

JUSTIFIED SOLELY BY FAITH IN CHRIST: A Plea to Reject the Neo-Lutheran Doctrine of OJ/SJ

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Introduction

- 1) “Did God forgive the sins of the world when Jesus died on the cross?”
- 2) “Has God justified all sinners for the sake of Christ?”

These were the two questions my WELS district president presented to me in October of 2012, with the backing of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, as “yes/no” questions to which he expected any Lutheran pastor to respond with an immediate and unequivocal, “Yes!” Here was my reply then, which remains my reply 14 years later:

- Jesus paid for the sins of the world, made satisfaction (i.e., atonement) for the sins of the world, earned righteousness and forgiveness of sins for all people at the cross.
- God only forgives and justifies sinners by imputing the righteousness of Christ to them.
- He only imputes the righteousness of Christ to unrighteous people through faith.
- Faith is only created by the Holy Spirit through the Means of Grace.
- Therefore, no, I do not speak of God having already forgiven the sins of the world at the cross, because the Holy Spirit did not apply the merits of Christ to the world at the cross, nor did the world believe in Christ at the time Jesus died. We are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—not without grace, not without Christ, and not without faith and the means of grace.

For that answer, I was, within days, suspended from the WELS ministerium.

Whether or not I would have been suspended from an LC-MS ministerium for the same answer, I cannot say for certain. In fact, I suspect—and truly hope—that many synodical pastors regularly preach the simple truth that Jesus made atonement for all by His death on the cross, and that believers in Him are justified. The truly grievous, unforgivable offense, it seems, is the disloyalty shown to the synodical institution when a pastor publicly questions the novel formulations embedded within the synod’s foundation, as if exposing the flaws in the foundation were more harmful than the flaws themselves. Regardless, the teaching called “Universal Justification,” or “General Justification,” or “Objective/Subjective Justification (OJ/SJ)”¹ so permeates the past and present doctrinal writings, both official and unofficial, of all the synods of the former Synodical Conference that, even if they would not suspend me, I could not, in good conscience, claim to be “walking together” with those who teach it.

In 2013, I joined the Evangelical Lutheran Diocese of North America (ELDoNA), who, at that time, to their great credit, took an official position against OJ/SJ and in favor of justification by

¹ Also known as Objective/Subjective Reconciliation (*die objektive und die subjektive Versöhnung*)

faith alone.² Although I parted from the diocese in 2022 for unrelated reasons, I believe their position remains the same as mine on this article of faith, and I know with certainty that it is the position of my congregation and of the Confessional Lutheran Ministerium. I am grateful for the opportunity to defend this position before you today, because I am convinced that it is the position of Holy Scripture and of the Lutheran Confessions, no matter how many oppose it or how prestigious they may be in the eyes of men.

The basic teaching of OJ/SJ

For the sake of contrast, let us begin with a brief summary of OJ/SJ.

For as extensively as the Lutheran Confessions speak on the chief article of the Christian faith, neo-Lutherans in America were not satisfied with the language of the Confessions. Walther and others insisted there has to be more to it, that the Scriptures and the Confessions are not clear enough on the chief article, that a new explanation of justification was necessary. They asserted that a justification of all men must have preceded the justification that takes place through faith,³ a reconciliation of all men with God that took place “nineteen hundred years ago,”⁴ from Pieper’s perspective, “eighteen hundred years ago,” as Walther pronounced in his infamous Easter absolution sermon. OJ claims that, as an immediate result of Christ’s suffering and death, God’s wrath against all mankind was erased, in a forensic act,⁵ being changed into grace;⁶ He went from being an enemy of mankind who hated sinners to having His wrath against all men cancelled, the sins of all men wiped away in God’s sight, a God who was, for His part, reconciled (*versöhnt*) toward all men, once for all, by the death of Christ, and who reconciled (*versöhnte*) the whole world to Himself, objectively, without man’s knowledge or involvement. God, since the moment of Christ’s death, holds nothing against any man. God, in His heart, has justified and forgiven every human being who has ever lived,⁷ without imputing the righteousness of Christ to anyone (or, perhaps, by imputing it to everyone apart from faith?). He “did” this in His heart⁸ when Christ died and “declared” it to the world by raising Christ from the dead.⁹ This heart-forgiveness/justification encompasses all men, including the souls in hell.¹⁰ God forgave even them their sins, reconciled them to Himself, and declared them righteous, too—in His heart.¹¹

² It has become tiresome to hear proponents of OJ/SJ claim that they, too, teach justification by faith alone. To teach that God has justified the whole world, with some different meaning of “justified,” and then claim to teach justification by faith alone, is either sheer dishonesty or cognitive dissonance.

³ The “other side of the same coin,” according to the worn-out analogy of many synodicalists.

⁴ Franz Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 347.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:364.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 2:398.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 2:348, n. 34.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 2:505, 3:195.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 2:321.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 2:381. “Not only those who are actually saved (the elect), but also those who are actually lost have been completely reconciled to God.”

¹¹ *Contra*: Rom. 1:18; Rom. 2:5-8; Eph. 2:3; John 3:36; Rom. 12:19; Eph. 5:6; Col. 3:6; John 20:23, etc. These passages do not present a God whose wrath toward all men has been changed to grace and who

At the same time, it is said that no one will benefit from God's heart-forgiveness unless he believes that God, indeed, forgave all people and declared them all righteous in His heart when Jesus died. "To be justified," according to the OJ/SJ paradigm, is to receive by faith, subjectively, the verdict that was already objectively rendered upon all people in God's heart.¹² Faith does nothing more than accept God's previous declaration that the whole world is forgiven. As for those who do not have faith in OJ, they will perish eternally because, although the Judge pronounced the innocent verdict upon all men, they did not personally believe it, due either to ignorance or to rejection.

**Justification by faith =
justification by faith in OJ**

While this may sound, to the average Christian, like utter nonsense, or like an absurd caricature, and while it may not match perfectly everyone's personal understanding or explanation of OJ,¹³ it is actually the teaching of Walther and Pieper that has been handed down to generations of synodical pastors in Walther's essays and sermons (including his *Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*) and in Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*. It is a made-up teaching, born of Walther's fantasy that, if the forgiveness of sins has not already been pronounced upon all men, if it occurs only when a man believes, then redemption is not complete,¹⁴ no pastor can absolve anyone (since he can't see their faith), no one can be certain of being forgiven (since he can't know whether or not he believes in Jesus), and faith somehow becomes synergistic, a human achievement, man's personal, meritorious contribution to his own salvation.¹⁵ A person's status before God cannot actually change when he believes in Jesus, according to Walther; faith must simply accept what has already happened, what already exists. But, knowing that neither the Scriptures nor the Confessions ever say this in so many words, he scoured the Scriptures, the Confessions, and the Lutheran fathers to determine where he might "clarify" their meaning.

This is the error which has become both a sacred cow and a rallying point for the former Synodical Conference, which we have steadfastly rejected, and to which we will now respond.

has already forgiven the very ones upon whom His wrath is being poured out. Unless the words "wrath" and "forgiveness" have completely lost their meaning.

¹² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:552.

