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Is Law Intrinsic to God's Essence?

David P. Scaer

Concern has been brewing in some Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS) circles over antinomianism. Antinomianism is a term broad enough to embrace libertinism, the idea that Christians can do whatever they want. Antinomianism questions the function of the law in Christian life, a locus in dogmatics known as sanctification and discussed in the Formula of Concord, article VI, under the heading “The Third Use of the Law.” For the record, there is only one moral law with three functions, not three laws.¹ To say it another way, it is one law with three appearances, depending on the situation.² Those questioning the third use hold that the law is addressed to Christians as sinners but has no place in their life of faith. Law is seen as one huge negative, an overwhelming “No,” and like an autoimmune disorder, law eventually turns on itself to self-destruct; it does not belong to God's essence and is not eternal.

The New “Theology of the Cross” and the Third Use of the Law

Deniers of the law's third use have arrogated to themselves the well-known phrase “the theology of the cross,”³ which actually means that those who become Christians should expect to suffer with and for Christ. While this phrase may be part of the paradigm of the new definition of the law, its striking feature is that the law has no function for faith. Those not acquainted with this proposal (denying the law's

¹ Thus, the three uses of the law are uses of the *one moral law*. The Lutheran Confessions (Ap IV [II] 6, in Theodore G. Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959], 108, hereafter Tappert) and the Lutheran dogmatic tradition also recognize three kinds of *Old Testament law*: moral, ceremonial, and civil. See Luther's preface to the Old Testament (1523), vol. 445, pp. 243–244, 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, 1957–1986); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2009–), hereafter AE.

² This suggestion is offered by Bernd Wannewetsch of Basel, Switzerland. See my discussion of this in *Law and Gospel and the Means of Grace*, ed. John R. Stephenson (St. Louis: The Luther Academy, 2008), 62–69.

³ See the classic book, Gerhard O. Forde, *On Being a Theologian of the Cross: Reflections on Luther's Heidelberg Disputation, 1518* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 108–109: “The temptation is always to fall back on the law, either in its original sense or perhaps in some new sense like a ‘third use.’ But the theologian of the cross knows that there is no way back.”

David P. Scaer is the David P. Scaer Professor of Biblical and Systematic Theology and Chairman of the Department of Systematic Theology at Concordia Theological Seminary, Fort Wayne, Indiana.

third use under the moniker “theology of the cross”) may easily think that it is Luther’s theology. It is not, and it is this issue that we want to address. To avoid confusing this new proposal with what Luther taught, we will refer to the new proposal with quotation marks as the new “theology of the cross.”

Those who identify with the new “theology of the cross” also march under a banner inscribed with *lex semper accusat* (“the law always accuses”), words excised from the Apology.⁴ Law as accusation exhausts its function; for the new “theology of the cross,” function determines the Law’s essence. Put another way, it argues back from the effect to the cause. Since the law unveils sin, in its essence, it accuses.

While the LCMS accepts the entire Book of Concord, some Lutheran churches do not accept the Formula, where the law’s third use is defined. Thus, one might argue that its denial is of little consequence, that is, until one realizes that the law, with no function for the life of faith of believers, also has no role in understanding God, with the result that Christ’s sufferings and death cannot be seen as an atonement for sin and for the penalties that the law imposes. Ironically, the Apology, from which *lex semper accusat* is taken, provides this excellent description of what came to be called the third use. “We do not overthrow the law, Paul says (Rom. 3:31), but uphold it; for when we have received the Holy Spirit by faith, the keeping of the law necessarily follows, by which love, patience, chastity, and other fruits of the Spirit gradually increase.”⁵ Luther scholar Timothy J. Wengert goes as far as speaking of “the ‘notorious’ third use of the law” among Lutherans.⁶

Christ as the “End of the Law”

Steven Paulson’s denial of the third use relies on an idiosyncratic and false interpretation of Romans 10:4, “Christ is the end of the law”⁷ that is, that Christ terminates the law.⁸ Yet, Robert Jewett in the Hermenia commentary series of

⁴ Ap IV (III) 46, 164 (= Ap IV 167, 285, Tappert, 130, 150); XII (V) 88 (Tappert, 195); cf. Ap IV (III) 136 (= Ap IV 257, Tappert, 144); XII (V) 34 (Tappert, 186), where the law “only” accuses in certain situations.

⁵ Ap XX 15 (Tappert, 229).

⁶ For a lengthy argument against the third use, see Timothy J. Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 37–39.

⁷ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (ESV), copyright © 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

⁸ Steven D. Paulson and Nicholas Hopman, “Christ, the Hated God,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2016): 1–27, here at 1, 6. Paulson places this interpretation in the introduction to his *Lutheran Theology* and claims it as Luther’s position. “For Luther the break-through of the gospel is that where Christ is preached as crucified for our sins and sake, the law comes to an end. That is the central point of Paul’s letter to the Romans (10:4): ‘Christ is the end of the law’ ” (Steven D. Paulson, *Lutheran Theology* [London: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2011], 4).

