



Atonement in Our Circles and Church

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Beloved, while I was very diligent to write to you concerning our common salvation, I found it necessary to write to you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. (Jude [1]:3)

Introduction

Twice this century Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne has held multi-day symposia prompted by issues about the teaching of Christ's work of atonement "in our circles" and "in our church." Given the importance of the atonement, this is a cause for attention.

After brief expressions of the importance of the atonement and the meaning of vicarious satisfaction, this essay describes the symposia in 2008 and 2020. The meaning of "in our circles" and "in our church" was not as delineated as might have been wished. Reading the symposia papers and watching the symposia videos make it plain, however, that a large part of it is the influence of Gerhard O. Forde and his disciples among Lutherans outside of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA).

This essay describes the atonement theology of Forde and his disciples. It considers confessional Lutheran responses to Fordean atonement by symposia presenters and in the work of Jack D. Kilcrease.

One symposium presenter said,

Anti-atonement theology has been circulating for quite some time, with little obvious effect on the world of confessional Lutheranism. But lately, there seems to be some confusion on this subject even within confessional Lutheranism.¹

This essay suggests reasons for further research about whether the confusion has happened only lately.

¹ Peter J. Scaer, "Reckoned Among the Lawless," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 209-225, 215.

Evidence from Kurt E. Marquart, Robert D. Preus, and others suggests that the confusion is of longer standing “in our circles” and “in our church.” Maybe we just have not been smelling the coffee.

This essay concludes with a recommendation of a constructive contribution to the issue by Robert D. Preus.

Importance of Atonement

Junius B. Remensnyder says that because the atonement “directly concerns each one’s personal salvation, the interest attaching to it is not to be computed. The realization of the significance of the atonement is the most tremendous thing for every immortal soul.”²

Occupying this vital place in the body of Christian truth, it naturally is selected as a principal target of attack. So we find that against perhaps no other doctrine confessed by the whole Christian Church is there such a concert of hostile criticism as is now experienced by this one. It is either openly denied or so stated as to deprive it of any positive significance.³

Concurring, J. K. Mozley says “There is no Christian doctrine which arouses fiercer resentment and opposition than the subject of our present study. ... The Christian Doctrine of the Atonement marks a point at which differences ... become especially acute.”⁴

At the 2019 Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, Andrew J. Preus said, “The topic assigned to me is ‘The Atonement: When did Lutherans start denying it?’ This is a long story, which goes back to the fall in the Garden of Eden.”⁵

The teaching that Jesus made satisfaction for sins is at the center of all Christian doctrine. Sinful man is justified before God through faith *on account of Christ* who made satisfaction for sins (AC IV). This is why we must expect the devil to attack it in every generation.⁶

Jack D. Kilcrease says, “Among the many historic Christian doctrines that have received a cold reception in post-Enlightenment theology, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement stands out particularly as an object of derision.”⁷ He says,

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.⁸

² Junius B. Remensnyder, *The Atonement and Modern Thought* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1905) 36.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ J. K. Mozley, *The Doctrine of the Atonement* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1916), v.

⁵ Andrew J. Preus, “The Atonement: When Did Lutherans Start Denying It?” Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, May 10, 2019.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Jack D. Kilcrease, “Johann Gerhard, the Socinians, and Modern Rejections of Substitutionary Atonement,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 82, nos. 1-2, 2020, pp. 19-44, 19.

⁸ Kilcrease, “Modern Rejections,” 19-20.

Vicarious Satisfaction

Kilcrease briefly expands upon that parenthetical reference to the active and passive obedience of Christ.

Like Luther, Flacius, and the Formula of Concord, Gerhard accepts the doctrine of active and passive righteousness, wherein for the sake of redemption, Christ must both positively fulfill the law (active righteousness), as well as suffer its punishment (passive righteousness).⁹

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

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

"God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law." (Galatians 4:4) Abraham "believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness." (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:3, James 2:28) God imputes, counts, and reckons the death of Christ to us as exhausting the Law's penalty for our sin and He imputes the righteousness of Christ to us. (Romans 4:5-8, Psalm 32:1-2) The whole extended argument Paul makes in Romans 4 and 5 is centered on imputation, reckoning, and counting. In two chapters, relying on the text as rendered in English by the *New King James Version*, Paul explicitly uses terms of imputation six times and terms of counted or accounted six times. It is the backbone of his argument. Remove imputation of Christ's righteousness to us by substitution and the whole epistle to the Romans collapses.

Orientation of Sin and Consequences, Atonement and Benefits

Sin has manifold ill consequences. The work of Christ in atonement kills many birds with one stone and does so in a panoply of ways. Scripture speaks of atonement using a variety of words and themes.¹⁰ It is important to understand, as Theodore Dierks lucidly explains,¹¹ 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.¹²

"The devil is merely God's executioner, carrying out the judgments of God."¹³ "If God no longer pronounces condemnation on the sinner, the devil can no longer rule over such a one."¹⁴ "Since the guilt

⁹ Kilcrease, "Modern Rejections," 33.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ Theodore Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, (St Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1938).

¹² Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 19.

¹³ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

¹⁴ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

of sin has been made of none effect, man has also been redeemed from eternal death.”¹⁵ “Since the guilt of sin has been cancelled, man is also delivered from the power of the devil.”¹⁶ “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.”¹⁷ “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.”¹⁸

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).¹⁹

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*.²⁰

So, in Lutheran theology, we do affirm, and prominently so, the victory of Christ over his and our enemies. We affirm our deliverance from their tyranny. The atonement would be incomplete without this. But the basis of the defeat of our enemies is the removal of the legal guilt that was the basis for their executioner status. Thus, vicarious satisfaction must remain in the proclamation of the Gospel, and its orientation as the basis of the manifold benefits of the atonement must remain.

