

Objective Justification

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Introduction

You have asked me to speak to you about the doctrine of justification especially in the light of the “four statements” concerning this doctrine that have surfaced in the so-called “Kokomo case.” It will therefore not be the purpose of this paper to discuss every aspect of this teaching. We are all agreed that the word “justify” is a forensic term, which means to “acquit” or to “pronounce not guilty.” There is also no dispute in regard to the basic position of the Lutheran Church that men are justified or forgiven by grace for Christ’s sake through faith, even though those who teach universal justification are often accused of ignoring the importance of faith in justification. That accusation is either dishonest, made to discredit the defenders of the biblical doctrine, or it is made in ignorance of our position.

The crux of the controversy can be summed up in a very simple way: “Has God forgiven the sins of all men?” If we could all answer that question with an unequivocal “yes,” the “four statements” would cause us little difficulty.

Definition of Terms

The doctrine that God has forgiven the sins of all men is often called it “universal” justification. In our circles a synonym for that term is “objective justification.” The two terms are relatively modern. They are not used in the Lutheran Confessions. They are also not really synonymous. “Universal justification” is a term denoting the doctrine that God has forgiven the sins of all men. Strictly speaking, the term “objective justification” expresses the thought that the sins of a man are forgiven by God whether he believes it or not. Objective justification is not necessarily universal, but if justification is universal it must of necessity be objective.

A theologian is free to use the terms or to avoid them. They are useful theological tools for those who understand the doctrine, but for those who do not understand they often only add to the confusion, as is demonstrated by some of the letters in *Christian News* on this subject. To debate about the use of the terms before we settle the simple question, “Has God forgiven the sins of all men?” would therefore be a waste of time. If we could agree on the answer to that question the terms would cause us little difficulty.

A New Doctrine?

Before we answer the central question on the basis of Scripture there is one peripheral question and one very important related matter that should be discussed. Both sides in the present controversy agree that universal justification was taught by C. F. W. Walther and other respected theologians of the old Synodical Conference. We will therefore not cite the dozens of passages that could be quoted from Hoenecke and Walther and Stoeckhardt and Pieper and many other theologians who taught in so many words that the sins of all men have been forgiven by God. Nevertheless, those who attack the position of our church often insist that this is a new doctrine. At first, Prof. Meyer was charged with introducing this teaching, but now all seem to admit that the doctrine goes back at least to Walther’s time. They sometimes, however, insist that Luther and the Confessions do not teach this.

Luther and Objective Justification

That Luther believed in objective justification is, however, very easy to demonstrate. Luther says, for example, that when we baptize someone we must say to the person being baptized, “All your sins are remitted by reason of the presence of Christ. Therefore I baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This means that I remit all your sins, cleansing you of them right now” (*LW* 22, 177). In that context he writes,

“Baptism ... remains valid and correct, even if it could be proved that a child or an adult did not believe when baptized ... whether I believe or disbelieve, it remains good and valid in itself.” That he had a correct understanding of the function of faith in this matter is clear from the words that follow: “If I believe, it benefits me ... if I do not believe, Baptism will not redound to my good in all eternity” (p. 175).

Commenting on the words of Christ in which he commanded his disciples to “preach the remission of sins” (Lk 24:47) Luther says that this is nothing else than “to preach the Gospel, which announces to all the world that in Christ the sins of the whole world are swallowed up, that he died to take our sins away from us and that he rose to devour them and wipe them out, so that all who believe this have such hope and assurance” (*St. L.* 11, 693). It is crystal clear that the announcement of forgiveness to all the world comes first; then faith builds on that announcement and finds comfort and assurance in it.

If there is still any doubt that Luther believed that when God tells us in the Gospel that our sins are forgiven this is true whether we believe it or not, all such doubt ought surely to disappear when we listen to Luther’s ridicule of the Roman doctrine of the “erring key” (*LW* 40, 337ff). That term, in Roman Catholic theology, means that when the priest says, “*Absolvo te*,” “I forgive your sins” those words are not true if the person is not really contrite, if he has knowingly omitted some sins from his confession, or does not intend to carry out the satisfaction prescribed by the priest. Lutherans whose theology is basically Romanizing will say that the pastor’s words, “I forgive you all your sins” are true only for the believers in the audience.

Speaking of the “erring key” Luther writes,

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 ... He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But that 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. (*LW* 40, 366f)

In that same context he indicates very clearly that when the pastor speaks the absolution he should be able to say, “I know for certain that I have loosed you before God, whether you believe it or not.” We need no more evidence than this to prove beyond question that Luther believed in what we call “objective or universal justification” even though he did not use the term.

Objective Justification in the Confessions

What is true of Luther is true also of the confessions. We will not repeat here what Luther says of forgiveness in his *Large Catechism* explanation of the Fifth Petition (*LC* 111, 88). In order to save time we shall simply list, without discussion in every case, some of the confessional passages which clearly teach universal, and therefore also, objective justification.

The law would seem to be harmful since it has made all men sinners, but when the Lord Jesus came he forgave all men the sin that none could escape. (*Apol.* IV, 103)

If somebody doubts that his sins are forgiven, he insults Christ because he thinks that his sin is greater and stronger than the death and promise of Christ. (*Apol.* IV, 149)

What else is the refusal to believe absolution (Note: “I announce the grace of God unto *all of you*, and...I forgive you *all your sins*.) but the accusation that God is a liar? If the heart doubts, it maintains that God’s promises are uncertain and inane. (*Apol. XII, 62*)

It is God’s command and the Gospel itself that they should be sure that their sins are forgiven freely for Christ’s sake, not doubting that they are forgiven them personally. If anyone doubts, he makes the divine promise a lie. (*Apol. XII, 88*)

If anybody, therefore, is not sure that he is forgiven, he denies that God has sworn to the truth; a more horrible blasphemy than this cannot be imagined. (*Apol. XII, 94*)

The last three quotations, by the way, echo what Luther says again and again about the efficacy of the keys. Of the pastor’s words, “I forgive you all your sins” Luther repeatedly affirms that these are God’s words and “God does not lie.” Lack of faith in those words “means as much as to say: God you are a liar. It is not true what you say. I do not believe it” (*LW 40, 368*). Of special significance in that connection is his statement:

He who promises me, “Whatsoever you loose shall be loosed,” does not lie; this I know. If my repentance is not sufficient, his Word is; if I am not worthy, his keys are; He is faithful and true. My sins shall not make a liar out of Him.” (*LW 40, 375*)

It is very evident that the Lutheran doctrine of absolution rests on the foundation of the universal forgiveness of the human race. It is also clear that any Lutheran pastor who denies universal justification has violated his confessional oath. Thus what at first appears to be a peripheral matter turns out to be a question of confessional honesty.

