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Johann Gerhard, the Socinians, and Modern Rejections of Substitutionary Atonement

Jack D. Kilcrease

I. Introduction

Among the many historic Christian doctrines that have received a cold reception in post-Enlightenment theology, the doctrine of substitutionary atonement stands out particularly as an object of derision. This assault on the orthodox view of atonement has generally taken a two-pronged form. First, it is typically argued that Christ's death as a payment for sin presupposes a negative picture of God as child-abuser¹ or vindictive moral bookkeeper.² Second, an argument is mounted in favor of a view of the divine-human relationship that is more "loving" and "affirming." Nevertheless, the logic of the more "affirming" view of the divine-human relationship is inexorably tied to an implicit (or, in many cases, not so implicit) legalism.³

The last point is particularly salient from those operating within the confessional Lutheran paradigm. For Lutheran Christians, modern flights from substitutionary atonement are highly problematic not only because they directly contradict numerous and clear statements of the Bible and the Book of Concord⁴ but also because they endanger the chief article of Christianity: justification through faith alone. Put succinctly, without a Christ who genuinely

¹ See this frequently cited article, which perfectly embodies this line of argument: Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1–29.

² Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 174.

³ See J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 129–218.

⁴ See Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics*, vol. 3 (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 2003), 179–217; Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1951), 342–382; John Schaller, *Biblical Christology: A Study in Lutheran Dogmatics* (Milwaukee: Northwestern, 1981), 135–187.

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fulfills the law on behalf of humanity (both actively and passively), there would be no alien righteousness for justifying faith to receive. As is evident from the soft-moralism from the opponents of substitutionary atonement, rejection of substitutionary atonement inevitably leads to a form of works-righteousness.

In this, as in many other matters, Johann Gerhard (1582–1637) anticipated and provided important resources for contemporary Lutherans to combat such destructive teachings. Indeed, recognizing the deep connection between the work of Christ and the article of justification, Gerhard devotes a significant portion of his *Theological Commonplace* on justification to the early modern challenges that face the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Such challenges are analogous to, if not the same as, those that we face in our own environment.

In his seventeenth-century environment, Gerhard's main opponents were the Socinians, a group of early Unitarians operating out of the kingdom of Poland.⁵ As will be observed below in the writings of the Socinians and Gerhard's response to them, errors in the doctrine of atonement ultimately often express less immediately recognizable errors in the doctrine of God (among others). Examining these sources and their arguments will grant us an important perspective from which we can observe how a similar logic of belief has pervaded modern rejections of substitutionary atonement. Although it is highly questionable that Socinianism served as a direct inspiration for modern rejections of substitutionary atonement, it will nevertheless be shown that the Socinians present similar patterns of argumentation and therefore also offer similar aberrations in other doctrines of the Christian faith.

II. The Teachings of the Racovian Catechism on Atonement and Justification

Among the many Socinian sources that Gerhard cites, the Racovian Catechism (1605) is the one that features most prominently. For this reason, we will examine some of its contents below before discussing Gerhard's response to its teaching on atonement.

The Racovian Catechism was the product of the Racovian Academy in Raków, in what is modern-day Poland.⁶ The authors of the work (Valentinus Smalcius, Hieronim Moskorzowski, and Johannes Völkel⁷) were part of an antitrinitarian

⁵ Charles A. Howe, *For Faith and Freedom: A Short History of Unitarianism in Europe* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1997), 61–78.

⁶ Piotr Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata: Essays on the Polish Reformation(s)* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2016), 57–59.

⁷ Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata*, 58.

break-off sect from the Reformed Polish Church. This break-off sect is often referred to as the Polish Brethren or Ecclesia Minor.⁸

Fausto Sozzini (latinized as “Socinus,” from whom Socinianism takes its name) found little more than persecution throughout Italy and Switzerland for his Unitarian beliefs, until he made his way to Poland.⁹ Poland possessed a monarch who was supportive of religious toleration.¹⁰ There, Sozzini took it upon himself to convince the Ecclesia Minor to reject their Arian beliefs in favor of his pure Unitarianism.¹¹ After having established the Racovian Academy, the Ecclesia Minor published the Racovian Catechism as a confession of faith and apparently also as a means of spreading Socinian belief throughout Europe. For example, it was sent to King James I in England as a way of planting Unitarian belief in that nation.¹²

For our purposes, a word must be said regarding the theological method of the Racovian Catechism. By and large, the Catechism’s orientation might be described as biblicistic rationalism.¹³ The authors typically begin a section by appealing to a magisterial (rather than ministerial) use of reason as the basis of their own position or as a basis of attacking a historic Christian belief. After reaching their conclusion through a rationalistic argumentation, they then attempt to expound Scripture in support of this conclusion. As might be expected, the authors of the Catechism interpret Scripture in a biblicistic manner, that is, one that does not take into consideration the tradition of the ancient church or its creeds. Nevertheless, the authors make an attempt to mimic the language of biblical-creedal Christianity as much as possible. To say the least, many of their scriptural arguments rely on ad hoc reasoning and are very strained. Indeed, modern liberal critics of Scripture would probably not even accept these arguments. In part, this seems to be due to the fact that unlike modern Unitarians, the early Socinians still held fairly traditional Christian beliefs about the inspiration and authority of the Bible while simultaneously holding to rationalistic beliefs that had come about apart from any engagement with the Scriptures.¹⁴

⁸ Phillip Hewett, *Racovia: An Early Liberal Religious Community* (Providence: Blackstone Editions, 2004), 20–21.

⁹ Jerzy Kloczowski, *A History of Polish Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 105.

¹⁰ Marian Hillar, “From the Polish Socinians to the American Constitution,” *A Journal from the Radical Reformation: A Testimony to Biblical Unitarianism* 4, no. 3 (1997): 22–24.

¹¹ Howe, *For Faith and Freedom*, 62–63, 65, 74.

¹² Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata*, 231.

¹³ See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 1:394; Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology: Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Trinity International Press, 2013), 27–28.

¹⁴ See *The Racovian Catechism*, trans. Thomas Rees (London: Paternoster Row, 1818), 1–19; Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata*, 47–48.

The doctrine of the atonement fundamentally deals with the question of how God re-establishes his relationship with humanity by removing the barrier of sin. How one defines God will necessarily inform how one interprets the divine solution to sin. Therefore, it is worth beginning our discussion with the Racovian Catechism's doctrine of God. When called upon to define God's fundamental nature, the Catechism answers the question thus:

What do you understand by the term God? The supreme Lord of all things. And whom do you denominate Supreme? Him, who, *in his own right, has dominion over all things*, and is dependent upon no other being in the administration of his government. What does this dominion comprise? A right and supreme authority to determine what he may choose (and he cannot choose what is in its own nature evil and unjust) in respect to us and to all other things, and also in respect to those matters which no other authority can reach; such as are our thoughts, though concealed in the inmost recesses of our hearts; for *which he can at pleasure ordain laws, and appoint rewards and punishments*.¹⁵

What comes across most strongly in this definition of God is the notion that he is an infinitely powerful and utterly autonomous being. As such, God establishes the law, thereby rewarding the righteous and punishing the wicked as he sees fit. Indeed, although the authors seem to imply that God possesses fundamental attributes ("he cannot choose what is in *its own nature* evil and unjust"), they also suggest that he sets standards of reward and punishment in a somewhat arbitrary manner in accordance with his own supreme freedom ("*he can at pleasure* ordain laws, and appoint rewards and punishments"). Hence, much like many in the Reformed tradition,¹⁶ the Socinians defined God on the basis of his ability to exercise an uninhibited sovereignty.

