

Objective justification

God in Christ reconciled the world, not imputing their sins against them

David R. Bickel
Johnston, Iowa

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Introduction

Has Christ defeated my sins long ago in his death and resurrection or only when I respond in some way? To put it another way, is his victory objective, true for believers and unbelievers alike, or is it subjective, true only for those who believe it is true and only after they believe it? An instance of God's saving his people from their enemies illustrates what is meant by the objectivity of his triumph:

Now there were four men who were lepers at the entrance to the gate... So they arose at twilight to go to the camp of the Syrians. But when they came to the edge of the camp of the Syrians, behold, there was no one there. For the Lord had made the army of the Syrians hear the sound of chariots and of horses, the sound of a great army, so that they said to one another, "Behold, the king of Israel has hired against us the kings of the Hittites and the kings of Egypt to come against us." So they fled away in the twilight and abandoned their tents, their horses, and their donkeys, leaving the camp as it was, and fled for their lives. And when these lepers came to the edge of the camp, they went into a tent and ate and drank, and they carried off silver and gold and clothing and went and hid them. Then they came back and entered another tent and carried off things from it and went and hid them. Then they said to one another, "We are not doing right. *This day is a day of good news.* If we are silent and wait until the morning light, punishment will overtake us. Now therefore come; let us go and tell the king's household." So they came and called to the gatekeepers of the city and told them, "We came to the camp of the Syrians, and behold, there was no one to be seen or heard there, nothing but the horses tied and the donkeys tied and the tents as they were." (2 Kings 7:3-10)

The lepers had good news to tell, not news about their own beliefs or anything else that depended on their thoughts or desires but good news about something that happened outside them. The defeat of the enemy was indeed completely objective: it was true whether or not anyone else knew about it. It was true even before they found out about it. Upon learning their enemies were conquered, they could enjoy the spoils.

However, their fellow Israelites could not benefit from the victory until they heard about it. After hearing the good news about the objective truth, they would only take possession of what was won for them if they believed that news. Belief is subjective, varying from one person to another. The objective good news of God's triumph over his enemies calls for faith, the subjective receipt of that victory. So it is with God's work in Christ.

The apostles on objective justification

A particularly clear text presents the efficacy and success of the atonement as completely independent of faith:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. (2 Corinthians 5:18-19)

By the non-imputation of sins, Paul means forgiveness or justification (Romans 4:1-8). This justification is considered *objective* in the sense that it occurred in the saving work of God in Christ without depending on any human response. *Subjective* justification, by contrast, is only received by faith in that saving work. Using Luther's verbs, the objective justification *achieved* by Christ on the cross is *given* to those hearing the good news of that victory over all their sins and over the curse of the law:

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.¹

All who believe the good news that they have already been reconciled to God receive subjectively the benefits of their justification, including assurance that their sins are forgiven because they had been imputed to Christ. Their faith does not *purchase* their justification, but *grasps* the offer made in the good news.

John's teaching of the atonement is the same as Paul's. Again, there is the objective justification: Christ is the propitiation not only for believers' sins but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2). However, the benefit of that propitiation is only subjectively experienced by those who acknowledge their sins and who believe the good news that God's Son came in the flesh (John 20:31; 1 John 1:9; 4:1-3).² The purpose of such coming in the flesh was to take away the sins of the world that the world might have eternal life (John 1:29; 3:16).

¹ Luther, M. (1999, c1958); Vol. 40: *Luther's Works*, vol. 40: Church and Ministry II (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.); Luther's Works (Vol. 40, pp. 213-214); Philadelphia: Fortress Press. He explains the winning as the work of the Son and the distribution as the work of the Holy Spirit in his Large Catechism in the section on the Third Article of the Creed. On receiving the forgiveness offered in the sacraments, see ["Ways the Son of Man calls forth life: Seeking the kingdom of God in word and sacrament."](#) That essay observes the relevance of Jesus' bringing salvation in the forms of healing and exorcism.

² Many in the Reformed tradition re-interpret these passages in order to protect Calvin's limitation of the atonement to the elect. Even those who speculate that universal atonement would imply universal salvation cannot explain why, if God's wrath against the elect was fully propitiated on the cross, the elect remain under that wrath until they believe. Thus, they in effect distinguish between objective justification and subjective justification without using those terms. The problem with Calvinism is not so much its terminology as its replacing the good news that God reconciled the world with the message that God reconciled only the chosen. Calvinists differ among themselves on how sinners should come to believe that they, too, have been reconciled without having that information revealed by Scripture alone, as seen from the citations of Hodge and Owen in ["Calvinistic modification of justification by faith alone: Does God save all who believe the good news of Christ crucified?"](#) Calvin's news can bring as much terror as joy: "There has been a victory over your fearful enemies, but it may have been only for others, not for you."

