



# Vicarious Satisfaction in Explanations of Luther's Small Catechism?

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## Summary

This article briefly sketches the orthodox Christian doctrine of Christ's redemption by vicarious satisfaction; briefly sketches heretical denial of vicarious satisfaction by popular Lutheran theologians; and exhibits how the Lutheran church has taught the truth of vicarious satisfaction across synods and centuries in North America in explanations of Luther's Small Catechism.

With interesting variations of language, and coming originally from German, Norwegian, and English sources, they all teach the same thing. Yet in seminaries, dogmatics texts, books, journal articles, conference papers, blog posts, podcasts, YouTube videos, social media, and elsewhere, popular Lutheran theologians and pastors undermine or outright contradict all this consistent teaching of the Catechism.

Explanations consulted below include: The one used in my confirmation instruction (Grimsby), the one used in my father's confirmation instruction (Pontoppidan translated by Lund), Norwegian Synod, General Synod, Drewes (Synodical Conference), AELC, Dell's, Missouri Synod, Wisconsin Synod, Evangelical Lutheran Synod, Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, the Church of the Lutheran Brethren, and ending with the esteemed Reu and the remarkable Koehler.

## The Law, Sin, and Death

"Whosoever commits sin transgresses also the law: for sin is the transgression of the law." (1 John 3:4)

The penalty of the Law for transgressing it is death. "The LORD God commanded the man, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,

for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” (Genesis 2:16-17) Adam ate of that tree, and he died. “Through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned.” (Romans 5:12) “The wages of sin is death.” (Romans 6:23)

### **Redemption by Vicarious Satisfaction**

How has Jesus redeemed you?

Jesus made satisfaction to God for us under the Law in two ways.

- **Active Obedience.** On our behalf He lived a life of active obedience under the Law. He fulfilled all righteousness for us under the Law.
- **Passive Obedience.** On our behalf He rendered passive obedience to God. He did this by his innocent suffering of the Law’s penalty of death.

“God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law.” (Galatians 4:4)

God demonstrated his satisfaction with the redeeming work of Christ by resurrecting him from the dead (Romans 4:25). God announces his satisfaction with the redeeming work of Christ by his “word of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19) which He proclaims by the apostles and pastors in the “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:18).

### **Denial of Vicarious Satisfaction by Lutheran Theologians**

But some popular Lutheran theologians like Gerhard Forde reject the vicarious satisfaction as being too juridical, too forensic. Gustav Aulen rejects vicarious satisfaction calling it a false “legal order” of the atonement.<sup>1</sup> Others call it the “legal scheme” of the atonement.<sup>2</sup>

According to Forde, God just up-and-forgave without Christ fulfilling the law and suffering its penalty for us. Yes, Jesus died on the cross, but not to make vicarious satisfaction. It was simply to make such an inspiring and dramatic gesture of a free-standing forgiveness that already had existed that we might finally believe that God, before and without the sacrifice of Christ, was read to up-and-forgive.<sup>3</sup> That notion and variations sympathetic with it are circulating in the Lutheran church.

### **Denial of Vicarious Substitution a Wholesale Rejection of Everything Lutheran**

Those errors against Christ and his vicarious satisfaction for us are not what Luther says in the Large Catechism or his 1535 commentary on Galatians; not what the Lutheran confessors say in the Augsburg Confession<sup>4</sup> or the Formula of Concord;<sup>5</sup> not what we pray in the historic liturgy; not what we sing in our Lutheran hymns;<sup>6</sup> and not what we teach about Baptism or the Lord’s Supper. They are not what the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod confesses in its Brief Statement.<sup>7</sup>

Later, I hope to be able to bring forward from Scripture, the Catechism, the confessions, liturgy, hymns, and Sacraments the true Christian teaching of Christ’s vicarious substitution by which He redeems us. In this article, I do so from explanations of the Catechism from many synods from the middle of the 19th Century to the present day.

As I do this, I ask you, what were you taught about how Jesus redeems you? Were you not taught what is set forth below from so many explanations of the Catechism? Why, then, would you follow instead what

erring teachers are popularizing now?

### **My Confirmation Instruction**

When I was in confirmation instruction, the explanation of the Catechism used (Grimsby, 1941) taught this:<sup>8</sup>

“8. With what has Christ redeemed you?”

“With His perfect life and obedience Christ fulfilled the law in my stead.

“With His precious blood, and innocent suffering and death He paid for my sins.”

Those two answers are the two parts of vicarious satisfaction. The first is Christ’s active obedience fulfilling the Law for me. The second is his passive obedience of innocent suffering and death as the Law’s penalty for my sin.

### **My Father’s Confirmation Instruction**

My father, born in 1918 and confirmed in 1933, was taught the same thing in a country Norwegian Lutheran Home Missionary church.