¹³ No wonder, as novel, Scripturally unsupported doctrines are always susceptible to *ad hoc* and *ad lib.* definitions.

¹⁴ In the usage of Scripture, "redemption" refers, not to a single act on God's part, but to various phases of man's deliverance, some of which are complete and some of which are still being and will one day be completed.

¹⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:508. "An essential prerequisite of justification by faith, or of subjective justification, is the objective justification (the reconciliation) of all mankind. If God had not in His heart justified the whole world because of Christ's vicarious satisfaction, and if this justification were not offered in the Gospel, there could not be a justification by faith. All those who deny the objective justification (the objective reconciliation) will, if they would be consistent, also deny that subjective justification is brought about by faith; they will have to regard faith as a complement of Christ's merit—a human achievement."

The ambiguity of German & English, the clarity of Scripture

We suspect that part of Walther's faulty understanding sprang (though not unavoidably) from his own native tongue.

At the heart of the issue is how to understand the concepts of "atonement" and "reconciliation," which are both combined in the single German word *Versöhnung*, with the corresponding verb *versöhnen*. *Versöhnung* is the word used by Walther and Pieper for all three things:

1. What Christ did on the cross, namely, suffered and died for the sins of the world (which we normally refer to as "atonement," *Versöhnung* in German);
2. The (supposed) immediate result of what Christ did on the cross, namely, that the Father was reconciled (*versöhnt*) with all men, that the Father forgave all men in His heart, justified them in His heart, and reconciled (*versöhnt*) them to Himself in His heart, on account of #1;
3. The justification or reconciliation (*Versöhnung*) that men receive when they believe #2.

In German, *Versöhnung* goes both ways. It was done with respect to God ("God was reconciled"), and with respect to man, in God's heart ("man was reconciled"). In fact, according to OJ, it happened/happens to man twice, first in God's heart, without man's involvement at all, and then when a man believes. It is sometimes used synonymously with justification, but certainly not always.¹⁶

To be fair, English is only a little better. We do have separate words for atonement and reconciliation, but even "atonement" is an intentionally blurry word, sometimes used interchangeably with reconciliation in the translations of Tyndale and the KJV, and also able to be used in both a "Godward" and a "manward" direction.¹⁷ Still, English speakers know there is a difference between "atoning for one's sins" (that is, doing something for the offended party to earn back his favor) and the reconciliation that takes place when an estranged family member is brought back into the family, which are clearly two separate acts.

Where German and English are ambiguous, the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible are not. To understand these Scriptural concepts, we need to go back to the Scriptures and turn to them for clarity.

The Scriptures present, in very simple and clear language, two sets of terms to describe two separate actions that bring about man's salvation, one that is directed toward God (or God's Law), and the other that is directed toward man:

¹⁶ For example, *Gott ist versöhnt* can hardly mean "God is justified" or "God is forgiven."

¹⁷ The English word "atonement" (at-one-ment) was a brand new word in English in the early 1500's, which William Tyndale seems to have chosen in order to *combine* the concepts of payment for sins with the intended restoration of fellowship or "oneness."



Atonement: The satisfaction for sins that Christ made on behalf of all men by His active and passive obedience, rendering the Father willing and able to forgive sins¹⁸ to all who seek reconciliation with Him through Christ. (כִּפּוּר , ἐξιλάσκομαι, λύτρον)



Reconciliation: God's act of changing a person's status from enemy to beloved child, bringing him back into fellowship with Him when he believes in Christ, who made atonement for his sins. (καταλλάσσω)

Let us begin with a Biblical explanation of reconciliation, which, in Scripture, is synonymous, or rather coincidental, with “justification,” “the forgiveness of sins,” and “the adoption of sons.”

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is a New Testament word, not used at all in the Old Testament in the context of God and man.¹⁹ In the New Testament, the Greek verbs and nouns translated into English as “to reconcile” or “reconciliation” primarily come from the καταλλάσσω (*katallasso*) word family, which denotes restoring harmony between parties or changing an enemy into a friend, usually in the context of God and sinners. The basic meaning of the verb is “to alter, to change, to make other.” Hence, “to change a person's status from enemy to friend, from sinner to son.”

In the Bible, **God is always the one who does the reconciling**, who alters the status of a man from “sinner” to “righteous one,” from enemy to child and heir.²⁰ Scripture never refers to God as “being reconciled (*katallasso*).” Only sinful man is reconciled to God, by God. “To be reconciled to God,” in the context of Scripture, means to be brought back into a restored relationship with God, back into communion or fellowship with Him, so that God's enemies are no longer regarded as His enemies, but are actually brought back into His house and adopted as His beloved children.

**“Reconciliation” coincides with
“Justification” & “Adoption”**

Since God is always the Reconciler of man, and man is always the object of reconciliation, it is easy to see why “reconciliation,” in the language of Scripture, **always coincides with justification**, God's forensic act of acquitting the sinner who appeals to Christ as his Mediator. Just as God never needs to be reconciled (*katallasso*), so God is never the One who needs to be forgiven or justified (δικαιόω, *dikaioo*). Just as God always does the reconciling, so God always does the forgiving. Man is always the object of both actions. When God forgives men their sins, God, at the same time, restores those forgiven sinners into fellowship with Him and adopts them

¹⁸ Yes, “willing to forgive” or “ready to forgive.” This is what it means that the Father accepted Christ's sacrifice on behalf of mankind, that He is willing to forgive, and will most certainly forgive, the one who seeks His forgiveness for Christ's sake alone.

¹⁹ The KJV sometimes used “reconciliation” for the Hebrew *kipper* and the Greek *exhilaskomai*, but those instances have been replaced in modern translations with “atonement” (e.g. Lev. 8:15).

²⁰ There is no in-between status. Either a person is God's enemy, or the person is God's child and heir. There is no such thing as friend-but-not-yet-child, non-enemy but not yet son. And yet few who promote OJ speak of God as having already adopted all mankind as His children, which would leave most of His sons in hell. Or did the adoption take place in God's heart too?

as His beloved children. Sinners, when they are forgiven, are said to be “reconciled to God” or to have “received reconciliation,” which, as Gerhard observes, is the same thing.²¹

Atonement

But God is holy and just and cannot, according to His own righteous character, simply pretend that sins do not exist. In order for God to forgive sins and reconcile sinners to Himself, God’s justice demanded that reparations (“*satisfactio*, *Genugtun*” in the language of the Confessions) be made for the sins that were committed against Him. “Satisfaction, expiation, and propitiation” are the Latin-based words that express this concept. The Law needed to be satisfied. Sin needed to be expiated. God needed to be propitiated—rendered willing and able to forgive. This is where the unique English word “atonement” comes in, and we will use it in the sense of “**reparations for sin; the earning or meriting of forgiveness.**” The established term “vicarious atonement” or “vicarious satisfaction” refers to the earning back of God’s favor, not for oneself, but for others, meriting God’s forgiveness for them, in their place.

