

Influence of the Forensic Model of Justification in the Interpretation of Romans 4:5

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Abstract

This study examines the influence of the forensic model of justification on the interpretation of Romans 4:5 within Christian theological traditions. Romans 4:5 has long served as a central text in debates concerning the nature of justification, particularly whether justification should be understood as a legal declaration of righteousness or as a transformative process involving moral renewal. The study investigates how the forensic interpretation, especially articulated during the Protestant Reformation by Martin Luther and John Calvin, has shaped exegetical and theological understandings of the Pauline doctrine of justification. It also engages alternative interpretations from Roman Catholic theology, represented by Robert Bellarmine and the Council of Trent, as well as contemporary scholarship associated with the New Perspective on Paul, particularly James D. G. Dunn and N. T. Wright. Using the grammatical-historical method, this research conducts lexical, syntactical, contextual, and theological analysis of Romans 4:5 within its broader literary context in Romans 3–5. Particular attention is given to key Greek terms such as *dikaioō* “justify,” *asebēs* “ungodly,” *logizomai* “credit” or “impute,” and *dikaiosynē* “righteousness.” The findings demonstrate that Paul presents justification as a forensic act in which God declares the ungodly righteous through faith apart from works. The repeated use of legal and accounting terminology strongly supports the doctrine of imputed righteousness rather than infused righteousness or prior moral transformation. The study concludes that the forensic model most adequately explains the language and theological argument of Romans 4:5. Justification in Paul is therefore fundamentally a gracious judicial act of God, grounded in faith and the righteousness of Christ, rather than in human merit or works.

Keywords: Justification, Forensic Model, Protestant reformation, Imputed Righteousness, Justification by Faith, Sanctification, covenant

1. Introduction

The Epistle to the Romans, traditionally attributed to the apostle Paul, stands as one of the most theologically profound and systematically articulated writings in the New Testament. Likely composed in the mid-first century CE, it addresses a diverse Christian community in Rome, composed of both Jewish and Gentile believers. The letter offers a comprehensive explanation of the gospel of Paul, emphasising key doctrines such as justification by faith, the universality of sin, the role of the law, and the transformative power of grace through Jesus Christ.¹ Moving from doctrinal foundations to ethical encouragements, it not only explains the righteousness of God but also urges believers to live in accordance with that righteousness, making it fundamental for Christian theology and practice.

Roman influence was strong in administration, the military, and law, especially in areas such as Corinth, a Roman colony rebuilt by Julius Caesar between 46 and 44 BC and the capital of Achaea, a Roman province from 15 AD. Paul, writing to a Roman audience, likely had Roman law in mind, which his Greek-speaking addressees, mainly from lower classes of Jewish or Greek backgrounds, would have understood and interpreted according to Roman legal principles.²

The forensic model of justification influences the interpretation of Romans 4:5 by viewing justification as a legal declaration of righteousness. This model, prevalent in the Pauline epistles, especially in Romans, sees justification as God's divine act of declaring a believer righteous based on faith, not works. It's crucial for understanding Paul's theology of salvation and righteousness, in contrast to models focused on moral change or church inclusion. The forensic model highlights the legal and declarative aspects of justification, central to the argument of Paul.

Paul uses forensic metaphors extensively in Romans to convey the concept of justification. These metaphors are drawn from legal settings, where justification is akin to a judge declaring a defendant not guilty. This is evident in the way Paul contrasts the righteousness of God with Roman justice, highlighting the

¹ David A. deSilva, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Contexts, Methods & Ministry Formation* (InterVarsity Press, 2018), 441.

