

Church History (19): Anselm on Christ's Incarnation

"Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109), the first of the great Schoolmen, was one of the ablest and purest men of the medieval Church. He was the most original thinker the Church had seen since the days of Augustine" (Schaff).¹ Born in Italy, he became an abbot in North France in 1078, and the archbishop of Canterbury (England) in 1093. Anselm wrote three works on the incarnation: *On the Incarnation of the Word* (1092), *Why God Became Man* (1094), and *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin* (1099).

I. Anselm on Christ's Incarnation

1. *On the Incarnation of the Word* (1092). The primary purpose of this treatise was to show only the Son became incarnate and not the Father or Spirit. It was in response to "a certain cleric in France who presumed to say this: 'If the three persons are only one thing and not three things, such that they are none the less identical in will and power, then the Father and the Holy Spirit as well as the Son became flesh'."² He later summarized the position of his opponent more fully as follows: "If God is numerically one and the same thing, and if the very same thing is Father and is Son, how did the Father not also become flesh, since the Son did? Therefore, whatever the Father is, the Son is also, and what is affirmed of the Son should not be denied of the Father. But the Son became flesh. Therefore, the Father also became flesh."³ Anselm begins by stressing the need of faith over reason. "Beginnings foolishly, some try to ascend intellectually to those things that first need the ladder of faith, and they sink into many kinds of errors by reason of the deficiency of their intellect."⁴ He felt his opponent was placing reason over faith.

He then provides an important distinction regarding the "unity of substance and plurality of persons."⁵ While each of the three persons share things in common, they also possess things proper to each. "For example, the Father's person is both God, which He shares with the Son, and Father, which is proper to Him. Likewise, the Son's person is both God, which He shares with the Father, and Son, which we predicate only of this person. Therefore, these two persons have one thing in common (i.e. God), and two things as proper (i.e. Father and Son)."⁶ Each person possesses the same essence, while also possessing unique relations. "For we understand everything common to them (i.e. almighty, eternal) only in regard to what is common. And we signify things proper to each (i.e. father or begetter to the Father, and word or begotten to the Son) by the two names, namely, Father and Son."⁷ This maintains, "unity of substance and plurality of persons."

Thus, for Anselm, the two persons (father and Son), "are two things, provided that we understand how they are things. For the Father and the Son are not two things in such a way that by these two things we understand their substance, but that we understand their relations."⁸ By "relations" is meant, the unique relations of the three person to each other. The Father begets, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son. These relations are unique or proper to each person. "There is one God, and this God is three persons (Father and Son and Holy Spirit), and only the person of the Son

¹ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:598

² Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 1

³ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 3

⁴ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 1

⁵ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 2

⁶ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 2

⁷ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 2

⁸ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 2

became flesh (although with the co-operation of the other two persons). And those who deliberately assert anything contrary to these things are not Christians."⁹

Therefore, since the Father and the Son are not two substances, they are not several and distinct from one another as to substance, nor the Father one substance, the Son another; rather, the Father and the Son are one and the same substance. And they are several and distinct from one another as to person, since the Father and the Son are two persons and distinct from one another, and not one and the same person.¹⁰

Within the second half of the treatise (8-16), Anselm addresses the actual incarnation. He first provides two reasons why the Son, and not Father or Spirit, became incarnate. First, because in the incarnation, the Son became the son of man, it is proper for the Son alone to become incarnate. Second, as the one who was to become flesh was to intercede for the human race, and the human mind more appropriately enough conceives a son pleading with his father than one individual pleading with another, although the human, not the divine nature, makes this supplication to the deity.¹¹

He then describes the nature of the incarnation. "For one who correctly understands the Son's incarnation believes that the Son assumed a human being into the unity of His person and not into the unity of His substance. And my adversary foolishly thinks that the Son assumed a human being into the unity of His substance rather than into the unity of His person"¹² Thus, it was the Son alone who became incarnate. "The word was made flesh" (Jn.1:14). Anselm then underscores the fact, that within the incarnation, the Son assumed to Himself a real human nature not a human person. "When the 'Word became flesh', He assumed the nature that alone we signify by the term 'human being' and ever differs from the divine nature; He did not assume another person."¹³ This means, the person of Christ, assumes His personality from the person of the Son. As a result, the person of the Son alone, became incarnate (and not the Father or Spirit).

