

For Jesus' Sake:  
The Relationship between Atonement and Justification  
By Rolf Preus  
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Theological topics do not fit together like a machine or a Rubik's Cube. We speak of a body of doctrine. In the Bible, when the word doctrine is found in the plural it usually refers to false doctrines. The pure and wholesome doctrine is singular, united, and joined together as a body. Christian doctrine is joined together organically.

It is because of this organic union that we often engage in theological shorthand without even thinking about it. When we speak of sin we assume God's judgment against it. When we speak of God's judgment we assume he is judging sin. When we talk about grace we assume Christ's suffering on the cross. We don't always flesh out everything we are saying because we know how this fits together with that and we assume that those to whom we are speaking also know.

But we might be wrong to make this assumption. We who are gathered here today may understand that whenever we speak of God forgiving sins we are talking about Jesus' vicarious obedience and suffering. If we are Lutherans we know, or should know, that there can be no forgiveness apart from Christ's fulfillment of the divine law and his suffering divine punishment for all sin on the cross. After all, St. Paul virtually identifies redemption through Christ's blood and the forgiveness of sins in Ephesians 1:7. This is on account of that, as we confess:

Our churches also teach that men cannot be justified before God by their own strength, merits, or works but are freely justified for Christ's sake through faith when they believe that they are received into favor and that their sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This faith God imputes for righteousness in his sight (Rom. 3-4).

Sins are forgiven on account of Christ, who by his death made satisfaction for our sins. This is obvious. But what may be obvious to us may not be obvious to others. In fact, the necessary connection between Christ's atonement and our justification is not universally regarded as necessary. Justification is disjoined from the atonement. When this happens, the result is disastrous. Justification loses its substance and becomes meaningless. Forgiveness requires sin and sin, in order to be sin, must anger God.

It is at this point where human ingenuity rises up to correct the word of God. God's word teaches that God is angry with all sinners on account of their sin. St. Paul writes in Romans 1:18,

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. (Romans 1:18)

God's word also teaches that God, for Christ's sake, forgives all sinners all their sin. St. Paul writes in Romans 5:18-19,

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 my 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 natural man, to whom the things of the Holy Spirit are foolishness (1 Corinthians 2:14), insists that this is a contradiction. This is why we see so many efforts made to reconcile God's anger and forgiveness in one way or another.

The only way to reconcile divine wrath with divine forgiveness is at the cross where Jesus became the propitiation for our sins. The problem with this is that divine anger as a theological reality is out of style. But without divine wrath sin becomes unreal. Perhaps we have modern methods of psychotherapy to thank for this state of affairs. Which pastor among you has not had to deal with

parishioners who are burdened by sins they have been told are diseases. Needing forgiveness, they are rather directed to treatment. Call it therapy. But forgiveness isn't the counselor's to give. That would be judgmental, because forgiveness requires sin. Diseases or disorders or dysfunctions cannot be forgiven. We need to be real sinners, having committed real sins that really make God angry, before we can receive real forgiveness! Without real sin forgiveness is altered into something else and atonement for sin becomes unnecessary.

The vicarious atonement, as the necessary payment for sin, has been under attack within Lutheranism for quite some time. Whether its denial creeps in from outside of the church whereby categories of thought from the social sciences replace theological categories, or whether it is the simply the result of the gradual decay in theological substance in theological seminaries and universities over the couple of centuries, the doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction – that Christ has offered up to God in our stead the obedience we owed and has suffered from God in our stead the punishment we deserved – is rejected by many influential theologians today.

Consider the teaching of the highly touted Evangelical Catechism, published in Germany in 1979 and in America in 1982. In explaining the relationship between atonement and justification, the Evangelical Catechism says:

The church's message concerning justification has also suffered from overly-literal explanations of how Christ has atoned for human sin. When metaphors and images of the atonement are taken too concretely, they distort our understanding of God. For example, God has sometimes been seen as paying a debt to the devil, or as requiring the bloody sacrifice of his Son in order to satisfy his wrath. When such language is used it often contradicts other things we know about God from the Scriptures, including his power over evil and his steadfast love and forgiveness.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Evangelical Catechism: Christian Faith in the World Today, Augsburg Publishing House, 1982, pages 209-211.

