

**Does the Lutheran Confessions' Emphasis on Subjective Justification
Mitigate Their Teaching of Objective Justification?**

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Introduction

Theological parlance in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod often speaks not only of justification, but of “objective” and “subjective” justification. Whether or not these designations are the most apt, they usually serve the purpose of communication. The terms refer to two aspects of the justification of sinners before God. The *Lutheran Cyclopedia* describes objective justification thus:

God sent His holy, innocent Son to become man, and made him man’s Substitute. This Substitute fulfilled all requirements of the law in our place (active obedience). He also suffered the pangs and woes which we had deserved (passive obedience). Divine justice is satisfied and love triumphs. Through Christ God has reconciled the world unto Himself, 2 Co. 5:19. This act of God is called objective justification ...¹

And subjective justification:

We receive this righteousness [of Christ] through faith. The moment we accept the righteousness which Christ won, God pronounces us justified, free from sin, acquitted (subjective justification, Gn 15:6; Lk 15; Gl 2:16).²

Put differently, objective justification refers to an attitude on the part of God which He assumed as a direct result of Christ’s atoning work. It is logically prior to the faith of any person. Subjective justification occurs when an individual appropriates this divine verdict so that it becomes his own possession. It coincides with the creation of faith in man.

If one were to choose between the two, he would probably be tempted to say the Lutheran Confessions stress subjective justification. For instance, Article IV of the Augsburg Confession:

¹ Erwin L. Lueker, ed., *Lutheran Cyclopedia* (St. Louis, 1975), p. 434.

² *Ibid.*, p. 434. See the formulation (which lacks the terms “objective” and “subjective”) in the *Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of the Missouri Synod*, which was first adopted in 1932 (St. Louis, n.d.), p. 9.

Our churches also 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 on account of Christ, who by His death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3,4).³

Faith, the telltale sign of subjective justification, is very much in evidence. It remains so in the last of the Confessions, the Formula of Concord:

The only essential and necessary elements of justification are the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and faith which accepts these in the promise of the Gospel . . . (FC SD III 25).

Such is the case everywhere “between the covers.” The Confessions never use the word “justify” unless faith is at least in the immediate context. And they never explicitly distinguish between objective and subjective justification.⁴

This might give pause for thought. Do the Confessions teach objective justification at all, if this is true? Or, if they teach it, is their objective justification doctrine mitigated by the prominent place subjective justification enjoys on their pages?⁵

In practice, that might work out like this: the Confessions could be construed to say that the death of Christ makes it possible for God, whose anger at sin and sinners has in no way been put aside yet, to offer justification to a given man—if he will believe. When a person is in fact converted, then (and only then) does God pronounce the “not guilty” verdict on him and put aside His righteous wrath over against that man. In this scenario, justification belongs precisely where the Symbols appear to put it: with faith.

³ Confessional quotes are normally taken from Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia, 1959). [note: this is the translation of the Latin text, p. 30.]

⁴ The late Dr. Harry Huth used to point out these two facts to his symbolics classes at Concordia Theological Seminary Ft. Wayne. The present writer took his introductory courses in the summer of 1979, and reports both of these observations on the basis of first-hand experience.

⁵This paper concedes—indeed, it assumes—that subjective justification is prominent in the Confessions.

But the scenario has its problems. Most obvious is the one Edward Preuss reports: “The Wurttemberg superintendent Burk experienced ... [what] seemed to him like a faulty circle:

I am to believe and thereby become righteous. However, I cannot believe this before it is so. And yet, it is not so, for I am first to become righteous.⁶

“God be praised,” Preuss continues, “the case is different.”⁷ It can only be different, however, if one believes in objective justification. This gives him an object for his trust. There is a place to join this “circle.”

Objective justification is not a mere frill or incidental detail. Without it, there can be no subjective justification; but do the Confessions know this?

The present study contends that they do. Its main thrust is that the Confessions teach objective justification, and that this doctrine is in no way mitigated by their emphasis on subjective justification. Chapter One will seek to show that the Confessions actually set forth objective justification by tracing their teaching on the atonement of Christ. Chapter Two will employ reasoning like that used above in connection with the Burk quote to show that objective justification is present even—especially—in the midst of sections which appear to stress subjective justification. The final chapter will deal with a number of Confessional expressions which often lead to misunderstanding over this crucial point.

⁶ *The Justification of the Sinner Before God*, Edward Preuss, tr. by J.A. Friedrich (Reprint. St. Louis, n.d.), 22.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 17.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ATONEMENT IN THE CONFESSIONS

The Lutheran Confessions do teach objective justification, that all men have been declared righteous by God as a result of the work of Christ. The most direct way to establish this is to examine the doctrine of the atonement as the symbols present it. A variety of models are used throughout the Book of Concord to conceptualize the teaching on the atonement. At times they overlap. This first chapter is devoted to the respective models and their interaction. As much as possible, it is limited to the Confessional data on the work of Christ itself, and does not consider sections which treat of apprehension by faith.⁸

I. The Atonement Models

A. Major Models

1. **Christ the obedient one: the one who has obedience.** While a fine starting-point from a logical perspective, this theme is only found in the FC, especially in the third article.⁹ Jesus the God-Man rendered obedience for all (FC Ep III 3), as their substitute both in His perfect life and His suffering and death (FC SD III 14-15). His obedience is not only the righteousness which God reckons to men (FC Ep III 4; FC SD III 56); “it is a perfect satisfaction and reconciliation¹⁰ of the human race, since it satisfied the eternal and immutable righteousness of God revealed in the law” (FC SD III 57).¹¹

⁸ On some occasions, however, this chapter draws material from references which say, “when we believe **that** ...” or words to the [that] effect. In these cases the Confessions are obviously referring to a reality which must have existed prior to faith, as will be shown in detail in Chapter Two.

⁹ FC III was written particularly in response to the teachings of Andreas Osiander The Elder (1498-1552) who held that God does not impute Christ’s obedience to the sinner in justification, but rather has Christ dwell in the sinner so that a man’s sins are as but a drop of water in the sea of Christ’s essential righteousness.

¹⁰ In this reference, “satisfaction” is *Genugtueung* in the original German and *satisfactio* in the Latin; “reconciliation” is *Versöhnung* and *expiatio*, respectively.

¹¹ Other references to Christ as the Obedient One: FC Ep III 5; SD III 9, 11, 12, 22, 30, 54, 55, 58; V 22, XII 10.

2. **Christ the redeemer.** More common in the Bible than the Confessions, the redeemer/redemption picture appears mostly in the FC (Though many of these are merely passing references, especially in Article VII), and a bit in SA and the Catechisms.¹² In Philip Melanchthon's one usage of the term, it is immediately connected to the sacrifice and propitiation ideas (Ap IV 179). "Redemption" obviously involves payment. Christ is said to have redeemed our nature (FC Ep I 6), but more often the object of redemption is "me" or "us" (see SC II 4; LC II 27; III 51). LC II 31 indicates that the cost of the redemption was Jesus' active and passive obedience, without using those terms.

3. **Christ the price.** Melanchthon is more fond of this term.¹³ The price is so high, no mere man can pay it (Ap IV 57). The payment is for sin and eternal death (FC Ep V 5; SD III 14-15; V 20; Ap XIII 160).

4. **Christ made satisfaction.** This is an even more popular term with Melanchthon.¹⁴ With it, one moves a step away from the "cold cash" picture of a secular transaction toward the idea of sacrifice. "Obedience" is also involved (See FC SD III 14-15, 56-57). Jesus' death is a satisfaction for both guilt and eternal death (Ap XII 140). His merits are authorized to make satisfaction for others (Ap XXI 19); in fact, for the sins of the world (Ap IV 40).

5. **Christ the sacrifice.** Most of these references are in Ap XXIV, "On the Mass."¹⁵ This article responds to the Romanists, who found Biblical support for the "sacrifice of the Mass" in Old Testament texts by noting that OT sacrifices merited nothing in their own time—they were but a symbol of the sacrifice to come—so in the New Testament there is clearly only one sacrifice: "Christ on the cross" (Ap XXIV 56). Presupposed are the

¹² References include SA II i 1-3; iii 2; iv 3; SC II 4; LC II 27, 31; III 51; FC Ep I 6; III 6; SD II 50; III 4, 11, 35; VII 44, 45, 47; VIII 47; XI 15.

¹³ He uses it about as often as the other confessional writers: Ap IV 57, 98, 204; XII 160; LC II 31; FC Ep V 5; SD III 14-15; V 20. See the thought in SC II 4 and LC II 31.

¹⁴ Thirteen of 19 confessional occurrences are in his corpus: AC IV 1-2; XXIV 24-25 (Lat.), 27 (Ger.); Ap IV 40, 178; XII, 140, 147; XXI 19; XXIV 19, 23, 58, 89, 90; SA III iii 38; LC II; 31; FC Ep V 5; SD III 14-15, 56, 57.

¹⁵ Outside of AC III 3 and Ap XIII 8 all occurrences of the term are in Ap XXIV: 22, 23, 53, 56, 59.

principles that retribution must be made for sin, that God must be appeased, that the shedding of blood is necessary, and that the sacrifice itself be fit according to the law. These were the very principles which the OT cultus taught.

But the discussion of sacrifice has already reached its climax earlier in Ap XXIV, when Melancthon distinguished between-propitiatory and eucharistic sacrifices. He noted that a propitiatory sacrifice “reconciles God,” “placates His wrath,” or “merits forgiveness . . . for others . . . There has really been only one propitiatory sacrifice in the world, the death of Christ . . .” (Ap XXIV 14-22).

6. Christ the propitiator/propitiation. This leads to one of the most frequently-occurring atonement expressions in the Confessions, propitiation.¹⁶ In this picture, reconciling God and placating His wrath are essential. If God’s wrath is not stilled, there simply is no propitiation. Besides calling Christ the propitiator or propitiation, the Confessions also indicate that on account of Christ (*propter Christum*) we have a propitiated God.¹⁷

7. Christ the Expiator/Expiation. While this is not a major theme,¹⁸ it is listed here because it parallels the propitiation idea. It is proper to propitiate a person, not a thing or abstraction. For the latter, “expiation” is a handy term, as when the FC speaks of Christ expiating sin (FC Ep V 5; SD V 20).¹⁹ Elsewhere, Jesus is called an “expiation,” in both Ap XXIV 23²⁰ and FC SD III 57.²¹ The Ap XXIV reference seems to slide the word very comfortably into the context of propitiatory sacrifice, while the FC III passage explicitly

¹⁶ Jesus is called the “propitiation” in AC XXI 2 (Lat.); Ap IV 179, 204, 238, 242, 382; XX 2, 5; XXIV 19-22, 23, 24, 53; XXVII 17; FC SD XI 28. He is called or identified as “propitiator” in AC III 2 (Ger.); Ap IV 40, 46, 80, 82, 157, 165, 211-12, 213, 215, 221, 222, 223, 230, 231, 238, 245, 246, 251, 253, 269, 290, 291, 299, 308-309, 387, 389; XII 43, 76-77; XXI 17; XXIV 57, 97.

¹⁷ Lat., *propitium*. See Ap IV 45, 145, 203, 211, 345, 376, 386; XV II.

¹⁸ It occurs only 4 times.

¹⁹ The Latin *expiasse* renders *gebüßet und bezahlet* in both cases. Notably, in one case the object is “all sin,” and in the other “all *our* sin.” The FC does not make an issue of whether Christ expiated all sins or merely “ours.” “Propitiation” is similarly treated: compare AC III 2; Ap XX 2; XXIV 19-22; and FC SD XI 28 with Ap IV 238, 242; XX 5.

²⁰ *Expiationem / Bezahlung*.

²¹ *Versöhnung / expiatio*.

indicates that the scope is the human race. As the Confessions use the term “expiation” to refer to the atonement, it seems to be neither extensively or intensively more restrictive than the term “propitiation.” The similarity between the usages is so close as to suggest virtual identity.

8. **Christ the Mediator.** This is the second dominant theme.²² Here the picture is of an ambassador making peace between hostile parties. Christ is just such a mediator, not the saints (Ap XXI 34). Only He makes a mediation which leads us to the Father and gives us a gracious (*placatum*) God. He alone could do it, for He is both God and Man (see FC SD III 56).

B. Other models

1. **Christ the Conqueror of the Devil.** This idea only comes up in 5 places, 2 of which refer to Gen. 3:15 (Ap XII 55; FC SD III 23). Two of the other occurrences mention Christ’s conquest of Satan along with His taking the penalty of sin (Ap II 50) or being the Redeemer (LC II 27). Ap IV 139 motivates Christians to subdue the devil and comply with God’s will in the power of the conquering Christ. In the next paragraph it becomes clear that the forgiveness of sins is at the heart of the victory Christians have in Him.

2. **Christ as Victor over Death.** In contrast to man’s meager payments, Christ renders the prescribed satisfaction and thus becomes Victor over death (Ap XII 146, 157). He robs sin of its power, the law (Ap IV 79), and destroys the kingdom of death by forgiving sin (Ap XII 55; FC SD II 15). As in the previous category, the victory motif does not stand out as the primary one. Atonement as satisfaction or forgiveness on account of Christ always underlies it.²³

²² Melancthon is fond of this one, too: AC XX 9-10; XXI 2 (Lat.); Ap IV 46, 69, 80, 145, 157, 165, 213, 214, 238, 242, 269, 270, 291, 294-295, 299, 313, 316, 317, 324, 357, 459, 375, 376-377, 378, 387; XII 43, 64, 76, 84, 87; XV 7, 9; XXI 34; XXIV 57, 58; SA III xiii 1; FC SD III 12, 23, 28, 30, 33, 56; VIII 47.

²³ In *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A.G. Hebert (1931; New York: Macmillan, 1977), Gustav Aulèn concluded that the victory motif was in fact the controlling one also in Luther. While he does not express himself directly on the Confessional view in this book, the data from the Symbols presented here would seem to militate against his appeal for Lutherans to

3. **Christ as Savior.** Surprisingly uncommon, this theme almost always occurs in the FC, and usually as a passing title in Article VII.²⁴

4. **Christ as the one who bears sin.** This expression always occurs in citations of or references to John 1:29.²⁵ The picture, of course, is that of the world's sin being laid on Jesus and borne away.

II. Interrelationships of the Atonement Models

The findings of this section will be presented under 4 broad thesis headings:

A. Christ pays the price (offers a satisfaction, makes a sacrifice) which propitiates, reconciles, satisfies God.

A price or sacrifice will not achieve its goal if it is inadequate. Christ, however, did accomplish His goal. His work propitiates, reconciles, and satisfies God. It must therefore, be adequate.