Therefore, since neither the divine substance can lose singularity, nor the divine relations plurality, when God is generated from God, or God proceeds from God, one thing in God is thus three, and three things are one, and yet the three things are not predicated of one another.¹⁴

2. *Why God Became Man* (1094). The primary purpose of this treatise was to prove the necessity of the incarnation in relation to the atonement. "I have named this treatise *Why God Became Man*, and have divided it into two books. The first book answers the objections of unbelievers who reject the Christian faith because they think it militates against reason, and in the second book, I show that the blessed immortality, the reason behind man's creation, could only become a reality through the agency of a Man-God."¹⁵ The treatise is in the form of a dialog between Anselm and an imaginary friend named Boso. "The treatise, which is in the form of a dialogue, is the author's most elaborate work, and he thought the argument sufficient to break down the objections of Jew and Pagan to the Christian system" (Schaff).¹⁶ He begins Book 1 by stating the question on which the whole work hangs: "By what logic or necessity did God become man, and by His death, as we believe and profess, restore life to the world,

⁹ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 3

¹⁰ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 9

¹¹ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 10

¹² Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 9

¹³ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 11

¹⁴ Anselm, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, 16

¹⁵ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, Preface

¹⁶ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 5:604

when He could have done this through the agency of some other person, angelic or human, or simply by willing it?"¹⁷

For it was appropriate that, just as death entered the human race through a man's disobedience, so life should be restored through a man's obedience; and that, just as the sin which was the cause of our damnation originated from a woman, similarly the originator of our justification and salvation should be born of a woman. Also that the devil, who defeated the man whom he beguiled through the taste of a tree, should himself similarly be defeated by a man through tree-induced suffering.¹⁸

(1) The need for an atonement. According to Anselm, the necessity for an atonement was due man's sin and God's justice. (a) Man's sin. Anselm defines sin as a debt to God. "If an angel or a man were always to render to God what he owes, he would never sin. Then, to sin is nothing other than not to give God what is owed to Him. All the will of a rational creature ought to be subject to the will of God."¹⁹ For Anselm, sin is any violation of the will of God as made known in Scripture. It's failure to give to God the honor that's due Him. "This is the debt which a man owes to God. Someone who does not render to God this honor due to Him is taking away from God what is His, and dishonoring God, and this is what it is to sin."²⁰ Thus, the severity of sin is seen in the transcendence, worth, and honor of God. "Therefore, everyone who sins is under an obligation to repay to God the honor which he has violently taken from Him, and this is the satisfaction which every sinner is obligated to give to God."²¹ Thus, for Anselm, man's problem is twofold: he still owes God perfect honor, and now, in addition to that, he owes God a satisfaction for his sin. "When you give God something of what you owe Him, even if you have not sinned, you ought not to reckon this to be recompense for what you owe Him for sin. For you owe this to God already."²²

Man is unable to repay what he owed before his sin, that is, an obligation not to sin, and the fact that he is in debt as a consequence of his sin is inexcusable. For the very fact of his inability is blameworthy; because it is something he ought not to have, no indeed, he is under an obligation not to have it. Therefore, just as it is blameworthy for someone to have lost that ability which he received in order that he should be able to guard against sin, similarly it is blameworthy for him to have an inability as a result of which he cannot uphold righteousness and guard against sin and cannot, moreover, repay the debt which he owes on account of his sin.²³

(b) God's justice. Having defined sin as a debt, Anselm returns to the main argument: "whether it is fitting for God to forgive a sin out of mercy alone, without any restitution of the honor taken away from Him."²⁴ To forgive a sin out of mercy alone, "is nothing other than to refrain from inflicting punishment. And if no satisfaction is given, the way to regulate sin correctly is none other than to punish it. If, therefore it is not punished, it is forgiven without its having been regulated." And, as "it is not fitting for God to allow anything in His kingdom to go unregulated," "it is not fitting for God to forgive a sin without punishment."²⁵ Anselm then anticipates an objection: "When God teaches us to forgive those

¹⁷ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:1

¹⁸ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:3

¹⁹ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:3

²⁰ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:11

²¹ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:11

²² Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:20

²³ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:24

²⁴ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:12

²⁵ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:12

who sin against us, He seems to be contradictory, as He's teaching us to do something which is not fitting for Him to do Himself (i.e. forgiving others by pure mercy without demanding punishment or vengeance)." He responds: "There is no contradiction in this, because God is giving us this teaching in order that we should not presume to do something which belongs to God alone. For it belongs to no one to take vengeance, except to Him who is Lord of all. I should explain that when earthly powers take action in this way in accordance with right, it is the Lord Himself, by whom they have been appointed for the task, who is acting."²⁶

