

Justification: “Objective” and “Subjective”

DAVID JAY WEBBER

The terms “objective justification” and “subjective justification” do not have a long and deep pedigree in Lutheran theological history. They are not Reformation-era terms. But the truths that these terms are intended to express certainly do have such a pedigree. In summarizing the meaning and application of St. Paul’s statement in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, that “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (5:19, ESV¹), the Lutheran theologian Johann Quistorp the Elder (1584-1648) 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.²

These dual truths are summarized in a 1981 statement that served to settle a controversy regarding the teaching of objective justification within the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod:

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).³

By God’s design and according to God’s saving plan, Jesus was the representative and stand-in for mankind in his death and resurrection. Jesus’ justification therefore was, in this sense, the vicarious “justification” of mankind. But Jesus’ justification was not in *every* sense the justification of mankind, because each human being is not as a consequence now destined for heaven. Mankind’s justification in Christ’s justification is not universalism. For the personal

¹Scripture quotations marked “ESV” are from the Holy Bible, English Standard Version®, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

²Johann Quistorp; quoted in Friedrich A. Schmidt, *Justification: Subjective and Objective* (1872) (translated by Kurt E. Marquart) (Fort Wayne, Indiana: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1982), 21.

³Walter A. Maier, statement made to the Board of Control of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, January 30, 1981; quoted in Robert D. Preus, “Objective Justification,” *Concordia Theological Seminary Newsletter* (Spring 1981).

salvation of the individual, “justification” in the sense of a personal *reception* of “the treasure of justification,” by faith, is necessary.

The use of the “objective” and “subjective” terminology became somewhat standardized within the Missouri and Norwegian Synods in North America in the second half of the nineteenth century, in the context of a renewed study of, and appreciation for, the proper relationship between absolution and justification. But other terms were also used: *general* and *individual* justification; *universal* and *personal* justification; and objective and subjective *reconciliation*.

The use of such terminology, and the embracing of this way of explaining the two sides of justification, were not limited to Lutherans in the Missouri and Norwegian Synods. For example, Carroll Herman Little (1872-1958) – a theological professor in the United Lutheran Church in America – taught that “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”; and that “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.”⁴

The specific word “forgiveness,” and the specific 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. In forgiveness something bad is taken away, while in justification something good is given or credited. But in Biblical, Lutheran theology, “forgiveness” and “justification” are *functionally synonymous*. “Forgiveness” and “justification” are basically two ways of looking at, and describing, the same thing – albeit from slightly different angles.

The Apology of the Augsburg Confession accordingly states that “To obtain the forgiveness of sins is to be justified according to [Ps. 32:1]: ‘Blessed are those whose transgression is forgiven.’”⁵ 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. ... And since the promise cannot be 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. ... 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

⁴C. H. Little, *Disputed Doctrines* (Burlington, Iowa: Lutheran Literary Board, 1933), 60-61.

⁵Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:76, *The Book of Concord*, edited by Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 133. Hereafter cited as Kolb/Wengert.

account of Christ and that God is reconciled and gracious on account of Christ – receives the forgiveness of sins and justifies us.⁶

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,” 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.⁷

When the Lutheran Confessions speak of a Christian’s new standing before God, they often jump back and forth unselfconsciously between the two terms “justified” and “forgiven.” And therefore today, a Lutheran discussion of justification, and a Lutheran discussion of forgiveness or absolution, are really two aspects of the same discussion.

As noted, the original focus of the nineteenth-century deliberations in the Missouri and Norwegian Synods was not on justification *per se*, but was on the nature and character of absolution *in relation to* justification. Is absolution merely an expression of God’s wish for someone’s forgiveness, which may or may not be fulfilled depending on whether the condition of faith is met? Or is absolution a powerful impartation of a forgiveness that already exists for the world in Christ, which is either received by faith or rejected by unbelief? Theodore Julius Brohm made a presentation to the 1860 convention of the Missouri Synod “Concerning the Intimate Connection of the Doctrine of Absolution with that of Justification.” Among the theses that he set forth in this presentation were these:

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 [the forgiveness of sins].
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.”

In the discussion that followed his presentation, Brohm emphasized that

⁶Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:43-45, Kolb/Wengert 127.

⁷Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:9-11, Kolb/Wengert 563-64. Punctuation slightly revised.

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.

