

Atonement

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There is a standard potted history of Atonement theory – taught, it would appear, in seminaries and divinity schools – in which Anselm figures as the villain who foisted penal substitution on a Latin West that was altogether too eager to embrace it, along with its associated ideology of violence. Peter Abelard, by contrast, spoke of Christ as a moral exemplar and of his passion as an act of love that would kindle an answering love in the heart of the believer; but in setting forth this appealing alternative his was nearly a lone voice, drowned out by a chorus of theologians interpreting the Cross in terms of divine wrath, punishment, and sacrifice. This story makes periodic intrusions into popular theological consciousness through debates over episcopal elections¹ and new hymns,² and it is well-represented in the scholarly literature.³

¹In 2009 the bishop-elect of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern Michigan, Kevin Thew Forrester, came under scrutiny for a number of reasons, including what some regarded as an insufficiently orthodox understanding of the Atonement. Fr Thew Forrester and his defenders frequently invoked some version of the standard history sketched here. In the end, his election did not receive the necessary consents, and a new election was held.

²The committee charged with developing a new hymnal for the Presbyterian Church (USA) made news in 2013 for its decision to exclude the popular song “In Christ Alone” because of objections to the words “till on that Cross, as Jesus died, the wrath of God was satisfied” – words that some members of the committee complained were objectionably Anselmian.

But the story is largely false. Anselm did not teach penal substitution; Abelard did. The notion of wrath plays no role at all in Anselm's positive account of the redemption, which also makes no mention of blood and almost no mention of the Cross; and Abelard's emphasis on the change of heart wrought by a discerning response to the Passion found echoes in many of the scholastic theologians who developed Anselm's account.

In order to provide a more accurate account of medieval thinking about the Atonement, I will begin with a brief discussion of the main lines of theological discussion before Anselm's day. I then look at Anselm's reasons for rejecting the dominant account of earlier theologians before turning to a detailed examination of his positive account of the Atonement. Next I lay out Abelard's discussion of the saving work of Christ in his commentary on the Letter to the Romans. In the final section of the paper, I examine the ways in which theologians of the twelfth through fourteenth centuries developed both Anselmian and Abelardian themes in their reflections on the Atonement.

³Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg, Pa: Trinity Press International, 2001), provides a particularly influential recent statement of the standard history. See Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Power in the Blood: Sacrifice, Satisfaction, and Substitution in Late Medieval Soteriology," in *The Redemption: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on Christ as Redeemer.*, ed. Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O'Collins (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 177–204, for further references, a fuller account of the standard history than I have given here, and abundant argument in support of the claim that "There seems to be a lot wrong with this general picture"

Medieval Atonement Theory Before Anselm

Early Christian writings on Atonement are not chiefly in the business of presenting theories, if by a theory we mean something like a systematic account of how, exactly – by what means, or through what sort of transaction or mechanism – Christ accomplishes reconciliation between God and humanity. Christian writers of the first few centuries proclaimed such reconciliation as a fact and employed a variety of metaphors and images to elucidate it. They spoke of a cosmic struggle in which Christ achieved a decisive victory, of the return of a king to restore order in his own dominions, of the mystical inclusion of sinful humanity in the perfect humanity of the Incarnate Word. We therefore do them an injustice if we approach them solely with an eye to finding whatever it was that did for them what penal substitution, say, did for later writers.

