

“Should We Teach Objective Justification?”

Part One

It is a privilege to be talking to you today and tomorrow about that topic of Christian doctrine that is closest to our hearts. The term “objective justification” may not be very exciting, but the teaching that this term identifies is that pure, wholesome, and heavenly food that satisfies our souls, gives us strength to live, and confidence to die. In this first session, we will set the biblical foundation for this teaching, and respond to a couple of objections to it. In our second session, we define the gospel and gospel preaching and see that the sermon is God’s absolution. In the third session, we will consider that everything the pastor does as pastor is preaching and that pastoral counseling and personal absolution belong together. Finally, we will confront contemporary challenges to objective justification in a new form of pietism that rejects Christ’s vicarious satisfaction. We will see how antinomianism is a threat to the pure teaching of objective justification. Denying God’s wrath doesn’t take it away. Only Jesus can do that.

Christian preaching preaches Christ. It not only preaches what Christ teaches; it preaches Christ himself. Who is Jesus? What has Jesus done for us? When we confess Christ in the Catechism we confess who he is: true God, begotten of his Father from eternity, and true man, born of the Virgin Mary. We confess what he has done. He has redeemed me. There are a number of words used to identify what our Lord Jesus has done. Words such as redemption, reconciliation, atonement, justification, propitiation, and salvation are not just metaphors used to picture God’s love. They teach the doctrinal substance of God’s love for us in Christ. Redemption, reconciliation, atonement, justification, and salvation go together. There is no redemption without reconciliation. There is no reconciliation without justification. There is no justification without salvation.

When we Lutherans identify the central topic of our Christian religion, we speak of justification. It is the chief topic. It is the topic that, if it is distorted, all Christian theology is distorted along with it, but if it is kept sound, so will be the body of doctrine that is taught.

If our doctrine of justification is from God, we must not change it. In the Preface to the Book of Concord we Lutherans resolve not to “depart in any way at all, either in content or in formulation, from the divine truth” that we confess in the Lutheran Confessions. This is in obedience to the apostolic command to “Hold fast the pattern of sound words which you have heard from me.” (2 Timothy 1:13) Our Lord Jesus warns us to “beware of false prophets.” The bitter fruit of the false prophet is teaching that destroys faith and by destroying faith robs us of our salvation.

Neither the Holy Scriptures nor the Lutheran Confessions use the terms “objective” or “subjective” justification. The Lutheran dogmatic tradition does not use these terms. It is not

necessary for us to use these terms either. Since this is so, we might wonder why some of us Lutherans insist on using this extra-biblical, extra-confessional term. Why quarrel over words when it is the substance of the gospel that God calls us to proclaim? If I insist on teaching objective justification, I become guilty of logomachy – now there's an accusation that will make every friendly North Dakotan tremble in his boots!

But it isn't so. We who teach objective justification could dispense with the term. We admit it isn't biblical or confessional. We could come up with a different term. But in matters of doctrinal controversy, when the divine truth is being challenged, it often becomes necessary to fight over the words we use. We who call ourselves Athanasians as opposed to Arians freely admit that the term, *homoousios*, that is, of the same substance, is not found in the Bible. But we cannot admit that the doctrine is not taught. To deny that the Son is of the same substance as the Father is to deny the Holy Trinity who is the only true God. For if the Son is not of the same substance as the Father he is not God. If he is not God he is not our Savior.

While the terms "objective justification" and "subjective justification" may have arisen in the 19th century, the objective/subjective distinction in the topic of justification has always been made. This distinction is inherent in the gospel itself. The doctrine of objective justification teaches that God, freely by his grace, without reference to any merit or worthiness in sinners, for the sake of the vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus, has forgiven this whole world of sinners all their sins and declared them to be righteous. The doctrine of subjective justification is that we receive this forgiveness and righteousness only through faith in the gospel of Christ. There are not two justifications: one objective and one subjective. There is only one justification. We view it from the side of its acquisition for us by Christ and we view it from the side of its reception by us through faith. In either case, it is the same Jesus, the same verdict from God, the same forgiveness of sins, the same justification.

Objective justification is explicitly taught in the Bible. Let us consider just a few portions of God's written word.

The best known words from God that teach the doctrine of objective justification were proclaimed by John the Baptist and are sung by the faithful in the Gloria in Excelsis and in the Agnus Dei every Sunday morning: "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." The word for take away can also be translated to bear. It means to bear and by bearing to remove, that is, to forgive. If Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world then the sin of the world is taken away. In Christ, that is, for his sake, on account of his sacrifice for us all as the Passover Lamb, the sin of the world is gone.

The words of Jesus in the Lord's Supper teach objective justification. The "for you" cannot be sincerely spoken by the minister who administers this sacrament if the "you" in the "for you" are

only those who believe. The minister says or sings the words of Jesus, "Take drink, this is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you and for many for the remission of sins." Who are the many, but the many for whom Jesus gave his life a ransom? The shedding of his blood is for the forgiveness of sins. It is shed for many. Unless we are to embrace Calvinism and insist that the many is not all, we must acknowledge that Jesus shed his blood for all and all those for whom he shed his blood are forgiven of all their sins.

And this is what St. Paul explicitly teaches. In Romans 4:5 he writes:

But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

Faith doesn't believe in him who justifies the righteous, but in him who justifies the ungodly. The word for ungodly here is never used to identify a believer. But the believer is to believe that God justifies the ungodly. He is to believe in this God. And it is through faith in the God who justifies the ungodly that the believer's faith is accounted for righteousness. The accounting of faith as righteousness employs a popular figure of speech known as metonymy. Faith is born in, is sustained by, and holds onto the declaration of God that justifies the ungodly by reckoning to him the righteousness of Christ. Since faith is so intimately joined to this justification, Paul says that faith is reckoned as righteousness when he is referring to what faith receives: the righteousness of Christ.

St. Paul teaches objective justification in Romans 4:24-25.

It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification.

See how beautifully the apostle joins subjective justification, which is faith, to objective justification, which is the object of faith. Paul is talking here about how God reckons faith as righteousness. He explains how this is so by referring to the death and resurrection of Jesus. He died because of our sins. He was raised because of our justification. Our sins caused his death. Our justification caused his resurrection. He bore our sins. He died. Now then, what of this bearing, this dying, this vicarious satisfaction, this payment of his life as a ransom to God, this propitiatory sacrifice to pacify God and take away his anger? What of it? Did his giving up his life for us all bring about that for which he gave it? He was raised because of our justification. By conquering our sins with his righteousness, he justified us. He did so on the cross. By replacing our sin with his righteousness, he justified us. The proof of our justification is his resurrection. Had he failed in taking away our sins, reconciling us to God, propitiating God, and fulfilling all righteousness he would have stayed dead. But because all mankind was justified by his death, he rose from the dead. This is why St. Paul can also say of him, that he was "declared

to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead.” (Romans 1:4) The power of Christ’s resurrection is the power of his death. It is his power to blot out all sin by bearing it in his own body on the cross. Jesus rose from the dead. Why? He rose because he justified us in his death.

St. Paul teaches objective justification in Romans 5:8-10.

But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life.

Note the connections here. Jesus died for us means we have been justified by his blood means when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through Christ’s death.

Paul teaches objective justification in Romans 5:18-19.

Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.

When Paul alternates between saying “all men” and “many” in reference to the same group of people, we do not redefine all to mean many but not all. Rather, we understand many to mean all. “All” does not mean “not all.” “Many” may mean not all or all. The alternating between the two expressions defines the many as being all men.

The many that were made sinners refers to all mankind, that is, everyone born with a father and a mother from the fall of Adam and Eve. Jesus is the only One born without a human father. That all people were made sinners by Adam’s sin is stated clearly. That all are likewise made righteous by Christ’s obedience is just as clear. The “will be” in the second clause of verse 19 is obviously a logical, not a chronological, future. In other words, just as by Adam’s sin all were made sinners, just so, by Christ’s obedience all are made righteous.

St. Paul teaches objective justification in 2 Corinthians 5:19.

God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

The clear meaning of 2 Corinthians 5:19 is that God is not imputing the sins of the world against them. The “them” (*autois*) of the second clause refers back to the “world” (*kosmon*) of the first clause. What was God doing “in Christ”? The text tells us. He was “reconciling the world to himself, not counting their sins against them.” These two participles, reconciling and not imputing, are joined to the preceding “God was in Christ.” These two participles tell us what God was doing in Christ. They do not say what God will be doing. They talk about what God did. The “reconciling” and the “not imputing” of 2 Corinthians 5:19 are joined to the “God was in Christ” of the same verse and the “them” refers back to the “world”.

