

# On the Distinction between Objective and Subjective Justification

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## Introduction

Does faith save us? Is faith a cause of salvation? What is saving faith? Is saving faith the same thing as strong faith? Does the current climate of “born again” decision theology necessitate a re-examination and a more careful expression of the scriptural and therefore orthodox Lutheran teaching on the nature and activity of faith? Questions of this sort we dare not treat carelessly; without thinking them through clearly and giving them the answer of our God and Savior in the Sacred Scriptures, we shall run the risk of a gross confusion of Law and Gospel, and that to the peril of the souls in our care. It is the very real and present danger of such a confusion that has provoked the request for a paper on Objective and Subjective Justification and their proper distinction. That Satan hates this precious and brightest jewel in the Bible is evident from the repeated attacks made on it during the history of the Church; each attack has been met with defections from the ranks of the faithful on the part of many and an ever more lucid exposition of the truth of God’s Word on the part of the orthodox. So St. Augustine declares against the Pelagians and others that faith is altogether the gift of God. Again Justification as God’s free gift is attacked; Anselm and Bernard appeal to the grace of God and the merit of Christ against the growing semi-Pelagianism of their day. Again it is attacked; this time the Lord of the Church raises up Luther to give the brilliant answer contained in his explanation to the Second and Third Articles of the Creed. But his bones are barely cold in the grave, when Melancthon fathers the Synergistic expressions spawned after the Smalkaldic War; that attack is met by the clear and evangelical answer of Article 11 of the Formula of Concord, only to be attacked again by new Arminians and Synergists. The first great schism on the Synodical Conference, the Election Controversy of 1879-81, has confusion on Objective and Subjective Justification at its core; confusion on their proper distinction has found its home in the Common Confession, the American Lutheran Church and the writings of Lenski and Reu. Let us not therefore succumb to the wiles of the Old Evil Foe, who would like nothing better than to see us fall into carnal (not to say Pharisaic) security, that we are orthodox because of our scriptural position on Inspiration, Creation, the Anti-Christ, and Church Fellowship, while he is free to subvert and destroy the very heart and core of the Gospel in our midst, without which our position on everything else will degenerate into meaningless orthodoxism. Our pastors feed on commentaries from Eerdmanns, Baker, and Zondervan; they have as their mainstay the works of Lenski; and while many fine things are to be learned from all of these, they will be searched in vain for a clear and correct statement on Justification. Is it too much to suggest that the *pro-forma caveat*, “You’ve gotta watch out for these fellows,” is not sufficient for a generation that fills its ears with the voices of no others? On the subject of this paper the author is aware of only one English language commentary that clearly expresses, distinguishes, and warns against the errors on the doctrine of Objective and Subjective Justification, namely our own J. P. Meyer’s commentary on II Corinthians, *Ministers of Christ* (cf. especially pp. 98-103). As Meyer points out, even the English translation of Pieper’s *Dogmatics* is subject to misunderstanding on this vital point.

Given the history of the controversy and its tendency to emerge anew in one generation after another, given the perversity of our own sinful nature *and will*, and the tenacity of the Old Evil Foe, we

do well to give our energy and attention to a re-thinking and a restatement of the truth of God's Word on these central truths of His revelation and work for us and for our salvation.

### **Statement of the Doctrine of Objective Justification**

By objective (or universal) justification we mean simply this: God, on account of His own free and unmerited grace, has forgiven the sins of the whole world;<sup>1</sup> this "not guilty" verdict God has declared over the whole world<sup>2</sup> without injury to His divine justice;<sup>3</sup> for the sacrifice of His Son in the place of all mankind<sup>4</sup> serves as the all-sufficient satisfaction for the offence done to God by the individual and collective sin of our fallen race,<sup>5</sup> and that sacrifice provides each and every sinner with the only possible, perfect, and complete covering for his guilt.<sup>6</sup>

- 1) Romans 5:18-19 Therefore as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.

This passage (together with II Corinthians 5:19-21, which we shall consider below) forms the *Sedes Doctrinae* for the doctrine of objective justifications. Limitations of time and space make a thorough exegesis of this and the other significant passages from which we draw the doctrine impossible; worthy of a separate study would be an examination of the verb δικαίωω and the more related words δίκαιος, δικαιοσύνη as they occur here and elsewhere in the Scriptures; for our purposes, let it suffice to note that these words are grounded in a legal relationship, according to a specific norm, whether it be in law or in custom. In both the immediate and the remote context of these verses St. Paul is discussing man's legal status with God; he is discussing God's verdict over mankind according to the norm and standard which God Himself has established from the time of Adam's creation. And what is that verdict? All mankind is found guilty of sin, and that since the Fall of Adam; his sin is imputed or charged to the whole race, as is evidenced in the decree of death, the appropriate sentence for the guilty, which hangs over the heads of all alike. The "many" sinners of vs. 19 is obviously the "all" of vs. 18; all are declared guilty, all are found disobedient, all are condemned, and that even before they are born, that apart from any action of their own will.

