

Propitiation

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In view of present-day tendencies the frequent restatement of fundamental truth of the simplest nature is never out of place. It is indeed against such fundamental truth that the most subtle attacks of the devil are directed, for if a destructive blow reaches the foundations the whole building of truth is shaken and weakened.

Nothing is commoner at the present time than statements from professed teachers of Christianity as to the redemption work of Christ which are loosely worded and vague, if not positively erroneous. And the former are generally more mischievous than the latter.

To juggle with the word "atonement" is an old device, leading to positive error. It is a simple matter to insert two hyphens and print it "at-one-ment," and this proceeding adopted, nothing is simpler than to evacuate the word thus mangled of all its proper meaning. It is not surprising if the unwary and unlettered are deceived by such dishonest playing with words, for they may not have means to hand whereby the fraud may be discovered. But what shall we think of those who perpetrate it? Are these would-be teachers without understanding also? We would fain think so, for the only alternative is to regard them in the light of those who wilfully corrupt the Word of God.

For what are the facts of the case? They are these: "Atonement" is an exclusively Old Testament word. It appears once in the New Testament of the Authorized Version, viz. in Romans 5: 11. But there it is a manifest mistranslation. The marginal reading "reconciliation" being the correct word. In the Old Testament it frequently occurs, and there, as may be easily verified by the simplest reader, if a good concordance such as "Young's" be at hand, always as the translation of the Hebrew word the simple significance of which is "*to cover.*"

"Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is *covered,*" was David's exclamation in Psalm 32: 1. Here we have the great Old Testament thought as to God's dealing with sin in forgiving mercy. It first appears in Genesis 3: 21, where after the ineffectual efforts of Adam and Eve to cover their sinful nakedness from God's presence by fig-leaf aprons of their own manufacture, God Himself covered them by coats of *skins* — such coats necessarily involving the death of a victim. The thought so clearly enshrined in this picture, suitable to the infancy of the human race, recurs again and again in Scripture. The meaning of the word "atonement" is thus clearly established as the *covering of sin by sacrifice.*

There is thus about the word no thought at all of making two parties one in mind and purpose — men being lifted by Christ and His example to the level of His own high ideals and conceptions of God — which is the thought attempted to be derived from "at-onement." The fact is the real and simple

meaning of the word is just that which this new spelling was expressly designed to avoid.

But in Old Testament times Christ was as yet unrevealed; His work as yet unaccomplished. It was the age of forecasts, types, and shadows, and such necessarily lack the sharpness of outline which we expect in the substance. The term "atonement" therefore is, as one might expect, general and comprehensive rather than detailed and particular. When we come to the New Testament therefore we find that the Old Testament term is dropped and other terms of more special and limited bearing take its place.

One such term is "Propitiation," which stands at the head of this paper.

The word *propitiation* occurs but a few times in the New Testament scriptures, yet as presenting to us the redemption work of Christ in its bearing Godward, rather than manward, it is of the greatest possible importance. It is the first and most fundamental thought connected with the death of Christ.

The Epistle to the Romans presents us with an orderly unfolding of the Gospel. Its first two and a half chapters are occupied with the assertion and proof of universal sin and corruption. Every kind of man is condemned, all pretension to goodness is demolished, and all the world is brought in as "guilty before God" (Rom. 3: 19). From that point the gospel of God, which alone meets this condition, is unfolded, and in this unfolding the first great landmark is found in the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ, meeting every claim of the righteousness of God. "Christ Jesus, whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in His blood, to declare His righteousness" (ver. 25).

The reader is asked to read carefully the whole passage, verses 21 to 26 inclusive, whence the above quotation is taken. He will find the following: —

1. The Righteousness of God.

i.e. The maintenance by God of all His rights in a right way. This necessarily comes first into prominence inasmuch as sin is lawlessness, *i.e.* the assertion of man's will as against God's rights. It is fitting then that the first word of gospel after the terrible unfolding of man's sin should be "the righteousness of God" (see Rom. 3: 21).

2. The Law of Moses Superseded.

The righteousness of God is manifested "without the law." The law was the careful declaration of God's rights first and foremost, and of those duties which in a secondary way man should render to his fellows. The smallest infringement of God's rights under law brought condemnation and death.

3. "Righteousness of God by faith of Jesus Christ towards all, and upon all those who believe."

(New Trans., J.N.D.)

Here we have the wonderful fact that in connection with Jesus Christ, and not law, by faith and not works, God has so maintained His rights that He approaches all men favourably in a right way; and as regards all who believe, His righteousness is upon them, that is they are justified or made right in His sight. Under law there was no satisfying of God's righteous claims, no harmonising of the "light" which had been outraged by sin with the "love" which delights in mercy. In Christ, there is all this. In Him, "mercy and truth are met together, righteousness and peace have kissed each other," and God can

exercise His rights of mercy in a right way, *i.e.* without jeopardising the display of any attribute of this character.

But how so? At what particular point in connection with Christ do we find the "righteousness of God" established. The answer is, we find it in

4. Propitiation.

"Christ Jesus . . . set forth a propitiation through faith in His blood." The word used here is one which signifies the place where propitiation was typically accomplished under law, *viz.* the mercy-seat. Christ Jesus then is set forth as the mercy-seat, and the propitiation is made in His blood.

The type may help us as to this. In keeping with the instructions given in Leviticus 16. it was the duty of the high priest to enter the Holy of holies once a year, "not without blood," as Hebrews 9: 7 says, "which he offered for Himself and for the errors of the people." This blood was sprinkled *on* the mercy-seat and *before* it seven times. In virtue of this blood-shedding, which was the witness of death — the original sentence on sin — executed in a flawless victim, God was propitiated or rendered favourable by having His righteous claims met.