As for Luther, although he would no doubt agree that God is sovereign over his creation (particularly in his discussion of "the hidden God"), in many of his writings, he argues that God's most fundamental nature is revealed in his self-communicating and loving triune agency in creation and redemption:

These are the three persons and one God, *who has given himself to us all wholly and completely*, with all that he is and has. The Father *gives himself to us*, with heaven and earth and all the creatures, in order that they may serve us and benefit us. But this gift has become obscured and useless through Adam's fall.

¹⁵ *Racovian Catechism*, 25. Emphasis added.

¹⁶ See a brief and enlightening summary in Donald K. McKim, "A Reformed Perspective on the Mission of the Church in Society," in *Major Themes in the Reformed Tradition*, ed. Donald K. McKim (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1998), 362.

Therefore the Son himself *subsequently gave himself and bestowed all his works, sufferings, wisdom, and righteousness, and reconciled us to the Father, in order that restored to life and righteousness, we might also know and have the Father and his gifts.*¹⁷

After listing the divine attributes in a manner consummate with the tradition of Classical Theism, the Racovian Catechism begins its polemic against the doctrine of the Trinity on predictably rationalistic grounds:

Prove to me that in the one essence of God, there is but one Person? This indeed may be seen from hence, that the essence of God is one, not in kind but in number. Where it cannot, in any way, contain a plurality of persons, since a person is nothing else than individual intelligent essence. Wherever, then, there exist three numerical persons, there must necessarily, in like manner, be reckoned three individual persons.¹⁸

This argument against the Trinity is interesting on several levels. First, it illustrates the rationalism of the Catechism, as well as its lack of serious engagement with the catholic tradition of the church. The Catechism's argument may rightly provoke the reader to ask (along with the church fathers) why the authors do not take into consideration the fact that there are examples in the natural world of genuine substantial unity with a simultaneous plurality of centers of identity (fountain and stream, sun and rays of light, etc.).¹⁹ If there are natural phenomena that analogically correspond to orthodox Christianity's understanding of the Trinity's unity and harmony in difference, how could one rationally rule this out as existing in the realm of the divine?

Second, it should be noted that the authors' argument hinges on the definition of "person" ("individual intelligent essence") developed by Boethius in his *The Trinity Is One God, Not Three Gods* (ca. AD 520–521).²⁰ Although, broadly speaking, this definition is biblically accurate, it is also in many respects ambiguous. Put succinctly, the definition is problematic insofar as it could characterize either

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *Confession Concerning Christ's Supper* (1528): vol. 37, p. 366, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–1976); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress Press, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE. Emphasis added.

¹⁸ *Racovian Catechism*, 33.

¹⁹ See Tertullian, "Against Praxeas," in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers: The Writings of the Fathers Down to AD 325*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 603.

²⁰ Boethius, "The Trinity Is One God, Not Three Gods" in *The Theological Tractates*, trans. H. F. Stewart and E. K. Rand (London: William Heinemann, 1918), 2–37.

the whole of the divine substance or an individual person within the Godhead.²¹ Not only did such ambiguity create significant problems for the western discussion of the Trinity in the Middle Ages but also, as Richard Muller has shown, the Socinians exploited ambiguity of the definition to their advantage in their debates with the Protestant Scholastics.²²

When addressing the question of Christology, the authors of the Racovian Catechism assert that although Jesus was certainly miraculously born of the Virgin Mary,²³ he was nevertheless a mere human and in no way divine. Beyond the aforementioned argument against the Trinity, the authors state that, logically speaking, a person cannot subsist in two natures. In order for a person to possess a nature fully and completely, that nature must be predicated of that person “absolutely.” Therefore, it would be a contradiction in terms for the Son to possess a divine and human nature absolutely (thereby making him *vere deus et vere homo* simultaneously), insofar as each nature would necessarily qualify and relativize the absolute reality of the other.²⁴ This of course raises the issue as to why the New Testament repeatedly refers to the man Jesus as God (John 1; Heb 1; Phil 2, etc.). According to the Catechism, Jesus is called God insofar as he is an exalted human being who exercises sovereignty as the ruler of the whole universe.²⁵ Again, it should be observed that the Socinians define divinity by its ability to exercise autonomous authority.

When they discuss the work of Christ, the Socinians adapt Calvin’s concept of the threefold office of Christ to suit their purposes.²⁶ Whereas for most of the theologies of the magisterial reformers the accent falls most heavily on the sacerdotal office of Christ,²⁷ the Racovian Catechism emphasizes the prophetic office.²⁸ The authors see Christ as the revealer of the higher and better law than can be found in the Old Testament. Likewise, in contrast to the understanding of the magisterial

²¹ Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:34.

²² Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 4:79, 178.

²³ *Racovian Catechism*, 52–53.

²⁴ *Racovian Catechism*, 55–56. See discussion in Wilczek, *Polonia Reformata*, 48–49.

²⁵ *Racovian Catechism*, 55.

²⁶ See John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.15.1–6; John T. McNeill and Ford Lewis Battles, trans. and eds., *Calvin: The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1967), 1:494–503; *Racovian Catechism*, 169.

²⁷ Regarding Luther, see Paul Althaus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 201–223; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther’s Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development*, trans. and ed. Roy A. Harrisville (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 223–228. For Calvin’s understanding of the work of Christ, see Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 158–166.

²⁸ *Racovian Catechism*, 168–173.

reformers,²⁹ the Socinians do not understand the ethical teachings of the beatitudes as Christ's purification of the law, as it was already articulated in the Old Testament, from false interpretations. Rather, the Catechism's authors insist that Christ genuinely revealed a higher and better moral law.³⁰ In addition, Christ's law also contains within it the promise of salvation and eternal life for those who obey it. The Catechism argues that although the Old Testament prophets hoped for eternal life, there are no genuine promises of eternal life in the Old Testament.³¹

In the sections on justification and theological anthropology, the Racovian Catechism explains how this view of the law fits into the Socinians' soteriology. They reject the doctrine of original sin in favor of a belief that humans can follow the law by their own efforts.³² They qualify this by admitting that in the postlapsarian world, humans are somewhat habituated to sin.³³ Nevertheless, they still suggest that through self-discipline and the aid of the divine Spirit, humans can obey the law of Christ sufficiently to achieve salvation.³⁴

From this, it logically follows that the Catechism necessarily rejects the Reformation's *sola fide*.³⁵ Of course, humans should have faith in God, in that they must trust in him and believe the truths of the faith. Nevertheless, the more important point is that faith gives rise to an obedience (they cite Jas 2:26 at this point) that adheres to Jesus' newly revealed divine law.³⁶ Obedience to Jesus' newly revealed law is the basis of our inheriting eternal life, as opposed to the ceremonial law of Moses.³⁷ Ultimately, this is the Catechism's interpretation of the distinction that Paul makes between law and gospel.³⁸

In light of this highly legalistic and Pelagian notion of salvation, one is compelled to wonder what conceivable rationale Christ's death on the cross might have. It should first be observed that the sections on the death of Christ and his sacerdotal office are at times somewhat confusing. As noted earlier, the authors of the Catechism have a tendency of trying to mimic the language of orthodox Christian teaching, even when they clearly attack and reject it. Hence, there is a great deal of talk of "Christ's death for sinners," along with much other language that

²⁹ See Luther, *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7)* (1532), AE 21:74–115. See Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.8.7; McNeill and Battles, *Calvin*, 1:373–374.

³⁰ *Racovian Catechism*, 173–249.

³¹ *Racovian Catechism*, 277–284.

³² *Racovian Catechism*, 325–326.

³³ *Racovian Catechism*, 326.

