

**“Our Righteousness before God...  
Is Revealed in the Gospel.  
On this Righteousness Faith Relies.”**



"Law and Grace" (Lucas Cranach the Elder)

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## ***Part I: Why Objective Justification Mattered to the Reformers***

### **A. The Synodical Conference and Beyond**

This essay is about the doctrine of justification, and more precisely about the distinction that is made in Confessional Lutheran theology between the “objective” and “subjective” aspects of this doctrine. This distinction has been defined and described in many different ways over the years, especially by theologians from within the Synodical Conference tradition of American Lutheranism. But as our baseline here – to orient us toward what we will be talking about – we will quote the words of a theologian from the first half of the twentieth century who was *not* from the Synodical Conference.

Carroll Herman Little (1872-1958) was the son of a Tennessee Synod minister, and was educated for the ministry (under Henry Eyster Jacobs and his colleagues) at the Lutheran seminary in Philadelphia. In 1917 Little was called to a professorship in the Lutheran seminary in Waterloo, Ontario. At the time, the Waterloo seminary was affiliated with the General Council. But when the General Council merged with the General Synod and the United Synod in the South in the following year, to form the United Lutheran Church in America, it became a ULCA seminary. Little taught there until his retirement in 1947. Little was never a member of a Synodical Conference congregation or synod, but as a student of the Holy Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions he became persuaded that the general way in which justification was understood and explained in the Synodical Conference was soundly Biblical and evangelical. He therefore recommended that this approach be adopted by other Lutherans.

Little’s unique perspective and independent judgment on these matters can help us to see, therefore, that the objective/subjective distinction in the doctrine of justification is not an idiosyncratic quirk of a narrow parochial theological tradition that unnecessarily divides Lutherans. It provides, rather, a beneficial and clarifying articulation of the doctrine of justification that can serve to unite Lutherans in a deeper appreciation of what it means to confess that a penitent sinner is justified before God, by faith in the One whom the Father sent “to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14, ESV). While the objective/subjective terminology may have been developed in the Synodical Conference in the nineteenth century, what the terminology sets forth and clarifies was understood by Little to be the doctrine that all Lutherans actually believe, or should believe. And we would say today as well, that this is still what all Lutherans actually believe, or should believe, even if the terms are unfamiliar to some, or misunderstood by some.

In 1933, Dr. Little wrote:

If there is one doctrine on which the Lutheran Church may be said to be a unit and on which it presents a united front, it is the doctrine of Justification by Faith alone, a doctrine which was the material principle of the Reformation. And yet many writers ignore or overlook a feature which constitutes the foundation of this doctrine and which is necessary for its right understanding, viz., Objective Justification.

Objective Justification may be defined as God’s declaration of amnesty to the

whole 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 merit of the Redeemer.

While this form of Justification is not what is usually understood by the term, it has abundant testimony from Scripture, as the following quotations will show: “Therefore as by the offense of one, judgment came upon all men unto condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one, the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous” (Rom. 5:18-19). “Who was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25). “To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:19). “For He hath made Him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). “And He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2).

Subjective, or Personal or Individual Justification, or the act of God by which, out of pure mercy and grace for Christ’s sake, He pronounces the believer free from guilt and punishment and actually clothed with the imputed righteousness of Christ while he is in a state of faith, is the actual acceptance by faith of the Objective Justification. In the Gospel God announces to all men His grace and mercy in Christ, offers to all who hear it the forgiveness of sins and the merit of Christ, and actually operates these affects wherever they are not rendered void by obstinate resistance. (Cf. 2 Thess. 2:10,13; Rom. 1:16; Matt. 23:37; Luke 19:41-42.)

If personal or subjective Justification is the acceptance by faith of objective Justification it is manifest that it does not take place “in view of faith.” Thus a synergistic view of Justification is avoided. This is the chief advantage in treating the subject under these two forms.<sup>1</sup>

Not every Lutheran whose teaching on justification makes use of the objective/subjective paradigm would necessarily agree with every turn of phrase that Little employs in his summary of this doctrine, or with all of Little’s choices of Bible passages that he includes among the *sedes doctrinae* for this teaching. And many Lutherans would no doubt want to cite other Bible passages, in addition to the ones that Little cites, in support of this teaching. From the outset, we would recognize that there is no *absolute* unanimity among orthodox Lutherans, from all eras of Lutheran dogmatic history, in how these things are best to be explained, or in how the various passages of Scripture that speak to this matter are in fact to be brought to bear on the subject. Occasional terminological and exegetical differences among theologians, who nevertheless agree with each other in the substance of their doctrine, are nothing new in the Lutheran Church.

Not even the Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, to which all pastors and teachers in the church are expected to subscribe, are exempt from this. For example, the *Brief Statement* of 1932 explains – as we would expect – that a minister’s “confessional obligation covers all doctrines, not only those that are treated *ex professo*, but also those that are merely introduced in support of other doctrines.” It goes on to state, however, that this confessional

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<sup>1</sup>C. H. Little, *Disputed Doctrines* (Burlington, Iowa: Lutheran Literary Board, 1933), pp. 60-61.

obligation “does not extend to historical questions, ‘purely exegetical questions,’ and other matters not belonging to the doctrinal content of the symbols.” Still, in spite of the occasional differences of opinion that may be evident among Lutherans today, or between them and the authors of the Confessions, as to exactly which and how many passages of Scripture do in fact teach the articles of faith that are set forth in the Symbolical Books, the *Brief Statement* affirms that “All doctrines of the Symbols are based on clear statements of Scripture.”<sup>2</sup>

Within the Lutheran Symbolical Books – as authored variously by Martin Luther (1483-1546), by Philip Melanchthon (1497-1560), and by a committee comprised mostly of their students – differing emphases and formulations can also clearly be seen. Not only is this not a problem, but as Hermann Sasse states, “This variety in expression of one and the same truth gave the Lutheran Confessions a richness which the confessions of other churches do not possess.”<sup>3</sup>

With respect to the way of understanding the article of justification that is endorsed in this essay, we would likewise say that, in spite of occasional differences of opinion that have existed over the centuries regarding which passages teach the objective and subjective aspects of this doctrine, or how they teach it, there is nevertheless a Biblically-based consensus among orthodox Lutherans that this basic way of understanding justification before God and the forgiveness of sins truly is rooted in Scripture, and serves as an important guide to preachers in how the gospel – in all its Christ-centered fullness – is most faithfully to be preached. And we joyfully recognize that many leading figures among the doctors of the Christian church – before, during, and after the era of the Reformation – have grasped and taught these fundamental points as well, even if they too may have differed from each other, and from us, in some of their terminology and emphases.

## **B. Law and Gospel**

The title of this essay is: “Our Righteousness before God...Is Revealed in the Gospel. On this Righteousness Faith Relies.” This is a direct quotation from the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord. Here is the larger context:

...we believe, teach, and confess that the entire obedience of the entire person of Christ, which he rendered to the Father on our behalf unto the most shameful death of the cross [Phil. 2:8], is reckoned to us as righteousness. For the human nature alone, apart from the divine nature, could not satisfy the eternal, almighty God neither through its obedience nor through its suffering for the sins of the whole world. On the other hand, the deity alone, without the humanity, could not mediate between God and us. 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*

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<sup>2</sup>A *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod* (1932), section 48.

<sup>3</sup>Hermann Sasse, *This is my body* (revised edition) (Adelaide, South Australia: Lutheran Publishing House, 1977), p. 253.

made righteous,” in 1 John 1[:7]: “The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin,” and in Habakkuk 2[:4]: “The righteous will live by faith.” For this reason, neither the divine nor the human nature of Christ in itself is reckoned to us as righteousness, but only the obedience of the person, who is at the same time God and a human being. Therefore, faith looks to the person of Christ, as this person submitted to the law for us, bore our sin, and in going to his Father performed complete and perfect obedience for us poor sinners, from his holy birth to his death. Thereby he covered all our disobedience, which is embedded in our nature and in its thoughts, words, and deeds, so that this disobedience is not reckoned to us as condemnation but is pardoned and forgiven by sheer grace, because of Christ alone.<sup>4</sup>

The Concordists are responding to Andreas Osiander’s incorrect teaching regarding the Christian’s righteousness before God, which in effect separated the divine and human natures of Christ, and which attributed the Christian’s righteousness to the indwelling of Christ’s essentially righteous divinity. In the face of this, they repeat, and expound upon, the fundamental defining confession of the Lutheran Reformation: that a sinner is justified before God by faith in Christ. More precisely, they emphasize that sinners are justified by Christ’s obedience to his Father in history, and not by his mere existence as God’s incarnate Son, or by his mystical indwelling within a believer. And, they emphasize that sinners receive Christ – and everything he earned, accomplished, and brought into existence for their salvation – by means of faith.

The focus of what the Concordists are teaching here is not on the act or receptiveness of faith, but it is on that which faith receives. Faith receives a righteousness that is tied to the objective saving work of Christ, in real history. Faith is not the context or setting for God’s creation of an individualized righteousness for each believing person. It is instead the passive reception of a righteousness before God that was objectively brought into existence for the human race by the obedience of our divine-human Savior; and that is revealed, made known, and delivered to us in the gospel. Our faith does not rely on a potential righteousness, or even on a righteousness that is not yet “our righteousness” before God. Faith relies on, and receives, Christ’s “perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race, which satisfied God’s eternal, unchangeable righteousness, revealed in the law.” This is “our righteousness” in Christ, even before we receive it, because our Savior has procured it for *us* and established it for *us*.

Our faith does not contribute, in whole or in part, toward bringing “our righteousness” into existence. Jesus brought “our righteousness” into existence by his obedience, and by his vicarious death on the cross for the sins of humanity. This is what it means to say, as the Formula of Concord does say, that God reckons this righteousness – this already-existing perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race – “to faith.” It is *reckoned to* faith.

Our Lutheran forefathers had emphasized, in response to scholastic Roman error, that we are justified by *faith*, and *not by works*. In this context, our Lutheran forefathers now also emphasize that we are justified *by* faith, and not just *in* faith, or *because of* faith. In other words,

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<sup>4</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:56-58, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), pp. 572-73. Emphasis added.

“our righteousness” – which is established and defined by the work of God in Christ, and not by the work of God in us – is received *by means of* faith.

None of this would make any sense, of course, apart from the important Biblical distinction between law and gospel – to which this section of the Formula of Concord alludes. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession teaches that “All Scripture should be divided into these two main topics: the law and the promises.” The Apology goes on to state that “In some places it communicates the law,” by which is meant the moral law, or “the commandments of the Decalogue, wherever they appear in the Scriptures.” But “In other places it communicates the promise concerning Christ, either when it promises that Christ will come and on account of him offers the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life, or when in the gospel itself, Christ, after he appeared, promises the forgiveness of sins, justification, and eternal life.”<sup>5</sup> The Formula of Concord similarly affirms that

The distinction between law and gospel is a particularly glorious light. It serves to divide God’s Word properly [cf. 2 Tim. 2:15] and to explain correctly and make understandable the writings of the holy prophets and apostles. Therefore, we must diligently preserve this distinction, so as not to mix these two teachings together and make the gospel into a law.<sup>6</sup>

We would add as well that these two teaching must not be mixed together in such a way as to make the law into a gospel either.

The Lutheran Reformers did not make up this distinction and then impose it on the Scriptures. Like a fountain in the center of a pool, this distinction arises from Scripture, and then falls back down upon it to illuminate its proper meaning and application. Indeed, law and gospel is the very “language” of Scripture and of God. Whenever God is speaking through his Word, he is either forbidding, commanding, and judging; or he is forgiving, enlivening, and saving.

When the resurrected Christ told his disciples what they should preach as they went out into the world, and when he distilled their future message down to its most basic content and thrust, this is what he said: “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47, ESV). The law drives the mind and heart to repentance, and the gospel is then preached for the forgiveness of sins, as it bestows the comfort of God’s pardon in Christ on the mind and heart. This does not mean that all Christian preaching is always to be solely on the topic of the doctrine of law and gospel *as such*. But it does mean that all topics from within the whole counsel of God that are made to be the subject of preaching, are to be preached in a “law-gospel” way.

This is how John the Baptist had preached, as he prepared the people of Israel for the manifestation and saving work of their Messiah. On one occasion, John said: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him” (John 3:36, ESV). While the rhetorical form of this particular statement was

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<sup>5</sup>Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:5-6, Kolb/Wengert p. 121.

<sup>6</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration V:1, Kolb/Wengert p. 581.

more gospel-law than law-gospel, the effect was and is the same. The doctrine of law and gospel is not a formulaic rhetorical straightjacket, but is a divine guide for how Christ is to be preached, and to whom. He is to be preached to the penitent, as one who justifies and saves sinners. He is not to be preached to the impenitent, as one who justifies and condones sin.

The objective dimension of Christ's saving work for the human race, and the objective dimension of his establishing of humanity's righteousness before God by his obedience, are elements of the gospel. These truths, regarding what is already so for all people in and because of Christ, are not a negation of the law. Remember that the man crying in the wilderness, who said that the wrath of God remains on the one who does not obey the Son, in the same man crying in the wilderness who said this, in regard to that Son: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1:29, ESV). Is John contradicting himself? Or does John understand the distinction between law and gospel – that is, the distinction between how God looks at and addresses the *fallen* world in and unto itself, *apart from* Christ; and how God looks at and addresses the *redeemed* world, *in and through* Christ?

### **C. Forgiveness in the Old and New Testaments**

John's description of Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world is drawing on, and combining, two Old Testament images. The "Lamb of God" image comes from the Passover (Exodus 12:1-30). Those houses for which a lamb had been slain, and on whose doorposts the blood of the lamb had been smeared, were "passed over" by the angel of death. The lamb in this way provided a covering for the people of Israel, and a protection for that nation from God's wrath and judgment. The firstborn of all the families of the Egyptians were slain, but the firstborn of Israel were spared, not just because they were Israel, but because they followed the Lord's directive – issued through Moses – regarding the lamb and the blood. The Epistle to the Hebrews reminds us – with respect to Moses on this occasion – that "By faith he kept the Passover and sprinkled the blood, so that the Destroyer of the firstborn might not touch them" (11:28, ESV).

Jesus is now pointed out by John the Baptist as a lamb for the whole world, and not just for Israel. His blood, according to God's plan, will provide a covering over all the children of Adam, and not only over the children of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. And Christ's blood, in God's economy, is shed to be a protection against eternal death, and not only to be a protection from temporal death.

The image of a substitutionary sacrifice that "takes away" sin comes from the scapegoat, or Azazel, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:1-34). Two goats are featured in the ritual for this important annual observance. Each of them represents an important aspect of the totality of what is happening, and of what is being signified, on this Day. One of the goats is sacrificed by the high priest as a sin offering for the nation, "because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins" (Leviticus 16:16). And what happens to the other one – the scapegoat – is described in this way:

And Aaron shall lay both his hands on the head of the live goat, and confess over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins. And he shall put them on the head of the goat and send it away into the wilderness by the hand of a man

who is in readiness. The goat shall bear all their iniquities on itself to a remote area, and he shall let the goat go free in the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:21-22, ESV)

By means of this annually-repeated ritual, the people of Israel understood that a crucial component of their reconciled state with God, and of their acceptance by God, was the transfer of their *sin* to *another*: who would die for that sin in their place; and who would take that sin away from them, so that when God looked upon them, he would no longer see it, or be offended by it.

The Old Testament uses a variety of terms to express the various aspects of the concept of forgiveness. All of these terms contribute, however, to a general picture of sin being *lifted off of*, and *sent away from*, the one or the many who are being forgiven. The ritual of the scapegoat in particular fleshes out this image of what God's forgiveness of his people actually entails. Their sins are lifted off of them, as a weight or burden would be lifted, and are then sent or carried away from them. Psalm 103 also verbally paints such a picture of God's forgiveness, when it states: "For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does he remove our transgressions from us" (11-12, ESV).

The most commonly-used New Testament Greek word for "forgive" – *aphiēmi* – embodies this kind of imagery within its very etymology and literal meaning. The term is constructed from a combination of two roots: *apo*, which means "off" or "away"; and *hiēmi*, which means "to send." So, when the New Testament, through the use of this term, speaks of the forgiveness of someone's sins, what it is literally saying is that sins are being sent off and away from that person. This also means that in the Lamb of *God*, who *takes away* the sin of the *world*, God is *forgiving* the sin of the *world*. To *forgive* sin is, quite literally, to *take away* sin. Because of his love for the world, God the Father sent the world's sin *off of* the world by transferring it to his Son, so that his Son could then take it *away from* the world.

Remember, though, that all of this is part and parcel of the gospel. All of this language about the sending off of sin, and the taking away of sin – whether we are talking about the world as a whole, or individual believers within the world – is not "law" language. It is "gospel" language.

