The Atonement 1: Introduction

“Atonement” is an unusual word. We don’t use it much in everyday conversation. The noun and its verb, *to atone*, appear about 100 times in the Old Testament, most often in the context of sacrifice. The equivalent Greek verb and nouns are used a mere six times in the New Testament. The ESV does not even use *atonement/atone* in the NT, but instead speaks of *propitiation*, hardly a more common word in everyday language (more on these terms at the end).

This illustrates that the importance of a term does not necessarily depend on its frequency. The subject we address when we add the article to the noun and speak of “the atonement” is huge; it is as big as the gospel. So what are we talking about?

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I have wanted to

look at this subject for quite a while. Because of its size, it has had to wait until I had time to dig in. Which I finally managed this year, so here we go. In this first instalment ("What?"), I will do some groundwork. The second and third instalment ("How?") will look at various models and explanations of the atonement.

What Are We Talking About?

The atonement is about the cross and the death of Jesus and the meaning this has. In the words of Baker and Green (2011: 53), we are speaking of "the saving significance of Jesus' death".

However, to put it like this is both too broad and too narrow – because atonement is an ambiguous word (see Craig 2020: 10-12). Its meaning can be as narrow as *to deal with (or atone for) our sin*, something much more limited in scope than salvation or even the cross; the latter may accomplish several things beyond atonement in this strict sense.

On the other hand, atonement is also used broadly in the sense of reconciliation with God. Either way, broad or narrow, we may want to include the incarnation and the life of Jesus as much as his death, and his resurrection and his ascension as well. After all, his death means nothing without his life. It means little without the resurrection and his ascension to heaven, where he intercedes for us from a position of power at the right hand of God.

Perhaps for this reason, Eddy and Beilby (2006: 9) in their introduction to four views of the atonement offer an even broader definition than Baker and Green: "the saving work of Jesus Christ". This is so broad as to hardly makes sense; salvation and atonement are not synonyms.

My focus is going to be on the narrow end of this spectrum: in what way(s) does Jesus' death on the cross make atonement? But the various effects and meanings of the life and death of Jesus are not easily kept separate from each other.

Still: the death of Christ is obviously central; it is for good reason that the cross has become the predominant symbol of the Christian faith.

That the death of Christ is of enormous importance was clear to the church from its beginning. This conviction precedes the faith of Paul, who came to believe in Jesus only a few years after it had happened, as can be seen in this verse, showing it was in place perhaps from day 1: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3 ESV).

Christ died for our sins. What does that mean? How does Jesus’ death do anything about our sin and why did it require his gruesome execution on a Roman cross?

> The gospel of atonement by God incarnate remains the best news in the world. (Davidson 2017: 56)

Multiple Facets

According to a common explanation, one that you have probably heard, Jesus took upon himself the punishment for our sins; he died in our place, as our substitute. This view is often called penal substitution. It has been the most widespread explanation in the churches following the Reformation. However, it is not the only view, and in our days, penal substitution has many critics.

I will write about these alternatives in a later issue, but for now, I want to point out that there is room for more than one explanation. It is to be expected that one explanation will not do to cover everything the cross

accomplished:

- We use many images for God: he is (like a) father, king, lord, shepherd, mother, guide, saviour, light etcetera. We need all of these and more to even begin to grasp what God is like.
- The human predicament is multifaceted as well: sin, death, guilt, spiritual blindness, physical illness, shame, depression and other psychological disorders, bondage, broken relationships, hostility, evil, lostness, and more. The three most prominent facets of sin and its consequences may be guilt, defilement, and estrangement. For the atonement in a broad sense to be effective, it will have to deal with all of these. Atonement in a narrow sense must at least resolve guilt and defilement, thus making reconciliation between us, God, and others possible.
- The Bible itself uses multiple images to speak of the atonement. Baker and Green (2011: 41, 123) speak of “five constellations of images”,

  borrowed from the public life of the ancient Mediterranean world: the court of law (e.g., justification), the world of commerce (e.g., redemption), personal relationships (e.g., reconciliation), worship (e.g., sacrifice) and the battleground (e.g., triumph over evil). Within these categories are clusters of terms, leading us to the conclusion that the significance of Jesus’ death could not be represented without remainder by any one concept or theory of metaphor.

One could add the world of medicine with the language of healing and disease. Likely, then, next to multiple images and metaphors, we will have to use several models to grapple with the atonement. However, I do not agree with Joel Green that this leads us to a kaleidoscopic view (2006). A kaleidoscope changes randomly; it is too post-modern an image for my taste. Rather, I believe we should think of the atonement as a multifaceted reality.

In what follows, I will say a bit more about these images; they give us a first impression of how rich and deep a subject the atonement is.

