

JUSTIFICATION IN AQUINAS

Although compared with Reformation theology,¹ Medieval theology devoted “marginal” space to treating the doctrine of justification,² Aquinas treats justification (and related questions) in its own right in the section “Treatise on Grace” in his most mature work: *Summa Theologica*.³ Aquinas has also complemented this treatment in his mature⁴ and extensive reflections on justification in his *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*,⁵ though this work is less studied and less systematic.⁶ In this commentary, the *doctor angelicus* has left behind a considerable contribution, and may even be the key to understanding the positions he takes in the *Summa*. It would be tenable to say that Aquinas’s reflections in the *Summa* on grace and justification were—first and foremost—his attempts to address more extensive theological and philosophical questions in light of his biblical interpretation (i.e., his attempts to answer extrabiblical questions

¹ There has been somewhat of a revival of Thomistic studies among Protestants in recent years that have led to a rediscovery of Aquinas’s thought. This rediscovery has inspired some Protestants to defend Thomas against a long history of Protestant caricatures, concluding that Aquinas’s theology relies upon grace just as much as his Protestant critics. Timothy Renick, “Second Chance for Thomas,” *Christian Century* 122, no. 17 (2005), 22, 24. David C. Steinmetz, “What Luther Got Wrong,” *Christian Century* 122, no. 17 (2005): 23, 25-26. Luther’s denunciations of Thomistic theology have long been understood by some to be largely rooted in distortions of Thomas’s thought by subsequent Thomistic theologians. John L. Farthing, *Thomas Aquinas and Gabriel Biel: Interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas in German Nominalism on the Eve of the Reformation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1988). This has given some the impression that if Aquinas’s theology of grace had been faithfully followed, the Protestant schism would not have had the kind of theological soil it needed to take root and grow.

² Karlfried Froehlich, “Justification Language in the Middle Ages,” *Justification by Faith: Lutherans and Catholics in Dialogue, VII*, ed. H. George Anderson, T. Austin Murphy, Joseph A. Burgess (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Augsburg Publishing House, 1985), 143.

³ All quotations from the *Summa* are taken from the English Translation, *Summa Theologica*, trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 5 vols., *rev. ed.* (1948; repr., Notre Dame, Indiana: Ave Maria Press, 1981).

⁴ Aquinas’s commentary on Romans is considered one of his particularly “mature” Scripture commentaries, perhaps even put in its final form during his last years in Naples (1272-1273). Eleonore Stump, “Biblical Commentary and Philosophy,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aquinas*, ed. Norman Kretzmann and Eleonore Stump (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 254.

⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. Fabian Larcher, ed. Jeremy Holmes (unpublished).

⁶ Torrell laments: “The great systematic works have monopolized attention. But ‘to read’ Scripture was the first task for the master in theology, and therefore also for Thomas. . . . Though long overlooked in favor of the *Sentences* or the *Summa*, this kind of biblical teaching was nevertheless Thomas’s ordinary labor.” Jean-Pierre Torrell, O.P., *Saint Thomas Aquinas, vol. 1: The Person and His Work*, trans. Robert Royal (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 55.

in a way that was faithful to the teaching of *sacra pagina*). This paper is an attempt to explore aspects of Aquinas's teaching on justification in light of his commentary on Romans. Although the *Summa* is more extensive in its scope of inquiry on justification, this study will show that the basic contours of Aquinas's doctrine of justification can be seen as the result of his Pauline interpretations from the book of Romans.⁷

Aquinas's Expectations for Justification as a Remedy

Several aspects of Paul's discourse in Romans prior to his most extensive teaching on justification are decisive for the shaping of Aquinas's expectations for what Paul's language of justification is intended to accomplish. Before Romans 3:21 where Paul transitions to his most explicit teaching on justification, Aquinas believes Paul has already largely set the stage for this teaching in his previous discourse on the nature and power of sin, the nature of faith, and particularly in his depiction of an inevitable eschatological judgment. Therefore, in this section, we will mostly explore these aspects of Aquinas's hermeneutical navigation through the Pauline discourse prior to Romans 3:21.

Saving/Justifying Faith⁸ as Involving Charity and Fulfilling the Law

Aquinas's first extended reflection duly arises at the verse he recognized (as do many modern exegetes)⁹ as containing the main theme of Paul's letter in Romans 1:16-17. Here

⁷ I hope this paper will not be an "exercise in post-Reformation polemic," but it is hard to deny that "confessional disputes shape the evaluation of Thomas." Michael Root, "Aquinas, Merit, and Reformation Theology After the Joint Declaration of Justification," *Modern Theology* 20, no. 1 (2004): 6. Therefore, rather than deny my bias and pretend that this paper is purely a neutral exercise of disinterested objective analysis, I would rather overtly acknowledge my interests and motivations for this study: I am a Reformed Protestant who believes that most Protestants do not appreciate the degree of biblical support in the Catholic tradition for their doctrine of justification, nor the level of sophistication in Aquinas's integrative theology that greatly influenced subsequent Catholic thought. Although it is not my desire in this paper to decide whether Aquinas's doctrine of justification is "Protestant" or "Catholic," my conviction is that Protestants who have tried to put Aquinas on the Reformation side of the schism have deeply misunderstood both Aquinas and the Catholic tradition, and some who have corrected these misinterpretations have also misconstrued Aquinas and the Catholic tradition. There has been more heat than light. E.g. John H. Gerstner, "Aquinas Was a Protestant," *Tabletalk*, ed. R. C. Sproul and John H. Gerstner, May 1994, 14. Cf. Robert Reymond, "Dr. John Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59 no. 1 (1997): 113-121. A closer analysis of Aquinas's exegetical reasons for his doctrine of justification will prove most helpful, for it will keep both Protestants and Catholics close to their shared authority—the *sacra pagina*—and thereby foster more sympathy from Protestants about Catholic perspectives on justification. It will further serve to help evangelicals overcome their distortion of Aquinas's theology as merely an attempt to "Christianize Aristotle's God." e.g. E. J. Carnell, *An Introduction to Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1956), 132. Cited in Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1991), 13.

⁸ Hereafter, I will use justifying faith and saving faith interchangeably, since they basically refer to the same phenomenon in Aquinas's commentary on Romans.

⁹ E.g. Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, ed. Moisés Silva (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998), 58ff. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The

Aquinas explains his understanding of the range of meaning of Paul's term "salvation," as well as how this salvation is conferred to sinners. Salvation has a threefold referent in connection to the gospel: 1) the forgiveness of sins, 2) sanctifying grace,¹⁰ and 3) eternal life. The Gospel confers this threefold salvation "by faith,"¹¹ which comes about through things like preaching, confessing the faith, the use of Scripture, etc. Aquinas allows two possible meanings for the genitive construction δικαιοσύνη θεου [*the righteousness/justice of God*]: the righteousness that is revealed in the gospel. It could refer to God's faithfulness to his promises, in which case ἐκ πίστεως εἰς πίστιν [*from faith to faith*] means from the faithfulness of God (to fulfill his promises) to the faith of the one who believes in the fulfillment of God's promise in Christ.¹² Δικαιοσύνη θεου can also refer to the righteousness God gives through Christ to the ungodly to make them godly ("the justice of God by which God makes men just").¹³ In this case "from faith to faith" means "proceeding from faith in the Old Testament to faith in the New."¹⁴

In explanation of Paul's thematic refrain, "the just one will live by faith," Aquinas takes the opportunity to define faith. Since Aquinas believes that justification is "by faith," his understanding of what this faith entails decisively shapes his understanding of what justification brings about. He here defines faith as "willed assent, with certitude, to that which is not seen."¹⁵ Faith involves the human will because, unlike scientific knowledge that "assents by the necessity of reason," faith has equal certainty but is beyond reason.¹⁶ If reason does not compel the intellect to assent, something else must be compelling it, namely, the will.¹⁷ Paul's language of

New International Commentary on the New Testament, eds. Ned B. Stonehouse, F.F. Bruce, Gordon D. Fee (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1994), 63ff.

¹⁰ Aquinas has already loosely defined "grace" in his commentary in two ways: 1) as a gift "we receive through Christ" and "by which we are restored" and 2) as "the first among God's gifts, because by it the sinner is made holy." Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §60, §70.

