

The Doctrine of Justification in St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: By Works or by Faith (*Tertium Non Datur*)

A cursory exegesis of Romans 3 and 4, based solely on the Biblical text, with special emphasis given to passages that have been used to support "Objective Justification"

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INTRODUCTION

Much time has been spent in our circles over the past two years studying and explaining the Lutheran (that is, apostolic, Christian, catholic, Scriptural) doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ. Much attention has naturally been paid to Martin Luther, Martin Chemnitz, Aegidius Hunnius, Johann Gerhard, et al., as some of the principal fathers of the Lutheran Church in order to establish that our doctrine is the same as theirs in both form and content. Additionally, many of their writings have been elucidated in order to expose the modern aberration called "Objective Justification" that falsely traces its lineage to these Lutheran fathers.

But the foundation of our faith, the rule of our confession is and has always been the Word of God alone. In every case, as we formulated our Theses on Justification and subsequent articles, and as we weighed the arguments against them, we did not rely on the Lutheran fathers or even the Lutheran Confessions as the source of our doctrine. *Sola Scriptura* remains our unaltered position; we rely only on the Holy Spirit's inspired words to define and dictate our beliefs. If a doctrine is presented in the Holy Scriptures, it is to be believed and confessed by all God's people; if not, then not. We know this. We are convinced of it. And now again, with renewed vigor, we turn *ad fontes* to let the Holy Spirit's own words teach us about the article of justification.

Specifically, this essay will focus on St. Paul's presentation of the doctrine of justification in the first part of his Epistle to the Romans, and with good reason. This epistle is, as Luther says, "really the chief part of the New Testament, and is truly the purest gospel...In this epistle we thus find most abundantly the things that a Christian ought to know, namely, what is law, gospel, sin, punishment, grace, faith, righteousness, Christ, God, good works, love, hope, and the cross."¹ Additionally, Romans is the Biblical book most cited in the Book of Concord. And since we are chiefly investigating the Scriptural teaching of justification, Romans is a natural starting point, because, of the 222 uses in the

¹ Martin Luther. *Luther's Works*, Vol. 35: *Word and Sacrament*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1999), 380.

New Testament of the δίκαι- root, half are attributed to St. Paul, and more than half of those are found in this one epistle.²

It is also fitting that we begin with Romans, because, of the five most commonly cited *sedes doctrinae* for “Objective Justification” (i.e., Rom. 3:24, Rom. 4:5, Rom. 4:25, Rom. 5:18-19, 2 Cor. 5:19), four are from this epistle. Three of those four passages, with their surrounding context, will receive special attention in this essay. The others, Lord willing, will be treated on another occasion.

Since, as Lutherans, we start from the conviction that the Book of Concord of 1580 correctly expounds the Holy Scriptures and likewise serves as our formal exegesis of the Scripture passages cited therein, this essay will cite some of the relevant portions of the Lutheran Confessions. Otherwise, no Church fathers—ancient or modern—will be cited in this essay to bolster our interpretation or our conclusions, and no appeals will be made to any other authorities or experts, apart from lexicons and grammars; we will work exclusively within the parameters of the Scriptures and the Confessions so that it can be seen that our confession is rooted directly in Holy Writ. Hopefully this will also reveal the shame of those who accuse us of a “highly reduced *Vater Theologie*.”

OVERVIEW: TWO METHODS OF JUSTIFICATION IN ROMANS

Forms of the word “just” or “righteousness” or “justification” occur 64 times in the Epistle to the Romans, almost exclusively within the first ten chapters, with only one exception (Rom. 14:17). For our purposes, we will focus especially on chapters three and four, but in order to follow Paul’s train of thought, we offer below a summary of Paul’s justification argument for the first ten chapters.

- I. The Gospel—the message of God’s gift of justification by faith in Jesus Christ—is introduced (1:1-17).
- II. Justification by works is impossible, because there is no one righteous according to the Law, neither Jew nor Gentile (1:18 – 3:20).
 - A. The Gentiles are unrighteous sinners
 - B. Jews and Gentiles are all under sin, with or without the Law
 - C. The Jews have not been justified by the Law, but are revealed by the Law as sinners
- III. God has revealed the only way for sinners to be justified, namely, by faith in Jesus Christ (3:21 – 5:21).

² We are, of course, aware that the Scriptures often teach the same truth using other words and phrases. For example, Chemnitz points to John 3:16-18 as describing the doctrine of justification without using the word: “John, therefore, often speaks like this, John 3:16-18: ‘He who does not believe is condemned already He who believes shall not be judged.... He does not come into judgment [John 5:24].... He sent His Son not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him ... that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.’ It is clear that these expressions are paraphrases of the word ‘justification’ and have the same meaning we have been speaking about” (Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, p. 483). (Indeed, throughout the Scriptures the doctrine of justification by faith is presented using many pictures, analogies and phrases, while the teaching of “Objective Justification” that God has already forgiven/justified all people in the world apart from faith is not taught with any pictures, analogies or phrases.) But since the term “justification” is in question, we will focus on the uses of that word and its relatives.

- A. God fulfilled His promise and sent His Son to redeem sinners by becoming a Mercy Seat in His blood, so that all may be justified by faith in Christ Jesus
 - B. The example of Abraham proves from Holy Scripture that God has always intended faith as the only means by which sinners are justified
 - C. The blessed fruits of justification by faith: peace, access to God, and eternal salvation
 - D. All who are descended from Adam (by natural birth) are injured by his sin, while all who are descended from Christ (by spiritual rebirth) are helped by His righteousness
- IV. Those who have been justified by faith are to make a beginning of righteous living in this life, in which they will struggle in great weakness, being comforted by God's promises of present help and final victory in Christ Jesus (6:1 – 8:39).
- V. The Jews have largely rejected the Gospel of justification by faith in their pursuit of justification by works and, therefore, are still not righteous before God, while, through the preaching of the same Gospel, many Gentiles are being brought to faith, and therefore, to righteousness (9:1 – 10:21).

As we study the Scriptural teaching on justification, we encounter the following family of words:

δίκαιος:	just/righteous
δικαιοσύνη:	justice/righteousness, the quality of righteousness
δικαιώω:	to justify, make righteous, pronounce righteous, acknowledge as righteous, vindicate
δικαίωμα:	just/righteous standard, justification, that which is deemed righteous
δικαίωσις:	justification, the act of justifying
δικαιοκρισία:	just/righteous judgment

We speak specifically of justification as it is taught in Scripture as a “forensic act,” referring to a judge’s proclamation of the defendant as righteous, that is, to the judge’s acquittal of the defendant. In fact, the whole family of words is thoroughly judicial in nature, though not necessarily involving an actual trial; the very concept of “justice” or “right-ness” requires a judgment or determination on the part of someone as to what is right and wrong, as to who qualifies as “just” and who doesn’t. In a handful of cases in Romans, Paul uses this family of words to refer to a human judgment made about God (Rom. 3:4) or about man (Rom. 5:7), but in the rest of the cases he uses them in reference to God’s judgment as to who and what is “right” or “righteous” or “just” in His sight. “To justify” is the opposite of “to condemn” (cf. Prov. 17:15).

Throughout the epistle, St. Paul describes two diametrically opposed judgments of God as to who or what is righteous in His sight. These are the only two principles by which God is said to “justify” anyone, and even then, one of these principles is purely hypothetical in nature. We know this dichotomy well enough as the distinction between Law and Gospel, but the actual words Paul commonly uses in Romans to distinguish between these two opposing principles by which God justifies are “works/deeds” on the one hand, and “faith/believing” on the other.

Romans 3:27-28 Where is boasting then? It is excluded. By what law (i.e., “principle”)? Of works? No, but by the law (i.e., principle) of faith. Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law.

Romans 4:4-5 Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace but as debt. But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness,

Romans 9:30-32 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness of faith; but Israel, pursuing the law of righteousness, has not attained to the law of righteousness. Why? Because they did not seek it by faith, but as it were, by the works of the law.

Thus we have in Romans two divinely revealed methods of justification: “Works-Righteousness” and “Faith-Righteousness.”

Under Works-Righteousness, God judges men based on their obedience or lack thereof to the “righteous standards” (δικαιώματα – cf. Rom. 2:26) He has laid down, both in writing, to the Jews (Rom. 2:17-18), and in the hearts of all men by nature (Rom. 1:32, 2:14-15). According to this principle, Paul says that “...the doers of the law will be justified (δικαιωθήσονται)” (Rom. 2:13). That is, those who continually, throughout their entire lives, do everything written in the Book of the Law to perfection (cf. Gal. 3:10), not only with outward deeds, but also with inner fear, love and trust in God, will be justified by God.

The meaning of the word “justify” under this principle means simply “to judge a person to be righteous according to his own merits.” The Judge justifies those who deserve to be justified, those who have earned their justification. These sinless, righteous people are justified by God as the fulfillment of a debt or an obligation on His part, like paying a worker his agreed-upon wages (cf. Rom. 4:4). Notably, “to justify” under the principle of Works-Righteousness has nothing to do with “forgiving sins” or “absolving sinners,” because, by definition, only those who are already sinless can be justified under the principle of Works-Righteousness. God justifies the just.

But, of course, as Paul convincingly demonstrates in 1:18 – 3:20, this Works-Righteousness will not actually result in the justification of anyone, because “we have previously charged both Jews and Greeks that they are all under sin” (3:9). (The source of this sinful condition and the explanation of its transmission from fallen Adam downward will be revealed in Chapter 5.) After spending two full chapters proving his point, the apostle arrives at this simple syllogism: According to the divine principle of Works-Righteousness, God only justifies sinless people whose deeds perfectly fulfill God’s righteous standards. But all are under sin. Therefore, no one will be justified by works. As he says in the concluding words of this section:

Romans 3:19-20 Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those 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 no flesh will be justified in His sight, for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

The blessed alternative to Works-Righteousness is presented at length beginning in 3:21, introduced with the striking contrast of Paul’s “Νυνὶ δὲ - But now...” Here St. Paul offers the quintessential explanation of the divinely-authored “other” path to a righteous verdict before God: Faith-Righteousness.

We will now proceed to treat exegetically the foundational summary of Faith-Righteousness in Romans 3, which also includes one of the *sedes doctrinae* of “Objective Justification,” v. 24.

ROMANS 3:21-26

²¹ Νυνὶ δὲ χωρὶς νόμου δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ πεφανέρωται, μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν, ²² δικαιοσύνη δὲ Θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ εἰς πάντας καὶ ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας. Οὐ γὰρ ἐστὶ διαστολή. ²³ πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον καὶ ὑστεροῦνται τῆς δόξης τοῦ Θεοῦ, ²⁴ δικαιούμενοι δωρεὰν τῇ αὐτοῦ χάριτι διὰ τῆς ἀπολυτρώσεως τῆς ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ²⁵ ὃν προέθετο ὁ Θεὸς ἱλαστήριον διὰ τῆς πίστεως ἐν τῷ αὐτοῦ αἵματι, εἰς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ διὰ τὴν πάρεσιν τῶν προγεγονότων ἀμαρτημάτων, ἐν τῇ ἀνοχῇ τοῦ Θεοῦ, ²⁶ πρὸς ἔνδειξιν τῆς δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ ἐν τῷ νῦν καιρῷ, εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον καὶ δικαιοῦντα τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ.³

²¹ But now, apart from law, God's righteousness has been revealed, attested by the Law and the Prophets— ²² God's righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all who believe, ²³ for there is no distinction, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, ²⁴ being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, ²⁵ whom God set forth as a Mercy Seat through faith in His blood, as a sign of His righteousness, due to the remission of the sins committed beforehand in the forbearance of God, ²⁶ as a sign of His righteousness in the present time, that He may be just and the One who justifies him who is of faith in Jesus.

