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A Theological Assessment of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

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The hypothesis of this article is that Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* should not be regarded as a serious or complete theory of the atonement. This is due to its thorough disregard of and incompatibility with Scripture, internal inconsistencies, errors and general theological inaccuracies. To prove this hypothesis we provide a biblical survey of atonement themes and meaning. We examine the Mosaic sin-offering and atonement sacrifices of Leviticus 4 and 16 and the Servant Song of Isaiah 53. We show that Jesus' understanding was that he was the Servant, as indicated by linguistic and conceptual connections in Mark 10:45b, Luke 22:37 and Acts 8. We conclude that atonement must be viewed in relation to the salvific death of Jesus and explained with reference to the terms, metaphors and ideas used in Scripture. We then survey historical theology in order to place *Cur Deus Homo* in its appropriate historical context. Our theological assessment then proceeds from both a scriptural and historical perspective, while also noting the systematic and practical advances, implications and consequences of *Cur Deus Homo*. We conclude that although a solid apologetic for the incarnation and a lasting repudiation of the devil-ransom theory, *Cur Deus Homo* is deficient as a theory of the atonement. The satisfaction theory becomes little more than a moral theory and leads to other errors. The theory of penal substitution by way of sacrificial ransom, best articulated by the Reformers, is to be preferred as the view that most accords with Scripture.

A Theological Assessment of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*

Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* (CDH) provides a satisfaction theory of the atonement. The concept of satisfaction has tainted Latin theology from the time of its introduction by Tertullian. In Anselm it makes a foray into Medieval atonement theory where it is then adopted and confused by ecclesiastical indulgence and penitential systems. It was left to the Reformers to instill new meaning into the word and place it firmly within a scriptural context of penal substitution by way of sacrificial ransom. The hypothesis of this article is that Anselm's CDH should not be regarded as a work of serious atonement theory. This supposition will be proven by surveying the biblical account of atonement and the witness of historical theology. This survey will then be used to systematically and practically

assess *CHD*, its argument, assertions, worth and merit. *CHD* is a marvellous and logical apologetic for the incarnation and a solid and lasting repudiation of the devil-ransom atonement theory. However in relation to the atonement it is seriously flawed. A careful reading of *CHD* reveals it to be ‘one theologian’s attempt to make sense of the atonement by thinking not in biblical concepts but in terms of the legal and social norms of his day’.¹ In his attempt to be relevant and his disregard for Scripture, Anselm loses the true meaning of the scandal of the cross and fails to guard the treasure entrusted to him.

‘Atonement’ is the reconciliation of God and humanity. In theology it is used ‘to denote the work of Christ in dealing with the problem posed by the sin of man, and in bringing sinners into right relation with God’.² We will begin with a biblical survey of atonement themes. Anselm should not be uncomfortable with this approach. His caveat is that we should accept his thesis provisionally until confirmed by a greater authority.³ Anselm’s interlocutor Boso, confirms this understanding, ‘if you give any reply which seems to be in contradiction with Sacred Authority, let me bring this authority to your notice, so that you may demonstrate how it is not contradictory’.⁴ Boso fails in his task and by the end of the work capitulates, ‘all that is contained in the New Testament and the Old has been proved’.⁵ *CHD* clearly does not prove all that is contained in Scripture, especially with regard to the atonement. The Bible explains atonement using various metaphors: the law court (e.g. justification), commerce (e.g. redemption), relationship (e.g. reconciliation), worship (e.g. sacrifice) and warfare (e.g. victory).⁶ Each idea is necessary to form a comprehensive biblical understanding of atonement—‘The danger lies in overestimating one single aspect of the subject (e.g. Anselm)...’⁷ We will briefly trace the major atonement themes in Biblical Theology in order to set the foundation for our theological assessment of *CHD*.

In the Mosaic Law, the sin offering and annual Day of Atonement are provided as the means of reconciling sinful Israelites with their holy God. The sacrifices of Leviticus 4 and 16 are for the purpose of atonement, providing cleansing and forgiveness.⁸ The Hebrew verb *kip̄p̄ir*, ‘to make atonement’ occurs sixteen times in Leviticus 16.⁹ The word denotes both purification and bearing guilt.¹⁰ Milgrom argues that the word has developed from ‘wipe away’ or ‘purge’, to ‘substitute’ or ‘ransom’ and finally into a process of expiation found in the scapegoat rite that atones for all of Israel’s sins.¹¹ The sacrifice is appropriated

by the priest or the person laying their hands on the sacrificial animal, signifying transference of sin.¹² Leviticus 17:11 provides further theological meaning.¹³ The blood, representing the life of the sacrificed animal, is given in exchange for the sinner, allowing the sinner to be forgiven, purified and restored to fellowship with God and the community. Clearly substitution and propitiation are implied.¹⁴

The language of sacrifice is also used to refer to the work of the Servant in Isaiah 53. The Servant was wounded for our transgressions, upon him was the punishment that made us whole and his life was made an offering for sin.¹⁵ While the thought of a human sacrifice was previously unknown, Isaiah's vision reveals a new, comprehensive purification 'that secured global, permanent purity that actually changed the object for which purification had been made—removing sin, sin's effects and sin's source ... Such extraordinary purification required an atonement of equally extraordinary and radical nature'.¹⁶ The Servant provides this radical atonement. He poured out himself to death, yet he bore the sin of many.¹⁷

In the New Testament Jesus implies he is the Servant spoken of in Isaiah 53. Jesus says he came 'to give his life a ransom for many'.¹⁸ Some scholars dispute the authenticity of this statement.¹⁹ However, France maintains that, 'δοῦναι τὴν ψυχὴν ναὺ τῷ λύρον ἅντι πολλῶν ἡ' is a perfect summary of the central theme of Isaiah 53, that of vicarious and redeeming death'.²⁰ Isaiah 53 is clearly linked conceptually and linguistically to Mark 10:45.²¹ Jesus 'obeys God to death and thus makes atonement and redemption for sinful Israel ... he fulfills the mission of Israel to be the mediator of God's salvation to the nations'.²² In Luke 22:37 Jesus originates the messianic interpretation of Isaiah 53.²³ That the Servant Song is meant to have christological interpretation is demonstrated by Philip's conversation with the Eunuch.²⁴

