

Looking Forward to our Justification with the Earliest Church Fathers

By Mark Skillin, M.Div., ThM.

As an evangelical, I have always had a somewhat ambivalent attitude toward the earliest pastors and apologists of the church. One reason for this ambivalence can be understood from the fact that, as an evangelical, I have tracked my theological history primarily from the Protestant Reformation. For the evangelical Christian, Martin Luther rediscovered the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith alone, which had remained shrouded in darkness until the *sola fide* light came on for him early in the sixteenth century. Luther's doctrine could not be found in the reformer John Hus, or Wycliff who came before him. Nor could it be found amongst the reforming and separatist Waldensians. If the darkness of an unbiblical understanding covered their teachings, what is an evangelical to make of the periods even further removed from the Protestant Reformation? One searches in vain for Luther's *sola fide* perspective, even in Augustine, who is to this day well regarded by both Catholics and Protestants. The vain search continues with the earliest fathers of the church, even those just one generation removed from the apostles. Alister McGrath, in his seminal work, *Iustitia Dei*, quotes Krister Stendahl approvingly:

It has always been a puzzling fact that Paul meant so relatively little for the thinking of the church during the first 350 years of church history. To be sure, he is honored and quoted, but—in the theological perspective of the West—it seems that Paul's great insight into justification by faith was forgotten.¹

This is not just the opinion of Krister Stendahl and Alister McGrath, but is something that has been widely recognized. Phillip Schaff, in his well-regarded church history, observes:

The doctrine of the subjective appropriation of salvation, including faith, justification, and sanctification was as yet far less perfectly formed than the objective dogmas; and in the nature of the case, must follow the latter. If anyone expects to find in this period, or in any of the church fathers, Augustin himself not excepted, the Protestant doctrine of justification by faith *alone*, as the "*articulus stantis aut cadentis ecclesiae*," he will be greatly disappointed....Paul's doctrine of justification, except perhaps in Clement of Rome, who joins with it the doctrine of James, is left very much out of view, and awaits the age of the Reformation to be more thoroughly established and understood.²

Clearly, as an evangelical, I would have every reason to have an ambivalent attitude toward the earliest church fathers. If they did not understand something believed to be fundamental to the gospel, namely, "justification by faith alone," then what is to be gained from reading them? In fact, couldn't it be considered a potentially spiritually damaging exercise? If they did not

1 Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Doctrine of Justification*, 2 ed. Cambridge University Press, 1986 p.19.

2 Phillip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol.2 Hendrickson, 1858 pp.588-9.

promote salvation through faith alone by Jesus Christ's death on the cross alone, then wouldn't they by necessity teach salvation by some kind of mixture of faith and works? This is not just a reasonable inference, but is considered to be a fact of our theological history. Martin Luther, recognized this and made the following estimation:

Behold, what great darkness is in the books of the Fathers concerning faith; yet if the article of justification be darkened, it is impossible to smother the grossest errors of mankind....I can find no exposition upon the Epistles to the Romans and Galatians, wherein anything is taught pure and aright. O what a happy time have we now, in regard to the purity of the doctrine; but alas! we little esteem it. After the Fathers came the pope...³

"Pure doctrine" for Luther is a post-Reformation reality. Of course, this does not mean for Luther that there is nothing at all to be gained in reading the earliest church fathers. But if "pure doctrine" concerning *the* crucial doctrine of our salvation is not to be found with them, and is to be found in post-Reformation teaching, why bother? My evangelical ambivalence seems quite understandable. In light of this it may be wondered why then this study on the salvation teachings of the earliest church fathers? I need to pause for a moment and explain how it is that I, as an evangelical, became interested in reexamining at the witness of the earliest church teachers.

It occurred to me some time ago that it was quite strange that the apostle James, pastor of the church in Jerusalem, would make what amounts to an unorthodox and heretical statement, according to Reformation teaching, that a man "is justified by works and not by faith alone," in the name of what he considered to be orthodoxy and "pure doctrine." How could a pastor write *that* in a letter which was to be circulated to numerous churches in order to guide them in right and orthodox thinking? If I were to make that statement in a sermon from the pulpit of an evangelical church, I would be called to the carpet by the elders of that church. If I were to say what James said during an ordination council, I would be politely, yet firmly, instructed to rethink how I express myself in order to lead people to a proper understanding of their salvation. I would be informed that, according to *our* confession, "works" do not have an instrumental relationship to justification. So James' assertion would at best be deemed misleading, and at worst, heretical. Either way, it would not be a phrase to use in a post-Reformation, evangelical, faith alone confessing church. So a statement that was deemed edifying to James and necessary for the churches he was writing to, has somehow become damaging and misleading for us. What happened between the time of James and our times that makes this so? The answer is of course the Reformation. Luther, being such a bold and courageous defender of his "pure doctrine" as to assert that no apostle worth his stripe would make such a statement, concluded that the epistle of James had to be considered sub-canonical.⁴ Luther was no diplomat. For that I respect him greatly and I have come to agree with him on this point. If Luther's doctrine is right, then what James wrote is in fact mistaken and even damaging. If Luther is right, then the elders would be quite correct to call me on the carpet, and the ordination council to instruct me to go back and get justification right before I victimize congregations with a polluted mixture of faith and works.

3 William Haslitt ed. *Martin Luther's Table Talk*, Christian Heritage 2003 pp.323-4.

4 Werner Georg Kummel *The New Testament: The History of the Investigation of its Problems*, Abingdon Press 1970 pp.24-5.

