

# Our Righteousness before God Is Revealed in the Gospel.

## On this Righteousness Faith Relies.

The Emmaus Conference, Tacoma, Washington

April 21-23, 2015

Reaction and Response by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz

✠ *In Nomine Jesu* ✠

### Introduction

What is a Lutheran?

This is no flippant question. It's the core question at the heart of this conference. The answer to this question is the reason we're here.

I wish that in today's world there were a consistent answer to this question. Sadly, many in the "Lutheran tradition" have abandoned altogether the faith of their forefathers. Scripture is out the window, and Holy Writ is viewed as an assemblage of early Christian myths and fables. A quest for numerical success has led many churches down a sub-Lutheran or non-Lutheran path; along this trail Word and Sacrament ministry is exchanged for mass marketing and church growth ministry. Solid catechesis is replaced by confirmation-lite. Liturgical worship is replaced by a format that is indistinguishable from that of the non-denominational community church. Law-gospel preaching gives way to how-to moralizing. The foolishness of the cross is replaced by the wisdom of the world.<sup>1</sup>

Against this confusing backdrop it's only natural that devout adherents to the truth yearn for the good old days. Take us back to the days before abortion on demand, before gay "marriage," and before fornicators occupied every house on the block. Take us back to the halcyon days of page 5 and page 15 in *The Lutheran Hymnal*, back to the days of tasty potlucks with red Jell-O, when the smell of Folgers, not Starbucks, wafted through the church basement.

But wait—those were also the days of low-church pietism (at least in the WELS). The black Geneva gown came from, well, Geneva<sup>2</sup>. Celebrating Holy Communion once a month (once every three months was not unheard of) on "Communion Sunday" was standard practice. The 1950s were nice, but they were hardly the pinnacle of confessional Lutheranism.

So if we want to be *real* Lutherans, if we want to be *confessional* Lutherans, we'll need to roll back

through the devolution of the last three centuries—rewinding back through the American Century<sup>3</sup>, back through the days of rationalism and pietism<sup>4</sup>—and we'll need to return to the Age of Orthodoxy<sup>5</sup>. If we can rest only on the Book of Concord and its elucidations by the Lutheran scholastics—great divines like Martin Chemnitz, John Gerhard, Abraham Calov, Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, and others—and if we can sing only Lutheran hymns translated by Catherine Winkworth<sup>6</sup>, then we can be *old* Lutherans who remain uninfected by the distortions and novelties of the last three centuries. Add a collar and chasuble, along with a Cohiba and a wee dram of 18-year-old single-malt, and you pass the litmus test of a confessional Lutheran.<sup>7</sup>

I highlight this yearning to reprimarize the Age of Orthodoxy precisely because it has surfaced in recent controversies surrounding Objective Justification. Detractors paint the doctrine of universal objective justification (UOJ) as a Johnny-come-lately teaching, a recent doctrinal novelty, an American invention. C. F. W. Walther<sup>8</sup> is viewed as a 19th-century frontiersman, a dim bulb at best, compared to the bright Lutheran lights of the 1600s. The Wauwatosa theologians of the early 20th century are written off completely as backcountry rubes whose return to the *fontes* of Scripture somehow rates them as lesser scholars than their

---

<sup>3</sup> The "American Century" is a name given to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially the latter half of the century after World War II when global affairs were dominated by the influence of the United States.

<sup>4</sup> The ages of rationalism and pietism in the church comprise primarily the 1700s. Pietism turned away from organized church and the sacraments and emphasized personal piety. This was followed by rationalism, when people turned away from Scripture altogether.

<sup>5</sup> The Age of Orthodoxy in the Lutheran Church includes the time from the completion of the Book of Concord in 1580 until the end of the 1600s. The period was marked by great suffering by Lutherans during the Thirty Years' War (ca. 1618-1648), and by steadfast confession of evangelical Lutheran truth by faithful Lutheran scholastic dogmatists.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878) translated German hymns into English. She is credited with making many of the classical Lutheran chorales accessible to the English-speaking world.

