

The Very Gate of Paradise to Me: The Development of Protestantism's Teaching on Justification by Faith

Dr. Richard Gamble

*Professor of Systematic Theology
Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary*

I. Introduction: Luther's (1483-1546) 95 Theses.

This paper traces the glorious Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone from Luther's developing understanding to Calvin's clearer exposition.

This doctrine developed out of the overall darkness of the system of Roman Catholic theology. The particular issue which generated Luther's 95 Theses, and is the exclusive topic of each of those theses, was the presence of indulgence preachers in Germany. For the purpose of funding St. Peter's Basilica, preachers offered papal forgiveness and release for those who were bound in purgatory. Only the holiest people, like monks, had assurance of direct access to heaven, so indulgences meant that a possessor could obtain the release of souls of less than perfect loved ones dearly departed. Luther's 95 Theses were against those preachers, sent from Rome, and the papal theology behind the indulgence. When one reads the 95 Theses in their historical context, there is no question that because of this terrible situation, Luther was looking for a fight.¹ In looking at these theses, however, there is not a word on justification in any of this opening salvo of the Reformation from 500 years ago. The articulation of this doctrine came later for Luther. This paper will now move from the 95 Theses to an examination of Luther's articulation of the doctrine of Justification.

II. Luther's Doctrine of Justification.

A. Human Nature.

Analysis of the doctrine of justification must begin with Luther's concept of human nature. Luther rightly argued that the natural state of the human heart is not at all inclined toward God's holy Law – it does not want to conform to it. Human nature also does not admit its frailty

¹ After 70 arguments against Indulgences and the theology behind it, Luther announced in thesis 71: "Let him who speaks against the truth concerning papal indulgences be anathema and accursed." He followed in 72: "But let him who guards against the lust and license of the indulgence preachers be blessed." This is something of the flavor of Luther's polemical writing. The 95 theses close with these final blasts 92: "Away, then, with all those prophets who say to the people of Christ, "Peace, peace," and there is no peace!" 94: "Christians should be exhorted to be diligent in following Christ, their Head, through penalties, death and hell." His final judgment was 95: "And thus be confident of entering into heaven through many tribulations rather than through the false security of peace." These translations of these theses may be found in Martin Luther, *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, ed. Timothy F. Lull (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1989), 27-29.

and sin.² He believed that the human heart is in bondage to sin and is addicted to this world.³ Luther's biblical view of human nature did not fit into contemporary Roman Catholic teaching.

B. Salvation and Works.

As Luther understood the Roman notion of justification, a person can and does perform certain good works prior to their actual justification before God. The Roman system argued that those good works are fully acceptable to God.⁴ After coming to faith, the Christian adds *further* good works to their justification. Luther, of course, totally disagreed with that teaching.⁵

In contrast, Luther distinguished between a man and a man's works. It is individual men who stand either justified and saved by God – or judged and condemned. A person's "works" *per se* are neither justified nor condemned.⁶

Thus, for a "work" to be accepted by God, it is the person who does the work that must first be accepted. If an individual is not accepted or justified before God, then his work simply cannot be justified. Thus, it is not possible properly to speak of someone having any type of good works before their own justification.⁷

Furthermore, no one can "add" to their justification by their works – simply put, no man can be justified by his works. This biblical teaching is not contradicted by the apostle James' statement, argued Luther, that without works faith is dead. Luther underlined that God acknowledged good works, but that those were the works performed by men who were already justified.⁸

C. The Law.

A third necessary component to Luther's view of justification includes understanding the role of the Law. Luther observed that God threatens great punishment for those who transgress his Law. Thus, the Law brings fear into people's lives.⁹ The Law itself teaches that it requires a new

² Martin Luther, "The Method and Fruits of Justification," in *Great Sermons from Master Preachers of All Ages*, ed. Theodore W. Engstrom (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1951), 43.

³ *Ibid.*, 44-45.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁷ A man must be justified first and then his works may be acceptable to God. It cannot be the case that works are first acceptable and then the man is justified. Luther, "Method and Fruits of Justification," 32-35.

⁸ He soundly condemned supposed good works approved by the Roman Catholic Church. See, *ibid.*, 45.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

and regenerate mind.¹⁰ The Law makes demands that are impossible for any person to fulfill in the natural state.¹¹ With this in mind, now consider Luther's doctrine of faith.

D. Faith.

Luther ridiculed Catholic theologians who taught that faith played a small part in justification while works enjoyed a large role.¹² For Luther, justification was by faith and not through any type of works.

