

Is “Objective Justification” Scriptural and Lutheran?

*A brief study drawn from the Holy Scriptures
and the writings of the Reformers*

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Justification is rightly called the doctrine by which the church stands or falls, lives or dies. Without justification, what do we have? Without a status of “not guilty” before God we are doomed to eternal death for our sins. Without justification, there is no Lutheranism; without justification, there is no Christianity.

So when anything begins to challenge our understanding of justification it is shaking the foundation of our faith. If you shake too much the house might fall. In supposedly confessional Lutheran circles, there has been some poking at justification through the outright rejection of the objective, general aspect of justification. The scriptural basis for such a teaching has been called into question; it has been claimed that the Lutheran Confessions know nothing of an “objective” justification.

I’m thankful for such discussions because they keep us from merely relying on what we’ve been taught and trusting those who taught us; they drive us completely back to the source, the Scriptures, to God’s flawless testimony of his plan and execution of salvation promised since the Garden of Eden. In this paper we will review some key portions of Scripture that affect our understanding of justification, as well as examining what Luther and the other confessors say regarding this central component of the Christian faith.

To begin, we should define a few key terms to ensure that we’re not talking past each other as we discuss these things:

Justification: A courtroom term, to be declared innocent, not guilty. In eternal matters, to be declared not guilty of sin before God.

Faith: Something that trusts and depends on something else; that which receives the blessings of God (*organon leptikon*) created by God through the means of grace. Faith causes nothing to be true nor is it efficacious to cause salvation. Faith only receives. Faith must have an object, and for faith to be of any value, that object must be trustworthy.

Means of Grace: The gospel in God’s Word, which may be heard, read, or received when connected with earthly elements in the sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper.

Objective (General) Justification: God has forgiven the world’s sins through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus; the entire human race is declared “not guilty” because of Christ’s payment for sin.

Subjective (Personal) Justification: Through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, the blessings that Christ won for the world become mine. I receive them and benefit from them through God-worked faith in what he’s said and done.

Reconcile: To put two warring parties at peace with each other, often by means of an atonement sacrifice (propitiation) which covers the offenses.

Objective Justification in Scripture

While it might be tempting to simply rattle off the *sedes* for objective justification in a rapid-fire, bullet-point fashion and be done with it, that doesn't serve us well. We need to spend quality time with the Word of God and not simply skim over or rewarm previously worked exegesis. However, if this paper is to be "brief" as its title suggests, we cannot hope to make it through every passage referring to justification, in either its objective or subjective aspects, in the time allotted. Thus, we will limit ourselves to four portions of Scripture from John 1, 1 John 2, Colossians 1, and Romans 3.

John 1

John's Gospel, after the beautiful prologue which connects Christ to the very beginning of time in addition to his incarnation, drops us off right at John the Baptist's feet to hear his simple, beautiful, and clear proclamation of law and gospel. It is the latter on which we will focus our attention.

John 1:29 (NA27, ESV)

Τῇ ἐπαύριον βλέπει τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἐρχόμενον πρὸς αὐτὸν καὶ λέγει· ἴδε ὁ ἀμνὸς τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ αἴρων τὴν ἁμαρτίαν τοῦ κόσμου.

The next day he saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"

John points Jesus out to the crowd, and in a few short words connects him both to the Passover, a rescue from death through the blood of a lamb, and the Day of Atonement, the vicarious removal of sin as it wanders out into the wilderness on the back of the scapegoat and is gone. John takes those sources of comfort designed for and given to the Jewish people and assures that these benefits are for all people, the world.

The substantival participle, ὁ αἴρων, "the one taking away," is present. From John's vantage point, the work at that moment was on-going. Jesus, as our priest, was still gathering the sacrifice, still living that flawless life that would be offered in exchange for the world's sinful lives. His active obedience would be an ongoing process until death.

From our perspective, Jesus' work is completed, or to borrow his word, finished. Jesus is the Lamb of God who has taken away the sins of the *world*. They are not merely paid for¹ but taken away and removed, the very picture of the word "forgive." John clearly says that Jesus' work was to forgive the sins of the world, of all people. Through his vicarious death and triumphant resurrection the Lamb did his work; those sins have been removed.