“Atonement” =
 “satisfaction” =
 “earning forgiveness”

The usual Hebrew verb for “to make reparations for sin” is the verb כָּפַר (*kipper*), always in the Piel conjugation. The noun for the reparations, often translated “ransom,” is the related word כֹּפֶר (*kopher*). In the Greek of the LXX and of the New Testament, the concept is represented with forms of the verb ἐξιλάσκομαι (*exhilaskomai*), while the noun “ransom” is usually λύτρον (*lytron* – related to the word for “redemption” in Greek). In every case, it means “to make a propitiatory offering, that is, an offering of reparations designed to appease the offended party, to earn forgiveness, to make the offended party willing to forgive.”

In the language of Scripture, God is always the one to whom, or with respect to whom, the atonement (*kopher*, *lytron*) or reparations must be made, making Him willing and able (according to His righteous character) to forgive sins. These reparations were provided by Christ on behalf of mankind through His perfect life, and through His innocent suffering and death (that is, His active and passive obedience). This is the proper meaning of “to make atonement,” or “to make satisfaction”—literally, to “do enough” (German *genug tun*) to earn God’s forgiveness. By His obedient life, and by His innocent suffering and death, Christ made “atonement” for the sins of mankind, that is, He did enough to earn (or merit) God’s forgiveness for all sinners.²² The reparations required for restoring sinners into fellowship with God were provided vicariously for sinners, by Christ alone. God the Father is willing and able, according to His own character as the just and holy God, to forgive sins and to reconcile sinners to Himself only on the basis of these reparations provided by Christ.

²¹ Johann Gerhard, *Theological Commonplaces: On Justification through Faith*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes, Heath R. Curtis, and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, Theological Commonplaces 19 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 50.

²² Note the difference between “earning forgiveness for someone” and “forgiving someone,” just as “to acquire righteousness for someone” is not the same thing as “to declare someone righteous.” These are two distinct acts and should not be confused.

But how are the reparations provided by Christ (the merit of Christ or the righteousness of Christ) applied to sinners, so that God may justly forgive them? How does God reconcile them to Himself? When does He justify them? Answer: When, by the working of the Holy Spirit, they use the reparations Christ has provided, that is, stated in various ways:

- when they approach God on the basis of those reparations;
- when they “use Christ as Mediator” (cf. Ap:IV);
- when the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the unrighteous 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” (AC:IV – see below).

The reparations provided by Christ must be used by sinners or applied to sinners in order for God to receive them into grace, forgive them, and reconcile them to Himself. This “using” of Christ’s reparations, as Melancthon put it in the Apology, is not man’s contribution to his own salvation, or the one good work man must do to save himself, as Walther and Pieper claimed. First, because faith is a gift of God, not man’s work. Second, because man is not to hold up his faith to God in order to be justified. He is to hold up Christ and His merits to God in order to be justified. **But to hold up and rely on Christ’s merits is the very definition of justifying faith.**

Atonement, then, by definition, includes a **past-tense accomplishment**, namely, that Christ suffered and died for the sins of all, acquired perfect righteousness, and merited justification for all men; and also a **present-tense promise**, that, on account of the atonement made by Christ, **the Father wishes to be gracious and to forgive sins** to all who seek Him through Christ, that is, on the basis of His suffering and death as the Mediator between God and man. As it says in the Apology, Article IV:

Faith is that very righteousness by which we are accounted righteous before God, namely, not because it is a work that is in itself worthy, but because it receives the promise by which God has promised that for Christ’s sake **He wishes to be propitious to those believing in Him.**

This is the content of the Gospel (“the word of reconciliation”)—not that the wrath of God has already been erased toward all men, not that the reconciliation of man has already taken place, but that reconciliation with God is the **promised result** when any sinner approaches God believing in Christ Jesus as the propitiation for our sins, as the only One who makes the Father willing and able to forgive. The Gospel promises **reconciliation with God, forgiveness of sins, justification, salvation, adoption, and eternal life** to all who seek it through Christ, who suffered and died for our sins. Those who believe have the righteousness of Christ imputed to them, and in this way they are justified and reconciled with God. Those who do not believe are neither forgiven nor justified, in God’s heart or otherwise, because **in order for God to forgive, the righteousness of Christ needs to be imputed to the sinner, and that imputation only happens by faith.**²³

²³ Aegidius Hunnius’ rebuke of Samuel Huber applies here, as if it were written directly against Walther and Pieper: “In addition, since this general justification, according to Dr. Huber’s hypothesis, embraces also unbelievers, let him respond to this: Were sins forgiven to them through the imputation of the obedience of Christ, or apart from it? If it was without the imputation of the obedience of Christ, then

Let us now turn to the Scripture text that provides the most comprehensive explanation of the relationship between atonement, faith, and justification.

Romans 3:21-26

²¹ But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, ²² even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; ²³ 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 propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, ²⁶ to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (NKJV)

Since all have sinned and no one is righteous of himself, no one can satisfy the Law so as to earn God's forgiveness, that is, a righteous status before God (cf. Rom. 1:18 — 3:20).

But already in the Old Testament God testified that, with the coming of the Christ, a valid pathway would be opened for sinners to be justified before the holy God. That pathway is "faith in Christ Jesus." Faith is the pathway by which the righteousness of God is applied "to all and on all who believe" (v.21), whether before or after Christ came.

With regard to justification, there is no difference between Jews and Gentiles, or from one man to the next, because all have sinned (aorist/past tense) and fall short (present tense) of the glory of God. No one is justified by doing things (v.22-23).

Instead, all are justified²⁴ in the following way: freely, by God's grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (v.24), through faith in Christ as the Propitiator (v.25). That is *how* all are

the eternal justice of God will be endangered, since He remits sins without regard for a mediating satisfaction. But if it is through the imputation of the merit of Christ, then let him explain: Does the Scripture ever, anywhere, mention any bare, simple imputation that is considered without respect to faith? And what need is there for several, since the Apostle teaches one method and one way alone for obtaining remission of sins, and that is through faith, so that he exclaims that, "We are not justified except through faith in Jesus Christ" (Gal. 2). There are a great many sermons on the justification of men before God in our published writings—in the Augsburg Confession, the Apology, the Smalcald Articles, in both Catechisms of Luther, in the Epitome and the Formula of Concord—indeed, in the entire controversy with the papists that has gone on now for more than 70 years. But regarding this general justification by which all men were supposedly justified at some time, received into the embrace of divine grace, adopted, with sin having been forgiven to all men equally—truly, properly and by the deed itself—of this, I say, in all of these published writings and in all of Holy Scripture, there is nothing but eternal silence." (Aegidius Hunnius, *A Clear Explanation of the Controversy among the Wittenberg Theologians concerning Regeneration and Election with a Refutation of the Arguments that Dr. Samuel Huber Has Thus Far Brought into the Midst*, trans. Paul A. Rydecki, (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2013), 62.)

²⁴ Here, in a truly egregious example of bad exegesis, I have seen some synodicalists place a period. "All have sinned. All are justified. Therefore, if you say that all are not justified, you are directly contradicting God's Word!" But the sentence does not, in fact, end with the word "justified," nor is "justified" even an indicative verb. The sentence goes on to explain *how* all are justified, which does not actually end up in all human beings being justified, because not all believe in Christ.

justified, in that way and in no other way. “Being justified” is a present passive participle. It does not indicate that “all have been justified” (past tense indicative). It indicates the only way in which all people are justified. Or, to turn it around and make it an active verb, it indicates the only way in which God justifies all people, namely, freely, by His grace, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, through faith. Where any of these elements is lacking, there is no justification of sinners, in God’s heart or otherwise.

