

## The beginning

It all began for me about 8 years ago.

Well, actually it began for me 25 years ago, just east of Yellowstone Park near Cody, WY.

I was an 18-year-old with dreams, which is typical for most young men. I had dreams of living on a ranch in the mountains, quietly pursuing a life of hunting, fishing, and hiking in the mountains.

Thankfully, God rudely interrupted my plans with something called conviction of sin. It was hard for me. I had been a “good” boy. I never smoked, drank, cruised the strip, or willfully looked at pornography. I read a chapter out of my Bible and prayed before I went to bed, every night.

And it started there. With that Bible. And with an honest heart.

“That’s not me, Lord. Please help me to love You.” I had prayed that prayer, quite “innocently,” a few years earlier after reading the verse that says, “Love the Lord with all your heart.” I knew that I did not love God. I feared Him, reverentially. I wanted to go to heaven ... who doesn’t? But deep in my heart I knew that I really didn’t love God.

God began to answer that prayer to love Him. I never knew where it would take me, or I might have cringed at the thought of it. But slowly (due to my habit of reading just one chapter before bed, instead of seriously diving into the written Word of God) I began to see more about myself than just the fact that I did not love God. I began to see that I was a proud person. Worse yet, I was wrapped up in myself. No, I wasn’t wrapped up in marijuana, women, and bank robberies, but I was still wrapped up in the sin of self-centeredness. If you enjoyed elk hunting, guitars, and .22 rifles, then you were a friend of mine. If not, then ... no, I didn’t hate your guts. But I certainly had no love, and very little time, for you.

Like a man in a vise that is slowly being squeezed, God revealed myself—or perhaps better said, “my SELF”—to myself. It got bad. Then it got worse. Then it got to the point where I realized a painful truth: In myself was nothing better than Adolf Hitler. I can remember thinking that if I had been born in his shoes, I would have been just as bad, if not worse.

It was getting about the time. Almost there ... Almost to the glorious position of Romans 8:1.

But I had to pass through Romans 7:24 to get to Romans 8:1.

Finally it happened. One evening, kneeling beside my bed, I told God what He had been waiting for months or years to hear: “God, I can’t be good. I have tried and tried. If I am going to be a good man, You are going to have to do it.” I resigned that night. I gave up trying to “lift myself with my own boot straps.” No, I wasn’t turning away from religion, I was finally realizing that without Him doing it, I would never be able to consistently practice His righteousness.

And He did. He spoke to my heart that evening, saying, “Son, your sins are forgiven you.”

For a few moments, I pondered those words. The wonder of it all ... not that I was forgiven (which was good), but that God had called ME His SON!! All I could do was weep in

gratitude. I knew that by nature I was nothing close to a son of the God. I was the son of self.

But God did make me His son. My life changed. My goals changed. My previous dreams of a happy life of hunting seemed like dung. I loved people. I mean, truly cared about the drunk man on the street. I was concerned about his well-being.

My guns and guitar and hockey skates held little attraction. In fact, I would have given every last one of them away to someone that needed them. Divine love had been put into my heart.

I had been, indeed, made into a son of God. His character and life had been transplanted into me, undeservedly. I was, indeed, a recipient of an undeserved gift, the gift of the divine nature. My conversion was pure grace.

## Moving on

There were ups and downs over the years. When I drew near to God, He would draw near to me. When I drew toward some self-centered pursuit, well, I drew away from Him.

About 10 years later, I found myself in a conservative Anabaptist-type congregation. (I never dreamed that was where I would end up at my conversion ... a long story in itself.) Memories of how God had changed me were relatively fresh, and I naturally expected the same from others. Conversion meant “change,” (and still does) and so if someone claimed to be “converted” or “born-again,” that meant his/her core values and desires had experienced a revolution. Holiness unto the Lord and helping hurting humanity (spirit, soul, and body) would be the cravings of the regenerated heart. The values and passions of society would be counted as worthless.

But strange things were happening around me. Different theological ideas, ideas I had never heard before, were presented to me. And people who were claiming to have gotten “born again” still had the same values, or even lower ones, more toward the flesh, a year after their experience.

I was introduced to ideas that I had never actually read in the Bible. Like, “imputed righteousness of Christ.” Presented as they were, I had my questions, but since some of what was being said sort of made sense, I (without realizing it even) began to accept them as deep theological answers to hard questions.

But deep inside, without realizing it at the time, I was shaking my head. Why? Why did so many of the “born again” people, who claimed an assurance in their heart that they had made peace with God, keep drifting toward the desires of the flesh, instead of away from those desires? Why did, for example, dress standards slowly get more immodest and more vain than three years ago? And yet, the same old testimony was repeated: “I got born again on x date!”

I had never really taken an interest in theology. It was hard to understand. Those who were wrapped up in it seemed more intent on getting the i’s dotted and the t’s crossed than in loving their neighbor as themselves. I can distinctly remember a zealous young brother recommending to me Charles Finney’s *Systematic Theology*. He loaned me his copy, and I sat down with it.

I don't think I spent over three minutes in it. It was hard to understand, and had little practical application, as far as I could see. I gave it back to him.

And yet, without realizing it, I was getting a theological indoctrination. Hymns were being sung. Sermons preached. And books read. I was always an avid reader, so I read a lot of biographies and church history. Something with some practical application. Some reality. None of this theology.

Or so I thought. I *was* getting theologically indoctrinated.