The judgment of God that is proclaimed in the law, is a reflection and outgrowth of what God sees when he looks at the world apart from Christ, and sees the world as it is in and unto itself. Outside of Christ, God sees a world that is defined by fallen humanity's innate wickedness and hostility toward him, and a world that deserves to be, and is, under his wrath.

In contrast, the forgiveness and acceptance of God that is proclaimed in the gospel, is a reflection and outgrowth of what God sees when he looks at the world through the "lens" of Christ, and sees the world as it is in Christ, under the covering of Christ's righteousness. In and through Christ, God sees a world that is defined by his Son's sinlessness, and a world where there is no accusing law, but only the peace and harmony with God that has been established by the obedience of Jesus.

Do not try too hard to understand this. The twofold mystery of what God sees and says for condemnation apart from Christ, and what God sees and says for justification in Christ, cannot be



understood beyond what Scripture specifically reveals. The Lord himself declares: “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isaiah 55:9, ESV).

Nevertheless, we do learn from the Scriptures that, in Christ, there is now a new righteous reality for the world, and for God as he looks at the world. And we learn from Scripture that God himself has brought about this new reality, which is not characterized merely by *proposals* and *possibilities* for the world, but by things that are, in Christ, already *real* and *true* for the world. For “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19, ESV). And “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21, ESV).<sup>7</sup>

In our theology and preaching, we cannot allow a fear of minimizing the law to cause us to minimize the gospel. And we should never presumptuously think that by presenting the gospel as a pure, unqualified gift, we would be making it “too easy” for people to be saved. That is not our business. We are the stewards of these mysteries, not their masters.

Neither is it our place to think that the way in which we present the gospel should be changed – from an unconditional announcement of an already-accomplished reconciliation and justification, to a conditional message about a potential reconciliation and justification – so that those whom we perceive to be believing it too quickly or too casually would not just take the gospel “for granted.” In truth, penitent sinners *should* take the gospel “for granted,” because it *is* granted. The gospel, and Christ in the gospel, are *granted to* them, and *bestowed upon* them, as a divine gift. Just before his arrest and passion, Jesus prayed to his Father in heaven:

“Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him authority over all flesh, to *give eternal life* to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” (John 17:1-3, ESV)

And St. Paul reminds us that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are *justified by his grace as a gift*, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith” (Romans 3:23-25, ESV).

In the mystery of the convicting and regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, the law and the gospel each stand on their own, undiluted in their respective content and effect, and serving God’s purpose of driving sinners all the way to repentance, and of drawing penitents all the way to Christ:

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<sup>7</sup>Adolf Hoenecke writes that “the reconciliation in which God reconciles the world with himself” did *not* consist of an internal “change of the mind of God toward the world,” since “the various clauses of the Scripture passages” that address this “say nothing about a change of God’s mind but only about certain arrangements, judicial facts, and activities, like ‘not counting sins’ and ‘making Christ to be sin’” (*Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. III [translated by James Langenbartels] [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 2003], p. 180). So, while there is something “new” *for* God, and for how God now looks at and relates to the world through Christ, there is nothing “new” *in* God – that is, in his own infinite and immutable mind.

For God has consigned all to disobedience, that he may have mercy on all. Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! “For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?” (Romans 11:32-34, ESV).

A conditional message about a potential justification is not the Christian gospel. It is no gospel at all. It cannot calm the fears of a troubled conscience. It cannot grant comfort or elicit faith. Quite simply, a conditional message about a potential justification cannot forgive sins. In this regard, Ken R. Schurb makes an important pastoral observation:

A crushed unbeliever must be told that God is no longer angry with him in Christ, that all his sins are forgiven, that God has declared him “not guilty” (i.e., justified him) – or he will not believe. Simply to tell him, “God loves you, and Christ died for you,” is not sufficient. Even a 16th century Roman Catholic could say this much. Urging a penitent unbeliever to have faith on such a basis is fruitless. He must know that Christ’s atonement directly affects God’s attitude toward him in such a way that God no longer wants to punish him, but loves and forgives him. In other words, he must know objective justification.<sup>8</sup>

#### **D. Forgiveness and Justification**

The word “forgiveness,” and the word “justification,” do not mean exactly the same thing. To forgive the sin of someone is to send off, or remove, the sin from that person. To justify someone is forensically to declare that person to be righteous. Forgiveness is an essentially negative concept. Something bad is removed or taken away. Justification is an essentially positive concept. Something good is given or credited.

But in Biblical, Lutheran theology, “forgiveness” and “justification” are *functionally synonymous*. Both ideas represent a new, non-condemning status before God, and not an inner sanative experience. “Forgiveness” and “justification” are basically two ways of looking at, and describing, the same thing – albeit from slightly different angles. For this reason, when the Lutheran Confessions speak of an individual Christian’s new standing before God, they often jump back and forth unselfconsciously between these two terms and concepts.

For example, the Apology of the Augsburg Confession states, quite simply, that “forgiveness of sins is the same as justification according to Ps. 32:1, ‘Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven.’”<sup>9</sup> In the context of elaborating on the distinction between law and gospel, and the difference between faith and works, the Apology also reminds us that

since justification takes place through a free promise, it follows that we cannot justify ourselves. Otherwise, why would a promise be needed? And since the promise cannot be

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<sup>8</sup>Ken R. Schurb, *Does the Lutheran Confessions’ Emphasis on Subjective Justification Mitigate Their Teaching of Objective Justification?* (1982).

<sup>9</sup>Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:76, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), p. 117.

grasped in any other way than by faith, the gospel (which is, strictly speaking, the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the law does not teach. Nor is this a righteousness of the law. For the law requires of us our own works and our own perfection. But the promise freely offers to us, who are oppressed by sin and death, reconciliation on account of Christ, which is received not by works, but by faith alone. ... Therefore it follows that personal faith – by which an individual believes that his or her sins are remitted on account of Christ and that God is reconciled and gracious on account of Christ – receives the forgiveness of sins and justifies us.<sup>10</sup>

And in the Formula of Concord, the following declaration is made:

Regarding the righteousness of faith before God, we unanimously believe, teach, and confess...that poor sinful people are justified before God, that is, absolved – pronounced free of all sins and of the judgment of the damnation that they deserved, and accepted as children and heirs of eternal life – without the least bit of our own “merit or worthiness” [SC, “Creed,” 4], apart from all preceding, present, or subsequent works. We are justified on the basis of sheer grace, because of the sole merit, the entire obedience, and the bitter suffering, death, and the resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us as righteousness. The Holy Spirit conveys these benefits to us in the promise of the holy gospel. Faith is the only means through which we lay hold of them, accept them, apply them to ourselves, and appropriate them. Faith itself is a gift of God, through which we acknowledge Christ our redeemer in the Word of the gospel and trust in him. Only because of his obedience does God the Father forgive our sins by grace, regard us as upright and righteous, and give us eternal salvation.<sup>11</sup>

The Augsburg Confession is the most fundamental and most universal symbol of the Lutheran Reformation. It does not have a fully developed section expounding on the objective and subjective aspects of justification and forgiveness. But a recognition of these two aspects of justification and forgiveness is implicit in everything that it does say about Christ’s saving work, and about the Christian’s saving faith. The Augsburg Confession declares:

...it is taught that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God through our merit, work, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith when we believe that *Christ has suffered for us* and that *for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us*. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness in his sight, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:21-26] and 4[:5].<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:44-45, Kolb/Wengert p. 127.

<sup>11</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:9-11, Kolb/Wengert pp. 563-64. Punctuation slightly revised.

<sup>12</sup>Augsburg Confession IV:1-3 (Latin), Kolb/Wengert pp. 39,41. Emphases added.

Do note the construction. The saving truth of Christ that is to be believed is this: Christ has suffered for us, and for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. This saving truth is the essential content of the gospel. And this is what we believe when we believe the gospel, because it is true. It is true for everyone for whom Christ died already when it is preached, even before it is believed. It is not true *because* we believe it, or only *as* we believe it. And according to the Augsburg Confession, when we do believe this gospel – that for Christ’s sake our sin is forgiven – we then *receive* forgiveness of sin and *become* righteous before God, out of grace for Christ’s sake through faith. The forgiveness of sin in its objective dimension is the forgiveness that is “given” – in and through the means of grace. The forgiveness of sin in its individual and personal dimension is the forgiveness of sin that is “received” – by faith.

A bit further on in the Augsburg Confession, in its discussion of the fruitfulness of a true faith, we are reminded

that this faith is bound to yield good fruits, and that it ought to do good works commanded by God on account of God’s will, and not so that we may trust in these works to merit justification before God. For forgiveness of sins and justification are *taken hold of by faith*, as the saying of Christ also testifies [Luke 17:10]: “When you have done all [things]...say, ‘We are worthless slaves.’” The authors of the ancient church teach the same. For Ambrose says: “It is established by God that whoever believes in Christ shall be saved without work, by faith alone, *receiving* the forgiveness of sins as a gift.”<sup>13</sup>

Note again that forgiveness and justification are “taken hold of by faith.” This expression provides a very vivid illustration of the fact that what faith embraces is not just a divine proposal for the possible creation of something that does not actually exist yet. Forgiveness and justification in Christ are there, in the preached gospel. They are real, and can be grasped. And by faith they *are* grasped. If they are *not* grasped by someone for whom Christ died, they still were graspable. In the objective sense they were still true and real. The gospel was *for* that person, even if the gospel was never *received by* that person.

### **E. The Ancient Fathers and Father Martin**

At the very beginning of this part of our essay, we indicated that its thrust would be to explain “why objective justification mattered to the Reformers.” We freely concede that as far as the *terminology* of this topic is concerned, the Reformers did not usually speak of the objective component of our justification or forgiveness as an objective “justification.” But they most definitely *did* speak of the objective component of our justification or forgiveness as an objective “forgiveness.” And in light of what we have noted about the functional interchangeability of these terms, there is no substantial difference between acknowledging the “objective” aspect of our *justification* in Christ, and acknowledging the “objective” aspect of our *forgiveness* in Christ.

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<sup>13</sup>Augsburg Confession VI:1-3 (Latin), Kolb/Wengert p. 41. Emphases added. Punctuation slightly revised. The quotation purportedly from St. Ambrose is actually from a writing of an anonymous ancient author who is generally referred to today as “Ambrosiaster.”

An individual is justified by faith, as he believes in the justification that exists for him, and for all people, in Christ. Likewise, an individual receives the forgiveness of his sins, as he clings by faith to the forgiveness of sins that exists for him, and for all people, in Christ. There is a justification, and a forgiveness, that already exist in Christ as a result of Christ's finished saving work in history, and that are the "object" of saving faith for the penitent and believing subject.

Yet it is not only the Reformers of the sixteenth century, in their reading of Holy Scripture, who discerned and proclaimed this twofold truth. The best of the ancient Fathers of the church also understood this, and preached this. In explaining the meaning of St. Paul's teaching that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus" (Romans 3:23-24, ESV), St. John Chrysostom employs the metaphor of a king personally delivering a pardon or a reprieve to the human race – understood in this case as a body of imprisoned criminals. The "Golden Mouth" writes:

"All have sinned," says Paul [Romans 3:23]. 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. All, then, who run to Christ are saved by his grace and profit from his gift. But those who wish to find justification from the Law will also fall from grace. They will not be able to enjoy the King's loving-kindness because they are striving to gain salvation by their own efforts; they will draw down on themselves the curse of the Law because by the works of the Law no flesh will find justification.<sup>14</sup>

Chrysostom describes the justification and forgiveness that God established in Christ for all sinners, in terms of the divine King setting "all men" free from the chains of their sins. This objective truth then becomes the basis upon which individual sinners are now invited to "run to Christ," by faith, to partake personally of the benefits of humanity's pardon or reprieve.

In a truly remarkable letter that St. Ambrose of Milan penned to a layman named Irenaeus – a portion of which is quoted in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession – the "Pastoral Doctor" discusses original sin and its effects, natural law and the revealed Mosaic Law, the distinction between law and gospel, the objective forgiveness of all men in Christ, the evangelical and saving character of Baptism, and the personal justification of an individual baptized Christian by faith. Irenaeus had asked his pastor for an explanation of these words from St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: "For the Law works wrath; for where there is no Law, neither is there transgression" (4:15). As a part of his response, the bishop said this:

The Law of Moses...entered...into the place of the natural law. ...since deception had banished that [natural] law and nearly blotted it out of the human breast, pride reigned and disobedience was rampant. Therefore, that other [Law of Moses] took its place so that by its written expression it might challenge us and shut our mouth, in order to make the whole world subject to God. The world, however, became subject to him through the Law,

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<sup>14</sup>St. John Chrysostom, "Discourses against Judaizing Christians," II, I:7–II:1, *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 68 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1979), pp. 38-39.

because all are brought to trial by the prescript of the Law, and no one is justified by the works of the Law; in other words, because the knowledge of sin comes from the Law, but guilt is not remitted, the Law, therefore, which has made all men sinners, seems to have caused harm. But, when the Lord Jesus came he forgave all men the sin they could not escape, and canceled the decree against us by shedding his blood<sup>15</sup> [Colossians 2:14]. This is what he says: “By the Law sin abounded, but grace abounded by Jesus” [Romans 5:20], since after the whole world became subject he took away the sins of the whole world, as John bears witness, saying: “Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” [John 1:29] Let no one glory, then, in his own works, since no one is justified by his deeds, but one who is just has received a gift, being justified by Baptism. It is faith, therefore, which sets us free by the blood of Christ, for he is blessed whose sin is forgiven and to whom pardon is granted [Psalm 32:1].<sup>16</sup>

In his commentary, Ambrose does not treat the general forgiveness or justification of “all men” and of “the whole world,” in isolation from the personal forgiveness or justification of the one who has “received” the gift of the Lord’s justification in Baptism, and who by faith has been individually set free from sin through the blood of Christ. The personal and individual aspect of justification always presupposes the objective and general aspect of justification, and always builds on it. And the proclamation of the objective and general aspect of justification – when it is proclaimed rightly, and for the right reason – always serves, promotes, and feeds into, the personal or individual aspect of justification. The significance of what Jesus accomplished for all men, and for the whole world, is the content of what is preached for the sake of an individual’s justifying faith. These intimately-related truths of the gospel can never be separated, even though they can and should be distinguished – as St. Ambrose distinguishes them.

This is also the way Martin Luther approaches this, in the Smalcald Articles. Here, on behalf of the whole Lutheran Church, he begins his summary of “the first and chief article” by describing certain objective truths that “must be believed,” and that are “obtained or grasped” by faith alone:

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]).

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<sup>15</sup>The original Latin of this key sentence is as follows: *Sed veniens Dominus Jesus, peccatum omnibus, quod nemo poterat evadere, donavit, et chirographum nostrum sui sanguinis effusione delevit.*

<sup>16</sup>Ambrose of Milan, “Epistle 73” (to Irenaeus), *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 26 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), pp. 464, 467-68; and as quoted (in part) in Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:103, Kolb/Wengert pp. 137-38. The above text is conflated from both sources.

Immediately after this summary of what is to be believed, obtained, and grasped by a Christian, Luther goes on to describe the believing, the grasping, and the obtaining that allow these objective truths to be received for justification by the individual:

Now because *this must be believed* and may not be obtained or grasped otherwise with any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3[:28,26]: “For we hold that a person is justified by faith apart from works prescribed by the law”; and also, “that God alone is righteous and justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.” Nothing in this article can be conceded or given up, even if heaven and earth or whatever is transitory passed away. As St. Peter says in Acts 4[:12]: “There is no other name...given among mortals by which we must be saved.” “And by his bruises we are healed” (Isa. 53[:5]).<sup>17</sup>

The well-known axiomatic phrase “faith alone” makes an appearance here. We are justified by faith alone. Of course, the rejected antithesis to faith – as that which justifies – is “works prescribed by the law.” Luther teaches that we are justified by faith alone, exclusive of such works. He does *not* teach that we are justified by faith alone, exclusive of that which faith believes, or exclusive of that which is obtained or grasped by faith.

Faith, as that which justifies, is to be separated from the works of love and service that flow from faith, and that are spawned by faith. Faith, as that which justifies, is *not* to be separated from the saving work of *Christ* that flows into faith, and that spawns faith. Faith alone justifies before God, precisely because it believes, grasps, and obtains the objective, justifying truth of Christ. And as Luther explains it here, that truth includes the fact that Jesus Christ “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification”; the fact that Jesus Christ is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world”; the fact that the Lord has laid on Jesus Christ “the iniquity of us all”; and the fact that all who have sinned “are now justified without merit” by God’s grace, “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,” by his blood.

