

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

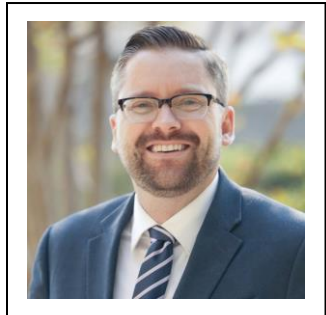
# The Gospel According to the Church Fathers

NATHAN BUSENITZ, PHD<sup>1</sup>

**After the apostles died, was the gospel hopelessly lost until the Reformation?**

That certainly seems to be a common assumption in some Protestant circles today. Thankfully, it is a false assumption.

I'm not entirely sure where that misconception started. But one thing I do know: it did not come from the Protestant Reformers.



The Reformers themselves (including Luther, Zwingli, Calvin, and others) were convinced that their position was not only *biblical*, but also *historical*. In other words, they contended that *both the apostles and the church fathers* would have agreed with them on the heart of the gospel.

For example, the second-generation Lutheran reformer, Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), wrote [a treatise on justification](#) in which he defended the Protestant position by extensively using the church fathers. And John Calvin (1509-1564), in his *Institutes*, similarly claimed that he could easily debunk his Roman Catholic opponents using nothing but patristic sources. Here's what he wrote:

If the contest were to be determined by patristic authority, the tide of victory — to put it very modestly — would turn to our side. Now, these fathers have written many wise and excellent things. . . . [Yet] the good things that these fathers have written they [the Roman Catholics] either do not notice, or misrepresent or pervert. . . . But we do not despise them [the church fathers]; in fact, if it were to our present purpose, I could with no trouble at all prove that the greater part of what we are saying today meets their approval.

---

<sup>1</sup> Dr. Nathan Busenitz serves as Dean of Faculty and Associate Professor of Theology at The Master's Seminary. In addition, Dr. Busenitz serves as pastor and elder at Grace Community Church in Los Angeles, CA.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

**Source:** John Calvin, "Prefatory Address to King Francis I of France," *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Section 4.

How could the Reformers be so confident that their understanding of the gospel was consistent with the teachings of the ancient church? Or perhaps more to the point: **What did the early church fathers have to say about the gospel of grace?**

2

Here is an admittedly brief collection of 30 patristic quotes, centering on the reality that justification is by grace alone through faith alone. Many more could be provided. But I think you'll be encouraged by this survey look at the gospel according to the church fathers.

(Even if you don't read every quote, just take a moment to consider the fact that, long before Luther, the leaders of the ancient church were clearly proclaiming the gospel of grace through faith in Christ.)

**1. Clement of Rome (30-100):** "And we, too, being called by His will in Christ Jesus, are not justified by ourselves, nor by our own wisdom, or understanding, or godliness, or works which we have wrought in holiness of heart; but by that faith through which, from the beginning, Almighty God has justified all men; to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

**Source:** Clement, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 32.4.

**2. Epistle to Diognetus (second century):** "He gave His own Son as a ransom for us, the holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for them that are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God? O sweet exchange! O unsearchable operation! O benefits surpassing all expectation! That the wickedness of many should be hid in a single righteous One, and that the righteousness of One should justify many transgressors!"

**Source:** *The Epistle to Diognetus*, 9.2-5.

**3. Justin Martyr (100-165)** speaks of "those who repented, and who no longer were purified by the blood of goats and of sheep, or by the ashes of an heifer, or by the offerings of fine flour, but by faith through the blood of Christ, and through His death."

**Source:** Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*, 13.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

**4. Origen (185-254):** “For God is just, and therefore he could not justify the unjust. Therefore he required the intervention of a propitiator, so that by having faith in Him those who could not be justified by their own works might be justified.”

**Source:** Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, 2.112.

**5. Origen (again):** “A man is justified by faith. The works of the law can make no contribution to this. Where there is no faith which might justify the believer, even if there are works of the law these are not based on the foundation of faith. Even if they are good in themselves they cannot justify the one who does them, because faith is lacking, and faith is the mark of those who are justified by God.”

**Source:** Origen, *Commentary on Romans*, 2.136.

**6. Hilary of Poitiers (300-368):** “Wages cannot be considered as a gift, because they are due to work, but God has given free grace to all men by the justification of faith.”

**Source:** Hilary, *Commentary on Matthew* (on [Matt. 20:7](#))

**7. Hilary of Poitiers (again):** “It disturbed the scribes that sin was forgiven by a man (for they considered that Jesus Christ was only a man) and that sin was forgiven by Him whereas the Law was not able to absolve it, since faith alone justifies.”

