

# A combined analysis of abelard's accounts of sin and atonement



Throughout his tumultuous career, Peter Abelard faced a series of vehement backlashes against his theological work as well as the manner in which he conducted his personal life; indeed, his affair and secret marriage to Heloise famously culminated in a physical castration, and his conflicts with Bernard and William of St. Thierry, a theological one. Abelard's controversial stance regarding the Trinity and the rights of the devil lead to his condemnation at the Council of Sens in 1141 and, after a failed attempt to win favour with the Pope, he was excommunicated and his works burned. The viciousness of Bernard's polemic against Abelard has branded him and his theology with the stamp of heresy, but Abelard was a talented thinker and debater, as the Chambers Biographical Dictionary describes him, "the keenest thinker and boldest theologian of the 12th Century"[1] and, especially given the rise of the moral theory of atonement within our more liberal modern context, Abelard's theology, especially his soteriology, deserves to be revisited. Having disregarded the ransom and satisfaction theories of atonement, ubiquitous in medieval soteriology, Abelard embarked upon a consideration of the true role of Christ and the crucifixion within God's model of salvation. He does so in relation to his specific conception of sin. In this essay, I will aim to examine whether Abelard's account of sin sheds any light on his account of the atonement. I will seek to sustain the line of argument that Abelard's conception of sin is inextricably linked to his understanding of atonement; his belief in the inherited punishment of original sin renders Christ's death necessary for our freedom from this punishment. Simultaneously, however, we find in Abelard a shift from this bloody, sacrificial salvation towards an atonement of love; his understanding of sin as entirely intentional

necessarily means that salvation, for Abelard, must occur at the level of the <https://assignbuster.com/a-combined-analysis-of-abelards-accounts-of-sin-and-atonement/>

intention- Christ's death works in a subjective sense to ensure the redirection of our intentions from concupiscence to purity and from fear to love. This is not to argue that Abelard is a proto-modern moral atonement theorist since he does still seem to subscribe to the idea of the objective sacrifice. However, in Abelard, we find a definite movement towards a soteriology spinning on the axis of love; Abelard's conception of righteousness is defined in terms of loving God and, in turn, his conception of sin is defined in terms of a lack of this love. Atonement, therefore, hinges on the rekindling of lost love.

In order to assess the extent to which Abelard's conception of sin sheds light on his theory of the atonement, it is first of all necessary to explore what sin looks like for Abelard; as Williams notes, 'Abelard's understanding of the power that sin has over us will be crucial to understanding what he thinks Christ accomplished for us on the Cross.'<sup>[2]</sup> Abelard seems to be espousing a dual-level understanding of sin whereby he argues that we are bound by the punishment for original sin ('the objective dominion of sin')<sup>[3]</sup>, on the one hand, and bound by personal sin ('the subjective dominion of sin')<sup>[4]</sup> on the other. I will turn to the latter type first. I think it is fair to say that Abelard's understanding of sin is inextricably linked to his idea of righteousness which, as Williams observes, 'is simply to love God for his own sake and to act rightly out of love for him.'<sup>[5]</sup> This love Abelard refers to as 'charity'; it exists both in us and in God with God's own charity sparking charity in his creation towards him. Given that righteousness and justice hinge on loving God, it follows that 'our sin is scorn for the creator, and to sin is to scorn the creator- not to do for his sake what we believe we ought to do for his sake,

or not to renounce for his sake what we believe ought to be renounced.'[6] Acting against God's will is tantamount to acting against God, therefore acting outside of perfect love for him. Abelard postulates a highly individualistic conception of sin; guilt is located in the soul of each individual and they therefore have sole responsibility for the management of it and, in turn, their relationship with the creator since, as Kemeny points out, ' the object of sin is God; sin interrupts harmonious relations between Creator and creature.'[7]

Abelard espouses a somewhat complex view of the location of sin, the point at which sin actually takes place. Contrary to the thought of many of his contemporaries, Abelard rejects the notion that actions themselves can have an ethical value irrespective of intention; he writes that ' there is no substance to a sin; it consists of non-being rather than of being. It is as if we define shadows by saying they are the absence of light where light did have being.'[8] In addition, Abelard rejects the notion that the vices of the mind and body which make an individual prone to sin are not, in and of themselves, sinful since some vices of the mind do not lead to sin ; as Kemeny writes, ' ...some vices of the mind- for example, dullness- do not make people prone to sin. Others, like irascibility, do.'[9] Through overcoming these vices, one can nurture merit and virtue but they are not inherently sinful themselves. Instead, these morally neutral vices make the will inclined to act in an unfitting way. It is in the intention that Abelard locates sin; actions have a derivative ethical value from the intentions with which they are committed. As Marenbon writes, ' actions are rightly described of good or bad, but only by virtue of the intentions from which

