

A Brief Biography of St. Anselm 1033 – 1109

prepared for Anselm Presbytery
Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches
October, 2018¹

Rev. Jack E. Phelps

I do not seek to understand in order that I may believe, but I believe in order that I may understand; for of this I feel sure, that if I did not believe, I would not understand. — *Proslogium of Anselm*

A consideration of the life of St. Anselm brings to the fore once again the question posed by historians throughout the ages: do his times forge the man or do men genuinely shape their times? Despite the pseudo-intellectual dilemma underlying the question, the answer is readily obvious to the orthodox Christian. Within the framework of God's plan and providence, both answers are equally valid. Capable men rise to their times, yet their actions (or failures to act) are the secondary means by which God shapes history.

Take the well-known case of Alexander. Granted he was well educated, possessed a keen intellect, a strong will, and a martial personality. Had the murder of Phillip of Macedonia occurred a decade earlier or a decade later, however, world conditions likely would not have been ripe for Alexander's conquests and the course of Mediterranean history would have taken an entirely different turn. The question of Alexander's complicity in the famous homicide is not relevant to the point; different times, a different outcome. By the same token, were Phillip's son of a different demeanor or of lesser capability, history likewise turns out differently.

So it is with the ecclesiastical crises that arose around the turn of the 12th century. When Anselm succeeded Lanfranc as prior of the monastery at Bec in 1063, a pattern was established that would repeat itself some 30 years later on the other side of the channel. After Duke William defeated Harold at Hastings, he began a campaign of Normanization in England. Having had previous dealings with Lanfranc in Normandy, he established the former prior of Bec and abbot of Caen at the see of Canterbury in August of 1070.

¹ This paper was originally adopted by Anselm Presbytery in two parts; the first in October, 2006, and the second in October, 2007. This version combines the original two essays into one, with minor revisions.

Across the channel, the founding abbot of Bec, Herluin, died in 1078. Anselm, who had served as prior, was elected to take his place and the stage was set for him to follow in Lanfranc's path. The choice of Anselm for the leadership of the abbey and subsequently for the archbishopric at Canterbury, put a decisive and indelible stamp on the course of church history. With his writings and his actions, Anselm became both the voice of Augustinian orthodoxy and the standard of moral courage for his troubled times.

Disputes with Kings

It seems unlikely that Anselm ever formulated the situation in Calvinian terms, but during the years of his maturity, he was consistently cast in the role of prophet to the civil government. The first controversy was with the Conqueror's son, William II, beginning in 1093. The second was with Henry I and lasted four years (1103 – 1107) culminating in the Concordat of London.

Anselm and the Red King

During his years at Bec, Anselm became well known both on the Continent and in England, where the abbey owned vast tracts of real property. He was respected for his theological insights revealed through his writings, and he was beloved because of his sensitive spirit and his gentle manner. After Lanfranc's death in 1089, William II (Rufus) left the see of Canterbury open and the rents accrued to the Crown.

Reluctantly bowing to pressure from both the king (who was ill) and the bishops and nobles of the region, Anselm agreed to become Archbishop of Canterbury, and he was consecrated to the office in December of 1093. Difficulties emerged almost immediately and centered around two issues: which pope would be officially recognized in England and upon whose authority did the privilege of investiture lie? Rufus was inclined to support Clement III, while Anselm, who was in favor of Hildebrand's reforms and regarded Clement as no more than a pawn of Henry IV, maintained allegiance to Urban II. This difference led directly to the first investiture conflict between Anselm and Rufus.

William Rufus proposed that Anselm receive the pallium from Clement, which Anselm refused to do. Thereupon, the king claimed that he, himself, had the right to confer the vestment on his newly appointed archbishop. Again, Anselm refused, asserting that not only was Urban II the legitimate pope, but that the appointment of church officials was the church's business and not the king's. After refusing permission for Anselm to travel to Rome to receive the pallium, and without telling Anselm, Rufus sent messengers to Urban who sent the pall to England in a silver case under the care of a papal legation. It was laid on the table

at Canterbury and Anselm took it up without the king's interference. Anselm's stand on principle had prevailed, yet he allowed Rufus to save face.