The preaching of the gospel and the pronouncing of absolution today are not merely reminders of a past pardon for all that was issued by God long ago, in conjunction with the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rather, according to Brohm,

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, thus 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.⁸

Brohm's theses, and his explanation of his theses, were shaped largely by Martin Luther's teaching on absolution and the power of the keys, especially as found in his treatise on "The Keys" from 1530, and in a letter that he and Philip Melancthon wrote to the city council of Nürnberg in 1533. The "keys" terminology originates in Jesus' solemn declaration to Peter in Matthew 16:19 (ESV): "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (ESV). Yet when Jesus fulfilled this pledge after his resurrection, and gave to Peter the authority to bind and to loose, he did not give that authority *only* to Peter. We read in John 20:22-23 (ESV) that Jesus told "the disciples":

Receive the Holy Spirit. If you [plural] forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you [plural] withhold forgiveness from any, it is withheld.

In his treatise on "The Keys," Luther described the objective content of the keys, and the source of their power to forgive, when he stated that "hidden in the keys of Christ" lie "his blood, death, and resurrection, by which he has opened to us heaven, and thus imparts through the keys to poor sinners what he has wrought through his blood." The office of the keys is, therefore, "a high and divine office, aiding our souls to pass from sin and death to grace and life; it grants them righteousness without any merit of works, solely through forgiveness of sins."⁹ Further on in the treatise, Luther addresses his readers personally, with these words of encouragement and instruction:

⁸Theodore 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, 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), 16-17.

⁹Martin Luther, "The Keys," *Luther's Works* 40 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 328.

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.¹⁰

The loosing key flows out from the objective forgiveness of all for whom Jesus died, and announces that forgiveness to everyone who hears the spoken word of absolution. The means of grace in general, and the loosing key in particular, do not create God’s forgiveness. They carry, convey, and deliver God’s forgiveness as it already exists in Christ. The forgiveness that Christ won is in the gospel, and in the absolution, so that it can be conferred upon those who believe this divine pardon. 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 won it on 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 persists in his rejection of Christ will someday learn – on Judgment Day if not before – “how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it.”

The objective truth of God’s forgiveness of *redeemed* humanity *in* Christ, does not contradict the continuing reality of God’s condemnation of *fallen* humanity *outside of* Christ. The gospel does not *contradict* the law, but coexists with it in symbiotic tension within God’s ongoing conversation with humanity. Therefore objective justification – which is an important component of the gospel – does not contradict the law, either. These words of John the Baptist continue to be true: “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).

Yet in his explication of what believers do in fact believe, *these* words of John the Baptist *also* continue to be true: “Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, ESV). When John said this, Jesus was still walking the earth, on a pathway that was taking him to Calvary and to the empty tomb. Now, during the Easter season each year – as the church looks back upon the finished work of Christ – it joyfully prays in the Easter Preface: “...chiefly are we bound to praise You for the glorious resurrection of Your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord; for He is the very Paschal Lamb, *which was offered for us and has taken away the sins of the world.*”¹¹

¹⁰Martin Luther, “The Keys,” 366-67. Emphases added.

¹¹Proper Preface for Easter, *Evangelical Lutheran Hymnary* (Saint Louis: MorningStar Music Publishers, Inc., 1996), 73. Emphasis added.

In settling a dispute in the city of Nürnberg on the relative desirability or propriety of public absolution, as compared to private absolution, Luther and Melancthon wrote a letter to the Nürnbergers in which they point 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].¹²

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. And the fact that this gospel “demands our faith” proves 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.

Luther emphasizes some of these same points in a sermon for Easter Tuesday, where 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 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...¹³

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...”¹⁴ Absolution comes before faith and gives birth to faith. Kurt E. Marquart comments on this passage from the Augustana: “Absolution can exist without faith (although its

¹²Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, “Letter to the Council of the City of Nürnberg” (April 18, 1533), *Luther’s Works* 50 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 76-77. Emphases added.

¹³Martin Luther, “Sermon for Easter Tuesday,” *Complete Sermons of Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2000), 1.2:316. Emphasis added.