However, I have become convinced that Luther was *not* correct, and that James was completely “justified” in what he wrote. That we are, in fact, “justified by works and not by faith alone.” And contrary to the diplomatic John Calvin, “justified” in James has the very same meaning as it had for Paul.⁵ What I have come to see is that Paul taught the same things as James, that works enabled by faith justify us before God. Of course, this has to be arrived at through biblical rationale. This I have demonstrated in other places and is outside the scope of this article.⁶ But after coming to this conclusion, it occurred to me that it would be very interesting to look again, and in some cases for the first time, at the teachings of the earliest church fathers. What I discovered was a pleasant surprise. As it turns out, the earliest apologists and pastors had a remarkably Pauline understanding of salvation. The burden of this article is to show how this is the case. The conception of how and when the early fathers understood they were to be justified before God bears a remarkable and unmistakable similarity to Paul’s doctrine. What will be seen is that these modern scholars, whom I have quoted, are in fact correct. Justification by faith *alone* is absent in the vast majority of early patristic teaching. However, these scholars operate from the premise Paul taught such a doctrine, and then conclude that Paul’s doctrine of justification is strangely absent. What I will demonstrate in this article is that Paul’s doctrine of justification was very much in view for the early church fathers. After all, shouldn’t we expect that the earliest fathers would understand the fundamentals of the faith? As we will see, they did not preside over a falling church⁷, rather, they reflect quite well the Pauline understanding of an eschatological justification. They, as well as Paul, were “forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, [pressing] on toward the goal to win the prize for which God [had called them] heavenward in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13,14).

It has to be stated from the outset that the doctrine of justification was not a controversial issue for the church in the second and third centuries. Other doctrines were being challenged and needed to be self-consciously defined as Christian doctrines in order to resist the false teaching that threatened the church. McGrath notes that, “The few occasions upon which a specific discussion of justification can be found generally involve no interpretation of the matter other than a mere paraphrase of a Pauline statement. Justification was simply not a theological issue in the pre-Augustine tradition.”⁸ Of course, this is not to say they did not have a working understanding of justification. As will be demonstrated, it is clear that they did. When the church was faced with a doctrinal challenge from inside or out, the leadership was forced to formulate detailed and nuanced doctrinal statements to fend off the encroaching error. We do not have the luxury of the type of statements that controversy produces. However, their working knowledge of justification is able to be discerned in the very practical and pastoral exhortations for the church. It is to be seen in how they motivated their fellow Christians toward holiness and faithful living. Was it by gratitude for a salvation once received, or for the goal of a salvation yet to be obtained, or some combination of the two?

My method in the following analysis will be to work closely with the primary sources.

5 Ed. John McNeill, *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol.1 Westminster Press 1960, p.816. John Calvin draws a distinction between an initial justification as the imputation of righteousness and a subsequent justification as the declaration of a prior imputation.

6 Mark Skillin, *Saved By Faithfulness*, Christ Covenant Church 2009.

7 To use Luther's assessment of the “standing or falling” church according to justification by faith alone.

8 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p.19.

Of course, the best method for the reader is to read the documents I quote from in their entirety before interacting with this article. There is nothing like hearing first-hand from primary sources before reading an analysis like this one. After a brief survey of each document, I will present a summary of their views of salvation. Here I will demonstrate that the early fathers had a cohesive and unified understanding of when and how their justification would take place. Lastly, and most importantly, we will see how their common understanding was derived from the apostle Paul himself.

Clement

The first document is an anonymous letter to the church in Corinth, which from very early tradition was and is still understood to be written by Clement, the third bishop to preside over the church in Rome. It is apparent from numerous factors that this letter was written around 96 AD.⁹ This was a letter addressing a church which was embroiled in a great controversy having to do with a disgruntled contingent who took it upon themselves to overturn the presiding eldership in Corinth. Clement's letter is an exhortation to discontinue the rebellion and reunify under the appointed shepherds of the church.

Of particular interest for us in Clement's exhortation is the link he draws between their willingness to preserve unity in following the commands of God and their reception of mercy and the forgiveness of sins. He writes, "Since, then, [God] sees and hears everything, we should fear him and rid ourselves of wicked desires that issue in base deeds. *By doing so* we shall be sheltered by his mercy from the judgments to come."¹⁰ The "base deeds" for Clement represent the subversive rivalry that has undermined the church's leadership. But of note is his understanding that the reception of mercy is achieved by repenting of these "base deeds." Likewise, he reasons, "Happy are we, dear friends, if we keep God's commandments in the harmony of love, so that by love our sins may be forgiven us."¹¹ Here he is more explicit: the forgiveness of sins is obtained by keeping "God's commandments in the harmony of love." Of course, by all accounts, the chief part of our justification is the forgiveness of sins, and here Clement connects justification to the "keeping of commandments." But he goes on to elucidate this perspective when he writes, "We should attach ourselves to those to whom God's grace has been given. We should clothe ourselves with concord, being humble, self controlled, far removed from all gossiping and slander, and *justified by our deeds*, not by words."¹² Clement motivates the church toward "concord," with that being the basis of their justification. He also holds up Abraham as an example of humble obedience to the will of God: "Let us, then, cling to his blessing and note what leads to it. Let us unfold the tale of the ancient past. Why was our father Abraham blessed? Was it not *because he acted in righteousness and truth, prompted by faith*?"¹³ Notice, for Clement, faith and obedience are connected, but faith is the means by which obedience occurs, and the blessing came about "because he acted in righteousness and truth." He follows this by pointing out that what was true of Abraham has been true of all "the righteous": "We should observe that all the righteous have been adorned with good deeds and the very Lord adorns himself with good deeds and rejoices. Since, then, we have this example, we should