But God remains gracious; and that grace, which by its very definition is not and cannot be earned or deserved, is active in seeking man's salvation, man's restoration to the innocent, the not-guilty, the just status with respect to God's standard that man enjoyed before the Fall. And that grace is perfectly and completely expressed in the obedience of One, which obedience is now charged, imputed and declared over all. Just as the "all" and the "many" are identical in guilt, so now are the "all" and the "many" identical in righteousness, in innocence; just as the guilt and the death were not merely available or possible on account of Adam's Fall, so the restoration and the justification is the gift to all as an accomplished fact through the obedience of One, which obedience—again—is imputed. To state it negatively, all sin has already been forgiven; it is a mutually exclusive proposition to say that God has given the obedience of His Son to all, and to say as well that man's sin is not forgiven until he does something, or until he believes it. The imputation of guilt did not require that the individual sin, nor that he believe himself a sinner; likewise the imputation of Christ's obedience needs no work or belief of man to effect it or complete it. In sum, the sin of the whole world has already been forgiven.

2) II Corinthians 5:19 God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.

The point of this passage is essentially the same as the point of the previous passage. Once again, notice the all-embracing, already accomplished character of the passage: the world is reconciled! Not, the world *can be* reconciled, or has reconciliation available to it. That reconciliation is entrusted to us in the Word. But it would be folly to speak of the reconciliation as entrusted to us, if, in point of fact, the reconciliation had not yet occurred; if prior to committing the word of reconciliation there is no reconciliation, then the word entrusted to our proclamation is a lie. And far be it from us to rend the sacred mantel cast over us in the Word, to make His Word and His Act of reconciliation of no effect until we have done something or until we have believed something.

3) II Corinthians 5:21 For He hath made him to be sin for us who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.

Not the least injury to God's Justice is done in His gracious action of forgiving the sin of the whole world. For Christ has become man's Substitute; He has traded places with us, taking all our guilt, the guilt of the whole world on Himself, bearing every single sin in His own body on the tree. The penalty, He pays, so that there is no more penalty to be paid; if the penalty has already been paid in the sacrifice of Christ, then for God not to forgive sin would be unjust; He would be demanding a second payment for the same offence. Conversely, the righteousness of Christ, His status as innocent before God and that by right and desert, is ours; that is the status and the judgment of God over the whole world. Notice yet again the imputed and judicial and forensic nature of the change; the Apostle speaks neither of a charge in man's essence, nor of damage to God's immutability; but a change in status, a change in relationship is spoken of, and that by a just decree of God on the basis of the exchange made in Christ's sacrifice.

4-5) John 1:29 Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.

Galatians 3:13 Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us; for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree.

Isaiah 53:11 He shall see the travail of His soul, and shall be satisfied.

The Old Testament flavor of the first two of these passages and the Old Testament source of the third remind us that sin is 1) an offense against God's holiness for the which a reparation, a payment, a satisfaction must be made which will remove the offense and undo the damage; 2) as well, sin more than invites the wrath of God not merely against the sin but also against the one who dared to commit it; and that wrath of God expresses itself in a judicial and forensic act, namely, a curse which declares the separation of the sinner from God's fellowship and his banishment from God's presence; the sentence of the curse is ultimately carried out in death and hell (for the essence of hell is separation from God's grace and goodness).

The whole purpose and goal of Christ's sacrifice on the Cross is to act for us, to intervene in our behalf, to render to God satisfaction for the offense and substitution, under God's wrath bearing our penalty of death and hell. And this He does for the whole world, utterly, once and for all, removing the offense and suffering the curse for all mankind. Already in the prophet Isaiah, we are assured that His

work shall not be in vain; God will be satisfied with it, which satisfaction He shows in our Lord's resurrection. The reader cannot but note yet again the completed nature of the work: Christ's work does not begin a process to be continued and completed and "brought to perfection by man's works or the supposed and mythical works of supererogation in the saints; and Christ's work does not need man's decision to bring it into effect. Indeed what pride, what arrogance, what blasphemous presumption on the part of a man to think that anything he does could be ranked along side of this supreme act of Christ, God's sacrifice for us, our Substitute under the curse of God against sin and sinners! No, all-sufficient, perfect and complete in every detail is this sublime and unique act of Christ the Sacrifice, Christ the Substitute for us and for all the world.

6) I John 2:2 He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.

To say that God's anger against the individual and collective mass of sin is propitiated, and to say that the guilt of sin and its penalty have been removed is to say the same thing. No other propitiation is needed, none other can be found, any other kind of propitiation is impossible. Man's works will not propitiate God's wrath; for even in the best of them man sins; even for the best of them man needs propitiation. Nor will man's faith propitiate God, whatever that faith may be; for God is already satisfied by the work of Christ. "For the sins of the whole world," rules out any exceptions and all self-righteousness; God smiles on His world of lost and fallen creatures; for they are covered by the sacrificial blood of His Son, and their status is therefore that of forgiven sinners, reclaimed and redeemed and justified by the blood of the Lamb.

