

Confessional Clarification of the Article of Justification

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If I am correctly informed, the Wyoming District of the Missouri Synod has proposed a formal confessional clarification of the article of justification, in view of the obfuscation produced by the Vatican/"Lutheran" compromise. Since justification is the article by which the church stands or falls, it would be most fitting if global confessional clarification would begin there. It must be stressed that this cannot be the work of one group or synod, perhaps later to be imposed on others. From the beginning this task must be understood and executed globally, with all confessionally minded Lutheran churches represented, including Wisconsin and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and their worldwide sister churches like the Ukrainian. In my humble opinion such a global, multilateral confessional effort is the only realistic way of overcoming the tragic divisions within the former Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America.

A contemporary clarification of justification would have to begin with what the Formula of Concord calls "the only essential and necessary elements of justification," that is, (1) the grace of God, (2) the merit of Christ, (3) the Gospel which alone offers and distributes these treasures, and (4) faith which alone receives or appropriates them (SD III.25). The first three items define the universal/general dimension of justification (forgiveness as obtained for all mankind on the cross, proclaimed in the resurrection [see Rom 4:25 and 1 Tim 3:16] and offered to all in the means of grace), and the fourth, the individual/personal dimension. No one actually *has* forgiveness unless and until he receives it by faith. This distinction between forgiveness as obtained for and offered to all, and that same forgiveness as actually received and possessed, is often described (as in the English translation of Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*) with the words "objective" and "subjective." But the terms *universal* or *general* and *individual* or *personal* are much to be preferred. In the first place, the so-called "subjective" justification is every whit as objective as the "objective," in that it is an action of God. Secondly, Calvinists also speak of an "objective" and a "subjective" justification, but in a completely different sense: their "objective" justification happened on the cross, but for the elect only, not for all; and their "subjective" justification is just that: it "takes place in the heart or conscience of the sinner," and "yet it is quite impossible that [children] should experience justification by faith" [L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974], 517 and 173].

The right teaching here must defend the fullness of our Lord's saving work against the denial of *sola gratia* (grace alone) by Rome on the one hand and against the denial of *universalis gratia* (universal grace) and the means of grace by Geneva on the other. Only the Church of the Augsburg Confession teaches the article of justification in its evangelical truth and plenitude, that is, both grace alone and universal grace, and therefore also the means of grace!