

# Doctrine of the Atonement

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The word *atonement*, which is almost the only theological term of English origin, has a curious history. The verb "atone", from the adverbial phrase "at one" (M.E. *at oon*), at first meant to reconcile, or make "at one"; from this it came to denote the action by which such reconciliation was effected, e.g. satisfaction for all offense or an injury. Hence, in Catholic theology, the Atonement is the Satisfaction of Christ, whereby God and the world are reconciled or made to be at one. "For God indeed was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). The Catholic doctrine on this subject is set forth in the sixth Session of the Council of Trent, chapter ii. Having shown the insufficiency of Nature, and of Mosaic Law the Council continues:

Whence it came to pass, that the Heavenly Father, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1, 3), when that blessed fullness of the time was come (Galatians 4:4) sent unto men Jesus Christ, His own Son who had been, both before the Law and during the time of the Law, to many of the holy fathers announced and promised, that He might both redeem the Jews, who were under the Law and that the Gentiles who followed not after justice might attain to justice and that all men might receive the adoption of sons. Him God had proposed as a propitiator, through faith in His blood (Romans 3:25), for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for those of the whole world (I John ii, 2).

More than twelve centuries before this, the same dogma was proclaimed in the words of the Nicene Creed, "who for us men and for our salvation, came down, took flesh, was made man; and suffered. "And all that is thus taught in the decrees of the councils may be read in the pages of the New Testament. For instance, in the words of Our Lord, "even as the Son of man is not come to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a redemption for many" (Matthew 20:28); or of St. Paul, "Because in him, it hath well pleased the Father that all fulness should dwell; and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, making peace through the blood of his cross, both as to the things that are on earth, and the things that are in heaven." (Colossians 1:19-20).

The great doctrine thus laid down in the beginning was further unfolded and brought out into clearer light by the work of the Fathers and theologians. And it may be noted that in this instance the development is chiefly due to Catholic speculation on the mystery, and not, as in the case of other doctrines, to controversy with heretics. At first we have the central fact made known in the Apostolic preaching, that mankind was fallen

and was raised up and redeemed from sin by the blood of Christ. But it remained for the pious speculation of Fathers and theologians to enter into the meaning of this great truth, to inquire into the state of fallen man, and to ask how Christ accomplished His work of Redemption. By whatever names or figures it may be described, that work is the reversal of the Fall, the blotting out of sin, the deliverance from bondage, the reconciliation of mankind with God. And it is brought to pass by the Incarnation, by the life, the sufferings, and the death of the Divine Redeemer. All this may be summed up in the word *Atonement*. This, is so to say, the starting point. And herein all are indeed at one. But, when it was attempted to give a more precise account of the nature of the Redemption and the manner of its accomplishment, theological speculation took different courses, some of which were suggested by the various names and figures under which this ineffable mystery is adumbrated in Holy Scripture. Without pretending to give a full history of the discussions, we may briefly indicate some of the main lines on which the doctrine was developed, and touch on the more important theories put forward in explanation of the Atonement.

(a) In any view, the Atonement is founded on the Divine Incarnation. By this great mystery, the Eternal Word took to Himself the nature of man and, being both God and man, became the Mediator between God and men. From this, we have one of the first and most profound forms of theological speculation on the Atonement, the theory which is sometimes described as Mystical Redemption. Instead of seeking a solution in legal figures, some of the great Greek Fathers were content to dwell on the fundamental fact of the Divine Incarnation. By the union of the Eternal Word with the nature of man all mankind was lifted up and, so to say, deified. "He was made man", says St. Athanasius, "that we might be made gods" (*De Incarnatione Verbi*, 54). "His flesh was saved, and made free the first of all, being made the body of the Word, then we, being concorporeal therewith, are saved by the same (*Orat.*, II, *Contra Arianos*, lxi). And again, "For the presence of the Saviour in the flesh was the price of death and the saving of the whole creation (*Ep. ad Adelpium*, vi). In like manner St. Gregory of Nazianzus proves the integrity of the Sacred Humanity by the argument, "That which was not assumed is not healed; but that which is united to God is saved" (*to gar aproslepton, atherapeuton ho de henotai to theu, touto kai sozetai*). This speculation of the Greek Fathers undoubtedly contains a profound truth which is sometimes forgotten by later authors who are more intent on framing juridical theories of ransom and satisfaction. But it is obvious that this account of the matter is imperfect, and leaves much to be explained. It must be remembered, moreover, that the Fathers themselves do not put this forward as a full explanation. For while many of their utterances might seem to imply that the Redemption was actually accomplished by the union of a Divine Person with the human nature, it is clear from other passages that they do not lose sight of the atoning sacrifice. The Incarnation is, indeed, the source and the foundation of the Atonement, and these profound thinkers have, so to say, grasped the cause and its effects as one vast whole. Hence they look on to the result before staying to consider the means by which it was accomplished.

