

## Salvation *sola fide* and *sola gratia* in early Christianity

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Martin Luther's passion was to proclaim his discovery that man is justified by faith in Christ. This meant to him that, in man's relationship with God, he does not have to correspond to God's 'righteousness' by his own 'works' or efforts, but that God freely bestows the righteousness of Christ on everyone who believes in Christ as Saviour.<sup>1</sup> Luther even introduced his discovery into his translation of Rom. 3:28. Whereas Paul wrote there that 'man is justified by faith apart from works of the law', Luther translated that 'man is justified without works of the law, only by faith'.<sup>2</sup> Although this translation was fiercely criticized, he vigorously defended it, saying that a version including 'only' made up a more natural German sentence than without this adverb. Moreover, he referred to Ambrose and Augustine who said before him that faith alone makes one righteous.<sup>3</sup> In Latin, 'only by faith' is *sola fide*; combined with *sola gratia*, 'only by grace', these words became important slogans of Lutheran and Calvinist Protestantism. For *sola gratia*, one may refer to Rom. 3:24, 'justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus' (RSV), and to Eph. 2:8-9a, 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God, not because of works' (RSV). Of course, in both expressions *sola* has a polemical meaning. *Sola fide* is directed against the doctrine of justification by faith and works, just as *sola gratia* is directed against the combination of divine grace and human cooperation as the ground of salvation. In the same vein, *sola Scriptura* was formulated against Scripture and Tradition as the foundation of Catholic doctrine.

In the sixteenth century Luther was not the only Protestant theologian who referred to texts of the church fathers that seemed to endorse the view that man is justified only by faith. To mention a few other examples: in his explanation of the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus quoted Origen's interpretation of Rom. 3:27-28 and Ambrose's comments on Rom. 3 and 4, where *sola fide* occurs several times indeed.<sup>4</sup> Martin Chemnitz too invoked Origen in his discussion of the decrees of the Council of Trent.<sup>5</sup>

Also in the last centuries the passion for the doctrine of justification only by faith and salvation only by grace has remained a characteristic of Protestant theology. The same fascination is visible in the ongoing Protestant interest in patristic testimonies to this theme. In 1891 Adolf Harnack published a learned study on the history of the doctrine of salvation only by faith in the ancient Church.<sup>6</sup> To be sure, Harnack was keen enough to perceive the

<sup>1</sup> Cf. A.E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei. A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, Cambridge 1998<sup>2</sup>, 188-207.

<sup>2</sup> According to the textus receptus, Paul wrote: λογίζομεθα οὖν δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου. Luther's translation was: 'So halten wir es nu / das der mensch gerecht werde / on des Gesetzes werck / allein durch den glauben' (1534).

<sup>3</sup> In his *Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, WA 30,2, 642. Another general, unspecified reference to Augustine, Hilarius, Cyril (of Alexandria) and Ambrose as advocates of justification by faith alone occurs in Luther's Commentary on Genesis 18:2-5, ed. J.G. Walch, *Dr. Martin Luthers Sämtliche Schriften* I, Groß Oesingen 1986, 1153 (§ 73). I owe this reference to my colleague Hans-Martin Kirn.

<sup>4</sup> Z. Ursinus, *Explicationum Catechetiarum Absolutum Opus*, Geneva 1608<sup>5</sup>, 400 (61<sup>st</sup> question). As we will see, the commentary which was then attributed to Ambrose is nowadays denied to him; the anonymous author is now called 'Ambrosiaster'.

<sup>5</sup> M. Chemnitz, *Examen Decretorum Concilii Tridentini* I, Frankfurt a.M. 1566, 705; also in idem, *Loci Theologici* II, 1599, 750-751; 762-763; 772.

<sup>6</sup> A. Harnack, 'Geschichte der Lehre von der Seligkeit allein durch den Glauben in der alten Kirche', *ZThK* 1 (1891), 82-178.

differences between Protestantism and ancient Christianity; yet one may suppose that he might not have studied this topic if he had not been acquainted with the passion for this theme. Some scholars, however, who studied the patristic sources openly displayed their disappointment with the result. For example, Eva Aleith and Thomas F. Torrance concluded that Paul's doctrine of salvation by faith and by grace had been seriously neglected by the Apostolic Fathers and later on.<sup>7</sup>

In the present contribution I will give an impression of the way in which – and in how far – the Protestant intuition that is expressed by the slogans *sola fide* and *sola gratia* occurred in the first centuries of Christianity. The choice of this subject shows that the interest for this theme is still alive. It is inevitable that in this context I can deal only with some chapters in the history of justification or salvation only by faith and only by grace. The emphasis will be put on the concept of justification or salvation by faith; 'grace' will mainly be dealt with in this context, and not so much as an independent theme.

As a preliminary remark, it must be said that the Protestant interpretation of justification by faith as the bestowal of a righteous status that remains valid for the whole of a Christian's life apart from his 'works', is not shared by all exegetes. It has been argued that Paul's justification language only concerns the initial justification of sinners – valid for Jews and Gentiles alike – who enter into the community of those who believe in Christ as Saviour; in other words, 'righteousness' (or 'justification') in Paul may be conceived as a 'transfer term'.<sup>8</sup> In this approach it is underlined that, when Paul wrote about justification by faith, a considerable part of the Christians consisted of a messianic current within Judaism, which was open for Gentiles if they accepted the Jewish observance of the Mosaic law. In this context, Paul defended his view that Gentile Christians were not obliged to adopt this observance, since faith in Christ was sufficient for being fully accepted into the Christian community and by God. This implies that Jewish Christians were not privileged by their own observance of the law, and that they had to accept the Gentile believers in their own right. Moreover, it should be noted that the Protestant interpretation of justification as the bestowal of a righteous status deviates from the Roman Catholic interpretation, according to which justification does not only consist of God's acquittal of the sinner, but includes moral renewal.<sup>9</sup>

However, since I intend to examine in which way justification and salvation by faith and by grace occurred in early Christianity, it would take us too far to examine more deeply the different interpretations of Paul's doctrine of justification and salvation since the sixteenth century. In the course of the essay it will appear in which different ways this aspect of Paul's teaching has been understood in the first centuries.

