**A Brief Defense against “Objective Justification”**

taken from *Luther’s Small Catechism: An Introduction to the Catholic Faith*

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Since this may be the only catechism in existence which explic­itly rejects the teaching of “Universal” or “Objective Justification,” reinvented from a late-sixteenth century heresy and popularized in the nineteenth century by the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS), the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod (WELS), and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (ELS), a defense, however brief, seems in order here.

At least two versions of Objective Justification have been offi­cially taught, though they sometimes overlap. One says that God has already declared every single human being—past, present, and future—to be righteous in His sight (justified, forgiven, absolved) for the sake of Christ’s substitutionary death and resurrection. The other says that God already declared the sinful world as a whole to be righteous in His sight (justified, forgiven, absolved) by reckon­ing the whole world to be in Christ, so that by the act of raising Christ from the dead, He was simultaneously “declaring” the whole world, reckoned to be in Christ, to be righteous. Both ver­sions insist that a sinner must put his or her faith in this Objective Justification of the world, and in this way, the individual is said to personally receive the benefit of the Objective Justification, with the result that he or she is said to be “subjectively” justified. If the Sub­jective Justification does not take place for an individual, then God’s declaration of the world’s righteousness will be rendered in­effective for that individual.

This all sounds very confusing to those who have not been brought up hearing it. That is because it is not what one reads in Holy Scripture, nor is it what one finds in the Lutheran Confes­sions. Phrases like “universal justification,” “the justification of the world,” “the absolution of the world,” “objective and subjective justification,” are novelties in the Church and should be rejected as such, together with all notions of God justifying anyone prior to or apart from faith.

The clear and consistent message of Scripture and the Lutheran Confessions is that there is only one way for sinners to be justified, and that is by faith in Jesus Christ. Justification is a free gift. The earning of this gift took place on the cross. The offer of this gift goes out to all through the preaching of the Gospel. The receiving of this gift takes place through faith.

“But,” they argue, “a gift has to exist already in order for it to be received by faith!” No, it does not. Because justification is not a “thing” that God created 2,000 years ago, nor is it a declaration that He has already made upon all people. It is a promise that He has been making all along, since the Garden of Eden: a promise to jus­tify poor sinners who seek refuge (that is, who believe) in Christ crucified and in Him alone. Men “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. IV).

While there are hundreds of references to justification by faith in the Scriptures and the Lutheran Confessions, there are only a handful of Bible passages which are regularly mustered on behalf of a justification that has supposedly occurred not by faith. The pri­mary passages cited in favor of Objective Justification are Rom. 3:24, Rom. 4:5, Rom. 4:25, Rom. 5:18-19, and 2 Cor. 5:19. Others are sometimes cited as secondary “proofs.” In order to fortify the reader against the misreading of these passages which the Lutheran synods tend to promote, a simple explanation of each one is offered here. It will be shown that each of these passages can and should be interpreted according to the clear and consistent teaching of Scripture, which was also the clear and consistent teaching of the Lutheran Confessions and of Martin Luther, who summarized his teaching in this simple way: “All men are sinners and are justified solely by faith in Christ” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 26, p. 59).

**John 1:29** The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, “Behold! The Lamb of God **who takes away the sin of the world**!”

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That God has already absolved all people or forgiven all people or declared all people to be righteous, whether they behold the Lamb of God in faith or not.

**What it *does* mean**: Jesus is the true sacrificial Lamb foreshad­owed in the Old Testament sacrifices. He takes away the sin of the world, first, by bearing the world’s sin, suffering and dying for it. He paid the penalty for all sins of all sinners with His holy, precious blood and with His innocent sufferings and death. This is called “universal atonement,” “satisfaction” or “propitiation.” He takes away the sin of the world, second, by sending His Holy Spirit out into the world to call sinners in the Gospel to “behold the Lamb of God!” All who behold Him in faith are forgiven, justified and saved (*see* John 3:14-15, 6:40).

**John 3:16-17** For God **so loved the world** that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but **that the world through Him might be saved**.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That God loved the world in such a way that He has already justified the world, or that the whole world has actually been saved through Christ.

**What it *does* mean**: God loved the world in such a way that He gave His Son into death for the whole world, so that the world might believe in Him and not perish. It was truly God’s purpose and desire to save all people, and Christ, by His death on the cross, has indeed earned the gift of salvation for all people and holds out the promise of salvation to all people. By their own fault, many people do not believe in the Son, and so they are “condemned already” (John 3:18), not justified already.

**Romans 3:23-24** for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, **being justified freely by His grace** through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus…

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That every sinner has already been justified by God, or that any sinner is justified by God without faith in Christ.

**What it *does* mean**: God justifies all sinners in the same way: through faith in Christ Jesus. All who believe (v.22) are justified by God’s grace, not by any worthiness in themselves. All who believe are justified through the redemption that is in Christ Je­sus, not through their own merits or works. No one is righteous in himself. But “the righteousness of God is revealed…through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe” (vv.21-22). In this way, God remains just and “the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (v.26). Not “all” who have sinned end up being justified, because not all have faith in Jesus.

**Romans 4:5** But to him who does not work but believes on Him **who justifies the ungodly**, his faith is accounted for righteousness.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That God has already justified all the ungodly, unbelieving people in the world.

