

Jesus Canceled Your Debt!

By Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

✠ *In nomine Jesu* ✠

Objective justification under attack

A dispute has arisen among Lutheran theologians regarding the doctrine of justification. The specific question deals with the completeness of justification at Christ's cross and empty tomb, as well as the role of faith in justification. Did God justify the world objectively, apart from the faith that receives it subjectively? Or is God's justification only effected when an individual trusts the promise of forgiveness? Is there only one justification—that which is a completed reality by the work of Christ and received by faith? Or is the distinction between objective and subjective justification practically teaching two justifications which are separate and distinct from one another? Is justification complete apart from faith? Or is justification only completed when faith is added?

We maintain:

- God forgave the sin of the world by removing the sin of the world and placing it upon Christ. The world's debt has been paid in full and canceled by Christ (universal forgiveness).
- In the cross and empty tomb of Christ, God really has acquitted the world of sin, so that in Christ Jesus the world's status has been changed to "justified" before God (universal justification). On this basis, real reconciliation has been effected between God and the world (universal acquittal, universal reconciliation).
- Through the means of grace, these completed realities are proclaimed and distributed wherever the gospel goes out into the world.
- Through Spirit-worked faith, these completed realities are appropriated and received through faith, so that the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness of Christ become the possession of individual sinners (individual justification).

We understand the word "justification" to be defined according to a broader sense of the term, so that it is used in reference to the substitution of the righteousness of Christ for the world's sin; the universal verdict of "not-guilty" pronounced upon Christ as the world's substitute; the achievement of the forgiveness of sins for all people; and the personal attribution of forgiveness and imputation of the righteousness of Christ through faith.

This is the position articulated by theologians of the former Synodical Conference. The Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), and the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod are heirs of this doctrinal position. Advocates of this position see the substance of this doctrine (if not its terminology, which arose later) taught by Luther, the Lutheran reformers, the Lutheran Confessions, and early Lutheran dogmaticians.

For the Wisconsin Synod and member churches of the former Synodical Conference it is a question whose answer has already been determined through comprehensive exegesis of Scripture, study of the Lutheran Confessions, and careful attention to the voices of orthodox Lutheran theologians. Justification is both objective and subjective, yet it is not two doctrines or two justifications, but rather one justification that is accomplished objectively and universally and distributed and appropriated subjectively and individually. We do not separate the doctrine of justification into two separate species, one which is apart from faith ("faithless justification"), and the other that includes faith. The distinction of universal and individual within the doctrine of justification is a distinction within one substance.

Because we are confronting an assertion today that the concept of universal objective justification is a later theological development, I have, for the most part, refrained from quoting authors from the 19th century forward. In some respects this is unfortunate, because there are some beautifully clear studies and expositions of the doctrine that have been produced in the last 150 years. Nevertheless, the primary focus in this paper is showing that the basis for the doctrine is Scripture itself. Additionally helpful in treating the subject, the writings of church fathers, Lutheran dogmaticians, the Lutheran Confessions, and Luther himself, speak in harmony with Scripture in teaching that the whole world was forgiven and acquitted in Christ at the cross and empty tomb.

The terms *objective* and *universal* are not synonymous. When we speak of justification as *objective* we mean that it happens outside of the realm of someone's personal experience. Justification is objective, in the sense that it takes

place in the sphere of God's activity, apart from any cooperation on the part of the person justified.¹ When we speak of justification being *universal* we speak of its applicability to all people. In this study, for the sake of simplicity and commonly accepted usage, the terms objective, universal, and general justification are used virtually interchangeably, and the terms subjective, individual, and personal justification are similarly used.

Understand justification exegetically

The doctrine of justification is drawn first and above all from the Word of God. The Lutheran Confessions rightly expound the Word of God, and theologians comment on the Word of God, but Holy Scripture is the only *norma normans* and the sole fount and source of doctrine. Because the discussions in our circles have been primarily about objective justification (and personal justification through faith alone is not in dispute), the selections expounded here are generally passages that teach the doctrine of justification as a completed, objective, and universal reality. We agree that a poor sinner is personally justified through faith alone.

You will note that not every passage uses the word "justify" or "justification." Many of the passages teach the universality of the work of Christ using different terms. All of them, however, tie the concepts of justification, atonement, removal of sin, forgiveness, and reconciliation between God and the world, to the once-for-all work completed by Jesus at the cross and empty tomb. All of them connect these accomplished realities to the *finished* work of Jesus on earth, not to his ongoing work of mediation or to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 3:22-24

²²This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. ²³There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (NIV).

²²δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας, οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν διαστολή. ²³πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ, ²⁴δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ.

Romans 3:22-24 may find a place as one of the *sedes doctrinae* for objective justification, but we readily acknowledge that the passage can be understood both universally and individually.

One explanation of the passage is as follows:

- Verse 22 says that "righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."
- "All have sinned" in verse 23 means "all [who believe] have sinned." "All have sinned" does not, in this context, refer to the whole world, but is specifically referring only to believers.
- As a corollary, "[all] are justified freely by his grace . . ." refers also in this context specifically only to believers.

The word in Romans 3:24 is "δικαιούμενοι," literally "being justified," or simply "justified." It is a present passive participle.²

A problem with this explanation is that in this understanding Romans 3:23 does not refer to the world. Normally, whenever we say "all have sinned," we are expressing a universal truth, and Romans 3:23 is used extensively with that understanding. But the explanation above limits "all have sinned" only to believers. The explanation doesn't preclude or overtly deny universal sinfulness, but with this interpretation it cannot be used to teach universal sinfulness. The Christian church has, however, used Romans 3:23 for millennia to support the doctrine of universal sin. The Lutheran Confessions use Romans 3:23 to teach universal sin,³ so the explanation for Romans 3:23 given above, limiting "all" to

¹ In this sense, even faith is an objective act of the Holy Spirit, since faith is not worked collaboratively with the will of the sinner.

² In English a participle is a verbal adjective; the verb is used as a descriptor to modify a noun or a pronoun. Examples of participles in English include: a *walking* stick (present active participle); a *closed* door (perfect passive participle). English also has the gerund, which is a verbal noun; the action of the verb is used as a substantive: "*Walking* is fun," or "I like *swimming*." In Greek, the participle has multiple functions. It can be a verbal adjective or a verbal noun (other uses include circumstantial and supplemental). Here the participle δικαιούμενοι is adjectival, modifying πάντες.

³ Apology, Art. IV, 32.

only believers, is a novelty. R. C. H. Lenski—himself no proponent of objective justification—expounds, then rejects, this interpretation.⁴

Another possible explanation to the present passive participle “δικαιούμενοι,” “being justified,” is to understand it in the ongoing, potential sense. This understanding favors the subjective interpretation, as well. It would see “all have sinned” as referring to the entire world (consistent with historical understanding), but it would see “being justified” as an ongoing descriptor of those who are “being justified [as they come to faith].” In other words, all have sinned, but they are “being justified” as they believe in Jesus (and not before). The grammar of the text allows for this understanding.

Romans 3:22-24 supports universal justification when we understand the verses as follows:

- As verse 22 says, the “righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.” Only those who believe have the righteousness of God in Christ imputed or credited to them individually. Only believers are “clothed in Christ” (Galatians 3:27). This is personal justification.
- “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” refers to the whole world. The passage is understood in a manner consistent with its historical and confessional use to show that all human beings are sinful and in need of redemption.
- “Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” describes the state or status that “all” are now in through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. This is general justification.

This third explanation is consistent both with the historical and confessional understanding of Romans 3:23. It also points to redemption as being the source or cause of the new status that the world has in and through Christ. It is grammatically consistent in that the πάντες, “all,” of Romans 3:23 is modified by the participle “δικαιούμενοι.” It is consistent with other passages that support general justification. This explanation of the passage sees both personal justification (v. 22) and general justification (v. 24) taught in harmony with the rest of Scripture.

John 1:29b

^{29b}“Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (NIV).

^{29b}Ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου.

John the Baptist pointed to Jesus as the Lamb of God, the one removing the world’s sin. For his mostly Jewish audience John called to mind a powerful picture of the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement. The sin of the Israelite community was laid upon the victim, and the victim carried all of the sin away.⁵

The verb αἴρω means to “lift up,” “remove,” “take away,” or even “blot out.” Here the present active participle ὁ αἴρων with the definite article is substantive. Jesus is the “one who is removing” the sin of the world. With the singular τὴν ἁμαρτίαν the emphasis is on the quality (the guilt) of the sin and even the totality of the sin, not on individual sins particularly.

What does it mean to take away the sin of the world? If the sin of the world is laid upon Jesus and taken away, then it is removed completely. The transfer of the world’s guilt onto the Lamb of God indicates complete, objective, universal forgiveness accomplished by Christ, the world’s sin-bearer.

Of this passage Luther says:

How amazing it is that the Son of God becomes my servant, that He humbles Himself so, that He cumbers Himself with my misery and sin, yes, with the sin and the death of the entire world! He says to me: “You are no longer a sinner, but I am. I am your substitute. You have not sinned, but I have. The entire world is in sin. However, you are not in sin; but I am. All your sins are to rest on me and not on you.” The Son of Man performs the basest and filthiest work. He does not don some beggar’s torn garment or old trousers, nor does He wash us as a mother washes a child; but He bears our sin, death, and hell, our misery of body and soul. Whenever the devil declares: “You are a sinner!” Christ interposes: “I will reverse the order; I will be a sinner, and you are to go scot-free.” Who can thank our God enough for this mercy?⁶

⁴ Lenski, R. C. H. *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans* (Columbus, Ohio: Wartburg Press, 1945) p. 253.

⁵ See Leviticus 16:20-22.

⁶ Luther, Martin. *Luther’s Works: American Edition*, Vol. 22 (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1957) p. 166.

2 Corinthians 5:14b

^{14b}One died for all, and therefore all died (NIV).

^{14b}εἷς ὑπὲρ πάντων ἀπέθανεν· ἄρα οἱ πάντες ἀπέθανον·

This passage highlights the substitutionary nature of Jesus' work. We describe Jesus' work as "vicarious." Everything Jesus did he did as the world's substitute. He did not come to be a new lawgiver or a teacher of morality; he came to live, die and rise again as our substitute. All of his active obedience is the substitute for the world's disobedience. He was not just the substitute for those who are finally saved; he is the stand-in for the entire human race.

Jesus, as the substitute for the world, died for the world's sin. Jesus' death was ὑπὲρ πάντων. The preposition ὑπὲρ means more than "on behalf of." Jesus' death was "in the place of" all. These words absolutely preclude any possibility of limited atonement. What follows proclaims the effective outcome of Jesus' death: ἄρα οἱ πάντες ἀπέθανον, "Therefore, all died." Christ died for the world, therefore every sinner died in and through Christ, as every sinner's substitute. The death of all flows consequentially from the death of Christ, that is, in the person and body of Christ, God condemned and put to death all sinners, attributing the just punishment for sin—death—to Christ, the world's substitute.

It is objective and universal to say that all people were put to death in Christ. But Scripture also speaks of an individual "putting to death," followed by an individual "raising to life" in Baptism:

We died to sin; how can we live in it any longer? Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life. If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been freed from sin.⁷

The point here is that Scripture uses the picture of dying and rising in Christ in both a universal and in an individual way. On the one hand, Jesus' death and resurrection were the punishment and the vindication of the world in him. This is an objective, universal truth that was completed and accomplished two millennia ago. On the other hand, an individual sinner only participates in the death and resurrection of Jesus, along with all of the benefits that accompany them, through personal application and appropriation of Jesus' death and resurrection through the means of grace, that is, through Baptism, through the preaching of repentance and forgiveness. The universal passage does not nullify or disprove the individual passage, and the individual passage does not nullify the universal reality.

Romans 4:25

²⁵He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (NIV).

²⁵ὃς παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν καὶ ἠγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν.

The picture of the death and resurrection of the world in Christ, the world's substitute, is powerfully taught in Romans 4:25. Jesus' death was the death of the world for its sin. His resurrection from the dead was the vindication or the justification of everything he accomplished. It is the proof that his work was complete and acceptable to God the Father.⁸

But Paul says that Jesus' resurrection is more than just the justification of Jesus. He says Christ was raised to life διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν, for *our* justification. διὰ plus the accusative indicates cause. The prepositional phrase is rightly translated "because of our justification."

Paul ties justification, as an accomplished fact, to the death and resurrection of Jesus. Justification *happened* when Jesus died and was raised to life again.

Paul says that Jesus was handed over for *our* sins and raised for *our* justification; who is the antecedent of the possessive pronoun ἡμῶν? Throughout Romans 4 Paul speaks repeatedly of righteousness being credited through

⁷ Romans 6:2b-7.

⁸ Romans 1:4 also teaches the importance of the resurrection as vindication of everything that Jesus is and everything he accomplished: "Who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord" (NIV).

faith. Immediately preceding this passage, in Romans 4:23, 24, Paul writes, “²³The words ‘it was credited to him’ were written not for him alone, ²⁴but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead” (NIV). The ἡμῶν fits perfectly with “for us who believe in him.” Understood this way, *our* sins means the sins of believers and *our* justification means the justification of believers.

Yet throughout Scripture the Word teaches consistently that Jesus died for the sin of the world. Why would Paul limit Jesus’ death in this context only to believers? If we understand παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν to refer only to “us who believe,” Paul would be speaking of the death and atonement of Jesus in terms of its applicability to only a limited group. Granted, saying here that Jesus died for “our [believers’] sins” need not negate universal atonement, but if everywhere else Scripture refers to Jesus’ death as being for all human beings, why would Paul not speak in consonance with the rest of Scripture?⁹ Since Scripture speaks elsewhere of Jesus’ death being for all, it is harmonious with all of the testimony of God’s Word to understand this passage in the same way. It follows then that if ἡμῶν in the first clause refers ultimately to all people, then the ἡμῶν in the second, parallel clause also refers to all people: Jesus was given over to death for all; he was raised to life for the justification of all. Grammatically, either understanding of ἡμῶν (as referring only to “us who believe” or to all people) is possible.

In our Lutheran Confessions, the Smalcald Articles use Romans 4:25 in the universal sense.¹⁰ In his brief commentary on this verse in his lectures on Romans, Luther expounds it in both the universal and the individual sense:

The death of Christ is the death of sin, and His resurrection is the life of righteousness, because through His death He has made satisfaction for sin, and through His resurrection he has brought us righteousness. And thus His death not only signifies but *actually effects the remission of sin as a most sufficient satisfaction*. And his resurrection is not only a sign or a sacrament of our righteousness, but it also produces it in us, *if we believe it*, and it is also the cause of it [italics mine].¹¹

We must also look closely at διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν. The phrase can be understood retrospectively or prospectively. If we understand it retrospectively we are looking back on a completed justification: Jesus was handed over to death because of (διὰ) our transgressions, and he was raised to life because of (διὰ) our [completed] justification. If we understand it prospectively, we are looking forward to a future justification: Jesus was handed over to death for our transgressions, and he was raised to life for our [potential, to be completed in the future] justification. Grammatically, however, a prospective understanding of this passage is much weaker, due to Paul’s use of διὰ plus the accusative. Since διὰ plus the accusative denotes the cause of something or points to one thing as the result of something else, the forward-looking interpretation of δικαίωσιν as a future potentiality is weakened. διὰ plus the accusative does not normally indicate purpose, but cause.

If one wants to limit the justification here only to a limited group, a much stronger case can be made grammatically for limiting ἡμῶν to believers than can be made for understanding διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν as referring to a future, incomplete potentiality. I will readily concede the former on a grammatical basis, while I see the latter as less likely by analysis of the text. However, even if ἡμῶν were to refer only to believers, Paul still ties justification to Jesus’ death and resurrection as an accomplished fact. Regardless of whom he’s specifically referring to here as the antecedent of ἡμῶν, he’s still saying that justification *happened* when Jesus died and was raised to life again.

Johann Gerhard, who after the two Martins—Luther and Chemnitz—is numbered among the greatest theologians of the orthodox Lutheran church, saw the death of Jesus as the damnation of our sin in Christ, and he saw the resurrection of Jesus as our absolution in Christ. He writes in his commentary on Romans 4:25:

⁹ When we ask someone the question, “Whom did Jesus die for?” frequently we will get the answer, “For us.” We will then follow up with the question, “Who is *us*?” to which we expect the answer, “For everyone.” We would not allow the answer, “For everyone who believes.”

¹⁰ Smalcald Articles, I. In this section of the Smalcald Articles Luther uses Romans 4:24-25 together with John 1:29, Isaiah 53:6, and Romans 3:23-25, clearly in a universal sense, as applicable to all the human race.

¹¹ Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Romans*. Trans. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954) p. 87. Note that Luther here equates *remission of sin* and *most sufficient satisfaction*. If we say that Christ has made satisfaction for the world’s sin, then we cannot refuse to say that God has remitted the sin of the world in Christ. Of course the remission of sins is only appropriated “if we believe it.”

As God punished our sins in Christ, because they were laid on him and imputed to Him as our Substitute, so in the same manner He, by raising Him from the dead, absolved Him by this very act of our sins which had been imputed to Him, and thereby He absolved in Him also us."¹²

Because Lenski had an unfavorable view of objective justification, he tied the resurrection of Christ to the reconciliation of the world, but not its justification. In his commentary on Romans he writes:

This reconciliation embraced the whole world of sinners and was thus "without faith, prior to and apart from faith." When Christ died on the cross he cried: Τετέλεσται, "It has been finished!" Then and there the whole world of men was reconciled to God by Christ. The resurrection of Christ only corroborated the tremendous fact of the world's reconciliation. The Scripture term for this is καταλλαγή, "reconciliation," the whole world of sinners was made completely other. Christ's resurrection shows that God accepted Christ's sacrifice for the world, that Christ's blood had, indeed, reconciled the whole world to God.

One may call God's raising up of Christ God's *declaration* to this effect, and, because it is such a declaration, one may call it "the universal justification of the whole world." Yet to use the word "justification" in this way is not a gain, for it is liable to confuse the ordinary man; we are fully satisfied with the Scriptural word "reconciliation."¹³

What's curious about Lenski's treatment of the subject is how he clearly and correctly ties the reconciliation of the world to Jesus' resurrection but then discourages speaking of "the universal justification of the whole world," when the word that's tied to Jesus' resurrection in Romans 4:25 is not καταλλαγή, "reconciliation," but δικαίωσις, "justification"!

We have no problem seeing Jesus' resurrection as the justification of the world in him. When we understand this passage in a universal, completed sense, such an understanding fits perfectly with the rest of Scripture. By raising Jesus to life, God declared the world's sin paid for, he declared Christ to be absolved (justified) of the world's sin that had been charged to him, and he declared the world to be justified in Christ as the world's substitute. In Christ as its stand-in, the world has been justified before God through and because of its resurrected substitute, Christ Jesus.

2 Corinthians 5:19a

¹⁹that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them (NIV).

