

VERDICT

Essay 11

1984

Documents on the Atonement

Robert D. Brinsmead

Introduction

*In our recent series on *The Scandal of God's Justice* (Essays 6-8) we concluded with a critique of the law-based theology of Western Christianity, which has developed the penal-substitutionary theory of the atonement. Our position is not a lone voice crying in the wilderness of the current religious scene, nor is it a reflection of the sentiments of liberalism (as some have superficially concluded).*

*In this issue of *Verdict* we have reproduced some observations on the atonement by scholars of wide renown and with reputations of commitment to the historic Christian faith. The testimony of these scholars is particularly helpful since they trace the history of ideas. We need to know how the various dogmatic traditions arose. We need to examine the history of ideas and not ignorantly imagine that all our Western evangelical traditions passed unchanged from the New Testament era to our own. The theological tradition of the Christian church needs to be respected, and none of it should be lightly brushed aside; yet we should be aware of how certain doctrines of the Bible have been interpreted and shaped by Western philosophy and culture.*

F. R. Barry

Western thought was Latin thought. The Latin mind had a passion for definition, for precise, clear-cut statements, Yes or No, and carried that passion into its theology even at the cost of breaking up the Church.

One of the finest and most characteristic achievements of the Latin mind was the structure of Roman Law; and not the least contribution of the Western Church was

that it kept Roman law in tact during the social anarchy of the invasions and bequeathed it to the barbaric successor-states. Yet a legal approach to theological questions is fatal to any doctrine of the Atonement, and most of the makers of Western or Latin theology had minds conditioned by legal ways of thinking. Some of them had been trained in the law schools—Tertullian practiced in the Roman courts; some, like Ambrose or Gregory the Great, were engaged in administering Roman justice either as highly placed civic officials before they took office in the Church or later, as bishops, from their Episcopal chairs. Augustine, in his religion a Christian Platonist, was a brilliant representative of the Latin culture— North Africa was more Roman than Rome— and had been taught, as he was baptized, by Ambrose. Centuries later, Anselm of Canterbury, who has dominated the West ever since— his theology still persists in popular Protestantism as well as in Counter-Reformation doctrine— and has left his mark on the Book of Common Prayer, was by training and cast of mind a lawyer....

There is little doubt that both in the time of the Fathers and— still more markedly— during the middle ages, ecclesiastical disciplinary practice is closely related to Latin Atonement theories....

The keynote of all theories in this tradition is the vindication of justice, either by due imposition of penalty or by the satisfaction of just claims, and the Cross is conceived very largely in terms of a juridical transaction either in the criminal or the civil courts. This was something that justice required. Since God's decrees, said Ambrose, cannot be broken, "the person was changed rather than the sentence". (The modern Christian reacts to this by the protest: "But I thought you said you were talking about justice".) Him who was without sin, said Gregory, God condemns (*damnat*) on behalf of sinners. In no other way could sins be justly forgiven. Christ offered himself to God on our behalf— or, in the cruder versions of the theory, an innocent Christ was punished in our stead— and so made remission of sin possible without derogation from the divine justice. The legal requirements had now been met and the Crown would take no further proceedings. Man was now reconciled to God— or was it that God was now reconciled to man? The theory comes perilously near to that and Reformation theology said it explicitly— in flat contradiction to Scripture....

The theories were of their own time and place and were part of the risk inherent in the venture of attempting to Christianize the Latin culture. As such, they are entitled to respect even while we are pointing out their failures. And we enlightened twentieth-century Christians must be on guard lest we adopt towards them— or, for that matter, any other theories— a merely superior, patronizing attitude. What they say may be regarded as unsatisfactory. But they were moving on deeper levels of thought than much of our morally opportunist modernity. They did understand the profundity of the question. They did understand the wickedness of wickedness as a corruption not merely, a mistake" (*hamartia*). They knew that the moral order of the universe had been violated and must be restored and that this could be only at dreadful cost. God

is not a “good fellow” who looks the other way— and that indeed would be to treat his children as less than responsible moral beings. They took the problem of sin with dead seriousness. . . . They did not realize that sin— in any religious or Christian meaning of the word, is not offence against the moral law but estrangement from a personal and loving God, and therefore cannot be treated in purely ethical, still less in legal, terms at all. Forgiveness is not a relation of “rights” or “deserts”; forgiveness is a relation of persons, and to tell us that God’s justice has been vindicated is not to tell us that we have been forgiven. The teaching of Jesus goes far beyond all acknowledged standards of moral obligation and far beyond the structures of law by which human society is organized and the weak, in a sinful world, protected. . . . The parable of the laborers in the vineyard seems meant to teach that distributive justice—and still less, one would suppose, retributive justice— is not the ultimate measure of God’s dealings with us....