Thus, the greatest purpose of Christ's atonement, was the preservation of God's honor and justice. "Does it seem to you that He is preserving His honor intact if He allows it to be taken from Himself on such terms that, on the one hand, it is not repaid to Him, and, on the other, He does not punish the person who takes it?"²⁷ "It is a necessary consequence, therefore, that either the honor which has been taken away should be repaid, or punishment should follow. Otherwise, either God will not be just to Himself, or He will be without the power to enforce either of the two options; and it is an abominable sin even to consider this possibility."²⁸ Anselm then clarifies, that in one sense it's impossible for any man to add or subtract from the honor of God. "'For this same honor is, in relation to Him, inherently incorruptible and in no way capable of change."²⁹ But, says Anselm, when a creature does that which he is created to do, he gives honor to God within the created order, and thus manifests God's glory in creation. "When such a being desires what is right, he is honoring God, not because he is bestowing anything upon God, but because he is voluntarily subordinating himself to His will and governance, maintaining his own proper station in life within the natural universe, and, to the best of his ability, maintaining the beauty of the universe itself."³⁰

(2) The nature of the atonement. For Anselm, the death of Christ was a satisfaction, paid to God, not the devil, for the sin (debt) of mankind. This means, Christ's life and death, fully satisfied the justice of God concerning man's debt. This was possible because Christ was sinless Man and eternal God. "No man can be made truly happy, unless the recompense for his sin is paid, which no one should pay except man, who owes it, and yet, no one can pay it except God; thus, it is necessary that a God-Man should pay it."³¹ Anselm then shows, how it was necessary "that God should assume human nature from the race of Adam and from a virgin woman."³² "Just as it is right that a human being pay recompense for the guilt of humanity, it is likewise necessary that the person paying recompense should be identical with the sinner, or a member of the same race. Otherwise, it will be neither Adam nor his race who will be making recompense on Adam's behalf."³³

Thus, according to Anselm, the atonement was both from God and for God. "Anselm rejected the view, widespread among many early Church fathers, that Christ's death was a ransom paid to Satan to free sinners from captivity to him. Satan has not 'rights' over the human race, Anselm argued; he is a robber and an outlaw who has taken us captive unjustly. Christ's death was paid as a ransom, not to Satan, but to God."³⁴ As a result, not only is the atonement not made to Satan, nor is it made for Satan (or the other fallen angels). "For such as man could not be reconciled except by a man-God who was capable of dying, through whose righteousness what God lost through the sin of mankind might be restored,

²⁶ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:12

²⁷ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:13

²⁸ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:13

²⁹ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:15

³⁰ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 1:15

³¹ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 2:7

³² Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 2:8

³³ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 2:8

³⁴ Nick Needham, *2000 Years of Christ's Power*, 2:272

likewise the condemned angels cannot be saved except by an angel-God who would be capable of dying and who would restore by his righteousness what the sins of the others have stolen."

As we have been considering the justice of God and the sin of mankind, we now see that a greater and juster mercy cannot be imagined. What, indeed, can be conceived of more merciful than that God the Father should say to a sinner condemned to eternal torments and lacking any means of redeeming himself, 'Take My only-begotten Son and give Him on your behalf,' and that the Son Himself should say, 'Take Me and redeem yourself.'³⁵

3. *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin* (1099). The primary purpose of this treatise was to show that in the incarnation, the Word remained free from original sin. (1) The nature of original sin. Original sin is received at man's origin, or "after each individual's origin or beginning, being contracted at that particular person's origin."³⁶ Anselm distinguishes between "original" and "personal" sin. "The sin that is contracted at his origin is called 'original,' but the sin that each man commits after he has become a person can be called 'personal' sin, because it comes about through a fault in the person."³⁷ All men are born originally corrupt because of their relation with Adam. For Anselm, original sin includes guilt and corruption. "If Adam and Eve had retained their original righteousness, their descendants would, like them, have been originally righteous. But they committed personal sin, and so whereas originally, they had the strength and integrity to remain righteous without trouble, their whole being was not weakened and corrupted. And because the whole of human nature was contained in Adam and Eve, and noting of it existed outside them, the whole of human nature was weakened and corrupted."³⁸ "If God does not condemn a man except because of injustice, but does condemn him because of original sin, original sin can only be injustice."³⁹

