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J. I. Packer's Theology of Justification—His Reception and Appropriation of a Classic Protestant Doctrine

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Abstract: This article is a systematic overview of Packer's theology of justification from the perspective of descriptive, analytical, and critical methodologies. A series of books written by Packer were investigated in order to identify various references to justification, which led to a categorization consisting of six features (justification as the legacy of the Reformation, eternal status, a precursor of sanctification, trust in Christ, covenant reality, and a divine promise). Two of Packer's most important books used for this research, *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (2005) and *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (2011), also revealed the theological foundation of justification, which I present as the two pillars on which Packer's theology of justification stands: God's being and Christ's incarnation. These two pillars reveal not only God's invisible being as Trinity but also his self-disclosure in Christ as an exclusive focus of the sinners' belief of justification. The six features and the two pillars of Packer's theology of justification demonstrate not only how he received and appropriated the classical Protestant teaching about God's decision to consider sinners righteous despite their sins but also how it generates, through faith in Christ, a consistently new life.

Keywords: justification; eternity; sanctification; trust; covenant; promise



Citation: Simuț, Corneliu C. 2023. J. I. Packer's Theology of Justification—His Reception and Appropriation of a Classic Protestant Doctrine. *Religions* 14: 1442. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel14121442>

Academic Editor: Fábio Py

Received: 15 September 2023

Revised: 17 November 2023

Accepted: 18 November 2023

Published: 21 November 2023



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1. Introduction

J. I. Packer is a famous name within Evangelical quarters. Theologically Anglican and confessionally Evangelical, he was not only a very prolific writer, but also a very involved Christian whose convictions went far beyond his academic preoccupations. Packer began his career in Bristol, and then he moved to Oxford, wrote for the *Evangelical Quarterly*, signed the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy*, served as editor of *Christianity Today*, and supervised the *English Standard Version*, in addition to teaching at Regent College in Vancouver. His interest in Puritan theology constantly pushed him back into the history of the 16th and the 17th centuries, while his own theology was heavily impregnated with the doctrines of the various strands of the then ecclesiastical Reformation(s). Despite his vested interest in Reformation theology, Packer did not produce a lengthy systematic treatment of the doctrine of justification. What he did do, however, was write a rather short six-thousand-word article published as an e-book (*Sola Fide: the Reformed Doctrine of Justification*) in 2012 (Packer 2012). Although concise and clear, this e-book cannot take precedence over Packer's impressive theological activity, which spreads across many decades and dozens of books. This is why some of Packer's most famous books were used for this investigation of his theology of justification, rather than his 2012 e-book. In general, Packer writes for the public (that is, people without vested scholarly interests in academic theology), so his explanations are not difficult to understand; his perspective on justification therefore follows the same pattern. Before providing more information about Packer's theology of justification, it is crucial to establish why this particular enterprise is important: in my opinion, this paper investigates Packer's perspective on justification in an attempt to demonstrate his intention to return to what I call a classic Protestant doctrine;

thus, what Packer seeks to do in his writings is go back to the doctrine of justification in order to emphasize its original 16th century aspects, as well as its contemporary importance in the 20th and 21st centuries. For this particular study, several books were used, but some of the most important were Packer's *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (2005) and his *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (2011), which revealed critical insights into how he understood the doctrine of justification. Since it is scattered throughout his many published works, Packer's theology of justification can be said to have a wide range of characteristics. However, for the purposes of this study, six characteristics are considered vitally important, and, in this respect, Packer saw justification as the legacy of the Reformation, as eternal status, as a precursor of sanctification, as trust in Christ, as covenant reality, and as a divine promise. There could have been multiple possibilities to categorize the features of Packer's theology of justification, but these six characteristics appear to be more encompassing than others, in the sense that they can easily include those who are less general in focus. Also, these six general characteristics of Packer's theology of justification are totally dependent on two theological pillars, which constitute their very foundation. The first pillar is God's being, and Packer aptly discusses God's trinitarian being as foundational not only for humanity's epistemology (or how it can know God) but also for its soteriology (specifically how it can be saved by God). The second pillar is a particularization of God's being, namely, Christ's incarnation, which singles out the exclusivity of Christ for salvation.

