

**WHY
THE
REFORMATION
STILL
MATTERS**

**MICHAEL REEVES
& TIM CHESTER**

“Rarely does one find such a rich combination of historical theology and passionate exegetical argument. This is a warm, pastoral, and rigorous defense of the central claims of the Reformation. It also includes a defense of this common heritage from the perspective of Anabaptist/Baptist distinctives that recognizes important differences with the magisterial Reformers. For both reasons, *Why the Reformation Still Matters* represents an important contribution to ongoing conversations in the global church.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California; author, *Calvin on the Christian Life*

“Authors Michael Reeves and Tim Chester have made a solid contribution to the commemoration of the Reformation in their clear account of what the major Reformers, especially Martin Luther and John Calvin, taught about Jesus, God’s grace, Scripture, the sacraments, and other important subjects. With the five-hundredth anniversary of Martin Luther’s posting of the Ninety-Five Theses quickly approaching, this timely book underscores the vital importance of what he and other early Protestants devoted their lives to teaching.”

Mark Noll, Francis A. McAnaney Professor Emeritus of History, University of Notre Dame; Editor, *Protestantism after 500 Years*

“Reeves and Chester clearly and straightforwardly explain the vital importance of the Reformation, summarize its message, and show its ongoing relevance. *Why the Reformation Still Matters* may be only two hundred pages long, but it vibrates with life. A brilliant achievement by two modern-day doctors of the church, and a great little book.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Professor of Systematic Theology, Redeemer Seminary, Dallas; author, *The Whole Christ*

“If there are any doubts over whether the Reformation still matters or whether the church needs to be always reforming, Reeves and Chester dispel them. Winsome and wise, this book provides solid reasons to be Protestant and offers biblically and historically accurate accountings of key doctrinal formulations. As Protestant Christians around the world celebrate the five-hundredth anniversary of the Revolution of 1517, they will find strong encouragement here. *Semper reformanda!*”

Sean Lucas, Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi; Senior Minister, The First Presbyterian Church, Hattiesburg, Mississippi; author, *God’s Grand Design: The Theological Vision of Jonathan Edwards*

Why the Reformation Still Matters

WHY THE *REFORMATION* STILL MATTERS

Michael Reeves and
Tim Chester

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In memoriam
Edward Coombs
He loved and lived for Jesus Christ.
The world was not worthy of him.

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Abbreviations

- Calvin, *Commentary* *Calvin's Commentaries* (New Testament). Edited by D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance. 12 vols. Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1959–1972
- Calvin, *Institutes* *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. 2 vols. The Library of Christian Classics 20–21. Philadelphia: Westminster; London: SCM, 1961
- Luther's Works* *Luther's Works: American Edition*. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. Philadelphia: Fortress; St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1955–1987

Introduction

Five hundred years ago a young German monk walked from his monastery, across the town of Wittenberg, to the Castle Church. The door of the church acted as a kind of public bulletin board. There the monk nailed a poster with ninety-five statements or theses. His name was Martin Luther (1483–1546).

The ninety-five theses were an invitation to a public debate. It was the sixteenth-century version of a provocative blog post inviting online discussion. The prompt was the practice of the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel (1465–1519). Luther's close friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon (1497–1560) described Tetzel as “a most audacious sycophant.”¹ “A brazen creep,” we might say today. Most people at the time believed in purgatory, a place of torment to which people went at their death so they could be purged of their sins before moving on to heaven. Tetzel was selling indulgences—promises from the pope that gave people time off purgatory. “As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs” went the advertising jingle. Luther's ninety-five theses were a protest against these indulgences and the church's preoccupation with wealth. They were not a particularly radical series of statements, cer-

1. Philip Melanchthon, *The Life and Acts of Martin Luther* (1549), accessed February 24, 2016, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/melan/lifea-01.txt>.

tainly not by the standards of Luther's later thought. They did not question the existence of purgatory or even the limited value of indulgences. But they hit the church where it was most vulnerable—in the pocket.

The local archbishop complained to the pope. But the opposition made Luther more resolute. He began to attack the infallibility of the pope. He burned the papal bull that threatened his excommunication. Emperor Charles V called a conference in the city of Worms. Luther's friends ably defended him, but the emperor eventually called Luther himself to attend, with the promise of protection. Here stood Luther with the whole church system ranged against him. Luther said:

Through the mercy of God, I ask your Imperial Majesty and your Illustrious Lordships, or anyone of any standing, to testify and refute my errors, to contradict them with the Old and New Testaments. I am ready, if better instructed, to recant any error and I shall be the first to throw my writings into the fire.