Tertullian . . . was... “the first man of genius of the Latin race to follow Jesus Christ and to re-set his ideas in the language native to that race”....

Since Tertullian was himself a lawyer, his whole thinking tends to take legal form. Not only so, but the Latin language imposed certain conditions on his thinking. The Latin translation of Righteousness (Greek: *dikaiosune*) was *justitia*, and throughout the course of Western theology this fact has imported a legal emphasis into the Latin doctrines of Atonement and of God’s relationship to man. Moreover, as Burnaby points out, the Greek language has no verb for “to deserve” and correspondingly no noun for desert or merit. “The Greeks thought of merit or worth adjectivally, as a quality of persons or things. The Latins ask what a man has done to make him worthy. For the Greeks desert is a matter of estimate, for the Latins a matter of fact... Thus *mereri* (to deserve) properly denotes the act by which the agent earns either a stipulated payment or a legal punishment.”...

From this there was to develop the doctrine of “merits”. To keep the commandments of God is meritorious, in the sense that it gives a man a claim on God. But what if a man goes the second mile and performs acts of supererogation, which go beyond what is strictly obligatory— fasting, for example, or voluntary celibacy, even perhaps martyrdom itself? These would constitute a “surplus” of merit, so that in the divine record a man would be not “in the red” but in credit, would have a balance. Cyprian taught that such surplus merit could be transferred from one person to another. If Christ by his death and passion earned such a surplus it could be paid to God as a “satisfaction” for the sins of the world. That may sound to us, and indeed it is, sub-Christian; but Anselm’s doctrine is here already in germ....

Like Ambrose, Tertullian and Cyprian had a profound influence on Augustine. But apart from that, the catholic faith in North Africa was essentially a Roman Catholic faith and was therefore deeply imbued with the notion of justice as it was understood by the Roman lawyers— to give every man his due or what he deserved. And this helps to explain how a man like Augustine, whose own deepest experience of God

moved in another dimension altogether, should have been betrayed into the dreadful theory which has ever since been known as Augustinian. . . . Augustine knew in his own soul, only the love of God can cross the gulf and effect atonement, reconciliation. How can the man who wrote the *Confessions* have succumbed to the terrible doctrine of hell-fire and become the father of Augustinianism... “*Because it is impossible for us to love a God who condemns to eternal fire all those of his children who have never heard the Gospel message, it is impossible for us to believe that such a God exists*”....

The sociological context of feudalism cannot but have colored Anselm’s theology. As Archbishop, he “held” from the Crown as baron-in- chief, as in theory English bishops do still (that is why they do homage on appointment). He thinks in terms of the reparation due for the slighted honor of man’s supreme overlord— a due far greater than sinful man can pay. Thus he conceives the juridical transaction in terms of civil rather than criminal law; it was not punishment, it was “satisfaction”. The legalistic approach of the Latin mind was in his inheritance and in his bloodstream; what he did was to give it a new turn. Anselm’s theory has commonly been interpreted as a kind of theological counterpart of Romano-Norman jurisprudence, or an epiphenomenon of the feudal system. It is, however, at least as probably explicable in the light of current ecclesiastical usage. The meaning of “satisfaction” is probably penance. “The Latin idea of penance,” says Aulen, “provides the sufficient explanation of the Latin idea of the Atonement . . . The Latin doctrine was completely in accord with the general nature of mediaeval theology, with its typical emphasis on penance and the sacrifice of the Mass. The doctrine of penance emphasized the necessity of satisfaction and the Mass was interpreted primarily as a sacrifice for sins.”...

The strength of the Latin theory, as we have seen, is that it takes men’s feelings of *guilt* seriously. (“There was no other good enough to pay the price of sin.”) What is lacking in it is the note of triumph so characteristic of the “classic” theory, as it was of the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, centered in the Resurrection. The claim of Reformation theology to be a revival of pure scriptural doctrine is one that requires “a thousand qualifications”. For in fact it took over most of the Latin theory . . . and Aulen seems to be justified in asserting that in the history of Christian doctrine the Latin theory was “only a sidetrack, and the proud claim of Roman theology to represent the continuity of Christian doctrine cannot be substantiated....The main line in the development of doctrine is continued not by Anselm and the mediaeval scholastics but by Luther.”...