Methodologically, I focused on some of Packer's most important books, which contain relevant thoughts about justification—Packer does write a lot about justification, which is mentioned numerous times in his works, but these references tend to be repetitious—and two were of particular significance for this study: *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God* (2005) and *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (2011). The other books written by Packer that I found quite useful for a perusal of his doctrine of justification are his *Knowing God* (the 2021 edition), *God's Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions* (2012), *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fulness of Life with God* (2009), and *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (2008). These primary sources were dealt with mainly by means of a descriptive methodology, which was supplemented by a more analytic approach when coupled with a series of secondary sources, of which three I found appropriate for suitable explanations about Packer's theology of justification. The first is *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (2010), written by Fred R. Sanders, who explains how Packer connects justification and adoption; the second is Reid Hensarling's *The Biblical Gospel: Its Significance and Impact in Spiritual Renewal* (2012), which I used to emphasize how Packer's theology of justification is relevant to Christian life based on the reality of the believer's new life in Christ; and the third is *Sanctus: Christian Sanctification* (2010) by David T. Williams, which was used to demonstrate how justification leads to sanctification in Packer's theology. My own interactions with the primary and secondary sources result in a critical methodology with the specific purpose of showing how Packer's theology of justification is aimed at convincing his readers that God's decision to consider sinners righteous must be seen in a life of holiness.

In his only systematic treatment of justification, a short article published as an e-book in 2012 and titled *Sola Fide: the Reformed Doctrine of Justification*, Packer discusses first the 'need, meaning, and means of justification'. According to Packer, the need for justification is 'human sin', and the meaning of justification is defined as 'a judicial act of God pardoning and forgiving our sins, accepting us as righteous, and instating us as his sons', while the means of justification consist of 'faith', in the sense that justification happens 'by faith' (Packer 2012). Second, Packer approaches what he calls 'the constant threat of displacing the cross with self-justification', which he divides into three disruptive realities: 'the intruding of works', 'the displacing of the cross', and 'the eliminating of faith' (Packer 2012). To support his claims, Packer resorts to the arguments of some Reformation theologians, such as Martin Luther, Philip Melancthon, John Calvin, John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, and Richard Hooker, but he also references the *Augsburg Confession*, the *Westminster Confession*,

the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, which he calls the ‘Anglican Articles’ (Packer 2012). A methodological clarification is needed here: the reason why I did not use Packer’s brief e-book on justification extensively not only has to do with the fact that it is rather short and published late in life, but also that I preferred to use various works that he published during his very long theological career together with particular insights he considered relevant to the specific time when they were first published. This is why this article is based on the multiple references to justification that Packer included in some of his most famous works, rather than on his short 2012 e-book on justification. Thus, one positive aspect of this paper is its focus on Packer’s corpus of writings rather than on his *Sola Fide* e-book; conversely, a negative aspect—as well as a limitation—of this study lies in its author’s decision to investigate Packer’s doctrine of justification without specific references to his 2012 e-book on justification (a decision that is based on the author’s conviction that Packer’s legacy is better served by an investigation of his treatment of justification throughout some of his most impactful books, rather than an analysis of a relatively obscure production).

2. Justification as the Legacy of the Reformation

One of the first aspects one sees in Packer’s theology of justification has to do with the fact that justification itself, as a foundational Christian doctrine, is part of the legacy of the Reformation. In this respect, as we can read in his *Keep in Step with the Spirit: Finding Fullness in Our Walk with God*, Packer emphasizes not only that justification comes down to us as a ‘root principle’ of Protestantism, but also that it can be defined as ‘full acceptance within God’ (Packer 2005, p. 102). Justification is mentioned both in connection with what happens with the human being in his relationship with God, who accepts him or her, and with respect to how God acts upon the human being; thus, in Packer, justification consists of ‘Christ’s righteousness imputed in its sole and sufficient ground’ (Packer 2005, p. 102). Justification occurs in the life of the human being only by faith through the active work of the Holy Spirit (Packer 2005, p. 112) who reveals God’s benevolent attitude towards men and women by means of his grace (Packer 2005, p. 114). Packer also reveals that justification is an objective divine reality grounded in God’s being and involvement in creation with particular emphasis on the life of human beings (Packer 2005, p. 132). When God’s justification and human life are bridged, one can establish that—in Packer—justification is the very beginning of Christian life as the foundation of man’s sanctification (Packer 2005, p. 123).

Roche Coleman notices Packer’s objective aspect of justification by pointing out ‘the legal standing before God’ of the justified person (Coleman 2013, p. 27) who not only escapes God’s condemnation but also benefits from divine pardon. The crucial role of justification in Packer is also highlighted by Christ Woodall who acknowledges that, for Packer, the doctrine of justification stands at the very foundation of the church (Woodall 2015, n.p.).

