COMMENTARY ON BURNELL F. ECKARDT, JR.’S
ANSELM AND LUTHER ON THE ATONEMENT: WAS IT “NECESSARY”?

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Importance and Standing

Sin and salvation. Every Christian must think about sin and salvation. To be sure, there are other important topics, perhaps some as important, but are there any more important?

Lutherans repeatedly say that justification is the article of faith upon which the church stands or falls. This is most certainly true. But the atonement goes along with that. In his article, “Flights from the Atonement,” Dr. David P. 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.²

In the history of atonement theology, Anselm and his Cur Deus Homo are highly important. Their influence permeates salvation thinking even when we are not aware of it. In turn, salvation thinking influences many other areas of thought. What is the relation of Luther’s proclamation on justification and atonement to Anselm? As humans go, these two men, Anselm and Luther, stand as two of the tallest, if not the tallest, in salvation theology history (aside from, obviously, Jesus and the writers of Scripture).

So, the first marvel of this dissertation by Dr. Eckardt is simply this: his selection of topic. Before he ever wrote the first word of this study, he already accomplished half of the mission by identifying the importance of a topic that needed to be researched and explained. As Eckardt himself says in the preface, “There will never be a topic more worthy of research than the doctrine of the atonement, which we find at the heart of the mystery of the Christian faith.”

Furthermore, he was swimming in waters that others had muddied. Several essential points of conventional wisdom about the relation of Anselm and Luther are simply wrong, but they are supported stoutly by a rigid scaffolding of academic circular cross-footnoting. It takes some academic guts to put one’s toe into this water, especially when it could make or break whether you are awarded a degree. This becomes apparent, if not from before, at least after the fact, when you observe efforts of conventional theologians such as G. R. Evans to pan Eckardt’s dissertation.³ It is Evans, not Eckardt, who missed something. I take the evaluation of Kenneth Hagen, rather than those like Evans, who in the foreword says:

The style is invigorating, the argument engaging, the question commendably narrowed, the conclusions trustworthy. ... No one is in a better position to sort through the issues than Eckardt. ... He ably criticizes those who import theological presuppositions not derived from the historical authors [Anselm and Luther] themselves.

I take Robert Preus’ evaluation, who in a second foreword said:

Over the years there have been many books touching upon Anselm’s and Luther’s doctrine of the vicarious atonement, at times comparing the views of the two great theologians and often drawing the must unfounded and bizarre conclusions. Eckardt’s study goes directly and objectively back to the two major sources of the doctrine of the atonement as it has been taught in Western Christendom for the last thousand years.

In this context, Dr. Eckardt’s work fulfills the finest in doctoral dissertation criteria, namely, that it advances rather than merely repeats the state of the art.

And that is why you should read it, because it can advance rather than merely repeat your understanding of sin, salvation, atonement, and justification, upon which you stand or fall.

Author

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Dr. Eckardt is a sometime composer of sacred music. He also is known locally as the man behind the piano in the community jazz band. A native of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, Dr. Eckardt and his wife Carol have six sons, four daughters-in-law, and nine grandchildren.

Among his other works are:


“When Theology Lost Its Heart: Justification from Abelard to the Late Schoolmen (1000-1349),” in A Justification Odyssey (2001) – Congress on the Lutheran Confessions, (St. Louis, MO : Luther Academy ; Minneapolis, MN : Association of Confessional Lutherans, 2002).


Preview of Substance

To understand a theologian, it helps to bear in mind not only what he seems to be saying, but his purpose in saying it, and his method of arriving at it or expressing it. Purpose and method matter for meaning. Can we be so sure we got the what while ignoring the why and the how?

The trouble with many conventional treatments of Anselm and Luther is that they fail to consider their differences in purpose and method. This failure, especially among many claiming to be heirs of Luther, has driven a deeper and wider wedge between Anselm and Luther than is warranted. To be sure, they have differences, and to be sure, the differences are significant. But on vicarious satisfaction, they hardly are as distant from one another as has been made the popular perception.
Eckardt’s study responds to the comparisons that have been made between Anselm and Luther on the atonement. Eckardt carefully observes Anselm’s purpose. He carefully observes Luther’s purpose. They both are talking about the atonement, but they have different purposes. Eckardt carefully observes Anselm’s method. He carefully observes Luther’s method. They are both talking about the atonement, but their methods are different. When they are read with purpose and method in mind, Anselm and Luther come into focus. The result is seeing major points of difference, but also major areas of similarity. Their answers to the question, “Was the atonement necessary,” both are “Yes.”

As simple and innocuous as that might sound superficially, the consequence is a continental divide with Luther and Anselm together on one side, though by method and purpose differently, and many other atonement theologians on the other side.

Anselm’s purpose is faith seeking understanding. Luther’s purpose is proclamation of the Word, which is proclamation of Christ.

Anselm’s method is sola ratione or remoto Christo (Christ being removed). Luther’s method is sola scriptura.

Anselm views Christ “from above.” He starts at God and moves to who Christ must be. Luther views Christ “from below.” He starts at the Jesus in the manger and sees who the baby is.

Anselm and Luther have very different doctrines of man and of sin. Yet, the two both see the atonement as necessary and their doctrines of the atonement have significant similarities.

The differences make the atonement even more necessary for Luther than for Anselm.

**Plan of the Dissertation**

Chapter I is an introduction. This sets up the dispute over vicarious satisfaction. It shows the attack on Anselm and the attempt to enlist Luther’s endorsement of the attack.

