

Why God Became a Man
A Conversation with Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*
By Tami Jelinek

Part One

Is Anselm faithful to Paul's argument in Romans 3?

In Romans 3, Paul precedes his argument for Christ's sacrifice as sufficient for, and accomplishing "satisfaction" (Gr: *Hilasterion*; translated "sacrifice of atonement," or "propitiation," vs. 25) by affirming first that even though our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God, and that the truthfulness of God is increasingly shown in contrast to the untruthfulness of humanity, resulting in God's glory; God is still just in inflicting His wrath upon us:

(5) But if our injustice serves to confirm the justice of God, what should we say? That God is unjust to inflict wrath on us? (I speak in a human way.) (6) By no means! For then how could God judge the world? (7) But if through my falsehood God's truthfulness abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner?

Anselm agrees with Paul that humankind is not excused because of our inability to pay the debt to God we incurred by our sin; but he speculates that the reason we are not excused is that Adam was created with the ability to choose righteousness and not sin, but by choosing sin lost that ability, so that he and all who came after him are to blame for not only our sin, but our inability to overcome it, or make satisfaction for it. In Anselm's words, "Man is blameworthy for not having the ability which he received in order to be able to avoid sin" (CDH: I, 24).¹ Paul on the other hand simply states that humankind is "under the power of sin" and completely unable to overcome it. There is nothing in Paul's argument here that suggests we once had the ability to choose not to sin and lost it

¹ Jasper Hopkins and Herbert Richardson, translators, *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Anselm of Canterbury* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: The Arthur J. Banning Press, 2000), 344.

of our own free will. In fact, based on his earlier statement (vs. 7), Paul may be interpreted as affirming that God decreed our inability to choose righteousness for His glory, which Scripture equates with our salvation (cf. Isaiah 40:5; Luke 3:6). As is often the case with Anselm, his pursuit of reason alone, apart from the Scripture, leads to conclusions unconfirmed by Scripture. Here Paul makes no mention of being under the power of “the Devil,” but rather demonstrates that humankind in our natural, unregenerate condition is altogether unrighteous, and “under the power of sin”—presumably our *own* sin, for which we are indeed responsible:

(9)...we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin, (10) as it is written: There is no one who is righteous, not even one; (11) there is no one who has understanding, there is no one who seeks God. (12) All have turned aside, together they have become worthless; there is no one who shows kindness, there is not even one.

While Anselm confirms our responsibility for our sin, and does not excuse us based on our inability to perform God’s just demand for satisfaction, he diverts his discussion to conjecture about “the Devil,” and replaces Paul’s argument that we are “under the power of [our own, innate] sin” with his speculation that we “allowed ourselves to be conquered by the Devil” (CDH: I, 22).²

Paul continues to lay the foundation for his argument that when we were sinners, we were justly under God’s wrath and in need of an atoning sacrifice (Gr. *Hilasterion*):

(19) Now we know that whatever the law says, it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be silenced, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. (20) For "no human being will be justified in his sight" by deeds prescribed by the law, for through the law comes the knowledge of sin.

² Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 342.

Paul argues that man is made accountable for his sin when he is judged guilty by the law. It is through the law that man has the knowledge of sin. Indeed, in another place in Romans, Paul says, “I would not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, “You shall not covet” (Romans 7:7). Paul is not arguing that we (and likewise Adam and Eve, cf. Romans 5:13) were not already sinners before the law showed us what we were. Quite the opposite—the law reveals to us (as it did to them) our *already existent* guilt. Conversely, Anselm speculates that humankind was created sinless, and with an ability in our natural state to not sin (CDH: I, 22).³

According to Paul, we are judged guilty by the law, and having been judged guilty, we are accountable to God. We cannot be justified by the law—which is really the same thing as saying we cannot justify ourselves, or make “satisfaction” to God by our works. Anselm, in agreement with Paul, affirms humankind’s inability to satisfy God’s justice, or to pay for our own sin, by reason alone, apart from Scripture. However since the law—and the purpose for which it was decreed—is such a foundational component of Paul’s argument in Romans 3, it would be inappropriate to affirm that Anselm is faithful to Paul, when he does not even mention the law as that which convicts humankind’s conscience of sin and renders them accountable to God—thus owing God “satisfaction.”

Paul’s argument here is that we are made righteous (receive the righteousness of God, are justified, or declared righteous) apart from the law (which could justify no one) through faith in Jesus Christ:

(21) But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, (22) the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe.

³ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 342.

Anselm, in discussing how Christ's death made satisfaction for sin, rarely mentions faith, or specifies for whose benefit the satisfaction is performed. In several places he implies that the benefit is universal, restoring all of humankind, or the whole "human race" (CDH: I, 3; I, 5).⁴ According to Paul's argument, the "all" who have sinned are now all justified by grace, through the redemption that is in Christ:

(23) since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; (24) they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,

Anselm's cosmological, biological understanding of "Adam's race" (CDH: II, 8)⁵ would have Paul teaching not merely universal atonement (which Anselm's theory of satisfaction seems to suggest if it is followed logically), but also universal redemption.