A second aspect that reveals that, in Packer, justification is part of the legacy of the Reformation is a particular reference to Luther and his perspective on justification. Thus, in his *Concise Theology: a Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs*, Packer indicates that Luther’s understanding of justification was unequivocally based on the reality of faith, and faith itself was supposed to be anchored in Christ (Packer 2011, p. 160). According to Packer—and in this, he borrows from the late medieval and early modern theological language—‘the necessary means, or instrumental cause, of justification is personal faith in Jesus Christ as crucified Savior and risen Lord’ (Packer 2011, p. 165). In other words, justification cannot be brought about in a practical way unless the personal dimension of belief is activated individually by a person who exercises his or her faith. Justification, however, is not merely dry doctrine; on the contrary, it is the foundation of a new life because, as Packer points out, ‘justification is basic blessing’ (Packer 2011, p. 167) that places believers on a secure path towards God. This happens because justification leads to adoption, which is ‘the

crowning blessing' (Packer 2011, p. 167) and cannot be realistically be achieved in the absence of justification.

Fred R. Sanders sees a connection between justification and adoption in Packer, as well as his apparent classification of justification and adoption according to the scale of this foundational and upper blessing. Sanders, however, is swift in declaring that, in Packer, this is not a denigration of justification; on the contrary, it is a realistic acknowledgement of God's work (Sanders 2010, p. 170). This vital connection between justification and adoption in Packer is also dealt with by David T. Peckham who emphasizes that, once justification is achieved, adoption can also be worked out because 'every obstacle has been removed' (Peckham 2013, p. 123). This is an essential realization about Christian existence—in line with the theology of the Reformation—because, according to Peckham, justification and adoption are based on God's decision to make human beings 'holy and without blame' without being 'even slightly tainted with sin' (Peckham 2013, pp. 122–23).

3. Justification as an Eternal Status

Another important feature of justification in Packer is its eternal status. A justified person, Packer explains in his *Knowing God*, enters a state of eternal bliss because that person is 'chosen from eternity to final salvation' (Packer 2021, p. 272). This eternal status given by justification strengthens the justified person with 'justifying faith' (Packer 2021, p. 223), which enables the believer to lead a life of boldness and courage. Why is this important? Because, as Packer indicates, 'the gospel centers upon justification' (Packer 2021, p. 133), which means that justification is the very core of the good news of humanity's salvation in Christ. When a person understands this particular salvific reality, he or she accepts the 'gospel in the mind and the Holy Spirit in the heart' (Packer 2021, p. 265), which leads to the essence of Christian life: what we understand by reason must be coupled with what we feel by feelings—our entire psychology changes when we comprehend that, in justification, we find 'pardon of all sin, past, present, and future, and complete acceptance' by God (Packer 2021, p. 222). According to Packer, justification is important because it is God's gift to humanity (Packer 2021, p. 145), and its acceptance produces peace in the life of the believer.

The link between justification and peace in Packer does not escape Max Anders' analysis, which explains the peace of justification by offering the example of Abraham's faith in God (Anders 2012, p. 73). Believing God leads to knowing God, which, in turn, leads to reconciliation with God and peace with God, as well as with one's own self. It is important to notice that P. T. O'Brien picks up the same theme of peace and justification in Packer when he writes that, according to Packer, 'justification brings peace with God (because sins are forgiven) and the hope of God's glory (because the sinner is accepted as righteous)' (O'Brien 2002, p. 84)—a clear demonstration that Packer's perspective on justification is a very practical lesson for Christian life given that God's glory (or presence) confirms the justified person's eternal status.

Peace is vital as an indicator of justification's eternal status because, in Packer's *God's Will: Finding Guidance for Everyday Decisions*, peace is twofold: first, there is an objective peace, which means that we are reconciled with God, and, second, there is a subjective peace that indicates that we are reconciled with ourselves. Dwelling on the reality of peace reveals that justification lies at the very foundations of Packer's theology because believers must be 'constantly remembering what our Lord went through in order to bring us pardon for sin and justification through faith' (Packer and Nystrom 2012, n.p.). Being aware of one's justification and the peace it brings on these two levels, objective and subjective, results in the believer being given an 'inheritor status' (Packer and Nystrom 2012, n.p.), which confirms once again the eternal status of justification. But peace is not the only aspect of justification that reveals its eternal status; freedom is another one—and it is by no means less important than peace. According to Packer, freedom has the capacity to anchor us 'in the life of enjoying, serving, and pleasing our heavenly Father' (Packer and Nystrom 2012, n.p.), which is once again proof in favor of justification's eternal status simply because

it connects the believer with God on a permanent basis in this life and the next. Why? Because justification makes believers sons of God through adoption (Packer and Nystrom 2012, n.p.)