Although there are good reasons to start this investigation in the New Testament, by paying attention to the deutero-Pauline and catholic epistles and Acts,<sup>10</sup> I will immediately go to the less-known literature of the church fathers. I am not only interested in their own views, but also in their reports of deviating opinions.

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<sup>7</sup> E. Aleith, *Paulusverständnis in der alten Kirche*, Berlin 1937; Th.F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, Edinburgh / London 1948.

<sup>8</sup> Thus E.P. Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism. A Comparison of Patterns of Religion*, London 1981<sup>2</sup>, 544.

<sup>9</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans I* (ICC), Edinburgh 1985, 95; cf. McGrath, *Iustitia, Dei* 267-284.

<sup>10</sup> See, e.g., A. Lindemann, *Paulus im ältesten Christentum. Das Bild des Apostels und die Rezeption der paulinischen Theologie in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Marcion*, Tübingen 1979, and E. Dassmann, *Der Stachel im Fleisch. Paulus in der frühchristlichen Literatur bis Irenäus*, Münster 1979.

## Clement of Rome

The first text outside the New Testament which seems to reflect Paul's view on justification by faith occurs in the epistle of Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, which is usually dated around 96. Clement says about the Old Testament pious and, subsequently, about the Christians:

All of them therefore were all renowned and magnified, not through themselves or their own works or the righteousness which they had wrought, but through his (i.e., God's) will; and therefore we who by his will have been called in Christ Jesus, are not made righteous (δικαιούμεθα) by ourselves, or by our wisdom or understanding or piety or the deeds which we have wrought in holiness of heart, but through faith, by which Almighty God has justified (ἐδικαίωσεν) all men from the beginning of the world; to him be glory for ever and ever. Amen.<sup>11</sup>

This sounds Pauline, and yet Clement's concept of faith seems different from Paul's. For in the preceding section, Clement said: 'Why was our father Abraham blessed? Was it not because he wrought righteousness and truth through faith?' (31:2). This implies that Clement considers faith as an instrument to do righteousness and truth, whereas for Paul (at least in Rom. 3-4) faith is essentially trust in God or Christ the Saviour in order to receive justification. Like Paul does in Rom. 4:3 and Gal. 3:6, Clement quotes Gen. 15:6: 'Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness', and he continues: 'Because of his faith and hospitality a son was given him in his old age, and in his obedience he offered him as a sacrifice to God' (10:6-7). This implies that Clement puts faith on a par with hospitality and obedience. This agrees with his statement about Abraham's nephew Lot: 'For his hospitality and piety Lot was saved out of Sodom' (11:1). Likewise, he says about Rahab: 'For her faith and hospitality Rahab the harlot was saved' (12:1). It seems that these examples were inspired by the epistle to the Hebrews (11:17, 31), where Abraham's sacrifice and Rahab's hospitality are connected with their faith (πίστει)<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the same examples of Abraham and Rahab occur in the epistle of James 2:21-25. Thus it appears that Clement does not adopt Paul's one-sided concept of faith as trust in God or Christ in order to receive justification. For him, 'faith' can be put on a par with other virtues like hospitality and obedience, and can be exchanged with 'piety' (εὐσέβεια). It is noteworthy that Clement also says:

Let us then join ourselves to those to whom is given grace from God; let us put on concord in meekness of spirit and continence, keeping ourselves far from all gossip and evil speaking, and be justified by deeds (ἔργοις), not by words.<sup>13</sup>

This text reminds one of James 2:24, which says 'that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone', although Clement does not oppose 'works' and 'faith', as James does, but 'works' and 'words'. We may conclude that in spite of Clement's allusions to Paul's view on justification in Rom. 3:28, he did not adopt this typically Pauline standpoint in all respects.

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<sup>11</sup> Clement, *Corinthians* 32:3-4, translation K. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers I*, Cambridge (MA) / London 1912, 63. For this section, cf. R. Roukema, 'De doorwerking van Paulus in 1 Clemens en in christelijke geschriften uit de tweede eeuw', *Analecta Bruxellensia* 5 (2000), 113-128.

<sup>12</sup> For another connection between Clement and the epistle to the Hebrews cf. Heb. 11:33, which reads 'Through faith they (...) wrought righteousness' (οἱ διὰ πίστεως ... εἰργάσαντο δικαιοσύνην), and Clement, *Corinthians* 31:2, quoted above (δικαιοσύνην καὶ ἀλήθειαν διὰ πίστεως ποιήσας).

<sup>13</sup> Clement, *Corinthians* 30:3, translation Lake, 59.

### Three church fathers of the second century

In the second century, the topic of Abraham's justification by faith is referred to by Justin Martyr, Irenaeus of Lyons and Clement of Alexandria.<sup>14</sup> Unlike Paul, however, their point was not so much to distinguish between faith and works of the law, but rather to emphasize the correspondence between Abraham and the Christians. Thus they intended to show to the Jews that the Christian interpretation of the Old Testament was legitimate, and to the Marcionites and Gnostics that the Old Testament testifies to the Father proclaimed by Christ and not to an inferior God. Moreover, by stressing the continuity between the Old Testament and Christian faith, these fathers showed to the Gentiles that the new Christian religion was rooted in an ancient and respectable tradition. This implies that although they quoted Paul's texts on justification, they used them in a different context than his; for in the second century, the controversy about the obligation for Gentile Christians to do the works of the Mosaic law was outdated. Even without an explicit appeal to Paul, it was evident that his approach had prevailed. As a new religion, Christianity had overflowed the banks of Judaism, although groups of Jewish Christians, like Ebionites and Elkasaites, continued to exist. The church which existed outside Judaism was not urgently forced anymore to deal with questions about circumcision, food laws, and the observance of the Sabbath.

