

THE NECESSITY OF THE ATONEMENT

by Francis Turretin

Francis Turretin's defense of the absolute necessity of Christ's atonement, arguing against Socinian objections that divine justice requires satisfaction for sin through Christ's vicarious suffering.

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by Francis Turretin (1623-1687) The following essay was part of a larger volume of Turretin's work (in an English translation) on the atonement published in Philadelphia in 1817. It was originally titled "A Historical Sketch of Opinions on the Atonement..." and was translated by James R. Wilson (1780-1846). This article is now in the public domain and may be freely copied and distributed. The electronic edition of this book was scanned and edited by Shane Rosenthal for Reformation Ink.

The Priesthood of Christ, according to the Apostle Paul and the types of the Jewish ritual, is divided into two parts: the atonement which he made to divine justice, and his intercession in heaven, (1Jn 2:2. Heb 9:12). The necessity of such an atonement, which is the foundation of all practical piety and all Christian hopes, must therefore be firmly established, and defended against the fiery darts of Satan, with which it is attacked by innumerable adversaries.

Upon this subject, the opinions of divines may be classed under three heads: 1. That of the Socinians, who I not only deny that an atonement was made, but affirm that it was not at all necessary, since God both could and would pardon sin, without any satisfaction made to his justice. 2. That of those who distinguish between an absolute and a hypothetical necessity; and in opposition to the Socinians maintain the latter, while they deny the former. By a hypothetical necessity they mean that which flows from the divine decree, God has decreed that an atonement is to be made, therefore it is necessary. To this they also add a necessity of fitness; as the commands-of God have 1 been transgressed, it is fit that satisfaction should be made, that the transgressor may not pass with impunity. Yet they deny that it was absolutely necessary, as God, they say, might have devised some other way of pardon than through the medium of an atonement. This is the ground taken by Augustine in his book on the Trinity. Some of the reformers who wrote before the time of Socinus, adopt the opinions of that father. 3. That of those who maintain its absolute necessity; affirming that God neither has willed, nor could have willed to forgive sins, without a satisfaction made to his justice. This, the common opinion of the orthodox, is our opinion.

Various errors are maintained on this point, by our opponents. The removal of the grounds upon which they rest will throw light upon the whole subject. They err in their views of the nature of sin, for which a satisfaction is required; of the satisfaction itself; of the character of God to whom it is to be rendered; and of Christ by whom it is rendered.

1. Of sin, which renders us guilty, and binds us over to punishment as hated of God. It may be viewed as a debt which we are bound to pay to divine justice, in which sense the law is called "a hand-writing," (Col 2:14) as a principle of enmity, whereby we hate God and he becomes our enemy: as a crime against the government of the universe by which, before God, the supreme governor and judge, we become deserving of everlasting death and malediction. Whence, sinners

are expressly called "debtors," (Matt. 6:12); "enemies to God," both actively and passively, (Col. 1:21); "and guilty before God," (Rom 3:19.) We, therefore, infer that three things were necessary in order to our redemption; the payment of the debt contracted by sin., the appeasing of the divine wrath, and the expiation of guilt.

2. From the preceding remarks, the -nature of the satisfaction which sin requires may be easily perceived. That which we are chiefly to attend to in sin being its criminality, satisfaction has relation to the penalty enacted against it by the Supreme Judge.