they spring. But intentions, although they belong to the life of the mind, are sinful only in relation to a definitely intended (although perhaps prevented) action.'[10] Any intention to act against the will of God shows contempt for God and any intention which seeks to do what the individual believes to be good/ in accordance with God's will is demonstrating love. There is no fault in acting in accordance with a good intention but to be morally good, the belief to which the intention is aiming must be correct. For Abelard, consent is giving into one's intention. The intention is what understands the action- the reasons for committing it, the moral value of the action etc. Though for Abelard, an agent is not responsible for their natural inclinations, they are responsible for what they consent to in order to satiate their appetites. Abelard maintains that much of our immoral behaviour is actually involuntary- we cannot help but consent to satiate our desires- but this does not excuse them nor mean we are not morally responsible for these involuntary actions. Consenting to act against the will of God, irrespective of natural inclination, is tantamount to refusing God the love he is due from his creation.

In tandem with his subjective understanding of personal guilt and sin, Abelard espouses a specific understanding of original sin and the burden which post-lapsarian humanity carries. Firstly, the conditions which incline human beings towards evil desires were generated during the fall; the fall disrupts the ability of the rational soul to rule the body and there exists a void between humanity and God. Thus, after the fall, humanity inherits certain bodily and mental weaknesses, the morally neutral 'vices' which Abelard speaks of. It is these vices, however, which give rise to the evil

desires which lead to sin. In addition, the fall generated sin-inducing conditions in making the world less bearable; as Williams observes, 'because of original sin, we are subject to temporal misfortune as well as eternal damnation. The hardships of this present life in turn incline us to look for security in worldly goods, and the Law, by promising us such goods, makes our desire for them all the more fervent.'[11]

With regards to original sin proper, Abelard takes a very different stance to the majority of his contemporaries. He argues not that humanity has inherent sin by virtue of its relation to the first parents, Adam and Eve, but that it possesses an inherent punishment for that sin. As Abelard writes, 'and so, since we say that people are procreated and born with original sin, and that they contracted this original sin from their first parents, it seems that this ought rather to be related to the punishment for sin...than to the guilt of the soul and contempt of God.'[12] Original sin, or the punishment for it, is transmitted through sexual intercourse, in the loose sense that it is transmitted from parent to offspring, but the sexual act itself is not sinful and adds nothing to the punishment of original sin.

It seems, then, that Abelard is espousing a two-level approach to sin- original punishment is inherited by every human being but, separate from this, every human being gathers their own personal guilt based on their succumbing to evil intentions. As we shall see, this two-fold understanding of sin feeds into a distinctly twofold understanding of atonement. In addition, it will become clear that with regards to personal guilt, Abelard's focus on sin as the lack of love towards God will become the focus of his atonement theory.

Abelard emphasizes the transformative power of Christ on the cross as the sole mechanism for atonement for personal sin. Abelard focuses on what the death of Christ did in us. Undergirding Abelard's thought is the fundamental idea that Christians should never serve God out of fear but only out of love; theories such as the ransom or satisfaction models make us unwilling to express love for God on account of the bloody act we have witnessed in the death of Christ- it is not the product of love. For Abelard, if we serve God out of fear, we do not truly love God and without this love we cannot hope to achieve salvation. Alternatively, Abelard wants to argue that through the atonement, God generates a love in us that allows us to do good works. The mechanism of salvation from personal guilt is at the level of the human heart. This makes sense when one considers Abelard's aforementioned understanding of sin as individualistic and intentional. Through a newly revived love for God inspired by the passion and a desire to imitate the perfect love manifested in Christ, our intentions are once again pointed towards acting in accordance with God's will and thus away from concupiscence (the lusts and desires of the heart). As Abelard writes, ... through this unique grace that he displayed to us- namely that the Son assumed our nature and taught us through his words and his example, unto death- he has bound us closer to him in love...therefore, the true love of anybody who is the recipient of such a favor of divine grace will not recoil from suffering (tolerare) for his sake[13] However, although it is undeniable that Abelard heavily espouses this subjectivist understanding of atonement and does seek to move atonement theology more in the direction of transformation through love rather than fear, I think that Abelard's status as a mere 'exemplarist' can sometimes be over-emphasized. Nieuwenhove <https://assignbuster.com/a-combined-analysis-of-abelards-accounts-of-sin-and-atonement/>

summarizes the response of many to Abelard's soteriology: ' Abelard's understanding of salvation is utterly subjectivist (it is something that happens to us) while a balanced soteriology should be objectivist as well.'<sup>[14]</sup> Abelard's contemporaries condemned him for a similar reason, arguing that his theory of atonement was on the side of heretical Pelagianism; for example, ' the Pelagian danger Bernard fears is that Abelard has rendered Christ's atoning work unnecessary for our salvation. On such a view, we are in principle capable of earning worthiness of salvation on our own.'<sup>[15]</sup>

