

# Objective, Universal Justification or Justification by Faith Alone

The issue of which is the correct teaching, Objective, Universal Justification or Justification by Faith Alone, can be answered quite easily by simply looking at the Scriptures which are cited and used as proof texts for these two positions.

And to clarify the issue, it should be pointed out that though Calvinists deny the universal atonement of Christ, neither side in this controversy among Lutheran churches would reject the universal atonement of Christ. Both sides agree that Jesus Christ fulfilled all righteousness in the stead of all and that He suffered and died to satisfy God's just wrath and atone for the sins of all. — John 1:29; 2 Corinthians 5:15; 1 John 2:1-2; 1 Timothy 2:6.

Nor is there dispute among Lutherans that God desires all to be saved and commands that the Gospel be preached to all. — John 3:16; 2 Peter 3:9; Ezekiel 33:11; Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-47.

Lutherans also agree that the forgiveness of sins and eternal salvation are received by faith which God works through the preaching of the Gospel and the right administration of the Sacraments. — John 1:12-13; 3:5-6; 6:63; Romans 1:16-17; 10:17; Ephesians 1:13-14; 1 Thessalonians 1:5; 2:13; 1 Peter 1:23; 2 Peter 1:19-21.

Where the real difference exists is in regard to official doctrinal statements of the Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Synod and others which teach an objective and universal justification — that apart from and prior to faith in Christ, God has already absolved all sinners (believers and unbelievers) and declared them justified, forgiven and righteous in His sight. This is usually stated to have occurred either when Christ died upon the cross or when God raised Him up again on the third day.

## Official doctrinal statements of the Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Synod state:

1. "Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod" adopted in 1932 and still the Synod's official position.

*Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ, Rom. 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Rom. 4:25; that therefore not for the sake of their good works, but without the works of the Law, by grace, for Christ's sake, He justifies, that is, accounts as righteous, all those who believe, accept, and rely on, the fact that for Christ's sake their sins are forgiven....*

2. 1983 CTCR "Theses on Justification" adopted and affirmed by the LCMS

*By "objective" or "universal" justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ's sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God's unilateral act prior to and in no way dependent upon man's response to it, and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ's sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness. (Rom. 3:24; 4:25; 5:19; 2 Cor. 5:19-21; Ap IV, 40-41; SA II, i, 1-3; FC Ep V, 5; FC SD XI, 15) It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That God's acquisition and establishment of forgiveness in objective justification is a conditional verdict, depending on faith or any other human response or activity; That it is not Biblical to speak of "objective justification." — Par. 23*

*It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That forgiveness of sins and justification for all have not been declared by God when He raised His Son from the dead, but have merely been acquired or made a possibility through Christ's atonement. — Par. 22*

*It is contrary to Scripture and the pure Gospel to teach: That God's verdict of justification or forgiveness is a conditional verdict which specifies that justification occurs only when a person believes.... — Par. 34*

### 3. WELS Doctrinal Statement "This We Believe"

*We believe that God has justified all sinners, that is, he has declared them righteous for the sake of Christ. This is the central message of Scripture upon which the very existence of the church depends. It is a message relevant to people of all times and places, of all races and social levels, for "the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men" (Romans 5:18). All need forgiveness of sins before God, and Scripture proclaims that all have been justified, for "the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men" (Romans 5:18).*

### 4. ELS Statement of Faith: "We Believe, Teach and Confess" adopted in 1992

*By His perfect life and His innocent sufferings and death Jesus has redeemed the entire world. God thereby reconciled the world to Himself, and by the resurrection of His Son declared it to be righteous in Christ. This declaration of universal righteousness is often termed "objective justification."*

### **The Lutheran Confessions, however, teach this regarding justification:**

*Augsburg Confession, Art. IV — "Also they teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works, but are freely justified for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that they are received into favor, and that their sins are forgiven for Christ's sake, who, by His death, has made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in His sight. Rom. 3 and 4."*

