



Nice Guys Ruin the Consolation of Christ's Blood

By T. R. Halvorson

In Scripture and the Lutheran confessions, Christ works the atonement in his life of active obedience (Matthew 3:15), his passive obedience of humbling himself to death on the cross (Philippians 2:8), and in his rising for the justification of the whole world. "God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law." (Galatians 4:4) Christ "was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification." (Romans 4:25)

When Christ had finished his work, there it is.

There it is. It is there objectively. It is *extra nos*, outside of ourselves.

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).

Their ministry is to preach the "word of reconciliation." That Word announces to the world that Christ finished his work, there it is, believe it. The Holy Spirit uses the Word and Sacraments to create faith where and when He wills. When one believes the objective truth of justification by the atoning work of Christ, he benefits from justification by his *intra nos* (within himself) faith in the *extra nos* (outside himself) justifying work of Christ. In Christianity, faith means believing *truth*, not creating "truth" by believing.

But some popular Lutheran theologians reject this. They deny that Christ accomplished vicarious satisfaction. They do not see atonement on the cross. Yet they must preach something called

“Christ,” something called the “cross,” something called “justification,” and something called “faith,” because of the lay people. They must sound Lutheran; they must sound Christian to retain their followings. They cannot afford an exodus from the pews and offering plates.

So, they use all that traditional sounding language, but they have moved atonement from the cross to the Christian. They have moved it from outside of ourselves and from being believed as an accomplished fact by our Beautiful Savior to inside of ourselves, only if, when – and *because* – we believe. By their teaching, belief, not the work of Christ, creates. Belief, not the work of Christ, atones. God does not need to be reconciled. Only we need to be reconciled. That is why nothing happens until faith creates and atones. God all along was ready to forgive without the sacrifice of Christ. Nothing needs to happen on the cross, nothing needs to happen between Christ and the Father. The only place where something needs to happen is in our hearts. “The blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God” (Hebrews 9:14), did nothing. All the action is existentialist in our angst and dread about trusting God to up and forgive.

They engage in rationalistic and sophistical speculations about eternity and the foundation of the world. They say God’s Law could not be a true word of God because God from the foundation of the world always had in mind to redeem man. Since God always had in mind to forgive, therefore the Law needs to be simply terminated, not fulfilled — as if the Gospel word of “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8) were not true — as if Christ’s passive obedience to suffer the penalty of Law were not also in God’s mind for the redemption of the world way back at the foundation of the world. Apparently, John the Baptist did not know what he was talking about when he said the lamb slain from the foundation of the world is “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:20)

They do not say this in sermons or daily devotionals where the lay people would catch on. They say it in theological journals and theology books that few lay people read. There they go to lengths to reject vicarious satisfaction and deny that atonement or justification happened there and then at the cross and empty tomb. Instead, though Christ did not make satisfaction to God for us, nevertheless, his grand gesture toward us inspires “faith” for us to believe that God forgives. This “faith” believes in “forgiveness” even though according to it, Christ did not fulfill the Law for us, and Christ did not suffer the Law’s penalty of death for us. Paul is all wet when he says, “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous.” (Romans 5:19) These “Lutherans” abolish the obedience of Christ and the justifying virtue of Christ’s obedience to make us righteous.

In their view, there is no justification and no faith until the grand gesture is preached and someone believes the preaching. In that instant, finally, a creative event occurs that is called “faith” and “justification.” No work of atonement happened until it first happens in our hearts. Preaching and hearts. That is what Gerhard Forde meant when he said, “theology is for proclamation.” The Gospel, instead of announcing an accomplished work of Christ, is nothing but a preaching that, when a hearer believes, works atonement. God is at the periphery and self is at the center.

The traditional language hides the theological theory behind what they preach. Many sincere and unsuspecting lay people are deceived by the smoke screen of Lutheranesque talk.

The deniers of vicarious satisfaction are well read in Luther. They must be. They must look far and wide through *Luther's Works* to find words, phrases, and sentences to cherry pick and distort for their Lutheranesque verbiage. They seize upon Luther's statements about God's "alien work" to say that one of God's two Words that He speaks to man is not really his word. They herald the love of God over the Law even though God everywhere in Scripture says that what the Law commands is love. They are substituting their connotation for God's denotation of what the Law says. Because we are sinners and the Law, as an authentic Word of God, accuses us of sin, the Law has its own authentic negative ring. But these theologians give it another synthetic negative ring, the hollow ring of not being an authentic Word of God, that saints like David somehow never heard.

