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FACTITIVE OR FORENSIC? THOMAS CRANMER AND THE DOCTRINE OF JUSTIFICATION

Charles E. Fry

Did Cranmer think that justification was about being made righteous, as some have argued, or being declared righteous? This article demonstrates that the latter was Cranmer's mature view, which carried him through the flames of martyrdom.

Introduction

In 1523, a bitter Cambridge don wrote in the margin of John Fisher's *Assertionis Lutheran Confutatio* these words: "Luther wantonly attacks, and raves against, the Pontiff... He accuses a whole council of madness; it is he who is insane!.. oh, the arrogance of a most wicked man!"¹ Yet thirty three years later, this man went through the martyr's flames for his Protestant faith, embracing Luther's condemnation of the Catholic Mass, as well as embracing, in broad terms, Luther's doctrine of justification by faith alone. The man, of course, was Thomas Cranmer (1489–1556). He would be instrumental in bringing the Reformation to England and making justification by faith alone the official teaching of the newly founded Church of England.

What, exactly, was Cranmer's doctrine of justification? Did he teach a factitive or a forensic justification? What implications do these questions have for our present day? The aim of this essay is to examine and answer these questions, first by briefly considering Cranmer's life and doctrinal development that ultimately gave him settled conviction on justification. This enables us to better interpret Cranmer and why he articulated his doctrine as he did. Second, attention will be given to defining the issue and key terms—specifically, the terms, "factitive" and "forensic." Third, this essay will assert that in the end, Cranmer held to a forensic understanding of justification. The main primary source that will be used is Cranmer's 1547 *Homily of Salvation*, a work that seemed to have been given confessional status by Cranmer.² Finally, this essay will end with a summary and some brief implications of Cranmer's doctrine for us today.

¹ Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 27.

² James I. Packer and G. E. Duffield, eds., *The Work of Thomas Cranmer* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1965), xxiii, xxix. Packer asserts that Cranmer

In order to understand Cranmer's doctrine of justification, it is important to first become familiar with the man himself—his personality, concern, and theological development—that we might better read and interpret and his work.

1. Cranmer's Background and Doctrinal Development

There are four aspects to Cranmer's background and process of doctrinal development that are helpful to understand if we are to interpret rightly his doctrine of justification. These four developments help us understand why he wasn't as precise at times in his doctrine of justification and why his earlier works were not as clear. The first is his cautious temperament and desire for a slow and steady reform. Geoffrey Bromiley states, "By temperament Cranmer was cautious and conservative. He came slowly to his own convictions, and he did not attempt to press them hastily on others. He was content to wait both for favourable circumstances on the one hand and a leaven of instruction on the other. His aim was not to sectionalise the church and nation, but if possible to carry them with him..."³ He was careful about leaving his Catholic moorings and cautious about expressing his views on justification in a way that did not upset Henry VIII. But after Henry VIII died and Edward VI came to the throne, Cranmer unveiled his *Homily of the Salvation of Mankind* (on justification), as well as his notebooks (*Great Commonplaces*) which revealed the extent of his scholarship on justification by faith alone. When providence opened the door of opportunity, Cranmer was ready with a fully developed doctrine of justification, which he hoped would reform the Church of England.

A second factor in Cranmer's personality as related to justification was his method of achieving doctrinal certainty. Cranmer came to certainty through two means: a deep reverence for the Scriptures as his ultimate authority and a close study of the church fathers. Cranmer did not want to discover anything new; he did not trust himself or his own interpretation. Rather, he began by careful study of the Scriptures themselves, citing in his *Notes on Justification* (date uncertain) passages on justification by faith alone, along with quotes from the Church fathers that supported *sola fide*. Where these coincided, Cranmer believed the truth could be known:

regarded "the homily on Salvation as having confessional status, as appears from Article XI of his Forty-Two."

³ Geoffrey Bromiley, *Thomas Cranmer, Theologian* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), xix.