Fortress Press says that this passage “should not be understood in this context as cessation and termination” but “as ‘fulfillment’ or ‘goal,’ which means that the teleological perspective remains primary in this verse.”⁹ It “has a directional sense that explains how Christ is the goal of the law.”¹⁰ It does not refer to the law’s cessation as proposed by the late and still influential Luther Seminary professor Gerhard O. Forde and by his disciples Timothy Wengert, James Nestingen,¹¹ Steven Paulson, and, more recently, Nicholas Hopman.¹² In accusing sinners, the law has outlived its function and so, for faith, has no purpose.¹³ Paulson reinforces his untenable interpretation of Romans 10:4 as proof for the law’s extinction by advising readers to consult Paul before preaching on the Gospels, thus encouraging preachers to read the Gospels not on their own terms but through the lens of his misunderstanding of Paul’s words “the end of the law.”¹⁴ But is the law inherently accusatory, and need we consult Paul to understand Jesus?

The Third Use of the Eternal Law

In Eden, Adam’s moral nature corresponded to the law implanted in creation. It was without accusation. The command not to eat of the tree was not a legal prescription but a test of Adam’s faith and love for God. By disregarding God’s

⁹ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia, ed. Eldon Jay Epp (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), 619.

¹⁰ Jewett, *Romans*, 619–620.

¹¹ James Nestingen, “Speaking of the End to the Law,” in *The Necessary Distinction: A Continuing Conversation on Law and Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 169–184. Nestingen acknowledges Forde’s influence (175) and speaks of the termination of the law (170).

¹² Paulson and Hopman, “Christ, the Hated God,” 1–27; Nicholas Hopman, “The Heidelberg Disputation; April 26, 1518,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 31, no. 4 (2017): 436–444; Steven D. Paulson and Nicholas Hopman, “Atonement,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions*, ed. Timothy J. Wengert, et al. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 48–51.

¹³ Paulson, “Christ, the Hated God,” 1. Also cited in support of the view that law has come to end is John 1:17, “The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.” At face value, it could be taken to contrast the law with the gospel, but William C. Weinrich, *John 1:1–7:1*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2015), 119, 187–191, points out that it contrasts the written revelation of Torah to the superior one in God’s incarnation in Jesus Christ. See also Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 78–79. Simply put, John 1:17 is not a law and gospel passage. Ironically, Gerhard Forde, on whom Paulson is dependent, correctly uses the Greek word τέλος when he says, “The Word and sacraments are themselves the end (*telos*), the purpose of it all” (*Theology Is for Proclamation* [Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990], 35). The public Office of the Ministry is also described as the *telos* of all offices (181). In both places, Forde uses the word *telos* in the proper sense of purpose and completion and not as annihilation, as Paulson does.

¹⁴ Paulson, “Christ, the Hated God,” 9. “So true preaching is learned from Paul before one ventures into the lengthy gospels without being tempted with displacement, which is original sin’s repeated failure in telling the story of Jesus Christ.”

command, he gave birth to the law's second use; but in the next life, the law's third use will be its chief and only use. We will do the things God wants from our hearts, without fear of accusation. When the Formula states that the law reminds Christians that their good works are still impure (FC SD VI 20–21), the law's third use can soon be seen by some as the flip side of the second use. Piotr Malysz notes that "the third use of the Law is frequently little more than the second without a 'sting,' with salvation serving as a catalyst."¹⁵ In this fallen world, accusation is the law's chief function, but this does not translate into being its original, final, or now its only purpose. Law does not come to an end by self-destruction, as proposed by Forde and his disciples. As confessed in the Formula of Concord (FC SD II 50), *lex est aeterna* ("the law is eternal").

When the mantra of *lex semper accusat* is taken out of its context in the Apology, it takes on the status of a theological trump card, denying any function to the law but accusation. Seeing law as only accusation disqualifies it as a guide of Christian behavior. Hence, no third use of the law is left. Christians will never be perfect in this life, and the law reminds them that even their good works are impure (FC SD VI 21), but in Christ they are already free from the law's accusations. This is what *simul iustus et peccator* is all about. The law's third use is nothing other than the Ten Commandments christologically fulfilled, informed, and defined. Believers do Christ's works, which God through his Spirit works in them (Phil 2:13). Works of the law's third use are trinitarian through and through. Believers' good works are not only patterned after what Christ did, but are also what Christ does in them. Good works are those of the third use and have their origin in God's trinitarian existence, in which each divine person loves the other with a perfect love (John 5:20). This love manifests perfectly in God offering up Christ as a sacrifice to satisfy the law's demands and suffer its accusations (John 3:16). Trinitarian love that expresses itself in Christ's life and atoning death—his active and passive obedience—comes to further expression in believers who live and die for others (John 15:12–13, 17; 1 John 4:7). That's the third use in a nutshell.

