



## Revisiting ‘the Nature of Protestantism’: Justification by Faith Five Hundred Years On

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### Abstract

This article builds on contemporary debates about the doctrine of justification by faith alone to revisit the old question of the “nature of Protestantism”. Traditionally a core feature of Protestant theology, the doctrine of *sola fide* has been under assault for the past forty years, including within Protestant theology. This essay begins by showing that the major contemporary critique that *sola fide* bases salvation on a “legal fiction” misses the way that early Reformers like Luther and Melancthon understood the doctrine very substantially in terms of its pastoral power to “console” consciences. Attending to the theme of “consolation” reveals a psychological and affective realism close to the heart of the doctrine of justification by faith alone as it was originally understood. This article then shows that traditional Protestant critiques of the reliability of external mechanisms and instruments in the mediation of grace were shaped by the same orientation to psychological and affective factors that are evident in the doctrine of justification. Together, these observations suggest that “the nature of Protestantism” may be usefully understood in terms of a foundational prioritization of psychological and affective considerations over metaphysical considerations in theology.

### Keywords

Nature of Protestantism, Protestant principle, justification by faith alone, externals

This essay is about the state of the doctrine of justification by faith alone today in light of recent critiques, and about the ways in which the doctrine continues to shape Protestants who no longer formally subscribe to it. The argument is first and foremost theological rather than historical, but it is driven by an interest in how evaluations of justification by faith have changed over time to get us where we are today. My hope is that a thoughtful evaluation of the current state of this doctrine as it looks from within the Protestant fold will give

us a some new insight into this important dimension of the relation between Protestant and Catholic theological traditions, as we look back over 500 years of division. Ultimately, it will give us some new purchase on the old question of "the nature of Protestantism" through analysis of a certain kind of orientation to psychological and affective realities in Protestant theology.

### Is there a 'Protestant Principle'?

Is the doctrine of justification by faith alone fundamental to what it means to be Protestant? Can you be a Protestant and yet reject *sola fide*? Martin Luther would have said you cannot. In the *Smalcald Articles*, the closest thing to a confessional statement that Luther wrote, he called justification by faith the doctrine without which "everything is lost",<sup>1</sup> and later Protestants liked to refer to justification as the "the article by which the church stands or falls" (*articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*).<sup>2</sup>

The problem, of course, is that over the past 500 years a very large number of Protestants have not in fact subscribed to this doctrine, at least not to the form it takes in early Lutheran and Reformed confessions. Many Pietists and evangelicals, and most Methodists and Pentecostals, for example, hold to an Arminian view of justification that the magisterial Reformers would have regarded as semi-Pelagian and deeply problematic.

For this reason, amongst others, it has become fairly common to define the phenomenon of Protestantism genealogically rather than through attempting to identify some set of core Protestant intellectual and theological principles. A good example of such a definition is given by Alec Ryrie in his recent book, *Protestants: The Radicals Who Made the Modern World*. According to Ryrie, at minimum we can say that "Protestants are Christians whose religion derives ultimately from Martin Luther's rebellion against the Catholic Church."<sup>3</sup> In a definition like this, it is not what Protestants believe, but where they come from that makes them Protestant.

There is much to be said for a genealogical definition like this one. In particular, as Ryrie points out, it has the great advantage of including the many groups that fell foul of the major protestant confessions at various points but who are no less products of Luther's rebellion: Anabaptists, Quakers, Pentecostals, and so on. And it also captures the way in which Protestant identity has, unfortunately, often tended to a kind of tribalism, where for a number of Protestants

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), p.301.

<sup>2</sup> J.H. Alsted, *Theologia scholastica didactica* (Hanover, 1618), p.711.

<sup>3</sup> Alec Ryrie, *Protestants: The Radicals Who Made the Modern World* (London: William Collins, 2017), p.8.

the rejection of Catholicism seemed to become more important, in practice, than any particular doctrinal reason for such rejection.

Theologically, however, a definition like this is pretty dull. Surely Protestantism is not just some theological empty set, defined only in its opposition to Rome. Does the fact that a thing has many variegated expressions mean it cannot also have a unifying core, or at least a set of unifying themes, questions, or sensibilities?

This question is an old one. Starting in the early nineteenth-century, the question of the "nature of Protestantism" was hotly debated, especially in German intellectual circles, for almost 150 years.<sup>4</sup> Many of the leading theological figures of the period weighed in at different points: Friedrich Schleiermacher, F.C. Baur, Johann Möhler, Albrecht Ritschl, Richard Rothe, Ernst Troeltsch, Adolf von Harnack, and Paul Tillich all made substantial contributions to this now somewhat forgotten debate. What all of these figures shared was a sense of the enormous intellectual and cultural significance of the Protestant Reformation, and a belief that, despite many caveats, the term "Protestantism" does indeed capture a set of ideas and sensibilities that transcends a purely historical description of the churches whose origins can be traced to Luther's break with Rome. To a substantial degree, these debates about the so-called nature of Protestantism fulfilled the same function for German Protestants at the time that debates about the genealogy of modernity serve today: they were a way of asking where we are today – culturally, spiritually, and intellectually – and how we got here.

