

Universal/Objective Justification: An Historical Perspective

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Terms. They are tricky little devils. They can be so very handy and yet at times they seem to be more trouble than they are worth. This is especially true if they happen to be theological terms. We use them as a sort of verbal or written shorthand. Over the centuries the church has condensed lengthy, complex theological concepts and explanations into seemingly simple words and phrases. Used properly they are wonderful time savers. We speak a word or a phrase and paragraphs of definition come to mind. But such a term is only valuable when everyone uses the term in the same way. Without agreement on the meaning that stands behind a term, there is the very real possibility people are not communicating and are in fact talking past each other. Someone spouts a term. Everyone shakes their head in agreement, calling their own definition to mind, believing that a unity exists when there is no real unity. Too often the result in such circumstances is a false sense that we have arrived at doctrinal security.

That's why it is so vital everyone understands what meaning stands behind the theological terminology we use. Although terms are man-made, they need to be based on more than human ideas. To be of value theological concepts must echo scriptural truth. The agenda for today has us considering the historical perspective surrounding terms connected to justification. As we investigate the development and use of a set of terms, we must remember the scriptural revelation from which these terms are derived. The exegetical essay which follows will provide that scriptural basis for the terms now under consideration.

Justification is the central doctrine of the Christian religion. The doctrine of justification distinguishes Christianity from all man-made religions. *Justificatio est articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*.¹ There is some debate as to whether or not Martin Luther is responsible for those exact words. From what I've been able to find, the first use of those exact words was by Lutheran theologian Balthasar Meisner who said that it was a "proverb of Luther."²

We don't have record of Luther using the exact phrase, but he made a number of statements which are very close, including *quia isto articulo stante stat Ecclesia, ruente ruit Ecclesia*—"Because if this article [of justification] stands, the church stands; if this article collapses, the church collapses."³ Luther's statement in his Genesis commentary is likewise very close. "This is the chief article of our faith; and if you do away with it . . . or corrupt it . . . the church cannot exist, nor can God keep his glory."⁴ Even without the exact verbiage there is no doubt that the doctrine of justification by faith alone is at the heart of Luther's teaching and is central to the Lutheran Reformation. One can find quite a few additional Luther quotes that reflect this truth.

In this epistle, therefore, Paul is concerned to instruct, comfort, and sustain us diligently in a perfect knowledge of this most excellent and Christian righteousness. For if the doctrine of justification is lost, the whole of Christian doctrine is lost. And those in the world who do not teach it are either Jews or Turks or papists or sectarians. For between these two kinds of

¹ "Justification is the article by which the church stands and falls."

² *Anthropologia sacra* disputation 24, (Wittenberg: Johannes Gormannus, 1615). Quoted by Arthur Carl Piepkorn, *The Sacred Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions: Selected Writings of Arthur Carl Piepkorn*, Volume 2, (Mansfield, CT: CEC Press, 2007), 260.

Interestingly, in 1618 Reformed theologian Johann Heinrich Alsted wrote *articulus iustificationis dicitur articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*—"The article of justification is said to be the article by which the church stands or falls." In *Theologia scholastica didacta* (Hanover, 1618), 711.

³ WA 40/3.352.3.

⁴ Luther's Works (American Edition) 4, 60. [Hereafter LW]

righteousness, the active righteousness of the Law and the passive righteousness of Christ, there is no middle ground. Therefore he who has strayed away from this Christian righteousness will necessarily relapse into the active righteousness; that is, when he has lost Christ, he must fall into a trust in his own works.⁵

If we lose the doctrine of justification, we lose simply everything. Hence the most necessary and important thing is that we teach and repeat this doctrine daily, as Moses says about his Law (Deut. 6:7). For it cannot be grasped or held enough or too much. In fact, though we may urge and inculcate it vigorously, no one grasps it perfectly or believes it with all his heart. So frail is our flesh and so disobedient to our spirit!⁶

“Justification is that forensic act of God, by which He, on the basis of the perfect vicarious atonement wrought by Christ, declared the whole world to be justified in His sight (objective justification), and transmits and imputes the effect of this declaration to all whom He brings to faith by the work of the Holy Ghost through the means of grace (subjective justification).”⁷

In his *Summary of Christian Doctrine* Dr. Edward Koehler subdivides the term justification. “Objective justification is God’s declaration of amnesty to the world of sinners on the basis of the vicarious obedience of Christ, by which He secured a perfect righteousness for all mankind, which God accepted as a reconciliation of the world to Himself, imputing to mankind the merits of the Redeemer.”⁸ The fully adequate scriptural basis for this definition is found in places like 2 Corinthians 5:19, “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.”⁹ This “message of reconciliation” is nothing other than the gospel itself. It brings to us the good news that God is reconciled to all people, that he does not impute trespasses unto the whole world. In other words, God forgives all sins of all people. This is the message which all true ambassadors of God bring in God’s name, for real and genuine gospel preaching consists in proclaiming to sinners the fact of the forgiveness, the fact that the world is reconciled unto God. So Paul goes on to tell us in verse 20, “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.” It is just that simple — the gospel tells us that *God is reconciled to us* (objective justification), and works in us the faith by which *we, on our part, are reconciled to God*, and this forgiveness is made our own (subjective justification).

