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## Reckoned among the Lawless

Peter J. Scaer

The Apostle Paul makes it clear that the wrath of God comes down upon all unrighteousness (Rom 1:18). No one can escape this wrath, for no one is righteous (Rom 3:10). Through the law, no one is justified, for “through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Rom 3:20).<sup>1</sup> All have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory (Rom 3:23). And “the wages of sin is death” (Rom 6:23).

Salvation is a gift, but it comes at a high price: “through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood” (Rom 3:24–25; cf. Exod 25:17). Salvation is made possible by Christ, who was handed over for our trespasses (Rom 4:25).

And it was not enough for our Lord to have died on our behalf; so also was it necessary for him to be obedient to the very law that condemns us. “For as by the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s obedience the many will be made righteous” (Rom 5:19). All of this can be found in the opening chapters of Romans.

Turn to Galatians, and the picture becomes fuller still. Paul uses the language of the marketplace, preaching that “Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us” (Gal 3:13). He did not skirt the law’s demands, but was “born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law” (Gal 4:4–5). As he twice adds in his first letter to the Corinthians, “You were bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23).

Peter likewise reminds diaspora Christians that they have been ransomed not with “silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet 1:18–19). This was not simply God’s preferred choice, as if there were another way. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” (Heb 9:22).

The Gospels themselves testify to this deep truth. The Lord’s Prayer speaks of sin as a debt (Matt 6:12; Luke 11:4). Debt cannot be erased; someone will be left

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footing the bill. This is not an end run around the law. Christ says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them” (Matt 5:17). Our Lord says that all of the Law and the Prophets depend on the fulfillment of the law as summarized: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind,” and then, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt 22:37, 39).

Accordingly, Christ is baptized that he might fulfill all righteousness (Matt 3:15). Our Lord is then promptly led into the desert that he might fulfill the law’s first table: “You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve” (Matt 4:10). And in denying the desires of the flesh, as well as power and glory, he fulfills the second table of the law as well.

Christ was obedient unto death (Phil 2:8). He proved to be the true son, the one who heard and willingly obeyed his father’s command (Matt 21:28–32). Our Lord testifies to his life’s purpose: “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt 20:28). This fulfillment culminates in the “blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28).

For those who idly speculate whether there was any other way as if to safeguard God’s freedom, the Garden of Gethsemane dispels all doubt (Matt 26:36–46). Our Lord would have to drink the cup of suffering and wrath of which the prophets spoke.<sup>2</sup> As the Lord spoke to the nations through Jeremiah, “And if they refuse to accept the cup from your hand to drink, then you shall say to them, ‘Thus says the LORD of hosts: You must drink!’” (Jer 25:28). The message to the nations becomes the Father’s message to the Son. The chief priests were right, “He saved others; he cannot save himself” (Matt 27:42). The Son of Abraham, the true Isaac cries out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46). The Father must go forward with the sacrifice. There was no other way.

The Gospel of Luke builds on the work of Matthew and prepares us for the Epistles. Zechariah, drawing upon the language of the exodus, tells us that the Lord has redeemed his people (Luke 1:68). This freedom came not only by the strength of our Lord’s mighty arm, but by the death of a Passover lamb, and by blood that marked the Israelites’ doors. With Moses and Elijah, our Lord speaks about the exodus (Luke 9:31). Luke repeatedly ties Christ’s death to the Passover (Luke 22:1, 7, 8, 15) where his blood will be shed, that he might deliver us from sin and death (Luke 22:20).

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<sup>2</sup> For an excellent discussion of the cup of God’s wrath, see Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Matthew 21:1–28:20* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2018), 1435–1436.

Isaiah 53 foretold that Christ would be “pierced for our transgressions” and “crushed for our iniquities” (Isa 53:5). God himself would offer the sacrifice, for the Suffering Servant would be “smitten by God, and afflicted” (Isa 53:4). Our Lord identifies himself as that Suffering Servant: “For I tell you that this Scripture must be fulfilled in me: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’” (Luke 22:37; cf. Isa 53:12 LXX), or “among the lawless.” But here, the King James Version is better. For he was not simply “numbered” among the lawless, but “reckoned” (ἐλογίσθη) among the lawless.<sup>3</sup> Reckoned among the lawless, he was no outlaw God. Instead, as we see, he was wounded for our lawlessness (Isa 53:5, LXX).

Three times Pilate declares Christ’s innocence (Luke 23:4, 14, 22), a verdict affirmed by Herod (Luke 23:9). The penitent thief had it right: “And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong” (Luke 23:41). Luke’s centurion punctuates this truth, declaring, “Certainly this man was innocent” (23:47). This truth becomes part of the earliest apostolic kerygma, as when Peter indicts his fellow countrymen for denying “the Holy and Righteous One” (Acts 3:14).

Christ, the righteous one, is reckoned lawless, so that we the lawless might be reckoned righteous. And this brings us back to Romans 4:22, where righteousness was reckoned unto Abraham. And again, Jesus “was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom 4:25).