But for the purpose of introducing medieval speculation on Atonement, the injustice is necessary. And what we find when we search in early Christian writing for a counterpart to penal substitution is the ransom theory. Drawing on passages such as Mark 10:45/Matthew 20:28 – “For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” – many early Christian writers spoke of Christ’s death on the Cross as a ransom. A ransom is a price paid to redeem captives. The price is Christ’s death and the captives are sinful human beings: but to whom is the

price paid? According to many of the church fathers, the ransom is paid to the devil, who had acquired some sort of rights over humanity by successfully tempting our first parents to disobey God. Origen, for example, writes as follows:

To whom did he give his life as a ransom for many? Not, certainly, to God. Was it not, then, to the evil one? He had us in his power until the ransom for us – the life of Jesus – was paid to him, mistaken as he was in supposing that he could gain the mastery over that life, and not seeing that he could not bear the agony of holding it.⁴

Versions of this theory, sometimes developed in quite striking ways (such as Gregory of Nyssa's idea that God tricked the devil into overreaching by veiling the divinity of Christ in human flesh), can be found in a number of writers, but it is through Augustine that the ransom theory became a foundation of early medieval thinking about Atonement.

According to Augustine, it was by God's justice that human beings were delivered into the power of the devil as punishment for their disobedience,⁵ and it was therefore fitting that God should overcome the devil through justice rather than (as was certainly possible for God) through mere force:

It was right for the devil to be overcome, not by God's power, but by his justice.

For what is more powerful than the All-Powerful? What creature can compare

⁴*In Matt.* 16.8. All translations are my own.

⁵*De Trinitate* 13.12.16. The passive voice is intentional: according to Augustine, God permitted, but did not bring it about, that humanity fell under the devil's control.

in power to the All-Powerful? But because the devil in his wicked perversity had come to love power and to reject and contend against justice . . . it pleased God, in order to rescue humanity from the devil's power, to overcome the devil not by power but by justice. . . . It is not that power is something bad and to be avoided, but there is an order to be observed; and in that order justice comes first.⁶

Augustine continues:

What, then, is this justice by which the devil was overcome? Precisely the justice of Jesus Christ. And how was he overcome? It was because he found nothing worthy of death in Christ, yet he killed him. And indeed it is just that the debtors whom he had in his control should be set free by believing in the one whom he killed even though no debt was owed.

“Even though no debt was owed” translates *sine ullo debito*, which Augustine uses to emphasize two related claims. First, Christ need not have died. Not having inherited the corrupted humanity passed on by Adam and Eve, he did not “owe” death; instead, as Jesus says of himself in the Fourth Gospel, “I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me: I lay it down of my own accord. I have the power to

⁶*De Trinitate* 13.13.17.

lay it down and the power to take it up again" (John 10:17b-18).⁷ And second, Christ was perfectly sinless, which was why the devil was guilty of injustice in killing him and therefore "most justly lost those who, because of their sin, had deserved to be under his control."⁸

Latin writers between Augustine and Anselm will typically agree, with variations of emphasis and detail, that the devil had some rights over humanity that it was fitting (though not necessary) for God to recognize, rights that the devil forfeited by his unjust aggression against the sinless Christ.⁹ It is not surprising, then, that Anselm would seek to clear the ground for his rather different understanding of the Atonement by attacking the ransom theory.

Anselm's Critique

Anselm puts his criticisms in the mouth of his interlocutor, Boso, who sets the agenda for *Cur Deus Homo* by offering, on behalf of unbelievers, the objection that the Christian account of redemption must impugn either God's power or his wisdom:

If you say that God—who you say created all things by his command—could not

⁷*De Trinitate* 4.13.16. Anselm will follow this emphasis in *Cur Deus Homo*, repeatedly quoting or alluding to these verses and exercising all his ingenuity in reinterpreting other passages of Scripture that appear to assert some necessity or obligation at odds with Christ's sovereign and free self-offering.

⁸*Enchiridion* 14.49.

