

Thursday Theology: How Expansive is the Easter Promise?

Co-missioners,

Christ may be risen indeed, yet countless people for whom he died don't believe this, nor will they in their lifetimes. All too many don't know of Christ at all. What becomes of them when all is done? Dare we assume that God gives up on them?

Christian thinkers have tussled with this question since the days of St. Paul. Today's first-time contributor, Dr. Norman Metzler, will reflect on it again using a distinction familiar to students of classic Lutheran-style dogmatic theology. For those who don't know the terminology, he'll explain what it means as he goes along. By all means stick with him. You'll be intrigued by the alternatives he'll have you weighing when you reach the end.

Dr. Metzler taught theology for many years at Concordia University, Portland, Oregon, an institution of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod that closed its doors in 2020. He continues in retirement to be listed on LCMS clergy rolls and has contributed several articles to [the Daystar Journal](#), an outlet for LCMS moderates with a passion for the Gospel. On stumbling across Crossings earlier this year, he wrote to ask how he could be involved in the conversations that happen among us. We suggested Thursday Theology as a possible venue. He responded promptly with what you'll read here, for which

we thank him heartily.

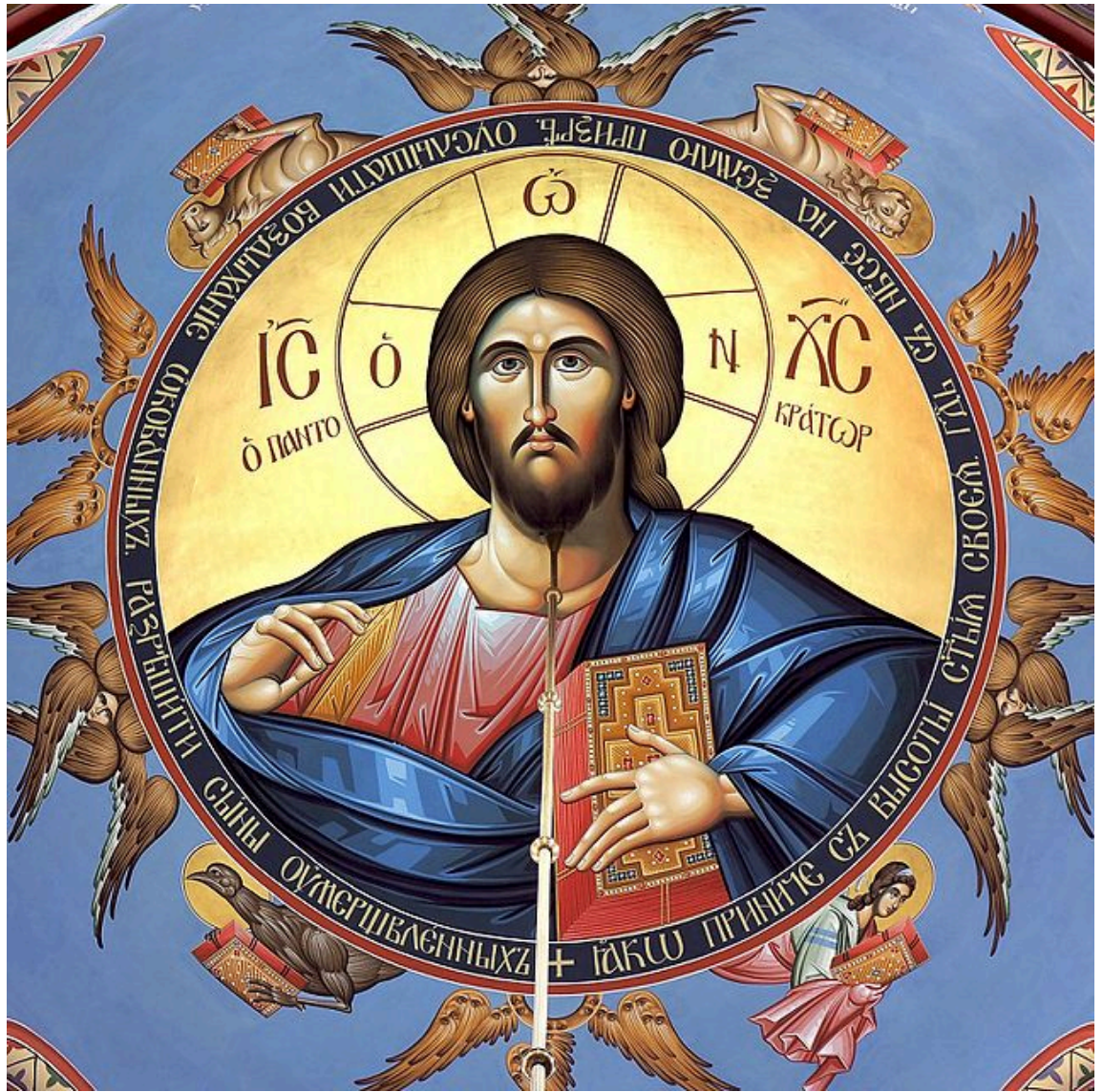
Norm will welcome your feedback, by the way. You can route it through our editor, [Jerry Burce](#).