Paul enunciates again that the sacrifice of Christ that satisfies God is effective [in justifying the believing sinner] *through faith*, thus limiting its scope:

(25) whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement (*Hilasterion*) by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; (26) it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Again, the requirement of faith for justification is a primary focus of Paul, and barely mentioned by Anselm. This is likely due to his commitment to arguing from reason alone. There is also the strong implication from Paul here that God's righteous judgment demanded satisfaction, through his statement that God restrained His wrath that was justly due for sins previously committed. The sacrifice of Christ so completely satisfied the righteousness and justice of God, that his wrath was justly removed from those believers whose sins justly made them the objects of God's wrath (see also, Ephesians

⁴ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 303; 304.

⁵ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 355.

2:3). According to Paul, when “God put forward Christ as a *Hilasterion*,” He showed his righteousness (i.e., His justice)—He proved that sin would not go unpunished, even though He had shown forbearance for a time. In the “present time,” all of those sins He had “passed over” were accounted for, and punished, when he placed them upon His Son. Now *that’s* satisfaction!

Part Two

How does Anselm understand sin, humanity’s responsibility for sin, and the death of Christ as the sacrifice that satisfies God?

Anselm’s premise upon which he establishes humankind’s responsibility is that “the will of every rational creature ought to be subordinate to the will of God,” and that this is the “debt” all rational creatures owe to God. “To pay this debt is not to sin; to not pay it is to sin.” He also implies that God gave human beings a will which was “able to act” in submission to God’s will. Based upon this premise, that human beings “owe” God the submission of their will to His, and that they were given the ability to pay that debt; when they did not, they “stole” from God the honor that was due Him. “Sin is nothing other than not to render to God what is due.” It is this “repayment of stolen honor” which “constitutes the satisfaction which every sinner is obliged to make to God.” And as long as the sinner does not repay what she has stolen, she remains guilty (CDH: I, 11).⁶ The idea of “repayment of honor that was stolen” as what constitutes “satisfaction” to God seems incongruous with the language of Scripture. As we saw above in Romans 3, the “satisfaction” (Gr. *Hilasterion*) required by God was not a repayment of something that was stolen from Him, but rather an appeasement of His requirement that sin (i.e., the

⁶ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 318-319.

transgression of His law—why not just use the biblical definition of sin here? cf. 1 John 3:4) be punished.

Anselm states, contrary to Scripture, “the Father did not delight in the Son’s torment” (CDH: I, 10).⁷ Yet in Isaiah we read that it pleased the Lord to bruise His Son (Isaiah 53:10); and in this same context we find the concept of Christ’s sacrifice as *satisfaction*: “As a result of the anguish of His soul, He will see it and be satisfied” (Isaiah 53:11 NAS). This is where the unbeliever will accuse God of injustice toward His Son. As “Boso” posits on behalf of the unbeliever, “It would be strange if God so delighted in, or so needed, the blood of an innocent man, that He either would or could only spare the guilty by means of this innocent man’s being put to death” (CDH: I, 10).⁸ And yet, isn’t this what God’s law requires? “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Hebrews 9:22).

Anselm’s assumption that “the Devil” is a personal entity or being which is “tormenting man” with God’s “permission” (CDH: I, 7),⁹ and that Adam was placed in the garden “between God and the Devil, in order that he would conquer the Devil” (CDH: I, 22),¹⁰ is likewise speculative and leads his argument away from a solid scriptural foundation. Yes, humankind deserves to be punished for its sin, and that punishment is spelled out in Scripture: while sinners, as objects of God’s wrath, we were separated from God’s presence (cf. Ephesians 2:3; Isaiah 59:2). The heart of every man and woman is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked (cf. Jeremiah 17:9), and each of us is tempted when we are drawn by *our own lust* (cf. James 1:14). The creature, or “fallen

⁷ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 316.

⁸ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 317.

⁹ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 307-308.

¹⁰ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 342.

angel,” so-called “the Devil,” has nothing to do with it. We were our *own worst adversaries*. And it is in our *own minds* that we were alienated from God, until He reconciled us by His death (cf. Colossians 1:21-22).

