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The Death of Jesus as Atonement for Sin

The teaching of Jesus' death as atonement for sin has received renewed attention recently in biblical and theological studies. Some of this attention has been in reaction to the omnipresent mantra of critical scholarship that such teaching was a later creation of the church in order to provide a more suitable interpretation of the death of Jesus. Both the Symposium on Exegetical Theology and the Symposium on the Lutheran Confessions at Fort Wayne, held in January 2008, took up the challenge of engaging this debate. The four articles in this issue were first delivered as papers during these symposia.

David Scaer addresses the tendency of Lutherans to see atonement as a doctrine easily separated from—and less important than—justification. He demonstrates the intimate interrelationship and interdependence of these doctrines as well as the current challenges being issued against a proclamation of the atonement that is faithful to the teaching of the Scriptures, especially of Jesus in the Gospels. The remaining three articles each focus on the atonement as proclaimed in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John respectively. Jeffrey Gibbs, author of the recently published Concordia Commentary on Matthew 1–10, explores the variety of texts in which Matthew proclaims the atonement. In addition to his emphasis on Jesus' substitutionary role as the New Israel, Gibbs gives significant attention to showing how Matthew proclaims the death of Jesus as the eschatological visitation of the Father's divine wrath over all sin. The article by Peter Scaer introduces us to some of the modern debate and then focuses on the teaching of atonement in Mark. Not only does he review the traditional texts proclaiming atonement (especially Mark 10:45), but he also probes how Jesus (and subsequently Mark) use the Lord's Supper and Baptism in order to proclaim Jesus' death as atonement. My article addresses the challenge that the fourth evangelist does not understand Jesus' death as atonement for sin by demonstrating ways in which this Gospel proclaims atonement that are in concert with the more explicit atonement teaching in 1 John.

Debate about the atonement in our circles used to center around the legitimacy of proclaiming the atonement also according to the *Christus Victor* model rather than strictly using the more familiar Anselmic model. Much more is at stake in the current debate. We hope these articles will help readers to ground their teaching of the death of Jesus as atonement for sin in the very Gospels that narrate our Lord's exemplary life lived and laid down in our stead to pay for the world's sin and conquer our foes, death and Satan.

Charles A. Gieschen
Associate Editor

Flights from the Atonement

David P. Scaer

Self-reflection generally produces predictably favorable results. To create an image of ourselves with which we can live, we sift out unpleasant evidences and preserve positive ones. If we are successful, we can propel ourselves to greater excellence in our own eyes. Socrates said “know thyself,” but we can know ourselves as little as we can know the ways of God. You get the idea. Should we ever reach that point where we get close to discovering our true selves, our memories self-ignite and become the kidneys of our minds to eliminate the uncomplimentary residue that clogs the arteries of our self-esteem. James did not go far enough when he spoke of a man who observes his natural face in a mirror and then forgets how he looked (Jas 1:23-24). It is more likely that he was looking in a glass darkly and did not see his appearance in the first place.

This inability for self-critique also applies to communities of faith, whether it be the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod (LCMS), or the Roman Catholic Church. Even the most sophisticated public relations attempts to polish the mirror does little more than reinforce what we already think of ourselves. Self-image rarely corresponds to the way others see us. The prayer “Lord, cleanse thou me from secret faults” asks for their removal and not that they should be known to us. A side benefit of the symposium series of Concordia Theological Seminary, now happily and unexpectedly in its thirty-first year, is that guest speakers give us an opportunity to see ourselves in ways we could never discover by ourselves. Put in another way, “Oh that we would see our theological selves the way others do.” If critique does not match our self-image, we cast the tie breaking vote. At the 2007 symposium, one lecturer uncovered aspects of our corporate life at odds with our self-image and a brouhaha rose from the back benches whose echoes bounced into the pages of *Forum Letter*.¹

¹ Robert Benne, “Missouri Synod Paradox—Churchly and Sectarian at the Same Time,” *Forum Letter* 36, no. 3 (March 2007): 1-3.

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.

I. Primary and Secondary Fundamental Doctrines?

For Lutherans the doctrine of justification by grace through faith on account of Christ is so central to our self-image that we claim that by it the church stands or falls. A glitch in this doctrine threatens to ripple through the entire system with disastrous results. Get this doctrine right and the others will fall in line, or at least there is a good chance that they will.² We might, however, want to take a second look at this.³ A correct articulation of justification has not prevented errors in other doctrines. To complicate matters, Lutherans have disagreed, and still do, on the definition of justification.⁴ On the other hand, before the Lutheran articulation of this doctrine, the church flourished and produced still binding trinitarian and christological formulations.⁵

² "As Dr. Luther wrote, 'If this one teaching stands in purity, then Christendom will also remain pure and good, undivided and unseparated; but . . . where it does not remain pure, it is impossible to ward off any error sectarian spirit' (SD III, 6). Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 563. Speaking for many others, Matthew Harrison says: "My friends, the doctrine of justification is the answer to life's persistent questions. The doctrine of justification by grace through faith for Christ's sake has something to say about being human. The doctrine of justification is the heart and soul, the *sine non qua*, of Lutheranism and not only of Lutheranism but the *sine non qua* of Christianity." See "Crossing Old-Line Boundaries: The Works of Lutheran Charity," *CTQ* 71 (2007): 260.

