

SUBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION: The Doctrine And Its Relationship To OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION

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“Men, what must I do to be saved?” the jailer at Philippi asked Paul and Silas. It’s the most important question anyone can ask. The answer is the teaching we call “subjective justification.” This doctrine tells us how a person comes to possess the salvation gained by Christ on the cross. In Paul’s words it is expressed simply, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” In subjective justification, God applies to the individual sinner through faith the objective justification granted to the whole world in Christ. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son (objective justification) that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (subjective justification).

Even though Paul expressed this doctrine in eleven words to the jailer, it requires all the words in the Bible to express to the Holy Spirit’s satisfaction the glory and grace of God in granting such justification, the spiritual depravity of man in necessitating such justification, the work of the incarnate Son in accomplishing such justification, the comfort and favor which belongs to those who appropriate such justification... As John wrote, the whole world would not contain the books that could be written about our salvation in Christ.

In our discussion here we will narrow the topic to focus particularly on the relationship between subjective and objective justification. Such an emphasis is called for at the present time because of confusion about the validity of objective justification. We will be concerned primarily with the nature and function of saving faith, because faith is where objective and subjective justification meet. Faith is the relationship between the two. Specifically, objective justification provides a foundation which is indispensable if any individual sinner is to believe that Jesus died for him. We will consider the topic in the following parts: I. Faith is a “hand” in which the individual receives the objective justification won by Christ on the cross. II. Without objective justification, individual faith has nothing to receive.

I.

God has declared all sinners righteous in His eyes for the sake of Jesus, who took away the sin of the world (objective justification). Yet not all people ultimately enjoy the benefits of God’s declaration. In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats Jesus teaches clearly that some will be saved and the others damned:

Then the King will say to those on his right, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”

Then he will say to those on his left, “Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mt 25:34, 41).

Even though justification has been pronounced over the entire world, that is, over every sinner in the world, still not all are finally saved. The *appropriation* of justification, making it

one's own, is not universal and general, but individual. Some appropriate the forgiveness provided for the world, others do not. Those who are finally sent "into the eternal fire" are sent there in spite of having been reconciled (2 Re 2:1, He 10:29).

This non-appropriation of objective justification may be illustrated by an example from everyday life: Following the Vietnam War the president of the United States declared amnesty for those who had evaded the draft. The amnesty was equally valid for every draft evader, whether they all returned from Canada or not. Many continued a self-imposed exile in spite of having been exempted from prosecution. If the president had sent ambassadors to the draft evaders in Canada, urging them to return to the U.S. and enjoy their amnesty, we would have an illustration of the Apostle Paul, an ambassador for Christ, going into a world of universally reconciled sinners and pleading on Christ's behalf: "Be reconciled" (2 Cor 5:19-20)! As Luther illustrates it, "A king gives you a castle; if you do not accept it, your refusal does not make the king a liar nor his gift void. You have cheated yourself; it is entirely your own fault: the king has certainly given you the castle" (St. L. XIX, 946f, in Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p. 400). Francis Pieper offers the following important observations on the appropriating of objective justification:

Faith in the Gospel is in every case *fides specialis*, personal faith. Only he is a believer who applies the general promises of the Gospel to himself and declares with Paul, "I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me" (Ga 2:20) (Pieper II, p. 431).

The nature of the general promise calls for individual appropriation.... It is plainly unbelief when individual sinners refuse to consider themselves the objects of God's grace (Pieper, II, p. 431).

Scripture sometimes calls faith "obedience" (Rm 1:5, Ac 6:7) and commands men to believe (1 Jn 3:23). This terminology indicates not that faith is a work, but that God not only permits us to regard Him as gracious to us for Christ's sake, but even commands us to do so. These terms have therefore been called "concentrated Gospel" (Pieper, II, 441).

Objective justification is not universally appropriated, but individually, subjectively.

The means of appropriation is faith. "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16:16).

We know that the appropriation of forgiveness by an individual cannot be by means of any qualifications, merits, or worthiness, for God declares that He saves those who have not only failed to earn his favor but have actively worked for the opposite. God justifies sinners by grace. The appropriation of justification through faith, then, is the opposite of any works or merit:

Rm 3:22-24: This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.

Rm 3:27-28: Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.

Rm 4:4-5: Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation. However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.

Ga 3:22: But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin, so that what was promised, being given through faith in Jesus Christ, might be given to those who believe.

