

## Why Anselm Still Matters

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*The doctrine of the atonement once more has become a point of contention, not only for revisionists but among evangelicals as well. This challenge is an opportunity to hear the tradition anew. In this article the author suggests that a careful reading of Anselm's classic argument in Cur Deus Homo, especially with respect to the idea of "wrath," can meet these challenges more effectively than is often supposed. Furthermore, reclaiming this doctrine in all its particularity is especially crucial for contemporary theology.*

### *The State of the Question*

St. Paul tells us that by his death Christ is our peace (Eph. 2:13–14): how strange that the meaning of that death has become such a battleground. Yet this should be no surprise to us, since Paul also said that same cross would be a “scandal,” a stone over which people trip. The disagreements are in part derived from the very distinct way Christians have of thinking through God’s active love. I remember I once invited a Shiite Muslim graduate student in philosophy to a class I was teaching on Christianity and other religions. He emphasized all the points of agreement between the two “religions of the book.” But then at the end of the class, almost as an afterthought, he mentioned how confusing he found the cross. If God wanted to forgive, why would he not simply wave his hand and say all was forgiven? Why would he need to send his Son to die? At that moment it was clear how drastically different the logics of our two “Abrahamic” faiths were. (One might add that this is the very question that St. Anselm addresses, as we shall see.)

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Why should God's Son need to die? And how does that death change me for the better? It is not only outsiders who have argued over such questions, but also Christians themselves. The conflict goes back to the earliest debates of the church, but has taken its own forms in our own time. A central concern of postmodernism has been the watchword "suspicion": behind all ideas are the real motives based on power or aggression. So, on what we might call the "left wing" of contemporary atonement critique are those who find here what has been called, most provocatively, "divine child abuse." An angry God exacting violence is the projection of human anger and aggression. Next, in what one might call the "nonviolent camp," scholars such as J. Denny Weaver in his recent *The Nonviolent Atonement*<sup>1</sup> basically offer Jesus as an example of loving obedience to God: the violence of his death amounts to a tragic consequence of his faithfulness. They too are objecting to any association between God and violence. It is simply not the divine intention or purpose to induce suffering of any sort, including that of God's Son. A third tack, also following along the "suspicion" line, might be called "liberationist." It sees Jesus' divine work as freeing the oppressed, which resulted in suffering, but does not have any desire to valorize submission to it. The crucified Jesus is identified with the wretched of the earth, but his dying per se has not wrought salvation in itself.

A second kind of Christian rethinking worries more about how atonement theories are used in church practice. These critics, among them evangelicals like N. T. Wright, find traditional appeals to the atonement—the kinds one might sing in praise songs—as too individualistic, too going-to-heaven oriented, as if Jesus died to pluck me out of history, while in fact the saving event was all about renewing the people of God and transforming history. Other evangelicals, looking with understandable dismay at this assault, draw in the wagons. An eloquent example recently, involving again not a few evangelical Anglican colleagues, is *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution*.<sup>2</sup> Their argument is basically that without a juridical, punishment model of the work of Jesus on the

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<sup>1</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, and Andrew Sach, *Pierced for Our Transgressions: Rediscovering the Glory of Penal Substitution* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2007).

cross, “the soteriological heart of historic Christianity” is lost.<sup>3</sup> In this game the stakes are being raised high on both sides.

The way traditions move forward is by looking backward. The renewal of the faith of Israel came when King Josiah’s repair team stumbled upon a dusty copy of the Torah in the renovated Temple, and the king began, to his chagrin, to read. We read an old text, in a new moment, and like that wise steward in the Gospels, pull out things old and new. As with Josiah himself, it begins with the Scripture—the battle cry of the Reformation was, after all, *ad fontes*: back to the wellspring! Hearing the Bible’s word about the atonement anew can be helped by listening anew to one of its great interpreters. St. Anselm gave the classic account of Christ’s work on the cross in his masterpiece, *Cur Deus Homo*, “why God became human.” How might one respond to standard critiques of the book? Along the way one finds that Anselm offered a more powerful argument than people give him credit for. Finally, in the last section of this essay, Anselm’s perspective will be considered in relation to our postmodern context.

