

Author's Note: I was recently asked by a reader of this website which of the several articles on justification most clearly dealt with the doctrine of objective justification. In my search I found that, apart from the article by H. A. Preus, this topic had not received much attention in the papers included on this site. So I went through my files and found this undated article that I wrote about twenty years ago, in the early nineties.

Like a bad penny, the denial of objective justification keeps coming up among conservative/confessional Lutherans in America, and we who are the heirs of the wholesome, biblical, and confessional theology of such genuine Lutherans as C. F. W. Walther and H. A. Preus need to reiterate again and again the clear gospel truth that God, for the sake of the vicarious obedience and suffering of his only begotten Son Jesus Christ, has justified the whole world of lost and condemned sinners who fell in Adam's fall. As St. Paul wrote by inspiration of the Holy Spirit: "For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Romans 5, 19)

The doctrine of universal grace is not a Lutheran construct. It is clear biblical teaching. And there is no universal grace apart from objective justification. The faith that believes in the forgiveness of sins and receives the forgiveness of sins is the faith that is given the forgiveness of sins. No mere man or minister can discern faith in the heart of another. But any pastor can absolve the penitent – and that by the authority of Jesus Christ himself! How can this be? It can be, it must be, and it is because the same Jesus who gives his Church and her ministers the authority to forgive sins is the Jesus who has taken away the sin of the world! Objective and universal justification is the foundation for the efficacy of the absolution and the ground of the Christian's faith. May God graciously keep the teaching of objective justification pure among us!

Pastor Rolf David Preus, March 16, 2012

OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION

by Rolf Preus

Some time back, my brother-in-law, who was raised Roman Catholic and is now a Lutheran, was recounting to us how the nuns used to threaten the children by saying, "You'd better behave, or God won't . . ." After telling us how the nuns would always make God's blessing contingent on the good behavior of the children, he summed up their approach by saying, "You'd better be good or Jesus won't rise from the dead!" Sorry, sister. It already happened. Jesus died on the cross and rose from the dead on the third day. But so what?

The "so what" of Christ's death and resurrection is the recurring question and topic for hot debate among theologians. It shouldn't be. The clear meaning of this event cannot honestly be disputed. St. Paul's theological interpretation of it (Rom. 4:25) stands: "He was delivered over because of our sins and was raised because of our justification." It was because of our sins that he died on the cross. It was because of our justification that he was raised from the dead.

Jesus was identified by John the Baptist as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." He "takes away." The word translated "takes away" can also be rendered "bears" or "forgives." One may emphasize either aspect of the same truth. We would not teach that God forgave us our sin without talking about how Jesus bore it. If our sin were not laid on Jesus it remains on us and we must bear it. Without the shedding of blood (Christ's blood) there simply is no forgiveness. On the other hand, it would be a denial of the "so what" of Christ's death and resurrection to say that Jesus did bear our sin but our sin is not thereby forgiven. Why did he bear our sin - and our sins - if not to take them away? What does his suffering mean if not that our sins are forgiven? Or, to put it another way, what should I believe about my sins as I see Christ crucified for me? Are my sins imputed to me or to Christ? To Christ! Then what do I, in faith, conclude? That they are not imputed to me! The little child who is taught to confess, "Jesus died for my sins," is, at the same time, taught to believe the therefore, the "so what," the inescapable and undeniable conclusion that "my sins are forgiven because Jesus took them away."

This is the gospel. We can state it in a variety of ways because the Bible does so. Just a few common soteriological terms (that is, words the Bible uses to describe how Jesus saved us) will make the point.

Redemption. Jesus redeemed me. He paid the price to set me free. Since the ransom he paid for me (his own life) was accepted by God (God raised him from the dead) I am therefore set free. We should note here that sometimes the Bible uses a word for redeem which emphasizes the payment Christ made and sometimes it uses a word which emphasizes the freedom from sin which results from that payment. In English, we translate both words with redeem.

Propitiation. Jesus is the propitiation for my sins. He is, as the NIV puts it, the atoning sacrifice for my sins. God is not angry with me, he is propitiated or pacified because Jesus has stilled his anger by being the propitiation (the means by which God is propitiated).

Reconciliation. God, for Christ's sake, is my friend. He is at peace with me. On account of Christ's doing and dying, I have peace with God.

