

# Justification Expounded by Scripture

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✠ *In nomine Jesu* ✠

The focus of our study over the next four days is the doctrine of justification. Our first essay presents an exposition of justification and urges diligence in expounding the doctrine in precise biblical terminology. Our second essay will focus on the proper use of the doctrine of justification, its application as a doctrine of comfort and assurance for a troubled conscience, and the role the doctrine plays in ministry and mission outreach. Our Bible studies offer the opportunity to the convention for group discussion and consideration of proper, as well as improper, applications of the doctrine of justification. May the Spirit of truth lead us into a deeper understanding and appreciation of this precious truth, that we articulate it and apply it correctly, always to the glory of God!

## ***Justification is a legal term***

Let's begin by considering the word *justification*. The basic meaning of *justify* is to prove something to be right, just or valid; to absolve; or to free a person from guilt or sin. *Justification* is the act of justifying, absolving, or declaring free from guilt. To be justified is to be forgiven.<sup>1</sup>

Justification is a declaration, not a transformation. While the word *sanctify* means "to set apart" or to "make holy," the word *justify* does not mean "to make righteous," but "to declare righteous." Justification is accomplished as a verdict rendered by God.

Justification is necessary, because a human being in his natural state stands opposed to God, hostile to God, separated from God, and burdened with the guilt of his sin before God. For a human being to be acceptable in the eyes of God he must be found guilt-free and righteous in the positive sense. Anything less finds a human being incapable of standing in the judgment before a just and holy God, who demands perfection. Every sin must be removed, and all guilt must be absolved. In place of guilt there must be innocence, and in place of sin there must be righteousness. Jesus said, "Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:20). Without holiness no one will see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14).

How does a sinner go from being wicked in God's eyes to being righteous in God's eyes? Where can we obtain the righteousness that God in his law requires—a righteousness that avails before God and is acceptable in God's sight? We cannot pay for our own sins to remove our own guilt, nor can we offer God our own righteousness, for all our righteous acts are like rags of uncleanness (Isaiah 64:6). The law of God has enslaved a fallen world in disobedience (Romans 11:32). Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by observing the law; rather through the law we become conscious of sin (Romans 3:20). The righteousness we need to stand before God cannot come from within; it must come from without.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been revealed, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe (Romans 3:21, 22). God gave his only-begotten Son to live, to die and to rise again for sinners. It's

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<sup>1</sup> Both the Apology to the Augsburg Confession and the Formula of Concord explicitly equate the terms *justification* and *forgiveness*. "To attain the remission of sins is to be justified, according to Psalm 32:1: 'Blessed is he whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the LORD does not count against him and in whose spirit is no deceit'" (AC:IV, 76).

important we understand that the words “for sinners” do not mean only “on behalf of sinners,” but “in place of sinners.” Christ is our proxy. Jesus took our place under God’s law (Galatians 4:4, 5), and he fulfilled it perfectly, without sin (Hebrews 4:15). The term for this is Jesus’ *active obedience*. Jesus then offered his innocent life as the payment (*atonement*) for the guilt of sinners. In this great transaction that took place on the cross, God removed the guilt of the world’s sin and replaced it with the righteousness of Christ.

Here is the legal or juridical nature of justification, revealed at Calvary. The change does not take place in the sinner. The change takes place in the relationship or the status between a sinner and God.<sup>2</sup> A verdict has been rendered, which declares man free of sin and guilt, righteous in God’s sight, and worthy of eternal life, for Jesus’ sake.

This understanding of justification is the heart of the difference between Roman Catholicism and the true catholic faith of confessional Lutheranism. A juridical understanding of justification drove the theology of the Lutheran Reformation. Rome defines justification not in juridical terms but in terms of transformation of human character. In Roman Catholic theology, justification is not a verdict which changes man’s status, for Jesus’ sake; it is a transformation that is brought about in the character of a human being. In Rome’s view, justification is incomplete and ongoing. The Roman church teaches that men are not declared just, but they become just over time, as they receive an infusion of grace to work at perfecting obedience to God. The incomplete justification taught by Rome leaves the sinner in perpetual doubt as to whether he is worthy or righteous enough to enter heaven. This doubt arises not only in Roman Catholicism, but in any theological system where justification (God’s completed verdict *for us* in Christ) is confused with sanctification (God’s continued working *in us* to produce a Christian life).

### **Justification is an objective reality**

We call justification *objective*, because the reality of God’s verdict takes place completely in the realm of God, entirely apart from man’s involvement. Man has nothing to do with it, and man’s subjective perception or opinion does not change it.

What causes justification to take place? Lutheran theologians have always maintained that there are two causes for man’s salvation: (1) the grace of God and (2) the merits of Jesus Christ. Neither of these two causes has anything to do with the participation of sinful human beings. Both causes exist completely in God’s sphere.