The imperial advocate responded in a chiding tone:

Your answer is not to the point. There should be no questioning of things which the Church Councils have already condemned and on which decisions have already been passed. . . . Give us a plain reply to this question: Are you prepared to recant or not?

Luther replied:

Your Imperial Majesty and your Lordships demand a simple answer. Here it is, plain and straight. Unless I am convicted of error by the Scriptures . . . and my conscience is taken captive by God's word, I cannot and will not recant anything, for to act against our conscience is neither safe

for us or open to us. On this I take my stand. I can do no other. God help me. Amen.²

Luther's ideas spread across Europe, speeded by the recently invented printing press. In many places they found a ready audience. The evident corruption of the Catholic Church had given many people a longing for change, and renewed interest in ancient learning associated with the Renaissance had led to a rediscovery of the Scriptures.

Already in the Swiss city of Zurich, Huldrych Zwingli (1484–1531) was introducing reform on the basis of his reading of the Bible, which he had come to regard as the supreme authority in all matters. At first his reforms were welcomed by the Catholic authorities, but in 1523, after two public disputations, the city backed Zwingli and broke from Rome.

In England William Tyndale (1494–1536) was influenced by Luther's ideas. Serving as a chaplain at Little Sodbury Manor, near Bath, he was shocked by the ignorance of the local clergy. To one he famously said, "If God spare my life, ere many years pass, I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou dost."³ Tyndale set off to London, expecting to receive church support for his plan to translate the Bible into English. But the bishop of London was not interested, because he did not want Lutheran ideas spreading in England. Opposition to Tyndale grew, and eventually he left England for life on the run in Germany and modern-day Belgium. Tyndale was eventually betrayed and martyred in 1536, but not before he had translated the New Testament and much of the Old.

2. Martin Luther, "The Diet of Worms: Luther's Final Answer," cited in Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 214.

3. William Tyndale, *The Works of William Tyndale*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Parker Society, 1848; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2010), 1:xix.

In 1536 John Calvin (1509–1564) was passing through Geneva on his way to Strasbourg. But the leader of the church in Geneva, William Farel (1489–1565), persuaded him to stay, and the city gave him the job of teacher of Scripture. Farel was a Reformer but lacked a talent for organization. So Calvin took the lead. Initially the citizens of Geneva were not sure they liked Calvin's comprehensive vision of a Christian city, and in 1538 he was sacked. But three years later Calvin was reappointed and spent the rest of his life making Geneva a powerhouse for Reformation ideas, sending pastors across Europe to plant Reformation churches.

In England the origins of the Reformation were as much political as religious. Henry VIII (1491–1547) wanted to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon (1485–1536), because she had failed to give him the son and successor he craved. But, after much prevarication, the pope refused to sanction the divorce. It did not help that the pope was beholden to Emperor Charles V, who also happened to be Catherine's nephew. So in 1534 Henry broke from Rome, making himself the head of the Church of England. Henry wanted to retain Catholic theology without Roman authority.

But, while the origins of the Reformation in England might have been political, plenty of people were sympathetic toward Luther's ideas. Henry's archbishop, Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556), was intent on Protestant reform. His prayer book, the *Book of Common Prayer*, wrote Reformation theology into the weekly liturgy of parish churches across England. In subsequent years England seesawed between Protestantism and Catholicism until Elizabeth I (1533–1603) settled the country on her own peculiarly English version of Protestantism (a version that rather disappointed the Puritans).

Luther posted his ninety-five theses on October 31, 1517.

The Reformation was a complex movement with many tributaries. It was not the work of one man or one movement. Nevertheless, October 31, 1517, has taken on symbolic significance. More than any other event, this has the best claim to be the starting gun that set everything else in motion.

But five hundred years on, does the Reformation still matter?

It matters because this is our story. If you are Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Congregational, Independent, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Pentecostal, Presbyterian, or Reformed, then these are your roots. Your history can be traced back to these events five hundred years ago.

But are the Reformers like embarrassing grandparents? Are they a part of our story we would rather leave behind or can safely ignore? Or are they perhaps heroes we are content to lionize at a safe distance?