Peace and Joy,
The Crossings Community

Objective and Subjective Justification Revisited

Rev. Dr. Norman Metzler

There has been renewed interest in the doctrine of “objective justification” in recent decades among Lutherans. While this discussion is occurring within the specific Lutheran theological parameters of “objective justification” and “subjective justification,” it has arisen within the broader theological discussion of “universal salvation” within Christianity. The doctrine of Objective Justification teaches that objectively or generically speaking, all people are justified or reconciled to God through the work of Christ. (See e.g. Franz Pieper, [Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II](#), pp. 347 ff.) Some theologians have challenged this teaching on the grounds that it might be seen to support “universal salvation,” a notion broadly rejected within Christianity. Others continue to affirm Objective Justification in order to make clear that we are saved purely by the grace of God, and not by our good works.



Christ Pantocrator (Church of St. Alexander Nevsky, Belgrade)

[From Wikimedia Commons](#)

The doctrinal counterpart to Objective Justification, according to Pieper, is the doctrine of Subjective Justification, according to which only those with the gift of faith will actually experience justification or salvation through Christ. This raises the unavoidable question of the fate of all those – the vast majority of humanity – who have never heard the gospel and therefore have never been blessed to receive the gift of faith because they were never exposed to the “first gift.”

Those who affirm Objective Justification acknowledge that most people are living in spiritual darkness; the Christian mission is to bring the light of the gospel to their darkness. Christians are called to share that Good News humbly and lovingly, certainly also applying the Law of God to those who reject the gospel. Orthodox Christianity uniformly holds that there is no other way for people to be saved than through the grace of God revealed in Christ.

What then, it may fairly be asked, is the fate of all those who are not reached with the gospel? While this approach to justification affirms salvation as a gift, not dependent on our works, it does make salvation conditional upon our personal experience of saving faith. A plausible line of reasoning might be that a gift is only meaningful if the gift is opened. For those without the gift of faith, the gospel is irrelevant; they are still living in their sins, apart from Christ, and are therefore justly condemned to eternal torment in hell. The quandary is that salvation cannot be both completely unconditional, a gift of grace alone, and at the same time be somehow conditional, dependent upon one's personal faith.