From the cross Jesus cried triumphantly, “It is finished” (John 19:30). What is finished is his life of active obedience, his passion and suffering—all his work of bearing and atoning for the sin of the world. This truth of Jesus’ completed work stands as an objective truth, whether a human being believes it or not. There is nothing that any human being can do to change what happened outside Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago. No doubt or disbelief can change the fact that the lifeless Lord Jesus Christ came back to life on Easter Sunday and left behind an empty tomb. Jesus’ triumphal cry from the cross, “It is finished,” stands forever as the objective declaration that Christ’s work of salvation is complete.<sup>3</sup>

### **Justification is complete for all**

The term *objective justification* is often used in our circles to describe the truth that God’s justification is complete for the entire world. Properly speaking, the term for this is *universal*

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<sup>2</sup> Some have taught incorrectly that justification is the result of a change in God’s heart and in his attitude toward the sinner. This is problematic in that it implies a change in an unchanging God. It is more precise to recognize in justification a change in man’s status before God. God’s economy remains the same: reward for the righteous, punishment for the sinner (Romans 2:6-11). Jesus, in satisfying the law in our place and offering himself as the atoning sacrifice for sin, has taken the place of the world, thus enabling God to look favorably upon the world, for Jesus’ sake. Lutheran theologian Adolf Hoenecke very carefully and precisely articulates this truth in his *Evangelische-Lutherische Dogmatik* (Hoenecke, 190-192).

<sup>3</sup> A German Lutheran proverb says, “*Jesus Christus starb für mich, fühl’ Ich oder fühl’ Ich nicht*” (“Jesus Christ died for me, whether I feel it or not”).

*justification* or *general justification*. I prefer to maintain the distinction between *objective* (referring to the truth that justification takes place completely in the sphere of God, apart from man's subjective involvement) and *universal* (indicating the all-embracing object of God's objective verdict, namely the entire world). Since the term *objective justification* is found neither in Scripture nor in the Lutheran confessions, we can understand the term correctly as referring to the justification of the entire world. The distinction between objective and universal is useful, however, and, in some cases, significant.<sup>4</sup>

In the 1500s, while the Lutheran theologians in Germany were rediscovering and expounding the biblical doctrine of justification, John Calvin (1509-1564) was working in Geneva to bring about a reformation in Switzerland. Unfortunately, Calvin's doctrine of justification differed from the biblical truth correctly expounded by the Lutherans. Calvin wrestled with the question of why some are saved and not others. His inability to submit his human reason to Scripture and his stubborn insistence that the things of God had to make sense led him to a logical but erroneous conclusion. Calvin taught that God had decided in eternity who would be saved and who would be damned, and nothing could change this predetermined, sovereign decision of God. Calvin reasoned that the blood of Christ would not be wasted on those who were going to be condemned anyway, so he taught *limited atonement*. He did not believe that Jesus died for the sin of the whole world, but only for the sin of believers who had been elected by God to salvation.

Of course, Scripture teaches that Jesus died for all. No sinner was missed; no sin was left unpaid. For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son (John 3:16). Jesus is the atoning sacrifice, not only for our sins, but for the sins of *the world* (1 John 2:2). God was in Christ reconciling *the world* to himself, not counting men's sins against them (2 Corinthians 5:15). Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away [Greek: "bears"] the sin of *the world* (John 1:29). Scripture goes beyond saying that God has *reconciled* the world to himself and paid for the sin of the world in Christ. The Bible reveals the wonderful truth that through the life, death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, God has *justified* the world. All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23).<sup>5</sup> The term "justification" is applied universally when St. Paul writes, "He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for [Greek: "because of"] our justification" (Romans 4:25).

The words *atonement*, *reconciliation*, *forgiveness* and *justification* are not always interchangeable. Each has a distinct and particular meaning. However, each of these terms is bound to the once-for-all events that took place at Calvary and the empty tomb, and each of these terms can be applied properly in the universal sense.

Scripture teaches *universal grace*: "For God so loved *the world* that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16). The gospel reveals God's love in Christ, which extends to every single human being of all time.

Scripture teaches *universal atonement*: "[Jesus Christ, the Righteous One] is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). *Atonement* is often defined in Sunday school and catechism class as "at-one-ment." This is, more precisely, the result of Christ's atonement, that we end up reconciled and at one with God. *Atonement* is payment to make up for guilt. Synonyms for atonement are *satisfaction* and *expiation*.

Scripture teaches *universal reconciliation*: "God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:19). Jesus is the universal peacemaker. His sacrifice on the cross has removed the

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<sup>4</sup> *Objective* and *subjective* are the terms most commonly used in our fellowship. Since faith is the work of God, without man's participation or cooperation, we can legitimately say that the gift of faith is the result of the objective will and working of God. In place of the terms *objective* and *subjective justification*, we might prefer to use the older terms *general* (allgemeine) *justification* and *personal* (persönliche) *justification*. The term *subjective justification* might be misinterpreted to mean an experiential awakening based upon feeling or emotion; this would not be a meaning intended by Lutherans. The term *universal justification* may be confused with *universalism*, the teaching that all people will be saved.

