

# Long Before Luther

---

Where Was the Gospel  
*before* the Reformation?

---

Nathan Busenitz

# An Introductory Quiz

# An Introductory Quiz

1. Faith alone makes someone just and fulfills the law; faith it is that brings the Holy Spirit through the merits of Christ.

## REFORMATION

(Martin Luther, *Preface to Romans*)

# An Introductory Quiz

2. It is determined by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved and have forgiveness of sins, not through works but through faith alone, without merit.

## PRE-REFORMATION

(Ambrosiaster, 4<sup>th</sup> century, *Comm. on 1 Cor. 1.4*)

# An Introductory Quiz

3. Faith is reckoned as righteousness to the believer, independently of any righteous actions (Rom 4:5–6). What righteousness is this? The righteousness of faith, preceded by no good works, but with good works as its consequence.

## PRE-REFORMATION

(Augustine, 5<sup>th</sup> century, *Exp. on the Psalms*, 31.7)

# An Introductory Quiz

4. God's plan of salvation excludes all our works. "Not of works, lest any man should boast." It comes to us upon the footing of grace, pure grace alone.

## POST-REFORMATION

(Charles Spurgeon, 19<sup>th</sup> cent., *Just. by Faith*)

# An Introductory Quiz

5. No one can embrace the grace of the gospel without removing himself from the errors of his past life into the right way, and applying his whole effort to the practice of repentance. Can true repentance stand apart from faith? Not at all. But even though they cannot be separated, they ought to be distinguished.

## REFORMATION

(John Calvin, 16<sup>th</sup> century, *Institutes* 3.1.5)

# An Introductory Quiz

6. To have brought humanity, more senseless than stones, to the dignity of angels simply through bare words, and faith alone, without any hard work, is indeed a rich and glorious mystery. It is just as if one were to take a dog, consumed with hunger and disease, foul and loathsome to see, unable to move and lying passed out, and make him all at once into a human being and to display him upon the royal throne.

## PRE-REFORMATION

(John Chrysostom, 4<sup>th</sup> cent., *Hom. Col. 1:26–28*)

# An Introductory Quiz

7. This man [the publican in Luke 18] went away justified without performing any works of penance, without doing any sacrament or ritual, without any meritorious works whatsoever. His justification was complete without any of those things, because it was solely on the basis of faith.

## POST-REFORMATION

(John MacArthur, 21<sup>st</sup> cent., *Jesus' Perspective on Sola Fide*)

The Gospel &  
the Reformation

# The Reformers

- The medieval Catholic view of the gospel insisted on earning enough righteousness to gain God's favor.
- The Reformers, like Luther, recognized that such a standard was impossible to achieve, no matter how hard they tried.



**Martin  
Luther**

“At last meditating day and night, by the mercy of God, I ... began to understand the righteousness of God is that through which the righteous live by a gift of God, namely by faith. ... Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open.”

# The *Five Solas*

- *Sola Scriptura* – Scripture alone
- *Sola fide* – Faith alone
- *Sola gratia* – Grace alone
- *Solus Christus* – Christ alone
- *Soli Deo Gloria* – For the glory of God alone

# Key Question

Was the Reformation understanding of the gospel (that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone) some sort of 16th-century invention?

# Roman Catholic Opinion

**FRANCIS BECKWITH:** The early church is more Catholic than Protestant. . . . [Catholics have] more explanatory power to account for both all the biblical texts on justification as well as the church's historical understanding of salvation prior to the Reformation all the way back to the ancient church of the first few centuries.

# Roman Catholic Opinion

**GERRY:** As far as “Protestant Christianity” goes it did not exist until the 1500s. I challenge anyone to find the current protestant beliefs and practices before the 1500s.

# Biblical Basis

- Luke 18:13–14
- Romans 3, 4, 5
- Galatians 3:8
- Ephesians 2:8–9
- Philippians 3:8–9
- Titus 3:5–7

Scripture establishes the truth that our righteous standing before God is not based on good works we have done; but only on the finished work of Christ on the cross.