### Marcionites and Gnostics

Another reason why the second-century church did not pursue Paul's polemics, may have been that Marcion and Gnostic teachers appealed to it.

Although only few of the Marcionite testimonies to Paul's teaching of justification by faith have survived, the Marcionite view can briefly be reconstructed as follows. The high, good God, who is the Father of Jesus Christ, accepts his children by grace, provided they believe in Christ, who proclaimed his Father's love and redeemed them from the curse of the law (Gal. 3:13). The lower God of the Old Testament demanded that the Jews observe his covenant by keeping the Mosaic law. His salvation for the Jews who believed in him consisted of the restoration of their country and repose in Hades in Abraham's bosom.<sup>15</sup>

As for the Gnostic Christians, references to faith and grace occur in several Nag Hammadi texts, even though allusions to Paul's epistles are rare. It would be worthwhile to further investigate these themes in the original Gnostic writings, but in the context of the present essay it would take us too far. Therefore I will confine myself to the church fathers' perception of the Gnostic views, however prejudiced their reports may be and in part distorted. In any case, their testimonies give evidence of the alleged views to which they reacted in their own reflections.

The church fathers inform us that Gnostics put 'faith' (πίστις) on a lower level than 'knowledge' (γνῶσις), since only the latter would provide one with certainty about salvation. This means that faith is characteristic of average Christians, whereas *gnosis* is reserved for advanced, spiritual Christians.<sup>16</sup> To some extent, this Greek distinction between faith and knowledge is even shared by Clement of Alexandria, who identifies himself with the 'Catholic' church.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho* 23,4; 92,3; 119,5-6 (ed. M. Marcovich, PTS 47); Irenaeus, *Demonstration* 24; 35; 93; 95 (SC 62); *Against Heresies* IV,5,3.5; IV,8,1 (SC 100); Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis* I,30,4; I,31,2; II,28,4; V,4,1; V,8,5; VI,103,1 (SC 30; 38; 278; 446).

<sup>15</sup> B. Aland, 'Marcion. Versuch einer neuen Interpretation', *ZThK* 70 (1973), 420-447 (439-447); A. Le Boulluec, *Clément d'Alexandrie. Les Stromates* V Tome II. *Commentaire, bibliographie et index* (SC 279), Paris 1981, 30; U. Schmid, *Marcion und sein Apostolos. Rekonstruktion und historische Einordnung der marcionitischen Paulusbrieffausgabe*, Berlin / New York 1995, 316; 331-332.

<sup>16</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I,6,2 (SC 264); Clement, *Stromateis* II,10,2 (SC 38).

<sup>17</sup> Cf. R. Bultmann, 'πιστεύω' etc., *TDNT* VI, 176-177; for Clement, see R. Roukema, *Gnosis and Faith in Early Christianity. An Introduction to Gnosticism*, London / Harrisburg 1999, 151-153.

An interesting testimony to the Gnostic awareness of being saved by divine grace comes to light in Irenaeus' description of the second-century disciples of Simon Magus (cf. Acts 8:9-13). He writes that, in their view, in Simon God the Father had descended to earth, in order to confer salvation on men 'through knowledge of himself'. He adds that according to the Simonians, 'men are saved by his (i.e., Simon's or God's) grace, and not on account of their own righteous works'.<sup>18</sup> This is a clear reminiscence of the Pauline emphasis on divine grace as the ground of salvation as it is formulated in Eph. 2:8-9 ('by grace you have been saved..., not because of works').

Next, church fathers like Irenaeus, Clement, and Origen testify that the Gnostics were convinced of being saved or elected because of their spiritual nature (φύσει).<sup>19</sup> Irenaeus explains that, according to the Valentinian Gnostics, it was impossible that their spiritual substance would ever come under the power of corruption, whatever the sort of actions in which they indulged. 'For even as gold, when submersed in filth, loses not on that account its beauty (...), so they affirm that they cannot in any measure suffer hurt, or lose their spiritual substance, whatever the material actions in which they may be involved'.<sup>20</sup> This description apparently points to the Gnostic experience to be 'saved by grace, apart from works', even though the term 'grace' is not used here. In the same context Irenaeus says that, according to the Valentinian disciple Ptolemaeus, the plain 'psychic' members of the church, who have neither the Spirit nor the perfect *gnosis*, are saved by works and mere faith (δι' ἔργων καὶ πίστεως ψιλῆς), whereas the Valentinians themselves are not saved by their conduct but because they are spiritual by nature.<sup>21</sup> In other terms, this amounts to their recognition of divine grace.

#### Catholic appeals to faith and grace

However, the Marcionite and Gnostic appeals to divine grace did not bring about that in 'Catholic' Christianity of the second century nobody ever referred to grace or faith as a sufficient ground of salvation. Alluding to Eph. 2:8, Polycarp writes to the Philippian 'that you have been saved by grace, not because of works, but by the will of God through Jesus Christ'.<sup>22</sup> The epistle to Diognetus reminds its readers that God 'manifested himself through faith, by which alone it is given to see God' (8:6), and that 'the righteousness of the one (i.e., Christ) should make righteous many wicked' (9:5).<sup>23</sup>

We also have some testimonies of Christians who have not left any writings of their own. Origen quotes the mockery of the Platonic philosopher Celsus (± 180), who introduced Christians who said to him: 'Do not ask questions; just believe', 'Your faith will save you', and 'Believe if you want to be saved, or go away'.<sup>24</sup> Yet it is evident that these sayings do not

<sup>18</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I,23,3; *secundum enim ipsius gratiam saluari homines, non secundum operas iustas* (SC 264).

