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Penal Substitutionary Atonement?

Walter A. Maier III

I. Introduction¹

With regard to the saving work of Jesus Christ, the teaching that had been imparted to me since childhood could be summarized by the phrase “penal substitutionary atonement.” Not that those words were actually used when I was a boy, because they would have been too difficult for me to understand. But the phrase captures the essence of what I was taught: that Jesus, for me and for all people, not only lived a perfect life, keeping all of God’s commandments, but he also took upon himself the sins of the world and paid fully for those trespasses with his suffering, and with his death, on a cross. In other words, Jesus took our place; as our substitute, he endured the penalty we transgressors deserved, and so made possible our forgiveness and salvation.

However, through discussions carried on by the exegetical department of this seminary, I became aware of another position regarding the saving work of Christ. This position has a different explanation and is opposed to the concept of penal substitutionary atonement. It has had, I learned, some influence in the Christian Church, even among a number of Lutherans. In large measure because of this alternative position and its influence, the exegetical department chose the theme “The Cross, the Atonement, and the Wrath of God” for the 2020 symposium.

The topic of this particular study was chosen to discuss the other viewpoint and offer a response. In order to do so, my focus fell on Gerhard O. Forde, a leading proponent of the alternative position. Forde, who lived from 1927 to 2005, taught as professor of systematic theology at Luther Northwestern Theological Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. Following will be a review and summary of much of what Forde taught as derived from his writings (especially from his “The Work of Christ”² and *Where God Meets Man*³), then a brief general response to Forde’s understanding of

¹ This article is a slight revision of a paper given at the Exegetical Symposium of Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on January 21, 2020. All translations from Scripture are my own.

² Gerhard Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), 2:3–99.

³ Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther’s Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1972).

the atonement, and then a response based on specific passages of the Old Testament. From what I could determine in my examination of Forde, he did not much refer to the Old Testament, and yet that portion of Scripture contains crucial truths with regard to the nature of the atonement, and is in addition the lens through which the New Testament must be studied and interpreted.

II. A Review and Summary of Much of What Forde Taught

Forde explains that unconverted man, under the power of unbelief, stands opposed to God's grace and is in bondage to a system of works-righteousness, namely, believing that a person has to earn salvation.⁴ God wants to be merciful, but natural man, alienated from and setting himself up against God, rejects God's mercy.⁵ This aroused the wrath of God, which in essence was God making himself absent, or hidden, from human beings.⁶ To overcome this impasse, God became man and came to us, to be present for us. God came in Christ. God had to come this way to save us, to have mercy, and to show his mercy.⁷

So Christ came, preaching forgiveness and unilaterally forgiving sins, that is, forgiving without any so-called "payment" having been made for them. According to Forde, "we" — "we" being natural, unconverted man—would not have this. So we works-righteous legalists killed Christ. Christ was put to death because he simply forgave sins; it was not for our sins, in order to make forgiveness possible. We regarded what Christ did as wrong, and in this way, as Paul writes, he was made "to be sin for us" (2 Cor 5:21). Christ bore our sins in his body, not in a substitutionary sense, but in this physical manner: we sinned and beat his body, spit on it, crowned his head with thorns, and put nails through his hands and feet.⁸

Thus Forde can liken Christ's death to an accident. He uses this analogy: "A child is playing in the street. A truck is bearing down on the child. A man casts himself in the path of the truck, saves the child, but is himself killed in the process. It is an accident."⁹ The death of the man could be called a sacrifice—he gave his life for another. Comparing this example to the spiritual reality, we are the ones driving the truck of legalism. Christ, to save us, put himself in the way of the truck. So his death was a sacrifice; it was for us, but not in the sense of substitutionary atonement.

⁴ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 58, 69, 81. See also Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 9; Gerhard Forde, *A More Radical Gospel*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 221–222. In this and following footnotes, the citations of Forde are not exhaustive but constitute representative examples.

⁵ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 58, 91.

⁶ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 58, 73. Cf. *A More Radical Gospel*, 95.

⁷ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 67, 72, 73.

⁸ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 79, 80–81, 90–92; *A More Radical Gospel*, 91–93, 96.

⁹ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 88.

He died because we by nature are bound to works-righteousness. He did not die for our sins, to pay the penalty for our transgressions.¹⁰

Forde explains that Christ's death saves in part because it reveals our sin of rejecting the merciful God and his mercy and grace. Christ's sacrifice unmask our bondage to legalism. At the same time, the death of Jesus reveals God's mercy, love, and grace.¹¹

The resurrection vindicates Christ and his message and his exercise of unilateral forgiveness. Thus he can really say, "I forgive you." In that sense, Jesus has won forgiveness for us.¹²

God creates in us faith in the event of the cross and the empty tomb. In this way, God makes us new people. God is satisfied when we believe and trust in him as the God who has and shows mercy. Such faith lets God be God (and not ourselves), fulfills the law, and makes us pleasing to God.¹³

We would all agree with Forde's assertion that natural man is under bondage to belief in works-righteousness. In some areas, Forde seemingly comes close to the traditional Lutheran understanding and formulation regarding salvation. Other aspects of Forde's position, while unique, might at first glance seem unobjectionable. But he is actually investing certain phrases with new meaning, and in the end denies penal substitutionary atonement.

