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### **Justification and the Office of the Holy Ministry**

The first five articles in this issue were originally papers presented at the 35th Annual Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions held in Fort Wayne on January 18–20, 2012 under the theme “Justification in a Contemporary Context.” The final two articles, by Joel Elowsky and Roland Ziegler, were first delivered as the plenary papers of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod Theology Professors Conference that met at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, Missouri, on May 29 to June 1, 2012, under the theme “To Obtain Such Faith . . . The Ministry of Teaching the Gospel” (AC V). It has been the practice of the two seminary journals to alternate in publishing plenary papers from this bi-annual conference in order that these studies may be shared with the wider church.

*The Editors*

## Gerhard Forde's Theology of Atonement and Justification: A Confessional Lutheran Response

Jack Kilcrease

In recent times, Gerhard Forde's (1927–2005) theology has enjoyed a great deal of influence among North American Lutherans. In a previous article,<sup>1</sup> we discussed Forde's doctrine of law and drew out many of the theological implications for preaching and Christian living. In the present article, we will examine Forde's doctrine of atonement and its relation to his understanding of justification.

In discussing Forde's thought, we will draw primarily on his piece entitled *The Work of Christ* (1984) found in the Braaten/Jenson dogmatics.<sup>2</sup> We will also draw heavily upon his essay "Caught in the Act,"<sup>3</sup> written the same year. This basic account will be supplemented by other writings and essays, the primary one being his short systematic theology, *Theology Is for Proclamation!* (1990).<sup>4</sup> We will also draw on his doctoral dissertation, *The Law-Gospel Debate* (1969).<sup>5</sup> Although this is a relatively early writing, his understanding of the law and its place in the order of redemption presented there both anticipates and clarifies his later and more developed theological works.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Jack Kilcrease, "Gerhard Forde's Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique," CTQ 75, (2011): 151–179.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The Work of Christ" in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:24.

<sup>3</sup> Gerhard Forde, "Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ," in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation!* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Gerhard Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> In his own theological autobiography, Forde himself sees his later works as a deepening of theological themes already present in his early theological writings. See comments in Gerhard Forde, "One Acted Upon," *Dialogue* 36, no. 1 (Winter, 1997), 59–60, 61.

## I. Forde's Critique of Previous Theologies of Atonement

### *Penal Satisfaction*

We begin our examination of Forde's theology with a preliminary discussion of his critique of various theories of atonement proposed within the larger Christian theological tradition. Of all the doctrines of reconciliation that Forde discusses, it would seem that he dislikes none more than penal satisfaction. Forde's negative judgment upon this view of atonement first took shape in his doctoral dissertation, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, which largely colors his view of the doctrine in his subsequent writings.

In this early work, prior to discussing the doctrines of law and atonement in the theology of the 19th-century Erlangen theologian Johannes von Hofmann,<sup>7</sup> Forde enters into a short critique of the doctrine of reconciliation as expounded by the Lutheran scholastics. Lutheran scholasticism held that there was an eternal law (i.e., the holy and eternal statutory will of God), which was reflected both in natural law and sacred Scriptures. Since the law is the eternal will of God, it must be fulfilled in order for redemption to take place.<sup>8</sup> To put the matter succinctly: in redeeming creation, God simply cannot ignore his own will.

As it pertains to the nature of atonement, Forde primarily registers his dislike of the doctrine of *lex aeterna* because it seems to place redemption within the structure of eternal law.<sup>9</sup> According to Forde, if the gospel only comes about as a result of the fulfillment of the law, then the gospel is necessarily subsumed under the form of the law. As a result, the law becomes God's primary reality and the gospel is, at best, merely derivative and, at worst, something of an afterthought.

Forde's second objection to penal substitution touches on the eschatological nature of salvation. Conceptualizing redemption as the fulfillment of the law by Christ, Forde argues, does not make atonement a maximally disruptive eschatological act. Forde divides the human relationship with God between an old age of the law and a new age of the gospel. If the law was fulfilled in the gospel, then the new age of grace would, in fact,

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<sup>7</sup> Forde's position owes much to the theology of von Hofmann and his engagement with von Hofmann in his doctoral dissertation. For scholarship on von Hofmann, see Matthew Becker, *The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 4–6.

<sup>9</sup> Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 6.

represent an unactualized potency latent in the old age of law.<sup>10</sup> Forde credits Hans Joachim Iwand's dialectical interpretation of Luther as one source of this formulation.<sup>11</sup> One could also point to the influence of early- to mid-20th-century interpretations of New Testament eschatology proposed by such figures as Albert Schweitzer<sup>12</sup> and Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>13</sup> These treatments argued that the advent of the kingdom of God in the preaching of Jesus and Paul represented a total reversal of the previous reality of the old age.

Lastly, in *The Law-Gospel Debate* Forde rejects the idea of substitutionary atonement because it describes reconciliation as an act that simultaneously fulfills God's justice and mercy. Forde feels that atonement is best thought of as a fulfillment of God's unilateral love, without any attempt to balance out love with justice. According to Forde, by way of contrast, the Lutheran scholastics "... attempted to understand the nature of the divine act in Christ in terms of an equivalence between wrath and love."<sup>14</sup> Such a formulation makes salvation a mechanical and legalistic balancing act. Beyond this, Forde argues that the Lutheran scholastic doctrine of atonement makes the grace of redemption less authentic because it insists on the need for the satisfaction of justice.

In his treatment of the subject in the Braaten/Jenson dogmatics, Forde expands the criticisms first offered in *The Law-Gospel Debate*. Substitutionary atonement fits the work of Christ into a legal framework, which obscures the actual event of the cross and domesticates the radicalism of

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<sup>10</sup> Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 200–216.

<sup>11</sup> Forde, "One Acted Upon," 59–60. See the following works by Iwand: Hans Iwand, *Die Gegenwart des Kommenden: eine Auslegung von Lukas 12* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag des Erziehungsvereins, 1966); *Glaubensgerechtigkeit* (München: Christian Kaiser, 1980); *Glaubensgerechtigkeit nach Luthers Lehre* (München: Christian Kaiser, 1941); *Nachgelassene Werke*, 6 vols., ed. Helmut Gollwitzer (München: Christian Kaiser, 1962–1974).

<sup>12</sup> See the following from Albert Schweitzer: *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God*, tr. Walter Lowrie (New York: Macmillan, 1950); *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*, tr. William Montgomery (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1998); *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, tr. John Bowden (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> See the following major works by Rudolf Bultmann, *Die Geschichte der Synoptischen Tradition* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1957); *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper, 1962); *Jesus and the Word*, tr. Louise Pettibone Smith and Erminie Huntress Lantero (New York: Scribner, 1958); *Jesus Christ and Mythology* (New York: Scribner, 1958); *Primitive Christianity in Its Contemporary Setting*, tr. R.H. Fuller (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1956); *Theologie des Neuen Testaments*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1953).

<sup>14</sup> Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 131.

