

THE EVOLUTION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT IN THE  
MEDIÉVAL CHURCH: ANSELM, ABELARD AND AQUINAS

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The doctrine of the atonement has gone through a gradual evolution from the days of Christ. Unlike other major doctrines (e.g. the Trinity, Person of Christ, etc.) the doctrine of the atonement was not the subject of any major controversy in the councils of the Early Church. Thus there were no official declarations from the major ecumenical councils on the specifics of the doctrine. As a result, as Quinn observes, “the history of theological reflection on [the doctrine of the atonement] is richly pluralistic.”<sup>1</sup>

Most Early Church thinkers held to some form of the ransom theory of the atonement. This theory emphasized the battle fought between God and Satan. Warfare, slavery, and freedom were the dominant themes. Adam and Eve fell into the bondage and control of Satan because of their sin. Their original sin was passed on to the rest of humanity, putting all human beings under the oppression of Satan and sin. Jesus died on the cross as a ransom payment to set humanity free from Satan. Augustine’s view is typical of this ransom emphasis:

In this redemption, the blood of Christ was given, as it were, as a price for us, by accepting which the devil was not enriched, but bound: that we might be loosened from his bonds, and that he might not with himself involve in the meshes of sins, and so deliver to the destruction of the second and eternal death, any one of those whom

1. Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 283.

Christ, free from all debt, had redeemed by pouring out His own blood unindebtedly.<sup>2</sup>

Many suggested that Jesus paid this ransom to the devil, who rightfully held mankind in captivity. Some even went so far as to suggest that God tricked the devil with Christ's humanity, as a fisherman tricks a fish. Christ's humanity was the bait Satan fell for, not realizing the hook of Christ's divinity, which made it possible for humanity to be set free and impossible for Christ to stay dead. Pope Gregory the Great describes this idea around A.D. 600:

Matching deceit with deceit, Christ frees man by tricking the devil into overstepping his authority. Christ becomes a "fishhook": his humanity is the bait, his divinity the hook, and Leviathan [Satan] is snared. Because the devil is proud, he cannot understand Christ's humility and so believes he tempts and kills a mere man. But in inflicting a sinless man with death, the devil loses his rights over man from his "excess of presumption." Christ conquers the devil's kingdom of sin, liberating captives from the devil's tyranny. Order is reinstated when man returns to serve God, his true master.<sup>3</sup>

The ransom theory was the dominant theory of the Church until Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109) wrote *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm expounded the satisfaction theory of the atonement. This theory taught that Christ died on the cross as a substitute to satisfy God's justice. Anselm appears to have single-handedly changed the focus of thinking about the atonement from the battle, slavery, and freedom motif to the legal image of justice. Throughout the Middle Ages after Anselm, the satisfaction theory became the prevailing theory with minor adjustments.

After Anselm, Peter Abelard (1079–1142) promoted the exemplary theory of the atonement, in which Christ died as the supreme example of God's love. The exemplary theory was immediately challenged and rejected as heresy by the Roman Catholic authorities. It appears that Anselm's theory had become so entrenched in Roman Catholicism in such a short period of

2. Augustine, "On the Trinity," 13.15.19.

3. As quoted in Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 323.

time that any challenges were deemed anathema. Thomas Aquinas (1227–1274) combined the theories represented above in a more comprehensive account of the atonement, but the satisfaction theory overshadowed the ransom theory and his inclusion of the exemplary theory appears to be in a severely truncated version.

Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas have contributed greatly to the doctrine of the atonement. What were these contributions? Did their contemporaries (or future theologians) misunderstand them? How have these misunderstandings affected the history of the doctrine of the atonement? The thesis of this article is that we can see an evolution of belief rather than a rejection and substitution of belief. This is important because the idea that each person rejected the previously held understanding of the doctrine of the cross in favor of his own theory led to the “single theory” mindset which has had serious ramifications to this day. Gustaf Aulen argues for the ransom theory, liberals demand the moral influence theory, and conservatives promote the penal substitution theory as the only true understanding of what Christ did on the cross. However, if what we see is not a subtraction, but rather an evolution of the doctrine of the cross, we do not have to reject the competing theories unless they are unscriptural. If Anselm simply made minor corrections to the ransom theory, adding his satisfaction component to better understand the cross, and if Abelard maintained both the ransom theory and the satisfaction theory, but also made his unique contribution of moral influence, then we see an evolution of the doctrine rather than an adversarial competition. If these men are seen as enriching the doctrine rather than taking away from it, the modern liberal view, Aulen’s *Christus Victor*, and any other single-theory position would be seen as truncating rather than liberating the theological enterprise. The evolution of the doctrine may not always yield good fruit, but if the concept of a multidimensional understanding of the doctrine of the cross can be found in the Bible, we will benefit from it by rejecting any single theory as being exclusive in favor of a rich, multifaceted understanding of the cross. An examination of Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas will

help us to see if this evolutionary understanding of the doctrine of the atonement is true.

### *Anselm*

Anselm of Canterbury was the first of the great scholastic doctors. He is famous for his ontological argument for the existence of God. His greatest influence on Christianity comes from his satisfaction theory explained in his book *Cur Deus Homo* (*Why God Became Man*). In this treatise, he revised the ransom theory and added the idea of satisfaction in a formula based on the feudal system of his day. Anselm has been criticized for throwing out the ransom theory completely,<sup>4</sup> adding the illogical and immoral view of satisfaction,<sup>5</sup> and, with his feudal perspective of honor, relying more on contemporary life and logic than the Bible.<sup>6</sup> Are these accusations legitimate?