¹⁹ὥς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσειν ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν

Scripture speaks here of a reconciliation (καταλλαγή) effected between God and man. The Greek word ἄλλος means "other." The verb ἀλλάσσω means to "make other" or "change." When combined with the perfective prefix κατα, the word καταλλάσσω means to "reconcile," with the underlying sense that something has finally and perfectly changed. For there to be reconciliation, something has to change. God does not change; he is immutable.¹⁴ His attitude toward sin does not change, and his justice and mercy do not change. The change that brings about reconciliation must either be in man or between God and man. We know that man remains sinful and corrupt in his natural self, even after the completed work of Christ, and that man's sinful nature remains hostile and unreconciled toward God, so the change that brings reconciliation cannot be in man. The change that brings about reconciliation must be in the status or the relationship between God and mankind.

Paul uses the imperfect ἦν periphrastically with the present participle καταλλάσσειν to communicate the sense of a past progressive or simple imperfect: "God was reconciling." This reconciliation was brought about ἐν Χριστῷ. Jesus is God's instrument through whom he achieves reconciliation. The object of the act of reconciliation is κόσμον. The term κόσμον is universal. Nobody is excluded from the reconciliation that God was bringing about in Christ.

The phrase that follows explains how this reconciliation in Christ came about: God was μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν. The word λογίζομαι means to "reckon," "account," "attribute," or "impute." The present participle λογιζόμενος indicates action contemporaneous to καταλλάσσειν. The pronouns αὐτοῖς and αὐτῶν refer back to the collective κόσμον. Paul explains how reconciliation was achieved: God was no longer counting "their" (the world's) transgressions "to them." Here the plural τὰ παραπτώματα denotes not the quality, nature, or guilt of sin (as

¹² Marquart, Kurt, translator. *Justification—Objective and Subjective: A Translation* (Concordia Theological Seminary Press: Fort Wayne, Indiana), p. 21. Gerhard is quoted in the essay delivered at the opening convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872. The original citation is written in Gerhard's *Adnotationes in Epistolam ad Romanos* (Erfurt: Christiani von Saher, 1655) p.155.

¹³ Lenski, p. 84.

¹⁴ Malachi 3:6.

in John 1:29), but specific transgressions. These transgressions were not attributed to the world, because they were attributed to Christ. “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.”¹⁵

Opponents of universal justification may object to the absence of any justifying terminology in this passage (any form of δικαίωσις or δικαίωμα). The point is conceded, but it is irrelevant. For there to be universal reconciliation there must be a change in status. For there to be a change in status, the sin that bars access to God and prevents reconciliation with God must be removed. All of this has been completed in Christ. In Christ its substitute the world has now been declared sin-free, and since the barrier to peace with God has been removed from the world and laid upon Christ, reconciliation has been achieved.

1 John 2:2

²He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world (NIV).

²καὶ αὐτὸς ἱλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου.

St. John the Apostle calls Jesus the ἱλασμός for our sins and for the whole world. An ἱλασμός is a “sin-offering,” an “expiation” or “propitiation.” The word indicates not only an offering that is presented, but an offering that is actually accepted and is the real satisfaction that expiates sin. It’s well translated by the NIV as “atoning sacrifice.”

The word that John uses here is different from the ἱλαστήριον that Paul uses in Romans 3:25. Both ἱλασμός and ἱλαστήριον can mean “sin-offering,” but ἱλαστήριον is used also as the place where atonement happens. The ἱλαστήριον is equated with the sacrifice itself by metonymy. In the Septuagint, the word ἱλαστήριον is used to translate the Hebrew חַפְצֵי־הַכֶּסֶף (*hakapporet*), the cover of the Ark of the Covenant, the mercy seat, where the blood of the sacrificial animal was sprinkled for the cleansing of the people’s sin. The distinction is important. Jesus is not only the source of atonement. He is not only the place we go to find or grasp atonement, the ἱλαστήριον. Jesus is the very atonement (ἱλασμός) for our sin. He is the propitiation, the payment, the sacrificial substitute. His blood is the offering. His impeccable human nature, his perfect life of obedience, and his innocent body were tendered as the propitiation for all sinners.

In confirmation class we treat rather lightly the word “atonement” by telling our students that the word means “at-one-ment.” While this is a helpful mnemonic device, it doesn’t do justice to the real meaning of the word. The root meaning of the Hebrew word כָּפַר (*kafar*) is “to cover.”¹⁶ On the great Day of Atonement (יּוֹם הַכִּיּוּפּוּרִים, *yom hakippurim*) Aaron went into the Most Holy Place “to make atonement for” (לְכַפֵּר, *lekapper*) the sin of the people. The translators of the Septuagint used the word ἱλασμός to translate “atonement,” rendering the Day of Atonement as ἡμέρα ἐξίλασμοῦ. Carrying the thought of the Hebrew, the ἱλασμός is the covering for sin. When an ἱλασμός is made, sin is covered over and hidden from view.

John says explicitly that Jesus is the ἱλασμός . . . περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου. The preposition περὶ with the genitive means “for” in the substitutionary sense. Jesus is the covering for the sin of the world.

Since Jesus atoned for the sin of the world, the world’s sin is covered and goes unseen. It is not possible to teach universal atonement, universal payment, and universal covering of sin as accomplished realities without also teaching universal forgiveness as an accomplished reality in the sacrificed body of Christ. The sin of the world really was covered by Jesus’ propitiation. It is a false dichotomy to say, “The sin of the world was covered by Christ,” or “The sin of the world was paid for by Christ,” but to be unwilling to say, “The sin of the world was forgiven by Christ.” How can sin be covered, paid for, borne away and removed, but not forgiven?

¹⁵ 1 Peter 2:24.

¹⁶ As an example, כָּפַר is the word used in Genesis 6:14, where God instructs Noah to cover the outside of the ark with pitch.

Colossians 2:13, 14

¹³When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, ¹⁴having canceled the written code, with its regulations, that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross (NIV).

¹³καὶ ὑμᾶς νεκροὺς ὄντας ἐν τοῖς παραπτώμασιν καὶ τῇ ἀκροβυστίᾳ τῆς σαρκὸς ὑμῶν, συνεζωοποίησεν ὑμᾶς σὺν αὐτῷ· χαρισάμενος ἡμῖν πάντα τὰ παραπτώματα, ¹⁴ἐξαλείψας τὸ καθ' ἡμῶν χειρόγραφον τοῖς δόγμασιν ὃ ἦν ὑπεναντίον ἡμῖν, καὶ αὐτὸ ἤρκεν ἐκ τοῦ μέσου προσηλώσας αὐτὸ τῷ σταυρῷ·

This passage teaches both subjective and objective justification. It teaches subjective justification in personal regeneration: “When you were dead in your sins . . . God made you alive with Christ.” The whole world has not been made alive in Christ. There is no universal regeneration or universal quickening to salvation. Paul is referring to the conversion of the Colossians and speaking specifically to believers.

But when Paul speaks of forgiveness he ties it not to the personal regeneration or quickening that a believer has experienced but to the once-for-all act of Jesus on the cross, by which he canceled the condemnation of the law for all mankind, “nailing it to the cross.” Here Scripture identifies forgiveness with the cross, not with faith.

The present middle participle χαρισάμενος means to “freely give,” “remit,” “pardon.” St. Ambrose of Milan, quoted favorably in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, uses this passage for support of his statement, “But when the Lord Jesus Christ came, he forgave to all people the sin, which no one could avoid.”¹⁷ A notable shift is the move from ὑμᾶς, “you,” as Paul addresses the Colossians and their conversion, to ἡμῖν, “to us,” as he speaks of the remission of sins. Paul includes himself with the Colossians, not only as a fellow believer, but as part of the world of sinners for whom Christ canceled the written code and against whom Christ blotted out the handwriting of the law.

Luke 23:34a

^{34a}Jesus said, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing” (NIV).

^{34a}ὁ δὲ Ἰησοῦς ἔλεγεν· Πάτερ, ἄφες αὐτοῖς, οὐ γὰρ οἴδασιν τί ποιοῦσιν.

This may not be a commonly used proof passage for objective justification, but it does illustrate the completely one-sided, objective nature of God’s forgiveness. The word used here is ἄφες, from ἀφήμι, translated “forgive.” It’s the same word that Jesus uses in Matthew 18:27 in the narrative of the king who forgave the unmerciful servant’s debt. It paints the picture of canceling something or casting something away completely.

As they crucified him, Jesus interceded to his Father for his enemies. His enemies were not penitent. They did not trust in Jesus as the Messiah. They were completely without remorse, repentance, or saving faith of any kind. Yet Jesus asked that his Father forgive them, even though Jesus knew their darkened hearts perfectly.

What are we to make of this plea from the cross? Is it possible that Jesus’ intercession fell on deaf ears, and that in spite of Jesus’ pleading, the Father refused to forgive? Was it the ignorance of the soldiers in carrying out the crucifixion that made them candidates for forgiveness, in spite of their unbelief? Was it because “they were just doing their job”? Was this some special dispensation of forgiveness just for the soldiers on that day? Was Jesus merely using this phrase as a demonstration of his perfect magnanimity, as he sought forgiveness for the unworthy? If we deny the objective and universal nature of God’s forgiveness in Christ, we have to come up with some creative explanation for this remarkable word from the cross, in which Jesus asks that the impenitent, unbelieving, evildoing enemies of the gospel be forgiven!

Jesus’ words of intercession underscore the truth that forgiveness was for *them*! God’s forgiveness is for the wicked, for the undeserving, for the ignorant, for blasphemers, for the cruelest, coldest and most heartless evildoer. Whether they finally received or rejected it, Jesus’ blood was shed for them, and forgiveness was complete for them. The debt of the soldiers who crucified Jesus was paid and canceled at the cross.

¹⁷ Apology IV, 103, selections printed below.

1 Timothy 4:10

¹⁰That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe (NIV).

¹⁰εἰς τοῦτο γὰρ κοπιῶμεν καὶ ὀνειδιζόμεθα, ὅτι ἠλπίκαμεν ἐπὶ θεῷ ζῶντι, ὃς ἐστὶν σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, μάλιστα πιστῶν.

The words “salvation,” “save,” and “Savior” are words that are used in Scripture in both a universal and an individual sense. Here Paul states clearly that Jesus is σωτὴρ πάντων ἀνθρώπων, “the Savior of all men.” He then goes on to expound it further, pointing out the special relationship that believers have with their God, with the words μάλιστα πιστῶν, “even more so of the faithful.” The genitive could indicate possession (“all men’s Savior, and especially believers”), but since the emphasis in the verse is on θεῷ ζῶντι, and the subject of the clause is σωτὴρ, the context favors an objective genitive. All people are the objects of the Savior’s work, especially believers. We love to say, “Jesus is my Savior.”

God is not merely the potential Savior of all people; he *is* the Savior of all people. If God is the Savior of all people, and Christ’s redemptive work is complete, then we can say that God saved all people in Christ. To say that God did not save all people in Christ would be to say that Jesus’ work was incomplete or not for all. Consider these parallels in the way we speak:

Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the world: Christ atoned for the world.

Christ is the world’s Redeemer: Christ redeemed the world.

Christ is the world’s Savior: Christ saved the world.

Paul’s inclusion of the words μάλιστα πιστῶν emphasizes that the benefit of God’s saving work, final entrance into the kingdom of heaven, is only realized by those who have faith in Christ.

Thinking people recognize that words are used in different ways. So it is with the words “saved” and “salvation”:

- (1) All people were *saved* at the cross.
- (2) “Brother, are you *saved*?”
- (3) Not all people will be *saved*.

This isn’t paradoxical; it’s simply using the word “saved” in three different ways. In the first sentence it refers to the once-for-all, completed work of Christ at Calvary, through which the Savior of the world *really did save the world* through the shedding of his own blood and his glorious resurrection to life. In the second sentence, *saved* is used as a descriptor for a person who stands presently in a state of grace through faith (for reasons that should be obvious to Lutherans, we don’t customarily use the word *saved* in this way, preferring different terminology to describe believers in Jesus). In the third sentence it refers to the final result of his work, namely achievement of the eternal bliss that the Savior is even now preparing for his faithful believers when we are finally *saved* with him in heaven. We’ll see more of how words are used differently in different contexts and with different absolute meanings in the third section of this paper, when we address the issue of technical precision in speaking and writing about justification.

Ephesians 1:7

⁷In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God’s grace (NIV).

⁷ ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν διὰ τοῦ αἵματος αὐτοῦ, τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν παραπτωμάτων, κατὰ τὸ πλοῦτος τῆς χάριτος αὐτοῦ

There is no question that this whole section of Ephesians is referring specifically to believers. The whole context, in which Paul speaks of the predestination of the saints, is intended for the joy, amazement and comfort of God’s people in Christ. Continuing our study on proper use of terminology, however, the point of interest in this passage is how Paul equates “redemption through his blood” with “the forgiveness of sins.”

The equation of the two terms “redemption” and “forgiveness” here illustrates that they are interchangeable. Just as we can say, “God redeemed the world in Christ,” so we can say, “God forgave the world its sins in Christ.” The point in this passage is not to teach the universality of redemption or forgiveness; this passage does not specifically teach universal redemption or forgiveness in this context. But it does show us that the two terms are equivalents. If the

terms are interchangeable, then to deny one is to deny the other. It is then impossible to say, “I believe in universal redemption through his blood,” but then to say, “I reject universal forgiveness of sins.”

The context here is specifically subjective: Only believers take possession of these universal realities through faith. Only we believers *have* (ἔχομεν) redemption through his blood, and this only ἐν ᾧ, that is, in Christ. In the same way we can say that only we believers *have* or *possess* the forgiveness of sins, and this only in Christ.

1 Timothy 3:16

¹⁶Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory (NIV).

¹⁶καὶ ὁμολογουμένως μέγα ἐστὶν τὸ τῆς εὐσεβείας μυστήριον· Ὃς ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι, ὤφθη ἀγγέλοις, ἐκηρύχθη ἐν ἔθνεσιν, ἐπιστεύθη ἐν κόσμῳ, ἀνελήμφθη ἐν δόξῃ.

Paul is writing to Timothy about the work of Christ. Of Jesus he says, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι. The NIV translates this, “He was vindicated by the Spirit.” A preferable translation is, “He was justified in the Spirit.” The word Paul is inspired to use here is ἐδικαιώθη. How was Jesus justified? He had no sins of his own for which he had to be declared righteous or found “not-guilty.” The reference is to Jesus’ resurrection. Just as we see in Romans 1:1-4 and in Romans 4:25, the resurrection of Jesus is the justification of Jesus as the world’s sin-bearer, and the justification of the world is completed in Jesus.

Johann Gerhard saw in this passage testimony that Christ was absolved for the sin of the world that was laid upon him. Gerhard inferred that in the absolution of Christ, the world itself is absolved in him:

Because Christ arose, we are therefore no longer in sins, since most assuredly full and perfect satisfaction has been made for them, and because in the resurrection of Christ we are absolved of our sins, so that they no longer can condemn us before the judgment bar of God . . .

This power of the resurrection of Christ includes not only the application of the righteousness that avails before God, but also the actual absolution from sins, and even the blessed resurrection to life, since by virtue of the resurrection of Christ we are freed from the corporal and spiritual death of sins. Some bring in here the apostolic teaching in 1 Timothy 3:16, *God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit* (namely through the resurrection by God the Father) that is, he was absolved of the sins of the whole world, which he as Sponsor took upon himself, so that he might make perfect satisfaction for them to God the Father. Moreover in rising from the dead he showed by this very fact that satisfaction has been made by him for these sins, and all of the same have been expiated by the sacrifice of his death.¹⁸

Romans 5:18

¹⁸Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men (NIV).

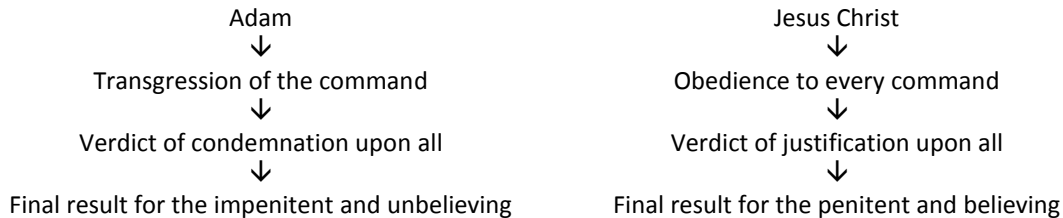
¹⁸Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δι’ ἐνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι’ ἐνὸς δικαιώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς·

This whole section of Romans from 5:12 through 5:21 lays out the stark and simple contrast between the effect of the action of the first Adam and the effect of the action of the second Adam, namely Christ. Adam sinned and brought condemnation. Christ was obedient and brought justification. Romans 5:18 most clearly lays out the contrast between the results of Adam’s sin and the results of Christ’s righteousness.

¹⁸ Gerhard, Johann. *Disputationes Theologicae* (Jena, 1656) p. 1450. *Quia Christus resurrexit, ideo non amplius sumus in peccatis, quia scilicet praestita est pro illis plena et perfecta satisfactio, et quia in Christi resurrectione a peccatis nostris sumus absoluti, ut non amplius coram Dei iudicio nos condemnare possint. . . Haec vis resurrectionis Christi complectitur non solum iustitiae coram Deo valentis applicationem, sed etiam actualem a peccatis absolutionem, ac tandem beatam ad vitam resurrectionem, quia virtute resurrectionis Christi a morte spirituali peccatorum et corporali liberamur. Quidam huc accommodant locum Apostolicum 1 Tim. 3. v 16. Deus manifestatus est in carne, justificatus Spiritu, videl. per resurrectionem a Deo Patre, hoc est, absolutus a peccatis totius mundi, quae ipse ut Sponsor in se receperat, ut pro illis perfectam satisfactionem Deo Patri praestaret, resurgendo enim ex morte ipso facto demonstravit, pro peccatis illis a se esse satisfactum, eaque omnia sacrificio mortis suae fuisse expiata.*

The result of ἐνὸς παραπτώματος, “one transgression,” was κατάκριμα, “a verdict of condemnation,” upon all men. The word κατάκριμα denotes a verdict or judgment, not a process.¹⁹ All people were found universally guilty because of Adam’s one rebellion against God’s command. In the same way also (οὕτως καὶ draws the parallel contrast), through the ἐνὸς δικαίωματος, “one declaration of righteousness,” comes εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους, “upon all people,” for the action of δικαίωσιν ζωῆς, “justification of life.”

We cannot help but be struck by the parallel structure of Paul’s sentence. He lays out side by side the condemnation of all through the transgression of Adam and the justification of all through the work of Christ. The judgment in each case is both objective and universal. Whether a sinner acknowledges it, or not, he stands condemned through Adam’s sin; the sin and condemnation are an objective and universal reality, regardless of personal perception. Whether a sinner acknowledges it, or not, he was acquitted through Christ’s work; the atonement and accompanying not-guilty verdict are an objective and universal reality, regardless of personal perception.