According to David C. Scott, in Packer, adoption cannot be detached from justification because of 'Christ's death and resurrection', which leads not only to our being considered righteous in God's sight but also to our being declared sons of God, pardoned, and accepted by God himself (Scott 2018, p. 52). This is nothing but a clear demonstration of God's saving grace—Reid Hensarling tells us—because 'a Christian's new life in Christ is real' (Hensarling 2012, p. 53), which shows that Packer's theology of justification is foundational to a practical Christian life.

4. Justification as a Precursor of Sanctification

Packer is emphatic about the fact that we must make a sharp distinction between justification and sanctification because such a distinction does exist in reality. In brief, as we read in Packer's *Rediscovering Holiness: Know the Fulness of Life with God*, while justification is entirely God's work by which he considers us righteous by forgiving our sins, sanctification is our cooperation with God in appropriating the reality of his forgiveness by leading a life of holiness. In Packer's words:

The distinction between justification and sanctification becomes important. As far as concerns the making of atonement for our sins, the work is entirely and exclusively God's. When we confess ourselves lost sinners and cast ourselves on Christ to save us, we are acknowledging by our action that we contribute nothing to our new relationship with God save our need of it, and this is the exact truth. We get into God's favor, not by paying our way, but by accepting His gift of a blood-bought amnesty. However, in sanctification, which is the work of God without us from which our holiness flows, we are called to cooperate actively with God. In order to do this as we should, we need to have some overall awareness of His purpose and strategy for our lives as a whole. (Packer 2009, p. 42)

Elements of a very practical Christian anthropology are evident here as Packer speaks about holiness, confession, and acceptance; human beings must always work with God, in close cooperation with him, but only after they realize that everything begins with him and continues with him, even if we are invited to work under his permanent guidance. Packer's Christian anthropology is rooted in justification as God's exclusive work, but then it develops along the lines of sanctification, which, although firmly anchored in God's exclusively justification, develops as man's attempt to constantly work together with God towards visible and demonstrable holiness—in this sense, Packer's perspective on sanctification is both positional (as dependent on the exclusive character of justification) and progressive (as the human being's cooperation with God towards personal and communitarian holiness).

David T. Williams believes that, in Packer's theology, and in line with his reliance on Puritan theology, 'God justifies in order to sanctify' (Williams 2010, p. 129) because we are not only forgiven by God; we are actually invited to live as forgiven people by working together with God. This is why Don J. Payne thinks that, in Packer, 'sanctification is synergistic' (Payne 2020, p. 6, n. 8).

Packer's discussion about justification is eventually all about sanctification, and it is in this particular aspect that his theology of justification is, once again, a genuine sample of Christian living. Thus, Packer argues that justification is 'the context of holiness through Jesus Christ' (Packer 2009, p. 87), meaning that sanctification cannot be achieved in the absence of justification. In this respect, justification is not only the context of holiness, as Packer puts it, but also the mandatory precursor of sanctification. In Packer, holiness is the content of sanctification, which is thoroughly Christological and pneumatological; in other words, sanctification can only be achieved in Christ and through the Holy Spirit, but, if this is true about sanctification, then it must be also true about justification. Should anyone ask why, the main similarity between justification and sanctification resides in

their reality as divine actions, while their dissimilarity has to do with the fact that, while the former is exclusively God's work, the latter is primarily God's work and then our own as well. However, as we see in Packer's *God Has Spoken*, justification is not merely Christological and pneumatological; it is also ecclesiological because there is a connection between justification and the church since those who put their trust in God by faith become believers and consequently members of the church. Moreover, the church speaks with one voice—or at least, it should—and this is what Packer calls 'the church's corporate witness' (Packer 2016, p. 113), which touches multiple aspects, including the acknowledgment of justification's role as the foundation of sanctification.

In Packer, justification and sanctification go hand in hand, although they are treated as distinct divine actions. This reality prompts Chet Cataldo to note that, in Packer, 'righteousness is both declarative and experienced' (Cataldo 2010, p. 45), which means that God's righteousness comes to a human being both by God's declaring him or her righteous and by his or her decision to act upon that righteousness. The resolution to do something about one's righteousness and work together with God is a confirmation of divine adoption, which, as Chun Tse points out (Tse 2020, p. 16, n. 20), appears to emerge as Packer's favorite gospel privilege. In this respect, based on David J. McKinley's opinion about Packer's take on Puritan theology, one may conclude with McKinley that Packer promotes a perspective on Christian life as 'focused on sanctification or growth in holiness' (McKinley 2023, p. 10).

