

The Waltherian Error of UOJ: A Response to Magnus Sorenson's "The Justification of Christ as the Efficient Cause of Our Justification -The Narrow Lutheran Middle in the Controversy on Universal Objective Justification (2017)."

Presented by Rev. Paul A. Rydecki at the annual meeting of the Confessional Lutheran Ministerium
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Introduction

This essay represents my long-overdue response to Pr. Magnus Sorenson and the members of the Confessional Orthodox Evangelical Lutheran Communion (COELC) regarding their stance on Universal Objective Justification (UOJ), also known as Objective/Subjective Justification (OJ/SJ), which they call a "middle way." Our Ministerium has appreciated the dialogue we have carried out thus far with the COELC. It is my fervent hope and prayer that, after considering the following response, they might finally abandon UOJ as a lost and unworthy cause.

I hope, too, that the explanation given here may, by the grace of God, fortify its readers in the true Scriptural teaching of justification and embolden them to discard their fear of synodical repercussions for daring to speak of the elephant in the room, namely, the fact that UOJ is not actually rooted in Scripture at all but in a short, inconsequential saying of a beloved church father, being then read back into Scripture as Rome reads purgatory back into it. It's hard to miss the irony when those who wish to speak with the language of the Lutheran Confessions are branded as unlutheran (indeed, unchristian!) because they refuse to accept novel terms and turns of phrases added to so-called Lutheran orthodoxy long after the ink had dried on the Book of Concord.

Pr. Sorenson's version of UOJ

Pr. Sorenson, following Tom Hardt, author of "Justification and Easter: A Study in Subjective and Objective Justification in Lutheran Theology," thinks he has identified two distinct historical teachings of UOJ and claims that his version, which he claims to be the authentic version taught by C. F. W. Walther, is the right version, the one that successfully follows a "narrow Lutheran middle" between an error on either side. I believe this is an accurate summary of his entire essay:

Error on one side: UOJ, "Huberian Version"

One justification: 2,000 years ago. All individual men were justified and forgiven as a result of Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. When people are told this and come to believe it, then they receive the benefit of it and are said to be subjectively justified, but no actual, forensic justification takes place in the present through the means of grace, because the true, forensic justification of all individual men is the objective one that took place 2,000 years ago.

Error on the other side: No UOJ. Justification by faith alone.

One justification: by faith alone in Christ. All men were not forgiven at the cross. All men were not declared righteous in Christ at His resurrection. The righteousness of Christ that is imputed to believers was completed by Jesus' death on the cross. The absolution pronounced through the means of grace does not depend on a justification of the world that took place in Christ's resurrection. In no sense has all mankind already been forgiven or declared righteous in God's judgment. The only justification taught by Scripture is the one that happens by faith in Christ.

The "narrow Lutheran middle": UOJ, "Waltherian Version"

Two justifications: one of all men in Christ 2,000 years ago, the other through faith. The forensic act of the objective justification of mankind (but of no individuals) took place in the Father's act of raising Jesus from the dead as the Substitute and Representative of mankind. Jesus needed to be forgiven the sins of the world that He had borne and for which He had suffered in order for Him to be "our Righteousness." When individuals hear that Christ suffered in their place and was justified, absolved, and forgiven in their place and accept it to be true for them individually, they are declared righteous by a separate forensic act of subjective justification. Individuals cannot be absolved through the Means of Grace unless Christ, their Representative, was already absolved for them.

The concept of the “narrow Lutheran middle” is nothing new to me. From 1991-1995 I sat at the feet of Prof. Dan Deutschlander, to whom Pr. Sorenson credits the phrase, at Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, and sought every possible opportunity to be taught by him. I even audited his “Christianity 101” class just to hear him speak. He was the most solid, orthodox Lutheran teacher I had ever encountered, and his wise approach of seeking to avoid the errors that often lie on either side of a doctrinal controversy helped shape my thinking and my ministry.

Prof. Deutschlander was trained and ordained in the LCMS and ministered in the English District for a time before colloquizing in the WELS. I don’t think he made a sharp distinction between versions of UOJ, but he certainly held to it. If I recall correctly, he liked to describe Objective Justification simply as “God has justified all people,” and Subjective Justification as “God has justified me.” As I sat in his classroom, and for years later, I never questioned his position on the article of justification. After studying it on my own, several years after my ordination, I thought about discussing my objections with my beloved professor. To say that I never had a chance to do so would be only partially true. The whole truth is that I could have telephoned him at any time before or after my suspension from the WELS ministerium but couldn’t bear the thought of him digging in his heels in defense of the error of UOJ as a result of such confrontation. Now it’s too late.

In any case, I could only wish that Pr. Sorenson had not cited Deutschlander’s “Lutheran middle” to describe his own teaching of justification, not only because it dredges up my discomfort over my favorite professor’s poor, Waltherian-influenced teaching on this article (which I, too, reflected for some years of my ministry), but chiefly because it doesn’t apply to the matter at hand. His way is not, in fact, a Lutheran middle way, but just another wrong way.

Defining UOJ - like nailing jelly to the wall

Perhaps there is some value in identifying the various versions of UOJ and their diverse sources. The truth is, I have rarely encountered anyone who consistently and strictly holds to either the Huberian Version or the Waltherian Version of UOJ, as defined by Pr. Sorenson. Ask ten pastors in each of the American Lutheran synods and you are bound to get two, three, or more descriptions and explanations of OJ/SJ within the same synod.

