

Justification

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Version 1.0 | Published 1 May 2026 | DOI <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-118912>

Other language version: Rechtfertigung (Deutsch)

The concept of justification is central in Protestant theology. Its theological meaning differs fundamentally from its meaning in non-theological language. In everyday language, the term refers to the act of explaining, or accounting for, a particular behavior or action before another entity. Within theology, it designates the relationship between human beings and God. It designates a divine act through which God frees human beings from the injustice of their sins and bestows righteousness on them. Questions about how God justifies, to what extent justification is an act of divine grace, whether and in what way human beings can contribute to their justification, and what constitutes the healing power of righteousness have been the subject of theological reflection and debate since ancient times.

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Editorial Note

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1. Language-Usage and Biblical Tradition

In the literal sense as it is mostly used in the biblical writings, the noun “justification” refers to God’s judicial action whereby God bestows (i.e., creates) righteousness on human beings. The texts in the Old Testament that deal with the question of whether and how human beings can attain righteousness before God (Ps 72:13) are primarily those from the exilic and post-exilic periods. In later texts, the insight that human beings are incapable of being righteous before God by their own means becomes increasingly clear (Ps 143:2; 51:6). This is accompanied by a strengthening of the

forensic concept of divine judgment. Thus, in the Psalms of Solomon from the 1st century BC, God's justification appears to be entirely focused on God's acts of judgement (cf. PsSal 2:15; 3:5; 4:8; 8:7; Sir 18:2). The Book of Job makes it clear that the question of human righteousness before God is also a question about God's righteousness. The songs of God's Servant in the Book of Isaiah praise God's just and saving will among the nations, which, through the vicarious death of the Servant of God for sins (Isa 53:11f.), justifies the many, including the nations (Isa 52:15). The idea that God, through the suffering of God's servant, makes righteousness available not only to Israel but to all people is a crucial prerequisite for Jesus' message of the coming kingdom of God, which applies to all people.

In the New Testament, "justification" plays a central role, especially in Paul's  letters. Paul's letters to the Galatians and Romans develop the fundamental insight that God sent Jesus Christ to redeem humanity from sin and that God demonstrated God's righteousness in Jesus' death on the cross (Rom 3:24f.). Accordingly, righteousness before God does not consist in the works of the law (Gal 3:11). Rather, God justifies "the one who has faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:26, cf. Gal 2:16). By way of summary, Paul states in Romans 3:28: "A person is justified by faith apart from the works prescribed by the law." Luther makes it clear in his translation of this verse that a person is justified "by faith *alone*"; since righteousness is excluded from the works of the law, faith remains the only way to salvation. Paul justifies this position by referring to Genesis 15:6, according to which Abraham's faith in God's promise was credited to him as righteousness. On this basis, Paul concludes: "But to the one who without works trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Rom 4:5).

The separation of righteousness from works raises the question of what significance the law has for those who believe in Christ and what role human works play. For Paul, it is clear that the law is "holy and just and good" (Rom 7:12). If it does not lead people to righteousness, the fault does not lie with the law but with the power of sin, which causes it to be the case that "nothing good dwells" in human flesh (Rom 7:18). The redemption of human beings "from this body of death" (Rom 7:24) is therefore only possible by means of the reconciliation that God has established for all people through the death of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 5:14f.) and which is actualized solely through faith in the word of reconciliation. However, Paul considers it wrong to conclude from this that "we should continue in sin in order that grace may abound" (Rom 6:1). Rather, an individual is, according to Paul, united with Christ in baptism and thereby becomes a new creature such that he or she is now able to live as a new human (Rom 6:4) and do good works.