Forde asks, "Why cannot God just pardon, without any payment involving atonement for sin and fulfillment of the law? Why cannot God unilaterally forgive, as we do?"¹⁴ On the other hand, Forde raises the question, "If God has been paid and thus is satisfied, how is that mercy?"¹⁵ Mercy, according to Forde, is relenting from judgment, not a pardon resulting from the fulfillment of judgment.¹⁶

Forde also asks, "Why should God pay God? Why must God's justice be satisfied before he can be merciful?" Forde responds by writing that divine love is a love that does not need to be bought off. The crucifixion takes place not to make God merciful but because God is merciful and desires to be so concretely for us. The

¹⁰ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 88–89.

¹¹ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 67–69, 90.

¹² Forde, "The Work of Christ," 92; *A More Radical Gospel*, 100.

¹³ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 50–51, 58, 75–76, 95, 97; cf. 70; *Where God Meets Man*, 38–40, 56–57; *A More Radical Gospel*, 97.

¹⁴ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 21, 23; *A More Radical Gospel*, 90–91.

¹⁵ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 22–23. See also *A More Radical Gospel*, 87.

¹⁶ This phrase is taken from Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of Atonement: From Luther to Forde* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), 141. Forde writes (*Where God Meets Man*, 12): "If God has been paid, how can one say that he really forgives? If a debt is paid, one can hardly say it is forgiven. Nor could one call God's action mercy."

cross is the price of God remaining a God of mercy, a price paid by God, but not to God.¹⁷

Forde states that if penal substitutionary atonement is necessary, this makes God into “a kind of celestial and eternal bookkeeper”¹⁸ and “a vindictive tyrant.”¹⁹ It restricts the freedom of God (again, why can he not just forgive unilaterally?).²⁰ Forde believes the demand for innocent blood is cruel, and leads to a gruesome and forbidding picture of the deity.²¹ He wonders why God should find the death of the Son so acceptable,²² and even thinks that “if Jesus’ death had been merely a payment to God he would not have done enough.”²³ Forde, agreeing with the Socinians, writes, “How can the suffering of one man outweigh the punishment due the whole race? The sufferings of Jesus are finite, not eternal. What was demanded was eternal death, but Jesus was dead only three days.”²⁴

Another objection Forde has to penal substitutionary atonement deals with the resurrection of Christ. If one says that God must be satisfied, then, according to Forde, “everything depends on Jesus’ punishment and death *but not on the resurrection*. There is no need for a resurrection really—one could just as well say that the Son of God suffered and was killed to pay the debt and that’s all there is to that. What need is there for anything more?”²⁵

According to Forde, another weakness of penal substitutionary atonement, and the final one presented here, is its real Achilles’ heel. This is the idea of substitution. He explains: “The transfer of someone else’s sin to the innocent is absurd and improper, just as in reverse the transfer of someone else’s righteousness to the unrighteous.”²⁶ He questions “how the suffering and obedience of one can be transferred to another.”²⁷

III. A Brief General Response to Forde

While Forde has much to say about the mercy, grace, and love of God, that is not the case with regard to God’s holiness, righteousness, and justice. Forde, it seems, does not like and/or accept all of the teaching of Scripture about God, but in

¹⁷ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 23, 25, 72–75, 81–82; *Where God Meets Man*, 11, 37.

¹⁸ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 36.

¹⁹ Forde, *A More Radical Gospel*, 103.

²⁰ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 24.

²¹ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 23–24.

²² Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 23.

²³ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 42. See also p. 12.

²⁴ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 24.

²⁵ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 38.

²⁶ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 24.

²⁷ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 25.

a selective manner holds to portions of God's Word. He wants a God who conforms to Forde's preconceived notions of what God should be, and not the God presented by the entirety of Holy Writ. God being holy, righteous, and just, besides being merciful, gracious, and loving, is not a fault or a wrong on the part of God, or an embarrassment to the believer. That is simply the way God is, as taught by Scripture. We are to hold to the whole counsel of God's Word, not parts of it. Forde's emphasizing some attributes or characteristics of God and his greatly downplaying of others results in a distorted picture of God, which does not benefit the church.

Thus, Forde does not have a proper balance between God's mercy, grace, and love on the one hand, and his holiness, righteousness, and justice on the other. This latter set of divine attributes cannot be left out of a discussion concerning man's sin, despite what Forde might prefer. God had to be "true to himself"²⁸; God had to be God. In his holiness, righteousness, and justice, God could not just ignore sin or unilaterally forgive the trespasses of mankind. Something had to be done to satisfy, to meet the demands of, to take away the offense to, those attributes of God. We must recognize this, and to use phraseology from Forde, "let God be God."²⁹

Forde attempts to bolster his teaching concerning God by using crass terms to portray the concept of penal substitutionary atonement. In so doing, he is denigrating that doctrine. For example, Forde does not speak of God as holy, righteous, and just but rather, as mentioned previously, as "a kind of celestial and eternal bookkeeper" and "a vindictive tyrant." It is not redemption but a matter of God being bought off. It is not justice, righteousness, and holiness that demands innocent blood but cruelty. According to Forde, the necessity of vicarious satisfaction through the shedding of blood does not lead to a recognition of God's justice, righteousness, and holiness but to a gruesome and forbidding picture of the deity.

Forde wonders how, if the judgment has been carried out, one can speak of mercy, since mercy is relenting from judgment. He does not mention that mercy is indeed associated with penal substitutionary atonement because God did not execute the judgment on us, but on his Son, Jesus Christ.