<sup>7</sup> Please don't be offended by my lighthearted caricature. I love the beauty, reverence and richness of vestments and of liturgical worship, and I share an appreciation for fine cigars and good Scotch.

<sup>8</sup> Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther (1811-1887) was the preeminent Lutheran theologian of the 1800s and the first president of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

---

<sup>1</sup> This paragraph presents a broad characterization of the status of Lutheranism today across all denominations that retain the name "Lutheran." It is not meant to describe any denomination or congregation in particular.

<sup>2</sup> Geneva, Switzerland, was the seedbed of Calvinism, not Lutheranism.

theological predecessors.<sup>9</sup> The desire to be *old* Lutherans relegates anything from 1680 forward to the trash heap.

### **Objective justification: Its importance to the Reformers**

Pastor Webber's essay masterfully exposes as a fallacy the notion that the concept of UOJ was unknown to the Reformers. The term "universal objective justification" is a later addition to orthodox Lutheran vocabulary, but the concept is articulated in other terms throughout the writings of none other than Martin Luther himself.

Luther's teaching was completely theocentric. His understanding of the depravity of natural man and the hopelessness of the natural human condition was shaped by his knowledge of the law in the Bible and from his own despondent spiritual struggles. He knew from personal experience the liberating wonder of God's free grace in Christ. He reveled in amazement at the beauty of the free forgiveness God had revealed to him in the gospel. His doctrine was entirely monergistic, and he tolerated nothing that even hinted at synergism.<sup>10</sup>

Luther was more of an occasional writer than a systematic dogmatician. Apart from the Large and Small Catechisms (1529) and the Smalcald Articles (1537), relatively little of Luther's writing is systematic in nature. Most of Luther's works handed down to us are sermons, treatises, commentaries, and letters expressing theological opinions.<sup>11</sup> In the fledgling Evangelical Church at the time of the Reformation, Luther's opinion was frequently sought to answer questions and to address minor disputes that arose among Lutheran theologians.

At the heart of Luther's teaching is the understanding that we are saved *by grace alone*. This grace is not something that God infuses into man to transform him into a righteous person on the inside;

---

<sup>9</sup> For the first several decades of its existence, the WELS seminary was located in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin. Confronting a growing tendency in Lutheranism to articulate doctrine by quoting Luther, the Book of Concord, and early Lutheran theologians, the WELS seminary professors espoused a "Wauwatosa theology" that advocated returning to Scripture as the fount of theological truth. A rallying cry was "*Ad fontes!*" or "Back to the source!"

<sup>10</sup> Theocentric—Centered completely on God and his grace. Monergistic—God works alone, without human participation. Synergism—The false idea that man cooperates or works together with God to accomplish his own salvation.

<sup>11</sup> In contrast to Luther, John Calvin (1509-1564) was a systematic theologian. Calvin's *Institutes* are a comprehensive work that treats doctrines systematically. In the wake of Luther's death, Calvin's teaching spread more rapidly than Luther's and even made inroads into Wittenberg. Clearly Calvin's doctrine was seductive because of its appeal to human reason, whereas Luther's teaching was illogical but thoroughly biblical. But I have also wondered whether Calvin's up-front systematic approach might have made his doctrine more accessible to a broader audience. It took several generations and well into the 1600s for Lutherans to catch up and develop a comprehensive systematic theology.

it is an undeserved love in the heart of God that *reckons* and *judges* a person to be righteous from the outside. We are saved *by faith alone*. Faith is not just inanimate knowledge of facts but an intimate trust in the merits of Jesus the Savior of the world. This trust is not the willful creation of man but the work of the Holy Spirit. This trust does not *cause* a person to be forgiven; it grasps, appropriates, and clings the forgiveness Jesus won at the cross and empty tomb. (For this reason we precisely say that we are saved *through* faith alone.) These truths are taught *by Scripture alone*. Traditions, councils, canon decrees, popes and church fathers can and do err, but God's Holy Word never errs. We need nothing other than the inspired Word of God to teach us everything we need to know about salvation in Jesus.