## Turning point

Something else began about eight years ago.

I ended up in Bolivia, planning—if God so willed—to spend the rest of my life there. Reading material was sparse (partly due to the fact that I felt God call me to quit reading about church history, and rather “make some history”). But one day a brother (very much “Anabaptist” in his life) recommended and loaned me a book about grace. *What's So Amazing about Grace*, by the well-known Evangelical author Philip Yancey.

Philip has some interesting stories about what he calls “grace.” But red flags came up. It has now been about eight years, so I am sure my retelling of this part will not be verbatim, but here is the major thing that struck me as way off-track. His analogy ran like this:

We humans tend to look at things from a different perspective than God. We see mountains where He sees molehills, if even molehills. Just like the earth; we see tall mountains and deep valleys. But if the earth were shrunk to the size of a billiard ball, it would actually be smoother than a billiard ball. And God looks at us just like that, through grace; the big differences we see are non-existent in His eyes. He sees a liberal Baptist as equal with a conservative Mennonite. And that is what is so amazing about grace ...

Huh?

God looks at a divorced and remarried liberal Baptist—who also smokes when out of church, and has a *Playboy* magazine under the mattress—as equal to a non-resistant, non-conformed, honest, moral, sincere conservative Mennonite?

Huh?

I realized that Yancey's definition of grace was skewed. Big time.

But yet, what I found just as disturbing is that most of the Anabaptist people I had associated with had pretty much the same view as Yancey. No, (they believed) in the end, it is just grace (Yancey's version of it). What we do really doesn't affect how we will be judged in the end. They (Anabaptist friends) said to me:

“God isn't concerned about our performance.”

“God does not accept our good works.”

(When asked about why they freely attended a church that didn't practice covering the head of women) “God is not looking at what we do.”

(When returned from a counseling session in another state) “I was told not to worry about what I do, we're not saved by that.”

And so Yancey's theory of the billiard ball earth, in which every hill and dale has been smoothed over in God's

eyes, was actually how many Anabaptist people viewed Christianity ... in the end, it really didn't matter if you obeyed Jesus or not.

And it began to make sense why people could drift in five years time, drift into things they once strongly opposed. After all, *in the end, it really doesn't matter. Grace will cover it all.*

Well, that book was sort of a turning point for me. No longer could I sit back and ignore theology as sort of irrelevant. What we believe about God and the Christian life will pretty strongly affect how we live. I mean like ... if you believe that grace is just a cover over of everyone with the imputed righteousness of Christ, then it indeed really doesn't matter how you live.

So I began, sort of subconsciously at the time of reading the book, to dig. I knew something was terribly wrong with Yancey's view of grace, but just what, and how, and why, I couldn't explain.

I felt I needed answers. And I felt the church needed answers. If Yancey was seriously screwed up in his view of grace, then what was the real meaning and effect of grace?

## Digging

I began to dig. Word studies. Praying. Digging into the Greek and Hebrew. Looking into the teachings of the early church. Studying church history for the historic teachings down through the centuries. Downloading about a dozen Greek lexicons to compare definitions. Looking up every instance of the word “justification” and “blood” in the first nine volumes of the Ante-Nicene Fathers to see how the early church viewed those terms. Etc. and etc.

## Bombshells

I don't know of a better way to describe some of my discoveries than bombshells dropping. At first, being in Bolivia with the Bible and some basic Greek materials, word definitions kept “bombing” me. You mean ... salvation means *that*?!? And redemption really means *that*?!?

And so it went. Quickly I learned that dictionaries often give definitions for a word, then at the end it would have an entry like this: “7. *Theol.* In the Bible, the ...”

I soon questioned this. Why did the theological meaning differ from the plain ol' common meaning of the word? The common meaning of the word made sense. But so many times, the official theological meaning twisted the meaning enough to make the word to not mean what it really meant.

I then realized that to understand the Bible we simply need to ditch all the theological baggage a word has accumulated, and start from scratch. Not that the theological meaning was *always* totally wrong, but by using the common definition of the word, the whole tenor of the meaning changed.

Salvation, redemption, propitiation, faith, grace, regeneration, born again, repentance, justification ... They all needed a fresh look to see if the theologians of centuries past had loaded them down with false ideas.

## The result

Well, about eight years have passed. In one sense, it has been a volcanic earthquake to me. Ideas I used to have about

theology have been shaken around and thumped a few times, needless to say. A few ideas have simply been blown away. On the other hand, it is sort of a sweet home-coming; a return to some of the things I subconsciously picked up as a seeking teenager who read the Bible, focusing upon the teachings of Jesus and living them out.

I am sure I am not done in my journey. I don't understand everything; that is for sure. But a lot of things make more sense now.

## The reason for this letter

For several years now I have threatened to write a book. It would be—of all things!—a theology book. But not a typical one. I have no unction whatsoever to write a theology book in “theological” terms. Christians have better things to do than just split doctrinal hairs in terms the average person can't grasp.

But this book will not be about doctrinal hairs. It will be about some very fundamental views of what Christianity is all about. For example, what does it mean to be “saved”?

Perhaps some would question why such a simple idea needs to be looked at. We all know what being saved is, don't we?

Well, if you think that “saved” means “forgiven,” you are wrong. Probably many of you who get this letter know that. But if I were to make a survey across the average American church member, I would guess that 90% of the people would answer that “saved” means to have your sins forgiven.