Anselm’s mind was intensely rationalist. His most famous book, *Cur Deus Homo* (Why did God become Man?) depends on the doctrine of real universals (which Rashdall dubs “the old bastard Platonism”) as much as and more than, it depends on Athanasius and Gregory the Great, by whom it has been to some extent anticipated. He “differed from most of his predecessors in preferring to defend the faith by

intellectual reasoning (i.e. by arguing what *must* be true) rather than by employing arguments built on Scripture or other written authorities”...

Anselm repudiated as blasphemous the notion, with nearly a thousand years behind it, of the death of Christ as a ransom paid to the devil. What God owed the devil was nothing but punishment for seducing man and usurping God’s authority. He never had any lawful rights over man; no debts were due from the sovereign to a traitor. Man had deserted to the rebel’s flag, but God still remains his lawful sovereign, and what does man not owe to his overlord for having thus dishonored his fealty? What reparation does justice require of him? Thus in effect Anselm has substituted abstract justice for a personal devil, and for criminal punishment, civil damages.

Man for his sin owed God an infinite debt and man, therefore, must offer the satisfaction. But man cannot pay for it, for all men are sinful. God alone can offer the requisite satisfaction. Yet the satisfaction must be made by man; he as the guilty party must do his penance before he can hope for forgiveness of sin. There is only one way out of this moral dilemma. God himself must become man and the God-man must offer the satisfaction; and this was the purpose of the Incarnation. Thus the demands of justice were satisfied. Christ was sinless and he was God incarnate; as such he *owed* no satisfaction at all. Thus by the voluntary sacrifice of his passion and death he earned an “excess of merits”, infinite merits; and since the performance of penance (as Cyprian taught) can claim recognition from the divine justice, the offering of an infinite satisfaction secures from God the forgiveness of all sins “through the merits of Jesus Christ our Lord”.

Here we have the Latin doctrine of the Atonement in its finished and almost archetypal form.... The Reformation, no less than the Counter-Reformation, really took over the substance of Anselm’s doctrine; and it still persists in many of our hymns if not in overt doctrinal exposition.... What, we may ask, is the secret of this persistence, despite the conviction which most of us feel today that the theory itself is profoundly unsatisfying? ...

Anselm helps to relieve the burden of guilt. That is just what Abelard’s theory can never do....

Abelard, and the liberals who follow him, avoid what Quick called the “monstrous doctrine” that Christ’s self-oblation on the Cross changed God’s attitude to man, but maintain that the effect of Calvary is that it “gives man new and convincing evidence (convincing *de iure* if not *de facto*) of what has always been true— that God loves him. Thus there is no directly cosmic importance at all in the death and resurrection of Christ because the order and constitution of God’s universe remain exactly the same after as before.” The liberal theories of the Atonement take us one step further away from the New Testament than the juridical theories. They are called ‘subjective’ because according to them the effects of Christ’s Atonement begin only when the human soul accepts and believes in God’s love declared in Jesus Christ. It never seems even to occur to liberal theologians that a mere declaration of God’s

unchanging love, however convincing, is something less than the mighty act of deliverance, victory and new creation which the apostolic writers believed the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus to be.”...

Nowhere more than in its Atonement doctrine is the Reformation seen to have been late mediaeval rather than modern. . . . Protestantism has taken over substantially the Latin and mediaeval Atonement doctrine while repudiating the whole penitential system and the “superstitious” sacrifice of the Mass with which it had been indissolubly bound up. The concept of Satisfaction remains central— though too often presented in cruder form as a substitutionary punishment— and is understood as a rational necessity....

Luther seems to adopt almost *in toto* the characteristically Latin doctrine. He concentrated almost exclusively on the death of Christ, “to the neglect, absolute or relative, of all other aspects of his work, person and teaching.”...

Penal substitution in its crudest form was to remain the orthodoxy of Protestantism. Luther had little concern for the Resurrection or for the Spirit of Christ in the *koinonia*....

