

**RENAISSANCE HUMANISM AND THE JUSTIFICATION OF JOHN
OECOLAMPADIUS: HIS TEACHING ON THE DOCTRINE AND A REVISION OF
MCGRATH'S PORTRAYAL OF THE SWISS REFORMER**

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Introduction

The recent debates about justification have compelled scholars to reassess the traditional understanding of the doctrine, particularly considering whether the interpretation of the New Testament have been overly shaped by a sixteenth-century lens. These critiques indicate the need not only to revisit what the biblical texts say, but also to properly understand the history of Christian witness in the development of our theology. In important ways, it is accurate to say that the historiography of the Reformation is “no more and no less the historiography of the Renaissance.”¹ Paul Oskar Kristeller paved the way for recognizing this reality in his groundbreaking study that overturned the prevailing view that Renaissance Humanism was an anti-Christian philosophical system distinct from the Reformation.² He demonstrated that Renaissance Humanism is better understood to have been a cultural and educational program which was influential on the emergence of the Reformation movement.³ Two of the most important elements of humanism for the Reformation were the textual and philological return to

¹ Bard Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers: A History of the Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 373.

² See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York: Columbia University, 1979), 22, 74-75.

³ *Ibid.*, 10, 95, 110, 123. Kristeller’s view put the humanist-scholastic debate into perspective by recognizing its important role in the changing approach to theology without exaggerating the differences and discontinuities between the two methods. See *Ibid.*, 43, 74-75, 80. This view has been affirmed by numerous scholars as an accurate perspective on the connection between the Renaissance and the Reformation. See, for example, Lewis William Spitz, “The Course of German Humanism,” in *Itinerarium Italicum*, ed. Heiko A. Oberman and Thomas Jr. Brady (Leiden: Brill, 1975), 376-379; Lewis W. Spitz, “Humanism and the Protestant Reformation,” in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Rabil Jr (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 381, 393-394; Euan Cameron, “The Late Renaissance and the Unfolding Reformation in Europe,” in *Humanism and Reform*, ed. J. Kirk (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 19-23.

the original sources, known as *ad fontes*, and the moral and ethical reform of individuals and communities.⁴ Lewis Spitz maintains that “Humanism made the Reformation possible,” and identifies one of the “indispensable preconditions for the success of the Reformation” was “an army of young humanists who rallied to the evangelical cause.”⁵ The purpose of this study is to specifically look at one of these young humanists, John Oecolampadius (1482-1531), who became an influential reformer for the evangelical cause, particularly in the early Swiss Reformation in Basel.

Renaissance Humanism and Justification

At the time of his lectures, Kristeller suggested that it would be interesting to explore the extent to which humanist ideas “exercised an influence on the theological discussions and controversies of the Reformation period.”⁶ In his various writings, Alister McGrath has applied this suggestion to investigate “the relationship between the Reformation and the two great intellectual movements of the late medieval period—scholasticism and humanism—with a view to clarifying the intellectual origins of the European Reformation.”⁷ And based on his study of various Reformers, McGrath draws the overall conclusion, “The intellectual origins of the Reformed church are not, it would seem, to be sought primarily in the context of the tensions within late medieval theology, but in the context of the emergence of the new methods and presuppositions of the Renaissance.”⁸ McGrath especially focuses on the humanist influence on

⁴ See Cameron, “The Late Renaissance and the Unfolding Reformation in Europe,” 23; Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers*, 333, 373; Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, 69-70; John F. D’Amico, “Humanism and pre-Reformation Theology,” in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms, and Legacy*, ed. Albert Jr. Rabil, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1988), 350. Cameron notes the imprecision of identifying the various components and emphases of the different types of humanism. For a summary of these various emphases, see Alister E. McGrath, *Reformation Thought: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. (Malden Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 39-65; Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 35-38; Thompson, *Humanists and Reformers*, 333.

⁵ Spitz, “The Course of German Humanism,” 397, 414. See also Spitz, “Humanism and the Protestant Reformation,” 381-383.

⁶ Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and Its Sources*, 80-81.

⁷ McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 7.

one of the most prominent theological controversies during the Reformation period, namely the doctrine of justification.⁹

In his description of the impact of humanism on the Reformation in Switzerland, McGrath contends that their particular humanist emphasis on moral living and ethics resulted in a subjective or moralist view of justification. In his influential book, *Iustitia Dei*, McGrath categorizes the reformer John Oecolampadius as an early humanist who held to “subjective” views of justification and the atonement. He summarizes that Oecolampadius viewed justification not as an *imputation* of righteousness, but as the *actualization* of righteousness.¹⁰ He supports this categorization of Oecolampadius based on the ideas that justification was not a primary doctrine for Oecolampadius; that he emphasized the new life of faith that produces good works; and that his “strong emphasis upon the importance of regeneration in the Christian life inevitably led to justification being subordinated to regeneration.”¹¹ In his *Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, McGrath asserts that the Swiss Reformers, including Oecolampadius, “initially demonstrated a *near-total disinterest* in the doctrine [of justification] and subsequently appear to have *misunderstood* it, regarding it as *detrimental* to the development of piety.”¹² In an earlier article specifically addressing the connection between humanism and the doctrine of justification, McGrath also claims that Oecolampadius developed a subjective Abelardian theory of the atonement in contrast to Zwingli’s Anselmian theory, “which could be seen as

⁸ Ibid., 107. McGrath discusses the humanist influence on Zwingli, Bucer, Calvin, Luther, and Melancthon in Ibid., 47-52, 52-53, 54-58, 59-68 respectively. He also identifies the significant roles of Reuchlin, Valla, and Erasmus, as well as the weight placed on the study of original languages and the impact of the printing press. See Ibid., 128-131, 137, 168, 181, 188.

⁹ See his sections on justification in McGrath, *Reformation Thought*, 101-131; Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 249-253; Alister E. McGrath, “Humanist Elements in the Early Reformed Doctrine of Justification,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 73 (January 1, 1982): 5-20; McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 27-28, 57-63, 115-120, 162-163.

¹⁰ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), II: 33-34.

¹¹ Ibid., II: 34.

¹² McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 198. Emphasis mine. In the updated second edition, Oecolampadius’ name is completely removed from the discussion about the role of humanism and justification in the Swiss Reformation. See Alister E. McGrath, *The Intellectual Origins of the European Reformation*, 2nd ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2004), 187-188.

representing an *even greater emphasis* upon the *ethical nature of justification*.”¹³ He deduces from their “confusion regarding the nature of justification,” that, “[t]he tendency to equate justification with piety, or to make justification dependent upon piety, ultimately arises from the absence of a clear concept of imputed righteousness.”¹⁴ He specifically suggests that it is possible that they understood an *ethical doctrine of justification* to be inconsistent with a *forensic doctrine of justification*.¹⁵ He concludes that it is more probable that the concept of imputed righteousness had not yet arrived in Switzerland from its German source.¹⁶ This assessment of Oecolampadius enables McGrath to maintain his view that forensic justification only “becomes particularly evident” in Melancthon after 1530.¹⁷ It also allows the suggestion to stand that the ethical emphasis in the humanism of Oecolampadius resulted in him holding to a moralist view of justification.