Eph 2:8-9: It is by grace you have been saved, through faith - and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast.

On the basis of such passages our Lutheran Confessions say about the appropriation of atonement through faith:

That this (justification) remain the office and property of faith alone, that it alone, and nothing else whatever, is the means or instrument by and through which God's grace and the merit of Christ in the promise of the gospel are received, apprehended, accepted, applied to us, and appropriated; and that from this office and property of such application or appropriation love and all other virtues or works are excluded.

That neither renewal, sanctification, virtues nor good works are ... our righteousness before God, nor are they to be constituted and set up as a part or cause of our righteousness, or otherwise under any pretext, title, or name whatever to be mingled in the article of justification as necessary and belonging thereto; but that the righteousness of faith consists alone in the forgiveness of sins out of pure grace, for the sake of Christ's merit alone; which blessings are offered us in the promise of the Gospel, and are received, accepted, applied, and appropriated by faith alone (FC III, 38-39, Trigl. p. 929).

Since faith is the opposite of all works and merit, it is compatible with grace, whereas any merit or worthiness cancels out grace:

Rm 4:16: The promise comes by faith so that it may be by grace....

Rm 11:6: And if by grace, then it is no longer by works; if it were, grace would no longer be grace.

So little is merit compatible with grace and faith that the Scriptures warn sternly against laying claim to merit:

Ga 5:4: You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ, you have fallen away from grace.

Rm 9:30-32: ... the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it. Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works.

It is essential to understand that, when it comes to salvation, faith is the opposite of a “work.” Only then can we understand how it functions with grace in making justification our own. To be sure, faith is a good work and pleasing to God, but it does not save us on that account. Rather it saves us by laying hold of the merits of Christ. Faith is a “hand” (“receiving organ”) into which the merits of Christ (objectively imputed to the whole world, 2 Cor 5:19) are placed and made our own by the Holy Spirit:

Php 3:7-9: But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ... I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ - the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Jr 33:16: ... The LORD Our Righteousness.

1 Cor 1:30: It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God - that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.

Luther describes the hand of faith:

In what manner, then, do we lay hold of this treasure and gift, or what is the purse or chest into which we are to put it? It is faith alone.... It holds out the hand and opens the bag and is content to receive nothing but benefactions. For as God, the Giver, moved by His love, bestows these blessings upon us, so we are the recipients through faith, which does nothing but accept the gift. For it (salvation) is not of our doing and cannot be merited by our work; it already exists, presented and bestowed. Only see that you open your mouth, or rather your heart, be still, and let yourself be filled. This cannot be done except by your believing the words (*What Luther Says*, Ewald Plass, ed., Vol. I, p. 491-492).

Our Lutheran Confessions speak of faith in these terms:

... 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 ... (AC ap, IV, Trigl. p. 147).

These treasures are offered us by the Holy Ghost in the promise of the Holy Gospel; and faith alone is the only means by which we lay hold upon, accept, and apply, and appropriate them to ourselves. This faith is a gift of God, by which we truly learn to know Christ, our Redeemer, in the Word of the Gospel, and trust in

Him, that for the sake of His obedience alone we have the forgiveness of sins by grace, are regarded as godly and righteous by God the Father, and are eternally saved. Therefore it is considered and understood to be the same thing when Paul says that we are “justified by faith,” Rm 3:28, or that “faith is counted to us for righteousness,” Rm 4:5, and when he says that we are “made righteous by the obedience of One,” Rm 5:19, or that “by the righteousness of one justification of faith came to all men,” Rm 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 (FC III, 10ff, Trigl. p. 919).

If Christ perfectly redeemed the world with his sacrifice, then the function of faith is to do nothing more than receive this. However, if the universal atonement is denied, faith must be credited with some kind of merit of its own. As Pieper says:

The idea that faith in its function as a receptive organ must do more than merely believe the Gospel, that it receives forgiveness because it is a good quality (“ethical act”) or produce good qualities, finds favor only with those who deny, or at any rate have forgotten, that Christ has perfectly redeemed the world and that the Gospel is the message of God’s grace (Pieper II, p. 439).

