

A History of the Term “Objective Justification”

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You have asked me to present a paper on the history of the term “objective justification.” The reason for such a request is quite clear. Ever since the publication of the *Declaration* of the American Lutheran Church in 1938, and particularly since the appearance of its successor, the *Common Confession*, there has not only been much discussion about the general content of these documents, but particularly also concerning their presentation of the doctrine of justification. The real point of the discussion was, of course, the doctrine itself, particularly the thought that in Jesus Christ God has already declared the entire world righteous, entirely apart from the faith of man. But gradually the terminology of an “objective” justification became more and more of an issue, so that finally—in spite of a misleading antecedent which speaks of the redemptive work of Christ rather than of a judicial verdict of God—the mere parenthetical inclusion of the term in Art. VI of the Common Confession (“This is sometimes spoken of as objective justification”) was presented by its defenders as a victory for Synodical Conference theology. While we could not share this elation because of the serious defects of the definition, others began to criticize the term “objective justification” itself. It was claimed that this expression is more or less of an innovation, a mere local use, and without standing in good theological literature. The implication was that differences on such a point of terminology should not be permitted to become a major issue. All this certainly calls for an inquiry into the history and use of the term, both within the Synodical Conference and without. For the sake of completeness this study must include also its synonyms which speak of “general” or “universal” justification, as well as its substance as stated above.

I

In tracing the use of the term “objective justification” in Synodical Conference literature one finds that, apart from the frequency with which it occurs in recent years, it was generally used rather sparingly, and usually in close connection with equivalent expressions (“general” or “universal” justification) which seem to be added by way of explanation.

The most emphatic use of our term is undoubtedly that of Dr. Franz Pieper, particularly in his *Christliche Dogmatik* of 1917. One passage from the recent English translation¹ will illustrate the point; “An essential prerequisite of justification by faith, or of subjective justification, is the objective justification (the reconciliation) of all mankind.” (Vol. II, p. 508.) His thought is that without this basic judicial act of God there would be no Gospel for faith to believe, no gracious forgiveness for it to receive and appropriate as its own. And yet the *Brief Statement*, in the drafting of which Franz Pieper had so large a part, does not use the term. We do find a powerful equivalent, however, namely that “God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ.” (Art. 17.) Hoenecke uses both terms, speaking first (*Dogmatik*, III, 354) of a universal justification which took place in time, namely in the death and resurrection of Christ, and which came upon all men, Romans 5:18; and then (page 405) of the manner in which Scripture establishes the connection between the objective act of justification and the subjective possession and enjoyment thereof in blessed peace.

The files of our *Theological Quarterly* yield some other examples, such as an article in which John Schaller discusses “the doctrine of the universal, so-called objective justification.” Vol. VII, p. 81. Or Vol. III, p. 107, where Prof. Aug. Pieper refers to such as deny the actuality of objective justification. At approximately the same time August Graebner’s *Doctrinal Theology* was published, which follows the same method of using the double terminology, “general or objective justification” (page 189). And Stoeckhardt is particularly reserved in the use of our term. In his Commentary on Romans he manages to summarize the first five chapters of this epistle in his well-known Excursus on the Pauline Doctrine of Justification without once using the word “objective.” And yet, it was not that he was not familiar with the term, nor does he seem to have opposed its use, for on page

262 we find him calling the passage in chapter 5:18-19 “the *locus classicus* for the doctrine of the universal or so-called objective justification.”