**Source:** Hilary, *Commentary on Matthew* (on [Matt. 9:3](#))

**8. Didymus the Blind (c. 313-398)** “A person is saved by grace, not by works but by faith. There should be no doubt but that faith saves and then lives by doing its own works, so that the works which are added to salvation by faith are not those of the law but a different kind of thing altogether.”[31]

**Source:** Didymus the Blind. *Commentary on James*, 2:26b.

**9. Basil of Caesarea (329-379):** “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord, that Christ has been made by God for us righteousness, wisdom, justification, redemption. This is perfect and pure boasting in God, when one is not proud on account of his own righteousness but knows that he is indeed unworthy of the true righteousness and is justified solely by faith in Christ.”

**Source:** Basil, *Homily on Humility*, 20.3.

**10. Jerome (347–420):** “We are saved by grace rather than works, for we can give God nothing in return for what he has bestowed on us.”

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

**Source:** Jerome, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1.2.1.

**11. John Chrysostom (349-407):** “For Scripture says that faith has saved us. Put better: Since God willed it, faith has saved us. Now in what case, tell me, does faith save without itself doing anything at all? Faith’s workings themselves are a gift of God, lest anyone should boast. What then is Paul saying? Not that God has forbidden works but that he has forbidden us to be justified by works. No one, Paul says, is justified by works, precisely in order that the grace and benevolence of God may become apparent.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Ephesians*, 4.2.9.

**12. John Chrysostom (again):** “But what is the ‘law of faith?’ It is, being saved by grace. Here he shows God’s power, in that He has not only saved, but has even justified, and led them to boasting, and this too without needing works, but looking for faith only.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 7.27.

**13. John Chrysostom (again):** “God allowed his Son to suffer as if a condemned sinner, so that we might be delivered from the penalty of our sins. This is God’s righteousness, that we are not justified by works (for then they would have to be perfect, which is impossible), but by grace, in which case all our sin is removed.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, 11.5.

**14. John Chrysostom (again):** “Everywhere he puts the Gentiles upon a thorough equality. ‘And put no difference between us and them, having purified their hearts by faith.’ (v. 9.) From faith alone, he says, they obtained the same gifts. This is also meant as a lesson to those (objectors); this is able to teach even them that faith only is needed, not works nor circumcision.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Acts*, 32 (regarding [Acts 15:1](#))

**15. John Chrysostom (again):** “What then was it that was thought incredible? That those who were enemies, and sinners, neither justified by the law, nor by works, should immediately through faith alone be advanced to the highest favor. Upon this head accordingly Paul has discoursed at length in his Epistle to the Romans, and here again at length. “This is a faithful saying,” he says, “and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on 1 Timothy*, 4.1.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

**16. John Chrysostom (again):** ““For it is most of all apparent among the Gentiles, as he also says elsewhere, ‘And that the Gentiles might glorify God for His mercy.’ ([Romans 15:9](#)<sup>L</sup>.) For the great glory of this mystery is apparent among others also, but much more among these. For, on a sudden, to have brought men more senseless than stones to the dignity of Angels, simply through bare words, and faith alone, without any laboriousness, is indeed glory and riches of mystery: just as if one were to take a dog, quite consumed with hunger and the mange, foul, and loathsome to see, and not so much as able to move, but lying cast out, and make him all at once into a man, and to display him upon the royal throne.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Colossians*, 5.2.

**17. John Chrysostom (again):** “Now since the Jews kept turning over and over the fact, that the Patriarch, and friend of God, was the first to receive circumcision, he wishes to show, that it was by faith that he too was justified. And this was quite a vantage ground to insist upon. For a person who had no works, to be justified by faith, was nothing unlikely. But for a person richly adorned with good deeds, not to be made just from hence, but from faith, this is the thing to cause wonder, and to set the power of faith in a strong light.”

**Source:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Romans*, 8.1.

**18. Augustine (354-430):** “If Abraham was not justified by works, how was he justified? The apostle goes on to tell us how: What does scripture say? (that is, about how Abraham was justified). Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness ([Rom. 4:3](#)<sup>L</sup>; [Gen. 15:6](#)<sup>L</sup>). Abraham, then, was justified by faith. Paul and James do not contradict each other: good works follow justification.”

**Source:** Augustine, Exposition 2 of Psalm 31, 2-4.

**19. Augustine (again):** “When someone believes in him who justifies the impious, that faith is reckoned as justice to the believer, as David too declares that person blessed whom God has accepted and endowed with righteousness, independently of any righteous actions ([Rom 4:5-6](#)<sup>L</sup>). What righteousness is this? The righteousness of faith, preceded by no good works, but with good works as its consequence.”

**Source:** Augustine, Exposition 2 of Psalm 31, 6-7.

**20. Ambrosiaster (fourth century):** “God has decreed that a person who believes in Christ can be saved without works. By faith alone he receives the forgiveness of sins.”