“The post-Reformation theologians accepted the Anselmian doctrine without suspicion altogether, ignoring or missing the close relationship between this doctrine and the theological tradition which the Reformation had challenged with its watchword of *sola gratia*”. 1

F. W. Dillistone

Commenting on the greatness of Roman law as an historical phenomenon Fritz Schulz has written, ‘Roman law is the purest expression of the Roman nature and the most powerful witness to the greatness and glory of Rome’. And as he contemplated its influence upon the history of Europe John Buchan wrote: ‘The Romans as a race had legal genius and their juristic conceptions, elaborated early in the Republic and codified by the great jurists of the later empire, were the foundation of the law of the mediaeval and modern worlds’. That Roman law has greatly affected the development of Christian thinking on the atonement there can be little doubt....

‘The Roman jurists’ aim is to find— within the specified framework— the rule arising out of the nature of the thing itself, out of conditions as they are.’...

The obvious implication of such a view is that Law itself is the final authority. Law governs the fertility and the sowing and the harvesting and the division and the appropriation of land: Law governs the times and seasons, day and night, summer and winter, days of fasting and days of feasting, days of favor and days of ill-fortune: Law governs relationships between humans, between men and animals, between men and the gods: Law governs actions and arrangements of all kinds... It is a system of eternal principles inherent in the natural order, waiting to be formulated openly, with a kind of scientific detachment, in relation to every particular case....

Every failure to fulfill the necessary *obligatio* carried an appropriate penalty which had to be publicly declared: then the penalty would be inflicted and satisfaction obtained either directly or through compensation or through a substitute or through a surety guaranteeing future redress. Wrongdoing is essentially failure to fulfill obligations within the one organic society. Reparation is made by means of an appropriate act either of offering compensation or of enduring pain....

I believe that no unified theory of atonement in terms of legal comparisons can be derived from the New Testament. That, legal conceptions were in the writers' minds I do not doubt. That it was natural to appeal to the accepted axioms of their time I readily allow....

It is when we leave behind the Palestinian environment, however, and move out into the Graeco-Roman world that we encounter the possibility of interpreting the work of Christ far more precisely in legal terms. The great system of Roman law was largely responsible for holding that world together and wherever there was an important city; men trained in the law could be found amongst its citizens. Sooner or later a man would be brought to Christian faith that would use his *legal* knowledge and training to clarify and confirm the doctrine and discipline of the Church. Such a one was Tertullian, an able Carthaginian lawyer, who embraced Christianity and soon set to work to interpret its teaching in terms of his own familiar categories. As A. C. McGiffert once wrote: 'He (i.e. Tertullian) looked at everything with the eyes of a lawyer. Religion and morals, the gospel itself, bore a legal aspect to him, and he gave the language and the theology of western Catholicism a legal cast which they have never lost.'...

The ideas and language which Tertullian employed in dealing with an urgent practical problem in the life of the Church were to be taken up and used in a brilliantly logical and systematic way by Anselm in his attempt to provide a convincing demonstration that the Incarnation was not only a fact but also a necessary fact, the only possible means by which sinful man could have been saved....

'The Cur Deus Homo was the product of a feudal and monastic world on the eve of a great transformation. With all its originality and personal intensity of vision it bears the marks of this rigorous and— if the word can be used without blame— repressive régime. Anselm's favorite image of the relations between God and Man was that of a lord and his vassals.'...

To appreciate the background of Anselm thinking, it is particularly important to notice the kind of illustrations which he used in his addresses and ordinary conversations. They are essentially hierarchical in pattern after the model of ancient Roman institutions....

Anselm references to God's honor are to be interpreted in the light of contemporary usage....

The picture of atonement painted in the *Cur Deus Homo* is impressive if set in the midst of medieval feudalistic conceptions of authority, of sanctions and of reparation. It belongs to what may be called the style of the Roman legal tradition even though the great revival of interest in Roman law had scarcely begun when Anselm himself was a student. Yet the general ideas of Roman justice were abroad in Europe and the structure of feudal life with the emphasis upon the land and its produce, upon a hierarchy of functions necessary for the organization of a land-based society and upon methods by which any disturbance of the smooth working of the social organism could be dealt with, was in many ways parallel to the structure of life in ancient Rome. The essential conceptions were obedience, obligations, merits, satisfaction. These provided a useful mode of comparison for the Christian interpretation of Atonement...

