

# Christ is the Savior of All People

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What the Bible teaches about sin and salvation can be summarized by seven points.

1. All people are by nature lost sinners. They are condemned both by the guilt they inherited from Adam and by the sins they themselves have committed.
2. Jesus lived a perfect life for all people.
3. Jesus died on the cross and paid for all of the sins of the whole world.
4. Jesus rose from death, and this demonstrates that ...
5. God has forgiven all sins through Jesus. This means, "You are forgiven through Christ!"
6. Whoever believes in Jesus as the Savior from sin has eternal life.
7. Whoever does not believe in Jesus does not have eternal life.

All of these are direct statements. They are clear statements of Scripture. Nevertheless, all of these statements are denied by various parties in the Christian church. Number 1, original sin, is denied by all the synergists who believe that people have some remaining spiritual ability to turn themselves to God. Number 2, the active obedience of Christ, has been denied by various parties in the Lutheran church, including in the Nordic countries. Number 3, the atonement or redemption, is denied by the Calvinists who limit it to the elect and by the Catholics and others who deny that Christ made the complete payment for sin. Number 4, the resurrection, is denied by liberal churches, but the meaning of the resurrection is denied also by Lutherans who deny number 5, objective justification. Number 6, subjective justification, is denied on the one hand by Catholics and others who claim that we are not justified by faith alone but by faith and works. On the other hand it is denied by pluralists or universalists who claim people can be saved without faith in Christ. Pluralists and universalists also deny number seven.

The point of this catalog is to show that every teaching of Scripture, no matter how clear and how important it is, has been denied by factions in the church. Such denials almost always come from one of two approaches to theology: 1) judging the validity of scriptural teachings by the use human reason; 2) using reason to try to reconcile all teachings into a logical system, rather than letting them stand as Scripture has stated them.

In this short presentation, we will see how this principle applies to number 5, the truth that has been called objective justification. This is quite a simple truth. It can be stated in two sentences:

Christ paid for all of the sins of all of the people.  
God the Father accepted Christ's payment for sin and credited it to all people.

Strictly speaking, it is only the second sentence that summarizes objective justification. The first sentence describes what is more commonly called redemption or atonement. Strictly speaking, atonement is the basis for objective justification.

"God the Father accepted Christ's payment for sin and credited it to all people." It is hard to understand how any Christian can be troubled by this statement, yet alone how they could reject it. Christ is the infinite Son of God. How could his death be any less than the complete payment for all of the sins of all of the people? If his Son made a perfect payment for all of the sins of all people,

how could God the Father accept it as only a partial payment or a payment for only some people?

How could he accept it as only a potential payment which we must make actual by adding something to it, even if the only thing we have to add is faith? The denial of objective justification is unreasonable. But more importantly it is unscriptural.

Scripture is loaded with testimonies that Christ paid for all of the sins of all of the people. We can list only a few of them.

**John 1:29b**

Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.

**1 John 2:2**

He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but for the sins of the whole world. If sin is taken away, it is forgiven. An atonement is a complete payment. This payment was made for the whole world, not just for believers. This is something that is very clear if we just read the passages, and do not overthink the issue.

More than a decade ago I was presenting at a free conference in Finland and one of the men in attendance, who was a member of what we would probably characterize as a pietistic mission society, during the question period asked me if I believed in objective justification. After I made certain that he understood the term in the same way we did, and after I had assured him we believed and confessed that truth, he said, "I am glad to hear that. Our old teacher used to tell us, 'In the liturgy we say, "You take away the sin of the world." but in our heart we always say "You took away the sin of the world."'" Objective justification is not more complicated than that.

2 Corinthians 5:14b

One died for all, and therefore all died.

Romans 3:23-24

There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup> and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Romans 5:18

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

This time the recipients of the benefit of Christ's death are described as "all"—the all that are justified freely by grace are the same as the all that sinned. This must refer to all people. The all who were condemned by Adam's sin are the same group that was justified by Christ's act of righteousness.

Romans 5:8-10

But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.<sup>9</sup> Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him!<sup>10</sup> For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!