Forde asks incorrectly, "Why must God's justice be satisfied before he can be merciful?" Mercy is an attribute of God, with him from eternity, long before the crucifixion. Because of his mercy, and grace and love, God sent his Son to die for the world.

In his antagonism to penal substitutionary atonement, Forde questions why God should find the death of the Son so acceptable, and he even doubts that the

²⁸ This phraseology is borrowed from Forde, "The Work of Christ," 75.

²⁹ Forde, "The Work of Christ," 76.

suffering and death of Jesus were enough to pay for the sins of the whole world. What Forde chooses not to bring into the discussion is the teaching throughout Scripture that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, offered up the perfect, all-sufficient sacrifice, namely, himself. That is why his death is so acceptable. Christ could atone for all the transgressions of humanity because he was not only man, but also God. Because God was involved, redemption is complete and universal. Forde acknowledges that this is the teaching of classical Lutheranism, but apparently he rejects it. For example, he writes:

Can the suffering and death of one man atone for the sins of the whole world? . . . The usual answer is to say that because he is divine, his sufferings have infinite worth. But that is only a further theory which complicates rather than solves matters. For instance, can the divine suffer? According to the old dogmatics divinity and suffering were mutually exclusive. Or if it can, why is his *death* necessary? After all, if all his sufferings have infinite worth, one would think that the beating and the crown of thorns would have satisfied God!³⁰

Forde exhibits a weak or shallow Christology with his question concerning divinity and suffering, and thus his implying that Christ could not have atoned for the sin of the whole world. We do not divide the person of Christ. He was, is, and remains to all eternity God and man in one indivisible person. Both natures constitute only one person.

On the one hand, it is correct to say that God cannot suffer and die. On the other hand, since the divinity and humanity are one person in Christ, and that *person* suffered and died, it is correct to say that the Son of God suffered and died. Thus Christ's passive obedience has "infinite worth." Christ is our Redeemer according to both his human and his divine nature. The Formula of Concord, Solid Declaration (VIII 44–45; K-W, 624:44–45) states:

Likewise, Dr. Luther wrote in *On the Councils and the Church*, "We Christians should know that if God is not in the scale to give it weight, we, on our side, sink to the ground. I mean it this way: if it cannot be said that God died for us, but only a man, we are lost; but if God's death and a dead God lie in the balance, his side goes down and ours goes up like a light and empty scale . . . But he could not sit on the scale unless he had become a human being like us, so that it could be called God's dying, God's martyrdom, God's blood, and God's death. For God in his own nature cannot die; but now that God and man are united in one person, it is called God's death when the man dies who is one substance or one person with God." From this it is evident that it is incorrect to say or write that these expressions, "God suffered," "God died," are simply

³⁰ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 12.

praedicatio verbalis (that is, simply mere words), which are not in fact true. For our simple Christian creed demonstrates that the Son of God, who became human, suffered for us, died for us, and redeemed us with his blood.³¹

Regarding the necessity of the death of Christ, the message throughout the Old and New Testament is that the redemption of the world required the supreme, ultimate sacrifice: the death of the Substitute/Redeemer. Concerning the Old Testament, this message was made explicit with the animal offering of Abel (Gen 4:4; Heb 11:4) and continued to be proclaimed with the blood sacrifices of the patriarchs and of the Israelite cultic system formalized at Mount Sinai (see below). This was the message of the prophets: for example, Isaiah 52:13–53:12 (see below). The New Testament states, “For the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).³²

Forde wrongly objects that penal substitutionary atonement minimizes the importance of the resurrection and, in fact, really makes it unnecessary. The resurrection proved these three realities. First, Christ had paid fully the penalty for the sins of all people. Second, his self-sacrifice for the world’s trespasses totally satisfied the holiness, justice, and righteousness of God. Third, Jesus was the victor, and not sin, death, and the devil. These statements could not be proclaimed as the truth if Jesus had remained in the tomb. If he had, the opposite of those statements would be the reality (1 Cor 15:17–19).

Though Forde regards the idea of substitution and transference as absurd, that, nevertheless, is what both the Old Testament and New Testament teach. The next portion of this study will discuss representative Old Testament passages that put forth this teaching. What counts is not Forde’s opinion concerning propriety but God’s chosen method, which he makes known in Scripture.

IV. Relevant Old Testament Passages

The First Gospel Announcement

Forde asks in rhetorical fashion why God cannot just forgive, as we do. The implication is that this is indeed the way God operates. The king in the parable (Matt 18:23–34) forgave his servant the debt of millions of dollars without a cent being

³¹ See also FC Ep III 3 (K-W, 495:3); FC SD III 4 (K-W, 562:4), 55–56 (K-W, 572:55–56), 58 (K-W, 572–573:58). Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

³² See also AC (German) XXIV 25 (K-W, 70:25); AC (Latin) XXIV 24–27 (K-W, 71:24–27); Ap XII 140 (K-W, 211:140) and 147 (K-W, 212:147); XXIV 22–24 (K-W, 261–262:22–24) and 53 (K-W, 268:53).

repaid, and we forgive our debtors without demanding repayment. According to Forde, God acts in the same way. Therefore the concept of penal substitutionary atonement is unnecessary and should be discarded.