This sets the foundation for what God entrusts to his ambassadors to preach. What is the “word” of 2 Corinthians 5:19 that the ambassador of Christ is to preach? Is it that God will become reconciled and not impute sin to specific believers at a future point in time? No, that is not what the text says. Rather, the word entrusted to the preacher to preach (which St. Paul proceeds to do in the next verse) is that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not reckoning their trespasses to them. It is done. That is what the preacher is to preach. The non-imputation of sin and the forgiveness of sin is the same thing.

This forgiveness or non-imputation of sin is a blessed reality that cannot be denied. It is what has happened in Christ. The world’s sin is not imputed to the world. The world’s sin has been forgiven. This is what it means to “not impute” – it means to forgive.

This is the foundation for justification through faith alone. God forgave the sins of the whole world in Christ. This is to be believed! The following verse treats faith:

Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God.

We must not ignore these words. Faith trusts in the word of universal reconciliation and forgiveness. If the word is not universal, it is not personal. The “word of reconciliation” of 2 Corinthians 5:19 is the word of universal reconciliation and forgiveness. This word is preached by Christ’s ambassadors in order to be believed, as St. Paul makes plain in the next verse.

The Bible teaches objective justification. So do the Lutheran Confessions. Article IV of the Augsburg Confession reads:

Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ’s sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3-4).

It is frequently claimed that the Lutherans of the 16th and 17th centuries did not teach objective justification. It is true that they did not use the terms “objective” and “subjective” justification. But as we can see by a careful examination of these words from the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran confessors of the 16th century confessed the doctrine of objective justification.

According to AC IV, what do those who are justified through faith believe? What is the object of their faith? What is it that makes their faith justifying? Melancthon writes:

. . . when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins.

When are we justified through faith? We are justified through faith when we believe that we are received into God's favor and that our sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. When I believe that my sins are forgiven for Christ's sake I am justified through faith. What faith is that? It is faith that my sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. The object of justifying faith is that my sins are forgiven for Christ's sake.

Is the object of my faith true or is it not? When the preacher preaches that my sins are forgiven for Christ's sake should I believe this to be so? Is it so? If it isn't so, I can hardly be justified through believing what is not true! But if it is so, it must be so because it is so, not because I believe that it is so.

The clear, simple teaching of AC IV – the foundational confessional Lutheran statement on the doctrine of justification through faith alone – is that justifying faith believes in a forgiveness of sins that is true before faith believes it and through faith receives it. “Their sins *are forgiven* for Christ's sake.” This is what we Lutherans confess in the Augsburg Confession. This is the doctrine of objective justification. “When they *believe* that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake.” This is the doctrine of subjective justification. These are not two doctrines or two justifications. These are two different aspects of the one doctrine of justification.

Let us briefly consider objections to the doctrine of objective justification. The most common objection is that objective justification teaches that everyone will be saved whether he believes or not. This objection is groundless. Objective justification is not a substitute for faith. It is the object of faith. It is faith's foundation. When it comes to forgiveness of sins we must distinguish between its acquisition, its bestowal, and its reception. In English we use three words that begin with the letter G: gained, given, and gotten. Forgiveness of sins is gained by Christ by means of his vicarious obedience and suffering. Forgiveness of sins is given to us by God by means of the gospel that is proclaimed and the sacraments that are administered. Forgiveness of sins is gotten by us through faith that believes what the gospel gives. To teach that the gospel gives forgiveness is not the same thing as to say that everyone to whom forgiveness is given receives what is given through faith. Forgiveness may be gained by Christ's vicarious obedience and given in the means of grace and not gotten through faith. But unbelief does not negate the gift. It rejects the gift. It doesn't make it invalid. As Luther says:

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. (Martin Luther, "The Keys," LW, 40, pp 366-367)

Another common objection is that the fact that Christ redeemed the whole world and made atonement for the sins of the whole world does not mean that God justified the whole world because justification is always through faith. This objection reveals confusion about the synonyms of salvation. While we must distinguish between the specific meanings of such words as atonement, reconciliation, redemption, propitiation, justification, forgiveness, and salvation, we cannot separate the substance of one soteriological term from another. Where there is redemption there is forgiveness. Without redemption there is no forgiveness. To speak of a universal redemption without a corresponding universal forgiveness truncates redemption, robbing it of its full meaning. To redeem doesn't just mean to make a payment. It means to set free by means of making that payment. Free from what? From the curse of sin! This is why St. Paul can write in Ephesians 1:7, "In Him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins." He identifies redemption with forgiveness.

To put this in more technical theological terms, the Bible teaches both the intensive and extensive perfection of the atonement. By intensive, we mean that everyone for whom Christ died was thereby reconciled to God and forgiven of his sins. The atonement is intensively perfect. It means its goal of reconciliation and forgiveness.

The extensive perfection of the atonement means that Christ is the atoning sacrifice – the propitiation – for the sins of the whole world. Jesus died for all. He redeemed all. Everyone who fell into sin by Adam's disobedience is justified by Christ's obedience.

We Lutherans teach both the intensive and the extensive perfection of the atonement. The Reformed branches of Protestantism do not. Calvinists teach the intensive perfection of the atonement while denying its extensive perfection. Arminians teach the extensive perfection of the atonement while denying its intensive perfection. In this way both branches of that Protestant brand can explain the question that bedevils Lutherans: why are some saved while others are damned?

The Calvinist explains why some are saved and others are lost by appealing to the doctrine of limited atonement – the L in the TULIP acronym – that explains that Jesus did not die for everyone, but only for the elect. Everyone for whom he died goes to heaven. Calvinism

explains the why some and not others question by affirming the intensive perfection of the atonement while rejecting the extensive perfection of the atonement. The reason some are saved is that God wanted to save them. The reason some are damned is that God didn't want to save them.

The Arminian explains why some are saved and others are lost by appealing to the doctrine of the free will. They reject Calvinism's denial of universal grace, teaching that Jesus died for everyone. But they also deny that everyone for whom Jesus died is forgiven. Forgiveness comes as a result of the sinner's choice. Choosing Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior effects the forgiveness of sins. For the Arminian, the fact that Jesus died for all and that not all are ultimately saved proves the free will.

For us Lutherans, the teaching of salvation by grace alone and the teaching of universal grace must be taught side by side without compromising on either one. For the Calvinists we are Arminian and for the Arminians we are Calvinist. In fact, we are neither. We teach both the intensive and extensive perfection of the atonement, even though it doesn't fit neatly into a theological system.

A third objection to the doctrine of objective justification is that it stands opposed to the power of the word. If all sins were forgiven when Jesus died and rose, then the gospel is merely information about this past forgiveness and not the powerful imparting of forgiveness here and now. This objection brings us into the definition of the gospel and the nature of gospel preaching. We will address it in our next session: "The Sermon as Absolution."

"Should We Teach Objective Justification?"

Part Two: The Sermon as Absolution

The Lutheran Church has no official systematic theology. Since God can neither err nor deceive, we do not believe that there can be contradictions in the pure doctrine of God's word. On the other hand, there are apparent contradictions. The law doesn't contradict the gospel and the gospel doesn't contradict the law. But they appear to. The task of the preacher is not to get God's word to fit into a neat and tidy system of doctrine. It is to preach and teach the whole counsel of God faithfully – never compromising anything God says to make it suitable to a larger system of doctrine. For Lutherans, the doctrinal system must always give way to the plain meaning of the biblical text.

Calvinism, on the other hand, is by nature systematic. In Calvinism, the teaching of double predestination requires the teaching of the limited atonement. In Calvinism, the bondage of the will necessitates a limited atonement, for if man is saved by grace alone and not everyone is

saved this must mean that God does not want to save everyone. Lutherans are willing to live within paradoxes. We teach that God wants everyone to be saved. We teach that no one is saved except by God's grace alone. That there is an apparent contradiction between the teaching of grace alone and universal grace should not bother us. Apparent contradictions are only apparent. They appear to be contradictions. They are not real contradictions because God, the Author of the Bible, cannot contradict himself.