Perhaps this shows up most clearly in passages which use the terms “price” and “propitiation” as if they were interchangeable. Ap IV 53, for instance, speaks of “the merits of Christ as price and propitiation” (see Ap IV 204 and 211-12, as well as Ap IV 179). Christ both paid and satisfied (FC Ep V 5; SD III 14; see Ap XXIV 55 and AC XXIV 27- Ger.). His was no “garden variety” payment. It actually did the job of propitiating and satisfying God.²⁶

At times the point is made in terms of “reconciliation.” FC SD XI 15 says the entire human race is redeemed and reconciled with God. AC III 2 (Lat.) puts Christ's reconciling

“return” to the “classic” victory view.

²⁴ See AC XX 12; SC IV 10; FC SD II 50; VII 39, 43, 48, 89, 90, 106.

²⁵ They are Ap IV 103; SA II i 1-3; ii 7; III iii 38; FC SD XI 28. The German word is *tragen*; the Latin is *tollere*.

²⁶ Since “payment” is related to propitiation and to satisfaction, it should be no surprise that the latter two are directly related. For instance, a propitiatory sacrifice is a work of satisfaction (Ap XXIV 19). There is no special priority; the Apology can say satisfaction leads to God being propitiated (Ap IV 178), but also that the Propitiator makes satisfaction (Ap XXI 19). Incidentally, Christ the “Mediator” also makes satisfaction (Ap IV 40-41; XXIV 58).

the Father to us side by side with His being a sacrifice for all sins (see also Ap XXIV 19-22, 23, 58, 89). Again, the payment reaches its goal.

The underlying reason for this does not become clear until one reaches the FC, though the Catechisms hint at it.²⁷ The Formula is at pains to explain that Christ's obedience is our satisfaction and righteousness because it is the obedience of the God-Man (FC SD III 14-15, 56-57). To such a view, any doubt about the extensiveness or intensiveness of the atonement would be an insult to Christ's person as well as His work.

B. Christ as mediator and propitiator placates and reconciles God.

As suggested above, "mediator" and "propitiator" mean virtually the same thing in the Confessions. Edmund Schlink has caught this:

As here (Ap IV 80) "propitiator" is rendered "*Mittler und Versühner*," and in other places "*Mittler*" is rendered "*Mediator et propitiatorium*," so Jesus Christ is mediator and propitiator at the same time; he is mediator as the propitiator, and propitiator as the mediator.²⁸

As the title would suggest, Christ as propitiator placates God so that God is *placatum* (variously rendered "gracious", "reconciled") over against men (Ap XXIV 19; XXI 20; see also IV 80, 238). Elsewhere, the result of Christ's propitiation (that God is *propitius*) is laid side by side with *placatum* (Ap IV 45, 386; XV 9). Christ as mediator is also said to placate God (Ap IV 163, 376).

Likewise, Jesus is the "propitiator through whom the Father is reconciled" (AC XX 9; cf. Ap IV 238; XXIV 23). Indeed, Ap XXIV 19 regards "reconciling God" and "placating His wrath" as essentially synonymous.²⁹ It is no surprise, then, that two of the

²⁷ E.g., "He suffered, died, and was buried that He might make satisfaction for me and pay what I owed, not with silver and gold but with His own precious blood" (LC II 31).

²⁸ *Theology of the Lutheran Confessions*, tr. by P.F. Koehnke and H.J.A. Bouman (Philadelphia, 1961), p. 86. See AC XXI 2; Ap IV 40-41, 145, 157-8, 165, 213, 238, 242, 269; XII 43, 76-77; XV 7-9.

²⁹ Interestingly, the German word *Versühner* or its cognates are used to translate the expression that Christ is the Propitiator (Ap IV 238), to translate Christ as *placans iram Dei* (*Gottes Zorn gestillet und versühnet*, Ap XXIV 19), or as parallel to *reconciliatur* in AC XX 9.

passages already listed (AC XX 9, Ap IV 238) as well as others (Ap IV 295, 376; XXIV 58) indicate that Christ the Mediator reconciles God. In short, whether He is called Mediator or Propitiator, His work is the same; it is that He reconciled God, placated God's wrath, and merited forgiveness of sins for others (see Ap XXIV 19 again).³⁰

C. Since Christ has placated God as Mediator and Propitiator, God forgives sins and bears them away.

In the models examined thus far in theses "A" and "B," God has had a somewhat passive role. He is the receiver of the payment Jesus made. Therefore He is propitiated. In this third thesis, His change of attitude over against men manifests itself in a more "active" way. He forgives. At bottom, of course, there is no difference between God being "passively" propitiated on one hand, and being "actively" forgiving on the other.³¹ But the pictures are somewhat different. Forgiveness as a result of Christ's work (Ap IV 242; XX 2; see also AC XX 9-10; Ap IV 294) simply stresses the far-reaching implications of the atonement.

Forgiveness of sins certifies that human sins were borne away by the Lamb of God (Ap IV 103; SA II ii 7). Luther said as much in his Galatians commentary:

If the sins of the entire world are on that one man Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on Him, then they are still on the world. Again, if Christ Himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through Him.³²

³⁰ As Schlink notes in a similar connection: ". . . The Confessions are not much concerned about a nice distinction and an isolation of various terms—a comparison of the Latin and German texts makes this especially clear—but precisely by using all of them together they bear witness to the work of Christ. In fact, none of the terms mentioned can be correctly understood if isolated" (p. 85, emphasis original).

³¹ The Confessions are not unaware of this: Ap IV 45, 295.

³² *Lectures on Galatians (1535), Luther's Works* 26, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis, 1963), p. 280.

The intimate connection between propitiation and forgiveness is made quite clear in FC SD XI 28, which joins (among other passages) John 1:29 with I John 2:2.³³

D. Since God gives forgiveness of sins on account of Christ, He gives justification and righteousness on account of Christ.

The next picture carries the image of God’s activity one step further. Not only does He receive payment and accept it; not only is He placated and forgiving; now He pronounces men righteous. Again, only the picture varies; the substance is the same. Ap IV 41 talks about a promise which offers both forgiveness and justification. FC Ep III 6 indicates that on account of Christ’s obedience we have the forgiveness of sins and are held to be holy and righteous by God. A bit earlier, the FC had said Christ “won the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, as it is written, ‘For as by one man’s sin many were made sinners, so by one man’s obedience many will be made righteous’ (Rom. 5:19)” (Ep III 3). Note that forgiveness and righteousness are again treated as synonymous,³⁴ and that in FC Ep III, faith is not brought into the discussion until paragraph 5.

When faith is mentioned, it is interesting to see what else is often involved in the context. FC SD III 30:

Scripture teaches that the righteousness of faith before God consists solely in a gracious reconciliation or the forgiveness of sins, which is bestowed upon us by pure grace because of the unique merit of Christ, the mediator, and which we receive only by faith in the promise of the Gospel.

The righteousness (reconciliation, forgiveness) is bestowed because of Christ’s merit before it is received by faith. If this is not true, the language of bestowal ceases to make sense.

³³ With regard to the latter, the word *propitiation* is used in the Latin translation; the German has *Versöhnung*.

³⁴ On the essential identity of the forgiveness of sins with justification in the Confessions, see AC IV 1, 2; Ap IV 40, 76, 290; Ep III 7; SD III 9, 10, 17, 62.

Much the same point is made more graphically in Ap XXI 19, which contends that a propitiator's

merits must be authorized to make satisfaction for others and to be bestowed on them by divine imputation, so that through them we may be accounted righteous as though the merits were our own. If one pays a debt for one's friend, the debtor is freed by the merit of another as though it were his own. Thus the merits of Christ are bestowed on us so that when we believe in Him we are accounted righteous by our trust in Christ's merits as though we had merits of our own.

Note the overlap of the payment and imputation of merit/satisfaction ideas. When a debt is paid by a substitute, the creditor (to extend the overlap logically) can be said to impute the idea of full payment to the debtor, i.e., to think of him as having paid in full. And also note that while being declared righteous is specifically connected with faith (trust) here, Jesus' merits are said to be bestowed by divine imputation on those for whom Jesus made satisfaction prior to faith—if the debtor illustration is to make sense.

Finally, SA II i 1-3 cannot be overlooked:

The first and chief article is this, that Jesus Christ, our God and Lord, "was put to death for our trespasses and raised 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).

The last Bible passage is of extreme importance. It says "all . . . are justified." Moreover, it leaves out the reference to faith that actually occurs in Rom. 3:25! Perhaps this is because the very next paragraph would go on to treat of faith. Erasmus' edition of the Greek New Testament, to which Luther had recourse, did contain the words *diva th`~ pivstew~* in Rom. 3:25,³⁵ and Luther's much earlier gloss on the verse mentions the

³⁵ The present writer consulted a 1659 edition of Erasmus' New Testament with glosses by Matthias Flacius (Frankfurt: Beyer, Ammarium, Serlinum) in the rare book collection at the library of Concordia Theological Seminary, Ft. Wayne, IN. In spite of the late date, there seems to be no suggestion that the text of Erasmus has been altered in this work.

reference to faith.³⁶ Yet in his theological “last will and testament,” the Smalcald Articles, Luther found it correct to say “all . . . are justified.”

The Lutheran Confessions teach objective justification. The way they talk about Christ’s atonement and its results is sufficient proof to show this. If Jesus is a successful propitiation, God is no longer angry at the world’s sin. That is to say, He forgives and justifies all men. But do the symbols take away with the left hand what they have given with the right? Does the emphasis on subjective justification in the Confessions submerge the teaching on objective justification except in the places identified above? To this question one must now turn.

³⁶ Cf. Luther’s *Lectures on Romans*, *Luther’s Works* 25, ed. by Hilton C. Oswald (St. Louis, 1972), p. 32. Luther lectured on Romans on the basis of the Vulgate.

CHAPTER TWO

OBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION UNDERLYING THE EMPHASIS ON SUBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION

This chapter proposes to show that the Confessional stress on subjective justification, far from undercutting objective justification, in fact presupposes it and relies on it. This can be seen not merely in secondary concerns of the symbols, but in several of the most fundamental soteriological affirmations which the Confessions make. Six closely related themes are examined here.

I. Faith Is Receptivity

In Ap IV 75-121, Melancthon is concerned to show that Christians are justified by faith alone.³⁷ The first way he proposes to do so is by a series of arguments centering on one syllogism.³⁸ The syllogism is set forth in 76-78:

Forgiveness of sins is the same as justification (Therefore we are only justified by the same thing through which we receive the forgiveness of sins); by faith alone we receive forgiveness; therefore, we are justified by faith alone.

The major premise is substantiated simply by quoting Ps. 32:1. In 80-85, Melancthon employs 4 different arguments to prove the minor premise. Thus, faith as receptivity is crucial to Melancthon's overall case. It underlies his insistence on justification by faith alone. And if faith is conceived as receptivity, it must receive (not create) something.^{39?}

³⁷ A glance at the various section headings in Ap IV would perhaps suggest that this thought is more *appropos* to 61-74. A large part of that section is, however, devoted to clarifying definitions of terms and other attempts to allay confusion (61-66, 71-74). In reality, only 67-70 set forth an argument. The section 75-121 is a more extensive treatment of the material covered in 67-70.

³⁸ This analysis of Ap's argument is heavily dependent on J.B. Carpzov, *Isagoge in Libros Ecclesiarum Lutheranarum Symbolicos* (Leipzig, 1665), pp. 229-230.

³⁹ [The author's typescript does not indicate the placing of this footnote: it is placed here by conjecture.] Lowell Green has caught essentially the same insight in his analysis of Melancthon: "Therefore, if we examine justification 'by grace alone' in the *Apology*, we shall find that in every instance faith justifies because it apprehends Christ. In other words, in Melancthon faith justifies in the sense of accepting the

Not only is faith as receptivity “qualitatively” significant as a key element of a central Confessional thrust; it is “quantitatively” significant too. The Confessional writers (especially Melancthon) depict this aspect of faith with striking frequency, perhaps more than any other. The specific words they chose in this connection complement each other and reinforce the utter passivity with which faith receives.⁴⁰ It adds nothing, contributes nothing.

But what does it receive? In a near-majority of the usages, faith receives the forgiveness of sins. Other fairly common objects include the promise, grace, Christ, reconciliation, and justification.⁴¹ This is important, because faith is said to receive Christ and the divine love that sent Him to the cross, but also the results of His atoning work, including justification. To the confessors, these “results” exist every bit as much prior to and outside of faith as the grace of God

forgiveness God has promised through Christ, not in the sense of paying God the honor due him as in Luther” [*How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel* (Fallbrook, CA, 1980), pp. 218-19].

⁴⁰ Following is a list of the Latin and German verbs used to express faith as receptivity, and the frequency with which each word is used in such a connection in the Confessions. (The list considers the words as used in the original language in which each Symbol was written. It is evident that terms for receptivity are more common in Melancthon—Latin—than in the other confessors.):

<i>accipio</i> —58x	<i>ergreifen</i> —8x
<i>apprehendo</i> —29x	<i>annehmen</i> —7x
<i>consequor</i> —22x	<i>empfangen</i> —6x
<i>assentio</i> —2x	<i>erlangen</i> —6x
<i>habeo</i> —2x	<i>applizieren</i> —4x
<i>impetro</i> —1x	<i>fassen</i> —3x
	<i>zueignen</i> —3x
	<i>empfangen</i> —2x
	<i>bekommen</i> —1x

⁴¹ The complete list follows:

Forgiveness of sins—78x (44.3%)
The promise—22x (12.5%)
Grace—14x (8%)
Reconciliation—9x
Christ—9x
Justification—8x
Mercy—7x
Merit of Christ—7x
Righteousness—7x
Blessings—5x
Access to the Father—2x
Baptism—2x
Absolution—1x
Christ on the cross—1x
Gospel—1x
Name of Christ—1x
Pardon—1x
Word of God—1x

and Christ Himself. Put differently, one does not have to believe before God forgives him; rather, in faith one accepts God's forgiveness.⁴²

Therefore, the Formula calls faith a means and instrument⁴³ (FC Ep III 5; SD III 43) by which one apprehends, accepts, appropriates, grasps, obtains, receives, and applies to oneself the treasures of Christ (see FC SD III 10, 16, 38, 39). It is not to be confused with mere historical knowledge (Ap IV 48, 50). It actually receives the blessings God gives in the Gospel: "Whoever lets these words be addressed to him and believes that they are true has what the words declare" (LC V 35; see also Ap XII 65). "... faith ... properly accepts the forgiveness of sins" (Ap IV 155) as opposed to works accepting it (Ap IV 147, 211, XXIV 12; SA II; 4, ii 24). The Augsburg Confession rejects "those who teach that forgiveness of sin is not obtained through faith but through the satisfactions made by men" (XII 10, Ger.). An implication is that the door is opened to work-righteousness whenever faith is not viewed as receptivity.