9 Cyril Richardson ed., *Early Church Fathers*, Simon & Schuster, 1996 p.57.

10 Richardson, *Early Church Fathers*, p.57.

11 Richardson, p.67

12 Ibid, p.57

13 Ibid, p.58

unhesitatingly *give ourselves to his will*, and put all our effort into acting uprightly.”¹⁴

Clement consistently points forward to the future judgment as the motivation for their obedience in the present as follows:

We must, then, be eager to do good; for everything comes from him. For he warns us: “See, the Lord is coming. He brings his reward with him, to pay each one according to his work.” He bids us, therefore, to believe on him with all our heart, and not to be slack or negligent in every good deed. He should be the basis of our boasting and assurance. We should be subject to his will. We should note how the whole throng of his angels stand ready to serve his will.... We, then, should make every effort to be found in the number of those who are patiently looking for him, so that we may share in the gifts he has promised. And how shall this be dear friends? If our mind is faithfully fixed on God; if we seek out what pleases and delights him; if we do what is in accord with his pure will, and follow in the way of truth. If we rid ourselves of all wickedness, evil, avarice, contentiousness, malice, fraud, gossip, slander, hatred of God, arrogance, pretension, conceit, and inhospitality. God hates those who act in this way.... So, then, let us obey his most holy and glorious name and escape the threats which Wisdom has predicted against the disobedient. In this way we shall live in peace, having our confidence in his most holy and majestic name.¹⁵

Clearly, Clement understood their future acceptance to be contingent upon their obedience to him in restoring unity in Corinth. Notable is the fact that Clement never looks back on the cross and gratitude for forgiveness obtained as a motivation for present obedience. However, in this letter is found the one possible place in the earliest fathers for faith alone teaching.¹⁶ Clement writes:

So all of them received honor and greatness, not through themselves or their *own* deeds or the right things they did, *but through his will*. And we, therefore, who by his will have been called in Jesus Christ, are not justified *of ourselves* or by our wisdom or insights or religious devotion or the holy deeds we have done from the heart, but by that faith by which almighty God has justified all men from the very beginning.¹⁷

Here Clement contrasts “holy deeds” with “that faith by which God has justified all men.” This presents a difficulty in his letter, as he had already taught that they are “justified by their deeds, not by their words.” I withhold proposing a solution to this difficulty, but content myself with pointing this out, and also observing that the vast weight of this letter supports Clement’s “justification by their deeds.” At the end of the article, by way of conclusion, I will propose a solution to this apparent dilemma.

An Early Christian Sermon

14 Ibid, p.59

15 Ibid p.59-60,70

16 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol.2 pp.588,9

17 Ibid p.57

The next document is the earliest sermon on record, most likely written by a church leader in Corinth as an address for his church in the middle of the second century. It is highly unlikely that it was written by Clement, despite the tradition which attributes it to him. However, this in no way minimizes the significance of this document for our understanding of the early church's views of justification, since it would have been delivered by a pastor of that local body.¹⁸

The preacher begins by reflecting on how much God has done for the church through Christ: "And we too do wrong if we fail to realize...how much suffering Jesus Christ endured for us." "For he took pity on us and in his tenderness saved us, since he saw our great error and ruin, and that we had no hope of salvation unless it came from him. For he called us when we were nothing, and willed our existence from nothing." He then goes on to exhort the church to suitable response to this mercy received: "How many blessings we owe to him! For he has given us light; as a Father he has called us sons; he has rescued us when we were perishing."¹⁹ Jesus' cross is briefly reflected upon in order to elicit gratitude at the beginning of the sermon, and the rest of the sermon is taken up with the "many blessings we owe to him."

It is interesting how he proceeds after he rejoices in what Christ has done: "Seeing, then, that he has had such pity on us...but through him [we] have come to know the Father of truth—what is knowledge in reference to him, save refusing to deny him through whom we came to know the Father?" So, for him, to know the Father is to acknowledge the Son. "This, then, is our reward, if we acknowledge him through whom we are saved. But how do we acknowledge him? By doing what he says and not disobeying his commands; by honoring him not only with our lips, but with our heart and mind."²⁰ He then reflects on the standing of the Christian who has been brought to Christ, and for that reason must keep his commands. "That is why, if you acted in this way, the Lord said, 'If you are gathered with me in my bosom and do not keep my commands, I will cast you out and will say to you: "Depart from me. I do not know whence you come, you workers of iniquity."'"²¹

He then relates that "Christ's promise is great and wonderful, and means rest in the coming Kingdom and in eternal life." This promise is obviously for his fellow Christians. He then exhorts them as to how they are to obtain "Christ's promise":

What, then, must we do to get these things, except lead a holy and upright life and to regard these things of the world as alien to us and not to desire them? For in wanting to obtain these things [of the world] we fall from the right way....Yes, if we do the will of Christ, we shall find rest, but if not, nothing will save us from eternal punishment, if we fail to keep his commands. If even such upright men as these [Noah, Job, Daniel] cannot save their children by their uprightness, what assurance have we that we shall enter God's Kingdom if we fail to keep our baptism pure and undefiled? Who will plead for us if we are not found to have