166. Wherewith has Christ redeemed us?

He has paid for our sins with His holy, precious blood, and with his innocent sufferings and death, and he has fulfilled the Law in our stead with his holy life and perfect obedience.<sup>9</sup>

### **Norwegian Synod**

The Norwegian Synod taught the same thing in 1950:

137. Why was it necessary that the Son of God should become true man?

It was necessary that the Son of God should become true man, in order that he might fulfil the law and suffer punishment in man’s stead.

138. Why was it necessary that our Savior should be true God?

It was necessary that our Savior should be true God, because otherwise His work could have had no atoning power.<sup>10</sup>

### **General Synod**

The General Synod was teaching the same thing in 1846.

65. Why was it necessary that Christ should become man?

It was necessary that Christ should become man that he, by submitting to suffering and death could redeem us.

66. Why was it requisite that Christ should also be true God?

Christ had to be true God, in order that his redemption might have the efficacy to produce reconciliation with God.

67. By what did Christ redeem us, and produce reconciliation with God?

Christ effected reconciliation with God by his obedience unto death.

68. What did Christ fulfill in our stead?

Christ in our stead yielded a perfect obedience to the whole law.

69. What did Christ take upon himself?

Christ took upon himself the guilt and punishment of our sins.

70. What did Christ suffer for us?

Christ died for us, and shed his blood for us, on the cross.<sup>11</sup>

The General Synod still was teaching the same thing in 1893:

189. What did Christ fulfill in our stead?

Christ in our stead rendered perfect obedience to the whole law.

190. Wherewith has Christ redeemed you

Christ has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy, precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death.<sup>12</sup>

### **Drewes Catechism**

The “Drewes Catechism” published by the Synodical Conference in 1930 teaches the same thing:

212. In what respect has Christ redeemed you from all sins?

a. Christ fulfilled the whole law for us and thus paid our great debt.

b. Christ bore the punishment of sin and thus cancelled the punishment.<sup>13</sup>

### **AELC**

The Augustana Evangelical Lutheran Church’s 1939 explanation of the Catechism teaches the same thing:

59. What is the work of Christ as High Priest?

As High Priest, Christ has fulfilled the law in our place, suffered and died for our sins, and ever lives to pray for us.<sup>14</sup>

### **Dell’s Senior Catechism**

Dell’s *Senior Catechism*, was first published by The Wartburg Press in 1939, was in its 17th printing in 1955, and continued to be printed into the 1960s by assignment to Augsburg Publishing House. It teaches the same thing:

127. Why was it necessary for Christ to be both God and man?

True man He must be that He might put Himself under the law, suffer and die for our sins; true God He must be that He might thus merit for all men forgiveness of sin and life eternal.<sup>15</sup>

Jesus's suffering and death is called "vicarious" Atonement. A vicar is one who acts for someone else, in someone else's stead. Jesus suffered in our stead. He bore the lightning of God's wrath that we might enjoy the sunshine of God's love.<sup>16</sup>

### **Missouri Synod**

In the Missouri Synod, the "blue Catechism" of 1943 teaches the same thing.<sup>17</sup>

129. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true man?

It was necessary for our Savior to be true man —

A. That He might take our place under the Law.

B. That He might be able to suffer and die in our stead.

130. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true God?

It was necessary for our Savior to be true God —

A. That His fulfilling of the Law might be sufficient for all men.

B. That His life and death might be a sufficient ransom for our redemption.

Missouri's "burgundy Catechism" of 1991 teaches the same thing:<sup>18</sup>

122. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true man?

Christ had to be true man in order to

A. act in our place under the Law and fulfill it for us (active obedience);

B. be able to suffer and die for our guilt because we failed to keep the Law (passive obedience)

123. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true God?

Christ had to be true God in order that

A. His fulfilling of the Law, His life, suffering, and death, might be a sufficient ransom for all people.

Missouri's newest "burgundy and black Catechism" of 2017 teaches the same thing:<sup>19</sup>

159. Why is it so important for us as sinners that the Son of God has become our Brother?

As our brother,

A. Jesus fulfilled our obligation to keep the Law (His active obedience);

B. Jesus suffered and died to pay the penalty of our sin (His passive obedience)

### **Wisconsin Synod**

The Wisconsin Synod's "Kuske Catechism" of 1998 teaches the same thing:

176. Why was it necessary that Jesus be both true man and true God in one person?

176a. It was necessary that Jesus be both true man and true God in one person so that he could be under God's law and also keep it perfectly for me. (active obedience)

176b. It was necessary that Jesus be both true man and true God in one person so that he could die and also ransom me by his death. (passive obedience)<sup>20</sup>

### **Evangelical Lutheran Synod**

The Evangelical Lutheran Synod teaches the same thing in its explanation of the Catechism:

138. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true man?