In this essay, I will use the terms *objective*, *universal* and *general justification* interchangeably, and *subjective* and *personal justification* interchangeably.

<sup>5</sup> The subject of both phrases of the Scripture passage is the word "all." *All* have sinned, *all* being justified freely through Jesus' redemption.

barrier of guilt and sin that separated humanity from God. Where the barrier of hostility has been removed, there is peace. In Christ and through Christ the status between God and the human race has changed from one of hostility to peace. We sing at Christmas, “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled.”

Scripture teaches *universal forgiveness*: “God was reconciling *the world* to himself in Christ, *not counting men’s sins against them*” (2 Corinthians 5:19). Forgiveness is the non-imputation of sin, so that sin and guilt are no longer charged to a person’s account (Psalm 32:1, Romans 4:7,8). The sin of the world has been charged to Christ, laid upon his shoulders, and nailed with him to the cross. It is no longer charged to us.

Scripture teaches *universal justification*: “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [Greek: “being justified”] freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23, 24). “He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for [Greek: “because of”] our justification” (Romans 4:25). “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for *all men*, so also the result of one act of righteousness was *justification<sup>6</sup> that brings life for all men*. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous” (Romans 5:18,19). In Romans 5 the Apostle Paul details the complete contrast between the first Adam and the second Adam (Christ). The former brought death; the latter brought life. The sin of the former resulted in universal condemnation; the obedience and sacrifice of the latter brought universal justification.<sup>7</sup>

### Justification is by faith

The completed, objective reality of God’s “not-guilty” verdict in Christ is received, or appropriated, only through faith. This grasping of the reality of Christ’s completed work through faith we call *subjective justification* or *personal justification*. God’s verdict of “not-guilty” stands vis-à-vis the entire world regardless of human knowledge or belief, nevertheless this truth must be appropriated or personalized for each individual sinner to receive the benefit of God’s verdict. For a person to go to heaven, he must be brought by the Holy Spirit to repentance and trust in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of his sins.

But what is faith? It’s important to understand what faith is—and what faith isn’t.

Faith is not mere knowledge of facts. It is implicit trust in the promises and actions of God. “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding” (Proverbs 3:5). “See, I lay a stone in Zion, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation; the one who trusts will never be dismayed” (Isaiah 28:16).

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<sup>6</sup> Greek has two words for *justification*: δικαίωμα and δικαιωσι. Δικαίωμα means “justification” in the sense of a verdict that is rendered, a declaration of “not-guilty.” Δικαιωσι brings out more the sense of the action of declaring righteous or the state of being declared righteous (in English it’s difficult to capture exactly the nuance of the two Greek nouns). The word used in Romans 4:25 and 5:18 is δικαιωσι. In Romans 5:16 Paul uses δικαίωμα.

<sup>7</sup> Dr. R. C. H. Lenski, 20th-century Lutheran theologian and author of an excellent series of commentaries on the books of the New Testament, had no trouble with “universal atonement” and “universal reconciliation,” but denied “universal justification,” saying, “One may call God’s raising up of Christ God’s *declaration* to this effect, and, because it is such a declaration, one may call it ‘the universal justification of the whole world.’ Yet to use the word ‘justification’ in this way is not a gain, for it is liable to confuse the ordinary man; we are fully satisfied with the Scriptural word ‘reconciliation’” (Lenski, 84).

Early Lutheran dogmaticians Philip Melancthon and Martin Chemnitz both equated justification with reconciliation (Chemnitz, 43, 72), and in Romans 4:25 it is clear that the term “justification” is also applied universally: Jesus was delivered over to death for our [the world’s] sins and was raised to life for our [the world’s] justification. If we ask the question, “For whom did Jesus die?” the answer must be: for the world. If we ask, “For whom was Jesus raised?” the answer must also be: for the world. It is untenable to understand the passage as, “He was delivered over to death for our [only believers] sins and was raised to life for our [only believers] justification.” That would be limited atonement, as Calvin wrongly taught. Likewise it is untenable to understand, “He was delivered over to death for our [everyone’s] sins and was raised to life for our [only believers] justification.” That would mean that Jesus died for everyone, but he rose again on Easter only for believers.

Faith is preceded by true contrition, genuine sorrow over sin. “The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Psalm 51:17).

Faith lays hold of the completed work of Christ for comfort and the certainty of salvation. “Whoever believes in him is not condemned” (John 3:18a). “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see” (Hebrews 11:1).

Faith is not the product of human reason, intellect or will. Faith is a gift from our gracious God: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God” (Ephesians 2:8,9). Yet, while faith does not originate in man’s will, faith engages and involves a believer’s mind, assent and will.

