

Objective Justification in the Confessions

Introduction

The Confessions do not use the term “Objective Justification.” It is often stated that the confessions neither use the term, nor teach the doctrine as such. This is not the case. While it is true that the term is not used, the Confessions clearly teach this doctrine. The reason this is disputed is that those who deny Objective Justification are looking for the wrong thing in the Confessions.

Instead of looking for specific statements which teach that the world is justified, we should instead be looking at the specific passages where the Confessions describe what faith receives.

The position of the Synodical Conference

The Synodical Conference, in their paper *Justification — Objective and Subjective* writes:

When G. Fritschel claims: “In the Gospel God shows the sinner a way out, which *can* redeem him from death and damnation and *bring about the forgiveness of his sins*,” he thereby denies that justification has already been accomplished by Christ and that thus the righteousness which avails before God already exists. But thus teach not only the Scriptures but also the Confessions of our church, as in the 6th article of the Augsburg Confession, where it says, following the Latin: “forgiveness of sins and justification *are apprehended by faith*” (Tappert, p. 32), and, “grace, forgiveness of sins, and justification *are apprehended by faith*” (Tappert, p. 44). Thus also the Apology: “Faith *accepts the forgiveness of sins*” (Tappert, p. 115). Further: “Justification is something promised freely for Christ’s sake alone, wherefore it is accepted always and only by faith before God” (cf. Tappert, p. 137).

These quotations show clearly that a justification must first be in existence, which faith can accept, that faith does not have to bring it about first, but that it embraces it as already existing. But if someone were to say: Yes, forgiveness of sins indeed already exists, but not justification, he would have to be ignorant of our Confessions, which expressly teach that justification and forgiveness of sins are the same. “We believe, teach, and confess that according to the usage of Holy Scripture the word justify in this article means absolve, that is, acquit of sins” (cf. Tappert, p. 473).¹

The Synodical Conference recognized from the beginning that the central issue with Objective Justification is: What does faith receive? Does faith only receive a promise that it *will be* forgiven, or does faith receive the forgiveness of sins itself? If the former, then there is no forgiveness of sins in an actual sense before faith. If the later, then the forgiveness of sins already exists, and is received by faith.

The four quotations from the Augsburg Confession, and the Apology cited by the SCP clearly state that faith receives the justification and the forgiveness of sins. Furthermore, the Synodical Conference is quite clear

1. <https://archive.org/details/Justification-objectiveAndSubjectiveATranslation/page/n0> Tr. Kurt Marquardt. Hereafter referred to as *SCP*. The author of this paper is not stated. It is most likely C. F. W. Walther, who was present when the paper was presented, and who certainly agreed with it even if he was not the author.

in stating that justification and the forgiveness of sins are the same thing. With this in mind, we can further examine the Confessions, specifically looking for those places where they state what it is that faith receives.

Further citations from the Confessions

First, the Augsburg Confession in article IV on Justification teaches:

It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith, when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us. For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21–26 and 4:5.²

The question at issue here is not whether faith is counted as righteousness, but rather: *What does faith receive?* By answering that question, we also answer the question: *Why is faith counted as righteousness?*

This article states that “we receive forgiveness of sin . . . through faith.” But does this mean that faith is receiving forgiveness, or that faith is the instrument through which we are forgiven after we have believed? Is the forgiveness of sins, which already exists, delivered to faith, and received by faith, or does faith receive a promise of forgiveness that only becomes true after faith? One might take the statement either way.

But the Confessions themselves shed further light on this:

Since we obtain justification through a free promise, however, it follows that we cannot justify ourselves. Otherwise, why would a promise be necessary? The Gospel is, strictly speaking, the promise of forgiveness of sins and justification because of Christ. Since we can accept this promise only by faith, the Gospel proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the law does not teach. And this is not the righteousness of the law.

For the law requires our own works and our own perfection. But to us, oppressed by sin and death, the promise freely offers reconciliation for Christ's sake, which we do not accept by works but by faith alone. This faith brings to God a trust not in our own merits, but only in the promise of mercy in Christ.

*Therefore, when a man believes that his sins are forgiven because of Christ and that God is reconciled and favorably disposed to him because of Christ, this personal faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and justifies us.*³

Here we see that the question is not really even whether the Gospel is a promise. It is certainly a promise. But is it also delivering what it promises? The last statement makes this abundantly clear: Faith obtains the forgiveness of sins and justification when a man believes that his sins are forgiven because of Christ. Faith is believing something that is already true, not something which becomes true because faith believes it.