“There he could be sure that his own understanding of Scripture was not just a private eccentricity, but that he had found the true catholic faith... ‘When all the fathers agreed in the exposition of any place of Scripture... he looked on that as flowing from the Spirit of God.’”⁴ Cranmer’s desire for ecumenicity and for concurrence with the fathers shaped his wording on justification; he wanted to affirm Augustine (for example) and at the same time embrace the Protestant understanding of *sola fide*.

A third factor in Cranmer’s development of justification was his visit to Nuremberg in 1532. During his year on the Continent, he was exposed first hand to the German reformers, their theology, and godly lives.⁵ He encountered the Lutheran Andreas Osiander and married Osiander’s wife’s niece, a clear break from the conservative (Roman Catholic) faith and practice. This point is important, for it was the first sign of his fissure with Rome. More importantly, his trip to Nuremberg brought him into contact with the Reformation on the Continent and introduced him to key international figures (such as Melancthon, who clearly taught the doctrine of imputation) who would be used to shape his doctrine of justification.

A final factor in Cranmer’s personality and concern that is critical to his view of justification was his submission to the King as the head of the church. When one reads of the final days before Cranmer was martyred, one cannot but gasp at his staccato-like denials of the Protestant faith.⁶ How could this happen? How could he so thoroughly repudiate all he had stood for and built into the fabric of England? Did he really believe in *sola fide*? No doubt, fear, tiredness, and old age played their part in his recantations. Yet, as one reads the entire story of Cranmer’s life, his intense sense of responsibility to submit to the King out of reverence for God had a large part in Cranmer’s manoeuvres. When Mary was enthroned, Cranmer saw this as being God’s decree; he felt called, therefore, to submit to the Catholic faith while somehow holding to his convictions. Though Cranmer was wrong to do so (and as armchair critics we would do better!), in the final analysis, we have to agree that this vacillation was due (at least in part) to his conviction that God had called the monarch to be the head of England’s Church. Again, this helps us to see his reticence in articulating *imputatio* as clearly as we would want.

These four aspects of Cranmer’s life—his cautious and slow temperament, his theological epistemology, his visit to the Continent in

⁴ Packer and Duffield, *Thomas Cranmer*, xix.

⁵ MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 70–76.

⁶ E.g., MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 584–605.

1532 and his conviction that the monarch is to be obeyed absolutely as unto the Lord—are helpful in seeing how Cranmer approached, developed in, and applied the doctrine of justification by faith alone. In short, these four developments made Cranmer cautious and at times not as clear in his articulation of justification.

2. Defining the Issue

Some respected theologians have concluded that while Cranmer embraced the Reformation formula of justification by faith alone, he did so with a belief in *factitive* justification. Factitive justification is defined as *becoming* righteous rather than being *declared* righteous.⁷ It is, “the infusion of divine righteousness which is the cause of subsequent moral renewal and is not identical with the renewal itself.”⁸ This definition of justification was at the heart of the Tridentine doctrine of justification.⁹ The Lutheran Osiander, Cranmer’s friend and contemporary, eventually held to a factitive doctrine of justification: “He asserted that justification does not consist in the imputation of the vicarious righteousness of Christ to the sinner, but in the implanting of a new principle of life.”¹⁰

Perhaps the clearest example of factitive justification is Augustine’s *A Treatise on the Spirit and the Letter*, written in AD 412. This work was at times in the background of discussion on justification during the Reformation.¹¹ Augustine clearly taught “faith alone,” yet faith was seen as humility ... that is, coming to see one’s inability and desperate need for help in living a righteous life and being driven to Christ for healing. “Grace” was an infused substance for Augustine that brought a renovated life through diffused love. This love *from* God created love *for* God, producing an actual righteousness. The righteousness of God (*iustitia Dei*) is *actual* righteousness given to a person, bringing healing. “When, indeed, He (God) by the law discovers to a man his weakness, it is in order that by faith he may flee for refuge for His mercy, and be

⁷ Alister McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 61.

⁸ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 300.

⁹ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 300.

¹⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996 [1938]), 525.

