Chapter 1
Chaucer, the Medieval Nominalist Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformation

J. V. Fesko*

Within the realm of Protestant theology there are a few well-known allegories informed by theological ideas, such as C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, Witch, and the Wardrobe*, or John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*. But few are aware that Geoffrey Chaucer (ca. 1343-1400), famous for his *The Canterbury Tales*, wrote a brief allegory of his own that showcases the late-medieval doctrine of justification, namely the *Clerk’s Tale*. Allegories possess both strengths and weaknesses given their imprecise nature—razor sharp theological distinctions can be lost in the effort to tell a story. What might make for a good story does not necessarily preserve important theological points. At the same time, allegories have the potential to take complex theological arguments and present them in a simplified manner—one need not be trained in the finer points of the theology to understand the overall thrust of an argument. Chaucer’s the *Clerk’s Tale* falls into this latter category.

Very few people in the church are directly familiar with one of the more common understandings of justification in the Middle Ages, but Chaucer’s allegory offers a simplified view. But one should not be too easily misled by the apparent simplicity of the tale, as a number of key theological concepts lie beneath the surface such as the medieval ideas of the *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* (“the absolute and ordained power of God”), the doctrine of covenant justification and the medieval maxim of *facientibus in quod se est, et Deus non denegat gratiam* (“Do what is in you and God will not deny his grace”), as well as the idea of an initial and final

* J. V. Fesko, Ph.D., is Academic Dean and Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Westminster Seminary California, Escondido, CA.
justification. At the same time, Chaucer’s tale not only reveals key elements of a medieval doctrine of justification but also provides a window into how a number of scriptural texts figured into this doctrine.

There are a number of allusions, particularly to Old Testament texts, that provide the reader with an interpretive index to compare and contrast with later Reformation interpretations. By comparing later Reformation interpretations of some of these key texts, one then has the basis upon which to understand how Protestant theologians arrived at a very different doctrine of justification in comparison with the medieval view that Chaucer presents in the Clerk’s Tale. Hence, this essay will proceed with an examination of the Clerk’s Tale, followed by an analysis to expose the doctrine of justification beneath the allegory. Subsequently, the essay will then compare and contrast key scriptural allusions in the allegory with later Reformation interpretations, primarily through the work of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-64), to explain how the Reformation doctrine of justification differs from this medieval variant.¹

The Clerk’s Tale Summarized

The Clerk’s Tale begins with the introduction of one of the chief characters, Walter, the Marquis of Saluzzo, Italy. Walter is lord of the land, and all of its inhabitants, both rich and poor, were obedient and loyal to him. But the people of Saluzzo were distraught because the Marquis was a bachelor and they wanted him to take a wife. Walter, however, was reluctant to take a wife because as a bachelor he was free to act as he pleased—he did not want to be bound by marriage. Nevertheless, the Marquis

¹ There were other views of justification in the middle ages, such as in the theology of Thomas Bradwardine (1290-1349) and Gregory of Rimini (d. 1358). See Thomas Bradwardine, “The Cause of God Against the Pelagians,” in Forerunners of the Reformation: The Shape of Late Medieval Thought, ed. Heiko Oberman (Cambridge: James Clark & Co., 1967), 151-64; idem, De Causa Dei, Contra Pelagium et De Virtute Causarum, Ad Suos Mertonenses (London: Ex Officina Nortoniana, 1618); Gregory of Rimini, Super Primum et Secundum Sententiarum, ed. Elgius Buylaert (1522; St. Bonaventure: The Franciscan Institute, 1955). For an overview of the medieval period, see Alister E. McGrath, Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 55-207.
voluntarily consented to find a wife and discovered a poor woman of the lowest social order, Griselda. Even though Griselda was of little means, she was rich in virtue and diligence, which commended her to the Marquis. Walter chose Griselda to be his wife, fitted her with royal garments, married her, and she eventually gave birth to a daughter.

Several years passed before the Marquis desired to test the fidelity of his wife and so he instructed one of his servants, the Sergeant, to take his daughter and inform Griselda that she would be put to death. The Marquis had no intention of harming the child and instructed the Sergeant to hide his daughter in Bologna with the Marquis’ sister. But as far as Griselda knew, her daughter was to die, but she was nevertheless faithful to her husband, Walter, and voluntarily turned her daughter over to the Sergeant. Four more years passed and Griselda gave birth again, this time to a son. Once the boy was weaned, the Marquis wanted to put his wife to the test again. He instructed the Sergeant to take the child and informed Griselda that he would be put to death; the boy was also taken to Bologna to be raised with his sister. To the Marquis’ amazement, Griselda patiently and faithfully suffered this second apparent loss. The Marquis decided to reveal the truth to Griselda but not before one last test of fidelity.

