

Essay for the 69th Annual Convention of the Concordia Lutheran Conference

Holding Fast to the Scripture's Teaching of Objective Justification

*"God was, in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself,
not imputing their trespasses unto them" (II Corinthians 5:19).*

Every doctrine of Scripture is important and not to be yielded to the heterodox, even if it is a "non-fundamental" teaching (a doctrine that may be denied without directly destroying saving faith in Christ). It should not be forgotten that the Holy Ghost warns us to beware of the dangers of even a "*little leaven*" (Galatians 5:9) when it comes to the damaging effects of false doctrine. But the doctrine of God's Word that is the focus of this essay, namely, the doctrine of *Justification*, is rightly identified as "the chief doctrine of the Christian religion" (Cat. Q/A 194) and certainly cannot be classified as "non-fundamental." And though this doctrine has been treasured, taught, believed, and confessed by the followers of the Lord for thousands of years, and though it was also correctly taught by Luther himself and faithful Lutherans after him over the past five centuries, yet in recent years there has been a movement among many who proclaim themselves to be orthodox, conservative, and confessional Lutherans to deny a crucial aspect of the doctrine of Justification, namely, the *objective* nature of God's forgiveness of a poor sinner based purely upon the redemptive work of Christ, regardless of the attitude of the sinner toward God. While the doctrine of Justification will be on these pages set forth in a complete way according to the clear passages of Scripture, the part of this doctrine that will receive the greatest weight in this essay is what is most generally referred to as *Objective Justification*.

But why does this essay need to be so long? Should not a core teaching of the Gospel be explainable in one short, easy sentence? Yes, it should be that easy; and, in fact, it *is* that easy. Here is what such a sentence might sound like: "On account of Christ's universal atonement (II Corinthians 5:15), God has forgiven the sins of the whole world, as St. Paul writes to the Corinthians: '*God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them*' (II Corinthians 5:19)." That is a sufficient explanation of the doctrine of Objective Justification. So why do Lutherans often give very long presentations of doctrines that can be so simply and concisely taught? Why did Lutheran theologians in the past go to such great lengths to categorize passages of Scripture dealing with the communication of attributes in connection with the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ under the headings *genus idiomaticum*, *genus maiestaticum*, and *genus apotelesmaticum*? It was *not* for the purpose of confusing people, and it was *not* for the purpose of impressing others with their dialectic abilities. It was done in order to present a thorough, well-structured, and precise rebuttal to various errors that had been raised by the heterodox contrary to the teachings of God's Holy Word. Even the most simple and clear teachings of Scripture can be, and have been, distorted by the sinful mind of man and proclaimed in a mutilated, corrupted form to the spiritual harm of many (II Peter 3:16; Romans 16:18). When that happens, the error needs to be combatted, and the clear doctrine needs to be set forth again and again—presenting the simple truths of the Bible from different angles and in the minutest details in order to counter the attacks that have been brought against it. This then necessarily results in a longer presentation, a much more detailed treatment, of a specific doctrine than would otherwise be needed or even be advisable for the purpose of instruction under different circumstances.

Accordingly, the essayist hopes and prays that this long presentation of the Doctrine of Justification—focusing particularly upon its *objective* facet—does not seem too tedious but is regarded to be appropriate in length and depth in light of the importance of this subject and in view of the assaults that this precious doctrine, which lies at the very heart of the Gospel, has

recently suffered. And may we never grow weary of...

Holding Fast to the Scripture's Teaching of Objective Justification.

While there will be some overlap and redundancy between the five parts of this essay, the general organizational order to be observed on the following pages is outlined here as follows:

Part I: *The doctrine of Objective Justification: What it **is** and what it is **not**;*

Part II: *Objective Justification is the direct result of Christ's universal atonement;*

Part III: *Objective Justification is required for a correct understanding of justification by faith;*

Part IV: *Arguments that have been raised against Objective Justification;*

Part V: *Objective Justification must be defended.*

I. The Doctrine of Objective Justification: What It *Is* and What It Is *Not*

The term "*justification*" is the noun form of the verb "*to justify*," which means, according to its Biblical usage, "*to declare righteous*." Sometimes the Bible talks about *God* being *justified* (Psalm 51:4; Romans 3:4, 26; I Timothy 3:16), which means that He is acknowledged, recognized, and *declared to be righteous*, as He is in and of Himself. Much more often, however, the Bible talks about *God justifying humans*, which means that He pronounces a gracious verdict upon those who are sinful in and of themselves, *declaring them to be righteous* through the merits of Christ, on account of His work of redemption. In such justification, since God is declaring people who are *sinful* to be *righteous*, He is canceling their guilt, forgiving their sins. Consequently, expressions of Scripture that describe the Lord as forgiving sins (Matthew 9:2), or counting sinners as being righteous (II Corinthians 5:21), or not holding their sins against them (II Corinthians 5:19) are all rightly classified under the heading of *justification*, even if those passages do not use the specific words "justify" or "justification." The term "*objective*," when paired with justification, refers to what takes place *outside* of sinful men, namely, how God's wrath has been appeased, and He graciously grants forgiveness to all. When the term "*subjective*" is used with justification, it refers to what takes place *inside* the individual sinner—the individual *receiving* forgiveness, being justified by God through faith. A commonly used synonym for *Objective Justification* is "*General Justification*"; and a common synonym for *Subjective Justification* is "*Personal Justification*." Additionally, some prefer to describe God's justification of all mankind as "*universal justification*" or "*universal reconciliation*." All such expressions are fine; but since the most common ones seem to be *objective* and *subjective justification*, these will be the terms used most frequently in this essay.

An important point to understand well about *Objective Justification* is that it has nothing to do with man's attitude toward God (whether he does or does not believe the Gospel or love the Lord), but focuses purely upon God's attitude toward man (whether God is burning with righteous wrath against the sinner or has had His wrath appeased and is extending His loving forgiveness toward sinners). Accordingly, the universal proclamation of divine pardon in the Gospel is the message that God has forgiven the sins of all mankind (II Corinthians 5:19) neither prompted by nor contingent upon anything in man (Romans 3:23–24). Not only is *Objective Justification* something that exists in the heart of God (unrelated to what is in the heart of man), but it is also *based upon* something that is likewise completely objective, outside of us humans, namely, the redemptive work of Jesus Christ, whereby He fully atoned for the sins of the whole world (II Corinthians 5:14–15). Christ's vicarious active and passive obedience fully satisfied God's legislative and punitive justice, and thus reconciled the world of sinners to God, who no longer imputes their sins against them for Jesus' sake. The Scriptures state: "*As by the offense*

of one [Adam] judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of One [Christ] the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience [the] many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall [the] many be made righteous" (Romans 5:18–19); and again: "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" (II Corinthians 5:19). Restated more concisely: God's objective forgiveness of all mankind is based upon the scope and sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work, and is not at all effected by how His forgiving grace is or is not received by individual sinners.

Another way of expressing the doctrine of *Objective Justification* is to say that God has been *propitiated*, or placated, toward all sinful mankind; His wrath against sinners has been appeased. As a result, the Lord extends "on earth peace" and "good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). Even though the wrath of God has been justly provoked by the sins of men, there has also been a reconciling of the world by God through Christ's substitutional satisfaction of divine justice. Dr. Francis Pieper writes: "This reconciliation, as Scripture plainly tells us, does not consist in a change of heart in man, but in a change of heart in God. God no longer looks upon sinful man with wrath, but 'before His divine tribunal' forgives the sins of mankind, does not impute their trespasses unto them" (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, p. 398). Notice that *Objective Justification* can accurately be described as "a change of heart in God"—changing from righteous wrath against the sinner to loving forgiveness. While some may not care for such anthropomorphisms (referring to the "heart" of God) and anthropopathisms (referring to a "change of heart" in God) involved in such a description, the Bible itself speaks this way when God's forgiving mercy and turning from wrath is depicted as the Lord *repenting* of His plans to punish sinners (Exodus 32:12, 14; Jonah 3:10). The Bible frequently uses anthropomorphisms and anthropopathisms to describe the Lord and His actions in ways that we humans can understand and to which we can relate (Psalm 34:15; Leviticus 26:42). Accordingly, God's gracious forgiveness is described this way in Psalm 85: "Thou hast forgiven the iniquity of Thy people; Thou hast covered all their sin. Thou hast taken away all Thy wrath; Thou hast turned Thyself from the fierceness of Thine anger" (vv. 2–3). Since such expressions are used in the Scriptures, we must not criticize their use, but we must also not make the mistake of taking them literally and think that there is an actual change that takes place in God. Acknowledging that God is *unchangeable* and *eternal* (not bound by any constraints of time), it is proper to say that His wrath was provoked by the sinfulness of man from eternity, even before He created man in the course of time (Isaiah 46:9–10; 48:4–5, 8; Deuteronomy 31:29), and also that His righteous wrath against sinful mankind had been appeased by Christ from eternity (I Peter 1:18–20; I Timothy 1:9; Revelation 13:8). So without using the common anthropopathism, we may say that forgiving grace for Christ's sake and consuming wrath apart from Christ both exist simultaneously in the Lord toward the entire human race from all eternity—the sins of men prompting the righteous hatred, and Jesus' vicarious atonement prompting the gracious forgiveness. Thus *no* actual *change* in God took place (Malachi 3:6) since all of this lay before Him from eternity (Psalm 90:4). It is, however, certainly easier for us humans, bound by time as we are, to speak of the Lord's forgiveness of sinners in an anthropopathic way.