### **Causes of Objective Justification**

It should be obvious from the above that there are but two causes of this justification, 1) the grace of God<sup>7</sup> and 2) the sacrifice of the God-man, Jesus Christ<sup>8</sup>. No cause can be found in man; for man has no essential, residual, or accidental good which God could consider worthy of His Incarnation and Sacrifice.<sup>9</sup> The fact that man has nothing in him which might merit or which could cause God to justify the sinner makes it all the more imperative that justification be proclaimed as an accomplished fact rather than a mere possibility, that forgiveness be held out as already won rather than only available; for when that imperative is not heeded, man may understandably be driven to despair by the scriptural, ethical and logical impossibility of his doing anything right or perfectly which would cause the possible justification to become actual in his own case, and the available forgiveness to become his own with any certainty.

7) II Timothy 1:9 (God) hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works, but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the World began.

Before the world began, before we were born, before any man had done either good or evil, God determined to rescue mankind through the Incarnation, Sacrifice, and Resurrection of His Son. Nor should we think that God determined all this in view of any good that man might do; for, as we shall shortly see, man is utterly incapable of any good without or apart from his justification; man's justification is therefore the antecedent and cause, the *sine qua non* of any good in man. If God were to justify man only in view of man's good works consequent upon that justification, there would in fact be

no justification; thus St. Paul rules out any works at all, whether antecedent or consequent, by saying “not according to our works.” Since it is not and cannot be according to our works or anything at all in us, it

is according to grace, which by definition must be free and unmerited, incapable of cause in man.

8) Ephesians 2:1-5 Walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet smelling savour.

Notice that this work called for and called forth (to be walking in love) is to be the result of what Christ has done, the consequence, not the cause, of His offering of Himself for us. Again, man’s works do not cause justification, but justification is to cause man’s works of love and obedience, a justification already accomplished, already completed in Christ’s sacrifice “for us,” i.e., in our stead, on our behalf

9) Ephesians 2:1-5 (for our purposes it is sufficient to note the description of man as he is by nature, namely:) dead in trespasses and sins; children of disobedience; by nature the children of wrath; dead in sins.

Totally depraved, altogether dead as far as good and God are concerned—that is the condition of man since the Fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden; that is his nature (though not his essence). In that state man has not even the potential for good and all that he does is evil, calling forth the wrath of God and deserving of the curse of God. Can the dead raise themselves? No more can the dead in sins produce or effect in God a blessing. Can a child of wrath father God’s mercy and love? The question answers itself. There is nothing in man, nothing potential or possible, nothing past or future, which could prompt God’s decree of justification. It must be, can only be, caused by God Himself, by His grace, by the atoning sacrifice of Christ.

### **The Treatment of Objective Justification by our Confessions**

Our Lutheran Confessions have no separate article on Objective Justification; the closest we can come to a paragraph of formulation for this doctrine is in Article IX of the Formula of Concord, under the doctrine of election. But even that is not really sufficient or suitable for stating the orthodox position in a clear and unequivocal manner. For our Fathers it was not difficult at all to consider objective and subjective justification under the same heading, and they were apparently unaware of any need to separate them or distinguish between them. But such was and remained the case only so long as the orthodox had a clear understanding of the nature of faith; once that understanding was gone, it became necessary (at the end of the last century) to begin making such a distinction. (A possible reason for the loss of such an understanding we shall consider below in Part III.) But having said all that, we shall not go wrong in assuming that, had we asked then for it, they would have had little difficulty in making the distinction; indeed, given their clear and concise formulations on faith and its relation to justification, one can only conclude that they considered the distinction all but self-evident. We take note of this silence in the Confessions at this point and on this matter, lest someone charge us with indifference to the problem, or ignorance of its existence, or failure to take it into account.

### **Statement of the Doctrine of Subjective Justification**

By subjective justification we mean that act whereby the objective justification, or the “not guilty” verdict, or the forgiveness (all of which, as we have already seen, mean the same thing essentially) earned for all, merited for all, and completed for all is offered<sup>1</sup>, given<sup>2</sup> and sealed to the individual<sup>3</sup> by the proclamation and declaration of God in the Gospel,<sup>4</sup> which Gospel as the effective means of grace<sup>5</sup> creates faith, i.e., appropriating trust and confidence, in the already and fully accomplished fact of forgiveness.<sup>6</sup> To put it more simply and to demonstrate the difference: in objective justification God declares the whole world “not guilty” and forgiven; in subjective justification God declares me “not guilty” and forgiven, and by that declaration in the Gospel He creates “saving faith” by the Gospel.

1) Acts 16:30-31 Sirs, what must I do to be saved? And they said, Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved and thy house.

It is not unreasonable to suppose that the trembling jailor had heard the message of Paul and Silas, that he at the very least knew what they were in jail for; it is not impossible that he also heard their songs and prayers at midnight (vs. 25) or before, even though he was in bed sleeping at the exact time of the earthquake. And now in his terror, faced with the prospect of death and having just escaped it—perhaps only for the moment—he asks a perfectly natural question according to the *opinio legis*: What must I do? Does the Apostle say: “My good jailor, this is what you have to do: you have to believe; that is your part, your doing, in the whole business of salvation.” That is the exact opposite of what St. Paul says; for he clearly demonstrates in all of Romans 4, believing and doing are opposites. Rather, he is telling the jailor: “There is nothing at all for you to do; it has all been done for you in this Christ of whom you have heard; simply believe it; it is here offered to you full and free; be confident and trust that God means for you to have it too, for Christ died in the place of all.”