¹¹ For example, Luther appeals to Augustine’s work in his 1518 *Heidelberg Disputation*. Remarkably, in this early work Luther seems to lean toward factitive justification. Shortly after Heidelberg, he embraced a forensic understanding through Melancthon.

healed.”¹² In this work, Augustine only referred to the atonement in chapter 22 when he referenced Romans 3. Yet he did not explain it, nor did he build his doctrine of justification on the cross in chapter 22. In other works, Augustine often quoted Galatians 2:21¹³ which ties together Christ’s death with our inability to keep the Law. Yet he still did not tie Christ’s death to substitutionary atonement or imputation.

In contrast to factitive justification, forensic justification has at its heart substitutionary atonement and imputation: Christ’s keeping of the Law is credited to the believer’s account. Christ’s death on the cross is substitutionary, taking the curse of the Law upon himself for the believer. In chapter 8 of *Iustitia Dei*, Alister McGrath sketches the doctrine of justification during the English Reformation. He rightly describes the early English reformers such as Tyndale and Frith as holding to Augustine’s factitive understanding of justification, where references to imputation are omitted. He states that the Lutheran, Robert Barnes, provided in 1534 the first clear statement of justification by imputed righteousness in the English Reformation.¹⁴ It was not until then that forensic justification began to surface in the English Reformation.

To summarise the difference, in factitive justification faith is humility that sees one’s inability. This leads to grace being an infused substance that heals and makes one righteous in conduct. In forensic justification, faith is trust in Christ’s finished work on the cross and his perfect obedience to the Law. This leads to grace being God’s unmerited favour, a position of acceptance. Through trust, Christ’s righteousness is credited to the believer’s account and the curse and threat of the Law that we deserve is credited to Christ as he died on the cross. The atonement and Christ’s keeping of the Law for the believer are central to forensic justification.

There are scholars who have presented Thomas Cranmer’s view as being factitive.¹⁵ However, other scholars, such as Ashley Null, see

¹² Augustine, *A Treatise on the Spirit and the Letter*, found in Philip Schaff (ed.), *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Volume 5* (New York: The Christian Literature Company, 1887), chapter 15, 89.

¹³ Such as in his work, *On Nature and Grace*.

¹⁴ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 286.

¹⁵ E.g., McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 288–9, concludes that Cranmer’s view was factitive, while also acknowledging that Cranmer’s *Homily of Salvation* has Melancthonian elements to it (such as an Anselmian view of the death of Christ and the role of God’s Law). The author observes that Cranmer uses the phrase, “*making* righteous” as opposed to “*declared* righteous.” “Cranmer interprets justification to mean, ‘making righteous,’ which clearly reflects the strongly factitive Augustinian concept of justification...” He states, the “Homily simultaneously develops an Augustinian

Cranmer as being thoroughly forensic. He quotes Cranmer's definition of justification from his *Great Commonplaces*, II, folio 84: "Henceforth, 'to justify' signifies 'to pronounce, declare or demonstrate just.'"¹⁶ Null also states, "Under this heading, he recorded verses of Scripture which used the word 'iustificare' in a forensic sense."¹⁷ In parsing out the place of works in Cranmer's justification, Null states that Cranmer's doctrine of sanctification and its relation to justification never veered from "acceptable Protestant thought."¹⁸ Summarising Cranmer's doctrine of justification and the place of works and practical righteousness, Null writes, "He acknowledged Augustine's clear teaching that justification involved a truly significant internal change in the believer, but he argued that this inner transformation was insufficient for a truly meritorious basis for the forgiveness of sins... Hence, justification made the believer 'right-willed', not righteous."¹⁹ To be sure, there are passages of Cranmer's work that could fit in either a factitive or a forensic paradigm. For example, article 12 of the *42 Articles* states, "Workes done before the Grace of Christe and the inspiratione of his spirite are not pleasaut to GOD, forasmoche as thei spring not of the faithe in Jesu Christe..."²⁰ However, in reading the whole of the *Homily*, together with his *42 Articles* and references to

concept of justification and a Melancthonian doctrine of justification *per solam fidem*." He also correctly notices that Cranmer's article 11 of the *42 Articles* is vague on justification; Cranmer does not write with clarity on imputation, but refers the reader to the *Homily*, which McGrath sees as being factitive. He also acknowledges that Melancthon's *Apology* of the Augsburg Confession, which is clear on imputation, also "has references... which do indeed refer to justification as 'making righteous.'" The above quotes are all from chapter 8, which also contains an important and helpful treatment of justification in the developing English Reformation.