The Marquis sent for his daughter and son, ages 12 and 7, and informed his wife that the people of Saluzzo were discontent with her service and thereby required the Marquis to take another wife. Griselda, resolute as ever in her love and devotion to the Marquis, considered herself blessed to have been his wife and resigned herself to return humbly to her father’s house. The Marquis intensified the level of the test by informing Griselda that she had to serve as a lady-in-waiting to his new wife and she had to plan and execute the wedding festivities. Once again Griselda was unflinching in her loyalty and devotion to the Marquis, regardless of what he asked her to do, and the Marquis was ultimately convinced of her unwavering fidelity. The Marquis revealed the true nature of the tests and Griselda was so overcome with joy that she nearly fainted. She was stripped of her tattered clothing and dressed once again in royal garments, and Griselda and the Marquis afterward lived together for many years.
Analysis of the *Clerk’s Tale*

At first glance, the *Clerk’s Tale* seems like a horrible story given Walter’s penchant for cruel tests for his faithfully devoted wife, Griselda, and it hardly appears to bear any resemblance to a theological discourse of any sort. Yet a number of studies on *The Clerk’s Tale* situate it within the milieu of late-medieval Oxford University where Chaucer was exposed to a number of nominalist works, such as those written by John of Salisbury (ca. 1120-80) and William of Ockham (ca. 1300-49). One of the chief ways in which medieval nominalism appears in the *Clerk’s Tale* is in Walter’s attitude towards marriage. The people of Saluzzo approached the Marquis to encourage him to marry because they were concerned that his royal line would not continue. But the Marquis did not want to enter into marriage: “I always have enjoyed my liberty; That’s hard to find once marriage shall intrude. Where I was free I’ll be in servitude” (145-47). But the Marquis was nevertheless willing to enter into marriage with a proviso: “Yet I see how sincere is your intent, And will as always trust in what you say; Of my free will I therefore will assent, To take a wife as quickly as I may” (148-51).

As a bachelor, the Marquis stands outside of the covenant of marriage but of his free will binds himself to it. Hence, no outside power was able to impose any conditions upon him; the conditions of the covenant were only those that he willingly imposed upon himself. The Marquis’ interaction with his people and the prospects of entering the marriage covenant parallel the theological categories

---


---

* Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan *
of the *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* and a medieval nominalist doctrine of the covenant. According to these ideas, God is completely unbound and even *ex lex* (“outside the law”)—he is free to operate according to his absolute power. But God willingly binds himself to his creation and to humanity through a covenant, which is a manifestation of his ordained power.

God’s dependability rests in his voluntary covenantal activity with the world through his covenants with Adam and Noah, and especially with the church. In this second covenant, God commits himself to a process of salvation, which despite the sinfulness of humanity, he nevertheless upholds. The specifics of this process entail that God has agreed on the basis of his ordained power and according to the terms of his covenant that he will justify every sinner who does what is within him to love God. Here we may invoke the medieval maxim: *Facientibus quod in se est, et Deus non denegat gratiam* (“Do what is within you and God will not deny his grace”). The medieval nominalist Gabriel Biel (1425-95) made this medieval maxim famous.

Given these theological anchors, the *Clerk’s Tale* takes on a greater degree of clarity when we consider Walter’s (read God) marriage to Griselda (read fallen sinner). Chaucer places the greatest amount of social distance between the Marquis and his wife to highlight the differences between God and sinful humanity. The

---

5 For definitions of these terms, see Richard A. Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn Principally from Protestant Scholastic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), s. v. *potentia absoluta* (p. 231) and *potentia ordinata* (p. 232).


9 Gabriel Biel, *Collectorium in IV Libros Sententiarum Guillelmii Occam* (1501; reprint, Hildesheim, Germany: Georg Olms Verlag, 1977), b. II d. 27 q. 1 art. 3 dub. 5.