In fact, the Confessions stress faith as receptivity to such a degree that some might contend that they do not take sufficient stock of the "psychological" aspects of believing. Certainly, the Symbols are aware of struggles the believer faces (e.g., Ap XXIV 46) or the struggles in the lives of Biblical characters (cf. FC SD VII 46), but usually such "psychological" concerns ultimately take a back seat to man's need for forgiveness. Faith gives a Christian the assurance he needs in the face of doubt and despair, not because of any quality attaching to itself, but because it accepts the forgiveness without which nothing else matters: "... it is impossible to separate faith from love for God, be it ever so small. For through Christ we come to the Father; and having received the forgiveness of sins we became sure that we have a gracious God (Ap IV 141; cf. 46, 271).⁴⁴ Therefore faith is the best worship of God in which man can engage (Ap IV 59-60, 228, 310).

⁴² Cf. Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. II, trans. by Theodore Engelder and J.T. Mueller (St. Louis, 1951), pp. 538-41, especially footnote 70 on p. 539. This point will be discussed at greater length in the next section of this chapter.

⁴³ *Mittel und Werkzeug*

⁴⁴ In fact, given the lost condition of sinful man, anything which defeats the terrors of sin and eternal death must do so because it receives the forgiveness of sins. This is the first of Melancthon's arguments to prove the minor premise of Ap IV 77. See Ap IV 80-81 and Carpzov, p. 229 f.

So the Confessions ask rhetorically, “Who does not see that this doctrine—that by faith we obtain the forgiveness of sins—is most true and certain and indispensable for all Christians?” (Ap IV 398). It is “The very voice of the Gospel” (Ap XII 2), which must be preserved in the church (Ap XXVIII 7; cf. 23). As in the case of Baptism, while the sacrament’s blessings “cannot be received unless we believe them” (LC IV 33); nonetheless, Baptism is an objective treasure, like Christ on the cross (LC IV 37), and “... my faith does not constitute Baptism but receives it . . .” (LC IV 54). As receptivity, faith receives something real, something which existed intact logically prior to faith itself.⁴⁵ Hence, “psychological” concerns about faith are, at best, secondary. The most significant thing about faith is its object.

II. The object of faith is variously named.

... as the merit of Christ cannot be laid hold of for righteousness and salvation except by the organ of faith divinely ordained for this, so, if faith seeks justification elsewhere than in its own proper and chief object, it neither finds nor receives it.⁴⁶

“Object of faith” in this section refers either to references which specifically call something the “object” or passages in which the content of faith (i.e., what, specifically, faith believes) is set forth. This is similar to but not identical with, the listing in the last section of what faith receives.⁴⁷ The same point can be made, however: if the Confessions say the object of faith is both Christ and His work *and* the results of His work such as forgiveness and justification, objective justification is being taught even in a section which refers to faith.

⁴⁵ Many of this section’s thrusts are expressed well in the 1872 Synodical Conference essay on justification: “These quotations show clearly that a justification must first be in existence, which faith can accept, that faith does not have to bring 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” (“Justification—Objective and Subjective: A Translation,” tr. by Kurt Marquart (Ft. Wayne, 1982), p. 22).

⁴⁶ Martin Chemnitz, *Examination of the Council of Trent*, vol. 1, tr. by Fred Kramer (St. Louis, 1971), pp. 565-66.

⁴⁷ See note 5 above.

Others have noted that this phenomenon in fact occurs in the Symbols. Francis Pieper's position has already been mentioned.⁴⁸ Carpzov:

. . . no one ought to be offended if he reads on one occasion that the grace of God is mentioned as the object of justifying faith, and on another the obedience of Christ or His merit, and again the forgiveness of sins; for none of these excludes the others, but rather includes them.⁴⁹

Or Henry Hamann:

Faith justifies merely because of its object. As objects of justifying faith we find the following: grace and the forgiveness of sins (AC XX 28), reconciliation through Christ (Ap IV 144), the promise of the Spirit (IV 128), Christ and, in Christ, the righteousness that avails before God (Ep III 5), God's grace and the merits of Christ (SD III 38), etc. The objects of faith are, in short, all the gifts God would give us in Christ.⁵⁰

Turning to the primary sources, one can first readily find an abundance of references to the atonement or what lead up to it as objects of faith. The promised mercy (Ap IV 55-56) of God (Ap IV 58, 331, 337) or of Christ (Ap XXI 15), which has been promised for Christ's sake (Ap IV 79-81, 44) is such an object. So are Christ Himself (Ap IV 256, 296; FC Ep III 6, XI 11, 13, 18; SD V 19) and the events of His life (Ap IV 57) in which He made satisfaction for sin and guilt (AC IV 2; Ap XXIV 55; FC Ep V 5; SD V 20, 22, 23), along with His blessings (Ap IV 101) merits (Ap XXI 19-20), and name (Ap IV 98).

But the results of all this are also objects of faith. For Christ's sake we have a gracious⁵¹ God (AC V 3, Ger.; FC Ep III 9; SD VII 62) or we are received into grace (AC XXVI 4-5, Lat.).

⁴⁸ See note 6 above and the corresponding text.

⁴⁹ “. . . neminem offendi debere, si legerit, pro justificantis Fidei Objecto nunc *gratiam DEI* allegari aliquando *Obedientiam CHRISTI* sev mentum eius, iterum *remissionem peccatorum*; Nullum enim horum excludit alterum, sed potius includit” (p. 208, emphasis original).

⁵⁰ “Justification by Faith in Modern Theology,” Concordia Theological Monthly XXIX (Jan., 1958), 25-37, p. 28. Cf. also Chemnitz's four classes of Bible passages which express the object of saving faith, *op. cit.*, pp. 569-70.

⁵¹ *Gnädigen*

On account of Him, God has been placated⁵² (AC XX 15, Lat., XXVII 49;⁵³ Ap IV 87, 163, 222, 230, 279, 292-93, 299; XII 80; XV 6), reconciled (Ap XXIV 38), and propitiated⁵⁴ (AC XX 24, Lat.;⁵⁵ Ap IV 100, 180, 345, 379, XXIII 36). Likewise, faith believes that because of Christ men are received into God's favor (AC V 3, Lat.; XXVII 37, Lat.) and have access to God (Ap IV 376).

As noted in Chapter One's discussion of the atonement, where such attitude exists on the part of God, there He must also be forgiving. "Pious consciences ... must believe in the forgiveness of sins freely given for Christ's sake" (Ap XX 8; see also XI 2). Faith believes that forgiveness is offered by God (Ap XXIV 70), and that we have it (Ap IV 62). Such belief is necessary for the Christian and it was so regarded by the Reformers (Ap XII 60). God has not only forgiven us; He has sealed it with His oath, and surely we ought believe when God swears (Ap XII 94). Therefore we believe that this forgiveness is as contemporary as the means of grace (Ap XIII 4), yet the promise is as old as Old Testament history (Ap XXIV 55). The Confessors believed that they were (and therefore are) forgiven.⁵⁶

They also believed they were "reputed to be righteous" on account of Jesus. This comes up particularly in a section which deals with the good works of regenerate Christians (Ap IV 160-165; see especially 161, 163, 165), but it obviously points to an objective reality:

If anyone thinks that he is righteous and acceptable because of his own keeping of the law rather than because of Christ's promise, he insults this high priest. It is hard to understand how a man can do away with Christ, the propitiator and mediator, and then imagine that he is righteous before God (Ap IV 165; cf. also IV 221).

AC IV 1-2 (Ger.) is noteworthy in this regard. First, it sets forth subjective justification: "... we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous [i.e., are justified] before God by grace, for Christ's sake through faith, when we believe" But then comes the object of faith:

⁵² Latin, *placatum*

⁵³ The corresponding German is *gnädigen* in both of these AC references.

⁵⁴ Latin, *propitium* or *propitius*

⁵⁵ Again, the German is *gnädigen*.

⁵⁶ Other references include AC XX 9-10, Ger.; Ap IV 149-150, 239, 260, 276, XII 35-36, 44, 45, 65, 72, 73, 88, 95, 96 ("we shall be pardoned," *tribuendam veniam*).

“... that Christ suffered for us and that for His sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness ... [is] ... given to us [i.e., we are justified].” Putting the two references to justification together, the basic sentence says that we are justified when we believe we are justified. The latter reference is to the object of faith: objective justification (see also FC SD III 11).

The Confessions, in their stress on faith as opposed to Romish works, can often give the unwary reader the impression that faith creates something in regard to justification. While nothing could be further from the Symbols’ intention, some of the figures of speech they employ appear to make faith a causative factor. For instance:

For how will Christ be the mediator if we do not use Him as mediator in our justification and believe that for His sake we are accounted righteous? (Ap IV 69).

In the Apology’s terminology, to “use” Christ is to “believe” in Him for salvation. Basically, the above sentence is asking how Christ will be the mediator if we do not believe He is the mediator—as if our believing it makes it so. As Chapter One noted, however, the Confessions realize that Christ **is** the mediator. Ap IV 69 is concerned that He be *our* mediator, a mediator we recognize and confide in. This is to “use Christ.” But we couldn’t use Him as mediator if He were not the mediator in and of Himself. This is a fairly typical example of a figure concerning faith.

A fascinating reference is Ap IV 97, which expounds Acts 13:38, 39. The Bible passage reads in part: “by him [Jesus] every one that believes is justified from everything from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” Melancthon first concludes: “Christ was given for us to believe that we were justified on account of Him.” An accomplished justification,

contemporaneous with the “giving” of Christ is the object of faith.⁵⁷ The Apology here sees the significance for objective justification in a Bible passage which treats the justification of believers.

Another object of faith is “the promise” which is based on the work of Christ (Ap IV 148) and the grace of God (Ap IV 303).⁵⁸ In fact, the promise is the source of faith as well as the object of faith (Ap XXI 20).

Faith does not create as it receives; it receives what is already a reality. It is, in fact, the word of forgiveness, already acquired and objectively offered and imparted, that creates faith. Melanchthon (Ap XII, 42) says, “Faith is conceived and confirmed through absolution, through the hearing of the Gospel.”⁵⁹

Since the promise is firm and powerful, and since faith does not create forgiveness, Melanchthon can say:

If somebody doubts that his sins are forgiven, he insults Christ because he thinks that his sin is greater than the death and promise of Christ, though Paul says that grace abounded more than sin (Rom. 5:20), that mercy is more powerful than sin (Ap IV 149).

Obviously, the Apology directs the doubter to “the death and promise of Christ” for certainty, not the doubter’s own faith.

⁵⁷ The Latin reads, “*Ideo Christus datus est, ut credamus nos propter ipsum iustificari.*” If standard rules of grammar apply here at all, the present infinitive *iustificari* is governed by the perfect main verb *datus est*, not the present subjunctive *credamus*. Justification is here seen as past event, having occurred at the same time as *datus est*. It should be noted that the German translation takes justification as present (*gerecht werden*). But the reading of the Latin set forth above makes sense not only grammatically, but also as a step toward the assertion of subjective justification two sentences later: “we are accounted righteous for Christ’s sake when we believe God is reconciled to us [*placatum esse*] because of Him.” Nor is this manner of speaking unique to this reference in the Apology. Compare Ap XII 45, which says the Gospel “properly is to believe the forgiveness of sins which has been given (*donatam*) on account of Christ.” Again, the German renders with a present (*vergeben sein*).

⁵⁸ On “promise” also see AC XIII 54, 76-77, XXIV 55; FC SD III 30. Other related objects of faith include the Gospel (FC SD V 25), the words of institution (LC V 35), Scripture and the Gospel (LC V 31), the Gospel and Baptism (LC IV 28-30), and absolution (AC XXV 4, Ger.).

⁵⁹ Robert D. Preus, “Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 45 (July, 1981), 163-184, p. 178. Cf. the 1872 Synodical Conference essay: “For if I am to be saved through believing that I am redeemed, that I am reconciled with God, that my sins are forgiven me, then all that must already be there beforehand . . . As surely therefore as God’s Word assures us that we are to become righteous, to be reconciled with God and saved through faith, so surely all these things must be there already before my faith, and they simply wait for me to accept them” (p. 13).

Pieper, however, notes that one's own faith would be decisive if the Confessions rigidly divided Jesus and His work on one hand from the results of His work on the other. As we have seen, they actually make no such distinction as to the object of faith (or what faith receives). But,

If this distinction were consistently applied ... one could no longer believe in the forgiveness of sins, or justification, on the basis of the gracious promise in the objective means of grace, but would have to deduce the fact that one is justified from the fact that one truly believes. In other words, when the sinner smitten by the Law asks: Does God forgive me my sins? he could not be directed to the forgiveness of sins pronounced in the Gospel, but would have to be instructed first of all to examine himself whether he has the faith in the "*bonum iustificum*."⁶⁰

This is the travesty which results from a denial of objective justification. Probing still further along these lines, Pieper quotes Carpzov's analysis of the Confessions:

The forgiveness of sins is viewed in two ways: (1) as it has been purchased by Christ and is offered in Word and Sacrament and (2) as it is appropriated and possessed by faith. ... In the former respect the forgiveness of sins is the object of faith in so far as faith justifies (*quatenus iustificat*). In the latter respect the forgiveness of sins is also the object of justifying faith, but not in so far as faith justifies, but in so far as faith occupies itself with a good object, namely, with the forgiveness of sins as already accepted, taking pleasure in it and rejoicing in it.⁶¹

(A prime example of faith occupying itself with a good object in the Confessions is the belief that God hears our prayers. See Ap IV 204, 332-33, 350).

A way of testing Carpzov's distinction is to see whether references which explicitly attempt to define or describe the Gospel always include references to faith as part of the message. If not, the "core" of the Gospel (which is the object of justifying faith) does not include faith itself. In reviewing the Confessions, one finds that while many such references include faith as part of

⁶⁰ Pieper, *op. cit.*, p. 540.

⁶¹ Carpzov (*Isagoge in libr. symb.*, p. 208 f.; quoted in Baier-Walther, III, p. 285) quoted in *ibid.*, p. 541, footnote 75. See Ap IV 141: "For through Christ we come to the Father; and having received the forgiveness of sins, we become sure that we have a gracious God who cares about us, we call upon Him, give thanks to Him, fear and love Him. So John teaches in his first epistle (4:19): 'We love,' he says, 'because He first loved us,' that is, because He gave His Son for us and forgave us our sins."

the Gospel (AC V 3, Ger.; Ap IV 260, 274, 345, XII 2, 86, XXVII 13, FC SD V 20), several of the more careful definitions do not. For instance:

. . . The Gospel, strictly speaking, is the kind of doctrine that teaches what a man who has not kept the law and is condemned by it should believe, namely, that Christ has satisfied and paid for all guilt and without man's merit has obtained and won for him forgiveness of sins, the "righteousness that avails before God," and eternal life.⁶² (See also AC XII 5, FC Ep V 7; SD II 50, 54, V 9, 21).

Edmund Schlink concurs:

In such definitions of the Gospel it is noteworthy that Christ is almost always expressly mentioned, but not always faith. Since the concept of faith is missing in numerous definitions of the Gospel, this very absence again insures the significance of "faith justifies." That is, Christ is our righteousness, God justifies us for Christ's sake.⁶³

Thus, the object of saving faith is what God has done for the world in Christ: both His atonement (and everything the atonement presupposes, such as the grace of God and the events of Jesus' life) and the results of the atonement like forgiveness, justification, and the promise.

