



## **Sinless Society: Relativizing Atonement Toward Insignificance**

Copyright © 2026 T. R. Halvorson

### **Outline**

Abstract

Atonement Theories Likened to Lymphocytes

A Succession of Lymphocytes

Distinguishing Contextualization from Lymphocytes

Contextualization

The Lymphocyte Image

Mann and the Lymphocyte Problem: A Theologian's Half-Acknowledgment

Atonement for Subjectively Self-Imposed Shame

The Lymphocyte Image Hangs Over Narrated Self-Coherence

Toward Insignificance

An Accidental Metanarrative

No Word for It

Widespread Perhaps, But Not Universal

A Dismal Prospect

A More Hopeful Prospect

Learn the Language: Original Sin in Lutheran Theology

Take a Load Off: Universal Objective Atonement

Widen the Solution: Lutheran Vicarious Satisfaction and *Christus Victor*

Conclusion

### **Abstract**

This essay examines and challenges an influential agenda that relativizes theories of atonement

toward irrelevance. The agenda originates in John Bowker's simile likening atonement theories to lymphocytes: like white blood cells that take their shape from whatever antigen they encounter, atonement theories are "solutions looking for a problem," each molded to fit the particular spiritual crisis its culture identifies most acutely. Seen through this lens, the great historic models—Ransom, *Christus Victor*, Theosis, Anselmic Satisfaction, Penal Substitution, Lutheran Vicarious Satisfaction, Moral Influence, and Governmental—become not rival accounts of a timeless truth but a succession of differently shaped antibodies, each indexed to its age and destined to lose relevance as that age passes. The implication is corrosive: if every theory is merely problem-shaped and society-originated, then there is no timeless human problem and no timeless divine solution, and atonement itself eventually vanishes into insignificance.

The essay first distinguishes the lymphocyte image from ordinary contextualization, which expresses a fixed, pre-existing message in the language of a culture without altering its content. The lymphocyte image makes the stronger claim that the perceived problem actively forms the solution, generating plurality, contingency, and a deflationary suspicion of every model.

The essay then turns to Alan Mann's *Atonement for a Sinless Society* as a case study. Mann argues that modern people no longer relate to "sin" but instead suffer chronic shame arising from an incoherent self, a gap between the ideal self one narrates and the actual self one lives. His remedy, here named "Narrated Self-Coherence," offers Jesus' coherent self-narration, supremely in the Eucharist, as a story into which the divided self can be re-authored. The essay contends that Mann half-acknowledges his own theory to be one more lymphocyte: he adopts Bowker's diagnostic logic and applies it to displace penal substitution yet never confesses that his own model is equally provisional and bound for obsolescence. Worse, in resisting metanarratives, Mann inadvertently constructs a super-metanarrative that narrates the rise and fall of all atonement theories, his own included. His theory is also shown to be subjective (locating the problem *intra nos*), narrowly defined, and unable even to claim universal help.

Against this bleak prospect, the essay proposes a more hopeful alternative grounded in Lutheran theology. First, rather than abandoning the word "sin," it urges learning the language of original sin as confessed in the Augsburg Confession, since God's Word itself has the living power to teach what sin is. Second, it commends Christ's universal, objective vicarious satisfaction, which addresses sin as a real offense *extra nos* and lifts from sinners the burden of self-salvation. Third, it argues that Lutheran vicarious satisfaction does not solve only one problem but grounds a manifold atonement: drawing on Dierks, Peters, Pieper, and Kilcrease—and on Luther's Large Catechism—it shows how Christ's satisfaction of the Law's guilt reverses the verdict that gave the tyrants of sin, death, and the devil their grip, thereby harmonizing vicarious satisfaction with *Christus Victor* in a single, enduring work.

### **Atonement Theories Likened to Lymphocytes**

Our age has created a variety of agendas that relativize atonement theories. While some focus on one or another theory and relegate it to irrelevance, others are panoramic and affect not simply

most theories, but any theory at all *per se*. Here we will look at one such agenda formulated by John Bowker and picked up by others such as Alan Mann. As we do so, we should bear in mind that the Mann agenda is one species of the relativizing genus, not the entire genus itself, and that the simile he uses is only one among many similes that could be used to describe in essence the same thing.

The biologist-turned-scholar of religion John Bowker says:

Theories of atonement are somewhat like lymphocytes in the body: they are solutions going around looking for a problem, and taking the shape of the problem as it is identified.... [They] are simply applications of the cure (the death and resurrection of Christ) to the problem of sin or mortality however it is identified.<sup>1</sup>

This simile bridges theology (theories of atonement) with immunology (lymphocytes) to explain how human ideas change based on the problems they are trying to solve.

On the science side of the simile, lymphocytes are a primary type of white blood cell that serve as the backbone of our immune system. They originate in bone marrow, circulate through our bloodstream and lymphatic system, and account for roughly 20% to 40% of all white blood cells in adults. Their primary responsibility is to recognize, target, and destroy specific foreign invaders like viruses, bacteria, and cancerous cells. There are three main types of lymphocytes, B Cells, T Cells, and NK Cells. The simile references Type B cells that generate specialized proteins called antibodies, which lock onto specific bacteria and viruses to neutralize them or mark them for destruction. They patrol our bloodstream before we even get sick, waiting to encounter a foreign invader like a virus or bacteria. When a B cell lymphocyte meets a new germ, it physically molds its receptors to lock onto that specific threat. It creates customized antibodies that fit the shape of the invader to neutralize it. The immune system does not produce one all-purpose antibody; it generates a whole repertoire, each shaped to bind a particular antigen.

On the theology side, like a lymphocyte molds itself to fit a specific virus, an atonement theory molds itself to fit the specific spiritual or cultural crisis of its time *as society identifies it*. Each theory of the atonement takes its distinctive shape from the particular problem a *culture feels* most acutely as its *defining wound*. The theories are not so much rivals competing to be the single correct account as they are differently-shaped answers, each one contoured to the crisis it arose to meet.

## **A Succession of Lymphocytes**

Seen this way, the list below is less a menu of competitors than a survey of the immune repertoire of Christian soteriology: nine antibodies, nine antigens. Note that in the list, the atonement theories are not necessarily represented in their own voice or as their supports purport, but as seen through the lymphocyte lens.

1. **Ransom.** If the problem is perceived or identified as humanity's captivity to the devil, who holds a claim over those he has enslaved, then the solution is a price paid to buy the captives back. Fallen humanity has, in effect, sold itself into bondage and cannot purchase its own

---

<sup>1</sup> John Bowker, *The Meaning of Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 97-98.

freedom. Christ offers his life as the ransom that redeems, “buys back,” those held hostage and restores them to God.

