The Doctrine of Justification since the Reformation

The use and emergence of the terms “objective” and “subjective” in relation to justification.

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Introduction:

The doctrine of justification has filled our hearts and minds throughout this conference. Indeed, it always consumes our hearts and minds whenever we gather, for it is upon this solid rock that our faith is built. It is this solid rock that fills our preaching. It is, as has been said before, the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls.

That this is true can be found in numerous quotations from the forefathers of our faith. C.F.W. Walther for instance warns: “Woe to him who injects poison into the doctrine of justification! He poisons the well which God has dug for man’s salvation. Whoever takes this doctrine away from man robs him of everything; for he takes the very heart out of Christianity, which ceases to pulsate after this attack.”

Likewise, Chemnitz is right to remind us that we have this treasure only because of the grace of God and consequently urges us to hold it dearly and defend it tenaciously: “We must devote far more effort to retaining the genuine meaning and apostolic purity of the doctrine of justification, to handing it on to our posterity, and to preventing its being torn away from us or being adulterated by sophistic trickery or fraud. With the aid of God we can prevail more easily because we “have inherited the labors of others,” John 4:38.

Numerous other quotations could be found to convince us from countless witnesses that it is so. But, who among us needs to be convinced? Surely it is God’s grace and God’s grace alone that has also brought us to the blessed conviction that this is indeed a precious doctrine that needs repeated study, constant meditation, and vigilant defense. It is for this reason that a conference slate of papers entirely devoted to the doctrine of justification has to this point consumed our attention and will yet into the afternoon.

The essay committee has assigned an historical look at this doctrine, to see what the fathers of our faith have said about justification, specifically in regard to the terms “objective” and “subjective.” This is, without a doubt, a broad topic since it covers approximately 400 years of history. It is a topic about which there is much controversy, even among Lutherans. It is also a difficult topic to approach, particularly because in regard to the terms themselves not all authors are in agreement regarding the origination of these terms.

So, in order to approach this in an orderly way and on the basis of their own words this essayist will show the following: Objective and subjective justification has always been purely taught, whether they used the terms or not, by those who clearly and carefully distinguish Law and Gospel, as well as those who give God all the

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3 Luther is also among those who reminds us of the great blessing that this article of justification is: “What are all creatures in comparison with the doctrine of justification? If we understand this article correctly and purely we have the right heavenly sun, but if we lose the correct understanding of it we have nothing but the darkness of hell. One can never praise it highly enough and defend it sufficiently...Where this article remains pure Christendom will remain pure, in beautiful harmony, and without schisms. But where it does not remain pure it is impossible to repel any error to heretical spirit. And St. Paul says specifically of this doctrine that a little leaven ferments the whole lump [1 Cor. 5:6]” (Tappert 164-165). (Lutheran Confessional Theology in America: 1840-1880. Edited by Theodore Tappert.© 1872 Oxford University Press, Inc.)

4 That this is a worthy exercise is evident from the Scriptures as well especially since the writer urges us: Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7). Where they have erred, we will not go. But where they have taught the Word of God in its truth and purity it is good and right for us to follow and imitate their faith.

5 Almost all agree that these terms enter common usage in the churches of the Synodical Conference around 1872 and then even more during the Election Controversy of the 1880’s. However, one historian in our own Synod remarked that he has not been able to trace them further than that, although, they surely were in usage prior to this time.

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credit in our salvation by maintaining justification by grace alone (objective justification), justification by faith alone (subjective justification), and justification through Scripture alone (the Means of Grace).6

Objective justification is a forensic declaration of God by grace alone.

Since the beginning of time the justification of poor sinners before the most righteous and holy God through faith alone has been a matter that has been hotly contested and persecuted. It led to the murder of Abel. It led to the persecution of the prophets. It led to the death and resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus, this for our salvation. In fact, it was for the sake of our sins he was delivered over to death and for the sake of our justification that he was raised to life.7 It shouldn’t be surprising then that it is a matter that has been hotly contested since the time of the Reformation.

The papists hated the doctrine of justification by grace alone through faith alone. They adamantly and firmly condemned the Lutheran teaching that works are entirely excluded from the matter and that faith itself was not a work which justified because of what it did. The Council of Trent clearly leveled their anathema against the Lutherans. Our fathers, in response to the papist anathema, responded clearly to the attacks. In fact, it was necessary to fight against this works righteousness of the papists at many times and in various ways. Against the papists the Lutherans demanded: Grace alone apart from works, APART FROM THE WORKS OF THE LAW!8

Yet, that was far from the only fight which our fathers fought. There were the Calvinists who limited the atoning work of Christ and made election a double decree of God. Thus the Calvinists taught a monergism, namely that God is the determining factor in the election to salvation AND in the election to damnation.9 On account of this damnable doctrine they limited the work of Christ ONLY to those who were the elect. Again, the Lutherans were forced to respond. And so, against the Calvinists the Lutherans demanded: Grace alone apart from works FOR ALL MANKIND. As Chemnitz clearly declared:

“We must retain this universal promise against dangers we might imagine regarding predestination, so that we do not argue that this promise pertains only to certain few others, but not to ourselves. There is no doubt that this thought troubles the minds of all people. From this have arisen many useless controversies by writers on the subject of predestination. But we must make up our minds that the promise of the Gospel is universal. For just as the preaching of repentance is universal, so also is the preaching of the remission of sins universal... That not all obtain the Gospel promise comes from the fact that they do not all believe. For the Gospel, even though it promises freely, yet requires faith; it is necessary that the promises be received by faith.

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6 This is not a unique approach to the locus of justification. Chemnitz suggests the following: “Cheminz believes that a definite Pauline order should be maintained; the theologian should consider (1) what the Gospel is in contrast to the Law; (2) the meaning of the words justify, righteousness, and righteous as they are used in the Gospel, (3) the meaning of such words as grace and freely, (4) what justifying faith is and what it clings to, and (5) the place of good works, since these are expressly removed from the article of justification” (Preus 95). (Robert D. Preus. The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism vol 1. © 1970 Concordia Publishing House.) Likewise, in a paper presented to the first convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872, the following thesis was presented: “Thesis 3: In the pure doctrine of justification, as our Lutheran church has presented it again from God’s Word and placed it on the lamp-stand, it is above all a matter of three points: 1) Of the doctrine of the universal, perfect redemption (Erloesung) of the world through Christ; 2) Of the doctrine of the power and efficacy of the means of grace; and 3) Of the doctrine of faith” (Schmidt 1). (F.A. Schmidt. Justification, objective and subjective: a translation of the doctrinal essay read at the first convention of the Synodical Conference in 1872. © 1982. Concordia Theological Seminary Press. Trans. Kurt Marquart.)