But now... V. 21 begins a new, contrasting thought with its “But now.” “Now” is in reference to the revelation (πεφανέρωται) of God's righteousness in Christ, which is the theme of the Gospel that the risen Christ commanded His apostles to preach to every creature (Mark 16:15), that Paul, too, had been separated to preach (1:1), and that is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes (1:16). Before the Gospel went out into the world, it had largely been thought by men—both Jews and Gentiles—that the path to “God's righteousness,” that is, to being approved as righteous in the sight of God, was by works, by man's conformity to the standards set down in God's law, whether it be the Law written down by Moses or the law which God has written into man's heart by nature (2:14-15). But now...

...apart from law. The lack of the article makes “law” indefinite, unspecified, that is, not “the Law of Moses” in particular, but apart from law in general, apart from any regulations or commands to which men are to conform. This phrase strikes at the heart of fallen human nature, because it contradicts man's innate *opinio legis*, as noted in the Apology: “But works become conspicuous among men. Human reason naturally admires these, and because it sees only works, and does not understand or consider faith, it dreams accordingly that these works merit remission of sins and justify. This opinion of the Law inheres by nature in men's minds.” (Ap: art. iii, par. 144)

...God's righteousness has been revealed. Luther's translation, “ist offenbaret und bezeuget,” is somewhat ambiguous regarding the timing of this revelation. He almost seems to make the Law and the Prophets themselves the agents of this revelation of God's righteousness, as if to say that it was the Old Testament that “revealed and attested” this righteousness of God. This is grammatically possible and certainly correct dogmatically. I think the context points to the coming (that is, the entire life and

³ Greek text throughout this essay is from the Majority Text, which in all cases cited is identical with the Textus Receptus. English translations of the sections under discussion are mine.

ministry) of Christ as the revelation and as the fulfillment of the Old Testament testimony. The Lord promised in Isaiah 56:1, “Thus says the LORD: ‘Keep justice, and do righteousness, for My salvation is about to come, and My righteousness to be revealed.’” Paul now heralds the promised revelation.

Paul had first mentioned “God’s righteousness” (δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ) back in 1:17. There he said that “[in the Gospel] God’s righteousness is revealed from faith to faith.” That was a direct reference to the present-tense, ongoing preaching of the Gospel, which continually uncovers or reveals to all who hear it the righteousness of God as being “from faith to faith.”

That reference in 1:17 was clearly set up as a contrast to 1:18. Just as, in the Gospel, “God’s righteousness is revealed (δικαιοσύνη Θεοῦ ἀποκαλύπτεται – present tense) from faith to faith,” so also God’s wrath is revealed (Ἀποκαλύπτεται – present tense - ὀργή Θεοῦ) “upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.” This is a present-tense, ongoing revelation of God’s wrath, given (1) *through the Law of Moses*, but also (2) *through natural law* as men are “given up to vile passions” (Rom. 1:26) and “receive in themselves the penalty of their error which was due” (Rom. 1:27). Most especially, God’s wrath is revealed universally and continually (3) *through the fact that all men die*, “because all sinned” as original sin spread from Adam to his descendants (Rom. 5:12-14). The Gospel, in contrast, is the ongoing revelation of God’s righteousness from faith to faith.

But here in 3:21, Paul uses a different verb (πεφανερώται) and a perfect tense to speak of this revelation, thereby emphasizing, not the ongoing preaching of the Gospel, but the revelation of God’s righteousness that was made in the past (from Paul’s perspective) and remains valid into the present. God’s righteousness “was and still remains revealed.”

God’s righteousness has been revealed once for all in the Person of Jesus Christ. It has been revealed in a threefold manner.

First, it has been revealed in the active obedience of Christ, who came to “fulfill all righteousness” (πληρῶσαι πᾶσαν δικαιοσύνην – Matt. 3:15, cf. 5:17); who actually was righteous, “Who committed no sin, Nor was deceit found in His mouth” (1 Pet. 2:22), being “obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:8), and thus forever bears the name “My righteous Servant” (Is. 53:11) and “the Righteous One” (τὸν δίκαιον – Acts 22:14).

Second, God’s righteousness has been revealed in the Person of Christ in His passive obedience, in that God’s righteous judgment that sinners deserve death (Gen. 2:17, Ezek. 18:20, Rom. 1:32) was carried out against Christ, who knew no sin, but was “made sin for us” (2 Cor. 5:21), who “suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust (δίκαιος ὑπὲρ ἀδίκων), that He might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18).

Third, God’s righteousness has been revealed in the Person of Christ in such a way that God has determined that only and all those who are connected with Christ are judged by Him to be righteous, while all who are not connected with Christ are judged to be sinners and are condemned. “But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became (ἐγενήθη) for us wisdom from God—and righteousness (δικαιοσύνη) and sanctification and redemption” (1 Cor. 1:30). And God made Him to be sin for us “that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” 2 Cor. 5:21. There is ample testimony to this fact in Scripture.

So Jesus could say to His disciples on the night in which He was betrayed, concerning the work of the Holy Spirit: “He will convict the world...of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more” (John 16:8-10). The world would be convicted of righteousness—that is, of seeking to

establish its own righteousness—because in reality, the righteousness that avails before God⁴ ascended to heaven with Jesus when He went to His Father.⁵ Only those who are connected with Christ are righteous in God’s sight. How this connection between sinners and Christ is made is described in the following verse.

...God’s righteousness through faith in Jesus Christ. Here Paul repeats and then qualifies the phrase “God’s righteousness” in order to indicate that he is changing subjects from the previous discussion of Works-Righteousness in 1:18–3:20. There, under the principle of Works-Righteousness, under the Law, God’s righteousness (Θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην) was contrasted with human unrighteousness (Rom. 3:5), and humans were judged to be wanting. There, God’s righteous standard (τὸ δικάϊωμα τοῦ Θεοῦ) judges that those who practice unrighteousness “are deserving of death” (Rom. 1:32). There, only the “doers of the Law” are “righteous in the sight of God” and “will be justified” (Rom. 2:13), and that, because they have earned or merited such “justification,” which, under the Law, amounts to God approving of those who deserve His approval. As previously stated, God justifies the just.

But, as Paul demonstrated, that kind of “righteousness of God” is unattainable, since the Law already condemns all men as unrighteous sinners. So now the apostle is changing subjects, talking about a different “righteousness of God” that isn’t attained or attainable by human merit; it cannot be earned by man the sinner; it is not deserved by man the sinner. Rather this righteousness of God, having been acquired by Christ, is passed on to sinful men in connection with Christ—a connection that is made solely “through faith in Jesus Christ” (διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ). It is passed on by means of imputation (Rom. 4:5). Here the preposition διὰ + genitive (πίστεως) is clearly expressing means—the means by which God’s righteousness, wrapped up in Christ, is obtained by men, while the genitive case of Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ is best interpreted as an objective genitive, Jesus Christ being the object of faith.⁶

Thus God’s righteousness that comes by imputation through faith in Jesus Christ is contrasted with God’s righteousness that comes by consideration of the works of men, again pointing to two and only two methods of justification.

... unto all and upon all who believe. Again, the contrast with 1:18 is highlighted with the apostle’s construction. Just as God’s wrath is revealed “upon all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who hold back the truth in unrighteousness (ἐπὶ πᾶσαν ἀσέβειαν καὶ ἀδικίαν ἀνθρώπων τῶν τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἐν ἀδικίᾳ κατεχόντων),” so now God’s righteousness has been revealed “unto all and upon all who believe (εἰς πάντας καὶ ἐπὶ πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας).”

⁴ As Luther translated this phrase in Rom. 3:21: “die Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt,” the righteousness that avails before God.

⁵ Luther makes this connection beautifully in his sermons for Cantate Sunday, e.g., <http://www.godwithuslc.org/luther-first-sermon-for-cantate-easter-4/>

⁶ Some have tried to translate “faith” as “faithfulness,” combining it with a subjective genitive in “Jesus Christ”: “through the faithfulness of Jesus Christ...” NIV2011 offers this possibility as a footnote. But Luther clearly translated as “through faith in Christ” (durch den Glauben an Jesum Christum), the Lutheran Confessions do the same, and all faithful English translations have followed suit.

Both prepositions (unto and upon) with the accusative indicate action from one place to another. Just as wrath is being revealed from God toward the unrighteousness of men, so, too, the righteousness of God through faith is not static, but proceeds from God toward believers. Luther here adds an explanatory phrase in his translation: “Ich sage aber von solcher Gerechtigkeit vor Gott, die da kommt durch den Glauben an Jesum Christum zu allen und auf alle, die da glauben.” “*But I am talking about such righteousness before God that comes through faith to all and upon all who believe.*” How does it come? By imputation (Rom. 4:5).

“Who believe” is a present active participle, clearly identified as substantival by the article, literally, “...upon all the believing ones,” or “the believers.”

So the recipients of God’s righteousness are said to be believers in Jesus Christ. This righteousness must “come unto and upon” believers, because it is not their own; it is “God’s” righteousness—the righteousness merited by Jesus Christ. If it did not come “unto and upon” them, they would remain “children of wrath, like the rest” (Eph. 2:3); they would be “condemned already,” since the only way to escape condemnation is through faith in Christ (John 3:18).

This action of God’s righteousness “coming” or “being passed on” to believers in Jesus Christ is the act of “justification.” This same act on God’s part is also described as the imputation (or counting or accounting or reckoning) of righteousness (Rom. 4:5, 4:24), the forgiving of sins (Rom. 4:7), and the non-imputation of sins (4:8). Throughout Paul’s Epistle to the Romans, in every case, God is always the subject doing the justifying, and believers in Christ are always the object of God’s work, the ones whom God justifies.

... *attested by the Law and the Prophets.* We come back to this phrase from v.21 now that Paul has introduced this righteousness of God as Faith-Righteousness. While the actual revelation of this righteousness of God took place in connection with the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Christ, it has ample attestation in the Old Testament. Paul already cited the passage from Habakkuk 2:4, “the just shall live by faith.” In the next chapter, he will treat extensively the example of Abraham, to whom faith was reckoned for righteousness. These two examples were clearly chosen by the apostle because they specifically mention both righteousness and faith.

Once he has established the Old Testament teaching of justification by faith using those two examples, Paul will go on in chapter 4 to cite the example from Psalm 32 where he equates justification with the forgiveness of sin or non-imputation of sin. That example shows us that neither the word “righteousness” nor the word “faith” needs to be present in order for the doctrine of Faith-Righteousness to be taught. Psalm 32 clearly indicates David’s faith in God’s mercy when he says, “I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, ‘I will confess my transgressions to the LORD.’” It then clearly indicates the imputation of righteousness, or the non-imputation of sin, to believing David when it goes on to say, “And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.”

Once Paul establishes for us that the teaching of righteousness by faith was the common teaching of the Old Testament, it is not difficult to find many such references, even when the words “righteousness” or “faith” are not specifically mentioned.

For there is no distinction... These words mark the beginning of a new sentence that will stretch all the way through v.26, one phrase being linked with the next by a series of conjunctions and

prepositional phrases. Even if this Greek sentence is broken into smaller sections in English, the thought remains one united thought throughout this section and must be taken together.