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I,6,2; 7,5; II,29,1; IV,37,2 (SC 264; 294; 100); Clement, *Stromateis* II,10,2 (SC 38); *Excerpts from Theodotus* 56,3 (SC 23); Origen, *Commentary on John* XIII,63-64; 294 (SC 222); *Philocalia* 25,1 (SC 226); cf. *Tripartite Tractate* (NHC I,5) 118,14-122,12; 129,35-133,15. Irenaeus' and Clement's testimonies have been critically examined by L. Schottroff, 'Animae naturaliter salvandae, zum Problem der himmlischen Herkunft des Gnostikers', in W. Eltester (ed.), *Christentum und Gnosis*, Berlin 1969, 65-97, by W.A. Löhr, 'Gnostic determinism reconsidered', *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992), 381-390, and by G.P. Luttikhuisen, 'Gnostic ideas about Eve's children and the idea of humanity', in idem (ed.), *Eve's Children. The Biblical Stories Retold and Interpreted in Jewish and Christian Traditions*, Leiden / Boston 2003, 203-217.

<sup>20</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I,6,2 (SC 264); translation A. Roberts, W.H. Rambaut, ANCL 5, Edinburgh 1868, 26.

<sup>21</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I,6,2 (SC 264).

<sup>22</sup> Polycarp, *Epistle to the Philippian* 1:3; edition and translation K. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers* I, 283-285.

<sup>23</sup> See *Epistle to Diognetus* 8-9 as a whole; edition and translation K. Lake, *Apostolic Fathers* II, 366-371.

<sup>24</sup> Origen, *Against Celsus* I,9; VI,11 (SC 132; 147); cf. the translation by H. Chadwick, *Origen. Contra Celsum*, Cambridge 1980, 12; 324.

betray the Pauline opposition between faith and works, but the distinction between faith and reason.

It is most interesting that the appeal to faith is sometimes rejected by Christian authors. Hermas of Rome generally writes positively about it and is instructed in a vision that God's chosen ones are saved by faith. In another vision, he is praised for 'believing that salvation can be found through nothing but the great and glorious name', viz. of the Lord.<sup>25</sup> However, he also describes Christians who had become rich and liked to keep company with the Gentiles. He writes that 'they were not apostates from God, but remained in the faith, without doing the works of the faith'. Others are described as 'double-minded, not hoping to be saved, because of the deeds which they had done'. Yet another category were those 'who only believed (οἱ πιστεύσαντες μόνον), but did the works of lawlessness; but they were never apostates from God'.<sup>26</sup> These Christians are not described in positive terms, but rather as those who are rebuked in the epistle of James (2:14), who pretended to have faith without having works. Nevertheless, it is not excluded that we find here a trace of Paul's teaching of justification by faith, without works of the law.

Similarly, around 200 Tertullian of Carthage mentions Christians who said that 'baptism is not necessary for them to whom faith is sufficient', by referring to Abraham who did not please God by a sacrament of water, but of faith. Tertullian admits that 'there was salvation by means of bare faith (*per nudam fidem*) before the passion and resurrection of the Lord'. Yet he responds that since the Lord's birth, passion, and resurrection have been added to faith, baptism is included as well, as a cloth of bare faith which cannot exist without its own law.<sup>27</sup> Later on Tertullian deals with Christians who had to do penance, and who said that for the Lord it was sufficient if they repented 'with the heart and the mind' (*corde et animo*), even though they did not do it in an act (*actu*). In Tertullian's words, these Christians said that they sinned without damage to their fear and their faith.<sup>28</sup> In yet another passage he quotes Christians who shrank back from martyrdom. They considered it madness to have themselves killed, and said: 'Once for all Christ died for us, once for all he was slain that we might not be slain'.<sup>29</sup> Tertullian does not have a good word for these Christians, but for our purpose it is most valuable that he recorded their views. In some way they appealed to faith as a sufficient ground for salvation. Adolf Harnack considers their conviction as a reaction to the severe practice of penance which the church prescribed to sinners at that time, and identifies the Roman bishop Callistus as the one who indulgently liberalized it.<sup>30</sup> In Harnack's opinion, however, those who resisted the practice of penance by appealing to their faith, were still no genuine Pauline Christians. He concludes that although they seem to appeal to faith in the same way as Paul and Luther, the difference is that, by faith, Paul invalidated the Mosaic law and Luther broke the ring of Catholicism, whereas Callistus just relaxed the old disciplinary rules, and nothing else.<sup>31</sup>

### Origen of Alexandria

About 244-246, Origen of Alexandria wrote a voluminous commentary on Paul's epistle to the Romans, when he lived in Caesarea of Palestine. For the most part, this commentary is

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<sup>25</sup> Hermas of Rome, *The Shepherd*. Visions III,8,3; IV,2,4; edition and translation K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* II, 46-47; 64-65.

<sup>26</sup> Hermas of Rome, *The Shepherd*. Similitudes VIII,9,1; 9,3; 10,3; edition and translation (slightly adapted) K. Lake, *The Apostolic Fathers* II, 210-213.

<sup>27</sup> Tertullian, *On Baptism* 13,1-2 (CCSL 1; SC 35); translation S. Thelwall, ANF III, Grand Rapids 1980, 676.

<sup>28</sup> Tertullian, *On Repentance* 5,10 (CCSL 1; SC 316); translation S. Thelwall, ANF III, Grand Rapids 1980, 660.

<sup>29</sup> Tertullian, *Scorpiace* 1,7-8 (CCSL 2); translation S. Thelwall, ANF III, Grand Rapids 1980, 634.

<sup>30</sup> Harnack, 'Geschichte', 108-123. However, since Callistus' episcopate dates from ± 217 to 222, it is clear that the opinions described by Tertullian also preceded him.