### *The Contemporary Anglican Perspective*

These same questions and tensions about the doctrine of the atonement pervade the Anglican scene, though with its own distinctive features as well. In the major authors and works of the early liberal Catholic movement (which was seminal for regnant Anglicanism in North America) a strong account of the decisive work of Christ on the cross, and of the wrath of God which it dealt with, may be found. To be sure, F. D. Maurice, *Lux Mundi*, and *Essays Catholic and Critical* are careful to state that the agent of this atoning work is God (but so, as we shall see, was Anselm).<sup>4</sup> Already may be found the claim that Anglicanism is distinctively a “religion of the Incarnation,” already the *victor* theme is prominent, but this note is not sounded to the exclusion of the cross as a “propitiation for our sin.” However, by the latter

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<sup>3</sup> From Timothy George’s review of *Pierced for Our Transgressions*, included in the frontmatter of the book.

<sup>4</sup> See “On the Atonement,” in F. D. Maurice, *Theological Essays* (Cambridge: Macmillan & Co., 1853), 127–151; Arthur Lyttelton, “The Atonement,” in *Lux Mundi: A Series of Studies in the Religion of the Incarnation*, ed. Charles Gore (London: John Murray, 1890), 275–312; Kenneth E. Kirk, “The Atonement,” in *Essays Catholic and Critical*, ed. Edward Gordon Selwyn (London: SPCK, 1926), 247–278.

part of the twentieth century, several factors conspired to change the environment: a weakening of theological interest and ecclesial practice connected to a doctrine of sin, an encroaching pluralism in which a Christian account is one among many, a spirituality of presence, and a certain debasing of the currency of “incarnationalism.” The gospel has become the message of God’s deep and abiding presence with us, whose most poignant and costly exemplar was the crucified and risen Jesus Christ, dramatically represented to us in the sacraments of the church. As a result the accounts of the atonement per se are truncated.<sup>5</sup> This drift has been accompanied by a more caricatured account of the atonement options (by a generation of church leaders summoning up what they recalled of Aulén from seminary). Our God is with us, not against us. He is gathering all things to himself, through the new life of the resurrection (of which the cross is the inevitable stage and contrast). We are at work disassembling the hierarchies in which lords need appeasing. Archbishop Anselm would find these contemporary co-religionists a daunting audience.

### *The Argument Itself*

Anselm was a Frenchman who, as a Benedictine monk and scholar, came to England and served as Archbishop of Canterbury from 1093 until his death in 1109. The first great scholastic theologian, he is famous for offering one of the great proofs for the existence of God; he also is a source of the tagline that theology is “faith seeking understanding.” With respect to the topic at hand, his defense of the

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<sup>5</sup> Consider two examples from able and influential theologians of the past generation. James E. Griffiss wrote that “the Cross shows a man who was able to give and offer himself totally for other” (“Jesus: God with Us,” in *Theology in Anglicanism*, ed. Arthur A. Vogel [Wilton, Conn.: Morehouse, 1984], 77–78). Louis Weil defined the gospel as “the good news that God is the creator of all that exists and that he has entered into and shared our human life in Jesus Christ so that the whole creation might come to its fulfillment.” Further, commenting on Romans 6:9–11, he states: “This is the heart of the paschal mystery, that death has been conquered by the dying and rising of Christ, and that members of his Body share that victory” (“The Gospel in Anglicanism,” in *The Study of Anglicanism*, ed. Stephen Sykes and John Booty [Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1988], 53). In the quotation from Griffiss we hear the echo of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, while that of Weil is reminiscent of the “physical” theory of the atonement, in which it is Christ’s presence with us throughout his whole life that atones. This atonement is experienced, in Weil’s view, especially in liturgical participation. Both accounts are typical of contemporary Anglican opinion, and while they do not logically exclude a stronger account of the atonement, atonement proper is certainly soft-pedaled.

doctrine of the atonement, Anselm was not trying to offer a proof—how could one prove such a singular and surprising event? Rather he was trying to show the doubter its inner logic. He said that he wanted to think about the question *remoto Christo*,<sup>6</sup> as if Christ himself were “off the table.” How could the very idea of the event make sense?