(b) But something more on this matter had already been taught in the preaching of the Apostles and in the pages of the New Testament. The restoration of fallen man was the work of the Incarnate Word. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19). But the peace of that reconciliation was accomplished by the death of the Divine Redeemer, "making peace through the blood of His cross" (Colossians 1:20). This redemption by death is another mystery, and some of the Fathers in the first ages are led to speculate on its meaning, and to construct a theory in explanation. Here the words and figures used in Holy Scripture help to guide the current of theological thought. Sin is represented as a state of bondage or servitude, and fallen man is delivered by being redeemed, or bought with a price. "For you are bought with a great price" (1 Corinthians 6:20). "Thou art worthy, O Lord, to take the book, and to open the seals thereof; because thou wast slain, and hast redeemed to God, in thy blood" (Revelation 5:9). Looked at in this light, the Atonement appears as the deliverance from captivity by the payment of a ransom. This view is already developed in the second century. "The mighty Word and true Man reasonably redeeming us by His blood, gave Himself a ransom for those who had been brought into bondage. And since the Apostasy unjustly ruled over us, and, whereas we belonged by nature to God Almighty, alienated us against nature and made us his own disciples, the Word of God, being mighty in all things, and failing not in His justice, dealt justly even with the Apostasy itself, buying back from it the things which were His own" (Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*

V, i). And St. Augustine says in well-known words: "Men were held captive under the devil and served the demons, but they were redeemed from captivity. For they could sell themselves. The Redeemer came, and gave the price; He poured forth his blood and bought the whole world. Do you ask what He bought? See what He gave, and find what He bought. The blood of Christ is the price. How much is it worth? What but the whole world? What but all nations?" (*Enarration on Psalm 95*, no. 5).

It cannot be questioned that this theory also contains a true principle. For it is founded on the express words of Scripture, and is supported by many of the greatest of the early Fathers and later theologians. But unfortunately, at first, and for a long period of theological history, this truth was somewhat obscured by a strange confusion, which would seem to have arisen from the natural tendency to take a figure too literally, and to apply it in details which were not contemplated by those who first made use of it. It must not be forgotten that the account of our deliverance from sin is set forth in figures. Conquest, captivity, and ransom are familiar facts of human history. Man, having yielded to the temptations of Satan, was like to one overcome in battle. Sin, again, is fitly likened to a state of slavery. And when man was set free by the shedding of Christ's precious Blood, this deliverance would naturally recall (even if it had not been so described in Scripture) the redemption of a captive by the payment of a ransom.

But however useful and illuminating in their proper place, figures of this kind are perilous in the hands of those who press them too far, and forget that they are figures. This is what happened here. When a captive is ransomed the price is naturally paid to the conqueror by whom he is held in bondage. Hence, if this figure were taken and interpreted literally in all its details, it would seem that the price of man's ransom must be paid to Satan. The notion is certainly startling, if not revolting. Even if brave reasons pointed in this direction, we might well shrink from drawing the conclusion. And this is in fact so far from being the case that it seems hard to find any rational explanation of such a payment, or any right on which it could be founded. Yet, strange to say, the bold flight of theological speculation was not checked by these misgivings. In the above-cited passage of St. Irenæus, we read that the Word of God "dealt justly even with the Apostasy itself [i.e. Satan], buying back from it the things which were His own." This curious notion, apparently first mooted by St. Irenæus, was taken up by Origen in the next century, and for about a thousand years it played a conspicuous part in the history of theology. In the hands of some of the later Fathers and medieval writers, it takes various forms, and some of its more repulsive features are softened or modified. But the strange notion of some right, or claim, on the part of Satan is still present. A protest was raised by St. Gregory of Nazianzus in the fourth century, as might be expected from that most accurate of the patristic theologians. But it was not till St. Anselm and Abelard had met it with unanswerable arguments that its power was finally broken. It makes a belated appearance in the pages of Peter Lombard.