The word “for” (γάρ) is used either to give a reason for the preceding statement, or to explain the previous statement. The context indicates the use. In this case, the preceding statement (vv. 21-22) is that God’s righteousness comes (by imputation), apart from law, through faith, unto all and upon all who believe. This is a summary statement which Paul will break down into its various parts and explain in vv. 23-26.

Just as there was no distinction between Jew and Gentile under the Law, or between those who had sinned “much” and those who had sinned “little;” just as there was no distinction among men under the Law, so that “every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God,” so that “by the deeds of the law no flesh will be justified in His sight,” likewise, the apostle will go on to point out, there is no distinction among men under justification by faith with regard to their deeds. Paul insists that God’s righteousness comes by faith upon all believers equally, because, as regards the necessary components for their justification, there is no distinction among them. Why is there no distinction? Paul goes on with another “for,” this time giving the *reason why*.

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God... First, who are the “all” (πάντες)? There are two possibilities. The nearest possible antecedent is “all who believe.” The apostle could be limiting the “all have sinned” to believers, not as if unbelievers had not all sinned (he had already proven and stated quite clearly that all people in general are “under sin” – Rom. 3:9), but because he has already made the summary statement (vv.21-22) limiting the scope of those upon whom God’s righteousness comes to “all who believe,” and now wishes to demonstrate why this justification is through faith alone and not based on any law-distinction among believers. This would, all by itself, make any argument for Universal or “Objective Justification” based on these verses moot.

However, I favor the second possibility, which is the broader one. “All” refers to all men descended (in the natural way) from Adam. This interpretation is preferable because (1) Paul has already made a similar statement with regard to all men, both Jews and Greeks (Rom. 3:9); (2) Paul is here describing the difference between justification by works, which only applies to the sinless, and justification by faith, which only applies to sinners. He is speaking generically, describing that all sinners are justified in exactly the same way, namely, by faith. (3) Paul makes a similar statement in Galatians 3:22 where he speaks broadly of all men (actually “all things”) being under sin, with believers in Christ as those who are justified: “But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe.”

...have sinned. Aorist active indicative. The aorist tense indicates action done in the past. This emphasizes that mankind’s real problem under Works-Righteousness is not a continual habit of sinning, but the very fact that a person has *ever* sinned, including his conception in sin. Men, by nature, generally realize that they have committed sins, but they also tend to think that they will be fine as long as they “don’t do it again,” or as long as they do better the next time. But Paul slams the door on any hope for a justification by works by pointing out that, under the Law, there is no hope for rescue or forgiveness for those who have sinned. As James points out, “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all” (James 2:10).

... and fall short of the glory of God. Present passive indicative from ὑστερέω, which, in the passive, means to “lack, be lacking, go without, come short of.” Paul places the sinning in the past (from

conception in original sin onward – cf. Rom. 5:12-17, 1:18-3:20), but the “lacking” or “falling short” in the present. All men continually stand before God for judgment, and, when judged by the Law, according to works, all men continually come short.

...*the glory of God*. Luther translates, “und mangeln des Ruhms, den sie an Gott haben sollten.” “...and lack the praise that they should have with God.” He takes “of God” as a subjective genitive so that God is the one who gives glory to man—or would give it, if man didn’t fall short because of his sin. This interpretation is in accord with the “glory” (δόξα) Paul had spoken of in 2:5-10, where God promises to grant “glory, honor, and peace to everyone who works what is good.” But here Paul says all men come short of or lack this “glory of God,” since only non-sinners qualify for it under the Law.

...*being justified*. Present passive participle from the verb δικαιόω. The tense of participles is relative to the main verb. A present tense participle, as we have here, indicates time contemporaneous with the main verb. The main verb that immediately precedes this verb is “fall short (ὕστεροῦνται),” also a present tense verb. Therefore, at the same time that sinners “lack” the glory of God, they are contemporaneously “being justified.” **The tense of the participle alone excludes the interpretation of a one-time justification that God supposedly accomplished at some time in the past** (e.g., at the time of Christ’s death or resurrection, as taught by “Objective Justification”).

The present tense of this verb has a gnomic sense (as does the main verb ὕστεροῦνται); it is not describing something that *is happening* right now (from the Apostle Paul’s perspective), but something that *does happen* axiomatically, on a continual or habitual basis, allowing it to hold true for believers from Adam and Eve to Abraham to Paul to us to all who will believe in Christ in the future. All men, as a rule, fall short of the glory of God, being justified, as a rule, through the redemption...through faith.

Passive verbs emphasize those who receive the action of the verb, in this case, the antecedent “all” from 3:23.⁷ Passive verbs have an implied subject, or doer of the action, which is sometimes identified with ὑπὸ + genitive and translated “by,” as we have an example here in this same section. Rom. 3:21 speaks of the righteousness of God that “is attested (μαρτυρουμένη – present passive participle) by the Law and the Prophets (ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ τῶν προφητῶν).” Where the subject is able to be identified, passive verbs can be turned around and made active for the sake of clarity. For example, “The Law and the Prophets attest the righteousness of God.” Here in Rom. 3:24, there is no question that God is the subject (Rom. 3:26), that is, the One who does the justifying. Thus, to help us understand the meaning, we can turn it around and make it into an active statement, “God justifies all...”

But it should be noted that the sentence does not end there with a period. The Greek for this verse does not allow the interpretation that, “All have sinned, and all are justified. Period.” The sentence goes on with the participle “being justified” being qualified in the rest of v.24 and in v.25 with the phrases “freely,” “by His grace,” “through the redemption,” “through faith,” and “in His blood” (as will be discussed below), so that God’s justifying activity is inseparably linked to all of the qualifiers mentioned in this sentence by the apostle.

⁷ Just as Paul qualified the “all” in v.22, so he will qualify the “all” who are justified by adding “through faith” (v.25), and “the one who is of faith in Jesus” (v.26).

Finally, a word here about basic English grammar, since this phrase has been so abused by some in order to try to prove “Objective Justification.” In English, most verbs are dynamic (doing an action), but some are stative (describing the state of something). For example, “to go” is dynamic, while “to lie (on a bed)” is stative. The verb “to be” can either be *stative*, used together with an adjective (including the English past participle used as an adjective), or it can be used to form a *dynamic passive verb*. To illustrate:

Stative Verb: “All the people were sick, but then the doctor gave them medicine and healed them. Now they are all healed and healthy.” In other words, “are” in this sentence describes a state of healthiness in which all the people “are,” since the healing happened in the past.

Dynamic Verb: “All the people drank poison and are (stative) sick, and are healed (dynamic passive) by the doctor freely as a gift through the medicine that he has prepared for them, which he administers to all who come to him for help.” In this case “are healed,” as a dynamic passive verb, does not describe the state of the people due to a past action, but rather the present action of the doctor in healing them, which he does through certain means which only benefit those who use them.

Those who read the phrase “are justified” in Romans 3:24 (the translation of the NIV and ESV) as if it were a stative verb⁸, as though all people were in a state of *having been* justified, are sorely misrepresenting the Greek present passive verb δικαιούμενοι, which is a dynamic verb, not a stative verb. It does not describe the state in which all men “are,” but the action of God in justifying them, which He does through certain means which only benefit those who use them.

Luther clearly understood this basic point of grammar and translated with the dynamic “und werden gerecht,” “and become righteous.” The KJV and NKJV make the English less ambiguous by translating “being justified” as opposed to the ESV and NIV84, “are justified.” The NIV2011 adds an extra “all” that isn’t in the Greek, “all have sinned...and all are justified...,” adding another layer of ambiguity to the verb.

...freely, by His grace. Paul now begins to explain the manner in which God justifies according to Faith-Righteousness. First, He justifies “freely” (δωρεάν), an adverbial accusative from the word “gift,” i.e., with no cost to the recipient. Luther translates according to the sense of the word: “ohne Verdienst,” “without merit,” emphasizing that this justification cannot be earned by those who are justified, as opposed to the justification under the Law, which is entirely by one’s own merit. Paul will come back to this language in chapter 5 when he discusses the “gift of righteousness” (δωρεᾶς τῆς δικαιοσύνης).

Closely related to the concept of “freely” (Vulgate: gratis) is “by His grace” (Vulgate: per gratiam), here expressed with a simple dative of means, which can also be understood in this case as the more classical dative of agent, so that, in a sense, grace is the “doer” of justification.

⁸ Forrest Bivens, WELS seminary professor: “Romans 3:23,24 and Romans 5:18,19 affirm that *all* are sinners and *all* are justified. Through Adam all are condemned, and through Christ *all* are justified. The astonishing reality is that God has forgiven the sins of the whole world, whether people believe it or not.” <http://www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/october-2011/question-and-answer>

Whereas “freely” indicates the lack of payment required of the recipients of justification, the word “grace” indicates the free favor of the Giver as the motivating factor (or “cause”) in God that moves Him to justify sinners. Luther reflects this with his translation of this dative, “aus seiner Gnade,” “out of His grace.” In the next chapter, Paul will contrast grace with debt. Justification by grace, then, means that God does not justify sinners out of any obligation on His part, but out of His pure kindness toward those who have not earned it. Therefore, God justifies “by grace alone,” by which is meant that He justifies without any human merit and without any obligation.

Paul will continue to emphasize God’s grace in the following chapters, contrasting it with sin (Rom. 5:15-20), and with the law (6:14), and specifically contrasting grace (as the true cause of election) with works (as the false cause of election), pointing out the incompatibility of these two causes. “And if by grace (χάριτι), then it is no longer of works (ἐξ ἔργων); otherwise grace is no longer grace. But if it is of works, it is no longer grace; otherwise work is no longer work” (Rom. 11:6).

...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Paul has given the motivating factor underlying the justification of sinners, namely, God’s free grace. But grace is not all that is required for the sinner’s justification. Justification by grace excludes human merit, but it does not exclude all merit. On the contrary, God’s justice requires merit so great that it can truly compensate for all the righteousness sinners have not provided and for all the sins sinners have committed. The apostle now proceeds to highlight that merit.

Paul adds a second factor through which God’s justification of sinners occurs, namely, “the redemption” that is in Christ Jesus, or literally, “the redemption the one in Christ Jesus.” This is sometimes referred to as the “meritorious cause” of justification, or that which earned the justification of sinners. Luther translates freely: “durch die Erlösung, so durch Christum JESUM geschehen ist,” “through the redemption that has taken place through Christ Jesus.” To redeem is to “liberate for the price of a ransom,” or to “buy out of slavery.” While the word is used throughout the Old Testament for more mundane types of liberation, the great Old Testament example of divine redemption was Israel’s redemption from slavery in Egypt. Moses reminds the Israelites how “the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand, and redeemed you from the house of bondage, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt” (Deut. 7:8). This was a picture of the redemption from sin that God would accomplish through the Messiah. For example, Isaiah prophesies that “Zion shall be redeemed with justice, And her penitents with righteousness” (Is. 1:27), and, “You have sold yourselves for nothing, And you shall be redeemed without money...The LORD has comforted His people, He has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has made bare His holy arm in the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Is. 52:2, 9-10).

St. Peter speaks of the price of our redemption, which was, as Isaiah had prophesied, “without money”: “You were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot” (1 Pet. 1:18-19). St. Paul does not speak of this redemption as merely a past event, but notes that this redemption is “in Christ Jesus,” that is, the redemption of sinners is to be sought and found in the Person of Christ and in connection with Him. He goes on in the next verse to explain how this is so.