Faith was the sole instrument of salvation for Luther.¹³ The type of faith that is salvific is that type that produces a certainty of salvation. Faith for Luther is resting in God through Christ.¹⁴ It is by faith alone that believers are made sons of God.¹⁵

Luther acknowledged that Roman Catholic theologians thought that his view of faith was nothing more than impious arrogance.¹⁶ The papal church condemned and persecuted those who held such a biblical notion of faith. Catholic theologians argued that if such confidence of salvation by faith came to some biblical figures like King David, it was only *via* special revelation.

However, as Luther studied the book of Galatians, he was convinced that those Christian converts in Galatia had been seduced by false prophets wrongly to believe that salvation must be completed by works of the Law.¹⁷ It is this Galatian heresy that is the actual teaching of the Roman Church. The next step for Luther included receiving a new will.

E. New Will or Conversion by Grace.

The redeemed sinner is then transformed by the Holy Spirit – receiving a new will. This conversion is a work of divine grace.¹⁸ Luther made the process easy to comprehend: hear the preached word, believe in the Christ who is preached, and thus be saved.¹⁹

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

¹² Ibid., 35. That truncated view of faith held by Rome to which Luther refers is termed *historic faith* in systematic theology.

¹³ Ibid., 35.

¹⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁵ Ibid., 41.

¹⁶ Ibid., 38.

¹⁷ Ibid., 37.

¹⁸ In "Method and Fruits of Justification," see page 40 on the new will and page 41 on motivation.

¹⁹ Ibid., 33-34.

Nothing is required unto justification but to hear Jesus Christ as Savior and to believe in him, which is an act of grace.²⁰ It is a righteousness that is not by law nor is it by nature.²¹ Justification is release from bondage and reception of the Holy Spirit by faith.²² It is being adopted as sons.²³ The converted heart then knows that it has forgiveness of sins.²⁴

It is this type of redeemed person who can and does perform good works. From that new foundation flows the believer's good works.²⁵ The convert then can do such works from a proper heart attitude.²⁶ For Luther, good works are directed toward neighbors and not toward God.²⁷ Now, consider how Luther's thinking developed.

III. Development of Luther's Understanding of Justification.

A. Introduction.

1. Development is Normal.

In this section, the development of this great Protestant doctrine will be observed. Everyone knows that people mature and develop through life, not just physically and mentally but theologically as well. In the same manner, Luther developed in his understanding of the nature of Christ's salvation.

The goal of this analysis is not to bury Luther but to praise him. Nevertheless, a close examination of Luther's teaching on justification by faith reveals some rather surprising conclusions. In fact, Luther himself was not as clear on the forensic character of justification as were later Lutherans. To advance further in this discussion, clear definition of terms is necessary.

2. Define Terms.

One way to define justification is by not using the adjective *forensic* common to later Protestant understanding. Those who do not use this word generally use the adjective *effective* or *renewal* as the descriptive term. That understanding of justification is one which observes moral effects (thus, effective) in the converted sinner's life. In this view, justification renews the sinner and moves him or her toward holiness. Effective or renewal justification is the classic Roman Catholic definition.

²⁰ Ibid., 34.

²¹ Ibid., 45.

²² Ibid., 46.

²³ Ibid., 47.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid., 38.

²⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁷ Ibid., 37, 41, 49. See also A. Chacko George, "Martin Luther's Doctrine of Sanctification with Special Reference to the Formula '*Simul Iustus Et Peccator*': A Study in Luther's Lectures on Romans and Galatians." (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1982).

The Protestant doctrine of justification by faith alone is termed *forensic justification*. Forensic is a word that means *legal*. To have forensic justification is to be considered legally righteous by God. For example, when a condemned thief has served his prison sentence and is released from incarceration, he is considered forensically righteous relative to his thievery. That verdict does not mean that he did not do the crime, but there are now no legal grounds further to incarcerate him for what he did.

B. Luther's Imprecise Elements.

1. Introduction.

Yet, even in Luther's theologically mature teaching, there were imprecise elements about his handling of justification from a systematic perspective.²⁸ Luther said that there was a way to receive righteousness and to become acceptable to God. One must hear Christ's words, rest upon him, and deny himself. This is done by faith, which is a gift, whereby Christ remits the person's sins.²⁹

When Luther deals with "man's salvation" he oftentimes uses a notion of justification that clearly includes what would generally be termed *works*.³⁰ Luther, at times, included being made holy within a discussion of justification. As an example, he describes saving faith as faith that "justifies a man, and makes him godly indeed."³¹

