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From Justification by Faith to Justification by Faith Alone: The Historical Development of Christian Soteriology from Paul to Luther

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Abstract

The historical relationship between the Apostle Paul's doctrine of justification and Martin Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone has often been narrated as a recovery of an original Pauline teaching. This article reassesses that narrative by placing Luther within the patristic and scholastic history of Christian soteriology. It examines Pauline texts, the medieval exegetical tradition that mediated them to the schools, and major theological formulations associated with Augustine, Pelagius, Thomas Aquinas, and Luther, while engaging modern debates over the New Perspective on Paul and competing interpretations of grace, faith, works, and righteousness. Paul's justification discourse addressed questions arising from Torah, covenant, Christ, and the incorporation of Gentiles. Augustine and medieval scholastic theology reorganized the problem around grace, human agency, sacramental participation, transformation, and merit. Luther inherited Pauline and Augustinian categories but reconfigured their theological function in response to late-medieval questions concerning sin, assurance, penitence, and righteousness. Luther's "justification by faith alone" was neither a simple rejection of the preceding tradition nor an unchanged restoration of Paul. It represents a historically situated reconfiguration of Pauline themes. The relationship between Paul and Luther is therefore best described as continuity without identity.

Keywords: Augustine; justification; Luther; Paul; Reformation; soteriology

1. Introduction

Few concepts have exercised a more enduring influence on the development of Western Christian theology than justification. At the center of the doctrine lies a fundamental question of Christian soteriology: how can human beings stand in a right relationship with God? Yet the historical significance of justification extends far beyond this apparently straightforward question. Discussions of justification have repeatedly involved broader questions concerning sin, divine grace, human freedom, faith, works, sacramental participation, ecclesial authority, and the constitution of the Christian community. The history of justification is therefore not simply the history of one doctrine. It is also a history of changing attempts to understand the relationship between divine action and human response.

The importance of this issue is particularly evident in the relationship between the Apostle Paul and Martin Luther. Paul repeatedly speaks of justification, faith, righteousness, grace, law, and works, while Luther made justification by faith the central organizing principle of his theological critique of late-medieval Christianity. The apparent similarity between their positions has encouraged a powerful historical narrative: Paul proclaimed

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justification by faith; medieval Christianity gradually obscured this doctrine through its emphasis on works, merit, and sacramental practices; and Luther subsequently recovered Paul's original teaching through the doctrine of *sola fide*. Within such a narrative, the Reformation appears primarily as a return to an earlier Pauline Christianity (McGrath 2005, pp. 218–21).

This interpretation contains an important element of truth. Luther's theology was deeply dependent upon Paul, and Pauline texts played a decisive role in his understanding of justification. Nevertheless, identifying Luther's doctrine directly with Paul's formulation creates a historical problem. Paul and Luther lived in profoundly different theological and social worlds. Paul's discussions of justification emerged within the context of first-century Judaism and the formation of communities composed of Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ. Luther's doctrine, by contrast, developed within a late-medieval Christian world shaped by Augustine, scholastic theology, penitential practice, sacramental theology, and centuries of debate concerning grace, sin, merit, and human agency.

The problem becomes particularly clear once Paul's relationship to Judaism is reconsidered. Older interpretations frequently represented Judaism as a religion in which human beings sought to establish righteousness through obedience to the law, thereby creating a sharp contrast between Jewish "works-righteousness" and Christian "faith" (Sanders 1977, pp. 33–34). E. P. Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* challenged this reconstruction by presenting what he called "covenantal nomism" as a fundamental pattern within Palestinian Judaism. In this pattern, God's election of Israel and the covenant constitute the framework within which obedience to the law takes place. Obedience is therefore not simply an attempt to earn entry into the covenant (Sanders 1977, p. 422).

James D. G. Dunn developed this question in a particularly influential direction. In his discussion of what became known as the "New Perspective on Paul," Dunn argued that Paul's language concerning "works of the law" should be understood in relation to practices that marked Jewish covenant identity. His interpretation drew particular attention to circumcision and Jewish food regulations. When Paul denies that justification depends on "the works of the law" (Galatians 2:16, *The Holy Bible* 2021, NRSVue), he is not rejecting moral effort in general. He is making a claim about the specific practices that marked Jewish covenant identity. Dunn's reading of this verse connects the "works of the law" to circumcision and Jewish food regulations—the very issues that had precipitated the Antioch dispute. He adds that Sabbath observance was one of the practices by which Jews were identified (Dunn 1983, pp. 107–8).

For Dunn, the fundamental point at issue was not the rejection of the Law per se, but the fact that Paul was confronting how Jewish and Gentile believers could coexist when these boundary markers were no longer required (Dunn 1983, pp. 113, 115). This shift from individual soteriology to ecclesial boundary-making had already been anticipated by Krister Stendahl, who argued that Paul's central concern was the relationship between Jews and Gentiles rather than the existential anguish of the individual sinner (Stendahl 1963, p. 201). The question of what stands opposite to these "works of the law" has also generated significant exegetical debate. The NRSVue translates πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ in Galatians 2:16 as "the faith of Jesus Christ," not "faith in Jesus Christ" (NRSVue). This translation leaves open whether Paul means the believer's faith in Christ or Christ's own faithfulness. Richard Hays has argued for the latter reading, contending that Paul's thought is structured by the narrative of Christ's faithfulness rather than by human belief as such (Hays 1983, pp. 157–61). However, these New Perspective readings have not gone unchallenged. Stephen Westerholm has framed the dispute most sharply: does "justification by faith" mean that sinners find God's approval by grace, or that Gentiles are included without becoming Jews? His own answer is that the New Perspective has rightly identified the occasion of

Paul's doctrine, while the "Lutherans" have rightly grasped its point (Westerholm 2004, p. 445).

Sanders himself subsequently emphasized the distinctive character of Paul's soteriology. In his discussion of Paul, he argued that Paul's thought should not simply be reconstructed by beginning with a human "plight" and then asking how Christ provides its solution. He identified this "plight to solution" framework, which is characteristic of Bultmann and his heirs, as an interpretive import rather than Paul's own logic (Sanders 1977, p. 442). Rather, Sanders famously proposed that Paul's thought could be understood as moving from "solution" to "plight": Paul's experience of the saving action of God in Christ provides the framework within which the human predicament is interpreted (Sanders 1977, p. 443). This observation is significant because it prevents justification from being isolated from Paul's wider understanding of salvation (Sanders 1977, p. 447).

This historical complexity also changes how Luther should be understood. Luther did not encounter Paul in a historical vacuum. He encountered Paul after more than a millennium of Christian interpretation. Between Paul and Luther stood Augustine's theology of grace, the patristic controversies concerning sin and human freedom, medieval developments in sacramental theology, scholastic accounts of merit and causality, and late-medieval debates concerning repentance and the righteousness of God. Krister Stendahl has famously warned against this hermeneutical gap, arguing that Western interpreters have long read Paul through the lens of Luther's introspective conscience, thereby mistaking the sixteenth-century quest for a gracious God for Paul's own theological center (Stendahl 1963, p. 201). Stephen Chester likewise demonstrates that the Reformers did not read Paul in a vacuum; rather, they developed a new exegetical grammar in dialogue with their medieval predecessors (S. J. Chester 2017, p. 67).

Recent scholarship on Luther has further illuminated the theological substance of this continuity. The Finnish school, most notably Tuomo Mannermaa, has emphasized the participatory dimension of Luther's doctrine of justification (Mannermaa 2005, pp. 4–5). As Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson summarize, this school locates the believer's righteousness not merely in a purely forensic declaration but in a real participation in Christ (Braaten and Jenson 1999, p. viii). This emphasis on union with Christ is essential for the present argument, as it demonstrates that Luther's use of Pauline vocabulary was organized around a participatory framework, an element that returns in the discussion below.