...whom God set forth as a Mercy Seat (ἱλαστήριον). The term ἱλασμός is the word for “atonement” in the LXX, and is used in the New Testament only by the apostle John in 1 John 2:2 & 4:10. It means

“expiation, propitiation, means of expiation.” It is “is the action in which God is propitiated and sin expiated.” The word ἱλαστήριον is only used in the New Testament here and in Heb. 9:5, where the author follows the LXX in using this word to refer to the lid on the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant.

Thus “Mercy Seat” is more than “propitiation.” It is the place where propitiation takes place, the seat of mercy, and the means of appeasing or reconciling. The apostle here makes the definitive connection between Christ and the Old Testament shadow of the Mercy Seat, the place where the blood of the atoning sacrifice was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement, the place where God chose to locate Himself in order to show mercy to His people and to give His people a place to find mercy from Him.

...through faith. This phrase could be modifying the more immediate *Mercy Seat*, “...a Mercy Seat through faith,” meaning that the Mercy Seat is approached by the sinner and thus becomes beneficial to the sinner *through faith*, or it could even be going back to the beginning of v. 24, “being justified...by grace...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...*through faith*.”

The Confessions cite Rom. 3:25 here:

Secondly. It is certain that sins are forgiven for the sake of Christ, as Propitiator, Rom. 3, 25: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation. Moreover, Paul adds: through faith. Therefore this Propitiator thus benefits us, when by faith we apprehend the mercy promised in Him, and set it against the wrath and judgment of God. And to the same effect it is written, Heb. 4, 14. 16: Seeing, then, that we have a great High Priest, etc., let us therefore come with confidence. For the Apostle bids us come to God, not with confidence in our own merits, but with confidence in Christ as a High Priest; therefore he requires faith. (Ap:IV:82)

... in His blood. This phrase could be modifying “through faith,” that is, “through faith in His blood,” His blood (that is, His substitutionary death) being the object of faith. Faith normally takes a genitive object without a preposition, but here Paul uses the preposition ἐν, as he does on only two other occasions with πίστις (Gal. 3:26, Eph. 1:15). In those cases, the meaning appears to be similar to the use with the genitive, although perhaps nuanced by the preposition. Thus here the meaning would be “through faith in (or in connection with) His blood.”

Luther translates “in seinem Blut,” indicating that he did *not* understand “faith in His blood” (which would be “Glauben an seinen Blut” in German), but rather understood “in His blood” as modifying another phrase, such as “a Mercy Seat...in His blood.” In other words, Christ is the Mercy Seat in connection with His death on the cross for the sins of the world. However, Luther translates the same phrase as “through faith in Christ Jesus (Glauben an Christum Jesum)” in both Gal. 3:26 and Eph. 1:15.

Either of these meanings is possible, and neither changes the sense of the apostle’s discourse.

Although the sentence continues with the purposes and effects of justification, Paul has now concluded his description of God’s manner of justifying. He takes sinners who fall short of His glory and justifies them (1) freely, by His grace, (2) through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, (3) through faith. All of these are essential components of justification. The apostle Paul has included all of them in his doctrine of justification, and nowhere has he indicated that all sinners have already been justified

or declared righteous by God, because not all sinners have faith in Christ, and only in connection with Christ does God justify.⁹

...as a sign of His righteousness, due to the remission of the sins committed beforehand in the forbearance of God.

The word ἔνδειξιν means “sign, proof, demonstration.” The verb ἐνδείκνυμι means “to show, demonstrate.” It is only used four times in the New Testament, all by St. Paul. εἰς has a variety of meanings, but often denotes purpose. Here it appears to mean, “for the purpose of [giving] a demonstration/sign of His righteousness,” righteousness being an objective genitive. Again there is some question as to the antecedent. It appears to refer back to the nearest verb, “set forth.” “God set forth Christ as a Mercy Seat...in order to give a sign of His righteousness.”

Luther has a rather unique take on this part of the verse.

“...damit er die Gerechtigkeit, die vor ihm gilt, darbiete, in dem, daß er Sünde vergibt, welche bis anher geblieben war unter göttlicher Geduld.”

“...so that He may offer the righteousness that avails before Him, in that He forgives sin, which had previously remained under divine patience.”

First, Luther takes the Greek word “a sign, show, display” (ἐνδειξιν) and interprets it as “offer.” Then he seems to take “the righteousness of God” here as the gracious gift of righteousness that Christ won for us and that God now offers, so that His setting Christ forth as a Mercy Seat was done, not as a sign of God’s righteousness, but for the purpose of then offering Christ’s righteousness to believers, thus forgiving them their sins.

While Luther’s view is certainly in line with the analogy of faith, the Greek noun ἔνδειξιν does not appear to have the sense of offering something to someone; it clearly has the meaning of a show or proof or demonstration (cf. 2 Cor. 8:24, Phil. 1:28), as does its related verb ἐνδείκνυμι.

I take the verse this way: Paul is speaking here of those whom God forgave before the coming of Christ (“the remission of the sins committed beforehand in the forbearance God”), as He did with all the Old Testament believers, notably Abraham and David, whom Paul will mention in chapter 4. God set forth Christ as a Mercy Seat through faith in His blood, as proof that He is righteous, because His justice requires atonement/payment for sin, and yet He forgave sins to all the Old Testament believers without any meritorious sacrifice having been made at that time. That would have been “unjust,” according to the Law, which stipulates that “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (Heb. 9:22), and, even in the case of the animal sacrifices instituted by God, “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4), except that God has now shown His justice in providing the Mercy Seat in the blood of Christ. And since the connection between sinners and the Mercy Seat is “through faith,” the Old Testament believers were “justly” forgiven their sins, even though the sacrifice of Christ

⁹ The phrase “in Christ” has been applied by proponents of “Objective Justification” to all people, both believers and unbelievers. But in every case, the Scripture’s use of this phrase is limited to believers. E.g., Jn. 6:56; Jn. 14:20; Jn. 15:2,4,5,6,7; Rom. 6:3,11; Rom. 8:1; Rom. 12:5; Rom. 16:7; 1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Cor. 3:1; 1 Cor. 15:18; 2 Cor. 5:17; 2 Cor. 5:21; 2 Cor. 12:2; Gal. 1:22; Gal. 2:17; Gal. 3:26,27,28; Eph. 1:1,3; Eph. 2:6; Eph. 2:10; Eph. 2:13; Eph. 4:32; Phil. 1:1; Phil. 4:21; Col. 1:2; Col. 1:28; 1 Thess. 2:14; 1 Thess. 4:16; 2 Tim. 3:12; 1 Pet. 5:14.

had not yet been made, so that their faith was not in vain, and God's forgiveness was not without merit (and therefore, unjust), even though the merit would be provided in the future from their perspective.

...as a sign of His righteousness in the present time, that He may be just and the One who justifies him who is of faith in Jesus.

This phrase also appears to refer back to "whom God set forth," and is set in apposition to the phrase dealing with the sign of God's righteousness in the past, now referring to the "present time," that is, the time since the coming of Christ. God's setting forth Christ as a Mercy Seat serves a dual purpose. First, it proves that God was just in forgiving sins to Old Testament believers (v.25), because they trusted in the Mercy Seat who would come (and has now come). Then, it demonstrates His justice in the present time as well, as He justifies the sinner who believes in Jesus, because he trusts in the Mercy Seat who has now appeared. God, therefore, remains just, because He has not left sin unpunished. He is also now shown to be just when He justifies believers, because they are connected with Christ's sacrifice by faith, which (as Paul will explain in the next chapter) God counts to them for righteousness.

Again, Luther adds quite a bit of interpretation to his translation of this verse:

"...auf daß er zu diesen Zeiten darböte die Gerechtigkeit, die vor ihm gilt, auf daß er allein gerecht sei und gerecht mache den, der da ist des Glaubens an Jesum."

"...in order that He, at this time, may offer the righteousness that avails before Him, in order that He alone may be righteous and may make righteous the one who is of faith in Jesus."

The translation "offer" is here repeated, and God's righteousness is again treated, not as God's attribute of being just, but as the object which God passes on to believers. He also adds the word "allein" ("alone"), which is not in the Greek. We are more familiar with his addition of the word "alone" to 3:28, "...without deeds of the Law, through faith alone." However, in 3:28, Luther is contrasting two distinct and opposite methods of justification, which "justifies" his use in German of the particle "allein." I do not find as much justification for its inclusion in 3:26.

Some Roman Catholics have sharply criticized Luther for his translation of Rom. 3:25-26, accusing him of twisting Paul's meaning. They (i.e., the Romanists) understand Paul to be saying that God "makes people just" by turning them into people who are more and more righteous in their deeds. In other words, they add "New Obedience" to faith in the article of justification, and they accuse Luther of imposing his view of "justification by faith alone" on the apostle.

But there is nothing in the text that supports the Romanist interpretation. Rom. 3:21 has already excluded works of obedience from God's act of justification, and Rom. 3:28 will likewise exclude deeds of the law. Chapter 4 will explain in detail that God's act of justifying believers is indeed by the "counting" or "imputation" of righteousness as opposed to actual righteousness, and the rest of Romans will likewise herald faith alone as that which justifies. So Luther's interpretation of how God justifies (i.e., not by works of obedience, but by faith alone) is entirely correct.

However, I do believe his translation of 3:25-26 to be overly interpretive, to the point that it obscures the simple reading of the text, which is, admittedly, somewhat difficult in places to piece together.

In any case, Paul unmistakably identifies those whom God justifies. He is the Justifier of “the one who believes in Jesus (τὸν ἐκ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ).” Period. Nowhere in these verses has Paul indicated that God has declared all sinners righteous, whether they believe in Christ or not.

The long sentence of vv.23-26 has reached its climactic conclusion as Paul has now effectively fleshed out the summary statement he had made in vv.21-22 (and in 1:17). God’s righteousness has truly been revealed. A righteous God cannot declare sinners righteous, except by (1) providing a Mercy Seat in the blood of a Righteous Substitute, and (2) giving sinners a means of approaching that Mercy Seat so that they may be justified, namely, faith.¹⁰ Thus God is righteous, and has provided a viable way—the only viable way—for sinners to be declared righteous. Luther’s simple summary of St. Paul’s Gospel is still the best summary of these verses: “All have sinned and are justified solely by faith in Christ.”¹¹

ROMANS 4:5

¹ Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν Ἀβραάμ τὸν πατέρα ἡμῶν εὐρηκέναι κατὰ σάρκα² Εἰ γὰρ Ἀβραάμ ἐξ ἔργων ἐδικαιώθη, ἔχει καύχημα, ἀλλ’ οὐ πρὸς τὸν Θεόν.³ Τί γὰρ ἡ Γραφή λέγει «Ἐπίστευσε δὲ Ἀβραάμ τῷ Θεῷ, καὶ ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.»⁴ Τῷ δὲ ἐργαζομένῳ ὁ μισθὸς οὐ λογίζεται κατὰ χάριν ἀλλὰ κατὰ ὀφείλημα.⁵ Τῷ δὲ μὴ ἐργαζομένῳ, πιστεύοντι δὲ ἐπὶ τὸν δικαιούντα τὸν ἀσεβῆ, λογίζεται ἡ πίστις αὐτοῦ εἰς δικαιοσύνην. ⁶ Καθάπερ καὶ Δαβὶδ λέγει τὸν μακαρισμὸν τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ᾧ ὁ Θεὸς λογίζεται δικαιοσύνην χωρὶς ἔργων, ⁷ «Μακάριοι ὧν ἀφέθησαν αἱ ἀνομίαι, καὶ ὧν ἐπεκαλύφθησαν αἱ ἁμαρτίαι. ⁸ Μακάριος ἀνὴρ ᾧ οὐ μὴ λογίσῃται Κύριος ἁμαρτίαν.» ⁹ Ὁ μακαρισμὸς οὖν οὗτος ἐπὶ τὴν περιτομήν, ἢ καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν ἀκροβυστίαν λέγομεν γὰρ ὅτι «Ἐλογίσθη τῷ Ἀβραάμ ἡ πίστις εἰς δικαιοσύνην.»