The sensibilities of the Reformation can certainly seem strange to modern people. Was Europe really thrown into turmoil by debates over whether righteousness was “imputed” or “imparted,” the one a declaration that we are right with God and the other simply a new power to win God’s approval? Did people really fight over whether we are saved by faith alone or by faith and works combined? Was there really a time when theology mattered this much to people?

Is the Reformation Bad News?

I (Tim) was watching a television documentary recently when the presenter said, “In many ways the Reformation and the bitterness and division it represents reminds us of the worst aspects of our religious instincts.”⁴ I can rewind my television, so I was able to check that I had heard him right. These words typify

4. Ifor ap Glyn, “Pagans and Pilgrims: Britain’s Holiest Places,” episode 1, BBC4, first broadcast March 7, 2013.

the attitude of many. Religion is a thing of mystery, people suppose. And with this supposition goes another: that to claim to know the truth and challenge other people's perception of the truth is a ridiculous act of arrogance. To quarrel about religion is uncharitable, a denial of the very thing you claim to follow.

It is certainly true that we can act toward people with whom we disagree in ways that deny the gospel we profess, and the leaders of the Reformation were sometimes guilty of this. But the assumption behind such attitudes is that the divisions of the Reformation were not worth making—truth does not really matter.

But consider what was at stake. At its heart the Reformation was a dispute about how we know God and how we can be right with him. At stake was our eternal future, a choice between heaven and hell.

And it still is. That our modern world finds the Reformation alien says as much about us as it does about the Reformers. It exposes our preoccupation with this material world and this momentary life. If there is a world beyond this world and a life beyond this life, then it does not seem to matter very much to us—out of sight, out of mind. It is a bizarre position to take when so much is at stake. For the Reformers there was no need more pressing than assurance in the face of divine judgment, and there was no act more loving than to proclaim a message of grace that granted eternal life to those who responded with faith.

The Reformation still matters because eternal life still matters.

Is the Reformation Yesterday's News?

The Reformation still matters because the debates between Catholics and Protestants have not gone away. Today there are

voices claiming that the Reformation is over. Any substantial differences between Catholics and Protestants, it is claimed, have faded away or been overtaken by more pressing concerns. It makes no sense, according to this line of thinking, to live our lives as if we are still embroiled in the sixteenth century.

In 1994 a number of leading evangelicals and Roman Catholics signed a document entitled *Evangelicals and Catholics Together*. While noting ongoing differences, this controversial document called for mutual acceptance and common witness. Among the signatories was the evangelical historian Mark Noll. In 2005 he published a book (with Carolyn Nystrom) entitled *Is the Reformation Over?* The answer, he acknowledges, is complex. But Noll claims that on justification “many Catholics and evangelicals now believe approximately the same thing.”⁵ Although he identifies the nature of the church as an ongoing difference, Noll says:

If it is true, as once was repeated frequently by Protestants conscious of their anchorage in Martin Luther or John Calvin that *iustificatio articulus stantis vel cadentis ecclesiae* (justification is the article on which the church stands or falls), then the Reformation is over.⁶

Highlighting numerous examples of cooperation, Noll says that differences between Catholics and evangelicals are “infinitesimal” compared with their shared differences with liberal Christianity and secular culture.⁷

Of course much has changed over the past five hundred years. On many moral issues like abortion Catholics and Prot-

5. Mark A. Noll and Carolyn Nystrom, *Is the Reformation Over? An Evangelical Assessment of Contemporary Roman Catholicism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005), 231.

6. *Ibid.*, 232.

7. *Ibid.*, 230.

estants find themselves making common cause. And much has changed within both Catholicism and Protestantism. Both have been impacted by modernism and postmodernism. If the differences are narrowing, it is often because many Catholics no longer follow official papal teaching, and many Protestants are losing the biblical insights gained at the Reformation. We need a stronger, not a weaker, focus on Reformation theology.

Sixteenth-century Catholics and Protestants both acknowledged they had much in common. That is not news. But they also knew the differences between them were fundamental. They could not be ignored then, and they cannot be ignored now. The fault lines of the Reformation have not gone away. Our contention is that on key issues like justification and Scripture the issues remain and are not negligible.

But it is not just in discussion with Catholicism that the Reformation continues to matter. The Reformation was always intended to be an ongoing project. One of its slogans was *semper reformanda*, usually translated as “always reforming”; but a better translation may be “always being reformed” (by God’s Word). It describes not a movement forward to some uncharted horizon but a continual movement back to God’s Word.