Forde makes the fundamental error of equating God's forgiving with our forgiving, of making them the same. But they are not. The point of comparison of the parable is that as the king forgave, so are we to forgive, with no strings attached. Many think that the king stands for God, but that is only partly correct. Yes, God forgives, and so we also are to forgive. Yes, the debt God has forgiven each one of us is huge, enormous; next to that, anything we forgive is minute. But the comparison is taken too far if one would say that God forgives us without any payment having been made. That is how *we* are to forgive, but again, do not make our forgiving the same as God's forgiving. Payment has been made to God for every single sin of the human race. Forgiveness by God means that he does not hold *us* accountable for the debt, he does not charge *us* with sin. But God has laid that debt on someone else, held that person accountable. Of course, that person is Jesus Christ, who has rendered full payment for our debt.

Behind every act and pronouncement of forgiveness by God in Scripture lies Genesis 3:15, the first gospel announcement. During the Old Testament era, God always forgave in view of the coming deliverer promised in that verse, who would be wounded, even unto death, to atone for the trespasses of Adam and Eve and their sinful descendants. During the New Testament era, God forgives because the promised Seed has come and carried out his redeeming work.

The Substitutionary Sacrifice

Genesis 22 clearly shows that substitutionary sacrifice was God's plan for humanity and acceptable to him. God put Abraham to the test by telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. Abraham, obedient to the Lord, was about to slay his son, but at the last moment the Angel of the Lord stopped him from doing this. Genesis 22:13 recounts how Abraham, looking up and seeing a ram caught by its horns in a thicket, took the ram and offered it up "instead of" (Hebrew תַּחֲתָיִם) his son. The ram was a substitute for Isaac, and this vicarious sacrifice foreshadowed both the Mosaic sacrificial legislation and the sacrifice of Jesus Christ instead of, in the place of, all people. Walter Kaiser comments concerning Genesis 22:

Thus the principle of vicariousness is brought into play: one life takes the place of another. Accordingly, Abraham is asked by God to offer life, the life that is dearest to him, his only son's. But in the provision of God, a ram caught in the thicket is interposed by the angel of the Lord, thus pointing out that the

substitution of one life for another is indeed acceptable to God and that is what relieves us from sacrificing average sinful life.³³

The Sacrificial System

The Old Testament sacrificial system revealed the Lord as holy, just, and righteous, but also as a God of grace, mercy, and love. These sacrifices showed God's plan and activity to deliver sinful humans from their transgressions.³⁴

The key verb associated with the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, which appears forty-nine times in the book of Leviticus alone, is the Hebrew קָפַר (occurring mainly in the Piel). In the context of sacrifice, it is usually translated as "make atonement" and has the basic sense "to be/stand between." A sacrifice "stood between" the holy God, who hates sin, and a sinful person or sinful persons. The guilty sinner deserved the penalty of death from the righteous, just God. However, that penalty instead figuratively fell on the sacrificial victim—whether a lamb, ram, goat, bull, dove, or pigeon—which was put to death *instead of*, as a *substitute for*, the sinner. The innocent, so to speak, died in place of the guilty (cf. 2 Cor 5:21). Symbolically, God's justice was carried out on the sacrifice and thereby satisfied, and thus the sinner was spared death and, in fact, had forgiveness. This basic concept of the sacrifice "being/standing between" with the corresponding result can be rendered by the English verb "atone (for)" and the related noun, "atonement." In Leviticus, the repeated clause, after a description of a sacrifice for a person or persons who had committed sin, is that, in this way, "the priest will atone for him/them, and he/they will be forgiven" (e.g., Lev 4:20, 26, 31; 5:10, 13; 19:22).³⁵

This institution of atoning sacrifice foreshadowed the substitutionary sacrificial work of Christ (1 John 2:2). The sacrificial directives, though formally recorded and presented in detail in the Mosaic law, had their roots in Genesis 3:15. In that passage, which presents the Seed of the woman being wounded in his victorious struggle with Satan, the principle of substitutionary sacrifice originates. The promised Savior would be wounded unto death, for that is the penalty required by the world's sin. Yet as a man will recover from a heel wound, so the deliverer would recover from his wound, that is, be raised to life again.³⁶

Features of the various animal sacrifices revealed God's holiness, righteousness, and justice; but also his grace, mercy, and love; and his work or activity on behalf of

³³ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 55–56.

³⁴ Walter A. Maier III, *1 Kings 1–11* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 638.

³⁵ Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 638.

³⁶ Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 639.

sinful people for their salvation. A cumulative listing of certain features highlights their christological aspects, how they foreshadowed the atoning work of the coming Savior.³⁷ First, an animal with a defect could not be offered (e.g., Lev 22:17–25; Deut 15:21; Mal 1:8). Only the perfect deliverer could bear the sins of others (1 Pet 1:19). Second, with the burnt, sin, and fellowship (or peace) offerings, the one bringing the animal for sacrifice was specifically directed to place his hand on the head of the animal. Following are representative verses (cf. Lev 8:18, 22):

Leviticus 1:4—“He will lay his hand on the head of the whole burnt offering and it will be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.”

Leviticus 3:2—“He shall lay his hand on the head of his offering and he shall slaughter it at the entrance of the tent of meeting.”

Leviticus 4:4—“He shall bring the bull to the entrance of the tent of meeting before Yahweh and he shall lay his hand on the head of the bull. Then he shall slaughter the bull before Yahweh.”

Leviticus 4:15—“The elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before Yahweh. Then one shall slaughter the bull before Yahweh.”