Law and Gospel

If we are to be properly on our guard against being misled in regard to the doctrine of universal justification, it is very important to have a clear understanding of the distinction between law and gospel. When Moses at Mt. Sinai asked to see God’s glory he was told by God, “There shall no man see me and live” (Ex 33:20). Moses wanted to see what God was like. But while God declined to show his glory to Moses, he did promise to tell Moses what kind of God he was. He did this when he promised to proclaim the name of the Lord to the greatest of the Old Testament prophets.

God’s own description of himself in fulfillment of that promise is certainly one of the greatest passages in the Old Testament. When Jehovah proclaimed his name to Moses he said,

The LORD, the LORD God, merciful and gracious
 long-suffering and abundant in goodness and truth,
 keeping mercy for thousands,
 forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin,
 and that will by no means clear the guilty,
 visiting the iniquity of the fathers
 upon the children, and
 upon the children’s children,
 unto the third and fourth generation.

In those words God revealed himself to Moses as the God who in grace and mercy forgives sins and, at the same time, (we might almost say, in the same breath), as the God who punishes all sin, the God of justice, who will never declare the guilty to be righteous. To human reason this must always be a stumbling block and an offense. The mind of man will never discover a way to reconcile these two: God forgives every sin—God

punishes every sin. This is the stubborn contradiction with which every earnest student of God's Word must finally come to grips. Only at the cross of Christ, where God found a way to forgive and to punish at the same time and in the same act, can we find an answer to this dilemma. In Christ God has forgiven every sin and in Christ God has punished every sin.

And yet to all eternity he remains the same God, the God who punishes and the God who forgives. Unless we understand that we will always have trouble with the doctrine of universal justification. In reality, no man has a right to believe that his sins are forgiven unless he also believes that his sins have been punished. That is why orthodox theologians who do not merely parrot what they have heard others say so often seem to have difficulty in making up their minds whether the doctrine of vicarious atonement or the doctrine of justification is the central doctrine of the Christian religion. We find that apparent vacillation especially in Martin Luther.

In answering the question, "Has God really forgiven the sins of all men?" we must constantly be on our guard lest we be led astray by arguments from reason which hold that this doctrine contradicts other clear statements of Scripture, e.g. the doctrine of the eternal damnation of unbelievers. Theologians who teach universal justification are often accused of being universalists.

We must always bear in mind that just as Law and Gospel appear to contradict each other, so the message which lies at the very heart of the Gospel, namely, that for Jesus' sake God has indeed forgiven the sins of all men, will also appear to contradict clear elements of the law. When men argue that universal justification must eventually, if it is consistently held, lead to universalism, the doctrine that all men will finally be saved, they are in essence saying that if God really forgives he can no longer be the God who by no means clears the guilty. Yet God himself says that he does both.

The Biblical Evidence

Against the background of the distinction between law and gospel, it should not really be difficult for those who bring "into captivity" every thought to the obedience of Christ to find the answer to our question, "Has God really forgiven the sins of all men?" In answering that question, the response, of course, finally must come not from Luther nor from the Confession, but it must be found in the *sedes doctrinae*, the clear Bible passages in which that doctrine is taught.

The First Sedes: 2 Corinthians 5:19

One of the most important of those passages is 2 Corinthians 5:19:

ὡς ὅτι θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, μὴ λογιζόμενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν καὶ θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς.

The ὡς ὅτι with which the passage begins is a rather rare construction in the New Testament, though more common in later *Koine*. According to some grammarians it very likely has no more significance than either ὡς or ὅτι would have if either word were used alone. Either ὡς or ὅτι can mean "that" or "because." The last example of the use of ὡς ὅτι in later Greek given by Moulton-Milligan clearly requires the translation "because." The Vulgate translates the phrase "*quoniam quidem*", "because indeed", or "seeing that surely." Even though only one modern translator, so far as I am aware (Moffatt), translates ὡς ὅτι with "for," this Vulgate translation seems to reproduce the sense of the Greek very accurately. With the ὡς ὅτι Paul gives the basis for what he had said in verse 18.

For the sake of a clearer understanding of verse 19 and the ὡς ὅτι phrase the obvious parallelism between this and the previous verse should be pointed out. The words of verse 18, τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ καταλλάξαντος ἡμᾶς ἑαυτῷ διὰ Χριστοῦ, are echoed in verse 19 in θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ. In the same manner the

δόντος ἡμῖν τὴν διακονίαν τῆς καταλλαγῆς of verse 18 is balanced with the θέμενος ἐν ἡμῖν τὸν λόγον τῆς καταλλαγῆς of verse 19. Or in translation:

- v.18 “God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ” is echoed by
 v.19 “God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ;” and
 v.18 “and who gave to us the ministry of reconciliation., “ is parallel to
 v.19 “and having placed in us the word of reconciliation.”