That same truth is brought to us in Romans 5:18, 19, “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. 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.” Christ was delivered up into the hands of wicked men, crucified and slain, not for his own offenses (as he “had no sin,” 2 Corinthians 5:21), but for the offenses of the whole world. When he was raised again from the dead, he was justified or declared free from the sins for which he died, not his, but the sins of the whole world. This justification is our justification.

The terms “objective” and “universal” justification are used to describe the love God has for the entire world (John 3:16a). Although “objective” and “universal” tend to be used interchangeably, the terms are not exactly synonymous. “When we speak of justification as *objective* we mean that it happens outside the realm of someone’s personal experience. Justification is objective, in the sense that it takes place in

⁵ Ibid., 26, 9.

⁶ Ibid. 26, 26.

⁷ E. W. A. Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine: A Popular Presentation of the Teachings of the Bible*. Second Revised Edition. (Prepared for publication by Alfred W. Koehler, 1952), 149.

⁸ C. H. Little in *Disputed Doctrines*, 60. Quoted by Koehler, 147.

⁹ All biblical quotations are from the New International Version 1984, unless otherwise noted.

the sphere of God's activity, apart from any cooperation on the part of the person justified.¹⁰ When we speak of justification being *universal* we speak of its applicability to all people."¹¹ In spite of that distinction, in commonly accepted usage the terms objective, universal, and general justification are viewed as virtually the same.

While the two terms have been used without noting any great distinction between them, Dr. Siegbert Becker pointed out that there is still need for care, especially when talking with a Calvinist.

[W]e should be aware that also a Calvinist, who would most assuredly reject the doctrine of universal justification, could perhaps feel perfectly at ease with the concept of objective justification. Strictly speaking, the term objective justification means that a sinner is justified by God whether he believes it or not. Many Calvinists believe that this is true of the elect. While they might therefore be willing to accept our terminology when we speak of "objective justification" they would vehemently reject the concept of "universal justification" because that would conflict with their doctrine of limited atonement.¹²

As far as the term ("universal/objective justification") itself is concerned, it is a relatively new term in the vocabulary of the church. The first appearance of the term "universal justification" is apparently found in the work of Samuel Huber¹³ in the late 1500s. Ironically his use of the term was rejected by orthodox Lutherans because of difficulties connected to the definition he attached to it.¹⁴ As a result of Huber's definition and its rejection, opponents of the universal/objective justification say it is a contrived doctrine whose terminology grew out of Pietism. In this day of internet blogs, there has been a lot of digital ink spilled in objection to this term. Much of that rejection comes from a failure to understand that it was the pollution of Huber's definition and not the term itself that led orthodox fathers in the Post-Reformation to initially reject it.

By the 1800s orthodox Lutheran theologians used a number of terms to describe the salvation that Christ completed by his suffering, death, and resurrection, including general justification and objective reconciliation. Although the terminology is relatively modern, the concept of a Christocentric forgiveness, completed for all people, a forgiveness that exists before faith, is found in the church long before the Reformation.

¹⁰ In this sense, even faith is an objective act of the Holy Spirit, since faith is not worked collaboratively with the will of the sinner.

¹¹ Jon D. Buchholz, "Jesus Canceled Your Debt!", 1-2.

¹² Siegbert W. Becker, *Universal Justification* (Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Essay File), 1.

¹³ Samuel Huber (c. 1547–1624) was born in Burgdorf (near Bern). Trained as a Reformed pastor and teacher, he converted to Lutheranism and championed Lutheran theology against the Calvinism of the Reformed Church in the Swiss Confederation. The doctrine known as 'Huberism' refers to Huber's advocacy of universal atonement: he argued that Jesus died for the sins of all mankind (*Christum Jesum esse mortuum pro peccatis totius generis humani*), whereas Calvinists argued that Jesus died only for the elect.

Huber was banished from the Confederation on 28 June 1588. That same year he subscribed to the Formula of Concord at Tuebingen and became pastor at Derendingen. In 1592 he was called to the University of Wittenberg. He was dismissed in 1594 because he adopted the view that man must make universal election and calling sure by repentance and faith. He was exiled in 1595.