¹⁴Augsburg Confession XII:5 (Latin), Kolb/Wengert 45.

benefits of course go to waste unless faith receives them), but faith cannot exist without absolution.”¹⁵

Within the Missouri and Norwegian Synods of the mid nineteenth century, the teaching of the Lutheran theologian Johann Gerhard (1582-1637) that Christ was absolved of humanity’s sin in his resurrection, was also influential in how their way of explaining the objective and subjective aspects of forgiveness and justification took shape.¹⁶ In commenting on the Epistle to the Romans, Gerhard writes that “the heavenly Father, by delivering Christ into death for the sake of our sins, condemned sin in His flesh.” Gerhard goes on to explain that God the Father “punished our sins in Christ, which were imposed on Him and imputed to Him as to a bondsman,” and that “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.”¹⁷

Elsewhere, in one of his theological disputations, Gerhard explains the saving significance of the death and resurrection of Christ in a similar way. In this disputation he speaks first of how the Lord’s resurrection assures Christians that their 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.” As he continues to unfold the blessings of the resurrection of Christ for believers, Gerhard goes on to say that “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 the corporal and spiritual death of sins.” But then, as the text of this disputation continues, Gerhard cites “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),” and explains that when the divine Son was in this way justified,

*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.*¹⁸

¹⁵Kurt 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), 118.

¹⁶This can be seen especially in C. F. W. Walther’s Easter sermon “Christ’s Resurrection – The World’s Absolution,” in *The Word of His Grace: Occasional and Festival Sermons* (Lake Mills, Iowa: Graphic Publishing Company, Inc., 1978), 229 ff.

¹⁷Johann Gerhard, *Adnotationes ad priora capita Epistolae D. Pauli ad Romanos*; 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), 36.

¹⁸Johann Gerhard, *Disputationes Theologicae* (Jena, 1655), XX, 1450 (translated by Kurt E. Marquart); quoted in Jon D. Buchholz, “Jesus Canceled Your Debt!” (2012), 10. Emphasis added.

In a separate commentary on 1 Timothy 3:16, Gerhard similarly states that the phrase “He was

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, which he had carried to the cross. In God's tribunal they are all lifted and removed from him. Since Christ, both in his death and in his resurrection, was humanity's bondsman, sponsor, and representative before God, this lifting of humanity's sins from *him* was, before God, the lifting of humanity's sins *from humanity*. An individual human being is obviously a part of "the whole world," and of the human race. An individual human being can therefore be certain that he is included both in Christ's perfect satisfaction before the Father, and in the Father's absolution of Christ.

Gerhard never expresses himself 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.¹⁹ This is because 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 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 in another place 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.²⁰

The discussions of objective forgiveness, objective absolution, and objective justification that began in the Missouri Synod, spread also into the Norwegian Synod, where the clarity and comfort with which Brohm and others in Missouri had explained these things were greatly appreciated. But almost immediately, the Norwegians were criticized for their embracing of this

justified" means, among other things, that "He was declared to be righteous, since in and by means of the resurrection Christ was absolved of the sins of men that He took upon Himself as Guarantor in order to make satisfaction for them to the Father" (*Adnotationes ad Priorem D. Pauli ad Timotheum Epistolam*, translated by Paul A. Rydecki. Translation slightly revised.).

¹⁹In commenting on Romans 5:19, Gerhard explains that "a distinction must fully be made between the acquisition and the application of the merit of Christ; or between the benefit itself and participation in the benefit. The acquisition of the merit, or the benefit itself obtained by the death of Christ, is general. For as Adam, by his disobedience, enveloped all of his posterity in the guilt of sin, so Christ, who suffered and died for the sins of all, also *merited and acquired righteousness for all*. But this benefit is only *applied* to those who are grafted into Christ by *faith*, and only they become participants in this benefit" (*Adnotationes ad priora capita Epistolae D. Pauli ad Romanos*; 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," 27. Emphasis added.)

²⁰Johann Gerhard, *A Comprehensive Explanation of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper* (translated by Elmer Hohle) (Decatur, Illinois: Johann Gerhard Institute, 1996), 165. Emphases added.

form of teaching by many within the Augustana Synod, and later by George Fritschel and others in the Iowa Synod. Friedrich A. Schmidt, in the essay on “Justification” that he delivered at the first convention of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference in 1872, demonstrated the unsound foundation on which these criticisms were based, by pointing out that

when G. Fritschel claims: “In the Gospel God shows the sinner a way out, which *can* redeem him from death and damnation and *bring about the forgiveness of his sins*,” he thereby denies that justification has already been accomplished by Christ and that thus the righteousness which avails before God already exists. But thus teach not only the Scriptures but also the Confessions of our church, as in the 6th article of the Augsburg Confession, where it says, following the Latin: “forgiveness of sins and justification *are apprehended by faith*” [AC VI:2], and, “grace, forgiveness of sins, and justification *are apprehended by faith*” [AC XX:22]. Thus also the Apology: “Faith *accepts the forgiveness of sins*” [Ap IV:62]. Further: “Justification is something promised freely for Christ’s sake alone, wherefore it is accepted always and only by faith before God” [Ap IV:217].