In instituting the Eucharist Jesus identifies himself as the Passover Lamb who takes away the sin of the world.²⁵ Paul makes it clear that it is God's righteous action to give Jesus as a sacrifice of atonement for the purpose of justification of the sinner²⁶ and reconciliation with God.²⁷ God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself²⁸ and salvation is confirmed as a gift of God's grace.²⁹ Hebrews provides certainty that the work of Jesus fulfils the sacrificial element of atonement. Jesus has appeared once to remove sin by the sacrifice of

himself.³⁰ Hebrews also provides a warfare metaphor stating that through his death Jesus destroys the one who has power over death, that is, the devil.³¹ This victory also allows Christians to be free from slavery to sin.³²

Our survey shows that Scripture explains the salvific death of Jesus in terms of atoning sacrifice and ransom; inseparable with justification and redemption (involving forgiveness of sin and reconciliation with God) and victory over Satan, sin and death. Child's argues that the term reconciliation 'can also function as a broad, inclusive theological category ... it encompasses the subject matter of atonement, sacrifice, forgiveness, redemption, righteousness, and justification'.³³ Atonement therefore is best understood as part of the soteriological work of Christ in dealing with sin, integral to God's plan for reconciliation with humanity.

To arrive expediently at Anselm we must first review historical theology to examine which features of reconciliation were emphasised and how the atonement was expressed. This will allow us to assess where *CHD* stands in the history of atonement theology. To begin, 'the early Fathers applied to the work of Christ the ordinary sacrificial language borrowed from the Old and New Testaments'.³⁴ However Origen and then Irenaeus, provide early statements of the devil-ransom theory—

The powerful Word, and true man, [ransoming] us by his own blood in a reasonable way, gave himself a ransom for those who have been led into captivity. And since the Apostasy [i.e. Satan] unjustly held sway over us ... [Jesus] acted justly even in the encounter with the Apostasy itself, ransoming from it that which was his own ... By his own blood then the Lord redeemed us, and gave his life for our life, his flesh for our flesh; and he poured out the Spirit of the Father to bring about the union and communion of God and man.³⁵

Irenaeus seeks to maintain God's justice. He expresses ideas associated with sacrifice, ransom, substitution and redemption; but with a sense that the ransom is paid to, or made from, the devil.

Of the Greek Fathers, Gregory of Nyssa is attributed with the devil-ransom theory. Rufinus follows asserting that 'The humanity of Christ was the bait, and his divinity the hook'.³⁶ Like a fish being dragged out of the water, Satan

was deceived into giving up his power over death.³⁷ Augustine's formulation of the theory sought to disarm any charge that God was unjust or dishonest.³⁸ He explains that the devil had an 'absolute right' to hold humanity to the law of death due to sin. This right is extinguished because Jesus was unjustly and without fault slain by the devil. It is therefore just that the devil is compelled to give up those who believe in Jesus, 'In that they live eternally, they live in him who paid on their behalf what he did not owe'.³⁹ Jesus death is again seen as a payment to the devil, ensuring the release of the sinner who is otherwise held captive 'By undergoing death, Jesus paid to Satan the debt which man owed, and thereby ransomed the human race'.⁴⁰

Tertullian is the likely antecedent to Anselm as he was first to employ the word 'satisfaction'. This word was 'purely a Latin conception, having no equivalent in Greek; and was borrowed from the legal language of Rome'.⁴¹ Tertullian introduces an idea unknown to our scriptural survey. However Tertullian never refers to the work of Christ as satisfaction, 'He applies the expression, *satisfacere deo*, solely to men's repentances, prayers, confessions, and good works generally'.⁴² It is significant that the first appearance of 'satisfaction' is in association with penance.

Prior to Anselm, only Gregory of Nazianzus repudiated the devil-ransom theory. His repudiation is significant because he raises an inherent difficulty in understanding the ransom theme—'Was it paid to the evil one? Monstrous thought! The devil receives a ransom not only *from* God but *of* God ... To the Father? But we were not in bondage to him ... And could the Father delight in the death of his Son?'⁴³ Despite this objection the devil-ransom theory seized the imagination of the West and was the existing tradition in Latin theology up to the time of Anselm.

We have sketched the basic biblical atonement themes in order to provide a foundation to our assessment of *CHD*. We may now also assess *CHD* in light of the historical tradition existing at Anselm's time. Anselm wrote *CHD* ('Why God Became Man?')⁴⁴ in 1098.⁴⁵ Anselm uses Boso as an interlocutor to pose various questions for discussion. The main question is—'By what logic or necessity did God become man, and by his death ... restore life to the world, when he could have done this through the agency of some other person, angelic or human, or simply by willing it?'⁴⁶

Anselm's *ratio decidendi*⁴⁷ is that for heaven to have its full complement recompense for sin must be paid 'which no one can pay except God, and no one ought to pay except man: [therefore] it is necessary that a God-Man should pay it'.⁴⁸ In a sense, the rest of *CHD* is 'directed towards proving this thesis'.⁴⁹ *CHD* is a type of apologetic aimed at the objections of unbelievers. Anselm uses 'unavoidable logical steps' with the supposition 'that nothing is known about Christ'.⁵⁰ Anselm's methodology betrays an Aristotelian dialectic that would become the norm of Scholastic theology. Anselm uses this method to develop his Christology, logically explaining the relationship between the incarnation and the atonement. Anselm's basic argument is—