*Augsburg Confession, Art. V — "That we may obtain this faith, the Ministry of Teaching the Gospel and administering the Sacraments was instituted. For through the Word and Sacraments, as through instruments, the Holy Ghost is given, who works faith; where and when it pleases God, in them that hear the Gospel, to wit, that God, not for our own merits, but for Christ's sake, justifies those who believe that they are received into grace for Christ's sake."*

*Smalcald Articles, Part II, Article I — "That Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, died for our sins, and was raised again for our justification, Rom. 4:25. And He alone is the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world, John 1:29; and God has laid upon Him the iniquities of us all, Is. 53:6. Likewise: All have sinned and are justified without merit [freely, and without their own works or merits] by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, in His blood, Rom. 3:23f. Now, since it is necessary to believe this, and it cannot be otherwise acquired or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that this faith alone justifies us as St. Paul says, Rom. 3:28: For we conclude that a man is justified by faith, without the deeds of the Law. Likewise 3:26: That He might be just, and the Justifier of him which believeth in Christ. Of this article nothing can be yielded or surrendered [nor can anything be granted or permitted contrary to the same], even though heaven and earth, and whatever will not abide, should sink to ruin. For there is none other name under heaven, given among men whereby we must be saved, says Peter, Acts 4:12. And with His stripes we are healed, Is. 53:5. And upon this article all things depend which we teach and practice in opposition to the Pope, the devil, and the [whole] world. Therefore, we must be sure concerning this doctrine, and not doubt; for otherwise all is lost, and the Pope and devil and all things gain the victory and suit over us."*

Luther's Small Catechism, Apostles' Creed, Article 3 — *"...in which Christian Church He daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers..."* (Note: Why would Luther say that Christ "daily and richly forgives all sins to me and all believers" if all sins were actually already forgiven when Christ died on the cross and rose again?)

## Looking to God's Word

The best and only way to rightly judge the doctrine and be sure we teach and confess only the revealed truth of God's Word is to examine the Scripture passages which are often cited and touch on this issue:

- John 3:16-18, 36 — *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God ... He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him."* (Note: Christ was sent into the world to save the world, but it is only the believers who are not condemned and who are justified, forgiven and saved. Those who do not believe remain under God's wrath.)

- John 8:24 — *"I said therefore unto you, that ye shall die in your sins: for if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins."* (Note: Jesus says that those who do not place their faith in Jesus will die in the guilt of their sins.)

- 1 John 5:11-12 — *"And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life."* (Note: Forgiveness and eternal life are in Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Those who trust in the Son have life; those without faith in Christ do not.)

- Romans 3:21-26 — *"But now the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus."* (Note: Part of this passage is often used in support of objective justification, but justification is connected with faith in Jesus Christ throughout. It makes clear that God justifies those who have faith in Jesus. The "all" in verses 23 and 24 is the "all them that believe" in verse 22. Those justified are those who believe in Jesus.)

- Romans 4:23—5:2 *"Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification. Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."* (Note: The fact that Jesus was raised for our justification is often used in an attempt to teach that Christ's resurrection is the justification of all. The context, however, makes clear that our justification is by faith in Jesus Christ and not apart from faith. Christ was raised that we might be justified through faith in Him and His atoning sacrifice and have peace with God.)

- Romans 5:16-19 — *"And not as it was by one that sinned, so is the gift: for the judgment was by one to condemnation, but the free gift is of many offences unto justification. For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by*

one, Jesus Christ.) Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." (Note: This passage is also used by those who teach objective justification, but it is those who "receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness" by faith who "shall reign in life." Adam's sin brought death to us all. Through faith in Christ's atoning sacrifice "shall many be made righteous.")