<sup>31</sup> Harnack, 'Geschichte', 123.

available in an abridged Latin version made by Rufinus of Aquileia around 405, but as for Rom. 3-4, the chapters that deal with justification, a considerable part has been preserved in Greek excerpts.<sup>32</sup> How did Origen interpret Paul's statement that man is justified by faith apart from works of the law?<sup>33</sup>

He says that it is sometimes possible that someone who only believed (πιστεύσαντα μόνου) obtains justification without having done anything. Origen gives two examples of persons who were justified only by faith (ἐκ μόνης πίστεως) apart from works. First, he mentions the criminal who had been crucified with Jesus (Lk 23:42-43) and who was promised to enter paradise only for the sake of his faith (*pro hac sola fide*). Secondly, he refers to the woman who had anointed Jesus' feet, and to whom Jesus had said *pro sola fide*: 'Your sins are forgiven', and 'Your faith has saved you; go in peace' (Lk 7:37-50).<sup>34</sup> However, Origen warns those who conclude from this that it is not important to behave according to God's will as faith is sufficient for justification. He reacts that unrighteousness that is committed after justification annuls the grace of the one who justified (i.e., God).<sup>35</sup> This implies that Origen interprets Paul's concept of justification by faith as the remission of sins to one who starts to believe in Christ; or to put it in E.P. Sanders' words, as 'a transfer term'.<sup>36</sup>

This is also true for Origen's interpretation of Rom. 3:25-26, which reads according to Rufinus' version:

For God is just, and the one who is just could not justify the unjust; for that reason he wanted there to be the mediation of a propitiator so that those who were not able to be justified through their own works might be justified through faith in him.<sup>37</sup>

Similarly, Origen says that the propitiation effected by Christ 'comes to every believer by way of faith',<sup>38</sup> and that 'human salvation is no longer based upon merits but upon mercy'.<sup>39</sup> This concerns sinners who come to believe. In his comment on Rom. 3:27-28 he writes on the relationship between faith and works:

The justification by faith, which alone is sufficient and originates from God, anticipates the works which will come after the justification by faith, in order that the justified person will not boast before God, as if he had received from God no gift at all, but as if he were justified by the works of law. As for me, I think that also the works that precede faith, even if they seem favourable, do not justify the one who performed them, since they were not built on the good foundation of faith.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> The relevant Greek texts have been edited and translated into French by J. Scherer, *Le commentaire d'Origène sur Rom. III.5-V.7*, Cairo 1957. The critical edition of the Latin version has been prepared by C.P. Hammond Bammel, *Der Römerbriefkommentar des Origenes. Kritische Ausgabe der Übersetzung Rufins I-III* (AGLB 16, 33, 34), Freiburg 1990, 1997, 1998. Delarue's older edition of the Latin text can be found in PG 14, 831-1294. An English translation of the Latin version was made by Th.P. Scheck, *Origen. Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (FaCh 103-104), Washington 2001-2002. Unfortunately, the numeration of Origen's chapters and sections diverges in the respective editions and this translation.

<sup>33</sup> For this section, cf. R. Roukema, 'Origenes' visie op de rechtvaardiging volgens zijn Commentaar op Romeinen', *GThT* 89 (1989), 94-105, and P. Grech, 'Justification by Faith in Origen's Commentary on Romans', *Aug.* 36 (1996), 337-359.

<sup>34</sup> Scherer, *Commentaire*, 164-165; Scheck, FaCh 103, 226-227 (AGLB 16, 248-249; PG 14, 952C-953C).

<sup>35</sup> Scherer, *Commentaire*, 164-165.

<sup>36</sup> Sanders, *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*, 544.

<sup>37</sup> Scheck, FaCh 103, 217 (AGLB 16, 236; PG 14, 946C).

<sup>38</sup> Scheck, FaCh 103, 223 (AGLB 16, 244; PG 14, 950C).

<sup>39</sup> Scheck, FaCh 104, 192 (AGLB 34, 711; PG 14, 1203B).

<sup>40</sup> Scherer, *Commentaire*, 166-167.

Here Origen appears to conceive the ‘works of law’ as good works in general, and not in particular as the ceremonial prescriptions of the Mosaic law. Yet in his interpretation of Rom. 11:6 (‘But if it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works’) he explains that

the works that Paul repudiates and frequently criticizes are not the works of righteousness that are commanded in the law, but those in which those who keep the law according to the flesh boast; i.e., the circumcision of the flesh, the sacrificial rituals, the observance of the Sabbaths or new moon festivals. These, then, and works of this nature are the ones on the basis of which he says no one can be saved, and concerning which he says in the present passage, ‘not on the basis of works; otherwise, grace would no longer be grace’. For if anyone is justified through these, he is not justified *gratis*.<sup>41</sup>

In his comments on ‘God’s righteous judgment’ (Rom. 2:5-6), Origen rejects the alleged heretical view that the natures of human souls are either good or evil, and maintains that God renders to each one not on account of his nature but on account of his works. Next, he explains that for believers the mere fact that they believe cannot be sufficient.<sup>42</sup> This remark shows that Origen knew the view that faith alone was sufficient to be saved. This comes to light once more in his interpretation of Rom. 10:9, which says that one who confesses Jesus as Lord and believes in his resurrection will be saved. Origen admits that some think that a person who lacks good works and virtues will nevertheless be saved by this, that he has believed, even though he cannot possess the glory of blessedness.<sup>43</sup> Of course, Origen does not agree. In a good Catholic manner he maintains that, for justification, faith cannot do without love and good works.<sup>44</sup> For God ‘justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5) who, by faith, turns away from ungodliness so that faith that turned him away from ungodliness is reckoned to him as righteousness’.<sup>45</sup>

Wherever in Rufinus’ version the expression *sola fide* occurs, it always deals with the initial justification which, as a matter of course, is to be followed by a virtuous Christian life.<sup>46</sup> To conclude this survey of Origen’s treatment of this theme it should be noted that, apart from his *Commentary on Romans*, the question how man can be justified hardly occurs in his other works (as far as they have been preserved).<sup>47</sup> This means that in this verse by verse commentary he tried to interpret Paul’s argument as accurately as he could, but otherwise Paul’s terms played no part in Origen’s vocabulary. In his own view, one should discriminate between several levels of faith, whereas ‘knowledge’ (γνῶσις) by far exceeds mere faith.<sup>48</sup>

### Marius Victorinus

More than a century after Origen, the production of some remarkable Latin commentaries on the Pauline epistles testifies to a revival of interest in Paul’s theology in the Western church.