# Acts 13–15

1. The proclamation of the true gospel (Acts 13–14)

# Acts 13:38–39

Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins; and by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses. (NKJV)

# Acts 13–15

1. The proclamation of the true gospel (Acts 13–14)
2. The perversion of the true gospel (Acts 15:1–5)

# Acts 15:1, 5

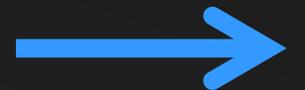
Certain men came down from Judea and taught the brethren, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.” . . . Some of the sect of the Pharisees who believed rose up, saying, “It is necessary to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.”

# Acts 13–15

1. The proclamation of the true gospel (Acts 13–14)
2. The perversion of the true gospel (Acts 15:1–5)
3. The preservation of the true gospel  
(Acts 15:6–11)

# Acts 15:7–11

Peter stood up and said to them, “Brethren, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles would hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God, who knows the heart, testified to them giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He also did to us;

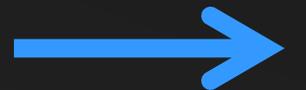


# Acts 15:7–11

and He made no distinction between us and them, cleansing their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you put God to the test by placing upon the neck of the disciples a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? But we believe that we are saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, in the same way as they also are.”

# The Biblical Basis

(Gal 1:6–9) I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is really not another; only there are some who are disturbing you and want to distort the gospel of Christ.



# The Biblical Basis

(cont.) But even if we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to what we have preached to you, he is to be accursed! As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to what you received, he is to be accursed!

# The Biblical Basis

**(Rom 3:28)** A man is justified by faith apart from the works of the law.

**(Rom 5:1)** Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

**(Eph 2:8–9)** By grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

# The Biblical Basis

**(Phil 3:8–9)** We do not rest on “a righteousness of [our] own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith.”

**(Titus 3:5–6)** He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy.

# Surveying the Church Fathers

What about the church leaders  
who came after the apostles?

# Clement of Rome (c. 30–100)

And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen.

*(First Epistle to the Corinthians, 32.4)*

# Polycarp (69–160)

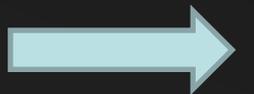


Even without seeing him, you believe in him with an inexpressible and glorious joy that many long to experience. For you know that you have been saved by a gracious gift—not from works but by the will of God through Jesus Christ.

*(Epistle to the Philippians 1.2–3)*

# Epistle to Diognetus (~150)

He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness?



# Epistle to Diognetus (~150)

By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors! (*Epistle to Diognetus, 9*)

# Hilary of Poitiers (300–368)

“It disturbed the scribes that sin was forgiven by a man (for they considered that Jesus Christ was only a man) and that sin was forgiven by Him whereas the Law was not able to absolve it, since faith alone justifies.”



(Commentary on Matthew)

# Basil of Caesarea (4th cent.)

This is perfect and pure boasting in God, when one is not proud on account of his own righteousness but knows that he is indeed unworthy of the true righteousness and is justified solely by faith in Christ.

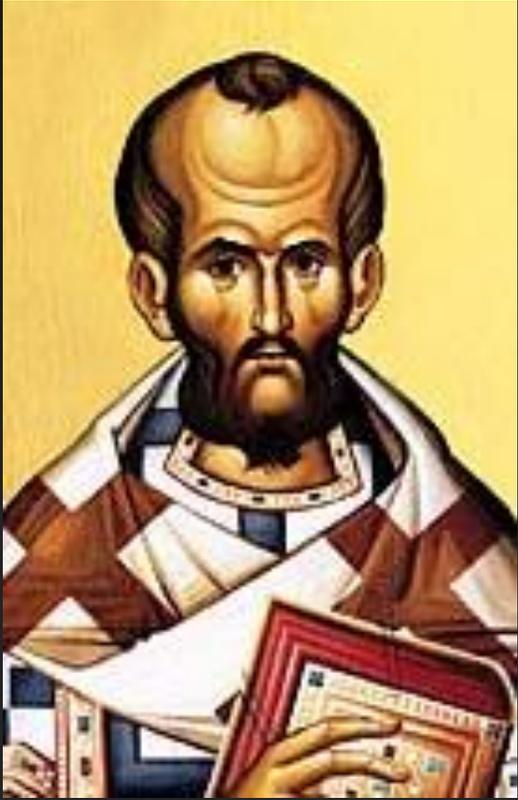
And Paul boasts that he despises his own righteousness, seeking that righteousness that is on account of Christ, which is the righteousness of God by faith. *(On Humility)*