The role of faith as a mere “hand” not only safeguards God’s glory in saving us purely by his grace, but also holds tremendous comfort for those who may be concerned about the strength or quality of their faith. Because of faith’s function as a receiving hand the strength of faith makes no difference in receiving salvation—“A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Is 42:3). It’s what faith grasps, its object, its content, that matters, no matter how firm or tenuous the grip. Luther explains:

It is, of course, true that I and you do not hold and believe the saving truth so firmly as St. Peter does. Yet we have one and the same treasure. Two persons may hold glasses of wine in their hands: the hand of one trembles, the hand of the other does not. Two persons may hold a purse full of money: one with a weak hand, the other with a strong hand. Whether the hand is strong or weak, please God, it neither increases nor decreases the contents of the purse. So the only difference between me and St. Peter is the fact that he holds this treasure more firmly (*What Luther Says*, p. 487).

The objective, historical reconciliation which Christ accomplished is brought to sinners in the “message of reconciliation” (2 Cor 5:19). The finished act of salvation comes to us as a report, a news item, the appropriate response to which is belief:

Rm 1:16-17: I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes. For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last ...

Mk 16:15-16: He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Jn 20:31: But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

2 Cor 5:19: ... God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them, and he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.

The faith by which this grace-bearing message is received is comprised of knowledge, assent, and trust. Our Confessions explain:

That faith which justifies is not merely a knowledge of history, (not merely this, that I know the stories of Christ’s birth, suffering, etc. which even the devils know) but it is to assent to the promise of God, in which, for Christ’s sake, the remission of sins and justification are freely offered (AC ap IV 48, Trigl. p. 135).

But faith, properly so called, is that which assents to the promise (is when my heart, and the Holy Ghost in the heart, says: The promise of God is true and certain) (AC ap IV, 113, Trigl. p. 155).

... so faith is not only knowledge in the intellect, but also confidence in the will, i.e., it is to wish and to receive that which is offered in the promise, namely, reconciliation and remission of sins. Scripture thus uses the term “faith,” as the following sentence of Paul testifies, Rm 5:1, “Being justified by faith, we have peace with God” (AC ap IV 183, Trigl. p. 205).

The message of reconciliation is contained not only in the word but also in the sacraments. They, too, convey the forgiveness of sins which Christ obtained for us by his work of universal reconciliation (Ac 2:38, Mt 26:26-28). The gospel, whether in word or sacrament, extends the objective gift of justification to each sinner, and the sinner makes it his own by receiving the promise in the hand of faith:

For when we are baptized, when we eat the Lord’s body, when we are absolved, our hearts must be firmly assured that God truly forgives us for Christ’s sake. And God, at the same time, by the Word and by the rite, moves hearts to believe and conceive faith, just as Paul says, Rm 10:17: “Faith cometh by hearing.” But just as the word enters the ear in order to strike our heart, so the rite itself strikes the eye, in order to move the heart. The effect of the word and of the rite is the same, as it has been well said by Augustine that a Sacrament is a visible word, because the rite is received by the eyes, and is, as it were, a picture of the word, signifying the same thing as the word. Therefore the effect of both is the same (AC ap, XIII, Trigl. p. 309).

Objective justification, brought to us by objectively valid means of grace for us to receive by faith alone, is the source of our individual confidence and comfort amid doubts and temptation. Luther, always hungry for objective assurance independent of emotions and human variables, says in the Large Catechism:

I come hither (to baptism) in my faith and in that of others, yet I cannot rest in this, that I believe, and that many people pray for me; but in this I rest, that it is Thy Word and command. Just as I go to the Sacrament trusting not in my faith, but in the Word of Christ; whether I am strong or weak, that I commit to God. But this I know, that He bids me go, eat, and drink, etc., and gives me His body and blood; that will not deceive me or prove false to me.... Why so? Because we know that God does not lie. I and my neighbor and, in short, all men, may err and deceive, but the Word of God cannot err (Trigl. 309).

Consistent with this reliance upon the objective word and promise, we find that much of the Bible presents the object to be believed without mentioning the need for the subjective faith itself. The objective facts produce faith automatically so that faith need not be mentioned. Luther noticed that

Faith is an unceasing and constant looking which turns the eyes upon nothing but Christ, the Victor over sin and death and the Giver of righteousness, salvation, and life eternal. This is why Paul, in his epistles, sets Jesus Christ before us and teaches about Him in almost every single verse. But he sets Him before us through the Word, for in no other way can He be apprehended except by faith in the Word (*What Luther Says*, p. 466).