Anselm did not throw out the ransom theory; he simply revised it. He agreed that humankind had sold itself into the slavery of the devil.<sup>7</sup> He believed that people are rescued from the enemy through Christ's death. He even embraced Christ's death as a ransom payment for people's sins. But he did not agree with the elaborate illustrations of the ransom theory such as that of Augustine who saw the atonement as a mousetrap set to catch the devil.<sup>8</sup> God did not owe the devil anything, because both the devil and humans belong to God. It was right for humans to be tormented by the devil, but it was not right for the devil to do it. God used the devil to punish people in their sin, but the devil had no rights over them. "For he [Satan] did not do it [punish people] by God's orders, but only with the permission of God's

4. Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 84–92; McDonald, *Atonement*, 175. McDonald states, "The only agreement between Abelard and Anselm is that both are equally strong in repudiation of the ransom theory."

5. Rashdall, *Idea of Atonement*, 360.

6. See Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 44.

7. Anselm used Scripture very sparsely, but from the content of his work, it is evident that he relied on several passages for his revised ransom theory including 1 John 5:18; Col 1:13–14; 2:15 and Matt 20:28.

8. Sykes, *Sacrifice and Redemption*, 130.

incomprehensible wisdom, which orders even evil things for good.”<sup>9</sup> The ransom is not paid to the devil; it is paid to God.<sup>10</sup> The ransom did overcome the devil and by this defeat, brought honor to God.<sup>11</sup> Colossians 2:15 brings out this defeat of the demonic forces and honor given to God, achieved through the cross: “When he had disarmed the rulers and authorities, he made a public display of them, having triumphed over them through him.”

Anselm’s greatest contribution to the doctrine of the atonement and his chief emphasis in *Cur Deus Homo* was the idea of satisfaction. All of humanity owes God absolute obedience to his will. When people sin they dishonor God and so they must either be punished or give satisfaction for dishonoring God. Anything a person does is already owed to God and so that person is not able to pay the satisfaction due God. Anselm also said, “It is not enough for someone who violates another’s honor to restore the honor, unless he makes some kind of restitution that will please him who was dishonored, according to the extent of the injury and dishonor.”<sup>12</sup> He says that the payment for the sins of the world would have to be “something greater than everything that exists, except God.”<sup>13</sup> The only possible satisfaction is God himself. But, “No one ought to make it except man; otherwise man does not make satisfaction.”<sup>14</sup> Only God can make the satisfaction and only humans should make the satisfaction, so Anselm shows the necessity of the God-man. Christ’s death is so good it is “more loveable than sins are hateful,”<sup>15</sup> and so is sufficient “for the sins of the whole world, and infinitely more.”<sup>16</sup> It would not be right for God to simply express mercy to the sinner without demanding satisfaction, because this would detract from his justice. With Christ’s death on the cross God’s justice is

9. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 108.

10. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 181.

11. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 161.

12. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 119.

13. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 150.

14. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 151.

15. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 164.

16. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 176.

satisfied, as Rom 3:26 says, “so that he would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.”

Some have said that Anselm’s satisfaction theory is illogical because he says it is necessary in the sense that it is the only way humanity could be forgiven.<sup>17</sup> But if it is necessary, how could God be free? Later Aquinas and others would state that God could have saved humans another way if he had chosen to. Anselm answered this question. Christ was under no compulsion to die for humanity—he was perfectly free. “But because (as has been said) the world could not be saved in any other way, he steadfastly determined to suffer death rather than leave the world unsaved.”<sup>18</sup> Anselm is correct. There is no need to conjecture other possible ways for salvation. The Bible gives no indication that any other way was possible, and in fact says in Heb 9:22, “Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

Others have argued that the satisfaction theory “is based on an analogy with Germanic law and is colored by a feudal notion of honor that is not worthy of God.”<sup>19</sup> Collier captures Anselm’s idea of honor well:

This theory is built on the definition of sin as the refusal to render to God what is due to Him. What is due Him is honor, given by subjection of one’s will to God’s Will. A creature who sins refuses God His due, detracts from His honor and insults Him. There arises an obligation to restore the honor and to undo the insult, and that is *satisfaction*.<sup>20</sup>

First, of all it must be asked, “Is there something wrong with making doctrine contemporary as long as it fits the categories of Scripture? Honor was something the people in eleventh century feudal England could relate to. The use of the idea of honor seemed to help them understand the atonement better. Second, the accusation that honor is not biblical must be challenged.

17. Oxenham, *Catholic Doctrine*, 173. He says, “But the statement of a *necessity* for the Incarnation is obviously inconsistent with making it also a free exhibition of love.”

18. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 117.

19. Cited in Hannah, “Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement,” 339.

20. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 44.

Revelation 5:13 says, “And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, ‘To him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever.’” All of God’s creation is called to give him honor and glory. Isaiah 43:7 says that the reason God created human beings was for his glory (see also 1 Pet 2:9). God’s creation gives him glory and honor by praising him (Heb 13:15), loving him (Mark 12:28–33) and obeying him (Rom 12:2). Sin dishonors God (Rom 3:23) and demands punishment (Rom 6:23). Christ became men and women’s substitute (a concept seen more clearly in Aquinas and pre-figured in the Old Testament sacrifices). So the argument that Anselm is too dependent on the culture of his day rather than the Bible is inaccurate.

