

SIN, GRACE, AND REDEMPTION IN PETER ABELARD

I. INTRODUCTION

“From time to time some of my friends startle me by referring to the Atonement itself as a revolting heresy,” wrote Austin Farrer, “invented by the twelfth century and exploded by the twentieth. Yet the word is in the Bible.”¹ Farrer is referring to Romans 5:11 in the Authorized Version: “we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.” Here the word ‘atonement’—literally, the state of being “at one”—translates the Greek *katallagē*, which means “reconciliation.” The doctrine of the Atonement, then, is in its essentials the claim that the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ effects a reconciliation between God and human beings, who had been—and apart from Christ’s gracious action would have remained—estranged on account of human sin. And that doctrine, far from being a twelfth-century innovation, is a prominent theme of the Pauline epistles and a matter of theological consensus from the earliest days of Christian thought.

One must distinguish, however, between the *doctrine* of the Atonement and *theories* of the Atonement. Where the doctrine simply states that the Passion of Christ effects a reconciliation between God and human beings, theories of the Atonement try to explain *how* the Passion has such an effect. Various theories of the Atonement have been put forward, and none has ever received the kind of broad and enduring support that would entitle it to be regarded as *the* orthodox view. Nevertheless, some theories have better credentials than others, and Abelard got himself in trouble by revising or denying some well-credentialed twelfth-century views and—according to his detractors, at least— embracing a most unsatisfactory alternative.

¹Austin Farrer, “Christ’s Atoning Death,” in *A Faith of Our Own* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1960), 20.

The best place to look for Abelard's theory of the Atonement is in his *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*. The Commentary consists of verse-by-verse exposition of the literal sense of Romans, with frequent excursus or *quaestiones* on theological or exegetical issues raised by the text.² (The only formal division of the Commentary is into a prologue and four "books," but as Buytaert rightly notes, "The division into Books is rather artificial" [16].) The *quaestio* on the Atonement, found early in Book II, has been the target of both scholarly study and theological polemic ever since Bernard of Clairvaux's energetic propaganda war against Abelard. In his *Letter to Pope Innocent Concerning Certain Heresies of Peter Abelard* Bernard charged Abelard with exemplarism and Pelagianism. By 'exemplarism' I mean the view that the Passion has redemptive efficacy only as an unparalleled example of divine love. There is no "objective transaction" in the Atonement (as Swinburne calls it): no penal substitution, in which Christ undergoes on our behalf the punishment for our sins, no payment of a ransom to deliver us from the power of the Devil, but simply a manifestation of divine love that awakens an answering love in the believer.³ By 'Pelagianism' I mean the view that human beings do not need divine grace in order to act rightly. Bernard argues that Pelagianism follows from exemplarism. If our redemption consists in some change of heart brought on by our response to Christ's loving example, then it is we who accomplish our own redemption. Abelard, according to Bernard, "makes the glory of our redemption and the pinnacle of our salvation consist, not in the power of the Cross or the price of Christ's blood, but in the improvement of our own way of life (*in*

²The critical edition is *Petri Abaelardi Opera Theologica I: Commentarium in Epistolam Pauli ad Romanos; Apologia contra Bernardum*, vol. 11 in *Corpus Christianorum Continuatio Mediaevalis*, ed. Eligius M. Buytaert (Turnholt, Belgium: Brepols, 1969). Further citations of this work are given in parentheses in the body of the paper. Buytaert catalogues the *quaestiones* on pp. 17-20.

³Richard Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 162.

nostrae . . . conversationis profectibus).”⁴

Bernard, as Philip Quinn dryly noted, “was far from being a fair-minded philosophical critic,”⁵ and his recounting of Abelard’s views is full of the pervasive misunderstandings of one who has been blinded by partisanship. But if Bernard was led astray because he was too keen on condemning Abelard as a heretic, other readers have been misled because they were too keen on commending Abelard as a hero. For example, Hastings Rashdall praised Abelard lavishly for at last stating the doctrine of the Atonement “in a way which had nothing unintelligible, arbitrary, illogical, or immoral about it”⁶—precisely *because* Abelard was an exemplarist and eschewed such bizarre notions as penal substitution and the ransom paid to the Devil. In a different vein, Richard Weingart⁷ argued at length that Abelard’s theory is orthodox, multifaceted, and eminently defensible; but John Marenbon is surely correct to warn that Weingart’s “book must be read with caution, since the author’s desire to make Abelard’s thought conform with what he takes to be orthodoxy sometimes leads him to distort it.”⁸

No such polemical intent, whether of friend or foe, mars Quinn’s sober and illuminating discussion. Quinn argues that “the transformative power of divine love”⁹ is the central but not the only motif in Abelard’s account, and he denies that Abelard is a Pelagian.¹⁰ Unfortunately, Quinn focuses on the short *quaestio* on the Atonement and given little attention to the Romans

⁴Letter 190, in *Sancti Bernardi Opera* (Rome: Editiones Cistercienses, 1957), VIII: 37.