A Christian’s faith does not make any of this to be true. It is true because *God* made it to be true: in and through the perfect life of his Son; in and through the substitutionary death of his Son; and in and through the victorious resurrection of his Son. This truth does not exist *because of* faith, but it does exist *for the sake of* faith and *for the benefit of* faith. And God imputes this truth to those who do believe it. Luther emphasizes these points in a sermon for Easter Tuesday, when he says that

we should preach also forgiveness of sins in his name. This signifies nothing else than that the Gospel should be preached, which declares unto all the world that *in Christ the sins of all the world are swallowed up*, and that he suffered death to put away sin from us, and arose to devour it, and blot it out. All this he did, that whoever believeth, should have the comfort and assurance that it is reckoned unto him, even as if he himself had done it; that his work is mine and thine and all men’s; yea that he gives himself to us with all his gifts

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<sup>17</sup>Smalcald Articles II, I:1-5, Kolb/Wengert p. 301. Emphasis added.

to be our own personal property. Hence, as he is without sin and never dies by virtue of his resurrection even so I also am if I believe in him...<sup>18</sup>

In a more extensive sermon on one of the verses that he mentions in the Smalcald Articles, Luther notes that the proclamation of John the Baptist with respect to Jesus – “Behold, the Lamb of God!” (John 1:29) – is “an extraordinarily free and comforting sermon on Christ, our Savior.” The Son of God “assumes not only my sins but also those of the whole world, from Adam down to the very last mortal. These sins He takes upon Himself; for these He is willing to suffer and die...” And how, according to Luther, is this truth to be applied – in view of the distinction between law and gospel that governs the church’s proclamation? As far as the law is concerned, Luther states that the reason why it was necessary for the *world’s* sins to be assumed and taken upon himself by the Lamb of God, is because “The entire world...is under the dominion of sin and completely discredited before God.” Therefore, “Anyone who wishes to be saved must know that all his sins have been placed on the back of this Lamb!” As the gospel in this verse is then developed by Luther, he paraphrases the Baptist’s words, and draws out their meaning:

Therefore John points this Lamb out to his disciples, saying: “Do you want to know where the sins of the world are placed for forgiveness? Then don’t resort to the Law of Moses or betake yourselves to the devil; there, to be sure, you will find sins, but sins to terrify you and damn you. But *if you really want to find a place where the sins of the world are exterminated and deleted, then cast your gaze upon the cross.* The Lord placed all our sins on the back of this Lamb. ...”

Luther had already explained in this sermon that the reason why Jesus was willing to suffer and die under the weight of the world’s sins in this way, was so that “our sins may be expunged and we may attain eternal life and blessedness.” Now he explains *how* our sins are personally expunged from our lives in God’s sight, and how we personally attain eternal life and blessedness. This is by means of faith, which receives and rests in Christ; and not by means of works, or human religious efforts of any kind. He declares to his listeners:

Therefore a Christian must cling simply to this verse and let no one rob him of it. For there is no other comfort either in heaven or on earth to fortify us against all attacks and temptations, especially in the agony of death. And whoever believes that this Lamb bears the sins of all the world must regard pope and Turk as the Antichrist. For the pope has taught that the Christian must be concerned with bearing his own sin, atoning for it with alms and the like. ... But if what he teaches is true, then I, not Christ, am yoked and burdened with my sin. And then I would necessarily be lost and damned. But Christ does bear the sin – not only mine and yours or that of any other individual, or only of one kingdom or country, but the sin of the entire world. And you, too, are a part of the world.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Martin Luther, “Sermon for Easter Tuesday,” *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), Vol. 1.2, p. 316. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup>Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 22 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), pp. 161-64. Emphasis added.



In both of these sermons, Luther's language is very vivid and evocative. In the *objective* sense of forgiveness, in Christ, the sins of the world are "swallowed up," and are "exterminated and deleted." In the *subjective* sense of forgiveness, the believer who clings to Christ in the gospel has "the comfort and assurance" that this swallowing up, extermination, and deletion of sin is reckoned to him, and that his own sins are therefore "expunged."

Luther touches on yet another of the verses that he had cited in the Smalcald Articles – from the Prophet Isaiah – when he comments on the statement in the Epistle to the Hebrews that Jesus, in his death on the cross, had "made purification for sins" (Hebrews 1:3). Luther explains that it is not we who make purification of our own sins, by our penances or good works, but that *Jesus* makes this purification for us, in our stead. According to Luther, in saying that it is *Christ* who makes this purification, the author of this epistle

makes useless absolutely all the righteousnesses and deeds of penitence of men. But he praises the exceedingly great mercy of God, namely, that "He made purification for sins," not through us but through Himself, not for the sins of others but for our sins. Therefore we should despair of our penitence, of our purification from sins; for *before we repent, our sins have already been forgiven*. Indeed, first His very purification, on the contrary, also produces penitence in us, just as His righteousness produces our righteousness. This is what Is. 53:6 says: "All we like sheep have gone astray, we have turned everyone to his own way, and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all."<sup>20</sup>

The objective forgiveness of humanity's sins in Christ is not a remote or detached truth as far as the conscience of the individual Christian is concerned. Even though it involves all the people for whom Christ died – and that is everyone! – it is pondered by each believer in a very personal way. Luther gives evangelical direction to our meditation and reflection in this respect, by telling us that Jesus made purification "not for the sins of others but for *our* sins." Each of us, in our personal repentance and faith, is able to say with relief and joy that purification was made by *my* Savior for *my* sins. A conscience that is properly comforted by the gospel no longer fears, therefore, that this purification was probably made for the sins of others, who are more worthy, and not for my sins.

But also, since this purification was accomplished *through Christ*, in the realm of sacred history, and not *through us*, in the realm of our religious experience, we appreciate the significance of the fact that "*before we repent, our sins have already been forgiven*." To the conscience of someone who is penitent, and who is very much aware of his inability to produce anything that could conceivably earn God's favor, this assurance instills within him a certain confidence that his sins are truly forgiven. His forgiveness is not based on anything that is in him. It is based on the purification that Christ accomplished for everyone – and consequently *also* for him – long before he repented or believed.

In the objective sense, our sins were not just *potentially* forgiven before we repented. It is not as if the "ingredients" of our forgiveness were laid out on the counter of God's kitchen, in

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<sup>20</sup>Martin Luther, "Lectures on Hebrews," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 29 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), pp. 112-13. Emphasis added.

preparation for the possibility of these ingredients being mixed together to form a “forgiveness cake” if and when we might someday repent and believe. On the basis of Hebrews 1:3 and Isaiah 53:6, “the foremost teacher of the Augsburg Confession,” who “More than all others...understood the true, correct interpretation of the Augsburg Confession,”<sup>21</sup> teaches us that “before we repent, our sins have already been forgiven.” And if someone might be tempted to think that it is his *penitence* that earns or produces his personal forgiveness or personal purification, that person would similarly be taught by Luther that the purification for sin that was accomplished by Christ is actually *what produces our penitence* – and the faith that receives the forgiveness which Christ established and brought into existence for us, by his atoning death.

## **F. Forgiveness, Justification, and the Resurrection**

In much of what Luther says about the objective justification or forgiveness that has been brought into existence for humanity by Christ, he ties this specifically to the Lord’s atoning death. But this justification or forgiveness is tied also to the Lord’s resurrection. Later Lutherans would say, in fact, that it is tied *chiefly* to the Lord’s resurrection. Robert D. Preus wrote, for example, that

According to all of Scripture Christ made a full atonement for the sins of all mankind. Atonement (at-one-ment) means reconciliation. If God was not reconciled by the saving work of Christ, if His wrath against sin was not appeased by Christ’s sacrifice, if God did not respond to the perfect obedience and suffering and death of His Son for the sins of the world by forgiveness, by declaring the sinful world to be righteous in Christ – if all this were not so, if something remains to be done by us or through us or in us, then there is no finished atonement. But Christ said, “It is finished.” And God raised Him from the dead and justified Him, pronounced Him, the sin bearer, righteous (I Timothy 3:16), and thus in Him pronounced the entire world of sinners righteous (Romans 4:25).<sup>22</sup>

A central feature of this way of explaining the full meaning of humanity’s justification in Christ is a reading of 1 Timothy 3:16 that sees that verse’s statement about Christ’s being “justified in the spirit” (ASV) (*edikaiōthē en pneumati*) to be a reference to his resurrection, and to the significance of his resurrection for all whose sins he had borne. This is especially evident

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<sup>21</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration VII:33-34, Kolb/Wengert p. 598. Kolb/Wengert p. 598.

<sup>22</sup>Robert D. Preus, “Objective Justification,” *Concordia Theological Seminary Newsletter* (Spring 1981). In this article, Preus also wrote: “The doctrine of objective justification is a lovely teaching drawn from Scripture, which tells us that God, who has loved us so much that He gave His only to be our Savior, has for the sake of Christ’s substitutionary atonement declared the entire world of sinners for whom Christ died to be righteous (Romans 5:17-19). Objective justification, which is God’s verdict of acquittal over the whole world, is not identical with the atonement; it is not another way of expressing the fact that Christ has redeemed the world. Rather it is *based upon* the substitutionary work of Christ, or better, it is a part of the atonement itself. It is God’s response to all that Christ did to save us; God’s verdict that Christ’s work is finished, that He has been indeed reconciled, propitiated. His anger has been stilled and He is at peace with the world, and therefore He has declared the entire world in Christ to be righteous” (Emphasis added. Punctuation slightly revised.).

also in this carefully-worded formulation, which arose in the context of a discussion of objective justification in the Missouri Synod in 1981:

When the Lord Jesus was “justified” (I Timothy 3:16) in His resurrection and exaltation, God acquitted Him not of sins of His own, but of all the sins of mankind, which as the Lamb of God He had been bearing (John 1:29), and by the imputation of which He had been “made...to be sin for us” (II Corinthians 5:21), indeed, “made a curse for us” (Galatians 3:13). In this sense, the justification of Jesus was the justification of those whose sins He bore. The treasure of justification or forgiveness gained by Christ for all mankind is truly offered, given, and distributed in and through the Gospel and sacraments of Christ. Faith alone can receive this treasure offered in the Gospel, and this faith itself is entirely a gracious gift and creation of God through the means of grace. Faith adds nothing to God’s forgiveness in Christ offered in the Gospel, but only receives it. Thus, “He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and He that believeth not the Son, shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on Him” (John 3:30).<sup>23</sup>

The resurrection of Christ is his vindication and justification by God the Father. In the Father’s raising of his Son from the grave, the Father testified to his full acceptance of Jesus’ sacrifice on behalf of all humanity. And in the same way as Jesus had been condemned in the place of all people in his suffering and death, so too was he justified in the place of all people in his resurrection.

In the cross, the sins of the world were placed upon Christ. And those who had actually committed these sins were vicariously condemned, in the condemnation of their substitute and Savior. Now, in the resurrection, the sins of the world – which had been successfully and fully atoned for by Jesus’ death – are removed from Christ, and lifted off of him. In other words, he is absolved of those sins. And those who had actually committed these sins are vicariously absolved and justified, in the absolution and justification of their substitute and Savior.

In his own reading of 1 Timothy 3:16, Luther did *not* interpret that particular verse in precisely this fashion.<sup>24</sup> But on the basis of other passages of Scripture – especially Romans 4:25, which Luther *did* understand to be teaching a direct connection between the Lord’s resurrection and humanity’s justification – Luther’s actual teaching on this point ended up being essentially the same as the teaching of these more recent Lutheran interpreters.

In one of his Easter sermons, Luther develops his thoughts about the death of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ, in the form of a comparison between two contrasting “pictures”: a “picture” of the events of Good Friday, which portrays the soteriological significance of that day; and a “picture” of the events of Easter Sunday, which portrays the soteriological significance of that day. He begins by saying that the first “picture”

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<sup>23</sup>Walter A. Maier, statement made to the Board of Control of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, January 30, 1981; quoted in Robert D. Preus.

<sup>24</sup>See Martin Luther, “Lectures on 1 Timothy,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 28 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1973), p. 306.

is sombre, full of distress, misery, and woes; it is the scene of blood presented to us on Good Friday – Christ crucified between murderers and dying with excruciating pain. This scene we must contemplate with much earnestness, ...to realize that it all happened on account of our sins, yea, that Christ as the true High Priest sacrificed Himself for us and paid with His death our debts. ... Therefore, as often as we remember or view this doleful, bloody scene, we ought to bear in mind that we have before us our sins and the terrible wrath of God against them, a wrath so dire that no creature could endure it, that all atonement became impossible except the one made by the sacrifice and death of the Son of God.

But then, as Luther moves on to a consideration of what happened *after* the Lord's suffering and death – under the great weight and judgment of our sins – he begins to speak in a different way. He says that now “this picture of sorrow is changed.” Indeed, before three full days had gone by,

our Lord and Saviour presents to us another picture, beautiful, full of life, lovely and cheerful, in order that we might have the sure consolation that not only *our sins were annihilated in the death of Christ*, but that *by His resurrection a new eternal righteousness and life was obtained*, as St. Paul says, Rom. 4: “Christ was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.” And 1 Co. 15: “If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.” As in the former scene we saw the burden of our sin upon Him and bringing Him to the cross, so in this other scene of the resurrection *we witness no longer sin, pain and sorrow, but only righteousness, joy and happiness*. It is the victory of life over death – a life everlasting, with which this temporal existence on earth cannot be compared. Of this we have reason to rejoice.

As Luther then reflects more deeply and practically on these two contrasting “pictures” of Christ, he states:

Merely to view the former scene would be terrible, but when we view it in connection with the glad event of the resurrection, and when we bear in mind why our Lord suffered thus, we will derive from such a contemplation much benefit and consolation. It will become apparent to us how inexpressibly great the love of God toward us poor sinners was, as He had compassion on our misery, even to such an amazing extent that He did not spare His beloved and only Child, but gave Him up for us, to bear upon the cross and in death the burden of our transgressions, which were too heavy for us and would have crushed us to the earth. This load was taken from us and placed by God Himself upon His Son, who, as God from eternity, could alone bear the heavy weight of sin. Upon Him we now find our burden. Let us leave it there, for there is no one else to be found who could better relieve us of it. The other scene presents to us Christ no longer in woe and misery, weighed down with the ponderous mass of our sins, which God has laid upon Him, but beautiful, glorious and rejoicing; for *all the sins have disappeared from Him*. From this we have a right to conclude: *If our sins, on account of the sufferings of Christ, lie no longer upon us, but are taken from our shoulders by God Himself and placed upon His Son, and if on Easter, after the resurrection, they are no more to be seen, where then are they?*

Micah truly says: *They are sunk into the depth of the sea, and no devil nor any body else shall find them again* (Mic. 7:18-19).

After recounting the objective realities that have been established for those for whom Jesus died and rose again – established *in his death and resurrection* – Luther goes on to discuss the importance and role of faith, as that which alone receives the benefit of our Savior’s death and resurrection on our behalf. Where there is no faith, there is no such reception; and the benefits of the Lord’s death and resurrection are not personally applied or enjoyed. Luther says:

This article of our faith is glorious and blessed; whoever holds it not is no Christian... If we desire to be true Christians it is necessary for us firmly to establish in our hearts through faith this article, that Christ, who bore our sins upon the cross and died in payment for them, arose again from the dead for our justification. The more firmly we believe this, the more will our hearts rejoice and be comforted. For it is impossible not to be glad when we see Christ alive, a pure and beautiful being, who before, on account of our sins, was wretched and pitiable in death and in the grave. We are now convinced that our transgressions are removed and forever put away.<sup>25</sup>

According to God’s will and plan as revealed throughout the Old Testament, Christ’s suffering did not redeem only those who would eventually believe in this redemption, and thereby partake of its saving benefits. Rather, as Luther says in a sermon on Chapter 19 of St. John’s Gospel, “Christ’s suffering is the fulfillment of Scripture and the accomplishment of the redemption of *the human race*.” The words that Jesus spoke from the cross just before he gave up his spirit, “It is accomplished” (John 19:30), therefore mean *this* for the redeemed human race:

The Lamb of God is slain and offered for the sins of the world [John 1:29; Rev. 13:8]. The true High Priest has completed His offering [Heb. 10:12ff.]; the Son of God has given and offered up His body and life as a payment for sin; sin has been blotted out; God’s wrath appeased; death overcome; the kingdom of heaven won and heaven opened. Everything is fulfilled and completed, and no one may dispute, as if anything yet remained to be fulfilled and accomplished.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Martin Luther, “First Easter-Sermon,” *Dr. Martin Luther’s House-Postil* (second edition) (Columbus, Ohio: J. A. Schulze, Publisher, 1884), Vol. II, pp. 268-71. Emphases added.

<sup>26</sup>Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 69 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), p. 265. Emphasis added.