Chapter II presents points of correspondence between Anselm and Luther on substance. Eckardt views this from two perspectives: first, looking from Anselm to Luther; and second, looking from Luther to Anselm. In the first perspective, waypoints along the path of comparison are Anselm’s views of sin, God’s justice, and the vicarious satisfaction. In the second perspective, waypoints are Luther’s views of Christ, the love of God, and faith.

Chapter III compares purpose and method in style of expression. Both men use Scripture, but for different purposes. Anselm uses it to achieve pulchritude (agreeableness arising from beauty). He uses reason for the same purpose, to show fittingness and beauty. Luther uses Scripture for proclamation. He does not depend on the pulchritude of Scripture. This has made many theologians conclude that the two disagree on the Atonement. That is not true, at least, not to the extent portrayed.

Chapter IV presents points of difference between Anselm and Luther. They have very different ideas of what sin is. They have very different ideas of how faith advances. Anselm believes faith can advance by reason seeking understanding of what Scripture and the church fathers have taught. Luther, on the other hand, mistrusts reason, and adheres to the Word of God even when he himself acknowledges that he
cannot resolve Scripture’s paradoxes or what rationales might lie behind its teachings.

In Luther’s theology of the cross, it does not matter that we cannot resolve paradoxes or penetrate the hidden counsels of God. God often absconds regarding his reasons or his seeming contradictions. But attempting to rationally systematize doctrine does not make things any better. Suppose you were to resolve a scriptural paradox. Would that change Scripture’s paradoxical teaching? No. The teaching would remain. Suppose you could catch the absconding Deity and demand his rationales. Would what you found out about the hidden God change what the revealed God has says? No. Everything the revealed God says still would be true. Furthermore, in this life, what the revealed God has said, paradoxes and all, apparent irrationalities and all, is more than sufficient for forgiveness, life, and salvation.

So the differences are significant, but all by itself that still does not conclude the question, how corresponding or different are their ideas of the atonement.

Chapter V sums up the effects of the similarities and differences between Anselm and Luther on the necessity of the atonement. Owing to their differences of purpose and method, they have different reasons for nevertheless coming to the same conclusion. For Anselm, the atonement is necessary because it appeals to reason and it is fitting. For Luther the atonement is necessary because, as a matter of fact, atone is what Jesus did, therefore, to proclaim Christ, one hardly can avoid proclaiming the atonement He worked.

The Chapters

Chapter I -- Introduction

In the 19th century, an attack on the orthodox doctrine of vicarious atonement began in earnest. Johann Christian von Hofmann opposed Anselm and vicarious satisfaction. As if to enlist Luther’s endorsement of the attack, he tried to show that Luther cannot be associated unambiguously with vicarious satisfaction. Supporting Hofmann was Albrecht Ritchl.

In 1931, Swedish Lutheran Gustaf Auken’s Christus Victor was published in English. He posits a sharp distinction of two ideas of the atonement. He calls vicarious satisfaction the Latin view characterized especially by Anselm. He calls the other view the “classical” view. In support of this view, he claims Irenaeus and Luther. This gave new life to the attack of Hofmann, Ritchl, and company on Anselm, and new support for a caricature of Luther as opposing Anselm and vicarious satisfaction.

More recently Jürgen Moltmann, rejecting not only vicarious satisfaction but also traditional Christology, misappropriates language from Luther to project an impression that, building on Luther, one rightly rejects Anselm and vicarious satisfaction.

Pitting Luther against Anselm became well more than a cottage industry. “Most mischievous of all is Gerhard Forde.”

Perhaps Forde’s treatment is the most annoying because it is most clearly an effort to put words into Luther’s mouth, words which are more convincing of Forde’s antagonism towards the Anselmian view than of his accuracy in representing Luther.
Anselm’s definition of sin as privation of justice forces him to deny that concupiscence is sin. This allows him to be optimistic about the powers of reason. Luther’s more profound understanding of sin makes him mistrust reason in theology. This sets up a stark contrast of method between them. But difference of method in and of itself does not necessarily have to produce contradictory results.

The primary characteristic of Anselm’s method is a chain-of-reasoning progression. In the progression, point is built upon previous point, ascending a ladder of logical reasoning, leading finally to the conclusion that Anselm set out to prove. Generally, he sets out to do this sola ratione (by reason alone) and remoto Christo (Christ being removed), which means that what already is known of Christ or his work from Scripture or tradition is off-limits for the method of proof.

Anselm’s method is not borne of a desire to discredit the authority of Scripture. He believes that what Scripture teaches is true. What he is not so sure of is Scripture’s power to convert, its internal capability to accomplish its ends. Anselm is employing reason not with the purpose to supplant any scriptural doctrine, but to enhance the prospects of convincing people of what Scripture teaches.

By contrast, Luther has confidence that the Word of God, besides telling the truth, has the power to convert.

This leaves open the possibility that, despite great differences of purpose and method, Anselm and Luther still in substance teach the same vicarious satisfaction.

After having introduced all this, the balance of Chapter I presents Luther’s acquaintance with Anselm. Across six and a half pages, Eckardt surveys references to Anselm in Luther’s works. Luther clearly is familiar with Anselm, and while he does make a couple criticisms of him, the great weight of the references clearly belie the claims of Hofmann, Ritchl, Aulèn, Moltmann, Forde, and others about Luther’s supposed antipathy toward Anselm.