As we examine the literature of the closing decades of the 19th Century we find even less evidence of the use of this somewhat philosophical or psychological expression. It is almost as though the men of these days were not familiar with the term. And yet there is a rather striking instance which proves the contrary. The occasion was the General Pastoral Conference of 1880, held in Chicago for the purpose of discussing differences that had arisen within the Missouri Synod concerning the doctrine of Election. Walther’s doctrine was being attacked, and Prof. F. W. Stellhorn, subsequently to become one of the leaders of the Ohio Synod, was one of the chief spokesmen against him. In an effort to prove the particular election of individuals to be but a judicial application of the terms of God’s universal will of grace, Stellhorn spoke as follows: “I remind you of an analogy, the doctrine of a twofold justification. There, in opposition to modern theologians, all of us teach that there is an objective justification, which came to pass through the resurrection of Christ. By this resurrection all mankind has been justified objectively. There God has declared: Now all men are justified, freed from their sins. And he who accepts this objective justification in faith is also justified subjectively (*der wird auch subjektiv gerechtfertigt*). (*Verhandlungen der Allgem. Pastorkonferenz*, p. 32.²) In his reply Dr. Walther called this the language of scholars (“*wie die Gelehrten reden*”), but entered on the use of these same terms, differing with Stellhorn only because of the latter’s way of implying that justification involved two judicial acts of God. Obviously both men were operating with familiar and accepted terms. The fact that they were but little used in the writings of those days seems to have been simply a matter of preference. It was not that the terms were not known and accepted.

II

This is as far back as I have been able to trace the use of our term in Synodical Conference literature. The marks of the trail have been few and far between. This does not mean, however, that there was little interest in the subject. We have already seen how frequently the writers chose to use a less abstract and philosophical terminology, and simply spoke of a general or universal justification; or made the statement complete, namely that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ. This thought is the subject of many an article and essay, both in their theological publications and in periodicals intended for lay readers. Thus Stoeckhardt wrote an extensive series of articles on the topic of justification by faith, running through seven issues of the *Lutheraner* of 1888. It is in these articles that he assembles an impressive list of quotations from the confessions, testimonies in which justification or forgiveness are spoken of as the substance of the Gospel and the object of faith.

But the man who from the beginning had not only insisted on the centrality of the doctrine of justification, but also on the basic importance of a true appreciation of its “objective” quality was, of course, Walther himself. On the occasion of the first convention of the Synodical Conference, 1872, he was the author of the doctrinal essay and his subject was the doctrine of justification. It was no mere academic interest that led to this particular choice. One of the charter members, the Norwegian Synod, was under severe criticism at the hands of other Norwegian bodies and particularly also the Iowa Synod. The reason was its assertion that Absolution was not a mere empty announcement of, or wish for, the forgiveness of sins, but a powerful impartation of it. Having been charged by the Iowa Synod with teaching a universal justification, the Norwegian Synod was now asking the sister synods for a statement on the issue. Walther’s essay was the answer, particularly in Thesis V, VI, and VII. The last of these may serve as an example:

The Gospel is not a mere historical account of the completed work of redemption, but much more a powerful declaration of peace and promise of grace by God to the world redeemed by Christ. Thus it is always a powerful means of grace, in which God on His part brings, offers, distributes, gives and presents the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness earned by Christ, although not all to whom God lets His earnest call of grace go out accept this invitation of the reconciled God and thus do not either become partakers of the benefits following it. (Quoted from *Grace for Grace*, 1943. S.C. Ylvisaker, Chief Editor.)

In his elaboration of Thesis V Walther shows how the resurrection of Christ is the basis and cornerstone of justification. And in reply to the inquiry of the Norwegians concerning universal justification he says: "This doctrine is stated in Romans 5:18, and it is therefore not merely a biblical teaching, but also a biblical expression that justification of life has come upon all men." (Proceedings of the First Convention, 1872, p. 43.) Then follows an impressive list of quotations from earlier orthodox Lutheran theologians (pages 44-45), also the Latin text of Art. VI of the Augsburg Confession (that "remission of sins and justification is apprehended by faith") and similar testimonies.

Another indication of the consuming interest which this topic held for the founding fathers of the Synodical Conference is the classic monograph, *The Justification of the Sinner Before God* by Dr. Ed. Preuss, at that time professor in St. Louis. Again one paragraph will suffice to show how the author felt about universal justification.