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<sup>41</sup> Scheck, FaCh 104, 159 (AGLB 34, 672; PG 14, 1178BC). For references to ‘grace’ in Origen, see B. Drewery, *Origen and the Doctrine of Grace*, London 1960.

<sup>42</sup> Scheck, FaCh 103, 111-112 (AGLB 16, 110; PG 14, 878C).

<sup>43</sup> Scheck, FaCh 104, 139 (AGLB 34, 649; PG 14, 1163C).

<sup>44</sup> Scherer, *Commentaire*, 178-183.

<sup>45</sup> Scherer, *Commentaire*, 186-187.

<sup>46</sup> Scheck, FaCh 103, 39-41.

<sup>47</sup> In his *Commentary on John* XX,66 (SC 290) Origen reacts to people who maintained that the works of Abraham which one has to do (according to Jn 8:39) consist mainly of the imitation of his faith, which was reckoned to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). In this context Origen refers to Rom. 3:27-28.

<sup>48</sup> See, e.g., Scherer, *Commentaire*, 182-185, and Origen, *Commentary on John* XIX,16-20 (SC 290), where § 20 reads: ‘Now there is a great difference between knowing with respect to believing and only believing’ (Πολὺ δὲ διαφέρει τὸ πρὸς τῷ πιστεῦειν τοῦ ἐγνωκέναι τοῦ πιστεῦειν μόνου); translation R.E. Heine, FaCh 89, 171.



This revival may partly be due to the emergence of the Manicheans, who quoted Paul in favour of their own doctrine, just as the Marcionites and – to some extent – the Gnostics of the second and third centuries had done.<sup>49</sup>

After 363, Marius Victorinus of Rome, a convert from Platonism, wrote commentaries on the epistles to the Galatians, the Ephesians, and the Philippians. His comment on Eph. 2:8-9 reads:

‘For you have been saved by grace through faith’. The apostle has explained plainly that there ought to be faith on our part, but we ought believe only in Christ. Because of this [salvation] is ours in this way alone, we have not been saved by our merit but by grace of God. To sum it up, Paul adds the following: ‘And this is not from you, it is a gift of God; it is not from works, lest perchance someone boast’. Because we have been saved grace, Paul claims, it is of God. So you too Ephesians, because you have been saved, it is not from you, it is a gift of God. Nor is it from your works, but it is the grace of God, it is the gift of God – not by your merit.<sup>50</sup>

Yet Victorinus distinguishes between works and merit, and he declares that one should daily take care of the poor and do other good deeds. Finally he says:

For he who imagines that the reward was merited by his works, wants the reward to be of his own doing (I know not how) and not of the one who bestowed it – and this is bragging.<sup>51</sup>

His comment on Gal. 2:15-16 reads:

For we know that man is not justified by works of the law, but that he is justified through faith, that is, faith in Jesus Christ. Since we know this – he says –, we believed and still believe in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith, not by works of the law. For by works of the law no flesh, that is, no man who is in the flesh, will be justified (cf. Rom. 3:20). So if, knowing this, we believed that justification happens by faith, we are quite wrong if we now return to Judaism, from which we have come in order to be justified not by works but from faith and by faith in Christ. For precisely faith alone (*fides sola*) gives justification and sanctification.<sup>52</sup>

The final remark shows that for Victorinus ‘faith alone’ did not only regard the initial remission of sins, but also the subsequent sanctification of the Christian. Thus he explains that faith and righteousness are interrelated: the objective of faith is that one is righteous, and faith only helps one if he is righteous.<sup>53</sup> It appears that here Marius Victorinus understands ‘righteous’ and ‘righteousness’ as moral terms. Yet he also underlines that this righteousness stems from God and from faith in Christ.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. A. Mutzenbecher, *Sancti Aurelii Augustini De Diuersis Quaestionibus ad Simplicianum* (CCSL 44), Turnholti 1970, xv-xvi; Th. De Bruyn, *Pelagius’s Commentary on St Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford 1993, 15-16.

<sup>50</sup> Marius Victorinus, *Commentary on Ephesians* (ed. A. Locher 152; also in CSEL 83,2); translation S.A. Cooper, *Metaphysics and Morals in Marius’ Victorinus’ Commentary on the Letter to the Ephesians*, New York etc., 1995, 67; see also his comments, 159-160.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibidem*, translation Cooper.

<sup>52</sup> Ed. Locher, 26. *Sola fides* also occurs in Marius Victorinus’ comments on Gal. 3:2; 3:7; 3:21-22; 6:10; Eph. 2:14-15; 3:16-17; Phil. 1:29.

<sup>53</sup> *On Ephesians* 6:13-14; ed. Locher, 201; translation Cooper, 109.

<sup>54</sup> *On Philippians* 3:8-9; ed. Locher, 101.