Since the time it was first published, McGrath’s *Iustitia Dei* has received both praise and criticism. For example, in one of the essays dedicated to McGrath for his 50th birthday, Gerald Bray praised the work for successfully bringing justification back to the center of theological discussion, but also called for further engagement with the recent debates about justification, as well as more in-depth study on some of the historical details.¹⁸ While the recent third edition addresses some of these concerns, McGrath himself notes that “it is still an uncomfortable fact” that some of the work is based on older scholarship.¹⁹ McGrath’s depiction of Oecolampadius’

¹³ Alister E. McGrath, “Humanist Elements in the Early Reformed Doctrine of Justification,” *Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte* 73 (January 1, 1982): 9-10. Emphasis mine.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (1986), II: 23-24.

¹⁸ Gerald L. Bray, “Alister E. McGrath and Justification,” in Sung Wook Chung (ed), *Alister E. McGrath and Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 24-32. See also the paper delivered at the 2010 Evangelical Theological Society previously published as John Warwick Montgomery, *Christ Our Advocate: Studies in Polemical Theology, Jurisprudence and Canon Law* (Bonn: Verl. für Kultur und Wiss., 2002), 292-302.

¹⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *Iustitia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), x.

doctrine of justification falls into this category, since it is almost entirely based on the conclusions of Henri Strohl's work published in 1951.²⁰

McGrath reiterates the exact same conclusions that Strohl made, and uses the same references to Oecolampadius' writings as Strohl did. For example, McGrath's claim that justification and regeneration cannot be separated is based on Strohl's description of Oecolampadius' comments on Hebrews 10:24.²¹ When Strohl's own work on Oecolampadius' view of justification is considered, it becomes apparent that Strohl drew most of his conclusions from selected portions of the biography by Staehelin published in 1939. Strohl states that his conclusions are based on themes found in Oecolampadius' teaching on 1 John, Mark, Colossians, Hebrews, the catechism he authored, and the new Reformation order.²² However, a comparison of the summaries of these sources by Strohl and Staehelin reveals a tremendous amount of similarity. Other than the sermons on 1 John, Strohl has no interaction with any portion of Oecolampadius' writings that are not included in Staehelin's biography.²³ So when Strohl concludes that Oecolampadius was a moralist in his view of justification, McGrath merely imports these arguments and conclusions into his portrayal of the development of justification in the early stages of the Reformation.

Very few scholars have done much research on Oecolampadius in general,²⁴ so the portrayal by McGrath that Oecolampadius was subjective and moralist in his view of justification has essentially gone unchallenged. Only three other authors have observed aspects

²⁰ See Henri Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1951), 106-108.

²¹ Compare McGrath, 'Humanist Elements,' 10 and Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme*, 108.

²² Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme*, 107-108.

²³ See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, 463-464 on the church-visitation policy, 490-492 on Mark, 494 on Colossians, 577-578 on John, 586-588 on the catechism. In every case, Strohl has adopted Staehelin's quotation or description of 'the new life' and identified this as the totality of Oecolampadius' teaching despite the fact that Staehelin includes much more in his own summaries of these sources. McGrath also cites this as one of his sources in both editions of *Iustitia Dei*, though it does not appear that he interacted with it.

²⁴ The need for further research on Oecolampadius has been stated repeatedly for 180 years, beginning with Philip Schaff in 1827, and more recently by Ed Miller (1982), Thomas Fudge (1997), Bruce Gordon (2002), and Amy Nelson Burnett (2008). See, for example, Amy Nelson Burnett, "Contributors to the Reformed Tradition," in *Reformation and Early Modern Europe: A Guide to Research*, ed. David M. Whitford (Kirksville, MO: Truman State Univ Press, 2008), 35.

of Oecolampadius' writings that present a different picture than McGrath has given us. Akira Demura noted in 1997 that some of Oecolampadius' comments on justification are reminiscent of Luther's doctrine of justification, but not quite as forensic as Calvin's.²⁵ Most significantly, he states that we "find a clear-cut statement on the imputation theory of justification" in Oecolampadius' comments on Romans 3:21.²⁶ While Demura does not directly refer to McGrath's portrayal of Oecolampadius, two recent dissertations do. In her dissertation on Oecolampadius' exegesis of Isaiah, Diane Poythress states that McGrath "wishes to liberalize Oecolampadius's teaching" on justification and contends that Oecolampadius "held to a fully Reformed view."²⁷ She also comments in a later footnote that Strohl's synopsis of Oecolampadius' emphasis on the practical and ethical life of the church is "an exaggeration of one aspect of the Reformer's writings," which would have been corrected by a broader reading of his writings.²⁸ Most recently, David Fink's dissertation on the development of the doctrine of justification identifies that both Staehelin's and McGrath's depictions of Oecolampadius' teaching on justification are inadequate. He also reiterates that Oecolampadius is "one of the most under-studied of the first-generation Swiss reformers," with no focused study on his doctrine of justification.²⁹ These scholars who have interacted with the writings of Oecolampadius maintain that McGrath's portrayal of Oecolampadius needs revising. In order to demonstrate the extent of this revision, we will consider both the humanist background of Oecolampadius and what he taught with regard to the doctrine of justification.

²⁵ Akira Demura, "Two Commentaries on the Epistle to the Romans: Calvin and Oecolampadius," in Wilhelm H. Neuser, and Brian G. Armstrong (eds), *Calvinus Sincerioris Religionis Vindex* (Kirksville, Mo.: Sixteenth Century Journal Publishers, 1997), 169-170.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

²⁷ Diane Marie Poythress, "Johannes Oecolampadius' Exposition of Isaiah, Chapters 36-37" (PhD thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992), 583, 584-585, 589. See fn. 82 for her critique of McGrath. She unnecessarily concedes that Oecolampadius taught that regeneration precedes justification by citing a reference in Staehelin's summary of Oecolampadius' theological views from before his 'breakthrough' to the Reformation.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 588. See fn. 99 where she infers that Strohl primarily drew his conclusions about Oecolampadius from the French translation of his sermons on 1 John published in 1540.

²⁹ David C. Fink, "Divided by Faith: The Protestant Doctrine of Justification and the Confessionalization of Biblical Exegesis" (Ph.D. thesis, Duke Divinity School, 2010), 258 fn. 11. He also identifies that Oecolampadius recovered "earlier patristic insights which had become obscured by the ravages of time and the accumulation of corrosive traditions." See Fink, "Divided by Faith," 308.