# Ambrosiaster (4<sup>th</sup> cent.)

Paul tells those who live under the law that they have no reason to boast basing themselves on the law and claiming to be of the race of Abraham, seeing that no one is justified before God except by faith.

Those are blessed of whom God has decreed that, without work or any keeping of the law, they are justified before God by faith alone.

# John Chrysostom (347–407)



For as people, on receiving some great good, ask themselves if it is not a dream, as not believing it; so it is with respect to the gifts of God. What then was it that was thought incredible? That those who were enemies and sinners, justified by neither the law nor works, should immediately through faith alone be advanced to the highest favor. →

# John Chrysostom (347–407)

... As the Jews were chiefly attracted by this, [Paul] persuades them not to listen to the law, since they could not attain salvation by it without faith. Against this he contends, for it seemed to them incredible that a person who had misspent all his former life in vain and wicked actions should afterwards be saved by his faith alone. On this account he says, “It is a saying to be believed.”

*(Homily on 1 Timothy, 1.15–16)*

Digging a  
Little Deeper

# Digging Deeper

We can get more specific by considering the following three facets of Reformation soteriology:

- 1. Forensic Justification:** The Reformers viewed justification as a legal declaration of righteousness.

# Digging Deeper

## 2. Justification Distinguished from Regeneration:

The Reformers did not equate justification with sanctification (though they are inseparably linked).

3. The Imputed Righteousness of Christ: The Reformers insisted that justification involved the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer's account.

**Alister McGrath:** “The question of ‘Forerunners of the Reformation doctrines of justification’ must therefore be regarded as involving the question of whether the concepts of forensic justification or imputed righteousness, or the deliberate and systematic distinction between justification and regeneration, can be shown to have been taught at any period in the history of doctrine prior to the Reformation.”

# Digging Deeper

1. Forensic Justification

2. Justification Distinguished from  
Regeneration/Sanctification

3. The Imputed Righteousness of Christ

# Forensic Justification

## Key Biblical Passages:

- Deuteronomy 25:1–3
- Proverbs 17:15
- Zechariah 3:1–5
- Luke 7:29
- Romans 4:5
- Romans 8:33–35
- 1 Corinthians 4:4

# Forensic Justification

That the church fathers understood justification in a forensic sense can be shown in two ways:

1. The use of law court imagery
2. The juxtaposition of justification with legal terms like condemnation

# Forensic Justification

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

*(Homily on Romans 3:4)*

What does the word *justified* mean? It means, that if there could be a trial and an examination of the things God had done for the Jews, and of what had been done their part toward him, the victory would be with God, and all the right on his side.

# Forensic Justification

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

If any then were to contradict, they do the same as if a person who after committing great sins was unable to defend himself in court, but was condemned and going to be punished, and then being forgiven by royal pardon, should have the impudence after his forgiveness to boast that he had done no sin.

# Forensic Justification

Origen (c. 182–254)

The judgment on Adam was that through his one sin condemnation came to all men. But in sharp contrast to this, through Christ justification is given to all for the many sins in which the entire human race is bound up.

# Forensic Justification

Ambrose (337–397)

In Adam I fell, in Adam I was cast out of Paradise, in Adam I died. How shall the Lord call me back, unless He finds me in Adam, so that as I was liable to guilt and owing death in him, so now in Christ I am justified?

