The Historical Origin of Satisfaction Theory

Anselm’s work *Cur Deus Homo* (1098) was the first serious attempt to set forth a comprehensive and systematic doctrine of atonement. His main purpose was to provide an objective doctrine of atonement that would reject, on the one hand, the idea of a forgiveness of sin which would be a bare remission of penalty; and on the other, an optimistic conception of the human’s capacity to perform all that is needed.1 According to Anselm sin offends the honor of God, because sin is in essence the failure to give God what is due to God.2 Sin also mars the beauty of the universe by disrupting the order and beauty of creation.3 In order for God’s honor to be kept intact, two possibilities exist: either a balancing of scales through retributive punishment, or satisfaction that remits the penalty through a means other than punishment.4 Because God is holy, human guilt necessitates a sacrifice that is undefiled. However, humankind is unable to offer a sufficient sacrifice because there exists no human without sin. In addition, only the penalty of death is sufficient to restore God’s honor, because it is the greatest possible satisfaction.5 A finite being’s greatest compensation or satisfaction are at best finite and cannot restore the eternal dignity of God.6 Atonement, therefore needs to be made by an eternal being who is greater than anything other but God, but who is simultaneously truly human, since humans have to compensate for their own sins. The only person who can make such a satisfaction is a God-man who partakes in human nature, but is not sinful.7

Anselm’s doctrine shows similarities with the feudal philosophy of his time and with Neo-Platonism. God is depicted as a feudal overlord bound above all things to safeguard His honor and to demand adequate satisfaction for any infringement of it, while the universe is viewed as a hierarchic constellation of beauty that finds its prototype in divine nature. These influences cause him to focus upon an abstract code of honour that functions apart from God’s being. In his book *Jesus Kurios*, Bram van Beek rightly criticizes the rational nature of Anselm’s discourse. He notes that Anselm emphasizes the objective reality of guilt, but the relational aspect of reconciliation is underemphasized. Surely over and against God’s wrath as an emotion stands not only rational payment in blood, but an equally emotional love that embraces the sinner. Furthermore, if Anselm’s rational method is followed to its full conclusions several loopholes appear. Van de Beek asks: How is it that a finite human being can mar the glory of an infinite God? Anselm’s view on sin and merit is also, according to Van de Beek, unbalanced. When it comes to human sin the infinite consequences are highlighted, while on the side of merit finitude is highlighted. Van de Beek rightly states that Anselm tends to see the human and divine natures of Christ in opposition to each other. For Anselm only the death of Jesus has real meaning. Jesus’ life is necessary only to make it possible to die as a divine human being. The *unio personalis* only become important in his death.

Despite some shortcomings, Anselm provided a foundation that the Reformers later built upon. Whereas Anselm attempted to give a rational philosophical explanation of atonement, the reformers were more concerned with the actual biblical data. They regarded the sacrificial and penal models that are found in Scripture as the unifying center of the Christian doctrine of the atonement. Whereas Anselm argued that offended honor calls for atonement, the Reformers changed the focus to offended righteousness. They did not view sin in terms of dishonour, but in terms of guilt and punishment *satisfaction poenalis* (satisfaction through punishment). The Reformers also did not distinguish between

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