The conflict between crown and mitre did not end there, however. With Urban II strongly opposed to the practice of the church paying homage to kings, Anselm's contributions to the realm from the coffers of the see were well below the expectations of the king. Frustrated, Rufus threatened to put Anselm on trial in the royal court. Anselm stood his ground and refused to cede jurisdiction. Finally, he requested leave from the king to travel to Rome and consult with the pope. In 1097, Anselm left for Rome, but not before requesting an audience with the king and conferring upon him God's blessing.

With Anselm out of the country, Rufus once again began appropriating to the crown revenue and property belonging to the church. Meanwhile, in Rome, Anselm conferred with Pope Urban II, who threatened to excommunicate Rufus. Anselm remonstrated with the pope and stayed his hand on this matter, but Urban issued an edict of anathema on all lay investiture and upon all the clergy who submitted to it. Forbidden by Rufus to return to England, Anselm remained on the continent, spending the majority of his time in the vicinity of Rome. During this exile of nearly three years duration, he participated in the important council at Bari, defending the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son against the anti-*filioque* position of the Greek bishops. He also completed his important treatise on the incarnation, *Cur Deus Homo*.

Anselm and Henry I

During the summer of 1100, Rufus was killed by an arrow while hunting in one of the game preserves he had created by confiscating more than two dozen church cemeteries. He was not mourned and his body was buried without benefit of clergy. His younger brother took the throne as Henry I.

One of the first acts of the new monarch, who desired the favor of the influential clergy, was to recall Anselm from exile. The archbishop was not back in England long, however, before the investiture controversy arose once again. Henry sought to fill the 15 vacant church positions (11 abbeys and 4 bishoprics) with men of his own appointment and demanded that Anselm consecrate them. Anselm, obedient to the papal edict, refused. Delegations were sent to Rome asking Pope Pascal II to settle the matter, but when the pope upheld the rulings of his predecessor, Henry refused to comply. In 1103, Anselm himself traveled to Rome, together with an emissary from the king. Pascal II then excommunicated the bishops who had accepted their office from the king, but did not take the additional step of excommunicating Henry. It seems likely he was dissuaded from this further action by the urging of Anselm, just as Urban II had been.

Since neither Anselm nor the king had achieved an outcome that satisfied their concerns, Anselm remained in exile. The dispensation of mercy that Henry had received failed to have the effect Anselm might have wished for and Henry remained steadfast in his determination to retain the right of investiture claimed by both his father and his brother. At last, in 1105, Pascal II declared Henry excommunicated. This threat to his soul, together with the urgings of his wife who was beholden to Anselm, led the king to seek a conference with Anselm, which took place at Bec in the summer of 1106.

Anselm and the king reached agreement, secured the approval of Pascal II and the pact was finally ratified on August 26, 1106. The terms included the king surrendering any right of investiture in the future, restoring revenue seized from Canterbury during Anselm's absence and renouncing claim to the revenues of vacant abbeys and bishoprics. The pope agreed to confirm the appointments made by Henry during the time of the controversy and to rescind the writ of excommunication against the king. The king was also given the right of nomination for future bishops, subject to church approval. Anselm then returned to England and consecrated the bishops who had been previously appointed.

The agreement of Bec resolved most of the difficulties between the church and the crown, but another year would pass before the investiture controversy was finally put to bed. In August of 1107, the Concordat of London was announced. According to the contemporary account of Eadmer who, like Anselm, was a Benedictine scholar, the meetings lasted three days and culminated in a public meeting with both Henry and Anselm in attendance. The king once and forever renounced the crown's right of investiture. For the church's part, Anselm declared that no clergy would "be deprived of consecration to the office to which he had been appointed because of his having done homage to the King."