Faith is worked by the Holy Spirit, without synergy or cooperation on the part of man. “No one can say, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ except by the Holy Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). “It does not, therefore, depend on man’s desire or effort, but on God’s mercy” (Romans 9:16).

Faith is produced in human hearts by the Spirit working through his instrument or *means of grace*. This tool of the Spirit is the gospel, coming to us verbally in the spoken and written word of God and both verbally and tangibly in the sacraments. “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). “So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

Lutheran theologian Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586) describes faith thus:

“Faith” in the article of justification must be understood not only as knowledge and general assent, stating in a general way that the promise of the Gospel is true, but that at the same time it includes the activities of the will and the heart; that is, it is a desire and a trust which, in the struggle with sin and the wrath of God, applies the promise of grace to each individual, so that each person includes himself in the general promise given to believers. In this way he raises himself up so that he determines without hesitation that the promise of the Gospel is firm for him also. From this he gains comfort and life in time of temptation.<sup>8</sup>

We must understand that faith doesn’t create anything new. Faith doesn’t bring anything into existence that doesn’t already exist. Faith doesn’t *cause* something to happen. Faith simply grasps—trusts—something that already is in place. Faith grasps the objective reality of God’s completed salvation in Christ. Faith appropriates the universal truth and takes personal ownership of God’s forgiveness found only in the Savior.<sup>9</sup> Remember the causes of our salvation, according to Scripture: (1) the grace of God and (2) the merits of Christ. There is nothing inside man, including faith, which is a cause of salvation.

We must also understand, as stated above, that faith in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord is not something that a human being can come to on his own. A few years after John Calvin, a teacher by the name of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) taught—partly as a reaction to John Calvin’s doctrine of double-predestination—that the determination of whether a person will be saved or lost rests within the will of man. Arminius taught that man has a *free will* and must make the choice to accept Jesus in faith or reject him. Faith, according to Arminius, is an act of the will, the result of man’s rational decision. Like

<sup>8</sup> Chemnitz, 92.

<sup>9</sup> This very important truth—that faith is *appropriative* and not *causative*—can be illustrated thus: A sports fan may say, “I believe that my team will win the World Series this year.” Such faith does not bring about the desired outcome. The person’s belief doesn’t cause anything to happen. In this case, the “faith” expressed is merely a hope or a wish that something will happen. Likewise, if a team wins, and a jaded, cynical fan refuses to believe it, that fan’s erroneous belief doesn’t change the reality of what happened.

Faith is simply trust. Faith must have an object, something that it holds onto. That object may or may not be real or true, but faith doesn’t make it real or true. Faith that holds onto something untrue is misplaced—no matter how sincere it may be. Christian faith appropriates and holds onto the reality of God’s justification completed in Christ. It does not *cause* justification or forgiveness to take place. It simply *grasps* God’s justification that is already a reality.

Calvin, Arminius set his own reason above Scripture, and he came up with another reasonable but unbiblical understanding of salvation.<sup>10</sup> Luther recognized that unbelieving man does not have a free will, but that his will is entirely bound up and enslaved in sin. He confessed in his explanation to the Third Article of the Apostle's Creed, "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." Faith must come from God, because in the bondage of our will we cannot come to faith on our own.

Through the work of the Holy Spirit, we are personally justified, as we are given the gift of faith. Faith lays hold of Christ. Faith grasps Jesus' completed work of redemption. Faith trusts that reconciliation between God and mankind has been accomplished by the Savior. Spirit-worked faith brings God's universal verdict of "not-guilty," lays hold of the righteousness of Christ, and appropriates it for our own.

This is justification by faith and through faith. Scripture speaks abundantly of the sinner's personal justification through faith which appropriates the righteousness of Christ. "A righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe" (Romans 3:21, 22). "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness." Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness" (Romans 4:3-5). "This is why 'it was credited to him as righteousness.' The words 'it was credited to him' were written not for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Romans 4:22-24). Why is a sinner found righteous before God through faith? Only because of the object that Christian faith clings to. We don't have faith in works, we don't have faith in feelings, and we don't have faith in faith. Christian faith holds onto Christ. Chemnitz wrote, "Faith is the unique means and instrument through which we lay hold on the righteousness of Christ, receive it, and apply it to ourselves."<sup>11</sup>

The truth that a person must be individually justified through faith does not undermine the general, once-for-all justification accomplished on Calvary. Some have wrongly supposed that Christ's justifying work on Calvary was incomplete, and that faith is required to make justification complete. This is not a biblical understanding of justification. It nullifies Jesus' declaration from the cross, "It is finished," by saying that the justification of the world really isn't finished, or that when Jesus said, "It is finished," he meant something other than the justification of the world. It inserts an additional cause for man's salvation beyond the grace of God and merits of Christ and includes faith as a cause of salvation. It redefines faith as something that brings about an effect and causes forgiveness and justification to take place.