The Humanism of John Oecolampadius

There are many ways in which humanism was central in the life of Oecolampadius. The name given to him at his birth in 1482 was Johannes Huszgen (or Huszchyn), which he later changed to Oecolampadius, a Latinized form of the Greek translation of a German word that was similar to his name, “hausschein” (house lamp).³⁰ The very name by which we know him today was the direct result of his involvement with the humanist movement. Even as a young boy, he was shaped by humanism since the school master over his Latin-school in Heilbronn had studied at Heidelberg, one of the centers of humanism, under the renowned humanists, Rudolf Agricola and Jacob Wimpfeling.³¹ At the age of 17, Oecolampadius himself went to the University of Heidelberg, where he learned from and became friends with Jakob Wimpfeling and was introduced to the notion that the ideal man was the “homo trilinguis,” who knew the three languages of the classics: Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.³² Jakob Wimpfeling (1450-1528) was a well-known humanist member of the Rhenish Sodality and priest at Speyer Cathedral, who became dean and rector of the University of Heidelberg after beginning there as a professor in 1498.³³ He was a prolific writer, most famous for his *De Integritate, Isidoneus*, and *Adolescentia*, who emphasized ethical-religious training in the manner of the Brethren of the Common Life and taught that humanism was of little use if it did not serve Christian morality. Oecolampadius’ biographer, Ernst Staehelin considers the whole time period of Oecolampadius’ life from 1499-1512 as “in the influence of the Wimpfeling Reform Movement.”³⁴ Oecolampadius earned a B.A. from Heidelberg in May 1501 and an M.A. in October 1503.³⁵

³⁰ Staehelin deduces that he changed his name sometime soon after 1500, and at least by 1511 when it first appears as Oecolampadius. See Ernst Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk Johannes Oekolampads*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte 21 (New York: Johnson, 1939), 24, 33.

³¹ See *Ibid.*, 11-13. Spitz identifies Heidelberg as for the first twenty years of the sixteenth century in Spitz, “The Course of German Humanism,” 401; Spitz, “The Importance of the Reformation for Universities: Culture and Confession in the Critical Years,” 48.

³² Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 23. From the summer of 1498 to the summer of 1501, Oecolampadius learned directly from Wimpfeling. See *Ibid.*, 20.

³³ See William Roscoe Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 52. See also Spitz, “The Course of German Humanism,” 398-399.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 15-54.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 14, 24. For the documentation, see Ernst Staehelin, *Briefe und Akten Zum Leben Oekolampads: Zum Vierhundertjahrigen Jubilaum der Basler Reformation herausgegeben von der Theologischen Fakultät der*

After a brief time as a tutor to the sons of the elector of the Palatinate, Oecolampadius was ordained as a Roman Catholic priest in April 1510 and became the preacher at St. John's Church in his hometown of Weinsberg. During this time, Oecolampadius and Wimpfeling regularly corresponded with each other, and Wimpfeling, among others, urged Oecolampadius to publish his sermons on the Seven Last Words of Christ in 1512, which were quite similar to Wimpfeling's own work, "Historia violatae crucis." In 1514, Wimpfeling himself recommended these sermons to a professor at Heidelberg, which eventually resulted in word getting to Erasmus about Oecolampadius' skills.³⁶ After less than three years as a priest in Weinsberg, at the age of 31, Oecolampadius returned to the academic life, again attending schools that were strongly influenced by humanism. Staehelin identifies the period of his life from 1513-1518 as "in the influence of Christian Humanism."³⁷ Oecolampadius matriculated at the University of Tübingen in April 1513 where he learned Hebrew, and became friends with Philip Melanchthon.³⁸ Melanchthon frequently visited his grand-uncle, the famous humanist, Johann Reuchlin, at Stuttgart, and brought other students to meet with him. It is quite likely that Melanchthon brought Oecolampadius to study with Reuchlin, since within a year Oecolampadius is quite connected to the Reuchlin-circle.³⁹ Johann Reuchlin (1455-1522) had earned a reputation for his superior scholarship, especially in the Hebrew language, and is often considered one of the most influential leaders of 'Christian Humanism.'⁴⁰ His Hebrew grammar, *De rudimentis hebraicis* (1506) was intended to help students master the Hebrew language, however it led to a great

Universitat Basel, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationgeschichte, Bd. 10, 19 (New York, London [Leipzig]: Johnson, 1971), I: 1, 2.

³⁶ Ibid., 33-36, 41-45, 54.

³⁷ Ibid., 55-96. Staehelin describes Oecolampadius as being in "the circle of Wimpfeling" until 1513 when he then becomes more associated with the Christian humanists. See Ibid., 32.

³⁸ Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 57-59. Oecolampadius also attended Stuttgart, Heidelberg, and Basel during this time as well. Staehelin notes that Oecolampadius may have taught himself Hebrew or that he studied under the converted Spanish Jew, Matthew Adrianus. It is likely that there was a combination of both.

³⁹ See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 58-60.

⁴⁰ Spitz, "The Course of German Humanism," 408-409; Estep, *Renaissance and Reformation*, 53-55; Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 55-56.

controversy in which he was accused of heresy.⁴¹ However, his love and promotion of Hebrew inspired many humanists, including Oecolampadius, to study and learn the language. The humanist influence of both Wimpfeling and Reuchlin was quite significant in his life.

The skills and knowledge Oecolampadius acquired from his connections with Wimpfeling and Reuchlin brought him into contact with the great humanist, Desiderius Erasmus.⁴² Oecolampadius made his first journey to Basel in September 1515 to assist Erasmus in his *Annotations on the New Testament* by providing about a hundred comments in the places where the New Testament referred to the Old Testament.⁴³ Oecolampadius' expertise in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin earned him a good reputation as a "homo trilinguis."⁴⁴ While in Basel, Oecolampadius also served as the confessor priest at the cathedral in Basel under the humanist bishop, Christoph von Utenheim, and in October 1515, he matriculated at the University of Basel, another one of the universities which "served as resting places for the wandering humanists."⁴⁵ He would eventually earn his Doctorate of Divinity from the University of Basel in 1518 after a few years of traveling back and forth between Basel and Weinsberg where he continued to preach regularly.⁴⁶ Oecolampadius' preaching still reflected the essential character of Wimpfeling's theology, but he began to incorporate more of the church fathers in his sermons and focus more sharply on the Scriptures in their original context.⁴⁷

⁴¹ Reuchlin's main antagonist was Johannes Pfefferkorn, who believed that the only way to win the Jews to Christianity was to destroy all their writings in Hebrew except the Old Testament. The 'Reuchlin Controversy' lasted from 1510 to 1520. For further details see Erika Rummel, *The Case Against Johann Reuchlin: Religious and Social Controversy in Sixteenth-Century Germany* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

⁴² After a brief return to his priestly office in Weinsberg, Oecolampadius was recommended to Erasmus by Wimpfeling and the rector of the school at Schlettstaat, especially because of his mastery of Hebrew. See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 61.

⁴³ Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 65-66.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 61. Johann Froben, the printer of Erasmus' NT, expressed gratitude to "Oecolampadius of Weinsberg, beyond praise in soundness and devotion, as well as distinguished theologian and expert in three languages." See Miller, "Unsung Hero," 7.