Witnesses to Orthodox Lutheran Doctrine

The orthodox Lutheran doctrine of vicarious satisfaction is revealed in Scripture, taught by Luther, confessed in the Lutheran confessions in the *Book of Concord*,²¹ taught in explanations of the *Small Catechism*,²² sung in Lutheran hymns,²³ prayed in the Lutheran liturgy,²⁴ and received in Baptism²⁵ and the Lord’s Supper.²⁶

¹⁵ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

¹⁶ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

¹⁷ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 44.

¹⁸ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 43.

¹⁹ Dierks, *Reconciliation and Justification*, 21.

²⁰ Albrecht Peters, trans. Thomas H. Trapp, *Commentary on Luther’s Catechisms, Creed 2* (Concordia Publishing House, St. Louis: 2011), 161-162.

²¹ T. R. Halvorson, “Vicarious Satisfaction in the Lutheran Confessions,” *Brothers of John the Steadfast*, August 25, 2022, <https://steadfastlutherans.org/2022/08/vicarious-satisfaction-in-the-lutheran-confessions/>.

²² T. R. Halvorson, “What Are You Taught About Redemption [Vicarious Satisfaction in Explanations of the Small Catechism],” *Brothers of John the Steadfast*, August 16, 2022, <https://steadfastlutherans.org/2022/08/what-are-you-taught-about-redemption/>.

²³ T. R. Halvorson, “Vicarious Satisfaction in Lutheran Hymns.”

²⁴ T. R. Halvorson, “Vicarious Satisfaction in Liturgy: Worship in General.” Additional essays on parts of the liturgy are planned.

²⁵ Peter J. Scaer, “The Atonement in Mark’s Sacramental Theology.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 227-242, 237-241, 242.

²⁶ Arthur A. Just, Jr., “The Cross, the Atonement, and the Eucharist in Luke.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 227-244, 241-244. Scaer, Peter J. “Mark’s Sacramental Theology,” 236-237, 242.

Atonement Symposia: 2008

Twice this century Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne has held multi-day symposia to address issues about the teaching of Christ's work of atonement "in our circles" and "in our church."

The first was in 2008 when, according to Charles A. Gieschern, "much more [was] at stake in the current debate"²⁷ than had been before. That assertion coming from such a source with the participation in the symposium by such presenters as listed below is a cause for attention.

In an "Editorial" in the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* introducing the publication of several of the symposia presentations as articles in that journal, Gieschen said.

Debate about the atonement in our circles used to center around the legitimacy of proclaiming the atonement also according to the *Christus Victor* model rather than strictly using the more familiar Anselmic model. Much more is at stake in the current debate.²⁸

The phrase "in our circles" was not immediately defined. One must go to the presentations to satisfy any curiosity about what that means.

Unfortunately, before going on with the description of the symposia, we must pause to clarify something regarding Gieschen's use of the term "Anselmic model." Luther's and Lutheran Orthodoxy's atonement is not only the penal substitution of Anselm, but the full vicarious satisfaction. As Francis Pieper explains, Anselm's penal substitution, which is right as far as it goes, embraces the passive obedience but not the active obedience of Christ for us.

Anselm of Canterbury declared in his book *Cur Deus Homo* (II, 11) that Christ's obedience did not form a part of the satisfaction rendered for men because Christ, as every other rational creature, owed God his obedience.²⁹

Forde says, Lutheran "orthodoxy differs from Anselm in its emphasis upon active obedience in the fulfillment of the law as well as passive obedience."³⁰ For a thorough comparison of Anselm and Luther, see Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr.'s doctoral dissertation, *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was it "Necessary"?*³¹

This difference between the "Anselmic model" and Lutheran theology has immense practical effects. Hear Luther in the following from Francis Pieper:

This teaching of Scripture is of great practical importance. In his life of faith the Christian continually resorts to Christ's vicarious fulfillment of the Law. Luther: "He satisfied the Law; He fulfilled the Law perfectly, for He loved God with all His heart, and with all His soul, and with all His strength, and with all his mind, and He loved His neighbor as Himself. Therefore, when the Law comes and accuses you of not having kept it, bid it go to Christ. Say: There is the Man who has kept it; to Him I cling; He fulfilled it for me and gave his fulfillment to me." (Erl. XV, 611, 63.)³²

Returning to the description of the symposia, in 2008 two symposia went four days. The 23rd Annual

²⁷ Charles A. Gieschen, "Editorial." *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, p. 194.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. II (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), II.373.

³⁰ Gerhard O. Forde, "The Position of Orthodoxy," 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), 39.

³¹ Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr. *Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was it "Necessary"?* (San Francisco: Mellen Research University Press, 1992). See T. R. Halvorson, "Commentary on Burnell F. Eckardt, Jr.'s Anselm and Luther on the Atonement: Was It 'Necessary'?", https://trhalvorson.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Commentary_BurnellEckardt_AnsemlutherOnAtonement.pdf

³² Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, II.375.