Unsurprisingly, these nineteenth and twentieth-century accounts of Protestantism were far from uniform. So, for example, some figures identified Protestantism's essence in a procedure of stripping away the accretions of the patristic and medieval periods to reprimarize a putative pure religion of the New Testament; others in the triumph of a certain kind of individualism; others in the appeal to scripture as the supreme authority in theological matters; and still others located the essence of Protestantism in Luther's doctrine of justification by faith and its implications. The latter was usually understood to be particularly important, and was often referred to as the "material principle" of Protestantism.<sup>5</sup> Most accounts listed more than one of these characteristics.

<sup>4</sup> For a good overview see Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, *Der Protestantismus: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Munich: Verlag C.H. Beck, 2010), pp.62-108.

<sup>5</sup> The widespread nineteenth-century view that justification by faith alone is the "material principle" of Protestantism, and the authority of scripture the "formal" principle, appears to derive from statements by J.P. Gabler and K.G. Bretschneider in the first two decades of the nineteenth-century. See Albrecht Ritschl, "Über die beiden Principien des Protestantismus", in *idem.*, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* (Freiburg & Leipzig: J.C.B. Mohr, 1893), pp.234-47.

These attempts to define the nature of Protestantism ultimately proved to be a failure. Today, it is all too easy to see how nineteenth-century interest in the “nature of Protestantism” was shaped by assumptions about the intellectual and cultural superiority of Protestantism over Catholicism, and indeed over every other religion and culture, that are now seen to be highly problematic. This is what is happening, when Paul Tillich, for example referred to Protestant Christianity as “a special historical embodiment of a universally significant principle”,<sup>6</sup> or when Adolf von Harnack lauded Luther as setting forth a view of the gospel that “rises superior, not merely to this or that particular dogma, but to dogmatic Christianity in its entirety”.<sup>7</sup>

Well beyond the cultural and religious condescension implied in such claims, there are further reasons the sands have shifted today. One of the most striking changes, from the perspective of 2017, is that Christian theologians in the twenty-first-century – and Protestant ones not least – tend to be far more ambivalent about modernity than were the likes of Ritschl or von Harnack. Indeed, where nineteenth-century theologians’ accounts of the genealogy of modernity were largely optimistic and focused on the birth and triumph of Protestantism, and with it freedom of intellectual inquiry, freedom of conscience, and so on, our genealogies of modernity today are far more pessimistic. These days we are just as likely to interpret modernity in terms of a narrative of decline and fall – perhaps most commonly, from the great philosophical and theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas to twenty-first-century secular nihilism and its sister, the brutal and faceless god of late capitalism. In many of these new narratives of modernity, Duns Scotus has become the new Adam, and modernity’s original sin is his rejection of the analogy of being, which unhooked creation from its Creator and paved the way for the disenchantment of the world.<sup>8</sup>

This change of mood and change of narrative has been reflected quite profoundly in how the classical Protestant account of justification by faith alone now tends to be understood by theologians. In recent decades there has been a series of important developments in understanding the doctrine of justification in the theological academy, resulting in something of a sea change in views on this topic since the late 1970s. These include the following:

<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p.vii.

<sup>7</sup> Adolf von Harnack, *History of Dogma. Vol. VII*, trans. William M’Gilchrist (London: Williams & Norgate, 1899), p.267.

<sup>8</sup> See e.g., Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), among many others.

- 1) The traditional Protestant doctrine of forensic justification has been under fire as a reading of St Paul from the domain of New Testament studies for the past forty years, ever since the publication of E.P. Sanders' *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Although more recent scholarship on the topic has developed a more complex and less wholly negative view of Luther – no less a Paul scholar than John Barclay has recently judged Luther's interpretation to be “a brilliant re-contextualization of Pauline theology in the conditions of the sixteenth-century church”<sup>9</sup> – the credibility of Luther's account has nevertheless suffered a significant intellectual blow.
- 2) It is now eighteen years since Catholics and Lutherans signed the landmark Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification. This declaration identified new common ground on the topic, lifted longstanding anathemas, and signalled the relatively diminished significance of this doctrine as a church-dividing issue.
- 3) Due in part to the influence of Alastair McIntyre, recent decades have witnessed the rise of virtue ethics to become arguably the dominant paradigm in the field of Christian Ethics across confessions, including among Protestant ethicists. This development is a very striking one given the fact that virtue ethics has usually been understood since Luther to be incompatible with the doctrine of justification by faith – in Luther's influential view, “the entire *Ethics* of Aristotle is the worst enemy of grace”<sup>10</sup> – and it has signalled a widespread sense that justification by faith is an inadequate foundation for Christian ethics.
- 4) Building on the biblical and ecumenical work I have already referred to, much of the most exciting work in Protestant soteriology in the past few decades has centred around a recovery of the categories of participation and *theosis* as the primary models for salvation, often in explicit contrast to traditional Protestant forensic and substitutionary models. Theologians like T.F. Torrance, Kathryn Tanner, and Paul Fiddes have led the way here, assisted by revisionist work in Luther studies by Tuomo Mannermaa and his students, and by Todd Billings and Julie Canlis in Calvin studies.