The relationship between Paul and Luther can therefore be described as "continuity without identity." "Continuity" refers to the persistence of a shared theological vocabulary—faith, grace, righteousness, Christ, law, works, and justification—and a shared set of authoritative texts. "Identity," however, would require that this vocabulary perform the same theological function in both contexts and be embedded in the same argumentative structure. That stronger claim cannot be sustained. Paul's justification discourse emerged in relation to Torah, covenant, and the inclusion of Gentiles, whereas Luther's doctrine developed in response to sin, repentance, sacrament, ecclesial mediation, and the crisis of individual assurance.

Despite these significant advances in Pauline and Lutheran scholarship, these fields have largely proceeded in isolation. Pauline scholars typically focus on the first century, while Luther scholars focus on the sixteenth, leaving the precise mechanism of historical and theological transition underexplored. What remains to be fully explained is how the shared Pauline vocabulary was historically transposed and functionally reconfigured through the intervening medieval tradition. While this article cannot offer an exhaustive survey of medieval Pauline exegesis, it deliberately engages with this exegetical tradition as a vital historical bridge. Broad studies of medieval biblical interpretation illuminate how the shift toward scholastic methods and literal exegesis fundamentally reshaped theological inquiry

(Smalley 1978, pp. 292–93). More specifically, recent scholarship on the Pauline reception in this era demonstrates that the original first-century context of Paul's thought was gradually replaced by new doctrinal and ecclesial frameworks (Cartwright 2013, pp. 3–4). Building on these foundations, this study focuses on a series of representative theological turning points—Augustine, Aquinas, and Biel—where the conceptual framework of justification was decisively reshaped. By tracing this development from Paul to Luther, this article seeks to demonstrate that "continuity without identity" is not merely a hermeneutical observation, but the result of a profound soteriological reconfiguration driven by the shift from the first-century question of Gentile inclusion to the late-medieval crisis of individual assurance. Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations follow the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue).

2. Paul and Justification: Faith, Torah, and the Question of Christian Identity

Any historical reconstruction of Paul's doctrine of justification must begin with the religious world in which Paul lived. The difficulty is that Paul's letters do not present a systematic treatise entitled "the doctrine of justification." His statements concerning justification occur within arguments about concrete communities, Jewish and Gentile relations, Torah observance, Christ, sin, faith, and the promises made to Israel. Justification must therefore be reconstructed within the wider theological and historical argument of the Pauline letters.

For much of the modern period, Paul's doctrine was interpreted through a sharp contrast between Judaism and Christianity. Judaism was frequently characterized as a religion of law in which human beings sought righteousness through obedience, while Christianity was characterized as a religion of grace in which righteousness was received through faith. This interpretation made Paul's opposition between faith and works appear straightforward (Dunn 1983, p. 96). Krister Stendahl exposed the historical anachronism underlying this framework. He argued that the Reformation's focus on the individual's quest for assurance led later interpreters to read back into Paul a concern that was not his own. What Paul originally addressed as the corporate question of how Gentiles could be incorporated into the people of God was thus transformed into a timeless, individual struggle for salvation (Stendahl 1963, pp. 205–6). Stendahl's criticism was aimed at the Pauline side of this contrast. The Jewish side was no less a construction: it presupposed a Judaism defined by legalistic self-righteousness, and Sanders set out to dismantle that construction (Sanders 1977, p. 4; see also p. 33).

Sanders's *Paul and Palestinian Judaism* sought to reconstruct Jewish religious life from a broad range of Palestinian sources rather than beginning with Paul's polemics and treating them as transparent descriptions of Judaism (Sanders 1977, p. 4). His analysis led him to the concept of "covenantal nomism." The basic pattern involves God's election of Israel, the giving of the law, the divine promise to maintain the covenant, the obligation of obedience, and the possibility of repentance and atonement for transgression. In this framework, obedience to the law belongs to the covenant relationship rather than constituting a simple mechanism for earning admission to it (Sanders 1977, p. 422).

The importance of this argument for Pauline studies is substantial. If Jewish obedience takes place within a covenantal framework established by divine election, then the contrast between Judaism and Christianity cannot simply be formulated as "works versus grace." Sanders's reconstruction therefore undermined an older Protestant caricature of Judaism as a religion of self-generated righteousness. At the same time, Sanders did not conclude that Paul and Judaism were essentially identical (Sanders 1977, p. 514). His subsequent analysis

of Paul emphasized the distinctive character of Paul's soteriology and his understanding of the saving action of God in Christ (Sanders 1977, p. 519).

This creates a crucial distinction. The rejection of the caricature of Jewish legalism does not eliminate Paul's criticism of Torah observance. Instead, it requires that criticism to be interpreted more precisely. Paul is not merely arguing that moral effort is incapable of saving sinful human beings. He is also confronting the question of how Torah functions after the Christ event and what consequences that has for the inclusion of Gentiles (Dunn 1983, p. 117).

This does not mean, however, that justification can be reduced to ecclesial boundary-making. Dunn's interpretation itself became the subject of substantial criticism, and later debate showed that Paul's language concerning "works of the law" could not be exhausted by the category of Jewish identity markers (Westerholm 2004, pp. 442–44). Westerholm's distinction between the occasion and the point of Paul's doctrine is not a compromise between the two readings. It identifies what changed between Paul and Luther. For those who apply Paul's words to later situations, he writes, "it is the point rather than the historical occasion of the formulation that is crucial" (Westerholm 2004, p. 445; see also pp. 188–93). Luther inherited Paul's point—that sinners are declared righteous by grace rather than by works—while the occasion to which that point was applied shifted from the admission of Gentiles to the assurance of the late-medieval sinner. The history of the debate matters here because it shows that Paul's doctrine of justification cannot be reduced to a single explanatory formula. Its implications for the comparison with Luther are drawn in Section 5.

The same point appears in Galatians 3. Paul invokes Abraham's faith and God's promise in an argument concerning Gentile inclusion and the significance of the law after the coming of Christ. As Westerholm observes, Paul does not simply set law aside; he distinguishes sharply between the promise given to Abraham and the law delivered at Sinai, arguing that the two operate on different principles (Westerholm 2004, pp. 374–77). Paul makes this distinction explicit when he writes: "the law, which came four hundred thirty years later, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise" (Galatians 3:17, NRSVue). The argument cannot therefore be adequately represented as a simple movement from "law" to "faith." Paul continues to reason from Israel's Scriptures even while arguing that the coming of Christ has transformed the significance of Torah and covenantal identity.

Paul's argument in Romans 3 is important precisely because it moves from the universal problem of sin to the manifestation of "the righteousness of God". As Paul writes, "But now, apart from the law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed and is attested by the Law and the Prophets, the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction" (Romans 3:21–22, NRSVue). Richard Hays has argued that the phrase is central to the argument of Romans 3. In his reading, Paul's fundamental concern in the chapter is the integrity of God: the righteousness of God is manifested through what Hays renders as "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ," whose obedient death is the representative act by which human unfaithfulness is overcome and "the many" are constituted righteous (Hays 1983, pp. 172–74). On this reading, "faith" in 3:22 is not primarily the believer's act; it names the faithfulness through which God's righteousness is disclosed. The believer's faith receives that disclosure rather than producing it. The same phrase appears in Luther's later theology with a different function. For Luther, "the righteousness of God" is not the righteousness by which God is righteous in Himself, but the righteousness received by faith (Luther 1972a, p. 30; see also p. 151)[1]. At the same time, Paul insists that this righteousness does not divide God's people: "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of gentiles also? Yes, of gentiles also, since God is one, and he will justify the circumcised on the ground of faith and the uncircumcised

through that same faith" (Romans 3:29–30, NRSVue). The argument thus joins universal human sinfulness, divine righteousness, Christ, faith, and the unity of Jews and Gentiles. Justification cannot be isolated from this wider theological argument (cf. Romans 3–4, 7; Galatians 2–3, NRSVue).