³ There is no suggestion in the Corinthian correspondence that this church had the difficulties with justification that the Galatians had, but this did not prevent them from having women preachers and charismatic practices, denying the resurrection of the dead, and baptizing surrogates for the dead.

⁴ Lutheran pietism shifted the weight from justification to sanctification, as did rationalism by seeing salvation as a result of an ethical life. In the 1960s and 1970s some LCMS pastors took justification's place as the chief doctrine to mean that it was the only one that mattered. This infection passed into the ELCA where it eliminated barriers to allow fellowship with the Reformed, Episcopalians, and Methodists, and allowed the ordination of women pastors and closed the eye to the ordination of homosexuals. For differences among Lutherans, see Robert D. Preus, "Perennial Problems in the Doctrine of Justification," in *Doctrine is Life: Essays on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet I. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 97-117.

⁵ Michael Root makes this assessment: "We may decide that the theology of Gregory of Nyssa passes the test of being compatible with a true doctrine of justification. It would be odd, however, to say that the doctrine of justification was hermeneutically important to Gregory, and an interpretation of Gregory that used justification as a central concept may be appropriate for certain purposes, but it would be using categories foreign to Gregory's own theology." See "Continuing the Conversation: Deeper Agreement on Justification as Criterion and on the Christian as

Giving pride of place to justification as the chief doctrine assumes that some doctrines are more necessary than others. While the categories of primary and secondary fundamental doctrines may seem a bit old fashioned,⁶ erstwhile LCMS pastor Richard John Neuhaus claims a similar model in Roman Catholic theology: "There is, to be sure, hierarchy in the sense that some truths are more foundational than others."⁷ Axiomatic for any theology, so it seems, is that one core doctrine opens the door to the entire system and reappears throughout it, as justification does in the Augsburg Confession. In the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, Roman Catholics saw justification as a doctrine of the first rank without it being given exclusive honor.⁸ The dust has not settled on this document.⁹

Like Roman Catholics, the Reformed do not see justification as the one chief doctrine.¹⁰ Evangelicals who stand in the Reformed tradition may share with Lutherans a verbally identical definition, but in understanding faith as a conscious rational decision of which only the intellectually mature are capable, their definition is compromised. Since infants and young children cannot believe, their birth within a Christian family – and not faith – gives them a place within the covenant. Prime facie justification by faith is denied. The Evangelical or Reformed definition of faith which does not allow the *fides infantium* compromises their understanding of justification of faith and calls into question other aspects of their theology. Only that faith which is pure receptivity responding in trust to Christ

simul iustus et peccator," in *The Gospel of Justification*, ed. Wayne C. Stumme (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 48–49.

⁶ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1950–1953), 1:80–93.

⁷ Richard John Neuhaus, "True Devotion to Mary," *First Things* 178 (December 2007): 42.

⁸ The Lutheran World Federation and the Roman Catholic Church, *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).

⁹ Avery Cardinal Dulles says of the *Joint Declaration*, "Although not all would agree, I think the much vaunted Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration on Justification by Faith, signed in 1999, exaggerated the agreements"; see "Saving Ecumenism from Itself," *First Things* 178 (December 2007): 25.

¹⁰ Roman Catholic theologian H. Ashley Hall makes this observation: "For Lutherans, the doctrine of justification is properly called a dogma, since it is equated with the clearest summation of the gospel, its 'living voice.' . . . While Lutherans are unique in seeing the doctrine of justification as the chief article, Roman Catholics and Protestants esteem the doctrine as a chief article." See "The Development of Doctrine: A Lutheran Examination," *Pro Ecclesia* 16, no. 3 (2007): 270. Alistair McGrath notes that the early Swiss reformers saw their reformation in terms of morals not of justification. In the eighteenth century, John Wesley saw his work in the same way. See Alistair McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), 248–249.