**Chapter II – Points of Correspondence**

Anselm and Luther each have a different set of central concerns leading to their views of the atonement. For Anselm, sin, the justice of God, and vicarious satisfaction are at the center. For Luther, Christ (his high Christology), the love of God, and faith are at the center. For each of them, to be sure, there are other indispensable ancillaries. For neither man are the three concerns mentioned the entirety of their thought, but the three are central.

To compare the two on each man’s own respective terms and not force a result upon them, Eckardt adopts a two-perspective approach. First, he looks at Anselm on Anselm’s own terms, and then from Anselm on Anselm’s own terms to Luther and compares Luther to him. Second, he looks at Luther on Luther’s own terms, and then from Luther on Luther’s own terms to Anselm and compares Anselm to him. These two perspectives avoid imposing Anselm’s terms onto Luther or Luther’s terms onto Anselm. Just as importantly, these perspectives also avoid imposing 19th, 20th, or 21st century presuppositions onto either Anselm or Luther. We must let Anselm answer for himself and Luther answer for himself.

*Sin*
On this plan, Eckardt begins with Anselm and his first central concern, sin. What does Anselm think sin is? How does his idea of sin affect whether the atonement is necessary? How does his idea of sin affect vicarious satisfaction?

For Anselm, sin is a privation of original righteousness. This makes sin tremendously serious. It warrants the penalty of death. When, in *Cur Deo Homo*, Boso suggests that perhaps a single act of remorse could blot sin out, Anselm famously replies, “You have not yet considered how weighty a matter is sin.”

For Luther, sin is the vice of concupiscence, a morbid quality of the soul. Thus, Anselm and Luther differ extremely in their ideas of sin. How does this difference affect the questions about whether the atonement is necessary and about vicarious satisfaction? Does Luther’s view make the atonement unnecessary? Does it preclude vicarious satisfaction?

No, just the other way around. For all the seriousness of Anselm’s view of sin, Luther’s view is even more serious. Concupiscence is even worse than privation of original righteousness. The morbid condition of the soul is even worse than privation of original righteousness. If the difference on sin causes a difference on the necessity of atonement, the difference is not that Luther sees less necessity for atonement. The difference is that Luther sees more necessity.

Luther’s serious view of sin, though not among his three central concerns leading to his view of the atonement, nevertheless is not hidden in a corner. He teaches it in his most known, most translated, most read works such as the Large Catechism and *De Servo Arbitrio*. Because of his view of sin, Luther agrees with Anselm that atonement is necessary. Also because of his view of sin, satisfaction will have to be vicarious because sinful man cannot make satisfaction for himself.

Eckardt does not say this at this juncture of his dissertation, but as I read and re-read this section, it occurs to me that Hofmann, Ritchl, Aulén, Moltmann, Forde, and company have got this, to say it in the finest academic tone, bass ackwards. They have observed the difference between Anselm and Luther on sin and flipped the polarity of the difference backwards as if Luther’s view of sin were less serious, and hence that Luther views the atonement as less necessary and that Luther views vicarious satisfaction as less necessary. They then claim Luther supports their heterodox and heretical attacks on the atonement.

Anselm thinks sin is serious and therefore an atonement of vicarious satisfaction is necessary. Luther thinks sin even more serious, and *a fortiori* an atonement of vicarious satisfaction is necessary.

*God’s Justice*

Continuing his plan of comparison, Eckardt proceeds to Anselm’s second central concern, the justice of God.

The concept of fittingness is critical to Anselm. God must be just because it is fitting for God to be just. In *Cur Deo Homo*, Anselm considers whether God could forgive sin out of pure mercy, without satisfaction. He says, it is not “fitting for him to forgive sin which is unpunished.” For Anselm, the justice of God is strictly forensic. It derives from God being the perfect Judge. Anselm’s method is *remoto Christo*. He develops it without consideration of what we know about Christ from Scripture or tradition.

As was the case on sin, where Anselm’s and Luther’s ideas were fundamentally different, so here, the two
men use the term “God’s justice” very differently. But again, how does this difference affect the questions about whether the atonement is necessary and about vicarious satisfaction? Does Luther’s view make the atonement unnecessary? Does it preclude vicarious satisfaction?

No, not when we take each man on his own terms. Anselm got to the necessity that sin be punished by his *sola ratione* chain-of-reasoning progression that began with God’s action being fitting. Never mind how he got there, once he is there, he is there. Is Luther also there or not, never mind how he might have gotten there.

Luther’s method is fundamentally different. He distrusts reason and makes no use of *sola ratione*. He has the highest of Christology, so he never would consider proclaiming Christ *remoto Christo*. Luther’s method is *sola scriptura* and Christological.

By Luther’s method, what develops? Scripture reveals Christ. Scripture reveals what Christ does. Christ takes the punishment of sin. Luther gets his idea about God’s justice not from a rational chain of deductions about God’s supposed nature as Anselm does, but from the concrete facts of what Christ did. Luther looks at these facts and sees that God executed justice on him for us. Luther concludes from the fact that God’s justice was satisfied in the death of Christ, God’s justice must be satisfied. Once Luther is there, he is there, never mind how he got there.

As with the section on sin, as I read and re-read this section on God’s justice, though Eckardt does not bring it up at this juncture of his dissertation, it occurs to me that Hofmann, Ritchl, Aulén, Moltmann, Forde, and company have gone off the rails here as well. To make out that Luther’s thought gives support to an up-and-forgive mercy without satisfaction, by pure mercy without justice, one would have to say that Luther’s concrete facts of what God has done in Christ are less of a reason to believe in the justice of God than is Anselm’s chain of reasoning from fittingness. In other words, they refuse to take as a clue about God’s justice what God has in fact done.

