

Objective Justification: The Controversy Examined

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Introduction

The chief article of the Christian Faith, above all others, is the doctrine of Justification by faith. The Lutheran Church has long declared that upon this article, the Church stands or falls. In short, when this doctrine is undermined, there *is* no Christian Church, for whatever the Church may call itself, it has lost that essential doctrine which distinguishes it from every religion of man, for all human religions begin with the premise that man becomes righteous by his own efforts. In some fashion, whatever is regarded as “salvation” or “heaven” is earned by human effort, even if that effort is assisted by some force outside of man. On the contrary, the Christian faith confesses that a man is justified by faith alone. All human works whatsoever are entirely excluded from the matter of how a man becomes righteous before God.

Because this doctrine is so essential to the Church, it is no surprise that Satan constantly strives to overthrow it. The first controversy in the Christian Church is recorded in the book of Acts, regarding whether it was necessary for salvation that the Gentiles keep the law. Judaizing teachers had entered the church demanding that circumcision, and the keeping of other laws, most notably that forbidding the eating of unclean meats, were necessary for salvation. The resolution of the controversy as recorded in Acts 15 did not end the matter, for the same controversy broke out in the congregations of Galatia. There the faith of many was overthrown when they abandoned the Gospel and submitted themselves willingly to the bondage of the Law. Paul writes to them:

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. (Gal. 3:21–22).

A LITTLE HISTORY

The history of heresy is the history of Satan’s attempts to undermine this doctrine, that salvation is by faith alone, in one manner after another. The great falling away of which Paul prophesied in 2 Thess. 2:3 was a falling away from the the Gospel of justification by faith. The man of sin, the son of perdition as revealed in the office of the Pope, who sat in the temple of God, that is, at the head of the Christian Church on earth, usurping the place of Christ, and demanding obedience to his own pronouncements on pains of eternal death. During the Reformation, the chief counter-claim of the Papacy was that a man is justified, not by faith only, but also by works, and without the performance of such works no one can be saved.

At Augsburg, the Lutheran princes presented their answer to the claims of the Papacy, in the confession which defines the Lutheran Church. There, the doctrine of Justification is described in these words:

Our churches teach that people cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works. People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that

their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. By His death, Christ made satisfaction for our sins. God counts this faith for righteousness in His sight (Romans 3 and 4).¹

But Satan never rests, and though every church bearing the name Lutheran has, at least on paper, confessed this article, it has been denied in countless ways. Since the definition was, so to speak, written in stone, the *application* of this article became the devil's target, for God did not only establish this article, but instituted an office in the Church whereby the forgiveness of sins won by Christ would be distributed to poor sinners through the means of grace. Augsburg testifies in the very next article:

So that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given [John 20:22]. He works faith, when and where it pleases God [John 3:8], in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake. This happens not through our own merits, but for Christ's sake.²

Christ instituted the means of grace for the distribution of the forgiveness of sins to His people: His Word and Sacraments. Further, Christ instituted the *means* of the means, that is, the office of the ministry by which these means would be distributed. Men whom Christ calls in an orderly manner, through His church, are placed into this office and given this express duty: to forgive and retain sins (John 20:21–23). It is through these means that justifying faith is created and sustained in the hearts of every Christian.

In the 18th century, the Lutheran Churches in Germany and Scandinavia were ravaged by Pietism. A definition of Pietism in the strictest sense is not particularly useful, because Pietism far exceeded the initial forms in which it first gained traction, to reach into every part of the Lutheran Church's life. For our present study, a more **general definition of Pietism or the core idea of Pietism** is more useful, namely that:

The true measure of Christianity is not faith, but the results of faith, both external in good works, and internal in feeling sorrow for sin, and peace with God. Practices which obtain the best results as measured in these internal and external works, are those which also produce true and genuine faith. Practices which do not produce these results should be abandoned or subordinated to those which do.

Because the means of grace and the ministry do not always produce such observable or felt results, the *efficacy* of the Word and Sacraments, as well as the Ministry are denigrated by Pietism. Since Pietism is all about results, when results are not immediately visible from a given activity, Pietism denies the efficacy of that activity, even if it be the preaching of the Gospel, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper. Pietism naturally reasons that if the external preaching of the Gospel by a called Pastor did not produce sufficient and observable results, then the sinner was not sufficiently contrite, his penitence was not true penitence, his sorrow not deep enough, and the ministry is to blame. Because of this, the idea that a pastor can simply *pronounce* the forgiveness of sins upon a sinner, and have that pronouncement actually be true, is anathema to the pietist. If the paster absolves the sinner where there are insufficient results, the sinner is given false comfort by the pastor! If the sinners sins are not forgiven until he has reached as state of sufficient sorrow that

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1. Augsburg Confession, Art. IV. All references to the Lutheran Confessions are taken from *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House (2005).
 2. *ibid.*, Art. V.

he might know, for certain, that God will now have mercy upon him, then Absolution actually is a danger, for it presents the sinner from attaining a sufficient level of piety, and is thus dangerous and damaging to his faith.

As reasonable as this all may sound (for all people are pietists by nature), it is an outright denial of the objective fact that God has forgiven the sins of the world by the sacrificial suffering and death of His Son. The denial of absolution therefore directly effects that most essential question as to whether Christ has, or has not, already atoned for the sins of the world, and whether the Father has, or has not declared that He has been reconciled by this sacrifice.

