

Redeemer OPC, Hawaii

Adult Sunday School

The Person and Atoning Work of Christ (6)

“The Substitutionary Atonement by Christ”

- I. Introduction. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury from AD 1093-1109, was a theologian in the church who was responsible for a great leap forward in our understanding and expression of the doctrine of Christ’s atonement. He wrote a small treatise entitled *Cur Deus Homo*, or *Why the God/Man?* It asked and answered the question, Why was the atonement necessary? I.e., What was its significance? It was very influential in the church then. It still is, in the sense that what Anselm distilled and pointed out from Scripture is still held as orthodoxy today and is foundational for the whole doctrine of the atonement that we hold today. It isn’t that he came up with something that had never been understood before, but that he recaptured the Biblical truth and clarified it after many centuries during which various false theories of the atonement circulated. In relation to the church’s development of her understanding of Biblical doctrine, it was a somewhat later event, but it clarified some of the basic elements that were foundational and crucial to the right and more complete understanding of the doctrine of Christ’s atonement for sin. We’ll first look at some of the metaphors by which God presents various aspects of the atonement in the NT. Then, we’ll look at several of the unbiblical, unorthodox theories of the atonement that have circulated throughout the centuries, with some being still alive today among various groups.
- II. New Testament Metaphors for the Atonement. These metaphors, or varying language in some cases, weave different themes of the atonement together.
  - A. Redemption. To redeem something is to buy it back. It hinges on the idea that it has been sold, or borrowed against, such as at a pawn shop, and there is a price that must be paid to regain it. So when man sold himself into sin by his disobedience to God, a price had to be paid to “purchase him back” out of that “ownership.” So, Scripture uses that language in various places to describe what Christ did by His death; e.g., Rev. 5:9; 1 Cor. 6:20;
  - B. Remission. This is similar to redemption in that it involves paying a price. If any of you still receive paper bills in the mail for utilities, medical bills, etc., you may see on the payment stub where it shows

you the amount you owe and to whom you should send your check, “Please remit payment to...” So, when you “remit” payment, you are accomplishing the “remission” of that bill or debt. The idea behind remission, then, is to pay a price to cancel, or pay off, a debt. This theme figures heavily into Anselm’s explanation of Christ’s atonement and its necessity if anyone were to be saved. Man, by his sin, failed to pay the debt of obedience he owed to his Creator. He further incurred a debt by his sin that needed to be paid. But sinful man could pay neither part of the debt. He needed someone else, who owed no debt to God, to pay it for him. We particularly find this idea of remission as payment of a bill in places like Mt. 26:28. The Greek word used there is variously translated “remission” or “forgiveness” in different translations of Scripture. But the idea is that with payment of what is owed, the debt is forgiven, or canceled. This is what Christ accomplished when He paid the terrible price of God’s wrath for the debt that we incurred by our sin, and He paid the price of obedience to God’s law to make up for the deficit in our failure to obey that constituted indebtedness.

- C. Ransom. Again, this refers to paying a price. We have heard of kidnappers demanding a ransom payment; if they receive it, they promise to free their victim, so he can be returned to his family and friends. When man fell, he was taken over by sin and placed under its dominion. When Christ ransomed His people, He paid the price that it took for them to be freed from it. Scripture uses this imagery in places like Mt. 20:28, where Jesus Himself used it. “Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”
- D. Bride Price. Obviously, this focuses on payment as well. This is the idea of a dowry that a groom had to pay to the intended bride’s father to show that he had the means to support a wife, and as a sort of guarantee that he would keep his wedding vows and take care of his wife. Christ’s bride is the church, and He paid the price to make her His own and provide completely for her salvation, sanctification, glorification. He has the means to take care of His bride now and in eternity with the perfect security of eternal glory.
- E. Christus Victor. This does not focus on payment. This is the idea that Christ, by His saving work, and particularly sealed by and seen in His resurrection from the dead, crushed the forces of wickedness in victory over them. We see this in 1 Cor. 15:54-57 (READ), and Col. 2:15. And note that right before, in Col. 2:14, it refers to Christ’s atonement as that which canceled out the debt against us that God’s

law levied because of our breaking it. Lutherans emphasize the Christus Victor aspect of Christ's atonement, but perhaps a little too much, to the neglect of the other aspects we have already mentioned.