But to write a book is a huge task, at least the type of book I want to write. I want to look at the Bible of course, and what it says. But I also want to look at the historic teaching of the church, with a special emphasis on the early church. Then I want to look at what many people today believe. All this will take some research, to find the quotes, make the comparison, and come to conclusions that are in simple English, yet documented to prove that I am not simply making this stuff up.

After all, some of it will seem quite unbelievable to many of my friends and brethren in Christ.

Now the reason for this letter.

This letter is a primer, a sort of launching pad for the project. Or maybe an outline. It will probably provide feedback for me to examine my findings with others, who can critique and challenge me.

With that in mind, here we go ... for starters. (If I don't get burnt for heresy, then I can continue with more later.)

(By the way, since this letter will go to mostly people that would consider themselves as “Anabaptist” in doctrine, it is written from that perspective. And please remember that when I use the term “Anabaptist,” “Catholic,” “Protestant,” etc, I am speaking in general. You likely know a Catholic who doesn't fit the mold.)

## The Protestant Triad of Error

American Christianity suffers more from Protestant theology than perhaps any other perversion. That statement alone is probably enough for some to trash this letter. So I had better have some proof to back it up. It is a huge

statement to take upon myself. But I can no longer be quiet. Many years of questioning, seeking, praying, and confusion have brought me to the point to make three bold statements about Protestant theology.

Ready? (No, not asking if your noose is ready for me, but if you are ready to honestly look at foundational ideas in your theology. Think about these things for a couple of years as you read the Bible.)

Protestantism introduced three seriously flawed ideas about salvation. I will list them, then follow with a more detailed explanation. And please excuse the theological terms in the following list. I will explain them later in the detailed sections.

1. Justification by faith. This has been called the “cornerstone of the Protestant Reformation.” Now, justification by faith is biblical. But did you know that Martin Luther's view of it had never been taught in the entire history of the church? Did you know he changed the meaning of the word?
2. Imputed righteousness. Just like number 1 above, the teaching concerning imputation was given a whole new twist by the Protestant theologians. But—bless his heart for his honesty in admitting it—John Calvin himself admitted that the Bible never explicitly says that Christ righteousness is imputed to anyone.
3. Penal Substitutionary atonement. This idea was yet another unheard of teaching that the Protestants introduced. This means that Jesus took your punishment as your substitute. Does it shock you that this idea (as set forth by the Protestant theologians) had never been taught in the first 1500 years of the church (or at very best, it was a very minor idea)?

## Justification

What does the word mean? How does it happen?

For 15 centuries, it meant exactly what the word literally means—to make something to become just or upright. In the same sense, sanctification means to make something to become “sanct” or holy.

But for whatever reason, the meaning got changed in the Protestant Reformation. No longer did it mean to take an unjust thing and turn it into a just thing. It now meant—according to the theologians—to declare it forgiven. The justified thing no longer had to be made into an upright character, it just simply had to be forgiven of its past.

The official theological terms are “forensic” justification and “ontological” justification. Forensic is a term dealing with courts and judges. Ontological means, basically, “reality.” But I don't like theological terms, because they don't sink in if you don't grasp the meaning of them. So let's stick with “made just” vs. “declared just.”

We have a sinner, a thief. He has stolen some candy bars from Wal-Mart. How do you “justify” him?

The early church took him to Jesus, who changed his heart. He was now a just person who would never steal again. He was made just. And all the charges of

unrighteousness against him were dropped, because he was now a just man.

The Protestants took him to God the judge, who said, you are now forgiven, “just as if you had never sinned.” He was declared just, because his record now showed that he had never stole a candy bar in his life.

But notice one thing in the second scenario. The thief may or may not have had a change of heart. And without a change of heart, he will likely go out and steal again.

You are maybe aware that it is historical fact that the Lutheran Reformation actually brought about a lower moral level in the German people than before the Reformation? There is a very solid reason for that. Lutheran justification was “forensic,” not “ontological.”

A few quick points about justification, which I want to detail and document in my upcoming book:

1. You will not find (at least I haven't) any early church writing expounding on justification being “declarative.” You will find Origin (I think it was him ...) making a statement like this: “The philosophies of the heathen justified the heathen.” Protestants scream “Heresy, heresy!!!” Well, the translator of the ANF makes an honest little footnote, saying, “The point we need to remember is that *the theological meaning of the word as we know it was not developed at that time.*” (Not a verbatim quote, but close.) Hmmm. Take what Origin said, and read it with the original meaning of justification. He was simply saying that the moral teachings of the philosophers made the heather more just (upright) than when they had no teaching whatsoever. Of course, making them fully and truly upright in heart would take Jesus and His teachings, but the philosophers did make a start towards righteousness of character. They justified—made the heathen more righteous—the people by their moral teachings. My point? The definition of justification got changed by the Reformers.

2. Perhaps some may question why all the lexicons and commentaries say justification means to declare righteous, not make righteous. The answer is quite simple: probably every lexicon and commentary that North American Anabaptist people have in their houses was written by Protestants. Take Strong's Concordance (James Strong was a Methodist.) Here is his definition for #1344, δικαιοω, the Greek word for justify: “to render (that is, show or regard as) just or innocent.”

