



Loss of Scripture and Atonement: It Goes Both Ways

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It would be downright mockery if the modern theologians, who deny the inspiration of Scripture and the satisfactio vicaria, consented to subscribe to the Symbols of the Lutheran Church, because the entire doctrinal content of the Symbols rests on those two fundamental doctrines.¹

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Abstract

The essay argues that the doctrines of Scripture and vicarious atonement (*satisfactio vicaria*) are reciprocally linked: loss of one typically leads to loss of the other. While the path from

¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), I.359, n. 164.

denial of Scripture's inspiration to erosion of atonement is widely recognized, the reverse direction—loss of atonement leading to loss of Scripture—receives less attention but is equally significant.

The author begins by drawing on Francis Pieper to demonstrate this dynamic. Pieper identifies Christ's substitutionary satisfaction as the heart of the Gospel and the Christian faith. Denial of this doctrine is not merely one error among others but the deeper "disease" of which rejection of Scripture as God's infallible Word is a symptom. Without faith in the crucified Christ who atones, one lacks the spiritual capacity to rightly receive Scripture. Pieper illustrates this connection historically through the Socinians, 19th-century rationalism, and J.C.K. von Hofmann.

The essay supplements Pieper with multiple conceptual lines of connection—spiritual-Christological, anthropological, doctrinal, hermeneutical, worldview, and epistemological—showing how rejecting penal substitution flattens sin, necessitates a hermeneutic that sits in judgment over Scripture, and creates irresolvable conflicts with the biblical text's self-understanding.

A detailed case study examines "Radical Lutheranism," especially Gerhard O. Forde's theology. Forde rejects the orthodox Lutheran doctrine of vicarious satisfaction, proposing instead an "up and forgive" view in which God simply forgives without the cross serving as payment, and atonement occurs existentially in the event of proclamation (absolution) that kills and raises the sinner. To sustain this, Forde subordinates Scripture to higher-critical methods (Source and Redaction Criticism), treating key atonement passages (e.g., ransom sayings, Words of Institution) as later church additions rather than Jesus' own words. Scripture is relegated to secondary discourse that authorizes proclamation rather than functioning as primary divine address. This "sheer proclamation" approach, the essay contends, conflicts with the Lutheran Confessions, which ground absolution in Christ's complete obedience and merits.

The reciprocating motion between these doctrines calls for vigilance on both fronts. Guarding Scripture while allowing atonement to be hollowed out leaves the faith vulnerable. True Christian faith and a proper attitude toward Scripture arise together from encounter with the atoning Christ. The essay concludes that the church must confess and proclaim both the formal principle (Scripture) and the material principle (justification by Christ's vicarious satisfaction) in their inseparable unity.

1. Introduction

A loss of the doctrine of Scripture, given time, usually leads to loss of other truths, especially Christ's atoning work. Most confessional Lutherans and other historically orthodox Christians know this. What is less well known is that it also goes the other way. A loss of the doctrine of atonement, given time, usually leads to loss of the doctrine of Scripture, which in turn leads to losses of other truths. This essay seeks to raise awareness of the second motion, from loss of atonement to loss of Scripture.

This essay will sketch and illustrate the connection between loss of atonement and loss of Scripture using insights from Francis Pieper and a set of conceptual lines of connection. Then it will present a case study: atonement and Scripture in Radical Lutheranism.

The reciprocating motion between Scripture and atonement cautions us against watchfulness only at one front, the front of Scripture. It is necessary also to watch at the front of atonement. In either direction or at either front, all the same things are at risk in either direction.

2. Loss of Atonement Leads to Loss of Scripture

A. Francis Pieper's Insights

Synopsis

Francis Pieper identifies Christ's vicarious satisfaction in his work of atonement as essential to the Christian faith.

But the offense of the cross² and the natural inability of sinful man to receive the Gospel³ cause opposition to vicarious satisfaction to rise not only in the world but in the church.

Pieper connects denial of vicarious satisfaction in the atonement to denial of Scripture. He uses the language of disease and symptoms, of a real reason, and of a necessary causal connection. He says, that: denials of the doctrine of Scripture are symptoms of a more deep-seated disease, the denial of vicarious satisfaction; the real reason Scripture is not recognized as Christ's Word is the denial of vicarious satisfaction; and there is necessarily a causal connection between the denial of Christ's vicarious satisfaction and the rejection of Scripture as the Word of God.

Consistent with this, Pieper says faith in Christ and the Gospel precede recognition of the divine authority of Scripture. Consequently, in dealing with unbelievers it would be fruitless to begin with an attempt to convince them of the divine authority of Scripture. First they must come to the knowledge of their sins and to faith in Christ, the Redeemer from sin. When a person believes that God has saved mankind from eternal damnation by the substitutional suffering and death of his Son, that person will not be inclined to doubt that God has in addition given man the Holy Scriptures as his infallible Word.

² Galatians 5:11. The meaning of the phrase, "offense of the cross" is clear in Tyndale's translation, "the offense which the crosse geveth." The cross gives offense. The cross speaks an insulting indictment against us as sinners. In one aspect, it says that what God required as satisfaction for our sin was "the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot," (1 Peter 1:18-19), the suffering of God's "Beloved son" (Matthew 3:17. 17:5, Luke 20:13). The measure of the satisfaction says something offensive about the measure of our sin. In another aspect, since Christ is our substitute on the cross, when we look upon him there, we see how our sin looks in the eyes of God. "His appearance was so marred, beyond human semblance, and his form beyond that of the children of mankind." (Isaiah 52:14, ESV2011). His awful, to say the least, appearance is the picture of us as sinners.

³ 1 Corinthians 2:14, 1:18, John 3:3, 6:44, 8:43-47, Romans 8:7-8. Explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, Luther's Small Catechism. "Let us bear in mind that the Christian religion, the truth that mankind is reconciled to God through the *satisfactio vicaria* of Christ and that man therefore has a gracious God by faith in Christ without the deeds of the Law, is *terra incognita* to all men, including the philosophers. This truth, the essence of the Christian religion, has never "entered into the heart of man" (1 Cor. 2:9)." Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.17.

Pieper observes this dynamic—the motion from denial of atonement to denial of Scripture—in multiple contexts in history. We will look at three examples: the Socinians, 19th century rationalism, and J. C. K. von Hofmann. These sources, along with others,⁴ flow together into contemporary denials of atonement and hence of Scripture.

Following is a selection of passages from Pieper demonstrating the foregoing synopsis.

What Is the Christian Religion

- “The Gospel, which brings men the forgiveness of sins for the sake of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction ... constitutes the very essence of the Christian religion.”⁵
- “In the Christian language, religion has an altogether different meaning. The Christian religion is faith in the Gospel, that is, faith in the divine message that through the substitutionary satisfaction of Christ (*satisfactio vicaria*) God is already reconciled to all men.”⁶
- “The nature and character of Christian worship differs radically from that of the worship practiced in all other religions. Christians worship God as the God who has bestowed His grace upon them not on account of the works of the Law, but for the sake of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction.”⁷
- “Whoever denies the substitutional satisfaction of Christ denies the very essence of the Christian faith, because only the reliance on Christ’s vicarious satisfaction (1 Cor. 2:2; 15:1-3; John 1:29) is the Christian faith.”⁸
- “But the faith in Christ, which the Holy Ghost works through the Scriptures, is always faith in the *Christus crucifixus*, that is, faith in the vicarious satisfaction of Christ, the faith that [as Luther says] “Christ suffered for us” (St. L. XVIII: 1681). Without this faith the so-called faith is on a level with the faith of the Turks or Jews, who believe in God “without the cost”; here the spiritual understanding of Scripture and a genuine “experience of Christ” are entirely out of the question.”⁹

Symptom and Disease

- “The fact that the modern theologians do not perceive Scripture (which verily is

⁴ A very prominent one being Peter Abelard. “The modern deniers of the Vicarious Satisfaction have closely followed the pattern set by Abelard (d. 1142). He taught that the Son of God came into the flesh not to satisfy the justice of God, but to give us, by His teaching and example, particularly by His death, the supreme proof of God’s love and thus to awaken in us love for God; and that by exercising this love for God we are reconciled and justified. To say that God was reconciled by the blood of the innocent Christ would be, says Abelard, ‘cruel and unjust.’” Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.356

⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.196.

⁶ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.9.

⁷ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.12.

⁸ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.232.

⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* I.326.