This point also explains why Paul's relationship to Luther is more complex than the traditional "recovery" narrative suggests. Luther was able to find in Paul the resources for a doctrine of justification centered on faith because Paul had already placed divine grace and faith at the center of his account of God's saving action. Yet Luther did not reproduce Paul's first-century argument. He reread Paul through a theological tradition that had developed doctrines of sin, grace, merit, sacrament, repentance, and ecclesial mediation over centuries. As Stephen Chester demonstrates, while the Reformers undeniably depended on their predecessors for particular exegetical points, these continuities existed within a radically altered framework; they developed a new exegetical grammar of Pauline theology that differentiated them sharply from the medieval tradition (S. J. Chester 2017, p. 67)

It is this transformation that makes the history of justification historically significant. Luther's theology was genuinely Pauline, but it was not simply identical to Paul's theology. The continuity is real; the identity is not. The difference between the two becomes visible only when the intervening history of Christian theology is taken seriously (Stendahl 1963, pp. 199–201).

Sanders's point bears directly on the comparison with Luther. If Paul's gospel moved from solution to plight, then the plight he describes is one that has already been interpreted by the solution (Sanders 1977, pp. 442–44). Sanders is explicit that the plight is not the starting point: Paul's thought "must be seen as the reflex of his soteriology" (Sanders 1977, p. 510). He grants that the way the problem is posed in Romans may not reflect Paul's actual preaching, but the order of Paul's gospel remains solution first. It is therefore misleading to read Paul as though he were answering Luther's question, and to treat the sixteenth-century crisis of assurance as the plight for which Paul's gospel supplies the solution. The continuity between them is the continuity of a vocabulary and a set of texts, not of a single problem.

3. From Pauline Justification to Medieval Theology: Grace, Freedom, and Sacramental Mediation

The history of justification after Paul cannot be adequately described as a gradual replacement of "faith" by "works." Such a narrative would obscure the substantial changes in the questions that Christian theologians were attempting to answer. Paul's arguments emerged from the Christ movement's encounter with the problem of incorporating Gentiles into a community whose inherited scriptural and covenantal identity was profoundly shaped by Israel's law. By late antiquity and the medieval period, however, the central theological problem had acquired a different configuration. Christian thinkers increasingly had to explain not only how sinners were reconciled to God, but also how divine grace transformed human beings, how human freedom operated under grace, and how the church's sacramental life participated in this transformation. The question of justification therefore remained continuous with Paul, but its conceptual setting changed considerably (McGrath 2005, pp. 55–59).

Augustine occupies a decisive position in this transformation. His anti-Pelagian writings did not simply oppose "grace" to "human effort"; rather, they attempted to explain how divine grace could be indispensable to salvation without making human willing and acting meaningless. In *On Nature and Grace*, written in response to Pelagius, Augustine argues that the grace of Christ is not a reward granted on the basis of prior human merit. Grace is precisely gratuitous because the human condition cannot supply the basis upon which salvation is owed. Yet Augustine does not thereby deny that human beings possess a

will. The difficulty lies in the condition of that will. For Augustine, the problem is not that human beings lack the formal capacity to choose, but that the will has been profoundly affected by sin and therefore cannot simply be assumed to possess the moral power required for righteousness. Grace consequently does more than provide external instruction: it heals and redirects the will (Augustine 1992, pp. 24–25).

This point is essential for understanding why the Pelagian controversy should not be reduced to a simple opposition between divine determinism and human autonomy. Pelagius and his followers were concerned to preserve the moral responsibility of Christians. The material associated with Pelagius emphasizes the capacity of human beings to choose between good and evil and insists that divine commandments would be unreasonable if human beings had no capacity to obey them. Modern scholarship has accordingly warned against treating Pelagianism as a crude doctrine of salvation by autonomous human achievement (Scheck 2013, pp. 79–81). Pelagius's own commentary on Romans shows that grace remained an important category in his thought, although its meaning differed significantly from Augustine's. Grace, for Pelagius, included the revelation of the law, the forgiveness of sins in baptism, and the example and teaching of Christ (de Bruyn 1993, pp. 38–44). The controversy was therefore not about whether grace existed, but about what grace did and what kind of human agency remained possible under its operation.

The later anti-Pelagian writings pushed the argument further. Having argued that grace is not a reward for prior merit, Augustine extended that claim in On the Predestination of the Saints and On the Gift of Perseverance (428–429) to the very beginning of faith and to perseverance itself. The faith by which one becomes a Christian is not a human initiative that grace then rewards: it is itself a gift, and grace is "not given according to any merits, but causes all good merits" (Augustine 1992, pp. 219–24). The same is true of perseverance: the grace by which one remains faithful to the end is "the great gift of God by which his other gifts are preserved" (Augustine 1992, pp. 274–75). The development sharpened the problem that the medieval tradition would inherit: if both the beginning of faith and final perseverance are gifts, how are human freedom, effort, and merit to be located within the economy of grace? This is the question that passes into the medieval discussion of justification.

The controversy left the Western church with a question that doctrine alone could not answer: how is the grace that precedes and sustains the will actually communicated to sinners? The answer was increasingly sought in the church's sacramental and penitential order. Baptism was understood as the sacrament of initial justification; penance as the sacrament by which justification is restored after sin; the Eucharist as the food that sustains the life of grace. The sacraments were not an external supplement to justification; they were the ordinary means by which the church believed grace was given, increased, and recovered (Aquinas n.d., ST III, q. 62, a. 1). Davies's discussion of the same question confirms this reading (Davies 2014, p. 331). The medieval church did not simply replace Paul's faith with a system of meritorious works. Rather, it inherited a theological world in which grace, faith, charity, baptism, penance, Eucharist, and the moral transformation of the believer were increasingly understood as related elements of Christian salvation. The penitential discipline in particular made the believer's relation to grace a matter of continual examination and performance (Hamm 2004, pp. 88–95), while the Eucharist was understood as the sacrament in which the sacrifice of Christ and the participation of the believer were joined (Oberman 1963, pp. 271–79). Justification therefore became intertwined with the question of how grace was communicated and how the believer participated in the life of grace.

The scholastic synthesis of the thirteenth century did not begin from a direct reading of the Pauline text alone. It inherited a Paul already mediated by the gloss and the disputed question. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, Paul's epistles were among the most

frequently studied books of the Bible (Collins 2013, pp. 175–79). The standard form of that study was the gloss: a running exposition, marginal and interlinear, that accompanied the text in the classroom. The Gloss on Paul was associated with Anselm of Laon and his school, and it became the ordinary text through which the Pauline corpus was taught. The glossators were teachers, and the Gloss was a school book (Smalley 1978, pp. 46–66).

From the gloss there developed the quaestio. Anselm of Laon introduced quaestiones into his lectures, and Peter Lombard's Magna Glosatura on the Pauline Epistles is "stuffed full of quaestiones" suggested by Anselm's gloss. The running exposition was broken by theological questions that the text itself had raised; doctrinal matters "would arise naturally from the text of the Pauline Epistles" (Smalley 1978, pp. 72–73). Twelfth-century exegesis then divided into two styles: the monastic rhetoric of William of St. Thierry and the scholastic logic of Abelard, the latter laying "the foundation for thirteenth-century scholastics such as Thomas Aquinas" (Cartwright 2013, pp. 205–6). What Aquinas inherited was therefore a Pauline text already organized by the school.

