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Divine Satisfaction in Tertullian, Augustine, and Anselm

In the annals of Western theology, perhaps no doctrine has occupied the minds of its thinkers so profoundly than that of divine satisfaction. Present as early as the 2nd century in the progenitive writings of Tertullian of Carthage, hailed by many as the Father of Latin Theology, the concept of divine satisfaction and its corollaries were expounded upon in the Early Middle Ages by Augustine of Hippo and brought to a fuller and more systematic development in the High Middle Ages by Anselm of Canterbury. Though these three towering figures lived and operated in different regions and eras of Christian history, each contributed progressively to this flowering doctrine, building upon their predecessors to more precisely explicate both the atonement's inner workings within the relationship of the Father and Son, and also its benefits for the believer. The culminating product of their combined efforts proved immensely valuable in understanding the atonement of Christ, passing the test of time to serve the Church even today.

To fully appreciate the significant contributions of these three theologians, the emergence of Western thought within the history of the Church must first be understood. From the faith's infancy until the fall of Rome, orthodoxy was largely recognized, set forward, and crystallized in the East. It was in such illustrious cities as Constantinople, Alexandria, and Antioch that Christianity's foremost theologians did their work. For example, though Tertullian himself had done much to clarify the Triune nature of God, it would be Origen of Alexandria who cast his imposing shadow over the debate at Nicaea—not the great Latin Father; and it was Easterners

who defended so vigorously the divinity of Christ and the Holy Spirit as co-equal, co-eternal, and *homoousios* persons of the Trinity (e.g. Athanasius of Alexandria and Basil of Caesarea). To further illustrate, all seven of the Ecumenical Councils recognized by both West and East, dating from 325 to 787, were convoked by Eastern emperors and assembled in Eastern cities. Such was the situation both Tertullian and Augustine found themselves in as they strenuously labored to produce and preserve orthodox theology in their Western contexts.

Tertullian flourished during the late 2nd and early 3rd centuries in Carthage—located in the Roman province of Africa. In those nascent days of the Christian faith, what is today recognized as North Africa was in many ways a center of great ecclesial energy and momentum. Further east in Alexandria, the monumental Origen was penning his theological and exegetical treatises concurrent with Tertullian. Later in the Latin Father's life, much of Carthage's activity would be dominated by schism in the wake of intense Roman persecution and equally intense response on the part of the Christians, which would bear major implications for the Church at large. Finally, roughly 160 years after Tertullian's death, the region would boast Augustine of Hippo as champion among its ranks. But until then, Latin theology could look only to Tertullian as its representative of intellectual renown.¹

Today, Tertullian is perhaps remembered best for his pioneering recognition of God as a Triune being, having conceived the very term 'Trinity' in its consensus usage, and more infamously, his sudden and late devotion to the Montanist sect—a schismatic group of frenetic believers whose orthodoxy has been doubted since their inception all the way through the present. And yet, one aspect of Tertullian's theology that has suffered disregard is his placing the believer's act of repentance as the foreground to a wider, cosmic, and eternal setting of divine satisfaction. A trained expert in Roman law, Tertullian understood sin to be a legal transgression

¹ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 213.

against God that demanded some sort of satisfaction. But he spoke of this satisfaction only in terms of the penitent pacifying God's offended wrath in a public confession of sin—known as *exomologesis*. “This act, which is more usually expressed and commonly spoken of under a Greek name, is ἐξομολόγησις, whereby we confess our sins to the Lord—not indeed as if He were ignorant of them but inasmuch as by confession, satisfaction is settled; of confession, repentance is born; by repentance, God is appeased” (Tertullian, *On Repentance*, IX). As a corollary to this man-centric perspective, Tertullian even claimed unbelievers in their sin made satisfaction unto Satan.²

Tertullian's background in Roman law was not the only driving force behind this innovative view of satisfaction. Perhaps just as influential was his austere warfare waged against sinful and worldly behavior. His work *On Repentance* is clearly galvanized by a stern disapproval of certain Christians' unwillingness to participate in *exomologesis* in fear of public shame. “If you shrink back from *exomologesis*, consider in your heart the Hell, which *exomologesis* will extinguish for you” (*On Repentance*, XII). So it is evident Tertullian saw repentance as the primary means of restoration unto God. “For, sinner as I am of every dye and born for nothing save repentance, I cannot easily be silent about that concerning which also the very head and fount of the human race and of human offense—Adam, who was restored by *exomologesis* to his own paradise, is not silent” (*On Repentance*, XII). But what of the role of Christ? Per Tertullian, since the Church is nothing less than the body of Christ, the believer's act of repentance is done not merely to another believer but to Christ Himself. “When... you cast yourself at the brethren's knees, you are handling Christ; you are entreating Christ. In like manner, when they shed tears over you, it is Christ who suffers; Christ who prays the Father for

² Chad van Dixhoorn, *Lecture 4A: Irenaeus & Tertullian*.

mercy.” Upon surveying Tertullian’s thoughts on repentance, it is obvious he believed this divine satisfaction to be accomplished not by the passion of Christ but by the penitence of the Christian.