Perhaps this biblical barrage seems unnecessary, or too simple. But when the truth is denied or left unspoken, it is soon forgotten. We might say that this is Lutheranism 101, and now I mean the CPH book that goes by that title. As Scott Bruzek writes in that volume, “Giving His life for the life of the world, His crucifixion atoned for the sins of every person everywhere.”<sup>4</sup> And again, “Jesus takes the punishment that we deserve as sinful rebels.”<sup>5</sup>

### Taking a Step Back: Anselm, Abelard, and Aulén

All this is simple, but not simplistic. So much is accomplished by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. Were it all to be written, I suppose that the world could not contain the books that would be written.

Traditionally, discussion on the atonement has centered on Anselm, Abelard, and Aulén. These are typically said to represent three theories of the atonement. And here lies the beginning of our present predicament. Theories are by their nature

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<sup>3</sup> Scripture quotations marked KJV are from the King James or Authorized Version of the Bible.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Bruzek, “Getting Right with God,” in *Lutheranism 101*, ed. Scot A. Kinnaman (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2010), 46.

<sup>5</sup> Bruzek, “Getting Right with God,” 47.

tentative and open to change and challenge. If theology is for proclamation, it must have content; it must be more than simply an event, and it cannot be a matter of opinion in a world of relativity.

The notion that there are theories of atonement changes everything. When we proclaim that Christ's death propitiated the wrath of God, that his death was a payment for sin in fulfillment of the law, we are said to be promoting Anselm's theory,<sup>6</sup> which is then marginalized as medieval or western. Doctrine based on the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world is treated as if it were only an eleventh-century opinion. Nevertheless, other points of view can be helpful.

Peter Abelard's moral model claims that Christ's sacrificial love motivates us to love God and neighbor, with "the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him."<sup>7</sup> Love enkindles love. His death is a spectacle, a passion play to inspire would-be martyrs and cross bearers. Like the blind men of Jericho, our sight is restored, and we follow our Lord into Jerusalem (Matt 20:29–34).

Gustav Aulén is credited for popularizing *Christus Victor*, the idea that by our Lord's crucifixion and resurrection, God conquered death and delivered us from the devil.<sup>8</sup> J. Louis Martyn depicts this as an apocalyptic battle, in which Christ defeats the power and principalities of this fallen age. Thus, Aulén and Martyn remind us that sin and death are mighty and enslaving powers. God's Son must burst upon the scene; the Strong Man must defeat Satan and deliver us from his bondage.

Theories, though, have a way of multiplying. Peter Schmiechen has posited no less than ten models of atonement.<sup>9</sup> Bruce R. Reichenbach adds an atonement as healing.<sup>10</sup> C. Norman Kraus, a missionary to Japan, popularized an atonement model based on the concepts of honor and shame.<sup>11</sup> Surely there are more to come.

These models give us something to consider, and in truth, they often overlap. As such, the faithful may hear all of this as one song, with Anselm singing the melody, Abelard and Aulén adding voices in harmony, and perhaps other voices

<sup>6</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, "Why God Became Man," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 100–183.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Abelard, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Steven R. Cartwright (Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 168.

<sup>8</sup> Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Motifs of Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1953).

<sup>9</sup>These models include sacrifice, penal substitution, liberation, renewal of creation, restoration of creation, Christ the goal of creation, Christ the way to the knowledge of God, Christ the reconciler, and the love of God. Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), vii–viii.

<sup>10</sup> Bruce R. Reichenbach, "Healing View," in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 117–142.

<sup>11</sup> C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990).

joining in. In our circles, we do something similar when we speak of a theology of vocation, a theology of mercy, a theology of the cross, and so on. What matters is that we do not lose sight of the fact that the reality is whole, and that we do not deny the truth or let a category or model become a thing unto itself.

### Diversity: All but One

Indeed, a multiplicity of so-called atonement theories might be helpful, if they were employed to help us see the multifaceted nature and effects of Christ's death. But that is not the way it has played out.

While those who stand with Anselm typically recognize the truth found in *Christus Victor* and the Moral Atonement, supporters of Abelard and Aulén do not often reciprocate. A fairly typical example of this may be found in Stephen Finlan's *Problems with Atonement*, in which he speaks well of many models of the atonement, but takes aim at substitution, "For the last 250 years, popular notions of atonement have caused embarrassment among Christians who recoil from the idea that the Son's death was either a kind of payment or a divinely demanded penalty."<sup>12</sup> It is strange to worry about embarrassment when Christ calls himself a scandal. But Finlan denies the link between blood and atonement, so much so that he encourages his readers to be suspicious of the narratives that tell of the institution of the Supper.<sup>13</sup>

Likewise, in *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, Joel Green and Mark Baker speak glowingly of the theology of the cross, praising many and various theories of the atonement, but without a positive word to say for substitutionary atonement. Anselm is said to have been too immersed in a medieval world of chivalry and feudalism. Supposedly, Anselm's readers could be led to "think that forgiveness is earned from God by Jesus rather than grasping that forgiveness is God's gracious gift."<sup>14</sup> Such a false dichotomy should be easily spotted, especially in an age where gifts are given along with a receipt, in case the recipient wishes to exchange a gift already paid for.