It was necessary for our Savior to be true man in order to

fulfill the law for us (active obedience), and

suffer and die in our place (passive obedience).

139. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true God?

It was necessary for our savior to be true God in order that

His fulfilling the law for us, and

His suffering and dying in our place might be sufficient (vicarious atonement).<sup>21</sup>

### **Free Lutheran Congregations**

The Association of Free Lutheran Congregations teaches the same thing in its explanation of the Catechism:

166. With what means had Christ redeemed us?

He has paid for our sins with his holy and precious blood and His innocent death, and

He has fulfilled the Law in our place with His holy life and His perfect obedience.<sup>22</sup>

### **Church of the Lutheran Brethren**

The "red Catechism" of the Church of the Lutheran Brethren teaches the same thing:

174. How has Christ redeemed you?

Christ has redeemed me by paying for my sins with His holy and precious blood, and with His innocent sufferings and death; and by fulfilling the law in my place by His perfect life and complete obedience.<sup>23</sup>

### **Reu Catechism**

Johann Michael Reu was the author of the esteemed *Catechetics, or Theory and Practice of Religious Instruction* (Chicago: Wartburg Publishing House, 1918).

By the time it appeared in its third edition in 1931 it was a 658-page manual on the history, theory, and practice of education in the Lutheran church. Reu's *Catechetics* was the first and is still the only work by an American Lutheran author which attempts to survey the whole field of sacred and secular educational theory and practice and then seeks to combine these different perspectives into a systematic, scholarly whole. First

making its appearance in German in 1915, it went through three editions over the subsequent twenty-five years and was a staple in Lutheran seminaries and teacher-training institutions for two generations.<sup>24</sup>

Reu's 1947 explanation of the Catechism teaches the same thing:

I was a condemned creature. God, the righteous Judge, had found me guilty and in His holy wrath had turned me over to the power of sin, death, and the devil as a well-deserved punishment. These dreadful masters held me as their prisoner and slave.

God's Word tells me that Jesus took my place as my substitute and by His obedience to the Father and by His willing suffering and death earned the ransom with which He purchased my freedom.

In many other places the Bible uses a different way to describe what Jesus did for me, namely that He covered up my sins with His blood so that they can no longer serve as evidence against me to condemn me.

These are two different ways of saying that Jesus has by His blood changed God's righteous wrath to goodwill toward me — or that He has reconciled God — so that He will no longer permit the three cruel masters to punish me for my sins.<sup>25</sup>

### **Koehler Catechism**

The "Koehler Catechism" of 1946 still is deemed by many to be a superior explanation of the Catechism. It used the 1943 Concordia Publishing House basic text, but then was richly supplemented by Dr. Edward W. A. Koehler. Dr. Robert Preus, President of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne wrote the foreword to the second edition when it was brought back into print in 1981 through Concordia Theological Seminary Press. Here are Koehler's annotations in questions 129 and 130.

129. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true man?

[Answers A and B from Missouri's blue 1943 explanation]

A. In order to save man, it was necessary for Christ to do and to suffer what man should have done and suffered; hence He had to become man that as man's Substitute He might act in man's place. Therefore He did not take on the nature of angels (Heb. 2:16), but flesh and blood, a human nature (Heb. 2:14, 16), — The Law was given to man to fulfill (192, 193). But as man is not able to render a perfect obedience (See Question 88), the Son of God was made man, and was made, or put, under the Law to fulfill it for those who were under the Law (315). To fulfill man's duties under the Law it was necessary for our Savior to become man Himself. — B. By his sins man had deserved death (196), and the justice of God demanded that this penalty be fully paid. To redeem us from the curse of the Law, Christ had to suffer death in our place (353). But as in His divine nature He could not die, He had to become man (316: He took on flesh and blood, became man, that He might be able to die, and through His death destroy the devil, who had the power of death).

130. Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true God?

[Answer A from Missouri's blue 1943 explanation]

A sinful man can fulfill the Law not even for himself (204), much less for another; even a saint — if there were such — could keep the Law only for himself, and his obedience would not benefit anyone else (197: "The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him" and not another). God alone is not under the Law. Therefore our Savior had to be God in order that, being put under the Law, He might fulfill it for those who could not do so themselves, and that His obedience might be sufficient for all men. For the fact that He is God gives immeasurable value to His obedience, and assures us that He fulfilled the Law to the full satisfaction of God, who was well pleased with Him (291), and that by His vicarious obedience we are made righteous (318).