Notice the parenthesis (which are his), which effectually change the root meaning. At least he is honest enough to put the real meaning, “render just.” But the parenthesis end up making everyone think it means “show or regard” as just. Every Protestant lexicon does this with the word. Yet, the more honest ones will admit that the simple meaning of the word is to simply turn an unjust thing into a just thing. One lexicon even acknowledged that any time an omega is added onto a Greek adjective (which is what happened in the case of the Greek adjective for

righteous) it always means to change something to make it like the adjective. So the adjective δικαιο (righteous) with an omega (ω) added becomes a verb that means to make something to be δικαιο—righteous. And let me be fair here, *by extension* δικαιοω can mean to prove just—for example, “Wisdom is justified of her children.”

3. John Calvin spent 100 pages in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (at least in the copy I have) explaining that justification never, ever, never means to make just in the New Testament, it always means to declare just. Why did he go to such lengths? I would say because he was going against 1500 years of historical teaching and meaning of the word. I have not found any pre-Protestant teaching that makes justify to always mean “declare righteous.” No Waldensian, no Bohemian Brethren, no Lollard, no Catholic, no Orthodox, no one ...
4. While we are on Calvin, he had little qualms about persecuting the Protestants who did not accept the new definition. Although they were a small minority (>5% ... my rough guess), there were some Protestant theologians who strongly opposed the idea of “forensic” justification. Calvin put his approval on killing those who opposed his teachings, and still felt himself a just man. Because his righteousness did not come from what he did (despite the fact that 1 John 3:7 etc. makes it absolutely clear that a person must DO righteousness to be righteous). So John Calvin could murder (execute) those who disagreed with him, and still be righteous. Why, because he had been declared righteous, even though he still did unrighteous deeds like execute those who didn't agree with his doctrine. And of course, you won't find any early Anabaptist writings (with the possibility of a couple of ambiguous sentences from Menno Simons that *possibly* could be interpreted that way) that teach that justification was merely declaring someone righteous, but rather a changing of their character to uprightness.

What does all this mean? It means you and I need to go back through our Bibles and reread the verses about justification by faith and put the meaning of “being made—yes, actually made—into a just and upright person” back into the Scriptures.

The change is very profound. It is the difference in a thief being declared forgiven or being transformed into an honest man. That is quite a difference!! And it is tremendous good news to tell people that by means of faith they can be changed into a righteous person, one who lives righteously in this present world. Justified by faith!!

### Imputed righteousness

“Imputed righteousness? Imputed nonsense!”

Notice the quotes? Can you guess who said that? You will find this in John Wesley, quoting a Quaker. And yes, Wesley was in general agreement.

It was Wesley (who did take the Protestant view of justification—which then necessitated a second work of grace to change the character of the person, in his theology ... “forensic” justification creates a theological quagmire for those who also want to become righteous in character.) who opened my eyes to the folly of imputed righteousness of Christ.

And then a friend dropped a bombshell statement to me: “The Bible never says anywhere that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to us.”

At first, I half-way doubted that was true. But when I looked up the verses that talk about “imputed to him for righteousness” I had to agree: the Bible never says anywhere that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to anyone. (And by the way, I wont comment on it, but check out Psalm 106:31, where a man’s good work was “counted unto him for righteousness.” And yes, the Hebrew wording is the exact same as when faith was imputed to Abraham for righteousness. Hmmm ...)

It simply isn’t there. Check it out yourself.

Well, if you still disagree, you have someone else to convince, John Calvin himself. He said (paraphrasing) that “the Bible never explicitly says that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to man, one just comes to that conclusion by all the other teachings about the subject.”

Well, I suppose that was the final blow to me about believing that Christ’s righteousness is imputed to man. Of course, several years have passed and I am more convinced than ever (if you can get more convinced than 100% ...) that the righteous deeds of Jesus are never imputed to the account of anyone else.

And yet, in our Anabaptist churches you can hear that idea coming across the pulpit from time to time.

“And it was imputed to him for righteousness.” What does that mean? It means that “it” (acting in faith on what God had said) was counted to “him” (Abraham) for “righteousness” (for having done a righteous deed). In simple words, when Abraham acted upon what God had said, God marked it on his account as having acted uprightly.

And if we as Christians act upon what God has said to us through Jesus, then we will have it marked down on our account as having done what is right.

Quite simple. Yet the Protestant theologians have made that whole thing to say that my sins were written on Jesus’ account, and His good deeds will be written on my account, and I will thus be judged to be a righteous man on judgment day, because all of Jesus’ good deeds will show up on my account.

I can only say like the old Quaker: “Imputed NONSENSE!”

## Substitutionary atonement

Ah, the big one! ☺

I hardly know where to start. I could make some statements that would scare many of you off right now (if you haven’t already prepared your stake to burn me at.) Shall I “tease” you a little, stroke up your curiosity?

Ok, just a little, if you will hold off on the execution until I am finished, and give me a fair chance to explain.

I don’t believe that Jesus died on the cross to pay for your sins.

“HERETIC!!!” ☹

I maybe shouldn’t have said that until later. But let me explain.

When we talk of atonement, we need to go back to the drawing board with the word itself. The word atonement did not originally mean “to make peace with someone by appeasement.” It meant to unify two separated things. It literally meant, at-one-ment. To help you remember that, quit pronouncing the word as you normally would, and from henceforth and forevermore start saying at-one-ment. Or just replace the word atonement with unification. Or better yet, reunification. Whatever it takes to help you remember that at-one-ment means to unify two separated things.

