

Studies in Church History

Anselm and the Atonement Doctrine

A Survey of the Church in the Middle Ages

Throughout the Middle Ages the prevailing doctrine of the Atonement was that which was advocated by Origen, known as the "*ransom to the devil theory*". Very little thought had been applied to this doctrine as the issues during the first four centuries which occupied the Church were those that concerned the Incarnation of Christ. It was Anselm however, who challenged the traditional teaching and introduced a more thorough going Pauline doctrine which became the backbone of the accepted evangelical teaching of today. Anselm therefore stands in the eleventh century as an important turning point on this essential issue of the meaning of the death of Christ.

Before we come to deal with the issues of the Atonement, it would be helpful for us to place Anselm in the context of the Middle Ages and catch a glimpse of the state of the Church during his day.

The Middle Ages period spans from the Fall of Rome in 476 to the fourteenth century, the beginning of the Reformation. Others suggest that the enthronement of Gregory 1 (590-604) as Pope introduced the Middle Ages. It was a period of remarkable growth in the Roman Catholic Church witnessing its rise in religious and political power and the development of many of the main Roman Catholic dogmas.

The following will provide an over-view of the essential features of Middle Ages period of Church History.

1 Gregory the Great 590-604, was one of the "chief architects of the papal system". He was probably one of the greatest and most outstanding pope.

2 Christianisation of Britain. The Gospel had made strong impact on Britain by the 3rd century. In 597 Augustin (known as Saint Augustin) came to England and established Roman Catholicism in Canterbury where the Cathedral was built.

3. The rise of Monasticism. Christian asceticism arose in Egypt 251, monastic orders were organised in the 3rd and 4th centuries. From the 5th century onwards Monasticism become more structured and its popularity grew.

4. The rise of Islam 570.

5. Popes Hadrian 11 (867-872) and John V11 (872-882) claimed the right to interfere in political disputes and even to dispose of the imperial crown.

6. Gregory V11- Boniface V111 (1073-1294). The Papacy reaches its height.

The Church began to acquire wealth, property and lands. The popes claimed that they had the right to operate without any state interference. Pope Hildebrand in 1075 dominated the Emperor Henry 1V.

7. The Crusades 1095-1270. Turkish Muslims had captured Jerusalem and were harassing Christian pilgrims. Eight crusades aimed to re-capture Jerusalem and destroy the Arab Muslims. The cause failed.

8. Roman Catholic doctrine of the Middle Ages.

i) *Papal Claims:* Popes no longer represented humble pastors, but now entered the political arena and sought to humiliate the Kings.

ii) *The Lord's Supper* had ceased to be a simple remembrance meal. The sacrificial concept arose early (2rd cent) with the "*Real Presence*" becoming a doctrine in 831 known as Transubstantiation.

iii) *Purgatory*, a concept taught by Augustine developed into an accepted doctrine by 1439.

iv) *Prayers* for the dead and saints: recognised by the Church in 787.

v) *Adoration of Mary:* in 431 the Council of Ephesus declared Mary to be "Theototokos" (Mother of God). At the end of the 6th century prayers and worship was being offered to Mary.

vi) *Auricular Confession:* prayers of confession before a priest became common in the 5th century and by 763 it was commanded.

vii) *Priesthood:* with emphasis laid on the need for an "altar" the office of the priest became more powerful as having divine authority and special grace.

viii) *Worship of images:* at the beginning of the 7th century pictures and images were allowed in Churches but not to be the

objects of worship. By the 8th century people were offering worship and prayers to their pictures and images surrounded by an atmosphere of superstition and ignorance.

9. Non-Roman Catholic groups. In the 7th century a "sect" known as the Paulicians arose: also in the 10th century the Bogamils in Bulgaria and Bosnia. Later, ascetic minded Christians having a reverence for the scriptures were known as the Cathari (the Pure) . At the end of the 12th century in the Netherlands the Beghards, a praying people arose. In the 12 - 13th centuries the Albigenses and Waldensians became popular. All these groups opposed the Catholic Church. (Note: for more information regarding non-Catholic groups see on this CD the "History of Baptism" under "Resource Material".