¹ What, then, shall we say that Abraham, our father, has found according to the flesh? ² For if Abraham was justified by works, he has a boast, but not with God. ³ For what does the Scripture say? “And Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him for righteousness.” ⁴ Now, to him who works, the wages are not counted according to grace, but according to what is owed. ⁵ But to him who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. ⁶ As David also speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ⁷ “Blessed are they whose iniquities have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered. ⁸ Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will never count sin.” ⁹ This blessedness—does it come upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? For we say, “Faith was counted to Abraham for righteousness.”

The apostle goes on in this chapter to prove that, indeed, “the Law and the Prophets” attest justification by faith alone. He begins with the example of Abraham, who “has a boast, but not with

¹⁰ In chapter 8 and in chapter 10, the apostle will also mention God’s means of bringing the Mercy Seat to men and of bringing men to appeal in faith to the Mercy Seat, namely, by “calling” them (8:30) through the preaching of the Word of Christ (10:17).

¹¹ Martin Luther. *Luther’s Works*, vol. 26: *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, eds. J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald, & H. T. Lehmann (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 59.

God.” Why does he not have a boast with God? Because he was not justified by works or by merit. Instead, he was justified by faith; faith “was counted to him for righteousness.”

The apostle so clearly presents justification in these verses as the blessed result of faith that it is hard to fathom how anyone could use them to teach that God actually justifies all people *not by faith*. Those who do so make their entire argument from four words in Rom. 4:5, “...who justifies the ungodly.” Not all proponents of “Objective Justification” cite this verse, but some do. This is their argument:

Romans 4:5 teaches objective justification. The God who justifies the ungodly (the Greek word is never used to refer to believers, but always and only to unbelievers) is the God who has justified everyone. This is the God in whom Abraham believed and was thus, subjectively, justified.¹²

Romans 4:5 also teaches the grand truth that our God is the “God who justifies the wicked,” all of them.¹³

Given the above references to this verse, we will discuss it here briefly.

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

Perhaps the most obvious error made by proponents of “Objective Justification” in citing this verse is their treatment of the verb. It says, “...who justifies (τὸν δικαιοῦντα) the ungodly.” “Justifies” is a present active participle—the exact same form Paul had just used in Rom. 3:26: “...who justifies (δικαιοῦντα) the one who is of faith in Jesus.” If Paul were presenting a different act or method of justification here—a justification of those who are *not of faith in Jesus*—then he would be refuting his argument in chapter three rather than establishing it.

Furthermore, the present tense “justifies the ungodly” is clearly not being used temporally, but gnominically, as something that God customarily “does.” He justifies ungodly people. However, “Objective Justification” does not speak of God justifying or declaring all people righteous gnominically, but temporally, not in the present, but in the past, associating the supposed justification of “all the ungodly” with the resurrection of Christ. Rolf Preus tries to slip this temporal change from the Biblical text by unnoticed. “The God who justifies (gnomic present) the ungodly is the God who has justified (temporal past) everyone.” This understanding of “has justified” is refuted by the basic grammar of Rom. 4:5.

We proceed to the phrase, “the ungodly (τὸν ἄσεβῆ).” The claim is that “the ungodly” (sometimes translated “the wicked”) refers “always and only to unbelievers.” The claim is that God justifies (and has justified) all unbelievers.

One wonders if the author of this statement has thought through it at all.

The term “ungodly” does not mean “unbeliever.” It means “godless, impious, wicked,” and is used throughout the Scriptures as a synonym for “sinner (ἁματωλός)” (cf. Ps. 1:1, Ps. 1:5, Ezek. 33:8, 1 Tim. 1:9, 1 Pet. 4:18, Jude 15). It refers both to a person’s natural state before God, and to an unconverted person’s continued status before God. With regard to the righteous standards of the Law,

¹² Rolf Preus. <http://www.christforus.org/ObjectiveJustificationforWebsiteMarch2012.htm>.

¹³ Forrest Bivens. <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/BivensPrimary.pdf>

Paul has already stated that, “There is none righteous, no, not one; There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God” (Rom. 3:10-11). Indeed, “There is no distinction, for all have sinned” (Rom. 3:23). Just as all men have sinned, so all men are ungodly with reference to their nature and their deeds as judged by the Law.

And yet, while all are ungodly by nature and “there is none righteous, no, not one,” the Scriptures often speak of a distinction between “the ungodly and the righteous” or “the sinners and the righteous.” We note, for example, the parallelism of Ps. 1:5-6:

*Therefore the ungodly shall not stand in the judgment,
Nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.
For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
But the way of the ungodly shall perish.*

Where did this “righteous” group come from if they are all, by nature, sinners, unrighteous, and ungodly?

Answer: God justifies (“declares righteous”) the ungodly.

In other words, God justifies, not righteous people, but sinners. This has been the apostle’s point since Rom. 1:18. Under Works-Righteousness, God justifies the just. Under Faith-Righteousness, He justifies the ungodly.

Has God justified all the ungodly? This verse, with its present tense verb and its lack of the modifier “all,” certainly does not say so. If He has, then the distinction between “the ungodly and the righteous” would be nonsensical, for, according to “Objective Justification,” God has declared all the ungodly unbelievers to be righteous, thus nullifying the entire “ungodly” group. Rather, Ezekiel spoke of which ungodly are justified in 33:11: “Say to them: ‘As I live,’ says the Lord GOD, ‘I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked (τὸν ἄσεβῆ) turn from his way and live.’” In other words, God justifies the wicked person *as he is converted* from unbelief to faith.

The apostle Paul spells this out so clearly in Rom. 4:5 that one has to put on blinders in order to miss it: “But to him who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.” God takes ungodly people and justifies them through faith, declaring them righteous, counting them among the righteous. There are not two distinct acts of God going on here, as Rolf Preus claims—one in which all the ungodly unbelievers were justified by God, and another in which believers are justified by God.

How does God justify the ungodly? The mechanism for this justification is the imputation of the foreign (i.e., belonging to another) righteousness of Christ. This is absolutely essential for any justification of sinful, ungodly people—by God’s own decree. He solemnly declares, “For I will not justify the wicked (LXX - τὸν ἄσεβῆ)” (Ex. 23:7; cf. Prov. 17:15). But all people are, by nature, wicked. God’s solution, as revealed especially in Romans, Galatians and Ephesians—but also in Genesis—is to count faith for righteousness, thus justifying those who are, by nature, wicked, but who are, by faith in Christ, counted as righteous. *Simul justus et peccator*. Righteous and sinner (ungodly) at the same time.

The Confessions cite Rom. 4:5 in this regard:

Scripture thus uses the term “faith,” as the following sentence of Paul testifies, Rom. 5, 1: Being justified by faith, we have peace with God. Moreover, in this passage, to justify signifies, according to forensic usage, to acquit a guilty one and declare him righteous, but on account of the righteousness of another,

namely, of Christ, which righteousness of another is communicated to us by faith. Therefore, since in this passage our righteousness is the imputation of the righteousness of another, we must here speak concerning righteousness otherwise than when in philosophy or in a civil court we seek after the righteousness of one's own work, which certainly is in the will. Paul accordingly says, 1 Cor. 1, 30: Of Him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is made unto us wisdom, and Righteousness, and Sanctification, and Redemption. And 2 Cor. 5, 21: He hath made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. But because the righteousness of Christ is given us by faith, faith is for this reason righteousness in us imputatively, i.e., it is that by which we are made acceptable to God on account of the imputation and ordinance of God, as Paul says, Rom. 4, 3. 5: Faith is reckoned for righteousness. (Ap:Of Love and the Fulfilling of the Law:184-187)

In addition to the claims made about the phrase “justifies the ungodly,” there is another claim made for “Objective Justification” based on this and the surrounding verses. In their 1983 Theses on Justification, the LCMS classified Rom. 4:5 as only as a “Subjective Justification” verse, in apparent disagreement with the exegesis of Rolf Preus.

In normal Biblical and ecclesiastical usage the terms ‘justify’ and ‘justification’ refer to the (‘subjective’) justification of the individual sinner through faith (Rom. 4:5, 5:1, etc.; AC IV, 3; FC SD III, 25).¹⁴

However, in the next sentence, these same theses incomprehensibly cite the entire section of Rom. 4:1-8 as a secondary basis for the teaching of “Objective Justification,” and for an entirely different reason:

But because theologically justification is the same thing as the forgiveness of sins (Rom. 4:1-8; Ap IV, 76; FC Ep III, 7), it is Biblically and confessionally correct to refer to the great sin-cancelling, atoning work of the Redeemer as the "objective" or "universal" justification of the whole sinful human race. (John 1:29; Rom. 5:6-18; 2 Cor. 5:19; Col 2:14-15; 1 Tim. 3:16; Ap IV, 103-105; LC V, 31, 32, 36, 37; FC SD III, 57)

To summarize, the authors of the Theses needed to find a Biblical reference equating justification with the forgiveness of sins, because the article of justification is so inseparably linked to faith in the Scriptures and Confessions that no case could be made from the Confessions for all men having been declared righteous (as the Brief Statement declares). But there are a few passages in the Confessions that speak of the forgiveness of sins having been won at the cross, which, while still not “Objective Justification,” is as close to a confessional basis as exists for “Objective Justification.” So the authors found it expedient to cite a Bible passage that equates justification with the forgiveness of sins.

But the irony of their choice of Romans 4:1-8 could hardly be thicker. Indeed, the apostle does here equate the sinner being forgiven with the sinner being justified. But he so explicitly identifies faith as the means by which God forgives/justifies the sinner, that to use these verses to prove that all sinners have been forgiven/justified *not by faith* is nothing short of deceptive.

The apostle says, ⁵ *But to him who does not work, but believes in Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.* ⁶ *As David also speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:* ⁷ *“Blessed are they whose iniquities have been forgiven, and whose sins have been*

¹⁴ Theses on Justification: Part I. A Report of the Commission on Theology and Church Relations of the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod, May 1983.

covered.⁸ *Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will never count sin.*⁹ *This blessedness—does it come upon the circumcised, or also upon the uncircumcised? For we say, “Faith was counted to Abraham for righteousness.”*

Thus the apostle equates:

“to count faith for righteousness” (v.5,9)

“to count righteousness apart from works” (v.6)

“to forgive iniquities” (v.7)

“to cover sins” (v.7)

“not to count sin” (v.8)

Paul’s entire discussion of forgiveness here—his only use of the word “forgive (ἀφίημι)” in the entire Epistle to the Romans—is concerning the forensic act of God absolving/forgiving the one who believes in Him—by faith alone, apart from works. He makes clear (as does the context of Psalm 32) that, in fact, not all sinners have had their iniquities forgiven them, nor have all sinners had righteousness counted to them, nor have all sinners had faith counted to them for righteousness; he does not speak of all men as being among the “blessed.”