Ok, now we have to figure out how that unification happens. And, the New Testament really doesn’t give the details in how all that happens. It says Jesus died on the cross for our sins, but all the details of how and what happened, and how it was accomplished isn’t really spelled out.

So we have what are called atonement theories. And “theory” is the word used for explaining things that are not really spelled out.

But did you know that the whole idea that Jesus died as a substitute for you on the cross, taking the punishment that you deserved so that God’s wrath could be satisfied, is a THEORY?

Shocking? If you are like me, that was gospel truth. It was settled fact.

Well, I just urge you to check it out. If you have a computer, google up “atonement theories” (if you dont use the internet, a library might have some books on the topic) and get ready for a shocker. The idea that Jesus died on the cross and took your legal penalties to satisfy God’s wrath is a THEORY that was never really in existence until the 1500s.

That means that nobody before the 1500s really believed that Jesus died on the cross as a substitute to satisfy the wrath of God, by taking your sins upon Himself and taking your punishment and thereby making at-one-ment.

I don’t have time (or won’t take it anyways) to go into the details. But basically for the first 1000 years of church history people tended to believe that at-one-ment did not happen in a court room, but rather on the battlefield. There was a war, because Satan held humanity in slavery. God in His love and mercy saw humanity in bonds, and sent Jesus to ransom humanity and procure liberty for him. There was a battle, and Jesus won. (Or alternatively, Jesus paid a ransom to Satan for the release.) Humanity was freed from Satan, and at-one-ed with God once again. The official title for this type of thinking is Christus Victor, or Jesus the Victor.

In the 1100s, a man name Anselm developed a different theory. He said God’s honor was destroyed by man’s sin and a debt was owed to God, so someone had to pay off this honor debt and restore the honor. Jesus did this, and God’s honor was now satisfied.

Then came the Protestants. By the time they got done with the theory, it basically said that every man had to pay a penalty for his sin, and Jesus paid the penalty, so now God’s

wrath was satisfied and the at-one-ment could take place between the sinner and God.

Have you ever heard that one before? “Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe ...” Or, “It is written on the page, where my sins were written down, paid in full by the blood of the Lamb ...”

Probably a better question is, have you ever heard anything besides that?

The sad thing is that even in our Anabaptist churches many have never heard anything else, and have swallowed it hook, line, and sinker. I almost got hooked myself.

Let’s look at a few problems with the theory.

1. The Bible never says that Jesus paid our debt of sin on the cross. Does it? Do we have a debt that He has to pay? Or was that debt forgiven, meaning no one had to pay? Look again at the parable of the man who owed 10,000 talents. Let me ask you a startling question: who paid off the debt? The man’s big brother Jesus? No! No one paid the debt! When a debt is forgiven, no one pays!

Let me “blow you away” with a statement, and you think about it. If someone (Jesus) had to pay for your sins, your sins were not forgiven, they were paid for. But if God forgave your sins, **NOBODY HAD TO PAY!**

What would you think of me if someone stole my truck and I said, “I can’t forgive until somebody pays for it”? Would that be forgiveness? **NO!** Forgiveness does not require a payment!

I know this is new thinking for us, but we have swallowed the Protestant pill, brothers. We need to go back to the drawing board on how we view the at-one-ment and forgiveness. Sins that are forgiven do not need any payment to cancel them.

2. If you stop and think about the typical “Jesus died on the cross to satisfy God’s wrath” teaching, man is not changed in the process. In fact, God is changed, not man. Think about it. You have a court trial with a guilty man and an angry God. Jesus intercedes and offers to take the punishment. So God takes out His wrath on Jesus, killing Him on the cross in the process. Now that a penalty has been paid, and God’s wrath has been satisfied, man can be at-one-d with God. But who got converted in the process, man or God? God did! He was converted from an angry God to a satisfied God.

I have the same thing to say about this as what I said about Protestant “imputed righteousness”: **NONSENSE!**

And yet, I hear it all the time across our Anabaptist pulpits (by the way, I have yet to see an early Anabaptist support penal substitutionary atonement. This atonement theory was later picked up in Dutch Mennonitism, but the Swiss Brethren and Hutterites did not accept it until the Swiss Brethren came to Pennsylvania and came into contact with the Great Awakening. Today, a large percentage have unconsciously accepted the idea, without realizing that it was created by the Protestants. Even just

recently I heard a message in a conservative Anabaptist congregation called “The Dismantling of the Trinity” that was pure Protestant atonement theory. Interesting and stirring message in one sense, but the bottom line is that it really didn’t have a lick of New Testament Scripture that specifically said the Trinity was “dismantled” at the crucifixion when the sins of the world were laid upon Jesus and God’s wrath was satisfied when God punished the Son for the sins of the world. Pure THEORY. Protestant atonement THEORY. Based on their interpretation of Isaiah 53 but not clearly supported in the NT.)

Is God so hard-hearted that He cannot forgive someone unless He first whup out His anger on somebody? He expects more than that from us. Folks, let’s think about what we are teaching! It makes us think God is against us instead of for us.

(And I don’t disfellowship people that believe wrong at-one-ment theories, it just saddens me to see how we (me included) can swallow ideas that are not biblical. I used to think along those lines myself.)

## So what?

Now some of you are probably asking, so what about all this, Mike? You bash all the foundational teachings of salvation that the Protestants have, what do you have that is any better?

Good question. And a very valid one.

First, I don’t really have all the answers. ☺

But I will share a few things for us to consider.