³⁴ *Racovian Catechism*, 330.

³⁵ *Racovian Catechism*, 320–321.

³⁶ *Racovian Catechism*, 321–322.

³⁷ *Racovian Catechism*, 322.

³⁸ *Racovian Catechism*, 324.

sounds (if not read carefully) as if the Catechism is teaching substitutionary atonement.³⁹

Nevertheless, the authors eventually launch a lengthy polemic against the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. Christ taught that by following the divinely revealed law, one would attain eternal life. Nevertheless, the world rejected Christ and crucified him. The crucifixion reveals the testing that true and obedient believers will have to endure if they are going to attain the eternal life. In the same manner, the resurrection reveals the eternal life that believers will attain if they are obedient and suffer for Christ's law.⁴⁰ Passages such as Romans 3:25 and 1 John 2:2, which speak about Christ's "propitiation" on the altar of the cross, are reinterpreted as "expiation" insofar as Christ's death "removed" sin, that is, revealed the Father's will to remove sin by forgiveness.⁴¹ Beyond the promise of eternal life, the resurrection represents the Father's public stamp of approval on the teachings of Christ.⁴²

When they present the traditional Anselmic rationale (generally shared by both Roman Catholics and the reformers alike⁴³) for the substitutionary nature of Christ's death, the Racovian Catechism's authors criticize it on the basis of its supposedly improper understanding of the divine attributes of mercy and justice:

They [orthodox Christians] say that there are in God, by nature, justice and mercy: that as it is the property of mercy to forgive sins, so is it, they state, the property of justice to punish every sin whatever. But since God willed that both his mercy and justice should be satisfied together, he devised this plan, that Christ should suffer death in our stead, and thus satisfy God's justice. . . . This reason [offered above] bears the appearance of plausibility, but in reality has in it nothing of truth or solidity; and indeed involves a self-contradiction. For although we confess, and hence exceedingly rejoice, that our God is wonderfully merciful and just, nevertheless we deny that there are in him the mercy and justice which our adversaries imagine, since the one would wholly annihilate the other. . . . But as it is evident God forgives and punishes whenever he deems fit, it appears that the mercy which commands to spare,

³⁹ E.g., see comments in *Racovian Catechism*, 297–298, 350.

⁴⁰ *Racovian Catechism*, 297–300.

⁴¹ *Racovian Catechism*, 318–319.

⁴² *Racovian Catechism*, 301. See a good summary of Socinian views of atonement in L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (New York: Longman, Green and Co., 1920), 281–290.

⁴³ Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo?" 1.12, in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, trans. and ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), 120–121.

and the justice which commands to destroy, do so exist in him as that both are tempered by his will.⁴⁴

As can be observed, they argue on rationalistic grounds (typical of the Racovian Catechism) that if the Anselmic claim—that God is both just and merciful in the absolute sense—is granted, then these divine attributes would simply cancel each other.

Several other things should be noticed about the passage cited above. First, the idea that mercy and justice are not absolute in God, but rather “temper” each other in their application to the divine-human relationship, leads inexorably down the path of works-righteousness. In other words, in practice, the authors’ claim about the divine attributes results in a conception of a God who is perhaps less inclined to punish sin with death automatically (Rom 6:23) but nevertheless also expects humans to strive for their own moral improvement as a condition of his leniency and granting of salvation. Indeed, one of the chief arguments the Racovian Catechism makes against substitutionary atonement is that if humans are told they cannot earn their salvation, they will not strive to do good works.⁴⁵ From this, it becomes clear that in rejecting penal substitution, the Socinians do not eliminate the problem of the law and its judgment. Rather, they simply pass the problem on to sinners in the form of a new legalism.

Second, it should not go unnoticed that a significant part of the Catechism’s rationale for the rejection of substitutionary atonement is God’s ability to exercise arbitrary authority (“God forgives and punishes whenever he deems fit”). We have previously seen this tendency in earlier statements of the Catechism. As a distant, isolated monarch, the Socinian God may simply judge and show mercy without exercising faithfulness to his own eternal nature, or for that matter, his previously issued commands and promises.

III. Gerhard’s Response to Socinian Atonement Theology

Gerhard addresses the Socinian rejection of substitutionary atonement in his *Theological Commonplace* on justification. He begins the work by refuting the Roman Catholic understanding of the terms *justification* and *grace* as taught by the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and the premier Catholic apologist of the early modern period, Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621).⁴⁶ Throughout this discussion, Gerhard borrows terms from schematization provided by Aristotelian causation

⁴⁴ *Racovian Catechism*, 307.

⁴⁵ *Racovian Catechism*, 306.

⁴⁶ Johann Gerhard, *On Justification*, *Theological Commonplaces XIX*, trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 13–52.

theory (formal, material, instrumental, final⁴⁷) to describe the manner in which God effects justification.⁴⁸

In this section, Gerhard designates Christ and his death on the cross as the “meritorious cause” of our justification.⁴⁹ Although this is obviously not a category of causation found in Aristotle’s metaphysics, it is, interestingly enough, one found in the sixth session of the Council of Trent (i.e., the decree on justification).⁵⁰ Moreover, although Gerhard repeatedly notes that there are significant disagreements between his Roman Catholic opponents and himself regarding the nature of justification (i.e., imputed vs. infused righteousness), he also affirms that there is a broad consensus between them regarding the fact that Christ’s substitutionary death on the cross was a necessary condition for salvation.⁵¹

For Gerhard, the broad consensus between Catholics and Lutherans on the death of Christ stands in stark contrast to the heretical views of the Socinians: “All agree that Christ our Mediator and Redeemer is the meritorious cause of our justification, that is, all except the Neophotinians.”⁵² For those unfamiliar, it should be noted that Gerhard typically refers to the Socinians as “Neophotinians” or simply “Photinians.”⁵³ Photinus was a fourth-century heretical bishop who taught a form of modalism and denied the incarnation.⁵⁴ In light of his deep study of the church fathers,⁵⁵ Gerhard thought of the Socinians in large measure as being a mere revival of the ancient heresy of Photinus. Later, Gerhard also connected the Socinian

⁴⁷ Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 5.2, section 1013a in *The Works of Aristotle*, vol. 1, trans. W. D. Ross (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1984), 533.

⁴⁸ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 27, 56. Also see Johann Gerhard, *Annotations on the First Six Chapters of St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Paul Rydecki (Malone, TX: Repristination Press, 2012), 166.

⁴⁹ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 56–57.

⁵⁰ *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, trans. Theodore Alois Buckley (London: George Routledge & Co., 1851), 33.

⁵¹ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 53–54.

⁵² Gerhard, *On Justification*, 54.

⁵³ E.g., see Johann Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, Theological Commonplaces I–II, trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2007), 295.

⁵⁴ See description in R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 236–238.