The Apology also notes this:

And Paul says, Rom. 4, 6: David also describeth the blessedness of the man to whom God imputeth righteousness without works. Paul, then, says that he is blessed to whom righteousness is imputed through faith in Christ, even though he have not performed any good works. That is the true, permanent consolation, by which hearts and consciences can be confirmed and encouraged, namely, that for Christ’s sake, through faith, the remission of sins, righteousness, and life eternal are given us. (Ap.:Of Love and the Fulfillment of the Law:256)

This in no way changes the fact that forgiveness has been won / obtained / merited / earned / acquired by Christ as a free gift to be given. The merit for our forgiveness is fully in place, just as the satisfaction for sins has truly been made in the death of Christ. It is to this merit and satisfaction of Christ that the Confessions refer in the passages cited in the LCMS Theses on Justification. But to earn or win forgiveness for someone, in Biblical and confessional language, is not the same thing as to forgive someone his sins or to declare someone righteous. Where there is no faith, there is no counting of righteousness, and therefore, no justification of the sinner.

In summary, since Paul clearly equates “to forgive someone his iniquities” with “to count faith for righteousness,” under no circumstances can anyone legitimately wrestle the term “forgiveness” away from the context of these verses to speak of a universal forgiving of all sins to all unbelievers, or a universal absolution/justification already pronounced upon all unbelievers, as Walther and the LCMS have tried to do. If anything, by using Romans 4:1-8 to demonstrate that justification and the forgiveness of sins is the same thing, the authors of the LCMS statement have succeeded in highlighting Walther’s error of “Easter Absolution.”¹⁵

¹⁵ So Walther: “Since it was all mankind in whose place and for whom Christ suffered, died and made payment, who was it, then, that was absolved in and through Christ’s Person when the eternal Judge set Him at liberty? It was - oh, marvelous and endlessly comforting truth! - it was all mankind. . . . Are you saying that God has already

AC:IV

This is a fitting place to bring in the basic Lutheran confession regarding the article of justification—Augsburg Confession, Article IV—since “Romans 3 and 4” is cited at the end of this article as the basis of our confession, including a direct reference to Paul’s words in Rom. 4:5.

Der IV. Artikel. Von der Rechtfertigung.

Weiter wird gelehrt, daß wir Vergebung der Sünden und Gerechtigkeit vor Gott nicht erlangen mögen durch unser Verdienst, Werke und Genugtun, sondern daß wir Vergebung der Sünden bekommen und vor Gott gerecht werden, aus Gnaden um Christus willen durch den Glauben, so wir glauben, daß Christus für uns gelitten hat, und daß uns um seinetwillen die Sünde vergeben, Gerechtigkeit und ewiges Leben geschenkt wird. Denn diesen Glauben, will Gott für Gerechtigkeit vor ihm halten, und zurechnen, wie St. Paulus sagt zu den Römern am 3. und 4.¹⁶

Article IV: Justification

It is further taught that we cannot obtain the forgiveness of sins and righteousness before God through our merit, works and satisfaction, but that we receive forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God, by grace for Christ’s sake through faith, if we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake sin is forgiven to us, righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For this faith God will consider and account for righteousness before Him, as St. Paul says to the Romans in chapters 3 and 4. (my translation)

One can hardly imagine a more beautiful, concise summary of Romans 3 and 4 than appears in the Augustana. The chief article of Christianity is presented here in all its simplicity. We receive (present tense) forgiveness of sins and become (present tense) righteous before God “aus Gnaden,” from grace, “um Christus willen,” for Christ’s sake, “durch den Glauben,” through faith. We receive forgiveness of sins and become righteous before God “so wir glauben,” if we believe (present tense), not “whether we believe or not.”

And what are we to believe? Not that all sinners have already been forgiven and justified, but (1) “daß Christus für uns gelitten hat,” that Christ suffered (past tense) for us, and (2) “daß uns um seinetwillen die Sünde vergeben, Gerechtigkeit und ewiges Leben geschenkt wird,” that for His sake, sin is forgiven (vergeben wird – present passive) to us, righteousness and eternal life are given (geschenkt wird – present passive) to us. There is no question whatsoever in these tenses and word forms. The

in Christ absolved all men, including all the ungodly, all slaves of iniquity, all unbelievers, all mockers, all slanderers? Who could believe that! - And yet it is so, dear friends. Let these thoughts sink deep into your consciousness: It is certain that God has loved the world, the ungodly world, so much that He not only wanted to give His only begotten Son for the salvation of the world, but has already given Him. It is certain that Christ was the Lamb of God who not only wanted to take upon Himself the sins of the world, but has already borne the sins not only of a part of the world, but of the whole world. It is certain that Christ not only wanted to be the Reconciler, the Savior and Redeemer of all men without exception, but is that already as Paul writes: ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself’ (2 Cor. 5:19a). As certain as these things are, so certain it is also that God the Father, in raising Jesus Christ from the dead, has already absolved all men from all their sins.” Quoted by Rolf Preus, <http://www.christforus.org/ObjectiveJustificationforWebsiteMarch2012.htm>.

¹⁶ The Latin version of 1584 is equally clear, but since we subscribe to the Book of Concord of 1580, that is the text that will be considered here.

only past tense in the entire article is “that Christ suffered for us.” Justification and forgiveness are not placed in the past, but in the present, “if we believe.” If the passive verbs cause confusion for anyone (that is, if someone is tempted to understand them as English stative verbs), we can turn them around into active verbs: “If we believe...that God forgives sin to us and gives righteousness and eternal life to us for Christ’s sake.” These are both gnomic present tenses. “If we believe that God habitually or characteristically does this.” We are not at all confessing a past act on God’s part with these words, but rather a characteristic act on God’s part—to forgive sins by grace, for Christ’s sake, through faith. “This faith” is the very thing that “God will consider and account for righteousness before Him.” There is no other teaching in Romans 3 and 4.

Nevertheless, there is one more passage in Romans 4 for us to consider.

ROMANS 4:25 (4:22 – 5:1)

²² Διὸ καὶ «ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.»²³ Οὐκ ἐγράφη δὲ δι’ αὐτὸν μόνον ὅτι ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ,²⁴ ἀλλὰ καὶ δι’ ἡμᾶς οἷς μέλλει λογίζεσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ἐπὶ τὸν ἐγείραντα Ἰησοῦν τὸν Κύριον ἡμῶν ἐκ νεκρῶν,²⁵ ὃς παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν καὶ ἠγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν. ¹ Δικαιωθέντες οὖν ἐκ πίστεως, εἰρήνην ἔχομεν πρὸς τὸν Θεὸν διὰ τοῦ Κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ,

²² Therefore also “it was counted to him for righteousness.” ²³ Now, it was not written for his sake alone that “it was counted to him,” ²⁴ but also for our sake, to whom it would be counted, to those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead, ²⁵ who was delivered up for the sake of our trespasses and raised for the sake of our justification. ¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Διὸ καὶ «ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ εἰς δικαιοσύνην.». *Therefore also “it was counted to him for righteousness.”* Throughout chapter 4, Paul has been proving his teaching in Rom. 3:21-28 that God justifies sinners (i.e., people who are, for their part, ungodly and have no inherent righteousness of their own) by faith in Christ Jesus. The mechanism for this justification, as Paul describes through the example of Abraham (and Psalm 32), is that God “counts/imputes” righteousness to those who have not worked for it, but who, instead, believe in Him (Rom. 4:5-6). He first cited Genesis 15:6 back in Rom. 4:3 in order to establish from Scripture that Abraham was justified, not by works, but by faith. That is, justification was the result of Abraham’s faith. As he concludes the chapter, he demonstrates that what was true for Abraham is true for all who believe as Abraham did.

Here in 4:22 Paul cites Gen. 15:6 again. Διὸ means “therefore,” pointing back to a reason previously given, in this case: “He did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform” (4:20-21). “Therefore,” for this reason—because Abraham did not waver through unbelief but was strengthened in faith, trusting that God was able to do what God had promised—“it was counted to him for righteousness.” Faith was that very thing that was counted to Abraham for righteousness.

Οὐκ ἐγράφη δὲ δι’ αὐτὸν μόνον ὅτι ἐλογίσθη αὐτῷ,

Now, it was not written for his sake alone that “it was counted to him,”

Paul makes it clear that he is referring to “what was written” in Holy Scripture, specifically in the Book of Genesis 15:6. He says that it was written “not for him alone.” He uses the preposition διὰ + *accusative*, which expresses cause: “for him, for his sake, on account of him, because of him.” This construction can indicate different kinds of causes. Often it looks backward retrospectively at something that has already occurred or that already holds true and thus causes something else to happen, as in Jesus’ parable of the sower and the seed: “But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root (διὰ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν ρίζαν) they withered away” (Matt. 13:6). The fact that the plants had no root caused them to wither away when the sun was up.

But the διὰ + *accusative* construction is frequently used in the New Testament prospectively, to denote a future goal or purpose or benefit, sometimes known as a “final cause.” Jesus speaks in Matt. 19:12 about “...eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven’s sake (διὰ τὴν βασιλείαν τῶν οὐρανῶν).” The kingdom of heaven has not caused men to become eunuchs. Rather, some men have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of or for the benefit of the kingdom of heaven. Or in Matt. 24:22: “...but for the elect’s sake (διὰ δὲ τοὺς ἐκλεκτοὺς) those days will be shortened.” The elect are not the ones causing the days to be shortened. Rather, God will shorten the days for the sake of or for the benefit of the elect. Or in John 1:31: “I did not know Him; but that He should be revealed to Israel, therefore (διὰ τοῦτο) I came baptizing with water.” John came baptizing with water, not because Christ had already been revealed to Israel, but for the sake of, or for the purpose of revealing Christ to Israel. Or in 2 Tim. 2:10: “Therefore (διὰ τοῦτο) I endure all things for the sake of the elect (διὰ τοὺς ἐκλεκτούς), that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.” The elect were not the ones causing Paul to “endure all things,” but rather, he endured all things for their benefit, which he explains in the following clause, namely, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory.

The context must determine in each case when the διὰ + *accusative* construction is being used to express a cause that already exists, or a goal for which something else is done. The apostle uses this same construction four times in these three verses. A retrospective/prospective, retrospective/prospective use will become evident.

In this verse, Paul refers to Abraham, whose justification by faith (c. 2000 BC) preceded Moses’ writing of Genesis in c. 1500 BC. Moses did write his words “it was counted to him” because of Abraham, or for the sake of demonstrating how Abraham was justified. But the apostle Paul proves from Moses’ words that Moses did not only write these words in 1500 BC “for Abraham’s sake,” looking backwards (retrospectively) to Abraham.

ἀλλὰ καὶ δι’ ἡμᾶς οἷς μέλλει λογίζεσθαι, τοῖς πιστεύουσιν ἐπὶ τὸν ἐγείραντα Ἰησοῦν τὸν Κύριον ἡμῶν ἐκ νεκρῶν

...but also for ours, to whom it would be counted, to those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead

ἀλλὰ καὶ δι’ ἡμᾶς. Not for Abraham’s sake, *but also for ours*. Moses, writing in 1500 BC under divine inspiration, was not looking *backward* at “us,” as if his writing were caused by our existence in 1500 BC or by our justification having already taken place in 1500 BC. Rather, he was looking *forward* to us, as people who would one day read his inspired writing and would benefit from it, for the purpose of demonstrating that future generations would be justified in the same way Abraham was, namely, by faith. Therefore, Paul is clearly using the construction διὰ + *accusative* here to indicate *final cause*, a goal

or purpose, that is, not only for the purpose of showing how Abraham was justified, but also for the purpose of showing (prospectively) how we would be justified in the present time.

