Third Short Paper

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*Cur Deus Homo* by Anselm of Canterbury

Anselm of Canterbury was born in northern Italy but soon moved to France, where he gained a reputation as a teacher at the Normand Abbey of Bec. Later he was invited to England to become archbishop of Canterbury. He came to prominence and played a strategic role at the dawn of the theological renaissance of the twelfth century. Many theologians consider his work *Cur Deus Homo* to be his most important, because of its long-lasting affect upon theology, specifically, theologies of the atonement, both Catholic and Protestant.[[1]](#footnote-1) As a scholastic, Anselm highly esteemed human reason. He sought to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christian faith and present an apologetic argument that would both strengthen the faith of Christians and answer the questions of skeptics.[[2]](#footnote-2)

In this paper, I will show that the thesis of *Cur Deus Homo* was that the Incarnation of the Son of God was the only possible solution for the great dilemmas faced by God and man. Man faced a great dilemma because he owed God a life of obedience, but had failed to live up to that obligation. He thus robbed God and owed Him a debt he could not pay. How then could he ever be forgiven? God faced a great dilemma because He could not allow His purposes to be thwarted for man, yet man had incapacitated himself. God could not just fulfill man’s purpose for him; after all, it was *man’s* purpose. But no man could now fulfill it. Man deserved punishment, but if God just destroyed him, He would seem unable to accomplish what He set out to do. Anselm’s thesis can be demonstrated by examining these dilemmas from his perspective. If we understand the problems clearly as he saw them, we will also understand his thesis that the Incarnation was the best and in fact, the only possible solution for them.

Why God Became Man is written in the form of a dialogue between Anselm and a supposed disciple of his named Boso, who asks his teacher a series of questions about the purpose of the Incarnation. Anselm used this strategy to make his presentation more understandable and bring out the many issues involved.[[3]](#footnote-3) Early in the discussion, Boso points out that to many, the Christian doctrine that Christ had to die for our sins is a ridiculous idea that makes no sense. Why would God have to become a man and suffer such ignominy and pain? Surely there must have been other, less difficult ways by which God could have saved man?[[4]](#footnote-4)

Anselm devoted chapters to answering Boso’s question. He explained the dilemma caused by man’s sin and failure to fulfill God’s purpose in creating him, and demonstrated why it was more serious than most recognize, and more difficult to resolve. Since God had a purpose for creating man, fulfilling that purpose is what man owes God. It is his duty to render to God what God made him for and expects of him. In fact, Anselm says the essence of sin is to not render to God His due.[[5]](#footnote-5) Adam and Eve, for example, owed complete loyalty and obedience to God. Their duty was to live their lives in accordance with His truth. God also made them intelligent and holy in order to enjoy happiness in life, which was His purpose for them. But their sin thwarted that purpose, took from God what was rightfully His, and made their lives miserable at the same time.[[6]](#footnote-6) In a sense, the devil stole Adam and Eve from God by tempting them to sin, and they stole from God by not being loyal and obedient to Him.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Whoever does not obey God robs Him of His due and dishonors Him. Such a crime cannot be paid back merely by repenting and agreeing to do what is right, for that was owed in the first place. There must also be a payback or satisfaction made, greater than what was stolen.[[8]](#footnote-8) There is nothing greater or better than God, and no higher purpose than maintaining His honor. Robbing Him is therefore a far graver sin than most ever realize. How can such an affront to the Most High God ever be atoned for and repaid?[[9]](#footnote-9)

Man’s debt to God is very great, but he is now too weak and sinful to live the life God requires of him, and has nothing with which to satisfy his great debt. Neither does he have any excuse, since God warned him in the first place what to avoid. Anselm says he is like a servant who has been given a task to do and at the same time warned to avoid falling into a ditch. But he has purposefully thrown himself into that ditch and can now neither escape the ditch nor do what his master originally ordered. “Just so inexcusable is man, who has voluntarily brought upon himself a debt which he cannot pay, and by his own fault disabled himself, so that he can neither escape his previous obligation not to sin, nor pay the debt which he has incurred by sin.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Man was supposed to defeat the devil; instead, he let the devil defeat him and rob both him and God. Now he has no chance of defeating him.[[11]](#footnote-11) He was supposed to live a blessed life of happiness with God, but no sinner can be truly happy, so again, he has failed to be what God intended. He has not only ruined his own life and future, he has dishonored the most valuable Person in the universe and robbed Him of His glory. He needs to defeat the devil and pay God more than he originally owed in order to satisfy the demands of justice.[[12]](#footnote-12) But to pay God back in that way and defeat the devil is exactly what man can no longer do. His dilemma is truly great!