2. Problems from Current Scholarship?

Turning to current Luther scholarship, European Lutherans have been moving toward ecclesiastical union with other Protestants as well as the Roman Catholic church. Thus, one should not be surprised that current Luther scholar Olli-Pekka Vainio would claim that "Luther's doctrine of justification cannot be classified with simplistic categories like 'forensic' and 'effective.'"³² He judges such categories as too elementary and misleading. More liberal European scholars define justification in a "narrow sense" where justification is forensic and judicial, and a "broader sense" where justification includes union with Christ, receiving the Holy Spirit and producing effective change in the believer. They argue that Luther embraced both of these definitions in his view of justification, depending on the context.³³ However, the "broader

²⁸ Ibid., 33.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 34.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Online preview of "Martin Luther and Justification" by Olli-Pekka Vainio in the *Oxford Research Encyclopedia*, <http://oxfordindex.oup.com/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.336?rskey=GlZcjs&result=43>, accessed October 19, 2017.

³³ See Olli-Pekka Vainio, "Martin Luther and Justification": "Depending on the context, Luther may use both narrow and broad definitions of justification." "On the one hand, justification means imputation of Christ's alien righteousness to the believer without merits. On the other hand, faith involves effective change in the believer that enables one to believe in the first place. This change is not meritorious because it is effected by Christ indwelling in the believer through faith. Thus, Christ gives two things to the

sense” of justification precisely fits the Roman Catholic definition! The question that this paper must answer is whether the charge is true: did the great Protestant reformer still hold to Roman Catholic notions of justification?

C. Luther’s Teaching and Development.

Martin Luther argued in his *Lectures on Galatians* in 1531 that to be justified means, “that by faith only in Christ we are pronounced righteous.”³⁴ Thus, it would be incorrect to assert that Luther denied forensic justification: no one wants to make Luther a Roman Catholic on the 500th anniversary of the Reformation!

Yet, an argument can be made that Luther held to some renewal concepts in his doctrine of justification. This would stand in contrast to the definitive *Formula of Concord*, produced after Luther’s death, which states that the notions of renewal, sanctification, or good works are not to be any part of the teaching of justification.³⁵

To demonstrate the thesis that Luther’s doctrine was not as clear as later Lutheranism, examining some of Luther’s early uses and definitions is needed. His doctrine of justification developed historically.

Luther argued in 1520 – three years after the 95 Theses – that to preach Christ means, “to feed the soul, make it righteous, set it free, and save it.”³⁶ This definition of “preaching the gospel” includes more than forensic justification alone. He added that faith, “will fill believers with so great a righteousness that they will need nothing more to become righteous.”³⁷ The phrase “to become righteous” is an important theological term that specifically means what theologians call *renewal*. As Luther developed in his understanding of justification he was engaged in a battle with the Roman Catholic charge that when someone preached justification by faith alone that such teaching would produce licentiousness.

sinner: *gratia*, that is, the forgiveness of sins, and *donum*, that is, Christ himself. The media through which Christ offers his mercy are the word and sacraments. Thus, Luther’s sacramental theology, Christology, and soteriology form a coherent whole. Because justification involves union with Christ, which means participation in Christ’s divine nature, Luther’s doctrine of justification has common elements with the idea of deification.”

³⁴ Martin Luther, “A Commentary on St. Paul’s Epistle to the Galatians (Selections)” in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), 116 as cited by Peter A. Lillback, “Calvin and Forensic Justification” in *Justified in Christ*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint (Fearn, Scotland: Mentor, 2007), 72.

³⁵ “Sometimes ... the words *regeneratio* and *vivificatio* are used in place of justification, and then they mean the same thing, even though otherwise these terms refer to the renovation of man and distinguish it from justification by faith.” Epitome, III. 5 in “Confessions of the ELC,” in *The Book of Concord the Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. and trans. Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 474, quoted in Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 58.

³⁶ Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” in *Selections*, 55 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 73.

³⁷ Luther, “Freedom of a Christian,” in *Selections*, 56 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 73.

Two years later (1522), in discussing justification, the German reformer said of the Christian, “thus made righteous, he would live in eternal bliss.”³⁸ He continued, in “[Christ’s] passion and death ... he makes us righteous, and gives us life and salvation.”³⁹ Luther was very clear when he concluded “that a man is given righteousness, life, and salvation by faith.”⁴⁰ Luther defined his terms carefully, using the renewal terms to be “made righteous,” that Christ “makes us righteous” and that man is “given righteousness” especially in contrast to “salvation.” These definitions specifically mix phrases that were prohibited to be united by the *Formula of Concord*.