Let’s start at the beginning.

Man was created, whole and pure. He chooses to sin. God is obligated to depart.

Let’s stop here. The Protestants focus on the penalty of sin, as if God said, “If you sin, I will have to punish you for that sin.”

There is another way to look at what God said. God said “in the day you eat, you will die.”

We know that man ate. And he died. He died that very day.

God was not threatening Adam with punishment, He was warning Adam of consequences. God simply warned Adam that if he disobeyed, He would have to leave him on his own, because God and willful sin cannot dwell together. Impossible. So God was warning Adam of the consequences of disobedience, not threatening him with punishment.

So Adam sinned willfully, and God had to separate from him. God left Adam’s spirit, and Adam’s spirit died that day. That very day. Later Adam also died physically.

The problem is that Adam’s sin caused that every descendent of his would be born spiritually dead—God would not be reigning naturally, but rather self, sin, and Satan would naturally rule in every human born thenceforth. Humanity had been sold into Satan’s kingdom, by one sin.

But God loved humanity. He devised a plan to save the human race from its plight. Humanity was “corrupted” (some people say depraved, but that is not a KJV word, so I won’t use it). In other words, the character of humanity would only

get worse and worse with each generation that was without God. We see it happening all the time, in history and in today's society. The "corruption" is like a dead possum on the road. The longer it stays dead, the more it decays. And the longer the human race stays dead, the worse it gets "corrupted." The only way to reverse the corruption in a dead possum is to bring it back to life. The only way to stop the corruption of sin in humanity is to bring humanity back into unity with God. (Remember that word "at-one-ment"? ☺)

So God devised a plan to rescue humanity. To save it from its death, its separation from God.

Why God waited many centuries to pull it off, I have no idea. But that is what He did. For many centuries, He forgave men their sins, but He didn't put His Holy Spirit back into them to enliven them ("quicken" is the KJV word) again. Except for certain prophets ... but the general race of men could only attain forgiveness, not quickening of the Spirit. He sent the law of Moses to show humanity its great need and corruption. But the law could never restore that life in the spirit of man, it could only provide forgiveness.

But then came Jesus. He came to give forgiveness, and to give it more abundantly. Or did He?

No! He came to "give life"!

This is a very fundamental aspect we need to remember about salvation. Jesus did not come to earth so that we could be forgiven. He came to enliven (quicken—which word I don't like because so many of us don't know what it means anymore) us. He came to restore humanity to the life that Adam had before the fall. He came to at-one us with God.

He came to "take away" our sins, not forgive them. "Take away sins" does not mean "forgive us our sins." It means just what it says, "take them out" of our heart so that they don't rule our hearts any more. Just like someone takes the President out of the White House, so that he himself could be President. "Take away" means remove, not forgive.

Got that? Remove, not forgive. ☺

The early church focused on the resurrection, not on Jesus' death on the cross. I think I could safely say that the Ante-Nicene Fathers wrote five times more about the resurrection than about the death of Jesus on the cross. The reason Jesus had to die on the cross? So He could resurrect! You can't resurrect if you are not dead, so Jesus had to die.

Simple, not? (But, yes, there was more to it than just that ...)

And the resurrection of Jesus destroyed the power of Satan. It broke the rule of sin in man's heart.

Let it suffice to say, for now, that I see the book of Esther as containing the at-one-ment mystery in type. The Jews were saved from destruction. How? Not in a courtroom setting (as per Protestantism), but on the battlefield, when they were *given the authority to overthrow their enemies and kill them!* They were saved when they were given the power to destroy that which was destroying them.

Friends and brethren, we are like the Jews. The irrevocable law of spiritual death is upon us. If we die in our sins, our separation from God is sealed for eternity. The only way we can be saved is if someone, somehow, can restore that life of God in our spirit before we die.

Know anyone capable of restoring the Holy Ghost in us? Anyone who has that power and authority to fill our hearts with the Holy Spirit so we can kill Haman and his cohorts?

John said (Rev. 5), "And I wept much, because no man was found worthy to open and to read the book, neither to look thereon." But then the good news was told him: "And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof."

Brethren and friends, we need weep no more. The Lion of the tribe of Judah has prevailed. God sent His Son to earth, and heaped upon Him all the temptations of man—yeah, as it says in Isaiah 53:6, the Lord laid all of humanity's sins upon Him—all of humanity's weaknesses and temptations. This Jesus had to prove that He was capable of walking through all the temptations and weaknesses of humanity, to prove that He could do it and not sin. Because if He was not capable of overcoming sin in His own walk on the earth, He was in no way qualified to pour out His Spirit into the hearts of dead men to help them overcome also.

So he had to "run the gauntlet" so to speak. All of humanity's temptations, oppressions, and afflictions had to be borne by Him for a season of 33 and a half years to prove His capabilities. Yes, Satan's bruising of the Messiah (foretold in Genesis, that the seed of the snake would bruise the seed of the woman) on Gethsemane pleased the Father, because He saw His Son pass the test with flying colors ... the Son was capable even of dying an unrighteous death, and never sinning once. Not even sinning with His mouth. In fact, He forgave those who unrighteously killed Him.

The Father was pleased with the Son's victory over the bruising, and proclaimed Him the Savior of the world. Because He had proven Himself capable of overcoming all sin, He was resurrected to the Father's right hand ... to do what?

"To purchase my pardon on Calvary's tree ..."?

NO!