¹⁴ C. F. W. Walther's edition of *Baier's Compendium Theologiae Positivae* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1879) cites the rejection by orthodox faculties of Huber's contention that justification was "universal" and that Christ's redemption had properly speaking and in actual fact been conferred on all men (III, V, 286-287). The rejection of Huber's language, however, was generally understood to be due to his other errors, principally about the election of grace.

It was not the Reformation that came up with the doctrine of justification. It was God. And God did not wait until the sixteenth century to communicate this wonderful truth to the world. Even among the fathers of the early church, the doctrine of justification was accepted just as much as it was in the days of Luther. It is true that the explanations surrounding the doctrine were not as carefully defined neither were they as critically studied as in the era of the Reformation and following, but such a study in the early church was unnecessary since justification was an accepted Christian truth.

Heretics tend to force the church to deal with certain issues and clearly define the scriptural basis for a doctrine. In the early church many of the disputes surrounded the nature and persons of God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Yet even in the midst of those tumultuous debates, the doctrine of justification by faith was taught and received as biblical, right, and true. There was no need to have a debate around that which was accepted as scriptural.

In the writings of the early church, we find numerous references to what we call the doctrine of justification. Once again because objective justification was not under debate, the references often tend to be about justification in general. Yet even then we find references which indicate the universal nature of justification.

Outside of the New Testament, one of the earliest, if not the earliest, Christian document we possess is a letter from the church at Rome to the church at Corinth. It was written about 96 A.D. and was so highly esteemed in the early church that it was considered part of the canon in Egypt and Syria. Credited to Clement, the presbyter – bishop at Rome, this letter reminded the Corinthians that God had justified all men.

So all of them received honor and greatness, not through themselves or their own deeds or the right things they did, but through his will And we, therefore, who by his will have been called in Jesus Christ, are not justified by ourselves, or by our wisdom or insight or religious devotion or the holy deeds we have done from the heart, but by that faith by which almighty God has justified all men from the very beginning. To him be glory forever and ever. Amen.¹⁵

In responding to an attack by Semi-Pelagians, Prosper of Aquitaine¹⁶ wrote in his *Answers to the Gauls*,

Likewise, he who says that the Saviour was not crucified for the redemption of the entire world does not take into account the power of the mystery of the cross, but considers only the portion of mankind who have no faith.

For it is certain that the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ is the price for the redemption of the entire world.¹⁷

John Chrysostom¹⁸ in his *Discourses against Judaizing Christians* speaks as a Lutheran would:

¹⁵ Clement, bishop of Rome. *First Clement*, 32:3-4. In *Early Christian Fathers*, volume 1. Translated and edited by Cyril C. Richardson. (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1953), 58.

¹⁶ Prosper of Aquitaine (c. 390-ec. 465) was a church historian, theologian, supporter of Augustine, and contender against Semi-Pelagianism. He originally wrote against the Semi-Pelagian views of Rufinus. He wrote to Augustine asking for supporting arguments and Augustine replied to him. In *Answers to the Gauls* Prosper wrote 15 articles and 15 qualifications (or summaries) of the articles.

¹⁷ Prosper of Aquitaine, *Prosper of Aquitaine: Defense of St. Augustine*, translated by P. de Letter (Ramsey, NJ: Newman Press, 1963), 159.

¹⁸ John Chrysostom (c. 345 – 407) became Patriarch of Constantinople in 398. His fame rests chiefly on his sermons. Because of his oratorical skills the name “Chrysostom” (“golden-mouthed”) was applied to him after his death.

“All have sinned,” says Paul. They were locked, as it were, in a prison by the curse of their transgression of the Law. The sentence of the judge was going to be passed against them. A letter from the King came down from heaven. Rather, the King himself came. Without examination, without exacting an account, he set all men free from the chains of their sins.¹⁹

Commenting on 2 Corinthians 5:19,²⁰ Ambrosiaster²¹ wrote, “God was in Christ, that is to say, the Father was in the Son, reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them. Creation sinned against God and did not repent, so God, who did not want his work to perish, sent his Son in order to preach through him the forgiveness of sins and thus reconcile them to himself.”²²

Cyril of Alexandria²³ comments on John 1:29,²⁴ “But now he who of old was dimly pictured, the very Lamb, the spotless Sacrifice, is led to the slaughter for all, that he might drive away the sin of the world . . . For one Lamb died for all.”²⁵

In discussing 2 Corinthians 5:14²⁶ Augustine wrote in his *City of God*,

Paul said, “Therefore all died; and Christ died for all, in order that they who are alive may live no longer for themselves, but for him who died for them and rose again.” All people, consequently, without a single exception, were dead through sin, original sin or original sin with personal sin superadded, either by ignorance of or conscious refusal to do what is right. And for all these dead souls one living man died—a man utterly free from sin—with the intention that those who come alive by forgiveness of their sins live no longer for themselves but for him who died for all on account of our sins and rose again for our justification.²⁷

As was the case in the early church, in the sixteenth century the universal nature of Christ’s saving work was not a dividing issue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics. John Calvin was the one who promoted the notion of a limited atonement, a heresy which both Roman Catholics and Lutherans rejected. As a result there are few apologetic statements in the Lutheran Confessions which discuss the reality of Christ’s work accomplished for the whole world. It was a given fact as far as Catholics and Lutherans were concerned. The primary point of contention between these two groups was in *how* the work of Christ for the world was brought to bear on the individual sinner.

