

## **Peter Abelard's Theology of Atonement: A Multifaceted Approach and Reevaluation**

Denis Kaiser  
Ph.D. Candidate, SDA Theological Seminary  
Andrews University

### **Introduction**

*Cur Deus homo*—Why God became man: The title of Anselm of Canterbury's famous book<sup>1</sup> touches at the core of Christianity's foundational issues—the significance and purpose of Christ's incarnation, life on earth, and death on the cross. The French philosopher, theologian, and logician Peter Abelard (1079–1142), a contemporary of Anselm, resolved this question in a manner that gave rise to theological discussions and controversies among his contemporaries and numerous generations of scholars. There are three main interpretations of Abelard's work. The first group of scholars concluded that this medieval theologian-philosopher overemphasized the moralistic or subjective<sup>2</sup> aspect of Christ's death, at the expense of its substitutionary nature, and they concluded that Abelard's atonement theology was heresy.<sup>3</sup> The second group of writers agreed that

<sup>1</sup> Anselm of Canterbury, *Cur Deus homo: Warum Gott Mensch geworden*, 5th ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The two primary theories of atonement are generally described as “subjective” vs. “objective.” The “objective” view of atonement contends that atonement accomplishes something objectively with God: satisfaction theory, penal substitution, etc. The “subjective” view of atonement is often equated with the moral influence theory which argues that Christ's death was an exemplary act of obedience which induces love to God in those who learn about that act.

<sup>3</sup> Jean Rivière, *Le dogme de la rédemption au début du moyen âge*, Bibliothèque Thomiste, vol. 19 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin, 1934), 106-125; J. G. Sikes, *Peter Abailard*, reprint, 1932 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), 207-210; A. Victor Murray, *Abelard and St. Bernard: A Study in Twelfth Century 'Modernism'* (Manchester, UK:

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Abelard overemphasized the subjective aspect of the atonement, yet considered Abelard a genius and orthodox theologian.<sup>4</sup> The third group of theologians rejected both assessments, suggesting that Abelard did not deny the substitutionary aspect of Christ's death at all.<sup>5</sup> In other words, various scholars have come to entirely opposite conclusions about the central question of whether Abelard did or did not reject the substitutionary aspect of Christ's death. It is no wonder that the French abbot Thomas of Morigny, one of Abelard's contemporary opponents, compared him with the Homeric sea-god Proteus "who slips through our hands and takes another shape before our description of him is complete," implying that Abelard is one of the most difficult persons to assess.<sup>6</sup>

---

Manchester University Press, 1967), 126-134; John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 217-221; Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1989), 162.

<sup>4</sup> Charles de Rémusat, *Abélard*, vol. 2 (Paris: Librairie Philosophique de Ladrange, 1845), 447, 448; Hastings Rashdall, "Abelard's Doctrine of the Atonement," *Expositor* 4, no. 8 (1893): 137-150; Robert S. Franks, *The Work of Christ* (London, UK: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 146, 283, 284.

<sup>5</sup> Robert O. P. Taylor, "Was Abelard an Exemplarist?" *Theology* 31, no. 184 (1935): 207-213; Laurence W. Grensted, *A Short History of the Doctrine of the Atonement*, reprint (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1962), 103-110; Richard E. Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," (Ph.D. dissertation, Yale University, 1965); idem, *The Logic of Divine Love: A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abailard* (London, UK: Clarendon, 1970), 125, 126; D. E. Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard: The Influence of Abelard's Thought in the Early Scholastic Period*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, vol. 14 (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 137, 138; Rolf Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, Beiträge zur Geschichte der Philosophie und Theologie des Mittelalters, Neue Folge, vol. 10 (Münster: Aschendorff, 1972), 96-104, 118-121; Alister E. McGrath, "The Moral Theory of the Atonement: An Historical and Theological Critique," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38, no. 2 (1985): 206, 207-209; idem, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*, reprint (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), 138; Philip L. Quinn, "Abelard on Atonement: 'Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It'," in *Reasoned Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology in Honor of Norman Kretzmann*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 290-291, 300; John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 322, 323, 330, 331; Michael T. Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1997), 278, 283-287.

<sup>6</sup> David Knowles, *The Evolution of Medieval Thought* (New York: Vintage Press, 1963), 120; Nikolaus M. Häring, *Thomas von Morigny: Disputatio catholicorum patrum contra dogmata Petri Abailardi*, Studi medievali, Series 3a, vol. 22 (Spoleto: Centro italiano di studi sull'alto medioevo, 1981), 369; Richard Gibbons, ed., *Beati Gosvini vita* (Douai: Marci Wyon, 1620), 443c; Michael Clanchy, "Abelard—Knight (Miles), Courtier (Palatinus), and Man of War (Vir Bellator)," in *Medieval Knighthood*, ed. Stephen Church

### *KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

The writer of this article sides with the third group. Yet one may legitimately ask what statements from the writings of Abelard gave rise to the conclusion that he denied the objective, substitutionary aspect of the atonement. Thus this article looks at the issue from various angles (historical, literary, and theological) in order to clarify what Abelard's view of atonement was, why he presented it in such a way as he did, and why it is so easy to misunderstand him.

#### **Philosopher, Teacher, and Eccentric Controversialist**

Before looking at Abelard's views of atonement it will be helpful to gain some knowledge of his personality and approach, the documentary situation, and the context of personal and political conflicts. The first two aspects provide auxiliary insights for understanding his style of argumentation, whereas the other two aspects supply some further background to the discussion of Abelard's views and to the question of misconceptions.

#### Philosopher and Controversialist

Peter Abelard, born into a noble family, left his home as a teenager to become a peripatetic studying dialectic, better known today as logic.<sup>7</sup> While other young men were rushing to recapture the holy places in Palestine, he preferred the conflicts of disputation to the trophies of war.<sup>8</sup> It was difficult for him not to get into conflict with his teachers. About 1100 Abelard attended lectures in the school of William of Champeaux, a renowned teacher at the cathedral school of Notre Dame in Paris, yet within a short

---

and Ruth Harvey, vol. 5 (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1995), 112, 113; Peter Godman, *The Silent Masters: Latin Literature and Its Censors in the High Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 106.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities: A Translation with Notes of the Historia Calamitatum*, transl. by J. T. Muckle and preface by Étienne Gilson, reprint, 1954 (Toronto: The Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982), 12; Wim Verbaal, "The Council of Sens Reconsidered: Masters, Monks, or Judges?" *Church History* 74, no. 3 (2005): 464; Kathleen M. Starnes, *Peter Abelard: His Place in History* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981), 2, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 12; James C. Robertson, *History of the Christian Church from the Apostolic Age to the Reformation, A.D. 64-1517*, vol. 5, new and rev. ed. (New York: Pott and Young, 1874), 100, 101; Andrew Miller, *Short Papers on Church History*, vol. 2 (London, UK: Morrish, 1876), 122; William Barclay, "Men and Affairs," *Expository Times* 85 (1974): 128.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

period he had begun arguing against his teacher's realist views.<sup>9</sup> Abelard's metaphysics may probably be best described as non-realism or nominalism marked by a strong current of Platonism.<sup>10</sup> After opening rival schools at Melun and Corbeil, Abelard experienced a mental breakdown, probably caused by overwork. He recovered at home, then returned to Notre Dame and began to attack Champeaux again on the issue of the universals. In 1108 or 1109, he established another rival school in Paris, where he taught for four years.<sup>11</sup>

Abelard soon turned to the study of theology, and it did not take very long until he came into conflict with his new teacher, the famous Anselm of Laon, formerly a student of Anselm of Canterbury. Since Abelard considered the content of Anselm's lectures as something that could also be acquired from the reading of books, he cut his teacher's classes and began giving his own lectures on the Bible, although he was still a novice in theology. This not only brought him trouble with his teacher, but it also brought the enmity of two influential fellow classmates, Lotulf of Lombardy and Alberic of Rheims.<sup>12</sup> This enmity took its toll when, in 1121, they accused him of teaching tritheism in his work *Theologia summi boni*. Lotulf and Alberic had never read his book but merely assumed he was teaching this heresy since he was a nominalist—a hypothesis that also led to the heresy charges against Abelard's first teacher, Roscelin of Compiègne, in 1092. Even before the publication of the book, Lotulf and Alberic urged prominent persons to forbid Abelard to teach. It was probably

---

<sup>9</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 12; Barclay, 128; Starnes, 3; Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 344; Marenbon, 9, 10.