This concept of work done in time that we see in John's words is supported by another often-cited passage on the objective aspect of justification, 2 Corinthians 5:19. There the imperfect periphrastic construction (imperfect form of εἰμί with a present participle) of θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ

¹ Those who object to the teaching of objective justification often try to make a distinction between the sins of the world being *paid for* and the sins of the world being *forgiven*, which is a distinction without a difference.

κόσμον καταλλάσσω ἐαυτῷ [God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself] communicates the imperfect tense showing a “motion picture” (Wallace 541) of action. Christ’s work was work done in time to completion with effect for the entire world.²

1 John 2

1 John 2:2 (NA27, ESV)

καὶ αὐτός ἰλασμός ἐστιν περὶ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν, οὐ περὶ τῶν ἡμετέρων δὲ μόνον ἀλλὰ καὶ περὶ ὅλου τοῦ κόσμου.

He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.

John takes us again to the Day of Atonement in his first epistle. The high priest entered the Most Holy Place once a year with blood to make atonement for his own sins and the sins of the people. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us that Jesus’ priesthood was unique in many ways, not the least of which is that he did not need to offer a sacrifice for his own sins as the sinless Son of God.

The propitiation, the atonement sacrifice, is one that reconciles two at-war parties by covering over and doing away with the problem that separated them. Perhaps you’ve explained atonement as the act of putting two people *at one* with each other again. The sin that separated mankind from God could only be dealt with by a perfect sacrifice. Jesus was that required sacrifice, offered “once for all” (1 Peter 3:18).

The Day of Atonement had to be celebrated annually, as commanded by God, a regular reminder of the unworthiness of priest and laity alike to stand in the presence of a holy God. But the sacrifice was offered annually because it did not actually forgive sins; it was a mere reminder of the people’s status before God and a shadow of the real sacrifice that was coming.

John says that Jesus is that sacrifice by which we, along with the whole world, benefit. Jesus’ propitiation, his atoning sacrifice, has been offered for our sins. The entire human race has been reconciled to God—a thought that surfaces clearly in the Formula of Concord, as we’ll see in a few moments.

Colossians 1

Colossians 1:19–20 (NA27, ESV)

¹⁹ ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ εὐδόκησεν πᾶν τὸ πλήρωμα κατοικῆσαι ²⁰ καὶ δι’ αὐτοῦ ἀποκαταλλάξαι τὰ πάντα εἰς αὐτόν, εἰρηνοποιήσας διὰ τοῦ αἵματος τοῦ σταυροῦ αὐτοῦ, [δι’ αὐτοῦ] εἴτε τὰ ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς εἴτε τὰ ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς.

¹⁹ For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, ²⁰ and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.

² For a more detailed grammatical break down of 2 Corinthians 5:19, see Buchholz 6-7.

The verbs in the latter part of this beautiful Christological hymn in the middle of Colossians 1 are almost all aorist, indicating a one-time, completed action. God was pleased (εὐδόκησεν, aorist indicative) to dwell (κατοικῆσαι, aorist infinitive) and to reconcile (ἀποκαταλλάξαι, aorist indicative) all things which resulted in peace (εἰρηνοποιήσας, aorist active participle) through Jesus' blood. All of the actions are over and done. As the incarnation happened once at the conception of the Holy Spirit within the Virgin Mary so that God miraculously, incomprehensibly, and fully dwelt within a human being, so also the reconciliation of "all things" happened once. The peace promised between God and sinful mankind and foretold by the angels on the first Christmas night was accomplished at the cross.

Wenzel summarizes the thoughts well:

The general statement that it has been the good pleasure (of God) to reconcile all things unto Himself through Christ is modified by the participial clause: *having made peace through the blood of His cross*. Εἰρηνοποιήσας, that aorist, is contemporaneous to ἀποκαταλλάξαι, the aorist, the reconciling and the making of peace being effected at the same time and by the same act, and, we may add, by the same subject, God. It is a mistake to say that *Christ* is the subject of having made peace. The nominative here used can hardly be taken in any other sense than as referring to the subject contained in εὐδόκησεν. Least of all can πλήρωμα be the subject. As God has reconciled, so also has He made peace through the blood of the cross. God sent His Son into the world. God gave Him up to die on the cross. God has thereby made peace with τὰ πάντα, be it things on earth or things in heaven.... The blood of the cross, the death of God's own Son on the cross, was the great atoning sacrifice of Christ, to appease the wrath of God over sin and to reconcile all things unto Himself and re-establish peace between God and man. Christ was God's representative and He was man's representative, and being the God-man, He was able to represent both. [emphasis original] (Wenzel 127-128)

Romans 3

The book of Romans is Paul's master class not only in a logical argument for the Christian faith but for logical arguing in general. The entire letter hangs together in a way that is almost without equal throughout the books of Scripture.