Even the much later and carefully edited 1531 *Lectures on Galatians* articulated at times the renewal concept in his doctrine of justification: “Because you have laid hold upon Christ by faith, through whom you are made righteous, begin now to work well.”⁴¹ The issue is not a purely legal or forensic righteousness, but being *made* righteous. The differences may at first appear subtle, but they are important.⁴² In conclusion, to demonstrate the problem, in the vast corpus of Luther’s writings, the term *forensic*, relative to justification, never appears!⁴³ In contrast, we need to turn very briefly to later Lutheran expressions on justification.

D. Lutheranism’s Classic Doctrine of Justification.

Justification as a forensic category alone is found in the Lutheran centerpiece *Formula of Concord* from 1577. Section III, called “The righteousness of Faith before God,” reads:

Neither renewal, sanctification, virtues, nor good works are at all a form, part, or cause of justification, that is, our righteousness before God. They are not to stand or be set up as a part or cause of our righteousness. They are not to be mixed into the article of justification under any pretext, title, or name whatever, as though they are necessary and belong to justification. The righteousness of faith stands alone in the forgiveness of sins out of pure grace, for the sake of Christ’s merit alone. These blessings are brought to us in the gospel promise and are received, accepted, applied, and appropriated through faith alone.

Notice the carefully articulated theology in this foundational Lutheran creed. The term *justification* was defined as “our righteousness before God”.

The *Formula* states that the notions of renewal, sanctification, or good works are not a form, nor a part, nor a cause of justification. Also, these terms are not to be mixed into the doctrine of

³⁸ Luther, “Preface to the New Testament,” in *Selections*, 16 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 72.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Luther, “Preface to the New Testament,” in *Selections*, 17-18 as cited by Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 72-73.

⁴¹ Luther, “Galatians” in *Selections* 111, as cited by Lillback, *Justified* 73. Antiquated English translation updated by the author.

⁴² Since Luther had lectured on Galatians already in 1519 and 1523, this theologically mature treatise would not inadvertently insert a renewal element into an exclusively forensic notion of justification.

⁴³ Lillback, “Forensic Justification,” 72.

justification because they do not belong to the doctrine of justification. Rather, out of grace that is found in Christ, righteousness is by faith alone and is applied through faith alone. There is much about which to rejoice in this great presentation of the gospel! It is in accord with Reformed expressions of justification.

In conclusion, it is clear that there was a development in Luther's thinking and that it is difficult to prove that he taught exclusively the later proper theology of the *Formula of Concord*. Next, it must be analyzed how the doctrine of justification developed from Luther who died in 1546 to the Formula of Concord of 1577. The answer is found via Rome's counter push against the Protestants.

IV. Roman Catholic Opposition: The Council of Trent.

The Roman Catholic counter-position on justification was codified at Trent beginning in 1547, the year after Luther's death. It is not possible to understand the Protestant doctrine of forensic justification without analysis of the doctrines of Trent. As Luther fought against Catholic notions of justification, Trent made Roman Catholic doctrine clear.

With the valiant Luther removed from the scene, Catholic doctrine had to be combatted. John Calvin and others took up the task. Calvin had already published on the doctrine of justification before the doctrinal statements of Trent. The first edition of the *Institutes* did not have a separate chapter on justification, but the topic was treated at the close of the chapter on the law. Thus, justification did not carry thematic prominence. However, in the 1539 edition, which was seven times the size of the 1536 edition, there was a separate chapter called "Concerning Justification by Faith and the Merits of Works," situated between his chapters on repentance and the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. This chapter was a polemical confrontation with the Roman Catholic notion that justification had its basis in grace-assisted meritorious works performed by the baptized.⁴⁴ The third edition of the *Institutes* appeared in 1543 and included a clear statement that justification included the imputation of Christ's righteousness.⁴⁵

A few years after this third edition, Calvin replied at length to the Council of Trent as a whole and to its teaching on justification in particular in his *Antidote to the Council*. The theology of the Council of Trent is divided into Sessions and within the Sessions, there are various heads of doctrine. The sixth session of the council dealt with the doctrine of justification.

A. Justification.

1. Original Sin.

Calvin argued that they began incorrectly in their second head of doctrine on original sin.⁴⁶ Original sin has left the human will only weakened, they wrongly argued, instead of totally

⁴⁴ See Richard B. Gaffin, "Justification and Union with Christ" in *A Theological Guide to Calvin's Institutes*, ed. Hall & Lillback (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2008), 249-51 and Lillback, "Forensic Justification," 60.

⁴⁵ *Institutes* III. 11.2. See Lillback, "Forensic Justification," 61.