For example, the COELC version of UOJ (so-called Waltherian) came up in my suspension from the WELS. The typical WELS teaching of UOJ looks more like the Huberian Version, with the justification of all men being the immediate result of Christ’s death on the cross and with no subsequent justification of Christ in His resurrection. According to the typical WELS version, Christ’s resurrection itself was the result of the justification of all men that supposedly took place when He said, “It is finished.” Nevertheless, Pastor Jon Buchholz, my WELS district president at the time, aided by ELS Pastor David Jay Webber, insisted that the true teaching of UOJ is the Waltherian Version. Yet what these pastors revealed was their willingness to blend versions or to accept either version, because, in the end, the only truly egregious and damnable error, in their view, is to teach that God has not forgiven all men or declared all men to be righteous. This became especially obvious in the two litmus-test questions they presented to me in 2012 (garnered directly from the professors at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary), demanding an unequivocal “yes” answer, or face suspension from the WELS ministerium:

- 1) Did God forgive the sins of the world when Jesus died on the cross?
- 2) Has God justified all sinners for the sake of Christ?

Notice that these questions are worded more in line with Huberian UOJ, but the very WELS official who publicly promoted the Waltherian Version still demanded a simple “yes” answer to these two questions. And, as far as I am aware, no pastor in the WELS or ELS has ever been disciplined for teaching one version or the other—as long as he is quick to confess that “all people have been forgiven and justified.”

Since Pr. Sorenson claims the Waltherian position, let’s take a look at some of Walther’s words. While Walther clearly ties the justification of the world to the resurrection of Christ and not to Christ’s death on the cross, as Pr. Sorenson correctly describes, one can hardly agree with Pr. Sorenson that “Walther seems

to have rejected the notion that individuals were justified in objective justification” (p. 7), as the following quotes from Walther should make clear.

Since it was all mankind in whose place and for whom Christ suffered, died and made payment, who was it, then, that was absolved in and through Christ's Person when the eternal Judge set Him at liberty? It was—oh, marvelous and endlessly comforting truth! —it was all mankind.¹

I ask, did Christ only die for mankind in general and not for each and every individual man? By equating the people for whom Christ died with the people who were supposedly justified in His resurrection, Walther is either claiming that (1) Christ only died for mankind as a class, not for men as individuals, or (2) All men individually died with Christ, just as all men individually were justified in Christ. I think Walther would claim the latter position. If he claimed the former, then his teaching would be even more wretched than anyone realized.

Christ's acquittal [was] the acquittal of all men, Christ's justification the justification of all men, Christ's absolution the absolution of all men...Many a one among us is perhaps thinking: Are you saying that God has already in Christ absolved all men, including all the ungodly, all slaves of iniquity, all unbelievers, all mockers, all slanderers? Who could believe that! And yet it is so, dear friends...As certain as these things are, so certain it is also that God the Father, in raising Jesus Christ from the dead, has already absolved all men from all their sins.²

Are we to believe that every time Walther says “all men,” he actually means “no men at all” but only “mankind as a group with no individuals in it”?

It is solely the resurrection of Christ from the dead that makes the absolution which one person pronounces upon another a real absolution, namely, a powerful repetition of the absolution which God already pronounced upon the entire world of sinners 1800 years ago. For God has already forgiven you your sins 1800 years ago when He in Christ absolved all men by raising Him after He first had gone into bitter death for them...And this brings me to the second part of today's Easter message, in which I now would show you that every man who wants to be saved must accept by faith the general absolution, pronounced 1800 years ago, as an absolution spoken individually to him.³

Did Walther actually address a congregation of Christians and inform them that “God has already forgiven *you* your sins 1800 years ago,” while meaning by it that God most certainly did *not* forgive *them* their sins, but instead forgave Christ in their stead? And if Walther wishes for his hearers to accept the general absolution as an absolution “spoken individually to him,” how can anyone claim that no individuals were included in that “general absolution”?

A few examples from another essay Walther presented at the Western District Convention in 1874:⁴

While all religions, with the exception of Christianity, show how man must by his own efforts accomplish his salvation, the Christian religion on the contrary teaches not only how people eventually shall be eternally saved, but *that they are already saved*...On the other hand, the Lutheran Church assures man on the basis of God's Word: Everything has already been done; you are already redeemed; *you have already been made righteous before God; you have already been saved*. You therefore do not have to do anything to redeem yourself; you do not have to reconcile God to yourself; you do not have to earn your salvation. Only believe that Christ, the Son of God, has done all this in your stead; and by means of this faith you are a participant in this salvation. (emphasis added)

The apostle speaks of such preachers: “So we are ambassadors for Christ” (2 Corinthians 5:20). So he calls them not only teachers, but says they should be ambassadors, who bring the good news of the Gospel to all the world. They are not to teach the world all by themselves, like a philosopher. No, the chief function, the

¹ Walther, C. F. W. “Christ's Resurrection – the World's Absolution.” In *The word of His Grace : occasional and festival sermons* / by C.F.W. Walther; translated and edited by the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Translation Committee. Lake Mills, Iowa : Graphic Pub. Co., 1978. p. 232.