It is true that Anselm uses very little Scripture and seems to be overly focused on the rational side of the atonement. However, this was his stated purpose: “For you prove that God was necessarily made man, in such a way that . . . you would satisfy not only Jews, but even pagans, by reason alone.”<sup>21</sup> And Anselm is not afraid to resort to mystery rather than forcing rational arguments where they do not fit: “Who, then, will dare even to imagine that human understanding is able to discern how wisely, how wonderfully, such an unsearchable deed [the incarnation] was done?”<sup>22</sup>

Anselm’s satisfaction theory was not fully satisfactory. The penal substitution of the reformers was not fully developed in Anselm. The doctrine of atonement was still in progress. The biggest deficiency in Anselm’s theory of atonement was in his application; this shortage would plague theologians until Martin Luther. Anselm believed the benefits of the atonement only fully satisfied past sins. Once a Christian received the forgiveness provided for through the cross, he maintained his forgiveness for subsequent sins if he was “willing to make due satisfaction and

21. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 183.

22. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 167.

then amend [his] conduct.”<sup>23</sup> The idea of a person making his or her own satisfaction through penance would be more fully developed in Aquinas, but even here hints of Pelagian influence can be seen. Anselm did not emphasize penance and at times seemed to contradict the idea of penance. He asked the fictitious Boso: “Tell me, then, what will you pay to God for your sin?” Boso replied with the standard understanding of works righteousness: “Repentance, a contrite and humble heart, fastings and all sorts of bodily labors, mercy in giving and forgiving, and obedience.” But Anselm pointed out that people already owe these things to God and therefore they cannot be payment for one’s debt of sin.<sup>24</sup> He then explained the concept of satisfaction in the cross. How does this reply coincide with what Anselm said later about penance after baptism? Anselm was an original thinker but he was also a man of his times. There was a double sense of satisfaction, which only became more elaborate and entrenched in scholastic theology until the Reformers rescued the application of the doctrine of the atonement from the clutches of penance.

### *Abelard*

Peter Abelard was a unique figure in the twelfth century. More is known of Abelard’s personal life than of any other figure in the Middle Ages because he wrote an autobiography (unusual for that time). He fell in love with a teenaged girl, Heloise, whom he tutored. She became pregnant, so they were married privately for the sake of the legitimacy of the child. Heloise’s uncle hired some men to castrate Abelard. He left humiliated and became a monk, while Heloise became a nun. They wrote love letters to each other throughout their lives. Her poems are still published today and considered “classics of medieval love poetry.”<sup>25</sup> This excursion into the love life of Abelard might seem to be a digression, until one understands his doctrine of the atonement, which exalts God’s love over his need for satisfaction.

23. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 167.

24. Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 136.

25. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 326.

Olson and others have accused Abelard's view of the atonement of being subjective and a rejection of Anselm's satisfaction theory.<sup>26</sup> It supposedly implies a denial of original sin.<sup>27</sup> Richard Swineburne claims, "Abelard's exemplary theory of the atonement, that Christ's life and death work to remove our sins by inspiring us to do penance and good acts, contains no objective transaction."<sup>28</sup> Both conservatives and liberals pit Abelard against Anselm. William G. T. Shedd stated, "To the theory of Anselm . . . stands in the very sharpest contrast the theory of Abelard."<sup>29</sup>

Bernard of Clairvaux sent a letter to Pope Innocent III seeking Abelard's condemnation. He claimed that Abelard's view of the atonement made Christ's death a mere example of his love; its Pelagian tendencies denied original sin and "rendered Christ's atoning work unnecessary for our salvation."<sup>30</sup> These accusations imply that Abelard taught that it is possible for people to make themselves worthy of salvation on their own. Pope Innocent III agreed with a synod of bishops in Paris who condemned Abelard and so issued an edict against him. Abelard went to appear before the Pope in hope of clearing himself of the condemnation, but he died en route. Was Abelard guilty of these charges? Was his view of the atonement purely subjective? Did he completely reject the ransom theory and satisfaction theory of the atonement? A thorough look at his commentary on Rom 3:19–27, where his most extensive writing on the doctrine of the atonement is found, will answer these questions.

26. Gustafson, "Princell and the Waldenstromian View," 206, says, "Peter Abelard . . . reacted to this objective view [Anselmian] and, in contrast, proposed a subjective view of the atonement, emphasizing man's response to Christ."

27. Dilling, "Atonement and Human Sacrifice," 31, accuses Abelard of holding a "Pelagian view of sin" which generated a theory "that enables man to help himself."

28. As quoted in Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 282.

29. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 2:154. He also said, "Abelard denies the doctrine of satisfaction" (2:155); Suggit, "Freedom to Be," 31–37.

30. Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement," 293.

