



ATONEMENT VI:

Satisfaction

ST. ANSELM (1033-1109), Archbishop of Canterbury, was the first to develop the satisfaction or commercial theory of atonement. This theory “is articulated in his work, *Cur Deus Homo?* (‘Why Did God Become Man?’).”¹ According to Anselm:

... [N]o sin ... can be forgiven without satisfaction. A debt to Divine justice has been incurred, and that debt must needs be paid. But man could not make this satisfaction for himself; the debt is something far greater than he can pay ... The only way in which the satisfaction could be made, and men could be set free from sin, was by the coming of a Redeemer who is both God and man. His death makes full satisfaction to the Divine Justice, for it is something greater than all the sins of all mankind.”²

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Centuries later, The Westminster Confession of Faith, formulated under the authorization of the British Parliament in 1646, stated:

The Lord Jesus, by his perfect obedience and sacrifice of Himself, which He through the eternal Spirit once offered up unto God, hath fully *satisfied* the justice of his Father; and purchased not only reconciliation, but an everlasting inheritance in the kingdom of heaven for all those whom the Father hath given unto Him.”³

Still later, the American Presbyterian scholar, Charles Hodge (1797-1878), further explored the intrinsic worth of Christ’s satisfaction:

The first point is that Christ’s work was of the nature of a satisfaction, because it met and answered all the demands of God’s law and justice against the sinner. The law no longer condemns the sinner who believes in Christ. Those, however, whom the infinitely holy and strict law of God does not condemn are entitled to the divine fellowship and favour. To them there can be no condemnation. The work of Christ was not, therefore, a mere substitute for the execution of the law, which God in his

sovereign mercy saw fit to accept in lieu of what the sinner was bound to render. It had an inherent worth which rendered it a perfect satisfaction, so that justice has no further demands. . . . No further punishment can justly be demanded for that offence. This is what is called the perfection of Christ's satisfaction. It perfectly, from its own intrinsic worth, satisfies the demands of justice."⁴

Inevitably, however, the satisfaction theory of the atonement has been subject to critical review, appraisal and rejection from the time of Anselm until now. These critiques must subsequently be explored. Meanwhile, let us recall the promise: "He shall see of the travail of his soul, and shall be *satisfied*: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many" (Isaiah 53:11, emphasis supplied).

Endnotes

1. Wikipedia, "Anselm of Canterbury," at en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anselm_of_Canterbury.
2. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Doctrine of the Atonement," at www.newadvent.org/cathen/02055a.htm.
3. Charles Hodge, "The Intrinsic Worth of Christ's Satisfaction," at www.ccel.org/ccel/hodge/theology2.iv.vii.ii.html (emphasis supplied).
4. *Ibid.*

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