(c) But it is not only in connection with the theory of ransom that we meet with this notion of "rights" on the part of Satan. Some of the Fathers set the matter in a different aspect. Fallen man, it was said, was justly under the dominion of the devil, in punishment for sin. But when Satan brought suffering and death on the sinless Saviour, he abused his power and exceeded his right, so that he was now justly deprived of his dominion over the captives. This explanation is found especially in the sermons of St. Leo and the "Morals" of St. Gregory the Great. Closely allied to this explanation is the singular "mouse-trap" metaphor of St. Augustine. In this daring figure of speech, the Cross is regarded as the trap in which the bait is set and the enemy is caught. "The Redeemer came and the deceiver was overcome. What did our Redeemer do to our Captor? In payment for us He set the trap, His Cross, with His blood for bait. He [Satan] could indeed shed that blood; but he deserved not to drink it. By shedding the blood of One who was not his debtor, he was forced to release his debtors" (Serm. cxxx, part 2).

(d) These ideas retained their force well into the Middle Ages. But the appearance of St. Anselm's "Cur Deus Homo?" made a new epoch in the theology of the Atonement. It may be said, indeed, that this book marks an epoch in theological literature and doctrinal development. There are not many works, even among those of the greatest teachers, that can compare in this respect with the treatise of St. Anselm. And, with few exceptions, the books that have done as much to influence and guide the growth of theology are the outcome

of some great struggle with heresy; while others, again, only summarize the theological learning of the age. But this little book is at once purely pacific and eminently original. Nor could any dogmatic treatise well be more simple and unpretending than this luminous dialogue between the great archbishop and his disciple Boso. There is no parade of learning, and but little in the way of appeal to authorities. The disciple asks and the master answers; and both alike face the great problem before them fearlessly, but at the same time with all due reverence and modesty. Anselm says at the outset that he will not so much show his disciple the truth he needs, as seek it along with him; and that when he says anything that is not confirmed by higher authority, it must be taken as tentative, and provisional. He adds that, though he may in some measure meet the question, one who is wiser could do it better; and that, whatever man may know or say on this subject, there will always remain deeper reasons that are beyond him. In the same spirit he concludes the whole treatise by submitting it to reasonable correction at the hands of others.

It may be safely said that this is precisely what has come to pass. For the theory put forward by Anselm has been modified by the work of later theologians, and confirmed by the testimony of truth. In contrast to some of the other views already noticed, this theory is remarkably clear and symmetrical. And it is certainly more agreeable to reason than the "mouse-trap" metaphor, or the notion of purchase money paid to Satan. Anselm's answer to the question is simply the need of satisfaction of sin. No sin, as he views the matter, can be forgiven without satisfaction. A debt to Divine justice has been incurred; and that debt must needs be paid. But man could not make this satisfaction for himself; the debt is something far greater than he can pay; and, moreover, all the service that he can offer to God is already due on other titles. The suggestion that some innocent man, or angel, might possibly pay the debt incurred by sinners is rejected, on the ground that in any case this would put the sinner under obligation to his deliverer, and he would thus become the servant of a mere creature. The only way in which the satisfaction could be made, and men could be set free from sin, was by the coming of a Redeemer who is both God and man. His death makes full satisfaction to the Divine Justice, for it is something greater than all the sins of all mankind. Many side questions are incidentally treated in the dialogue between Anselm and Boso. But this is the substance of the answer given to the great question, "Cur Deus Homo?". Some modern writers have suggested that this notion of deliverance by means of satisfaction may have a German origin. For in old Teutonic laws a criminal might pay the wergild instead of undergoing punishment. But this custom was not peculiar or to the Germans, as we may see from the Celtic eirig, and, as Riviere has pointed out, there is no need to have recourse to this explanation. For the notion of satisfaction for sin was already present in the whole system of ecclesiastical penance, though it had been left for Anselm to use it in illustration of the doctrine of the Atonement. It may be added that the same idea underlies the old Jewish "sin-offerings" as well as the similar rites that are found in many ancient religions. It is specially prominent in the rites and prayers used on the Day of Atonement. And this, it may be added, is now the ordinary acceptance of the word; to "atone" is to give satisfaction, or make amends, for an offense or an injury.

(e) Whatever may be the reason, it is clear that this doctrine was attracting special attention in the age of St. Anselm. His own work bears witness that it was undertaken at the urgent request of others who wished to have some new light on this mystery. To some extent, the solution offered by Anselm seems to have satisfied these desires, though, in the course of further discussion, an important part of his theory, the absolute necessity of Redemption and of satisfaction for sin, was discarded by later theologians, and found few defenders. But meanwhile, within a few years of the appearance of the "Cur Deus Homo?" another theory on the subject had been advanced by Abelard. In common with St. Anselm, Abelard utterly rejected the old and then still prevailing, notion that the devil had some sort of right over fallen man, who could only be justly delivered by means of a ransom paid to his captor. Against this he very rightly urges, with Anselm, that Satan was clearly guilty of injustice in the matter and could have no right to anything but punishment. But, on the other hand, Abelard was unable to accept Anselm's view that an equivalent satisfaction for sin was necessary, and that this debt could only be paid by the death of the Divine Redeemer. He insists that God could have pardoned us without requiring satisfaction. And, in his view, the reason for the Incarnation and the death of Christ was the pure love of God. By no other means could men be so effectually turned from sin and moved to love God. Abelard's teaching on this point, as on others, was vehemently attacked by St. Bernard. But it