1. God has been dishonoured by human sin and satisfaction is required.

Someone who does not render to God this honour due to him is taking away from God what is his, and dishonouring God, and this is what it is to sin. As long as he does not repay what he has taken away, he remains in a state of guilt. And it is not sufficient merely to repay what has been taken away: rather, he ought to pay back more than he took, in proportion to the insult which was inflicted... Therefore, everyone who sins is under an obligation to repay to God the honour which he has violently taken from him, and this is the satisfaction which every sinner is obliged to give to God.⁵¹

2. It is unfitting for God to forgive sin without punishment or satisfaction.

In consequence of this reasoning, if it is not fitting for God to do anything in an unjust and unregulated manner, it does not belong to his freedom or benevolence or will to release unpunished a sinner who has not repaid to God what he has taken away from him ... It is a necessary consequence, therefore, that either the honour which has been taken away should be repaid, or punishment should follow.⁵²

3. Humanity can not make the required satisfaction.

Man needs to conquer the devil through the difficulty of death, and in so doing to sin in no way. He cannot do this, so long as he is conceived by the wound of primal sin, and so long as he is born in sin.⁵³ And 'a person who has of his own accord bound himself by a debt which he cannot repay, has thrown himself into this state of incapacity by his guilt. As a result, he is unable to repay what he owed before sin, that is, an obligation

not to sin, and the fact that he is in debt as a consequence of his sin is inexcusable'.⁵⁴

Boso summarises the argument at the end of Book 1, 'You have brought me by logical reasoning to this point, so that I might see that man owes to God for his sin something which he is incapable of paying back, and cannot be saved unless he repays it.'⁵⁵

4. It is necessary that God brings to completion his purpose for humanity.

God has made nothing more precious than rational nature, whose intended purpose is that it should rejoice in him ... It is necessary, therefore, that, with regard to the nature of mankind, God should finish what he has begun. However, this cannot be done, as we have said, except through the paying of complete recompense for sin, something which no sinner can bring about.⁵⁶

5. A God-man must be born with both the power to make the satisfaction and the obligation to make the satisfaction.

In order, therefore, that a God-Man should bring about what is necessary, it is essential that the same one person who will make recompense should be perfect God and perfect man. For he cannot do this if he is not true God, and he has no obligation to do so if he is not a true man.⁵⁷

6. The death of the God-man outweighs all sins. God's honour is restored. The reward for the satisfaction cannot go to the God-man because he has no need for reward. The reward is given as salvation to those on whose behalf the satisfaction is made.

If this life is given for all sins, it outweighs them all.⁵⁸ ... Christ of his own accord gave to his Father what he was never going to lose as a matter of necessity, and he paid, on behalf of sinners, a debt which he did not owe.⁵⁹

That honour, to be sure, belongs to the whole of the Trinity. It follows that because Christ himself is God, the Son of God, the offering he made of himself was to his own honour as well as to the Father and the Holy Spirit; that is, he offered up his humanity to his divinity, the one selfsame divinity which belongs to the three persons.⁶⁰

On whom is it more appropriate for him to bestow the reward and recompense for his death than on those for whose salvation, as the logic of truth teaches us, he made himself man, and for whom, as we have said, he set an example, by his death, of dying for the sake of righteousness? For they will be imitators of him in vain, if they are not to be sharers in his reward ... The debt that they owe for their sins would, as a result, be excused and they would be given what, because of their sins, they are deprived of.⁶¹

CHD made several contributions to atonement theology. Its most positive aspect is that it discredits the devil-ransom theory—‘Within a very few years the theory of a transaction with the devil had passed altogether out of the field of serious theology.’⁶² Anselm uses Boso to mount the attack,⁶³ first answering the Greek Fathers—

As for your statement that he came for your sake to drive out the devil: what do you have in mind when daring to make this assertion? Does the omnipotence of God not rule everywhere? How was it, then, that God needed to come down from heaven in order to defeat the devil?⁶⁴

Anselm then replicates Augustine’s formulation to deny that God needed to act justly due to the ‘rights’ of Satan—

take the other thing which we are in the habit of saying: that God, in order to set mankind free, was obliged to act against the devil by justice rather than mighty power ... Otherwise, so we argue, God would have been doing unjust violence against the devil, since the latter was the lawful possessor of man; for the devil had not gained his hold over man with violence: rather it was man who had gone over to the devil of his own free will. I do not see what validity there is in that argument.⁶⁵

Anselm’s conclusion puts the matter beyond doubt—

it is nevertheless not the case that God needed to come down from heaven to conquer the devil, or to take any action against him in order to set mankind free ... God did not owe the devil anything but punishment ... whatever was demanded from man, his debt was to God, not to the devil.⁶⁶

In debunking these theories Anselm, ‘brought our thought back to God from the devil, whose power and rights had been unduly exalted.’⁶⁷ With God’s

honour restored Anselm brought the objective nature of the atonement firmly to the foreground, 'He secured the general recognition, once for all, of the God-ward significance of the Atonement.'⁶⁸ Anselm's satisfaction theory is expiatory because it remits the debt of humans, understood now as guilt before God.⁶⁹ Anselm's model of atonement by a God-man logically necessitates the incarnation 'he was the first ... to frame a theory, both of the necessity of the appearing of the God-man, and of the necessity of His death'.⁷⁰ Anselm takes sin and the need for its remission seriously.⁷¹ He tells Boso that repentance will not make recompense, 'You have not yet considered how heavy the weight of sin is.'⁷² Anselm proves that due to sin's liability sinners cannot make satisfaction to God and so require God's redemptive action. This action is undertaken by God as a moral necessity to fulfil God's purposes for humanity.⁷³ Finally, Anselm makes the work of Christ central. The emphasis is upon Christ's work of obedience 'The satisfaction therefore was active, and the idea of punishment is entirely absent'.⁷⁴ The effect is to free humans from a dread of God and point away from the existing penitential discipline 'the inquiry turned men's thoughts away from the externalism and superstition of a mere ecclesiastical system to the significance of the person and work of Christ'.⁷⁵ On these matters Anselm may be commended.