<sup>10</sup> William J. Courtenay, "Late Medieval Nominalism Revisited: 1972-1982," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 44, no. 1 (1983): 160, 161; T. Gregory, "Abelard et Platon," in *Peter Abelard: Proceedings of the International Conference, Louvain, May 10-12, 1971*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert, Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, Series I, Studia 2 (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1974), 38-64.

<sup>11</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 13-16, 18, 19; Starnes, 3-5; Marenbon, 10, 11, 113, 114; Paul L. Williams, *The Moral Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 16; Regine Pernoud, *Heloise and Abelard*, transl. by Peter Wiles (London, UK: Collins, 1962), 27; cf. Margaret Anne Cameron, "William of Champeaux and Early Twelfth-Century Dialectic," (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2005), 78-127.

<sup>12</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 20-24; Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 337; Starnes, 6; Marenbon, 12, 13; Ermenegildo Bertola, "Le critiche di Abelardo ad Anselmo di Laon ed a Guglielmo di Champeaux," *Rivista di Filosofia Neoscolastica* 52 (1960): 495-522; Odon Lottin, *Psychologie et morale aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles* (Louvain-Gembloux: Abbaye du Mont Cesar, 1959), 5:443, 444.

### KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

because the papal legate felt unfamiliar with the technical language of scholastic argumentation that he refused to evaluate the work personally, leaving the task of evaluation to the initial accusers. Since the book was being published without an imprimatur, Alberic and Lotulf suggested its condemnation even if it were not found to contain any heretical ideas.<sup>13</sup>

After his famous affair with Heloise and his castration at the behest of her enraged uncle, Abelard fled to the monastery of St. Denis. Although the abbot and the monks were at first favorable to him and begged him to continue teaching in their place, he soon came into variance with them for criticizing their lifestyle.<sup>14</sup> Because of these conflicts, he was sent to another priory in the Champagne. Yet, he was also able to offend his fellow monks at the new location by questioning the identity of their patron saint. Subsequently, he left the priory and retired to a solitary place near Troyes.<sup>15</sup> In 1125, he was elected abbot by the monastery of St. Gildas de Rhuys, an invitation that he accepted, not realizing the strong differences between himself and the monks. Abelard was probably totally ignorant of the Celtic dialect of the monks. His attempts to change them and their lifestyle even led the monks to attempt to kill him by poisoning the altar wine.<sup>16</sup>

#### A Dialectic and Didactic Approach

Abelard's personality and his penchant for argument exposed him to the enmity of numerous groups of people and no doubt increased the likelihood that his views on atonement would be misinterpreted and condemned. But Abelard's personality was not his only problem; another aspect of his work that also increased his susceptibility to misinterpretation was his style of argument.

Abelard's most comprehensive discussion of his views on atonement are found in the five books of his *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*. The glosses that Abelard wrote to single phrases and verses in Paul's Epistles to the Romans can be divided into two groups—helps for a better understanding of the textual context, and explanations on the terminological

---

<sup>13</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 43, 44; William J. Courtenay, "Inquiry and Inquisition: Academic Freedom in Medieval Universities," *Church History* 58, no. 2 (1989): 173; Marenbon, 9, 17; Starnes, 15, 16.

<sup>14</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 40, 41; Marenbon, 16.

<sup>15</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 53-55, 57; Starnes, 16, 17; Marenbon, 18, 19.

<sup>16</sup> Abelard, *The Story of Abelard's Adversities*, 64-67, 75-77; Starnes, 20-23; Marenbon, 21, 22.

content. The first group of notes may further be divided into five categories: discussions and notes on (a) sentence structures; (b) grammar; (c) Paul's language and style; (d) the structure of the context and the connection of thoughts, particularly if longer subordinate clauses appear; (e) paraphrases to express the meaning of a specific passage. Abelard's exegetical method does not differ much from other exegetical writings of his day and is in line with the writings of people associated with the school of Anselm of Laon.<sup>17</sup> He quoted from Origen, Ambrosiaster, Pelagius, Haimo, and especially from Augustine, as well as some unknown sources. However, though Abelard's exegetical methods are not particularly original, his presentation style did set him apart and left him vulnerable to misinterpretation. Abelard was fond of presenting his arguments in the format of *quaestiones* and a *solutio*, questions of a fictitious objector and a concluding solution. Use of this technique was not new, but Abelard employed it so much and to such an extent that it was truly unique. It was through this format that he dealt with the theological topics of his contemporaries, adopting traditional positions or developing new concepts by the use of logic and dialectic in his reasoning. By raising questions about traditional interpretations of specific Bible passages, Abelard attempted to provoke his students to think more deeply about the involved issues. He tried to help people through logic and dialectic to recognize and apply truths personally. That is why the deliberations and remarks in his commentary on Romans were based on a common center, namely the individual person and the personal responsibility for his/her actions, well-being, salvation, and damnation. Yet, his didactic approach should not be mistaken as a disregard of Scripture and its teachings. Therefore his approach should be described as personal rather than subjective.<sup>18</sup> The dichotomy of objective vs. subjective fails to adequately describe Abelard's emphasis on the personal acceptance and

---

<sup>17</sup> Damian van den Eynde, "Les Écrits perdus d'Abélard," *Antonianum* 37 (1962): 468; Rolf Peppermüller, "Exegetische Traditionen und Theologische Neuansätze in Abaelards Kommentar zum Römerbrief," in *Peter Abelard: Proceedings of the International Conference, Louvain, May 10-12, 1971*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert, *Mediaevalia Lovaniensia, Series I, Studia 2* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1974), 117, 118; idem, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 8-10.

<sup>18</sup> Peppermüller, "Exegetische Traditionen," 118-122; Eileen Frances Kearney, "Master Peter Abelard, Expositor of Sacred Scripture: An Analysis of Abelard's Approach to Biblical Exposition in Selected Writings on Scripture" (Ph.D. dissertation, Marquette University, 1980), 347, 348.

### KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

application of Christ's substitutionary death, as will be shown further below.