<sup>9</sup> John M.G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), p.572. See also especially Jonathan A. Linebaugh, *God, Grace and Righteousness in the Wisdom of Solomon and Paul's Letter to the Romans* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp.123-76.

<sup>10</sup> Thesis 41 of the *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology* (WA 1:226-7; LW 31:12, 14).

- 5) Finally, and perhaps in the end most significantly of all, global Protestantism has been transformed by the astonishing success of Pentecostal and charismatic forms of Christianity. Pentecostal soteriologies, arising as they do historically out of Holiness Methodism, tend to be quite unapologetically Arminian, highly optimistic about Christian sanctification, and largely uninterested in classical Protestant theologies of justification.<sup>11</sup>

Given all of these developments, I sometimes wonder if any Protestant theologians still believe in *sola fide* at all! For Martin Luther, at any rate, Protestant theology's current situation would seem deeply bizarre: why bother being a Protestant if not for the sake of the doctrine without which "everything is lost"?

The result of all of this is that 2017 is a particularly interesting time to reflect on the doctrine of justification by faith, and not just because of the symbolism of the quincentennial. Together, the developments I have just described amount to nothing less than a forty year process of dethroning the doctrine of justification by faith from its central place in Protestant theology. It is in the context of this dethroning that my argument in what follows needs to be understood.

My argument has two parts. In the first part, I will draw out some further implications of an argument I have made elsewhere: namely, that one of the most influential critiques of the doctrine of justification by faith in recent years – the argument that justification by faith alone turns Christian salvation into a "legal fiction" – misses the mark, and that it does so in a particularly interesting way.<sup>12</sup> Specifically, this critique fails to recognize that a core feature of the doctrine of justification as Luther and other early Reformers understood it is *its orientation to the psychological and emotional life of the Christian*. This is a dimension of the doctrine that has often been neglected, including in Protestant accounts, but it is very evident in the key early texts. Understanding this feature of the doctrine helps us to understand why primarily philosophical critiques of the doctrine, like the legal fiction argument, have always had trouble explaining the sheer pastoral power of the doctrine over the history of Protestantism.

The second part of my argument is that understanding this psychological and affective orientation of the Protestant doctrine of justification can give us interesting new purchase on the question of

<sup>11</sup> See e.g., the official Assemblies of God position paper on Reformed theology: "An Assemblies of God Response to Reformed Theology: Position Paper Adopted by the General Presbytery in Session August 1&3, 2015". <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Topics-Index/Reformed-Theology-Response-of-the-AG-Position-Paper>. Accessed 14 October 2017.

<sup>12</sup> See Simeon Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrines," *Modern Theology* 31, no. 3 (2015), pp.434-43.

the “nature of Protestantism” more broadly. Specifically, I think it helps make sense of the relationship between justification by faith and the long-standing Protestant suspicion of any idea that grace is reliably mediated through external instruments and practices. What I will argue is that this Protestant critique of “externals” – associated paradigmatically with the sacramental theology of Huldrych Zwingli – originates to a significant degree in the same prioritization of individual psychological and emotional life that was so important for the doctrine of justification by faith.

### Legal Fictions and Affective Realism: Reinterpreting Justification by Faith

In referring to the doctrine of justification by faith alone, what I have in mind is a particular account of how human beings are rescued from sin and death and enabled to live with God in eternity that locates the fundamental salvific event in the divine imputation of Christ’s righteousness to sinners apart from any meritorious action or cooperation on their part. The classic description of this dynamic can be found in Article 21 of Lutheran theologian Philip Melanchthon’s *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, arguably the most influential account of justification of the Reformation period:

Christ’s merits are given to us so that we might be reckoned righteous [*iusti reputemur*] by our trust [*fiducia*] in the merits of Christ when we believe in him, as though [*tamquam*] we had merits of our own.<sup>13</sup>

This way of thinking about justification has often been described more narrowly as *forensic* justification. This is because the primary metaphor here is a legal or contractual one: salvation takes place through a kind of transfer of credit that takes place before the judgment seat of God.

There is much that could be said about the contours here – about the way that other theological imageries beyond the forensic also inform Melanchthon’s picture; about how his account was shaped by its formulation as a response to the theology of merit given in the official Catholic response to the Augsburg Confession (the *Confutatio Pontificia*); about the influence of Erasmus’ critical edition of the New Testament on Melanchthon; and so on.<sup>14</sup> For the sake of simplicity and given the constraints of space, I will narrow my focus to the aspect of Melanchthon’s account that for hundreds of years was

<sup>13</sup> *The Apology of the Augsburg Confession (The Book of Concord, p.240)*. Melanchthon’s extended discussion of justification can be found in Article 4.