The most commonly perceived contradiction is between the law and the gospel. This is not to say that we cannot come up with explanations as to why the gospel doesn't contradict the law. Any pastor worth his salt is able to do so. While the law that threatens appears to contradict the gospel that absolves, we know that the threats and the absolution are not addressed to the same person in the same way. The threats of the law are always directed against one's behavior. Human behavior is judged by God's law. The law cannot cease to judge without ceasing to be the law. The promise of the gospel, on the other hand, is not directed to or against anyone's behavior. It is a word from God that is directed to faith for faith and can only be apprehended by faith. As St. Paul writes to the Romans:

I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "The just shall live by faith." Romans 1:16-17

Anyone capable of rational thought and possessing the intelligence and verbal ability to articulate Christian doctrine can explain what God's law says and what God's gospel says. But the word of God is, of itself, the power of God. It never merely informs. It does. God's call to Jeremiah vividly describes the inherent efficacy of God's word, both law and gospel:

Then the Lord put forth His hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me:
"Behold, I have put My words in your mouth.

See, I have this day set you over the nations and over the kingdoms,
To root out and to pull down,
To destroy and to throw down,
To build and to plant." Jeremiah 1:9-10

I suppose we could find a contradiction between rooting out and pulling down, destroying and tearing down on the one hand and building and planting on the other. But then we consider that what is being torn down is not the same thing as what is being built up. The contradiction disappears. But inasmuch as we are talking about what God's word does to people, the tearing down and the building up cannot be considered merely in the abstract. We are talking about people's experience. The law is experienced. The gospel is experienced. The experience of the law does not validate the law nor does the experience of the gospel validate the gospel. But

neither the law nor the gospel can be rightly apprehended except by experiencing the threats and the promise.

In one of the most thorough and beautiful explanations of the doctrine of justification ever written, Melancthon's defense of justification in Article IV of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, he gives two reasons why we must keep this topic of Christian teaching pure: for the consolation of troubled consciences and for the glory of Christ. The two go together. God is glorified where Christ bears in his body the sin of the world and washes it away by his blood. Christology is unintelligible if limited to the incarnation and the two natures in Christ. We need the atoning sacrifice. The God-man must do for us what only he can do. He must face the law. He must confront its demands. He must do what it says we must do. He must suffer what it says we must suffer. He must become the Lamb, the propitiation, the pacification of God, and only when he does can the gospel triumph over the law.

Is it appropriate to say that the gospel triumphs over the law? It is God's law no less than it is God's gospel. Is God triumphing over God? I am not saying that the gospel has to fight against the law as law. I am not saying that the gospel is good and the law is bad. The victory is not literally the victory of the gospel over the law. It is rather the victory of the sin-bearer over sin. St. Paul describes this victory in 1 Corinthians 15:56-57,

The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

The strength of sin is the law because the law reveals, exposes sin for what it is. It stirs it up. Where sin is forgiven, the law is silenced. When Christ dies for sin he takes the sting out of death. He meets and suffers the law's demands. Death, which is the law's punishment of sin, remains the last enemy to be overcome, but he has been overcome. This is the gospel truth.

The preacher may feel powerless. If he does, that's good. For him to trust in his power of preaching is a sure road to failure. We are not sufficient of ourselves. Our sufficiency is of God. But as powerless as we see and feel ourselves to be, we cannot afford to question the power of God's word, both law and gospel. Preaching does things. It effects things. This is why Jesus established the preaching office when he sent out the apostles as the church's first pastors to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.

In fact, there have always been preachers. Adam was a preacher. So was Seth. The preaching office has always been filled with preachers. And while false preachers outnumber true preachers, God's word cannot be silenced. This means that God's church cannot be extinguished. The reason we need preachers is that we need the gospel. The reason we need the gospel is that we need to be justified before God through faith. The purpose, therefore, of

preaching is justification through faith alone. Any preacher who doesn't know that should stop preaching. In Article IV of the Augsburg Confession we confess the central topic of the Christian religion: justification through faith alone. In Article V we confess:

In order that we may obtain this faith, the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and the sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Spirit is given, and the Holy Spirit produces faith, where and when it pleases God, in those who hear the Gospel. That is to say, it is not on account of our own merits but on account of Christ that God justifies those who believe that they are received into favor for Christ's sake. Gal. 3:14, "That we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith."

Our churches condemn the Anabaptists and others who think that the Holy Spirit comes to men without the external Word, through their own preparations and works.

The Holy Spirit produces justifying faith. He does so where and when it pleases God in those who hear the gospel. This is why the ministry of teaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments was instituted. The purpose of preaching is that sinners who are objectively justified by the vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus might be subjectively justified through faith that believes they are received into God's favor and are justified for Christ's sake.

This brings us to the third objection to objective justification. It goes like this: If all sins were forgiven when Jesus died and rose, then the gospel is merely information about this past forgiveness and not the powerful imparting of forgiveness here and now.

This objection may appear to have some plausibility when we consider the way objective justification is sometimes articulated. I will never forget a Winkel some years ago at which an old retired pastor solemnly intoned, "We need to remember that the Lord's Supper doesn't forgive us our sins. It assures us of the forgiveness of sins." He said so quite dogmatically. What made it such a memorable moment for me was the expression on my vicar's face, looking at me, pleading with his eyes and incoherent mumbling to say something. Since nobody else said anything and the vicar obviously wanted me to talk, I responded to the old pastor with these words: "Namely, that in the Sacrament forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given us through these words." Nobody said anything after that. Who is going to argue with Luther's Small Catechism?

But the fact that the pastor said it illustrates how the doctrine of objective justification has been misapplied. The notion that if all sins were forgiven at the cross where Jesus suffered and died for the sin of the world we cannot actually forgive sins but can only offer the assurance of the forgiveness of sins is an ironic twisting of objective justification to teach exactly the opposite of what this doctrine actually teaches.

The doctrine of objective justification became controversial in North American Lutheranism within the Synod of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, commonly called the Norwegian Synod, during the second half of the nineteenth century. In 1874, Herman Amberg Preus, who was president of the Norwegian Synod, responded in the Synod's official publication, *Evangelisk Luthersk Kirketidende*, to accusations against the Norwegian Synod by Profs Weenas and Oftedal of the Augsburg Seminary of the Norwegian-Danish conference. Weenas and Oftedal were Haugeans. As Pietists, they were quite critical of what they called the "rational orthodoxy" of the Norwegian Synod. They coined the term "Wisconsinism" to criticize the Norwegian Synod, which was concentrated in southern Wisconsin. The Norwegian Synod had also found theological soulmates in St. Louis, Missouri, and for years sent their American born young men to Concordia Seminary to be trained for the pastoral office. The criticism of the Norwegian Synod's "Wisconsinism" was a criticism as well of the teaching of C. F. W. Walther and the Missouri Synod.

Among the points of controversy between the Norwegian Synod and the Pietistic Norwegian Lutheran groups in America was the doctrine of objective justification. The Pietists insisted that the Norwegian Synod was teaching that anyone could be saved, whether he believed or not, if he joined an orthodox synod. The teaching of objective justification was regarded as minimizing the importance of faith. H. A. Preus responded to the accusation by carefully defining the gospel. Preus defined objective or universal justification in these words:

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.

Preus goes on immediately to add:

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*.

The controversy about objective justification is a controversy about how to define the gospel. To say that Jesus has earned or obtained the forgiveness of sins and justification refers, not to a deal that God is willing to make with the one who believes in Jesus, but to what God has already done in Christ. Preus establishes the truth of objective justification in the biblical teaching of universal redemption. He argues that if Christ has redeemed the world he has justified the world. What does the gospel say? Does it say to us that this is what God will do if we believe in him? Or does it say to us that this is what God has done? Is the gospel a deal? Or is it a declaration of divine forgiveness for the sake of the redemption of Christ?