#### Criticism Resulting from Incomplete Editions

A third factor that increased the likelihood that Abelard's views would be misunderstood is the incompleteness of the various editions of his works. Abelard revised his works numerous times and even his students redacted his compositions for their own purposes; the "final" results were often left incomplete. Thus they contain "numerous addenda, minor deletions, improvements in definition, illogical and ungrammatical insertions, and strident phrasing."<sup>19</sup> For some books it is even impossible to produce a final text. Luscombe, e.g., has stated that "the sheer chaos of the varieties of the versions of the *Sic et Non* constitutes an editorial nightmare."<sup>20</sup> This circumstance may have had various reasons. Maybe Abelard was never really content with his writings, which is why he never ceased refining and improving them. The existence of numerous editions may be indicative of his desire to improve his previous writings to keep up with the development of his own ideas. Specific events may have led him to see the need for correction or adaptation of previous deliberations and considerations. As set out above, Abelard seemed to have an eccentric, confrontational, and unstable personality, all characteristics that could explain a tendency for leaving his compositions incomplete, for beginning a project without finishing it. There is another aspect that gives rise to difficulties. Due to his diverse interests, Abelard focused on numerous topics during his lifetime, but even a rough dating of his writings is difficult since he himself rarely dated anything he wrote.<sup>21</sup> Thus the circulation of numerous editions and versions that are incomplete, ambiguous, and not up to date may have been an additional cause for unnecessary criticism.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup> Daniel F. Blackwell, *Non-Ontological Constructs: The Effects of Abaelard's Logical and Ethical Theories on His Theology: A Study in Meaning and Verification*, Basler und Berner Studien zur historischen und systematischen Theologie (Bern: Peter Lang, 1988), 56:1, 2; Eligius M. Buytaert, "Critical Observations on the 'Theologia Christiana' of Abelard," *Antonianum* 38 (1963): 390, 391; idem, "The Greek Fathers in Abelard's 'Sic et Non,'" *Antonianum* 41 (1966): 414; Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard*, 95, 96.

<sup>20</sup> Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard*, 96. The *Sic et Non* contrasts statements of various church fathers and biblical writers, without solving the contradictions. Yet Abelard did not want to raise doubts about the church's teachings but he tried to provide examples as a basis for discussions on various topics.

<sup>21</sup> Starnes, 28.

<sup>22</sup> Blackwell, 1, 2; Luscombe, *The School of Peter Abelard*, 96.

Personal and Political Conflicts

The condemnation of Abelard at the council of Sens in 1141 was primarily based on a list of nineteen charges (*capitula*) devised by Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry. The latter was the initial instigator of the controversy, but the more famous and influential Bernard had greater clout and therefore became the main prosecutor in the case.<sup>23</sup> Conflict between Bernard and Abelard was inevitable given that each employed two very different approaches: Bernard insisted on accepting the mysteries of Christian belief on the basis of faith alone, whereas Abelard believed in using human reason to study and comprehend questions of faith.<sup>24</sup> In their *capitula*, Bernard and William accused Abelard of teaching that Christ's incarnation and death were unnecessary, his death was not a sacrament of redemption and an example of humility, his blood was a payment made to the devil, and his love was exhibited but not infused (and thus did not provide the assistance of grace).<sup>25</sup> Abelard felt misunderstood and wronged by his main opponent, stating that the charges were based either on malice or ignorance.<sup>26</sup> That several of these charges were obviously false accusations will become evident further below.

Another thread should be observed. While Abelard's opponents presented theological accusations against him, political factors may also have played a role in their animosity. The fact that Arnold of Brescia, who had been previously condemned by the Second Lateran Council (1139), appeared among Abelard's students generated some fear that Arnold, bolstered with new strength by his connection to Abelard, could potentially gain a following. Condemning Abelard and his theological views would keep this potential danger at bay.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Verbaal, 462; Starnes, 25.

<sup>24</sup> F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 159, 160.

<sup>25</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Disp. Ab. 7*, quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Growth of Medieval Theology (600 - 1300)*, The Christian Tradition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 3:139; Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 407, 408; Grensted, 106; Quinn, 292.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Abelard, "Apologia contra Bernardum," in *Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert, Corpus Christianorum, Continuatio Mediaevalis (Turnholti: Typographi Brepols Editores Pontificii, 1969), 11:359-366; Joseph McCabe, *Peter Abelard* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1901), 363; Murray, 54; Starnes, 26, 49, 50.

<sup>27</sup> Verbaal, 461, 489; Constant J. Mews, "The Council of Sens (1141): Abelard, Bernard, and the Fear of Social Upheaval," *Speculum* 77, no. 2 (2002): 364, 365.

### *KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

Something that Abelard failed to mention in his autobiography is the fact that he had been challenging Bernard to meet with him for a scholastic disputation over the latter's accusations. It seems that later Abelard falsely claimed that Bernard was the one to call for a meeting. At any rate, Abelard, who was looking for a disputation, set out for Sens for the purpose of meeting Bernard, but to his surprise found himself in a juridical procedure when he arrived.<sup>28</sup> When asked to respond to Bernard's charges, he simply appealed to Pope Innocent II. Yet Innocent was indebted to Bernard for the latter's help in restoring him as a pope and was therefore not inclined to take Abelard's side. Subsequently, Innocent not only condemned Abelard but also presided over the burning of his books. Interestingly, the later Pope Celestine II, a senior cardinal in Rome at the time of the burning of Abelard's books, seemed to be more positive about Abelard's contributions, as evidenced by the fact he held on to his copies of Abelard's *Theologia* and *Sic et Non*. Bernard of Clairvaux went so far as to state that Celestine II had great affection for Abelard.<sup>29</sup>

#### **Abelard's Theology of Atonement**

As we have seen, the circulation of incomplete and not up-to-date editions of Abelard's writings, his nominalist stance, and his unique use of large *quaestiones* may have provided reasons for misunderstandings. Abelard was a teacher who through the means of dialectic tried to help people understand and apply the truths personally. Given Abelard's eccentric and confrontational debating style, it is not surprising that such influential individuals as Bernard of Clairvaux became offended and enraged, creating personal animosities. The presence of a condemned heretic among Abelard's students made it necessary to find something against Abelard to prevent Arnold of Brescia from gaining power among Abelard's followers. This section will show whether Bernard's charges against Abelard in the context of his atonement theology were justified or not.

#### **The Individualistic Element**

While Abelard's atonement theory is often described as "subjective," a term that is in general linked to the moral influence theory, identifying it as individualistic or personal is preferable since his concept of atonement

---

<sup>28</sup> Verbaal, 482-487, 489, 490.

<sup>29</sup> Starnes, 25; Sikes, 235; Clanchy, *Abelard: A Medieval Life*, 218.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

was much broader than the moral influence theory.<sup>30</sup> The passage considered to exhibit the subjective view of atonement most clearly is found in Abelard's commentary on Rom 3:26.

Redemptio itaque nostra est illa summa in nobis per passionem Christi dilectio quae nos non solum a seruitute peccati liberat, sed ueram nobis filiorum Dei libertatem acquirit, ut amore eius potius quam timore cuncta impleamus, qui nobis tantam exhibuit gratiam qua maior unueniri ipso attestante non potest.<sup>31</sup>

Interestingly, several translations of the first clause insert an additional word in their attempt to clarify the meaning of the statement. Some translators add such words as “enkindled,” “kindled,” or “instilled” to suggest that Abelard promoted the idea that Christ's passion provokes this greatest love.<sup>32</sup> Others, in their attempt to justify the belief that Christ's passion revealed to us his love, tend to add such phrases as “shown to us” or “manifested in our case,”<sup>33</sup> though Abelard himself did not use these words. Translators of that second group tend to emend *in nobis* by translating the phrase as “to us” or “in our case,” although it is clearly an ablative to be translated as “in us.” As Taylor and Quinn have both noted, the translators of this second group are obviously trying to promote the idea that Christ's passion showed or exemplified his love “to us.”<sup>34</sup> Another suggestive translation is the insertion of the phrase “is brought about by the very great love instilled through the passion of Christ,”<sup>35</sup> as if *illa summa . . . dilectio* were an ablative of means. In fact, Abelard's noun is a nominative and should be translated, “our redemption is that supreme love in us through the passion of Christ,” which suggests that it is through or by

---

<sup>30</sup> Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 173, 174.