They seize upon the *telos* (end, goal, purpose, objective) of the Law (Romans 10:4) to make it into termination of the Law as sheer termination without fulfillment because it always was "alien" to God. This they say despite Paul's and Luther's meaning, as should be expected of *telos*, as a goal, purpose, or objective to be fulfilled. They waterboard Christ's saying, "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill," until it finally confesses that fulfill means sheer termination without fulfillment. They truncate Paul's words, "Christ [is] the end of the law for righteousness" by cutting off the phrase "for righteousness." By dismembering the Word, they make it say what they want. Thus, they rob Christ of his fulfillment of the Law.

When they rob Christ of his fulfillment of the Law for me, they rob me of my consolation in the blood of Christ. With their doctrine in mind, what good does it do me when my pastor says to me at the Communion rail, "This is the blood of Christ, shed for the remission of your sin"? They have reduced the blood of Christ from accomplishing satisfaction to God for me to a mere inspiration to believe some foggy notion of God's good will, not rooted in any truth, but created just now by my faith.

Instead of Christ's Words of Institution assuring me that Christ carries the weight, their teaching shifts the weight to me. They lay upon me the unbearable heaviness of faith in my faith instead of faith in Christ's blood. Their pat on the head might give some a sense of equanimity, but it only assaults me with the monster of uncertainty. All this nice-guyism where, by their termination of God's Law without it being fulfilled, they try to present themselves as nicer than God, is not so nice. It is a legalism that commands, "Create atonement by faith," "Save yourself by believing." That is Pharaoh commanding me to make bricks without straw.

Faith without the truth to be believed is not so easy. Faith must have something besides itself or some generic "preaching" to believe. The Formula of Concord addresses this. In Article III of the Solid Declaration on "The Righteousness of Faith before God," ¶ 57, we confess "Faith relies on this before God, which God credits to faith." What is "this" that faith relies on? What is "this" that God credits to faith? It is the vicarious satisfaction worked by Christ for us. The passage is dealing with a controversy whether Christ worked his vicarious satisfaction for us only according to his divine nature, only according to his human nature, or by his whole undivided person, both

divine and human. In answering that it is by his whole person, the entire discussion presupposes that Christ did, of course, work vicarious satisfaction.

[57] As mentioned above, the obedience not only of one nature, but of the entire person, is a complete satisfaction and atonement for the human race. By this obedience God's eternal, unchangeable righteousness, revealed in the Law, has been satisfied. So, our righteousness benefits us before God and is revealed in the Gospel. Faith relies on this before God, which God credits to faith, as it is written in Romans 5:19:

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous.

The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. (1 John 1:7)

The righteous shall live by his faith. (Habakkuk 2:4 [see also Romans 1:17])

[58] Neither Christ's divine nor human nature by itself is credited to us for righteousness, but only the obedience of the person who is at the same time God and man. And faith thus values Christ's person because it was made under the Law [Galatians 4:4] for us and bore our sins, and, in His going to the Father, He offered to His heavenly Father for us poor sinners His entire, complete obedience. This extends from His holy birth even unto death. In this way, He has covered all our disobedience, which dwells in our nature, and its thoughts, words, and works. So disobedience is not charged against us for condemnation. It is pardoned and forgiven out of pure grace alone, for Christ's sake.¹

What faith relies on is the obedience of Christ, his vicarious satisfaction. What God credits to faith is the obedience of Christ. Christ is the end-goal of the Law because He fulfilled it by his active obedience and his passive obedience, his innocent suffering and death. To preach something else might arouse warm religious affections, but those affections are not what the Lutheran confessions call faith.

In the drive to reject the so-called "legal scheme" of the atonement, look how far popular theologians have gone to deny the obedience of Christ to the Law. Steven D. Paulson, for example, in his popular book, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T & T Clark International, 2011), while at the bottom of one page admitting that Christ is without sin,² at the top of the next page launches into an elaborate indictment of Christ as having sins of his own, as being "an original sinner." He speculates into unrevealed mysteries of Gethsemane putting confession of sins of his own into Christ's mouth when He prayed that the cup might pass from him.