⁴⁶ John Calvin, "Articles Agreed Upon by the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris in reference to matter of faith at present controverted with *The Antidote*" in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company,

depraved. While there is a human will, Calvin countered, that will is not simply prone *towards* sin but is made subject *to* sin.⁴⁷

2. Baptism.

In the 5th head of that sixth Session, Trent taught that baptism was necessary for salvation. Thus, unbaptized infants were excluded from God's kingdom. Calvin countered that infants have been adopted into God's kingdom, not through the rite of baptism, but because of God's promise.⁴⁸

3. Prevenient Grace.

In the sixth head, Trent argued that justification comes when someone co-operates with God's preventing, or what we now term *prevenient*, grace.⁴⁹ Calvin countered that such teaching disagreed with both Paul and Augustine. The human will must be fully re-formed by God moving from that which is bad to the good. There can be no sharing in salvation between God and ourselves!⁵⁰

4. Not Faith Alone.

The eighth head argued that justification was not by faith alone. Justification is not the forgiveness of sins, they argued, but includes renovation and sanctification.⁵¹ Calvin, of course, thought that the Scriptures denied such a position. He taught that the definition of justification was to be set free from the liability of sin and to be regarded as righteous in God's sight because Christ expiated the believer's sins.⁵² Any notion of righteousness must be from faith and not from works. Like law and gospel, faith and works cannot be confounded, the very mistake made by the theologians of Trent. For Calvin, while justification and sanctification are joined, nevertheless, they are not the same. When Christ justifies, he will also sanctify.

Calvin argued that the dispute between the Reformers and the Roman church revolved around the cause of justification. Trent asserted that the cause of justification was twofold: one part

1958), 93. "That free-will was by no means extinguished in them, though weakened in its powers and under a bias."

⁴⁷ Ibid, 108-09.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 110. "In virtue of this promise they are admitted to baptism, because they are considered members of the church."

⁴⁹ Ibid., 94. "The commencement of this Justification in adults is to be derived from the preventing grace...; by his existing and assisting grace disposed to turn in order to their own justification by assenting freely to the same grace, and co-operating with it."

⁵⁰ Ibid., 110-13. "That will in man is one thing, and the free choice of good and evil another; for freedom of choice having been taken away after the fall of the first man, will alone was left; but so completely captive under the tyranny of sin, that it is only inclined to evil" (113).

⁵¹ Ibid., 95. "Justification, which is not the mere forgiveness of sin, but also Sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man."

⁵² Ibid., 114-115. Justification "without doubt means acquittal...the imputation of righteousness."

forgiveness and another part spiritual regeneration.⁵³ Calvin stood opposed to the Catholics and argued that justification was one and simple, wholly included in God's gratuitous acceptance. Instead of the Roman Catholic partial justification, Calvin countered with a whole righteousness of the believer who flees to Christ and is found in him.⁵⁴

5. Role of Faith.

In the ninth head of doctrine, the Tridentine theologians made a twofold argument. First, faith was described by them as the beginning or foundation of justification that is thus gratuitous because no merit precedes it.⁵⁵ Calvin replied to this error with clear exegetical arguments. Faith is no mere beginning of justification, but it is its inception and complete accomplishment.⁵⁶ Concerning faith's gratuitous character relative to meritorious works preceding it, Calvin simply countered that the Bible teaches that *no* works are meritorious relative to justification. Faith must always be gratuitous.⁵⁷

Second, the theologians at Trent also addressed the perceived vain confidence of the so-called Protestant heretics.⁵⁸ This supposedly vain confidence was holding with certainty that the believer's sins were forgiven and then finding rest in that certainty. However, Calvin boasted in that confidence and remarked that such certainty gave Protestants confidence boldly to address their Father in heaven. This deep assurance is sealed on the hearts of God's children by the Holy Spirit's power.⁵⁹

6. Increasing Justification.

The eleventh head of Tridentine doctrine argued for a person's ability to increase his or her justification. Calvin acknowledged that a believer should daily increase in good works and that those good works may be acceptable to God and even be judged as righteous. Yet for Calvin, the

⁵³ Ibid., 116. Or Trent said it was "partly of imputation, partly of quality." Calvin further countered, "It is false to say that any part of righteousness (justification) consists in *quality*, or in the habit which resides in us, and that we are righteous (justified) only by gratuitous acceptance" (117).

⁵⁴ Also, instead of viewing baptism as the instrumental cause of justification, Calvin countered that the gospel itself had first place. The Roman mistake is similar to someone, per Calvin (*Antidote*, 117), who "call[s] a mason's trowel the instrumental cause of a house!"

