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Christology and Soteriology

30 November 2007

St. Athanasius and St. Anselm on Redemption

Introduction

I spent several years with a group of Evangelicals that had newly discovered the Church Fathers, and I also spent several months investigating Eastern Orthodoxy. From both groups I heard the accusation that the western view of redemption had gone off course with St. Anselm, resulting in a disproportionate focus on sin and punishment. At that time, I read St. Athanasius' *On the Incarnation* as an example of a Patristic view of redemption, and what I found there was a fresh perspective for me on the work of Christ in redemption. However, I never had read any of Anselm's writings on the subject.

I now want to take the opportunity to compare *On the Incarnation* with Anselm's work, *Why God Became Man*, to see how the idea of redemption developed in the West. I also want to see if Anselm is compatible with the Fathers, or is he a point of departure for the West? Finally, I will look at some implications of these two saints' work for the Church today.

Anselm's View of Redemption

First of all, it is important to realize the purpose and scope of Anselm's work, *Why God Became Man*. He is responding to many requests that he provide an answer to the following question. "By what logic or necessity did God become man, and by his death, as we believe and profess, restore life to the world, when he could have done this through the agency of some other person, angelic or human, or simply willing it" (265; bk. 1, ch. 1). Anselm's work is in the form of a dialog in which he addresses objections and accusations that were common in his day, especially those that come from unbelievers. Because the request is for an explanation of the logic behind Christian doctrine, and the target audience includes unbelievers, Anselm leans much more heavily on rational argument and cultural analogies than he does on the authority of Scripture and the traditional teaching of the Church, of which his audience is not interested (269; bk. 1, ch. 4). This is more of an apologetic work focused on particular objections rather than an attempt to systematically cover all aspects of the work of redemption.

Anselm begins his argument by defining the problem: "the human race, clearly his most precious piece of workmanship, had been completely ruined; it was not fitting that what God had planned for mankind should be utterly nullified, and the plan in question could not be

brought into effect unless the human race were set free by its Creator in person” (269; bk. 1, ch. 4). It is because humanity is so precious to God that he does not leave us in a state of ruin, but will personally go to any lengths consistent with his nature to liberate us. One of the complaints that Anselm is addressing is that the Christian doctrine of redemption has God going to too much trouble. It is therefore important to begin with the high value that God places on the human race in order to justify the extreme measures that he takes to save them.

What must be done to solve this problem? The issue of human sin must be dealt with. It is sin that causes our ruin and blocks us from happiness. “. . . the remission of sins, therefore, is something absolutely necessary for man, so that he may arrive at blessed happiness” (282; bk. 1, ch. 10). The focus of *Why God Became Man* is to show that the work of Christ is the only way that this remission of sins could be accomplished.

One of the questions Anselm has to deal with is why God doesn't just forgive us without going through the incarnation and the cross? If God “created all things by issuing commands,” could he not also forgive the sins of man just by issuing commands (271; bk. 1, ch. 6)? Anselm's answer is that justice, or the honor of God does not permit him to grant forgiveness arbitrarily. Such arbitrary forgiveness causes two problems of justice. First of all, the way to regulate sin is through punishment, so if God was to forgive sinners without receiving satisfaction, he loses his

ability to regulate sin. This is like saying that if the government decided to forgive all criminals, it would lose its ability to enforce the laws. The second problem is that such forgiveness would make the sinner equal to the righteous person (284; bk. 1, ch. 12).

Another question that Anselm addresses is the possibility of paying the debt of our sin through contrition and penance. Such works give honor to God, so should they not count as payment for the debt of sin? The answer is that such works are only what is expected from each man. These works are owed to God in order to “reach the state for which [we] were created.” If we already owe God these and other works of obedience, there is nothing left for us to apply as payment for our sins (304–305; bk. 1, ch. 20).

If we can do nothing to provide satisfaction for our sins, who can? Whatever being could and would accomplish such a work of salvation, humanity would be its bonds slave. We would owe that being our lives. However, because we were created to be bondslaves of God, being beholden to a lesser being would mean that we had not been restored to our original position before the fall. Our redemption would be incomplete (270; bk. 1, ch. 5). The one who is to save mankind “. . . should be someone who would make a payment to God greater than everything that exists apart from God.” The only one who can do that is God himself. However, because it is mankind that owes the debt, repayment can only

come from a man, “. . . otherwise mankind is not making recompense” (319–320; bk. 2, ch. 6). Anselm comes to the conclusion that the savior must be perfect God and perfect man in one person. “Given, therefore, that it is necessary for a God–Man to be found in whom the wholeness of both natures is kept intact, it is no less necessary for these two natures to combine, as wholes, in one person, in the same way as the body and the rational soul coalesce into one human being. For otherwise it cannot come about that one and the same person may be perfect God and perfect man” (321; bk.2, ch. 7). Because sin started with Adam and Eve, this person must be one of them, or one of their descendants. Also, because Eve, a virgin woman, was the cause of this evil, it is appropriate that the savior comes from a virgin (322–323; bk. 2, ch. 8).