"*Objective justification*...happens to all for Christ's sake before any act of mankind or the individual's faith, and on the basis of which God issues the invitation, 'Be [ye] reconciled to God' (2 Cor. 5:20)" (Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, p. 354). "*The Word of reconciliation*" (II Corinthians 5:19) is the announcement of God's gracious forgiveness to sinners; it is *not* a proclamation of *potential* forgiveness or *conditional* grace. That the Lord's wrath has been fully appeased by Christ is an objective fact, not a subjective possibility based upon whether the sinner believes it or not. Hence God's decree of grace and forgiveness includes no provisos. It is true, however, that if we are considering whether or not a specific

person will ultimately *benefit* from the objective Gospel of God's grace, that *is* a conditional matter. Referring to those who did not benefit from the proclamation of the Gospel, the Bible says: "*The Word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it*" (Hebrews 4:2). Because of this, conditional statements may be used with regard to whether or not a sinner will be profitted by the grace of God and be saved in the end. For example, one may correctly apply the message of John 3:16 by saying: "If you believe in the only-begotten Son of God, you will not perish but have everlasting life." Likewise, one may apply the words of Acts 10:43 and say: "If you believe in Jesus, you shall receive the remission of sins." However, those conditional statements are still based upon facts that are objectively true in the Lord (His saving love and forgiveness in Christ); and they remain true whether or not anyone believes them to be true (Romans 3:3; II Timothy 2:13). *The objective Gospel facts must never be preached or taught in a conditional way!* Consider some different examples from the Scriptures, and notice that even though *conditional* statements are used, they are based upon facts that are *unconditional*. When speaking to a man whose son was possessed by a devil, Jesus says in Mark 9:23, "*If thou canst believe, all things are possible to him that believeth.*" Now that was a *conditional* statement, but the promise here given was an expression of objective and unconditional facts of God's power and grace. It would be wrong to think that the man's faith would determine whether or not God would be powerful enough and gracious enough to help. The condition of faith determined whether or not that man (and his son) would *benefit* from the power and grace of God. Obviously, though, the objective attributes of the Lord (His omnipotence and mercy) and His offer of help would have been no less valid and efficacious even if the man refused to believe. Similarly, in Romans 10:9, when St. Paul writes, "*If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised Him from the dead, thou shalt be saved,*" the statement is conditional, but the promise is still based upon the objective fact that God has forgiven the sins of men and grants free salvation for Christ's sake. The sinner will be saved only if he receives the grace of God in Christ by faith (that is the conditional part); but whether or not a person believes that which the Gospel proclaims, the fact of God's grace and forgiveness in Christ still remains objectively true.

Summarizing the points of the previous paragraph more concisely: Even though the Bible sets forth *faith as a condition to receive* God's gracious forgiveness in Christ (which is *objectively given to all without any conditions whatsoever*), the Gospel's promises of divine love and forgiveness *are not conditional* as though man must do anything (including believing in Jesus) in order for God to extend His forgiving grace to the sinner. Dr. C. F. W. Walther writes: "[The Gospel] promises us the grace of God and salvation without any condition whatsoever. It is a promise of free grace. It asks nothing of us but this, 'Take what I give, and you have it.' That is not a condition, but a kind invitation" (*The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 10). Because some have misunderstood and misrepresented what the doctrine of *Objective Justification* actually **is**, the following statements are intended to remove such misunderstandings by making clear what this doctrine is **not**:

- The doctrine of *Objective Justification* does *not* teach that the damned in hell, or even the unbelievers here on earth, are declared to be "*saints*" by God. *The Bible only uses the term "saints" with reference to Christians* (I Corinthians 1:2).
- The doctrine of *Objective Justification* does *not* mean that faith is unnecessary for a sinner to receive God's forgiveness or that the unbelievers will be free from condemnation and escape eternal punishment in hell. *Since they despise and spurn God's forgiving grace, they will receive the wages of their sins* (John 8:24; Romans 6:23; II Peter 2:1b; John 3:36).
- The doctrine of *Objective Justification* does *not* undermine or weaken the

power of the Office of the Keys when the sins of the impenitent are truly “retained” (John 20:23) and “bound” to them (Matthew 18:18) as a direct result of their rejection of divine grace so that their sins are *not* forgiven (subjectively).

- The doctrine of *Objective Justification* does *not* lead to a confounding of the keys; it does *not* mean that forgiveness is proclaimed to the impenitent, which must never be done. *The keys are confounded, not by the sweet message of the Gospel itself, but by a misapplication of the Gospel of God’s grace to those who are carnally secure* (Ezekiel 13:22).

II. Objective Justification Is the Direct Result of Christ’s Universal Atonement.

In numerous passages, the Bible states that justification is based upon Christ’s work of redemption—that the forgiveness of sins (not a mere potential for forgiveness contingent on man’s faith) has been purchased and won for us by Jesus’ holy life, suffering, and death as He served as our Substitute under the Law of God. The following are a few passages of Scripture that clearly establish this direct connection: “*It pleased the Lord to bruise Him. ...He shall see of the travail of His soul and shall be satisfied; by His knowledge shall My righteous Servant justify many, for He shall bear their iniquities*” (Isaiah 53:10–11). “*Being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 3:24). “*When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*” (Romans 5:10). “*In whom we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace*” (Ephesians 1:7). “*That He might reconcile both [Jews and Gentiles] unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby*” (Ephesians 2:16). “*In whom we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins*” (Colossians 1:14). “*Having made peace through the blood of His cross, by Him to reconcile all things unto Himself*” (Colossians 1:20). According to these and other similar passages of Holy Writ, God has reconciled sinners to Himself, forgiving all their transgressions in His heart, based purely upon Jesus’ redemptive work.

The all-sufficient payment for sin was accomplished by Christ’s active and passive obedience; that payment was accepted by God for our forgiveness. And the fact that His payment was accepted for our justification was demonstrated and manifested when God raised His Son back to life on the third day. Accordingly, St. Paul writes to the Romans: “*Jesus our Lord...was delivered for [because of] our offenses, and was raised again for [because of] our justification*” (4:24–25). The “*justification*” mentioned in this passage cannot refer to forgiveness imputed to *faith* (subjective justification) but must refer to forgiveness *in the heart of God* (objective justification), because it is here described as being the *cause* (not the effect or result) of Christ’s resurrection. It would be a *non sequitur* (it would not follow logically) to say that Jesus was raised because God imputes forgiveness to faith. However, saying that Jesus was raised because God had forgiven sinners in His heart—having accepted Christ’s redemptive work for our reconciliation—dovetails perfectly with what the Bible teaches concerning redemption leading directly to justification, as the verses quoted in the previous paragraph clearly teach. Dr. Johann Gerhard writes: “When [God] brought [Christ] out of death, He acquitted Him of our sins imputed to Him, and consequently also absolved us in Him, so that Christ’s resurrection is the cause and proof and completion of our justification” (*Annotationes in Epist. ad Romanos*, Jena Ed., 1666, p. 156). “In Christ’s resurrection we are acquitted of our sins, so that they can no longer condemn us before the judgment of God” (*Disputationes theologicae*, Jena Ed., 1655, Vol. XX, p. 1450).

In order, then, to ascertain the extent/scope/amount of people who have been *justified* by God *objectively* in His heart, we need only learn from the Bible the extent/scope/amount of people

who have been *redeemed* by Christ. The Apostle Paul concisely states: “*He died for all*” (II Corinthians 5:15). John the Baptist identified Jesus as “*the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*” (John 1:29). Clearly all mankind have been redeemed by the Lord Jesus Christ; and, therefore, all mankind must be included in the resulting declaration of divine forgiveness. Calvinists are consistent in their false teachings when they deny *God’s Universal Will of Grace* (denying that God truly desires to save all people), the *Universal Atonement* (denying that Christ fully paid for the sins of the world), and the doctrine of *Objective Justification* (denying that God has objectively declared the world to be righteous in His sight). Yes, the Calvinists are completely *wrong* on all of those points, but they are *consistent* in their errors—one error logically leads to the next. However, the Lutherans who deny *Objective Justification* show great *inconsistency* when they accept the doctrines of God’s Universal Will of Grace and the Universal Atonement, while they reject the *result* of that atonement, namely, God’s reconciliation and justification of the world. They agree with the Bible on the point that Christ fully paid for the sins of all mankind (that Christ offered a propitiating sacrifice to God for the sins of the whole world), but since they deny *Objective Justification* they take the position that God did not *accept* that payment for the forgiveness of all mankind (that He was not actually propitiated toward the world of sinners). But, thankfully, the Bible proclaims the most joyous and comforting fact of *Objective Justification*—that God has been propitiated with regard to the sins of the whole world (I John 2:2), that His wrath has been appeased toward all people (II Corinthians 5:19; Colossians 1:20).

The Greek word ἱλασμός is translated in the Bible as “*the propitiation*” (I John 2:2 and 4:10), and is defined as “an appeasing” or “the means of appeasing” (Thayer’s *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*). It is true that I John 2:1–2 focuses more on Christ’s work of redemption than on the resulting justification when it says: “*If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.*” However, this passage is distorted and great damage is done to the entire Gospel if the propitiating work of Christ (the redemption) is presented as not actually causing God to be propitiated or appeased—objectively justifying the world. On the basis of I John 2:1–2, how can real comfort be given to “*any man*” who sins, and how can Jesus truly be our “*Advocate with the Father*” if the payment He made on the cross were not actually accepted by God, if God were not actually propitiated by the work of Christ (even though this passage calls Him “*the propitiation for our sins*”)? But if it is acknowledged that God has been propitiated, then *toward whom* exactly has He been propitiated? Only the *believers*? Why then does the Apostle here emphasize that Jesus is the propitiation not only for *our* sins “*but also for the sins of the whole world*”? Should this passage be taken to say that God has *not* been propitiated toward the unbelievers and will only be propitiated toward them if they ever repent and believe the Gospel? And if faith is required to propitiate God, then that should also be mentioned as contributing toward the propitiation for sin, and not solely *Christ* and *His* merit. But no, such a twisted interpretation has absolutely no basis at all in the words or context of I John 2:1–2, nor can any support for that kind of blatant distortion of the Gospel be found anywhere across the breadth of Holy Scripture!