2) Mark 16:16 he that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; he that believeth not shall be damned.

The offer of forgiveness and eternal life in the Gospel message does not disappoint; it gives and imparts exactly what it promises. In the day of wrath and in the hour of death the believer shall certainly see that it was so: Christ did die for me, even for me, as He said in the Gospel of the Word, as He said no less in the Gospel of the Sacrament. Well is it that believing and Baptism are linked together—both are a receiving, neither are a doing; in both God is the one who is active, who works, so that Baptism gives us faith which believes, gives even what faith believes, as St. Peter tells us: Baptism doth also now save us (I Peter 3:21).

3) John 3:16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (18) He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.

Jesus is telling Nicodemus about facts proclaimed, which facts and their proclamation are intended to create a response in the one who hears, namely the response of individual appropriation and its necessary consequence of faith, i.e. trust in the promise made in the proclamation. So He compares His own exaltation on the Cross to the lifting up of the serpent in the wilderness. And what of that comparison? There was health and perfect healing accomplished in that serpent, because of the promise

of God; the look of faith to the serpent did not cause the serpent on the pole to heal, but rather the promise and Word of God, which promise inspired and created the confidence and the trust in which those looked who were healed. In each one individually, one after another, the health provided for was personally received as that promise created the faith and trust commanded, invited and sought by God. So in the Crucified Christ as well; there is perfect healing; and that healing is available, but much more; it is already there as an accomplished fact. In the proclamation of the Gospel the reality of that healing is sealed to the individual as he hears it and in hearing it believes it. The hearing and believing does not establish the fact, nor does it bring a mere potentiality into effect; rather it receives the benefit of that effect in a personal way, as by the proclamation and the promise confidence and trust are created. Faith then is what St. Augustine taught us: *scientia, assentia, fiducia*; that is, the Word of forgiveness, the fact of its already having been won by Christ the Crucified, is announced to the individual, so that he knows now what he did not know before; that message creates assent that it is a true message, that it all actually happened; and that true message incites and inspires confidence that the hearer is included in that benefit proclaimed. Notice that in vs. 18 unbelief is clearly the cause of the condemnation: unbelief rejects the fact and/or refuses assent and in consequence will not appropriate the forgiveness and healing to himself; it is there for him and won for him in spite of his unbelief; but he casts it aside and spurns it, and so casts aside and spurns its benefit; for God forces no one to believe. But notice as well that Jesus does not say that one is saved *because* he believes, as He says one is condemned because he does not believe. The distinction and the difference is vitally important, as we shall note below; the proper equation is; faith receives salvation, unbelief causes damnation. While we may grant that the equation is not strictly logical, it is the clear teaching of this passage and all others concerned with subjective justification. But lest we lose the point we want to make most especially with this passage, subjective justification concerns itself with the individual; any individual and all individuals who hear the Word of the Gospel and are moved by it to trust it, have what Christ promises in that Gospel.

4) Romans 10:17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God.

Faith, which we have already defined as knowledge, assent, and confidence, does not fall from the sky and is not an emotion conjured up by the individual. It is a clear and easily defined matter so long as the doctrine of the means of grace is not forgotten; for the individual hears. And what is it that he hears? He hears words, words whose content convey a message, to which message the individual responds, out of which (note the Greek preposition) message the response of “Yes” is formed. It is God who declares it in Word and Sacraments: The sin of the world is forgiven; therefore your sin is forgiven on account of My Son’s substitutionary sacrifice.

5) Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the Gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.

As with so many of the passages here cited, a whole paper could easily be written on all that is said by the Apostle in this one short verse. For our purposes we note briefly that the Gospel message is “power;” it has inherent within it the ability to accomplish its purpose of creating faith—that is its power; it does not depend, indeed it cannot depend on man’s will to accomplish the purpose of creating faith; it is itself sufficient to the task assigned it by God, that of bringing us from death to life, from unbelief to confidence in what the Gospel offers and conveys, namely the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Everyone who believes has that inherent power to thank for it, and God to praise for it, in that it is God who has given the Gospel such power.

6) Ephesians 2:4-5 But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loves us, even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ—by grace ye are saved.

Notice how the Apostle incites and strengthens faith not by talking about faith but by talking about God's grace, by proclaiming objective justification. With him we can only make a formal distinction between the objective justification and the subjective justification of the sinner; the proclamation of the former accomplishes the latter; he lifts the eyes of his audience from themselves to the open arms of the Father and the extended arms of the Crucified, and declares: What God did for all, He did for us, and in telling us about it in the Gospel, He made it our own, He quickened us, He imparted the saving benefit to us individually (as the Apostle continues in the following verses).

