
HOW DID WE GET TO...?

A Series on Christian History and Doctrine

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INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered why Christians, perhaps yourself included, affirm certain doctrines? Or maybe you have wondered why Christians and Jews separated into distinct religions or why theological liberals and conservatives so seldom attend the same churches.

“How did we get...” is a series designed to help you find some answers. The series covers six topics:

- How did we get to the doctrine of the Trinity?
- How did we get to the doctrine that Jesus was fully human and fully divine?
- How did we get to the doctrine of original sin?
- How did we get to the doctrine of justification by faith?
- How did we get to a distinction between Judaism and Christianity?
- How did we get to theological liberals and conservatives?

For each topic, I have a short video (available on YouTube), an outline, discussion questions, and a glossary. Each session is intended to give you the beginning of the story. More could—and should—be said about all of them, but my hope is to provide a useful introduction to these key topics.

A few notes to begin. First, I called this video series “how did we get to...” even as I recognize that not everyone might find themselves in the “we.” I get that. I, for example, disagree with the doctrine of original sin. My claim, therefore, is not that all Christians believe the doctrines or like the historical realities I cover. I mean “how did we get” more in the sense of “how did we end up with” or “how did we inherit.” You may or may not like what we ended up with, but I think understanding how particular doctrines came to be accepted by many is useful. I may not agree with Augustine’s understanding of original sin, but I have certainly “ended up” with it in the sense that it has affected my religious tradition. I think it is also worth learning about ideas with which you disagree because can lead to reflection on what you believe and why. Sometimes—and this is true for me and Augustine—a thinker with whom you disagree still asks you questions that make you consider your positions anew.

Second, this series focuses on how what we might call “the mainstream church” came to the doctrines and situations it did. Christianity is a diverse tradition and not everything I say about “the church” or “Christians” applies to everyone who understand themselves to be part of the church or a Christian. My goal was to help people understand the doctrines and historical situations of a large

swath of Christians, particularly the swath that continues to exercise influence over large numbers of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christians today.

Third: theology is hard. In this series, I attempt to make the topics as accessible as possible without diluting them of all complexity and nuance. Even so, some of the topics are difficult. They involve debates among people with unfamiliar names who had philosophical, theological, and cultural assumptions different from many of those you or I might have. In order to tell the stories accurately, I do include details and terminology that might be confusing. I encourage you to focus on the big ideas and think about what questions people were trying to solve, what answers they came to, and why they found those answers compelling. If you can't remember the name of all the councils or every discarded belief, don't worry. I have to look many of them up too.

Fourth, I made this series with Sunday School or adult forums in mind. You can certainly watch it on your own, but I do think discussing the ideas and events in a group will be valuable. In my experience, many Christians have no idea what the people sitting around them on a Sunday morning believe. That makes it easy to assume that everyone sees the world just like you do. In the same way that learning that not all Christians for all time have thought exactly what you do, learning that people with whom you serve on committees and pray and sing see important issues differently can provide some humility (could you possibly be wrong or at least not fully correct?) and perspective (there might be other ways of seeing the world).

Finally, I am grateful for the congregation at the Congregational Church United Church of Christ of Rochester, Minnesota. They approached me about creating this series, funded it, and produced the videos. Thank you especially to Pastor Andrew Greenhaw, videographer Ryan Bliss, and congregant Janet Bartz for all their work to make this series possible. (I should also note that they allowed me complete freedom in terms of content—which means that they are in no way responsible for any errors, omissions, or bad historical or theological interpretations Those are mine alone.) People in that congregation, like many of us, had questions about Christian doctrine and vocabulary. My thanks to them for sponsoring this project as part of their quest to learn more.

Blessings as we learn together,

Sarah Ruble

HOW DID WE GET TO... THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH?