These quotations show clearly that a justification must first be in existence, which faith can accept, [and] that faith does not have to bring it about first, but that it embraces it as already existing. But if someone were to say: Yes, forgiveness of sins indeed already exists, but not justification, he would have to be ignorant of our Confessions, which expressly teach that justification and forgiveness of sins are the same. “We believe, teach, and confess that according to the usage of Holy Scripture, the word justify in this article means absolve, that is, acquit of sins” [FC Ep III:7].²¹

Norwegian Synod Pastor Herman Amberg Preus explained and defended his synod’s teaching in an 1874 article that included a section on “The Justification of the World.” As Preus 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*.

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

²¹Friedrich A. Schmidt, *Justification: Objective and Subjective*, 22. Emphases in original.

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.”

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,” and 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.²²

In their teaching on “objective” or “universal” justification, the pastors and theologians of the Missouri and Norwegian Synods were consciously drawing on the writings of Luther, Gerhard, and other orthodox Lutheran theologians of the past. They were not influenced by, and were not trying to reproduce, the erroneous teaching of Samuel Huber (1547-1624), a convert from Calvinism to Lutheranism and for a time a professor at Wittenberg, who had used similar terminology. Schmidt states:

When a king pardons a group of criminals, then they all are from the king’s side acquitted of guilt and punishment, but whoever among them does not accept the pardon, must continue to suffer for his guilt; it is the same with sinners in the justification which has happened through Christ’s death and resurrection. Yes, if God had not written and sealed the letter of pardon, then we pastors would be liars and seducers of the people if we said to them: Only believe, then you are righteous. But now that God has through the raising of His Son signed the letter of pardon for the sinners, and sealed it with His divine seal, we can confidently preach: the world is justified, the world is reconciled with God, which latter expression too would be impermissible if the former were not true. Our old dogmaticians too would themselves have used the expression more – since they believed and taught the substance – had not *Huber* shortly before Gerhard’s time taught that God had not only justified all men already, but had also elected them to eternal life. In order to avoid the appearance of agreement with this erroneous doctrine, they used the expression only rarely. ... The Wittenberg theologians (Gesner, Leyser, Hunnius, and others) did not want to tolerate Huber’s expression: ... “Christ imparted the redemption to the entire human race *in the proper sense*,” because the *actual imparting*, “as it is taken in the theological schools,” refers to the *appropriation* (See Wittenberg *Consilia* I, 642ff.). Nevertheless we find not a few unimpeachable theologians who speak of a universal justification or absolution.²³

²²Herman Amberg Preus, “The Justification of the World,” *Evangelisk Luthersk Kirketidende* (February 13, 1874) (translated by Herbert Larson). Emphases in original. Punctuation slightly revised.

²³Friedrich A. Schmidt, *Justification: Subjective and Objective*, 20-21. Emphases in original.

Christ's atonement for all human sin – which absolution reveals and applies – did not merely put God into a neutral state: no longer wrathful against humanity; but not yet reconciled to humanity either, until and unless specific human beings repent and believe. The righteousness that avails before God, which Jesus acquired for humanity in his death and resurrection, is not an inert righteousness. It is a justifying righteousness, which exists in Christ *for* everyone, and which is offered in the means of grace *to* everyone. As Robert D. Preus explains,

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 Son 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.

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).²⁴

Being careful about how these things are understood, preached, and applied, is not merely a matter of ivory tower hair-splitting. The gospel must not be proclaimed as if it were a conditional message about a potential justification. Such a "gospel" would not calm the fears of a troubled conscience. 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.²⁵

²⁴Robert D. Preus, "Objective Justification," *Concordia Theological Seminary Newsletter* (Spring 1981). Emphases added. Punctuation slightly revised.

²⁵Ken R. Schurb, *Does the Lutheran Confessions' Emphasis on Subjective Justification Mitigate Their Teaching of Objective Justification?* (1982), 32.

As interesting as it is to review the private writings of Luther and Gerhard that the American Lutherans of the nineteenth century found so helpful on this issue, as well as the private writings of respected twentieth-century theologians who explained and defended this teaching, these private writings are nevertheless not a part of the official Confessional corpus of Lutheranism as found in the Book of Concord. Is this teaching on objective and subjective justification, forgiveness, and reconciliation also found in the Confessions? Yes, it is.

The Augsburg Confession is the most universal symbol of the Lutheran Reformation and of the Lutheran Church. It does not have a section explicitly 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].²⁶

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 already true for everyone for whom Christ died 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.