¹⁶ Ashley Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance: Renewing the Power to Love* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 177. MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 342–3, noted that Cranmer's "Great Commonplaces," now in the British Museum, were used to bring Henry VIII to a right understanding of justification. He also notes that Null's work on the Great Commonplaces, "has effectively refuted the alternative view that Cranmer advocated the alternative hypothesis of factitive justification or agreed with Osiander's championing of essential righteousness ..." (MacCulloch, *Thomas Cranmer*, 345, n. 158).

¹⁷ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 177.

¹⁸ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 210.

¹⁹ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 211.

²⁰ Thomas Cranmer, *The Forty-Two Articles of Religion* (published in 1553), found in Charles Hardwick, *A History of the Articles of Religion* (Cambridge: Deighton, Bell, and Company, 1859), 290. The later 39 Articles are more clear on justification. This essay quotes the original work of Cranmer.

his other works, this essay demonstrates that Thomas Cranmer taught forensic justification. As noted above, Cranmer did describe justification as “to pronounce, declare, or demonstrate just.” Cranmer also repeatedly spoke of Christ’s obedience for us, of Christ’s merits for the Christian, and of the substitutionary nature of the atonement. These are objective truths of Christ’s work for the believer in history, apart from his work of righteousness within us—truths that are at the core of forensic justification.

The next section further presents from Cranmer’s works why we may assert that Cranmer’s works were forensic. This will be done by seeing how he understood each word in the Reformation phrase, “Justification by Faith Alone.”

3. Cranmer’s Understanding of “Justification by Faith Alone”

“Justification”

In considering Cranmer’s understanding of the Reformation formula, “justification by faith alone,” how did he define the word, “justification”? What did he mean—and not mean—by the use of this word? Article XI of his Forty-two Articles states, “Justification by onely faith in Jesus Christ in that sence, *as it is declared in the homilie of Justification*, is a most certeine, and wholesome doctrine for Christian menne.”²¹ In his *Homily of Salvation*, Cranmer gives fuller expression to the definition of justification:

Because all men be sinners and offenders against God, and breakers of his law and commandments, therefore can no man by his own acts, works, and deeds, seem they never so good, be justified and made righteous before God; but every man of necessity is constrained to seek for another righteousness or justification, to be received at God’s own hands, that is to say, the remission, pardon, and forgiveness of his sins... And this justification or righteousness, which we so receive by God’s mercy and Christ’s merits, embraced by faith, is taken, accepted, and allowed of God for our perfect and full justification.²²

The believing sinner is given a righteousness that comes from God and is equated with the remission, pardon, and forgiveness of sins which can only come through the death of Christ. Indeed, Cranmer asserts that works follow; but they are in no way determinative of our justification.

²¹ Hardwick, *A History*, 290. Emphasis added.

²² Thomas Cranmer, *Homily of Salvation* (1547), found in the Parker Society (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Cranmer* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1846), 128.