2. ***Christus Victor***. If the problem is perceived or identified as humanity’s helpless subjection to the hostile powers of Sin, Death, and the Devil, then the solution is a decisive victory that breaks their grip. Humanity is occupied territory, unable to overthrow the tyrants who rule it. Christ enters that territory, meets the powers in open conflict, and in his death and resurrection conquers them, setting the captives free.
3. **Theosis (Eastern Orthodox)**. If the problem is perceived or identified as humanity’s separation from the divine life it was created to share, then the solution is to be lifted, by grace, into participation in God. Human beings were made for union with God but have fallen into corruption and mortality, unable to ascend to him on their own. In the Incarnation the Son joins human nature to God in his own person, opening the way for humanity to share, through cooperative ascent, in the divine life and likeness.
4. **Anselmic Satisfaction**. If the problem is perceived or identified as a debt of honor that human sin owes to God and the disorder it works in creation, then the solution is an offering of infinite value that repays the debt. To dishonor God is to unsettle the right order of the universe, which his justice cannot simply ignore. The God-man, by freely offering the death he did not owe, renders a satisfaction of infinite worth, so that the debt is paid and punishment need not fall.
5. **Reformed Penal Substitution**. If the problem is perceived or identified as criminal guilt before a righteous Judge whose law demands death, then the solution is a substitute who bears the penalty in the sinner’s place. Humanity has broken God’s law, and his retributive justice requires that the sentence be carried out. Christ stands in the dock as substitute, bearing the full penalty and wrath due to sin, so that justice is satisfied and the guilty go free.
6. **Lutheran Vicarious Satisfaction**. If the problem is perceived or identified as humanity’s exposure to the law’s accusation and curse together with humanity’s inability to render the perfect righteousness the law demands, then the solution is a substitute who both keeps the law and bears its penalty for us. The law condemns on two counts at once—for sins committed and for the righteousness never achieved. Christ acts in our place throughout his whole life, perfectly obeying the law (active obedience) and suffering its curse (passive obedience), so that both demands are met on our behalf.
7. **Moral Influence**. If the problem is perceived or identified as a hardened, fearful heart that misperceives God and has grown cold toward him, then the solution is a demonstration of love that melts and rekindles that heart. The crisis is not legal or cosmic but interior: humanity misreads God as a harsh punisher and has hardened itself against his love. In the self-giving of the cross God displays a love so overwhelming that it corrects the

misperception and kindles an answering love, transforming the heart from within.

8. **Governmental.** If the problem is perceived or identified as the threat that free forgiveness would pose to cosmic law and order, then the solution is a public display of suffering that upholds the law while allowing pardon. God is not a wrathful judge demanding payback but a Ruler responsible for the good of his creation, who cannot let his law appear to be a bluff. In Christ's suffering, which is not the exact penalty for sin but a sobering public exhibition of its gravity, God vindicates his law and deters future lawlessness so that he may forgive without weakening his government.

When we view atonement theories as arising only from society's perceived or experienced problems that change from age to age, and thus the theories serially change to meet their own ages, each theory is relativized to its own age. As ages pass, their relevance passes. Truth is swallowed by history. There is no timeless human problem and there is no timeless divine solution. All we have to do is wait, and atonement vanishes.

## **Distinguishing Contextualization from Lymphocytes**

### ***Contextualization***

Contextualization is the broad, fairly neutral term for the whole task of expressing an unchanging message, one existing before contextualization takes place, in the language, categories, and concerns of a particular culture. It is a goal and a discipline.

For example, in the age of Lutheran Orthodoxy, theologians like Johann Gerhard, Johannes Quenstedt, Abraham Calov, and the rest drew a firm distinction between the *principium* of theology and its *forma* or mode of presentation. The principle and source were Scripture alone. The Aristotelian-scholastic apparatus (genus and species, the four causes, distinctions between *res* and *modus*, the careful definitions, divisions, and disputation form) was understood as an organizational and pedagogical instrument, a way of arranging, defending, and teaching doctrine with precision, not a second source feeding content into it.

Quenstedt's *Theologia didactico-polemica* is the showcase, using enormous logical scaffolding placed in the service of doctrine he simply drew from the text of Scripture. For Orthodox Lutherans the method is a servant, not a master, and reason in theology is ministerial, not magisterial. It is an instrument that organizes and clarifies but does not generate or judge revealed truth. Properly used, the scholastic method no more alters the doctrine than a filing system alters the documents it sorts. Robert Preus says:

Quenstedt was the Thomas Aquinas, so to speak, of Lutheran Orthodoxy, the last great representative. To anyone following his arrangement of material and noting his exegesis it will become evident that he was fair and meticulous in his work and drew from the best which his precursors had to offer. The strong exegetical basis for his entire treatment will be noticeable throughout. Quenstedt's systematic section on the Atonement actually presents nothing but exegesis of passages [of Scripture]

pertaining to the doctrine, arranged according to a quite skeletal scholastic outline. The reader will notice, too, how very closely Quenstedt's terminology and understanding of this great doctrine approximate what has always been believed and taught concerning the vicarious atonement within conservative Lutheranism.<sup>2</sup>

There is, to be sure, a risk that method can unintentionally and even unconsciously affect the substantive content, not just the organization or pedagogical technique. Caution must be exercised not to so overdrive contextualization that the Gospel thereby is altered.

### ***The Lymphocyte Image***

The lymphocyte image adds three things beyond the bare idea of contextualizing.

First, it specifies the direction of fit. A lymphocyte does not exist first as a finished antibody waiting to be applied; it takes its shape *from* the antigen it meets. So, the image says atonement theories are reactive and problem-shaped, that the problem is identified first and the solution then conforms itself to that contour. Plain "contextualization" leaves open which comes first. Done rightly, the Gospel could be fixed and merely translated, with the culture supplying only vocabulary. Bowker's lymphocyte image commits to the stronger claim that the perceived problem actively forms the solution.

Second, it implies plurality and contingency. Different antigens summon differently shaped lymphocytes, so the image predicts that there will be many atonement theories, each indexed to the problem of its age, none of them final. That is why writers like Alan Mann finds it congenial: it does theological work for him by suggesting that penal substitution was the right shape for the problem of guilt-ridden Europe and is simply the wrong shape for the problem of a shame-ridden, sinless society.<sup>3</sup> The neutral word "contextualization" does not by itself license that relativizing of any one model.

Third, and this is the part that cuts in more than one direction, the image is faintly diagnostic or even deflationary. To say a theory is "a solution looking for a problem" is ordinarily a mild criticism, the suggestion that the answer came first and went hunting for something to answer. Bowker partly inverts that, the problem comes first and the solution conforms, but the phrase keeps a residue of that original wryness. It quietly reminds you that atonement theories are *responses*, historically conditioned and provisional, not timeless deliverances. Alan Mann embraces this for his theory of atonement because it relativizes the models he wants to displace. But it relativizes his own model by the same logic, and that is the double edge.