7 Cf. Romans 4:25

8 In his Loci Theologici Martin Chemnitz continues to wage war when he quotes Melanchthon: “This is the promise of the remission of sins, or reconciliation or justification, concerning which the Gospel primarily speaks, so that these benefits are sure and do not depend upon the condition of fulfilling the Law” (445).

9 It is important to note here that on the basis of Scripture it is taught among us that God, purely out of his grace and mercy has elected some to salvation. However, it is also clearly declared that he has not elected the others to damnation. No, rather he desires the salvation of all as countless passages of Scripture make plain.

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The term “freely” does not exclude faith, but it does exclude our worthiness as a condition...and it demands that we accept the promise, and this cannot take place except through faith.”

And let us not forget the predecessors of those who surround us and our people on a daily basis, the Arminians. Like the papists the Arminians wanted to assign to us some of the work in our salvation. Both unabashedly declare (and thus creating great confusion), “Christ has done it all!” but, then quickly say, “Now, this much is up to you.” The Arminian error in this doctrine is to make conversion our work, and thus make faith a CAUSE of salvation. Against these our fathers emphatically declared: By grace alone without the works of the law, TOTALLY APART FROM YOU! They wanted to cry out (and did): “But Scripture teaches that Christ has done all, and has already acquired for us reconciliation with God, righteousness, entitlemet to be children of God, that it lies there in readiness and is distributed in the holy Christian church through the Gospel. Now no one needs to do anything more than to accept salvation.”

If only the attacks upon the doctrine of justification had come from the outside of the Lutheran church, then, perhaps, some of the time, they might be readily identified and fought. But, sadly, Satan worked and continues to work within the Lutheran ranks. Some wanted to make justification an act of God “at the moment of faith” and so they denied and even rejected universal, objective justification. For instance, Gottfried Fritschel in his article Zur Lehre von der Rechtfertigung made a false distinction between reconciliation and justification. He wrote that the whole world, with the exception of no one, has been reconciled with God in Christ. Forgiveness of sins is bought for all men. However, only when the sinner has experienced the wrath of God and in faith takes hold of Christ, only then does God look on him in Christ. In regard to justification he uses phrases like “now and not before” in regard to the act of justification.

Likewise, Heinrich Schmid in The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church makes justification “the effect of faith.” He notes that “this act occurs in the instant in which the merit of Christ is appropriated by faith.” And again he uses phrases in regard to justification like “from the moment when faith is exercised.” Thus, in a very

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65 Chemnitz, 455.
66 Schmidt 12-13
67 See below for the timing of these particular departures from the doctrine of justification.
68 Translated by Tappert and included in Lutheran Confessional Theology in America.
69 See these phrases in their context: “In the suffering and death of Christ a sufficient and perfectly valid sacrifice was offered for the sins of the whole world. Christ is the lamb of God that bore the sins of the world. Thus the whole world, with the exception of no individual at all, has been reconciled with God in Christ. The treasure of the forgiveness of sins has been bought for all men, unbelievers as well as believers, damned as well as saved. And yet, although the whole world is reconciled with God in the death of Jesus Christ, all men are not on this account justified. Justification is something different from reconciliation, and dare not be confused with or exchanged for it. Reconciliation applies to all men, but justification is attained only by those who appropriate to themselves the merit of Jesus Christ through faith. In the atonement wrought by Christ’s death it was made objectively possible that the sins of an individual could be forgiven, which occurs in faith, in the justification of the sinner before God. When the sinner has stood penitently before the judgment of God, has experienced the wrath of God and the torments of his conscience, and in faith has taken hold of Christ and his holy merit, only then does God look upon him in Christ and for Christ’s sake declare him free and liberated from all his sins... now and not before... and this is not a subjective transaction in man but is an objective deed of God... Consequently, while forgiveness of sins and justification are offered to all men in the gospel, only those who are justified who have faith in Jesus” (BOLD emphasis mine) (Tappert 147-148).
70 See these phrases of Schmid in their context: “The effect of faith is justification; [1] by which is to be understand the act of God by which he removes the sentence of condemnation, to which man is exposed in consequence of his sins, releases him from his guilt, and ascribes to him the merit of Christ. Br. (574): “Justification denotes the act by which the sinner, who is responsible for guilt and liable to punishment, but who believes in Christ, is pronounced just by God the judge.” [2] This act occurs in the instant in which the merit of Christ is appropriated by faith, [3] and can properly be designated a forensic or judicial act, since God in it, as if in a civil court, pronounces a judgment upon man...” (BOLD emphasis mine) (Schmid 424). “For God, from the moment in which faith is exercised, regards all that Christ has accomplished, as if it had been done by man, and attributes the merit of Christ to him, as if it were his own” (BOLD
The subtle way (though they would argue otherwise) faith became a cause of salvation; faith became a cause of justification.

The other error, already introduced above, was a false distinction between the terms justification and reconciliation. Fritschel argues that these two doctrines are separate. “Where in the Lutheran Church was reconciliation ever conceived of as justification,” he asks. Reconciliation, he argues, is universal. Justification is not. This difference between reconciliation and justification is the basis for the “then/now” distinction between them.

Here on the basis of an unfortunate translation of Pieper’s Christian Dogmatics confusion entered our own circles. This is the statement:

When the sinner comes to faith in Christ or in the Gospel, he is at once justified before God by his faith. Since the Gospel offers him the forgiveness of sins gained by Christ for the whole world (objective justification), the acceptance of this offer by faith, is all that is needed to accomplish his subjective justification.