With reference to consciences that have already been terrified by the preaching of the law of God, the Apology states that

in the midst of these terrors, *the gospel about Christ (which freely promises the forgiveness of sins through Christ)* ought to be set forth to consciences. They should therefore believe that *on account of Christ their sins are freely forgiven*. This faith uplifts, sustains, and gives life to the contrite, according to the passage [Rom. 5:1]: “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.” This faith receives *the forgiveness of sins*. This faith justifies before God, as the same passage testifies, “since we are justified by faith.” This faith shows the difference between the contrition of Judas and Saul on the one hand, and Peter and David on the other. The contrition of Judas or Saul was useless for the reason that it lacked the faith that grasps *the forgiveness of sins granted on account of Christ*. Accordingly, the contrition of David and Peter was beneficial because faith was added, which apprehends *the forgiveness of sins given on account of Christ*.²⁷

²⁶Augsburg Confession IV:1-3 (Latin), Kolb/Wengert 39,41. Emphases added.

²⁷Apology of the Augsburg Confession XII:35-36, Kolb/Wengert 192-93. Emphases added.

Faith is of crucial importance in the doctrine of justification. But faith is important and necessary, not so much because of what it *is*, but because of what it *receives* and *grasps* – namely the forgiveness of sins. And the forgiveness of sins that is given by God so that it can be received and grasped, is not given on account of faith or because of faith, but is “given on account of Christ.” What faith embraces is not just a divine proposal for a possible forgiveness and justification that do not actually exist yet, but that may be brought into existence if certain conditions are met. Forgiveness and justification in Christ are already 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.

Again, with reference to Luke 24:47 – where “Christ commands the preaching of repentance and the forgiveness of sins in his name” – the Apology acknowledges that God’s Word, in law and gospel,

accuses all people of being under sin and subject to eternal wrath and death, and for Christ’s sake offers the forgiveness of sins and justification, which are received by faith. The proclamation of repentance, which accuses us, terrifies consciences with genuine and serious terrors. In the midst of these, hearts must once again receive consolation. This happens when they believe the promise of Christ, namely, that on his account we have the forgiveness of sins. This faith, which arises and consoles in the midst of those fears, receives the forgiveness of sins, justifies us, and makes alive.²⁸

So, faith “justifies us,” not because justification is *completed* by faith, but because justification is “*received* by faith.”

The Formula of Concord – in the context of setting forth a sound explanation of the doctrine of the person and work of Christ – also explains the relationship between what is offered in the gospel, and the faith that relies upon what is offered in the gospel, when it confesses 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]: “For just as by one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience will the many be made righteous,” in 1 John 1[7]: “The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin,” 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

²⁸Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:62, Kolb/Wengert 130. Punctuation slightly revised.

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.²⁹

The Concordists are responding to Andreas Osiander's teaching regarding the Christian's righteousness before God, which attributed the Christian's righteousness to the indwelling of Christ's essentially righteous divinity. In the face of this error they emphasize that sinners are justified by Christ's obedience to his Father, and not by his mere existence as God's incarnate Son, or by his mystical indwelling of the 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 may in some way exist but that is not yet "our righteousness" before God. Faith relies on, and receives, Christ's "perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race." 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." 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, "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.³⁰

²⁹Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration III:56-58, Kolb/Wengert 572-73. Emphasis added.

For a fuller discussion of this section of the Formula of Concord, and of the entire subject of objective and subjective justification, see David Jay Webber, "Our Righteousness before God...Is Revealed in the Gospel. On this Righteousness Faith Relies" (2015).

³⁰This would seem to be what Martin Luther is driving at in these theses: "1. [To say] that the Son of David is sitting at the right hand of God [Ps. 110:1; Matt. 22:42-45] means that the Son of God is risen from the dead. 2. His resurrection from the dead is our justification [Rom. 4:25], through faith alone. 3. [To say] that we are justified by faith alone means that all the righteousnesses of the Law and of human beings are condemned" ("Disputation on Justifying Faith and Miracle-working Faith and That We Are Justified by Faith Alone" [April 24, 1543], *Luther's Works* 73 [Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2020], 378). See also Tom G. A. Hardt, "Justification and Easter: A Study in Subjective and Objective Justification in Lutheran Theology," *A Lively Legacy: Essays in Honor of Robert Preus*, 52 ff.