Query: How many other programs of contextualization go beyond its bare idea and wittingly or not become reactive and context-shaped? In how many of them does the message itself change as distinct from context only providing language or organization to presentation?

---

<sup>2</sup> Robert D. Preus, "The Vicarious Atonement in John Quenstedt," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, 32:2 (1961), 78-97, as quoted in Johannes Andreas Quenstedt and Robert D. Preus, *Atonement in Lutheran Orthodoxy: Johannes Quenstedt*. 2nd ed. trans. Matthew Carver (Sidney, Montana: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2024), 97.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

## **Mann and the Lymphocyte Problem: A Theologian's Half-Acknowledgment**

### ***Atonement for Subjectively Self-Imposed Shame, not Objective Guilt***

In *Atonement for a Sinless Society*,<sup>4</sup> Alan Mann constructs an account of atonement for people today who cannot relate to the language of “sin.” He does not claim there is no sin. His argument runs deeper than lost vocabulary. He holds that the standard definition of sin as an offense against divine law was always a reduction. Following Hall<sup>5</sup> and Biddle,<sup>6</sup> he understands sin as the absence of mutual, intimate, unpolluted relating, a matter of “missing the mark” rather than willful rebellion. In this sense, sin turns out to coincide with the actual plight of the shamed self, which is how Mann claims to remain within orthodoxy rather than abandoning sin altogether.

The experience people have is not of a God who is offended but of an incoherence of self. The narrative they tell themselves about their ideal self is contradicted by their actual self, the life they are really living. That discrepancy between the ideal self and the actual self is the incoherence, and it produces a sense of shame at falling short of one's own narration of the ideal. It gives millions of people a personal, pervasive, and self-diminishing dis-ease, namely shame. For them shame, not sin, is the problem.

Shame defined in that way has its effects and consequences. It renders confession of the incoherence too difficult, because to confess it would only deepen the wound. It disables its sufferers from living for the Other, who is God, or for the other, who is the neighbor. What such a person needs is a new narration, a new story that can heal the incoherence and remedy shame. Mann finds that “narrative possibility” in the story of Jesus, especially in Gethsemane and on the cross. There the crisis for Christ was whether he would hold together his self-narration of an ideal self and what might turn out to be an incongruous actual self. For Mann the submission to the will of God and this coherence are the same act. Jesus' “Yes” to the Father is not a submission that suppresses the self but the very act that realizes his real self and so proves he is not living the self-contradiction that shames the rest of us.

The coherence Jesus embodies becomes a story we can indwell. Those of us who shame ourselves find atonement not by copying a technique but by entering Jesus' narration and being re-authored by it. For the shamed self this is a process rather than a single crisis event. A key portal to that entry is the Eucharist, which is repeatable and communal, and which narrates the coherence of Jesus that could also be ours. The Eucharist works precisely because of this. Confession becomes bearable there, since the self authors a new story rather than being forced to expose the old one.

Mann gives no name to his theory of atonement, and several might be apt. For the convenience of having a shorthand to reference it, I will call it “Narrated Self-Coherence.” In this theory, atonement is about the problem of the self not being at-one with itself, about the self being

---

<sup>4</sup> Alan Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003).

<sup>6</sup> Mark E. Biddle, *Missing the Mark: Sin and Its Consequences in Biblical Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005).

incoherent, and atonement is the achievement of at-one-ment<sup>7</sup> of the reconciled, coherent self by using the narrative of Christ's coherent self to reauthor the self.

Mann's book in both editions has a significant, if somewhat niche, reception history. The endorsement side is heavy with well-known names in the emerging-church and progressive-evangelical world. Steve Chalke (Mann's co-author on *The Lost Message of Jesus*), Brian McLaren, Scot McKnight, Joel B. Green, Mark D. Baker, Ron Martoia, Mike McNichols, and Graham McFarlane of London School of Theology all supplied promotional commendations. Ron Martoia's comment captures the reception of the second edition specifically, that the update integrated new material that makes this even more relevant to our current cultural and church landscape. McKnight framed it as one of the few works probing classic atonement theories in the context of a radically shifted audience and starting afresh from shame rather than imposing older guilt-based theories.

The academic reviews that are the easiest to access are:

- Robert W. Canoy in *Review & Expositor* (2016), published by Sage.<sup>8</sup>
- Benjamin G. White in *Reviews in Religion & Theology* (Wiley, 2017), keyed to the James Clarke UK edition.<sup>9</sup>
- Adrian Rosen<sup>10</sup> in *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*.
- Aaron Perry in *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, reviewing the 1st ed.<sup>11</sup>
- Robert D. Falconer's review in *Conspectus* (2017, vol. 23),<sup>12</sup> a South African theological journal, which is the most substantive.

### ***The Lymphocyte Image Hangs Over Narrated Self-Coherence***

Bowker's immunological image hangs over Alan Mann's *Atonement for a Sinless Society* from the start when he quotes Bowker: "Theories of atonement are somewhat like lymphocytes in the body: they are solutions going around looking for a problem, and taking the shape of the problem

---

<sup>7</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*,

<sup>8</sup> Robert W. Canoy, Review of *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed., by Alan Mann. *Review & Expositor* 113, no. 4 (November 2016): 562–64. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637316674281j>.

<sup>9</sup> Benjamin G. White, Review of *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, by Alan Mann. *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 24, no. 2 (April 2017): 322–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/rirot.12924>.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian P. Rosen, review of *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed., by Alan Mann, *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 25, no. 1 (February 2022): 186–188. [https://www.academia.edu/44576685/Adrian\\_Rosen\\_Book\\_Review\\_Alman\\_Mann\\_Atonement\\_for\\_a\\_Sinless\\_Society\\_pp\\_186\\_188](https://www.academia.edu/44576685/Adrian_Rosen_Book_Review_Alman_Mann_Atonement_for_a_Sinless_Society_pp_186_188)

<sup>11</sup> Aaron Perry, review of *Atonement for a "Sinless" Society: Engaging with an Emerging Culture*, by Alan Mann, *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 212–216. [https://wesley.nnu.edu/fileadmin/imported\\_site/wesleyjournal/2008-wtj-43-1.pdf](https://wesley.nnu.edu/fileadmin/imported_site/wesleyjournal/2008-wtj-43-1.pdf) (review begins on p. 212)

<sup>12</sup> Robert D. Falconer, Review of *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2nd ed., by Alan Mann. *Conspectus* 23 (2017): 157–166. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0034637316674281j>.

as it is identified.”<sup>13</sup> The question is whether Mann recognizes that his own shame-based theology is one more such lymphocyte. He embraces the logic as method, applies it reflexively in places, yet never fully delivers the self-implicating confession the image demands of everyone, himself included.