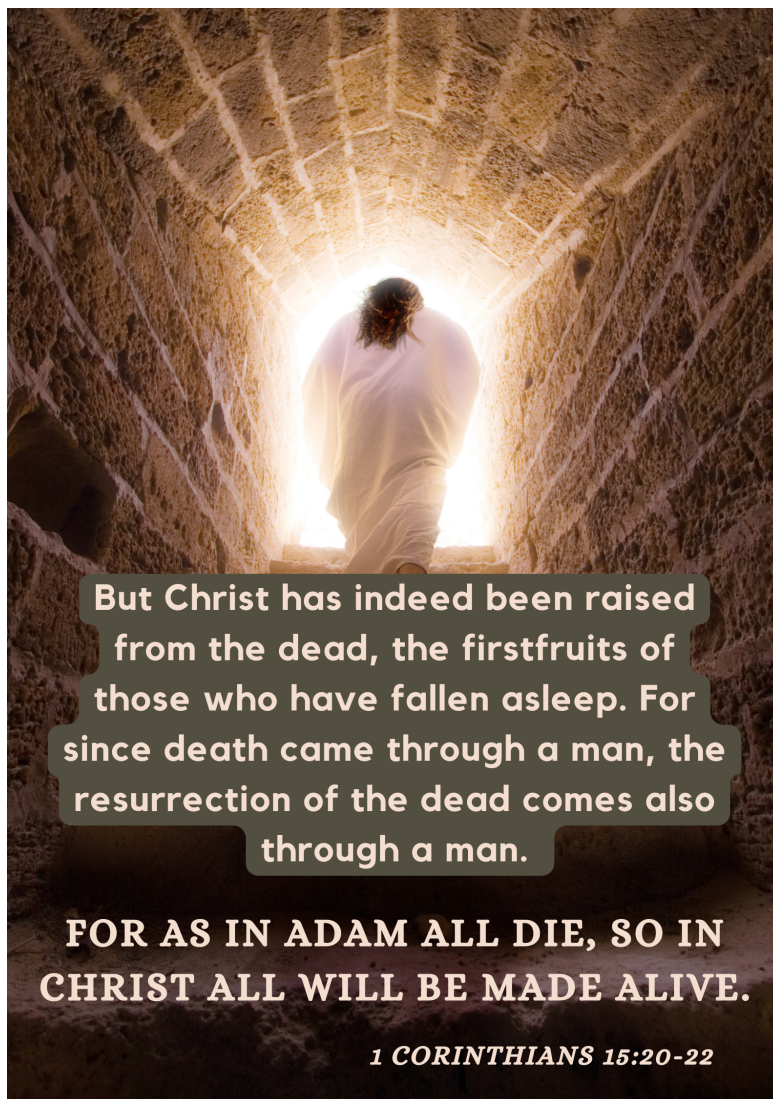
While Martin Luther and most Christians did not endorse John Calvin's doctrine of "double predestination," according to which God intentionally chose some for salvation and others for eternal damnation, there is no circumventing the various biblical passages suggesting that some people are saved while others are perishing. For example, St. Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, "the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18) In his Sermon on the

Mount Jesus asserts that the gate to destruction is wide and entered by many, while the gate to life is narrow and only a few find it (Mt. 7:13-14; cf. Mt. 22:14).

However, there are also many passages in scripture, for example as listed by David Bentley Hart in his book [*That All Shall Be Saved*](#) (pp. 94 ff.), that clearly extend Christ's saving work to all of humanity, not just to those with personal faith. This is perhaps most clearly expressed by St. Paul in his contrast of Adam and Christ; as Adam in the Fall into sin condemned all humanity to disobedience, so Christ through his death on the cross included all humanity in his work of salvation (e.g. Rom. 11:32; 1 Cor. 15:22). Christ objectively died and rose for the salvation of "the world" (John 3:16,17), the justification of all people. If God truly desires to have all people saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim 2:4,6), then these passages provide compelling reasons to believe that all people ultimately will in fact be saved, including the majority of humanity that never got to hear and accept the Good News of their salvation during their lifetime—or who for whatever reason in ignorance may have even rejected the gospel.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans addresses this very situation. He explains that God in his sovereign power hypothetically could have predestined some people for salvation and others for destruction, such as those Jews who were rejecting his gospel proclamation. But in fact, their rejection of the gospel was actually part of God's plan to have his Good News spread to the Gentiles. These recalcitrant Jews will ultimately be saved as part of God's chosen people and heirs of the promise given to the patriarchs (Rom. 11:25-26, 11:32). Now if those Jews who were explicitly rejecting Christ can ultimately be saved

by grace as part of his greater plan, then it would seem fitting that all nations can be blessed (as was promised by God to Abraham) by being predestined and chosen for salvation through Christ, even if in this lifetime they reject Christ, or never get the opportunity to hear the gospel in the first place. All people are part of God's saving plan.



But Christ has indeed been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man.

FOR AS IN ADAM ALL DIE, SO IN CHRIST ALL WILL BE MADE ALIVE.