The redemption that is in Christ Jesus is expanded upon: God set Jesus forth, literally, as a *Propitiatorium*, as a Mercy Seat, as the place to which God invites all people to come for mercy and forgiveness. Just as the lid on the Old Testament ark of the covenant (i.e., the mercy seat) had blood applied to it to make atonement for the sins of the Israelites, so Christ’s blood was spilled on the cross to make atonement for our sins. Just as God was only merciful and willing to forgive the Israelites through the mercy seat, sprinkled with blood, so God is only merciful and willing to forgive sinners who approach Him through Christ (i.e., through faith in Christ), who is the true Mercy Seat, on account of the blood He shed for our sins.

The shedding of the blood of Christ was needed in order to satisfy God’s righteousness. Prior to the death of Christ, no true sacrifice for sins had been made. And yet, knowing that Christ’s sacrifice would be made for sinners, God was able to “pass over the sins that were previously committed” (v.25), that is, by Old Testament believers, and justify those Old Testament believers (like Abraham, cf. Romans 4) by faith in the coming Christ, just as He is able to justify New Testament believers by faith in the Christ who has now shed His blood for our sins.

And in this way God remains just in declaring unrighteous ones righteous, **which would otherwise be an unjust action** (cf. Ex. 23:7, Prov. 17:15), because His just requirement for reparations and for righteousness was met by Christ for us, and those who believe in Jesus have His righteousness applied to them by faith (vv.25-26).

Note: **Without the faith-imputation of the righteousness of Christ to sinners, God would be unjust in forgiving them their sins and justifying them, even in His righteous heart.**

Augsburg Confession, Art. IV

Romans 3 and 4 are summarized beautifully in the Fourth Article of the Augsburg Confession (which cites these two chapters as its Scriptural basis).

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.

Melanchthon couldn’t have stated the article of justification more clearly. Anyone reading this without Walther’s glasses would answer the question, “When are men justified before God?”, with Melanchthon: “When they believe.” That is literally what AC:IV says.

How do proponents of OJ typically react to this clear statement? “This article is only talking about *subjective* justification.” As if the Lutheran Fathers did not need to articulate *objective*

justification, since “everyone took it for granted.”²⁵ Or worse, they twist the text to say something it doesn’t say: “You see, men are *subjectively* justified when they believe *that they were already objectively justified (forgiven)* for Christ’s sake, *before they believe.*”

But this is not what it says, nor is it grammatically possible to interpret the words in that way. Proponents of OJ are substituting past tense verbs for the present passive verbs (in German, Latin, and English) in the Augsburg Confession, changing “sins are forgiven” (present tense) into “sins were forgiven” or “have (already) been forgiven” (past tense).

But the German and Latin are perfectly clear: Justification is not a one-time event in the past that needs to be believed in order for it to be received through faith. Justification is always and only an act of God that coincides with faith.

The German says that men are justified:

so wir glauben, daß Christus für uns gelitten hat und daß uns um seinetwillen die Sünden vergeben, Gerechtigkeit und ewiges Leben geschenkt wird

that is:

if we believe that Christ suffered for us (past tense) and that, for His sake, our sins are forgiven to us (present tense), righteousness and eternal life is given (present tense) to us.²⁶

The Latin says that men are justified...

quum credunt se in gratiam recipi et peccata remitti propter Christum, qui sua morte pro nostris peccatis satisfecit

that is:

when they believe that they are received into grace (present tense) and that sins are remitted (present tense) for Christ’s sake, who, by His death, made satisfaction for our sins (past tense).

For those who struggle to understand present passive verbs, one needs only to turn it around and make it into an active verb, providing the implied subject. Rendered in the active voice, this is what the German of AC:IV says:

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, God forgives us our sins and gives us righteousness and eternal life.

²⁵ Yes, my WELS District President actually made that incredibly absurd claim.

²⁶ One wonders how Walther’s disciples understand that last part in German, where it says that we are justified when we believe that “eternal life is given to us.” Do they believe that the Father also already gave eternal life to all men?

Similarly the Latin:

God justifies [men] freely, for Christ's sake, through faith, when they believe that God receives them into grace and forgives them their sins for Christ's sake, who, by His death, made satisfaction for our sins.

AC:IV clearly teaches only one moment of justification, only one forgiveness of sins, which occurs only when a person believes in Christ for the forgiveness of sins. The “suffering of Christ” (German) and the “satisfaction made by Christ” (Latin) took place in the past, as the basis for the justification that takes place in the present when sinners trust in **God's promise to forgive them** their sins for Christ's sake. The OJ reading of this article is a prime example of eisegesis, reading a person's preconceived notions back into the Confessions.²⁷ This is what we believe Walther and Pieper did with certain passages of Scripture as well.

Let us turn to some of those passages into which Walther and others have read a justification of sinners that supposedly took place prior to and apart from faith in Christ.

Romans 4:25

²⁵ who was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification. (NKJV)

This verse is one of the *sedes doctrinae* of OJ, revealing how weak its foundation truly is.

First, the context. The whole chapter compares Abraham's justification, which was by faith in God and His promise, with our justification, which is also by faith in God and His promise to justify those who believe in Christ. Never in the context of Abraham's justification is any future justification of the world (or justification in the heart of God) mentioned as the basis for Abraham's justification. In vv. 22 and 23, Paul says, “And therefore ‘[faith] was accounted to him for righteousness.’ Now it was not written for his sake alone that it was imputed to him, but also for us. It shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead.” If faith shall be imputed or reckoned to us for righteousness, then to be declared righteous without faith, apart from the imputation of righteousness by faith, **would be completely contrary to the apostle's entire argument and contrary to God's own justice**. In order to apply Christ's righteousness to men, faith is required. If Christ's righteousness is not applied, sinners are not justified. God is not the Justifier of the unbeliever. He is the Justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (cf. 3:26).

²⁷ Another example of which is found in Ap:IV, where Melancthon cites Ambrose, “Christ forgave to all sin which no one could avoid...” But both Ambrose and Melancthon go on to explain where and how exactly Christ “forgave to all sin which no one could avoid.” He forgave to all (and continues to forgive to all) “after the laver of Baptism,” so that “faith is that which frees through the blood of Christ, because he is blessed whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Here Ambrose clearly states that the “all” whose transgression is forgiven are the same “all” who have been justified through Holy Baptism and faith. Melancthon summarizes this teaching of Ambrose in the words that follow, “These are the words of Ambrose, which clearly favor our doctrine. He denies justification to works, and ascribes to faith that it sets us free through the blood of Christ.” No one reading this without Pieper's glasses would ever conclude that the sins of all unbelievers were forgiven apart from Baptism and faith.

Now the verse in question: Both halves of the verse use the Greek preposition $\delta\iota\acute{\alpha}$ + accusative, showing a causal relationship between the verb and the prepositional phrase. “Because of” or “for the sake of” or “for” or “on account of” are all acceptable translations.