1. Anselm 1033-1109

In 1056 Anselm entered a monastic school in Normandy France becoming Prior in 1063. He had from his youth wanted to become a monk. His strong character and remarkable intellectual abilities gained him a high reputation as a teaching and spiritual director. He was known as a man of which his prayers were aflame with passionate faith, "*Grant that I may taste by love what I apprehend by knowledge, that I feel in my heart what I touch through the Spirit*".

Anselm was clearly a man of spirituality and nowhere is this more evident than in this well known statement, "*I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe that I may understand; for this I also believe, that unless I believe I will not understand*". He went on to state, "*Although the right method of procedure demands that we should believe the mysteries of faith before we venture to discuss them rationally, none the less it seems to me to indicate negligence if, after we have been confirmed in the faith, we do not study to comprehend what we believe*". Thus Anselm sought not only to believe the faith but also to understand it. He wanted to present a reasoned explanation for the faith.

One of Anselm's major works was "*The Monologian*", of which the original title was "*An example of Meditation on the Rationality of Faith*". It set out to prove the existence of God by arguments derived from human reason and not from scriptural revelation. It was an "*apologetic*". Anselm wanted to offer a rational argument to the unbeliever and the sceptic showing that it is irrational to not believe in the existence of God. Briefly, the

argument sought to establish that the signs of moral purpose and intelligent design in the universe which are observable in nature, presupposes some perfect and self-existence Being as its Creator; a supreme God must be the author of all things. Anselm, however was not content with this argument and he sought for some compelling proof for the existence of God and formulated the "*Ontological Argument*". Here he defines God as being so perfect that nothing greater is conceivable, from which it follows that he cannot be conceived as non-existent. The argument, of course is defective and is based on subjective supposition.

Anselm found himself being drawn more and more away from his desirable quiet studious life. When he became Abbot of Bec in Normandy in 1078 he was obliged to pay several visits to England. He rapidly won friends and a following (including the respect of the King William Rufus, son of William the Conqueror). The Church in England was speedily reorganising itself after the Norman Conquest of 1066. At the invitation of the English clergy, the King appointed Anselm to become Archbishop of Canterbury as the only person he could trust in such a position. Thus on September 5th 1093 Anselm was enthroned at Canterbury Cathedral. He was clearly, one of the great archbishops of Canterbury being renowned as a theologian and philosopher. Anselm's reign was marked by religious conflict with King Rufus and his successor Henry 1 over the issue of papal supremacy. He was exiled more than once. As Archbishop he was known as a reformer, encouraging regular Church synods, enforcing clerical celibacy and suppressing the slave trade.

Of all of Anselm's writings his most popular and famous contribution to the theological debate of his day was his *Cur Deus Homo?* ("*Why did God become man?*"). Few books perhaps, none of comparable length, have had so great an influence on the development of dogma.

2. Origen and the Ransom to the Devil theory (Recapitulation theory) (AD 185-254)

In order to appreciate the relevance of Anselm's teaching it is important for us to grasp the prevailing doctrinal position of the Church on the teaching of the death of Christ. Origen had taught that through the sin of Adam man had become enslaved to the devil. God in His grace wished to set men free, but was unable to because of the devil's claim which, he said, was just.

Consequently, to neutralize Satan's claim a ransom had to be paid in the form a valuable person over whom Satan had no right - a sinless person. Thus for Origen the cross was a cosmic drama in which Christ Jesus the Man was handed to the devil as bait; the devil claimed it as his rightful possession, only to be caught on the concealed hook of Christ's deity. For when Satan took Christ, he took One who alone among men did not rightly belong to his jurisdiction; and when he had thus broken the rules of strict justice, it was only just for him to be deprived of those others whom he held in bondage.

Apart from a few dissenting voices, this was the generally accepted doctrine of the cross. Until Anselm, no one had challenged this teaching. However, it was Anselm alone who was now to radically transform the teaching of the atonement by refocusing attention on the scriptures and presenting a reasoned argument showing the fallacy of Origen's teachings.