God's revelation. It makes the "[l]aw . . . [into] an objective schema of commands and prohibitions, a checklist of what must be done and not done to be saved." Therefore "[o]nce this [the fulfillment of the law] occurs it is it is easier to make the logic of substitution work: someone might fulfill the checklist for someone else."<sup>15</sup> Advocates of substitutionary atonement, Forde argues, forget the true and concrete historical narrative of the life of Jesus by fitting it into an abstract framework regarding law and the necessity of its fulfillment.<sup>16</sup> Substitutionary atonement theology therefore rationalizes God's actions to make his grace controllable and predictable. Ultimately, this has the effect of domesticating the cross by fitting it into neat and understandable categories.

Following from this and his earlier criticism in *The Law-Gospel Debate*, Forde ultimately believes that the legal schema is not only an abstraction that obscures the concrete existence of Jesus, but that it also ultimately negates God's mercy manifest in the revelation of Christ. Having described Anselm's theory of atonement,<sup>17</sup> Forde asks "But what of God? Can God not simply forgive?"<sup>18</sup> In other words, not only is God's sovereignty constrained by the concept of the eternal law, but the doctrine of substitution represents God as an ogre who can only forgive as a result of Jesus' death. For God's mercy to be truly merciful, according to Forde's definition, it must be the result of spontaneous forgiveness. A God who demands that sin be punished would actually not be merciful, since by definition mercy is a relenting from judgment, not a pardon resulting from judgment's fulfillment. Therefore, Forde states: "The question remains: if God has been satisfied, where is God's mercy?"<sup>19</sup> If God's mercy is not real mercy, reconciliation dissolves into a theory about a legal transaction, and the reality of God's active love present in the saving event of the cross is lost.

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<sup>15</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ" 2:24.

<sup>16</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:80–81.

<sup>17</sup> See discussion of Anselm's doctrine of atonement in the following works: Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, tr. A.G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 84–92; Daniel Deme, *The Christology of Anselm of Canterbury* (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2003), 175–208; G.R. Evans, "Anselm of Canterbury," in *The Medieval Theologians*, ed. G. R. Evans (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 94–101; Bengt Häggglund, *History of Theology*, tr. Gene Lund (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1968), 167–174; Giles Gasper, *Anselm of Canterbury and His Theological Inheritance* (Burlington, Vt: Ashgate, 2004), 144–173; Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, 5 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971–1989), 3:106–108, 116–117, 139–144, 210–211.

<sup>18</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:21.

<sup>19</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:23.

*"Subjective" or "Moral Influence" Theories of Atonement*

Having discussed Forde's critique of penal satisfaction, we now consider the status of so-called "Subjective" theories of atonement in his theology. "Subjective," or what are frequently described as "moral influence" theories of atonement, fair somewhat better in Forde's appraisal than the class of theories described in the previous section. Forde's assessment is more favorable on several fronts. First, he appreciates<sup>20</sup> many of the critiques of penal satisfaction offered by Abelard<sup>21</sup> and by the later Socinians,<sup>22</sup> particularly with regard to issues of rational coherence.<sup>23</sup> Second, according to Forde, those who advocate subjective theories of atonement understand the gratuity of divine love. The recognition that divine love is a love that does not need to be "bought off,"<sup>24</sup> was, and remains, the main contribution of those who advanced this theory of atonement. This particular insight is very strongly represented in 19th-century liberal Protestant theologies of atonement. In his treatment of this class of atonements theologies in the Braaten/Jensondogmatics, Forde mainly focuses on the figures of Friedrich Schleiermacher and Albrecht Ritschl.<sup>25</sup>

Ultimately, though, Forde does not find this theory of atonement to be without fault either. To begin with, he observes that both Schleiermacher and Ritschl identified Jesus' work with the communication of his peculiar God-consciousness to the church. The vocation of the church is then, in turn, to communicate this consciousness to the world.<sup>26</sup> In Schleiermacher, this consciousness consists of divine sovereignty (i.e., "absolute dependence"), whereas in Ritschl, it is primarily that of divine love. For the liberal

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<sup>20</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:24.

<sup>21</sup> See Peter Abelard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, tr. and ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1966), 276–287. Also, see summary in the following: Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 95–98; Geoffrey Bromiley, *Historical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 185–188; Häggglund, *History of Theology*, 167.

<sup>22</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:24. Regarding the Socinian theory of atonement see: Faustus Socinus, *The Racovian Catechism*, tr. Thomas Rees (London: Paternoster Row, 1818), 297–320.

<sup>23</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:24.

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther's Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 11.

<sup>25</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:29–31. See Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, tr. H.R. Mackintosh and J.S. Stewart (New York: T & T Clark, 1999). For the theology of Albrecht Ritschl, see: *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, 3 vols. (Bonn: A. Marcus, 1895–1903).

<sup>26</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:30.

theologians, these experiences were not meant to contradict previous or normal human experiences of the divine, but rather to fulfill and complete them.

For Forde, herein lies the difficulty with these theories. According to him, the eschatological nature of atonement necessitates that the work of Christ be a wholesale reversal of all that had come before. The gospel cannot be identified with an activation or supplementation of the possibilities already present in the old age. This is true whether these possibilities or potencies are to be identified with an eternal law or a particular description of universal religious experience. The continuity of the old creation represents the continuity of the law. If the law's continuity is unbroken, then the condemnation and demand of the law will never be broken. Therefore, the cross must be something brutal, harsh, and utterly disruptive, smashing to pieces all previous realities. It is the end of all human attempts at controlling God, including the attempt to force God into the straightjacket of human conceptual schemes, which ultimately serve a death-dealing legalism.

In discussing the feminist strain of the liberal theological tradition and its challenge to the Christian idea of atonement, Forde makes many of the same criticisms. In his late essay, "In Our Place," Forde argues that the feminist theological critique of the Anselmic doctrine of atonement is unfair when that critique holds that Anselm's doctrine represents cosmic child abuse. After all, even within the Anselmic schema, Jesus was an adult and gave up his life freely.<sup>27</sup> He notes, however, that such a critique on the part of feminist theologians (and other liberals) certainly does correctly expose the legalism of penal substitution, as well as the tyrannical view of God that it presupposes (i.e., one who demands sacrifice in exchange for forgiveness).<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, the feminist theologians have the same problem that the larger liberal tradition does. In rejecting legalism, they set up a new law of personal fulfillment and social justice in order to replace it. Although they believe that such goals mean liberation from the tyranny of the law (i.e., an antinomianism that seeks to disestablish heteronomous authorities), such theological proposals degenerate into a new legalism. In effect, they simply set up a new law of personal liberation and therefore perpetuate the law's

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<sup>27</sup> Gerhard Forde, "In Our Place," in *A More Radical Gospel*, 103. No date for this essay is given. It appears to have been written for a conference at Luther Seminary in the late 1990s.