We, then, are redeemed from the guilt of sin; the wrath of God is appeased; all creation is again under the bright rays of Mercy, as in the beginning; yea, in Christ we were justified before we were even born. For do not the Scriptures say: 'God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them'? This is not the (that?) justification which we receive by faith, but the one which took place before all faith. —And Romans 5:18: 'As by the offense of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation, even so by the righteousness of One the free gift came upon all men unto the justification of life.' That is the great absolution which took place in the resurrection of Christ . . . (Quoted from the Friedrich translation of Preuss.)

Although the term "objective justification" is not in evidence in this discussion that is contemporary with the founding of the Synodical Conference, a previously cited book, *Grace for Grace*, furnishes what may be a clue to the gradual adoption of the terminology of an "objective" justification as a synonym for general or universal justification. Through the work of a certain Eielsen, a follower of the pietistic Hauge, and because of the position of the Augustana Synod, the Lutheran Norwegians had been compelled to face the issue of Pietism more directly than the German founders of the Synodical Conference. In *Grace for Grace* we read, on page 156:

It is the bane of Pietism that it centers its attention so much on the feelings and the spiritual condition of man's heart that it forgets or pays but slight attention to the great objective facts of God's love for men and the all-sufficient atonement of the Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. It bids men look within for assurance that they have truly repented and believed instead of telling them to fix their eyes on Christ and His word and to rest in His promises, regardless of the sins and little faith that they too often find in their own hearts. This deep-rooted difference between orthodoxy and pietism explains why a controversy arose regarding such fundamental questions as that of Absolution and the related doctrines of the Gospel and Justification, and that, almost from the beginning of Norwegian Lutheran history in America.

Does this not explain the gradual transition that takes place, the coming into favor of a term with which, as Stellhorn reveals, the founding fathers were perfectly familiar and which, as we shall presently see, had good standing in Europe? They obviously preferred the simpler forms that describe the justification of man as general or universal. But here was another term that emphasized the historical reality or "objectiveness" of this judicial act of God, entirely apart from what man happens to think, or how he may feel about it.³ It was the specific antidote for the subjectivism of Pietism, and for a theology that had, perhaps unconsciously, been influenced by it. It was a way of getting back to the sober factualness of the Gospel as history in the highest sense of the word. And so they found good use for the term, which soon became a part of their working vocabulary.

III

The question still remains whether this was an innovation as far as the doctrine itself is concerned, one that constitutes a break with the continuity of orthodox Lutheranism since the days of the Reformation; also whether the terminology was of such limited acceptance, that its use in Synodical Conference theology may be considered a mere local idiom.

As far as the first point is concerned, namely whether our fathers operated with the thought of a justification which is an accomplished fact, a recent essay by Prof. Meyer, published in the October 1954 issue of the *Quartalschrift* lists a number of pertinent quotations (pp. 256-258). Many more are found in Walther's edition of Baler, (Vol. III, pp. 134ff and 271ff), Stoeckhardt's listing in the *Lutheraner* has already been referred to. This includes passages which state that justification by faith consists solely of receiving and accepting a treasure, the presence of which is already an accomplished fact. So Luther (St. L. XI, 1104:28) who speaks of a faith that has nothing to do but to receive. "*Denn es ist nicht unsers Tuns und kann nicht durch unser Werk verdient werden, es ist schon da geschenkt und dargegeben.*" Or "*Willst du nun solcher grossen Gueter brauchen: Wohlan, er hat sie dir schon geschenkt; tue du ihm nur so viel Ehre, und nimm es mit Dank an.*" (St. L. XII, 156:13.) Or the following: "*An dem einen, selig werden, hat es freilich keinen Mangel noch Fehl; denn das ist gar dargegeben und geschenkt im Wort oder Evangelio.*" (St. L. XI, 968:24.) The *Quartalschrift* quotation relates this specifically to the article of justification: "*Siehe, da hast du alles, so zu diesem Artikel gehoert, von der christlichen Gerechtigkeit, die da steht in der Vergebung der Suenden, durch Christum uns geschenkt, und mit dern Glauben durch und in dem Wort empfangen.*" (Page 257.) On the same page we have a quotation from the Formula of Concord which is likewise to the point. And Walther quotes Calov who says that our redemption, reconciliation, and the expiation of our sins are not subject to conditional factors, but that faith, which is necessary, has no other function than that of appropriating these gifts (quoted Baier-Walther, III, 135).