I know of no Lutheran theologian who advances the notion that the atonement was a debt God paid to the devil. Such a notion is offensive in the extreme, predicated as it is on the lie that God owes the devil anything at all. Clearly, the writers of this Catechism were not seriously concerned about such a notion. Their real target was the doctrine that God required the bloody sacrifice of his Son to satisfy his wrath. This is the unanimous teaching of orthodox Lutheranism because this is the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures. This is what hilasmos means. Jesus “is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.” (1 John 2:2) God’s steadfast love, far from being in contradiction to the teaching that God’s wrath was appeased by the bloody death of his Son, is defined by this teaching, as St. John writes:

In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 1 John 4:10

Leon Morris in his The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross points out that when the word hilaskomai is used in the LXX to mean forgive it also entails the concept of the turning away of wrath.<sup>2</sup> What kind of forgiveness is it that does not entail the setting aside of anger? They are two sides of the same coin.

Gerhard Førde, a popular Lutheran theologian in America, even among many conservative Lutherans, similarly attacks the doctrine of the vicarious atonement of our Lord Jesus in his book, On Being a Theologian of the Cross. He writes:

For the most part we will, no doubt, be modest enough to admit that we cannot go the whole way on the glory road without the help of grace. But then Christ gets called into the scheme to make it work. Christ and the cross are taken up into abstract doctrines. The result is that the cross too is looked upon as though it were transparent. Theologians of glory will claim not only to be able to see through creation but

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<sup>2</sup> The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, by Leon Morris, 1965, Tyndale Press, London, page 157.

also to see through the cross to figure out the final “Why.” Why did Jesus have to die? Apparently to pay for our failures and mistakes in the pursuit of “virtue, godliness, wisdom, justice, goodness, and so forth.” Thus the cross is not really just what is visible. It becomes a launching pad for speculative flights into intellectual space, into the invisible things of God. It is not simply that a man sent from God is suffering, forsaken, and dying at our hands – as if that were not enough! – but he is a payment to God (whose justice one has supposedly peered into and figured out) in some celestial court transaction.<sup>3</sup>

Førde describes the historic Christian doctrine of Christ’s vicarious atonement as a theology of glory as theologians take speculative flights into intellectual space. What he calls speculative is the clear teaching of the Holy Scriptures. There is nothing speculative about it. It is the gospel proclaimed clearly by the prophet Isaiah:

Surely He has borne our griefs  
And carried our sorrows;  
Yet we esteemed Him stricken,  
Smitten by God, and afflicted.  
But He was wounded for our transgressions,  
He was bruised for our iniquities;  
The chastisement for our peace was upon Him,  
And by His stripes we are healed.  
All we like sheep have gone astray;  
We have turned, every one, to his own way;  
And the LORD has laid on Him the iniquity of us all. (Isaiah 53:4-6)

That Christ paid his life of obedience to the penal justice of God as the ransom to set us free from our sins is no mere theoretical construct or theological speculation. It is part of the golden thread woven throughout the Holy Scriptures from Genesis to Revelation. What Førde mocks as “some celestial court transaction” is solid biblical blood-atonement theology, from God providing animal skins

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<sup>3</sup> On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther’s Heidelberg Disputation, 1518, by Gerhard O. Førde, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1997, pages 75-76.

to cover the guild-ridden Adam and Eve, to St. John identifying Christ as the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Offense at the blood shed to propitiate wrath is as old as Cain, the unbeliever. That this offense should be paraded as sound Lutheranism – as Luther’s theology of the cross, no less! – is the scandal of our time.

Why does modern theology reject the vicarious atonement of Jesus? Perhaps it is an aversion to acknowledging the reality of God’s anger against sinners. It may be a byproduct of the breakdown of doctrinal substance and its replacement with some sort of existential experience. It may be the fruit of the so called demythologizing of the Scriptures advocated by Rudolph Bultmann in the first part of the twentieth century.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in American was formed in 1986. In 1984, Fortress Press published Christian Dogmatics, edited by a couple of Norwegian-Americans by the names of Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen. The Braaten/Jensen Dogmatics has been the textbook on Christian doctrine used in the ELCA for about thirty years now. Here is what it says about Christ’s crucifixion:

The crucifixion of Jesus happened only once and will never happen again. Nevertheless, the meaning of the historical cross was transmitted in the suprahistorical language of mythological symbolism. The cross is not a fact of history that interprets itself. The New Testament writers used a rich variety of symbols taken from the world of ancient Jewish and gnostic mythology to interpret the meaning of the cross. When the cross is viewed mythologically, and not simply as one historical event alongside others, it receives redemptive significance of cosmic proportions. It is the task of the doctrine of the atonement to explicate the dogmatic meaning of the cross.<sup>4</sup>

So then, we need to interpret the myth. We must “explicate the dogmatic meaning of the cross.” It won’t do simply to restate the

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<sup>4</sup> Christian Dogmatics, Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jensen, editors, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1984, Volume One, pages 547-548.

ancient myths. Myths, by their nature, are created and sustained within a particular culture with its particular worldview. As Bultmann has taught us, we need to speak in categories accessible to people today. But what replaces the myth of the atonement? When we demythologize the Holy Scriptures in order to ascertain the doctrinal substance that lies underneath the myth, what do we find?