But if Anselm's model be regarded as an exact reflexion of God's ordering of His world, if the legal processes which he takes for granted be accepted as valid for all time, if the *Cur Deus Homo* be given the status of a definitive theory of atonement or a logical proof of the necessity for the Incarnation, then the result for Christian theology can be disastrous. Neither Roman law nor feudal law, impressive as each is as a means of regulating a hierarchical society, can claim timeless validity as the structure necessary to express the relations between God and man. Anselm's dialectic was doubtless satisfying to the educated monk of his own day and its relatively simple categories of debt, merit, satisfaction, payment, transfer of assets, have elicited a response in the imaginations of Protestants who from the seventeenth century onwards became increasingly familiar with the structures of capitalism. But neither to the philosopher nor to the man of the world is it likely to make any strong appeal today....

Anselm believed that he could demonstrate by an appeal to reason alone that the incarnation and atonement of Christ must necessarily have taken the form that they did. He made little reference to the Bible or even to the tradition of the Church....When we reach the next most famous figure in the history of the legal interpretation of atonement, we find ourselves in a very different atmosphere. Calvin had been thoroughly trained in the science of law as it was being taught in France in the sixteenth century. That this training gave sharpness, a precision, and orderliness to his mind is abundantly clear. But when it came to expounding Christian doctrine, there was no question of his arguing a case in order to convince believers and unbelievers by the methods of law and logic. Rather it was Calvin's constant ambition to present the evidence of the Scriptures in so comprehensive and so orderly a way that the doctrines of the faith would strengthen the conviction and purpose of God's elect and would stand as a bulwark against all false teaching and aggressive unbelief....

Whereas the key-terms in Anselm (and the later scholastic theologians) were those belonging primarily to Roman civil law and to medieval feudal law— debt, liability, compensation, satisfaction, honor, price, payment, merit— in Calvin we find constant

reference to punishment, death, the curse, wrath, substitution, surety, merit, imputation— in other words to criminal law reinterpreted in the light of the Biblical teaching on the Law, sin and death....

His picture is perhaps more economical in construction and more sharply defined than any other in the history of the theology of the Atonement. God has given man his Law: man has defied God by breaking the Law: he therefore stands condemned at the bar of judgment and no punishment is conceivable except eternal death: yet the Son of God has become man and has stood *in man's place* to bear the immeasurable weight of the Wrath, the Curse, the Condemnation of a righteous God: Christ in fact 'was made a substitute and a surety in the place of transgressors and even submitted as a criminal, to sustain and suffer all the punishment which would have been inflicted on them' (*Institutes*, 2:16:10); so man's guilt was obliterated: God has opened the way for man to accept his release, to be justified by faith, to become accepted in the Beloved. This picture, with minor variations, remained dominant in Reformed theology until well into the nineteenth century. It seems to provide a clear delineation of Biblical truth. It appears to be void of ambiguity and mystery. It links up with common human experiences of the law court, the trial and condemnation of offenders, the imposition of the death sentence, the occasional (and thereby the more dramatic) reprieve. Is this not the best mode of comparison available to bring the message of reconciliation vividly before the imaginations of sinful men?

The difficulties in the way of accepting Calvin's doctrine as it stands are mainly two. . . . The Law of the Bible must be divided into three....

The second main difficulty which confronts us as we examine Calvin's doctrine of atonement is his use of terms which had a well-defined reference and validity within the legal context of his own day but which are inapplicable as they stand either to the social order of Israel in the Biblical period or to that of Europe or America in the twentieth century. Such terms as eternal law, surety and substitute, imputation and satisfaction, penalty and merit, are freely used with the assumption that their framework of reference remains inviolable amidst all processes of social change. But this is a very large assumption. Satisfaction and merit have a clear-cut quantitative reference within the context of Roman law. Is it certain that exact equivalents can be found within the social structure of Hebrew society, even in its later period, to say nothing of the early patriarchal era? Substitute and surety can be employed within the context of a well-established court of law with a judge imposing the death penalty and then accepting some surety on behalf of the condemned prisoner. But is this necessarily the framework within which the great declarations of Old and New Testaments ought to be set? ...

The poet who so poignantly and vividly described the sufferings of the righteous servant moved, it is true, within a generally accepted social philosophy of retribution and reward but the processes are not strictly legal and are certainly not to be interpreted in terms of developed Roman jurisprudence....