In light of the salvation for all people revealed in Jesus Christ, the question about the role of the law is concretized in the question about whether Jews and Gentiles can enjoy fellowship without the Gentiles being obliged to obey the law and, in particular, having to be circumcised. At the Apostolic Council in Jerusalem (ca. 48 AD), the apostles concluded that circumcision should not be imposed on Gentiles. They should only abstain from meat sacrificed to idols and from sexual immorality (Acts 15:28f.). Nevertheless, questions about the necessity of observing the law and doing good works preoccupied the early Christian communities intensely. This is evident, for example, in the conflicts to which Paul responds in his letters. The author of the Epistle of James also felt compelled in his context to emphasize, in opposition to an inactive faith, that "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (James 2:17; cf. James 2:26). It is therefore already apparent in the New Testament that along with the insight into righteousness through faith emerges the perennial question as to whether and in what way human beings can and should contribute through their own actions to the righteousness received by faith in Christ's saving work.

2. Doctrinal Developments in the Early and Medieval Church

Rooted in the conviction that God made salvation available to humankind through Jesus Christ, the theologies of the Church Fathers tend to focus on the question of how the divine sonship of Jesus Christ and his incarnation are to be understood (cf. art. Doctrine of Christ's Two Natures). The guiding principle here is the conviction that the Son of God is of the *same essence* as the Father (Council of Nicaea 325) and that he simultaneously *truly* became human. Operative in the background is a foundational soteriological conviction: what is not assumed is not redeemed. The issue of how to understand justification is not initially raised "explicitly to the level of dogmatic reflection."^[1] This changes with Augustine , whose later work emphasizes that we become righteous solely through the grace of the just God. This

insight into God's righteousness and the sole efficacy of God's grace becomes decisive for his teaching on sin. Because human beings are sinners from birth and because original sin (*peccatum originale*) consists in turning away from God and in self-love, we cannot by ourselves rectify our relationship with God. The latter depends solely on God's grace. Central to this understanding of grace is that grace moves the human will toward belief in God (cf. art. Faith). Grace is thus justifying grace (*gratia iustificans*).^[2] Accordingly, faith does not emerge from human effort. Rather, the decision to believe is given to humans as a gift.^[3] Even though the concept of justification does not yet play a dominant role in Augustine's work, his teaching on grace and his corresponding teaching on sin shaped the development of Western theology and created the conditions that made it possible for the concept of justification to become as central in Western theology as it eventually did. In Eastern theology, the effect of salvation on human beings is framed primarily by the concept of *theosis* (deification). This remains decisive in Orthodox theology to this day.

Following Augustine ^{GND}, the teaching on justification in medieval theology gained a firm place in the commentaries on the *Sentences* and in theological *summae*. In accordance with the Latin term *iustificatio*, Thomas Aquinas ^{GND} understands justification as a process of being made righteous through the infusion of grace, which is God's work alone and which moves individuals to recognize God's love and to worship God in faith, love, and hope. Aquinas in essence defines justification in continuity with Augustinian theology, namely, as a process of human transformation brought about solely by God's grace. Pushing back against a habitual understanding of grace, the late medieval theologies of Duns Scotus ^{GND}, the school of William of Ockham ^{GND}, and Gabriel Biel ^{GND} place greater theological emphasis on God's freedom in God's benevolent and wise order and on the work of the Holy Spirit. This corresponds with an emphasis in pastoral and penitential theology on human cooperation in preparing for grace (*facere quod in se est*), something which inevitably provoked the criticism that it was a form of semi-Pelagianism.^[4]

3. The Reformation Teaching on Justification

Martin Luther's ^{GND} theology developed out of the combination of, on the one hand, his personal existential experience with the sacrament of penance (cf. art. Repentance) and, on the other hand, his theological role as a teacher of biblical interpretation. With regard to the practice of penance, Luther was preoccupied with the question of how he could know whether or not he had felt sufficient remorse and performed sufficient acts of penance. His superior, Johann of Staupitz, comforted him during his periods of severe trial by referring to God's mercy (cf. art. Grace) exhibited in Jesus Christ and by directed Luther's attention to the cross. Through his persistent search for the true meaning of the biblical statements about God's righteousness and God's justification of human beings, Luther eventually arrived at the exegetical realization that justification in Paul's ^{GND} writings has a forensic meaning. It is therefore to be understood as being declared righteous, not as an event of actually becoming righteous. Correspondingly, Luther's interpretation of Paul's claims about righteousness through faith without the works of the law led him to the insight that, in declaring human beings to be righteous, God does not exercise judicial righteousness but rather gracious righteousness.^[5] Fundamental to the latter is the sending of God's Son for the redemption of humanity and his vicarious death on the cross for the sin(s) of humanity. In "On the Freedom of a Christian" (1520), Luther interprets justification through the image of a joyful exchange, according to which Christ takes on the sins of humanity and, in return, gifts believers his righteousness. Justification so understood is granted to human beings solely through the promise of the Gospel, in which God forgives their sins and declares them righteous in their faith in Christ.