### Divine Child Abuse

If others take their potshots, feminist theology takes dead aim at substitutionary atonement. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker argue that the traditional idea of Christ's sacrifice promotes an angry and bloodthirsty God, who engages in a

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<sup>12</sup> Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 84.

<sup>13</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 116.

<sup>14</sup> Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011), 159.

form of divine child abuse.<sup>15</sup> Carlson Brown and Parker strike at the heart of the Christian enterprise: “The atonement is the central reason for the oppressiveness of Christianity,” adding that “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering.”<sup>16</sup> So much for Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion*, Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, or our Lord himself, when he said that by being lifted up, he would draw all people to himself (John 12:32). The irony is thick. Worried terribly about divine child abuse, this same feminist movement is fundamentally built on the sacrifice of unborn children in the name of individual autonomy, free love, self-advancement, and finally no reason at all, much less the salvation of the world.

How have biblical scholars responded to the feminist critique? Stephen Finlan vacates the field by claiming, “Atonement is not an essential doctrine of Christianity but is in fact derivative. The more central doctrine is Incarnation.”<sup>17</sup> While Rudolf Bultmann aimed to demythologize Christ’s birth, miracles, and resurrection, Finlan demythologizes Christ’s death: “The Incarnation need not issue in the mythology of substitutionary atonement.”<sup>18</sup> Be that as it may, arguments that pit the incarnation against the cross happen among us too, and are usually fruitless, as the two go together.

But to say that substitutionary atonement is a secondary doctrine is not enough. It must be discredited. Stephen Finlan notes that the Anselmic view is superstitious, primitive, and destructive of monotheism. Sitting in the seat of scoffers, Finlan equates the idea of purchase or ransom with bribing or manipulating the divine judge. Icing the cake, he adds, “The atonement doctrine is the font of anti-Semitism.”<sup>19</sup> This charge is as malicious as it is tiresome.

### **But What Is the Question?**

According to Anselm, sin is a debt that must be paid by the one who owes it, namely, a human being. But since our sin is so great, the one who pays the debt must be God, as one man’s death would not be a sufficient payment for the sin of the world. Accordingly, “the satisfaction whereby humanity can be saved can be effected only by One who is God and human.”<sup>20</sup> That is Anselm in his own words.

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<sup>15</sup> 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 R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1–30.

<sup>16</sup> Carlson Brown and Parker, “For God So Loved the World?,” 26.

<sup>17</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 104.

<sup>18</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 114.

<sup>19</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 116.

<sup>20</sup> Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 2.6, cited in Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 156.



Most objections to Anselm run along these lines. If God is powerful, he can defeat all foes, including sin and death. If he is merciful and loving, he can forgive all sins, quite apart from any payment, whether it is our works or the work of Christ on our behalf. If sin is only an illness, it can be cured. If sin holds us in bondage, we can be freed. In any case, no one can really say for sure why Christ died. As Bruce Reichenbach replies: “His mercy is so great that his forgiveness can be sufficient. God chooses the particular method of atonement for his own reasons, not necessity.”<sup>21</sup>

### Forde Lives

Anti-atonement theology has been circulating for quite some time, with little obvious effect on the world of confessional Lutheranism. But lately, there seems to be some confusion on this subject even within confessional Lutheranism.

Strident feminism holds little appeal. But Gerhard Forde speaks with a Lutheran accent and employs Lutheran categories. He speaks often of absolution and the power of the Word. He underlines the necessity of preaching, promotes a theology of the cross, and quotes Luther often. And yet, at the heart of his theology is an empty place.

Concerning the feminist theology, Forde writes, “In the main, I agree with many critiques of the traditional doctrines of the atonement in Brown/Parker.”<sup>22</sup> Forde argues that if we think of Christ’s death as a vicarious satisfaction, God appears to be a “vindictive tyrant demanding his pound of flesh before he can be merciful.”<sup>23</sup> Forde’s position on this remained largely consistent throughout his life.

Consider, for instance *Where God Meets Man*, written in 1972. Forde begins by exposing what he sees as misguided Lutheran teaching: “We begin by assuming the law is a ladder to heaven. Then we go on to say, ‘Of course, no one can climb the ladder, because we all are weakened by sin. We are therefore guilty and lost.’”<sup>24</sup> Lutherans are invited to nod in agreement. None of us can by our own works reach up into heaven. But then something strange happens. Forde describes our “gospel” in this way. “What we need is someone to pay our debt to God and to climb the ladder for us. This supposedly is what Jesus has done for us. As our ‘substitute’ he has paid off God and climbed the ladder for us. All we have to do now is ‘believe’

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<sup>21</sup> Reichenbach, “Healing View,” 109.