While a preliminary reading of *CHD* exhibits these contributions, on closer inspection the work reveals a number of weaknesses. Held to the light of Scripture, these errors and misconceptions render the work inadequate as an atonement theory. The ideas and metaphors employed by Anselm are foreign to our scriptural survey 'it is wholly outside of the teaching of the Scriptures. The total silence of the New Testament upon its essential elements furnishes a strong presupposition against it'.⁷⁶ Anselm's theory developed out of the feudalistic system of his day where 'Justice and law had become more of a personal matter; violations of the law were now thought of as offenses against the person of the feudal overlord'.⁷⁷ Anselm regards God 'no longer as a Judge, but rather as a feudal Overlord, bound above all things to safeguard His honour and to demand an adequate satisfaction for any infringement of it'.⁷⁸ Whereas the Bible depicts salvation as a gift of God's grace and righteousness to sinners,⁷⁹ Anselm consistently reverses this notion. Satisfaction is based on 'the mythological conception of God as the mighty private man, who is incensed at the injury done to his honour and does not forego His wrath till He has received an at least adequately great equivalent'.⁸⁰ The God-ward emphasis of the theory

becomes a deficiency when it is not balanced with God's purpose of reconciliation with humanity. While metaphors from the courts and commerce are used in Scripture's account of the atonement,⁸¹ in Anselm these ideas assume new meaning. Jesus does not die in our place as a ransom or sacrifice. Rather he satisfies or pays a debt we owe.⁸² Jesus becomes our guarantor, paying a debt we are liable for but are not able to pay ourselves. The idea of sin as indebtedness⁸³ owed for dishonouring God places the relationship of sinner to God in a civil jurisdiction⁸⁴ where redemption becomes reparation. However penal terminology is more natural to biblical language, where redemption is freedom from sin's judgment as part of reconciliation with God—

For Anselm, in contrast to later penal substitution theories of the atonement that focused on a courtroom setting and infractions against a legal code, the medieval offenses were centered in the relationship between lord and vassal. In the end, however, Anselm's focus on honor causes him to fall short of the relational understanding of sin so central to the biblical writings. The emphasis on meeting the debt to the honor of the offended lord places little importance on the relationship itself.⁸⁵

Anselm's theory has serious consequences for the relationship between God and his people and thus our understanding of atonement and reconciliation. Anselm's insistence on a dialectical method renders God's motivation in saving sinners to a logical or moral necessity or worse still, mythical superstition. Due to Anselm's complete failure to consider the scriptural witness, the motivation for redemption oscillates between honour and justice 'But the two ideas are incompatible; they denote entirely different relations between God and man.'⁸⁶ God's grace becomes necessity, although not compulsion.⁸⁷ Anselm seems to have contradictory notions of God's character.⁸⁸ God's motivation anchored in love and righteousness⁸⁹ is ignored, replaced with Augustine's mythical speculation—

For out of this mortal progeny, so rightly and justly condemned, God by his grace is gathering a people so great that from them he may fill the place of fallen angels and restore their number. And thus that beloved Heavenly City will not be deprived of its full number of citizens.⁹⁰

Anselm has often been charged with Nestorianism. A division of the divine-human natures in Christ is evident when he says, '[Jesus] offered up his humanity to his divinity ... Christ offered himself as a human being'.⁹¹ This again shows an Augustinian influence.⁹² Anselm appears to separate the divine

and human in Christ 'the Godhead is referred to only as determining the worth of the human Person in His actions'.⁹³ Anselm destroys the two-natures doctrine of Athanasius in favour of the Augustinian theory 'that it was the *man* Jesus who died'.⁹⁴ Anselm seems to hold to the Chalcedonian hypostatic union formula in the incarnation of Christ, but at his death a Nestorian element becomes apparent:

For, in the case of Christ, the difference between his natures and the unity of his person had the effect of making it possible for his divine nature to bring about what had to happen for the restoration of mankind, should his human nature not be capable of this, and for his human nature to show forth whatever was not at all appropriate for his divine nature ... but both would be himself, one and the same, and being both human and divine, *he would pay through his human nature the debt which human nature owed*, and would be capable, through his divine nature, of what was expedient.⁹⁵

The danger of this heresy⁹⁶ is that God is no longer the actor. Where is God in Christ reconciling the world to himself?⁹⁷ Anselm 'circumvents the scandal of God incarnate on the cross by placing Jesus' divinity in a kind of protective bubble wrap'.⁹⁸

A further deficiency is that Anselm does not explain how the atonement is made operative—'Here he falls back ... upon the Moral theory'.⁹⁹ Jesus is merely an example to follow. The suffering Christ endured on the cross was to 'set an example to mankind, the purpose of which was that people would not turn aside ... from the righteousness which they owe God'.¹⁰⁰ It appears that there is no real, actual atonement along scriptural lines of Christ dealing with sin. There is no propitiation in the sense of turning away the wrath of God. Nor is there expiation in the sense of real forgiveness of sin and justification of the believer. Instead Jesus must be compensated for his work. The equivocal reward is then vaguely given to those for whom he died, not as salvation, but as an aid to following his example 'For they will be imitators of him in vain, if they are not sharers in his reward'.¹⁰¹ Anselm's concept of reward is also foreign to Scripture where any sense of reward would be ascension, session and glorious victory.¹⁰² Anselm also betrays a low view of sin, it is not a total depravity but something, 'unreal and irrelevant to man's need of an actual salvation, the analogy of it as debt is necessarily misleading'.¹⁰³ Satisfaction becomes an external, impersonal idea exclusive of atonement 'it is wholly

novel and unscriptural to confine the Atonement to the relations between God and Christ, and to ignore the reconciliation between God and man without which the Atonement is incomplete'.¹⁰⁴

