

LCMS Circuit Bible Studies — 2013-2014

What Difference Does it Make ... to the baptized? ... the unbaptized?

December 2013

LEADER'S GUIDE

TOPIC: What difference would it make, *if our witness to the person of Jesus Christ did not center and remain on His vicarious atonement/substitutionary work for us?*

1. FOCUS OF THIS STUDY

The Vicarious Atonement of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world is a cornerstone of the Christian witness to the fallen. It is Good News, setting free the sinner from of damnation. The atonement accomplished for us by Jesus Christ is justification of the sinner through faith. It answers the blood of Abel, it catches the ram in the thicket by its horns, and is vividly portrayed on Good Friday in the offensive corpse of our Savior hanging lifeless on the cross.

Atonement is good. We know atonement. Guilt can lead us to self-chosen and even prescribed acts of atonement for our sins that may seem to soothe our conscience, but they atone for nothing before God. One may even be taught to repeat "I'm sorry", but apart from contrition and faith in Christ's vicarious atonement, there will never be any atonement for sin.

Atonement is the answer to an eye-for-an-eye. It inflicts a punishment; it fulfills a demanded justice, and it stops escalation. Boyfriends everywhere are right now offering to do whatever it takes to make up for the transgression they committed against a weeping girl. Thereby showing that atonement not only answers an offense against another but it calms if not relieves an inner stricken conscience.

Atonement is a relational experience. A man stranded on a desert island, may think he has no need for atonement, as it appears there is no one around him to offend. This thinking however, ignores the man's relationship to the God who demands we worship none other, that we use His name properly and that we hear and believe His Word. In the civil realm or in the eyes of other people, it may be possible to repay or to make it up to the neighbor against whom we have sinned. But in the spiritual realm before God, we have no means by which we are able to atone for our sins against God or against our neighbor.

The challenge is not so much Jesus' death on the cross, but the idea that His death is a *vicarious* atonement. "Vicarious" is not always a positive term. It may be a foreign concept for people who understand vicarious experiences negatively, for instance, someone who lives "vicariously" through another. Better to allow the Lord to provide His own definition of vicarious atonement through His prophet Isaiah: *"He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed."* Isaiah 53:3-5. The "he" is Christ whom God sent to be our substitute so that He might do for us what we cannot ever do to atone for our sins and our sinfulness. Be mindful that this is not some kind of virtual substitution, but an actual reality as the Son of God took on human flesh. *"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong*

slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” Hebrews 2:14-18.

To say that we are saved from eternal hell by the act of another, does not fully communicate the height, depth, width and breath of what Christ’s substitutional sacrifice has accomplished for us. It is vicarious for us precisely because the sacrifice is not done in any way by us, but is finished totally and completely by Christ for us (Jn 19:30) and in us (Ph 1:6). The validity of this vicarious atonement is assured to us in the bodily resurrection of Christ. Its blessings are given to us in baptism where we are fully united to Christ in His death and resurrection. Baptized into Christ, believing His promises, we are so wedded to Christ that what is ours (sin and death) totally becomes His, and all that is His (righteousness, life, peace, etc.) totally becomes ours. In this way, He washes us, prepares us and presents us to Himself as His spotless bride (Ephesians 5). Now God the Father deals with us only according to Him who is our bridegroom. He stood in our place that we might be united with Him in His place.

Leader: There is nothing else in the world like the vicarious atonement made by Christ as taught in our churches. Challenge the participants to name another religion or philosophy with an equal teaching. Challenge them with this thought: *Heresy begins with the watering down or elimination of Christ’s vicarious atonement.*

2. SCRIPTURAL AND DOCTRINAL WITNESSES

THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS

1 Peter 2:24	What is the result of His vicarious atonement?
1 Peter 3:18	What is the result of His vicarious atonement?
Matthew 20:28	Is there intent behind His vicarious atonement?
Mark 10:45	What is the relationship between servanthood and His vicarious atonement?
Isaiah 53:1-12	What is the result of His vicarious atonement?
2 Corinthians 5:21	Who benefits from His vicarious atonement?
Galatians 3:10, 13	What is the relationship of works to His vicarious atonement?
John 12:27-33	When is His vicarious atonement accomplished?
Luke 4:16-22	Who benefits from His vicarious atonement?
Romans 5:1-11	His vicarious atonement was accomplished in a moment in time. What is the state of our existence now that it is accomplished?
Revelation 21:5	The purpose of His vicarious atonement?

NOTE: There may be too many passages listed for your time allotment. Select some in advance. The key is to look in each of these for how each rules out salvation by works.

Christ’s vicarious atonement is both well-trodden ground for us and a complete mystery.

THE DOCTRINAL WITNESS

Consider these words from the Article IV of the Augsburg confession. Comment on how the atonement drives this article of faith.