¹¹ "The second consideration is how the Gospel confers salvation, namely, through faith, which is indicated when he says, to everyone who believes." *Ibid.*, §100.

¹² *Ibid.*, §102.

¹³ *Ibid.* Cf. *ST I-II.113.1*: "Justice is so-called inasmuch as it implies a certain rectitude of order in the interior disposition of a man" and "Aristotle calls this metaphorical justice." The reason it is called justification rather than faithification or lovification is because whereas faith and charity "imply a special directing of the human mind to God by the intellect and will," justification implies a more general "rectitude of order" not limited to either the intellect or the will only. *ST I-II.113.1.ad.2*.

¹⁴ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §102.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, §105. Cf. Aquinas's definition of faith in the *Summa*: "Faith is a habit of the mind, whereby eternal life is begun in us, making the intellect assent to what is non-apparent." *ST II-II.4.1*.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* For example, Aquinas notes that Paul offers the example of Abraham believing that God would give him a son even though he was so past the age of physical capability that his wife laughed at God's promise.

¹⁷ Yet any movement of the will toward God is "already informed with grace" because it is the result of grace. *ST I-II.111.3*. "Whilst we are being justified we consent to God's justification (*justitiae*) by a movement of our free-will. Nevertheless this movement is not the cause of grace, but the effect; hence the whole operation pertains to grace." *ST I-II.111.2.ad.2*. Aquinas's teaching on faith is one area (among others) where characterizations of Aquinas's position by distrustful evangelicals who claim Aquinas thought of human reason as

“live by faith” indicates for Aquinas that faith is more than just intellectual assent but a disposition of the will “moving the intellect to assent.” But this cannot happen without love for God¹⁸—which love Aquinas calls *charity*.¹⁹ Saving faith, then, requires a change or movement of the will²⁰ (which Aquinas assumes must be changed or moved by the working of grace).²¹ He concludes, then, that saving faith must include a *habitus* (Aquinas’s Aristotelian word for “a stable disposition”²²) that is “formed by charity”—all of which requires the indwelling of God in the heart. These “virtues” of faith and charity are evidence of God’s life within the human soul,²³ for “the soul lives the life of grace through God” who “dwells in the soul by faith.”²⁴

ultimately autonomous (and revelation therefore gratuitous) become an embarrassing mark of ignorance. For a brief sampling of these sorts of criticisms catalogued by an evangelical more sympathetic with Aquinas, see Norman L. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 11-20.

¹⁸ That a movement of the will towards God would necessarily require love for God (charity) is held by Aquinas on the authority of Scripture, but is further developed by both an Augustinian notion of grace and a highly sophisticated Aristotelian anthropology that Aquinas systematically unravels at various places in the *Summa*. The “will” is defined as a rational appetite that by its very nature always tends toward a perceived good. “The principle of voluntary movements must be something naturally willed. Now this is good in general, to which the will tends naturally.” *ST I-II.10.1*. The will naturally perceives as good those objects that are fitting to its nature. “Every agent acts for an end” and “the end is the good desired and loved by each one. Wherefore it is evident that every agent, whatever it be, does every action from love of some kind.” *ST I-II.28.6*. “Love denotes a certain adapting of the appetitive power to some good.” *ST I-II.28.5*. “Love belongs to the appetitive power which is a passive faculty. Wherefore its object stands in relation to it as the cause of its movement or act. Therefore the cause of love must needs be love’s object. . . . It follows therefore that the good is the proper cause of love.” *ST I-II.27.1*.

¹⁹ Aquinas’s case that justifying faith must be formed by charity is made only briefly at different places in his Romans commentary. For example: “God dwells in the soul through faith: ‘That Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith’ (Eph 3:17); but this indwelling is not perfect, unless faith is formed by charity, which by the bond of perfection unites us to God, as Col 3:14 says. Consequently, the phrase, *lives by faith*, must be understood of formed faith.” Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §108.

²⁰ The *Summa* further delineates this movement as a movement toward God and away from sin. Justification happens “by a movement from one contrary to the other, and thus justification implies a transmutation from the state of injustice to the aforesaid state of justice. And it is thus we are now speaking of the justification of the ungodly, according to the Apostle. . . . And because movement is named after its term *whereto* rather than from its term *whence*, the transmutation whereby anyone is changed by the remission of sins from the state of ungodliness to the state of justice borrows its name from its term *whereto*, and is called justification of the ungodly.” *ST I-II.113.1*.

²¹ Although at times Aquinas seems to equate faith and faithfulness (e.g. “*Does their unfaithfulness*, namely, of those [Jews] who have not believed, *nullify the faithfulness of God?*”), he does not appear to appropriate this sense of faith into any of his explicit teaching about justifying faith. Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §132.

²² Joseph P. Wawrykow, *The Westminster Handbook to Thomas Aquinas* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 167. Frederick Christian Bauerschmidt, *Holy Teaching: Introducing the Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2005), 135.

²³ William T. Cavanaugh examines divine indwelling and the role of theosis in Aquinas’s doctrine of justification and compares it to Luther’s notion of union with Christ in justification. William T. Cavanaugh, “A Joint Declaration?: Justification as Theosis in Aquinas and Luther,” *The Heythrop Journal* 41, no. 3 (2000): 265-80.

Although saving faith requires assent to something God has said “for the reason that it was said by God,” he also understands saving faith to involve more than believing *that*, but also a “believing *unto* God,” i.e. “to go to God by believing, which charity does.”²⁵ Saving faith involves a movement of the heart toward God, which movement requires love for God.²⁶ In other words, since faith is something one *lives* by (“the just shall *live* by faith”), and one’s actions are determined by their inner dispositions, Aquinas understands faith to entail a fundamental change that takes place in the human heart through grace—a change that moves the heart toward God through love.²⁷

For Aquinas, faith was necessary for salvation even under the Old Law, and although faith is granted apart from both the Law and apart from any merit or any works, “works are [also] required in the New Law.”²⁸ The “law of faith is the law inwardly written, through which are directed not only external works but even the very motions of the heart, among which the act of faith is the first” which Paul later calls “the law of the spirit” (Rom 8:2).²⁹ He understands this to be Paul’s point when he says “Do we therefore overthrow the law by faith? On the contrary, we establish the law” (Rom 3:31).³⁰ This for Aquinas means “by faith we complete and fulfill the Law.”³¹ This understanding of faith—which he gets from Paul’s letter to the Romans—shapes how he understands the meaning of Paul’s language of justification *by faith*.

Sin as Ontological Corruption

By the time Aquinas arrives at his reflection on Romans 3:21 where Paul writes about justification by faith more explicitly, he is already predisposed to understand this justification as

²⁴ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §106-108. In the *Summa*, Aquinas teaches that “sanctifying grace causes a person to be immediately in union with God” and that grace “is nothing short of a partaking of the Divine Nature.” *ST I-II.111.5; 112.1*. He frequently appeals to Ephesians 3:17 (“that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith”) and Colossians 3:14 (“love, which is the perfect bond of unity”).

²⁵ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §327. Ultimately Aquinas believes that faith and charity are infused simultaneously in justification: “In the justification of the ungodly, a movement of charity is infused together with the movement of faith.” *ST I-II.113.4.ad.1*.

²⁶ “This is an emphasis from Augustine that the Protestant Reformers lost in their emphasis on faith alone: the faith in those made righteous by God is marked by love. This is different from the passive righteousness that Wittenberg students would see in this locus three hundred years later.” Mark Reasoner, *Romans In Full Circle: A History of Interpretation* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 30.

²⁷ Cf. *ST II-II.4.3*. Charity “quickens the act of faith” (i.e. makes it a living faith, not a dead faith).

²⁸ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §316.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, §316.

³⁰ νόμον οὖν καταργοῦμεν διὰ τῆς πίστεως; μὴ γένοιτο· ἀλλὰ νόμον ἰσχύνομεν

³¹ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §321. For Aquinas (as for Augustine), obedience to the law is, “in its deepest sense ... nothing less than love: to follow God’s law is to love.” Matthew Levering, *Biblical Natural Law: A Theocentric and Teleological Approach* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 206.