Anselm fundamentally misunderstands and misrepresents the person and work of Christ 'The death of Christ is entirely severed from His lifework on earth ... This God-man need not have preached, and founded a kingdom, and gathered disciples; he only required to die'.¹⁰⁵ Anselm explicitly denies substitutionary atonement—'God the Father did not ... hand over an innocent man to be killed in place of the guilty party'.¹⁰⁶ Anselm also argues that since humanity was conquered by the devil, atonement must include the defeat of the devil by man.¹⁰⁷ Anselm 'admits a sense in which Satan stole man from God and in which man is in captivity to Satan and to sin'.¹⁰⁸ However in denying the devil-ransom theory Anselm also denies *Christus Victor*.¹⁰⁹ Anselm insists that God did not need to come down from heaven to conquer the devil and in his Nestorian confusion he will only allow that it was the humanity of Jesus that defeated Satan.¹¹⁰ His theory denies a scriptural understanding of the atonement and is wholly unsatisfactory—

His whole emphasis is on the death as an isolated fact ... [but] the death had been the climax of a long conflict, and had constituted Christ's victory. Hence, also, the note of triumph which had always been typical ... from the Apostolic Age onwards, is damped down ... the atonement is no longer seen as directly the work of God.¹¹¹

In the twelfth century, Abelard developed a moral-influence theory in reaction to Anselm.¹¹² Abelard took a subjective approach, seeing Christ's death in sacrificial terms but emphasising its role as an example of God's love, an example we should follow.¹¹³ Abelard provides an awareness of the subjective impact of the love of God for individuals.¹¹⁴ Abelard therefore provides a balance to Anselm's objective approach but ultimately both reduce the atonement to a moral theory—'Abelard might easily have quoted one or two sections of the *Cur Deus Homo?* in support of his case. Christ's death is an example of obedience for us to follow'.¹¹⁵

Anselm's reductionism of God to a type of feudal overlord and his failure to deal with categories of subjective forgiveness and justification, plants the seed for further heresy. The Socinians rationally critiqued Anselm's satisfaction theory

arguing 'that no one can represent others as moral subjects'.¹¹⁶ However it is evident that much of their soteriology is consistent with Anselm. They view Jesus' death as an example 'epitomizing the type of dedication which we are to practice'.¹¹⁷ Anselm's theory 'has a strong tendency to universalism'.¹¹⁸ Cross develops a merit theory 'based on ideas found in Anselm'.¹¹⁹ Using Anselm's scheme 'Christ's death is a supererogatorily good act that merits a reward from God'.¹²⁰ Cross concludes that by this merit—

human beings can indeed make sufficient reparation for the Godward aspect of their sins. They thus do not need to plead Christ's life and death as reparation for their sin ... repentance and apology to God is sufficient ... the sinner need not know that Christ has acted in this meritorious way. For that matter, the theory does not require any knowledge of Christ at all ... the only difference *knowledge* of Christ's redemptive activity makes is exemplary: Christ gives the believer a pattern of behaviour.¹²¹

Certainly words can be twisted, but any atonement theory which logically leads to such statements must surely be deficient and so wholeheartedly rejected. In the full-blown Scholasticism of the thirteenth century *CHD* becomes dominant.¹²² In his discussion of the atonement Aquinas denies that 'to make satisfaction is the responsibility of the one who sins'¹²³ because 'the passion of Christ was ... a superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the human race'.¹²⁴ However ever since Tertullian's introduction of the word, 'satisfaction' in terms of atonement seems to be confused with 'penance'.¹²⁵ It is impossible for Anselm or Aquinas to be free from the ecclesiastic penitential and meritorious structures of their day. Anselm says, 'Everyone knows that the righteousness of mankind is subject to a law whereby it is rewarded by God with a recompense proportional to its magnitude'.¹²⁶ For Aquinas, 'The penalties inflicted in penance by the Church are before his mind, and, not very consistently with his view of the Satisfaction of Christ as superabundant, he argues that these penalties ... have satisfying force'.¹²⁷ That satisfaction becomes an equivocal term associated with penance and indulgences is seen clearly in Luther—

In regard to 'satisfaction', how unworthily the Romanists have dealt with it! They have abused it to an extraordinary extent. ... In the first place, they have expounded it in such a manner that the people in general have not the slightest understanding of the true satisfaction. ... Moreover, they are so insistent on satisfaction, and construe it as necessary in such a way, that they leave no room for faith in Christ.¹²⁸

The Reformers were required to reinterpret the word ‘satisfaction’ when used in atonement theory. Luther revised the view of Christ’s death ‘in terms of the vicarious penal suffering of Christ’.¹²⁹ Pannenberg notes that Luther ‘did not set this view in antithesis to the idea of satisfaction but related the two theories’.¹³⁰ However in Calvin the accent shifts from satisfaction to substitution—

Christ interposed, took the punishment upon himself, and bore what by the just judgment of God was impending over sinners; with his own blood expiated the sins which rendered them hateful to God, by this expiation satisfied and duly propitiated God the Father, by this intercession appeased his anger, on this basis founded peace between God and men.¹³¹

That which was represented figuratively in the Mosaic sacrifices is exhibited in Christ the archetype. Wherefore, in order to accomplish a full expiation, he made his soul ... a propitiatory victim for sin (as the prophet says, Is. 53:5,10), on which the guilt and penalty being in manner laid, ceases to be imputed to us...Christ, in his death, was offered to the father as a propitiatory victim; that, expiation being made by his sacrifice, we might cease to tremble at the divine wrath ... For, were not Christ a victim, we could have no sure conviction of his being ... *our substitute-ransom and propitiation*.¹³²