The Bible describes the righteousness imputed to sinners in justification as a corollary of the imputation of guilt to Christ as part of His vicarious atonement. We are told in the second epistle of Paul to the Corinthians: “*He hath made Him to be sin for us, Who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him*” (5:21). In both cases the imputation is a divine verdict in the tribunal of God that does not rely upon the beliefs of the person upon whom the verdict is pronounced. So Jesus, “*who knew no sin*” according to His own holiness, was made “*to be sin for us*” according to God’s judgment. Christ certainly understood that verdict to be just and true since He became our Substitute; however, it was not true because Christ

believed it to be true. Rather, it was true because “*the Lord [had] laid on Him the iniquity of us all*” (Isaiah 53:6). Likewise, in the case of sinners who have the righteousness of Christ objectively imputed (credited) to them, that is God’s own verdict resulting from Christ’s work of redemption (since His wrath was placated thereby). Some people believe and trust in that gracious verdict of the Gospel, but most do not; however, the verdict stands as true whether or not anyone believes it (Romans 3:3; II Timothy 2:13). As has been stated before, however, faith is required in order for a person ultimately to *benefit* from that divine verdict of forgiving grace and be saved (Hebrews 4:2; Acts 13:46).

Luther says: “Even he who does not believe that he is free and his sins [are] forgiven shall also learn, in due time, how assuredly his sins were forgiven, even though he did not believe it. . . . 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 keys’ 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” (*Luther’s Works*, English Edition, Vol. 40, pp. 366–367).

Holding to the erroneous position that the universal atonement accomplished by Christ did *not* result in the objective justification of the world, if held consistently, would lead to other false opinions, such as: Christ did not fully atone for the sins of the world (something was deficient in His redemptive work); or, though Christ’s work was sufficient, yet God still did not accept it for the reconciliation of sinners; or, something in man (namely, his faith) is required in order fully to appease God’s wrath and move Him to extend His forgiving grace. Disproving such errors with the Scriptures is not difficult. The fact that Christ accomplished everything needed to redeem mankind can be proved by John 19:30 (“*It is finished*”). The fact that God *did* accept the sacrifice of Christ for man’s justification is proved by Romans 4:25 (“*[Christ] was delivered for our offenses, and was raised again for our justification*”). And the fact that nothing in man is needed to appease God’s wrath can be proved by Romans 5:10 (“*When we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*”). Additionally, if Christ’s redemptive work were insufficient (apart from the believer’s faith) to appease God’s wrath and prompt His forgiveness, then the Savior’s vicarious atonement could not be the sole basis of the Lord’s eternal decree of election. In other words, if faith is required to propitiate God, then faith would also be a necessary factor in and cause of one’s predestination, which is the old error of *intuitu fidei*—the false doctrine promoted by synergists that God predestinated people because He foresaw their future faith. That error can be disproved with passages such as II Timothy 1:9 (which removes the thought of anything in us accounting for our predestination), Ephesians 1:3–7 (which makes it clear that the cause of our election was *purely God’s grace in Christ Jesus*), and II Thessalonians 2:13 (which teaches that *we were chosen from eternity to be brought to saving faith*, not because of any foreseen faith within us).

Because of the universal atonement of Christ, which was accepted by God for the justification of the world, God extends His loving-kindness to every human being, not only to the believers (Matthew 5:45). Without the redemptive work of Christ, there would be no reason for the Lord to treat sinful mankind with grace. Rather, the goodness of God would be restricted to those creatures that had *not* sinned against Him and provoked His just wrath, such as the angels that carry out His commands (Psalm 103:20–21), the birds of the air, which He sustains with food (Matthew 6:26), and so on. But when Adam and Eve sinned against the Lord, they were not immediately damned as the perfect justice of God would have demanded. Why? Because God’s justice had been satisfied on the part of all mankind by the redemptive work of Christ, which had been accepted by God from eternity for the reconciliation of the world (I Peter 1:18–20; I

Timothy 1:9; Revelation 13:8). The fact that divine wrath was thus appeased as a result of Christ's redemptive work is the teaching of *Objective Justification*. St. Paul writes: "*If through the offense of [Adam] [the] many be dead, much more the grace of God, and the gift by grace, which is by one Man, Jesus Christ, hath abounded unto [the] many. ...Therefore as by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of One the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life*" (Romans 5:15, 18).

Did God *need* to provide such glorious redemption and forgiveness for His sinful creatures? Would it have been a violation of the love that belongs to His very essence (I John 4:8) if He did *not* send His only-begotten Son to redeem the world but simply damned every sinner to hell? Dr. Walther gives the following answer: "What God has done according to the Gospel He was not obliged to do, as though He could not possibly have remained a just and loving God if He had not done it. God would still have been eternal Love if He had allowed all men to go to perdition" (*The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, 8). Yes, God is still pure love even if He shows no love to those who have provoked His wrath and deserve nothing but eternal punishment in hell; in fact, His holy justice demands that no love be shown to those who have merited only eternal hell-fire *unless there is a propitiation that fully satisfies His justice*. When the evil angels rebelled against God, they were immediately condemned; and the Lord did not seek to save them (II Peter 2:4)—that is what His perfect justice demanded. There is no redemption, justification, or salvation for the fallen angels because the only-begotten Son of God "*took not on Him the nature of angels; but He took on Him the seed of Abraham. Wherefore in all things it behooved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people*" (Hebrews 2:16–17). As a true human being, Christ fully atoned for the sins of the world; and God accepted that sacrifice for the forgiveness of all mankind. If the Lord did not objectively justify the world in Christ, He would have had no basis for extending His saving grace to the world; in fact, His justice would have demanded the opposite—the damnation of all mankind. Nor would His justice permit what the Bible describes as God's primary will, namely, His desire to save all people, if God had not accepted the redemptive work of Christ for the objective justification of all.

Exploring this point a little further: Carefully consider how the Lord dealt with the *angels that sinned* in a manner very differently than He dealt with the *human race, which had also fallen into sin*. In both cases, creatures that were created holy rebelled against the Lord and provoked His wrath, making themselves worthy of eternal destruction in hell. As a result of Adam and Eve's fall into sin, all of their descendants enter into this world completely sinful and corrupt—spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. In the case of the *devils*, God immediately "*cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment*" (II Peter 2:4); but with *humans*, the Lord shows much love and kindness even to the unbelievers here on earth, "*for He maketh His sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sendeth rain on the just and on the unjust*" (Matthew 5:45). Why such drastically different treatment for the fallen human race as opposed to the fallen angels? Simply because there was no redemption and hence no forgiveness provided for the devils (Hebrews 2:16); but there is *forgiveness for all mankind through the redemptive work of God's only-begotten Son* (II Corinthians 5:19). If Jesus' work of redemption had only been accepted by God for the justification of *believers*, then all the unbelievers would find themselves in the same situation as the devils—receiving no love from the Lord at all but only His wrath and punishment (no time of grace would be extended to them). And since all people are born into this world as unbelievers, then God would not even seek to make *anyone* a recipient of His love but would immediately damn everyone to hell if Christ's work of redemption had only been accepted by God for the justification of those who believe on Him. Accordingly, every time the Bible gives

expression to God's love for all mankind (e.g. John 3:16), every time the Bible speaks of divine kindness being extended to all people (e.g. Matthew 5:45), and every time the Bible describes God's desire to save the unbelievers (Ezekiel 33:11; II Peter 3:9; I Timothy 2:4)—*which expressions are never found with regard to the devils*—the Scriptures thereby testify to the fact that the redemption of all mankind has been accepted by God for the justification of all. As was mentioned earlier, the Calvinists are *consistent* in their heresy when they deny God's Universal Will of Grace, the Universal Atonement, and the *Objective Justification*; but the Lutherans who accept those first two doctrines while denying the third are manifestly *inconsistent* in their theology.

III. Objective Justification Is Required for a Correct Understanding of Justification by Faith.

The *objective justification* earned by Christ's work of redemption must be accepted by faith in order for a sinner to *receive* the forgiveness of all his sins. Notice how Luther, quoting various passages of Scripture, eloquently transitions from the doctrine of *Universal Atonement* to *Objective Justification* to *Subjective Justification* in the following quotation from the *Smalcald Articles*:

“The first and chief article is this, *That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification*, Romans 4, 25. *And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world*, John 1, 29; *and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all*, Isaiah 53,6. *Likewise: All have sinned and are justified without merit [freely, and without their own works or merits] by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood*, Romans 3,23 ff. Now, since it is necessary to believe this, and it cannot be otherwise acquired or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says, Romans 3,28: *For we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law*. Likewise v. 26: *That He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Christ*” (*Concordia Triglotta*, p. 461).

The way that Luther ends that statement, referring to faith as receiving God's gracious justification, should certainly not be taken to mean that there is no justification prior to faith. (In fact, it assumes that there *is* justification prior to faith—something already there for faith to receive.)

Those who deny *Objective Justification* tend to lay a great deal of emphasis on passages that teach *Subjective Justification* such as Romans 3:28 and Galatians 2:16—acting as if such passages disprove that all people have been forgiven. These are, indeed, wonderful, very comforting Gospel passages that declare both how we *are* and how we are *not* justified, namely, *by faith and not by the works of the Law*. Listen to what these passages say: “*A man is justified by faith without the deeds of the Law*” (Romans 3:28). “*Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ and not by the works of the Law; for by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified*” (Galatians 2:16). Passages such as these clearly state the fact that we are justified, declared righteous, forgiven *by faith* in Christ; but they do *not* specifically state the *function* of justifying faith. In other words, such passages teach that faith justifies, but they do not explain *how* or *why* faith justifies. They do, however, also make it clear in what way faith does *not* justify us, namely *not as a meritorious work*, since faith is set forth as the opposite of “*the deeds of the Law*.” So, clearly, faith does *not earn or merit* the justification (which *was* earned and merited by Christ's work of redemption). But then what role exactly does faith play in our justification or forgiveness? In passages such as Acts 10:43 and Acts 26:18, we are told that

the way faith justifies a poor sinner is by *receiving the forgiveness of sins* purchased by Christ and offered freely in the Gospel. Accordingly, faith has been described as the hand of a beggar that receives but does not earn the forgiveness that is given, or imputed, to it (Romans 4:5).