In his opening “Musings and Methodologies,” Mann argues that the shifting context in which we “do theology”<sup>14</sup> may call us “to re-articulate our understanding of the biblical narrative, and the theologies we build (in this case, a theory of atonement).”<sup>15</sup> In that parenthesis, Mann identifies his own product as one of these context-shaped constructions, a solution built to fit a newly identified problem.

The treatment of the Bowker quote itself confirms this posture. Immediately after citing it, Mann describes his task in precisely Bowker’s terms. It is “not to go on a crusade in order to search out the sin that has hidden itself among the ruins of modernity—for sin, as we shall see, has become meaningless and insufficient as a descriptor for the plight of the self.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, having identified shame as the contemporary plight, the church “needs to incarnate... the story of atonement so it can be heard.”<sup>17</sup> This is the lymphocyte taking the shape of the problem as identified.

Mann reinforces the move through Douglas John Hall, whom he endorses: atonement theologies are “sometimes so perceptive and brilliant that they last beyond their appropriate time,”<sup>18</sup> perpetuated “because too few Christians have the courage to enter into the new, emerging darkness and prefer to rely on the old light of entrenched soteriologies.”<sup>19</sup> By casting penal substitution as a solution that once fit but no longer does, Mann implies that his own shame model is the lymphocyte for the present moment.

Where he stops short is in spelling out the consequence: that his own theory is equally provisional and will, by the same logic, outlive its usefulness. He gestures toward this. He insists no single model is “meaningful and sufficient for expressing all plights,”<sup>20</sup> that the Christian community needs “a myriad of narratives,”<sup>21</sup> and that he offers only “a narrative possibility”<sup>22</sup> rather

---

<sup>13</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 9.

<sup>14</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 3.

<sup>16</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 4-5, quoting Douglas John Hall, *The Cross in Our Context* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003), 130.

<sup>20</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 72.

<sup>21</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 72.

<sup>22</sup> Mann uses the phrase “narrative possibility” 13 times in the book. For example, on page 79: “From the outset, it must be made clear that our goal in the first instance is not the construction of doctrinal or propositional “truths” about Jesus and the atonement. This is an unnecessary distraction, for these are of no concern to the sinless self on her search for salvation. We are merely seeking a narrative possibility that is bearable and conceivable, and one that is meaningful

than a final account. His governing disposition, theology as “faith seeking understanding,”<sup>23</sup> never “an untouchable, propositional statement, but always open to dialogue,”<sup>24</sup> is that of someone who knows he is producing another lymphocyte.

But explicit admission never arrives. Mann adopts Bowker’s diagnostic stance as his own and turns it, partially, on himself. He concedes that his shame theology is a problem-shaped, context-bound solution. What he never quite says is that it is therefore destined to be outgrown as penal substitution was. He implies the indictment without confessing to it.

What really happens is that, before he is even done with his first edition in 2005 or his second edition in 2015, Mann has merely expanded the earlier list of eight age-relativized, society-generated and now irrelevant theories to include a ninth, his own:

9. **Narrated Self-Coherence.**<sup>25</sup> If the problem is perceived or identified as the chronic shame of a self too incoherent to face itself, in a society that has lost the very word for sin, then the solution is a coherent counter-story into which the divided self can be re-authored. Modern people suffer less from guilt over what they have done than from shame over what they feel themselves to be, an unbearable gap between the ideal self they narrate and the real self they live. In Jesus, the one self who stays coherent under pressure by opening to the Other rather than hiding, the shamed self finds a story it can indwell, supremely in the Eucharist, and so is healed into honest, mutual relating.

## **Toward Insignificance**

### ***An Accidental Metanarrative***

In a section of his book named “The Problem with Metanarratives,”<sup>26</sup> Mann says:

The question often raised, however, is whether the metanarrative (and that includes those of religious purpose) can ever be used meaningfully when set against the typically isolated, localized, personalized, and pluralistic narratives of those who live in current Western society? After all, it should be self-evident that our lives are multi-storied rather than the product of a single, all-encompassing drama. Indeed, given that there are so many stories, and that we can interpret similar events in

---

and sufficient.” On page 83: “For Jesus’ own story to be a narrative of atonement, it must contain a plot that is recognizable to the sinless self. It must also represent an alternative: a narrative possibility, a meaningful, and sufficient counter-story that can be appropriated by those of us isolated through chronic shame.” On page 98: “What follows is no formulaic answer to our plight as human beings but a story that in its telling is heard and therefore becomes a narrative possibility that may bring at-one-ment, just as it tells of one who is himself at-one—even in his dying.”

<sup>23</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 1.

<sup>24</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 1.

<sup>25</sup> This is a name I have given to it for the sake of having a handy shorthand for it here. Mann himself does not give it a name.

<sup>26</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 52-54.

different ways, the claim that no single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction, nor encapsulate or handle all contingencies of life, appears to be a reasonable assumption. Given these observations, it is easy to understand the recent derision of the metanarrative.<sup>27</sup>

To his credit, Mann does not join in the movement to jettison the idea or use of metanarrative *per se*. But his method has cast off the metanarratives entailed the eight atonement theories listed above. Here is an irony: in the name of suspicion of metanarratives, Mann (along with others in his circle) has created a new one without seeming to know it. It is a kind of super-metanarrative because it stands above all other metanarratives from before now and will continue to stand above all new metanarratives in the future. It tells the story about how eight metanarratives arose, were told, and then became obsolete, one after another. When an atonement theory is society-originated to solve the human problem as the people of an age perceive it, the theory is relativized to that age and becomes obsolete with the passing of the age. Mann's theory is as liable to obsolescence as those that he pushed aside. Just give it time, and the flow of history will carry Mann's theory into insignificance.

### **No Word for It**

Mann says:

We live in a society that could be called sinless. That is, individuals no longer live with a sense of sin or guilt in the way that many classical models of atonement require in order for them to be successfully communicated. If this is the case, then the implications for the Christian community, and its models of atonement are obvious. Though evangelistic initiatives may wish to chart a society in which sin still abounds, the increasing reality is that the plight of the self is that he or she is “a sinner with no word for it.”<sup>28</sup>

Has the postmodern self truly found its liberation in the narratives it has produced—narratives free from sin and responsibility towards the Other/other? Is a sinless society a utopia in no need of atonement, or is sin simply hidden in the vocabulary we use to tell our story?<sup>29</sup>

Shame generates the sinless society—not in reality, but in perception. But it is the perception that is most real to the psyche of the modern mind. It is this story that has to be met with our narratives of atonement because it is this story that shapes so many of us. The chronically shamed, sinless self needs to be saved—not from divine wrath, but from self-judgment, which isolates and alienates the self from the

---

<sup>27</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 52-53.