Anselm’s reason is that he reasons from fittingness that God must be just. Luther’s reason is that Scripture reveals that God in fact has been just. This difference provides no basis for a contention that Luther undermines Anselm’s conclusion that God’s justice cannot be evaded.

Luther uses the term ‘God’s justice” for the justice or righteousness that God gives freely to sinners in the Gospel. Luther declares that the “alien righteousness” of Christ is bestowed upon the sinner “from without.” This righteousness is alien to the sinner and from without the sinner because it is not the sinner’s but Christ’s. It is the righteousness which Christ has earned. The sinner receives this righteousness through faith. It is not the believing itself that constitutes righteousness before God, but the Christ in whom one believes. Luther’s placement of so much stress on the fact that what cancels sin is this righteousness of Christ points to an agreement in principle with Anselm’s refusal to skirt the justice of God. To say that Christ’s righteousness swallows up sin, and that this righteousness becomes ours through faith is to say that sin cannot be dealt with except by means of this righteousness.

When Luther says that salvation is by faith alone, he is pitting faith against a domestic righteousness of the sinner’s own by the sinners works and merits. He is not pitting faith against God’s justice but against a doomed human works righteousness. Faith saves because it receives the alien righteousness that Christ
earned by the work of atoning for us vicariously.

Vicarious Satisfaction

Continuing his plan of comparison, Eckardt proceeds to Anselm’s third central concern, the vicarious satisfaction.

Consistent with his method throughout, Anselm’s thought here is driven again by fittingness. God must save because otherwise his creation would be foiled rather than vindicated. God would have created in vain, which is unfitting for God. God must finish what He started.

How will God save? Whatever He decides to do, it must be fitting, and this includes fitting with what already has been concluded in early stages of Anselm’s chain of reasoning, especially that God’s justice must be upheld because injustice would be unfitting.

Fittingness also requires that the one in the wrong must satisfy, the one who owes must pay. So fittingness requires that God’s justice be upheld by a remission of sin in which man, the guilty party, makes the satisfaction.

With all this in place, Anselm can arrive at the homo piece of deus homo, that is, man. Without this piece, an imagined vicarious satisfaction would be unfitting because satisfaction would not be made by the fitting party, the one in the wrong.

The vicarious satisfaction is not, so to speak “x for y,” but “x for x,” man for man. Because Christ is man – homo – in Christ man makes satisfaction for himself.

Note that this link in the chain of reasoning, as is consistent throughout Anselm’s thought, is based on fittingness. Man for man is fitting, and that is why the charge of the naysayers that Anselm is only being legalistic simply imposes their notions about law onto a man who at this juncture is not even thinking from Scripture or God’s Law, not operating on sola scriptura, but is operating sola ratione on the basis of fittingness. They pound the square peg of Anselm with a large enough sledge of their own presuppositions to drive him into their own round antinomian hole. They are reactionaries against a “legal scheme” which is a straw man. They have refused or failed to take Anselm on his own terms.

Fittingness carries further. Fittingness requires not only man for man, but sinful man for sinful man, sinner for sinner. Thus, in another link in the chain of reasoning, Christ pays not as another, but as the sinner, which fulfills the original requirements from sin and God’s justice. Stop right here and take stock of where we are, how close we have come to the necessity of the imputation of the sins of man to Christ, how close we already are to Luther, who by an entirely different route arrives at his “happy exchange.” But holding that thought in suspense for the time being, we carry on with Eckardt’s development.

Since man fittingly has made satisfaction for man, Aulén and Forde claim they have caught Anselm in a gotcha. Man pays for man, which is justice, and therefore Anselm’s vicarious satisfaction has no mercy. They have not understood so much as the title of Anselm’s book, Cur Deus Homo. They observe the homo piece and are blind at this juncture to the deus piece. Christ is not only homo. Christ is deus-homo, the very thing that Anselm made his topic, the very thing he so clearly and simply flagged by his title. Because of deus-homo, it also is true that God himself pays the debt. God never owed a debt. For him to make
satisfaction is mercy.

Furthermore, again the naysayers are not taking Anselm on his own terms about fittingness. We have seen already that not only is it fitting that man make satisfaction for man, but also that it is fitting that God save his creation. The need for God himself to make the atonement is strictly in keeping with what is fitting.

Aulén denies a priori the possibility of the very point Anselm is trying to prove. It is man who must perform the satisfaction – therefore it cannot be God? The deftness of this non-sequitur has evidently convinced Forde.6

One wonders whether Forde bought Aulén’s claim without investigating it for himself.7

While at this juncture, Eckardt does not get ahead of himself, yet we as readers already can anticipate something about whether Anselm and Luther correspond or differ from each other here. What Anselm consistently does is maintain the whole deus-homo. The heterodox and heretical theologians make Christ either all deus or all homo, a false dichotomy that denies the Incarnation. Luther’s central concern of his high Christology will not let him go off into one ditch of a Christ who is homo but not deus nor the other ditch of a Christ who is deus but not homo. Like Anselm, Christ as God-man in the personal union of the two natures always is solidly at the center. Luther gets there from sola scriptura and Anselm gets there from sola ratione, but both get there.