Because God in Christ did everything necessary for the salvation of humanity, Luther ^{GND} maintains that it is impossible for individuals to contribute through works to their own justification. In fact, he considers any attempt to please God through works as an expression of unbelief, since it fails to recognize God's all-encompassing grace. In contrast, the faith that relies on God's promise and does not attempt to become righteous through works is righteous in that it recognizes God's grace and refrains from self-justification. Luther does not understand righteousness by faith as a habitus or a quality of human beings but as righteousness "extra se" in Christ. This position is correlated with, on

the one hand, the existential experience of sin's being forgiven through justification but not eliminated and, on the other hand, the conviction that human beings, when they consider themselves as they are, cannot perceive themselves as righteous. Only in Jesus Christ is one righteous. That is why Luther characterizes the existence of the believer as both sinner and righteous (*simul iustus et peccator*). This implies that human beings cannot claim righteousness as their own quality.

After initially defining justification in the "Confessio Augustana" as the forgiveness of sins and recognition of righteousness in faith,^[6] Philipp Melanchthon ^{GND} felt compelled in the Apology for the "Confessio Augustana" and in his later writings to emphasize that God's justifying judgment is not based on any achievement or quality of human beings but consists instead in the imputation of the *alien* righteousness of Christ, which individuals take hold of in faith. According to Melanchthon, forgiveness of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness mean the same thing as being adopted as a child of God. Unlike Luther ^{GND}, however, he does not describe this in terms of oneness with Christ. Although Luther and Melanchthon have different emphases in their interpretation of justification by faith alone, they nevertheless place equal emphasize on it as the central article of Reformation theology.^[7] This understanding of justification is present in the theology of John Calvin ^{GND} and the Reformed tradition. In the latter, the sole efficacy of grace in justification is, however, based on God's eternal decree of election. The reformed tradition also places more importance on works in the process of sanctification, both with regard to the individual believer's certainty of his or her status as elect and for the sake of the Christian community as a whole.

After Luther's death, disputes arose among his followers concerning how to understand justification. The 1577 Formula of Concord eventually settled these disputes. Regarding justification, the Formula's rejection of Andreas Osiander's ^{GND} thesis that justification entails a participation in the divine righteousness of Christ is particularly important. In opposition to this thesis, the Formula emphasizes the imputation of Christ's alien righteousness. As for the dispute over the meaning of good works, the Formula stresses that these are not the object but the consequence of the promise of justification. Finally, with regard to the quarrel between Matthias Illyricus Flacius ^{GND} and Viktorin Strigel ^{GND} over the understanding of original sin, the Formula rejects Flacius' classification of original sin as a formal substance. It instead characterizes original sin as a corruption of human nature, not a mere accidental quality (*Akzidens*).

In contrast to the Reformation teaching on justification, the Council of Trent's 1547 Decree on Justification defines justification as actually being made righteous, for which preparation in the form of free consent and cooperation on the part of human beings is necessary.^[8] Accordingly, baptism – the sacrament that mediates justification – not only forgives but also removes sin, which is why, in the case of new sin after baptism, penance (cf. art. Repentance) is required to restore baptismal grace. In order to emphasize the moral renewal that takes place through justification, the Council condemns the Reformation's foundational insight that we are justified by faith alone. The contrast between the two positions intensified in the years that followed, with the Roman Catholic theology of grace placing even greater stress on human cooperation in the process of inner and outer transformation and with Lutheran theology giving the highest importance to its understanding of justification as the imputation of alien righteousness.