Christ's own Word, given us through His Prophets and Apostles) to be the Word of God, is but a symptom of a deeper-seated disease, namely, that they have quite generally discarded the doctrine of the *satisfactio Christi vicaria*. ... Modern theology must therefore return to the Scriptural teaching of the *satisfactio vicaria*. Without this return it will never attain the Christian attitude toward Scripture, but will continue, in its teaching on Scripture, to contradict Christ and His Apostles to their face."¹⁰

Real Reason; Causal Connection

- “The denial of the *satisfactio vicaria* is about as universal as the denial of the inspiration of Holy Scripture. *And right here we have the real reason why Scripture is not recognized as Christ's Word.* Whoever denies the *satisfactio vicaria* does not know the Christ whom Scripture shows us. (John 1:29: ‘Behold the Lamb of God, etc.’; Matt. 20:28: ‘to give His life a ransom for many.’) And one who does not know Christ cannot know Christ's Word. Christ Himself makes the statement: ‘Why do ye not understand My speech? Even because ye cannot hear My Word. . . . He that is of God heareth God's words; ye therefore hear them not because ye are not of God.’ (John 8:43,47.) ... *There is necessarily a causal connection between the denial of Christ's vicarious satisfaction and the rejection of Scripture as the Word of God.* And conversely, the knowledge of Christ as the sinner's Savior and the recognition of Scripture as the Word of God go hand in hand.¹¹

Faith in Christ and the Gospel Precedes Recognition of Scripture

- “Nor can those have the *testimonium Spiritus Sancti* who consistently deny the vicarious satisfaction of Christ, since the Christian faith is *fides Christi “crucifixi,”* and only with this faith does the Holy Ghost enter the heart of man, to enable him to judge correctly concerning divine things, and that includes Scripture.”¹²
- “In dealing with an unbeliever we cannot begin with an attempt to convince him of the divine authority of Scripture. We must first bring him to the knowledge of his sins and to faith in Christ, the Redeemer from sin. We should preach to him on the basis of Scripture — without discussing the authority of Scripture — repentance and remission of sin. If a man has in this way — and there is no other way — become a Christian, a sheep of Christ's flock, a child of God, then he will know that the Word of Scripture is God's Word, just as the children of God among the Jews knew and received the word Christ spoke as God's Word. If the camel has first gone through the eye of the needle (Hofacker's phrase), that is to say, if a man has by way of the *contritio* and *fides* wrought by the Holy Ghost become a Christian, he will refrain from criticizing anything in Scripture, even if he does not understand certain portions of it; the truth of the entire

¹⁰ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.300-301.

¹¹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.6, emphasis added.

¹² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.312.

Scripture is guaranteed to him by the authority of Him (John 10:35; 17:14,17) whom he adores in faith as his Lord and Redeemer. That is the Christian attitude toward Scripture. Luther describes it thus: ‘If you cannot understand how it could have been six days [at creation], then accord the Holy Spirit the honor that He is more learned than you. For you are so to deal with the Scriptures that you bear in mind that God Himself is saying this.’ (St. L. 111:21.) And this submission to God’s Word is not an ‘enforced’ subjection to an ‘external authority,’ unbecoming the Christian, but a childlike, willing, glorious submission to God; even as the Christian in his entire life submits to God’s ways and permits God to guide him.”¹³

- “If a person actually believes the Gospel, if he believes that God has saved mankind from eternal damnation by the substitutional suffering and death of His Son, he will not be inclined to doubt that God has in addition given man the Holy Scriptures as His infallible Word. Whoever really believes the doctrine of justification may indeed for a time be assailed by doubts regarding the divinity of Scripture, but it is hard to assume that he could persistently deny it and still cling to the Christian doctrine of the remission of sins by faith in the merit of Christ.”¹⁴
- “Our missionaries in heathen countries, our home missionaries, and our institutional workers do not therefore begin with rational arguments for the divinity of Holy Scripture, but they preach ‘to one and all’ (*‘in den Haufen hinein’*) repentance and remission of sins. And when faith in *Christum ‘crucifixum’* has once been created, there is no need to worry about securing faith in the divinity of Holy Scripture.”¹⁵

Ken Schurb takes up this same insight in his essay, “Gospel and Scripture.”

In dealing with an unbeliever we cannot begin with an attempt to convince him of the divine authority of Scripture. We must first bring him to the knowledge of his sins and to faith in Christ, the Redeemer from sin.

After people are converted to Christ by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel, they will want to have the same attitude toward Scripture that Jesus had. When people are justified by faith, it is in their new nature to take God at His word in everything He says. In this sense, they believe all that is laid down and written in the Scriptures.¹⁶

¹³ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.137-138.

¹⁴ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.268-269, n. 80, quoting from *Lehre und Wehre*.

¹⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.313.

¹⁶ Ken Schurb, “Gospel and Scripture” in Ken Schurb, ed., *Rediscovering the Issues Surrounding the 1974 Concordia Seminary Walkout* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2023), 29, quoting Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1950), I.137-138, and citing Jacob A. O. Preus, *It Is Written* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), Martin Chemnitz, *Loci Theologici*, Part II, trans. J. A. O. Preus, *Chemnitz’s Works* 8 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2008), 915-18, 927-32; and Johann Gerhard, *On Justification*

Socinians

The Socinians, who follow the doctrines of Socinus,¹⁷ oppose any element of Christ making satisfaction for us in the atonement. Satisfaction is,

opposed by the Socinians, who say that the satisfaction is not proper, but according to Socinus (*Praelectiones Theologicae*, ch. 19, p. 109), “only a kind of deliverance without any true price being paid.”¹⁸

This is what Luther refuted when he spoke of adversaries who assert some kind of atonement “without the cost.”¹⁹ Ronald F. Ziegler notes that:

Already, in the time of Lutheran orthodoxy, Abraham Calov and Johann Andreas Quenstedt spent considerable effort in refuting the teachings of the Socinians [against vicarious satisfaction].²⁰

For more on this and the ongoing contemporary significance of the Socinians, see:

- Jack D. Kilcrease, “Johann Gerhard, the Socinians, and Modern Rejections of Substitutionary Atonement,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 82, no. 1-2 (2018), 19-44.
- Hägglund, Bengt. “The Struggle Against Socinianism,” in Bengt Hägglund, *History of Theology*, 4th rev. ed. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007, 322-323.

Pieper states the relationship between Socinian denial of substitutionary satisfaction and the denial of Christ on the one hand and denial of the inspiration of Scripture on the other.

- “Socinus ... denies the deity of Christ and the substitutionary satisfaction and this results most naturally in the denial of the inspiration of Scripture.”²¹

19th Century Rationalism

- When rationalism, which wielded a mighty influence after the middle of the 19th century, discarded the Christian doctrine in general, namely, the *satisfactio Christi*

through Faith, trans. Richard J. Dinda, ed. Joshua J. Hayes and Heath R. Curtis, gen. ed. Benjamin T. G. Mayes, *Theological Commonplaces* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 115, 122, 242-45; also Eugene E Klug, “Saving Faith and the Inerrancy of Scripture,” *Spr* 39 (March 1976): 202-11.

¹⁷ Lelio Francesco Maria Sozzini (29 January 1525 – 4 May 1562), often known in English by his Latinized name Laelius Socinus.

¹⁸ Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Johannes Quenstedt*, 2nd ed. trans. Matthew Carver (Sidney, Montana: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024), 126.

¹⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* I.326

²⁰ Roland F. Ziegler, “Foreword,” in Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), ix. See Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Johannes Quenstedt*, 2nd ed. trans. Matthew Carver (Sidney, Montana: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024) and Abraham Calov, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Abraham Calov*, trans. Matthew Carver (Sidney, Montana: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024).

²¹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), I.273, n. 87, emphasis added.

vicaria, it also discarded the inspiration of Holy Scripture. The denial of the *satisfactio vicaria* is a surrender of the *differentia specifica* of Christianity and puts the Christian religion in a class with the pagan religion of works. What need is there after that of a God-inspired Holy Scripture? ... Because it has not returned to the Scripture doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction of Christ, modern theology stands outside the sphere within which the Word of Christ, which we have in the Scriptures of the Apostles and Prophets, is recognized as Christ's, that is, God's Word. Whoever will not believe what Christ and the Apostles teach of the reconciliation of the world by the substitutional satisfaction of Christ will naturally also not believe what Christ and the Apostles say of Holy Scripture. Whoever rejects God's thoughts and entertains his own thoughts on God's reconciliation of sinful mankind will naturally also entertain his own thoughts on God's Word, Holy Scripture, even to the extent of rejecting what God says regarding Scripture.²²

J. C. K. von Hofmann²³

“J. C. K. von Hoffman attacked the orthodox doctrine of vicarious satisfaction in the name of a *heilsgeschichtliche* theology.”²⁴ Hofmann claimed his new *Heilsgeschichte* (salvation history) and *Ichtheologie*²⁵ were (1) truer to Scripture, (2) truer to Luther, and (3) truer to the Lutheran confessions than was Lutheran Orthodoxy's vicarious satisfaction.

Two of Hofmann's colleagues at Erlangen University, Theodosius Harnack and Gottfried Thomasius, and another of Hofmann's contemporaries, Rostock University theologian Friedrich Adolph Philippi, devoted considerable effort to refuting Hofmann's doctrine of atonement and maintaining the position of Lutheran orthodoxy. The three of them distributed Hofmann's three claims among themselves and refuted them thoroughly.²⁶

Jack D. Kilcrease provides “*Heilsgeschichte* and Atonement in the Theology of Johannes Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810-1877): An Exposition and Critique.”²⁷

²² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.267-268.

²³ Johannes Christian Konrad von Hofmann (21 December 1810 – 20 December 1877).

²⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 3.

²⁵ *Ichtheologie* literally “I-theology” or “ego-theology” — theology centered on the self. The idea is that Hofmann grounded theological knowledge not primarily in Scripture as an external, authoritative Word of God, but in his own subjective Christian experience. He famously argued that *he himself* — his personal experience of regeneration and faith — was the primary object of theological study. The theologian examines his own inner Christian life and derives theology from that self-reflection. This is why Pieper calls it a “subjective theology.” Rather than Scripture speaking to the theologian, the theologian's inner experience becomes the starting point and interpretive lens. You can see immediately why this would lead where Pieper says it leads — if the self and its experience are the foundation, then Scripture becomes subordinate to that experience, and doctrines like vicarious satisfaction that offend the natural self can be quietly set aside when they conflict with what the theologian finds in his inner life.

²⁶ Theodosius Harnack, Gottfried Thomasius, and Friedrich Philippi, *Atonement in Confessional Lutheran Theology: Harnack, Thomasius & Philippi* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc. 2025).

²⁷ Jack D. Kilcrease, “*Heilsgeschichte* and Atonement in the Theology of Johannes Christian Konrad von Hofmann (1810-1877): An Exposition and Critique,” *Logia: A Journal of Lutheran Theology* 22, no. 2 (2013), pp. 13-26.

In a passage from Pieper quoted earlier in this essay, Hofmann is an example Pieper cites. He says,

- Hofmann, for instance, who has been called the father of the subjective theology (*Ichtheologie*) among the conservative Lutheran theologians of the nineteenth century, has very definitely denied the substitutional atonement of Christ. The denial of the *satisfactio vicaria* is about as universal as the denial of the inspiration of Holy Scripture. And right here we have the real reason why Scripture is not recognized as Christ's Word. ... There is necessarily a causal connection between the denial of Christ's vicarious satisfaction and the rejection of Scripture as the Word of God.²⁸

B. Conceptual Lines of Connection

This portion of the essay lists (only briskly) multiple conceptual lines of connection from loss of atonement to loss of Scripture. These lines are drawn from treatments of the subject across Christendom. They are distinct yet overlapping.

Lines of connection include:

- *Spiritual-Christological*: Christ with his vicarious satisfaction is not only a doctrine. He, with his work, is the object of saving faith. One who does not have “this faith” as previously discussed in reference to *Augsburg Confession*, Article IV,²⁹ does not know Christ who is the author, guarantor, and subject of Scripture. Christ's text becomes opaque and alien at its core. The unbeliever does not know Christ as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (John 1:29), the ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). Not knowing *this* Christ, he is spiritually unable to understand Scripture. He cannot hear it. (John 8:43, 47) This inability leads to a rejection of Scripture.
- *Anthropological*: When vicarious satisfaction is denied, the doctrine of sin is flattened. In the flattened view, sin does not appear, as Paul says, “exceedingly sinful.” (Romans 7:13). Sin may be only moral weakness, ignorance, or social dysfunction, but not fault, guilt, iniquity, or worthy of condemnation.³⁰ That makes substantial portions of Scripture seem harsh, primitive, or morally offensive, so the plenary authority of Scripture is abandoned. The sacrificial system, the imprecatory Psalms, the wrath of

²⁸ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, I.6

²⁹ Although a Lutheran confessional article is cited here for handy reference to material previously discussed in this essay, there is no implication that only Lutherans have “this faith” or that only Lutherans can understand Scripture. Many Christians outside of the Lutheran church do have “this faith” which is and always has been the faith of the church catholic.

³⁰ In this flattened view, while condemnation for actual sin is rejected, original sin as real sin and condemning sin is a special object of derision. But we confess, “Our churches teach that since the fall of Adam [Romans 5:12], all who are naturally born are born with sin [Psalm 51:5], that is, without the fear of God, without trust in God, and with the inclination to sin, called concupiscence. [2] Concupiscence is a disease and original vice that is truly sin. It damns and brings eternal death on those who are not born anew through Baptism and the Holy Spirit [John 3:5].” *Augsburg Confession*, Article II.

God, the language of curse and condemnation, the bloodiness of atonement,³¹ etc. becomes an embarrassment,³² so the pressure to revise or relativize Scripture follows.

- *Doctrinal interdependence*: Vicarious satisfaction is the “material principle” of the gospel (justification through Christ’s substitutionary work), while Scripture’s inspiration and inerrancy is the “formal principle” (the authoritative source).³³ The two are interdependent: the Bible’s central message is Christ, the atoning substitute. If that message is judged false, inadequate, or in need of correction, then the source itself cannot be fully trustworthy in all it teaches. Denying the atonement forces a choice—either abandon parts of the Bible or demote it from infallible divine revelation to a fallible human witness open to revision.
- *Hermeneutical*: If vicarious satisfaction is wrong, then enormous swaths of Scripture are not just difficult but positively misleading—Isaiah 53, Romans 3, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 9-10, 1 Peter 2:24, 1 John 2:2, etc. The denial therefore requires a hermeneutical move that finds some principle outside of or above the plain sense of the text by which to sort the acceptable meaning from the unacceptable meaning. The text becomes answerable to that principle. The principle judges Scripture. The principle sorts the canon of Scripture into a canon within the canon: which parts of the canon are authoritative?
- *Worldview consistency*: Modern sensibilities find key elements of the biblical worldview surrounding vicarious satisfaction offensive. Holy justice, divine wrath against sin, human guilt, and the necessity of penal satisfaction are rejected. Atonement is reframed (moral influence, *Christus Victor* without penal elements,³⁴ etc.). But the biblical text consistently presents exactly that worldview across both Testaments. To sustain the denial, one must conclude that Scripture is mistaken or culturally conditioned on these core matters. That conclusion is incompatible with inerrancy.
- *Epistemological*: A thread running through some of other lines is epistemological. Epistemology is the study or theory of *how* we know what we know. When a person rejects vicarious satisfaction but sees that Scripture teaches it, that creates an epistemological conflict: in spiritual matters, is revelation in Scripture the solution to the epistemological problem? The typical response is revision of atonement from what Scripture says requires “flexibility” in interpretation → that flexibility is applied to the text’s self-claims about its own divine origin and freedom from error → full inerrancy

³¹ Hebrews 9:22, Revelation 1:5.

³² John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 25-26.

³³ “A Statement of Scriptural and Confessional Principles,” Article IV(C), Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, *Proceedings of the 1973 Convention*, Resolution 3-01, 127–128.

³⁴ Gustaf Aulén did not recognize *Christus Victor* in coordination with or complementary to Anselm. Rather, “Anselm is judged not simply inadequate, but anathema.” Peter J. Scaer, “The Atonement in Mark’s Sacramental Theology.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 227-242, 227.

is denied → and then we are off to the flexibility races, so to speak.

The spiritual-Christological line of connection between denial of atonement and denial of Scripture warrants special attention. While the other lines might be reduced by some people to rational, intellectual, or philosophical problems, this one is different. It is a heart-level causal barrier. Not everyone hears Jesus' voice.³⁵ Jesus often described this as lacking ears to hear.³⁶ The veil of Moses lies on the hearts of many.

Moses, put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ. But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. (2 Corinthians 3:13-16)

We understand Scriptures when Christ opens them to us: "Did not our heart burn within us while He talked with us on the road, and while He opened the Scriptures to us?" (Luke 24:32) "He opened their understanding, that they might comprehend the Scriptures." (Luke 24:45).

3. Case Study: Atonement and Scripture in Radical Lutheranism

Origin of Radical Lutheranism

The designation "Radical Lutheranism" originates with an essay by Gerhard O. Forde titled, "Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America."³⁷ Forde published this in 1987. In that year, negotiations among multiple Lutheran synods were under way to form the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Also in that year, the journal *Lutheran Quarterly* was relaunched. These events were the dual occasion for Forde's article. "Radical Lutheranism" led off as the first essay in the first issue of the relaunched journal. It was intended to provide a theological direction for the journal in terms of the radical implications of justification by faith alone. The formation of the ELCA by merger raised questions about Lutheran identity. In the article, Forde addressed the future of Lutheran identity, which he viewed as being bound largely to ethnic and cultural backgrounds rather than the theological identity he argued should be defined by dedication to the "radical" gospel of Jesus Christ and the concept of justification by faith.

In the article, the word "radical" does not mean what one might expect from its use in American politics. The word comes from the Latin *radix*, which means root. Forde wanted to "probe to the root, the *radix*, of our identity crisis."³⁸ He wanted to direct attention to the root, the rock

³⁵ John 18:37.

³⁶ Matthew 11:1, 13:9, 13:15, 13:43, Mark 4:9, 7:16, 8:18, Luke 14:35.

³⁷ Gerhard Forde, "Radical Lutheranism: Lutheran Identity in America," *Lutheran Quarterly* 1(1987): 4-18, reprinted in Gerhard O. Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, eds Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 3-16.