10 Steinmetz, “Medieval Nominalism and the *Clerk’s Tale*,” 43.
Marquis found his wife “among the poor folks” and in particular, with one “who was considered the poorest of them all” (204-05). But despite Griselda’s poverty and low social station, she was marked by “virtuous beauty,” and “inasmuch as virtue was her pleasure, She knew about hard work, not idle leisure. . . . Inside her virgin breast was found to be, A heart that was both sober and mature. She cared, with great respect and charity, For her poor aged father” (216-21). These elements of the Clerk’s Tale reflect a common medieval understanding of election, whereby God chooses those who are worthy and rejects those who are unworthy.\(^1\) Ockham, for example, argues that there is a cause of predestination originating, not in God, but in the one who is predestined: “He will persevere to the end; therefore he will be predestinate. For just as God is not a punisher before a man is a sinner, so He is not a rewarder before a man is justified by grace.”\(^2\)

When the Marquis deigns to marry Griselda, this woman of lowly estate, he clothes her in regal garments, which parallel the concept of the infusion of divine habits in a person’s initial justification:

This marquis, though had had his craftsmen make, Of gems, in gold and azure set, a treasure, Of rings and brooches for Griselda’s sake; To fit her for new clothes, he had them measure, A maiden of like build; they had not leisure, That his bride be adorned in such a way, As would befit so grand a wedding day (253-59; cf. 654-58).\(^3\)

But Chaucer is not primarily interested in the sinner’s initial justification, reflected in Griselda’s investiture, but rather in the life-long process of becoming more just, which culminates the second or final justification at the consummation.\(^4\) A person’s status is always

---

\(^1\) Steinmetz, “Medieval Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale,” 45; Oberman, Harvest, 185-216.


\(^3\) Steinmetz, “Medieval Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale,” 49.

\(^4\) Steinmetz, “Medieval Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale,” 47; cf. Oberman, Harvest, 134-35; “Council of Trent, sess. VI, 13 Jan 1547: Decree on Justification,” in

---

* Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan *
unknown and indefinite until his death and appearance before the
divine bar because at any moment he can fall into mortal sin and
lose his justified status. Interest in final justification is especially
evident in the mounting tension that builds throughout the story
when the Marquis tests Griselda with greater and greater
incomprehensible absurdity—surrendering her first child
presumably to death, surrendering her second child to the same
fate, being cast off for another woman, and then being asked to plan
and execute her husband’s wedding to this other woman. Many a
woman would instead want to plan and execute her cruel husband
rather than a wedding.
Yet, in the face of each test, Griselda responded with joy,
humility, and diligent obedience and love for her husband. She was
willing to suffer humiliation and renunciation of all social status,
and perhaps even death itself (though this is never asked) rather
than refuse to obey her husband’s every desire, no matter how
absurd. But Griselda’s seemingly meaningless suffering gives way
to the revelation of her vindication. Griselda discovers that her
children are alive, that the Marquis still wants to remain married to
her, and that the purpose of all of these tests was to reveal “your
every purpose, all your will” (1077). The final revelation, a final
judgment, if you will, disclosed the fact that in the face of
tremendous tribulations and tests, Griselda was faithful the entire
time and never failed to love her seemingly cruel husband. Chaucer
concludes the tale with the following words: “So patient was a
woman to the end, Toward a mortal man, the more we ought, To
take without complaint what God may send” (1148-50).
Before we conclude the analysis of Chaucer’s allegory, one other
dimension of the tale should be taken into account, namely the
people of Saluzzo. While Chaucer undoubtedly draws the reader’s
attention to the interaction between Griselda and the Marquis, the
people of Saluzzo play an important and contrasting role in the
narrative. Covenantal elements appear in the agreement between
the people and the Marquis when he consents to find a wife. The

Heinrich Denzinger, ed., Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on
Matters of Faith and Morals, 43rd ed., ed. Peter Hünermann (San Francisco: Ignatius

Steinmetz, “Medieval Nominalism and the Clerk’s Tale,” 48.

Chaucer, the Medieval Nominalist Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformation
Marquis tells the people: “And furthermore, this you will swear to me: Against my choice you’ll not complain or strive . . . With hardy will they swore, gave their assent, To all of this, not one of them said ‘Nay’” (169-77). With these words the Marquis sealed the covenant with the people.\(^\text{16}\) Even though the stipulations of the covenant were clear—no complaints or action against his choice of a wife—the people were quite dubious and fickle throughout the narrative.