⁵Philip L. Quinn, “Abelard on Atonement: ‘Nothing Unintelligible, Arbitrary, Illogical, or Immoral about It,’” in *Reasoned Faith*, ed. Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 292.

⁶Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 360.

⁷*The Logic of Divine Love: A Critical Analysis of the Soteriology of Peter Abailard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970).

⁸John Marenbon, *The Philosophy of Peter Abelard* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 322 n.

⁹Quinn, 296.

¹⁰Quinn, 292-295.

Commentary as a whole. In this essay I wish to preserve Quinn's fair-mindedness while broadening the scope of the discussion to include the Romans Commentary as a whole. By doing so I hope not only to offer a more complete account of Abelard's theory of the Atonement but also to show how that theory is connected to Abelard's understanding of both original sin and divine grace. It will soon become clear that Abelard is not an exemplarist of the sort that Bernard deplored and Rashdall praised. Abelard does acknowledge an "objective transaction" in the death of Christ. In order to explain what that transaction is, and why it is needed, I look at Abelard's account of the dominion of sin over fallen human beings. This dominion has both an objective and a subjective aspect. The objective dominion of sin is our being liable to the *punishment* of sin; in the Passion Christ delivers us from the objective dominion of sin by taking that punishment on our behalf. The subjective dominion of sin is our strong inclination to obey our disordered desires; in the Passion Christ delivers us from the subjective dominion of sin by inspiring us with the love of God. As I will show, however, this subjective transformation raises a difficult question about the nature of divine grace. In the end, it is not Abelard's supposed exemplarism but his unusual account of grace that might justify calling him a Pelagian.

II. TWO MAJOR THEMES OF THE ROMANS COMMENTARY

The Romans Commentary has two overarching themes. The first is the exaltation of divine grace at the expense of human merit, as Abelard announces in his Prologue to the work:

The intention of [the Epistle to the Romans] is to call back to true humility and brotherly harmony the Roman converts from among both Jews and Gentiles, who were claiming superiority over each other in prideful contentiousness. Now it does this . . . by both magnifying the gifts of divine grace and minimizing the merits of our own deeds, so that no one will presume to boast of his own deeds but will attribute whatever ability he has to divine grace, recognizing that he has received from divine grace whatever good he has. . .

. The manner of treating that subject matter consists, as has been said, in minimizing our works and magnifying grace, so that no one will presume to boast of his own works, but rather “let him who boasts boast in the Lord.” (43)¹¹

Throughout the *Commentary* Abelard takes every opportunity to remind the reader that we owe every good thing to divine grace and can claim nothing on our own merits. Now it would be odd, to say the least, if a work whose announced purpose was to extol divine grace and depreciate human merit should turn out to be Pelagian.

The second main theme of the *Commentary* is that we are meant to serve God out of love rather than out of fear (*amore potius quam timore*).¹² To be righteous is simply to love God for his own sake and to act rightly out of love for him. This love is of course called ‘charity’, and Abelard frequently *identifies* justice (or righteousness) with charity—not only in human beings but even in God. God’s justice is taken to be his drive to justify, rather than his drive to punish; and since we are justified on account of charity (God’s own charity kindling charity within us), it seems natural for Abelard to speak of God’s justice and his charity as equivalent. Thus when Paul describes God as “just and justifying,” Abelard glosses “just in his will and justifying through his action” (113). God is “just in his will” because he has perfect charity towards us; he is “justifying through his action” because he creates charity in us, thereby making us just, i.e., righteous.

¹¹When Abelard quotes the parts of Romans on which he is commenting in a given passage, I italicize the Scriptural text; other quotations from Scripture are indicated by quotation marks.

¹²This theme first appears in the commentary on the second word of the Epistle (which in Abelard’s translation is *servus*, servant) and recurs throughout the work. It is especially prominent in Book III, where Abelard comments on Romans 7 and 8.

III. THE OBJECTIVE TRANSACTION

The first theme suggests that human redemption is entirely God's doing; it is nothing of which we can boast. The second theme suggests that what God does is to enkindle supernatural charity by which we serve God out of love for himself and not out of fear. What sort of theory of the Atonement will fit these themes best? I think we can see pretty clearly that an exemplarist theory would not be a good fit at all, at least if we assume that God's redemptive action is to be found in the Passion of Christ. For unless the Passion actually accomplishes something, unless there is an "objective transaction" made in and through the death of Christ, there is nothing about the Passion to inspire our love: pity, perhaps, or sympathy, but not love or gratitude. Loving Christ because of what he did for us on the Cross makes sense only if he in fact did something for us on the Cross. And whatever that was, it had to be something Christ *intended* to accomplish in his Passion. Otherwise the connection between his Passion and our redemption would be merely accidental, and it would be incongruous to feel gratitude and love toward Christ on account of his death. We might of course be very glad the Passion had taken place, and we might properly feel gratitude and love toward whoever gave the Passion a redemptive efficacy Christ had not intended; but there would be no sense in loving Christ because he died for us, precisely because, *ex hypothesi*, he didn't in fact die *for us* at all.