The first half of the verse contains an ellipsis. “He was delivered up [to death] for [the sake of / in order to make satisfaction for] our trespasses.” In this case, the causal relationship between the verb and prepositional phrase is called a “final cause” (*causa finalis*), showing purpose. Making satisfaction for our offenses was the purpose of Christ being delivered up to death, the reason why He died.

The second half of the verse likewise includes a final cause, showing purpose: “He was raised for [the purpose of] the justifying of us,” that is, in order to justify us, not apart from faith, but through faith. That is a chief purpose for which Christ was raised, that He might be the living Mediator between sinners and the Father, to be our Advocate and Intercessor at the Father’s right hand. As it also says in the Apology, Article III: “Christ was raised again to reign, to justify, and to sanctify believers according to the Apostles’ Creed and the Nicene Creed.”²⁸

While much has been made by Walther and his disciples about one of the several interpretations Gerhard once suggested concerning this verse,²⁹ Gerhard clearly approves of the following summary of it:

Paraphrase: Christ Jesus our Lord subjected himself to death for our sake, and was delivered up to it, in order that he might make satisfaction for and expiate the sins of the whole world. But he was raised up again from the dead that he might testify and demonstrate that death has been completely conquered and destroyed, and that righteousness and life have been provided for men, and that he might apply these things to those who believe in him.³⁰

We fully agree with this summary of this verse, as stated here and as explained throughout the entire theological examination of Romans 4:25 presented by Meisner under Gerhard’s presidency. If Walther’s disciples were willing to reject the claims of OJ and simply say with Gerhard and Meisner that Christ’s resurrection demonstrates and manifests that

²⁸ One notes that the Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds are mentioned as the basis for Article III. The only reference to justification (that is, the forgiveness of sins) in the Creeds is in the Third Article of the Apostles’ Creed, “I believe in the forgiveness of sins,” and in the Nicene Creed, “One Baptism for the forgiveness of sins.” While Christ’s suffering, death, and resurrection remain in the past, the purpose of Christ’s resurrection, namely, the justification of believers, continues until the end of time, as something that is worked by Christ through His Holy Spirit.

²⁹ For example, Walther seems to have built his whole error of OJ on his misreading of a single paragraph in which Gerhard wrote that our justification is attributed to Christ’s resurrection, “thirdly, with respect to the actual absolution from sin,” as if by this one statement Gerhard had overturned his entire body of teaching in which he clearly and repeatedly stated that only believers in Christ are justified before God. There are two responses to that saying of Gerhard: (1) He only includes believers among those who are absolved in Christ, as the context shows. (2) Even if he had strayed into including unbelievers among the justified in some mystical sense, it reflects only a minor opinion, of a fallible man, in his private writings, which neither reflects his overall teaching of justification, nor can or should it form the basis for our understanding of the chief article, since the Scriptures themselves never extend the status of “justified” to anyone except believers in the Lord Jesus.

³⁰ Balthasar Meisner and Johann Gerhard, *The Summary of the Gospel: A Theological Examination of Romans 4:25*, trans. Paul A. Rydecki (Independently published, 2026), 17.

“righteousness and life have been provided for men,” we could come to an agreement. But “to provide righteousness and life for men” is very different from the claim of OJ that “God has justified all men” or “declared all men righteous.” Indeed, eternal life itself has been “provided for (all) men,” as Gerhard says, as a gift to be received by faith alone. But that does not mean that all men have been made alive. “He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36).³¹

Romans 5:1-11

¹ Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ² through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ³ And not only that, but we also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; ⁴ and perseverance, character; and character, hope. ⁵ Now hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us.

⁶ For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly.

⁷ For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. ⁸ But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. ⁹ Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. ¹⁰ For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. ¹¹ And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation. (NKJV)

These verses are also treated as a *sedes doctrinae* for OJ/SJ in Pieper’s *Christian Dogmatics*.³²

As we have stated previously, the atonement—Christ’s payment for our sins—is an accomplished fact, accomplished when He died on the cross, “when we were still without strength” (cf. 5:6). His death was, indeed, for the sins of all men (2 Cor. 5:14, 1 John 2:2). But neither Paul and his readers, nor we who live now, were reconciled to God **at the moment** Christ died, as we shall demonstrate below.

³¹ “The wrath of God abides on the unbeliever,” according to Jesus. On the other hand, Pieper, quoting Meyer, says the opposite: “Now, just so God has for Christ’s sake dismissed from His heart all wrath against men, with whom He was angry because of their sins. God now feels toward men as though they had never offended Him by sinning, as though never a disagreement between God and men had occurred. Here, then, the so-called objective justification is clearly taught: If God is reconciled with men, if He no longer has anything against them, then He has evidently in His heart absolved them of their sins, then He regards them as righteous for Christ’s sake. Hence, according to Scripture, the reconciliation between God and men, their justification, took place before they came to faith.” This is blatant heresy.

³² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 2:348.

All these words and phrases line up in Romans 5:1-11:

1. Having been justified by faith (5:1);
2. Having been justified by His blood (5:8);
3. We were reconciled to God through His death (5:10);
4. Having been reconciled (5:10);
5. We received the reconciliation (5:11).

Pieper acknowledges #1 as SJ. He then wants #2 & #3 (5:8,10), to refer to OJ. It is unclear whether he wants #4 to refer to OJ or SJ. He then wants #5, to be SJ as the reception of OJ. His assertion is that Paul is using the same word in multiple different ways in these eleven verses, alternating between objective and subjective, without ever indicating to anyone that he is switching back and forth.

In truth, all five of the above phrases refer to the **same event**, namely, the reconciliation of believers to God, which took place at their conversion (usually simultaneous with baptism), when their status before God was changed from “enemies” into “children of God.” In other words, he is referring to the justification that took place through faith for Paul and the believers to whom he is writing. “We,” he says, “were justified (that is, reconciled to God) through the blood (or death) of Christ, by faith.” Paul has already made this teaching abundantly clear in the previous two chapters. The death of Christ (i.e., the atonement, the earning of forgiveness) is the basis for our justification. Faith is the instrument of our justification. Both are required in order for sinners to be justified/reconciled to God. Without the death of Christ as the reparations (that which merited our justification), no one is justified or reconciled to God. And without faith, which uses the reparations, or which uses Christ as Mediator, no one is justified or reconciled to God. Paul does not have to include both elements (the atonement and faith) in every single sentence. Where he omits one, he assumes the reader has been paying attention and will understand the other to be present.

To explain Paul’s argument in these verses:

We were justified by faith (just as Abraham was, cf. chapter 4), and therefore we have reconciliation, that is, “peace with God” (5:1) and “access by faith”³³ (5:2). As those who have been justified and reconciled to God by faith, we have many great blessings already in this life (e.g., perseverance and character), with hope also for the life to come (cf. 5:2-5).