- 2 Corinthians 5:18-21 — *"And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."* (Note: This is often viewed as the key passage teaching objective justification — "that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them" — but the present participles indicate that, in Christ, for the sake of His atoning sacrifice, God was and still is reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them. God reconciled the Apostle Paul and He still reconciles us today by the sending of His Son to atone for our sins, sending men to preach the Gospel which offers and gives to us God's mercy and forgiveness won for us by Christ and by sending his Holy Spirit to work through the Gospel to create and sustain faith in Christ which believes that God forgives sins, justifies sinners and gives eternal life to all who believe.)

- Genesis 15:6 (cited in Romans 4) — *"And he believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness."* (Note: How was Abraham justified, long before Christ's death and resurrection? It was through faith in God's promise of a Savior to be born of Abraham's descendants.)

- Psalm 32:1-6 (also cited in Romans 4) — *"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered. Blessed is the man unto whom the LORD imputeth not iniquity, and in whose spirit there is no guile. When I kept silence, my bones waxed old through my roaring all the day long. For day and night thy hand was heavy upon me: my moisture is turned into the drought of summer. Selah. I acknowledged my sin unto thee, and mine iniquity have I not hid. I said, I will confess my transgressions unto the LORD; and thou forgavest the iniquity of my sin. Selah. For this shall every one that is godly pray unto thee in a time when thou mayest be found: surely in the floods of great waters they shall not come nigh unto him."* (Note: Since the one who confesses his sins and receives God's forgiveness in faith is counted blessed, it is understood that those who do not acknowledge and confess their sins remain under God's wrath and condemnation until they repent.)

- Colossians 1:19-23 — *"For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell; and, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven. And you, that were sometime alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now hath he reconciled in the body of his flesh through death, to present you holy and unblameable and unreproveable in his sight: if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel, which ye have heard, and which was preached to every creature which is under heaven; whereof I Paul am made a minister...."* (Note: By making peace through the cross of Christ, God is reconciling all things to Himself in order to present us blameless in His sight; but we are reconciled to God by faith in the message of the Gospel and are not reconciled or justified apart from faith — "if ye continue in the faith grounded and settled, and be not moved away from the hope of the gospel.")

- Galatians 2:16 — *"Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified."* Cf. Galatians 3, especially verse 22. (Note: St.



Paul, in his letter to the churches in Galatia, speaks only of justification by faith in Christ Jesus who redeemed us from the curse of the law by His death on the cross.)

- Luke 18:9-14 — *“And he spake this parable unto certain which trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and despised others: Two men went up into the temple to pray; the one a Pharisee, and the other a publican. The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican. I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess. And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner. I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”* (Note: Jesus is quite clear than only one of these two men went down to his house justified — it was the tax collector who humbled himself and pleaded for mercy. If both were objectively justified, Jesus would have had to say both were justified but only the tax collector was subjectively justified.)

- 1 John 1:7 — 2:2 — *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.”* (Note: Though Jesus Christ the righteous is the propitiation (or atoning sacrifice) for the sins of the world, who is forgiven and justified? It is the one who acknowledges and confesses his sins and looks to Christ and His shed blood for forgiveness.)

- John 20:23 — *“Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.”* (Note: How can ministers of the Gospel forgive and retain sins if God has already forgiven all? Would it not be a lie, according to objective justification, to tell an unbeliever his sins are not forgiven? And what’s the point of absolving sinners who repent if the real absolution already took place some 2,000 years ago?)

- Matthew 16:19 — *“And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”* (Note: How can ministers of the Gospel forgive and retain sins if God has already forgiven all? Would it not be a lie, according to objective justification, to tell an unbeliever his sins are not forgiven? And what’s the point of absolving sinners who repent if the real absolution already took place some 2,000 years ago?)

- Acts 3:19 — *“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord....”* (Note: If the doctrine of objective justification were true, wouldn’t this passage and others like it need to say: “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, because your sins were already blotted out 2,000 years ago?”)

- Acts 22:16 — *“And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”* (Note: If all our sins are already forgiven, what is the point of being joined to Christ in Baptism and washing away via God’s means of grace what has already been forgiven and washed away?)