This passage is almost shocking isn't it? It does not say that Christ died so that we could later

become reconciled and stop being his enemies. It says the reconciliation took place while we were still God's enemies. The reconciliation therefore cannot be a change in us. It must be a change outside of us in God's courtroom. The Bible defines this reconciliation in a passage that has been the center of much discussion.

2 Corinthians 5:19a

God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their sins against them.

Again it is the world that is the recipients of the benefits of Christ's death. The benefit is named in two ways, joined by an equal sign: reconciling to God = not counting their sins against them. To not count sins is the same thing as to forgive them.

Psalm 32:1, 2

Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered.

Blessed is the man, whose sin the LORD does not count against him.

Perhaps here is a place to talk about the terminology. The terminology itself is not very important. If one believes that God the Father accepted Christ's payment for sin and credited it to all people, it does not make a great deal of difference what name we give to it. It is handy to have some commonly agreed on terminology, so that we can communicate with each other more easily. But even in the Bible the same thing is sometimes called by different names. (The one John calls Antichrist is called the Man of Sin or Lawlessness by Paul. What Jesus calls the sin against the Holy Spirit is called the sin unto death in John's first letter.) If there is the same teaching, difference of vocabulary is not divisive. However, sometimes people pass off a difference of doctrine as simply a difference of terms.

Some Lutherans who deny objective justification claim that they are only against the term, but they accept the doctrine of 2 Corinthians 5 under the name "world reconciliation". We can hardly object to the term "world reconciliation. It comes right out of the passage. If someone says, "I don't care for the term 'objective justification'. I don't think it is very clear. I prefer the term 'world reconciliation,'" we could live with that. We don't fight word battles.

(Suppose you met someone in a far corner of the world who had become a Lutheran simply by reading the Bible without meeting another Lutheran. As he hears you speak of the Lutheran faith, he discovers that that is what he is too. One after another you find that you believe the same doctrines simply because that is what the Bible says. Finally near the end to the discussion you ask, "Do you call the pope the Antichrist?" He says, "No, I don't." You are disappointed, but he is quick to add, "No, I don't call the pope the Antichrist. Following Revelation 17 I call the pope the Prostitute that sits on many waters." Wouldn't you be quick to say, "Okay. I think we can go along with that.")

But rejection of the term "objective justification" is often not simply preference for another term. It is a rejection of the truth that God the Father accepted Christ's payment for sin and credited it to all people. Let's look at three terms.

**Objective justification:** Justification is that God declares that sins are forgiven. "Objective" means that this declaration happened before I ever heard about it or believed it. It happened in God's courtroom when Jesus finished his work. It happened while I was "still God's enemy."

**Universal justification:** We use this interchangeably with "objective justification," but the two terms

emphasize different truths about this teaching. "Objective" emphasizes that it happened outside of me. "Universal" emphasizes that it applies to everyone in the world. The biblical truth that "God the Father accepted Christ's payment for sin and credited it to all people" is both objective and universal, so we may use the terms interchangeably to refer to the same thing.

World Reconciliation: As noted above, there is nothing wrong with this term. God did reconcile the world, but he did this by not charging their sins to them, that is, by forgiving their sins. One cannot accept the term "world reconciliation" in the sense in which it is defined in 2 Corinthians 5, and then deny the validity of the term "objective justification." It is not the use of the term "world reconciliation" that is a problem. The problem is a denial of a world justification.

If I can say A=B and B=C, I cannot deny that A=C.

Justification=not counting sins against someone, that is, forgiveness of sins  
Reconciliation=not counting sins against someone, that is, forgiveness of sins  
Reconciliation= Justification  
World Reconciliation=World Justification

God forgave all the sins of all the people in the world. We cannot say that this was applied to the world but not to the individual people. The passage uses the singular "world" as well as the plural "them." A verdict made on the world is a verdict made for everyone in the world.

That is not to say that world justification/world reconciliation is the whole story. The Bible talks about world justification/world reconciliation/objective justification side by side with personal justification/individual reconciliation/subjective justification. It sees no contradiction between believing both. The Bible in fact requires us to believe both.