Fritschel states: “Everywhere it has been the belief of the Lutheran Church that reconciliation and justification are distinguished from each other, that on the basis of the reconciliation accomplished for the whole world in Christ’s death and resurrection God declares righteous or justifies the individual man who appropriates this general reconciliation to himself in faith, and therefore while the reconciliation happened then, when Christ performed his hold work of redemption, justification occurs now, when the individual takes hold of Christ’s merit in faith, whereupon, in that very moment, God declares him just” (Tappert 150).

Regarding the difference and distinction between reconciliation and justification, none of us will debate the fact that these have different shades of meaning, as a diamond has different sides and faces to it. Yet, according to their universal character there is no difference. Prof. Meyer is right to question Lenski who says: “Reconciliation...signifies that through Christ’s death God changed our status. By our enmity, our sin, our ungodliness (all synonymous) we had gotten ourselves into the desperate status that deserved nothing from God but wrath, penalty, damnation; and unless God did something to change this status, it would compel him to treat us thus. By means of Christ’s death (dia) God changed this into an utterly different status, one that despite our enmity, etc., enabled him to go on commending to us his love, this very love that changed our status, this love that impelled Christ to die for us hostile enemies of God….A change had to take place in our case, and we could not make it ourselves, God had to make it. It took the sacrificial death of his Son to do it....Being enemies we were reconciled to God. This is the objective act. It wrought a change with or upon these enemies, not within them. It as yet did not turn their enmity into friendliness, did not make the world the kingdom. It changed the unredeemed into the redeemed world. The instant Christ died the whole world of sinners was completely changed. It was now a world for whose sin atonement has been made, no longer a world with sins unatoned” Meyer asks: “How anyone with this grasp of the objective nature of καταλλαγή can still refuse to accept the objective nature of the justification of which Paul is here speaking is difficult to understand” (Meyer 114-115). (J.P. Meyer. Ministers of Christ: A Commentary on the Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians. © 1963. Northwestern Publishing House.) Likewise Stoeckhardt, commenting on Romans 5:8ff declares: “Reconciliation and justification here mean one and the same thing to Paul” (142). (George Stoeckhardt. General Justification. Trans. Otto F. Stahlike. Concordia Theological Quarterly, vol 42 #2.)

Stoeckhardt tries to explain the opponents rationale: “When they treat of justification they lay down approximately the following sequence of thought: God through Christ has reconciled the sinful world with himself through the sacrificial death of Christ. That salvation and reconciliation which is effected through Christ Jesus, Christ’s obedience, suffering and death, must be definitely distinguished from the actual forgiving of sins. Through this reconciliation God has only made it possible for Himself to impart to sinful man further demonstrations of His grace. He has so far suppressed His wrath that He further concerns Himself with the sinners of the world. Reconciliation has opened the way for the possibility of the forgiveness of sins, of justification...” (Stoeckhardt 139). Note, into this way of thinking he ties in Thomasius, Kahnis, Martensen, Luthard, Frank, Philippi.

Prof. Meyer offers the German and the corrected translation: “At the same moment that a man comes to faith in Christ or in the Gospel, that is, in the forgiveness of sins won by Christ and offered in the Gospel, he is justified before God through his faith. This is the so-called Subjective Justification in distinction from the so-called Objective Justification, which is present before faith” (Meyer 100).
What can we say? What Lutherans have always said and declared: GRACE ALONE FOR ALL MANKIND! At all times the truths of the Scriptures have been expressed by the fathers. They have clearly and without ambiguity declared that justification is universal and it is objective. Walther proclaims: "God does nothing by halves. In Christ he loves all sinners without exception. The sins of every sinner are canceled. Every debt has been liquidated. There is no longer anything that a poor sinner has to fear when he approaches his heavenly Father, with whom he has been reconciled by Christ." And again: "By the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead God has abolished the entire world of sinners from their sins." Luther points us to the Fifth Petition for comfort telling us to pray for forgiveness and adds, "Not that he does not forgive our sins without our prayer or before we ask. In fact, before we prayed for it or ever thought about it, he gave us the Gospel in which there is nothing but forgiveness." The Formula of Concord speaks of our righteousness which is revealed in the Gospel as being universal, "a complete satisfaction and expiation for the human race." Luther in his remarks on Galatians 3:13 says: "Thus, if Christ himself was found guilty (schuldig geworden ist) of all sins which all of us (wir alle) have done, then we are acquitted of all sins...etc." Luther likewise points us to the universal, objective nature of justification:

"Here I find this One among the sinners, yes, Him Who has taken all men’s sins upon Himself and carries them, and besides this I see no sin in the whole world, anymore, except on Him alone; therefore He shall yield Himself and die the death of the Cross. Thus the Law with its accusation and terror presses upon Him with full force and slays Him. Through this innocent death of Christ the whole world is purified and released from sin and thereby redeemed from death and from all evil...For of these two things one must certainly and indisputably be true: Namely, if all the world’s sins lie on the single man Jesus Christ, as the Holy Spirit testifies through Isaiah 53:6, then of course they do not lie on the world; but if they do not lie on Him, then, without fail, they must certainly lie on the world. Again, if Christ Himself has become guilty of all our sins, which we have ever committed, then we are indeed absolved, free, and acquitted of all sins; but this has not happened through ourselves, our works or merit, but through Him."

Numerous other quotations might be added. But let these suffice to show that our fathers taught and held to universal, objective justification.

They also clearly made it known that this universal, objective justification was forensic in nature. This means nothing other than that which happens in a courtroom - a verdict is reached. The one verdict stands as condemnation, the other as justification. The one verdict stands as guilty, the other as not guilty. This even the opponents of universal, objective justification recognize. Chemnitz summarizes the forensic thrust of the word "justification."
'Justification' means the remission of sins, reconciliation, or the acceptance of a person unto eternal life. To the Hebrews 'to justify' is a forensic term, as if I were to say to the Roman people 'justified' Scipio when he was accused by the tribunes, that is, they absolved him or pronounced him to be a righteous man. Therefore Paul took the term "justify" from the usage of the Hebrew word to indicate remission of sins, reconciliation, or acceptance. All educated people understand that this is the thrust of the Hebrew expression, and examples are encountered frequently.  