<sup>28</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 5, quoting Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free, 1973), 198.

<sup>29</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 23.

Other/other.<sup>30</sup>

Mann uses the word “shame,” but that denotes an effect of the problem, not the problem that caused it. The cause is the incoherent self that one experiences only because (1) the self (2) narrates to the self (3) that an ideal self that the self wants to be (4) is not one’s actual self, so that (5) the self hears that it is incoherent.

This is specific and subjective. It is specific because it is not a generic meaning for the word “shame.” It is severely narrowed down to this pointedly focused instance of shame.

Whereas traditional notions of sin are objective because they say sin is an offense against someone outside of ourselves (*extra nos*), either God or our neighbor,<sup>31</sup> this self-incoherence problem is *intra nos* (inside of ourselves). It is about what the self tells the self about its ideal self and its actual self and the self-incoherence the narration exposes.

Notice what happens when people are sinners but have no name for it: they also have no name for atonement. Mann writes a whole book positing his “narrative possibility” for a new atonement and never gives it a name. When sin vanishes, atonement vanishes. We cannot name sin, and Mann cannot name atonement. This is a telltale sign that the relativization of atonement has moved toward its insignificance.

### ***Widespread Perhaps, But Not Universal***

Mann wants to establish that chronic shame is widespread enough to warrant a theology, but his method is suggestive rather than statistical. He reaches for “millions”<sup>32</sup> and for words like pervasive<sup>33</sup> and universal, and he leans heavily on the writers he cites to carry the scale.

His own quantitative claims appear Chapter Two, “Recognizing Shame.” He argues that the success of John Bradshaw’s and Brené Brown’s work serves “to emphasize the pervasiveness of this uniquely personal experience.”<sup>34</sup>

I first came across the work of Brene Brown via her TEDTalks (ted.com). At the time of writing she was one of the top five most viewed talks with close to 20 million views.<sup>35</sup>

He states that “shame has so consumed millions of us that we have taken on the identity of a shamed

---

<sup>30</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> Even when David murders Uriah and commits adultery with Bathsheba, bringing consequence onto Israel, he nevertheless confesses, “Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you may be justified in your words and blameless in your judgment.” Psalm 51:4. This reveals a decidedly objective idea of what sin is as always sinning against God even in enormous fault against our neighbors, and as being done not only in our own, inward, self-narration about ourselves, but always being done in God’s sight.

<sup>32</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 24.

<sup>33</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 3, 24, 26, and 39.

<sup>34</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 24.

<sup>35</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 3, n. 5.

person, and can only relate to ourselves, and to others, through this lens.”<sup>36</sup> He describes sufferers going “to extraordinary lengths to run away from this disease of the soul.”<sup>37</sup>

The boldest universalizing language is borrowed. From Brown he takes the claim that “shame is universal and one of the most primitive human emotions that we experience.”<sup>38</sup> He opens the chapter with Fowler’s line, “Now that I have eyes for it, I see [shame] everywhere,”<sup>39</sup> and frames human vulnerability as total: “we are all vulnerable to shame because we are human.”<sup>40</sup>

He also uses Brown to explain why something so common stays hidden, namely that “the less we talk about shame, the more control it has over our lives.”<sup>41</sup> And he sets the cultural scene by noting that Brown has “catapulted talk of shame from the therapist’s couch into mainstream vernacular”<sup>42</sup> and onto the bestseller list, while citing Stockitt that “shame is so pervasive, so universally evident.”<sup>43</sup>

One qualification matters. Mann does not, in these numbers, separate ordinary human shame, to which he says everyone is liable, from the specific chronic shame of self-incoherence that his argument addresses. The “millions” and “universal” language blur the two. He establishes that very many people are affected, pervasively, but he never quantifies the chronic variety as such.

That leaves us with a new atonement theory that, on its own terms and taking everything it says at face value, does not even claim that it can help everyone. It cannot claim to help everyone when it is problem-formed, society-originated, lymphocytic, but not everyone has the antigen or even pathogen that its antibody kills.

### ***A Dismal Prospect***

Mann’s Narrated Self-Coherence atonement theory is bleak. The prospect it provides is dismal. At best it solves a problem so specific and narrow that many of us are abandoned to our own significantly different issues. I say abandoned for two reasons. First, the lymphocyte lens has relativized all earlier atonement theories to their ages and rendered them inefficacious for us now, leaving us with nothing but the new theory. Second, for the alleged but never substantiated millions that it purports to help, its help will continue only so long as this age does. But when this age of the shamed incoherent self passes, this atonement theory that was formed by relativizing to shame specifically defined in that way will lose its potency. The lymphocyte lens must admit that its

---

<sup>36</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 24.

<sup>37</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 29.

<sup>38</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 26, quoting Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (London: Penguin, 2012), 68.

<sup>39</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 24, quoting James Fowler, *Faithful Change* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), 91

<sup>40</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 24.

<sup>41</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 26, quoting Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (London: Penguin, 2012), 68.

<sup>42</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 3.

<sup>43</sup> Mann, *Atonement for a Sinless Society*, 3, quoting Robin Stockitt, *Restoring the Shamed: Towards a Theology of Shame* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 7.

solution is, may I say, not immune to the sickness of all the others, that it is time-bound and society-originated, destined for an ineffectual future.

## **A More Hopeful Prospect**

### ***Learn the Language: Original Sin in Lutheran Theology***

Mann says the problem is not that there might not be any sin in sinners, but that today's sinners do not know the word for it. But he never proposes a vocabulary lesson.

The name for sin is sin, and we can learn what that means. To say otherwise is pessimism in the extreme. To say otherwise is more insulting to humanity than the accusation of God's Law is, which is saying quite a bit since the Law does insult mightily. At least with his Law, God seems to think hearing his speech could do us some good. Paul says, "I would not have known sin except through the law. For I would not have known covetousness unless the law had said, 'You shall not covet.'" (Romans 7:7) "By the law is the knowledge of sin." (Romans 3:20) The Word of God is not inert information. It is God's own chosen means of grace by which the Holy Spirit acts.

The word of God is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (Hebrews 4:12)

But Mann's theory consigns us to baby talk that never learns the language as if we have no prospect of learning it and as if God's Word had no life or power to teach it.

For those not familiar, the first writing that defines Lutheranism is the *Augsburg Confession* (1530). There is no church Lutheran in name that does not at least pay lip service to this confession. After its first article on God, it proceeds immediately to Article II on Original Sin.

[1] 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].