The people questioned the Marquis’ honesty and intention to wed (252), they could not recognize Griselda when she was dressed in her regal garments (384-85), which demonstrated they judged things merely by appearances because “Is virtue often hidden, folks opined” (426). When the children disappeared their professed loyalty to the Marquis turned to hatred: “Because of this, where all the folks before, had loved him well, his scandalous ill fame, Was something they began to hate him for” (729-31). When the children returned to Saluzzo the people flocked around them: “And when such a rich array they had espied, among themselves they quickly would decide, That Walter was no fool to have expressed, The will to change his wives, for it was best” (984-87).

In the end when the Marquis vindicates Griselda, he offers stinging words of rebuke for the people:

\[\text{O stormy people! Fickle, never true! As changeable as is a weather vane! In rumors you delight, whatever’s new, Just like the moon you ever wax and want! You’re full of chatter, never worth a jane! Your judgment’s false, your constancy will cool, Whoever trusts you is an utter fool (995-1001).} \(^\text{17}\)\]

To say the least, there is a stark contrast between the two covenants, one with the people and the other with Griselda. Within the framework of the allegory, the different responses to the covenants with the Marquis parallel the old and new covenants of the Bible as they were understood by medieval theologians.\(^\text{18}\) Under the old

\(^{16}\) Johnson, “Two Covenants,” 18.
\(^{17}\) Johnson, “Two Covenants,” 18-19.

\(*\) *Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan* \(*\)
covenant, which was stricter, the people of Israel were fickle, disobedient, and unfaithful. Under the new covenant, Jesus is a gentler and kinder Moses, and with the proviso that sinners merely need to do what is in them, offer their best effort, one’s attitude towards the will of God, no matter how seemingly absurd, will in the end secure justification.\textsuperscript{19} Again, the people are fickle and Griselda has an unswerving love for the Marquis, something the people lack. In terms of the narrative, the message is clear—formal obedience and lip service are insufficient—faith must work through love to secure one’s justification.

When we strip away the story and look allegorically at its climactic outcome, the medieval nominalist doctrine of justification continues to emerge, as those who are faithful to the end, and do what is in them to love God (facientibus quod in se est), will be finally justified. David Steinmetz explains:

\begin{quote}
The Clerk has elaborated on an allegorical level the main elements of the nominalist doctrine of justification, but he has done so in order to press home a tropological point. Those men and women who faithfully keep the terms of God’s covenant with them, although it involves joyless obedience in unexpected and wholly undeserved adversity, will find that obedience vindicated. Conformity of our will to the will of God, not in order to obtain temporal or eternal benefits from Him but out of love for Him alone—a love which is not turned aside when God Himself seems to be the very one who opposes our obedience and is the apparent cause of our adversity—will be rewarded at long last.\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

With this theological goal in view, the point of the \textit{Clerk’s Tale} comes into focus—the story is ultimately about fidelity through the process of justification, which culminates in final vindication and consequent reward before the divine bar.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{19} Johnson, “Two Covenants,” 24-25.
\textsuperscript{20} Steinmetz, “Medieval Nominalism and the \textit{Clerk’s Tale},” 50.
\end{flushright}
Comparison and Contrast

1. Optimistic and pessimistic anthropologies

Anyone vaguely familiar with the Reformation doctrine of justification can immediately detect significant differences with the doctrine presented in the *Clerk’s Tale*. A number of Protestant confessions reveal an entirely different principle at work—for Chaucer, Griselda’s faithful obedience is front and center, but for the Reformers, Christ’s obedience takes center stage in the drama of redemption.21 The differences between the medieval and Reformation views most strikingly appears in Chaucer’s allusions to various biblical texts throughout the *Tale*. One can begin with Chaucer’s characterization of Griselda, a woman of virtue despite her lowly estate. Despite her poverty, Griselda is nonetheless rich in virtue before she is chosen by the Marquis. If Griselda is an avatar for an optimistic medieval view on anthropology and of fallen humanity’s abilities, then Gomer, the adulterous wife of Hosea the prophet, would be the personification of sinful humanity for the Reformers. Though opinions were divided over the precise nature of Gomer’s harlotry, Calvin’s characterization of Hosea’s wife reflects the idea that her adulterous ways were presented “as in a living portraiture” so that people could see “their turpitude and perfidiousness.”22 To say the least, the Reformers took an opposing view of fallen humanity in comparison to the view reflected in Chaucer’s tale.