18 Richardson, pp.184,5

19 Ibid, p.193

20 Ibid, p.194

21 Ibid, p.195

holy and upright deeds?²²

Of course, the preacher's question is a rhetorical one. It is important to note that he does not envision a future in which Christ will plead for those devoid of "holy deeds." The presbyter continues with the application: "So, my brothers, let us enter the contest...let us, then, compete so that we all may be crowned...thus, brothers, by doing the Father's will and by keeping the flesh pure and by abiding in the Lord's commands, we shall obtain eternal life."²³

Again he pleads with them:

So, my brothers, we must not be double minded. Rather we must patiently hold out in hope so that we may also gain our reward. For *he can be trusted who promised to pay each one the wages due his work*. If, then, we have done what is right in God's eyes, we shall enter his Kingdom and receive the promises....So, my brothers, by doing the will of God our Father we shall belong to the first Church, the spiritual one, which was created before the sun and the moon. But if we fail to do the Lord's will, that passage of Scripture will apply to us which says, "My house has become a robbers den." So, then, *we must choose to belong to the Church of life in order to be saved*. So, brothers, since we have been given no small opportunity to repent, let us take the occasion to turn to God who has called us, while we still have One to accept us. *For if we renounce these pleasures and master our souls by avoiding their evil lusts, we share in Jesus' mercy*.²⁴

He concludes with a solemn charge, "Brothers and sisters, we must have faith. We are engaged in the contest of the living God and are being trained by the present life in order to win laurels in the life to come."²⁵ He ends where he began, describing the Christian life as a contest of life and death. Having faith for the presbyter cannot be described as faith alone in Jesus' finished work in the cross, but faith in "Christ's promise" is the promise of his Kingdom, which is eternal life.²⁶ However, this is to be obtained by those who "lead a holy and upright life." Jesus' death brings us to him, and once in his "bosom" we are called to "keep my commands" in order to not be "cast out."²⁷ Nowhere in this sermon is "reward" represented to mean something above and beyond being saved, but salvation is consistently presented as the reward of a holy life.

Ignatius

Church historian Cyril Richardson makes the observation that Ignatius "never grasped Paul's teaching on justification."²⁸ He makes this assertion even though Ignatius was bishop of the influential church in Antioch, which served as Paul's home church in the midst of his extensive missionary endeavors. The writings of Ignatius reveal an intimate knowledge of Paul's

22 Ibid, p.195

23 Richardson, p.196

24 Ibid, p.197, 199, 200

25 Ibid, p.202

26 Ibid p.195

27 Ibid p.194-5

28 Ibid, p.78

writings, and as we shall see, bear a notable resemblance to Paul's aspirations for justification before God.

Ignatius wrote a series of letters while being transported by the authorities to Rome for execution. His letters were written to inspire the churches to faithfulness by his bold example in being eager to die for the cause of the gospel. As with Clement, Ignatius was preoccupied with the church's unity and harmony among its members. Clearly, rivalry and dissension was a common problem for the early church and it appears that Ignatius was using his impending martyrdom as an exemplary event to encourage the unity he desired to see. The language is forceful as follows: "Thus, united in your submission, and subject to bishop and the presbytery, *you will be real saints.*"²⁹ "Therefore you need to abide in irreproachable unity *if you really want to be God's members forever.*"³⁰ "It is essential, therefore, to act in no way without the bishop, just as you are doing. Rather submit even to the presbytery as to the apostles of Jesus Christ. He is our Hope, *and if we live in union with him now, we shall gain eternal life.*"³¹

It is impossible to miss the gravity with which Ignatius exhorts the churches. He makes no mistake that their true identity as God's people is established by their pursuit of unity and that to live in unity with the people of God is to be unified with God Himself. For Ignatius, by pursuing unity with one another we have unity with God and will *gain eternal life*. Ignatius is clear, our pursuit of unity leads to our acceptance, but to refuse this way results in condemnation: "The last days are here. So let us abase ourselves and stand in awe of God's patience, *lest it turn out to be our condemnation....* Do not let anything catch your eye besides him, for whom I carry around these chains— my spiritual pearls!"³²

Ignatius employs his present imprisonment (as Paul did his wounds) as evidence for his credibility. He makes much of his desire for martyrdom. It is true he goes beyond the apostolic witness in expressing his unreserved zeal for martyrdom, but Ignatius' attitude is not as far removed from the biblical testimony as is sometimes made to seem. Paul himself wrote of preferring death to life and refused the prophetic warning of Agabus (Phil. 1:23; Acts 21:10-14). The writer of Hebrews approvingly writes of saints who were tortured and refused to be released from imprisonment for the sake of "a better resurrection" (Heb. 11:36). It may be more biblically fair-minded to acknowledge that when faced with the possibility of capture and martyrdom many options are open to God's people. Jesus Himself chose to hide from persecutors on particular occasions but then willingly surrendered to them in the end. Ignatius chose one option, and in his mind, he did so for the good of the church as well as for his own gain. Of course, for him, these goals converged. He did not cease to fulfill his duty as a bishop by his single minded pursuit of what he wanted to gain through martyrdom. Rather, he made much of his pursuit for the good of the churches, just as Paul presumably shared his zeal for death, not as an exercise in spiritual chest-pounding, but as an instructive message for the church in Philippi.