The ὡς ὅτι points out the relationship between the two verses, and we may understand Paul as saying:

God reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation. *We can say this because* (ὡς ὅτι) God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ by not imputing their trespasses unto them, and he has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

In other words, we can be sure that we have been reconciled because the whole world has been reconciled and we know that we have the ministry of reconciliation because God has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

The translation given above indicates that we have treated καταλλάσσω as a supplementary participle and the whole phrase as a periphrastic construction. The argument that ἦν...καταλλάσσω cannot be periphrastic because of the intervening words, ἐν Χριστῷ κόσμον, cannot be maintained. There are many New Testament examples of such words separating the auxiliary verb from its supplementary participle, and Moulton in the third volume of his *Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (p. 88) lists 2 Corinthians 5:19 as an example of periphrastic conjugation. We may cite as examples of this type of construction the following:

- 1) Mt 27:33, Γολγοθᾶ, ὃ ἐστὶν Κρανίου Τόπος λεγόμενος (cp. Mk 15:22, τὸν Γολγοθᾶν τόπον, ὃ ἐστὶν μεθερμηνευόμενον Κρανίου Τόπος).
- 2) Col 3:1, οὗ ὁ Χριστὸς ἐστὶν ἐν δεξιᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ καθήμενος.
- 3) Mk 1:33, καὶ ἦν ὅλη ἡ πόλις ἐπισυνηγμένη πρὸς τὴν θύραν.
- 4) Mt 24:38, ἦσαν ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις ἐκεῖναις ταῖς πρὸ τοῦ κατακλυσμοῦ τρώγοντες καὶ πίνοντες.
- 5) Lk 23:8, ἦν γὰρ ἐξ ἰκανῶν χρόνων θέλων ἰδεῖν αὐτόν.

That is surely sufficient evidence to demonstrate that the word order in 2 Corinthians 5:19 is by no means an argument against the understanding of ἦν...καταλλάσσω as periphrastic.

This will, to a certain extent, also refute the claim, that καταλλάσσω is a circumstantial participle expressing purpose, so that we should translate: “God was in Christ to reconcile the world to himself” (namely, by bringing men to faith in Christ’s atonement). The reconciliation, therefore, is for the most part a future event that takes place when men come to faith. The past tense of καταλλάσσω in verse 18 is explained by limiting the reconciliation there to people who have already come to faith.

It has been said that if the reconciliation spoken of in verse 19 were something that happened when Christ rose from the dead, the present participle is out of place. If Paul had wanted to speak of a past reconciliation, it is argued, he would have used an aorist participle. That argument is absolutely untenable. No one, for example, would argue that the sentence, “I was sitting” cannot refer to something that happened sixteen years ago because “sitting” is a present participle and if you want to speak of things that happened in the past you must use a past participle. As is the case in English, so it is also in Greek. As a general rule we can say that the Greek participles are timeless (except for the future participle) and they take their temporal significance from the main verb in the sentence. If the aorist participle were used here it would normally denote an action

that took place before “God was in Christ.” The English translation of such a Greek construction would be, “God was in Christ, having reconciled the world unto himself” (even before he was in Christ).

The participle can not express purpose in this context. It is true that the present participle, especially in the *Koine*, may occasionally express purpose but this is relatively rare. It is much more common for the New Testament writers to use the infinitive, a prepositional phrase, or a final clause to indicate purpose. Many of the relatively few examples of a final participle (one expressing purpose) cited by the grammarians are extremely doubtful. The example from Acts 21:3, “ἐκεῖσθε γὰρ τὸ πλοῖον ἦν ἀποφορτιζόμενον τὸν γόμον,” however, deserves special attention because it employs the same form as 2 Corinthians 5:19, that is, ἦν with a present participle. The English translations generally render the periphrasis, “(the ship) was *to unload*,” or words to that effect. But even the English translation, “was to unload,” has a different connotation than we would find in “came to unload,” and the first phrase does not imply purpose. The sentence is just a statement of historical fact, the periphrastic imperfect denoting an action that took place regularly. Tyre was the regular port of call, the place where the ship again and again unloaded. Robertson in his *Grammar* (p.1115) therefore translates, “The ship was appointed to unload her cargo,” and BD translates, “the ship had the characteristic of” (unloading).

The construction that we have in 2 Corinthians 5:19 is very similar in form to the one in Acts 21:3. However, in the Acts passage the periphrastic imperfect clearly denotes iterated action in the past. In Second Corinthians it denotes continued action in the past. The reconciling was going on throughout the ministry of Jesus, beginning at his birth and reaching its climax in the resurrection. Usually when the present participle expresses the idea of purpose it is joined to a verb denoting motion, such as πέμπω, ἀποστέλλω or ἔρχομαι. If Paul had said, “God sent Jesus καταλλάσσοντα τὸν κόσμον ἑαυτῷ,” it would be normal to translate, “to reconcile the world to himself.” Strictly speaking, the idea of purpose really lies more in the context than in the participle. When Jesus in the parable of the fig tree says that the owner “ἦλθεν ζητῶν καρπὸν,” that could be translated, “He came as one seeking fruit,” and the context clearly indicates that his coming was for the purpose of seeking fruit.

That Paul in verse 19 of the fifth chapter of Second Corinthians is not speaking of a future reconciliation which takes place when men come to faith is also demonstrated by another passage in which καταλλάσσειν is used. That this reconciliation took place in the past and before we came to faith is surely made clear by Paul’s statement that we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son while we were still enemies (Ro 5:10). And if Paul can say that God reconciled (ἀποκαταλλάξαι¹) “all things” to himself through the blood of Christ’s cross, that must surely include more than believers unless we want to write a Calvinistic gloss on that “all.” Moreover, when Paul says in Second Corinthians 5:13 that God reconciled us to himself through Christ, we may grant that the ἡμᾶς means believing children of God without admitting that this reconciliation is limited to believers or that it took place when they became believers.

To use ἡμᾶς to limit the reconciliation to believers is shown to be untenable by verse 21. Surely no Lutheran theologian would say that the ὑπὲρ ἡμῶν of that verse is such a limiting phrase in the light of the many passages of Scripture that tell us that Christ took upon himself the sins of the world.