But here we must attend to a twofold payment, which is noticed by jurists. One which, by the very deed of payment, sets at liberty the debtor, and annuls the obligation, whether the payment is made by the debtor in his own person, or by a surety in his name. Another in which the bare fact of payment is not sufficient to liberate the debtor, because, the payment is not precisely that which is demanded in the obligation, but all equivalent. In this case, though the creditor such payment, has a right to refuse the acceptance of yet if he admits it and esteems it a payment, it is a satisfaction. The former of these takes place in a pecuniary, the latter in a penal debt. In a pecuniary transaction, the fact of the payment of the sum due frees the debtor, by whomsoever the payment is made. Respect here is had, not to the person paying but to the payment only. Whence, the creditor, having been paid the full amount due, is not said to have treated with indulgence the debtor, or to have forgiven the debt. But in penal matters the case is different. The debt rewards not things, but persons; not what is paid, so much as him who pays; i.e., that the transgressor may be punished. For as the law demands individual personal obedience, so it demands individual personal suffering. In order that the guilty person may be released through an atonement made by another in his stead, the governor or judge must pass a decree to that effect. That decree or act of the judge is, in relation to the law, called relaxation, and in relation to the debtor or guilty person., pardon; for his personal suffering is dispensed with, and in its place a vicarious suffering accepted. But because, in the subject under discussion, sin has not a relation to debt only, but also to punishment, satisfaction is not of that kind, which by the act itself frees the debtor. To effect this there must be an act of pardon passed by the Supreme Judge, because that is not precisely paid, i.e., a personal enduring of the penalty, which the law demands, but a vicarious suffering only. Hence we discover how perfectly accordant remission and satisfaction are with each other, notwithstanding the outcry made by the enemy respecting their supposed discrepancy. Christ made the satisfaction in his life and at his death, and God, by accepting this satisfaction, provides for remission. The satisfaction respects Christ, from whom God demands a punishment, not numerically, but in kind, the same with that which we owed. Pardon respects believers, who are freed from punishment in their own persons, while a vicarious suffering is accepted. Hence we see how admirably mercy is tempered with justice. Justice is exercised against sin, and mercy towards the sinner; an atonement is made to the divine justice by a surety, and God mercifully pardons us.

3. This reasoning is greatly fortified from a consideration of the relations in which God stands to the sinner. He may be viewed in a threefold relation: as the creditor; as the Lord and party offended; and as the judge and ruler. But though both the former relations must be attended to in this matter, yet the third is to be chiefly considered. God here is not merely a creditor, who may at pleasure remit what is his due, nor merely the party offended who may do as he will with his own claims without injury to any one; but he is also a judge and rectoral governor, to whom alone pertains the infliction of punishment upon offenders, and the power of remitting the penal sanction

of the law. This all jurists know belongs to the chief magistrate alone. The creditor may demand his debt, and the party offended reparation for the offence or indemnity for his loss; but the judge alone has the power to compel payment, or exact punishment. Here lies the capital error of our adversaries, who maintain that God is to be considered merely in the light of a creditor, who is at liberty to exact or remit the punishment at pleasure. It is however certain, that God sustains the character of judge and ruler of the world, who has the rights of sovereignty to maintain, and professes himself to be the guardian and avenger of his laws; and hence he possesses not only the claims of a creditor, which he might assert or remit at pleasure, but also the right of government and of punishment, which is naturally indispensable. We must, however, in the punishment itself, distinguish accurately between the enforcing of the penalty, and the manner and circumstances under which it is enforced, as they are things widely different. Punishment may be viewed generally; and in this respect the right of Heaven to inflict it is indispensable, being founded in the divine justice. If there be such an attribute as justice belonging to God, then sin must have its due, which is punishment. But as to the manner and circumstances of the punishment, the case is altogether different. They are not essential to that attribute. They are to be arranged according to his will and pleasure. It may seem fit to the goodness of God that there should be, in relation to time, a delay of punishment; in relation to degree, a mitigation of it; and in relation to persons, a substitution. For although the person sinning deserves punishment and might suffer it with the strictest justice, yet such punishment is not necessarily indispensable. For reasons of great importance, it may be transferred to a surety. In this sense, it is said by divines that sin is of necessity punished impersonally, but every sinner is not therefore of necessity to be punished personally. Through the singular mercy of God some may be exempted from punishment, by the substitution of a surety in their stead. But that we may conceive it possible for God to do this, he must not be considered as an inferior judge appointed by law. An officer of that character cannot remit anything of the rigour of the law by transferring the punishment from the actual offender to another person. God must be viewed in his true character, as a supreme judge who giveth account of none of his matters, who will satisfy his justice by the punishment of sin, and who, through his infinite wisdom and unspeakable mercy, determines to do this in such a way as shall relax somewhat of the extreme rigour of punishment, by admitting a substitute and letting the sinner go free. Hence we discover to whom the atonement is to be made; whether to the devil, (as Socinus, with a sneer, asks,) or to God, as sovereign judge. For as the devil is no more than the servant of God, the keeper of the prison, who has no power over sinners, unless by the just judgment of God, the atonement is not to be made to this executor of the divine vengeance, but to the Supreme Ruler, who primarily and principally holds them in durance. We may add, that it is a gratuitous and false supposition, that in the suffering of punishment, there must be some person to whom the punishment shall be rendered, as in a pecuniary debt. It is sufficient that there is a judge, who may exact it in order to support the majesty of the State, and maintain the order of the empire.