Aulén’s own theory suffers from the very deficiency that he charges against Anselm. He charges that since, in Anselm, man must make satisfaction for man, Anselm fails to answer his own question about why God became man. Aulén contends that in Anselm’s theory, God need not atone. God could send someone who is only a man. In Aulén’s Christus victor theory, we are in bondage to the tyrant, the Devil. So God sent his only begotten Son to deliver us from the tyrant. But why, Aulén? Since Satan is an angel, why would it not have been sufficient to send an angel? Aulén is missing his own point, let alone Anselm’s.

For Luther, the Hauptartikel of the Christian faith, justification, can be expressed in an abundance of images. All the images “are generally quite compatible with Anselm’s thought.”8

Luther most frequently speaks in terms of this celebrated fröhliche Wechsel, the happy exchange. In this exchange, we receive all good and Christ receives all evil. We receive all that Christ has earned by the atonement — grace, life, and salvation. Christ receives in exchange our sin, death, and damnation in his passion.

This exchange occurs by forensic imputation. Christ’s righteousness is counted or reckoned to us.

This is so compatible with Anselm and vicarious satisfaction that those who want to drive a wedge between Luther and Anselm and enlist Luther as an endorser of their denial of vicarious satisfaction first must mutilate what Luther says. Forde portrays Luther’s happy exchange as if it happens not by forensic imputation but by the mystical presence of Christ in the Christian. Then he can say that it is practically the same thing as the scholastic gratia infusa – infused grace. This grace or righteousness becomes a property of man. As a result, the atonement is not a satisfaction, nor is it very vicarious. Voilà! Luther opposes Anselm… but not before Luther opposes Luther.

Here Forde has done again what we observed him doing with deus-homo. He considered one, the homo,
but not the other, deus. He refused to take Anselm on his own terms and let Anselm’s position be what he said it was right from his title onward, Cur Deus Homo. In the same way, Luther’s exchange has two sides, one from Christ to us, and the other from us to Christ. Forde considers only one of them, thus denying by ignoring what Luther was saying from the very title onward, exchange. He observes what the sinner receives from Christ and says the sinner receives it by infusion, not imputation. In his scheme, if Christ does not receive the sins of man by infusion rather than by forensic imputation, where is the exchange? To employ Luther’s exchange against Anselm, first Forde amputates half of the exchange.

He had to amputate half of the exchange because, had he maintained it on his (Forde’s) own terms, look at the Christological implications. If the exchange were by infusion rather than by imputation, then he would be saying that sin was infused into Christ and sin became a property of Christ just like grace is infused into the sinner and grace becomes a property of the sinner. With Luther’s high Christology as a center of his concerns, with his purpose being to proclaim Christ, this is the sort of error Luther does not make. Luther is too centered on Christ to speak in such oblivion of one’s Christological implications.

Thus is Luther’s writings and sermons, he frequently proclaims Christ, “that Christ made satisfaction for our sins and that his satisfaction is ours.” Christ’s satisfaction has “through his blood and death paid for our sins and reconciled God.” Notice the objective effect of the atonement on God in Luther’s proclamation.

Vas ist das? Vicarious satisfaction.

Christ

Having completed his first perspective from Anselm to Luther, Echardt now continues to his second perspective from Luther to Anselm. He begins with Luther’s first central concern, Christ.

“Luther’s Christology is of the highest kind.” Jesus is God emphatically. One finds less reference to the humanity of Christ in Luther because it is less scandalous to reason.

Many theologians say that for Luther, justification is the heart of all theology. While that is so, affirmations of it can become distortions if it is not held in coordination with Luther’s Christology. He emphasis on Christology is so consistent and emphatic that “we may call it the shibboleth of Luther.”

Luther does not deal with the atonement abstracted from Christology or the work of Christ abstracted from Christ. What makes the work of Christ wondrous is that the man Christ is fully and bodily God, making the atonement the work of God himself. “For Luther Christology cannot be discussed statically. ... The One who is in the Father is for Luther the One who suffers, and through whom justification is accomplished; and for Luther it is not possible to ponder these thoughts in isolation from each other.”

This Christology differs from that of Anselm. The naysayers assert the differences as though Luther repudiates Anselm and the vicarious atonement, and as if the difference makes Luther an endorser of their heterodox or heretical ideas.

But here again, the difference arises from differences of method and purpose. Anselm arrives at his view of Christ “from above” while Luther arrives at his view of Christ “from below.” We also should remember that Anselm’s De Incarnatione Verbi is his most polemical work and was written to defend the doctrine of
the Trinity against Roscelin. This purpose affected his method of viewing Christ “from above.” Yet both Anselm and Luther arrive at Chalcedonian Christology. While the differences remain significant, they do not cause Luther to repudiate vicarious atonement.

The Love of God

Continuing his plan of comparison, Eckardt proceeds to Luther’s second central concern, the love of God. For Luther, the love of God for us is lavish beyond comprehension. The love of God for his people is behind everything He does, not only the atonement, but including the atonement. God has in his incarnation and work of redemption “completely pour himself forth and held nothing back that he has not given to us.”

Eckardt’s development of this concern is somewhat brief by comparison to other sections of his dissertation. For a robust development, see Jack D. Kilcrease, The Self-Donation of God: A Contemporary Lutheran Approach to Christ and His Benefits (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013).

“Anselm attributes the work of Christ to the love of God, although he is more inclined to attribute it ultimately to fittingness.” Therefore, “Anselm can be found emphasizing divine justice over divine love.” Nevertheless Anselm does say, “because he has done all these things in this way, he demonstrates how much he loves us.”