Symposium on Exegetical Theology discussed “Atonement for Sin in the Scriptures: Challenging the Modern Dismissal of This Biblical Theme.” The 31st Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions focused on “Atonement: Biblical, Confessional, Ecumenical Perspectives.”³³ Presentations included:³⁴

- David P. Scaer, “Flights from the Atonement”³⁵
- Simon J. Gathercole, “The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement and Contemporary Debate”
- Michael J. Root, “The Work of Christ and the Deconstruction of Twentieth Century Lutheranism”
- Charles A. Gieschen, “The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John: Atonement for Sin?”³⁶
- Peter J. Scaer, “The Atonement in Mark’s Sacramental Theology”³⁷
- Charles P. Arand, “Atonement and the Two Kinds of Righteousness”
- Simon J. Gathercole, “Christ Died for our Sins According to the Scriptures: Paul’s Gospel and its Old Testament Background”
- Jeffrey A. Gibbs, “Son-Substitute, Servant, and Sacrifice: Atonement in the Gospel of Matthew” (“The Son of God and the Father’s Wrath: Atonement and Salvation in Matthew’s Gospel”)³⁸
- John A. Maxfield, “Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin on the Significance of Christ’s Death”

After publishing several of those symposia papers in Volume 72, no. 3 (2008), the *Concordia Theological Quarterly* continued the topic in no. 4 with articles by William C. Weinrich, Noamichi Masaki, Timo Laato, and Lawrence R. Rast, Jr. Masaki’s topic was “Contemporary Views on the Atonement in Light of the Lutheran Confessions.”

Atonement Symposia: 2020

Between the symposia in 2008 and the symposium in 2020, had things gotten better? In the 2020 symposia, Arthur A. Just, Jr. exclaimed:

It seems incredible that there are theological forces in our church that prompted an exegetical symposium at Fort Wayne in 2020 addressing *The Cross, the Atonement, and the Wrath of God*. As Lutherans, how could these things not be unquestioned among us as central to the heart of our theology, the essence of biblical theology? How can Lutherans tell the story of the Bible apart from the cross and the atonement?³⁹

Just is a little bit more forthcoming about what “in our church” means. He assessed and found wanting a writing of “our colleague at our sister seminary ... from the Summer 2019 edition of *Concordia Journal*.”⁴⁰

³³ “Fort Wayne seminary announces symposia,” *Reporter*, December 19, 2007, <https://reporter.lcms.org/2007/fort-wayne-seminary-announces-symposia-2/>

³⁴ *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008; and “Fort Wayne seminary announces symposia,” *Reporter*, December 19, 2007, <https://reporter.lcms.org/2007/fort-wayne-seminary-announces-symposia-2/>

³⁵ David P. Scaer, “Flights from the Atonement,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 195–210.

³⁶ Charles A. Gieschen, “The Death of Jesus in the Gospel of John: Atonement for Sin?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 243–61.

³⁷ Peter J. Scaer, “The Atonement in Mark’s Sacramental Theology.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 227–242.

³⁸ Jeffrey A. Gibbs, “The Son of God and the Father’s Wrath: Atonement and Salvation in Matthew’s Gospel,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 72, no. 3, 2008, pp. 211–225.

³⁹ Just, *op cit.*, 228. He then provided a thorough debunking of a theological myth that Luke has no doctrine of atonement. Luke has a doctrine of sacrificial vicarious atonement with an accent on its liturgical delivery in pastoral ministry in the Lord’s Supper.

⁴⁰ Just, *op cit.*, 230–31, citing Joel Okamoto, “The Word of the Cross and the Story of Everything,” *Concordia Journal*

In telling the “story of everything,” Just said, the author told an essentially bloodless story, or at the most gave the blood atonement of Christ subplot status.⁴¹

Another symposium presenter, John W. Kleinig, said,

confessional Lutheran teaching has recently been challenged on many fronts by those who cannot stomach this whole “bloody” business. In our own circles, the most forceful attack on this teaching has come from those who are uneasy about the propitiation of God’s wrath by Christ’s sacrificial death. They separate justification from its foundation in Christ’s atoning death and his fulfilment of God’s law by what he suffered on our behalf.⁴²

Again, “in our circles” is vague. But, when Kleinig said as quoted above, “the most forceful attack on this teaching has come from those who are uneasy about the propitiation of God’s wrath by Christ’s sacrificial death,” in support of that assertion he said, “Jack D. Kilcrease discusses *this* in his article “Atonement and Justification in Gerhard Forde,” *CTQ* 76 (2012): 269–293.”⁴³ Add to that the substance of “separat[ing] justification from its foundation in Christ’s atoning death and his fulfilment of God’s law by what he suffered on our behalf” and material in presentations such as Peter J. Scaer’s and Walter A. Maier III’s. Taken together, these more than intimate the meaning well enough. “In our circles” and “in our church” means wherever within our synod or synods closest to us the atonement teaching of Gerhard O. Forde and his disciples has influence.

David P. Scaer says Forde disciple Steven D. Paulson’s

right of center position in the ELCA has been reason enough to provide for him an audience in the LCMS. He has contributed to *Logia*, been published by the Luther Academy, and contributed to Concordia Publishing House’s recently published *The Necessary Distinction*.⁴⁴

The 35th Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology in 2020 addressed “The Cross, the Atonement, and the Wrath of God.”⁴⁵ Presentations included:

- Jeffrey H. Pulse, “Substitutionary Atonement in the Joseph Narratives”⁴⁶
- Peter J. Scaer, “Reckoned Among the Lawless: The Gospel as the Law’s Fulfillment”⁴⁷
- John W. Kleinig, “Sacrificial Atonement and the Wrath of God in the Light of the Old Testament”⁴⁸
- Walter A. Maier III, “Penal Sacrificial Atonement?”⁴⁹

(Summer 2019): 63.

⁴¹ Just, *op cit.*, 230–231.