What Luther writes in the Large Catechism regarding the petition for forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer, speaks more directly to the distinction between objective and subjective forgiveness, as this distinction would be applied to the daily struggles and daily comfort of a Christian:

Although we have God's Word and believe, although we obey and submit to his will and are nourished by God's gift and blessing, nevertheless we are not without sin. We still stumble daily and transgress because we live in the world among people who sorely vex us and give us occasion for impatience, anger, vengeance, etc. Besides, the devil is after us, besieging us on every side and, as we have heard, directing his attacks against all the previous petitions, so that it is not possible always to stand firm in this ceaseless conflict. Here again there is great need to call upon God and pray: "Dear Father, forgive us our debts." *Not that he does not forgive sins even apart from and before our praying; for before we prayed for it or even thought about it, he gave us the gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness.* But the point here is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness.³¹

The forgiveness that Christ won *for* humanity is offered *to* humanity in the gospel. The recognition and acceptance of this forgiveness by those who believe, is a recognition and an acceptance of something that already exists. God's forgiveness is not triggered or brought into existence by our praying for that forgiveness, or by our thinking about it and desiring it. The forgiveness of sins is already in the gospel for everyone, before anyone prays for it or thinks about it. This is true of the gospel whenever and wherever the gospel is offered and given to someone: whether for the first time, for the kindling of faith; or as a part of the Christian's baptismal life of daily dying to self and daily rising in Christ.

Luther had spoken in a way that is similar to how he speaks in the Large Catechism, in his 1521 treatise "Against Latomus," where he drew a comparison between what Christ did for everyone in his death and resurrection, and what the Holy Spirit does and will do for Christians in their life of faith and in their own future resurrection. In this treatise he begins by quoting St. Paul's words from the 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). With a desire to explain the difference between being objectively set free from the *law* of sin and death, and being subjectively set free from sin and death *in actuality*, Luther then 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.³²

³¹Large Catechism III:86-88, Kolb/Wengert 452. Emphasis added.

³²Martin Luther, "Against Latomus," *Luther's Works* 32 (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1958), 207. Emphases added.

In his propitiatory sacrifice and in his resurrection, Christ merited for a humanity enslaved to sin and mired in death “the law of the Spirit of Life” – that is, he merited *for* the world, the way of salvation that is implemented and enacted by the Holy Spirit *in* the world. In terms of what Christ *merited* for “everyone” – with respect to humanity’s needed liberation from sin and death – “everyone” has been objectively “absolved” from sin and “freed” from death, “once and for all.” “Everyone” in this context does not mean everyone who believes, because not everyone for whom Jesus meritoriously died and rose again *does* eventually believe. The absolution of everyone is attached to the Son’s *earning* of salvation, and not only to the Holy Spirit’s *application* of salvation. And yet, it is only *in the application* that believers are liberated from the *power* of sin and the *sting* of death in *this* life; and it is only in the faith which the Holy Spirit works in Christians, that they are able to look forward in hope to their ultimate liberation from sin and death *itself* in the *next* life. Without the converting and regenerating work of the Spirit through the means of grace, the absolution of “everyone” does not actually *benefit* everyone. What Christ *merited for* all is, sadly, not *received by* all.

In Luther’s Smalcald Articles, we see an even clearer presentation of this doctrine, both in terms of the justification and reconciliation that exist in Christ for all, and in terms of the personal faith that allows individuals to know and experience this justification and its saving benefits. He begins his summary of “the first and chief article” of the Christian religion 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]).

Note in particular how Luther selectively quotes from Romans 3:23-25. In the Biblical text, immediately after saying the things that Luther does quote, St. Paul also says that these truths and blessings are “to be received by faith.” But Luther very deliberately does *not* quote *that* statement. Luther’s purpose in citing some of this passage but not all of it – at this point in his presentation – is to show which portions of the passage speak of the objective aspect of justification. Apart from and before anyone believes in these things, Luther confesses that all have sinned, and that all are now justified by God’s grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. The sinfulness of all, and the justification and redemption of all, can be considered and reflected upon in their own right as theologically significant facts, before the progression of thought goes on to a consideration of the means by which this redemption and this justification are received by an individual. And that is exactly what Luther is doing here.

But then, right after his summary of what is to be believed, obtained, and grasped by a Christian, Luther does 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]).³³

The well-known phrase “faith alone” makes an appearance here. We are justified by faith alone. In context, the rejected antithesis to faith, as that which justifies, is “works prescribed by the law.” Luther teaches that we are justified by “faith alone,” and are not justified in whole or in part by such works. However, he does *not* teach that being justified by “faith alone” means that we are not justified by the gospel of Christ crucified for sinners to which a justifying faith clings, or that we are not saved by the objective justification of “all” which exists in the gospel and which is received by means of 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.