In Cur Deus Homo, Anselm already anticipates the calumny of Forde who contends that in Anselm’s vicarious satisfaction, because satisfaction is made, there is no mercy. Anselm explains that since in Christ, God makes satisfaction, the vicarious satisfaction exhibits a divine mercy beyond what Boso and Forde envisioned. With this element included in Anselm’s vicarious atonement, again, the contention of a wedge between Luther and Anselm is an exaggeration.

Faith

Continuing his plan of comparison, Eckardt proceeds to Luther’s third central concern, faith.

Faith and the love of God are bound together. In Luther’s theology of the cross, faith holds to the love of God when sight is denied. Not only is sight often denied, but God even acts in ways that appear contrary to love and kindness. Faith is exercised in darkness and despite all appearances, experiences, and temptation regards God as sweet and merciful.

Luther’s faith is trust. It has two ideas: blind trust in the Gospel (not blind in the Kirkegaardian sense, but in the sense explained above), and a confidence that the Gospel is for me, not just historical truth. While the content of faith is important, Luther usually is not talking about faith as what is believed but about the faith by which the Gospel is believed.

In keeping with his purpose of faith seeking understanding, Anselm’s references to faith are more apt to be to what is believed. In Cur Deus Homo, Anselm’s purpose is set when Boso tells him, “I did not come to you to remove from me doubts about my faith, but in order that you might show me the reasons for my certainty.” Boso is interested in the rationale of the faith which is believed; he is not concerned about the condition of his own faith.
Again, however, this is an emphasis resulting from purpose and method that does not exclude trust from being part of faith. In *Cur Deus Homo* and in his prayers, trust as part of faith comes through.

The most distinct difference between Anselm and Luther on faith is about darkness. There, Anselm relies more on reason. This might be the widest gap between the two men.

Both the faith that is believed and the faith by which the Gospel is believed – blind trust that the Gospel is for me – are part of faith. Both men assert both parts, Anselm decidedly more emphatic of one and Luther decidedly more emphatic of the other. But these differences of emphasis, decided as they are, do not prevent either one from holding to vicarious satisfaction.

**Chapter III – Points of Some Similarity: on Style of Expression**

Both Anselm and Luther make abundant use of Scripture. Their purposes and methods of doing so, however, are different.

We recall that Anselm’s purpose of faith seeking understanding leads him to use a method of *sola ratione* and *remoto Christo*. Yet, except in his polemical works, he weaves scriptural language throughout. Why?

*Sola ratione*, everything about God himself and about what God does must be fitting. A key element of fittingness is *pulchritude*, beauty. The vicarious satisfaction is fitting and beautiful. Something so beautiful should be expressed in a fittingly beautiful way. So Anselm uses chain of reasoning, the crafting of words, and simplicity to achieve a pulchritude that attracts the reader by the enjoyableness of the style of expression. Where can one find the most beautiful language? Scripture. By weaving scriptural language into the chain of reasoning, Anselm achieves a unity of style with substance, beauty expressed with pulchritude, fittingness expressed not just fittingly but befittingly.

Anselm was a man of peace. He tried to avoid conflict. He preferred not to write polemically. There were occasions, however, when he was thrust into polemics. Polemics are not beautiful, and thus the method and style of writing does not require pulchritude. Nor, because of his distaste for polemics, would Anselm devote the time and labor to achieving pulchritude in this kind of writing. Thus, in his polemical writing, we see the least incidence of scriptural language in Anselm, often to the point of being scant or even nonexistent.

By contrast, Luther’s purpose is proclamation of Christ, his method is *sola scriptura*, and he is at home in polemics. Scriptural language is as abundant in Luther as in Anselm’s devotional and other non-polemical writings. But their styles of use are different because of their different purposes and methods. Anselm uses scriptural language not to convince by appeal to Scripture’s authority but to attract by pulchritude. Consequently, he rarely cites the location, attributes the scriptural author, or otherwise makes it patent to the reader that Scripture is what he is using. Those familiar with Scripture will, of course, recognize that he is using scriptural language while others would not. By contrast, Luther is using the authority of Scripture to proclaim Christ. He is using Scripture to convert sinners by the power of the Word of God to create contrition and faith.

Thus, where Anselm’s agenda is the chain of reasoning, because that is fitting and beautiful, Luther’s is *enarratio*, an exposition of the Word under the Word’s own guidance. He ordered his thoughts not by a
pattern constructed by reason but according to Scripture: Scripture’s thoughts in Scripture’s own pattern. Proclamation brings the Word forth into the public as it is. The key objective is clarity.

This is not to say that Luther just slopes points down on paper. Clarity is not achieved when we fail to make a proper division of Law and Gospel. The necessity of properly distinguishing Law and Gospel affects the order of presentation. This can be seen in his most familiar work, the Catechism. We must remember that “the catechism” existed already and included the Creed, the Our Father, and the Ten Commandments. But the catechisms tended to confuse students about Law and Gospel by the very order in which these three parts were presented. Over a significant period of time and after a significant amount of thought and consideration of alternatives, Luther re-ordered the Catechism so that the Law is first, then the Creed, and then the Our Father. This, however, is not for the purpose of pulchritude, but for clarity of enarratio.

The same purpose drives Luther’s innovative division of the Creed into three rather than the traditionally many more articles, whereby he highlights not only the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but creation, redemption, and sanctification. Whereas Anselm considers the Trinity somewhat abstractly within itself, Luther sees the Trinity pro nobis, for us. Thus, he highlights what the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do for us. He does this to proclaim Christ and make the Gospel clear. There is no speculating into the godhead, only a hearing of what God says about himself in the Word.