Pastor Webber highlights numerous excerpts from Luther's writings that illustrate the Reformer's twofold understanding of justification as an objective truth that is grasped by faith. Over and over again from page 14 onward, Pastor Webber cites Luther's teaching and illustrates clearly how Luther viewed his own forgiveness and the forgiveness of the sin of the world to have been completed at the cross and empty tomb of Christ. This compendium of Luther quotes in Pastor Webber's essay can serve as an excellent reference resource for anyone who wishes to study Luther's articulation of justification.

Luther's personal spiritual trials forced him to look *outside of himself* for the assurance of his salvation. When the devil drew his attention inward to his own feelings and personal wrestling, Luther found himself spiraling deeper into a black hole of despair. His only hope was to turn outside of himself, to look to Christ and his completed work, and to find there the completed reality of his already-accomplished salvation. The idea of looking inward, of having faith in his own faith, or the notion that his own trust or *anything inside of himself* would somehow complete his forgiveness, was anathema to Luther!

Does anyone wish to accuse Dr. Luther of being something less than a *confessional* Lutheran?

The beauty of Luther's understanding is that it is based solely on Scripture. Blessed with an incisive intellect, he was able to cut through any false notion that robbed Christ of his glorious grace or ascribed to man any role in his own salvation. At the time of the Reformation, the only age Luther wanted to repristinate was the age of the early Christian church, where the prophetic and apostolic Scriptures ruled. The later Wauwatosa theologians emulated Luther's Wittenberg theology: *Ad fontes!* Luther could quote the church fathers when their teaching aligned with Scripture — and he often did so to illustrate that the evangelical teaching of the

Lutheran Reformation was not a theological novelty or anomaly but a return to the foundational truths of the apostolic church. He could also dispense with the church fathers when their sagacious opinions espoused human wisdom and contradicted the Word of God. To Luther, church fathers and traditions were either useful in their accord with the Word or irrelevant when they disagreed with the Word. It didn't matter what the visible church said; it mattered what God's Word says.

Pastor Webber points out a significant distinction between Luther and theologians who followed in his wake:

One key area where many of the Lutheran dogmaticians of the late sixteenth century and seventeenth century definitely did fall short of the "gold standard" of Luther, was in their too-frequent employment of Aristotelian philosophical categories in their theological thinking and writing.<sup>12</sup>

This important point needs to be pressed home. As apologists for the Lutheran faith the scholastics played in the same scholastic arena with the Roman Catholic and Calvinist adversaries against whom they contended. There they felt compelled to compete according to the rules of their day, which meant wedging evangelical Christian doctrine into a pagan Aristotelian paradigm. It didn't always work.

The Internet is making the theological writings of the 1600s more accessible, and some excellent work is being done to translate important dogmatic works from Latin into English. It is critical that any reader trying to understand the writings of 1600s-era Lutheran dogmaticians understand Aristotle's causation paradigm and how it was applied to theology. Without such understanding, not only is the terminology foreign and abstract, but the language and conclusions are easily misinterpreted.

Pastor Webber does a very good job of explaining Aristotle's four causes.<sup>13</sup> I would add that what Aristotle called "causes" are in our way of speaking more appropriately termed "factors" or, as Pastor Webber identifies them, "components."<sup>14</sup> For a marble statue to exist, there must be marble. According to Aristotle, the marble is the *material cause* of the statue's existence. Yet none of us would understand the marble as bringing about the existence of the statue. The marble is a factor or component in the statue's existence, but it doesn't cause it to exist, as we understand causation. Of Aristotle's four causes, only one – the *efficient cause* – actually brings something into existence or causes it to exist.

