JUITA

Jurnal Ilmiah Tafsir Alkitab
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Injili Indonesia Samarinda
Vol. 3 No. 2 (2026): 126-145
p-ISSN: 3032-7989 | e-ISSN 3062 9306

Justification by Faith in Romans 3:21–26: An Exegetical-Theological Study and Its Relevance to Legalism in the Indonesian Church

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History
Submitted : August 07, 2026
Revised : October 09, 2026
Accepted : October 12, 2026
Published : October 15, 2026

DOI
https://doi.org/10.69668/juita.v3i2.224

Description
This article is a research project that examines the topic of justification by faith based on Romans 3–5. The purpose of this study is to explain the meaning of justification from exegetical and theological perspectives and to demonstrate its relevance to the church today.

Citation
Sugito, S., & Sugiharto, A. (2026). Justification by Faith in Romans 3:21–26: An Exegetical-Theological Study and Its Relevance to Legalism in the Indonesian Church. *Jurnal Ilmiah Tafsir Alkitab*, *3*(2), 126–145. https://doi.org/10.69668/juita.v3i2.224

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Abstract

This study analyzes justification by faith in Romans 3:21–26 through an exegetical-theological approach and evaluates its relevance for addressing legalism in the Indonesian church. The study addresses tendencies to associate salvation with obedience to the Law, religious performance, and human works, thereby obscuring divine grace. It aims to elucidate Paul's understanding of justification and demonstrate how this theological framework critically engages legalistic patterns in church life. Using a qualitative literature-based method and historical-grammatical analysis of the Greek text, supported by critical commentaries, the study finds that justification is grounded in δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (the righteousness of God), revealed apart from the Law and accomplished through Christ's redemptive work, with faith as its means of reception. The term ἱλαστήριον places Christ's death at the center of God's saving action. Good works are therefore the ethical outworking, not the ground, of justification. This framework challenges performance-based religiosity and reorients ecclesial life toward grace and faithful obedience. The novelty of this study lies in integrating a historical-grammatical exegesis of Romans 3:21–26 with Barclay's concept of incongruous grace to provide a framework for evaluating whether religious practices function as responses to grace or as substitutes for it.

Keywords: *Justification by faith; Romans 3:21–26; δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ; πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ; legalism.*

INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of justification by faith constitutes a central tenet of Christian theology because it addresses the fundamental question of human salvation. In Romans 3:21–26, Paul asserts that sinful humanity cannot attain justification through human effort, observance of the Law, or good works, but receives it through faith in Jesus Christ as an expression of God's grace. This doctrine is not merely a matter of dogmatic formulation; it also has contextual implications for contemporary Christian communities. Although the tension between divine grace, faith, religious observance, and human works is not unique to Indonesia, it is also evident in specific Indonesian ecclesial contexts. For example, Boangmanalu et al., in their study of the GKPPD congregation, report that some

congregants continue to associate salvation with obedience to the Law, despite the Pauline emphasis on salvation by grace through Christ (Boangmanalu et al., 2024). This finding does not represent Indonesian Christianity as a whole, but it provides a documented instance of how the relationship between grace, faith, and religious observance can become a theological concern within an Indonesian congregation. In this respect, Romans 3:21–26 offers a relevant exegetical framework for examining whether religious obedience functions as a response to divine grace or is implicitly regarded as a basis for salvation.

This study is motivated by documented cases in which congregants associate salvation with obedience to the Law. Boangmanalu et al., for example, report that many members of the GKPPD today still hold a legalistic view that salvation is earned through good deeds and traditional Pakpak Dairi rituals; therefore, a theological affirmation of salvation as a free gift (*sola gratia*) based on Romans 3:23–26 is urgently needed (Boangmanalu et al., 2024). This study does not represent the Indonesian church as a whole, but they indicate a pastoral problem that warrants theological attention. Where such an understanding prevails, the issue is not merely a matter of soteriological theory; it affects the life and practice of the congregation's faith (Sutriatmo, 2022). Romans 3:21–26 presents justification as God's gracious action, accomplished through Christ and received through faith (Payer et al., 2022). This issue remains significant within the Indonesian church context, where legalistic tendencies may emerge when salvation and spiritual maturity are measured primarily by outward religious practices, including participation in worship, fasting, prayer, and ministry, while the primacy of faith and divine grace is overlooked (Sonata, 2024). Such a framework risks generating spiritual pressure and reducing religious practices to formal observance. Accordingly, a renewed examination of justification by faith is necessary to reaffirm that justification rests on God's grace and is received through faith, while good works constitute the tangible ethical fruit of faith in the contemporary life of the church.

Several previous studies have examined the doctrine of justification by faith from different perspectives; however, significant gaps remain for further investigation. Iswahyudi and Putrawan examine justification by faith within Paul's theology and affirm faith in Christ as the basis of justification. Nevertheless, their study remains situated primarily within the broader field of biblical theology and does not specifically address the problem of legalism in congregational life (Iswahyudi & Putrawan, 2022). Lim investigates the relationship between faith, the righteousness of God, and the Law through Paul's use of Habakkuk 2:4b, but his analysis is predominantly intertextual and historical rather than focused on contextual and pastoral implications (Lim, 2022). Langerman demonstrates that justification has significant implications for social ethics and that good works emerge as the fruit of a life grounded in grace; however, his study is framed within the context of social ethics and ecumenical dialogue in South Africa (Langerman, 2021). Juanda, Binar, and Laia contribute to the discussion of the relationship between grace and faith through exegetical studies of Ephesians 2:8–9 and Philippians 1:29, but their research does not specifically examine justification in Romans 3:21–26 or address the problem of legalism within Indonesian congregations (Juanda et al., 2025).