5. Justification as Trust in Christ

This is a key theme in Packer's theology of justification because the specificity of the Christological content of justification as a divine act presents 'Christ's perfect obedience' (Packer 2005, p. 88) as a mandatory example to all believers. Packer develops his Christological perspective on justification in his *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, and he clearly indicates that the obedience showed by Christ also reveals 'his substitutionary sin-bearing for us on the cross' (Packer 2005, p. 88), which is the very foundation of sanctification. Again, detaching justification from sanctification is impossible simply because the glue that keeps them together is Christ himself, the essence of the believers' holy life given and kept within them pneumatologically:

It is out of our union by the Spirit, through faith, with the Christ who died for us and whom first we trust for justification . . . that our subsequent life of holiness is lived . . . Holy people glory not in their holiness, but in Christ's cross; for the holiest saint is never more than a justified sinner and never sees himself in any other way. (Packer 2005, p. 88)

One can easily see that, no matter what direction Packer's explanations go, he eventually ends up speaking about holiness, which is solid proof of his ultimate concern for Christian living—and that is essentially Christological and pneumatological. Christ and the Spirit work out our holiness based on God's initial justification on our behalf and then his subsequent sanctification within us, both powerfully anchored in the believer's trust.

Packer's notion of trust in Christ as essential to justification does not escape the analysis of R. C. Sproul, who writes in connection to Packer's theology that 'it is good for a person to trust in Christ and in Christ alone for his or her salvation' and that shows that 'our justification is by faith insofar as faith is the instrumental cause of our justification' (Sproul 2002, p. 25). As far as Alister McGrath is concerned, Packer's theology of justification consists of 'imputed righteousness' and the necessity to 'trust Jesus Christ' (McGrath 1997, p. 274).

Justification as trust in Christ singles out Packer's desire to emphasize the exclusivity of Christ as an object of faith in justification. In this regard, Packer discusses the rather thorny issue of legalism, which he dismisses by means of justification. Packer's theory of legalism has two aspects: first, there is a code of legal requirements for all situations, and, second, this code—when or if applied in one's life—leads to gaining divine favor. Neither of these aspects, Packer argues, has anything to do with how God's plan of salvation was conceived or operates within the reality of creation. On the contrary, while there is

nothing within the human being or creation itself that can provide any support towards obtaining any sort of divine favor, salvation begins, develops, and culminates in God's very being. In other words, we can neither do anything towards our own salvation nor can we somehow convince God to bless us with his favor; what we can do instead is understand 'justification by faith alone, through Christ alone, without works of law' (Packer 2005, p. 93). In other words, there is a way to holiness—Packer argues—but this has nothing to do with 'curtailing of personal Christian liberty by group pressure' (Packer 2005, p. 93), meaning that nobody can force us to do anything for salvation. What we must understand is that only Christ is the foundation of our salvation through God's justification in him by trust in Christ.

Robert L. Reymond equates Packer's perspective on justification as trust in Christ with 'the biblical doctrine of justification' (Reymond 2010, p. 755); this reveals the importance of Packer's theology of justification for Christian living because Reymond discusses these aspects just before he delves into the doctrine of sanctification and holiness. Likewise, Joshua Harris points out that, for Packer, as Christians, we are the persons who hold to 'our union with Christ . . . as we trust in him' through 'the Spirit of adoption' (Harris 2010, p. 139), and these are all key elements of a genuine Christian living.

6. Justification as Covenant Reality

Justification as covenant reality is one of Packer's most interesting perspectives on justification, and there are a couple of reasons why. First, as we see in Packer's *Concise Theology*, justification is part of what he calls 'covenant salvation' (Packer 2011, p. 89). This means that God's decision to save humanity is constitutive of a personal decision he took for himself, which he considers binding to himself, and that is the covenant. According to Packer, justification is the very first aspect of this covenant salvation and is followed by adoption, regeneration, and sanctification—and all these he sees as 'covenant mercies' and an indication that they all occur because God decided to bestow them upon human beings. Men and women are expected to be loyal to this covenant, which God establishes not only with himself but also with them; in this respect—and this is an aspect that reveals the practical side of justification—responding to God and his covenant with us implies what Packer describes as 'a regular devotional exercise', which is compulsory to all those who put their faith as trust in God. Why? Because in doing so, believers not only respond to God's covenant but also 'appreciate all the wonders of God's redeeming love' (Packer 2011, p. 90).

In other words, justification plays an epistemological role when it comes to the fact that, once justified, the believer learns more about God's love. In this regard, Thomas Talbott writes that there is a 'logic of divine love', which Packer seems to have understood as focused primarily on the individual or on the believer as an individual person (Talbott 2014, n.p.). The individual person, however, is not alone in God's 'covenant salvation' because, as Douglas van Dorn explains quite persuasively with reference to Packer's understanding of the covenant, individual persons do not 'represent merely themselves, but also those who would come after them in their covenant' (Van Dorn 2012, p. 126). This insight sheds light on Packer's doctrine of justification as a sample of both individual and collective (or perhaps one should better say ecclesiastical) living.