Then follow two arguments from the lesser to the greater: (#1) Christ loved us to the point of dying for us when we were still without strength (5:6), that is, when we were still unbelieving sinners (5:7), dead in our sins and trespasses (cf. Eph. 2:1). If Christ loved us enough to die for us when we were still sinners in God’s sight, we can most certainly expect salvation from the coming wrath on the Last Day (5:9) now that God has declared us righteous in His sight through faith (5:1), by Jesus blood (5:8). (#2) If God was willing to take us, who were His enemies, and reconcile us to Himself through His Son’s death (5:10), turning us from His enemies into His children—a reconciliation that took place when He brought us to faith in His Son (5:1)—then He

³³ Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article IV: “Paul on the contrary, teaches that we have access, i.e., reconciliation, through Christ. And to show how this occurs, he adds that we have access *by faith*. *By faith, therefore, for Christ’s sake, we receive remission of sins.*”

will most certainly save us reconciled children eternally (5:10). And not only do we have a future salvation to look forward to as God's reconciled and forgiven children, but even now this reconciliation is a source of great rejoicing (5:11).

Those who wish to make the first half of v.10, "we were reconciled to God," apply to a universal reconciliation of all men, will have to admit that the second half of v.10 must also apply to all men, that "we shall be saved by His life," referring to eternal salvation in heaven. For as much as Walther's disciples deny teaching universalism, their interpretation of Romans 5:10 leads to no other conclusion.

Romans 5:18-19

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment [*came*] to all men, unto condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act, the free gift [*came / comes*] to all men, unto 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. (literal translation)

Romans 5:18-19 is used as another *sedes doctrinae* of OJ by both the WELS and the LCMS. This should have been recognized as illegitimate from the beginning, because **there are no verbs** in the Greek of Romans 5:18, as reflected with the brackets above. Indeed, the translation chosen by the LCMS for its *Lutheran Study Bible*, the ESV, translates v.18 with a present tense verb: "so one act of righteousness **leads to** justification and life for all men." A verse in which all the verbs have to be supplied by context and interpretation hardly qualifies as a *sedes doctrinae*. In truth, neither v.18 nor v.19 includes a past-tense verb which proclaims that God "has already justified all men."

Far from teaching that "God has already justified all men," these verses, along with the rest of Paul's teaching in Romans 3 and 4, teach that Christ merited justification and life for all men, so that all men might be justified and made alive by being brought to faith in Christ. In other words, this verse teaches God's intention of justifying all men by faith, because Christ has earned that benefit for them, not a past-tense justification of all men that supposedly happened apart from faith.

Is that a novel suggestion? Not at all. It is the summary of everything Paul has taught thus far in the epistle to the Romans. Furthermore, Gerhard teaches the same thing about these verses in his commentary on Romans.³⁴ More importantly, the Formula of Concord specifically lists Romans 5:18 and Romans 5:19 as teaching **the same thing as "we are justified by faith."**³⁵

Therefore it is considered and understood to be the same thing when Paul says that we are *justified by faith*, Rom. 3, 28, or that *faith is counted to us for righteousness*, Rom. 4, 5, and when he says that we are *made righteous by the obedience of One*, Rom. 5, 19, or that by *the righteousness of One justification of*

³⁴ Gerhard, *Annotations*, 241-47.

³⁵ The references to Romans 5:18 and 19 are part of the original text in the Book of Concord, not merely suggested references, as are often included (with brackets) in Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions, Reader's Edition.

*faith came to all men,*³⁶ Rom. 5, 18. For faith justifies, not for this cause and reason that it is so good a work and so fair a virtue, but because it lays hold of and accepts the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel; for this must be applied and appropriated to us by faith, if we are to be justified thereby. Therefore the righteousness which is imputed to faith or to the believer out of pure grace is the obedience, suffering, and resurrection of Christ, since He has made satisfaction for us to the Law, and paid for [expiated] our sins.

In reality, the Lutheran understanding of these verses, and of the entire article of justification, has been clearly stated and often repeated since 1530. The fact that the modern synods have reinterpreted the meaning of these verses to bolster their novel teaching of the already-pronounced justification of the world apart from faith puts them squarely in the neo-Lutheran, not the confessional Lutheran camp.

2 Corinthians 5:19

¹⁸ Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, 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.

²⁰ Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. ²¹ For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

One of the main themes of 2 Corinthians is a defense of the Christian ministry in general, and of Paul's God-given ministry in particular. That theme is clearly evident throughout Chapter 5.

In verse 18, Paul points to the origin of his ministry. First, God reconciled "us" (ministers!) to Himself and gave "us" (ministers!) the ministry of reconciliation, that is, the ministry by which God reconciles other sinners to Himself. Paul himself, before his conversion, was an overt enemy of God. But Jesus spoke to him directly, and through the ministry of Ananias, converted him and reconciled him to God in his baptism (which Ananias administered). Then God immediately gave to Paul the ministry of reconciliation, so that the Gentiles, too, might be reconciled to God through Paul's ministry, just as he had been graciously reconciled to God (through faith, on the basis of Christ's death, not at the moment of Christ's death). Indeed, in Romans 11:15, Paul says that **the Jews' rejection of the Gospel was already resulting in "the reconciliation of the world,"** not at the cross, not in God's heart, but **through the ministry** that had turned away from the Jews to the rest of the world.

Unless one believes (and some in the WELS may indeed believe) that all men (even unbelievers) have been given the ministry of reconciliation, one must concede that the "us" in

³⁶ Yes, so clear it was to the Formulators that Romans 5:18 teaches that justification happens only by faith that they added the phrase "of faith" here.

v.18, who were reconciled to God, and the “us” in the same verse, to whom the ministry was given, is referring to the Christian ministers alone, who were reconciled to God when they were individually converted and then called by God to be ministers.

Then in v.19-21, Paul goes on to recap what he has just said in v.18, to give the Corinthians an example of what the ministry of reconciliation entails. Modern translations often say that “God was reconciling the world to Himself in Christ.” This is where the Brief Statement derived its language that “God has already declared the whole world to be righteous **in Christ**.”³⁷

But that is not how the text reads, nor is it how any of our Lutheran fathers interpreted it. “θεὸς ἦν ἐν Χριστῷ, God was in Christ” is treated by our Lutheran fathers (and Lutheran Confessions³⁸) as teaching the Personal Union of the divine and human natures in Christ, so that God Himself was there, in the person of Christ, reconciling the world to Himself.

“κόσμον καταλλάσσων ἑαυτῷ, reconciling the world to Himself,” which is restated by the apostle as, “not imputing their trespasses to them,” **a phrase which he directly explains, Romans 4:5-8, as that which happens to the sinner by faith**. Note, first, that these are both present participles, expressing ongoing action, following the imperfect verb “was.” This describes what God “was doing” in the person of Christ, through the ministry of Christ, as He brought people to faith,³⁹ not what He “did once for all” at the cross. In fact, Luther’s final translation of the Bible into German uses present indicative verbs here,⁴⁰ properly avoiding the notion of a one-time reconciliation of every human being, while indicating the ongoing reconciliation of the world that God continually does through the ministry of the Gospel, through which the Holy Spirit changes God’s enemies into His children. The world is, indeed, the scope of the ministry. Christ certainly merited reconciliation with God for the world (i.e., atoned for

³⁷ The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, “A Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod” (adopted 1932; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, n.d.), “Of Justification.” “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.”

³⁸ FC:SD:VII; cf. also Johann Gerhard, *On the Person and Office of Christ*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, Theological Commonplaces (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 325.