Abelard began with scrupulous commentary on the passage in Romans. He showed how this text was written to refute the Jews who trusted in the law and external observances for their salvation. The law justifies no one. The law reveals sin and renders everyone completely without excuse. But Christ became a human being and suffered, demonstrating perfect love. Later Abelard would elaborate on this exemplary idea, but it is important to notice what he said immediately following his quotation of John 15:13. John 15:13 does commend a “moral theory” of the atonement, saying, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” But Abelard then commented, “So we, through his grace, are joined to him as closely as to our neighbor by an indissoluble bond of affection . . . A righteousness, I say, imparted to all the faithful in the higher part of their being.”<sup>31</sup> Abelard seems to be advocating a union with Christ that takes place due to an impartation of righteousness. If this is what Abelard is referring to, then his view of the atonement must be seen as objective, rather than subjective. Atonement is something Christ accomplishes in the believer by his death. Alister McGrath concurs that the exemplary quality of Christ’s death is merely a secondary consequence of redemption in Abelard’s thought. He rejects Rashdall and others who have turned Abelard’s theory into a subjective, moral theory alone. He states:

Abailard is an exemplarist if, and only if, it can be shown that he understands Christ to be our example, *through whose imitation we are redeemed*—whereas it is clear that he understands Christ to be our example in the sense that, *because we are redeemed by him, we now wish to imitate him.*<sup>32</sup>

It appears that Abelard borrowed from the idea of mystical union in the Eastern Orthodox view of the atonement and combined it with the western satisfaction theory in an objective theory of the atonement. His theory cannot be accused of being

31. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 278.

32. McGrath, “Moral Theory,” 209. Evangelicals also have wrongly accused Abelard of being entirely subjective. See Walters, “Atonement in Medieval Theology,” 245.

subjective. There is a subjective element, which he discussed in the next section, but it is clearly objective in nature. In fact, though he stated the atonement is “impartially extended over all”<sup>33</sup> he spoke of the elect being delivered from the torments of the devil.<sup>34</sup> Quinn comments from this section that Abelard taught “Christ redeemed only the elect.”<sup>35</sup> If this is a reasonable interpretation of Abelard, then he was teaching the doctrine of definite atonement, which is certainly objective in nature.

Abelard did not entirely reject the legal aspects of the satisfaction theory. In his commentary he went on to describe that believers are justified freely, not based on their previous merit, but rather on God’s grace—the God who first loved us. Only those who believe are propitiated or reconciled to God by the death of Christ. He was commenting on Rom 3:24–25a which states: “Being justified as a gift by his grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith.” For Abelard “in his blood” meant “by his death.”<sup>36</sup> Only then did he speak of God showing forth his love to us “to convince us how much we ought to love him who ‘spared not even his own Son’ for us.”<sup>37</sup> Abelard clearly did not reject the legal idea of justification; he simply kept it in the context of God’s love.

It is helpful to know that the medieval understanding of justification did not separate it from sanctification. Anselm believed that righteousness was imparted rather than imputed to the believer, which both justified and sanctified him. Justification and sanctification were not divided until the Reformation. Martin Luther sought to hold justification as far away from sanctification as possible, though it is not true to say he had no doctrine of sanctification. John Calvin sought to keep justification and sanctification as close as possible without confusing the two. There is an evolution of the doctrine of salvation as well as

33. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 278.

34. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 280.

35. Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 285.

36. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 279.

37. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 279.

the doctrine of the atonement. But Abelard seems to have made a major leap in his doctrine of the atonement.

After his comments on Rom 3:19–26, Abelard proposed a question, “If the Lord could forgive sin and set people free from the devil before the cross, why was the cross necessary?” In answering this question he first showed the deficiency of the ransom theory. He revealed by way of illustration that the devil did not acquire the right to hold humans in bondage. He said that if a slave (humankind) leaves his master, the master has every right to get the slave back. And if another slave (the devil) seduces the first slave (humankind) to leave his master, the seducer is more guilty than the seduced and certainly has gained no rights over the slave from the master. He suggests that God gave permission or assigned the devil to torment the human race. Notice Abelard did not reject the ransom theory wholesale.<sup>38</sup> He simply took away the illogical and unbiblical notions. There was a ransom, but the price was paid to God, not the devil.<sup>39</sup> D. E. Luscombe points out that in Abelard’s commentaries on Ephesians and 1 Corinthians the elect are liberated from captivity under the devil through Christ’s battle with the devil. He quotes Abelard saying, *at vero miserum est, imo miserrimum, creatorem suum relinquere et diabolo servire. A qua servitute sive captivitate nos Christus liberavit.*<sup>40</sup> He adjusted the ransom theory, but did not in any way reject it.

After his reconstruction of the ransom theory, Abelard asked why the passion was necessary since God had already remitted sins in the past. Abelard used the Virgin Mary (he did not hold to the immaculate conception of Mary) and Mary Magdalene as examples. Why was it necessary that the Son of God “should take upon him our flesh and endure such numerous fastings, insults, scourgings and spittings, and finally that most bitter and

38. Contra Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, 2:155; Walters “Atonement in Medieval Theology,” 240.

39. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 283.

40. As quoted in Luscombe, *School of Peter Abelard*, 149. A translation of the Latin would be “While in truth he is poor, indeed wretched, to abandon his creator and to serve the devil, from which slavery or captivity Christ has freed us.”

disgraceful death upon the cross, enduring even the cross of punishment with the wicked?”<sup>41</sup> He then asked in similar fashion, “How did the death of his innocent Son so please God the Father that through it he should be reconciled to us—to us who by our sinful acts have done the very things for which our innocent Lord was put to death?”<sup>42</sup> He gave the solution to these perplexing questions in the third part of this section on Romans 3. Before we get to his solution it is important to note the things Abelard brought up in the questions. He believed the cross was a punishment. Anselm never said that Christ was punished for humanity. He said either man can be punished or God can be satisfied through the death of Christ. There is a type of substitution seen in Anselm, but not penal substitution. Abelard embraced penal substitution in claiming Christ’s death was a punishment. This idea of penal substitution would be expounded by the Reformers and is in agreement with Isaiah 53, which prophecies the death of the Messiah. Isaiah 53:4–6 declares:

Surely our griefs he himself bore, and our sorrows he carried; yet we ourselves esteemed him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was pierced through for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the chastening for our wellbeing fell upon him, and by his scourging we are healed. All of us like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; but the LORD has caused the iniquity of us all to fall on him. [NASB 1995]

It is clear Abelard referred to Isaiah 53 because he asked how the Father could be pleased by the death of his innocent son, referring to Isa 53:10: “But the LORD was pleased to crush him, putting him to grief.” In his comments on Rom 4:25 Abelard said:

In two ways he is said to have died for our faults: first, because the faults for which he died were ours, and we committed the sins for which he bore the punishment; secondly, that by dying he might remove our sins, that is, the punishment of our sins, introducing us into paradise at the price of his own death, and might, by the display

41. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 282.

42. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 283.

of grace such that he himself said “Greater love no man hath,” draw our minds away from the will to sin and enkindle in them the highest love of himself.<sup>43</sup>

Abelard clearly taught a penal substitutionary atonement along with the revised ransom theory, union with Christ (notice the idea of reconciliation in the questions above), and his own contribution of the exemplarist theory.

The ultimate solution to the questions Abelard proposed reveals his emphasis concerning the atonement, that is, what he felt was the most important aspect of the atonement, not the sole motif to the exclusion of all others. He said that by the example of the incarnation and death of Christ we are in some way “bound” to him by love, “with the result that our hearts should be enkindled by such a gift of divine grace, and true charity should not now shrink from enduring anything for him.”<sup>44</sup> He went on to say that our redemption, which he also called a “deeper affection in us,” causes us to be a “greater lover of the Lord,” “frees us from slavery to sin” and “wins for us the true liberty of sons of God.”<sup>45</sup> It is clear that Abelard saw sanctification as a part of the benefits of the cross, in fact, the most important benefit.

Abelard finished his commentary on this section by discussing the final verse, Rom 3:27. In this section he discussed the importance of the sacraments. Can one be saved without baptism? His answer was yes, if 1) the person was uninformed about baptism, and 2) the person purely loved God. Fairweather comments in a footnote, “Abailard’s general outlook keeps him from understanding the full significance of the sacraments as means of grace.”<sup>46</sup> In this final section Abelard seemed to say that the appropriation of God’s grace is not so much through the sacraments, but rather through faith, which produces love and includes repentance.

43. As quoted in Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement,” 290.

44. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 283.

45. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 284.

46. Abelard, “Exposition of Romans,” 287.

Abelard held to several theories of the atonement. He was not completely clear on the intricacies, but seemed to embrace a penal substitutionary version of satisfaction along with an imparted righteousness or sanctification. His unique contribution, the exemplarist theory, had an objective and subjective component. Objectively he believed God's love was imparted to the soul when faith was expressed. His understanding of "impartation" seemed to include the idea of imputation, though he never used this terminology. Subjectively the believer would see the love of Christ in a new way, which compelled him or her to live out this love that was imparted. He held to a mystical union or reconciliation that somehow infuses God's love and encourages love to grow in the believer's heart. He also accepted the ransom theory, in which Christ's death defeated the devil and freed the believer from the slavery of sin.

The only deficiency in Abelard's theory of the atonement was his lack of separating justification from sanctification. His appropriation was not bogged down with the sacraments, but rather elevated faith (though he did not reject a place for the sacraments). One might complain that his emphasis should have been on satisfaction rather than the subjective element of an exemplarist theory of atonement. But is this true? What is the chief end of humanity? It is to glorify God and enjoy him forever together with the rest of the body of Christ. Anselm's satisfaction theory is really an essential means to this end, not the end itself. Abelard's view seems to come closer to the end. He says, "Yet everyone becomes more righteous—by which we mean a greater lover of the Lord—after the Passion of Christ than before, since a realized gift inspires greater love than one which is only hoped for."<sup>47</sup>

### *Aquinas*

Aquinas brought in the full force of the scholastic method and presented the most thorough understanding of the atonement. His theory can be described as eclectic, though he did have his own

47. Abelard, "Exposition of Romans," 284.

contributions. He embraced a revised ransom theory and borrowed from both Anselm and Abelard. He contributed the most exhaustive understanding of the means of appropriating the benefits of the atonement. His view was more thorough than those previously discussed, but, it was also the most confusing. It had serious deficiencies as well. First, Aquinas's eclecticism will be discussed, and then his theory or system will be examined in a brief overview. Finally his elaborate means of appropriation will be explained and critiqued.

Unlike Anselm,<sup>48</sup> Aquinas did not believe the Passion of Christ was the only way God could have provided redemption. If God wished to simply will people's forgiveness, he could have done so. But the most advantageous way for humans to be redeemed was by the cross. In explaining why, Aquinas revealed his eclecticism:

A means is the more appropriate for an end, as it brings together more assets towards the end. Now because man was set free through Christ's passion, many things having to do with man's salvation over and above liberation from sin also converged.

First, man could thus see how much God loved him, and so would be aroused to love him. In this the perfection of his salvation consists. Paul therefore writes, *God shows his love for us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

Second, he gave us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and of other virtues which his passion revealed and which are necessary for man's salvation. Peter notes that *Christ has suffered for us, leaving you an example that you may follow in his footsteps.*

Third, by his passion, Christ not only freed man from sin, but merited for him the grace of justification, and the glory of beatitude as we shall see.