<sup>22</sup> Gerhard Forde, “In Our Place,” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Steven D. Paulson and Mark C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 102.

<sup>23</sup> Forde, “In Our Place,” 103.

<sup>24</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Where God Meets Man: Luther’s Down-to-Earth Approach to the Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1972), 10.

it.”<sup>25</sup> What are we to make of this? In some ways, it captures our belief, but in the worst possible way. I know of no Christian who believes that Christ paid off God, though the Scriptures do say that he paid the price of our sins. And, if Forde is to use the ladder analogy, perhaps that ladder would be the cross, on which Jesus was lifted up.

Though we may wish to give him the benefit of the doubt, Forde pulls no punches, calling traditional teaching about the atonement absurd. He asks, “In the first place, can we so lightly assume that God is one who can be ‘bought off’—even by Jesus?”<sup>26</sup> This Forde speaks concerning the one smitten by God, the one upon whom has been laid the iniquity of us all (Isa 53:4, 6).

Forde goes on further to question whether one man’s death can save us from our sin. How can we be sure that Christ has paid enough? He scoffs, “Can the suffering and death of one man atone for the sins of the world?”<sup>27</sup> Would that Forde had heard the words of unbelieving Caiaphas: “You know nothing at all. Nor do you understand that it is better for you that one man should die for the people, not that the whole nation should perish” (John 11:49–50).

Christians claim that Christ is God and that his death is a sufficient payment for sin. Forde counters that if his suffering were of infinite worth, then “the beating and the crown of thorns would have satisfied God!”<sup>28</sup> Thus, Forde offers a caricature of atonement and turns mystery into mockery. Offering what he seems to consider a decisive blow, he writes: “If God has been paid, how can one say that he really forgives? If a debt is paid, one can hardly say it is forgiven. No one could call God’s action mercy.”<sup>29</sup>

In *Theology Is for Proclamation*, Forde continues in the same vein: “The favor of God does not have to be purchased by the suffering and death of Jesus. God cannot and does not need to be bought, even by Jesus. It is not that Jesus has to die before God can be forgiving. God out of love and mercy sends Jesus to forgive.”<sup>30</sup> Notice again the sleight of hand. Yes, God can be forgiving before Jesus dies. But such forgiveness does not deny, but in fact affirms the necessity of Christ’s death. In fact, God’s initial mercy and love brought about Christ’s sacrifice in the first place. With Paul Gerhardt, we sing, “Love caused thine incarnation,”<sup>31</sup> and add to that the crucifixion as well.

<sup>25</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 12.

<sup>28</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Forde, *Where God Meets Man*, 12.

<sup>30</sup> Gerhard Forde, *Theology Is for Proclamation* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), 124.

<sup>31</sup> See *LSB 334:4. Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006).

Forde offers more of the same in his 1984 essay, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ.” There he claims that Christ’s death must be about more than satisfying God’s honor or wrath. He asks the same questions, “If death was a *payment*, how could reconciliation be an act of *mercy*? Mercy is mercy, not the act of payment.”<sup>32</sup> What a strange thing to say. Surely the Good Samaritan showed mercy to the man lying half dead. He bound up his wounds and took him to the inn. “And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back’” (Luke 10:35). Traditional Lutheran atonement theology is not absurd, but it is absurd to think that the showing of mercy comes at no cost, that a gift given must not first be purchased.

It would seem that Forde does not think too highly of God’s mercy, but too little of our sin and its ramifications. Bill Gates may well be able to afford to donate a few dollars to charity, but that would neither make him worthy of great praise, nor would that prove him to be merciful. It would simply show that he was wealthy.

Forde teaches that we cannot make ourselves righteous by means of the law. He is right to note that we need absolution, a word of forgiveness, that theology is for proclamation, and that by the gospel we are set free. But what exactly is that gospel, and from where does that word of forgiveness come? Given the fall into sin, God cannot simply say, “Let there be forgiveness.” Our sin has changed the dynamics. Words have to be backed up by action. Christ’s death is the payment that makes absolution possible. Anyone can write a check, but it does no good if there is no money in the bank.

Indeed, Christ declares his divinity by offering forgiveness (Mark 2:10). And yet, even in the midst of his ministry of forgiveness, our Lord is preparing for the price that he must pay. When Christ is baptized, the heavens are torn open, prefiguring the tearing of the temple curtain, and signaling that Christ for us was baptized unto death. Having cleansed the leper, he finds himself in the lonely places (Mark 1:45).<sup>33</sup> Though he heals many, he does so at a price, fulfilling Isaiah 53: “He took our illnesses and bore our diseases” (Matt 8:17).