There is still more difficulty however, and *Cur Deus Homo* reveals yet another aspect of the great dilemma of salvation. This is the more “God-ward” aspect, because it deals with the dilemma God faced in order to save man. How could He show love and mercy to man, forgive his sin and restore him to his original purpose, and at the same time maintain justice, honor, and respect for His law? Beyond this, God made man for a purpose which he could no longer fulfill, so it looked as though God had failed and was unable to accomplish what He intended. This dishonored God according to Anselm, and was an “unseemly falling off from His design,” which simply could not be allowed.[[13]](#footnote-13) But how could it be rectified, since man no longer even had the capacity to live as God required? How could God defeat the devil through man, since man had become a slave to the devil and to sin? Man had totally failed God, robbed God, and dishonored God, and deserved the highest form of punishment. But to merely destroy man would still rob God of what He had originally intended, and not fulfill His purposes.

Some would ask why God could not simply forgive man on the basis of His compassion. But Anselm points out that the situation is more complicated than that. Were God to simply forgive, it would violate His own standards of justice and further dishonor Him. If the guilty were simply forgiven without making any payment for their wrongdoing, sin would be unpunished, “undischarged” throughout the universe.[[14]](#footnote-14) If God were to do nothing with sin, then the guilty and not guilty would be treated equally, which would be very “unbecoming” to God. It would actually make Him unjust and prove that the universe is not subject to any law. It would be unjust of God to reward a person for stealing from Him, and grant them happiness when they had sinned against Him. No one should be happy or rewarded who has not put away their sin and paid the price for it. But no man is able to pay God or totally put away their sin. So all are miserable and none deserve to be happy. How can man be saved if he doesn’t pay what he owes, and shouldn’t be saved without paying? How can God show compassion without violating His own justice?

So then, man has a great dilemma in that he owes a debt to God he is unable to ever pay, yet unless he pays it, he can never be happy and fulfilled in life. God has a great dilemma in that He wants to forgive and restore man, so that His purposes for him might be realized, but at the same time, His justice will not permit this unless and until His honor is restored and the debt owed Him satisfied. By expounding upon these dilemmas in detail, Anselm has brought his readers to the realization of how serious a problem both mankind and God face because of man’s sin. Someone has said that a diamond shines brightest when placed upon a dark background. This is what *Cur Deus Homo* does – it paints the very dark background of these dilemmas so that the beauty of the “diamond,” God’s solution, the Incarnation of God in Christ, can be seen and appreciated.

Man owed God, but could never pay his debt. Man was supposed to live a life of total obedience, but when he failed to do so, he permanently diminished his capacity to obey. Man was supposed to defeat the devil but he was defeated by the devil. Man was supposed to glorify God and bring Him honor by obedience, but instead, he dishonored Him by going his own way. Man was supposed to be happy and blessed in God’s presence forever, but instead he was exiled from God. Only God had the power to do what was needed, but He could not do it as God. He did not owe any debt, and He could not simply do for man what man was supposed to do for himself, because if He did, man still would not be fulfilling his obligation and pay back what he owed. It seemed that no man would ever be able to fully live the life God intended and His purposes for man would forever be thwarted. These terrible, seemingly unsolvable dilemmas were the reason why God became man.

God had to clothe Himself with the humble robe of human flesh and become the God-Man, for only then could He, as a man, could do all that man was required to do. He would have to be born of a woman and live as man with all his limitations. He would have to pay to God what man owed, living the life God required, then suffering in man’s place to pay his debt, even though He Himself owed nothing.

Anselm explains that God had to truly be a man. He was born of a virgin who was purified of her own sin “retroactively” as it were, because she would look in faith to the sacrifice her Son would offer.[[15]](#footnote-15) That way He would be human, yet untainted by sin. He willingly suffering the punishment man deserved in perfect obedience to His Father’s will. Coupled with the supreme worth of His Person as the Son of God, this made His sacrifice of infinite value, more than enough to pay off all the amassed debt of mankind.[[16]](#footnote-16) As man, Jesus defeated the devil and fulfilled God’s purposes for man. As man, He paid man’s debt and satisfied God’s justice. Christ’s Incarnation and death was more than sufficient to make salvation, happiness, and immortality available to man, while at the same time satisfying all requirements to restore abundantly the glory and honor of God. Thus, Anselm’s thesis is demonstrated: The Incarnation of the Son of God was necessary for the “satisfaction” of God, and the only possible resolution of the great dilemmas faced by God and man.

Bibliography

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1. Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction* 6th ed., Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017. 31, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus Homo*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, [http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/ basic\_works.html](http://www.ccel.org/ccel/anselm/%20basic_works.html) (accessed April 22, 2017). 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Anselm, Ibid, 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid, 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Anselm, 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid, 192. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid, 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Ibid, 205. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ibid, 233. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Anselm, Ibid, 230. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid, 234. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Anselm, 203. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Anselm, 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid, 251. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)