4. The person who makes the atonement is here to be considered. As sin is to be viewed in the threefold light of debt, enmity, and crime; and God in the threefold light of creditor, party offended, and judge; so Christ must put on a threefold relation corresponding to all these. He must sustain the character of a Surety, for the payment of the debt. He must be a Mediator, a peace-maker, to take away the enmity of the parties and reconcile us to God. He must be a Priest and victim, to substitute himself in our room, and make atonement, by enduring the penal sanction of the law. Again: that such an atonement may be made, two things are requisite: — 1. That the same nature

which sins shall make restitution. 2. That the consideration given must possess infinite value, in order to the removal of the infinite demerit of sin. In Christ, two natures were necessary for the making of an atonement: a human nature, to suffer, and a divine nature, to give the requisite value to his sufferings. Moreover, we must demonstrate how it is possible, in consistency with justice, to substitute an innocent person, as Christ was. in our room; because such a substitution, at first view, appears to be not only unusual, but also unjust. Though a substitution, which is common in a pecuniary debt, rarely occurs in penal transactions — nay, is sometimes prohibited, as was the case among the Romans, because no one is master of his own life, and because the commonwealth would suffer loss in such cases — yet it was not 'unknown among the heathen. We have an example of it in Damon and Pythias; two intimate friends, one of whom voluntarily entered himself bail for the other to Dionysius in a capital cause. Curtius, Codrus, and Brutus devoted themselves for their country. The right of punishing hostages, when princes fail in their promises, has been recognized by all nations. Hence hostages are called anti-psukoi substitutes. To this Paul alludes, when he says, (Rom 5:7) "For a good man some would even dare to die." The Holy Scriptures often give it support, not only from the imputation of sin, by which one bears the punishment due to another, but from the public use of sacrifices, in which the victim was substituted in the place of the sinner and suffered death in his stead. Hence the imposition of hands, and the confession of sins over the head of the victims.

But, that such a substitution may be made without the slightest appearance of injustice, various conditions are requisite in the substitute or surety, all which are found in Christ. 1. A common nature, that sin may be punished in the same nature which is guilty, (Heb 2:14). 2. The consent of the will, that he should voluntarily take the burden upon himself, (Heb 10:9) — "Lo, I come to do thy will." 3. Power over his own life, so that he may rightfully determine respecting it, (John 10:18) — "No one taketh away my life, but I lay it down of myself, for I have power to lay it down, and take it up again." 4. The power of bearing the punishment due to us, and of freeing both himself and us from the power of death; because, if he himself could be holden of death, he could free no one from its dominion. That Christ possesses this power, no one doubts. 5. Holiness and immaculate purity, that, being polluted by no sin, he might not have to offer sacrifice for himself, but for us only, (Heb 7:26-27.)