### **Causes of Subjective Justification**

We turn now to the cause of subjective justification. While it is true that unbelief is the cause of damnation,<sup>7</sup> and while it is true that no one is saved without faith,<sup>8</sup> it is altogether incorrect to say that faith is a cause of salvation<sup>9</sup> or that we are saved because we believe<sup>10</sup> or that all we have to do is believe in order to be saved.<sup>11</sup>

We have already seen in Part I that the causes of objective justification are to be found in God alone, i.e., in His grace and in the vicarious sacrifice of His Son. We have also seen that objective justification and subjective justification are not two separate doctrines, but two aspects of the same doctrine. The distinction between them therefore cannot be that God causes the former and man causes or even helps to cause the latter. The distinction is rather in this, that in subjective justification we are considering objective justification from the standpoint of its proclamation to the individual and the result of that proclamation; the result God desires and calls forth by the proclamation is faith, a result achieved through the power inherent in the Gospel message itself.

Therefore, the only cause of subjective justification that in any way differs from the causes of objective justification is the aspect of proclamation; if we want to limit ourselves to two causes, we may say that the causes of subjective justification are: 1) the grace of God in Christ<sup>12</sup> and 2) the effective Power of the Gospel.<sup>13</sup> That distinction is most clearly set forth and maintained in the exposition of the Catechism under the Third Article, when with the Scriptures and the rest of the Confessions we teach that subjective justification, or the process of coming to faith, may be explained by the three words conversion, regeneration, and quickening. We do not turn ourselves—God turns us from hell to heaven and that by the Gospel; we do not give birth to ourselves the second time any more than we did the first—God gives us the new birth of faith in the merit of Christ through the effective means of grace, the Gospel; we do not raise ourselves from the dead—God does that without any aid or any possibility of cooperation on our part, and He does it by the life-giving power of the Gospel. (Cf. pp. 134-137 in the Catechism.) And so it *must* be; for if man needs to do anything to bring about his own salvation, if even a decision is required from him which he is to produce himself, or even help to produce, then we must all surely perish. For have we anything at all, even the slightest trace of an ability with which to apply ourselves to the offered grace of God? The unanimous voice of the Scriptures is a resounding “No!” We are described as dead in sins; St. Paul says of himself: In my flesh dwelleth no good thing (Romans 7:18); indeed the only activity ascribed to us is that of hatred and warfare against God (Romans 8:7), and our will is to dismiss the preaching of the cross as foolishness (I Corinthians 1:18). So far is man from aiding in his own conversion that he has not even the capacity to believe inherent in him; that too God must give in the Gospel. Those of a decision theology stripe will declare against us on this point:



“But, of course, man has the capability of faith, the capacity for making a decision; for if he did not, he would differ in no way from a brute animal, save in this respect that a man is culpable and an animal is not; and therefore we must press man to make his choice, to apply his will, be it ever so still, be it even described as dead, to make use of the capability of believing inherent in his dead soul.” That sounds all very reasonable on the surface; but it remains altogether unscriptural and even, upon closer examination, patently absurd. Did Lazarus in his grave have the potentiality of coming to life? He did not! It is the nature of the dead to stay dead; Christ’s word: “Lazarus, come forth!” did not merely activate some latent capacity in Lazarus; nor did those words give Lazarus something to ponder and then decide whether he would do it or not. The words gave the capacity for life not at all inherent in the dead, and then filled the still and totally passive body with life. Or one might speak in the same way of the world before it was the world: was there a capacity or a capability of existence in that non-existence? Again, the answer must and can only be “No!” It is the negative nature of things which do not exist, that they do not exist, they are not. It was God’s energizing Word, His creating Word of “Let there be ... and there was!” that brought something out of nothing; the nothing did not hear His voice and ponder it and then decide to respond to it. So is faith altogether the creation of God’s Gospel, giving both capacity and content; the resistance of death and enmity is not persuaded to change; rather it is overcome by the Gospel. To ask why this happens in some and not in others is beyond the scope of this paper, and furthermore beyond the reach of our comprehension. Suffice it to say that the faith of the believer is altogether God’s doing and the unbelief of the perishing altogether their own doing.

7) John 3:18 Cf. # 3 above.

8) Mark 16:16 Cf. # 2 above.

9) Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest any man should boast.

Faith is not the cause of salvation but that which receives it and is moved to embrace it by the grace of God. The whole process of salvation, from the coming of Christ and even before in the plan of God, down to the creation of faith and its ultimate realization of the heavenly goal, all flows from the grace of God. Man has not whereof to boast and never may he say with any right: “At least I had the good sense to believe.” St. Paul with these few and crystal clear words even removes the ground from under those who declare that the reason why some believe and not others is to be found in the diminished struggle against faith on the part of the believers as opposed to the unbelievers. No one may boast; all glory goes to God and His grace!

10) Ephesians 5:25-26 ... Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself for it; that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word.

Notice how clearly the Apostle spells out the causes of salvation and the conspicuous absence of any reference at all to man’s works, man’s decision, or man’s will. All is ascribed to the love of Christ and His sacrifice and then to the means of grace whereby He makes it our own and appropriates it to us individually.

11) Acts 16:30-31 Cf. # 1 above.

II Timothy 1:9 Who hath saved us, and called us with an holy calling, not according to our works,  
but according to his own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.