Fourth, man thus feels a greater obligation to refrain from sin as Paul says, *You were bought with a great price, so glorify and bear God in your body.*

Fifth, in this way a greater dignity accrues to man. Man had been overcome and deceived by the devil. But it is a man also who overcomes the devil. Man had merited death; a man by dying would

48. Anselm seems to be more Biblical on this point.

conquer death. *Thanks be to God*, Paul writes, *who has given us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.*

It was therefore better for us to have been delivered by Christ's passion than by God's will alone.<sup>49</sup>

In this lengthy passage the ransom theory can be seen in the first and last passages. People are liberated from their sin; the devil is overcome; death is conquered; and victory is won through the death of Christ. Abelard's influence can be seen in the exemplary theory here promoted in the second and third paragraphs. The example of Christ's love moves people to love God. Christ's passion also revealed an example of obedience, humility, etc. for men and women to follow. Finally Anselm's influence can be seen in the satisfaction theory promoted in the fourth paragraph. Christ merited justification and the ultimate end of seeing God in heaven.

Aquinas presented a series of questions with potential answers both pro and con, and finally presented his own view. It will be helpful to divide up his thoughts into the categories given above: ransom, example, and satisfaction. Like Anselm and Abelard he did not reject the ransom theory; he simply modified it. Though the devil did not gain a right over humans by tempting them into sin, God delivered humanity into the bondage of Satan as well as sin. Aquinas was careful to point out that this deliverance over to Satan was by God's permission, because "the devil was not so strong that he could harm men without God's permission."<sup>50</sup> Christ's death defeated the devil by "overthrowing the pride of the devil" through "the lowliness of his passion."<sup>51</sup> Christ then paid the ransom price to God, making it possible for people to be set free. When Christ's passion is applied to one's life through faith, love, and the sacraments, a person can "protect himself against the assaults of the enemy and escape eternal ruin and death."<sup>52</sup> Aquinas, like all of the medieval theologians for that matter, was not clear as to what this

49. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 46,3.

50. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,2.

51. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 46,4.

52. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,2.

protection entailed. It seems to be more than simply protection from hell. It does seem to at least include protection from being deceived by the devil, “even in the time of Antichrist.”<sup>53</sup> However this protection against deception is not automatic and can be neglected.

Aquinas also embraced the subjective aspect of Abelard’s exemplary theory. Christ’s passion “stimulates love.”<sup>54</sup> Aquinas’s favorite, or at least most-quoted, verse in regard to Christ’s example was Rom 5:8, “But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.” Abelard’s most quoted verse in regards to the exemplarist theory was John 15:13, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.” Another verse used by Aquinas was 1 Pet 2:21, “For you have been called for this purpose, since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in his steps.” Aquinas described the pain and suffering Christ experienced in some detail, and divided it into two types of pain: sensible pain which is derived from bodily injury, and inner pain. Death by crucifixion is very excruciating. The nails pierced the hands and feet at junctures where highly sensitive nerve endings are located. Death did not come quickly.<sup>55</sup> The inner agony came from all the sins of mankind being placed on Jesus. Isaiah 53:11 says, “As a result of the anguish of his soul, he will see it and be satisfied; by his knowledge the Righteous One, my Servant, will justify the many, as he will bear their iniquities.”

Aquinas referred to Ps 22:2, which, because of the context of Ps 22:1, may be a reference to Christ’s experience of being forsaken by God while on the cross. Ps 22:1–2 expresses the suffering of David and is a prophecy of the torture of Christ: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Far from my deliverance are the words of my groaning. O my God, I cry by

53. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,2.

54. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,1.

55. Also, though Aquinas did not mention it, asphyxiation took place because the only way of relief was to push up on the nail through the feet in order to breathe.

day, but you do not answer; and by night, but I have no rest.” Jesus quoted v. 1 while on the cross in Mark 15:34. Next, Aquinas declared that Christ suffered maximum pain, greater than what a normal human would suffer. He claimed that Christ’s body was made in such a way that his sense of touch was more acute than that of other people. The intensity of his sadness was also greater because of his purity. The depth of what Christ went through in his passion stimulates love from his people.

Finally Aquinas saw the death of Christ as a satisfaction of God’s justice. He said:

Christ’s passion delivered us from the debt of punishment in two ways. First of all, directly, for the passion of Christ was adequate, and more than adequate, to satisfy for the sins of all mankind. Once sufficient satisfaction has been made, the debt of punishment ceases. Second, indirectly, for Christ’s passion is the cause of the forgiveness of sin, and sin is the basis for the debt of punishment.<sup>56</sup>

Like Abelard, Aquinas held to a penal substitutionary satisfaction.<sup>57</sup> Adam sinned and became God’s enemy under God’s wrath.<sup>58</sup> Romans 5:9–10 states:

Much more then, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from the wrath of God through him. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.

God hates both sin and sinners; therefore he must punish sin. Christ’s passion removes sin and appeases God as a “most acceptable sacrifice to God.”<sup>59</sup> Christ becomes a substitute for humans. Aquinas said that Christ died so that by “bearing the penalty we owed, he might free us from the sentence of death, in the way that anyone would be freed from a penalty he owed if another person undertook the penalty for him.”<sup>60</sup> Christ’s death

56. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,3.

57. Contra Stump, “Atonement according to Aquinas,” 64–72, who claims that Aquinas did not hold to a penal or a substitutionary atonement.

58. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,4.

59. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,4.