III. The promise is before us and outside of us; it actually offers something.

"Promise" gets the spotlight in this section because it is such a decisive theme in the Confessions. As the Symbols use the term, it is laden with objective justification implications, for, as just noted, it is a direct result of what God has done for the world in Christ. What God will do is not the point:

⁶² Notice that the mention of faith here is not part of the Gospel message. Rather, all that is being said here is that faith believes the Gospel, i. e., that the Gospel is the object of faith.

⁶³ Schlink, *op. cit.*, p. 102, footnote 19. Robert Preus puts it even more strongly: "And so it is, strictly speaking, not talk about forgiveness, or talk about faith, or even talk about justification by faith which is the Gospel, but the work and righteousness of Christ (Apol. IV 43), which we apprehend by faith, as our Confessions assert again and again (SD III 13, 25, 30, 38, 41, 42, 43; Apol. XXVIII 3, 19, 30, 34; X 7; XII 42, 61, 65, 116; XIII 19-20; IV 45, 43, 50, 48, 56, 55, 304, 264, 267, 272, 291, 292, 217, 270, 299, 338, 386)" (pp. 167-168).

... The Book of Concord understands by the means of grace something altogether different from the notion of the fanatics. They imagine that it is with the divine promises as with the word of man, where the thing indicated does not yet lie in the word; yet with God the matter is wrapped up in the Word. Therefore the Symbolical Books make use of the language of the Bible, which often names the abstract and means the concrete; so Paul, who by the promise always understands the thing promised.⁶⁴

Melanchthon, especially, uses the word “promise” as his pet expression for the Gospel: “All Scripture should be divided into two chief doctrines, the law and the promises” (Ap IV 5). On occasion, he explicitly identifies “Gospel” and “promise” (Ap IV 388, XII 53). The Formula likes to talk about the “promise of the Gospel” (SD III 25, 38, 39, 43).⁶⁵

While the last section of this paper viewed the promise as a result of Christ’s work, this section intends to come at the matter in greater depth from the other side. Specifically, it will attempt to show what the content of the promise is, then it will note that the promise actually offers something. Again, if the promise has justification as its content and/or if it offers justification, this justification must exist before men come into contact with the promise and believe it.

As one might guess, the content of the promise is rich and variegated. The Symbols speak of promised mercy (Ap IV 79-82), the promise of grace (Ap IV 303), and the promise of redemption (SA III v 4). Forgiveness is a “thing promised”⁶⁶ on account of Christ, as are justification (Ap IV 182) and reconciliation (Ap IV 217). Indeed, these “things” become near-ontological entities. Melanchthon, coordinates the promises concerning Christ⁶⁷ with those

⁶⁴ 1872 Synodical Conference essay, p. 28. Carpov, after a section on the nature of a promise, says, “In the apostolic text not only is objective firmness (*firmitas*) understood, but subjective certainty (*certificatio*), and indeed not only on the part of God but also on our part, so that it may be certain and proven to we who believe . . . [In *Textu Apostolico enim non objectiva solum firmitas intelligitur, sed subjectiva certificatio, et quidem non ex parte DEI tantum, sed ex parte nostri etiam, ut nobis credentibus etiam promissio certa et explorata fit ...]*” (p. 230, emphasis original).

⁶⁵ Holsten Fagerberg has observed: “Inasmuch as God gives His promise of forgiveness in the Gospel, an abrupt transition from the Gospel, which contains the promise, to an identification between the Gospel and the promise takes place. Thus the Gospel receives the definite and restricted character of a Word of promise. In SA’s interpretation of Mark 1:15, ‘Gospel’ is rendered as ‘promise,’ and the promise is understood to be a personal statement, *Zusage*, concerning forgiveness of sin for Christ’s sake” (*A New Look at the Lutheran Confessions, 1529-1537*, Tr. by Gene J. Lund (St. Louis, 1971), pp. 94-95).

⁶⁶ “*Res promissa.*”

⁶⁷ “*Promissiones de Christo.*”

concerning forgiveness and our gracious acceptance (Ap IV 102). The latter are as real as the former. “Faith alone, looking to the promise and believing with full assurance that God forgives because Christ did not die in vain, conquers the terrors of sin and death” (Ap IV 148; cf. 197 along with 120, 186, and XXIV 55). Thus, “... the Gospel promises the forgiveness of sins with certainty” (Ap IV 264). The “Gospel and absolution” is precisely “that sin has been forgiven and grace has been obtained through Christ”: (AC XII 5, Ger.; cf. Ap IV 40, 180, XII 35). In Ap IV 217 the conscience finds peace and is justified by faith because faith receives the promise of justification, which essentially means that God is placated.⁶⁸ Ap IV 295 echoes the latter thought.

The Confessions make this point in opposition to the works-righteousness of Rome: “If mortal works merited the forgiveness of sins and justification, there would be no need for Christ and the promise, and everything that Paul says about the promise would be overthrown” (Ap IV 87; cf. 223). Against such an error, Paul (and the Confessions after him) urges the Christian doctrine of justification—objective and subjective:

For these reasons Paul contends that we are not justified by the law; to the law he opposes the promise of the forgiveness of sins granted for Christ’s sake, and he teaches us to accept the forgiveness of sins by faith, freely for Christ’s sake (Ap XII 79; cf. 76-77).

Since the promise is on account of Christ, not works (Ap XV 10-12, XX 10, Ap XXVII 33-34), “... we must not set our love or works against the wrath of God or trust in our love or works, but only in Christ, the mediator. We must take hold of the promise of the forgiveness of sins before we keep the law” (Ap XII 87; cf. IV 150).

The great advantage of the Lutheran position over the Roman one is that the Reformers refused to stand before God on the ground of their own sin-polluted works, but on the solid rock of God’s grace and Christ’s work. Therefore troubled consciences can know “it is the command of God—yes, the very voice of the Gospel—that we should believe the absolution and firmly believe

⁶⁸ Note that because faith receives justification, by faith the conscience receives peace. This is another variation on the distinction, recognized by Carpozov, between faith as it justifies and faith as it concerns itself with a good object. Note, too, that again the Symbols speak of the promised justification while explaining a Bible passage about justification by faith.

that the forgiveness of sins is granted us freely for Christ's sake ..." (Ap XI 2). God commands us to believe the promise (Ap XII 72, 88, IV 344-47), and even confirms it with an oath (Ap XII 94), not because He is arbitrary and capricious, but because the promise is actually true in Christ (Ap IV 345, XII 72). "Daniel knew that the forgiveness of sins in the Christ was promised not only to the Israelites but to all nations. Otherwise he could not have promised the king forgiveness of sins" (Ap IV 262). God goes to such lengths to confirm and publish His promise because He wants men to believe it.⁶⁹ Luther notes in connection with the Fifth Petition that in the Gospel "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" (LC III 88; cf. Ap IV 101, 257). If there is nothing but forgiveness in the Gospel before we prayed for or thought of it, forgiveness must exist in the promise prior to faith.⁷⁰ In fact, the promise is seen as so identical with its contents that it is sometimes said to justify (Ap IV 58-59, 297-98; cf. Ap XII 95; FC Ep III 9).⁷¹

More typically, however, the Symbols say the promise offers something. For example, while the German text of AC XXIV 30 indicates that grace and forgiveness are promised⁷² us by Christ, the corresponding Latin in XXIV 31 says Christ's benefits are truly offered⁷³ to us. Ap IV 48 can speak on the one hand of the promise of God in which forgiveness and justification is offered,⁷⁴ and on the other hand of "the offered promise of forgiveness and justification."⁷⁵ (Also in

⁶⁹ See Ap IV 97, 228, 259; XII 94; SA III iii 4. As will be noted later, the whole "promise" model has a built-in impetus toward the means of grace.

⁷⁰ The Formula argues on the analogy of the certainty of the promise (Gospel) to prove the *manducatio indignorum*: "Just as the Gospel is and remains the true Gospel even when godless hearers do not believe it (except that in them it does not effect salvation), so whether those who receive the sacrament believe or do not believe, Christ nonetheless remains truthful in His words when He says, 'Take eat, this is my body' " (FC SD VII 89).

⁷¹ "The Gospel is not only a promise of forgiveness, but is itself already forgiveness; not only the announcement of the divine deed of grace, but itself the deed of divine grace" (Schlink, p. 103). This helps explain Ap IV 188: "Therefore we call upon devout minds to consider the promises, and we teach them about the free forgiveness of sins and the reconciliation that comes (*fit*) through faith in Christ."

⁷² "Zugesagt ist"

⁷³ "Vere exhibeantur"

⁷⁴ "Promissioni Dei, in qua gratis propter Christum offertur remissio peccatorum et iustificatio."

⁷⁵ "Oblatum promissionem remissionis peccatorum et iustificationis"

this paragraph, faith justifies by accepting the offer in the promise, namely, justification. See also Ap IV 297).⁷⁶

What is offered in the promise? Melancthon says mercy (Ap IV 339) and forgiveness (Ap IV 312; cf. XXIV 69-70) are. And so it has been from the “first promise”:

Adam was rebuked and terrified after his sin; this was contrition. Then God promised grace and said there would be a seed that would destroy the kingdom of the devil, death, and sin! This was the offer of the forgiveness of sins (Ap XII 55).

Again, the forgiveness of sins was truly offered to Adam in the promise. It was in no way conditioned on Adam’s faith, for up to the time God made this announcement to Adam, Adam had no faith in Christ. He knew nothing about Christ until the promise was given.⁷⁷ In addition, reconciliation is offered in the promise (Ap IV 41-42, 44), as is justification (Ap IV 5, 40, 43, 62, 367-68; XII 29).

Luther agrees. He notes that “The Gospel offers consolation and forgiveness in more ways than one ...” (SA III iii 8), but in the Large Catechism he focuses on “The holy sacraments and absolution as well as through the comforting words of the entire Gospel” (II 54). Fundamentally, the “treasure comprehended and offered to us in the Word” is “The Lord Christ upon the cross” (LC IV 37). Therefore, “Baptism promises and brings ... victory over death and the devil, forgiveness of sin, God’s grace, the entire Christ, and the Holy Spirit with His gifts” (LC IV 41). These are the blessings “offered⁷⁸ and promised⁷⁹ in the words which accompany the water ...” (LC

⁷⁶ Compare Chemnitz in the *Examen*: “... because in the promise, through the Word and the sacraments, the Holy Spirit through the ministry shows, sets forth, offers, dispenses, communicates, and gives these merits and blessings of Christ, therefore faith does not doubt that by laying hold of the promise it truly receives and possesses these things” (p. 577).

⁷⁷ Cf. the words of E.W.A. Koehler: “It is quite incomprehensible how any man can say that the Gospel indeed proclaims and offers forgiveness of sins to all the world and yet deny that the sins of all men are already forgiven. No prison warden may tell the convict that he is free unless the governor has previously pardoned him. If this has not happened, the warden may perhaps talk of the willingness of the governor to pardon and about the possibility that he will do so, but he cannot ‘talk pardon,’ cannot tell the prisoner, ‘you are pardoned, you are free.’ Even so here” (“Objective Justification,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* XVI (April, 1945), 217-35, p. 226.

⁷⁸ “*Forgetragen*”

⁷⁹ “*Verheissen*”

IV 33). And “because he offers and promises forgiveness of sins ... The treasure is opened and placed at everyone’s door, yes, upon everyone’s table, but it is your responsibility to take it and confidently believe that it is just as the words tell you” (LC V 35).

The Formula, with its penchant for summary, states the matter thus:

Neither is contrition nor love nor any other virtue the means and instrument with and through which we could receive and accept the grace of God, the merit of Christ, and the forgiveness of sins offered to us in the promise of the Gospel, but only faith (FC SD III 31; cf. 16, 30, 39; V 9, 21).

The promise offers something. Faith simply receives what the promise offers. God wants us to receive; therefore, He wants us to believe. But if we are to believe, He must offer blessings such as forgiveness and justification in fact, not just potentially.⁸⁰ Otherwise, we will never believe.

⁸⁰ As a matter of convenience, here follows a list of passages in Ap IV on Justification which speak of “justification” logically prior to faith or as the object of faith. They are all mentioned in appropriate sections of this paper: Ap IV 40-41, 43, 48, 62, 84, 97, 180, 182, 217, 297, 367. A debatable case is Ap IV 157-58: “For if the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation do not come freely for Christ’s sake, but for the sake of our love, nobody will have the forgiveness of sins unless he keeps the whole law, because the law does not justify so long as it can accuse us. Justification is reconciliation for Christ’s sake. Therefore it is clear that we are justified by faith, for it is sure that we receive the forgiveness of sins by faith alone.” When Melancthon says, “Justification is reconciliation ...,” it appears to this writer that he is speaking of objective justification and laying the foundation for the conclusion “we are justified by faith.” Melancthon’s argument is begging the question (assuming what he is trying to prove) if both references to justification are about subjective justification. The section is, however, a difficult one, and at least one respected interpreter seems to take both references as subjective: “The complete reconciliation is not only the presupposition of justification, but in the justification of the sinner reconciliation with God takes place. Justification *is* reconciliation (Ap IV 158; cf. SD III, 25)” (Schlink, p. 83, emphasis original).

IV. Man cannot love an angry God.

This point comes up infrequently, always in Melanchthon's writings, but it is often at a decisive juncture in the argument, and the relevance of this point to the present study cannot be overlooked. As noted above, the promise will never achieve its goal of creating faith if it is empty, or if the blessings it describes lack only faith in the hearers to be complete. Unless men know that God is propitiated, they will not believe. Man cannot love an angry God.

Fundamental to this thesis is the chilling prospect of facing the holy Judge. "In justification," Melanchthon realizes, "our business is with God; His wrath must be stilled and the conscience find peace before him" (Ap IV 224). Therefore he marvels that the Romanists never seemed to catch the awesome implications of their own words:

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? (Ap XII 34).

The opponents do not distinguish law from Gospel. They are not aware that "The law always accuses us and thus always shows us an angry God" (Ap IV 295). And "while he terrifies us and seems to be casting us into eternal death, human nature cannot bring itself to love a wrathful, judging, punishing God." Thus, "a heart that really feels God's wrath cannot love him unless it sees that He is reconciled"⁸¹ (Ap IV 36; cf. 300, XII 88-89).

Hence, "amid the terrors of sin, a human being must have a very definite Word of God to learn to know God's will, namely, that He is no longer angry" (Ap IV 262; cf. XXI 17). This Word of promise, of course, is based on "The certain propitiation for our sins" in the merits of Christ (Ap IV 53).