Aquinas lectured on Paul twice—once near the beginning of his career and again at its end (Harkins 2013, p. 242). His Super Epistolam ad Romanos proceeds by dividing the text, reconciling authorities, drawing distinctions, and resolving disputed questions; the literal sense is pursued for the sake of the theological truth the Apostle conveys (Harkins 2013, pp. 236–39, 263). On justification, Aquinas distinguishes two senses of iustificare: to do justice, as in Romans 2:13, and to be made just, as in Galatians 2:16. The second is the sense that belongs to the gospel, and it is effected by God's grace (Harkins 2013, p. 258). The ceremonies of the Old Law, he argues, could not confer grace; they were "weak and needy elements" that pointed forward to Christ (Harkins 2013, pp. 259–60). The lectures on Paul were therefore not a preliminary to the Summa but its exegetical ground: the theology that appears in the Summa as a system is worked out in the commentary as a reading of the text (Harkins 2013, p. 262).

Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* gave this exegetical theology its systematic form. His treatment of justification in the *Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 113 does not reduce justification to a forensic declaration that the sinner is righteous. Aquinas describes justification as a movement from a state of injustice to a state of justice and identifies four elements involved in that movement: the infusion of grace, the movement of free choice toward God through faith, the movement of free choice in detestation of sin, and the remission of sins (Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 113, a. 6). Grace remains the originating divine cause, but justification also involves a genuine movement within the human subject; Aquinas therefore refuses both a purely external conception of justification and a conception in which human action operates independently of grace (Davies 2014, pp. 227–28).

Aquinas distinguished between operating grace and cooperating grace. His distinction rests on a simple principle: an effect is attributed to the mover rather than to the thing moved. When the mind is moved and does not itself move, God is the sole mover, and the grace is called "operating." When the mind both moves and is moved, the operation is attributed to both God and the soul, and the grace is called "cooperating" (Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2). Augustine had already expressed this distinction in the formula: "He operates that we may will; and when we will, He cooperates that we may perfect" (Augustine, De gratia et libero arbitrio 17, quoted in Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2). Aquinas applies this to the interior act of the will, where God moves the will—especially when a will that previously willed evil begins to will good—and to the exterior act, where the will commands the action and God assists it (Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2). The scholastic account does not oppose divine and human action; it tries to show how both can be real at once without making grace anything other than primary. Operating and

cooperating grace are not two different graces but one grace considered under different effects (Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 111, a. 2, ad 4).

In Aquinas, grace is not merely God's favorable disposition toward a sinner; it is a divine gift that transforms the human person. Justification consequently involves a real inward transformation as well as the remission of sins. Faith has a central role, but it does not stand alone, as it would in Luther's later account. Aquinas understands faith within a larger theological structure involving charity and the infused virtues. His treatment of justification thus brings together divine initiative, human response, and inward transformation (Davies 2014, pp. 223–29).

Aquinas's doctrine of merit is often read as the claim that human beings can earn salvation independently of grace. This reading is misleading. Aquinas's discussion of merit in *ST* I-II, q. 114 follows immediately upon his treatment of justification because merit itself remains dependent upon grace. He distinguishes between *meritum de condigno* and *meritum de congruo*: a work considered as proceeding from free will can only merit congruously, because of the infinite inequality between God and man; but for one who is in grace, a work proceeding from the grace of the Holy Spirit merits eternal life condignly, because its value depends on the dignity of grace, whereby man is adopted as a son of God (Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 3). The difficulty was to give human action a real place in salvation without making God a debtor to human beings. Medieval theologians found in the concept of meritum one way of addressing this difficulty. Grace remained prior, but it did not make human action superfluous. It enabled and elevated it (see also Aquinas n.d., *ST* I-II, q. 114, a. 2).

Aquinas's synthesis was not simply repeated in the later Middle Ages. The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries saw a series of shifts that gradually changed the terms in which justification was discussed—not by rejecting grace, but by relocating the point at which the sinner's relation to grace was thought to begin (Oberman 1963, pp. 131–41).

One of the most consequential of these shifts concerned the axiom *facere quod in se est*. In the theology of the *via moderna*, especially as represented by Gabriel Biel, this principle was understood to mean that God does not deny grace to those who do what lies within their natural powers. Biel did not intend this as a doctrine of human self-sufficiency. The axiom was grounded in God's covenant, not in human merit, and it was articulated within a pastoral theology oriented toward the actual needs of penitents (Hamm 2004, pp. 88–95). The effect, however, was to place the human subject's initiative at the beginning of the process: everyone is by nature in a position to discharge this first duty, and God is then obliged by his own ordination to infuse grace. The sinner could not know whether he had in fact done his very best; the standard of love for God above all things made certainty practically impossible (Oberman 1963, pp. 132–33).

A second shift concerned the distinction between *attritio* and *contritio*. *Attritio* was the sorrow of fear—the penitent feared punishment. *Contritio* was the sorrow of love. The question that confronted both confessors and penitents was whether the first could ever be enough. Scotus had argued that it could: *attrition* might suffice either as a disposition *de congruo* or, in its minimal form (*parum attritus*), as the disposition that the sacrament would transform into contrition (Oberman 1963, pp. 148–49). Biel rejected this solution. His main line of argument required *contritio*, a genuine love of God for God's sake, and treated servile fear only as a first step toward it (Oberman 1963, pp. 147, 152–57). Other theologians took intermediate positions. The disagreement mattered because it shaped what priests told penitents in the confessional, and what penitents expected of themselves. If forgiveness depended on the quality of one's contrition, then the sinner could never be certain that the quality was sufficient (Hamm 2004, pp. 95–100).

The penitential system itself had become increasingly elaborate in the later Middle Ages. The sacrament of penance remained the ordinary means by which justification was restored after mortal sin (Oberman 1963, pp. 135, 152), but the practices surrounding it—contrition, confession, satisfaction, and the growing use of indulgences—placed a heavy burden of performance on the individual (Hamm 2004, pp. 95–97, 121). This did not mean that grace had been replaced by human effort. It meant that the sinner's relationship to God was increasingly mediated through a series of practices that the individual was responsible for performing correctly. The problem was no longer simply how grace transforms the human person, as it had been for Aquinas, but how the individual can know that grace has been received—and how that knowledge can be secured against the fear of insufficiency (Hamm 2004, pp. 88–91).

Luther's later formulation of *sola fide* acquired its distinctive force within this late medieval theological environment. The crucial issue was no longer whether grace mattered—both Augustine and Aquinas emphatically affirmed that it did—but how grace should be related to faith, righteousness, human participation, sacramental mediation, and assurance of salvation. Luther's radical move was not simply to assert that faith was important, but to reorganize these relationships around the believer's reception of Christ and Christ's righteousness (Grobien 2019, pp. 35–40).

4. Luther and the Reconfiguration of Justification

Where the medieval theological tradition had sought to explain how divine grace could transform the sinner while preserving a meaningful role for human participation, Luther's theology of justification began from a different question. Luther did not begin with the abstract proposition that faith should replace works. His theological development took place within a late medieval religious world structured by confession, penance, sacramental practice, ecclesiastical authority, and a highly developed theology of grace and merit. The question that increasingly pressed upon him was how a sinner could stand righteous before God when every attempt to establish one's righteousness through penitential performance seemed to generate further uncertainty—what Stendahl called the introspective conscience (Stendahl 1963, pp. 202–3). Late medieval pastoral theology responded to this anxiety by repeatedly lowering the minimal requirement for contrition (Hamm 2004, pp. 91–100), while the underlying distinction between *attritio* and *contritio* made it impossible for the penitent to know whether his sorrow was sufficient (Oberman 1963, pp. 159–60). The distinctive force of Luther's doctrine of justification therefore lay not simply in affirming faith, but in redefining the relationship among faith, righteousness, grace, works, and the believer's assurance before God (McGrath 2005, pp. 218–20). This question of assurance was not, moreover, a purely modern projection onto Paul, even if it was not identical to Paul's own primary concern: as Westerholm has shown, Paul's justification language itself answers the question of how sinners can find a gracious God in the face of coming judgment (Westerholm 2013, p. 21). The analysis that follows is thematic rather than chronological; it traces the reconfiguration through the loci that Luther himself treated as central.