In our own preaching and teaching, not to mention evangelism, we should take the cue of the Bible writers—and Luther: Present the objective deeds of Christ on behalf of all mankind, letting the Holy Spirit do His work then of creating faith. Pieper agrees that this is the way to bring people to faith. He says:

We must, after having shown men their sinfulness by the Law, preach the objective reconciliation, or justification, of the whole world. Then faith will often be engendered, as Walther used to remind us, even before the word “faith” has been mentioned. He who does not preach the objective reconciliation achieved through Christ’s vicarious satisfaction will never, as far as his preaching is concerned, get his hearers to believe (Pieper, p. 402).

It’s possible that faith may not even be conscious of itself, but merely fix upon Christ without reflecting that it is doing so. On the other hand, focusing inward to examine one’s own faith can even take our eyes off Christ and do more harm than good. As Dr. Becker used to remind us, constantly assessing the progress of one’s faith is like periodically digging up a seed to see whether it’s growing. Far better to concentrate on providing water—or in the case of faith, the word and sacraments—and forget the seed itself. Luther made a practice of just that. He says: “I am accustomed, for the better understanding of this point, to divest myself of the idea that there

is a quality in my heart at all, call it either faith or love, but in their place I put Christ and say, 'He is my righteousness' ” (St. L. Ma, 1669, in Pieper, p. 440).

It bears mentioning explicitly, what we have assumed all along thus far, that faith itself is a gift of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3). He creates faith in us through the very means of grace which bid us believe (Rm 10:17). Natural man is incapable of receiving the things of the Spirit without a miracle by the Spirit bringing him to faith (1 Cor 2:14). The Holy Spirit's power is always present with the objective word and sacraments (Is 55:11). God wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tm 2:4). When people reject the gospel the fault is entirely their own.

Two important results flow from the doctrine of justification by grace through faith as the Bible reveals it and as our church fathers have confessed it. First, all glory for our salvation is reserved for God alone. And second, for us, we have assurance of our salvation, because it depends not at all upon us. It depends only upon Christ who said, "It is finished." Here we have something certain:

Rm 4:16: The promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be *guaranteed* to all Abraham's offspring

Php 3:8-9: ... not a righteousness of my own ... but the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

Ga 2:16: We, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified.

Eph 3:12: In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence.

Our Confessions express what a treasure this certainty of salvation is:

Remission of sins is something promised for Christ's sake. Therefore it cannot be received except by faith alone. For a promise cannot be received except by faith alone. Rm 4:16: "Therefore it is of faith that it might be by grace, to the end that the promise might be sure;" as though he were to say: "If the matter were to depend upon our merits, the promise would be uncertain and useless, because we never could determine when we would have sufficient merit." And this experienced consciences understand (and would not, for a thousand worlds, have our salvation depend upon ourselves) (AC ap., IV 84, Trigl. p. 145).

To summarize up to this point: the relationship between objective and subjective justification concerns the nature of saving faith, how it does and does not function in our salvation. Faith doesn't save us by meriting salvation on its own. If it did it would be incompatible with grace, as has been shown. In order to save us, then, it merely receives the objective declaration of forgiveness announced to the entire world in the gospel. It is therefore compatible with grace and gives us certainty that we are saved.

As an expression of our Wisconsin Synod's teaching concerning subjective justification we have these words from *This We Believe*:

We believe that the individual receives this free gift of forgiveness through Christ, not by works, but only by faith (Eph 2:8-9). Justifying faith is a trust in Christ and His redemptive work. This faith justifies, not because of any inherent virtue, but only because of the salvation prepared by God in Christ, which it embraces (Rm 3:28; 4:5). On the other hand, although Jesus died for all, Scripture tells us that "he that believeth not shall be damned" (Mk 16:16). The unbeliever loses the forgiveness won by Christ.

We reject every teaching that makes man somehow responsible for his salvation. We reject all efforts to present faith as a condition man must fulfill to complete his justification (pp. 11-12).

II.