In this book we outline some key emphases of the Reformation and explore their contemporary relevance. We look at questions like How can we get God’s approval? How can we overcome sin in our lives? How does God speak to us? How can we know what is true? Why do we take bread and wine? Which church should we join? What difference does God make on Monday mornings? What hope can we have in the face of death?

It is our contention that five hundred years on, evangelical churches would be well served by a rediscovery of Reformation

theology. The thought of the Reformers not only challenges Catholic practice; it also challenges many aspects of evangelical practice. The Reformers are not embarrassing grandparents—they are vital conversation partners with the potential to renew and reinvigorate our churches.

Justification

How Can We Be Saved?

Luther's Story and Justification

The first biography of Luther was written by his friend Philip Melanchthon in 1549. Melanchthon tells us that after Luther graduated, he started to study law. His family and friends confidently expected that the bright young Luther would make a major contribution to the state, but instead he joined the Augustinian monks.

On his entrance there, he not only applied with the closest diligence to ecclesiastical studies; but also, with the greatest severity of discipline, he exercised the government of himself, and far surpassed all others in the comprehensive range of reading and disputation with a zealous observance of fasting and prayer.¹

1. Philip Melanchthon, *The Life and Acts of Martin Luther* (1549), accessed October 15, 2015, <http://www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/melan/lifea-01.txt>.

But all his religious endeavors could not give Luther any assurance. When a close friend died, Luther became terrified by the thought of the judgment of God. And it was all made worse by the theology of the day.

Medieval theology saw sin as a problem of *being* that needed *healing*. This took place through sacraments. In this life the Christian is suspended between the grace of God (mediated through the sacraments) and the judgment of God. Medieval theology, then, added a distinction between *actual* grace and *habitual* grace. Actual grace gave forgiveness of sins, provided they were confessed. Habitual grace changed people deeper down, in their very being—overcoming the problem of original sin.

Luther's problem was that since only actual sins confessed were forgiven, he was obsessed with not overlooking sin. He would spend hours in confessing to his superior in the Augustinian order, and then come rushing back with some new misdemeanor he had remembered. At one point his superior said: "Look here, Brother Martin. If you're going to confess so much, why don't you go do something worth confessing? Kill your mother or father! Commit adultery! Stop coming in here with such flummery and fake sins!"²

In 1512 Luther, aged twenty-six, was sent by his order as a lecturer of biblical studies to the new university at Wittenberg. It was here, studying Augustine and lecturing on the Psalms, Romans, and Galatians, that Luther came to a radically fresh understanding of the gospel.

Sorting out the development of Luther's thought is notoriously difficult. Luther's new convictions took time to form. There is a lot of debate among scholars about what he believed and when he believed it. So we shall present it in a simplified

2. *Luther's Works*, 33:191, cited in Timothy George, *Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman; Leicester: Apollos, 1988), 65.

form as a double movement. It is more complex than this, with significant overlaps, but this form will help us understand what was going on in theological terms.

Luther's First Step: Righteousness as a Gift

One key moment is what is known as Luther's "tower experience." Its date is contested, and it may have a longer process than one "eureka" moment. Luther described his experience like this:

Meanwhile in that same year, 1519, I had begun interpreting the Psalms once again. I felt confident that I was now more experienced, since I had dealt in university courses with St. Paul's Letters to the Romans, to the Galatians, and the Letter to the Hebrews. I had conceived a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his Letter to the Romans, but thus far there had stood in my way, not the cold blood around my heart, but that one word which is in chapter one: "The justice of God is revealed in it." I hated that word, "justice of God" (*iustitia Dei*), which, by the use and custom of all my teachers, I had been taught to understand philosophically as referring to formal or active justice, as they call it, i.e., that justice by which God is just and by which he punishes sinners and the unjust.

But I, blameless monk that I was, felt that before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience. I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my satisfaction. I did not love, no, rather I hated the just God who punishes sinners. In silence, if I did not blaspheme, then certainly I grumbled vehemently and got angry at God. I said, "Isn't it enough that we miserable sinners, lost for all eternity because of original sin, are oppressed by every kind of calamity through the Ten Commandments? Why does God heap sorrow upon sorrow through the Gospel and through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and his wrath?" This

was how I was raging with wild and disturbed conscience. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

