

Does Tanner's incarnation model of atonement adequately replace the Anselm's satisfaction model?

Christ's work pivots on his having been crucified and his having died. Sin, redemption, atonement, ransom, sacrifice and blood: these words cluster together as motifs throughout the New Testament. Christ died for us¹, for our sins², for the ungodly³, for all⁴. He died as a ransom⁵, suffering death so that he might taste death for everyone⁶, a sacrifice of atonement through the shedding of blood⁷ because righteousness could not be gained by the law⁸. This has long been a central tenet of Christian faith. The hymns we sing speak of Christ's atoning function: 'Jesus, our great High Priest, Hath full atonement made.' The Eucharist is built upon the sacrifice of atonement. Precisely how the crucifixion of Jesus' brings about our liberation from sin seldom makes itself clear in worship. If most believers have this as their theological grounding, they may be forgiven for thinking that atonement is altogether something to do with the collage of death, blood, violence, pain and extreme cruelty that they encounter.

There is a disconnect between Christ's message of forgiveness and mercy⁹ and the cause and reason for his dying on the cross. What sort of mercy, asks Weaver in *The Nonviolent Atonement*, operates on such a 'basis of contingent forgiveness?' (Peterson 2016), No mercy at all it seems. Consequently, some have rejected theologies of atonement that appear incompatible with the Christian message. For Mann and Chalk, penal substitution turns 'God from a loving Father into a vengeful tyrant' (Chalke and Mann, 2003). For Rita Brock, a god

¹ Romans 5:8, 1 Thessalonians 5:10

² 1 Corinthians 15:3

³ Romans 5:6

⁴ 2 Corinthians 5:15

⁵ Hebrews 9:15

⁶ Hebrews 2:9

⁷ Romans 3:25

⁸ Galatians 2:21

⁹ Matthew 5-7

that requires his son's punishment to atone for sin is guilty of 'cosmic child-abuse,' (Brock, 2008) Standard models of atonement imply variously 'unappealing or one-sided' (Tanner 2004) characters of a God that appears to take a sadistic delight in death and suffering.

The importance of this is not merely academic; scholars (Greeley, 1993; Johnson and Greeley, 1995; Unnever, Cullen and Bartkowski, 2006) have linked a person's image of God to their social and political outlook. Holding one's God to be master or judge, rather than a friend or spouse, means that one is more likely to support the death penalty (Unnever, Cullen and Bartkowski, 2006). If the image of the atonement and blood sacrifice is at the forefront of our conception of God, might we, consequently, be less inclined to act with love and charity towards our neighbour? That is not the focus of this essay. However, Tanner (2004) worries that the cross is 'a model for abuse,' while Clark M. Williamson wonders if atonement theories accustom us to violence, racism and holy war with 'violence itself being sacralised, made holy' (Williamson 2010). If atonement theologies move Christianity away from Christ's message, then should we not jettison this piece of doctrine or at least diminish the importance of the crucifixion?.

For Tanner, Christ's death distracts us from his life and ministry in Anselm's satisfaction model. 'The multifaceted character of the atonement' (Beilby and Eddy, 2006) is underplayed by both Anselm and Abelard. 'Obedience to the mission, that is pointedly displayed on the cross, is all well and good but the more important point is what the mission is to which Jesus' life is dedicate' (Tanner 2004) Christ's death obstructs his healing mission of acceptance of sinners and inclusive fellowship. 'Rejection and death stand in the way' (Tanner 2004). Likewise, the resurrection is given no importance in Anselm's model; 'the only purpose of the incarnation was to accomplish a saving death' (Brock and Parker, 2009). The resurrection overcomes the impediment of death and continues this mission. To that extent, she writes, it would have been altogether better if it hadn't happened at all. That is not to say that Christ's essential function might have been accomplished on the day of his Nativity. Such would have been the case had the only requirement been the sacrifice of the

God-man; so Jesus' ministry was by no means superfluous. His life had to be excellent and glorious 'to make ample satisfaction for the sins of the whole world and infinitely more' (Anselm 2010). However, the answer to the question *Cur Deus Homo?* is narrow and simple, that God became man so that a man, free from sin and guilt, to be 'an acceptable sacrifice to God' (Aulén, 2010). Christ's work of redemption appears for Anselm to begin and end, if not on the cross, then at least some time between Gethsemane and Golgotha. Yet it was Jesus' public ministry that gave rise to his death. This fact 'turns our attention away from any exclusive focus on Jesus' death, to the character of the mission' (Tanner 2004).