In a more extensive sermonic commentary 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

³³Smalcald Articles II, I:1-5, Kolb/Wengert 301. Emphasis added.

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. ...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.³⁴

Luther’s language is very vivid and evocative. In the *objective* sense of forgiveness, in Christ, the sins of the world 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 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 the Epistle to the Hebrews

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.”³⁵

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 – which 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,

³⁴Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of St. John,” *Luther’s Works* 22 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1957), 161-64. Emphasis added.

³⁵Martin Luther, “Lectures on Hebrews,” *Luther’s Works* 29 (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 112-13. Emphasis added.

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 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. On the basis of Hebrews 1:3 and Isaiah 53:6, Luther teaches that “before we repent, our sins have already been forgiven.” And if we might be tempted to think that it is our *penitence* that earns or produces our personal forgiveness or personal purification, Luther would remind us that the purification for sin that was accomplished by Christ is actually *what produces our penitence* – and that this purification for sin is likewise what produces the faith that receives the forgiveness which Christ established and brought into existence for us, by his atoning death.

In his Smalcald Articles presentation, Luther cites a portion of another passage from the Epistle to the Romans which is often cited in discussions of objective and subjective justification, where St. Paul teaches that righteousness “will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Romans 4:24-25, ESV). This passage is also used by Luther in one of his Easter sermons, in which he develops his thoughts about the death and resurrection of Christ by means of a comparison between two contrasting “pictures” which he verbally paints for the mind’s eye of his listeners: 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”

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 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 this recounting of 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.³⁶

³⁶Martin Luther, “First Easter-Sermon,” *Dr. Martin Luther’s House-Postil* (second edition) (Columbus, Ohio: J. A. Schulze, Publisher, 1884), II:268-71. Emphases added.

Further on in the sermon, Luther summarizes these points once again, and compares what happened to Jesus in his death and resurrection, for us and on our behalf; and what happens to us now, in our personal justification and forgiveness, as we hear and believe the Easter Gospel:

In the former scene of suffering and death we witnessed our sin, our sentence of condemnation and death resting heavily upon Christ, making Him a distressed, pitiable Man; now, on Easter, we have the other scene unalloyed with sin; no curse, no frown, no death is visible; it is all life, mercy, happiness and righteousness in Christ. This picture can and should cheer our hearts. We should regard it with no other feeling but that today God brings us also to life with Christ. We should firmly believe that as we see no sin nor death nor condemnation in Christ, so God will also, for Christ's sake, consider us free from these if we faithfully rely upon His Son and depend upon His resurrection. Such a blessing we derive from faith.³⁷

These expositions of the passages Luther quotes in the Smalcald Articles help us to know more fully what these passages meant to Luther, and therefore to see more clearly what Luther was intending to teach in the Smalcald Articles. And Confessional Lutheran pastors who subscribe to the Smalcald Articles as an official symbolical book of their Church, and as a testimony of their own beliefs, can accordingly be guided by these expositions in understanding with greater insight what *they* are expected to confess and teach regarding our redemption by God, our reconciliation with God, and our justification before God.

We should not think that this way of teaching about justification and forgiveness was invented by Luther. The Fathers of the ancient church who had a better-than-average understanding of justification by faith, also had a better-than-average understanding of objective and subjective justification! 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 imagery of a king delivering a reprieve to a body of imprisoned criminals, and setting them free from their chains, to illustrate the way in which God, in Christ, has pardoned and liberated the human race. He states:

All human nature was taken in the foulest evils. "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.³⁸

³⁷Martin Luther, "First Easter-Sermon," II:276.

³⁸St. John Chrysostom, *Discourses Against Judaizing Christians: The Fathers of the Church* 68 (translated by Paul W. Harkins) (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1979), II, I:7-II:1, 38-39.

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 profit personally from the pardon that had been issued to humanity.

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 – he 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 a baptized Christian by faith. Irenaeus had asked 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, Ambrose 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, 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 [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].³⁹

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 does distinguish them.

³⁹St. Ambrose, Epistle 73 (to Irenaeus), *Letters 1-91: The Fathers of the Church* 26 (translated by Mary Melchior Beyenka) (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1954), 464, 467-68; and as quoted (in part) in Apology of the Augsburg Confession IV:103, Kolb/Wengert 137-38. The above translated text is conflated from both sources.