Again, the Apology states:

2. AC, IV. All quotes from the confessions are from Tappert.

3. AP, IV, 43–45. Emphasis added.

So Paul says (Gal. 2:19), “I through the law died to the law.”

For the law only accuses and terrifies the conscience. In these terrors our opponents say nothing about faith, but present only the Word that denounces sin. Taken alone, this is the teaching of the law, not of the Gospel. They say that by these sorrows and terrors men merit grace if they love God. Yet how will men love God amid such real terrors when they feel the terrible and indescribable wrath of God? What do they teach but despair, when amid such terrors they show men only the law?

As the second part of our consideration of penitence, we therefore add faith in Christ, that *amid these terrors the Gospel of Christ ought to be set forth to consciences—the Gospel which freely promises the forgiveness of sins through Christ. They should believe therefore that because of Christ their sins are freely forgiven.*

This faith strengthens, sustains, and quickens the contrite according to the passage (Rom. 5:1), “Since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God.” *This faith obtains the forgiveness of sins.* This faith justifies before God, as the same passage attests, “We are justified by faith.” This faith shows the difference between the contrition of Judas and Saul on the one hand and that of Peter and David on the other. The contrition of Judas and Saul did not avail because *it lacked the faith that grasps the forgiveness of sins granted for Christ’s sake.* The contrition of David and Peter did avail because *it had the faith that grasps the forgiveness of sins granted for Christ’s sake.*⁴

The phrase “obtains the forgiveness of sins” (Latin: *consequitur*) might be ambiguous in regards to our question⁵ were it not for the fact that in the same context the Apology unambiguously states that faith *grasps*⁶ the forgiveness of sins. The whole thrust of the text is clear: The Gospel is set before the eyes of terrified sinners. There the Gospel declares that because of Christ their sins are freely forgiven. This is what they should believe. Faith grasps this forgiveness which is offered in the Gospel, a forgiveness which is already there.

The Apology quotes Ambrose:

The law would seem to be harmful since it has made all men sinners, *but when the Lord Jesus came he forgave all men the sin that none could escape and by shedding his blood canceled the bond that stood against us* (Col. 2:14). This is what Paul says, ‘Law came in, to increase the trespass; but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more’ (Rom. 5:20) through Jesus. For after the whole world was subjected, he took away the sin of the whole world, as John testified when he said (John 1:29), ‘Behold the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’ So let no one glory in his works since no one is justified by his deeds. But he who is righteous has it as a gift because he was justified after being washed. It is faith therefore that frees men through the blood of Christ; for ‘blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered’ (Ps. 32:1).⁷

Notice how, as in one breath, the Apology can state that Jesus forgave all men, and canceled the bond that stood against us, but at the same time says that it is faith that frees men through the blood of Christ. There is

4. AP XII, 33–36. Emphasis added.

5. Although the Kolb-Wengert edition rightly translates it as “receives.”

6. *apprehendens*.

7. AP IV, 103. Emphasis added.

no conflict or contradiction here. Scripture teaches both, and so do the Confessions. And if anyone wonders what the connection between these two is, according to the Confessions, that is readily shown. Faith believes and receives what is already true.

The Apology quotes Tertullian:

For Tertullian speaks excellently about faith, dwelling especially on the oath in the prophet (Ez. 33:11), “As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” By swearing that *he has no pleasure in the death of the wicked, God shows that he requires the faith with which we believe him when he swears and are sure that he forgives us.* Even by themselves, the authority of the divine promises ought to be sufficient for us, but this promise is confirmed with an oath. *If anybody, therefore, is not sure that he is forgiven, he denies that God has sworn to the truth;* a more horrible blasphemy than this cannot be imagined. This is what Tertullian says: “He invites us to salvation with an offer and even an oath. When God says, ‘As I live,’ he wants to be believed. Oh, blessed are we for whose sake God swears an oath! Oh, most miserable are we if we do not believe the Lord even when he swears an oath!”⁸

Certainly this faith must believe firmly that God freely forgives us because of Christ and because of his promise, not because of our works, contrition, confession, or satisfactions. For if faith relies on these works, it immediately becomes unsure because an anxious conscience sees that these works are not good enough.⁹

The oath which God declares is a statement of fact. He forgives us. That is what faith is believing. That this is especially clear is evident from the opposite: If, on hearing this oath the sinner is not sure that he is forgiven, then he is denying what God has sworn to be the truth, namely, that their sins are forgiven.