Before we can hope to understand what is happening in the middle of chapter 3 of Romans, we need to have a firm idea of where Paul has been up to this point in the letter. Beginning with 1:18, Paul tackles mankind's ideas of eternal safety and well-being. Be they the pagan Gentiles who claimed ignorance of God's laws or the Jewish people who claimed they had kept God's law well enough, all are skewered by Paul's harsh, harsh preaching of the law.

In these chapters Paul takes every argument that mankind produces for a right relationship with God and kicks it to the curb. Paul shows that "every earthly prop" does, in fact, give way. Do you think you have no knowledge of God and thus do not deserve any punishment from him? Your conscience itself shows that to be false (1:20, 2:14-15). Do you think because you have God's law and are proud that you have God's law and boast that you have God's law and even have God's law

on a scroll or inscribed in mind, that you are saved? Hardly! Do what it says! And when you don't, you know doubly that you deserve God's wrath (2:23-24).³

Paul's conclusion is clear:

What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;
no one understands;
no one seeks for God.
All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
no one does good,
not even one.”
“Their throat is an open grave;
they use their tongues to deceive.”
“The venom of asps is under their lips.”
“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. (Romans 3:9-20, ESV)

God's law condemns all mankind, both Jewish people and Gentiles alike. All people of all times are sinners without any hope, by nature, of having a right relationship with God. Thanks be to God that this is not the place where his message to mankind ends!

Romans 3:21–25a (NA27, ESV)

²¹Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν, ²²δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας. οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶν διαστολή, ²³πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ θεοῦ ²⁴δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ· ²⁵ὃν προέθετο ὁ θεὸς ἰλαστήριον διὰ [τῆς] πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι.

²¹ But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it— ²² the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: ²³ for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

³ See also James 1:22.

As Paul does not limit the condemnation of the law but damns all people, so too he says that all are declared righteous, justified. Paul very simply and very bluntly says πάντες ἥμαρτον and δικαιούμενοι; all have sinned and all are justified.

An argument has been suggested that the πάντες of v. 23 does not refer to the entirety of mankind but leads us back simply to the πιστεύοντας, the believing ones, of v. 21. That is, that all *believers* have sinned and all *believers* are justified. While certainly true, imposing such a limit on Paul's words is unconscionable. It is at best ignorant about and at worst dishonest with the context and structure of Paul's letter. He's just spent nearly three chapters, right through 3:20, explaining how all people on earth have no righteousness of their own and are hopeless. Should we now suppose after that all-encompassing condemnation, Paul suddenly uses that same all-encompassing word πάντες he's been using throughout the letter to refer to only a subset of mankind? Kuske comments:

Πάντες means "all the people in the world," unless it is limited by a modifier in the context. The subject in the previous verse (to which this verse is joined by γὰρ) is all Jews and all Gentiles. Since the whole world is included in these two groups, Paul is referring to all mankind when he uses πάντες as the subject of ἥμαρτον. (Kuske 173)

The verb ἥμαρτον is aorist because once that sin happened one time, that was all mankind needed to gain the status of "sinner" (James 2:10). That one required sin has happened and is done, even while we still continue to sin daily; this is a fact about the human race. Meanwhile δικαιούμενοι is present because its action is ongoing at the same time as the previous verb, ὑπεροῦνται.

The verb ἥμαρτον is aorist, stating a fact about all mankind. Verse 19 said no one keeps God's law perfectly, so all people stand condemned. Verse 20b repeated this thought by saying the law is a mirror showing that all are imperfect. In the latter verse, Paul used the noun ἁμαρτία in referring to sin. Here he uses the verb ἁμαρτάνω. The fact that all have "missed the mark" is proof of verse 22....

