



## Justification And Substitution As Pillars Of Soteriology: A Systematic Theology Perspective

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		<b>Abstract</b>
Received:	07 July 2025	<i>The issue of salvation remains a central and foundational theme within Christian theology, maintaining its relevance across generations. Two principal pillars underpinning the construction of Christian soteriology are the doctrines of justification and substitution. The doctrine of justification asserts that sinful humanity is declared righteous before God solely through faith in Jesus Christ, independent of human works. Meanwhile, the doctrine of substitution posits that Christ offered Himself as a sacrificial substitute, bearing the penalty of sin on behalf of humankind. This study employs a descriptive qualitative method through a literature review approach, examining a wide range of theological sources, both classical and contemporary. The primary objective is to investigate thoroughly the biblical, historical, and rational foundations of these two doctrines as essential components of soteriology within the framework of systematic theology. The findings reveal that justification and substitution are not merely isolated theological concepts, but rather constitute an integrated whole in articulating God's salvific work in Christ. Together, they offer a coherent and theologically robust response to the challenges posed by relativism and pluralism within the context of postmodern thought.</i>
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### INTRODUCTION

The concept of salvation—soteriology—constitutes the core of many religious systems and belief structures worldwide. Across diverse theological traditions, there exist varying perspectives on how humanity may attain salvation. However, within the framework of Christian theology, salvation possesses a distinctive character, in that it is not predicated upon human endeavour, but rather upon the initiative and redemptive work of God through Christ (Siburian et al., 2025). Among the many doctrines that compose Christian soteriology, two stand out as its principal pillars: the doctrines of justification and substitution. These are not only doctrinally foundational, but also crucial to a correct understanding of the relationship between sinful humanity and a holy God (Gulo & Bambang, 2025). The doctrine of justification affirms that human beings are declared righteous before God solely by faith in Christ, and not by good works or human effort (Daeli et al., 2022). In parallel, the doctrine of substitution asserts that Christ, as

the divine substitute, bore the penalty of human sin on the cross—thus satisfying divine justice and securing salvation as a gift of grace. These doctrines are inseparable; together they form the theological framework that guarantees salvation as the assured work of God, rather than a speculative hope (Sibirian et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, in the face of increasingly relativistic postmodern thought, such claims to absolute truth—like those presented in the Gospel—face profound challenges. Postmodernism rejects universal and objective truth-claims, favouring instead paradigms of truth that are subjective, contextual, and socially or experientially constructed. Within this intellectual climate, the doctrines of justification and substitution are often perceived as exclusive, and thus, incompatible with contemporary understandings of value, justice, and spirituality. The problem addressed in this article is as follows: *What is the position of the doctrines of justification and substitution as pillars of soteriology within systematic theology, and how relevant are they in the context of contemporary theological thought?* In response to this, the study aims to explore and reaffirm the fundamental role of these doctrines within Christian soteriology and to evaluate their theological resilience against postmodern critiques.

This study employs a systematic theological approach through doctrinal analysis, critically engaging both classical and contemporary theological texts to construct a coherent, Scripture-based argument regarding the place of justification and substitution within God's salvific plan. Primary sources include the Bible, Reformed theological works, and selected critical theological literature. The findings of this investigation indicate that the doctrines of justification and substitution remain the indispensable foundation of Christian soteriology. They cannot be supplanted by alternative narratives constructed through postmodern methodologies. Far from being mere historical artefacts of theological tradition, these doctrines retain both normative and transformative power in addressing the perennial spiritual needs of humankind.