III. Anselm's Satisfaction Theory of the Atonement. This was a huge contribution by Anselm to the better understanding of Christ's atonement. It went beyond his view of Christ's death as the payment of a debt, which was in itself a huge contribution. It was important because it brought the matter of God's justice into view, in connection with the idea that sin is the breaking of God's law. Justice, by its very nature, is related to righteousness, and righteousness is related to goodness. As Abraham said to God when he pleaded with Him about Sodom and Gomorrah, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?" That's the older translation. The ESV is, "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do what is just?" Anselm answered that question, "Yes, God is always righteous and just, but He is also always good. A judge who never punishes evil is not a good judge because he is not a just judge. This was at the heart of Anselm's point. God's own justice demands that evil be punished because God is just, and righteous, and good. So, if our evil is to be punished, and yet without our suffering the eternal punishment it justly deserves, someone else would have to suffer the punishment in our place to satisfy, make satisfaction for, our sins. And that someone would have to be free of any liability to punishment himself; he would have to be righteous himself. That One is Jesus Christ, who is both perfectly holy God and perfectly sinless man, and could therefore satisfy divine justice in our place. 535 years later, that same concept of Christ's priestly work on behalf of His people was still recognized to be utterly Biblical doctrine and was ensconced in the WSC Q. 25: "How doth Christ execute the office of a priest? Christ executeth the office of a priest, in his once offering up of himself as a sacrifice to satisfy divine justice, and reconcile us to God, and in making continual intercession for us." In addition to this, the idea of satisfaction is also tied up with the idea of debt payment. Sin incurs a debt because God's law imposes the obligation of perfection. One sin, and we are unable to pay our debt or make satisfaction. Both the debt repayment and satisfaction ideas were Anselm's very astute Biblical answer to the question, "Why the God/Man?" There was more in his treatise regarding the Deity and humanity of Christ, too, but we have already studied those. You can see what huge leaps forward these were in the understanding of Christ's atonement by God's people. The idea of substitution is also tied up with all this, but we'll wait till next time to study that. In the meantime, we should examine some...

IV. Unbiblical Views of Payment in the Atonement.

- A. Pecuniary Debt. This treats our sin debt in the same manner as a financial obligation. If one person steps up to pay any portion of the obligation that the one who incurred it cannot pay, the money must be accepted. E.g., if your friend loses his job and can only pay half of his electric bill, and you provide the money for the other half, the electric company has to accept it. It is legal tender for the payment of the full bill, even though it comes from two sources. The problems with seeing our sin and the atonement in this manner: 1). We cannot provide any portion of the payment for our sin debt because we are sinners who are unable to render payment. If we try to pay a portion of it by our efforts, it renders the whole payment void. Because of the broken covenant of works, our efforts are no longer considered “legal tender” to pay our debt. We are effectively bankrupt. We need someone to pay our whole debt, and it must be someone who owes nothing himself: namely, Christ; 2). God is not required to accept payment from anyone other than the debtor, unless He obligates Himself to do it by promise. And if He does, He will accept payment from no one but the One He has designated as Surety (co-signer); namely, Jesus Christ.
- B. Moral Debt. Let’s say that a person in a store that I’m visiting shoplifts a shirt. The owner of the store catches him in his crime and calls the police. I offer to pay for the shirt in order to avoid the person’s arrest, trial, and jail. The police will ask the store owner if he wants to press charges. As the agent of justice, the policeman knows that the owner is not required to accept my payment because the law has been broken. More than just the financial transaction, a moral debt was incurred. The owner may or may not accept my payment. But if he does, and files no charges, then he is overlooking the moral debt and accepting financial payment alone. This view of the atonement imagines Christ as the innocent bystander who offers to pay for our sins. It’s not far from how some Arminians view Christ’s atonement. But at the cross, it is not a bystander who offers to pay in place of the debtor and criminal. It is the Owner who does so. God sent His Son into the world to pay the debt as our Substitute. He came to pay for the moral debt—that is, the guilt—of debtors who cannot pay their own debt. God overlooks nothing, but demands and exacts full payment by full punishment. Thus, justice is served. Mercy is that He has given a Substitute at the cross. So, God remains perfectly just, but is also merciful, and since His justice is fulfilled on behalf of the ungodly, He can be both just and the justifier of the ungodly. This is because Christ made satisfaction of our moral debt, as we see in Col. 2:13-14.