⁴⁵ Spitz, "The Importance of the Reformation for Universities: Culture and Confession in the Critical Years," 396. Spitz identifies Tübingen and Basel among these strongly humanist universities.

⁴⁶ Staehelin, 93. Some writers, e.g. Sime and Hillerbrand, state that he earned his D.D. in 1516, but Staehelin seems to be correct that it was December 1518 based on the chronology in the documents.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 84, 93. See also Peter Opitz, "The Exegetical and Hermeneutical Work of John Oecolampadius, Huldrych Zwingli and John Calvin," in *Hebrew Bible, Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Sæbø, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 408. Oecolampadius also had begun working on

His humanist connections presented him with several substantial opportunities in 1518. Oecolampadius was invited by Erasmus to assist him with the second edition of his Greek New Testament, and he was recommended by Reuchlin to become the chair of Hebrew at the University of Wittenberg.⁴⁸ Oecolampadius chose to assist Erasmus, though that doesn't seem to have happened. Instead, he completed the work he was doing on *A Handbook of Greek Grammar* so that he could provide philological resources to other students.⁴⁹ At the end of 1518, Oecolampadius was called to the position of cathedral preacher in Augsburg where he also used his humanist skills to translate more writings of church fathers.⁵⁰ His time at Augsburg did not last very long. Oecolampadius soon expressed discontent with his position, because he did not think he had a proper outlet for his gifts and his desire to study. So without consulting his friends, he surprisingly entered a nearby Brigittine monastery at Altomünster in April 1520.⁵¹ Apparently, Oecolampadius felt the need to retreat from his work to find clarity in his thinking about the humanist movement and Luther's writings. At some point around 1519, Oecolampadius had his "breakthrough to the Reformation understanding."⁵² During his time at the monastery, Oecolampadius continued translating more church fathers.⁵³ He remained in

translations of the early church fathers, Peter of Alexandria, Gregory Thaumaturgus, and a fifth-century monk named Theodosius. He also cites works from Ambrosius, Augustine, Gregory the Great, Bernard, Aquinas, Gregory of Nyssa, Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianus, Jerome, Seneca, Plato, Xenophon, Euripides, and Menander. See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 74, 85-86, 89-90, 93.

⁴⁸ See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 87. Erasmus' invitation was sent on March 13 and Reuchlin was asked to make his recommendation on March 30.

⁴⁹ Oecolampadius stated in the dedication that he wanted students to be able to understand what Basil, Chrysostom, Origen, Gregory, and others had written. The grammar was first published by Andreas Catander. It was republished in many editions and used by Thomas Cranmer and theologians in Paris. See Hillerbrand, *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Reformation*, 169; Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 91-93.

⁵⁰ Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 101-103. He translated works by Gregory of Nazianus and Cyprian of Antioch during this time period. See also Rudolf Wackernagel, *Humanismus und Reformation in Basel* (Basel: Helbing & Lichtenhahn, 1924), 342.

⁵¹ Staehelin, 113, 151. See also E. Gordon Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation* (London: Epworth Press, 1969), 15-16. Rupp and others put the date as 1521, but since his treatises were published in 1521 with his departure soon after, it appears that Staehelin is correct to date this in 1520.

⁵² See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 93-94, 106-113. Staehelin identifies that Oecolampadius had aligned himself with Luther sympathizers by May 1519.

⁵³ See *Ibid.*, 115-119, 173-186. During this time period, he translated works by Gregory Thaumaturgus, Chrysostom, John of Damascus, and Gregory of Nazianus. Oecolampadius would later resume his translation of the Church fathers around 1524 and continue through 1528. See *Ibid.*, 454-455.

correspondence with several humanists, and he published treatises on the Lord's Supper, the Virgin Mary, and confession. His work, *That Confession Ought Not Be Burdensome to Christians* (1521), particularly caused a great deal of unrest and forced him to flee the monastery in February 1522.

Near the end of 1522, Oecolampadius returned to Basel. He soon contacted Zwingli for the first time to express his desire to affiliate with him in the evangelical cause. Within six months of returning to Basel, Oecolampadius was appointed by the city council as a Lecturer in Holy Scripture at the University. His lectures were open to the public and drew overflow crowds of over 400 people at times. Many of these lectures were eventually published as 15 different commentaries covering 21 books of the Bible.⁵⁴ He applied his humanist skills to explain the Scriptures from their original languages and to draw from the wisdom of ancient authors and rabbinic exegetes.⁵⁵ His contemporaries regularly acknowledged his theological abilities and praised him for his scholarship.⁵⁶ The influence of Oecolampadius on Basel was so strong that Erasmus wrote to Zwingli, "Oecolampadius is reigning among us."⁵⁷ His attempts to persuade the city council of Basel to embrace the Reformation were finally achieved on April 1, 1529. Oecolampadius became highly involved in the debates about the Lord's Supper, most notably disputing alongside Zwingli at the Marburg Colloquy in October 1529. He died only two years later, at the age of 49, just a few weeks after Zwingli.

⁵⁴ Prior to his death, his published commentaries were on 1 John (1524), Isaiah (1525), Romans (1525, 1526), Malachi (1526), Job (1526, 1567), Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi (1527), and Daniel (1530, 1567). After his death, his lectures were transcribed and published as commentaries on John (1533, 1535), Jeremiah (1533), Ezekiel (1534), Hebrews (1534), Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, and Jonah (1535, 1558), Matthew (1536), Genesis (1536), and Colossians (1546).

⁵⁵ See Hughes Oliphant Old, "The Homiletics of John Oecolampadius and the Sermons of the Greek Fathers," in *Communio Sanctorum: mélanges offerts à Jean-Jacques von Allmen*, edited by A. de Pury (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1982), 239-250 and Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church: The Age of the Reformation*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1998), 63-64.

⁵⁶ Examples could be given from Wimpfeling, Froben, Aleander, Erasmus, Zwingli, Luther, Bucer, Calvin, and Bullinger. See, for examples, Staehelin, *Briefe Und Akten*, I: 24, 129; II:715; J. Brashler, "Oecolampadius, Johannes (1482-1531)," in *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters*, ed. Donald K. McKim (InterVarsity Press, 2007), 782; Miller, "Unsung Hero," 6, 12.

⁵⁷ Letter from Erasmus to Zwingli October 11, 1523. Cited in Rupp, *Patterns of Reformation*, 19; Brashler, "Oecolampadius, Johannes (1482-1531)," 782.

Oecolampadius was an influential Reformer, who taught during a very significant transitional period in the history of theology. He was also a very significant humanist in the eyes of some of his contemporaries.⁵⁸ There is no doubt that humanism permeated the life and teachings of Oecolampadius. This is evident in his education at strongly humanist universities, his friendships and connections with prominent humanists, his attaining to the ideal of ‘homo trilinguis,’ his quest to make available the thoughts of the church fathers, and his desire and ability to go *ad fontes* with the Scriptures. Having located Oecolampadius in his humanist world, it is now important to consider his teaching on the doctrine of justification.