At the same time that πάντες ... fall short of being perfect, they are also acquitted by God. Paul could have used another 3rd person plural present verb coordinated with ὑπεροῦνται by a καί or δέ. Instead, by the use of an adverbial participle of accompanying circumstance, he highlights the simultaneous ongoing action of the verb and the participle. (Kuske 173, 175-176)

Scripture uses justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, atonement, and redemption as different ways of describing the same truth, and thus in the end, they are synonymous concepts. They all serve as different pictures to communicate the unfathomable depth of what Christ did at his cross and proclaimed by his empty tomb. They are different facets of the gem of God's plan of salvation which he accomplished in time through the life and work of Jesus. If one is redeemed, he is justified, reconciled, and forgiven. If he is reconciled, he is redeemed, forgiven, justified, etc. If the world has an atoning sacrifice, then through that Sacrifice all things have been reconciled to God. If the world's sins have been taken away, forgiven, in the Lamb of God, then truly *all* have been justified, as many as have fallen short of the glory of God. As Adam and Eve brought death and separation from God to all mankind in their rebellion, so the completed mission of the Offspring of the woman was to bring life and reconciliation to all mankind.

Paul continues on this beautiful point in chapters four and five of Romans, which offer their own clear proclamations of the objective aspect of justification:

Jesus our Lord... was delivered up for our trespasses *and raised for our justification*.

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.

Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned.... *If many died through one man's trespass, much more have the grace of God and the free gift by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for many.* And the free gift is not like the result of that one man's sin. *For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brought justification....*

Therefore, *as one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.* [emphasis added] (Romans 4:25, 5:9-12, 15-16, 18-19, ESV)

Objective Justification at the Reformation

Tackling the subject of objective justification through the mouths and pens of the reformers can be a little bit tricky. Clearly, their battle was with Rome, fighting for the truth of justification through faith as opposed to the damning Roman heresy of justification through works. Most of their work is centered on this issue rather than the issue before us.⁴ Likewise, the terms “objective justification” and “subjective justification” are terms of later invention to clearly fend off the heresies that sprang up in American Lutheranism.

However, despite the terms not being coined until later, the teachings they represent were not unknown or undiscussed at the time of the Reformation. In both the reformers' writings and the Confessions themselves we can find references germane to the discussion of a general justification versus a personal justification.⁵

⁴ However, rejection of the objective aspect of justification leads to the same, if more subtle, error that Rome espouses: justification by works. See the section “Objective Justification and Evangelism.”

⁵ What follows is, again, a brief sampling of the available resources. For a much more exhaustive treatment of the historical and confessional writings of the Lutheran church on objective justification, see David Jay Webber's paper “Our Righteousness before God... Is Revealed in the Gospel. On this Righteousness Faith Relies” listed on the Works Cited page.

Luther

When Luther addresses justification as an objective reality, he often does so with a passing reference that seems to assume this to be a known truth that needs little time to explain. In his Commentary on Galatians, speaking to 3:13 (“Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ‘Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree’” [ESV]), Luther writes:

When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, *He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: “Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them.”* Now the Law comes and says: “I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!” And so it attacks Him and kills Him. *By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil.* [emphasis added] (LW26 280)

Luther similarly references objective justification in a sermon on John 19, especially regarding Jesus’ words from the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). He writes:

Christ’s suffering is the fulfillment of Scripture and the *accomplishment of the redemption of the human race....* The Lamb of God is slain and offered for the sins of the world. The true High Priest has completed His offering; the Son of God has given and offered up His body and life as a payment for sin; sin has been blotted out; God’s wrath appeased; death overcome; the kingdom of heaven won and heaven opened. *Everything is fulfilled and completed and no one may dispute, as if anything yet remained to be fulfilled and accomplished.* [emphasis added] (quoted in Webber 21)

There, too, we see that clear emphasis against the Romanists’ works righteousness, but also set in the context of the human race’s redemption and reconciliation.

Elsewhere Luther likens the Keys and the messages they proclaim to the generous gift of a wealthy king:

St. Paul says in Rom. 3[:3]: “Their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God.” We are not talking here either about people’s belief or disbelief regarding the efficacy of the keys. We realize that few believe. We are speaking of what the keys accomplish and give. He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key’s fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king’s fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it. (LW40 367)

The fact is that some do not benefit from the gifts given in the global declaration of “justified” and “redeemed.” The problem comes when unbelief rejects those blessings, real as they are, so that there is no benefit to the individual. Rejection of God’s forgiveness leaves a person condemned, but it does not mean that God was not faithful in giving those blessings. We’ll revisit those thoughts below.