The practical aspect of justification in Packer is also confirmed by the goal of the divine covenant, which is the sanctification of all those who enter the covenant; Packer explains that the people who are accepted into God's covenant are not only sanctified and lead holy lives but are also in the position of belonging to God in their capacity as children of God. Packer also explains that, at this point in time, God's creation heads towards the goal of sanctification to the point the covenant—and the holiness of the people within it—reaches its culmination. In Packer's words:

The goal of God's covenantal dealings is, as it always was, the gathering and sanctifying of the covenant people 'from every nation, tribe, people, and language (Rev. 7:9), who will one day inhabit New Jerusalem in a renewed world order

(21:1–2). Here the covenant relationship will find its fullest expression—‘they will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God’ (21:3). Toward this goal God’s shaping of world events still moves. (Packer 2011, p. 89)

Nevertheless, it is vital to understand that the practical dimension of justification in Packer is profoundly Christological; the covenant is in Christ, and all the people who are part of the covenant are in Christ, which means that, as Packer plainly puts it, ‘no one outside of Christ can be in covenant with God’ (Packer 2011, p. 89). In other words, justification happens only in Christ, the covenant works only in Christ, salvation in the end is only in Christ, and true living exists only in Christ.

All these aspects occur because of one fundamental truth: justification does not make anyone righteous—on the contrary, in justification, God only considers us righteous because of his covenant. Bill Thrasher noticed this aspect in Packer’s theology (Thrasher 2001, p. 34), but it must be highlighted here that, in Packer, justification—while declarative—cannot be said to have been accomplished in the absence of real transformation and sanctification. This is why Darryl Wooldridge writes that Packer’s view of justification ‘includes both regenerative and transformative elements by participating in Christ in an ontic union’ (Wooldridge 2016, p. 67), thus confirming the profound practicality of Packer’s outlook on justification.

7. Justification as a Divine Promise

Packer explains that, in the end, justification is so powerfully anchored in God’s reality that it must be seen as a divine promise. The logic behind this theological equation is this: God is sovereign over creation in all respects, and, in dealing with humanity’s most fundamental problem—which is sin—he invites all human beings to repentance based on the atonement he works through Christ. Packer provides this image of justification as a divine promise in his *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, where he also points out that the reality of human salvation involves God’s work (the atonement in/through Christ and the invitation to repentance) and man’s reaction (calling the ‘name of the Lord’). This is why Packer writes that ‘God in the gospel really does offer Christ and promise justification and life’ to all those who call him (Packer 2008, p. 109). Packer is convinced that justification as a divine promise is inextricably connected with ‘the truth of the gospel promises’, which indicates that justification as a promise is rooted in God’s word. Concretely, this means that justification is deeply moored in God’s very being. Packer admits that God’s sovereignty manifests in election but—irrespective of how the election is perceived by human beings—he emphasizes that justification as a divine promise remains a constant and open invitation to all humanity (Packer 2008, p. 109).

This particular theme is of crucial importance because sin acts as perhaps the ultimate oppression over the human race; this is why Jonathan R. Huggins points out that, in Packer, God’s righteousness, the very core of justification, is provided to oppressed people (Huggins 2013, p. 174). The oppression of sin is thus countered by the promise of justification; in this regard, Chris Bruno shows that, according to Packer, through justification, God cancels the estrangement caused by sin and repairs the rift between himself and humanity. While God demonstrates his solution through Christ, human beings do so through ‘works of love’, which illustrate once more the practical essence of Packer’s understanding of justification (Bruno 2019, p. 114).

Justification as a divine promise can also be seen in Packer’s *Fundamentalism’ and the Word of God*, where he includes divine promises among God’s words and discusses justification—as we have already seen—in the context of God’s sovereignty. This is important because, while God’s words are viewed by Packer as accompanying God’s salvation, God’s promise is nothing but his salvation. Along the same line, justification is not only a divine promise but also divine salvation, and Packer makes this connection to demonstrate that God’s word is not empty. God’s word is a promise that can be trusted because there is a long line of historical characters who explained God’s word to those in need, to the point that Christ himself linked his own words to those of the Old Testament. For Packer, this is

crucial because it establishes not only the validity of justification as a divine promise, but also the reality of justification as anchored in God's sovereignty over creation. What humans must is display obedience to God's words and thus to God himself. Here is Packer's explanation:

... there is nothing of which the Bible is more sure than that God has from the first accompanied His redemptive acts with explanatory words—statements of fact about Himself and His purposes, warnings, commands, predictions, promises—and that it is in responding specifically to these divine words that obedience consists. (Packer 1958, p. 93)

And these truths are based on other equally vital truths, such as 'that the dead do not perish, that justification is by faith and not by works, that God is sovereign in saving mercy' (Packer 1958, p. 93). This is how Packer demonstrates that justification is a divine promise and that it is a fundamental aspect of Christian living.

