

Review of Common Confession

Article VI – Justification

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In our review of the VI Article of the Common Confession, on Justification, we shall

A. consider briefly the position ever held by the Lutheran Church and defended by the Synodical Conference for eighty years,

B. review also the position held by the American Lutheran Church in the past on this doctrine, especially since this church body has sharply differed with us, and

C. ask ourselves whether or not the Common Confession clearly composes the old controversy and adequately confesses the truth.

A.

To give a detailed presentation of our orthodox position on the doctrine of Justification is not within the scope of this paper. Neither is it possible in the time allotted us to go into a detailed exegesis of the Scripture passages involved. We shall, however, first of all try to summarize as briefly and clearly as possible our position on the Scripture's Doctrine of Justification, called by Luther the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. (Art. Sm. p. 460,5)

Justification is basically a declaratory act of God, in which He pronounces a sinner righteous. The Scriptural word for "justify" (OT – קִיְיַם; NT – δικαιῶν) is used in this forensic way almost without exception, as Dr. A. Hoenecke points out in detail in his *Ev. Luth. Dogmatik* (Band III, p. 331 ff.). As a judge after due investigation acquits a defendant, thus God renders His verdict of acquittal upon the sinner. Those whom God justifies, i.e., declares righteous, receive this as a free gift, and without any merit on their part (Rom. 3, 24; 4,5), purely as an act of God's mercy and grace (2 Tim. 1,9; Tit. 3,5), for Christ's sake. The righteousness which God imputes to the sinner is the righteousness purchased and won by Christ in His work of redemption (2Cor. 5,21; Gal. 3,13; Gal. 4, 4,5).

The astounding thing about this act of God's justification, clearly expressed in Scripture, is the fact that **it applies to the whole world**. St. Paul writes: "Therefore as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous" (Rom. 5, 18-19). Christ's resurrection was the seal of this declaratory act of God. "Christ was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification" (Rom. 4, 25). This is the objective or universal justification of all men. The Brief Statement of the Missouri Synod expresses this Scriptural truth very exactly and concisely when it states: "that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ." St. Paul also declares: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (2. Cor. 5, 19). This fact of God's universal declaration of forgiveness stands firmly upon Scripture. Yes, it stands as an accomplished fact, and if no person on earth believed it. It is not conditioned by any attitude or merit on the part of man. It is not even conditioned by man's faith. God did not justify only those whom He knew would come to faith. He did not merely make possible a justification for those who would later believe. God has already declared the whole world to be

righteous in Christ. That objective truth, which stands as an accomplished fact, is basic for a correct understanding of the subject of justification.

We also speak, of course, of a subjective or personal justification. Here we have reference to that oft-repeated expression of Scripture that man is “justified by faith” (Rom. 1, 17; 3, 22.28; 5,1; 9, 30.31; 10,6; Gal. 2,16; 3,24; 5,5). Justification is clearly a matter of faith in this sense, that man by faith apprehends or accepts this universal declaration of God’s righteousness imputed to the world, and offered in the Gospel. Our confessions clearly define this function of faith when they say, “We believe, teach and confess that faith alone is the means and instrument whereby we lay hold of Christ, and thus in Christ of that righteousness which avails before God, for whose sake this faith is imputed to us for righteousness, Rom. 4,5.” (Formula of Concord, Epitome.) Faith is thus described as the instrument whereby we lay hold of a righteousness which is already present **before** faith. Here especially it is necessary to note that the Scriptures never state that man is justified **on account of faith** (διὰ πίστεως), but rather that the object of his faith, namely Christ, is *through faith* imputed unto him for righteousness (διὰ πίστεως). Faith is passive in justification. It never enters the picture as a *cause* of justification, but always as an instrument of receiving the universal justification of God pronounced in the Gospel.

This Scriptural method of presenting justification, although contrary to man’s natural way of thinking, places justification on an unshakable foundation. Dr. Stoeckhardt presents this doctrine throughout his exegesis on Romans in this beautifully objective way, also showing the tremendous comfort derived therefrom. “God has in Christ,” he writes, “already forgiven the sins of the whole world. The entire Pauline doctrine of justification, and also all comfort derived from this doctrine stands and falls with this special article of objective justification. For thus alone does it become unmistakably clear that justification is in no way dependent upon man’s conduct (*Verhalten*). And thus alone can the individual become certain of his own justification. For it is a compelling conclusion: If God has already in Christ justified all men and forgiven them their sins, so I also must have a gracious God and the forgiveness of all my sins (*Römerbrief*, p. 264). It will be argued, perhaps, that neither Luther nor our early Lutheran confessions make this distinction between “objective” and “subjective” justification. It is true that they do not make use of this specific terminology, just as little as they use the term “verbal inspiration.” But to deny that both Luther and our Confessions present justification from the standpoint outlined above would certainly take a great deal of misinterpretation. Luther surely stresses justification by faith. So do our Confessions. But faith is never presented as something necessary to complete a justification which God has only made possible. Dr. Stoeckhardt writes:

Never in this sense do we hear it presented: I believe; I am conscious of the fact that I believe on my Savior. Therefore I am justified in the sight of God. A believing Christian does not make the pulse of his faith-life the criterion of his state of grace... The believer rather makes this conclusion: O, how godless I still am. Out of my heart godless thoughts continue to arise. There is no doubt but that I am a poor, unworthy sinner. My sin is ever before me. But now God’s Word tells me, that God has already declared godless Sinners righteous. Thus I belong without any doubt whatsoever in the number of those whom God justifies (*St. Römerbrief*, p. 185).

That has always been the true Lutheran position, upheld by the Synodical Conference for eighty years.

B.

Over against this position we wish to review the position held by the American Lutheran Church in the past, a position which lies in sharp contrast to the presentation outlined above.

Originally the Ohio Synod accepted the position of the Synodical Conference. Evidently a different position on the doctrine of Justification arose out of the Predestination-Controversy. In any event, the Ohio *Kirchenzeitung* in its May issue of 1905 rejected in no uncertain terms Missouri’s position on Objective

Justification as a “sin against holiness,” “insanity,” “night of error,” and a “miserable figment of man’s own invention.” Ohio’s objections are summarized in the following manner:

(1) Reconciliation and personal justification are thrown together (by Missouri), so that nothing is left of an individual justification by faith. According to Missouri’s new teaching the whole world is justified, in fact, already when Christ completed his work of redemption. A different justification, which takes place when man comes to faith is not present according to this teaching. Thus the central teaching of Scripture and of the Lutheran church is destroyed. (2) According to this new doctrine of justification is already completed without faith, before faith ever enters into the picture. Faith limps behind. Man should only believe in a justification already completed a long time ago. Thus Missouri destroys the Bible teaching of a justification by faith. (3) It is no longer true according to this new doctrine that God first justifies in the moment that a sinner comes to faith. No longer - faith, then justification; rather centuries ago a justification of the whole world - now believe this! We shudder at this sin against everything sacred! God preserve these blinded creatures, who prate so about the clarity of Scripture, and condemn vigorously everything that doesn’t suit their fancy. Now through their own blindness they have fallen so deeply into the night of error! God have mercy upon the poor people who are no longer hearing the central teaching of Scripture, but rather a miserable fallacy, a poor figment of man’s own invention (*Lehre u. Wehre*, Vol. 51, p. 385 ff.)

Ohio’s *Kirchenzeitung* then goes on to define its own position on Justification: “Through the reconciliation of Christ the holy and gracious God has made advances to us, so that forgiveness of sin and justification have been made possible on His part; Justification itself, however, does not occur until through God’s grace the spark of faith has been kindled in the heart of the poor sinner.” Missouri’s comment to this statement, appearing in *Lehre und Wehre* (Vol. 51, p. 388), sets forth the difference very clearly: “We preach: for Christ’s sake God has in His heart forgiven all men and offers this forgiveness in the means of grace, that you may receive it by faith, – so receive and make this treasure your own: Ohio (*die Kirchenzeitung*) preaches: God has certainly not forgiven the sins of the world, but it is possible for Him to do so and in the Gospel He says, that He will do so under the condition, that you first of all believe -- so believe, that God might be able to grant you forgiveness.”

Thus we find a sharp distinction existing between Ohio and Missouri forty-five years ago on the doctrine of justification. Is there any indication that this distinction was settled prior to the formulating of the Common Confession? In 1938 the American Lutheran Church in its “Declaration” (II, A) states: “(God) purposes to justify those who have come to faith.” This is again a clear rejection of the doctrine of objective justification. Statements appearing in church periodicals again and again present this thought that God is “ready to forgive” all those who come to faith, that He has redeemed the whole world, but justifies only “those who come to faith.” Universal redemption is taught, but not universal justification. It is interesting to observe the exegesis of Dr. R. C. Lenski, Ohio’s leading exegete, on these *sedes doctrinae* found in Romans. Dr. Lenski is agreed that the word “justify” as used by Paul is always forensic, but goes to great lengths to attempt to prove that the justifying act of God applies only to believers after they have come to faith. On Romans 3, 21-26 he repeatedly points out that God, in His judicial verdict of acquittal, is influenced by faith alone. On Romans 4, 5, where Paul speaks of God justifying the ungodly, he says: “God declares the ungodly righteous by reckoning his faith for righteousness. But for faith there would be no justification. I must ever, say: I believe, therefore am I justified. The strength of my faith is the degree of my certainty” (p. 299). On Romans 5, 19 he comes out with the flat statement: “Nowhere in the Bible is any man constituted or declared righteous without faith, before faith,” all asseverations and argumentations to the contrary notwithstanding.” Dr. Lenski plainly recognizes no biblical doctrine of objective justification and is very clear in stating so. His divergence from Dr. Stoeckhardt on this point cannot merely be passed off as an exegetical question of minor consequence, since it involves the central teaching of Scripture, the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.