Paul's solution to the wickedness described in the previous chapters, which concludes with Paul's charge that both Jews and Gentiles are ὑφ' ἁμαρτίαν εἶναι [*under the power of sin*] (Rom 3:9). In Aquinas's interpretation, Paul is emphasizing the need for justification by faith by emphasizing the ontological corruption of mankind. Since this power of sin is described in ontological terms, Aquinas therefore expects Paul's solution (justification by faith) to also address this ontological corruption as a remedy.

When God gives people over to a "debase mind" (Rom 1:28) Aquinas takes this in an "interior sense" rather than "man's external sense."³² In Aquinas's words, Paul describes "the sins by which a person deteriorates within himself" and becomes "misaligned in his desire for external things."³³ God's punishment is to give them over to their sins—"not of course, by impelling them to evil but by abandoning them, *to dishonorable passions*, i.e. sins against nature."³⁴

Aquinas understands this ontological corruption largely in terms a lack of love, drawing out how many of the sins Paul mentions are simply the opposite of, and destructive of, neighborly love. "Haters of God" are those who "attack something God loves in men, namely, mutual love."³⁵ When Paul describes the sinners who are "filled" with wickedness, Aquinas already sees this as the negative parallel to the believer: "For just as every virtue, inasmuch as it carries out a precept of the Law qualifies as righteousness, so every sin, inasmuch as it is at variance with the rule of the divine law, qualifies as wickedness."³⁶

Aquinas is disinclined to understand Paul's charge that "no one is just, not even one" as a Pauline exaggeration. Rather, he understands it to mean that all are unrighteous *in and of themselves* (i.e. apart from the grace of God) or that "no one is just in every way but has some sin."³⁷ Aquinas also does not understand the "works of the law" (by which "no flesh will be justified") as referring only to the ceremonial laws since Paul adds, "through the law comes knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:20). It includes also the moral precepts of the law. The Law—both ceremonial and moral³⁸— "is not enough to make one just; another remedy is needed to suppress concupiscence."³⁹

The logic of Paul's transition from ontological corruption to justification by faith is explained: "After showing that Jews and gentiles are equal as far as the state of previous guilt is

³² Ibid., §154.

³³ Ibid., §157-158.

³⁴ Ibid., §147.

³⁵ Ibid., §162.

³⁶ Ibid., §156.

³⁷ Ibid., §277.

³⁸ He reiterates this interpretation later when he says: "Not only without the ceremonial works, which did not confer grace but only signified it, but also without the works of the moral precepts, as stated in Titus 3(:5), 'Not because of deeds done by us in righteousness.'" Ibid., §317.

³⁹ Ibid., §298. Concupiscence in Aquinas is a general cause of sin, a craving for something that *appears* "delightful to the senses," and "is the craving for pleasurable good." *ST* I-II.30.1.*ad*.3; I-II.30.3.

concerned, the Apostle now shows that they are also equal as far as the state of subsequent grace is concerned.”⁴⁰ It is worth noting that “guilt” here appears to be used by Aquinas to refer not merely to legal guilt or guilty actions but a guilt chiefly consisting in ontological corruption.⁴¹ Again, this shapes his expectations as he moves on to Paul’s discussion of justification by faith, looking for more than just forgiveness or absolution, but for an ontological remedy for the interior corruption caused by being ὕφ’ ἁμαρτίαν: *under [the power] of sin* (Rom 3:9).

Paul’s Reasons for Depicting The Eschatological Judgment

Paul’s presentation of the dilemma of sinful humanity (both Jew and Gentile⁴²) also includes the danger of eschatological retribution κατὰ τὰ ἔργα: *according to works* (Rom 2:6-16). Aquinas’s understanding of this eschatological judgment decisively shapes his expectations for Paul’s language of justification as the needed solution. According to Aquinas’s interpretation, Paul contrasts the circumcised Jews who transgress the Law and the praiseworthy uncircumcised Gentiles who do not have possession of the Law. As Aquinas interprets it, the point of this comparison is to show that faith (a gift from God) is what causes obedience and not mere possession or knowledge of the law. Gentile believers keep the Law “instinctively” in a way that shows the Law to be “written in their hearts” by the Spirit (not by the letter) on the day of eschatological judgment (Romans 2:14-16, 25-29). Aquinas understands Paul to be showing the Jew that “the Jewish Law heard or accepted” is “not enough for salvation,”⁴³ yet he shows this by comparing Gentiles without the law who are obedient because of faith (the law written in their hearts) with Jews who have possession of the law but are disobedient because they lack faith (they lack the law written on the heart). Aquinas understands the key difference in terms of God’s grace that changes the heart through faith: “Gentiles converted to the faith ... began to obey the moral precepts of the Law by the help of Christ’s grace.”⁴⁴ If Gentiles by faith obey the law instinctively while Jews disobey the law in spite of their possession of it, then the law does not cause divine righteousness; grace-wrought faith does.

Merit in the Eschatological Judgment

⁴⁰ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §299.

⁴¹ Aquinas here appears to understand culpability in the same basic terms as Augustine: culpability is rooted in essential interior corruption. Gerald Hiestand, “Augustine and the Justification Debates: Appropriating Augustine’s Doctrine of Culpability,” *Trinity Journal* 28, no. 1 (2007): 115-39.

⁴² “For all who have sinned without the Law will also perish without the Law, and all who have sinned under the Law will be judged by the Law; for it is not the hearers of the Law who are just before God, but the doers of the Law will be justified. ... But if you bear the name ‘Jew’ and rely upon the Law and boast in God ...” (Romans 2:12-13).

⁴³ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §210.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, §216.

Aquinas's teaching on merit arises in the context of Paul's depiction of eschatological judgment. Because Aquinas understands Paul to be warning the Jews of their need for God's gift of faith (the law written on the heart) in light of the impending eschatological judgment *κατὰ τὰ ἔργα* [*according to works*],⁴⁵ the eschatological judgment Paul depicts is no mere hypothetical for Aquinas, as though Paul were going to relieve the dilemma later by teaching that the judgment will not be based on works after all. For Aquinas, the reason why Paul brings up the eschatological judgment in the first place is to warn the Jews that if God's judgment is impartial and *κατὰ τὰ ἔργα*, only obedient works (not the mere possession of the law) will help them on the day of judgment. Mere possession of the law is useless without faith; one cannot truly obey the law until God's grace has circumcised the heart.

Believing Gentiles, then, are incorporated into Paul's argument for the sake of illustrating the sufficiency of God's gift of faith in the heart for producing the obedience necessary for a favorable judgment in the eschaton. The sufficiency of faith for obedience and eternal reward is contrasted with the insufficiency of mere possession of the law without faith. In other words, Aquinas understands the rhetorical function of Paul's depiction of eschatological judgment "according to works" to forcefully underscore the need for faith *because faith is what produces true obedience in the heart that leads to the kind of works that will be rewarded with eternal life in the eschaton*. This hermeneutical framework decisively shapes Aquinas's understanding of why the justification of the ungodly that produces obedience is by the gift of faith, and since faith is a gift from God, cannot be attained by possession of, or graceless obedience to, law (or any works whatsoever).

Aquinas expounds on Paul's language about the good works that "merit" reward.⁴⁶ First, he argues that "according to works" does not mean "according to equality of works because the reward exceeds the merit."⁴⁷ Second, he gives three characteristics of the deeds Paul depicts as being rewarded with eternal life. Each of these arises from Paul's wording "[God will give] to those who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality, eternal life"

⁴⁵ Paul's expression is hardly ambiguous here: ἐν ἡμέρᾳ ὀργῆς καὶ ἀποκαλύψεως δικαιοκρισίας τοῦ θεοῦ ὃς ἀποδώσει ἐκάστῳ κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτοῦ· τοῖς μὲν καθ' ὑπομονὴν ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν ζωὴν αἰώνιον, τοῖς δὲ ἐξ ἐριθείας καὶ ἀπειθοῦσι τῇ ἀληθείᾳ πειθομένοις δὲ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ ὀργὴ καὶ θυμός. θλιψίς καὶ στενοχωρία ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ψυχὴν ἀνθρώπου τοῦ κατεργαζομένου τὸ κακόν, Ἰουδαίου τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλλήνος· δόξα δὲ καὶ τιμὴ καὶ εἰρήνη παντὶ τῷ ἐργαζομένῳ τὸ ἀγαθόν, Ἰουδαίῳ τε πρῶτον καὶ Ἑλληνι· οὐ γὰρ ἔστιν προσωποληψία παρὰ τῷ θεῷ. (Rom 2:5b-11).