Some helpful observations have been made in more recent times specifically regarding the original Greek of Romans 4:25 – which Luther cites in this sermon and in the Smalcald Articles – where the apostle writes that Jesus “was handed over to death for our trespasses and was raised for our justification.” This verse can also be translated to say that Jesus was handed over or delivered up “because of” (*dia*) our trespasses, and was raised up “because of” (*dia*) our justification. This would probably be a better rendering, in fact. Siegbert W. Becker points out that “When Paul says that Christ was delivered because of our transgressions, the *dia* [‘because of’] is without a doubt retrospective. He was put to death because our sins had been imputed to him. And while it is true that ‘our’ in this context refers to believers, and [that] only believers can *say* what Paul says here, yet it is crystal clear that what Paul asserts here of believers is true of all men. ... It is clear that *paradothē dia ta paraptōmata ēmōn* [‘delivered up because of our transgressions’] stands in exact parallelism to *ēgerthē dia tēn dikaiōsin*

This all pertains, in Christ, to “the human race” – not as a pregnant potentiality that is in need of being “completed” by faith in each individual, but as that which has been “completed” already, and needs now only to be distributed and received. This truth allows a pastor’s preaching of the message and meaning of Christ’s death and resurrection to be a gracious announcement and bestowal of a finished salvation, to and upon those who hear him in faith. Such preaching is not merely a proposal for a salvation that does not really exist yet, but that may or will be brought into existence for each individual under certain conditions. According to the gospel, and what is offered in the gospel, when Jesus said “It is accomplished” (or “It is finished”), this is exactly what he meant. To be sure, faith must receive this. And if *faith* does not receive it, it is not received at all. But faith merely *receives* it. Faith does not *complete* it.

In another sermon for Easter, Luther expands on the vicarious aspect of Christ’s death and resurrection by explaining how “everyone” is benefitted by his death and resurrection – since this was all accomplished, not for Christ himself, but for us sinners. Luther proclaims, with vivid and colorful imagery, that

our Lord Jesus Christ by his triumph overwhelmed and felled death and the devil; the devil he strangled in his own body; death he drowned in his own blood; sin he erased with his martyrdom and suffering. All this he personally accomplished, but not for himself. For as true, eternal God and Lord over all things, he did not require such a victory for himself; even less did he have need to become man, and still less to suffer under Pontius Pilate. However, because so great and eminent a personage accomplished this, you, I, and everyone else, all of us are benefitted. That is the power and the fruit of Christ’s suffering and resurrection.

And Luther then also emphasizes – as we would expect – how the objective, vicarious “erasure” of human sin through the events of the cross and empty tomb, becomes a comforting “erasure” of an *individual’s* sin, by faith:

From these events we must understand what a majestic, eminent person Christ is, true God and man. His suffering and death were of tremendous import and his resurrection from the dead, glorious and triumphant. Now the power and the fruit of all this is that we believe and know that his victory and triumph were intended for and bequeathed to all, as a gift to all who believe in him. Therefore, we must not only believe that Christ died and rose from the dead in his own person, but also that we partake of this suffering and resurrection as a treasured gift and derive genuine comfort from the same... ..the victory and the glorious resurrection of this most noble person is a gift to all believers, for each one to have against his own death; I against mine, you against yours, for Christ’s resurrection is greater than heaven and earth. *By it the sins and death of all mankind have been swallowed up.* My righteousness cannot redeem me from a single sin, let alone the entire burden of sin and

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*ēmōn* [raised up because of our justification]. If the *dia* [‘because of’] is retrospective in the first member of the parallelism, it is very natural that we should understand the second *dia* [‘because of’] as retrospective also. *Dikaiōsis* [Justification] is the act of pronouncing a verdict of not guilty over someone. The genitive pronoun *ēmōn* [‘our’] obviously must be an objective genitive, and the normal way to translate in this context would then be, ‘Christ was raised because we had been justified’ (“Objective Justification” [1982]).

death. But because this person is true God and man, he accomplishes it, gaining an eternal, glorious victory over sin, death, and the devil. *The same victory is mine, if only I believe in him and confess him to be the person who has accomplished all this for me and all believers.* If a person does not wish to believe this, let him be. We preach to those who gladly hear and who have need of this message.<sup>27</sup>

### **G. The Formula of Concord's Teaching and Luther's Teaching**

At the end of Article III of the Solid Declaration of the Formula of Concord, which deals with the subject of the righteousness of faith, we read: "For any further, necessary explanation of this lofty and sublime article on justification before God, upon which the salvation of our souls depends, we wish to recommend to everyone the wonderful, magnificent exposition by Dr. Luther of St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, and for the sake of brevity we refer to it at this point."<sup>28</sup> That is a pretty weighty endorsement of Luther's Lectures on Galatians! And it is a worthy endorsement, because these lectures do indeed embody some of the best material produced by the older Luther – on justification itself, and on the other articles of faith that are organically connected to justification.

By this point in his life, Luther's theology had been brought to a greater maturity and clarity, in the crucible of his conflicts with both Rome and the Enthusiasts; and in the context of his deepening pastoral and personal appreciation for the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners – humanity's only hope, and Luther's only hope. And as we would expect, the Galatians Lectures do address the subject of justification and forgiveness according to the objective and subjective categories – even though that terminology is not employed in so many words.

In Galatians 3:13, St. Paul writes: "Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – for it is written: Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree." Luther's comments on this verse focus in on the meaning of the statement that it was "for us" that Christ became a curse, and, in our place, placed himself under the judgment of the law against our sins. He emphasizes that Paul "does not say that Christ became a curse on His own account, but that He became a curse 'for us.'" He goes on to explain that

Christ is innocent so far as His own Person is concerned; therefore He should not have been hanged from the tree. But because, according to the Law, every thief should have been hanged, therefore, according to the Law of Moses, Christ Himself should have been hanged; for He bore the person of a sinner and a thief – and not of one but of all sinners and thieves. For we are sinners and thieves, and therefore we are worthy of death and eternal damnation. But Christ took all our sins upon Himself, and for them He died on the cross. Therefore it was appropriate for Him to become a thief and, as Isaiah says (53:12), to be "numbered among the thieves."

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<sup>27</sup>Martin Luther, Sermon for "Holy Easter," in *The Complete Sermons of Martin Luther*, Vol. 6, pp. 13-14. Emphases added.

<sup>28</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:67, Kolb/Wengert p. 573.

Luther goes on then to describe what is revealed to faith, and what faith perceives, when the gospel of Christ's substitutionary death for *all* sinners is announced to *individual* sinners like us: "And this is our highest comfort, to clothe and wrap Christ this way in my sins, your sins, and the sins of the entire world, and in this way to behold Him bearing all our sins." And Luther then contrasts the mystery of this "great exchange" with the moralistic Roman teaching on how sin is removed from sinners, and how sinners are justified:

When [Christ] is beheld this way, He easily removes all the fanatical opinions of our opponents about justification by works. For the papists dream about a kind of faith "formed by love." Through this they want to remove sins and be justified. This is clearly to unwrap Christ and to unclothe Him from our sins, to make Him innocent, to burden and overwhelm ourselves with our own sins, and to behold them, not in Christ but in ourselves. This is to abolish Christ and make Him useless. For if it is true that we abolish sins by the works of the Law and by love, then Christ does not take them away, but we do. But if He is truly the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, who became a curse for us, and who was wrapped in our sins, it necessarily follows that we cannot be justified and take away sins through love. For God has laid our sins, not upon us but upon Christ, His Son. If they are taken away by Him, then they cannot be taken away by us. All Scripture says this, and we confess and pray the same thing in the Creed when we say: "I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who suffered, was crucified, and died for us."

Returning to his exposition of the deeply significant "for us" phrase in the verse at hand – with hints of some of the imagery that we see in his hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice"<sup>29</sup> – Luther states:

This is the most joyous of all doctrines and the one that contains the most comfort. It teaches that we have the indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God. 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."

When Jesus became, by imputation, all sinners and every sinner, and when he took upon himself not just an abstract concept of sin, but all the actual sins of all sinful people, he was hauled before

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<sup>29</sup>See especially stanzas 4 and 5:

4. But God beheld my wretched state / Before the world's foundation, / And, mindful of His mercies great, / He planned my soul's salvation. / A father's heart He turned to me, / Sought my redemption fervently: / He gave His dearest Treasure.

5. He spoke to His beloved Son: / "'Tis time to have compassion. / Then go, bright Jewel of My crown, / And bring to man salvation. / From sin and sorrow set him free; / Slay bitter death for him, that he / May live with Thee forever." (Martin Luther, *Nun freut euch, liebe Christen g'mein*, translated by Richard Massie)



the bar of his own divine law. And in the stead of all sinners he received the condemnation of that law. Luther continues:

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.

In the same way as the sins that were imputed to Christ were real sins, so too was his expiation for sin a real expiation. The objective soteriological consequence of this expiation is described by Luther as the world now having been “purged” from all sins, and having been “set free” from death and every evil; and as sin and death now having been “abolished” by Jesus. These things are true for the world *in Christ*, and are announced in the gospel for the absolution of those who believe. These things do not negate the damning judgment of God’s law that abides on unbelief, and on the sins of unbelievers, *outside of Christ*.

To be sure, this is a paradox. Luther describes the paradox in terms of a “duel” between “righteousness” personified and “sin” personified. This duel is fought in and upon Christ, who by nature and obedience is the Righteous One, but who by imputation is the universal sinner. As Luther discusses *this*, it is now the hymn “Christ Jesus Lay in Death’s Strong Bands”<sup>30</sup> that is called to mind by some of his phrases. He says:

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. “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen” (1 Cor. 15:57). 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

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<sup>30</sup>See especially stanzas 4 and 5:

4. It was a strange and dreadful strife / When Life and Death contended. / The victory remained with life, / The reign of death was ended; / Holy Scripture plainly saith / That death is swallowed up by death, / In vain it rages o’er us. / Alleluia!

5. Here the true Paschal Lamb we see, / Whom God so freely gave us; / He died on the accursed tree – / So strong His love – to save us. / See, His blood doth mark our door; / Faith points to it, death passes o’er, / And Satan cannot harm us. / Alleluia! (Martin Luther, *Christ lag in Tobesbanden*, translated by Richard Massie)

one of them must yield and be conquered, since they come together and collide with such a powerful impact. Thus the sin of the entire world attacks righteousness with the greatest possible impact and fury. What happens? Righteousness is eternal, immortal, and invincible. Sin, too, is a very powerful and cruel tyrant, dominating and ruling over the whole world, capturing and enslaving all men. In short, sin is a great and powerful god who devours the whole human race, all the learned, holy, powerful, wise, and unlearned men. He, I say, attacks Christ and wants to devour Him as he has devoured all the rest. But he does not see that He is a Person of invincible and eternal righteousness. In this duel, therefore, it is necessary for sin to be conquered and killed, and for righteousness to prevail and live. Thus *in Christ all sin is conquered, killed, and buried; and righteousness remains the victor and the ruler eternally.*<sup>31</sup>

In this struggle between righteousness and sin, righteousness won – decisively and irreversibly. And it was a fight to the death. In the conquest of sin that took place in Christ, therefore, the sin of all people – which he bore – was not just suppressed or curtailed. It was killed and buried. And also in Christ, for the people whose sin he had carried, righteousness is now the victor and king.

In a sermon on the third chapter of St. John's Gospel, Luther brings out the parallelism between the law and the gospel, and between the realities that the law and the gospel each describe and address, even more vividly than in the Galatians Lectures. He begins by noting that Jesus had proclaimed "to Nicodemus and to the whole world that God sent His Son into the world, not to condemn the world but to save it" [cf. John 3:17]; but he also notes that, according to Jesus, "such salvation comes from faith, for whoever believes in Christ does not enter into judgment" [cf. John 3:18]. So, depending on whether this is viewed from above or from below, the whole world is either saved or not saved. From above, according to the finished work of Christ on behalf of all men, the world is saved. From below – the realm of faith or unbelief – the world as such is not saved, but only those individuals in the world who believe. In exploring and contrasting the faith of believers, and the unbelief of unbelievers, Luther muses that

Such a message should really dissolve all discord and unite us in thanks to God night and day. The whole world should jump and dance for joy. But, as it happens, the world cannot endure this message. If a man will not bear the proclamation of good news, how could he endure the announcement of misfortune, that is, of the fact that he is damned and lost?

The gospel that all people should believe, but that all do not believe, is "the joyful message" that

the judgment is over; this means that *the wrath of God, hell, and damnation are no more*. For the Son of God came that we might be saved and delivered from death and hell. Then what is still lacking? Faith. People refuse to believe this. God gives His Son to save the world; but the world says: "It is not true that the world is steeped in sin and is damned."

The objective consequence of Christ's work, and the content of the gospel that is now to be preached for salvation, is that in Christ there is no more judgment, no more wrath, and no more

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<sup>31</sup>Martin Luther, "Lectures on Galatians" (1535), *Luther's Works*, Vol. 26 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), pp. 276-77, 279-81. Emphases added.

damnation. The gospel is not a message merely that a way for these things to be abolished in the future is now available. It is a message that these things *have been abolished* in Christ. But since the unbelieving world refuses to acknowledge its *need* for salvation, it is blind to the salvation that has *already been procured* for it. Therefore, as we read in John's Gospel, "this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light" (John 3:19). Luther paraphrases and applies this verse, stating that it is as though Christ wished to say: "Whoever believes, does not go to hell; whoever does not believe, already has the sentence of death pronounced on him." He then asks:

Why? Well, because he does not believe in Christ. This is the judgment: that such an ineffably comforting doctrine of God's grace, procured for the world through Christ, is proclaimed, but that the world still wants to believe the devil rather than God and His beloved Son. And this despite the fact that God assures us: "*Sin, hell, judgment, and God's wrath have all been terminated by the Son.*" We wretched people might well bewail the sin into which we fell through Adam, the death which resulted, and all the attendant misery, also the judgment of God which we must bear. All this often makes it appear that God is angry with us, that God is too harsh and stern, like an unfair judge. But God wants to inform us in this text: "Good and well. Through My Son I shall cancel My charge against you so that you need lament no more. To be sure, you have sinned, and with this sin you have deserved the judgment of God. But your sin shall be pardoned, death shall be abolished; I shall no longer remember man's sin, in which he is born and in which he lived. The accounts are to be considered settled. God will not again call a single sin to mind. Just believe in My Son." Now what is still lacking? Why the judgment if *all sin has been removed by the Son*? The answer is that the judgment is incurred by man's refusal to accept Christ, the Son of God. Of course, man's sin, both that inherited from Adam and that committed by man himself, is deserving of death. But this judgment results from man's unwillingness to hear, to tolerate, and to accept the Savior, *who removed sin, bore it on His shoulders, and locked up the portals of hell.*

Luther very artfully compares and contrasts what we would describe as the objective and subjective aspects of God's forgiveness. In the objective sense, sin, hell, judgment, and wrath have already been "terminated" by Christ; and "all sin" has already been "removed" by Christ. In view of the fact that this has been accomplished for everyone by his Son, God the Father now invites us by faith to "accept Christ" and all that he accomplished, and thereby to receive individually – in the subjective sense – the canceling of his charge against us, the pardoning and forgetting of our sin, and the abolishing of our death. Luther is emphatic that the gospel

is not a harmful message; it is one that helps and saves. Still it is despised by nearly all... And the preachers also wrangle with one another over it, whereas they should do nothing but praise and thank God, rejoice in Christ, and say: "God be praised in eternity that *judgment has been abolished!* We shall rejoice for evermore." But this does not happen. To be sure, *the judgment has been removed, and hell and God's wrath have been removed. Security and peace between God and us have also been established through the Son*, who did not come to condemn the world – the world was already condemned before His coming – but to save the world. All that is still lacking is the acceptance of the Son.