Our Lord says, “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!” (Luke 12:49–50). Here Christ speaks of his death not simply as a murder. While Christ is put to death by leaders who fear loss of power and prestige,

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<sup>32</sup> Gerhard Forde, “Caught in the Act: Reflections on the Work of Christ,” in *A More Radical Gospel: Essays on Eschatology, Authority, Atonement, and Ecumenism*, ed. Steven D. Paulson and Mark C. Mattes (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), 87.

<sup>33</sup> For more on this, see Peter J. Scaer, “The Atonement in Mark’s Sacramental Theology,” in *CTQ* 72 (2008): 227–242.

at a deeper level he is sacrificed as the Lamb of God, the Suffering Servant on whom must be placed the iniquity of us all (Isa 53:6).

Forde is correct to assert that God's favor precedes the sending of his Son, and that his forgiveness precedes his death, but not because that forgiveness is somehow untethered from Christ's sacrifice. God, in favor, sends his Son to be the sacrifice. The Son willingly obeys, because of a double love, first for the Father, but then also for the world. In this sense, the crucifixion happened in time, even as the atonement is eternal.

How does Forde avoid the link between shed blood and forgiveness? It should be noted that he removes our trump cards from the deck. The Son of Man came to give his life "as a ransom for many" (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45). Likewise, Christ offers the blood of the covenant, which is "poured out for many" (Mark 14:24). Indeed, this blood of the covenant is "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). This is more than compelling evidence. Yet, in Carl Braaten's *Dogmatics*, Forde disregards these sayings, noting, "Such passages in their present form at least, are usually regarded as having come not from Jesus himself but from later interpretative traditions."<sup>34</sup> If that is what we are dealing with, then there may be little hope of going further.

### **In Steven Paulson, Forde Lives**

Though Forde has passed on, faithful students carry his torch. In a work of Forde's collected essays, *A More Radical Gospel*, Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson lay out the problem in Anselm's theology, claiming that it places the necessity of Christ's death upon God. They ask, "If Jesus' death was a payment to God, then how is the reconciliation he establishes one of mercy?"<sup>35</sup> They proceed to ask, "Indeed, why is Christ's death *necessary* at all? Forde's radical response is that—it was not! Why could God not just forgive us? He did!"<sup>36</sup> What meaning might we find in the cross? Mattes and Paulson write, "Christ's death is a historical crime, not a sign, or myth, or piece of the system of salvation."<sup>37</sup> Behind the jargon is a cross that may as well be empty.

Paulson's local appeal, like that of Forde, is that he employs distinctly Lutheran vocabulary, including law and gospel and absolution, along with a heavy dose of the hidden God. As with Forde, he views Christ's work not as the fulfillment of the Law,

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<sup>34</sup> Gerhard Forde, "The Shape of Tradition," in *Christian Dogmatics* 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 1:13.

<sup>35</sup> Mark Mattes and Steven Paulson, "Introduction," in Gerhard Forde, *A More Radical Gospel*, ed. Mark C. Mattes and Steven D. Paulson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xxv.

<sup>36</sup> Mattes and Paulson, "Introduction," xxv.

<sup>37</sup> Mattes and Paulson, "Introduction," xv.

but the end of the Law entirely. Paulson writes: “Even Christ’s own fulfilling of the law is manageable for Satan. But when Christ ceases playing by the rules and irrationally and illegally gives his absolution to the ungodly and elects the unrighteous unfairly and inequitably, he exercises a power that is horrible apart from the law.”<sup>38</sup> The key for Paulson is preaching, or more precisely, a word of absolution. As Paulson puts it, “But that means that God really does operate outside the law and his will is not the law—it is something else.”<sup>39</sup> Put simply, God freely speaks forgiveness, and therefore God is an outlaw. Paulson’s description of the Christ as an outlaw seems closer to his counterfeit foe, described by St. Paul: “And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord Jesus will kill with the breath of his mouth and bring to nothing by the appearance of his coming” (2 Thess 2:8).

According to what might be called radical Lutheranism, God’s Son does not cover sin or pay for sin, instead, he simply ignores it. Paulson writes, “Therefore, it is not the uniting of mercy and justice as attributes in the being of God, but is God forgetting something out of mercy that overcomes justice.”<sup>40</sup> Justice is neither maintained, nor is it fulfilled. God simply offers an absolution *ex nihilo*. As Paulson puts it, “The unfettered absolution of sinners, while they are sinners, does not fit the pattern of the law. Here God goes rogue, operating *ex lex*—outside the law.”<sup>41</sup> The word of the law is not fulfilled, but simply superseded by another word, a word of promise. So, then, when we say that Christ earned for us salvation, we supposedly fall into the legal scheme, and in doing so, “we crucify the one thing needed for our freedom—God’s irrevocable promise.”<sup>42</sup> Paulson’s absolution is simply a repeat of God’s power at creation. Let there be forgiveness, and there is forgiveness.