The world's redemption was complete at Calvary. The general justification accomplished in God's great exchange at the cross provides the object for justifying faith which personally grasps the objective truth.

### **Justification must be taught clearly and carefully**

We have briefly reviewed the basic teaching of the Bible concerning general and personal justification. The doctrine of justification is rightly called the doctrine on which the church stands or falls. It is, therefore, impossible to speak of these things correctly unless we use terminology with a precision that is consistent with Scripture. Chemnitz reminds us:

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<sup>10</sup> Jacob Arminius is the father of "decision theology," a theological system that is widely adopted by many Protestant church bodies today. In this system, faith is an act of human reason. Babies cannot have faith, because they cannot render a decision for Jesus. An important aim of worship is to create an environment where a person can more readily make a decision for Christ. This system strikes at the heart of justification by God's grace alone and ultimately makes salvation depend upon whether or not man makes the right decision.

<sup>11</sup> Chemnitz, 86.

The Holy Spirit has certain terms in the teaching on justification that are not found in common usage. The church must be concerned about language, that is, it ought not devise new ideas or produce new dogmas, but those things which have been given us by the Holy Spirit it must learn from the correct meaning of the words that Scripture uses in teaching the heavenly doctrine. . . . The neglect of correct language was the source and spring of all errors under this article.<sup>12</sup>

Correct use of terminology, wording, and phraseology are essential. The insertion or omission of one word or phrase can render a perfectly valid, scriptural statement grossly heretical. In the Christian church's struggle to define the doctrine of Christ's divinity, the insertion of the smallest letter in the Greek alphabet, iota, turned truth into heresy.<sup>13</sup> John Calvin, in his zeal to exalt God and his sovereignty above all things, correctly stated the biblical truth that in eternity God elected believers to salvation—and then he went one step further and fell into heresy by saying that in eternity God elected unbelievers to damnation. Matthias Flacius<sup>14</sup> taught the biblical truth that man is a thoroughly wretched and depraved creature—and then he went one step further and fell into heresy by saying that man is *essentially* sinful, thus precluding the possibility of a really human yet sinless Christ. It is correct to say, “Good works are necessary,” but if we say, “Good works are necessary *for salvation*,” we stumble into heresy. When we say, “God has elected believers to salvation,” we speak the truth. If we say, “God has elected believers to salvation *in view of their faith*,” we slide into synergy and undermine grace. In each example, the mark of heresy is to go as far as Scripture goes—and then to go one step further.

Having offered this exhortation to careful terminology, please permit me to offer a gentle word of encouragement always to employ terms according to their proper, Spirit-given meaning, lest through careless speaking and writing we raise doubts and confusion, at best, or lapse into heresy, at worst.

The doctrine of *objective justification* is a defining doctrine for the Wisconsin Synod and for the old Synodical Conference. In our zeal to expound the true, biblical doctrine of objective justification against those who oppose the doctrine, we have, at times, “pushed the envelope,” and employed words and phrases in imprecise and incorrect ways. Except where indicated, I have no particular authors or writings in mind, as I offer the following as a loving critique of some wording and phraseology which has circulated in our midst:

- In speaking of *objective* and *subjective justification* we may never use these terms to imply that there are two justifications. There is one justification; it is an objective, universal reality, completed by Christ at Calvary, and appropriated subjectively through faith.
- “*God has forgiven the whole world. God has forgiven everyone his sins.*” This statement is absolutely true! This is the heart of the gospel, and it *must* be preached and taught as the foundation of our faith. But here's where the caveat comes in: In Scripture, the word “forgive” is used almost exclusively in a *personal*, not a universal sense. The Bible doesn't make the statement, “God has forgiven the world.” Rather, the Spirit of Inspiration overwhelmingly uses the word “forgive” (Greek: ἀφίημι) within the context of repentance and faith, effected through the means of grace. There are good reasons why the Spirit chooses a particular word to be used in a particular context. Using the word “forgiveness” in the atypical sense, apart from repentance and faith, one might easily find himself in the incongruous position of saying to the impenitent or unbelieving, “God has forgiven your sins [objective gospel], but your sins are not forgiven [Ministry of the Keys].” Although one might discern this as the

<sup>12</sup> Chemnitz, 15.

<sup>13</sup> In the early 300s A.D. the heretic Arius chose the Greek word ὁμοιουσιος (homoiousios – “of a similar substance”) to assert that Jesus was similar to God but was not truly God. The Christian church chose the word ὁμοουσιος (homoousios – “of the same substance”) to be included in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) as a declaration of the truth that Jesus is truly God, of the same divine essence as God the Father.