We find nothing. The demythologizing of the Scriptures has been compared to the peeling of an onion. By the time you get to the center, there's nothing there. This is illustrated by Braaten/Jensen's Dogmatics. We read:

But wrath cannot be placated in the abstract by heavenly transactions between Jesus and God. Nothing is accomplished for us by that. God's wrath against us is placated only when God's self-giving makes us his own, when God succeeds in creating faith, love, and hope. . . . When one is dealing with the way things are, wrath cannot be placed in the abstract – say at the moment of Christ's death when payment is supposedly made. Wrath is placated when the body and blood are given to us and are received in faith. It is in the giving and the receiving that wrath is placated.<sup>5</sup>

Some pages later the author puts it quite plainly: "The cross is not a juridically or ritually prescribed means for propitiating God."<sup>6</sup> The rejection of Christ's propitiatory sacrifice moves the doctrine of justification away from what Jesus accomplished for us by his passion nearly two thousand years ago and makes our assurance of God's forgiveness depend on what we experience here and now.

The problem with existentialists is that they don't understand how the experience they are so determined to capture and preserve is actually experienced. The present experience is bound to the past the historicity of which they insist doesn't matter. It is bound to the past by the Word they are bent on demythologizing. Not understanding what joins the here and now to the then and there,

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<sup>5</sup> Braaten/Jenson Dogmatics, Volume Two, page 51

<sup>6</sup> Braaten/Jenson Dogmatics, Volume Two, page 69

they undercut the faith they are trying to defend. They would preserve the branch they are sitting on by cutting it off from the tree that holds it up, and while they fall to the ground, they pontificate on the irrelevancy of the facticity of the tree. One is reminded of the limerick:

As I was sitting in my chair  
I saw the bottom wasn't there,  
Nor legs, nor back, but I just sat,  
Ignoring little things like that!

Faith, which is here and now, when it loses its foundation in the then and there, loses its mooring and is cast adrift to be tossed this way and that by every wind of teaching. This is the tragedy of contemporary Lutheran theology.

Robert Preus quotes a 19<sup>th</sup> century Jewish convert to Christianity from Germany by the name of Philippi who speaks from the heart about the implications of the denial of the vicarious satisfaction. He writes:

He who takes away from me the atoning blood of the Son of God, paid as a ransom to the wrath of God, who takes away the satisfaction of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, vicariously given to the penal justice of God, who thereby takes away justification or forgiveness of sins only by faith in the merits of this my Surety and Mediator, who takes away the imputation of the righteousness of Jesus Christ, takes away Christianity altogether, so far as I am concerned. I might then just as well have adhered to the religion of my ancestors, the seed of Abraham after the flesh.<sup>7</sup>

The need for atonement is sin itself. We look to the cross for forgiveness of sin. We can also look to the cross to see sin. As we confess in the Formula of Concord, Thorough Declaration, Article V,

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<sup>7</sup> "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification" by Robert D. Preus, *Concordia Theological Quarterly*, Volume 45, number 3, July, 1981, page 169



Yea, what more forcible, more terrible declaration and preaching of God's wrath against sin is there than just the suffering and death of Christ, His Son? But as long as all this preaches God's wrath and terrified men, it is not yet the preaching of the Gospel nor Christ's own preaching, but that of Moses and the Law against the impenitent. For the Gospel and Christ were never ordained and given for the purpose of terrifying and condemning, but of comforting and cheering those who are terrified and timid. (V, 13)

Luther makes this point even more strongly in his comments on Galatians 1:4, "who gave himself for me."