[3] Our churches condemn the Pelagians and others who deny that original depravity is sin, thus obscuring the glory of Christ's merit and benefits. Pelagians argue that a person can be justified before God by his own strength and reason.<sup>44</sup>

Here are some things this vocabulary of sin realizes. First, original sin is real sin, before any sin by act or omission, called actual sin, is done. Second, original sin all by itself is condemning sin. While actual sin is real sin and condemning sin too, original sin already is both. Third, original sin

---

<sup>44</sup> From "Article II. Original Sin" in *The Augsburg Confession, Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions*, Pocket Edition. © 2005, 2006 Concordia Publishing House. Source: [https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/augsburg-confession/chief\\_articles/article\\_ii/](https://bookofconcord.cph.org/en/augsburg-confession/chief_articles/article_ii/)

is my sin. It started with Adam, but having been born of Adam, it is my sin. (Genesis 3, Romas 5) This is the height of odium to the world. Does anyone like to hear this, that original sin is my sin? Welcome or not, with this Paul shows that sin and Christ's atonement are universal for all men, for all ages, for all places.

Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous. (Romans 5:18-19)

The dismal and bleak prospect Mann's theory left us with turns bright and hopeful here because this is something true *of* us all—sin—and true *for* us all—Christ's propitiation. This is anything but culture bound or society-formed. The Law of your original sin is *about you* and the Gospel of Christ's propitiation for the whole world, not just some people, is *for you*. "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world?" (1 John 1:2)

Original sin runs deeper than actual sins. In original sin, we do not rightly trust God. That is a root disease on which actual sins grow. In original sin, we do not rightly fear God. Even when the word "fear" is used, it has become common to recast it as respect, not fear. Luther never lets us off that hook. In his *Small Catechism*, for each of the commandments in the Ten Commandments, he begins his explanation of what that commandment teaches by saying, "We should fear, love, and trusts God so that . . ." The teaching of original sin sounds odious, but it has the bright prospect of getting at the root of the problem, not some more superficial effect. Christ gets at this root problem and all the branch and leaf problems that grow on it by his mighty work of atonement.

### ***Take a Load Off: Universal Objective Atonement***

By his vicarious satisfaction, Christ accomplished atonement objectively for everyone. God, who was offended by our sin, is outside of ourselves, that is, objective. Our problem of sin, guilt, judgment, curse, condemnation, and all the rest is objective. It is not just in our heads. It is not just a self-narration that we tell ourselves making us feel the shame of self-incoherence. The solution matches the problem by being objective. By his work of redemption, Christ made satisfaction to the Triune God as our substitute. "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 9:14). Christ "Himself bore our sins in His own body on the tree." (1Peter 2:24). The work of Christ stands outside of ourselves, and it stands whether we believe it or not. It does not come into existence only when or because we believe or for any other reason internal to ourselves. While we do not receive the benefit of it without faith, the *it* that would benefit us still stands there. It is with God outside of ourselves objectively. And it is universal: "He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world." (1 John 1:2)

Jack D. Kilcrease has repeatedly cautioned that rejection of substitutionary atonement abandons man to having to work for his own salvation.

For Lutheran Christians, modern flights from substitutionary atonement are highly problematic not only because they directly contradict numerous and clear statements of the Bible and the Book of Concord but also because they endanger the chief article of Christianity: justification through faith alone. Put succinctly, without a Christ who genuinely fulfills the law on behalf of humanity (both actively and passively), there would be no alien righteousness for justifying faith to receive. As is evident from the soft-moralism from the opponents of substitutionary atonement, rejection of substitutionary atonement inevitably leads to a form of works-righteousness.<sup>45</sup>

For faith to receive Christ's forgiveness and imputed righteousness, Christ must fulfill the law in our place. Without a fulfillment of the law vicariously for sinners, there would be no righteousness (active and passive) that the Father could transfer from Christ to us through the Word and sacrament ministry of the Church.<sup>46</sup>

Thanks to the vicarious satisfaction of Christ, the entire load has been lifted from us. This is the only way to take the load of having to save ourselves off from sinners.

Come to Me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light. (Matthew 11: 28-30)

Theories of atonement that deny vicarious satisfaction leave sinners in a plight like that of the Hebrews when Pharaoh commanded them to make bricks without straw and to keep up the quota. (Exodus 5:1-21) It is too much for them. But subjective theories of atonement leave the heavy lifting for salvation on our backs. In Mann's theory, we are weighted with the self-effort of narrating a new story to re-author ourselves. We are required to self-talk our way into self-coherence. Even the Eucharist covertly becomes a work we do instead of a Sacrament Christ gives to his Bride, the Church. By contrast, Luther reformed the canon of the Mass as a skillful surgeon dexterously employing the scalpel of justification by grace and faith for the sake of the death and merit of Christ.<sup>47</sup> With that knife he cut away fourteen tumors<sup>48</sup> of cancerous human work, the work of

---

<sup>45</sup> Jack D. Kilcrease, "The Centrality of Substitutionary Atonement" in Jack D. Kilcrease, *Atonement in Confessional Lutheran Theology*: Jack D. Kilcrease (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2025), 38. Previously stated in Jack D. Kilcrease, "Johann Gerhard, the Socinians, and Modern Rejections of Substitutionary Atonement." *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 82, no. 1-2 (2018), 19-20.

<sup>46</sup> Jack D. Kilcrease, "The Erlangen School and the Great Nineteenth Century Lutheran Atonement Debate" in *Atonement in Confessional Lutheran Theology: Harnack, Thomasius & Philippi* (Sidney, MT: Synoptic Text Information Services, Inc., 2025), 39.

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

<sup>48</sup> There were 14 Eucharistic prayers in the canon that made the Lord's Supper into a sacrifice the Church offers to God rather than a Sacrament that Christ gives to the church.

making a sacrifice to God. There is the bright prospect for us in the Eucharist, Christ's finished work given to us freely.

### ***Widen the Solution: Lutheran Vicarious Satisfaction and Christus Victor***

In Bowker and Mann's accidental metanarrative, one theory of atonement comes and goes, then another comes and goes, each of them having been molded to solve a single problem.

But Lutheran vicarious satisfaction does not work that way. The Lutheran doctrine does not solve just a single problem. It solves many. While it teaches that vicarious satisfaction is indispensable, this is not the only aspect of the atonement. The atonement is a manifold panoply of salvation.<sup>49</sup> Other aspects are grounded upon vicarious satisfaction. They are effects of Christ making satisfaction for us.

For purposes of this essay, we will illustrate this by showing the harmonization of two theories in Lutheran theology: substitutionary satisfaction and *Christus Victor*.

Vicarious satisfaction does not exclude *Christus Victor* (victory over and deliverance from our enemies) but explains it and gives it its ground. As Luther explains in the *Large Catechism*, the devil is God's mask and jailer based on our guilt under the Law. Once Christ by vicarious satisfaction reverses God's verdict of guilty to innocent, the devil and all other enemies lose their legal custody, and thereby we are delivered from our enemies.<sup>50</sup>

We will observe this by reference to four Lutheran theologians: Theodore Dierks in the last book on atonement published by The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod's publishing house, Concordia Publishing House, Albrecht Peters in his unparalleled commentaries on Luther's Small and Large Catechisms, Francis Pieper in his *Christian Dogmatics*, and Jack D. Kilcrease in his study of *The Doctrine of Atonement from Luther to Forde*.