<sup>31</sup> Abelard, *Comm. Rom.* II, 256-261. Translation: “Therefore, our redemption is that supreme love in us through the passion of Christ, that not only liberates us from the slavery of sin, but also acquires for us the freedom of the sons of God so that we would complete everything through the love of him rather than fear that he exhibited so much grace for us that no greater may be found.”

<sup>32</sup> James Orr, *The Progress of Dogma Being the Elliott Lectures, Delivered at the Western Theological Seminary Allegheny, Penna., U.S.A., 1897* (London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901), 229, 230; Stott, 217, 218; Marenbon, 322.

<sup>33</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology, Being the Bampton Lectures for 1915* (London, UK: MacMillan, 1919), 358; Franks, 145.

<sup>34</sup> Taylor, 211-213; Quinn, 288, 289.

<sup>35</sup> Marenbon, 322.

*KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

means of Christ's passion that this supreme love is in us, resides in us, or is present in us.<sup>36</sup>

Another statement used to show Abelard's rejection of the idea of a substitutionary sacrifice is found a few passages prior to the above quotation. At first glance, the statement itself sounds like a "violent" disagreement with the substitutionary aspect of atonement.

Quam uero crudele et iniquum uidetur, ut sanguinem innocentis in pretium aliquod quis requisierit, aut ullo modo ei placuerit innocentem interfici, nedum Deus tam acceptam Filii mortem habuerit, ut per ipsam uniuerso reconciliatus sit mundo.<sup>37</sup>

Those that quote this passage as a positive statement representative of Abelard's views on atonement<sup>38</sup> ignore the context in which this passage is located, namely the *quaestiones* which constitute the queries of a fictitious objector. The very next sentence presents a less positive summary of the preceding questions of this objector: "Haec et similia non mediocrem mouere quaestionem nobis uidentur, de redemptione scilicet uel iustificatione nostra per mortem Domini nostri Iesu Christi."<sup>39</sup> This example clearly shows the need for paying attention to the context of specific statements and for being aware of Abelard's manner of presentation in order to avoid misinterpretations.

The Substitutionary Element

While it has been recognized by some of Abelard's modern critics that his writings seem to provide positive statements on Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, Abelard's positive statements about substitution are usually regarded as a mere cloak to appease his opponents. Stott states, for example, that the apparent subjective comment on Rom 3:26 "is quite explicit, so that I do not see how one can fairly eliminate this element from Abelard's

---

<sup>36</sup> Taylor, 213.

<sup>37</sup> Abelard, *Comm. Rom.* II, 234-238. Translation: "How cruel and wicked it seems that anyone should demand the blood of an innocent person as the price for anything, or that it should in any way please him that an innocent man should be slain, still less that God should consider the death of his Son so agreeable that by it he should be reconciled to the whole world."

<sup>38</sup> Stott, 217.

<sup>39</sup> Abelard, *Comm. Rom.* II, 239-241. Translation: "These and similar considerations seem to me to raise a question of the very first importance, concerning, that is to say, our redemption and justification through the death of our Lord Jesus Christ."

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

view.”<sup>40</sup> In other words, Stott holds that the true thrust of Abelard’s thought is subjective and opposed to a substitutionary theology of atonement. Merely depending on Orr’s misleading translation of that passage (see above), Storrs also overlooks the fact that Abelard himself admitted the incompleteness of these deliberations on atonement, referring to his comments on Rom 5:5-8 and the *Tropologiae* for a more comprehensive discussion of the topic.<sup>41</sup> Yet, clearer and more comprehensive statements on the purpose and significance of Christ’s death are also found in other places of Abelard’s Romans commentary. For example, expounding on the meaning of *qui traditus est* (who was given) in Rom 4:25, he states,

Tam mortis Christi quam resurrectionis causam ad nos reducit. Duobus modis propter delicta nostra mortuus dicitur, tum quia nos deliquimus propter quod ille moreretur et peccatum commisimus cujus ille poenam sustinuit, tum etiam ut peccata nostra moriendo tolleret, id est poenam peccatorum, introducens nos in paradysum, pretio suae mortis auferret et per exhibitionem tantae gratiae, quia ut ipse ait maiorem dilectionem nemo habet, animos nostros a uoluntate peccandi retraheret et in summam sui dilectionem incenderet.<sup>42</sup>

Here Abelard suggests that Christ’s death intended to accomplish the following goals: (1) to bear the punishment for our transgressions and sins; (2) to take away our sins, or to be more precise, the punishment of our sins (*poenam peccatorum*); (3) to pay the price (*pretio*) to bring us into Paradise; (4) to draw our minds away from the will to sin; and (5) to enkindle in us the highest love of Christ. This comment clearly describes an exchange or a substitution—Christ died the death that we deserved so that we might have the life he deserved; the innocent took upon himself the punishment that the sinners and transgressors deserved. All these aspects may also be found in other places in Abelard’s Romans commentary and his other

---

<sup>40</sup> Stott, 218 fn. 23.

<sup>41</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:290.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 26/2:380. Translation: “He attributes the cause of both Christ’s death and resurrection to us: In two ways, it is said, he died *because of our sins*: on one hand, because we committed the transgression on behalf of which he had to die and because we committed the sin whose punishment he took on himself; on the other hand, to take away our sins through his dying, namely to take away the punishment for the sins (while he was introducing us into Paradise) through the price of his death and through the demonstration of such a big grace (as he himself says, ‘no one has greater love than this’ [John 15:13]) to turn away our hearts from the intent to sin and to ignite them for the supreme love to him.”

### KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

writings. Describing the removal of our sins, Abelard states that Christ's death provided the sacrifice that is able to remove sin and that Christ bore the penalty of human sin making possible the forgiveness of sin.<sup>43</sup> Discussing the same concept in other terms, he argues that Christ's blood was given for us and it cleansed the stain of our sins.<sup>44</sup> He suggests that Christ died *pro nobis scilicet* (for us of course) and *propter delicta nostra* (for/because of our sins).<sup>45</sup> He further states that Christ's blood was the *pretium* (ransom) paid or completed for us.<sup>46</sup> In addition, Abelard points out in other writings that Christ did *emit* (purchased) and *redemit* (redeemed) us *proprio sanguine* (through his own blood).<sup>47</sup> It was the very Creator of the world that became the *pretium* (price) for us.<sup>48</sup> He states that Christ bore our sins, took these upon himself, and endured the punishment of our sins.<sup>49</sup>

#### Critique of Other Atonement Theories in Developing a More Comprehensive Atonement Concept

Abelard's critique of other atonement theories served primarily the purpose of pointing out the imbalance and weaknesses of these other theories. Further it should be noted that he employed the means of dialectic to critique them, which determined the style of argumentation and thus his remarks should not be mistaken as representative of his overall theology.

