic ethos of human achievement or a more specific conformance to Jewish cultic norms.

Concerns such as these inform the detailed historical analysis set out in this volume, in that they highlight the importance of ensuring that these questions are engaged and answered as part of the historical analysis which lies at its heart. New theological generations tend to ask new questions, and probe the Christian tradition for answers. Yet before turning to the detailed historical analysis of the development of the Christian doctrine of justification, we need to consider at least something of its conceptual and semantic background of the concepts of righteousness in the culture of the Ancient Near East in general, and the history of Israel in particular. We therefore turn to consider these fundamental elements of the Christian understanding of justification, and how they shaped the western theological tradition at this point.

¹⁴ Thomas, *Paul’s ‘Works of the Law’*, 211–19.

¹⁵ Augustine, *De spiritu et littera*, xxix, 50.