Anselm further speculates that when man did not “defeat the Devil,” he “removed from God whatever God had purposed to do with human nature” (CDH: I, 23).¹¹ This view seems to suggest that human beings did this, apart from God’s decree, and as such is an affront to God’s sovereignty over His creation. It also fails to appreciate that righteousness and eternal presence with God *through Christ* was the purpose of God for His covenant people all along. Did not the “fall” reveal to Adam and Eve their already existent need for Christ? They were created “naked.” Is this not what their “nakedness,” and the shame they felt when it was revealed to them that they were naked (i.e., without the garments of salvation, cf. Revelation 3:18; Isaiah 61:10), represent? What if God, in order to show us His great mercy, created us in need of that mercy, and without the ability to perform our own righteousness, so that we could be covered in Christ’s righteousness? What if God, in order to show us His glory (i.e., His light, and His salvation) created us in need of the “God-man” Savior to confer upon us the *Imago Dei* (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:49)? Herein is the grace of God most profoundly demonstrated:

Romans 5:8 God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.

Titus 3:5 He saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy.

¹¹ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 343.

Part Three

What are the strengths and weaknesses of Anselm's argument?

I appreciate the soundness of Anselm's reasoning regarding why the redeemer of humankind had to be divine: If the redeemer was a mere man (created sinless) then redeemed men and women would serve this man, rather than God, as their redeemer. But this, reasons Anselm, would be in conflict with the purpose for which humankind had been created—to serve only God—and therefore redemption would not have accomplished its restorative objective (CDH: I, 5).¹² However, in not pursuing further biblical foundation for his answer to the question, why the redeemer had to be divine, and relying solely on reasoning apart from revelation, his answer lacks the theological depth and richness scriptural authority provides. For example, Jesus Christ is the Messiah and Savior anticipated by Israel's prophets, and according to those prophets, this Savior could be none other than God (Isaiah 43:3; 45:21; Hosea 13:4). It is therefore not possible to call Jesus Christ "Savior" without also calling Him "God." So the same Scriptures that confirm humankind's redeemer *had to be* divine, also confirm the deity of the Son of God, and provide strong support for the doctrine of the trinity. Anselm's nearly exclusive focus on reasoning apart from Scripture sometimes renders him near-sighted, and missing the bigger picture of redemption's story that only divine revelation can unveil.

Anselm is particularly strong in his defense of God's justice, and in his explanation of why God's mercy cannot forgive at the expense of His justice: "It is not fitting that God should forgive sin that goes unpunished;" and later, "if injustice is forgiven out of mercy

¹² Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 305.

alone, then injustice is more at liberty than justice” (CDH: I,12).¹³ With this latter statement he affirms that injustice undermines God’s sovereignty.

Anselm’s argument that God created humankind for a purpose, and since that purpose was thwarted by sin, it is logical that God would redeem humankind from sin *so that* we would fulfill the purpose for which we were created is a strong argument. However his reference to the “human race” needing to be “set free by its very Creator” in this same passage leaves him open to inferences of universal salvation. Has the entire human race been set free? (CDH: I, 4).¹⁴ In another place he suggests that all of humanity was created to enjoy God (CDH: II, 1).¹⁵ If all humanity is not in fact enjoying God, has God failed to achieve His purpose? In presupposing a biological, universal understanding of Genesis creation, rather than seeing it in the context of God’s covenant with His people, Anselm again leaves the door open to a universal understanding of the atonement and redemption.

Part Four

A Biblically, Logically and Pastorally Motivated Critique of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*

In Anselm’s commendation of *Cuer Deus Homo* to Pope Urban II, he loosely quotes Isaiah 7:9 when he states, “Unless you believe, you will not understand.” He appropriately goes on to recognize that the “way in which we ought to advance to understanding” begins from a foundation of faith (CDH: Commendation).¹⁶ Here he finds some affinity with Paul’s prayer for the Ephesians that God would give them a “spirit of wisdom and revelation” so that they would grow in their knowledge and experience of

¹³ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 320.

¹⁴ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 304.

¹⁵ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 350.

¹⁶ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 295.

“the riches of His glorious inheritance” (Ephesians 1: 17-18). But then, in his preface, Anselm states his intention to proceed with his arguments “as if nothing were known of Christ” (CDH: Preface).¹⁷ Even though his stated purpose at this juncture is to provide believers with answers to the questions of unbelievers who find the Christian faith “incompatible with reason,” I question the value of this focus, based on what Scripture affirms about the natural man or woman, to whom God has not revealed Himself:

1 Corinthians 2:14 Those who are unspiritual [natural, unregenerate] do not receive the gifts of God's Spirit, for they are foolishness to them, and they are unable to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

At some point we must conclude that after all the philosophical arguments presented to demonstrate humankind’s need for redemption, there remains the requirement of faith, without which it is impossible to please God (cf. Hebrews 11:6). This is why I appreciate the statement from Anselm’s inquisitor, “Boso”: “right order requires that we believe the deep matters of the Christian faith before we *presume* [emphasis mine] to discuss them rationally...” (CDH: I, 1).¹⁸ In other words, it would be inappropriately presumptuous to think that we can discuss rationally the deep matters of the Christian *faith*—most certainly including (the “God-man”) Christ’s sacrifice and what it accomplished for His people—if we don’t first believe them. Therefore I assert that Anselm is biblically contradictory, if not also logically fallacious, when he states: “Although [unbelievers] seek a rational basis because they do not believe whereas we seek it because we do believe, nevertheless it is one and the same thing that both we and they are seeking” (CDH: I, 3).¹⁹

¹⁷ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 296.