To interpret the Christian doctrine of atonement in terms of legal processes and penal analogies became increasingly dangerous for there was little assurance that the forensic reference would carry immediate conviction or would even correspond to the inner reality of the legal images contained in the Bible itself. The great advances in the study of history have served to call in question the whole concept of a Divinely-given code. How is it possible to imagine that a set of laws, formulated for a particular people at a particular moment in history, could have a universal reference for all times and all nations? Similar advances in scientific studies have undermined the concept of natural law. How is it possible to imagine that a single set of symbols, however abstract, can embrace within an unchanging formula the principles governing the process of the whole universe? That there have in the course of human history been epoch-making declarations of moral law on the one hand and expressions of natural law on the other hand is clear enough. How man's conduct in any particular period is to be related to them is by no means so obvious....

And only by a severely selective process can a body of law derived from the Bible be regarded as universal in its relevance: even then it is so restricted in its content that it leaves vast numbers of human problems untouched....

My conclusion must then be that no strictly penal theory of atonement can be expected to carry conviction in the world of the twentieth century. 2

Alan Richardson

Throughout the first five centuries of the Christian era the Church was content to assert this principle— that God was incarnate for the sake of our salvation— without elaborating theories as to the exact method by which that salvation was accomplished. Many individuals attempted to think out the mode in which atonement had been made, but the Church as a whole embraced no theory....

Sooner or later, of course, it was inevitable that theorizing should begin. Christians naturally began to ask such questions as: How can the death of Christ render possible the forgiveness of sins? How does Christ's death bring salvation and eternal life to men? ...

It was Origen (c. A.D. 183-253), Clement's distinguished pupil and successor as head of the school of Alexandria, who first gave expression— almost, we may say, accidentally— to the Ransom Theory, the view that the death of Christ was a ransom paid by God to the devil....

The "Satisfaction Theory" of Anselm is obviously a great improvement upon the crude Ransom Theory. The devil as a possessor of rights is completely left out of the explanation, while on the other hand there is no suggestion of an angry God. The attractiveness of Anselm theory for the medieval mind is shown by the fact that, although it was strikingly new, it won rapid and universal acceptance. It became the current view of the later middle Ages, and the theologians of the Reformation built upon it, though it is doubtful whether they improved upon it. Its chief weakness is the

weakness of all theories: it was the creature of its own times. Later ages could not regard God as a feudal Overlord after the days of chivalry had passed; and the explanation of the Atonement in terms of “honor” and “satisfaction” was suitable only in the days when society was ordered upon a feudal basis. The conception of God as feudal Lord is not as universal as the conception of him as Father; and the theory of Anselm tended to stress God’s honor rather than his love.

We now come to our third type of theory, which is often called the Penal Theory, for reasons which will appear. The Renaissance brought with it a revival of interest in ancient law; and we are consequently not surprised to find that the Reformation divines work out a theory of the Atonement in legal terms. The Penal Theory is grounded upon the new political and legal ideas of the sixteenth century; it starts from the ideas of the inviolability of law and the justice of God. God is perfectly just, and the divine law of punishment can never be set aside. Man by his transgression has earned the dreadful punishment which the inviolable law of God must inflict. God’s justice is such that sin cannot go unpunished. But the extent of man’s sin is infinite: an infinitely severe punishment is its inevitable consequence. However, God is not only just, he is also merciful; and he himself in his infinite mercy provided a substitute who, being of an infinite nature should be able to bear the punishment for the sins of the whole world. Thus, Christ came down to offer himself as our substitute; he bore the punishment instead of us; and by so doing he rendered it possible for God to forgive sins, and at the same time to remain perfect both in his justice and his mercy. It is sometimes objected to this theory that God is not thus shown to be just but rather unjust, in that he allows the innocent to suffer for the guilty; this, however, is not a valid objection to the theory as stated by the Reformation divines...