The kingdom comes even to unbelievers

Objective justification is not only an apostolic interpretation of salvation history, but Jesus even before his exaltation taught the objective nature of his conquest of death and hell as he heralded “the good news of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16). Luther explained this gospel of the kingdom as basic Christian truth:

What is the kingdom of God? Answer: Simply what we learned in the Creed, namely, that God sent his Son, Christ our Lord, into the world to redeem and deliver us from the power of the devil and to bring us to himself and rule us as a king of righteousness, life, and salvation against sin, death, and an evil conscience.”³

In a synagogue of his homeland, Jesus announced the good news that the Messianic “liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind” had finally arrived (Luke 4:18-19, 43). Rather than receiving freedom from bondage to Satan and the healing that would culminate in the resurrection of the just, the congregation adamantly refused to believe that the prophecy of healing and freedom had been fulfilled in their hearing (Luke 4:20-30). Of course, such unbelief did not make the good news of liberty and healing false; rather, they refused to accept the offered liberty and healing for themselves.

The objectivity of the good news and the invitation to receive it by faith is seen throughout Christ’s ministry. When the hemorrhaging woman touched his garment, he noted that power went out of him. The power was in him objectively even before she came to him, but he told the woman she had received her salvation from the illness by faith in that power (Mark 5:25-34).⁴ Likewise, he gave sight to the blind who believed he could do so:

When he entered the house, the blind men came to him, and Jesus said to them, “Do you believe that I am able to do this?” They said to him, “Yes, Lord.” Then he touched their eyes, saying, “According to your faith be it done to you.” And their eyes were opened. (Matthew 9:29-30)

Of course, they could not believe while they were still blind that they had sight, nor could they believe in their own faith, but they could and did receive the gift of sight by believing the objective truth that Jesus had the power to save them. Similarly, after Jesus revealed himself to Martha as the Resurrection and the Life, he asked her, “Do you believe this?” She confessed her faith in that objective fact, which was true before she believed and would have remained true had she not believed it (John 11:25-27). However, she received that eternal life by believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31). Her faith did not rest in her own faith, decision, inner desires, or in anything else subjective, but in something outside her, the preached good news of the kingdom. Jesus commended her for seeking that kingdom by hearing his word instead of anxiously seeking the cares of this age, as the nations do (Luke 10:38-42; 12:22-31).⁵ Thus, by faith in Christ’s word, Martha received the kingdom of God like a little child learning the catechism, and the kingdom will not be taken away from her.

³ Tappert, T. G. (2000, c1959); *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (The Large Catechism: 3, 51); Philadelphia: Fortress Press. Students of redemptive-historical hermeneutics will notice that Luther understood the meaning of the kingdom even without the benefit of modern biblical theology.

⁴ On healing as salvation, see the first footnote.

⁵ Cf. [“What does it mean to seek the kingdom of God? Matthew 6:33 and Luke 12:31 in the contexts of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lucan parables.”](#)

Although Jesus came to save not only Martha, but all the children of Abraham, they in large part did not receive him (John 1:11). Just as Nazareth turned down Christ's invitation of healing and liberty, other cities refused to believe the good news proclaimed by his disciples as they healed the sick, saying, "The kingdom of God has come near to you." Jesus instructed his representatives to shake the dust off their feet as a curse and to tell the cities that, nevertheless, the kingdom of God had come near to them (Luke 10:9-12). For it was an objective fact that the kingdom had come to those cities as the disciples healed the sick and cast out demons in Jesus' name, even though such redemption was not believed, but rejected. Further, when the Son of Man comes in his kingdom on the day of judgment, such high-minded cities will cast down to hell (Luke 10:13-16; Matthew 13:36-43). After the gospel of the kingdom has been announced to all nations, those going on with the cares of this life just as if there were no other life will be overtaken by his coming (Matthew 24:14, 37-44). As they do not believe his objective promise of forgiveness, they in effect call him a liar (Apology of the Augsburg Confession, Article 12, citing 1 John 5:10). The past, present, and future coming of the kingdom demands repentance and offers life while there is still time to receive it—no amount of wishful thinking will make the Messianic reign go away.

Conclusion

The promise of the good news made to all who hear it is always *true* whether or not it is believed, but the promise is only *taken* by faith. Believing is the only way to receive a promise, as the same article paraphrases Romans 4:16; Abraham, the pattern of justification by faith, simply believed the true promise made to him (Romans 4). In fact, the objectivity of justification is what makes receiving it by faith possible. For if the gospel is that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their sins against them, then, by the gift of the Holy Spirit and on the authority of the Scriptures, I can know that I have been justified. Upon believing the good news proclaimed by the apostles, I become subjectively justified, saved from the curse of the law. On the other hand, if the sacred writings do not promise me that Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, then I am left asking, "What must I do to be saved?"⁶

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⁶ [Robert Preus](#) and [Kurt E. Marquart](#) provide further information on objective justification.