Our response to the misunderstanding of *lex semper accusat* is this: law is intrinsic to God's essence and is reflected in everything he does. Law exists eternally in God and is the first or original revelation of God. Law is what God is, which is to say that goodness and love is what God is. The moral law is not an arbitrary morality or system of ethics imposed on sinners by a capricious deity. Since without the law, the gospel cannot be understood or believed, law's primacy within God is affirmed by the gospel and not abolished or negated. By Christ fulfilling the law, he

¹⁵ Piotr J. Malysz, "The Third Use of the Law in Light of Creation and the Fall," in *The Law in Holy Scripture*, ed. Charles A. Gieschen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2004), 215.

does not terminate it, as proposed by the new “theology of the cross,” but affirms it. Law and gospel are both perfect revelations of God but in different ways. Law is what God is eternally in himself and gospel is his gracious response to our disregard of who and what God is. Jesus summed up the law in the commands to love God and the neighbor (Matt 22:37–39). This love originates in the trinitarian relationship in which each divine person loves the other with a perfect love, out of which relationship emerges the command to love the neighbor (John 17:26; 1 John 4:7–21). Love of the neighbor is descriptive of the God who shows his love to us as his neighbors. By creating us and then by rescuing us from our sin, he loved us with an undeserved love. Before asking us to love him and our neighbors, God fulfills his own command to love. Luther’s explanation of the first commandment—that we should fear, love, and trust in him above all things—is a call to faith and assumes faith.¹⁶ Each of the Ten Commandments is addressed not to unbelievers but to believers who, in spite of the constant danger of falling into sin, are to live their lives in doing the good works that Christ did. By each of the last nine commandments, which Luther begins explaining by saying, “We should fear and love God,” faith is assumed and becomes the source of the good works required of believers. These are the works of the law’s third use.

Systematizing theology into separate *loci* can lead to thinking that one doctrine can be separated from another, thus resulting in disconnected abstract truths. Such a situation then allows the law’s third use to be detached from the doctrines of Christ and God, as done by the new “theologians of the cross.” The Scriptures are not written in this atomistic way, but each doctrine is presented in, with, and under all the others. What Jesus taught was an extension of who he was and what he did. For example, Christ’s blood offered to the Father as a sacrifice is the same blood given in the Sacrament (Matt 26:28). To take this one step further, the sacrificial character of Christ’s death comes to expression in Christians living and dying for others, as Jesus proposed to James and John (Matt 20:26–28). That is the third use of the law. Christ’s humiliation—not using his deity for his own benefit—reaches out into the lives of believers, who are to regard others as superior to themselves (Phil 2:1–11). By sacrificing himself to the Father, Christ assumes the law’s accusations to himself and transforms the law’s second use into the third use, which is nothing other than the extension of his life (Christology) into the lives of believers. The Samaritan in Luke’s parable is a description first of Christ and then of believers (Luke 10:30–37). Martyrdom is the perfect expression of the law’s third

¹⁶ See also the Large Catechism: “The purpose of this commandment, therefore, is to require true faith and confidence in God” (LC I 4; Tappert, 365).

use. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13).

The Eternal Law and the Atonement

“Soft antinomianism,” a recently coined term associated with the new “theology of the cross,” comes across as benign, but any denial of the third use, small or catastrophic, is symptomatic of a structural flaw in how God, Christ, and the atonement are understood and corrupts the entire theological enterprise. Foundational for this theological restructuring is the denial of the *lex aeterna*. Since for Forde, Paulson, and Nestingen, law is defined by its accusatory function and does not belong to God’s essence, it is not eternal and will pass away.¹⁷ Still left to be answered is where or with whom the law originated. In “The Problem of Freedom Today and the Third Use of the Law,” Stephen Hultgren explains how J. C. K. von Hofmann (1810–1877) answers this question in his *Heilsgeschichte* theology. Hofmann articulated essential elements appearing one century later in the new “theology of the cross,” such as understanding Christ’s death as an expression of God’s love for the world and not as propitiation.¹⁸ For Hofmann,

The Law is an interim measure . . . of God’s overall plan to realize his love for humanity. In a certain sense, the Law is only a consequence of humanity’s fall into sin and of God’s wrath. God’s wrath is not directed at human failure objectively to live up to God’s standard as revealed in the Law. Rather, His wrath was due to the fact the humanity has turned away from him.¹⁹

For Hofmann, as for Forde and the new “theologians of the cross” after him, law is God’s response to humanity’s breaking union with him. Since law is not intrinsic to God’s essence, Christ’s death is no longer seen as a sacrifice for offenses against the law.²⁰ In Hofmann’s scheme (adopted by Forde), atonement no longer takes place between the Father and the Son but between God and believers when they hear God’s word of forgiveness in the preaching. Forde calls this “a reversal in direction,” so that “atonement occurs when God succeeds in getting

¹⁷ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 224. “The law remains eternally, but it is not an eternal law in the sense of ruling or making any demands of Christians—nor is it the very mind of God itself.” In this explanation of the Greek word *τέλος*, Nestingen understands fulfillment of the law as termination (“Speaking of the End to the Law,” 170).

¹⁸ Stephen Hultgren, “The Problem of Freedom Today and the Third Use of the Law,” in *The Necessary Distinction*, 197–199.

¹⁹ Hultgren, “The Problem of Freedom Today and the Third Use of the Law,” 199.