John Kleinig explains concerning Leviticus 1:4,

After the person who brought the animal for sacrifice had offered it [presented it] to the Lord, he laid his right hand on the head of the animal. He thereby presented it as his legal possession and part of his own household so that he and his family would gain the Lord’s acceptance by its acceptance. The person who laid his hand on the animal was the ritual beneficiary of the sacrifice.³⁸

Moreover, the hand-laying made it plain that the animal was offered up in the stead of the person, as a substitution.³⁹ Atonement was achieved through this substitutionary sacrifice. It could be suggested that the hand-laying also symbolized, at least with some of the sacrifices, the transferal of guilt from the person to the animal, the sacrifice. Christ, the innocent one, bore the sin of the world (Isa 53:6; 2 Cor 5:21).⁴⁰

³⁷ The following listing of five points is taken from Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 640–641. That listing in the commentary, in turn, is indebted to the summary provided by J. Barton Payne in his *The Theology of the Older Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962), 383–385.

³⁸ John W. Kleinig, *Leviticus* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2003), 63.

³⁹ Lev 1:4: “It will be accepted for him.” Payne, (*The Theology of the Older Testament*, 384), for example, has the same understanding: “In the ritual the offerer presented his sacrifice and laid his hands on its head . . . thus appointing it as a proxy for himself . . . to take the sinner’s place.”

⁴⁰ On the Day of Atonement, the high priest laid both of his hands on the head of the goat that was kept alive. The text makes clear that this was a symbolical transferal of guilt to the goat: “Aaron

Third, the animal was slaughtered or slain. Its death, again, was substitutionary, taking the place of the sinner's death. Christ suffered the penalty all people deserved and died in the stead of the human race. Fourth, the sacrificed life was committed to God; one way was burning the whole offering or parts of the animal on the altar (e.g., Lev 1:6–9). The author of Hebrews writes that Christ “offered himself without blemish to God” (Heb 9:14; cf. Eph 5:2). Fifth and finally, there might be some ceremonial indication of the fact that the people were atoned for, that they were cleansed of sin, and that God was able to and would have fellowship with them. This could be indicated by application of the sacrifice to the people by sprinkling sacrificial blood on them (Exod 24:8; cf. Isa 52:15; Heb 9:19–20; 1 Pet 1:1–2).⁴¹ This Old Testament sprinkling of blood is in the background when Jesus is proclaimed “the mediator of a new covenant,” whose “sprinkled blood” is superior (Heb 12:24). Moreover, Christians through drinking the wine in the Lord's Supper receive the blood of Christ—to use the words of Christ, “my blood of the covenant, which is being poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:27–28; cf. Heb 10:29; 13:20).

The principal element of the Old Testament sacrifices, in fact the essence of the sacrificial system, was the blood of the animals. The life of the sacrifice was given in place of that of the sinner or sinners. The chief sign or symbol of that substitutionary life was the blood of the animal, for the basic substance of life is blood. Leviticus 17:11 explains: “Because the life of the flesh is in the blood.” As the sacrificial animals symbolized the coming Lamb of God, so the blood of these animals symbolized the blood of the Messiah, which would be shed for the sins of the world (1 John 1:7; 2:2; 4:10; Rev 5:6–9). If the sacrifices were to be understood as portraying substitutionary atonement, the shedding of the blood and the slaying of the animal showed that this

shall lay both of his hands on the head of the living goat and he shall confess over it all the iniquities of the Children of Israel and all their transgressions with regard to all their sins and put them on the head of the goat. He shall send [it] by the hand of an appointed man into the wilderness” (Lev 16:21). This pictured the sins of the people being sent or taken away forever because of God's grace, mercy, and love, and because of the coming Messiah (Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 637; see also Kleinig, *Leviticus*, 347).

⁴¹ After the fellowship, or peace, offerings (the thank offering, the freewill offering, and the votive offering), which were not only (or even primarily) for the atonement of sin, was a communion meal that followed the sacrificial rite in which the meat of the offering was eaten (Lev 7:11–18; 19:5–8; 22:29–30; Ps 22:26–27 [ET 22:25–26]; cf. Exod 24:11). The eating of the sacrifice, Payne explains, served as a tangible proof of fellowship, as God and the person(s) “sat down together at the same table” (*The Theology of the Older Testament*, 384). God was the host, and the people were his guests. God, however, did not eat with them; rather, they ate the meal in his presence.

was specifically *penal* substitutionary atonement. A penalty had to be paid for atonement to take place, and that penalty was death.⁴²

Because of the continuing sinfulness of the people and the continuing accusation of the law, ritual atonement was constantly being made before Yahweh at the central sanctuary. The fire on the altar where sacrifices were offered to the Lord burned perpetually (Lev 6:6 [ET 6:13]). Each evening and morning, a lamb was sacrificed as a burnt offering to God on behalf of sinful Israel (Num 28:3–4, 8, 15), as an atonement for the guilt of the people. In addition, general sacrifices were offered up for Israel during the holy days and appointed festivals (see Num 28:9–29:39). So many animals sacrificed and so much blood shed each year! Yet fellowship with the Lord was made possible by this substitutionary sacrifice, the means God used to grant the people forgiveness.⁴³