It is clear therefore that, in Packer, God and humanity work together for salvation because God's work, essential and initial as it is, must be concertedly met by 'human responsibility', as Vaughn W. Baker points out in his discussion about synergism (Baker 2012, p. 60). Tony Merida cements the argument by pointing out that, in Packer, God's promise of justification is 'actually good news for sinners' in the context of God's omniscience since 'he knows it all, but he declares believers righteous' (Merida 2021, n.p.). Since Packer's theology of justification is synergistic and humanity must respond to God's promise, its practical aspect is unmistakably transparent.

8. Evaluation: The Two Pillars of Justification

The reality of justification would not have been possible in the absence of two vital aspects. Packer himself does not connect these two aspects with justification, but the link between them and justification is, in my opinion, evident in his theology. These two aspects are like two pillars on which justification stands and in whose absence justification would have been impossible. In his *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, Packer provides an ample discussion about the Spirit, which is, in fact, a debate about God's being—and this is the very first pillar of justification. The first aspect that made justification possible is God's being. Although, as Packer points out, 'the truth of the Trinity is a New Testament revelation' (Packer 2005, p. 52), the same God as a triunity of being was active in the times described in the Old Testament; in other words, the very same God—ontologically extant as a Trinity of divine persons—was the one who decided not only to punish humanity's sin but also to find a solution for this otherwise inescapable problem. This God, whom no human being was ever able to see in the times past of the Old Testament or in the times following the events presented in the New Testament, was the one who decided to create the reality of justification by which sinners were considered righteous before him—and that, as Packer points out, was always an eternal divine decision (Packer 2021, p. 272).

When we read Packer, we see that the God who justifies sinners is the same God who adopts them as his children. John Jefferson Davies sees this in Packer, and, in an attempt to put his theology in a nutshell, he provides us with a sample of theological mathematics he identifies in Packer: 'penal substitution/justification + adoption: the forensic + the familial' (Davis 2015, p. 137). Mitchell L. Chase also juxtaposes God's being and justification in Packer's thought when he reveals that justification can work only when God's wrath has been quenched, and this is not so much about the fact that God can be angry but that, in the very core of his being, God found a way beyond his aversion to sin in order to consider sinners righteous in Christ (Chase 2010, p. 79).

With Christ, we reach the second pillar of Packer's theology of justification because God's decision to consider believers righteous is anchored in Christ, or—more precisely—in his work on behalf of sinners, and Christ's work begins with his incarnation. If the first pillar of Packer's theology of justification is God's being, the second is Christ's incarnation as a particularization of God's being. This is why Packer perceptively mentions that, when people discuss how God is seen in the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments,

‘that is in question . . . is not the mode of God’s being from eternity, but the manner of its revelation in history’ (Packer 2005, p. 52). This is to say that what matters the most for us as human beings is not only our understanding of God’s being as Trinity (a capacity in which we cannot see God), but also—and essentially—Christ’s incarnation (a capacity in which we can see God because, in Christ, the invisible God gets a face, since Jesus is the very image of God). It is Jesus incarnate who ultimately helps us understand that, as Packer puts it, ‘the God of both Testaments is one’ (Packer 2005, p. 53), and whatever we know about God we know through Christ’s incarnation: ‘though God’s triunity is an eternal fact, only through Christ was it made known’ (Packer 2005, p. 52).

The importance of Christ’s incarnation for Packer’s theology does not escape Donald J. Payne’s attention who writes about its ‘revelatory function’—and this in turn makes Christ ‘the focal point’ and ‘interpretative criterion’ in relation to Scripture because ‘Jesus’ teachings constitute the ultimate form of God’s self-revelation’ (Payne 2009, p. 61), without which humanity would not have had full access to God’s salvation and justification. Richard A. Holland Jr. also noticed that, in Packer, Jesus was presented as deeply involved in human reality. Moreover, this ‘transformation’ only added to his divinity without affecting his divinity, which became incarnate first in ‘the womb of Mary’ in order to be ‘made visible in the early life, sufferings, and the bodily resurrection of Jesus’ (Holland 2012, n.p.) as the foundation of human salvation and justification. Holland Jr. makes it clear that Packer’s theology confirms the vital role of Christ’s incarnation for the life of the church, which always understood God’s being through what believers saw in Jesus as Christ incarnate (Holland 2012, n.p.).