<sup>28</sup> Forde, "In Our Place," 102–103.



oppression.<sup>29</sup> If one posits that the goal of human existence is personal liberation, then one must live up to that goal, meaning that the demanding character of the law has simply reappeared in a new form. Since the human person is viewed as the innocent victim of oppressors, one is prevented from understanding oneself as a sinner. Without the death-dealing revelation found in the cross, one will simply persist within the sphere of the old creation and its legalism, will never be resurrected through divine grace, and will never have the law fully established within by faith. In feminist theology, then, the old medieval interpretative method of "moral tropology"<sup>30</sup> is revived and Christ becomes primarily an exemplar of the continuity of the legal schema and not a redeeming *sacramentum* of death and resurrection.<sup>31</sup>

Hence, when liberal theologians claim that Christ went to the cross merely to demonstrate his loyalty to his mission of communicating his God-consciousness or, perhaps, uphold his belief in the liberating truth of social justice, the harsh, brutal, and eschatological disruption of the cross was obscured and obfuscated. Ultimately, this does little better than serve as a means for sinful humanity to protect itself from the brutal negation presented before its eyes in the crucified Jesus. Therefore, Forde writes, "The bleakness and disaster of the cross are covered by all the theological roses. Jesus is rescued from death by theology, so any further resurrection is largely superfluous."<sup>32</sup> As a result, legalism is unbroken by the disruptive event of the cross and human conceptual schemes are allowed to put a limitation on God's grace.

### "Classical" or "Conquest" Theories of Atonement

Finally, Forde discusses the "classical" or what is often called the "conquest" theory of atonement. This theory of atonement primarily views the work of Christ as the conquest and destruction of demonic forces (i.e., sin, death, the devil, etc.). In describing this model of atonement, Forde draws heavily on the scholarly findings of the Swedish Lutheran theologian Gustaf Aulén in his classic work *Christus Victor* (1931). After reviewing the various versions of this motif in patristic theology,<sup>33</sup> Forde discusses what he considers to be weaknesses and strengths of the theory. Among the strengths, Forde argues that the conquest theory represents

<sup>29</sup> Forde, "In Our Place," 105–109.

<sup>30</sup> Forde, "In Our Place," 102–105.

<sup>31</sup> Forde, "In Our Place," 109–113.

<sup>32</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:31.

<sup>33</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:37–39.

"... a protest against any legalistic rationalization that oversimplifies the human problem and ends with a God who is either a vindictive bookkeeper [penal substitution] or an overindulgent lover [subjective theories]." <sup>34</sup>

In this, Forde appears largely to adopt Aulén's own interpretation. For Aulén, the conquest motif was the most fitting description of atonement because it represented a movement of God towards humanity, rather than a movement of humanity to God.<sup>35</sup> In both the satisfaction and moral influence theories, he detected often latent and sometimes not-so-latent legalistic and anthropocentric impulses.<sup>36</sup> Beyond this, Aulén viewed the conquest motif as representing an important negation of what he considered to be the rationalization of theological discourse found in scholasticism and post-Reformation theology.<sup>37</sup> As mythological and anthropomorphic as the theories of conquest offered by the church fathers were, they nevertheless functioned as accurate narrative representations of the event of redemption.<sup>38</sup> Since the event of redemption in Christ transcended normal human categories of rationalization, the actual mechanism of redemption is best left undescribed.<sup>39</sup> The most Aulén believed one could say is that atonement was a unilateral movement of the Second Person of the Trinity towards the created realm in order to save it from the snare of demonic forces.<sup>40</sup>

According to Forde, the difficulty with the view of Aulén and the church fathers is that the gritty reality of the cross once again becomes obscured. For the Greek fathers in particular, Jesus' humanity is invested with divine glory in order to overcome and conquer where previously Adam had failed. Does this not, asks Forde, come perilously close to the Gnostic idea that Christ did not actually die?<sup>41</sup> Does not his redemption therefore reside in his hidden glory and not his death? Moreover, taken to its logical conclusion, the true battle of redemption for the church fathers occurs not in the concrete reality of the cross, but in the unseen realm of demonic forces. In looking for redemption in Christ, the believer is there-

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<sup>34</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:41.

<sup>35</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 145-146.

<sup>36</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 146-147.

<sup>37</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 156-158.

<sup>38</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 58-60.

<sup>39</sup> Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 153, 156-158.

<sup>40</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *The Faith of the Christian Church*, tr. Eric Wahlstrom and G. Everett Arden (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1948), 204.

<sup>41</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:40.

fore asked to look past the actual and concrete reality of the cross to something invisible beyond it. Ultimately, ". . . the dramatic-dualistic imagery can also misdirect our attention away from the Jesus who was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate to a mythic figure who was paying a ransom to the Devil."<sup>42</sup> The cross is therefore transcended, and its existential force is blunted through mythological and cosmological speculation. Indeed, yet again, "roses still obscure the truth."<sup>43</sup>

## II. Forde's Doctrine of Atonement and Justification

### *Human Existence under the Hidden God*

Now that we have reviewed Forde's critiques of previous theologies of atonement, we turn to our central inquiry, namely, Forde's own description of the nature of atonement and how it determines his theology of justification. For Forde, Christ's work of reconciliation should be understood primarily as God's response to humanity's bondage to the power of unbelief. As will be demonstrated, he primarily constructs his theory of atonement around the moral influence and conquest atonement motifs. Put succinctly: Forde holds that God overcomes human bondage to unbelief by way of the grand existential gesture of the cross and the empty tomb.

Forde begins the exposition of his doctrine of atonement by describing the human situation under the power of sin and God's wrath. Much as for Luther in his *Bondage of the Will*,<sup>44</sup> Forde describes God's wrath as manifesting itself primarily in his act of concealing his eternal being. As hidden, God is not concrete, but rather frighteningly abstract. He is

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<sup>42</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:41.

<sup>43</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:40.

<sup>44</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, American Edition, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Fortress Press; St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1986), 33. For a description of Luther's debate with Erasmus, see the follow sources: F. Bente, *Historical Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 209–225; Martin Brecht, *Martin Luther*, 3 vols. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985–1993), 2:213–238; Gerhard Forde, *The Captivation of the Will: Luther vs. Erasmus on Freedom and Bondage*, ed. Steven Paulson (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005); Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and the Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 11–66; Harry McSorley, *Luther: Right or Wrong?, An Ecumenical-Theological Study of Luther's Major Work, The Bondage of the Will* (New York and Minneapolis: The Newman Press and Augsburg Publishing House, 1969), 277–354; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, tr. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 16–18.

everywhere and nowhere. By the power of his electing will, he relentlessly works all things. Because of human unbelief in his goodness and grace, his electing and all-determining nature becomes an unbearable threat. As Forde writes:

It is time now to take the final step. The fact is that we simply cannot reconcile ourselves to God. Why? Just because God is God. We cannot bear that. God is the almighty Creator of heaven and earth. God rules over all things, and God's will ultimately will be done. That is too much. Furthermore, according to the Scriptures, God is an electing God. God chooses. "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy" is virtually God's name. The very thought of such a God is a threat to us.<sup>45</sup>

Relying on several remarks Luther made in his *Antinomian Disputations*,<sup>46</sup> Forde identifies the hidden God's threatening activity with the law. Forde writes in *The Law-Gospel Debate* that the law must be broadly understood as "a general term for the manner in which the will of God impinges on Man."<sup>47</sup>

Because the God of the Bible has revealed and identified himself as the almighty and electing creator, we cannot get around his unrelenting accusing and demanding activity by appealing to secondary causes, human autonomy, or by trying to weaken him with metaphysical tricks. All these acts are, according to Forde, attempts of sinful humans to justify themselves against God and his law. In a similar fashion, contemporary theologies whose goal is to develop a theodicy represent little more than human attempts at self-justification. Ultimately, all such theologies are infantile attempts at intellectualizing away the self-evident threat posed by the hidden God to humanity. God's law, wrath, and hiddenness cannot be escaped by way of clever intellectual theories.<sup>48</sup>

Whether consciously or unconsciously, all human beings recognize these truths and, therefore, rightly perceive the hidden God as a threat. This is why the human will is bound to the power of unbelief and sin. Humanity is incapable of loving or trusting in a God who wills its annihilation. Therefore, Forde writes:

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<sup>45</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:65.