**What it *does* mean**: That God does not justify people who are already righteous. He justifies people who know that they are ungodly and wicked, and yet are brought to “believe on Him who justifies the ungodly.”

**Romans 4:25**  who was delivered up because of our offenses, **and** **was raised because of our justification**.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That God already justified all people 2,000 years ago by raising Jesus from the dead.

**What it *does* mean**: Just as faith “was accounted to Abraham for righteousness” (v.22), so faith “shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead” (v.24). God imputes or accounts the righteousness of Christ to believers in Christ, and in this very way He justifies believers in Christ. Christ Himself is our righteousness, and the Father raised Him from the dead for the purpose of applying His righteousness to us by faith, so that we might be justified by faith in a living Savior, “who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us” (Rom. 8:34).

**Romans 5:18-19** Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment *came* to all men, *resulting* in condemnation, even so **through one Man’s righteous act the free gift *came* to all men, *resulting* in justification of life**. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also **by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous**.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That the “one Man’s righteous act” has already resulted in justification of life for all men, or that all unbelievers have already been “made righteous.”

**What it *does* mean**: By one sin Adam brought condemnation on all who are biologically descended from him, since his sin passes down to them. But Christ came and, by His whole life of being righteous and by His innocent death on the cross, earned righteousness for all men, passing His righteousness down (by imputation) to all who are spiritually descended from Him, that is, to all who believe in Him. His righteousness *comes* (present tense) to us through faith, resulting in our justification and eternal life. The Formula of Concord specifically mentions these verses from Romans 5 as referring to justification by faith (*see* Q. #388). The verbs in italics in the verses cited above are not in the original Greek at all. The word that *is* in the Greek is the future tense verb, “many will be made righteous,” which cannot point to a one-time justifying event on Easter Sunday. As Luther says about Romans 5:18, “Yet not all men are justified through Christ, nevertheless he is the man through whom all justification comes” (*Luther’s Works*, Vol. 52, p. 71).

**2 Corinthians 5:19** that is, **that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them**, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That God did this reconciling without means, or that these words are to be understood universally about all men regardless of faith.

**What it *does* mean**: The tense of the verb in v. 19 (“was recon­ciling…not imputing”) does not indicate a one-time action that took place on Easter Sunday, but a continuing act in the past. God Himself walked the earth in the Person of Christ and was reconciling all people to Himself through the ministry of Christ, as Christ called all people to trust in Him as the atoning sacrifice and as the one Mediator between God and men. Before His as­cension, He committed this same ministry of reconciliation to His apostles so that they might point all people to Christ, the Reconciler, so that all people might “be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). It is still Christ who, through the office of the minis­try, reconciles men to God as, by faith in Him, we are brought into Him and “become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21).

**Colossians 2:13-14** And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, **He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses, having wiped out the handwriting of requirements** that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, **having nailed it to the cross**.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That every human being was made alive together with Christ or forgiven.

**What it *does* mean**: As vv.11-12 make clear, the Apostle Paul is speaking about those who have been “made alive” together with Christ through the “circumcision” of Holy Baptism, through faith. God “forgave us all our trespasses” in the waters of Holy Baptism, and there, as He united us to Christ’s death (*see* Rom. 6:3-4), He put us up on the cross with Christ and brought us to life with Christ. Paul does not have the unbaptized unbelievers in view at all in these verses.

**1 Timothy 3:16** And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifested in the flesh, **Justified in the Spirit**, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That God justified the whole world when He raised Jesus from the dead or that He absolved Jesus of the sins of mankind as the Substitute for mankind, meaning that all people have now been absolved of their sins vicariously.

**What it *does* mean:** From Maundy Thursday through Holy Saturday, Jesus appeared outwardly to be a failure who was rejected by God. It appeared that His enemies had been right and that He had been wrong. But in the end, Jesus was proved right about everything He did and said, especially when He was “justified,” that is, vindicated, proved to be the righteous Son of God by His glorious resurrection (*see* Romans 1:4). It cer­tainly cannot be said that the whole world was vicariously “manifested in the flesh” or “seen by angels” or “preached among the Gen­tiles” or “believed on in the world” or “received up in glory.”

**1 Timothy 4:10** For to this end we both labor and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, **who is the Savior of all men**, especially of those who believe.

**What it *doesn’t* mean**: That God has declared all men righteous, or that He has actually saved all men from sin, death, and eternal condemnation in hell.

**What it *does* mean:** That God has given His Son as the sacrifice for all men, earning salvation for them. His genuine purpose is to save all men from sin, death, and eternal condemnation in hell (*see* John 3:17). He does this saving through the preaching of the Gospel and through the faith which is created through the Gospel (*see* Rom. 1:16), which is why He is said to be the Savior “especially of those who believe.”

**1 John 2:2** And **He Himself is the propitiation for our sins**, and not for ours only but also **for the whole world**.

**What it *doesn’t* mean:** That all people are already justified or forgiven, whether they trust in Christ as the propitiation for their sins or not.

**What it *does* mean**: Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the whole world and earned forgiveness for all people. In the Gospel, God offers Christ’s universal atonement (propitiation) to all sinners, so that, by faith in Him, all people may have His atonement applied to them and so be cleansed of their sin and forgiven. As John says a few verses earlier, “But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses 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” (1 Jn. 1:7-9).