This God–Man pays recompense for our sins by voluntarily giving his life. He “ought to have the following characteristics: it will not be a matter of necessity that he will die, because he will be omnipotent; he will not be dying obligatorily, because he will never be a sinner, and it will be within his capacity to die of his own free will, because this will be necessary” (331; bk. 2, ch. 11). In other words, the God–Man would be a being who should be able to live for ever because of his divine nature and innocence. He has the power to live forever, and he has not done anything deserving death. However, he also must have the ability to lay

down his life freely, so that he can accomplish our redemption. Anselm then demonstrates that the destruction of such a man is a greater evil than all other sins combined, so the value of this man's life is greater than all other sins. By laying down his life, he can pay for all sins. This payment even includes the sin of those who put Christ to death (even though such a sin is greater than all other sins) because those who put Christ to death did not know what they were doing (333–336; bk. 2, ch. 14–15).

Christ is the one who uniquely fits these requirements. He is the one who is fully God and fully man, and who laid down his life for our sakes (336; bk. 2, ch. 16). When Christ gave up his life, it is a greater loss than any other man giving up his life because the rest of us will die anyway. Christ alone did not have to die, and he owed no debt to God, but “. . . he gave his life, so precious; no, his very self; he gave his person – think of it – in all its greatness, in an act of his own, supremely great, volition” (349; bk. 2, ch. 18). After having “performed his supremely great action” of laying down his life, Christ does not receive anything for himself. Being the Son of God, he already has all things, and being perfect, he has no debt to pay. Therefore, he gives the recompense to us as a gift. “On whom is it more appropriate for him to bestow the reward and recompense for his death than on those for whose salvation, as the logic of truth teaches us, he made himself a man, and for whom, as we

have said, he set an example, by his death, of dying for the sake of righteousness” (353; bk. 2, ch. 19)?

Because Anselm is addressing those who claim that God is too lofty to go to all of this work of becoming a man in order to save humanity, he points out that “God’s restoration of human nature was more miraculous than his creation of it.” While both restoration and creation are equally easy for God, the restoration of humanity is even more marvelous because God accomplishes something that is contrary to what we deserve. Also, the restoration involves the incredible wonder of the incarnation. “What a great thing it is, too, for God and man to combine in One, in such a way that a man is identical with God, while the integrity of both natures is preserved” (337; bk. 2, ch. 16).

The central theme of Anselm here is that God wants to forgive humanity, but justice, or the honor of God, demands satisfaction before forgiveness can be given. Christ is the only one who can fulfill the requirements of justice on behalf of humanity, which he does by freely giving up his life. The focus of Anselm is on the cross much more than the resurrection or any of the other mysteries of the life of Christ. In order to be the one who could pay the debt owed by humanity, it was necessary for the Word of God to become man and to live a sinless life, but in Anselm’s argument, that’s the extent of the significance of Christ’s earthly life.

Athanasius' View of Redemption

Athanasius begins *On the Incarnation* with a simple but direct statement why the Word of God, who by nature does not have a body, assumed a human body. "He has been manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of His Father, for the salvation of us men." Therefore, the question of the Incarnation is a question of salvation. Athanasius then covers the creation of the world by God, stressing the importance of the fact that "the renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning" (26; sec. 1).

Athanasius describes the creation and fall of humanity in an interesting way. Man was created as essentially impermanent, like the animals. However, God "bestowed a grace which other creatures lacked – namely, the impress of His own Image, a share in the reasonable being of the very Word Himself, so that, reflecting Him and themselves becoming reasonable and expressing the Mind of God even as He does, though in limited degree they might continue for ever in the blessed and only true life of the saints in paradise." The immortality of man is tied intimately with his bearing the image of God, and is not a static thing, but is the result of a relationship with God by which he grows into the being that God created him to be. The picture here is not of a fully formed and

complete being which falls from his position of perfection by committing sin. Rather, he is like a child who has the potential to grow into perfection and eternal life, but instead takes a wrong turn, departs from his calling of the contemplation of God, and goes down the path of death (28–29; sec. 3). The fall is described as a process of complete corruption, falling under the dominion of death, so that man reverts to his impermanent animal nature from which he was created, and ultimately to non-existence. Because man was created by the Word of God, who is existence, when we broke the relationship with God, we were doomed to lose existence.