#### ***Theodore Dierks***

Sin has manifold ill consequences. The work of Christ in atonement is a manifold panoply of salvation. Scripture speaks of atonement using a variety of words and themes.<sup>51</sup> It is important to

---

<sup>49</sup> Scripture speaks of atonement in words and themes of covenant, testament, sacrifice, Day of Atonement, Passover, Pascal Lamb, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, justification, the blood of Christ, Lamb of God, payment, Surety, covering, mercy-seat, deliverance, victory over our enemies (the Devil, the world, our sinful selves, death), and ransom, to name some. Themes of *Christus Victor*, ransom, and others hold prominent places in Lutheran theology along with vicarious satisfaction.

<sup>50</sup> Albrecht Peters, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms, Creed* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis: 2011), 161-162; Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 28-29, 44, 48; and Theodore Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938), 19, 43-44.

<sup>51</sup> Scripture speaks of atonement in words and themes of covenant, testament, sacrifice, Day of Atonement, Passover, Pascal Lamb, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, justification, the blood of Christ, Lamb of God, payment, Surety, covering, mercy-seat, deliverance, victory over our enemies (the Devil, the world, our sinful selves, death), and ransom, to name some. In Scripture and in dogmatics, these words and themes have usually related and sometimes partially overlapping meanings. Yet each remains a distinct theme.

understand, as Theodore Dierks lucidly explains,<sup>52</sup> that the orientation of sin and its consequences affects the orientation of atonement and its benefits.

While sinners suffer physical and spiritual death, bondage to sin, bondage to the devil, lostness, blindness, darkness, inherited corruption, and inability to deliver themselves from these conditions, Dierks says Christ and the Apostles orient these as the consequences of legal guilt. These consequences are judgments and punishments of God for the guilt of sin. Bondage to the devil is not of the devil's own power or right but exists by God using the devil as an executioner of judgment.

Why is man unable to free himself from the bondage of sin? It is because he cannot remove his guilt. As long as he is guilty, he is under the bondage of sin because of the judgment of God; and as long he is under bondage, he can only heap guilt upon guilt.<sup>53</sup>

“The devil is merely God's executioner, carrying out the judgments of God.”<sup>54</sup> “If God no longer pronounces condemnation on the sinner, the devil can no longer rule over such a one.”<sup>55</sup> “Since the guilt of sin has been made of none effect, man has also been redeemed from eternal death.”<sup>56</sup> “Since the guilt of sin has been cancelled, man is also delivered from the power of the devil.”<sup>57</sup> “Because the guilt of sin has been erased, therefore we are no longer under the judgment of God to suffer the penalty of guilt, i.e., to be under the bondage of sin, death, and the devil.”<sup>58</sup> “In all this, the blotting out of the guilt of sin by the self-sacrifice of Christ must always be emphasized as the cause and source of redemption from sin, death, and the power of the devil.”<sup>59</sup>

In order to efface the guilt of sin, God sent His only-begotten Son into the world to take the place of sinful man. Of Him God demanded perfect obedience to His holy Law, and imputing to Him the guilt of all sins of all men, He demanded that He pay the penalty. Through His vicarious satisfaction, or atonement, Christ turned the wrath of God into grace and favor. In other words, in Christ, God reconciled the world unto Himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them (objective justification); and whoever believes and accepts this reconciliation has forgiveness and pardon (subjective justification).<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> Theodore Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938).

<sup>53</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

<sup>55</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

<sup>56</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

<sup>57</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

<sup>58</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 44.

<sup>59</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

<sup>60</sup> Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 21.

## *Albrecht Peters*

As Albrecht Peters explains in his consummate five-volume commentary on Luther's catechisms, this orientation accords with Luther's teaching in the *Large Catechism*.

The reformer thus takes up both constellations of motifs: on the one hand, Christ as the one who vanquishes all the powers of destruction and powers of death and, on the other hand, Christ as our substitute and as our propitiatory offering over against God's holy, judging wrath. Luther links both aspects in such a way that the hidden emphasis from the Western Church and the Middle Ages, on the punishing suffering of Christ, persists. The propitiation of God's wrath remains the center, in terms of content, in the catechisms as well; at the deepest level, it is God's curse of judgment that delivers us over to the powers of destruction. These powers stand in a unique relationship with God; according to the *Large Catechism*, on the one hand, they are our "tyrants," caught up in rebellion against God, and yet, on the other hand, they are the "harsh schoolmasters" that God Himself put in place, which means that they are the authorities who run the prison; the real prison came into existence for us when God gave us over under the condemning wrath of His Law. "Death, sin, hell, all of these come from the wrath of God; they are its harsh schoolmasters." Even among these ominous allies, Luther intimates that there is a pecking order; Satan stands at the top; he "clearly is to be identified as a prince over sin and the prince of death." This is the specifically theological dimension; to it corresponds an anthropological aspect. As we are free, in heart and conscience, from the accusation of the Law and from the wrath of God that thereby brings its onslaught, we are free, as well, with respect to the battle against the satanic demons; for us, these have been rendered harmless, because the wrath of God no longer stands behind them.

By means of these insights, Luther deepens and personifies both the "classical theory of the atonement" of the Christus Victor model as well as Anselm's teaching about satisfaction. By means of his hyper-realistic and drastic images of Christ's victory over the dark comrades, sin, death and the devil, he reaches back into the tradition of the early Church and the Eastern Church and renews its emphasis on the motif of a battle that encompasses the entire earth. But because he points out, in, with and under the onslaughts of the powers of death, how Christ fully suffers the deepest, holy wrath of judgment from God that hangs over all human guilt, and inserts the Law at this point as well, into the list of the powers that effect the curse, the reformer deepens the early Church's confession about Christus Victor by means of insights that are set forth initially by Paul: precisely by suffering the full consequences of the divine curse of judgment upon the guilt of human sin, Jesus Christ overcomes the

original power of those that destroy.<sup>61</sup>

### **Francis Pieper**

Francis Pieper teaches this orientation.