60. Stump, “Atonement according to Aquinas,” 65.

reconciles people to God, making them one with God.<sup>61</sup> Ephesians 2:13 says, “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” Both Aquinas and Abelard used far more Scripture than Anselm in discussing their beliefs.

Aquinas believed that the extent of Christ’s death was potentially universal. One might ask how one man’s death could be sufficient for all the sins of the world. Aquinas answered by revealing the greatness of Christ. He said, “A man effectively atones for an offence when he offers to the one who has been offended something which he accepts as matching or outweighing the former offence.”<sup>62</sup> Christ’s sacrifice outweighs all the sins of the world because his love was so great a love, the life he laid down was of magnanimous dignity (that of both God and man), and the pain he suffered was so extensive. Christ’s passion was not only sufficient; it was a “superabundant atonement for the sins of mankind.”<sup>63</sup> First John 2:2 says, “He himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world.” His death even covered the sins of those who killed him. Aquinas concludes, “The dignity of Christ’s flesh should not be reckoned merely from the nature of flesh, but according to the person who assumed it; it was, in fact, the flesh of God, and on this account, of infinite value.”<sup>64</sup>

In his thoroughness, Aquinas gives the fullest expression of how one appropriates the benefits of the atonement. Christ’s passion has to be applied before it is efficacious. “This is done [Christ’s passion applied] by baptism and penance and the other sacraments, which derive their power from the passion of Christ.”<sup>65</sup> Faith is also necessary, not a dead faith that can tolerate sin, but a “faith that is vivified by love.”<sup>66</sup> The only passage of Scripture he quoted in this section was Rom 3:25, which brings in faith, but says nothing about sacraments: “Whom God

61. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 48,3.

62. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 48,2.

63. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 48,2.

64. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 48,2.

65. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,1.

66. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,1.

displayed publicly as a propitiation in his blood through faith.” Later he said we must apply the benefit “through faith and love and the sacraments of faith.”<sup>67</sup> In another place he made the same statement: “Provided we share in his passion by faith, love, and the sacraments of faith.”<sup>68</sup> By “love” he seems to mean good works. He said in the same context, “By the performance of good works, the patriarchs merited entry into the heavenly kingdom through faith in Christ’s passion.”<sup>69</sup>

At times he exalted baptism and the eucharist as the chief sacraments, because through them the power of Christ’s passion is “conjoined to us.”<sup>70</sup> But at other times he seemed to exalt penance. Baptism takes care of all sins up to one’s baptism, but it can only be applied once. Any sins committed after baptism must be satisfied through penance. He said, “It is therefore right that those who commit sin after baptism should be made to conform to the suffering Christ by experiencing some penalty or suffering in their own persons.”<sup>71</sup> This punishment is not equal to what the person deserves to pay because “Christ’s satisfaction works along with it.”<sup>72</sup> Aquinas believed that penance was necessary for salvation, not absolutely (i.e. like grace and baptism), but “on a supposition” for those who are in sin:

It is necessary for the sinner’s salvation that sin be taken away from him; which cannot be done without the sacrament of Penance, wherein the power of Christ’s Passion operates through the priest’s absolution and the acts of the penitent, who cooperates with grace unto the destruction of his sin.<sup>73</sup>

Aquinas also believed in purgatory, where one is punished for those sins for which satisfaction was not made in this life.

The main deficiency in Aquinas’ theory of atonement is his view of penance. Penance consists of contrition, confession, acts

67. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,3.

68. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,5.

69. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,5.

70. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 62,5.

71. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,3.

72. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, 3a. 49,3.

73. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New Advent), 3. 84,5.

of penance and absolution. In Tertullian's day, acts of penance included wearing sackcloth and ashes, fasting, self-humiliation, self-prostration, self-chastisement and self-torture. "Through the compensation of this penance, the Lord has determined to award pardon, to placate His wrath, and to 'expunge eternal punishments.'"<sup>74</sup> In the thirteenth century and until the Reformation, acts of penance were more or less severe, but always considered to be punishment for sin.

Ronald Frost refers to Aquinas's view of grace as the "cooperative model of faith" in which Aquinas embraced a "progressive justification."<sup>75</sup> Roger Olson says that accusations of semi-Pelagianism are unwarranted because of Aquinas's monergistic view of salvation.<sup>76</sup> Aquinas was not Pelagian because he says people's works cooperate with God's grace, but it seems semi-Pelagianism is a warranted accusation because of Aquinas's view of penance.<sup>77</sup> When penance is required for reconciliation with God, and a person's works of penance help bring satisfaction, then that person's works cooperate with God's grace to bring about salvation. This is semi-Pelagianism. However, a belief in monergism does not save a sinner, trust in Christ's work of atonement does.

It would appear that Aquinas's doctrine of the atonement did not substantially add anything to the previous views, except that he did bring more clarity to the concept of penal substitution, declaring that punishment was exacted on Christ in our behalf. Like Anselm and Abelard, he did not reject the contributions to the doctrine of the cross that had gone before, but he did explain in more detail what was latent in the other views as far as appropriation of the benefits of the cross are concerned. Unfortunately,

74. Strehle, "Extent of the Atonement," 7.

75. Frost, "Aristotle's Ethics," 229.

76. Olson, *Story of Christian Theology*, 347.

77. Walters, "The Atonement in Medieval Theology," 262, correctly identifies the deficiency in both Anselm and Aquinas stating, "By leaving an opening, however, for the necessary appropriation of the atonement through the sacraments, Anselm's satisfaction theory—especially as it was elaborated by Aquinas and integrated into medieval piety—left people in a similar position of believing that they were required to add to the work of Christ."

his explanation led to a thorough merit-based system of penance; the Reformers would correct this.