³⁸ Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," 7.

bottom of what a Lutheran is. He said:

In the “homeland” established Lutheranism was predominantly a folk religion, a quasi-political and ethnic reality, closely identified with national and social life. Take all that away [as was happening in America] and what is left? What is Lutheranism at rock bottom?³⁹ . . . Is retention of the name [Lutheran] anything more than romantic nostalgia?⁴⁰

Forde was dead right to steer his readers toward an identity by confession rather than identities by ethnicities, culture, family ties, and so on. He was, in a sense, conducting an intervention, and a needed one.

Not only so, but Forde contributed something new to the existing body of literature and the state of analysis of the situation. Martin Marty and others had analyzed the greatest threats to a truly Lutheran identity that are worth remembering. But Forde added one: Decadent Pietism.⁴¹ Not traditional Pietism, which has its own problems but also some virtues, but an American shift from those virtues to Decadent Pietism. This was highly insightful, much needed, and still forcefully relevant today.

In the midst of all this, Forde says:

My thesis is that Lutherans, to be true to their identity, yes, even to reclaim their identity, or rather be reclaimed by it, should become even more radical proponents of the tradition that gave them birth and has brought them thus far. The crisis in identity indicates the necessity for staking out some turf on the ecclesiastical map. What shall we be? Let us be radicals: not conservatives or liberals, fundagelicals or charismatics (or whatever other brand of something-less-than gospel entices), but radicals: radical preachers and practitioners of the gospel by justification by faith without the deeds of the law. We should pursue it to the radical depths already plumbed by St. Paul, especially in Romans and Galatians, when he saw that justification by faith without the deeds of the law really involves and announces the death of the old being and the calling forth of the new in hope. We stand at a crossroads. Either we must become more radical about the gospel, or we would be better off to forget it altogether.

We should realize first of all that what is at stake on the current scene is certainly not Lutheranism as such. Lutheranism has no particular claim or right to existence. Rather, what is at stake is the radical gospel, radical grace, the eschatological nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ crucified and risen as put in its most uncompromising and unconditional form by St. Paul.⁴²

³⁹ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 2.

⁴⁰ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 3.

⁴¹ Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 4.

⁴² Forde, “Radical Lutheranism,” 5.

One could hardly say it better — assuming no equivocation of terms. As we will see, Forde himself identifies equivocation as the ‘decisive’ issue in the Law-Gospel debate, yet he tragically contributes mightily to further equivocation in ways that hollow out what initially sound like the wonderfully sound statements quoted above.

Sources of Forde’s Atonement Theory

We saw earlier that Forde’s disciple Steven D. Paulson says Forde’s career began with the atonement controversy and ended with it, and that Jack D. Kilcrease says Forde’s atonement theology was essentially stable from his doctoral dissertation in 1969 to his death in 2005.⁴³ Thus, we might think we could get a basic and representative idea of his atonement teaching from just *The Law-Gospel Debate*.⁴⁴ But it is easy enough and fairer to consider additional writings. Upon considering them, we find that we would not have gotten Forde’s own full atonement theory from just *The Law-Gospel Debate*. Essential sources for this purpose have been identified by Kilcrease⁴⁵ and Forde’s later editors, Paulson, Mark C. Mattes, and Nicholas Hopman,⁴⁶ and include:

- Caught in the Act⁴⁷
- The Work of Christ⁴⁸
- Where God Meets Man⁴⁹
- Theology Is for Proclamation⁵⁰

Law-Gospel Debate

Law-Gospel Debate Is About Atonement

The earliest of the sources we will examine is *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 1969.⁵¹ Off the top,

⁴³ Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 101, 131. To see that this spans from 1969 to 2005, assemble the information on both cited pages.

⁴⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969).

⁴⁵ Kilcrease, *Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 101, 131.

⁴⁶ Gerhard O. Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, eds Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Gerhard O. Forde, *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament*, eds Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017); Gerhard O. Forde, *The Essential Forde: Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, eds Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019).

⁴⁷ Gerhard O. Forde, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ,” *Word in World*, 3/1 1983, 22-31, reprinted in Gerhard O. Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004).

⁴⁸ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Work of Christ” in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson, eds., *Christian Dogmatics* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), II.1-99.

⁴⁹ Gerhard O. Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther’s Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972).

⁵⁰ Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation!* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

⁵¹ *The Law-Gospel Debate* published in 1969 by Augsburg Publishing House, was a revised form of Forde’s 1968 Harvard University doctoral dissertation.

that title does not sound like it is about the atonement. But it is. Forde's first two sentences say:

The beginning of the modern debate about law and gospel took the form of a controversy over the doctrine of the atonement. The controversy erupted when J. C. K. von Hoffman attacked the orthodox doctrine of vicarious satisfaction in the name of a *heilsgeschichtliche* theology.⁵²

Forde first portrays what he understands to be the position of orthodoxy on atonement. Then he lays out Hofmann's *heilsgeschichtliche* scheme and then Hofmann's doctrine of atonement. Forde proceeds to treat atonement as essential to the Law-Gospel debate for the rest of the book, with chapters such as "Hoffman on the Atonement," and "The Atonement Controversy." By page 137, the line has been drawn to Karl Barth and Neo-Orthodoxy, and then to the reply to Barth by Lutherans.⁵³ Thus, the inspiration of Scripture, higher criticism, Neo-Orthodoxy, and Law-Gospel Reductionism all are woven together with the atonement. Steven Paulson says, "Forde first became a theologian by taking up the great and nearly unceasing debates over atonement, and he finished the same way."⁵⁴

Critical Problem: Place of the Law in Atonement

Forde identifies the critical problem in the controversy: *the place of the Law*.⁵⁵ What is the position of Lutheran Orthodoxy that Hofmann attacked, and what has the Law got to do with it?

In Lutheran Orthodoxy, Christ comes born under the Law to redeem those who are under the Law.⁵⁶ The Law's penalty for sin is death.⁵⁷ "Life is in the blood,"⁵⁸ and "without the shedding of blood there is no remission."⁵⁹ We are redeemed with "the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."⁶⁰ By his blood, Christ entered the Most Holy Place and offered himself through the Spirit to God to cleanse our conscience from dead works.⁶¹

⁵² Forde, *Law-Gospel Debate*, 3.

⁵³ Marquart identifies one of the significant tributaries leading to Seminex as Barthian Neo-Orthodoxy, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 78-79, 112-114, and 118-119. Marquart refers to "the Barthian penetration of the seminary" by 1959, p. 119.

⁵⁴ Paulson, "Forde Lives!" 32.

⁵⁵ Forde, "The Critical Problem: The Place of Law in the Theological System," *The Law-Gospel Debate*, Chapter V, 69-78.

⁵⁶ Galatians 4:5.

⁵⁷ Romans 6:23.

⁵⁸ Genesis 9:4, Leviticus 17:11, Deuteronomy 12:23, John 6:53-54.

⁵⁹ Hebrews 9:22.

⁶⁰ 1 Peter 18.19.

⁶¹ "Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats and the ashes of a heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" Hebrews

Lutheran theology calls this voluntary and substitutionary suffering of the Law's penalty of death for sin Christ's passive obedience.

Lutheran Orthodoxy teaches that Christ also rendered active obedience to God for us under the Law. He himself was not bound by the Law, but he voluntarily assumed our place under it and fulfilled it for us. For example, he fulfilled the Fourth Commandment by his submission to Joseph and Mary⁶² and by his provision for Mary from the cross when He placed her in the care John.⁶³ Even his Baptism was not for himself, since it was a Baptism for the remission of sin and He had no sin of his own. His Baptism was for us. It was part of his saving mission to fulfill all righteousness for us.⁶⁴

Attack on Law and Vicarious Satisfaction

In *The Law-Gospel Debate*, Forde begins with Hofmann's critique and rejection of that place of the Law in Christ's atonement. In the past, Abelard, Socinus, Grotius and others criticized orthodoxy for that placement. They all wanted to get rid of the Law from the atonement, even if they became law-heavy in other areas or ways. Each developed his own explanation of how Christ atones without rendering satisfaction to God under the Law.

Heilsgeschichtliche: A Historical Scheme to Replace the Legal Scheme

Hofmann extends that trend with his invention of *heilsgeschichtliche*, salvation history, a dispensational scheme⁶⁵ comprised of two dispensations, one of Law and the other of Gospel.

The critical problem is the manner in which one conceives of the place of law in the theological system. Is the law as the orthodox system implied ... or is it, as Hofmann has said, only a part of a historical dispensation?⁶⁶

Dispensationalism is the belief that God works differently and relates to man differently in different periods of time called dispensations. Simply by history moving on from one dispensation with a legal basis to another dispensation with a Gospel basis, the Law ends.

All the adversaries of Lutheran Orthodoxy reject the place of the Law calling it either "the legal framework,"⁶⁷ "the legal order" (Gustaf Aulén),⁶⁸ or "the legal scheme" (Gerhard O.

9:12-14.

⁶² Luke 2:51.

⁶³ John 19:26.

⁶⁴ Matthew 3:15.

⁶⁵ David P. Scaer, "Is Law Intrinsic to God's Essence," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 82, nos. 1-2, 2020, 9.