The original contribution (*novelty*) of this article lies in its renewed affirmation and fresh reading of the integration between justification and substitution as the central structure of soteriology amidst the shifting paradigms of postmodern thought. In doing so, the article offers a robust theological foundation for sustaining and actualising the Gospel in the midst of the epistemological challenges posed by relativism and pluralism.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing both content analysis and descriptive theological methods, conducted primarily through library research. The central focus of this methodological framework is to explore and critically analyse the doctrines of justification and substitution as foundational pillars within Christian soteriology. This approach was chosen for its interpretative and contextual character, enabling the researcher to uncover the

theological meaning embedded within classical and contemporary theological texts and documents (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data for this research were gathered from a diverse range of credible and relevant secondary literature, including the Holy Scriptures (the Bible), works of systematic theology, academic journals, peer-reviewed scholarly articles, and historical theological documents. Particular emphasis was placed on literature that provides an in-depth discussion of justification and substitution within the broader framework of salvation in Christ, especially from within the Reformed tradition and in dialogue with the challenges posed by postmodern thought (Daeli et al., 2022; Gulo & Bambang, 2025; Siburian et al., 2025).

The data were analysed thematically, tracing consistent theological patterns across the literature and interpreting them within the structure of systematic theology. While the study is descriptive—explicating the doctrinal content in depth—it is also analytical and evaluative, offering theological arguments in response to issues such as truth relativism and the epistemological crisis characteristic of postmodernism.

Through this methodological approach, the research seeks to produce a systematic theological understanding while reaffirming the doctrinal position of justification and substitution as the twin pillars of Christian soteriology. The original contribution of this method lies in its capacity to explore the interrelation between doctrines in a coherent manner, while also demonstrating their theological resilience in the face of modern critiques.

## **RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Systematic Theology as a Method of Theological Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Approach Integrating Scripture, Tradition, and Reason**

Systematic theology is a theological discipline tasked with the structured, logical, and contextual formulation, interpretation, and communication of the doctrines of the Christian faith. As a method of doing theology, systematic theology is not merely concerned with organising doctrinal themes; it also engages in profound reflection upon theological truths rooted in Scripture, enriched by ecclesial tradition, and articulated through rational discourse. These three loci—divine revelation, the historical witness of the Church, and human reason—form an interdisciplinary framework for theological interpretation.

Scripture constitutes the primary and authoritative source in the construction of systematic theology. It is regarded as the *norma normans*—the norm that governs and evaluates all theological affirmations. However, interpretation of Scripture does not occur in a vacuum. Throughout history, the Church has borne witness to the Gospel through interpretation and theological reflection, forming a living tradition. While this tradition does not supersede the authority of Scripture, it plays a vital role in providing a consistent hermeneutical lens and safeguarding against doctrinal deviation.

In addition, reason functions as a bridge between the biblical text, historical tradition, and contemporary context. Rational reflection enables the

articulation of Christian faith in a manner that is both intellectually credible and pastorally responsible, particularly within academic and ecclesial discourse. It is through reason that theology engages with cultural and philosophical developments, ensuring that doctrinal formulations are not only orthodox but also intelligible and relevant. Thus, the systematic theological approach is inherently integrative, seeking an understanding of faith that is both faithful to the apostolic tradition and responsive to the pressing questions of each era. Theology, in this regard, is not limited to the repetition of inherited dogma; rather, it is a dynamic enterprise that continually plumbs the depths of the mystery of faith while addressing the challenges posed by contemporary thought.

Within this methodological framework, the doctrines of justification and substitution are examined as two central foundations of Christian soteriology. These doctrines are not developed solely through a textual reading of Scripture but are also interpreted in light of the Church's historical understanding, and critically evaluated through coherent and rational theological argumentation. In this way, systematic theology provides the methodological structure through which these doctrines may be understood as a unified and complementary whole in articulating the nature of salvation in Christ Jesus (Olson, 2002).

### **Pauline Soteriology in the Light of Systematic Theology: Faith as the Foundation of Salvation**

The concept of salvation in Paul's epistle to the Galatians offers a robust theological foundation for the doctrines of justification and substitution within the framework of systematic theology. Paul unequivocally asserts that salvation does not arise from adherence to the Law (Torah), but is granted solely through faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:8–14). He appeals to the covenant with Abraham as the basis for the promise of salvation, thereby demonstrating that salvation has always been a gift received through faith, rather than the product of human merit or works (Dunn, 1993: 163–165). In Paul's theology, the Law serves not as a means of justification, but as a pedagogical tool to reveal sin (Gal. 3:11–12; Bruce, 1982: 165–166).