qualifies as the *sola fide* by which sinners are justified. Self-reflection does not belong to the faith which justifies. For Calvin it does.¹¹ In Lutheran theology transformation of sinners (sanctification), which is more prominent in Roman Catholic and Reformed theologies, follows simultaneously with the creation of faith but does not belong to the believer's justification. Differences in defining faith render Lutheran agreements with mainline and Evangelical Protestants on justification more apparent than real. Describing justification does not accomplish justification. Another problem is raised when it is asked whether faith or the sacraments are more important for salvation. The inevitable answer is faith, but the comparison turns faith into a substance or "thing" alongside of the sacraments. Sacraments are really "divine things," the *communio sanctorum*, by and through which faith is created and hence possess the prior and greater position.¹²

Side by side with justification by faith at the heart of Lutheran theology is *sola scriptura*, though in practice some Lutheran theologians rely more on and cite non-biblical sources like Luther, the Lutheran Confessions, Lutheran Orthodoxy, the fathers cited by them, and favored theologians.¹³ In theological discussion, officially accepted documents often stand on a par with the Scriptures. So much for *sola scriptura*. Since the LCMS's controversies erupted in the 1960s and 1970s, Evangelical definitions of the Bible, like those on justification, have been regarded as the same as Lutheran ones because of identical wording, but they lack the christological component. Lutheran adherence to the inspiration and authority of Scripture includes their being thoroughly christological and not that they merely contain christological components. In the case of the Old Testament, these components are often limited by Evangelicals to messianic prophecies and types authorized by New Testament reference. Christ, however, is both the woof and the weave of the testaments and not only a golden thread lost in the tweed. If Christ is the golden thread, then all the Scriptures are pure gold. The Spirit who inspires is no more and no less than the Spirit of Christ, and so the Spirit's language is totally christological. Christ through the Spirit is both author and content of the

¹¹ Phillip Cary argues that for Calvin being saved by faith means knowing that one is saved by faith; see "*Sola Fide: Luther and Calvin*," *CTQ* 71 (2007): 265-281.

¹² This is implied when faith is compared with Baptism and the Lord's Supper, with the former designated as a primary fundamental doctrine and the latter a secondary one. If God is present in Baptism, this sacrament has a prior value in creating and confirming faith.

¹³ H. Ashley Hall notes that "the majority of Catholic doctrines and ecclesial practices are accepted by Lutherans"; see "The Development of Doctrine," 267.

Bible (John 16:14–15). Not only is the christological character of the Scriptures proven by citation (Luke 24:27), but it is required from the perspective of the doctrine of justification, which according to Lutherans is the chief doctrine. Any Scripture alleged to be non-christological would be incapable of effecting faith and justifying the sinner. A non-christological interpretation of a biblical pericope points to a deficit in trinitarian theology, since the Spirit would then be inspiring “truths” which did not have to do with Christ.

If Lutherans cannot recognize that shared doctrinal definitions with the Reformed mask bottomless crevices, it might surface that Lutherans are not agreed among themselves. Meeting in Helsinki in 1963, the Lutheran World Federation (LWF) could not come to agreement among its member churches. Hence one can sympathize with the Vatican’s hesitancy in signing the *Joint Declaration* and then adding an appendix to the document. Unclear to the Roman Catholic representatives was who spoke for Lutherans. Since then both Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians have distanced themselves from the document.¹⁴ Matters are further complicated by disagreement among Luther scholars on what his doctrine of justification really was. The Finnish School led by Tuomo Mannermaa holds that Luther understood justification as *theosis*, the indwelling of God in the believer.¹⁵ For R. Scott Clark, *theosis* seems close to the view of Osiander that justification takes place in the believer and not in Christ. Robert Jenson challenges this, since *theosis* has to do with the flesh and blood of Jesus and not a mystic indwelling.¹⁶ Clark correctly points out that this does not have to be an either-or situation,¹⁷ but it does show

¹⁴ Avery Dulles provides a brief survey of Lutheran and Roman Catholic dissent to the *Joint Declaration* (JD); see “Justification and the Unity of the Church” in *The Gospel of Justification*, ed. Wayne C. Stumme (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 126–127. Dulles has a low view of the *Joint Declaration*, as evident in his brief survey: “But if I were in a position to do so, I would prohibit these Lutheran positions from being preached in Catholic pulpits or taught in Catholic seminaries and catechisms. And conversely, I suppose that many Lutherans who subscribe to JD consider the Catholic positions described in that document misleading and even false.” That says it all!

¹⁵ For example, Tuomo Mannermaa, *Christ Present in Faith: Luther’s View of Justification*, ed. Kirsi Stjerna (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

¹⁶ Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, *The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 297.

¹⁷ R. Scott Clark, “*Iustitia Imputata Christi*: Alien or Proper to Luther’s Doctrine of Justification,” *CTQ* 70 (2006): 269–310. This should not be an either-or, as Clark notes: “I see no compelling reason to treat Luther’s doctrine of union and his doctrine of justification as if they were mutually exclusive. Both doctrines were important to Luther’s Protestant development, but they were logically distinct and Luther ordered

confusion in the Lutheran ranks. Objective justification means it happens first *extra nos* in Christ and then *in nobis*.