⁶⁶ Gerhard O. Forde, "The Critical Problem: The Place of the Law in the Theological System," in *The Essential Forde*, 45.

⁶⁷ Jason D. Lane, "That I May Be His Own: The Necessary End of the Law," in Steven D. Paulson and Scott L. Keith, eds., *Handing Over the Goods* (Irvine, CA: 2018), 54.

⁶⁸ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herbert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 91.

Forde⁶⁹ and Steven D. Paulson⁷⁰) of the atonement. They want to solve the problem of the place of the law in atonement by removing it one way or another. Hofmann did this by an exogenous injection into Christian theology of German Idealism's view of history.⁷¹ By it, "law is simply replaced by a historical scheme."⁷²

Subsequent Stages of the Law-Gospel Debate

Having set out Hofmann's *du jour* rejection of orthodoxy, Forde proceeds through the timeline and the theologians of the controversy including Theodosius Harnack, Albrecht Ritschl, Karl Barth, Werner Elert, Helmut Thielicke, Gustaf Wingren, Hans Iwand, and a selection of Luther research scholars that he considers representative of Luther research.

No one's atonement theory stands up to evaluation. Starting with Lutheran Orthodoxy, each position is subject to critique from other theories, but then those critiquing theories also fail under subsequent critiques. By process of elimination, all the basic types of theories of atonement are rejected.

You can read the 233-page presentation of the process of elimination. Alternatively, you could get a good taste for the process in a little more than two pages in *Forde's Theology is For Proclamation*, pages 119-121.⁷³ There he dispatches the basic types of atonement doctrines: vicarious satisfaction, subjective atonement, moral influence, and cosmic victory. Another way to survey this in four pages is Forde's "The Work of Christ," *Christian Dogmatics*, volume 2, pages 7-10.

With Lutheran Orthodoxy rejected and all the ancient, medieval, and modern theories rejected too, but sharing the penchant of the adversaries to rid atonement theology of the Law, Forde needs a new scheme. He sees strengths in Hofmann's *heilsgeschichtliche*, but critiques of it add it to the heap of rejected tradition. What to do?

In *The Law-Gospel Debate*, Forde gives one big non-negotiable requirement for his new theory of atonement: *the Law must be removed, vicarious satisfaction must be rejected*. The Word, insofar as atonement is concerned, must be reduced to the Gospel, whatever the Gospel may be. With that much, he agrees with all the critics of vicarious satisfaction.

In our next section we will discover the explicit statement of the new theory of atonement.

Caught In the Act

An oft-cited example of Forde's own doctrine of atonement is his 1983 essay "Caught in the

⁶⁹ Gerhard O. Forde, "The Work of Christ" in Gerhard O. Forde, "The Shape of Tradition," in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, eds., *Christian Dogmatics*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, II.26.

⁷⁰ Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), pretty much the entire book.

⁷¹ Gerhard O. Forde, "The Critical Problem: The Place of the Law in the Theological System," in *The Essential Ford*, 49.

⁷² Forde, "The Critical Problem," 49.

⁷³ Gerhard O. Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 119-121.

Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ.”⁷⁴ There he rejected the orthodox Lutheran doctrine. He replaced vicarious satisfaction with, to use his own phrase, an “up and forgive” theory. Before and without the sacrifice of Christ, God just up and forgave sin, he says. Further, he says that God always was ready to just up and forgive, but we wouldn’t buy it. Thus, he simplifies and short circuits all the prior attempt at getting rid of the role of the Law in the atonement. Simpler than Hofmann who said the Law was actually the deal in the legal dispensation, Forde declares that the Law never was the deal. His doctrine is a simple, “Never mind” to the Law.

Three times in “Caught in the Act” Forde poses the question, why could not God just up and forgive without the cross and, for that matter, without the incarnation.

The persistent criticism of doctrines of vicarious satisfaction and substitutionary atonement since the enlightenment have the same root. The picture painted of God is too black, too contrary to the biblical witness. If the death was payment, how could reconciliation be an act of mercy? Mercy is mercy, not the result of payment. If God is by nature love and mercy, why could he not just up and forgive? Jesus, it seems, forgave sins *before* his death. Why then was the death necessary?⁷⁵

So we come back to our original question: Why the murder of the innocent one? What does that accomplish for us—or for God? What is “the word” of Christ? What does he actually do for us that God could not have done with greater ease and economy in some other way? The crucial and persistent question emerging from discussion of the various views seems always to be that of the necessity for the concrete and actual work of Christ among us. It is, of course, ultimately the question of the necessity for Christology at all. Cannot God just up and forgive and/or cast out demons? Or to use another current form of the question: Is there not grace aplenty in the Old Testament? Or in nature? Or in other religions even? Why Jesus? Why the New Testament?⁷⁶

Why could not God just up and forgive? Let us start there. If we look at the narrative about Jesus, the actual events themselves, the “brute facts” as they have come down to us, the answer is quite simple. He did! Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness, declaring the bounty and mercy of his “Father.” The problem, however, is that we could not buy that. And so we killed him. And just so we are caught in the act.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ,” *World in World*, 3/1 1983, pp. 22-31.

⁷⁵ Forde, “Caught in the Act,” 23.

⁷⁶ Forde, “Caught in the Act,” 25.

⁷⁷ Forde, “Caught in the Act,” 26.

Forde died in 2005, but as Forde disciple Steven D. Paulson⁷⁸ says in the title to his 2019 essay in *The Essential Forde: Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, “Forde Lives!”⁷⁹ He lives in the ongoing work of “his disciples Timothy Wengert, James Nestingen, Steven Paulson, and, more recently, Nicholas Hopman,”⁸⁰ among others.

Paulson and Mark C. Mattes in their 2017 “Introduction” to an anthology of Forde’s writings, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, track Forde saying:

Indeed, why is Christ’s death *necessary* at all? Forde’s radical response is that—it was not! Why could God not just forgive us? He did!⁸¹

Paulson says again in “Forde Lives!”, “The stupefied atonement question—Why could God not just up and forgive?—is answered simply: He did!”⁸²

“Caught in the Act” was a journal article in *Word and World*, a peer-reviewed journal of theology for Christian ministry, which positions it somewhere between a strictly academic theological journal and a more pastoral publication. In our next section we will engage how Forde formulates this theory of atonement in two additional genres of literature:

- Formal, professional dogmatics
- Popular teaching for lay people

The Work of Christ, Where God Meets Man

The Theory

In “The Work of Christ,” which appears in *Christian Dogmatics*, Forde first lays out a pessimistic prospect for any dogmatic consideration of the atonement. He categorizes the ideas of the atonement in tradition into three groups: objective (ones in which the atonement of Christ acts upon God), subjective (ones in which it acts upon man), and classic (victory over divine forces).⁸³ He proceeds through an investigation and evaluation of the tradition of atonement ideas. He finds all of them wanting.⁸⁴ This brings him to his reconstruction of atonement that he hopes will avoid the hazards of dogmatic failures in tradition.

In *Where God Meets Man*, Forde lays out essentially the same material but, in a mode addressed to lay people. This reads very smoothly and is more of a page turner. He speaks

⁷⁸ David P. Scaer, “Is Law Intrinsic to God’s Essence,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 82, nos. 1-2, 2020, 5.

⁷⁹ Steven D. Paulson, “Forde Lives!” in Gerhard O. Forde, *The Essential Forde: Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, eds. Nicholas Hopman, Mark C. Mattes, and Steven D. Paulson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 18-33.

⁸⁰ David P. Scaer, *op cit*.

⁸¹ Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson, “Introduction” in Gerhard O. Forde, *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xxv.

⁸² Paulson, “Forde Lives!” 29.

⁸³ See similarly, Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 41.

⁸⁴ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 1-9.

warmly to his readers and makes the subject accessible.

His solution is that atonement, instead of happening at the cross and empty tomb, happens when the preached word of the cross does something to a sinner, namely, kill him. The cross shows that even for the Only Begotten Son of God, under the Law, there was no way out, only death.⁸⁵ When that word of the cross is preached, then the sinner is confronted with the concrete fact that, if there was no way but death for Christ, there is no way for the sinner to sidestep or weaken the Law. As with Christ, the only solution is for the sinner to die. The Gospel kills and resurrects the sinner. The atonement happens here and now in our existential crisis. There is no atonement until sinners no longer hear the voice of the law.

If Jesus' death has been merely a payment to God he would not have done enough. Wrath and law would not have been *satisfied* in actuality. They are not satisfied until they end, until we don't feel or hear them anymore, i.e., until God acts to put the old Adam to death and to raise up a new one.⁸⁶

Jesus does not die "instead" of us, but rather "ahead" of us, bringing it forward to us. . . . He dies ahead of us to bring us life here and now.⁸⁷

What this means is that the cross and resurrection must be so understood and preached that they bring about in us as well a death and a new life. . . . For if there was no way out for Jesus, how could there be a way out for us. That is the ultimate crescendo of the law. The cross makes us face the truth. It destroys the old Adam.⁸⁸

The Theory Versus Scripture

Having constructed his theory of atonement, Forde must now engage what Scripture actually says. It is at precisely this point, having dispensed with every dogmatic account of the atonement, that Forde turns to Scripture, and what he finds there requires him to dispense with much of that as well.