At the heart of Anselm’s argument is the honor of God (especially Book I.13–15). This has been widely condemned over the years as an imposition on the biblical message from Anselm’s own cultural world, namely medieval feudalism. God would seem to become a feudal prince whose rights have been infringed, and gets into a pique. But if the reader looks carefully, he or she realizes that this honor is equated with the order and justice of the universe, indeed its beauty as a world made and arranged as good by God. At one point in the treatise Anselm actually talks about God’s honor as “the beauty and order of . . . [the] universe.”<sup>7</sup> The honor of God is his investment in the world as a just place. Anselm wants us to realize how much we rightly have invested in that honor. What if the God who would wave his hand at sin is the same kind of God who would look at the consequent moral anarchy and say “whatever” (so Book I.6, 12)? In other words, God’s justice, his mercy, the order and beauty of the universe, and his involvement with his creatures are woven together, and one thread cannot be pulled out in disregard of the rest.

In such a world as ours, the monstrosity that is sin as rebellion against God’s will entails the disordering of the created order, which is moral and spiritual as well as physical. Those spheres are interconnected, as the ecological crisis so eloquently reminds us. God’s taking sin seriously, his defense of his honor, if you will, is at the same time his defense of a just world, the kind of world in which we can flourish. It means not petulance but that love and zeal for justice which are simply God’s own nature.

One can go one step further. In the Bible, alignment with and connection to that righteous will, which is God, is itself life, and separation from it is death. We humans may seem to carry on when we are living alienated from God, but we are like the wasp, severed, who does not yet know he is dead. In other words, the logic of the Bible

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<sup>6</sup> Anselm, preface to “Why God Became Man,” in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham*, ed. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster, 1956), 100.

<sup>7</sup> Anselm, “Why God Became Man,” 124.

binds the forgiving of sins and the bestowing of life closely together. Again a wave of the hand will not do, for God's making our alienation from him right is his healing and bestowal of life. All of that is packed into this idea of the honor of God, and though the expression is for the most part foreign to the Bible, the thoughts behind it are not.

This leads us to the second important question: Who is able to accomplish this work of making amends to the honor of God and protecting the moral order of the universe? Again, while Anselm as a devout Christian obviously has Jesus in mind, he holds him in abeyance for argument's sake. Who would it have to be? Since humans are the ones who got us into this mess, Anselm says in Book I that a human needs to lead us out of it. But it can only be God, for he alone had the requisite justice and goodness to offer the recompense that could set the world right (see especially Book II.6). Only he has the goodness and justice which could be offered to right his offended goodness and justice. This is also crucial for those who criticize the atonement as a human sacrifice brought to a vengeful God—Anselm is clear that God must do the making right, and God in fact does.

So in sum: Should be human, but must be God—Anselm concludes, only if there were a God-man could the circle be squared, the problem solved. And so, without assuming Christ, he works his way around to the faith-derived rational sense of what God has done. And yet Anselm is careful not to say that this essential “fit” between what was required and who Jesus was meant that God “had” to atone for our sins in this way. There is no such necessity in God, for he is free with respect to the world; when we read that “it was necessary” that the event of the cross should have taken place as it did, it simply means that God's act in sending and giving Jesus, Son of God and Son of Man, fit perfectly with who he is, both good and just, free and active in the world. The death of the Son of Man and of God makes a perfect fit not only in who Jesus is, but also between the consequences of a terrible world and God's intention to repair it. Again, one might think that this means that human sinfulness lays a kind of necessity on God, but this only means we have not thought hard enough about God being God. For he is the one who in freedom can make adverse circumstances conform to his own will. Listen to the words spoken at the empty tomb: “Remember how he told you . . . that the Son of man must be delivered into the hands of sinful men” (Luke 24:6–7, RSV). That word “necessary” bespeaks not compulsion but power, even over

broken and forbidding circumstances—it is the divine “necessity” of a “fit” (see Book II.5).

We need to make one more point about Anselm’s case, one that is often overlooked. Anselm understood the work of Christ on the cross to be what he called *satisfactio*, “the doing of what is required,” and he understood this to be in contrast to *poena*, from which we get the word “punishment.” Instead of rendering justice with a massive rod of iron upon humankind, whose deliberate rebellion against a loving God would merit such treatment, God took this burden, and this work, on himself, in the only way it could be also taken on effectively for humankind. Yes, Jesus suffered in our stead, but the heart of the divine solution is not punishment, it is the creativity of deflection and self-assumption and costly renewal, all of which went for Anselm by the name “satisfaction.”