⁴⁶ I put "merit" in quotations because much of the Protestant antipathy towards Aquinas's teaching on merit is caused and perpetuated by a failure to understand Aquinas's own definition for "merit." Aquinas defines: "Merit and reward refer to the same [thing], for a reward means something given anyone in return for work or toil as a price for it." *ST I-II.114.1*. If God gives rewards, they are given for some reason. This reason is what Aquinas refers to as "merit." Merit is simply the reason of reward. If we take Aquinas's definition of "merit," then, we would have to say that anywhere the Bible teaches about reward, some idea of merit is presupposed. As we will see in my conclusion, even Martin Luther admitted to such a thing as "merit" in a biblical sense, a merit that is by grace alone. Unfortunately, he was so opposed to abuses of the term "merit" that he had no place for fully developing a doctrine of "merit" in a biblical sense. Such has been the state of the Protestant tradition to this very day: "merit" is understood to involve something that is fundamentally repugnant to a grace-centered soteriology—while at the same time, the notion of divine reward in the eschaton is accepted without any suspicion.

⁴⁷ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §194.

(Rom 2:7).⁴⁸ The first is patience (καθ' ὑπομονήν) which Aquinas understands in terms of “tolerating adversity” and perseverance. The second feature is “the goodness of a work” (ἔργου ἀγαθοῦ) or its conformity to God’s law (and human reason). The third feature is “right intention, i.e. to seek eternal life” rather than mere temporal goods (δόξαν καὶ τιμὴν καὶ ἀφθαρσίαν ζητοῦσιν).⁴⁹ Aquinas holds fast to this Pauline depiction of the final judgment and thus understands the final meriting of eternal life to be κατὰ τὰ ἔργα. This final meriting of eternal life should not be confused with justification in Aquinas’s thought, for one is by faith and the other by works.

Justification by Faith

To summarize up to this point, several factors have shaped Aquinas’s expectations for Paul’s subsequent language of justification by faith: 1) Paul’s statement that “the just shall *live* by faith,” causes Aquinas to infer that πίστος [*faith*] in Paul’s epistle is no mere intellectual assent, but a “living faith” that fulfills the law.⁵⁰ Aquinas understands faith as a virtue inasmuch as it is a *habitus* (a steady disposition of the will) formed by God’s indwelling, which happens only through charity. Only this kind of faith moves the will to assent to the revealed truth about Christ. Thus for Aquinas, whatever justification means, it must include a change of the core inner person. 2) Paul’s depictions of the human condition in terms of ontological corruption naturally dispose Aquinas to expect Paul’s language of justification do the work of ontological remedy, and this fits nicely with his understanding of the nature of justifying faith as a change of the heart—the interior ontological core of a person. 3) Aquinas’s interpretation of Paul’s warnings to Jews of eschatological judgment “according to works” is understood by Aquinas to include the argument that uncircumcised Gentiles with faith now instinctively keep the law (showing it is “written on their hearts” by the Spirit). 4) Paul’s descriptions of the good works that receive the reward of eternal life are understood by Aquinas to show that perseverance in good works “merit” eternal life and cause one to prevail at the eschatological judgment.

Therefore, when Paul argues that δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ [*the justice of God*] has been manifested χωρὶς νόμου [*apart from the law*], Aquinas takes him simply to mean “without the Law causing righteousness,” for he understands Paul to have already described exactly how this righteousness has been manifested in Gentile Christians who instinctively keep the Law apart from the Law through faith-wrought obedience.⁵¹ That one is justified *apart from the works of*

⁴⁸ But this poses a problem for Aquinas’s understanding. If only those whom God gives the grace of justification can keep the law (and therefore find favor in the eschatological judgment), how can Paul say God is no respecter of persons? Aquinas answers that justice is concerned with debts, “but God calls sinners to repentance not from debt but as a favor.” *Ibid.*, §206. In other words, God gives justice to some, grace to others, and neither distributive justice nor gratuitous grace is an injustice to the sinner.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, §196.

⁵⁰ This is how Aquinas summarizes his previous discussion about faith as a *habitus*. *Ibid.*, §303.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, §300. “This justice of God, I say, has been manifested now, i.e. in the time of grace ... *inasmuch as it is evident that many have been divinely made just*. And this apart from the Law, i.e., without the Law causing righteousness.” Italics added.

the law means without pre-existing merits that prompt God to justify: “without works *prior to becoming just, but not without works following it.*”⁵² Aquinas understands faith as the key principle of righteousness given by God as a gift that works obedience in the lives of the Gentile Christians.

God’s justice is said to exist through faith in Jesus Christ, not as though by faith we merit being justified, as if faith exists from ourselves and through it we merit God’s justice, as the Pelagians assert; but because in the very justification, by which we are made just by God, the first motion of the mind toward God is through faith: “Whoever would draw near to God must believe” (Heb 11:6). Hence faith, as the first part of justice, is given to us by God: “By grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing; for it is the gift of God” (Eph 2:8).

Aquinas gives a succinct summary of his previous explanations of why faith is the key principle of righteousness,⁵³ and why its presence in the just necessarily involves charity and the divine indwelling.

But this faith, out of which justice exists, is not the unformed faith about which James 2(:26) says, “Faith without works is dead,” but it is faith formed by charity, about which Gal 5(:6) says, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith [working through love],” through which Christ dwells in us; “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:17), which does not happen without charity: “He who abides in love abides in God and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16). This is the faith about which Acts 15(:9) says, “He cleansed their hearts by faith,” a cleansing that does not occur without charity: “Love covers all offenses” (Pr 10:12).

... it transcends human power and merit: “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us” (2 Cor 3:5).

... Furthermore, man should not ascribe this glory to himself: “Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to thy name give glory” (Ps 115:1); “Give glory to God” (Ps 66:2).

Consequently, because all have sinned and cannot of themselves be justified, they need some other cause to make them just.⁵⁴

From this last line we can see that Aquinas’s understanding of Paul’s terminology of “justification” as a being “made righteous” (as opposed to merely declared righteous) is shaped by his previous interpretations of Paul’s description of how faith has changed the Gentile Christians into law keepers by a law that is “written on their hearts” within his warnings of eschatological judgment. Faith is that “out of which justice exists” and from which good works

⁵² Ibid., §317. Italics added. This way of qualifying the relationship of works to justification shows that Aquinas thought of justification as an event rather than a process.

⁵³ It is simply erroneous to hold that Aquinas only thought of faith as a virtue and not as a “justifying principle.” Contra David S. Schaff and Robert Reymond: Robert Reymond, “Dr. John Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant,” 114. For Aquinas, this would mean that faith does not cause righteousness, which undermines the most basic contours of his doctrine of justification.

⁵⁴ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §302-306.

come “instinctively.” The gratuitous nature of the grace of justification (“*being justified freely*”) consists in the fact that faith is given as a gift “without the merit of previous works.”⁵⁵ God does not give faith as a recompense for works; it is freely given.

Paul’s discussion of Abraham’s faith being “reckoned to him as righteousness” does not mean (for Aquinas) that Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to him externally. Rather, presumably because the antecedent of “it” (in “*it was reckoned to him as righteousness*”⁵⁶) is Abraham’s act of faith, he takes for granted that it is Abraham’s faith (not Christ’s active and passive obedience) that is “reckoned as righteousness.”⁵⁷ Paul’s uses of the word λογίζομαι⁵⁸ [*count, reckon, take into account*] are understood by Aquinas to highlight that God does not merely look at a person’s outward works (which other persons can see), but reckons a person righteous based on that which God alone can see—“the inward faith of the heart.”⁵⁹ Λογίζομαι functions to distinguish righteousness in eyes of man from righteousness in the sight of God (*iustitia quae est apud Deum*). Just as wickedness is described in ontological terms (“lust of the heart,” “degrading passions,” “desire,” “a depraved mind”: Rom 1:24, 26-28), so true righteousness, as Aquinas perceives it, is considered by God to consist chiefly in the ontological righteousness of the heart.

