

## An Evaluation of Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement

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*God made him who had no sin to be sin for us,  
so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.  
(2 Corinthians 5:21)*

The doctrine of atonement has resurfaced in recent years as an area of controversy. This paper goes back to the eleventh century contribution of Anselm in his book *Cur Deus Homo* ('Why the God Man'). It is in this work that Anselm argues that atonement for sin is achieved because Christ paid our debt in our place. Anselm's book laid the foundations for much of the subsequent debate surrounding the doctrine of atonement.

### Historical understandings of the atonement

Many different theories of atonement have been put forward in the course of church history. They can be broadly placed within three categories. The 'Moral Influence View' (or 'Exemplary View') stresses the affect that the atonement has on those who believe, with the cross seen primarily as a picture of God's love for humanity designed to provoke a similar response within the believer's heart. The 'Dramatic View' of the atonement stresses the victory that was achieved over sin and death through a transaction between God and the devil as God ransomed men's souls with the blood of his son. The third, which is associated with Anselm, is the 'Satisfaction Theory' which argues that only through the substitutionary death of the God-man, Jesus Christ, could God be reconciled with man without compromising either his justice or his plan for creation.

### Anselm's 'Cur Deus Homo'

The 'Satisfaction Theory' was put forward by Anselm in his two-book work '*Cur Deus Homo*'. Anselm wrote while he was in exile as Archbishop of Canterbury, and therefore while he was 'suffering under great anguish of heart'. In the first book Anselm explores the objections of unbelievers who despise the Christian faith because they deem it contrary to reason and concludes the impossibility of any man being saved without Jesus Christ. The second book explores why God had to become man, arguing that it was through this plan that both the body and soul of man could be made immortal. He wrote at the request of many believers, 'not for the sake of attaining to faith by means of reason, but that they may be gladdened by understanding, and that they may be always ready to convince anyone who demands of them a reason for the hope which is in us' (I.1). In his writings he engages in dialogue with a certain Boso who questions the reason for Jesus' death on the cross: 'I desire that you should discover to me, for what necessity and cause God, who is omnipotent, should have assumed the littleness and weakness of human nature for the sake of its renewal?' (I.2)

### Why did God have to die?

According to Boso, unbelievers think it unreasonable that God had to die to redeem man. They reason: if the God who created this universe were not able to free man by a simple command, then surely he is a powerless God? If God were able to redeem man by other means (i.e. by a simple word) and yet chose death instead, then we must conclude he is unwise.

Boso argues the cross could not be as a ransom to the devil in order for God to regain ownership of man, because the devil and man are both under the ownership of God, only in existence at the divine exertion of God's will. The devil has no just claim over sinful man, but rather, the devil is allowed to torment man because 'God in (his) justice permits this, and ... man in (his) justice suffers it' (I.8). Thus, when man is said to suffer justly this is not because the devil had the right to demand sin or the punishment of sin.

Anselm engages with Boso's questions in a number of ways. He asserts the will of God can never be irrational (I.9), therefore it is possible to reason why God would have to take on the likeness of man and die in order to redeem man. Furthermore, if God is wise and sovereign we, surely, must conclude that there was no other way to save man. Anselm also describes how the redemption of man could not be carried out by any being other than God himself: if God were to use another being to reconcile sinful man back to God, man would cease to be solely the servant of God (the position to which he was created) and would then be indebted also to the being that had rescued him from sin. Finally, Anselm describes how, even if we often do not understand God's actions, his will should always be a sufficient explanation of why God does anything and this includes why he had to die.

### Man's sin and God's honour

Boso suggests it remains unclear how the death of his Son gained the salvation of man. Anselm answers by first stating some agreed assumptions: 'Let it be agreed between us that man was made for happiness, which cannot be attained in this life, and that no being can ever arrive at happiness, save by freedom from sin, and that no man passes this life without sin. Therefore, in order that man may attain happiness, remission of sin is necessary' (I.10)

Anselm then continues by describing what it is to sin and what it is to make 'satisfaction for sin'. To sin, he says, is to fail to give to God the honour that is due by being subject to his will. As long as man does not restore to God what is his due, he remains at fault and because of the contempt that man shows God in dishonouring him in this way, it is only fitting that man should restore more than he took from God in sinning. This repaying of honour is what Anselm called 'satisfaction for sin', something required by God. To cancel out sin by compassion alone and avoid all punishment for the contempt shown to God by man would make injustice part of God's character.

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In response Boso says if God is free and subject to no-one or no law, then nothing is unjust unless God wills it to be unjust. Anselm corrects Boso: something improper cannot be considered just simply because God wishes it to be just. For if God wishes to lie, we must not conclude that it is right to lie, but rather that God unjust! (I.12). It does not belong to God's liberty or free will to let sin go unpunished on account of his compassion. Hence the death of Christ cannot primarily be a moral display of God's love; if it was (as stated by the 'Moral Influence View' of the atonement) then God's own trustworthiness should be called into question.