9. Conclusions

In the several books selected for this study of Packer’s theology of justification, which—although not organized systematically with the notable exception of his very short 2012 e-book *Sola Fide: the Reformed Doctrine of Justification*—offers valuable insights into how justification leads to holiness and a specific Christian living, six features emerged as crucially important. The first one has to do with the fact that justification is a legacy of the Reformation mostly because it focuses on its objective character, its vital significance for the church, and its declarative aspects regarding man’s new status in Christ before God through faith. The second characteristic of justification in Packer is its eternal status, which is anchored in God’s decision to consider believers righteous despite their sins that are forgiven in the past, present, and future. Third, justification in Packer is seen as a precursor of sanctification, which means that God’s decision to consider sinners righteous leads to a life of holiness. This particular holiness reveals the fourth characteristic of Packer’s theology of justification, which is trust in Christ; there cannot be any justification unless the sinner decides to place his faith as trust in Christ and in him alone. Fifth, Packer views justification as covenant reality, which reveals that God’s decision to consider sinners righteous is deeply rooted in the covenant he established with himself and humanity, even before creation was made. The sixth and last image of justification in Packer is justification as a divine promise, namely, a reality that—once revealed by God’s word—remains valid and active throughout history for all those who believe in Christ for their new life of holiness.

This new life, however, which is not only presented in terms of holiness but also as expounding the essence of Christian living, is impossible to lead in the absence of the two pillars that sustain it. The first pillar on which justification stands in Packer’s theology is God’s being and especially his triadic ontology. God is revealed in the Scriptures of the Old and the New Testaments as a Trinity who acts in history for the benefit of humanity, even if this trinitarian aspect of his being is revealed clearly only in the New Testament. Nevertheless, even if the Old Testament presents God as fundamentally invisible, the people who approached him on a personal basis through trust and prayer revealed an existence that is essentially similar to what one sees in the New Testament. There is though one extremely important distinction between the theology of the Old Testament and that of the New Testament: the fact that, while in the Old Testament, God remains perpetually

invisible to humanity, in the New Testament, God becomes visible in Christ in his capacity of Logos who becomes incarnate. Thus, Christ's incarnation is the second pillar of Packer's theology of justification, which is not only firmly anchored in God's being through Christ, but also exclusively focused on Christ as a visible revealer of God's invisible being. Every human being who places his or her trust in Christ enters a relationship with God and can therefore be justified or considered righteous before God despite his or her sins for a new life characterized by holiness.

As far as I can tell, Packer's doctrine of justification is not merely an appropriation of a classical doctrine but also an attempt to demonstrate the perpetual validity of this 16th century doctrine for our contemporary societies. This appears to be anchored in his conviction that the Reformers got it right in the first place; in other words, the Reformers correctly understood the doctrine of justification because they had an exceptionally good grasp of the meaning of justification as a biblical doctrine; this is why, in my opinion, Packer merely saw himself as an individual whose duty was not only to receive this doctrine as it was handed down to him for the past five centuries but also to show its veracity and applicability to contemporary people in their specific contexts.

Note. In 1994, Packer signed the 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' document, which caused significant uproar among Evangelical theologians. For instance, Leonardo de Chirico is critical of Packer's decision to sign this ecumenical initiative because, among other serious charges such as confusing the 'Christian mission with a social agenda' and undermining 'evangelism in Catholic countries' (or in Orthodox ones for that matter), the incriminated document is said to betray 'the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith' (De Chirico 2003, p. 341). As far as I can tell, while the 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' document does not say anything about the classical Protestant presentation of justification as forensic, it does mention that 'We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ. Living faith is active in love that is nothing less than the love of Christ, for we together say with Paul: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2).' Two aspects must be highlighted here: first, this paper focuses exclusively on how Packer's doctrine of justification emerges from his writings as an attempt to receive and appropriate a classical Christian doctrine, and, second, I have not come across any reference to the 'Evangelicals and Catholics Together' document in Packer's works. While it is true that Packer's activity spans across many decades that precede the more or less fateful year 1994, I have not seen any instance in which Packer recanted specific issues related to his understanding of justification following his decision to sign the 1994 document. Whether or not Packer's decision to sign the 'Evangelical and Catholics Together' document was in line with his Evangelical beliefs or whether it alters/cancels his Evangelical credentials (or even his Evangelical convictions) is a matter that, in my opinion, lies beyond the scope of this paper and may constitute a different academic endeavor altogether.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Data sharing not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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