### Ambrosiaster

An interesting commentary on all thirteen Pauline epistles was written by an anonymous Roman author who is called Ambrosiaster, since his works used to be attributed to Ambrose of Milan. In his *Commentary on Romans* (from ± 374-379) he declares several times that one is justified *sola fide*, without doing any works.<sup>55</sup> When Luther and Ursinus referred to Ambrose as a witness to justification *sola fide*, they had this commentary in mind.<sup>56</sup> In Ambrosiaster's comment on Rom. 3:28 these works are specified as follows:

He says that the Gentile is surely justified by believing, without doing any works of the law, i.e., without circumcision or new moon festivals or reverence for the Sabbath.

This means that according to Ambrosiaster Paul does not mean good works in general, but those prescriptions of the Mosaic law which might be an obstacle for Gentile believers to join a Jewish sort of Christianity. In line with this assessment, he notes in his comment on Gal. 3:12 that the law of the ten commandments is helpful, whereas the other precepts are a burden.<sup>57</sup>

### Augustine of Hippo (and Pelagius)

We come to the giant among the Western church fathers, Augustine of Hippo. It has been observed that Augustine most probably did not know Marius Victorinus' commentaries on the Pauline epistles, but was acquainted with Ambrosiaster's (and, moreover, Jerome's).<sup>58</sup>

In his collection *On Various Questions* (from 390-395, when he was a priest in Hippo) he goes into James 2:20, 'But wilt thou know, O vain man, that faith without works is dead?' (KJV).<sup>59</sup> In his interpretation Augustine quotes Paul's statement that man is justified by faith, apart from works, and says that it has been misunderstood by those who hold that one will be saved even if he behaves badly, provided he believe in Christ. In Augustine's view, James clarifies how Paul's statement has to be understood, namely, that the works one accomplished before he believed are not counted as merits for justification. Augustine explains that the Jewish Christians thought they were in a better position than the Gentile Christians, as if they had come to the grace of the gospel thanks to the merits of the good works they had done in obedience to the Mosaic law. In this context Paul said that man is justified by faith apart from preceding works. After justification good works are supposed to be the consequence of faith. So as a true Catholic, Augustine harmonizes Paul and James.

Consequently, when answering a question concerning Paul's teaching about grace (in 396-398), Augustine underlines, in his interpretation of Rom. 9:10-11, that the grace of faith precedes the works, and that works will follow God's grace.<sup>60</sup>

In a later treatise, *On Faith and Works* (from 413), he deals with the opinion that one should first baptize people, and teach them only subsequently how, as Christians, they are supposed to behave, e.g., that they are not allowed to go to prostitutes. If such a Christian corrects his lifestyle, that is fine; but if not, he will in any case be saved thanks to his faith, without which he will be lost forever. Such a Christian 'will be saved as through fire' (cf. 1 Cor. 3:15).

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<sup>55</sup> Comments on Rom. 3:24; 4:5-6; 9:28 (CSEL 81,1). *Sola fide* also occurs in his comment on 1 Cor. 1:4 (CSEL 81,2); *per solam fidem* in his comment on Gal. 3:18 (CSEL 81,3).

<sup>56</sup> Ambrose himself uses the expression *sola fides* occasionally in *Epistula* 20 (77), 9 (CSEL 82,1).

<sup>57</sup> CSEL 81,3, 34.

<sup>58</sup> A. Bastiaensen, 'Augustine's Pauline Exegesis and Ambrosiaster', in F. Van Fleteren, J.C. Schaubelt (eds), *Augustine. Biblical Exegete*, New York etc. 2001, 33-54. Bastiaensen draws this conclusion on the basis of Augustine's exegetical studies (45).

<sup>59</sup> *De Diuersis Quaestionibus LXXXIII* 76 (CCSL 44A).

<sup>60</sup> *Ad Simplicianum de Diuersis Quaestionibus* I,2,2 (CCSL 44).

Augustine's reaction to this view is that faith without works is of no avail (cf. Jas 2:20).<sup>61</sup> The opinion he refutes clearly originated in the context of massive interest of Roman citizens in being admitted to the Catholic church and thus in joining the state religion.

However, in his polemics with Pelagius and the Pelagians of the early fifth century, Augustine emphasizes other aspects of the same question. In line with Origen and the Latin commentaries on the Pauline epistles, Pelagius maintained (in 405-410) that man is justified by faith alone, but he noted that this did not imply that man can do away with the works of righteousness.<sup>62</sup> In his view, justification by faith alone was meant for those who come to Christ for the first time, and was directed against salvation by the works of circumcision, the Sabbath, and so forth. Augustine deals with this matter in his book *On the Spirit and the Letter* (from 412), where he explains exhaustively what it means that Jews and Gentiles are justified through faith in Jesus Christ, apart from works of the law.<sup>63</sup> According to Augustine these works are not only the practice of circumcision and other Jewish rites and prescriptions, as Ambrosiaster and Pelagius thought. Instead, the whole Mosaic law is concerned, because as a whole it is a letter that kills (2 Cor. 3:6) since man is not able to keep it. As an example, he quotes the commandment, 'Thou shalt not covet'. On the one hand it is a good commandment, but on the other hand man is not able to obey it, so that it is true that 'the letter kills'.<sup>64</sup> Yet Augustine maintains that man is able to keep these commandments because God works it in him through faith in Jesus Christ.<sup>65</sup>

It is noteworthy that Augustine does not say that one is justified *sola fide*.<sup>66</sup> This may be the reason why Luther appealed to Augustine only in a general way as a witness to justification by faith alone, and also said that Augustine wrote nothing precisely about faith, except when he fought the Pelagians.<sup>67</sup> In general, Augustine inextricably connects faith and love, referring to Paul's expression 'faith working through love' (Gal. 5:6).<sup>68</sup>

#### Gregory of Nyssa

Finally I want to draw attention to Gregory of Nyssa, one of the Cappadocian church fathers from the second half of the fourth century. For this section, I draw on a paper by Martin Laird, "'By faith alone": a technical term in Gregory of Nyssa'.<sup>69</sup> Although Laird does not refer to the peculiar Protestant interest for salvation *sola fide*, it is evident that the choice of his theme is somehow related to it. Yet his paper shows that Gregory does not use the expression 'only by faith' as an answer to the question in which way man can be justified or saved, but in order to answer the question how man can know God. In the Alexandrian tradition from which

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<sup>61</sup> *On Faith and Works* 1; 21 (CSEL 41).