Discussing whether God was limited in his means of salvation by external necessities, Abelard suggested that God was not limited in any way but was free to choose a means of redemption most fitting to him.<sup>50</sup> Since Christ simply forgave sins by speaking a word during his incarnation, he concluded that Christ's death was not necessarily a prerequisite for

---

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 26/2:380, 408, 440, 546. Apparently, those who emphasize the legal or forensic aspect of atonement have difficulties to comprehend that Abelard was able to affirm both the death of Christ being the foundation for forgiveness of sin and an example of God's supreme love. Thus Allison would probably argue that Abelard saw a connection between Christ's death and forgiveness of sin but not a "necessary connection." See Allison, 397. Yet, considering his repeated witness of Christ's sacrifice as the basis for forgiveness, redemption, victory, etc., it seems futile to get hung up on his emphasis of God's love.

<sup>44</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:450, 452, 528, 582.

<sup>45</sup> Abelard, *Comm. Rom.* IV, 138.

<sup>46</sup> Abelard, *Comm. Rom.* II, 587, 588. Price: 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23; OT Exod 13:13; 21:30; 30:12; 34:20; Lev 19:20; 25:26; 27:27; Num 3:46; 18:15; Ps 49:8 (redeem). Also Zec 11:13; Mat 27:6, 9.

<sup>47</sup> Abelard, *Ep.* 5; PL 178:209D.

<sup>48</sup> Abelard, *Ep.* 5; PL 178:210A.

<sup>49</sup> Abelard, *Serm.* 12; PL 178:481B.

<sup>50</sup> Abelard, "Theologia Christiana," 12:364.

forgiveness.<sup>51</sup> Of course, this reasoning may lead to the impression that Abelard denied the redemptive efficacy of Christ's death. Yet, his point was rather "whether God had no other means by which he could redeem humanity."<sup>52</sup> He argued that God's essence was love and it was in harmony with his own essence that he decided to reconcile sinners to himself. It was this essence of divine love that provided the only motivation for Christ's incarnation and God's working in and through Christ.<sup>53</sup>

Abelard also criticized the idea that the devil had the right to hold sinners in bondage and that Christ's death was a payment to the devil to ransom them from this captivity. This so-called ransom theory was proposed by such ancient and contemporary writers as Origen, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bernard of Clairveaux.<sup>54</sup> That theory was also taught at the school of Laon where Abelard had been a student.<sup>55</sup> Abelard was not the first to take issue with the ransom view; Anselm of Canterbury had previously raised objections to this theory too, suggesting his satisfaction theory as an alternative.<sup>56</sup> Abelard objected to the ransom theory in three ways. First, he stated that Christ only redeemed the elect, who were never

---

<sup>51</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:284, 286.

<sup>52</sup> Steven R. Cartwright, "The Romans Commentaries of William of St. Thierry and Peter Abelard: A Theological and Methodological Comparison" (Ph.D. dissertation, Western Michigan University, 2001), 197.

<sup>53</sup> Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 406.

<sup>54</sup> Origen, *Comm. Rom. 2*; idem, *Comm. Matt. 16*; Augustine, *Trin. 13*; Gregory the Great, *Moral. 33*; Bernard of Clairveaux, *Ep. 190*; Williams, 153; Grensted, 37, 38, 43, 46, 50; Quinn, 285. Since Abelard quoted several of these writers, he probably knew of their remarks on this topic. See, e.g., Buytaert, "Greek Fathers," 452; Lucille Claire Thibodeau, "The Relation of Peter Abelard's 'Planctus Dinae' to Biblical Sources and Exegetic Tradition: A Historical and Textual Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1990), 248.

<sup>55</sup> Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. Yet, there are no indications that Abelard knew Anselm's satisfaction theory. See Rolf Peppermüller, "Einleitung," in *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos, Fontes Christiani*, vol. 26/1, by Peter Abelard (Freiburg et al: Herder, 2000), 35, fn. 148; idem, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 91, 92. Thus, it seems improbable that Abelard "expressed contempt" for Anselm's satisfaction theory, as Allison claimed. See Gregg R. Allison, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to Christian Doctrine*, foreword by Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), 397. Although Abelard quoted Anselm's writings in his *Theologia Christiana* and *Theologia Scholastica*, there are no reasons for assuming a direct literary relationship between the latter's statements in *Cur Deus homo* and Abelard's arguments against the devil's just right to enslave mankind. See Abelard, *Theol. Christ.*, 4:1287A-B; idem, *Theol. Schol.*, 2:1071C; Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love*, 89.

*KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

in the devil's power.<sup>57</sup> Second, he argued that the devil had deceived the first humans and never fulfilled his part of the "bargain" or transaction (Gen 3:4, 5, 7, 19), and thus the devil could not have acquired any rights over humanity.<sup>58</sup> Third, he conceded that God may have permitted the devil to punish humanity for their sins. Yet, since the devil had no right to hold them in bondage, he had to release them as soon as God forgave their sins and removed the punishment. That is why God did not have to pay a ransom to the devil to redeem humanity.<sup>59</sup> Abelard further emphasized that God as the *summum bonum* could not have acted immorally and thus could not have granted the devil, who seduced man in wickedness, any special right, power, or dominion over his victims.<sup>60</sup> Like Anselm of Canterbury, he concluded that the ransom theory—the theory that the devil could hold man justly in bondage and Christ's death was necessary to redeem man from the devil—was not sufficient to explain why God became man.<sup>61</sup>

Eventually, Abelard turned to the question of the recipient of the payment. It should be noted that his remarks made in that context also belong to the *Quaestiones* section on Rom 3:26. Abelard reasoned that it is usually not the torturers but the masters and lords that determine the amount of the ransom money. Thus, he indicated that the ransom could not have been paid to the devil, as the ransom theory held. Instead, Abelard suggested that the *pretium sanguinis* (blood price) for our redemption was paid to the one (God) who had power over humanity and who had given them over to the torturer (the devil). It should be noted, however, that in the context of Rom 4:11, addressing believers in Christ that do not accept the law and the prophets, Abelard argued that it was indeed the devil who held us in bondage and demanded the blood of Christ as a ransom or payment for us.<sup>62</sup> Yet, shortly afterwards he summarized that Christ, the unblemished lamb, gave himself as a sacrifice to the Father.<sup>63</sup> He suggested on the other hand that declaring Christ's death a payment of a debt to God's injured

---

<sup>57</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:282; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 89.

<sup>58</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:282, 284; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 89.

<sup>59</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:282, 284, 288; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 89, 90.

<sup>60</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:282; Williams, 155.

<sup>61</sup> John Suggit, "Freedom to Be: Peter Abelard's Doctrine of Atonement," *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa*, no. 8 (1974): 34, 35.

<sup>62</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:346.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 26/2:348.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

honor would belittle God's love. Since the murder of Christ was a more serious transgression than Adam's sin in tasting the fruit in the Garden of Eden, God should have been even angrier with humanity and it would have been incomprehensible that Christ's death was somehow necessary for God to become willing to reconcile.<sup>64</sup> All these statements are susceptible to misunderstanding because Abelard felt free to employ arguments that were not representative of his own view and sometimes even opposite to his own opinion but that showed the inherent problems of extreme and one-sided positions.