¹⁹ John Chrysostom, *Discourses against Judaizing Christians*, Discourse II, I:7-II:1, in *The Fathers of the Church*, vol. 68, translated by Paul W. Harkins (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1979), 38-39.

²⁰ “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

²¹ Ambrosiaster is the name given to the writer of a commentary on Paul’s epistles. This commentary was erroneously attributed for a long time to Ambrose (died 397), the bishop of Milan.

In 1527 Erasmus expressed doubt that the work was written by Ambrose. His judgment was eventually accepted by scholars, and the author is generally called Ambrosiaster or Pseudo-Ambrosius.

The commentary itself was written during the papacy of Damasus I, that is, between 366 and 384.

²² Ambrosiaster, *Commentary on Paul’s Epistles* in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament VII 1-2 *Corinthians*. Edited by Gerald Bray. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 251.

²³ Cyril of Alexandria (c. 376 – 444) was the Patriarch of Alexandria from 412 to 444.

²⁴ “The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’”

²⁵ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament Iva, *John 1-10*. Edited by Joel C. Elowsky. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 68.

²⁶ “For Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”

²⁷ Quoted in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, New Testament VII 1-2 *Corinthians*. Edited by Gerald Bray. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 246.

According to the Roman Catholic doctrine of the medieval scholastics, solidified by the Council of Trent, the forgiveness of sins is not distributed gratuitously in the gospel but rather earned by meritorious works and participation in the sacramental system. It was in the response to this false Roman notion that the confessors repeatedly emphasize justification by grace through faith.²⁸

It doesn't surprise us, then, that when the Lutheran Confessions treat justification the points of dispute center largely on questions about *how* justification or the remission of sins are delivered to and obtained by the sinner. Therefore most of the statements in the Lutheran Confessions and in the writings of Lutheran theologians during the Age of Orthodoxy deal with the personal justification of an individual.

Those who deny objective justification try to make the case that the doctrine is not found in the Lutheran Confessions. This is not the case. While the term “objective justification” does not appear in the Confessions and while objective justification doesn't receive nearly the same amount of attention as the doctrine of justification through faith, the doctrine is taught implicitly throughout, and in some cases explicitly.

The Apology to the Augsburg Confession, quoting St. Ambrose of Milan with approval, says that God forgave the sins of the world in Christ at the cross:

The law was shown to be harmful since all are made sinners, but when the Lord Jesus came, he forgave the sin for everyone, which no one could avoid, and he blotted out the bill of indictment that stood against us by the pouring out of his blood [Col. 2:14]. This is what Paul says [Rom. 5:20], ‘the sin abounded through the law; but grace superabounded through Jesus.’ For after the entire world was placed in subjection, he took away the sin of the entire world, just as John testified, saying [John 1:29], ‘Behold the Lamb of God, behold, the one who takes away the sin of the world.’ And so let no one glory in works, because no one is justified by their deeds.²⁹

Notice that the Apology doesn't just say that Jesus won or achieved or obtained forgiveness for the whole world. It specifically declares, “He *forgave* the sin for everyone.” Forgiveness is not just a promise. It is a completed reality. The idea that forgiveness does not happen until a sinner believes was not the position of the Lutheran theologians.

The Apology emphasizes the necessity of faith, but it treats the object of faith as something that is completed and certain. Those who do not believe reject Christ and his completed work, but unbelief does not change what God has done.

For since God swears that he does not desire the death of a sinner, God shows that he requires faith in that we believe him when he swears and are sure that he forgives us. The authority of the divine promises ought by themselves to be sufficient for us. But this promise has also been confirmed with an oath. Therefore, if any are not certain that they are forgiven, they deny that God has sworn to the truth. A more horrible blasphemy cannot be imagined. For this is what Tertullian says, “He invites us to salvation with an offer and even an oath. When God says, ‘As I live,’ he wants to be believed. Oh, blessed are we for whose sake God swears an oath! Oh, most miserable are we if we do not believe the Lord even when he swears an oath!”³⁰

Luther in the Smalcald Articles understands Romans 3:23-25 and Romans 4:25 together with John 1:29 and Isaiah 53:6 as applying to the whole world:

²⁸ Buchholz, 12.