These are not mere academic questions. This is not a quibble about definitions. We concede that the gospel can be defined in different words. God's written Word teaches the gospel using a variety of soteriological terms. The question is: what is faith to believe? When I hear the gospel proclaimed to me, what am I to believe? Am I to believe that God, for Christ's sake, forgives me all my sins so that I can say with confidence that my sins are forgiven? Or must I rather believe that if I believe then my sins are forgiven? Listen as H. A. Preus lays the gospel foundation for faith:

If God is reconciled with the whole world since he does not impute its transgressions to it but to Christ, then the world must be righteous and guiltless in his eyes. God has solemnly testified to this by raising Christ from the dead, as Paul says: "He was delivered for our offenses and was raised for our justification." As "the Lamb of God," Jesus was loaded with the sin of all the world, was cursed for it and its unrighteousness, and suffered death. When God awakened him from the dead he declared the guilt erased, and Christ free and righteous. However, since Christ did not bear *his* sins but *the world's*, was condemned not for *his* sins but for the whole *human race*, so neither is Christ declared righteous for *his* person by the resurrection, but the whole *human race* for which he died and rose was thereby declared righteous by God. Just as "Christ was raised for our justification" (Ro. 4:25), thus his resurrection is the foundation on which our justification rests. Therefore Paul also says in 1 Corinthians 15:17: "If Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; you are yet in your sins." Then the work of redemption were declared invalid, but now through his resurrection it is declared completed and valid, so that "all things are ready." But it was everyone whom he redeemed, therefore also for the justification *of everyone* that he rose. The sinner is to appropriate this to himself in faith for his comfort and salvation. But it could not possibly be the will of God that anyone should believe it and comfort himself with it, if it had not taken place, if the world was not freed from condemnation through the death and resurrection of Christ and acquitted of its sin and guilt and declared righteous. Yes, were it not so, if the world had not been declared righteous before him through Christ's death and resurrection but he still counted their transgressions against them, then of course we were not freed from sin and its guilt through the death of Christ, then surely God declared by that that he had not been reconciled through the atoning work of Christ but still required something more in order to be reconciled, then had Christ not perfectly redeemed and atoned for everyone, then

would he not have become their righteousness before God either. But now, "he was raised for our justification," since God has testified through Christ's resurrection that he has forgiven the world its sin and declared it righteous in his eyes, and through the Gospel he proclaims this blessed message to it. Therefore God also now lets his messengers admonish the whole world to leave its unbelief and its enmity against God and to reconcile itself with God by *believing*, and for its comfort, appropriate this blessed message to itself that God does not count its transgressions against it but credits it with the righteousness of Christ.

If Christ's redemption is complete our sins are forgiven. Preus joins together the various synonyms of salvation, bringing out their necessary implications. In so doing, he sets forth the confessional Lutheran paradigm in which justifying faith is both purely passive and purely receptive. It is purely passive in that it is not a work. It does not do anything to make justification a reality. It does not justify by anything it does or on account of any fruit that it produces. It is purely receptive in that it simply receives what God gives. The gospel truth is that God forgives me all my sins because Jesus died on the cross for me. Is it true that God forgives me for Christ's sake? If this is not true until I believe it is true, then my faith becomes the catalyst that activates the forgiveness of sins. My assurance of being forgiven resides within me where my faith can be located. My conception of the gospel forces me to look within my believing heart for the assurance of my salvation.

This is the bane of the Reformed limited atonement. If Jesus didn't die for all, something other than his death and resurrection must become the basis for faith. For the Reformed, faith becomes its own object. Consider this definition of the gospel from a conservative Reformed "Statement on Social Justice and the Gospel,"

We affirm that the gospel is the divinely-revealed message concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ—especially his virgin birth, righteous life, substitutionary sacrifice, atoning death, and bodily resurrection—revealing who he is and what he has done with the promise that he will save anyone and everyone who turns from sin by trusting him as Lord.

The gospel is a deal. You do this and God will do that. The vicarious obedience and sacrificial death of Jesus may be a logical necessity for the forgiveness of sins, but it by no means secures it. Faith does. Faith is not the empty hand that receives God's gift. It does what must be done to seal the deal.

The famous evangelist, Billy Graham, who was no Calvinist, nevertheless popularized the Reformed view of faith in his sermons. He likened faith to sitting in a chair. Believing that the chair will hold you up is not faith, he said. It is when you sit down on the chair that you exercise faith. This is the faith that justifies.

Contrast his view of faith to what we confess in the Formula of Concord:

Thus the following statements of St. Paul are to be considered and taken as synonymous: “We are justified by faith” (Rom. 3:28), or “faith is reckoned to us as righteousness: (Rom. 4:5), or when he says that we are justified by the obedience of Christ, our only mediator, or that “one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18). For faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel. This merit has to be applied to us and to be made our own through faith if we are to be justified thereby. Therefore the righteousness which by grace is reckoned to faith or to the believers is the obedience, the passion, and the resurrection of Christ when he satisfied the law for us and paid for our sin.

The confessors alternate between saying that we are justified by Christ’s obedience and that we are justified by faith. It amounts to the same thing. The reason faith justifies is because it lays hold of what God promises in the gospel. This gospel is that “we are justified by the obedience of Christ, our only mediator.” This gospel is that “one man’s act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all men” (Rom. 5:18). The gospel is not activated by faith. It is received. The gospel is objective justification. Faith is subjective justification.

Does this make the gospel mere information? Does this void the preaching of power? Does it render the absolution only an announcement of what happened long ago and not rather a bestowal of forgiveness here and now? By no means! Rather, the reality of Christ’s redemption assures us of the efficacy of the preached word.

Preachers don’t judge faith. They proclaim to faith. To judge faith rightly requires knowledge that no preacher has. Only God can see faith. Only God can examine the heart. All the preacher can do is to rightly divide the word of truth. He can judge doctrine, but not the heart. He can know what the law says, to whom it says it, and why and how he should preach it. Likewise, he can know what the gospel says, to whom it says it, and why it is the power of God unto salvation. He must preach it.

But he cannot preach it if he cannot know that the words he speaks convey the forgiveness of sins. The words he preaches don’t bring forgiveness about. They bestow forgiveness that is already there. They do not effect or cause the forgiveness of sins. They give the forgiveness of sins that the Lord Jesus effected or caused by his vicarious obedience and sacrificial death. If Christ didn’t effect that forgiveness the preacher could not preach it.

Since the forgiveness of sins is effected, brought out, caused by the impeccable obedience and innocent suffering of Jesus, this is what the preacher preaches, whether from the pulpit or when the penitent seeks absolution from him, as from Christ himself. There is no special pastor power

at work here. The minister is, as John the Baptist was, merely the voice. The speaker is Jesus. From his redemption he speaks.

There is no true absolution that is not an unconditional absolution. The only conditions required for the efficacy of the absolution are those met by Christ in his redemption of the world. Must the pastor know the heart of the one he is absolving in order to absolve him? No. As H. A. Preus put it, "God's word of absolution is therefore also his absolution." Even as the forgiveness of sins is bound to Christ's redemption, obtaining its efficacy from the blood that Jesus shed, this same forgiveness is bound to the external word in regard to its bestowal. God gives what is God's to give. The minister can know and the penitent can believe that the pastor's absolution is God's absolution because God has already absolved the whole world in the death and resurrection of his Son. The preached gospel does not merely inform. It gives. The pastor's sermon is Christ's absolution.

"Should We Teach Objective Justification?"

Part Three: Pastoral Counseling and Personal Absolution

Years ago, after my father had given a paper on the pastoral office and the regular call as taught in AC XIV and the Lutheran dogmaticians, a participant in the crowd pressed him on one of his many assertions. (Dad was rather assertive.) He had said that preaching the gospel and administering the sacraments were the only duties of the office. The questioner was a bit perplexed by that claim. He asked Dad if a pastor did not also visit the sick and the dying, and call on members, visitors, and others. He did more than preach and administer the sacraments, did he not?

This led to an interesting discussion about preaching. What does the preaching task encompass? What does the preacher preach? When does he preach? Where does he preach? How does he preach? Why does he preach?

The "what" of the preaching is the whole counsel of God as it is clearly taught in the Holy Scriptures. We say that the content or substance of the preacher is the gospel for a couple of reasons. First, the word gospel identifies the doctrine of justification, that is, the teaching that God forgives and justifies undeserving sinners through faith alone, not because of anything good they will ever do, but freely, by his grace alone, for the sake of the vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus Christ who has made satisfaction for our sins. This gospel of justification is the theme of biblical teaching from Genesis through Revelation. Second, since the gospel of justification is the heart and soul of biblical teaching, we use the word gospel in a wider sense to refer to all topics of Christian doctrine. This is why in Article VII of the Augsburg Confession we say that for the true unity of the church it is enough to agree on the teaching of the gospel and

the administration of the sacraments, while in Article X of the Formula of Concord we say that true unity requires agreement in doctrine and in all its articles, as well as agreement concerning the right use of the sacraments. Clearly, for the confessors, the teaching of the gospel entailed the teaching of all topics of Christian doctrine. What does the preacher preach? He preaches the Bible. He preaches Christ crucified for sinners. This is the same preaching. In preaching Christ and him crucified, the preacher preaches God's law, the wrath of God against sinners, the promises of God, the attributes of God, God's creation of the world, God's redemption of the world, the forgiveness of sins, baptism, the Lord's Supper, sanctification by the Holy Spirit through the means of grace, prayer, eschatology, the orders of creation, the doctrine of church and ministry, and so on. All preaching is for the sake of the gospel and centers on the gospel. This is the substance of the preacher's preaching.