Finally, it should be said that a present participle in a periphrastic construction is to be understood as contemporaneous with the main verb unless the context requires it to have a future connotation. “I am coming” or even “I was coming” has reference to the future when I add the words “next week.” There is absolutely nothing in this context that indicates that Paul wants us to understand καταλλάσσων in this way.

Even if we would grant, however, for the sake of argument, that the participle in 2 Corinthians 5:19 denotes purpose, this would not by any means indicate that the reconciling would take place again and again in future times when men come to faith. We could still say, as Franz Pieper does, that the reconciliation took place on Easter Sunday. Assuming that the participle expresses purpose, it would still be possible to say that God was in Christ (as he obeyed the law fully in our place and as he suffered the penalty of our sin) in order that he might, (by raising him from the dead on Easter Sunday), reconcile the world to himself by not imputing their trespasses unto them.

¹ Col 1:20.

When commentators insist that “God was in Christ to reconcile the world to himself by bringing them to faith” they do violence to the text. Paul does not say this. He says instead that God reconciled the world to himself not by bringing them to faith, but “by not imputing their trespasses unto them.”

The idea of bringing men to faith is in this context, but not in verse 19. As far as God is concerned he reconciled the world, that is, all men, to himself through Christ (διὰ Χριστοῦ in v. 18). He did this by not imputing the sins of the world. Μὴ λογίζομενος αὐτοῖς τὰ παραπτώματα αὐτῶν cannot mean anything less than that. No matter what else may be said about this passage, αὐτοῖς and αὐτῶν can have no other antecedent than “world,” the plural pronouns being construed according to sense.

The reconciliation that takes place when men come to faith is spoken of in the following verse. When Paul says, “We pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God,” he calls upon them to be changed in their relationship to God. How that takes place is very clear from the wider biblical context. When men recognize in faith and through faith that God has forgiven them, as the word of reconciliation says, they will be changed from men who are terrified before God’s wrath and who hate God to people who see God as their gracious heavenly Father. God changed them or reconciled them in relation to himself by not imputing their trespasses to them. He placed them into a different relationship to himself in and through Christ. When they accept that message in faith they will be changed in the way they relate to God. Our conviction that this is what Paul says to us is strengthened by the fact that this change that takes place in the moment of conversion is called μετάνοια, repentance, which literally denotes a *change* of mind. This μετάνοια is the change that takes place when men on their part are reconciled to God. Having learned from the law to see God as enemy and punisher they now through faith in the Gospel promise come to see him as friend and pardoner.

When Franz Pieper says that when God reconciled the world to himself a change took place in God he uses language that can be justified by biblical usage. The Bible in many ways says that God put away his wrath and turns from the fierceness of his anger. But we recognize that this is an anthropopathism, that speaks of God in human terms. *We* can only think of what happened as a change in God. But the change that takes place does not consist in this that his anger changes to love. Rather, if we abide by the actual words of Scripture, the change as we conceive of it took place in this way that God, who apart from Christ sees us as guilty sinners, in and through Christ now considers us to be not guilty because of the atoning work of the Savior. We can only conceive of that as a change in God’s attitude toward us. What has really changed is our standing before God. God is always angry with sinners. As Luther says, it is impossible for God not to be angry with sinners or not to hate sinners. However, since in Christ he no longer sees us as sinners, he is no longer angry with us. Only in that sense can we say that there is a change in God’s attitude toward us.

Yet many of Pieper’s followers have insisted that the change in God’s attitude consists in this that God’s *anger* was changed into *love*. This sort of language can only result from a failure to understand the distinction between Law and Gospel. God has always been and will always be the God who forgives and the God who punishes. He has always been and will always be the God who loves sinners in spite of their sin. He has always been and always will be the God who hates sinners because of their sin. He cannot become angry or stop loving any more than water can become or stop being wet.

With the Confessions we are willing to say that God is reconciled to the world, but that we should be careful when we say that God was reconciled and then on that basis argue that this must denote a real rather than an apparent change in God is also indicated by the fact that in Scriptural usage God is never the object but always the subject of καταλλάσσω. The Bible never says that God is καταλλασσόμενος.

On the other hand, however, it is also true that the Bible never says that God is not reconciled. When modern theologians say that God does not need to be reconciled this is often joined with a denial of the wrath of God. Everyone who wishes to speak as the oracles of God speak must admit that the Scriptures have much to say about the fearful wrath of God against all sin. This wrath must somehow be appeased, and it was appeased through the death of Christ. In debating the question whether God is reconciled or not, one should really distinguish between the Greek word καταλλάσσω and its common English translation “reconcile.” The English word does not have the very strong basic meaning of “change” that is found in the Greek word. It may well be

that Paul would never had said that God was καταλλάσσόμενος but that he would still have been willing to say with the Lutheran confessions that God was reconciled.

Καταλλάσσω is formed from ἄλλος, other. The simplest form of the word is ἀλλάσσω. When the Greeks invented that word they did the same thing we might do in English if we were to coin the word “otherize.” The fundamental connotation of καταλλάσσω, reconcile, is that of change. When God reconciled the world to himself, therefore, some sort of change took place.

What that change was must be determined both from the narrower and wider context of Scripture. That there was no basic change in the nature of the world is very evident from what the Bible says about the nature of man even after Calvary. That there was no change in the nature of God is also clear from the biblical teaching of divine immutability. The change therefore must be sought elsewhere.

But the search need not last long. Paul tells us what the change was that took place when he says that when God reconciled the world to himself he did not impute the sins of men to them. Instead he imputed them to Christ. “He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us” (v. 21). Isaiah had said it more than seven centuries before Paul when he wrote, “The Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all.” And when Christ was made to be sin for us, we were made “the righteousness of God in him.” This, in short, is the change that took place in the καταλλαγή.

