

# Anselm & the Necessity of the Atonement

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## The Development of the Doctrine of the Covenant (6)

### (I) Introduction

In the first issue of our series on the development of the doctrine of the covenant, we defined the covenant of grace as *a bond of friendship between the Triune God and His elect people in Jesus Christ (BRJ 33)*. The next two issues examined the views of the early church on the covenant and more particularly their dogmas of the Holy Trinity and the Person and natures of Christ, doctrines foundational to the truth of God's covenant (*BRJ 34 & 35*). The development of the doctrine of the covenant from the early church to the Reformation is followed by a consideration of the views of three individual theologians: Augustine and sovereign grace (*BRJ 36*), John of Damascus and the perichoresis (*BRJ 37*) and (now) Anselm and the necessity of the atonement. Thus we move geographically from Africa (Augustine) to Asia (John of Damascus) to Europe (Anselm) and doctrinally from soteriology (sovereign grace) to theology (the perichoresis) to Christology (the necessity of the atonement).

Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109) is one of the most important medieval theologians. If Bede is the most historical, and Wycliffe the most biblical, Anselm is the most philosophical of English pre-Reformation thinkers.<sup>1</sup> Now this is not necessarily, or even, perhaps, ordinarily, a good thing, but if to it is added a dash of originality, and, in many areas, a high degree of theological acumen, we can understand why Anselm has always commanded interest and respect. In the history of the western church, Anselm is seen as marking the beginning of the scholastic period, but his real significance lies in two theological works—*Proslogion* (which contains his famous ontological argument for the existence of God) and *Cur Deus Homo* (which seeks to answer the most profound of questions: Why did God become man?). The latter is Anselm's most valuable work, for it marks a real progress in the history of dogma. "With the *Cur Deus Homo*," Philip Schaff tells us, "a new chapter opens in the development in the doctrine of the Atonement."<sup>2</sup> We would add that this book also constitutes a step towards a

<sup>1</sup>Though born in Aosta, Italy, and spending a lot of time in France, his archbishopric in Canterbury forever associates him with England.

<sup>2</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 5 by David S. Schaff (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrikson, repr. 1996), p. 604.

deepened understanding of God’s way of restoring covenant fellowship with man. Thus, through the dialogue between Anselm and his pupil (Boso) in the *Cur Deus Homo*, it has pleased the Holy Spirit to lead the church more fully in the truth.<sup>3</sup>

## (II) Analysis

For Anselm, fallen man is wholly ruined, for he is given over to the power of the devil and death (*Cur Deus Homo* I:7, 9; II:2).<sup>4</sup> Anselm is very clear on the federal headship of Adam (I:3, 18; II:8), and the effect of Adam’s sin on the whole of his posterity—Christ excepted (II:18a)—continually stating that all men partake of his corruption and sin (I:3, 18, 23, 24; II:8, 16, 18a). God’s just judgment on man compounds his misery, for He decreed that man “should not henceforth of himself have the power to avoid sin or the punishment of sin” (I:7, cf. I:18). To the objection that since man is unable to avoid sinning, God ought not judge him, Anselm makes a good reply. He likens man to a slave whom his master has assigned work, and warned against falling into a deep ditch, from which he would be unable to extricate himself. The slave, despising his master’s command, promptly jumps into the ditch, and so is unable to complete his task. Similarly, man’s impotence serves rather to “increase his crime” and to “double” his sin, for “his very inability is guilt, for he ought not to have it” (I:24).<sup>5</sup>

Anselm defines sin as “nothing less than, not to render to God his due” (I:11). Sin is so heinous (I:21) because it is *against the supreme justice and holiness of God*. Anselm teaches the *spirituality* of true obedience, for without “*uprightness of will ... no work is acceptable*” to God (I:11). It is no wonder that Boso is “alarmed” (I:22) at the great burden (I:21) and vast debt (I:24) of sin.

However, God wills to save mankind (I:25). This divine will is a *willing necessity*, for He is not constrained by anything outside of Himself, but only from “the necessity of maintaining his honour; which necessity is after all no more than this, viz., the immutability of his honour” (II:5).