But the opponents will continue to make the argument that reconciliation differs from justification. They may even argue that the forgiveness of sins is not the same as justification. Yet, we do not stand alone in declaring that it just isn't so. We stand in good company declaring that these are all synonyms of justification, as Chemnitz points out:

Augustine himself in treating Romans 5, where "to be justified" is explained in the text as meaning "to be reconciled"... Again he [Paul] explains justification on the basis of Ps. 32:1-2 as "covering iniquity" or as "not imputing sins," cf. Rom. 4:7-8; 2 Cor. 5:19. In Rom. 5:10 the word "to be reconciled" is clearly a synonym for "to be justified." Titus 3:5-7 joins these three expressions: to justify, to save, and to become heirs of eternal life, as being synonymous, each of which explains the other. Gal. 3:25-31 Acts 3:25 explain justification in terms of the blessing in opposition to God's curse... John, therefore, often speaks like this, John 3:16:8: "He who does not believe is condemned already....He who believes shall not be judged....He does not coming judgment [John 5:24]....He sent his Son not to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him...that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." It is clear that these expressions are paraphrases of the word "justification" and have the same meaning we have been speaking about.  

These objections might also be added to those noted above: (1) The accusation of universalism, namely that since the world was justified when Christ rose from the dead.  

(2) Related to the charge of universalism is the concern that universal, objective justification may soften the law and even lead to a carnal security. In other words, the Gospel message of justification becomes a pillow to sleep on while the Law thunders on. (3) It can lead to a lawlessness and antinomianism. While this is a moment for us to pause and consider how we have preached law and gospel to our people, especially in this regard, Chemnitz responds to these charges appropriately:

Augustine states in regard to Psalm 101 that the pagans condemned the teaching of the church by saying, "You have destroyed discipline and perverted the morals of the human race by giving to men an opportunity for repentance and by promising immunity for all sins; and thus men do evil, secure in the fact that all things will be forgiven them when they have been converted." Such objections some people tried to refute by changing the doctrine so that they restricted grace and in hyperbolic language extolled other teachings to the skies. But Augustine, after he learned his lesson from the Pelagian controversy, came to realize that the church was not being helped by this kind of thinking and that the truth was only being perverted and ultimately lost. For just as they

be justified is not to be called into judgment (Ps 143:2), not to be condemned (Jn 3:18), not to come into judgment (Jn 5:24), not to be judged (Jn 3:18)” (318). And again: “Justification is an action of God that occurs in time and especially to each individual sinner. But there is also an objective justification, which happened to all people in time, specifically in Christ’s suffering and resurrection (Ro 5:8; 2 Cor 5:21; Ro 4:25). Our dogmatians do not treat objective justification especially but only incidentally” (337-338)." (Adolf Hoenecke. Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, vol III. © 2003. Northwestern Publishing House. Tran. James Langebartels)

29 Quoting Melanchton in his Loci Theologici 461.
30 Chemnitz 482-483.
31 These charges may arise because of careless preaching of or thoughtless listening to phrases like: “Even your sins, O unrepentent man, have been forgiven” (Tappert 156).
should not do evil that good may come of it, so they should not teach falsely in order that the truth might be defended and retained.32

We can be sure on the basis of Scripture33 and on the testimony of those who have gone before us justification is universal (It is for all.), and it is objective (It happens outside of man.). Prof. Deutschlander summarizes well what we mean when we confess universal, objective justification:

By objective (or universal) justification we mean simply this: God, on account of His own free and unmerited grace, has forgiven the sins of the whole world; this “not guilty” verdict God has declared over the whole world without injury to His divine justice; for the sacrifice of His Son in the place of all mankind serves as the all-sufficient satisfaction for the offence done to God by the individual and collective sin of our fallen race, and that sacrifice provides each and every sinner with the only possible, perfect, and complete covering for his guilt.34

Subjective justification is a forensic declaration of God received by faith alone.

Here Chemnitz drives us straight to the point:

The point at issue is this: When the mind is terrified by the recognition of sin and a sense of the wrath of God, (1) What is that entity on account of which the sinner, condemned before God’s judgment to eternal punishment, obtains remission of sins, is absolved from the sentence of condemnation, and is received into eternal life? (2) What is the instrument or means by which the promise of the Gospel, that is, the promise of grace, mercy, reconciliation, salvation, and eternal life, is received, laid hold upon, and applied? For these two things are sought in the article of justification: the merit or satisfaction and the application of it to oneself.35

As we begin to approach subjective justification it necessary for us never to leave behind objective justification.

These two belong together. It is only when these are taught side by side that we have the true doctrine of justification. Deutschlander reminds us that the fathers had no trouble considering these two topics side by side nor distinguishing between them. And indeed, there was no reason to make the distinction until the understanding of the nature of faith was confounded.36

If we are to understand why, since Christ died for the sins of the whole world, all are not saved, then we must understand how his work is applied to those who are.37 It is necessary to understand how the universal, objective justification of God becomes my own and what is this faith that receives it. “Ph. D. Burk correctly says: ‘The relationship of objective justification to the other so-called justification can be expressed in this way, that in the latter the appropriation of the former occurs.” 38

35 Chemnitz 473.
33 Though the Scripture passages are not supplied here I am confident that our other essayists at this conference have and will flesh out these passages for us.
35 Chemnitz 474.
36 Deutschlander Distinction 5.
37 Chemnitz begins to explain: “Because Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world, and yet not all are saved through Christ, therefore it is necessary that there be an application of those things which Christ by his obedience has merited and acquired an application to each individual who has been ordained to eternal life. It is certain that this takes place by faith” (494).
38 Hoenecke 338. He also notes there: “Emphasizing objective justification is necessary in order to preserve the real content of the gospel” (338).
Paul Althaus phrases these same questions in terms of *when* man is justified. E. Reim translates the following section from *Die Christliche Wahrheit*:39

The act by which God justifies takes place in Jesus Christ. Thereby the question is already answered: *When* is man justified? The answer must read: In the cross and the resurrection of Jesus. But God’s action in the death and resurrection of Jesus is not a matter of the past, but becomes a present thing for us at every stage of history (*an jedem Ort des Geschichtsräumes*) by the way in which God deals with us in the Gospel, in its preaching, absolution, Sacrament. As something inseparable from Christ, the one action of God becomes contemporary for me—thus overcoming the barrier between past and present—by means of the awarding and appropriating function of the Gospel as it is proclaimed and administered. Thus the question concerning the time may be answered: I am justified in my baptism; but also: now, in my hearing the Word that is meant for me; today, in my receiving the Sacrament. Not as though this implied constantly recurring new acts of God, nor a repetition of the first act. Rather, it is always the one and the same historic act of God which confronts me wherever I may be—never to be localized exclusively in one specific moment, not even in Baptism. Its locale is in Christ; it occurs wherever Christ is present; it consists in this that Christ is present for us.