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Anselm declared that there is nothing greater nor better than God and subsequently there is nothing more just than maintaining the honour of his name through receiving satisfaction for sin. It is impossible for God to lose honour. Either a man renders to God his due and does not sin, or he sins and makes satisfaction for those sins. If man sins and does not make satisfaction for his sin, then God extracts the honour from him by subjecting him to torment against his own will and thus shows that he is the Lord of man. God extracts payment for sin by the removal of happiness. Anselm upholds that nothing can be added or taken away from God's honour. Although sin destroys the beauty and order of the universe it never tarnishes the beauty and honour of God. Although man chooses not to submit to the divine will, he cannot escape it. If he chooses to run from the will that commands, he falls into the power of the will that punishes. God cannot allow sin to go unpunished. If he did so, there would be a part of the universe that God did not control and he would be a deficient God. Such a thing cannot exist, and so satisfaction or punishment must follow every sin.

#### **Man's inability to save himself**

Anselm asks Boso to tell him what payment should be given to God to make satisfaction for sin. Boso answers 'repentance, a broken and contrite heart, self-denial, various bodily sufferings, pity in giving and forgiving, and obedience ... to give up worldly joy, to submit obediently to him, freely bestowing my possessions in giving to and releasing others'. To this Anselm replies: 'But what do you give to God by your obedience, which is not owed him already, since he demands from you all that you are and have and can be?' Boso accepts: 'If in justice I owe God myself and all my powers, even when I do not sin, I have nothing left to render to him for my sin.' (I.20). If man is left to himself, reason concludes, there is no hope for sinful man to ever attain the happiness that he was created to enjoy.

Anselm pushes this point by outlining the burden of sin. A glance contrary to the will of God is so heinous a sin that even if the whole of the created order rested on man making that contrary look, man would be wrong to do so. It is not right that man be raised to happiness with even the debt of one contrary look to the will of God without satisfaction being made for that sin.

Boso concedes this: if man can pay and yet refuses to render to God what is his due, then he is unjust. But seeing that man is born into sin and therefore unable to make satisfaction even if he desires to, can man still be called unjust? Anselm replies with a story. Suppose a master assigns a slave a piece work to do, and commands a slave not to throw himself into a ditch, which he points out to the slave, and from which the slave would be unable get himself out. Suppose the slave, despising the masters command, throws himself into the ditch, from which he is unable to get himself out and thus unable to carry out the original task set by his master. Will this slave's inability excuse him from not accomplishing all that the master commanded? By no means, instead it will increase his crime since he brought his inability on himself. He has doubled his sin in not doing what he was commanded to do and in doing what he was commanded not to do. And so it is with man's sin, for man ought not to have this inability to honour God. And so without any atonement for his sin, God's divine

nature will allow nothing but punishment. (I.24) Anselm states in the conclusion of his first book that reason alone can show that man could never save himself, nor could he restore himself to happiness.

### **Only the 'God-man' can make satisfaction for sin**

God's plan for the universe was either to complete what he had begun or else concede that his creation, capable of such good, was made in vain. The latter is not consistent with his character and so God must perfect his creation lest he be seen to have failed in his design. Yet, as Anselm reasoned in his first book, this cannot be achieved without the expiation of sin. That which needs to be repaid to God must be greater than the whole universe as anything less is already owed to him in worship. Who can pay such a price, except God himself? 'If it be necessary, therefore, as it appears, that the heavenly kingdom be made up of men, and this cannot be effected unless the aforesaid satisfaction be made, *which none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it* (II.6 emphasis mine).' At this point Boso declares: 'Blessed be our God!'

Anselm argues that Christ's death was not simply because he became man and hence became mortal. Mortality is not the essential nature of man. It is a result of the fall. This is proven in the resurrection body, which is fully human and yet free from mortality. Therefore, Anselm argues, there must be another reason for Christ's death.

### **Christ's death outweighs man's sin**

If Jesus Christ the God-man is omnipotent then he can 'lay down' his life as well as 'pick it up again'. So it follows that no one could force him to lay down his life unless he chose to do so. It should also be remembered that the gift he presented freely to God for the satisfaction of sin must be greater than anything in the possession of God, which includes himself. God the Son cannot *give* himself to God in holiness and obedience as that is due to God. Therefore the gift that the Son made was to deliver himself to death for the sake of God's honour. God could not demand his death since no sin could be found within him. 'Nothing is more severe or difficult for man to do for God's honour, than to suffer death voluntarily when not bound by obligation; and man cannot give himself to God in any way more truly than by surrendering himself to death for God's honour (II.11).'

### **How man's salvation follows from Christ's death**

If Christ gave beyond what was required, it was necessary that God the Father should reward Christ for his work. As Anselm points out, however, what can God the Father give to God the Son? There is nothing that God the Son needs, since he never lacked anything. However, if a reward is not given to him or anyone else, then it will appear as if the Son had done his great work in vain. Anselm answers 'Upon whom would he more properly bestow the reward accruing from his death, than upon those for whose salvation, as right reason teaches, he became man.' (II.19) His reward is that God should remove the debt owed by man's sin, and give what their transgressions had forfeited. This, he describes, is how human salvation is made possible through the death of Christ.