Of course, the Penal Theory seems to us crude and repellent. But it was natural that society at a certain stage of its evolution should believe that its laws are so sacred that every violation of them must receive plenary punishment. Nowadays we hold very different ideas about the ethics of punishment. In modern society justice does not mean merely the infliction of punishment after transgression: the society which inexorably carries out this penalty is not necessarily thought by us to be ideally just. We cannot believe that God must find “satisfaction” in punishment before he can forgive: not so does an earthly father treat his children’s offences. . . . It is perhaps not too presumptuous a claim to make that our social and ethical ideas have evolved a long way since the sixteenth century; and consequently we cannot rest content with the Reformation theories of the Atonement. Many men and women of our own generation have been repelled from Christianity by old-fashioned teachers insisting upon some form of the Penal Theory; but it is these people who have rebelled against the inadequate ethical conceptions of an earlier age, rather than their teachers, whose outlook is the more Christian: they are the men and women who, through false teaching given in Christ’s name, have denied Christ for Christ’s sake.

Very few people nowadays feel satisfied with any of the theories of the Atonement which we have so far discussed, and it is a real consolation to reflect that none of these theories can claim to be binding upon Christians....

We must remember that the experience is primary, while the theory is only secondary. Throughout all our discussions we must not forget that theory should be but an aid to practice, and that there is an art as well as a theory of Atonement. Those who practice the art are best qualified to understand the theory, for Christian doctrines and theories about them are not abstract things removed altogether from real life. "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know of the doctrine." 3

James E. Tull

To interpret the wrath of God as vindictive anger or personal vengeance poses serious theological difficulties for a Christian understanding of the character of God. If God's wrath is "the emotional reaction of an irritated self-concern" (William Temple), if we think of God as one who loses his temper and throws his love aside in violent reaction to our sin, we have, in our own minds, seriously compromised the character of God.

This kind of interpretation is a temptation to many who think of the doctrine of the Atonement in juridical terms. Seen in these terms, God is angry with us and demands that we be punished for our sins. The loving Christ steps between us and God's anger, and takes the blow of God's wrath upon himself. By venting his anger upon Christ instead of upon us, God's anger is appeased, and his demand for justice is satisfied....

God is not a cosmic Shylock, demanding his pound of flesh....

In Christ, God has shown conclusively that his righteousness transcends the mandate of a legal requirement. The bonds of any merely "forensic" understanding of justification are decisively broken. In Christ's ministry and cross the righteousness of God stands revealed in its glory and its power. Here was the man who loved not only his friends, but also his enemies; who prayed to the Father for the forgiveness of those who nailed him to the cross; who, when reviled, reviled not again. His obedience was given not to the dictates of an impersonal law but to the will of the Father—an obedience even unto death....

The Pauline emphasis is that God in Christ reconciled the world to himself, not that Christ reconciled God to the world. The forensic theories of atonement affirm the opposite, namely, that God would not be reconciled until he was appeased by the death of his Son, who made a willing offering of himself on the cross in order that the Father's anger might be placated. The justice of God had first to be satisfied before his love could become operative. By stepping into our place, Christ paid the price for our sins, died the death that we should have died, and satisfied to the full the demand of God's justice for the payment of the debt which our sins had made to accrue

against us. By the payment of our debt with his blood, Christ reconciles the Father to us.

The very reciting of representative Scriptural passages on this subject should be enough to establish the fallacious character of this argument. "If, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life" (Rom. 5:10, RSV, italics added). "All this is from God, who through Christ *reconciled us to himself* and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, *God was in Christ reconciling* the world to himself.... We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:18-20, RSV, italics added). "For he is our peace, who has made us both one... [that] might *reconcile* us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end" (Eph. 2:14-16, RSV, italics added). "And you, who once were estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, *he has now reconciled* in his body of flesh by his death" (Col. 1:21-22, RSV, italics added).

Interpreters of the Atonement who think of Christ's work as one whose purpose is to propitiate the anger of God, or to satisfy God's demands for justice, do violence to the unity of the will of Christ with the will of the Father. In many instances, this type of interpretation exalts the justice of God above the mercy and love of God. For example, the American theologian A. H. Strong maintained that justice "is a principle of God's nature, not only independent of love, but superior to love." W. G. T. Shedd, another American theologian, held that justice inheres in God's nature, but mercy is God's disposition. In other words, mercy is a more or less capricious act after justice is done. Love serves the ends of justice. While God is a God of both justice and love, he is justice primarily, love secondarily. Justice is the higher principle.

In popular theology, at least, the interpretation of the Atonement in terms of satisfaction and propitiation has been attended by a conception which places Christ in a position inferior to the claims of justice. For if the work of the Son is that of appeasing the Father, it would seem to follow that the principle of justice is superior to Christ's work of love. W. J. Wolf's insight here is penetrating: "A God who forgives because His justice has been satisfied does not really forgive." This position makes "the grace of God of no effect."