This preaching goes on whenever, wherever, to whomever and for whomever the pastor does pastor things. It's all encompassed under the task of preaching. We concluded the last session by asserting that the pastor's sermon is Christ's absolution. Since this is so, this means that everything the pastor says to those committed to his spiritual care serves that purpose: absolution. The purpose of preaching is that we may obtain the faith through which we are justified. This means that the purpose of teaching Bible classes, visiting people at the hospital, calling on delinquents (every pastor's favorite activity!), visiting shut-ins, and talking to those burdened or not burdened by their sins must be directed toward the same goal, namely, that they be absolved by Christ, rest confident in his absolution, and from this absolution find both comfort and strength to live holy lives.

If the justification of the sinner is the goal of preaching, and if preaching encompasses all of the speaking the pastor does in carrying out his pastoral duties, then the primary qualification for the pastoral office is the ability to teach the divine doctrine. Of the many qualifications Paul lists for the bishop of 1 Timothy 3 and the presbyter of Titus 1, being "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2) and "holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict" (Titus 1:9) are the only abilities he mentions. Knowledge of disciplines other than theology, the ability to organize and motivate, and having a winsome personality are nowhere mentioned as necessary qualifications for a pastor. He must, however, understand and be able to teach the sound doctrine and to show how errorists are in error.

The gospel forms the office. The office doesn't form the gospel. The word "functional" is often used among us in a negative way to describe a false doctrine of the ministry that makes pastors superfluous by claiming that anyone may publicly preach, teach, and administer the sacraments even if he is not rightly called. Let us use the word "functional" in a positive way. The office is functional because the functions of the office are the sine qua non of the office. There is no such thing as a pastor who doesn't carry out pastoral functions. These functions are the pure

preaching of the gospel and the right administration of the sacraments. Apart from carrying out these functions, no man is a pastor. He may be ordained. He may be qualified. He may be willing. But the office is essentially functional. That is to say, the reason people need pastors is because they need the food the pastor is called to feed them. Their need for a good buddy or a sympathetic ear may be met in someone else. The doctrine is what makes the pastor the pastor. The saving doctrine is above the pastor. The pure gospel forms the office and apart from that gospel the office has no value.

It is the pure gospel that forms the office. It is not something else. The essence of the office is the doing for which the office was instituted. We may not substitute another doing and have the same office. Pastor, God did not call you to be a therapist. You need not become an expert in the social sciences of psychology or sociology or their various sub-disciplines. God did not call you to organize events. Administrative and organizational skills are not listed among the qualifications for a pastor in the Pastoral Epistles or anywhere else in the New Testament. God did not call you to be a lawyer, a social worker, or a political advocate. He called you to preach the gospel.

The pastor is a shepherd. That's what the word means. He feeds the sheep. He leads them by means of the word and feeds them the word. He is a teacher. Pastor and teacher are used interchangeably in Paul's writings. In our Lutheran tradition the so called preaching office was also called the teaching office. Walther of the Missouri Synod called it the preaching office. Hoenecke of the Wisconsin Synod called it the teaching office. These men taught the same thing. To say that this is teaching and that is preaching is a distinction without a difference. Teaching and proclaiming are the same activity. The pastor is an overseer. He watches over the people, applying God's word to their needs. This requires that he watch over the doctrine because the doctrine they hear will either help them or hurt them. He cannot oversee the souls of the people without being first and foremost a sound theologian. The pastor is a physician. When Jesus' disciples were asked why he ate with tax collectors and sinners, Jesus replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." (Mark 2:17) There are a number of metaphors used to describe the pastor as he carries out his duties. In every instance the duties are the same: to preach the gospel and administer the sacraments.

If all of the pastor's pastoral care can be subsumed under the task of preaching and if the sermon can be rightly described as an extended absolution then it is vital that every pastor understand, believe, and be willing to teach and apply the doctrine of objective justification. It is vital for the care of souls. A man who doesn't believe in objective justification cannot adequately care for the spiritual needs of his parishioners. If he cannot do that, of what use is he?

I am not ashamed to admit that I frequent both Walmart and Sam's Club. It's a habit I developed when raising a large family. With the family all grown up, married, and with families of their own, the old habits remain. When my wife is off shopping for the necessities of life, I am browsing through the religious books to see what's for sale. I recommend that every evangelical Lutheran pastor do the same thing. See what kind of spiritual junk food is offered up as theological eye candy to your parishioners. You will see that what passes for evangelical Christianity is anything but. The gospel is not God's absolution. It is not the promise of forgiveness upon which the penitent can rest secure. It is a deal. It's a means by which God empowers you to live a successful life. The success is gotten by applying to your life spiritual principles derived from the Bible. Success is obtained by means of correct application of God's law. A legal deal doesn't deliver anyone from sin.

God's absolution does. But it is not pronounced in a vacuum. They used to talk about pastoral counseling. Then they talked about personal absolution. Those urging a return to the practice of private confession and absolution criticized the notion that the pastor was a counselor. When you consider the underlying principles and teachings of modern psychotherapy, it is difficult to get them to jibe with the gospel of Christ. After all, Jesus died for sinners. When the passions of the id conflict with the conscience of the superego causing distress for the ego, the doctor's cure is to adjust either the id or the superego or both to alleviate the conflict. There's no need for atonement or absolution in such a system.

Defenders of the pastor as counselor may respond that there is, however, helpful insight to be gained by a study of the methods of modern psychotherapy. Would you not agree, for example, that the assertion of binding doctrine should give way, at least initially, to careful listening? Perhaps the non-directive talk therapy of the famous psychologist, Carl Rogers, could also be used by the Lutheran pastor? But then the Lutheran pastor might say that we already knew that. In the Epistle of James we read, "So then, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." (James 1:19) Much of what is taught about counseling among secular therapists is common sense. What do they teach that we did not already know from a study of the Scriptures? More to the point: much that they teach and assume is antithetical to Christian doctrine, concerning both the nature of the problems people face and the solution for those problems.

Pastoral counseling and personal absolution need not be set up in opposition to the other. The one encompasses the other. Absolution does not occur in a vacuum. As we pastors take seriously our task to be physicians of the soul, let us consider both the malady and the cure. The malady is sin. The cure is the blood and righteousness of Jesus.

Now I know what some of you Lutherans are thinking. You're thinking that if we're going to be talking about absolution we should be talking about the power of the word. So why do I talk

about the blood instead of talking about the word? We don't talk about the blood instead of talking about the word. We'll get to the word. But before we do we must speak of the blood. There is no word that can absolve apart from the blood. So we must speak of Christ's blood and righteousness.

But before we do, we must talk about sin. The strength of sin is the law. We must make a sharp distinction between the suffering sin causes within the sinner and sorrow for sin. Listen to David describe the former:

When I kept silent, my bones grew old
Through my groaning all the day long.
For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;
My vitality was turned into the drought of summer. (Psalm 32:3-4)

This is not contrition. When David's bones grew old through his groaning all day long; when God's hand was heavy upon him; when his strength was sapped and he lay helpless; he was not yet ready to hear the gospel.

You're talking with a parishioner who is suffering from sin. He's miserable. Your heart goes out to him. You want to absolve him. Good for you! You want to talk about Jesus and his atoning death. You would love to open your Bible to Isaiah 53 and walk him through the words. But wait. You're not in control here. The word of God is not a tool in your hand. It's not an instrument that you wield. It's the voice of God. Its power doesn't rest on you or depend on you. You can't get it to work. All you can do – and this you must do – is to discern whether he needs to hear the law or the gospel.

Nathan came to visit David after David had experienced internal spiritual misery that weakened his body. Nathan went to David to absolve him. But he didn't absolve him right away. He told him a story about a man with one hundred sheep who stole the lamb of his poor neighbor and fed it to his guests. When Nathan said to David, "You are the man," (2 Samuel 12:7) he specified just what David did that was sin. It was by covering the specifics that David was led to confess: "I have sinned against the LORD." It was not until David confessed that Nathan absolved him. "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

Those who object to the doctrine of objective justification will argue that it leads to carnal security. If all sins are already forgiven, then let us sin so that grace may abound. The argument is directed against the pastoral abuse of the absolution. The abuse of legitimate authority doesn't render it illegitimate. Do pastors abuse this authority? Do they absolve when they should rather speak the law as Nathan spoke to David? Yes, they do. This is quite common. We want to help. We want to make it work. We know that the law won't convert the sinner. Unless and until he

hears the gospel – the clear, free, and unconditional absolution – he will find no peace. That is perfectly true, but it is outside of our power to prepare the heart to hear the gospel. Only God can do that. What we must do is to speak God's word.