²⁰ Gerhard O. Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 2, ed. Robert Jenson and Carl Braaten (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 47–49; Hultgren, “The Problem of Freedom Today and the Third Use of the Law,” 199.

through to us who live under wrath and law.”²¹ What Forde confidently labels “Luther’s Theology of the Cross” is not actually a doctrine of the atonement but a malformed theory of justification posing as a doctrine of atonement.²² Inherent in Hofmann’s redefinition of atonement is a particular form of dispensationalism—the belief, still popular among some Evangelicals, that God works differently in different periods of time (called “dispensations”). For Hofmann, law has a function only until the gospel comes. In the new “theology of the cross,” when faith is created, the law has outlived its purpose.

The inclusion of the law’s third use in Formula of Concord VI is regarded as a Calvinist intrusion into Lutheran theology, which was first introduced by Melancthon in 1534. Not explained is how Melancthon provided the battle cry *lex semper accusat* in the Apology in 1531 and then only three years later was considered responsible for introducing the third use of the law into Lutheran theology.²³ Arguments advancing the new “theology of the cross” are just as likely to reference Luther as they do the Scriptures, perhaps even more so. It presents itself at least as a culturally Lutheran Reformation theology. During the Reformation quinquennial, the new “theology of the cross” garnered additional support; it is claimed to represent what Luther actually believed.²⁴

Although the new “theology of the cross” cannot be equated with Gustaf Aulén’s *Christus Victor* theory,²⁵ which was popular in the last century, it has taken over its terms in describing Christ’s death as a conflict with demonic forces. Yet, there is an important difference: for the new “theology of the cross,” the conflict is not a cosmic, interstellar one, as it was for the Gnostics and Manicheans, but an internal existential conflict that Christians experience. In letting themselves be justified by God, believers are freed from having to justify themselves.²⁶ Forde understands law not as *lex aeterna* but as “a generalized existential dread expe-

²¹ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2:47.

²² Forde’s restructuring of the doctrine of atonement into a malformed doctrine of justification has been adopted by Wengert, Nestingen, Paulson, and Hopman and is promoted in *Lutheran Quarterly* and now in the *Concordia Journal*. See Nestingen, “Speaking of the End to the Law,” 175; Joel P. Meyer, “Justification as the Ground and Goal of the Christian Life in Luther’s Catechisms,” *Concordia Journal* 43, no. 4 (2017): 43–57.

²³ Wengert, *Reading the Bible with Martin Luther*, 38.

²⁴ Paulson makes this clear in his introduction to *Lutheran Theology*, 4. (See note 8, above.)

²⁵ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

²⁶ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2:36–41. Paulson follows Forde in seeing the atonement existentially as taking place within the believer and not as a cosmic battle, which he describes as Manichaeism (Steven Paulson, “A Royal Ass,” in *The Necessary Distinction*, 270–272). See also Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 131–133. In that theology, atonement affects a change in us, not in God.

rienced by human beings in the old, evil age.”²⁷ According to his scheme, he cannot define the gospel as a fulfillment of the law, since this would make the gospel subservient to the law. This view, which is unacceptable in his sight, is found in Lutheran Orthodoxy, in which the doctrine of the law was essential for its doctrine of Christ’s substitutionary atonement. Justice and mercy cannot be given equal standing in God. This is reason enough for Forde to reject the Lutheran Orthodox view of the atonement, which requires that God’s justice and mercy be balanced into one act.²⁸

Existentialism and the New “Theology of the Cross”

The new “theology of the cross” is a theology of justification and neoorthodoxy is a theology of revelation. In spite of their differences, one can hardly fail to recognize similarities. Both focus on the oral word, in other words, preaching as a present reality that is not grounded on past events. Historical critique of the biblical reports does not play a prominent part. Both proposals are based on existentialism.²⁹ The title of Forde’s book *The Preached God: Proclamation in Word and Sacrament* speaks volumes.

The *extra nos* element that is so essential to the Lutheran orthodox doctrine of reconciliation and justification—that these take place outside of us—is neglected or explicitly denied by the new “theology of the cross.” Reconciliation and justification are placed instead in the preached word. Objectivity is found in the word or the promise and not in any act or apart from the faith created by the word. In this scheme, there is no place for what is called “objective justification” in Lutheran dogmatics—that, in raising Jesus from the dead, God forgave the sins of the entire world. Justification in the new “theology of the cross” is no more than a subjective, existential experience taking place in a person when he responds to the gospel or the promise. Word or proclamation is the ultimate reality behind or under which there is no external substructure either in history or in God. Absolution is the ultimate form of the word addressed to the believer. Absolution is even defined by Nestingen as the atonement: “[Christ] enters the conscience through the absolution, through the proclaimed Word and the administered Sacrament to effect

²⁷ Jack D. Kilcrease, “Gerhard Forde’s Doctrine of the Law: A Confessional Lutheran Critique,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 75, nos. 1–2 (2011): 153. See also Scott Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2001), 128.

²⁸ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2:25. “Christ suffers the punishment due us under divine wrath. Punishment and satisfaction are more less equated.”