> And to sum up, the successes of the Saviour, brought about by His Incarnation, are of such kind and magnitude that, if one wished to go through them all, it would be like those who gaze at the expanse of the sea and try to count its waves. (Athanasius 1903: 143; *Incarnation* LIV)

Multiple Images

Sacrifice. The most common way to speak of the atonement both in the NT and in the post-apostolic age is the atonement as sacrifice. Terms like *propitiation*, *cleansing*, *washing*, and *(making) atonement* in a narrower sense all have their origin in the sacrificial world of tabernacle and temple, as do all references to the blood of Jesus. "The New Testament mentions the 'blood of Christ' three times as often as his 'cross' and five times as often as his 'death'" (Rogers 2017: 403).

How do blood and sacrifice deal with sin or impurity? This question is not explicitly discussed in the NT or in the church fathers. It was a given to them that sacrifice accomplished this. Unfortunately, it is not a given to us. We will have to return to this question later.

Punishment. Especially in Romans and Galatians, Paul uses terminology that is legal or, to be more precise, forensic (that is, relating to a court of law). This includes the ideas of condemnation, judgment, and punishment, and of course that crucial term *justification*, one of the outcomes of the atonement. Justice systems therefore provide parallels and words to speak of the atonement.

Redemption. "The Son of Man came … to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45 ESV). Some metaphors are borrowed from the world of commerce. Words like *redemption*, *purchase*, and *ransom* sound like a financial transaction; there is a price to be paid. Frequently, the background is that of the slave market. It can also be the OT institution of redemption of

a person or his property by a next-of-kin. It should be noticed that Scripture never identifies a recipient of what is ‘paid’ in the atonement. It is, after all, a metaphor, a partial and incomplete parallel between the world of humans and the activities of God. It is not used in its original, literal meaning. To redeem or to ransom means to set free.

This kind of language is already used for the exodus, in which God redeemed Israel. It is quite clear that no one received any payment from God:

> But it is because the Lord loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the Lord has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. (Dt. 7:8 ESV; such redemption language is especially frequent in the second half of Isaiah)

Reconciliation. The world of human relationships also provides terminology to speak of the atonement. Reconciliation is one such term, and perhaps the idea of forgiveness has its origin in the personal sphere as well. When Paul speaks of reconciliation in Romans 5:11f, it appears he adds something new to what he has covered so far. Through the atonement, God does more than acquit us, even more than declare our status to be righteous. He aims for (and the cross accomplishes) full relational restoration, in one word: reconciliation. We don’t need to fear God anymore, for all grounds for anger and judgment have been cancelled out. And our hostility is countered and defused by Christ lovingly dying for us.

Victory. The death of Jesus, especially in combination with his resurrection, was a resounding victory. It makes sense to portray it as a triumph over sin, death, and the powers of evil (e.g. Col. 2:15; Heb. 2:14; John 12:31). The cross is the climax and a decisive turning point in Satan’s war against God.

It is noteworthy that Paul uses three of these images in one dense

sentence in Romans 3:

> For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are **justified** by his grace as a gift, through the **redemption** that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a **propitiation** by his blood, to be received by faith. (Rom. 3:23-25a ESV; emphasis added)

In another dense statement, he combines commercial, legal, and battle imagery:

> And you … God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col. 2:13-15 ESV)

The “record of debt”, a certificate of indebtedness, was a commercial and legal document, a formal IOU. It is wiped out through the cross. Since it is nailed to the cross, it doubles as the formal indictment against us, listing our crimes. This suggests that Jesus’ death functions as a legal execution; he died because of our crimes. At the same time (perhaps because of this, that is, by dealing with our transgressions), he triumphs over the powers of this world.

The imagery associated with the atonement, then, is diverse. However, it is likely that many of these images point in a similar direction. We owe a debt, deserve legal punishment, are under a curse, need healing, and are defiled and in need of purification. The language varies, but the underlying reality at least points in a similar direction.

Obviously, Paul had no qualms mixing his metaphors. He presents a multifaceted understanding of the atonement.

> The result has been unexpectedly rich. I thought I understood the doctrine of the atonement; indeed, I have taught on the subject. But I had no idea of the depths of fresh insight that the study would bring. As I delved into the doctrine of Christ's atonement – biblically, historically, philosophically – new understanding has been the reward. (Craig 2018a: Preface)

Appendix 1: The English Word *Atonement*

Atonement is difficult to define as a theological term, largely because our definition will depend on our understanding of it. To give a thing a name is often to predetermine its meaning: a name comes with a bias. Therefore, it is a blessing to have this slightly archaic word in English. It works well as a technical term for our subject, one we can all use, even when we understand the mechanism differently.

It is a unique word. *Atonement* is "one of the few theological terms that is 'wholly and indigenously English'" (Eddy and Beilby 2006: 9). The word originally had a meaning close to *reconciliation* ('at-one-ment'). *Reconciliation* is still one of its meanings.

However, *atonement* often has a cultic ring to it, not a relational one, and it implies something formal and substantial must be done to make reconciliation possible. In this sense, it is something distinct from reconciliation, something that precedes it. The biblical words that are translated (even if not in every translation) with *atonement*, *to atone*, or *to make atonement* all have this narrower meaning; they do *not* mean *reconciliation* or *to reconcile*.