The Lutherans in America were not except from the effects of Pietism. The Norwegian Lutherans, in particular, struggled with a number of controversies, among them the question of whether the pastor may truly absolve sin. In 1860's and 70's, various individuals, particularly faculty members of Augsburg Theological Seminary, (then the defacto seminary of the Lutheran Free Church, a body which eventually merged into the ALC), denied the efficacy of absolution. Their argument went as follows: Because no pastor can see the faith of anyone, he cannot know whether a person is truly justified. Only the individual Christian can know whether he has true faith by examining himself. Only then can he know that his sins are forgiven. Therefore, because no pastor can look into the heart of another, so also he cannot absolve anyone of their sins. Herman Amber Preus, president of the Norwegian Synod, and one of the founders of St. Olaf College, responded that God has *already* absolved the world of sin by the death of His Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore, the pastor can absolutely declare the forgiveness of sins to the sinner, because that forgiveness is an objective fact, entirely independent of whether the sinner believes or not. During the course of this controversy, the term "objective justification" was adopted to confess this truth.³

The matter did not end there. In response, August Weenaas, and Sven Ofterdahl, two of the professors on the faculty of Augsburg, accused the Norwegian Synod, and H. A. Preus in particular, of universalism. Preus maintained that the question of whether God has, or has not, declared the suffering of Christ as the full and complete payment for the sins of all the world was an essential part of Justification, so much so, that Scripture used the word Justification in a two-fold sense. Without God making this declaration that in Christ the world is already reconciled to the Father, the sinner has no assurance that his sins are forgiven. Instead he must look within himself to determine whether or not he is saved, by evaluating the quality and extent of his faith. Preus responded to his opponents:

But now because of the fact that according to Professor Weenaas' view God is not perfectly reconciled through the death of Christ and has not let his wrath be appeased, and after having been obtained, yet the world has not been pardoned and justified, and therefore not completely re-deemed either, and "access to salvation" is not "opened for everyone," then the professor naturally cannot proclaim this glad tidings either so that the poor sinner could and should believe it to his comfort and salvation. On the other hand he must preach "another gospel" in which the right faith, as a hand, does not merely grasp the righteousness already gained and bestowed, but obtains a deserving character as a work of a good nature. *According to his new gospel the professor*

3. Other terms which were also used are "general" or "universal justification", but all of these are synonyms for the same doctrine. The writings of H. A. Preus are the earliest examples this author could find of the specific use of the term "objective justification".

must preach that through his suffering and death Christ has only accomplished so much that God has now become willing to let his wrath cease and to be reconciled and to loose, confer grace, forgive, justify and open access to salvation, but that in actuality he can only do and does all this, if man on his part fulfills the condition placed on him by God, namely that he is supposed to believe. And the thing which is thus supposed to be believed does not become this that God already has done this and is reconciled but that God will do it and will be reconciled when he sees the obedience and the good quality in man, that he believes. But it must however be clear even for weak eyes that according to this teaching 1) Christ did not completely redeem the world and reconcile God with it, but only began the work of redemption which a person is supposed to complete by faith and make God willing to be reconciled, while a person's faith is first supposed to bring it about that God really becomes reconciled, however, therefore, it is well to notice, only with the believer, not with the world. Thus 2) the Gospel no longer becomes the Good News which bestows the forgiveness of sins and justification and thereby works faith which appropriates this gift to itself, but it becomes a new law which demands faith from man for complete satisfaction. And 3) faith becomes not the poor sinner's hand which merely grasps and makes one's own what is already prepared and at hand, namely God's love, conferring of grace, forgiveness of sins and justification, but it becomes a fulfilling of the new law, a work of man or a new quality in him who has such a power and merit in himself that it finishes the work of redemption begun by Christ and works a change in God's heart so that now he lets his wrath cease, becomes reconciled with the believer, loves, confers grace and justifies him. And finally 4) salvation no longer comes by grace alone for the sake of Christ, but by merit, namely by the merit of faith.⁴

It should not go without notice that when the opponents questioned the validity of absolution by denying any certainty with which the pastor could pronounce the sinner's sins *actually* forgiven, they also, in effect, denied the vicarious atonement of the whole world. In effect, they stripped the Atonement of Christ of any *actual* reconciliation, and made it reconciliation *in potential*. This then became the point of controversy: Does the Universal Atonement actually apply as an objective fact, or is it merely the predicate to faith which demonstrates the *possibility* and *willingness* of God to forgive sins? The answer to this question struck right at the heart of Justification, for depending upon how this question is answered, the *object* of justifying faith *changes*. Does justifying faith grasp an objective fact, that God, in Christ, has already forgiven the sins of the world, or rather, that God *will* forgive sins once faith believes that God is willing to do so? The former is faith in an objective fact. The latter is faith in *faith itself*, as God will view it.

If justifying faith grasps an objective truth, then it must grasp something that God has already declared to be true in itself. There are then two declarations, or judgments at work in Justification: the first, that God has declared Himself reconciled to the world in Christ, and the latter, that God counts the faith of him who believes this, as righteousness. Both take place in time. The former at the resurrection of Jesus, the latter when the sinner first believes. In other words, in defending Absolution, the Norwegian Lutherans were defending the certainty of Justification itself, and furthermore, making a distinction between two acts of God: That in which He declares Himself satisfied by the suffering of Christ, and that by which He forgives the sins of the individual sinner when He counts their faith as righteousness. This distinction they termed Objective Justification and Subjective Justification. Later, C.F.W. Walther can be found using the same terms, and from there they passed into common usage in the Lutheran Church.

4. *The Justification of the World*, H. A. Preus, 1874. Tr. Rev. Herb Larson. <http://www.christforus.org/Papers/Content/HermanAmbergPreusonJustificationofWorld.htm>

THE PRESENT-DAY CONTROVERSY

The doctrine of Objective Justification, by that specific name, has found its place in the Lutheran Church since the Absolution Controversy. The doctrinal writings of the Synodical Conference theologians from then until now, have taught this distinction. In his *Christian Dogmatics*, Franz Pieper does not have a section titled “Objective Justification”, but rather teaches this doctrine under the title, “Objective and Subjective Reconciliation” (Vol. 2, p. 347). He uses the actual term “Objective Justification” in a few places, most notably under the heading, “The Assurance of Justification” where he writes:

We note, finally, that the assurance of justification is bound up with the truth that the creation of faith and justification occur at the same moment. Apology: “Faith reconciles and justifies before God the moment we apprehend the promise by faith.” (Trigl. 213. See also Trigl. 149, Art. IV [II], 97; 147, *ibid.*, 87.)¹⁰⁵ Objective justification precedes faith, for it is the object of faith, and its proclamation creates faith (Rom. 10:17). Subjective justification, however, does not take place prior to faith nor later than faith. To assume a *prius* or *posterius* in time would abolish the “by faith” (*πίστευ*) and thus also the assurance of justification.⁵

While one might reservations about the use of the term “objective” from then until the present day, the modern controversy on the doctrine of Objective Justification in which the doctrine itself was denied, broke out in a Wisconsin Synod congregation, Faith Lutheran Church, Kokomo, IN. The history of this event is quite involved. At one point, the congregation was presented with the following four theses by their pastor (though, ironically, the statements were prepared by members of his congregation which *opposed* the same):

1. Objectively speaking, without any reference to an individual sinner’s attitude toward Christ’s sacrifice, purely on the basis of God’s verdict, every sinner, whether he knows it or not, whether he believes it or not, has received the status of a saint.
2. After Christ’s intervention and through Christ’s intervention, God regards all sinners as guilt-free saints.
3. When God reconciled the world to Himself through Christ, He individually pronounced forgiveness on each individual sinner whether that sinner ever comes to faith or not.
4. At the time of the resurrection of Christ, God looked down in hell and declared Judas, the people destroyed in the flood, and all the ungodly, innocent, not guilty, and forgiven of all sin and gave unto them the status of saints.

As is almost always the case, the opposite of an error is another error. Thus the opposite of a denial of the objective fact that God has been reconciled to the world, are statements such as these, which, in essence, declare that there are no sinners *at all* in God’s eyes, and that it is only the *lack of faith* that damns anyone to hell. These statements precipitated a modern-day revival of the controversy which had begun approximately 100 years prior, among the Norwegian Lutherans, and it has continued to this day. In reacting to Kokomo statements, a number of men, among them a certain layman named Larry Darby, and Rev. Gregory Jackson, have accused *all* who teach the doctrine of Objective Justification, of universalism, and of denying justification by faith alone. Others have since joined them in this accusation.

The state of the controversy, as it stands today, is rather difficult to nail down. Some still believe the two sides are merely speaking past one another and are using different terminology but teaching the same

5. Pieper, F. (1953). *Christian Dogmatics* (electronic ed., Vol. 2, p. 552). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

doctrine. Others are convinced that there is difference in doctrine. The resolution of even this question has proven to be nearly impossible. Suffice it to say that the opponents of Objective Justification no longer give the benefit of the doubt to those who teach it, but accuse them, not merely of using poor terminology, but of false teaching.

In order to deal with this question in any coherent way, it is necessary to state the points of division. What are the questions which divide the two sides? While the attempt to put it in concise terms might prove a fools game, the reader will hopefully suffer fools gladly, as this author puts forward the following statement of the controversy:

Has God objectively declared that Christ has atoned for the sins of all the world, or does He only declare His forgiveness to the individual sinners by virtue of His faith?

Is the object of justifying faith the forgiveness of sins which Christ has already won for the world, or is it, rather, in the promise that God *will* forgive sins when the sinner believes that God is willing to do so?

When the Augsburg Confession declares that the content of justifying faith is this: “that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” is this being received into favor, and this forgiveness of sins for Christ’s sake speaking of something that is already objectively true, or something that only becomes true when faith believes it is true?

Are the terms “Objective Justification” and the “Universal Atonement” synonyms, or is there a distinction that must be made between them?

And finally:

Does Objective Justification imply that the only real sin is unbelief, or does it confess that those who are damned bear the full guilt of their sin?

IS IT REALLY JUST TERMINOLOGY?

Before we examine these points, it will be useful to first address the question as to whether this entire controversy may, in fact, merely be *logomachy*, or an argument about words, or terminology. The answer to this question is a resounding “Yes and No”.

Yes, because for some, it is most certainly just an argument over terms. The doctrine of Objective Justification, prior to the Absolution Controversy, was treated as a part of the Vicarious Atonement and Justification by Faith. There are well-reasoned arguments against using the word “Justification” in “Objective Justification” and “Subjective” in “Subjective Justification”. A preference in terminology, however, does not equate to a difference in doctrine. *Some* individuals in the modern controversy began merely questioning the terms. For them, at the beginning, the discussion was an argument of words. This author can understand their initial reasons for rejecting the terms “Objective” and “Subjective”, and can even sympathize with them.

Even the late Kurt Marquardt agreed that the terminology which we use is not ideal, and is prone to be misunderstood:⁶

I agree with Henry Hamann that the terminology “objective/subjective justification” is less than ideal since “subjective justification . . . is every whit as objective as objective justification.”

On the other hand, when Calvinists use the same terminology, it expresses their meaning very well: “Passive or subjective justification takes place in the heart or conscience of the sinner.” The Reformed reject universal grace, hence cannot mean general justification by “objective justification;” and “subjective justification” means for them something experiential—precisely what it does not mean for Lutherans. Biblically, justification is God’s act, which faith receives or believes, but does not feel or “experience.”

To avoid these problems, it would be best to retain the more traditional usage, which spoke of the “general justification” of the world in Christ and of the “personal justification” of individual sinners through faith alone. This corresponds exactly to the biblical distinction between God’s own completed reconciliation of the world to Himself in Christ (II Cor. 5:19) and our reconciliation to him by faith (v. 20).

... One must assume—other things being equal—that when orthodox Lutheran theologians speak of “objective” and “subjective” justification, they mean to express biblical, confessional truth, and not Calvinist or other deviations.

However, it is not about the meaning of words for everyone. Jackson, and more recently a handful of other Lutheran pastors, have directly accused those who teach Objective Justification of false doctrine. This issue is not going away any time soon.

The Declarative nature of Justification

Since we have stated the state of the controversy to the best of our ability, we now take up these questions. The first is this:

Has God objectively declared that Christ has atoned for the sins of all the world, or does He only declare His forgiveness to the individual sinners by virtue of his faith?