Here one should not forget that Christ and *faith* belong together. Only in faith is God’s verdict real for us. In this respect God’s act of justification is at once “objective” and “subjective.” God sends Christ and the Gospel, God grants faith that lays hold on Christ in the Gospel and thereby has this justification. This results in the following answer to the question concerning the time: I have this justification (I am justified) when God works faith in me through the Gospel. This “subjective” version of the answer does not imply a conflict with the previously stated “objective” form, but the two belong together. Their unity consists in this that the “objective” answer can be perceived by faith alone, but this faith does not look to its own resources, but only to what it is given, to the “objective” fact. We are justified at the cross; we are justified by faith—these twain belong inseparably together.40

There is a struggle here, one that we are keenly aware of in America. We cling to *sola gratia* with fierce tenacity, and rightly so. In the same way, the Scriptures also drive us to cling to *sola fidei* with the same tenacity. Yet, with a history of subjectivism in our rearview mirror and with a world all around with an overly subjective view of things we struggle to clearly teach and preach these truths. Tappert, quoting Forde, describes the struggle like this: “traditional piety was torn between the poles of orthodoxist “objectivism” and pietistic “subjectivism.”41

So, the question you’ve been waiting for, the reason this paper was assigned to me: What is the genesis of the terms “objective” and “subjective” in relation to justification? The genesis of the terms is hard to trace, but they appear to enter common usage among us in the latter half of the 16th Century.42 One might surmise that since this is a core doctrine to our faith the Rationalists might have begun to develop terms like *objectives* and *subjective* in relation to justification in order to reconcile the doctrine of the law with the doctrine of the gospel. While it is true that “the desire to reconcile the doctrine of the Law and of the philosophy of the Gospel is the source and origin of all corruptions,”43 this alone does not help us trace the development and use of these terms.

Some, and perhaps rightly so, direct us to Pietism as the instigator:

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39 Notice how Althaus seamlessly weaves together objective and subjective justification while the entire time directing us to the cross.
40 Reim 7.
41 Tappert 141.
42 Schmidt states that old dogmaticians didn’t often speak of universal, objective justification because of Huber who taught “that God had not only justified all men already, but had also elected them to eternal life” (21). Tappert notes this about Huber: “Samuel Huber (1547–1624) attacked Reformed teaching when he was in Switzerland and Lutheran teaching when he was in Germany. He criticized the Reformed doctrine of predestination and annoyed Lutherans by contending that universal salvation was established through the sacrificial death of Christ” (161).
43 Chemnitz quoted by Preus 98.

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It is the bane of Pietism that it centers its attention so much on the feelings and the spiritual
c condition of man’s heart that it forgets or pays but slight attention to the great objective facts of
God’s love for men and the all-sufficient atonement of the Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. It
bids men look within for assurance that they have truly repented and believed instead of telling
them to fix their eyes on Christ and His word and to rest in His promises, regardless of the sins and
little faith that they too often find in their own hearts. This deep-rooted difference between
orthodoxy and pietism explains why a controversy arose regarding such fundamental questions as
that of Absolution and the related doctrines of the Gospel and Justification, and that, almost from
the beginning of Norwegian Lutheran history in America.\footnote{Reim 4.}

This, too, is difficult to trace even though we can here again see the correlation. What we can trace is there
development and usage among us and others within and without the Synodical Conference. There are several dates
and controversies that we might keep in mind. (1) 1872 was the first meeting of Synodical Conference. A paper was
presented titled Justification – objective and subjective. In this paper the doctrine of objective justification, in
particular, was clearly expounded. This is, perhaps, the first clear usage of the term in our circles. (2) In 1880 a
controversy arose at the General Pastoral Conference of 1880. Reim writes in this regard:

Walther’s doctrine was being attacked, and Prof. F. W. Stellhorn, subsequently to become one of
the leaders of the Ohio Synod, was one of the chief spokesmen against him. In an effort to prove
the particular election of individuals to be but a judicial application of the terms of God’s universal
will of grace, Stellhorn spoke as follows: “I remind you of an analogy, the doctrine of a twofold
justification. There, in opposition to modern theologians, all of us teach that there is an objective
justification, which came to pass through the resurrection of Christ. By this resurrection all
mankind has been justified objectively. There God has declared: Now all men are justified, freed
from their sins. And he who accepts this objective justification in faith is also justified subjectively
(\textit{der wird auch subjektiv gerechtfertigt}). (\textit{Verhandlungen der Allgem. Pastoralalkonferenz}, p. 32. In his
reply Dr. Walther called this the language of scholars (“\textit{wie die Gelehrten reden}”), but entered on the
use of these same terms, differing with Stellhorn only because of the latter’s way of implying that
justification involved two judicial acts of God. Obviously both men were operating with familiar
and accepted terms. The fact that they were but little used in the writings of those days seems to
have been simply a matter of preference. It was not that the terms were not known and accepted.\footnote{Reim 2.}

Likewise, Buchholz in his paper to the 2005 WELS Synod Convention wrote:

The terms \textit{objective justification} and \textit{subjective justification} came out of this \textit{[Election]} controversy, as the theologians of the Missouri and Wisconsin Synods grappled with how best to express the
justification won at the cross as a completed reality, while maintaining the necessity of faith as the
receiving organ that grasps the imputed righteousness of Christ offered in the gospel.\footnote{Buccholz 1. (\textit{Justification in Mission and Ministry. Essay presented to the 58th Biennial Convention of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod assembled at Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, July 27, 2005}. Jon Buchholz.)}

Understanding the history of these terms helps us to understand the charges that Fritschel raises when he seems to
label and understand subjective justification as “a consciousness on man’s part of something God did long ago.”\footnote{Tappert 152.}
He also labels subjective justification our work and not God’s.\footnote{He further states: “In subjective justification therefore it is not God who does something – that is to say, he does not there
declare a man just, and it is not a forensic act, because this happened long ago in Christ’s death and resurrection – but it is an act of man, namely, an acceptance on his part – although to be sure, through the faith that God produces in him.” Footnote: “in the personal justification of the individual God does nothing, but only man acts insofar as he believes” (Tappert 154).}
Thus, it becomes necessary to understand the true nature of faith as the Scriptures use it. Here Deutschlander does us a great service in *Ein Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch*:

The words Glaube and glauben have a much more precise meaning in German than do the English equivalents. In common English usage the words "to believe," and "faith" are used as synonym for "to feel," "to have an opinion," "to hope," all of these with or without any reason or basis in fact.