Definitions for Justification

Since Oecolampadius did not write a systematic theology or a *loci communes*, these labels are not derived from Oecolampadius himself, but have been placed upon him. Therefore, it is essential that we understand what we are looking for in order to discern if he is moralist in his view of justification. The moralist doctrine of justification that McGrath presents is based on Augustine’s teaching that a person is justified by love (*caritate*) alone more than by faith alone.⁵⁹ Augustine understood the verb *iustificare* to mean ‘to make righteous’ based on the idea that the suffix *-ficare* was the unstressed form of *facere*, and therefore justification was considered both an event and a process that involved *inherent* righteousness rather than *imputed* righteousness.⁶⁰ McGrath identifies this view as essentially the characteristic medieval understanding of justification, which remained until the time of the Reformation when the distinction between justification and regeneration was first made.⁶¹ In contrast to moralist justification is “forensic justification,” which McGrath identifies as having three key aspects: 1) a forensic declaration of righteousness that is a change in *status* not *nature*; 2) a distinction between *justification* and

⁵⁸ Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 103-104. He gives the examples of Johann Fabris, Jakob Spiegel and Johann Eberlin. See also the quote from the humanist Mutianus Rufus in Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 16.

⁵⁹ McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (1986), I: 28-30.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, I: 31, 36, 40-41.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I: 41-47, 51.

regeneration; and 3) a *synthetic* rather than an *analytic* judgment by God based on the alien righteousness of Christ imputed to the believer.⁶² As we consider what Oecolampadius taught, these are the elements to use to categorize his views on the doctrine of justification.

The Writings of Oecolampadius

To assess Oecolampadius' views, we will primarily consider his exegesis from his commentaries on 1 John and Romans. While this is partly due to space constraints, it is also because the Romans lectures provide his interpretation of the biblical book that deals most specifically with the issues at hand and the 1 John sermons are the main sources that McGrath and Strohl use to argue that Oecolampadius held to a moralist view of justification.⁶³ These works also represent his earliest teaching after his "reformation breakthrough." Oecolampadius began preaching on 1 John in the winter of 1523. Staehelin identifies these sermons as the first time Oecolampadius spoke the Reformation message in a more comprehensive way.⁶⁴ The Romans commentary is from the midweek lectures he began in August 1524.⁶⁵ When we look at these writings, it will become very apparent that Oecolampadius did not hold to a moralist view of justification. In saying this, I am not disputing that Oecolampadius emphasized right living, ethics, and the new life in Christ. Evidence for these elements abounds in his writings. The claim that I am challenging is that this ethical emphasis demonstrates or necessitates a subjective moralist view of justification.

When we explore his sermons on 1 John, we readily find that he does not teach a subjective moralist justification. In his twelfth sermon on 1 John, Oecolampadius writes:

Indeed we are justified by faith, and we are made sons of God, but *justification is not attributed to love*. Indeed love and the working of righteousness flow from faith, and are

⁶² Ibid., I: 182.

⁶³ See Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme*, 107-108.

⁶⁴ Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 231. The 1 John commentary was first published in June 1524. It was re-published in Paris and again in Basel in 1525. It was also published as a German translation in 1525, and then as a French translation in 1540. See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 231-232.

⁶⁵ The Romans commentary was published in August 1525 and republished in 1526. Both the 1 John and Romans commentaries are available at <http://libguides.calvin.edu/content.php?pid=47579&sid=442083>.

evidences of faith. Moreover, however great love is, nevertheless *it does not justify*, because no one loves as much as he ought.”⁶⁶

He then repeats again that it is clear from the Word, “that love and the working of righteousness are evidences of faith,”⁶⁷ and in his next sermon, he reiterates that one is not justified by love, because “indeed neither love, nor a good conscience justifies.”⁶⁸ Akira Demura points out this same passage to show that while Oecolampadius did “emphasize responsive human love toward God and charity among men,” he was careful to articulate that love does not justify, but rather is an evidence of faith.⁶⁹ Staehelin also referred to these comments, as well as Oecolampadius’ comment that Peter’s statement that love covers over a multitude of sins, to show that Oecolampadius is teaching that justification is not by love.⁷⁰ This is a vitally important statement made by Oecolampadius, because it explicitly distinguishes him from Augustine’s moralist doctrine of justification, in which one *is* justified by love. Using McGrath’s definitions, Oecolampadius self-identified that he was *not* moralist in the sense that one is justified by love.

Further evidence that he is not moralist is found in how he understands the relationship between justification and piety. Oecolampadius teaches that true faith will always produce good works, but there are no good works unless one is previously justified. In the fifth sermon, he distinguishes between lifeless faith and true faith, explaining, “In fact good works will be nothing, unless previously you yourself were good... unless you were justified by faith; neither will you be justified or faithful if something evil was pleasing to you.”⁷¹ Oecolampadius further taught that these good works which proceed from faith after one is justified are *righteous*. For example, in his tenth sermon, he teaches:

⁶⁶ Johann Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam Ioannis Apostoli Catholicam Primam, Ioannis Oecolampadii Demegoriae, Hoc Est, Homiliae Una & Viginti* (Nuremberg: Apud Iohann Petreium, 1524), 52b. Emphasis mine. All the translations from the Latin are my own, since there are no English translations of Oecolampadius’ commentaries. The original is provided in italics after each citation: *Fide enim iustificamur, & filii dei efficimur, at charitati non tribuitur iustificatio. Profluunt enim ex fide charitas, iustitiaeque operatio, & fidei sunt indicia. Quamvis autem charitas magna sit, non tamen iustificat, quia nemo diligit quantum debet.*

⁶⁷ Ibid. *quod charitas & iustitiae operatio indicia sunt fidei.*

⁶⁸ Ibid., 60a. *Neque enim charitas, neque bona conscientia iustificat.*

⁶⁹ Demura, “Two Commentaries on Romans,” 174.

⁷⁰ Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 228.

⁷¹ Oecolampadius, *In Epistola Ioannis Primam*, 25b. *Quin nulla erunt bona opera, ni antea bonus ipse fueris... nisi te fides iustificet, neque iustificatus eris vel fidelis, si quippiam tibi mali placuerit.*

Consequently, if you have faith and that true knowledge that Christ is our righteousness... know that you yourselves ought to be righteous, and strive to be so... [A]nd you will be those who do righteousness, even though our righteousness is nothing compared to his righteousness, nevertheless it is great, because he works it in us.⁷²

It is important to notice that he identifies two distinct kinds of righteousness here: Christ as our righteousness and the righteousness that we do by Christ working in us. Oecolampadius is apparently compelled to explain in this sermon the difference between these two kinds of righteousness:

And whoever believes, he actually works righteousness by faith, and his works become just and holy, which otherwise would merit damnation, since the deeds were resulting from faith... [but] one is not justified as a result of them, one is justified by faith.⁷³

Oecolampadius is seeking to make it clear that doing righteousness is distinct from justification, because the righteousness of justification is by faith alone, while doing righteousness is a later result of that faith. In fact, what he teaches here is very similar to what John Calvin would later teach on this topic. Calvin comments on this same verse that the author “proves by many arguments that faith is necessarily connected with a holy and pure life. The first argument is that we are spiritually begotten after the likeness of Christ; it hence follows, that no one is born of Christ but he who lives righteously.”⁷⁴ Like Calvin, Oecolampadius makes specific distinctions between the righteousness which follows justification and the righteousness of justification itself.