How many of us have spoken absolution when the man or woman suffering from guilt had not acknowledged the sin that brought the suffering? We may not identify feeling spiritual pain with contrition any more than we can identify feeling comfort with being forgiven. God is in charge of his law. We may not presume to short-circuit the work of God by making it our work. You absolve sinners who confess their sins. Confession is not identical to contrition. There can be a false confession. That's God's business, not ours. Neither confession nor contrition is the cause of forgiveness. The cause is the vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus. But contrition is the context. It is the place. It is where forgiveness is sought, given, and received. Only the sick need a doctor. Jesus came to call sinners, not the righteous, to repentance.

One does not safeguard the gospel from abuse by denying universal and objective justification. One compromises the gospel. A conditional absolution is no absolution. It's a deal. You do this and God will do that. If the doctrine of objective justification is not true, then there can be no unconditional absolution, for no pastor can discern what is in another's heart. If faith is required for the absolution's efficacy, then we must trust in our faith. This amounts to trusting in ourselves, for our faith lies within. Only a word coming to us from outside of us is worthy to elicit genuine faith, because whenever faith looks inward it is corrupted by the sin that clings to our flesh. But the efficacy of this word that lies outside of us relies on more than the word itself. It relies on the blood.

Let's talk a bit about pastoral authority. Perhaps you have heard the unjust criticism. Pastors who hold to a high view of the office are considered stuck up sacerdotalists. When they defend the efficacy of the word God gives them to speak they are accused of elevating themselves for speaking it. The humility appropriate for a pastor does not entail diminishing his holy office. Jesus says, "He who hears you hears me." He says, "Whosoever sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whosoever sins you retain, they are retained." If this is what he promised his ministers, they had better take this promise seriously.

But it would be a real shame if what we intended for an evangelical purpose were to be taken as a legal requirement. Permit me to share with you a conversation I had on a bus driving through Greece about thirty years ago. We were taking a tour through many of the cities in Greece and Turkey where Paul preached. My parents took me and my wife on the trip along with a brother and a sister and their spouses. There were several professors and students from CTS in Ft. Wayne on the tour. Our tour guide in Greece was a member of the Greek Orthodox Church, but was rather soured on it. One day, I struck up a conversation with her by asking the David Scaer question: "What do you think of Jesus?" She responded that Jesus was the Son of God. I asked

her what he did for her. She said, "He died for me." I asked her why he died. She said, "He died for me to take away my sins." "Did he?" I asked. "Did he what?" she replied. "Did he take away your sins?" She thought for a moment, smiled, and blurted out: "Yes! So I don't have to confess them to a priest!"

Consider how she felt. Knowing that Jesus took away her sins meant that she didn't have to confess those sins to a pastor. I would suggest that that lady in Greece felt the way many of our Lutheran laity feel. If Jesus took away my sins when he died for me, why should I have to confess them? I can go straight to God. You can tell them that they have it all wrong.

Confession and absolution is not law, but gospel. "Yes, you can go straight to God," we tell them, "But God isn't going to talk to you through the air. He speaks through men." We can argue the argument for private, personal absolution. We should. I've done so. But if folks continue to think of private and personal confession and absolution as a burden rather than as the removal of a burden, we shouldn't be surprised.

The absolution is a liturgical rite with the laying on of hands. But it is more than that. The bestowal of forgiveness is more important than the form the absolution takes. We need not hold the personal absolution hostage to the correct liturgical framework. Pastor talk is Jesus talk, Jesus talk is talk of his crucifixion and resurrection, and that means absolution. Listen to the familiar words:

Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained." John 20:19-23

What does Jesus do immediately before giving them the authority to forgive and to retain sins? He said "peace be with you" twice. Between these two statements, he shows them his hands and his side. After showing them his hands and his side, he sends them. He breathes the Holy Spirit on them and gives them the authority to forgive and retain sins. Before sending them out to forgive and retain sins by his authority, he shows them the wounds that he suffered in order to gain the authority to forgive sins. It is the blood. That's where forgiveness is. There is no absolution apart from the blood. With the blood is absolution. St. Paul identifies redemption with the forgiveness of sins. John the Baptist directs us to the blood, for it was when he was crucified that Jesus became the Passover Lamb. Jesus gives us to eat and to drink of his body and blood. From the skins with which God clothed Adam and Eve after their fall into sin, to the bloody sacrifices of Abel and beyond, all the way to the sacrifice of Christ's body and blood on the cross, the forgiveness of sins has always been tied to, bound to, dependent upon the blood.

This is how to absolve the penitent. Show them the blood. Don't claim authority for your word of absolution until you have shown them the blood. Don't talk about the power of the keys, the efficacy of the means of grace, the validity of the absolution, unless you have talked about the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus.

Preaching from the pulpit, in the home, at the hospital, in the office, or wherever it occurs is always talk about the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus, who was delivered up because of our sins and raised again for our justification. We talk this talk so much that we may begin to think that it's getting a bit old. But consider to whom we are talking. How often do they hear it? How often do they need to hear it?

I don't like to share personal feelings with a group of Lutheran pastors, not only because I am a coldblooded Norwegian who doesn't believe in sharing feelings with anyone, but also because my feelings aren't really the measure of anything worthwhile. But perhaps I can illustrate something for you that my wife has noticed even if I didn't. I'd get a bit depressed – nothing serious, just a little melancholy, wondering if the pastoral task is really worth it. Then I would visit the nursing home and give the Lord's Supper to a few parishioners, come home, and not be so depressed. Why? What brings a pastor joy? To speak God's words of absolution – in the liturgy, in the sermon, in the Supper, and in the absolution itself – that's what brings joy. You know why? Because it doesn't depend on me. It depends on an article of doctrine that I learned as a young man and in which I found deliverance from my own doubts. We call it objective justification. What it means is that our ministry is never in vain. God himself is talking through us when we absolve those God has called us to serve. We may do so formally or informally, vested or not, wearing a clerical collar or wearing an open collared dress shirt. Everything we do and say as pastors is geared toward that single aim: the justification of sinners. God justifies through his word. God sends us to speak that word. What a joy it is to be a pastor!

“Should We Teach Objective Justification?”

Part Four: The Vicarious Atonement, Its Denial, Pietism, and Objective Justification

We were talking about the blood. Blood means atonement. Atonement means forgiveness. Without the vicarious satisfaction, there is no objective justification. Without objective justification, faith is turned in on itself. This is the cardinal error of pietism. To understand pietism we need to shed ourselves of certain caricatures, that is, features of it that we find particularly annoying, and focus on where it is in error.

As you know, Norwegian American Lutheranism is heavily influenced by pietism. When my father was serving as pastor of a congregation of the Little Norwegian Synod (now known as the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, or ELS) back in the 1940s before he was married, he would visit a

certain family to enjoy a few games of whist. While Dad, the father of the home, and a couple of the children were in the kitchen playing cards, the matriarch of the family would sit in the living room reading her Bible. She never said a word. Every time he came by to play cards, she should leave the group, sit down in the living room, and read the Bible until they were done playing cards. That's how a passive aggressive Norwegian Lutheran confesses the faith!

We think Pietist and we think conservative. A preoccupation with rules, perhaps, a bit old fashioned, we might think, but on the conservative-liberal continuum, pretty much on the conservative side. I learned when serving in northern Minnesota in the 1980s that among folks in the ALC (which had formerly been the ELC and is now part of the ELCA) the words Pietist and conservative meant the same thing. To a degree this is true. A Pietist would by no means deny the blood atonement. Many hymns in the Danish-Norwegian tradition of Lutheranism, written by authors heavily influenced by pietism, proclaim the vicarious satisfaction beautifully. Still, the pietistic preoccupation with the phenomenon of faith led many of the Norwegian Lutherans of the nineteenth century to attack the doctrine of objective justification. The Anti-Missourian Brotherhood, a movement within the Norwegian Synod of the nineteenth century that finally broke with the Norwegian Synod, was dominated by Pietists. They opposed the doctrine of objective justification, the confessional Lutheran doctrine of election, the unconditional absolution, and, of course, the Lutheran doctrine of church and ministry. For the Pietist, the purity of the faith trumps the purity of the doctrine. To be concerned about the latter lands you in dead orthodoxy. Walther lambasted this notion in his third evening lecture in The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel.