Paulson draws heavily on Forde’s and on Luther’s idea of the hidden God. The God revealed in Christ, as made known by the preacher, offers mercy. The hidden God is a menacing figure, who seems not to have been touched by the atonement. Forde writes, “Only the historical, concrete, suffering, and dying Jesus can save us from the wrath of the *deus ipse*.”<sup>43</sup> That is, only the revealed God can save us from the hidden God, who seems to be battling his own demons. Perhaps this should not be so surprising, given, as Paulson writes, “the atonement is not an objective fact

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<sup>38</sup> Steven D. Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God: Vol. 1: Hiddenness, Evil, and Predestination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 229.

<sup>39</sup> Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 133.

<sup>40</sup> Steven Paulson, “The Law-Gospel Distinction in Lutheran Theology and Ministry,” in *God’s Two Words: Law and Gospel in the Lutheran and Reformed Traditions*, ed. Jonathan A. Linebaugh (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018), 119.

<sup>41</sup> Paulson, “The Law-Gospel Distinction in Lutheran Theology and Ministry,” 119.

<sup>42</sup> Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 165.

<sup>43</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “Reconciliation with God,” in *Christian Dogmatics*, 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:71.

accomplished on Calvary.”<sup>44</sup> As Forde puts it, “The cross is what it costs God to remain true to himself, to remain a God of mercy.”<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the crucifixion is more a case of anger management.

In Paulson’s new scheme, satisfaction is redefined and occurs when the sinner comes to faith. As Paulson and Mattes summarize the theology of Forde: “God will not be satisfied until he has mercy on us, until we become people of faith.”<sup>46</sup> Of course, not all will become people of faith. And how this sort of thinking fits in with such teaching as the parable of the wedding banquet is hard to say (Matt 22:1–14; Luke 14:16–24).

We confess that God is fully satisfied on account of Christ, that there is no hidden part of him that has not been touched by the atonement. When Christ said, “It is finished,” the work of salvation was complete (John 19:30). Yet this, too, is denied by Paulson, who writes, “The cry of dereliction (Why have you forsaken me?) and Christ’s declaration ‘It is finished’ are not utterances of the Son being faithful in his calling to the end (a martyr, hero, or model), but one in need of a preacher—lamenting, yet having none.”<sup>47</sup> Yes, if only our Lord, the incarnate Word, had a preacher, though in quoting Psalm 22, he very well knew how the story would end.

Indeed, the God whom Paulson presents appears schizophrenic. He writes, “Specifically, God’s greatest opponent is his own will as revealed clearly in the law. The promise finally conflicts with the law,” adding, “God contradicts God at the crucial moment of divine hiddenness—when the absolute law finds itself unexpectedly opposed to the gospel that absolves. Then God is suddenly revealed as an outlaw.”<sup>48</sup> With all this God talk, there is strikingly little reference to the life of Christ or the incarnation. God sends his Son to be a man, to take his place among our fallen humanity, to be our representative and stand with us in solidarity. This we see in Luke’s baptismal account, where Christ allies himself with a fallen people (Luke 3:21–22).

The Father and Son engage in a concord and enterprise of love. And yet, God’s Son must be treated like Adam’s son. The one who is declared the Son of God must be thrown out of paradise and into the desert in order to fulfill the law and make the sacrifice for our salvation. This is not simply God versus God, but it is the Son acting in our stead according to his Father’s good pleasure, both Father and Son knowing what is at stake, and the terrible price that must be paid.

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<sup>44</sup> Steven Paulson and Nicholas Hopman, “Atonement,” in *Dictionary of Luther and the Lutheran Traditions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 48–51.

<sup>45</sup> Gerhard O. Forde, “Reconciliation with God,” 75.

<sup>46</sup> Mattes and Paulson, *A More Radical Gospel*, xxv.

<sup>47</sup> Steven D. Paulson and Nicholas Hopman, “Christ, the Hated God,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (2016): 20.

<sup>48</sup> Paulson, *Luther’s Outlaw God*, 109.

Again, following Forde, Paulson thinks of Christ's death as a kind of accident, as might occur when a hero takes the brunt of an oncoming truck, while whisking away a child to safety. But if it were simply a matter of an oncoming truck, why then did God not perform a miracle and simply divert the truck, or make it disappear? Our Lord, as he did in Nazareth, would have simply walked away.