The Confessions

Playing off of Luther’s comments above while commenting on John 19, the Lutheran Confessions stand firm on the objective reality of the justification and reconciliation of all mankind. In the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, Article XI, we find the article on election. Election always and only speaks to the believer, to the elect, to bring them comfort. However, in order to set the stage for the elect’s certain call, we must begin with the concrete, objective, and certain reality of Christ’s forgiveness for all people from which we draw our hope. To do otherwise quickly leads to the Calvinist’s double predestination and limited atonement. The reformers understood the necessity of this order, and so began Article XI this way:

[I]f a person wishes to think or speak about the election and *praedestinatio* (or preordination) of God’s children to eternal life correctly and profitably, one should as a matter of course refrain from speculation over the naked, secret, hidden, inscrutable foreknowledge of God. On the contrary, one should focus on how God’s counsel, intention, and preordination in Jesus Christ (who is the genuine, true “Book of Life” [Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 20:15]) is revealed to us through the Word. This means that the entire teaching of God’s intention, counsel, will, and preordination concerning our redemption, calling, justification, and salvation must be taken as a unity. This is the way Paul treats and explains this article (Rom. 8[:28ff.]; Eph. 1[:4ff.]) and the way Christ explained it in the parable of Matthew 22[:2-14]. This teaching states that in his intention and counsel God had preordained the following:

1. That *the human race has been truly redeemed and reconciled with God through Christ*, who has merited with his innocent obedience, suffering, and death both the righteousness that avails before God [Rom. 1:17; 3:21-26; 2 Cor. 5:21] and eternal life. [emphasis added] (Kolb 643)

There can be no misunderstanding the authors’ intent nor the teaching they proclaim in the confessions to which we have subscribed: all people, the entire human race, have been both redeemed and reconciled through Christ’s work. There is no room for limited atonement; there is no room for *intuitu fidei*, that God only justified those he knew would believe. Those who came after Luther reinforced what he believed and taught: God has objectively reconciled the entire world in Jesus. All mankind is redeemed. We are heirs and fellow confessors of this ironclad truth.

Justification, Faith, and Unbelief

One of the biggest frustrations about discussions with those who deny objective justification is that they attempt to prove their point by proclaiming the truth of subjective justification. The implication is that objective justification and subjective justification are mutually exclusive of one another. We’ve seen that the concept of objective justification is clearly taught in Scripture and

clearly confessed, if not using that exact term, in the Book of Concord. And so this argument pits two beautiful, cherished doctrines of Scripture against each other. In a way, it's like being told you don't love your spouse because you love your children.

The results of Christ's work (objective justification) do not do anyone any good if they are not received by faith (subjective justification). Abraham was not credited with righteousness for no reason; he was credited with righteousness because he trusted what God had said. His faith received the blessings and promises of God at face value and assumed that all God said was true, even if it might require a miracle resurrection of a to-be-sacrificed only son.

Scripture *most often* speaks of justification, redemption, reconciliation, etc. in a subjective, narrow sense, though certainly not exclusively.⁶ This makes sense because the vast majority of Scripture is written to Christians, people in whose hearts God has already worked faith. The most comforting thing for me to hear may not be that Jesus forgives the sins of the world but that Jesus forgives *my* sin. And so the apostles and evangelists speak in those terms when it is fitting: You have a personal connection to the heavenly Father *in Christ*. You are justified *in Christ*. The promise of eternal life is certain *in Christ*. All that is true for you because faith clings to Christ. Objective justification is always "in Christ" as well, as the one from whom it emanates, but without faith it is of no benefit. Christ provides, but if I actively reject, I forfeit his gift.

We might often think of unbelief as a passive attribute because we were all born into it—being dead in sin. But unbelief is far from passive. Unbelief is an active, willful, spiteful rebelling and warring against God. We lost most of our free will in the Garden of Eden, but there remains this last shred, this powerfully horrendous ability to walk away from God's blessings, to reject him, and to be his enemy.

That is the horrifying power of unbelief. Unbelief can take an objective truth and blessing and deny me access to it. Unbelief hears of God's goodness in Christ, his proclamation of "not guilty" proclaimed over the whole world for Christ's sake, and rejects it all. Hearing that glorious good news, unbelief draws God in close, spits in his face, and says, "I don't need you. I can do this on my own." Unbelief boils down to self-reliance and hoped-for self-righteousness, a wayward assumption that I need no Messiah, no Savior, because I can be God and Savior for myself. I don't need the Almighty. This is going to the wedding banquet and deciding that you don't need the king's clothes; yours are good enough.