Confusion among Lutheran laity is of a different kind. Surveys show that a majority were more likely to see works as a factor in justification. From an eschatological perspective this response has a lot going for it. So the Athanasian Creed states, "Those who have done good things will enter into eternal life, and those who have done evil things into eternal fire," a phrase approximating Jesus' words at the final judgment (Matt 25:46).

II. Justification as the Chief Doctrine?

Francis Pieper, the LCMS's premier theologian, held that justification was the chief doctrine and only Lutherans got it right. Rome and the Arminians did not. Calvinists had the right wording but their doctrine of a limited atonement nullified their definition. Pieper may have realized this claim could be (mis)understood to mean that those not holding to the Lutheran definition were lost. Caught between two poles, neither of which he was willing to give up, he held that justification could take place where it was improperly defined. Rather than consigning this vast majority of Christendom to condemnation, he gave them a pass if they believed in Christ. So the phrase "felicitous inconsistency" came into lingua franca of the LCMS,¹⁸ but this made the chief doctrine less chief. Rather than focusing on one doctrine as the one of honor, the theological environment of a particular period determines the one on which the church stands or falls.

Pieper further hedges his position on justification as the chief doctrine by making the atonement the presupposition for justification, and so the *propter Christum* carries the greater weight.¹⁹ In this hierarchy of what is more or less fundamental, Jesus' death and resurrection occupies the position between justification and atonement. Of "first importance" for Paul was the message he received from the apostles and which he preached: "Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that

them quite differently than Ritschl, Holl, and the New Finnish school would have us think"; see "*Iustitia Imputata Christi*," 309.

¹⁸ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 1:21-34.

¹⁹ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, 3:514. The following translation of the German may not be adequate: "Thus Christology serves merely as the substructure of justification." It would better be rendered: "Thus Christology alone [*lediglich*] is the foundation for justification." See the German text in Francis Pieper, *Christliche Dogmatik*, 3 vol. (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1917-1924), 2:619. Root notes that Barth makes the confession of Christ the article by which the church stands or falls; see "Continuing the Conversation," 50.

he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4-5).²⁰ Because Christ's death was "for our sins," this proclamation justified the believer, but a fuller articulation of justification was reserved for Galatians and Romans, which may mean that the Corinthians were at least straight on justification; however, without correction and amendment, this felicitous inconsistency was doomed to collapse. Paul framed his doctrine of justification in response to those who placed adherence to Old Testament laws alongside of faith in Christ.

Similarly, Luther developed his doctrine of justification by faith in reaction to medieval church teaching that indulgences, pilgrimages, and masses assuaged divine displeasure over sin. This does not mean that non-Pauline books did not have messages that justified sinners by forgiving them, or that those who believed the teachings of the fathers and theologians before Luther were not accepted by God on account of Christ or they did not know it. They did, but the Old Testament prophets, the evangelists, and even Jesus did not articulate the doctrine of justification as Paul did, or take the matter further as Luther did. Absence of an articulated doctrine of justification does not mean that there was ever a time when believers were not justified by faith. Even James knew faith was the key to Abraham's being justified. A prophet's call to Israel to cease their devotion to pagan gods and to turn to the patriarchal God was a call to faith and forgiveness. Since the entire biblical message is about God graciously forgiving sinners by faith, justification permeates the entire Scriptures.

Another fly that spoils the ointment is when the articulation of the doctrine is passed off as essential to the proclamation. This conflation between justification, which is effected by the gospel, and its definition may have resulted from the Reformation controversy. Since Paul articulated the doctrine as no other biblical writer had, his definition becomes the additive to get greater interpretative (homiletical) mileage out of the biblical texts, including the words of Jesus. Recite the Pauline doctrine and justification takes place.²¹

²⁰ The Greek text reads: παρέδωκα γὰρ ὑμῖν ἐν πρώτοις, ὃ καὶ παρέλαβον, ὅτι Χριστὸς ἀπέθανεν ὑπὲρ τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ἡμῶν κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς καὶ ὅτι ἐτάφη καὶ ὅτι ἐγήγερται τῇ ἡμέρᾳ τῇ τρίτῃ κατὰ τὰς γραφὰς.