In his *Lectures on Romans*, Luther takes aim at a number of medieval nominalists, including John Duns Scotus (ca. 1266-1308),

---

21 See, e.g., Augsburg Confession, IV; Smalcald Articles, I; Formula Concord, III; Belgic Confession, XXII-XXIII; Heidelberg Catechism, q. 61-64; Second Helvetic Confession, XV; The XXXIX Articles, XI; Irish Articles, XXXIV-XXXVIII; Westminster Confession of Faith, XI; Westminster Shorter Catechism, q. 33; Westminster Larger Catechism, q. 72-73. For these confessional documents see Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, vol. 2 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003).

Ockham, Biel, and their optimistic anthropology. Luther argued that these nominalists took no account of original sin in their anthropology and did not echo earlier church fathers, such as Augustine (354-430) and Ambrose (ca. 340-97), but instead reflected the pagan views of Aristotle (384 BC – 322 BC). In his reflection upon this nominalist anthropology, Luther writes:

> It is plain insanity to say that man of his own powers can love God above all things and can perform the works of the Law according to the substance of the act, even if not according to the intentions of Him who gave the commandment, because he is not in a state of grace. O fools, O pig-theologians (Sawtheologen)!

Luther offers similar criticisms in his 1517 *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology.*

### 2. Faith working through love v. faith alone

When the Marquis presented Griselda with the prospect of surrendering her daughter to be put to death, she willingly consented given that it was the will of her husband (491-504). At first glance such a request might seem over the top, but if the allegorical framework provides an interpretive key, then Griselda’s surrender to her husband’s will echoes the sacrifice of Isaac (Gen. 22). God commanded Abraham to sacrifice his only son, Isaac, upon Mt. Moriah. This text has been historically connected to the doctrine of justification through its subsequent interpretation in the book of James: “Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar” (James 2:21)? Calvin engages the “sophists” who “leap on the word ‘justification’, and sing out in triumphant chorus that part of justification depends on works.” Important to note is that by the term *sophists*, Calvin has Roman

---


24 Martin Luther, *Disputation Against Scholastic Theology*, Luther’s Works, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (St. Louis: Concordia, 1957), 9-16; Carlson, *Justification*, 75.
Catholic theologians of the Sorbonne in mind, advocates of this nominalist medieval view of justification. Calvin counters their claims:

A sober exegesis must be sought from the circumstances of the present passage. We have said that James is not here dealing with the source or the manner of man’s attainment of righteousness (as is evident to all), but is stressing the single point, that good works are invariably tied to faith: so when he states that Abraham was justified by works his words are in confirmation of the justification.

Evident throughout the Reformer’s exegesis of the life of Abraham was that his works were evidence of his faith, not that they constituted the ground or cause of his justification. This conclusion is no more evident than in Calvin’s explanation of Romans 4, when he writes that Abraham was not in any way justified by his works. Calvin contends that Paul’s expressions can be reconciled with James by acknowledging, “That those to whom righteousness is imputed are justified, since Paul uses these two expressions as synonyms.” And what, according to Calvin, is the source of this imputed righteousness? “It is necessary,” writes Calvin, “that Christ should be seen to be the one who clothes us with His own righteousness.”

By way of contrast, medieval exegetes interpreted Romans 4

---


---

• Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan •
somewhat differently. Though his views were representative of earlier realist medieval theology, Thomas Aquinas’ (1225-74) explanation of the function of faith presents a view commonly shared among both nominalist and realist doctrines of justification. When Paul explained that Christians were justified “apart from works of the law” (Rom. 3:28), Aquinas argues that Paul has something very specific in view, namely the works of the ceremonial law. Aquinas writes that not only are ceremonial works of the law excluded from consideration in our justification, but also the moral precepts of the law prior to a person’s conversion. However, based upon his understanding of James 2:26, Aquinas contends that works subsequent to a person’s conversion are necessary for justification. Aquinas elsewhere explains that the act of faith

depends on the intellect and on the will moving the intellect to assent. Hence, the act of faith will be perfect, if the will is perfected by the habit of charity and the intellect by the habit of faith, but not if the habit of charity is lacking. Consequently, faith formed by charity \( fides caritate formata \) is a virtue; but not unformed faith.29

For Aquinas, the believer’s good works are not precluded from consideration in justification but are absolutely necessary for the whole process, as charity forms the core of a justifying faith.