Here's another way of putting the same argument. On an exemplarist theory, the Passion works for our redemption only by presenting an extraordinary example of love that inspires an answering love in our hearts. But the Passion is not an example of love at all if Christ was not in some way acting for our benefit by allowing himself to be delivered up unto death. So exemplarism turns out to be incoherent. Only if there is an objective transaction can there be the

subjective transformation.

So the two main themes of the Romans Commentary, taken together, should make us expect Abelard to acknowledge some objective benefit that accrues to us in virtue of the Passion of Christ: a benefit we could not attain for ourselves (so that we have no ground for boasting) but that God in Christ won for us in his Passion (so that he kindles in us the true love of God that enables us to serve God in the right way, thereby making us righteous). That benefit is deliverance from the power of sin. Expounding Romans 7:14, Abelard writes:

But I am carnal: that is, I am given to carnal pleasures and earthly longings. Indeed, I am so carnal that *I am sold into bondage to sins:* that is, I subject myself freely to sin and its slavery for a payoff in earthly goods, exercising every concupiscence in order to acquire and attain them. Or at any rate I was sold into bondage to sin in and with our first parents on account of the delight and tasting of the apple that Eve desired (*concupivit*). That's how we were made captives. 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 own powers, but only by the grace of the Redeemer. (205)

Note the commercial language. Earthly goods are the payoff (the *pretium*) we received for selling ourselves into slavery; but having sold ourselves, we can no longer buy ourselves back. The context ensures that we take “redeem” in its most literal sense, “to buy back”; 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.”

Of course, some of the metaphors in which Abelard affirms this transaction require comment. I want to look at two in particular. First, in what sense are we “taken captive”?

Earlier writers had talked about a ransom paid to the devil.¹³ Does Abelard here mean to affirm

¹³The ransom theory was the dominant theory of the Atonement for the first millennium or so of Christian thought. Unlike the theory of penal substitution, it can claim some basis in the words of Christ himself. In Matthew 20:28 and Mark 10:45, Jesus says, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for the sake of many.” In his attack on Abelard Bernard clearly regards the ransom theory as a non-

that the Devil had us in captivity, and that the price of Christ's blood was paid to the Devil? And second, what is the "dominion of sin" from which we are set free? 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.

IV. THE POWER OF THE DEVIL

Let's look first at what Abelard has to say about our being captives. Abelard has nothing but scorn for the notion that the devil somehow acquired rights over human beings, and that Christ's death was a ransom paid to the devil to release us from captivity. He writes:

If a slave should will to desert his master and place himself under another's control, would he be so much within his rights to act in this way that his master, if he so chose, could not lawfully track down the slave and bring him back? And who would doubt that if some master's slave uses persuasion to seduce a fellow slave and make him stray from obedience to his rightful master, the seducer is accounted much more guilty in the eyes of the master than is the one seduced? And how unjust for someone who has seduced another to earn thereby some privilege or power over the one he seduced! Even if he formerly had some rights over him, has he not earned the loss of those rights on account of the wickedness of his seduction? . . . If either of these slaves should be placed above the other or receive power over the other . . . it would be more conformable to reason that the one who was seduced should exact vengeance on the one who harmed him by seducing him. (114-115)

On the strength of this analogy and a few other arguments, Abelard concludes that the devil did not acquire any rights over human beings simply because he successfully tempted them to disobey God. God may have given the devil permission to torture human beings as punishment for their sins, but the devil is only a jailer or licensed tormentor; he has no actual right over us, and God can withdraw us from the devil's power at any time without doing the devil any injury at

negotiable element of orthodoxy, but no less a figure than Anselm of Canterbury had denied it: see *Cur Deus Homo* I.7.

all.

Moreover, Abelard argues, we know that God can keep a human being free of sin from birth, since he did so for Jesus. If he can do that for one person, he can do it for everyone. And if everyone were free of sin, then no one would need punishment, and so there would be no reason for the devil to have license to torment anyone at all. So there was no need for the Passion in order to free us from the power of the devil, since “the divine mercy had the power to free human beings from the devil’s power by its mere say-so” (116).

But if we were not captives of the devil, then to whom was the price of Christ’s blood paid? Abelard asks:

To whom was the price of blood paid so that we might be bought back, if not to him in whose power we were—i.e., as has been said, to God himself, who had entrusted us to his tormentor? For it is not tormentors but their masters who collect or receive the price for captives. And in what way did he release those captives on payment of that price, given that he himself previously demanded or instituted that price for the release of his captives? But how cruel and wicked it seems for someone to require the blood of an innocent man as a price. (117)

Abelard is not merely saying that it would be wicked for God to demand the blood of his innocent Son as the price for release of human captives. He is saying that the notion of a price for release of captives is *incoherent*. Human beings were not under the devil’s power, but under God’s power. And the notion that God demanded payment from himself, having arbitrarily set the price at the death of his Son, is absurd.