There are various passages that describe faith as receiving different things. John 1:12 describes faith as receiving Christ. John 3:33 describes faith as receiving Jesus' "*testimony*." Romans 5:11 describes faith as receiving "*the atonement*." Romans 5:17 describes faith as receiving "*abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness*." Galatians 3:14 describes faith as receiving "*the promise of the Spirit*." Hebrews 10:26 describes faith as receiving "*the knowledge of the truth*." James 1:21 describes faith as receiving "*the engrafted Word*." Revelation 22:17 describes faith as receiving, *taking* "*the water of life*." In all of those examples, that which is received by faith already exists for, and is given to, the individual before it is believed and accepted. Likewise, the way that the Bible describes the function of faith in justification as *receiving* the forgiveness of sins (Acts 10:43; 26:18) shows that faith cannot be regarded as a prerequisite either for the *existence* or the *giving* of the justification. Stated another way, the faith of a Christian, whereby he receives the forgiveness of sins, cannot be regarded as that which causes God to grant him forgiveness. Receiving a gift cannot be regarded as a prerequisite for the gift to exist or to be given. It is nonsensical to say that something needs to be received before it is given or to think that receiving a gift could in any way cause that gift to be given. No, clearly the gift must be given before it can be received; and the receiving of the gift is not what prompts the giving of it. But even if this is accepted to be the general rule when it comes to giving and receiving, could it be that God's justification of a sinner is an exception to that rule? In other words, is forgiveness the one thing that cannot be given until it is first received? To answer that question, let us first consider an example of what takes place when humans forgive each other, and then, more importantly, focus our attention on the way the Bible describes God's gracious forgiveness toward men.

Consider the following situation: A man's pride is wounded by his neighbor's tactless, rude behavior; and a bitter feud develops between them. Later, a third party (a friend of both feuding individuals) talks to one of the men and causes him to abandon his hostilities toward his neighbor—successfully appeasing his wrath. The man then forgives his neighbor in his heart, desires to have a friendly relationship with him once again, and communicates that desire to him. But his neighbor still refuses to be reconciled. Has there been any forgiveness in such a case? Was there any reconciliation? In one respect, "yes;" and in another respect, "no." There was only a reconciliation, an end of hostility, on the part of the one, but not on the part of the other. This is, sadly, a somewhat common situation in human affairs: One person may want to have a loving relationship with another, but the other individual refuses the offer of peace. This is why we Christians are told in Romans 12:18: "*If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men*." In that verse, the Christian is exhorted to extend the hand of love and peace even to those who only want to continue fighting with him. And that is precisely how the Lord describes Himself in His relationship with the stubborn unbelievers, saying: "*All day long I have stretched forth My hands unto a disobedient and gainsaying people*" (Romans 10:21; Isaiah 65:2). Pleading with the wicked who were rejecting His loving forgiveness and choosing rather to die in their sins under the penalty of divine justice, the Lord says through the Prophet Ezekiel: "*Why will ye die, O House of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, saith the Lord God*" (18:31–32). But now consider why it is that the Lord takes no pleasure in the death of the unbelievers. Why is He not joyful in the execution of His righteous wrath upon those who have certainly merited it? Why does it not please Him to see the wicked receive the punishment that they justly deserve? *Because He has forgiven them in His heart on account of Christ's atonement; He does not want them to die in their sins but desires that they accept His forgiveness by faith.*

Objective and *Subjective* Justification should not be thought of as two different kinds of justification, since it is the very same righteousness of Christ that cancels the sins of the world *objectively* and that is received by the faith of the individual Christian *subjectively*. But can it be said that God does anything that is different or anything more when He *subjectively* justifies a person compared to when He *objectively* justifies a person? Yes, because in subjective justification God not only forgives the sinner in His heart on the basis of Christ's work of redemption (Romans 5:18), but He also imputes Christ's righteousness to the faith that the Holy Ghost has created in the believer through the Means of Grace (Romans 3:30). With *Objective Justification*, the divine action takes place *outside of the individual sinner*, in the tribunal of God, in view of Jesus' redemptive work; it is God's direct response to the universal atonement accomplished by Christ irrespective of man's attitude toward God. However, the case is different with *Subjective Justification* where the divine action takes place within the *individual sinner*—God placing the gracious gift of forgiveness into the beggar's hand of faith. But, again, the imputed righteousness received by faith is the exact same gift that has been purchased for all by Christ (*Universal Atonement*) and granted to all by God (*Objective Justification*)—even to those who reject it by their unbelief. Describing it in another way, it is the *Objective Justification* (God's gracious declaration of righteousness upon all sinful mankind on account of Christ's work of redemption) that a sinner appropriates by faith when he is subjectively justified by the Lord.

A passage of Scripture that nicely sets forth the relationship between *Objective* and *Subjective* Justification is Romans 4:5, where we read: "*To him that worketh not, but believeth on Him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.*" According to this verse, a person who does not trust in his own works is described as placing his trust in the God who justifies one who is "*ungodly*," a person with no saving faith at all; and that faith—the faith in God who justifies the unbeliever (which is *Objective Justification*)—is counted for righteousness to the Christian's faith (which is *Subjective Justification*). Even though it can be argued that a greater emphasis is placed on *Subjective* Justification in this verse, yet that doctrine has a crucial buttress in the doctrine of *Objective* Justification, which is also clearly stated, and for good reason! Not only is the forgiveness of sins that Christ earned for all and objectively granted to all the very message of the Gospel to which the believer clings in faith, but the fact that God justifies the *unbeliever*—one who is incapable of doing any good works at all (Hebrews 11:6; Romans 8:7–8)—powerfully emphasizes a recurring theme in this epistle to the Romans, namely, that when a Christian receives the imputed righteousness of Christ by faith, he is not to think that it has anything to do with his own good works (neither was it his faith that moved God to forgive him).

If an unbeliever has been thoroughly humbled by the Law of God, understands that he cannot save himself but only deserves God's wrath and punishment, and is desperate to find relief from his terrors of conscience, that man needs to hear the Gospel. He is to be told about Jesus and how the Lord God has forgiven him all his sins because of what Christ has done for him. Through that message of grace, the Holy Ghost can create saving faith, which clings to the objective promise of God's mercy. Such faith receives the forgiveness that the Lord is giving. In this way, God *subjectively justifies* the sinner—moving him to trust in the *Objective Justification* set forth in the Gospel. Obviously, God must have objectively forgiven the sins of an individual before the forgiveness of sins can truthfully be announced to him by the preaching of the Gospel and before that forgiveness can be received by faith. If the Gospel is stripped of the comfort of *Objective Justification*, it would merely be presenting a potential, possible, future forgiveness, the actual bestowal of which would all depend on whether or not the hearer already believes. If a contrite unbeliever must first have faith before the forgiveness of sins can be proclaimed to him, then he will never be brought to faith since the means to convert him—the Gospel's message of forgiveness—will be permanently withheld. He would be hopelessly

locked in the circular trap that requires him first to receive the forgiveness of sins by faith before God will actually forgive him. Again, the obvious point is that if a person must first receive something before it will be given to him, then the gift will never be either given or received; it will always remain out of reach, like the end of a Penrose staircase.

Accordingly, as long as *Objective Justification* is denied, the only way around the dilemma of requiring one to receive forgiveness before it will be given is to invent an additional, new kind of Gospel (a temporary, “pre-gospel” Gospel) as well as an additional, new kind of faith (a temporary, “pre-faith” faith). That new kind of Gospel would inform the contrite, unconverted individual about the *possibility* of forgiveness, without actually giving it to him since he does not yet believe it; and then if the sinner does start to believe that first kind of Gospel (the promise of a potential, future forgiveness), then a second Gospel (one that *actually does convey* forgiveness) would then be preached in order to put him into possession of Christ’s righteousness. Those two kinds of Gospel would naturally require two different kinds of faith—the first one which does not receive forgiveness (since it has not yet been given) but moves God to grant forgiveness, followed by the second kind of faith that *actually does* receive the forgiveness of sins after it has been granted. It should, of course, go without saying that Holy Scripture only speaks of *one Gospel*—that which conveys the benefits of Jesus’ vicarious atonement, even the forgiveness of sins, to lost mankind. Likewise, the Bible only speaks of *one kind of saving faith*—that which receives the forgiveness that God grants to sinners on account of Christ’s work of redemption (not on account of some pre-existing faith).

Saving faith needs to cling to the message of God’s grace in the Gospel—the glad tidings that the wrath of God has been appeased by Christ and that all of our sins have been forgiven for His sake. Faith must not cling to faith itself as that which placates divine wrath or atones for sin or moves God to grant forgiveness. While faith can and should be described as a condition for a sinner to *receive* forgiveness from the Lord, it must *not* be described as a condition that first needs to be met before God will *extend* His gracious forgiveness to the sinner. In other words, since faith is required to receive and personally benefit from the *objective justification* of the world, a penitent person would rightly be told, “If you believe in Christ as your Savior, you will receive God’s forgiveness and saving grace.” This is how the Bible speaks (Acts 10:43). However, it would be completely wrong and untrue to tell the penitent person, “If you believe in Christ, your faith will appease God’s wrath and move Him to forgive you.” The Bible never speaks like that. Those who deny the doctrine of *Objective Justification* might not use that exact verbiage (saying that a man’s faith appeases God’s wrath and moves Him to grant forgiveness), but that is exactly the point that they are advancing when they say that there is *no objective forgiveness of the world* in the heart of God based purely upon Christ’s redemptive work. They represent faith as being *more* than just the means whereby a sinner *receives* forgiveness from the Lord; thus they imply, even if they do not directly state it, that a person’s faith is a requirement, in addition to the merits of Christ, in order for God to be propitiated and moved to grant forgiveness.