Luther's early theology cannot itself be reduced to the mature doctrine of *sola fide*. His intellectual development was gradual. McGrath has shown that the young Luther initially retained important features of late medieval approaches to justification, including the medieval understanding of justification as a process by which the sinner is made righteous. Only through a developing engagement with Paul, particularly the Romans lectures of 1515–16, did Luther move toward a conception in which the righteousness by which the sinner is justified is received as a gift rather than achieved as a quality (McGrath 2005, pp. 218–21). This development is important because it prevents the familiar story of Luther's "discovery" from being turned into a single dramatic moment in which he

suddenly abandoned medieval theology. The point is not that the later Luther lost interest in transformation. Mary Gaebler has argued that the later Luther became increasingly interested in the believer's growth and agency in the temporal realm (Gaebler 2013, pp. 117–54). What changed was the function of transformation in justification, not Luther's concern for the Christian life.

The question of the *iustitia Dei*, or "righteousness of God," was central to this development. Luther's later interpretation of Romans 1:17 depended upon a distinction between righteousness understood as something possessed or produced by human beings and righteousness received as God's gift. In the account that took shape in the Romans lectures, the righteousness of God is not primarily a standard by which God measures human performance. It is the righteousness that God gives to the sinner through Christ. Luther's interpretation thus changes the function of the term "righteousness." Instead of asking how the sinner can become sufficiently righteous to satisfy divine judgment, the theological problem becomes how the sinner receives the righteousness that comes from outside the self (Luther 1960b, pp. 336–37).

This movement toward an "extrinsic" or received righteousness did not mean that Luther thought the Christian remained morally unchanged. The distinction is rather between the basis of justification before God and the subsequent life of the justified person. Luther could therefore speak simultaneously of the believer as righteous and sinful: righteous because Christ's righteousness is received through faith, yet still a sinner in terms of the continuing reality of human existence. The apparent paradox was not a defect in the system but a deliberate way of distinguishing the believer's standing before God from the believer's ongoing moral struggle (Luther 1963, p. 232).

Luther's *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518 provides an especially important window into this redefinition of righteousness. Its distinction between a "theologian of glory" and a "theologian of the cross" cannot simply be equated with the later formal doctrine of justification, but it reveals the theological logic underlying Luther's critique of human righteousness. In Thesis 28, Luther states that "the love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it." The point is that divine love does not wait for a pre-existing human quality that would make the sinner worthy of God's love. Rather, divine love creates the condition it seeks. This conception has direct implications for justification. If God's righteousness is fundamentally creative and gracious, then justification cannot be understood simply as God's recognition of a righteousness already present in the sinner (Luther 1957c, p. 57).

The controversy over indulgences provided the immediate ecclesiastical context in which these theological questions became publicly explosive. Luther's *Ninety-Five Theses* of 1517 were formally concerned with the power and efficacy of indulgences rather than constituting a fully developed treatise on justification. The theses repeatedly return to repentance, contrition, ecclesiastical authority, and the danger of false assurance. Thesis 32, for example, rejects the confidence that indulgence letters could provide certainty of salvation, while Thesis 36 insists that the truly repentant Christian receives remission of guilt and penalty without an indulgence letter (Luther 1957a, p. 28). The significance of the theses therefore lies partly in the fact that they exposed a conflict between a system of ecclesiastical satisfaction and Luther's increasingly radical conviction that forgiveness rested upon God's promise rather than upon the acquisition of an ecclesiastically mediated spiritual benefit (Luther 1957b, pp. 90–91).

By 1520, however, Luther's theological position had become much more explicit. *The Freedom of a Christian* provides perhaps the clearest concise statement of the relationship between faith and works in his mature early theology. Luther begins with two apparently contradictory propositions: "A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and

"A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all." The apparent contradiction disappears once freedom is understood in relation to justification. Before God, the Christian does not need to establish righteousness through works. Yet precisely because the Christian no longer needs to use works as a means of self-justification, he or she is free to perform works for the benefit of the neighbor (Luther 1957d, p. 344).

The freedom just described does not make works superfluous. This is why Luther's *sola fide* should not be interpreted as an endorsement of moral indifference. The theological function of works is not abolished but redefined. Works no longer constitute the ground upon which the believer becomes righteous before God. They become the expression of a faith that has already received God's promise. As Luther insists, "Good works do not make a good man, but a good man does good works"; the tree must be good before it can bear good fruit (Luther 1957d, p. 361). Luther therefore distinguishes the function of faith from the function of works. Faith receives Christ; works serve the neighbor. This service is not an optional extra but the necessary shape of a life freed from self-justification: "A man does not live for himself alone... rather, he lives only for others and not for himself" (Luther 1957d, pp. 364–65). The distinction is not between an active faith and an inactive Christian life, but between two different theological questions: how a sinner is justified before God, and how a justified Christian lives within the world. Luther himself marks this transition by turning from the "inner man," justified by faith apart from works, to the "outer man," who must discipline the body and serve the neighbor (Luther 1957d, pp. 358–59).

Luther's famous "happy exchange" imagery makes this relationship particularly clear. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, faith unites the believer with Christ in a relationship analogous to marriage. Luther describes this as the "third incomparable benefit of faith": the soul is joined to Christ as a bride to her bridegroom, so that "everything they have they hold in common, the good as well as the evil" (Luther 1957d, p. 351). Christ takes upon himself the believer's sin, while the believer receives Christ's righteousness and life. The exchange is stark: "Christ is full of grace, life, and salvation. The soul is full of sins, death, and damnation." Luther's Latin makes the symmetry exact: "Christus plenus est gratia, vita et salute. Anima plena est peccatis, morte et damnatione. Intercedat iam fides, et fiet, ut Christi sint peccata, mors et infernus, animae vero gratia, vita et salus" (WA 7:25–26; Luther 1897). Faith stands between them, so that sins and death become Christ's and grace and life become the soul's (Luther 1957d, p. 351). The metaphor is significant because it explains why Luther could speak of justification in terms of both declaration and participation. The believer is justified not because a moral quality has first been produced within the believer, but because the believer is united to Christ and receives what belongs to Christ. This is why Luther can say that the believing soul "is free in Christ, its bridegroom, free from all sins... and is endowed with the eternal righteousness, life, and salvation of Christ its bridegroom" (Luther 1957d, p. 352). The righteousness of the Christian is therefore fundamentally Christological.

This conception also explains Luther's insistence that faith itself should not be understood as a meritorious human achievement. The point of faith is precisely that it receives rather than earns. Modern scholarship has identified this as one of the most difficult conceptual questions within Protestant accounts of justification: if faith is a human act, why should faith not itself count as another kind of work? McGrath formulates the point concisely: justification is *propter Christum, non propter fidem propriam*—faith does not earn acceptance but merely grasps the Christ who is present in it (McGrath 2005, p. 245). Luther's answer depends upon the distinction between faith as a trusting reception of God's promise and works as human acts performed as potential grounds for righteousness. Faith does not function as a moral achievement added to Christ's work; it is the means by which the believer receives Christ and his righteousness (Luther 1957d, p. 346). Yet this receptive faith

is never barren. As the good tree bears good fruit, works necessarily follow justification, but they demonstrate rather than cause the believer's righteousness (McGrath 2005, p. 247). This point is reinforced by Luther's argument in *De servo arbitrio* that the will is bound to sin and incapable of contributing to its own liberation. Because "free choice, having lost its liberty, is perforce in bondage to sin and cannot will anything good", faith cannot be a human decision that triggers salvation; it must be a gift of grace. Even faith, in this account, is a gift of grace rather than a human achievement (Luther 1972b, p. 116).