<sup>14</sup> Matthias Flacius (1520-1575) was a staunch supporter of genuine Lutheranism. He rightly taught that man is totally depraved and cannot save himself or cooperate in his salvation. However, he crossed the line when he said that man is *essentially* sinful, that is, sin is part of a person's being or essence. The consequence of this false teaching is that Jesus was either (1) not really a human being or (2) not without sin.

difference between gospel and law, practically it is theological double-speak, to be avoided by using words as Scripture does.

A second observation regarding the statement above: this does not reflect the historical treatment of the doctrine of forgiveness. Historically, the doctrines of redemption, atonement and justification have been treated under the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed, while the doctrine of forgiveness has been a Third Article doctrine, treated as a present, daily reality, worked by the Holy Spirit for believers, brought about through word and sacrament. Luther explains, "In this Christian church he [the Holy Spirit] daily and fully forgives all sins to me and to all believers."<sup>15</sup>

- "*God has forgiven all sins, but the unbeliever rejects God's forgiveness.*" Again, this statement is true—and Luther employed similar terminology to press the point of Christ's completed work of salvation.<sup>16</sup> But we must also recognize that Scripture doesn't speak this way. Jesus says, "If you do not forgive them, *they are not forgiven*" (John 20:23). "If you do not forgive men their sins, your Father *will not forgive your sins*" (Matthew 6:15). There are many impenitent and unbelieving people in the world who embrace God's forgiveness wrongly and imagine it to be theirs, even while they are living in impenitence and unbelief. In the context of their flawed belief system they are not rejecting God's forgiveness; rather, they are misappropriating a forgiveness that is not theirs. Jesus said to the impenitent Pharisees, "*Your guilt remains*" (John 9:41), and to the unbelieving Jews, "You will die *in your sins*" (John 8:24). We speak clearly and precisely when we reserve the words "forgive" and "forgiveness" for personal justification through repentance and faith—as did the Spirit of Truth when he inspired Holy Scripture.

- "*Holy Communion reminds us of the forgiveness won for us on the cross.*" Similar statements might be heard regarding Baptism and Confession and Absolution. These statements emphasize objective justification at the expense of the present reality of personal justification, distributed and effected through the means of grace. They express a view of the sacraments that comes dangerously close to the Reformed notion of powerless, ineffectual ordinances that are only reminiscent of past reality. The gospel, as it is preached, taught and offered in the sacraments and keys, not only *announces* the forgiveness of God; it *effects* the forgiveness of God in Christ. Luther made a distinction between the acquisition of forgiveness and the distribution of forgiveness:

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. If now I seek the forgiveness of sins, I do not run to the cross, for I will not find it given there. Nor must I hold to the suffering of Christ, as Dr. Karlstadt trifles, in knowledge or remembrance, for I will not find it there either. But I will find in the sacrament or gospel the word which distributes, presents, offers, and gives to me that forgiveness which was won on the cross.<sup>17</sup>

- "*God has declared the entire world holy.*" This is an inaccurate statement. The word "holy" means "set apart" or "transcendent." The Hebrew word *קדוש* (qadowsh), the Greek word *ἅγιος* (hagios), the Latin word *sanctus* and the German word *heilig* all denote the same thing: something that is separated from or set apart from something ordinary or common. The word "holy" cannot be used in a

<sup>15</sup> Luther's Explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles' Creed.

<sup>16</sup> In his discourse on the Ministry of the Keys, Luther explains the objective nature of God's verdict of forgiveness apart from faith. "Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it. St. Paul says in Rom. 3: '[Does] their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God[?]' 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" (*LW*, vol. 40, "The Keys," 366-367).

<sup>17</sup> *Luther's Works* (American Edition), vol. 40, "Against the Heavenly Prophets," 213-214.



universal sense. Scripture uses the term only to apply to believers or saints (from the Latin word *sanctus*). We cannot say, “God has sanctified the entire world.”

- “*God has declared the entire world righteous.*” This statement is true, as we understand it to mean that God has rendered a verdict of “not-guilty” toward the entire world. It is also true—and must be taught—that the righteousness of Christ now stands in place of the world’s sin; this is the whole point of what Jesus did for us at Calvary. However, once again we’re wresting a term out of its usual context. In Scripture the term “righteous” usually refers to believers. It is a particular term that is typically reserved for the people of God.<sup>18</sup> As Luther did with forgiveness, theologian Johann Quenstedt made a distinction between the objective righteousness of Christ, which was acquired for us through his perfect obedience, and the credited righteousness of Christ which is imputed (from the giving perspective) or appropriated (from the receiving perspective) only through faith:

(1) It is not simply the same to say, “Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us,” and “Christ is our righteousness.” For the imputation took place, not when Christ became righteous for us, but when we accepted this righteousness by faith. The righteousness of Christ is the effect of his office. The imputation is the application of the effect of his office. (2) The one, however, does not do away with the other. Christ is our righteousness *effectively* because he justifies us. He is our righteousness *objectively* because our faith rests in him. He is our righteousness *formally* in that his righteousness is imputed to us.<sup>19</sup>

- We want to be careful about carelessly interchanging words. *Atonement*, *reconciliation*, *justification*, and *redemption* are not synonyms, and they must be used appropriately in their correct context. Use words like *righteous* and *holy* according to their precise meanings.