It is what Ignatius said about his death and what is to be gained that is particularly instructive for us. For Ignatius, martyrdom was the way in which he was to gain God Himself. He states, "But if I suffer, I shall be emancipated by Jesus Christ; and united to him, I shall rise

29 Richardson, p.88

30 Ibid, p.89

31 Ibid, p.99

32 Ibid, p.91

to freedom.”³³ His death, was his “emancipation” and union with Christ. This mindset he understood to be crucial for the mission of the church. He had embraced Jesus’ teaching that to be friends with the world is to be enemies with God: “It is not that I want merely to be called a Christian, but actually to *be* one. Yes, if I prove to be one, then I can have the name. Then, too, I shall be a convincing Christian only when the world sees me no more....The greatness of Christianity lies in its being hated by the world, not in its being convincing to it.”³⁴ Along the same theme he writes, “Now is the moment I am beginning to be a disciple. May nothing seen or unseen begrudge me making my way to Jesus Christ. Come fire, cross, battling with wild beasts, wrenching of bones, mangling of limbs, crushing of my whole body, cruel tortures of the devil – only let me get to Jesus Christ!”³⁵ Unmistakable is Ignatius’ perspective that what he does, or is willing to do in submission, is determinative for his identity as a Christian. It is in his martyrdom that he proves to be a Christian— “*if I prove to be one, then I can have the name.*” Clearly, like Paul, he sees his death as the means by which he gains Christ.

The cross, for Ignatius, was primarily something to be imitated, not just reflected upon as he pleads with the churches to “let me imitate the passion of my God.”³⁶ The cross of Christ was not to be understood to be a substitute for Ignatius’ obedience. The cross as the place of God’s mercy for our sins sounds a minor note for him, and is preeminently an example to be emulated in his life. Martyrdom, for Ignatius had become a necessary act of “imitation” by which he would “get to Jesus Christ,” and through which he would “become a disciple” and “*be* a Christian.” Never, through his seven letters, does Ignatius give as his motivation for martyrdom gratitude for Christ’s death by which all has been accomplished. This is not to say that Ignatius was not grateful to Jesus for his Passion. This is strongly implied in his greeting to the churches: “Greetings in the blood of Jesus Christ; Yours is a deep, abiding joy in the Passion of our Lord.”³⁷ But never does Ignatius describe appreciation for what Jesus has done as a motivation for imitating Jesus’ Passion. The perspective of gratitude is noticeably absent and is even shocking given the modern post-Reformation emphasis on gratitude as the *primary* motivator for obedience.

Ignatius describes his motivation in this way:

Why, then, have I given myself up completely to death, fire, sword, and wild beast? For the simple reason that near the sword means *near God*. To be with wild beasts means *to be with God*. But it all must be in the name of Jesus Christ. To share in his Passion I go through everything, for he who became the perfect man gives me the strength.³⁸

Like Clement, Ignatius understood faith in God’s promise to reward obedience as the means by which a person is able to obey. He writes, “‘The tree is known by its fruit.’ Similarly, those who profess to be Christ’s will be recognized by their actions. For what matters is not a momentary

33 Richardson, p.104

34 Ibid, p.104

35 Ibid, p.105

36 Ibid, p.105

37 Ibid, p.107

38 Ibid, p.113

act of professing, but being persistently motivated by faith.”³⁹ So a person is “motivated by faith” to obey. Obedience, for Ignatius, is the basis for belonging to God, and faith the basis for obedience. Ignatius has glowing words for the church in Rome that reflects his perspective: “You are a credit to God: you deserve your renown and are to be congratulated. You deserve praise and success and are privileged to be without blemish. Yes, you rank first in love, *being true to Christ’s law* and stamped with the Father’s name. To you, then, the sincerest greetings in Jesus Christ, our God, *for you cleave to his every commandment— observing not only the letter but their spirit.*”⁴⁰

Faith alone teaching leads to gratitude as the primary motivator for Christian obedience, because if Jesus has “done it all at the cross” then nothing more remains to be done but believe. This was most emphatically *not* Ignatius’ view of things. It is at this point that many conclude that Ignatius must have had a defective understanding of salvation, that he did not have a mature understanding of Paul’s doctrine of justification. However, what we will see is that Ignatius’ views follow quite consistently from the apostle he was so fond of quoting.

Justin Martyr

Justin Martyr was a Christian apologist of the second century and his works were well known and well regarded by his contemporaries.⁴¹ He was concerned to demonstrate to the Roman authorities that Christians were not to be feared for scandalous practices, as many were maliciously reporting. He contended that the Christian church was, in fact, beneficial to the well-being of the empire. He argued for Christianity as a superior religion based on its historical credibility, and on the basis of the ethics of its adherents. It is this point that particularly sheds light on the subject of justification. In order to argue for its superiority on the basis of its ethics, Justin Martyr discusses the beliefs that motivated the Christian to be ethical.

Justin Martyr was a prolific writer, but for this article, I will limit myself to his most extensive work which is his first apologetic treatise. This treatise was addressed to the emperor of Rome, but with an apparent desire for a much wider reading. Within this treatise I will focus on the latter portions of his writing, which covers the faith and life of Christians. He begins by pointing out how absurd it is that men in their day worship idols that have been formed and fashioned by immoral craftsmen. Apparently this craftsman class had a reputation for gross immorality. Justin then goes on to contrast the lives of these craftsmen with the lives of Christians.