Peter J. Scaer assembles a "barrage" (his term)⁸⁹ of Scriptural passages that plainly teach vicarious satisfaction before analyzing Forde's theology. Scaer asks, "How does Forde avoid the link between shed blood and forgiveness?"⁹⁰ Forde himself acknowledges that Scripture "quite regularly,"⁹¹ teaches vicarious satisfaction. So, how, indeed, does Forde do it?

In "The Work of Christ," after the introductory survey and rejection of all atonement ideas in

⁸⁵ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 36-38.

⁸⁶ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 42 (emphasis in original).

⁸⁷ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 43.

⁸⁸ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 39.

⁸⁹ Peter J. Scaer, "Reckoned Among the Lawless," 211.

⁹⁰ Peter J. Scaer, "Reckoned Among the Lawless," 218.

⁹¹ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 14.

church tradition, next the doctrine of Scripture is rejected also. Having rejected vicarious satisfaction (and all other dogmatic ideas of the atonement), *then Scripture is treated as merely part of tradition.*⁹² As you read the following, notice what Forde says about Source Q, redactions of the Gospels, Jesus' ignorance, and the placement by redactors onto Jesus lips of things He never said but the church in its tradition decided later. Also notice the diminished or absent role of inspiration by the Holy Spirit.

The earliest layers of the new Testament Gospel sources, the sayings of sources such as Q, indicate no particular reflection on or view of Jesus' work or his fate. Jesus' death was no doubt a mighty shock, but it seems to mostly have been understood in terms of the usual fate of God's prophets: they were rejected and came to a bad end. ... this early view of the life and death of Jesus is reflected also in some of the speeches in Acts, such as Peter's speech in Acts 2, and even in some of Paul's earlier writings (see, e.g., 1 Thess. 2:14ff.). Jesus himself, though he might have and quite possibly did reckon with a violent death at the hands of his adversaries, seems not to have understood or interpreted his own death as a sacrifice for others or ransom for sin. Such interpretation apparently came as a result of later reflection. Even in their final redaction the synoptic Gospels contain little direct or explicit interpretation of Jesus' work. Mark 10:45 has Jesus say that the Son of Man came to give his life "a ransom for many," and the accounts of the Last Supper speak of Jesus' blood as his "blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mark 14:24) and "my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt.26:28). Such passages, in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretive traditions. The same is true of instances where Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection, such as Mark 8;31ff. and 9:31, and parallels in the other Synoptics. These are interpretations attributed to Jesus after the fact. But aside from such scanty references, the Synoptics even in their final form afford little explicit interpretation of Jesus' work.

There is, however, a great deal of interpretation implicit in the presentation of Jesus' life and death. This is no doubt more important than the few explicit passages.⁹³ The passion predictions placed on Jesus' lips show that already in the earlier days there was an attempt to come to grips with the terrible tragedy and offense of his death by seeing it as part of the divine will. Jesus' death was not the result of mere human caprice; it happened "according to the Scriptures," just as the Scriptures reveal—especially in the psalms of lament and suffering.⁹⁴

⁹² Forde, "The Work of Christ," 11-19.

⁹³ Query: What principle of hermeneutics is Forde using here.

⁹⁴ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 12-13.

So, having rejected vicarious satisfaction, but seeing that Scripture teaches vicarious satisfaction, Forde took a view of Scripture hypothesizing back to a mythical state of pre-Scripture that cleanses it of vicarious satisfaction.

The quoted passage deploys both major sub-branches of Higher Criticism of Scripture: Source Criticism (the Q hypothesis)⁹⁵ and Redaction Criticism.⁹⁶ In New Testament scholarship, “Source Q” (often just called Q) refers to a lost written collection of Jesus’ sayings. The name “Q” comes from the German word *quelle*, which means “source”. So, the Q Source is the “source source.” It is hypothetical. No early Church Father mentions Q, and no physical evidence supports it. With hypothetical sources and a series of redactions, the New Testament becomes not Scripture but just part of an evolving church tradition.

The Q hypothesis was invented in an attempt to solve the so-called synoptic problem about why the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke are so similar yet have distinct differences. If we have firstly rejected vicarious satisfaction, we then reject inspiration as the explanation for why, without Q and evolving redaction, the Holy Spirit could inspire the apostles to write Scripture, and the Spirit-inspired Gospels would be both similar and diverse. The denial of atonement leads to denial of Scripture. Note well, this was done so that, as evidenced in the passage from Forde quoted above, we can say such things as that Christ’s own explanations of his death were simply church traditions “placed on Jesus’ lips.” As a result, the “according to the Scriptures” that we confess in the Nicene Creed is rejected.

Christ’s Atonement Sayings Removed by Higher Criticism

So, Jesus did not say things the Bible reports him saying. The following were not originally in Q. They were added later by church tradition. The redactors put these words on his lips and the final redaction “has Jesus saying” them. Jesus had no understanding of any of this.

- “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45). Ransom (*lytron* in Greek), a term historically used for the price paid to liberate slaves or prisoners of war.
- “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” (Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:20)
- “Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. (John 12:24) “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself. This He said, signifying by what death He would die. (John 12:32-33)
- Jesus’ three predictions of his passion: First (Matthew 16:21, Mark 8:31, Luke 9:22), second Matthew 17:22–23, Mark 9:31, Luke 9:44), and third (Matthew 20:17–19, Mark

⁹⁵ Robert L. Thomas and Stanley N. Gundry, *A Harmony of the Gospels* (Chicago: The Moody Bible Institute, 1978), 274-279.

⁹⁶ Thomas and Gundry, *Harmony of the Gospels*, 287-294.

10:32–34, Luke 18:31–33).

- “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This command I have received from My Father.” (John 10:17-18)
- “Jesus, knowing that all things were now accomplished, that the Scripture might be fulfilled ... said, ‘It is finished.’” (John 19:30).

If previously one has rejected vicarious satisfaction, then all these evidences that Jesus knew what was going to happen, that He came for the purpose of doing it, that his doing it would atone for us, that it was his mission, that He had a commandment from his Father to do it, that He had power over what would happen, that He was acting voluntarily, that He knew when he had finished it, etc. must be removed from Scripture in some way or sense. Forde uses Higher Criticism for this.

Words of Institution Wiped from Scripture

Scaer’s question persists: “How does Forde avoid the link between shed blood and forgiveness?”⁹⁷ Forde avoids the link by simply wiping texts from Scripture, including Christ’s own words, that plainly make the link.⁹⁸ In the quotation below, hear Forde’s word ruling over the top of God’s Word. Note that the quotation is Forde’s own words, not Scaer’s or anyone else’s characterization of Forde. Also, as you read this, realize that this is in the two-volume *Christian Dogmatics* published by Fortress Press from which seminarians have been trained.

Mark 10:45 has Jesus say that the Son of Man came to give his life “as a ransom for many,” and the accounts of the Last Supper speak of Jesus’ blood as his “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt. 26:28). Such passages, in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretive traditions. The same is true of instances where Jesus predicts his own death and resurrection, such as Mark 8:13ff and 9:31, and parallels in the other Synoptics.⁹⁹

All Forde had to do for his anti-atonement theology was subordinate Scripture to his prior rejection of vicarious satisfaction, baldly claiming that passages which contradict his theory are “usually regarded” as later tradition rather than authentic words of Jesus — an assertion he makes without evidence simply because his foregone conclusion requires it.¹⁰⁰ Higher

⁹⁷ Peter J. Scaer, “Reckoned Among the Lawless,” 218.

⁹⁸ Peter J. Scaer, “Reckoned Among the Lawless,” 218.

⁹⁹ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Shape of Tradition,” in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, eds., *Christian Dogmatics*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984, II.13.

¹⁰⁰ In *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde*, Kilcrease does the heavy lifting of examining the evidence

Criticism, Neo-Orthodoxy, Law-Gospel Reductionism, and denial of the atonement are a team of oxen pulling together in the same yoke, but it began with rejection of vicarious satisfaction. There is, if you will, a lead ox.

Contrast this with Luther. As Bryan D. Spinks observes, for Luther, Christ's words of institution "are the gospel (i.e. justification) in a nutshell."¹⁰¹ He quotes Luther thusly,

For if you ask: What is the gospel? you can give no better answer than these words of the New Testament, namely, that Christ gave his body and poured out his blood for the forgiveness of sins. . . . Therefore, these words, as a short summary of the whole gospel are to be taught and instilled into every Christian's heart, . . .¹⁰²

. . . they are the sum and substance of the whole gospel.¹⁰³

This was Luther's liturgical criteria for his reform of the Mass regarding the *Verba*. The Words of Institution are the Gospel in a nutshell, the substance of the Mass, the sum of the Gospel. Therefore, Christ's words need to be enunciated in the Mass so that people can hear and understand them. Forde's approach is to deny that Christ even spoke those words.