While this by no means reveals a clear statement of forensic justification, it does suggest that Oecolampadius understood justification to be a change in *status* more than a change in *nature*. There is, however, a glimpse of the concept of imputation, in the statement from his sixteenth sermon, “Indeed Christ came, who appeased the Father, and who reconciled us to him, whose righteousness is our righteousness, who as redeemer and priest made satisfaction for sins

⁷² Ibid., 48b. *Si igitur fidem & veram illam scientiam habetis, quod Christus nostra est iustitia, ... scitote quomodo & vos iusti esse debeatis, & satagite ut sitis. Quia enim ipse pater est iusticiae, filii eritis & ipsi iusticiam facientes, & tametsi nulla sit nostra iusticia ad illius collata iusticiam, magna tamen est, quia ipse illam in nobis operatur.*

⁷³ Ibid. *Ex deo natus est, qui scit quod iustus est Christus hoc qui scit, is etiam credit in Christum: Et qui credit, is etiam per fidem operatur iusticiam, fiuntque opera illius iusta & sancta, quae alioqui damnationem mererentur, siquidem extra fidem facta fierent, licet speciem bonam prae se ferrent, & qui non iustificabatur ex se, fide iustificatur.*

⁷⁴ Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles*, trans. John Owen (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1855), 201-202.

by one sacrifice.”⁷⁵ Oecolampadius teaches here that Christ’s righteousness is our righteousness, but from these sermons on 1 John there is no explanation *how* Christ’s righteousness is ours, so it would be difficult to categorize this as “forensic,” even though there are indications that suggest the possibility. It is evident, though, that even with his ethical emphasis derived from his humanist background, Oecolampadius does not teach a moralist view of justification in his sermons on 1 John from 1523.

Likewise, when we consider Oecolampadius’ lectures on Romans from 1524, we find further evidence that he does not hold to a moralist view of justification, and we get a fuller picture of what his objective views include. The most relevant places in Oecolampadius’ teaching to consider when assessing his doctrine of justification undoubtedly include his explanations of *iustitia Dei* and *iustificatio* in his Romans commentary.⁷⁶ Oecolampadius offered specific remarks under the heading *Iustitia Dei* in three different places. In his exegesis of Romans 1, he wrote:

Take care not to understand here by the *righteousness of God*, the judgment of God by which he punishes the guilty, or righteousness, by which his own self is his righteousness... Indeed, the gospel declares that God is a friend to the believing ones, angry with the unbelieving ones: and so here the righteousness of God is placed opposite the wrath of God. And *it is the righteousness of God, which justifies the impious by grace, without respect to works.*⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Oecolampadius, *In Epistola Ioannis Primam*, 77. *Advenit enim Christus qui placuit patrem, & nos illi conciliavit, cuius iusticia, nostra est iusticia, qui redemptor & sacerdos uno sacrificio pro peccatis satisfecit.* Emphasis mine. This comment also refutes the idea that Oecolampadius rejected a satisfaction theory of the atonement. Similarly, Oecolampadius wrote, “There is indeed satisfaction and propitiation for us in Christ, more than sufficient in every way... because he alone was innocent and immaculate, therefore he is a worthy priest who expiated our transgressions.” See *Ibid.*, 52b.

⁷⁶ McGrath himself notes the importance of commentaries, especially those on Romans, for the development of the doctrine of justification. See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (1986), I: 39–40. However, neither Strohl nor McGrath interact with Oecolampadius’ commentary on Romans at all.

⁷⁷ Johann Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam B. Pauli Apost. ad Rhomanos Adnotationes à Ioanne Oecolampadio Basileae Praelectae* (Basel: Andream Cratandrum, 1525), 10a. Emphasis mine. *Cave ne intelligas hic per iustitiam dei, iudicium dei quo animadvertit in noxios, vel iustitiam, qua ipsemet est sua iustitia. ... Declarat enim Evangelium, quod deus amicus sit credulis, iratus incredulis: atque ita opponitur hic iustitia dei irae dei. Et est iustitia dei, quae gratis iustificat impium, absque operum respectu.*

Then in his comments on Romans 3:21-23, Oecolampadius taught, ‘Again in this place, righteousness is where God *considers us justified*, when certainly we are in his grace.’⁷⁸ Finally, he commented on Romans 3:26 that ‘because God promised salvation through his Son, and not through our works, this is correctly called righteousness.’⁷⁹ From these explanations of *iustitia Dei*, we see that Oecolampadius understood the righteousness of God as that which is opposite to the wrath of God, fulfills the promises of salvation through his Son, and justifies the one who believes apart from works by considering the believer righteous when they are not actually righteous. Demura contends that Oecolampadius’ comments on *Iustitia Dei* are “an unmistakable echo of Luther’s ‘*simul iustus ac peccator*.’”⁸⁰ This conclusion is confirmed when we consider that Oecolampadius taught that the believer is still affected by sin while considered righteous by grace at the same time.

When he develops the “chief thought that we are justified by faith alone” in his exposition of Romans 4, Oecolampadius expressed that “as long as we live, carnal desire remains in us: which although it is still called sin, it is not counted as sin.”⁸¹ He likewise declared that “the life of the justified is perpetual wrestling: though urged by the Holy Spirit to do good, the flesh hinders and spoils the work.”⁸² Similarly, in his explanation of Romans 7, Oecolampadius identifies Paul as an example for Christians, because “even the justified apostle still recognizes

⁷⁸ Ibid., 34b-35a. *Etiam hoc loco iustitia est, qua nos deus iustos reputat, quando scilicet in eius gratia sumus.* Emphasis mine.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 35b. *Caufa haec est, quia innititur promissionibus. Iusti autem est praestare promissa, & quia deus promisit salutem per filium, & non per opera nostra, recte iustitia dicitur.* He also says that it is because God promised to forgive sins through Christ (*quia deus promiserat se remissurum peccata per Christum*).

⁸⁰ Demura, “Two Commentaries on Romans,” 171.

⁸¹ See Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 41a, 53a.

⁸² See Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 57a.

in himself sin and the desire of sinning.”⁸³ And in chapter 8, he affirmed that for “the old man to be crucified and abolished” means that “we cease from sinning,” but he then explained that this does not mean “that evil affections die all at once, because this is not granted to us in this life.”⁸⁴ Oecolampadius’ view was that the believer is considered righteous though still affected by sin, and that even though impure and ungrateful acts are mixed in, the one who has been justified will always strive to do good works.