Finally, it should be mentioned that Abelard's theology of atonement was multifaceted and ultimately broader and more comprehensive than many of the other contemporary theories of atonement. Weingart has summarized Abelard's view of the meaning of the cross as consisting of three separate elements: the cross was (a) the place where Christ, the only true and perfect priest and victim, sacrificed himself for the sins of mankind; (b) the battlefield for Christ's conquest of the devil and our deliverance from the satanic slavery of sin and death; and (c) the means whereby Christ bore our sins, endured the curse of the law, assumed God's righteous judgment against sin, and freed us from the wrath of God.<sup>65</sup> Suggit has pointed out that Abelard described Christ in terms of a priest who sacrificed himself on the altar of the cross and a king who was able to bind the devil and subdue all things to himself.<sup>66</sup> While Abelard criticized various aspects of the existing objective atonement theories, he was far from rejecting the substitutionary aspect of atonement as such as his dialectical argumentation style could suggest. Rather he used extreme arguments to attack weak points of these views only to present his own more comprehensive concept of atonement, admittedly in an unsystematic way.

Past Event and Present Experience

It is worth noting that, regardless of what aspect of atonement Abelard concentrated on, he repeatedly emphasized that the Christ event was not merely an incident in the past but was supposed to have an impact on the believer today, thus becoming a real, present experience. A clear example of the substitutionary element in Abelard's atonement theology with its

---

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 26/2:288; Williams, 156.

<sup>65</sup> Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 410.

<sup>66</sup> Suggit, 35.

*KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

effects on the present experience of the believer is found in one of his hymns for Good Friday:

Solus ad victimam procedis, Domine,  
Morti te offerens quam venis tollere,  
Quid nos miserrimmi possumus dicere,  
Qui, quae commisimus, scimus te luere.

Nostra sunt, Domine, nostra sunt crimina  
Quid tua criminum facis supplicia?  
Quibus sic compati fac nostra pectora,  
Ut vel compassion digna sit venia.

Nox ista flebilis praesensque triduum  
Quo demorabitur fletus sit vesperum,  
Donec laetitiae mane gratissimum  
Surgente Dominosit maestis redditum.

Tu tibi compati sic fac nos, Domine,  
Tuae participes ut simus gloriae;  
Sic praesens triduum in luctu ducere,  
Ut risum tribuas paschalis gratiae.<sup>67</sup>

Taylor argues that *victimam* is a specific religious term with the meaning “the victim of a sacrifice.”<sup>68</sup> Abelard considered Christ’s sacrifice as discharging the debt of punishment for us (a historical event), yet at the same time, he tried to explain how that sacrifice has an ongoing impact on human lives. His readers were to think of the passion not merely as a past event but they were to envision the suffering Christ as a person who is

---

<sup>67</sup> Taylor, 208, translated this hymn as follows: “Alone, O Lord, Thou goest forth to be the sacrifice, and offerest Thyself to that death which Thou comest to take away. What can we wretches say, who know that Thou undergoest the punishment, while we have done the wrongs? The offences are our own, our own indeed. Why dost Thou make their punishments Thine own? O make our hearts to share their pain, that our fellow-suffering may deserve to gain mercy. Let Thy sad night and all these whole three days be the night for which weeping endures, until the Lord rises and the happy morn of joy is granted to us who were in misery. Do Thou, O Lord, make us so to share Thy sufferings that we may be partakers of Thy glory. Cause us to spend these three days in such lamentation that Thou mayest bestow on us the smile of Easter grace.”

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 209.

present now and who works on people also currently. This thinking was in contrast to the established transactional theories of Abelard's contemporaries, which tended to depict the sacrifice of Christ purely as a past event. Further, the hymn suggests that this theme flowed from Abelard's heart and experience rather than just being an academic perspective.<sup>69</sup> Christ works on the human heart to provoke a change in the believer by displaying himself through his passion and by focusing his personality on them. Thus grace is not merely a thing or a legal action; it is God acting upon the human spirit so that the heart is changed, Christian life is awakened, and the mind is drawn in love to Christ and away from sin when the believer discovers what Christ has done for him.<sup>70</sup> Human beings are unable to bring about this change or make themselves worthy of salvation. Redemption came to the believers and was made effective for them "thanks to God, that is, not the law, not our own powers, not any merits, but a divine benefit of grace conferred on us through Jesus, that is, the savior of the world."<sup>71</sup> For Abelard the principal theme was the power of God's love as manifested in Christ's passion and in us in order to transform us by delivering us from slavery to sin. But although Abelard emphasized the personal, individualistic aspects of atonement, the substitutionary aspect of atonement was not denied or ignored in his work, but explicitly affirmed.<sup>72</sup>

### **Underlying Aspects of Abelard's Atonement Theology**

It has been shown above that both subjective and objective elements are found in Abelard's reflections about atonement in the context of his commentary on Romans, with most of the so called "subjective" elements being found in the *quaestiones* section in the mouth of the fictitious objector or as objections to various one-sided and erroneous teachings on atonement. Nevertheless, it is still not clear why Abelard focused so much on the individual and atonement's practical significance for him. This section will look at several aspects that underlie and influence his views on atonement, such as predestination and free will, the nature of sin, the reconciliation of

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 210, 211.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 211, 213; Grensted, 109.

<sup>71</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:540, 542. Cf. idem, *Serm.* 12; Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love*, 150; Quinn, 293, 294; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 100.

<sup>72</sup> Quinn, 291; Grensted, 105; cf. Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 97-104.

### KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT

God and man, and the restoration of man. Ignoring these aspects will inevitably lead to misconceptions about Abelard's individualistic and spiritual focus.

#### Predestination and Free Will

Abelard drew heavily from Augustine, who argued in favor of both predestination and free will, yet the question is how these terms are defined. Abelard viewed God as sovereign and the *summum bonum*, a concept that seems to be contrary to the idea of God predestining some for good and some for evil. He argued that humans may not always understand the ins and outs of God's purposes and actions,<sup>73</sup> yet God would nevertheless offer his grace to every person, good and wicked, elect and non-elect, day by day.<sup>74</sup> While some neglect the offered grace, there are others that are moved towards good works. Those who neglect or reject him are without excuse and it is they rather than God who are guilty of their condemnation.<sup>75</sup> Of course, this raises questions about divine predestination and Abelard solved these by saying that God foresees and foreknows those who will accept his grace, which allows him to choose and predestine them prior to their existence. As a result, predestination does not interfere with a person's free will.<sup>76</sup> Further, only if a person was capable of making decisions based on a free will could the person be held accountable for his actions and responsible for his sins. Humans make their decisions in their hearts, which are the seat of both their relationship to and alienation from God. It is each individual and not God that is responsible for severing this relationship.<sup>77</sup>

#### The Nature of Sin

The discussion of human free will raises, of course, questions regarding Abelard's view of the nature of sin, which has in turn ramifications for the theology of atonement. He stressed the personal nature of sin as a free action of a person. While he affirmed that every person inherits sin, he clarified that the sin that is inherited is not the guilt of sin but the

---

<sup>73</sup> Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 58.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 54; *idem*, "Exegetische Traditionen," 122, 123.

<sup>75</sup> Abaelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/3:634, 636; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 53, 59.

<sup>76</sup> Abaelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:578, 26/3:620, 622; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 60, 62; *idem*, "Exegetische Traditionen," 122.