Theology Is for Proclamation

The pattern of having first rejected vicarious satisfaction and thereafter altering the doctrine of Scripture to fit continues in Forde's *Theology Is for Proclamation*.

Sequence

As we engage Forde's work in *Theology Is for Proclamation*, bear in mind, he long since had already developed his doctrine of atonement and, as Jack D. Kilcrease says, his atonement theology was essentially stable from his doctoral dissertation in 1969 to his death in 2005.¹⁰⁴ Forde published *Theology is for Proclamation* in 1990. When we see what happens to the doctrine of Scripture here, it will be in consequence of what already had happened to the doctrine of atonement.

Prolegomena

In the introduction of *Theology is for Proclamation*, Forde argues that systematic theology exists to serve proclamation — and that confusing or conflating the two causes serious

upon which Forde bases his errors. In some cases, Forde cites passages from Luther that refute Forde and maintain the orthodox Lutheran view. In other cases, as wild as this might seem, Forde has no basis at all. He merely asserts premises that his argument needs simply because his argument needs them.

¹⁰¹ Bryan D. Spinks, *Luther's Liturgical Criteria and His Reform of the Canon of the Mass* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2021), 47.

¹⁰² *LW* 36.183.

¹⁰³ *LW* 36.277.

¹⁰⁴ Kilcrease, *Atonement from Luther to Forde*, 101, 131. To see that this spans from 1969 to 2005, assemble the information on both cited pages.

problems for the church.

Forde draws a key distinction between primary and secondary discourse. Primary discourse is direct declaration — the Word of God spoken in the present tense, first-to-second person, as in a pastor declaring absolution or baptism. It is the “I love you” of the Christian faith. Secondary discourse is reflection *about* God: systematic theology, explanation, teaching, and analysis. He insists these two must be clearly distinguished and properly correlated, not confused.

The danger, Forde says, is that secondary discourse tends to crowd out primary discourse. When systematic theology substitutes for proclamation, what gets delivered from the pulpit is essentially a lecture *about* God rather than a word *from* God. Using the analogy of two lovers, Forde illustrates how absurd and unsatisfying it is when secondary discourse displaces the direct, present-tense declaration that the moment actually requires.

Yet the two cannot be separated entirely. Without systematic theology, proclamation happens only by accident, without conscious intention. And without a proper understanding of proclamation as its goal, systematic theology overreaches. It mistakes itself for the conclusion of the argument rather than the preparation for the final move, which must always be proclamation itself.

Forde traces this problem historically. From the early church onward, the present-tense Gospel gradually receded into past-tense reporting. The Reformation briefly recovered primary discourse but couldn't sustain it, as theology increasingly migrated from the church to the academy. The Enlightenment deepened the crisis by questioning the validity of any historically grounded religion, pushing theology into a defensive posture, either accommodating modern rationalism on the left, or digging into inerrancy on the right. Forde sees both strategies as failures: accommodation erodes the faith, while insisting on an infallible historical record still leaves the church with “old news,” which remains bad news regardless of its accuracy.

The solution proposed is a systematic theology consciously oriented toward proclamation. It is a theology that drives toward the present-tense, unconditional promise of the Gospel rather than retreating into secondary discourse. Forde describes the book as a preliminary sketch or outline, testing this thesis across traditional theological topics, while acknowledging it does not aim to be a complete systematic theology.

The Missing Locus

Below, in order of appearance, the loci he addresses explicitly are listed. As you peruse the list, notice what is missing.

- Prolegomena, Method¹⁰⁵
- Theology proper, Doctrine of God¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ Introduction, the nature of systematic theology and its relation to proclamation.

¹⁰⁶ Chapter 1, God not preached and God preached, the hidden and revealed God.

- Election, Predestination¹⁰⁷
- Theological Anthropology, The Human Condition¹⁰⁸
- Natural Theology¹⁰⁹
- Hamartiology, Doctrine of Sin¹¹⁰
- The Image of God¹¹¹
- Christology, The Person of Christ¹¹²
- Soteriology, Atonement¹¹³
- Pneumatology, Faith¹¹⁴
- Protology, Doctrine of Creation¹¹⁵
- Eschatology¹¹⁶
- Hermeneutics¹¹⁷
- Sacramentology: Baptism¹¹⁸
- Sacramentology: Lord's Supper¹¹⁹
- Ecclesiology, Doctrine of the Church¹²⁰
- Doctrine of Ministry, Ordained Office¹²¹

There is no explicit locus of Scripture. Scripture is relegated to the background. It comes into play incidentally. Any doctrine of Scripture is merely implied.

Forde deliberately avoids grounding his theology in a doctrine of Scripture's inerrancy or infallibility. He mentions inerrancy in the introduction and in the Christology chapter, and in both cases critically, arguing that an inerrant historical record does not solve the problem of the Gospel becoming old news, and that conservative Christologies depending on inerrant Scripture tend to produce lectures about Christ rather than proclamation of him.

What emerges instead is something like a functional or proclamatory understanding of

¹⁰⁷ Chapter 1, the electing God and the mandate to do the electing in proclamation.

¹⁰⁸ Chapter 2, bondage of the will.

¹⁰⁹ Chapter 2, its place and limits relative to proclamation.

¹¹⁰ Chapter 2, original sin, the upward fall, sin as faithlessness.

¹¹¹ *Imago Dei* reframed in terms of the upward fall.

¹¹² Chapters 3 and 4, Jesus the preacher, the two natures, discontinuity and continuity.

¹¹³ Chapter 4, critique of atonement theories, actual atonement through proclamation.

¹¹⁴ Chapter 5, faith as hearing, faith as joy in God.

¹¹⁵ Chapter 5, creation received as gift through faith.

¹¹⁶ Present throughout but especially Chapters 5 and 6, the eschatological word.

¹¹⁷ Chapter 6, law and gospel, letter and spirit, doing the text.

¹¹⁸ Chapter 6.

¹¹⁹ Chapter 6.

¹²⁰ Chapter 6.

¹²¹ Chapter 6.

Scripture. Scripture is authoritative not primarily as truth revealed by God through the prophets and apostle, but as a witness that authorizes and generates the proclamation.

Forde takes historical critical investigation of Scripture seriously. He engages it throughout the Christology chapters without any apparent anxiety, treating the discontinuity it uncovers between the Jesus who preached and the Jesus who is preached not as a threat but as theologically illuminating.

Remember that Forde had rejected vicarious satisfaction by 1969 and he is writing this for publication in 1990. First, vicarious satisfaction was rejected, so there had to be something else that atones. Forde comes up with proclamation—absolution, Baptism, Communion, and the right kind of preaching, namely preaching that primary discourse, not secondary—as the event of atonement.

In this scheme, Scripture falls in with systematic theology in the category of secondary discourse. Since Scripture consists largely of past-tense accounts and reflection, it is secondary. Scripture is the record and witness that authorizes proclamation rather than being proclamation itself. Therefore, it cannot be part of God’s primary address to man. Just as systematic theology overreaches if it tries to preach, so does Scripture.

Atonement

In Chapter 4, Forde takes up Christology and atonement. He works through the tradition critically. He critiques the “being” Christology of the Alexandrians and the “becoming” theology of the Antiochenes. Both, he says, fail to deal with the raw fact of Christ’s death. They make covert attempts to protect him from it. He reconstructs Christology in terms of *act* rather than *substance* and then addresses atonement directly. Forde proposes moving from the language of *being* and *becoming* to a language of *acting*, hence the deliberately awkward formulation: Jesus is the one in whom God does God to us.

As Forde had been doing since 1969, here he once again weighs vicarious satisfaction, moral influence, and *Christus Victor* and finds all of them wanting. All of them are attempts to evade, albeit by different means, what actually happened: *human beings killed Jesus*.

That is the point Forde insists must not be lost. *We killed him*. All atonement theories share the tendency to forget this, Forde says, by rushing to explain the universal meaning of the death, whether as satisfaction, example, or cosmic victory, in ways that allow the actual participants to drop out of the picture and shift the blame elsewhere. But actual reconciliation requires that the proclamation bring everyone under the charge: *you did it*.

“You Did It” and the Vanishing Savior

This essence in Forde’s theory—that human beings killed Jesus, that you did it—portends implications on the doctrine of Scripture.

Jesus himself says how and why He will die. His own sayings are compatible with the fact that humans carried it out. God’s will is very commonly carried out by humans. But Jesus still says

he gave “His life a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:28, Mark 10:45). He still says, “Therefore My Father loves Me, because I lay down My life that I may take it again.” He still says, “No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” He still says, “This command I have received from My Father.” (John 10:17-18) He still says, “This is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.” (Matthew 26:28, Luke 22:20)

Because of Forde’s atonement essence, that human beings killed Jesus and you did it, all of those sayings must be removed somehow. No wonder he exhibits no anxiety with Higher Criticism and explicitly uses Source Criticism and Redaction Criticism to dismiss Jesus’ sayings as later inventions of church tradition. In his rejection of vicarious satisfaction, he cannot allow that the Father gave a commandment to Christ to give his life, or that Christ voluntarily gave his life, or that no one took Christ’s life from him but he laid it down, or that Christ gave his life as a ransom for sinners. Those don’t sit well with the supposedly raw fact that you did it. They assign far too much agency in the atonement to God, far too much action by God.