<sup>3</sup>“Boso takes the part of the ‘unbeliever,’ at least in principle, though as the two become more and more engrossed in the discussion he slips out of his role from time to time” (Gillian R. Evans, *Anselm* [Wilton, Connecticut: Morehouse-Barlow, 1989], p. 72).

<sup>4</sup>All quotations from *Cur Deus Homo* are from S. N. Deane’s translation in Charles Hartshorne (ed.), *St. Anselm: Basic Writings* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1962). Another translation is found in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham* in The Library of Christian Classics, vol. 10, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1956), pp. 100-183.

<sup>5</sup>Similarly David, after confessing, “Against thee, thee only have I sinned,” adds, “I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me,” not *mitigate* but to *aggravate* his sin (Ps. 51:4-5).

Anselm sees another factor in God's will to save man: His love. Anselm often speaks of God's love or compassion (e.g., I:3, 6, 23, 24, 25; II:16, 20), and it is at the very least implied in Book I, chapter 9, where he mentions the council of the Trinity regarding man's redemption.<sup>6</sup>

But how is God to save man? Boso proposes a *sinless human being not descended from Adam* as man's saviour (I:5). Anselm rightly argues that the man who would rescue mankind from Hell would deserve religious service, so this would never do (I:5). Anselm could have argued here, as he does elsewhere (II:8), that such a one not of Adam's race, lacks essential solidarity with our humanity. Furthermore, he could have shown that a man, even a sinless man, could never be of such *intrinsic worth* as to redeem the vast host of the elect. Also, if Anselm had not been bound to avoid references to the Bible, he could have pointed out that it teaches that the saviour had to be a descendent of Adam, Abraham, David, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Anselm's argument against a sinless man as our deliverer also closes the door on the notion of a *good angel* as our saviour. For how can a man, who was intended to be "an *equal* with the holy angels" be the *servant* of an angel (I:5)? The arguments used against the sinless man as saviour, based on the need for a solidarity with the human race, are even more forceful with regard to an angel.

A third option is that God might save us by *divine compassion without regard to justice*. Anselm feels that this "alternative" is the most serious contender, as does Boso, who, as devil's advocate, repeats the charge of the unbeliever:

If you say that God, who, as you believe, created the universe by a word, could not [save man without satisfaction] by a simple command, you contradict yourselves, for you make him powerless. Or, if you grant that he could have done these things in some other way, but did not wish to, how can you vindicate his wisdom, when you assert that he desired, without any reason, to suffer things so unbecoming (I:6)?

Some time later, Anselm returns to this objection: "For God to put away sin by compassion alone, without any payment of the honour taken from him," he

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<sup>6</sup>Contrast H. D. McDonald's comment on Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*: "the love of God is given no emphasis as a motive in his scheme of redemption" (*The Atonement of the Death of Christ: in Faith, Revelation and History* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985], p. 171). For Anselm, his treatment of the honour and justice of God only serves to magnify the love of God in saving us (II:20).

<sup>7</sup>See the first few chapters of Book I and Anselm's "Preface" to *Cur Deus Homo*. Anselm, however, does not really succeed in this.

variously describes as “not right,” “not fitting,” “not proper,” “unbecoming,” “incongruous” and “inconsistent” (I:12). He proceeds to give five arguments, the heart of which is that God, *as God, must* punish sin (I:12). Boso then raises a further question: if man can forgive sin without satisfaction, why cannot God (I:12)? Anselm agrees that God is “so merciful as that nothing more merciful can be conceived,” but adds that “we ought so to interpret these things as that they may not seem to interfere with his dignity.”<sup>8</sup> Just as God cannot lie—and this far from proving any deficiency in God, rather argues the excellency of His veracity—even so He cannot be merciful in any way inconsistent with His own divine character. For Anselm, if we ever conceive of God as being merciful in this way, we should be forced to conclude that the one we are thinking of is not God (I:12). For the creature to take away the honour due to the Creator without restoring what he took away is “a thing than which no greater injustice” can be suffered. Since “there is nothing more just than Supreme Justice,” which is God, and God “maintains nothing with more justice than the honour of his own dignity,” “the honour taken away must be repaid, or punishment will follow.” Boso concurs: “I think nothing more reasonable can be said” (I:13).