²⁹ Apology IV, 103, 137. This and following quotations from *the Book of Concord* taken from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, editors. *The Book of Concord* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

³⁰ Apology XII, 94, 203.

Here is the first and chief article:

That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification” (Rom. 4[:25]); and he alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1[:29]); and “the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa. 53[:6]); furthermore, “All have sinned,” and “they are now justified without merit by his grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus . . . by his blood” (Rom. 3[:23–25]).³¹

At this point allow a simple listing of additional statements from our Confessions.³²

A. Christ has made satisfaction for the sins of all men and is thus our righteousness.

However, because, as has been stated above, the obedience is that of the entire person, it is a perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race, which satisfied God’s eternal, unchangeable righteousness, revealed in the law. Thus, it is our righteousness before God and is revealed in the gospel. On this righteousness faith relies before God, and God reckons it to faith, as is written in Romans 5[:19; Luther’s translation]: “For just as by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience will the many be made righteous,” in 1 John 1[:7]: “The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.”³³

We teach that the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross was sufficient for the sins of the entire world and that there is no need for additional sacrifices, as though Christ’s sacrifice was not sufficient for our sins.³⁴

B. The whole world has been redeemed and reconciled.

That the human race has been truly redeemed and reconciled with God through Christ, who has merited with his innocent obedience, suffering, and death both the righteousness that avails before God [Rom. 1:17; 3:21–26; 2 Cor. 5:21] and eternal life.³⁵

C. The promise of the Gospel is universal.

Therefore, if we want to consider our eternal election to salvation profitably, we must always firmly and rigidly insist that, like the proclamation of repentance, so the promise of the gospel is *universalis*, that is, it pertains to all people (Luke 24[:47]). Therefore, Christ commanded preaching “repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name to all nations.” “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son” for it (John 3[:16]). Christ has taken away the sins of the world (John 1[:29]); his flesh was given “for the life of the world” (John 6[:51]); his blood is “the atoning sacrifice for . . . the whole world” (1 John 1[:7; 2:2]). Christ said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11[:28]). “God has imprisoned all in unbelief, that he might have mercy on all” (Rom. 11[:32]). “The Lord does not want any to perish but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3[:9]).³⁶

Luther in his Large Catechism speaks of forgiveness as existing even before we believe it or ask for it:

³¹ Smalcald Articles I, 301.

³² This outline is based on a presentation by Torald N. Teigen, in his essay, “the Proclamation of Justification: The Gospel Message of Forgiveness,” printed in *His Pardoning Grace*, (Milwaukee: NPH, 1966), 62-88.

³³ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III, 57, 572.

³⁴ Apology, XIII, 8, 220.

³⁵ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XI, 15, 643.

³⁶ Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, XI, 28, 645.

“Dear Father, forgive us our debts.” Not that he does not forgive sins even apart from and before our praying; for before we prayed for it or even thought about it, he gave us the gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness. But the point here is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness.³⁷

Luther in many other writings repeatedly and regularly teaches an objective, universal forgiveness. In his lectures on the book of Galatians, delivered in 1535, he writes:

When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, he sent his Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon him, and said to him; "Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short, be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that you pay and make satisfaction for them." Now the law comes and says: "I find him a sinner, who takes upon himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins than those in him. Therefore let him die on the cross!" And so it attacks him and kills him. *By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil.* But when sin and death have been abolished by this one man, God does not want to see anything else in the whole world, especially if it were to believe, except sheer cleansing and righteousness. And if any remnants of sin were to remain, still for the sake of Christ, the shining Sun, God would not notice them.

If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on him, then they are still on the world. *Again, if Christ himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through him.* But if he is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them.

Now let us see how two such extremely contrary things come together in this person. Not only my sins and yours, but the sins of the entire world, past, present, and future, attack him, try to damn him, and do in fact damn him. But because in the same person, who is the highest, the greatest, and the only sinner, there is also eternal and invincible righteousness, therefore these two converge: the highest, the greatest, and the only sin; and the highest, the greatest, and the only righteousness. Here one of them must yield and be conquered ... *Thus in Christ all sin is conquered, killed, and buried; and righteousness remains the victor and the ruler eternally.*

Therefore Christ, who is the divine power, righteousness, blessing, grace, and life, conquers and destroys these monsters-sin, death, and the curse-without weapons or battle, in his own body and in himself.