<sup>46</sup> Martin Luther, *Only the Decalogue is Eternal: Martin Luther's Complete Antinomian Disputations and Theses*, tr. and ed. Holger Sonntag (Minneapolis: The Lutheran Press, 2008).

<sup>47</sup> Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 192.

<sup>48</sup> Forde, *Theology is for Proclamation*, 19–20.

God is a threat and a terror to the alienated. Faced with the threat of God and especially with the mere idea of God's election, I can only say, "No." In defiance of God and all the logic of the case, I must simply assert my own freedom so as to have some say about my own destiny. So, I must take over God's role. I must say to God, in effect, "God, I do not know what you plan to do; I cannot trust you. Therefore I must take my destiny into my own hands because I believe I can better decide such things."<sup>49</sup>

Ultimately, then, a God who is neither touched nor seen, and who relentlessly works all things in his wrath, cannot be trusted. Deluding itself into the fantasy that it can rely on its own power of self-determination, humanity must eventually deny God's existence itself. Forde writes: "To put it bluntly, our so-called freedom cannot stop until it has done away with God altogether."<sup>50</sup>

Ultimately then, the only solution to the problem of divine hiddenness is for God to become a God who in a tangible manner relents from his wrath and becomes a God of love and grace. In a word, it is for God to surrender himself to humanity in the person of Jesus and thereby reverses his previous negative existential relationship to the human person.<sup>51</sup> This action will entail the event of atonement and justification, to which we now turn.

### *The Actualization of Atonement and Justification: The Ministry, Death, and Resurrection of Jesus*

As we have seen, Forde holds that one cannot start from a pre-existent scheme or an abstract theory about God's nature in order to attain correct theological knowledge. Therefore, invoking Karl Rahner's famous distinction between Christology from "below and above,"<sup>52</sup> Forde begins his atonement essay "Caught in the Act" (1984) by stating that a proper understanding of the work of Christ must necessarily begin "from below."<sup>53</sup> What this means in practice is that the starting point of all theological reflection must involve what Forde refers to as the "actual narrative"<sup>54</sup> found in the Gospels.<sup>55</sup> According to Forde's reading of this

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<sup>49</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:66.

<sup>50</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:68.

<sup>51</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:67-69.

<sup>52</sup> Karl Rahner, "The Two Basic Types of Christology," in *Theological Investigation*, vol. 13 (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 213-223.

<sup>53</sup> Forde, "Caught in the Act," 93.

<sup>54</sup> Forde, "Caught in the Act," 91.

"actual narrative," Jesus did not come teaching a particular atonement theology or an abstract theory about the nature of God. Rather, Jesus simply traveled around Palestine, spontaneously and unilaterally forgiving sinners. Regarding this, Forde writes:

Why could not God just up and forgive? Let us start there. If we look at the narrative about Jesus, the actual events themselves, the "brute facts" as they have come down to us, the answer is quite simple. He did! Jesus came preaching repentance and forgiveness, declaring the bounty and mercy of his "Father." The problem however, is that we could not buy that. And so we killed him. And just so we are caught in the act. Every mouth is stopped once and for all. All pious talk about our yearning and desire for reconciliation and forgiveness, etc., all our complaint against God is simply shut up. He came to forgive and we killed him for it; we would not have it. It is as simple as that.<sup>56</sup>

For Forde, this "actual narrative" therefore provides a more correct rationale for the crucifixion than either traditional theology or even the New Testament authors themselves ever could.<sup>57</sup> Jesus died because the legalistic opposition of sinful humanity ran headlong into the gracious and forgiving will of God. In point of fact, humanity, enthralled under the power of legalism, actually prefers not to be forgiven so that it can maintain its illusory control over God with its good works. In this regard, Forde writes: "But why did we kill him? It was, I expect we must say, as a matter of 'self-defense.' Jesus came not just to teach about the mercy and forgiveness of God but actually came to do it, to have mercy and to forgive unconditionally . . . [this] shatters the 'order' by which we must run things here."<sup>58</sup> Another analogy Forde uses to describe the crucifixion is that of an "accident." Jesus' death is not unlike a man who throws himself in front of a moving truck and is killed while attempting to save a child playing in the road.<sup>59</sup> In this analogy, sinful humanity is driving the truck and the man

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<sup>55</sup> This emphasis probably owes much to Barth's so-called "Actualism." See discussion in Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols., tr. G. T. Thomason et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1936–1977), 2:257–321, and in George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 30–32. For Barth's influence on Forde, see James Nestingen, "Examining Sources" in *By Faith Alone: Essays on Justification in Honor of Gerhard O. Forde*, ed. Joseph Burgess and Marc Kolden (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 11.

<sup>56</sup> Forde, "Caught in the Act," 90–91.

<sup>57</sup> Oddly enough, Forde argues that the authors of the New Testament misunderstood the work of Jesus. See Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:11–19.

<sup>58</sup> Forde, "Caught in the Act," 92.

<sup>59</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:88–89.

killed is Christ. Humanity drives the truck insofar as we participate the legalistic order of the present evil age.

In spite of Forde's analogy of a car accident, Jesus' death is not in a literal sense accidental. It was in point of fact a quite integral part of God's own plan of redemption. Forde asserts that God willed for Jesus to be "... crucified by the [sinful and legalistic] order itself, so to bring a new order."<sup>60</sup> By killing Jesus, sinful humanity comes to recognize its bondage. In rejecting Jesus and his mercy, humanity is truly made conscious of its root-sin of opposition to God's grace. God allows himself to be killed by us, states Forde, in order to make "... it plain that 'all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' (Rom 3:23)."<sup>61</sup> Jesus therefore did not die to fulfill the law or suffer the punishment for our sins as a substitute.<sup>62</sup> Rather, he died in order to reveal fallen humanity's sin of self-justification and opposition to God's grace.<sup>63</sup>

Ultimately, Jesus is victorious over the old sinful order by the power of his resurrection. In the resurrection, God not only negated the present evil age, but has also vindicated Jesus and his practice of unconditionally forgiving sinners. Therefore, writes Forde: "The resurrection is his [Jesus'] vindication against us. Therefore, it is vindication against death, the power of death resident in our legalism (see 2 Cor 3). It is the proof that he was right and we are wrong. God has made him Lord. God has now said what he has to say."<sup>64</sup>

For this reason, the death and resurrection of Jesus is an utterly disruptive eschatological event. It is the breaking point between the old age and the new, the death of the old being of sin and the re-creation of the new person of faith.<sup>65</sup> In that we are made conscious of our sin by the

<sup>60</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:91.

<sup>61</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:90.