Romans 3:22-24

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

Immediately after talking about the subjective or personal or individual justification that takes place in faith Paul talks about the objective justification which is the basis for the subjective. Then in 2 Corinthians he reverses the order.

2 Corinthians 5:18-21

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup> that 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. <sup>20</sup> 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. <sup>21</sup> God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Here he states first of all that God reconciled us to himself in Christ. God did not need to be reconciled—there was nothing wrong with him. Nothing about him needed to be changed. We were the ones who needed to be changed. The first thing that changed was our status before God's court. Christ paid the debt of the whole world. God the Father accepted this payment and credited it to the world. This transaction is reported in the ministry of reconciliation, that is, in the gospel. The content of the gospel is this: God has not charged the world's sin against them.

This reconciliation which was at first objective needs to become subjective. God is at peace with us. All our debt has been paid. But we need to hear about it, use the gift, and enjoy the peace. This is why the ambassadors of Christ go out and announce that sin has been forgiven and we have peace with God. Since we no longer stand under God's wrath as expressed by the law, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is based on the Great Exchange. Jesus was made sin for us—all our sins were charged to him and he paid for them as if they were his own. His payment was counted as our payment. His innocent death and holy life were credited to us. In him we are made the righteousness of God.

As wonderful as this reconciliation is, there is nothing strange or unusual about the fact that it is first objective and then become subjective.

If I go and deposit a million dollars (or kronor or euros) in an account I set up for you that money is legally yours. But to benefit from it you need to hear about it, believe it, and spend it. If you do not believe it is for you, you will not benefit from it even though it was yours.

In the war between Britain and the United States in 1812 a treaty was signed in Europe that established peace between England and America. But the British and America soldiers at New Orleans did not hear about the peace, so they fought a useless battle and died for nothing.

At the end of World War II the United States and Japan signed an agreement that established peace. But on some Pacific Islands Japanese soldiers kept hiding in the jungle eating bugs and roots for another 10 years because they did not believe the announcements of peace that were broadcast to them repeatedly. Though the peace was real, they did not enjoy it.

Luther used a similar comparison.

Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins are forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly *his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it...* 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. <sup>1</sup>

There are not really two reconciliations or two justifications. They are two aspects of one reconciliation. Reconciliation was already an objective reality when Jesus paid for sin and the Father received the payment. God shows this to us in especially three ways. The first two are special signs.

When Jesus declared, "It is finished," sin was paid for. God's acceptance of the payment was demonstrated by the tearing of the veil of the temple. The barrier that stood between sinners and a holy God was removed. The door to heaven was open. All three of the synoptic gospels report this dramatic sign (Mt 27:51, Mk 15:38, Luke 23:45). This was the sign that the countless animal sacrifices which could never in themselves pay for a single sin were now to stop. They simply pointed ahead to the one perfect sacrifice that was coming. Now that that sacrifice was complete, the time for those sacrifices was at an end.

The second sign was even more important—Jesus' resurrection from the dead. By his resurrection Jesus was shown to be the Son of God with power. One passage talks directly about the connection between the resurrection and objective justification.

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<sup>1</sup> *Luther's Works, Vol. 40: Church and Ministry II*, pp. 366-67 (Fortress, 1958). Italics added.

Romans 4:25

<sup>25</sup>He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.

Jesus was delivered over to death because we had sinned. It would be nonsense to say he was delivered so we could sin. He was raised to life not so we could be justified, but because we had been justified. Both parallel statements look back to a cause. They do not look forward to a purpose.

When God raised Jesus from the dead, he declared that the death of Jesus has fulfilled its goal, that sin has been atoned for, that he has accepted the atonement, and so the glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead is also at the same time the actual, solemn, formal absolution which God has pronounced on sinful people. Just as the atonement for sin is universal, so this verdict of justification is universal and applies to the whole world of sinners.