Following Forde, Paulson often refers to substitutionary atonement as a scheme. He denounces the fallacy that a person can become righteous on his own as judged by the law. But so also does he condemn the idea that "sinners can be *declared righteous*, forensically as in a court of law—though they are not actually righteous in themselves. A debtor deserves punishment, but if a generous patron paid the debt it may be right for a judge to let a criminal go free. In either case, the key is that the law remains the form of righteousness."<sup>49</sup> We speak about such things as redemption and justification. Paulson, following Forde, calls it the "legal scheme."<sup>50</sup>

### Wrath, Justice, and Mercy

One of the difficulties for Lutherans is that we are thought to hold to the same doctrine of substitutionary atonement as do the Calvinists. Charles Hodge speaks eloquently of Christ's death as a payment for sin, but he prefaces this truth by saying, "It pleased the Lord to bruise him."<sup>51</sup> Surely, God sent his Son to die, but it was hardly pleasant. Drawing upon the Old Testament sacrificial system, especially "the blood, the entrails and the goriness," Thomas Schreiner ably argues that sin's penalty is death.<sup>52</sup> He then explains, "The wrath of God flows from his holiness—from the perfection of his character and the beauty of his goodness, his matchless character."<sup>53</sup> Again, Schreiner writes, "God is angry because of human rejection of his lordship."<sup>54</sup>

Against such a view, the words of Forde and Paulson may seem much more attractive. If God is pictured as caring primarily about his own holiness, then it would seem a self-centered God indeed. This is a God who can be praised even if in his limited atonement he eternally chooses to save some and damn others. There is

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<sup>49</sup> Steven Paulson, *Doing Theology the Lutheran Way* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2011), 124.

<sup>50</sup> Paulson, "The Law-Gospel Distinction in Lutheran Theology and Ministry," 104 and Gerhard Forde, "The Work of Christ," in *Christian Dogmatics* 2 vols., ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 2:24.

<sup>51</sup> Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* vol. 2, 517, cited in Ben Pugh, *Atonement Theories: A Way through the Maze* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 86.

<sup>52</sup> Thomas Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View" in *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 83.

<sup>53</sup> Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," 80.

<sup>54</sup> Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," 80.

once more a confusion as to who God is, in and of himself. There is a failure to understand the nature and relationship of his attributes. If his holiness leads us to think that God does not like to get his hands dirty, then we are following along the wrong path.

### **The Goodness of God's Wrath**

It may help to reconsider the relationship between God's love and his wrath. God is love (1 John 4:8). That is the eternal reality, within the Godhead, Father loving Son, Son loving Father, brought full circle and then reaching out in the Holy Spirit. We may also say that God has wrath, or that he is angry. But we may not say that God is wrath, or is anger, or even that God is justice. In a world of perfect love, there is no need for a court system. The first signs of God's justice appear with the dawn of sin, which changes everything.

Adam could not simply be forgiven and reenter paradise. The offspring of Eve would have to pay the price. God's reaction to Abel's murder is telling. Our Lord says to Cain, "What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Gen 4:10). Our Lord is concerned here not for himself, but for the injustice done to Abel. For good reason, Rachel weeps for her children. When early Christians are imprisoned and put to death, Christ takes it personally, asking, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" (Acts 9:4). To simply let sin pass shows not love or forgiveness, but only indifference and apathy. Righteous anger is appropriate in the face of grave injustice. Its opposite is not love, but indifference and apathy. Wrongs must be made right, or else Abel's blood will continue to cry out from the ground. In a world filled with justice warriors, this message would seem to resonate.

The Scriptures do not deny God's anger, but say that he is slow to anger (Exod 34:6; Num 14:18; Ps 103:8). Sin brings death, yet Cain is allowed to live. In his divine forbearance, our Lord passed over former sins (Rom 3:25). But the wages of sin is indeed death. The cross is the place where mercy and truth have met together; "righteousness and peace kiss each other" (Ps 85:10). There is indeed such a thing as righteous anger, and it flows from love for the innocent. When we deny God's wrath, we are not thereby proclaiming that God is more loving, but instead we are saying that God does not care about injustice, or that he is not angry with me. As such, my life of sin need not be placed before a mirror or under a microscope.

### **A World without Law, a World without Love**

With the psalmist, we delight in the law and meditate on it day and night (Ps 1:2). We give thanks to God for delivering us from sin and its punishment. Of



course, our fallen flesh returns to sin, like a dog to its vomit. But as Christians, we love God's law. Indeed, Luther's hymn on the Ten Commandments is remarkably positive. What therefore is the law? Is it really such an ugly thing? Our Lord summarizes it in the most positive of ways: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:37-39). If we were to summarize the commandments in one word, it would be, "Love." Faith will not be necessary in the heavenly places, for we shall know our Lord by sight. Hope will have been fulfilled. Only love remains: "So now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13:13).

Love is more than a feeling; it has shape and substance. It is seen in the fear, love, and trust of God. It is in honoring God's name, gladly hearing his word. It is cherishing our parents, holding life sacred, honoring marriage, being thankful for what we have, speaking and thinking well of others. The law lived out is a very attractive world indeed, a world in which there is piety toward God, care and concern for neighbors. This is the law as we see it most positively in the Sermon on the Mount, where we are invited to keep not only the letter, but the spirit of the law. In contrast, Paulson writes, "Luther's Christian freedom then means the human is not being freed from hating the law into loving it, or from being accused by the law to being blessed by it. This Christian is being freed, necessarily, from the law altogether."<sup>55</sup> But, we may ask, who wants to be free from cherishing God's name, honoring parents, and protecting life?