Thus, for example, the mother of the confessed ax murderer is heard to say outside of the courtroom: "But I still believe that he is innocent and a good boy;" or the soap opera heroine says to the victim of some unimaginable disaster: "You’ve just got to have faith!" In both examples, faith/to believe are used with total indifference to facts, evidence, any reason or basis, to the point that faith and facts, faith and history virtually become opposites. Orthodox German Lutheran writers *never* use Glaube/glauben that way. In orthodox German Lutheran usage these words are rooted in facts, in history, in knowledge. In English someone may ask the question: Why do you believe that? and get the answer: That’s just the way I feel about it. In German glauben would not be used that way. If we accept St. Augustine’s definition of faith as "scientia, assentia, fiducia," the German emphasizes scientia and the English fiducia, almost to the exclusion of scientia. For the Lutheran pastor the point is an extremely important one: if in his speaking and preaching and writing he uses the words "faith" and "believe" in a German (as well as Latin and Greek) sense, but his hearers understand him in an English sense, he may unintentionally mislead his audience. What does the speaker mean and what does the hearer understand by the sentence: “All you’ve got to do is believe and have faith.” If the speaker is a good Lutheran (though a sloppy speaker), he means: “Jesus really did come and die for the sins of the world, and therefore for your sins; his payment is an accomplished fact, and your forgiveness was won by Him alone; through this message God bids you trust in this accomplished fact as it applies to you.” If the speaker is careless and does not explain himself, the hearer may understand something quite different: “I’m supposed to decide that everything is OK—if I decide that, it’s true; if I decide the opposite, then that’s true, and if someone else decides a third thing, that’s true for him; thus Christianity is a feeling that everything will work out right as long as I believe it, and I can believe what I want, as long as I believe something.”

Faith, then, is not an emotion or feeling. It is not a choice. It is not an opinion. Faith is based in sure and certain facts. Faith is all about its object. Faith is focused on something outside of me. This makes faith, like justification itself, completely objective in nature for it places its confidence in sure and certain things. It is confidence and trust focused completely on Christ its Source, Christ its Content, and Christ its Goal.

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49 Deutschlander *Wordbook 4. (Ein Kleines Theologisches Wörterbuch).* Prof. Daniel M. Deutschlander [Rev. 1994.]
50 “The notion that faith is mere feeling and apart from a specific promise of God is often rejected. Condemned as well is the very English and existential notion that nothing is true until and unless I believe it. "Faith" does not establish truth; rather the truth of God’s promises creates, establishes and is the heart and core of faith. Thus for example in the Formula of Concord, Article II, par. 56 (Tappert, p. 532): We should not and cannot pass judgment on the Holy Spirit’s presence, operations, and gifts merely on the basis of our feeling, how and when we perceive it in our hearts. On the contrary, because the Holy Spirit’s activity often is hidden, and happens under cover of great weakness, we should be certain, because of and on the basis of his promise, that the Word which is heard and preached is an office and work of the Holy Spirit, whereby he assuredly is potent and active in our hearts (II Cor. 1:21ff.).” (Deutschlander *Faith Serves 4. (WHAT DO WE MEAN WHEN WE SAY: “FAITH SAVES”?* Prof. D. Deutschlander.)

51 The dangers of subjectivism are clearly warned about: "Confidence and trust all too easily shifts from Christ its Source, Christ its Content and Christ its Goal, to the decision and confidence itself; the synergist gets up in the morning and asks not after Christ, but after his own feelings, which he mistakenly equates with faith (of which more below); does he “feel right with God;” does he feel at peace and forgiven? Then he is and need concern himself with the matter no longer. How easily that slips into a carnal security, with the self at the center, rather than Christ; how lightly one can dismiss Word and Sacraments, the objective means of grace that way; how imperceptible but deadly may become the slide into the posture of the self righteous Pharisee,
Here the testimonies of the fathers are in place. Walther notes:

Luther occasionally uses the expression that, objectively, every person is already righteous in the sight of God because of the living and dying of Christ in his stead. When God justifies an individual by offering him the Gospel and the individual refuses to accept, he is, indeed, not justified, but is and remains a condemned sinner. To such a person the chief torment of hell will be the fact that he knows: “I was redeemed; I was reconciled to God; I was righteous; but because I would not believe it, I am now in this place of torment… Of what use would it be if someone were to offer you millions, holding them out to you, and you would not deem it worthwhile to extend your hand and take them? You would remain beggars until your dying day… A person must believe that what the Gospel says concerns him.”

And Chemnitz adds:

Besides this, when “faith” is concerned with external objects, it obviously signifies “desire,” “trust,” “expectation,” and “petition” for a mitigation or for aid or deliverance. The same will be the nature and meaning of “faith” when it has to do with justification as its object. From this the correct meaning is confirmed that even when faith is concerned with external objects, yet in order that the promise may be sure and the confidence of our hope firm, that faith which relies on the promise of mercy for the sake of Christ must always shine forth. For unless faith first establishes that God is favorable toward us and has been reconciled, no peace of conscience can be sought or aid be expected.

For we are justified by faith, not because it is so firm, robust, and perfect a virtue, but because of the object on which it lays hold, namely Christ, who is the Mediator in the promise of grace… We must not determine the status of our faith on the basis of our feeling of comfort or spiritual joy… But when the true object is firmly centered in the Word and when the predicted emotions follow, or at least the attempts and the desire, then there is true faith.