I meditated night and day on those words until at last, by the mercy of God, I paid attention to their context: “The justice of God is revealed in it, as it is written: ‘The just person lives by faith.’” I began to understand that in this verse the justice of God is that by which the just person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith. I began to understand that this verse means that the justice of God is revealed through the Gospel, but it is a passive justice, i.e. that by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: “The just person lives by faith.” All at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of Scripture in a different light. I ran through the Scriptures from memory and found that other terms had analogous meanings, e.g., the work of God, that is, what God works in us; the power of God, by which he makes us powerful; the wisdom of God, by which he makes us wise; the strength of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, “the justice of God,” with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. This phrase of Paul was for me the very gate of paradise. Afterward I read Augustine’s “On the Spirit and the Letter,” in which I found what I had not dared hope for. I discovered that he too interpreted “the justice of God” in a similar way, namely, as that with which God clothes us when he justifies us. Although Augustine had said it imperfectly and did not explain in detail how God imputes justice to us, still it pleased me that he taught the justice of God by which we are justified.³

3. “Martin Luther Discovers the True Meaning of Righteousness,” an excerpt from “Preface to the Complete Edition of Luther’s Latin Works” (1545), trans. Andrew Thornton from “Vorrede zu Band I der Opera Latina der Wittenberger Ausgabe, 1545,” in vol. 4 of *Luthers Werke in Auswahl*, ed. Otto Clemen, 6th ed. (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1967), 421–28.

In Romans 1:17 Paul writes, “For in it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, ‘The righteous shall live by faith.’” Luther could not understand how the righteousness or justice of God could be *gospel*—good news. It seemed to offer only the threat of judgment. Not only does the law condemn us, but so does the gospel! “For *in the gospel* a righteousness of God is revealed.” But Luther began to see the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel not simply as a *quality of* God—his impartial justice by which he judges sinners. Instead he saw it as a *gift from* God. The righteousness of God is the righteousness he gives to us so that we may be righteous before him. The righteousness of God is not an attribute of God that stands over and against humankind, judging us on the basis of merit. It is the gift of God by which God declares us righteous even though we are not in ourselves righteous. Luther says:

[Paul] says that they are all sinners, unable to glory in God. They must, however, be justified through faith in Christ, who has merited this for us by his blood and has become for us a mercy seat [compare Ex. 25:17; Lev. 16:14–15; 1 John 2:2] in the presence of God, who forgives us all our previous sins. In so doing, God proves that it is his justice alone, *which he gives through faith*, that helps us, the justice which was at the appointed time revealed through the Gospel and, previous to that, was witnessed to by the Law and the Prophets.⁴

This first step in Luther’s thought was from a troubled conscience, created by medieval theology, to a rediscovery of the view of Augustine—and Augustine’s view of sin. Luther came

4. Martin Luther, “Preface to the Letter of St. Paul to the Romans,” trans. Brother Andrew Thornton OSB, accessed October 9, 2015, www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/prefacetoromans (emphasis added); also available at www.yale.edu/adhoc/etexts/luther_preface.html.

to see sin not simply as a weakness of being or lack of good, but as rebellion against God. It was a *relational* problem. Moreover, man *coram Deo* (before God) had *no* resources. Luther said, “If anyone would feel the greatness of sin he would not be able to go on living another moment; so great is the power of sin.”⁵

But Luther would go beyond Augustine. Augustine had said that when a sinner recognizes his need of salvation, he turns in faith to God. God gives him the Holy Spirit, who begins to change him. In this view of Augustine’s, the righteousness of God is *the gift of transforming grace within us*. And *justification is the process of healing* which the Spirit works within us. God changes us from a selfish person into a loving person so that we can obey him from the heart. Righteousness is a gift, but it still requires a process of change from us in response.

Luther’s Second Step: External Righteousness

The second step in Luther’s thought moved him from Augustine’s view to a distinctive evangelical position. If that first step in his thought was a rediscovery of Augustine, the second movement can be seen as a rediscovery of Paul. Luther now sees that “justify” does not mean to *make* righteous or to change a person, but to *reckon* righteous, to declare righteous, to acquit. Justification is about my *status* before God, not what God does *within* me.

Medieval theology thought of grace as a quality at work *within* us. Righteousness would be given to us so that we could become justified. We would be healed by God’s grace so that we could be right before him.

5. D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Weimar: Böhlau, 1833–), 39:210, cited in Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 142.