⁸¹ Lat., "*placatus*." A failure to teach objective justification aright, one might argue, will inevitably result in a confusion of Law and Gospel. This could be a fruitful area for further study from doctrinal, historical, and pastoral viewpoints. See, for example, C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between Law and Gospel*, Tr. by W.H.T. Dau (St. Louis, 1928), pp. 165-192 and 236-246.

This is of great practical importance. A crushed unbeliever must be told that God is no longer angry with him in Christ, that all his sins are forgiven, that God has declared him “not guilty” (i.e., justified him)—or he will not believe. Simply to tell him, “God loves you, and Christ died for you” is not sufficient. Even a 16th century Roman Catholic could say this much. Urging a penitent unbeliever to have faith on such a basis is fruitless. He must know that Christ’s atonement directly affects God’s attitude toward him in such a way that God no longer wants to punish him, but loves and forgives him. In other words, he must know objective justification.

Of course, “whoever knows that he has a Father reconciled to him through Christ truly knows God, knows that God cares for him, and calls upon God” (AC XX 24, Lat.)—in short, he begins truly to believe in God and to love Him. But in this life we always need the Gospel because we can never stand on our own works:

If faith receives the forgiveness of sins on account of love, the forgiveness of sins will always be unsure, for we never love as much as we should. In fact, we do not love at all unless our hearts are sure that forgiveness of sins has been granted to us. If our opponents require us to trust in our own love for the forgiveness of sins and justification, they completely abolish the Gospel of the free forgiveness of sins. For men can neither render nor understand this love unless they believe that the forgiveness of sins is received freely (Ap IV 110; cf. 174-176).

And even this faith is not a product of human effort. God creates it through the means of grace.

V. The means of grace are based on objective justification and they continually offer it.

Obviously, one must hear a word if he is to believe it (e.g.: SA III viii 8). Likewise obvious is that the sacraments admonish, cheer, confirm (Ap IV 276) and assure (FC Ep VII 20) Christians in the belief that their sins are forgiven. And all this presupposes objective justification, as shown above.

But the connection between the Gospel and the atonement is much more intimate than the relationship between report and underlying event. The Gospel actually offers those who hear it the

blessings of the atonement, and it has the power to produce faith which receives these blessings.⁸² None of this is new to the present study. The burden of this section is to focus on Word and sacrament as the contemporary world's link with the forgiveness of sins. The means of grace continually apply this blessing to men today. Objective justification is objectively offered: "... this merit and these benefits of Christ are to be offered, given, and distributed to us through his Word and sacraments" (FC SD XI 16). Luther is more graphic:

Although the work was accomplished and forgiveness of sins was acquired on the cross, yet it cannot come to us in any other way than through the Word. How should we know that this has been accomplished and offered to us if it were not proclaimed by preaching, by the oral Word? Whence do they know of forgiveness, and how can they grasp and appropriate it, except by steadfastly believing the Scriptures and the Gospel? Now, the whole Gospel and the article of the Creed, "I believe in the holy Christian Church, the forgiveness of sins," are embodied in this sacrament and offered to us through the Word (LC V 31-32; cf. Ap XXIV 36, 69-70)⁸³

Carpzov agrees that forgiveness must be considered two ways: first as it has been acquired by Christ and is offered in the means of grace; and then, second, as it has been accepted through faith.⁸⁴ The point is that objective justification lends itself to the means of grace concept, just as the

⁸² "Through the Gospel the sinner is made contemporaneous with the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. By the Gospel he is reconciled, even though the work of reconciliation was already finished in Christ's death on the cross. The reconciliation is not only the basis for justification laid long ago in the historical event, but 'justification is reconciliation for Christ's sake' (Ap. IV, 158)" (Schlink, p. 103).

⁸³ See also Luther's words in *Against the Heavenly Prophets in the Matter of Images and Sacraments, 1525*: "We treat of the forgiveness of sins in two ways. First, how it is achieved and won. Second, how it is distributed and given to us. Christ has achieved it on the cross, it is true. But he has not distributed or given it on the cross. He has not won it in the supper or sacrament. There he has distributed and given it through the Word, as also in the gospel, where it is preached. He has won it once for all on the cross. But the distribution takes place continuously, before and after, from the beginning to the end of the world" (in *Luther's Works* 40, Tr. and ed. by Conrad Bergendoff (Philadelphia, 1958), pp. 213-14).

⁸⁴ P. 208. Cf. Abraham Calov: Justification "is the object of faith in that it is offered by God in the Gospel; it is the effect, to put it thus, in so far as grace having been apprehended by faith, the forgiveness of sins happens to us by that very act." (*Exegema Augustanae Confessionis* (Wittenberg, 1665), p. 4, quoted in Kurt Marquart, "The Reformation Roots of 'Objective Justification,'" unpublished paper, pp. 5-6. Marquart notes that formulations such as those of Carpzov and Calov were (at least in part) occasioned by vigorous Roman attacks on the "special" faith (*fides specialis*) doctrine taught by the Lutherans in which they would "require everyone to believe that his sins are forgiven him" (Ap XII 60). The opponents of the Reformation asked, "How can you be forgiven by faith ... if your 'special faith' must believe that you already are forgiven? If you are already forgiven before faith, and if faith must believe this, then how can you be forgiven by faith?" (Marquart, p. 5). The answer to the question is an insistence on both objective and subjective justification.

very idea of promise does.⁸⁵ Indeed, objective justification, as the Confessions see it, is available to men only in the means of grace.

As noted in the last section, even the Christian man cannot stand before God on the basis of his own works. "... unless God constantly forgives, we are lost" (LC III 91) This is precisely what God does through the means of grace. "... personal faith ... accepts the promise as a present reality and believes that the forgiveness of sins is actually being offered" (Ap XIII 21, emphasis added).⁸⁶ This happens in the church: "The Holy Spirit must continue to work in us through the Word, daily granting forgiveness until we attain to that life where there will be no more forgiveness" (LC II 58; cf. 62; Ap VII 9). Meanwhile, "because I always sin, I ought always take the medicine" (AC XXIV 33, Lat.; see LC IV 80-83; LC Confession 32-33). Not only that; Christ "is the mediator continually, and not just at the beginning of justification" (Ap IV 317; see also LC IV 86). Hence, the Formula holds up the example of Abraham. It notes that Paul says:

Abraham was justified before God through faith alone for the sake of the Mediator without the addition of his own works, not only when he was first converted from idolatry and had no good works, but also afterward when the Holy Spirit had renewed and adorned him with many resplendent good works (Rom. 4:3; Gen. 15:6; Heb. 11:8). (FC SD III 33; also see the section Ap IV 159-65 on this "continual justification," and against work-righteousness.)⁸⁷

⁸⁵ See Ap IV 53; also Ap IX 2 on Baptism: "It is most certain that the promise of salvation also applies to little children. It does not apply to those who are outside of Christ's church, where there is neither Word nor sacrament, because Christ regenerates through Word and sacrament. Therefore, it is necessary to baptize children, so that the promise of salvation might be applied to them according to Christ's command (Matt. 28:19), 'Baptize all nations.' Just as there salvation is offered to all, so Baptism is offered to all—men, women, children, and infants. Therefore it clearly follows that infants should be baptized because salvation is offered with Baptism."

⁸⁶ Carpov explains the present tense in the wording of AC IV 1, "non possint justificari coram Deo" Thus: "The Protestants here speak concerning justification as it happens and is continued, for as it is declared to have happened and to be continued by external signs before men, to that extent (of course) the profession of faith and good works have their place ..." (*Loquuntur Protestantes de Justificatione prout illa fit ac continuatur, nam prout facia esse aut continuari externis signis coram hominibus declaratur, eatenus omnino professio Fidei et bona Opera suum habent locum.*—p. 202).

⁸⁷ "We believe that God justifies, or offers and grants the forgiveness of sins, *as often* as the Gospel is preached, absolution is pronounced, and the sacraments are administered, and that God, in every case where the Holy Ghost creates faith in the heart of a man, appropriates to that man, and puts him into possession of, the forgiveness, or the justification which was gained by Christ for all men and belongs to all men, so that he now holds and possesses it" (*Lehre und Wehre* 51, 564, quoted in Theodore Engelder, "Objective Justification" *Concordia Theological Monthly* IV, (July 1933) 507-17, reprint (Ft. Wayne, 1981), p.515). Also cf. Schlink, pp. 102-03.

Of course, the “Gospel or absolution offers ‘subjective’ effects and benefits only because it carries ‘objective’ content, value, and power.”⁸⁸ It offers men Christ on the cross (LC IV 37) and His blessings (LC IV 44); the Holy Spirit, righteousness, and eternal life (AC XXVIII 8-9 Ger.; Ap VII 5, XII 29); forgiveness (Ap XII 42, XXIV 75; SA III iii 8; LC III 88); and salvation (LC II 38). Luther says, “The Creed brings us pure grace ... the Father gives us all creation, Christ all His works, the Holy Spirit all His gifts” (LC II 68-69). The means of grace offer all this whether people believe it or not: “Let the conclusion therefore be that Baptism always remains valid and maintains its integrity, even if only one person were baptized and he, moreover, did not have true faith” (LC IV 60). Such a sentence betrays an underlying belief in objective justification.

Yet this in no way means the Symbols are unconcerned about faith. In fact, the message of forgiveness is the very tool the Holy Spirit uses to create faith. Objective justification brings about subjective justification:

The holy sacrament was not instituted to make provision for a sacrifice for sin—for the sacrifice has already taken place—but to awaken our faith and comfort our consciences when we perceive that through the sacrament grace and forgiveness of sin are promised us by Christ (AC XXIV 30-33, Ger.).

Both the promise and the bestowal of merits are therefore the sources of trust in mercy. Such trust in God’s promise and Christ’s merits must be the basis for prayer. We must be completely certain that we are heard for Christ’s sake and that by His merits we have a gracious Father (Ap XXI 20; cf. Ap XXIV 32; FC SD II 54, along with FC Ep V 7; SD VII 81)⁸⁹

⁸⁸ Marquart p. 19.

⁸⁹ Cf. Lowell Green on Ap IV 69: “Thus, the Word of God justifies in a twofold sense: The preaching of the Gospel arouses faith, while the word of pardon itself remits sin. In the context immediately following, Melancthon shows that with this concept of the Word he intends to include also the forensic declaration of righteousness for the sake of Christ (*iustos pronuntiam*)” (p. 218).

VI. Only faith can accept a promise.

Faith dare not be underrated, for not only *does* it accept what the promise (and the means of grace) offer; *only* faith can accept these blessings. This was Melanchthon's most potent argument against the Confutation's doctrine of work-righteousness:

Fourth, the forgiveness of sins is a thing promised for Christ's sake. Therefore it can be accepted only by faith, since a promise can be accepted only by faith. In Rom. 4:16, Paul says, "That is why it depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed," as though he were to say, "If it depended on our merits, the promise would be uncertain and useless inasmuch as we could never determine whether we had merited enough" ... Based upon the nature of a promise, this is Paul's chief argument, which he often repeats (Rom. 4:16; Gal. 3:18). (Ap IV 84; cf. Ap XII 80; XV 10-11; IV 43, 50, 70, 297)

Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how anything *but* faith (e.g., works) could receive a promise. A promise can be believed; it cannot be "worked on." Nothing can even be done as a result of a promise unless it is first given credence.⁹⁰

In the nature of the case, promise and faith are correlative. This not only means that faith grasps the promise, but also that the promise requires faith (see Ap IV 324). If one does not believe the promise, he is calling God a liar (Ap XII 61-62). In short, then, the Romanist emphasis on works is entirely misplaced. Since God offers His blessings via a promise, faith is required (not works): "... at every mention of mercy, this requires faith, which accepts the promise of mercy" (Ap IV 55; cf. Ap IV 267 as well as AC XXV 4 (Lat.) and Ap IV 272).

This is also true when the promise comes in sacramental form:

Thus we teach that in using the sacraments there must be a faith which believes these promises and accepts what is promised and offered in the sacrament. The reason for this is clear and well-founded. A promise is useless unless faith accepts it (Ap XIII 19-20; cf. AC XXIV 33 Ger.; LC V 34).

⁹⁰ In other places the Confessions occasionally speak of related entities which can be accepted only by faith: mercy (Ap IV 174); forgiveness (Ap XII 63); the imputation of the righteousness of the Gospel (Ap IV 163); and justification (Ap IV 217).

The sacraments do not work *ex opere operato* (by the mere performance of an outward act, without faith in the recipient):

God's works, however, are salutary and necessary for salvation, and they do not exclude but rather demand faith, for without faith they could not be grasped (LC IV 35;⁹¹ cf. Ap XXIV 90).

Faith, then, is of great importance, because only it receives the promise. This does not dilute the promise, either with respect to its objective validity, its contents, or its power, though:

Let us remember that the Gospel promises the forgiveness of sins with certainty. It would clearly be an abolition of the Gospel if we were to deny that the forgiveness of sins must surely be given by a promise ... Wherever there is a promise, there faith is required. Only faith can accept a promise (Ap IV 264; cf. Ap IV 44).

This gives rise to a kind of shorthand. Since the justifying promise is received by faith, "justification must necessarily be ascribed to faith" (Ap IV 298; cf. Ap IV 67). Hence, the expression "faith justifies." And so the Ap can say, "The Gospel proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the law does not teach" (IV 43), for work-righteousness is the target against which Melancthon directs his attack:

We are not to think from this that we receive the forgiveness of sins by trust in this love or on account of this love, just as little as we receive the forgiveness of sins on account of the other works that follow it. For the forgiveness of sins is received by faith alone—and we mean faith in the true sense of the word—since the promise can be received only by faith (Ap IV 112).

Chapter Two of this study has been devoted to detecting objective justification implications in the midst of Confessional sections which ostensibly stress subjective justification. Since forgiveness, the stilling of God's wrath, justification, and other results of the work of Christ

⁹¹ The word translated "demand" is *fodern* in Luther's German. Two modern possibilities exist. It could be *fordern* ("demand") or *fördern* ("further"). The Latin translation of LC has *requirunt*. Cf. Tappert p. 441, footnote 5.

are described as what faith receives, or what faith believes, or what the promise and the means of grace offer, or a necessary condition before men can believe, these blessings must be logically prior to and independent from the existence of faith. The final section recapitulated many of the preceding points as it observed that only faith can receive a promise. At the same time, it showed the makings of at least one “shorthand” expression frequently used by the Confessions, “faith justifies.” Chapter Three will concern itself with this and other often misunderstood expressions in the Symbols.

CHAPTER THREE

DIFFICULT EXPRESSIONS

The stress on subjective justification in the Lutheran Confessions does not prevent them from teaching objective justification. It is taught directly, as the Symbols discuss the atonement and its results, and it is taught indirectly, implicit in references which spotlight subjective justification. But the Confessions also contain expressions which seem exclusively to credit faith with the existence of justification (e.g., “faith justifies,” “we are justified when we believe”). Such expressions are the subject of this final chapter.