Again, as we have noted before, the motivation for our salvation existed in God even before He created the world; that attribute of grace (which is of His very essence) was active in devising the plan for our justification. Even our calling (*cum affectu et effectu*) finds its beginning before ever there was a beginning. Thus both objective and subjective justification have their source and their cause in God alone, not at all in man, neither in his works, his subsequent faith, nor his mythical capacities or decision making abilities.

13) 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand, by which also ye are saved if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain.

To the Gospel St. Paul ascribes the agency of our salvation; it is the instrumental cause by which faith is created, apart from which faith man remains dead in damning unbelief. Notice again the interesting juxtaposition of roles, that of faith on the one hand and unbelief on the other: the Apostle says of the Gospel, not faith, “by which also ye are saved;” on the other hand, if you forget the Gospel, no longer stand in the Gospel, you will not be saved; and that unbelief into which you have lapsed will be your own fault, because you did not keep the Gospel in memory. So the Gospel saves, not faith; but unbelief damns, and that unbelief has man, not God, as its cause.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Treatment of Subjective Justification by our Confessions**

While we do not find a detailed study of objective justification as such in our Confessions, and while there is no definitive article on the distinction between objective and subjective justification, there is a brilliant body of material that has to do with faith, its causes, its source, its content and its goal. Since we are supposedly celebrating the anniversary of the Formula of Concord, it would be altogether fitting that we all study especially Articles II and III in both the Epitome and in the Thorough Declaration. The reader will find these articles and the historical introduction to them most relevant to the topic we are considering and to the current “decision theology” environment in which so much of the church is awash these days. Some of the phrases and certainly the thinking of the synergists of our day comes right out of the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. The synergists were trying to answer that impossible question to which we made reference above: How is it that some believe and not others. Their answer was that since the grace of God is universal and its offer likewise universal, the reason why some believe must be found in them. In the Election Controversy in the early days of the Synodical Conference the same issue was raised again; the Ohio Synod gave answer to the question of why some and not others by declaring that God elected to salvation those whom He foresaw would believe, that is, “in view of faith.” But both

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<sup>1</sup> The use of the word “if” in this passage and many others when justification is the subject suggests a fruitful topic for another paper; one might note for example I John 1:7-9, or Romans 10:9, or related passages, such as Luke 7:50 et. al.; one has more than the suspicion that clauses which appear to be conditional when introduced by εἰ, (which most passages have instead of ἐάν) can better be translated “whoever” rather than “if.” I Cor. 15:2 does not make faith a condition of salvation, but rather unbelief the condition of damnation, and so does not belong in such a list; but the word “if” suggests the problem elsewhere, and therefore we take passing note of it here.

this incorrect conclusion of the Ohio Synod, and its stepfather, the synergism of Melancthon, George Major, Strigel and others is clearly condemned in the aforementioned articles. Melancthon taught that there were three efficient causes in conversion: the Holy Ghost, the Word of God, and the will of man (this latter defined as "*Facultas se applicandi ad gratiam.*") Article II clearly condemns this third cause, and it insists that only the first two apply, and that famous formula of St. Augustine is accepted: "God makes willing persons out of the unwilling and dwells in the willing." Again, and sad to say, time and space do not permit here the consideration of these two articles in any detail; we can but urge a renewed study of them and promise that any who undertake it will be more than happy that they did!

### **The Importance of a Correct Understanding of These Doctrines**

A confusion in these doctrines can only and must inevitably result in errors which ascribe something to the will of man of which man's will is altogether incapable, together with a misunderstanding of the nature of faith, which errors are not only contrary to the Scriptures but which also can lead to the destruction of faith itself. In this final section of our study we will turn our attention to some of those errors and attempt a practical application of the orthodox teaching to the concrete situations of the pulpit, the classroom and the evangelism call.

The heart and core of synergism is that man is capable at the very least of responding to the call of the Gospel, of deciding for Christ. The "altar call" of Billy Graham is familiar to all; and the call of his kindred spirits is no less familiar: "Take Jesus into your heart today;" "All you have to do is believe!" "Decide right now to accept Him!" The terrible error, the dread poison to the soul that lurks very near the surface of all such calls is twofold: For the one who has made his decision the possibility of self-righteousness will be an ever present danger—I decided, I put my trust in Him. Confidence and trust all too easily shifts from Christ its Source, Christ its Content and Christ its Goal, to the decision and confidence itself; the synergist gets up in the morning and asks not after Christ, but after his own feelings, which he mistakenly equates with faith (of which more below); does he "feel right with God;" does he feel at peace and forgiven? Then he is and need concern himself with the matter no longer. How easily that slips into a carnal security, with the self at the center, rather than Christ; how lightly one can dismiss Word and Sacraments, the objective means of grace that way; how imperceptible but deadly may become the slide into the posture of the self righteous Pharisee, "who stood and prayed thus with himself:" I thank Thee Lord, that I am not as other men are, who have not yet decided or refuse to decide; I thank Thee Lord, that I at least made the right choice.