But Luther said that grace was not some “thing” at work within us, but God’s unmerited favor toward us. The cause of justification is the alien righteousness of Christ. It is “alien” not because it comes from outer space(!) but because it is external to us. It is not inherent within people or in any sense said to belong to them. It is extrinsic rather than intrinsic. Luther spoke of God’s accepting the righteousness of Christ as our righteousness even though it is alien to our nature. We are declared righteous not on the basis of a future gradual process of healing, but on the basis of the finished work of Christ.

Melanchthon in particular developed the idea of extrinsic righteousness into the idea of “imputation” (though Luther, too, uses the phrase in his description of his experience in the tower). Medieval theology (and the early Luther) spoke of an impartation or infusion of righteousness that effected our justification. But Melanchthon spoke of the righteousness of Christ as being “imputed” to us—it is reckoned as ours by God. Our sins are not removed but are not counted against us. Justification, then, is not about God *making* us righteous, but *declaring* us righteous. It is the language of the law court rather than the hospital. Justification is not a process of healing but a declaration that we have a right, positive standing before God.

By Faith Alone

We are declared righteous in this way by *faith alone*. Luther saw people as passive in the process of justification. We cannot initiate the process. We are powerless and enslaved. We have nothing to contribute to our salvation. And so justification is—and can only be—by faith and by faith alone. Faith, here,

is *fiducia*, “personal trust or reliance.” In the medieval period, faith was often seen as a virtue (in the sense of “faithfulness” or “loyalty”). For Luther faith is simply taking hold of Christ. It is receiving what Christ has done.

If anyone thinks these are subtle distinctions or that the difference with Catholicism is exaggerated, consider the statements made at the Council of Trent (1545–1563). The Council of Trent was Catholicism’s response to the Reformation, a response it has never retracted. It was quite explicit in its condemnation of justification by faith alone:

If any one says, that by faith alone the ungodly are justified in such a way as to mean that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to receive the grace of Justification and that it is not necessary for a man to be prepared and disposed by the movement of his own will; let him be anathema. (Sess. 6, Canon 9)

If any one says that justifying faith is nothing else but confidence in the divine mercy which forgives sins for Christ’s sake; or that we are justified by this confidence alone; let him be anathema. (Sess. 6, Canon 12)

The contrast to Luther is stark. Luther says, “If faith is not without all, even the smallest works, it does not justify; indeed it is not even faith.”⁶ Luther, as we shall see, was clear that faith goes on to produce good works in a person’s life. But any hope of salvation based on good works, even in part, denies the adequacy of our only true hope, Jesus Christ.

Because in Catholicism salvation depends on faith plus works, the council denies the possibility of assurance. For the Reformers, to express assurance was to boast in Christ and his

6. D. Martin Luthers Werke, 7:231, cited in George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 71.

finished work. For Catholicism, to express assurance was a proud and presumptuous boast in your own good works.

If any one says that a man who is born again and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is assuredly in the number of the predestinate. . . . and that he has the gift of perseverance to the end (unless he has learned this by special revelation); let him be anathema. (Sess. 6, Canons 15–16)

In recent years Catholic contributors to ecumenical discussions have made statements on justification by faith that some evangelicals have felt able to affirm. But typically these statements lack precision on the key issues of the Reformation. They fall far short of a repudiation of the anathemas against Reformation theology made at the Council of Trent.

At Once Righteous and a Sinner

At first Luther thought of Christians as partly sinful and partly righteous. The phrase in Latin is *simul iustus et peccator*, “at the same time righteous and a sinner.” Luther continued to use this phrase, but understood it differently. He would add the word *semper*, “always.” The Christian was *always* righteous (in status) and *always* sinful (in lifestyle). We are not in a gradual process from one thing to another. We are sinful because we continue in our old sinful habits. But we have already appeared before the judgment seat of God and have been declared righteous.

We are in truth and totally sinners, with regard to ourselves and our first birth. Contrariwise, insofar as Christ has been given for us, we are holy and just totally. Hence from different aspects we are said to be just and sinners at one and the same time.⁷

7. D. Martin Luthers Werke, 39:523, cited in George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 71.

Summary

We may summarize Luther's theology of justification this way:

1. Justification is a forensic act by which a believer is *declared* righteous. Justification is not a process by which a person is made righteous. "Forensic" means legal—it invokes the image of a law court. It involves a change of status—not a change of nature.
2. The cause of justification is the alien righteousness of Christ. It is not inherent within a person or in any sense said to belong to us. It is "imputed" or reckoned to us. It is not "imparted" or poured into us.
3. Justification is by faith alone. We can contribute nothing. Christ has achieved everything for us already.
4. Because justification is an act of God and because it is based on the finished work of Christ, we can have assurance. Justification is future in orientation: it is acquittal on the day of judgment. But justification is the assurance in the present that the final verdict will be in our favor.