In addition, we also find that Oecolampadius makes a distinction between justification and piety when he affirms that justification by faith alone is sufficient *and* that living rightly is required for those who have been justified. In order to maintain both these assertions, there must be a distinction between justification and piety. He uses the example of the crucified robber to prove that he was not expected to complete his faith with works, “but by justification of faith alone, the follower was taken up into paradise.”⁸⁵ Likewise, he writes, “thus anyone who believes is justified, even if nothing was completed by him of works.”⁸⁶ He then quickly responds to the concern that if someone might say they were justified and yet act unrighteously, such a person scorns the grace of justification,” and “pardon is not given [to them].”⁸⁷ Contrary to the moralist view of justification, Oecolampadius is not teaching that piety is what justifies, or that justification is the actualization of righteousness, but rather Oecolampadius emphasizes that justification is *sola fide* (by faith), but can never be *vana fides* (empty faith) or *fictitius fides*

⁸³ Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 62b. Emphasis mine. *Non introducit apostolus alienam personam, sed suam propriam. dicit autem: Quod ago, in carne scilicet, improbo per legem, & odi spiritu. Et agnoscit in se adhuc apostolus etiam iustificatus peccatum, & peccandi cupiditatem.*

⁸⁴ Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 62a-62b.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 37b. *sed solius fidei iustificatione comitem in paradysum assumpsit.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* *concludimus, fide iustificari hominem absque operibus legis, qualiacunque praecepta sunt in lege. Origenes hunc locum aperte declarat, dicens, sufficere solius fidei iustificationem, ita ut credens quis tantummodo, iustificetur, etiam si nihil ab eo operis fuerit expletum.”*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* *Huic dicitur, quod si quis post iustificationem iniuste agit, sine dubio iustificationis gratiam spernit. Quippe non ideo datur venia, ut rursus liceat peccare.*

(false faith).⁸⁸ It would not be too much to say that Oecolampadius is seeking a solution to the same problem about which Melanchthon would later write. McGrath includes an excerpt from Melanchthon’s *Loci Communes* in the *Christian Theology Reader* to show that “Melanchthon aims to set out the place of good works in the Christian life, avoiding any suggestion that justification takes place on their account—while at the same time stressing that they have a real and significant role within the context of Christian living.”⁸⁹ This could just as easily summarize what Oecolampadius is aiming to teach here.⁹⁰ Demura maintains that Oecolampadius’ perspective is similar to Calvin’s “ethical code,” which taught that one is not justified by works, but the one who is justified is never without works.⁹¹ This is quite contrary to the moralist view of justification described by McGrath.

While his sermons on 1 John did not demonstrate all three elements of “forensic” justification, his lectures on Romans do, even if it is not as strong as in later Reformers. Any indication of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was fairly muted in his sermons on 1 John. In Romans, though, it is more pronounced. While Oecolampadius uses the term *imputat* most often in reference to sin that is not counted against (imputed to) those who believe,⁹² like Erasmus, he changed the Latin translation of Romans 4 from *reputatum* to *imputatum* to state that Paul “insinuates that if for Abraham, who abounded in all good works, faith alone was

⁸⁸ For example, see Oecolampadius’ comments in Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 59a. Staehelin broadly summarizes all of Oecolampadius’ comments on Romans 6-8 as his exposition on “faith that is not empty.” See Staehelin, *Das Theologische Lebenswerk*, 216.

⁸⁹ Alister E. McGrath, *The Christian Theology Reader*, 3rd ed. (Malden MA: Blackwell Pub, 2007), 444-445.

⁹⁰ He begins his comments on Romans 5, “He transitions now to works and the fruit of faith, more correctly, the blessings, which come forth from faith. First, faith justifies before God, as was said abundantly above.” *Transit nunc ad opera & fructus fidei, imò beatitudines, quae ex fide proveniunt. Primum. fides iustificat coram deo, ut supra abunde dictum.* See Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 47a.

⁹¹ Demura, “Two Commentaries on Romans,” 171.

⁹² For example, in his explanation of why the saints before the cross are described as righteous, he argues that it was not because they were spotless, but that their unrighteousness was not imputed to them as sin. See Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 33a. The idea of sin not being imputed to those who are justified is also found on 44a, 49b, 65b. See also Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 104a, 104b.

imputed (*imputata est*) as righteousness, then no one else remains to be justified by works.”⁹³

Oecolampadius stated more specifically in his comments on Romans 5:19:

The righteousness of Christ was obedience all the way to death on the cross, and it works in those who believe, so that they already do not want to be disobedient, but [want to be] obedient to God. Nevertheless, however much our obedience may be, it is not sufficient to save, because it always still has attached some degree of disobedience. Further, *the obedience of Christ is imputed as righteousness to those who believe.*”⁹⁴

Using the same terminology as he did with reference to Abraham’s faith being imputed as righteousness, here he expressly declares that the obedience of Christ is imputed as righteousness to those who believe, even while they are still marred by disobedience.

Though this is the clearest statement of external imputation, in other sections of his commentary on Romans, Oecolampadius states that Christ’s merit is given to us and that Christ *is* our righteousness. He comments on Romans 8:1, “Therefore all our merit is in Christ, who is our righteousness, and who bore the sins of the world, as is in 2 Corinthians 5.”⁹⁵ And in his comments on Romans 12:1, he teaches that we offer ourselves as sacrifices, “[b]ecause we learned by faith that Christ is the sacrifice for us *and our righteousness.*”⁹⁶ So, while his terminology of imputation is not as frequent or as consistent as Melancthon or Calvin, the *concept* of Christ’s righteousness being imputed to the believer is plainly present in Oecolampadius’ teaching on Romans.

⁹³ Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Rhomanos*, 43a. *Insinuat, si Abrahae, qui tot bonis operibus abundavit, sola fides ad iustitiam imputata est, relinquitur nullum alium operibus iustificari.* See also Ibid., 40a. *Opus illud dei, fides inquam imputata.* For the significance of this change in the use of *imputat*, see McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (2005), 239.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 50b-51a. Emphasis mine. *Iustitia Christi fuit in obedientia usque ad mortem crucis, & operatur in credentibus, ut iam non inobedientes, sed obedientes deo esse velint. Non tamen nostra obedientia quantacunque sit, sufficit ad salutem, quia semper adhuc aliquid inobedientiae adiunctum habet. Caeterum obedientia Christi credentibus imputatur ad iustitiam.*