- Matthew 26:26-28 — *“And as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”* (Note: What would be the point of partaking of the Lord’s Supper regularly if all our sins are already pardoned and forgiven? Doesn’t the objective justification doctrine make of the Lord’s Supper nothing more

than a reminder of what God already did for us centuries ago? And, perhaps, that's why the Lord's Supper has been celebrated with less frequency in the synods which teach objective justification than in the ancient church.)

## **Summary**

On the basis of Scripture, we believe that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, fulfilled the righteous demands of God's Law in our stead and then suffered the just punishment for our sins and the sins of the entire world when He was crucified and died on the cross. He propitiated God's just wrath against our sins and the sins of all by His atoning sacrifice on the cross, and His resurrection on the third day is proof that God accepted His sacrifice as full payment for the sins of all mankind.

Therefore, it is right to say that Christ has purchased and won (or procured) the forgiveness of sins and justification for all mankind and that God reaches out to all in the Gospel with His offer and promise of forgiveness and pardon in Christ Jesus. Those who look in faith to Christ and His atoning sacrifice are forgiven by God, justified and counted righteous. Those who do not believe the Gospel remain dead in their sins and do not have God's pardon and forgiveness and are not justified and counted righteous by God. Cf. John 3:16, 18, 36; 8:24; Mark 16:15-16; Col. 1:19-23; 1 John 5:11-12.

The LCMS, WELS, ELS and others err by using the term "justification" — which the Scriptures use in connection with those to whom God imputes righteousness through faith — in connection to a universal declaration of God prior to or apart from faith which is not taught in the Scriptures. They err by teaching that all people are already declared forgiven, righteous and justified in Christ apart from God-wrought faith in Christ. This is similar to the WELS error of using the term "saint," which the Bible uses only of those who are believers, and saying that all are saints because of Christ, including Judas and those in hell.

### **This error causes confusion in the church for the following reasons:**

- 1) It directs people to place their faith in a declaration of God not found in the Scriptures rather than trusting in Christ and the atonement He accomplished by His sacrificial death on the cross for the sins of all;
- 2) It takes from the Church the binding key given by Christ since, according to the objective justification, all are already justified and forgiven prior to and apart from repentance and faith;
- 3) It takes from the Church the loosing key since, according to the LCMS teaching, all are already justified and forgiven prior to and apart from repentance and faith;
- 4) It gives false security to those continuing in sin and disobedience since, according to objective justification, all sins are already forgiven for the sake of Christ's death and resurrection prior to and apart from faith;
- 5) It would seem to require that God again imputes sin and the condemnation of the Law to those who do not believe that God has already forgiven them.

### **The error is divisive of fellowship for the following reasons:**

- 1) It relates to the central and chief article of the Christian Faith and directly to the salvation of lost souls, meaning erring teaching on this article could result in the eternal ruin of souls.

2) Since it relates to the chief article of the Christian Faith, error in this doctrine affects and infects almost all other articles of Christian doctrine (as seen in This error causes confusion in the church... above).

3) The Word of God does not permit us to add to or take away from God's Word in any way (Deuteronomy 4:2; Matthew 5:17-19) and commands Christians to mark and avoid false teachers (Matthew 7:15-21; Romans 16:17-18; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18; Galatians 1:8; 2 John 8-11; Isaiah 8:20).

4) Those holding to universal objective justification also clearly reject the true Scriptural doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ and His atoning sacrifice (as seen in the CTCR antithetical statements).

5) Church bodies holding to universal objective justification have removed and suspended pastors and teachers for questioning this erring doctrine on the basis of sound Scriptural exegesis.

### **Where the Rubber Meets the Road**

Some would argue, "But Pastor, this is a minor issue and I know of plenty of pastors in the LCMS, WELS, ELS, etc., who don't teach "objective, universal justification." They just teach justification by faith.