To bring Christ's life into central significance, Tanner advances something closer to Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor* model. His *Classical* model of atonement recasts the ransom-theory of the patristic church where God descends to man to perform 'atonement as a Divine conflict and victory... over the evil powers of the earth' (Aulén, 2010). She diverges from Aulén in that he considers the incarnation as merely a 'necessary prerequisite' (Tanner 2004) for Christ's struggle with sin and death. Tanner -- in line with her earlier claim about the need for his public ministry -- not unreasonably, moves Christ's whole life to the centre of this struggle. The cross becomes simply the culmination of that fight and it is through the incarnation that the fight with death and sin is engaged and won. Humanity is saved, not through Jesus' death on the cross, but by the incarnation; our humanity uniting with Christ's is 'purified, healed, and elevated -- saved from sin and its effects' (Tanner 2004). The 'mechanism of atonement,' which Tanner says is missing in Aulén's model is supplied by the incarnation and life of Christ. Through the Incarnation the Word becomes comingled with the characteristics of human existence, infusing it with holiness. Humanity is, in short, created anew, sanctified by Christ. This sounds very like Irenaeus: 'For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality' (Roberts et al., 1885). Tanner does not make the connection. However Aulén devotes a number of pages to this connection between incarnation and atonement in *Christus Victor*. The reconciliation between man and God is effected through the incarnation. Through 'the entrance of the Divine into humanity, human

nature is (as it were) automatically endued with Divine virtue and thereby saved from corruption (Aulén, 2010). It is through this mechanism, that humanity can achieve its *At-one-ment* ‘Humanity is a one with the divine in Jesus – on the cross as everywhere’ (Tanner 2004). It is Christ’s Incarnation, not his death, which frees us from the bondage of sin.

This model tries to pull the teeth of Anselm’s juridical model. What occurs on the cross comes too late after the event of humanity’s already-accomplished salvation. Certainly, Christ must suffer, and suffer death; that is what it means to live a human existence. That is in the nature of the flesh and life he has assumed. His death was a necessary condition of his being a man and not, in itself, a necessary condition of salvation; if atonement can only be conceived in terms of God bringing Jesus to death, then there is nothing good about that. Neither is there anything good about the image of God’s slighted honour eclipsing the suffering world and His own law being the sole impediment to reconciliation.

This, according to Tanner, is an outdated system. The laws of chivalry demand satisfaction for God who has been, insulted by an inferior being: man. Man is constitutionally incapable of meeting that demand and must appeal to Christ as his champion. This feudal model of the vicarious satisfaction is, for Tanner, a time-bound, outmoded, medieval idea -- objectionable and incomprehensible to modern ears. It is based on a penitentially-framed honour code of ‘subordinates and superiors’ (Tanner 2004), what Williamson calls, ‘the rigid order of... honour/shame social hierarchy.’ (Williamson 2010). However, this is an unfair criticism. It is a product of Anselm’s own time and, to present-day sensibilities it seems bizarre. However, the images we use now to describe God, heaven or any abstract thing may seem equally nonsensical and grounded in its time. Anselm surely isn’t suggesting that God is sitting on his throne silently fuming at the dishonour that has been made. To suggest as much would be, as Luther says, ‘a fool’s game, such as a swine or cow might join in’ (Aulén, 2010) to guess at the nature of Hell’s gate or the fabric of the banner that Jesus holds in his hand. Anselm’s figurative account points towards a cosmic imbalance, a something-being-not-right in the universe that has its origin and cause in humanity. ‘Sin has damaged relations with God; the

divinely willed 'order' of creation has been violated' (Peterson 2016). We might use metaphors of science, travel, economics or space to fill these depths with meaning. For Anselm, casting about to make sense of our situation, alighted on this commonplace feudal relationship.

This relationship helps to make sense of Christ's duty and obedience and our place in relation to that. Christ endured suffering and died voluntarily. He was 'obedient unto death, even the death of the cross'¹⁰ because he owed obedience to his father, 'maintaining truth and righteousness unflinchingly... he underwent affliction because he persevered in acting obediently' (Anselm 2010). Though this would seem to consolidate a mindset where social reform is impossible, it was written before the Industrial Revolution and our preoccupation with social relations would have been unknown. What was possible was disobedience to God. Framed in this manner, Christ's obedience is no more than the demand that is placed on everyone. He symbolises acting out of truth and love, enacting God's will by carrying on his ministry in dramatic form until the very end. In this, he shows the very limit of what the burden of obedience entails: 'All desire to be happy with him; few wish to suffer anything for him.' (Thomas a Kempis, 2003). This is not far removed from Tanner's incarnational model; Christ died, as he lived, with grace in the most extreme circumstances at the hands of evil men intent on political murder. In this, his death, as Clark M. Williamson says, 'Christ's death is revelatory not expiatory... it reveals or discloses God's love for us.' (Williamson 2010). Anselm seems to understand this. If nothing of Christ's life and work was known outside of the first century, it would have been strange for him to write about the expiatory effects of his death. Jesus lived perfectly and showed humans how to live. However, as I explained, this cannot be the end of things, if all Christ did was map out a way of existing that would reduce fear and guilt. That would be a lukewarm sort of salvation.