Conclusion from Scripture

We could continue with many other passages from Scripture that reinforce the same truths. As I noted above, the overriding emphasis with the passages I selected for close study is on the universal, objective aspect of justification, since that’s largely the point of contention today. When we teach universal objective justification we are not denying justification by faith. None of these passages deny justification by faith. There is only one justification. There is only one forgiveness of sins. The point supported by these and other passages is that justification is both general and personal. If we say that justification is only personal we teach justification narrowly, incompletely and incorrectly, and we end up ascribing an efficient role to faith. If we say that justification is exclusively general and universal, we end up teaching universalism or, a step short of that, Huberism (see below). The doctrine of justification must be taught completely in all its aspects.

Passages from Scripture or the Book of Concord that speak of justification in subjective, personal terms cannot be used to refute objective justification. In the same way, passages that speak of justification in general, objective, or universal terms cannot be used to refute subjective justification. The reinforcement of one does not undercut the other. Passages that teach objective justification are used to teach objective justification, while passages that teach subjective justification are used to teach subjective justification.²⁰

Hold to justification confessionally

The term "universal objective justification" is a relatively new term in the Christian church. Samuel Huber (c. 1547-1624) used the term "universal justification" in the late 1500s, but his use and explanation of the term were rejected by orthodox Lutherans. Orthodox theologians of the 1800s used a number of terms to describe the salvation that Christ completed at the cross and empty tomb, including general justification and objective reconciliation. But the concept of an entirely Christocentric, completed forgiveness for all people that exists before faith and as the object of saving faith is found even in the writings of the ancient church fathers. St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407),²¹ in his *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, spoke the same language as later Lutherans:

I (7) "All have sinned," says Paul. They were locked, as it were, in a prison by the curse of their transgression of the Law. The sentence of the judge was going to be passed against them. A letter from the King came down from heaven. Rather, the King himself came. *Without examination, without exacting an account, he set all men free from the chains of their sins.*

¹⁹ Greek words ending in -μα can indicate a verdict, a judgment, a proclamation, a declaration, or a completed act; words ending in -σις generally indicate a process or an act in process.

²⁰ We embrace a parallel principle in our division of God’s word into law and gospel. The law (e.g., “God hates sinners,” Psalm 5:5) cannot be used to deny the gospel (“God loves sinners,” John 3:16), neither can the gospel be used to deny the law. Law passages teach the law, while gospel passages teach the gospel.

²¹ St. John Chrysostom was an important figure in the early Christian church, serving as bishop of Constantinople. He was known for his preaching eloquence, whence came the name “Chrysostom,” or “Golden Tongue.”

II (1) *All, then, who run to Christ are saved by his grace and profit from his gift.* But those who wish to find justification from the Law will also fall from grace. They will not be able to enjoy the King's loving-kindness because they are striving to gain salvation by their own efforts; they will draw down on themselves the curse of the Law because by the works of the Law no flesh will find justification [italics mine].²²

At the time of the Lutheran Reformation, the *universal* import of Jesus' saving work on the cross was not a dividing issue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. John Calvin was the one who promoted the notion of limited atonement, a heresy which the Roman Church and the Evangelical Lutherans both rejected entirely. Consequently, there are relatively few apologetic statements in the Lutheran Confessions that press home the point of the work of Christ as a completed reality, accomplished for the whole world, universal in its scope. It is a truth the confessors simply took as a given. The Roman Catholic treatment of forgiveness in some ways parallels Luther's two-fold treatment of the topic—forgiveness won and forgiveness delivered. The primary point of contention was in the delivery, in *how* the work of Christ for the world was brought to bear on the individual sinner. According to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the medieval scholastics, solidified by the Council of Trent, the forgiveness of sins is not distributed gratuitously in the gospel but rather earned by meritorious works and participation in the sacramental system. It was in response to this false Roman notion that the confessors repeatedly emphasize justification by grace through faith.

It doesn't surprise us, then, that when the Lutheran Confessions treat justification the points of dispute center largely on questions about how justification or the remission of sins are delivered to and obtained by the sinner. What is the nature of faith (simple trust or *fides formata?*), the nature of grace (undeserved love in the heart of God or *gratia infusa?*), the nature of man's will and participation (*arbitrium servum* or *arbitrium liberum?*), and the effects of sin (just what is concupiscence, anyway?). It is the second part of justification that the confessions treat most thoroughly, and therefore most of the statements in the Lutheran Confessions and in the writings of Lutheran theologians during the Age of Orthodoxy deal with the personal justification of an individual.

We don't have to look far to see that Martin Chemnitz described justification in subjective terms. In his *Enchiridion*, Chemnitz writes:

145 *In what, then, does justification of man the sinner before God consist according to the statement of the Gospel?*
In this very thing, that God imputes to us the righteousness of the obedience and death of Christ the Mediator and thus justifies us freely out of grace, without our works or merits, alone by faith that apprehends the grace of God the Father and the merit of Christ; that is, He forgives us [our] sins, receives [us] into grace, adopts [us] as [His] sons, and receives [us] to the inheritance of life eternal. Rom 4:24-25, 28; 4:5; 10:4; Gal 3:24; Eph 2:8, 9; Tts 3:5-7.²³

Each clause of Chemnitz' answer above narrows the definition further, so that according to Chemnitz' use of the term here, justification includes faith, forgiveness, adoption, and even reception into eternal life. (One could even understand Chemnitz' point to say that a sinner is not *finally justified*— we need to understand the Aristotelian causation language of the scholastics—until he is received into the inheritance of life eternal, *i.e.*, his soul is in heaven.) He goes on to say:

149 *Are all men justified and saved because of this righteousness of the Son of God?*
The way is broad that leads to damnation, and there are many that walk in it. Mt 7:13.²⁴

In other words, there is no such thing as "universal individual justification." We do not deny this treatment of justification. We embrace and agree with Chemnitz on all of these points, recognizing that he is treating justification narrowly.

But even as Chemnitz defined justification narrowly, he still described what we today call "universal objective justification" in a different way, using different terminology:

The Gospel reveals and declares this mystery, which was hidden for long ages, that since the human race could not make satisfaction to the Law and the Law could in no way be dissolved and destroyed, God made a transfer of the Law to another person (*a matter which belongs to the article of justification* [italics mine]) who should fulfill the Law both by

²² St. John Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, Discourse II, I:7-II:1, in *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 68, trans. Paul W. Harkins (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979), 38-39.

²³ Chemnitz, Martin. *Ministry, Word and Sacraments: An Enchiridion*. Trans. Luther Poellot (Saint Louis: Concordia, 1981) p. 72.

²⁴ Chemnitz, *Ministry, Word and Sacraments*, p. 74.

satisfaction and obedience for the whole human race. And because that person is both God and man, therefore His satisfaction is the expiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), and hence Christ is the end of the Law for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).²⁵

Chemnitz calls the transfer of the world's sin onto Christ "a matter which belongs to the article of justification."

Deniers of objective justification try to make the case that the doctrine is not found in the Lutheran Confessions. I respectfully disagree. While it doesn't receive nearly the emphasis as the doctrine of justification through faith (for reasons given above), the doctrine is taught implicitly throughout, and in some cases explicitly.

Chemnitz is also the author of Article III of the Formula of Concord, which ties redemption, justification, and salvation together in the past tense to the completed work of Christ. Article III is clear that the righteousness of faith is credited through faith alone, but it uses "justified" universally in the past tense to describe Jesus' finished work:

In opposition to both these groups it has been unanimously taught by the other teachers of the Augsburg Confession that Christ is our righteousness not according to His divine nature alone, nor according to His human nature alone, but according to both natures. *For he has redeemed, justified, and saved us from our sins as God and man, through His complete obedience* [italics mine]. Therefore, the righteousness of faith is the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and our adoption as God's children only on account of Christ's obedience. Christ's obedience alone—out of pure grace—is credited for righteousness through faith alone to all true believers. They are absolved from all their unrighteousness by this obedience.²⁶

The Apology to the Augsburg Confession, quoting St. Ambrose of Milan with approval, says that God forgave the sins of the world in Christ at the cross:

For, by the Law, sin is perceived, but guilt is not taken away. The Law, which declared all people sinners, seemed to have done harm. *But when the Lord Jesus Christ came, He forgave to all people the sin, which no one could avoid* [italics mine]. And, by the shedding of His own blood, he blotted out the handwriting that was against us. . . Because after the whole world became subject, Christ took away the sin of the whole world, as John testified, saying in John 1:29, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" . . . But he who is righteous has righteousness given to him because he was justified from the washing of Baptism. Faith, therefore, is that which frees through the blood of Christ, because he is blessed "whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered" (Psalm 32:1).²⁷

This is a clear example of the how our Lutheran confessions treat the forgiveness of sins in two different ways. The first is universal and in the past tense. Forgiveness is the result of the completed work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Note that the Apology doesn't just say that Jesus won or achieved or obtained forgiveness for the whole world. It explicitly says, "He *forgave* to all people the sin." This is important for understanding that forgiveness is not just an unfulfilled promise that is available. It is a completed reality. Our confession says, "He *forgave* to all people the sin." The second treatment of forgiveness is particular and in the present tense. "Faith, therefore, *is* that which *frees* through the blood of Christ, because he is blessed 'whose transgression *is forgiven*, whose sin *is covered* [italics mine]."

The notion that forgiveness does not happen until a sinner believes was foreign to the Lutheran theologians. According to the Augsburg Confession, "remission of sins" and "justification" are treated as completed realities that exist because of Christ's complete work. Implicit in the idea that something can be grasped is the idea that it exists beforehand to be grasped; it must exist as an objective reality. This is the object for faith to grasp:

For *remission of sins and justification* is apprehended by faith, as also the voice of Christ attests: When you shall have done all these things, say: We are unprofitable servants (Luke 17:10). The same is also taught by the Fathers. For Ambrose says: It is ordained of God that he who believes in Christ is saved, freely receiving *remission of sins*, without works, by faith alone [italics mine].²⁸

The Apology emphasizes the necessity of faith, but it treats the object of faith as something that is completed and certain. Those who do not believe commit a great blasphemy by rejecting Christ and his completed work, but their unbelief does not undo God's solemn declaration:

For as God swears that He does not wish the death of a sinner, He shows that faith is required, in order that we may believe the one swearing, and be firmly confident that He forgives us. The authority of the divine promises ought by itself

²⁵ Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part 1. Trans. Fred Kramer (St. Louis: Concordia, 2008) p. 498.

²⁶ SD, III, 4.

²⁷ Apology IV, 103.

²⁸ AC VI.

to be great in our estimation. But this promise has also been confirmed by an oath. *Therefore, if any one be not confident that he is forgiven, he denies that God has sworn what is true, than which a more horrible blasphemy cannot be imagined.* For Tertullian speaks thus: He invites by reward to salvation, even swearing. Saying, "I live," He desires that He be believed. Oh, blessed we, for whose sake God swears! Oh, most miserable if we believe not the Lord even when He swears! [italics mine]²⁹

Luther in the Smalcald Articles speaks of justification in the same terms as redemption and salvation, tying them all together. The Smalcald Articles also understand Romans 3:23-25 and Romans 4:25 together with John 1:29 and Isaiah 53:6 as applying to the whole world:

The first and chief article is this: 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).³⁰

The Formula of Concord equates "reconciliation" with "forgiveness of sins": "The righteousness of faith before God consists alone in the gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins, which is presented to us out of pure grace, for the sake of the only merit of the Mediator, Christ, and is received through faith alone in the promise of the Gospel."³¹ The Formula also makes it explicitly clear that "to justify" and "to forgive" are one and the same: "We believe, teach and confess that according to the usage of Holy Scripture the word justify means in this article, to absolve, that is, declare free from sins."³²

Luther's Large Catechism speaks of forgiveness as existing objectively even before we believe it or ask for it:

Dear Father, forgive our trespasses. Not as though He did not forgive sin without and even before our prayer (For He has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness before we prayed or ever thought about it). But this is the intent that we may recognize and accept such forgiveness.³³

Luther himself can be quoted most extensively as teaching an objective, universal forgiveness. In his lectures on the book of Galatians delivered in 1535 he writes:

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.*³⁴ 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.

If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on him, then they are still on the world. *Again, if Christ himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through him.*³⁵ But if he is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them.

Now let us see how two such extremely contrary things come together in this person. Not only my sins and yours, but the sins of the entire world, past, present, and future, attack him, try to damn him, and do in fact damn him. But because in the same person, who is the highest, the greatest, and the only sinner, there is also eternal and invincible righteousness, therefore these two converge: the highest, the greatest, and the only sin; and the highest, the greatest, and the only

²⁹ Apology XII (V), 94.

³⁰ SA I.

³¹ FC III, 30.

³² Epitome III, 7.

³³ LC, Lord's Prayer, 88.

³⁴ Luther's German here is even more forceful than the English translation in the American Edition: *Durch solchen unschuldigen Tod Christi ist die ganze Welt von Sünden gereinigt und entlediget, und derhalben erlöset von dem Tode und allem Uebel.* Luther, Martin, *Luther's Galater Brief* (Philadelphia and Leipzig: Schäfer u. Koradi, 1892), p. 349.

³⁵ *So Christus aller unserer Sünden, die wir je gethan haben, selbst schuldig geworden ist, so sind ja wir von allen Sünden abfolvirt, frei und los gesprochen; doch ist solches nicht gefchehen durch uns selbst, unfer Werk und Verdienst, sondern durch ihn.* *Ibid.*, p. 350.

righteousness. Here one of them must yield and be conquered. . . *Thus in Christ all sin is conquered, killed, and buried; and righteousness remains the victor and the ruler eternally.*

Therefore Christ, who is the divine power, righteousness, blessing, grace, and life, conquers and destroys these monsters—sin, death, and the curse—without weapons or battle, in his own body and in himself.

To the extent that Christ rules by his grace in the hearts of the faithful, there is no sin or death or curse. But where Christ is not known, there these things remain. And so all who do not believe lack this blessing and this victory. "For this," as John says, "is our victory, faith" (1 John 5:4).³⁶

Luther underscored the truth that since sin has been forgiven and removed in the sacrifice of Christ, the only judgment that is left is God's judgment that falls upon unbelief:

"But your sin shall be pardoned, death shall be abolished; I shall no longer remember man's sin, in which he is born and in which he lived. The accounts are to be considered settled. God will not again call a single sin to mind. Just believe in my Son." Now what is still lacking? Why the judgment if all sin has been removed by the Son? *The answer is that the judgment is incurred by man's refusal to accept Christ, the Son of God.* Of course, man's sin, both that inherited from Adam and that committed by man himself, is deserving of death. But this judgment results from man's unwillingness to hear, to tolerate, and to accept the Savior, who removed sin, bore it on His shoulders, and locked up the portals of hell.

It is expressly stated here that Christ came and removed the sin of the world so completely that it is *entirely deleted, entirely forgiven.*³⁷

In Luther's own commentary on Romans 3:23-25 he says that God "justifies all men" and this justification is received through faith:

The very fact that Christ suffered for us, and through His suffering became a propitiation for us, proves that we are (*by nature*) unrighteous, and that we for whom He became a propitiation, must obtain our righteousness solely from God, now that forgiveness for our sins has been secured by Christ's atonement. By the fact that God forgives our sins (*only*) through Christ's propitiation and so justifieth us by faith, He shows how necessary is His righteousness (*for all*). There is no one whose sins are not forgiven (*in Christ*) [italics in source].

I prefer the explanation: God reveals Himself through the remission of sins that are past as *the One who justifies all men.* His gracious remission of sins proves Him to be the God who is just and who alone has power to justify [italics mine].³⁸

In his commentary on the power of the Keys, Luther points out that the validity of forgiveness depends upon the power of the Word, not upon the faith of the person hearing the absolution. The reality of the forgiveness offered does not hinge upon the faith of the hearer:

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it. St. Paul says in Rom. 3 [:3]: "Their faithlessness nullifies the faithfulness of God." We are not talking here either about people's belief or disbelief regarding the efficacy of the keys. We realize that few believe. We are speaking of what the keys accomplish and give. He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key's fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king's fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.³⁹

Luther makes a clear distinction between forgiveness achieved (objectively and universally) and forgiveness distributed (and appropriated subjectively) when he writes against the iconoclastic and anti-sacramental heavenly prophets:

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world . . .

³⁶ LW AE, Vol. 26, p. 280-282, excerpts (italics mine).

³⁷ LW AE, Vol. 22, p. 382-383.

³⁸ Luther, Martin. *Commentary on Romans* trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), p. 78-79.

³⁹ LW AE, Vol. 40, p. 366-367.

If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross. Therefore Luther has rightly taught that whoever has a bad conscience from his sins should go to the sacrament and obtain comfort, not because of the bread and wine, not because of the body and blood of Christ, but because of the word which in the sacrament offers, presents, and gives the body and blood of Christ, given and shed for me.⁴⁰

Johann Gerhard understood that faith has what it grasps as its object. All of the objects of faith are preexisting. They exist to be apprehended as completed realities.

The relationship, therefore, is between the promise of God and our faith; faith rests in the promise and, believing, becomes a participant in the good promises, just as we heard above from Augustine [reference omitted] regarding the Word of God: "O sinner, do you believe in Christ?" You say, "I believe." "What do you believe? That all your sins can be freely forgiven through this? You have what you believed!" . . .

For if we want to listen to Scripture, true and saving faith that grasps the words of the promise grasps the grace of reconciliation and of justification. It grasps righteousness. It grasps the adoption of the children of God. It grasps the Spirit of sonship. It grasps true and saving knowledge of Christ. It grasps eternal life. It grasps the remaining gifts of God that we ask from him [references omitted].⁴¹

The concepts of universal absolution, objective forgiveness, the complete swallowing up of sin in the person and body of Christ, sending sin away by imputing it to Jesus, canceling the debt of the world's sin, and declaring the world to be acquitted and sin-free in Christ—all of these things are taught implicitly, and in so many cases explicitly, in the writings of Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard, and other Lutheran scholastics. But what was, for the most part, implicit in the writings of early Lutheran fathers had to be expounded explicitly when the church was confronted with later challenges to the Christocentricity of salvation.

The problem of pietism

If the only question for Lutherans were whether a sinner becomes personally justified by works or by faith, then the matter of "what is justification?" might well have been settled with the publication of Book of Concord. Unfortunately, the introduction of new heresies didn't stop in 1580. Heretical camels kept on sticking their noses under the orthodox tent, and faithful confessors continually had to beat back new threats to the truth. Following the Age of Orthodoxy came the Age of Pietism. Pietism emphasized the personal, the subjective, the experiential and the emotional to the point where it became *all* about the individual. The strength of one's individual repentance (how genuinely sorry are you?), the earnestness of one's spiritual anguish and wrestling, the intensity and sincerity of one's faith (do you really, *really* believe?)—these became the measure of a Christian, to the virtual exclusion of objective truth. The objective value of Word and Sacrament took a back seat to personal experience and individual preference. Pietism flowed easily into rationalism (if it's all about my personal experience, shouldn't it make sense?), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church drifted far from its orthodox moorings. This sad climate of touchy-feely, sense-oriented religiosity downplayed doctrine, denigrated the office of the ministry, minimized the importance of the sacraments, and plunged the Lutheran Church into a morass of subjectivism and doctrinal ambiguity.