⁵⁵ See Benjamin Mayes, “*Lumina, Non Numina*: Patristic Authority According to Lutheran Arch-Theologian Johann Gerhard,” in *Church and School in Early Modern Protestantism: Studies in Honor of Richard A. Muller on the Maturation of a Theological Tradition*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor, David Sytsma, and Jason Zuidema (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 457–470. Also see Johann Gerhard, *Confessio Catholica*, 2 vols. (Jena, 1634–1637) and Johann Gerhard, *Patrologia sive de primitivae ecclesiae christianae doctorum vita ac lucubrationibus opusculum* (Leipzig, 1653).

teaching with Peter Abelard's (1079–1142) development of the moral influence theory of the atonement.⁵⁶

Gerhard considers the fact of Christ's death for our sins to be so unassailable that he quips that the teaching of the Socinians does not even rise to the level of heresy, but is rather pure insanity: "In the previous century they vomited up this blasphemous error, or rather not so much an error as a madness."⁵⁷ Gerhard argues that the heresy the Socinians promote is rooted in two other errors found in earlier theologians. The first is the antitrinitarianism of Calvin's most famous opponent, Michael Servetus (ca. 1511–1553):⁵⁸

The occasion for this blasphemous error is twofold. (I) The denial of Christ's divinity. Around AD 1532, when the Spaniard Miguel Servetus renewed the error of Paul of Samosata and Photinus concerning the deity of Christ, those who followed in the footsteps of that Neophotinian began to deny Christ's satisfaction, which was offered for our sins, along with His divinity. Since a mere man could not pay a ransom equivalent to our sins, once they have denied Christ's divinity it is then easy for them to deny His satisfaction.⁵⁹

Gerhard goes on to argue that the second basis of the Socinian heresy was the adaptation of the Reformed tradition's tendency to see God as exercising arbitrary authority:

[The second basis of the Socinian heresy is] [t]he absolute decree of election, which the Calvinists champion. You see, if it is by the absolute will of God that those to be saved are elected to eternal life, then surely it is also by the absolute will of God that their sins are forgiven them—or at least were able to be forgiven—and there would be no need for Christ's satisfaction and merit. See Grawer (*Dissertatio opposita Ostorado*, p. 8) where he lucidly demonstrates that, as long as the dogma of an absolute decree of predestination stands, it is impossible to solidly refute the error of the Neophotinians. Here I quote Calvin's words (*Instit.*, bk. 2, ch. 17, sect. 1): "As for me, I confess that if someone wanted to set Christ against the judgment of God simply and of Himself, there would be no place for merit since there is no worthiness found in man which could propitiate God."⁶⁰

⁵⁶ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 55. See Peter Abelard, "Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans," in *Scholastic Miscellany*, 276–287.

⁵⁷ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 54.

⁵⁸ See Roland Bainton, *Hunted Heretic: The Life and Death of Michael Servetus, 1511–1553* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960).

⁵⁹ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 56.

⁶⁰ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 56.

Gerhard's first observation regarding the source of the Socinian heresy is straightforward insofar as it draws on the classical Christian rationale for the incarnation. Jesus had to be God to die on our behalf on the cross. God does not owe himself a debt of obedience, and only God can forgive sins.⁶¹ Likewise, only God could overcome death and renew his image within us.⁶² Gerhard's second point is subtler and, in fact, intricately connected with larger medieval and Protestant Scholastic discussions regarding the freedom of divine will and its bearing on the necessity of the incarnation and the atonement.

Although there was generally a consensus in the medieval period that Christ's substitutionary death on the cross was the cause of human salvation,⁶³ there was nevertheless a significant disagreement over how necessary it was for God to act in this manner to redeem humanity. On one end of the spectrum, Anselm (1033–1109) taught in his work *Cur Deus Homo?* that because God is by nature the highest good and governor of the moral order of the universe, the crucifixion was a necessary and fitting condition for salvation. Ultimately, insofar as God is by nature both merciful and just, he could not bring about redemption without expressing both attributes in the redemption worked through the crucifixion.⁶⁴ By contrast, Duns Scotus (ca. 1266–1308) held that God's will was considerably more capable of arbitrary action. According to at least one reading of his theology of atonement, no action possesses intrinsic merit, not even the work of the God-man. Therefore, Christ's death on the cross was sufficient only because God accepted it as such (*acceptatio divina*).⁶⁵

In late medieval theology, these differing concepts of the necessity of atonement fed into differing interpretations of the distinction between God's "absolute power" (*potentia absoluta*) and "ordered power" (*potentia ordinata*). William of Ockham (1285–1347) followed in a similar trajectory of the fellow Franciscan Scotus and argued that God could do all possible things (i.e., things that were not inherently contradictory, such as to create square circles) before he created the world.

⁶¹ Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo?" 2.6–7, in *Scholastic Miscellany*, 150–152.

⁶² Athanasius, "On the Incarnation of the Word," trans. Archibald Robertson, in *The Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 52–110.

⁶³ Gwenfair M. Walters, "The Atonement in Medieval Theology," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank James III (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 239–262.

⁶⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo?" 1.12, in *Scholastic Miscellany*, 120–121. Also see Burnell F. Eckardt, *Anselm and Luther on Atonement: Was it "Necessary"?* (San Francisco: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

⁶⁵ Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 104. Also see discussion of the acceptance theory of the atonement in Robert Mackintosh, *Historic Theories of Atonement* (London; New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1920), 110–111.

Nevertheless, after establishing creation and the order of redemption, the Lord could only exercise his divine omnipotence in accordance with his covenantal promises (*pactum*).⁶⁶ By contrast, Thomas Aquinas (who recognized a similar distinction in the two divine powers) opines that even in acting in accordance with his absolute power, God would be bound to behave in accordance with his eternal transcendental properties, such as wisdom and goodness. Hence, for the Angelic Doctor (Aquinas), God's establishment of his ordered power was by no means arbitrary, but it expressed his eternal nature as goodness and wisdom itself.⁶⁷

How one understands the boundaries of God's absolute and ordered power obviously has a great deal of bearing on how one understands the necessity of the work of Christ. On one end of the spectrum, Anselm held that God could not act in a way that does not accord with his nature. For Anselm (as well as Aquinas), in creating the world and establishing the order of redemption, God's absolute power was still ordered by his transcendental attributes. Hence, the substitutionary price of the work of Christ is not arbitrary but a necessary expression of God's inherent qualities as God. By contrast, for Scotus and Ockham, God's actions in establishing the order of redemption were almost purely arbitrary.

This medieval discussion provides a valuable background of different theological schools that emerged in the Reformation and post-Reformation era. Indeed, the reformers, and the Protestant Scholastics after them, did not rethink everything in the medieval theological system. Rather, they largely limited themselves to reformulating the doctrines of justification, the sacraments, and the church. Much of the rest of their theology drew significantly from pre-Reformation models as a means of providing a complete system of doctrine for their students.⁶⁸ This is evidently the case for Gerhard as well. Anyone casually familiar with Gerhard's writings will recognize his deep engagement with the patristic and medieval traditions on every page of his *Theological Commonplaces*.

In light of this, it should be noted that Gerhard, along with the other Lutheran and Reformed Scholastics, not only accepted the distinction between God's absolute and ordered power⁶⁹ but also extended the same principles found in the medieval

⁶⁶ Helmar Junghans, *Ockham im Lichte der neueren Forschung* (Hamburg: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1968), 233–243; Armand Augustine Maurer, *The Philosophy of William of Ockham in the Light of Its Principles* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1999), 259–263; Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3: 69–70.

⁶⁷ *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 25, art. 5; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, vol. 1, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Glencoe Publishing/Christian Classics, 1981), 139–141.

⁶⁸ See comments in Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 1:34, 49–61, 446–450.