In this study, legalism is understood not simply as obedience to God or participation in religious practices, but as a theological distortion in which human works or religious performance are regarded as the ground of justification or divine acceptance, in place of God's saving action in Christ received through faith (Gathercole, 2020). This definition requires several distinctions. Christian obedience refers to the believer's response to God's revealed will and grace, whereas spiritual disciplines such as prayer, fasting, worship, Bible reading, and ministry are practices through which faith is nurtured and expressed. Religious formalism, by contrast, occurs when external religious observance becomes detached from genuine faith and inward transformation. Works-righteousness refers more specifically to the attempt to establish righteous standing before God through human achievement or merit, while moralism places disproportionate emphasis on moral conduct as the measure of religious standing. Legalism overlaps with these phenomena but is distinguished by the theological function assigned to human performance: practices that are legitimate expressions of Christian faith become legalistic when they are treated as grounds for God's acceptance or as measures of a person's worth before God. Thus, this study does not equate Christian obedience, holiness, or spiritual disciplines with legalism. Rather, following the theological logic of Romans 3:21–26, it identifies legalism primarily where human performance displaces divine grace and Christ's redemptive work as the basis of justification.

In this study, "works of the Law" (ἔργα νόμου) refers to the performance of the Mosaic Law as a whole, considered as a basis for righteous standing before God. We acknowledge Dunn's argument that the phrase in Paul's context particularly highlights identity markers such as circumcision, food laws, and Sabbath observance, which separated Jews from Gentiles (Dunn, 1988). However, Romans 3:20 and 4:4–5 indicate that Paul's critique extends beyond ethnic boundary markers to any human performance offered as the ground of justification (Moo, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). This broader reading justifies the hermeneutical move from the Mosaic Law to contemporary religious practices: the issue is not the practices themselves but the function assigned to them. Accordingly, we distinguish soteriological legalism, in which works are treated as the ground of acceptance before God, from covenantal obedience, in which works are the grateful response of those already accepted by grace.

In the Indonesian context, a society characterized by religious and cultural diversity, Rerung and Yohanis link Calvin's thought on justificatio and sanctificatio to social transformation, but their approach is conceptual and has not yet examined these issues through an exegetical analysis of Romans 3–5 (Rerung & Yohanis, 2025). Furthermore, Tambun has specifically interpreted Romans 3:21–31 and affirmed justification by faith, not by works; however, his study does not offer a focused historical-grammatical exegesis of Romans 3:21–26, nor does it link it to the phenomenon of legalism and the congregation's understanding of the relationship between faith and works (Tambun, 2025). Thus, a research gap remains: the lack of integration of the exegesis of Romans 3:21–26, the doctrine of justification by faith, the problem of legalism, and the realities of Indonesian congregational life within a single research framework. This study fills that gap by conducting an exegetical analysis of Romans 3:21–26 to formulate a more comprehensive understanding of justification by faith, while also

demonstrating that good works are not the basis of justification but rather the ethical and practical consequences of faith that has received God's grace. The novelty of this study lies in the integration of a historical-grammatical exegesis of Romans 3:21–26 with a theological critique of legalism, particularly in situating the relationship between δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, χωρὶς νόμου, and the work of Christ as the basis of justification within the context of the Indonesian church.

Previous studies have examined justification by faith from theological, intertextual, ethical, and contextual perspectives, but an important exegetical-theological problem remains insufficiently explored. Studies by Iswahyudi and Putrawan, Lim, and Langerman address justification, faith, the Law, and good works from different perspectives, while Rerung and Yohanis and Tambun contribute to the Indonesian context. However, these studies do not sufficiently clarify how Romans 3:21–26 relates δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, χωρὶς νόμου, πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, and Christ's redemptive work to the distinction between the ground of justification and the ethical function of good works.

The unresolved issue is therefore how Paul establishes justification apart from works of the Law while preserving the theological significance of the Law and the ethical significance of obedience. This study addresses this gap through historical-grammatical exegesis and theological-contextual synthesis of Romans 3:21–26, with particular attention to the relationship between grace, faith, Christ's redemptive work, and good works. The study thus provides a theological framework for evaluating legalistic tendencies in Indonesian church life without equating Christian obedience or spiritual disciplines with legalism.

Based on the background outlined above, a significant gap emerges between Pauline theology and contemporary ecclesial practice. Romans 3:21–26 presents justification as God's gracious act accomplished through Christ and received through faith, apart from works of the Law. In this theological framework, human works do not constitute the ground of justification but emerge as the ethical consequence of faith. Yet, within some Indonesian congregational contexts, salvation and spiritual maturity may still be associated with obedience to religious rules, ritual participation, ministry involvement, and outward expressions of piety. This creates a tension between a grace-centered understanding of justification and a performance-based pattern of religiosity. The problem is therefore not the practice of obedience itself, but the theological shift that occurs when obedience moves from being a response to divine grace to becoming a basis for measuring one's acceptance before God. This theory–reality gap demonstrates the need for a renewed exegetical examination of Romans 3:21–26 that can clarify the relationship between faith, the Law, and good works while providing a theological framework for critically addressing legalistic tendencies in contemporary church life. This study addresses two questions: (1) How does Paul, in Romans 3:21–26, ground justification in the righteousness of God revealed apart from the Law, and what roles do faith and Christ's redemptive work play in that argument? (2) How can this exegetical-theological framework evaluate legalistic tendencies documented in selected Indonesian church contexts?

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, literature-based design using a historical-grammatical exegetical approach. The primary source is the Greek text of Romans 3:21–26 according to NA28, including significant textual variants recorded in its apparatus insofar as they affect interpretation. Secondary sources include major critical commentaries on Romans representing Reformed, New Perspective, Catholic, and socio-rhetorical approaches (Cranfield, 1979; Dunn, 1988; Fitzmyer, 1993; Jewett, 2007; Longenecker, 2016; Moo, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). They also include studies on Second Temple Judaism and Pauline theology, journal articles on justification, the Mosaic Law, πίστις Χριστοῦ, and legalism, and Indonesian theological studies documenting congregational understandings of salvation and religious practice. Lexical analysis relies primarily on BDAG (Bauer & Danker, 2013).