Christ “was delivered over to death for our sins.” Because we had sinned, we deserved to die. Instead of requiring our death, however, God sent his Son to earth to live the perfect life we could not live and die the death we should have died. By his life he earned righteousness for us, and by his death he paid for our sins. In Christ, God now views us as righteous; in him we have been justified. The sinner’s justification is an accomplished fact, punctuated by Christ’s cry on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30). And to show that he had accepted his Son’s sacrificial death for the justification of all sinners, God raised his Son from death on Easter morning. In doing so God made a statement to all the world... We might paraphrase that in this way: Christ had to die because we had sinned, but he could be raised to life because we had been justified by his death. <sup>2</sup>

Paul is not saying Jesus’ resurrection was the cause of our acquittal. Just the opposite, our acquittal was the cause of Jesus’ resurrection. Our acquittal was established by Jesus’ paying the ransom price for us on the cross (3:24). Because this was an established fact, God brought Jesus back to life. Or to put it another way, by raising Jesus, God was assuring us that Jesus had indeed accomplished our salvation. <sup>3</sup>

Christ’s resurrection took place as an actual absolution from sin... As God punished our sins in Christ, upon whom he laid them and to whom he imputed them, as our Bondsman, so He also, by the very act of raising him from the dead, absolved him from our sins that had been charged to him, and so he absolved also us in him.” <sup>4</sup>

Putting it another way, if Christ’s death on the cross was the payment of our bill, the resurrection was the presentation of a receipt marked PAID IN FULL.

The evidence is clear. It is quite simple. It is consistent. Christ’s death is credited to the whole world. The effect of his death is the forgiveness of sins for the world. It is said various ways but it always comes out the same.

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<sup>2</sup> Armin Panning, *Romans*, p. 78 (NPH, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> David P. Kuske, *A Commentary on Romans 1-8*, p. 237 (NPH, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Abraham Calov, quoted in F. Pieper, vol. 2, *Christian Dogmatics*, p. 321 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953).

<u>The beneficiaries</u>	<u>The benefit</u>
The world	their sin is taken away
The whole world	Christ is their atoning sacrifice
All	Christ died for them=they died.
All	have sinned, were justified freely by grace.
All men	condemned by Adam's sin, justified by Christ's righteousness
The world/people	reconciled=not counting their sins against them

When it is so simple, why do some people have so much trouble with it. This probably flows from two main causes. The first is to attempt to escape the ditch on the left side of the road by driving into the ditch on the right side of the road.

This has been done again and again in church history. The Roman Catholics made the real presence of Christ's body and blood in the Lord's Supper into idolatry of the elements, so the Reformed turned to nothing but bread and wine. Infant baptism was sometimes abused to promote a false security apart from faith and repentance. The Judaizer's rejected Paul's proclamation of salvation by faith alone because of the fear that such a teaching would encourage people to sin.

It is pretty much the same in this case too. Universalism and pluralism teach that everyone will be saved even without faith in Christ. To counter this some Lutherans teach that there is no justification before faith. Some universalists may even use objective justification as an excuse for their belief. But this is the abuse of the doctrine, not its proper use. Again there is nothing new about this. Already in the times of the Apostle Paul those who wanted to try to excuse an indifference to sin tried to use justification by faith alone as an excuse for their casual attitude toward sin. "If we sin more, God just has more chance to be gracious." Subjective justification by faith alone is as subject to misuse as is objective justification. Sinners are always looking for an excuse to minimize God's law. The solution is the same in every case. We simply keep all the teachings of God's Word in close connection. We preach both the law and the gospel in their proper relationship and in proper balance.

The second reason for problems with the doctrine of objective justification is closely related. It is the temptation to try to use reason to fit all the teachings of God's Word into a system that seems logical to our reason.

Again, this is nothing new. The classical example is the efforts of the Arminians and the Calvinist to answer the question "Why are some saved, and not others?"

The Calvinist reasons: there must be a difference in God. God gets whatever he wants. Some people go hell. God wanted them to go to hell. He predestined them to damnation or at least did not provide a Savior for them, Christ died only for the elect. The elect are brought irresistibly to faith. Justification is objective but it is not universal.

The Arminian reasons: the difference must be in man. God wants everyone to be saved. Christ died for everyone. The same gospel is preached to everyone. Some reject it, some accept. The difference must be in the people. Some must have something in them which lets them apply themselves to grace. God has elected some means that can lead people to salvation, but he does not elect individuals to salvation. Justification is offered to everyone, but only those who believe are justified.