The Pietists did not deny the vicarious satisfaction. They taught, as we do, that Jesus offered up his life of obedience to the bar of God's justice, fulfilled the demands of God's law in our stead, and suffered on the cross the just punishment for our sins. They taught the propitiatory sacrifice. They sang about it and preached it. What they could not do was to join the atonement to forgiveness in such a way as to be able to assert that all those for whom Jesus died have been forgiven of their sins. There remained a chasm between Christ's work on the cross and the forgiveness of sins. That chasm is bridged by faith. It becomes the catalyst that activates the atonement so that it can grant the forgiveness of sins. When sins are not forgiven until genuine faith is present that genuine faith becomes the focal point of theological concern. Missouri located forgiveness in the vicarious satisfaction. The Pietists located forgiveness in faith. For the Missourians there was an organic connection between the atonement and the forgiveness of sins. If there is the one there must be the other. Thus, forgiveness of sins happened at Calvary and the open tomb. The Pietists broke the bond between atonement and forgiveness. The Missourians and the Norwegian Synod emphasized the pure gospel because the gospel, as a means of grace, bestows the forgiveness of sins. The Pietists emphasized the pure faith without which there is no forgiveness of sins.

Here we are in the twenty first century. Today we are confronted with a new form of pietism. It is even more radical than the nineteenth century version. Whereas the nineteenth century Pietists built a wall between atonement and forgiveness – a wall that could be overcome by faith – the twenty first century Pietists overcome that wall, not by making atonement and justification coterminous, but by rejecting the vicarious atonement. The denial of the atonement has been a feature of American Lutheran theology for some time. Listen to these words from the book, Evangelical Catechism: Christian Faith in the World Today, published by Augsburg in 1982.

The church's message concerning justification has also suffered from overly-literal explanations of how Christ has atoned for human sin. When metaphors and images of the atonement are taken too concretely, they distort our understanding of God. For example, God has sometimes been seen as paying a debt to the devil, or as requiring the bloody sacrifice of his Son in order to satisfy his wrath. When such language is used it often contradicts other things we know about God from the Scriptures, including his power over evil and his steadfast love and forgiveness.

The denial that God required the bloody sacrifice of his Son to satisfy his wrath is a denial of the vicarious satisfaction. It is a denial that Jesus is the propitiation for our sins. This denial of the vicarious atonement became part of the official dogmatic textbook for much of the ELCA in the publication of Braaten and Jensen's Dogmatics in 1984, two years before the formation of the ELCA. We read:

But wrath cannot be placated in the abstract by heavenly transactions between Jesus and God. Nothing is accomplished for us by that. God's wrath against us is placated only when God's self-giving makes us his own, when God succeeds in creating faith, love, and hope. . . . When one is dealing with the way things are, wrath cannot be placed in the abstract – say at the moment of Christ's death when payment is supposedly made. Wrath is placated when the body and blood are given to us and are received in faith. It is in the giving and the receiving that wrath is placated.

Divine wrath is not placated objectively at the crucifixion of the Son of God where he bore the wrath of God against sinners in his own body. Instead, God's wrath is placated here and now when God gives us the body and blood of Jesus and we receive it in faith. The Supper, faith and peace with God are all separated from the propitiatory sacrifice. Indeed, there is no propitiatory sacrifice. There is no need.

The vicarious atonement is denied by Lutheran theologians whose writings have become popularized among us in the Missouri Synod. For example, Gerhard Førde's book, On Being a Theologian of the Cross, is widely read and studied by budding young theologians in the Missouri Synod today. Here is what Førde teaches in that book about the vicarious atonement:

For the most part we will, no doubt, be modest enough to admit that we cannot go the whole way on the glory road without the help of grace. But then Christ gets called into the scheme to make it work. Christ and the cross are taken up into abstract doctrines. The result is that the cross too is looked upon as though it were transparent. Theologians of glory will claim not only to be able to see through creation but also to see through the cross to figure out the final “Why.” Why did Jesus have to die? Apparently to pay for our failures and mistakes in the pursuit of “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth.” Thus the cross is not really just what is visible. It becomes a launching pad for speculative flights into intellectual space, into the invisible things of God. It is not simply that a man sent from God is suffering, forsaken, and dying at our hands – as if that were not enough! – but he is a payment to God (whose justice one has supposedly peered into and figured out) in some celestial court transaction.

Førde mocks the doctrine of the vicarious atonement as part of a speculative flight into intellectual space, calling it “some celestial court transaction.” Yet Førde is promoted as a Luther scholar who will introduce us to Luther’s theology of the cross.

Another theologian from out of the ELCA who is popular among Missourians is Steven Paulson. He contributed a chapter to [The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel](#), published last year by Concordia Publishing House. In an essay that appeared in the Lutheran Quarterly a couple of years ago, titled, “Christ, the Hated God,” Paulson writes: “Faith centers on the *communicatio idiomatum* (Christ’s communication of human and divine attributes) rather than a theory of atonement by which our sins become Christ’s and He forgives us.” Throughout his essay he argues against the “legal scheme” by which works achieve salvation. It is not by works. This means it is not by Christ’s works. He denies that “Christ’s perfection by law” makes peace, placing the doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction into the same category as works righteousness.

What we see coming from the “conservative” elements of the ELCA is the same old denial of the vicarious satisfaction that dominated the theological establishment of the nineteenth century. A Lutheran theologian of the nineteenth century by the name of Philippi who converted from Judaism to Christianity had this to say about the denial of the vicarious atonement by the liberal Protestants of his day:

He who takes away from me the atoning blood of the Son of God, paid as a ransom to the wrath of God, who takes away the satisfaction of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, vicariously given to the penal justice of God, who thereby takes away justification or forgiveness of sins only by faith in the merits of this my Surety and Mediator, who takes away the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, takes away Christianity altogether, so far as I am concerned. I might then just as well have adhered to the religion of my ancestors, the seed of Abraham after the flesh.

Let us briefly consider and respond to some common objections to the biblical doctrine of penal substitution.

First, there is the objection that it is unjust to punish Christ who was innocent. We respond that Christ willingly accepted the punishment for the sins of the world. It was his Father's will. His will was to do his Father's will. Nobody took his life from him. He gave it up freely of his own accord.

Second, there is the objection that it is impossible to transfer our sins onto Christ and his righteousness unto us. But being impossible is no argument against what God says. Gabriel told Mary who wondered how she could become the mother of God, "For with God nothing shall be impossible." (Luke 1:37)

Third, there is the objection that the doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction is impersonal. It is legal, judicial, and forensic. It entails no personal confrontation with the love of God. Only someone who has never been in trouble with the law could say such a thing! When you are being accused by the law – as impersonal as the law might be when considered in the abstract – you take it very personally.

Fourth, some object to the doctrine of the vicarious atonement by claiming that the early church did not teach it. That's not so. Consider this statement from the Epistle to Diognetus, a second century theologian:

But [God] was patient, he bore with us, and out of pity for us took our sins upon himself. He gave up his own Son as a ransom for us, the holy one for the lawless, the innocent one for the wicked, the righteous one for the unrighteous, the imperishable one for the perishable, the immortal one for the mortal.

Fifth, it is objected that the vicarious atonement – if applies to the whole world – must mean that all people everywhere will be saved whether or not they believe the gospel. This does not follow. We distinguish between the gaining, the giving, and the getting. The vicarious satisfaction gains forgiveness. It does not give it, nor is it gotten except through faith alone. That Christ's death wiped out all mankind's debt of sin against God does not mean that all mankind comes into possession of this forgiveness.

Sixth, the objection is that for God to punish his innocent Son for our sins amounts to cosmic Child abuse and is unworthy of a loving God. It makes him out to be vengeful; not loving. This objection is grounded in a failure to understand God's love. In what way did God love? He loved the world in such a way that he gave. He referred to Jesus as "my beloved Son" when Jesus was being baptized, and yet John who baptized Jesus identified him as the Lamb of God

who takes away the sin of the world. The Evangelist John says that he who came by water also came by blood. (1 John 5:6) Clearly, the Father's love for his eternal only begotten Son does not mean that the Son cannot face divine anger against sin. To the contrary, as John points out it is precisely in the bloody sacrifice that propitiates God that true love is seen, as we read in 1 John 2:10, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."