It is interesting to note that Luther criticizes the preachers' unedifying wrangling over the gospel precisely in the context of his explanation of these objective truths *of* the gospel: that judgment *has been* abolished; that judgment, hell, and God's wrath *have been* removed; and that security and peace between God and us human beings *have been* established – all through Christ, the Son of God. Let *us* not wrangle over these truths. Let us *preach* them, so that those who repent and believe can be comforted *by* them. Luther points out that Jesus himself is implicitly offering such comfort to those whom he invites to believe in him, when Jesus says, "This is the judgment, that the light has come into the world" (John 3:19). According to Luther – as he paraphrases the verse – the Lord's meaning is this:

"It is a grand and blessed light which shines into your hearts and says: 'Fear not the wrath of God, for God is gracious to you.' Even if your sin and your conscience plague and oppress you and you stand in awe of God's judgment, you must realize that *all has been changed* and that *judgment has been abolished*. Instead of harboring fear of the Final Judgment you must yearn and long for it, since it does not denote your judgment at all but your redemption." At that time we shall be delivered from the last enemy, death (1 Cor. 15:26); our bodies will rise again from the grave. Devil, death, and worms will cease; and God's disfavor will end. This judgment will draw you from the grave and deliver you from all evil. Therefore the Day of Judgment will be a time of rejoicing for you, far more so than the wedding day is for the bride; for this terrible Day has been converted into a happy and desirable Day for you. Thus *all is well if you believe*. But *those who love darkness more than light will experience the reverse*. They must live in dread of the Last Day. For the believer, the thought of this Day is comforting, since condemnation and the terrible judgment are gone.<sup>32</sup>

In his treatise "Against Latomus," Luther expands on the objective/subjective distinction in the form of a comparison between what Christ did for everyone, in his death and resurrection; and what the Holy Spirit does and will do for us, in our life of faith and in our future resurrection. He begins by quoting St. Paul's words from his Epistle to the Romans, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death" (8:2). And then Luther asks:

Why does he not say that, "It has set me free from sin and death"? Has not Christ set us free from sin and death once and for all? Paul, however, is speaking of the proper operation of the law of the Spirit, which does what Christ has merited. Indeed, *Christ once and for all absolved and freed everyone from sin and death when He merited for us the law of the Spirit of Life*. But what did that Spirit of Life do? He has not yet freed us from death and sin, for we still must die, we still must labor under sin; but in the end He will free us. Yet *He has already liberated us from the law of sin and death, that is, from the kingdom and tyranny of sin and death*. Sin is indeed present, but having lost its tyrannic power, it can do nothing; death indeed impends, but having lost its sting, it can neither harm nor terrify.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Martin Luther, "Sermons on the Gospel of St. John," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 22, pp. 381-85. Emphases added.

<sup>33</sup>Martin Luther, "Against Latomus," *Luther's Works*, Vol. 32 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), p. 207. Emphases added.

The propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, and the resurrection of Christ, merited *for* the world the way of salvation that the Holy Spirit now implements *in* the world. The meritorious sacrifice of Jesus, and God’s acceptance of that sacrifice, resulted in a real absolution of “everyone”; and “everyone” was – in Christ – thereby “freed” from sin and death. “Everyone” in this context does not mean everyone who believes, because not everyone for whom Jesus died *does* eventually believe. But Luther clearly connects this absolution to the Son’s *earning* of salvation, and not only to the Holy Spirit’s *application* of salvation.

And yet, as Luther also emphasizes, it is only *in the application*, and in the faith which the Holy Spirit works in Christians, that believers are *personally* liberated from the kingdom and tyranny of sin and death. Without the converting and regenerating work of the Spirit – through the means of grace – the absolution of “everyone” does not actually *benefit* everyone. Ultimately, that absolution benefits only those who do eventually receive it by faith.

## Part II: Why Objective Justification Matters to Us

### A. Luther and the Theologians of the Age of Orthodoxy

Martin Luther’s appearance on the scene of church history, at the pivotal time when he did appear, was in some ways like the striking of a huge lightening bolt, which jolted and shocked Christendom as a whole. Andreas Musculus – one of the Concordists – said of Luther:

Since the Apostles’ time, no greater man has lived upon the earth. God has poured out all His gifts on this one man. Between the old teachers (even Hilary and Augustine) and Luther, there is as wide a difference as between the shining of the moon and the light of the sun.<sup>34</sup>

While we might not agree with all of the superlative praises that have been heaped upon Luther by his admirers over the centuries, we would grant that there is some basis for these statements: in Luther’s penetrating grasp of what was truly ailing the church of his time; in his clear perception and articulation of the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners; and in his unwavering personal reliance on the promises of the Word of God, in life and in death. It does not surprise us, therefore, that the teachers of the church in the generations that followed him, were not able fully to live up to his stature; or to reflect in their work, as brilliantly as Luther did in his ministry, the light of heavenly, evangelical truth.

One key area where many of the Lutheran dogmaticians of the late sixteenth century and seventeenth century definitely did fall short of the “gold standard” of Luther, was in their too-frequent employment of Aristotelian philosophical categories in their theological thinking and writing. These categories – and other even more incongruous ideas and assumptions from the world of pagan philosophy – had been *severely* overused by the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages. While Luther did occasionally employ some Aristotelian terms and concepts, it is

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<sup>34</sup>Andreas Musculus, quoted in Charles Porterfield Krauth, *The Conservative Reformation and Its Theology* (Philadelphia: General Council Publication Board, 1899), p. 311.

pretty clear to those who are familiar with his prodigious theological output that he did not value these categories very highly, and did not use them very frequently. His approach to God, and to the things that God had revealed and instituted, was Pauline and Abrahamic, and not Aristotelian. He no doubt sensed that the stark law-gospel contrasts of God's Word would lose much of their crushing and healing power, if they were unnaturally smoothed over by a philosophical dissection, or filtered through the screen of a philosophical construct, rather than just being proclaimed in their full force and mystery.

But Luther's friend and colleague Philip Melanchthon was not as averse to using these terms and concepts. As we all know, in his later years especially, Melanchthon got himself into quite a bit of trouble through his teaching on the "three causes" of conversion. In Article II of the Formula of Concord, the Lutheran Church as a whole rejected the synergistic implications of that unhelpful foray into the thought patterns of the Aristotelian causation paradigm. But in other areas of theology, this less cautious opinion of Melanchthon – regarding the usefulness of philosophical categories in theology – was largely followed by the teachers of the Lutheran Church.

There was not just one way in which this Aristotelian causation thinking was applied by the Lutheran theologians who lived in the decades after Luther's life. But the basic and most common structure of it is described by Bjarne Wollan Teigen, who notes that four "causes" of a thing – material, formal, efficient, and final – were usually posited and described

after the fashion of the familiar illustration of the statue: the marble block = the material cause; the sculpting = the efficient cause; the shape of the statue = the formal cause; and the final cause = the purpose for which the statue is intended. Hence it is not really a statue until it is admired or worshiped. ... Recent scholars have demonstrated that Aristotle never intended to set up such a rigid, mechanical form for explaining phenomena. One cannot find in Aristotle's expositions his applying the four causes to one example. He generally varies them, using one or two of the causes in one analysis and others in a different arrangement as the material which he is examining might suggest. His system, it has been noted, went into a dogmatic degeneration in the Middle Ages. The scholars also generally agree that this four-fold analysis might work fairly well with respect to man-made objects (statues, libraries, etc.), but the analysis imparts a spurious equality to the four causes. A system may seem to be pertinent when applied to artifacts, but the scholars agree that it goes awry when applied even to natural objects, "natural teleology."<sup>35</sup>

And when such a system is applied to revealed theology, the effects are even worse. It is generally understood now, with the hindsight of a few centuries, that this causation thinking is what led the Lutheran theologians of the post-Luther era to slip into distorted forms of teaching regarding the doctrine of election, and the doctrine of the sacramental union in the Lord's Supper, which departed to a greater or lesser degree from the evangelical decisiveness of Luther's Scriptural teaching on those topics. When the Lutheran dogmaticians of the seventeenth century taught that God's eternal election of those who are ultimately saved took place "in view of faith" (*intuitu fidei*), this *in effect* negated much of the significance of the Biblical doctrine of election as

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<sup>35</sup>Bjarne Wollan Teigen, *The Lord's Supper in the Theology of Martin Chemnitz* (Brewster, Massachusetts: Trinity Lutheran Press, 1986), p. 99.

an awe-inspiring testimony to God's infinite and unfathomable grace in Christ. According to the Scriptural teaching, the mystery of God's eternal election in Christ – which impacts the elect, in time, through the work of the Holy Spirit in the means of grace – is ultimately the “cause” of the persevering faith of Christians who do believe to the end. But the “in view of faith” expression gave the impression that *God's election* was somehow “caused” instead by *the persevering faith of the Christian*, which God foresaw, and which prompted God to choose or elect that Christian on this basis. Even when such a backwards conclusion was not the intent, and when the dogmatists said that the faith which God foresaw was itself a gift of God, this was nevertheless the unhelpful and misleading implication of such a construct.

Also, under the influence of a form of Aristotelian thinking that suggested that the divinely-instituted sacramental action of consecration, distribution, and reception functions as the three “causes” of the Real Presence in the Lord's Supper – so that there is no Real Presence until all three of these acts have occurred in order – “some of our Lutheran teachers limited the real presence to the moment of eating and drinking.” But as Wilbert W. Gawrisch goes on to state, this receptionist teaching should never really have been adopted, and it accordingly should not be perpetuated by the church today, since it “goes beyond the specific words of Christ. Careful reading of the text indicates that Christ was referring to what he was offering his disciples and inviting them to take when he said, “This is my body ... This is my blood.”<sup>36</sup>

It does not surprise us, then, that the theologians of this era would also try to squeeze the doctrine of justification into a similar kind of philosophical mold, in a way that unfortunately resulted in a weakening of the impact that the preaching of justification – in all its objective fullness – was intended by God to have on the mind and heart of a Christian. And the kind of clarity that we see in Luther's expositions of the objective and subjective aspects of God's justification in Christ, as he perceived this distinction to be set forth in various passages of Scripture, was also often diminished.

For example, Aegidius Hunnius (1550-1603) described the “causes” of justification in the form of a hypothetical catechetical dialogue between a student and a teacher:

*In order that each part may be examined in order, give me such a definition of justification that embraces the sum of the whole treatment that will follow.* Justification is the act of God by which He deigns to consider the man who is frightened by the awareness of sins and who flees to the Throne of Grace with pure mercy, through and for the sake of the merit of Christ, apprehended by faith; and, having forgiven him his sins, He reckons him as righteous, free from damnation, and also an heir of eternal life, without any human merit and without any view of God toward the virtues or the works of man. *What kind of definition is this?* It is a causal definition, seeing that the true causes are being enumerated and the false causes removed. *How many causes of justification are there?* Three. First is grace, that is, the gracious favor of God. Second: The obedience of Christ. Third: Faith. *Why do you number the causes in this order?* I put the grace of God in first place because this was given to us, as the Apostle testifies, before times of eternity, and it is also the

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<sup>36</sup>Wilbert R. Gawrisch, review of *The Lord's Supper in the Theology of Martin Chemnitz* by Bjarne Wollan Teigen, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Vol. 84, No. 2 (Spring 1987), p. 155.

source and beginning of the remaining causes, since it occurred by the mercy and grace of God that the Son was sent into the world to satisfy God in our place. Faith, on the other hand, since it is considered relatively to the obedience of Christ as the instrument that apprehends the thing that is apprehended, necessarily presupposes that which is apprehended, namely, the merit of Christ. In the order of causes, the merit of Christ comes before our faith, although in the case of the fathers, who lived before the Messiah was born and suffered, their faith (temporally speaking) existed prior to the suffering of the Lord, as they were naturally looking forward toward that which was to come. Still, if you consider the order of causes, the suffering of the Son comes first before God, who justifies (who views the merit of His Son outside the realm of time). Similarly, if you weigh the order of causes and effects, the suffering of Christ, is naturally prior to the salvation of the patriarchs (for this depends on the suffering of Christ as the effect brought about by the cause), although if you view the priority of time, the fathers gained that salvation before the Lord suffered – indeed, before He was born into the world.<sup>37</sup>

The causation scheme followed by Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) is even more complicated, and suffers from the same kind of Aristotelian distortion. His list of “the causes...of our justification before God” is comprised of five such causes:

1. The chief efficient cause is the grace of God, that is, God’s free favor that takes our misery into account.
2. The meritorious cause is Christ in the office of redemption which the Apostle [Paul in Romans 3:24-25] describes with three very significant words. First, with the word *apolytrōsin* [redemption], which regards the spiritual captivity in Satan’s kingdom, from which we have been redeemed by the precious *lytrō* [ransom] of Christ. Second, with the word *ilastērion* [propitiation], which regards the lid of the ark of the covenant in the Old Testament. Third, with the phrase the *aima tou christou* [blood of Christ], which, by way of synecdoche, signifies the entire obedience of Christ, active as well as passive.
3. The instrumental cause is faith, that receiving (*lēptikon*) means that embraces the benefits of Christ offered in Word and Sacraments, those imparting (*dotikois*) means.
4. The formal cause is *paresis* [passing over], the remission of sins, which is joined by an indivisible connection with the imputation of the righteousness of Christ. (Rom. 4:3).
5. The final cause with respect to God is *endeiksis tēs dikaiosynēs autou* [the demonstration of his righteousness]. In justification or the remission of sins, God remains just in that He justly punishes our sins in Christ, who received them upon Himself; and He justifies believers by means of the righteousness of Christ that has been imputed to them.<sup>38</sup>

These convoluted descriptions present quite a contrast to Luther’s simple yet profound axiomatic distinction between forgiveness won, and forgiveness distributed:

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<sup>37</sup>Aegidius Hunnius, quoted in Paul A. Rydecki, “The Forensic Appeal to the Throne of Grace in the Theology of the Lutheran Age of Orthodoxy: A Reflection on Atonement and Its Relationship to Justification” (2013).

<sup>38</sup>Johann Gerhard, quoted in Rydecki.



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.<sup>39</sup>

Instead of a completed forgiveness won, and a completed forgiveness distributed, the Aristotelianized explanations seem to give us something closer to this: forgiveness component one, plus forgiveness component two, plus forgiveness component three, equals a completed forgiveness.

And yet, even with the problems that were introduced by the over-use of Aristotelian terms and concepts, the Lutheran theologians in the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy were sometimes capable of expressing themselves on this subject with great eloquence and evangelical simplicity, without always imposing an unnatural Aristotelian grid onto the texts of Scripture that they were at those times expounding. Hunnius was the theologian who took the lead in refuting the odd theology of a Calvinist-turned-Lutheran theologian named Samuel Huber, who taught both a “universal election” and a “universal justification” of the human race. Some of Hunnius’s analysis and criticism of Huber’s view may have been hampered or distorted by his Aristotelian mindset. But in summarizing what he understood Huber’s erroneous teaching actually to be, he shows at the very least that he realized that Huber was not teaching the kind of universal justification or universal forgiveness in Christ that *Luther* had taught – Huber’s claims to the contrary notwithstanding – and that what Hunnius is criticizing in Huber is not *Luther’s* genuine doctrine. Hunnius summarizes Huber’s position – which he rejects – as follows:

Huber professes such a justification, for the sake of which Christ has properly, actually and practically *conferred* redemption on the entire human race in such a way that sins have been *equally* remitted to all men, including the *Turks*, and that all men (including unbelievers) *have received* remission of sins, and that the whole human race has, *in actual fact*, been received into the grace and bosom of God.<sup>40</sup>

To apply the contemporary terminology, what Huber was understood to be teaching was not a universal *objective* justification of the world, but a universal *subjective* justification of the world. Note that, according to Hunnius’s summary, Huber held that this universal justification has been *conferred on* the human race, and that the human race has *received* remission of sins. But these are the terms of subjective, personal justification. In the *objective* sense, *Jesus* is the only individual, *as an individual*, who has been justified. The human race *as a whole* is a part of this, because Jesus was the stand-in for the human race in his absolution and justification, and received his absolution and justification on humanity’s behalf. But otherwise, as far as any other people are

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<sup>39</sup>Martin Luther, “Against the Heavenly Prophets,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), pp. 213-14.

<sup>40</sup>Aegidius Hunnius, *Theses Opposed to Huberism: A Defense of the Lutheran Doctrine of Justification* (translated by Paul A. Rydecki) (Malone, Texas: Repristination Press, 2012), p. 57. Emphases in original.

concerned, before this forgiveness and justification in Christ is distributed through the means of grace, and before it is believed by the individual, there is no universal *conferring* of justification, and no universal *receiving* of remission of sins.

In spite of these confused and confusing expressions, Huber does also maintain that those only are saved, who “receive Christ” by faith.<sup>41</sup> He at first seems to teach universalism, or at least universalism would seem to be a logical necessity of some of the things that he says about everyone being elected, and so forth. But in the end he does not teach universalism. Huber clearly wants to be Lutheran in his theology, and not everything that he says is wrong. But Huber improperly mixes together ideas and teachings that Luther, and the other Confessors of the Lutheran Church, keep distinct; and he thereby calls down upon himself the condemnation of Hunnius, and of Orthodox Lutheranism as a whole.

Hunnus himself does show elsewhere in his writing against Huber’s errors, that he has not completely forgotten Luther’s theology on this point. Hunnius properly rejects the claim of Huber that, since “all men” were redeemed by Christ from sin and death, in time, therefore “all men” were also previously elected by God, before the beginning of the world. Yet Hunnius *does* say *this*, with respect to “all men”: “But we respond from the start that we steadfastly teach that Christ, by the decree, counsel, ordination, good pleasure and command of the eternal Father, has freed *each and every* mortal, without any exception at any time or in any place, from sin, death and eternal damnation.”<sup>42</sup> That’s an expression of the true Lutheran doctrine of objective justification! In his refutation of Huberism, Hunnius was certainly not refuting *this* doctrine, which he himself taught. Objectively speaking, Christ has indeed “freed” the human race from sin, death, and eternal damnation.