It is clear, however, that these Pelagian/ mere exemplarist accusations are ill-founded. Abelard does clearly accept the objective transaction occurring at the crucifixion of Christ. Firstly, it is through this objective transaction that the inherited punishment for original sin is absolved. Abelard clearly is not rejecting the notion of bloody transaction or payment; as he writes in his commentary on Romans seven, ...we had the power to sell ourselves into slavery, but we do not have the power to buy ourselves back. Innocent blood was given for us. Nor can we free ourselves from the dominion of sin by our powers, but only by the grace of the redeemer.<sup>[16]</sup> As Williams notes, '... Christ is our redeemer. the one who buys us back. The price he paid was his blood- in other words, his life. One could hardly ask for a clearer affirmation of an " objective transaction."...Christ bore the punishment for our sins so that we don't have to.... the punishment to which we would otherwise have been subject is cancelled.'<sup>[17]</sup> In this sense, then, Abelard is espousing a version of the penal substitution model whereby Christ dissolves our punishment for Adam's sin.



In addition to Abelard advocating the idea of an objective transaction as the mechanism for absolution from the punishment for original sin, it also seems to be the case that without the 'objective transaction', there would be nothing to enkindle the love necessary for atonement in the subjective sense. It is through the imitation of Christ's perfect sacrificial love that we are saved; as McGrath observes, 'Abailard is an exemplarist if, and only if, it can be shown that he understands Christ to be our example, through whose imitation we are redeemed- whereas it is clear that he understands Christ to be out example in the sense that, because we are redeemed by him, we now wish to imitate him.'[18] Without Christ's gift of redemption and the selflessness necessary for the achievement of it, we are not only inspired to imitate Christ but also grateful for his grace. It seems, then, that Abelard cannot be categorized a mere exemplarist since, firstly, he espouses a dual-level theory of atonement, and, secondly, the example necessary for the exemplarist position was only provided by an objective transaction. I think that Quinn's assessment of Abelard as a 'hierarchical pluralist'[19] is an accurate one; he argues that 'like Aquinas, he offers an account of the Atonement that has a dominant motif to which others are subordinated.'[20] Indeed, Abelard does have an objective and subjective element to his atonement theory but I think it is also true to say that the objective elements are underdeveloped in comparison to the subjective. Abelard wants to emphasize the transformative power of love in his atonement 'hierarchy' against the backdrop of sacrificial, satisfaction theories and, thus, perhaps emphasizes the subjectivist side of his theory to a greater extent. This does not, however, mean that the objective side of his understanding should be forgotten. I think that Williams offers a useful summary of the working

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relationship between Abelard's objective and subjective elements: the objective dominion of sin is our being liable to the punishment for sin, namely, eternal damnation; the Passion releases us from that dominion by way of the objective transaction that...Abelard must in consistency affirm. The subjective dominion of sin is our inability to withstand the power of concupiscence; the Passion releases us from that dominion by way of the subjective transformation that the exemplarist reading of Abelard has taken as central.[21]

It seems that Abelard's conception of sin is inextricably linked to his theory of atonement. His postulation of a dual level sin- original sin (punishment), which is inherited, and personal sin, which is individually accumulated- is mapped onto his soteriology, original punishment being absolved by an objective sacrificial transaction, and personal sin being dissolved through a redirection of the human will towards God and his love. In addition, the internalism present in Abelard's conception of sin is also present in his account of atonement; since sin is located in the intent, freedom from personal sin comes from an alteration at the level of the intent/will/ heart through the transformative power of love. The entire framework of Abelard's soteriological theory is love; righteousness being defined in terms of loving God and, in turn, sin being characterized in terms of a lack of this love. Atonement, therefore, hinges on the rekindling and reviving of love between the creator and his creatures.

[1] The Chambers Biographical Dictionary [2] Brower, J. E., and Guilfooy, K., The Cambridge Companion to Abelard (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 263 [3] *ibid.* p. 265 [4] *ibid.* [5] *ibid.* p. 261 [6] Abelard, Scito <https://assignbuster.com/a-combined-analysis-of-abelards-accounts-of-sin-and-atonement/>

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