Jonathan Edwards on the Nature of Sin

Summer Study June 2018
Theories of Atonement

• Patristic or “classical” theories
  • Ransom theory (Origen)
  • Christus Victor (see also Gustav Aulén)

• Medieval Scholastic:
  • Anselm’s satisfaction theory

• Moral influence theory (Hugo Grotius 1583-1645)
Evidence suggests Jonathan Edwards’ adherence to a *version* of the penal substitution theory of atonement. Evidence also suggests that Edwards’ version of the penal substitution theory requires certain metaphysical commitments about the nature of Christ’s relationship to the elect, echoing those issued in his *Original Sin* 4.3, and elsewhere, regarding the relationship of Adam to his posterity. In what follows, I argue that such evidence points to Edwards’ adherence to what has more recently been described in the literature of contemporary philosophical theology as an account of *realist* penal substitution.

Jonathan Edwards’ doctrine of atonement has recently become a source of interest amongst some contemporary systematic theologians. This article sets out to redress two longstanding and historically strident claims regarding Edwards’ doctrine of the nature of atonement: first, that Edwards espoused an Anselmic satisfaction theory of atonement; second, that Edwards also laid the theological foundation for the moral government theory of atonement, popularized in nineteenth-century America by those of his intellectual tradition. In this article, I lay out the conceptual core of both Anselm’s satisfaction theory and the moral government theory of atonement. I argue that the claims noted above lack the explanatory resources needed to account accurately for Edwards’ understanding of the nature of the atonement.

Two concerns in contemporary theology give rise to this attempt to retrieve a key aspect of Edwards’ thought. The first need arises from the more specific realm of Edwards studies. While there have been a number of works produced on Edwards’ doctrine of the atonement, these studies often narrowly focus on whether Edwards espoused a penal substitutionary or a moral governmental motif of the atonement. Because it has been framed in these terms, this conversation so far has frequently been approached from the wrong angle, one that assumes Edwards’ doctrine rests either on a moral or a legal basis. The discussion has not yet centered on Edwards’ broader aesthetic framework. The second concern arises out of the broader domain of systematic theology. The doctrine of penal substitutionary atonement has largely fallen into disrepute. Mark Baker and Joel Green’s *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross* will serve below as a representative of some of these contemporary criticisms of penal substitution. Although they convincingly deconstruct legal and moral expressions of penal substitutionary atonement, which are ultimately built on the Anselmian satisfaction theory, Baker and Green nevertheless do not undermine a proper articulation of penal substitution. It is at this crucial point that Edwards can retrieve penal substitution for theology today. Against the background of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo* and John Stott’s *The Cross of Christ*, it can be shown that, far from articulating either a legal or moral view of the atonement as these two figures do, Jonathan Edwards offers a competing aesthetic vision for penal substitutionary atonement. Instead of being based on legal or moral necessity, Edwards’ understanding of the atonement is based on the beauty of the Trinity.

Atonement

- Where is Edwards in all of this?