Inside the central sanctuary, in the Most Holy Place, was the ark of the covenant. Over the ark and covering the Tables of the Law inside the ark was the כַּפֹּרֶת (*kappōreth*), “mercy seat” (KJV) or “atonement cover” (Exod 25:17–22; 26:34). The Hebrew noun *kappōreth* came from the verb כָּפַר. This cover, made of pure gold and having the same dimensions as the length and width of the ark (Exod 25:17; see also Exod 25:10), was located between the Tables of the Law (below in the ark) and the Lord, who dwelt above the ark, enthroned on the cherubim who overshadowed the atonement cover (Exod 25:18–22; Num 7:89; 2 Sam 6:2; 2 Kgs 19:14–15). The cover symbolized the atonement made by Christ, which “stands between” man’s sinfulness (as made known by the Tables of the Law) and the holy, righteous, just God. The LXX most often translates כַּפֹּרֶת, “atonement cover,” with ἱλαστήριον (see also Heb 9:5), the word Paul uses for Christ in Rom 3:25, where it is commonly translated as “propitiation,” but which has a fuller meaning (“a sacrifice/offering of atonement”). In the context of Rom 3:21–31, Paul is speaking of “the righteousness of God” which is “apart from the law” and which comes “through faith in Jesus Christ” (Rom 3:21–22), so that all believers are justified “by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24), “through faith in his blood” (Rom 3:25).⁴⁴

With an understanding of the sacrifices and the atonement cover over the ark of the covenant, there can be a full appreciation of what took place on the Day of Atonement, the most sacred day in the Hebrew religious calendar. Only on that day did the high priest, and only the high priest, enter the Most Holy Place where the ark was located to make ritual atonement for himself and all Israel, using the blood of sacrificed animals. Since the sacrificial blood carried into the Most Holy Place and

⁴² Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 641. See part III above regarding the necessity of the death of Christ.

⁴³ Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 641–642.

⁴⁴ Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 635.

the atonement cover on which it was sprinkled both symbolized the atonement that would be effected by the Messiah, this was the strongest assurance to the high priest, his household, and the whole community of Israel that they had forgiveness for all their sins. This was a powerful foreshadowing of what Christ would accomplish (Heb 9:11–12), who as the world's substitute paid the penalty for humanity's transgressions with his shed blood.⁴⁵

The Suffering Servant

Isaiah 52:13–53:12, the Fourth Servant Song and one of the greatest gospel passages in Scripture, has traditionally been interpreted as presenting the Messiah's penal substitutionary atonement. Certain verses in particular can be cited.

Isaiah 53:5—“But he was pierced through because of our transgressions, crushed because of our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace [leading to our peace] was on him, and by his stripes [or ‘blows’] we have been healed.”

Forde, though, could interpret this verse as saying that because we were legalistic sinners we killed Christ. He did not die as one bearing our sins and iniquities. Further, because God has created faith in us in the event of the cross and the empty tomb and made us new people, we have peace and spiritual healing.

Isaiah 53:8—“Because of the transgressions of my people he received blows.”

Isaiah 53:11—“And he bore their iniquities.”

Isaiah 53:12—“And he carried the sins of many.”

Again, however, Forde would not interpret these verses as proclaiming the Messiah as the world's substitute bearing the sins of the world and suffering the punishment for them. Rather, he would explain that we legalists because of our rejection of Christ treated him in a sinful way: we struck him, beat him, pierced him, and killed him.

Another verse for consideration is Isaiah 53:6, “All of us like sheep have gone astray; each to his own way we have turned; and Yahweh has caused to *pāga* ' him the iniquity of all of us.”

The verbal root involved has been put into English transliteration because different translations are possible. One rendering could be “Yahweh has caused to meet in him the iniquity of all of us.” Another possibility is “Yahweh has caused to fall on him the iniquity of all of us.” In response to both of these renderings, Forde would probably say that Yahweh sent Christ, who encountered hostile legalists who in their iniquity mistreated him and killed him. Christ did not die, however, because

⁴⁵ Maier, *1 Kings 1–11*, 637, 641.

he was the world's substitute, bearing the transgressions of all people and paying the penalty for them.

Of course, another way to interpret verse 6, and all of the other previously cited portions of Isaiah 53, would be the opposite of Forde's explanations. In other words, these verses are indeed proclaiming the Messiah as the substitute for mankind, bearing humanity's transgressions. Edward Young writes this about Isaiah 53:6:

The first half of the verse sets forth the reason for the servant's suffering, and the second asserts that the Lord Himself made the servant suffer by placing on him the iniquity that belonged to us all. The verb describing the latter act is in the causative [Hiphil] stem and means *to hit or strike violently* [additional possible translations]. The iniquity of which we are guilty does not come back to us to meet and strike us as we might rightly expect, but rather strikes him in our stead. . . . The guilt that belonged to us God caused to strike him, i.e. he as our substitute bore the punishment that the guilt of our sins required.⁴⁶

John Oswalt offers these comments on the same verse.

Sheep are prone to get lost. Like them, we humans seem not to be much aware of the consequences of our choices. And like them, we are frequently helpless in the consequences, especially the eternal ones. So what has happened? The consequences have fallen on the Servant. This is not accidental; the text says explicitly that God has made this happen. What a mystery! The conventional thought of the day said that if a person suffered it was because God was bringing his iniquity on him. . . . Here God has made this person suffer for the iniquity of "all of us."⁴⁷

This interpretation, that Isaiah 53:6, and, indeed, the other verses of the chapter that have been referenced, are proclaiming Christ's penal substitutionary atonement, is supported by Isaiah 53:10, which states: "But Yahweh was pleased to crush him [the Servant] utterly; though you [Yahweh] set forth his life as a guilt offering . . ." This last portion could also be translated "when his soul sets forth a guilt offering . . ."