<sup>77</sup> Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 412.

punishment for sin, denying Augustine's doctrine of original sin.<sup>78</sup> That punishment consists of temporal and eternal death, yet God took the eternal penalty from the baptized person (though the temporal penalty was not taken from him).<sup>79</sup> Sin in the sense of guilt is the result of a free choice of an individual and not something that is transferred from the parents to their children.<sup>80</sup> Abelard attempted to solve the tension between the concept of God as the *summum bonum* and the medieval idea that unbaptized infants were eternally lost, being sent into hell, by claiming that God in his foresight only allows the death of those infants that would have become very wicked.<sup>81</sup> He also admitted that there may have been reasons involved that we cannot really fathom. The death of unbaptized infants is a divinely appointed means for the living to realize and understand the evilness of Adam's transgression and to motivate them to avoid sinning.<sup>82</sup>

One could surmise that this personal perspective of sin would undermine its universality, but this was not so for Abelard. He still saw the universality of sin's scope and the seriousness of the personal consequences of man's sin. Accordingly, he believed that sin (a) defaced God's image in man, leading to the latter's alienation from his creator; (b) caused a use of the freedom of the will to give preference to evil rather than righteousness; (c) made it impossible for man to initiate his own salvation; and (d) made man devoid of the *caritas* (love) and brought him under the control of the *cupiditas* (cupidity, avarice, lust) the desire for the transitory, carnal, and unrighteous.<sup>83</sup>

Further, Abelard distinguished between actions and intentions. Actions were *res* (things) that were neither good nor bad, being morally indifferent

---

<sup>78</sup> Abaelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:390, 396, 400, 410, 508; Marenbon, 325; Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love*, 44, 47-49; idem, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 407; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 105.

<sup>79</sup> Abaelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:436, 438; cf. Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 105, 106. He argued that the sacrament of baptism does not justify a person, although it is nevertheless necessary for salvation because it removes the penalty of sin, namely original sin. A predestined person has to live a just life in order to be saved and someone who lives a just life must be baptized in order to be saved. See Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 111, 108.

<sup>80</sup> Marenbon, 325.

<sup>81</sup> Abaelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:422, 424; Marenbon, 325; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 115.

<sup>82</sup> Abaelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:430; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 117, 116.

<sup>83</sup> Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 407, 409.

*KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

since they could not be viewed apart from the person and the circumstances. The quality of a specific action had to be evaluated on the basis of the intention motivating that action. Intentions, on the other hand, were not *res* but they could be good or evil. Only a definitely intended action, even if it had not been carried out, could be regarded sinful. Thus, even the mental “action” of deciding to perform a specific sinful act constituted a sin. It was not enough, in Abelard’s view, to merely have an evil attitude or a wicked disposition. It was the evilness of someone’s intentions that made a person evil.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, Abelard pointed out that sin entails four different factors: (a) there are vices or defects of the mind that are not sin *per se* but inner weaknesses and inclinations reducing the power of a person to resist a temptation; (b) there is an evil will that leads to an evil action; (c) to intentionally yield to, consent to, or indulge in these vices is sin, yet in order to be considered sin, there must be not merely the thought of the action but actual readiness to put the action into practice; and (d) the performance of the action is the last factor of sin.<sup>85</sup> Taking into account the aspect of ignorance, Abelard argued that the sinner must understand that his action is unfitting and contemptible in the eyes of God in order for the action to constitute a genuine sin. Thus, although killing Jesus was an evil action, it was not a sin because the involved individuals acted in the belief that they were doing God’s will.<sup>86</sup> It seems, however, that Abelard did not see the potential irrationality of evil existing in a world that is estranged from its creator.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>84</sup> Abelard, *Theol. Christ.*, 369.696-698; idem, *Collat.*, 160.3158-3165; Marenbon, 245, 247, 255, 256; Robert Blomme, *La doctrine du péché dans les écoles théologiques de la première moitié du XIIe siècle*, *Dissertationes ad gradum magistri in Facultate Theologica vel in Facultate Iuris Canonici consequendum conscriptae*: Series 3, 6 (Louvain-Gembloux: Publications Universitaires de Louvain, 1958), 12:113-219; Suggit, 32; Thomas Bushnell, “Peter Abelard’s Conception of the Good” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, 2007), 107, 132.

<sup>85</sup> Marenbon, 257, 260; Weingart, *The Logic of Divine Love*, 50-52; Suggit, 33; Bushnell, 107, 108; Jean Porter, “Christian Ethics and the Concept of Morality: A Historical Inquiry,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 26, no. 2 (2006): 10; D. E. Luscombe, “The Ethics of Abelard: Some Further Considerations,” in *Peter Abelard: Proceedings of the International Conference, Louvain, May 10-12, 1971*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1974), 80; Peppermüller, *Abaelards Auslegung des Römerbriefes*, 51-66.

<sup>86</sup> Bushnell, 108, 133.

<sup>87</sup> Weingart, “The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard,” 412.

### The Reconciliation of God and Man

Abelard suggested that reconciliation consists of three actions that must take place between the sinner and God: (a) repentance; (b) confession; and (c) satisfaction.<sup>88</sup> In regard to the first two aspects, he pointed out that repentance may occur in the mind. Sin is forgiven when God pardons, even though no public confession may have been heard. Thus one might ask if confession is truly necessary, yet Abelard suggested that it is nevertheless useful.<sup>89</sup> His interiorization of sin and its remission drew, of course, attention to the longstanding problem of the proper role of the subjective and objective elements of penance.<sup>90</sup> Abelard also talked about the necessity of prayer, true heart contrition, and the remission of sins. From his point of view, true reconciliation could not take place without repentance. Sin could only be forgiven if the sinner became as one who no longer deserved the punishment. However, he also emphasized that reconciliation was accomplished by God rather than by man.<sup>91</sup> He stated that man does not become different by following Christ's example; rather true reconciliation is something that is effected by God's grace. It is only through the Christ, who is the mediator between God and man because he is the God-man, that we are reconciled to God. Employing traditional language, he suggested that it is only through him that anything that we do will please the Father, and it is only through him that we may gain any good thing from the Father. Christ became the reconciler in his blood, namely through his death. Yet, Abelard emphasized that a person has to have faith for the merits of Christ to become effective for him. Only those who believe with a persevering faith are affected by this reconciliation.<sup>92</sup>

### The Restoration of Man

Abelard believed that sin was not merely an action, nor was it simply a substance that could be removed using the right remedy. Rather, sin had to do with the inward disposition and defilement of the heart. Reconciliation, therefore, required not just an act of compensation to make

---

<sup>88</sup> Susan R. Kramer, "'We speak to God with our thoughts': Abelard and the Implications of Private Communication with God," *Church History* 69, no. 1 (2000): 33.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 34, 35.

<sup>90</sup> Paul Anciaux, *La Theologie du sacrement de penitence au XIIe siecle* (Louvain: E Nauwelaerts, 1949), 176-178; Bernhard Poschmann, *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*, Transl. by Francis Courtney (New York: Herder and Herder, 1964), 157.

<sup>91</sup> Kramer, 28-40; Suggit, 34.

<sup>92</sup> Suggit, 32, 35.

*KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

up for the dishonor inflicted on God; rather, what was even more necessary was a change in the sinner and his attitude, the realization of a true heart conversion. Thus, Abelard argued that forgiveness of sins did not merely constitute an outward act but also a change of the inward disposition of the sinner.<sup>93</sup>

God was motivated by love in both the creation and the restoration of humanity. Christ revealed divine love during his incarnation. It was the purpose of his ministry to deliver us from the slavery of sin, evil, and death so that he could restore us to the fellowship with God.<sup>94</sup> Abelard considered the message of John 15:13—"Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends"—elemental for a proper understanding of the meaning of the cross. This supreme love for humanity was demonstrated by God in the fact that he took on human nature and suffered and died—actions that should, in turn, lead us to cling to him.<sup>95</sup> By his death and resurrection Christ taught us something about eternal life in heaven.<sup>96</sup> Since, in Abelard's view, God's justice was nothing else than his love and charity, Christ's incarnation, life, and death were to be considered as demonstrations of his justice and love, and as a "redemptive act of grace, begun and finished by God in Christ."<sup>97</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux and William of St. Thierry, however, regarded such statements as illustrations of Abelard's acceptance of the Pelagian heresy, thinking that redemption came through a human effort.<sup>98</sup> Abelard did not actually espouse Pelagianism, however; he merely emphasized that God's loving and gracious redemptive action is efficacious for man only if the latter accepts it by faith. Furthermore, he considered God's redemptive action not only as a past event but also as something that should bring about a change now. In his opinion, atonement included several aspects and a very important one was that the Holy Spirit, who is love, is shed abroad into our hearts, creating a new principle of life in our hearts so that sin is removed from our heart and that we show forth love too. This kindling love does not merely occur on a psychological level by reflecting about Christ's exemplary life and passion

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 33, 34.