⁴² John W. Kleinig, “Sacrificial Atonement by Jesus and God’s Wrath in the Light of the Old Testament,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3–4, 2020, pp. 195–208, 195.

⁴³ Kleinig, “Sacrificial Atonement,” 195, n. 3 (emphasis added).

⁴⁴ David P. Scaer, “Is Law Intrinsic to God’s Essence,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 82, nos. 1–2, 2020, pp. 3–18, 15, n 53.

⁴⁵ Symposium Brochure, 35th Annual Symposium on Exegetical Theology, Symposia Series 2020, Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, “The Cross, the Atonement, and the Wrath of God.” <https://www.ctsfw.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/2020-Symposia-Brochure-WEB.pdf>

⁴⁶ Video: Jeffrey Pulse, “Substitutionary Atonement in the Joseph Narratives,” <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Weblink/ViewDetails/18275>

⁴⁷ Peter J. Scaer, “Reckoned Among the Lawless,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3–4, 2020, pp. 209–225.

⁴⁸ John W. Kleinig, “Sacrificial Atonement by Jesus and God’s Wrath in the Light of the Old Testament.” *Concordia theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3–4, 2020, pp. 195–208.

⁴⁹ Walter A. Maier, III, “Penal Substitutionary Atonement?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3–4, 2020, pp. 245–263.

- Arthur A. Just Jr., “The Cross, the Atonement, and the Eucharist in Luke and Hebrews”⁵⁰

Gerhard O. Forde

In 1961 Robert D. Preus already had said,

The last decades have witnessed some significant and provocative studies in the doctrine of the Atonement. Two of these studies [by Gustaf Aulén and Karl Barth] particularly have stimulated interest by the way in which they have broken with the old Lutheran and Protestant treatment of the doctrine.⁵¹

Aulén did not merely recognize *Christus Victor* in coordination with or complementary to Anselm. “Anselm is judged not simply inadequate, but anathema.”⁵² Karl Barth’s Neo-Orthodoxy affected not only the doctrine of Scripture, but other doctrines including the atonement. Aulén, Barth, Peter Abelard, the Socinians, Johannes Von Hofmann,⁵³ and others would flow together into contemporary Lutheran circles via Gerhard O. Forde.

While Forde develops his atonement doctrine in many of his writings, an oft-cited example is his 1983 essay “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ.”⁵⁴ There he rejected the orthodox Lutheran doctrine. He replaced vicarious satisfaction by the righteous life, the innocent sufferings and death, and the sacrificial blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world 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.⁵⁵

While Socinianism might not be among the direct inspirations of modern rejections of vicarious satisfaction including Forde’s, “the Socinians present similar patterns of argumentation.”⁵⁶

For Calvin, the work of Christ possessed no inherent value. Nevertheless, the Father affirmed that the death of Christ would suffice as the price of salvation by fiat, and hence it became so. Gerhard notes that in a similar manner, Calvinists also hold that God chooses the elect without reference to the merit of Christ (contrary to Eph 1:5).

Seen from this perspective, Gerhard’s insight into the Socinian position proves cogent. If God was capable of arbitrarily choosing the elect and simply assigning a value to the work of Christ (as Calvin and some of the Reformed authors claimed), then why should one not take this position to the extreme and claim that God can simply decree forgiveness and salvation with an equal level of arbitrariness (i.e., without the death of Christ as the price)? Indeed, it is Gerhard’s contention that this is precisely what the Socinians did.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Arthur A. Just, Jr., “The Cross, the Atonement, and the Eucharist in Luke.” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 227-244.

⁵¹ Robert D. Preus, “The Vicarious Atonement in John Quenstedt,” *Concordia Theological Monthly*, vol. xxxii, no. 2, February 1961, pp. 78-97, 78.

⁵² Peter J. Scaer, “Mark’s Sacramental Theology,” 227.

⁵³ 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).

⁵⁴ Forde, Gerhard O. “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ,” *World in World*, 3/1 1983, pp. 22-31.

⁵⁵ For an exposition of Forde’s doctrine drawn from his dogmatics text (Gerhard Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2:3-99.) and one of his books (Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther’s Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972)), see Walter A. Maier III, “Penal Substitutionary Atonement?” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol. 84, no. 3-4, 2020, pp. 245-263.

⁵⁶ Kilcrease, “Modern Rejections,” 20.

⁵⁷ Kilcrease, “Modern Rejections,” 32.

Jack D. Kilcrease

In the symposia, the work of Jack D. Kilcrease is evident. In his 2020 symposium article, Kleinig cited Kilcrease's 2012 journal article, "Atonement and Justification in Gerhard Forde: A Confessional Lutheran Response,"⁵⁸ and his 2018 book, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde*.⁵⁹ David P. Scaer lauds Kilcrease's work.

In 2009, Jack D. Kilcrease presented a polemical *tour de force* against Forde's denial of the atonement in his doctoral dissertation. In 2011, he took on Forde's doctrine of the law in a *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (CTQ) article. And he also addressed Forde's theology in a lecture at the symposia series of Concordia Theological Seminary—Fort Wayne in 2011, which was published in CTQ in 2012. Without specific reference to Forde, but with him in mind, Kilcrease evaluated historical understandings of the death of Jesus in *The Self-Donation of God* in 2013, arguing against Forde that for Lutherans, Christ's death was a propitiation. In 2018, he extended his critique of Forde in *The Work of Christ: Revisionist Doctrine and the Confessional Lutheran Response*.⁶⁰

Kilcrease constructed a firm foundation in his 2009 doctoral dissertation, *The Self-Donation of God: Gerhard Forde and the Question of Atonement in the Lutheran Tradition*,⁶¹ subsequently developed into a book in 2013.⁶²