The Smalcald Articles:

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, “was put to death for our trespasses and raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:25).

He alone is “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). “God has laid upon him the iniquities of us all” (Isa. 53:6).

Moreover, “all have sinned,” and “they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, by his blood” (Rom. 3:23–25).

Inasmuch as *this must be believed* and cannot be obtained or apprehended by any work, law, or merit, it is clear and certain that such faith alone justifies us, as St. Paul says in Romans 3, “For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Rom. 3:28), and again, “that he [God] himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26).

8. AP XII, 94–95. Emphasis added.

9. AP XII, 94–95. Emphasis added.

Nothing in this article can be given up or compromised, even if heaven and earth and things temporal should be destroyed. For as St. Peter says, “There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). “And with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:5).¹⁰

Romans 3:23–25 in particular states that all are justified by the God’s grace as a gift. Luther says this must be believed. Once again, faith is grasping, apprehending, receiving a forgiveness and justification that already exists.

The Large Catechism:

Although we have God’s Word and believe, although we obey and submit to his will and are supported by God’s gift and blessing, nevertheless we are not without sin. We still stumble daily and transgress because we live in the world among people who sorely vex us and give us occasion for impatience, wrath, vengeance, etc.

Besides, Satan is at our backs, besieging us on every side and, as we have heard, directing his attacks against all the previous petitions, so that it is not possible always to stand firm in such a ceaseless conflict.

Here again there is great need to call upon God and pray, “Dear Father, forgive us our debts.” *Not that he does not forgive sin even without and before our prayer; and he gave us the Gospel, in which there is nothing but forgiveness, before we prayed or even thought of it. But the point here is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness.*¹¹

What is true before faith is also true after faith. The Gospel does not change because of our faith. The point is for us to recognize and accept this forgiveness. But for that to be true, the forgiveness must already exist. If it only exists after we accept it, then there is nothing to accept.

The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration:

Against both parties the other teachers of the Augsburg Confession held unanimously that Christ is our righteousness, not according to the divine nature alone or according to the human nature alone but according to both natures; as God and man *he has by his perfect obedience redeemed us from our sins, justified and saved us*. Therefore they maintained that the righteousness of faith is forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, and the fact that we are adopted as God’s children solely on account of the obedience of Christ, which, through faith alone, is reckoned by pure grace to all true believers as righteousness, and that they are absolved from all their unrighteousness because of this obedience.¹²

This quote, above all others, is contested by the opponents of Objective Justification. They would have us believe that because righteousness is reckoned to believers as righteousness through faith alone, that this thereby alters what was said in the first sentence: Christ, by his perfect obedience, redeemed us from our sins, justified, and saved us. But it does not alter it one whit. That statement stands as a fact, as should by now be

10. SC II, I, 1–5.

11. LC III, 85–88. Emphasis added.

12. FCSD, III, 4. Emphasis added.

more than evident in that this is the way the Confessions speak about the forgiveness of sins throughout. The grammar here is as simple as it can be. Christ redeemed, justified and saved us by his perfect obedience.

Or are we to believe that here the Formula is trying to tell us that Christ redeemed us prior to our faith, but did not justify and save us prior to our faith? The fact that these things are only reckoned to us through faith does not in any way change the basis on which they are reckoned: The already-accomplished obedience of Christ, which has already accomplished our redemption, justification, and salvation. Once again, faith receives what already exists.

Later in this same article, the Formula speaks in the same way:

Therefore we believe, teach, and confess that the total obedience of Christ's total person, which he rendered to his heavenly Father even to the most ignominious death of the cross, is reckoned to us as righteousness. For neither the obedience nor the passion of the human nature alone, without the divine nature, could render satisfaction to the eternal and almighty God for the sins of all the world. Likewise, the deity alone, without the humanity, could not mediate between God and us.

Since, as was mentioned above, it is the obedience of the entire person, therefore *it is a perfect satisfaction and reconciliation of the human race, since it satisfied the eternal and immutable righteousness of God revealed in the law. This obedience is our righteousness which avails before God and is revealed in the Gospel, upon which faith depends before God and which God reckons to faith*, as it is written, "For as by one man's disobedience many will be made sinners, so by one man's obedience many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19), and "the blood of Jesus, his Son, cleanses us from all sin" (1 John 1:7), and again, "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Hab. 2:4).