To the extent that Christ rules by his grace in the hearts of the faithful, there is no sin or death or curse. But where Christ is not known, there these things remain. And so all who do not believe lack this blessing and this victory. "For this," as John says, "is our victory, faith" (1 John 5:4).³⁸

In Luther's commentary on Romans 3:23-25 he says that God “justifies all men” and this justification is received through faith:

The very fact that Christ suffered for us, and through His suffering became a propitiation for us, proves that we are (*by nature*) unrighteous, and that we for whom He became a propitiation, must obtain our righteousness solely from God, now that forgiveness for our sins has been

³⁷ Large Catechism, Lord's Prayer, 88, 452.

³⁸ LW, 26, 280 – 282 [selections with added emphasis].

secured by Christ's atonement. By the fact that God forgives our sins (*only*) through Christ's propitiation and so justifieth us by faith, He shows how necessary is His righteousness (*for all*). There is no one whose sins are not forgiven (in *Christ*) [italics in source].

I prefer the explanation: God reveals Himself through the remission of sins that are past as the One who justifies all men. His gracious remission of sins proves Him to be the God who is just and who alone has power to justify.³⁹

In commenting on the authority of the Keys, Luther points out that the power of forgiveness depends upon the power of the Word, not upon the faith of the hearer.

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 [:3]: "Their faithlessness nullifies the faithfulness of God." We are not talking here either about people's belief or disbelief regarding the efficacy of the keys. We realize that few believe. We are speaking of what the keys accomplish and give. He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key's fault. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king's fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.⁴⁰

In his "Against the Heavenly Prophets," Luther distinguished between two ways about speaking 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.⁴¹

Pastor Jon Buchholz, after studying what the fathers of various ages taught on the doctrine of justification, properly comes to the conclusion:

The concepts of universal absolution, objective forgiveness, the complete swallowing up of sin in the person and body of Christ, sending sin away by imputing it to Jesus, canceling the debt of the world's sin, and declaring the world to be acquitted and sin-free in Christ—all of these things are taught implicitly, and in so many cases explicitly, in the writings of Luther, Chemnitz, Gerhard, and other Lutheran scholastics. But what was, for the most part, implicit in the writings of early Lutheran fathers had to be expounded explicitly when the church was confronted with later challenges to the Christocentricity of salvation.⁴²

The Book of Concord collected the confessions of the Lutheran church, including the Formula of Concord which addressed those issues which had arisen after the death of Luther. Unfortunately, theological challenges did not suddenly stop in 1580. The Age of Orthodoxy was followed by the Age of Pietism.

In the 1943 publication *Grace for Grace*, Pietism was well described:

³⁹ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, translation by J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1954), 78-79.

⁴⁰ LW, 40, 366-367.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 213-214.

⁴² Buchholz, 16.

It is the bane of Pietism that it centers its attention so much on the feelings and the spiritual condition of man's heart that it forgets or pays but slight attention to the great objective facts of God's love for men and the all-sufficient atonement of the Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. It bids men look within for assurance that they have truly repented and believed instead of telling them to fix their eyes on Christ and His word and to rest in His promises, regardless of the sins and little faith that they too often find in their own hearts. This deep-rooted difference between orthodoxy and pietism explains why a controversy arose regarding such fundamental questions as that of Absolution and the related doctrines of the Gospel and Justification.⁴³

Pietism emphasized the personal, the subjective, the experiential and the emotional. The objective value of Word and Sacrament became less important than personal experience and individual preference. One person tried to analyze the strength of another's repentance. The intensity and sincerity of one's faith became the measure of a Christian. Pietism led to rationalism, and the Lutheran Church slid off of its scriptural foundation.

Those who spend time in the blogs which have taken up the question of objective justification have perhaps run across the name of Johann Jakob Rambach,⁴⁴ a seventeenth century Pietist. Some have charged Rambach with inventing the teaching of universal objective justification. A closer examination, however, suggests he agreed with Johann Gerhard on the matter of vicarious justification in Christ. In addition his position agrees with what Luther wrote against the heavenly prophets regarding justification acquired and justification appropriated. Rambach writes:

Christ was in His resurrection first of all justified for His own Person, Is. 50:5, 1 Tim. 3:16, since the righteousness of God declared that it had been paid and satisfied in full by this our Substitute, and issued Him as it were a receipt thereof, and that happened in His resurrection, when He was released from His Debtor's prison and set free. But since the Substitute was now justified, then *in him also all debtors were co-justified* (*Ausfuhrliche Erklarung der Epistel an die Romer*, p. 322). The same to Rom. 5: 19: *The justification of the human race indeed also occurred*, in respect to the acquisition, in one moment, in the moment in which Christ rose and was thus declared righteous; but in respect of the appropriation *it still continues* till the last day (*Ibid.*, p. 386).⁴⁵

In response to Pietism, it was necessary to emphasize again that faith is never an agent, causing something to happen. It lays hold of, receives, and grasps something that has already happened. This was not a new doctrine. Church fathers, the Lutheran Confessions, and orthodox theologians had said the same thing. But because of Pietism's emphasis on the personal and the emotional, it was necessary to shift away from the subjective and underscore the objective. Theologians returned to the objective reality of forgiveness for all in Christ in contrast to the emotional and faith-centered subjectivism of Pietism.