<sup>62</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:81. Forde writes "What sort of sacrifice is this, and how is it 'for us'? *It is surely mistaken to say that his Father needed the sacrifice in order to be changed to a merciful God*" (emphasis added). Similarly, he writes again: "*Jesus dies for us and not for God*. There is not just a little perversity in the tendency to say that the sacrifice was demanded by God to placate the divine wrath" (2:82, emphasis added). In these statements, it is clear that Forde utterly and completely rejects the notion that Jesus died for our sin in order to fulfill the law of God.

<sup>63</sup> Of course, Luther also held that the crucifixion revealed the depth of human sin. The whole human person is corrupted, because Christ is the Savior of the whole human person. See AE 33:227-228. Nevertheless, for Luther it is because Christ is the substitute for our sins that we can understand the depth of sin through the cross.

<sup>64</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:92.

<sup>65</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:93.

death of Jesus, we quite literally die.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, by the power of the resurrection God validates Jesus' forgiveness and, therefore, creates new beings of faith.<sup>67</sup> Having succeeded in inculcating trust in his grace, God is "satisfied," not by Jesus' death and righteousness, but by our own righteousness actualized by faith. In this regard, Forde comments:

When faith is created, when we actually believe God's unconditional forgiveness; then God can say, "Now I am satisfied!" God's wrath ends actually when we believe him, not abstractly because of a payment to God "once upon a time." Christ's work, therefore, "satisfies" the wrath of God because it alone creates believers, new beings who are no longer "under" wrath. Christ actualizes the will of God to have mercy unconditionally in the concrete and thereby "placates" God.<sup>68</sup>

As is clear from what was said above, Forde's rejection of the confessional Lutheran understanding of atonement also causes a significant deviation from the historic Lutheran teaching regarding justification. For this reason, Forde's view of justification is not in accordance with the Formula of Concord's definition of justification as the forgiveness of sins and the imputation of righteousness.<sup>69</sup> In traditional Lutheran doctrine, Christ's positive act of obedience and his negative act of suffering the judgment of sin are imputed to the believer and received by faith.<sup>70</sup> For Forde, the role of the imputation of passive righteousness is taken over by the divine act of forgiveness by fiat (i.e., forgiveness without a payment for sin), whereas the role of active righteousness is taken over by the positive righteousness of the new being of faith. Hence, faith saves not because it receives Christ's imputed righteousness, but rather partially

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<sup>66</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:94.

<sup>67</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:95.

<sup>68</sup> Forde, "Caught in the Act," 97.

<sup>69</sup> FC Ep III, 2; *Concordia Triglotta: The Symbolic Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, ed. F. Bente and W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921), 793. "Accordingly, we believe, teach, and confess that our righteousness before God is [this very thing], that God forgives us our sins out of pure grace, without any work, merit, or worthiness of ours preceding, present, or following, that He presents and imputes to us the righteousness of Christ's obedience, on account of which righteousness we are received into grace by God, and regarded as righteous." Here after *Concordia Triglotta* will be cited as "CT."

<sup>70</sup> FC Ep III, 1; CT, 793. "... Christ is our Righteousness neither according to the divine nature alone nor according to the human nature alone, but that it is the entire Christ according to both natures, in His obedience alone, which as God and man He rendered to the Father even unto death, and thereby merited for us the forgiveness of sins and eternal life, as it is written: As by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of One shall many be made righteous."



because it receives God's act of forgiveness in Christ and partially because it recreates believers as righteous in themselves.<sup>71</sup> Because of this, justification ceases to be wholly *extra nos* and is only in the most tenuous sense *propter Christum*. In the next section, we will expand on these points more fully.

It should of course be noted that it is not Forde's intention to undermine faith in Christ. Rather, in describing atonement and justification, he wishes to emphasize the mercy of God (that does not need to be purchased) and the creative nature of the word (which creates what it speaks). Overall, Forde does not want to be reductive in his understanding of justification or atonement. He wishes to emphasize the active and creative nature of God's love. Neither does he wish to reduce the work of Christ and the reconciliation of sinners to a mechanical legal transaction.

### III. A Confessional Lutheran Assessment and Response

The first and most important issue concerning an assessment of Forde's teaching from a confessional Lutheran perspective is to address the nature of atonement and its inner relationship to the article of justification. What Forde's interpretation of the doctrine of atonement makes clear is that there is a necessary relationship between the article of the work of Christ and that of justification. In other words, if one rejects the notion of Christ's vicarious satisfaction of the law (both actively and passively), the entire soteriological apple cart is upset and the forensic nature of

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<sup>71</sup> See Forde, "Forensic Justification and the Christian Life: Triumph or Tragedy?" in Mattes and Paulson, 114–136. Forde appeals to Luther's teaching in the Romans commentary of 1516 over and against the teaching of the Lutheran scholastics. He appears to assume that Luther's teaching on this point was different than Melancthon's forensic concept of justification present in the Lutheran confessional writings. This view goes back to Karl Holl and the Luther Renaissance, and is heavily influenced by his Swabian Pietism. See discussion in Lowell Green, *How Melancthon Helped Luther Discover the Gospel: The Doctrine of Justification in the Reformation* (Fallbrook, Ca: Verdict Publications, 1980), 31–45, and Armand Boehme, "Tributaries into JDDJ: Karl Holl and Luther's Doctrine of Justification," *Logia* 18, no. 3 (2009): 1–16. Boehme helpfully identifies the following essays by Holl that deal with his work on justification in Luther: Karl Holl, "Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Luthers Vorlesung über Römerbrief mit besonderer Rücksicht auf die Frage der Heilsgewissheit," in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Kirchengeschichte*, 3 vols. (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1928), 1:111–154; "Die *justitia dei* in der vorlutherischen Bibelauslegung des Abendlandes," 3:171–88; "Die Rechtfertigungslehre in Licht der Geschichte Protestantismus," 3:525–57; "Was hat die Rechtfertigungslehre dem modern Menschen zu sagen?" 3:558–567. For evidence of Forde's influence by the Luther Renaissance, see Nestingen, "Examining Sources," 14–16.

justification is lost.<sup>72</sup> Put succinctly: if Christ does not fulfill the law on our behalf, then someone else must, and that someone is necessarily us. This is evidenced by the fact that, without fail, those who reject vicarious satisfaction (for example, the aforementioned Abelard and Socinians) posit the fulfillment of the law by believers in some sort of watered-down form. In Forde's case, the believer does not fulfill the law by his or her own efforts *per se*, but rather is recreated by God's effective address as one who has fulfilled the law by faith. God is thereby "satisfied" and his wrath is silenced. In this formulation, Forde wishes to describe atonement and justification as expressions of the dynamic character of God's word.

Nevertheless, beyond the brute fact that this description of justification is in total disagreement with the confessional and biblical authorities,<sup>73</sup> Forde's teaching lacks coherence with his own theological presuppositions in at least two ways. First, in his discussion of penal substitution, Forde registers much disdain for the idea that God needs bloody sacrifice in order to save. Ultimately, though, within Forde's own doctrine of atonement, God does apparently need the law to be fulfilled or divine wrath will never cease. Forde's own critique of the antinomianism present in the feminist theology (that we examined above) presupposes this. The sinner is never free from the law until the law is fulfilled. For Forde, the redemptive fulfillment of the law is simply moved from an external location (in Christ) to an internal one (within the believer).