Calvin explains the atonement clearly within the central ideas of scriptural reconciliation. Where the language of satisfaction is used it is given a different meaning ‘the Reformers taught that our Lord’s sufferings were penal, and Anselm expressly distinguishes between punishment and satisfaction ... satisfaction was instead of punishment; but they transformed it into satisfaction by punishment’.¹³³ The major biblical atonement themes of sacrifice and ransom leading to justification and reconciliation are given prominence—‘Calvin’s Reformed theory of the atonement has biblical underpinnings in the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and ... the apostle Paul’s strong emphasis on Christ turning aside the wrath of God for us’.¹³⁴

Penal substitution is criticised on the grounds that the Father is pleased to punish the Son.¹³⁵ Due to the Post-Apostolic context of manumission ransom was understood as a pecuniary exchange,¹³⁶ in the sense of money being consideration for the release of a prisoner or slave. This led to the devil-ransom

theory and then to confusion as to where the price was paid. However as Calvin shows, the ransom idea must be understood from the Old Testament where it is used to designate the role of the sacrifice. Sacrifices were offered to appease God¹³⁷ and were non-pecuniary. Therefore when Jesus dies as a ransom there is no price paid to anyone, rather the price (or ransom) is the sacrifice itself, the price is Jesus. Also, the sacrificial animal was not punished as if it had done something wrong. Rather the animal was sacrificed thus bearing the punishment of the sinner. In a similar way Jesus is not punished, although he is made to bear sin and its punishment. The atoning work of Jesus should therefore be understood as a 'substitute-life' interpreted through the scriptural lens of sacrificial ransom.

CHD fails a thorough theological assessment. McIntyre attempts to redeem Anselm by interpreting his comment that one must share in Christ's reward in the manner prescribed by Scripture,¹³⁸ as meaning that 'Each sinner must do what the Scriptures prescribe; hear the Gospel, repent of his sins, turn to Christ for forgiveness and salvation, and give evidence of his having been forgiven.'¹³⁹ Anselm's notion of Jesus saying, 'Take me and redeem yourself'¹⁴⁰ is for McIntyre unmistakably salvation *sola gratia*.¹⁴¹ However on both of these occasions Anselm's meaning is ambiguous. *CHD* is silent regarding the appropriation of salvation by the believer and the ethical response required by repentance. Anselm's appeal to Scripture could mean anything and surely the enslaved sinner would rather Jesus say 'By me you are redeemed'.¹⁴² McIntyre's attempt to cast *CHD* positively is reading his own Protestant justification by faith back into a work of Medieval Scholasticism. The equation does not work.

In the final analysis, Anselm fails the test of Scripture by using metaphors and concepts foreign to biblical atonement. 'Anselm offers a less-than-biblical view of the cross.'¹⁴³ Anselm adopts Tertullian's 'satisfaction' and thus moves away from the Apostolic authority more appropriately found in Athanasius' emphasises on the death of Jesus 'as a substitute-life'.¹⁴⁴ Scripture's atoning sacrificial ransom is not again prominent until the Reformers articulation of penal substitution. This view of the atonement is to be preferred as it is consistent with our scriptural survey. Pannenberg notes that 'Without this vicarious penal suffering, the expiatory function of the death of Jesus is unintelligible, unless we try to understand his death as an equivalent offered to God along the lines of Anselm's satisfaction theory, which has no basis in the

biblical data'.¹⁴⁵ From a systematic perspective Anselm also fails. The two-natures doctrine is shattered by a Nestorian separation. God becomes the object but not the subject of atonement. God is not in Christ reconciling the world to himself. Atonement in Anselm is missing, having been reduced to a human Jesus dying as the guarantor of human debt, restoring God's honour and thus providing an example for humanity to follow and the possibility of salvation for those who make the correct approach. Anselm's *CHD* must be regarded only as an apologetic for the incarnation and a repudiation of the devil-ransom theory. *CHD* and its satisfaction ideas should not be considered a complete theory of the atonement.

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ENDNOTES

1. J. B. Green & M. D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000), p. 136.
2. L. L. Morris, "Atonement" in I. H. Marshall, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer, D. J. Wiseman (eds.) *New Bible Dictionary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997), p. 102.
3. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo (CHD)*, Bk. 1, Ch. 2 in B. Davies and G. R. Evans (eds.), *Anselm of Canterbury—The Major Works* (Oxford, OUP, 1998), p. 267. In subsequent quotations I will give the Book and Chapter number from the *CHD* together with the page number from this edition.
4. *CHD*, 1.3, p. 268.
5. *CHD*, 2.22, p. 355. Anselm attributes the corroboration of Scripture with his logic to God and repeats his humble disclaimer, 'If we have said anything that ought to be corrected, I do not refuse correction.'
6. Green, pp. 23 and 97.
7. B. S. Childs, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1993), p. 486.
8. Leviticus 4:20b, 26b, 31b, 35b. Leviticus 16:30 says, 'For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD.' All Bible quotes are from the NRSV unless stated otherwise.
9. E.S. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus, A Commentary* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 226. The translation to 'make atonement' is supported by the LXX rendering of the Greek word *i]lasthron* (*hilastirion*) as propitiation.
10. W. J. Dumbrell, *The Faith of Israel: A Theological Survey of the Old Testament*