An interesting contribution comes from an otherwise little known theologian, Philip D. Burk. Though both he and his illustrious father-in-law, Johann Albrecht Bengel, were Pietists, yet they were keenly aware that the individual believer's assurance of salvation was seriously endangered by the subjectivism of Pietism, and that faith needed a secure, objective basis on which to rest. Burk's *Die Rechtfertigung* was

⁴³ S.C. Ylvisaker, editor. *Grace for Grace*, 156. Quoted by Edmund Reim in *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, [Vol. 52 no 2, April 1955], 87.

⁴⁴ Johann Jakob Rambach (24 February 1693 – 19 April 1735) graduated from and then taught at the University of Halle. In 1731 he accepted an offer from Landgrave Ernst Ludwig of Hesse to come to Giessen as superintendent and first professor of theology. In 1732 he was appointed director of the Paedagogium at Giessen. In addition to writing on a variety of theological topics, he authored over 180 hymns.

⁴⁵ Kurt Marquart, translator. *Justification –Objective and Subjective: A Translation* (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1982), 21. [italics and references in original]

the result of their concern, and of their desire to lead the movement out of the quicksands of doubt into which it had gotten itself. In his book Burk points out that there are passages in which the Scriptures speak of justification as a universal gift for all men, and calls this universal justification an indispensable basis for the faith of the believer.⁴⁶

The fathers of the Synodical Conference, in their careful exposition of justification, spoke in perfect harmony with Luther, the Confessions, and the orthodox theologians of the sixteenth century. The author⁴⁷ of the essay which was delivered at the opening convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872 demonstrated this care in expounding the doctrine of universal justification, while maintaining important distinctions.

Therefore his [Christ's] obedience consists not only in his suffering and dying, but also in his spontaneous subjection to the law in our stead and his keeping of the law in so perfect a fashion that, reckoning it to us as righteousness, God forgives us our sins, accounts us holy and righteous, and saves us forever on account of this entire obedience which, by doing and suffering, in life and in death, Christ rendered for us to his heavenly Father. This righteousness is offered to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and in the sacraments, and is applied, appropriated, and accepted by faith, so that thus believers have reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, the grace of God, adoption, and the inheritance of eternal life.

Further, since as was mentioned above, it is the obedience of the entire person, therefore it is a perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race, since it satisfied the eternal and immutable righteousness of God revealed in the law.⁴⁸

The author is careful not to say that justification is *given* to the whole world or *accepted* by the whole world. Thus he maintains Luther's twofold distinction:

Therefore it is so important that Christ did not bring along a humanity from heaven, but assumed it from the Virgin Mary, for now our humanity is truly justified in Him. That we now are to preach, and he who grasps this is helped, and he is a blessed man. Miserable on the other hand is he to whom this does not appeal, for God shouts it out into the world: "All things are ready," now quickly come and accept grace, salvation, and life, but alas, proud man does not want to know anything of this most precious gift of God, which he *offers and presents (darreicht)* in the Gospel, yes, properly understood, even *imparts* to the whole world. It is better, however, not to use the word "*impart*" (*mittheilen*) of the universal justification of the world, because in our German language it almost always signifies not only a *presenting (Darreichen)* from God's side, but also an *accepting* from man's side.⁴⁹

The 1872 essayist also explains why in the aftermath of the Huber controversy the term "universal justification" fell out of favor:

But now that God has through the raising of His Son signed the letter of pardon for the sinners, and sealed it with His divine seal, we can confidently preach: the world is justified, the world is reconciled with God, which latter expression too would be impermissible if the former were not true. Our old dogmatists too would themselves have used the expression more - since they believed and taught the substance - had not *Huber* shortly before Gerhard's time taught that God had not only justified all men already, but had also elected them to eternal life. In order to avoid the appearance of agreement with this erroneous doctrine, they used the expression only rarely.

⁴⁶ Quoted in Baier-Walther, III, 273.

