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1. To encourage *reformation* in local Christian churches worldwide.
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

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# JUSTIFICATION

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## INTRODUCTION



*John H. Armstrong*

The concept of justification is specifically grounded in the biblical language of righteousness (Greek: *dikaïosunê*). Thus New Testament scholar Ralph P. Martin is correct when he notes that this word, when “applied to human beings, connotes the status of being in the right when tested or judged by God.” In the Old Testament the condition of righteousness was at the very center of covenantal relationship with *Yahweh*. In the New Testament the term takes on added eschatological content (e.g., Romans 2 and 9-11). Without these biblical categories the concept tends to miss several important New Testament truths.

Since the time of Martin Luther (1483-1546) debate over the meaning of justification has been intense. Tight battle lines are still drawn. Some Reformed/Lutheran evangelicals believe any attempt to rethink this issue will lead to certain heresy. Meanwhile, many Catholics continue to trust in their own “merit” to put them right with God. (Many Protestants do the same, but by trusting in the sacraments or in their church membership without *explicit* faith in Christ alone!) Confessional Protestants, following Luther’s understandable reaction against the idea that human effort contributes anything to one’s acceptance before God, argue for an *exclusively* forensic idea. Luther held that justification was granted to

believing people solely on the basis of their response (*sola fide*). This response brought the imputation of Christ's merits. (Note how prominent the idea of "merit" is in this debate.) In Luther's emphasis, stress is placed upon justification being *only* a legal declaration of the divine court. It has nothing to do with relational concepts. This is a declaration that says I am not guilty because of Christ's imputed righteousness for me. The result of this position has generally been to treat justification in strictly personal ways that forbid it to have anything to do with "the works of the Spirit," union with Christ or the new covenant community. Meanwhile, Roman Catholics, under the influence of Thomas Aquinas (and St. Augustine too) still argue for an internal transformation that confuses justification with sanctification. The result of this confusion is sad. Few practicing Catholics understand that God accepts them into his family *solely* on the basis of Christ's work and God's grace.

In Paul, justification by faith is clearly a *relational* concept. The objections made over the centuries regarding legal fiction, carry *some* weight. If, however, the concept is properly rooted in relationships it "carries for Paul a dynamic nuance of a new attitude of God to human beings, as of humans to God, which in both instances leads to a chain of events" (Ralph P. Martin).

I believe the time is right for biblical theology to correct errors on both sides of this historic divide. My sympathies are clearly Protestant and decidedly evangelical. My concerns are biblical and pastoral. My prayer is for genuine reformation and real revival, which is properly anchored in the grace of God alone.



## Theme Articles