Repeatedly in his *Homily of Salvation*, Cranmer makes reference to Christ's merits alone—his obedience to the Law and his death on the cross for us—being imputed to us: "God sent ... our saviour Jesus Christ into this world to fulfil the law for us, and by shedding his most precious blood to make a sacrifice and satisfaction... to assuage his wrath..."²³ "The most precious body and blood of his own dear and best beloved Son Jesu Christ; who besides his ransom, fulfilled the law for us perfectly."²⁴ "The grace of God... doth shutteth out the justice of man, that is to say, the justice of our works, as to be merits of deserving our justification."²⁵ "So that Christ is now the righteousness of all them that truly do believe in him. He for them paid their ransom by his death. He for them fulfilled the law in his life. So that now in him and by him every true Christian man may be called a fulfiller of the law."²⁶ "No man can be justified by his own good works, because that no man fulfilleth the law according to the full request of the law."²⁷ "We put our faith in Christ, that we be justified by him only, that we be justified by God's free mercy and the merits of our Saviour Christ only, and by no virtue or good work of our own that is in us, or that we can be able to have or to do, for to deserve the same, Christ himself only being the cause meritorious thereof."²⁸

One could continue to quote from the *Homily*, but the above references demonstrate that Thomas Cranmer understood the doctrine of justification to be a forensic declaration of righteousness to the believing sinner, based on Christ's Law keeping and death imputed to the child of God.

"By Faith"

In evaluating Cranmer's understanding of "justification by faith alone," we must also consider Cranmer's understanding of justifying faith. In his 1538 Articles, Cranmer defined saving faith as, "a firm trust in the mercy of God promised for Christ's sake, whereby we maintain... and conclude with certainty that he is merciful and propitious even to us."²⁹ The true and justifying faith is, "to have a sure trust and confidence in God's merciful promises to be saved from everlasting damnation by

²³ Cranmer, *Homily*, 128. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Cranmer, *Homily*, 129.

²⁵ Cranmer, *Homily*, 129.

²⁶ Cranmer, *Homily*, 130.

²⁷ Cranmer, *Homily*, 130.

²⁸ Cranmer, *Homily*, 132.

²⁹ Packer and Duffield, *Thomas Cranmer*, 4. Emphasis added.

Christ; whereof doth follow a loving heart to obey his commandments.”³⁰ From his *Annotations to the King's Book* (1538), he states, “For perfect faith is nothing else but assured hope and confidence in Christ's mercy; and after it followeth, that he shall enter into perfect faith by undoubted trust in God, in his words and promise...”³¹ Such faith looks entirely away from any work within a person and looks only to the Saviour in trust for forgiveness of sins and salvation. Here, faith is full assurance of pardon, for it is based not on oneself, but rather on Christ's objective work. Cranmer was quick to assert that such faith was a “lively” faith, certain to produce good works; yet these good works never brought about one's justification or preceded justification (this distinction in Cranmer's teaching will be further discussed below).

Cranmer closely tied true faith with the doctrine of Augustinian predestination. *The King's Book* and Cranmer's nemesis Gardiner taught prevenient grace, which opened the way for a person to turn back to God by acts of penance.³² Cranmer understood the Pelagians and the scholastics to invent another grace, which was the grace of free will.³³ Such grace opened the way for works to be introduced before a soul was justified, thus circumventing true and simple faith in Christ's works. Hence, we see in Cranmer's *Articles* an entire section on predestination (Article 17).

Finally, in regard to Cranmer's view of faith, one can see his deep concern to keep faith itself from becoming a work. In his *Homily of Salvation*, he gave clarification to the role of faith through the technique of personification: “It is not I (faith) that take away your sins, but it is Christ only; and to him only I send you for that purpose, forsaking therein all your good virtues, words, thoughts, and works, and putting your trust in Christ.”³⁴

“Faith Alone”

Finally, what did Cranmer mean when he said we are justified by faith *alone*? This question has already been indirectly answered throughout this essay. Yet, it is important to clearly, yet briefly, state the place of works in Cranmer's doctrine of justification. In his *Homily of Salvation*, he wrote, “But this saying, that we be justified by faith only, freely, and without

³⁰ Cranmer, *Homily*, 133.

³¹ Packer and Duffield, *Thomas Cranmer*, 9.

³² Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 159.

³³ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 159–160.