Discussion Guide

For many Protestant Christians, justification by faith is a central doctrine. Yet not all Christians have understood it as central and, even among those who do, not all agree on what it means. In this video, Sarah traces the development of the doctrine of justification by faith. She argues that is a biblical, but not the only biblical, theme related to salvation. She also contends that as the doctrine developed, particularly among Christians influenced by the theology of Augustine, the meaning of justification shifted. Augustine had understood justification as demanding a real change in a person (a real change made by God in the person). Luther, and many Protestants, came to understand it as God's declaration about a person's status based only on Christ's merit.

Questions for Discussion (you might find it helpful to read these questions before you watch the video):

1. What do you think of when you hear the term "justification by faith"?
2. What is your understanding of justification by faith? Did any of the ideas about justification by faith that Sarah explored in the video confirm, challenge, or nuance your ideas?
3. Sarah says that justification by faith is a central theme in a couple of Paul's letters but is not a theme in all of the Bible. Should that effect how central a doctrine it is for Christians? How do you think Christians should decide what is a central or key doctrine and what is not?
4. Sarah argues that the meaning of justification by faith shifted from Augustine to Luther. What meaning do you find most compelling (biblically, theologically, pastorally, etc.?). Why?
5. Sarah argues that the doctrine of justification by faith is countercultural. What do you think of that claim?

Key Ideas (you can watch for these in the video and revisit them afterwards in your discussion):

1. Justification by faith is a central doctrine for Christian traditions influenced by Augustine, but its meaning has been long contested.
2. Justification by faith is a key theme in Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians. It is not, however, a major theme (at least in an explicit sense) in other parts of the New Testament.
3. Augustine of Hippo emphasized justification by faith. He understood justification to be a real change in a person, but a real change made by God in a person.
4. Medieval theologians largely accepted Augustine's understanding of justification by faith, but disagreed on whether a person could, in some sense, merit justification and how much justification depended on what a person did. They also tied justification by faith to the penitential system.
5. Martin Luther rejected the common-at-his-time understanding of justification and its requirements (specifically, that a person could be truly contrite and therefore "merit" justification). Luther believed that justification was a declaration by God that a person was right with God, based on the merits of Christ. People simply needed to trust that God was telling the truth about their status.
6. Although Protestants have differed on the details, many accept Luther's basic understanding of justification. They separate justification (a change in status before God) and sanctification (becoming holy), at least conceptually.

HOW DID WE GET TO...THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION BY FAITH?

Video Outline

I. Introduction

A. “The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by Faith.”: 1999 statement by Lutherans and Catholics on a doctrine that had long divided them.

B. In this video, we are going to explore what the doctrine of justification by faith is and how did it come to be such a big deal.

C. Thesis: Understandings of justification by faith have shifted over time. Also, the doctrine of justification by faith connects with other questions such as the role of human agency in salvation, the extent of human fallenness, and the relationship between God’s grace and good works.

D. Definition of justification by faith.

1. Hard to answer because what justification means is precisely what is under debate.

2. Generally, justification is being right or being aligned with God.

a) When we think about the doctrine of justification, we are thinking about how people in the Christian tradition have thought about being brought into line or declared in line with God, what that takes, and who is involved.

II. The Bible

A. Language of justification found especially in two of Paul’s letters, Romans and Galatians.

1. Romans 3: “we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law.”

2. Romans 5: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God.”

3. Galatians 2: “Yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ. And we have come to believe in Christ Jesus, so that we might be justified by faith in Christ, and not by doing the works of the law, because no one will be justified by the works of the law.”

B. What Paul means by “works of the law” becomes part of the debate about justification itself.

1. Some later interpreters use “works” to mean anything humans do to try to earn or merit God’s favor.

2. Many modern scholars believe that Paul has in mind specific works such as keeping kosher, observing the Sabbath, and practicing circumcision.

a) These interpreters argue that Paul is not talking generally about doing good things.

b) In the context of questions about how Gentiles are made right with God, Paul opposes those who think that Gentiles must adopt kosher, sabbath, and circumcision.

c) Jesus, for Paul, is sufficient.

