



Subjective and Objective Justification

PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

Session 1

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Session 1:

INTRODUCTION OF TERMS

Did Jesus die for the sins of the whole world, or did He die only for the sins of those who believe in Him? Has the entire world been justified, or only those who believe?

In The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, we use terms like subjective (individual or personal) justification and objective (general or universal) justification to answer the above questions. In this Bible study we examine these terms and what they mean. We also seek to discuss what their scriptural foundation is, and why they are important.

1. Subjective or Individual Justification

“To the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works: ‘Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man against whom the Lord will not count his sin’ (ROM. 4:5–8).

Justification is thus by faith, not by works. God justifies a person when that individual hears the Gospel and the Holy Spirit creates faith in the Gospel in that person.

“So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” (ROM. 10:17).

“For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (ROM. 3:28).

Subjective justification means the justification of the individual. Subjective justification talks about the way in which Christ's work comes to you through the Gospel and is received in faith.

2. The Factors in Subjective or Individual Justification

- **What Christ has done**
- **The Gospel**

“But since justification takes place through a free promise, it follows that we cannot justify ourselves. Otherwise, why would a promise be needed? And since the promise

cannot be grasped in any other way than by faith, the gospel (which is, strictly speaking, the promise of the forgiveness of sins and justification on account of Christ) proclaims the righteousness of faith in Christ, which the law does not teach.” (Ap IV, 43)¹

- **Faith**

Romans 3:28 (see above)

3. Things to Watch for When Talking about Subjective or Individual Justification

- **Christ has accomplished salvation.** Consider these “salvation equations”:

- Christ’s work + our works = salvation. (No!)
- Christ’s work + our faithfulness unto death = salvation. (No!)
- Christ’s work + Gospel (Means of Grace) + God’s gift of faith = salvation! (Yes!)

- **The Gospel is not an offer.**

- **Faith has no value in itself.** Consider this equation:

- Christ’s work + a person’s faith = salvation. (Tricky! See discussion below.)

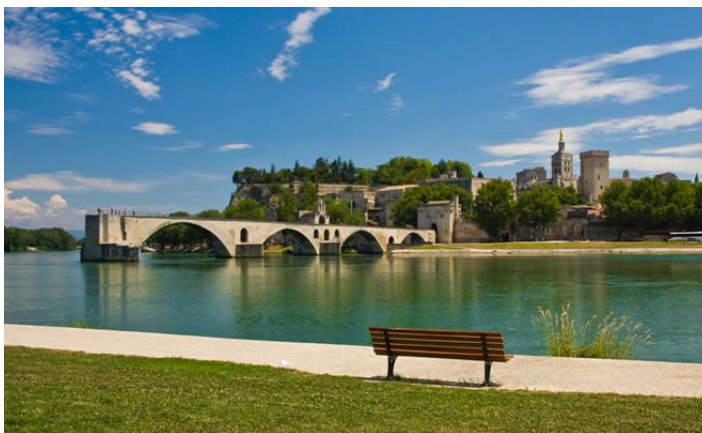


Figure 1: Unfinished Avignon Bridge

How should we understand and talk about faith so that we stay on the straight, biblical path?

Faith is not a human work, even though it is we as human beings (not God) who believe. To reject Christ and refuse to believe in Him is to declare God’s promises null and void for oneself.

¹ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 127.

Faith is always faith *in* something or someone. There is no such thing as “absolute” or “abstract” faith — faith as something that I possess or produce myself. Rather, faith is trusting in the Gospel and thus trusting in Christ as my Savior.

Faith is more than mere knowledge. It affects the entire person.

Without faith in the Gospel, a person does not receive the benefits of Christ’s death and resurrection.

4. Objective or Universal Justification

What do we mean when we talk about “objective” (“general” or “universal”) justification?

“By ‘objective’ or ‘universal’ justification one means that God has declared the whole world to be righteous for Christ’s sake and that righteousness has thus been procured for all people. It is objective because this was God’s unilateral act prior to and in no way dependent upon man’s response to it, and universal because all human beings are embraced by this verdict. God has acquired the forgiveness of sins for all people by declaring that the world for Christ’s sake has been forgiven. The acquiring of forgiveness is the pronouncement of forgiveness.”²

5. The Basis of Objective Justification: The Universality of Grace and the Universal Extent of the Work of Christ.

Read 1 Timothy 4:10. In what sense is God the “Savior of all people”? Does this simply mean that God makes salvation possible, that He is the “possible Savior of all people”? Or is God really only the Savior of the believers? Has God saved all people or only those who believe?

“This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” (1 TIM. 2:3–6).

According to the passage, for whom did Christ die? A separate section.

² Commission on Theology and Church Relations, *Theses on Justification* (St. Louis: The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, 2015), Thesis 23.

The first thing to remember about objective or universal justification, therefore, is that it is about the object of faith (what faith believes *in*), namely the work of Christ. This work of Christ is universal, that is, it concerns all people. Christ died for *all* people.

6. Conclusion

Objective justification means that God has justified the entire world. Subjective justification describes the way in which we, as individuals, are justified through the Gospel. Christ's work on the cross becomes ours and is received by faith. We will explore both teachings more fully in Session 2.