¹⁸ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 300.

¹⁹ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 303.

I also disagree with Anselm's belief that "the divine nature is impassible" and ostensibly cannot suffer (CDH: I, 8).²⁰ I find much more affinity with a later theologian, Jurgen Moltmann (b. 1926) who writes, "If God were really incapable of suffering, he would also be as incapable of loving as the God of Aristotle, who was loved by all, but could not love. Whoever is capable of love is also capable of suffering, because he is open to the suffering that love brings with it."²¹ Or as the Christ hymn of Philippians states, "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:8). To grasp the depth of the agony Christ (who was fully divine) endured on the cross is to grasp the depth of His love for His people, for it was for "the joy set before Him" (Hebrews 12:2) that He endured such agony. God (post-incarnation) now experiences joy in His redeemed people (Zephaniah 3:17; Psalm 137:6), and desires to dwell with them (Psalm 132:13). This is the same joy that was "set before Him" when He endured the suffering of the cross (as God-incarnate). Again, due to his self-imposed near-sightedness, Anselm seems to insinuate that Christ merely suffered as a man, and not as God, in his suggestion that the divine nature cannot be understood to "labor in what it wills to do" (CDH: I, 8).²² Did Christ not experience the agony (not merely as a human being, but as God the Son) of separation from His Father? Is this separation not in fact the death He died, from which we have been made alive in Him (cf. Ephesians 2:6)? When we so quickly dismiss the idea that the Son of God, being in very nature God (cf. Philippians 2:6-9) could and did actually *feel* the shame He despised, because with Anselm we are clinging to the idea that to feel such shame, or to suffer the consequences

²⁰ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 309.

²¹ McGrath, Alister E., ed. *The Christian Theology Reader*. 3rd ed. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 227.

²² Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 309.

of being “made a curse” (cf. Galatians 3:13), are not things that could be experienced by an “impassible” divine being, we miss the magnitude of His sacrifice, and I would suggest, diminish the glory of the cross, and the salvation it accomplished.

It seems that Anselm comes dangerously close to denying the full divinity of the Son, while incarnated in Jesus Christ, when He attempts to explain His “obedience” to the Father: “For even with respect to His humanity He did not have from Himself the will to live justly, but, rather, had it from the Father, so also He could not have had the will by which He willed to die...except from the Father...We cannot deny that the Father drew and moved the Son toward death when He gave Him that willingness” (CDH: I, 10).²³ He goes on to say that the Son exercised His free will, in the same way that all “rational nature freely and without necessity keeps the will which it has received from God,” when the Son “freely and unwaveringly kept the will which He had received from the Father” (CDH: I,10).²⁴ Why not just say succinctly, with respect to Christ’s fully divine nature, that both Father and Son share the same divine will, as they both share the same divine nature and are of the same divine substance? This seems to better preserve the integrity of Christ’s full divinity, even while He was incarnated as a fully human being.

Finally, Anselm is logically strong here: “only a human being ought, but only God can” therefore, the redeemer had to be a “God-man” (CDH: Introduction).²⁵ Hopkins points out a “problem” however, with Anselm’s argument: “The sense in which only a [human being] ought to make atonement is not the same sense in which the God-man ought to make atonement. For a human being of Adam’s race ought to make satisfaction

²³ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 315.

²⁴ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 316.

²⁵ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 143.

because he owes the debt that is incurred due to sin...However, the sense in which the sinless God-man ought make atonement is not that he himself owes.... any debt for sin...Accordingly, Anselm stands accused of equivocation, something detrimental to his line of reasoning” (CDH: Introduction).²⁶ What this analysis misses is an appreciation for the *substitutionary* nature of the atoning sacrifice of Christ. In fact, it is precisely because the God-man owed no debt for His *own* sin that His sacrifice on our behalf was efficacious toward *our* righteousness:

2 Corinthians 5:21 For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

Isaiah 53:5 But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed.

In conclusion, there are few doctrines more significant to believers’ experience of our salvation than the substitutionary nature of Christ’s *satisfying* sacrifice for our sins, which rendered us holy and blameless in God’s sight (Colossians 1:22). No amount of human reasoning alone, and certainly no philosophical argumentation unilluminated by divine revelation, can bring comfort and rest to the souls of God’s people like the assurance of the completed work of Christ we receive from His Word.

²⁶ Hopkins, *Treatises of Anselm*, 144.