And Luther in the Large Catechism agrees:

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. In short, whatever God effects in us he does through such external ordinances.

Thus, as we can see that subjective justification also focuses our hearts and minds on the objective justification won on the cross, as Deutschlander emphasizes:

“who stood and prayed thus with himself:” I thank Thee Lord, that I am not as other men are, who have not yet decided or refuse to decide; I thank Thee Lord, that I at least made the right choice. The equal and opposite disaster and soul destroying tragedy of synergism is despair. What if the sinner feels he “almost believes;” what if he is-not aware emotionally of the peace and joy which should be his if he “really believes?” What if he begins to search within and asks the perfectly logical question: “How do I know that I believe enough?” For all such there can but be the opposite of faith, the soul-wrenching agony of doubt; and from doubt despair easily grows. “I do not feel it; I am not aware of it; I doubt; I do not think I have placed my whole trust in Christ; therefore my faith cannot be saving faith or real or enough—I am damned and lost forever!” (Deutschlander Distinction 11-12).

54 Walther 291.
53 Chemnitz 495.
54 Chemnitz 503.
55 Quoted by Schmidt 34.

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By subjective justification we mean that act whereby the objective justification, or the “not guilty” verdict, or the forgiveness (all of which, as we have already seen, mean the same thing essentially) earned for all, merited for all, and completed for all is offered, given and sealed to the individual by the proclamation and declaration of God in the Gospel, which Gospel as the effective means of grace creates faith, i.e., appropriating trust and confidence, in the already and fully accomplished fact of forgiveness. To put it more simply and to demonstrate the difference: in objective justification God declares the whole world “not guilty” and forgiven; in subjective justification God declares me “not guilty” and forgiven, and by that declaration in the Gospel He creates “saving faith” by the Gospel.56

Through God-given faith the objective truth of the Gospel is appropriated and applied to the individual. What God did for the world, he did for me. I am not saved because I believe in Jesus. I am saved because Jesus died for me. And so there is the ultimate comfort for you and for me because of this objective truth which God has applied to me by giving me faith. Deutschlander points us to the comfort that is ours:

Faced with the strength of the temptations and the wretchedness of our still sinful nature – indeed, its love of weakness and temptation – we have ample reason to go back again and again to the ultimate reality of our faith and the cornerstone truth of the Scriptures. And that is the doctrine of justification. It is this, that God has declared the whole world not guilty! because of the work of Christ, who bore the sins of the whole world on his cross (Jn 1:29; 3:16; 2 Cor 5:14-21). While we stumble along in our weakness and in the perversity of our still remaining fallen nature, this rock-solid truth sustains us at the foot of his cross and under our own: Since the sin of the world has been paid for, so too has my sin been paid for; it is true because God says so; I believe it because the gospel means of grace has moved me to believe. Were it otherwise, we would be back with Homer and the Iliad or with Sartre and Nausea for a bible. We would be left with nothing but confusion, then despair, then death, then hell.57

This justification which saves by grace alone and faith alone is declared, given, and sealed through Scripture alone.

Here we can begin to see how when the doctrine of justification begins to crumble and is placed on slippery ground, that all other doctrines of Scripture are affected. Yes, the denial and rejection of universal, objective justification even poisoned the well of the Means of Grace.

This is how the controversy began. In 1861 the Norwegian Synod and Missouri Synod declared that absolution imparts forgiveness. It was stated: “Absolution is given whether you believe it or not.”58 Some objected and it led to the discussion and study of justification.

The Norwegian Synod maintained that the only basis for the forgiveness of sins is the atonement made by Christ. Man’s faith could not be a basis, they argued, since this would mean that man contributes to his own salvation. Accordingly the whole world (unbelievers as well as believers) has been justified by Christ’s suffering and death. This emphasis on an objective justification was opposed by other Norwegians and by the Swedes, who held that no man is justified until through faith he subjectively accepts the gift of the atonement.59

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56 Deutschlander Distinction 6.
58 Tappert 141-142.
59 Tappert 142.

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In this essayist's opinion the issue in this study of justification also revolved around this, namely whether the Means of Grace contain or give the forgiveness of sins. On the one side the Augustana Synod and some Norwegians with them stated: "The gospel proclaims and contains, offers and tenders the forgiveness of sins to all who hear it, but this forgiveness is given, conveyed, and imparted only to those who accept it in faith."60

And, on the other side the Norwegian Synod, along with the Missouri Synod, confessed: "The preaching of the gospel gives, conveys, and imparts forgiveness of sins to all to whom it is proclaimed, whether they believe it or not."61 And again: "The Word of God under all circumstances comprehends the forgiveness of sins and offers it to man...whether it is proclaimed to Peter or Judas, to Paul or Simon Magus."62 Later similar statements were made between essentially the same parties in the Brief Statement and the Common Confession.63

Yet, our fathers faithfully remind us that the promise of the Gospel, the content of the Gospel isn't dependent on faith. No, the work of God is not dependent upon us even in the slightest matter. God ensures this by working out our salvation through his Son on the cross and by raising him from the dead AND by giving us this salvation completely and wholly in the Gospel message, that is, in the Means of Grace. This is true regarding Baptism. The faith of the baptized does not make or break baptism and God's promise attached to it.64 This is true regarding the Supper. The faith of the recipient doesn't make Jesus body and blood a reality in the Sacrament. Nor does the faith of the recipient make it a beneficial and forgiving meal.65 And so it is true with the Absolution, or the proclamation of the Gospel in the Word. Walther notes:

We cannot look into people's hearts; but that is not necessary at all; we are to look only in the Word of our heavenly Father, which informs us that God has absolved the entire world. That assures us that all sins have been forgiven to all men... Another query: Is it right to absolve a scoundrel of this kind [i.e. impenitent]? Answer: If he is known to you as a scoundrel, it is wrong because you know that he will not accept forgiveness. Knowing this, you would commit a great and grievous sin by performing the sacred act of absolution for him and thus cast pearls before swine.66