² *Ibid.*, 232

³ *Ibid.*, 233.

⁴ Walther, C. F. W.. *Selected Writings of C.F.W. Walther: Convention Essays*, Concordia, St. Louis, MO, 1981, pp. 75–90.

real assignment, is that the preacher come as God's messenger and say: "*Dear people, rejoice, you are saved; are you not aware of this?*" I come to you as a messenger of God to bring you this good news: God is reconciled with you!" (emphasis added)

Proponents of Waltherian UOJ usually complain that this is the wrong way to speak, to tell the people of the world that "they are already saved." But Walther made this the hallmark of Christian/Lutheran teaching. Indeed, he says that the Lutheran Church assures man that "*you* have already been made righteous before God." If he holds firmly to his own Waltherian Version, then what he means is, "you, as individuals, have most certainly not already been made righteous before God." How is the average person supposed to understand "you" to mean, "not you, but Christ, in whom God reckons you to be, although you do not yet believe in Him"? How is it that Sts. Peter and Paul failed to preach with the clarity of Walther? They called upon people to "repent and be baptized...for the forgiveness of sins," or to "believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved," when they should have said, "Rejoice! You are already redeemed and saved and forgiven. Are you not aware of this?"

UOJ a reactionary doctrine

But this confusion is to be expected, because UOJ is not well-established in the Scriptures, like the true teaching of justification is, so it naturally lends itself to modification and alteration according to the understanding of the user. Given the non-existence of the phrase, "the justification of the world," in the Lutheran Confessions and the sudden proliferation of the phrase from Walther's time forward, it is clear that "the justification of the world" is a reactionary doctrine, invented in modern times by those who felt the need to safeguard the glory of Christ and to distinguish the Lutheran Church more starkly from the rest of Christianity. Prominent Lutherans felt the need to react to errors on all sides: *Rome's error* that there's something insufficient in the merit of Christ that men (dead or alive) need to provide. *Calvin's error* that Christ neither died for all men nor ever intended for all men to be saved. *The Arminian error* of turning faith into a meritorious work that man must produce from his natural powers and add his glorious work of faith to the work of Christ. *The universalist error* that Christ's work is so effective that all men have been justified by it and will eventually be saved. No Lutheran wants to espouse or be accused of espousing any of these errors. Perhaps UOJ appeared to its earliest proponents to be that narrow Lutheran middle way that successfully navigates around all these errors to the side. Perhaps they truly thought they were giving all glory to God by teaching UOJ.

But they were wrong. To put it crassly, UOJ is like communism. Its proponents sing its praises as an ideal, even as they recognize that the practice of it never actually achieves the ideal but eventually turns disastrous.⁵ And yet they continually insist that it can be implemented beneficially. "We just have to do it right!" they claim. The problem is that UOJ, like communism, is flawed at its very core and therefore bound to produce ever worse versions of itself as time goes by. Even if one could accurately distinguish between versions of UOJ and consistently hold to a pure and pristine Waltherian (or Huberian) version, it would be of no use, because UOJ itself is a lie, not only absent from the Scriptures, but contradictory to the clear teaching of Scripture and a misrepresentation of the Scriptural paradigm of how and why God forgives sins.

The Scriptural paradigm

The Scriptural paradigm of forgiveness is foreshadowed throughout the Old Testament and clearly explained in the New. St. Paul himself says this at the beginning of his masterful presentation of the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ. "But now the righteousness of God apart from the law is revealed, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe" (Rom. 3:21-22).

A chief witness of the Law concerning the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ is seen in the pattern of sacrifices for sin that God gave to Israel through Moses. The pattern was repeated multiple times every single day, from the time of Moses on, although it was "not possible that the blood of bulls and goats

⁵ Saints in hell, for example?

could take away sins” (Heb. 10:4). In this pattern, a ceremonially clean, spotless animal, without blemish, was brought to the priest by the sinful Israelite. Though the animal was spotless (representing sinlessness, righteousness, and holiness) there was an imputation of the sinner’s guilt to the sacrifice. The animal received the penalty the sinner deserved, being put to death by the priest in the sinner’s place. As a result of this, and virtually simultaneous with it, there was an imputation of the animal’s spotlessness to the sinner who brought the sacrifice. And on the basis of this imputation, the sinner who brought the animal was, through the mediation of the priest, justified and forgiven. An oft-repeated phrase in the Law of Moses is, “So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his sin, and it shall be forgiven him” (Lev. 4:26).

All of this beautifully foreshadowed and depicted God’s actual method of forgiving sins through Christ. As revealed clearly in the New Testament, Christ is both the sinless Substitutionary Sacrifice and the High Priest. In this case, the sinners do not bring their own sacrifice to the priest. Instead, God the Father uses sinful men to bring about His own sacrifice. He sets forth His beloved Son as the Substitute for the sins of mankind. He imputes the sins of the world to His sinless Son, who bears them willingly upon Himself. And then Christ, as High Priest, offers Himself up as the Substitute for all men, suffering and dying, *not for mankind in general, but for all individual men who make up the human race.*

There are numerous, clear passages of Scripture that speak of Christ’s work as the sinless Substitute who suffered for the world’s sins.