IV. [JUSTIFICATION]

¹ *It is also taught among us that we cannot obtain forgiveness of sin and righteousness before God by our own merits, works, or satisfactions, but that we receive forgiveness of sin and become righteous before God by grace, for Christ's sake, through faith,* ² *when we believe that Christ suffered for us and that for his sake our sin is forgiven and righteousness and eternal life are given to us.* ³ *For God will regard and reckon this faith as righteousness, as Paul says in Romans 3:21-26 and 4:5.* *The Book of Concord.* T. Tappert, p. 30

Read this brief excerpt from Pieper's *Christian Dogmatics*:

"Whoever denies the substitutional satisfaction of Christ denies the very essence of the Christian faith, because only the reliance on Christ's vicarious satisfaction is the Christian faith." *Christian Dogmatics*, F. Pieper, Vol. I, p. 232:

Does Pieper go too far? (Perhaps get out the volume and read the quote in context.)

How does this clash or harmonize with popular notions and statements of the Christian or personal faith?

Challenge your participants to wrestle with Pieper. Can what he says be put in a bulletin or in a sermon?

3. CONSEQUENCES FOR THE HEARERS IF UNCLEAR/INCONSISTENT

Perhaps the biggest mistake any Christian can make today is trying to set aside Good Friday and bring back the Day of Atonement. After Easter, the Christian church set aside the sacrifice of animals because it was fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ. Yet, sometimes in our honest efforts to make Christianity "real" for our contemporaries, we devise acts, rituals, and idols that take us from observing Christ to co-opting His work.

- How are pastors pressured to change proclamation of Christ's vicarious atonement into acts of experiences for their people? What difference does it make?

Hypocrisy is the act of saying one thing but doing another. It was Jesus' chief complaint against the Pharisees.

- How difficult is it for a Pastor or Christian Teacher to avoid proclaiming the gift to his congregation but then take it back by demanding/suggesting certain behaviors or attitudes in order to receive the gift? What difference does it make?

Some have said that a Pastor's aim is to deliver a good conscience to his people.

- How does an unclear proclamation of His vicarious atonement foil this?

The *Lutheran Cyclopedia* lists these various false atonement theories:

1. Jesus' death was an unplanned accident.
 2. Jesus was a martyr who died for a principle.
 3. Jesus died to show us how much God loves us.
 4. Jesus died to show us how to live morally toward others.
 5. Jesus died to show God's wrath and you better behave or this will happen to you.
- Which is your favorite and how does it pervert the Gospel?

Leader: The point being made in this study is that if there is no vicarious atonement accomplished by Christ in the church then the Church is not present. Ask the participants if they are embarrassed, confused, or at a loss concerning the role of His vicarious atonement in their teaching and preaching. Is it enough to base our ministry upon Christ's work alone, or do we feel the need to add to it?

It is one thing to make a mess of His vicarious atonement for Christians, but think of the consequences for the one hearing the Gospel for the first time.

The first question in the Explanation to the *Small Catechism* goes like this: What is Christianity? Which is the correct answer?

1. *Christianity is the life and salvation God has given in and through Jesus Christ.*
 2. *Christianity is a life and salvation God offers in and through Jesus Christ.*
 3. *Christianity is a personal relationship with God... and Jesus too.*
 4. *Christianity is Jesus Christ offered in and through your life's work for God.*
- Explain how the other answers recast Christianity to be like every other religion that subverts His vicarious atonement? Moreover, what difference does it make?

An inquisitive person asks you, "How does Jesus' dying on a cross help me?"

- Can your answer make any sense without referencing His vicarious atonement? Try it.

Across the backyard fence, your neighbor tells you that his church requires him to tithe.

- How does His vicarious atonement work its way into the conversation?

A woman stands up at the Voter's Meeting and shares that her cousin came to church with her a few weeks back and was appalled at the crucifix on display on the altar. Because she is sensitive to others, she suggests that it be replaced with an empty cross or even nothing at all.

- There is opposition to this idea from the Voters but they do not know why. How would His vicarious atonement fit into your explanation?

A child in the local Christian school is told if she does not fold her hands and bow her head during prayer she is making Jesus sad.

- In this classic example of mixing Law and Gospel, how does a clear presentation of His vicarious atonement untangle this mess and comfort this child (and her parents)?

A couple in your Pastor's Class returns after Spring break travels telling you that in the church they attended on Easter neither Jesus nor His resurrection was mentioned much in the sermon. They want to know how come.

- How would you respond and reference His vicarious atonement in your answer?

Leader: The truth is that there may not be a whole lot of difference between the person who has been in the pew for a lifetime and the person just walking in the door when it comes to their understanding and ability to identify points of Christian doctrine. Challenge the participants to explain His vicarious atonement with minimal technical wording. If they struggle, ask them for examples of illustrative stories they could use.