The Second Sedes: Romans 5:18,19

The second passage of those most often cited as proof for universal justification is Romans 5:18 and 19. There Paul writes,

18 Ἄρα οὖν ὡς δι’ ἐνὸς παραπτώματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς κατάκριμα, οὕτως καὶ δι’ ἐνὸς δικαίωματος εἰς πάντας ἀνθρώπους εἰς δικαίωσιν ζωῆς· **19** ὥσπερ γὰρ διὰ τῆς παρακοῆς τοῦ ἐνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν οἱ πολλοί, οὕτως καὶ διὰ τῆς ὑπακοῆς τοῦ ἐνὸς δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται οἱ πολλοί.

English translators have been obliged to add a verb or a verb and a noun when translating verse 18. The suggested additions are “judgment came” (KJV), “means” (S-G), “issued in” (Mof) “were condemned ... judged” (AAT), “affected” (Bkly), “led” (RSV), “the issue is” (NEB), “resulted” (NASB), “the result was” (NIV). Because εἰς κατάκριμα and εἰς δικαίωσιν are obviously prepositional phrases expressing result, the last two would seem to be the preferable rendering based directly on the Greek idiom.

But no matter what is done to express Paul’s thought in idiomatic English, the agreement between all these translators in reproducing the teaching of Paul is unanimous. The only error committed by the translators cited is found in the rendering of the words δικαίωσιν ζωῆς, SG, Mof, AAT, RSV, and NEB all translate the phrase with “acquittal and life” or words to that effect. This is strictly speaking not true. The righteous act (a collective singular) of Christ results in acquittal for all men. But it does not result in life for all men. The verdict of acquittal pronounced for Jesus’ sake on all men results in life only if the verdict of pardon is accepted in faith. All that the genitive ζωῆς tells us that there is some kind of relationship between the acquittal and life. What that relationship is must be made clear by the context, in this case all the passages of the Bible that speak of faith as the means by which we lay hold of God’s forgiveness, and conversion, by which we come to that faith, as a resurrection to new spiritual and eternal life.

Otherwise all the translations cited, even though the various translators stand at opposite poles of the theological spectrum, are all agreed that Paul says that a verdict of condemnation was pronounced on all men because of the sin of Adam and a verdict of acquittal was pronounced on all men because of the righteous life of Christ.

We need therefore consume little of the time allotted to this paper to demonstrate that verse 18 teaches a universal justification. Those who deny this doctrine base their arguments on verse 19, which for that reason requires more comment.

It has been argued that the πολλοί of this verse clearly indicates that Paul did not mean to say that all would be justified in and through Christ. It has even been said that “many” means “not all.” This is an argument unworthy of Lutherans who have always opposed the Calvinistic notion that the words of Jesus in which he says that his blood was shed for many (Mt 26:28) and that he had come to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10:45) are proof for the doctrine of limited atonement. In both of those passages, by the way, the article is not used with πολλοί. All that we can logically say about the use of the word “many” here is that it does not necessarily include “all” and that it does not necessarily exclude any. If he died for all, he certainly died for many; and if he died for many, he may have died for all. How these words are to be understood can only be determined from the context.

This is true also here. First of all, it should be pointed out that the πολλοί here has the article, “the many,” a common expression in Greek for “the masses.” Goodspeed translates οἱ πολλοί with “the mass of mankind” and Moffatt renders the phrase with “all the rest.”

It is true that ordinarily in Greek usage, οἱ πολλοί, at least in its political usage, stood in contrast to οἱ ὀλίγοι, the masses in contrast to the aristocracy. In that case πολλοί did not mean “all.”

However, this is not the contrast here. In this whole context the word πολλοί is opposed not to ὀλίγοι but to εἷς, one. One man did something and “the many” were effected by what the one did. If one man keeps the Law, we would expect that one man would be pronounced innocent. Instead, many are pronounced innocent. So also if one man sins, we would not expect many to be condemned. Just as οἱ πολλοί in Greek politics included all those who were not included in ἐν τοῖς ὀλίγοις, so here the phrase οἱ πολλοί includes all those beside the one who is excluded by the context. Goodspeed’s “all the rest” is as good an interpretative rendering as any.

There is stronger evidence in the context that forces us to conclude that the οἱ πολλοί are all men. In verses 12 to 14 Paul had asserted that all men, πάντες, died because of Adam’s sin. But, then, in the next verse he says that οἱ πολλοί died. No one can argue successfully that οἱ πολλοί does not mean all men in this case. And just as the πάντες of verse 12 is reflected in the οἱ πολλοί of verse 15, so the πάντες of verse 18 is in both cases reproduced by the οἱ πολλοί of verse 19.

It has been said that since κατασταθήσονται (v. 19) is a future tense, Paul cannot be speaking of an acquittal that took place when Christ was raised from the dead. The Greek lexicographers demonstrate that καθίστημι is often used in a forensic context. We assuredly have such a forensic context here. The κατάκριμα and the δικαίωσιν of the previous verse is enough to establish this. Literally καθίστημι means “set down” and in view of the context we might render ἁμαρτωλοὶ κατεστάθησαν with “they were set down as sinners in a forensic sense” that is, “they were pronounced guilty.” So δίκαιοι κατασταθήσονται might be paraphrased, “they, that is οἱ πολλοί, the many, or all, will be set down as righteous, again in a forensic sense.” We may view the future here as a gnomic future, denoting something that happens in every case. If all are condemned because of the sin of one man (18a), and all are justified because of the right action of one man (18b), and if all are *set down* as sinners through one man’s disobedience (19a), then we can certainly expect that all men *will be set down* as righteous through one man’s obedience (19b). If the action (described in 19b) is something that takes place when a man comes to faith, then these words are not true because all do not come to faith, and while many, πολλοί, are called, few, ὀλίγοι, are chosen. To say that “all” here means “all who come to faith” is to commit the same sin that is committed by Calvinists when they say that the “all” for whom Christ died are “all who are elect.” The “all” of 18b are the “all” of 18a and of verse 12.