⁵⁵ Ibid., 97. "That we are, therefore, said to be justified by faith, because faith is the beginning of salvation, the foundation and root of all justification."

⁵⁶ John Calvin, "The Necessity of Reforming the Church" in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 122. "As far as a fixed and immovable station is from a transient passage, so far are they in this dogma of theirs from the meaning of Paul."

⁵⁷ Ibid., 122-24. "Who see no gratuitous righteousness of God, except in the very vestibule, and think that the merit of works pervades the edifice?"

⁵⁸ Calvin, *Antidote*, 97-98. Consider language from Canon X: "Boasting a confidence and certainty of the forgiveness of his sin."; "Neither is it to be asserted ... that acquittal and justification are obtained by this faith alone."; "seeing that no man can know with a certainty of faith ... that he has obtained the grace of God."

⁵⁹ Calvin, *Reforming the Church*, 125-27.

person's justification, as well as his works, are acceptable through Christ by faith. Calvin vehemently denied that God freely justifies and then leaves the believer to procure further righteousness through his own obedience to the law.⁶⁰

7. Sin, God's Commands, and the Christian Walk.

Trent's twelfth head of doctrine combined three different, though related, topics. First, the Roman Catholic Church argued that a justified man is able to keep God's commandments. Calvin took issue and argued correctly that fallen humanity is not able to keep God's law. Instead, believers must flee to Christ's grace.⁶¹

Next, Protestants and Catholics found completely different ways of understanding the Christian walk. They agreed that believers both suffer and do good works through their lives. However, the Roman theologians argued that suffering for Christ's sake merits eternal life. In other words, they articulated that suffering forms part of the believer's righteousness and thus, the suffering believer does not depend solely on God's grace. Furthermore, they denounce the Protestants for rightfully arguing that the righteous also sin when they perform good works. Calvin lamented that it was too plain that no believer is motivated by a perfect love for God when he obeys God's commands.⁶²

8. No Certainty.

The thirteenth head of Trent's Acts assailed the Protestant notion of having a certainty of salvation. In contrast, Calvin argued that this certainty does not flow from the knowledge of God's secret council. Rather, certainty is rooted in Christ's historic work that the believer knows (Calvin adds "feels assured") has been applied to him.⁶³ However, Calvin's development of the doctrine of forensic justification was not complete simply with the writing of his important *Antidote* to Trent. The next historical document that helped to develop Protestant thinking on justification is the German *Interim*.

V. The German *Interim*

A. Historical Background.

The *Interim* was published in 1548 as the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V's response to the massive problems which flowed from the Protestant Reformation. The discord and disruption from the Reformation had now poured into other nations besides Germany. Charles V believed that something had to be done.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Ibid., 129: "It is execrable blasphemy against God for any mortal to give way to such presumption as to award eternal life to the observance of his own traditions."

⁶¹ Ibid., 130-31. The Roman theologians then added that even holy men fall into daily sin. Calvin shot back that the lightest sin is inconsistent with the law's observance.

⁶² Ibid., 132-34.

⁶³ Ibid., 135-36.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 190-92.

The *Interim* was not submitted as a hypothetical document subject to public debate in the manner of Luther's 95 Theses. The Holy Roman Emperor, who controlled all of Europe except France and England, required that all states under his Lordship must submit either to Roman Catholic teaching or to his *Interim*.⁶⁵ In fact, there would be no toleration for anyone to teach, write, or to preach against the *Interim*.⁶⁶

Under the threat of enraging the Emperor, John Calvin entered the fray with a relatively short work with a long title: *The Adultero-German Interim to which is added the true method of giving peace to Christendom and of Reforming the Church*.

B. Calvin's Opposition.

Calvin's response was literarily sophisticated and unquestionable in its denunciation of the *Interim*. The real-life situation in Europe was clear – theologically, it was truly a struggle between life and death. To oppose the *Interim* meant nothing short of persecution. Calvin chided supporters of the *Interim* because they were willing, in his opinion, to abandon Christ in the face of death.

The *Interim* offered what Calvin termed “a half Christ” that stained with falsehood every part of doctrine related to him.⁶⁷ The overall argument of the *Interim*, thought Calvin, was to keep the “fundamentals” safe and not to worry about other doctrine.⁶⁸ However, it was sacrilegious, according to Calvin, to tear away a part of Christ's gospel. Believers were forbidden to mingle human figments with God's pure truth. His response was a presentation of those vital points of doctrine which could never be yielded.⁶⁹

C. Calvin's Positive Teaching.

For Calvin, a proper presentation of the statement that believers are justified by faith includes a number of corresponding topics, including the nature of corrupted humanity and God's character and grace toward sinners.