The exegetical analysis proceeds in three steps, which correspond to the structure of the discussion. First, the text is situated historically and literarily as the climax of Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–3:20, with attention to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles, the identity-forming function of the Mosaic Law, and contemporary reassessments of first-century Judaism. Second, the grammatical analysis of verses 21–22 examines syntax, verbal aspect, and key genitive constructions, particularly δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ and πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Third, the exegesis of verses 21–26 analyzes the structure of the passage and its key terms (δικαιόω, χάρις, ἀπολύτρωσις, ἱλαστήριον, πάρεσις, and ἔνδειξις). It reads them in their literary and Old Testament contexts rather than as isolated word studies, and compares the findings critically with major scholarly interpretations.

The exegetical findings are then synthesized theologically in two stages. First, they are formulated as theological propositions concerning divine righteousness, grace, Christ's redemptive work, faith, the Law, and good works, and are condensed into three hermeneutical principles: divine initiative, the distinction between the ground and the means of justification, and excluded boasting (Rom 3:27). Second, these principles are brought into critical dialogue with legalistic tendencies documented in previous Indonesian studies, so that the Indonesian context functions as the setting for theological application rather than as a determinant of the meaning of the text. This study has three limitations. Its contextual analysis relies on secondary rather than primary empirical data. The historical-grammatical approach gives less attention to reader-oriented dimensions. Finally, the synthesis draws substantially on the Reformed tradition, a bias the study seeks to mitigate by engaging New Perspective and apocalyptic readings.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Greek Text of Romans 3:21–26 (NA28)

21Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται, μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν· **22**δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας καὶ ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας· οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή· **23**πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ, **24**δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ· **25**ὃν προέθετο

ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον, διὰ τῆς πίστεως, ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι, εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ, διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων, **26**ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ· πρὸς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ. Two variants merit attention. In 3:22, some manuscripts add καὶ ἐπὶ πάντας after εἰς πάντας, a reading generally regarded as a conflation; NA28 follows the shorter reading. In 3:25, manuscripts differ on the presence of the article in διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως. Neither variant alters the main theological argument, but their discussion demonstrates the textual basis of the exegesis.

Historical Context of Romans 3:21–26

Romans 3:21–26 represents the climax of Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–3:20. Romans 1:18–32 depicts the sinfulness of the Gentiles, while Romans 2:1–29 demonstrates that the Jews, despite possessing the Mosaic Law, have no grounds for boasting. Romans 3:1–20 then concludes that all humanity is under the power of sin. Romans 3:20 provides the transition to Romans 3:21: διότι ἐξ ἔργων νόμου οὐ δικαιωθήσεται πᾶσα σὰρξ ἐνώπιον αὐτοῦ, "For no flesh will be justified before him by works of the Law." This statement is immediately followed by Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται..., "But now, apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been revealed..." (Rom. 3:21). The expression Νυνὶ δὲ ("but now") marks a decisive shift in the development of Paul's argument. Paul moves from a universal diagnosis of sin to God's saving action. Romans 3:21–26 may therefore be understood as the soteriological center of the argument developed in Romans 1–5.

A historical clarification is necessary before interpreting Paul's discussion of the Law and justification in Romans 3:21–26. First-century Judaism should not be characterized simplistically as a religion in which salvation was earned through human works or moral achievement. Contemporary Pauline scholarship has challenged this caricature and has emphasized the complexity of the relationship among covenant, grace, Law, faithfulness, and works within Second Temple Judaism (Nyman, 2020). Therefore, Paul's contrast between justification and works of the Law should not be understood as a rejection of Judaism, the Mosaic Law, or Jewish obedience as such. Rather, the exegetical question concerns the theological function of the Law in relation to justification: whether righteous standing before God is established through observance of the Law or through God's gracious action revealed in Christ and received through faith. This distinction is essential for interpreting χωρὶς νόμου ("apart from the Law") without reducing Paul's argument to a simplistic opposition between Jewish legalism and Christian grace.

Since Sanders described Second Temple Judaism as "covenantal nomism," in which obedience maintains rather than earns covenant membership, Pauline scholarship has reassessed Paul's polemic against works of the Law (Sanders, 1977). The New Perspective, represented by Dunn and Wright, emphasizes justification as God's covenant faithfulness and the inclusion of Gentiles (Dunn, 1988; Wright, 2013). The apocalyptic reading (Campbell, 2009) interprets Romans 3:21–26 as God's liberating invasion rather than a contractual exchange. Barclay offers a significant synthesis: grace in Second Temple Judaism was widespread, but Paul's distinctive emphasis is on the incongruity of grace, given without regard to the worth of

the recipient (Barclay, 2015). Barclay's category is particularly fruitful for this study, because legalism can be described precisely as the attempt to restore congruity between human worth and divine favor.

Within the historical context of the first century, this issue was also closely related to the relationship between Jews and Gentiles. The Mosaic Law was not merely a set of individual moral regulations; it also functioned as a marker of Jewish communal identity, including practices such as circumcision and dietary regulations. Consequently, the question of the basis of justification also raised the question of who belonged to the people of God. Studies of Romans indicate that the issues of justification and the inclusion of the Gentiles are closely interconnected (Burkett, 2012). Paul, therefore, is not arguing that the Mosaic Law has no value whatsoever. Rather, in Romans 3:21 he states that the righteousness of God has been revealed “apart from the Law,” while simultaneously emphasizing that it is “attested by the Law and the Prophets.”