Isaiah 53:6 the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

John 1:29 Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

2 Corinthians 5:14 If One died for all, then all died

1 John 2:2 He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

1 Peter 1:18-19 You were ransomed...with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

1 Peter 2:24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree.

1 Peter 3:18 For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous

2 Corinthians 5:21 He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us.

1 Timothy 2:6 who gave Himself a ransom for all

The imputation of sin to the Substitute was universal; the sins of all men were counted against Christ as if they were His, even though, in reality, He remained spotless and righteous. Christ suffered everything that every last man, woman, and child of the human race deserved to suffer for their sins. This is the historical explanation of “vicarious atonement.” The sinner’s life—yes, his very soul—should, by rights, be forfeited as the atoning price for his sins. But God permits a sinless Substitute to take the place of the sinner—of all sinners! God permits the Substitute’s life to be forfeited in place of the sinner’s life. The Substitute dies so that the sinner does not have to die. This fact allows the preacher to proclaim to anyone and everyone in the world, “Christ took your sins—your sins as an individual—upon Himself and suffered and died for them.” This much is true, whether the hearer believes it or not.

But this did not happen as if sins were like a pile of bricks that are moved from one location to another. When it says that Christ is the Lamb who takes away the world’s sins, this does not mean that the world has no more sins, or that the world, in any sense, is automatically or immediately righteous in God’s judgment. It means that the sins of the world, that is, of all the people of the world, were imputed to the Lamb, who bore them away and suffered for them. Imputation means that, although the Lamb is sinless, God reckons the sins of the world to be upon Him; He counts the world’s sins against Him, even as the Lamb’s own true righteousness still belongs to Him, and even as the world’s true sins still belong to the world and remain recorded in the “books that will be opened” on the Day of Judgment (Dan. 7:10, Rev. 20:12). The only way to escape the condemnation for the sins recorded in those books is to have one’s name recorded in the “Lamb’s book of life” (Dan. 12:1, Rev. 21:27).

Now we are left with some important questions: If Christ’s substitutionary sacrifice was like the Old Testament sacrifices, and if His sacrifice was for the sins of the world, was His righteousness immediately imputed to all the people of the world? If so, then we must agree that all people *are indeed counted righteous*

by God, that all people have already been forgiven. If not, why not? What is the difference between the pattern of Old Testament sacrifice, where the sinful Israelite was counted as sinless upon the death of the substitute, and the work of Christ?

In answer to the first question, “Was the righteousness of Christ, the Substitute, imputed to the whole world whose sins He bore?” both the Huberian and Waltherian Versions of UOJ say, “Yes, but...”

Huberian UOJ says, “Yes, His righteousness was imputed to the whole world, but we will add that it was imputed to the world in an ‘objective sense’ (as if that had any meaning), and then add that, in a ‘subjective’ sense, His righteousness is only imputed to believers.” This is unscriptural nonsense.

Waltherian UOJ says, “Yes, His righteousness was imputed to the whole world, but we will restrict the meaning of ‘world’ to ‘Christ alone, who was standing in for the world.’ It still needs to be imputed to believers.” This is more unscriptural nonsense.

Do you see how similar the Huberian and Waltherian versions of UOJ are in reality? Both invent an imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the whole world. Pr. Sorenson thinks he has avoided the absurdity of Huberian UOJ by claiming that “this forgiveness and righteousness that God has declared in Jesus, was not conferred or imputed to anyone except Jesus at the time of the resurrection” (p. 32). But he doesn’t realize that this, too, is absurd. Whose righteousness was “imputed” to Jesus? Why, His own true righteousness, of course! But this is nonsense. The concept of imputation means that God graciously counts something that isn’t there as if it were there, just as non-imputation means graciously not counting something there that is there—all in order that the one who needed saving might be saved, so that the one who needed forgiveness in the first place might receive it. Christ never abandoned His perfect record of obedience to His Father. He didn’t need to have His righteousness imputed back to Him. He never lost it!

What is more, the Waltherian Version is a complete deviation from Scripture. Throughout the entire pattern of substitutionary sacrifice, well-established in the Old Testament and applied to Christ in the New, nowhere, anywhere, is the substitute *forgiven* in the sinner’s place. Nowhere is the substitute subsequently *absolved* in the sinner’s place so that the sinner can then be absolved by virtue of the absolution of his substitute. The whole notion of substitution is turned on its head if the substitute receives both the punishment for sins *as well as the forgiveness for those same sins*. You can either receive the punishment or the forgiveness, not both. The whole notion of substitution becomes a farce if the substitute died so that the sinner might not die, but then is raised to life, *still acting as substitute*. What happens to the substitute is *not supposed to happen* to the one for whom he serves as substitute. No, the substitutionary work of Christ was finished when He died on the cross. At that moment, the imputation of sin to the Sinless had already taken place and the Sinless received the full penalty for it. The Church has always embraced the vicarious atonement. Not until Walther, however, did Lutherans begin to embrace a “vicarious justification.”

No, the plain answer given throughout the Scriptures is this: The people of the world are not all immediately considered righteous in God’s judgment by virtue of the Substitute’s suffering and death (or resurrection). His righteousness is not imputed to everyone whose sins He bore. He was not absolved of the world’s sins, allowing one to say that the whole world was absolved in Him. God does not view the world as being both “in Christ” and “outside of Christ.” The whole world is not counted righteous before God, in any sense. It never has been, and it never will be.