1. Human Corruption and God's Grace.

Turning to human nature, Calvin argued that the starting point was to acknowledge the great depth of human depravity, the reality that man's only hope was that God give cold and lifeless hearts the breath of life. Hand in hand with that reality, for Calvin, was the corresponding

⁶⁵ States that were under Charles V rule included Burgundy and the Low Countries, Spain, Italy (Kingdoms of Naples, Sicily, Sardinia, Duchy of Milan) as well as the Holy Roman Empire. The Kingdom of France was wholly encircled by Charles V's lands.

⁶⁶ Calvin, *Reforming the Church*, 192.

⁶⁷ John Calvin, “Letters of Pope Paul III to the Emperor Charles V” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 240-41.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 192. Charles V argued that the *Interim* was supposedly not at variance with true catholic religion and doctrine. However, it mandated two massive changes: that the people receive both bread and wine at Communion and that priests be free to marry.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 242-43.

notion of God's awesome righteousness. The salvific question was the application of that unparalleled righteousness to human beings. Calvin asserted that in justification the regenerated are able to come to God's tribunal because, by faith, they are convinced that they, through Christ, approach him as their Father. Through the free remission of sin, the regenerated know that they are regarded as righteous in his sight. That righteousness comes solely and entirely through Jesus Christ.⁷⁰

2. True Righteousness & Truly Renewed.

Calvin's view of justification was carefully presented and nuanced. He said specifically that God is unlike an earthly judge who only acquits the person under trial. In addition, argued Calvin, God also bestows true righteousness.⁷¹ Thus, for Calvin, the believer's righteousness in Christ is full and complete and in no way requires human addition. Furthermore, when so regenerated, when regarded as righteousness by Christ's great merit, the believer is truly renewed by the Holy Spirit to live a holy life and glory in free adoption in God.⁷²

3. Paul & James.

Calvin then answered the objection that arises from comparing Paul's teaching on justification with that of James. Paul, at Romans 10, taught that righteousness was externally granted to the redeemed and not a quality infused into them. Such external righteousness provided for the certainty of faith. Christ's righteousness is given exclusively by grace. The apostle James, Calvin argued, used the word *justify* to speak of the approval of righteousness. James' *justify* was to furnish credible evidence of an internal disposition. James' reference is not toward God (that human actions can merit divine salvation) but toward men in that actions can demonstrate man's regeneration.⁷³ In fact, while God does reward good works, the ground for that reward is divine gratuitous acceptance and not the merit or worth of the work itself.⁷⁴

Calvin then summarized his teaching: Christ expiated his people's sins, appeased the Father's wrath, and then adopted his children. By faith, God justifies sinners by imputing Christ's obedience to them. Calvin then moved to a discussion of the nature of faith. True faith will include love and is never exclusively knowledge.

4. Faith & Justification.

Calvin argued that the doctrine of justification requires a proper definition of faith. Faith justifies because it makes believers put on Christ and by the Holy Spirit's power unites those believers to Christ. Faith is a certainty of conscience which embraces Christ; it is an evidence of

⁷⁰ Ibid., 244-45.

⁷¹ Ibid., 245. Calvin already answered the antinomian question that perplexed the Westminster divines. For more information see W. G. Gamble, *Antinomianism and the Westminster Assembly* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, forthcoming). Consider as well as the contemporary objection of N. T. Wright who argues that in justification God only acquits and does not confer righteousness.

⁷² Calvin, *Letters*, 246.

⁷³ Ibid., 247-48. Calvin was very clear that God does not reward good works as a debt. Righteousness must be measured by perfect obedience to the law- which no man can do.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 248-49.

adoption.⁷⁵ Calvin concluded that faith is an undoubting persuasion of the truth of God's word that focuses on the divine free promises in Christ and produces a confident hope of salvation.⁷⁶ This faith does not reside in the mind but produces heartfelt affections which spring from the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷ Such faith is not possessed by all men but by those who are ordained to eternal life.⁷⁸ Calvin concluded that all of these parts of faith must be included in a true doctrine of justification.⁷⁹

D. Calvin's Polemics Against Rome.

1. Nature of Justification.

A counter-argument by Roman Catholic theologians revolves around the true nature of justification. Calvin repeatedly instructed that justification is based upon the expiation of the believer's sins in Christ. A second counter-argument was specifically the notion that the apostles were invested with the power of binding and loosing. Calvin turned to exegesis and church history to argue that when the apostles exercised the power of binding and loosing that it was through preaching the gospel and not through hearing someone's confession. History demonstrates that there was no priestly confession for the church's first thousand years.⁸⁰

2. Confession of Sin.⁸¹

The *Interim* also proposed a lessening of the need to confess sins to a priest.⁸² But, Calvin argued, if forgiveness were truly dependent upon a priest, then how could someone deduct confessing any sin without fear of falling under divine condemnation?