But even some pietists were able to articulate the universal and objective nature of justification correctly. Johann Jakob Rambach (1693-1735)⁴² is sometimes flamed in the blogosphere today as one of the supposed inventors of

⁴⁰ Luther, AE Vol. 40, p. 213-214.

⁴¹ Gerhard, Johann. *Locorum Theologorum*. Locus XIX: *De Justificatione per Fidem*, §178, 2 (Frankfurt and Hamburg: Zacharia Hertelius, 1657) p. 415. Later in the same section Gerhard uses the word "justification" in the personal sense to describe the application and final result of everything that is apprehended by faith: "In proper words we don't say that justification is grasped by faith; but we say that Christ and in Christ the mercy of God, remission of sins, righteousness and eternal life are grasped by faith, and in this way become justification" (§178, 3). Gerhard spoke in a way different from AC VI, noting justification as a final result as distinct from its component elements, because he was refuting Bellarmine's argument that faith only justifies in such a way that charity and righteousness become inherent in the believer.

⁴² Johann Jakob Rambach, D.D., was a member of the Theological Faculty at Halle and director of the Paedagogium at Giessen, Hesse. He was a prolific author and hymn writer. According to C. F. W. Walther, Rambach's pietistic sentiments were evident in his claim that anyone who could not state the exact time of his conversion and reception into grace could not be certain that he was a true Christian. (I have not independently corroborated Walther's claims about Rambach.) But in this selection he concurs with

universal objective justification, but in fact he taught in accord with the orthodox Johann Gerhard on the matter of vicarious justification in Christ, and he wrote nothing different than what Luther himself had written against the heavenly prophets in 1525 regarding justification acquired and justification appropriated. Rambach writes:

Christ was in His resurrection first of all justified for His own Person, Is. 50:5, 1 Tim. 3:16, since the righteousness of God declared that it had been paid and satisfied in full by this our Substitute, and issued Him as it were a receipt thereof, and that happened in His resurrection, when He was released from His Debtor's prison and set free. But since the Substitute was now justified, then *in him also all debtors were co-justified*" (*Ausführliche Erklärung der Epistel an die Römer*, p. 322). The same to Rom. 5:19: "*The justification of the human race indeed also occurred*, in respect to the acquisition, in one moment, in the moment in which Christ rose and was thus declared righteous; but in respect of the appropriation *it still continues till the last day*" (*Ibid.*, p. 386) [italics and references in the original].⁴³

In the controversy with Rome, the main point of contention was between the doctrine of justification by faith alone in contrast to Rome's doctrine of justification by faith *and* works. It was in response to pietism and rationalism that faithful theologians were compelled to grapple again with the question of what "justification by faith alone" means. Does "justification by faith" mean "justification *because of* faith" or does it mean "justification *through* faith"? What does faith do? Does faith cause something to happen? Or does faith merely apprehend or grasp something that has already happened and exists as a completed reality? Is the value of faith defined by its inherent strength of conviction (it doesn't matter what you believe, as long as long as you believe it strongly and sincerely)? Or is the value of faith defined by the intrinsic value of the object it grasps?

Especially in response to Pietism, it was necessary to emphasize again that faith is *instrumental*; it is never *efficient*. It is never an agent, causing something to happen. It lays hold of, receives, and grasps something that has already happened. Faith has an object. Johann Gerhard had taught:

It is one thing to be justified *on account of* faith and another to be justified *by* faith. In the former view, faith is the meritorious, in the latter, the instrumental cause. [There must be an organ by which I come into the possession and enjoyment of what someone offers me.] We are not justified on account of faith as a merit, but by faith which lays hold of the merit of Christ.⁴⁴

This was not a new doctrine; church fathers, the Lutheran Confessions, and orthodox dogmaticians had said the same thing. But the climate of the times required a shift away from the subjective and an emphasis on the objective. Some have claimed that the doctrine of universal objective justification is an outgrowth of pietism. This is true, but not in the sense that the teaching was a natural extension of pietistic thought. It was rather a necessary *reaction* in opposition to pietistic thought. Theologians returned to the objective reality of forgiveness for all in Christ in contrast to the emotional and faith-centered subjectivism of pietism.

As I read documents from the early days of the Synodical Conference, I can't help being impressed by how carefully these faithful men treated the doctrine of justification. They were well acquainted with Samuel Huber, and they were careful not to slip into his heretical excesses. In their meticulous exposition of the doctrine, they spoke in perfect harmony with Luther, the confessions, and their earlier dogmatic counterparts. C. F. W. Walther is believed to be the author of the essay delivered at the opening convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872.⁴⁵ Regardless of who wrote the paper, the essayist does a masterful job of expounding the doctrine of universal justification, while maintaining important distinctions. Some excerpts:

Therefore his [Christ's] obedience consists not only in his suffering and dying, but also in his spontaneous subjection to the law in our stead and his keeping of the law in so perfect a fashion that, reckoning it to us as righteousness, God forgives us our sins, accounts us holy and righteous, and saves us forever on account of this entire obedience which, by doing and suffering, in life and in death, Christ rendered for us to his heavenly Father. This righteousness is offered to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and in the sacraments, and is applied, appropriated, and accepted by faith, so that thus believers have reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, the grace of God, adoption, and the inheritance of eternal life.

Johann Gerhard that the justification of the world took place in the verdict of acquittal pronounced upon Christ in his resurrection, and he agrees with Luther in the twofold distinction of forgiveness as a once-for-all acquisition and an ongoing appropriation.

⁴³ Marquart. *Justification—Objective and Subjective*, p. 21.

⁴⁴ Gerhard, Johann. *Locus de Justificatione per Fidem*, §179, 7. Quoted in C. F. W. Walther, D.D. *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. Trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1921), p. 273.

⁴⁵ In the Afterword to the essay, Kurt Marquart attributes authorship to F. A. Schmidt. Additional scholarship points to authorship by Walther, which Marquart subsequently acknowledged as being more likely.

Further, since as was mentioned above, it is the obedience of the entire person, therefore it is a perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race, since it satisfied the eternal and immutable righteousness of God revealed in the law.⁴⁶

The author is careful not to say that justification is *given* to the whole world or *accepted* by the whole world. Thus he maintains Luther's twofold distinction:

Therefore it is so important that Christ did not bring along a humanity from heaven, but assumed it from the Virgin Mary, for now our humanity is truly justified in Him. That we now are to preach, and he who grasps this is helped, and he is a blessed man. Miserable on the other hand is he to whom this does not appeal, for God shouts it out into the world: "All things are ready," now quickly come and accept grace, salvation, and life, but alas, proud man does not want to know anything of this most precious gift of God, which he *offers and presents (darreicht)* in the Gospel, yes, properly understood, even *imparts* to the whole world. It is better, however, not to use the word "*impart*" (*mittheilen*) of the universal justification of the world, because in our German language it almost always signifies not only a *presenting (Darreichen)* from God's side, but also an *accepting* from man's side.⁴⁷

The 1872 essayist also explains why in the aftermath of the Huber controversy the term "universal justification" fell out of favor:

But now that God has through the raising of His Son signed the letter of pardon for the sinners, and sealed it with His divine seal, we can confidently preach: the world is justified, the world is reconciled with God, which latter expression too would be impermissible if the former were not true. Our old dogmatists too would themselves have used the expression more—since they believed and taught the substance—had not *Huber* shortly before Gerhard's time taught the God had not only justified all men already, but had also elected them to eternal life. In order to avoid the appearance of agreement with this erroneous doctrine, they used the expression only rarely. Already in the year 1593 the Wuerttemberg theologians (Heerbrand, Gerlach, Hafenreffer, Osiander, Bidembach, and others) conceded to Huber with reference to the doctrine of justification that he seemed to deviate from them in it "*in phrasi tamen magis ac loquendi modo, quam re ipso,*" that is, "more however in the expression and in the manner of speaking than in the substance itself" (Loescher's *Unschuldige Nachrichten*, 1730, p. 567). The Wittenberg theologians (Gesner, Leyser, Hunnius, and others) did not want to tolerate Huber's expression: "*Christus contulit proprie redemptionem toti generi humano,*" that is, "Christ imparted the redemption to the entire human race *in the proper sense,*" because the *actual imparting,* "as it is taken in the theological schools," refers to the *appropriation* (see Wittenberg *Consilia* I, 642ff) [italics and references in the original].⁴⁸

C. F. W. Walther, in his now-famous Easter sermon from 1846, spoke in concert with Johann Gerhard two centuries earlier, as he pointed to the resurrection of Jesus as proof of the verdict of acquittal that had been declared upon the world in Christ:

Jesus, when He was raised from the dead, was absolved for all sin, but since it was not for Himself but for all people that Christ died, who was it really that was set free, who was it really that was absolved when Jesus rose from the dead? It was all people! Just as all Israel triumphed when David defeated Goliath, so all humanity triumphed when Jesus defeated sin, death and Hell. And so we hear Paul saying in his second epistle to the Corinthians, "We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died." And again in his epistle to the Romans, "Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men." Just as Christ's condemnation was the condemnation of all mankind, Christ's death the death of all mankind, Christ's payment the payment for all mankind, even so Christ's life is now the life of all mankind, His acquittal the acquittal of all mankind, His justification the justification of all mankind, His absolution the absolution of all mankind.⁴⁹

Why the emphasis on universal objective justification today?

A notable shift in emphasis on the importance of the doctrine of universal objective justification has taken place over the years. Martin Luther said that sinners who are troubled by their sins should not run to the cross or hold to the sufferings of Christ but should go the Sacrament of the Altar for the forgiveness and comfort that are distributed there. Johann Gerhard encouraged troubled consciences to flee to the completed satisfaction of Christ and to the sacraments for refuge and consolation. The Gausewitz Catechism, introduced in 1917, revised in 1953, and commonly used in churches of our synod for decades, says nothing of universal objective justification. Yet the 1981 annotations to the

⁴⁶ Marquart, *Justification—Objective and Subjective: A Translation*, p. 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 17-18.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁹ Walther, C. F. W. *Christ's Resurrection—Your Absolution*, trans. Daniel Preus (Sermon Mark 16:1-8, Easter 1846).

Missouri Synod Catechism,⁵⁰ the Kuske Catechism⁵¹ used in the WELS, and the 2001 ELS Catechism⁵² all at least mention the doctrine and its terms or elaborate them in some detail. What changed in the Lutheran church in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century that prompted this new emphasis on objective justification?

After the election and conversion controversies of the late 19th century, confessional Lutherans in America were split largely into two camps. The members and affiliates of the Synodical Conference held to one unified doctrinal position. The American Lutheran Church (ALC) was formed in 1930, a union of a number of smaller synods. Both groups were conservative in their theological outlook, but among the doctrines that separated them were predestination, conversion, and general justification. In 1949 the Common Confession was drafted in an attempt to bridge the doctrinal gap between the ALC and the Missouri Synod, and the Missouri Synod adopted the confession in 1950.

The Common Confession used language very similar to Luther's twofold teaching on forgiveness, but it presented the doctrine of justification in terms that were just vague enough to allow for a broad interpretation and bring together the two sides, which as late as 1938 had been at complete odds on the issue of justification:

By his redemptive work Christ is the Propitiation for the sins of the whole world; hence forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men. (This is often spoken of as objective justification.) "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the Word of Reconciliation," 2 Corinthians 5:19. Hence no sinner need be eternally lost on account of his sins. God offers this propitiation and reconciliation freely to all men through His means of grace. There is nothing in sinful man or in what he may do to merit God's declaring him righteous. God justifies the sinner solely on the basis of Christ's righteousness, which He imputes to the sinner through the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith. Such faith is wrought in man by the Holy Spirit. Through this faith we not only receive from God but also retain the blessed assurance of our righteousness in His sight for Christ's sake.⁵³

The problem with the Common Confession is not what it says. It's what it *doesn't* say. It doesn't say that Christ forgave the sin of the world, only that the forgiveness of sins has been secured and provided. It doesn't say that God has acquitted the world in Christ. The problem with the confession is that it allowed both the ALC and the Missouri Synod to continue to believe as they wished on justification—the ALC denying universal forgiveness, and the Missouri Synod teaching it as the object of faith—and the core difference was not resolved. The Common Confession spoke Luther's language in some respects, but it refused to echo Luther and remained silent in others.

For a confession that addressed the most important article of faith, the Common Confession was deemed insufficient. In 1951 E. H. Wendland was the essayist for the 31st Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Synod. His assignment was to review the Common Confession. He found its language to be vague and inadequate as a confession of the church, because of what it failed to say:

This fact of God's universal declaration of forgiveness stands firmly upon Scripture. Yes, it stands as an accomplished fact, and if no person on earth believed it. It is not conditioned by any attitude or merit on the part of man. It is not even conditioned by man's faith. God did not justify only those whom He knew would come to faith. He did not merely make possible a justification for those who would later believe. God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ. That objective truth, which stands as an accomplished fact, is basic for a correct understanding of the subject of justification. . . Faith is passive in justification. It never enters the picture as a *cause* of justification, but always as an instrument of receiving the universal justification of God pronounced in the Gospel.⁵⁴

As we approach it we naturally ask, "Will it contain an unequivocal statement on objective justification? Will it rule out the thought that faith is first necessary before any justification of God's part is possible?"

We read: "*By His redemptive work Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world; hence, forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men. (This is often spoken of as objective justification.)*"

We readily agree that this first sentence is a statement which sets forth the Scriptural truth of universal redemption. We cannot say that there is anything unscriptural about it, as far as it goes. But we certainly cannot agree with the following

⁵⁰ Koehler, Edward W. A., annotator. *Luther's Small Catechism* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1981) p. 207.

⁵¹ Kuske, David P, *Luther's Catechism*, third edition (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1998) p. 209-211.

⁵² *Catechism & Explanation* (Mankato, Minnesota: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001) p. 143.

⁵³ *The Common Confession Parts I and II* (1949), Article VI.

⁵⁴ Wendland, E. H. *Review of Common Confession Article IV—Justification* (Essay presented at the 31st Biennial WELS Convention at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm Minnesota, 1951) p. 1-2.

parenthetical statement, that this sentence adequately and unequivocally covers objective justification. As a matter of fact, we cannot find the essential characteristic of objective justification mentioned at all, the fact that God “*has already declared* the whole world to be righteous in Christ” (cf. Brief Statement). “Secured and provided” do not convey the thought of an outright . . . [acquittal]⁵⁵, declaring man as acquitted before the bar of God’s justice. Perhaps they can be interpreted in that light by members of the Missouri Synod. But they can just as well be interpreted by the American Lutheran Church to uphold their old position, that although God has secured and provided forgiveness of sin by the redemptive work of Christ, He does not . . . [really]⁵⁶ justify or declare the sinner to be righteous until the first spark of faith is kindled in his heart. The ambiguity of the Common Confession’s definition of objective justification is so evident that we cannot see how it can be accepted as a final settlement of the old controversy. If the committee attempted to find words and expressions behind which both positions on objective justification could reach a compromise statement which would offend neither one side nor the other, it could not have done any better. But is the doctrine of Objective Justification something that Missouri wishes to compromise, compromise to the extent that this central doctrine of Scripture should not be clearly stated? Is the distinction which developed at the turn of the century just so much theological “hair-splitting”?⁵⁷

In the face of efforts to compromise, it is necessary to articulate a clear confession of the truth; this explains the emphasis on the doctrine of universal objective justification during the second part of the twentieth century. Following Missouri’s adoption of the Common Confession and the subsequent breakup of the Synodical Conference in 1961, confessional Lutheran churches began to place much more emphasis on the objective and universal nature of justification. Edmund Reim’s essay tracing the history of the term “objective justification” was presented to the Milwaukee City Conference in 1955.⁵⁸ J. P. Meyer’s *Ministers of Christ*⁵⁹ commentary on 2 Corinthians with its overstatements about people in hell having the status of saints (see below) was first published in 1963, and the teaching has received considerable press since as the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. Since catechisms invariably reflect the issues of their times, it is not surprising that the modern catechisms of all of the descendants of the former Synodical Conference give particular treatment to the doctrine.

⁵⁵ Wendland here uses the word “grant.” I do not find that the use of the word “grant” here is the best use of terminology, because it blurs the distinction between accomplishment and distribution and may imply that God’s forgiveness is universally distributed. I would have preferred a word like “acquittal.”

⁵⁶ Wendland uses “actually.” The English word “actually” here is another unclear term, and it should be understood in the sense of “really.” In Latin the words *realiter* (“really”) and *actualiter* (“at the present time”) mean very different things. The world was *really* justified by Jesus’ death and resurrection. An individual sinner is *presently* justified through the means of grace.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵⁸ Reim, Edmund. *A History of the Term “Objective Justification”* (Essay prepared for the Milwaukee City Conference, Wisconsin Synod, 1955).

⁵⁹ Meyer, Joh. P. *Ministers of Christ* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1963).

Speak of justification correctly

To illustrate the importance of precise articulation, I'll use the doctrine of the Trinity. We must be very careful that we reserve certain terms (e.g., "essence" or "substance") only to describe God's unity, and other terms (e.g. "person" or "hypostasis") to speak of the persons of the Trinity. If we confuse and misuse terms, we can fall into expression of any number of heresies, including tritheism, modalism, Arianism, monarchianism, and more. No one should dispute that the precise and proper use of words is essential to retaining the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.

Some of the problems about justification that have arisen in Lutheran circles are the result of ignorant, careless, or otherwise imprecise communication. When we are speaking about universal justification, we must use universal terms; when speaking about individual justification, we must use individual terms. We should be careful that we do not mix metaphors in such a way that it becomes unclear whether we are speaking universally or individually. We must not extend metaphors beyond the scope of their illustration. We must always properly distinguish between law and gospel, both in their teaching and in their proper application. We cannot use passages that treat objective justification to prove or disprove subjective justification, and we cannot use passages that treat subjective justification to prove or disprove objective justification. We cannot become one-dimensional in our teaching, so that we ignore either the objective or the subjective side of the whole doctrine of justification. Finally, we must recognize that some terms are used universally, some terms are used exclusively for individuals, and some terms are used in both the general and the particular sense.