²¹ Some Reformed theologians put so much weight on the definition of justification that those seen to deny it are declared apostate. A panel of Evangelical theologians assembled in 1995 at Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, expressed their displeasure with "The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium," prepared by Evangelicals and Catholics Together; see "Irreconcilable Differences:

III. Atonement and Justification

In this scenario Paul becomes a midrash for the rest of the Bible, and so he often comes across as the preacher of the gospel in the place of Jesus, who is consigned to the role of a preacher of the law, as in the Sermon on the Mount. This is a common view of Christian and non-Christian alike. To this we respond that all of the Spirit's words create faith by which Christians are justified, but among his inspired words those spoken by Jesus in his humiliation take precedence in honor and effect.²² Foundational and intrinsic to the Lord's Prayer are atonement and justification in our asking God to forgive our debts as we forgive our debtors, though those who pray these words may be unaware that they are only fully understood in the Eucharistic words: "for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). Christians forgive those whom God has already forgiven and not

Catholics, Evangelicals, and the New Quest for Unity," *Bible Bulletin Board Web site* (Columbus, NJ: Bible Bulletin Board), <http://www.biblebb.com/files/ECTDOC.HTM> (accessed November 2, 2007). The group was displeased at the absence of "by faith alone [*sola fide*]" in paragraph 12: "We affirm together that we are justified by grace through faith because of Christ." This led John MacArthur and R. C. Sproul to state that the Roman Catholic Church was "an apostate form of Christianity," "a false religion," and "another religion." The other two panelists took exception but disapproved of the definition. MacArthur said some of his own church members "know about Christ, they know about the Bible, they believe all that, what they don't know about is how to become a Christian—how to be genuinely converted and saved—they don't know that." Sproul saw faith as accepting Christ as Lord and Savior. In regard to babies, Sproul agreed with the Roman Church that regeneration preceded faith but rejected their belief in baptismal regeneration. For Sproul and other Evangelicals, faith is a conscious decision and not, as Lutherans hold, merely trust. Sproul's claim that "'Justification by faith alone' is an essential doctrine" requires the believer to understand imputation.

²² One notes the christological interpretation of the Beatitudes in the homily by Pope Benedict XVI on All Saints' Day 2006: "Thus, we have come to the Gospel of this feast, the proclamation of the Beatitudes which we have just heard resound in this Basilica. Jesus says: Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed those who mourn, the meek; blessed those who hunger and thirst for justice, the merciful; blessed the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted for the sake of justice [righteousness] (cf. Mt 5: 3-10). In truth, the blessed *par excellence* is only Jesus. He is, in fact, the true poor in spirit, the one afflicted, the meek one, the one hungering and thirsting for justice, the merciful, the pure of heart, the peacemaker. He is the one persecuted for the sake of justice. The Beatitudes show us the spiritual features of Jesus and thus express his mystery, the mystery of his death and Resurrection, of his passion and of the joy of his Resurrection. This mystery, which is the mystery of true blessedness, invites us to follow Jesus and thus to walk toward it." See "Homily of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Vatican Basilica, Wednesday, 1 November 2006," http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/homilies/2006/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20061101_all-saints_en.html.

those whom God is about to forgive. God does the unconscionable thing in showing no greater favoritism to his own people than he does to his enemies, whom he showers with the same astounding generosity (Matt 5:45).

His non-discriminatory beneficence is evidence of objective justification; if this phrase is too scholastic, try universal justification. Narrow justification down to the one person of Jesus whom God finds and declares as righteous (Acts 3:14–15) and in this declaration he incorporates all of humanity. In raising Jesus from the dead, God found him righteous, and in that one act God found all of humanity righteous in him (1 Cor 15:22). Jesus, as the second, greater, and true Adam, possessed all of humanity in himself. So if all sinned in the first Adam and were condemned to death, how much more shall life and resurrection be given to all in the greater Adam, in and from whom God constituted a new humanity. Apart from how the Reformed understand faith, their doctrine of a limited atonement has christological consequences in that the first Adam remains more effective in bringing sin, death, and condemnation on all than Christ who brings justification, resurrection, and salvation only to the elect. Justification, like atonement, is as cosmic in its dimensions as Adam's sin. God does not justify individuals separately at the moment of faith, but justification happens once and for all in Christ²³ and by faith we share in what already exists as a reality in Christ. Preaching creates faith in Christ in whom sins are forgiven.

While in the divine hierarchy a greater honor belongs to the gospel of proclamation of Christ's death and resurrection than to faith which is effected by such proclamation, an even greater honor belongs to the events which form the content of the proclamation. Without Christ's death and resurrection as historical events, the proclamation would be empty words with no salvific value. This is at the heart of Paul's argument in 1 Corinthians, though these Christians were unaware of it. They believed the gospel that Christ died and rose, but they did not realize that their denial of the general resurrection logically meant that Christ was still dead and they could no longer count themselves as forgiven (justified). Without the historical foundation of Christ's resurrection, their justification or being forgiven was null and void. They were still in their sins. Within the Corinthian context, the doctrine by which that congregation was going to stand or fall was Christ's resurrection, without which justification by faith would not have a leg to stand on. Justification would have been the second

²³ "He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30).

shoe to fall, or was it the third? First was the general resurrection, the second was Christ's resurrection, and finally their justification. Matthew's argument is similar but perhaps not as obvious. His aggressive—and one might add polemical—defense of the empty tomb (Matt 28:11–15) is the foundation for Christ's entrusting his words and ministry to the apostles (Matt 28:16–20). The empty tomb reinforces his resurrection appearance to the women (Matt 28:9–10) that he had actually been raised from dead. Without a historically verifiable resurrection, as far as that is possible, Christ's establishing his church in the apostolic ministry would be vacuous. God's participation in history provided the foundation for the gospel, and the gospel creates and confirms faith by which believers are justified before God.