3 Anselm's teaching on the Atonement

We must bear in mind the fact that originally Anselm was not writing a book on the Atonement but rather on the Incarnation (*Cur Deus Homo* "Why did God become man?"). The atonement doctrine is introduced in order to defend his doctrine of the Incarnation. For Anselm, the reason why God became man was in order to die for the sins of man. Thus, he is able to produce his doctrine of the Atonement as an argument necessitating the Incarnation. Jesus was born because He had to die. This is why God became Man!

In his work Anselm proposes to argue from pure logical based on three main principles:-

- i) Salvation apart from Christ is impossible:
- ii) Humanity needs to be saved:
- iii) Salvation could only come through a God-Man.

The material in *Cur Deus Homo* ("Why did God become man?") is presented in a question and answer form, thus he can arrange for an imaginary friend called "Boso" to freely criticise the "Ransom to the devil theory" in the third person without necessarily identifying himself with this teaching.

In his book, "*Cur Deus Homo?*", Anselm seeks to raise, and answer, popular questions of his day, such as, "*Could not God have saved man by a mere act of His omnipotence just as easily as He could create the world?*": "*Could not He, the merciful God, simply have pardoned the sin of man, without demanding*

satisfaction?": "And if a mediator was necessary, why did He choose His only-begotten Son for the work of mediation, and not some other rational being?"

It is important for us to realise that fundamental to Anselm's thinking is his view of sin and the justice of God. He defines sin in this way, "*Sin is nothing else than not to render to God His due*". For Anselm, sin is a dishonouring of God, a negation of His rightful glory. The important point that Anselm is making here is that sin is an offence against a person (viz. God) and not a mere principle. Anselm sees that sin is not merely an offence against an impersonal "*law*", but rather it is an offence against the very "*Law Giver*" Himself. Thus, one must restore the honour and do restitution to God for dishonouring Him. This you do by repaying to God something that is pleasing to Him. Restoration and compensation therefore constitute the satisfaction that must be rendered to God because of man's sin. To the objection that God might in His mercy remit sins without any reference to His injured honour, Anselm replies that this would be an offence against all order. If God were to simply remit sin due to his love and mercy this would be an irregularity and an act of injustice. God's justice demands that satisfaction for sin is rendered. Whilst we ourselves may merely forgive people who offend against us, but with God it is different. Due to His perfect justice, God cannot simply overlook sin or dismiss it through His love. Anselm's view is that because of our sin we must either make satisfaction to God or receive punishment. If we were to be punished we would all be destroyed in hell. How then can we make this satisfaction to God so that He can forgive us?

For Anselm therefore, this satisfaction which must be made to God because of man's sins constitutes the heart of the Atonement. In other words, Anselm is arguing that the satisfaction is not paid to the devil but rather it is paid to God because it is God's honour that has been offended through man's sin. This is the core of Anselm's thesis. God becomes the object of the Atonement, not the devil. The cross, therefore, has an objective, God-ward meaning. The death of Christ seeks to achieve something in the Godhead in order that man may then be forgiven of his sin.

However, man must pay the satisfaction, as it is man who has sinned, but it is only God who can make a full satisfaction. Consequently, the God-Man must make the satisfaction. There is only One who meets this criterion. Christ alone meets this need. His death, because He is God makes His satisfaction infinite, thus his death can avail for all sinners. But, it is God's mercy that prompts Him to make this satisfaction through His death, as it is God who "So loved the world that He gave His only Son". Yet, although the Father sends the Son, the death of

Christ, the God-Man, is totally voluntary and through it He brings infinite glory to God.

Now, justice requires that such an act, as the death of Christ should be rewarded. The Father must acknowledge the infinite value of Christ's death and seek a reward for His Son. But, as Christ has no need of a reward, as He is the very Son of God possessing infinite glory, He passes it on to those for whom He died, an elect company of human souls from every generation. The reward, therefore, is of benefit to sinful men and women and becomes a form of forgiveness of sins and of future blessedness for all those who live according to the commandments of the Gospel.

Anselm had therefore introduced a totally radical view of the atonement built upon his doctrine of the Incarnation. Indeed, for Anselm the Atonement necessitates the Incarnation. Why did God become man (*Cur Deus Homo?*)? Answer, because of the satisfaction that was needed to be made on man's behalf to God. Without this view of the Atonement, we cannot give a suitable answer for the Incarnation. Without the Atonement, we do not have a reason for Christ becoming man.