Under these conditions, it was not unjust for Christ to substitute himself in our room, while he is righteous and we unrighteous. By this act no injury is done to any one. Not to Christ, for he voluntarily took the punishment upon himself, and had the right to decide concerning his own life and death, and also power to raise himself from the dead. Not to God the judge, for he willed and commanded it; nor to his natural justice, for the Surety satisfied this by suffering the punishment which demanded it. Not to the empire of the universe, by depriving an innocent person of life, for Christ, freed from death, lives for evermore; or by the life of the surviving sinner injuring the kingdom of God, for he is converted and made holy by Christ. Not to the divine law, for its honour has been maintained by the perfect fulfillment of all its demands, through the righteousness of the Mediator; and, by our legal and mystical union, he becomes one with us, and we one with him. Hence he may justly take upon him our sin and sorrows, and impart to us his righteousness and blessings. So there is no abrogation of the law, no derogation from its claims; as what we owed is transferred to the account of Christ, to be paid by him.

These preliminary remarks we have thought necessary, in order to the lucid discussion of the question concerning the necessity of the atonement. We now proceed to inquire whether it was necessary that Christ should satisfy for us, as well absolutely, in relation to the divine justice, as hypothetically, on the ground of a divine decree: whether it was absolutely necessary, in order to our salvation, that an atonement should be made, God not having the power to pardon our sins without a satisfaction, or whether it was rendered necessary only by the divine decree? The Socinians, indeed, admit no kind of necessity. Some of the old divines, and some members of the Reformed Church, contend for a hypothetical necessity only. They think it sufficient for the refutation of the heretic. But we, with the great body of the orthodox, contend for both. We do not urge a necessity simply natural, such as that of fire to burn, which is involuntary, and admits of no modification in its exercise. It is a moral and rational necessity for which we plead; one which, as it flows from the holiness and justice of God, and cannot be exercised any other way than freely and voluntarily, admits of various modifications, provided there is no infringement of the natural rights of Deity. That there is such a necessity, is evinced by many arguments.

1. The vindicatory justice of God. That such an attribute is natural and essential to God, has been proved at large elsewhere. This avenging justice belongs to God as a judge, and he can no more dispense with it than he can cease to be a judge or deny himself; though, at the same time, he exercises it freely. It does not consist in the exercise of a gratuitous power, like mercy, by which, whether it be exercised or not, injustice is done to no one. It is that attribute by which God gives to every one his due, and from the exercise of which, when proper objects are presented, he can no more abstain, than he can do what is unjust. This justice is the constant will of punishing sinners, which in God cannot be inefficient, as his majesty is supreme and his power infinite. And hence the infliction of punishment upon the transgressor or his surety is inevitable. No objection to this can be drawn from the liberty of God, for that is exercised only in matters of positive enactment, not in such as are of natural right: nor from his mercy, because that, while it may free the sinner from punishment, does not demand that sin shall not be punished.

2. The nature of sin, which is a moral evil and essentially opposed to holiness, forms another argument. The connection between it and physical evil is natural and necessary. As physical or penal evil cannot exist without moral evil, either personal or imputed, so there cannot be moral evil without producing natural evil. Moral and physical good, or holiness and happiness, are united together by the wisdom, as well as by the goodness and justice of God; so that a good man must be happy, for goodness is a part of the divine image. The wicked must be miserable, because God is just; and this the rather, because when God gives blessings to the righteous, he does it of his own bounty, without any merit on their part; but when he punishes the sinner, he renders to him precisely what he has merited by his sins.

3. The sanction of the Law, which threatens death to the sinner, (Deut. 27:29, Gen 2:17, Eze 18:20, Rom 1:18, Rom 1:32, and Rom 6:23). Since God is true and cannot lie, these threatenings must necessarily be executed either upon the sinner, or upon some one in his stead. In vain do our opponents reply, that the threatening is hypothetical, not absolute, and may be relaxed by repentance. This is a gratuitous supposition. That such a condition is either expressed or understood, neither has been nor can be proved. Nay, as the penal sanction of the law is a part of the law itself, which is natural and indispensable, this sanction must also be immutable. With the judicial threatenings of the law, we must not confound particular and economical comminations, or

such as are paternal and evangelical, which are denounced against men to recall them to repentance. Such threatening's may be recalled in case of penitence. Of this kind were those denounced against Hezekiah, (Isaiah 38) and against Nineveh, (Jon. 3).