Anselm concluded his second book rejoicing with Boso that they had together discovered the compassion of God, which earlier seemed to be lost due to the conundrum of God's holiness and man's sin: 'For what compassion can excel these words of the Father, addressed to the sinner doomed to eternal torments and having no way of escape: "Take my only begotten Son and make him an offering for yourself" (II.20).'

### **A critique of Cur Deus Homo**

Anselm roots the burden of man's sin in the character of God. Through

'satisfaction for sin' God rewarded Christ with infinite merit, which Christ in turn, passed on to sinful man in order that man's debt might be cancelled. However, Anselm gave little discussion as to how that merit is passed on. There does not seem to be any mention or hint of the mystical union with Christ, through faith, which unites us to Christ in both his death and resurrection (as spoken of in Romans 6).

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Furthermore, while Anselm asserted that Christ died in our place, he does not talk in terms of Christ taking the punishment for sin in our place. Death is not described as the punishment of our sin, but rather Christ's death brings about man's salvation primarily because it is through his death that Christ is able to offer something in excess of what God requires. Satisfaction is therefore presented as an alternative to punishment, rather than it being satisfaction of God's wrath.

Stott suggests Anselm presents God as a feudal lord who demands honour and punishes dishonour. Anselm wrote when the term 'satisfaction' was accepted terminology in the medieval justice system; a powerful force during the re-structuring of a previously Roman society. Justice and law became more of a personal matter, with violations of the law offences against the feudal overlord. Within this feudal structure, 'satisfaction' could be offered to the feudal lord as an alternative to punishment; 'satisfaction' in medieval times could almost be seen as bribery to avert punishment. Micah 6 clearly presents God as one who can not be bribed.

The discussion as to whether Christ's death paid exactly what sinners owed, or more than sinners owed, is not based upon a biblical argument. Stott describes Anselm as stepping beyond the boundaries of biblical revelation in his scholastic reasoning on this point. Stott also suggests that we should remain dissatisfied whenever the atonement is presented as a necessary satisfaction of either God's law or of God's honour insofar as these are objectified as existing in some way apart from God. Anselm, however, does not suggest that God's law or his honour are merely an arbitrary standard imposed by God on mankind, but rather Anselm grounds the reality of sin in the character of God. Instead it is Anselm's belief that all sin stems from a violation of God's inherent honour that forms the backbone of his theory of atonement.

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*The New Testament ... emphasises  
the initiative taken by God to redeem man  
at the cost of his Son's sufferings,  
in which God himself also suffered.*

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Anselm clearly challenges the sufficiency of the 'Moral View' of the atonement. He does not deny that Christ's death functions as an example to us. 'No man except this one ever gave to God what he was not obliged to lose, or paid a debt he did not owe. But he freely offered to the Father what there was no need of his ever losing, and paid for sinners what he owed not for himself. Therefore he set a much nobler example.' (II.18b)

But Christ's death is much *more* than an example. The cross can only be a picture of God's compassion when we realise that Jesus bore God's judgement in our place.

Anselm also refutes the 'Dramatic View' of the atonement, showing that there is no just claim of the devil over sinful man and thus no transaction needed between God and the devil to make 'satisfaction for sin'. Anselm, however, perhaps give insufficient attention to the validity of the Dramatic View. Christ's death in our place on the cross was a defeat of Satan because it disarms his power to accuse and condemn. John Stott says that Gustav Aulén, who popularised the 'Dramatic View' of the atonement in his book '*Christus Victor*', was right to draw the church's attention to the Cross as victory over the devil and all evil powers. 'Gustav Aulén was also correct in pointing out that the "note of triumph", which sounds like a "trumpet call through the teaching in the early church" was largely absent from the cool logic of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*.'

Finally, Anselm's entire approach to this topic rests on his ability to reason with logical man. He does this because of his assumption that man was made to be rational, in order to desire that which was of greatest value: God. The Bible, however, puts more weight on man being a relational being, made in the image of God (which no doubt includes being rational), and finding 'happiness' in worshipping the creator God. Man's sin is that he suppresses the knowledge of his Creator and all that he was created for. Anselm emphasises that man should choose God because logically God is supremely beautiful and just. This is undoubtedly true. The Bible, however, does not describe sin as a failure to live out logic and reason, but as a refusal to worship and honour God.

Anselm's greatest contribution is in his recognition of man's inability to save himself, by teaching of the gravity of man's sin in relation to God's holiness. Anselm also teaches us in detail of Christ's uniqueness as the God-man, and of his incarnation. His contribution has provided a crucial foundation to our understanding of the doctrine of atonement today.

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### Northern Training Institute

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