So far Anselm has argued (1) that man is in desperate need of salvation; (2) that God wills to save man; and (3) that it is impossible for God to save humanity through a sinless man, or a good angel, or an act of God’s forgiveness *solely* of mercy. With the establishment of these three foundational truths, the way is prepared for Anselm to further develop his thesis: the Incarnation (and death) of the Son of God was the only way to save mankind.

God, in His wisdom and grace, chose Jesus Christ, who is both *God and man*, to be our deliverer. Anselm’s Christ is the Chalcedonian Christ.<sup>9</sup> He is “very God and very man, one person in two natures, and two natures in one person” (I:8), and that Person is the eternal Son of God (II:13). The “Chalcedonian Definition” is particularly evident in Book II, chapter 7. Here Anselm rules out any “mixing” of the two natures into a third type of being, who is neither God nor man, as well as excluding the transmutation of Christ’s God-head into His humanity or vice versa.

Anselm argues that since God is “beyond doubt impassible” (I:8, cf. II:12), Christ had to be man in order to suffer (e.g., II:18b). The death of Christ Jesus,

<sup>8</sup>If God forgave sins without satisfaction, He would show more interest in the salvation of sinners, than in His own glory (cf. James H. Thornwell, “The Necessity of the Atonement” in *The Collected Writings of James Henry Thornwell*, vol. 2 [Carlisle, Pennsylvania: BOT, repr. 1974], pp. 210-261).

<sup>9</sup>See the *Creed of Chalcedon* (451).

being that of a sinless man, and being “above the call of duty” (II:11, 18b), and being *freely* offered (I:9; II:11, 14, 18b, 19), was so great a gift that it deserved a reward (II:20). However, man’s debt is so great that the satisfaction of it has to be greater in value than an infinite number of worlds, in fact, all that is not God (I:21; II:14). Thus it is absolutely necessary for our Redeemer to be true God also, for only then is Christ’s death of “infinite value,” and only then can He “pay what is due for the sins of the whole world” (II:14, cf. I:21; II:6, 11). Therefore the Almighty can “reconcile sinners to God” only by a “man, who must be at the same time Divine” (II:15).<sup>10</sup> For Anselm, the death of Christ is so great that it can save Christ’s murderers (II:15), and men from all ages, for its efficacy is retroactive (II:16, 17).<sup>11</sup> Thus God, in Christ, restores the honour due to Himself as the blessed Father, Son and Holy Spirit (II:18b), and shows us the greatness of His love and compassion (I:3), that He might be just (or “honourable,” as Anselm would say), and the justifier of him who believeth in Jesus (cf. Rom. 3:26).

### (III) Evaluation

For Gordon Clark, Anselm’s “fatal flaw” is his profession “to obtain the doctrine of the Satisfaction without depending on Scripture.”<sup>12</sup> Without going too far into the difficult and oft debated subject of Anselm’s view of the relationship between faith and reason, and the nature of a “rational proof,” we can say that Anselm did seek to present the biblical position on the atonement, as he understood it.<sup>13</sup> No doubt, as he says himself, he could have filled out much more about the life of Christ had he been allowed to use the Scriptures (II:11), but still the debate moves within the ambit of *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding).<sup>14</sup> However, a thoroughly Reformed treatment of Christ’s atonement (and indeed all other doctrines) requires solid biblical exegesis rather than “reason” or “human experience.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Similarly, Anselm says that since the required satisfaction is one which “none but God can make and none but man ought to make, it is necessary for the God-man to make it” (II:6).

<sup>11</sup>“Such virtue is there in his death that its power is extended to those far remote in place or time” (II:16, cf. *Westminster Confession of Faith*, VIII:5).

<sup>12</sup>Gordon H. Clark, *The Atonement* (Jefferson, Maryland: Trinity Foundation, 1987), p. 81.