<sup>62</sup> Pelagius, *Commentary on Romans* 3,28 (ed. A. Souter); translation Th. De Bruyn, *Pelagius's Commentary on St Paul's Epistle to the Romans*, Oxford 1993. A. Souter, *Pelagius's Expositions of Thirteen Epistles of St Paul I*. Introduction, Cambridge 1922, 70, lists 36 texts where Pelagius speaks of justification or salvation by faith alone (however, Rom. 4:11 should be 4:12), but these include some in which this teaching is explained away (namely: Rom. 3:28; 1 Cor. 6:10; Gal. 2:17; 3:12; 5:24; Eph. 5:5). Cf. J. Ferguson, *Pelagius*, Cambridge 1956, 127.

<sup>63</sup> *On the Spirit and the Letter* 13/21; 29/50 (CSEL 60).

<sup>64</sup> *On the Spirit and the Letter* 14/23 (CSEL 60).

<sup>65</sup> *On the Spirit and the Letter* 29/50 (CSEL 60).

<sup>66</sup> In *On the Spirit and the Letter* 13/22 he writes: 'colligimus non iustificari hominem praeceptis bonae vitae nisi per fidem Iesu Christi'; this is an allusion to Gal. 2:16, 'scientes autem quod non iustificatur homo ex operibus legis nisi per fidem Iesu Christi' (Vulgate).

<sup>67</sup> *Tischreden* 4, 3984 (WA): 'Augustinus nihil acriter de fide scribit, nisi cum contra Pelagianos pugnat; die haben Augustinum aufgeweckt und zum manne gemacht' (56). However, McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 24 maintains that Augustine's doctrine of justification is not merely a reaction against Pelagius but originated in 396-397.

<sup>68</sup> See G. Bavaud, 'La doctrine de la justification d'après saint Augustin et la Réforme', *REAug* 5 (1959), 21-32; McGrath, *Iustitia Dei*, 23-36.

<sup>69</sup> *Vigiliae Christianae* 54 (2000), 61-79. The author pointed me to his forthcoming book *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence*, Oxford 2004.

Gregory often drew, 'faith' was usually understood in its Greek sense, according to which faith was insufficient to know God. Laird remarks that Gregory's treatment of faith (πίστις) exhibits a remarkable exaltation over knowledge (γνώσις) and stands out in bold relief (62). According to apophatic theology God is fundamentally unknowable, but in spite of this philosophical starting point Gregory explains, in his book *Against Eunomius* (from 380-383), in what way God can yet be known: 'He is contemplated only by faith' (διὰ μόνης τῆς πίστεως θεωρεῖται).<sup>70</sup> Gregory considers faith as 'the apex of apophatic ascent, having shed all images, concepts and movement. It is this exalted state which Gregory says is tantamount to that Pauline πίστις which renders one just before God' (69). Likewise, in a homily on the Song of Songs he maintains that the soul 'must establish in itself by faith alone (διὰ μόνης πίστεως) the nature that transcends every intelligence'.<sup>71</sup>

Laird shows that for Gregory 'faith' and 'by faith alone' are technical terms in his apophatic vocabulary. Faith 'clearly has an access which comprehension does not have' (63). Gregory's source for this unusual conception of 'faith' are the Pauline epistles, to which the epistle to the Hebrews is to be counted as well. His use of 'faith' is inspired by Heb. 11 ('by faith...'), 2 Cor. 5:7 ('we walk by faith and not by sight'), and Rom. 4:3 ('Abraham believed in God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness') (66-67; 69).

### Conclusions

It may be concluded that in spite of the Protestant appeals to some church fathers as witnesses to the doctrine of justification only by faith without works of the law, this peculiar emphasis on faith alone as the basis of divine justification is rare in the first centuries. As far as it occurs in patristic literature, most authors had the initial justification of converts in mind, not the divine bestowal of the righteous status that would endure or could be reiterated all their lives. In this respect, Marius Victorinus seems the most Protestant interpreter of Paul, since he repeatedly speaks about 'faith alone' and connects it with both justification and sanctification. Moreover, there were other, anonymous Christians who appealed to faith as the basis of salvation. Most church leaders probably considered them as lax, because they deemed these Christians neglected the moral consequences of faith. Even Augustine did not quite teach what Luther taught, although Luther was much inspired by him.

Our investigation did not deal with the notion of salvation only by grace to the same extent as salvation only by faith, so that it would be hazardous to draw general conclusion with respect to this theme. However, it is clear that, in relation to faith, the aspect of grace was not forgotten in the church. In different belief systems, Marcionites and Gnostics were also aware of it.

We saw that Gregory of Nyssa used the expression 'only by faith' in a different context from the one of salvation or justification. Yet his reference to 'faith alone' in his apophatic theology might appeal to the modern reader in a way that cannot be reached anymore by the traditional question what is a sufficient basis for being justified or saved. If God exists, how can He be known? Gregory answers: He can be known by faith alone. In the late fourth century, it was most unusual for an intellectual to say so. Perhaps Gregory's answer can still inspire God-seekers even in the twenty-first century.

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<sup>70</sup> Laird, 'By faith alone', 64-65; Gregory, *Contra Eunomium* I, 371 (GNO I, 136, 17).

<sup>71</sup> Laird, 'By faith alone', 72, with reference to *In Canticum* III (GNO VI, 87, 5-8).