²⁹ Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 35. “The concrete moment of proclamation is the doing of the mighty act of God in the living present. It is not a recital of past acts, but the doing of the act itself now.”

the forgiveness of sin. This is the true substitutionary atonement, happening here and now.”³⁰ There is good reason to challenge Nestingen’s claim that this is Luther’s view.³¹

In a dictionary entry coauthored with Hopman, Paulson denies that the atonement is Christ offering himself to God,³² saying, “Therefore righteousness does not win the victory over sin in Christ’s obedient death on the cross by making a payment for sin to the law (as in the [Lutheran] orthodox system). Instead, righteousness defeats sin in Christ’s resurrection.”³³ Paulson’s view is at odds with Romans 4:25: “[Jesus] was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification.”³⁴ Here, justification is a result of the atonement and not a substitute for it. Paulson also sets forth his denial of the atonement in his *Lutheran Theology*³⁵ and in *The Necessary Distinction*.³⁶ Again, in the new “theology of the cross,” atonement is no longer seen as God sacrificing Christ so that he can be righteous in forgiving sinners.³⁷ This position is seen by Paulson as a defect in Lutheran orthodoxy. For him, law is alien to God’s essence, that is, alien to who he is and hence not eternal. Thus, there is no necessity for Christ—or, for that matter, anyone else—to appease God’s wrath. In coming to terms with why Christ died, placating divine wrath is taken off the table. Removed from the essence of God is the moral component of law. Atonement is no longer a struggle within God in which his love satisfies his avenging justice so that he can justify the sinner, but it is replaced by a struggle that the Christian experiences within himself. This internal struggle is passed off as the atonement. Consider what Paulson says: “Until the law is satisfied—that is, until the sinner dies—there simply will be no atonement and reconciliation with God.”³⁸ Atonement now “is Christ who gives himself to his opponents in the form of a simple

³⁰ Nestingen, “Speaking of the End to the Law,” 174.

³¹ Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*, trans. Edwin H. Robertson (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1986), 280–286. See also 381, “There, Luther describes Christ, who is delivered up to the wrath of the Father, bearing the punishment deserved by sinful humanity and reconciling God and humankind.”

³² Paulson and Hopman, “Atonement,” 48–51.

³³ Paulson and Hopman, “Atonement,” 51. See also Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2:25.

³⁴ My translation.

³⁵ Paulson’s *Lutheran Theology* is listed by *Logia* as one of the twenty-five best books in the last twenty-five years (John T. Pless, “Twenty-Five Titles in Twenty-Fives Years,” *Logia* 26, no. 1 [2018]: 9).

³⁶ Paulson, “A Royal Ass,” 265–284. Cf. Nestingen, “Speaking of the End to the Law,” 169–184.

³⁷ Paulson and Hopman, “Atonement,” 51: “Atonement is not a legal transaction between the Father and the Son. Instead, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (who preaches and believes the good news) work together outside the law in mercy.”

³⁸ Paulson and Hopman, “Atonement,” 51.

promise.”³⁹ The weight of God’s action is switched from the atonement that Christ offered

at Golgotha to the moment of faith that believes the word. This position is at odds with that of the LCMS’s premier theologian Francis Pieper, who wrote that “the objective reconciliation or objective justification [is] of the whole world.”⁴⁰ Unless this is preached, faith cannot be created. But the new “theology of the cross” places both the atonement and reconciliation in the moment of faith, and together they define justification.

In setting forth their doctrine of atonement, Forde and Paulson make use of Luther’s “happy exchange” language, in which Christ and the believer each take the place of the other. As we share in his blessedness, he shares in our misery. But they give a different twist to Luther’s “happy exchange” description of the atonement. According to them, Christ shares in our misery, but does not take our place under God’s wrath. If this were the case, so it is argued, law would become superior to God. According to Forde and Paulson, this cannot be allowed, because law is not eternal and does not belong to who God is. Christ shares in our sin, not by imputation but by becoming one with us.

Digression: Objective Justification

Not long after the LCMS was formed, it had to address the denial of objective or universal justification first with the Ohio Synod and then with the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Synod, both forerunners of the ALC and now the ELCA. In both cases, fellowship was disrupted. Rather than seeing justification first as an act of God in forgiving the world of sin in Christ’s resurrection (objective justification), it was seen as the personal experience that took place only when a person heard and believed the gospel (subjective justification). Faith was made a cause of justification. Justification was to be understood as subjectively happening in the faith of the believer and not objectively in God forgiving the world in Christ. Denial of objective justification surfaced again in 1965 at Concordia Theological Seminary and was resolved when it was rejected by the faculty in the 1980s after the seminary moved to Fort Wayne. This denial of objective justification in the LCMS did not deny the vicarious satisfaction, as is now done in the new “theology of the cross”; however, both positions placed the deciding moment in faith and not in what God accomplished in Jesus.

³⁹ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 5.

⁴⁰ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1953), 2:402.