The objection that the vicarious atonement – specifically Jesus bearing divine wrath against all sinners – militates against love reminds me of the words that Henrik Ibsen put into the mouth of his character Brand in a play by the same name. When his wife told him that he must have more love, Brand replied:

Of what the paltering world calls love,
I will not know, I cannot speak;
I know but His who reigns above,
And His is neither mild nor weak;
Hard even unto death is this,
And smiting with its awful kiss.
What was the answer of God's love
Of old, when in the olive-grove
In anguish-sweat His own Son lay;
And prayed, O, Take this cup away
Did God take from Him then the cup?
No, child; His Son must drink it up!

The reason theologians deny the vicarious satisfaction is that they do not want to consider the wrath of God. But denying it won't make it go away. You cannot rightly consider the crucifixion of Jesus unless you see in it the wrath of God displayed. The anger of God against sin is what every sinner seeks to flee. He can deny the just God and manufacture his own god who lets him get away with sin. He can refashion the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ into a wrathless deity who does not punish sin. But it is the cross that stymies him. That's because the cross does not reveal God's love until it reveals his wrath. First it reveals his wrath. We confess in the Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article V, paragraph 12,

In fact, where is there a more earnest and terrible revelation and preaching of God's wrath over sin than the passion and death of Christ, his own Son? But as long as all this proclaims the wrath of God and terrifies man, it is not yet the Gospel nor Christ's own proclamation, but it is Moses and the law pronounced upon the unconverted. For the Gospel and Christ are not ordained and given us to terrify or to condemn us, but to comfort and lift upright those who are terrified and disconsolate.

Just about every form of idolatry seeks to silence the threats of God's law. They all fail. Only the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus can deliver us from God's wrath. By doing what the law told us to do and by suffering what the law required us to suffer he has taken away God's wrath. The doctrine of objective justification teaches that God's wrath has been stilled. As we sing in the hymn by Paul Speratus,

Yet as the law must be fulfilled
Or we must die despairing
Christ came and hath God's anger stilled
Our human nature sharing
He hath for us the law obeyed
And thus the Father's vengeance stayed
Which over us impended.

It is done. It is finished. God is propitiated. Our sins are forgiven. God's vengeance has been stayed. This is the gospel we believe. Apart from this gospel, what St. Paul refers to as the preaching of Christ and him crucified, the wrath of God remains. Only when the wrath is removed are we free to live in communion with God. To deny the wrath of God is not to remove it. It is to pretend it is not there. Any "gospel" that does not deal with the wrath of God is no gospel at all, but mere sentiment.

The old Pietists of the nineteenth century severed the atonement from forgiveness. This made faith the condition for rather than the reception of the forgiveness of sins. The new Pietists of the twenty first century deny atonement altogether. They, as their forebears, are stuck with a faith that is disjointed from the cross. A wall is erected between the second and third articles of the Creed. Deprived of the vicarious satisfaction, today's Pietists may not locate forgiveness, peace, reconciliation, and the stilling of God's anger at Calvary. They imagine, nevertheless, that they can receive it in the preaching. That's their cardinal error. What isn't obtained by Christ then and there cannot be given to us here and now. The tragic fact is that for them the wrath of God is more than ever a present reality against which they must kick, fight, scream, and utter their defiance. But they cannot get rid of what only the vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus can get rid of. What happens when, despite all your creative theologizing, you are unable to get rid of God's wrath against you?

It's simple. Deny that the law has anything to say to you. Pretend that, since we are children of the gospel, we no longer need to be guided by the law. The law works wrath. So get rid of it. This is what has happened. Does antinomianism give rise to a denial of the propitiatory sacrifice? Or, is it the other way around? In either case, where the wrath of God is denied, the law itself is denied. If the wrath of God is denied, no longer do the civil authorities punish the

bad guys by God's own authority. If the wrath of God is denied, no longer does the law serve as the mirror to bring us to despair of ourselves. If there is no wrath of God there is no law of God.

Look at the fruit of this doctrine! We don't have to look to the ELCA. Look in our own backyards. When the wrath of God is denied, there is no need for forgiveness. Forgiveness of sins is replaced by the outright denial of sin, for any notion of sin where there is no punishment is theoretical at best. The child learns not to sass his mother when he sasses his mother and suffers punishment for it. Sin and punishment: you cannot separate them. Without the wrath of God, sin is defined away. What has happened to us? How is it that abortion, sodomy, fornication, gluttony, drunkenness, selfish ambitions and others sins emanating from our sinful flesh can be treated as something other than sins, either as acceptable behavior or as dysfunctional behavior that requires therapy? It is because there is no wrath of God. There is no law. There is no sin.

But without sin, the absolution is an empty sound with no meaning, no comfort, and no power. To deny that the law of God is a guide for the life of regenerate Christians who are obligated to obey that law and whose obedience to that law pleases their gracious heavenly Father who receives it as a precious offering for the sake of the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus, is to vitiate this gospel. The best way to preach the gospel of objective justification is by preaching the law with great specificity. We do not condemn sin in the abstract, as if to know I am a sinner can somehow be separated from knowing actual sins I have done. It is precisely by preaching the law to Christians as that which they are required to do that they will learn to hunger and thirst for the righteousness they do not have and find comfort in the righteousness of Christ that is given to them in the gospel. As Luther said, "Hunger is the best cook."

When I was a student at Concordia Theological Seminary in Springfield, Illinois, my wife and I lived in downtown Springfield, about four blocks away from the Capitol Cue, an old fashioned pool hall that featured real billiard tables where old men played three-cushion billiards. To score a billiard, your cue ball must hit three cushions and two balls, hitting the second ball after hitting the third cushion. Those old men were good. I saw one fellow make five billiards in a row. I would be lucky to make one billiard out of five tries. One thing I did learn, though I found it extremely difficult to put into practice, is that when you go for a billiard you cannot let yourself be distracted by the location of the balls you are required to hit. Oh, you know where they are. You need to know. But you must line up your shot according to the spots on the side of the billiard table. This is counterintuitive, but it's the only way to make your shot.

The spots are the gospel. The balls are the law. You look to the gospel. You look to Jesus. You hear his word. His absolution doesn't tell you to look inside of yourself to examine your faith. His absolution tells you to look outside of yourself. It directs you to the cross. So you shoot the shot. You miss. So you think you'd best ignore the spots lined up on the sides of the table.

Don't. Yes, you missed. You'll do that. But you'll also make a billiard. You will do that, too. Here's the point: if you ignore the spots, you'll never make a billiard.

You ignore the gospel – Christ's absolution – and you will never do a good deed. This gospel is not just something Jesus did a long time ago. It is what God says to you today. It's not just what God says to you today. It's what Jesus did a long time ago. It is his person, his work, and his word. To deny his person, his work, or his word is to reject his absolution. Then everything you ever do in life will be a sin.

But when Christ absolves you, he fills you with the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit who brings you to faith changes the way you think and feel and act. That we don't trust in our good works for our justification doesn't make them of no value. I don't trust in my wife for my justification, but I can't live without her. And that God accepts us means he accepts what we do. True faith lives on the absolution of Christ that obtains its efficacy from his vicarious suffering and death. This faith flows into love because the same Spirit who brings us to the faith that justifies us and sets us at peace with God is the Spirit who fills us with the love of God. God doesn't despise our works of love. Neither should we. Yes, they are stained by sin, but for Christ's sake that sin is forgiven. This forgiveness empowers us. The absolution we hear is spoken by God. Christ gained it. He gives it. We've got it. There is nothing uncertain in this because when Jesus lived, obeyed, died, and rose again God forgave us all our sin. This is the source of everything good we will ever do. It joins us together in communion with God and one another. Praise God for the teaching of objective justification! May he teach us preachers to preach it that those entrusted to our spiritual care may find in this truth rest for their souls.

Pastor Rolf David Preus, October 1-2, 2018 North Dakota District LCMS Pastors' Conference, Bismarck, North Dakota

All citations from the Lutheran Confessions are taken from the Tappert edition.

February 13, 1874

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FC SD III par 12-14, Tappert, page 541

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The Missouri Synod in the twentieth century reaffirmed its historic teaching on justification with the adoption of the 1983 CTCR "Theses on Justification" at the Indianapolis convention in 1986. Thesis #23 reads: "By 'objective' or 'universal' justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ's sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God's unilateral act prior to and

in no way dependent upon man's response to it and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ's sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness. (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; Ap IV, 40-41; SA II, i, 1-3; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD XI, 15)”

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