4. COMFORT AND CONSOLATION FOR THE HEARERS

John 11:25-26

Jesus proclaims that “whoever believes in Me, though he die, yet shall he live, and every one who lives and believes in Me shall never die.” He then invites Mary and Martha to believe in Him, for He is the Resurrection and the Life. While the cross was yet in the future, was there room for the sisters to misunderstand Jesus? How does the vicarious atonement help us understand and proclaim Christ’s promises?

John 14:18-19

The RSV here reads, “I will not leave you comfortless.” Jesus is about to remove His visible presence from His disciples (through His death, resurrection and ascension). But His promise remains, “I will come to you.” In our sin we have no hope for anything good, but in Jesus God gives sure and certain comfort and hope. “Because I live, you will live also,” He says. How does the vicarious atonement help us fill out this picture?

Mark 9:23-24

The father of the possessed boy expresses our situation very well. We believe and yet we are aware of unbelief chasing us at every turn. How much does it comfort us to hear that His vicarious atonement was Christ’s work for us even as we wallow in unbelief?

Psalm 4:8

When Christians become anxious, it is because Satan is putting them in doubt of the firmness of the Gospel. This only increases at night when we are alone with our thoughts and the devil’s whispers. Our peace has to be of God’s making. How do His vicarious atonement and Holy Baptism come together to calm a troubled heart?

Leader: The result of the doctrine of His vicarious atonement should be, as it always is with the Gospel, a deep sigh of relief. Ask the participants if they ever seek to bring their congregation to that point in their preaching. Ask them if the proclamation of His vicarious atonement could do that.

Martin Luther is recorded as having said, “The Lord Christ died and was buried; I too. Then He rose and ascended into heaven; I too.”

- Luther shows us how the vicariousness of the atonement is of such a pureness that in God’s eyes we too have suffered in completeness and ascended in holiness. What is left for us to do but to rejoice?

In Article XX of the Augsburg Confessions we read: “First, that our works cannot reconcile God or merit forgiveness of sins, grace, and justification, but that we obtain this only by faith when we believe that we are received into favor for Christ’s sake, who alone has been set forth the Mediator and Propitiation, 1 Tim. 2:5, in order that the Father may be reconciled through Him. Whoever, therefore, trusts that by works he merits grace, despises the merit and grace of Christ, and seeks a way to God without Christ, by human strength, although Christ has said of Himself: I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. John 14:6.”

- How can negative reinforcement, coupled with speaking gently, be helpful in waking pre-occupied souls that are in error against Christ if they reduce or deny the vicarious atonement of Jesus Christ for them by worry or display of trophies?

In the *Large Catechism*, under the description of the Lord’s Supper, we read: “Thus we have briefly the first point which relates to the essence of this Sacrament. Now examine further the efficacy and benefits on account of which really, the Sacrament was instituted; which is also its

most necessary part that we may know what we should seek and obtain there. Now this is plain and clear from the words just mentioned: *This is My body and blood, given and shed **for you**, for the remission of sins.* Briefly, that is as much as to say, "For this reason, we go to the Sacrament because there we receive such a treasure by and in which we obtain forgiveness of sins." Why so? Because the words stand here and give us this; for on this account He bids me eat and drink, that it may be my own and may benefit me, as a sure pledge and token, yea, the very same treasure that is appointed for me against my sins, death, and every calamity."

- Christ instituted His Supper for us and our forgiveness. The culmination of the vicarious atonement is that forgiveness is not effected upon a distant cross and left there, but brought to us and delivered to us at an altar where simple bread and wine have been consecrated. What stands between Christ and a Christian when the Supper is served?

Leader: The link between Jesus' death on the cross and the Sacraments via His vicarious atonement should have been made by now. If not, this is the time to point it out.

5. POINTS TO PONDER

- A. "By His death [Christ] made satisfaction for our sins" (AC IV.2 *Latin*, Tappert, p. 30). We are justified through faith because we receive the results of His vicarious atonement.
- B. The vicarious aspect of the atonement is offensive to the world.
- C. It's not atonement unless it is vicarious atonement.
- D. Luther wrote, "We are beggars. This is true." How does the vicarious atonement render such a statement a statement of victory, and not a word of despair?
- E. It is His vicarious atonement on Good Friday; it becomes our vicarious atonement on Easter and Pentecost. Christ united Himself with our sins to pay the price and now we are united with Him and His victory and firmly believe it is so.
- F. The Holy Spirit's role is to deliver to us the benefits of Christ's vicarious atonement through the Gospel and the Sacraments.

Leader: Thank you for your work on this study.

AUTHOR: Rev. Mitchell Otto
popcoralville@msn.com

Pastor, Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, Coralville, Iowa

GENERAL EDITOR: Rev. Mark W. Love
markwlove@gmail.com

Pastor, St. Peter's Lutheran Church, Rockford, Michigan