Lutheran View of Justification	Catholic View of Justification
a forensic act	a healing act
the image of a law court	the image of a hospital
alien righteousness (of Christ)	inherent righteousness (within the believer)
imputed	imparted
by faith alone	begun with faith and continued through sacraments and good works
justified now on the basis of Christ's finished work	justified now on the basis of what we shall become
an assured future	an uncertain future

Justification and Sanctification

Erasmus, the great humanist scholar, objected to all this, saying, “Lutherans seek only two things—wealth and wives . . . to them the gospel means the right to live as they please.”⁸ In other words, all this talk of justification by faith alone was simply an excuse to live a decadent life. However, Luther would argue strongly that, while we are not *justified* by works, works should *follow* faith as its fruit. Saving faith will always be active in love. And this love is not expressed in religious duties to earn merit before God, but in practical service of one’s neighbor. We are freed from the burden of self-justification to serve one another in love. In the medieval system you sought justification by retreating from the world into a monastery to spend your time in confession and religious discipline. Justification by faith meant you were free to go out into the world and spend your time serving others without always looking over your shoulder to wonder what God was thinking of you.

There were some differences among the Reformers. Melancthon and later Lutheranism made a sharp distinction between justification and sanctification (here “sanctification” is the theological term for our growth in holiness and our gradual transformation into the image of Christ). They wanted to guard against the Catholic idea that justification begins with regeneration and is completed through sanctification. Luther himself does not make quite such a sharp distinction. Martin Bucer (1491–1551), the Swiss theologian and one of the shapers of the Reformed tradition, thought of a “double justification”: first, in “primary justification” we are *declared* righteous through the imputed righteousness of Christ, and, second, through

8. P. S. Allen and H. M. Allen, eds., *Opus Epistolarum Des. Erasmi Roterodami* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1928), 7:366, letter (no. 1977) of March 20, 1528, to Willibald Pirckheimer, cited in George, *Theology of the Reformers*, 72.

“secondary justification” we are *made* righteous—an activity that includes human effort.

John Calvin—the main shaper of the Reformed tradition—had a clear concept of forensic or legal justification. But he avoided the sharp distinction between justification and sanctification (or secondary justification) by placing both under the overarching and prior concept of the union of the believer with Christ through faith. So, although he calls justification the “main hinge upon which religion turns” and the “sum of all piety,”⁹ Calvin deals with justification in the *Institutes* under the topic of the Holy Spirit. Justification and sanctification are both fruit that flow from our union with Christ, which we experience through the Spirit. Calvin thus recovers the relational dimension of Luther while protecting the legal nature of justification made explicit in Melancthon.

Does Justification Still Matter?

So, does justification still matter? The answer must be a resounding *yes*. Nothing matters more than justification by Christ alone through faith alone. If justification by faith seems obvious to you, then it is because of Luther. But we must not presume on his legacy.

Many attempts have been made to move the center ground of Christianity elsewhere. But the fact remains that the biggest problem facing humanity is God’s justice. God is committed to judging sin. And that means he is committed to judging *my* sin. This is our biggest problem because that means an eternity excluded from the glory of God.

This is Paul’s argument in Romans 1:18–3:20. Step by step Paul establishes that all are guilty. Romans 2:5 says, “Because

9. Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.11.1, 3.15.7.

of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed." He reaches his conclusion in Romans 3:20: "For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his [God's] sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin." Christianity brings many blessings. It is right that Christians be involved in the pursuit of neighborhood renewal and social justice. But if one day God's righteous judgment will be revealed, if in the meantime we are storing up God's wrath against ourselves, if no one can be declared righteous through his or her own righteousness, then every person on earth faces a massive problem: God's judgment. And this problem dwarfs all the other problems we face. Nothing matters more than justification.

This is why Luther described justification as "the summary of Christian doctrine" and "the article by which the church stands or falls."¹⁰

But it is not just at a doctrinal or ecclesial level that it matters. It is a deeply personal doctrine. Every time I sin, I create a reason to doubt my acceptance by God, and I question my future with God. But day after day the doctrine of justification speaks peace to my soul.