By nature, of course, man is mortal, since he was made from nothing; but he bears also the Likeness of Him Who is, and if he preserves that Likeness through constant contemplation, then his nature is deprived of its power and he remains incorrupt. So is it affirmed in Wisdom: “The keeping of His laws is the assurance of incorruption.” And being incorrupt, he would be henceforth as God, as Holy Scripture says, “I have said, Ye are gods and sons of the Highest all of you: but ye die as men and fall as one of the princes.” (30; sec. 4)

Not only did man lose the immortality and likeness of God for which he was created, but our fall went further than merely returning to their animal nature, moving “gradually from bad to worse” so that “the

whole earth was rent with factions and battles, while each strove to outdo the other in wickedness” (30; sec. 5).

Once man had turned to sin, it was unthinkable that God should go back on his word to prevent the death of humanity, but it was equally unthinkable that the being that once had shared the divine nature “should perish and turn back again into non-existence through corruption” (32; sec. 6).

Human repentance is not a solution for Athanasius because although repentance might be sufficient to deal with a transgression alone, it does not have the power to release man from the bondage to corruption. Instead, intervention by the Word of God is required, who being the creator, is able to recreate all. He alone is worthy to suffer on behalf of all, and to be an ambassador to the Father of all (33; sec. 7). He took on a human body from a virgin, unstained by sin, and “He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father.” Out of love, he took death for all of us and abolished the law of death, making void its power over man (34; sec. 8).

It is because the bond of corruption could only be broken by death that the Word assumed a mortal body, but because he was still the Word of God, he was able to fulfill in his death all that was required for the human race. Also, “. . . through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the

promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that, by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all." The humanity that the Son of God assumed is united with all of humanity. In the resurrection, death was defeated in the body of Christ, and that victory over death spread throughout humanity (35; sec. 9).

While going into greater depth on the death of Christ, Athanasius says the following:

But beyond all this, there was a debt owing which must needs be paid; for, as I said before, all men were due to die. Here, then, is the second reason why the Word dwelt among us, namely that having proved His Godhead by His works, He might offer the sacrifice on behalf of all, surrendering His own temple to death in place of all, to settle man's account with death and free him from the primal transgression. (49; sec. 20)

By using the words "debt", "paid", "due", and "account", Athanasius employs accounting language here, and although the accounting metaphor is not dominant in *On the Incarnation*, this passage shows that it is not foreign to Athanasius. He has no problem using such language that was used by Jesus (Matthew 18:23–35), and St. Paul (Colossians 2:14), and would be used by later theologians such as Anselm.

Similarly to Anselm, Athanasius has to deal with those who ask why God could not have saved us a different way. Why did the Word made flesh have to die, and why did it have to be on a cross? “Death had to precede resurrection, for there could be no resurrection without it. A secret and unwitnessed death would have left the resurrection without any proof or evidence to support it” (52–53; sec. 23). This is a relatively simple argument because someone cannot rise from the dead if he has not died.

Athanasius cites a couple of New Testament passages (37; sec. 10) that are worth looking at because they illustrate how his view of redemption is rooted in Scripture. The first is Hebrews 2:14–15, “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage.” Here we see clearly that the Son partakes of our nature and destroys the devil and frees us from death. In 1 Corinthians 15:21–22, we see the parallel between Adam and Christ, showing how fitting it is that the savior be a man, in order to reverse what the first man caused. “For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”

Another way Athanasius looks at redemption is from the perspective of knowledge of God. If man has no knowledge of his creator, and is ignorant of the Wisdom of the Word of God, he is no different from the animals, which defeats the purpose of God's creation of man, and leads to human misery because, ". . . knowledge of their Maker is for men the only really happy and blessed life" (38; sec. 11). God reveals himself through creation, prophets, holy men, and the law, but despite all of these, humanity became dehumanized by the pleasures of the moment. (39–40; sec. 12). In Jesus Christ, God renewed his image in humanity (41; sec. 13). As a man in Christ, God was able to meet man at his own level and teach man about himself (43; sec. 15).

The central theme of Athanasius is that the Word of God unites himself with human nature, and conquers death by giving up his life. He takes our death in his death, and overcomes death with his life. Because he shares our nature, we share in his life.

Comparison of Anselm and Athanasius

Both Anselm and Athanasius see the fall of man as a tragedy in which the great act of the creation of humanity was in danger of ruin. The purpose of the Incarnation is to be the means by which God accomplishes our salvation. They also agree that God could not arbitrarily fix the situation. Athanasius says that if God just forgave Adam and Eve, he

would be going back on his word that if they ate from the tree, they would die. Anselm says that forgiveness without satisfaction would be a violation of God's honor.