In the OT, *to atone* is not a bad translation because it leaves the mechanism open: does the sacrifice purge, cleanse, expiate, annul, cancel, remove sin/defilement/impurity? Or does it appease, placate, propitiate, satisfy God? (The Hebrew word *kipper* is notoriously difficult to translate.) Probably both – beware of false dichotomies – even if not in every instance: on the one hand, atonement is made for sin(s) or for people, implying *they* are changed. On the other hand, the atoning sacrifice is offered *to God*. And some of the sacrifices are a pleasing aroma to the Lord, indicating a change in his attitude, which fits the concept of propitiation or appeasement.

"To make atonement" avoids having to make a translation decision that may be wrong and that would certainly bias the discussion. And either way, the outcome is the same: what is done makes someone acceptable again to appear before God.

The situation is different in the Greek NT. The Greek words used (more on them in the next section) have their original setting in the worship of the gods. In that context, they stand for appeasement and gaining favor. It is probably for this reason that the ESV avoids using *atonement* and instead translates *propitiation*. This removes the ambiguity but stirs up theological controversy: is Christ's death propitiation or expiation?

Appendix 2: Propitiation and Expiation

More words we hardly use in normal language! They stand for a perennial debate in English theology. Should we think of the sacrifice of Christ as a propitiation or as an expiation? And what is the difference?

First, the relevant Greek terms used in the NT. As mentioned earlier, they are rare. The verb *hilaskomai* appears in Luke 18:13 and Heb. 2:17; the noun *hilasmos* in 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

A related noun, *hilasterion*, is used in Heb. 9:5, where it refers to the cover of the ark of the covenant, also known as mercy seat, and in Rom. 3:25, where the exact meaning is much debated. Is Christ our mercy seat, that is, a place or a means to 'make atonement'? Or does it mean either propitiation or expiation? And how do these two terms differ from each other?

Here is one attempt to explain the difference:

> Expiation refers to a sacrifice that wipes away or covers from sight that which offends. The object of expiation is nonpersonal. Propitiation refers to a sacrifice which turns away wrath of the person. The object of propitiation is an offended moral agent. N. T. Wright captures the difference well: "You propitiate a person who is angry; you expiate a sin, crime, or stain on your character" (Cole 2017: 498, quoting Wright 2002: 476).

And here is a second attempt:

> In discussions of the bib[lical] teaching on atonement it has become customary to draw a distinction between propitiation and expiation. The former term indicates that the action is directed toward God or some other offended person. The underlying purpose is to change God's attitude from one of wrath to one of good-will and favor. In the case of expiation, on the other hand, the action is directed toward that which has caused the breakdown in the relationship. It is sometimes held that, while God is not personally angry with the sinner, the act of sin has initiated a train of events that can be broken only by some compensatory rite or act of reparation for the offense. In short, propitiation appeases the offended person, whereas expiation is concerned with nullifying the offensive act. (Silva 2014: II, 534)

Objections against propitiation are mainly: (a) a linguistic argument:

the way the relevant Greek terms are used in the Septuagint to translate Hebrew atonement terms; (b) it is inappropriate to ascribe wrath and anger to God (something the Bible does rather frequently, it may be noted); and (c) it would mean that God has to be appeased and his favour needs to be 'bought' with gifts, the way the ancient Romans and Greeks did with their gods – an unworthy representation of God.

Putting the argument like this admits something important: the original meaning in normal Greek was precisely what is objected to:

> The basic idea behind the religious use of ????????? in the Gk. world is the human effort to dispose in one's own favor the awful and freq. calamitous power of the dead, the demons, and the gods, and to strengthen one's own actions by the assistance of supernatural forces. (Ibid.: II, 532)

However, no one believes the ancient Israelites or the authors of the NT held such a crude notion of 'placating' God with sweet gifts or even of God's wrath as something close to human anger, which is often unreasonable and usually comes with a loss of control. Those who oppose the concept of propitiation should beware of setting up a strawman. That God reacts to evil in a way that has something in common with human anger is not unreasonable; surely, he is not indifferent. But in that case, more is needed than expiation only:

> Further analysis makes clear that the authors of the Heb. OT and the LXX translators are far removed from the crude pagan idea of propitiating a capricious and malevolent deity … There is a personal dimension that affects both the offending and the offended parties: where an offense has to be expiated, the action has to be taken because the personal relationship between the parties requires it. (Ibid.: II, 536)

The linguistic argument is difficult and involves more than a hundred OT passages; I cannot do justice to it here (see ibid.: II, 532-7 and Morris 1984: 155ff for an introduction). In summary, I would say that a combination of the two ideas fits best: propitiatory expiation or propitiation through expiation; as Silva puts it:

> What C. K. Barrett says of Paul's teaching in Romans might be applied also to those passages in the OT concerning the expiation of human sin: "It would be wrong to neglect the fact that expiation has, as it were, the effect of propitiation: the sin that might have excited God's wrath is expiated (at God's will) and therefore no longer does so" (*The Epistle to the Romans* [1957], 78)." (Silva 2014: II, 536f)

Book Recommendation

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