⁹See, for example, Leo the Great, *Sermon* 22; Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Iob* 3.14-16, 17.30, 33.7.

have accomplished all these things simply by commanding them, you are contradicting yourselves, since you are making him out to be powerless. On the other hand, if you acknowledge that he could have done all this simply by commanding it, but that he did not will to do it except in the way you describe, how will you be able to show that he is wise, when you claim that he willed to suffer such indignities for no reason at all? . . . [I]f indeed God was unwilling to save the human race except in the way you describe, when he could have done so through his will alone, face up to how you are impugning his wisdom—to put it mildly.¹⁰

Boso presents the ransom theory as a standard, but clearly unacceptable, answer to this challenge:

Now we are also accustomed to say that in order to liberate humanity God was obligated to act against the devil through justice before he acted through force, so that when the devil killed him who did not deserve death and who was God, he would justly lose the power that he held over sinners. Otherwise, God would have inflicted unjust force on the devil, since the devil justly had possession of human beings, whom he had not captured by force, but who had delivered themselves up to him of their own accord. But I do not see how this has any

¹⁰*Cur Deus Homo* I.6 (250).

cogency.¹¹

Boso argues that God remains sovereign even over sinful creatures. Both the devil and human beings are still God's own possession; God retains his prerogative to do as he pleases "with his own, about his own, in his own."¹² So although human beings deserved to be punished, and it was appropriate for the devil to punish them, God had every right to remove human beings from the devil's jurisdiction. The devil had acquired no rights over human beings; far from deserving to punish them, he deserved to be punished along with them.

Boso speculates that at the root of the theory of the devil's rights is a fundamental confusion:

I also think that those who hold that the devil had some just claim to possess humanity are brought to this view because they see that humanity was justly subject to the devil's persecution and that God justly permitted it; and on those grounds they suppose that the devil justly inflicted it.¹³

But that doesn't follow, he objects. Suppose I deserve to be struck, but you are not the one entitled to strike me. Then your striking me is just if we describe it as "my being struck," for I deserve to be struck, but unjust if we describe it as "your striking me," for

¹¹*Cur Deus Homo* I.7 (251).

¹²*Cur Deus Homo* I.7 (251).

¹³*Cur Deus Homo* I.7 (251).

you have no right to strike me. And such is the case for humanity's suffering at the hands of the devil. It is just if we describe it as "God's permitting humanity to suffer at the hands of the devil," for God acts wisely and justly in bringing good out of such evil, or as "humanity's being punished by the devil," for we deserve to be punished, but not as "the devil's punishing humanity," for the devil has no right to punish us and acts out of malice and an unjust will.¹⁴

Boso is allowed to deliver his criticisms¹⁵ without interruption and without comment, but Anselm (the author) apparently means us to regard them as decisive, since Anselm (the character) drops the subject for good and resumes the discussion by saying that surely God must have had *some* reason for acting as he did, even if we cannot see what it was.¹⁶ But outside *Cur Deus Homo* the ransom theory was not killed off all at once. Two generations later, Bernard of Clairvaux still regarded the notion of a price paid to the devil as a non-negotiable element of orthodoxy and vehemently criticized Peter Abelard for raising objections¹⁷ very much like Anselm's:

¹⁴The doctrine that one and the same action can take on opposite characteristics if considered in different ways is no ad hoc move on Anselm's part. He employs it frequently, applying it not only to statements of value (involving words such as 'just,' 'right,' and 'ought') but also to modal statements (involving words such as 'can' and 'possible'). For a brief discussion, see Visser and Williams 50.

¹⁵He also devotes a paragraph to rebutting the idea that the "handwriting of the decree" (Col. 2:14) conferred rights on the devil; I omit this argument for the sake of space.

¹⁶*Cur Deus Homo* I.8 (253).

¹⁷*Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica I: Commentarium in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos; Apologia contra Bernardum*, vol. 11 in *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert (Turnholt, Belgium:

Which am I to think is more intolerable in these words: their blasphemy or their arrogance? Which is more damnable: their insolence or their impiety? Would not the mouth of the one who speaks such things be more justly beaten with rods than refuted with arguments?¹⁸

Peter Lombard, too, would present a version of the ransom theory in his *Sentences* (by way of extensive quotations from Augustine). But these twelfth-century reaffirmations of the theory would represent its last serious appearance on the medieval stage, and even there it is evident that the theory does not express the best or most considered thoughts of its ostensible proponents. L. W. Grensted puts this well:

In almost every writer we find [the] deficiencies [of the ransom theory] made good by the introduction of ideas of a widely different character, though not as yet crystallized into definite theory, until at last in Bernard, and again in Peter Lombard, we find the old transactional language adopted and defended simply because it is the language of tradition, hallowed by its association with the fathers of the Church, and not lightly to be thrown aside, even though now inadequate to carry the thought of those who use it.¹⁹

Brepols, 1969), 114–117.