² Andrie Du Toit, *Forensic Metaphors in Romans and Their Soteriological Significance*, n.d., 54.

unconventional nature of divine grace that operates beyond human legal systems.³ The

forensic model is further supported by the notion that justification involves imputing Christ's righteousness to believers, granting them a right standing before God. This legal declaration is not based on the believer's works but on faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice. It is in this context that the paper will discuss the influence of the forensic model of justification in the interpretation of Romans 4:5.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Justification is one of the central theological themes in the Pauline corpus, particularly in Epistle to the Romans. Among the key passages addressing this doctrine is Romans 4:5, where the apostle states that God justifies the ungodly. Historically, Christian theologians have interpreted this statement through the forensic model of justification, which understands justification as a legal declaration in which God pronounces the sinner righteous apart from works.

This forensic interpretation gained prominence during the Protestant Reformation through the theological reflections of figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, who emphasised the legal and declarative nature of justification in opposition to medieval sacramental and transformative interpretations associated with scholastic theology. As a result, Romans 4:5 has frequently been seen as a key proof text supporting the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

However, modern biblical scholarship has questioned whether the forensic model fully captures what Paul intended as its meaning. The emergence of the New Perspective on Paul, promoted by scholars such as E. P. Sanders, James D. G. Dunn, and N. T. Wright, has challenged traditional Protestant interpretations by highlighting the covenantal and socio-historical aspects of the language of Paul of justification. These discussions have sparked significant debate about whether justification in Romans 4:5 should mainly be seen as a legal declaration, covenantal membership, or a combination of both.

Despite extensive scholarship on justification in Paul, there remains a need for a focused study on how the forensic model specifically influences the interpretation of Romans 4:5. Many

³ Ibid.

interpretations assume the forensic framework without critically examining how that model shapes exegetical conclusions. As a result, the relationship between theological presuppositions and textual interpretation in this verse has not been sufficiently explored.

This study, therefore, aims to examine how the forensic model of justification has influenced the interpretation of Romans 4:5 and to assess whether such a model accurately captures the intended meaning of the Apostle Paul within the literary, historical, and theological context of the epistle.

1.2 Research Question

How has the forensic model of justification influenced the interpretation of the Epistle to the Romans 4:5 in Christian theological traditions?

1.3 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to examine how the forensic model of justification influences the interpretation of Romans 4:5 and to evaluate the adequacy of this interpretive framework in explaining the theological argument of Paul. More specifically, the study aims to analyse Romans 4:5 within the broader literary and theological context of the Epistle to the Romans. It will examine the development of the forensic understanding of justification in Christian theology, particularly within the Protestant tradition, and investigate how major theologians and biblical scholars have interpreted Romans 4:5 through the lens of the forensic model.

Moreover, this study will evaluate alternative interpretations proposed in contemporary Pauline scholarship and contribute to a clearer understanding of the doctrine of Paul of justification and its implications for theological interpretation. Ultimately, the study seeks to clarify whether the forensic model adequately explains the language of Paul's justification in Romans 4:5 or whether additional theological and contextual dimensions must be considered.

1.4 Methodology

This study employs the exegetical method within the historical-grammatical method of biblical interpretation. The method seeks to determine the meaning of the text in its original historical and literary context. The methodology includes Lexical, syntactic, contextual, and historical-theological analysis.

1.5 Delimitations of the Study

This study is limited to Romans 4:5 as the primary text, along with its immediate and theological context. It does not attempt to provide a full systematic theology of justification but focuses specifically on the exegetical basis of the forensic model.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The doctrine of justification has occupied a central place in Christian theology, particularly in discussions concerning the nature of salvation, grace, and righteousness. Romans 4:5 has served as a critical proof text in debates regarding whether justification is forensic, that is, a legal declaration of righteousness, or transformative, involving an internal moral renewal. The Pauline doctrine of justification focuses on justification involving an act of judgment.⁴ According to the Essenes of Qumran, the pious cannot achieve acquittal in the judgment by their own perfection. IQS 11:10-15 affirms, “for mankind has no way and man is unable to establish his steps since justification is with God...”⁵ This chapter surveys major interpretations of justification with special attention to Romans 4:5, focusing on Reformation theology, Roman Catholic responses, modern Pauline scholarship, and the perspective of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The purpose of this review is to identify areas of agreement, disagreement, and unresolved exegetical questions that justify the present study.