When Paul says “we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand,” (Rom 5:2) Aquinas worries that this could be taken to mean that a person first believes and then God gives grace. In keeping with all he has said about faith being a divine gift (an infused *habitus*), he argues rather that faith “is the first effect of grace in us.”⁶⁰ Through faith we subsequently “stand” in grace. Aquinas calls this “the state of grace.”⁶¹ Once a person is justified by faith, they are in this state.

Justification, then, in Aquinas’s commentary on Romans,⁶² is “to make righteous” by the Spirit’s writing of the law on the human heart—a law that commands us to love God and love

⁵⁵ Ibid., §306.

⁵⁶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην (Rom 4:3)

⁵⁷ For a more explicit argument for this line of interpretation by a modern Protestant exegete, see Robert H. Gundry’s chapter “The Nonimputation of Christ’s Righteousness,” in *Justification: What’s at Stake in the Current Debates*, ed. Mark Husbands and Daniel J. Treier (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 17-45.

⁵⁸ “Abraham believed God, and it was *credited* to him as righteousness. . . . his faith is *credited* as righteousness. . . . Faith was *credited* to Abraham as righteousness. . . . the righteousness of faith which [Abraham] had . . . not through the Law, but through the righteousness of faith. . . . Therefore it was also *credited* to him as righteousness. . . . it was *credited* to him. . . . but for our sake also, to whom it will be *credited*, as those who believe in Him,” etc. (Romans 4:3, 5, 9, 11, 13, 22, 23, 24).

⁵⁹ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §327.

⁶⁰ Ibid., §383. Aquinas’s *Summa* teaches that the act of faith is the first manifestation of grace. *ST I-II.110.3.ad.1.*

⁶¹ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §383.

⁶² Cf. *ST I-II.113.6*: “The justification of the ungodly is a certain movement whereby the human mind [or soul] is moved by God from the state of sin to the state of justice.” This is a transformation ordained to the removal of sin in the person. *ST I-II.113.8*. Cf. Trent’s definition of justification: “A translation from the state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second

our neighbor, and requires charity.⁶³ It is “to make righteous” by the divine indwelling through the gift of faith which involves a fundamental change of the human will.⁶⁴ In other words, God makes the sinner righteous, apart from the Law and apart from any previous merit (it is a divine gift), by granting to the sinner a new inner disposition (“faith”) that works as a new principle of righteousness that requires charity, the love of God “poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us” (Rom 5:5).⁶⁵ This principle reorients the heart to the Law of God so that it obeys “instinctively” (Rom 2:14). This is justification, the freely given righteousness of God. Only this righteousness, although not merited in any way, is subsequently sufficient for the meriting of the divine reward of eternal life as Paul describes it. In the Thomistic soteriological scenario, then, the righteousness of the justified person is nothing less than the righteousness of God himself dwelling in the human person. Faith and good works are simply the effects of the divine indwelling.

Christ’s Death and Resurrection as Causes of Justification

Aquinas assigns two more causes to justification: Christ’s death and resurrection. Christ died as a necessary part⁶⁶ of making satisfaction for us “while we were yet sinners” (Rom 5:8).

Adam, Jesus Christ, our Savior.” *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Rev. H. J. Schroeder, O.P. (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books and Publishers, 1978), 31. For an examination of the relationships between Aquinas’s doctrine of justification and the council of Trent, see Bryan Cross’s articles “Aquinas and Trent,” parts 1-7, *Called to Communion: Reformation Meets Rome*, last entry posted March 7, 2010, <http://www.calledtocommunion.com/alphabetical-index/>, (accessed 7-19-10).

⁶³ In the *Summa* Aquinas explains more extensively why he thinks justification is said to be “by faith” rather than “by the gift of love.” The reason it is called justification rather than faithification or lovification is because whereas faith and charity “imply a special directing of the human mind to God by the intellect and will,” justification implies a more general “rectitude of order” not limited to either the intellect or the will only. *ST I-II.113.1.ad.2.*

⁶⁴ Desiring to keep the spirit of Augustine, who taught that justification was greater than God’s work of creation (since the heavens and earth will pass away, but the justification of the ungodly will endure), Aquinas also believes that in terms of what is made in justification, “the justification of the ungodly, which terminates at the eternal good of a share in the Godhead, is greater than the creation of the heaven and earth.” The gift of glory is greater, however, in terms of absolute quantity. *ST I-II.113.9.* He also believed that justification was miraculous in the sense that it can only be caused by a divine power and therefore its cause is hidden. It is also miraculous in the sense that it sometimes can involve something beyond the ordinary order of cause and effect. *ST I-II.113.10.* Although Aquinas distinguishes between God’s preparation of a sinner for justification (which might be a successive process) and the act of justification *per se*, he sees any instantaneous preparation or disposal also as miraculous. *ST I-II.113.10.*

⁶⁵ Aquinas understands charity to be another divinely infused *habitus*—the most important of all—that “reaches to the perfecting of all the moral habits and acts of the soul.” Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §392. For Aquinas, this gift is described in Rom 5:5: “And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

⁶⁶ I say “necessary part” because Aquinas believes the whole of Christ’s life—not just his death—is what brought about satisfaction.

This means “he was not moved to do this by our merits.”⁶⁷ “No other person could satisfy for the sin of the entire human race except Christ alone, who was immune from all sin.”⁶⁸ God put forward Christ as an “expiation” for sin and “Christ’s satisfaction was efficacious for justifying and redeeming” since sinners “had no way of making satisfaction unless God himself gave them a redeemer and satisfier.”⁶⁹ Aquinas understands the sacrifice of Christ that accomplished “satisfaction” as “the penalty of death” that Christ suffered “for us, a penalty man had incurred by sin.”⁷⁰ The Law could not “remit,”⁷¹ sins, so Christ suffered the penalty “for us” and this too

⁶⁷ Ibid., §399.

⁶⁸ Ibid., §307.

⁶⁹ Ibid., §308.

⁷⁰ Ibid., §309. Although here it sounds like Aquinas is locating satisfaction in the appeasement of God’s wrath as in a penal substitutionary model, later in his commentary (in his discussion of how the resurrection of Jesus justifies us), Aquinas explains “the penalty of death” not in terms of a wrathful God who pours out his wrath upon Christ at the cross, but simply as the organic outcome of joining the human race, which race had already accrued the penalty for sin: *mortality*. Thus, Aquinas understands the entire life of Christ to accomplish the “satisfaction” needed for redemption. As for why the Scripture so often speaks specifically of the death of Christ as achieving satisfaction for sin, Aquinas sees the whole life of Christ as being symbolically encapsulated in Paul’s language of Christ’s death (i.e. in the manner of a synecdoche: *Pars pro toto*). “For since Christ’s human nature was somehow the organ of his divinity, as Damascene says, all the acts and sufferings of his human nature were salutary for us, considering that they flowed from the power of his divinity. *But because an effect has to some extent a similarity to its cause, the Apostle says that Christ’s death, by which mortal life was extinguished in him, is the cause of extinguishing our sins*” (italics added). Ibid., §380. When discussing how Christ died for the ungodly, Aquinas puts it this way: “The very death of Christ shows God’s love for us, because he gave his own son that he should die *in making satisfaction for us*” (italics added, §399). Rik Van Nieuwenhove’s analysis of Aquinas as a theologian who can “accommodate modern concerns” has considered this aspect of Aquinas’s notion of the sacrifice of Christ. Nieuwenhove appropriates Aquinas as an alternative to views of satisfaction that involve the appeasement of a wrathful God, which, by modern concerns is seen to involve a problematic doctrine of God. Rik Van Nieuwenhove, “Bearing the Marks of Christ’s Passion,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, ed. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 278.