Speak of justification correctly using words and phrases properly

The words "justify" and "justification" can have different meanings. The word "justify" can variously mean to make righteous or just; to declare righteous or just; to acquit or render a verdict of not-guilty; to vindicate or prove right; to excuse or make an excuse for; to forgive or absolve; to impute or credit righteousness; to clothe with righteousness; and more. "Justification" can variously mean a verdict of not-guilty; forgiveness or absolution; self-righteousness; the righteousness that God gives; the process of crediting righteousness to someone; clothing with righteousness; vindication; an excuse or pretext for something; regeneration; and more. All of these come back to the fundamental meaning of declaring something to be right, but some meanings have very subtle nuances that distinguish them in very important ways from other, very similar meanings (e.g., make righteous vs. declare righteous). Some uses of the term are only applicable in the individual sense; other meanings are applicable universally. Some meanings are synonymous with those of other words (e.g., justification is equated with obtaining the forgiveness of sins in the Lutheran Confessions,⁶⁰ so it is synonymous to say, "a sinner has received forgiveness" or "a sinner has been justified"). Other meanings are not perfectly synonymous and therefore not entirely interchangeable (e.g., a verdict of not-guilty in the universal sense should not be equated with personal clothing with Christ in the individual sense).

The words "forgive" and "forgiveness" are narrower in the scope of their meaning. Forgiveness always means justification, and to forgive always means to justify,⁶¹ but justification and justify do not always mean forgiveness and forgive.⁶² The Greek word ἀφίημι, "to forgive," means to cancel a debt or to send something away. The noun ἄφεσις, "forgiveness," means a release, a cancelation, or a pardon. According to the meaning of the words, then, answering the questions, "Whose sin did God forgive?" and "When did God forgive sin?" is a simple matter of answering the questions, "Whose debt did God cancel?" and "When did God cancel the debt?" Since the word "to forgive" always means "to justify," we can simultaneously ask, "Whom did God justify?" and "When did God justify?"

The answers are beautifully simple: Jesus died to make satisfaction for sin. He died to pay for sin or to remove sin. Jesus canceled the debt of sin when he died on the cross and made payment for sin. Because Jesus' death paid for sin, the debt is removed. There is no more debt to be paid. The debt has already been paid by the blood of Christ. Whose debt was paid? It was the debt of the world, the debt of everyone's sin. The debt was canceled once and for all by the

⁶⁰ Apology, IV, 76, in the Latin: *Consequi remissionem peccatorum est iustificari*. In German: *Vergebung der Sünden erlangen und haben, daselbe heißt vor Gott gerecht und fromm werden.*

⁶¹ Epitome III, 7.

⁶² E.g. *Justification* in the sense of "the process of making someone righteous" is not the same as *forgiveness*. This meaning of justification is a valid meaning of the word, but it doesn't mean the same thing as forgiveness. This meaning of justification refers to a transformation in the character of a person—and it cannot be used in this sense to describe God's justification of the sinner—while forgiveness is forensic, a judicial or legal declaration.

substitutionary payment of Christ's blood for the world's debt of sin. Jesus forgave the sin of the world. Jesus justified the world. All of these are saying the same thing.

I suggest that most problems articulating the doctrine with precision can be avoided if we maintain three distinctions:

- (1) The forgiveness of sins was completed and won at the cross and empty tomb.
- (2) The forgiveness of sins is distributed in the means of grace and received by faith.
- (3) The forgiveness of sins is only ἐν Χριστῷ, in Christ.

Of the first point above, we can also say that forgiveness *was* accomplished (finished, realized, effected, acquired, completed) at the cross and empty tomb. This aspect of forgiveness is tied to the completed work of Christ, so it is expressed in the past tense. This is why we can say, "God *forgave* the world in Christ." It is forgiveness under the Second Article of the Apostles' Creed. This is also why I as a believer can appropriate individually the forgiveness achieved at the cross, and I can say, "Jesus *forgave* my sins when he died on the cross and rose again. Jesus *canceled my debt* when he died on the cross. In the death and resurrection of Christ, I *was forgiven*." What Christian does not find comfort and delight in expressing this confident, unconditional truth?

Of the second point above, we can also say that forgiveness *is* imputed (charged, conferred, dispensed, given, offered, applied) in the means of grace (from God's end). Forgiveness *is* appropriated (taken up, grasped, owned, held, accepted—from man's end).⁶³ This aspect of forgiveness is tied to the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, so we speak in the present tense. This is why we can say, "God *forgives* the sinner in Communion (or Baptism or the Keys)." It is forgiveness under the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed, as Luther explains in his Small Catechism, "In this Christian Church he [the Holy Spirit] daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers." This is also why I can appropriate individually the forgiveness given to me in the means of grace, and I can say, "When I was baptized God forgave my sins in the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. I *am* forgiven when I receive Holy Communion. I *am* forgiven in the absolution; through the minister's use of the loosing key God *forgives* me my sins." What Christian does not find precious comfort and delight in his baptism, in the Lord's Supper, and in the absolution?

Of the third point, we speak precisely by noting that forgiveness is always in Christ. Apart from Christ there exists no forgiveness that has been won. Apart from Christ there exists no forgiveness to be distributed. We could say, "God has forgiven the entire world," but the statement remains incomplete (and could even be abused in favor of universalism) until we clarify, "God has forgiven the entire world *in Christ*."⁶⁴

Whenever we write or speak or analyze a statement on justification, we do well to ensure that the distinctions noted above are being maintained. We recognize that not every speaker or author who confuses these terms is automatically to be counted as a heretic. Ignorance or carelessness might result in well-meaning statements intended to defend a doctrinal point that are imprecise, at best, or even outright wrong. When we encounter such imprecision and error we find an opportunity for correction and encouragement to communicate precisely.

Universal justification can be and has been taught wrongly. One example of such overtly false teaching about universal justification appears in the writings of one Samuel Huber (c. 1547–1624). Huber was born in Switzerland, where he championed the Lutheran doctrine of universal atonement against the Calvinist teaching of the Reformed Church of the Swiss Federation. In 1588 Huber was banished from the Swiss Federation, and he subsequently signed the Formula of Concord. But Huber went too far. In an overreaction to the Reformed doctrines of limited atonement and double predestination, Huber taught universal election. Huber claimed that God has already elected all people to salvation, but only those who believe in Christ actually have the benefits of their election to life realized. Huber also taught a version of justification that might be characterized as universal *subjective* justification.⁶⁵ He taught that God had already personally and individually conferred the righteousness of Christ upon every human being. At the same

⁶³ None of the words describing the receiving action of faith should ever be construed in a synergistic way. Faith is always worked monergistically by the Spirit.

⁶⁴ During the election controversy among Lutheran synods in the second half of the 1800s, proponents of election *intuitu fidei* pointed to statements of orthodox Lutheran theologians of the 1500s and 1600s who used the same phrase. Adherents to the truth had to show that the theologians of the 19th century were using the term *intuitu fidei* incompletely, and as a result they were teaching something very different from what the earlier Lutheran dogmatists meant by the term.

⁶⁵ Huber did not use the term "universal subjective justification," but an analysis of his doctrine and use of the words show that this is essentially what he was teaching when he said that "all men have received remission of sins."

time Huber rejected universalism, maintaining that faith in Christ was still necessary for final salvation. His teaching was opposed by orthodox theologians, including Polycarp Friedrich Leyser and Aegedius Hunnius.

Aegedius Hunnius wrote a series of theses refuting Huberism. His first thesis reveals Huber's error:

Huber professes such a justification, for the sake of which Christ has properly, actually and practically *conferred* redemption on the entire human race in such a way that sins have been *equally* remitted to all men, including the *Turks*, and that all men (including unbelievers) *have received* remission of sins, and that the whole human race has, *in actual fact*, been received into the grace and bosom of God.⁶⁶

Even a cursory review of Huber's teaching (assuming that Hunnius is representing it fairly) reveals that Huber did not observe the distinctions about forgiveness that Luther maintained. First, all of Huber's statements about justification have to be understood in the larger context of his false teachings on universal election. Second, it isn't difficult to see that Huber confuses the achievement and completion of forgiveness of sins at the cross, which are universal, and its distribution and reception, which are individual. All people, including unbelievers have not *received* the remission of sins that was won for them, because the gospel, through which the forgiveness of sins won at the cross is distributed, has not reached all people, and even among those who have heard the gospel, not all have *received* in faith the forgiveness it offers.

It is also clear that Hunnius, responding to Huber's claim that all people are subjectively justified, is using the word *justification* exclusively in a narrow sense:

Huber will *never* be able to explain his way out of this nonsense of insoluble contradictions and most prodigious absurdities. Therefore let him enjoy his justification, and let him bless his *elect and sanctified people* with it —Turks, Jews, and all unbelievers. We, in the meantime, shall restrict justification to believers only, as prescribed by all prophetic and apostolic Scriptures.⁶⁷

Used only in this narrow sense, justification cannot be considered universal. If justification is exclusively defined as "the righteousness of Christ imputed to a sinner through faith," then there is no such thing as any kind of universal justification. Huber tried to apply that definition universally and was condemned for his departure from the truth. Huber taught universal justification *in the wrong way*.

Only a few decades later Johann Andreas Quenstedt was no doubt still acutely aware of the Huberian controversy when in his dogmatic treatment of justification he was very careful to distinguish between Christ being the righteousness of God for the world universally and Christ's righteousness being imputed or given to us individually.

(1) It is not simply the same to say, "Christ's righteousness is imputed to us," and "Christ is our righteousness." For the imputation took place, not when Christ became righteous for us, but when we accepted this righteousness by faith. The righteousness of Christ is the effect of his office. The imputation is the application of the effect of his office. (2) The one, however, does not do away with the other. Christ is our righteousness *effectively* because he justifies us. He is our righteousness *objectively* because our faith rests in him. He is our righteousness *formally* in that his righteousness is imputed to us.⁶⁸

Quenstedt observed that the righteousness of Christ now stands as the perfect substitutionary obedience in place of the sin of the world, but he also noted that this righteousness of Christ is not *given* to everyone. (He's using the term *imputed* in the sense of communicating, crediting or imparting something.) The distribution of Christ's righteousness to an individual sinner occurs only as it is offered in the gospel and received through faith. Thus Quenstedt says, "This imputation took place . . . when we accepted this righteousness by faith." This is consistent with Luther's twofold distinction on forgiveness, and it speaks in accord with Scripture's picture of believers being clothed in Baptism with the righteousness of Christ.⁶⁹ For this garment of imputed righteousness Scripture uses individual terminology. A robe

⁶⁶ Hunnius, Aegedius. *Theses against Huberianism*. Trans. Paul A. Rydecki. Thesis 1 (italics in original).

⁶⁷ *Ibid*, Thesis 20 (italics in original).

⁶⁸ (1) *Non est simpliciter idem; Christi justitiam imputari & Christum pro nobis justum esse. Nam imputatio tunc fit, non quando Christus pro nobis justus fuit, sed quando fide hanc justitiam acceptamus. Christi justitia est effectus officii ejus, imputatio effectuum officii applicatio.* (2) *Unum non tollit alterum; Christus est nostra justitia effective, quia nos justificat; Est nostra justitia objective, quia fides nostra in ipsum fertur; Est nostra justitia formaliter, quatenus ejus justitia nobis imputatur*" (Quenstedt, 547).

⁶⁹ Galatians 3:26, 27.

of righteousness covers one person. The world does not wear a robe of righteousness; that does violence to the metaphor. A robe is something that an individual wears.⁷⁰

(This is perhaps a good place to point out that as orthodox theologians such as Quenstedt, Gerhard, Calov, and others fleshed out a Lutheran systematic theology, they continued to use language from the age of High Scholasticism⁷¹ which drew heavily from Aristotelian terminology and philosophy. See Appendix 3 for a more detailed explanation of how an understanding of Aristotelian philosophy gives us insight into the language of dogmatists from the Lutheran Age of Orthodoxy,⁷² and how the same term can be understood in different senses. When we are working with a term like “justify” we must understand not only the root meaning of the word but also the sense in which it is being used.)

Almost three centuries after Samuel Huber, C. F. W. Walther taught that the resurrection of Jesus was the justification of the world in Christ, and that this universal justification is appropriated by faith as a completed reality. It doesn't take much analysis to determine that Huber's doctrine was radically different from Walther's, and where Huber taught falsely, Walther remained orthodox. C. F. W. Walther was clearly not a fan of Samuel Huber, did not teach universal justification in the way that Huber taught it, categorically rejected Huberism, and even warned his students against the false teachings of Samuel Huber.⁷³ Any assertion that Walther's teaching of universal objective justification was a continuation of Huber's heresies is either ignorant or dishonest. Walther taught general justification *in the right way*; Huber taught it wrongly.

Unfortunately some of the infelicitous expressions found in our circles in defense of universal justification might sound remarkably like Samuel Huber. I attribute this back to the carelessness and imprecision that can easily cloud our writing and speaking, and it is cause for great concern. The now infamous section in J. P. Meyer's *Ministers of Christ* is an unfortunate example of imprecise use of terminology:

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 about it or not, whether he believes it or not, has received the status of a saint.⁷⁴

The unfortunate juxtaposition of dissimilar terms overshadows an otherwise excellent commentary on 2 Corinthians overall. Two glaring problems with the statement come to light. First, Meyer says that even the ignorant and unbelieving have *received* the status of a saint. While the statement can certainly be understood correctly to mean that an objective verdict has been rendered, using the word *received* implies that something has been appropriated—which is untrue apart from faith. Second, the use of the word *saint* in this context is completely incorrect. A saint is a person who has been set apart as holy to the Lord. It is a term that can only be used for believers; it cannot be used in the objective or universal sense. Granted, Meyer says that the ignorant and unbelieving have received the *status* of a saint, not that they are actually saints, but the term here is ill-used. (Northwestern Publishing House recently reprinted a new edition of Meyer's book. In deference to the original text, the editors of the new edition made the conscious choice not to change Meyer's words, but three of Meyer's controversial statements now include a publisher's footnote acknowledging his questionable use of terms.⁷⁵)

⁷⁰ Isaiah 61:10.

⁷¹ The age of High Scholasticism in Europe is roughly bounded by the years AD 1100 to 1350. During this time there was a revival in learning and study in Western Europe, especially of ancient classical philosophy and literature. Many of the first universities in Europe were founded during this time, several monastic orders were started, great cathedrals were constructed, and men like Peter Lombard, Peter Abelard, Duns Scotus, William of Ockham, and Thomas Aquinas expounded philosophy, ethics, and theology. The discipline of systematic theology was born during the High Middle Ages. The scholastic era laid the foundation for the Renaissance and the Reformation, but forward progress was severely impaired by the bubonic plague that decimated Europe in the mid-1300s.

⁷² The Age of Orthodoxy in the Lutheran Church is the period from about 1580, when the Book of Concord was published, to about 1700, when orthodoxy began to be supplanted by the Age of Pietism.

⁷³ See Walther's article from *Lehre und Wehre*, Vol. 29, No. 10, October 1883, translated by Souksamay Phetsanghane for *Studium: The Journal of Confessional Language Studies at MLC*, Issue 1 (studiumexcitare.com), published as “There Is Nothing New under the Sun.” Walther roundly takes Huber to task for his false teaching on election, predestination, and justification, and he points to Huber as having departed from the Book of Concord.

⁷⁴ Meyer, p. 103-104. See Appendix 2 for an evaluation of the Kokomo Statements; the statements were drawn largely from Prof. Meyer's words in his commentary on 2 Corinthians.

⁷⁵ The publisher's note for Meyer's statement quoted above reads:

It has been correctly observed that when the New Testament uses the term *hagioi*, generally translated as “saints,” it regularly restricts itself to speaking of believers. It is therefore critical to realize the adjusted meaning that Prof. Meyer here gives the

Some terms that Scripture uses to describe facets of God's plan of salvation are universal terms, and they are always universally applicable. Words like *atonement*, *propitiation*, *expiation*, and *payment* are applicable in Christ to the entire world. Lutherans would never use these terms in the exclusive sense to limit their effect only to believers. We always teach universal atonement, universal propitiation, etc. These words form the unshakable foundation for the conviction that sin has been completely removed for all people in Christ.

Other theological terms are only exclusive and can only be used as they apply to individual sinners. We can never use them in a universal way, as if they applied to the whole world. When they are used collectively, they refer to a specific subset of the world, namely to those who have faith in Jesus as their Savior. *Regeneration* can only describe the new birth that believers have experienced as they have been brought to life by the Holy Spirit. *Imputation* typically is the process of crediting something to someone. It is unclear to say that God has imputed Christ's righteousness to everyone, when behind the idea of an imputation is the idea of a positive balance transfer. Fleshing out the metaphor, the world doesn't have an account with God; an individual has an account. *Adoption* is the effect of God's claim upon a believer as a new member of his family, the household of believers. God has not adopted the world. *Sanctification* we recognize as the work of the Holy Spirit and a fruit of faith. It comes from the Latin word *sanctus*, which means "holy." Someone who is holy has been set apart as distinct from the whole. A *saint* is someone who has been set apart as holy and devoted to the Lord God. Since the Holy Spirit has not worked faith in the heart of everyone in the world, nor has everyone been set apart as holy, we cannot use the word *sanctification* in a universal sense.

Some words are used in both a universal and an individual sense. They can refer both to the world in its totality and to particular sinners individually. *Reconciliation* is one such word that is used both ways. Paul says, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation."⁷⁶ The "message of reconciliation" is the message proclaiming what has already been done, that reconciliation between the world and God has already been achieved in Christ. But then Paul goes on in the very next verse to say, "We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."⁷⁷ While God has reconciled all people to himself in Christ, all people are not individually reconciled to God. The word is used both universally and individually. We saw above how *salvation* and *saved* can have universal and individual meanings. *Redemption* is another word that has both universal and individual meaning. No Lutheran pastor would deny that Christ is the world's Redeemer, or that Jesus has redeemed the world with his blood: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us."⁷⁸ But *redeemed* is also used in the exclusive sense for those who are God's own people, "the 144,000 who had been redeemed from the earth."⁷⁹ This doesn't mean that Scripture teaches limited redemption, only that the word is used in both senses. The meaning that refers only to God's chosen people does not negate or deny the universal sense, and the universal use of *redemption* doesn't teach universalism.

term "saint" when he incorporates it into the phrase "the status of a saint." He is not saying that every person who has the status of saint *is* a saint, or a believer, or that he will necessarily be saved. That would be universalism. Rather, he is saying that in view of Christ's substitutionary death and merit, God now declares the sinner righteous. God can look at the sinner as holy because in Christ his status, his standing before God, has changed (Meyer, Joh. P. *Ministers of Christ* [Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2011] p. 95).

⁷⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19.

⁷⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:20.

⁷⁸ Galatians 3:13f. See also Galatians 4:5.

⁷⁹ Revelation 14:3. The same sense of redemption applying to God's people is also found in Luke 1:68; Luke 24:21; and 1 Peter 1:18.

The following table helps illustrate how words can be used in different ways. The list is by no means exhaustive:

General/universal/objective	Both	Personal/individual/subjective
Atonement	Reconciliation	Regeneration
Propitiation	Salvation	Imputation
Expiation	Justification	Adoption
Payment	Forgiveness	Sanctification
	Redemption	

Some terms are always universal. Other terms are personal or individual or refer collectively only to God's people, believers in Jesus. Other terms are found to have both a universal and an individual usage.