2.2 What is the relation of Romans 4:5 with the forensic model of justification?

Romans 4:5 stands as a foundational text for understanding justification in forensic terms, with the Greek word *logos* counted or credited functioning as a legal declaration rather than a transformative act.⁶ The passage directly illustrates the judicial character of justification of the theology of Paul by contrasting two paths to righteousness: those who perform works of the law versus

⁴ Peter Stuhlmacher, *Revisiting Paul's Doctrine of Justification: A Challenge to the New Perspective* (InterVarsity Press, 2012), 14.

⁵ *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English* (A&C Black, 1995), 79–88.

⁶ Benjamin L. Merkle and Thomas R. Schreiner, *Shepherding God's Flock: Biblical Leadership in the New Testament and Beyond* (Kregel Publications, 2014), 196.

those who believe, with faith itself becoming the grounds upon which God pronounces someone righteous.⁷

The forensic model hinges on a critical distinction that Romans 4:5 crystallises. When God justifies the ungodly, this act establishes a

new relationship through forgiveness, meaning the justified person is declared righteous rather than made righteous.⁸ This differs fundamentally from transformative understandings of salvation. Paul deliberately avoids claiming that justified individuals acquire standing before God through infused righteousness; instead, righteousness is imputed or credited to them.⁹ Precisely, what Romans 4:5 demonstrates through its repeated use of the accounting language affirms this notion.

The power of the passage lies in its structural argument. Justification proves to be an objective forensic judgment rather than a subjective transformation because its antithesis is condemnation, which is unmistakably a juridical determination.¹⁰ By contrasting righteousness through faith with righteousness through works of law, Paul teaches that believers are declared right before God by faith alone.¹¹ This makes Romans 4:5 not merely supportive of forensic justification but constitutive of it. The passage demonstrates how God functions as judge, pronouncing a verdict of righteousness upon the believer based on faith rather than performance.

2.3 The Reformation and the Forensic Model of Justification

The forensic model of justification was articulated most clearly during the Protestant Reformation. Reformers emphasized that justification is a declarative act of God in which righteousness is imputed to the believer apart from works. Various scholars, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, amongst others, support this notion.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 2006), 204.

⁹ Robert L. Reymond, *Paul, Missionary Theologian* (Mentor, 2000), 435–36.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, (InterVarsity Press 2006) 204.

2.3.1 Martin Luther

Martin Luther regarded justification by faith alone (*sola fidei*) as the central doctrine of Christianity. His interpretation of Romans 4:5 was foundational to his understanding of salvation. Luther argued that God justifies the ungodly not by making them inherently righteous but by declaring them righteous based on Christ's righteousness.¹² In his commentary on Romans, Luther emphasized the importance of the term *logizetai* (credited),

arguing that it refers to a legal reckoning rather than a moral transformation. For Luther, Justification represents a change in legal status before God, not an immediate change in moral character.¹³

Scholars such as John Wesley moderated the influence of Luther after splitting from the Moravians. Through the decades, Wesley continued to recognize his debt to Luther, despite differences concerning imputation and personal holiness.¹⁴ Moreover, Alister McGrath notes that the interpretation of Luther established justification as fundamentally forensic, rooted in divine grace and received through faith alone.¹⁵

2.3.2 John Calvin

John Calvin further developed the forensic doctrine of justification in his theology. Calvin defined justification as the acceptance with which God receives us into His favor as righteous persons.¹⁶ Calvin explicitly rejected the idea that justification includes moral transformation. Instead, he distinguished justification from sanctification, arguing that justification is an instantaneous legal declaration based on the imputed righteousness of Christ.¹⁷

In his commentary on Romans, Calvin interpreted Romans 4:5 as clear evidence that justification involves imputation rather than infusion.¹⁸ He explicitly interprets the phrase “counted (*λογίζεται*)

¹² Robert Kolb, *Martin Luther: Confessor of the Faith* (OUP Oxford, 2009), 5.