Forde's Disciples

While Gerhard O. Forde died in 2005, as Forde disciple Steven D. Paulson⁶³ says in the title to his 2019 essay in *The Essential Forde: Distinguishing Law and Gospel*, "Forde Lives!"⁶⁴ He lives in the ongoing work of "his disciples Timothy Wengert, James Nestingen, Steven Paulson, and, more recently, Nicholas Hopman,"⁶⁵ 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!⁶⁶

Paulson says again in "Forde Lives!", "The stupefied atonement question—Why could God not just up and forgive?—is answered simply: He did!"⁶⁷

Forde says Christ went about announcing absolution before his crucifixion. That was "up and forgive" without the blood of the cross. He concludes that atonement happens not on the cross but when a sheer

⁵⁸ Jack D. Kilcrease, "Atonement and Justification in Gerhard Forde: A Confessional Lutheran Response," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, vol 76, nos. 3-42, 2012, pp. 269-293.

⁵⁹ Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

⁶⁰ Scaer, "Is Law Intrinsic," 16.

⁶¹ Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God: Gerhard Forde and the Question of Atonement in the Lutheran Tradition*, Dissertation, Marquette University (2009).

⁶² Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran approach to Christ and His Benefits* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

⁶³ Scaer, "Is Law Intrinsic," 5.

⁶⁴ Steven D. Paulson, "Forde Lives!" in Gerhard O. Forde, *The Essential Forde*, 18-33.

⁶⁵ Scaer, *op cit*.

⁶⁶ 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.

⁶⁷ Paulson, "Forde Lives!" 29.

word of absolution is believed. Following that lead, James Arne Nestingen says,

“[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.”⁶⁸

That appears in a publication from Concordia Publishing House, a synod-wide corporate entity of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod.⁶⁹ That qualifies as “in our circles” and “in our church.”

That book, *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law and Gospel*, is supposed to be about the distinction between Law and Gospel. But the parties do not use the terms “Law” and “Gospel” to mean the same things. Thus, there might be more talking past one another than continuing conversation. Though the heirs of Hofmann use traditional Lutheranesque language, the treatment suffers from equivocation.

As someone who regarded himself as Lutheran, Hofmann insisted that the structure of this historical revelation takes the shape of law and gospel. Nevertheless, law and gospel possess different meanings for Hofmann than they do in orthodox Lutheranism. Unlike in the Formula of Concord, Hofmann did not identify the law with the eternal and immutable commandments of God (*lex aeterna*) and various ways that those commandments relate to human existence under sin and grace (*triplex usus legis*). Instead, the law is to be seen primarily as the time of the old covenant, wherein there was a reign of divine wrath and mechanical legalism.⁷⁰

Note the key element about time, “the time of the old covenant.” Christ is the end of the Law not by fulfilling it for us but simply by changing one age to another, thus terminating the Law without vicarious satisfaction. Mark C. Mattes says,

von Hofmann saw law ... as an epoch within the history of salvation. Likewise, Christ’s atonement was no compensatory reckoning—that is, Christ dying in the place of sinners, an execution of a substitute. ... Forde proposes that law and gospel refer to two different ages: one (law) is past, and the other (gospel) is promised.⁷¹

Note again the element about time, “an epoch within the history of salvation.” As David P. Scaer analyzes this, it is a type of dispensationalism, rather than proper distinction of Law and Gospel.

Inherent in Hofmann’s redefinition of atonement is a particular form of dispensationalism—the belief, still popular among some Evangelicals, that God works differently in different periods of time (called “dispensations”). For Hofmann, law has a function only until the gospel comes.⁷²

Forde himself speaks in similar language:

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?⁷³

Instead of having seven dispensations as in J. N. Darby (1800–1882), C. I. Scofield (1843–1921), and the

⁶⁸ 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.

⁶⁹ *Bylaws of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod*, 1.2.1(w)(2); and 3.6.1(2).

⁷⁰ Kilcrease, “Modern Rejections,” 38.

⁷¹ Mark C. Mattes, “Forde’s Works: A Guide to The Essential Forde,” in *The Essential Forde*, 9–10.

⁷² Scaer, “Is Law Intrinsic,” 9.

⁷³ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Critical Problem: The Place of the Law in the Theological System,” in *The Essential Ford*, 45.

Scofield Reference Bible, von Hofmann's *Heilsgeschichte* is a Lutheran two-dispensation Law-Gospel dispensationalism. Far from a toss-off characterization, Forde develops a chapter-length exposition of it in "Hoffman's *Heilsgeschichtliche* Scheme."⁷⁴ This is essentially an exogenous injection into Lutheran theology of German Idealism's view of history.⁷⁵ By it, "law is simply replaced by a historical scheme."⁷⁶

As a concomitant of equivocation on the meanings of "Law" and "Gospel" is equivocation about what substitution means. Forde recasts the meaning of "in our place." Instead of referring to our standing before God's justice with an exchange of our sins and Christ's righteousness, the phrase means the occupation of our space, as can be pictured in the occupation of a city. Through this, he says, Jesus "atoned" by exchanging places without what Lutheran Orthodoxy means in vicarious satisfaction. In the process of speaking of this exchange, he sapped Luther's meaning of *frohlicher wechsel*, "the joyous exchange," or "the wonderful exchange."⁷⁷ Contrary to what Forde says, here is Luther in his own words in a commentary on Psalm 22, which he regarded as "a prophesy of the suffering and resurrection of Christ and a prophecy of the Gospel,"⁷⁸