In addition, it follows that our sins are so great, so infinite and invincible, that the whole world could not make satisfaction for even one of them. Certainly the greatness of the ransom – namely the blood of the Son of God – make is sufficiently clear that we can neither make satisfaction for our sins nor prevail over it. The force and power of sin is amplified by these words, "Who gave Himself for our sins." We are indifferent, and we regard sin as something trivial, a mere nothing. Although it brings with it the sting and remorse of conscience, still we suppose that it has so little weight and force that some little work or merit of ours will remove it. But let we should not here the infinite greatness of the price paid for it. Then it will be evident that its power is no great that it could not be removed by any means except that the Son of God be given for it.<sup>8</sup>

It is not just our respected theologians who understand the need for atonement for sin if sin is to be forgiven. The great Norwegian playwright, Henrik Ibsen, put these words into the mouth of his character, Brand:

Hva verden kaller kjaerlighed, jeg ikke vill, jet ikke vet . . .  
Of what the paltering world calls love,  
I will not know, I cannot speak;  
I know but His who reigns above,  
And His is neither mild nor weak;

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<sup>8</sup> Luther's Works, Lectures on Genesis 1535, CPH, 1963, volume 26, page 33.

Hard even unto death is this,  
 And smiting with its awful kiss.  
 What was the answer of God's love  
 Of old, when in the olive-grove  
 In anguish-sweat His own Son lay;  
 And prayed, O, Take this cup away  
 Did God take from Him then the cup?  
 No, child; His Son must drink it up!<sup>9</sup>

This is the offense of the cross. God requires the punishment of his Son. But it is not an angry God who so demands that payment be made! It is a loving God! As Jesus said, recorded by St. John in that most famous of Bible passages,

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16)

We must be careful to avoid false antitheses. The Scriptures are not written for our ease in constructing doctrinal systems. The Bible is not systematic theology. It is the Word of God. Whatever system we use to explain what God says must be subordinated to the plain sense of the biblical text. God, not we, is in charge of what he says. It appears that much of the objection of modern theology to the historic, catholic, and biblical doctrine of the atonement derives from an alleged conflict between God's grace and his demand for satisfaction. Was it God's grace that prompted him to send his Son into the world to suffer and die for us? Or was it Christ's suffering and death that propitiated God? The Bible speaks both ways.

The church confesses it both ways as well. There is no real contradiction between the doctrine of the atonement as the vicarious satisfaction and the doctrine of the atonement as Christ's victory over the devil. In Luther's beautiful explanation of redemption in the Small Catechism both concepts are brought together in the words,

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<sup>9</sup> From Robert Preus's lecture notes on Justification.

Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature,  
 purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the  
 power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy,  
 precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death.

The vicarious satisfaction is expressed with the reference to the purchase and the payment. The Christus Victor theme is expressed by the reference to his defeat of sins, death, and the devil. There is no conflict between these two so called theories. Consider Luther's autobiographical hymn, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice" and compare it to Luther's favorite hymn, Paul Speratus's, "Salvation Unto Us Has Come." The former features Christ leading the devil captive – a Christus Victor motif – while the latter has Christ fulfilling the law and stilling God's wrath, a clear presentation of the vicarious satisfaction by which God is propitiated.

The reality of divine wrath against sin cannot reasonably be denied. The flight from a literal atonement is irrational if one believes in the free forgiveness of sins. What must we say about God if he forgives the ungodly without exacting any payment for their sins? Solomon writes:

He who justifies the wicked, and he who condemns the just,  
 Both of them alike are an abomination to the LORD. (Proverbs  
 17:15)

If it is an abomination to justify the wicked, how can St. Paul in Romans 4:5 identify the right faith as the faith that believes in the God who justifies the ungodly? It is either right or wrong to justify the ungodly! How can it be both an abomination and the object of faith at the same time? It cannot be both at the same time without the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus. It is quite obvious that absolute grace contradicts justice. By absolute, I mean considered of itself apart from its connection with the payment of the price that justice requires. Acquitting the guilty is an injustice. When Christ offers up his obedience to God on behalf of all humanity and suffers damnation on the cross in the stead of all humanity, then God can forgive anyone at all. As St. Paul writes:

. . . being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth *as* a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed, to demonstrate at the present time His righteousness, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Romans 3:24-26

God could not be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus unless Jesus were set forth as a propitiation.

There is an intimate and unbreakable bond between the vicarious satisfaction, that is, the doctrine of the substitutionary obedience and propitiatory sacrifice of Christ and the doctrine of justification through faith alone. If God fully and freely forgives all sins of all sinners it can only be on account of the merits of Christ.

Furthermore, if Christ has fully satisfied God's demands on the human race by his vicarious obedience and suffering, then forgiveness of sins must be a freely bestowed gift from a gracious God to undeserving sinners. The atonement and justification by faith alone stand or fall together.