¹³ Kolb, *Martin Luther*, 9.

¹⁴ Mark K. Olson, *Martin Luther's Contribution to John Wesley's Doctrine of Justification*, n.d., 13, accessed March 30, 2026, <https://dx.doi.org/10.5325/weslmethstud.13.2.0130>.

¹⁵ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 213.

¹⁶ Charles Raith II, *After Merit: John Calvin's Theology of Works and Rewards* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 91.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ John Calvin, *Commentary on Romans* (Ravenio Books, 2012), 157.

for righteousness” to mean righteousness is reckoned or imputed to the believer. It is not infused as an inherent moral quality. Justification is therefore forensic (legal), not transformative in its essence.¹⁹ The interpretation of Calvin became normative in Reformed theology and remains influential in contemporary Protestant scholarship.

2.4 Roman Catholic Response and the Transformative Model

The Protestant doctrine of forensic justification was strongly opposed by Roman Catholic theologians, particularly during the Counter-Reformation. The rejection is categorical in the writings of Robert Bellarmine and the Council of Trent. .

2.4.1 Robert Bellarmine

Robert Bellarmine was one of the most influential Catholic critics of Protestant justification. Bellarmine rejected the forensic model and argued that justification involves both forgiveness of sins and inner renewal. He interpreted justification as a process in which righteousness is infused into the believer, resulting in moral transformation. He argued that God does not merely declare sinners righteous but actually makes them righteous.²⁰ Critics have argued that Bellarmine conflates justification with sanctification by including moral transformation within justification itself.

2.4.2 The Council of Trent

The Catholic position was formally defined by the Council of Trent, which declared that justification includes both remission of sins and sanctification. The Council rejected the Protestant doctrine of imputed righteousness and affirmed that justification involves the infusion of righteousness. This interpretation has remained normative in Catholic theology.²¹

2.5 Modern Protestant Scholarship

Contemporary Protestant scholars have largely continued to affirm the forensic model of justification, though with some

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Roberto Bellarmino, *Disputatio de verbo Dei scripto et non scripto* (1618), 31.

²¹ Anthony N. S. Lane, *Justification by Faith in Catholic-Protestant Dialogue*, 2006, 86.

modifications. Some of these scholars include Douglas Moo and Thomas Schreiner.

2.5.1 Douglas Moo

Douglas Moo argues that justification in Romans is fundamentally forensic. Moo emphasizes that the language of justification in Romans reflects legal terminology drawn from the courtroom. Moo

interprets Romans 4:5 as clear evidence that justification involves imputation rather than moral transformation.²²

2.5.2 Thomas Schreiner

Moreover, Thomas Schreiner similarly argues that justification involves a legal declaration. Schreiner emphasizes that God justifies the ungodly apart from works, demonstrating that justification is based entirely on faith.²³

2.6 The New Perspective on Paul

The forensic model has been challenged by scholars associated with the New Perspective on Paul. James Dunn and N.T.Wright sheds more light on the forensic model.

2.6.1 James Dunn

James D. G. Dunn argued that justification should be understood in terms of covenant membership rather than legal imputation. Dunn emphasized the relational and covenantal dimensions of justification.²⁴

2.6.2 N. T. Wright

N. T. Wright argued that justification refers primarily to God's declaration that a person is a member of the covenant community. While Wright affirms the declarative nature of justification, he rejects the traditional Protestant emphasis on imputed righteousness.²⁵ Across these pages, Wright's central claim is that justification is not primarily about the transfer of righteousness. It

²² Douglas J. Moo, *James: An Introduction and Commentary* (InterVarsity Press, 2015), 148.

²³ Schreiner, *Paul, Apostle of God's Glory in Christ*, (InterVarsity Press 2006) 207 .