Paulson accuses Christ of the original sin of unbelief. He portrays his cry on the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me," as faithlessness.

Confessing made it so, and thus Christ committed his own, personal sin – not only an actual sin, but the original sin. . . . He looked upon himself on the cross and believed in his own belief.³

He has it bass ackwards. As David P. Scaer says:

This [Paulson's] bizarre and totally unacceptable interpretation cannot go unanswered. Jesus' plea to God in the moment of his greatest desperation was the most profound expression of faith ever spoken. True faith is not seen in the hour of health and prosperity but in the moment when the believer is overwhelmed by death. Jesus' enemies got it right: "He trusts in God; let God deliver him" (Matt. 27:43).⁴

This is what happens when terminating the Law without fulfilling it becomes the mainspring driving all of one's gears. Paulson begins *Lutheran Theology* immediately in the introduction on page 2 defining and denigrating "the legal scheme." This denigration and the termination of the Law without vicarious satisfaction rules over all just like the monism of the Tao in Taoism. This termination of God's Law is Paulson's law. Therefore, he cannot tolerate Jesus fulfilling God's Law for us; he cannot tolerate the active obedience of Christ; he cannot tolerate the passive obedience of Christ; he cannot tolerate vicarious satisfaction. That is why atonement does not happen on the cross. Atonement happens in preaching and faith.

This is a reversal from theology to anthropology. Paulson says:

The most famous theological assertion of the last two centuries came from Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), who knew Luther was correct, that faith makes god, and with this principle effected a Copernican revolution from theology to anthropology that made God a projection of human needs. Unfortunately, Christ suffered on the cross the cost of anthropological projection of the heart's faith, where he came to believe that his Father was not pleased with him, thus multiplying sin in himself just like any other original sinner who does not trust a promise from God.⁵

Paulson's animus against the Law is based in part on his misrepresenting it. He caricatures the Law saying, "The Law demands an example from Christ and an imitation by sinners."⁶ No. The Law is replete with redemption where a kinsman performs obligations for another. The kinsman is the *vicar* (substitute) of his relative, hence vicarious satisfaction. Christ became our Brother to qualify as our kinsman, our *vicar*, to vicariously satisfy the Law for us.

Anyone who properly understands the story of Boaz and Ruth knows this. Under the Law, Boaz is *vicar* and *levir*. As *vicar*, Boaz redeemed the land of Ruth's deceased husband from its bondage in debt. (Leviticus 25:23-28) With that redemption won by fulfilling the Law, Boaz next could qualify under the Law of *levir* to marry Ruth (Deuteronomy 25:5-10), and Ruth was a sanctified woman whom Boaz could marry. When Boaz informed the other relative, whose priority was ahead of his, of the duty to play the part of a *levir* as going along with the obligation of *vicar* to redeem the land, that other relative backed off. He wanted the land but not Ruth. That left Boaz free to buy "all that was Elimilech's" and thereby also claim the right to marry Ruth. (Ruth 4:9-10)

This is what Christ does for his bride, the Church. The Law is not demanding an example from Christ but redemption, and it is not demanding imitation of Christ but faith in Christ and fidelity to him as his Bride. The Law is out of the way because Christ fulfilled it, not because God just up and terminated it. We sinners cannot obey the law to believe, because we have no power to

believe in Jesus Christ our Redeemer Lord. But the Holy Spirit calls us by the Gospel, enlightens us with his gifts, and sanctifies and keeps us in the one true faith. We have looked at the demand of the law to have faith in Christ not to imply that we could do that without the Gospel and the Holy Spirit, but only to show that Paulson has caricatured what the Law demands.

Theologians of the contrary camp, in the name of love, have sapped the romance from Boaz and Ruth, from Christ and His Church. These nice guys have ruined the consolation of Christ's blood as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world, and the sins for which I need forgiveness.

¹ Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 545.

² Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 104.

³ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 105.

⁴ David P. Scaer, "[Is the Law Intrinsic to God's Essence](https://media.ctsfw.edu/Text/ViewDetails/16407)," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 81:1-2, January/April 2018, 3-18, 14. <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Text/ViewDetails/16407>.

⁵ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 105.

⁶ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 103.