That haughty, proud, and self-reliant sin of unbelief rejects forgiveness in totality. My faithless rejection of God's love does not negate his faithfulness, but it does exclude me from those blessings. I cannot by my willful rejection of God's mercy undo Christ's death and resurrection, but I can ensure that I will never, ever benefit from them.

⁶ At times, the objective and subjective aspects of justification (the broad and narrow pictures of forgiveness) are even referred to in very quick succession, such as the broad, objective statement of 2 Corinthians 5:19, following quickly by the narrow, subjective exhortation of v. 20: "*God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God*" [emphasis added] (ESV).

Unbelief isn't passive; it's active. Thus, it's not until God creates true passivity in our hearts, until he works in me to let go of every earthly prop and trust solely in his promises and actions, that I receive the benefits of Christ's work on my behalf. This is not *intuitu fidei*; this is justification *through* faith. This passive reception of God's blessings is what we've come to term the subjective (or perhaps "personal") aspect of justification. Faith is absolutely the only way to benefit from Christ's life, death, and resurrection; but that in no way changes the truth that the Lamb of God has taken away, truly forgiven, the sins of the entire world.

Faith does not cause a previously non-existent justification to materialize. Faith receives what God has already accomplished. I do not make a decision to believe; God chooses me. Faith doesn't just grasp at the sky or hope to make up a post-modern truth on which it can depend; it grasps the objective reality of Christ-crucified for all sinners and makes it mine. Jesus did not create the potential for all sins to be forgiven; he forgave all sins. When God creates faith in my heart through the means of grace, that faith trusts what God has said and done. Then I find myself, like Abraham, credited with an unearned righteousness. That all happens through the glorious gift of the gospel in Word and sacrament.

John probably sums it up better than anyone else can: "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:17-18, ESV).

Objective Justification and the Pastoral Ministry

All that precedes is fine and good if we are to be careful, accurate theologians. But we don't want to be just theologians; we want to be *pastors*. We want to shepherd the church of God of which the Holy Spirit has set us as overseers, his very under-shepherds. We want to tend to our people's every spiritual need, to build them up in every weakness with the tools God provides, and to point them over and over again to the beautiful Object of their faith. We want to show them weekly, daily, the One who was crucified, rose, and ascended for them.

Does objective justification play a role in that shepherding work? Some might say no. Some might say, "If I am on my deathbed, if I am terrified by my sins, you ought not come to me and tell me Jesus has forgiven the world; you ought to tell me that Jesus has forgiven *me*." We can certainly understand a desire for such personal assurance. Our aim is to bring comfort, and perhaps at times the notion of general justification won't be comforting.

But aren't there times where it is comforting? Aren't there times where we might use both objective *and* subjective justification to bring comfort? When someone sits in your office, wracked with guilt, convinced that his sin from days or decades before is unforgivable and he is not righteous before God, what do you say? Practicing proper law/gospel division makes clear that this is hardly the time for the law. This person has been crushed deeply by the weight of his sins. His conscience has shown him time and again all the awful things that he's done and what he deserves for his sin. Despite sitting in church on a regular basis, despite coming to the Lord's Supper regularly, still Satan has a whisper floating through his mind: "Not for you. He couldn't love you. He'll never forgive you after what you've done."

In this situation, what blessings there are to journey again to the cross and ask, “What does this mean? What is going on here? What is being accomplished here?” Here is the atoning sacrifice for all people being offered up. Here is God’s love not just for a segment of mankind but for the *world* accomplishing what he was sent to do. If the world’s sins have been forgiven, how can Satan say that your sins haven’t been paid for unless he is once again speaking in his lying mother tongue? In the sacrifice for the world and in the sacrifice for you and me, we find the solution for all of Satan’s deceptions. What blessings there are in both aspects of justification, both the broad and narrow senses, to speak comfort to the troubled soul, “The Lord has taken away your sins.” The one who offers his very body and blood to you is the one who is the atoning sacrifice for the entire world! You are a part of that world. He died for all; he died for *you*.

While objective justification is far from the only comfort we bring to a troubled soul, the one-two punch of objective and subjective justification defeats any exclusionary lies our enemy may throw at us or those in our care. Am I a part of the world? My sins are forgiven. Am I a baptized child of God? My sins are forgiven. We simply take God at his Word.