So, if the righteousness of the Substitute was not immediately imputed to the whole world, whose sins He bore, why not? What is the difference between the pattern of Old Testament sacrifice, where the sinful Israelite was counted as sinless upon the death of the substitute, and the work of Christ?

The difference is this: The sinful Israelites brought the sacrifice to the priest, trusting in the promised forgiveness. But in the sacrifice of Christ, it was not the world that brought the sacrifice. It was the Father who brought Him on behalf of the world, and it was Christ, the High Priest, who offered Himself for the world. The method which God established to apply that sacrifice to men, so that the righteousness of Christ might be imputed to men and so that God might not count men’s sins against them, is the preaching of the Gospel. So now, in the Gospel, the Father calls all men to the altar of the cross. He cries out in the Gospel,

“Here is your sacrifice! Here is your Mediator! I gave Him for you so that we might be reconciled. Repent and believe in Him! I offer Him to you as your Mediator. I will no longer impute sins to the one who believes in Him. All who believe in Him will be declared righteous. All who believe in Him will be forgiven. All who believe in Him will be adopted as My children and made heirs of eternal life!” Yes, the risen Christ Himself comes to the sinner in His role as High Priest and speaks through the ambassadors whom He sends out, “I gave Myself for you on the cross. I give Myself to you now in the Gospel. Repent and believe in Me! Be baptized and be saved!” And where the Holy Spirit brings people to believe in Him, Christ, the High Priest, applies His righteousness to the believer, and the believer is forgiven, absolved, justified, declared righteous because of the righteousness of the Substitute. Justification happens *when sinners use the Mediator*, that is, when sinners believe in the Mediator. In other words, justification happens by faith.

This is also taught plainly throughout the Lutheran Confessions, on page after page after page. It is stated clearly and succinctly in the Augsburg Confession, Article IV, and elsewhere. The article on justification in the Formula of Concord is rightly titled, “The righteousness of faith,” because it is faith that is imputed for righteousness, not a previously-occurring justification of Christ. What Melancthon says here in the Apology is exemplary of what is taught throughout the Book of Concord:

Now we will show that faith justifies and nothing else. Here, in the first place, readers must be taught about this point: Just as it is necessary to keep this statement—Christ is Mediator—so is it necessary to defend that faith justifies. For how will Christ be Mediator if we do not use Him as Mediator in justification, if we do not hold that we are counted righteous for His sake? To believe is to trust in Christ’s merits, that for His sake God certainly wishes to be reconciled with us. (Ap:IV:69)

Faith in Christ, the Substitute, has always justified, both in the Old Testament and in the New. The promise of the Gospel went out to believers in the Old Testament, too, only, for them, the substitutionary sacrifice and mediation of the Christ was in the future tense. But never were they told that the Christ would be absolved in their place. Never were they told that, if they wanted to believe in the efficacy of the sacrifices, they had to believe that the whole world would somehow be forgiven. No, they were simply told that God would forgive them for the sake of the Suffering Servant, in whom they were to believe, even as it was pictured for them in the pattern of Levitical sacrifices.

This justification by faith is the one that is clearly taught throughout the New Testament:

Romans 3:22-26 even the righteousness of God, through faith in Jesus Christ, to all and on all who believe. For there is no difference; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith..., that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Romans 4:3 Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness.

Romans 4:5-8 But to him who does not work but believes on Him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is accounted for righteousness, just as David also describes the blessedness of the man to whom God imputes righteousness apart from works: “Blessed are those whose lawless deeds are forgiven, and whose sins are covered; blessed is the man to whom the LORD shall not impute sin.”

Romans 4:24-5:1 [Faith] shall be imputed to us who believe in Him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up for our offenses, and was raised for our justification. Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ

Romans 8:30 those whom he called he also justified

Romans 8:34 Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.

Galatians 2:15-16 We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law.

1 Timothy 2:5 For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus

1 Peter 2:24-25 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

- 1 Peter 3:18** For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God.
- 2 Corinthians 5:15** and He died for all, that those who live should live no longer for themselves, but for Him who died for them and rose again.
- 2 Corinthians 5:21** For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.
- Hebrews 5:9-10** And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest “according to the order of Melchizedek,”
- Hebrews 7:24** But He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood. 25 Therefore He is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.
- Hebrews 7:27** [Christ] does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people’s, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.
- Hebrews 8:1-2** We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.
- Hebrews 8:6** He is also Mediator of a better covenant
- Hebrews 9:13-14** For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.
- Hebrews 9:15** Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant.
- Hebrews 9:26-28** As it is, he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.
- Hebrews 10:10** by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.
- Hebrews 10:12-14** But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.

In summary, Christ’s role as Substitute ended when He said, “It is finished!” and died. But His role as High Priest continues for all eternity. This, in fact, is the true power of the resurrection, not in that the Substitute received forgiveness in our place when He was raised from the dead, or in that all mankind was justified in His “justification,” but in that the Mediator between God and men, having offered Himself as the vicarious sacrifice for the world’s sins, now continues in His role as Priest and Mediator, in which He applies His finished sacrifice to those who believe in Him and intercedes for them continually before God the Father. This is what St. Paul means when he says in Romans 4:25, “...He was raised for our justification.”