[Answer B from Missouri's blue 1943 explanation]

A sinful man must die for his own sins, and he could not die for anyone else. A sinless man — if there were such — could possibly die for one other person, but at that he could not save him, because, to remain sinless, he would have to keep the Law for himself, and could not keep it for someone else. Therefore neither sinner nor saint could give to God a sufficient ransom for his brother (317). In order, then, that the suffering and death of our Redeemer might be a sufficient ransom, payment, to atone for the sins of all men (319), it was necessary for Him to be more than man, more than a saint, He had to be God. Only God can pay a ransom unto Himself (2 Cor. 5, 19). The saving value and strength of Christ's suffering and death lies not in its duration and intensity, but rather in this that it was God, who, in His human nature, suffered in Gethsemane and died on Calvary. ... The fact, then, that the *Son of God* paid the penalty of our guilt assures us that He fully satisfied the demands of divine justice against us, and that His suffering and death was a sufficient ransom for our redemption.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

In the face of all this evidence, who will say that over these centuries and across synods, millions of Lutherans were not taught that Jesus made satisfaction to God for us under the Law in two ways.

- **Active Obedience.** On our behalf He lived a life of active obedience under the Law. He fulfilled all righteousness for us under the Law.
- **Passive Obedience.** On our behalf He rendered passive obedience to God. He did this by his innocent suffering of the Law's penalty of death.

Why, then, do popular Lutheran theologians and pastors undermine or outright reject what we have been taught? What should we Lutheran lay people believe and confess? What should we lay people do about the teachings against the redemptive vicarious satisfaction worked for us by our Beautiful Savior?

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<sup>1</sup> Gustav Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1960), 91.

<sup>2</sup> Jason D. Lane, "That I May Be His Own: The Necessary End of the Law," *Handing Over the Goods*, Steven D. Paulson and Scott L. Keith, eds. (Irvine, CA: 1517 Publishing, 2018), 53-64, 56.

<sup>3</sup> T. R. Halvorson, "[The Cracked Foundation of Forde's Radical Lutheranism](#)," *Brothers of John the Steadfast*, February 6,



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2017; T. R. Halvorson, "[Safely Betting the Farm: Recommendation of Jack Kilcrease's Book on the Atonement](#)," *Brothers of John the Steadfast*, July 31, 2019.

<sup>4</sup> AC III IV, XXIV.

<sup>5</sup> SD III.13-16.

<sup>6</sup> William C. Weedon, "Jack Kilcrease's book on The Atonement," *Weedon's Blog*, August 3, 2019, <https://weedon.blogspot.com/2019/08/jack-kilcreases-book-on-atonement.html>, accessed August 8, 2022.

<sup>7</sup> "Brief Statement of the Doctrinal Position of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (1932)", Article 8, "Of Redemption." "The purpose of this miraculous incarnation of the Son of God was that He might become the Mediator between God and men, both fulfilling the divine Law and suffering and dying in the place of mankind. In this manner God reconciled the whole sinful world unto Himself, Gal. 4:4, 5; 3:13; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19."

<sup>8</sup> Henry P. Grimsby, *An Explanation of the Catechism* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1941), 50-51.

<sup>9</sup> H. U. Sverdrup, *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*, trans (from Norwegian) E G. Lund, abridged ed. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1900), 65.

<sup>10</sup> *Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism*, Norwegian Synod Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1950), 54-55.

<sup>11</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism*, 7th ed. (Baltimore: General Synod of the Lutheran Church, 1846), 28-29.

<sup>12</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism Developed and Explained* (Philadelphia: The United Lutheran Publication House, 1893), 59.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Drews, *Martin Luther's Small Catechism Explained by Way of Questions and Answers* (St. Louis: Rudolph Vokening, 1930), 36.

<sup>14</sup> *Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation*, rev. ed. (Rock Island, IL: Augustana Book Concern, 1939), 47.

<sup>15</sup> J. A. Dell, *Senior Catechism: Luther's Small Catechism in Question and Answer Form* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1939), 97.

<sup>16</sup> Dell, 103.

<sup>17</sup> *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism: A Handbook of Christian Doctrine* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1943), rev'd 1965, 106.

<sup>18</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1991), 125-125.

<sup>19</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017),

<sup>20</sup> David P. Kuske, *Luther's Catechism: The Small Catechism of Dr. Martin Luther and an Exposition for Children and Adults Written in Contemporary English*, 3rd ed. (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1998), 156.

<sup>21</sup> *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (Mankato, MN: Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 2001), 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Luther's Small Catechism with Explanation* (Minneapolis: Ambassador Publications, 2007), 76.

<sup>23</sup> Warren Olsen and David Rinden, eds., *An Explanation of Luther's Small Catechism* (Fergus Falls, MN: Faith and Fellowship Press, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Paul I. Johnston, "Christian Education in the Thought of Johann Michael Reu," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 58, no. 2-3, April-July 1994, pp. 93-111.

<sup>25</sup> M. Reu, *An Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism Together with Four Supplements* (Columbus, OH: The Wartburg Press, 1947), 109-111.

<sup>26</sup> Edward W. A. Koehler, *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism*, 2nd ed. (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1981), 143-144.