But we have learned [from our tradition] that God has no need of material offerings from men, considering that he is the provider of all. We have been taught and firmly believe that *he accepts only those who imitate the good things which are his— temperance and righteousness and love of mankind*, and whatever else truly belongs to the God who is called by no given name.⁴²

39 Ibid, p.92

40 Richardson, p.103

41 Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol.2 p.712

42 Richardson, p.247

Here Justin speaks of the basis on which God “accepts” men, the basis of imitating His “temperance and righteousness.” He then goes on using the language of being “worthy”:

We have also been taught that in the beginning he in his goodness formed all things that are for the sake of men out of unformed matter, and if they show themselves worthy of his plan, we have learned that *they will be counted worthy* of dwelling with him, reigning together and made free from corruption and suffering.⁴³

The refrain “we have been taught” and “we have learned” very likely speaks to the process of education that a convert would have received in the second century prior to their baptism. Justin Martyr writes concerning these converts, “Those who are persuaded and believe the things we teach and say they are true, *and promise that they can live accordingly*...are brought by us where there is water, and are reborn.”⁴⁴ Here Justin informs his readers of the moral life a Christian pursues and gives the basis as being “accepted” and “counted worthy” at the judgment. Since the Christian pursues a good life in order to be “counted worthy of dwelling with him,” he argues that “we are in fact of all men your best helpers and allies securing good order, convinced as we are that no wicked man, no covetous man or conspirator, or virtuous man either, can be hidden from God, and that everyone goes to eternal punishment or salvation in accordance with the character of his actions.”⁴⁵

Justin capitalizes on this motivation for future acceptance and argues persuasively for the social benefit of knowing that our future destiny of heaven or hell is “in accordance with...his actions.” He states, “If all men knew this, nobody would choose vice even for a little time, *knowing that he was on his way to eternal punishment by fire*; every man would follow the self-restrained and orderly path of virtue, *so as to receive the good things from God and avoid his punishments*.” He then warns the reader against “demons” who want to deceive and enslave: “For they struggle to have you as their slaves and servants, and now by manifestations in dreams, now by magic tricks, they get hold of all *who do not struggle to their utmost for their own salvation*— as we do who, after being persuaded by the Word, renounce them.”⁴⁶

In all of this, there is not as word of the cross of Christ being a substitute obedience for our own. Justin argues that the moral superiority of Christianity is derived from what motivates the Christian to be moral, or in his words, “temperate and righteous.” This is important for Justin, because he wants the emperor to know what motivates the Christian to be an ally with him for good order. For Justin Martyr, the Christian is in a great struggle for the salvation of his soul. Once again, the cross and its atoning sacrifice strikes a minor note with Justin Martyr just as it has for other early writers. Justin then makes explicit his intention, “[We] try to persuade those who unjustly hate us, so that they, *living according to the fair commands of Christ*, may share with us the good hope of receiving the same things [that we will] from God, the master of all.”⁴⁷

What follows is a description of “the fair commands of Christ” as spoken by Christ in the

43 Richardson, p.247

44 Ibid, p.282

45 Ibid, p.248

46 Ibid, p.249

47 Ibid, p.250

Sermon on the Mount. He describes the life that Jesus calls us to live, and how this has promoted sexual purity in particular: “Many men and women now in their sixties and seventies who have been disciples of Christ from childhood have preserved their purity; and I am proud that I could point to such people in every nation.”⁴⁸

Justin also recognizes that not all Christians have been people of good reputation, and have provided opportunities for pagans to slander the Christians. He fends off criticism by once again pointing to the words of Christ in the Sermon: “Those who are found not living as he taught should know that they are not really Christians, even if his teachings are on their lips, for he said that not those who merely profess but those who also do the works will be saved. For he said this: ‘Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the Kingdom of Heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.’”⁴⁹

His final section is given to describing the worship of the Christians. He describes how initiates are brought into the community of faith: “We...after thus washing the one who has signified his assent, lead him to those who are called brethren, where they are assembled. They then earnestly offer common prayers for themselves and the one who has been illuminated and all others everywhere, that we may be made worthy, having learned the truth, to be found in deed good citizens and keepers of what is commanded, *so that we may be saved with eternal salvation.*”⁵⁰

The early church documents we have looked at represent a cross section of literary types, from the sermon manuscript written for a local congregation, to an apologetic defense written for the benefit of an emperor. What we have seen through these various writings is a recognizable congruity when it comes to the main strands of thought regarding justification. As has been observed, the cross as a substitutionary atonement strikes a minor note, and at best is the ground upon which the writings are built. The *emphasis* throughout is one of a redemption or salvation which is yet to be obtained. Each writer is future-focused, and bases the need for present adherence to the commands of God on the promise of a future acceptance. Ignatius may be the most rhetorically dramatic in his expression of this, but the substance of what he writes to the churches is true of the rest as well, as shown below:

“It is not that I want merely to be called a Christian, but actually to be one. Yes, if I prove to be one, then I can have the name.”- Ignatius⁵¹

“Yes, if we do the will of Christ, we shall find rest, but if not, nothing will save us from eternal punishment, if we fail to keep his commands.” - early Christian sermon⁵²

“They...offer common prayers...that we may be made worthy, having learned the truth, to be found in deed good citizens and keepers of what is commanded, so that we may be saved with eternal salvation.”- Justin Martyr⁵³

48 Ibid, p.250

49 Richardson, p.252

50 Ibid, p.285

51 Ibid, p.104

52 Ibid, p.195

53 Ibid, p.285

“We, then, should make every effort to be found in the number of those who are patiently looking for him, so that we may share in the gifts he has promised. And how shall this be dear friends? If our mind is faithfully fixed on God; if we seek out what pleases and delights him; if we do what is in accord with his pure will, and follow in the way of truth.” - Clement⁵⁴

For the early fathers, how you live in the present has a direct bearing on how you will be received on that day when God's kingdom is revealed. The cross is not represented as a way out of this necessary pursuit of holiness, but as the basis for this necessary pursuit. Christ's sacrifice is recognized as a great gift for the church, but at the same time is seen as something that obligates the church to emulate what Christ has done for the church. For the early fathers there was no division between the exemplarist and the person who had faith in Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. Rather, the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ was to be imitated by the church, and only by that way of life was the future rest to be obtained.