We have already seen that this is not at all what the Scriptures teach concerning faith, Christ’s redemptive work, and the resulting justification. It is also important to reject the slanderous claim that this is what Luther taught; neither is such a false position to be found anywhere in the Lutheran Confessions. While we admit that Luther and the Confessions never used the term “*Objective Justification*,” they also never taught that a Christian’s faith is that which placates God and prompts Him to offer forgiveness. No, a reading of Luther and the Confessions reveals that they consistently taught on the basis of Holy Scripture that Christ’s vicarious active and passive obedience appeased the wrath of the Lord provoked by the sins of men (*this is the doctrine of Objective Justification*) and that the function of faith is simply to receive the divine forgiveness given in the Gospel for Christ’s sake (*this presupposes the doctrine of Objective Justification*).

In the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, we read: “The wrath of God cannot be appeased if we set against it our own works, because Christ has been set forth as a Propitiator, so that for His sake, the Father may become reconciled to us. But Christ is not apprehended as a Mediator except by faith. Therefore, by faith alone we obtain remission of sins, when we comfort our hearts with confidence in the mercy promised for Christ’s sake” (Article IV, section 80). Notice here that Melancthon rightly states that the wrath of God is only appeased by Christ, the Propitiator. He then says that “Christ is not *apprehended* as a Mediator except by faith.” Does this mean that Christ is not the Mediator, *objectively* speaking, for all men, even for those who do not believe on Him? Of course not! Objectively, He certainly **is** the one and only Mediator for all mankind by virtue of His redemptive work. (The faith of man has nothing to do with it). But here Melancthon speaks of Christ being “*apprehended* as a Mediator” **subjectively**, which happens only “by faith.” He goes on to say in the next sentence that “by faith alone we *obtain* remission of sins.” Does this mean that there is no remission of sins, *objectively* speaking, for all men, even for those who do not believe the Gospel? Of course not! *Objectively*, the remission of sins has been purchased by Christ and freely given to all mankind because of the accepted payment for sin. (The faith of man has nothing to do with it.) But here Melancthon speaks of “remission of sins” being *obtained*, or received, which he correctly says happens “*by faith alone*.”

The following are just a few more quotations from the Lutheran Confessions that emphasize the fact that faith simply *receives* the forgiveness that God extends to sinners for Christ’s sake. The *Augsburg Confession* states: “Remission of sins and justification is apprehended by faith” (Article VI)—*not caused* by faith or *actualized* by faith. Similarly, we read in the *Apology of the Augsburg Confession*: “The Gospel...offers, for Christ’s sake, remission of sin and justification, which is received by faith” (Article IV, section 62). In the following quotations from the *Formula of Concord*, we find a nice description of how *Subjective* Justification *receives* the *Objective* Justification, or, in other words, how the righteousness of faith is simply the reception of the *objective* gift of righteousness, which God grants to a poor sinner, not because of his faith but because of the merits of Christ. We read: “Concerning the righteousness of faith before God, we believe, teach, and confess...that poor sinful man is justified before God, that is, absolved and declared free and exempt from all his sins, and from the sentence of well deserved condemnation, and adopted into sonship and heirship of eternal life, without any merit or worth of our own, also without any preceding, present, or any subsequent works, out of pure grace, because of the sole merit, complete obedience, bitter suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone, whose obedience is reckoned to us for righteousness. These treasures are offered us by the Holy Ghost in the promise of the holy Gospel; and faith alone is the only means by which we lay hold upon, accept, and apply, and appropriate them to ourselves. ...For faith justifies, not for this cause and reason that it is so good a work and so fair a virtue, but because it lays hold of and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel; for this must be applied and appropriated to us by faith, if we are to be justified thereby. Therefore the righteousness which is imputed to faith or to the believer out of pure grace is the obedience, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, since He has made satisfaction for us to the Law, and paid for our sins” (*Thorough Declaration*, Article III, sections 9–10, 13–14). *As long as it is correctly understood that the reason faith justifies is purely because it receives the promised forgiveness, then the doctrine of **Objective Justification** must also be maintained.*

IV. Arguments that Have Been Raised against Objective Justification

Why are there those who have a difficult time understanding and accepting what the Bible teaches concerning *Objective Justification*? The problem certainly does *not* lie in the passages of Scripture themselves; it is *not* that God was unclear in what He caused to be written.

There are some who seem to oppose this doctrine simply because they do not like the terms used. And while it is true that the terms “*objective justification*” or “*universal forgiveness*” are not found in the Bible, yet that is not a reason to reject the use of those terms or, more importantly, the doctrine of Scripture to which they refer. As is the case with a number of other terms not found in the Bible but still used in Christian dogmatics (such as “Trinity,” “Sacrament,” and “Vicarious Atonement”), it is important to understand what they mean and acknowledge that the *doctrines* named and described by those terms *are clearly taught in the Bible*. It would be nonsensical for a person to say that he truly believes God has been *fully propitiated* concerning the sins of the whole world, while also saying that he does *not* believe that God has *objectively forgiven* the whole world in His heart. Since those are simply two different ways of saying the same thing, for a person to be consistent, he must accept both propositions or reject both. Persisting in trying to make a distinction where there is no true difference reveals that one either does not accurately grasp the definitions of the terms in use (II Timothy 2:25), or that he is simply striving about words to no profit (II Timothy 2:14). And while it is fine for a Christian to have his own preferred modes of expression and opt to use certain terms rather than others in his own speech, it would be uncharitable for him to criticize the use of synonymous expressions used by his spiritual brethren. Doing so could easily cause offense by making it look as if there is a breach in the fellowship. Again, a person’s dislike for certain terms and expressions must not be confused with (or be permitted to grow into) actual opposition to the doctrine of *Objective Justification* or any other doctrine of Scripture. Sadly, there are those who do not merely quibble about the terms used, but who oppose the doctrine itself and claim that it is unscriptural. We shall now consider some of their arguments and see why those arguments are invalid.

One particularly weak argument against *Objective Justification* is one that is advanced on the basis of Proverbs 17:15, where the Lord declares: “*He that justifieth the wicked, and he that condemneth the just, even they both are abomination to the Lord.*” Clearly, God here describes what He does not want *humans* to do. It would, indeed, be an abominable mixing of Law and Gospel—a confounding of the keys—for us to proclaim forgiveness to the impenitent or to pronounce God’s wrath and condemnation upon the penitent. Likewise, it would be a clear perversion of justice for a human judge to declare a guilty man to be innocent, and allow him to go unpunished as if no crime had been committed. But is it a perversion of justice for *God* to declare guilty people to be innocent and allow them to go unpunished as if no sin had been committed by them? No, it is definitely *not* a perversion of justice when *God* declares a sinner to be righteous in His sight, since His justice has been fully satisfied by the vicarious active and passive obedience of the Redeemer—which redemption was accomplished for all mankind (II Corinthians 5:15). It is intellectually dishonest and logically inconsistent for those who deny *Objective Justification* to cite Proverbs 17:15 in support of their position because they certainly acknowledge that it is *not* an abomination for *God* to forgive the wicked, to declare the guilty to be innocent, *otherwise no sinner at all could be justified*. Though they are not saying that God would never forgive those who have done wicked things, they do, however, want to restrict and limit the forgiving grace of God to those who already trust in it.

Another argument that is sometimes raised against *Objective Justification* emphasizes the fact that the Bible plainly declares that some people are not forgiven (Joshua 24:19). Concluding the *Parable of the Pharisee and the Publican*, Jesus says: “*I tell you, this man [the publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other [the Pharisee]*” (Luke 18:14). The publican received the forgiveness of sins through humble trust in God’s mercy, whereas the Pharisee rejected the same in his self-righteous pride. This is clearly a case of one man being subjectively justified by faith, and the other not being subjectively justified because of his unbelief. However, just because a person rejects divine mercy and forgiveness due to his fleshly arrogance

does not mean that God had not *objectively* justified him on account of the accepted payment for sin rendered by Christ for all mankind. So an important distinction needs to be made between *forgiveness given* and *forgiveness received*. But is it really accurate to say that God has given something to a person if that person never actually received it? Yes, the Bible does speak this way. Regarding the Children of Israel who never entered the promised land but died in the wilderness, Moses told the people: “*When the Lord sent you from Kadeshbarnea, saying, ‘Go up and possess the land which I have given you,’ then ye rebelled against the commandment of the Lord your God, and ye believed Him not, nor hearkened to His voice*” (Deuteronomy 9:23). Yes, God had given them the land; but they did not accept it. Consider also the parable of the *Marriage of the King’s Son* recorded in Matthew 22:1–14. Was not the invitation to the marriage feast truly *given* to those who despised and rejected it (vv. 3–6)? Was not a wedding garment truly *given* even to the man who refused to wear it to the wedding (vv. 11–12)? For a person ultimately to benefit from a gift of God, he must *accept* the gift. Think about how many people rejected the precious gift of God’s only-begotten Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, during His public ministry. Only a relatively small amount of people received Him through the spiritual regeneration worked by the Holy Ghost. Consequently, the Apostle John writes: “[*Christ*] was in the world, and the world was made by Him, and the world **knew Him not**. He came unto His own, and His own **received Him not**. But as many as **received Him**, to them gave He power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on His name, which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God” (vv. 10–13). Receiving Christ and His Gospel of forgiveness by faith is crucial if one is to benefit from His saving work. The man who is only *objectively* forgiven but not also *subjectively* forgiven is walking down the broad path that leads to eternal destruction in hell because of his rejection of God’s grace.