<sup>14</sup> For a useful overview, see Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp.237-43.



understood to be the most fundamental difference between Protestant and Catholic understandings of justification by faith.

The *locus classicus* here is of course the Council of Trent’s Decree on Justification. In the key section, the discussion of the formal cause of justification, the Decree explicitly picks up and then rejects Melancthonian language of “reckoning” and “imputation”:

[The] single formal cause [of justification] is the righteousness of God, not that by which He Himself is just, but that by which He makes us just, that namely, with which we . . . not only are . . . reckoned but truly are called and are righteous, receiving righteousness within us [*non modo reputamur, sed vere justi nominamur et sumus*]. . . .<sup>15</sup>

Here salvation again takes place through God’s work, but the nature of the work is different: it is not Christ’s external righteousness being “reckoned” or imputed to us in a divine law court that saves us, it is sanctifying grace infused within us, leading to a life of growth in such grace that saves. In the Protestant model, the sinner *is* transformed to some degree or other by this event, but in terms of formal causality such transformation can only ever be a kind of side effect of imputation. In the Tridentine model, by contrast, the infusion of divine righteousness is fundamental to Christian salvation rather than incidental to it.

In a way, the whole difference of approach comes down to two words. Melancthon’s *tamquam* – in his view it is “as though” Christians are righteous – and the Tridentine *vere* – the claim that Christians are, in some fundamental sense, “truly” righteous.

That little word “truly” contains what has long been one of the most powerful critiques of Protestant theologies of justification. It implies what has become known as the “legal fiction” critique of justification by faith – the view that Protestant soteriology is based on a kind of clever divine accounting trick, and in this it is disembodied and rationalistic. According to this critique, in Protestant hands “faith” becomes just a rational assent to an abstract truth that has no necessary connection to anything that actually takes place in the world, in the realm of bodies and of history. My colleague John Milbank memorably describes this model as a “loveless trust in an inscrutable deity” and a “blind calculus”.<sup>16</sup> Protestant theology is thus, it is argued, fundamentally out of touch with the real experiences of real human beings in the world. It is a linguistic construct, and it is

<sup>15</sup> Chapter VII; for *imputare* see Canon XI: “If anyone saith, that men are justified . . . by the sole imputation of the righteousness of Christ . . . to the exclusion of the grace and charity which is poured forth in their hearts by the Holy Spirit, and is inherent in them . . . let him be anathema.”

<sup>16</sup> John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), pp.63-65.



no wonder that a modernity founded on such a principle ended up disenchanting the world.

Although this critique of justification by faith has been around since at least Trent, it seems to have become more persuasive to more people in the past few decades, especially in Protestant circles. Kathryn Tanner, for example – one of the leading Protestant theologians working today – takes for granted in recent work what she calls the “obvious problems” with such models, arguing in *Christ the Key* for a Protestant soteriology based on participation rather than imputation.<sup>17</sup> Likewise Frank Macchia, a leading Pentecostal theologian, has argued that “an *extrinsic* notion of justifying righteousness construed as a legal or quasi-legal transaction” neglects “the very heart and soul of justification”, namely, “the more participatory and transformative aspects of salvation”,<sup>18</sup> and Clark Pinnock, another pioneering Pentecostal theologian, has referred to traditional protestant models as “engaging in fantasies . . . based on bare assent to propositions”.<sup>19</sup>

The problem with all of this is that the legal fiction critique simply is not sustainable as a reading either of Luther or of Melanchthon. The point is not difficult to demonstrate in the writings of either figure. For purposes of space, I will focus here on Melanchthon’s account of justification in the *Apology*.<sup>20</sup>

Here is how Melanchthon describes the acquisition of faith:

Therefore it follows that personal faith – by which an individual believes that his or her sins are remitted on account of Christ and that God is reconciled and gracious on account of Christ – receives the forgiveness of sins and justifies us. *Because in repentance, that is, in terrors, faith consoles and uplifts hearts, it regenerates us and brings the Holy Spirit that we might then be able to live according to the law of God, namely, to love God, truly to fear God. . . .*<sup>21</sup>

Here we see that faith, as Melanchthon understands it, is not in fact an abstract rational or propositional procedure. Rather, in Melanchthon’s

<sup>17</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Christ the Key* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.252 and throughout.

<sup>18</sup> Frank Macchia *Justified in the Spirit: Creation, Redemption, and the Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), p.39. Emphasis original.

<sup>19</sup> Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), p.156.