⁷¹ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §310. In the *Summa* Aquinas often defines justification as “remission of sins” and teaches that they are the very same in substance. *ST I-II.113.6.ad.2*. However, interpreters of Aquinas have often misunderstood his use of the term “remission.” For Aquinas, remission refers to the actual removal of ontological sin or corruption. Objection 3 in 113.2 clearly demonstrates the linguistic range of the term, for the objection assumes that “remission of sins” refers to the taking away of an actual sin, not just guilt. *ST 113.2.ad.3*. This point is even clearer when Aquinas argues that the removal of any sin could (technically) be called justification, since “every sin, inasmuch as it implies the disorder of a mind not subject to God, may be called injustice, as being contrary to the aforesaid justice” [i.e. ontological justice]. *ST I-II.113.1.ad.1*. For a recent misunderstanding of this issue, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64. Although McGrath argues that others have misunderstood Aquinas on this point, his own analysis still assumes a forensic understanding of “remission” in Aquinas’s discourse. Once Aquinas’s usage of “remission” is understood correctly, it is easier to see why Aquinas, after defining justification as a transmutation from ontological injustice to ontological justice, would also define the very substance of justification as “remission of sins.” This is also why Aquinas can believe that in the very same act of the infusion of grace, sin is remitted *and* guilt is taken away. *ST I-II.113.6.ad.2*. As we have already seen, Aquinas understands guilt (as does Augustine) to be rooted in ontological corruption. If ontological corruption is taken away, so is the basis for any more guilt. I am not aware of any study attempting to demonstrate the confusion brought about by the forensic categories of the Reformers in their usage of the term “remission,” but it seems likely that Protestant theologians such as McGrath are erroneously reading such exclusively forensic usages back into Aquinas.

demonstrates God's justice for passing over "former sins before the passion of Christ."⁷² However, this redemption "reaches us" only through faith in Christ⁷³ because "the power of Christ's blood works through man's faith."⁷⁴ The resurrection of Christ also causes justification, but Aquinas does not here explain exactly how.⁷⁵

The Insufficiency of Human Works for Justification

The Insufficiency of Temporal Motivation

Aquinas goes into a deeper explanation of why human works cannot cause divine righteousness. He rejects the idea that a sufficient inward *habitus* can be generated by "becoming accustomed to outward works" because the habit necessary for the kind of "good works" Paul describes in his depiction of eschatological judgment requires that one do such works with the right intention—namely, to obtain eternal life (as we have seen). This kind of habit requires something "which exceeds human ability, as is stated in 1 Cor 2:(9), 'It has not arisen in the heart of man what God has prepared for those who live him.'"⁷⁶ In other words, good works ordained to eternal life require faith in something beyond the temporal sphere of life. This kind of faith does not come naturally to the sinner. "Consequently ... a man's heart needs first to be justified inwardly by God, so that he can perform works proportioned to divine glory."⁷⁷

Man's Inability to Earn the Gift of Righteousness

Paul's distinction in Romans 4:4-5 between one who works and receives his "wage" as a debt and the other who does not work but has his faith counted as righteousness causes some

⁷² Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §311.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, §309.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, §310. Aquinas concludes after his discussion of Christ's propitiation: "And so it is clear how there is justification through faith in Jesus Christ, as has been stated above." §309. Aquinas sometimes speaks of grace as "Christ's grace." §216. Also, in his discussion of how circumcision was a shadow of Christ, he mentions that "by bodily circumcision is signified the spiritual circumcision to be accomplished by Christ: first in the soul, inasmuch as it is through him that concupiscence and the effects [*reatus*] of sin are removed by Christ." §348. It is also in his discussion of circumcision that he teaches that "through faith in Christ, of which circumcision was a sign, [circumcision] removed original sin and conferred the help of grace to righteously." §349.

⁷⁵ He simply quotes Rom 6:4: "So that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life." Then, after comparing this with what Christ's life and death accomplishes, he concludes again: "But his resurrection, by which he returns to a new life of glory, he calls the cause of our justification, by which we return to the new life of righteousness." *Ibid.*, §380.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, §325.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

trouble for Aquinas.⁷⁸ He favors an interpretation that would see Paul as ruling out the possibility altogether of anyone being given her reward as a “debt,” and in which case the “working” Paul deplores is a working “*so as to be justified by his works.*”⁷⁹ In this line of interpretation, Aquinas understands Paul to be ruling out works as a ground for justification, but (in keeping with Paul’s depiction of eschatological judgment) not for the meriting of eternal life. Thus, Paul’s point is simply this: faith is not attained as a recompense for works, it is given as a free gift, yet it is only those who have this gift that are considered truly righteous before God and will prevail at the judgment “according to works.”

The Insufficiency of the Law

In his discussion of Abraham’s faith, Aquinas is keen to explain that the reason why righteousness must depend upon faith and not upon the law. He gives several reasons, but the most important one is this: “the Law commands and does not confer the grace to fulfill, according to 2 Cor (3:6): ‘The letter kills, but the Spirit gives life,’ namely, because ‘the Spirit helps us inwardly in our weakness’ (Rom 8:26).”⁸⁰ If righteousness comes by faith—which is a gift and enables one to fulfill the law—the promise does not depend on “man” but upon justifying grace, which Aquinas here calls “infallible.”⁸¹ He comments further on Romans 8:4:

... the intention of the lawgiver is to make citizens good. Human law does this by merely indicating what ought to be done; but the Holy Spirit dwelling in the mind not only teaches what is to be done by instructing the intellect but also inclines the affection to act right.⁸²

⁷⁸ He entertains the possibility of taking both to refer to persons who receive eschatological reward by the working of grace, one by debt and the other by gift. Therefore, if such is the interpretation, the person’s reward is considered “debt” only inasmuch as her “works” are considered “according to their source, namely insofar as they are performed under God’s impulse in accord with the intention of God who predestines. And in this respect the aforesaid reward is due them by debt.” *Ibid.*, §329. Also, if this is the interpretation, the one who “does not work” Aquinas would take to refer to the person who dies before she has time to do any good works but who believes before her death—specifically “one who dies immediately after baptism.” *Ibid.*, §330. However, Aquinas does not favor this interpretation, and suggests an alternative.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, §331. Italics added. To illumine how the nuances of Aquinas’s interpretation affect his reading of this text, I offer a Thomistic interpolation of Romans 4:4-5: “Now to the one who works [thinking that by his works he shall be made righteous], his wage is not credited as a favor, but as what is due, [yet God is debtor to no man]. But to the one who does not work [to be made righteous by his works], but [by the infusion of grace] believes in Him who makes the ungodly righteous, his faith is righteous in God’s eyes [because he truly understands that true righteousness is God’s gift].”

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, §357.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, §360. Cf. *ST I-II.112.3*. “God’s intention cannot fail. ... Hence if God intends, while moving, that the one whose heart He moves should attain to grace, he will infallibly attain to it.” For Aquinas, the infusion of grace and the acceptance of grace are simultaneous in time (except for infants). *ST I-II.113.3*.

⁸² Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §602.

Justification as an Event Rather Than A Process

It can be observed by now that Aquinas understands justification as an event rather than a process.⁸³ The overwhelming force of Aquinas's analysis in Romans presupposes that a sinner is first made just *before* any good works follow. As we have seen, Aquinas emphasizes that "apart from the works of the law" means "without works prior to becoming just," but entails good works after becoming just.⁸⁴ Furthermore, although Aquinas prefers to speak about the change faith brings about in the will, he also views this as a justification of the sinners "heart": "a man's heart needs first to be justified inwardly by God."⁸⁵ Good works done with the intention of the eternal good "signify" that the grace of justification *has already been conferred*.⁸⁶ This implies a temporal scheme in which there is a *before* and *after* of justification without any time lapse in between.⁸⁷ Before justification a person is ungodly. After justification a person is righteous and begins to obey the law of God instinctively.⁸⁸ Previous to justification a person does not have good works and therefore cannot merit God's gift. After justification a person does good works and is capable of meriting eternal life. As we have noted, based on Aquinas's interpretation of the ontological corruption of mankind in the Pauline discourse, Aquinas considers a person to be helplessly⁸⁹ under the power of sin previous to justification (the state of sin) and after justification a person, by faith, stands in grace (the state of grace).⁹⁰

⁸³ In the *Summa*, this conviction of Aquinas's is even more apparent, for he explicitly argues that justification takes place in an instant and that God "needs no disposition of the creature, but provides the sufficient disposition." *ST I-II.113.7*. Although Aquinas lists a number of things that take place in justification and argues for ordering them a certain way, his *Ordo Iustificationis* is not one of temporal order, but one of logical (what he calls "natural") order. This aspect of Aquinas's doctrine of justification and the Catholic doctrine that followed the basic Augustinian paradigm for justification has been misrepresented in Protestant textbook overviews of historical theology. E.g. Alan F. Johnson, Robert E. Webber, *What Christians Believe: A Biblical & Historical Summary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1993), 307. John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 169. Cf. also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1995), 535-40, par 1987-2005.