V. THE OBJECTIVE DOMINION OF SIN: PUNISHMENT

So although Abelard is willing to use the metaphor of captivity, he rejects the notion that the Passion was a ransom paid to buy sinful human beings back from the devil. Instead, he seems

to take that metaphor as equivalent to the other metaphor I wished to explore, namely, that of the dominion of sin. What I hope to show is that for Abelard, sin has both an objective and a subjective dominion over us. 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, as I have already argued, 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.

The only sustained attention to the dominion of sin comes in a *quaestio* on original sin found in Book II of the Romans Commentary, well after the *quaestio* on Atonement. Abelard notes that Scripture uses the word ‘sin’ in a variety of senses. In the strict sense, ‘sin’ means actual contempt for God, which is what makes us guilty before God. In a second sense, however, ‘sin’ means the punishment to which we are liable on account of sin in the first sense. Yet a third sense is involved when Paul says that Christ became sin for us; here ‘sin’ means a sacrifice for sin (164).

When we speak of original sin, we are speaking of sin in the second sense. All human beings are conceived and born in a state of sin in the sense that we are all subject to the punishment for the sin (in the first and strictest sense) of our first parents. Now there is a serious question about how it can be just for God to inflict on us a punishment for something we didn’t do, and Abelard discusses the matter at great length. Fortunately that discussion is not relevant for our purposes. What matters for us is that when we say that Christ bore our sins on the Cross, we are talking about sin in the second sense; Christ bore the *punishment* for our sins so that we

don't have to. As a result our sins are "dismissed"; that is, the punishment to which we would otherwise have been subject is canceled. As Abelard says at the end of the *quaestio* on original sin, "God's forgiving (*condonare*) sin is nothing other than his remitting its eternal punishment" (175).¹⁴

So Abelard says here that apart from the redemptive work of Christ, we are all liable to punishment for sin, and that Christ himself bore that punishment on our behalf. In other words, Abelard explicitly teaches a theory of penal substitution. This point requires some dilation, since even commentators like Quinn who acknowledge it tend to underplay its importance. Abelard teaches substitutionary atonement in at least two other passages in the Commentary. The first is part of the exposition of Romans 4:25, where Paul says that Christ "was handed over on account of our sins." Abelard comments, "There are two ways in which Christ is said to have died *on account of our sins*. First, the transgressions on account of which he died were ours, and we committed the sin whose punishment he bore. And second, by dying he took away our sins: that is, he removed the punishment for our sins at the cost of his death" (153).

The second passage is part of the exposition of Romans 8:3, where Paul says, "God [sent] his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh¹⁵; and from sin he destroyed sin in the flesh." Abelard comments:

[Paul] explains the way in which we are freed from sin in Christ. For *God* the Father, i.e., the majesty of divine power, sent *his Son in the likeness of sinful flesh*: that is, he caused that Wisdom which is coeternal with himself to be brought so low as to assume a passible and mortal human nature, so that through the punishment for sin to which he was subject, he might himself seem to have sinful flesh, that is, flesh conceived in sin. *And from sin,*

¹⁴Abelard makes the same claim in the commentary on Romans 4:7-8 (124-126). For example, he writes that "sin (*iniquitas*) is remitted when the punishment for it, which could be exacted by justice, is dismissed (*condonare*) by grace" (124).

¹⁵Here and in Abelard's exposition 'sinful flesh' is literally 'flesh of sin'.

that is, from the punishment for sin that he bore for us in the flesh—in the humanity he had assumed, and not according to his divinity—*he destroyed sin*, i.e., he took away from us the punishment for sin by which even the righteous were bound before, and he opened the gates of heaven. (211)

Abelard’s ideas on penal substitution are admittedly sketchy. In each of these passages Abelard says that Christ bore the punishment for our sins, language that suggests at least two things: first, that what Christ suffered on the Cross is a penalty of the same kind as that to which sinful human beings are liable; and second, that since Christ undertook to suffer on our behalf, we are no longer subject to that penalty. Ordinarily when Abelard talks about the penalty for sin, he means eternal death, or in other words, damnation.¹⁶ But Christ didn’t undergo eternal death. What he did undergo was physical death, which Abelard seems also to have regarded as a punishment for sin¹⁷; but obviously even Christians are subject to physical death. So I don’t see any straightforward sense in which Abelard can hold that Christ bore the punishment for our sins. That somehow Christ’s temporal and physical death frees us from eternal and spiritual death, Abelard has no doubt; but he nowhere seeks to explain how such a thing happens.

VI. THE SUBJECTIVE DOMINION OF SIN: CONCUPISCENCE

Abelard emphasizes the objective side of the dominion of sin: “the debt of damnation by which we are bound, since we are made liable to eternal punishment” (171). But there is a subjective side as well. Our desires are disordered by sin, so that we cannot effectively will what we know is good. The Passion somehow sets us free, so that we no longer have to obey the

¹⁶For example: “through Adam we incur damnation” (157) and, at the end of the *quaestio* on original sin, “that utterly dire and eternal death that we incur through that [original] sin” (175).

¹⁷He speaks of “the condition of immortality, which was lost through original sin” (175). At 214 he says that we are “liable to physical death on account of the sin of our first parents” and explains why we do not recover immortality when our sins are forgiven.

promptings of concupiscence.