Thus when Lutheran theologians of the era label faith the *instrumental cause*<sup>15</sup> of justification, they do not mean that faith makes justification happen. They mean that faith is the *instrumental factor*, that is, the conduit or the instrument through which the completed justification is received. I appreciate Pastor Webber's observation that Luther's language was "Pauline and Abrahamic, and not Aristotelian."<sup>16</sup> Confusion is avoided when we simply use the language of Scripture itself.

The notion that faith makes something happen is absurd to begin with. Faith is trust. Trust relies on something. It is either properly placed in something worth relying upon, or it is misplaced in something that cannot deliver.<sup>17</sup> You can cling for dear life to a popsicle stick in the middle of the ocean, but it will not keep you afloat; the object of your misplaced hope will disappoint you. It is for good reason that Scripture says, "Everyone who trusts in him [Jesus] will never be put to shame" (Romans 10:11).

#### **Objective justification: Its importance to us**

There is only one justification. We do not divide objective and subjective justification into two separate species. They are two sides of the same coin, two facets of the same whole. Both objective and subjective justification must be embraced, taught, and applied in proper measure to souls in need of pastoral care, as we bring Christ to sinners.

We do no one any favors if we teach only universal objective justification without also teaching personal, Spirit-worked repentance and saving faith. A person who is rebellious, defiant, and committed to a sinful attitude or lifestyle needs to hear a call to repentance. He may still have lots of facts from confirmation class rattling around inside his head. He may be able to quote Bible passages. He may know very well the truth that the Lord Jesus died to take away his sin. The fact that he possesses such knowledge will only make the Day of Judgment worse for him when he learns on that day the awful truth that such knowledge without Spirit-worked repentance and a living trust in his Savior is worthless. This is the person of whom St. Peter writes, "'A dog returns to its vomit,' and 'A sow that is washed goes back to her wallowing in the mud'" (2 Peter 2:22). The verdict upon such deceived souls is terrifying. The pastor's message is to be clear: Repent, turn away from sin that leads to destruction, and with a broken and contrite heart cling to Jesus, your only Savior!

---

<sup>15</sup> Webber, quoting Aegidius Hunnius and Johann Gerhard, p. 32.

<sup>16</sup> Webber, p. 30.

<sup>17</sup> You can believe with all your heart that the Mariners (or the Diamondbacks or the Cardinals) will win the Series, but your believing doesn't make it happen.

---

<sup>12</sup> Webber, p. 30.

<sup>13</sup> Webber, p. 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> Webber, p. 33.

But an overemphasis on the subjective and personal side of justification results in legalism. Anyone who denies universal objective justification outright is left *only* with the subjective and personal. The history of this doctrinal controversy within Lutheranism bears this reality out again and again in practice, as Pastor Webber brings to light in his review of interactions between the Norwegian Synod and the Augustana Synod:

If the Gospel and Absolution contained nothing more than what man by faith put into them, then man really had to depend on his faith—he had to have faith in his own faith—and not in the Gospel.<sup>18</sup>

Legalism results from seeking the assurance of forgiveness in the genuineness of repentance and the sincerity of faith. For the legalistic pastor, this may mean withholding the assurance of forgiveness until he is satisfied that the person has truly repented. Instead of announcing an objective completed forgiveness, what he offers the penitent is conditional and uncertain. The promise of forgiveness is held out to be grasped, but only *if* certain conditions are met.

For a sinner seeking comfort, the results of such legalism are disastrous. A sincere and pious Christian who is burdened with guilt may be led into despair, never confident that his forgiveness is complete because he remains forever unsure whether his repentance and faith are adequate to gain the forgiveness that is tentatively offered. Tender souls carry away tremendous burdens away from the confessional when their pastor points them inward to their own wrestling and striving and believing as the basis for their forgiveness.