The same thought of a Gospel that proclaims forgiveness of sins as an accomplished fact stands out very clearly in another statement by Luther, although in a somewhat different context. In his explanation of the Fifth Petition (Cat. Maj., *Trig.*, 723:88) we find him saying: "Therefore there is here again great need to call upon God and to pray: Dear Father, forgive us our trespasses. *Not as though He did not forgive sin without and even before our prayer* (for He has given us the Gospel, in which is pure forgiveness *before we prayed or ever thought about it*)."

Another point is added by the *Formula of Concord* which speaks of our righteousness that is revealed in the Gospel as being universal, "a complete satisfaction and expiation for the human race." (*Trig.*, 935:57). In the same vein Walther quotes Gerhard, who on the basis of Romans 5:19 equates the many that through the disobedience of Adam were made sinners with the many that were made righteous through the obedience of Christ, and then concludes: "Therefore the boon of righteousness (*beneficium justitiae*) has through Christ been prepared for all." (III:271.) On the basis of the same passage Chemnitz speaks of the entire multitude of mankind (*totam hominum multitudinem*) as those for whom this salvation was acquired by the merit of Christ. (Quoted Baier-Walther III, 272.) Rambach: "*Da nun aber der Buerge gerechtfertigt worden, so sind in ihm auch alle Schuldner mit gerechtfertigt worden.*" (Ibid. III, 272.) An interesting contribution comes from an otherwise little known theologian, Ph. D. Burk. Though both he and his illustrious father-in-law, Joh. Albrecht Bengel, were Pietists, yet they were keenly aware that the individual believer's assurance of salvation was seriously endangered by the subjectivism of Pietism, and that faith needed a secure, objective basis on which to rest. Burk's *Die Rechtfertigung* was the result of their concern, and of their desire to lead the movement out of the quicksands of doubt into which it had gotten itself. In his book (still considered a noteworthy work) Burk points out that there are passages in which the Scriptures speak of justification as a universal gift for all men, and calls this universal justification an indispensable basis for the faith of the believer. (Quoted in Baier-Walther, III, 273.⁴)

Do we find passages, in which the other thought is expressed, namely that God's act of justification is the expression of a judicial verdict? Prof. Meyer's final quotation from Luther (QS., Oct., 54, p. 258) is very much in place. For if the *cogitatio divina* considers the sinner to be just, and his sins forgiven, then this *cogitatio* is certainly not to be pressed to the exclusion of any public declaration to that effect, but is known to man because God has declared these truths in the Gospel. In his remarks on Gal 3:13 (St. L. IX, 373:336ff) we find Luther saying: "Thus, if Christ Himself was found guilty (*schuldig geworden ist*) of all sins which all of us (*wir alle*) have done, then we are acquitted of all sins ... etc." Some of the quotations which Walther brings in this connection are highly interesting. A certain Wandallnus calls the purpose of the resurrection of Christ to be "*ut ... nostram justificationem declararet.*" (Op. cit. 111, 272.) Rieger: "*Wie wir in Adam alle sind des ewigen Todes*

schuldig und verdammt worden, also sind wir alle in Christo gerechtfertigt und vorn Urteil des ewigen Todes losgesprochen worden . . . wir sind alle mit dem gerechtfertigten Christo gerechtfertigt worden.” (Ibid.) The two quotations in the QS article (Oct. ‘54, p. 256f) support each other (each: *etiam nos in ipso absolvit*) and complete this line of testimony, convincing us that the substance of the doctrine of objective justification was certainly present in a time when the term had not yet been coined.