⁸⁴ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §317.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, §325. Italics added.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, §317.

⁸⁷ Aquinas's distinction between temporal order and the order of nature is especially helpful for understanding why he could speak of aspects of justification happening in a certain "order," even though they are simultaneous in time. *ST I-II.113.8*. Although simultaneous in time, they take place logically in the following order: 1) the infusion of grace [the motion of the divine mover], 2) the movement of the free-will towards God by faith [the movement of the moved], 3) the movement of the free-will against sin [also the movement of the moved], and 4) the remission of sins [the attainment of the end]. *ST I-II.113.6*. Logically/naturally, the motion of the mover (1) precedes the motion of the moved (2-3), while the end attained is naturally last (4). *ST I-II.113.8*. Thomas's *Ordo Iustificationis* is not one of temporal order, but one of logical (what he calls "natural") order.

⁸⁸ φύσει τὰ τοῦ νόμου ποιῶσιν [*by nature doing the things of the law*] (Rom 2:14).

⁸⁹ As we have noted, Aquinas considers a persons incapable *in and of themselves* (i.e. apart from justifying grace) of doing anything that might make them righteous. *Ibid.*, §277. Francis Schaeffer's claim that Aquinas denied human depravity and made perfection possible apart from grace is simply untenable, as is Carl F.H. Henry's claim that Aquinas did not take serious the scriptural claims about the effects of sin. Geisler, *Thomas Aquinas: An Evangelical Appraisal*, 12-13.

Conclusion

It is possible to see the foundational convictions of Aquinas's doctrine of justification in his interpretation of Romans.⁹¹ His perspective on justification was not due to a neglect of Pauline studies,⁹² but just the opposite.⁹³ It was a balancing act between different aspects of Pauline ideas (or at least Aquinas's interpretation of Pauline passages). In conclusion, I will explain only four: 1) justifying faith, 2) the insufficiency of works or the law for justification, 3) the inheritance of eternal life according to works, and 4) merit.⁹⁴

First, Aquinas's understanding of justifying faith comes from Paul. In his commentary on Romans, Aquinas does not hesitate to affirm over and over—without linguistic qualifiers—that “faith justifies.”⁹⁵ He understands Paul to give a lengthy contrast between the ontological corruption caused by sin and the righteousness that comes through faith. Paul describes faith as something a righteous person “lives by,” (Rom 1:17) as “obedience” (Rom 1:5) that “establishes the law” (Rom 3:31) and circumcises the “heart,” (Rom 2:29), as the way to gain access to a

⁹⁰ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §383. In viewing justification as an event, Aquinas is following St. Augustine. Gerald Heistand, *Augustine and Justification Debates: Did Calvin Step Too Far in the Right Direction?* (Morrisville, NC: Lulu Enterprises, 2003), 78-80. In support Heistand also cites Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1937). For an alternative interpretation that sees Augustine as having taught that justification encompasses a process, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 43.

⁹¹ I hope my analysis in this paper further corroborates Joseph P. Wawrykow's case against Karlfried Froehlich and Alister McGrath who suggest that “medieval theologians were misled in their speculation by the Latin rendering of the biblical Greek and Hebrew for “righteousness’.” Joseph P. Wawrykow, *God's Grace and Human Action: 'Merit' in the Theology of Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), 265-66. To attribute over a thousand years of exegesis that took Paul's “justification” in the sense of “made righteous” to a careless linguistic mishap by one Latin theologian (Augustine) is an oversimplification that only obfuscates the hermeneutical and contextual reasons why Aquinas (and Augustine, and others) understood Paul's language of “justification” to imply an ontological change of a sinner from ungodly to righteous. For this historiographic oversimplification, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 20ff.

⁹² Contra G.C. Berkouwer and Robert Reymond. Robert Reymond, “Dr. John Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant,” 121.

⁹³ Wawrykow helpfully points out Aquinas's indebtedness to his principle sources (e.g. the Bible and St. Augustine) in his chapter: “Concluding Observations: Thomas and His Authorities,” in *God's Grace and Human Action*, 260-84.

⁹⁴ Seeing how Aquinas's theology is rooted in biblical interpretation helps expose that evangelical distortions are typically specious. Aquinas held to a grace-centered soteriology based on biblical interpretation, and his doctrine of merit was not a pagan syncretism from Aristotelian philosophy, but a result of his interpretation of the depictions of the final eschatological judgment in Scripture. Furthermore, while it cannot be denied that Aquinas's theology thoroughly utilizes Aristotelian distinctions and predications, if our study of Aquinas's doctrine of justification is representative of his theological methodology, it is equally true that such distinctions and predications are more like the branches on his theological tree than the roots and trunk of his theological convictions. Christians today who use philosophy to defend or explain Christian convictions are utilizing a similar methodology.

⁹⁵ Aquinas, *Lectures on the Letter to the Romans*, §194.

certain “standing” in grace (Rom 5:1-2), and as that which fulfills the requirement of the law in us (*in nobis*, Rom 8:4), etc.⁹⁶ Therefore, Aquinas understands the significance of justifying faith in terms of a change or movement of the heart from sin to God that leads to a “state of grace,” causes true obedience, and ultimately fulfills the demands of the law (even if not perfectly).⁹⁷ To be “made righteous” simply means to be made obedient from the heart to the law of God. This is how he understands justification *by faith* as an internal rectitude that orders the heart aright so that it comes to obey the law instinctively (even if not perfectly).⁹⁸ Obedience from the heart to the law commands charity above all else—love for God and neighbor. This is also why he believes justifying faith, as well as charity (Rom 5:5), are infused by God at the same time. This is also why true faith necessarily requires charity.

Second, Aquinas’s tenacious denial that justification can be earned or merited by any human work is due to Pauline language about justification. Because Paul’s depiction of justification by faith is contrasted with justification by works of the law, Aquinas concludes that true righteousness comes about, not as the result of works or possession of the law, but by the instantaneous infusion of grace when God gives the sinner a new heart that causes them to love God and neighbor: namely, the gift of faith.⁹⁹ Since faith is what causes true obedience to the law—not the law itself or human works—Aquinas considers faith as the true gift of righteousness from God apart from the works of the law.¹⁰⁰ All actions and deeds are dictated by

⁹⁶ I adopted my usage of *in nobis* [inside us] and *extra nos* [outside of us] from Matthew C. Heckel, “Is R.C. Sproul Wrong About Martin Luther? An Analysis of R.C. Sproul’s *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* With Respect to Augustine, Luther, Calvin, and Catholic Luther Scholarship,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 47 no. 1 (2004): 89-120.

⁹⁷ Since Aquinas nowhere detects Paul distinguishing which aspects of faith justify and which do not, he takes for granted that when Paul says justification is “by faith,” this includes faith *in its entirety*. When asking the question, “Why does faith justify?” Aquinas does not quarantine the heavily emphasized dynamics of obedience in Paul’s depictions of faith. For Aquinas, faith justifies because it produces true obedience within. For Calvin, on the other hand, “faith is said to justify because it receives and embraces the righteousness offered in the Gospel.” John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.11.17.

⁹⁸ One of the reasons Calvin believed that faith itself could never justify but was only a “vessel” that received Jesus’ righteousness is this: faith does not fulfill the requirement of the law *perfectly*. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), III.2.1; III.11.7. This raises the further exegetical question of whether the apostle Paul himself, by his expression that “[by faith] we establish the law,” intended *absolute perfection*. Aquinas does not take the apostle in this way.

⁹⁹ Taking for granted Aquinas’s understanding of the meaning of justification (to make the ungodly righteous), for anyone to expect the ungodly to somehow merit their own justification approaches absurdity. Here it is helpful to keep in mind the relationship between *being* and *doing*. Humans *do* what they *do* because they *are* what they *are*. Ontology determines action. Being, then, is logically prior to doing. Therefore, just as a bad tree cannot bear good fruit in order to become a good tree, so for Aquinas, the ungodly cannot bear righteous fruit in order to become righteous—this is logically backwards and impossible. Rather, just as a bad tree must first *become* a good tree before it can bear good fruit, so an ungodly person must first *become* righteous [by God’s instantaneous, unmerited, and transforming grace] before they would be able to *do* the good works in obedience to the law.

