

Justification by Faith: a Patristic Doctrine

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[D. H. WILLIAMS](#) [NOTE: Professor of Patristics and Historical Theology, Baylor University]

Abstract

This essay challenges the criticism usually levelled at the early Fathers prior to Augustine for not articulating a view of justification by faith that corresponded with Pauline Christianity as reflected in the formulas of the sixteenth-century reformers. Not only is such a view anachronistic and tends to assume that there was (or is) a uniform definition of justification, but there is evidence that Latin theology before Augustine promulgated the tenets of unmerited grace and the necessity of righteousness that come only through justifying faith. In particular, the Matthew commentary of Hilary of Poitiers explicitly formulates a biblical theology of ‘fides sola iustificat’, and probably contributed to a revival of interest in the Pauline Epistles by the end of the fourth and early fifth centuries.