I. “Faith Justifies”

As the last two sections of the preceding chapter indicated, the Symbols are most concerned that God’s promises be believed, and so received. In this, the Confessions echo Luther’s thought: “For while the act has taken place, as long as I have not appropriated it, it is as if it had not taken place for me.”⁹² Melancthon in Ap IV has still other reasons for saying “faith justifies”; Paul himself says it (Rom. 3:28), as well as other Bible passages and testimonies of the orthodox church.⁹³ But, as noted above, his *tour de force* of deductive reasoning is directed against Roman work-righteousness (Ap IV 75-86; 69-74).

Melancthon had good reason to fortify his position so well on this front in the Apology. For the Confutation had declared:

The mention, however, that they here make of faith is approved so far as not faith alone, which some incorrectly teach, but faith which works by love, is understood, as the apostle teaches aright in Gal. 5:3. For in baptism there is an infusion, not of faith alone, but also, at the same time, of hope and love⁹⁴

⁹² *Against the Heavenly Prophets*, AE 40:215.

⁹³ See Ap IV 87-121. Cf. Carpzov, pp. 230-31.

⁹⁴ *Confutatio Pontificia, To Article V 2* in J.M. Reu, *The Augsburg Confession: A Collection of Sources* (Chicago, 1930), p. *351.

Again,

But in the same article their ascription of justification to faith alone is diametrically opposite to the truth of the Gospel, by which works are not excluded.⁹⁵

And yet again,

It has been sufficiently declared above that we are justified not properly by faith, but by love. But if any such statement be found in the Holy Scriptures, Catholics know that it is declared concerning *fides formata*, which works by love (Gal. 5), and because justification is begun by faith, because it is the substance of things hoped for, Heb. 11:1.⁹⁶

The Romanists would not exclude works from justification. And Melancthon is well aware of their position. He says the opponents “teach that a man is justified by faith and works” (Ap IV 245). In fact, “they do not attribute justification to faith except on account of love” (Ap IV 109; cf. IV 145). He is frustrated because they refuse to “grant that we are accounted righteous by faith for Christ’s sake” (Ap IV 362). Their doctrine makes men members of Moses, not Christ (Ap XII 86); it buries Christ (Ap IV 18). This happened even in Paul’s day (Ap IV 393), and it continues now, says Melancthon, with the Turks and the papacy (Ap XV 18).

“Our opponents imagine that faith is only historical knowledge ...” (Ap IV 48; cf. 51). They see it as “the start of justification or a preparation for justification. Then it would not be faith, but the works that follow, by which we become acceptable unto God ...” (Ap IV 71; cf. FC SD IV 34).⁹⁷

⁹⁵ *Idem*, to Article VI 3, Reu, p.352*.

⁹⁶ *Idem*, Part II, III. *Of the Mass* 21, Reu, p. *373. The Council of Trent would later pick up the same line of argument: “When the apostle says that a man is justified by faith and gratis, these words are to be understood in that sense which the perpetual consensus of the Catholic Church has held and expressed, namely, that we are said to be justified by faith because faith is the beginning of human salvation, the foundation and root of all justification, without which it is impossible to please God and to come to the fellowship of His children. But we are said to be justified gratis because none of the things which precede justification, whether it be faith or works, merit the grace of justification. ‘For if it is by grace, then it is not of works, otherwise [as the same apostle says], grace is not grace’ ” (quoted in Chemnitz, p. 549).

⁹⁷ Carpov, p. 231, offers a fourfold summary of the Roman Catholic position which the Ap refutes in Article IV. His points are summarized here:

- 1) They say they do not exclude Christ the propitiator; yet they bury Him and do away with Him.
- 2) They deny that the apostle excludes all works and the whole law from justification; they say he only

Holsten Fagerberg sums up the matter thus:

According to the Catholic point of view, faith alone can never justify, but only that faith which is active in love. When Paul says in Rom. 4:3 and 9 that faith is reckoned to us as righteousness, the Catholic understanding insists that this is a reference to faith active in love and good works. Contrary thereto, the basic concern of Ap is to show why faith alone makes men righteous before God and is reckoned as righteousness.⁹⁸

Hence, the stress “that a man is not justified by the precepts of a good life, but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Ap IV 87). It *is* a stress (see AC XXIV 28; Ap IV 59; 78, 117, 182, 201; XII 35-6, 54; XXIII 39; cf. also AC VI 3 (Ger.); Ap IV 177, 263), but a formidable one:

So this single expression, “He who believes” is so potent that it excludes and rejects all works that we may do with the intention of meriting salvation through them. For it is certain that whatever is not faith contributes nothing toward salvation, and receives nothing (LC IV 34; cf. Ap IV 89, 222, 380-82; FC Ep II 10; SD III 27, 33).

Like Ambrose, Melancthon “denies justification to works and ascribes it to faith, which liberates us through the blood of Christ” (Ap IV 104), while the Romanist stance “obscures Christ’s glory and mediatorial work” (Ap IV 324; cf. Ap IV 12, 29-30, 313). But, Melancthon responds, even the Book of James “does not omit faith nor exalt love in preference to it, but keeps it, lest Christ, the propitiator, be excluded from justification” (Ap IV 245). Schlink has caught the importance of this Christocentric thrust:

in the references to “justifying faith” that faith is meant which trusts the promise of Christ “that for his sake we have the forgiveness of sins” (Ap. IV, 62). For no other reason but that Christ is the mediator must we “defend the proposition, ‘faith justifies’ ” (Ap. IV, 69).⁹⁹

excludes certain kinds of works, namely, the ceremonial works.

3) They say faith is the beginning of justification, or that it is the required preparation for justification.

4) They pretend that when Scripture attributes justification to faith it means *fides formata*, and thus it only

attributes justification to faith on account of love.

⁹⁸ Fagerberg, p. 151. He makes a similar point regarding AC IV: “AC’s intent is to show—with the support of Romans 3 and 4—that man is justified not by works but by faith . . . apart from grace all works are sin and as a result cannot justify. All human merit must therefore be rejected” (p. 149).

⁹⁹ Schlink, pp. 99-100.

Men must be justified this way. Their own works will never do. Such works cannot pay the price for sin (Ap IV 57); they merely insult Christ (Ap IV 150; cf. AC XX 9-10 Ger.). Yet, the world thinks works are “a propitiation by which God is appeased and a price because of which we are accounted righteous. It does not believe that Christ is the propitiator, or that freely by faith we are accounted righteous for Christ’s sake” (Ap IV 211-212).¹⁰⁰ So the world resists the Confessional position “that faith alone justifies when ... it applies to us and makes our own the merit of Christ” (FC SD III 42; cf. 43; Ep III 6; Ap IV 227).¹⁰¹

The polemic against work-righteousness and the doctrine of faith as a receiving instrument form the foundation of the Symbols’ insistence that faith justifies:

... we receive the forgiveness of sins and reconciliation by faith for Christ’s sake, not for the sake of love or the keeping of the law. For this it necessarily follows that we are justified by faith in Christ (Ap IV 159).

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 ... (SA II; 4; cf. Ap IV 1, 214; XV 6).

“In the same way,” Melancthon argues, “if we must defend the proposition, ‘The promise of Christ is necessary over and above the law,’ then we must defend the proposition ‘faith justifies’ ...” because the promise “can be accepted only by faith. Therefore anyone who denies that faith justifies teaches only the law...” (Ap IV 70; cf. 386).

¹⁰⁰ Notice the contrast here. On the surface it would seem that Ap pits “faith justifies” against “work justifies.” But in fact, while the world thinks works are a propitiation, Ap contends that Christ is the propitiator. The world thinks works are the cause of our being accounted righteous (justified), but really, Christ is this cause. It is by faith (faith conceived as an instrument) that we are accounted righteous for Christ’s sake. Cf. Chemnitz: “Therefore the Pauline antithesis between faith and works shows that faith does not justify in this manner or for this reason, that it makes the man to whom the benefits of Christ are given worthy through works. But a humble man knows and confesses that his nature is unclean and that he is not worthy of these great blessings. Therefore faith seeks and obtains them by the free mercy of God, for the sake of Christ the Mediator” (p. 577).

¹⁰¹ Luther: “Here you clearly see that no work of satisfaction or sacrifice of reconciliation is of any use; only faith in the given body and the shed blood reconciles. Not that faith does the reconciling in and of itself, but it lays hold on and obtains the reconciliation which Christ has performed for us” (*The Misuse of the Mass*, *Luther’s Works* 36, tr. by Frederick C. Ahrens, ed. by Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia, 1959), p.177).

The formulation “faith justifies” is not intended to make faith a cause of justification, for faith only “justifies” because of its object:

Our know-it-alls, the new spirits, assert that faith alone saves and that works and external things contribute nothing to this end. We answer: it is true, nothing that is in us does it but faith, as we shall hear later on. But these leaders of the blind are unwilling to see that faith must have something to believe—something to which it may cling and upon which it may stand . . . Now, these people are so foolish as to separate faith from the object to which faith is attached and bound on the ground that the object is something external. Yes, it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart, just as the entire Gospel is an external, oral proclamation (LC IV 28-30; cf. Ap XXIV 55).

Olav Odhelius summarizes what has been said to this point: “Now since there is no other medium in man through which righteousness and salvation are apprehended except faith, there is every reason in the world to say that we are justified by faith alone.”¹⁰² But the Confessions have no interest in depicting faith as anything more than a receptive organ.

This is true even when the Confessions attribute great things to faith, and almost seem to personify it in the process. Through faith, say the Symbols, we are accepted (Ap IV 368), accounted righteous (Ap IV 211), and have a gracious God (Ap XV 11). On account of faith the good works we do please God (Ap IV 293; cf. 385, 166-67, 113-14; FC SD IV 7). Faith reconciles God (Ap IV 106), reconciles us to God (Ap IV 113-14; XI 2; XII 37; XV 5), covers our sins (Ap XII 96), makes confessing a salvific act (Ap IV 384), regenerates as well as justifies (Ap IV 86, 247, 338), and conquers terrors (Ap XXIV 60), the wrath of God (Ap XII 147), the curse of the law (FC SD VII 23), and death itself (Ap XII 146-47), for it sets Christ against such things (Ap IV 46). But, as Schlink notes regarding the last point,

¹⁰² *Disputationum homologeticarum in Augustanam Confessionem primasexta*, quoted in Preus, p. 181, note 24. Or. compare H.J.A. Bouman: “Faith is in constant reiteration presented as the divinely wrought means of appropriation, in constant antithesis to anything that smacks of being an *opus* or *meritum* of man. At times Melancthon thinks of justification in terms of its objective aspects, then as seen subjectively from man’s point of view, then again in both directions. Now Melancthon presents justification as a momentary act, now with the inclusion of its blessed results. If we may speak of one outstanding emphasis in Apology IV, it would seem to be *sola fides* [sic]. What systematization there is appears thus to be conditioned by the implied and expressed works-righteousness of Roman theology. This is also the conclusion of Engelland and Schlink” (“The Doctrine of Justification in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* XXVI [Nov. 1955], 801-19, p. 814).

Even in the statement that faith sets against (*opponit*) “God’s wrath ... Christ the mediator and propitiator,” the activity of this opposition is at the same time the complete passivity of reception. As faith “sets against,” it accepts “the forgiveness of sins” (Ap IV 46).¹⁰³

The Confessions bear this out. Faith *justifies* when it *obtains* forgiveness (Ap IV 45). It accepts forgiveness as it justifies and regenerates (Ap IV 292). Faith justifies because it receives the Word by which justification takes place (Ap IV 67). By it we get a new and clean heart (SA III xiii 1). Faith is so little a work of man (and so much a reception of God’s works) that Melancthon says it should be called “grace that makes us acceptable to God” (Ap IV 116).

Faith is said to “justify” solely because of what it receives: Christ’s atonement and its results. For the same reason, the Confessions (as well as the Bible) say faith is counted for righteousness.

II. Imputation

In his discussion of AC IV, Carpzov notes that the phrase, “this faith God imputes for righteousness before himself” is taken over from Rom. 4:5. To understand this phrase correctly, however, Carpzov adds that one must know what is meant by “imputation”—and what is meant by “faith.” “Faith” is not a legal virtue here, as the Papists or the Arminians would have it. Nor is faith considered in abstraction as an apprehending organ, as if the apprehension itself were such a great thing. No, here “faith” is understood by synecdoche: “The righteousness of Christ is understood with the organ, or insofar as it is apprehended by faith.”¹⁰⁴ In short, “faith is imputed for righteousness” means that “Christ’s righteousness (which is received by faith) is imputed for righteousness.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ P. 97, footnote 15. Cf. the whole section, pp. 97-100.

¹⁰⁴ Carpzov, p.209.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Quenstedt’s discussion of Rom.4:5: “In this passage faith does not denote merely an instrument which apprehends something, nor does it merely denote metonymically the thing that is imputed, namely, the righteousness of Christ; but here faith must be viewed symplectically and according to its intimate connection with its object as a complex term signifying the righteousness of Christ insofar as it is embraced and received by true faith. In this verse faith is not to be taken as pointing to its activity, but as pointing to its relationship with its object, that is, it is not to be understood as some work of ours, for here expressly and also in other

The Symbols support Carpzov's observation:

This merit [of Christ] has to be applied to us and to be made our own through faith if we are to be justified thereby (FC SD III 13; cf. 42, 14).

We shall therefore add clear testimonies stating that faith is the very righteousness by which we are accounted righteous before God. This is not because it is a work worthy in itself, but because it receives God's promise ... (Ap IV 86). Because the righteousness of Christ is given to us through faith, therefore faith is righteousness in us by imputation. That is, by it we are made acceptable to God because of God's imputation and ordinances, as Paul says (Rom. 4:5), "Faith is reckoned as righteousness" (Ap IV 307; cf. Ap IV 263; 292-93).

In fact, to pit faith against God's wrath and the terrors it causes is to pit Christ against it:

Our works cannot overcome the terrors of sin, but faith alone can overcome them. Only Christ, the mediator, can be pitted against God's wrath and judgment (Ap IV 214).

Since "it is faith ... that God declares to be righteousness ... he excludes even the merit of works according to the moral law" (Ap IV 89). Faith is "the righteousness of the Gospel, which deals with the promise of grace." It "receives justification and new life gratis" (Ap IV 366).

The Confessions speak of this reality in a variety of ways. They say righteousness is reckoned to faith (FC Ep III 14, 17, 57), that it is reckoned through faith (FC Ep III 9), and that it is given through faith (Ap IV 307; cf. 356). They also indicate that men are reputed righteous by faith (Ap XXIII 39), and that faith communicates Christ's merits to us (Ap IV 227, 305, 367).

The last expression in the preceding paragraph hints strongly at the underlying reason for these expressions. Robert Preus has noted that the Roman Catholics (especially at Trent):

affirmed, that the merits of Christ's atonement were the basis (*causa meritoria*) of our becoming righteous before God and that they are actually communicated (*communicantur*) to us, but piecemeal only and as love is infused, never by a gracious divine reckoning.¹⁰⁶

passages faith is opposed to good works" (quoted in Preus, pp. 181-82, note 25. Cf also Chemnitz, p. 533, and Schlink, p. 99).