To put His Spirit—the very same one with which He had overcome all the temptations with—back into the heart of humanity!

Now man could be salvaged, saved from sin. The Spirit of God was restored to the throne in the heart. Man had Eternal Life (Jehovah) back in him, just like it was before the fall in the garden.

What a Savior! Can anyone else do that? Can anyone else conquer all sin? Can anyone else put the Spirit of God back into man, besides Jesus?

Remember this, the Bible never says that Jesus died to purchase your pardon. Jesus says "I am come that they might have life." He came to sprinkle His blood—His life, or Spirit—on the altar of our heart, quickening (enlivening) it. His blood can quicken (enliven) our dead spirit. His blood (Life) can purge away the sin that controls our life. His blood (Spirit) can liberate us from sin.

Remember the verse that says, "Except ye eat my flesh and drink my blood you have no forgiveness?"

No, you don't remember that verse, because it says "you have no life!"

Isaiah prophesied: “by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.”

Remember that justify means to make a person just in character? The righteous servant (Jesus) will make many men just and upright, because he will bear (take away, like taking the trash out of the house and throwing it in the dumpster) their iniquities.

Oh, if He has not done that for you, let Him into your heart. Let him turn you into an upright man or woman. Let Him in so He can take the sin that is in your heart and yank it out of there and carry it away, just like the “scapegoat” symbolically took the sins that were laid on him and took them off into the desert somewhere. Somewhere far away. A place far from the human heart. What He did with them out there, I don’t know and I don’t care. The glory is that he dethrones them from the heart and carries them outside somewhere and dumps them.

The Lamb of God that taketh away sin ...

What a Savior!

## And the cross

I wrote this letter last evening, staying up until 12:20 a.m. I have quickly gone over it a couple of times for typos and other mistakes. It is not a complete, written in stone confession of faith. It is a letter, mistakes and all.

But now I feel to add another paragraph or two about the cross. You have likely heard about the “finished work of Christ on the cross.” You likely have heard that our salvation consists in “trusting in the finished work of Christ on the cross.”

Can you please tell me where the NT speaks about “the finished work of Christ on the cross”? And where we are told, “Except you trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross, you cannot be my disciple”?

Jesus said in His John 17 prayer that “I have finished the work ...” Notice something? He said that before He went to the cross. Hmmm ...

On the cross He said, “It is finished.” What did He mean by “it”? I won’t make any strong statements, because He could have referred to various things. But one thing was certain, His physical life was finished, or very nearly so. His pre-resurrection ministry was done.

If we are not careful, we read something into Jesus’ statement that is not there. We can easily say that Jesus finished His work of providing for our salvation on the cross, and all we need is to trust in that work.

There is a major problem with that theology. The Bible never really tells us to “trust in the finished work of Christ on the cross.” It does tell us that unless we take up the daily cross of self-denial we cannot be Jesus’ disciple. But taking up the cross of self-denial and trusting in the finished work of Christ on the cross are quite distinct things.

Think about it. The Protestant “doctrine of the cross” has basically ignored the purpose of the cross, which is to kill our self. There is more that could be said, but I remind the reader that Michael Sattler refuted the Protestant idea of “trusting in the finished work on the cross,” nearly five centuries ago. He said—and I agree—that Jesus’ work on the cross is not finished until He has brought us to the cross with Him, and

we have died to self there. Jesus’ pre-resurrection work was finished on a cross on Golgotha, but His work on the cross continues until this moment, and will continue until the second coming of Christ, until there is no more need for His cross. After that, there will be no more need of crosses to kill self!

## Closing

This letter is only a start. There is much more that could be said. I trust that I have at least challenged you to take a serious look at what you believe about salvation. I repeat from earlier, I have no desire to start splitting doctrinal hairs with people.

But as you can see, these issues are not hairs. They are foundational doctrines. At least I don’t see them as hairs to split. I mean, to me there is a world of difference between declaring someone forgiven and changing their character into righteousness.

And I know that some will try to mix the ideas presented here. Some will reject me entirely, perhaps even excommunicating me. Some may even hail me as a hero.

What you do with me is sort of beside the point.

What will you do with truth? Is what I have laid out truth?

It is your responsibility to determine that.

God bless you, and you may contact me concerning what I have said. And please remember that this is a letter, a quick spilling out of things I have looked into over the last eight or so years. I likely have said something wrong. Please look at the whole, not the undotted i’s and uncrossed t’s.

I can be contacted at [atnips@gmail.com](mailto:atnips@gmail.com) or by writing Mike Atnip, PO Box 292, Ephrata, PA 17522.

Yours for the King,

Mike

As a sort of PS. statement, I will add a couple of comments on Isaiah 53, since I know that is a foundation for the penal substitution theory. There are several ways that Isaiah 53 could be interpreted, so this is not to say my comments are the only way to look at it.

Obviously, the whole chapter is a prophecy of the Messiah. Vss 1-3 give a general look at His life. The thing to remember here is that these three verses do not refer specifically to His death, but His life in general.