Those who deny *Objective Justification* scoff at the idea that a person can be both forgiven and not forgiven at the same time. And, of course, phrasing it like *that* can make it appear to be contradictory (as if *Objective Justification* and *Subjective Justification* cannot both be true). However, the Scriptures teach that a person can, indeed, be *forgiven in one respect* and also *not forgiven in another respect*. The unbeliever *is* forgiven in that God has accepted Christ’s atoning work on his behalf, God’s justice has been satisfied, and His wrath has been appeased concerning his sins (II Corinthians 5:19); but in another sense, the unbeliever is certainly *not* forgiven, since he has rejected God’s gracious pardon, and will therefore die in his sins (John 8:24). In the case of a Christian, he is forgiven in *both* respects (*objectively* and *subjectively*). This is similar to the two-fold answer that is rightly given to the question, “Is Jesus the Savior of unbelievers?” In one respect, the answer is “Yes,” because He has fully atoned for their sins and suffered the pains of hell on the cross as their Substitute in order to save them from divine wrath (II Corinthians 5:14). But in another respect, the answer is “No,” since they reject Him as their Savior and lose the benefits purchased by His redemptive work (John 12:48; II Peter 2:1). In the case of Christians, Jesus is their Savior in *both* respects—with respect to His work as their Substitute under the Law, and with respect to their reception of His saving grace by faith. Stated another way: *Objectively* speaking, Jesus is the Savior of all mankind; *subjectively* speaking, He is the Savior only of the believers. The Apostle Paul brings out both of these points when he writes in his first letter to Timothy: “*We trust in the living God, who is the Savior of **all men**, specially of **those that believe***” (4:10).

It is true that the Bible clearly declares that some people are *not* forgiven (Exodus 23:7, 21), *subjectively* speaking, because they despise God’s grace and cast it away from themselves (Acts 13:46). One of the reasons why this fact might be misunderstood as disproving *Objective Justification* has already been covered, namely, a failure to distinguish between *forgiveness given* and *forgiveness received*. But there is another reason, which stems from a common error (a major mistake that is consistently made by people who say that the Bible is full of

contradictions), namely, *a failure to distinguish between Law and Gospel*. These two main doctrines of the Bible present *opposite truths* in order to accomplish different things in the hearts of men. The *Law* threatens God's wrath and punishment upon sinners in order to bring about contrition and impress upon them their desperate need for a Savior; the *Gospel* promises tender mercy and forgiveness for sinners in order to comfort the hearts of the contrite and create the faith that receives God's saving grace. Exodus 34:7 is an example of a verse in Scripture that includes **both** the Gospel's promise of forgiveness for the penitent as well as the Law's threat of non-forgiveness for the impenitent. There the Lord declares concerning Himself: "*Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation.*" Notice here how forcefully God declares that He will "*by no means clear the guilty.*" But that phrase comes right after an opposite phrase in which the Lord says that He *does* forgive those who are guilty of "*iniquity and transgression and sin.*" Now those are *not* contradictory statements, but they do present two different, opposite truths: The one is a *true statement of the Law* expressing God's justice and holiness; the other is a *true statement of the Gospel* expressing God's grace and mercy in Christ Jesus.

(Because it is so crucial to understand how Law and Gospel present opposite, though non-contradictory, messages when it comes to a sinner's justification before God, we shall continue to examine this point in greater detail in the following paragraphs.)

So does God *forgive* or *withhold forgiveness* from unbelievers? The answer is: "He does *both*, but in different respects." He *forgives* the unbelievers in view of Christ's fully-sufficient payment for their sins (**that** is the truth of the **Gospel**); but He does *not* forgive them in view of their rejection of His grace (**that** is the truth of the **Law**). True *Christians*, through saving faith in Jesus, are under the *Gospel*; they have a loving relationship with God as their dear heavenly Father and are heirs of everlasting life. By contrast, the *unbelievers* are under the *Law* and receive the condemnation and consuming wrath of the Lord. The Bible declares: "*God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved. He that believeth on Him is not condemned; but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only-begotten Son of God*" (John 3:17–18). But does a person's unbelief and the fact that he does not *receive* the grace of God in the Gospel mean that he was never included as an object of God's grace (that God never loved him, that Jesus did not die for him, that the Lord in His heart never forgave him)? No, those points of the Gospel are still objectively true also with regard to the unbelievers (as is clear from the first part of the passage just cited); but, sadly, they adamantly push away the blessings of the Gospel by their unbelief.

In Christ, on account of His all-sufficient vicarious atonement, God is full of love and forgiveness toward sinners; but apart from Christ, God is full of hatred and vengeful wrath against sinners. Now usually when the Bible describes the relationship of *Christians* with God, it is a description that is *in Christ* (describing them as the objects of His grace and forgiveness); and usually when the Bible describes the relationship of *unbelievers* with God, it is a description that is *apart from Christ* (describing them as not forgiven and as the objects of His wrath and punishment). This is understandable since Christians receive the Lord Jesus and His saving grace by faith (Ephesians 2:8), whereas the unbelievers "[*deny*] the Lord that bought them," reject His love, "*and bring upon themselves swift destruction*" (II Peter 2:1) under God's just and righteous hatred. Thus the Lord declared: "*Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated*" (Romans 9:13; Malachi 1:2–3). Consequently, the Bible usually describes Christians as being forgiven and unbelievers as not being forgiven. There are, however, some exceptions to this general rule, which we shall now briefly consider.

Sometimes the Bible describes *all people in general* as they are before God if considered *apart from Christ's imputed righteousness*. Regarding the Lord God in His holiness, the Bible says: *"Thou art not a God that hath pleasure in wickedness, neither shall evil dwell with Thee. The foolish shall not stand in Thy sight; Thou hatest all workers of iniquity"* (Psalm 5:4–5); and again: *"In Thy sight shall no man living be justified"* (Psalm 143:2). Observe the following points of contrast: Through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the *Gospel* declares that God no longer remembers our sins (Hebrews 8:12; Jeremiah 31:34); but when considered apart from Christ (as an application of God's *Law*), the Psalmist, who was a true believer, includes himself when he says: *"For we are consumed by Thine anger, and by Thy wrath are we troubled. Thou hast set our iniquities before Thee, our secret sins in the light of Thy countenance. For all our days are passed away in Thy wrath"* (Psalm 90:7–9). Similarly, from the *Gospel's* perspective of Christ's imputed righteousness, the Bible says that a Christian's works of love are *"good"* (Ephesians 2:10) and *"acceptable"* (I Peter 2:5) before God; but when considered apart from Christ (as an application of God's *Law*), the Prophet Isaiah, who was a true believer, includes himself when he writes by inspiration of God: *"We are all as an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags"* (64:6). According to the *Gospel*, the Apostle Paul includes himself with all Christians as being declared *righteous* (Romans 5:1); but describing himself according to God's *Law*, the same Apostle says that he is the chief of sinners (I Timothy 1:15). *None of these are contradictions.* (Remember that the *Law's* description of a sinner apart from the righteousness of Christ does not invalidate or contradict the *Gospel's* description of a sinner viewed through the righteousness of Christ.)

In this regard, it may also be helpful to consider verses of Scripture that describe a sinner's relationship with God using *both perspectives of Law and Gospel in the very same passages*. For example, we read in Psalm 130:3–4: *"If Thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?"* That is the truth of the **Law**. *"But there is forgiveness with Thee, that Thou mayest be feared [respected]."* That is the truth of the **Gospel**. Writing to the Galatians, St. Paul makes the point that there is no forgiveness for sinners through the Law when he states: *"No man is justified by the Law in the sight of God."* But then he continues in the very same verse to describe the salvation that is granted through the Gospel, saying: *"The just shall live by faith"* (3:11). In Romans 5:18 the Apostle Paul sets forth the Law when he says that all people are condemned through the sin of Adam; but then he goes on, in the very same verse, to set forth the Gospel's declaration that all people are justified through the righteousness of Christ. A section of Scripture that dramatically shifts back and forth between the perspective of the Law and the perspective of the Gospel is Romans 3:19–24, where we are told: *"Now we know that what things soever the Law saith, it saith to them who are under the Law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God. Therefore by the deeds of the Law there shall no flesh be justified in His sight, for by the Law is the knowledge of sin."* This is how we are before God on the basis of the **Law**. *"But now the righteousness of God without the Law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe"* (how we are before God on the basis of the **Gospel**); *"for there is no difference; for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God"* (perspective of the **Law**), *"being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"* (perspective of the **Gospel**).

When observing the differences between expressions of the Law and expressions of the Gospel in the Bible, care must be taken (as has already been mentioned) not to think of them as being contradictory or in opposition to each other. *"Is the Law then against the promises of God? God forbid"* (Galatians 3:21). If the distinction between Law and Gospel is *not* correctly observed, a passage such as Psalm 143:2 (which says that *"no man living"* is justified in God's sight) would be taken as a contradiction not only of Romans 5:18 (which says that *"all men"* are

justified by God) but also of Galatians 2:16 (which speaks of believers being justified) and Romans 8:30 (which states that the elect are justified by God). Consequently, distinguishing between Law and Gospel is crucial not only for those who teach *Objective Justification*, but also for those who deny *Objective Justification*, and also for the Calvinists (who limit justification to the elect), since Psalm 143:2 would otherwise be taken as removing the possibility of any person at all being justified before God. While not contradictory, the Law and the Gospel certainly do present different truths and different perspectives, which should be clearly recognized. Not surprisingly, a sinner viewed through the righteousness of Christ is described in a completely different way than a sinner viewed in the filth of his own iniquity.

Returning now to other heretical arguments raised against the Bible's teaching of *Objective Justification* — Those who oppose this most comforting doctrine place limits upon words and expressions that include **all mankind** (such as “*all men*” and “[*the*] *many*” in Romans 5:18–19, and “*the world*” in II Corinthians 5:19)—thus narrowing the scope to such an extent that only the believers are included. That is the exact same method used by the Calvinists when they twist the words of Scripture to restrict the atonement of Christ only to the elect. For example, a passage such as II Corinthians 5:15, which says that “[*Christ*] *died for all*,” is taken by the Calvinists to mean: *He died for all the elect*. Similarly, John 1:29, where Jesus is described as “*the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world*,” is taken by the Calvinists to mean: *The world of the elect has been redeemed by the Lamb of God*. Since this is the way that they consistently *wrest* [twist] *the Scriptures* (II Peter 3:16) that clearly teach Christ's redemption of all mankind, there is another kind of passage that provides an effective defense of the doctrine of the Universal Atonement, namely, a passage that does *not* specifically say that Jesus died for *all* but that *does* specifically say that He died for the *non-elect*. We have such a passage in II Peter 2:1, which states that heretics “[*deny*] *the Lord that bought them, and bring upon themselves swift destruction*.” Notice that this verse does *not* say “all” or “the world;” but since it specifies those who deny the Lord and are eternally destroyed as being the objects of Christ's redemptive work, it provides another way of showing that the Calvinists' restriction of the atonement to the elect is contrary to Scripture.