Some, such as Holl and Green, contend that Luther’s “happy exchange” contradicts forensic justification. Hoffman makes the mystical presence of Christ in the believer into a premise of the exchange. “On the contrary, for Luther the language of exchange was simply another way of expressing the same though as expressed elsewhere by the forensic terminology.”18

Chapter IV – Points of Difference

Here Eckardt develops further what he noted in earlier chapters about the sharp difference between Anselm’s idea of sin and Luther’s. Anselm expressly denies that concupiscence is sin and Luther expressly rejects the scholastic definition of sin, naming Anselm. He says, “Anselm’s definition is also too weak, when he says it is the absence of original righteousness which ought to be present.”19

There is a strong connection between their difference on sin and their difference on the means whereby faith advances. Because Anselm, for all the seriousness of his view of sin, views it less seriously than Luther, he is more optimistic than Luther about the capabilities of reason to advance faith.

Luther directly renounces the rational method of the scholastics in his commentary on 1st Peter, in his exposition of 3:15. (“Always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear.”) Anselm used this text to justify his use of reason. But Luther says,

The sophists have also perverted this text. They say that one must vanquish the heretics with reason and on the basis of the natural light of Aristotle, since the Latin expression rationem reddere is used here, as though St. Peter meant that this should be done by mean of human reason. Therefore they say that Scripture is far too weak to overthrow heretics. This, they say, must be done by reasons and must come from the brain, which must be the source of the proof that faith is right, even though our faith transcends all reason and is solely a power of God.20
The *sola scriptura* method impacts Luther’s homiletics. Eckardt develops two aspects of this. The first is about “preaching outlines,” and the second is about sermon illustrations.

Luther does not superimpose a preaching outline upon the text in order to preach it. Rather, he follows the order of the text. His sermons frequently contain exposition on each word or phrase in the order in which the words and phrases stand in the text.

Luther’s use of extra-Biblical sermon illustrations is generally limited to short phrases, employing similes or metaphors. These generally are not used to illustrate major points. “Luther certainly would have had no use for a preaching manual filled with ideas for sermon illustrations; he generally found his illustrations amply provided by the Sacred Scriptures.”

Instead, the characters and events of the texts themselves are the illustrations.

Luther expressly denied divine acceptance of sinners without atonement. He said, “It is not true that God can accept man without his justifying grace.” The law . . . will not be overcome except by the ‘child, who has been born to us.’ "I have often said that faith alone is not enough before God, but the price of redemption also must be there. The Turk and Jew, too, believe in God, but without the mediator and price."

Luther’s theology of the cross is correlative of *sola scriptura*. The trial of faith in which nothing is visible to show that God is or wants to be merciful and, on the contrary, by all appearances God is wrathful and there is no way out, destroys all comfort from reason and everything but the bare promise of the Gospel. Trial “push[es] faith back to its source, namely the word of the cross, for sustenance.”

Chapter V – *Was the Atonement “Necessary”*?

Anselm views “necessary” from the point of view of reason without the direct aid of Scripture. Reason must have premises. Without Scripture, it must get its prime premise somewhere else, and then its successive premises either from somewhere else or from itself in the intermediate conclusions it made from prior premises. Anselm goes to “fittingness,” of which pulchritude is a large part, for his prime premise, and he continues to resort to fittingness along with intermediate conclusions to develop his chain of reasoning.

From this chapter and certain passages of the prior chapters, a reader can observe that in Anselm’s argument, the question, “Was the atonement necessary,” is not a single question. Hear the following questions:

- For man to be saved, was atonement necessary?
- For God to save man, was atonement necessary?
- For God to remain fitting, was his saving man necessary?

These are only suggestive of the different aspects of “necessary.” Notice that these do not yet reach the aspect of whether vicariousness in the atonement is necessary. Anselm asks, “why God was not able to save man in some other way, and if he was able, why he willed to do it this way.” The question of necessity multiplies.
Anselm answers all three of the above-stated questions and more, which makes his chain of reasoning extensive. He answers questions that Luther does not even address. For example, Luther never addresses whether, for God to remain fitting, was his saving man necessary. Luther’s method is to address questions addressed in Scripture, not questions reason speculatively wishes to answer. His method is to observe the words of Scripture and ask catechetically (kata and echo, to sound over or repeat again), “What is this,” or “What does this mean?” Luther’s purpose is to proclaim Christ and his method is to bring Scripture into the public. His method is to enarrate Scripture. “Luther’s approach is to start with the Sacred Page, and to hold all Christian thought captive to it. In principle, Anselm’s sola ratione is anathema to Luther.”

Thus, the comparison of the idea of “necessary” in the two men must back up and recall that their different purposes and methods cause them to differ even on what “necessary” means. To take each man on his own terms, we must regard their respective different objects of necessity: necessary for what?

For Anselm, necessary means appealing to reason so that faith may find understanding. Does faith understand without vicarious atonement?

For Luther, necessary means unalterable and necessary to proclaim Christ. Have you proclaimed Christ without proclaiming vicarious atonement?

Notice from that formulation of the meaning for Luther what Aulén and Forde really are playing at. They are not playing at an ideology about atonement statically separate from Christ himself. They are playing at whether Christ will be proclaimed. When Forde, in his up-and-forgive theory of God’s mercy, rejects vicarious atonement in the name of Luther, he is abolishing what Luther had an irresistible vocation to do: preach Christ.