Grammatical Analysis of Romans 3:21

First, Νυνὶ δὲ: “But now”. The adverb νυνί with the adversative δέ may be read logically ("but as it is") or temporally ("but now"). The latter is to be preferred (Paschke, 2023; Du Toit, 2023): the phrase ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ in v. 26 confirms that Paul is thinking of a turning point in salvation history (Cranfield, 1979; Moo, 2018). The "now" contrasts with the time of God's forbearance (ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ, v. 26) and marks the arrival of the eschatological age in the Christ-event. Apocalyptic interpreters rightly stress this disjunctive character (Campbell, 2009), yet Paul immediately qualifies it: this new righteousness is "attested by the Law and the Prophets" (v. 21b). The "now" is therefore both new and continuous: new in its manifestation, continuous with Israel's Scriptures in its witness.

Second, Χωρὶς νόμου: “Apart from the Law”. Paul uses νόμος twice in v. 21 with different senses. In χωρὶς νόμου, the Law is the Mosaic covenant viewed as a system of obligation; the phrase echoes ἐξ ἔργων νόμου in 3:20 and should be taken adverbially with πεφανέρωται ("has been manifested apart from the Law") rather than adjectivally with δικαιοσύνη (Cranfield, 1979). In ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν, the Law is Scripture as witness, anticipating Paul's appeal to Abraham and David in Romans 4. The Law thus disqualifies itself as the means of righteousness while qualifying itself as the witness to it. This double function explains the apparent paradox of 3:31: faith does not abolish the Law but establishes it, precisely by allowing the Law to function as witness rather than as a ladder of merit.

Third, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ: “The Righteousness of God”. The genitive θεοῦ has generated three principal readings. A genitive of source (gift): the righteous status that comes from God to the believer, the classic Lutheran reading supported by Philippians 3:9 (τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην). A subjective genitive (attribute or activity): God's own covenant faithfulness, by which he keeps his promises to Israel and the world (Wright, 2013). Käsemann's synthesis: God's "salvation-creating power," a gift that never separates from its Giver (Käsemann, 1980). The context of Romans 3 favors a reading that holds the activity and the gift together. In 3:3–

5, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ stands parallel to πίστις τοῦ θεοῦ and ἀλήθεια τοῦ θεοῦ, attributes of God himself; in 3:25–26 the phrase denotes God's own justice that must be vindicated. Yet in 3:22 this righteousness comes "to all who believe," which implies a gift received. We therefore understand δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ as God's saving righteousness in action, which results in a righteous status conferred on believers (Moo, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). This dual sense is crucial for the critique of legalism: if righteousness is first God's activity, it cannot be humanity's achievement.

Fourth, Πεφανέρωται: The Manifestation of God's Righteousness. The perfect πεφανέρωται should be compared with the present ἀποκαλύπτεται in 1:17. In 1:17, God's righteousness is being revealed in the ongoing proclamation of the gospel; in 3:21, it has been manifested decisively in the historical event of Christ's death (Yoon, 2020). Traditional grammar reads the perfect as a past action with continuing results. Verbal aspect theory prefers to describe the perfect as stative, presenting the state of affairs as fully established (Porter, 1989). Either way, the semantic point holds: the manifestation is not contingent on human response. This grammatical observation supports the theological claim that justification is grounded extra nos, in an accomplished divine act, rather than in the believer's ongoing performance.

Fifth, Romans 3:22: δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ and πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ. Romans 3:22 states: δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας, "the righteousness of God through the faith/faithfulness of Jesus Christ for all who believe." Grammatically, *διὰ* with the genitive πίστεως indicates means or agency and may therefore be rendered "through faith" or "through faithfulness." The subsequent phrase, πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, is a genitive construction that has become one of the most significant debates in Pauline scholarship. Two principal interpretations may be identified. The first is the objective genitive, "faith in Jesus Christ." In the traditional reading, πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is understood as "faith in Jesus Christ," with Christ as the object of human faith. Accordingly, the righteousness of God is revealed through Christ's saving work and received through faith in Christ by those who believe. This interpretation is consistent with Paul's emphasis on human faith throughout Romans 3–5. The second is the subjective genitive, "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." This interpretation understands Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ as the subject associated with πίστις, rendering the phrase "the faithfulness of Jesus Christ." On this reading, the basis of justification is not the quality or strength of human faith but Christ's faithfulness to God, demonstrated through his obedience and death.

Exegetical Analysis of Romans 3:21–26

Romans 3:21–26 forms a single, densely packed period in which Paul answers the indictment of 1:18–3:20. Its structure may be outlined as follows: (a) the thesis that God's righteousness has been manifested apart from the Law (v. 21); (b) its means and scope, through faith for all who believe (v. 22); (c) the universal predicament (v. 23); (d) the mode and ground, freely by grace through the redemption in Christ (v. 24); (e) the instrument, Christ set forth as ἱλαστήριον (v. 25a); and (f) the purpose, a twofold demonstration (ἔνδειξις) of God's

righteousness (vv. 25b–26). Since Bultmann and Käsemann (Käsemann, 1980), many scholars have suggested that vv. 24–26a incorporate a pre-Pauline Jewish-Christian formula, citing the concentration of hapax legomena in Paul (ἱλαστήριον, πάρεσις, προγεγονότων) and the abrupt participial syntax of v. 24 (Jewett, 2007). Even if this hypothesis is accepted, the decisive interpretive question is how Paul employs the material in its present context; the additions δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι and διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως are widely regarded as distinctly Pauline emphases that bring the formula into the service of his argument against justification by works (Dunn, 1988; Moo, 2018).