**Ramifications of Denying Objective Justification
in the New "Theology of the Cross"**

Paulson defines Christ's atonement as his identifying with sinners. By placing himself under the law's accusations, Christ comes to see himself as a sinner and even the original sinner.⁴¹ This identification of Christ with sinners is not substitutionary or vicarious in the sense that by placing himself under God's wrath over human misconduct, he satisfies it. This Paulson rejects as the "legal scheme" that he finds basic for the Anselmic theory of atonement, which he rejects. Of this, he says, "Theories of atonement developed as a means of making the cross of Christ fit into this legal scheme. It is true that Christ pays debts, suffers punishment and pays ransom to the old lords of this world, but not to the legal scheme rule."⁴²

In support of his rejection of Christ's death as a substitutionary satisfaction, Paulson references Luther's explanation in the Small Catechism of the creed's second article, which states that Christ has redeemed the sinner not with gold or silver but with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. Rather than taking this as an opportunity to affirm the Anselmic view of the atonement, which Luther intended, Paulson holds that the believer, not God, receives Christ's atoning action. "It is faith that receives this blood (not the Father in heaven, or the law, or the devil), thus reversing and bringing to a halt all sacrifice that proceeds from sinner to God."⁴³ All that is needed is "a simple promise: I forgive you."⁴⁴ What Paulson describes as atonement is at one level a falsely formulated doctrine of justification, but it is better designated as a doctrine of sanctification. Without belief in objective justification, subjective justification simply becomes another way of speaking of sanctification because it takes place within the believer. Pieper, on the other hand, places the atoning moment in Christ and not faith.

The reconciliation of the world was not accomplished, either in whole or in part, by the Savior's guaranty that his disciples would lead a life "united with God," but solely and entirely by the Savior's own fulfillment of the divine Law. The Savior Himself paid the entire debt, "mathematically" and "juridically" computed, and in His resurrection received God's receipt for it; and this receipt was made out to mankind. Christ, who was given into death for our sins, was raised again for our justification (Rom. 4:25).⁴⁵

⁴¹ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 104–105.

⁴² Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 91.

⁴³ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 93.

⁴⁴ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 5.

⁴⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:365.

In classical Lutheran theology, as presented by Pieper, Christ suffers not for his sin, but for the guilt of the sin of all. Paulson sees it otherwise. Christ “came to believe that his Father was not pleased with him, thus multiplying sin in himself just like any other original sinner who does not trust a promise from God.”⁴⁶ So, for Paulson, Christ regarded himself as a sinner. His plea in Gethsemane to remove the cup is seen as his confession of his own sin and his cry of dereliction as a statement of unbelief.

Then finally in the words of the cross, “My God, my God . . .” he made the public confession of a sinner, “why have you forsaken me?” (Mark 15:35 NRS). Confessing made it so, and thus Christ committed his own, personal sin—not only an actual sin, but the original sin. He felt God’s wrath and took that experience as something truer than God’s own word of promise to him (“This is My son, with whom I am well pleased”). He looked upon himself on the cross and believed in his own unbelief.⁴⁷

To his own sin, Christ added the sins of the entire world. Sin is seen as unbelief in not accepting the gospel or the promise.⁴⁸ In assessing his situation of being crucified, Christ let his mind-set be determined more by the misery of his death by crucifixion and less by his self-awareness that having done God’s will, he was God’s Son.

This bizarre and totally unacceptable interpretation cannot go unanswered. Jesus’ plea to God in the moment of his greatest desperation was the most profound expression of faith ever spoken. True faith is not seen in the hour of health and prosperity but in the moment when the believer is overwhelmed by death. Jesus’ enemies got it right: “He trusts in God; let God deliver him” (Matt 27:43). This God did by raising him from the dead; and so his faith that he was God’s Son was confirmed (Acts 13:33).

Paulson’s view that atonement takes place in the faith of the believer resembles Osiander’s view that justification is only a subjective experience. He denies objective justification and holds only to subjective justification, which is, as explained above, only sanctification. Nevertheless, Paulson distances himself first from what he calls the ontological view of Osiander, that “sinners become righteous in themselves,” and then from the Lutheran orthodox view that sinners “can be

⁴⁶ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 105.

⁴⁷ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 105.

⁴⁸ This view was proposed by Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation*, 124, and now also by Joel P. Meyer in the *Concordia Journal*: “Our root sin is not to make bad choices according to a standard of right and wrong, good or bad. Our fundamental sin is that we do not expect good things from God” (Meyer, “Justification as the Ground and Goal of the Christian Life in Luther’s Catechisms,” 46).

declared righteous, forensically as in a court of law.”⁴⁹ His rejection of forensic justification raises concerns. Pieper enumerates six objections to forensic justification⁵⁰ and then adds this telling condemnation: “Those who deny the juridical character of reconciliation and of its appropriation are thus engaged, consciously or unconsciously, in the evil work of destroying the entire Christian doctrine, as it is revealed in Holy Scripture.”⁵¹ By juridical, Pieper expressly means *actus forensis*. Paulson will have none of this.