The early fathers had no notion of distinct ways of salvation, a way of faith and a way of obedience, as is later spelled out in various forms of Reformation theology. Rather, for them, the way of faith was identified with the way of obedience. The early fathers did not understand obedience to be the product of a faith that would *alone* save them, rather, obedience to the end would save them as a product of faith, as follows:

“Let us, then, cling to his blessing and note what leads to it. Let us unfold the tale of the ancient past. Why was Abraham blessed? Was it not because he acted in righteousness and truth, prompted by faith?” - Clement⁵⁵

“Brothers and sisters, we must have faith. We are engaged in the contest of the living God and are being trained by the present life to win the laurels in the life to come.” - early Christian sermon⁵⁶

“‘The tree is known by its fruit.’ Similarly, those who profess to be Christ's will be recognized by their actions. For what matters is not a momentary act of professing, but being persistently motivated by faith.” - Ignatius⁵⁷

This view of the Christian life as a great contest having been entered into and needing to be won in order to enjoy the benefits of an eternal rest, is reflected in what we know about their understanding of the sacraments.⁵⁸ Baptism was the point of entry into this contest. This rite was undertaken only after serious and sober instruction had taken place concerning “the way of life” that the Lord was calling them to through baptism.⁵⁹ To be washed and immersed in Christ's death was not just a celebration of what Christ had done for them, but a call to die to sin as Christ had died to sins. Being raised from the water was not just a celebration of the new birth, but it

54 Ibid, p.59

55 Richardson, p.58

56 Ibid, p.202

57 Ibid, p.92

58 Ibid, p.202

59 Ibid, p.282

was also a solemn pledge to live as one reborn.⁶⁰ A person, in becoming a Christian now enters the great life and death contest that remains to be won. In this light, it made perfect sense that only the baptized were allowed to celebrate the Supper. The Supper was for those on the inside, who understood God's call and had entered the great contest.⁶¹

The Apostle Paul

As we have seen, it is a common belief that the earliest fathers had not appreciated the apostle Paul's "justification by faith" doctrine. There can be no doubt that the documents from the early church fail to capture and do justice to Paul's theology. This was acknowledged by Polycarp, the revered second century pastor of the church in Smyrna: "Certainly, I nor anyone like me can follow the wisdom of the blessed and glorious Paul, who, when he was present among you face to face with the generation of his time, taught you accurately and firmly 'the word of truth'."⁶² However, this can be said of any theological writing of any period. The church is constantly trying to rise to the inspired thought of the apostles. What is at issue here is not whether the early church writers rose to the full expanse of Pauline theology, but whether they understood what is fundamental for the church to know for the establishment of the church *as Christian* in capturing crucial aspects of Paul's thought concerning justification.

First, I think it is important to acknowledge that the early fathers and the documents I cite do not rise to sufficiently express Paul's theology of the cross. As I have pointed out, the cross as the place of sacrificial atonement is not central in these writings. That being said, there are many clues in these writings that point to the fact that these men understood their need for the cross and their appreciation for what Christ has uniquely done for them. However, their focus and pastoral purpose was to exhort the church to faithfulness within a hostile environment. The sense you get is that they strongly believed that apart from their faithfulness in emulating Christ and his sacrifice, they would not enjoy the benefits of Christ's once-for-all death. Herein lies the reason for their emphasis. And it is this emphasis and concern that *does* reflect the thinking of the apostle Paul. Since it would be impossible to survey all of Paul's writings in the article, I will have to content myself with reference to one epistle, the epistle to the church in Philippi.

Paul in this letter is strongly future oriented concerning justification. He is suffering in prison as he writes this letter, and he has written to the Philippians in order to encourage them in their faith (1:12-14). Paul begins by letting them know he is praying for them, "that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless *until the day of Christ*."

He also wants them to know that his imprisonment is not ultimately a bad thing, that it has worked and will work good things for the church and himself personally. First, he points out that as a result of his imprisonment for the gospel, "most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly"(1:14). Second, he points out that "what has happened to me will turn out for my salvation"(1:19). This is striking, in that Paul links his present willingness to suffer for Christ with his future acceptance, or

60 Ibid, p.285

61 Ibid, p.286

62 Ibid, p.132

salvation. Some would resist this interpretation, but the context makes clear that deliverance from prison was not his concern as he subsequently writes, “I eagerly expect and hope that *I will in no way be ashamed*, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, *whether by life or by death*”(1:20).⁶³

Paul then calls the church to act likewise: “conduct yourselves in manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” He calls them to not be afraid of men, and this lack of fear “will be a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that *you will be saved*— and that by God”(1:28). Once again, the future is in view in regard to salvation. He then informs them that they have been called to suffer for Christ and presents Christ's obedient death for them as the pattern of their existence: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” After citing a poem which celebrates Christ's *obedient* death and resulting resurrection, Paul writes, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed— not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence— continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling.” Paul links Christ's obedience “to death, even death on a cross” as the basis or ground for their continued obedience. Just as Christ's obedience resulted in his vindicating resurrection, so they are now called to “work out *their* salvation” which lies in the future.