4. Enlightenment und Modernity

In the modern period, the idea of the external imputation of Christ's alien righteousness received numerous criticism. Pietists, for example, connect it to what they perceived as a lack of genuine inner renewal. Like the Socinians before them, Enlightenment thinkers argue that the imputation of an external righteousness is morally unacceptable. Immanuel Kant ^{GND} develops this criticism in his work "Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone" (1793/94). Protestant theologians in the 19th century subsequently reformulated the doctrine of justification, most notably Friedrich Schleiermacher ^{GND} in "The Christian Faith" (1820/21, 2nd edition 1830/31). According to Schleiermacher, the mediation of salvation is about the incorporation of individuals into the community of life with Jesus Christ, which takes place through their rebirth.

As constituting a new relationship between an individual and God, this incorporation is his or her justification, and, as a new way of life, it is his or her conversion.^[9]

As with the “Confessio Augustana” and other Reformation confessions, Schleiermacher ^{GND} defines justification as the forgiveness of sins and adoption as a child of God, but he emphasizes that this change in one’s relationship with God only occurs “insofar as the person has genuine faith in the Redeemer.”^[10] Albrecht Ritschl ^{GND} designates this understanding of God’s justifying judgment analytical insofar as the person is declared righteous on the basis of the righteousness of faith. By way of contrast, Ritschl draws attention to the synthetic understanding that he finds in the Reformers, albeit with Ritschl focusing more explicitly on the moral condition. What is crucial for Ritschl is that justification removes the sense of guilt that inhibits people from working toward the realization of the Kingdom of God. However, this can only occur through a judgment that is not grounded in any human achievement. Otherwise, it would not express the “pure divine intention of grace”^[11] and the creative will of God. The synthetic justifying judgment does not presuppose faith or a change of heart. In its synthetic character, it aims precisely at liberating individuals to live a moral life. Taking for granted the consciousness of guilt, it proceeds from at least a partial recognition of sin on the part of human beings.

In critical contrast to the epistemological and moral optimism of liberal theology, the representatives of so-called dialectical theology, especially Karl Barth ^{GND}, bring the radical nature of sin back into focus. This radicality consists in the fact that humanity fundamentally misunderstands sin and its dependence on God’s grace, desiring instead to “be its own helper.”^[12] According to Barth, God established God’s justice in the death of Jesus Christ and proclaimed it in his resurrection, thus granting humanity the right to be God’s covenant partner in Jesus Christ. However, this election and this promise “cannot be attained by any thought or effort or achievement on the part of man.”^[13] Since humanity is already justified in Jesus Christ, the faith in Jesus Christ awakened by the Holy Spirit can only be the recognition, knowledge, and confession of the establishment of God’s justice that has already taken place.^[14] In contrast to the Lutheran emphasis on the doctrine of justification as *articulus stantis et cadentis*,^[15] which became established in the confessional age, Barth asserts: “The *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae* is not the doctrine of justification as such, but its basis and culmination: the confession of Jesus Christ, [...] the knowledge of His being and activity for us and to us and with us.”^[16]

In more recent discussions, Wolfhart Pannenberg ^{GND} has criticized Barth and others for their view that reconciliation is complete in the Christ event and for their associated underestimation of the importance of historical mediation. Even more important is Pannenberg’s distinction between an imputative (*imputativ*) and a declaratory (*deklaratorisch*) understanding of the justifying judgment (*Rechtfertigungsurteil*).^[17] Although Pannenberg shares the Reformation critique of the effective understanding of justification and understands justification as a forensic event, he rejects the imputative understanding as attribution and, on exegetical grounds, favors a declaratory understanding of the justifying judgment. Accordingly, human beings are considered righteous insofar as they believe. This avoids not only the moral difficulty of imputing someone else’s righteousness but also the problem of how the justification of the ungodly can be considered a just judgment of God. This question had become particularly virulent in Lutheran theology in the early 20th century.