This is especially true of imputed righteousness. If justification describes a process of change, as Catholicism teaches, albeit one initiated by grace, then every setback throws my future into doubt. But if I am made right with God through the finished work of Christ, then nothing can unfinish that reality. I can have assurance, even in the face of my sin.

10. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 242, says that later Lutherans coined this slogan and that Luther had said, "If that article stands, the church stands; if it falls, the church fails" (Martin Luther, exposition of Ps. 130:4).

Paul brings his argument for justification by faith in Romans 1–4 to a climax in 4:25: “[Jesus our Lord] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.” What does he say next? What is the consequence of our justification? Paul continues: “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1–2). Justification is the reminder that we have peace with God and the hope of glory. And we need that reminder not just on the day of our conversion, but day after day.

The people of this world are on a mission: a mission to prove themselves. Perhaps the biggest reason why people are too busy is that they are trying to prove themselves. Busyness has become a mark of honor in our culture. Take an expression like “I’m a very busy man.” What does it mean in our culture? It does not mean “My life’s out of control.” It means “I’m a very important person—you should show me some respect.” The result is a level of overwork that is damaging our health and our homes.

We do not need the five hundredth anniversary of the Reformation to speak to people of justification. Every day you will meet people who are trying to prove themselves. Some are trying to prove themselves to God. Many are trying to prove themselves to others to establish their own identity. All these futile attempts at self-justification are stretching people to the breaking point.

Into this frenzy Jesus says, “Come to me . . . and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). We have good news for our busy culture. Proving yourself is just another term for justifying yourself. And we have good news of justification by grace.

If you are busy trying to prove yourself, then you will always

be busy. You will never get the job done—because you cannot prove yourself. You will be like a dog chasing its tail. Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). The job is done. The task is complete. There is full atonement. There is nothing left for you to do.

Justification in Evangelical Hymnody

The huge importance of justification for evangelical Christians can be seen in its prominence in evangelical worship and hymnody. Again and again throughout history you see evangelicals turning the Reformation doctrine of justification by Christ through faith alone into worship. In each case, it is quite clear, justification is not simply a doctrine to demarcate the true church. Nor is it merely a doctrine to be preached to unbelievers. It is the source of comfort and hope in the midst of the struggles of life.

We are spoiled for choice here, but take, for example, “Jesus, Your Blood and Righteousness,” by Nicholas Von Zinzendorf (1700–1760), translated by John Wesley (1703–1791):

Jesus, your blood and righteousness
my beauty are, my glorious dress;
mid flaming worlds, in these arrayed
with joy shall I lift up my head.

When from the dust of death I rise
to claim my home beyond the skies
then this shall be my only plea:
Jesus has lived and died for me.

Bold shall I stand in that great day
and none condemn me, try who may;
fully absolved by you I am
from sin and fear, from guilt and shame.

O let the dead now hear your voice;
let those once lost in sin rejoice!
Their beauty this, their glorious dress,
Jesus, your blood and righteousness.

John Wesley's brother Charles (1707–1788) expressed just the same delight in our justification in his famous hymn “And Can It Be”:

No condemnation now I dread;
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine!
Alive in Him, my living Head,
And clothed in righteousness divine,
Bold I approach the eternal throne,
And claim the crown, through Christ my own.

Or, finally, take “My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less,” by Edward Mote (1797–1874). Like the others, it beautifully captures the confidence we can have before God in Christ, as opposed to our own performance:

My hope is built on nothing less
than Jesus' blood and righteousness;
I dare not trust the sweetest frame,
but wholly lean on Jesus' name.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand . . .

When I shall launch in worlds unseen,
O may I then be found in him!
Dressed in his righteousness alone,
faultless to stand before the throne.
On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand;
all other ground is sinking sand.

DOES THE REFORMATION STILL MATTER?

In 1517, a German monk nailed a poster to the door of a church, disputing key doctrines taught by the Roman Catholic Church in that day. This moment set in motion a movement that changed the entire trajectory of church history. But do the Reformers still have something to teach us?

In this accessible primer, Michael Reeves and Tim Chester answer eleven key questions raised by the Reformers—questions that remain critically important for the church today.

“Rarely does one find such a rich combination of historical theology and passionate exegetical argument. This is a warm, pastoral, and rigorous defense of the central claims of the Reformation.”

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MICHAEL REEVES (PhD, King’s College, London) is president and professor of theology at Union School of Theology in Oxford. He is the author of a number of books, including *The Unquenchable Flame: Discovering the Heart of the Reformation*.

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