To recap our argument, at the external level sinners hear and believe the gospel and are forgiven (justified). Then we pass through the proclamation which justifies to the historical moments of crucifixion and resurrection which provide the proclamation with its content. Finally—or almost finally—we arrive at the atonement which for several reasons is the *fundamentum* of the Christian faith. From our perspective its importance rests in providing a foundation for our being forgiven (justified). As side benefits, death and Satan lose their threatening power. From God's perspective things are different. By the atonement, affronts from his rational creatures challenging his deity have been removed, and Satan is dethroned as the anti-god. God can be recognized as the sole creator, and so his creation awaits restoration. Atonement is all about his being creator *coeli et terrae*. Designating the atonement as the *fundamentum* does not detract from the necessity of Christ's crucifixion and resurrection as historical events, since they provide the housing, the external forms in which atonement and justification occur, and thus provide the gospel with its content. Remove the historical garments of the crucifixion and resurrection and not only is the king without clothing but there is no king. By the proclamation of the gospel, faith is created, and we are right smack back in the First Article of the Creed. Creation is not only restored but perfected.

IV. Atonement and the Trinity

In designating the atonement as the *fundamentum* for the Christian faith, a place must be found for the trinitarian mystery in relation to atonement and justification. Unless this is done, the doctrine of God is detached dogma. Rather than seeing atonement as foreign or even contradictory to who God is, it is the most profound expression of his trinitarian nature. If atonement is *fundamentum*, then Trinity must be "*fundamentissimum*," a mystery surpassing all others and in which all

others are subsumed. Atonement and God's trinitarian existence are distinct, but the former is the most perfect expression of the latter. In the moment of the atonement God is revealed as the Father who offers up the Son and in reciprocal action the Son offers himself up to the Father. In this sacrificing and being sacrificed, the eternal giving and receiving between the first and second persons of the Trinity is seen. Also within the inner-trinitarian life the Father gives of himself in love by eternally begetting the Son, and the Son responds to the Father with eternal love. All this is revealed in the atonement. Within the trinitarian life the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*) and the Father is the eternal source of the Son and the Spirit, so the Spirit is the goal and conclusion of the trinitarian life.

The atonement, which is characterized by the Father's sacrifice of the Son in which the Son sacrifices himself to the Father, is the source of the Spirit's ability to create faith so that in hearing the gospel of the atonement believers find themselves accepted by the Father and sacrifice themselves for others. In this way the trinitarian life and the act of atonement are seen in the lives of Christians. In our being presented by Christ as sacrifices to God, the effects of the atonement are seen in our lives (Rom 12:1). Before the Son offered himself as atonement to the Father, he was the Spirit of Christ who spoke through the prophets of what God was going to do. Now through an accomplished atonement the one who has always proceeded from the Son has become in the moments of the cross and resurrection the Spirit of Jesus testifying to what God has accomplished in these events. The holiness which characterized the trinitarian life is extended to sinners in the gospel to create faith. So the Spirit shares in the holiness of the Father through the Son and by his presence in the preaching of Christ's death and resurrection appropriates this holiness to believers so that before God they become saints, that is, holy ones. From their eyes the veil is removed and they see God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The one who is the eternal completion of the Trinity and brings the creative chaos to a glorious completion now completes the work of the Father and the Son in justifying sinners. Thus the Matthean formula Father-Son-Holy Spirit is not isolated dogma but a commentary of the cross event by and in which God makes atonement.