We confess in the Apology of the Augsburg Confession that:

Since Christ is set forth to be the propitiator, through whom the Father is reconciled to us, we cannot appease God's wrath by setting forth our own works. (Apology IV 80)

Why must we exclude our works from our justification? Because,

We cannot pit our works against the wrath and judgment of God. . . Only Christ, the mediator, can be pitted against God's judgment. (Apology IV 214)

This means that any intrusion of good works into the article of justification is an attack on Jesus Christ himself. It is an assault on his glory as our only mediator before God. Again, the Apology says:

If we want to please God because of our works and not because of Christ, what else is this but a transfer of Christ's glory to our works, a destruction of his glory as mediator? For he is the mediator continually and not just at the beginning of justification. (Apology IV 317)

The bond between atonement and justification requires that faith be defined as a purely receptive organ that does not contribute anything to what it receives. It simply receives what is given. What is given to faith to receive is the treasure that consists in the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus. Here is how faith is described in the Formula of Concord:

Faith is a gift of God whereby we rightly learn to know Christ as our Redeemer in the Word of the Gospel and to trust in him, that solely for the sake of his obedience we have forgiveness of sins by grace, are accounted righteous and holy by God the Father, and are saved forever. (FC SD III 11)

What faith trusts determines the nature of faith. We may not come up with a generic definition of faith that applies to any kind of faith in any kind of religious teaching, and then apply that generic understanding of faith specifically to the Christian gospel. No, the Christian gospel determines the nature of the faith that receives it. The doing and dying of Jesus accomplish our justification before God. The vicarious satisfaction and the forgiveness of sins are coterminous and inclusive the one of the other. This means that if one is trusting in Jesus as his Redeemer he is not trusting in his works, his devotion to God, his commitment to God, his decision for God, or anything else associated with his faith. When Luther translated Romans 3:28 and added the word "alone" after the word faith, he was not adding his own perspective to the sacred text. He was coming to a conclusion about the role of faith in justification that was necessitated by redemption of Christ and his propitiatory sacrifice of which St. Paul wrote in the previous verses. If the redemption redeems and if the propitiation propitiates then faith cannot do either. The "alone" in justification by faith alone is required by the object of faith, which is the redemption, the

propitiation, the vicarious satisfaction of Jesus. The object of faith determines the nature of faith and the function of faith. Faith is confidence or trust. That's its nature. Faith is pure receptivity. That's its function. It doesn't do. It receives.

Luther understood this. To trust in Christ is to trust in his vicarious satisfaction. It is to trust in Christ who has satisfied God's demands, Christ as the One who cannot be condemned, and Christ who is without sin. This Christ is the object of faith and this means that the notion of faith being a quality of the soul, a theological virtue which achieves its purpose only as it is formed by love, is impossible. The object of faith disallows such an understanding. Luther writes:

No one's faith endures unless he relies on Christ's own righteousness, and is preserved by his protection. For, as I have said, true faith is not what they have invented, an absolute – nay rather, obsolete – quality in the soul, but it is something that does not allow itself to be torn away from Christ, and relies only on the One whom it knows is in God's grace. Christ cannot be condemned, nor can anyone who throws himself upon him. This means that so grave a matter is the sin that remains [that is, in the believer], and so intolerable is God's judgment, that you will not be able to stand unless you shield yourself with him whom you know to be without any sin. This is what true faith does.<sup>10</sup>

The One whose righteousness God accepts, the One who is in God's grace, the One who cannot be condemned, the One who is without any sin, is the One in whom faith trusts. The sheep of the Good Shepherd will not follow the voice of the stranger because the stranger does not have the righteousness and grace they need, the stranger is not without sin and the stranger can be condemned. It is precisely the vicarious nature of Christ's obedience and suffering that makes faith purely receptive.