Speak of justification precisely by teaching it forensically

Luther observed that forgiveness was achieved at the cross once for all and is distributed continually in the means of grace. While acknowledging Luther's proper distinction, some have maintained that *achieving forgiveness* is not the same as *forgiving*. When speaking of completed forgiveness, how can we make the jump from saying, "Christ *achieved* forgiveness once for all on the cross," to saying "Christ *forgave* once for all on the cross"? The answer lies in the essential nature of forgiveness.

If forgiveness were curative, we could not say that "achieving forgiveness" and really "forgiving" are one and the same. If God were to forgive sins like curing a disease, it would be possible for a cure to exist in Los Angeles and a sick patient needing the cure in New York; unless the cure is brought to the patient there is no healing. "Achieved a cure" and "cured" are not essentially the same.

But forgiveness is not essentially curative. Forgiveness is essentially *forensic*,⁸⁰ analogous to what takes place in a courtroom, not a sickroom. Forgiveness is a declaration. The essence of forgiveness is the rendering of a verdict of not-guilty. The verdict is rendered not merely on the basis of God choosing to overlook our sin, but on the basis of the world's guilt being laid upon Christ. Because of Christ, justice has been satisfied, and a verdict of "not-guilty" has been achieved for those in whose place Christ stood under the justice bar, namely for the world. It means the same thing to say, "Christ achieved a declaration of not-guilty" and "Christ declared not-guilty." Because of the inherent nature of forgiveness, the *achievement* and the *effect* are one and the same. Spatial or temporal separation is immaterial to the effect. If the declaration is made in Los Angeles and the offender is on the lam in New York, his status has still been changed from guilty to not-guilty, whether he is aware of the fact or not. It is precisely because forgiveness is forensic, not curative, that the phrases, "Christ achieved forgiveness once for all on the cross" and "Christ forgave once for all on the cross" are identical in meaning.

In this sense the difference between universal and personal forgiveness is the difference between *pronouncing* the verdict and *announcing* the verdict. The verdict of "not-guilty" was pronounced once for all by God upon the world in Christ its substitute. The verdict was pronounced at the cross and the empty tomb. There the world's status in Christ was changed.⁸¹ The announcement of the verdict happens continually wherever the gospel is preached and the sacraments are administered.

We may also use the picture of forgiveness as curative, but the picture can only apply in a personal sense. When preaching on Moses and the bronze serpent in Numbers 21 or Jesus' analogy in John 3, we might apply the gospel by saying, "God cured the disease of your sin," but only in a personal proclamation. We should not misapply the metaphor by saying, "God cured the world's sin."

Speak of justification correctly by using metaphors properly

Scripture uses many pictures to describe how sinners are justified. When we use a metaphor illustrating justification, we must be careful that we do not mix metaphors or extend metaphors beyond the scope of their illustration. The pictures of canceling the world's debt of sin or rendering a verdict of "not-guilty" are universal. The picture of

⁸⁰ Apology III, 131, 184. This is the sense in which the Lutheran Confessions explain forgiveness, in the sense of a legal declaration of "not-guilty" upon sinners for Christ's sake.

⁸¹ See again 2 Corinthians 5:18ff. It is on the basis of this changed status that reconciliation has been achieved.

substituting the righteousness of Christ for the sin and guilt of the world is universal. The picture of clothing in Christ's righteousness is personal. The picture of crediting the righteousness of Christ to a sinner's account is personal. The picture of curing sin is personal. How we use a metaphor must be consistent with the universal or personal nature of the metaphor.

If we are speaking universally, the pictures of courtroom acquittal and debt cancelation extend to all. Speaking with Gerhard, we say that in the resurrection God showed he had acquitted Christ of the sin of the world, and thus acquitted the world in Christ. The world's guilt has been removed; the world's debt of sin has been canceled. The righteousness of Christ now stands as the substitute for the world's sin. Christ's forgiveness and Christ's righteousness stand as an objective, completed for all.

If we are speaking individually, the pictures of forgiving sin and clothing with Christ fit together. Removing sin's guilt (taking away something) and clothing with Christ (giving something) are two sides of the same coin. Both become the possession of the believer at the same time through faith. Applied to an individual believer, "to declare righteous" means to declare not-guilty, and it also means to find someone clothed in Christ's righteousness.⁸²

While the pictures of courtroom acquittal and debt cancelation extend to all, the picture of clothing in Christ's righteousness is only personal. When Jesus spoke to his disciples he said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven."⁸³ The righteousness that comes from God and avails before God is the righteousness of Christ's active obedience. It is delivered to sinners in the means of grace and received through faith. This is the righteousness a believer wears in Baptism. This is the righteousness that we are renewed in when we receive Holy Communion, as the Communion prayer asked for the communicants, "Take off from them the spotted garment of the flesh and of their own righteousness, and adorn them with the garment of the righteousness purchased with your own blood." The sin of every sinner was removed in the atoning sacrifice of Christ; in that sense, every sinner has been declared righteous, acquitted or justified in Christ. But not every sinner is "declared *righteous*" in the positive sense that every sinner has now received the garment of Christ's righteousness. The active obedience of Christ is imputed (given) only to believers in the gospel and received through faith; this is the receiving side of Luther's twofold treatment of forgiveness. For this reason, when we speak of objective justification, I prefer to say that God has *acquitted* the world in Christ or God has *declared the world not-guilty* in Christ or *canceled the debt* of the world in Christ, rather than to say that God has *declared the world righteous*. The latter is not wrong, but it requires further clarification, because it may give the impression that every sinner now possesses the righteousness of Christ, is clothed in the righteousness of Christ, and is numbered among the righteous.

In making the above distinction, we want to avoid speaking of "half of a justification" or of justification being complete only when faith is added. Faith does not complete the righteousness that is offered. It merely appropriates it, just as faith appropriates an already completed forgiveness. According to Luther's treatment of forgiveness, the achievement and the appropriation are two sides of the same coin. We avoid this trap if we simply use each metaphor properly and resist extending the metaphor beyond the scope of its own illustration.

We should reject any statements that articulate the doctrine in an unclear, imprecise, or confusing way, and we should renew our diligence and commitment to communicating clearly and correctly. Some statements communicate precisely and correctly, others can be confusing, and still others are incorrect. Consider the following:

⁸² In this sense there is a nuanced difference between declaring someone "acquitted," and declaring someone "righteous." The former is a neutral declaration, while the latter is a positive declaration. As an example, think of a credit card statement, with all of the charges debited from the account. The account has a negative balance. A debt is owed. Forgiving or absolving cancels the debt. It zeroes the balance. The account holder is now debt-free. He has been forgiven or justified in the sense that he has been acquitted of the debt. This does not, however, distribute a positive balance to the account holder. Believers possess both a debt-free balance sheet and a positive balance. A similar analogy could be used in a court of law. Declaring someone "not-guilty" acquits that person of the crime of which he was accused, but it does not declare him to be a morally upstanding, virtuous civic leader and all-around great guy. Believers are not only acquitted of guilt, they are found to be positively virtuous and upstanding, because Christ's righteousness is imputed to them, and they are "in Christ."

⁸³ Matthew 5:20.

Regarding “Universal objective justification” it is <i>correct</i> to say:	Regarding “Universal objective justification” it may <i>require clarification</i> if we say:	Regarding “Universal objective justification” it is <i>wrong</i> to say:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God has forgiven the sin of the world through the once-for-all death and resurrection of Jesus. God has absolved, removed, borne up and taken away the world’s sin by placing it upon Christ, the Lamb of God. (Justification = forgiveness.) • God has reconciled the world to himself by charging the world’s sin to Christ. (Justification = a change in status that permits reconciliation.) • God has acquitted (declared “not-guilty”) the entire world in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. (Justification = acquittal.) • The perfect righteousness of Christ is the objective substitute for the world’s sin. (Justification = substitutionary or vicarious righteousness.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God has <i>imputed</i> the righteousness of Christ to all people. (This statement may inadvertently give the impression that all people are clothed with the righteousness of Christ.) • God has <i>declared the world righteous</i> in Christ.⁸⁴ (This may sound like all people are now numbered among the just or the righteous—terms that are reserved for believers.) • God has <i>granted</i> his forgiveness to all people. (The word <i>granted</i> implies that forgiveness is handed out or distributed, something that happens only where the gospel is preached.) • God has <i>given</i> his forgiveness to all people. (Forgiveness is not universally distributed. One can, however, give, as in <i>render</i>, a verdict for all people.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All people have <i>obtained</i> (received, acquired, found, etc.) forgiveness from God. (Explanation: Forgiveness is not universally received or obtained.) • Every sinner is <i>clothed with Christ’s righteousness</i>. (Explanation: This happens only through the means of grace, especially Baptism. All are not baptized.) • In Christ, all people are regenerated. (Explanation: There is no universal regeneration or quickening.) • Forgiveness was completed at the cross, so Baptism and the Lord’s Supper <i>only give us the assurance of forgiveness</i>. (Explanation: In addition to pledging and assuring us of forgiveness, the gospel in Word and Sacrament actually delivers and gives that forgiveness of sins to us.)

Speak of justification precisely using Law and Gospel rightly

“All Scripture ought to be distributed into these two principal topics: the Law and the promises. For in some places Scripture presents the Law, and in others the promises about Christ.”⁸⁵ Universal objective justification is pure, unqualified, unconditional, no-strings-attached, nothing-more-to-be-added gospel. It is the objective basis for faith and hope that exists outside of the will, action, consciousness, experience, and faith of any individual. If there is any paradox at all between objective justification and subjective justification it is the irresolvable paradox between law and gospel. More precisely, the paradox is between general justification and personal *non-justification*, since it is only when we are using that law that we will ever say to someone, “Your sins are not forgiven.”

When we use the law, we speak according to the law. According to the law, God’s favor is conditional. His forgiveness has strings attached. His love must be merited. He hates those who do wrong, and his eye is on those who love and fear him. Finally, according to the law there is no forgiveness for any sinner, because “there is no one righteous, not even one.”⁸⁶ Dr. Siegbert Becker recognized this and pointed out that apart from the framework of law and gospel, there is no way of reconciling God’s universal forgiveness in Christ and the final condemnation of unbelievers:

We will never see a way out of that difficulty until we have a clear understanding of the distinction between law and gospel. The statement that God has forgiven the sins of all men, outside the framework of law and gospel, would actually be an untruth and a false doctrine.

The biblical revelation makes it clear that no one has a right to believe that God has forgiven every sin without at the same time believing that God has punished every sin. To say the one without also saying the other would be a clear denial of the unmistakable teaching of the Holy Scriptures.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ This is the language used in the *Brief Statement* (Article 17), a doctrinal confession adopted by the Missouri Synod in 1932.

⁸⁵ Apology IV, 5.

⁸⁶ Romans 3:10.

⁸⁷ Becker, Siegbert W. *Universal Justification* (Essay presented at the convention of the Southeastern Wisconsin District of the WELS, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, June 12, 1984) p. 2.

There are times when we are dealing with an individual in a particular setting that we cannot use the gospel. When we are speaking with an impenitent sinner, with someone who is confident in his own righteousness or someone who is living in the carnal security of willful sin, we cannot give dogs what is sacred and throw pearls to pigs.⁸⁸ Walther stated, "In the fourth place, the Word of God is not rightly divided when the Law is preached to those who are already in terror on account of their sins, or the Gospel to those who live securely in their sins."⁸⁹ To say to an impenitent sinner, "Your sins were taken away unconditionally by Jesus at the cross 2,000 years ago," when the person has already expressed his disdain for Christ's forgiveness, is to subject the sacred pearl of the gospel to further contempt. To that person we say, according to the law, "Repent! If you repent of your sin and turn away from wickedness, your sin may be forgiven. Until then, your sins are *not* forgiven." Notice that this holds out forgiveness as conditional: "If you repent . . ." That's because we're speaking according to the law at that point, and the law is always conditional.⁹⁰ Peter spoke the same way to Simon Magus, when the sorcerer wanted to buy the gift of the Holy Spirit: "Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin."⁹¹ Perhaps he will forgive you? Yes, perhaps! The law, which admonishes and calls to repentance, is never certain, except in its inevitable condemnation.

General justification is the foundation and motivation for mission work, but never in a vacuum apart from the law. I have reservations about an outreach campaign that proclaims, "I'm saved, so are you!" when such a gospel declaration is detached from the universal condemnation of the law, an accompanying call to repentance, and is broadcast to people who are smug, secure, contemptuous of Christ, and quite convinced that everyone ultimately goes to a better place. Aren't sinners still subject to the wrath of God? Apart from Christ, yes! The Christ-less proclamation of universal salvation might be a touching way to pique people's curiosity, in the hope that they will want to learn more, but it is not an outreach paradigm consistent with New Testament preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in Christ.⁹²

But when we are speaking to the penitent, to those who grieve over their sins, we speak the gospel in all its pure, unconditional, joyful, precious beauty. "God forgives you your sins in Christ! The blood of Jesus, God's Son, cleanses you from all your sin. I forgive you your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." And when we speak those words we are delivering real forgiveness that is objective and certain, regardless of the penitent's fears, failings, and trembling, tentative faith!

"But, pastor, how do I know that I have repented deeply enough, believe strongly enough, and desire sincerely enough to amend my sinful life? How do I know God's forgiveness is *for me*?"

"It is for you, because God forgives you unconditionally with a forgiveness that depends upon him and what he's done, not upon you. Look at Christ, the world's Redeemer. Look at the Lamb of God, who bore your sin as he bore the sin of the world. Your sin was forgiven at Calvary! Jesus paid your debt! It has been canceled, because on the cross Jesus said, 'Paid in full!'⁹³ Look at the resurrection and the empty tomb that prove you to be justified in Christ. Look at Jesus seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding for you with his hands and feet, those scars that bear witness to his love for you. Remember your Baptism, that holy washing of rebirth in which God cleansed you of your sins and placed his name upon you. Remember that your name was written in the Lamb's Book of Life. Listen now to the word of absolution, and know that Jesus' pronouncement on the lips of the pastor is true. Take Communion, and taste his forgiveness given to you in the sacrament."

⁸⁸ Matthew 7:6.

⁸⁹ Walther, Thesis 8.

⁹⁰ This is an important truth that warrants emphasis in other terms: The law is conditional, the gospel is inherently unconditional. Any preaching of the gospel that is conditional easily turns the gospel into a law. While the conditional preaching of the law can and should precede the gospel, we want to be very careful always to preach the good news clearly in unconditional, unqualified terms, with no uncertainties attached whatsoever.

⁹¹ Acts 8:22, 23.

⁹² The phrase "I am saved, so are you" uses terminology in a way that is likely to be completely misunderstood by people in our culture, who are accustomed to thinking of "the saved" as people who have had a conversion experience.

⁹³ This is the meaning of the Greek word Jesus used when he said from the cross, "It is finished." The word *τετέλεσται* was a word that might be written on an invoice: "Fulfilled!" or "Paid in full!"

In a sermon on John 1:29, Luther illustrates how universal forgiveness is the key to personal certainty:

You may say: "Who knows whether Christ also bore my sin? I have no doubt that he bore the sin of St. Peter, St. Paul, and other saints; these were pious people. Oh, that I were like St. Peter or St. Paul!" Don't you hear what St. John says in our text: "This is the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world"? And you cannot deny that you are also part of this world, for you were born of man and woman. You are not a cow or a pig. It follows that your sins must be included, as well as the sins of St. Peter or St. Paul.⁹⁴

There are no strings attached to the gospel. The focus is on Christ and what he's done, finished, accomplished. The forgiveness we share is more than a mere eventuality, to be made real by the addition of faith. It is a completed reality.

Is it any wonder that a denial of general justification invariably devolves into legalism?⁹⁵ If justification is not universal and objective, then it is *only* individual and subjective. Preaching forgiveness that only becomes real when faith is added already confuses law and gospel, and as soon as forgiveness depends upon something in the sinner it's only a matter of time before other conditions of the law are attached. The heart is turned inward to personal spiritual wrestling, anguish of soul, genuineness of repentance, and sincerity of faith. Just as a devout Calvinist who believes in limited atonement must ultimately look inward to his own sincerity, examine his own life, and wrestle within himself for the assurance that he is numbered among the elect for whom Christ died, so the hapless soul who rejects the objectivity, universality and completeness of Christ's justifying work at Calvary must invariably seek comfort in the contribution of his faith. Even if he concedes that it's Spirit-worked faith, exclusive subjectivity breeds faith in faith. History shows us what happened to the pietists, with their overemphasis on the subjective. Their intentions were sincere, but the outcome was disastrous, and sincere aspirations to piety soon became legalistic, judgmental, conscience-binding litmus tests for gauging the sincerity of others.

We see this today in those who openly reject universal forgiveness in Christ. Such people may think they are evangelical and confessional and genuinely Lutheran, but in every case I have seen, they confuse law and gospel in the most wretched way, and most sadly, they deny the fullness, the freedom and the completeness of the gospel. They are unwilling to say in an unqualified and unconditional way, "God has forgiven your sins in Christ! God canceled your debt in Christ!" They speak of the necessity of repentance and the righteousness of faith and the importance of faith and the confessional doctrine of justification by faith—and we deny none of these things!— but finally their aberrant spirit is revealed when it becomes obvious that their "gospel" is qualified and conditional and loaded with "ifs." They offer potential forgiveness as an unfulfilled promise until the conditions of repentance and faith are met. It is a wrong, legal focus that is more about the individual than it is about the object. Confusion of law and gospel and a preponderance of law expose the sinister, diabolical agenda that robs God of glory and deprives sinners of certain comfort in Christ.

Speak of justification rightly by preaching the gospel, not preaching about the gospel or preaching faith

Our culture is confused about faith. For many people, faith is an opinion about something. The opinion may or may not be grounded in reality, but in our culture that's not the point. The important thing is that you "just believe." If you're encountering problems in life, you just need to "have faith" that things will work out. If you want your team to win the championship, you "just need to believe." No mention is made of faith having any object, of faith believing *in something*. Whether something is true or false, real or imaginary, doesn't matter. Your truth is a personal and private thing, anyway. It is up to you what you want to believe in. Faith becomes an end unto itself.

The people in our congregations are not immune to this cultural thinking. This is precisely why we constantly want to turn our people's thinking away from themselves, their own opinions, their own feelings and their own faith and point them to the things that faith grasps. Only then will they have faith in the right things, as opposed to nebulous opinions that may or may not be grounded in some modicum of reality. So how do we accomplish this? How do we preach with the goal of true faith in mind? The answer is simple: We don't preach about faith. We preach the object of faith. We

⁹⁴ LW AE, Vol. 22, p. 169.

⁹⁵ *Legalism* is the abuse of the law. We abuse the law and become legalistic when we insist upon enforcing rules that Scripture has not made. We abuse the law when we do not apply the law properly; such abuse includes using the law to further convict and condemn someone who is already repentant or pointing someone to a law-based solution to a problem that can only be rectified by the gospel.

preach Christ. It is true that sometimes Jesus and his apostles told people to believe. But the enjoiner to believe was never separated from what people were to believe *in*.