The first part of verse 10 teaches that the Messiah suffered and died according to the will of Yahweh. The second part, with either translation, indicates that the Savior's life and death may be considered a guilt offering. The use of the phrase "guilt offering" brings to mind the Old Testament sacrificial system. A crucial concept associated with that institution, as already discussed, was vicarious atonement: the, so to speak, "innocent" animal bearing the guilt of a sinful human being and dying

⁴⁶ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Vol. 3: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 349–350.

⁴⁷ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40–66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 389.

in the stead of that person. The mention of “guilt offering” in Isaiah 53:10 provides the key for a proper understanding of the other phrases and verses in Isaiah 53: they, too, are portraying penal substitutionary atonement accomplished by Christ.

The Cry of Dereliction

Another Old Testament passage relevant to this discussion is Psalm 22:2 (verse 1 in the English Text), which states: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

My understanding of Psalm 22 sees the speaker as the preincarnate Christ, giving the Old Testament church a picture of his suffering and death on the cross. Others regard the speaker as David, but that what he reports about his own experience was in some way a foreshadowing of what Christ would have to endure. Be that as it may, there can be no doubt that Jesus made the psalm his own when he on the cross quoted this opening of Psalm 22. So the question arises, what does this verse teach us about the Messiah’s suffering? How are we to understand his being forsaken by God the Father? Forde, who holds that Christ *did not* suffer *for* our sins, has this explanation: “The cross is the price of mercy. It is not paid to God; however it is paid *by* God. God gave his divine Son, abandoned him to death for us.”⁴⁸ Forde also wrote, “He [Christ] suffers the total and ultimately meaningless destruction that is death. In the end he cries, ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ and enters the dark nowhere of death.”⁴⁹

This study respectfully disagrees with Forde. Christ’s death was not meaningless; no further comment is necessary. But it can also be said that the Father did not abandon Jesus to death, and that Christ did not enter “the dark nowhere of death.” Jesus earlier had promised the repentant thief, “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Right before he died, Jesus cried out, “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). The Father surely did receive Christ’s spirit, which entered paradise along with the spirit of the thief, as Christ had foretold.

If one does not go along with Forde’s explanation, how then should one understand Christ’s cry of dereliction? In this way: Jesus, who took our sins upon himself, was suffering the agonies of hell. Bearing our trespasses, he was struck by God with their full punishment. The penalty for our trespasses was everlasting damnation, nothing short of that. The main aspect of hell is being totally, eternally abandoned by God. God had completely withdrawn from the crucified Christ his grace, mercy, and love; Jesus felt only God’s terrible wrath. Christ, both man and the infinite God, endured everlasting damnation for everyone in order to redeem us and

⁴⁸ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” 74.

⁴⁹ Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 37.

all people, pay the full price demanded by God's holiness, righteousness, and justice. Christ asked "Why?" in his state of humiliation, when he as a man did not use continually or fully the attributes that belonged to him as God, specifically in this case, his omniscience. Thus in his extreme misery, he forgot.

Derek Kidner writes, "Our Lord's cry of dereliction (quoting this verse in His native Aramaic) told, it would seem, of an objective reality, namely the punitive separation He accepted in our place, 'having become a curse for us' (Gal. 3:13)."⁵⁰ Herbert Leupold comments: "Surely, God had forsaken Him who utters this complaint, but the reason was that He had made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin (II Cor. 5:21)."⁵¹

The Old Testament and the Justification of the Believer before God

The final set of Old Testament passages relate to the justification of the believer before God. First, a brief review of Forde's position is necessary. Once again, he asserts that God unilaterally forgives. In addition, Forde holds that God creates faith in us, and in this way we are new people. God is satisfied when we believe and trust in him as the God who has and shows mercy. Such faith fulfills the law and makes us pleasing to God.

From what I have seen in his writings, Forde, with regard to the matter of salvation, does not write about, or at least he greatly downplays, the idea of the believer receiving something from God. In contrast, traditional Lutheranism, as set forth in the Book of Concord, emphasizes that the believer through faith receives an alien righteousness, that is, the obedience-wrought righteousness of Christ, or to put it another way, that which Christ has acquired with his passive and active obedience.⁵² For Forde, however, the imputation of the passive righteousness is replaced by the divine act of forgiveness by fiat—that is, forgiveness without a payment for sin.⁵³ Instead of the reckoning of the active righteousness of Christ through faith, Forde sets forth the positive righteousness of the new being of faith.⁵⁴ So for Forde, as Jack Kilcrease has observed, the basis of one's righteousness before God is not outside of one's self; rather, one becomes righteous in oneself through faith.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 106.

⁵¹ Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1959), 197.

⁵² See, for example, Ap XXI 19 (K-W, 240:19); XXIV 12 (K-W, 259:12); FC Ep III 4 (K-W, 495:4); FC SD III 4 (K-W, 562–563:4), 9–10 (K-W, 563–564:9–10), 13–17 (K-W, 564–565:13–17), 23 (K-W, 566:23), 25 (K-W, 566:25), 56 (K-W, 572:56), 58 (K-W, 572–573:58).

⁵³ Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of Atonement*, 155.

⁵⁴ Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of Atonement*, 155.

⁵⁵ Kilcrease, *The Doctrine of Atonement*, 149, 158.