This question strikes at the heart of the matter. Has God declared that the world is no longer his enemy? Has God announced that He is at peace with men? Has God declared that the sins of the world are already taken away by Christ?

Those who deny objective justification state that if we say that the sins of the world are already forgiven, then there is no longer any need for justifying faith. If this is the case, then what are we to do with the specific statements of Scripture which speak of God, either in person, or through His ministers, being reconciled, no longer at enmity with the world?

Where the guilt of sin remains, God is still one’s enemy. Can God announce His good will and favor toward the world, if in fact, the sins of the world remain? The testimonies against this are numerous:

“For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Rom. 1:18).

6. Marquardt, K., *Objective Justification*,
<http://www.angelfire.com/ny4/djw/lutherantheology.marquartjustification.html>

“But in accordance with your hardness and your impenitent heart you are treasuring up for yourself wrath in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who ‘will render to each one according to his deeds’” (Rom. 2:5,6).

“The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23).

“You . . . were dead in trespasses and sins, in which you once walked according to the course of this world . . . among whom also we all once conducted ourselves in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others” (Eph. 2:1–3).

“Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience” (Rom. 5:6).

“And [God] said, ‘They always go astray in their heart and they have not known My ways.’ So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest’” (Heb. 3:10, 11).

“When a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die” (Eze. 18:24).

Finally, Paul quotes Deuteronomy: “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them’” (Gal. 3:10).

It is not possible, therefore, to speak of a reconciliation, peace, an ending of the enmity between God and man, where sin still remains. Yet Scripture clearly makes these statements, over and over again:

“God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16).

“Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the Sin of the World!” (John 1:29).

“God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them” (2 Cor. 5:19).

“Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us (for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree’), that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith.” (Gal. 3:13,14).

“And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

“Now we believe, not because of what you said, for we ourselves have heard Him and we know that this is indeed the Christ, the Savior of the world” (John 4:42).

“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6).

“If One died for all, then all died; and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again” (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

“For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time” (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

“We trust in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of those who believe” (1 Tim. 4:10).

“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9).

“And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.” (1 John 4:14).

“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life” (Rom. 5:18).

If someone would object by saying that many of these passages which declare that Christ died for the sins of the world do not teach that God is reconciled to the world, we have only to turn to John 3:16, which makes the love of God intrinsic to the death of Christ for all: “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” Indeed, our confessions similarly equate receiving forgiveness with Justification:

“To receive the forgiveness of sins is to be justified, according to Psalm 32:1, “Blessed is the one whose transgression is forgiven.” By faith alone in Christ—not through love, not because of love or works” (Apology IV, 76).

The opponents of Objective Justification have objected to the use of these passages on the grounds that these do not prove that God is reconciled and has already forgiven the sins of the world, but only that Christ has atoned for all sin. In other words, they say that these passages do not teach Objective Justification, but the Unlimited Atonement.

We do not deny that there is a distinction between the Atonement and Objective Justification. However, the two are so inseparable that without the former, the latter cannot exist, and without the latter, the former would be in vain. What then separates these two things: that Christ has paid for the sins of the world, and God declaring Himself reconciled to the world? Only this: *the official and judicial declaration*. It is necessary to justifying faith that Christ not only achieved the Atonement, but that this forgiveness be broadcast in such a way that all the world might know that the Father has officially declared Himself reconciled. The Unlimited Atonement declares the content of what God was doing in Christ. Objective Justification is the Father’s declaration that He has accepted what Christ has done in the Atonement. Subjective Justification believes what Objective Justification declares, for justifying faith must have an object, or it is in vain, and does not justify.

This is why the resurrection of Jesus is so utterly essential, that without it, *no one* can be saved. How is it that Paul could say to the Corinthians, “If Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins!” (1 Cor. 15:17). In addition to proving Christ to be a false prophet, without the resurrection, we would have no justification, no forensic pronouncement from the Father that our sins are forgiven. So Paul declares:

“Now it was not written for his [Abraham’s] sake alone that it [righteousness] was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification” (Rom. 4:23–25).

The Object of Justifying Faith

Is the object of justifying faith the forgiveness of sins which Christ has already won for the world, or is it, rather, in the promise that God will forgive sins when the sinner believes that God is willing to do so?

When the Augsburg Confession states the doctrine of Justification in this fashion: “People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake;” what is this faith? Faith is not an emotion, but *belief* and *trust*. Thus faith, by definition, must have an object, or it is not faith. Not everything that is called faith is justifying faith.

There is faith which does not justify. Faith in one's own merit is not justifying faith. Faith in a God other than the triune God is not justifying faith.

Furthermore, faith is not merely knowledge either. It is not merely belief in God, that He exists, that He is holy and good. If it were, then the devils would have faith also. Yet the knowledge of the one true God makes them tremble (James 2:19). If faith were knowledge, then Jesus would not be able to praise the faith of little children as He does in Matt. 18:3⁷ and 18:6 and 10, where Jesus refers the babes in arms who believe in Him.

Faith is belief and trust, or in short, the thing in which someone puts his trust, or hope. Hebrews 11:1, in introducing the subject of faith, defines it as the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. It then proceeds to describe faith, not on its own terms, but according to the object which faith grasped. Faith must have an object: that which is believed and trusted, or it is not faith.

What then is the object of justifying faith? The testimony of Scripture is unambiguous on this point. The object of faith is Jesus, Savior. Here, in Jesus (by whatever name He is known), is Salvation. To Adam and Abraham he was known as the promised Seed. God condemned the devil and promised redemption, "I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her Seed; He shall bruise your head, And you shall bruise His heel" (Gen. 3:15). "In you and in your seed all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 28:14). He would reverse sin. He would undo Satan's treachery. He would bring God's blessing of eternal life where there was only the curse of death. The object of justifying faith is Jesus as Savior, either as the one who *would* save, or the one who *has already* saved the world. Thus John the Baptist declared, "Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29). Paul told the Philippian Jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved" (Acts 16:31). There is no object of justifying faith other than Christ, as Savior.