Salvation. Jesus has rescued me from certain damnation. He has delivered me from my sins, from death, from the power of Satan. I was helpless. I needed a Savior. Jesus is my Savior because he saved me. And we can also say that he saved me because he is my Savior.

Justification. Jesus has justified me. He is, as God said through Jeremiah, "the LORD, our righteousness." The closest synonym to justify is forgive. When the Bible says that God forgives me, it is stated negatively in reference to my sins, that is, my sins are "sent away," "blotted out." When the Bible says that God justifies me, it is stated positively in reference to Christ's righteousness being reckoned to me. My sins were imputed to him and his righteousness was imputed to me. This double imputation is what Luther calls the "blessed exchange."

Every one of these soteriological terms assumes the truth of all the others. Redemption, propitiation, reconciliation, salvation, and justification all refer to the same truth while addressing or emphasizing different facets of it. We

call that truth the gospel. One is not redeemed if God is not propitiated, and vice versa. One is not forgiven if he is not saved, and vice versa. It is a supreme error to assume that one of these soteriological terms may obtain while others may not.

Furthermore, the Bible uses all of the above terms to describe both what God has done for the whole world and what God has done for the elect. That is, the words are used to state both the universal grace of God and to describe what God does in reference to his saints, that is, believers. When we talk about what God has done for the whole world we often use the word "objective" to describe it. It is objectively true. It is done. When we talk about the individual sinner receiving this objective gospel through faith, we use the word "subjective" to describe it. We've done this in the Missouri Synod for many years. From Walther's day to our own, pastors have been taught "objective" and "subjective" justification. Sadly, in recent years a number of people have objected to this and have called into question the biblical doctrine of "objective" justification.

Other terms, such as "general" justification or "universal" justification have been used to designate the same teaching. C. F. W. Walther preached an Easter sermon (see The Word of His Grace, Board for Publications of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1978) in which the theme was: "Christ's Resurrection - The World's Absolution." This is a portion of what Walther preached:

Since it was all mankind in whose place and for whom Christ suffered, died and made payment, who was it, then, that was absolved in and through Christ's Person when the eternal Judge set Him at liberty? It was - oh, marvelous and endlessly comforting truth! - it was **all mankind**. . . . Are you saying that God has already in Christ absolved all men, including all the ungodly, all slaves of iniquity, all unbelievers, all mockers, all slanderers? Who could believe that! - And yet it is so, dear friends. Let these thoughts sink deep into your consciousness: It is certain that God has loved the world, the ungodly world, so much that He not only wanted to give His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world, but has already given Him. It is certain that Christ was the Lamb of God who not only wanted to take upon

Himself the sins of the world, but has already borne the sins not only of a part of the world, but of the whole world. It is certain that Christ not only wanted to be the Reconciler, the Savior and Redeemer of all men without exception, but is that already as Paul writes: "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19a). As certain as these things are, so certain it is also that God the Father, in raising Jesus Christ from the dead, has already absolved all men from all their sins. [emphasis in the original]

This teaching has been called objective justification because it is objectively true apart from whether or not anyone believes it or benefits from it in any way. There is nothing particularly confusing about this teaching. Walther's words are quite clear. And Walther's words on objective justification are, if we permit Walther to interpret his own position, foundational for his entire theology. Commenting further on his assertion that "Christ's resurrection was the absolution of all men," Walther said:

And this is not just one of the many comforting doctrines which the Scriptures contain, but rather it is the only real foundation of the comfort which is contained in any doctrine of the Scriptures. Remove this comfort from the Scriptures, and all its other doctrines become empty husks that have no comfort.

Walther went on in his Easter sermon to demonstrate the necessity of faith to receive the forgiveness of sins. He clearly rejected the false conclusion that, since God has absolved the whole world, the whole world has therefore **received** the forgiveness of sins. No, he said, "so false is the conclusion that everyone has forgiveness." Walther then explained that the gift must be received and that faith and faith alone is the only way to receive it.

We emphasize Walther's position and quote from him at length, not to prove the truth of the doctrine of objective justification, but to prove that Walther taught it and regarded it as foundational. Critics of objective justification should, if they wish to be honest, indict Walther. They rarely do, however. One critic of objective justification, in a recently written book which purports to show the historical development of this doctrine, claims to trace the concept of "universal justification" back to F. A. Schmidt in 1872. He further claims

that this doctrine evolved in the Missouri Synod so that the position after 1930 was different than the position before it. The quotation above disproves that claim. Compare what Walther said to the CTCR document, Theses on Justification, approved by the 1986 convention of the LCMS. Our position has not changed. We teach what Walther taught.