### *Conclusion*

An evolution of the doctrine of the atonement is evident in the late Middle Ages. Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas put substance and clarity that was missing in the first ten centuries into the doctrine of the atonement. Anselm was the first to critique the ransom theory, getting rid of the excesses that were a result of a lack of serious attention to this doctrine. He systematized the idea of satisfaction, where Christ's death is seen as a substitute for the sinner's punishment. Abelard contributed his exemplarist theory with both an objective and subjective component to it. Christ's death imparts God's love into the believer's heart and gives the believer an example to follow, which brings a change in the person's life. Aquinas synthesized the different theories and refined the understanding of how a person appropriates Christ's satisfaction through the sacraments.

There were no more major contributions to the doctrine of the atonement until the Reformation. Peter Lombard embraced much of Abelard's thought. Duns Scotus refined Aquinas' ideas of penance even further. But no major breakthrough came before Martin Luther and John Calvin. Luther and Calvin were heavily indebted to Anselm, Aquinas and, to a lesser extent, Abelard. They both held to the satisfaction theory with penal substitution. Luther emphasized the ransom theory and Calvin promoted the satisfaction theory, but they both rejected penance as a means of appropriating the work of the cross. With Luther and Calvin, justification and sanctification were finally separated. Salvation was by grace through faith in the finished work of Christ alone. Luther neglected sanctification somewhat but championed justification. Calvin saw sanctification as a benefit of the atonement, but not as identical with justification. The evolution of the doctrine of the atonement made great strides with Anselm, Abelard and Aquinas, especially revealing its multifaceted nature. The church today is greatly indebted to their efforts and those of the Reformers.

Unfortunately, partially due to a misunderstanding of Anselm and Abelard, many have adopted a “single theory” view of the atonement.<sup>78</sup> Liberals have reacted to the evangelical understanding of penal substitution and conservatives have reacted to the liberal understanding of the moral influence theory. Neither side seems to understand Abelard, who held to an exemplarist theory incorporating both objective and subjective aspects without rejecting the satisfaction theory or the ransom theory. Many in the Neo-orthodox camp either exalt the exemplarist theory or Aulen’s perspective on the ransom theory, once again not realizing the rich, multi-dimensional nature of the cross. Any attempt to discard the ransom theory, exemplarist theory, or satisfaction theory, including its penal substitutionary aspect, would be a truncating of the rich doctrine of the atonement.

A few have advocated this multidimensional perspective concerning the doctrine of the atonement. Fisher Humphreys, in his book *The Death of Christ*, reveals that there are many models that explain the relationship of Christ’s death and our experience of being forgiven.<sup>79</sup> He says, “No single model can convey all the truth about the meaning of Christ’s death.”<sup>80</sup> This fits our analysis so far, but then he goes on to say, “No model for speaking about God is universally understood.”<sup>81</sup> But if the models are based on Scripture, with explanation from competent teachers and the illumination of the Spirit, they should be capable of being understood universally. He seems to be appealing to a type of relativism due to the culturally bound nature of humanity. After making this initial analysis he goes on to advocate a single view he finds the most satisfactory, called the cruciform

78. After rejecting Abelard because he was the first to introduce ideas embraced by the modern liberal theology of the cross “in opposition to the commercial theory of Anselm,” Walvoord, “Person and Work of Christ: Part VIII,” 303, says, “The only point of view which completely satisfies scriptures bearing on the death of Christ is the substitutional or penal concept of the atonement.”

79. Humphreys, *Death of Christ*, 30.

80. Humphreys, *Death of Christ*, 30.

81. Humphreys, *Death of Christ*, 35.

forgiveness theory.<sup>82</sup> Willem J. van Asselt makes a similar move by calling for “a multi-dimensional approach,” but then advocating the superiority of one view over the others.<sup>83</sup> He concludes his article by stating that the substitution model is more important than the “lower dimensions” because it offers “a more encompassing conceptual space.”<sup>84</sup> From a scriptural standpoint the ransom theory, substitution theory and moral influence theory (Abelard’s presentation rather than the seriously pared liberal view) are equally necessary for our understanding of the phrase “Christ died for us.” H. D. McDonald correctly states, “The atonement of the cross is, then, at once an act of God’s holiness and his love.”<sup>85</sup> Any understanding of the atonement must bring out God’s love, holiness and power. Abelard’s objective presentation of the moral influence theory exalts God’s love. Anselm’s satisfaction theory, especially when the penal aspect is understood, elevates God’s holiness.<sup>86</sup> The ransom theory’s focus on the defeat of Satan brings out God’s power. Christ’s death on the cross is multi-faceted and any attempt to downplay any of the facets does a disservice to the doctrine. The evolution of the doctrine must not be reversed.

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82. Humphreys, *Death of Christ*, 116–35. This view states that the pain the offended person suffers in being wronged is “the most important factor in his forgiveness of the wrongdoer.”

83. Van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement,” 52–67.

84. Van Asselt, “Christ’s Atonement,” 67.

85. McDonald, *Atonement*, 345.

86. McDonald, *Atonement*, 347, says, “There is, then, a right and proper sense in which the atonement of the death of Christ must be regarded as penal. It cannot be otherwise, since the feeling is instinctively that only as sin’s penalty is met can sin’s guilt be removed.”

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