And the true Lutheran doctrine of objective justification is taught by Gerhard as well, especially in one of his theological disputations. In this disputation, he speaks first of the comfort that the Lord’s resurrection gives us, that our sins truly are forgiven. He writes that “Because Christ arose, we are therefore no longer in sins, since most assuredly full and perfect satisfaction has been made for them, and because in the resurrection of Christ we are absolved of our sins, so that they no longer can condemn us before the judgment bar of God.” And the reason why each of us is able to know from the gospel that we are absolved of all our sins in the resurrection of Christ, is because *the whole world* was so absolved in the resurrection. The sins of the whole world had been placed upon Christ, and in his death he had made satisfaction for them to God the Father. And now, in his resurrection, Christ is *absolved* of the sins of the whole world. An individual human being is obviously a part of “the whole world.” An individual human being can therefore be certain that he is included both in Christ’s perfect satisfaction, and in the Father’s absolution of Christ. Gerhard explains it in this way:

This power of the resurrection of Christ includes not only the application of the righteousness that avails before God, but also the actual absolution from sins, and even the blessed resurrection to life, since by virtue of the resurrection of Christ we are freed from

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<sup>41</sup>Samuel Huber, “Dr. Samuel Huber’s Steadfast Confession,” in “Samuel Huber on Election and Justification: Translations from His Writings,” translated and edited by Andrew Hussman (2013).

<sup>42</sup>Hunnus, p. 51. Emphasis in original.

the corporal and spiritual death of sins. Some bring in here the apostolic teaching in 1 Timothy 3:16, God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit (namely through the resurrection by God the Father), that is, *he was absolved of the sins of the whole world, which he as Sponsor took upon himself*, so that he might make perfect satisfaction for them to God the Father. Moreover in rising from the dead he showed by this very fact that satisfaction has been made by him for these sins, and all of the same have been expiated by the sacrifice of his death.<sup>43</sup>

We have already taken note of the fact that Luther did not interpret 1 Timothy 3:16 in a way that would see this passage as contributing toward the teaching that in his resurrection Christ was justified and absolved on behalf of the world, and that the *world* was accordingly justified and absolved in *Christ's* justification and absolution. But Gerhard states that “Some” pastors and teachers do in fact bring the apostolic teaching of that verse into this article of faith, and apply it thereto. We agree with those who do so, and are glad to see Gerhard do so here.

Gerhard had expressed himself in a similar way in a commentary on Romans 4:25:

Just as the heavenly Father, by delivering Christ into death for the sake of our sins, condemned sin in His flesh through sin (Rom. 8:3) – that is, condemned it because it had sinned against Christ by causing death for Him, even though He was innocent, and so He withdrew from sin its legal right against believers so that it cannot condemn them any longer; or He also condemned it, that is, punished our sins in Christ, which were imposed on Him and imputed to Him as to a bondsman – so also, by raising Him from the dead, by that very deed He absolved Him from our sins that were imputed to Him, and consequently has also absolved us in Him, so that, in this way, the resurrection of Christ may be both the cause and the pledge and the complement of our justification. The following passages pertain to this: 1 Cor. 15:17, 2 Cor. 5:21, Eph. 2:5, Col. 2:12-13, Phil. 3:8-10, 1 Pet. 1:3.<sup>44</sup>

And the influence of Gerhard's formulations is fairly obvious in this statement by the later Lutheran dogmatician Abraham Calov (1612-1686), commenting on the same verse from Romans:

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<sup>43</sup>Johann Gerhard, *Disputationes Theologicae* (Jena, 1655), XX, p. 1450 (translated by Kurt E. Marquart). Emphasis added. The original Latin is as follows: *Quia Christus resurrexit, ideo non amplius sumus in peccatis, quia scilicet praestita est pro illis plena et perfecta satisfactio, et quia in Christi resurrectione a peccatis nostris sumus absoluti, ut non amplius coram Dei judicio nos condemnare possint. ... Haec vis resurrectionis Christi complectitur non solum justitiae coram Deo valentis applicationem, sed etiam actualem a peccatis absolutionem, ac tandem beatam ad vitam resurrectionem, quia virtute resurrectionis Christi a morte spirituali peccatorum et corporali liberamur. Quidam huc accommodant locum Apostolicum 1 Tim. 3. v 16. Deus manifestatus est in carne, justificatus Spiritu, videl. per resurrectionem a Deo Patre, hoc est, absolutus a peccatis totius mundi, quae ipse ut Sponsor in se receperat, ut pro illis perfectam satisfactionem Deo Patri praestaret, resurgendo enim ex morte ipso facto demonstravit, pro peccatis illis a se esse satisfactum, eaque omnia sacrificio mortis suae fuisse expiata.*

<sup>44</sup>Johann Gerhard, *Adnotationes ad priora capita Epistolae D. Pauli ad Romanos*; quoted in Rydecki.

Christ's resurrection took place as an actual absolution from sin (*respectu actualis a peccato absolutionis*). As God punished our sins in Christ, upon whom He laid them and to whom He imputed them, as our Bondsman, so He also, by the very act of raising Him from the dead, absolved Him from our sins imputed to Him, and so He absolved also us in Him.<sup>45</sup>

Neither Gerhard nor Calov ever express themselves in this way – concerning Christ's absolution on our behalf, and our collective absolution in Christ – without also always recognizing the necessity of a personal absolution, and faith in the same, for the justification of the believing individual. And we should not be surprised in the least by this. The whole point of talking about *humanity's* absolution in Christ's resurrection, is to lay the foundation for, and give substance to, the absolutions that are by necessity spoken to specific human beings here and now by their pastors. And faith is the only means by which these absolutions, and the justification in Christ that they convey, are received. There is, then, no contradiction whatever between Gerhard's teaching here – that in raising Jesus from the dead, God the Father “absolved Him from our sins that were imputed to Him, and consequently has also absolved us in Him” – and his teaching elsewhere, that “the merits of Christ are *received* in no other way than through faith, not to mention that it is impossible to please God without faith, Hebrews 11:6, let alone to be received into eternal life. In general, St. Paul concludes concerning this matter in Romans 3:28, Thus we hold then that *a man* becomes righteous without the works of the Law – only through faith.”<sup>46</sup>

The theologians of the period of Lutheran Orthodoxy were not always as clear as this in their preservation and re-articulation of Luther's insights regarding the objective and subjective components of the article of justification. Hunnius and Gerhard in particular were not always as clear on this subject as they were in the writings we have quoted here. But when they were clear, and when their general tendency to think and speak in an Aristotelian way was set aside in deference to the native sense of Scripture, we rejoice. We celebrate the soundness and evangelical comfort of their teaching at those times, even as we also, in the spirit of the Fourth Commandment, overlook the weaknesses and shortcomings in their manner of teaching that may have manifested themselves at other times – in regard to election, or the Real Presence, or justification.

## **B. Justification in the Narrow Sense and in a Broader Sense**

Another thing to take note of in the theology of this period, is that the term “justification” was almost always interpreted and used in a very strict and narrow sense, as referring to the personal application of the righteousness of Christ to an individual through the means of grace; and to the appropriation and reception of that righteousness by an individual through faith. We generally do not see the term “justification” being employed according to a broader sense, as sometimes referring also to the declaration that God the Father made in raising his Son from the dead, with respect to the world of sinners whose sins had been fully propitiated by his Son. A case

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<sup>45</sup>Abraham Calov, *Bibl. Illust.*, ad Rom. 4:25; quoted in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), p. 321.

<sup>46</sup>Johann Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (translated by Elmer Hohle) (Decatur, Illinois: Johann Gerhard Institute, 1996), p. 165. Emphases added.

in point is the theology of Martin Chemnitz (1522-1586), who was in many respects a transitional figure between the era of the Reformation and the era of Orthodoxy. He wrote that

the Gospel reveals and declares this mystery, which was hidden for long ages, that since the human race could not make satisfaction to the Law and the Law could in no way be dissolved and destroyed, God made a transfer of the Law to another person (a matter which belongs to the article of justification) who should fulfill the Law both by satisfaction and obedience for the whole human race. And because that person is both God and man, therefore His satisfaction is the expiation for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2), and hence Christ is the end of the Law for the salvation of everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4). And Him God sets before us through the ministry, that through His redemption, by faith in His blood, we may be justified gratis by the grace of God (Rom. 3:25).<sup>47</sup>

Chemnitz is willing to describe the transfer of the law to Christ – who on our behalf obeyed it in life, and made satisfaction to it in death – as a matter which *belongs to* the article of justification. But justification itself, strictly speaking, is understood as that which happens to those who believe, by God’s grace, through the ministry of the gospel. Again, Chemnitz is willing to describe the satisfaction of Christ as the expiation for the sins of the whole world in God’s sight. But he does not say that the satisfaction of Christ resulted in the vicarious *justification* of the whole world in God’s sight.<sup>48</sup>

We should always remember, though, that differences in terminology and emphasis, and occasional differences in interpreting one or another passage of Scripture, do not destroy the underlying dogmatic unity and consensus of a church, as long as the same doctrine is affirmed through the use of other terms and expressions, or on the basis of other pertinent passages of Scripture. This is the way it has always been in the Lutheran Church, and this is the way it is now.<sup>49</sup> Lutheran pastors and theologians have always known – or at least they *should* always have

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<sup>47</sup>Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent* (translated by Fred Kramer), Part I (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), p. 500.

<sup>48</sup>In His *Loci Theologici*, Martin Chemnitz unfortunately also gets bogged down in a very long and detailed discussion of the various “causes” of justification (efficient, instrumental, formal, final, etc.). See *Loci Theologici* (translated by J. A. O. Preus) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), Vol II, pp. 548-55.

<sup>49</sup>We also note these wise words of John P. Meyer (a leading theologian of the Wisconsin Synod in the twentieth century), who writes: “Those are in fundamental agreement who, without any reservation, submit to the Word of God. When the Word of God has spoken in any matter, that matter is settled. There may be things that some men have not yet found in their study of the Bible; there may be matters with reference to which they have accustomed themselves to an inadequate mode of expression; yet, no matter what their deficiency may be, they are determined to accept the Bible doctrine. Where such is the case, there is fundamental agreement. ... A fundamental agreement is all the church can ever hope to attain here on earth. We are not all equally gifted; one has a much clearer and a much more comprehensive insight into God’s doctrines than another. We all strive to grow daily in understanding. Besides, when once we have accustomed ourselves to a faulty or an inadequate expression, it is not only difficult to unlearn the particular phrase and to acquire a proper one, but the inadequate term may tend

known – that it is wrong “to quarrel about words, which does no good, but only ruins the hearers” (2 Timothy 2:14, ESV). In our evaluation of Gerhard and the theologians of his era, we are guided also by these words of Gerhard: “It is wicked to interpret a poor choice of words as error, when you know that the right meaning was intended.”<sup>50</sup>

Of course, what was *usually* and *generally* the case in this era, was not *always* the case, as far as the dogmatists’ more restricted use of the terminology was concerned. Johann Quistorp (the Elder) (1584-1648) was a leading Orthodox theologian in Rostock, in northern Germany. In regard to the meaning of the terms and concepts found in St. Paul’s statement that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19, ESV), Quistorp offered these observations:

The word *justification* and *reconciliation* is used in a twofold manner: 1) in respect of the acquired merit, 2) in respect of the appropriated merit. Thus all are justified and some are justified. All, in respect of the acquired merit; some, in respect of the appropriated merit.<sup>51</sup>

This twofold usage of the word “justification” did eventually become the generally-accepted usage in the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America, after the Lutheran synods that would form the Synodical Conference in 1872 had occasion – in the preceding decade – to give serious thought to this subject; and to re-appropriate, from the heritage of Confessional and Orthodox Lutheran theology, a fuller understanding of the doctrine of justification and the forgiveness of sins.

### **C. Luther and the Missouri Synod**

An essay delivered to the 1860 convention of the Missouri Synod by Theodore Julius Brohm, “Concerning the Intimate Connection of the Doctrine of Absolution with that of Justification,” did in fact inaugurate an ongoing discussion of these matters, not only in the Missouri Synod, but also in the Norwegian Synod and other synods. This essay was actually a presentation of several theses, with the expectation that they would be elucidated upon during a time of discussion by those present. But the discussion of the first six theses – which all dealt with absolution – was so extensive, that there was no time left for a discussion of any of the others. Among those discussed theses were the following:

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also to warp our views on other points. Yet, in spite of all such differences, where there is an unconditional willingness to hear what God has to say in his Word, there is fundamental agreement” (“Unionism,” in *Essays on Church Fellowship*, edited by Curtis A. Jahn [Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1996], pp. 63-64). Of course, requiring a fundamental agreement in all the articles of faith, which is the Confessional Lutheran position, is not the same as requiring agreement only in the so-called fundamental articles of faith, which is the position of unionism and modern ecumenism.

<sup>50</sup>Johann Gerhard, *Locus on Good Works*, sec. 38; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, “Duties of an Evangelical Lutheran Synod,” *Essays for the Church* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1992), Vol. II, p. 59.

<sup>51</sup>Johann Quistorp; quoted in C. F. W. Walther, *Justification: Subjective and Objective* (translated by Kurt E. Marquart) (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1982), p. 21.

1. Absolution, or the forgiveness of sins, is, according to Luther's teachings, the Gospel, whether it is proclaimed to many or to few. ...

4. Absolution consists: (a) not in a judicial verdict of the confessor; (b) nor in any empty announcement of, or wish for, the forgiveness of sins; but (c) in a powerful impartation of it.

5. The effect of Absolution (a) does not depend upon man's repentance, confession, and atonement, (b) but Absolution demands faith, creates and strengthens faith; (c) without faith it profits a man nothing; (d) although it is not therefore a "failing key."

As a part of the discussion, Brohm emphasized that

it is necessary to recognize, before all else, that this great treasure of the Gospel, the redemption which has come to pass for all men through Christ and the forgiveness of sins acquired thereby, is also presented to all men, according to Christ's command: "Preach the Gospel to every creature." To all who hear it, whether they believe or don't believe, forgiveness of sins is announced and presented. When a preacher announces the Gospel he always speaks an absolution, and truly also to those who do not believe, because absolution is a divine act and [is] not dependent on the belief or unbelief of men. The unbeliever, therefore, quite certainly rejects that which came to him also by the preaching of the Gospel, and precisely for this reason (his rejection), [he] forfeits it.

Also during the discussion of the theses, someone asked this question:

The tenet has always been declared and confessed by us that through Christ's resurrection from the dead God has absolved the whole world, that is, pardoned its sins. If, according to this, the whole world has already been absolved and its sin pardoned long ago, what exactly is absolution or the preaching of the Gospel in the church? Is it also a pardon, or merely an announcement of the pardon which has already occurred?

Brohm replied, in effect, that the good news of our absolution does not do us any good if we do not hear it. And God has ordained that the Gospel be proclaimed, so that we *can* hear it. But when we do hear this message, we are not merely being informed about something from long ago and far away. Rather,

Where the preaching of the Gospel is announced, there the dear Lord himself steps before the sinner and says, "I am reconciled and herewith announce to you that all your sins are forgiven you." Just as this would be no mere announcement but a powerful impartation of forgiveness if God so spoke to the sinner without means, this the preaching and Absolution of the pastor is also truly nothing else than an announcement of forgiveness, but such an announcement as actually brings and gives the forgiveness it announces.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Theodore Julius Brohm, "Referat ueber den innigen Zusammenhang der Lehre von der Absolution mit der von der Rechtfertigung," *Proceedings of the Convention of the Missouri Synod*, 1860, pp. 41-42; quoted in Rick Nicholas Curia, *The Significant History of the Doctrine of Objective or Universal Justification among the Churches of the Former Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America* (1983), pp. 16-17.

This discussion was clearly shaped by some of the things that Gerhard (and Calov after him) had said about the resurrection of Christ being the absolution of all those whose sins Christ had borne. Such expressions were apparently already a part of the standard phraseology employed by Missouri Synod pastors in their explanations of what soon came to be described as “objective justification.” Gerhard’s form of teaching was no doubt mediated to Missouri in part via earlier writings by its theological leader C. F. W. Walther – in an 1850 article in *Der Lutheraner*, and in an 1859 Convention essay – which followed Gerhard’s line of thought in their explanations of absolution and justification.<sup>53</sup>

But even more so, this Missouri Synod discussion – and the theses themselves – were shaped by Luther’s teaching on absolution and the power of the keys, which posited a relationship between absolution and justification that was very similar to what Brohm was saying. Walther, in those earlier writings, had also already directly cited some of Luther’s writings on the subject.