# Digging Deeper

1. Forensic Justification

2. Justification Distinguished from  
Regeneration/Sanctification

3. The Imputed Righteousness of Christ

# Distinct from Sanctification

## Key Biblical Passages:

- Matthew 13
- Luke 18:9–14
- Romans 6:1; 8:1
- Ephesians 2:8–10
- 1 Corinthians 1:30
- 1 Corinthians 6:11

# Distinct from Sanctification

This distinction (between justification and sanctification) is seen in the fathers in two ways:

1. Justification and sanctification are listed as distinct benefits of salvation.
2. A distinction is made between the root of salvation (justifying faith) and the fruit of good works (progressive sanctification).

## rigen (c. 182–254)

And this faith, when it is has been justified, is firmly embedded in the soil of the soul like a root that has received rain, so that when it begins to be cultivated by God's law, branches arise from it that bring forth the fruit of works. The root of righteousness, therefore, does not grow out of the works, but rather the fruit of works grows out of the root of righteousness, that root, of course of righteousness that God also credits even apart from works.

# Augustine (354–430)

“If Abraham was not justified by works, how was he justified?” The apostle goes on to tell us how: What does scripture say? (that is, about how Abraham was justified). Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6). Abraham, then, was justified by faith. Paul and James do not contradict each other: good works follow justification. . . . →

# Augustine (354–430)

*(cont.)* James dwells on an action performed by Abraham that we all know about: he offered his son to God as a sacrifice. That is a great work, but it proceeded from faith. I have nothing but praise for the superstructure of action, but I see the foundation of faith; **I admire the good work as a fruit, but I recognize that it springs from the root of faith.**

*(Exposition 2 of Psalm 31, 2–4)*

# Digging Deeper

1. Forensic Justification
2. Justification Distinguished from Regeneration/Sanctification
3. The Imputed Righteousness of Christ

# Imputed Righteousness

## Key Biblical Passages:

- Isaiah 53:11; 61:10
- Zechariah 3:3–5
- Matthew 5:26, 48
- Matthew 22:1–14
- 2 Corinthians 5:21
- Galatians 3:27
- Philippians 3:9

# Imputed Righteousness

The church fathers give evidence of:

1. The need for a righteousness that cannot be earned through the law or human merit.
2. The imputation of the sinner's guilt to Christ on the cross.
3. The reception of righteousness from God.
4. The reception of divine righteousness through Christ.

# Imputed Righteousness

Ambrosiaster (fourth century)

This he says, that without the works of the law, to an impious person (that is, a Gentile) believing in Christ, his faith is imputed for righteousness, as it was to Abraham. How then can the Jews imagine that through the works of the law they are justified with Abraham's justification, when they see that Abraham was justified not from the works of the law, but by faith alone? Therefore there is no need of the law, since an impious person is justified with God through faith alone.

# Imputed Righteousness

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

(On Rom. 3:25) The declaring of His righteousness also means that not only is He Himself righteous but that He also makes those who are filled with the putrefying sores of sin instantaneously righteous. And in order to further explain what he means by this “declaring,” he has added, “That He might be just, and the justifier of him who believes in Jesus.” Have no doubt, then, for it is not of works but of faith.

# Imputed Righteousness

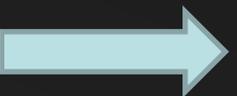
John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

“For although He was righteous,” he says, “He was made a sinner so that He might make the sinners righteous.” Yes rather, he said not only this, but even something far greater. For the word he employed is not the habit but the quality itself. For he did not say that He made Him a sinner, but “sin” . . . “that we” also “might become”—he did not say “righteous” but “righteousness,” and “the righteousness of God.” For this is “of God” when we are justified not by works—in which case it would be necessary that not a spot even should be found—but by grace, in which case all sin is done away.