- (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic), pp. 46-47.
11. J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16* (NY: Doubleday, 1991), pp. 1082-3.
 12. Lev. 4:4, 15, 24, 29, 33 and 16:21-22. M. J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1988) at 805 states 'This bringing of the animal and laying on of hands constituted a confession of guilt on the part of the sinner. The laying on of hands symbolized a transfer of the guilt from the sinner to the victim.'
 13. Lev. 17:11—'For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement.'
 14. E. Nicole, "Atonement in the Pentateuch," in C. E. Hill & F. A. James III (eds.), *The Glory of the Atonement* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004), pp. 37, 50 and so not exclusively 'expiation' contra Milgrom and C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), p. 94.
 15. Isaiah 53:5, 10.
 16. J. A. Groves, "Atonement in Isaiah 53" in *The Glory of the Atonement*, pp. 87-88.
 17. Is. 53:12.
 18. Mark 10:45b.
 19. See D.E. Nineham, *Saint Mark* (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd, 1963), p. 281, C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (London: CUP, 1963), p. 343 and C. K. Barrett, "The Background of Mark 10:45" in A. J. B. Higgins (ed.) *New Testament Essays* (Manchester, University Press, 1959), pp. 1-18.
 20. R. T. France, *Jesus and the Old Testament* (London, The Tyndale Press, 1971), p. 120. The Greek text is given for verse 45b 'to give his life a ransom for many'.
 21. *Septuaginta* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft Stuttgart, 1979). In Mark the adjective 'many' is used in its genitive plural masculine form, while in Isaiah 'many' is in its accusative and dative forms. It has also been shown that λύ τρον(ransom) may be interpreted against the background of Isaiah 43:3 and at the same time be combined with Isaiah 53:10ff. In Isaiah 43:3 other nations are given in ransom or in exchange for Israel. Here the Hebrew word kÿper is the equivalent to λύ τρον and ἡ λαγάμα('that which is given or taken in exchange') and ὑ πὲ ρfor/on behalf of) correspond in Mark with ἡ ντὶπολλῶ ν('in place of many'). See France, pp. 120-1 and S. Kim, "The 'Son of Man'" as the Son of God" (Tubingen, J.C.B. Mohr [Paul Siebeck], 1983), p. 57.
 22. Kim, p. 60.
 23. Erickson, p. 806.
 24. Acts 8:26-35 where the eunuch is reading from Is. 53:7-8 and he asked Philip, 'About whom, may I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip began to speak, and starting with this Scripture, he

proclaimed to him the good news about Jesus.

25. Mark 14:22-25; John 1:29, 36; 1 Cor. 5:7; Rev. 5:6.
26. Rom. 3:21-26, especially v. 25; 1 John 4:10 and Heb. 2:17b. Where ἱλαστήριον and ἰλάσκεσθαι should be translated “place of propitiation” although may mean “that which expiates or propitiates” and so is best to see elements of both propitiation and expiation—W. Bauer, F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1979), p. 375.
27. Rom. 5:10-11; Eph. 2:13-18.
28. 2 Cor. 5:18-19.
29. Eph. 2:8-9.
30. Hebrews 7–10; 9:26 where ‘for all’ is absent in Greek but ‘once’ would correspond with ‘once’ in 9:28. Also in 9:28 ‘of many’ means the elect. W. L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988) at 378 commenting on ‘for many’ in Mark 10:45 says ‘In rabbinic literature ... “the many” is a technical term for the elect community, the eschatological people of God.’
31. Heb. 2:14.
32. Rom. 6:16-23.
33. Childs, 486.
34. A. A. Hodge, *The Atonement* (London: Evangelical Press, reprinted 1974), p. 274.
35. Irenaeus, “Adversus haereses,” in H. Bettenson (ed.) *Documents of the Christian Church*, (London, OUP, 1967), pp. 30-31.
36. A. E. McGrath (ed.), *The Christian Theology Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2001), p. 334.
37. Rufinus, “Comm. in Symb. Apost.” in Bettenson, p. 35.
38. Erickson, p. 795.
39. Augustine, “On Free Will”, 3.10.31 in J. H. S. Burleigh (ed.) *Augustine: Earlier Writings* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), p. 190.
40. J. Hopkins, *A Companion to the Study of St. Anselm* (London: OUP, 1972), p. 188.
41. G. C. Foley, *Anselm’s Theory of the Atonement* (London: Longmans Green and Co, 1909), p. 78.
42. Foley, p. 79.
43. Gregory of Nazianzus, “Orat.” in Bettenson, p. 34.
44. *CHD* at 261, note 2, Davies & Evans (eds.) indicate that while there is no verb ‘became’ in Latin, it is clear from the summary in 1.1 [at note 42] that the title is an abbreviation of the question posed therein. Contra J. McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1954), p. 117.

45. McGrath, p. 340.
46. *CHD*, 1.1, 266 and again at 2.18, p. 348.
47. Reason for deciding—Why God Became Man?
48. *CHD*, 2.6, p. 320.
49. Hopkins, p. 187.
50. *CHD*, Preface, pp. 261 and 262.
51. *CHD*, 1.11, p. 283.
52. *CHD*, 1.12 and 1.13, pp. 286-87.
53. *CHD*, 1.23, p. 308.
54. *CHD*, 1.24, p. 310.
55. *CHD*, 1.25, p. 314.
56. *CHD*, 2.4, p. 317.
57. *CHD*, 2.7, p. 321.
58. *CHD*, 2.14 p. 335.
59. *CHD*, 1.18, p. 349.
60. *CHD*, 1.18, p. 351.
61. *CHD*, 1.19, p. 353.
62. L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: The University Press, 1920), p. 129.
63. Grensted (p. 26) notes that 'It was a stroke of genius on Anselm's part to disarm ecclesiastical criticism by making the unbeliever responsible for his very outspoken criticism'.
64. *CHD*, 1.6, p. 271.
65. *CHD*, 1.7, p. 272.
66. *CHD*, 2.19, p. 354.
67. Foley, p. 257.
68. J. S. Lidgett, *The Spiritual Principle of the Atonement* (London: The Epworth Press, 1923), p. 132.
69. A. Harnack, *History of Dogma* (NY: Dover Publications Inc., 3rd edn., Vol. VI, 1961), p. 70.
70. Harnack, p. 56.
71. *CHD*, 1.10, 11, p. 282-83.
72. *CHD*, 1.21, p. 305.
73. *CHD*, 2.4-5, p. 317-18.
74. Foley, p. 139.
75. Foley, p. 141 and pp. 133-34.
76. Foley, p. 143.

