

OBJECTIVE & SUBJECTIVE JUSTIFICATION REVISITED

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There has been renewed interest in the doctrine of “objective justification” in recent decades among some Lutherans, particularly theologians in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. While this discussion is taking place within the specific Lutheran theological parameters of the complementary doctrines of “objective justification” and “subjective justification,” it has arisen in relation to the broader theological discussion of “universal salvation” within Christianity. Just to be clear: the doctrine of Objective Justification teaches that objectively or generically speaking, all people are justified or reconciled to God through the work of Christ.¹ Some theologians have challenged Objective Justification on the grounds that it might be seen to support “universal salvation,” a notion broadly rejected within Christianity. Those who defend Objective Justification consider it very important to distinguish the Lutheran understanding of justification from the Roman Catholic view that requires “good works” in addition to “sola fide” (faith alone), on the one hand; and from the Calvinist claim of “limited atonement” which denies that the work of Christ extends to all people, on the other hand.²

The complementary doctrinal counterpart to Objective Justification, according to Koehler, is the doctrine of Subjective Justification or personal justification. Subjective Justification declares that “by faith one puts himself into personal possession of that justification which the Gospel offers to all men in general.” Koehler continues, “Thus it appears that universal salvation does not benefit any one unless it is followed by personal justification, i.e., unless the individual person trusts in the fact that for Christ’s sake his sins are forgiven. On the other hand, such personal justification is possible only because of the preceding universal salvation.”³

The conflict between these two aspects of justification is that according to Objective Justification, salvation is universal; everyone is saved by grace alone, and therefore there are no conditions on salvation. However, this universal salvation is only theoretical, because it is qualified by the complementary doctrine of Subjective Justification, according to which salvation is actually limited to those who possess faith. Now if personal, subjective faith is a necessary condition of actually being saved, then salvation is not unconditional, it is not by grace alone. If

¹ See e.g., Edward Koehler, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*, River Forest IL, Koehler Publishing Company, 1939, pp. 132-135.

² Cf. David Jay Webber, “Justification: Objective and Subjective,” in *The Doctrine of Justification: Theological Essays from the Weidner Institute*, edited by Jordan Cooper and Matthew Fenn, Just and Sinner Publications, 2021, pp. 19-73.

³ Koehler, p. 135.

personal faith is necessary for salvation, then a logical question regards the fate of those who hear the gospel but do not respond in faith. Some scripture passages appear to answer this question rather straightforwardly: “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.”⁴ According to tradition, those who refuse to accept the gospel are choosing eternal torment in hell with Satan.

However, a further question arises regarding the fate of the vast majority of humanity that never heard the gospel in the first place. Koehler utilizes the analogy of food to explain Objective and Subjective Justification: one may have food, but if one does not eat the food, it is of no benefit to that individual. Koehler’s analogy assumes that an individual has access to food but still needs to eat the food, or it does the person no good. To continue Koehler’s analogy, one may fairly ask about the majority of humanity that never had access to the food of the gospel and therefore did not have the option to decide whether or not to eat the food. According to tradition, the majority of humanity that never had access to the gospel is nonetheless condemned to suffer the just consequences of their sin, namely eternal torment in hell.

How then are we to deal with this seemingly intractable conflict between the doctrines of Objective and Subjective Justification? While Martin Luther and most Christians did not endorse John Calvin’s doctrine of “double predestination,” according to which God intentionally chose some people 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.”⁵ 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.⁶

However, there are many passages in scripture that appear to extend Christ’s saving work to all of humanity, not just to those with personal faith.⁷ 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.⁸ Christ objectively died and rose for the salvation of “the world,” the justification of all people.⁹ If God truly desires to have all people saved and come to the knowledge of the truth,

⁴ Mk. 16:16; cf. Jn. 5:24.

⁵ 1 Cor 1:18.

⁶ Mt. 7:13-14; cf. Mt. 22:14.

⁷ Cf. David Bentley Hart, *That All Shall Be Saved*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019, pp. 94 ff.

⁸ Rom. 11:32; 1 Cor. 15:22.

⁹ John 3:16,17.

then these passages provide compelling reasons to conclude 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 even have rejected the gospel.¹⁰

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans addresses the situation of those Jews who were rejecting the gospel. 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 gospel 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.¹¹ 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 the gospel, or never get the opportunity to hear the gospel in the first place. Literally all people are included in the saving plan of God.