Then verse 4. Here is where people start thinking along the lines of Jesus taking our punishment for us on the cross. And I understand how these verses can be looked at in that way. But let’s consider something a little different, and see if it makes sense. Verse 4 talks of carrying our griefs and sorrows. Here is a beautiful prophecy of the incarnation. Today, we here little about the incarnation, or the coming “in flesh” of the Messiah. I recommend the early church writings to those interested. Check out the early church view of what is called recapitulation. Recapitulation means to “resummarize.” Jesus “resummarized” the first creation, except when He went through the process of becoming a man (just like Adam became a man), He didn’t fail like Adam did. And so verse 4 tells of this: the Messiah came to earth as a human. He could have come as an angel with another type of

body. But then He would not have been tempted like we are. So Jesus came with a body and brain and emotions just like ours, and He “carried our griefs and sorrows.” In other words, He had to put up with the same temptations and bodily weaknesses that we do. (But He overcame, hallelujah!!)

Verse 5. This verse makes sense when interpreted in the typical substitution theory. I don’t criticize anyone for saying that this verse appears to support the idea that the punishment for our sin was laid on Jesus.

But it can also make sense like this:

Why did Jesus come to earth and take on a human body? So He could overcome for us. He came to earth and took upon himself the weaknesses of a human body and emotions, and the resulting rejection. So that we could find peace, He went through 33 ½ years of human sufferings. He had to be tempted in all points like as we are, so that He could be a faithful high priest. In other words, there was no way He could heal the disease of sin unless He took upon himself a human body with all its weaknesses and prove himself capable of overcoming rejection, false accusations, stripes, and ultimately an unjust death, all without sinning. As the Orthodox Church likes to say (and I like to say ☺), God became man so that man could become God (or like Him in character). That doctrine is called *theosis*. I wish our western churches could revive it among us.

Verse 6 again could easily be interpreted in the “Jesus took all our punishments on the cross” way of looking at things. But it can also simply mean that Jesus took upon Himself the responsibility to heal all the iniquity of men. In other words, God told the Messiah, “See all the iniquity down there? It is your job to fix that mess. The responsibility is laid on you to banish all iniquity on the earth. Go down there in a human body and show how it is done.”

Verse 7 seems to be referring to Christ’s death, yet it can easily mean—as does the general tenor of the rest of the chapter—that Jesus did not complain about His job of rescuing humanity from sin, even though it cost Him a number of years of tremendous rejection and misunderstanding. He came unto His own, and they received Him not. But He kept His mouth shut during the whole time, as far as complaining about it.

Verse 8. Clearly referring to His death. While this could be taken to mean that Jesus was “stricken” so as to take the punishment of the people, it simple refers to the fact that Jesus died because man had sinned. Had man never sinned, Jesus would not have had to assume a body and come to earth.

Verse 10. Here we immediately assume that the Father was the one that bruised the Son. But let’s consider the prophecy about the heel of the “seed of the woman” getting bruised. Who bruised that heel? The seed of the snake. The point is, “pleased the Lord to bruise him” does not necessarily mean that “the Lord” was the one that did the actual bruising, but rather that He allowed it. We can say that God afflicted Job, but in the sense that He allowed it, not that He actually did it. Or that God put Joseph in the dungeon. Again, God didn’t actually do the deed, but He allowed it.

And so the Lord bruising the Messiah can simply mean that the Lord allowed it, or in fact, planned it. And it pleased the Lord. Why? Because He knew His Son would overcome and thereby be crowned King. The Messiah had to assume flesh and blood and be rejected and thereby prove His power over sin that way. And so it pleased the Father to watch the whole thing unfold.

Did the Father do the actual beating? The verse doesn’t say that. (Some have said this would be a case of “divine child abuse” if the Father killed His own Son to satisfy His wrath.) It simply says that God planned that through a “bruising” and putting Him through a “grievous” situation, an offering would be made that would be able to put life back into the spirit of man once again. Jesus sacrificed 33 ½ years of being in heaven with His Father so that He could take on the sufferings of humanity and conquer them. God was pleased with that offering.

Verse 11. Suffering for righteousness sake satisfies the Lord. Whether that suffering be in His Son Jesus, or in any of His other children. Suffering is the main way that God brings honor unto himself. When a man suffers for righteousness sake, onlookers usually glorify God, since they recognize that man in himself does not generally have the power to keep his mouth shut when he is falsely accused and tortured. The martyrs down through the ages have also satisfied the Lord with their sufferings. Again, there is nothing in this verse that specifically says that the Father’s wrath was satisfied by Jesus death on the cross. That is an assumption. And I acknowledge that the verse could make sense that way. But I am trying to expound how the early church looked upon the whole matter.

I already looked at the part about “my righteous servant shall justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities.” But I will repeat. If we use the original sense of justify here, we end up seeing that Jesus shall make many people to be upright in character. Because He shall carry their iniquities. That could refer to one of two things. 1. Jesus assumed a human body and took upon Himself the great risk of walking around and getting tripped up and sinning. Do we realize the risk God took? To send His Son into a body just like ours? What a gamble! Just suppose the Son gave in to the temptations that His body constantly tempted Him with! The whole salvation operation would have failed!

Or, bearing their iniquities could refer to the scapegoat thing, where the second goat (type of the resurrected Messiah) actually took the sins and carried them off into a desert place. This was a type of taking the sins out of the heart of man. Like, taking pride out of a man’s heart. Or, taking lust out. It was the removal of the sin, not the forgiving of it.

In summary, it is time we took another look at Isaiah 53. We have become so used to the Protestant view that we seem to think that is the only way it can be looked at. I suggest to those interested to study the early church view of the incarnation and recapitulation.

I hope to bring some of this out in my book.

I told you my book project is quite overwhelming. ☺