This salvation by faith is realised through the redemptive work of Christ, who "redeemed us from the curse of the Law" by becoming a curse on our behalf (Gal. 3:13–14). This is the clearest Pauline articulation of penal substitution—Christ acting as a substitute for sinners by bearing divine wrath. As Dunn (1993: 173–174) notes, Christ's sacrifice is both final and sufficient, rendering the Old Testament sacrificial system obsolete, a view echoed in Hebrews 8:6–13. Within the Old Covenant, the Law functioned as a tutor—exposing sin and preparing Israel for the coming of the Messiah. Yet in the light of Christ, the Law no longer holds salvific efficacy, for the once-for-all sacrifice has been fulfilled by Christ (Heb. 10:10). Systematic theology situates the doctrine of justification as a judicial act of God, whereby the sinner is declared righteous not on the basis of works but through faith reckoned as righteousness (Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6).

This act of justification signifies not an internal moral transformation but a forensic change of status before God (Horton, 2011). Systematic theology thus

presents a comprehensive synthesis of Pauline soteriology: faith as the instrument, Christ as the objective ground of salvation, and the Law as a shadow pointing toward fulfilled grace. Paul's soteriological vision extends beyond justification. He teaches that the believer's ongoing life is empowered by the Holy Spirit, not governed by external regulations. From Galatians 5 onward, Paul outlines a life of spiritual freedom led by the Spirit—fulfilling the prophetic promises of Jeremiah 31:31–34 and Ezekiel 36:25–27, wherein the Spirit replaces the written code as the internal agent of transformation.

Systematic theology maintains that justification and sanctification are distinct yet inseparable. Justification is instantaneous, effected by faith alone, while sanctification is progressive, sustained by the Holy Spirit's work in the believer's life (Migliore, 2004). This demonstrates the coherence between the legal and ethical dimensions of Christian soteriology. Though some interpret a tension between Paul, who emphasises faith, and James, who underscores works, a careful reading reveals no real contradiction. Paul addresses legalism—salvation by works—whereas James counters antinomianism, correcting a faith that bears no fruit (Jas. 2:17–26). Their cordial relationship (Gal. 1:19; 2:9–10) further suggests theological alignment: salvation is by faith, and that genuine faith is evidenced by works (Pyatt, 2020). Systematic theology reconciles this apparent tension by affirming that authentic faith necessarily produces ethical fruit. One is not justified by works, yet the faith that justifies does not remain fruitless. Biblical soteriology thus reflects a holistic vision: faith as the foundation of salvation, and works as its necessary manifestation.

### **Justification as the Principal Pillar of Soteriology: A Theological and Biblical Study**

Within the framework of Christian soteriology, the doctrine of justification constitutes an essential foundation, affirming that salvation is not the result of human endeavour, but rather a juridical and definitive act of divine grace. Linguistically, the term *justification* derives from the Latin *justificare*—a compound of *justus* (just/righteous) and *facere* (to make)—meaning “to make righteous” or “to declare righteous” (Berkhof, 1997).

In its legal context, the term does not refer to a moral transformation of the individual, but to a formal declaration of innocence. As Morris notes, justification possesses a forensic backdrop, originating in the judicial sphere, wherein a judge pronounces a person to be either guilty or acquitted (Morris in Panjaitan et al., 2023). This understanding parallels Old Testament usage, as in Deuteronomy 25:1, where judges are instructed to “justify the righteous and condemn the wicked.” Justification, therefore, reflects the verdict of God as the divine Judge who declares the sinner righteous based on a specific ground—namely, faith in Jesus Christ.