There is in reality no warrant for denying that universal justification is taught in Romans 5:18,19. These verses are in perfect harmony with 2 Corinthians 5:18 and 19.

A Third Sedes: 1 Timothy 3:16

In his first letter to Timothy Paul records what may well have been an early Christian hymn; which reads in part (1 Ti 3:16):

Ὁς (or Θεός) ἐφανερώθη ἐν σαρκί, ἐδικαιώθη ἐν πνεύματι.

There can be no doubt that these words refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. He appeared in a fleshly mode of existence and was justified in a spiritual mode of existence. According to 1 Peter 3:18, this spiritual mode of existence began when he was made alive. When the Savior came to be in this new mode of existence through his resurrection, he was justified, that is, he was declared free of the guilt of all the sins that were laid upon him. By the resurrection the sins for which he was “numbered with the transgressors” were formally declared by the Father to be completely paid for. Christ was no longer “guilty” but free from all liability to punishment. But the sins for which he had been condemned were the sins of the world, and because Christ is the substitute for all men we can say that if one was justified, the all whose substitute he was were also justified in his resurrection, just as Paul can say, “If one died for all, then were all dead” (2 Co 5:14).

A Fourth Sedes: Romans 4:25

A passage that has some indirect application to the question with which we are concerning ourselves here is Romans 4:25, where Paul says,

ὅς (Ἰησοῦς ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν) παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν καὶ ἠγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν.

Christ “was delivered for (because of) our offenses and raised again for (because of) our justification.”

In English “because of” (διὰ) is a phrase that can be understood either retrospectively or prospectively. For example, “I came because of my parents” might mean, “I came because my parents pressured me to come,” or “I came because I expected to see my parents here.” The same thing is true of the Greek διὰ with the accusative.

When Paul says that Christ was delivered because of our transgressions the διὰ is without doubt retrospective. He was put to death because our sins had been imputed to him. And while it is true that “our” in this context refers to believers and only believers can *say* what Paul says here, yet it is crystal clear that what Paul asserts here of believers is true of all men. This is so well known to every orthodox Lutheran that we need not cite the Bible passages that place that fact beyond all doubt.

It is clear that παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν stands in exact parallelism to ἠγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν. If the διὰ is retrospective in the first member of the parallelism it is very natural that we should understand the second διὰ as retrospective also. Δικαίωσις is the act of pronouncing a verdict of not guilty over someone. The genitive pronoun ἡμῶν obviously must be an objective genitive, and the normal way to translate in this context would then be, “Christ was raised because we had been justified.”

Paul indicates in 1 Timothy 3:16 as we have seen, that Jesus was justified when he was raised from the dead. That would be in perfect harmony with what Paul says in Romans 4:25 if we understand διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν as retrospective. It is also in perfect harmony with what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 5:18.19 and Romans 5:18.19. We hardly need to repeat that even though the ἡμῶν refers to those who believe (v. 24), we are not justified in saying that it is true only of those who believe.

A Fifth Sedes: 1 John 2:2

We may also say that the passages that say that Christ died for all, that he took away the sins of the world, that he gave his life as a ransom for all, and all the other passages of a similar nature in reality teach

universal and objective justification. How can we possibly say that Christ is the Lamb of God that took away the sins of the world without saying that the sins of the world are forgiven?

These words of John the Baptist are an obvious reference to the scapegoat of Leviticus 16. When Aaron laid the sins of the people on the scapegoat and sent him away into the wilderness, this was most assuredly a graphically concrete way of proclaiming the forgiveness of sins. The psalmist surely portrays forgiveness without using the word when he writes,

The Lord is merciful and gracious,
 slow to anger and plenteous in mercy.
 He will not always chide,
 neither will he keep his anger forever.
 He hath not dealt with us after our sins,
 nor rewarded us according to our iniquities.
 For as the heaven is high above the earth,
 so great is his mercy toward them that fear him.
 As far as the east is from the west,
 so far hath he removed our transgressions from us.

If we grant that those words speak to us of forgiveness, as they most assuredly do, how can we possibly say that when Christ took away the sins of the world they were still not forgiven? But perhaps one of the clearest passages of this whole group is 1 John 2:2, which says, “Αὐτὸς ἰλασμὸς ἐστὶν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου.” Here again we have a clear use of the word κόσμος as a designation for the whole human race. John states most emphatically that Jesus is the ἰλασμὸς not only for the sins of the believers but also for the sins of the unbelievers.

The full significance of this sentence will become clear only if we have a clear understanding of the word ἰλασμὸς. It is related to the verb ἰλάσκειν, which means “to appease anger.” Christ is thus the sacrifice for the sins of the world that appeases the anger of God. Since it is sin that arouses the anger of God, only the removal or forgiveness of sin can appease and take away the wrath of the Almighty. In fact, the removal of God’s anger and the forgiveness of sins are treated as synonymous expressions in the Old Testament. We might cite as an example these words of the psalmist (Ps 85:2,3),

Thou has forgiven the iniquity of thy people,
 thou hast covered all their sin.
 Thou hast taken away all thy wrath,
 thou hast turned from the fierceness of thine anger.

Even more significant is the Septuagint’s use of a related word, ἰλαστήριον, as a translation for כַּפֶּרֶת, mercy seat. The mercy seat was the place where an atonement was made for the sins of the people by the blood that was sprinkled there by the high priest. The word for atonement is כַּפֶּרֶת, which is derived from כָּפַר which basically means “to cover.” Thus when the blood was sprinkled on the mercy-seat a “covering” was made by which the sins of the people were hidden from the eyes of an angry God. While it is not necessary to make our case, I am convinced that if John had spoken in Hebrew he would have said that Christ is the *Kippur*, the cover, for our sins and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

But to cover sins is to forgive sins. That those two phrases are totally synonymous, and that both terms are synonymous with justification is made as clear as anything can be when Paul says, that David speaks of the man to whom God imputes righteousness (whom God justifies) when he writes, (Ro 4:7,8),

Μακάριοι ὧν ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι καὶ ὧν ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι· μακάριος ἀνὴρ οὗ οὐ μὴ λογίσηται κύριος ἁμαρτίαν.