<sup>13</sup>In Book II, chapter 19, Anselm says to Boso, that in their discussion, “by the help of God, we have somewhat examined” “the Scriptures, which rest on solid truth as a firm foundation.”

<sup>14</sup>Yet it cannot be denied that *Cur Deus Homo* was also designed as an apologetic to convince “infidels” (I:1-6; II:22) and that Anselm speaks of “infallible reason” (II:21), though he also, in a different context, refers (depreciatingly) to “mere reason” (II:11).

For Anselm's *honour* of God, the Reformers and their successors have substituted the *justice* of God in keeping with the biblical terminology and idea. Although it is often alleged that Anselm's use of the term "honour" owes more to medieval and feudal imagery, it cannot be denied that he uses the word in an essentially Christian sense, as an attribute of the great Triune God in keeping with His truth, mercy, wisdom and compassion.<sup>16</sup>

Given Anselm's place in church history and his speaking of God's honour rather than justice, we can hardly expect a well-drafted presentation of justification by faith alone.<sup>17</sup> Yet given the remarks of some, we are surprised that he says so much about faith, and that what he says is so good. Anselm writes of God's salvation as being "unmerited" (I:3) and "of grace" (e.g., II:5), and there is nothing in *Cur Deus Homo* contrary to solifideanism.<sup>18</sup> In one important passage, Anselm says of unbelievers,

let them cease from mocking us, and let them hasten to unite themselves with us, who do not doubt but that man can be saved through Christ; else let them despair of being saved at all. And if this terrifies them, *let them believe in Christ as we do, that they may be saved* (I:24).

"Christian faith" for Anselm has content: "Christian doctrine." "The Catholic faith," he says, chiefly enjoins upon us *belief* in things "with regard to Christ" and His "salvation of men, and how God saves man by compassion" (I:25). Thus Boso can speak of "the consolation of *faith*" (I:21).

When Anselm asks Boso, what payment he can make to God for his sin, Boso lists: "repentance, a broken and a contrite heart, self denial, various bodily sufferings, pity in giving and forgiving, and obedience" (I:20). Boso then asks,

Do I not honour God, when for his love and fear, in heartfelt

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<sup>15</sup>However, even Reformed theology has often used a more philosophical approach with insufficient attention to the Scriptures in its treatment of the necessity of the atonement (e.g., Thornwell, *Op. cit.*, pp. 210-263). John Murray's chapter on this subject evinces a much healthier approach (*Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* [Aylesbury, Bucks: BOT, repr. 1979], pp. 9-18).

<sup>16</sup>Cf. John D. Hannah, "Anselm on the Doctrine of Atonement," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, vol. 135, no. 540 (Oct. - Dec., 1978), 339.

<sup>17</sup>Notice how the Holy Spirit connects the *justice of God* in Christ's redemption and man's *justification* in Romans 3:26.

<sup>18</sup>Cf. James Buchanan, *The Doctrine of Justification* (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: BOT, repr. 1984), pp. 96, 112.

contrition I give up worldly joy, and despise, amidst abstinence and toils, the delights and ease of this life, and submit obediently to him, freely bestowing my possessions in giving to and releasing others (I:20)?

Anselm responds in terms reminiscent of Luke 17:10: “But what do you give God by your obedience, which is not owed him already, since he demands from you all that you are and have and can become?” Boso gets the point: I cannot “pay any of my debt to God” (I:20). Thus Anselm, destroying man’s merit, shuts us up to faith in the free mercy of God in Christ.

However, Anselm, while speaking often of Christ’s suffering and satisfaction and of Christ’s dying for us, never says that Christ suffered *as our substitute* and was *punished for our sins*. In his theology, Christ’s satisfaction was “a gift rather than ... a punishment.”<sup>19</sup> Omitting Christ’s *penal substitution*, Anselm held that, as the sinless God-man, Christ’s free death was of infinite worth and able to restore the Divine honour and merit a reward.