The two are in agreement that human repentance is not a sufficient remedy for man's problem. Athanasius says that repentance only deals with the transgression, but not the bondage to corruption. Anselm says that penance is already owed God as a duty, being a necessary part of our spiritual growth, so it cannot be used to pay the debt caused by sin. It is interesting that in their own way, both of our theologians say that spiritual growth is a part of human existence, even without the problem of sin. Anselm says it in passing while explaining the insufficiency of penance to obtain forgiveness of sins, and Athanasius says it in his description of the original state of mankind.

The two differ somewhat in the way they explain the death of Christ. Athanasius says that all of humanity died with Christ, so the power of the law of death over humanity was broken. Anselm says that Christ's death was an offering that provides satisfaction for the debt owed by mankind due to sin. However, they are not that far apart. Athanasius says that Christ ". . . fulfilled in death all that was required" (35; sec. 9). This sounds very close to the language of satisfaction. If one sees that the power of death was due to the debt of sin, then there is a way to unite these two perspectives.

Athanasius focuses on the solidarity of the Word with our human nature. By taking on our nature, all of humanity was raised and exalted when Christ was raised and exalted, leading to the famous statement, “He, indeed, assumed humanity that we might become God” (93; sec. 54). This is not a major theme in Anselm, but he does allude to it. First of all, he acknowledges that God took humanity into himself. “. . . it was a necessity that God should take man into the unity of his person, so that one who ought, by virtue of his nature, to make the repayment and was not capable of doing so, should be one who, by virtue of his person, was capable of it” (348; bk. 2, ch. 18). Second, he says somewhat in passing that this union results in the exaltation of human nature. “. . . in the incarnation of God it is understood that no humiliation of God came about: rather it is believed that human nature was exalted” (275; bk. 1, ch. 8). What could be debated is whether or not Anselm believed this exaltation was limited to the human nature in the person of Christ, or if it affected all of human nature, which Athanasius clearly affirms.

Indeed, the corruption, restoration, and exaltation of human nature is very strong in Athanasius. For him, redemption is primarily a change in human nature. The Word joins himself to human nature and as a man conquers death so that human nature is no longer in bondage to death. By joining the divine and human natures in the person of Jesus, the rest of humanity can now partake of the divine nature. The focus of Anselm is

exterior to human nature. Redemption is primarily seen as a legal problem to be solved. From this difference in emphasis, one can see the different models of personal salvation. Eastern Christianity, in the spirit of Athanasius and the other Fathers, sees personal salvation as primarily the work of the transformation of the soul, or divinization. Faith, the Sacraments, prayer, and penance are means by which this process takes place, and sin is primarily seen as a hindrance to this process, and so must be avoided. Western Christianity tends to see personal salvation as a means to avoid the punishment due to sin, whether eternal or temporal, and faith, the Sacraments, prayer, and penance are means to mitigate such punishment.

While aspects of the Eastern view are known in parts of the Western tradition, there are many Western Christians for whom this Patristic view of redemption, and the divinization view of personal salvation are completely unknown. Ten years ago, I was one of those Western Christians.

Conclusion

I have tried to show that the models of redemption given by Sts. Athanasius and Anselm are not contradictory, but complementary ways of looking at our salvation. They address different problems in different ages, and bring out different aspects of this divine mystery. I found that

W. H. Kent stated this very well after he explained several Patristic and Medieval views on the atonement, including those of Athanasius and Anselm.

On looking back at the various theories noticed so far, it will be seen that they are not, for the most part, mutually exclusive, but may be combined and harmonized. It may be said, indeed, that they all help to bring out different aspects of that great doctrine which cannot find adequate expression in any human theory. And in point of fact it will generally be found that the chief Fathers and Schoolmen, though they may at times lay more stress on some favourite theory of their own, do not lose sight of the other explanations. (par. 16)

Anselm took a more rational approach because his target audience rejected explanations that they called “beautiful notions . . . to be viewed like pictures” (269; bk. 1, ch. 3). However, I prefer the beautiful notions and pictures I find in the writings of Athanasius, and I think that in our post-modern world, where rationalism hit a dead-end, many others feel the same as I do. For many people today, Anselm seems cold. A repulsive vision of an angry God that takes out his displeasure on his own son is easily, although erroneously, derived from his model of satisfaction.

Athanasius is a good alternative way of looking at redemption, while remaining orthodox.

The concept of the solidarity of human nature found in Athanasius, as well as many other ancient writers, is an important concept for today as an antidote to individualism. People would like to think that they are somehow connected to others, but our materialistic world view has no room for such a concept. Until someone finds a way to better express the concept in modern terms, exposure to writings like *On the Incarnation* are a good way to begin to communicate it.

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