<sup>94</sup> Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 409, 410.

<sup>95</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:274, 276, 380, 386, 500, 516, 584.

<sup>96</sup> Abelard, "Theologia Christiana," 12:292; idem, *Prob. Hel.*, 6.

<sup>97</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:276, 278, 288, 290; Cartwright, 197.

<sup>98</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Ep.* 190.7.17, 190.9.23, 60.9.23; William of St. Thierry, *Disp. Ab.* 3.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

(moral influence) and thus as a result of human initiative; rather, the restoration of an attitude of love towards God is a real regenerative effect generated through the Holy Spirit, who wants to restore people to fellowship with God and transform them into sons of God. This infusion of love is the principal work of God's regenerative grace.<sup>99</sup> Abelard emphasized that this change is an act of God's grace, not of human effort. He also stressed that there are two kinds of slaves, one acting out of fear and the other one out of love.<sup>100</sup> It is love that unites man to God, creating a bond between the two.<sup>101</sup> Thus the two key concepts of Abelard's view become visible—the freedom of human choice and love.<sup>102</sup>

Yet, there remain various questions that Abelard did not answer. He did not explain how love is implanted in the human heart through Christ's love. Neither did he explain how we are made more righteous after Christ's passion, nor did he elaborate on the process through which the benefit of Christ's passion operates to inspire love in the believer.<sup>103</sup> By not answering these questions, he left room for other interpreters to draw various conclusions about his meaning, some of which misrepresented Abelard's actual views. To avoid misinterpretations and distortions, it is advisable to consider all of Abelard's statements on atonement together.

Thus, the connection between Abelard's concept of atonement and the above four underlying aspects may be summarized as follows. The human ability to make free choices ensures that we are responsible for our own actions and eventually guilty for the sins we committed, and not God (the *summum bonum*) who allegedly predestined some to eternal damnation and others to eternal glory. Further, limiting sin to outward actions falls short of the true problem because sinful actions are only the outflow of a sinful disposition of the human heart. Starting from these two presuppositions Abelard argued that true reconciliation between God and man can only occur if the inward disposition of love to God is restored in man, a change

---

<sup>99</sup> Abelard, *Expositio in Epistolam ad Romanos*, 26/2:278; Suggit, 36; Cartwright, 197; Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 410, 411, 413. Bernard's critique of Abelard—"What profit is there for Christ to instruct us by example if he did not first restore us by his grace?"—seems odd given the fact that Abelard strongly emphasized that God has to regenerate the heart of a person before any good thing may come from that individual. See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Ep.* 60.9.23.

<sup>100</sup> Suggit, 34.

<sup>101</sup> Weingart, "The Atonement in the Writings of Peter Abailard," 409, 410.

<sup>102</sup> Suggit, 34.

<sup>103</sup> Quinn, 294.

*KAISER: PETER ABELARD'S THEOLOGY OF ATONEMENT*

that cannot be accomplished by human effort but only by God's regenerative act in the heart of the person. Still the person has to accept God's efforts because God does not impose the change on the person. That is why Abelard emphasized the utter insufficiency of any atonement theory that would merely deal with our outward behavior or the solving of legal issues. He reasoned that atonement can only truly solve the bridge between God and man if it also reaches the root of the problem, namely the disposition of the heart.

**Conclusion**

Although a number of statements may be collected in favor of a moral influence element in Abelard's writings, this study has illustrated the dubiousness of the former proof-text method. Some "individualistic" statements have been distorted by the insertion of additional words to prove an exemplarist view. Other statements should be handled with caution because they are found in *quaestiones* sections that give a voice to a fictitious objector. Thus, it should be noted that such statements are not necessarily representative of Abelard's own view of atonement. Rather he employed the means of dialectic to question imbalanced and weak arguments. His argumentative style and his reasoning about philosophical and theological intricacies brought him more than once into conflict with other scholars. His main prosecutor, Bernard of Clairvaux, mistook Abelard's debating style and didactic approach for an attempt to question foundational truths and to unsettle the faith of believers. The presence of a condemned heretic, Arnold of Brescia, among his students made it even more necessary to adopt measures against him in order to prevent Arnold from gaining a greater influence. Given the fact that in his writings Abelard frequently affirmed the substitutionary significance of Christ's death, it is easy to understand why he felt wronged by Bernard's *capitula* and why Abelard charged Bernard of malice or ignorance. Abelard suggested that Christ's death was not necessary to appease God and to make him willing to reconcile. Neither had the devil a legal right to hold humanity in bondage, nor did God make a payment to the devil to buy people back. All these theories would, in Abelard's opinion, diminish God's benevolent character, supreme love, and highest goodness. He suggested that God himself wanted to save and reconcile humanity to himself which is why all his redemptive actions were motivated by his love.

*JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY*

Further, Abelard critiqued the transactional theories because they did not go to the root of the problem. He emphasized that decisions are made in the human heart. People tend to use their freedom of choice to give preference to evil and it is impossible for them to initiate their own salvation. The human heart is the seat of his relationship to and alienation from God. That is why God, according to Abelard, works on the human heart to bring a change about of its attitude and intentions. Thus, although the cross reveals God's love, it is not merely a psychological influence that encourages people to change. Rather God himself infuses divine love and regenerates the human heart through the Holy Spirit to deliver it from the slavery of sin and recreate a new motivating power in man. Accepting God's actions by faith would make God's loving and gracious redemptive actions efficacious for man. Only these actions would really accomplish a reconciliation between God and man. Abelard's background of philosophy and teaching motivated him to focus on the present practical aspects of atonement for the individual believer rather than merely on its past theoretical and legal elements.

The multifaceted approach of this study—focusing on biographical, historical, literary, and contextual facets of the topic—suggests that injustice is done to Abelard if we focus merely on one facet or aspect. Since people are more than just their ideas and beliefs, it is often necessary to study their personality, experience, relationships, writings, and connected topics to be capable of doing a realistic evaluation. The misunderstandings and conflicts, arising from Abelard's confrontational debating style, dialectic teaching style, and "incomplete" writing style that left questions open for discussion, may teach us to pay more attention as to how we should phrase our beliefs to avoid misunderstandings. Abelard's attempt of developing a more balanced and comprehensive theory of atonement encourages modern theologians to reflect about the practical implications and significance of our beliefs, something that is so important to make our faith understandable and meaningful to people living in our current times.

**Denis Kaiser**, a native of Germany, studied in his home country, Austria, and the United States, and earned degrees in tax law, theology, and church history. He is currently completing a Ph.D. in Adventist Studies and Historical Theology at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He is married to Angelika. [denis@andrews.edu](mailto:denis@andrews.edu)