At the end of his analysis of the Roman notion of priestly confession, Calvin turned to a theme hinted at earlier and repeated later – that if the church mandates something beyond Scripture as

⁷⁵ Ibid., 249-50. This vital faith obliterates a supposed distinction between “informal” and “formed” faith. This faith “could by no means apply to mere knowledge” (252).

⁷⁶ Ibid., 251. Calvin cited various passages from Paul and concluded that “these words plainly denote a mutual relation between faith and the free promises of God.”

⁷⁷ Ibid., 252: “he does not place faith in the brain.”

⁷⁸ Ibid., 250-52, 253, Calvin identifies this as “effectual calling.” [251: we must study brevity]

⁷⁹ Ibid., 254.

⁸⁰ John Calvin, “Remarks on the Letter of Pope Paul III” in John Calvin, *Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1, trans. Henry Beveridge (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1958), 256-57.

⁸¹ Ibid., 255. After his positive presentation on faith, Calvin went on the offensive against the Roman Catholic notion of the need to confess sins to a priest to obtain forgiveness. Calvin truly went on the offensive! “It is an atrocious insult to God to arrogate so much to man as to make the Remission of Sins depend on their pleasure.” “When men rise up and lay their veto upon Christ to restrain his grace, is it not more than sacrilegious audacity?” “Here a mortal man interposes, and dares to preclude access.” They “rob him [Christ] of part of the honor and transfer it elsewhere.”

⁸² Instead of confessing every possible sin it was supposedly only those that came to mind after examination.

being necessary for salvation, then, “consciences shall be brought into bondage, the grace of Christ prostituted, and faith oppressed.”⁸³

3. Satisfaction for Sin.

Calvin next turned to the Roman Catholic practice of making satisfaction for sin. The Roman position was that eternal punishment is forgiven in Christ but that temporal divine punishment (not civil) was exclusively eliminated by the sinner’s own satisfaction. Calvin was offended by a notion that men could somehow appease God’s wrath through offering some type of compensation or satisfaction. Rather, a believer ought to practice true humility and repentance to avenge his own sin, not wanting to experience God as an avenger. If satisfaction would have a use in the church it would be as an example and not as an aid to spiritual justice. Calvin concluded his analysis of this theme with a warning not to be lulled by a siren song that this was only a small matter of doctrine which could be admitted into the church with no great danger. Even the least deviation from the gospel was a downward path to death.⁸⁴

4. Justification & Worship.

Calvin’s next topic was worship. He refused to separate the doctrine of justification from proper worship because worship consists of true religion. One cannot separate the mode of how one is saved from the mode in which God is worshipped. Thus, true worship, according to Calvin, consists of two equally necessary parts: inward worship of the heart and worship acts that conform to the divine command.⁸⁵

Supporters of the *Interim* argued that the Protestants were too strict in their form of worship and that their rigidity destroyed freedom. Bracketing actions done in worship relative to decency and order, Calvin focused on works, which his opponents argued were supposedly pleasing to God in themselves and by which he was duly worshipped. But adding anything human to divine worship, which is spiritual righteousness, argued Calvin, overthrows proper religion.⁸⁶

Having examined a number of Luther and Calvin’s writings, it is safe to conclude that there was a maturation and development in both of their teachings on forensic justification. Such development is a normal part of theological growth. Together we can thank God that in both the Lutheran and Reformed creedal statements, this celebrated Biblical teaching is both prominent and emphasized.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 256.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 257-59. Rather, such teaching leads to ungratefulness to Christ and is treacherous to salvation.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 261. Concerning divine command, Calvin argued that God desires obedience to him in worship. “All modes of worship devised contrary to his command, he not only repudiates as void, but distinctly condemns.” Any work undertaken without divine command perverts godly living. This drew him into a short excursus on supposed works of supererogation. First, for Calvin there were no such possible works because God’s law commanded all to love him with all their heart. But no man has fully accomplished this command. Also, biblical examples of Christ commanding the rich young ruler to sell all does not warrant as an act of supererogation. Neither does someone who practices celibacy.

⁸⁶*Ibid.*, 263. “I deny, therefore, that any worship of God is legitimate, save that which is required according to his will.”