# Imputed Righteousness

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

(On Rom. 5:17) If any one were to cast a person who owed ten mites into prison, and not the man himself only, but wife and children and servants for his sake; and another were to come and not to pay down the ten mites only, but to give also ten thousand talents of gold, and to lead the prisoner into the king's courts, and to the throne of the highest power, and were to make him partaker of the highest honor and every kind of magnificence, the creditor would not be able to remember the ten mites; so hath our case been.



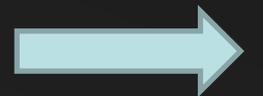
# Imputed Righteousness

(cont.) For Christ hath paid down far more than we owe, yea as much more as the illimitable ocean is than a little drop. . . . For this is what Paul intimated by saying that “they who have received the abundance of the grace and righteousness shall reign in life.” And as he had now clearly demonstrated this, he again makes use of his former argument, clenching it by taking up the same word afresh, and saying that if for that offense all were punished, then they may be justified too by these means.

# Imputed Righteousness

Epistle to Diognetus (2<sup>nd</sup> century)

He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness?



# Imputed Righteousness

(cont.) By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God?  
O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!

# Digging Deeper

A survey of patristic literature provides evidence that the church fathers generally understood:

- Justification as forensic
- Justification as distinct from sanctification
- Christ's righteousness as that which is imputed to the believer

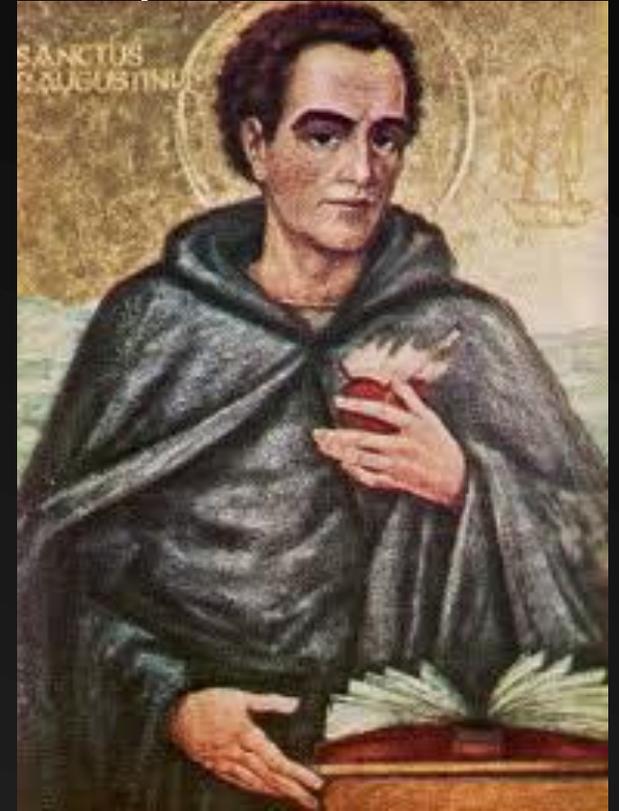
# Augustine and Later Theologians

What about Augustine and  
those who came after him?

# Augustine (354–430)

What is grace? That which is freely given. What is “freely given”? Given, not paid. If it was due, wages would be given, but grace would not be bestowed. . . . But having obtained that grace by faith, you will be just by faith—“for the just lives by faith.”

*(Tractates on the Gospel of John, John 1:15–18)*



# Prosper (390–455)

Just as there are no crimes so detestable that they can prevent the gift of grace, so too there can be no works so eminent that they are owed in deserved judgment that which is given freely. Would it not be a debasement of redemption in Christ's blood, and would not God's mercy be made secondary to human works, if justification, which is through grace, were owed in view of preceding merits, so that it were not the gift of a Donor, but the wages of a laborer? *(Call of All Nations, 1.17)*

# Theodoret (393–457)

All we bring to grace is our faith. But even in this faith, divine grace itself has become our enabler. For [Paul] adds, “And this is not of yourselves but it is a gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Eph. 2:8–9). It is not of our own accord that we have believed, but we have come to belief after having been called; →



# Theodoret (393–457)

*(continued)* and even when we had come to believe, He did not require of us purity of life, but approving mere faith, God bestowed on us forgiveness of sins.