The equal and opposite disaster and soul destroying tragedy of synergism is despair. What if the sinner feels he "almost believes;" what if he is-not aware emotionally of the peace and joy which should be his if he "really believes?" What if he begins to search within and asks the perfectly logical question: "How do I know that I believe enough?" For all such there can but be the opposite of faith, the soul-wrenching agony of doubt; and from doubt despair easily grows. "I do not feel it; I am not aware of it; I doubt; I do not think I have placed my whole trust in Christ; therefore my faith cannot be saving faith or real or enough—I am damned and lost forever!"

Ah, but thanks be to God, such errors of expression, such synergistic notions, such confusion does not occur in our midst! *Denkst du?* First of all, let the reader understand that the writer is accusing no one of outright synergism; we submit the following merely to demonstrate the ease with which synergistic expressions can creep into our vocabulary, to the confusion of our people, and perhaps our own as well. I refer you to p. 24 of the Evangelism Commission's TAS manual, as but one of many cases in point, indeed but one of many such reference pages. While there are places in the TAS manual which clearly and very correctly define faith as God's gift, there are other places (such as p. 24) where a

fog exists in which a synergist could easily hide and lurk in wait to do his faith-destroying work. We have in TAS, expressions such as these: “So faith is placing your whole trust in Christ for everlasting life. God throws us the life preserver, Christ. God moves and enables us to grab hold of Christ, that is, to believe in Him. When our whole trust is placed in Christ we have everlasting life. When we truly believe on Christ, truly trust Him for everlasting life....” Brethren, that’s dangerous stuff! The example of the life preserver is one which presupposes that man *wants* to be saved, that man is *willing* to be saved, neither of which is true! In conversion God does not merely move our will, he changes it; He overcomes it! The Formula of Concord specifically condemns just such analogies as this life preserver one in Article II, paragraphs 77-86 and elsewhere in the same article. As to “whole trust” and “truly believe,” I understand and appreciate that the Evangelism Commission wishes these to be understood in contrast to any works which man might perform. But even so, these are terms used with ease by synergists to convey their dread decision theology; that alone should be sufficient to make them suspect. But in point of fact the terms are in and of themselves suspect. What is “whole trust?” It is that faith which is whole, which is complete, which is perfect; and there is no such thing this side of heaven, except in the imagination of a synergist. And what is “truly believe?” Is there some other kind of believing worthy of the name? For a synergist there might be; but in the Scriptures and in Lutheran orthodoxy there is either faith or unbelief and hypocrisy—*Tertium non datur*. Again, let it be repeated: I am accusing no one of synergism; and I do not deny that there are places in TAS where the matter is presented correctly. But it remains a mystery to me that we can use such phrases as those so consistently, and even defend them as capable of a correct understanding—contorted though the explanation may be—and that in a day and age when such expressions cannot but be taken by many in a synergistic sense, given the popularity of synergistic thought forms in our day. What is worrisome is that these and similar expressions keep occurring and not just in TAS. The point is that faith is not man’s doing; it is not something that he even wants; in fact he resists and struggles against it by nature. Thus faith is God’s doing altogether in the means of grace, and expressions that may or must give any other impression are to be avoided like the proverbial plague.

But do we not encounter numerous expressions in Luther and in our Confessions, even in the Formula of Concord,<sup>2</sup> which loudly declare: “Faith alone saves!” Do we not often as well speak of “saving faith?” To be sure, “faith alone saves!” is one of the battle cries of the Reformation, and the expression “Saving faith” is deeply rooted in our consciousness. But permit me to suggest that the day may be long gone when we could safely continue to use such expressions without an explanation of what we mean. When Luther and the Confessions insist that “Faith alone saves!”, and when our Fathers spoke to us of “saving faith,” there was a well-grounded assumption that everybody agreed on the nature of faith, i.e., that it is knowledge given by the Scriptures of Christ and His work for our salvation, that it is assent worked by the Scriptures to the truthfulness of that knowledge, and that it is confidence created by the Scriptures in the merit of the Savior applied to the individual. The question is: Do people who have English as their native tongue and who think almost only in English mean that by “faith?” I am convinced that the answer is: They do not! We dare not forget that Luther all but invented standard High German with his translation of the Bible, and that he did much to give words like “*glauben*” and “*Glaube*” a “Lutheran” sense and meaning for the Germans; when the German speaks of faith, he emphasizes the aspect of faith as knowledge, faith as having a concrete basis in fact and history; the very pains to which modern German theologians go to give the word another meaning is evidence of the difficulty they have in separating the words from a Lutheran sense. But does English have the same emphasis? Again, we should remember that the Reformed theologians who translated the KJV did much

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<sup>2</sup> As in Article II, par. 52 of the Thorough Declaration; but cf. also par. 59 ff. as well.

to give meanings to words in English, as Luther did in German. I dare say that if you asked the man on the street, or for that matter, took a poll of the members in the pew, the vast majority of them would define faith as a feeling, a confidence, an idea—and nothing more; the last adult I baptized simply assumed faith and intellect, faith and fact, faith and history were opposites! In the English mind faith more often than not has and needs no basis in fact or history. When we say: “Faith alone saves!” to such a person, or when we talk of “saving faith” to such a one, we simply cannot assume that he understands Greek and German; it is much more likely that when we say, “All you have to do is believe,” or “Just have faith,” that he will misunderstand us altogether, and translate that something like this: “So long as I feel right with God, and believe there is a God, I will be saved; once I have done that believing, made that decision, I need nothing more.”