Tanner's view fits well into modern theology's emphasis on the saving power of Christ's teaching: Christ's prophetic office at the expense of both his priestly and royal office. His

¹⁰ Philippians 2:8

death becomes *symbolic* of his love. In this, it becomes shorn of its supernatural significance. Christ is understood in a demythologized, secularized way: ‘The traditional “otherworldliness” of Christ is... dismissed’ (Simut, 2013), his divine nature concealed, deep within his human nature, to be considered or ignored as might be required for the purposes of one’s understanding of atonement and salvation. If ‘Sin is a personal act’ (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2019) then such acts exist and the boundaries in which they play are prescribed from within. This tension ‘awakens freedom’s possibility’ (Bernasconi and Judaken, 2012) giving rise not only to both permission and prohibition, but also to the possibility of transgression and all that is concomitant to that: ‘anxiety, fear, conflict and death’. It is through the idea of the incarnation that Tanner sees Aulén’s Christos Victor fight is ‘waged and won’ (Tanner 2004). This, for Tanner, is worked out, not in an individual, but in a sociological context; the saving acts flow to ‘the humanity of Christ in virtue of an already present community with that humanity’ (Tanner 2004). In dying for us, Jesus is transformed into an advocate acting on our behalf, so we no longer have to live ‘in a sin-afflicted, death-ridden world’ (Tanner 2004).

By setting such high store in the therapeutic value of the Christian doctrine of sin, Tanner advances a comfortable at-one-ment for a comfortable time, one that can undertake a programme of internal housekeeping and set the world of sin as ‘the other’. Sin is disavowed, not through the mechanism of atonement, but through a recasting. That would be a convenient evasion. By explicitly retransforming the cross, demythologizing and secularizing it, removing its sacrificial significance and turning it back into an instrument of ‘political execution’ (Tanner 2004). The burden of guilt falls, not on each one of us, but on Roman and Jewish men from the first century, or perhaps more generally as policemen who kneel on another man’s neck. These men become a totem for all that is bad, outside of the tidy, self-regulating community of Christ. When we say that ‘Christians must concede that the Christian doctrine of sin has been tragically misused by Christians’ (Johnson, 2014) often we have in mind *other Christians*. The internal, late-twentieth century self-help mechanism of Tanner’s incarnational model appears permissive of this.

Anselm's satisfaction model, however, grasps nature of sin in its broadest and most destructive: God's entire work 'that work of his so very precious' (Anselm 2010) was wholly ruined. It is also more sensitive to humankind's relationship sin and God. Humans have an instinct for perfection. We perceive it in its absence: 'The righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith... The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness.'¹¹ It is the blessedness for which we were created but cannot ever attain. We glimpse it fleetingly at times and we recognise it. However, we cannot fix it. Even in the transcription of my cells, I find I cannot give what is owed to God, which is that perfection. Anselm says 'Sin is simply not giving God what we owe' and since 'the wages of sin is death'¹² my death is already assured. But my human mind aspires still to perfection, to immortality and to everything that I never could have had, except the world had been made perfect. Mortality, as Boso says, does not 'inhere in the essential nature of man' (Anselm 2010). It is the consequence of sin, but it is also sin itself in a cycle of self-replicating failure: 'Because of the man who was conquered, the whole of humanity is rotten and, as it were, in a ferment with sin - and God raises up no one with sin' (Anselm 2010) Perfection is demanded of us but we cannot match the demand. We are condemned to spending our lives trying to lift ourselves to perfection by our bootstraps. Perfection will not permit imperfection. Imperfection would take something from perfection if that were to happen, which it cannot: 'Nothing can be added or subtracted from the honour of God' (Anselm 2010). Perfection, though, must be restored: the order and the beauty of the universe cannot persist chaotically because all things must come under God. This is a far bigger prospect than the homey self-help philosophy of Tanner's. 'Anxiety, fear, conflict and death' (Tanner 2004) can be suppressed and managed locally and wealth and culture will help here, but it falls short of the reconciliation those who seek religion seem to crave. Her model of atonement, whilst de-centring Christ's death, falls short in providing all that Anselm's model of atonement promises.

¹¹ Romans 1:17-18

¹² Romans 6:23

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