Eberhard Jüngel ^{GND} objects to the forensic-declaratory interpretation of justification in his monograph “Das Evangelium von der Rechtfertigung des Gottlosen als Zentrum des christlichen Glaubens: eine theologische Studie in ökumenischer Absicht” (1998). In its place, Jüngel develops an account of God’s declaration of righteousness as proof of his love that overcomes death. However, the forensic-declaratory interpretation also views this as the basis of salvation and justification. The difficulties present in the doctrine of imputative justification are not resolved by this approach, however, because the imputed righteousness remains external to human beings.

In order to explain why faith is not a human achievement, the declaratory understanding of justification requires a consistent exploration of faith as the reference point for God’s justifying judgment. Referencing the effect of faith

through the Holy Spirit is not sufficient here if faith is understood, as it is in the imputative understanding, as an act of appropriating the righteousness of Christ. This understanding falls short of Paul's ^{GND} more comprehensive understanding of faith as being in Christ, which is mediated through baptism. As being in Christ, faith is in fact connected with the self-understanding that Paul articulates in Gal 2:20: "it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me." In this way, Christ is understood as the basis of new life and therefore also as the basis of a new self-understanding. Faith is the effect of the Spirit of Christ, who opens up to human beings their being in Christ. It is therefore not something that human beings achieve on their own. If justification is understood as an event of incorporation into Christ, through which human beings trust in Christ, then this event does not require any preparation in the form of a readiness for grace or a desire for grace, as is the case in Tridentine theology of justification. Insofar as they both understand justification as in no way based on any prior action on the part of human beings, the declaratory and imputative interpretations of justification coincide.

In modern ecumenical debates, the Reformation theology of justification has raised the question of whether emphasizing the pure passivity of human beings in the process of justification means that we are justified "with us without us" (*mit uns ohne uns*), as Karl-Heinz Menke ^{GND} succinctly puts it.^[18] The question of the personal involvement of human beings was also a topic of discussion within the Reformation itself, as can be seen in the various models that developed the idea of the intimate union of human beings with God through faith (*unio mystica*). The *unio mystica* is conceived in analogy to the union of divine and human nature in the incarnation of the Logos. Although interpreted differently, Lutheran and Reformed dogmatics define the concrete union of divinity and humanity as *communio* and *communicatio*. Tübingen Lutheran Christology develops an account according to which the unity of the person of Jesus Christ is constituted by the unconditional mutual communication between divinity and humanity. Christ is the divine-human person in a reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving, or sharing and participation.^[19] This dynamic understanding of the constitution of the person is operative in the background of Friedrich Schleiermacher's ^{GND} conception of salvation as the Savior accepting believers into his God-consciousness.^[20] Using Jesus' God-consciousness – which is determined by the being of God in him – as an analogue, Schleiermacher characterizes the receptivity of believers as a "living receptivity"^[21] through which they are personally involved in their incorporation into the community of life with Christ. Even though Pannenberg does not base his argument on Schleiermacher, he nevertheless understands faith in a similar way as a *participation* in Jesus' Sonship (*Sohnesverhältnis*).^[22]

5. Ecumenical and Contemporary Meaning

With the signing of the "Gemeinsamen Erklärung zur Rechtfertigungslehre" (GER) (*Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*) on Reformation Day in Augsburg in 1999, the division between churches over the doctrine of justification was declared to be resolved. Through reappraisals of the individual doctrinal differences, it was possible to reconcile the forensic and effective interpretations of justification by means of an agreement regarding the sole efficacy of God's grace. In the ensuing discussion, however, it became clear that the anthropological differences in the understanding of the human will and its freedom, which first emerged in the debate between Erasmus of Rotterdam ^{GND} and Martin Luther ^{GND} on free will in 1525, continue to exist in a modified form to this day. Catholicism teaches that human beings have the freedom to strive for grace and are therefore expected to strive for grace in preparation for justification. Within Catholic teaching, this striving is what constitutes the personal involvement of human beings in their justification. In Protestant theology, this possibility is rejected because human beings are understood to be so distorted by sin that they cannot free themselves from it and are completely dependent on God's grace. However, since Roman Catholicism teaches that the participation in the form of preparation for grace is itself attributed to God's grace and also emphasizes the sole efficacy of grace in the appropriation of salvation, it is fitting that the difference in the understanding of freedom is not thematized in the GER as something that divides the churches.^[23] The commitment to the sole efficacy of divine grace in justification is probably also the reason why the World Council of Methodist Churches in 2007 and both the World Communion of Reformed Churches and the Anglican Consultative