<sup>20</sup> The following four paragraphs recapitulate an argument I make at more length in Zahl, “Affective Saliency”, pp.434-43. For a similar argument about Luther, focusing on his early anthropology and the development of the doctrine of the bondage of the will, see Simeon Zahl, “The Bondage of the Affections: Willing, Feeling, and Desiring in Luther’s Theology, 1513-25,” in *The Spirit, the Affections, and the Christian Tradition*, ed. Dale M. Coulter and Amos Yong (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), pp.181-205.

<sup>21</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession (The Book of Concord, p.127)*. Emphasis added.

view faith can take hold only in a particular experiential and affective context, namely "in terrors". We see furthermore that faith "consoles and uplifts hearts", and produces concrete affective consequences of "love" and the proper "fear" of God. And we learn that, according to Melancthon, the Holy Spirit is the agent of this real transformation by which Christians become "able to live according to the law of God".

Importantly, such claims are not secondary asides in the context of a largely "objective" account of justification. Rather, it is not an exaggeration to say that the dominant theme in Melancthon's exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith is the "experiential" and affective work of the Holy Spirit in "consoling terrified hearts" and in kindling a genuine and transformative love towards God and neighbour. This theme of the doctrine of justification "consoling hearts" appears on almost every page in Article 4 of the *Apology*. In Melancthon's words: "only that which brings peace to consciences justifies before God"; "in justification . . . consciences *must* find peace with God"; "faith justifies and regenerates *inasmuch* as it frees us from our terrors and produces peace, joy, and new life in our hearts".<sup>22</sup> For Melancthon the key to understanding forensic justification lies above all in understanding the powerful affective salience he perceives it to have for fearful human beings with troubled consciences.

Furthermore, Melancthon's descriptions of such consolation are consistently paired with an explicit critique of the idea that faith is a matter of mere assent to propositions. The acquisition of faith is not "idle knowledge"<sup>23</sup>, and neither is it arbitrary or random or abstract. Rather, "faith arises and consoles in the midst of . . . fears."<sup>24</sup> In other words, faith represents a key moment, inspired by the Holy Spirit, in a concrete affective sequence of moving from existential terror over sin and death to a new state of consolation, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. And as a set of affective or emotional experiences, the sequence is not just conceptual or metaphorical. It is something that takes place in time, in the actual historical experience of a given individual.

Indeed, at a key point Melancthon argues that it is the scholastic account of salvation that constitutes the "fiction", not the Protestant one. As he puts it, the view that the Spirit is bestowed *ex opere operato* through the sacraments means that this can take place "without the recipient being favorably stirred[,] as if in actual fact the bestowing of the Holy Spirit were without any effect."<sup>25</sup> Regardless of whether this assessment of scholastic sacramental theology

<sup>22</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ibid., pp. 146, 154, 197)*. Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ibid., pp. 157, 139)*.

<sup>24</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ibid., p.130)*.

<sup>25</sup> *Apology of the Augsburg Confession (Ibid., p.131)*.

is in fact correct,<sup>26</sup> the fact that Melanchthon makes this argument demonstrates just how far he is from viewing justification by faith as a legal fiction. In his view, it is scholastic sacramentology that is the “fiction” – albeit an ontological rather than a legal one.

Clearly then, in its early and most influential form, the doctrine of forensic justification is not what its critics believe it to be. In Melanchthon's mature view – and the same point can easily be shown in Luther – forensic imagery of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to sinners through faith is interpreted very substantially in terms of its affective and psychological effects, in a robust, explicit, and psychologically plausible synthesis.<sup>27</sup>

If this point is so clear from the text then why has it so rarely been recognized? The short answer has to do with a parallel development that took place in Protestant theology starting in the 1520s, where, in response to the rise of the Radical Reformers, Luther and his heirs became increasingly anxious about the place of subjective religious experience in Christian theology. This anxiety about what Luther called “enthusiasm” grew over the course of the sixteenth-century and ultimately became powerful enough to dismantle Melanchthon's synthesis of forensic images and affective consolation. By the time of the Formula of Concord in 1577, Lutheran theology had made a decision formally to separate the mechanism of justification before God from both its subjective preconditions – the fear and anxieties that impel the Christian to repentance – and its subjective effects – love, joy, and peace in the Spirit. According to the Concordists, justification refers solely to formal absolution, or “pronounc[ing] free from sin”, and is to be distinguished from both “the contrition that precedes justification” and “the good works that follow it”. These dimensions, while real and important, “do not belong in the article on justification before God.”<sup>28</sup> Justification proper, they now proclaimed, takes place only *coram deo*; if you want to talk about subjective preconditions and effects then you aren't talking about justification at all, but about sanctification. It seems to me that the “legal fiction” critique can get a lot more traction on this later Protestant way of formulating justification, even as it is not persuasive as a critique of justification by faith alone in its original, and most influential, Protestant forms.

<sup>26</sup> Melanchthon's argument here has interesting parallels with Karl Rahner's critique of neo-scholastic theology as failing to represent grace as something that registers in the experience of the Christian, rather than just in the realm of “purely ontological reality”. See Karl Rahner, “Religious Enthusiasm and the Experience of Grace”, in *Theological Investigations XVI*, p.37.