The distinction becomes particularly important in Luther's later interpretation of Galatians. His exposition of Galatians 2:16–20 emphasizes that the believer's righteousness is inseparable from Christ. The Christian does not possess righteousness independently and then approach Christ; rather, faith binds the believer to Christ. Luther's interpretation of "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" therefore gives justification a participatory dimension that complicates the common picture of Luther as advocating nothing more than a purely external legal declaration. Luther insists that through faith, the believer is "cemented to Christ" so that "He and you are as one person, which cannot be separated," a union so intimate that "this faith couples Christ and me more intimately than a husband is coupled to his wife" (Luther 1963, p. 168). His critique of works-righteousness does not require him to deny transformation or participation. What he rejects is the idea that such transformation constitutes the basis upon which God accepts the sinner.

This distinction also helps explain Luther's attitude toward good works. In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther insists that works must not be neglected simply because they do not justify. Indeed, once the inner man is justified by faith, "here the works begin," and the believer must discipline the body and act in love (Luther 1957d, p. 358). Indeed, he argues that faith produces works of love and service. The believer who has been liberated from the necessity of earning righteousness is liberated precisely for service. Luther insists that Christians do not live "for himself alone," but "only for others," so that through their works, they may "serve and benefit others" (Luther 1957d, pp. 364–65). Thus, *sola fide* and Christian ethics are not opposing principles. The former establishes the basis of the believer's relationship with God; the latter describes the consequences of that relationship in the believer's life.

The same logic underwrites Luther's understanding of Christian freedom. Freedom is not autonomy in the modern political or philosophical sense. Rather, as Luther famously formulates it, the Christian is "a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none," and yet at the very same time "a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all" (Luther 1957d, p. 344). This paradox is not a contradiction. The Christian is free precisely because he is no longer bound to secure his own salvation; this very liberation turns him outward, away from the anxious self toward the needs of the neighbor (Luther 1957d, pp. 364–65). Consequently, Christian freedom is not an end in itself but the structural condition for the works of love described above. The relationship between justification and ethics is therefore not accidental. It is structurally embedded within Luther's doctrine of freedom.

The same reconfiguration extended to the sacramental and ecclesiastical structure of medieval Christianity. His criticism of the penitential system did not amount to a rejection of every sacrament or of the church as such. In *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), he challenged the medieval enumeration and theological understanding of the sacraments, arguing that a sacrament must be grounded in Christ's institution and joined to a divine promise. As Luther insists, "no apostle has the right on his own authority to institute a sacrament, that is, to give a divine promise with a sign attached. For this belongs to Christ alone" (Luther 1959, p. 118). His treatment of penance demonstrates the transitional character of his position: he remained concerned with confession and forgiveness while challenging the sacramental framework through which medieval theology had organized

them. Because the church "can give no promises of grace" and therefore "cannot institute a sacrament" (Luther 1959, pp. 107–8), penance could be retained as a practice of forgiveness but not as a divinely instituted sacrament. The same complexity appears on the Catholic side. Luther's opponents were not defending a single, unified theological position. They disagreed among themselves over which authority—scholastic theology, the papacy, the Fathers, or the institutional church—should bear the weight of their defense (Bagchi 1991, pp. 7–14). As the controversy developed from the indulgence debate to the sacramental and ecclesiological disputes of the early 1520s, the focus of their responses shifted accordingly: from defending papal jurisdiction to defending the sacerdotal character of the priesthood and the sacrificial nature of the mass (Bagchi 1991, pp. 117–19).

For this reason, Luther's doctrine of justification should be described as a reconfiguration rather than a simple restoration. He inherited from Paul the fundamental conviction that righteousness before God cannot be grounded in human boasting and that faith in Christ is decisive. He inherited from Augustine the profound conviction that salvation depends upon divine grace rather than autonomous human power. He also inherited the medieval concern with penance, sacrament, sin, merit, and the transformation of the Christian life; yet the medieval consensus on the nature of justification, which Luther would later disrupt, was itself remarkably stable (McGrath 2005, pp. 214–15). He also inherited the exegetical tradition through which Paul had been read in the schools—the Gloss and the disputed question (Smalley 1978, pp. 46–66, 73). This inheritance was not a set of ideas passed down intact. Luther's early theology, up to about 1514 and in some respects until 1515, was essentially that of the *via moderna*: he worked with its covenantal framework, its interpretation of the axiom *facienti quod in se est Deus non denegat gratiam*, its understanding of *iustitia Dei*, and its critique of created habits in justification (McGrath 2005, pp. 218–24); his earliest writings already show doubts about created habits, and the break becomes unmistakable by the Romans lectures of 1515–1516 (S. J. Chester 2017, pp. 96–97). His later break with this theology did not mean that he simply discarded it; the continuities that remain exist within a radically altered framework, and the new grammar is sufficiently sharp that Luther and those who follow him can no longer fit their understanding of salvation back into Augustine's (S. J. Chester 2017, pp. 66–67, 99). Yet he reorganized these inherited elements around a different distinction: justification before God rests upon Christ's righteousness received through faith, while good works belong to the life that flows from this justification rather than constituting its basis (McGrath 2005, pp. 246–50); works are necessary and their absence shows that faith is dead, but they are not an efficient cause of justification (S. J. Chester 2017, p. 163).

This reconfiguration of the relationship between faith and works becomes especially visible in Luther's defense of his translation of Romans 3:28. In his 1530 Open Letter on Translating, Luther defended his addition of the word allein (alone) to the phrase "justified by faith" on the grounds that the German language requires it to make the sense of the original Greek unmistakable: "It belongs there if the translation is to be clear and vigorous". Yet his defense was not merely linguistic. Luther insisted that allein was necessary precisely to exclude any human contribution to justification, and he acknowledged that the word solum was not in the Greek or Latin text: "It is a fact that these four letters so la are not there" (Luther 1960a, p. 188). The novelty of Luther's formula therefore lay not in the word "faith" itself, which had been used in the tradition before him, but in the function he assigned to it: faith alone receives, while works are entirely excluded from the ground of justification. Berndt Hamm has shown that late medieval theology already contained a range of "solus" formulations, and that "even the distinctive *sola fide* of justification 'by faith alone' can appear among this ensemble of Catholic solus formulations". What changed with Luther was not the vocabulary but the theological function: he broke the formula away

from the penitential and covenantal framework in which it had previously operated and reorganized it around the unconditional promise of justification (Hamm 2014, pp. 236–37).

The historical importance of Luther's doctrine consequently lies not in the invention of "faith" as a theological category, nor even simply in the assertion that faith is more important than works. Its significance lies in the redistribution of theological functions. Faith becomes the means of receiving Christ and his righteousness; works become the fruits and obligations of the justified life; grace becomes fundamentally a gift rather than a resource incorporated into a process of human merit; and ecclesial practices are evaluated according to their relation to the promise of the Gospel. Chester describes this as the emergence of a new Pauline exegetical grammar: the Reformers retain the vocabulary they inherited, but they put it to work within a framework that is radically different from that of their predecessors (S. J. Chester 2017, pp. 64–67). In this sense, Luther did not merely return to Paul. He read Paul through a late medieval theological crisis, namely the collapse of the *via moderna*'s covenantal framework and its account of created habits, and produced a new configuration of Pauline categories in response to problems that Paul himself had never encountered in precisely the same form (S. J. Chester 2017, pp. 97–99). The point is not that Luther invented a new set of terms, but that he reorganized the relations among terms that Paul had already used: faith, works, grace, righteousness, and the church's practice (McGrath 2005, pp. 246–50).