While it is not usually cited as such, it should be apparent therefore that John's passage is another clear piece of evidence testifying to universal and objective justification. The context of the words quoted above from Romans 4 also includes the statement that God is the one who justifies the ungodly, τὸν δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἄσεβῆ. One is almost tempted to add this phrase also to the *sedes* that establish objective justification, even if we could not with these words alone demonstrate the doctrine of universal justification. The word ἄσεβῆς is a very strong word. It regularly in the New Testament is a designation for unbelievers, even for those who are finally condemned (cp. e.g. 1 Pe 4:18, where ὁ ἄσεβητης is the antonym of ὁ δίκαιος, and Ju 15) . We are not pressing the word beyond what it can bear if we say that, when Paul says that God justifies the ungodly, he is asserting that God declares the unbeliever just. The fact that the unbeliever by rejecting God's verdict deprives himself eternally of the joy and comfort that this message gives does not make the declaration of God untrue, and, as Luther says, they will know someday how surely their sins were forgiven. Yet that knowledge then will only add to their torment in hell.

The Place of Faith

The doctrine of universal justification is often ridiculed with the argument that if God really forgives sins prior to faith then the Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith becomes meaningless. Such conclusions demonstrate a rationalistic spirit that consciously or unconsciously refuses to be guided by Scripture alone.

The Bible teaches clearly that those who do not believe in Jesus will be eternally lost. If the doctrine of universal justification is divorced from the teaching of the vicarious atonement it becomes a false doctrine and must issue finally in universalism. As we have already indicated, no one has a right to believe that his sins are forgiven unless he also believes that his sins have been fully paid for. Anyone who believes in a God who forgives sins but does not punish sins does not worship the God who revealed himself to Moses.

Moreover, the Bible clearly teaches that God's forgiveness must be proclaimed and announced to men. God gives his forgiveness to men through his Word. In other words, he conveys the forgiveness that is in his heart to men by telling them that he has forgiven them. Just as we need to know that our friends have forgiven us if we have offended them, just as they must tell us in words or indicate by their actions that they have forgiven us if we are to be comfortable in their presence, so men must know that God has forgiven them if they are to find assurance before his dreadful wrath.

God tells us in the Gospel that he has forgiven us. Rather, he tells us that he has forgiven the sins of the world, that the sins of the whole world are covered (ἰλασμός) by Christ, that the sins of the whole world are taken away by the Lamb of God. And every man who hears it ought to know that he is included in the pronoun "us" when the Bible says, "God has made him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Co 5:21), every man ought to know that he is included in the pronoun "you" when Jesus says, "My body and my blood were given and shed for you for the remission of sins," for, as Luther says, "the words, 'for you,' require all hearts to believe.

When the ministers of his Word, both those who act in their capacity as public ministers and those who act by virtue of the universal priesthood, tell men that their sins are forgiven, there are really only two possible reactions to that message. Either it can be accepted by believing what we hear or it can be rejected in unbelief. Those who believe it will find joy and comfort and rest from a troubled conscience in the message. Those who do not believe it will find no comfort and hope for all eternity.

Faith does nothing more than accept the forgiveness proclaimed in the Gospel. It is not a condition we must fulfill before we can be forgiven. It is not a cause of forgiveness on account of which God forgives us. The forgiveness comes first. Faith is merely the response to the message. God says to us, "Your sins are forgiven." This is objective justification, and God's message to us is true whether we believe it or not. Faith makes God's

message its own and says, “My sins are forgiven.” This is subjective justification. The whole doctrine is just as simple as that.

The Importance of Objective Justification

We ought to teach universal and objective justification because the Bible teaches it. Even if we could not see why it is important, that would still be the duty of every orthodox theologian.

But universal and objective justification is one doctrine whose place in the victorious Christian life is clear. Wherever men teach that faith comes first as a condition that must be fulfilled or a work that must be done or even as a fact that must be recognized before forgiven is bestowed or becomes real, men will be trained to look into their own hearts for assurance rather than to the words and promises of God. If my sins are forgiven only if I first have faith then I have no solid foundation on which to rest my hope for eternal life. I must then know that I have faith before I can know that my sins are forgiven.

But there are times when a Christian does not know that he has faith. And many people who think they have faith do not have it, and many that think they are not believers are believing children of God. In regard to our own faith we may be in error or filled with doubt. But there is nothing uncertain in the truth that is proclaimed in the Gospel. Your sin is taken away, wiped out, forgiven, cancelled, swallowed up in the empty grave in Joseph’s garden. To that we must cling. To that we can cling. On that we can build a solid hope that will not make us ashamed.

In times of temptation when I am no longer aware of my faith, when my heart tells me that I am an unbeliever, I have no place to turn for assurance if faith must come before forgiveness. But if forgiveness comes first, if it is always there, if it is true whether I believe it or not, I do not need to know whether I have faith or not before I can cling to God’s promise. I know that my sins are forgiven whether *I feel* forgiven or unforgiven. I know that my iniquity is pardoned whether I believe it or not. And when I know that, then I know also that I am a believer. John teaches us that when he writes, “Brethren, if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart and knows all things.” Take away objective and universal justification and you have gone a long way toward cutting the heart out of the Gospel message.

The Four Statements

In the light of the previous discussion we may now briefly evaluate the so-called “Four Kokomo Statements.” The statements read:

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

These statements were not drawn up by anyone in WELS in order to present our position on universal and objective justification. They were quotations selected by lay members of a WELS congregation who did not agree with our doctrine. They held that Jesus by his vicarious satisfaction had made it possible for God to

forgive sins but that God forgives men only when and if they believe, so that man's act of believing always precedes God's verdict of innocence.