**Source:** Ambrosiaster, Commentary on [1 Corinthians 1:4](#)<sup>L</sup>.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

**21. Ambrosiaster (again):** “They are justified freely because they have not done anything nor given anything in return, but by faith alone they have been made holy by the gift of God.”

**Source:** Ambrosiaster, Commentary on [Romans 3:24](#)<sup>L</sup>.

**22. Ambrosiaster (again):** “Paul tells those who live under the law that they have no reason to boast basing themselves on the law and claiming to be of the race of Abraham, seeing that no one is justified before God except by faith.”

**Source:** Ambrosiaster, Commentary on [Romans 3:27](#)<sup>L</sup>.

**23. Ambrosiaster (again):** “God gave what he promised in order to be revealed as righteous. For he had promised that he would justify those who believe in Christ, as he says in Habakkuk: ‘The righteous will live by faith in me’ ([Hab. 2:4](#)<sup>L</sup>). Whoever has faith in God and Christ is righteous.”

**Source:** Ambrosiaster, Commentary on Paul’s Epistles; CSEL 81 ad loc.

**24. Marius Victorinus (fourth century):** “The fact that you Ephesians are saved is not something that comes from yourselves. It is the gift of God. It is not from your works, but it is God’s grace and God’s gift, not from anything you have deserved. ... We did not receive things by our own merit but by the grace and goodness of God.”

**Source:** Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Ephesians*, 1.2.9.

**25. Prosper of Aquitaine (390–455):** “And just as there are no crimes so detestable that they can prevent the gift of grace, so too there can be no works so eminent that they are owed in condign [deserved] judgment that which is given freely. Would it not be a debasement of redemption in Christ’s blood, and would not God’s mercy be made secondary to human works, if justification, which is through grace, were owed in view of preceding merits, so that it were not the gift of a Donor, but the wages of a laborer?”

**Source:** Prosper of Aquitaine, *Call of All Nations*, 1.17

**26. Theodoret of Cyrus (393–457):** “The Lord Christ is both God and the mercy seat, both the priest and the lamb, and he performed the work of our salvation by his blood, demanding only faith from us.”

**Source:** Theodoret of Cyrus, *Interpretation of the Letter to the Romans*; PG 82 ad loc.

**27. Theodoret of Cyrus (again):** “All we bring to grace is our faith. But even in this faith, divine grace itself has become our enabler. For [Paul] adds, ‘And this is not of yourselves



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics

but it is a gift of God; not of works, lest anyone should boast' ([Eph. 2:8-9](#)<sup>L</sup>). It is not of our own accord that we have believed, but we have come to belief after having been called; and even when we had come to believe, He did not require of us purity of life, but approving mere faith, God bestowed on us forgiveness of sins"

**Source:** Theodoret of Cyrus, *Interpretation of the Fourteen Epistles of Paul*; FEF 3:248–49, sec. 2163.



**28. Cyril of Alexandria (412-444):** "For we are justified by faith, not by works of the law, as Scripture says. By faith in whom, then, are we justified? Is it not in Him who suffered death according to the flesh for our sake? Is it not in one Lord Jesus Christ?"

**Source:** Cyril of Alexandria, *Against Nestorius*, 3.62

**29. Fulgentius (462–533):** "The blessed Paul argues that we are saved by faith, which he declares to be not from us but a gift from God. Thus there cannot possibly be true salvation where there is no true faith, and, since this faith is divinely enabled, it is without doubt bestowed by his free generosity. Where there is true belief through true faith, true salvation certainly accompanies it. Anyone who departs from true faith will not possess the grace of true salvation."

**Source:** Fulgentius, *On the Incarnation*, 1; CCL 91:313.

**30. Bede (673-735):** "Although the apostle Paul preached that we are justified by faith without works, those who understand by this that it does not matter whether they live evil lives or do wicked and terrible things, as long as they believe in Christ, because salvation is through faith, have made a great mistake. James here expounds how Paul's words ought to be understood. This is why he uses the example of Abraham, whom Paul also used as an example of faith, to show that the patriarch also performed good works in the light of his faith. It is therefore wrong to interpret Paul in such a way as to suggest that it did not matter whether Abraham put his faith into practice or not. What Paul meant was that no one obtains the gift of justification on the basis of merits derived from works performed beforehand, because the gift of justification comes only from faith."

**Source:** Cited from the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (ed. Gerald Bray), NT, vol. 11, p. 31.

© 2021, The Cripple Gate. Retrieved November 8, 2021.

<https://thecripplegate.com/the-gospel-according-to-the-church-fathers>

[WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG](http://WWW.LIONANDLAMBAPOLOGETICS.ORG)

© 2021, LION AND LAMB APOLOGETICS—PO BOX 1297—CLEBURNE, TX 76033-1297