Who is the “us”? Paul immediately qualifies the “us” as being οἷς μέλλει λογίζεσθαι, those “to whom it would be counted.” Μέλλει is in the present tense and can also be translated “will” (literally, “is about to”) instead of “would,” but the sense of this verb is often linked to the main verb. If the main verb is in the aorist (as we have here in “it was written”), μέλλει may simply indicate future time from the time of the main verb, being translated, “would” instead of will, as in Luke 19:11. Since, in Rom. 5:1, Paul will put “our” justification by faith as something that has already happened (since he is writing to believers), “would” seems to fit the context better in this passage. In either case, the meaning is that it was written that it was counted to Abraham for righteousness because of “us,” us being limited by the apostle to those “to whom it (that is, believing) would be counted.”

Paul further goes on to confirm and explain this meaning in the next phrase: *to those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead*. Here God the Father is said to be the object of faith, that we believe in “Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead.” Paul gives the solid comfort of Scripture to those who believe in the Father who sent His Son to die and then raised Him from the dead: Our faith is not in vain. Since the first book of the Bible, God has testified that He freely justifies those who believe in Him and His promises in Christ, as we do. Just as Abraham’s faith alone, without works, resulted in his justification, so the same is certain for us.

Thus Paul has carefully identified the “us” for whose sake Genesis 15:6 was written as those to whom believing would be counted for righteousness, namely, those who believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. It is simply grammatically impossible to expand the scope of the “us” here to refer to anyone except for “those who believe.”

ὃς παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν καὶ ἡγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν

...who was delivered up for the sake of our trespasses and raised for the sake of our justification.

With these words Paul concludes the sentence that he began in 4:23. Παρεδόθη (was delivered up) is an aorist passive with “who” as the subject, namely, “our Lord Jesus Christ.” He was delivered up into the hands of sinners, into death. This is the same word Jesus used to describe His betrayal: “Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be **betrayed** to the chief priests and to the scribes; and they will condemn Him to death, and deliver Him to the Gentiles to mock and to scourge and to crucify. And the third day He will rise again” (Matt. 20:18-19). It is also the word used for Pilate’s action: “So Pilate, wanting to gratify the crowd, released Barabbas to them; and he **delivered** Jesus, after he had scourged Him, to be crucified” (Mark 15:15).

In the New Testament, it is mainly used of wicked men who are charged with “delivering up” Jesus, using this verb. There is one reference in the Old Testament to the Lord being the one who “delivered up” the Messiah, and that, found only in the unique translation of Isaiah 53:6 in the LXX: “And the LORD delivered Him up for our sins (κύριος παρέδωκεν αὐτὸν ταῖς ἁμαρτίαις ἡμῶν).” Paul also speaks of Christ having “delivered Himself up (ἐαυτὸν παρέδωκεν)” in Eph. 5:25.

Christ was delivered up διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν, *for the sake of our trespasses*. Παραπτώματα are trespasses, a “falling to the side” of the path. Paul uses the word as practically synonymous with “sins.” He will use a different word (παράβασις - transgression) in Rom. 5:14 to refer to Adam’s specific sin against a commandment.

What does it mean that Christ was delivered up “for the sake of our trespasses,” again using a form of διὰ + *accusative*? One could take this as a final cause as well; he could again be expressing the idea of purpose here as he was in Rom. 4:24, and as He does in many passages where similar language is used (although in those passages he uses different prepositions). Galatians 1:4: “...who gave Himself (τοῦ δόντος ἑαυτὸν) for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age.” Ephesians 5:25-26: “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself (ἑαυτὸν παρέδωκεν) for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word...” And in Titus 2:14: “...who gave Himself (ὃς ἔδωκεν ἑαυτὸν) for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.” Thus here Paul’s meaning would be similar: Christ was delivered up, not only for the sake of Abraham’s trespasses, that is, for the purpose of making satisfaction for them, but also for the sake of ours, that is, for the purpose of making satisfaction for our trespasses.

But I think a straightforward causal understanding, in the retrospective sense, is preferable. This is also in line with the LXX’s usage of διὰ + *accusative* in a similar Messianic context in Isaiah 53:5: “But He was wounded for our transgressions (διὰ τὰς ἀνομίας ἡμῶν), He was bruised for our iniquities (διὰ τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν),” in which case “our sins” were the cause of the Messiah’s suffering, God having reckoned the sins of all men of all times to Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21).

They are “our” trespasses. The genitive “our” seems best classified as a subjective genitive. They are the sins that “we” have committed. Dogmatically we can affirm, based on a host of other passages (e.g., John 1:29, John 3:15-17, 1 Tim. 2:6, 2 Cor. 5:15, 1 John 2:2), that what Paul says here holds true for all people, namely, that Christ was delivered up for the sins of all men. However, exegetically, (1) recognizing that this is the continuation of the sentence that began in 4:23, (2) having clearly identified the “us” in this sentence as “those who believe,” (3) finding no expansion of “us” in the immediate context, we would be hard pressed to prove from this passage that “our” extends beyond the scope of “those who believe.”

This should not surprise us. The entire Epistle to the Romans is written by a believer (Paul) to believers, to the “called of Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:6), to the “saints” (Rom. 1:7). Paul nowhere indicates that the Epistle to the Romans was to be handed out to everyone on the streets of Rome as his letter to every citizen of the city, with every phrase applying to every reader equally. The epistle has a context, which the apostle clearly identifies in the first seven verses.

Some wish to assert that the word “our” here must refer to the sins of all men¹⁷, because in other passages Christ is said to have died for all men. But it is a logical fallacy to insist that a universal reference in some passages prevents a specific reference in other passages.

Others object that, to limit the scope of Paul’s words in this verse to believers is tantamount to “limiting the atonement,” as if Christ had been delivered up for some, but not for others. But that is a foolish objection. (1) First, St. Paul is the one who has limited the scope of his own words, using clear grammatical conventions to do so. (2) Second, it is not that Paul is *excluding* unbelievers from those for whom Christ died; he does not assert that Christ was delivered up *only* for the sins of believers. He

¹⁷ F. Pieper. *Christian Dogmatics*, Volume 2, p. 321.

simply isn't directly talking about unbelievers here. The fact that St. Paul is speaking to and about believers in Christ cannot be used to prove anything at all about those whom he is not here discussing. Neither can one logically conclude from Paul's statement about believers that the opposite must be true for unbelievers. It would be entirely an argument from silence. If one wishes to know the full scope of the atonement, then one must look for clear passages that reveal a scope beyond believers (see above). In fact, St. Paul himself, in order to prove the depth of God's love, will amplify his statement in Rom. 4:25 in the next chapter to specifically extend the scope of those for whom Christ died beyond believers with these words: "But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8), that is, while we were still living in unbelief and were still condemned by God as sinners. (3) Third, it is a foolish objection because the dogma commonly known as "Limited Atonement" is specifically defined in Calvinism as limiting the atonement, not to believers *per se*, but to the elect, due to God supposedly having predestined the larger part of mankind to damnation by absolute decree. Whereas in Calvinism's dogma, God's invitation to believe in His Son for justification based on the atonement He made is a false, deceptive, insincere and impotent invitation when spoken to the non-elect, the Biblical teaching clearly expresses God's sincere universal will for the salvation of all men, that all men "be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4), and His intent in sending His Son, "that the world through Him might be saved" (John 3:17). Therefore, as Paul speaks to believers about Christ having been delivered up "for the sake of our trespasses," those who are currently unbelieving in the world are not permanently excluded from benefiting from Christ's death, but are, rather, exhorted by the Gospel to believe in Christ, that they, too, may be justified by His blood. Thus the atonement made by Christ is in no way limited so as to exclude the unbelieving from its scope, but is rather set before all men in the Gospel so that all may use it in faith and thus benefit from it for their justification.

*...and raised for the sake of our justification.*¹⁸ Christ "was raised (ἡγέρθη)," an aorist passive indicative, the same verb Paul had just used in an active form in Rom. 4:24 to speak of Him "who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead." God the Father raised Jesus from the dead "for the sake of our justification." Here the noun is δικαίωσις, which occurs only twice in the entire New Testament: here and in Rom. 5:18. It means "the act of justification by the divine acquittal."

Paul has described this act in several ways: "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17); "...the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe" (3:22); "being justified" (3:24); "the One who justifies him who is of faith in Jesus" (3:26); "a man is justified by faith apart from the deeds of the law" (3:28); "there is one God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith" (3:30); "Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:3); "who justifies the ungodly... his faith is accounted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:5); "God imputes righteousness apart from works" (Rom. 4:6); "lawless deeds are forgiven...sins are covered" (Rom. 4:7); "to whom the LORD shall not impute sin" (Rom. 4:8); "faith was accounted to Abraham for righteousness" (Rom. 4:9); "that righteousness might be imputed to them ...who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had" (Rom. 4:11-12); "it was accounted to him for righteousness" (Rom. 4:22); "it was imputed to him" (Rom. 4:23); "It shall be

¹⁸ This, of course, is the phrase that has been claimed for "Objective Justification."

imputed to us who believe in Him” (Rom. 4:24). In all of these cases, Paul has described the act to which he now first gives a name in Rom. 4:25: δικαίωσις — justification.

The “our” is the same “us to whom it would be counted, to us who believe.” No change of subject has taken place. The genitive here is an objective genitive: “the justification of us” or “the act of justifying us.” Whether one takes the “our” as specifically referring to those who believe or whether one expands it beyond St. Paul’s discussion to include all people, **the meaning of the passage remains the same: Christ was raised for the sake of justifying us, which, as Paul has thoroughly demonstrated, He does through faith. He was raised for the sake of justifying us through faith.**

We are confronted once again with the διὰ + *accusative*. The simple translation, “...was raised on account of our justification” is undisputed. Also undisputed should be the translation, “...was raised on account of justifying us.” The justifying of us is indisputably identified by the apostle as a “cause” of Christ’s resurrection (note: not the other way around). As we have seen with the διὰ + *accusative* construction, there are two grammatical possibilities: Either “the justifying of us” is to be taken retrospectively, as a pre-existing cause that occurred prior to or simultaneously with Christ’s resurrection, causing Him to be raised; or “the justifying of us” is to be taken prospectively, as a final cause, as something that would occur after Christ’s resurrection, serving as the purpose for which Christ was raised.

The WELS, in support of “Objective Justification,” espouses the former interpretation—the retrospective one that places “our justification” prior to Christ’s resurrection. The WELS either ignores or quickly discounts the possibility of a prospective use of the prepositional phrase, claiming that, since διὰ + *accusative* expresses cause, the phrase ἡγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν must mean that “our justification” (that is, the justification of all human beings of all times, believers and unbelievers) had already taken place prior to or simultaneously with Christ’s resurrection in order for “our justification” to serve as a cause for Christ’s resurrection; the already-effected justification of all sinners prompted the Father to raise Jesus. This view is exemplified in the following quotations by current and former professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary:

In Romans 4:25 we are informed that Christ “was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.” The resurrection of Christ two thousand years ago demonstrated the grand truth that our justification, or pardon, was already a reality.¹⁹

With this διὰ phrase Paul takes us down Golgotha’s hill to Joseph of Arimathea’s garden. Now he invites us to stare into the empty tomb and ponder the meaning of Christ’s resurrection from the dead. It seems that limiting διὰ to “for” would perhaps limit our hearers’ understanding of what exactly God was doing on that first Easter Sunday. Why was Jesus raised from the dead by God the Father? It was “because of our justification.” By using the word δικαίωσις rather than δικαιοσύνη for the Lord’s not guilty decree, Paul especially emphasizes the *activity* involved in God’s declaration of innocence. Yes, the holy God actively declared sinners to be innocent for Jesus’ sake, and that act of declaring not guilty *caused* Christ’s resurrection on Easter Sunday.²⁰

¹⁹ Forrest Bivens. <http://www.wels.net/news-events/forward-in-christ/october-2011/question-and-answer>

²⁰ <http://www.wlsessays.net/files/LeyrerDia+TheAccusativeRomans4.pdf>, p.131.