²⁴ "Biblicalstudies.Org.Uk/Pdf/Ashland_theological_journal/41-1_137.Pdf," n.d., 141, accessed March 30, 2026, https://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ashland_theological_journal/41-1_137.pdf.

²⁵ N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God* (SPCK, 2013), 473.

is about God demonstrating His own righteousness (faithfulness to the covenant).

2.7 Seventh-day Adventist Understanding of Justification

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms the forensic nature of justification while maintaining its close relationship to sanctification. Ellen G. White emphasized that justification involves forgiveness of sins and acceptance with God, while sanctification

involves moral transformation.²⁶ She distinguished clearly between justification and sanctification, stating that justification is the believer's title to heaven, while sanctification is the believer's fitness for heaven.²⁷ This perspective maintains the forensic model while emphasizing the importance of transformation.

2.8 The Research Gap

The literature review highlights several key conclusions. First, the Reformers viewed Romans 4:5 as supporting the forensic model of justification. Second, Catholic theologians opposed the forensic model and focused on transformation. Third, contemporary Protestant scholars generally support the forensic interpretation. Fourth, the New Perspective has challenged traditional understandings. Despite extensive theological debate, disagreements persist regarding the precise meaning of Romans 4:5. Many theological positions have been formed without sufficient exegetical analysis of the text itself.

3. EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF ROMANS 4:5

3.1 Introduction

Romans 4:5 stands as one of the most significant Pauline texts for understanding the nature of justification. It has been central to theological debates concerning whether justification is primarily forensic, a legal declaration of righteousness, or transformative, involving moral renewal. This chapter presents a grammatical-historical and theological exegesis of Romans 4:5, focusing on its lexical, syntactical, and contextual features in order to determine its meaning and theological implications.

²⁶ Ellen G. White, *The Sanctified Life* (Review and Herald Pub Assoc, 2006), 10.

²⁷ Ellen G. White, *Faith and Works* (Review and Herald Pub Assoc, 2003), 106.

Romans 4:5 contrasts the way of working for reward with believing in God's promises made to the unworthy and ungodly.²⁸ The exegetical force of the passage derives from Paul's deliberate use of the Greek term λογίζομαι (reckoned or credited), as used in verse 3-4, which carries commercial and legal weight. Paul employs this accounting language through an analogy of wages, something earned and owed rather than gifted, to establish that if righteousness

came through work, it would be something deserved, whereas faith instead receives what cannot be earned.²⁹

The characterization of God as justifying the ungodly proves crucial to Paul's argument. As the chapter is entitled, Abraham himself was not justified because he exemplified obedience; rather, he represents the ungodly person justified by faith.³⁰ Abraham's faith was credited as righteousness while still uncircumcised, before circumcision was even commanded,³¹ which demolishes any claim that works preceded or enabled his justification. The crediting of righteousness consists in the forgiveness of sin, not a matter of being rewarded for faithful obedience, but having one's lawless deeds freely forgiven and sin not counted against one.³²

Paul universalizes the experience of Abraham by juxtaposing two kinds of people and two standards, the one who works versus the one who does not work but believes in God who justifies the ungodly.³³ This construction transforms Abraham from a particular historical figure into a paradigm for all believers. His faith represents not admirable faithfulness but empty-handed reliance on God's promise,³⁴ making Romans 4:5 fundamentally about the nature of faith itself, not as achievement or virtue, but as receptive trust in divine declaration.

The verse reads as follows in the Greek text of *Novum Testamentum Graece*:

²⁸ Thomas K. Ascol and Nathan A. Finn, *Ministry by His Grace and for His Glory: Essays in Honor of Thomas J. Nettles* (Founders Press, 2011), 195–97.

²⁹ Stanley E. Porter, *Sacred Tradition in the New Testament: Tracing Old Testament Themes in the Gospels and Epistles* (Baker Academic, 2016), 192.