For this reason neither the divine nor the human nature of Christ by itself is reckoned to us as righteousness, but only the obedience of the person who is God and man at the same time. *Faith thus looks at the person of Christ, how this person was placed under the law for us, bore our sin, and in his path to the Father rendered to his Father entire, perfect obedience from his holy birth to his death in the stead of us poor sinners, and thus covered up our disobedience, which inheres in our nature, in its thoughts, words, and deeds, so that our disobedience is not reckoned to us for our damnation but is forgiven and remitted by sheer grace for Christ's sake alone.*¹³

Faith looks to and grasps the reconciliation of the human race and the forgiveness of sins which the obedience of Christ has already accomplished, and is revealed in the Gospel. Therefore the Gospel delivers to us Christ and the forgiveness of sins which faith receives.

That these things are delivered to us in the Means of Grace we can also show:

In his purpose and counsel God had ordained the following:

1. 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.

13. FCSD, III, 56–58.

2. That this merit and these benefits of Christ are to be offered, given, and distributed to us through his Word and sacraments.

3. That he would be effective and active in us by his Holy Spirit through the Word when it is preached, heard, and meditated on, would convert hearts to true repentance, and would enlighten them in the true faith.

4. That he would justify and graciously accept into the adoption of children and into the inheritance of eternal life all who in sincere repentance and true faith accept Christ.¹⁴

Notice the order: 1. The world is redeemed. 2. This is offered, given, and distributed to us through the Word and Sacrament. 3. The Holy Spirit is effective in that Word working repentance, and creating faith. 4. Faith receives what the Word delivers: Christ and all His benefits.

This message is universal, and is to be preached in this way to all people:

We must by all means cling rigidly and firmly to the fact that as the proclamation of repentance extends over all men (Luke 24:47), so also does the promise of the Gospel. Therefore Christ has commanded to preach “repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name among all nations.” For God “loved the world” and gave to it his only begotten Son (John 3:16). Christ has taken away the sin of the world (John 1:29); he has given his flesh “for the life of the world” (John 6:51); his blood is “the propitiation for the whole world’s” sin (1 John 1:7; 2:2). Christ declares, “Come unto me, all who are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest” (Matt. 11:28). “God has included all men under disobedience so that he might have mercy on all” (Rom. 11:32). “The Lord is not wishing that any should perish, but that all should turn to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9). “He is simultaneously one Lord of all, rich toward all who call upon him” (Rom. 10:12). Righteousness “comes through faith in Christ to all and on all who believe” (Rom. 3:22). “This is the will of the Father, that all who believe on Christ should have eternal life” (John 6:40). *It is Christ’s command that all in common to whom repentance is preached should also have this promise of the Gospel proclaimed to them* (Luke 24:47; Mark 16:15).¹⁵

Notice that no distinction is made. To whom we preach repentance, we also preach the forgiveness of sins. Nor are these statements limited, as our opponents would have us believe, to the Universal Atonement. Christ did not earn the mere *potential* for the forgiveness of sins, and reconciliation with God. He actually took away the sin of the world, reconciled the world unto God, and has mercy on all. It is because of this, that we declare this reconciliation, this mercy, this forgiveness, to all people *along with repentance*. Note the distinction that when repentance is distinguished from the Gospel, it is speaking of the sorrow worked by the preaching of the Law. With the preaching of repentance, we also preach the Word of forgiveness, *to all*.

Conclusion

It is clear from all of these citations that the charge that actual justification and forgiveness, according to the confessions, only exists following faith, is false. It is further clear that the Confessions teach that justifica-

14. FCSD, XI, 14–18. Emphasis added.

15. FCSD XI, 28. Emphasis added.

tion and the forgiveness of sins are delivered in the Gospel itself, that faith receives them, and it is in this way that faith is counted as righteousness.

Nor is this confusing the Universal Atonement with Objective Justification. The Universal Atonement teaches that Christ, by His suffering and death, acquired forgiveness of sins for the world. Objective Justification teaches that it was not only acquired, but reckoned to the world, that is, by virtue of the Atonement God was actually reconciled to the world. Subjective Justification teaches that this justification, reconciliation, redemption, and forgiveness is received by faith alone, and in this way faith is counted as righteousness. This Scripture teaches that all are justified, but only some are justified, without contradiction. The Confessions teach the same. This also we teach.

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