The connection between original sin and the dominion of concupiscence is more oblique than one might suppose. Besides making us liable to eternal punishment, the sin of our first parents also brought hardship in this present life. In Romans 7:8 Paul refers to this temporal affliction itself as sin and remarks that “*sin*, i.e., the punishment and affliction of this temporal life that we endure because of the fault of our first parents, *has worked* in us *every concupiscence*—concupiscence, that is, of all earthly goods, so that through an abundance of them we might evade every anxiety of our present distresses” (197). The Old Law actually excited this concupiscence, because it promised these earthly goods as a reward for obedience. Paul says that “Before the Law, sin was dead,” meaning that the *fomes*¹⁸ of sin had less power to arouse concupiscence. But after the Law had been given, we could have some confidence that we would obtain the goods we desired, and so concupiscence was inflamed (198).

Thus, it is not original sin alone that enslaves us to sinful desire. 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. Now this sinful desire does not blot out our knowledge of what is good, as Abelard makes very clear. In fact, we do not merely recognize the goodness of what the Law enjoins; we want to do what it commands: “By the very fact that I want to do and to desire rationally (*per rationem appetere*) what it commands, I genuinely recognize that the law is good in its commandments” (208). But “I am burdened by the yoke of

¹⁸It is customary to leave the word *fomes* untranslated. It literally means “kindling” or “tinder”; metaphorically, the idea is that the disordered human heart needs only a small spark of temptation to ignite sinful action.

depraved habit that frustrates this good will” (209).

Abelard expresses this view most clearly in commenting on Romans 7:22-23, where Paul says, “For I delight in the law according to the inner man, but I find another law in my members, at odds with the law of my mind.” Abelard comments:

Since he has said that he wills to do the good that the law commands and yet doesn’t do it, he explains how both these things come about. He says that he delights *in the law according to the inner man*, i.e., that what the law commands pleases him, and that he desires it through reason. Here he calls reason “the inner man,” the spiritual and invisible image of God in which man was made according to his soul when he was created rational and thereby placed above the other creatures. And again he says he sees *another law in his members*: that is, he recognizes that the *fomes* of sin and the goads (*stimulos*) of concupiscence, which because of the weakness of the flesh he obeys like a law, reign *in the members* of his body and have dominion over him. . . . I say that this *law of concupiscence* is *at odds with*, i.e., contrary to, the natural *law of my mind*, i.e., reason, which ought to rule me as a law. Indeed, through reason I desire good, but through concupiscence I desire evil. (209)

Abelard never suggests that our inherited sinfulness clouds our discernment of good and evil, but it makes us prisoners of concupiscence and turns us away from God,¹⁹ so that we are powerless to act as reason dictates.

This powerlessness to carry out the good actions that the law prescribes and conscience approves is what prompts Paul to exclaim, “Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” His answer, of course, is “The grace of God through Jesus Christ our Lord.” But how does that grace work? Abelard’s answer is instructive:

[Paul] has said that *the grace of God will deliver him through Christ*. Now [in Romans 8:2] he explains how this happens. The *law of the Spirit of life*, that is, the law of charity and of divine love rather than fear (as the Old Law was) *in Christ Jesus*, i.e., given and offered to us through him, *has delivered me from the law of sin and therefore of death*, i.e., from the commandments or blandishments of carnal concupiscence, lest I obey them

¹⁹Thus Abelard: “*And taking me prisoner*, i.e., dragging me off unwillingly as a prisoner *to the law*, i.e., the obedience, *of sin* conceived by the mind, so that I execute it in deed, *which law*, thus taking me prisoner and turning me away from God, my rightful Lord, as has been said, *is in my members*” (209).

by consenting to them. (210-211)

What frees us from obedience to concupiscence, Abelard says here, is the love of God that is “given and offered to us through” Jesus. Because of that love, we need neither disobey the law because of concupiscence nor obey it merely out of fear; we can do God’s will out of love for God. “Perfect love casts out fear,” and it casts out concupiscence as well. And that perfect love is in some way given to us through or by the Passion.

But in what way? Is there something supernatural about the way in which the Passion creates love in us, or does our justification—our being made righteous through charity—work in a more or less natural way, by inspiring our gratitude and love in the same way as (though presumably to a greater degree than) a human benefactor’s kindness would inspire our gratitude and love? If grace works only in the latter way, there might be something to be said for Bernard’s complaint that Abelard is a crypto-Pelagian. For it would seem that our redemption is accomplished, not by “the power of the Cross or the price of Christ’s blood,” but by our own change of heart. So in order to complete our picture of the process of redemption in Abelard, we need to look more closely at Abelard’s understanding of grace: what it is, how it works, and to what extent its efficacy depends on human cooperation or even human initiative.

VII. GRACE

Now if we define Pelagianism as the view that it is possible for human beings to act rightly even without divine grace, Abelard is clearly not a Pelagian. He repeatedly states that no one acts well apart from grace. It is precisely this conviction that makes him puzzle at length over the text “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,” which Paul quotes from Malachi 1:2-3.