⁴⁷ Generally considered to be C. F. W. Walther

⁴⁸ Quoted in Marquart, 16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

Already in the year 1593 the Wuerttemberg theologians (Heerbrand, Gerlach, Hafenreffer, Osiander, Bidembach, and others) conceded to Huber with reference to the doctrine of justification that he seemed to deviate from them in it “*in phrasi tamen magis ac loquendi modo, quam re ipso,*” that is, “more however in the expression and in the manner of speaking than in the substance itself” (Loescher's *Unschuldige Nachrichten*, 1730, p. 567). The Wittenberg theologians (Gesner, Leyser, Hunnius, and others) did not want to tolerate Huber's expression: “*Christus contulit proprie redemptionem toti generi humane*” that is, “Christ imparted the redemption to the entire human race *in the proper sense,*” because the *actual imparting,* “as it is taken in the theological schools,” refers to the *appropriation* (see Wittenberg *Consilia* I, 642ff).⁵⁰

C. F. W. Walther in an 1846 Easter sermon agreed with Johann Gerhard two centuries earlier, as he pointed to the resurrection of Jesus as proof of the verdict of acquittal that had been declared upon the world in Christ:

Jesus, when He was raised from the dead, was absolved for all sin, but since it was not for Himself but for all people that Christ died, who was it really that was set free, who was it really that was absolved when Jesus rose from the dead? It was all people! Just as all Israel triumphed when David defeated Goliath, so all humanity triumphed when Jesus defeated sin, death and Hell. And so we hear Paul saying in his second epistle to the Corinthians, “We are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.” And again in his epistle to the Romans, “Then as one man's trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one man's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men.” Just as Christ's condemnation was the condemnation of all mankind, Christ's death the death of all mankind, Christ's payment the payment for all mankind, even so Christ's life is now the life of all mankind, His acquittal of all mankind, His justification of all mankind, His absolution of all mankind.⁵¹

In Synodical Conference literature some of the most emphatic use of the term objective justification belongs to Dr. Franz Pieper. In his *Christian Dogmatics* he states, “An essential prerequisite of justification by faith, or of subjective justification, is the objective justification (the reconciliation) of all mankind.”⁵²

The *Brief Statement* drafted in large part by Pieper does not use the term objective justification. Yet it does provide a powerful equivalent which offers the following very clear presentation of the matter, stating both the concept of objective and subjective justification and their mutual relation in a single sentence: “Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ; that therefore not for the sake of their good works, but without the works of the Law, by grace, for Christ's sake, He *justifies*, that is, *accounts* as righteous, all those who believe in Christ, that is, believe, accept, and rely on, the fact that for Christ's sake their sins are forgiven.”⁵³

Adolf Hoenecke uses both terms, speaking first⁵⁴ of a universal justification which took place in time, namely in the death and resurrection of Christ, and which came upon all men, Romans 5:18; and then⁵⁵ of the manner in which Scripture establishes the connection between the objective act of justification and the subjective possession and enjoyment thereof in blessed peace.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁵¹ C. F. W. Walther, *Christ's Resurrection—Your Absolution*, translated by Daniel Preus (Sermon Mark 16:1-8, Easter 1846).

⁵² Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), II, 508.

⁵³ Quoted in John P. Meyer, “Second Corinthians 5:11-21,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* 51(October 1954): 254.

⁵⁴ Adolf Hoenecke, *Dogmatik*, III, 354.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 405.

It is clear that though the terms “universal justification” and “objective justification” are found neither in the Scriptures nor in the Lutheran Confessions, the terms have been used by orthodox theologians to describe for us the central doctrine of God’s Word—justification. It is a justification that is universal, for God has pronounced his forgiveness over all mankind. It is a justification that is objective, for the legal pronouncement was issued by God’s grace for Jesus’ sake without being prompted in the least by anything in man.

The doctrine of universal justification which teaches that the sins of all men are forgiven, and the doctrine of objective justification, which teaches that a man’s sins are forgiven whether he believes it or not, are extremely important. The doctrine of salvation by works, which we call the *opinio legis*, is so deeply embedded in the sinful human heart that it is difficult to keep it from clouding also the doctrine of justification and forgiveness. Lutherans may think that they have been effectively vaccinated against this spiritual disease. And yet many Lutherans still labor under the delusion that God does not forgive us unless we believe. They believe that Christ has indeed provided forgiveness for all men, that God is willing to forgive, but before he really forgives he first of all demands that we should be sorry for our sins and that we should have faith. Just have faith, they say, and then God will forgive you. All the right words are there. The only thing wrong is that the words are in the wrong order. God does not forgive us *because* we have faith. He does not forgive us *if* we have faith. He has forgiven us long ago, when he raised his Son from the dead. The risen Savior commanded his apostles to preach this good news of forgiveness to every creature, to all nations.

If forgiveness were dependent on faith in the sense that God does not forgive until we believe, we would always have to be sure that we are believers before we could be sure that we are forgiven. Only the doctrine of universal justification makes it possible for a believing child of God to have such a sure foundation for his faith. May God protect us that we never surrender that doctrine.

Soli Deo Gloria.

James F. Korthals
15 January 2013

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