³⁴ Cranmer, *Homily*, 132. Parenthesis added.

works, as being unable to deserve our justification at God's hands; and thereby most plainly to express the weakness of man and the goodness of God,... the imperfectness of our own works and the most abundant grace of our Saviour Christ; and thereby wholly for to ascribe the merit and deserving of our justification unto Christ only and his most precious bloodshedding."³⁵ Here again we see justification based on Christ's death on the cross and not Christ's work in us.

Cranmer, of course, believed that works followed justification. Yet they did not come before justification in any form, whether a work of love, devotion, repentance, or any other work. In reflecting on the best works that man can give, even regenerate man, Cranmer stated, "For our own imperfection is so great, through the corruption of original sin, that all is imperfect that is within us, faith, charity, hope, dread, thoughts, words, and works, and therefore not apt to merit and deserve any part of our justification for us."³⁶ In Cranmer's view, "A person could fulfil the open requirements of the law but still be a lawbreaker in his heart because he acted out of dread of punishment rather than a delight in righteousness."³⁷ The motive for good works trying to earn justification is self interest, not genuine love for God that has been birthed by free grace.

Summary: "A Moste Certeine, and Holesome Doctrine for Christian Menne"

This year marks the five hundredth anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation—a fitting time to revisit the doctrine of justification and its development and prominence in the English Reformation. It is easy to forget or to give away the wonderful truths of the gospel that our Reformation fathers handed down to us through suffering and martyrdom. For the health of Christ's Church and for the comfort and assurance of our own souls, we must return to the doctrine of imputation and to the foundation Cranmer laid for England. As this essay noted, referring to Alister McGrath's assessment (see footnote 9), factitive justification is at the heart of the Tridentine doctrine of justification. To revert back to factitive justification is to once again plunge into the murky

³⁵ Cranmer, *Homily*, 131.

³⁶ Cranmer, *Homily*, 133.

³⁷ Null, *Thomas Cranmer's Doctrine of Repentance*, 161.

waters of the nineteenth-century Oxford Movement.³⁸ In short, the issue is important and the stakes, as always, are great.

As quoted earlier, the end of Cranmer's Article 11, *Of the Justification of Man*, states that justification by "onely faith" is, "A moste certeine, and wholesome doctrine for Christian menne." As we have seen, Cranmer saw this doctrine as causing a person to render true good works that are pleasing to God, yet works that come from being justified by Christ's keeping of the Law and his death on the cross credited to the believer. At the same time, Cranmer's doctrine of justification and the place of works caused the soul to boast only in God for one's salvation—a truly wholesome doctrine. It was also a doctrine "very full of comfort,"³⁹ giving the soul calm repose and rest in Christ and not in one's own faltering devotion.

On 21 March 1556 Thomas Cranmer was burnt at the stake in Oxford after repudiating his recantations. As the flames were lit, Cranmer stuck his unfaithful hand in the fire. At that moment, any hope in his own works of righteousness simply melted in the flames and vanished with the smoke. He died clothed in the righteousness of Christ alone, one moment seeing the hideous, seething mob of idolators, the next standing in the quiet of heaven before the King of glory, clothed in the perfect record of the obedience of Christ.

Standing before the holiness of God and the infinite perfection of his Law, a factitive justification has too many chinks in its armour to keep our consciences safe from condemnation. However, Christ is risen for the believer's justification and stands in heaven as our intercessor and great High Priest. his active obedience to the Law is freely credited to us through simple faith alone.

Christ's righteousness freely imputed to our account and our sin imputed to him on the cross is our assurance before the majesty of God and our only and sufficient source of hope and joy. Such humble, yet bold, assurance will cause the Church to once again stand firm for the glory of God.

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³⁸ C.f. chapter 4 of Diane Butler, *Standing Against the Whirlwind* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), for a helpful treatment of how the Oxford Movement diminished imputation and Charles McIlvaine's stand in America against this movement.

³⁹ J. I. Packer and R. T. Beckwith, *The Thirty-Nine Articles: Their Place and Use Today* (London: Latimer Trust, 2006), 9. This phrase is from the later 39 Articles, which were adapted from Cranmer's original 42 Articles.