Moreover, despite Forde's attacks on the Lutheran scholastic doctrine of atonement, the structure of the fulfillment of the law in his theology remains roughly the same as in the Lutheran dogmaticians. In other words, the Lutheran scholastic doctrine of active and passive righteousness<sup>74</sup> assumed that two things needed to be accomplished for salvation to

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<sup>72</sup> This is a point several theologians at Erlangen (specifically Gottfried Thomasius and Theodosius Harnack) made against von Hofmann. See Gottfried Thomasius, *Das Bekenntniss der Lutherischen Kirche von der Versöhnung und die Versöhnungslehre D. Chr. K. v. Hofmann's: Mit einem Nachwort von Th. Harnack* (Erlangen: Theodor Bläsing, 1857).

<sup>73</sup> See in particular AC III; CT, 45: "Also they teach that the Word, that is, the Son of God, did assume the human nature in the womb of the blessed Virgin Mary, so that there are two natures, the divine and the human, inseparably enjoined in one Person, one Christ, true God and true man, who was born of the Virgin Mary, truly suffered, was crucified, dead, and buried, that *He might reconcile the Father unto us, and be a sacrifice, not only for original guilt, but also for all actual sins of men*" (emphasis added). See also Isaiah 53, Rom 3:25, Cor 5:21, and 1 Pet 2:24.

<sup>74</sup> See summary in Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, tr. Charles Hay and Henry Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1961), 352–356.

be realized. First, viewed negatively, guilt needed to be dealt with and sin judged. The imputation of sin to Christ and his suffering of God's judgment against sin on the cross (passive righteousness) fulfilled this aspect of reconciliation. In Forde, such a negative judgment does not occur on the cross, but through the cross. Internally, the believers suffer the judgment of their old being through the existential encounter with the reality of their own rejection of God and his grace actualized on the cross. Second, positive righteousness *coram Deo* (active righteousness) needed to be actualized in the form of Christ's perfect adherence to the law. In Forde, faith fulfills the law and therefore "satisfies" God. The new creature of faith is positively righteous before God; God's wrath, therefore, is neutralized. Consequently, the role of Christ's active righteousness is replaced by the transformation of the sinner through the efficacy of the word of God.

Though we cannot explore the sources of Forde's thought within this context, perhaps it is not too bold to suggest that we detect here a lingering Kantian preference (endemic for so much of post-Enlightenment Protestant dogmatics<sup>75</sup>) for the phenomenal over the noumenal. For Kant, one cannot know the "*ding an sich*"<sup>76</sup> and therefore we can only know the effects of an entity on us rather than its actual reality in itself. Since positing the existence of an objective *lex aeterna* is too abstract for Forde, we must, therefore, focus on the existential impact of the law alone.<sup>77</sup> Correspondingly, he considers the idea of vicarious satisfaction to represent a mere "abstract payment,"<sup>78</sup> rather than the more concrete fulfillment of the law actualized internally through the existential impact of the cross on the consciousness of the believer.

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<sup>75</sup> See critique of modern Kantian epistemology in modern Protestant theology in Paul Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology from Luther through Leibniz* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 43–86. Helmut Thielicke traced back the theology consciousness to Descartes. See comments in Helmut Thielicke, *The Evangelical Faith*, 3 vols., tr. Geoffrey Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1974–1982), 1:38–64.

<sup>76</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, tr. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1958), 74, 87, 149, 172–173.

<sup>77</sup> Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 185. In response to Theodosius Harnack's *Amt-Wesen* distinction, Forde rejected the whole notion of speech about the law apart from its existential impact in stating that such a description of the law makes sinful humans "view it [God's law] in the abstract. . . . This allows man to place himself *above* the law and to look at it from God's point of view." For the *Amt-Wesen* distinction, see Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnung und Erlösungslehre*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1969), 1:368–401.

<sup>78</sup> Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:48.

This leads us to the second area of difficulty, namely, the consequences for the preaching of justification. Since Forde's account of reconciliation internalizes the basis of righteousness *coram Deo*, it is not difficult to recognize that on a pastoral level such an account will ultimately have the opposite effect that he intends. Forde is, of course, correct to identify the problem of post-lapsarian human nature as self-centered trust (*incurvatus in se*) and self-justification. It is for this reason that his understanding of justification is so problematic. If one is told that the basis of his righteousness before God is not *extra nos*, but, rather, that he becomes righteous *in se* through faith, the problem of the inward gaze of the sinner's eye will simply be exacerbated. Forde is correct to emphasize the effective nature of the word of the gospel for both justification and sanctification.<sup>79</sup> Nevertheless, his desire to give an account of justification that effectively and completely de-centers the self is ultimately blunted by his false understanding of the righteousness of faith.

Moving beyond issues directly pertaining to atonement and justification, another major area of concern and difficulty is Forde's underlying understanding of the relationship between the old and new creations. As is clear from our earlier discussion (particularly with regard to penal substitution), Forde is absolutely adamant that the relationship between the old and new beings must be thought of as a wholly disruptive death and resurrection. For him, atonement and justification are apocalyptic events that annihilate the old being of sin and replace it with a new being of faith. Sinful humanity resists this movement of death and resurrection because it wishes to maintain continuity with the old being and its autonomy through death-dealing legalism.<sup>80</sup>

In one of his later books, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life*, Forde quite specifically attacks the idea of a purely forensic justification on these grounds.<sup>81</sup> Much as penal substitution allows for the expression of God's merciful saving will to stand in an internal coherence with his holiness, so too a purely forensic account of justification (the "legal metaphor,"

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<sup>79</sup> See Gerhard Forde, *Justification by Faith: A Matter of Death and Life* (Milifinton, Pa: Sigler Press, 1999), 36. Forde writes: "[t]he old argument about whether justification is 'only' forensic or also 'effective' is transcended. . . . It is, to be sure, 'not only' forensic, but that is the case only because the more forensic it is, the more effective."

<sup>80</sup> This emphasis can also be found in Forde's students. See Mark Mattes, "Beyond the Impasse: Reexamining the Third Use of the Law," *CTQ* 69, no. 3-4 (2005): 278. Mattes writes: ". . . there is no continuity between old and new beings. This is because the new being lives from faith in Jesus Christ alone."

<sup>81</sup> Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 18-19.

as he puts it) allows the old being under the condemnation of the law to stand in continuity with the new creature of faith. Since the idea of imputed righteousness presupposes that the person of faith is the same subject as the one who once stood under the power of sin, a purely forensic justification allows the sinner to forgo the total death-dealing apocalyptic break of the cross.<sup>82</sup> In speaking forth the word of the gospel, God wishes to bring about something completely new and not simply a dressed up version of the old creation. In light of this, the imputation of righteousness is simply unnecessary if the old sinful subject has ceased to exist and has been replaced. As a side note, it should not go unnoticed that this account of the human subject's discontinuity is almost nearly identical with that of Immanuel Kant's own conception of justification.<sup>83</sup>

Much of the difficulty with Forde's doctrine of justification and atonement becomes evident from the perspective of the article of creation. According to Forde's description, what appears to be the case is that creation is not so much redeemed, but is in fact replaced.<sup>84</sup> The old creation

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<sup>82</sup> Forde, *Justification by Faith*, 13.