For Paulson, justification happens in the present moment and so is properly described as existential. For him, justification “is faith in Christ in the form of a promise made by Christ, and conveyed to you by a preacher.” And “Christ is present in faith, but in a hidden way, that is by means of a simple word. Christ is heard, not seen; even when the disciples had him in plain sight.”⁵² Here we have to ask if Paulson is proposing that the disciples’ witness to the resurrected Jesus was more a matter of hearing than seeing.⁵³

Again we come back to the major flaw of the new “theology of the cross”: that by redefinition, the atonement is denied. This follows from denying that law belongs to God’s essence. Without the inner compulsion of fulfilling his own law, God simply forgives the sinner. To this, Pieper provides a more than adequate response: “Luther states that it is paganism (the faith ‘of the Turks and Jews’) to imagine that God is gracious to men ‘without cost’—without the Vicarious Satisfaction.”⁵⁴ In the new “theology of the cross,” God forgives simply because he is God, without the necessity of propitiation. What Pieper wrote more than a century ago of the Socinians (Unitarians) is prophetically applicable to the new “theology of the cross”: “Men have asserted that God can forgive sins by His almighty power and therefore satisfaction to be rendered by Christ is superfluous.”⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 124.

⁵⁰ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:351–355.

⁵¹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:355.

⁵² Paulson, *Lutheran Theology*, 126. On this thought, he converges with Oswald Bayer, though one is not dependent on the other. See Trygve Wyller, *Glaube und autonome Welt: Diskussion eines Grundproblems der neueren systematischen Theologie mit Blick auf Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Oswald Bayer und K. E. Løgstrup* (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 90–145, esp. 142.

⁵³ Paulson’s right of center position in the ELCA has been reason enough to provide for him an audience in the LCMS. He has contributed to *Logia*, been published by the Luther Academy, and contributed to Concordia Publishing House’s recently published *The Necessary Distinction*, where he sets forth his view that the law is not eternal. Cf. Paulson, “A Royal Ass,” 265–284, here at 271; Steven D. Paulson, “The *Simul* and the Two Kingdoms,” *Logia* 24, no. 4 (2016): 17–26.

⁵⁴ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:347. See also C. F. W. Walther, *Law and Gospel*, trans. Christian C. Tiews (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 196. “[God] has laid the burden of our sins upon Him and given Him up to be crucified for our sins.”

⁵⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics* 2:351.

The Rise of the New “Theology of the Cross” and Responses to It

Forde began proposing his “theology of the cross” at least by 1969,⁵⁶ when the LCMS had begun to recognize the devastating effects of higher critical methods and the accompanying neoorthodoxy at its St. Louis seminary. In his locus on Christology in the Braaten-Jenson *Christian Dogmatics* in 1984, Forde further developed his views.⁵⁷ After his death in 2005, his essays continued to be published.⁵⁸

Scott R. Murray may have been among the first in the LCMS to see the fundamental flaws in Forde’s theology in his 1998 doctoral dissertation, published in 2002 as *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in American Lutheranism*.⁵⁹ In 2009, Jack D. Kilcrease presented a polemical tour de force against Forde’s denial of the atonement in his doctoral dissertation.⁶⁰ In 2011, he took on Forde’s doctrine of the law in a *Concordia Theological Quarterly* (CTQ) article.⁶¹ And he also addressed Forde’s theology in a lecture at the symposia series of Concordia Theological Seminary—Fort Wayne in 2011, which was published in CTQ in 2012.⁶² Without specific reference to Forde, but with him in mind, Kilcrease evaluated historical understandings of the death of Jesus in *The Self-Donation of God* in 2013, arguing against Forde that for Lutherans, Christ’s death was a propitiation.⁶³ In 2018, he extended his critique of Forde in *The Work of Christ: Revisionist Doctrine and the Confessional Lutheran Response*.⁶⁴

Another response to a theology along Forde’s lines comes from Nathan Rinne who takes issue with Nicholas Hopman’s interpretation of Luther. In his article “Luther’s *Antinomian Disputations* and *lex aeterna*,” Hopman proposed that Luther did not believe the law was eternal.⁶⁵ Yet as Rinne shows, what presents itself as scholarly Luther research may not be so.

⁵⁶ Gerhard Forde, *The Law-Gospel Debate: An Interpretation of Its Historical Development* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1969).

⁵⁷ Forde, “The Work of Christ,” in *Christian Dogmatics* 2:5–104.

⁵⁸ Gerhard O. Forde, “Sacraments as Eschatological Gift and Promise,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (2017): 310–319.

⁵⁹ Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God*, 123–132.

⁶⁰ Jack D. Kilcrease, “The Self-Donation of God: Gerhard Forde and the Question of Atonement in the Lutheran Tradition.” PhD diss., Marquette University, 2009.

⁶¹ Kilcrease, “Gerhard Forde’s Doctrine of the Law,” 151–179.

⁶² Jack D. Kilcrease, “Gerhard Forde’s Theology of Atonement and Justification: A Confessional Lutheran Response,” *Concordia Theological Quarterly* 76, nos. 3–4 (2012): 269–293.

⁶³ Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Self-Donation of God* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013). For a thorough discussion of Christ suffering under the law in Luther’s theology, see Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ*, 280–286.

⁶⁴ Jack D. Kilcrease, *The Work of Christ: Revisionist Doctrine and the Confessional Lutheran Response* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2018), esp. 105–170.