To that I must answer that I'm glad it is so, but does that mean we should ignore an error in official teaching and allow it to continue to be taught and spread until more and more hold to it and teach it?

The Bible commands us: "To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them" (Isaiah 8:20). And it warns against adding human opinion to God's Word, saying: "Behold, I am against the prophets, saith the LORD, that use their tongues, and say, He saith" (Jeremiah 23:31).

I titled this section "Where the rubber meets the road" because I would like you to see how important this issue is and how the error infects almost every other article of faith. Not only does it affect how I as a pastor teach and what you as a believer believe in regard to justification and the central article of the Christian faith, it affects so much more. I give you some examples below.

1) Is the Gospel, which I am to preach and we all are to believe, God's offer and promise to forgive you all your sins and give you eternal life when you look in faith for mercy and forgiveness to Christ Jesus and His atoning sacrifice on the cross for the sins of the world (John 3:14ff.)? Or is it simply the announcement that God has already forgiven the sins of all (including unbelievers) because of Christ's sacrifice, therefore one must believe it or it won't benefit him?

2) Do I tell the unbelieving that they remain under the wrath of God and will be condemned to hell unless they repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ? Or do I tell them that God has already forgiven all their sins and they simply need to believe and accept that fact in faith to be saved?

3) Do I use the Law of God to point out that no one is or can be counted righteous under the Law because all have sinned, and the Gospel to point out that God provided another way to be counted righteous in His sight — through faith in the perfect righteousness and innocent sufferings and death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world (Romans 3:9-28)? Or do I tell people that God's Law and His Gospel are contradictory, with the law saying all are sinners and condemned and the Gospel saying all are justified and forgiven?

4) In Sunday services, or in private confession and absolution, do I proclaim to the penitent and believing that I, as a called servant of Christ, in His stead and by His authority, forgive them all their sins (John 20:23; Small

Catechism)? Or do I say God already forgave all sins to all people 2,000 years ago; therefore just believe all sins are already forgiven?

5) If it becomes necessary to retain the sins of one who is impenitent and continuing on in his sinful ways (John 20:23), do I say to the impenitent that his sins are not forgiven unless and until he repents and looks to Christ in faith? Or do I say that God already forgave his sins objectively but they are not forgiven subjectively because of his impenitence?

6) When people are troubled over their sins, do I point them to Christ and His sacrifice for the sins of the world? Or do I tell them to believe that God has already absolved them of all sins and declared them just, righteous and forgiven when Jesus rose from the dead; just believe? Perhaps I should add, "Oh, by the way, the Bible doesn't ever actually say God has absolved the sins of all; it's just the teaching of our church body."

7) When people come for Baptism, do I tell them that God, in Holy Baptism, washes away all their sins, regenerates them and makes them children of God through faith in Christ Jesus (Acts 22:16; Galatians 3:26-27; Titus 3:3-7; John 3:5-6)? Or do I tell them that God has already forgiven and washed away all their sins and that Baptism is symbolic of God's action which has already taken place?

8) When people come to the Lord's Supper, do I tell them that Christ gives them to partake of His very body and blood which were sacrificed for our sins that we might have and receive God's mercy and forgiveness (Matthew 26:26-28)? Or do I tell them that the Lord's Supper is simply a reminder (or symbol) of the forgiveness God already imputed to the whole world when Christ died and was raised again?

My point is that this "little error," like leaven mixed into a lump of dough (Galatians 5:9), affects everything. To allow it to stand or to ignore it and just point to the good things said of justification by faith even among those who teach objective justification becomes a danger to souls and it changes everything we believe, teach and practice.

Therefore, if we wish to hear and believe the truth, if we wish to hear God's true absolution for our sins, if we wish to carry out church discipline as God commands, if we wish to rightly partake of Holy Baptism and the Lord's Supper, if we wish to rightly proclaim Christ's Gospel to the world, we need to reject universal, objective justification and hold to the justification taught in the Bible, that which is by faith in Jesus Christ and His atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world.