<sup>83</sup> See discussion in Immanuel Kant, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 22 vols. (Berlin: Druck und Verlag Georg Reimer, 1902–1942), 6:74–75. Also see Alister McGrath, *Iustia Dei: A History of the Christian Doctrine of Justification* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 340. Though we do not have the space in this article to cite the whole passage, McGrath (within whose writing we discovered the above citation) summarizes Kant's position succinctly: "Kant's solution to this difficulty [the problem of guilt] is, in fact, apparently irreconcilable with the general principles upon which his moral philosophy is based, particularly the axiom that an individual is responsible for his own moral actions. No individual can be good on behalf of another, nor can the goodness of a morally outstanding individual be permitted to remove the guilt of another. The basis of Kant's rejection of the concept of vicarious satisfaction (*stellvertretende Genugthuung*) is the principle that guilt, like merit, is strictly non-transferable. It is therefore remarkable that Kant's solution to the difficulty noted above is based on the assertion that the individual who turns away from his evil disposition to adopt a good disposition may be regarded as having become a different person: the old disposition is *moralisch ein anderer* from the new. The discontinuity between the old and new disposition is such that Kant denies that they may be predicated of the same moral individual. This conclusion appears to rest upon the assumption that the disposition itself is the only acceptable basis of establishing the identity of the moral agent. Having established this point, Kant takes the remarkable step of asserting that the new disposition 'takes the place' (*vertritt*) of the old in respect of the guilt which is rightly attached to the latter disposition." Note that Forde agrees with Kant in his rejection of the biblical principle of representation and substitution (see Forde, "The Work of Christ," 2:24). As any historian knows, influence is extremely difficult to prove. Nevertheless, it can be suggested that because the two authors have similar premises, they come to similar conclusions.

<sup>84</sup> I thank David Ramirez for this particular way of expressing the problem with Forde's description of redemption.

is not purified and redeemed by the cleansing blood of Christ, but rather is annihilated. This also seems to raise the logical problem as to why, if the old and new creatures are totally discontinuous, forgiveness is necessary in the first place. If I am not the same subject who was guilty, then why is it necessary that must I be forgiven?

Though it is certainly not his intention to impugn the goodness of the created order, by using the language of radical discontinuity Forde seems to place himself perilously close to Flacius' similarly unintended heresy.<sup>85</sup> After all, such an account of the relationship between the old and new creation would appear to assume the very thing that Flacius asserted, namely, that sin is the substance of human nature after the Fall and not merely an accident adhering in it.

In order to combat this charge, Forde would likely appeal to the sometimes rather hazily defined concept (common in many late 20th-century Lutheran theologians, notably Gerhard Ebeling<sup>86</sup>) of "relational ontology."<sup>87</sup> According to this manner of thinking, the ontic reality of a

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<sup>85</sup> FC, SD, I; CT, 859–881. FC, Ep. I; CT, 779–85. For sources on Flacius and his misstatement regarding original sin, see the following: F. Bente, *Historical Introduction to the Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1965), 144–145; Richard Klann, "Original Sin," in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert Preus and Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 115–117; Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and the Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2005), 118–120; Kolb, "Historical Background to the Formula of Concord," in *A Contemporary Look at the Formula of Concord*, ed. Robert Preus and Wilbert Rosin (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1978), 29–33; Oliver Olson, "Matthias Flacius," in *The Reformation Theologians: An Introduction to Theology in the Early Modern Period*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2002), 87; Heinrich Vogel, "On Original Sin, The Flacian Aberration" in *No Other Gospel: Essays in Commemoration of the 400th Anniversary of the Formula of Concord, 1580–1980*, ed. Arnold Koelpin (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1980), 126–131.

<sup>86</sup> See the following writings by Gerhard Ebeling: *Dogmatik des Christlichen Glaubens*, 3 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1979); *Lutherstudien*, 3 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1971–1989); *The Nature of Faith*, tr. Ronald Smith (London: Collins, 1961); *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1960).

<sup>87</sup> Forde credits Ebeling as a formative influence. Forde, "One Acted Upon," 60. By contrast, James Nestingen states that the claim that Forde was influenced by Ebeling was a pernicious rumor. See Nestingen, "Examining Sources," 20–21. Also note Forde's endorsement of the concept of relational ontology. See Gerhard Forde, Pat Keifert, Mary Knutsen, Marc Kolden, Jim Nestingen, and Gary Simpson, "A Call for Discussion of the 'Joint Declaration on the Doctrine on Justification'" *Dialog* 36, no. 3 (Summer, 1997): 226–227. Note that the authors view the difference between Lutherans and Catholics on the issue of justification specifically as it pertains to substance vs. "relational" ontology.

thing or person is not constituted by an unchanging essence within, but rather by the relationships they enter into, the most fundamental of which is their relationship to God.<sup>88</sup> Therefore, claiming a total discontinuity between the old and new beings is not somehow to assert that the substance of a creature is evil and therefore needs to be replaced by a new substance. Rather, it is to claim that through the effective address of the gospel a total and wholesale reversal of the existential relationship between God and the sinner occurs.<sup>89</sup>

On one level, Forde's insight here is something that confessional Lutherans should heed. The relationship of the sinner to God is not one of degrees, but of kind. The divine-human relationship constituted by the condemnation of the law is the very opposite of that of grace and justification. The life-orientation of the sinner is precisely the opposite of that of the person of faith. Lutherans should not be lulled (as some in fact have<sup>90</sup>) into accepting a Thomistic account of divine grace completing nature.<sup>91</sup> God's power, present and active in the preached Word, completely turns the sinner around. Divine grace does not work to activate the sinner's hidden potencies.

Nevertheless, Forde's rhetoric of total discontinuity fails on another level. First, his choice of language often seems to suggest that the creature's total being is constituted by the relationship of sin and condemnation. In fact, Forde often boldly speaks of his wholesale contempt for the notion that we are "continuously existing subjects,"<sup>92</sup> (i.e., that there is any continuity between the old and new beings). Nonetheless, if indeed we are not continuously existing subjects, what becomes of our status as God's good creatures, of which, as the Formula of Concord states, sin is merely

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<sup>88</sup> See Ebeling, *Dogmatik des Christlichen Glaubens*, 3:195–200. Ebeling describes the movement of justification from a state of non-being (*Nichtsein*) to being (*Sein*). Also see Wilfried Joest, *Ontologie der Person bei Luther* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1967), 14, 37, 362.

<sup>89</sup> For this reason, Forde's proposal should not be confused with the debate within Lutheran scholasticism regarding the question of whether the created world would be completely annihilated or renewed. All parties involved assumed the continuity of the human subjects in creation, redemption, and the eschaton. See discussion in Schmid, *Doctrinal Theology*, 655–656, and also Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951–1953), 3:542–543.

<sup>90</sup> See description in Mark Mattes, "The Thomistic Turn in Evangelical Catholic Ethics," *Lutheran Quarterly* 16 (2002): 65–100.

<sup>91</sup> See description in Jacques Maritain, *Integral Humanism*, tr. J. Evans (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 291–308.