³⁰ Ascol and Finn, *Ministry by His Grace and for His Glory 195-97*.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Channing L. Crisler, *An Intertextual Commentary on Romans, Volume 1: Romans 1:1-4:25* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021), 286.

³⁴ Ascol and Finn, *Ministry by His Grace and for His Glory, 195-97*.

τῷ δὲ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ πιστεύοντι δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῆ, λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην

Translated literally as, “But to the one not working, but believing upon the One who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness.”

3.2. Literary Context of Romans 4:5

3.2.1 Immediate Context: Romans 4

Romans 4 illustrates the principle of justification by faith, using Abraham as the primary example. Paul argues that Abraham was justified by faith apart from works, citing Genesis 15:6. The repeated use of the verb *logizomai* (to credit, reckon, or count) emphasizes the concept of imputation. Romans 4:5 serves as

a theological summary of Paul’s argument, emphasizing that justification is granted to the one who believes rather than the one who works.

3.2.2 Broader Context: Romans 3–5

Romans 3:21–26 presents justification as a gift of grace received through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul clearly states in Romans 3:28 that a person is justified by faith alone, apart from works of the law. Romans 5 then explains the consequences of justification, including peace with God. This wider context affirms that justification is an act of God grounded in grace, not human works.

3.3 Lexical Analysis

This section examines key Greek terms in Romans 4:5.

δικαιοῦντα (dikaiounta) – “Justifies”

The verb *dikaioō* means “to justify,” “to declare righteous,” or “to acquit.” In judicial contexts, the term refers to a legal declaration rather than a moral transformation. This forensic meaning is consistent throughout Paul’s writings. For example, Romans 8:33 states: “Who will bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies.” The courtroom setting indicates a legal declaration.

Importantly, God is described as justifying the ungodly, which suggests that justification occurs while the individual is still a sinner. This strongly supports a forensic interpretation.

ἀσεβῆ (asebē) – “Ungodly”

The term *asebēs* refers to someone who is impious or ungodly. This term describes individuals who lack righteousness. The fact that God justifies the ungodly demonstrates that justification does not depend on prior moral transformation. If justification required moral righteousness, the individual could not be described as ungodly. This

provides strong evidence that justification is declarative rather than transformative.

λογίζεται (logizetai) – “Credits” or “Counts”

The verb *logizomai* means “to credit,” “to reckon,” or “to impute.” This term was commonly used in financial and legal contexts. It refers to assigning something to someone’s account. In Romans 4, the term appears repeatedly, emphasizing the concept of imputation. Faith is credited as righteousness. This suggests that righteousness is not inherent but credited. This concept is central to the forensic model of justification.

δικαιοσύνη (dikaiosynē) – “Righteousness”

The term refers to righteousness or right standing before God. In this context, righteousness is something credited to the believer. This indicates that righteousness is not earned but given.

3.4 Syntactical Analysis

The structure of the verse contrasts two types of individuals: First, the one not working, second, the one believing. This contrast demonstrates that justification is based on faith rather than works. The phrase, God who justifies the ungodly identifies God as the agent of justification. The ungodly are the recipients. The verb credited is in the passive voice. This suggests divine action. God is the one who credits righteousness.

3.5 Theological Analysis

The verse clearly identifies God as the one who justifies. This emphasizes that justification is a divine act of grace. It is not

earned. It is one of the most significant theological statements in the verse. God justifies the ungodly. This indicates that justification occurs before moral transformation. The concept of crediting righteousness suggests imputation. Righteousness is credited to the believer. This is consistent with the theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin. This supports the forensic model.

3.6 Historical-Theological Interpretation

Reformation theologians interpreted this verse as supporting forensic justification. In contrast, Catholic theologians such as Robert Bellarmine argued for infused righteousness. However, the language of crediting supports imputation rather than infusion.