Faith claims what is Christ's. Luther writes:

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<sup>10</sup> Martin Luther, "Against Latomus," Luther's Works: American Edition, Volume 32, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, page 239

Therefore a man can with confidence boast in Christ and say: “Mine are Christ’s living, doing, speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered and died as he did.”<sup>11</sup>

It is the substitutionary nature of Christ’s work that compels the conclusion that faith cannot give or do or achieve, but only receive what God in Christ has done. Permit me to cite Luther here at some length as he explains the implications of St. Paul’s words recorded in Galatians 3:13, “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us – as it is written: Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree.” Luther writes:

This is the most joyous of all doctrines and the one that contains the most comfort. It teaches that we have the indescribable and inestimable mercy and love of God. When the merciful Father saw that we were being oppressed through the Law, that we were being held under a curse, and that we could not be liberated from it by anything, He sent His Son into the world, heaped all the sins of all men upon Him, and said to Him: “Be Peter the denier; Paul the persecutor, blasphemer, and assaulter; David the adulterer; the sinner who ate the apple in Paradise; the thief on the cross. In short be the person of all men, the one who has committed the sins of all men. And see to it that You pay and make satisfaction for them: Now the Law comes and says: “I find Him a sinner, who takes upon Himself the sins of all men. I do not see any other sins that those in Him. Therefore let Him die on the cross!” And so it attacks Him and kills Him. By this deed the whole world is purged and expiated from all sins, and thus it is set free from death and from every evil. But when sin and death have been abolished by this one man, God does not want to see anything else in the whole world, especially if it were to believe, except sheer cleansing and righteousness. And if any remnants of sin were to remain, still for the sake of Christ the shining Sun, God would not notice them.

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<sup>11</sup> LW 31 297

This is how we must magnify the doctrine of Christian righteousness in opposition to the righteousness of the Law and of works, even though there is no voice or eloquence that can properly understand, much less express, its greatness. Therefore the argument that Paul presents here is the most powerful and the highest of all against all the righteousness of the flesh; for it contains this invincible and irrefutable antitheses: If the sins of the entire world are on that one man, Jesus Christ, then they are not on the world. But if they are not on Him, then they are still on the world. Again, if Christ Himself is made guilty of all the sins that we have all committed, then we are absolved from all sins, not through ourselves or through our own works or merits but through Him. But if He is innocent and does not carry our sins, then we carry them and shall die and be damned in them. “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ! Amen.” 1 Cor. 15:57<sup>12</sup>

We see here a most beautiful and thorough description of the vicarious satisfaction. Notice that Luther is not talking here about what Christ does in union with us. He is not speaking of Christ present in faith. He is not addressing some sort of mystical experience. He mentions faith only briefly in passing as if he didn't see the need to talk about it but didn't want to neglect it altogether. What Luther is describing here is what has happened, objectively, that is, outside of our experience, in the doing and dying of the God-man. He is here establishing the vicarious satisfaction as the foundation for God's absolution of the whole world. He is disproving every claim that human merit plays a role in the justification of the sinner. God as the merciful Father and God as requiring and receiving the payment of a sacrifice to appease his wrath are not in conflict with each other, but are joined together in perfect harmony. Since Luther here expresses the righteousness that is of faith without addressing the mystical union or the divine indwelling of the believer, it is rather surprising to read these words

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<sup>12</sup> LW 26 280



of Tuomo Mannermaa in his book, Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification,

There is no doubt that the idea of the believer's real participation in Christ is an essential part of Luther's theology of justification. At least on the level of terminology, the distinction between justification and divine indwelling in the believer, made by the *Formula of Concord* and by the major part of later Lutheran theology, is alien to the Reformer.<sup>13</sup>

In the Lutheran / Roman Catholic dialogues on justification it was common for those seeking to bridge the chasm between Luther and Rome to try to distance Luther from the Formula of Concord.<sup>14</sup> Mannermaa follows the same approach. Trying to drive a wedge between Luther and the Formula of Concord, Mannermaa writes:

In Luther's view, faith is a victory precisely because it unites the believer with the person of Christ, who, in himself, is the victory.

According to the Reformer, justifying faith notes not merely signify a reception of the forgiveness imputed to a human being for the sake of the merit of Christ, which is the aspect emphasized by the *Formula of Concord*. Faith as real participation in Christ means participation in the institution of "blessing, righteousness, and life" which has taken place in Christ. Christ himself is life, righteousness and blessing, because God is all this "by nature and in substance" (*naturaliter et substantialiter*). Therefore, justifying faith means participation in God's essence in Christ.<sup>15</sup>

Mannermaa emphasizes the word "is" twice in this citation, first when he writes, "the person of Christ, who, in himself, is the victory," and again when he writes, "Christ himself is life, righteousness and blessing." But, as we have seen, Luther did not

<sup>13</sup> Christ Present in Faith: Luther's View of Justification, Tuomo Mannermaa, Fortress Press, 2005, page 41.