Paul himself continues, “What shall we say then? Is there iniquity in God?” (Romans 9:14).

Abelard comments:

The Apostle appropriately raises an objection on the basis of the preceding words. It is, as it were, an accusation and indictment of God, who, by not predestining Esau, judged him worthy of hate even before he was able to merit anything, and withheld from him such grace as he gave the other brother, when his brother likewise had not previously merited anything. As everyone agrees, he was unable to act rightly, since that grace was withheld from him; and so it does not seem to be Esau’s fault that he was wicked so much as God’s, since God was unwilling to give him the grace by which he would have been able to act rightly. (235)

Clearly the difficulty that Abelard states here is one that arises precisely because he thinks grace is necessary for right action. Never one to shirk a difficulty, he drives the point home for another couple of pages. He concludes the statement of the objection by pointing out that God is said have to mercy on whom he wills and to harden the hearts of whom he wills:

In other words, it is on account of God’s will and choice rather than their own merits that human beings are either saved because of God’s mercy or damned because of God’s hardening them in their sins, a hardening that God himself brings about by not having mercy on them. The upshot, it seems, is that the salvation or damnation of human beings is to be attributed entirely to divine choice. (237)

His first attempt to defend God against the charge of arbitrary favoritism depends on the claim that God can treat human beings however he pleases without doing them any injustice.²⁰ If the potter (who merely rearranges pre-existing stuff) has rights over the clay, so that he can legitimately make both an honorable and a contemptible vessel out of the same lump of clay, then surely God (who creates even the very stuff of which we are made) has rights over us, so that he can legitimately make both saints and sinners out of his human creatures. Abelard tries to take some of the sting out of this line of argument by pointing out that God can make the best possible

²⁰This was, by the way, the same tack Abelard took in explaining how it could be licit for God to punish us for the sin of Adam and Eve.

use even out of wickedness—as witness the use he made of the treachery of Judas. Moreover, God always has some reason for whatever he does or permits, even if that reason is “hidden from us and past finding out” (240).

Fortunately, Abelard recognizes that even if these considerations answer the charge of arbitrary favoritism, they leave God vulnerable to accusations of injustice on other grounds:

Even if God cannot be charged with injustice because he does not will to give his grace to some, I still think it’s a legitimate question how wicked human beings, to whom God did not will to give grace so that they might be saved, are responsible for being damned, so that they are said to be damned *by their own fault*. On the other hand, if it is no fault of their own, by what merit of theirs are they said to be damned by God, “who repays each according to his deeds”? But, once again, if someone is not saved, what fault is it of his, since God never willed to give him the grace by which he might be saved, and he could not be saved without it? (240)

One might say that God does indeed offer grace to saints and sinners alike, but sinners reject it.

But this suggestion doesn’t really help, Abelard says, because one needs divine grace even to accept divine grace. If God didn’t offer sinners the grace they needed in order to accept his saving grace, it isn’t their fault that they aren’t saved. In such a case, Abelard says, God would be like a doctor who brings in the medicine that would cure a desperately ill patient who is too weak to sit up on his own and take the pill. If the doctor doesn’t help the patient sit up and take the medicine, it is hardly the patient’s fault that he isn’t cured, and the doctor deserves no praise for bringing in the medicine if he does not take the necessary steps to ensure that it effects a cure (240).

And here Abelard’s discussion suddenly takes off in a new direction. He continues, “And so we say that it is not necessary for God to offer us new grace for each good work, so that there’s no way we can do or will good without a new gift of divine grace beforehand” (240-241). It’s the ‘and so’ (*itaque*) that is puzzling. How does the doctor analogy suggest the conclusion that a

single gift of grace is enough to carry us along for multiple good works? The doctor analogy is about our powerlessness to receive divine grace on our own; Abelard's conclusion is that once we have received grace, we don't exhaust its efficacy in a single good work. The conclusion seems at first glance to be a non-sequitur.²¹

I will return to this textual difficulty in a moment, but for now let's continue with the discussion of God's offer of grace. Abelard claims that "what happens with true and eternal goods is like what happens with the love or desire of temporal goods" (241). Imagine that some bigwig (*praepotens*) offers some of his riches to a couple of needy people in the marketplace, on the condition that they carry out some orders of his. One of them, "set on fire²² with desire for the reward that has been offered and promised to him, throws himself into the work and gets it done" (241). The other, however, is indolent and can't stand hard work: the more daunting the work, the less fired up he is about the reward. Why is it, Abelard asks, that one gets down to work and the other prefers to remain idle, even though each is offered the same reward? There is no reason but "the goodness of the one and the idleness of the other" (241). The rich man has done no more for one than for the other; that his equal actions have unequal results is attributable entirely to the difference between the two poor men.