In the name of not letting the actual participants drop out of the picture, Forde drops God out of the picture, drops the Father out of the picture, and drops Christ out of the picture. It is as if they were lesser participants, lesser actors, not the ones doing what Scripture says they did. The sayings of Jesus that had to be removed by Higher Criticism are precisely the ones that teach what Forde denies, and thus denial of atonement requires denial of Scripture.

Sheer Proclamation

What is left is sheer proclamation. In Chapter 3, Forde says the preaching Jesus did was “sheer mercy.”¹²² In the “up and forgive”¹²³ theory, atonement happens not on the cross, but when absolution is spoken and believed. That is the point of *Theology is for Proclamation!* Forde says, “Atonement is actually made through the proclamation.”¹²⁴

Following Forde’s lead about atonement happening not on the cross but only when absolution is believed, James Arne Nestingen teaches that,

“[Christ] enters the conscience through the absolution, through the proclaimed Word and the administered Sacrament to effect the forgiveness of sin. This is the true substitutionary atonement, happening here and now.”¹²⁵

¹²² Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 77-78, 80.

¹²³ Gerhard O. Forde, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ,” *World in World*, 3/1 1983, 22-31.

¹²⁴ Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 129.

¹²⁵ James Arne Nestingen, “Speaking of the End of the Law” in Albert B. Collver, Jr., James Arne Nestingen, and John T. Pless, eds., *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law & Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 174. In that passage, Nestingen says, “Christ finishes [note, not fulfills] the Law in two ways.” The first way is as quoted in the body here. The second way Jason D. Lane explains as “walking in the Law ... yet without compulsion (FC VI:18) “after justification.” Jason D. Lane, “That I May Be His Own: The Necessary End of the Law,” in Steven D. Paulson and Scott L. Keith, eds., *Handing Over the Goods* (Irvine, CA: 2018), 61.

This means atonement in Radical Lutheranism is an event that is done to us in the proclamation. The deed is accomplished in the saying. Proclamation enacts on the hearer what it announces. It kills one subject and raises another. The preacher's task is not merely to explain what the text means or to make it relevant by some method of translation into contemporary concerns. The task is to do the text to the hearers.

This sheer proclamation theory of atonement is in irreconcilable conflict with the Lutheran confessions in the *Book of Concord*. We leave to an excursus a presentation of evidence for this proposition.¹²⁶

The Movement in a Nutshell

First atonement was rejected. Then proclamation had to carry the load. Then Scripture had to be relegated to secondary discourse. Then, even as secondary discourse, many statements in Scripture had to be scrubbed by resort to Higher Criticism, Source Criticism, and Redaction Criticism.

Meanwhile, Forde's whole project to find a new theory of the atonement is supposedly grounded on facing the concrete facts of "what actually happened," "the actual events themselves,"¹²⁷ "the 'brute facts' of the case"¹²⁸ "We don't like, of course, to face that brutal simplicity," he says.¹²⁹ But to sustain his up-and-forgive theory, Forde could not face the concrete text of what Scripture says—"quite regularly," he admits.¹³⁰

4. Conclusion

Between the doctrine of Scripture and the doctrine of atonement there is reciprocating motion. Motion between them oscillates back and forth, each influencing the other and each being influenced by the other.

If we compare this to the chicken-and-egg conundrum ("Which came first, the chicken or the egg?"), the answer quite rightly and significantly is both. Which came first, the denial of Scripture or the denial of vicarious satisfaction? Both. The denial of Scripture leads to denial of vicarious satisfaction, and the denial of vicarious satisfaction leads to denial of Scripture.

The motion described in this essay goes both ways, and so must our vigilance. To defend Scripture while allowing the atonement to be hollowed out is to guard the door while leaving the window open. To proclaim a gospel of forgiveness without the vicarious satisfaction that

Hence, unless that walk is reclassified as being part of the atonement itself, that second way in Nestingen is not about the atonement itself but about one of its effects in the Christian life.

¹²⁶ See "Excursus: Conflict of Sheer Proclamation with the Lutheran Confessions."

¹²⁷ Forde, "Caught in the Act," 26.

¹²⁸ Forde, "Caught in the Act," 26. After casting aside all traditional theories of the atonement in Section I is "Theories Aside," Forde heads Section II, the construction of his theory, as "The Brute Facts."

¹²⁹ Forde, "Caught in the Act," 26.

¹³⁰ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 14.

grounds it is to promise what has not been purchased. The church needs watchmen on both walls that we may hold fast our confession:

I believe the Jesus 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.¹³¹

Excursus: Conflict of Sheer Proclamation with the Lutheran Confessions

This sheer proclamation theory of atonement is in irreconcilable conflict with the Lutheran confessions in the *Book of Concord*. It removes atonement from the cross and installs it in our consciences. The Radical Lutherans speak of this kind of absolution as the proclamation of “the promise” of the Gospel. But according to the Apology of the Augsburg Confession, that is a half-gospel.

[19] The second requirement for an atonement maker is that his merits are shown to make satisfaction for other people. They are divinely given to others, so that through them, just as by their own merits, other people may be regarded righteous. ...

[20] From both of these—the promise and the giving of merits—arises confidence in mercy. Such confidence in the divine promise, and likewise in Christ’s merits, should be promoted when we pray. For we should be truly confident, both that for Christ’s sake we are heard and that by His merits we have a reconciled Father.¹³²

Their absolution “promises” but it does not give Christ’s merits. It is a free-floating promise without a foundation on Christ’s work of vicarious satisfaction. It does not impute the obedience of Christ under the Law to us. The Apology says that from the two together, the promise and the giving of merits, confidence in mercy arises. In other words, faith grasps both the promise and the merits. A meritless promise of a Radical Lutheran “absolution” is not the ground of what Scripture and the confessions call faith.

The Epitome of the Formula of Concord confesses “In His obedience alone, which as God and man He offered to the Father even to His death, He merited for us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.”¹³³ The Solid Declaration specifies the obedience of Christ as elemental to true absolution.

Christ’s obedience alone—out of pure grace—is credited for righteousness through faith alone to all true believers. They are absolved from all their

¹³¹ Martin Luther, Explanation of the Second Article, *Small Catechism* in Paul Timothy McCain, ed., *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, 2nd ed. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 329.

¹³² Ap XXI.20

¹³³ Ep III.3.

unrighteousness by this obedience.¹³⁴

Catch that: absolved by Christ's obedience. Without vicarious satisfaction, there is no absolution. Sheer absolution is not Christian absolution. Again, the Solid Declaration confesses:

A poor sinful person is justified before God, that is, absolved and declared free and exempt from all his sins and from the sentence of well-deserved condemnation, and is adopted into sonship and inheritance of eternal life, without any merit or worth of his own. This happens without any preceding, present, or subsequent works, out of pure grace, because of the sole merit, complete obedience, bitter suffering, death, and resurrection of our Lord Christ alone. His obedience is credited to us for righteousness.¹³⁵

Yet again the Solid Declaration says,

Therefore, the righteousness that is credited to faith or to the believer out of pure grace is Christ's obedience, suffering, and resurrection, since He has made satisfaction for us to the Law and paid for <expiated> our sins. ... His obedience (not only in His suffering and dying, but also because He was voluntarily made under the Law in our place and fulfilled the Law by this obedience) is credited to us for righteousness. So, because of this complete obedience, which He rendered to His heavenly Father for us by doing and suffering and in living and dying, God forgives our sins.¹³⁶

The promise, that is, the Word of the Gospel, is the means of delivering the merits of Christ to us. "These treasures are brought to us by the Holy Spirit in the promise of the Holy Gospel."¹³⁷ "This righteousness is brought to us by the Holy Spirit through the Gospel and in the Sacraments. It is applied, taken, and received through faith."¹³⁸ Both are necessary: the merits of Christ in vicarious satisfaction; and the delivery of them in the means of grace, the promise, the Gospel. The Radical Lutherans have an empty promise. They promise forgiveness apart from Christ's vicarious satisfaction. That is broth where chowder or stew should be.

The Solid Declaration says, "We trust that for the sake of His obedience alone we have the forgiveness of sins by grace, are regarded as godly and righteous by God the Father, and are eternally saved."¹³⁹

No wonder Forde and the Radical Lutherans must try to pit Luther against the Lutheran

¹³⁴ SD III.4.

¹³⁵ SD III.9.

¹³⁶ SD III.14-15.

¹³⁷ SD III.10.

¹³⁸ SD III.16.

¹³⁹ SD III.11.

Confessions. As Peter Scaer assembled a “barrage” (his term)¹⁴⁰ of Scriptural passages that plainly teach vicarious satisfaction, anyone can assemble a barrage of passages in the *Book of Concord* that confess vicarious satisfaction as I, a layman, have done above.

¹⁴⁰ Peter J. Scaer, “Reckoned Among the Lawless,” 211.