Objective Justification and Evangelism

One of the practical matters cited by critics of the principle of objective justification is a concern for misguiding unbelievers. The thought goes something like this: “If you tell someone that justification has been pronounced over the whole world, then they will be misled into thinking that they benefit from that justification aside from faith. They will not be led to repentance and certainly not trust in their Savior.”

The conflating of objective justification and universalism is not a small concern, especially for the unchurched. But such a concern presupposes that evangelism work is done solely with the gospel, rather than with both law and gospel. To simply tell someone, “Jesus forgave the sins of the world,” or even more vapidly, “Jesus loves you,” though it is true, is only telling part of the story. God forbid that someone, called worker or laity, ever puts forward such a partial proclamation of his Word! The law must convict; the gospel must heal. The gospel message is the love of God that forgives actual sins, that meets our very real, eternal needs.

This argument, though, denies the power of the means of grace. It ignores the fact that sharing the gospel creates faith in that very gospel message. In the proclamation of the gospel, the objective truth no longer stays objective. The Holy Spirit creates saving faith in what Christ has done so the objective becomes subjective—what is for the world becomes my personal treasure. Our goal in evangelism is the sanctification⁷ of the unsanctified; God alone accomplishes that through the Word and sacraments alone.

Is there a danger of misuse and abuse of objective justification by unbelievers or even believers? Certainly. But the same is true of the gospel in general, not just objective justification. The gospel can easily be easily warped into a license to sin, which was clearly happening already in the apostolic era leading Paul to rhetorically ask the Roman Christians, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound?” (Romans 6:1b, ESV). If the cross of Christ is used to embolden the sinner, it has been woefully and damnably abused. But potential abuse cannot cause us to say less (or

⁷ Unlike justification, sanctification has no objective aspect.

more) than what God himself has clearly said. If we are to truly be disciple-makers of all nations, Jesus is clear we must teach *everything* that he has said in his Word, including the things we fear others may not understand as well as the things that are simply beyond human comprehension.

To evangelize with a partial proclamation of God's Word compromises our main purpose as conveyers of the ministry of reconciliation. While objective justification could potentially be misused or misunderstood in evangelism work, a denial of objective justification has equally horrendous implications when sharing the gospel. Throwing away God's clear concept of justification for all in Christ means that forgiveness is merely a potential rather than a reality. That means that faith must then *cause* or at least *complete* forgiveness, which is far from the scriptural principle of a passive, receiving faith. If someone is going to share a partial gospel that denies objective justification it must put conditions on grace and thus make it no longer grace. That proclamation must be a message which asserts that forgiveness is a possibility for the whole world, that God even *wants* to forgive the world, but that he has not done so.

Without objective justification, justification becomes something accomplished through works, rather than received through faith. Without objective justification, I, by my believing, cause my forgiveness or in some way am responsible for that forgiveness. It's not a surprise that this teaching that denies objective justification is so very tempting for our human natures. Without objective justification, the scriptural truths of global reconciliation in Christ's death and resurrection are lost and replaced with an *opinio legis*-rich dogmatic that glorifies mankind's work in his relationship with God. A denial of objective justification scratches the itch of sinful mankind to be at least partially responsible for his forgiveness. We see this itch being scratched in many false teachings among other groups such as the Arminian's decision theology and the Romanist's penance.

Scriptural justification, both in its objective and subjective aspects, is the middle road between the ditches of limited atonement and universalism. It avoids limited atonement by being clear that Jesus forgave the sins of all and thus justified all. It also avoids universalism by being clear that the objective reality is only received subjectively through faith. Objective justification keeps law and gospel well distinguished and distributed, so that the haughty soul is cut down and the hurting soul is comforted.

In our evangelism, we ought never to say that "It's ok if you sin; Jesus took that away," or leave any room for any thoughts that may lessen the severity of our sin. Objective justification demands clarity that the sins of the world are very real and very dangerous, but that Jesus forgave those sins at the cross in totality. This was not Jesus dealing with an abstract concept; this was Jesus making peace between the holy, just God and sinful mankind. The proclamation of all sins forgiven in Christ is the very tool that the Holy Spirit uses to assure us that, in fact, *our* sins are forgiven and to create faith that trusts in that Christ-won and Christ-given forgiveness. That's the beautiful comfort we have in the scriptural teaching of the means of grace: they are the power of God to create and sustain faith, and the tool by which the Holy Spirit corrects even our most grievous errors and misunderstandings.