3.7 Summary and Conclusion of Exegetical Findings

This exegetical analysis has demonstrated several key conclusions. Justification is performed by God. Justification is granted to the ungodly. Justification involves crediting righteousness. Justification is based on faith. Justification is not based on works. These findings strongly support the forensic model.

This chapter has examined Romans 4:5 using grammatical-historical exegesis. The evidence supports the conclusion that justification is forensic. God declares the ungodly righteous. This declaration is based on faith. Righteousness is credited. This provides strong exegetical support for the forensic model of justification.

4. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE FORENSIC MODEL OF JUSTIFICATION

4.1 Introduction

The exegetical analysis of Romans 4:5 in the previous chapter demonstrated that justification is presented as a declarative act of God in which righteousness is credited to the one who believes apart from works. This conclusion carries significant theological implications for understanding the nature of salvation, the

relationship between justification and sanctification, the role of faith, and the assurance of salvation. This chapter explores these implications by engaging historical and contemporary theological perspectives, including those of Martin Luther, John Calvin, Robert

Bellarmino, and the teachings of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, as well as modern Pauline scholarship.

The forensic model of justification raises several significant theological tensions that contemporary scholarship continues to navigate. Rather than treating forensic justification as a complete account of salvation, modern theology increasingly recognizes it as one essential dimension within a broader soteriological framework.

A major concern involves whether forensic justification must be opposed to union with Christ and participation in godly life. Some contemporary theologians have emphasized union and adoption as controlling metaphors while downplaying the forensic element.

Though this opposition itself proves unnecessary, forensic and transformative understandings need not conflict.³⁵ Recent ecumenical dialogue has moved toward affirming that justification is simultaneously forensic (the forgiveness of sins) and effective (the making righteous).³⁶

Luther's approach demonstrates that forensic language need not imply a legal fiction divorced from real change. He understood the justifying verdict as a performative word that accomplishes what it declares, grounded in his conviction that words actually alter and create reality.³⁷ Rather than restricting imputation to accounting language, recent scholarship suggests that Christ's imputed righteousness can include genuine transformation. Luther's concept of Christ present in faith illustrates how imputation brings both forensic declaration and lifelong renewal.³⁸

A critical gap in traditional forensic models concerns pneumatology. Protestant formulations typically emphasize the declaration of the Father and the work of the Son while leaving the role of the Holy Spirit unclear. This creates a tension with the ancient principle that all divine actions involve the undivided Trinity.³⁹ This suggests that a complete theology of justification must integrate the role of the spirit in making believers alive and renewing them, not merely pronouncing them righteous.

³⁵ Paul Copan and Michael M. C. Reardon, *Transformed into the Same Image: Constructive Investigations into the Doctrine of Deification* (InterVarsity Press, 2024), 286–87.

³⁶ Copan and Reardon, *Transformed into the Same Image*, 286–87.

³⁷ Robert Kolb, Irene Dingel, and Lubomír Batka, *The Oxford Handbook of Martin Luther's Theology* (OUP Oxford, 2014), 265.

³⁸ Copan and Reardon, *Transformed into the Same Image*, 286–87.

³⁹ Jeffrey K. Anderson, *Justification as the Speech of the Spirit: A Pneumatological and Trinitarian Approach to Forensic Justification* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2021), 127.

4.2 Justification as a Forensic Declaration

The primary theological implication of Romans 4:5 is that justification is forensic in nature. This means that justification involves a legal declaration by God rather than an internal moral transformation. The language of crediting righteousness (*logizetai*) reflects a judicial or accounting metaphor in which righteousness is reckoned to the account of the believer.

The forensic model emphasizes that justification originates entirely in the grace of God. Human beings, described as ungodly, lack the moral capacity to achieve righteousness through their own efforts.

The fact that God justifies the ungodly demonstrates that justification is not based on human merit but on divine grace.