Walther misread the Formula of Concord

Now, if the Scriptures are so clear about how sinners are justified, if the Old Testament Scriptures never foretold the absolution of the Christ in man’s place, if no New Testament Scriptures describe the absolution of the Christ in man’s place, where did Walther get this notion from—that sinners can only be absolved of their sins if their Substitute was already absolved of their sins? Where did Walther get the idea that all men have already been reconciled to God—a word which the Book of Concord almost always uses synonymously with justification?

The answer to the latter question is that Walther misread the Formula of Concord.

In the same essay of Walther referenced earlier, Walther says this concerning Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration, Article XI:

This is declared in the Formula of Concord: “In his purpose and counsel God has ordained... that through Christ the human race has truly been redeemed and reconciled with God and that by his innocent obedience,

suffering, and death Christ has earned for us the righteousness which avails before God and eternal life.” In the quoted testimony from the Formula of Concord it is highly important to note that it does not say: "The human race will truly be redeemed and reconciled with God", but rather: "has truly been redeemed and reconciled with God."

I have not been able to locate the original German of Walther’s essay. Perhaps this is a poor translation of Walther’s words into English, because there is certainly no past tense indicative verb “has been redeemed and reconciled” in either the German or Latin versions of the Formula of Concord. In both languages, it is a purpose clause expressing the purpose of God’s decree made in eternity. Perhaps Walther quoted the Formula of Concord correctly in his essay, “Gott in seinem Vorsatz und Rat verordnet hat: 1. Daß wahrhaftig das menschliche Geschlecht erlöst und mit Gott versöhnt sei durch Christum.” Even so, he misses the point that this entire paragraph is describing, not the state of how things are in the present or were in the past, but the purpose and intention of God from eternity in His decree of election.

Some translations of this paragraph in the Book of Concord—notably, those published by Waltherian sources—translate this as “that the human race is redeemed and reconciled.” Others, like Henkel, more properly translate “that the human race shall be redeemed and reconciled” (directly contradicting Walther’s words in his essay), or, as Jacobs translates even more properly, “that the human race should be redeemed and reconciled.” Because, again, the Formula is describing God’s decree in eternity of how He would carry out His plan and purpose of salvation, resulting in election. Do they wish us to understand that God, in eternity, decreed the human race to be already redeemed and reconciled to Him at that time? This is neither logically nor linguistically sound. The scope of God’s decree of election began as broadly as possible, with His desire and plan to save and to reconcile the whole human race to Him. But by the end of the eight steps outlined in that paragraph, it is narrowed down to those for whom all eight steps are true. That is, it is not the whole human race that is finally elect and saved.

But the Formula does say here that something has already happened in the past tense: “...durch Christum, der uns mit seinem unschuldigen Gehorsam, Leiden und sterben Gerechtigkeit, die vor Gott gilt, und das ewige Leben verdient habe.” “...through Christ, who, by His faultless obedience, suffering, and death, has merited for us the righteousness that avails before God and eternal life.” Indeed, Christ has merited righteousness and life for all men. But it is disingenuous to cite this paragraph from the Formula as if it confessed that the whole human race has already been reconciled to God.

But Walther’s faulty understanding of this section of the Book of Concord is clearly related to his faulty understanding of 2 Corinthians 5:19, as he writes in his Easter Absolution sermon:

It is certain that Christ not only wanted to be the Reconciler the Savior and Redeemer of all men without exception, but is that already as Paul writes: “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself” (2 Cor. 5:19a). As certain as these things are, so certain it is also that God the Father, in raising Jesus Christ from the dead has already absolved all men from all their sins.⁶

If we read 2 Corinthians 5:19 in context, according to the grammar, and in light of all the clear Scriptural references to justification and reconciliation, then we cannot conclude from it that the whole world has already been reconciled to God.

“that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them”

First, the grammar excludes a one-time reconciliation in the past. God “was (imperfect tense) reconciling.” One would need to have clear Scriptural evidence connecting this directly with Christ’s resurrection in order to take that ongoing language and change it to a one-time, finished event.

Second, in context and in light of the same apostle’s clear explanation of who it is to whom sins are “not imputed” in Romans 4:8, we should conclude that this non-imputation of sins is done to the same people here as in Romans 4:8, namely, believers in Christ. The surrounding verses demonstrate that Paul is talking about the reconciliation that happens through faith. He says in v. 18, “who has reconciled us to Himself

⁶ Walther, “Christ’s Resurrection,” 232-33

through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation,” not referring to an objective reconciliation (and commissioning!) of all men, but specifically to himself and the other ministers of the Gospel. Just as God was in Christ throughout His earthly ministry, reconciling the world to Himself, calling all sinners everywhere to repentance and faith, and, through faith, forgiving them their sins and reconciling them to Himself, so Paul and all ministers now carry out the same ministry, calling out on behalf of Christ, “Be reconciled to God!” (v. 20). If Paul had had in mind a completely different kind of reconciling (i.e., “objective” instead of “subjective”) in v. 19 than that which he describes in v. 18 and in v. 20, then we would expect him to have given some indication of it!