If Christ and His Salvation is the object of faith, then faith neither merits, nor makes preparation for salvation, but only *receives* it. Faith cannot properly be called a "condition" of Salvation, because all conditions are fulfilled in Christ Jesus. Redemption has already been obtained: "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption" (Heb. 9:12). Now it only remains that faith receive what Christ has done: "Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:4, 5).

From these and many more Scriptures besides, it is clear that the object of justifying faith is not faith, but Christ, and not just Christ as God, but Christ as the one who has already accomplished the salvation of the world, taken away its sin, made one sacrifice for all, and obtained eternal redemption.

Faith must have its object in something external to faith. Chemnitz writes:

7. "Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven."

The testimonies of the Scripture are firm and clear, which teach and affirm that the promise, which is characteristic of the Gospel, the promise concerning the free mercy of God, who remits sins, adopts, and receives believers to life eternal on account of the Son, the Mediator, is the true, proper, and chief object of justifying faith, in which it seeks, lays hold of, and receives justification, that is, reconciliation with God and forgiveness of sins⁸

Thus the Lutheran Confessions, throughout describe faith as that which receives its object:

Only God's grace, Christ's merit, and faith belong and are necessary to the article of justification. Faith receives these blessings in the promise of the Gospel, by which Christ's righteousness is credited to us. From this we receive and have forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, sonship, and are made heirs of eternal life. (F.C., SD, III, 25).

Troubled hearts should have a firm, sure consolation. Also, due honor should be given to Christ's merit and God's grace. Therefore, the Scriptures teach that the righteousness of faith before God stands only in the gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins, which is presented to us out of pure grace, only for the sake of the merit of the Mediator, Christ. This is received through faith alone in the Gospel promise. In the same way also, in justification before God, faith relies neither on contrition nor on love or other virtues. Faith relies on Christ alone and on His complete obedience by which He has fulfilled the Law for us. This obedience is credited to believers for righteousness. (F.C., SD, III, 30)

Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins and was raised again for our justification (Romans 4:24–25). He alone is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29), and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:6). All have sinned and are justified freely, without their own works or merits, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood (Romans 3:23–25). This is necessary to believe. This cannot be otherwise acquired or grasped by any work, law, or merit. Therefore, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us. (S.A. II, i, 1-4)

For faith makes righteous only because, as a means and instrument, it lays hold of, and accepts, God's grace and Christ's merit in the Gospel promise. (F.C. SD, III, 43).

Whatever one might say about the specific terminology that is used, and whatever distinctions one might make between the Atonement and Justification, this much is certain: the object of justifying faith is an objective fact, that is already completed, and external to faith itself. The object is Christ and his merits, His accomplished Salvation. Therefore in no way can that which faith grasps be the forgiveness of sins which *will be* a fact only after it is believed. The personal imputation of righteousness by faith is a *consequence* of faith, but it is not the object of faith.

The judgment of the Augsburg Confession

When the Augsburg Confession declares that the content of justifying faith is this: "that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake" is this being received into favor, and this forgiveness of sins for Christ's sake speaking of something that is already objectively true, or something that only becomes true when faith believes it is true?

We have just seen the manner in which the confessions have pre-supposed the receptive nature of justifying faith. Here we examine the essential question: When the confessions speak of faith believing that

8. Chemnitz, M., & Kramer, F. (1999). *Examination of the Council of Trent* (electronic ed., Vol. 1, p. 569). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

“they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake” is this thing which faith believes something that is declared to faith to already be true? Or rather, are the confessions saying that what faith believes is not yet true until the person believes it?

It is first necessary to understand that when the confessions use the term “justify” throughout, they speak of Subjective Justification, or the justification of the individual sinner. They do not use the term “justify” in a general sense, but only in regards to the specific sinner, who is now converted, who is baptized, who has saving faith. Yet to presume that the Confessors did *not* believe that the object of justifying faith was already an accomplished and objective fact before it is believed makes every statement regarding justification into a pretzel that bends back upon itself, and makes the statement meaningless.

If the thing which people who are justified believe is *not* that their sins are already forgiven for Christ’s sake, but only that they *will be* forgiven for Christ’s sake when they believe, what is this actually saying about Christ and His work? That He only obtained “potential” forgiveness? That the Lamb of God did not take away the sins of the world on the cross, but only takes it away when people believe? That “the world’s” sin is not entirely taken away, but only that part of the world which believes? Consider what this does to the object of saving faith. Faith is now directed at a *promise* to forgive, demonstrated in Christ, which only becomes true when it is believed to be true. It is not grasping objective truth, but a conditional promise, the condition of which is *faith itself*.

What place, then, do the merits of Christ have? If faith is created where the merits of Christ are declared, then the merits of Christ must already merit Salvation *before* faith believes this. Consider Article V of the Augsburg Confession:

Through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given. He works faith, when and where it pleases God, in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake. This happens not through our own merits, but for Christ’s sake.

If there is no Objective Justification, then the phrases “they are justified” is synonymous with “they are received into grace for Christ’s sake”, because it is not possible to speak of God “declaring someone righteous” who has not been “received into grace”. Yet this makes the statement of Article V: “He works faith in those who hear the good news that God justifies those who believe that they are justified”; or: “He works faith in those who hear the good news that God receives into grace for Christ’s sake those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ’s sake” even though this is not true until they believe it.

In both the articles I and V, the key word in both of these statements is “are”. If the confessors meant to say that the object of justifying faith is that the sinner “will be” received into grace, or his sins “will be” forgiven for Christ’s sake, then why did they say “are”? The German and the Latin languages are not without a future tense. The reason that the word is present-tense is obvious to anyone except those who deny Objective Justification. Because the whole world is already forgiven in Christ, and the whole world is already received into Grace for Christ’s sake.