Another takeaway from inward wrestling is pietism or pharisaism. A person who has examined himself and tested his own faith may conclude that his repentance is suitably genuine and his faith is indeed sufficient to gain God's grace. The object of his reliance or trust is not Christ and his completed work but on his own personal sincerity and integrity. As the Norwegians observed, at that point faith no longer trusts the gospel; rather, faith trusts in faith.

Pastor Webber illustrates how the resolution between the binding key (sins are not forgiven to the impenitent) and objective universal justification (Jesus forgave the sin of the world once for all at the cross and empty tomb) is the distinction between law and gospel and their application.<sup>19</sup> It is imperative that every Lutheran pastor properly handle and apply law and gospel. What else is legalism than an abuse or misapplication of the law, at the expense of the pure gospel? We don't use the

gospel to disprove the law. We don't use subjective justification to disprove the objective, or vice versa.

## Conclusion

An unswerving adherence to the inerrant and infallible Holy Scriptures is essential to being Lutheran. *Because* they are a correct exposition of God's Holy Word, a *quia* subscription<sup>20</sup> to the Lutheran Confessions is essential and foundational to being Lutheran. The mere possession of a pedigree inherited through a "Lutheran tradition" qualifies no one as Lutheran whose doctrine and confession are worlds apart from the teaching of Martin Luther.

But being a *confessional* Lutheran doesn't end with the Book of Concord. Doctrine and its application are never static. As new heretical camels continue to stick their noses under the tent, the church responds, formulates, articulates and *confesses* anew, with a confidence and vibrancy born of gospel certainty. This is not inventing novel doctrine. It is simply confessing and articulating the truth of Scripture to confront new challenges.

The need to articulate clearly the doctrine of objective universal justification arose in the 1800s in response to pietism and to the election controversy. These heresies forced diligent theologians to return to the Word to express new doctrinal formulations to combat new lies that undermined the certainty of the gospel. In the 20th century Lutherans of the Synodical Conference were compelled to defend universal objective justification against the exclusively subjective doctrine of the American Lutheran Church (ALC), and terminology was crafted to solidify objective justification. When the vague, compromise language of the Common Confession was adopted in 1949 by the LC-MS to smooth over differences with the ALC in their teaching on justification, the WELS and ELS were forced to *confess* the unambiguous truth in clear, certain terms. Today catechisms in use in the LC-MS (1981), the WELS (1998), and the ELS (2001) all clearly confess the doctrine of universal objective justification. While the patina of age may bring with it a certain well-burnished credibility, doctrinal formulations don't have to be *old* to be biblical and right.

Pastor Webber's scholarship offers a valuable resource to the church. His thorough documentation is especially useful as it provides a broad compendium of references from many sources, new

<sup>18</sup> Webber quoting Rhone, p. 43.

<sup>19</sup> Webber, pp. 6-10.

<sup>20</sup> The Latin word *quia* means "because." A *quia* subscription to the Lutheran Confessions adheres unreservedly to every doctrinal article in the confessions *because* it agrees with the Bible. Someone who accepts the Lutheran Confessions *quatenus* (insofar as) they agree with Scripture is reserving the right to disagree with the doctrine of the Book of Concord and is no confession at all. (We can subscribe to and confess the Koran, *insofar* as it agrees with Scripture.)

and old. The breadth of his citations from Luther and Lutheran voices from the Age of Orthodoxy overwhelmingly refute the few selective quotes conveniently adduced in support of an exclusively subjective justification. Put Pastor Webber's work into your file and use it as a starting point for your own further study. Then let your voice speak in accord with Chrysostom and Ambrose, with Chemnitz, Gerhard and Quenstedt, with Walther and Schaller, and with other faithful Christian confessors throughout the centuries, and most importantly let your voice speak in concert with Holy Scripture: Jesus canceled the debt of the world! You are justified in Christ! Amen.

✠ *Soli Deo Gloria!* ✠

*Pastor Jon D. Buchholz  
Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, Tempe, Arizona  
On the Second Sunday of Easter  
April 12, 2015*