“Bear this in mind, dear friends . . . it is your duty not only to *believe* as the Church believes, but also to *speak* in harmony with the Christian Church.”<sup>20</sup>

*Soli Deo gloria – To God alone be the glory!*

<sup>18</sup> An exception is in Romans 5:19, where the word δικαιος is used in the universal sense.

<sup>19</sup> (1) *Non est simpliciter idem; Christi justitiam imputari & Christum pro nobis justum esse. Nam imputatio tunc fit, non quando Christus pro nobis justus fuit, sed quando fide hanc justitiam acceptamus. Christi justitia est effectus officii ejus, imputatio effectuum officii applicatio.* (2) *Unum non tollit alterum; Christus est nostra justitia effective, quia nos justificat; Est nostra justitia objective, quia fides nostra in ipsum fertur; Est nostra justitia formaliter, quatenus ejus justitia nobis imputatur*” (Quenstedt, 547).

<sup>20</sup> Walther, *Law and Gospel*, 276-277.

## Appendix 1: The Kokomo Statements

One glaring example of imprecise theological formulation is the Kokomo Statements. For the sake of time and space, I've treated a discussion of the Kokomo Statements as an appendix to this paper.

We can't address the subject of objective justification and its history in the Wisconsin Synod without giving some attention to the Kokomo Statements. (There is a long history behind these statements and their use, which I won't expound on here.) The Kokomo Statements were assembled in the late 1970s as a caricature of what WELS teaches on objective justification. The statements are included here in italics, followed by a very cursory analysis of each statement:

1. *Objectively speaking, without any reference to an individual sinner's attitude toward Christ's sacrifice, purely on the basis of God's verdict, every sinner, whether he knows it or not, whether he believes it or not, has received the status of a saint.*<sup>21</sup> This statement is drawn verbatim from Professor J. P. Meyer's commentary on 2 Corinthians, where he treats 2 Cor. 5:19, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them." Professor Meyer lived through the lively discussions precipitated by the election controversy of the late 1800s and early 1900s, and he was himself an ardent champion of objective justification. He taught generations of pastors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. In all fairness to Professor Meyer, I suspect that if he knew how much mischief has been made with these words he probably would have chosen them more carefully. The statement as it stands uses an unfortunate juxtaposition of dissimilar terms. *Objectively speaking . . . every sinner. . . has received* ["received" is a subjective term which nullifies the objective premise] *the status* [objective] *of a saint* [subjective].

2. *After Christ's intervention and through Christ's intervention God regards all sinners as guilt-free saints.*<sup>22</sup> This is a paraphrase of another quote from J. P. Meyer. It is correct to say that the world's guilt has been charged to Christ and, objectively speaking, the world stands guilt-free for Christ's sake. However, as in the first statement, the use of the word *saint* in a universal context renders the statement unacceptable.

3. *When God reconciled the world to Himself through Christ, He individually pronounced forgiveness to each individual sinner whether that sinner ever comes to faith or not.*<sup>23</sup> When we wish to speak about objective justification, we must use objective terminology. This statement is a muddle of objective and personal terms. *When God reconciled the world* [objective] . . . *he individually* [a specific or personal term] *pronounced forgiveness* [as shown in the body of the essay, the word "forgive" in Scripture is overwhelmingly used to describe the personal remission of sins received through repentance and faith worked by the means of grace] *to each individual* [another specific term] *sinner*.

4. *At the time of the resurrection of Christ, God looked down in hell and declared Judas, the people destroyed in the flood, and all the ungodly, innocent, not guilty and forgiven of all sin, and gave unto them the status of saints.* Once again, when concepts and terms are not used within the framework of their definitions, the result is confusion. Hell, by definition, is a place of eternal suffering that is devoid of God's grace and forgiveness. Was the forgiveness of sins secured for Judas at the cross? Absolutely! Did Noah preach repentance and forgiveness for the sake of the coming Savior to the people of his day? Absolutely—Noah is called a preacher of righteousness (2 Peter 2:5). But in hell the damned are forever cut off from the grace—offered in the means of grace—which they rejected. It is nonsensical to apply the term "saints" (holy people sanctified to God) to people in hell.

Each of these statements is so poorly crafted that it cannot be accepted—regardless of authorship. Dr. Siegbert Becker, in an essay to Chicago area pastors, rightly lamented the poor choice of

<sup>21</sup> Meyer, 103-104.

<sup>22</sup> Meyer, 107. The paraphrase does not substantially change the substance of what Meyer wrote in *Ministers of Christ*.