In the type all was provisional and shadowy, in the mighty sacrifice of Christ all was real and eternal. The one was like a promissory note, valid in view of its redemption at the due date, yet intrinsically valueless, being only a piece of paper and a little ink. The other is like the whole sum in fine gold of perfect intrinsic value wherewith the note is redeemed.

"Once in the end of the world [the consummation of the ages] hath He appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself" (Heb. 9: 26).

Propitiation is also mentioned in two other New Testament books.

In Hebrews 2: 17 we should read that Christ is "a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God to make propitiation for the sins of the people." Here again we have it emphasised that whilst propitiation is needed on account of "the sins of the people," it is essentially Godward in its bearing.

It is also alluded to in 1 John 2: 2 and 1 John 4: 10. And here a point of great importance stands clearly out, *viz.* that Christ's sacrifice viewed as a propitiation covers not only the believer's sins, but also the whole world.

In connection with this care is needed, for it is very easy here to speak unscripturally. Nowhere are we authorized by Scripture to speak of Christ dying for the sins of everybody in the sense that He was everybody's substitute. On the other hand, we are nowhere authorised to limit the bearing of His sacrifice viewed as propitiation. In this connection its scope is nothing less than the whole world.

A clear understanding of this simple distinction is the key to the interpretation of scriptures which appear to clash. Such as, for instance: —

"To give His life a ransom for *many*" (Matt. 20: 28).

"Who gave Himself a ransom for *all*" (1 Tim. 2: 6).

The former has in view a *substitutionary* work. He died as a substitute for all who believe, hence they *must* go free; righteousness demands it. He did *not* die as a substitute for all, else *all* must go free.

The latter has in view a *propitiatory* work, *i.e.* the meeting of the divine claims apart from the

question of its application to individual cases. The death of Christ being of infinite value meets God's claims in regard to the question of sin regarded as one whole. It stands good therefore for all, as far as its intention is concerned.

The two points of view are brought together in the words already quoted from Romans 3. Righteousness is truly "upon all them that believe" — that is substitution in effect; it is just as much "towards all" in intention and offer, and this is connected with propitiation.

No illustration "runs on all fours," but there is a distinct analogy traceable in the schemes of insurance which have become so common in connection with publications such as diaries. On obtaining one at the new year the purchaser finds that by filling up a small coupon enclosed and remitting it to the office of the insurance company, together with a few stamps to cover cost of registration and reply, he is entitled to free insurance benefit for accidents, etc. The benefits offered do not appeal to some and they neglect it, others register and qualify for them if an accident befalls them.

Behind the thousands of small registration transactions, however, lies the one transaction between the publishers of the diaries and the insurance company. A cheque running into thousands of pounds has been paid by way of premium. It is not paid by way of covering any individual claim, for at the moment no one knows what claims, if any, there will be; though of course in effect it *does* cover every individual claim which can be sustained under the terms of the policy. It is paid rather by way of satisfying the claims of the company as a whole in regard to the liabilities they assume. Being thus satisfied they are favourable — *propitiated* if you will — towards all who purchase the diaries and therefore willing to consider them as definitely insured if registered.

Let the *many* small registration transactions represent that which takes place in conversion. Then it is that we each for ourselves, one by one, register under God's great salvation scheme, and discover that the price paid in Christ's redemption work suffices for us, so that we may look back and regard Him as our Substitute. Then it is that we gladly sing: —

"'Tis done, the great transaction's done,
I am my Lord's and He is mine."

We sing rightly, for the transaction between the soul and God at conversion is indeed *great*.

Infinitely greater, however, is that other transaction. ONE in contrast to many. The *one* paying of the great premium price which the claims of God's righteousness and outraged holiness demanded — the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ. Its primary *object* was, we repeat, the satisfying of divine claims, its *bearing* Godward; though in its ultimate *effect* the need of the repentant sinner is met.

At the same time, be it clearly understood, *both* propitiation and substitution were accomplished in the one sacrifice of the cross. It was there that He stood as the "ransom for all." There too that Jehovah "laid on Him the iniquity of *us all*" — *i.e.* of all repentant believers.

The foregoing scriptural distinctions are of great importance to those who preach the gospel. They should be carefully observed by those who would present the divine message without obscurity.

The great theme of the preacher going forth as a herald into a world of sinners is *propitiation*. He preaches Christ's work in that aspect, showing that thereby a righteous way has been made by which judgment against sin is deferred whilst forgiveness and salvation are made available for all, and are being preached amongst all nations. He speaks also of repentance and faith, and announces that "all who believe are justified from all things," thus leading up to *substitution*. This latter truth is, however, more particularly that which is needed by the awakened and anxious sinner to lead him into peace with

God.

In so saying we do but follow the order divinely worked out in Scripture. Propitiation is found in Romans 3: 25. Substitution in Romans 4: 25. Peace with God in Romans 5: 1.

One thing more. Behind the truth of propitiation lies the fundamental fact of the anger of God against sin, which expresses itself in penal retribution. In this behold the real reason why every teacher of "modern" tendencies avoids the subject even if he does not attempt to flatly deny or explain it away. And yet how oft reiterated in Scripture! Terrible indeed, yet staring us in the face upon almost every page of our Bibles. God "*hates* wickedness," He is "*angry* with the wicked every day" and ultimately "the wicked shall be cast into hell" — whether men believe it or not.

Let us boldly maintain this great truth of Scripture and suffer no strange or misty statements to loosen our hold upon it. Depend upon it, it is fundamental to the last degree.