The Meaning of πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ in Romans 3:22 and 3:26

The debate over πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ cannot be settled on grammatical grounds alone, since the genitive permits both readings (Hays, 2002). Advocates of the subjective genitive advance three arguments: (1) the parallel with πίστις τοῦ θεοῦ (3:3), clearly God's faithfulness; (2) the parallel with ἐκ πίστεως Ἀβραάμ (4:16), Abraham's own faith; and (3) the alleged redundancy of v. 22. Each can be answered. First, 3:3 concerns God, whose faithfulness is a covenant attribute; Christ's role in 3:21–26 is described not in terms of his faith but of his blood (ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι). Second, in Romans 4 Abraham functions as the paradigm of believers, which supports a reading of faith as human trust. Third, Paul's repetition is characteristic: the closely parallel Galatians 2:16 places καὶ ἡμεῖς εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐπιστεύσαμεν between two occurrences of πίστις Χριστοῦ, showing that the repetition is emphatic. In 3:22, the second phrase adds the emphasis on universality (πάντας), which Paul immediately explains with οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή (Dunn, 1988; Moo, 2018). Finally, v. 26 (τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ) most naturally identifies the person justified as the one who believes in Jesus. The objective reading therefore remains the more probable. Importantly, the subjective reading is not theologically opposed to this study's thesis; both readings locate the ground of justification outside human performance. For the purposes of evaluating legalism, the decisive point is shared: faith is not a meritorious work but the empty hand that receives what Christ has accomplished.

This distinction requires a clear differentiation between the ground of justification and the means by which justification is received. Christ’s redemptive work constitutes the objective ground of salvation, while faith in Christ represents the human response through which justification is received. Romans 3:24 emphasizes that human beings are justified freely by God’s grace. Therefore, faith is not a human achievement and does not function as a substitute for works of the Law.

Accordingly, good works are the ethical consequence of grace, not the ground of justification. Legalism emerges when obedience, spiritual disciplines, ministry, or religious practices that should function as responses to grace are transformed into grounds for divine acceptance or measures of spiritual worth. For the purposes of this study, πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is understood primarily as “faith in Jesus Christ,” particularly in light of its relationship with τοὺς πιστεύοντας and the broader use of πίστις and πιστεύω in Romans 3–5.

The Universality of Justification

The phrase εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας means "for all who believe." The term πάντας emphasizes the universal scope of the statement, while τοὺς πιστεύοντας is the present active participle of πιστεύω, "to believe." The present participle identifies those who believe, although its present form should not necessarily be understood as emphasizing an action that is temporally ongoing. Rather, the expression functions substantivally to designate "those who believe." Nevertheless, this universality does not mean that all human beings are automatically justified (Schellenberg, 2019). Paul establishes a clear qualification: justification is granted "to all who believe." He then adds οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή, "for there is no distinction." The term διαστολή means "difference," "distinction," or "differentiation."

In the context of Romans, this statement is particularly significant because Paul challenges any basis for justification grounded in ethnic identity. Jews and Gentiles alike stand under the power of sin and equally depend upon the grace of God. Consequently, faith in Romans 3:22 has implications that are not merely individual but also communal: faith in Christ becomes the basis for the unity of God's people across ethnic boundaries.

The Universality of Sin in Romans 3:23

The aorist ἥμαρτον sums up the indictment of 1:18–3:20 as a whole, while the present ὑστεροῦνται describes the ongoing consequence. "The glory of God" here likely alludes to the glory Adam forfeited, a theme present in Second Temple literature (e.g., Apoc. Mos. 20–21) and anticipated in Romans 1:23, where humanity "exchanged the glory of the immortal God" (Dunn, 1988; Jewett, 2007). Paul will later describe salvation as the restoration of this glory (5:2; 8:30). This Adamic background clarifies why the Law cannot justify: the human predicament is not merely a deficit of good deeds but a loss of the image-bearing relationship with God, which only a divine act of new creation can restore.

Justification as Grace in Romans 3:24

Verse 24 states: δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, "being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus." The term δικαιούμενοι is the present passive participle of δικαιόω, "to justify." The passive voice is theologically significant: human beings are not the primary agents of justification; rather, they receive the action of being justified. The relationship between δικαιοσύνη in verse 21 and δικαιούμενοι in verse 24 indicates that Paul moves from the concept of "the righteousness of God" to the concrete act of "justifying." The term δωρεάν means "freely," "without payment," or "as a gift." It excludes the notion that justification is a reward for human merit or achievement. Justification is ultimately grounded in God's saving initiative and the redemptive work of Christ rather than in human religious achievement (Sugiharto, 2020). According to Calvin, justification involves God's gracious acceptance of believers into his favor and treating them as righteous (Calvin, 2023). The term χάριτι, meanwhile, is the dative form of χάρις,

meaning “grace” or “favor.” The phrase τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι emphasizes that the source of justification is God’s grace.

The participle δικαιούμενοι links grammatically to πάντες (v. 23), so the same "all" who sinned are those justified, though in context only those who believe (v. 22). Barclay has shown that in antiquity a gift could be "perfected" in several distinct ways, including superabundance, priority, efficacy, and incongruity. What is distinctive in Paul is the incongruity of grace: God's gift is given without regard to the worth of the recipient, indeed to those who "fall short" (v. 23). Barclay also stresses that incongruous grace is not unconditioned in its effects; it creates a transformed people who respond in obedience. This nuance is decisive for the thesis of this article (Barclay, 2015). Legalism can be defined precisely as the attempt to restore congruity, to make divine favor correspond to human worth, whether through Torah observance in the first century or through religious performance today. At the same time, Barclay's distinction prevents the opposite error of antinomianism: grace that is unconditioned in its giving is nonetheless transformative in its effect.

Ἀπολύτρωσις, from the λυτρόω word group, is often defined as "liberation through the payment of a ransom," but this definition requires nuance. Morris (1955) argued that the λυτρ- word group consistently retains the notion of a price paid, supported by the Greco-Roman practice of manumission. Others contend that in the LXX the verb λυτρόω often describes God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt without any payment (e.g., Deut 7:8), so that the emphasis lies on liberation rather than transaction (Dunn, 1988). The phrase ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ and the reference to Christ's blood in v. 25 suggest that both elements are present: redemption is a new exodus, and it is costly, accomplished through Christ's death (Moo, 2018). The Exodus background reinforces the critique of legalism: Israel was redeemed before the Law was given at Sinai, so obedience to the Law was always a response to redemption, never its precondition.