<sup>23</sup> I cannot find the exact source for this statement, supposedly (per Becker) drawn verbatim from the writings of a WELS author. It may be a paraphrase of Meyer's words: "This applies to the whole world, to every individual sinner, whether he was living in the days of Christ, or had died centuries before His coming, or had not yet been born, perhaps has not been born to this day. It applies to the world as such, regardless of whether a particular sinner ever comes to faith or not" (Meyer, 109).

words, but he upheld the statements on principle.<sup>24</sup> I would like him to have said, “Throw them out and start over!” The Kokomo Statements should be roundly rejected by the WELS as an incongruous ecclesiological mishmash. The rejection of these statements, as they are written, is not a repudiation of objective justification, which these statements pretend to defend.

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<sup>24</sup> Becker, “Objective Justification,” Chicago Pastoral Conference, WELS, Elgin, Illinois, November 9, 1982.

## Appendix 2: The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification

The Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) has been formulated as the result of dialog held over several years between the Roman Catholic Church and Lutheran groups around the world. On Reformation Day, October 31, 1999, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) and other members of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) joined the Roman Catholic Church in adopting this Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification—the central doctrine which divided Lutherans and Roman Catholics at the time of the Reformation.

Have Lutherans and Roman Catholics really come to a consensus on justification? Has the time really come for rapprochement with Rome on this all-important issue? Even a cursory overview of the JDDJ reveals that nothing has changed Rome’s view of justification in the nearly 500 years since the Lutheran Reformation.

The complete text of the JDDJ, along with other pertinent information, is available online at: <http://www.elca.org/ecumenical/ecumenicaldialogue/romancatholic/jddj/index.html>

It comes as a surprise to many Lutherans to learn that the Roman Church has always taught salvation by grace through faith in the righteousness of Christ—even at the time of the Reformation. The fundamental issues are: What is grace? What is faith? And what is righteousness?

In Roman theology, justifying grace is not merely something in the heart of God. Rome speaks of *infused grace*, God’s grace that is poured out into the sinner to bring about a transformation of life and character. Therefore, the cause of man’s salvation is not merely grace in the heart of God that burns with love for a sinner and *declares* him righteous for Jesus’ sake, but the grace which God pours out into man’s heart which *changes* the sinner into a person acceptable to God. The use of the word *grace* according to the Roman understanding differs greatly from its use among Luther and the Lutheran confessors.

Faith, in Roman parlance, is not simple trust in the forgiveness of sins for Jesus’ sake. Faith is defined as *fides formata caritate* (“faith formed by love”). Faith includes love and good works, which, in Roman theology, are necessary for salvation. Lutherans historically have viewed faith as simple trust, which clings to Jesus for forgiveness and appropriates his merit as our own.

In Roman theology, justification is a process which takes place over time, as Christ’s righteousness is *infused* into the sinner to make him intrinsically righteous and acceptable to God. In Lutheran theology, Christ’s righteousness is *imputed* to the sinner to make him extrinsically righteous and acceptable to God, for Jesus’ sake.

The JDDJ is a capitulation to Roman Catholic doctrine on all these points.

“*The justified live by faith that comes from the Word of Christ and is active through love*” (JDDJ:12). “*They place their trust in God’s gracious promise by justifying faith, which includes hope in God and love for him*” (JDDJ:25). This is the Roman definition of faith formed by love, not the definition of Luther and the Lutheran Confessions, which views faith as simple trust which clings to the mercy of God and the merits of Christ.

“*When Catholics say that persons ‘cooperate’ in preparing for and accepting justification by consenting to God’s justifying action, they see such personal consent as itself an effect of grace, not as an action arising from innate human abilities*” (JDDJ:20). This statement reveals the Roman Catholic understanding of grace. This is infused grace: grace that is poured out into man, causing him to do something (“consenting”) which causes him to be justified. It is not clearly stated that the cause of man’s justification is completely outside of man. According to this statement, God’s infused grace brings about an inner change which justifies him before God.

“*For without faith, no justification can take place*” (JDDJ:27). Adolf Hoenecke wrote, “The emphasis on general justification is necessary to preserve the true content of the gospel.”<sup>25</sup> This statement from the JDDJ is an example of what Hoenecke feared. There is no general or objective

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<sup>25</sup> Hoenecke, 355.

justification here. The result in the JDDJ is a doctrine of synergism, humans cooperating with God to achieve salvation.

*“The justification of sinners is forgiveness of sins and being made righteous by justifying grace”* (JDDJ:27). Note well what is stated: justification is forgiveness *and being made righteous*. The juridical nature of justification is discarded in favor of the transformative Roman view.

*“The teaching of the Lutheran churches presented in this Declaration does not fall under the condemnations from the Council of Trent”* (JDDJ:41). Of course the teaching of these “Lutheran” churches is not condemned by Rome. It’s not Lutheran! The Lutherans gave in and adopted Rome’s teaching on justification.

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