In his treatise on “The Keys,” Luther stated, by way of definition, that “the true significance of the keys” is that they are “an office, a power or command given by God through Christ to all of Christendom for the retaining and remitting of the sins of men.” He then addressed his readers personally, with these words of encouragement and instruction:

Rely on the words of Christ and be assured that God has no other way to forgive sins than through the spoken Word, as he has commanded us. ... Do you believe he is not bound who does not believe in the key which binds? Indeed, he shall learn, in due time, that his unbelief did not make the binding vain, nor did it fail in its purpose. 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 [does not] nullify the faithfulness of God.” We are not talking here either about people’s belief or disbelief regarding the efficacy of the keys. We realize that few believe. We are speaking of what the keys accomplish and give. *He who does not accept what the keys give receives, of course, nothing. But this is not the key’s fault*. Many do not believe the gospel, but this does not mean that the gospel is not true or effective. A king gives you a castle. If you do not accept it, then it is not the king’s fault, nor is he guilty of a lie. But you have deceived yourself and the fault is yours. The king certainly gave it.<sup>54</sup>

The loosing key flows out from the objective forgiveness of all for whom Jesus died, and announces that forgiveness to everyone who now hears the spoken word of absolution. A sound understanding of the objective basis and objective character of this announced forgiveness does not in any way negate the need for a personal absolution, or for the means of grace in general. Just the opposite in the case. The means of grace do not create forgiveness. They carry, convey, and deliver it. The forgiveness that Christ won is in the gospel, and in the absolution, so that it can be conferred upon those who believe the divine message of their already-existing forgiveness in Christ. Of course, those who do not believe it, do not receive it, and remain in their lost condition. But even for unbelievers, their forgiveness was there for them in the gospel. Christ had won it on

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<sup>53</sup>See Curia, pp. 9-14.

<sup>54</sup>Martin Luther, “The Keys,” *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), pp. 366-67. Emphases added.



the cross for them and for everyone, and has placed it in his Word for them and for everyone. And that is why a person who rejects Christ will someday learn – perhaps on Judgment Day – “how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it.”

In an attempt to settle a dispute in the city of Nürnberg on the relative desirability or propriety of private absolution, as compared to public absolution, Luther and Melancthon wrote a letter to the Nürnbergers in which they pointed out that

The preaching of the holy gospel itself is principally and actually an absolution in which forgiveness of sins is proclaimed in general and in public to many persons, or publicly or privately to one person alone. Therefore absolution may be used in public and in general, and in special cases also in private, just as the sermon may take place publicly or privately, and as one might comfort many people in public or someone individually in private. Even if not all believe [the word of absolution], that is no reason to reject [public] absolution, for each absolution, whether administered publicly or privately, has to be understood as demanding faith and as being an aid to those who believe in it, just as *the gospel itself also proclaims forgiveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context*. Nevertheless the gospel certainly demands our faith and *does not aid those who do not believe it*; and yet the universal context of the gospel has to remain [valid].<sup>55</sup>

This reference to the “universal context” of a gospel that proclaims forgiveness to “all men in the whole world,” is just another way of acknowledging that there is a universal justification of all men in Christ, which is made known, and applied, in preaching and absolution. The gospel does not proclaim anything that is not true. And so, if the gospel “proclaims forgiveness to all men in the whole world and exempts no one from this universal context,” then there must be a forgiveness in existence for all men in the whole world, with no exemptions or exceptions. And the fact that this gospel “demands our faith” proves two important things about it: that the gospel, and the forgiveness it proclaims, exist prior to faith; and that the gospel, and the forgiveness it proclaims, are “an aid” for salvation only to those who believe in it.

#### **D. The Norwegian Synod and the Pietists**

The discussion about absolution and justification that was inaugurated in the Missouri Synod in 1860 soon spread into the Norwegian Synod, a sister church of Missouri. Guests from the Norwegian Synod who were present at the 1860 convention were positively impressed by the Brohm presentation, and thought it would be beneficial to their church body, and to the larger arena of Scandinavian Lutheranism in America, to share this material also in those circles. This was done by means of the publication of a Norwegian translation of the section of the Missouri Synod’s printed *Proceedings* that dealt with the presentation of Brohm’s theses, in the Norwegian Synod’s official periodical. Brohm’s theses on absolution in particular, in the Norwegian translation, were also read and discussed at the 1861 convention of the Norwegian Synod. In general, they were well-received and appreciated for their evangelical clarity.

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<sup>55</sup>Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, “Letter to the Council of the City of Nürnberg” (April 18, 1533), *Luther’s Works*, Vol. 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), pp. 76-77. Emphases added.

When a free conference between pastors of the Norwegian Synod and pastors of the Augustana Synod was planned for 1864, the subject that was set for the conference was absolution. The Norwegian Synod representatives desired to share with the pastors of the Augustana Synod – which at that point in its history included a sizeable contingent of Norwegians – the material that they had been studying, and benefitting from, on this subject. It had been hoped for a while that fellowship between the two groups might become possible, after this and other doctrinal topics – in regard to which some inter-synodical differences were perceived – could be worked-through and clarified. But to the surprise of the Norwegian Synod men, after the Norwegian translation of Brohm’s theses on absolution had been read at this free conference, the Augustanans

objected strenuously to the doctrine that Absolution or the Gospel is a *powerful impartation* of the forgiveness of sins. The Augustanans maintained that the Gospel imparts the forgiveness of sins to believers, but not to unbelievers. The [Norwegian] Synod pastors insisted that the Gospel is and remains the same, whether received or rejected by men, and that it is therefore a *powerful impartation* of the forgiveness of sins to all who hear it, whether they are believers or unbelievers. Here, then, the issue was drawn... Is the Gospel and absolution one thing when applied to the believer and another when applied to the unbeliever, or is it the same regardless of to whom it is applied? ... The [Norwegian] Synod pastors stressed the objective validity of the Gospel; it had in it the forgiveness of sins, and actually offered this to men. The mere fact that some failed to accept this did not do away with its objective reality. ... The Augustanans adopted the more subjective pietistic view and emphasized the fact that the Gospel did not have any saving or forgiving effect in the case of the unbeliever. If it did not have any saving or forgiving effect, they said, why speak of the Gospel as imparting the forgiveness of sins? How was the forgiveness of sins *powerfully imparted* to an unbeliever who, nevertheless, remained unabsolved? Out from this subjective reasoning, as the [Norwegian] Synod men thought, really approached the idea that each one made his own Gospel – if he believed, there was forgiveness in the Gospel; if he did not, there was no forgiveness in it.

The Norwegian Synod pastors gently warned their Augustana Synod friends that “If the Gospel and Absolution contained nothing more than what man by faith put into them, then man really had to depend on his faith – he had to have faith in his own faith – and not in the Gospel.”<sup>56</sup>

The contours of this debate between these two synods – one consciously rooted in Reformational thinking, and the other influenced by Pietism more than they probably realized – are essentially the same contours that manifested themselves in succeeding years, when the synods that would or did make up the membership of the Synodical Conference continued to defend their Confessional teaching about the objectivity of the gospel, and the objectivity of the forgiveness of sins within the gospel, against various attacks and misrepresentations from other Lutheran groups in America.

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<sup>56</sup>J. Magnus Rhone, *Norwegian Lutheranism up to 1872* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1926), pp. 231-32; quoted in Curia, pp. 19-20. Emphases in original.

And before long, especially within the Scandinavian Lutheran context, the discussion did indeed fan out into a treatment specifically of the doctrine of “the justification of the world,” as that which stands behind and enables an effectual absolution. This teaching was defended by the pastors of the Norwegian Synod, but was rejected and even ridiculed by their opponents, in the Augustana Synod and elsewhere. It is fair to say that at this point in history – in the 1860s and 1870s – disagreement on this matter is what scuttled the hope that the various Scandinavian Lutheran groups in America might be able to come together doctrinally and organizationally.

In an article that included a section on “The Justification of the World” that Herman Amberg Preus wrote and published in 1874 – in which he responds to various critics of the Norwegian Synod teaching – the author summarizes the confession of his synod on “the justification of the world,” or “as it is more often called, objective, universal justification.” He states:

By this we understand that by raising Christ from the dead God declares him righteous, and at the same time acknowledges and declares all people, the whole world – whose Representative and Substitute Jesus Christ was, in his resurrection and victory as well as in his suffering and tribulation (“He was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification”) – as free from guilt and punishment, and righteous in Christ Jesus. At the same time, we maintain and teach, in agreement with the Scriptures, that the individual sinner must accept and appropriate by faith this righteousness earned for everyone by the death of Christ, proclaimed by his resurrection, and announced and bestowed through the Gospel, to himself, for his comfort and salvation, and that for the sake of Christ whose righteousness the troubled sinner grasps and makes his own in faith, God justifies the believer and counts his faith to him for righteousness. We teach therefore that the expressions “justification” and “to justify” are used in Scripture and in the Lutheran Church in a twofold way: 1) that justification has come to *everyone*, namely when we mean that justification *is earned* for everyone by Christ, and 2) that only the *believer* is justified, when a person is talking about the righteousness being *received*.

According to Preus, the second part of this explanation refutes the claim of “Professor [August] Weenaas...when he asserts that our doctrine of the justification of the world ‘separates justification in Christ from faith and thereby actually from Christ himself.’” And in regard to the first part of the explanation, Preus goes on to demonstrate that “our doctrine of justification in the first sense, as a justification of everyone through the resurrection of Christ from the dead, is biblical,” by pointing out that

it is expressly taught in Romans 5:18.19, where it says, “Therefore, as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous.” To want to explain “all men” by “the believers,” as Pastor [Johannes M.] Eggen does..., is to do violence to the Word of God. According to Professor Weenaas’ explanation – “that the justification of life is appointed to everyone, has everyone as its object” – ...the Greek word “*eis*” (to, over) in the last place in verse 18 is taken in a completely different sense than in the first place, without anyone being entitled to, not to mention needing, so different an interpretation in the two parallel sentences. And when Professor [Sven]

Oftedahl – who is acquainted with the Greek text, and knows that there is no verb there but only the preposition *eis* (to), which Luther translates: “has come to all,” and our common translation of the Bible, “shall come upon all” – ...makes people who are not acquainted with the original text aware that “shall come” and not “has come,” is written in our Bible, then it is rightly suggestive of his spiritual bias, not to speak of the fact that by such an interpretation he is headed straight toward universalism.

The remark concerning what Professor Oftedahl had said is particularly interesting. It would seem that a Bible version that was commonly used among Norwegians had a misleading translation of Romans 5:18. While the Greek and the larger context would lead one to translate the apostle to be saying here that by the righteousness of one the free gift *came upon all men* unto justification of life, this popular Norwegian version apparently had Paul say instead that by the righteousness of one the free gift *will come upon all men* unto justification of life. Oftedahl had drawn people’s attention to this rendering, to counteract the Norwegian Synod’s belief that there was a decisive event in the past – namely Jesus’ resurrection – where the gift of the Father’s justification of his Son did indeed, in Christ, vicariously come upon “all men.”

This Norwegian Synod teaching is not universalism, of course, because no individual *as an individual* is actually saved today through this decisive past bestowing of that gift upon Christ, apart from a personal *reception* of this gift, by faith. But what Oftedahl’s preferred rendering of this Pauline passage would suggest, is that someday and eventually, “all men” *will* actually be saved, through a subjective, direct bestowing of the gift of justification upon all men. Preus’s ironic point is that some of those who erroneously think that the teaching of a universal justification of the world in Christ leads somehow to universalism, end up backing up over a cliff of universalism themselves, in their misconstruing of a passage such as Romans 5:18.

Preus continues by showing how “the correctness of this teaching” about the justification of the world in Christ is confirmed “from the biblical teaching about redemption.” He observes that

Scripture teaches that Christ “is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the *whole world*” (1 Jo. 2:2); that he is “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of *the world*” (Jo. 1:29); and that in Christ God reconciled *himself with the world, because he did not impute their trespasses unto them* (2 Co. 5:19). If Christ has borne the sin of the world and atoned for it, then in the sight of him who gave the ransom for it, the world is loosed and free from sin and its punishment – although it remains in bondage and under the wrath of God if it remains in unbelief.

Another problem that Preus perceives in the teaching of his opponents – especially Weenaas – is an un-Lutheran and synergistic understanding of the nature of faith. Weenaas had written, in criticism of the Norwegian Synod, that “When our opponents speak of faith as the ‘*receiving, accepting means*’ with which a sinner appropriates to himself, and thus becomes partaker in, the gift and treasure of the forgiveness of sins which is bestowed by God in absolution, then in any case that is only *half the truth*, and the fullness and depth of the mystery, even *the essentials of faith as ‘justifying,’ are completely overlooked.*” Weenaas had also denied that “*Faith as justifying* is something more than a mere ‘justifying *means*.’” Preus teases out the

logically necessary implications of Weenaas' position, and shows how un-evangelical they are, when he reflects on the sad fact that since, according to Weenaas' view,

God is not perfectly reconciled through the death of Christ and has not let his wrath be appeased, and after having been obtained, yet the world has not been pardoned and justified, and therefore not completely redeemed either, and "access to salvation" is *not* "opened for everyone," then the professor naturally cannot proclaim these glad tidings either, so that the poor sinner could and should believe it to his comfort and salvation. On the other hand, he must preach "another gospel" in which the right faith, as a hand, does not merely grasp the righteousness already gained and bestowed, but obtains a deserving character as a work of a good nature. According to his new gospel, the professor must preach that through his suffering and death Christ has only accomplished so much, that God has now become *willing* to let his wrath cease and to be reconciled and to loose, confer grace, forgive, justify and open access to salvation, but that in actuality he can only do, and does, all this, if man on his part fulfills the condition placed on him by God – namely that he *is supposed to believe*. And the thing which is thus supposed to be believed does not become this, that God already *has* done this and *is reconciled*, but that God will do it and *will be reconciled* when he sees the obedience and the good quality in man, that he believes. But it must however be clear, even for weak eyes, that according to this teaching 1) Christ did not completely redeem the world and reconcile God with it, but only began the work of redemption, which a person is supposed to complete by *faith*, and make God *willing* to be reconciled; while a person's *faith* is first supposed to bring it about that God really becomes reconciled – however, therefore, it is well to notice, only with the *believer*, not with the world. Thus 2) *the Gospel* no longer becomes the Good News which bestows the forgiveness of sins and justification, and thereby works faith which appropriates this gift to itself, but it becomes a new law which demands faith from man for complete satisfaction. And 3) *faith* becomes, not the poor sinner's hand which merely grasps and makes one's own what *is* already *prepared* and at hand – namely God's love, conferring of grace, forgiveness of sins and justification – but it becomes a fulfilling of the new law, a work of man, or a new quality in him who has such a power and merit in himself that it finishes the work of redemption begun by Christ, and works a change in God's heart so that now he lets his wrath cease, becomes reconciled with the believer, loves, confers grace, and justifies him. And finally 4) salvation no longer comes *by grace alone* for the sake of Christ, but by merit, namely by *the merit of faith*.<sup>57</sup>

Preus can see that the full comfort of the gospel for troubled sinners is at stake in this confused teaching. It is not just a matter of ivory tower theologians splitting hairs over obscure questions that do not really matter. These things do matter. Preus tries to be as charitable as he can be with Weenaas, in that he readily acknowledges that "Professor Weenaas has not comprehended the whole range of his teaching," and that "he himself has not drawn all these consequences from his doctrine." But the errors that Weenaas *has* consciously embraced regarding justification and faith do put his doctrine on such a trajectory, whether he fully realizes it or not. He should

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<sup>57</sup>Herman Amberg Preus, "The Justification of the World," *Evangelisk Luthersk Kirketidende* (February 13, 1874) (translated by Herbert Larson). Emphases in original. Punctuation slightly revised.

therefore pull back from this trajectory, by pulling back from his explicitly-stated incorrect, synergistically-oriented teaching.

In all of this, we are reminded of what the Augsburg Confession teaches: that faith “is brought to life by the gospel or absolution,” and that “faith believes that sins are forgiven on account of Christ...”<sup>58</sup> Which comes first, absolution or faith? Absolution comes first. Absolution gives birth to faith. Kurt E. Marquart comments on this passage from the Augustana: “Absolution can exist without faith (although its benefits of course go to waste unless faith receives them), but faith cannot exist without absolution.”<sup>59</sup>

In modern disputes regarding the doctrine of objective justification, and its relationship with subjective justification, no new objection has been raised that was not already raised in the nineteenth century, when Preus and his colleagues in the Norwegian Synod, and Brohm and his colleagues in the Missouri Synod, were pummeled with accusations from other Lutherans – who either did not understand what they were saying; or who did understand their teaching but rejected it, because of their own faulty theology.