What do we preach that people are to believe in? If we hold to the notion that forgiveness is only complete or justification is only real when faith is added, our preaching will sound something like this: "God promises that he will forgive your sins. Believe God's promise. The gospel is the promise that God wants to forgive you for Jesus' sake, and he will forgive your sins, if you believe it." Most of the people in our pews might be perfectly content to hear this message, and they would unconsciously filter it to hear an orthodox message. Most of the preachers who preach this way may very well think that they are preaching the gospel. In reality this is a very dangerous way to preach. Why? Because it is not preaching the gospel! It is preaching a qualified, conditional pseudo-gospel that has its focus split between what Christ has done and what remains undone.

If we preach a real forgiveness and a truly unqualified justification, we will say something like this: "Jesus Christ took away all of your sins when you died on the Christ. You were put to death for your sins when Jesus was put to death. When he rose from the dead on Easter Sunday it was because your sins were forgiven in him. Because of his death and resurrection you were absolved and set free from all sin, from all punishment and condemnation. Look at the gift God gave you in Baptism! Your sins were forgiven in the washing of rebirth, you were reborn a creature of righteousness and a child of God, and you were clothed with the righteousness of Christ. When the pastor says, 'I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' that absolution is as real today as it was when Jesus first left behind the empty tomb. When the pastor says after you've received Holy Communion, 'Your sins are forgiven! Depart in peace.' that forgiveness is as certain as the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament that achieved that forgiveness for you in the first place. See, here is Christ, who died and rose again for you! Taste and receive his free gift!" This is not preaching about the gospel; it is preaching the gospel. In such preaching there are no ifs or uncertainties. There may be little or no mention of faith. The point of preaching the gospel is to preach people to faith, but in preaching the gospel alone their faith is fed. The focus is entirely away from the recipient and exclusively on the finished work of Jesus at the cross, at one end, and on the means of grace that deliver his forgiveness, at the other end.

The Christian faith is firmly founded upon historical truths. We confess these truths every time we confess any of the ecumenical creeds. The gospel is not grounded in myths, fables, or opinions. But the gospel is more than just information. It is more than just facts. The heart of the gospel is that everything Jesus did he did for *you* and for every sinner. The joyful truth of Jesus' completed work is that you or I can say unreservedly, "*Your* sins are forgiven," and there is no doubt, because that proclamation is rooted in an historical, objective and universal truth. When and how and to whom we will apply and proclaim that truth is a matter of the proper use and application of the truth, properly distinguishing and correctly using law and gospel. But the truth itself stands *in ipso re*, in and of itself.

Jesus taught in a similar way in John 6, in his Bread of Life discourse.⁹⁶ He knows that he is speaking to a large group of people, some of whom did not believe (v. 64). First, he says, "The bread of God is he who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." He equates eating the Bread of Life with believing in him. "My Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day." Then he points his hearers to the object of faith and the source of life: "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. This bread is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world." Jesus' comparison of faith to eating is a powerful illustration of the nature of faith. We eat *something*, just as faith lays hold of something real. Jesus doesn't discount the need to come to him and partake of him, but the focus is on him, on the Bread of Life, and on the benefits that are found in him.

Jesus is also a stumbling block that causes people to fall. Nobody objects to having faith; everyone has faith in something. Nobody objects to preaching faith. The offense arises when we preach Christ. The content of the gospel is Christ. This why it is the same thing to say, "Our sins are forgiven because of Christ," and "Our sins are forgiven through faith in Christ." Preaching Christ is preaching everything he is and everything he has done. He is the only one who has given life to the world, the only Bread which a person may eat and live forever. To preach people to faith, preach Christ, preach the gospel.

⁹⁶ John 6:25-59.

Speak of justification precisely by observing the particular particles

When our Lutheran dogmatists treat the article of justification, they identify four factors. They are: (1) The grace of God; (2) the merits of Christ; (3) the gospel in Word and Sacrament; and (4) faith which apprehends or trusts. The first two are universal, for the grace of God has appeared to all people,⁹⁷ and the merits of Christ avail for all people. The first three are objective, in that they are detached from and prior to the individual experience. These things—God’s love, Christ’s justifying work, and the good news that proclaims them—are objective realities. These realities are apprehended by the fourth factor, saving faith worked by the Holy Spirit inside the individual.

Faith neither creates something new, nor does it cause something to happen, in the effective sense. Faith is not an agent for salvation, justification or forgiveness. The role of faith is exclusively instrumental, in which role it appropriates something that already exists. Missouri theologian Kurt Marquart, in an exceptionally thorough analysis of the Kokomo Statments (see Appendix 2) and their aftermath, shows how this concept is developed in the Book of Concord:

The pattern is clear and consistent throughout: the Gospel or absolution offers not a conditional, future prospect, but a perfected, past and present reality. God already is gracious, merciful, propitious, reconciled in Christ, and freely offers this ready forgiveness or grace in the Gospel. To believe this Gospel or absolution is to believe *oneself* forgiven, justified, accepted. Forgiveness exists “objectively” already before faith. Faith does not create forgiveness but only receives, accepts, appropriates it. Absolution is prior to, and creates faith, not vice versa (*Augsburg Confession* XII, 5; *Apology* XII, 42). The Gospel “offers forgiveness and justification, which are received by faith” (*Apology* IV, 62). And: “forgiveness of sins is the same as justification” (IV, 76).⁹⁸

A simple analogy is found in the water faucet at the kitchen sink. For water to flow onto someone’s hands in the sink, there must be four things in place. First, there must be water. It must exist independently as a real thing. Second, there must be a conduit that serves as the instrument for the water to travel. Third, there must be an agent to open the tap, so that the water can begin flowing. Fourth, there must be a receptacle to receive the water. Every comparison limps, of course, but in this example the water is the forgiveness of sins. It exists as a completed reality. It came into existence because of God in Christ, its agent, at the cross and empty tomb. The conduit is the gospel that proclaims and distributes the forgiveness of sins. We could speak of other instruments through whom the gospel is proclaimed, especially pastors and teachers and Christians sharing the good news. None of them causes forgiveness to happen; they simply distribute forgiveness in Christ. The agent opening the tap, so to speak, is the Holy Spirit, who testifies wherever the gospel is proclaimed and who opens human hearts and pours God’s grace into them. The hand is faith, placed there by the Spirit to receive all of the blessings of salvation.

It is simple enough to return to the rallying cry of the Reformation, the three *solas*, and say that we are saved "By grace alone! By faith alone! By Scripture alone!" But careful attention to the particular particles calls for greater precision. To distinguish between agent and instrument, we say that we are saved *by* grace alone, *because of* Christ alone, and *through* faith alone.

Speak of justification precisely by understanding God's transaction correctly

Looking at biblical terms that describe God’s interaction with sinners, it doesn’t take long to recognize that many of the words the Spirit inspired for use in Holy Scripture are terms that were commonly used in Greek society in business and the marketplace. ἐξαγοράζω is to purchase, buy back, redeem. ἀφίημι is to cancel a debt. τετέλεσται means “paid in full!” λογίζομαι is to reckon, to credit, or to attribute.

When did these things happen? When did redemption take place? When was the debt canceled? When was the price paid in full? When was the debt attributed to someone else? All of these things took place in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. All of these things have already happened. All of these things are completed. And all of these things that Jesus did he did for all people. The world was redeemed by the blood of Jesus. The world’s debt of sin was canceled. The price of the world’s sin was paid in full. The sin of the world was attributed to Christ.

There is no new transaction between the sinner and God. There is no new forgiveness that happens when an unbeliever comes to faith, in the absolution, in Baptism, Communion, or in the preaching of the gospel. There is a

⁹⁷ Titus 2:11ff.

⁹⁸ Marquart, Kurt, "Objective Justification." An analysis of certain papers by Mr. Larry Darby on the subject of "objective justification." Epiphany II, 1998.

proclamation of these wonderful realities and an appropriation of these beautiful truths that personalizes and individualizes them, so that the believer in faith says, “I have been redeemed! My debt has been paid in full and canceled forever! My sin has been attributed to Christ, and Christ’s righteousness is attributed to me!”

Speak of justification precisely by using universal terms universally and individual terms individually

I pointed to the Kokomo statements as an example of how justification terminology can be confused and misused. A problem in communicating justification arises when we take words that have a personal meaning and use them in a universal way, or vice versa. Consider the following:

- Justification means forgiveness.
- Justification means salvation.
- Justification means regeneration.
- Justification means acquittal of a crime or a debt, a pronouncement of “not-guilty” or “debt-free.”
- Justification means the imputation of the righteousness of Christ.
- Justification means personal absolution through Baptism, Communion, or the Keys.

All of these meanings of justification are valid, and they all communicate different facets of justification, but these different facets of justification are not in all cases synonymous.

Watch what happens when we try to equate dissimilar uses of similar terms:

- Justification means regeneration.⁹⁹
- Scripture teaches the justification of the world in Christ (Rom. 4:25, John 1:29, 2 Cor. 5:18ff, etc.).
- Therefore, the whole world is regenerated.

That’s wrong! The whole world has not been regenerated or “born again.” We cannot take an individual use of the word justification (in this case meaning “regeneration”) and use it in a universal sense. Does the word “justification” mean “regeneration”? Absolutely! Can “regeneration” be used universally? Absolutely not! So when we speak of God justifying the world in the resurrection of Christ, we are not speaking of justifying in the sense of regenerating. We are speaking there of the verdict of acquittal that was pronounced upon the world in Christ its substitute. Justification doesn’t *only* mean regeneration.

Here’s another, slightly more subtle incongruence:

- Justification means the imputation of the righteousness of Christ through faith.¹⁰⁰
- Scripture teaches the justification of the world in Christ (Rom. 4:25, John 1:29, 2 Cor. 5:18ff, etc.).
- Therefore the righteousness of Christ is imputed to every individual.

Here again, applying an individual use of justification (imputation of Christ’s righteousness through faith, or clothing with Christ’s righteousness) in a universal sense results in a position that undercuts the truth that the righteousness of Christ is given in Baptism, as Paul writes in Galatians, “All of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.”¹⁰¹ If we say “Christ’s righteousness has been imputed to the world,” we are saying something very different from what Lutheran theologian Johann Quenstedt said (see above, p. 23). At best we are using the word “impute” in a different sense than the orthodox dogmatician used it—which is both unnecessary and unwise. At worst, we are denying what Quenstedt said and are teaching something different, lending credence to the notion that we are inventing new doctrines. This is avoided simply by using terms correctly.

Here’s an example that actually works very well:

- Justification means a verdict of acquittal.¹⁰²
- Jesus was delivered over to death for our sins and raised to life for our justification (Rom. 4:25).
- Therefore, the world has been acquitted in Christ. The world has been justified in Christ.

God has justified the world by forgiving the world’s sin in Christ. God has justified the world by acquitting the world and rendering a verdict of “not-guilty” upon the world in Christ its substitute. In these senses we must teach universal

⁹⁹ Apology XII (V), 60; SD III, 18-20. The word “regeneration” can also refer not to justification but to the sanctification that is not part of justification but flows from justification. This section from SD III speaks at some length about the importance of using terms correctly and clarifying the specific meaning used in a given context.

¹⁰⁰ SD III, 4, etc.

¹⁰¹ Galatians 3:27.

¹⁰² Apology III, 184.

justification, and these truths cannot be denied. (It was specifically this “declaration” aspect of justification that Lenski rejected out of hand.¹⁰³) But if we are to speak consonantly with orthodox theologians, we will not say, “God has imputed the righteousness of Christ to the world or everyone in the world.”

I personally have found Quenstedt’s distinction on imputation and Luther’s distinction on forgiveness to be the most helpful in clarifying what universal justification is and what it isn’t. Quenstedt recognized the objective righteousness of Christ, but he limited imputation to the sphere of faith. Luther recognized the universal forgiveness of the world in Christ, but he connected distribution of that forgiveness to the proclamation of the gospel. These two masters were careful to keep each aspect of justification—universal and personal—in its proper sphere of articulation.

Speak of justification precisely by speaking of the sacraments correctly.

Justification is not taught correctly if it does not begin with the grace of God and the merits of Christ as its cause and agent and end with the means of grace and faith as its instruments. The universal forgiveness won for all at the cross cannot be emphasized at the expense of the gospel that delivers that forgiveness personally in the means of grace.

When we forget this, we end up saying some very wrong things. For example:

- The sacraments merely remind us of the forgiveness of sins won at the cross.
- Communion doesn’t forgive our sins; it only assures us that our sins have been forgiven.
- We cannot really use the Keys to say that someone is not forgiven, because an unbeliever was already forgiven at the cross.

In our own *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal*, the post-Communion prayer asks that “all who have received in his true body and blood *the pledge of your forgiveness* may be restored to live a new and holy life” [italics mine].¹⁰⁴ Why not simply say, “all who have received in his true body and blood your forgiveness . . .”? Much better is the section on Personal Preparation for Holy Communion, which says, “By means of this sacrament, Jesus not only forgives my sins but sweeps away all my doubts about his love for me, gives me his own strength to live a God-pleasing life, and grants me a joyful foretaste of heaven.”¹⁰⁵ This section communicates the power in the sacrament itself to do all of the things it delivers. The sacraments and the Keys—and indeed, every proclamation of the gospel of forgiveness—are not just pledges or reminders or assurances but actual conferrals and distributions of forgiveness with all its power and with all the blessings of God’s grace.

So which came first—faith or forgiveness?

In the matter of justification, which came first—faith or forgiveness? Or, to put the question another way, does faith cause forgiveness? Or does forgiveness cause faith? Which is correct?

The forgiveness of sins results in faith.

or

Faith results in the forgiveness of sins.

The Augsburg Confession says, “Men . . . 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, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins.”¹⁰⁶ Kurt Marquart explains the intriguing circular logic that’s present in the statement and resolves the question:

Logically there is here at least the suggestion of a circle: On the one hand forgiveness is the result of faith, and thus comes after faith, and on the other hand it is the object of faith and therefore goes before faith.

One way of resolving the paradox would be to say that by forgiveness as object of faith here is meant not anything actually existing before faith, but simply the principle of how sin is or will be forgiven, namely by grace through faith. Forgiveness then would not in any sense exist before faith. It would occur as soon as faith accepted the principle that forgiveness occurs in this way. Thus, forgiveness as the object of faith would not be anything past or completed, but something essentially future or present. This line of reasoning, however, suggests another “feedback circuit”: “I am forgiven when I believe that I am forgiven when I believe that I am forgiven, etc.”

¹⁰³ Lenski, p. 84.

¹⁰⁴ *Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal* (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), p. 36.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

¹⁰⁶ AC IV.

There is of course an important element of truth in this stress on the dependence of forgiveness on faith. For, as the final sentence of AC IV puts it, “This faith God will consider and impute for righteousness before Him, as St. Paul says in Romans 3 and 4” (German). But this is not the whole truth. While forgiveness does, in a sense, depend on faith, in a deeper sense yet faith depends on forgiveness, according to the Augsburg Confession. Perhaps the most decisive statement here is that which describes faith as “born of the Gospel, or of absolution” (XII, 5, Latin) or as believing “the Gospel and absolution (namely, that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ)” (German). It is very clear here that forgiveness, in the form of the absolution, exists before and independently of faith, and creates or gives birth to it. Forgiveness or absolution (that is, the Gospel itself) creates faith; faith merely receives or accepts forgiveness. Absolution can exist without faith (although its benefits of course go to waste unless faith receives them), but faith cannot exist without absolution.¹⁰⁷

The forgiveness of sins that was won at the cross when Jesus canceled the debt of the whole world is the object of faith. When repentance (law) and the forgiveness of sins (gospel) are preached in Jesus’ name to all nations,¹⁰⁸ it is the content of that preaching that creates faith, which then holds onto and claims the forgiveness of sins as its own. Forgiveness begets faith. Forgiveness came first. God’s forgiveness created faith, which clings to God’s forgiveness.

Look beneath the terms and get to the heart of the matter

It is one thing to resist the use of a term like “universal objective justification” for purely semantic reasons. A faithful pastor may choose to use terms other than “objective justification” or its equivalents—terms that came into use only in the last 150 years—to describe the same concept and still speak in perfect harmony with Scripture and the Lutheran confessions. But it is another thing altogether to deny the substance of the truth. When trying to clarify someone’s position on universal forgiveness, it can be helpful to ask the following questions:

- Was the debt of the world’s sin really paid in full and canceled forever by Christ on the cross? (John 19:30)
- Did Jesus complete his work of reconciling the world to God? (2 Cor. 5:11-21)
- Because of Christ’s completed work, are the transgressions of the world no longer attributed to sinners but to Christ, the sin-bearer? (John 1:29; 2 Cor. 5:19)
- Is God’s reconciliation of the world to himself a completed reality (2 Cor. 5:19) or merely something to be fully realized when faith is added?
- Has the world’s status before God changed from guilty to acquitted due to the completed work of Christ? (2 Cor. 5:19)
- Did God really and completely forgive the sin of the world (John 19:30) in the sacrifice and resurrection of Christ?
- In the death and resurrection of Jesus, did God acquit the world in Christ? (Romans 4:25; Romans 5:18)

The answer to each of these questions should be a resounding, unequivocal “yes!” If it is, we can set aside concerns about terminology and still remain confident that the truth is being taught. If there are reservations about answering the questions above in the affirmative, there is a darker reason lurking underneath. The person believes in limited atonement, believes that the forgiveness won at the cross was incomplete or only curative, or he views faith as having an efficient role in forgiveness and justification. None of these views are Lutheran.

Conclusion

This assignment has been a joyful labor, simply because researching and studying the exposition of the doctrine of justification through the ages has brought such tremendous encouragement to me personally. It is so refreshing to see the exuberance and the freedom found in the things that men like Luther and Gerhard and Quenstedt wrote about forgiveness. These men cherished the good news, and they expounded the limitless gospel with exhilarating joy.

At the risk of repeating what’s already been said, I’ll recap and summarize my conclusions:

1. The world has been justified, in the sense that God has forgiven the sin of the world in Christ. To forgive is to justify. Christ paid the world’s debt of sin. The debt of the world’s sin has been canceled. There is no more debt to pay. There is no more forgiveness to achieve. Luther spoke this way. The Lutheran Confessions speak

¹⁰⁷ Marquart, Kurt, “The Reformation Roots of ‘Objective Justification’” in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus* (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985), p. 3-4.

¹⁰⁸ Luke 24:47.

this way. We should thrill to speak this way, with unbridled gospel joy! Sin is done away with in the body and the sacrifice of Christ.