Now, are we able to do something similar in defense of the doctrine of *Objective Justification*? In addition to passages of Scripture that say “*the world*” (II Corinthians 5:19) and “*all men*” (Romans 5:18) in connection with justification, does the Bible ever specifically tell us that impenitent unbelievers are forgiven by God? Yes it does, in both the Old and New Testaments. (Such passages are rare, however, since the impenitent are not to take any comfort from the fact that they are objectively justified by God.) In Numbers 14:19–20, we read that Moses pleaded for God to forgive a rebellious people (who had not repented), saying: “*Pardon, I beseech Thee, the iniquity of this people according unto the greatness of Thy mercy, and as Thou hast forgiven this people, from Egypt even until now*.” Responding to that plea for mercy and forgiveness, the Lord told Moses: “*I have pardoned according to thy word*.” Again, the context of Numbers 14 clearly shows that the people whom God forgave were impenitent unbelievers. Of course, someone might say that verse 18 shows that God does *not* forgive everyone. In the first place, what is said in verse 18 cannot be used to invalidate or vitiate what is said in verses 19 and 20. Secondly, verse 18 is simply a restatement of what the Lord says in Exodus 34:7, which was discussed above and shown not to be in conflict with the doctrine of *Objective Justification*, but is a verse setting forth both Law and Gospel—including an expression of both forgiveness and non-forgiveness. There is nothing in the text of Numbers 14 that even hints at the possibility that the people might have repented prior to God's declaration of forgiveness upon them. Furthermore, if the people had already repented and turned to God in faith, the Lord would not have still been threatening to destroy them in His wrath, as He does in verse 12.

An example from the New Testament can be found in Romans 4:5, where the object of a Christian's faith is described as God who "*justifieth the ungodly.*" Here the one justified by the Lord is specifically called "*ungodly,*" which is ἀσεβῆς in the original Greek, and literally means: "Destitute of reverential awe towards God, condemning God, impious" (Thayer's *Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*). Can such a word be used to describe a Christian? Only if a person with saving faith in Christ can accurately be said to have no fear of God in him. In other words, *no, this cannot describe a true believer.* Those who deny *Objective Justification* might try to interpret this passage as saying that God justifies the believer who once had been ungodly, or that God justifies the ungodly man when He brings him to faith (which is to say that the man is actually justified when he is no longer ungodly). But both of those interpretations say something completely different than what the text itself states.

Another argument that has been raised against *Objective Justification* is this: If God has already given the forgiveness of sins to all people, would that not make the function of the Means of Grace unnecessary or redundant? Is not the function of the Gospel to offer and give God's forgiving grace to poor sinners? *It absolutely is.* But the thought that this disproves *Objective Justification* results from a failure to distinguish between various ways the verb "to give" is used in the Bible. It can be used in the sense of an eternal decree, such as when St. Paul writes to Timothy: "**Given** us in Christ Jesus before the world began" (II Timothy 1:9). It can be used in the sense of a promise conveyed by God to man concerning something that he does not yet possess, such as when the Lord told Abram: "*All the land which thou seest, to thee will I **give** it, and to thy seed forever. ...Unto thy seed have I **given** this land*" (Genesis 13:15; 15:18). It can also be used in the sense of God putting a person into possession of a certain thing, such as when Jesus said to His heavenly Father concerning His disciples: "*I have **given** them Thy Word*" (John 17:14). These different kinds of *giving* can all be correctly used in a discussion of justification: Forgiveness is *given* (objectively) to all mankind by the eternal decree of God based on Christ's work of redemption; it is also *given* (promised) to the contrite sinner through the message of the Gospel; and it is *given* (subjectively) to the believer through the saving faith that actually receives the gift.

One of the clearest passages setting forth the doctrine of *Objective Justification* is II Corinthians 5:19, which says: "*God was in Christ [in connection with Christ], reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them.*" Those who deny *Objective Justification* advance the argument that the expression "*in Christ*" as it is used in this verse restricts the reconciling and non-imputation of sin to *Christians*—those who are *in Christ* by faith. And while the expression, "*in Christ,*" certainly *can* refer to the relationship that Christians have with the Savior through faith, a survey of relevant passages of Scripture reveals that this is definitely *not always the case.* The Greek preposition at the heart of this argument is ἐν, which is most usually translated as "*in,*" but sometimes also as "*by,*" "*with,*" "*among,*" "*at,*" "*on,*" "*through,*" and certain other less frequent English prepositions in our King James Version. In every case, the expression "*in Christ*" refers to a certain *connection with Christ*, but that does not always refer to, or even imply, faith—especially when the Bible describes *God's own operations* as happening "*in Christ.*" For the purpose of answering the objectors, the various Biblical uses of the expression "*in Christ*" can be divided into three basic categories: 1) passages in which it clearly refers to being connected to Christ by faith; 2) passages in which it definitely *does not* and *cannot* be understood with reference to saving faith; and 3) passages in which it does *not directly* include faith in Christ, even though the concept of saving faith might still be assumed to be present.

A familiar passage that uses the expression "*in Christ*" in a way that *clearly* means in connection with one's faith in Christ is II Corinthians 5:17, which says: "*If any man be **in***

Christ, he is a new creature.” Some passages that definitely *cannot* be taken in connection with faith in Jesus are Matthew 11:6 and 13:57, both referring to people being “*offended in [Christ]*.” In certain other passages, even though “*in Christ*” could possibly be taken as “in connection with faith in Him,” yet it fits much better in the context of the passages to take it as “in connection with His redemptive work.” Passages that fall into that category include Ephesians 1:3, 4, 20; 3:11, 12; I Thessalonians 5:18; II Timothy 1:9; and others. Finally, there are also passages that use the same expression in the original Greek but appear different in our King James Version, such as Acts 17:31; Colossians 1:16, 17; and Hebrews 1:2. (In those verses the Greek preposition *ἐν* is translated as “*by*.”) Those verses provide examples of how “in connection with Christ” can also carry the basic meaning of “by means of Him.”

Concerning that third category (passages that would allow for interpreting “*in Christ*” either as “by faith in Him” or as “on account of His saving work”), how can it be determined which interpretation is preferable? A good rule of thumb is that when humans are said to be “*in Christ*,” it is a reference to **them** being connected to Jesus in faith (Romans 8:1; II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 3:28; Philippians 4:21). However, a definite exception to this general rule would be Matthew 13:57 where unbelievers are described as being “*offended in [Christ]*”—still *in connection with Christ*, but clearly not *by faith in Christ*. Another exception could be I Corinthians 15:22 where something is first said of humans “*in Adam*” (certainly not by faith in Adam but in connection with him, as a result of his sin), and then something else is said of humans “*in Christ*” (in connection with Him, as a result of His atonement and resurrection). Another good rule of thumb is that when the Bible describes what **God** has done “*in Christ*” (Galatians 3:17; Ephesians 1:3, 20), or what **God** wants for us “*in Christ*” (I Thessalonians 5:18), or what **God** has for us “*in Christ*” (Romans 8:39), or what **God** purposed in eternity “*in Christ*” (Ephesians 3:11), or what was accomplished **by Christ** (Romans 3:24), then it usually fits the context of the passage much better to take the expression “*in Christ*” as “in connection with Jesus’ work of redemption” (“for His sake”).

Returning now to II Corinthians 5:19, since this verse is describing something that **God did** in connection with Christ (namely, “*reconciling the world unto Himself*”), the “*in Christ*” should be taken as “in connection with Jesus’ redemptive work” rather than “in connection with Jesus by faith.” (God certainly was not operating by faith in Jesus.) Some might say that this verse is describing how the Lord reconciles people by bringing them to faith in Jesus; but that interpretation would, then, change **whom** this verse describes as the **object** of the reconciling act of God—treating the universal term “*world*” as if it refers only to the believers (or those who will become believers at some point). Furthermore, in the verse that comes immediately before II Corinthians 5:19, we find the same point expressed in these words: “[*God*] hath reconciled us to Himself **by Jesus Christ**” (v. 18), the word “*by*” being rendered from the Greek preposition *διὰ* with the genitive case, which also means “through the agency of,” namely, through the agency of Christ and His redemptive work. It is most certain, therefore, that what these two verses describe is the *objective reconciliation and justification of the world* as God’s gracious response to the perfect satisfaction of divine justice rendered by Christ in payment for the sins of *all mankind*.

V. Objective Justification Must Be Defended.

Can a single doctrine of Holy Scripture be twisted and perverted without also causing other doctrines to fall? It may, indeed, be possible in the short term, but the resulting instability in the body of doctrine will then be just one logical conclusion away from collapsing in on itself. It can and does happen from time to time that in the teaching and practice of certain false prophets they do not follow through consistently with the logical implications of their heresy. Thus other

doctrines that are threatened by the error may not be immediately overthrown. (This is sometimes referred to as “a blessed inconsistency.”) However, just because such internal contradictions might exist in the mind and rhetoric of a given heretic—resulting in such an inconsistency that does not immediately destroy other doctrines—it is still important not to ignore the dangerous ramifications for other related teachings of Scripture, if even one doctrinal error is tolerated. Regarding just a “*little*” bit of false teaching, St. Paul writes to the Galatians: “*A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump*” (5:9). Likewise, he also warns the young pastor Timothy: “*Shun profane and vain babblings; for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker*” (II Timothy 2:16–17).