³⁹ Cf. Johann Gerhard, *On Justification through Faith*, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes and Heath R. Curtis, Theological Commonplaces (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 390–91. “On the basis of 2 Cor. 5:19—“God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their sins to them”—we argue in this way: Our reconciliation with God consists in the nonimputation of sins for Christ’s sake. But now, justification is itself our reconciliation with God. Therefore justification consists in the nonimputation of sins. Bellarmine counters...We respond. We also admit that there are two benefits of Christ, namely, remission of sins or justification, and renewal, because we ‘receive twofold from the hand of God for all our sins’ (Isa. 40:2). At the same time, however, these two should not be confused. Renewal is the consequence of the forgiveness of our sins, even though they are simultaneous. Therefore what Bellarmine had to prove was that we are reconciled to God through the very gift of renewal, **but the cited texts do not prove this. In fact, they rather distinguish between reconciliation, which, they teach, happens by the nonimputation of sins, and the granting of gifts. By faith in Christ we are given the remission of sins which had made a separation between God and us (Isa. 59:2). Therefore by faith in Christ we are reconciled to God. The result of this reconciliation is the granting of the Holy Spirit and inner renewal.**”

⁴⁰ „Denn Gott war in Christo und versöhnet die Welt mit im selber und rechnet inen die sünde nicht zu.“ (<https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb11059049,710-711.>)

their sins). And the reconciliation of the entire world is, to be sure, God's earnest purpose. But **the world is not the object of an already-completed reconciliation.**

Chemnitz, too, for his part, uses present tenses when he speaks about this text and the reconciling of "the world." He also applies it to an ongoing ministry, directed toward the world, not to an already-accomplished reconciliation of every human being with God:

For Paul expressly distinguishes between the power and efficacy of reconciliation which belongs to God, and the ministry which was given to the apostles, so that it is God who reconciles the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19) and forgives sins (Is. 43:25), not however without means but in and through the ministry of Word and sacrament. Ministers indeed are said to loose and remit sins on account of the keys, that is, because they have the ministry **through which God reconciles the world to Himself** and remits sins.⁴¹

God the Father **reconciles the world** to Himself, accepts the believers, not imputing their sins to them.⁴²

In the second part of v.19, Paul declares that this same ministry has been handed down to him and to other ministers of the Gospel. As God was in Christ, carrying out the ministry, reconciling sinners by bringing them to faith in Christ and giving them the right to become children of God (cf. John 1:12), so Paul and the other ministers now stand in the stead of Christ, continuing the ministry of reconciliation until the end of time.

In vv.20-21, Paul summarizes that ambassador-ministry, the preaching of the "word of reconciliation," which is **not** the message that the whole world has already been reconciled to God, but is a plea to sinners to "be reconciled to God" (v.20), on the basis of the atonement ("He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us"), with the goal and purpose that all sinners should be reconciled to Him and justified through faith in Him ("that we might become the righteousness of God in Him").

FC:SD:XI

God's **universal purpose of reconciliation** is beautifully described in the Formula of Concord, in the article on God's eternal foreknowledge and election. Ironically, this very article has been cited by those who have donned Walther's OJ glasses as one of the "clearest" examples of OJ in the Book of Concord. Walther makes this claim in one of his convention essays:

This is declared in the Formula of Concord: "In his purpose and counsel God has ordained... that through Christ the human race has truly been redeemed and reconciled with God and that by his innocent obedience, suffering, and death Christ has earned for us the righteousness which avails before God and eternal life."...In the quoted testimony from the Formula of Concord it is highly important to note that it does not say: "The human race will truly be redeemed and

⁴¹ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, Part II, trans. Fred Kramer, vol. 2 of Chemnitz's Works (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 559.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 2:72.

reconciled with God", but rather: "has truly been redeemed and reconciled with God."⁴³

Since there is no past-tense verb ("has been reconciled") in the German or Latin of the Formula, I had to look up Walther's original German words in his essay to see if he was even more egregiously misrepresenting this paragraph or if it was poorly translated into English in the CPH series. It was, in fact, wrongly translated as a past tense—although that is not the only problem for Walther.

The original German of the Formula reads like this:

Gott in seinem Vorsatz und Rath verordnet hat: 1. Daß wahrhaftig das menschliche Geschlecht erlöset und mit Gott versöhnet sei durch Christum, der uns mit seinem unschuldigen Gehorsam, Leiden und Sterben Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, und das ewige Leben verdienet habe.

Walther emphasized that it does not say that the human race "mit Gott versöhnt werden soll" ("should be reconciled with God"), but rather, that the human race "mit Gott versöhnet sei," ("is/be reconciled with God"). In other words, he believed the Formula to be saying that God's eternal decree was stating the way things **were** at the time the decree of election was made. God decreed, in eternity, "that the human race **is** reconciled with God."

Walther's assertion that the German clause could have been stated more fully is correct, but his argument that, because it is not stated as fully as possible, it must have a different meaning, is poorly made. The modals *sollen* (should) and *wollen* (would) could be used or not used in 16th century German, just as they can be used or not used in English. There is no difference in meaning in English between "decreed that the human race **be** reconciled" and "decreed that the human race **should be** reconciled." The real question is, is this sentence an instance of indirect discourse or is it a purpose clause?

The subjunctive *sei*, which we see here, is used either in indirect discourse, where it would be translated "is" reconciled, or in a purpose clause, where it would be translated "be" (or "should be") reconciled. It certainly cannot be understood as a past tense, "has been reconciled."

But clearly this sentence is not indirect discourse, stating the way things were in eternity. It is, as expressly stated in the words themselves, a purpose clause, expressing God's **purpose** for the future, from creation to the Last Day. The Latin also agrees with this, using the imperfect passive subjunctive *reconciliaretur*, consistent with a purpose clause for a main verb in secondary sequence:

quod videlicet Deus in suo consilio et proposito decreverit haec: I. Ut humanum genus vere redimeretur atque cum Deo per Christum reconciliaretur, qui nobis innocentia atque perfectissima obedientia, passione ac morte acerbissima iustitiam, quae coram ipso valet, et vitam aeternam promeruit.

⁴³ Walther, C. F. W.. *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Convention Essays*, Concordia, St. Louis, MO, 1981, 75–90.

The natural translation of the Latin would be: “that God, in His counsel and **purpose**, decreed these things: (1) That the human race (should) be truly redeemed and reconciled with God through Christ...”

Here is what published English translations have done with the phrase in question:

1854 Henkel	"that the human race shall be truly redeemed and reconciled”
1911 Jacobs	"that the human race should be truly redeemed and reconciled”
1921 Dau/Bente	"that the human race is truly redeemed and reconciled”
2005 McCain	“that the human race is truly redeemed and reconciled”
1959 Tappert	"that the human race has truly been redeemed and reconciled”
2000 Kolb-Wengert	"that the human race has been truly redeemed and reconciled”

The Tappert and Kolb-Wengert past-tense translations are **linguistically indefensible**. The Dau/Bente and McCain present-tense indicative translations, which also reflect Walther’s faulty understanding of the phrase, are **contextually indefensible**. Only Henkel and Jacobs (who had no direct association with the Synodical Conference) translated it correctly, with Jacobs’ clear use of the English subjunctive being preferable, because, again, the clause is not indirect discourse, indicating the way it “is” (or “was”) in eternity, before the foundations of the world were laid, when God made His decree of election. It is a **purpose clause**, setting forth God’s very first purpose (also called His “antecedent will”) in His decree of election, namely, the full redemption, reconciliation, and eternal salvation of every human being—every last man, woman, and child who would ever live. This was not a decree that all human beings should be only “objectively” reconciled to God, but fully and completely, so that they would all end up in His Holy Church and, eventually, in heaven with Him.⁴⁴ If a person misunderstands this universal purpose of God, he will misunderstand the entire doctrine of election and justification, as the Calvinists also do.