<sup>14</sup> See, for documentation, "An Evaluation of Lutheran / Roman Catholic Conversations on Justification" by Rolf Preus, MST Thesis, Concordia Theological Seminary, 1987, pages 35ff.

<sup>15</sup> Mannermaa, page 16-17

teach that Christ was our righteousness according to the inherent righteousness of his person. Luther emphasized the work of Christ, his doing, the vicarious satisfaction! As he said:

Mine are Christ's living, doing, speaking, his suffering and dying, mine as much as if I had lived, done, spoken, suffered and died as he did.<sup>16</sup>

Mannermaa misses the point even as the Eastern Orthodox churches miss the point. Their doctrine of *theosis*, though differing from the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification, suffers from the same lack. The lack is a failure to connect the faith of the Christian to the vicarious obedience and suffering of Jesus. God became man to save us. But the incarnation was not an end in itself. The angel Gabriel told Mary that his name would be Jesus because he would save his people from their sins. This was impossible without suffering and dying in their place. The vicarious atonement is more than the logical necessity for forgiveness. It is the object of faith. The person of Christ is incomprehensible apart from him being lifted up. It is as Jesus is lifted up on the cross to suffer and die that we see who he is. To trust in Jesus and to trust in his vicarious satisfaction are the same thing.

By ignoring the relationship between the vicarious atonement and saving faith, the East ignores justification, replacing it with a synergistic doctrine of *theosis*. Rome falls into a false conception of justification, replacing the biblical doctrine of justification with a doctrine of sanctification that cannot make a sinner just, at least in this lifetime, thus robbing faith of its certainty. For there is no righteousness that avails before God except for the righteousness of Christ's obedience and suffering that he achieved entirely outside of his union with us. Listen to how the Formula of Concord faithfully sets forth the biblical and Lutheran doctrine of justification by faith alone:

For faith does not justify because it is so good a work and so God-pleasing a virtue, but because it lays hold on and accepts

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<sup>16</sup> See footnote 11.

the merit of Christ in the promise of the holy Gospel. This merit has to be applied to us and to be made our own through faith if we are to be justified thereby. Therefore the righteousness which by grace is reckoned to faith or to the believers is the obedience the passion and the resurrection of Christ when he satisfied the law for us and paid for our sin.<sup>17</sup>

The work of Christ and the righteousness of faith are the same. When the righteousness of faith becomes something achieved within the believer then faith is no longer faith.

St. Paul is talking about the article of justification in 1 Corinthians 1 when he discusses the offense of the cross. He writes:

Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom; but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Corinthians 1:20-25)

The offense of the cross is the offense of Christ's vicarious suffering and death. It scandalizes religious folks of every description. The offence of the cross is the offense of God's grace. These are the same offense seen from different sides. The cross has God blaming the innocent for the sin of the guilty. That is a scandal. Grace has God forgiving the guilty on account of the suffering of the innocent. That is a scandal. In either case, fallen, unregenerate, self-justifying human reason believes a grave injustice has been committed. But if we stumble over the offense of the cross we lose the gospel. That's because apart from a real atonement, free

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<sup>17</sup> FC SD III 13-14

forgiveness is license to sin. What else can justification by faith alone mean, except that God doesn't take sin seriously? God says the unjust is just. How can that be anything but supreme injustice?

It is theoretically possible to devise a system of grace without atonement. Islam, for example, has its own concept of divine grace that disallows the vicarious suffering and death of Jesus. God is gracious by giving us more credit for our good deeds than blame for our bad deeds. When he weighs our good and evil deeds on the scale of justice, he rigs the scale just a bit in favor of the good. That's grace.

Islam's theological objections to Christianity include their vigorous denial of the Triune God, insisting that God neither begets nor is begotten. At the heart of their denial of the Christian gospel is their revulsion at the notion that an innocent man should suffer for the guilty. It is unjust, they say. An anonymous Muslim challenges our Christian faith under the heading, "A Wonderful Question for the People of the Cross." Here are portions of it:

And was he crucified for some evil he had done?  
 Or why did he merit the punishment?  
 And did the Jews do well when they crucified him, in order  
 that you might be saved?  
 Or did they do evil that you might be delivered?  
 An extraordinary thing!  
 And if you say that they did well, I ask you, why  
 Do you count them enemies?  
 And if you say they did wrong, as they crucified God,  
 And this is fearful sin,  
 I say, why was it wrong,  
 If without it you could not be saved from the judgment?  
 And was he himself pleased with the crucifixion, or angry? Tell  
 me truly.  
 And if you say he was pleased with it  
 In order that he might atone for the fault of the repentant,  
 I say that Adam sinned and repented by the grace of God,  
 And God forgave him without atonement.