<sup>27</sup> On the cognitive scientific plausibility of Melanchthon's account, see Zahl, “Affective Saliency”, pp.440-42.

<sup>28</sup> “Epitome of the Formula of Concord”, Article III (*The Book of Concord*, pp.495-96).

What can we now conclude from all of this? Recognizing the affective and pastoral dimensions that were so fundamental to early Protestant accounts of justification has at least two important implications.

First, it means we can make a useful clarification concerning the old question of whether justification by faith alone is an implicitly anti-realist doctrine – whether what it describes is nothing more than a theological fiction. The answer is that *sola fide* is indeed a realist doctrine, but it is *differently realist* from the sort of account we find in Trent. The latter understands the reality of Christian transformation first and foremost in terms of an ontology of substance. Righteousness is “truly” infused into the being of the Christian. It is this ontological and substantial change, first and foremost, that constitutes the “reality” of the change that takes place in justification. In Melancthon’s account justification, by contrast, this kind of ontological realism is rejected in favour of a different realism: what I would call an *affective* or *psychological* realism. The reality of the change that takes place in salvation is thus theologically legible first and foremost from *pastoral experience* – from our readings of its affective effects, in consolation and peace and so on – rather than from its coherence within a prior metaphysical system in the first instance.

To put it slightly differently: Protestant theologies of justification by faith were conceived from the start, to a significant degree, as mechanisms for the shaping and transforming of affects. Although salvation was explicitly understood to be *caused* by factors entirely independent of such affects, nevertheless the doctrine was understood to be powerful and persuasive precisely insofar as it could foster specific affective effects – the consolation of the terrified heart and the birth of new affects of love and joy.

In light of this, it is no surprise that Protestant theology has always had to wrestle with the possibility that its true methodological foundation lies, not in scripture, as is so often claimed, but in religious experience. The persuasiveness of the doctrine of justification has always depended substantially on its pastoral and experiential power, not just its exegetical or philosophical plausibility, and in this respect religious experience has always been more fundamental to Protestant theology than many Protestants have wanted to admit. This particular strand in the DNA of Protestantism was made explicit most famously in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher, but it is also present to a significant degree in Pentecostal theology and spirituality, and it has long animated Pietist critiques of Protestant confessionalism. Indeed, it seems to me that it is precisely because of this deep implicit reliance on claims from religious experience that Protestants from Martin Luther to Karl Barth have often found it necessary to be so forceful in their *rejection* of religious experience. They protest too much.

And now a second implication: understanding the way that affective and psychological dynamics are so fundamental to the doctrine of justification by faith means that truly effective argument against the traditional Protestant view of justification is unlikely to take the form of a purely metaphysical critique like the legal fiction argument. Such arguments may appear persuasive from the outside, but they miss the fact on the ground of the way in which Protestant soteriology has always had robust pastoral and affective power for its adherents.

Rather, I would argue that effective critiques of the doctrine in future, as well as plausible re-articulations of it, will have to address these experiential dimensions. To critique Protestant theologies of justification one needs to demonstrate the specific ways that the alternatives are just as affectively and pastorally compelling as *sola fide*. In this vein, some particularly interesting frontiers would include work on the ways that a Thomist ontology of participation is or should be *emotionally compelling* to twenty-first-century people – perhaps the ways that it can foster a deeper sense of connectedness to creation than the Protestant view usually provides, or a more compelling sense of one's place in a larger structure of meaning – as well as work analysing the experiential and emotional power of the mass in Catholic theology and practice.

### Justification by Faith and the Protestant Critique of Externals

In the final part of this essay I want to return once more to the question of the “nature of Protestantism”, in light of what has now been established about the psychological and affective orientation of early Protestant accounts of *sola fide*. Over the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth-century debates, a further characteristic of Protestantism was identified that I think has wider traction than the other features, including justification by faith. I call this the Protestant “critique of externals”. By this I mean a deep-seated suspicion of the idea that God's grace and truth are reliably mediated through instruments or practices external to the Christian individual.

Paul Tillich formulates this critique with particular precision in *The Protestant Principle*: “The Protestant protest prohibits the appearance of grace *through* finite forms from becoming an identification of grace *with* finite forms.”<sup>29</sup> What Tillich means is that, in his view, a key feature of “the Protestant principle” is the position that, although salvific encounter is always mediated through forms and signs and instruments in some sense – through sacraments, through preaching, through the Bible, through people's embodied emotional experiences,

<sup>29</sup> Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, p.212. Emphasis added.

and so on – all such forms are finally provisional. Insofar as such forms succeed in communicating the presence and grace of God, and in helping to effect salvation, they are genuinely valuable. But there is no guarantee, according to this principle, that any given instrument will always “work”, i.e., that God will always and reliably use it under all or even most circumstances.