¹⁸Letter 190, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957), VIII: 37???

¹⁹L. W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), 56. Grensted's work deserves to be better known. Considerably more even-handed and textually responsible than other standard works, it is the most adequate history of Atonement theory currently available in English, though the time is certainly right for a new full-scale treatment of the matter.

Anselm's Account of the Atonement²⁰

So the objections that Boso raises on behalf of unbelievers cannot be met by appeal to the ransom theory, but Anselm does think he can meet them. In principle, it would seem that there are two approaches he could take. One would be to argue that although God could have reconciled humanity to himself by some means other than the passion and death of Christ, he did not act irrationally or unwisely in bringing about redemption in the way Christians say he did. The other would be to argue that God could not have redeemed humanity in any other way. But Anselm rules out the first approach because he thinks no such argument would be persuasive to an unbeliever who finds the initial objections compelling. Appeals to the rational beauty or poetic fittingness of the Christian account of redemption, though doubtless devotionally profitable for those who already accept that account, are useless as means of persuasion for those who remain unconvinced. So Anselm commits himself to arguing that God could not reconcile humanity to himself otherwise than by becoming incarnate and dying.²¹ And because it would be open to the objector to say that, in that case, it would

²⁰I have explored Anselm's account in greater detail in "Incarnation and Atonement," ch. 13 of *Anselm* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 213–242. I have also drawn here on a talk entitled "Anselm: Everything You Learned in Seminary Is False" (URL=[http://frthomaswilliams.com/Anselm on Atonement.mp3](http://frthomaswilliams.com/Anselm%20on%20Atonement.mp3)).

²¹By affirming that there was only one possible means of redemption for humanity, Anselm was departing from the consensus of earlier writers in the Latin tradition, such as Augustine and Leo the Great; later medieval writers, even those who are strongly influenced by Anselm in other respects, almost uniformly reject his teaching on this point.

have been seemlier and more reasonable for God to have left human beings unsaved, rather than subjecting himself to pain and death, Anselm must also argue that if human beings fall into sin, God cannot simply leave them unsaved.

Thus, the central positive argument of *Cur Deus Homo* can be summarized as follows:

- (1) Necessarily, if human beings sin, God offers them reconciliation.
- (2) Necessarily, if God does not become incarnate and die, God does not offer reconciliation to human beings.

Therefore,

- (3) Necessarily, if human beings sin, God becomes incarnate and dies.

Anselm attempts to make this argument “*remoto Christo*,” that is, without appeal to any of the details of the Christian story, for the unbelievers who are the targets of the argument do not accept that story. As a result, and contrary to what one often reads, there is next to nothing in *Cur Deus Homo* about blood or violence or even the Cross.²²

For Anselm thinks that reason alone can show that God must effect reconciliation through the voluntary death of a God-man, but of course no amount of argument

²²For example, ‘*sanguis*’ (blood) appears only three times in *Cur Deus Homo*, always in voicing the objections of unbelievers and never in the course of Anselm’s own positive argument. ‘*Crux*’ (cross) appears twice, in quotations from Philippians 2:8, when Anselm is arguing that Scripture does not imply, contrary to what reason shows, that Christ’s death was something imposed on him by necessity. There is simply no foundation at all for the strangely widespread notion that Anselm’s account of the atonement valorizes blood and violence.

would reveal that this death was a painful and bloody crucifixion.