5. Discussion: Continuity Without Identity—Paul and Luther in Historical Perspective

The historical relationship between Paul and Luther has often been framed as a choice between continuity and discontinuity. From one perspective, Luther appears unmistakably Pauline: both reject human boasting before God, place decisive weight upon faith in Christ, and interpret righteousness as inseparable from God's saving action. From another perspective, however, Luther's doctrine of justification emerged from questions that were not Paul's questions in precisely the same form. The relationship is therefore best understood as continuity without identity. Luther inherited Pauline categories, but he reorganized them within a fundamentally different historical and theological configuration (S. J. Chester 2017, pp. 27–28).

The first difference concerns the problem to which justification responds. In Paul's letters, justification language is closely connected with the question of how Jews and Gentiles are constituted as one people in Christ. This does not mean that justification is merely an ecclesial doctrine, nor does it exhaust Paul's understanding of salvation. Rather, the debate over "works of the law," circumcision, and the status of Gentiles demonstrates that justification has a significant boundary-defining function within Paul's argument. Dunn's influential formulation of the New Perspective emphasized precisely this dimension: "works of the law" should not automatically be understood as generic moral achievements by which individuals attempt to earn salvation, but in relation to practices such as circumcision, food regulations, Sabbath observance, and other badges of covenant membership (Dunn 1983, pp. 107–12).

The New Perspective itself took shape through a series of internal developments. Sanders's reconstruction of Second Temple Judaism had already challenged the characterization of Judaism as a religion in which individuals simply accumulated merit by performing works of the law. His concept of "covenantal nomism" sought to describe a pattern in which divine election and covenant preceded the individual's obedience within the covenant. Crucially, this pattern indicated that obedience functioned to maintain, rather than to earn, one's standing among the elect (Sanders 1977, p. 422). Dunn subsequently argued that Paul's critique should therefore be read against a different background: the problem was

not simply Jewish reliance on human merit, but the use of Torah-related practices to define the boundaries of God's people. For Dunn, "works of the law" functioned primarily as identity markers—such as circumcision, dietary regulations, and Sabbath observance—that distinguished Jews from Gentiles (Dunn 1983, pp. 107–12). Wright developed a related argument by placing justification within Paul's larger account of covenant, Messiah, and the eschatological people of God. In this framework, justification is not an abstract individual soteriology, but primarily the declaration that one belongs to the covenant family redefined around the Messiah (Wright 2013, pp. xv–xvii).

The New Perspective, however, has not gone unchallenged. Pauline scholars have not reached agreement on whether justification language can be reduced to questions of covenant membership and boundary formation. John Barclay, for example, has placed particular emphasis on the radical incongruity of divine grace, arguing that Paul's theology cannot be adequately understood if grace is treated merely as a mechanism for redefining ethnic boundaries. Other scholars have emphasized the apocalyptic, participatory, or salvation-historical dimensions of Paul's thought. The persistence of these competing readings, and the vigor with which traditional interpretations are defended against them, attests to the depth of the disagreement (see Westerholm 2013, pp. 1–4). This debate matters for the comparison with Luther. It shows that there is no single, uncontested "Pauline doctrine" of justification against which Luther's theology can be measured. Luther's interpretation should therefore be compared not with a supposedly uncontested Pauline doctrine, but with a historically situated and internally complex body of Pauline texts (S. Chester 2009, pp. 332–35).

The meaning of faith in Paul cannot be separated from this larger argument about covenant and community. In Galatians and Romans, faith is not presented as a generic psychological confidence or as an abstract human virtue. It is oriented toward Christ and embedded within the narrative of his death and resurrection. This narrative orientation is reflected in the disputed phrase πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ (Romans 3:22; Galatians 2:16 NRSVue), best rendered, as noted above, as "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ" rather than "faith in Christ" (Hays 1983, pp. 170–71). Paul's appeal to Abraham in Romans 4 further connects faith with God's promise and with the creation of a people that extends beyond the boundaries of ethnic Israel. Paul quotes Genesis 15:6: "Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness" (Romans 4:3 NRSVue). His argument turns on the verb λογίζομαι ("reckon"), which he sets against the language of wages and debt (Romans 4:4–5 NRSVue). Righteousness was not something Abraham earned; it was reckoned to him as a gift, and it was reckoned before he was circumcised (Romans 4:10 NRSVue). Abraham thus becomes the father of all who believe, circumcised and uncircumcised alike. The Pauline conception of faith is therefore simultaneously christological, covenantal, eschatological, and communal (Hays 1983, pp. 5–6).

Luther inherited this centrality of faith but placed a different theological pressure upon it. For Luther, faith became particularly important because it answered the question of how the individual sinner could possess certainty before God. The believer does not look inward to determine whether sufficient righteousness has been produced; instead, faith directs the believer outward toward Christ and God's promise. Luther states the outward direction of faith with unusual force in the Galatians commentary: faith "takes hold of Christ and has him present, enclosing him as the ring encloses the gem," and the Christ so grasped is "the One who is present in faith itself" (Luther 1963, pp. 129–32). The Latin is precise: "Sic ut Christus sit obiectum fidei, imo non obiectum, sed, ut ita dicam, *in ipsa fide Christus adest*" (WA 40/1:229; Luther 1911). Chester's analysis of Luther's Galatians commentary is particularly important for this point because it demonstrates that Luther did not simply separate justification from participation in Christ (S. J. Chester 2017,

pp. 183–90). Chester reads this not as a forensic declaration supplemented by a separate inward transformation, but as a single event in which the believer is united with Christ and receives his righteousness. His exegesis connects justification by faith with participation in Christ. Luther can say that "Christ and my conscience must become one body," and that "Christ is fixed and cemented to me and abides in me" (Luther 1963, pp. 166–67). It therefore complicates the familiar distinction between an "external" legal declaration and an "internal" process of transformation.

The participatory reading of Luther has been pressed most forcefully by the Finnish school. Mannermaa argues that Christ is not merely the object of faith but is present in faith itself (*in ipsa fide Christus adest*), so that justification is a real union with Christ rather than a bare declaration (Mannermaa 2005, pp. 5, 8–9). On this account, the forensic model separates *Christus pro nobis* from *Christus in nobis* and loses the participatory dimension that Luther inherited from Paul (Braaten and Jenson 1999, pp. viii–ix). Critics worry that the Finnish reading imports an Eastern ontology of *theosis* into Luther and blurs justification and sanctification; defenders reply that Luther's own language of the *forma* of faith and the real presence of Christ supports it (S. J. Chester 2017, pp. 202–6). For the present argument, the Finnish school matters because it identifies, in Luther's exegesis of Paul, the same participatory grammar that this article has traced from Paul to the Reformation. The article does not adjudicate the ontological question, but it takes the Finnish reading as evidence that Luther's participatory language is not a modern projection onto Paul.

The same difficulty appears in the meaning of "works." In Paul's letters, the category is not uniform. "Works of the law" in Galatians and Romans must be distinguished from Paul's broader references to obedience, moral conduct, judgment according to works, and the life of the Spirit. The Pauline letters themselves contain passages in which final judgment is associated with what human beings do. In Romans 2:6–13, God "will repay according to each one's deeds" (Romans 2:6 NRSVue), while Galatians 5:16–25 connects life in the Spirit with concrete forms of conduct. This tension between justification by faith and judgment according to works has generated sustained scholarly debate (Watson 1983, pp. 209–13).