Both solutions sound somewhat reasonable. What is the way out of the dilemma? It actually is quite simple. "Why are some saved and not others?" is not one question. It is two.

Why are some saved? It is entirely by God's grace, not due to any difference or merit in them.

Why are some lost? It is entirely their fault due to their rejection of God's grace.

This may not seem reasonable to us, but we simply have to let both answers stand. We have to fit our system to the answers. We cannot try to force the answers into our system.

God has forgiven all the sins of all of the people.

Forgiveness of sins leads to eternal life.

Not all people will have eternal life.

False Conclusion: God did not forgive the sins of all people.

That is not such bad logic, but it is bad theology because it leads to the denial of the first statement which is clearly scriptural. The line of reasoning is essentially the same as that of the Calvinist. It attempts to squeeze God's Word into our logical system.

We have seen above that we can offer some explanations which show how both statements (God has forgiven the sins of all people, and only those who believe will be saved) fit together and both are true. But even if we could not see how they fit together, we would have no right to decide which one we are going to reject. We must accept and proclaim them both. Scripture goes even farther in proclaiming such paradoxes.

How would you answer the question, "Has God saved everyone?" We might be inclined to say, "No, only those who believe are saved," because we do not want to be thought to be universalists. And the statement, "Only those who believe will be saved" is in fact true, but it is only part of the truth or only one way of expressing the truth.

1 Timothy 4:10

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

For some reason this passage was not much used in our catechisms and our writings and was not nearly as familiar as other passages about objective justification. I remember reading along in my Bible one day (I don't remember exactly when) and I thought, "Wow, I don't think I would have said it that way." Christ is the Savior of all people?? Isn't that universalism?? Doesn't that contradict, "Whoever does not believe will be damned?? I wouldn't have said it that way, but God did. He did because he wants us to be very sure of two truths that to us seem contradictory. If anyone is saved it is entirely due to Christ's work for him. We add nothing to salvation which is a completed work of Christ. If anyone is lost, it is entirely due to his rejection of the salvation that was won for him. I can't believe it, but it's true. I can't believe it but I do.

A strong and thought-provoking way to say it: Christ is the Savior of all people. He does not say Christ could be the savior of all people if only they believed. Christ might be your savior if you add faith to his work. He simply says, "Christ is the Savior of all people." That is objective justification. That is another way of saying, "God forgave the sins of the world." But where objective justification appears, subjective



justification is never far behind. Paul adds “especially for those who believe.” Everyone was given the gift of forgiveness. Not all will benefit from the gift. We say both because Scripture says both.

Although there may be a “happy inconsistency” which allows some who deny objective justification to preach the gospel, a gospel without objective justification by whatever name it might be called is really another gospel which really is not a gospel. It really is not good news.

A consistent Calvinist cannot preach to a crowd, “Christ died for your sins,” when he believes Christ only died for some of them. A consistent Arminian cannot say, “God has forgiven your sins.” He must say, “If you believe, God will forgive you sin.” Both of these poor people must look to their own faith, or worse yet to their own works, for assurance that they have forgiveness.

The story is told of Oliver Cromwell, the great English fighter for the Reformation, as he lay on his death bed. He was asked, “Do you believe?” and he said, “I am not sure.” He was then asked, “Did you ever believe?” To which he answered, “Yes.” Once saved—always saved—what a pathetic place to look for hope. Faith past or present—what a weak staff to lean on for support.

How much better forget about ourselves and to look to the cross. How much better to cling to the words, “It is finished.”

Jesus lived, died, and rose for you. Your sins are forgiven. That is true whether you believe it or you don't.

Jesus lived, died, and rose for you. Your sins are forgiven. That is true whether you are awake or asleep.

Jesus lived, died, and rose for you. Your sins are forgiven. That is true when your faith is strong or it is weak.

Jesus lived, died, and rose for you. Your sins are forgiven. That is true when you are on your death bed and consciousness is slipping away.

It is finished! The world's sins have been forgiven. Your sins have been forgiven.

I cling to what my Savior taught, and trust it whether felt or not.