C. Justification by faith in the New Testament

1. A major theme in Romans and Galatians.

a) Paul employs the term justification as he wrestles with how to understand how God could be faithful to God’s promises—particularly the promise of the covenant and the institution of markers of covenant faithfulness such as circumcision—if Gentiles are included in the covenant without circumcision.

2. Justification is not a theme throughout the New Testament.

a) Other New Testament books do not address it.

b) James discusses it in order to tell people who seem to have gone overboard on “justification by faith” that they also need to perform works. James writes about Abraham that “faith was active along with his works, and faith was brought to completion by the works” and that “You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone.”

D. Summary of Justification in the New Testament:

1. Justification is a theme, but only one of many ways of talking about right relationships between God and people.

2. Paul and James leave open some questions about the relationship between justification, faith, and works, whatever works mean.

3. Bible does not definitively answer a host of questions such as whether both God and human agency are active in justification or whether justification is a declaration God makes about a persons' status or whether justification is a process in which a person becomes more holy.

III. Justification by Faith as a Minor Doctrine

A. Most scholars agree justification by faith was not a prominent doctrine in the early centuries of the Christian church.

1. Early Christians thought about salvation or right relationship with God. They didn't, however, think of salvation primarily in terms of justification. They tended to talk about it in other ways such as participation, divinization, or theosis

B. The lack of emphasis on justification by faith continues today among Orthodox Christians

1. Orthodox theologian Juliya Vidovic notes that "from the outset, Eastern Christianity has displayed a certain lack of interest in soteriology expressed in terms of justification."

a) The Orthodox tradition cares about soteriology but does not think of it primarily in terms of justification by faith.

IV. The Rise of the Doctrine of Justification by Faith

A. Augustine was a key figure in the development of justification by faith.

1. He was not the first theologian to think about justification or use the word, but thought about it more systematically and made it a bigger emphasis in his theology than most previous theologians.

2. Augustine's influence on theology in the Latin-speaking West meant that his focus on justification by faith would make the doctrine significant for those traditions that grew out of the Latin-speaking West.

B. Components of Augustine's view of justification by faith.

1. God justifies people (meaning people cannot make themselves right with God).

a) Went with Augustine's strong doctrine of sin, which eventually became a doctrine of original sin with inherited guilt. Humans were caught in sin, unable to free themselves. Because people could not, by themselves, will the good, God had to justify them or make them right with God.

- (1) In his later life, Augustine's doctrines of grace and sin led him to espouse predestination. People could not will themselves to love God on their own, thus God had to justify based solely on God's decision to elect, not based on what people did.
2. Justification meant God making people righteous.
 - a) Justification was not simply a declaration by God that people were righteous. It was a process through which God made people actually righteous.
 - b) Being made righteous in *The Confessions*: God infuses Augustine with love for God (Augustine could not love God on his own). That infusion of love is a real change in Augustine.
3. Augustine was comfortable using the language of merit, particularly with regard to whether humans could merit eternal life.
 - a) Augustine did not think people could earn God's favor.
 - b) Because Augustine believed that justification was a real change in people, he could say that humans merited eternal life because, as he wrote, when God crowns our merit, God is crowning God's own gifts.

V. Medieval Theology and Justification

A. Medieval theologians concurred with Augustine that justification meant a real change in the person.

1. Theologian Thomas Aquinas: God's grace "moved a person to justice."

B. Medieval Debates

1. Merit.
 - a) Medieval theologians began to think about merit in the context of justification or what some would call "first grace." For them, the question became whether humans could merit justification, not just eternal life after a justified life.
2. Disposition to Justification
 - a) There was a spectrum of answers to the questions about merit and disposition ranging from less emphasis on what humans could do without grace to more emphasis on what humans could do without grace.

(1) For example, Thomas Aquinas, particularly in his *magnum opus Summa Theologia* claimed that humans needed a disposition toward justification, but that that disposition itself comes from God moving on the human will.