And lest anyone question the intent of the Augsburg Confession, one should turn to Luther:

Now, since Dr. Luther is to be regarded as the most distinguished teacher of the churches which confess the Augsburg Confession, . . . the proper meaning and sense of the oft-mentioned Augsburg Confession can and

should be derived from no other source more properly and correctly than from the doctrinal and polemical writings of Dr. Luther. (F.C., SD, VII, 41).

With that in mind, let us hear Luther's judgement on this matter. He writes in His commentary on Galatians:

But if He is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who became a curse for us, and who was wrapped in our sins, it necessarily follows that we cannot be justified and take away sins through love. For God has laid our sins, not upon us but upon Christ, His Son. If they are taken away by Him, then they cannot be taken away by us. All Scripture says this, and we confess and pray the same thing in the Creed when we say: "I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified, and died for us."

This is the most joyous of all doctrines and the one that contains the most comfort. It teaches that we have the indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God. When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: "Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them." Now the Law comes and says: "I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!" And so it attacks Him and kills Him. *By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil. But when sin and death have been abolished by this one man, God does not want to see anything else in the whole world, especially if it were to believe, except sheer cleansing and righteousness.* And if any remnants of sin were to remain, still for the sake of Christ, the shining Sun, God would not notice them.⁹

In bringing together the last three major points, that of the declarative nature of Objective Justification, the receptive nature of justifying faith, and the judgment of the Confessions, we cite Luther again, this time in the Large Catechism. There he is describing the objective nature of the Lord's Supper, that it is a declaration of Christ's pre-existing forgiveness, which faith receives:

Therefore also, it is useless talk when they say that Christ's body and blood are not given and shed for us in the Lord's Supper, so we could not have forgiveness of sins in the Sacrament. Although the work is done and the forgiveness of sins is secured by the cross, it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word. How would we know about it otherwise, that such a thing was accomplished or was to be given to us, unless it were presented by preaching or the oral Word? How do they know about it? Or how can they receive and make the forgiveness their own, unless they lay hold of and believe the Scriptures and the Gospel? But now the entire Gospel and the article of the Creed—I believe in ... the holy Christian Church, ... the forgiveness of sins, and so on—are embodied by the Word in this Sacrament and presented to us. (L.C., V, 31).

The distinction between the Atonement and Justification

Are the terms "Objective Justification" and the "Universal Atonement" synonyms, or is there a distinction that must be made between them?

9. Luther, M. (1999). Luther's works, vol. 26: Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4. (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann, Eds.) (Vol. 26, pp. 279–280). Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House. Emphasis added.

Many times, those who have entered into this controversy are quickly overwhelmed and confused. Both sides appear, at first glance, to be insisting upon the Universal Atonement, and yet one side is denying Objective Justification. Aren't these just two different terms for the same thing?

This is a fair question, and one that would not even need to be asked until the objective nature of the Universal Atonement has been denied, and its distribution through the means of grace called into question. It was denied during the 19th century Absolution controversy, and as a result, Objective Justification was classified as a thing in itself, not separate from, but certainly distinct in nature from the Universal Atonement.

Thus, in speaking of the entire subject of Soteriology, that is, the theology of Salvation, we have come to use three different categories: The Atonement, Objective Justification, and Conversion, or Subjective Justification. The lines of division between these three is as follows:

The Universal Atonement describes the work of Christ, namely, His active and passive obedience, whereby He lived a perfect life under the Law, came to bear the sins of the whole world in His body, was found guilty of those sins, suffered upon the cross, and died, and thus made satisfaction, or payment, for all sin. This is what the Confessions call "the merits of Christ".

Objective Justification is God's declaration that the Atonement which Jesus accomplished is, in fact, complete. Not only Jesus declares "It is finished" but the Father also declares it, that is, accepts the Sacrifice of His Son, pronounces it complete, declares Himself reconciled, and pronounces the sins of the entire world forgiven, all debt of sin having been paid in the Sacrifice of His Son. This He declares in two ways. First, in the resurrection of Christ from the dead, and second through the Ministry of the Word and Sacraments.

We have already examined these points under various sections previously, but here it is fruitful to bring these statements together in regards to a few verses in particular.

First, we have Romans 4:23–25:

"Now it was not written for his [Abraham's] sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification."

Here we have the three-fold distinction plainly declared, in such a way that we can see that Scripture does indeed, at times, use the word "justify" in a two-fold sense. The only way to take the last phrase of this verse "our justification" and limit it to the subjective justification, would be to deny the Unlimited Atonement, and say that these "offenses" are *only* the offenses of those who are justified by faith. In fact, if the antecedent of the pronoun "our" is not the world, then what does it mean that Jesus was raised for "our justification"?

If we were to argue that the justification here meant is not God's universal declaration of the forgiveness of sins in Christ, then the resurrection of Christ is not declaring anything that it can grasp, namely, that God is reconciled, but once more we are back to the pretzel faith: Christ was raised for *us specifically*, only when we believe that He was raised for *us specifically*. Before that time, He was raised, but not for us. But if, on the other hand, the resurrection of Christ *is* declaring something that faith grasps as an objective fact, then, in regards to justification, what is the objective fact of the resurrection if it is not the justification of the entire

world? What is the resurrection, *other than* a declaration by God of the finished work of Redemption for *the world*?

Thus, Romans 4:23–25 teaches all three of these things. Subjective Justification: the imputation of righteousness to those who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead. The Universal Atonement: “who was delivered up because of our offenses”, and Objective Justification, “and was raised because of our justification.”

There is one specific passage, one that can well be called the chief passage treating Objective Justification, which we must now consider. 2 Cor. 5:18–19:

“Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.”

