

Article reprinted from *Cross+Way* Issue Spring 1998 No. 68

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SATISFACTION

A striking omission in the new Draft Eucharistic Prayers highlights a major doctrinal concern.

by **David Phillips**

New Eucharistic Prayers

As part of the process of liturgical revision leading to the new Common Worship services, draft Eucharistic prayers have been sent to some parishes for testing. One of these prayers is a modified form of the fourth prayer in the ASB but now called Prayer C! As in the ASB this will be re-structured for the BCP order service, which in Common Worship is to be known as Rite 2 in Contemporary Language.

Overall Prayer C improves on the ASB. The fourth prayer in Rite A contains these words in the 'declaration':

he made there a full atonement for the sins of the world world, offering once for all his one sacrifice of himself.

In view of the debates about the meaning of 'atonement' this is rather vague and weak in comparison to (with) the Book of Common Prayer which reads:

who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation and satisfaction for the sins of the whole world.

The new draft prayer C has:

who made there by his one oblation of himself once offered a full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the whole world.

Setting aside the matter of whether 'oblation' is contemporary English, and whether its repetition in the BCP is significant there is a noticeable absentee - 'satisfaction'! Of course, it could be argued that words are not that important. However, when at a meeting of the Rites A & B Revision Committee the question was asked about what had happened to 'satisfaction' one person responded, does anyone believe in satisfaction these days? Reassurance was given.

Satisfaction not guaranteed

The argument for the retention of 'satisfaction' is that the doctrine of Satisfaction is true. It ought to be enough to say that the Bible clearly teaches it but some, especially some fashion-following evangelicals, assert that Scripture has been misread on this issue for at least a thousand years. Therefore appeals to Reformation worthies, or the doctrine of the Church of England (in particular Article XXXI) are dismissed because their views need to be revised

In 1931 Gustav Aulen published his work *Christus Victor* which claimed that the doctrine of the atonement had changed through history and that until the Middle Ages Christians had a different view. Aulen now appears to have overstated the evidence but also others have built on what he said in a way that was unwarranted. Hence the accusation that the doctrines of Substitution and Satisfaction are wrong.

Therefore, in seeking to defend Satisfaction it is best to appeal to one of those who Aulen cites as holding a contrary view. There can be no better place to turn than that wonderful piece of apologetic, *The Incarnation of the Word* by the great defender of the faith, Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria (dates c296-373).

Why did Christ Come?

In *The Incarnation*, Athanasius addresses the question of why the eternal Word came into the world, and turns this to a gospel defence and appeal.

Logically he begins with creation ex-nihilo (Ch 3) by the Word. Man is made of mortal matter, but incorrupt because made in the image of God. By transgression man became corrupt and under the condemnation of death - prone to our own mortality (Ch 4). We are thus the cause of our own corruption and death (5:1). Death gained 'a legal hold over us and it was impossible to evade the law since it had been laid down by God because of the transgression' (6:2).

For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death'.

Athanasius

The great dilemma

This produces a great dilemma. On the one hand 'to leave men to the current of corruption ... would be unseemly; and unworthy of God's goodness (6:7). But, 'on the other side the just claims of God lie against it: that God should appear true to the law He had laid down concerning death (7:1).

More than once Athanasius declares 'what should God do?'

The answer is the heart of the glorious gospel: 'For this purpose, then, the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God comes to our realm ...' (8.1). Athanasius goes on to explain this coming; that he took 'unto Himself a body, and that of no different sort from ours' (8:2). Only by death 'could the corruption of men be undone' and therefore 'He gave (his body) over to death in the stead of all, and offered it to the Father' (8:3). Two reasons are given for this:

- Firstly, that 'the law involving the ruin of men might be undone (inasmuch as its power was fully spent in the Lord's body...).
- Secondly, that he might turn men 'again toward incorruption, and quicken them from death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of the Resurrection...' (8:4).

Therefore, 'by offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent. For being over all, the Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by his death' (9:2).

In later chapters Athanasius goes on to give a second reason for the incarnation, that through the Word we might know God. The main thrust is then to attempt to convince and convict his readers of the truth of the gospel.

It will be seen quite clearly therefore that though the language is not as developed as it was later to become, Athanasius has here all the components of the doctrine of the Atonement.

The death of Christ:

- is clearly a substitute - 'an equivalent', 'in the stead of all'.
- is a 'sacrifice' and an 'offering'.
- is a satisfaction for he 'satisfied the debt'.

Satisfaction is evident in three further ways:

- the 'honour' of God is upheld - what he has made does not come to nothing.

- the 'justice' of God is upheld - His word is kept, and particularly
- the 'law' is upheld - the 'penalty of death' is carried out.

Two further points should be noted, firstly to do with wrath and secondly to do with victory.

Athanasius does not speak of 'wrath' in *The Incarnation*. It should be remembered however that wrath is simply an aspect of justice, and that the wrath of God is ultimately revealed in the 'penalty of death' and being 'everlastingly ... in death and corruption.' Therefore, the death of Christ clearly turns back the wrath of God because the debt is 'satisfied' and 'paid' (20:2).

Aulen claimed that the early theologians almost exclusively spoke of the atonement as victory over death and the devil. Athanasius frequently speaks of the 'victory over death', and used the language to great effect, for example, 'death had the mastery over them as king' (4:4). Most of this language comes in the second half of his work. It is the language of the gospel preacher and apologist, using the vivid imagery of death and its power vanquished. However, he only does this having previously laid a solid foundation in the first nine chapters of *The Incarnation*.

Gustav Aulen himself conceded that Athanasius does not fit neatly into his model of the early view. This is clearly because Athanasius sets out what we might call a systematic theology at the start of *The Incarnation*. Aulen accepts that for Athanasius 'the work of Christ ... is the victory over death because it is a victory over sin.'¹ However, this still fails to go back far enough in the argument Athanasius mounts, for both the victory over death and the victory over sin are merely consequences (albeit glorious consequences) of the fact that the honour of God and the justice of God are satisfied, and upheld, by the sacrifice of the Word.

As Aulen notes Athanasius nowhere gives much consideration to the victory over the devil.

The purpose of this article has been to show that the prevailing view today, that satisfaction is neither biblical nor patristic, is false. It has been shown that when Athanasius mounted his clear and systematic presentation of the primary reason for the incarnation of Christ he set out a doctrine of Substitution, Sacrifice and Satisfaction. In the work of evangelism, as with any gospel preacher, he used the imagery people would most relate to - victory over death - but behind this lies the doctrine of satisfaction - that Christ 'satisfied the debt'.

Quotations from:

The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers - Second Series Volume 4 (edited by Philip Schaff). The 38 volumes of the writings of Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers cost in the region of £1,000.

All of these, together with around 300 other works by Aquinas, Bunyan, Calvin, Denney, Edward, Finney and many others are all available on a single CD-Rom as *The Master Christian Library Version 5* by Ages Software, Albany, USA 1997 at about £60 from good Christian bookshops.

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Endnote:

1. Gustav Aulen *Christus Victor* (London SPCK 1931) p60