should be borne in mind that some of the arguments urged in condemnation of Abelard would affect the position of St. Anselm also, not to speak of later Catholic theology.

In St. Bernard's eyes it seemed that Abelard, in denying the rights of Satan, denied the "Sacrament of Redemption" and regarded the teaching and example of Christ as the sole benefit of the Incarnation. "But", as Mr. Oxenham observes,

he had not said so, and he distinctly asserts in his "Apology" that "the Son of God was incarnate to deliver us from the bondage of sin and yoke of the Devil and to open to us by His death the gate of eternal life." And St. Bernard himself, in this very Epistle, distinctly denies any absolute necessity for the method of redemption chosen, and suggests a reason for it not so very unlike Abelard's. "Perhaps that method is the best, whereby in a land of forgetfulness and sloth we might be more powerfully as vividly reminded of our fall, through the so great and so manifold sufferings of Him who repaired it." Elsewhere when not speaking controversially, he says still more plainly: "Could not the Creator have restored His work without that difficulty? He could, but He preferred to do it at his own cost, lest any further occasion should be given for that worst and most odious vice of ingratitude in man" (Bern., Serm. xi, in Cant.). What is this but to say, with Abelard that "He chose the Incarnation as the most effectual method for eliciting His creature's love?" (The Catholic Doctrine of the Atonement, 85, 86).

(f) Although the high authority of St. Bernard was thus against them, the views of St. Anselm and Abelard, the two men who in different ways were the fathers of Scholasticism, shaped the course of later medieval theology. The strange notion of the rights of Satan, against which they had both protested, now disappears from the pages of our theologians. For the rest, the view which ultimately prevailed may be regarded as a combination of the opinions of Anselm and Abelard. In spite of the objections urged by the latter writer, Anselm's doctrine of Satisfaction was adopted as the basis. But St. Thomas and the other medieval masters agree with Abelard in rejecting the notion that this full Satisfaction for sin was absolutely necessary. At the most, they are willing to admit a hypothetical or conditional necessity for the Redemption by the death of Christ. The restoration of fallen man was a work of God's free mercy and benevolence. And, even on the hypothesis that the loss was to be repaired, this might have been brought about in many and various ways. The sin might have been remitted freely, without any satisfaction at all, or some lesser satisfaction, however imperfect in itself, might have been accepted as sufficient. But on the hypothesis that God as chosen to restore mankind, and at the same time, to require full satisfaction as a condition of pardon and deliverance, nothing less than the Atonement made by one who was God as well as man could suffice as satisfaction for the offense against the Divine Majesty. And in this case Anselm's argument will hold good. Mankind cannot be restored unless God becomes man to save them.

In reference to many points of detail the Schoolmen, here as elsewhere, adopted divergent views. One of the chief questions at issue was the intrinsic adequacy of the satisfaction offered by Christ. On this point the majority, with St. Thomas at their head, maintained that, by reason of the infinite dignity of the Divine Person, the least action or suffering of Christ had an infinite value, so that in itself it would suffice as an adequate satisfaction for the sins of the whole world. Scotus and his school, on the other hand, disputed this intrinsic infinitude, and ascribed the all-sufficiency of the satisfaction to the Divine acceptance. As this acceptance was grounded on the infinite dignity of the Divine Person, the difference was not so great as might appear at first sight. But, on this point at any rate the simpler teaching of St. Thomas is more generally accepted by later theologians. Apart from this question, the divergent views of the two schools on the primary motive of the Incarnation naturally have some effect on the Thomist and Scotist theology of the Atonement. On looking back at the various theories noticed so far, it will be seen that they are not, for the most part, mutually exclusive, but may be combined and harmonized. It may be said, indeed, that they all help to bring out different aspects of that great doctrine which cannot find adequate expression in any human theory. And in point of fact it will generally be found that the chief Fathers and Schoolmen, though they may at times lay more stress on some favourite theory of their own, do not lose sight of the other explanations.