Walther (and generations of Lutherans after him) would have done well to pay attention to how Martin Chemnitz explained this “reconciling of the world,” which is fully in line with the rest of Scripture’s teaching on reconciliation and justification and with the explanation we have given above:

For Paul expressly distinguishes between the power and efficacy of reconciliation which belongs to God, and the ministry which was given to the apostles, so that it is God who reconciles the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19) and forgives sins (Is. 43:25), not however without means but in and through the ministry of Word and sacrament.⁷

Walther turned a father’s footnote into the foundation of the Gospel

But given the title of Walther’s famous Easter Absolution Sermon, “Christ’s Glorious Resurrection from the Dead *the Actual Absolution of the Entire Sinful World*,” it seems clear that much of his understanding of the article of justification was tragically shaped, not by Scripture, or even by the Confessions, but by what was essentially a footnote in a private writing of a respected Lutheran Church Father, Johann Gerhard, resulting in the elevation of a passing remark of Gerhard on Romans 4:25 to the status of foundational evangelical truth.

Here are Gerhard’s first two explanations of Romans 4:25 in his commentary on the book of Romans concerning the phrase, “He was raised to life for our justification”:⁸

1. With respect to the manifestation, demonstration and confirmation, because the resurrection of Christ is the clear testimony that full satisfaction has been made for our sins and that perfect righteousness has been achieved. Jerome says in h. 1: Christ rose in order that He might confirm righteousness to believers. Chrysostom says in hom. 9 ad Rom.: In the resurrection it is demonstrated that Christ died, not for His own sins, but for our sins. For how could He be raised if He was a sinner? But if He was not a sinner, then He was crucified for others.
2. With respect to the application. If Christ had remained in death, He would not be the conqueror of death, nor could He apply to us the righteousness that was obtained at such a high price (Rom. 5:10, 8:34). But since He rose from the dead and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God, from there He also offers to the world, through the Word of the Gospel, the benefits obtained by His suffering and death, and applies the same to believers, and in this way He justifies them. With respect to this application, Cardinal Toletus (in comm. h.1. and Suarez tom. 2, in part 3, Thom. disp. 44, p.478) acknowledges that our justification is attributed to the resurrection of Christ, writing thus: Christ, by His suffering, sufficiently destroyed sin. Nevertheless, in order that we might be justified and that sin might be effectively remitted to us, it was necessary for the suffering of Christ to be applied to us through a living faith. Therefore, Christ rose on account of our righteousness, that is, in order that our faith might be confirmed and that we might be effectively justified. The Apostle notably says that Christ died for our sins and was raised, not for righteousness, which is contrasted with sins in general, but διὰ τὴν δικαίωσιν ἡμῶν, for our justification, which consists in the absolution from sins.

We see nothing here about Christ being absolved in His resurrection, or of Christ serving as Substitute in His resurrection. Instead, Gerhard rightly points out the two key ways in which Christ’s resurrection brings

⁷ Martin Chemnitz and Fred Kramer. *Examination of the Council of Trent*, electronic ed., vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999), 559-560.

⁸ Gerhard, Johann and Paul A. Rydecki. *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2014, 213-214.

about our intended justification: in that (1) it confirms for us that Christ was righteous, and that, therefore, His death was substitutionary in nature, and in that (2) it enables Him to apply His sacrifice to believers. What Gerhard says here reflects very closely what he wrote in a pamphlet dedicated to explaining Romans 4:25:⁹

The fruit of Christ's resurrection is said to be our justification, insofar as through it He manifested that the Savior manifested and testified that payment has been made for our sins and that redemption has been accomplished, and that salvation and righteousness have been provided (see Rom. 8:34, 1 Cor. 15:17, etc.) Clearly the resurrection of Christ was necessary for the purpose of both demonstrating and applying our justification. For if Christ had not arisen, He would not have conquered death, but would have been conquered by death. Therefore, He would not have merited life and righteousness for us. And even if He had merited it, He would not now be able to confer and apply it, if He had remained in death. Having briefly shown these things, this is the sense and the paraphrase that emerge: Christ Jesus, our Lord, subjected Himself to death for our sake and was delivered over to it, so that He might make satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, and, by His death, make atonement. But He was raised from the dead that He might testify and show that, with death having been completely vanquished and destroyed, righteousness and life have been obtained for men, and that He might apply them to believers.

Unfortunately, Gerhard continued, adding a third explanation of this verse in his Romans commentary:

3. With respect to *the actual absolution from sin*. By delivering Christ into death for the sake of our sins, the heavenly Father condemned sin in His flesh through sin (Rom. 8:3). He condemned it because it had sinned against Christ by bringing about His death, even though He was innocent, and so He withdrew from sin its legal right against believers so that it cannot condemn them any longer. He also condemned it, in that He punished our sins in Christ, which were imposed on Him and imputed to Him as to a bondsman. So also, by the very act of raising Him from the dead, He absolved Him from our sins that were imputed to Him, and consequently also absolves us in Him, so that, in this way, the resurrection of Christ may be both the cause and the pledge and the complement of our justification. The following passages pertain to this: 1 Cor. 15:17, 2 Cor. 5:21, Eph. 2:5, Col. 2:12-13, Phil. 3:8-10, 1 Pet. 1:3.¹⁰