It would not be inaccurate to call this the Zwinglian principle in Protestantism. Certainly it is the sort of argument that was at work when Zwingli claimed, in his discussion of how Christians come to receive the Holy Spirit, that “God alone baptizes with the Spirit, and he himself chooses how and when and to whom that baptism will be administered.”<sup>30</sup> For Zwingli the determining factor in the baptism of the Spirit – and thus in salvation – is always the free decision of the Spirit to act at a given time and place and through a particular set of means. Even if the Spirit does very often in practice use the element of water, or particular baptismal rites, or a certain kind of ecclesial context, strictly speaking none of these conditions is finally decisive or necessary; all of them can in theory be dispensed with if the Spirit so chooses. To my mind it is this principle, more so even than *sola fide*, that constitutes Protestantism at its most radical. Nowhere are Protestants less Catholic than in the critique of externals.

Importantly, however, what Tillich and Zwingli are describing in their critique of externals is a kind of theological ideal *which has almost never characterized any actual historical instantiation of Protestantism*. Even Luther came very rapidly in the mid-1520s to identify the salvific work of the Holy Spirit very closely with what he called the “external Word” of preaching and the sacraments, in a way that clearly violates Tillich’s principle.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, there is, I believe, a kernel of truth in what Tillich is saying. But his way of putting it needs to be rephrased. Rather than arguing, with Tillich, that *only* such theologies are truly “Protestant” in which all external instruments of authority or grace are understood to be irreducibly provisional, we would do better to say that *a key legacy of the early Reformers for later Protestantism was a basic suspicion of external instruments and authorities in religion, such that attempts to convey and justify the role of such externals, even in a much more limited way, always operate in the shadow of this suspicion*.

We see this dynamic, in which a Protestant attempt to build up a theological framework for articulating the enduring value of some external activity, sign, authority, or instrument is soon attacked by

<sup>30</sup> Zwingli “Of Baptism”, in *Zwingli and Bullinger*, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1953), p.133.

<sup>31</sup> Luther developed this position most influentially in the treatise *Against the Heavenly Prophets*.

other Protestants as problematically rigid and potentially idolatrous, over and over in the history of Protestantism. Thus for every Luther attempting to explain the external efficacy of biblical preaching or the sacraments, there was a Karlstadt or a Zwingli calling the attempt into question. For every John Wesley trying to articulate the necessity of a certain kind of religious experience in salvation, of hearts being “strangely warmed”, there was a Charles Chauncy rejecting his view as irrational “enthusiasm” and a mere “Commotion of the Passions”.<sup>32</sup> For every confessional Protestant trying to argue for the authority of a tight system of doctrine, there have soon been Pietists arguing that words without experiences are spiritually dead, and liberals like Horace Bushnell arguing for the provisionality of all doctrinal claims. And for every Schleiermacher trying to incorporate religious experience into the heart of the dogmatic enterprise, there was a Karl Barth rejecting the attempt as hopeless subjectivism. And so on, on and on throughout the history of Protestantism.

The image that comes to mind is of the critique of external mediation as a kind of field of theological suspicion in which all Protestant theologies are suspended and with which they have inevitably to reckon. In pushing back against the Zwinglian principle, the challenge for Protestants is a bit like trying to build a structure deep underwater, or in outer space: it is certainly possible to build theological structures that can withstand the pressure of the suspicion of external instruments and authorities, but the pressure never goes away, and the fact of the pressure shapes how the structures must be built.

How does all of this relate to what I have been saying about the doctrine of justification? In fact, it relates quite closely. This is because the Protestant critique of externals has its origins in the belief that such a critique is a necessary implication of the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Zwingli makes the point very clear:

When he took upon himself the curse of the Law, Jesus Christ, the very Son of God, deprived us of all external justification. Therefore no external thing can make us pure or righteous. That means that everything ceremonial, all outward pomp and circumstance, is abolished.<sup>33</sup>

In other words, the Protestant critique of religious mediation is based, at least very substantially, on the worry that as soon as you make a particular external instrument a reliable mediator of God's grace, then human beings will seek to use the instrument to justify themselves

<sup>32</sup> Charles Chauncy, “The Heart and Fervour of Their Passions,” in *Religious Enthusiasm and the Great Awakening*, ed. David S. Lovejoy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), p.79.

<sup>33</sup> Zwingli, “Of Baptism”, p.130.



by works, and thus to establish a kind of idolatrous control over their relationship with God.

A curious feature of the intellectual history of Protestantism is that this Protestant suspicion of externals soon became unhooked from the doctrine of justification that was its original source. Many Protestants have clung to the suspicion of religious mediation long after they have jettisoned the doctrine of justification itself, and it is clear that it rapidly became conceptually possible within Protestantism to hold one of these positions and not the other. Thus John Wesley, for example, could at the same time be scathing about the use of images in Catholic worship, and yet deeply critical of traditional Protestant articulations of the doctrine of justification by faith.<sup>34</sup> Here we see a very concrete way in which the doctrine of justification by faith has continued to haunt Protestants long after they have rejected the formal doctrine: even Protestants who firmly reject *sola fide* remain committed to some of its most important metaphysical implications.