ἱλαστήριον and the Death of Christ in Romans 3:25

In v. 25 (ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἱλαστήριον διὰ πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι), the verb προέθετο may mean "purposed" (cf. 1:13; Eph 1:9) or "publicly displayed." The latter suits the context of ἔνδειξις ("demonstration") and the LXX use of πρόθεσις for the bread "set forth" in the tabernacle (Cranfield, 1979; Jewett, 2007). Whereas the kapporet was hidden behind the veil and approached only by the high priest once a year, God has now set forth Christ openly. Most importantly, God is the subject: atonement is not a human offering that changes God's attitude, but God's own provision. This subject-verb relation is the grammatical refutation of legalism, since the initiative belongs entirely to God.

Ἱλαστήριον appears in the NT only here and in Hebrews 9:5, where it unambiguously denotes the mercy seat. In the LXX it translates כַּפֹּרֶת in most occurrences (e.g., Exod 25:17–22; Lev 16:2, 13–15; Mulder, 2021). Three interpretive options emerge. (1) Expiation (Dodd, 1931): the removal of sin, without reference to divine wrath. (2) Propitiation (Morris, 1955): the turning aside of God's wrath, required by the preceding exposition of ὀργὴ θεοῦ (1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5). (3) Mercy seat (Bailey, 1999): Christ is the antitype of the kapporet, the place of

atonement on the Day of Atonement. An alternative proposal links the term to the martyr theology of 4 Maccabees 17:22, where the death of the martyrs is described as τοῦ ἱλαστηρίου θανάτου (Jewett, 2007). The mercy-seat reading best explains the LXX evidence and the cultic context of "blood" in v. 25. It does not exclude a propitiatory dimension; on the Day of Atonement, the sprinkling of blood both cleansed the sanctuary and averted judgment. Paul's paradox, however, is that God himself provides the means by which his own wrath is satisfied, so propitiation here is not human appeasement of a hostile deity but divine self-giving (Cranfield, 1979; Moo, 2018).

The syntax of v. 25a is disputed. Should ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι be read with πίστεως ("through faith in his blood") or with ἱλαστήριον ("a mercy seat by means of his blood")? Paul never elsewhere makes "blood" the object of faith, and the instrumental ἐν parallels 5:9 (δικαιωθέντες ἐν τῷ αἵματι αὐτοῦ). Most commentators therefore take διὰ πίστεως as a parenthetical insertion and ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι as modifying ἱλαστήριον (Cranfield, 1979; Moo, 2018; Schreiner, 2018). The result is a careful distinction between the objective ground of atonement (Christ's blood) and the subjective means of appropriation (faith), the very distinction this study argues is lost in legalism.

The Righteousness of God in Romans 3:25b–26

The following section explains the purpose of Christ's work: διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων, "because of the passing over of sins previously committed." This is followed by πρὸς τὴν ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ, "to demonstrate His righteousness." Here, ἔνδειξις denotes a "demonstration," "proof," or "manifestation" that makes something evident. Paul reiterates the concept of δικαιοσύνη through the expressions δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ (v. 21), τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ (v. 25), and τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ (v. 26).

The phrase διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἁμαρτημάτων ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ θεοῦ explains why the demonstration was necessary. Kümmel and others have shown that πάρεσις denotes the "passing over" or non-punishment of sins rather than their remission (ἄφεσις) (Kümmel, 1952). The preposition διά with the accusative is causal: God demonstrated his righteousness because he had previously passed over sins. A minority reads δικαιοσύνη here as God's saving faithfulness and πάρεσις as forgiveness (so that the cross demonstrates God's mercy), but the paired term ἀνοχή ("forbearance," cf. 2:4) points to a period in which judgment was withheld, which raised the question of God's justice. The cross answers that question: God did not overlook sin; he deferred its judgment to the event in which it would be fully dealt with. This reading is decisive against legalism, because it shows that no human performance can address the problem of past sins; only God's act in Christ resolves it.

His righteousness as exhibited in the death of Christ, which is sufficient to show men that God is neither indifferent to sin nor regards it lightly. On the contrary, it demonstrates that quality of holiness in Him which must find expression in His condemnation of sin (Vine, 1985). The articular infinitive εἰς τὸ εἶναι expresses purpose (or result). The καί linking δίκαιον and δικαιοῦντα may be read as concessive ("just even while justifying") or simply conjunctive ("just

and justifying"); the concessive nuance best captures Paul's point (Cranfield, 1979). In the Old Testament, a judge who acquits the guilty is condemned (Exod 23:7; Prov 17:15; Isa 5:23). Paul's claim that God "justifies the ungodly" (4:5) would be scandalous without 3:25–26. The cross resolves the tension: God's justice is not compromised but fulfilled, because sin is judged in Christ. The object τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ identifies the beneficiary not by ethnicity or achievement but by faith. Here the passage culminates: the same divine act that vindicates God's character defines the people of God, apart from works of the Law. Paul immediately draws the consequence in 3:27: boasting (καύχησις) is excluded.

The exegesis yields three hermeneutical principles that govern the application to contemporary contexts. First, the principle of divine initiative: God is the grammatical subject of the decisive verbs (πεφανέρωται, προέθετο, δικαιοῦντα), so justification cannot be relocated to human performance. Second, the principle of ground and means: Christ's blood is the ground, and faith is the means, so neither faith nor religious practice may be treated as meritorious. Third, the principle of excluded boasting (3:27): any practice that becomes a basis for confidence before God or for status within the community reproduces the structure Paul rejects, whether or not it involves the Mosaic Law. These principles allow the study to evaluate Indonesian practices such as tithing, fasting, and church attendance not by asking whether the practices are biblical, but by asking what function they are assigned.