If there is no objectively valid declaration of forgiveness then faith has nothing to receive and must instead become a merit, a work which in itself earns salvation. It becomes a condition, a qualification for receiving a limited atonement won by Christ only for "His own." Faith under this system, to be consistent, would have to be considered a complement of Christ's merit, a human achievement (Pieper, II p. 508). Under this system we would be saved, not by works, but by the one work of faith. And then, of course, it's no longer by grace. Furthermore, the objective nature of justification is intimately tied to the objective validity of the means of grace which confer it. In the final analysis, says Pieper,

the doctrine of justification by faith stands and falls with the Biblical doctrine of the means of grace. If we do not base the forgiveness of sins on the objective means of grace, we base our forgiveness on our subjective condition, our feeling, our worthiness, and the like, or even on the character of the officiant. Insofar as the Reformed "enthusiasts" teach an immediate revelation and operation of the Holy Ghost, detached from the means of grace (Zwingli, "The Spirit needs no guide," etc.), and insofar as modern Lutherans teach that faith must be based on the "Person of Christ," on the "historical reality of Christ," instead of solely on the forgiveness pronounced in the word, the gospel, they base justification on the gratia infusa (infused grace), after the fashion of Rome (Pieper, II, p.509).

Without objective justification, faith has nothing to believe. The gospel of forgiveness through the cross—the power of God for salvation—is weakened to no greater force than the envelopes you get in your mailbox saying, "You may have already won." "You may be justified, you may be one of God's elect. What's *your* reason for not trying Christ out? Jesus came into the world to save sinners." But which ones? Am I one of them? If there is no objective justification my assurance can't be "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so," because the Bible doesn't mention *my name*. As Pieper observes:

the denial of gratia universalis (universal grace) runs counter to fides specialis (individual faith). If the gospel excepted but a single person from the grace of

God and the name of this unfortunate being were not recorded in Scripture, no person could believe, on the basis of the Gospel, that God is gracious to him (Pieper II, p. 432).

I can believe Jesus died *for me* only if it's true he died *for the whole world*. Otherwise I have no objective promise to believe, no reason outside of myself to consider myself saved, and I'm left to my own feelings. Luther, for one, could never have contented himself with that kind of basis for faith. He says that without the *word* of Christ a person does not base his faith on Christ, but on "an air castle" (Pieper, II p. 447).

With this in mind, listen to an example of a "gospel" proclamation without objective justification. These are the words of Jay Adams in his book, *Competent to Counsel*, p. 70:

(Christian counselors) must present the good news that Christ Jesus died on the cross in the place of *His own*, that He bore the guilt and suffered the penalty for *their* sins. He died that *all whom the Father had given Him* might come unto him and have life everlasting. As a Reformed Christian, the writer believes that counselors must not tell *any* unsaved counselee that Christ died for him, for they cannot say that. No man knows except Christ himself who are his elect for whom he died. But the counselor's task is to explain the gospel and to say very plainly that God commands all men to repent and believe in Jesus Christ (emphasis mine).

Here we see the result when universal atonement, objective justification, is denied. You can't tell anyone Jesus died for them, only that He died for "His own." You can't believe your sins are forgiven on the basis of Jn 3:16 or any other objective promise in the Bible, for they all apply only to God's elect. Your faith is not in a word of promise from God but rather in your own act of believing which, you hope, reveals you to be among the elect for whom Christ died. In this case it does you no good to "fix your thoughts on Christ" (Hebrews, *passim*) because he may not have died for you. In this case faith must be more than a "receiving hand" because there is nothing for a mere hand to "grasp." As we see in Jay Adam's final sentence, faith in the gospel becomes a law to obey, not a promise to embrace.

By contrast, what comfort the message of universal reconciliation gives! For me, 2 Cor 1:20 illustrates the assurance we have for our faith based on the objective promise of the gospel: "For no matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ. And so through him the 'Amen' is spoken by us to the glory of God."

Only by presupposing objective justification and universal grace can Paul say about all God's promises that they are "Yes" in Christ. If they are "Yes" at all they must be "Yes" toward everyone, and therefore "Yes" to me. Subjective justification happens when we assent in faith, "Amen." Luther says:

Faith is the yes of the heart, a conviction on which one stakes one's life. On what does faith rest? On Christ, born of a woman, made under the law, who died, etc., as the children pray. To this confession I say yes with the full confidence of my heart. Christ came for my sake, in order to free me from the law, not only from the guilt of sin but also from the power of the law. If you are able to say yes to

this, you have what is called faith; and this faith does everything ... (*What Luther Says*, p. 446f).

If God's promises are not objectively "Yes" in Christ, then faith is asked to say "Amen" to God's "Maybe" in Christ, or God's "If" in Christ. This is what the "gospel" of Calvinism and Roman Catholicism require of faith: assent to a possibility, not a promise. But the fact is, "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'Yes' in Christ." Amen to that.

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Scripture quotes are from the New International Version, Zondervan.