But we don't base our confidence in the truth which Walther preached on the dignity of Walther or any other 19th century Lutheran. We, with Walther, believe in the perspicuity of the Scriptures. The Bible compels us to teach that God has, for Christ's sake, forgiven the entire world of all its sin.

John 1:29 teaches objective justification. Jesus has taken away the sin of the world. This passage alone should settle the issue. What does take away mean, if not forgive? Romans 4:5 teaches objective justification. The God who justifies the ungodly (the Greek word is never used to refer to believers, but always and only to unbelievers) is the God who has justified everyone. This is the God in whom Abraham believed and was thus, subjectively, justified. Romans 4:25, as noted above, teaches objective justification. Romans 5:19 teaches objective justification. 2 Corinthians 5:19 teaches objective justification. Anyone reading these passages as they stand, in their context, without any prior bias against this doctrine, will conclude that all of these texts - and many more - teach the simple truth that God, for Christ's sake, has forgiven all sinners all of their sins. The Missouri Synod fathers were right when they said that the resurrection of Christ is God's absolution of this whole world of sinners.

I cannot imagine how a pastor who rejects the doctrine of objective justification could possibly give pastoral care to the individual who suffers from feelings of great guilt which bring doubt concerning the assurance of the forgiveness of sins. The care of the penitent who is so suffering consists in nothing else than a patient, careful, thorough, and simple explanation of the doctrine of objective justification (usually without using the technical jargon). To make the giving of the forgiveness of sins contingent on the penitent's confidence that his sins are already forgiven is a denial of the Lutheran doctrine of the means of grace.

Can I, as a called minister of Christ, pronounce an unconditional, efficacious, and genuine absolution upon someone who confesses his sins? Can I do so by the authority of God? Can I do so while assuring the penitent that my words - which are God's words - guarantee to him that he is indeed absolved and set free before God in heaven? Well I certainly cannot do this if the sin of the whole world has not objectively been forgiven. There is no absolution, in fact there are no objective means of grace, and there is no pure gospel preaching without objective justification.

The denial of objective justification is an extremely serious matter. Quite simply, no man who does not believe in objective justification can be a good gospel preacher. He cannot care for the soul who is burdened by guilt and fears the punishment of God. He cannot be trusted to be a faithful pastor to the bruised reed or the dimly burning wick (Isaiah 42).

The proper distinction between the law and the gospel is more an art than a science. It can only be learned in the school of experience, as Walther taught. Many a novice has learned (from his mistakes) that he was too quick to apply the gospel to the one in spiritual pain. The doctrine of objective justification is not held, promoted, and defended by us to excuse us from preaching and applying God's law strictly and exactly. We hold to objective justification because it is biblical and true. We hold to it because without it the gospel itself becomes dependent on what happens within us, rather than on what happened on Calvary. We hold to it because when the law has done its work, a gospel contingent on faith is no good to elicit faith - this is an absurdity on the face of it - and what those accused by the law need is **faith**. Faith receives the pardon, faith receives the verdict, faith receives the absolution, the declaration; it creates nothing, it causes nothing, it does nothing, it contributes nothing, it simply trusts that word which is true prior to faith's existence. Faith trusts that word by which faith itself is created. Faith always trusts that which is fully and objectively true before there is any faith. The denial of objective justification forces us all into a vicious kind of fideism (faith in faith in faith in faith) which cannot get out of the circle because the final question to be answered is never "what does God tell me?" but always "how is my faith?" Those who deny this precious truth often parade themselves as being very concerned about sanctification, but what they actually accomplish

is the undermining of the very foundation for every good work a Christian will ever do.

I appeal to those conservatives who are even now wavering on the issue of objective justification to consider two evils and decide which is worse. The first evil is that an impenitent man comes to church, leaves impenitent, but thinks he's forgiven of his sins. The second evil is that a penitent man comes to church, leaves penitent, but thinks he's not forgiven. Isn't the second evil far worse? If we are concerned about the false hope of the impenitent, let's preach the law in its full severity, but for God's sake, don't deny objective justification just because folks are going to distort this truth to avoid facing their sin and the need to repent. Consider instead those who labor and are heavy laden. Don't give them a message which directs their faith inward to their faith! Give them the pure gospel, the objective gospel. Nothing else can bring them to repentance and true faith.