1 CORINTHIANS 15:20-22

From Canva

We propose an alternative understanding of Subjective Justification that avoids its inherent conflict with Objective Justification, at least as Subjective

Justification has traditionally been defined. Subjective Justification could be interpreted as demarcating all those with the gift of faith, namely the Church, the Body of Christ—without at the same time asserting that all those outside the Church of Christ and therefore without personal faith are condemned to eternal torment in hell. Such an understanding of Subjective Justification would acknowledge that there is only a limited number of people who are blessed to hear and receive the gospel by faith. However, those who are “chosen” are privileged to know that they and all people are saved by the grace of God alone revealed through Christ—not by their works, and not even by their faith. Whenever the scriptures speak about the requirement of repentance and faith for salvation, they do so in the context of those who are able to hear and respond to the gospel. The scriptures appropriately affirm that salvation is possible only because of the saving work of Christ, and therefore call unbelievers to repentance and faith in the gospel. Those who resist the gospel are warned with hyperbolic apocalyptic imagery about the tragic hopelessness of life apart from God’s heavenly kingdom, as portrayed for example in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

However, it is critically important to consider the audience to whom such apocalyptic warnings and threats are directed. Jesus uses such hyperbolic apocalyptic rhetoric when calling to repentance and faith those who were resisting his gospel, not when addressing those who were “poor in spirit” and yearned for Jesus’ message of the gift of salvation in God’s coming kingdom. As harshly as Jesus condemned the Pharisees for their opposition to his message, he did not exclude them from salvation. He confronts them with the seriousness of their rejection by

asserting that they will enter the kingdom only after those prostitutes and tax collectors who were condemned by the Pharisees as unworthy of the kingdom (e.g. Mt. 21:32). But Jesus does allow that even they may enter through that “narrow gate.” We know in the larger biblical context that the gate to heaven is wide open for those seeking the grace of God (Mt. 8:11; Lk. 15:11-32; Jn. 14:2; Rev. 22:2).

We therefore propose that the biblical apocalyptic threats are hyperbolic rhetoric used to call the opponents of the gospel to repentance and faith, and that those passages supporting Objective Justification are literally true. The alternative is to interpret those passages that severely limit salvation as literally true, and the universal-sounding passages as exaggerations. This latter view in effect is how traditional Christianity has typically interpreted Scripture. We offer the following perspectives on the traditional view:

- On the one hand, it seems quite reasonable that Jesus would use dramatic, hyperbolic imagery threatening weeping and gnashing of teeth—images that were current in the Jewish religious culture of that time—to confront those rejecting his gospel, with the intent of moving them toward repentance and faith (see e.g. Mt. 8:10-12). We know from scripture that Jesus often used hyperbolic rhetoric; at one point he proposed that if your hand offends you, cut it off so that it doesn’t keep you from entering God’s kingdom. St. Paul likewise exaggerated dramatically when he wrote that those advocating circumcision should emasculate themselves.

These are clearly instances of hyperbolic rhetoric intended to get people's attention and call them to repentance and faith rather than statements to be taken literally.

- On the other hand, it is difficult to see what purpose it would have served for Jesus and Paul to speak hyperbolically when they asserted repeatedly and unmistakably that God covered the sins of all people through the sacrificial death of Christ, if in fact they knew that only a relatively few would actually inherit eternal life. It seems inconsistent with the biblical picture of Jesus and Paul for them to have misled their audiences with the false hope that all will be saved, if in fact they knew it was not true.

It is therefore much more plausible and consistent with God's gracious love for all humanity as revealed through Christ, as well as Jesus' and Paul's rhetorical use of hyperbole—if indeed in contrast to traditional Christian theology—to view the apocalyptic warnings and the references to very few being saved as hyperbolic and metaphorical rhetoric, than it is to dismiss the numerous straightforward biblical assertions of salvation for all as hyperbolic and figurative rather than God's actual gracious plan.

If Objective Justification is to be understood literally and salvation is in fact universal, then there is no need for a literal eternal hell ruled by Satan. This actually corroborates the monotheistic worldview of Christianity, according to which there is simply no room for an eternal

hell ruled by Satan to co-exist alongside the heavenly kingdom ruled by God. Satan is totally subservient to God and will be destroyed when Christ returns in glory to usher in his heavenly kingdom. There can be no real eternal hell, but there will be a Final Judgment where we will give an accounting to Christ, our Savior, who will finally welcome us home in our perfect, new, spiritual bodies.

**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to
use**

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