We have seen that Anselm’s account includes a kind of moral realism articulated by means of his concept of “honor.” But his account, indeed any adequate account, needs a parallel kind of realism with respect to the remedy. Let me indulge my own “midrash” on Anselm. The world is a different place after Christ’s death. Note the close connection between atoning death and resurrection is expressed in Book II, whose emphasis is on the latter doctrine and its relation to the hope of heaven. Since our life is now hid with Christ in God (Col. 2), his death actually changes the nature of mine. Adam’s death had he not fallen would have been different from his alienated one. But Christ, who knew no sin, became sin: as a result he died my alienated one. A third kind of death, not my own but borrowed from Christ, comes into being. Given the connection of sin and death, atonement and life, this new kind of death is also a “substitution.”<sup>8</sup> The atonement ought not to be thought of as an attitudinal change in God alone. A next step in a thoroughly Anselmian spirit would be to give an account of the metaphysical change that has been accomplished in and for the world.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Anselm engages this question in Book II.2–3, but I am drawing the point out further than he does.

<sup>9</sup> A contemporary example of such an attempt to give a “realist” account of how death itself is changed by the atoning work of Christ may be found in Wolhart Pannenberg’s *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 270, where the argument concludes: “Only by the resurrection of Jesus, and by the linking of Christians to the death of him who in dying overcame death (Rom. 6:5ff.), was the

A way of summing up what Anselm has to say is to ask, whose problem is solved by the atonement? Is it a problem in God, say a tension between his love and his justice? I would say that for Anselm, the problem lies in us, for we are the ones who have offended the loving Creator we were created to serve. And in so doing we have offended the very order of things, and because he has an “investment” in that order, the offense comes finally to touch God, who then takes the initiative in its resolution.

By another way of a brief review, let’s list the standard critiques of Anselm, and assess how fair they are. First of all, his views are seen as hidebound medieval feudalism. While it is surely true that he is a child of his time, he is asking the big and perennial questions, such as “Why the atonement?”; “Whose work is it?”; “Could it have been otherwise?” Secondly, people claim it presents a cruel God demanding painful retribution and even the blood of his Son, but in fact the reparative work is God’s own, and is seen as a contrast to sheer punishment. And as to the wrath of God, we have seen that it is in fact tied to God’s fierce holiness which cannot be separated from his commitment to a justly ordered world, the atonement being his divine work preserving both. It turns out, in sum, that neither Anselm nor we can answer these pressing questions and tests, the kind that that Shiite friend asked, without describing the divine qualities in their fullness, without in essence retelling the story of his loving creation and care of the world, and the story of Jesus.

### *Why the Argument Matters*

Why is St. Anselm’s account of the satisfaction which was accomplished in the death of Jesus the beloved Son particularly apt for our time? Why do we need to hear it? First of all, it explains an act, an event; it offers more than Jesus being just an example for us. For that is all those “suspicion”-oriented accounts could come up with, and so long as that is all the truth we have, then at the end of the day the burden is still on me, which is never good news. Secondly, one might ask, even if Jesus should have to die, does it really need to be an exchange, a substitution? In the first option famously offered by Gustaf

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tie between sin and death set in another context and thus given a new significance inasmuch as death no longer involves the end of the human person (cf. Rom. 7:6).”



Aulén,<sup>10</sup> why not just emphasize Jesus as the victor over evil? For then he alone would do the deed, would he not? But in that case the problem, and its solution, would not involve our own fault. We would just be the victim, as in the strain of contemporary thought which moves in this direction—and it is true to an extent. But we all know, if we look a little harder at our hearts, that we are part of the world's problem, that we have “seen the enemy and it is us.” We know, in a more honest moment, that we are in that Good Friday crowd calling for Barabbas. At the very heart of Anselm's theology is that claim this satisfaction represents an exchange, Jesus in our place, Jesus for us—that is after all why Anselm explains why it had to be a God-man.

Once in a seminar I heard the view expressed that there are two kinds of people, both/and, and either/or. A student raised his hand and said that he was both a both/and and an either/or, which confirms the point. In education it is important to develop the skill to discriminate between both/and issues, issues where two views are really complementary, and either/or issues, where something at the very heart of the matter is at stake, to compromise which is to lose the whole game. In the Reformation people talked about the either/or question as the *articulus cadentis et stantis ecclesiae*—the issue over which the church stands or falls. In other words, it is the issue which, if you compromise or get it wrong, corrupts the whole gospel message. You can see the whole of Christian history as a debate over which issues are the either/ors, and how we will know. Of course in the Reformation, the great either/or was the Pauline message of justification, of God's putting us right with him based on nothing we do but on what he has done for us.