⁶⁹ See a brief summary in Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, 195–196; Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms: Drawn*

debate over the possibilities of God's absolute power into the distinction between God's "necessary will" (*voluntas necessaria*) and his "free will" (*voluntas libera*). God's necessary will refers to the fact that according as God is God, he necessarily wills himself and his own goodness and glory. God's free will refers to the range of decisions that God is able to make in accordance with his necessary will: whether to create the world, make a covenant with Israel, send Christ to die for our sins, and so on. These decisions represent possibilities that God might actualize, but they do not add anything to God's reality as God. Therefore, God does not make them out of the necessity of his nature but out of free choice.⁷⁰

In light of this background, it is not difficult to interpret where Gerhard and his opponents stand within the spectrum of theological opinion present in both medieval and Protestant Scholasticism on the question of the necessity of atonement. Although the sources of Calvin's theology are a notorious point of debate,⁷¹ it is clear from the discussion in the 1559 edition of the *Institutes* (cited by Gerhard above⁷²) that he takes a position quite similar to that of Duns Scotus. For Calvin, the work of Christ possessed no inherent value. Nevertheless, the Father affirmed that the death of Christ would suffice as the price of salvation by fiat, and hence it became so.⁷³ Gerhard notes that in a similar manner, Calvinists also hold that God chooses the elect without reference to the merit of Christ (contrary to Eph 1:5).⁷⁴

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

In contrast to all this, Gerhard stands quite squarely in the trajectory of Anselm and Aquinas. Indeed, in refuting the Socinian position, Gerhard recommends both Anselm's work and that of Bernard of Clairvaux.⁷⁵ This being said, it should of course be cautioned that there are real differences between Anselm and Gerhard's

Principally from the Protestant Scholastic Theology (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1985), 231–232.

⁷⁰ Gerhard, *On the Nature of God and On the Most Holy Mystery of the Trinity*, 244–246; Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, 3:432–475; Robert Preus, *The Theology of Post-Reformation Lutheranism*, vol. 2 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1972), 197–203, 224–249.

⁷¹ For various discussions, see Richard A. Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷² Gerhard, *On Justification*, 56.

⁷³ Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.17.1; McNeill and Battles, *Calvin*, 1:52.

⁷⁴ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 56.

⁷⁵ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 74.

views of atonement. Like Luther, Flacius, and the Formula of Concord,⁷⁶ Gerhard accepts the doctrine of active and passive righteousness, wherein for the sake of redemption, Christ must both positively fulfill the law (active righteousness), as well as suffer its punishment (passive righteousness).⁷⁷ By contrast, Anselm saw the crucifixion as a supremely meritorious act of supererogation, wherein the goodness of Christ's voluntary death compensates God for his loss of honor incurred by the act of human sin.⁷⁸

After reviewing and refuting the Socinians' exegetical arguments, Gerhard turns to his account of the divine will and attributes as they relate to the question of atonement. Due to the unity and the simplicity of the divine essence, the Socinians are certainly correct that there is no conflict of justice and mercy within God's eternal being: "Surely God's justice and mercy are not in and of themselves contrary properties since they are the very essence of God, which admits no contrariety at all because of its utter simplicity."⁷⁹ Nevertheless,

At the same time, however, with respect to its object—namely, the human race, which was inimical to God through sin—it was required that the marvelous *disposition of justice and mercy be obtained through Christ's satisfaction*. . . . According to *its very nature*, God's mercy wanted to spare man who had been misled by the devil's deceits and had fallen into sin and eternal death since, through the fall, man did not cease to be a creature of God. But, on the other hand, His righteousness decreed that man must be brought to the punishment he deserved on account of his sin. The *truthfulness of God* added its assent to this, and therefore the merit and satisfaction of Christ has intervened. Through this a transferal of the punishment owed to our sins has occurred so that God has *maintained His justice and truthfulness* and taken us into His grace. The pious ancients, especially Anselm and Bernard, have very beautiful thoughts on this.⁸⁰

Gerhard agrees with Anselm and Aquinas, against Scotus and Ockham, that God possesses a certain transcendental goodness that is expressed in his exercise of the condemnation of sin. Nevertheless, whereas for Anselm and Aquinas, the dis-

⁷⁶ See Luther, *Lectures on Galatians 1–4* (1535), AE 26:280; Heinrich Schmid, *The Doctrinal Theology of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles A. Hay and Henry E. Jacobs (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 354; and W. H. T. Dau and F. Bente, eds., *Triglot Concordia: The Symbolical Books of the Evangelical Lutheran Church, German-Latin-English* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1921).

⁷⁷ Johann Gerhard, *On Christ*, Theological Commonplaces IV, trans. Richard Dinda (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009), 320.

⁷⁸ Anselm of Canterbury, "Cur Deus Homo?" 2.18, in *Scholastic Miscellany*, 179.

⁷⁹ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 74.

⁸⁰ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 74, emphasis added.

cussion of divine justice focuses on abstract attributes within the eternal being of the one God, Gerhard focuses primarily on the concrete reality of God's holy word in Scripture. What is supremely important for Gerhard is God's "truthfulness" in his words of condemnation and mercy.⁸¹ Since God speaks truthfully about his eternal legal will (*lex aeterna*) revealed to us in his word of law, it logically follows that sin is antithetical to God's own eternal nature:

If the Law is the sign of the most just divine will, then surely it is by means of this most just will that God desires that which the Law has expressed. . . . And the image of God after which man was created was the perfect conformation of the entire person to the divine Law. Therefore it is by means of His most just will that God wills—indeed immutably wills—that which He expressed in the Law (Matt. 5:18; Luke 16:17). He who is just by His *own nature cannot help but be opposed to and punish sins on the basis of his justice*. But now, God is just of His own nature (Ps. 7:12), for *otherwise He would be unjust by His own nature*.⁸²

Hence, justice and mercy are part of God's necessary will ["primary actuality"] and are expressed in his free will and ordered power ["secondary actuality"] through the law and the gospel as they are recorded in Holy Scripture. The Socinians do not understand this and assume that divine freedom allows God to act in ways that are arbitrary, haphazard, and contrary to his very nature as God. Hence, the Socinian claim is that God's free will and ordered power are to be collapsed into his absolute power and necessary will:

If [it were the case] as Socinus teaches (*Contra Covet.*, pp. 9–11; *Praelect. theol.*, ch. 16), that the wrath and vengeance of God so depend on God's absolute will that He would be able not to deliver people who are clearly sinners up to eternal death, and then later He did deliver them up to death by His edict, and if by His power He was able to free them again without the intervention of satisfaction, it would follow (1) that "sin" and "not sin" are the same before God since there is the same disposition toward both in His nature. (2) That sin of itself is nothing, but rather is an opinion to be thought of as the arbitrary choice of the divine will. But now, "the power of sin is the Law" (1 Cor. 15:56). (3) That God's love for the devout and His hate for the wicked depend not on natural justice but on some arbitrary choice. (4) That nothing is ever opposed to God's nature, for whatever he can want to leave unpunished would be so. (5) That if God were to will idolatry, blasphemy, or perjury, these would not be sins. The Photinians are confusing God's mercy with His ἐνεργεία

⁸¹ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 74.

⁸² Gerhard, *On Justification*, 74–75, emphasis added.

[“working”], and secondary actuality with primary actuality. *Primary actuality is simply essential to God and is interchangeable with God’s essence so much so that, within the utterly simple essence of God, His mercy is something that is simply one and the same thing with the very essence of God.* However, it is called secondary actuality insofar as His mercy advances outwardly with respect to creatures, and thus concurs with the divine will. The will serves all the essential properties in God and of itself produces no effect without its union with one or the other of them, etc.⁸³

Ultimately, sin is antithetical to God’s very nature. Therefore, for the Lord to will to forgive sin without atonement would be tantamount to him willing the very thing he rejects. At the same time, God is by nature loving and merciful, and he has revealed this merciful nature in his promise of the gospel. Because God loves his creation, in becoming incarnate as Christ, he placed himself under the curse that his retributive justice imposed on his creation. Out of pure self-donating love, Christ suffered the penalty of sin on the cross. Hence, for Gerhard, in the cross, God reveals himself as both truthful and faithful. He is faithful to his own eternal nature as God, and he is truthful to the words of law and grace revealed to his creatures in historical time.