[5] Atque hoc est mysterium illud opulentum gratiae divinae in peccatores, quod admirabili commertio peccata nostra iam non nostra, sed Christi sunt, et iustitia Christi non Christi, sed nostra est. Exinanivit enim se illa, ut nos ea indueret et impleret, et replevit se nostris, ut exinaniret nos eisdem, ita ut iam non modo obiective (ut dicunt) sit nostra Christi iustitia, sed et [10] formaliter, sicut non tantum obiective Christi sunt peccata nostra, sed et formaliter. Quo modo enim ille in nostris peccatis dolet et confunditur, hoc modo nos in illius iustitia laetamur et gloriamur, at ipse revera et formaliter in illis dolet, ut hic videmus.⁷⁹

which may be rendered,

[5] And this is that rich mystery of divine grace for sinners, that by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours, but Christ's and the righteousness of Christ is not Christ's but ours, for He emptied himself of his righteousness that He might clothe us with it and fill us with it, and He filled himself with our sin, that he might empty us to the same, so that Christ's righteousness is no longer just objectively (as they say) ours, but also [10] formally, just as our sins are not only objectively Christ's, but also formally. For in the same way that he suffers and is confounded in our sins, in this way we rejoice and glory in his righteousness, but he really and formally suffers in them, as we see here.

For Luther, the exchange is about our sins and Christ's righteousness. Forde rids substitution of the element of justice that Christians continue to sing:

Many hands were raised to wound Him
None would interpose to save
But the deepest stroke that pierced Him
Was the stroke that Justice gave⁸⁰

Consistent with those changes, the meaning of "for Christ's sake" is changed. In Lutheran Orthodoxy, it means, as we pray in the Divine Service, "for the sake of his holy, innocent, and bitter sufferings and

⁷⁴ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 12-35.

⁷⁵ Forde, "The Critical Problem," 49.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* To be fair to Forde himself, he issues a serious critique of von Hofmann's historical scheme, but his disciples do not seem to have appreciated the weight of that critique.

⁷⁷ Gerhard O. Forde, "In Our Place," in *A More Radical Gospel*, 101-113.

⁷⁸ Martin Luther, *Reading the Psalms with Luther* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 56.

⁷⁹ *D. Martin Luthers Werke*, Kritische Gesamtausgabe (Critical Complete Edition), (Weimar: Herman Böhlau, 1892), 5:608.5-10 (*Operationes in Psalmos*, 1519-1521).

⁸⁰ "Stricken, Smitten, and Afflicted," LSB 451, TLH 153, ELH 297, CW1993 127, LW 116, AH 75, ALH 399.

death of Your beloved Son, Jesus Christ, be gracious and merciful to me, a poor, sinful being.”⁸¹ In the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, pastors announce this Absolution: “By the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ, he has removed your guilt forever.”⁸² In that compact and crystal declaration, the pastor teaches orthodox Lutheran vicarious satisfaction. He teaches Christ’s active obedience (the perfect life) and his passive obedience (innocent death). He teaches the effect of Christ’s substitutional obedience which is satisfaction (removed your guilt forever).

In Forde, grace and mercy always had been offered, even without the work of Christ. Our trouble is that we would not believe that, says Forde, and the job of the cross is to convince us. On the cross, Christ did not purchase and win me as Luther says in the catechism. Instead, the cross is how Christ reveals the grace and mercy of God, so that we will know of it and rely on it instead of on ourselves. The cross reveals a free-standing mercy that declares a general amnesty apart from anything being done to turn away the wrath of God or satisfy justice.

If you are keeping count, so far, the meanings of “Law,” “Gospel,” substitution, “in our place,” “happy exchange,” and “for Christ’s sake” have been changed. David P. Scaer and Andrew Preus have shown amply that Luther’s “theology of the cross” also has been given a new meaning.⁸³ At another time, we could continue our observations of the infiltration of the Lutheran lexicon with alien meanings. When so many terms have double meanings, equivocation reaches a threshold of obfuscation.

To be fair to Forde, however, sometimes his disciples go significantly beyond him. Some of their errors about Christ and the atonement should not necessarily be attributed back to their teacher.

For example, in Paulson’s drive to reject the so-called “legal scheme” of the atonement, look how far he has gone to deny the obedience of Christ to the Law. In *Lutheran Theology*, while at the bottom of one page admitting that Christ is without sin,⁸⁴ at the top of the next page he launches into an elaborate indictment of Christ as having sins of his own, as being “an original sinner.” He speculates into unrevealed mysteries of Gethsemane putting confession of sins of his own into Christ’s mouth when He prayed that the cup might pass from him. He accuses Christ of the original sin of unbelief. He portrays Christ’s cry on the cross, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me,” as faithlessness. He says,

“Confessing made it so, and thus Christ committed his own, personal sin – not only an actual sin, but the original sin. ... He looked upon himself on the cross and believed in his own belief.”⁸⁵

He has it bass backwards (pardon my Montanan). As David P. Scaer says:

This bizarre and totally unacceptable interpretation cannot go unanswered. Jesus’ plea to God in the moment of his greatest desperation was the most profound expression of faith ever spoken. True faith is not seen in the hour of health and prosperity but in the moment when the believer is overwhelmed by death. Jesus’ enemies got it right: “He trusts in God; let God deliver him” (Matt. 27:43).⁸⁶

Against Paulson’s theory, the Church sings:

Jesus, who through scourge and scorn

⁸¹ Divine Service, Setting Three, Lutheran Service Book (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 184.