To current readers, Tertullian’s ideas may appear erroneous if not fatally remote from the pale of life-giving orthodoxy. And yet, they would nonetheless play a decisive role in the maturing of Christian soteriology, which at that time was represented mainly by an Eastern line of thinking. The view of the East perceived salvation not primarily in relation to the satisfaction of divine wrath but as a process of moral growth and refinement—cultivated in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons.³ So while Tertullian’s doctrine of satisfaction failed to recognize the preeminent role of Christ’s atonement, it tilled the dogmatic soil for what was to come and set forth the fact of God’s offended wrath, innovating a schema of which both Augustine and Anselm’s systems would claim descent.

Aside from a few brief sparks of light,⁴ Tertullian would be the first and last glittering lamp of Western theology in the Ante-Nicene Church. As Henry Chadwick so forthwith described, in the middle of the 4th century, “the best guide on advanced theological questions [in the West] remained Tertullian, who had become a Montanist” (*The Early Church*, 213). Much of Latin theology simply borrowed from or translated Greek works. But one advantage the West enjoyed over the East was its colossal baldachin of apostles and martyrs, which provided it the confidence needed to grow beyond its adolescence and blossom into a fully realized realm of expansive Christian theory and practice. While the second half of the 4th century saw men such as Ambrose of Milan and Jerome of Stridon emerge as the first generation of this occidental

³ Chad van Dixhoorn, *Lecture 4A: Irenaeus & Tertullian*.

⁴ I refer to Lactantius Firmianus and Hilary of Poitiers, the latter of whom played an instrumental role in defending Nicene Trinitarianism in the West.

revolution, they were only paving the way for the great North African vagabond-turned-bishop—Augustine of Hippo.⁵

Augustine's adulthood prior to his conversion was marked by rebellious behavior, ideological capriciousness, and half-hearted attempts at Christian conversion. As such, when the troubled yet brilliant soul finally found its rest in God, it displayed a natural predilection toward emphasizing God as the prime mover in man's salvation. Coupled with this notion was Christ's atonement on the cross as a means of satisfaction, though not quite in the sense that would be standardized by future theologians.

Following the general consensus of his time, Augustine believed Adam's fall into sin had imprisoned the entire human race under the regime of Satan—a condemnation enforced in perpetuity via original sin. “By God's just and righteous permission, the sin of the first man put the whole race in the power of the Devil” (Augustine, *The Trinity*, XIII.4). Augustine thereby saw the atonement as satisfactory so as to win man from his captivity to Satan, Christ being the ransom necessary to ensure this cosmic transaction. The mode by which Christ released man from his inherent bondage to the Prince of the Power of the Air was His perfect righteousness, this satisfying the demands imposed for the emancipation of humanity. To Augustine, righteousness precedes power, the latter of which was in the sight of the Devil; but since the Devil lacked any sort of righteousness, Christ's sinlessness was able to circumvent his hold over man and thereby secure man's release.⁶ In this sense, Christ's unjust death “deprived [Satan] of his ‘right’ to power over men”—a privilege granted to believers through faith (*The Trinity*, XIII.4). This was not the first extra-Biblical mention of the Cross as achieving some sort of

⁵ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, 216.

⁶ Augustine of Hippo, *The Trinity* XIII, 96.

transaction,⁷ but Augustine's work was monumental in that it employed and reinforced the concordant view of Jesus' death being a ransom paid to the Devil—not to God.

As in Tertullian's work, Augustine's doctrine of satisfaction perhaps leaves present readers wanting. But it is his achievements that should be recognized first and foremost; unlike his fellow North African predecessor, Augustine placed the act of satisfaction not in the repentance of man but in the death of Christ. He thus perceived most properly the one accomplishing satisfaction but saw with muddled eyes the one being satisfied. It would be another Western theologian nearly 700 years later destined to bring the doctrine of divine satisfaction to its fullest development for the Church prior to the Reformation.

Anselm of Canterbury was among the brightest thinkers of the Western Church's scholastic age. And while those of this intellectually shimmering epoch have been described as mere summators of ancient doctrine,⁸ Anselm was in many ways beyond this sort, demonstrating an audacious and explorative mind. It was he who breathed fresh air into the doctrine of divine satisfaction, awakening it from its centuries' long slumber. Contrary to the prevailing stance of the Church, Anselm redirected the *telos* of the atonement not to the release of captives from the Devil but to the satisfaction of God Himself, asserting the One offended by Adam in the beginning as the One satisfied by Christ in the end. His greatest work, *Cur Deus Homo?*, best illustrates this view.