IV. Modern Rejections of Substitutionary Atonement

In this final section, we will focus on the modern rejections of the doctrine of substitutionary atonement. We do not have the space to deal exhaustively or fairly with modern objections to the doctrine. Instead, we will primarily deal with criticisms of the doctrine as they have developed in Lutheran circles over the previous two centuries. We will begin with the Hofmann controversy of the mid-nineteenth century and end with the theologies of the Lundensian school of the early twentieth century. Since we have already dealt with effects of these theological controversies surrounding the atonement theologies of Gerhard Forde and Robert W. Jenson in the late twentieth-century elsewhere, we will not trace the discussion down to the present.⁸⁴

We contend that although it would be difficult to draw a straight line of historical influence between the Socinians and these modern figures, there nevertheless remain many similar patterns of thought between the two groups of thinkers. At the heart of these theological systems lies a common understanding of the doctrine

⁸³ Gerhard, *On Justification*, 75, emphasis added.

⁸⁴ See Jack Kilcrease, “Gerhard Forde’s Theology of Atonement and Justification: A Confessional Lutheran Response,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 76, nos. 3–4 (2012): 269–294; Jack Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of Atonement: From Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018).

of God. Both the Socinians and the modern theologians discussed below maintain that divine freedom trumps God's faithfulness to his nature and covenants/testaments. Therefore, the fulfillment of the law by Christ on the cross is unnecessary for the achievement of redemption.

This way of viewing God's nature and the work of Christ invariably leads down the paths of both antinomianism and legalism. The antinomianism of these positions is manifest in their belief that humans can move beyond the condemnation of the law without having the law fulfilled on their behalf. The legalism of these positions logically results from their initial failure to take seriously the fulfillment of the law as a necessary condition of redemption. As can be observed both in the Socinians and in these later systems of theology, if Christ has not fulfilled the law, then invariably the problem of the law is passed onto sinners in the form of a new law that they must fulfill.

In nineteenth century Germany, Johannes von Hofmann (1810–1877) became the leading figure of the atonement controversy in Lutheranism.⁸⁵ As a young man, Hofmann attended the University of Berlin, where he studied under Schleiermacher and Hegel and read the works of Schelling.⁸⁶ Within the German idealist tradition represented by Schelling and Hegel, God is seen as an "Absolute Subject."⁸⁷ Through an act of self-alienation, God uses human history as a means of self-development and discovery.⁸⁸ Therefore, like the autonomous subject of modern Euro-American culture, or what the philosopher Charles Taylor calls the Enlightenment's "Punctuated-self,"⁸⁹ the German idealist God was not thought of as acting in a manner that is necessarily faithful to a discernible eternal nature that transcends history.

It could be argued that this development in German idealism and its influence on modern theology is by no means unsurprising in modern conceptions of human agency and destiny. Throughout history, humans have typically identified the divine with what their culture deems to be most real. For example, beginning with Thales,

⁸⁵ See Matthew L. Becker, *The Self-Giving God and Salvation History: The Trinitarian Theology of Johannes von Hofmann* (New York: T & T Clark International, 2004); Karlmann Beyschlag, *Die Erlanger Theologie* (Erlangen: Martin-Luther-Verlag, 1993), 61–83; and Lowell C. Green, *The Erlangen School of Theology: Its History, Teaching, and Practice* (Fort Wayne, IN: Lutheran Legacy, 2010), 105–133.

⁸⁶ Becker, *The Self-Giving God*, 6, 102–120.

⁸⁷ See Quentin Lauer, *Hegel's Concept of God* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1982), 115.

⁸⁸ See G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).

⁸⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 159–176. Taylor speaks of Locke here, but much of what he says is applicable to the rest of the Enlightenment and modernity in general.

the Greek philosophical tradition generally viewed the cosmic order as most real.⁹⁰ For this reason, God was to be primarily identified with the deep structures of the cosmic order itself (Stoicism's immanent *Logos*) or as the orderer of the cosmos (Aristotle's Prime Mover, Plato's *Demiurge*, etc.).⁹¹ Human vocation and ethics within this worldview likewise was seen as a conforming to and finding one's place within the cosmic order (*lex naturalis*).⁹²

By contrast, post-Enlightenment Western culture, with its twin engines of mass democracy and consumerism, has come to see the individual engaged in the activity of expressing his autonomous desires and free self-development as being most real. Indeed, the autonomous and rational subject is so real that the cosmic order is to be modified when it conflicts with the individual's interior desires (i.e., homosexuality, transgenderism, etc.). For this reason, the concept of God as an "Absolute Subject," which began in German idealism (or even possibly going back to Descartes⁹³) and is present in many modern theologies, makes a great deal of sense. Seen from this perspective, the God of modern theology and philosophy has become a gigantic projection of the Western autonomous individual. Moreover, such a conception of God would form a point of contact with the Socinian conception of God as an arbitrary monarch who can simply abandon his commitment to his law at will and with it the requirement that atonement be made for sin.⁹⁴

Due to the influence of German idealism, Hofmann largely rejected the classical theistic account of God as immutable and outside of time, found in the pre- and post-Reformation traditions of Western Christendom. Instead, Hofmann posited a God who evolved through time and was shaped by history.⁹⁵ Nevertheless, God's evolution does not occur through the universal history of humanity, such as Hegel and later figures like Pannenberg would contend.⁹⁶ Rather, the triune God develops himself through a specific history, namely that of Israel and the early church as it is

⁹⁰ Fredrick Copleston, *A History of Philosophy: Greece and Rome, From the Pre-Socratics to Plotinus*, vol. 1 (New York: Image Books, 1993), 22–24.

⁹¹ See Adam Drozdek, *Greek Philosophers as Theologians: The Divine Arche* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁹² See Howard P. Kainz, *Natural Law: An Introduction and Re-examination* (Chicago: Open Court, 2004), 1–14.

⁹³ James Henry Owino Kombo, *Theological Models of the Doctrine of the Trinity: The Trinity, Diversity and Theological Hermeneutics* (Carlisle: Langham Global Library, 2016), 69.

⁹⁴ F. LeRon Shults has noted the point of contact between early Enlightenment concepts of the self and the popularity of Socinianism in late-seventeenth-century England. See F. LeRon Shults, *Reforming the Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 50–51.

⁹⁵ Becker, *The Self-Giving God*, 144.

⁹⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, Rolf Rendtorff, Trutz Rendtorff and Ulrich Wilkens, eds., *Revelation as History*, trans. David Granskou (New York: MacMillan, 1968).

recorded in the Bible. In later theology, this came to be called “*Heilsgeschichte*” or “salvation history” theology.⁹⁷

As someone who regarded himself as Lutheran, Hofmann insisted that the structure of this historical revelation takes the shape of law and gospel. Nevertheless, law and gospel possess different meanings for Hofmann than they do in orthodox Lutheranism. Unlike in the Formula of Concord, Hofmann did not identify the law with the eternal and immutable commandments of God (*lex aeterna*) and various ways that those commandments relate to human existence under sin and grace (*triplex usus legis*).⁹⁸ Instead, the law is to be seen primarily as the time of the old covenant, wherein there was a reign of divine wrath and mechanical legalism: “[God’s] wrath is not something eternal, *but a historic relationship of God.*”⁹⁹ Indeed, when Paul contrasted law and faith, he meant merely to oppose “legalistic actions” to “an attitude which is contrasted with a legalistic outlook.”¹⁰⁰ Despite the fact that the Old Testament has a status as an era of wrath, Hofmann nevertheless admits that it still contained within itself many prophecies and intimations of a coming age of grace.¹⁰¹

Conversely, for Hofmann, the gospel primarily refers to the era of the New Testament and its ethos of grace. In enfolding his triune life in history, God has effectively evolved past his manifestation in the Old Testament age of wrath by sending his Son to overcome wrath with love. Jesus did not so much die as a substitute for sin as he revealed and actualized God’s love in history. Christ entered the world and was opposed by those who did not accept God’s love. Through the cross and empty tomb, Christ accepted the violence of human sin, and, through the resurrection, he overcame the negative verdict that those who had rejected him imposed on his person.¹⁰²

As can be easily observed, this account of atonement presupposes that God’s arbitrary freedom allows him to move autonomously past his previous legal relationship with humanity without a fulfillment of the law. This represents a similar line of reasoning to the Socinian concept of divine freedom and sovereignty. Overall, there is common assumption that God can simply transcend the judgment of the law through an act of will.