77. Erickson, p. 797.
78. Grensted, p. 123.
79. Rom 3:21-26; Eph. 2:8.
80. Harnack, p. 76.
81. See at footnote 7.
82. Green, p. 133.
83. In Luke 7:36-50 Jesus uses a parable including debtors and creditors as an illustration that cancellation of debt (not reparation/satisfaction) is similar to forgiveness of sin. To Anselm, cancellation of debt would render God unjust, thus the language of satisfaction is reciprocated for forgiveness.
84. *CHD*, 1.23 at 309 Anselm says, 'Man, therefore, neither ought nor can receive from God what God planned to give him, unless man returns to God all that he has taken away from him.' Harnack at 73 observes 'This principle places God and man entirely on the same footing as injured and injurer. God is wronged as a man is wronged.' This conception is citizen to citizen and thus a civil jurisdiction would apply. Penal or criminal law concepts could be implied if Anselm was developing the principle of *crimen laesae majestatis* [The crime of injured majesty], although this is not stated explicitly in Anselm.
85. Green, p. 132.
86. Foley, p. 149.
87. *CHD*, 2.5, pp. 318-19.
88. Foley at 153 says, 'The distinction between intrinsic and external ... simply helps to involve the argument in utter confusion and contradiction.' At 166, 'The scriptural teaching and the creedal confession of "forgiveness of sins" are lost in a philosophy which is not even consistent with itself ... It not only deprives the manifestation of God's love of its grace, but leaves no room for the motive of love in our redemption.'
89. John 3:16, Rom. 3:21-26.
90. Augustine, *City of God*, H. Bettenson (trans.) (London, Penguin Books, 1984), 1023, Bk.22.1—This idea is repeated by Anselm as a logical reason for salvation in *CHD* 1.16-18.
91. *CHD*, 2.18, p. 351.
92. W. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh, T & T Clark, Vol. 2, 1994), p. 405 says '[The Augustinian thought] ... that Christ, being equal to the Father as Logos, cannot be the Mediator according to his deity but only according to his humanity ... profoundly influenced Latin Scholasticism. It is presupposed materially in Anselm's satisfaction theory, even though Anselm did not use the

- Mediator [1 Tim 2:5] concept.’
93. Foley, p. 179.
 94. Harnack, p. 74.
 95. *CHD*, 1.17, pp. 345-46, my italics.
 96. Condemned by the Council of Ephesus in 431 – V. L. Walter, “Ephesus, Council of” in W. A. Elwell (ed.), *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), pp. 380-1.
 97. 2 Cor. 5:18-19.
 98. Green, p. 135.
 99. Grensted, p. 140.
 100. *CHD*, 2.18, p. 349 and 2.19 at 353 where ‘he set an example, by his death, of dying for the sake of righteousness?’
 101. *CHD*, 2.19, p. 353.
 102. Psalm 110; Phil. 2:9-11; Acts 2:32-36.
 103. Foley, p. 156.
 104. Foley, p. 191.
 105. Harnack, p. 76.
 106. *CHD*, 1.8, 275.
 107. *CHD*, 1.22, 23, 307-309 & 2.19, 354 where he says, ‘God demanded it of man that he should defeat the devil...’
 108. Hopkins, p. 189.
 109. Heb 2:14, see at note 30 for the warfare/victory metaphor..
 110. *CHD*, 2.19,p. 354.
 111. G. Aulén, *Christus Victor* (London, SPCK, 1950), p. 105.
 112. Erickson, p. 785.
 113. Abelard, “*Expositio in Epistolan ad Romanos*,” in McGrath, p. 343.
 114. McGrath, p. 343.
 115. Grensted, p. 140.
 116. Pannenberg, p. 429. Harnack at 73 helpfully observes that the observation that God and humans are moral beings ‘must not alter the fundamental relationship, that God is the Lord and man His creature’.
 117. Erickson, p. 783.
 118. S. R. Holmes, “The Upholding of Beauty: A Reading of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*,” in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 (2001): 202. See also Foley, p. 193.
 119. R. Cross, “Atonement without satisfaction,” *Religious Studies*, 37 (2001): 397. In discussing Anselm’s *CHD*, Cross writes at 407, ‘towards the end of the work, he develops a different (and in principle independent) theory, according to which

- Christ's death merits certain rewards for human beings'. Cross is also influenced by Swinburne.
120. Cross, p. 408.
 121. Cross, p. 406-407 & 410.
 122. Grensted, p. 147.
 123. Aquinas, "*Summa Theologiae*" in McGrath, p. 345.
 124. Aquinas, "*Summa Theologiae*" in McGrath, p. 346.
 125. See at note 41.
 126. *CHD*, 2.12, p. 284, Boso replies, "This is our belief."
 127. Grensted, pp. 154-55.
 128. Luther, "Pagan Servitude of the Church," in J. Dillenberger (ed.) *Martin Luther—Selections From His Writings* (NY: Anchor Books, Doubleday, 1961), p. 322.
 129. Pannenberg, p. 406.
 130. Pannenberg, p. 406, n. 23.
 131. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* translated by Henry Beveridge Esq, (Florida: MacDonald Publishing Company, No Date) 2.6.2, p. 262.
 132. Calvin, 2.6.6, p. 265 his italics.
 133. Foley, 219. So, for example, J. I. Packer, "What did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution," in McGrath, p. 376 uses the language of satisfaction but now totally within the context of penal substitution.
 134. R. E. Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief—Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002), p. 260.
 135. For an early expression see Gregory of Nazianzus at note 43.
 136. Possibly due to Origen's (*et al*) wrong understanding of 1 Cor. 6:20 & Mark 10:45.
 137. Erickson, p. 805.
 138. *CHD*, 2.19, p. 353.
 139. McIntyre, p. 189.
 140. *CHD*, 2.20, p. 354.
 141. McIntyre, p. 189.
 142. Isaiah 43.
 143. Green, pp. 131-32.
 144. Athanasius, "*De incarnatione*," in Bettenson, p. 34.
 145. Pannenberg, 427, n. 94.