In the same way God makes us a daily offer of his heavenly kingdom. He does everything he can to arouse our desire for the happiness of that kingdom by setting it before us and

²¹Adding to the strangeness is the conclusion of the sentence: "but often, although God distributes an equal gift of grace to some, it doesn't have equal effects on their deeds; in fact, one who has received more grace for acting will act less [well]." The 'but' implies that this observation in some way contrasts with what has just been said, but of course there is no contrast at all between the unequal effects of equal grace and the non-necessity of repeated gifts of grace. If Abelard had gone straight from the doctor analogy to the second half of the sentence, the connection would have been clear. If the doctor doesn't enable the patient to receive grace, it's the doctor's fault that the patient doesn't recover; but God offers everyone equal grace, so if someone doesn't act well it's her own fault.

²²"Set on fire" represents the Latin *accensus*, Abelard's usual word for the effect of the Passion on the receptive heart.

promising it to us (*exponendo et promittendo*). “For,” as Abelard assures us, “the greater someone understands a reward to be, the more he is naturally drawn to it by his own desire, especially when all that is needed to obtain it is the will, and it can be achieved by everyone with much less cost in effort or danger than is needed to acquire earthly kingdoms” (241-242).

Thus, Abelard says that the only grace God needs to provide beforehand is to reveal—and to see to it that we believe in—the happiness that he has promised and the means by which we can attain it. “But this grace,” he says, “God offers equally to the reprobate and the elect, in that he instructs both equally to this end, so that from the same grace of faith that they have got hold of, one person is incited to good works and another is rendered inexcusable by his negligent sloth” (242). Notice that Abelard assumes here that the reprobate and the elect both have faith, at least in the sense that they believe in God’s promise of an eternal reward. But in the elect this faith is operative through love, whereas in the reprobate it remains “inert and sluggish and idle” (242). In fact, Abelard says here that such faith *just is* the grace that grounds both the initial good will and perseverance in good will. There is, then, obviously no need for new infusions of divine grace for each new act of good will. If desire for heavenly beatitude is enough to inspire a first good act, it is enough to inspire further good acts. So (although Abelard doesn’t say this explicitly) if I fall away from the good work that I have begun, it must be my fault rather than God’s. For he has done everything necessary to entice me; my own lethargy is to blame for my backsliding.

At this point we have enough not only to solve the textual difficulty that faced us earlier but also to see clearly what is distinctive about Abelard’s view of grace. The textual difficulty, you will recall, is that Abelard moves immediately from the doctor analogy—which illustrates

human powerlessness to accept grace—to saying “And so we say that it is not necessary for God to offer us new grace for each good work” (241). How is the non-necessity of repeated gifts of grace connected conceptually with human powerlessness to accept grace? The connection works in the following way. Abelard first notes that if we are really as powerless as the doctor analogy suggests, human damnation will be the inevitable result of God’s refusal to stuff the salvific grace-pill down our throats. So he looks for an account of grace that respects the divine initiative (for we must not lapse into blatant Pelagianism) but lays the blame for damnation squarely on sinners. He respects the divine initiative by insisting that we cannot be saved unless God does what is necessary to draw us to him. But he makes sinners culpable for their own damnation by insisting not only that God does this for everyone (and not merely for those who will be saved) but also that everyone has the power to accept or reject God’s wooing. On this picture, grace is not like a steroid injection to give otherwise unavailable strength for good works, a new injection being needed for each new good work. Instead, it is simply a divine offer of a good that we already have the power to accept. As long as the good remains on offer and our power to accept it is intact, there is clearly no need for God to keep repeating himself.

So Abelard rejects the doctor analogy as originally presented. But does he also reject the view with which he introduced that analogy: namely, that we need grace in order to accept grace? He doesn’t say, but it’s reasonable to think the answer is no. We do need grace in order to accept grace, but the grace in question is simply God’s creating our nature appropriately, so that we can be moved by his offer of eternal life and can decide whether to put forth the effort needed to attain it. Abelard is certainly willing to call our natural powers gifts of grace, as he does in

discussing the Gentiles' natural knowledge of the moral law.²³

VIII. THE GRACE OF THE PASSION

Now notice that the motivation ascribed to human beings in Abelard's account of grace seems entirely mercenary. God gives us grace by offering us eternal happiness, and we do his will because we want what he offers. But the Passion was supposed to enable us to serve God because we love God for his own sake, and not because we fear punishment or desire reward.²⁴ And in any event, it seems clear that the offer of eternal happiness is not made exclusively in the Passion, so the Passion does not seem to be a distinctive vehicle of divine grace. So one might suspect that Abelard's account of grace is hopelessly at odds with his account of the Atonement.

I must admit that Abelard makes no effort to resolve this difficulty; there's no evidence he even realized there was a problem. But on his behalf I will propose a solution that accommodates the main lines of Abelard's thinking on these matters and does so in a way that I suspect would meet with his approval. First, there is one way in which the Passion is obviously distinctive. It involves not merely the offer of happiness but an actual concrete step taken by God to secure our happiness. It therefore excites not only desire but gratitude. Even so, that gratitude is still basically self-regarding; we are thankful for what God has done *for us*. Consider what Abelard has to say about the limited worth of this sort of gratitude:

²³See in particular the commentary on 1:21 (71).