Walther's Easter sermon clearly draws its title from these words of Gerhard, "the actual absolution from sin." Both Walther and Pr. Sorenson make much of this "Bondsman" or "Guarantor" analogy drawn from Gerhard's final note on Romans 4:25, although we must realize *the analogy is not drawn from Scripture*. But clearly "the absolution of the Bondsman" was not Gerhard's primary interpretation of Romans 4:25. It didn't make its way into the rest of his Romans commentary, nor into the pamphlet he dedicated to this verse, nor did it ever enter into any paradigm of salvation he ever taught in his voluminous *Loci Theologici*.¹¹ His entire Romans commentary is an exposition of justification by faith, with no reference anywhere to the "justification of the world," and no other reference to Christ's absolution as the basis for the absolution that takes place by faith or through the Means of Grace. Nor was Gerhard able to edit or revise his commentary on Romans, since he died before finishing it. I've written elsewhere about a possible way to understand his analogy correctly, but the more it is abused, the more I think it's something that sounds appealing, but that, if fully considered, is not in line with the truth of Scripture and certainly is not worthy to be inserted into the clearly expressed Scriptural paradigm of justification. As Gerhard sought to

⁹ Summae Evangelii, hoc est, Aphorismi Apostolici Rom. 4:25, "Qui traditus est propter delicta nostra, et resurrexit propter justificationem nostram," translation by author.

¹⁰ Gerhard

¹¹ In Gerhard's *Locus On Justification*, he uses this analogy of Christ as Guarantor only once, and not at all with regard to his "absolution." He writes: "Therefore we say that though Christ as the universal Redeemer and Savior made satisfaction for the sins of the whole world, it is imputed to any believer in place of the merit which he should have presented in his own place but could not. "As far as you stretch out your foot of trust in the Lord's gifts, to that extent will you have of them." From this precious and most abundant medicine of righteousness each one applies to himself what is fitting and sufficient for his own salvation. Christ transferred our debt to Himself as our Guarantor, paid it totally with His obedience and satisfaction, deposited this payment as a very large amount of gold at His own tribunal and throne for the use of needy sinners, and from it each thus takes by faith as much as he needs." Johann Gerhard, *On Justification through Faith*, ed. Joshua J. Hayes, Heath R. Curtis, and Benjamin T. G. Mayes, trans. Richard J. Dinda, Theological Commonplaces (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 449.

mine every bit of precious metal that he could from Romans 4:25, it seems that he brought forth a bit of fool's gold here, and Walther was, sadly, fooled by it.

And that, really, is the tragedy. Walther may not have been the first after Gerhard to be misled by this inconsequential saying, but because of Walther's key role in spreading Lutheranism in North America, generations of Lutherans have been influenced by his flawed understanding of the article of justification.

In effect, Walther's UOJ has done to Christ what Rome has done to Mary. Just as Rome has added unscriptural honors and roles to Mary, so UOJ has added unscriptural honors and roles to Christ. "Not only did He die for your sins, but He was also absolved in your place! Not only has He made atonement for the sins of the world, but God the Father has already declared all men righteous for Christ's sake! Not only did God love the world, but God forgave the world!" And just as Roman Catholics tend to feel that we are robbing Mary of her honor when, for example, we deny her role as mediatrix, so Walther's UOJ has produced generations of Lutherans who now believe that to reject UOJ is to rob Christ of His honor of having already forgiven all men their sins. To even suggest that all people are not already forgiven by God will result in loyal synodicalists rattling their sabers in defense of "Christ's honor." To teach it will get you banished from the Lutheran synods. Congregations have been divided over it. Christians have been made to stumble over it. And, perhaps worst of all, absolution has been made dependent on it.

But this is how the devil works. He whispers little lies into the Church, sweet-sounding lies that seem to glorify God at first, but then the lies take hold, the truth is obscured, and eventually the Gospel itself is condemned as heresy because people have come to prefer the manmade version of the Gospel promoted by their beloved teacher.

Regardless of which explanation of UOJ one gives or to which version one holds, *the preaching of it is essentially the same*. "All men are already forgiven, already saved, already reconciled with God, already declared righteous. You must accept this if you wish for that which is already true for all people to be true for you. You must accept the already-existing gift of having already been objectively declared righteous with the rest of humanity in order to be subjectively declared righteous as an individual." Or, in the perplexing words of C. F. W. Walther himself, "God looks with pleasure on the whole human race. Most people indeed retain God's wrath."¹² This is, in a word, gobbledygook.

Let us acknowledge UOJ for the gobbledygook theology it is. Let us stop trying to defend it or provide a better explanation for it. Let us be grateful to God for the true things our beloved teachers have passed on to us, but let us not be so devoted to them that we fail to acknowledge where they went astray. Let us forever abandon the lie that is "the justification of the world." And let us return and hold fast to the Scriptural paradigm of justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ. If we truly seek "the Lutheran middle" between two errors, then let it be this:

Error on the one side

Christ did not die for all men. God does not want all men to be saved. Only the elect are justified.

Error on the other side

Christ died for all men, and, therefore, all men are justified.

The narrow Lutheran middle

Christ died for all men.

God wants all men to be justified by faith in Christ Jesus, who died for them.

He works through the Gospel to call men to faith.

Those who believe in Him are justified.

¹² Walther, *Selected Writings*