You therefore lie about your Lord;  
 For the matter is plain as the Book put it;  
 For he fled from his cross, and wept much for himself,  
 And prayed to the God of heaven:  
 And said, 'I beseech thee, save me from this trial,'  
 And cried, 'Eli, Eli, why do you leave me this day to the  
 torment?'  
 And if you say that the cross was forced on him in spite of  
 himself :  
 Then this Almighty God is not Almighty,  
 For he hung on the Cross, cursed on every side as it is written.

See how they trip, stumble, and fall. They trip over the incarnation,  
 stumble at the atonement, and fall flat on their face with the  
 doctrine of justification by faith alone.

With the huge influx of Muslims into Europe and North America in  
 recent decades, it is good that we Lutherans understand their  
 theology theologically. We need to set aside a shallow sociopolitical  
 caricature of Islam painted in service to social, political, or military  
 aims. In distinguishing between the three major monotheistic  
 religions – Christianity, Judaism, and Islam – we should not permit  
 the political antipathy between Judaism and Islam disguise their  
 theological similarity on the most important theological issues.  
 Each affirms that there is only one god. Each claims to be the  
 authentic Abrahamic religion. Islam and Judaism also share a  
 common denial of the Holy Trinity who appeared to Abraham, the  
 deity of Christ whose day Abraham saw, the vicarious atonement  
 that was revealed to Abraham on Mt. Moriah when God provided a  
 ram to offer in the place of Isaac (though Muslims claim it was  
 Ishmael), and justification by faith alone of which Abraham is the  
 archetype of the faithful. So while both claim fidelity to the God of  
 Abraham, and both affirm the unity of the deity, and both Muslims  
 and at least the Orthodox Jews still believe in a god to whom they  
 must give an account, neither has a Mediator between God and  
 them who gave his life a ransom for all and from whom the grace of  
 God is obtained. Thus, neither receives the freely given forgiveness  
 of sins. Thus, to forgive another freely without requiring  
 satisfaction from him is no virtue. They have not learned theology

this way. That a man must pay for his sins without relying on the payment of another is a theological principle translated into every sphere of life. The righteousness Abraham obtains through faith is incomprehensible within the parameters of a religion that rejects the vicarious atonement. These so called Abrahamic religions are not really Abrahamic at all.

This is why Jesus, in setting his face toward Jerusalem, did not say that he wanted to go or that he should go. He said that he must go. He must be handed over to be crucified. The crucifixion was as necessary for him to be the Savior of sinners as atonement is the necessary precondition for the forgiveness of sins.

Not only must he suffer. He must also obey. Obedience must be rendered. The justice of God requires it. If it is by the disobedience of the one that the many were made sinners, it must also be by the obedience of the One that the many will be made righteous. God justifies no one unjustly. Martin Chemnitz writes:

We do not, therefore, teach that believers are justified without righteousness, a justification of the ungodly which God pronounces an abomination in Prov. 17:15 and Is. 5:23, but we say that it is necessary that in justification a righteousness should come in and intervene, and indeed, not just any kind of righteousness but one which is sufficient and worthy in the judgment of God to be declared suitable for eternal life. However, our inherent righteousness, which is begun in the renewal through the Holy Spirit, is not such on account of the adhering imperfection and impurity of the flesh. Therefore a different righteousness is necessary, by which, when it enters in and intercedes, we may be justified before God to life eternal. This indeed is the satisfaction and obedience, that is, the righteousness of Christ, the Mediator . . .<sup>18</sup>

Grace depends upon the merits and mediation of Jesus Christ. Grace without Christ is unchristian. The notion that God can forgive without the payment of the obedience and suffering of his

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<sup>18</sup> Examination of the Counsel of Trent Part I by Martin Chemnitz, translated by Fred Kramer, CPH, 1971, pages 500-501.

Son severs Christ from his church, for if forgiveness can be obtained without vicarious satisfaction of Jesus then forgiveness will be so obtained and that makes Jesus unnecessary. This is why the denial of the vicarious satisfaction inevitably leads to a universalism in which faith in Christ is not necessary for salvation. If Christ's vicarious satisfaction is not necessary, Christ is not necessary and there is no need to proclaim him, confess him, or trust in him. This is why we preach Christ crucified.