On the other hand, the history of the doctrine of the Atonement shows the danger of pressing the reconciling love of God in such a way that God's love is sentimentalized.

"We were reconciled to God," Paul says, "by the death of his Son" (Rom. 5:10, RSV). This means that we are reconciled, not by the fiat of a generous benevolence, but by the anguish of a costly grace....

Christ made himself one with sinners. He entered into the "horror of thickest darkness" as the dereliction and godforsakenness of the cross overtook him. His identification with the needs of sinners was so intense that the shame and curse of sin became his portion.

All of this involvement in vicarious suffering must be seen in the light of the person who endured to the uttermost. He who was chastised for our peace was the Son of God. But it cannot be too strongly emphasized that, while he took away the barriers which kept us from God, the Father was not just an admiring and sympathetic spectator who watched this drama of suffering and sorrow from afar. It was God in Christ who bore the load of our sins, who paid the price of reconciliation, whose love went to the utmost length to restore us to his fellowship....

In classical Greek, however, the word translated *propitiation* meant to placate or appease an angry deity. The problem posed in connection with a Christian doctrine of atonement is whether the sacrifice of Christ was intended to appease the wrath of God by the interposition of an offering on our behalf, which was acceptable to God.

This interpretation of the sacrifice of Christ poses serious questions about the intention and effect of Christ's atonement. In the concept of Christ's death which is found in the theory of "penal substitution," Christ interjects himself into our place, and receives the full punishment from the hand of God which was our due. He therefore appeased, made favorable, placated the vengeful anger of God, and satisfied God's demands for a just punishment. Thus he rendered God favorable to us by receiving in our place the blow which should have fallen on us....

The meaning of the cross is not that God stood apart from it in vengeful anger, demanding restitution for a broken law or an offended honor, but the exact opposite. The cross means that, in infinite love and compassion, God involved himself in our plight, becoming the Good Samaritan to us in Christ, while we were stricken and helpless in our sins. In Christ, he stepped into our destitute condition to take the penalty of our sins upon himself, gathering all our wrongs into his own great heart and consuming them in the fires of his own love. In this sense he bore the penalty for our sins, not in some kind of "mechanical substitution," but in the way of a profoundly personal love. 4

Harold H. Ditmanson

Yet despite [the] rejection of the abstract and impersonal theology of grace and merit, Luther and his colleagues worked within the context and limitations of the inherited doctrinal system....

It is of the utmost importance that forensic images of the atonement be delegalized and our interpretation of Christ's work be expressed in personal categories....

When Anselm said that man's lack of merit is compensated for by Christ's superabundant merits, he meant to protect the divine initiative. But he did not by any means safeguard the doctrine of grace. God still justifies on the basis of merit since he has received payment of the debt owed him and a free gift besides. Free, unmerited grace is hard to find in Anselm's scheme of thought. There is much of Anselm in subsequent theology, both Catholic and Protestant. Even the Reformers spoke often of "the merits of Christ," although the main thrust of their message was

determined by their recovery of Paul's teaching about the free, undeserved, personal character of grace. As we have seen, the nineteenth century initiated a vigorous reaction against the impersonal and legalistic categories of the Anselmic type of atonement theology. 5

Notes and References

1. F. R. Barry, *The Atonement* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968), pp. 127-29, 131-35, 139-40, 142-44, 148, 150-51, 157-59.
2. F. W. Dillistone, *The Christian Understanding of Atonement* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), pp. 172, 174-75, 186, 190-91, 193-97, 200-201, 207, 214.
3. Alan Richardson, *Creeds in the Making: A Short Introduction to the History of Christian Doctrine* (1935: reprint ed., Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), pp. 95, 98-9, 102-6, 111,
4. James E. Tull, *The Atoning Gospel* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1982), pp. 30-31, 44, 56-7, 59-60, 129-30.
5. Harold H. Ditmanson, *Grace in Experience and Theology* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1977), pp. 153, 226-27.

Each page in this document contains a true word for word unexpurgated transmission of the original essay: "*Documents on the Atonement- R.D.B.*", *Essay 11, 1984*. Permission to photocopy, fax or otherwise electronically transmit in unexpurgated form has been granted. Passages may be quoted within the limits of "fair use."
Greatest1command.com