Anselm seems (momentarily) to forget about the human nature of Christ, for he says that, since Christ is God, He is incapable of receiving any gift, and so passes it on to man (II:19).<sup>20</sup> For Anselm, since man was made in order to be happy in enjoying God, and Christ came to redeem him, it is logical that the reward which man receives is salvation. Anselm is right when he presents man with one of two options, either satisfaction or punishment (I:19), but unlike the Reformed he does not explain that the way of satisfaction is *through* punishment, the *vicarious* suffering of Jesus Christ. Similarly, his definition of satisfaction as merely a “voluntary payment of debt” (I:19), is insufficient, for he omits the *penal* and *substitutionary* nature of Christ’s sufferings, for Christ did not die as a private individual, but as our *federal head*, as our *sin-bearer*.<sup>21</sup>

Since Anselm fails to grasp fully the idea of Christ *for us* in our justification, it is not surprising that he gives only a very rudimentary expression of the work of Christ *in us*. On this last point, however, we must be lenient, since a treat-

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<sup>19</sup>Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Great Britain: Banner of Truth, 1969), p. 172.

<sup>20</sup>This is contrary to the Bible, which teaches that Christ, in His human nature at His exaltation, *receives* all authority (Matt. 28:18), power (Eph. 1:19-20) and glory (Phil. 2:9-11). For more details, see the *Westminster Larger Catechism*, Q & A 51-56.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. *Heidelberg Catechism* Q & A 79: “all his sufferings and obedience are as certainly ours, as if we had in our own persons suffered and made satisfaction for own sins to God.”

ment of soteriology is not within Anselm's "scope and purpose," for the question is, after all, Why did God become man? and not, What benefits does the God-man communicate to us?<sup>22</sup>

An inquiry into Anselm's view of the *extent* of the atonement seems fraught with difficulties. For example, Calvin, in whose time this was not an issue, can be quoted both for and against particular atonement. And it might, at this stage, even be worth asking if the question had ever occurred to Anselm. In Book II, chapter 18a, one might even think, when Anselm speaks of Christ making "ample satisfaction for the sins of the whole world," that he held to a general atonement. But when we realize that even Scripture uses these terms (e.g., I John 2:2), and note that Anselm immediately adds "and infinitely more," we understand that he is not speaking of the extent, but of the *intrinsic worth* of Christ's salvation, as the *Canons of Dordt*:

The death of the Son of God is the only and most perfect sacrifice and satisfaction for sin; and is of *infinite worth and value, abundantly sufficient to expiate the sins of the whole world* (II:2).

In fact, there is nothing substantial in the whole of *Cur Deus Homo* to argue that it teaches a general atonement. Nowhere, for example, does it discourse of the *potentiality* associated with the Arminian view or of man's supposed "free will." A case can even be made for particular redemption. The clearest statement occurs in Book II, chapter 19, where after Boso says that "the gift [of salvation] should be given by the Father to *whomsoever the Son wished*," Anselm replies,

Upon whom would he more properly bestow the reward accruing from his death, than upon *those for whose salvation*, as right reason teaches, he became man; and *for whose sake* as we have already said, he left an example of suffering death to preserve holiness ... Or whom could he more justly make heirs of the inheritance, which he does not need, and of the superfluity of his possessions, than *his parents and brethren* (II:19)?

This passage oozes with the *particularity* and *intent* of the atonement. And now what could be more fitting, than to engage one Gomaro in a dialogue with Anselm (being careful to ascribe to him nothing, but what is in keeping with his *Cur Deus Homo*)?

<sup>22</sup>Hannah, Op. cit., 340.

*Gomaro:* You speak often about “the elect.”<sup>23</sup> How are they redeemed?

*Anselm:* Through the satisfaction of Christ, for this is why God became man.

*Gomaro:* Why then do unbelieving infidels go to Hell?

*Anselm:* They are punished for the great debt of their sins.

*Gomaro:* If their sins were punished on themselves, they were not satisfied by Christ, since it would be incongruous for the infinitely wise God to satisfy for sins twice.

*Anselm:* Reason does demand that it is either punishment or satisfaction for sins, but not both.