<sup>92</sup> Forde, "Radical Lutheranism," in *A More Radical Gospel*, 15

an accidental disruption (FC Ep I)? If the essence of humanity is conceptualized relationally, must it not be defined at an even more fundamental level by the creator-creature relationship and not merely by the relationship of sin and condemnation? Indeed, as the history of the Fall suggests, this more fundamental relational status as God's good creatures is precisely what defines us as sinners. As Luther strongly implies in his description of the first article of the creed, sinful humanity perpetually receives itself as God's ever good creation, but nevertheless remains untrusting and ungrateful (SC II, 1).

Beyond its inability coherently to maintain the creator-creature relationship in light of redemption, Forde's rhetoric of wholesale disruption fails in other regards as well. Chiefly, the rhetoric of total reversal stands disconcertingly out of step with God's trustworthiness as it is proclaimed and revealed in the gospel. In other words, if God's redemptive act destroys creation, rather than redeeming and purifying it from its negative relationship of sin and condemnation, then has he not been faithless to that which has come before? If he acts in such a way as to be faithless to his original creation by simply replacing it, why would the believer expect God to be faithful in his promise of the gospel?

The problematic nature of Forde's fixation on the paradigm of discontinuity also manifests itself in his understanding of the relationship between forgiveness and the law. For Forde, as we noted earlier, God spontaneously forgives sinners by an act of fiat. God may, it appears, simply abandon his word of law and its clearly articulated threats of retribution present throughout sacred Scripture (e.g., Deut 27:26; 32:35). Nevertheless, the question remains: what assurance does the believer possess that God will not abandon his word of gospel just as he did his earlier word of law? Seen from this perspective, Christ's fulfillment of the law in traditional confessional Lutheran theology is neither an abstract nor mechanical legal transaction. It is part and parcel of the coherence of the creedal faith that sees God's dynamic activity in the first article (creation and law) as faithfully fulfilled in the second and third articles (atonement, justification, and sanctification).

Part of the answer to this question is that Forde tends to subsume the idea of the law as commandment into the larger reality of the law as negative existential relationship.<sup>93</sup> If God so chooses, he may reverse this relationship and thereby abrogate the law in favor of the new relationship

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<sup>93</sup> See summary description in Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 192. See my own discussion of this fact in Kilcrease, "Forde's Doctrine of the Law," 151-180.



of grace. Moreover (as we have previously seen), despite his rhetoric to the contrary, ultimately God really does need the law to be fulfilled in order to save.

Nevertheless, neither answer is sustainable from the perspective of the Scripture or the symbolic writings of the Evangelical Lutheran Church. As is abundantly clear from these authorities, God has two separate words of law and gospel. Through his redemptive work of atonement and justification by the blood of Jesus, God reveals his trustworthiness by fulfilling the threats and promises of both. Indeed, as the Apostle Paul puts it, by his act of redemption in the cross and the empty tomb, God revealed "his righteousness . . . [as the one who is both] *just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus*" (Rom 3:26 ESV; emphasis added).

In light of the biblical and confessional authorities, perhaps a better way of conceptualizing the relationship between the old and new creations might be on the basis of an analogy of the fifth ecumenical council's description of the relationship between the two natures in Christ. According to this council, Christ's divine person is a proper *hypostasis* or center of identity within which his non-personal humanity (*anhypostasis*) is incorporated and subsists.<sup>94</sup> In a similar manner, as David Scaer has correctly observed,<sup>95</sup> God's new act of redemption always incorporates within itself that which has come before. Hence, the new creation and its relationship with God's grace is (as Forde insists) something completely new. The new creation is not somehow the fruit of the activation of the hidden potencies in the old creation (i.e., the Thomistic "grace completing nature"). Rather, the new creation is its own independent reality, in a similar manner to the divine person of Christ. Ultimately though, because God is faithful to his previous words and works, he always incorporates his previous act into his new one. For this reason, the new creation becomes the proper *hypostasis* of the *anhypostasis* of the old creation.<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> For the text of the fifth ecumenical council see Heinrich Denzinger, *The Sources of Catholic Dogma*, tr. Roy Deferrai (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1954), 85–90. See discussion of the content of the fifth ecumenical council in Martin Chemnitz, *The Two Natures in Christ*, tr. J. A. O. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1971), 68–72; Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, pt. 2, vol. 2 (Louisville, Ky: Westminster-John Knox, 1995), 341, 387, 402–410, 419–462, 463; John Meyendorff, *Christ in Eastern Christian Thought* (Washington: Corpus Book, 1969), 38–40, 59–64; Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 2:29–30.

<sup>95</sup> See David Scaer, "Sacraments as an Affirmation of Creation," CTQ 57, (1993): 241–263.

<sup>96</sup> See AE 34:140, where Luther himself comments in *The Disputation Concerning Man* (1536): "Therefore, man in this life is the *simple material of God for the form of the*

Through Scripture we can see this in any number of instances. In becoming incarnate, Jesus took upon himself the flesh and condemnation of Adam in order to redeem. In the resurrection, his corpse was incorporated into his body of glory (see 1 Cor 15:35–38). Similarly, the sacraments of the new creation contain within themselves the elements of the old creation (bread, wine, water). Lastly, and most importantly, the law is contained within, and ultimately fulfilled in, the gospel (Rom 3:26; 8:3–4).

Although it is important to recognize the unity of the old and new creations, Forde must nonetheless be commended for insisting that the Bible describes the advent of the new creation as not coming about apart from eschatological judgment. Although the old creation is by no means abrogated by the new, in being purified from sin it does not escape God's judgment. For this reason, in the incarnation of the second Adam, the Holy Spirit purified the flesh he took from Mary from the sin of the first Adam. In the crucifixion, God concentrated all sin in the flesh of Christ and reduced him to a corpse in order to redeem the whole world (Isa 53:4; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:24). Nevertheless, this judgment does not annihilate, but rather cleanses creation from the accidental vitiation of sin. Jesus' body, which bore the burden of human sin, becomes for those who have faith the medium through which we die and are resurrected into a new and infinitely abundant divine life. For this reason, our bodies, vitiated by sin, will not be destroyed, but will be glorified by "putting on incorruptibility" (1 Cor 15:53).

#### IV. Conclusion

In developing a theology of atonement and justification, it is of the utmost importance that the Christian theologian think in terms of the internal coherence of the creedal faith. God's faithfulness in redemption must not trump his faithfulness to his creation and law. In spite of Forde's good intention, much of his theology of redemption can serve as a warning against drawing too sharp a line between the first article of the creed and the second and third. If God is truly the faithful God of the gospel, his identity as such will be revealed also by his faithfulness to that which he has created and also what he has commanded. Although, as we have seen, it was not Forde's goal to undermine the article of creation or law, his description of the gospel and the new creation that it establishes as

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*future life. . . [j]ust as the whole creation which is now subject to vanity [Rom 8:20] is for God the material for its future glorious form" (emphasis added).*

something wholly discontinuous strongly implies a lack of faithfulness on God's part to the realities established by him in the first article.

We have argued, in response to this, that, according to Scripture, when God speaks forth his new creation through the gospel, he does so in such a way as to incorporate the reality of the old creation into the wholly new creation that he brings about. He does so by purifying the old realities from sin and the negative relationship of judgment that sin entails. In this, Forde's description of God's action in the gospel as something completely new can be reconciled with the reality of God's faithfulness to the law and the old creation.