Hold fast to the Word and sacraments. In them you find the power of God through which he alone brings people from death to life, from unbelief to faith, from one rejecting God's forgiveness to one receiving his gracious, eternal blessings. May our proclamations of the whole counsel of

God never leave room for the unbeliever to find comfort in his unbelief, nor leave room for the believer to ever find anything short of complete comfort in his Savior!

Is “Objective Justification” Scriptural and Lutheran?

The distinction between the objective and subjective aspects of justification is really a matter of achieving and distributing. Luther comments:

We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world. For inasmuch as he had determined once to achieve it, it made no difference to him whether he distributed it before or after, through his Word, as can easily be proved from Scripture. (LW40 213-214)

Justification was objectively achieved for all mankind at the cross; there the world’s sins were forgiven and thus God declared the entire human race reconciled and redeemed. Justification is subjectively received through the means of grace, by which the Holy Spirit creates and sustains faith in Christ which receives the blessings of that objective achieving.

Justification, both its objective and subjective aspects, is not only Lutheran but undeniably scriptural. A rejection of the objective aspect of justification is slanderous toward the God who has proclaimed himself the willful and actual Savior of all mankind, who has taken away their sins, and reconciled all things to himself in the blood of Christ. God is, as he describes himself through the pen of the apostle Paul, “the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). May we never through direct teaching or indirect implication diminish what he is or what he has done!

Where there is not a bold, clear teaching of both the objective and subjective aspects of justification, there is no longer an unqualified subscription to the Lutheran Confessions, nor a willingness to proclaim the clear, unadulterated full counsel of God as given in his Word. Where there is a denial of objective justification, law and gospel are being confused or abused. Where there is confusion and outright denial on these matters amongst individuals and groups, we pray for the clarity that only the Holy Spirit can provide.

Objective justification has been and, by the grace of God, will continue to be a special hallmark of confessional Lutheranism, which has confessed this truth this way:

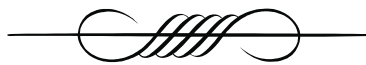
In the Son, true God and true Man, who by His coming into our flesh, His life of perfect obedience and His suffering upon the cross in our place and stead atoned for the sins of the world, removed all guilt, reconciled men to God and was raised again from the dead for their justification. We believe that by virtue of His sacrifice and His perfect obedience all men have been declared righteous by God; and this righteousness we proclaim and offer to men by the Gospel. (CLC Art. 4, § B)

By His perfect life and His innocent sufferings and death Jesus has redeemed the entire world. God thereby reconciled the world to Himself, and by the resurrection of His Son declared it to be righteous in Christ. This declaration of universal righteousness is often termed “objective justification.” One has this justification as a personal possession and is personally declared by God to be righteous in Christ when he or she is brought to faith in Him as Savior. This is often called “subjective justification”. If the objective fact of Christ’s atonement is not personally received by faith, then it has no saving benefit for the individual. We reject as unscriptural any teaching that people can be saved apart from faith in Jesus Christ. (ELS Art. 4)

Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ, Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 4:25; that therefore not for the sake of their good works, but without the works of the Law, by grace, for Christ’s sake, He justifies, that is, accounts as righteous, all those who believe, accept, and rely on, the fact that for Christ’s sake their sins are forgiven. (LCMS § 17)

We believe that God has justified all sinners, that is, he has declared them righteous for the sake of Christ. This is the central message of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends. It is a message relevant to people of all times and places, of all races and social levels, for “the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men” (Romans 5:18). All need forgiveness of sins before God, and Scripture proclaims that all have been justified, for “the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men” (Romans 5:18). We believe that individuals receive this free gift of forgiveness not on the basis of their own works, but only through faith (Ephesians 2:8,9). Justifying faith is trust in Christ and his redemptive work. This faith justifies not because of any power it has in itself, but only because of the salvation prepared by God in Christ, which it embraces (Romans 3:28; 4:5). (WELS Art. IV, § 1-2)

May the Lord continue to preserve this beautiful, complete, scriptural, Lutheran teaching of justification among us until he returns to take us home to glory!



*Salvation unto us has come
By God’s free grace and favor;
Good works cannot avert our doom,
They help and save us never.
Faith looks to Jesus Christ alone,
Who did for all the world atone;
He is our one Redeemer.
(TLH 377:1, CW 390:1 [alt.], ELH 227:1, LSB 555:1)*

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