¹⁰⁶ Preus, pp. 164-65. Cf. Trent, Sixth Session, Chapter VII: "This disposition, or preparation, is followed by justification itself, which is not only the remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inner

The Symbols are incredulous at such a thought:

To credit our works with being a propitiation and to claim that they merit the forgiveness of sins and that we are accounted righteous before God because of Christ by faith—what is this but to rob Christ of His honor as mediator and propitiator? (Ap IV 213; cf. 211-12).

Paul also teaches everywhere that righteousness is not to be sought in observances and services devised by men but that it comes through faith to those who believe that they are received by God into favor for Christ's sake. It is evident that the monks have taught that their invented observances make satisfaction for sins and merit grace and justification. What is this but to detract from the glory of Christ and obscure and deny the righteousness of faith? (AC XXVII 37-38, Lat.)

And because it [faith] receives the forgiveness of sins and reconciles us to God, we must be accounted righteous by this faith for Christ's sake *before* we love and keep the law ... (Ap IV 114, emphasis added).¹⁰⁷

The Confessions urge that “faith is imputed for righteousness” or that “faith communicates Christ's merits to us” for the same reason that they say “faith justifies”: to safeguard the doctrine of justification by grace.

A difficulty may arise in the minds of some when the Formula's precise description of justification is remembered. The Formula says:

Our righteousness before God consists in this, that God forgives us our sins purely by his grace, without any preceding, present, or subsequent work, merit, or worthiness, and reckons to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are accepted by God into grace and are regarded as righteous (FC Ep III 4).

man through voluntary acceptance of grace and of the gifts by which an unjust person becomes a just one, and an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to the hope of eternal life” (quoted in Chemnitz, p. 548).

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Carl Stange's paraphrase of Ap IV 117: “Up until now we have shown in considerable detail ... [first] that we receive the remission of sins by faith alone for the sake of Christ [cf. 75-85] and [second] that we are justified by faith alone [cf. 86-116], that is, we are made or regenerated from unrighteous men [75-85] into righteous men [cf. 86-116].” Lowell Green, who provides this quote from Stange (p. 221), continues: “Thus, Stange showed that Melancthon had used both Scriptural concepts of justification in the same sense—that is, that justification is by faith alone, through Christ, and that all works are excluded.” It should also be noted that the Confessions sometimes speak of “imputation of ... righteousness ... through the promise” (Ap IV 163; cf. 165 and FC SD III 25).

Justification is 1) the forgiveness (non-imputation) of sins and 2) the imputation of Christ's righteousness. But, if the language of the Confessions (as seen above) elsewhere suggests that imputation occurs with the presence of faith, and if this imputation is part and parcel of justification, can justification be said to exist logically prior to faith (and imputation)? This is the issue.

However, the Formula also shows that it considers justification to be complete with forgiveness or absolution:

... a poor sinner is justified before God (that is, he is absolved and declared utterly free from all his sins, and from the verdict of well deserved damnation. and is adopted as a child of God and an heir of eternal life) ... (FC SD III 9).

We believe, teach, and confess that according to the usage of Scripture the word "justify" means in this article "absolve," that is, pronounce free from sin (FC Ep III 7).¹⁰⁸

The Formula is not at odds with itself on this matter. Its writers simply recalled the truth expressed by Augustine (and quoted in the Apology): "All the commandments of God are kept when what is not kept is forgiven."¹⁰⁹ That is to say, the perfect righteousness of Christ is imputed to men when sins are not imputed to them.

Since justification is complete in (often identified with) forgiveness, the issue raised above becomes much less sticky. For, as previously shown, the Confessions are replete with references

¹⁰⁸ As noted above, the essential identity of forgiveness and justification is repeated throughout the Book of Concord. See especially Ap IV 76. Note also the analysis of Werner Elert: "... it is also a matter of importance that the Formula of Concord does not know of the difference later theologians made between 'forgiveness of sins' (*remissio peccatorum*) and the 'imputation of Christ' (*imputatio Christi*). Neither can the two be separated conceptually" (*The Structure of Lutheranism*, tr. by Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis, 1962), p. 117). Or Quenstedt: "The imputation of Christ's righteousness is essentially nothing else than the remission of sins, and the remission of sins is nothing else than the imputation of Christ's righteousness, so that either word separately taken expresses the whole nature of justification" (II, p. 753, quoted in Pieper, p. 537).

¹⁰⁹ Augustine, *Retractions*, I, 19:3, quoted in Ap IV 172. Melancthon cites this statement as he discusses the way in which God reckons the works of Christians as pleasing to Himself because of Christ—not because the works please Him in themselves. Carpzov, explaining the word "imputation," strikes a similar cord: "Truly, what God does not impute for condemnation, He imputes its opposite for justification. Now God does not impute sin and *anomia* for condemnation. Therefore He imputes its contrary, which is not the act of faith but the perfect righteousness apprehended by faith, for righteousness" ("*Quod enim DEUS not imputat ad condemnationem, eius contrarium ad Justificationem imputat. Jam peccatum et anomia DEUS ad condemnationem non imputat. Ergo eius contrarium, quod non actus Fidei est, sed Justitia perfecta Fidei apprehensa, imputat ad justificationem.*" - pp. 209-210, emphasis original).

to forgiveness as logically prior to faith. Perhaps the most significant is the quotation from Ambrose in Ap IV 103:

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 when 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 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).

Notice the underlined portions.¹¹⁰ If the necessary counterpart to the non-imputation of sin is the imputation of righteousness, this section implies that righteousness has been imputed to all. (Note that the word “justified” is used later in the quote in connection with faith—but this is in specific and explicit opposition to justification by one’s own deeds.)

¹¹⁰ The underlining has been supplied for emphasis and easy reference in this quote.

Another noteworthy statement appears in Ap XII 48:

Paul says in Col. 2:14 that Christ cancels the bond which stood against us with its legal demands. Here, too, there are two parts, the bond and the cancellation of the bond ... the bond therefore is contrition itself, condemning us. The cancellation of the bond is the removal of the sentence which declares that we are condemned and the substitution of the sentence by which we know that we have been delivered from this condemnation. The new sentence is faith, abolishing the earlier sentence and restoring peace and life to the heart.

The removal of the sentence of condemnation is forgiveness. To be more precise in terms of the above citation, it is justification—a “not guilty” verdict. When the condemnation is lifted, acquittal is the only possible alternative. This is logically prior to—indeed, it forms the basis for —“the new sentence by which we know we have been delivered ... faith.”

Other passages deal with the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in such fashion. Chapter One of this paper has already drawn attention to Ap XXI 19, in which the merits of Christ are said to be bestowed prior to faith. The next paragraph continues, “Both the promise and the bestowal of merits are therefore the sources of trust in mercy” (Ap XXI 20).¹¹¹ And later:

We maintain that we dare not trust in the transfer of the saints’ merit to us, as though God were reconciled to us or accounted us righteous or saved us on this account. We obtain the forgiveness of sins only by Christ’s merits when we believe in Him (Ap XXI 29).

If God is not reconciled to us on account of the transfer of the saints’ merit to us, He is reconciled on account of the transfer of Christ’s merit. He accounts us righteous for the same reason. The Apology says we obtain forgiveness (which is the same as justification) when we believe. But the basis for forgiveness—the imputation of righteousness—must have existed prior to faith.

Admittedly, this case is based on implications. The Confessions explicitly use the term “imputation” or the thought behind it only in connection with faith. Beyond what has been said above regarding their desire to safeguard the teaching of “grace alone,” one might speculate on another reason for this phenomenon. Perhaps an explanation lies in the “imputation” image itself.

¹¹¹ According to Ap IV 51, the object of faith is that “for Christ’s sake and not because of our own merits the forgiveness of sins is bestowed upon us.”

For instance, how would one receive something that is imputed to him? Forgiveness can be spoken of almost as an entity, something which can be given to someone who receives it. But when righteousness is reckoned to men, how would the confessors mention faith at all unless they spoke of imputation through faith, etc.? This, in turn, may be what prompts Schlink¹¹² and Elert¹¹³ to speak of justification as a present activity, while they say “reconciliation” can refer to the one-time work of Christ.¹¹⁴ Yet even Fagerberg, who takes the dubious step of making faith as it regenerates the basis of the declaration of righteousness,¹¹⁵ realizes that the imputation of righteousness must in one sense precede faith.¹¹⁶ The bestowal of Christ’s merit on all men is thus real, not potential.

III. Expressions suggesting Justification is potential without faith

Yet the Confessions sometimes speak of justification in such a way as to suggest, perhaps, that justification is merely potential until an individual believes in Christ. Three sorts of expressions are under consideration here: those which say God wants or wishes to justify men, those which say that men are justified if they believe, and those which say men are justified when they believe.

¹¹² Pp. 83, 103.

¹¹³ Pp. 126-128.

¹¹⁴ But Elert goes too far when he claims: “The relationship between Christ’s historical work of reconciliation and the reconciliation to God experienced by us at the present time must be understood as being analogous to the relationship between the ‘righteousness of Christ’ (*justitia Christi*) and ‘justification’ (*justificatio*). Just as the ‘righteousness of Christ’ (*justitia Christi*) cannot be handed down, so the historical work of reconciliation cannot be handed down” (pp 127-128). For one thing, the whole idea of “imputation” is that the righteousness of Christ be “handed down.” But further, justification is not depicted in the Confessions as a strictly “present” thing. See Ap IV 40, 97, 182, 217.

¹¹⁵ Pp. 151-152.

¹¹⁶ “Justification as the forgiveness of sin and the imputation of the righteousness of Christ forms the presupposition of the forensic declaration of righteousness, of God’s acceptance of man” (p.153). See his entire section, pp.149-155.

A. “God wants to justify”

One might think this means that God has not yet justified a man, but He wants to. Presumably, this justification will take place at the man’s conversion. Prior to that, maybe God has only the desire to justify.

But if one takes all such references in the Symbols together and subjects them to scrutiny, a different picture emerges. Again, the adversary is work-righteousness.

Because of his promise, because of Christ, God wishes to be favorably disposed to us and to justify us, not because of the law or our works: The promise we must always keep in view. In this promise timid consciences should seek reconciliation and justification, sustaining themselves with this promise and being sure that because of Christ and his promise they have a gracious God (Ap IV 180).

Early in the above paragraph, Melancthon says God wants to be favorably disposed to us, but toward the end he says consciences can be sure they have a gracious God. The Latin word is the same in both instances.¹¹⁷ The point is, therefore, not that God wants to be favorably disposed to us and to justify us as opposed in any way to His actually being propitious (or to the resulting reality of justification); rather, God wants to justify us as opposed to what men want, namely, to justify themselves.

God has appointed Christ as the mediator; he wants to be gracious to us through him, not through our own righteousness (Ap XV 9).

... God does not want our own righteousness but the merits of another (namely, of Christ) to reconcile him to us (Ap XXIV 23).

Thus Paul says, too, that righteousness is not by the law but by the promise, in which the Father has given the assurance that He wishes to forgive and to be reconciled for Christ’s sake (Ap IV 292).

For how will Christ be the mediator if we do not use him as mediator in our justification and believe that for his sake we are accounted righteous? But to believe means to trust in Christ’s merits, that because of Him God wants to be reconciled to us (Ap IV 69; cf. Ap IV 57, 228, 259; XV 12).

¹¹⁷ *Propitius*. Note that the latter instance makes the fact that God is *propitium* the object of faith.

The pattern is quite consistent. God wants to be propitious, to be forgiving, and to justify in His own way—not man’s way. Men choose Law over Gospel as the way of salvation (FC SD V 21). They even turn to illicit propitiators (Ap XXI 17). Against all this stands God’s loving determination, His “good and gracious will,” to save through His Son. To say God wants to justify in no way makes the justification potential. Otherwise, Melancthon had in mind a potential justification of Christians when he wrote that God “for Christ’s sake ... wishes to be propitious to believers in Christ: (Ap IV 86)!

B. “If men believe”

This expression occurs in a few places in the Confessions. Obviously, it refers to subjective justification:

This merit has to be applied to us and to be made our own through faith if we are to be justified thereby (FC SD III 13).

The question is, does such a reference exclude objective justification by its very language? Put differently, does the “if” imply that justification is strictly potential apart from faith? Perhaps it would seem so at times:

The righteousness of the Gospel promises us reconciliation and righteousness if we believe that for the sake of Christ, the propitiator, the Father is gracious to us and that the merits of Christ are granted to us (Ap IV 238).

... we are accounted righteous ... because of Christ, whose merits are conferred on us if we believe in him (Ap IV 296).

Men are not justified, therefore, because of any other sacrifices but because of this one sacrifice of Christ if they believe that it has redeemed them (Ap XIII 8; cf. Ap XV 10; FC SD V 24-25).

But other occurrences of this formulation provide a different insight as to its usage.¹¹⁸ Ap IV 260, for example, says, “The forgiveness of sins is granted to us if we believe that our sins are forgiven for Christ’s sake.” We are given forgiveness, in other words, if we believe we are forgiven. The forgiveness is real (not potential) prior to faith, for it is the object of faith. Certainly, “the forgiveness of sins is granted to us if we believe”; but that does not mitigate against the reality of the forgiveness won by Christ on the cross. Similarly, Ap IV 86 says “the reconciled are accounted righteous ... if they grasp this mercy by faith.” Again, the “if”-clause is true. But the people in question are “the reconciled,” quite apart from the “if.” They are the reconciled because Christ reconciled them to God in His propitiatory work.¹¹⁹

As he discusses a comment made by Jerome on Daniel 4:24, Melancthon offers some useful background for the interpretation of the “potential” passages in the Confessions. It is especially pertinent here:

Let us remember that the Gospel promises the forgiveness of sins with certainty. It would clearly be an abolition of the Gospel if we were to deny that the forgiveness of sins must surely be given by a promise. Let us therefore dismiss Jerome in the interpretation of this text, though the promise is involved in the word “redeem.” It signifies that the forgiveness of sins is possible, that sins can be redeemed, that the obligation or debt can be removed, that the wrath of God can be stilled (Ap IV 264).

Melancthon starts out emphasizing the certainty of forgiveness, but in the end he is saying “sins can be redeemed,” etc. Obviously, he did not think the latter expression contradicted the former. Apparently he is simply writing with variety, using “can” to refer more to a logical possibility than a real possibility.

John Gerhard’s explanation of the uses of “if” is, therefore, still very much to the point:

The term “if” is either etiological or syllogistic; that is, it designates either cause or consequence. In the preaching of the Law, “if you do this, you shall live: the term “if” is etiological, inasmuch as obedience is the cause on account of which eternal life is given to

¹¹⁸ [The author’s typescript does not indicate the placing of this footnote: it is placed here by conjecture.] At times, the “if” occurs in sections which talk about believers receiving consolation or confirmation of God’s love for them (Cf. Ap IV 62). These instances are not relevant to the present discussion.