3. Job and the place of obedience in justification

Another scriptural allusion appears in Griselda’s divestiture. When the Marquis informs Griselda that she will no longer be his wife, she immediately returns her royal garments, wedding ring, and jewelry, and states: “Naked out of my father’s house I came, And naked I must now return” (871-72). Chaucer echoes a statement from Job: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” (Job 1:21). Chaucer evidently believes Job’s words are suitably placed upon the lips of the suffering believer, which from one vantage point falls within the scope of a Reformation understanding of Christian suffering exemplified in Job. In his sermons on Job, for example, Calvin explains to his congregation that Christians should always recognize that everything they receive from God is by his free grace:

I was not able to helpe my selfe, nor to ridde mee of the povertie wherein I was, so as I must needs have perished al togither, if I had not ben succoured by others: so it please God too foster me, and to intertayne mee even too this hour, and too give mee of his gracious benefits without number. And therefore if it please him now to scourge me, it is good reason I shuld beare all paciently, seying it comment from his hande.\textsuperscript{31}

But Calvin also has a periodic inclination to view Job as a priestly figure and hence as one who pointed to Christ, even in spite of his tendencies to shy away from a christocentric reading of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{32}

Throughout his sermons on Job, Calvin repeatedly beats a steady drumbeat that sinners should seek the forgiveness of their


* \textit{Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan} *
sins, and hence their justification, solely in Christ. Calvin writes against the “Papists,” who

know what is righteousnesse after the maner of the heathen Philosophers. For if a man aske an heathen Philosopher what righteousnesse is: It is a life wel ruled in al vertuousnesse, will he answere. And even so also do the Popish divines reason of it. We say that the same is true in it selfe: but we must steppe yet further: that is too wit, to another righteousnesse which is not in men, and whereof there is not one drop to be found there. Then must they be sayne to have an other righteousnesse, which is, that having condemned us in our owne persons, should take us too mercie for oure Lorde Jesus Christes sake: that by hys meane we may be acceptable and holy to him, forsomuch as the obedience which Jesus Christ yielded unto him is set over unto us.33

The difference between the two trajectories is palpable: Chaucer applies Job’s words to Griselda because her obedience forms the core of the ongoing process of justification. Whereas for Calvin, Job’s words can certainly be applied to Christians but only when one first lays hold of and builds upon the foundation of the obedience and righteousness of Christ.34 According to Calvin, the believer’s good works are not constitutive of his justification.

For medieval commentators such as Aquinas, the book of Job was not primarily about God but about the Christian’s patient suffering in the midst of trial.35 Aquinas anticipates a number of elements from the Clerk’s Tale when he writes about the intent and nature of the Joban account: “Now one should consider that God not only orders the life of just men to their own good but also makes it conspicuous to others.”36 Concerning Job 23:10, “when he has

33 Calvin, Sermons on Job, serm. XLII (p. 199); Thomas, Calvin’s Teaching on Job, 316.
34 Calvin, Institutes, III.xi.1.
36 Thomas Aquinas, The Literal Exposition on Job: A Scriptural Commentary

Chaucer, the Medieval Nominalist Doctrine of Justification, and the Reformation
tried me, I shall come out as gold,” Aquinas explains this Joban theme of revealing the Christian’s character (faith working through love) in trial and adversity:

And here for the first time he manifestly explains the reason for his adversity, which was brought upon him so that he might appear to men to have been proved as a result of it, just as gold which can withstand the fire is proved. And just as gold does not become true gold but its genuineness is manifested to men as a result of the fire, so Job has been proved through adversity not so that his virtue might appear before God but so that it might be manifested to men.37

One can summarize Aquinas’ view of Job as the final revelation of the Christian’s faith working through love; the believer’s works are therefore constitutive of his justification. These are themes that emerge quite clearly in the Clerk’s Tale—Griselda’s continual fidelity and obedient love to her seemingly cruel husband is finally unveiled for all to see.

4. The timing of justification

If one thing is clear from the Clerk’s Tale, Griselda’s status is never certain until the end. The Marquis harbors a steady suspicion of Griselda’s true intentions and questions her fidelity. If it were not enough to surrender two children to execution and death, the Marquis still presses her with divorce and planning his wedding to his new bride. Viewed through the lens of the allegory, one never knows if the initially justified Christian will persevere to the end to be finally justified. Humanly speaking, this soteriological uncertainty is compounded by two factors: (1) for medieval nominalists predestination is based upon God’s foreknowledge of a


37 Aquinas, Exposition on Job, comm. Job 23:8-13 (p. 303); also Schreiner, Wisdom, 76-77.

* Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan *
person’s worthiness; and (2) a person must continually ensure that his faith is working through love—he must do what is in him. In other words, a person cannot appeal to the doctrine of predestination as a source of hope because in the end, the “believer” may not persevere and therefore ultimately not be elect. And a person might fall away and fail to do what is in him. According to these nominalist presuppositions, justification must await the consummation.