In the New Testament, the Greek term *dikaiōsis*, translated as “justification”, appears explicitly only twice—Romans 4:25 and 5:18. It denotes a juridical act of liberation and the restoration of the broken relationship between humanity and God (Bauer, 1979). Guthrie interprets justification as the removal of

deserved punishment for sin through the redemptive work of Christ (Guthrie, 2010). Thiessen identifies three components of justification: (1) the removal of condemnation, (2) the restoration of relationship, and (3) the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the sinner (Thiessen & Doerksen, 1992). Systematic theology situates justification within the character of God as both just and merciful. Berkhof (1997) argues that justification is an objective, once-for-all divine act that occurs outside the human subject. It is not a moral process but a legitimate and binding legal pronouncement, in which God declares the sinner righteous not by virtue of inherent righteousness, but through the imputed righteousness of Christ, received by faith (2 Cor. 5:21). Ladd further elaborates that, in the Hebrew context, a *righteous* person (*tsaddiq*) is one who lives in accordance with God's will, and that *tsadaq*—to justify—refers to God's act of declaring someone righteous according to His law (Bromiley, 1992). Hence, justification is both relational and forensic, not merely ethical.

This concept is particularly critical in addressing the crisis of salvation in a postmodern context, where truth is often perceived as relative and salvation is redefined in terms of moralism or personal experience. Systematic theology reaffirms that justification cannot be separated from divine revelation in Scripture, the historical witness of the Church, and faithful theological reasoning. Justification thus becomes the starting point of Christian soteriology, wherein God not only cancels condemnation but graciously grants the righteousness of Christ to the believer (Migliore, 2004).

### **Substitution as a Fundamental Element of Soteriology: A Theological and Biblical Exploration**

Within Christian soteriology, the doctrine of substitution is a vital component affirming that salvation is secured through the redemptive work of Christ, who takes the place of humanity in bearing God's wrath and judgement against sin. Theologically, penal substitution refers to the truth that Christ, the Son of God, voluntarily offered Himself to suffer and die in the place of sinners, thereby fully absorbing the penalty that rightly belonged to them (Jeffery et al., 2007). This doctrine posits that through His death, Christ purchased freedom for humankind, restored their relationship with God, and satisfied divine justice. The death of Jesus is not merely a symbol of love but a substitutionary act in which the consequences of sin were legally imputed to Him, and He bore the punishment that sinners justly deserved (Enns, 2004).

Simon Gathercole emphasises that substitution must be distinguished from, though often overlaps with, representation, propitiation, and satisfaction. Positively, substitution entails that Christ died in the actual place of sinful humanity; negatively, it serves to safeguard the unique legal and relational dimensions of Christ's atoning work from being diluted by broader metaphors (Gathercole, 2015). The theological roots of this doctrine can be traced to the divine warning in Eden (Gen. 2:17), which declared death as the wage of sin—a consequence reiterated in Ezekiel 18:3 and Romans 6:23 (Andreasen, 2000). Because fallen humanity is morally corrupt (Ps. 51:5), they are unable to repay

this moral debt. In such a state, humans are described as “children of wrath” (Grudem, 1994), unworthy before God and incapable of pleasing Him (Isa. 64:6).

Leon Morris affirms that those living in sin are enslaved by it and thus cannot liberate themselves. A transcendent, external power is needed for redemption, and herein lies the urgency of substitutionary atonement (Morris in Dale, 1990). Christ’s death on the cross was not accidental but a voluntary act of love by the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for His sheep (John 10:17). The cross thereby becomes the supreme expression of both divine love and justice: a love willing to sacrifice and a justice that does not overlook sin. This understanding is reinforced by Enns, who identifies numerous explicit New Testament references to Christ as substitute: He was made sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21), bore our sins in His body (1 Pet. 2:24), and suffered once to bear the sins of many (Heb. 9:28) (Enns, 2004). Substitution, therefore, is not a metaphorical abstraction but a theological reality embedded in the structure of Christian salvation.

A necessary condition of the substitute is sinlessness. If the substitute were guilty, he would suffer for his own sins and could not represent another. Thus, only Christ, the spotless One, was fit to serve in this role. As Cairus (2015) notes, had the death of Christ not been a soteriological necessity, God would not have willed His Son to die on the cross. Manu (2021) strengthens this claim by arguing that Christ’s death was indispensable to God’s salvific plan, as humanity is utterly incapable of self-redemption. His death was not the end, but the beginning of victory. Through His resurrection, Christ triumphed over death and opened the way for humanity to share in that victory (1 Cor. 15:54–57).