⁹⁵ Ibid., 64b-65a. Emphasis mine. *Unde omne nostrum meritum est in Christo, qui nostra iustitia est, & abstulit peccata mundi, ut est 2 Cor. 5. Eum qui non noverat peccatum, fecit pro nobis peccatum, ut efficeremur iustitia dei per illum.* See also his comments that justification is “not by our works, since Christ is our righteousness” (*non per opera nostra, quia Christus iustitia nostra est*) and that God’s grace grants righteousness (*tribuit iustitiam*) and Christ is the giver of righteousness (*dator est iustitiae*). See Ibid., 36a, 44a, 49a.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 92b. *Quia per fidem didicimus Christum pro nobis sacrificium, & nostram iustitiam...*

As opposed to any of the passages above from Romans that could have been used, the key passage McGrath and Strohl selected to prove that Oecolampadius held to a “moralist” view of justification is Hebrews 10:24.⁹⁷ This is a peculiar choice to draw any kind of a conclusion about one’s view of justification, since it is about encouraging others toward love and good deeds. If the same verse were used to identify Calvin’s view of justification, for example, we would only find some brief comments about the Jews being urged not to prevent other nations from being included in the church and an exhortation to emulate godly living.⁹⁸ This would not help us determine very much about Calvin’s doctrine of justification. Likewise, Oecolampadius’ comments on this verse provide us with his explanation for why Christians need to admonish one another and continually examine themselves.⁹⁹ While McGrath and Strohl see this as evidence that justification and regeneration cannot be separated,¹⁰⁰ Oecolampadius is merely reiterating the common theme that “faith may not be idle”¹⁰¹ There is no sense from this passage that Oecolampadius equates piety and justification or that justification is dependent on regeneration.¹⁰² In fact, he repeatedly teaches that they are distinct, because good works cannot justify or save, even though they must be evident *after* one has already been justified.

⁹⁷ See McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (2005), 251; Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme*, 108.

⁹⁸ Jean Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, trans. John Owen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1948), 238-239.

⁹⁹ Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 112b. Oecolampadius is addressing “what kind of faith ought to be in each one, certainly so that it may be effective through love... You see many boasting about faith, but quite few faithful in reality. It is easy to confess Christ with your mouth, but not likewise in your heart and in your work.” *qualis autem ista fides esse in unoquoque debeat hic aperit, nempe ut sit per charitatem efficax... Multos de fide gloriantes videas, sed paucos admodum revera fideles. Ore Christum fateri facile est, sed corde & opere non item.*

¹⁰⁰ See McGrath, “Humanist Elements in the Early Reformed Doctrine of Justification,” 9; McGrath, *Iustitia Dei* (1986), II: 33; Strohl, *La pensée de la Réforme*, 107.

¹⁰¹ Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 112. *In summa, fides non sit ociosa, sed per dilectionem continue operetur.* This phrase and very similar phrases are also found, for example, in Oecolampadius, *In Epistolam ad Hebraeos*, 121a, 122a; Oecolampadius, *Institutio Christiana sive Catechismus Puerorum Reipublicae Basiliensis*, 10; Oecolampadius, *In Epistola Ioannis Primam*, 40b.

¹⁰² In fact, in his lectures on Job, Oecolampadius insisted that he did not want to teach ambiguously so he laid out his “order of justification (*ordinem iustificationis*): “Moreover, you see the order of justification. First God sends preachers, they teach, God gives growth and shows mercy, he justifies, regenerates, and reforms, so that, the one who was perishing is born again.” *Vide autem tu ordinem iustificationis. Primò Deus mittit concionatores, illi docent, Deus incrementum dat ac miseretur, iustificat, regenerat, reformátque ut, iterum renascatur qui perierat.*

Conclusion

According to Oecolampadius, a person is justified by faith alone without works, and despite the ongoing presence of sin in the life of the believer, is considered righteous because of Christ's righteousness. He specifically taught that one is *not* justified by love, that the righteousness of justification is *not inherent*, nor is it an *actualization* of righteousness. While living righteously and giving evidence of piety is essential for Oecolampadius, good works and righteousness are only possible *after* one has already been justified. While it is difficult because of the transitional time period in which he was teaching, if forced to categorize his views on the doctrine of justification, Oecolampadius cannot rightly be called "moralist," but rather his teaching conveys the features of "forensic" justification. Though the imputation of the alien righteousness of Christ to the believer is less pronounced, the foundational concepts of forensic justification are all present. Calvin could have said about Oecolampadius' teaching on justification what he said about his exegesis, that Oecolampadius diligently applied himself to expound the Scriptures, but did not always reach the full scope.¹⁰³

What becomes apparent is that McGrath's conclusions about Oecolampadius were unfortunately based on a very limited reading by Strohl, which was not even a very close reading.¹⁰⁴ A more thorough study of Oecolampadius' writings shows that McGrath's portrayal of Oecolampadius' teaching on justification needs significant revision. While this study does not overthrow McGrath's major arguments about the development of the doctrine of justification, it does offer a necessary revision to the portrayal of Oecolampadius. It sheds further light on the timeframe for the decisive shift in the sixteenth century on the teaching of justification by

See Johann Oecolampadius, *In Librum Iob Exegemata. Opus Admodum Eruditum, ac Omnibus Divinae Scripturae Studiosis Utile* (Geneva: Ex Officina Ioannis Crispini, 1554), 180.

¹⁰³ Calvin wrote in a letter to Peter Viret on May 19, 1540, "No one, as I think, has hitherto more diligently applied himself to this pursuit than Oecolampadius, though he has not always reached the full scope or meaning." See letter 217 in Jean Calvin, *Ioannis Calvini Opera Quae Supersunt Omnia*, vol. 11 (Bad Feilnbach, Germany: Schmidt Periodicals, 1990), 36.

¹⁰⁴ Strohl also claimed that the first catechism of Basel supports these conclusions. However, if one actually reads the questions and answers of the catechism, we find the children expected to respond with phrases such as, "Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. Because as long as ones are truly believing, they are justified and consequently also saved." See Johann Oecolampadius, *Institutio Christiana sive Catechismus Puerorum Reipublicae Basiliensis* (Basileae: Oporinus, 1561), 4, 9-10.

identifying that the concept of imputed righteousness and forensic justification was already being taught in Switzerland by 1524, and a version of justification that was explicitly not moralist in 1523. It also refutes McGrath's suggestion that it was possible that the humanism of Oecolampadius was detrimental to, or inconsistent with, a forensic doctrine of justification. The evidence is more than sufficient to show that Oecolampadius was both thoroughly influenced by humanism and taught an emerging version of forensic justification. Unfortunately, McGrath allowed the inadequate and outdated conclusions of Strohl to shape his depiction of Oecolampadius and the early Swiss Reformation. Strohl's work overemphasized the moral and ethical emphasis of Oecolampadius' humanism at the expense of his humanist impulse to go *ad fontes*. When both these values are embraced, the result is a doctrine of justification that teaches that one is justified by faith alone based on the righteousness of Christ, which is then lived out in ethical and moral ways. McGrath's categorization overlooked a major component of Oecolampadius' humanism and resulted in a misguided speculation about the relationship between Renaissance humanism and the doctrine of justification.

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