No matter what words one chooses, there are different ways to talk about the atonement, and sometimes the choice falls into the either/or category. Deny that the God-man is the actor, or that something real has been done for us and outside of us, and Christianity slides between your fingers like sand. Here we see why atonement matters so much for the integrity of the gospel in our time. Think for example about the doctrine of the Trinity, which has been so popular a subject. It names the truth about God's very identity, and yet we humans can and do turn it into a concept of mutuality, or of historical development, or of mystery and meaning or something or other. The thing about the atonement is this: something happened. It happened

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<sup>10</sup> Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931).

outside of us. This particular person did that something for us which we cannot do for ourselves. As such it is a tent peg driven into reality which the shape-shifting of the human mind cannot transform in its own image. So Christianity is not finally a set of ideas; rather it is news about what God has done, and so about how the world really is. Those elements of recalcitrant and gracious realism have everything to do with the nature of the atonement, and are especially needed in our postmodern time.

So back to our eithers/ors and both/ands. The person of Jesus, God and man, his act, its exchange, the cost—that lies at the heart of what Anselm calls “satisfaction.” At that point we are at an either/or parting of the ways. Now I believe that the language of punishment in our stead, penal language, is also biblically faithful. It is a powerful way to speak of the person, the act, its exchange, the cost. Penal language is one form of what is irreplaceable—Christ who died in our stead, in our place, for my life. Anselm did not use penal language—he used satisfaction language, which is its cousin. So long as the element of “in our stead,” of substitution is there, the kind of language you use is a matter of both/and, of complementary metaphors. Christ dying for us, as the earliest apostolic witness affirms (and the creeds reiterate)—both punishment and satisfaction are effective ways of saying this. At the risk of sounding like that student, and in opposition to many postmodern voices, concerning the atonement I find an either/or: either the element of substitution, or we surrender the gospel itself. Once that is clear, there is a both/and having to do with which metaphor one relies upon to express that divine act.

This does not mean that there is not an exhortation that we evangelicals need to hear. For many of the critics of substitutionary or satisfaction or penal atonement are really attacking the way the doctrine is used. On this score humility and self-criticism are always to be encouraged. Does the doctrine become a kind of formula, invoked in too individualistic a manner, becoming at times a kind of talisman? Of course, precisely because we are forgiven sinners who get it wrong all the time. Should the atonement be invoked in churches which are centers of hospitality for the outcasts of one kind or another, so that our lives approach our confession of faith? Of course. Another way to put the matter is so obvious as barely to deserve mentioning: you and I are not saved by the doctrine of the substitutionary atonement, and if we think we are, we deserve all the critique postmoderns and others can give us. The doctrine of the atonement matters because it

points to Jesus Christ, who remains outside me, other than me, first rejected by and alienated from me, risen and present to me, the one who has accomplished this in my stead, in response to which I owe him “my soul, my life, my all.”<sup>11</sup> The doctrine of the atonement is not Christians trying to control the entire world. A doctrine is only a finger, like that of John the Baptist, pointing to the one who will not be controlled, but surrendered himself, in perfect love for his Father, and rules all the universe, already put right.

Thus critics of the theory of the substitutionary atonement by which Jesus makes satisfaction in our place can be answered, and it still serves to guard and proclaim the good news for us all. To be sure, it must not be reduced to some arithmetic of divine justice and love, nor is its reach only for individuals. The mention a moment ago of the Son’s love for the Father suggests, in closing, another way to talk about the same thing, a way that Anselm did not mention, though he could have. Trinitarian reflection, whatever its risks, has been a source of energetic rediscovery in theology in our own, increasingly postmodern era. It too involves a kind of fit, of an unimaginably deep sort. These theologians ask in challenge: Why should the Father need an offering of his Son? Is this but a word about vengeance? We evangelicals talk about the atonement, but in the end this cannot be separated from other central tenets we hold as Christians. Why would the Father surrender his Son, and receive him back in the resurrection? Because that is what the blessed Trinity does from eternity, giving and receiving one another in love in the Holy Spirit. That surrender is not some abuse, nor some postmodern projection, nor some plot for control. It is the fountain of everything that is, the shore toward which you and I travel, the net under our feet in this fleeting and disintegrating age. It is the reason theology is, for us travelers, joy and a rehearsal of the wonder at the end of all our days.

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<sup>11</sup> Isaac Watts, from the hymn “When I survey the wondrous cross.”