In contrast to the traditional understanding of Subjective Justification, we are proposing an alternative understanding of this doctrine that avoids its inherent conflict with Objective Justification. We submit that Subjective Justification is best understood as describing all those who possess the gift of faith and are therefore part of the Church, the Body of Christ -- without asserting the corollary, namely that all those who lack personal faith and do not belong to the Christian Church are condemned to eternal torment in hell. Our proposed understanding of Subjective Justification acknowledges that there is only a limited number of people who are blessed to hear and receive the gospel by faith. However, what that limited number of the “chosen” were privileged to know on earth was 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 are always addressing situations where people 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 dramatic apocalyptic urgency of 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 the biblical apocalyptic warnings and threats are directed. Jesus used such hyperbolic apocalyptic rhetoric when he was calling to repentance and faith those who were resisting his gospel. He did not address such

¹⁰ 1 Tim. 2:4,6.

¹¹ Rom. 11:25-26, 32.

warnings and threats to those who were “poor in spirit” and yearned for Jesus’ message of the gift of salvation in his coming kingdom. Furthermore, even though Jesus harshly condemned the Pharisees who opposed his message, he did not exclude them from salvation. He confronted them with the seriousness of their rejection by asserting that they would enter the kingdom only after the prostitutes and tax collectors whom the Pharisees self-righteously dismissed as unworthy of the kingdom.¹² But Jesus did 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.¹³

We therefore propose that the biblical apocalyptic threats that severely limit salvation are hyperbolic rhetoric, used in service of calling the opponents of the gospel to repentance and faith, and are not meant by Jesus and Paul to be taken literally. On the other hand, those scripture passages that support the doctrine of Objective Justification are best understood as the actual plan and destiny of God for all humanity. The alternative is to interpret those biblical passages that limit salvation to persons with saving faith as literally true, and therefore to discount the universal-sounding passages as only hyperbole. This latter view in effect is how traditional Christianity has typically interpreted scripture. We offer the following perspectives on this 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 – when he was confronting those who were rejecting his gospel, with the intent of moving them toward repentance and faith.¹⁴ Jesus often used hyperbolic rhetoric; at one point he said 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 to call them to repentance and faith, rather than predictive statements that are meant to be taken literally.
- On the other hand, it is difficult to see what purpose it would have served for Jesus and Paul to have knowingly misled their audiences by asserting repeatedly and unmistakably that God would cover the sins of all people through Christ and therefore all would be saved, if in fact they knew that only a relatively few would actually inherit eternal life. It is also exceedingly difficult to reconcile the gracious nature of God revealed in Christ with a God who would give humans free will, knowing full well that they would inevitably make bad choices during

¹² E.g., Mt. 21:32.

¹³ Mt. 8:11; Lk. 15:11-32; Jn. 14:2; Rev. 22:2.

¹⁴ E.g., Mt. 8:10-12.

their brief time on earth -- and then allow their bad choices to condemn them to eternal punishment.

- It is therefore much more plausible and consistent with the grace of God revealed in Christ, as well as much more fitting with Jesus' and St. Paul's rhetorical use of dramatic hyperbole, to understand their apocalyptic warnings of few people being saved and most condemned as hyperbolic and metaphorical rhetoric, than it is to dismiss their numerous straightforward assertions of salvation for everyone as hyperbolic and figurative, and not the actual gracious plan of God.

If Objective Justification is taken literally and salvation is finally universal, then there is no need or place for an eternal hell ruled by Satan. The justice of God is fully accounted for in the hell-on-earth of the sacrificial death of Christ with its universal significance, and therefore requires no additional realm of eternal torment. "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."¹⁵ This absence of any need for hell actually coincides with the monotheistic worldview of Judaism and Christianity, according to which there is no room for an eternal hell ruled by Satan, co-existing alongside the kingdom of God. According to scripture, Satan is totally subservient to God and will be destroyed when Christ returns in glory to usher in his heavenly kingdom.¹⁶

While Objective Justification eliminates the need for hell as a place of eternal punishment for unbelievers, and the monotheistic worldview rules out even the possibility of such an eternal hell, the force of scripture does support a literal Final Judgment, where all people will experience a life review before Christ the Judge.¹⁷ The Final Judgment, as the last stage of humanity's spiritual journey, will likely include appropriate rewards and purgations, in

¹⁵ Is. 53:5.

¹⁶ Cf. e.g., Job 1,2; 1 Cor. 15:24-26; Rev. 20.

¹⁷ Mt. 25:31-46, Jn. 5:22, 2 Cor. 5:10, Heb. 9:27.

preparation for their being graciously welcomed home by Christ their Savior.¹⁸ Those blessed with the gift of faith during their lifetime will already know that they are saved by the grace of God. Those who rejected the gospel during their lifetime will come to humbly acknowledge God's gift of salvation despite their ignorant rejection of the gospel. Finally, the majority of humanity that never heard the gospel will be happily surprised to experience the grace of God embracing them. Then it will be clear that God's plan and destiny for all people is in fact Objective Justification, the gracious reconciliation of everyone to God through Christ, who is God's final Word to all humanity and all creation.

¹⁸ Cf. 1 Cor. 3:10-15.