It is often maintained by the opponents of Objective Justification that this passage cannot be used to refer to anything other than justification by faith, and does not speak of God “not imputing” trespasses to the world, but only to those who believe. The key argument they make is in regards to the two words “was reconciling”. The word “was” is imperfect active indicative. The word “reconciling” is a present, active, participle”. Because of this, they insist that it must be interpreted in the present tense as “is reconciling”, and is not speaking of what God *did* but what He *is doing now* as individual people in the world are justified by faith. Even R. C. H. Lenski, says the same in his commentary, where he insists that “was reconciling the world ... not imputing their trespasses unto them” can *not* be true in any objective sense unless the aorist tense is used.¹⁰ As his earlier work on this passage attests, Lenski certainly knew better than to impose a present continuous action on the verb “reconciling” and “not imputing”. The Greek language does not correspond one-to-one with English tenses. The fact that the participle is present active, does not force a

10. ‘Some of the current exegesis asks: Does Paul not write “world” and “them”? Then he refers to only objective reconciliation. We ought to have three aorist forms *if* objective acts are referred to; we ought to have God *did* reconcile the world, *did* not reckon, also (*κατ*) *did* deposit. But Paul writes an imperfect *ἦν* and two present participles and only *one* aorist. ... What does Paul say? That what God has finished for him and for his helpers (aorist *καταλλάξαντος*) he is still busy with (durative present participles) in regard to the world, namely the individuals in it;’ — *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, Lenski, R. C. H. (1963). Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing House, p. 1044f.

This directly contradicts Lenski’s earlier work on this text as found in his *Eisenach Epistle Selections*, Lutheran Book Concern (1914), p. 489f., where he describes this reconciliation as an objective fact: “God reckoned the trespasses of the world to Christ when Christ died and paid the world’s penalty on the cross, and so ever after God does not reckon these trespasses to the world, does not treat the world with wrath and condemnation, casting it from him forever, but looking to Christ and his atoning merits, he turns his love and grace to the world, and offers it the pardon and salvation Christ has prepared (verse 20). The *αὐτοῖς*, **unto them** points to the individual sinners which make up the sum total called “world,” and in *παραπτώματα*, likewise their guilt is viewed as a multitude of trespasses, not as one single mass of sin. So we may say: every single sin of every single sinner was laid on Christ, and so is not now charged against the sinner by a reconciled God; if one single sin were so charged against you or me, our hope of salvation would be shut out from the start.’

change from “was” to “is”. English grammar is firmly rooted in time: a past, present, and future. Greek grammar is rooted in action: something that is ongoing, or punctiliar, at a moment in time, or at an indeterminate moment. The key here is that neither the present perfect participle “reconciling” nor the present passive/middle participle “imputing” imply the present tense, but when the imperfect active indicative form of the verb “to be” is used, the action, in every single instance of this construct in all of the New Testament, refers to an action in the past.

For example, here are some examples where his exact same word, and word (ἦν - “was”) is used with a *present perfect participle*:

“For He taught them (literally: “was teaching them”) as one having authority” (Matt. 7:29).

“Now a good way off from them there was a herd of many swine feeding” (Matt. 8:30).

“And always, night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones” (Mark 5:5).

“Now they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was going before them” (Mark 10:32).

“For he [Zacharias] beckoned (literally: was beckoning) to them and remained speechless (Luke 1:22).

“And Joseph and His mother marveled (literally; “were marveling”) at those things which were spoken of Him” (Luke 2:33).

“Then He went down to Capernaum, a city of Galilee, and was teaching them on the Sabbaths” (Luke 4:31).

There are many more examples, including a much larger number using the present passive/middle participle (the form of the word “imputing”). This is not to say that the translation “was reconciling ... not imputing” is merely a *possible* translation. This particular construct, with this word “was” joined to either a present participle, or a passive participle, is *in every single case in the entire New Testament*, translated “was” or put into the past tense. *All* of them are describing a continuous action in the past. The objection against this verse speaking of a past “reconciling of the world” as an objective fact that has already been accomplished cannot appeal to the Greek grammar, or else they must say that when the Gospel was written, the same heard of swine was still feeding in the Gadarenes, and Zacharias was still speechless. The entire New Testament usage, without exception, is against anyone who would try to translate this passage with “is”, or exclude the action of the verb as being an objective fact.

That the passage is speaking of a past reconciliation is also consistent with other passages, the most important of which is Romans 11:11-15, and particularly verse 15:

“Through their fall, to provoke them to jealousy, salvation has come to the Gentiles. Now if their fall is riches for the world, and their failure riches for the Gentiles, how much more their fullness! ... For if their being cast away is *the reconciling of the world*, what will their acceptance be but life from the dead?”

It should be obvious that Paul does not use the word “Gentiles” in a narrow sense, but is speaking of the entire Gentile world. The phrase “Jews and Gentiles” is inclusive of the entire world. It is not in the least foreign to Paul’s writing to speak of a reconciliation of the world. Thus he speaks similarly in Eph. 2:11–18, as to how Christ has ended the enmity which was caused by the Law, and now brings the Gentiles, who were once afar off, near, preaching peace to them:

“Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh ... being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace, and that He might reconcile them both to God in one body through the cross, thereby putting to death the enmity. And He came and preached peace to you who were afar off and to those who were near. For through Him we both have access by one Spirit to the Father.”

This entire passage speaks Objective Justification: God declaring the finished Atonement, so that those who hear might believe that their sins are forgiven, their trespasses are no longer imputed to them, they are reconciled to God.

What about damnation?

Does Objective Justification imply that the only real sin is unbelief, or does it confess that those who are damned bear the full guilt of their sin?

All of this is fine and good, but what does one do with the many passages which teach the wrath of God? It is in this area that we come to the opposite side of the debate, where a number of statements have been made that go above and beyond Objective Justification, and in stating too much, deny essential and clear statements of Scripture. The four “Kokomo” statements referenced in the earlier part of this paper speak in a manner that Scripture does not.

Scripture declares that the damned in hell are damned for their sins. They are not “guilt-free saints”. A saint is one who is declared righteous by faith, and therefore there are no saints in hell. God does not impute the forgiveness of sins to each individual sinner apart from faith. God did not declare Judas, the people destroyed in the flood, and all the ungodly in hell “innocent, not guilty, and forgiven of all sin.”