When Paul says that Christ was delivered because of our transgressions the διὰ is without doubt retrospective. He was put to death because our sins had been imputed to him. And while it is true that “our” in this context refers to believers and only believers can say what Paul says here, yet it is crystal clear that what Paul asserts here of believers is true of all men. This is so well known to every orthodox Lutheran that we need not cite the Bible passages that place that fact beyond all doubt. It is clear that παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν stands in exact parallelism to ἡγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν. If the διὰ is retrospective in the first member of the parallelism it is very natural that we should understand the second διὰ as retrospective also. δικαίωσιν is the act of pronouncing a verdict of not guilty over someone. The genitive pronoun ἡμῶν obviously must be an objective genitive, and the normal way to translate in this context would then be, “Christ was raised because we had been justified.”²¹

Thus the WELS teaches the basic tenet of “Objective Justification,” that God has already declared the whole world of sinners righteous in His sight. They cite the resurrection of Christ as proof of this.

The LCMS, on the other hand, generally promotes a unique understanding of Rom. 4:25 that seems to ignore entirely the actual grammar of the verse. Pieper writes:

Now, then, if the Father raised Christ from the dead, He, by this glorious resurrection act, declared that the sins of the whole world are fully expiated, or atoned for, and that all mankind is now regarded as righteous before His divine tribunal. This gracious reconciliation and justification is clearly taught in Rom. 4:25: “Who was delivered for our offenses and was raised again for our justification.” The term δικαίωσις here means the act of divine justification executed through God’s act of raising Christ from the dead, and it is for this reason called the objective justification of all mankind. This truth Dr. Walther stressed anew in America. He taught that the resurrection of Christ from the dead is the actual absolution pronounced upon all sinners. To refer the words: “Who was raised again for our justification,” to the so-called subjective justification, which takes place by faith, not only weakens the force of the words, but also violates the context.²²

Thus Pieper and Walther view Christ’s resurrection itself as the justification of all sinners; the two acts are equated by them as a single act. But it is difficult to see how exactly Pieper exegeted the words of Romans 4:25 to reach this conclusion. Instead of a causal relationship between “our justification” and Christ’s resurrection, Pieper somehow *equates* “our justification” with Christ’s resurrection. Yet none of the possible meanings of διὰ support Pieper’s assertion that “He was raised as a declaration of” or “as the execution of our justification.”

Tom Hardt notes the discrepancy between the WELS/Becker position and the mainstream Waltherian position of Missouri, siding with Walther and suggesting that the WELS has fallen into outright Huberianism. He notes three points “where Becker and the circle around him show an apparent theological weakness:”

1) Universal justification is identified with what happens in God’s heart at the atonement on Good Friday, not with the justification of Christ in His resurrection as an external act of God, directed towards the world. S. Becker: ... “We do not differ sharply between the expressions ‘universal atonement’ and ‘universal justification’ ”; S. Erlandsson: ... “Here in Rom. 4:25 it is stressed that if ‘our justification’ had

²¹ Objective Justification By Dr. Siegbert W. Becker [An essay delivered at the Chicago Pastoral Conference, WELS, Elgin, Illinois, November 9, 1982]

²² Pieper, F. (1953). Christian Dogmatics (electronic ed., Vol. 2, p. 321). St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House.

not taken place, Our Lord Jesus would not have left His grave. For as certain as our sins were the cause of Jesus' being delivered to death (v. 25a), equally certain our justification was the cause of Jesus' being raised from the dead (v. 25b). The Greek original text uses the same preposition *dia* in order to indicate the cause in both cases." Universal justification thus takes place prior to Easter and is the cause of resurrection, not its result. 2) Absolution and the means of grace are downgraded to means of communication and deprived of their efficacy. S. Becker. op. cit., p. 55, interprets John 20:23: "they are remitted unto them" as a reference to what has already happened at Calvary, p. 56: "The meaning is this: 'They have been forgiven completely in the past, and they still are forgiven now. This means that when we preach the message of the Gospel, we do not effect the remission of sins through our sermon.'" (tr. from Swedish). 3) Universal justification is said to be the contents of the sermon to be delivered to the heathen without any previous reference to the Law. This striking similarity to Huber's pastoral advice to the Wittenberg theologians, quoted above in our article, is found in Becker, op. cit., p. 56 f. (tr. from Swedish): "In America it is very common that Reformed missionaries tell a man whom they try to gain: 'Are you saved?' ... It is, however, not likely that a Lutheran missionary would ask: 'Are you saved?', as the experience of conversion is not so important from his theological point of view. As he believes in universal redemption and in universal justification it is more likely that he changes the order of the words and says: 'You are saved,' 'Your sins are forgiven unto you.' He can say so to everyone, as he knows that it is true about everyone." Through the centuries Huber's missionary sermon: "Habetis gratiam Dei" resounds in the 20th century.²³

For any differences that may exist between Becker/WELS and the Waltherian LCMS position, the fact is that Becker himself was trained and ordained in the LCMS, and he taught at Concordia, River Forest, for a number of years before colloquizing into the WELS, apparently perceiving no fundamental difference between the WELS position and the Missouri position on justification. This makes sense, because, while the precise mechanism of "Objective Justification" differs slightly between Becker and Walther, they agree on the fundamental aspect of "Objective Justification," namely, that God justified, forgave, absolved and declared all sinners righteous in His sight at the time of Christ's resurrection. For as much as Hardt wishes to put distance between Becker and Walther, they essentially agree: **God has already justified all sinners not by faith.** And they use all the same passages to "prove" it.

But what of this conclusion on the part of the WELS exegetes that Rom. 4:25 teaches that God justified all sinners, which then caused the Father to raise Christ from the dead?

(1) With regard to the prospective or retrospective use of $\delta\iota\alpha$ + accusative: Becker deduced that "if the $\delta\iota\alpha$ is retrospective in the first member of the parallelism it is very natural that we should understand the second $\delta\iota\alpha$ as retrospective also." However, we already noted how the apostle pointed used the preposition first to point backward to Abraham and then forward to us in vv.23-24 (still the same sentence as v.25!). It makes perfect sense for Paul to do the same thing in the concluding parallelism. Christ was delivered up on account of our sins (that were counted back to Him), and raised on account of our justification (which He effects by counting His righteousness to us when we "believe in Him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead").

(2) With regard to the context, both immediate and in the entire chapter: Becker is correct in defining $\delta\iota\kappa\alpha\acute{\iota}\omega\sigma\iota\nu$ as "the act of pronouncing a verdict of not guilty over someone." He is also correct

²³ <http://luk.se/Justification-Easter.htm>, Footnote #75

in identifying the genitive ἡμῶν as an objective genitive. However, he then adds his own bias to the text with his past-tense interpretation: “The normal way to translate in this context would then be, ‘Christ was raised because we had been justified.’” The problem, of course, is that, “in this context,” the apostle Paul has not once said in the entire Epistle to the Romans that all sinners (or any sinners, for that matter) were justified when Christ died and rose again. On the contrary, every verse from 1:16 to 4:24 indicates only two possible ways in which God justifies anyone: either by works, or by faith. The context unequivocally militates *against* a justification of all people apart from faith.

Kittel, in his monumental *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, also disagrees with the Becker/WELS position, taking this second διὰ clause as expressing a *final cause* specifically because of the context: “In R. 4:25: παρεδόθη διὰ τὰ παραπτώματα ἡμῶν καὶ ἡγέρθη διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν, **the first διὰ denotes the cause and the second the goal**. If we take the second διὰ in the sense of ‘because we are justified,’ i.e., that we may be partakers of ζωὴ αἰώνιος on this basis, this is out of line with the example of Abraham, whose justification is represented as the result of faith in God who awakens the dead.”²⁴

The “normal way to translate” this verse (contrary to Becker’s claim), given the context, is, “He was raised for the sake of our justification,” or, “He was raised for the sake of justifying us,” that is, so that we might be justified by faith in the God who raises the dead, just as Abraham was.

And what of the conclusion on the part of Pieper/Walther that Rom. 4:25 teaches that the resurrection of Christ was the justification of all sinners?

(1) With regard to the prospective or retrospective use of διὰ + accusative: Pieper doesn’t seem to deal with it at all, but instead takes his (i.e., Walther’s) preconceived notion of justification *not* by *faith* and superimposes it on the Biblical text, without addressing the causal relationship expressed in the Greek text. “The term δικαίωσις here means the act of divine justification executed through God’s act of raising Christ from the dead, and it is for this reason called the objective justification of all mankind.” The Biblical text simply says that “He was raised for (or because of, or on account of) our justification.” Without any grammatical basis, Pieper has to change the words of the apostle from “...was raised *on account of* our justification” to “...was raised *as* our justification,” turning God’s act of raising Christ from the dead into the justification of all mankind. At least the WELS position has some grammatical basis—even though it violates the context.

(2) With regard to the context: Pieper makes the striking statement that “To refer the words: ‘Who was raised again for our justification,’ to the so-called subjective justification, which takes place by faith, not only weakens the force of the words, but also violates the context.” One wonders to which context Pieper is referring, since the whole epistle thus far—and especially the verses immediately surrounding Rom. 4:25—has been proving that sinners are only effectively justified in one way, the

²⁴ Kittel, G., Bromiley, G. W., & Friedrich, G. (Eds.). (1964–). “δικαίωσις.” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

same way in which our father Abraham was justified: by faith—faith which God accounts for righteousness.²⁵

Thus we come to the end of Romans 4, having observed, up to this point in Romans, two and only two methods by which God justifies sinful human beings: either by acknowledging their own deeds as righteous, that is Works-Righteousness; or by counting the righteousness of the crucified and risen Christ to the one who believes, that is Faith-Righteousness. No other justifying act of God has been recorded in Romans 1-4. Perhaps the apostle will introduce a third method of justifying sinners in chapter 5—a justification of all sinners that God has performed neither by works nor by faith?

Lord willing, we will pursue the answer to that question in the continuation of this paper. For now, a closing word from the Lutheran Confessions that not only mentions, but also adequately summarizes Romans 3, 4 and 5:

Therefore it is considered and understood to be the same thing when Paul says that we “are justified by faith” (Rom. 3); or that “faith is counted to us for righteousness” (Rom. 4); and when he says, “that we are justified through the obedience of the one Mediator, Christ;” or, “that through the righteousness of One, the justification of faith comes upon all men” (Rom. 5). For faith justifies, not because it is such a good work and such a fine virtue, but because it lays hold of and receives the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel. For His merit must be applied to us and appropriated by faith, if we are to be justified by it. Thus the righteousness that is counted before God to faith or to believers by pure grace is the obedience, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, who made satisfaction to the Law for us and paid for our sins.²⁶

²⁵ If Pieper were referring to the “context” of Walther’s doctrine of justification not by faith, then he would be correct: the apostle violates it.

²⁶ FC:SD:III:12-14, my translation.

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