Luther confronted the problem in a different theological environment. His central concern was to deny that works could become the ground of a sinner's acceptance before God. Yet he did not conclude that works were unnecessary. The distinction was functional. This functional distinction is stated most compactly in *The Freedom of a Christian*, where Luther turns from the inner man to the outer man and asks how the Christian, who is already righteous by faith, is still to live among others. His answer is that the Christian is free in relation to justification and a servant in relation to the neighbor: "insofar as he is free he does no works, but insofar as he is a servant he does all kinds of works" (Luther 1957d, p. 359). The same point is reinforced by Luther's contrast between the tree and its fruits, since good works do not make a good man but proceed from one who has already been made good by faith (Luther 1957d, p. 361). The outward direction of the justified life is then spelled out in terms of service: the Christian "lives only for others and not for himself," and his works are directed to the welfare of the neighbor rather than to the establishment of his own righteousness (Luther 1957d, p. 364). In *The Freedom of a Christian*, Luther could therefore maintain both that the Christian is justified by faith and that the Christian is obligated to serve the neighbor. The apparent contradiction disappears once justification and Christian vocation are understood as different theological questions.

These differences are not three separate contrasts. They belong to a single shift in the problem that justification language was addressing. Paul asked how Jews and Gentiles could be constituted as one people in Christ. Luther asked how the individual sinner could stand assured before God. The vocabulary was carried across that shift, but its function changed with the question it was answering.

6. Conclusions

The historical development traced in this study suggests that the transition from "justification by faith" to "justification by faith alone" cannot be adequately understood either as a simple continuity or as a complete rupture. Luther was unquestionably indebted to Paul. His theology of justification depended upon Pauline language concerning faith, righteousness, grace, Christ, and works, and his mature theology repeatedly returned to Romans and Galatians as authoritative sources. Yet Luther's doctrine cannot be identified historically with Paul's own formulation. Between the apostolic period and the Reformation, Christian theologians repeatedly reinterpreted the relationship between divine grace and human agency in response to changing theological, ecclesial, and historical circumstances. Luther's doctrine was therefore simultaneously Pauline and historically new.

Paul's own discussion of justification emerged within the particular historical problem of the formation of the Christ-following community. The relationship between faith, Torah, circumcision, and Gentile inclusion was central to his argument, especially in Romans and Galatians. Modern scholarship has largely discredited the older caricature of Second Temple Judaism as a religion of straightforward, legalistic self-salvation (Sanders 1977, p. 422; Dunn 1983, pp. 107–12), and this recognition is essential for the comparison drawn here: Luther's late-medieval anxieties about individual assurance belong to a different theological framework than Paul's first-century arguments about covenant and community. At the same time, the various perfections of grace show that Paul's theology cannot be exhausted by the boundary-marking interpretation of the New Perspective (Westerholm 2004, pp. 188–93; Barclay 2015, pp. 564–65). Pauline justification therefore remains a multidimensional category, not a single doctrine against which Luther can be measured (see, e.g., S. Chester 2009, p. 335; Barclay 2015, pp. 564–65).

The problem was reformulated again by Augustine, around sin, grace, and the capacity of the will, and then by the medieval theologians, who developed increasingly sophisticated accounts of infused grace, faith, charity, sacrament, and merit. Aquinas did not abandon grace in favor of human merit. On the contrary, divine grace remained the first cause of justification. Yet Aquinas incorporated faith, charity, free choice, infused grace, sacramental participation, and merit into a coherent account of the transformation of the human person (Aquinas n.d., ST I-II, q. 113, a. 6; q. 114, a. 1–2; see also Davies 2014, pp. 227–29). Justification was therefore not merely an external declaration but a movement in which the sinner was transformed by grace. This system should not be caricatured as "salvation by works." Its theological logic was more complex: human actions could have a genuine role in the Christian's movement toward God precisely because grace made those actions possible (Aquinas n.d., ST I-II, q. 114, a. 1–2).

It was against this theological background that Luther's doctrine acquired its distinctive meaning. Luther's decisive intervention did not consist in discovering that grace mattered or that faith was important; both propositions had long been central to Christian theology. It consisted in reorganizing the relationship among grace, faith, righteousness, and works. The righteousness by which the sinner stands before God was increasingly understood as Christ's righteousness, received through faith rather than produced as a meritorious quality within the sinner (Luther 1963, pp. 4–5). Works remained necessary in the Christian life, but they no longer functioned as the basis upon which the sinner secured acceptance before God (Luther 1957c, pp. 55–56; Luther 1963, pp. 7–9). This did not make Luther's doctrine a form of moral quietism. His theology of Christian freedom explicitly connects justification by faith with service to the neighbor. The Christian does not perform works in order to purchase righteousness; precisely because righteousness has been received as a gift, the Christian is liberated for works of love. The distinction between justification and works therefore does not abolish Christian ethics; it relocates ethics within the life that

follows from justification. In Luther's theological structure, faith establishes the believer's relation to God, while love expresses that faith in relation to the neighbor (Luther 1957d, pp. 364–65, 371).

The word "alone" in *sola fide* should not be treated as a merely grammatical addition to Paul's theology. Historically, it expressed a reconfiguration of the place of faith within a much larger theological system. Luther's *sola fide* was directed against the possibility that anything belonging to the believer—whether moral achievement, penitential performance, ecclesiastical satisfaction, or human merit—could become the ground of justification. Faith alone meant that the sinner's righteousness before God depended upon Christ and God's promise rather than upon an achievement located within the sinner (Luther 1957c, pp. 55–56; Luther 1963, p. 4). Yet the historical evidence also cautions against turning this formulation into a timeless abstraction. Even within Luther's own theology, faith, works, participation in Christ, and Christian transformation remain closely connected. Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized that Luther's doctrine cannot be adequately represented by a rigid opposition between an external legal declaration and an internal spiritual transformation (S. Chester 2009, p. 315). His exegesis of Galatians, in particular, connects justification by faith with participation in Christ (S. Chester 2009, p. 335), while his *Freedom of a Christian* connects the reception of righteousness with the active service of the neighbor (Luther 1957d, p. 371). Luther's theology is therefore more complex than the simplified formula "faith instead of works" suggests.

The history traced here therefore challenges two opposing but equally problematic interpretations. The first is a teleological interpretation, according to which Christianity moved progressively from legalism to faith, from external authority to individual freedom, and finally reached its culmination in Luther's doctrine. Such an interpretation projects later categories backward onto earlier periods and treats historical development as if it were moving toward a predetermined destination. The second is a rupture interpretation, according to which Luther simply rejected the Christian theological tradition that preceded him and replaced medieval "works" with biblical "faith." This view underestimates Luther's deep dependence upon Augustine, medieval theology, late medieval spirituality, and centuries of Christian interpretation. The central conclusion of this study can therefore be stated in a simple formula: Luther's "justification by faith alone" was neither a complete departure from Paul nor a simple return to Paul; it was a historical reconfiguration of Pauline themes after centuries of patristic and scholastic interpretation. The continuity lies in Luther's dependence upon Paul's proclamation of Christ, faith, grace, and righteousness. The discontinuity lies in the historical problem that Luther was attempting to solve and in the new theological relationships he constructed among faith, works, righteousness, sacrament, and ecclesial mediation.

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Note

[1] Luther is quoted from the American Edition of *Luther's Works* (LW). Where the argument turns on the Latin wording, the original is quoted in the body with a reference to the Weimarer Ausgabe (WA); the WA volumes cited are listed in the References.

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