(2) The conveyance of original sin. Anselm maintained that original sin is conveyed to all men as soon as they have a rational soul. "I understand original sin to be simply the sin which is in an infant as soon as he has a rational soul."⁴⁰ To this original sin, is added personal sins as they are committed. "Because original sin is equal in all infants naturally propagated, all those who die in original sin alone are equally condemned. To this (original sin) is added personal sin; and since according to its nature a person is born sinful, the nature is thus rendered the more sinful by the person, because when the person sins, the whole man sins."⁴¹ Thus, for Anselm (as other Scholastics and previous patristics), original sin was washed away through baptism.

There are those who cannot bring themselves to accept that children who die unbaptized are condemned on account of that unrighteousness alone which I described, because no man judges them to be culpable of the sin of another person, and because at such an age, children are not just and have no discernment. In answer to these, it needs to be explained that God ought to act towards children in one way, and man another. For man should not demand from a nature what he has not given and is not due to him, nor is it any more just for a man to accuse a man of being born with a fault he was born with and

³⁵ Anselm, *Why God Became Man*, 2:20

³⁶ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 1

³⁷ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 1

³⁸ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 2

³⁹ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 3

⁴⁰ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 27

⁴¹ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 27

from which he cannot be healed without the help of another. Rightly, God demands from a nature what He has given (i.e. in Adam), and what is justly owed to Him.⁴²

As a whole, Anselm falls short of describing Adam as the covenant head of humanity. He describes man's relation to Adam in a physical and not federal sense. "It cannot be denied that infants were in Adam when he sinned. But they existed causally or materially in him, as they would in the seed. In him they were not other than him, in themselves they are other than him. In him they were he, in themselves they are they. More simply, they were in him, but they did not exist as themselves, because they were not yet themselves."⁴³ While mankind did not personal exist in Adam, they did have some sense of existence. "As it is true that everything that nature procreates from seeds has had some kind of existence in those seeds, so as I have said, all men in Adam, were not other than him."⁴⁴ Thus, for Anselm, all children are born equally with original sin, irrespective of the spiritual or moral condition of their parents. "It seems neither that the righteous by their righteousness lighten the burden of original sin on their children nor that unrighteous parents make it heavier by their unrighteousness."⁴⁵ "I assert that original sin is exactly the same in all infants conceived in nature, as much as the sin of Adam, which is the cause of their birth in sin, pertains equally to all."⁴⁶

There is no doubt that no infant keeps rectitude of will for the sake of rectitude itself. Therefore all infants are equally unrighteous, because they have none of the righteousness which is it each man's duty to have. This destitution of righteousness has descended to all infants from Adam, in whom human nature had robbed itself of that righteousness.⁴⁷

(3) The absence of original sin. At this point Anselm, combines two facts: while Christ possessed Adam's nature, he did not receive it in the same way others do. All men receive their humanity through a father and mother, who impose their will and power upon the offspring. "Down the line of our ancestors, as far as the Virgin His Mother, the will sowed the seed and nature brought it to life, so that the Virgin herself, partly in the natural cause and partly in the cause of the will, took her being from Adam, like all the others: but in her neither the will of a creature sowed her offspring, nor did nature nurture it, but the Holy Spirit and the Power of the Highest effected the miraculous propagation of a man from a virgin woman."⁴⁸ "It was not created nature, nor the will of a creature, nor a power given to any being that bore or sowed that seed; the will of God alone used a new power to set it aside from the Virgin for the procreation of a man free from sin."⁴⁹

It will also be clear from this that the Son of the Virgin is not subject to the sin or debt of Adam. For Adam was in a position only to keep the gifts of righteousness and happiness for those for whose generation he accepted the power subjected to his will. Therefore, he could not transfer these evils to any person, although propagated from him, in whose generation neither the propagating nature given to him nor his will worked anything or had the power to work anything. Thus, it is neither reasonable nor right that these evils of Adam should descend to the man born of the Virgin.⁵⁰

⁴² Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 28

⁴³ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 23

⁴⁴ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 28

⁴⁵ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 24

⁴⁶ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 24

⁴⁷ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 24

⁴⁸ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 23

⁴⁹ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 13

⁵⁰ Anselm, *On the Virgin Conception and Original Sin*, 12