V. Agreement on Justification?

Evaluations have differed on the outcomes of the discussions on justification which resulted in the *Joint Declaration* and "Evangelicals and Catholics Together." In spite of a much needed openness surfacing in the

documents, major differences remain and are unlikely to be resolved to everyone's satisfaction.²⁴ James A. Nestingen may be the most blunt in calling the *Joint Declaration* "a public relations document."²⁵ Avery Cardinal Dulles asks, "If Lutherans hold that the justified person remains always and inevitably a sinner, sinning in every act, and worthy of condemnation in the sight of God, while Catholics hold that justified persons have been cleansed of all sin and can by their good works truly merit the crown of eternal life, are the two parties not truly opposed to each other?"²⁶ Then we come to the issue of some Lutherans closely resembling Roman Catholics and Roman Catholics who preach sermons which easily rival those of Lutherans in preaching Christ, the only way justification is accomplished in individuals.²⁷

It might be good to evaluate where we are in ecumenical discussion and rely on the observations of Alistair McGrath who sees the World Council of Churches as increasingly inconsequential.²⁸ To this we add that the National Council of Churches has been on financial life support for some time. McGrath notes that, in the place of one Protestant denomination joining with another, a different type of ecumenism has arisen. An example of this since 1994 is "Evangelicals and Catholics Together" in which their theologians lay their cards on the table taking note of similarities and—for now—insurmountable differences.²⁹ In the face of the collapse of organizational ecumenism, Christians see a need for trans-denominational alliances for the sake of survival, even if they are not complete in every aspect and more informal. Agreements across

²⁴ See essays in *The Gospel of Justification*, ed. Wayne C. Stumme (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006).

²⁵ James Arne Nestingen "Anti-JDDJ: Visions and Realities," *dialog* 39 (Spring 2000): 140.

²⁶ Dulles, "Justification and the Unity of the Church," 127-128.

²⁷ Root provides a citation from the Act of Oblation to the Merciful Love of St. Therese of Lisieux which sounds much like Luther: "All our justice is blemished in your eyes. I wish, then, to be clothed in your *justice* and to receive from your love the eternal possession of *yourself*." See "Continuing the Conversation," 54. Also see n. 22 above.

²⁸ "Yet when the time came to mark the World Council of Churches' golden jubilee in 1998, nobody felt that was all that much to celebrate. . . . However noble its intentions, the organization had become bogged down in internal debates and ceased to play a credible role in bringing Protestants together." See McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 286.

²⁹ "Since neither secularism nor Islam seem likely to disappear in the foreseeable future, Protestantism can be expected to shrug off some of its historic debates and differences, in the interest of mutual survival." See McGrath, *Christianity's Dangerous Idea*, 287.

denominational lines have created a checkered board. In other words, "I won't go to Communion with you but we have a common purpose in commitment to certain doctrines."

But what doctrines are these? Women's ordination is one at the periphery, at least in comparison with the atonement which is at the center, but when we look at the feminist agenda we might discover that the ordination issue strikes an ice pick into the trinitarian heart. In the dwindling Lutheran opposition to the practice, we make common cause with Roman Catholic and Orthodox communions. Already for the LWF the ordination of women has replaced justification as the dogma by which the church stands or falls. Oppose this practice, then one is out of the fellowship and—as in its Nordic member churches—denied ordination. At the first meeting of the LCMS's consultation on "The Scriptural Relationship of Man and Woman," the keynote speaker began by saying that the ordination of women could only come up for discussion when Rome and the Orthodox initiated the practice.³⁰ Some participants were less than fully enthusiastic. In a feminine laden atmosphere where any or all distinctions between the sexes are eliminated, even in the matter of who may marry whom, adherence to biblical mandates and catholic practice of ordaining only qualified men is made increasingly difficult. Already in feminist circles the Father-Son-Holy Spirit formula is found to be offensive and more acceptable replacements for the masculine references have been put in place. Also in need of revision from a feminist perspective is the traditional doctrine of sacrificial atonement. The blood, guts, and sacrifice need removal.

VI. No Agreement on Atonement?

We should be able to acknowledge agreement on the historical character of Christ's death and resurrection³¹ and then proceed to the

³⁰ Gilbert Meilaender delivered the keynote presentation on "Men and Women in Christ" at the first consultation on December 4–5, 2006.

³¹ Richard Hays notes that the current Roman pontiff "regards the separation between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history as a disaster for theology and Christian faith. His book attempts to remedy the situation"; see review of *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, by Benedict XVI, *First Things* 175 (August/September 2007): 49. Hays notes that though the pope attempts to use historical methods, he does not give sufficient attention to how the evangelists made use of the words of Jesus. In this he is closer to hermeneutical methods used in the LCMS up to the last quarter of the twentieth century. John Stephenson, professor of historical theology at Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary in St. Catherines, Ontario, Canada, says that the late Robert D. Preus, who embodied confessional theology in himself as no other figure in the LCMS in the second half of the twentieth