So what dangerous ripple effects does the denial of *Objective Justification* naturally produce? Generically speaking, *it distorts and perverts the Gospel*. Dr. Adolf Hoenecke declares: “Emphasizing objective justification is necessary in order to preserve the real content of the Gospel” (*Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, Vol. 3, p. 338). More specifically, it leads to confusion or erroneous beliefs about such things as the sufficiency of Christ’s redemptive work and the *function* of faith in justification (*why* and *how* faith justifies and saves a person).

Denying *Objective Justification* causes faith to be given a quality or power that does not rightly belong to it. Faith certainly does *not* justify the sinner because it appeases God’s wrath and moves Him to forgive sins. The Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions consistently describe the function of faith as *receiving the forgiveness of sins* that God freely gives for Christ’s sake (not for the sake of man’s faith). In the absence of *Objective Justification*, the loving favor and grace of God is *not* based purely on the redemptive work of Christ but at least partially upon man’s faith. Thus the *favor Dei* (gracious disposition of God) is not strictly *propter Christum* (because of Christ). When Jesus said, “*Thy faith hath saved thee; go in peace*” (Luke 7:50), He was not saying that the man’s faith had earned God’s grace or had persuaded God to be gracious to him or had made an atonement for his sins. Any such theory is a blatant falsification of what it means to be saved by faith. Without *Objective Justification*, faith is credited with a quality that should only be given to Christ and His work of atonement; faith is turned into something that moves God to forgive rather than simply receiving the free gift of forgiveness. As soon as faith is regarded as that which propitiates God or moves Him to grant forgiveness, faith is then infused with merit. Simply giving God the credit for the creation and preservation of faith does not fix the problem but only leads to the following false assertion: “The Lord creates saving faith in my heart, and that faith, which He has created, merits His forgiving grace or causes God to forgive my sins.” Such a statement turns faith into a meritorious work and is just as wrong as if one would say: “The Lord moves and empowers me to do good works, and those works of mine, for which God gets all the credit, merit His forgiving grace or cause Him to forgive my sins.”

It should be clearly understood by every Christian that the redemptive work of Jesus Christ alone has satisfied God’s justice, appeased His wrath, and moves Him to forgive the sins of men, without anything in man contributing. Even God-wrought faith must not be thought of as being a factor in moving God to extend His forgiving grace to sinners. Faith does not cause the gift to be given; the gift of God’s gracious forgiveness is given to man for Christ’s sake before there is any faith in man to receive the gift.

Here is a simple test that one might use to determine if a person correctly understands the Gospel and the role of faith in forgiveness, which, if he *does*, means that he also accepts the doctrine of *Objective Justification*. The following question may be asked: “Do you believe that God’s wrath against the sins of the world has been completely appeased by the work of Christ and that nothing else needs to be done to propitiate divine justice?” If the person believes that, then he actually *does* believe in the doctrine of *Objective Justification*. If, however, he does *not* believe

that, if he instead believes that the faith of man is required (even if only in some small measure) to satisfy God's justice, appease His wrath, or move Him to grant forgiveness, then that person really does not understand what the Gospel teaches. And if that person claims to be a Lutheran, he should be asked to produce even a single passage of Scripture or any statement from the Lutheran Confessions that supports the idea that the Christian's faith plays *any part at all* in propitiating God. (He will find none.)

Since the Gospel is grossly misrepresented by those who deny *Objective Justification*, it is not surprising that this error makes mission work very difficult—even *impossible* if not for a "blessed inconsistency." The contrite sinner who does not yet trust in Christ as his Savior, but whose heart has been thoroughly prepared by the Law and is ready to hear the Gospel, should be told *what* exactly? That God has not and will not forgive his sins until he first believes that his sins are forgiven (or will be forgiven once he has faith)? That is certainly *not* the message of the Gospel! Rather, the Gospel is the declaration and application of God's loving forgiveness in Christ; it conveys this basic message: "*Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee*" (Matthew 9:2). He is to be directed to place all his trust in the gracious Lord "*that justifieth the ungodly*" (Romans 4:5) for Christ's sake. As was covered in greater detail earlier in this essay, if the Gospel's message of forgiveness can only be proclaimed to those who already believe it, then the kingdom of God's grace will never be extended through preaching. The fact that the Gospel is the means used by the Holy Ghost to convey His grace and forgiveness to sinners, the forgiveness of sins must be given by God prior to and apart from faith, if the Gospel can be preached at all to those who are contrite but do not yet know their Savior.

Trying to avoid mentioning *Objective Justification*, some might argue that the Gospel message to be brought to the contrite unbeliever is to trust in Christ, His cross, the universal atonement, or some other expression referencing the redemption *without including the promise of justification* (other than a potential, future justification). This they imagine is what Paul and Silas did when they said to the jailer at Philippi: "*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved*" (Acts 16:31). But if the redemptive work of Christ is divorced from the justification that it purchased, then there is really nothing in which to trust. The redemption is meaningless if it did not appease God's wrath against the sinner. Trusting in the cross of Christ cannot possibly mean trusting in an act of Jesus that produced no direct benefit for men (or only a potential benefit). No, trusting in Christ, trusting in His redemptive work, trusting in His blood, and similar expressions must mean trusting in the resulting justification and reconciliation with the Lord if it is to bring any comfort at all to the penitent. Understanding that the denial of *Objective Justification* diminishes the sufficiency of Christ's atonement and makes the individual's faith at least partially responsible for placating God and satisfying His justice, it is hard to imagine a true Christian defending such a position, if he consistently holds to what that would imply. Do Christians really think that God is gracious and forgiving to them because their faith moves Him to do so (trusting in the merits of their faith for righteousness before God), or do they, instead, believe that God is gracious and forgiving to them on account of Christ alone (trusting that their forgiveness is based entirely on His redemptive work, which they merely receive by faith)? When Christians pray, are they confiding in their faith and praying in their own name (imagining that it is their great faith that makes their petitions acceptable before the Lord), or are they, instead, praying in Jesus' name (trusting only in the merits of Christ for true righteousness before God, which they receive by faith)? When Christians take the body and blood of the Lord for the assurance of forgiveness in the Sacrament of the Altar, do they remember and proclaim the righteousness of *their faith* (thinking that their faith is the cause of their forgiveness), or do they, instead, remember and proclaim the innocent suffering and death of Christ (believing that *His sacrifice alone* is responsible for their forgiveness, which they receive by faith)? Do Christians think of their Baptism as that through which they put on the

righteousness of their own faith (their faith being the reason why God justifies them), or do they in Baptism put on the righteousness of Christ (whose righteousness they receive as their own by faith)? Do they consider themselves to be saints whose robes are washed in the purity of their own faith (cleansed by the virtue of their faith), or are their robes made white by the blood of the Lamb (the merits of which they receive by faith)?

Believing what the Bible teaches about *Objective Justification*, the proper role of faith in a Christian's salvation is rightly understood—merely receiving the gift of righteousness that was fully purchased by the Lord Jesus and freely given to sinners by the grace of God for Christ's sake. Without *Objective Justification*, faith is regarded as doing something more—something that will propitiate God and move Him to grant forgiveness — something completely foreign to the true Christian religion. Dr. Francis Pieper observes: “To be sure, those who ignore the correlative of faith [that which faith receives], the objective reconciliation of the Gospel, will encounter insuperable difficulties in defining the function of faith as being simply instrumental. On the other hand, those who hold with Scripture (2 Cor. 5:18 ff.; Rom. 3:24ff.) that the reconciliation of the world through Christ has been fully accomplished and that the Gospel proclaims this fact, will find it difficult, yes impossible, to view justifying faith as anything else than instrumental” (*Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 2, pp. 438–439).

If the Gospel of Christ is important to us, and it certainly is to every true Christian, will we not then earnestly strive to maintain and defend the doctrine of *Objective Justification* against all that would attack it? Of course we will! Through the pen of the Apostle Jude, the Lord tells us to fight for the purity of doctrine as revealed to the believers of old, saying: “*Ye should earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*” (Jude 3). We should be so thankful for the doctrine of *Objective Justification* as this is clearly set forth on the pages of Holy Scripture, in the Lutheran Confessions, and in the writings of great men like Luther, Walther, Pieper, and Hoenecke. More recently, the doctrine of *Objective Justification* has been clearly and accurately expressed in creedal writings such as *The Brief Statement of 1932* and *A Brief Sketch of the Doctrinal Position of the Concordia Lutheran Conference*. May we grow in our appreciation of this blessed doctrinal heritage and zealously fight to keep it!

It is so important to remain vigilant against all attacks on the doctrine of *Objective Justification*, especially the very subtle ones—such as when misapplications of Scripture are made to set *Subjective Justification* passages in opposition against *Objective Justification* passages, or when the difference between *forgiveness given* to all and *forgiveness received* only by the believers is obfuscated, or when the proper distinction between *Law* and *Gospel* is not correctly observed and passages declaring *God's judgment of wrath* according to His Law are pitted against *God's judgment of grace* according to His Gospel.

So cling tightly to the doctrine of *Objective Justification* for deep and lasting comfort in the Savior! Rejoice that God for Christ's sake has forgiven you all your sins, that nothing in you (not even your faith) is required to propitiate the Lord or cause Him to bestow His forgiving grace upon you. When you are blessed with the opportunity to do so, cheerfully announce to contrite sinners who are presently ignorant of the Gospel that they *have been* completely forgiven for Jesus' sake (*not* that they *will be* forgiven once they start believing that they are forgiven). May the doctrine of *Objective Justification* continue to be ever faithfully proclaimed from our pulpits and always find clear expression in the instruction classes and writings of all the pastors of the Concordia Lutheran Conference! And may the laymen of our Conference likewise be thoroughly established in the correct understanding of the Bible's teaching of *Objective Justification* for their strength and security in the Gospel and for their eternal salvation!

—P. E. B.

Soli Deo gloria!