Anselm argues for (1) by appealing to God's purpose in creating human beings. God gave human beings rationality so that they might love him, the supreme good, for his own sake and all other things for his sake, and in loving him would be fully happy. God's purpose for human beings does not change simply because we have thrown away the justice with which were created. So if God were to leave human beings in a state of injustice and unhappiness, he would fail in his purpose; he would have created human beings in vain. He must therefore offer reconciliation to human beings.

But why must he do so by becoming incarnate and laying down his life? Anselm's argument for (2) begins with the observation that any sin, however apparently trivial, is infinitely serious, not because human beings are infinitely important, but because sins are affronts to the infinite majesty of God. God cannot, as a matter of justice, simply cancel the infinite debt of sin. The debt must be paid, either by way of punishment or by way of satisfaction.²³ Punishment satisfies the demands of justice, but it leaves humanity unreconciled with God and thus is ruled out by (1);

²³In discussing Anselm, my preference is to translate *satisfactio* as 'recompense' rather than 'satisfaction', for reasons suggested by David Brown, "Anselm on atonement," in Brian Davies and Brian Leftow, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 279–302, esp. at 290–5. In this essay, however, I use 'satisfaction', which is almost universally used in scholarly discussions of later scholastic authors, so as not to obscure that they and Anselm are all using the same Latin word. Nothing, of course, follows as to whether they all mean the same thing, or intend the same concept, when using that word.

therefore, some satisfaction must be offered.²⁴ The one who makes the satisfaction must be a human being, since only a human being can pay what human beings owe. Yet only God can make this satisfaction, since the satisfaction must be proportionate to the sin, which is infinitely serious; and only God can give something of his own that is of infinite value. Therefore, the one who makes the satisfaction must be both God and man, a single being in whom two natures are united, and he makes this satisfaction by voluntarily laying down his life for the honor of God.

Abelard's Commentary on Romans²⁵

Unlike Anselm, Abelard did not set out to provide a systematic account of the Atonement; nor was he principally interested in defending the rationality of the Christian account against objections from unbelievers. His understanding of the saving work of Christ must be pieced together from somewhat scattered observations throughout his Commentary on the Letter to the Romans, both in the *ad litteram* commentary on particular passages and in two *quaestiones* (excursuses of modest length) on original sin and Atonement.

²⁴Note, then, that Anselm's account is in no way penal. Punishment, for Anselm, would be unavailing for the purposes of reconciling humanity with God, and Christ's death is in no sense a punishment that he endured in our stead.

²⁵I have discussed Abelard's account in greater detail in "Sin, Grace, and Redemption," in *The Cambridge Companion to Abelard*, ed. Jeffrey Brower and Kevin Guilfooy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258–78.

Although (as I have noted) Abelard agreed with Anselm in rejecting the idea of a ransom paid to the devil, he did find it fruitful to think of humanity as being in a sense held captive, not by the devil, but by sin itself. This dominion of sin had two aspects, which we can call objective and subjective. The objective dominion of sin is our liability to the just punishment of sin. The subjective dominion of sin is the disordering of our desires by concupiscence, which hinders us from willing what we know is right. Abelard argues that the death of Christ frees us from the dominion of sin in both its aspects.

The death of Christ frees us from the objective dominion of sin by bearing the punishment for sin on our behalf. In other words, Abelard explicitly teaches penal substitution. In the *quaestio* on original sin, Abelard says that Christ bore our sins on the Cross in the sense that he bore the punishment for our sins so that we would not have to; as a result, our sins are “dismissed,” which for Abelard is equivalent to saying that the punishment to which we would otherwise have been subject is canceled.²⁶ And in commenting on Romans 4:25, where Paul says that Christ “was handed over on account of our sins,” Abelard comments, “There are two ways in which Christ is said to have died *on account of our sins*. First, the transgressions on account of which he died were ours, and we committed the sins whose punishment he bore. And second, by