In his teaching, Anselm had at last brought the Church nearer to the Biblical Pauline presentation of the doctrine of the Atonement. Here in the objective, God-ward nature of the Atonement, showing that the cross was designed to deal with issues within the Godhead, namely the offended divine law, the offended God Himself, Anselm has made his chief contribution. It is Paul who teaches that the atonement was a '*propitiation*' for sin and something that renders satisfaction to God, an appeasement for sin. Anselm had now completely ousted the "*Ransom to the devil theory*". He had made the atonement rational, intelligible, and open to reason. Whilst Anselm stated that his argument had the full support of scripture, he said that it does not depend for its validity on any appeal to scriptural proof texts; it is put forward as a purely logical demonstration of the reasonable character of Christian doctrine.

Conclusion

Whilst Anselm's doctrine of the Atonement proved to be a significant return to the biblical teaching, it contained several defects.

i) In the first place his satisfaction theory seems to present the Roman Catholic concept of penance which is applied to Christ. The sacrifice of Christ is seen, not so much as suffering for the penalty of sin as a vicarious sacrifice, but rather through His death Christ is represented as winning merit from God in order to compensate for the demerit of mankind. In other words, the superfluous merit earned by Christ is made available to sinners. Anselm does not show how this merit is then transferred to man. Does he assume, as with other Latin theologians that man can earn this merit in God's sight? However, Anselm was not medieval in his outlook, as he held a biblical view of grace, "sole gratia" (grace alone). Nevertheless, his teaching is in danger of supporting and perpetuating the Roman Catholic view of salvation through faith and works (merit).

ii) Anselm does not leave room for the atoning significance of Christ's life in his obedience and fulfilment of the Law of God. He dwells on the death of Christ but seems to ignore the significance of Christ's life as a part of His atonement work. The Reformers spoke of Christ's active and passive work in relation to Atonement. His active work is His obedience to the Law - without which His death would have no value: His passive work was His death.

iii) Finally, Anselm represents an application of the merits of Christ to the sinner as a merely external transaction. There is no hint of the mystical union of Christ and believers. In spite of Anselm being such a passionate man himself, his doctrine is logical, distant and formal. He sees the atonement as a legal transaction void of the emotional experience of the sinner being forgiven by God and introduced into mystical union with God in Christ.

Anselm's theory is often known as the "*Commercial Theory*" of the Atonement. Anselm's radical view of the Atonement, whilst paving the way forward for the Reformers of the fifteenth century, must not be seen as identical with the Reformer's teaching on the Atonement. They took a much more biblical, Pauline view of the teaching of the Atonement and coupled it with a proper view of salvation by grace through faith alone.

Anselm's work is timeless. It could lead easily to a doctrine of the appropriation of Christ's benefits by faith alone, but with equal ease, it could also be used to emphasise the sacrificial value of the mass. Yet, Anselm is clearly Christocentric with his theology based on the principle that Christ is the sole author of salvation (in spite of his adoration of Mary, typical of the Catholic teaching of his day).

Nevertheless, Anselm must be congratulated for his radical thinking on the Atonement. Whilst there may be errors in his thinking (he was a Scholastic of the Middle Ages) he has presented an objective view of the Atonement showing that the death of Christ is performed by God and for God. He has shown clearly that God can only forgive sin through the satisfaction offered in Christ and that this forgiveness only works through the Divine action of the sacrifice. Anselm has shown that whilst God is love, His justice cannot permit sin to remain untreated. Either the sinner must be punished or satisfaction be fully paid. Anselm has demonstrated a way in which God's mercy and justice can be harmonised. He has also shown why Christ became man, and by so doing has blended the Incarnation and the Cross showing that the latter demanded the former. *Cur Deus Homo*", Why did God become Man? Anselm says that you only know this through the cross. Anselm has shown us how to understand the Incarnation, that you cannot divorce it from the cross and that the Atonement alone gives meaning to the Incarnation.