The first three statements are taken verbatim from WELS sources. It should be said that they are found in contexts that throw considerable light on what the writers intended to convey by the words used. The last statement is quoted from a term paper from Concordia Seminary in Fort Wayne. It reflects the views of a LC-MS professor who saw in it the significance of objective justification. It should probably be said that this professor does not accept our exegesis of 2 Corinthians 5:19 and Romans 5:19, which, by the way, is also the traditional standard LC-MS interpretation of those passages.

The laymen who drew up this list of statements evidently intended to persuade their congregation that universal justification could not possibly be true, because that would mean that God forgives also unbelievers. We can sympathize with their difficulties. It is hard for human reason to believe that if God has forgiven he can still condemn. Even for Christians the things of the Spirit of God are foolishness insofar as they are still natural men, or insofar as the Old Adam still clings to them. It is difficult to take every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. Walther was right when he said that the highest art of the Christian theologian is the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. But we need to remember that the main issue always was: "Has God forgiven the sins of all men?"

Because the passages are torn out of context, they are likely to cause some difficulties. When the LC-MS layman who felt called to come to the defense of the WELS Kokomo laymen circulated a questionnaire calling for an expression of opinion on the four statements, I also received a copy. I refused to participate in the survey on the ground that the statements are not clear and the results of the survey would therefore also be confused. Every one of the statements can be understood correctly, even though one must swallow a little hard to accede to the fourth. However, because the statements were used to discredit the truth of universal justification and to cause other laymen to doubt this teaching it is especially necessary to point out that the statements do not contain false doctrine.

Anyone who reads the statements carefully will recognize that they do not say that there are saints in hell. The charge that our Synod teaches such foolishness is a base canard that has been widely circulated on the basis of the four statements.

The third statement is a basically good summary of our position, although on the part of those who believe that we do not consider faith to be important enough, it probably needs the wider context of our stress on *sola fide*. Because the terms "general justification" and "individual justification" have sometimes been used as synonyms for objective and subjective justification, respectively. I would have preferred it if the words "individually" and "individual" had not been used. But the meaning of the statement is nevertheless clear and correct.

The first statement can easily be misunderstood and has caused confusion. The Bible never uses the word saint, when applied to human beings, in any other sense than a converted Christian. Those who have read those words in the context of John Meyer's Ministers of Christ know what Prof. Meyer wanted to say in that sentence. The key words are "objectively speaking" and "status." Meyer simply wanted to say that the sins of all men are forgiven. "Status of a saint" to him meant "the legal state of a forgiven sinner." While we may disagree with his use of English, we cannot as biblical theologians surrender what he wanted to say. Nevertheless it would have been better if he had not used the word saint in that connection, especially since the word "received" is also a word that is often used in describing the function of faith in justification. We receive the status of saint for ourselves or accept forgiveness through faith.

The same criticism can be directed against the second statement. One really becomes a guilt-free saint only through faith, if we limit ourselves to the biblical usage of the word. However, since our holiness, as Augustine says, consists in sin's remission rather than in life's perfection, we could say that when God forgave the sins of the whole world he regarded all sinners as guilt-free, but if they are guilt-free we might also say that they are considered sinless in the sight of God. But a sinless person is a holy person, a saint. The fact that

unbelievers do not consider themselves to be forgiven does not change the truth of God's Word that tells us that God does not impute the sins of all men to them, or that through one man justification has come upon all men.

Even the fourth statement can be defended even though it leaves much to be desired. As we have said, the statement is not drawn from a WELS source. If it is true that God has forgiven the sins of the world then it is also true that he forgave the sin of Judas. When Jesus called Judas "friend" in the garden, he was in effect treating him as a forgiven sinner. If Jesus took away the sins of the world he also took away the sins of the people who died in the flood. It is surely no more difficult to believe that God forgave sins that were already being punished than to believe that at the time of the resurrection he forgave sins that had not yet been committed. How that is possible I do not know. It very likely finds its explanation in the divine attribute of eternity.

But while the statement can be defended as expressing a biblical reality, yet it would be best not to speak in such terms. In Scandinavia it is customary on the part of some to ridicule universal justification with the remark, "The damned lie in hell with their forgiven sins." So this fourth statement is a caricature which has a tendency to make universal justification look ridiculous.

There is little point in talking about forgiveness for the damned. They have made their bed by not believing the Gospel and all that is left to believe then is the condemnation of the law which they hear in their own conscience.

If I know for sure that a man with whom I am dealing is a wicked impenitent unbeliever I will not tell him his sin is forgiven. That message is for those who are troubled by their sin. To the impenitent we preach the Law and the Lord Jesus promises to stand behind our message with his words, "Whosoever sins ye retain, they are retained." Only when men confess that they are sinners who need forgiveness are they ready to hear the message, "Your sins are forgiven," not "Your sins will be forgiven if you believe, or if you pray, or if anything," but just "Your sins are forgiven." And the Lord Jesus also promises to stand behind the word of those who speak for him. "Whosoever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them." "They are remitted" is a perfect tense, and we can really say "They have been forgiven long ago," or as Luther says, "before we prayed or before we ever thought of it."

What shall we say of the four statements? It would have been better if the Kokomo laymen had simply been told, "Since you refuse to accept the clear teaching of the Bible that God has for Christ's sake already forgiven the sins of the world, and since you are not willing to be treated as weak Christians but persist in 'doubtful disputations' (Ro 14:1), we can no longer tolerate your propaganda against the doctrine of our church or consider you to be in fellowship with us."

Three of the four statements, because of their lack of clarity, tend to confuse the issue. But since the disciplined laymen used them to advance their false doctrine, it was understandable that the congregation should also use them in its rejection of the falsehood being advocated. I do not consider any of the four statements to be false doctrine, but I would rather not use the language used in the first, second, and fourth.