²⁶*Commentaria in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos* (hereafter *Comm. Rom.*), in *Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica I* (*Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis XI*), ed. Eligius M Buytaert O.F.M. (Turnhout: Brepols, 1969),

dying he took away our sins: that is, he removed the punishment for our sins at the cost of his death."²⁷

The death of Christ frees us from the subjective dominion of sin by conveying God's love to us and thereby freeing us from disobeying God because of concupiscence or obeying him unworthily, out of fear rather than love. I use the word 'conveying' advisedly: it is ambiguous between 'demonstrating' and 'transmitting.' A purely exemplarist reading of Abelard sees the passion as a *demonstration* of God's love for humanity, inspiring our gratitude and love in the same way as a human benefactor's kindness would inspire our gratitude and love. Undoubtedly Abelard speaks in this way, thereby inviting Bernard's polemic that Abelard "makes the glory of our redemption and the pinnacle of our salvation consist, not in the power of the Cross or the price of Christ's blood, but in the improvement of our own way of life."²⁸ But it is clear that Abelard intends more than this. The passion not only demonstrates God's love but somehow *transmits* it: "divine love . . . [is] given and offered to us through" Jesus.²⁹ This part of the account, however, is not fleshed out in Abelard's work.³⁰

164, 175.

²⁷*Comm. Rom.* 153. See also the commentary on Romans 8:3, *Comm. Rom.* 211, where Abelard speaks of "the punishment for sin that [Christ] bore for us in the flesh"

²⁸Letter 190, 37.

²⁹*Comm. Rom.* 210.

Further Developments

The influence of Anselm on later medieval thinking on the Atonement can be seen in the centrality of the notion of satisfaction. But there are other concepts and themes, not present or not prominent in Anselm, that come to play important roles in scholastic discussions of Atonement. These notions give a fullness to later discussions that Anselm's account, focused as it was on a narrowly defined problem, arguably lacks – though this fullness sometimes comes at the expense of systematicity or even coherence. Moreover, even the notion of satisfaction is frequently treated in un-Anselmian ways.

To begin with the last point, one finds widespread agreement that the death of the God-man provides the only adequate satisfaction for sin; but most scholastic authors agree that God could have redeemed humanity without any such satisfaction. In the *Summa* attributed to Alexander of Hales, for example, we find the argument that it would have been consistent with the justice that is God's very nature for God to redeem humanity without any satisfaction being made at all.³¹ Bonaventure drew a similar conclusion from the notion of divine power: "Undoubtedly God could have freed and

³⁰I have offered what I take to be a natural development of the account – Abelardian, though not explicitly Abelard's – in "Sin, Grace, and Redemption," at 269–275.

³¹*Summa* III.1.4-7.

restored the human race in some other way. . . . For no limit should be placed on divine power. Indeed, just as God had the power to create the human race, so too he had the power to restore it, by the sheer affirmation (*nutus*) of his mind and command of his will."³² Contrary to what Anselm held, "God could have wiped out all demerits and reestablished humanity in its prior state, and nothing would have remained unordered, or even unpunished, in the universe, since sin carries with it its own punishment."³³ It was more suitable for God to accomplish redemption by way of satisfaction than in any other way,³⁴ but there was no necessity involved.

Alongside the Anselmian notion of satisfaction we find extensive discussion of the idea of merit. To make satisfaction is to repay a debt or restore a just state of affairs; to merit is to achieve a reward. There was no standard view of the respective roles of satisfaction and merit in Christ's saving work, and indeed it is often difficult to see how the notions function together in a particular thinker's understanding of the Atonement; but in general the notion of merit has wider application than that of satisfaction. For example, as unpromising as it might look to contemporary theological sensibilities, the standard scholastic question, "Did Christ merit from the moment of his conception?" shows a keen appreciation of the potential redemptive significance of the

³²*In Sent.* III. 20.6.

³³*In Sent.* III.20.6 dubium 4.