¹¹⁹ Elert is of this opinion (p. 128).

those who obey the Law. But in the Gospel promises, “if you believe, you will be saved,” the term “if” is syllogistic, inasmuch as it relates to the mode whereby God applies the divine promises, and this is through faith alone.¹²⁰

The “if” quotations earlier in this section all occur in contexts which oppose human cooperation toward salvation. It is extremely unlikely that Melanchthon would have written as he did if he thought his adversaries would view his “if” clauses as etiological. Not only does this suggest that the clauses are, therefore, syllogistic; it further suggests that Melanchthon was confident that even the Romanists would view them as syllogistic. Thus, the “if” clauses are no suggestion of a potential justification which becomes actual only at the point when faith is created.

C. “When we believe”

The potential problem with the third expression parallels the one which accompanied the first two expressions. If the Confessions say men are justified when they believe, does this imply that they are in no sense justified until they believe?

The background of this expression is likewise familiar: the polemic against Rome.

In the schools they also boast that our good works are valid by virtue of Christ’s suffering. Well said! But why not say something about faith? Christ is a propitiation, as Paul says, through faith (Rom. 3:25). When frightened consciences are consoled by faith and believe that our sins are blotted out by Christ’s death and that God has been reconciled to us because of Christ’s suffering, then indeed Christ’s suffering benefits us (Ap IV 382, emphasis added).

Faith is needed, not works, because only faith takes hold of Christ the mediator (Ap IV 378). When it is present, then the objective results of the work of Christ—sins being blotted out, God having been reconciled—benefit the individual. The “when” statement does not counter objective justification; it assumes objective justification.

Perhaps a more direct reference on this point is Ap IV 222, which holds that Paul:

¹²⁰ *Loci Theologici*, VII, 117, quoted in Preus, p. 178.

is not saying that love conquers the terrors of sin and death He does not believe that love justifies, for we are justified only when we take hold of Christ, the propitiator, and believe that for His sake God is gracious¹²¹ to us. Nor is justification even to be dreamed of without Christ, the propitiator.

Again, work-righteousness is the target, the “objective” result of Christ’s work is kept in view, and faith depicted as receptivity. Melanchthon’s great concern is that Christ not be left out of justification.¹²² He is not left out when we believe. This is not a temporal reference; it is a logical, one.

In Ap IV 83, Melanchthon quotes Acts 10:43, which says in part: “Every one who believes in Him receives forgiveness”¹²³ But his later comment on the passage shifts the relative clause to a temporal clause. Melanchthon writes: “And he adds: ‘when we believe¹²⁴ in Him.’ ” Thus he requires faith. We cannot take hold of the name of Christ except by faith” (Ap IV 83). The paraphrase reinforces the central contention of Ap at this point, that faith alone receives the forgiveness of sins. The polemic against Rome shapes the argument here, not a desire to say anything restrictive about God’s attitude—in Christ—toward the world.¹²⁵

The polemic is, in some ways, extremely subtle. For example, justification by works or by love would have to be a process. It would continue over a span of time. The use of the word “when,” however, calls attention to a specific point in time. It is not necessarily exclusive of any other point(s). The very fact that the Confessions can speak of justification as a finished work of God at any point in time helps to show the vast differences between their doctrine of justification and that of their opponents:

By faith alone, therefore, we obtain the forgiveness of sins when we comfort our hearts with trust in the mercy promised for Christ’s sake ... Our opponents suppose that Christ is the mediator and propitiator because He merited for us the disposition of love. And they would not have us make use of Him now as our mediator. Instead, as though Christ were

¹²¹ Lat., *placatum*.

¹²² Cf. also Ap IV 292-293.

¹²³ Lat., “*omnes, qui credunt in eum.*”

¹²⁴ Lat., “*cum credimus.*”

¹²⁵ Similiar statements elsewhere have the same basic concern. Cf. AC IV 1-2; XX 9-10 (Ger.); Ap IV 87, 97, 230; XII 65; XXI 19, 29, 31.

completely buried, they imagine that we have access through our own works, by which we merit this disposition, and then, through this love, have access to God (Ap IV 80-81).

Men's consciences cannot be pacified by works, no matter what they are. Only when they believe can they find peace (cf. AC XX 15 Lat.). One might even say, "whenever" they believe:

For that reason also, as the Augsburg Confession states in Article XI, we retain individual absolution and teach that it is God's command that we "believe this absolution and firmly hold that when we believe the word of absolution we are as truly reconciled with God as if we had heard a voice from heaven," as the Apology explains this article (FC SD XI 38).¹²⁶

No matter how much one works, he is continually striving toward justification. This is the sad outworking of the Roman system. But when one believes, at that instant he has full salvation. This is the superior claim of the confessors. It would have been out of keeping with the symmetry of this argument if the confessors had said that the world was justified at the death of Christ, for the entire human race was not even in existence to try and work on its salvation at that time. In short, there would have been no parallel within the Roman doctrine against which the confessors could focus their attack. The argument they did make does not mitigate objective justification. They purposely were not discussing objective justification in their "when" references.

Chapter Three of this paper has sought to explore Confessional expressions which might seem to say that faith contributes in some way to the reality of justification. It has shown that such expressions, to one degree or another, were used against the Roman Catholic teaching of justification by faith and works, faith formed by love. But none of them dilute the Confessions' doctrine of objective justification which is taught directly as they describe the results of Christ's work, and indirectly as they speak of the object of faith, the promise, and related matters.

¹²⁶ One should believe "whenever" because, as noted above, the means of grace continually offer and apply justification: "When we are baptized, when we eat the Lord's body, when we are absolved, our hearts should firmly believe that God really forgives us for Christ's sake" (Ap XIII 4).

CONCLUSION

The Lutheran Confessions teach objective justification, and this doctrine is neither restricted nor hindered by their teaching of subjective justification. To be sure, the Symbols say that “all are justified”—in those precise syllables—only in SA II i 3. Still, the evidence in terms of such themes as forgiveness or reconciliation is massive. So are the implications of faith as receptivity, the promise, the means of grace, and other emphases traced above in Chapter Two. Like the doctrine of the Trinity in the Bible, objective justification is not set forth explicitly, in so many words, in the Confessions (except for SA II i 3). The reader must infer, for example, that since “the forgiveness of sins is the same as justification” (Ap IV 76), and since “when the Lord Jesus came he forgave all men the sin that none could escape” (Ap IV 103). Christ justified all men. But this is a necessary inference. To shrink from it is, in the nature of the case, to fail to come to grips with the theology of the Confessions.

Unfortunately, many theologians—including many Lutheran theologians—do not seem to understand this. In 1888, George Stoeckhardt complained about the theological climate in Europe, where many of the leading lights taught that justification and the forgiveness of sins are but potential before a sinner believes in Christ.¹²⁷ “Thus faith is ... an action of man which effects something, which brings into being something that was not there before, namely the forgiveness of sins,” observed Stoeckhardt.¹²⁸

But one need not have looked to Europe for denials of objective justification, even in Stoeckhardt’s day. Already in 1871, Gottfried Fritschel of the Iowa Synod had written,

When it is said that the whole world, believers and unbelievers—even a Judas and all godless people—have been justified in Christ’s death and that, after their sins have been paid for in Christ, God looks upon them as just, it is thereby asserted that there is a justification of men before faith and without faith—yes, even in the midst of open unfaith. But the Lutheran Church knows of no other justification than a justification that occurs through faith. To put justification before faith is to destroy the doctrine of justification in

¹²⁷ He names Thomasius, Kahnis, Martensen, Luthardt, Frank, and Philippi. See “General Justification,” tr. by Otto F. Stahlke, *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 42 (April, 1978), 139-144, p.139.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

its innermost core, to kill it in its very bud. To teach a justification without faith is to deny the fundamental teaching of the Christian faith, the fundamental teaching of the Reformation. Justification and faith are correlative concepts which cannot be torn apart from each other. The Holy Scriptures everywhere and always attach justification to faith, and so Lutheran dogmatics uniformly inserted faith as an essential element into the idea of justification.¹²⁹

Fritschel's approach must be called simplistic and wooden in light of what this paper has shown. He seems to have taken expressions such as "faith justifies" in precisely the ways Chapter Three cautioned against. Likewise, he seems oblivious to the implications of such standard Lutheran formulations as faith as receptivity, etc. Though he does not address himself specifically to the Confessions, his reference to "the fundamental teaching of the Reformation" indicates that his understanding of the Symbols on this point is quite the opposite of what this study has found to be their teaching.¹³⁰ Fritschel had actually departed from Lutheranism, not those who upheld objective justification.

More recently Joseph Shaw has written in a popular treatment of justification:

let us make sure that we follow the New Testament also in underscoring that justification for all is to be treated as a possibility—something all can and may experience, but not something which automatically takes place.¹³¹

The language ("experience," "automatically") suggests that Shaw is especially guarding against universalism in this quote. Further down the page, however, he adds, "that men are asked to open

¹²⁹ "Concerning Objective and Subjective Justification," *Lutheran Confessional Theology in America 1840-1880*, ed. by Theodore G. Tappert (New York, 1972), pp. 150-151.

¹³⁰ Fritschel has two great concerns with regard to the objective justification doctrine of the Norwegians of whom he writes. First, he is worried that subjective justification, in the Norwegian scheme, will cease to be seen as a "juridical sentence pronounced by God," and be regarded instead as simply some "subjective act that takes place only in man" (p. 152). (He even sees the spectre of Schleiermacher in the Norwegian doctrine!) In response to this, one might note that Fritschel's prejudice hinders him. Even as he tries to reason along with the Norwegians, it is clear that subjective justification remains so prominent to him that the *actus forensis* character of justification is totally forfeited if subjective justification is seen as a reception of objective (and surely forensic) justification. Meeting the point head-on, though, the Confessional teaching that the means of grace continually offer and apply objective justification takes care of this concern. Indeed, "subjective justification ... is every whit as objective as objective justification" (Henry P. Hamann, quoted in Marquart, p. 24, note 1). Fritschel's second concern is "cheap grace," as we would term it: pastors preaching, "Even your sins, O unrepentant man, have been forgiven" (p. 156). Certainly, the Confessions in no way diminish the significance of penitence. As they are quick to point out in other contexts, though, abuse does not overthrow the proper use of a thing. To observe (accurately or not) that some pastors are casting pearl before swine does not devalue the pearl.

¹³¹ *If God be for Us*, (Minneapolis, 1966), p. 20 (emphasis original).

themselves to the gift of justification.”¹³² When justification is depicted as a possibility, synergism follows. The possible has to become actual. Here it becomes actual due to something in man.

Wilhelm Dantine, in a more scholarly presentation, summarizes this problem in the history of dogma:

One need only think how orthodox dogmaticians, always concerned for well-balanced definitions and at this point searching for a common category for Word and Sacrament and for faith on the other, thought they had found such a category in the concept of “means of grace” ... They distinguished between “the means of grace given on the part of God, or the means of grace exhibiting salvation, Word and sacraments” ... on the one hand, and “the means of grace grasped on our part, or the means of grace apprehending the offered salvation, faith resting upon the merit of Christ” ... on the other ... the result was ... that faith, thanks to its participation in the common category, experienced a decisive increase in value. It followed logically that faith, because of its undeniable importance to the salvation of the individual, in the end became the all supporting “means,” the secret mediator, and in any case the central pillar of the entire justification event. This is most meaningfully expressed by the fact that one could speak of *iustificatio* as “the effect of faith” ... one of the consequences of such definitions was that Pietism and all the movements linked to it soon made faith itself the secret (or should one say uncanny?) focal point of Christian faith. To bring all this to light, it only needed the complete historical development culminating in the fact that the essence of faith became the feeling of absolute dependence in the sense of Schleiermacher.¹³³

Of course, justification (subjective) is “the effect of faith.” But faith must also be the effect of justification (objective). Why? This paper has suggested at least three reasons.

First, faith must have a firm object. The receptive organ receives something, namely, Christ, His work, and the results of His work (including justification).¹³⁴ These results are complete prior to anyone’s subjective faith. Indeed, they are the object of faith. Referring to the Apostles’ Creed, one might say they are “second article” material, not “third article.” And as Luther observed, “Creation [the subject of the first article] is past and redemption [second article] is accomplished, but the Holy Spirit carries on His work unceasingly until the last day [third article]” (LC II 61).¹³⁵ A refusal to see justification in the abstract (objective justification) makes

¹³² P. 20 (emphasis added).

¹³³ *The Justification of the Ungodly*, tr. by Ruth and Eric W. Gritsch (St. Louis, 1968), pp. 30-31.

¹³⁴ See pp. 16ff. and 19ff. above.

¹³⁵ One should recall that Sa II i 1-3, which culminates in “all ... are justified” is concerned with Christ and His work. Cf. also Dantine: “This means that the judgment over sin, which is really the issue in God’s trial, occurs in the living Christ event, that is, in the sending of the Son, in the advent of the Logos in sinful flesh, in

justification an exclusively “third article” concern. The basic comfort for a contrite sinner (even a Christian) could no longer be that Christ won forgiveness or justification for him on the cross. Rather, in the time of doubt and struggle, he would have to dwell on whether he truly has faith (a “third article” question).

Such speculation is a dead end for the troubled sinner. Only the promise of Christ creates and sustains faith. It alone offers forgiveness and justification.¹³⁶ Introspection about the condition of one’s own faith does not. This is a second reason to say that faith results from justification.

The third reason is similar. Men cannot love an angry God. Even Christian people will find no ultimate comfort in a God who only justifies them if they believe in Him. Again, when pangs of conscience strike and their sins are vividly fixed in their minds, they will see how flawed and feeble their faith is. They may even conclude that they have no faith. Then they need that “very definite Word of God to learn to know God’s will, namely, that He is no longer angry” (Ap IV 262). Nothing less than this assurance will do in a sinful world.

Thus, there is no Gospel unless it is the unconditional Gospel about what God did for the world in Christ. There is no doctrine of justification by grace through faith unless there is objective justification. It is well for Confessional Lutherans that the Reformer wrote, “all ... are justified” (SA II i 3), and that the rest of the Symbols reverberate with this thought.

the earthly life during the humiliation as well as in the physical death on the cross. All this is *iustificatio*, justification of the ungodly! ... In other words, *iustificatio* is salvation event, which is to be ascribed to the Second as well as to the Third Article. Justification can mean the same as redemption and reconciliation. Thus the theme of justification is already God’s act of salvation in Christ. It will have to be the task of theological reflection to take care not to allow justification to be squeezed solely into the Third Article, as is generally done” (pp. 108-109).

¹³⁶ See pp. 30, 34-36 above. [In this edited Word 2000 document these pages would be 29-30 and 32-35.]

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