2. The world has been justified, in the sense that God has acquitted the world and declared it “not-guilty” in Christ, through his death and resurrection. Christ’s righteousness is the covering (*kippur*) for the sin of the world. This verdict has been declared once for all. Again, Luther and the orthodox Lutheran dogmaticians speak this way, and we should be unsparing in our robust proclamation of this truth.
3. We *can* say that God has “already declared the world to be righteous” in the sense that God has acquitted the world and declared it to be sin-free in Christ. God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, on the basis of a change in the world’s forensic status from “guilty” to “not-guilty” in Christ.
4. We *cannot* say that God has “already declared the world to be righteous” in the sense that God has given to every individual the robe of Christ’s righteousness. This is an improper extension of the metaphor of clothing. The objective righteousness of Christ for the world is appropriated individually only through faith. Because this sense of “declare righteous” is indistinguishable from the previous use of the term (#3 above), the language used in the *Brief Statement* of Missouri, *This We Believe* of the WELS, and *We Believe, Teach and Confess*¹⁰⁹ of the ELS, while correct, might benefit from further explanation, lest it be misinterpreted.
5. The world has *not* been justified in the sense that all people now wear the righteousness of Christ. Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, and orthodox dogmaticians did *not* speak this way. We should reserve the use of the term “imputed righteousness” for believers only. This is the way that our Lutheran Confessions use the term. This is the way that Chemnitz and Quenstedt spoke. We should reserve the term “impute” and the metaphor of clothing with Christ’s righteousness only to the sphere of faith.
6. It is correct to say that all three persons of the Trinity are active in justification, since *opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*.¹¹⁰ This should be properly articulated as: The Father gave his Son to be the world’s Savior and forgave the sin of the world for Christ’s sake; the Son made satisfaction for the sin of the world and became the righteousness of the world; the Holy Spirit, through the means of grace, creates the faith through which the individual sinner is justified and clothed in Christ. This isn’t as short and pithy as we might like, but it teaches justification in all its aspects.

What we have today is, in some respects, a dispute about words. One side is defining certain words like *justification* and *forgiveness* in a very narrow, limited way, and is unwilling to expand the definition to allow for a broader understanding. The other side is using the same words but defining them more broadly to embrace all of the truths that are part of the article of justification. In some cases, words have been used imprecisely or erroneously, even though intentions were upright.

But when it comes to words, if someone is willing to say, “Jesus bore the sin of the world. Jesus redeemed the world. Jesus took away the sin of the world. Jesus made atonement for the sin of the world. Jesus expiated the sin of the world. Jesus made propitiation for the sin of the world,” but is unwilling simply to say, “Jesus forgave the sin of the world,” or “God canceled the debt of the world’s sin for Christ’s sake,” he is only quarreling about words, because the words mean essentially the same thing. This kind of logomachy is exactly what the Apostle Paul condemns in the man who “has an unhealthy interest in controversies and quarrels about words that result in envy, strife, malicious talk, evil suspicions and constant friction between men of corrupt mind, who have been robbed of the truth and who think that godliness is a means to financial gain.”¹¹¹

In other more important respects, though, this is not merely a battle about words. The way of salvation itself and the comfort of souls are at stake, and there are certain truths that we must hold to, regardless of how they are expressed using varying terminology. A Lutheran pastor who is unwilling to say, “God has forgiven the world in Christ,” is not only refusing to acknowledge a truth that is expressed in the Lutheran Confessions, he is denying the heart of the gospel itself. If anyone is reluctant to say, “God acquitted the world in Christ when he raised Jesus from the dead,” he is turning away from the central truth of Scripture. If a pastor preaches or teaches, “Your sins are forgiven only if you

¹⁰⁹ *We Believe, Teach and Confess* (Mankato, Minn.: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1992)

<<http://www.evangelicallutheransynod.org/beliefs/we-believe-teach-and-confess/>>

¹¹⁰ The external works of the Trinity are indivisible.

¹¹¹ 1 Timothy 6:4b, 5.

have faith," he is directing his hearers' focus inward, horribly confusing law and gospel, and ultimately leaving his listeners in doubt. If he says, "Your sins are forgiven when you believe in Jesus," he is undercutting the simple truth that forgiveness was effected by Jesus for all people as an accomplished fact before any of us living today were even born.

Lutheran theologians through the centuries have maintained two defining characteristics of true doctrine: (1) the truth glorifies God above all things, and (2) it brings comfort to sinners who are troubled in conscience. Teaching justification correctly does both. First, it is completely theocentric in its focus upon God in Christ, it removes all doubt about the certainty of God's forgiveness in Christ, and it presents justification as a completed, objective fact. Second, it comforts sinners, because this truth is the solid assurance that faith grasps, the anchor for the soul, and the firm foundation of hope. If justification is an unfulfilled promise until faith is added to make justification and forgiveness real, not only is the glorious work of God in Christ at the cross demeaned and undermined, but the troubled sinner is compelled to wrestle within himself for the comfort of forgiveness. (1) God is not given glory above all things, and (2) sinners are robbed of the clarity, purity, fullness, and certainty of the unqualified gospel.

One notable characteristic of false doctrine is that it latches onto one aspect of the truth and ignores other aspects, while riding a particular hobby horse off into the sunset. Arius¹¹² acknowledged the oneness of God but rejected the Trinity. Roman Catholics teach that the body and blood of Christ are present in the Lord's Supper, but they deny the essential presence of the bread and the wine. Baptists teach the importance of Baptism as an ordinance, but they deny clear passages that teach its saving power. There are many other examples throughout the history of the Christian church of false teachers who became one-dimensional in their teaching and exclusive of other truths that are biblical. Usually the exclusion of certain true elements comes because those truths are perceived to be paradoxical, unreasonable, or in conflict with other truths. Human reason and attempts to answer the questions, "Why?" and "How?" often result in rejection of clear biblical truths, because they cannot be made to conform to a rational theological system.

Another way truth can be overcome by error is by pressing and expanding a particular point until it finally crosses the line between truth and error. A textbook example of this is found in the teaching of Matthias Flacius (1520-1575). He was a staunch, respected Lutheran theologian, and in the face of the false teaching that the unregenerate have a free will to choose the gospel, he correctly taught that natural human beings are completely infected with sin, totally depraved, and unable to choose Christ. But he crossed the line when, in pressing his point, he said that human beings are *essentially* sinful.¹¹³ That overstatement (and his refusal to retract it) earned Flacius a place in Lutheran history as one who did not adhere to the pattern of sound teaching. In our zeal to expound the truth we can carelessly make overstatements that leave the truth behind. In recent history, the Kokomo statements are examples of egregious overstatements that were crafted with pious intent but went beyond the truth.

A third way we can depart from the truth is by overreaction. We can so overcompensate for something that is said or done on one side of an issue, that our doctrinal pendulum swings far to the other side. Overreacting to legalism leads to antinomianism, laxity and licentiousness. The extreme counterpart to dead orthodoxism is pietism. We may become so committed to avoiding the ditch on one side of the road that we plunge into the opposite ditch on the other side. As we teach justification, we can fall into any of these pitfalls. We can fail to teach justification in all of its breadth, or in our zeal we can expound the teaching in such over-the-top terms that we end up going beyond what Scripture says. Both are wrong.

When we are studying the doctrine of justification as it's presented in Scripture and articulated by respected, orthodox Christian men through history, it becomes very quickly obvious that it is not a one-dimensional doctrine.

¹¹² Arius (c. AD 256-336) was an early church leader who denied the eternal divinity of Christ. He maintained that there was a time when Christ did not exist. He viewed the Word as the first creation of God, which God then used to create all other created things. The Council of Nicea in AD 325 condemned Arius' teachings and asserted that Jesus is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one substance with the Father."

¹¹³ Saying that a human being is *essentially* sinful is saying that a human being cannot exist without sin being part of his nature. Scholastics characterized things according to their *essence* and their *accidence*. Essential attributes are those attributes without which something cannot exist; they are part of the very substance or being of the thing. Accidental attributes are those things which can change or be taken away without affecting what something is. For example, an apple can be red or golden, but the color doesn't change the essence of the apple; color is an accidental attribute. If human beings were essentially sinful, as Flacius insisted, it would be impossible for Jesus Christ, as a true man, to be without sin.

The evidence shows that just as it would be incorrect for someone to insist that justification is only universal, it is equally incorrect for someone to insist that justification is only individual, subjective and personal. It is both.

Brothers, I thank you for the privilege of preparing this assignment. It has been much more than an academic exercise. It has been a great blessing to me and has brought me great personal comfort and encouragement. Confidence in the fullness of the gospel, in the certainty of complete forgiveness, in the absolute conviction that Jesus forgave our debt by his bitter suffering and death, so that we are acquitted with him by his resurrection, enables us to speak in concord with Scripture and our confessions, and to articulate the doctrine of justification clearly and carefully, to the glory of God and the consolation of souls. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!

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Appendix 1

Clarification of the issues

The discussion at hand deals only with the issue of justification, the meaning of the word justification, and the terms objective and subjective justification (and synonyms). On the following points there is no disagreement:

We agree and affirm that Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for the sin of the world (1 John 2:2).

We agree and affirm that God has reconciled the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:19).

We agree and affirm that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world (1 Tim. 4:10), and that Jesus' work of redeeming the world and making payment for all sin is a complete and accomplished fact (John 19:30).

We agree and affirm that Christ is the world's Redeemer (Gal. 3:13), the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), and the propitiation for the world's sin (1 John 2:2).

We agree and affirm that Jesus' sacrifice has expiated the sin of the world. Jesus is the once-for-all sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:10; 1 Peter 3:18; 1 John 2:2).

We agree and affirm that, while Jesus' work at the cross and empty tomb is complete, his work of interceding at the right hand of the Father and sending his Holy Spirit into the world is ongoing until the end of time (John 15:26; Rom. 8:34; 1 Cor. 12:3).

We agree and affirm that the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace, which is the gospel in word and sacraments, and that apart from these external means we know of no revealed way through which the completed work of Christ for all can be brought to individual human beings (Rom. 10:14-17; 1 Cor. 12:3).

We agree and affirm that faith itself is not a work of man but the work of God and a gift from God (John 6:29; 1 Cor. 12:3; Eph. 2:8, 9).

We agree and affirm that without saving faith, which is trust in Jesus Christ for redemption and forgiveness of sins, there is no eternal life. "Whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mark 16:16; John 3:18; 1 John 5:10).

Negative statements which are rejected

We specifically reject the teachings of *limited atonement*, *limited redemption* and *limited reconciliation*. Here we reject the teaching of the Calvinists, who say that Christ's atonement, redemption and reconciliation were not for all people but only for those who are finally saved.

We reject the idea that the work of Christ is incomplete and that there is still more payment to be offered or more work to be done by human beings to complement and complete Christ's work of salvation. Here we reject the teaching of the Romanists, who say that, while Christ died to remove the guilt and condemnation of sin, satisfaction for the temporal consequences of sin must still be made by each penitent. We reject the teaching that good works can help atone for the guilt of sin. We reject the teachings of the Latter Day Saints (Mormons) which hold up Jesus as a good man and moral example but deny his completed work of salvation. We reject any synergistic notion of cooperation between God and man to attain man's salvation.

We reject the teaching that God works through an internal call or through man's feelings or inner sensations, apart from the external means of grace, to work in a person's heart and create saving faith. Here we reject the teaching of the charismatic churches, which closely associate a person's faith with a feeling or an experience.

We reject the teaching that God and a human being work together to bring about saving faith. We reject the idea that faith is the product of man's thinking or choosing. We reject the false and synergistic teaching of *decision theology* taught by Baptists and other Arminians.

We reject the teaching of *universalism*, the idea that all people, regardless of their faith, will finally be saved. Here we reject the teaching of the Unitarian Universalists. We reject the teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses, Adventists, and others, who teach that there is no eternal place of suffering for the damned.

Appendix 2

The Kokomo Statements

We can't address the subject of universal objective justification and its history in the Wisconsin Synod without giving some attention to the Kokomo Statements, a glaring example of reprehensibly imprecise theological formulation. (There is a long history behind these statements and their use, which I won't elaborate on here.) The Kokomo Statements were compiled in the late 1970s as an assemblage of what WELS teaches on objective justification. For the sake of time and space, I've treated a discussion of the Kokomo Statements as an appendix to this paper. I've brought this analysis over from my essay to the 2005 WELS Synod Convention, with only a few minor changes:

The statements are included here in italics, followed by a very cursory analysis of each statement:

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.*¹¹⁴ This statement is drawn verbatim from Professor J. P. Meyer's commentary on 2 Corinthians, where he treats 2 Cor. 5:19, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." Professor Meyer lived through the lively discussions precipitated by the election controversy of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and he was himself an ardent champion of universal objective justification. He taught generations of pastors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In all fairness to Professor Meyer, I suspect that if he knew how much mischief has been made with these words he probably would have chosen them more carefully. Nevertheless, there is no excusing such clumsy, imprecise language as this. The statement as it stands uses an unfortunate juxtaposition of dissimilar terms. *Objectively speaking . . . every sinner. . . has received* ["received" is a subjective term which nullifies the objective premise] *the status* [objective] *of a saint* [subjective].
2. *After Christ's intervention and through Christ's intervention God regards all sinners as guilt-free saints.*¹¹⁵ This is a paraphrase of another quote from J. P. Meyer. It is correct to say that the world's guilt has been charged to Christ and, objectively speaking, the world stands guilt-free for Christ's sake. However, as in the first statement, the use of the word *saint* in a universal context renders the statement unacceptable.
3. *When God reconciled the world to Himself through Christ, He individually pronounced forgiveness to each individual sinner whether that sinner ever comes to faith or not.*¹¹⁶ When we wish to speak about universal justification, we must use appropriate terminology. This statement is a muddle of universal and individual terms. *When God reconciled the world* [universal] . . . *he individually* [a specific or personal term] *pronounced forgiveness to each individual* [another specific term] *sinner*.
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.* Once again, when concepts and terms are not used within the framework of their definitions, the result is confusion. Hell, by definition, is a place of eternal suffering that is devoid of God's grace and forgiveness. Was the forgiveness of sins achieved, completed and won for Judas at the cross? Absolutely! Did Noah preach repentance and forgiveness for the sake of the coming Savior to the people of his day? Absolutely—Noah is called a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5). But in hell the damned are forever cut off from the grace—offered in the means of grace—which they rejected. It is nonsense to characterize people in hell as "saints" (holy people sanctified to God) or even having the status of saints.

Each of these statements is so poorly crafted that it cannot be accepted, regardless of authorship. Dr. Siegbert Becker, in an essay to Chicago area pastors, rightly lamented the poor choice of words, but he upheld the statements on principle.¹¹⁷ I would like him to have said, "Throw them out and start over!" The Kokomo Statements should be roundly rejected by the WELS as an incongruous mishmash. The rejection of these statements, as they are written, is not a repudiation of universal objective justification, which these statements pretend to defend.

¹¹⁴ Meyer, 103-104.

¹¹⁵ Meyer, 107. The paraphrase does not substantially change the substance of what Meyer wrote in *Ministers of Christ*.

¹¹⁶ I cannot find the exact source for this statement, supposedly (per Becker) drawn verbatim from the writings of a WELS author. It may be a paraphrase of Meyer's words: "This applies to the whole world, to every individual sinner, whether he was living in the days of Christ, or had died centuries before His coming, or had not yet been born, perhaps has not been born to this day. It applies to the world as such, regardless of whether a particular sinner ever comes to faith or not" (Meyer, 109).

¹¹⁷ Becker, "Objective Justification," Chicago Pastoral Conference, WELS, Elgin, Illinois, November 9, 1982.

Appendix 3

Aristotle's Four Causes and their use in scholastic theology

Aristotle (384 – 322 BC) was a Greek philosopher whose thinking had a profound influence on the scholastics of Western Europe. In the nascent study of systematic theology in the High Middle Ages, Aristotle's Four Causes were used as a framework for explanation of why things are as they are.

Aristotle suggested that the reason for anything existing or happening can be attributed to four causal factors. While each of these factors contributes to something's existence, we would not today call each of these factors a "cause" in the sense of *making* something happen; the way we think and speak today we would attribute that role only to Aristotle's *efficient cause*. Think of the Four Causes in terms of "the reason that something exists" or "different senses in which we can describe something's existence."

Aristotle's Four Causes are:

- **The material cause.** This describes the material that something is made of. A building is made of many material things, including perhaps block, stone, wood, or concrete. These things must be present for the building to be in existence, and thus Aristotle viewed them as being part of the explanation for its existence, but we must not think of the material cause as actively causing something to happen.
- **The formal cause.** This is the form of the thing or the way it is arranged. Using the building analogy, a building is not just random concrete, block, etc., but it is the result of those building elements arranged in a formal, ordered way. As the formal cause is applied to more esoteric and metaphysical things, or to concepts and ideas, it becomes more complex to characterize. The formal cause of a sculpture is not only the idea in the mind of the sculptor but the finished, beautiful piece of art. The formal cause of a human being is body and soul joined together as male or female with all of the parts properly formed and arranged.
- **The efficient cause.** This is most closely aligned with what we today consider a "cause." This is the agent, the doer. It is the person, quality, or thing that makes something else actively happen. In a chain of dominoes, one domino is the efficient cause that knocks the next one over. Construction workers are the efficient cause of a building's existence. In a sacrament, Lutherans identify the Word of Christ as being the efficient cause for an earthly element becoming a sacrament (Element + Word = Sacrament). God is the efficient cause of creation, and so forth.
- **The final cause.** This is the purpose or the final outcome. It is perhaps the most detached from what we would consider a "cause" today, because it is not only a driving force (motive or purpose) for something's existence but the ultimate outcome itself. The final cause of a building is both the purpose it will serve (house, office building, airport terminal) that motivates its construction beforehand, as well as the final purpose being served as a completed building afterwards. The final cause, or goal, of redemption is the restored relationship between God and his people celebrated eternally in heaven.

In theological writings, it's not uncommon to find Lutheran dogmaticians using Aristotelian terminology carried over from scholasticism, as they describe things in the material, formal, efficient, and final sense. But because Aristotle's Four Causes limp in many cases, other causes were added as descriptors. For example, in Quenstedt's explanation of the righteousness of Christ referenced above, in addition to *formally* and *efficiently*, he adds *objectively*—an "objective cause." In justification, Lutheran theologians were unwilling to ascribe an efficient role to faith, so they refer to it as the *instrumental cause*. It is in some cases unfortunate, though, that dogmaticians were so tied to the scholastics' flawed causation paradigm, that they weren't able describe things in more helpful terms.

Understanding the causation paradigm helps us grasp why words can be used in different ways. When speaking of salvation, we can say that everyone has been saved *efficiently*, because Christ, the agent of salvation, has completed his saving work. Yet everyone is not saved *finally*, since not everyone is or yet will be in heaven. Or we could say that everyone has been forgiven *materially* and *objectively* through the completed work of Christ, but not everyone has been forgiven *instrumentally*, *actually*, *finally*, or *formally*. The scholastic language of causation may be helpful in drawing distinctions, but it can also create more confusion, especially if we try to relate our modern idea of cause to the way the scholastics thought of it.

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