Ask yourself, which of the two necessities is the more necessary: appealing to reason so that faith may find understanding, or proclaiming Christ in his atoning work? Luther’s necessity is the greater, and thus in Luther, the necessity of the vicarious atonement is greater than in Anselm. Aulén and Forde have the ratio upside down.

Luther himself says:

There are found among the new teachers those who say that the forgiveness of sins and justification by grace lie completely in divine imputation; in other words, that all depends on the reckoning of God, and that is enough, whether God reckons sin or does not reckon it, that a man is justified or not justified from his sin solely on that account. . . . If this were true, then the whole New Testament would be nothing and all in vain. Then Christ would have worked foolishly and vainly when he suffered for sin. Then also God would have carried on purely a shadow-fight or party-tricks without any need thereof. For surely without the need of Christ’s suffering he could have forgiven and not imputed sin, or faith other than that in Christ might have justified and brought salvation. Such are they who confide in a type of gracious divine mercy by which they think that their sins are not taken into account. Against this abominable, frightful interpretation, this error, the holy apostle used to bind justifying faith upon Jesus Christ.
## Table of Similarities and Differences

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<td><strong>Language</strong></td>
<td>Abundant use of Scripture, because it is the best language for pulchritude</td>
<td>Abundant use of Scripture, because the Word is a means of grace</td>
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<td>Necessary because of the justice of God</td>
<td>Necessary for the <em>fröhliche Wechsel</em>, the happy exchange of sin and righteousness</td>
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<td>Necessary for God to sustain his creation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Necessary means appealing to reason so that faith may find understanding. Does faith understand without vicarious satisfaction?</td>
<td>Even more necessary than Anselm knows because sin is even more serious than Anselm knows</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Faith

Usually a reference to what is believed, content of the faith
Closer to a theology of glory
Faith in the light of reason

The Word

Usually Christ, the Logos

Crisis

A challenge to intellectus, and hence very little crisis

Review of Substance

Luther differs from Anselm, and Luther agrees with Anselm.

For Anselm, faith seeks to understand by reason which relies on the pulchritude of the idea of the atonement and the pulchritude of the way the idea is expressed. Ratio provides intellectum.

For Luther, faith, by the Word as means of grace, blindly trusts in the dark where there is no pulchritude, no ratio, no intellectum. The bare promise of the Gospel provides certitude against every appearance of God’s wrath.

Both Luther and Anselm speak in terms of payment for sin, of substitution, and of redemption by the blood of Christ. Though for different reasons, for both men the atonement is necessary. By Luther’s reasons, the atonement is even more necessary than it is for Anselm.

Hofmann, Ritchl, Aulén, Forde, and company have got both Anselm and Luther profoundly wrong. They have failed to view each man on his own terms. They have used the significant differences between Anselm and Luther to cloud their agreement on vicarious satisfaction and its necessity. They have credited themselves as the heirs of Luther and have enlisted Luther as their endorser against Anselm and vicarious satisfaction. But Anselm and Luther do not disagree about vicarious satisfaction. On the contrary, for Luther, vicarious satisfaction is even more necessary than Anselm knows, and thus Luther opposes them more than Anselm does. Their errors have devastating implications for Christology, justification, and faith.

Evaluation

In English, Eckardt’s dissertation ranks as one of the top three Lutheran works on the atonement. The three are (in alphabetical order by author):

Commentary on Anselm and Luther on the Atonement


There are Lutheran writings in English about the atonement on my syllabus that I have yet to read. This list, hence, is subject to ongoing development.

Among non-Lutherans, Leon Morris’ several books remain the best.

Reading Eckardt, I repeatedly found myself looking away from the text, having been hit by it, experiencing shock at how low my Christology has been, and sorrow at how little capacity I have for reverencing Christ. Along with this, Eckardt preaches with Luther—even though the work is a dissertation—the consolation of faith in the Gospel of Christ’s vicarious satisfaction by which He atoned for even these sins.


4 Eckhardt, 5.

5 Eckhardt, 6. As brash as that might sound, it comports with Jack D. Kilcrease in *The Doctrine of Atonement: From Luther to Forde*, Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2018. As I said in my review of that work, "Kilcrease does the heavy lifting of examining the evidence upon which Forde bases his errors. In some cases, Forde cites passages from Luther that actually refute Forde and maintain the orthodox Lutheran view that Kilcrease teaches in chapters 2 and 3. In other cases, as wild as this might seem, Forde actually has no basis at all. He merely asserts premises that his argument needs simply because his argument needs them."

60 Eckardt, 41.

7 Eckardt, 39.

8 Eckardt, 44.

9 Eckardt, 47 quoting Luther from *Sermons of Martin Luther* [American Postil], reprint ed., Grand Rapids, 1988, 3, 131.

10 Eckardt, 47, quoting Luther from *American Postil* 2, 332.

11 Eckardt, 49.


13 Eckardt, 97.

14 Eckardt, 54-54, quoting Luther.

15 Eckardt, 55.

16 Eckardt, 55.

17 Eckardt, 57, quoting Anselm.
18 Echardt, 97-98.
19 Eckardt, 114, quoting Luther.
20 Echardt, 150, quoting Luther.
21 Eckardt, 152.
22 Eckardt, 158, quoting Luther.
23 Eckardt, 148, quoting Luther.
24 Eckardt, 159, quoting Luther.
25 Eckardt, 166.
26 Eckardt, 174, quoting Anselm.
27 Eckardt, 180-182.
28 Eckardt, 179.
29 Eckardt, 185 quoting Luther.