*Gomaro:* Then Christ did not make satisfaction for those who are in Hell, but only for the elect?

*Anselm:* I see no way of opposing you.

*Gomaro:* I have here the pronouncements of a venerable church assembly, dealing with many important subjects, including “The death of Christ and the redemption of men thereby.” Would you like a copy?

*Anselm:* Yes. My faith is always seeking understanding.

#### (IV) Conclusion

Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* is “an epoch-making book, a masterpiece of theological learning,” declares Louis Berkhof, combining “metaphysical depth with clearness of presentation.”<sup>24</sup> In many ways it is a model of doctrinal development. Anselm builds his doctrine of the atonement on the previous work of the church in her formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity (the early ecumenical creeds), original sin (Augustine) and the Person of Christ (*Creed of Chalcedon*). Viewing man as a rational creature, in the light of the great obligations placed upon him, he sees man as hopelessly lost in his heinous dishonouring of the infinite honour of God. Thus he grounds the *absolute necessity of the atonement in the very being of God Himself*.<sup>25</sup> In Anselm’s *magnum opus*, Shedd declares, we have the first systematic and scientific “*metaphysique* of the Christian Doctrine

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<sup>23</sup>Cf., e.g., I:18. Thus Jaroslav Pelikan speaks of Anselm’s “emphasis on divine election as the basis of the creation and redemption of man” (*The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, vol. 3 [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978], p. 272).

<sup>24</sup>Berkhof, *Op. cit.*, p. 171.

<sup>25</sup>Here Anselm is in advance of the three cardinal Reformers—Luther, Zwingli and Calvin—and even some of their successors, including Zanchius, Rutherford and Twisse (cf. Louis Berkhof, *Vicarious Atonement through Christ* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1936], pp. 47-49; *Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1996], p. 369).

of the Atonement.<sup>26</sup> Anselm ably disposes of the old Ransom-to-Satan Theory (I:7).<sup>27</sup> To those who seek to resurrect the Example Theory of the atonement, his words still ring out through the centuries: “*You have not as yet estimated the great burden of sin*” (I:21). As we read the *Heidelberg Catechism*’s Lord’s Days 5 and 6, we can almost hear the great archbishop ask, *Cur Deus Homo*?

As we have seen *Cur Deus Homo* has its faults, but, with James Orr, we must put this down to “the necessary defects of first great attempts.”<sup>28</sup> George Smeaton’s analysis bears repeating: Anselm “laid the foundation for all the subsequent groundings of the doctrine; and the advances made at the Reformation did not subvert the foundation laid, but fitted into it without incongruity.”<sup>29</sup>

Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* is also foundational to the doctrine of the covenant. Christ’s atonement is God’s means for removing the sins which separate us from Him and restoring us to covenant fellowship so that we are no longer God’s enemies but His friends! Moreover, given that God willed to create the world, and given that God willed sin and the fall, and given that God willed to save mankind, then the incarnation and atoning death of the Son of God was absolutely necessary. This was the *only way* that God could restore us to His friendship.

The perichoresis (a truth rooted in the *Persons and being of God*) determines the *nature* of the covenant as union and communion with God. Efficacious grace (a truth rooted in the *sovereignty of God*) determines the *particularity* of the covenant as realised with the elect alone. But the necessity of the atonement (a truth rooted in the *attributes of God*, especially mercy and justice) determines the *way* in which covenant fellowship is realised with the elect in Christ. Thus the covenant is all about *God*—His Triune life, His sovereignty, His attributes—and so God is zealous for His covenant.

<sup>26</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, vol. 2 (New York: Scribner, Armstrong and Co., 1877), p. 275; italics Shedd’s.

<sup>27</sup>He recognized that “whatever was demanded of man, he owed to God and not to the devil” (II:19).

<sup>28</sup>James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, repr. 1952), p. 28.

<sup>29</sup>George Smeaton, *The Apostle’s Doctrine of the Atonement* (Winona Lake, Indiana: Alpha Publications, repr. 1979), p. 520.