²⁴Abelard speaks eloquently of the spiritual immaturity of such mercenary motives for the love of God, which he associates with the Old Law. His most effective lines, however, are quoted from Augustine's *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 53:10: "If you praise God because he gives you something, you are not loving God unselfishly (*gratis*). You would be embarrassed if your wife loved you because of your wealth and would consider adultery if you happened to fall into poverty. Since, then, you want to be loved unselfishly by your wife, will you love God for the sake of something else? What reward will you receive from God, you greedy wretch?" (202).

If I love God because he loves me . . . the saying of Truth itself applies to me: “If you love those who love you, what reward will you have?” (Matthew 5:46) Certainly no reward for justice’ sake, since I am not regarding the worth of the thing loved but [merely] my own benefit. And I would love someone else as much or even more if he did me as much or even more good; and I would no longer love him if I did not hope to gain anything further from him. Hence, a good many people—in fact, nearly all of them—have grown so wicked in their thinking that they openly admit they wouldn’t revere or love God at all if they didn’t think he would be of any use to them. (202-203)

But the Passion, as an example of selfless love, contains within itself the seeds of a remedy for this selfishness. The love he showed us in the Passion was

that true and pure love that the Apostle describes in these words: “it does not seek its own”. . . . For Christ’s love for us was so pure that not only did he die for us, but in everything he did for us he sought no advantage for himself, whether temporal or eternal, but only our well-being; he did not act with an eye to some reward for himself, but did everything out of a desire for our salvation. (201)

And the Passion should not be thought of merely as an example to emulate. It is the event that above all others reveals to us the nature, the supreme and unstinting love, of God himself. By showing us the incomparable goodness and love of God, it shows us how much God deserves to be loved—not merely because of what he has done for us, but because of who he is. Abelard exclaims, “Oh that we might have such pure affection for God that we would love him insofar as he is good in himself rather than insofar as he is useful to us!” (204).

Paradoxically, by presenting God in his most lovable aspect and thereby moving us to love him without regard for our own happiness, the Passion also fits us to receive happiness. For the true reward for obedience to God is nothing other than God himself. Unless we love God for who he is, we do not really desire our own happiness after all; and anything else God might give us is good only because of God himself.²⁵ Recall that God’s grace was said to consist in his

²⁵As Abelard quotes from Augustine’s *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 53:10, “*He who made heaven and earth does not keep the earth in store for you, but himself. . . . Have no regard for all these things, but reach for God himself. And these things that he gives you are good on account of the giver*” (202).

offering us eternal happiness. We can now see that God's offering us eternal happiness can be nothing other than his offering himself. God himself is the *integra causa amoris* (204), the complete and sufficient object of love. By revealing himself as infinitely lovable through the sacrificial death of Christ, he empowers us to serve him out of love rather than out of fear. This love for God is the charity that makes us righteous. It is in this way that we are justified by the Passion of Christ.

IX. CONCLUSION

So we are justified, made righteous, through charity. This charity not only enables us to resist concupiscence, it also enables us to serve God out of love rather than out of fear. And since charity is enkindled in our hearts by the Passion of Christ, the exemplarist reading of Abelard has at least a kernel of the truth: the Passion accomplishes our reconciliation with God through its effect on the human heart. As we have seen, however, Abelard does not think it could have such an effect unless it also achieved some objective benefit for us; that benefit is our deliverance from punishment for the sin of our first parents. The exemplarist reading denies any such objective benefit and therefore misses a key aspect of Abelard's theory of the Atonement.

Now recall that it was because of his supposed exemplarism that Bernard charged Abelard with Pelagianism. Since the charge of exemplarism has been answered, one might expect that the charge of Pelagianism can be dropped as well. But in fact the issue of Pelagianism remains open. For Bernard's worry was that if our redemption consists in a change of heart brought on by our response to the Passion, then it is we who accomplish our own redemption; and Abelard certainly does think that our redemption consists precisely in such a change of heart.

Whether Abelard is a Pelagian will largely depend on how we characterize Pelagianism. If we define it as the view that one can act rightly apart from grace, Abelard is (as I have already argued) no Pelagian. But then one might worry that he escapes Pelagianism only a technicality, since he considers our natural powers gifts of grace—they even fit his definition of grace as “a gift not conferred on the basis of prior merits” (60). So suppose instead that we define Pelagianism as the view that human beings in their present state can will rightly through an unaided exercise of their power of free choice. On that definition Abelard is indeed a Pelagian. In the *Sententie Hermanni* he says that “unless we say that man from himself through free choice from his nature has the ability to love God and cleave to him, we cannot avoid the conclusion that grace predetermines our merits.”²⁶ In other words, if we are so enervated by the sickness of sin that we cannot, on our own, either accept or refuse the medicine of divine grace, some patients will be lost solely because the Great Physician gratuitously withholds treatment. Such caprice, Abelard thinks, cannot be reconciled with the divine charity that is both manifested and made effective in the Passion of Christ.

²⁶*Sententie magistri Petri Abelardi (Sententie Hermanni)*, ed. Sandro Buzzetti (Florence: La Nuova Italia Editrice, 1983), 155.