This dynamic can be described more precisely in light of the orientation to the psychological that, as I have established, lies very close to the original heart of the doctrine of justification. To a significant degree, the Protestant critique of religious mediation is in fact grounded in the same orientation to the psychological and the affective that we found in the Melancthon's account of justification. The worry is that the person will "misuse" external objects and instruments – that an image, for example, or a sacrament, will be "used" by the Christian as a way of trying to justify themselves before God, rather than as a divinely ordained instrument for the mediation of God's grace and presence. As Luther puts it in a discussion of idolatry and images: "The issue is not about the substance of a thing, but about its use or abuse. Our preaching is not about the nature of a thing in itself. Rather, it is about the warped use your heart makes of it."<sup>35</sup> This worry, which Zwingli and Luther share, is first and foremost a *psychological* worry. It assumes that the decisive theological and spiritual difference in such cases – whether we are venerating God through the instrument or venerating the instrument in place of God, and thus whether we are engaging in true worship or idolatry – is determined finally not by the object's intrinsic substance or nature but by our affective and psychological orientation to it – i.e., what we think and feel we are doing with it. In this we do

<sup>34</sup> See John Wesley, "A Roman Catechism . . . with a Reply thereto", in *The Works of the Reverend John Wesley, A.M.*, vol. V, ed. John Emory (New York: B. Waugh and T. Mason, 1835), pp.766-95.

<sup>35</sup> WA 28:554. Non est disputatio de substantia, sed usu et abusu rerum. Non praedicamus, was das wesen an yhm selber sey. Sed de verkereten misbrauch tui cordis. Non cupimus mutari res, sed tuum cor perversum.

see the infamous Protestant “inward turn”, at least to a degree. But we can now see that the “turn” in question is less about a putative exaltation of the individual or individual conscience *per se* than it is about a rediscovery and re-contextualization of a major strand of New Testament teaching: the prioritization of motivation over outward behaviour in ethical matters. In other words, it is an “inward turn” in quite precisely the same way that St Paul is engaging in an “inward turn” when he asserts in the Epistle to the Romans that “nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean” (Rom. 14:14).<sup>36</sup>

In light of all of this, what can we now say theologically about the question of whether there is a “Protestant principle”? Well, such a principle cannot simply be an appeal to the authority of scripture – there are too many exceptions to that rule, and too many difficulties in adjudicating between different such appeals on their own terms. It is also not simply adherence to the doctrine of justification by faith alone – today, as in the past, a great many Protestants are highly critical of *sola fide*. And it is not simply the critique of the belief that God’s grace is reliably mediated through external instruments – most Protestants seek to make exceptions to this rule in some form or other. Indeed, I would argue that in practice, although the Zwinglian principle continues to shape most Protestant theologies as a kind of inescapable field of suspicion in which they are suspended and by which they are shaped, nevertheless in its pure form the critique of externals is simply too stark to endure for long the realities our irreducibly material and embodied lives as creatures in the world.

But perhaps we can add something more than this to the old discussion about “the nature of Protestantism” by observing that Protestantism is deeply shaped by a new kind of privileging of psychological and empirical realities in matters of religion: affective consolation on the one hand, and the attitude of the heart in ethical matters on the other. This turn to the psychological and the affective is as characteristic of those deeply committed to the traditional Protestant understanding of justification as it is of those who reject *sola fide* but remain critical of the idea that externals can reliably mediate grace, and in this it does seem to cover quite a bit more ground than the other principles that have been examined.

My concluding suggestion, then, is that Protestant religion can be usefully understood as *psychological religion*. But it is not “psychological” in a disembodied or merely “existential” way. Rather, in the

<sup>36</sup> For this theme in New Testament ethics, in addition to Romans 14 see especially the moral equation of anger and lust with murder and adultery in the Sermon on the Mount; Jesus’ discussions of “what defiles a person” (Matt. 15:11, 15-20; Mark 7:15-23) and of good and bad trees and their fruit (Matt. 7:18, etc.); and Paul’s discussion of food offered to idols in 1 Cor. 10:23-29.

focus on consolation and on the attitude of the heart, Protestantism's style of orientation to the psychological is one that is closely tethered to bodies through what I have called an "affective realism". And in this I might furthermore suggest, more speculatively, that Protestantism is therefore also *pragmatic religion*. In a pattern set five hundred years ago in the development of the doctrine of justification by faith alone, Protestants from Luther to Wesley, and from Schleiermacher to Azusa Street, have tended to prioritize practical impact and experiential effectiveness over metaphysical elegance or cohesion. Whether such pragmatism will prove to be a strong enough foundation to support five hundred more years of Protestant theology and spirituality will depend on many factors; perhaps chief among them is whether anxious and terrified hearts will continue to be consoled.

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