Luther emphasized this point in his doctrine of *sola fide*, arguing that justification is received through faith alone and not through works. He understood justification as an external declaration grounded in the righteousness of Christ rather than in the moral condition of the believer. Similarly, Calvin argued that justification involves the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the believer. This imputation establishes the legal standing before God of the believer.

4.3 Imputed Righteousness and Union with Christ

The forensic model is closely connected to the concept of imputed righteousness. This doctrine teaches that the righteousness of Christ is credited to the believer. Conceptually, Imputation refers to the assignment of righteousness to the account of the believer. This righteousness is not inherent but is credited by God. Romans 4:5 provides strong support for this concept by using accounting terminology. This doctrine preserves the distinction between justification and sanctification. While Justification changes the legal status of the believer, Sanctification changes the moral character of the believer.

The forensic model is also grounded in the work of Christ. The obedience of Christ and sacrificial death provide the basis for justification. The righteousness of the believer is therefore not self-generated but derived from Christ. This ensures that justification rests entirely on the work of Christ rather than human effort.

4.4 Justification and Sanctification

One of the most important theological implications concerns the relationship between justification and sanctification. Justification is a legal declaration. Sanctification is a process of moral transformation. Romans 4:5 indicates that justification occurs apart from works. This suggests that sanctification must be distinguished from justification. On the other hand, Calvin emphasized that justification and sanctification are distinct but inseparable.

In contrast, Bellarmine argued that justification includes moral transformation. This interpretation was affirmed by the Council of

Trent. This view understands justification as involving infused righteousness. However, this interpretation faces difficulty explaining how God can justify the ungodly if justification requires prior moral transformation.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church affirms the forensic nature of justification while emphasizing the importance of sanctification. Ellen G. White distinguished justification from sanctification while affirming their close relationship.⁴⁰ She taught that justification provides the title of the believer to heaven, while sanctification prepares the believer for heaven. This perspective maintains the forensic model while affirming the necessity of transformation.

4.5 Faith as the Instrument of Justification

Romans 4:5 highlights that justification is obtained through faith. Faith is not a work but a way of receiving righteousness. Faith links the believer to Christ. This guarantees that justification remains rooted in grace. Faith does not earn justification, but it receives it.

4.6 Assurance of Salvation

The forensic model provides a strong foundation for assurance of salvation. If justification is based on God's declaration rather than human performance, the assurance of the believer rests on the faithfulness of God. Luther found great comfort in this doctrine. The believer can have confidence in salvation because it depends on the declaration of God.

4.7 Soteriological Implications

⁴⁰ White, *Faith and Works*, 20.

The forensic model safeguards the doctrine of salvation by grace. It ensures that salvation is not based on human merit. It preserves the distinction between justification and sanctification. It affirms the sufficiency of the work of Christ.

4.8 Eschatological Implications

Justification has implications for final judgment. The believer stands justified before God. This justification is based on the righteousness of Christ. This provides confidence in the final judgment.

5. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the summary of the study, the theological conclusions regarding the forensic model of justification, and recommendations for further theological research and ecclesial application. The purpose of this research was to examine Romans 4:5 within its immediate literary, historical, and theological contexts to evaluate the validity and implications of the forensic model of justification.

5.2 Summary and Conclusion

This study was undertaken in response to ongoing theological debates concerning the nature of justification, particularly the distinction between forensic or legal declaration and transformative or moral change models. The forensic model, strongly articulated during the Protestant Reformation by figures such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, emphasizes justification as a legal declaration of righteousness by God, apart from works.

This research has shown that Romans 4:5 offers strong exegetical support for the forensic view of justification. The evidence clearly indicates that justification is a legal declaration, based on imputed righteousness, received through faith, and unrelated to works.

God justifies the ungodly not by changing their moral nature at the moment of justification but by declaring them righteous based on faith. Sanctification follows justification but should never be confused with it. The forensic model, therefore, remains the most

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biblically accurate interpretation of justification in the theology of Paul.