Council in 2017 were able to officially agree to the GER, even though there remain differences in the understanding of human freedom and the meaning of sanctification.

The difference between the event described by the term “justification” and the *teaching* on justification (Rechtfertigungslehre) is crucial for explaining the contemporary significance of the latter. The term “justification” designates one aspect of the comprehensive work of salvation, in which God, through his Spirit in Jesus Christ, has made his righteousness accessible to human beings, thereby leading them to the fulfillment of their destiny as God’s image in communion with God and their fellow creatures. The term emphasizes that God grants righteousness through God’s work of salvation. However, it presupposes knowledge of the work of salvation proclaimed in the Gospel and is, in a sense, a theological “insider” term. In his catechisms and sermons, Martin Luther ^{GND} explained God’s saving grace toward humanity in terms of the Gospel’s promise of grace, mostly without recourse to the term justification. While the concept of “justification” can be dispensed with in preaching, the teaching on justification is, in its criteriological function (*ihre criteriologische Funktion*), indispensable for preaching. The sole efficacy of God in the event of salvation, specified in the *particulae exclusivae sola gratia, solo Christo, solo verbo, and sola fide*, is the fundamental principle around which the proclamation of the Gospel must be oriented. In this criteriological meaning, the teaching on justification has increased in interdenominational importance through the agreement in the GER. This applies regardless of the fact that “Catholics see themselves as bound by several criteria.”^[24] In its criteriological meaning, the doctrine of justification functions as a regulative idea for the explication of the Gospel, but precisely in this way it is to be distinguished from the event of salvation that the term “justification” refers to. The contemporary significance of the teaching on justification is based on the consideration of this difference and on its criteriological function.

Recommended Literature

For recommended literature, see the German version of this article.

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- ²³ Cf. GER, 31.10.1999 (https://lutheranworld.org/sites/default/files/2022-02/joint_declaration_2019_de.pdf), accessed on 26.03.2026, 13, Nr. 19–21.
- ²⁴ GER, 12, Nr. 18; GER 18 does not state what these criteria are, but in the dialogue certain criteria are put forward with regard to the understanding and institutional form of the Church.

Citation Style

Nüssel, Friederike: „Justification“, Version 1.0, in: Online Lexicon for Systematic Theology, ISSN 3052-685X, 1 May 2026.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-118912>

Metadata

DOI	https://doi.org/10.15496/publikation-118912
Creative Commons Licence Type	Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs CC BY-NC-ND (4.0)
peer reviewed by	Hendrik Klinge
Translator(s)	Dylan S. Belton

Index Theologicus (IxTheo)	Guilt , Jesus Christ , Justice , Reconciliation , Redemption , Salvation , Sin , Soteriology
Subject Headings (LOC)	Guilt , Jesus Christ , Justice , Reconciliation , Redemption , Salvation , Sin , Soteriology
Keyword	Guilt , Jesus Christ , Justice , Reconciliation , Redemption , Salvation , Sin , Soteriology
Mentioned People	Augustine of Hippo , Karl Barth , Gabriel Biel , John Calvin , John Duns Scotus , Erasmus of Rotterdam , Matthias Flacius , Eberhard Jüngel , Immanuel Kant , Martin Luther , Philipp Melanchthon , Karl-Heinz Menke , Andreas Osiander , Wolfhart Pannenberg , Paul , Albrecht Ritschl , Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher , Johann von Staupitz , Viktorin Strigel , Thomas Aquinas , William of Ockham

KEYWORDS