IV

The final question is whether we have built up a local, Synodical Conference terminology, whether we are needlessly isolating ourselves from the body of Lutheranism by insisting on an expression that has no standing elsewhere. Here my investigation is far from complete, and it will be seen that the idea of a judicial verdict that is an accomplished fact and universal in its scope is by no means always present in the thinking of theologians of our day. Yet the term, or better, the terms (objective—subjective) are there, and are being used, with varying degrees of appropriateness, while the doctrine itself is debated by men of many different kinds of theological convictions.

There is, for instance, a passage in the *Dogmengeschichte* of Loofs (p. 769) in which he speaks of a *subjective* and an *objective side* of justification, defining justification in another passage as “*eine ‘objektive’ Lehre von dem gottlichen Akt der justificatio.*” Ihmels probably has something else in mind when (in Schaff-Herzog, Rel. Enc., VI, p. 280) he says that when man believes, “justification and communion with God is subjectively and objectively realized.” But he also says (p. 278) “Some theologians resolve the objective process of justification into subjective consciousness, others emphasize the ethical aspect.” The corresponding article in HerzogPlitt (1883) refers to objective reconciliation, and in a way that suggests another reason for the increased use of our term in the middle of the last century, namely the subjectivism of Schleiermacher (for whom religion and its several doctrines were so largely a matter of feeling), whose influence had made itself so strongly felt just a few decades before. Now a reaction set in among various more or less positive theologians, who saw the need for an objective basis for a sinner’s assurance of pardon. The article quotes one of them as follows: “*Dorner glaubte die Objektivität in, Begründung der Rechtfertigung nur festhalten zu können durch die Annahme, dass der Glaube lediglich als organon leptikon fuer die a parte Dei schon vollzogene Rechtfertigung zu betrachten sei.*” (Vol. XII, 577.) Harnack is less sympathetic when in a sharply critical passage (concerning “the confusion inherent in the heritage of Luther”) he says: “*Man zerspaltete die Rechtfertigung und die Wiedergeburt, jene als das ‘Objective’ (der abstracte göttliche Act der Rechtfertigung, der forensische Rechtfertigungsspruch, der den impius fuer gerecht erklärt), diese als das Subjective.*” (*Dogmengeschichte* III, 882f.) But he states the facts very well. Of quite a different temper, but also proving the usage of our term, is a word of Luthardt from a longer passage on Romans 5:12-19: “*Hier ist Gehorsam, Gerechtigkeit Christi mit ihrem Resultat im Rechtfertigungsurteil Gottes, und damit die Macht und das Reich des Lebens objektive vorhanden; der einzelne tritt nur hinein in die Gemeinschaft dieses fertigen Heils, wozu er nichis selbst beitraegt, sondern bei dem es sich nur um Teilnahme und Aneignung handelt.*” (Quoted in Stoeckhardt, Roemerbrief, p. 268.)

In closing I cannot refrain from mentioning two very modern works. The first is the excellent article on *dikaiosyne* by Dr. Schrenk in Kittel’s *Theologisches Woerterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, translated by J. R. Coates (Bible Key Words—Harper). In discussing what he calls “the relation of the importance of the personal experience of justification, (*Das Verhaeltnis der subjektiven Stellungnahme zur objektiven Heilstat*), he states that “over against all exaggeration of the importance of the personal experience of justification, it is essential to insist that what is said in this connection is all orientated to the completely objective fact of what God has done” (*objektivster Gottestat*). Or that “the demand for faith always accompanies the most objective utterances concerning the righteousness of God.” (Kittel, *sub verbo*, pages 209f.)