Related to the German-English problem in such expressions as listed above, is yet another problem, namely the common confusion between what we mean by “saving faith” and “strong faith.” I dare say that in most minds they are the same thing; and, of course, they are not. “Saving faith” is that faith which trusts that the Virgin-born Son of God is my only Savior; “strong faith,” on the other hand, is that faith which regularly sees how this saving faith applies to specific situations in life and then finds joy and comfort in the application. Thus in Mark 4:40, Jesus asks the disciples: “How is it that ye have no faith?” He is not accusing them of denying His divine nature or what they understood at that point of His divine mission. He is talking about their failure to apply His Word in that concrete situation. That weak faith can end in no faith, we will not deny; but that it is the same thing, let no one assert—except a synergist. “Saving faith” is not a quantity to be measured; it is a simple “Yes!” to the doctrine of Objective Justification, and as such, totally the working and gift of God in the Gospel; saving faith talk belongs in talk of what God does, not what we do. Strong faith belongs at least as much in the doctrine of sanctification in the broad sense; there man applies himself to the Gospel, hears and reads and ponders it, makes applications that flow from God’s promise to never forsake him and the like; and God through such application and diligence gives understanding and comfort and strength by His Gospel. It should be obvious that if we are talking “saving faith,” and our hearers are understanding “strong faith,” we are in grave danger of unintentionally leading them either to synergistic pride and self-righteousness, or to synergistic despair.

What then should be our mode of expression, when: “Just believe the Gospel” will be misunderstood, and when: “All you need is faith,” will likely be taken in a synergistic sense? Why not follow the example of the Scriptures themselves? The sermons in Acts, the discourses of Paul and Peter spend very little time discussing faith; for it is not the nature of faith to look at itself, to navel gaze. It is rather the nature of faith to look at Christ in the Word and Sacraments; for not talk about faith creates faith and strengthens faith. That is what the proclamation of Christ Crucified and Risen for us and for our justification does. Read Romans, Galatians, even Hebrews 13; you will find that in those very sections which speak the most about faith, they speak not in a way that leads to introspection, but in a way that looks outside of self to Christ, the Source, the Content, the Goal of faith. I fear that in sermons we too often think that we have satisfied the necessity of preaching the Gospel when we have said little more than “Believe the Gospel,” in an otherwise law sermon. Given what most people will understand by that expression, we have done less than nothing in the service of the Gospel if we are therewith content. For faith to be created, for faith to be strengthened, there is little need of talking about faith; for the creation and strengthening of “saving faith” show the love of the Father who spared not His only-begotten Son, but freely delivered Him up for us all, as St. Paul does in Romans 8; show the Savior extended on the cross, willing, even eager to suffer hell itself for each weary sinner; paint the picture of His sacrifice on that altar and then paint it again, and yet again, and never tire or grow weary of painting it. For by nature we are all synergists, and quickly run back and forth between self-righteousness and

despair. And the message of the Gospel—not talk about faith—is the only antidote and all-sufficient cure. When the Savior’s sacrifice, the Father’s grace, the Spirit’s perpetual presence and faithfulness to the Gospel promises is held before the eyes and pressed to the bosom, God will assuredly do His work of creating faith, preserving faith, and strengthening faith, and that without any confusing demands from the preacher that: “Now all you have to do is believe it.”

The same holds true for an evangelism call. Preach the Gospel; let them know of you what St. Paul wanted his members to know: Christ Crucified! When the text or the conversation in an evangelism call invite a discussion of faith and its nature, then one need not fear to speak of it. But in our day, that newly devised jingle of “Less is more,” may well apply, until Bible Class or Adult Instruction, when it comes to talking about faith—prefer always to “talk about the Savior!”

“Faith alone saves;” “only believe;” “accept the Gospel;” “put your whole trust in Christ;” “there is nothing for you to do but believe.” Can these and like expressions be correctly understood? A better question would be: Are they correctly understood, or do they tend to confuse law and Gospel, confound the doctrine of justification, and contradict the most beautiful Jewel of all of Scripture and all of Lutheran theology? I leave the question with you for your devout consideration, and trust that you recognize the serious and vital implications of your answer. Needless to say, this unworthy work does not begin to say all that should be said on the doctrine of justification. As noted in the introduction, justification is a doctrine which Satan will not long endure uncorrupted, and in our own fallen nature and corrupt will he still finds a ready pair of allies for the attack. Perhaps the time is ripe for a call on the COP to encourage them to initiate a Synod-wide study of this doctrine in our day; certainly if “*Gesetzlich Wesen Unter Uns*” merited our serious re-examination, justification in our time of confusion merits such study no less. May our Savior deliver us from the deadly epidemic of synergism sweeping our land and most churches in it; for my part I remain more than a little concerned that the virus is closer to our door than we think. O God, for the sake of Thy grace and Christ’s merit, spare us!