⁸² Service of the Word, Christian Worship: A Lutheran Hymnal (Milwaukee, Northwestern Publishing House, 1993), 38.

⁸³ Scaer, “Is Law Intrinsic,” 3-18; and Andrew Preus, “The Theology of the Cross and the Lutheran Confessions,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 81:1-2, January/April 2018, 83-105.

⁸⁴ Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 104.

⁸⁵ Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 105.

⁸⁶ David P. Scaer, “Is Law Intrinsic,” 14. <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Text/ViewDetails/16407>.

Held Thy faith unshaken⁸⁷

Smelling the Coffee

Recall that Peter J. Scaer said,

Anti-atonement theology has been circulating for quite some time, with little obvious effect on the world of confessional Lutheranism. But lately, there seems to be some confusion on this subject even within confessional Lutheranism.⁸⁸

The question whether the confusion has happened only lately bears further inquiry. Evidence from Kurt E. Marquart, Robert D. Preus, and others suggests that the confusion is of longer standing “in our circles” and “in our church.” Maybe we just have not been smelling the coffee.

Kurt E. Marquart

In 1977, Kurt Marquart noted in *Anatomy of An Explosion: A Theological Analysis of the Missouri Synod Conflict*⁸⁹ that along with issues of Scripture, higher criticism, the confessional principle (of church fellowship), and Law-Gospel reductionism, the atonement was under attack in Seminex.

It is no accident that von Hoffmann, who replaced both inspiration and atonement with a curious “Law/Gospel” brew of his own, is today being rediscovered by anti-traditional Lutherans in America.⁹⁰

For his assertion Marquart cites Forde’s 1969 *The Law-Gospel Debate*.⁹¹ Look how long that was before “Caught in the Act” in 1983 and how long before the symposia in 2008 and 2020. Taking Marquart’s statement and evidence in Forde’s *The Law-Gospel Debate* tentatively at face value for purposes of evaluation, it purports that Law-Gospel reductionism entails a combined attack on inspiration and atonement, not just an isolated attack on inspiration. What should we think of that? Let us look at his evidence. Forde’s opening paragraph in *The Law-Gospel Debate* commences thusly,

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.⁹²

Hier, voila. Forde proceeds to treat atonement as part of 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.⁹³ Thus, the inspiration of Scripture, higher criticism, Neo-Orthodoxy, and Law-Gospel reductionism all are woven together with the atonement. Indeed, Paulson says, “Forde first became a theologian by taking up the great and nearly unceasing debates over atonement, and he finished the same way.”⁹⁴

⁸⁷ “Jesus, Name All Names Above,” *Ambassador Hymnal for Lutheran Worship* (Minneapolis: The Coordinating Committee of the Association of Free Lutheran Congregations, 1994), 80.

⁸⁸ Peter J. Scaer, “Reckoned Among the Lawless,” 215.

⁸⁹ Kurt E. Marquart, *Kurt E. Marquart, Anatomy of an Explosion: A Theological Analysis of the Missouri Synod Conflict*, Monograph Series, number 3 (Fort Wayne, IN: Concordia Theological Seminary Press, 1977).

⁹⁰ Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 41. Internal citations here are to the 2022 edition edited by David P. Scaer and Douglas Judisch published by Lutheran News, Inc.

⁹¹ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969).

⁹² Forde, *Law-Gospel Debate*, 3.

⁹³ 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.

⁹⁴ Paulson, “Forde Lives!” 32.

Marquart shows this had been coming for a long time.

Walther and Pieper already were thoroughly familiar with the kind of Luther-scholarship which, following von Hoffmann's lead, tried to pit Luther against the Lutheran Church on doctrines like inspiration, the atonement, and others. They also understood, as many today do not, that the new, re-interpreted Luther was being opposed not only to "later Orthodoxy," but to the Formula of Concord, and thus to the Lutheran Confessions themselves.⁹⁵

And again,

Both Walther and Pieper, as we have seen, protested most vigorously against the Erlangen approach, particularly of its leading light, von Hofmann, who denied not only verbal inspiration, but even Christ's substitutionary atonement. Hofmann's radically unorthodox approach was recently, and most warmly, again *commended* by ALC theologian Gerhard Forde.⁹⁶

We should not be surprised to find a nexus between the rejection of Scripture (inspiration) and the rejection of the atonement. Peter J. Scaer assembles a "barrage" (his term)⁹⁷ of Scriptural passages that plainly teach vicarious satisfaction before analyzing Forde's theology. He asks, "How does Forde avoid the link between shed blood and forgiveness?" By simply wiping texts from Scripture, including Christ's own words, that plainly make the link.⁹⁸ Hear Forde's word over God's Word (note that here we will read Forde's own words, not Scaer's or anyone else's characterization of Forde).

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 retro-edit God's Word and baldly claim his higher criticism is how Scripture is "usually regarded." In this he is not unlike Rudolph Bultmann.¹⁰⁰ Higher Criticism, Neo-Orthodoxy, Law-Gospel Reductionism, and denial of the atonement are a team of oxen pulling together in the same yoke.

Is the situation about the atonement in "in our circles" or "in our church" new? Or is it old? Does it go back *at least* to Seminex if not to Bad Boll or further, and for a long time we just were not smelling the coffee? Marquart says,

The surprising thing ... is not that the liberal invasion was finally repelled, but that it had been tolerated for so long. ... Let us look more closely at ... the ostrich-like denials on the part of Synodical officials long after the situation had become perfectly obvious.¹⁰¹

Marquart then proceeds to take that closer look going back to 1930. There was an astounding

⁹⁵ Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 46. See also Marquart's discussion of the linkage between sheer confessional subscription (an orthodoxy-by-constitutional-paragraph theory of the church) as rabbit's foot and openness to denial of the atonement, the Trinity of God, and the deity of Christ, pp. 73-74.