The other example consists of the last two paragraphs in the chapter on Justification in Paul Althaus’ *Die Christliche Wahrheit*.⁵

The act by which God justifies takes place in Jesus Christ, Thereby the question is already answered; When is man justified? The answer must read: In the cross and the resurrection of

Jesus. But God's action in the death and resurrection of Jesus is not a matter of the past, but becomes a present thing for us at every stage of history (*an jedem Ort des Geschichtsraumes*) by the way in which God deals with us in the Gospel, in its preaching, absolution, Sacrament. As something inseparable from Christ, the one action of God becomes contemporary for me—thus overcoming the barrier between past and present—by means of the awarding and appropriating function of the Gospel as it is proclaimed and administered. Thus the question concerning the time may be answered: I am justified in my baptism; but also: now, in my hearing the Word that is meant for me; today, in my receiving the Sacrament. Not as though this implied constantly recurring new acts of God, nor a repetition of the first act. Rather, it is always the one and the same historic act of God which confronts me wherever I may be—never to be localized exclusively in one specific moment, not even in Baptism. Its locale is in Christ; it occurs wherever Christ is present; it consists in this that Christ is present for us.

Here one should not forget that Christ and *faith* belong together. Only in faith is God's verdict real for us. In this respect God's act of justification is at once "objective" and "subjective." God sends Christ and the Gospel, God grants faith that lays hold on Christ in the Gospel and thereby has this justification. This results in the following answer to the question concerning the time: I have this justification (I am justified) when God works faith in me through the Gospel. This "subjective" version of the answer does not imply a conflict with the previously stated "objective" form, but the two belong together. Their unity consists in this that the "objective" answer can be perceived by faith alone, but this faith does not look to its own resources, but only to what it is given, to the "objective" fact. We are justified at the cross; we are justified by faith—these twain belong inseparably together. (Vol. II, p. 413f—my translation.)

Summary

What are our findings? We have seen that the terminology of an objective and a subjective justification is common property within our Synodical Conference. There is no reason why we should not use it in our discussions with each other. Nevertheless we still have a preference for the simpler terminology of a general or universal, and of a personal justification. To use these simpler terms will show that we are concerned about the substance of the doctrine rather than one single mode of expressing it. That was the method followed by our Standing Committee in Matters of Church Union in its 1951 Review of the Common Confession.

But no apologies need be offered for the use that has been made of the term. It is certainly not a local idiom, indicating a self-willed, separatistic trend. It is a term that serves well for the uncovering and rejection of the trends of subjectivism, against which our age is by no means immune. Therefore neither the term nor the fact of an objective justification of all mankind should be permitted to fall into oblivion.

ENDNOTES:

- 1) The German original reads: "*Es wurde schon bei der Lehre von dem Versöhnungswerk Christi ausführlicher dargelegt, dass die Rechtfertigung durch den Glauben oder die subjektive Rechtfertigung die sogenannte objektive Rechtfertigung oder Versöhnung der ganzen Menschenwelt zur Voraussetzung hat.*" — The emphasis is by Dr. Pieper.
- 2) Unless otherwise indicated, the translations are my own. E. R.
- 3) Objective: Having independent existence or authority, apart from our experience or thought...as...the moral law has objective authority.—Standard Dictionary.
- 4) We should also quote what Preuss has to say about this same man and his book on Justification and Assurance. Speaking of "the vexations which the Württemberg superintendent Burk experienced," he goes on to say, "It seemed to him like a faulty circle: 'I am to believe and thereby become righteous. But what am I to believe? This, that I am righteous. However, I cannot believe this before it is so. And yet it is not so, for I am first to become righteous.' God be praised, the case is different. This we must believe, that Christ has redeemed us. And as God said to His covenant people through Isaiah: 'I have redeemed thee, I have called thee by thy name; thou art mine,' even so does He tell us through His apostle: 'The handwriting that was against us is

blotted out'; 'He purged our sins'; 'We are reconciled'; 'Eternal peace reigns; all strife is ended.' That saving faith apprehends this and nothing else St. Paul teaches in those texts in which he expressly and officially treats of justification." Preuss, *Die Rechtfertigung des Suenders vor Gott*, p. 27f. Friedrich translation.)

5) For a discussion of another book by Dr. Althaus (*Grundriss der Ethik*) and a rather startling statement on justification, see the Book Review by Prof. Meyer on page 152 of this issue.