### **E. Preaching and Confessing Justification Today**

It is easy for terms like “propitiation” and “justification” to become overly abstract, both in our theologizing and our preaching. But we are not saved by abstractions. We are saved by a Person, and by the obedience of this Person. Lutherans confess in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession: “We know that what we have said agrees with the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures, with the holy Fathers Ambrose, Augustine, and many others, and with the whole church of Christ, which certainly confesses that *Christ is the propitiator and the justifier*.”<sup>60</sup> This is very concrete.

Objective justification is very concrete, because it is about this Person. In fact, this Person – our Lord Jesus Christ – *is* our righteousness. When we preach the gospel, we preach this Person, and the obedience of this Person, for the justification before God of those who hear and believe. And there is nothing more important to preach to a world of lost sinners, who would be without any true hope – in time or in eternity – without Christ, and without what he has done for them.

The forgiveness that we preach is not an abstraction either. Forgiveness is a real sending off of sin. And whenever we talk about forgiveness *before* God, we are talking about a real act, or real acts, *of* God. The forgiveness that Jesus won for us is not a pile of inanimate supernatural “stuff” that has been made available to God by the work of Christ, so that he can, as needed, scoop up some of it and pass it out to people. The forgiveness that we preach is, rather, a forgiveness that was established as an ongoing, vibrant reality for all people, by two closely-related “sendings off” of sin.

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<sup>58</sup>Augsburg Confession XII:5 (Latin), Kolb/Wengert p. 45.

<sup>59</sup>Kurt E. Marquart, “The Reformation Roots of Objective Justification,” in *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*, edited by Marquart, John R. Stephenson, and Bjarne W. Teigen (Fort Wayne: Concordia Theological Seminary, 1985), p. 118.

<sup>60</sup>Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:389, Tappert p. 166. Emphasis added.

In the suffering and sacrifice of Christ, all human sin was “sent off” *from humanity* by God the Father, and placed onto Jesus – who bore that sin on the cross, and absorbed into himself the judgment of his own divine law against that sin. Indeed, “*the Lord* has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6, ESV). And all human sin was then “sent off” *from Jesus* by God the Father, when he raised Jesus from the dead, and thereby absolved and justified his Son – and all people *in* his Son.

Christ had died for all humanity and not for himself, and is now raised for all humanity and not for himself. This was indeed all done for *us*. This was done for *all* of us. And this is now preached *to* us, *upon* us, and *into* us, as Christ – the Propitiator and the Justifier – is now preached *to* us, *upon* us, and *into* us.

The Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith in all its fullness – including not only *the believing*, but also and especially *what it is that is believed* – should not be preached as an abstraction. A clear understanding of the objective aspect of justification helps us to preach Christ, and in our preaching to deliver Christ to our listeners, more fully and more faithfully. The justification of the world in Christ is something that actually *happened* to Jesus, when he was brought forth from the grave.

His death accomplished the human salvation that we all need. His resurrection is, as it were, a declaration and an announcement from God *to his Son*, that he fully recognizes this fact. Jesus is no longer forsaken by God, as he was on the cross (Matthew 27:46). Instead, a holy God now declares to Jesus that Jesus is fully restored to his proper standing as God’s righteous and well-beloved Son. God no longer turns away from Jesus, due to his Son’s having been smeared with humanity’s transgressions. Instead, a righteous God now announces to Jesus that he is fully reconciled to him – and *in him* is fully reconciled to those whose sins he had borne and successfully atoned for.

Jesus is justified by God the Father in his resurrection. And in Jesus, those for whose sake he had died, and for whose sake he is now raised from the dead, are also justified. As the Savior of the world, Jesus is the substitute and stand-in for the world before God the Father – in his death, and in his resurrection. The world is therefore justified by God the Father in Jesus – not in and unto itself, but in Jesus. The world in and unto itself is still the *fallen* world, contaminated and corrupted by sin, and condemned by God. But the world in Christ is the *redeemed* world, the sin of which has been taken away by the Lamb of God, so that in Christ that sin is now gone.

Recognizing the truth of objective justification as a necessary component of the gospel, which is to be preached for the engendering of a justifying faith in those who hear the gospel, is not the same thing as thinking that one must regularly use the actual phrase “objective justification” in sermons. When is the last time we heard in a sermon that the Son of God is “of one substance” with the Father? The main purpose of theological terms like this – derived as they are from Biblical teaching – is not so much to provide us with a homiletical vocabulary, but to guide and orient the direction of our preaching, so that Christ is proclaimed correctly, as the divine Savior of humanity.

## F. Dispelling the Confusion within Lutheranism

What is more important than using the phrase “objective justification” in sermons, is making sure that when we do preach the objective aspect of justification, we preach it in an objective, universal, and general way. Likewise, when we preach the subjective aspect of justification, we are to preach it in a subjective, personal, and individual way. Jon D. Buchholz, in a recent study, has pointed out that

Some of the problems about justification that have arisen in Lutheran circles are the result of ignorant, careless, or otherwise imprecise communication. When we are speaking about universal justification, we must use universal terms; when speaking about individual justification, we must use individual terms. We should be careful that we do not mix metaphors in such a way that it becomes unclear whether we are speaking universally or individually. We must not extend metaphors beyond the scope of their illustration. We must always properly distinguish between law and gospel, both in their teaching and in their proper application. We cannot use passages that treat objective justification to prove or disprove subjective justification, and we cannot use passages that treat subjective justification to prove or disprove objective justification. We cannot become one-dimensional in our teaching, so that we ignore either the objective or the subjective side of the whole doctrine of justification. Finally, we must recognize that some terms are used universally, some terms are used exclusively for individuals, and some terms are used in both the general and the particular sense.

Buchholz then offers this specific advice:

I suggest that most problems articulating the doctrine with precision can be avoided if we maintain three distinctions: (1) The forgiveness of sins was completed and won at the cross and empty tomb. (2) The forgiveness of sins is distributed in the means of grace and received by faith. (3) The forgiveness of sins is only *en Christo*, in Christ.<sup>61</sup>

Among Lutherans who sincerely desire to be Confessional in their theology, a consensus is lacking on whether or not the doctrine of objective justification – as we have expounded it in this essay – is a genuinely Lutheran and Confessional teaching. Hopefully, at least in the minds of some who formerly were not sure, we have made a persuasive case that it is a genuine Lutheran belief. But even among those who do concur that this teaching is true, there is no complete consensus on the best way to explain it.

In regard to these questions, we appreciate the suggestions offered by Marquart:

A contemporary clarification of justification would have to begin with what the Formula of Concord calls “the only essential and necessary elements of justification,” that is, (1) the grace of God, (2) the merit of Christ, (3) the Gospel which alone offers and distributes these treasures, and (4) faith which alone receives or appropriates them (SD III.25). The first three items define the universal/general dimension of justification (forgiveness as

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<sup>61</sup>Jon D. Buchholz, “Jesus Canceled Your Debt!” (2012).



obtained for all mankind on the cross, proclaimed in the resurrection [see Rom 4:25 and 1 Tim 3:16] and offered to all in the means of grace), and the fourth, the individual/personal dimension. No one actually *has* forgiveness unless and until he receives it by faith. This distinction between forgiveness as obtained for and offered to all, and that same forgiveness as actually received and possessed, is often described (as in the English translation of Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*) with the words "objective" and "subjective." ... The right teaching here must defend the fullness of our Lord's saving work against the denial of *sola gratia* (grace alone) by Rome on the one hand and against the denial of *universalis gratia* (universal grace) and the means of grace by Geneva on the other. Only the Church of the Augsburg Confession teaches the article of justification in its evangelical truth and plenitude, that is, both grace alone and universal grace, and therefore also the means of grace!

Marquart opines that "the terms *universal* or *general* and *individual* or *personal* are much to be preferred" to the terms "objective" and "subjective," in part because "the so-called 'subjective' justification is every whit as objective as the 'objective,' in that it is an action of God." He observes that some Reformed writers also speak of an objective and a subjective justification, but in a way that is freighted with the distinctive doctrinal errors of Calvinism. Lutherans might therefore be advised to avoid terms which could be associated, in the minds of some, with certain false teachings.<sup>62</sup>

The point is certainly worthy of consideration. But we would add that speaking of a "universal" justification of the world in Christ could likewise be misunderstood to be teaching or implying the error of universalism – that all people whose sins were paid for by Christ – believer and unbeliever alike – actually receive the benefit of his saving work, and are all personally destined for heaven, regardless of whether they embrace or reject the gospel. Consideration can and should be given to coming up with the clearest and best way to explain these things. But there is no explanation of this or any article of faith that cannot be twisted or misconstrued by either a confused or a malevolent mind.

### **G. Postmodernists, Atheists, and All Others for whom Jesus Died and Rose Again**

It would be nice to think that the kind of clarification Marquart desires can – over time – be achieved, if all who care about these things listen together to the Scriptures and the Confessions of the church, and allow themselves to be led in their understanding of the Scriptures and the Confessions by the evangelical insights of Luther and others who did clearly grasp this Biblical teaching. But we do not have to wait for this to happen to be confident in our proclamation, to a world of sinners, of the saving gospel of Christ crucified *for* sinners – that is, for *all* sinners!

This gospel does not demand faith in order to be fully true, but it creates the faith that it requires, as it bestows Christ – the Justified and the Justifier – upon those who hear it. The

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<sup>62</sup>Kurt E. Marquart, "Augsburg Revisited," *2001: A Justification Odyssey*, edited by John A. Maxfield (Saint Louis: The Luther Academy, 2002), pp. 173-74. Emphases in original.

justification that is offered in the gospel – to all who hear the gospel – is not a pregnant potentiality to be *actualized in faith*. It is a finished reality – in Christ – to be *received by faith*.

If I do not have *Christ*, then I do not have my *justification*. If I remain in this Christless state until I die, then I die a lost man, dead in trespasses and sins, under the wrath and condemnation of God, and without hope. But if I *have* Christ, then I *have* my justification – because if I have *Christ*, I have the *world's* justification. And I am a part of the world for which Christ died and rose again.

Regardless of what terms may have been used to describe this truth, and regardless of exactly which Scripture passages may have been expounded in the service of this truth, it is our honest conclusion and sincere conviction that the orthodox Evangelical Lutheran Church has always known, implicitly if not explicitly, that the doctrine of justification presented in this essay is at the heart of the gospel. Christ, the man for others, saves us. We do not save ourselves, in whole or in part.

To believe in justification by God's grace, rather than by a synergy between God and man, is to believe this. To believe in justification by *faith*, rather than by *works*, is to believe this. To believe in justification *by faith*, rather than *in faith* or *because of faith*, is to believe this.

We believe these things, and confess these things, in a world that is becoming increasingly hostile to the very notion that *anything* is objectively true and accessible to all people. To the postmodern mind, *truth* is not the governing reality for human existence and meaning. *Power* is the governing reality. And any claims to the existence of objective truth that are made by someone, are seen simply to be that person's ploy to gain control over others. Claims to truth mask a desire for power. Claims to truth do not reflect an actual, genuine belief in truth. Or so the postmodern deconstruction goes.

Over against Christ and the Christian faith in particular, the postmodern world is echoing the words of Pontius Pilate: "What is truth?" "Do You not know that I have power...?" (John 18:38; 19:10, NKJV). But the church responds with the words of Jesus:

"Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out. And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." (John 12:31-32, ESV)

Preaching the *truth* of the *objective* justification of *all people*, presents postmodernists with three targets. But the *natural* man has *never* understood the gospel, or been willing to believe it. The genuine gospel of Jesus Christ does not meet any of the "felt needs" of a consistently postmodern person – or of any unregenerated person. And the old Adam within the postmodernist – and within any unbeliever – will never embrace a religion that threatens to drown and kill it, and that promises salvation only through a *new* birth, resulting in a *new* nature.

For premodern man, modern man, or postmodern man, the words of St. Paul have always held true: "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14, ESV). And these apostolic words also hold true:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.” (1 Corinthians 1:18-19, ESV)

The word of the cross – where the Savior of the world died for the sins of the world – is a miracle-working word, which can shine a divine and saving light into the darkness of any postmodern mind and heart. “And they said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household’” (Acts 16:31, ESV). We likewise say to our postmodern friends – as we introduce them to the risen Lord of the universe – “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

But not every unbeliever in our fallen world is a postmodernist. The new class of militant atheists that has been spawned in our generation is comprised of people who are hyper-modernists. They are quite certain, in their own minds, that there is no God. They consider this to be an objective truth that is accessible to all people. And in their books and speeches, they actively seek to spread the “good news” that they have come to embrace, that there is no salvation, no eternal life, no heaven, and ultimately no meaning to our existence.

One of the more popular proponents of the new atheism was Christopher Hitchens, up until his demise. But his writings are still exercising an influence. In one of those writings, Hitchens directly addressed some of the things we have been discussing. He wrote:

I find something repulsive about the idea of vicarious redemption. I would not throw my numberless sins onto a scapegoat and expect them to pass from me; we rightly sneer at the barbaric societies that practice this unpleasantness in its literal form. There’s no moral value in the vicarious gesture anyway. As Thomas Paine pointed out, you may if you wish take on another man’s debt, or even to take his place in prison. That would be self-sacrificing. But you may not assume his actual crimes as if they were your own; for one thing, you did not commit them, and might have died rather than do so; for another, this impossible action would rob him of individual responsibility. So the whole apparatus of absolution and forgiveness strikes me as positively immoral, while the concept of revealed truth degrades the concept of free intelligence by purportedly relieving us of the hard task of working out the ethical principles for ourselves.<sup>63</sup>

Hitchens had obviously heard the gospel, and consciously rejected it. He needed to hear it again, because the only thing we have to offer for the salvation of people like Hitchens is the gospel – since “faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17, ESV).

It is too late for Hitchens personally. But for people like him, who have in some manner heard the Christian gospel and intellectually understood it, yet have not believed it, they, too, need to hear it again. But preferably, they should hear it again as guests of the church – that is, within the community of a restored humanity in Christ that is enlivened in every moment by the forgiveness that the gospel delivers to God’s people.

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<sup>63</sup>Christopher Hitchens, “Letters to a Young Contrarian” (2001).

This would be a place – a healing and light-filled place – where the fruits of the gospel can be palpably seen and experienced; and where the fruits of the gospel can already begin to touch our atheist friends through the love of Christians, even before they believe the gospel. They can thereby know that the faith which inspires this is, at the very least, not immoral. And by the working of God’s Spirit through the Word, they may also finally be brought to a point where they are able to know that the faith that inspires this is *true*. Under God’s wise providence, this might help. Pray therefore that such atheists find their way to congregations that have taken to heart these words of St. Paul:

Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you. Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. (Ephesians 4:32–5:2, ESV).

And of course, Christ did not give himself up *only* for us Christians. That is one of the central, defining points of objective justification! And that is one of the points that St. John makes in his First Epistle, as he encourages us, in our weakness, to know that we have a Savior who will *always forgive* – because he is a Savior who has *already forgiven*:

If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1:8–2:2, ESV)

For our justification and forgiveness before God, we do not look inside ourselves – to anything that *we* produce, or even to anything that *God* produces *in* us. For our justification and forgiveness before God, we look *outside* of ourselves, to our Lord Jesus Christ alone, and to his obedience and saving work alone. And so we believe and teach, in the words of the Formula of Concord, that our Lord Jesus Christ

has redeemed, justified, and saved us from our sins as God and man, through His complete obedience. Therefore, the righteousness of faith is the forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and our adoption as God’s children only on account of Christ’s obedience. Christ’s obedience alone – out of pure grace – is credited for righteousness through faith alone to all true believers. They are absolved from all their unrighteousness by this obedience.<sup>64</sup>

✙ *Soli Deo Gloria* ✙

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<sup>64</sup>Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:4, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (second edition), edited by Paul Timothy McCain (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), p. 536.

## *Scripture Quotations*

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## *Select Bibliography*

The present essay is chiefly a work of historical theology. We have explored the question of what our forefathers in the faith believed and taught with respect to the matter of objective and subjective justification, and why. We have also sought to learn some lessons from this history for the well-being of the church in our own time. We have endeavored not to duplicate the fine work that has been done by others over the years, in explicating the doctrine of justification in all of its parts from the perspective of exegetical theology and pastoral theology, or in addressing the historical dimensions of this subject in ways that focus on times and places other than where our focus has been. The following bibliography is comprised of such other writings, which we recommend for further study:

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(The materials listed above that are available online, can all be accessed by means of this "Lutheran Theology" web page: [tinyurl.com/lutherantheology](http://tinyurl.com/lutherantheology))