The confusion and controversy that have so often surrounded the teaching on objective and subjective justification – in the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century, and in our own time – is very puzzling and discouraging. From what I have seen, some of the confusion arises from the weak and misleading expressions that have occasionally been used by would-be teachers and defenders of objective justification. Jon D. Buchholz offers some helpful counsel in this respect:

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 Christō*, in Christ.⁴⁰

Another reason for the confusion that abounds concerning the teaching on objective and subjective justification, is the failure of many of those who criticize it to make sure they actually understand what they are criticizing. I have seldom heard fully accurate descriptions of the doctrine – as taught correctly – from those who reject it. In my experience, the most common mistakes of the critics are that they fail to notice, in this teaching, that the only individual *as an individual* who is justified in the objective sense, is *Jesus*; and that justification in the objective sense has *not* been *received* by the world, the human race, all men, or whatever the universal term may be. Any proper discussion of the justification that is *received*, is a discussion of the *subjective* aspect of justification.

It must also be conceded that in Lutheran history, the term “justification” in particular was used by many Lutheran theologians only according to its subjective meaning. Those theologians used other expressions to describe the objective aspect of justification, yet without denying the reality of what the term “objective justification” is intended to convey. When differences among teachers are differences only in terminology, and not in substance, this is not divisive. We are “not to quarrel about words” (2 Timothy 2:14, ESV).

Martin Chemnitz, for example, wrote that God’s transfer of the Law to Christ – whose fulfillment of the Law was “by satisfaction and obedience for the whole human race,” and whose

⁴⁰Jon D. Buchholz, “Jesus Canceled Your Debt!,” 21-22.

“satisfaction is the expiation for the sins of the whole world” – is “a matter which *belongs to* the article of justification.”⁴¹ But he did not say that this saving work of Christ constitutes, in an *objective* sense, a “justification” itself of “the whole human race” and of “the whole world.” Yet Chemnitz *does indeed* teach the *doctrine* of objective justification, even though he does not use the *term*. He writes in his *Loci Theologici*, “Regarding our redemption,” that God

demonstrated His love toward us, whereby in the fulness of time He sent forth His only-begotten Son and delivered Him up for all, Rom. 5:8; 1 John 4:9. Luke 1:78 and 54: “through the bowels of His mercy...in remembrance of His mercy.” John 3:16: God accepted the sacrifice of His Son as satisfaction and propitiation for the sins of the whole world. 1 John 4:10 and 1 Cor. 1:30: He was made for us by God our redemption, righteousness, etc. 2 Cor. 5:19: “*God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.*”⁴²

It is of great significance that Chemnitz includes 2 Corinthians 5:19 in this section of his *Loci* “Regarding our redemption,” rather than in the section that immediately follows, “Regarding the distribution or application of this to the believer.” Chemnitz likewise does not hesitate to cite with approval St. Gregory of Nazianzus, “in the oration for the sacred Easter festival, where he says: ‘O Easter, great and holy, and *the cleansing of the whole world!* ...’”⁴³

Francis Pieper observes that “Scripture and the Confessions...know of only one object of justifying faith and use the terms ‘Christ,’ ‘Christ’s righteousness,’ ‘Christ’s obedience,’ ‘Christ’s suffering,’ ‘Christ’s merit,’ ‘forgiveness,’ ‘justification,’ etc., *promiscue*, or as synonyms...”⁴⁴ Pieper himself employs the terms “objective justification” and “objective reconciliation” as functionally synonymous.⁴⁵ Might it be easier for all Confessional Lutherans of good will to come to an agreement on “objective reconciliation,” and then move from there to a mutual recognition that “objective justification” really means the same thing? Perhaps we can all also listen, calmly and carefully, to Marquart’s constructive suggestions for how a common understanding could be reached by all those who sincerely want to be Confessional Lutherans:

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 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

⁴¹Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent I* (translated by Fred Kramer) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 499. Emphasis added.

⁴²Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici* (translated by J. A. O. Preus) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1989), II:548-49. Emphasis added.

⁴³Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent III* (translated by Fred Kramer) (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1986), 462. Emphasis added.

⁴⁴Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics 2* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 539.

⁴⁵Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics 2*:321-22; 347-51.

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...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!⁴⁶

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⁴⁶Kurt E. Marquart, “Augsburg Revisited,” in *2001: A Justification Odyssey*, edited by John A. Maxfield (Saint Louis: The Luther Academy, 2002), 173-74. Emphasis in original.