C.

Now we come finally to the Common Confession, where this doctrinal divergence has been supposedly resolved. As we approach it we naturally ask, “Will it contain an unequivocal statement on objective justification? Will it rule out the thought that faith is first necessary before any justification of God’s part is possible?”

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

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

Following this the Common Confession quotes 2 Cor: 5, 19. It is a beautiful passage on justification, but the words of this passage itself, printed in full, do not change our opinion, especially since we have seen exegetes take some of the *sedes doctrinae* from Romans and flatly deny the remotest possibility of a doctrine of objective justification on the basis of them, “all asseverations and argumentations to the contrary notwithstanding.”

The Common Confession continues: **“Hence no sinner need be eternally lost on account of his sins. God offers this propitiation and reconciliation freely to all men through His means of grace. There is nothing in sinful man or in what he may do to merit God’s declaring him righteous.”** These are fine statements. But do they bring us any closer to objective justification? One might assert that particularly the last statement quoted (There is nothing in sinful man, etc.) rules out faith as a factor in God’s act of declaration. But a more sober consideration quickly shows the fallacy of such thinking. The American Lutheran Church never did say that man could do anything to merit his justification. They will readily admit that even faith is not a meritorious act on man’s part. They always have. That is not the point under consideration here. The point is whether or not God justifies only **after** faith has been kindled. The succeeding statement in the Common Confession gives support to this thought that justification occurs only when faith is already present: **“God justifies the sinner solely on the basis of Christ’s righteousness, which He imputes to the sinner through the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith.”** Here God’s act of imputation and the sinner’s acceptance by faith are linked together so closely, without even a comma separating them, that the old error is strengthened. The thought is conveyed that the justification of the sinner is not complete until the missing factor of personal faith is supplied.

Certainly we do not mean to state that this confession should have ignored that which we call subjective justification. Faith as the instrument of receiving this declaration of God by the individual is also clearly set forth in the Brief Statement: “that **therefore** (note the resultant relation to objective justification) 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 in Christ, etc." Our point, however, has been to show that the Common Confession nowhere clearly sets forth objective justification, rather presents this doctrine throughout in such a manner that the old – and, as far as we know, new – Ohio position (that faith is always a contributing factor in God's act of justification) can find refuge in it.

If we are in error, if the American Lutheran Church no longer takes this position, then we would like to have that fact clearly stated in a confession of this kind. A clear, positive statement on objective justification, as found in the Brief Statement ("Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ.") is needed. This statement should be backed up by a direct reference to the *sedes doctrinae* on objective justification (Rom. 5, 18.19; 2 Cor. 5, 18-21; Rom. 4, 25), and not by the general reference to entire chapters from Romans (Romans 3-5), found at the bottom of the Common Confession. And although we realize that the Common Confession was intended to be purely positive in its presentation, an antithetical statement is no doubt needed here, as at other places in a confession of this nature, to safeguard the truth. "We reject as apostasy the doctrine of those who teach justification by faith, but who deny that in the death and resurrection of Christ God has already declared every sinner righteous in His sight (Rom. 4, 25; Rom. 5, 19), and who teach that through Christ's work of universal redemption God has only made possible a justification for all men, to be completed only when the missing factor of faith enters the heart."

We wish to conclude with a statement quoted from an essay by Dr. Theo. Dierks (Confessional Lutheran; August, 1949, p. 95 f.), stressing the importance of holding fast to the doctrine of objective justification in every detail: "Here is the exact point where men go off on a tangent and stray into the field of work-righteousness. Here is the starting point of the age-old false teaching that God is reconciled and is willing to forgive IF man will fulfill a certain condition (whatever that condition may be), THEN God will forgive. Scripture, however, teaches that God HAS once and for all in Christ forgiven all men their sins. Whoever accepts this forgiveness, whoever believes the gracious promises of God, has forgiveness of all his sins."

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Luther: "One should preach forgiveness of sins in Christ's name; That is nothing else than that one should preach the Gospel, which proclaims to the whole world that in Christ the sins of the whole world have been swallowed up, and therefore He died, that He might remove our sins from us, and therefore He rose again, that He might consume and destroy them." (XI, 693).