³⁴*In Sent.* III. 20.2.

whole of Christ's incarnate life, rather than an exclusive focus on the Cross. I will illustrate the complexities of scholastic treatments of satisfaction and merit by examining Thomas Aquinas.³⁵

Aquinas accepts the dominant medieval view that the breach between God and humanity could have been repaired without any suffering on the part of Christ. But there was no more fitting way for humanity to be set free than the passion of Christ:

A way of attaining a given end is more fitting to the extent that that way incorporates more things that are serviceable for that end. And the liberation of humanity through Christ's passion incorporates several things that pertain to human salvation, in addition to liberation from sin. First, through Christ's passion human beings recognize how much God loves them and are thereby stirred to love God, which is what constitutes the completion of human salvation. . . . Second, by his passion he gave us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and other virtues. . . . Third, through his passion Christ not only freed human beings from sin but also merited for them justifying grace and the glory of happiness. . . . Fourth, his passion declares to human beings a greater urgency in keeping themselves unstained by sin. . . . Fifth, his passion

³⁵Aquinas is by no means alone among scholastic authors in making room for both satisfaction and merit, alongside other themes, in treating the Atonement. Limitations of space prevent any discussion of other scholastics here, but for an overview of John Duns Scotus's account, see Richard Cross, *Duns Scotus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 129–32.

brought greater dignity to humanity: just as human beings had been overcome and deceived by the devil, it would also be a human being who overcame the devil; and just as human beings had deserved death, so too a human being, by dying, would overcome death.³⁶

Aquinas does not seek to bring these disparate themes – as well as others that arise elsewhere in his discussions of the Atonement – into any systematic coherence, and scholarly attempts to impose a rigid conceptual scheme of hierarchical or conceptual relationships on this variety of elements are unconvincing.³⁷

Consider first the notion of merit. For Aquinas, merit operates through the relationship of Christ as Head to the Church as his body. Christ merits grace not only for himself not only as an individual “but insofar as he is Head of the Church, so that grace might overflow from him to the members.”³⁸ Christ in fact merited eternal

³⁶ST III.46.3. Adam Johnson, “A Fuller Account: The Role of ‘Fittingness’ in Thomas Aquinas’ Development of the Doctrine of the Atonement,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12 (2010): 302–318, is correct in drawing attention to the number of disparate themes that Aquinas includes in his Atonement theology; but his contention that “For Thomas *convenire* refers primarily to the bringing together of various things” (305) is not sustained by the texts. Even in the passage translated here, the first sentence expresses a criterion for something’s being *convenientior*, not a definition of *conveniens*.

³⁷For example, Eleonore Stump regiments Aquinas’s use of merit and satisfaction, so that Christ’s passion and death *qua* satisfaction “are the solution to the problem of past sin” and *qua* meriting grace “the solution to the problem of future sin”: *Aquinas* (London: Routledge, 2003), 430. I can find no textual support for this reading of the relationship between merit and satisfaction.

³⁸ST III.48.1

salvation for us from the first moment of his conception,³⁹ “but there were obstacles on our part that were preventing us from attaining the effect of those previous merits; hence, in order to remove those obstacles, it was fitting for Christ to suffer.”⁴⁰ What were these obstacles? Aquinas points us back to his explanation of the superior fittingness of liberation through the passion, so presumably the obstacles were the moral deficiencies and weakness that the passion remedied.

Merit is just the first of the four ways in which Christ’s passion effects human salvation, according to Aquinas. It does so also by way of satisfaction, sacrifice, and redemption. To begin with satisfaction: to make satisfaction for an offense is to offer to the offended party something that he loves as much as or more than he hates the offense. And “by suffering out of charity and obedience, Christ offered God something greater than was required as a recompense for the whole offense of the human race.”⁴¹ It is “not merely a sufficient but indeed a superabundant satisfaction for the sins of the human race” because of the greatness of the charity with which he bore his suffering, the worth of the divine-human life that he laid down as a satisfaction, and the scope of his suffering and the greatness of his pain.⁴² And because Head and members are one

³⁹ST III.34.3; 48.1 obj. 2.