atonement. Whatever difficulties Lutherans had with the Roman Catholic interpretation of the Mass, few, if any, existed on the atonement in the Augsburg Confession, the Confutation, and the Apology. Such agreement is no longer the case. Among the so-called deficiencies of the catholic faith is "the notion that Jesus died to appease His Father's wrath." Offering scholarly support for his denial of the atonement is the Roman Catholic theologian Stephan Finlan.³² Sins are forgiven but without price and sacrifice. Finlan is single-minded in dismantling the Anselmic or Latin theory of the atonement. More than half a century ago Gustaf Aulén did this for Lutherans with his *Christus Victor*,³³ but he did this without Finlan's determination to paint the sacrificial aspects of the atonement in violent and, hence, unacceptable terms. He cites feminist theologians to show that Christianity is a violent religion precisely because of the atonement. In his first book one sentence says everything: "'Redemption' does not mean God actually paid anyone off, or paid Godself off; it just means God *rescued* people."³⁴ Were this not enough, Finlan followed up with another book two years later. There he states, "The killing of Jesus was very much like the killing of other honest men and women throughout time."³⁵ He goes even further when he writes, "What was formerly thought to uphold christology—Jesus' death as a

century, "entertained considerable respect for Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, whom he once labeled 'more Catholic—in the best sense of word—than the pope'; see "Robert Preus, Historian of Theology," in *Doctrine is Life: The Essays of Robert D. Preus on Justification and the Lutheran Confessions*, ed. Klemet I. Preus (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 363. Preus did not live long enough to see Cardinal Ratzinger become Benedict XVI. The atonement has, however, been a doctrine that has divided Western Christianity from the Orthodox. Yet some Lutherans can even set atonement aside. That Christ offered himself up as a sacrifice for sins and still presents himself to God as a sacrifice for sin gave cause for a LCMS pastor to resign and, in his own words, "to embrace the Orthodox Faith." John W. Fenton, "Statement of Resignation" *Conversi ad Dominum* blog (October 29, 2006), <http://conversiadominum.blogspot.com/2006/10/statement-of-resignation.html> (accessed March 29, 2007).

³² Stephen Finlan, *Problems with the Atonement: The Origins of, and Controversy about, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), and *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 2007). At the time his first book was published, Finlan was a research assistant for the Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture at Drew University; he is now an instructor in biblical studies at Fordham University and Seton Hall University.

³³ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (1931; repr., London: SPCK, 1953). This book had a wide influence in Anglican and Lutheran churches including the LCMS, especially in the 1950s.

³⁴ Finlan, *Problems with the Atonement*, 107 (emphasis original).

³⁵ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 40.

ransom payment or substitution—is no longer convincing and is ethically repugnant.”³⁶ For him sacrifice and atonement are only horrible metaphors about obtaining forgiveness by faith. So he concludes his book in this way: “But this does not mean that the individual’s faith is all-powerful, independent of Christ or of grace. Faith is faith *in Jesus*.”³⁷ Justification has entirely replaced atonement at the center of theology.

Coming off the presses shortly thereafter was a gentler critique of the atonement by David A. Brondos, who is calmly persuasive but whose conclusions are the same as Finlan’s.³⁸ After chapters on Isaiah, Luke, and Paul, he gives a detailed historical survey from Irenaeus³⁹ to feminist theology (e.g. that of Rosemary Radford Ruether). Christ’s death does not accomplish an objective redemption, but with the resurrection it is only revelation of God’s love for us. Like Finlan, Brondos sees sacrifice and atonement as no more than metaphors or picture language and compares his own method of excising sacrifice out of the Bible to demythologizing.⁴⁰ His limiting of the New Testament discussion to Luke and Paul is reminiscent of a late second-century heretic. Conveniently excluded are Matthew, Mark, and Hebrews with their sacrificial understandings of the atonement. For Brondos the patriarchal ideology which was at the heart of the doctrine of the atonement also prevented women from being ministers.⁴¹

VII. Conclusion

Agreement on justification seems out of our grasp, perhaps even among Lutherans, but if we are to get things in right order we should acknowledge agreement not only on the first things preached, that is the crucifixion and resurrection, but the atonement and the Trinity, the things behind the things preached which create faith. Without these there is no faith and no church. A Vatican response in 1998 to the *Joint Declaration* seems to be saying something very similar: “the message of justification, according to Scriptures and already from the time of the Fathers, has to be organically integrated into the fundamental criterion of the *regula fidei*, the

³⁶ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 127.

³⁷ Finlan, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 132 (emphasis original).

³⁸ David A. Brondos, *Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007). Brondos is an ELCA theologian at the Theological Community of Mexico.

³⁹ Aulén began his survey with Irenaeus, who seems to be a launching point for dislodging sacrificial aspects from the atonement; see *Christus Victor*, 32–51.

⁴⁰ Brondos, *Salvation and the Cross*, 183.

⁴¹ Brondos, *Salvation and the Cross*, 177.

confession of one God in three persons, christologically centered and rooted in the living church and its sacramental life."⁴²

⁴² Quoted in Root, "Continuing the Conversation," 50.