The beginning of God’s decree of election, which includes all eight points enumerated in the Formula, was His purpose to save all sinners and give them all eternal life. This is the very purpose Jesus reveals in John 3:17, also with a **purpose clause** and with the appropriate subjunctive verb: “For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him **might be saved**.” God’s intention in election was that all men should be saved through Christ, that the human race should be redeemed and reconciled to Him through Christ. Walther claims, on the other hand, that this purpose was already accomplished in eternity! “God, in His eternal counsel and purpose, decreed these things...that the human race **is** reconciled with God.”

The Formula then goes on to use a past tense, stating what Christ has already done, in time, in order that God’s eternal purpose of universal salvation might be realized:

...durch Christum, der uns mit seinem unschuldigen Gehorsam, Leiden und Sterben Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, und das ewige Leben verdient habe.

...through Christ, who, by His faultless obedience, suffering, and death, has merited for us the righteousness that avails before God, and eternal life.

⁴⁴ This teaching of God’s intention of universal salvation is a hallmark of Lutheran teaching, while being anathema to Calvin, who taught that God never intended to save all people.

The Formula does not say that God, in eternity, had already justified all sinners, declaring them righteous in His heart; or that He had, in eternity, already reconciled all men to Himself, changing them from enemies into sons, nor does it say that these things happened when Christ came. What it says is that, by His obedience, suffering, and death, **Christ has earned righteousness and eternal life** for the human race.

But as we have seen, in order for God to save (or justify or reconcile) sinners **through Christ**, sinners must actually **go through Christ**, which He invites them all to do, to use Christ as Mediator, to believe in Him, to seek God's forgiveness through Him who merited that very gift for us all. God's plan to redeem and reconcile the human race to Himself included not just the "what" of the decree, which includes its universality, but also the "how," which begins already in point #1, with what Christ earned for all, and continues through point #8. But for our purpose of outlining the "how" of justification, we will focus on the first four points. How should the human race be truly redeemed and reconciled with God? Through (1) **the atonement** (the earning of forgiveness) provided by Christ, through (2) the preaching of **the Gospel**, and through (3) **faith**, sinners would be (4) **justified**.

1. That the human race should be truly redeemed and reconciled with God through Christ, who, by his faultless obedience, suffering and death, has merited for us righteousness which avails before God, and eternal life.

Atonement

2. That such merit and benefits of Christ should be offered, presented and distributed to us through his Word and sacraments.

The Means of Grace

3. That he would be efficacious and active in us by his Holy Ghost, through the Word, when it is preached, heard and pondered, to convert hearts to true repentance and preserve them in the true faith.

Faith

4. That all those who, in true repentance, receive Christ by a true faith he would justify and receive into grace, adoption and inheritance of eternal life.

Justification

Notice that the Formulators were careful to place justification in the proper place, namely, as the result of faith worked by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, not as having already occurred "objectively," either in eternity or at the cross. For his part, Walther, reading the Formula of Concord through his new OJ/SJ glasses, was convinced that he had identified the hidden OJ in the Confessions. In reality, he merely exposed his own confusion and inability to recognize a purpose clause. And tragically, all the publishers of the English translations who were influenced by Walther's error followed suit and codified his error into a legacy of false interpretations of the doctrine on which the church stands or falls.

Conclusion

Take the whole Book of Concord. Take all the writings of Gerhard. Take all the writings of Luther, and Melancthon, and Chemnitz, and if you don't filter them through the neo-Lutheran OJ/SJ lens, you will see that they consistently and exclusively taught that justification takes place by faith alone in Christ, who, by His suffering and death, atoned for the sins of mankind and earned the gift of forgiveness for mankind, without ever claiming that the justification of the world in the heart of God was an immediate result of the atonement. And if, perhaps, they or other Lutheran fathers occasionally misspoke or erred in their private writings, or did not always express themselves accurately and clearly,⁴⁵ do not fret, or try to preserve their honor by treating their every word as infallible. They certainly did not claim infallibility for themselves. The word of man is fallible; the Word of God is not, and it is perfectly clear about how sinners are justified. Indeed, it is beyond all controversy that all the Lutheran fathers fully agreed on this basic Scriptural truth, which is nothing but a paraphrase of John 3:16-18:

- + God the Father gave His Son, who suffered and died for the sins of the world, so that all men might believe in Him and so be justified and eternally saved.
- + Those who believe in Jesus are both justified and eternally saved.
- + Those who do not believe are neither justified nor saved, but remain eternally condemned.

I realize how difficult it would be for the synods and their children to admit that their 19th century founders (or ancestors) erred in the chief article of the Christian faith, and that all their defenses of OJ/SJ over the past 150 years have only fostered the deception and enabled it to fester. But this rot at the root of the tree has severely damaged and diminished the Lutheran witness throughout the world, spawning other errors along the way and teaching generations of pastors that loyalty to synodical teaching, or synodical heroes, obligates them to read the Scriptures and Confessions through lenses darkened by the devil's deceit.

I, therefore, appeal to you today, in the name of the Lord Jesus, to remove the darkened lenses, to return to the simple, Scriptural, authentically Lutheran teaching of justification by faith alone in Christ, and to reject, publicly and definitively, any and every form of the neo-

⁴⁵ Although, even then, the failure is often on the part of the reader rather than the author, since those who read with Walther's glasses tend to zero in on any word or phrase that they think supports his doctrine, while failing to take in the whole argument Luther or others are making. For example, the OJ that Walther's disciples think they have identified on one page of Luther's Galatians commentary (e.g., Vol. 26, p.180) is actually explained as justification by faith a few pages later: "But the true theology teaches that there is no more sin in the world...Therefore wherever there is faith in Christ, there sin has in fact been abolished, put to death, and buried. But where there is no faith in Christ, there sin remains. And although there are still remnants of sin in the saints because they do not believe perfectly, nevertheless these remnants are dead; for on account of faith in Christ they are not imputed." (Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, Chapters 1-4* (1535), in *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 186.)

Lutheran gospel of Objective/Subjective Justification. As Luther himself summarizes his—or, more properly, the apostle Paul’s—doctrine in his commentary on Galatians:

Therefore my doctrine is true, pure, sure, and divine. Nor can there be any doctrine that is different from mine, much less better. Therefore any doctrine at all that does not teach as mine does—**that all men are sinners and are justified solely by faith in Christ**—must be false, uncertain, evil, blasphemous, accursed, and demonic. And so are those who either teach or accept such a doctrine.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Luther, LW 26:59.