⁴⁰ST III.48.1 ad 2.

⁴¹ST III.48.2.

⁴²ST III.48.2.

mystical person, the satisfaction that Christ makes belongs to all the baptized as members of Christ.⁴³ Thus note that the mystical union between Christ and his Church, into which human beings are incorporated by baptism, is a key part of the mechanism (so to speak) by which both merit and satisfaction effect human salvation.

Christ's death also effects human salvation as a sacrifice:

Something done for the honor that is properly owed to God, in order to conciliate him, is properly called a sacrifice. . . . "Now Christ offered himself for us in his passion," and this very deed – Christ's voluntarily undergoing suffering – was in the highest degree acceptable to God, because it proceeded from charity.

Thus it is clear that Christ's passion was a true sacrifice.⁴⁴

It might seem that sacrifice, so understood, is difficult to distinguish from satisfaction; and indeed in the next question the notion of sacrifice is discussed in the same language, and with the same definition, that Aquinas uses to explain satisfaction.⁴⁵

The fourth way in which Christ's passion effects human salvation is as a redemption. At one point Aquinas understands redemption entirely in terms of satisfaction: "Because Christ's passion was a sufficient and superabundant satisfaction for the sin and guilt of the human race, his passion was a sort of price by which we were

⁴³ST III.48.2 ad 1.

⁴⁴ST III.48.3.

⁴⁵ST III.49.4.

set free from both obligations,” that is, from both servitude to sin and liability to punishment in accordance with God’s justice.⁴⁶ Elsewhere he understands it in terms of merit, invoking again the mystical union between Christ and the Church.⁴⁷

As we have seen, Aquinas says that Christ’s “passion was a sort of price by which we were set free from” servitude to sin, and for Aquinas one way of understanding servitude to sin is as servitude to the devil. It is in this context that the old theory of the devil’s overreaching makes an unexpected return appearance:

There are three aspects of the power that the devil had over human beings before Christ’s passion that need to be taken into account. The first concerns human beings, who by their sin had deserved to be handed over to the power of the devil, by whose tempting they were overcome. The second concerns God, whom human beings had offended by sinning, and who, in accordance with his justice, turned human beings over to the power of the devil. The third concerns the devil himself, who by his most wicked will was preventing human beings from attaining salvation. As for the first, human beings were freed from the power of the devil by Christ’s passion in that his passion is a cause of the forgiveness of sins, as has been said. As for the second, what should be said is that Christ’s passion freed us from the power of the devil by reconciling us to God, as will be said below. As for the third, Christ’s passion freed us from the devil because in Christ’s passion the devil overstepped the boundaries of the power that God had handed over to him, by conniving at the death of Christ who, being sinless, did not deserve death. This is why Augustine says in *De Trinitate* XIII that the devil was overcome by the justice of Christ, “because he found nothing worthy of death in Christ, yet he killed him. And indeed it is just that the debtors whom he had in his control should be set free by believing in the one whom he killed even though no debt was owed.”⁴⁸

⁴⁶ST III.48.4.

⁴⁷ST III.49.1.

⁴⁸ST III.49.2.

This is not the only place in which the theory of the devil's rights appears in Aquinas,⁴⁹ but it seems fair to say that the theory appears only vestigially, with a nod to Augustine's authority and indeed almost wholly in Augustine's words.⁵⁰ Other themes – of which merit, satisfaction, and the sacramental appropriation of the benefits of Christ's passion are the most prominent – are the heart of Aquinas's account.

⁴⁹In the *ST* we find it also at III.46.3 ad 3.

⁵⁰*Pace* Johnson, "A Fuller Account," 307–309, whose failure to distinguish between the narrow theory of the devil's rights and the broader theme of liberation from the devil leads him to overstate the importance of the former in Aquinas's thought.