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60 Tappert 144.
61 Tappert 144.
62 Tappert 144.
63 Prof. Meyer here points us to the Brief Statement and its opposing document, the Common Confession. From the Brief Statement: "Scripture teaches that God has already declared the whole world to be righteous in Christ; that therefore not for the sake of their good works, but without the works of the Law, by grace, for Christ's sake, he justifies, that is, accounts as righteous, all those who believe in Christ, that is, believe accept, and rely on, the fact that for Christ's sake their sins are forgiven" (98-99). "Here we have three clear definitions, first, one concerning a declaratory act of God in respect to the whole world, performed on God Friday and Easter; secondly, one concerning a daily declaratory act pertaining to individual believers; and thirdly, one concerning the relation of the latter act to the former, being its personal application in specific cases" (99). From the Common Confession (emphasis Meyer): "By his redemptive work Christ is the Propitiation for the sins of the whole world; hence forgiveness of sin has been secured and provided for all men. (This is often spoken of as objective justification...)...God offers this propitiation and reconciliation freely to all men through His means of grace....God justifies the sinner solely on the basis of Christ's righteousness, which He imputes to the sinner through the Gospel and which the sinner accepts by faith" (Meyer 99).
64 Luther writes in his Large Catechism regarding Infant Baptism: "Furthermore, our prime concern here is not whether or not the baptized person believes; for if he does not believe, his Baptism itself does not on that account become invalid. Everything depends instead on God's Word and promise...then the Baptism is valid even if faith is lacking in the person being baptized. For my faith does not make Baptism what it is; rather, faith accepts what Baptism is" (105). (Luther's Large Catechism. Trans. Samuel Janzow. © 1978. Concordia Publishing House.)
65 Again, Luther reminds us in the Large Catechism: "For even though this very day a Jew were to come with deceitfulness and evil intent and we in good faith baptized him, we would nevertheless have to affirm that the Baptism was valid. For the water would be there together with the Word, even though the man did not receive it as he should have done. Here the situation is the same as for those who partake unworthily of the Lord's Supper: they receive the true sacrament even though they do not believe" (Luther 105).
66 Walther 191.

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Likewise Schmidt writes:

**Thesis 7: The Gospel therefore is not a mere historical narrative of the accomplished work of the redemption, but much rather a powerful declaration of the peace and a promise of grace on the part of God towards the world redeemed by Christ, and thus at all times a powerful means of grace, in which God for his part brings, proffers, distributes, gives and presents the forgiveness of sins and the righteousness acquired by Christ, even though not all to whom God issues his serious call of grace accept this invitation of the reconciled God, and thus also do not become partakers of the accompanying benefits.**

Thus, the third thesis of Hoenecke in regard to justification is right on the mark. "**Justification is offered by God through Word and sacraments, and it is received by the sinner through faith.**"

The Means of Grace are the God-appointed tools whereby the Holy Spirit creates the faith and trust in what Christ has accomplished by his life, death and resurrection. The Means of Grace, that is the Word in Word and Sacrament, truly contain and give what the Word says that they contain and give. What they promise is to be received and appropriated by faith. What they promise is given whether man rejects this message or not. Man’s rejection does not impact or affect the power and gift of God in the Means of Grace.

**Law and Gospel must be clearly and carefully distinguished.**

It strikes this essayist that the biblical doctrine of justification, objective and subjective, simply comes to the proper distinction between Law and Gospel. In fact, it seems possible that Walther may have given his evening lectures to those seminary students because these controversies had arisen as a results of the confounding of law and gospel so that even the heart of the Christianity had been struck.

Many instances from the history of the Church of days gone by might be adduced to show that the pure teaching of the article of justification is not preserved, and absolutely cannot be preserved, if the distinction of these two doctrines is neglected.

The law is one teaching of God whereby every man is condemned alike. The law, therefore, must be preached as if there was no gospel; it must be preached in all its severity and damning seriousness. The gospel is the other teaching of God, whereby every man is forgiven in Christ. Consequently the gospel must be preached in all its sweetness and comforting seriousness. And so, justification is preached – objectively because it takes place outside of us and subjectively because it is appropriated to us by faith so that each among us gladly says: "What God declared of the world, he also declared of me."

Here we stand in the company of men like Chemnitz who declares: “The Law shows sin, accuses, imputes guilt, and condemns sin; but the Gospel remits, covers, and does not impute sin, because it points to ‘the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world’ [John 1:29].” Therefore, in order to keep this distinction clear we understand that “the Gospel...speaks to the contrite, the broken, the captives, and keeps the new man in a state of grace.” The Gospel is not to be preached to the impenitent.

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67 Schmid 30.
68 Hoenecke 359.
69 Some may object on the basis that some will misuse these words “contain” and “give” to that even the unrepentant are given the forgiveness of sins. Luther’s response is clear: “How could we dare to suppose that the Word and ordinance of God would become wrong and invalid because of our wrong use of it?” (Luther 106).
70 Walther 40.
71 Chemnitz 449.
72 Chemnitz 450.

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This makes the Christian religion the most inclusive religion ever, while also the most exclusive. For “in one place the Bible offers forgiveness to all sinners; in another place forgiveness is withheld from all sinners.”73 Here, the Scriptures present us with a mystery: “God loves the world and hates the unbelievers.”74

Our God presents us with the awesome task of correctly handling Word of Truth75, of watching our life and doctrine closely.76 Here stands the warning, aptly stated by Walther:

...it devolves upon the preacher to offer the entire comfort of the Gospel in all its sweetness, however, in such a manner that secure sinners realize that the comfort is not intended for them.

The whole manner of the preacher’s presentation must make them realize that fact.77

So, be careful with your words: “When using terms that do not correctly express a certain thought, we are not heretics, but careless speakers.”78

Yet, let us not be so careful so that we are holding the Gospel back with strings. “We must not starve the children from fear that the dogs would get something of the children’s food, but we are cheerfully to proclaim the universal grace of God freely and leave to God whether people will believe it or misapply it.”79 Yes, above all, let us fearlessly and unashamedly preach the Gospel. It is the message which saved us. It is the message that will save our people. It is God’s power for the salvation of everyone who believes.80

God grant it for his dear Son's sake. To him be the glory.

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73 Law and Gospel 6.
74 Schmid 11.
75 2 Timothy 2:16.
76 1 Timothy 4:16
77 Walther 113-114
78 Walther 280.
79 Walther 377.
80 Romans 1:16