Nor does Scripture support the statements such as “The only sin that damns is unbelief”. In the section above titled “The Declarative nature of Justification” we presented many clear statements of Scripture which speak of the wrath of God, the wages of sin, the death that comes because of sin. In no way can any doctrine of Objective Justification deny this essential truth: The damn are held guilty for *all* their sins.

The Law and the Promises of God are not contrary to one another. The Gospel does not nullify the Law as if it no longer exists or applies. If such over-reaching statements, such as the Kokomo statements, are true, then the sin of unbelief can also not damn. Even the sin of unbelief *is* forgiven. Else, how could anyone be saved and forgiven for their past unbelief or their weak faith?

Make no mistake: Unbelief is a damning sin, but it is not the *only* damning sin. When Jesus appears on the last day, and declares to those on His left hand, “Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels,” what reasons does he give for this judgment? “For I was hungry, and you gave Me no food; I was thirsty and you gave Me no drink; I was a stranger and you did not take Me in, naked and you did not clothe Me, sick and in prison and you did not visit Me” (Matt. 25:41–43). These are not words which Jesus speaks to saints, but to those who are damned, not just because of their unbelief, but because of their many sins.

The opposite of an error is an error. And the opposite of the error of denying the universality of the Gospel, is to deny the universality of the Law.

The heart of the Controversy: Confusion of Law and Gospel

We have now examined each of the points which this author has proposed as the lines of cleavage between the various sides in this controversy. In examining the various arguments of those who over-reach this doctrine, one thing becomes evident. Both extremes have failed to apply the most important principle of Hermeneutics: The proper distinction between Law and Gospel.

On the one hand, we have the Kokomo statements, which speak of saints in hell. This is nothing other than a denial of the condemnation of the Law which applies to all people under all circumstances. The Law does not cease to bring condemnation after the death of Christ, but those who remain under the Law remain under its curse: “As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them” (Gal. 3:10).

The Law does not cease to be true just because Christ has fulfilled it. In fact, the opposite is true. Christ Jesus demonstrates the *true* meaning of the Law by His perfect obedience to it, his explanation of it, and His enduring its condemnation upon the cross. If the Law ceased to apply, then it would cease to bring us to Christ: “The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Gal. 3:24–25). In fact, if the Law would cease to condemn, then the Gospel would no longer have a purpose or function. “The Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:22). If the condemnation of the Law were to cease, so must justification by faith.

Those who deny Objective Justification, stating that if God has already forgiven the sins of the world, then He cannot damn *anyone*, are guilty of the same error, but from the opposite direction: A failure to discern that just as the Law teaches Universal Objective Damnation, so the Gospel teaches Universal Objective Justification. The former does not cease to be true because of the latter.

As to this, we come back to Romans 5:18, which we quoted above:

“Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life.”

Those who have difficulty imagining how it is that God could damn anyone if they are already justified will have even more difficulty with this verse. For just as they struggle with the idea that not all people who are objectively justified are thereafter justified by faith, so also they should struggle with the idea that all people who are condemned by the offense of Adam, do not actually end up being condemned, but some of them end up being saved. All men are universally condemned. And yet some are saved. All men are universally declared righteous, and yet most of them end up damned.

So how are these two things reconciled? In Christ. The Law universally damns, and the Gospel universally saves, and the only dividing line between the two is Christ. In Christ the entire world is redeemed. Outside of Christ the entire world is damned.

“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new” (2 Cor. 5:17).

“But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph. 2:4–10).

God forgive the sins of the world in Christ, but the forgiveness for the sins of the world are *in Christ alone*. God absolved the world of sin in Christ, but the absolution is *in Christ alone*. God reconciled the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. But the non-imputation of trespasses is *in Christ alone*. It is not ever outside of Him. Even so: *All faith is in Christ. There is none outside of Him.*

Every objective fact of Objective Justification is in Christ, and not a single one of them is outside of Christ. All of the New Testament bears witness to this truth: that one is either in or out. In Christ, or outside of Christ. In the feast, with the bridegroom, or outside, unknown by Him, in outer darkness. And the distinction between these two states is faith. Faith alone.

Therefore the fact that the world is justified in Christ, does not in the least contradict, lessen, or in any way take away from the essential doctrine of the Christian faith: “People are freely justified for Christ’s sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.”

Luther says in his sermon on the Proper Distinction between law and the Gospel:

This distinction between the Law and the Gospel is the supreme art among Christians. Each and all of those who glory in the name of Christian or have adopted it may and should understand this art. For wherever there is a deficiency in this respect, it is impossible to distinguish a Christian from a Gentile or Jew. So important is this distinction. For this reason Paul so strenuously insists that these two doctrines the Law and the Gospel be well and properly distinguished among Christians. Both the Law, or the Ten Commandments, and the Gospel are indeed God’s Word; the latter was given by God at the beginning, in Paradise, the former on Mount Sinai. But the matter of decisive importance is this, that these two words be properly distinguished and not commingled; otherwise the true meaning of neither will be known nor retained; yea, imagining that we have both, we shall find that we possess neither.”

Let no one grow proud and think that they have mastered this art to such a degree that he can declare that either the condemnation of the Law, or the reconciliation of the Gospel no longer apply, or that they contradict one another:

“Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe” (Gal. 3:21–22).

Conclusion

There is no Lutheran theology apart from Objective Justification. Give it any name you wish, and it still remains true. Without Objective Justification, there can be no means of grace. The entire Reformation

emphasis on the means of grace would be a horrible misdirection were it not for the fact that the things which the Word and the Sacraments distribute, namely, forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation, *already* exist in Christ. What the means of grace offers us is not the *potential* for forgiveness, or an *opportunity* to be forgiven if only you meet your obligation of faith, but the sheer, concentrated forgiveness of sins acquired on Calvary for the entire world. Without this, the Word and Sacraments could only say, “Your sins may possibly be forgiven. It is up to you.” But with this doctrine, comes absolute certainty: Here is the pure grace of God, the unmerited favor, completely and entirely won for you in Christ Jesus. Do not doubt it, but only believe it, and it is yours for eternity.

S.D.G.

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