*(Interpretation of the Fourteen  
Epistles of Paul; FEF 3:248–49)*

# Bede (673–735)



“No one obtains the gift of justification on the basis of merits derived from works performed beforehand, because the gift of justification comes only from faith.”

(Cited from Gerald Bray, *ACCS XI:31*)

# Anslem (11<sup>th</sup> cent.)

Question. Do you rejoice, brother, that you are dying in the Christian Faith?

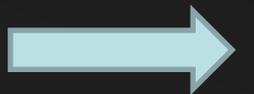
Answer. I do rejoice.

...

Qu. Do you confess that you have lived so wickedly, that eternal punishment is due to your own merits?

An. I confess it.

...



# Anslem (11<sup>th</sup> cent.)

Qu. Do you believe that the Lord Jesus Christ died for you?

An. I believe it.

Qu. Do you thank Him [for His passion and death]?

An. I do thank Him.

Qu. Do you believe that you cannot be saved except by His Death?

An. I believe it.



# Anslem (11<sup>th</sup> cent.)

Come then, while life remains in you, in His death alone place your whole trust; in nothing else place any trust; to His death commit yourself wholly; with this alone cover yourself wholly; in this enwrap yourself wholly. And if the Lord your God wishes to judge you, say, “Lord, between Your judgment and me I present the death of our Lord Jesus Christ; in no other way can I contend with You.” And if He shall say that you are a sinner; you say, “Lord, I interpose the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between my sins and You.”

# Anslem (11<sup>th</sup> cent.)

If He shall say that you have deserved condemnation; say, “Lord, I set the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between my evil deserts and You; and His merits I offer for those which I ought to have, but have not.” If He says that He is angry with you; say, “Lord I set the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between Your wrath and me.” And when you hast completed this, say again, “Lord, I set the death of our Lord Jesus Christ between You and me.” . . .



# Anslem (11<sup>th</sup> cent.)

Qu. Do you hope and believe, that not by your own merits, but by the merits of the passion of Jesus Christ, you may attain to everlasting salvation?

An. I do.

Then follows the assurance: and then let him say,

If any oppose you, and should object to you, set between him and you the merits of Christ's passion.

*(Anselm of Canterbury, Exhortations to a Dying Man)*

# Bernard (1090–1153)

As for Your righteousness, so great is the fragrance it diffuses that You are called not only righteous but even righteousness itself, the righteousness that makes men righteous. Your power to make men just is measured by Your generosity in forgiving. Therefore the man who through sorrow for sin hungers and thirsts for righteousness,



# Bernard (1090–1153)

(cont.) let him trust in the One who changes the sinner into a just man, and, judged righteous in terms of faith alone, he will have peace with God.

*(On the Song of Solomon)*

# John Wycliffe

Trust wholly in Christ, rely altogether on His sufferings, beware of seeking to be justified in any other way than by His righteousness. Faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is sufficient for salvation, and without faith it is impossible to please God.

(John Wycliffe, 14<sup>th</sup> century, *Writings of John Wycliffe*)

The **R**eformers  
& the **F**athers

# John Calvin

Moreover, (the Roman church) unjustly set the ancient fathers against us (I mean the ancient writers of a better age of the church) as if in them they had supporters of their own impiety. If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory—to put it very modestly—would turn to our side. →



# John Calvin

*(continued)* Now, these fathers have written many wise and excellent things. . . . [Yet] the good things that these fathers have written they [the Roman Catholics] either do not notice, or misrepresent or pervert. . . . But we do not despise them [the church fathers]; in fact, if it were to our present purpose, I could with no trouble at all prove that the greater part of what we are saying today meets their approval. (*Institutes*, Intro to Francis I, 4)

# Ephesians 2:8–9

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast.