⁶⁵ In this issue of CTQ, Nathan Rinne (librarian at Concordia University, St. Paul, MN) takes issue with Hopman’s reading of Luther. See below in this issue, pp. 65–82.

Forde presents his theology as Luther's. Hence, his chapter in the Braaten-Jenson *Christian Dogmatics* is called "Luther's 'Theology of the Cross.'" Paulson, Wengert, Nestingen, and Hopman present Forde's "theology of the cross"⁶⁶ as if it were an acceptable and academically informed interpretation of Luther's theology. They have been so successful that denial of the law's third use has come to be seen as a mark of loyalty to Luther. *Lex semper accusat*, ripped out of context, has come to be revered as incontrovertible truth. Since God forgives without Christ offering himself as a sacrifice under the law—what Paulson calls "the legal scheme"—their theology can be summed up with "God's gift for you," a phrase that exhibits the new "theology of the cross's" confusion of justification with the atonement. For Lutherans, justification is by grace, but atonement came with a high price, which, according to Luther's Small Catechism, is Christ's blood. Put Luther to the side and let the words of the Holy Spirit speak for themselves: "You were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot" (1 Pet 1:18). Hear also the words of Jesus, "This my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Matt 26:28).

This new theology could be rectified by understanding the gospel as the proclamation that Christ has both actively and passively fulfilled the law, but this is something that Paulson and the others explicitly reject. Since law does not have a fixed place in God, it does not lay down the framework in which Christ accomplishes his redemptive work. For Paulson, law and gospel are not complementary, and so proclamation of Christ's fulfillment of the law is not the gospel.⁶⁷

In a book review in *National Review*, David French, who is not identified as a theologian, writes, "Christians are familiar with the concepts of justification and sanctification. Justification is the moment when God—through His Son's atoning sacrifice—declares man righteous in His sight. Sanctification is the lifelong process of spirit battling flesh, of the redeemed man's journey to holiness."⁶⁸ In the new "theology of the cross," atonement, justification, and sanctification are reduced to the moment of hearing and believing.

Conclusion

In this world of sin, law comes as accusation to the old Adam within each of us. *Lex semper accusat*, but in Eden this was not so, and in the next world it will not be so. By disregarding the command that was a call to faith, to take God at his word,

⁶⁶ Nestingen, "Speaking of the End to the Law," 169–184.

⁶⁷ Paulson, "A Royal Ass," 271. "Nor is God . . . a being who 'corresponds to Himself' in the end—which is a version of making God into nothing but the eternal Law itself."

⁶⁸ David French, "Charity in an Angry Time," *National Review* 69, no. 22 (2017): 46.

Adam was responsible for turning the law as a description of God's positive relation to man into an accusation that no man but Christ alone could resolve. In Adam, "you shall" became "you shall not."⁶⁹ By Christ's fulfilling the law's requirements and suffering its accusations and penalties in our stead, he returned our perception of the law to its original, pristine condition as a perfect revelation of who God is and how Adam saw it before he transgressed. Christ accomplished what God demanded, and so the law's threats were transformed into gospel. The gospel is nothing else but the proclamation, that by his life and death, Christ absorbed the law into himself. It was not only a formal fulfilling of law, but he transposed the law into a brilliance far beyond what Adam knew. Now the law is christologically fulfilled and defined. So, the third use of the law is not only that believers refrain from moral wrong, but also that they do the works that Christ did. Here, Luther should speak.

Natural man would prefer that there be no law, because he is not able to perform what it demands. The sin that has been committed is the second tyrant, and it brings forth the third, namely, death and damnation. Who could be happy when he is answerable to those three? But now they have been vanquished, the Law is fulfilled by Christ and then also by us who have been endowed by the Holy Spirit. He adds the courage so that we may glory even in our sufferings (Rom. 5:3), and thus the Law is no longer outrageous in its dictates but an agreeable companion. The Law itself indeed is not changed, but we are.⁷⁰

If Christians now love the law, we can take this a step further: Christ does the works of the law in believers. *Simul iustus et peccator* describes our condition. Until we die, we live in two diametrically opposing realities: in one, we are shown our sin, and in the other, we are free from the law's accusations because we are in Christ. Denial of the third use of the law does not in each case translate into a redefinition of God as one who no longer requires the death of Jesus as atonement for sin. But it does allow it. And a denial of the eternal, unchanging nature of the moral law of God (FC SD II 50) demands it.

⁶⁹ See Luther's discussion of the law in Eden in his *Lectures on Genesis* (1535–1545/1544–1554), AE 1:103–110. One should not look to Luther for first, second, and third uses of the law. Yet, he does condemn as equivocation that the law has the same meaning in each case. So he writes, "That the Law before sin is one thing and the Law after sin is something else" (109–110).

⁷⁰ Luther, *Lectures on Isaiah* (1528), AE 16:98–99.

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.

Jack D. Kilcrease is Lecturer of Theology and General Education at Aquinas College, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and a member of Our Savior Lutheran Church in Grand Rapids.

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.