This study finds Forde's position unacceptable on the basis of Scripture and the Confessions. Believers do receive, or are given, something through faith; namely, what Christ won for them and all people as the world's *substitute*. This is the righteousness he acquired by perfectly keeping all of God's commandments (active obedience), and by paying totally the penalty that the world's transgressions deserved with his suffering and death (passive obedience). This righteousness covers the believer like a set of brand-new clothes. The result is that God regards the believer, though he is a sinner, as righteous, for Jesus' sake.

The first Old Testament passage to be examined that relates to the doctrine of justification by God's grace through faith in Christ is Isaiah 61:10.

I will indeed rejoice in Yahweh, my soul will exult in my God, because he has clothed me with garments of salvation, he has wrapped me with a robe of righteousness, like the bridegroom who priests⁵⁶ it with a turban, and like the bride who adorns herself with her jewelry.

The speaker in the verse represents all believers. The terms "salvation" and "righteousness" are basically equivalent, for the essence of salvation is being right with God. Verse 10 is speaking of God clothing the believer with the Messiah's active and passive obedience. Concerning this verse, Luther writes, "The church is clothed for salvation, conquering world and Satan. My tunic is victory. This is the church's most beautiful adornment, since by faith we overcome and are justified."⁵⁷ Reed Lessing observes about verse 10:

Now, speaking for Zion, Isaiah responds with praise to Yahweh for having cloaked his people with righteousness. Justification is not an improvement, an alteration, a change of heart, or a cleaning up of the old Adam. It is an imputed righteous standing, received by faith, for Christ's sake (Is 53:11; 54:17; Rom 3:24–30; Gal 3:8–14). . . . These garments of salvation are the same clothes John calls white robes washed in the blood of the Lamb (Rev 7:14).⁵⁸

The last two phrases of verse 10 about the bridegroom and the bride bring out the beauty and glory of the garments of salvation, of the robe of righteousness, using

⁵⁶ This is a very literal translation of the verb, taken from BDB, 464. Another rendering in English could be "plays the priest." The idea is that the bridegroom "decks himself with a splendid turban such as the priests wore" (BDB, 464).

⁵⁷ Martin Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (1527): vol. 17, 341–342, in *Luther's Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–).

⁵⁸ R. Reed Lessing, *Isaiah 56–66* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2014), 293.

wedding imagery. Dealing just with the last phrase, a woman is never more glorious or beautiful in appearance than on her wedding day. Also, her bridal dress and jewelry are things in which she takes great pride. So, too, spiritual Zion takes pride, in a godly sense, in its heavenly robe of righteousness.⁵⁹ As the hymn says, “Jesus, Thy blood and righteousness my beauty are, my glorious dress.”⁶⁰

The second Old Testament passage, which will be briefly reviewed, is Zechariah 3:4–5. This passage is similar to Isaiah 61:10 in that it portrays the believer’s reception of the alien righteousness of Christ as being covered with new, clean clothing. In Zechariah 3, Satan was making accusation against the high priest Joshua to the Lord, but the Lord acted on behalf of Joshua. The high priest, clothed with filthy garments, was standing before the divine Angel. The text of Zechariah 3:4–5 continues as follows:

And he [the divine Angel] answered and said to those standing before him, “Remove the filthy garments from him [Joshua].” And he [the divine Angel] said to him [Joshua], “See, I have caused to pass from you your iniquity and have clothed⁶¹ you with splendid robes.” And I said, “Let them place a clean turban on his head.” So they placed the clean turban on his head and they clothed him with garments, and the Angel of Yahweh was standing there.

The message is that Joshua, wearing the new clothing, stands guiltless before the Lord. The passage presents the Angel of the Lord as the one responsible for Joshua being clothed with the clean, splendid robes. This very Angel would become man and obtain the garments of salvation with his substitutionary holy life and innocent suffering and death. Leupold describes the action of verses 4 and 5 as “symbolical of the forgiveness of sins.”

As completely as a man whose filthy garments disfigure him is cleansed by their removal, so completely does God’s pardon remove the guilt of sin. As the bestowing of garments of beauty makes a man presentable, so does the garment of imputed righteousness make him worthy to appear before God and man, only, however, by virtue of the “rich apparel” that God has granted him.⁶²

⁵⁹ Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Vol. 3*, 466.

⁶⁰ *LSB* 563:1. *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

⁶¹ The Hebrew verb is an infinitive absolute. According to *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2nd ed., ed. E. Kautzsch, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon, 1910), Section 113z, the infinitive absolute can serve “as the continuation of a preceding finite verb [in Zech 3:4, the preceding finite verb is ‘I have caused to pass’]. In the later books especially it often happens that in a succession of several acts only the first (or sometimes more) of the verbs is inflected, while the second (or third, &c.) is added simply in the infinitive absolute.” The divine Angel saying here in verse 4 that “I have clothed you with splendid robes” is anticipatory of Joshua in verse 5 being clothed with clean garments.

⁶² Herbert C. Leupold, *Exposition of Zechariah* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 70.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, while Forde confesses Jesus Christ as Savior, his position regarding salvation should not gain acceptance within The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Based on his selective reading of Scripture and novel interpretation of passages, his teaching concerning the saving work of Christ and justification varies too widely from what is presented by the entirety of God’s Word and the Book of Concord. Despite Forde’s attacks, the doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement still stands, and must ever be taught and preached, to the glory of God, in faithfulness to Scripture, and for the everlasting spiritual welfare of many people.