Theological Synthesis of Romans 3:21–26

In sum, Romans 3:21–26 presents justification as God's Christ-centered initiative. Νυνὶ δὲ marks the eschatological turn in which δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ is manifested χωρὶς νόμου yet attested by Scripture (v. 21). The universality of sin (v. 23) grounds the universality of grace for all who believe, without ethnic distinction (v. 22). Justification is given δωρεάν by grace (v. 24), grounded in Christ's blood as ἱλαστήριον and appropriated by faith (v. 25), so that God is shown to be both δίκαιος and δικαιῶν (v. 26). Justification is therefore not merely a change in individual status but an eschatological act that vindicates God's righteousness and constitutes one people of God beyond the boundaries defined by the Law.

The nature of justification by faith in Pauline theology affirms that salvation is entirely the work of God's grace toward sinful humanity through faith in Christ. Paul declares that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, yet are justified freely by His grace (Rom. 3:23–24). Daniel Ronda emphasizes that, according to Paul, salvation never originates from human effort but solely from the grace of God (Ronda, 2020, p. 55). God's justification is forensic, in that God declares human beings righteous, and relational, in that it restores humanity's relationship with Him (Tomatala, 2020, p. 112). Thus, justification by faith is an entirely divine act: it transforms the legal status of human beings before God while simultaneously establishing a renewed relationship with Him.

The relationship between faith and works has often generated debate because the two are sometimes perceived as contradictory. Yohanes Siahaan argues that faith and works are complementary, with works constituting the natural fruit of a living faith (Siahaan, 2022). Beno Siagian further clarifies that genuine faith cannot remain detached from concrete action, since

Paul himself speaks of "faith working through love" (Gal. 5:6) (Siagian, 2021). Stevri Indra Lumintang likewise maintains that the principle of *sola fide* does not reject works but affirms that works are the logical consequence of saving faith (Lumintang, 2019, p. 142). More explicitly, Priyono's research argues that genuine faith is consistently manifested in concrete actions as evidence of that faith (Priyono, 2025). Thus, faith constitutes the basis of justification, while works represent the organic expression of genuine faith in the life of the believer.

Regarding the Law, Paul emphasizes that faith does not nullify the Law but, rather, establishes it (Rom. 3:31). According to McDonald, drawing on the perspective of James D. G. Dunn, Paul does not abolish the Law through faith; instead, faith establishes its proper function (Rom. 3:31). The Law is not a means of justification but an instrument through which God exposes sin (Rom. 3:20), enabling humanity to recognize its inability to save itself and its need for Christ's saving work (McDonald, 2022). This understanding continues to be affirmed in contemporary scholarship, which argues that Romans 3:20–31 presents the Law as a witness to the righteousness of God revealed through faith in Christ, rather than as a means by which justification is attained. Thus, the Law functions to expose sin and demonstrate humanity's need for a Savior. It serves a pedagogical function by revealing the reality of sin and humanity's inability to attain justification through its own efforts, thereby directing humanity toward Christ as the fulfillment of God's saving work. From Paul's perspective, this function is temporary and redemptive-historical, because with the coming of Christ, the Law no longer serves as a means of justification but as a witness pointing to the grace of God revealed in Christ (Adkins, 2026).

Meanwhile, McDonald describes the Law as a mirror that exposes humanity's sinfulness, thereby underscoring the necessity of grace (McDonald, 2022). The Law is not abolished by faith; rather, it is situated within the framework of the gospel as a guide that leads to God's grace. Law and faith do not negate one another but exist in a complementary relationship: the Law exposes sin, while faith leads to salvation. Paul understands the Law and faith not as two mutually contradictory realities but as two distinct realities within the economy of salvation (De Wit de Koning, 2020). Thus, faith does not abolish the Law but restores it to its proper function as that which points toward Christ and the grace of salvation. The Law reaches its fulfillment in the work of Christ while continuing to serve a theological function as a witness within salvation history, rather than as a means of attaining justification (Lengkong, 2026).

Theological Relevance to Legalism in the Context of the Indonesian Church

The exegetical findings from Romans 3:21–26 have significant implications for critiquing legalism within church life. Paul grounds justification in God's gracious initiative and the redemptive work of Christ rather than in human achievement through the Law. Therefore, religious practices cannot serve as the basis for obtaining God's acceptance. Legalism emerges when obedience, rituals, ministry activities, or particular forms of piety shift from being responses to grace to becoming measures of a person's worthiness before God.

In the context of the Indonesian church, this understanding is important for correcting forms of spirituality that assess the quality of faith primarily through religious performance. Research indicating that some believers continue to associate salvation with obedience to the Law demonstrates that this issue has genuine contextual relevance. Manullang argues that an awareness of grace liberates believers from legalistic pressures, enabling them to live in the joy of the gospel and engage in authentic ministry (Manullang, 2021). Siregar further argues that such awareness makes ministry more sincere because it is motivated by love rather than obligation (Siregar, 2022). At the same time, justification by faith does not diminish the importance of good works. Precisely because justification is a gift of grace, ethical living is no longer pursued as a means of earning God's acceptance but as a response to the acceptance already granted in Christ. Thus, faith and works should not be understood as two competing bases of salvation. Faith is the human response to God's saving work, while works are the fruit that demonstrates the ethical implications of that faith (Steinmetz, 2024). This perspective enables the church to avoid two extremes simultaneously: legalism, which makes works the basis of justification, and a passive understanding of faith that lacks ethical consequences for Christian life.