Erickson (1985) further asserts that although believers still undergo physical death, they have been delivered from the dominion of eternal punishment. The fear of death is replaced by peace in Christ, and death itself is reinterpreted as “sleep” in anticipation of resurrection and glorification.

### **The Doctrines of Justification and Substitution as Final Pillars of Soteriology in Response to the Challenges of Postmodern Relativism and Pluralism**

Amidst the currents of postmodern thought—which fundamentally reject claims to absolute truth and promote a relativistic outlook across all domains, including religion and theology—the doctrines of justification and substitution have come under intense hermeneutical pressure. Postmodernism, with its commitment to pluralism, insists that all religious narratives are local, temporally bound, and epistemologically equal. Consequently, the Christian affirmation that salvation is found exclusively in Christ is frequently perceived as intolerant or excessively exclusivist (Olson, 2002).

Systematic theology, however, maintains that the doctrines of justification and substitution are not mere dogmatic constructs, but rather expressions of the very heart of the Gospel, rooted in Scripture, affirmed by the historic tradition of the Church, and rationally articulated (Gulo & Bambang, 2025). Justification asserts that human beings are declared righteous by God solely by grace, through faith in Jesus Christ. It is a judicial decision in which God proclaims the sinner righteous—not on account of human merit, but based on the imputed

righteousness of Christ (Berkhof, 1997). In a postmodern context, where the boundaries between truth and falsehood are blurred, justification provides a theological and existential anchor, affirming that only through faith in Christ can humanity attain certainty of salvation. This truth is final, not contingent upon cultural interpretation or subjective spiritual experience (Gulo & Bambang, 2025).

Furthermore, the doctrine of substitution reinforces the exclusivity of the Gospel. Christ is not merely a moral exemplar or martyr of faith; He is the divine Substitute who bore the penalty of human sin. In His death on the cross, He stood in the place of guilty humanity, thereby satisfying divine justice without compromising divine love (Jeffery et al., 2007). In a world that relativises all spiritual paths as equally valid, substitution underscores that only the sacrifice of Christ is morally and theologically sufficient to bridge the chasm between sinful humanity and the holy God (Enns, 2004). While postmodernism challenges the grand narrative of Christian salvation by offering religious relativism as an alternative, justification and substitution emerge as two doctrinal pillars that safeguard the Gospel's integrity. Systematic theology, through its integrative approach, defends the claim that Christ is not one among many paths, but the only way of salvation (John 14:6; Enns, 2004). These doctrines provide not only theological clarity but also existential certainty for believers amidst a climate of moral ambiguity and ideological fragmentation (Olson, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

A systematic theological examination of the doctrines of justification and substitution reveals that both are foundational to the construction of orthodox Christian soteriology. Justification is rightly understood as God's juridical act of declaring the sinner righteous—not on the basis of their own merit, but on account of the righteousness of Christ, imputed to them through faith. It is not merely a legal pronouncement but a definitive act of grace that transforms the believer's status before God eternally and irrevocably. Conversely, the doctrine of substitution affirms that Christ voluntarily assumed the place of sinful humanity by bearing the divine judgement due to them. In His sacrificial death on the cross, Christ acted as the Substitute, fulfilling the demands of divine justice while simultaneously expressing the fullness of God's love. Substitution thus functions as the central mechanism through which objective salvation is accomplished. From the perspective of systematic theology, salvation is not the result of moral achievement or religious effort, but a gift from God, wrought through Christ and received by faith. In a postmodern world saturated with theological relativism and pluralism, justification and substitution together provide an unshakable foundation for the assurance of salvation. They are mutually reinforcing, capturing the dual realities of grace and justice, and declaring salvation to be both exclusively in Christ and universally offered to all through the Gospel.

Thus, justification and substitution are not merely doctrinal themes, but rather essential pillars that secure the integrity, relevance, and finality of Christian

soteriology. They respond robustly to the challenges of the age, and bear witness to the truth that salvation is possible only in and through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, the sole Redeemer and Saviour of humanity and the world.

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