⁹⁷ Johannes von Hofmann, *Interpreting the Bible*, trans. Christian Preus (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1959), 31–32.

⁹⁸ FC SD II 50; III 57; VI 1; Dau and Bente, *Triglot Concordia*, 901, 935, 963.

⁹⁹ Johannes von Hofmann, *Theologische Ethik* (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1878), 35. Emphasis added; my translation.

¹⁰⁰ Hofmann, *Interpreting the Bible*, 186.

¹⁰¹ Johannes von Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis*, 2 vols., 1st ed. (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1852–1855), 2.1:115–140.

¹⁰² Johannes von Hofmann, *Encyclopädie der Theologie*, ed. H. J. Bestmann (Nördlingen: C. H. Beck, 1879), 84–85; Hofmann, *Der Schriftbeweis*, 1:441–451.

According to Hofmann, by the power of the Spirit, Christians can now live out a spontaneous existence of love under the reign of God's grace: "The Spirit of Christ instructs as to what he [the Christian] must do, and motivates him to do it, and that which he then does is undeniably correct."¹⁰³ As Gerhard Forde has noted in his treatment of Hofmann, the gospel is for Hofmann not a promise but a new "internal law."¹⁰⁴ In the new era of grace, the church is free from the enslaving mechanical legalism labored under during the era of wrath. Hence, the two words of law and gospel are not juxtaposed to one another in the proclamation of the church but are rather eclipsed by a unitary principle of the love-ethos.¹⁰⁵

In this, the consequences of the rejection of substitutionary atonement become clear. Since the law is no longer fulfilled on behalf of Christians in the cross, Hofmann predictably comes to redefine the gospel as the experience of God's love and the love-based ethos that is now possible in the era of grace. Put succinctly, for Hofmann, the gospel is effectively a new law that replaces an old law. This represents another point of contact with the Racovian Catechism and its old law/new law theology.

Hofmann's theology of *Heilsgeschichte* and atonement sparked a debate not only with his Erlangen colleagues Theodosius Harnack (1817–1889) and Gottfried Thomasius (1802–1875)¹⁰⁶ but also with the Rostock theologian F. A. Philippi (1809–1882).¹⁰⁷ All three theologians agreed that Hofmann's position on atonement effectively destroyed the confessional Lutheran doctrine of forensic justification. With regard to Hofmann's rejection of substitutionary atonement, Philippi was especially tenacious in his appeal to the classical Anselmic logic of God's need to express his holiness and love in his work of redemption.¹⁰⁸ Philippi ultimately accused Hofmann of abandoning forensic justification in favor of a Roman Catholic doctrine of infused righteousness.¹⁰⁹

Among his many responses to these criticisms, one of Hofmann's attempts at a counter-argument proved to be extremely influential in future debates within Lutheranism on the issue of atonement. Hofmann spoke of Christ's work as an act of conquest, not only of the sinners who reject him but also of Satan, who instigated

¹⁰³ Hofmann, *Theologische Ethik*, 78, my translation.

¹⁰⁴ Gerhard O. Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969), 33.

¹⁰⁵ See Green, *The Erlangen School*, 124; Robert Schultz, *Gesetz und Evangelium in der Lutherischen Theologie des 19. Jahrhunderts* (Berlin: Lutherisches Verlagshaus, 1958), 110–120.

¹⁰⁶ Gottfried Thomasius, *Das Bekenntniss der lutherischen kirche von der Versöhnung und die Versöhnungslehre D. Chr. K. v. Hofmann's* (Erlangen: Theodor Bläsing, 1857).

¹⁰⁷ F. A. Philippi, *Dr. v. Hofmann gegenüber der lutherischen Versöhnungs- und Rechtfertigungslehre* (Erlangen: Theodor Bläsing, 1856).

¹⁰⁸ Philippi, *Versöhnungs- und Rechtfertigungslehre*, 35.

¹⁰⁹ Philippi, *Versöhnungs- und Rechtfertigungslehre*, 28.

the human revolt against God. In Hofmann's mind, this image of Christ the conqueror represented a point of contact with Luther. Appealing to some of the reformer's writings where he described Christ as struggling with demonic forces, Hofmann insisted that Luther had not actually fully accepted a doctrine of substitutionary atonement but had instead taught something akin to the *Christus Victor* model of some of the church fathers.¹¹⁰

Although Theodosius Harnack skillfully refuted this claim with a lengthy two-volume study of Luther's theology,¹¹¹ Hofmann's trajectory for the interpretation of Luther found expression in many in the twentieth century, including Gustaf Aulén (1879–1977) of the Lund School.¹¹² Aulén's work on atonement and Luther follows a similar outlook to that of Hofmann, but with some modifications. These modifications can be attributed to the obvious differences in *Sitz im Leben* but also to his interaction with Aulén's colleague Anders Nygren's project of motif research.¹¹³

In his classic work, *Christus Victor*, Aulén identified three major atonement motifs throughout the history of Christian thought: substitution, moral influence, and *Christus Victor* or conquest.¹¹⁴ The last motif describes Christ as true God who unilaterally acts on behalf of humanity, thereby destroying and despoiling the forces of darkness that enslave humanity. As Aulén emphasizes, the image of *Christus Victor* is not so much a set theory of the atonement as it is a recurring image of how God in Christ saves. Aulén viewed this motif as being the primary one promoted by the church fathers¹¹⁵ and (following Hofmann) revived by Luther in the sixteenth century.¹¹⁶ Luther's view was supposedly suppressed later by the rationalizing Scholastic Orthodoxy of the seventeenth century.¹¹⁷ For Aulén, Luther's great

¹¹⁰ Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 62–64.

¹¹¹ Theodosius Harnack, *Luthers Theologie mit besonderer Beziehung auf seine Versöhnungs- und Erlösungslehre*, 2 vols. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1969).

¹¹² Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate*, 47.

¹¹³ Anders Nygren, *Meaning and Method: Prolegomena to a Scientific Philosophy of Religion and a Scientific Theology*, trans. Philip S. Watson (London: Epworth Press, 1972). For those unfamiliar, Arne Rasmusson summarizes the program of motif-research thus: "A basic motif is, in this case, the answer of a religion to the basic categorical question, which for religion is the question of the eternal. It is the basic conception, the driving and unifying force of a religion. It is that which gives a religion its systematic meaning. Although these basic conceptions are historically given, the task of determining them is not only a genetic-historical question, but also and primarily a systematic issue of showing the driving and unifying motifs of, in this case, Christianity" (Arne Rasmusson, "A Century of Swedish Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 21, no. 2 [2007]: 134).

¹¹⁴ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (New York: Macmillan, 1969), 1–16.

¹¹⁵ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 16–60.

¹¹⁶ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 101–122.