Being free from the punishment of the law is indeed a good thing. But take away the law, and love itself vanishes. For love is simply the law fulfilled, what James calls "the law of liberty" (Jas 1:25). In love, we are taken up into the life of the Trinity. So John tells us, "And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us. Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him" (1 John 3:23-24). For Christians as Christians, the second table of the law is simply and beautifully the love of neighbor, the new life in Christ.

God showed his love not simply in words, but in deed. By his death, Jesus is "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). This was more than an absolution. And it is more than a creation *ex nihilo*, but it was the redemption of our sinful flesh, the taking on of God's wrath. John writes, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10). Knowing this, the law looks completely different. "By this we know that we love the children

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<sup>55</sup> Paulson, *Luther's Outlaw God*, 73.

of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. . . . And his commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:2–3).

We have overcome the world, because Christ has overcome the world. God’s mercy is shown not simply in a love that overlooks sin, which is easy enough, but in a love that pays the price, walks the extra mile, and bears the burden. This is the life that we now embrace.

### **All False Theology Is Psychology**

What, may we ask, is behind the rejection of substitutionary atonement, especially now among some Lutherans? And what does it have to do with the denial of the law’s eternity? If we say that Christ died to save us, all is well. Likewise, if we say that Christ came to save us from sin and the devil, we need lose no sleep. But if we say that Christ had to die as a payment for our sin, then we must take stock not only of our former life, but the life we now live. Once we say that Christ had to be obedient to the law, then we have to admit that the law matters, as does the Christian life. But if we say that the word of promise supersedes the law, then any discussion of the law or of Christian life becomes unimportant, secondary at best. Any exhortation to help our unborn neighbor, to defend marriage for the sake of children, or to speak out for confused children who are given puberty blockers and hormone treatment leading to disfiguring surgery is relegated to the place of the now defunct law. In an age of lawlessness, a lawless Savior is appealing. We can say with Forde and Paulson that like Christ, we care not so much for God’s law, but for his will, which is indeed a convenient place to be.

The present situation calls for a much more radical Lutheranism, one that recognizes that the Christian life is tied up and defined by the life of Christ, which can be seen in the law’s fulfillment. This is not simply a matter of prohibition, but a positive living out of love for neighbor, working not outside of the law, but cheerfully doing even more than the law demands, going as Christ said, the extra mile (Matt 5:41). As such, our lives are themselves confessions of Christ. We confess the law’s goodness, even in this sinful flesh. The “I” that is Christ’s life in me is unafraid to say that the law is good, and that it is eternal.

While the gospel delivers us from the law’s punishment, it also thrusts us back into the law as a cheerful way of life. As Christians, the commandments look stunningly appealing. If we celebrate Christ’s life, we celebrate the life of every child, and defend it even while in the womb. If we are moved by the gospel of Christ as bridegroom, we will speak up for earthly marriage, as a reflection of that truth, and as a safe space for children conceived in the male-female union. We may speak of dividing law and gospel, but faith and life go together. This is not simply a matter of

acknowledging law as a kind of penultimate reality, but in seeing that our lives have shape and purpose.

By insisting that Christians advocate for life and natural marriage, we are not engaging in social engineering, nor are we operating only on the level of natural law, fulfilling a civic duty. We enter the public square in defense of our littlest neighbors, whose lives are taken by abortion, and in doing so we confess Christ's incarnation and atoning work. In defending marriage, we honor our creator, and seek justice for children, who have a right to a mother and father. When it comes to the suffering of the innocent, justice matters.

The Christian life, and what often is called the third use of the law, matters. By our advocacy for the unborn and for the truth of marriage, we confess that Christ became one of us in the womb of Mary, and that he has come to be the church's bridegroom. When we are silent about abortion and earthly marriage, we deny the heavenly realities; we deny the very gospel itself.

Speak of the Christian life this way, and be prepared to be told that you are placing yourself again under an oppressive law, or that you are falling into moralism. Liberal atonement theology, in whatever form it may come into our circles, offers an out. Whatever the law may say is easily brushed aside, so that we may set our eyes on the way of the gospel.

But far from moralism, this is a life of love, the very life of Christ, apart from which there is no gospel at all. Apart from such an embodied confession, the gospel is simply an absolution without Christ's death or our life. Our manger scenes are meaningless when we do not stand and speak for the child seen in the ultrasound. All our talk of Christ as bridegroom is undermined when we cannot say a word for marriage. As such, radical Lutheranism is really not countercultural, but far too cultural, a way to affirm the law without taking it seriously or embracing it in the life of love and self-sacrifice, the kind of life that has meaning.

This is not simply a matter of natural law, but a confession of Christ's life lived on our behalf, the very life into which we are invited. Christ lived a life of obedience to the law, and did so according to his Father's good will. So also are we called to live that same life in Christ. It means that our own lives have meaning, deep theological and christological meaning. It may be good to know that Christ saved us, but for what?