(2) Gabriel Biel, a later medieval theologian accepted the axiom that “God will not deny grace to those who do their best.” Before receiving grace, humans could avoid mortal sin and love God above all else and could be truly contrite. That disposition, according to Biel, was meritorious and God had promised to reward it with the remission of sin.

(a) Biel would not have understood this as works righteousness because he believed that the only reason our human best merited grace was because God, who was under no obligation to humans whatsoever, had promised to accept human best as meriting grace.

C. Justification and the Penitential System

1. Medieval theologians connected justification with the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of penance.

2. The connection between justification and the sacramental system could be very reassuring because you were actually doing the things through which you would receive grace. But the notion that justification meant an actual change could induce anxiety about whether you had actually met the bar (see Martin Luther).

VI. Luther and the Reformation Difference

A. Martin Luther’s world.

1. Death an ever-present reality.

2. Devil understood as active in trying to drag people into hell.

3. The theology of Gabriel Biel (and others) offered a way of escaping hell: doing the best that was in you, particularly by contritely confessing and doing penance.

a) This gave Luther no assurance: “I tried to live according to the Rule with all diligence, and I used to be contrite, to confess and number off my sins, and often repeated my confession, and sedulously performed my allotted penance. And yet my conscience could never give me certainty, but I always doubted and said, ‘You did not perform that correctly. You were not contrite enough. You left that out of your confession.’”

B. Luther on justification by faith

1. His understanding changed over the course of his life.
2. As Luther started to read the Bible in light of Paul (and Luther's new reading of Paul), he began to see justification as a gift from God based solely on the merits of Christ.
 - a) God "justified" in the sense that God looked at someone and said "you are right with me" because of what Jesus had done.
3. Luther on faith.
 - a) Faith not believing hard enough or believing all the right things.
 - b) "Faith" is "trust." People were not to trust in themselves and their own goodness or merits, but to trust in Christ and in the promise of God.
4. Luther on justification by faith and the penitential system.
 - a) By Luther's time, indulgences had become part of the penitential system. After a contrite confession and absolution, a penitent would perform some work of satisfaction. In Luther's time, people could buy an indulgence rather than performing the work.
 - b) Indulgences seemed, to Luther, like purchasing grace.
 - c) According to Luther, people did not need to be "contrite enough" to be justified—they needed to trust God when God said they were justified.

C. Other Protestants

1. What set many, perhaps most, Protestants apart from Catholics was the shared belief that justification was a declaration about a person's status before God, not a change in the person.
2. Protestants conceptually separated being declared right with God (justification) from a change in the person (sanctification).

VII. Conclusion

A. Other questions raised by the doctrine of justification by faith:

1. The role of free will in justification.
2. The relationship between justification and sanctification.
3. How well the doctrine of justification adheres to what Paul wrote and what the Bible as a whole says about soteriology.

B. A possible implication of a Lutheran-leaning account of justification by faith.

1. All people infinitely loved by God independent of anything they do.
2. A countercultural message in a world where many people believe that their value is dependent on their success.

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Glossary

Augustine of Hippo: bishop and theologian; wrote the spiritual autobiography *The Confessions*. A key thinker in the development of the doctrine of justification. Augustine understood justification as a real change in a person.

Gabriel Biel: late medieval theologian who argued that “God will not deny grace to those who do their best.” His understanding of justification was influential during Luther’s lifetime and was one that Luther reacted against.

Indulgence: in Luther’s time, a part of the penitential system (or system of penance). People could purchase an indulgence rather than perform penance. Luther understood this practice as buying grace.

Justification: being right with or being made right by God.

Martin Luther: sixteenth-century theologian; Luther rejected the idea that people needed to be contrite and participate in the penitential system in order to be justified. He believed that justification was a gift from God based on the merits of Christ and did not depend on a real change in a person.

Sanctification: being holy or being made holy.

Soteriology: doctrine of salvation.