For Protestants, on the other hand, the believer’s justification by faith alone based upon the righteousness of Christ alone means that the consummation, the final judgment, has been brought forward into the present. The famous dictum attributed to Luther, that Christians are *simul iustus et peccator* (“simultaneously righteous and sinners”) reflects the believer’s settled judicial status. In other words, for medieval nominalism, justification is a process, a journey, whereas for Luther and Protestantism justification is a defining moment.\(^\text{38}\) The competing conceptions of faith explain the differences between the mature Luther and medieval nominalist views. For medieval nominalists, faith works through love—charity is the form of faith. For Luther, Christ is the form of faith:

> Faith takes hold of Christ and has Him present, enclosing Him as the ring encloses the gem. And whoever is found having this faith in the Christ who is grasped in the heart, him God accounts as righteous. This is the means and merit by which we obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness. ‘Because you believe in Me,’ God says, ‘and your faith takes hold of Christ, whom I have freely given to you as your Justifier and Savior, therefore be righteous.’ Thus God accepts you or accounts you righteous only on account of Christ, in whom you believe.\(^\text{39}\)

Hence, though the Christian still struggles with sin, the *peccator* side of Luther’s maxim, his judicial status is secure because it does not

---


rest upon faith working through love but upon Christ.

Given that justification rests upon the perfect obedience of Christ, it means that God has never lowered the standard of his law. For Luther and the Reformation justification can never be *facientibus in quod se est*, because the demands of God’s law and his righteousness (*iustitia Dei*) are too steep. But as Heiko Oberman explains, herein lies the key difference between Reformation and medieval views on justification:

One can summarize, therefore, Luther’s discovery in the following sentence: *the heart of the Gospel is that the iustitia Christi and the iustitia Dei coincide and are granted simultaneously*. It is on the basis of this view that the disciples of Occam are not presented or unmasked as Pelagians as such, but rather as ‘worse Pelagians,’ as those who ‘postea subinde peiores facti sunt!’ It is not the task of those who are justified to implement the iustitia Christi by relating themselves in an optimal fashion to the iustitia Dei. The Pauline message is the Gospel exactly because the iustitia Dei—revealed at the Cross as the iustitia Christi—is given to the faithful per fide. The ‘fides Christo formata’ replaces the medieval ‘fides charitate formata’; in other words, ‘faith living in Christ’ has come in the stead of ‘faith active in love’ as it had been formulated and defined in a unanimous medieval tradition and as it can be found with Thomas Aquinas, Duns Scotus, Gabriel Biel, et al., including the Council of Trent.\(^40\)

Given, therefore, the change in judicial grounds for one’s justification, the outcome of the final judgment is already decided the moment a person trusts in Christ according to Luther.

Along similar lines, Calvin offers his own criticism of the common medieval doctrine of justification in his sermons on Genesis, particularly as it concerns the initial and final justifications. Calvin notes that “papists” argue that the believer’s initial

\(^40\) Heiko A. Oberman, “‘Iustitia Christi’ and ‘Iustitia Dei’: Luther and the Scholastic Doctrines of Justification,” in *The Dawn of the Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 120.

• *Essays in Honor of James M. Renihan* •
righteousness and justification comes from faith through baptism, but he also explains its incomplete nature: “It is true they add that we cannot be completely righteous at any time, and they have to be aware of that whether they like it or not, and experience also keeps them convinced they are indebted to God in many ways.” Calvin characterizes the process of justification as a journey:

Jesus Christ opens the door for them, but it is up to them to enter, they say, and complete the trip. . . . They say we are justified at the outset by the pure grace of Jesus Christ, and then by faith. And then again they say we are justified by our works, in part by our satisfactions, which serve to appease God and acquit us of all of the offenses we are guilty of.41

To counter this claim Calvin asks the question: At what point was Abraham justified?42 This is an important question vis-à-vis the timing of justification in the application of salvation (ordo salutis) but also for the final judgment (historia salutis). Calvin explains that works must be completely excluded from our justification because they are always soiled by sin.43 Calvin asks a question, which is especially relevant given Chaucer’s allusions to Genesis 22 in the Clerk’s Tale:

Has there ever been a better work than Abraham’s, when he was ready to kill his son? And yet it is certain he harbored many regrets, which betray his weakness. So even that work is soiled in God’s eyes and cannot be imputed as merit.44

For Calvin, “there is not a single work which is not filled with a vice when it comes to being judged according to the worth God finds in it.”45 “If a wine,” writes Calvin, “is the best in the world and it is put

---

41 Calvin, Sermons on Genesis, 324-35.
42 Calvin, Sermons on Genesis, 325-26.
43 Calvin, Sermons on Genesis, 338.
44 Calvin, Sermons on Genesis, 353; cf. idem, Genesis, comm. Gen. 22:15 (pp. 571-72).
45 Calvin, Sermons on Genesis, 358.
in a foul-smelling cask or in a dirty bottle, the wine is ruined. That is the way it is with all our works.”46 Hence, “faith and only faith must justify us.”47 Even at the final judgment, the believer’s works are not judged in and of themselves but are covered by the righteousness of Christ and only appear righteous purely by faith: “Therefore, God approves that because it is from him, but let us note that he justifies us in our persons and even justifies us in our works by pure faith.”48 Like Luther, Calvin believed that Christians were *simul iustus et peccator.*49

The difference in the two readings of Job, and hence, the respective doctrines of justification, lies in merging justification and sanctification for Chaucer and numerous medieval theologians, versus recognizing that justification and sanctification are inseparable but nevertheless distinct soteriological benefits for the Reformation.50 For Chaucer, justification is by grace through faith working through love. The Marquis did not have to marry Griselda—he could have left her in her poverty. But by his grace he chose and entered into the covenant of marriage with her by his free will. Griselda did what was in her to show her love for her husband. For the Reformation, on the other hand, obedience and sanctification do not contribute to a person’s justification but rather are the fruits of it.

**Conclusion**

Reading Chaucer’s allegory leaves an indelible impression, one where the seemingly absurd suffering of Griselda regularly

---

46 Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis,* 360.
47 Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis,* 358.
48 Calvin, *Sermons on Genesis,* 360.
49 The *simul iustus et peccator* explicitly appears, e.g., in André Rivet, *Catholicus Orthodoxus, Oppositus Catholicico Papistae* (Leiden: apud Abrahamm Commelinum, 1630), IV.xviii (p. 512); and William Twisse, *Vindiciae Gratiae, Potestatis, Ac Providentia Dei* (Amsterdam: apud Ioannem Ianssonium, 1632), ILxiv.4 (p. 104). Twisse, for example, like Calvin and Luther, explains that the Christian is a sinner through his actions or disposition as one still inhabited by sin, but is nonetheless righteous through the imputed alien righteousness of Christ.
50 It should be noted that at certain points, according to Schreiner, Calvin echoes the nominalist *potentia Dei absoluta et ordinata* distinction (Schreiner, *Wisdom,* 105-20).
confronts the reader like repeated splashes of cold water upon the face. When we remove the narrative veil and uncover the medieval theological presuppositions, the hyperbolic suffering takes on a different cast. Set upon the backdrop of a medieval nominalist doctrine of justification and its attending features, such as the potentia Dei ordinata et absoluta as well as the faciuntibus in quod se est, Griselda’s suffering provides an interpretive index as to how a number of alluded and echoed biblical texts function within Chaucer’s understanding of justification.

Chaucer’s allegory provides a perfect foil to contrast at a number of key points such as the theological differences between medieval and Reformation understandings of justification, but also the interpretive grids through which a number of scriptural texts were read to reach their respective theological conclusions. While one can take a point-by-point analysis of Chaucer’s tale and explore each scriptural allusion and compare it with later Reformation exegesis, in true medieval fashion one can apply Ockham’s razor and ask one question: Where is the Christ-figure in the 
Clerk’s Tale? 
Griselda represents the fallen but nevertheless virtuous sinner, and the Marquis represents God, who willingly enters into a covenant with the sinner. The Marquis repeatedly tests Griselda and she does what is in her and, in the end, the Marquis does not deny her his grace. But in the course of allegory a Christ-figure never appears.

Were the Reformers to read this story they would likely re-write it along the lines of the prophet Hosea. Griselda would be an unworthy adulterer and the Christ-figure would be the prophet who, despite the profound wickedness of his wife, pursues and ultimately redeems her. While allegories can cloud important theological points, they can also sometimes illuminate and explain complex theological points. Such is the nature of Chaucer’s the 
Clerk’s Tale.