The pastoral implications can be stated concretely. In preaching, the order of indicative and imperative should be preserved: proclamation of what God has done in Christ should precede, and ground, every call to obedience. In catechesis, including confirmation classes, the distinction between the ground of justification (Christ's blood) and its means (faith) should be taught explicitly, so that faith itself is not reinterpreted as a meritorious work. In the integration of Paul and James, which previous Indonesian studies identify as a recurring source of confusion (Sugiono & Dompas, 2022; Tjhin, 2021), the church can teach that Paul addresses the ground of justification while James addresses the evidence of genuine faith, so that the two do not compete. In pastoral care, believers whose assurance depends on their religious performance can be directed to the perfect πεφανέρωται: God's righteousness has already been manifested, and its validity does not fluctuate with the believer's spiritual condition.

This relevance is also ecclesiological in nature. If justification is granted on the basis of God's grace rather than religious merit, then identity and relationships within the church community should not be constructed around degrees of piety, ministry involvement, or religious achievement. According to Michael F. Bird, justification by faith should be understood within the framework of the gospel that shapes the identity of God's people, rather than merely as a forensic declaration concerning individuals. The gospel unites believers as a community living under God's grace, so that relationships among believers are no longer defined by religious achievement or legalism but by God's acceptance in Christ (Bird, 2020). The church is therefore called to cultivate a grace-centered community in which faith produces a life of integrity without making human works the basis for judging or determining a person's worth before God. Thus, justification by faith in Romans 3:21–26 is not merely a doctrine concerning humanity's status before God but also a theological foundation for critiquing legalistic culture and cultivating church life rooted in grace.

The ecclesiological implication has a particular significance in Indonesia, where many churches have developed along ethnic and regional lines. Paul's statement οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή (v. 22) was directed against an identity marker that divided Jews and Gentiles. By analogy, any marker that becomes a condition of full belonging, whether ethnic heritage, denominational tradition, length of membership, or level of ministry involvement, functions as a new "work of the Law" when it determines who is truly accepted. The doctrine of justification therefore supports both the legitimate expression of culture in church life and a critique of any cultural or institutional boundary that competes with faith as the mark of God's people. At the same time, Barclay's observation that incongruous grace is transformative guards against the opposite error: a church that rejects legalism must still call its members to holiness, since grace that is unconditioned in its giving is never without effect in the life it creates (Barclay, 2015).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the basis of justification in Romans 3:21–26 and its implications for evaluating legalistic patterns in specific Indonesian church contexts. The exegesis demonstrates that justification originates in and is accomplished by divine initiative. The key verbs πεφανέρωται, προέθετο, and δικαιοῦντα establish God as the active subject; meanwhile, the perfect aspect of πεφανέρωται highlights the final realization of God's righteousness through Christ, χωρὶς νόμου, even though the Law and the Prophets corroborate this truth. The expression δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ refers to God's active righteousness in the work of salvation, through which a righteous standing is granted to those who believe. This justification given δωρεάν by grace, grounded objectively in Christ's blood, through which God presented him as ἱλαστήριον, and received through faith. Although πίστις Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ admits different interpretations, this study understands the phrase primarily as faith in Jesus Christ, without making human achievement the basis of justification. Through the cross, God addresses the πάρεσις of former sins and demonstrates himself to be both δίκαιος and δικαιῶν. Paul's subsequent conclusion in Romans 3:27, therefore, excludes boasting.

These exegetical findings provide three principles for assessing religious practices: the priority of divine initiative, the distinction between the ground and the means of justification, and the exclusion of human boasting. Acts of worship, prayer, scripture study, fasting, generosity, and service are not inherently legalistic on their own; they turn into legalism when they are used to justify oneself, either as a way to earn God's favor through effort or to claim social standing and marginalize others in the community. Reading through Barclay's concept of incongruous grace, legalism represents an attempt to establish a correspondence between divine favors and human merits. Social patterns of exchange might strengthen this inclination if being granted grace leads to a sense of duty to return the favor. The core value of this research is its fusion of historical-grammatical exegesis with the idea of incongruous grace. This combination creates a practical model for identifying legalism based on the theological purpose of religious acts, instead of how often or how intensely they are performed. This

framework enables the church to challenge legalism without discrediting sincere piety and to affirm holiness without making it the basis of divine acceptance. Ecclesiologically, Paul's declaration οὐ γάρ ἐστιν διαστολή challenges ethnic, denominational, and institutional distinctions whenever they compete with faith as the primary criterion for belonging to God's people.

This research provides a theological and functional framework for detecting legalism in Indonesian churches by combining the historical-grammatical analysis of Romans 3:21–26 with John M. G. Barclay's notion of incongruous grace. Rather than categorizing religious practices as legalistic due to how often, intensely, or externally they are performed, this model emphasizes their theological purpose. It differentiates between practices that stem from faith in God's unmerited grace and those used as tools to earn divine favor, gain religious prestige, or ostracize others from the fellowship. This separation enables a more subtle critique of legalism, safeguarding the worth of Christian piety and guaranteeing that holiness is not regarded as a prerequisite for justification. By linking Pauline theology to the Indonesian church context, this research offers a framework for investigating how ideas of grace, merit, and cultural reciprocity shape religious practice, although further empirical studies are needed to determine their exact contextual impact.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study is a literature-based exegetical and theological analysis. It did not involve human participants, personal data, or animal subjects; therefore, ethical approval was not required. All sources used have been properly cited.

FUNDING

This research received no external funding.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We, the authors, declare that we have no conflicts of interest that could influence the research, writing, or publication process of this article.

DECLARATION OF AI USAGE

During the preparation of this manuscript, the authors used ChatGPT (OpenAI) to assist in organizing draft structure and improving the clarity of English expression, and Grammarly to check grammar and spelling. These tools were not used to generate exegetical analysis, theological interpretation, or conclusions. All analysis, interpretation, and conclusions are the authors' own. The authors reviewed and edited all content and take full responsibility for the published article.

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