¹⁰⁰ In some ways, Aquinas’s view of the extent to which justification is by grace surpasses the position of many Protestants. In Aquinas, justification cannot simply be, as Reymond states, “the inevitable divine response to the sinner’s faith in Jesus Christ” (as some Protestants teach) because this obscures the extent of grace in justification—God does not simply wait on the sinner to believe, but grants the very faith by which the sinner is justified. cf. Reymond, “Dr. John H. Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant,” 116. Aquinas’s notion of faith as a virtue should not be understood as anything less than a free gift of God. It is a “virtue” *in virtue* of the fact that

the internal order of a person's soul. Faith is what causes a person to be righteous *internally*. This results in a changed life—both internally and externally, but from the inside out, and by the indwelling of God. Also, as we have seen, Aquinas does not separate justification from the divine indwelling. Faith is the result of God's infusion of grace. The righteousness that comes from this indwelling and this grace is therefore an alien righteousness¹⁰¹ because it originates from outside of us (*extra nos*) in God and not from inside human persons (*in nobis*).¹⁰² While originating *extra nos*, in justification God's righteousness dwells within us (*in nobis*) and changes our ontology. This is how, for example, the fruits of the Holy Spirit become ours. To ask whether these fruits of righteousness belong to the human person or to God introduces—in this way of thought—a false dichotomy. So in justification, a person becomes righteous by the righteousness of God, for he becomes righteous by the divine indwelling.

Third, Aquinas's view about the inheritance of eternal life κατὰ τὰ ἔργα [*according to works*] comes also from Paul. He does not see the eschatological judgment as hypothetical, but understands Paul to be warning the Jews that the law is not sufficient for prevailing at the eschatological judgment, which is impartial and “according to works.” Therefore, Aquinas understands the need for justification by faith as a need for God to change the heart so that obedience to the law and the doing of good works comes instinctively—as he depicts taking place among the Gentiles who do not have the law. Since Paul's depiction of the eschatological judgment involves giving the reward of eternal life “according to works,” Aquinas teaches that works are the grounds for inheriting of eternal life at the eschatological judgment. This is very different from the grounds of justification. In the eschatological judgment one prevails by faith-wrought works that proceed naturally from the infusion of grace. The eschatological reward of eternal life is indeed *a reward*, and thus implies previous merit. Whereas justification is by

faith orients the inner person toward God as ultimate end (virtues are inner dispositions toward certain goods). It is “infused” for at least three reasons: 1) it is not an exterior or physical reality of the person but rather an invisible internal reality, 2) it is the effect of God's indwelling and thus originates outside of the person (*extra nos*), and 3) it is beyond the natural capacities of that person to acquire. Aquinas's language of “infusion” is employed to keep these sorts of distinctions at the heart of the discussion of virtue. Therefore, it should be no surprise that Jonathan Edwards—a theologian keen on both grace and virtue—employed similar language for similar reasons (to distinguish himself from Arminians), even though his language has been obscured by Protestant translators. Gerald R. McDermott, “Jonathan Edwards on Justification: Closer to Luther or Aquinas?,” *Reformation & Revival* 14, no. 1 (2005): 119.

¹⁰¹ As Cavanaugh explains: “God can perform an act which is both mine and God's at the same time. ‘To be moved voluntarily, is to be moved from within, that is, by an interior principle: yet this interior principle may be caused by an exterior principle; and so to be moved from within is not repugnant to being moved by another’ (I.105.4, ad 2).” William T. Cavanaugh, “A Joint Declaration?: Justification as Theosis in Aquinas and Luther,” 270. Thus, for example, the fruits of the Spirit are ours—we become patient, gentle, peaceful, loving, etc., yet at the same time these are the fruits *of the Spirit*—they are God at work in us. It is a righteousness that is given to the sinner so that it becomes part of who she really is, yet it is nothing more than God in her. In this case, righteousness is not either God's or ours, either alien or human, but must be both. Aquinas's language of “participation” (which is also language used in Orthodox soteriology) overcomes this false dichotomy. Furthermore, it is this understanding of the divine indwelling that I believe significantly overlaps with the Orthodox doctrine of deification.

¹⁰² Contra Robert Reymond, “Dr. John Gerstner on Thomas Aquinas as a Protestant,” 114. And even once it is “inside” human persons, in Aquinas's thought, it is still just God inside us. To ask whether justifying righteousness is inherent to the sinner or an alien righteousness is a false dichotomy in Aquinas's scheme of thought (see above footnote).

grace-wrought faith given without any previous merit, the eschatological reward of eternal life is given as a gracious reward for good works—works done by the power of grace.

Fourth, the Pauline depiction of eschatological judgment is also where Aquinas gets his understanding of merit.¹⁰³ For Aquinas, merit is simply a way of referring to divine reward.¹⁰⁴ God has ordained that works proceeding from grace should receive a reward from Him; therefore they constitute “merit” or reason for reward. Since our work has the character of merit only “on the presupposition of the Divine ordination, it does not follow that God is made our debtor simply, but His own.”¹⁰⁵ Aquinas’s questions in the *Summa* on merit demonstrably show that one of his chief concerns is to protect his grace-centered soteriological convictions (e.g. salvation is infallibly carried out by grace, man never earns his salvation, etc.) in the face of the biblical depiction of the eschatological judgment based on merit. From this balancing act comes Aquinas’s subtle distinctions about how this merit does not involve justice and reward in the absolute and simple sense, and God is never made our debtor.¹⁰⁶ This is because Aquinas understands faith to be a free and unmerited gift from God sufficient for the righteousness that leads to eternal life. The eschatological judgment is based on works, but good works are brought about through the gift of faith (given to those who are predestined),¹⁰⁷ which the sinner never earns or merits. Ultimately, then, merit itself and “eternal life [are] *utter gift*.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰³ As Wawrykow points out, Thomas does not ultimately depend on Aristotle, the Fathers, or any medieval theologian for his teaching on merit, but “claims that his teaching on merit is biblically rooted.” Wawrykow, *God’s Grace and Human Action*, 265. When pressed by Erasmus on the New Testament teaching on “reward,” even Luther himself capitulated to speaking of a biblical sense of merit: “As for merit, *or the proposal of a reward*, what is *it* but a kind of promise? But that promise does not prove that we can do anything; *it* proves only this, that if anyone does this or that, he shall then have a reward. ... If ‘free-will’ cannot will good by itself alone, but wills good by grace alone (for we are speaking of ‘free-will’ apart from grace, and inquiring into the proper power of each), who does not see that the good will, *and merit*, and reward, are of grace alone?” Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, trans. J.I. Packer and O.R. Johnston (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell, 1998), 181. Italics added.

¹⁰⁴ *ST I-II.114.1*. “Merit and reward refer to the same [thing], for a reward means something given anyone in return for work or toil as a price for it.”

¹⁰⁵ *ST I-II.114.1.ad.3*.

¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, the works of the justified *in and of themselves* are not worthy of the divine reward, even though Aquinas speaks of “condign merit.” Inasmuch as such works are considered as springing from the human person, they are unworthy of the divine reward and there is no condignity. However, inasmuch as the works of the justified are considered as springing from the grace of the Holy Spirit living within that person, they constitute condign merit. In other words, merit is only “condign” because the works of the Holy Spirit in the justified are also the works of God himself. Who is willing to say that God’s works are not worthy of reward? *ST I-II.114.3*. Condign reward refers to reward that is given appropriately or “in accordance with a fair judgment.” *ST I-II.114.3*.

¹⁰⁷ Aquinas believes the gifts of faith and justification “signify the effects of predestination in time.” Harm Goris, “Divine Foreknowledge, Providence, Predestination, and Human Freedom,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, eds. Rik Van Nieuwenhove and Joseph Wawrykow (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 102. “A person’s holiness follows on God’s predestining will. ... Thus, in intending a human to eternal life, God also wills for that person the grace that will bring that person to this end. There is nothing in the person that could ‘earn’ either this end or this grace.” Joseph Wawrykow, “Grace,” in *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, 203. This eternal predestination is not based on God’s foreknowledge of that person’s moral goodness: “Foreknowledge of merits is not the cause or reason of predestination.” *ST I.23.5*.

¹⁰⁸ Wawrykow, “Grace,” 203. Italics added.