Thus the Greek Fathers, who delight in speculating on the Mystical Redemption by the Incarnation, do not omit to speak also of our salvation by the shedding of blood. Origen, who lays most stress on the deliverance by payment of a ransom, does not forget to dwell on the need of a sacrifice for sin. St. Anselm again, in his "Meditations", supplements the teaching set forth in his "Cur Deus Homo?" Abelard, who might seem to make the Atonement consist in nothing more than the constraining example of Divine Love has spoken also of our salvation by the Sacrifice of the Cross, in passages to which his critics do not attach sufficient importance. And, as we have seen his great opponent, St. Bernard, teaches all that is really true and valuable in the theory which he condemned. Most, if not all, of these theories had perils of their own, if they were isolated and exaggerated. But in the Catholic Church there was ever a safeguard against these dangers of distortion. As Mr. Oxenham says very finely,

The perpetual priesthood of Christ in heaven, which occupies a prominent place in nearly all the writings we have examined, is even more emphatically insisted upon by Origen. And this deserves to be remembered, because it is a part of the doctrine which has been almost or altogether dropped out of many Protestant expositions of the Atonement, whereas those most inclining among Catholics to a merely juridical view of the subject have never been able to forget the present and living reality of a sacrifice constantly kept before their eyes, as it were, in the worship which reflects on earth the unfailing liturgy of heaven. (p. 38)

The reality of these dangers and the importance of this safeguard may be seen in the history of this doctrine since the age of Reformation. As we have seen, its earlier development owed comparatively little to the stress of controversy with the heretics. And the revolution of the sixteenth century was no exception to the rule. For the atonement was not one of the subjects directly disputed between the Reformers and their Catholic opponents. But from its close connection with the cardinal question of Justification, this doctrine assumed a very special prominence and importance in Protestant theology and practical preaching. Mark Pattison tells us in his "Memoirs" that he came to Oxford with his "home Puritan religion almost narrowed to two points, fear of God's wrath and faith in the doctrine of the Atonement". And his case was possibly no exception among Protestant religionists. In their general conception on the atonement the Reformers and their followers happily preserved the Catholic doctrine, at least in its main lines. And in their explanation of the merit of Christ's sufferings and death we may see the influence of St. Thomas and the other great Schoolmen. But, as might be expected from the isolation of the doctrine and the loss of other portions of Catholic teaching, the truth thus preserved was sometimes insensibly obscured or distorted. It will be enough to note here the presence of two mistaken tendencies.

- The first is indicated in the above words of Pattison in which the Atonement is specially connected with the thought of the wrath of God. It is true of course that sin incurs the anger of the Just Judge, and that this is averted when the debt due to Divine Justice is paid by satisfaction. But it must not be thought that God is only moved to mercy and reconciled to us as a result of this satisfaction. This false conception of the Reconciliation is expressly rejected by St. Augustine (In Joannem, Tract. cx, section 6). God's merciful love is the cause, not the result of that satisfaction.
- The second mistake is the tendency to treat the Passion of Christ as being literally a case of vicarious punishment. This is at best a distorted view of the truth that His Atoning Sacrifice took the place of our punishment, and that He took upon Himself the sufferings and death that were due to our sins.

This view of the Atonement naturally provoked a reaction. Thus the Socinians were led to reject the notion of vicarious suffering and satisfaction as inconsistent with God's justice and mercy. And in their eyes the work of Christ consisted simply in His teaching by word and example. Similar objections to the juridical conception of the Atonement led to like results in the later system of Swedenborg. More recently Albrecht Ritschl, who has paid special attention to this subject, has formulated a new theory on somewhat similar lines. His conception of the Atonement is moral and spiritual, rather than juridical and his system is distinguished by the fact that he lays stress on the relation of Christ to the whole Christian community. We

cannot stay to examine these new systems in detail. But it may be observed that the truth which they contain is already found in the Catholic theology of the Atonement. That great doctrine has been faintly set forth in figures taken from man's laws and customs. It is represented as the payment of a price, or a ransom, or as the offering of satisfaction for a debt. But we can never rest in these material figures as though they were literal and adequate. As both Abelard and Bernard remind us, the Atonement is the work of love. It is essentially a sacrifice, the one supreme sacrifice of which the rest were but types and figures. And, as St. Augustine teaches us, the outward rite of Sacrifice is the sacrament, or sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice of the heart. It was by this inward sacrifice of obedience unto death, by this perfect love with which He laid down his life for His friends, that Christ paid the debt to justice, and taught us by His example, and drew all things to Himself; it was by this that He wrought our Atonement and Reconciliation with God, "making peace through the blood of His Cross".



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