4. The Preaching of the Gospel, which announces the violent and painful death of the Mediator and Surety on the cross, is another argument which power fully confirms the necessity of that event. For we cannot believe that God would multiply sufferings unnecessarily. His goodness and wisdom do not permit us to harbour an idea that the Father could expose his most innocent and beloved Son to an excruciating and ignominious death, without a necessity which admits of no relaxation. The only necessity which can be possibly imagined here,, is that of making an atonement to the divine justice for our sins. Every, one must perceive that it was absolutely necessary. I know that our opponents affect to produce various other reasons for the accursed death of the cross, such as to confirm Christ's doctrine, and to set an example of all kinds of virtue, especially of charity and constancy! But since Christ had confirmed his doctrines by numerous stupendous miracles, and 11 through his life had given the most illustrious examples of every human virtue, who could believe that God, for that one cause alone, would expose his only begotten Son to such dire torments? Therefore, without all doubt, there was another cause for that dispensation, to wit: a regard for the honour of his justice. To this the Holy Spirit bears witness by the Apostle Paul, (Rom 3:5) who affirms that "God hath set forth Christ to be a propitiation for our sins to declare his righteousness," which was inexorable, and did not suffer our sins to be pardoned on any other terms, than by the intervention of the death of Christ.

Again: if God was able and willing by his word alone without any atonement to pardon our sins, why does the Apostle Paul so often and emphatically refer our justification and salvation to the blood of Christ? "We are justified- by the redemption which is in his blood," (Rom 3:24.) "We have redemption through his blood; the remission of sins," (Eph 1:7). "He hath reconciled all things to himself by the blood of Christ," (Col 1:20). Now there was no need that his blood should be shed if remission depended solely upon the divine will. On this supposition, the apostle would rashly and falsely affirm, what he often Arms, that the blood of bulls and of goats, that is, the sacrifices under the law, could not take away sins; and that the oblation of Christ alone could If there was no need of any purgation, but penitence alone was sufficient to take away sin, that is, the guilt of sin, without any sacrifice, the apostle's assertion is groundless. What could be taken away without any sacrifice at all, could surely be removed by legal sacrifices. If the divine will alone is necessary, why is it that Paul never refers to it, but always ascends to the nature of things, as when he asserts that it was impossible for the blood of bulls to take away sins? Surely it must be because sin is so hateful to God, that its stain can be washed away by nothing less than the blood of the Son of God.

5. If there was no necessity that Christ should die, the greatness of God's love in not sparing his own Son, but delivering, him up for us all, which the apostle commends, will be not a little diminished. If there was no obstacle on the part of justice, in the way of our salvation, it would indeed have been great grace in God to have forgiven our sins. But it would have fallen far short of that stupendous love which, though justice inexorable stood in the way, removed, by means found in the treasures of infinite wisdom, all impediments to our redemption, displaying a most amiable harmony between justice and mercy. Nor can Christ be said to have appeased the wrath of God, if he, without demanding any satisfaction, could by a mere volition have laid aside his own wrath.

6. Finally, our opinion relative to the necessity of an atonement does not, in the least, derogate from any of the Divine Perfections. Not from God's absolute Power, because he can neither deny himself nor any of his attributes, nor can he act in such a way as to give the appearance of delighting in sin, by holding communion with the sinner. Not from the Freedom of his Will, because he can will nothing contrary to his justice and holiness, which would be injured should sin go unpunished. Not from his boundless Mercy, for this is exercised towards the sinner, though punishment is inflicted on the Surety. On the contrary, it makes a glorious display of the most illustrious of the divine perfections: of his Holiness, on account of which he can have no communion with the sinner, until, by an atonement, his guilt is removed and his pollution purged; of his Justice, which inexorably demands punishment of sin; of his Wisdom, in reconciling the respective claims of justice and mercy; and of his Love, in not sparing his own Son in order that he might spare us. This article was made available on the internet via REFORMATION INK (www.markers.com/ink). Refer any correspondence to Shane Rosenthal: Rosenthal2000@aol.com ☺☺☺

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