¹¹⁷ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 128–133.

innovation over the church fathers was to see divine wrath and law as something to be conquered along with the other forces of darkness.¹¹⁸

The motif of conquest was most important and fitting for Aulén because it resists rationalizing God's work of salvation through a mechanism of substitution. The *Christus Victor* motif also portrays God as acting out of unilateral love to rescue humanity from his own wrath as well as the power of the devil. Such a view of the work of Christ emphasized God's one-way movement to humanity, rather than (in Aulén's mind) the movement of humanity to God that is present in the Anselmic belief that Christ represents humanity before God and placates his wrath.¹¹⁹

As the reader may discern, this description of atonement echoes Hofmann's in some respects. The main difference would be that whereas Hofmann emphasizes human (and satanic) opposition to God's love, Aulén takes seriously the continuing opposition of the wrath of God. Nevertheless, such wrath is not overcome by the penal substitution of Christ but by a mere divine decision of love manifest in Christ's struggle, albeit a mysterious one.

Christus Victor's understanding of divine love as a unilateral movement that excludes any prompting on the part of humanity (i.e., Christ as the sacrificial representative of humanity *coram Deo*) echoes in many respects the motif research of Aulén's colleague Anders Nygren in his equally seminal work *Agape and Eros*.¹²⁰ In this work, Nygren identifies three major motifs regarding the divine-human relationship through the history of Western theology and philosophy. The first is the *Eros* motif. This motif describes the relationship of the human with the divine as a self-seeking love that lusts for fulfillment.¹²¹ Plato conceived of the "Good" as the supreme and genuine object of human desire, of which earthly erotic desire was a misdirected shadow.¹²² Second, there is the *Nomos* motif, which sees the divine-human relationship as structured within a legal framework. Judaism and Stoicism are examples of this.¹²³ Finally, Nygren posits the existence of the *Agape* motif, which finds its clearest expression in the New Testament. The *Agape* motif describes the divine-human relationship as based on a divine love that unilaterally moves toward humanity and is not prompted by any desirability on the part of the divine love's object.¹²⁴

¹¹⁸ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 111–116.

¹¹⁹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 145–159. See a similar argument in Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 199–202.

¹²⁰ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip Watson (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

¹²¹ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 160–199.

¹²² Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 166–181.

¹²³ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 254–288.

¹²⁴ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 61–159.

Nygren argues that over time the New Testament's *Agape* motif became diluted with both the *Eros* and *Nomos* motifs within the theology of the early church.¹²⁵ He argues that this dilution found its most systematic expression in Augustine's "*Caritas* Synthesis," which combined Paul's *Agape* with Plato's *Eros*.¹²⁶ Augustine and the medieval theologians saw God as the highest good and proper object of human desire. Nevertheless, God should be loved for his own sake, not because he fulfills the selfish longings of the human heart. Moreover, within this theology, God's grace is seen primarily as having the purpose of making humans capable of achieving sanctification and good works so that they might become objects of God's desire.¹²⁷ Coming at the end of the Middle Ages, Luther is thought to have destroyed the *Caritas* synthesis and returned Christianity to the *Agape* of the New Testament by emphasizing the unilateral nature of divine love present in the gospel. Christian freedom, therefore, implies an ethic based on disinterested self-sacrificial love.¹²⁸

Nygren's concept of the divine-human relationship based on *Agape* and Aulén's thinking on atonement possesses a clear parallel. For Nygren, the *Agape* motif is the essence of true Christianity¹²⁹ because it portrays divine love as unilateral divine movement, unprompted by the desirability of human works. Likewise, on the basis of this unilateral divine movement of love, the Christian acts out the same *Agape* toward his neighbor. It might be inferred that in Aulén's thinking, this notion of the essence of Christianity expresses itself in the form of a preference for the conquest motif of atonement. As we have seen, for Aulén, God's love unilaterally moves to conquer demonic forces that enslave humanity. Implicitly, Aulén would appear to associate the doctrine of penal substitution with a kind of *Eros*, wherein Christ as the representative of humanity makes himself an object of divine desire by his obedience.

In evaluating their position, it should be noted that, from a confessional Lutheran perspective, Nygren and Aulén are correct in seeing God's love as creative and unprompted. As Luther aptly observes, "The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it."¹³⁰ Nevertheless, this by no means excludes God's holiness or his faithfulness to the law in his act of redemption. This fact is precisely the reality that substitutionary atonement is meant to embody. God's love in sending Christ as a sacrifice for sin was not inspired by any legal obedience or

¹²⁵ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 247–448.

¹²⁶ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 449–558.

¹²⁷ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 609–666.

¹²⁸ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 681–699. See also Rasmusson, "A Century of Swedish Theology," 134–135.

¹²⁹ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 41–48.

¹³⁰ Luther, *Ninety-Five Theses* (1517), AE 31:41.

ontic desirability on the part of sinful humanity. Nevertheless, because of God's justice and faithfulness to his word of law, there was no saving humanity apart from his fulfillment of the law.

At least in the case of Nygren, the failure to see God as faithful both to the law and the gospel results in the same pattern of antinomianism and legalism that we observed earlier in Hofmann. Nygren does not so much speak of law and gospel, but rather, in a manner reminiscent of Hofmann, of the Old Testament as embodying the *Nomos* motif¹³¹ and the New Testament the *Agape* motif.¹³² Indeed, the Old Testament's continuing significance lies only in its ability to make the events of the New Testament explicable and to serve as a foil to the *Agape* motif, manifest both in the divine redemptive action of Christ and the ethics of the individual Christian.¹³³ As a result, *Agape* as explicated by Nygren seems to collapse law and gospel into each other by blending them together into a unitary principle of unconditional love.

If Hofmann's theology of atonement presupposed the Hegelian concept of God as an absolute and historically evolving subject, Nygren's (along with Aulén's) concept of God implies Kant's concept of the morally autonomous subject. Nygren's affinity for Immanuel Kant's work is well-documented,¹³⁴ and some have detected the influence of Kantian moral philosophy on the thesis of *Agape and Eros*.¹³⁵

In his *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant argues that true morality means willing the good for its own sake and thereby becoming autonomous. A person who does the good for its own sake is autonomous, which means that he is self-legislating. He does the good because he wills to do it, not for the sake of some other good that he is seeking to achieve. If a person acts morally for some other end, he is subjecting his will to some outside force (heteronomy) and thereby loses his autonomous authenticity.¹³⁶ Nygren's theology and ethic of *Agape* as something willed for its own sake bears extraordinary similarities to Kant's notion of moral autonomy described above.

¹³¹ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 254.

¹³² Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 46–48, 61–159.

¹³³ Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 255–257.

¹³⁴ William Alexander Johnson, *On Religion: A Study of the Theological Method in Schleiermacher and Nygren* (Leiden: Brill, 1964), 151; Rasmusson, "A Century of Swedish Theology," 133.

¹³⁵ Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 232.

¹³⁶ See Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 21–55.

V. Conclusion

As Gerhard's critique of the Socinian heresy shows, God as he is revealed in Christ and his atoning work is a God who is faithful. Before time, God the Father eternally and faithfully corresponds to himself in his word (Col 1:15, Heb 1:3). In his dealing with humanity in creation and redemption, the same triune God also faithfully fulfills his words of condemnation and mercy in the cross and empty tomb (Rom 3:23–26). For this reason, believers can rely on God's promise of salvation with the complete certainty of God's truthfulness (Rom 8:38–39; Heb 10:22). As we have observed, positing a God who is otherwise, necessarily calls into question the definitive nature of grace manifest in the cross, thereby returning believers to the challenge of achieving salvation by their own efforts.