Anselm's setting was not that of Ancient Rome nor its fall but of the High Middle Ages—a period defined by decentralized governments and the complicated web of feudal relationships. Perhaps influenced by the Medieval system so prevalent in his everyday context,

⁷ The anonymously written *Epistle to Diognetus* beautifully encapsulates the cosmic scenery of Christ's death, describing it as a "sweet exchange" (IX.2-5).

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* V.12, 588.

Anselm made central the idea of man being fundamentally indebted to God.⁹ Man as a creature owes his entire existence to the dutiful rendering of tribute to God—much like a vassal or lord was expected to pay taxes to and provide soldiers for his king. This, man has failed to do. As a just King, God is unable to look past the wrongs done to Him without exacting justice and thereby vindicating His own character.¹⁰ Fallen man cannot right such a wrong, for that which he owes is beyond his capability to disburse as both creature and sinner; yet concomitantly, only man is in a position to make this payment, since it was required not of God to Himself but of man to God.¹¹ Hence, He alone who can represent both parties and successfully satisfy divine wrath must be both God and man—Anselm’s answer to the question: *cur Deus homo?*

It should be noted Anselm’s refined view of divine satisfaction did not operate as cold and impersonal machinery. It was compelled not only by God’s demand for the vindication of His honor but also by His deep love for humanity, these motives being closely intertwined.¹² The end result of the atonement therefore is not a distinction between God’s satisfaction in the restoration of His honor and His satisfaction in the restoration of man unto Himself through Christ. Per Anselm, fundamental to God’s own honor is His original intention for mankind being fulfilled; “God has done... because His love will not leave man in bondage to sin and death...” (Eugene R. Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 57). If humanity were to be left in its fallen state, God’s absolute end for them, which is to dwell with Him in eternal blessedness,¹³ would be left in ruins and His honor thereby tarnished. And ultimately, “it is impossible for God to lose

⁹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?* I.11, 119.

¹⁰ Chad van Dixhoorn, *Lecture 15: Anselm of Canterbury*.

¹¹ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?*, II.18, 176.

¹² Eugene R. Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 57.

¹³ *Ibid.*

His honor” (Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?*, I.14, 123). Thus, it is not one’s individual sins against God that threaten to wound His honor so much as man’s descending course toward damnation over and against his Creator’s intended purpose for him.¹⁴ Anselm’s realization of this wonderful mystery points his readers back to the words of John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, He gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life.”

With this in mind, it may appear Christ’s atonement was compulsory, lest God suffer a tremendous and humiliating loss, and His honor be compromised.¹⁵ But can God be compelled by anything beyond His own self; is the King subject to His own dominion? Anselm thwarts this haunting mirage by asserting that God accomplished all these things firstly for His sake—tethered not by bonds outside Himself but by His very own being and character.¹⁶ He assures his readers to find comfort in this fact, for since God is bound to Himself, grace is promised to the believer.¹⁷ He concludes by evincing once again the wondrous mercy of God—encapsulated in His justice but in this way revealed all the more brilliantly. For Anselm, there is no greater display of mercy than for the Father to look upon the condemned sinner and say unto him, “Receive Christ!” and for the Son to echo forth, “Take me!”¹⁸

Anselm’s break from the traditional Augustinian view of satisfaction did not win over Christendom all at once but in gradual stages over time. Its widespread dissemination was

¹⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?*, II.1, 146.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, II.V, 149.

¹⁶ Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo?* II.5, 149.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, II.20, 181-182.

ensured by the later Schoolmen to come—especially in the writings of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁹ Moreover, Anselm’s seminal work would act as a seed to be watered by the Reformers to come. Many theologians in league with the Reformation notably rejected the centrality of ransom in Christ’s atonement in favor of Anselm’s own position concerning divine satisfaction. But this was taken further, the Reformers emphasizing Christ’s substitutional aspect of the atonement.

Altogether, Tertullian, Augustine, and Anselm represent the development of much of Christian soteriology. For this, their works might rightly be declared the crowning achievement of all Western theology up to the end of the Middle Ages.²⁰ While the definition of the being and essence of God proved to be the great triumph of the East, it was the West that asked and wrestled with the more intimate question, “Why did Christ die for me and what did His death accomplish on my behalf?” Those of Western thought would embrace the atonement not in the vein of Irenaeus but in that of Tertullian, who realized the necessity of divine satisfaction; of Augustine, who placed the responsibility of this satisfaction on Christ; and of Anselm, who located the end of all satisfaction in God. In their intellectual intrepidity and faithful witness to Biblical orthodoxy, the three would inform the progression of orthodox soteriology in the West all the way up to the present day and benefit an uncounted myriad of believers throughout the history of the Church.

I pledge my honor that I have neither given nor received any help on this test beyond that permitted by the instructor in charge.

¹⁹ Eugene R. Fairweather, *A Scholastic Miscellany*, 57.

²⁰ Those in the West to come would further develop this system, grasping Christ as not only man’s savior on the Cross but also his substitute.

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