This becomes even more clear as Paul continues, “Do everything without complaining or arguing, so that you may become blameless and pure...in order that I may boast *on the day of Christ* that I did not run or labor for nothing”(2:14,16). Clearly, if they do not continue to obey in his absence, this will result in Paul's labor for their salvation being “for nothing.” They will not be saved— they will have not “worked out their salvation.” Paul is laboring for them to not just believe that Jesus suffered, but to suffer as Jesus did: “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ *not only* to believe on him, but also to suffer for him”(1:29). This truth has been the impetus for his exhortation.

Similar to Ignatius, Paul writes about his own desires in order to inspire the church to follow his example of commitment to Christ. He makes the rhetorically powerful assertion, “I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, *and so*, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead”(3:10,11). For Paul, as for Christ, suffering for obedience is the necessary prerequisite for resurrection. Since this is the case, he desired to know Christ's sufferings. From this angle, it is easy to see now how Paul can say that “what has happened to me [his imprisonment] will turn out for my salvation”(1:19). In other words, his imprisonment is his experience of the sufferings of Christ which will lead him “to attain to the resurrection from the dead.” He goes on: “Forgetting what is behind, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus”(3:13b,14). Clearly, this pressing on to the heavenward prize is the resurrection to which Paul desires to obtain. “Forgetting what is behind” does not mean to minimize what Christ has done for him at the cross in the past, but incorporates what the cross calls him *to* by way of emulation. Paul and the church have been called to “*not only believe on him, but to suffer for him*”(1:29).

63 This interpretation agrees with Don Carson's analysis who writes, “In this context 'deliverance' does not mean release from imprisonment, but something more important: his ultimate vindication, whether in life or in death.” Don Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, Baker 1996, p.28.

This understanding for Paul is essential to his doctrine of justification by faith, and is something that is not at all missing in the teaching of the early church leaders. This is true, because for Paul, we are called to “not only believe on him, but to suffer for him” in our pursuit to obey him. For Paul, to believe on him includes believing that God will reward the faithful with future justification/salvation by means of the resurrection from the dead. Does the letter to the church in Philippi reflect everything Paul has to say about justification? No, it does not. But does Paul teach what is essential to his doctrine of justification in his letter to Philippi? Yes, he does. And in this letter, he sounds a lot like Clement, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, and the Corinthian preacher. As we have seen, they, like Paul, believed their future to be dependent on a life of faithfulness. They, like Paul, were “forgetting what is behind” and were pressing on “to the goal to win the prize.” From Paul's letter to Philippi, it appears that the earliest fathers understood Paul quite well, possibly better than we post-Reformation evangelicals do today.

But What About Clement?

By way of conclusion, it is time to take up the difficulty presented earlier in the article. As noted, the only exception to this unified witness of the early church fathers is one statement made by Clement in his letter to Corinth. Admittedly, this serves as an apparent difficulty for what I propose here. However, what we have seen is that this stands as an oddity. It is not at all reflective of what we read everywhere else with the early teachers. Several explanations could be proposed to resolve this difficulty. Without going into depth, I will merely suggest three possibilities.

It is possible that Clement, in this paragraph quotes earlier, was referring to the deeds of the divisive men within the church at Corinth. That it would not be by their so-called “holy deeds” that they would be justified, as they were not holy at all. Likely the divisive men he was opposing considered themselves to be more spiritual than the existing leadership, and in their misplaced zeal would have considered their rebellion to be motivated by an apparent concern for holiness.

A second proposal is that he simply misspoke. We must remember that Clement, though a respected pastor, was not an inspired apostle. It was *possible* for him to write things that he should have not written in his zeal to deal with the crisis in Corinth.

A third proposal is that Clement was rejecting “holy deeds” of the Mosaic Law. This was a common concern for early church teachers who, like Paul, had to contend with the so-called spiritual teachers who wanted the church to go back to the practices of the Old Covenant. A crucial point that makes this proposal compelling is that whenever the early teachers rejected “works” for justification, they were rejecting works of the Mosaic law.⁶⁴ Those who opposed the existing eldership in Corinth may have been asserting certain aspects of the Mosaic Law as necessary for the church.

64 McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, p.22 - “The earliest known Latin commentary upon the Pauline epistles is that of Ambrosiaster. Most modern commentators on this important work recognise that its exposition of the doctrine of justification by faith is grounded in the contrast between Christianity and Judaism: *there is not a trace of a more universal interpretation of justification by faith meaning freedom from a law of works* – merely freedom from the Jewish ceremonial law.”

These are just three possibilities and a separate article would be required in order to sufficiently present the pros and cons of each. For me, it is more likely that one of these proposals is correct than it is that the one place an apparent “justification by faith alone” teaching occurs among the early teachers overturns all the other places the opposite is taught. It is telling as well that the scholars who are sympathetic to Reformation teaching do not consider this one statement of Clement to be representative of the teaching of the early church. Hence, their conclusion that the early teachers did not understand Paul. My hope is that this article contributes to demonstrating they are incorrect in this belief. We can embrace the early teachers as faithful men following solidly in the footsteps of the inspired apostle.