⁹⁶ Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 109 (emphasis in the original).

⁹⁷ Peter J. Scaer, *op cit.*, 211.

⁹⁸ Peter J. Scaer, *op cit.*, 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 Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, and J. K. Riches (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 54-55.

¹⁰¹ Marquart, *Anatomy of an Explosion*, 86.

accumulation of warnings from various quarters. Lay people, pastors, and other synods gave warnings to Missouri, but various synodical communications assured that all was well, that everything was calm.

Between the symposia at Fort Wayne in 2008 and 2020, in 2019, the Association of Confessional Lutherans' National Free Conference No. 30 and the Luther Academy's Lecture Series No. 26 presented "A Congress on the Lutheran Confessions." The congress theme was "Antinomianism Old & New: The Return of Seminex Theology in Light of the Lutheran Confessions."

Robert D. Preus

In "Flights from the Atonement," as a preliminary observation, David P. Scaer noted that some Lutherans were beginning to separate justification and the atonement. Kleinig said in the symposia that those who attack vicarious satisfaction "separate justification from its foundation in Christ's atoning death and his fulfilment of God's law by what he suffered on our behalf."¹⁰²

That hardly was new. Forty-one years early, Robert D. Preus in his 1981 "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification" said "The second assault against the article of justification by faith is to separate God's act of justifying the sinner through faith from its basis in Christ's atonement."¹⁰³

This was done already in the Middle Ages when Abelard denied the vicarious atonement, but also by the nominalists who taught that justification was indeed a forensic act of God, but made it dependent upon His will rather than the atonement and righteousness of Christ. But the same tendency to separate God's justification of the individual sinner from its basis in Christ's atoning work really pervades all Roman Catholic theology, with a few exceptions, to this very day. Luther rails incisively against this Christless soteriology.¹⁰⁴

Preus then adduced strident statements of Luther in which he indeed does rail against the separation of justification from the atonement. Against the error, Preus said:

We note the close connection between the righteousness of faith, our justification, and the vicarious atonement of Christ. They entail each other. There can be no imputation of Christ's righteousness with which I can stand before God, if Christ did not by His atonement acquire such a righteousness. The purpose of Christ's vicarious work of obedience is that it might be imputed to me and all sinners. Therefore, to deny the vicarious atonement or to separate it from my personal justification threatens or vitiates the doctrine of justification by faith entirely.¹⁰⁵

Remember that what Preus says there about the impact of denying vicarious atonement on personal justification is exactly what Kilcrease said near the beginning of this essay.

With the background already having been given by Preus from 1961 to 1981, it should have been no surprise that Forde's 1983 "Caught in the Act" begins in the 12th century with Peter Abelard¹⁰⁶ and uses Gustaf Aulén's 1931 *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*. As Francis Pieper says,

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

¹⁰² Kleinig, "Sacrificial Atonement," 195.

¹⁰³ Robert D. Preus, "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification," *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, 45:3 (July 1981), 163-184, 165

¹⁰⁴ Preus, "Perennial Problems," 166.

¹⁰⁵ Preus, "Perennial Problems," 166.

¹⁰⁶ While Forde uses Abelard's criticism of penal substitution in Anselm, he levels just as strenuous a critique of Abelard's solution as he does of Anselm's. Gerhard O. Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," *World in World*, 3/1 1983, 22-31, 23-24.

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."¹⁰⁷

ACL and Luther Academy

Between the symposia at Fort Wayne in 2008 and 2020, in 2019, the Association of Confessional Lutherans' National Free Conference No. 30 and the Luther Academy's Lecture Series No. 26 presented "A Congress on the Lutheran Confessions." The congress theme was "Antinomianism Old & New: The Return of Seminec Theology in Light of the Lutheran Confessions."

A Constructive Contribution

Robert D. Preus was on to this a long time ago. What was his response to the situation? One of his antidotes was to identify a suitable representation of the orthodox Lutheran doctrine of vicarious satisfaction and provide an exposition of that representation. He identified Johannes Andreas Quenstedt, *Theologia Didactico-polemica sive systema theologicum* (1685), Part Three, Cap. III, Membrum II, "De officio Christi," Sec. 1, Th. 14 to 44.

This, I believe, is fair and adequate inasmuch as 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 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.¹⁰⁸

His assessment fits with what Roland F Ziegler notes:

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].¹⁰⁹

In "The Vicarious Atonement in John Quenstedt," Preus provided an exposition of vicarious satisfaction. In the process, he gave his own translations of excerpts from Quenstedt's "De officio Christi." I commend to you the reading of Preus' constructive contribution which you may access here:

- <https://media.ctsfw.edu/Text/ViewDetails/6998>
- <https://scholar.csl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4106&context=ctm>

¹⁰⁷ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), II.356

¹⁰⁸ Robert D. Preus, "The Vicarious Atonement in John Quenstedt," *Concordia Theological Monthly*, vol. xxxii, no. 2, 1961, pp. 78-97, 79.

¹⁰⁹ Roland F. Ziegler, "Foreword," in Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of the Atonement from Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), ix. Kilcrease observes that the same can be said for Johannes Gerhard. "Gerhard devotes a significant portion of his Theological Commonplace on justification to the early modern challenges that face the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Such challenges are analogous to, if not the same as, those that we face in our own environment." Kilcrease, "Modern Rejections," 20.