Thus was ended peacefully an important conflict that spanned decades of time and multiple regencies in both church and state. That it ended amicably with satisfaction on both sides is a tribute to the personal courage, the commitment to principle and the willingness to negotiate that were the operative characteristics of Saint Anselm. Having accomplished much, both in theology and in practice, that would benefit the church for centuries after his era, Saint Anselm passed into glory at Canterbury in April, 1109.

Anselm's written works

Unlike the doctrines of the Trinity and the Person of Christ, which stirred the early church and led to the convening of the great ecumenical councils, Biblical teachings on redemption did not become a focus of theological debate (except as a sub-point under the Incarnation) until the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries,

AD. When the Church needed orthodox guidance on the question however, God, in his providence, provided a man to articulate the doctrine clearly and powerfully.

After Anselm succeeded Lanfranc as archbishop of Canterbury, he spent several years working on his *Cur Deus Homo*. It was probably published in final form in 1098. In it, Anselm argued that the absolute necessity of the atonement was grounded in the honor of God. It was not merely God's love which motivated the atonement, but the necessity of restoring the honor of God, which had been affronted when man refused to submit his will perfectly to God's will. Either punishment or satisfaction must necessarily follow, so for God to save anyone, satisfaction was demanded by the very character of God. The need for complete reparation required that the one making the atonement be no less than God. But, likewise, because it was man who stood in need of making amends, the act of atonement must be made by man. Hence, the title of the work, "Why God Became Man." According to Anselm, the incarnation was the only solution available, given the dilemma.

The great strength of Anselm's doctrine of redemption is its insistence that the doctrine rests on the immutable nature of God. It also unequivocally establishes the objective nature of the atonement. Its weakness is in its failure to include the relationship of Christ's life to the atonement and the absence of any doctrine of the mystical union between Christ and the believer.

Anselm was a defender of orthodoxy on other key theological topics as well. During his first banishment from England because of his stand against abuses of the church, he ably defended the *filioque* clause of the Nicene Creed against the demands of the Eastern church at the Council of Bari (1098). He also wrote important works on proofs of the existence of God. As an Augustinian, he taught the basic harmony of reason and revelation, and from this foundation constructed his ontological proof for the existence of God. In effect, he said that since man cannot conceive of a higher, more perfect being than the Christian God, that God must, indeed, exist. If such a being can be thought of, it must actually exist.

An important short work on man's will also came from Anselm's pen, *De Libertate Arbitrii (On Free Will)*. For Anselm, true freedom of the will is to be driven internally toward "rectitude." Therefore, the first sinful act of Adam and Eve, while spontaneous, was not an act of true freedom. As a result, true freedom was lost at the fall when man became enslaved to sin.

Anselm conceived of original sin as "natural sin." That is, not natural as of the original creation, but the natural condition of each individual human in the world that has resulted from the fall. The whole race sinned because it was seminally present in Adam, but man does not inherit the specific sin of his immediate ancestors. Yet the guilt and pollution of sin are passed from father to

child in every generation. Anselm's teaching on the fall was consistent with Augustine's and anticipated the covenantal formulations of the Reformation. He taught that in Adam, original ("natural") sin resulted from his act of sin, while in his posterity the guilty acts of sin proceed from the "natural" (original) sin. With original sin, man lost the capability of self-determining holy behavior and became enslaved to sin (hence losing "true freedom").

Anselm's epistemology was Augustinian to the core. His dictum was essentially, "I believe, and from that I will be able to understand." Truth, though an objective reality, may only be found through "faith seeking understanding." Opposed to this is the rationalistic apologetic so common today, which reflects Abelard's, "I understand in order that I may come to believe."

An able scholar, a defender of truth and orthodoxy, a courageous man of God, an articulate expositor; all these are elements that comprise the man, St. Anselm. Each of them separately and all of them collectively offer us, the men of Anselm Presbytery, a standard by which to measure ourselves and an example to follow in life and scholarship.

Selected references for further study:

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Many of Anselm's works, translated by Jasper Hopkins, are available online in pdf. format at: <http://cla.umn.edu/sites/jhopkins>