Since Christ reconciled mankind with God, that is canceled their guilt, mankind is delivered from all the terrible consequences of guilt, from death, from the power of the devil, from the dominion of sin, etc. Scripture describes at great length this effect of reconciliation. ... But all of this, our deliverance from all evil, is due to our deliverance from sin. Scripture constantly reminds us that our deliverance from the guilt of sin through the one sacrifice of Christ must be kept in the foreground. Because our guilt is wiped out before God, therefore we are also redeemed from death, etc.<sup>62</sup>

### **Jack D. Kilcrease**

In his critique of Anselm, Aulén failed to recognize Luther's harmonization in the *Large Catechism* as just explained from Peters' commentary, which accords with Dierks' orientation stated above. Aulén did not recognize *Christus Victor* in coordination with or complementary to Anselm. Rather, "Anselm is judged not simply inadequate, but anathema."<sup>63</sup>

Jack D. Kilcrease also takes up the questions: How did the tyrants get their power over us? How did our enemies get their grip? They got it because of the just verdict of the Law that we are sinners. Kilcrease summarizes this piece of Theodosius Harnack's presentation of Luther's view:

The law was an eternal and objective standard that needed to be fulfilled by sinful humanity. The demonic forces that held humanity in their sway (law, death, and the devil) were not masters who had assumed their offices arbitrarily. Rather, these forces dominated the world because of human sin, and were manifestations of God's wrath.<sup>64</sup>

Kilcrease summarizes this piece of Luther's view directly from Luther in the *Large Catechism*:

Luther's combination of the two motifs becomes even more pronounced and explicit in his more-detailed account of the *Large Catechism*. First, the *Large Catechism* clarifies how bondage to the devil and the wrath and law of God are connected.

"For when we had been created by God the Father, and had received from Him all manner of good, the devil came and led us into disobedience, sin, death, and all evil,

---

<sup>61</sup> Albrecht Peters, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, *Commentary on Luther's Catechisms, Creed 2* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis: 2011), 161-162.

<sup>62</sup> Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), II.343-344.

<sup>63</sup> Peter J. Scaer, "The Atonement in Mark's Sacramental Theology." *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 227-242, 227.

<sup>64</sup> Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 28-29.

so that we fell under His [God's] wrath and displeasure and were doomed to eternal damnation, as we had merited and deserved.”

In other words, the demonic forces of the world gained their power over human beings as a result of sin. The devil led human beings into sin, thereby making them slaves to “sin, death and all evil.” The violation of God’s law incurred his wrath, which allowed humans to be held by these powers of darkness. These forces serve as a mask of God’s infinite wrath against sin.<sup>65</sup>

On the basis of this judgment of the Law, we are given over to jailors, who are our enemies, the tyrants that hold us: the devil, the world, the sinful self, and the Law (because by the flesh it is weak, Romans 8:3). That being so, through the cross, Jesus achieves not just one but both of our needs. God accepts the active obedience of Christ for us and his innocent suffering of the penalty of the Law for us. This vicarious satisfaction reverses the verdict of Law that was against us. Since the judgment of the Law was the basis of the grip of our enemies, the reversal of the verdict also looses their grip upon us. They no longer have the legal authority that our prior verdict of guilt gave them. Thus, they are conquered and we are delivered. Their former lawful custody now is unlawful thanks to Christ.

In the cross, Christ accomplished both parts of a unified atonement for us. He is at once our penal substitute and our conquering deliverer.

This is the beautiful harmonization of two views of the atonement, vicarious satisfaction and the conquest of our enemies. Adding to the beauty is how the harmonization prioritizes justification. Christ openly triumphs over the tyrants of darkness in the cross, but He does so by breaking their legal authority under the former verdict of guilt that now is washed away by his blood.

By rendering infinite satisfaction and neutralizing the threat of the law, Christ is also victorious over the demonic forces of the old creation. All these forces are masks of God’s wrath, in that “the whole creation is a face or mask of God.” The powers of darkness enslave and define persons living apart from the grace of God. When the law is satisfied, the proclamation of the word of God first kills and then breathes new life into the person of faith:

“I am crucified with Christ.” Paul adds this word because he wants to explain how the Law is devoured by the Law. . . . When by this faith I am crucified and die to the Law, then the Law loses all its jurisdiction over me, as it lost it over Christ. Thus, just as Christ Himself was crucified to the Law, sin, death, and the Devil, so that they have no further jurisdiction over Him, so through faith I, having been crucified with Christ in spirit, am crucified and die to the Law, sin, etc., so that they have no further jurisdiction over me but are now crucified and dead to me.”<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>65</sup> Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde*, 44.

<sup>66</sup> Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde*, 48, quoting Luther and citing LW 26:165; WA

## Conclusion

The lymphocyte image is more potent than it first appears, and its potency is precisely its danger. By construing every theory of atonement as a solution that takes its shape from a problem its age happens to feel, the image quietly converts the whole history of soteriology into a sequence of expirations. One antibody after another rises to meet its antigen, does its work, and then dissolves as the pathogen of the age recedes. Alan Mann's Narrated Self-Coherence does not escape this logic; it merely takes its place as the ninth in the series, a solution contoured to the shame of the incoherent self and therefore as time-bound and disposable as the eight it was meant to displace. Mann nearly says as much, and his refusal to finish the sentence, to confess that his own theory is destined to be outgrown, does not exempt him from the verdict. It only shows that the lymphocyte, turned on itself, devours its maker. What begins as a tool for relativizing rivals ends by relativizing everything, atonement included, and carries the very hope of salvation toward insignificance.

But the premise is false, and so the conclusion need not follow. The problem that atonement answers is not one perception among many that history will eventually replace, but sin, original and actual, condemning, the common inheritance of Adam's whole race. That is not a wound peculiar to guilt-ridden Europe or to a shame-ridden West. It is the human condition as such, and it has a name we can still learn, because the Word that names it is living and powerful enough to teach it. To say otherwise, to consign sinners to a permanent inability even to hear the word for their own plight, is a deeper pessimism than the Law's sharpest accusation. The Law at least assumes that its hearers can be reached.

And because the problem is objective, universal, and enduring, so is its solution. Christ's vicarious satisfaction is not a shape pressed upon the Gospel by the anxieties of an era., It is the finished work of God standing outside us, accomplished whether we believe it or not, offered for the whole world and not for some shame-afflicted fraction of it. Far from solving a single problem and then expiring, it grounds a manifold panoply of salvation. As Dierks, Peters, Pieper, Kilcrease, and Luther together make plain, the cancellation of guilt is the source from which deliverance from death, the devil, and the powers of darkness flows. Christ is at once our penal substitute and our conquering deliverer, and the second because of the first: by satisfying the Law that gave our enemies their lawful hold, he strips them of their custody and sets us free. Here the two atonement motifs do not succeed one another like passing lymphocytes. They cohere in a single, abiding work.

This is the more hopeful prospect, and it asks something of us. It asks that we be willing to hear ourselves named as sinners, that we accept the odium of original sin as our own, to receive the load lifted entirely from our backs. The choice this essay finally presses is not between an old solution and a new one, but between a soteriology that history dissolves and a gospel that history cannot touch, a Christ whose burden is light because he has already carried the weight.