

Guilt, Expiation, Atonement

by James D. Nickel

In the New Testament, the Greek word for atonement is *katallage* (noun) translated into English as “atonement” or “reconciling” or “reconciliation.” This word was used in the Greek business of money transactions and means “the exchange of one thing for another.” From this accounting context, the word was also used to identify the “adjustment of a difference” or “balance paid.” The authors of the New Testament, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, took this word and used it to mean “the restoration of a lost relationship” between man and God. God made man to walk with Him in friendship and fellowship. By his disobedience and rebellion, man ended up at enmity with God. In terms of the God’s redemptive work, *katallage* means that Jesus took that enmity away thus restoring the relationship of friendship. On the Cross, God in Christ reconciled the lost humanity of estranged sinners to Himself, not counting¹ their trespasses against them (cf. Romans 5:6-11; 11:15; II Corinthians 5:18-21).

“... how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:14)

There has been a marvelous and wonderful “adjustment of a difference” or “balance paid” in the atonement. In

astounding grace, the estrangement between man and God has been removed in Christ. *This is the Good News!* Now, in light of Christ’s finished work, Paul implores men, “Be reconciled to God” (II Corinthians 5:20). To rephrase Paul, he is announcing, “In Christ, God is friends with you; now, become His friends in experience by reconciling yourself to the Father’s great love (Romans 5:10; John 15:15; John 3:16-18).

Reconciliation is a two-way street. First, God reconciles the world to Himself in Christ. This is objective reality. The Gospel call, then, is that men are to reconcile themselves to God. Doing so is the subjective instantiation of objective reality.

What God in Christ has done on Calvary’s Cross, i.e., objective reality, is the opening of the communication link bridging estranged man to God. It is at the mercy seat, the blood of Christ shed on Calvary’s Cross, that God meets and speaks with us (Exodus 25:21-22). There is no longer any barrier of separation; the sin barrier that separates man from God has been permanently abolished. God’s face toward estranged man is the face of the forgiveness of Christ on the Cross, a face of solidarity, a face of openness, acceptance, and friendship.

Not only does atonement deal with sin’s penalty, it also deals with the pollution of sin; i.e., guilt. According to Hebrews 9:14, the blood of Christ *cleanses* the guilty conscience of the sinner. It is on the basis of a clear conscience that fellowship with the Triune God is commenced and continues from glory to glory (II Corinthians 3:18).²

¹ Counting, in Greek, is *logizomai*. It is an accounting term indicating that personal “charges” have been dropped from the books by an equivalent payment from another source.

² The blood of Christ continually cleanses us from all sin as we “walk in the light” (I John 1:7-9).

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The term *expiation* is closely related to atonement in that it defines the act of atonement; i.e., expiation is the means of payment, restitution, and restoration whereby atonement is made. Therefore, when we speak of “making atonement for sins,” we must understand this phrase in two contexts: (1) expiation, the restitution and (2) atonement, the reconciliation. Christ Jesus the Lord is both.

Expiation is closely related to the Greek word *hilasterion* translated propitiation in our English Bibles (see Hebrews 2:17; Romans 3:25 and I John 2:1-2; 4:10, where *hilasmos* is used). Propitiation literally means to “turn away wrath.” The writer(s) to the Hebrews called the mercy seat, the lid on the Ark of the Covenant, the *propitiation* seat (Hebrews 9:5). We are not to understand Christ’s sacrifice using the pagan understanding of these words, i.e., to offer sacrifice is to appease the anger, petty peevishness, irascibility and petulant displeasure of an offended deity. Christ does *not* appease an “angry” Father so as to turn Him from anger to mercy, love, and grace. The New Testament writers recast these words, like they did with many other words of koiné Greek.

Christ, as the perfect sacrifice, is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. By representing lost humanity in His death, the one for the many, Christ is saying “Amen” to the just judgment of God on the sin, a broken Law, and the resultant guilty alienation of humanity. By representing man in His death, Christ is affirming the holy love of the Father for a sinful and lost world, thus sealing God’s purposes to adopt humanity into His family by His blood (Ephesians 1:3-7). Christ, by His perfect and vicarious sacrifice, turns away the wrath of God against sin by freely owning its judgment. On the Cross, Christ made a public display of the constancy of His Father’s eternal purpose of holy love for all humanity (John 3:16-18).

An error that we often make with reference to expiation and atonement is to limit our understanding of these truths to personal or church/doctrinal matters. Atonement is a vital doctrine in terms of its connection to God’s people, *but it is much more than that*. Our Lord God is the maker of the heavens and the earth and all that they contain and He has reconciled the world of lost sinners to Himself. The Apostle Paul told the pagan Greek philosophers on Mars Hill that they, as estranged sinners, still “live and move and have their being” in the Lord of heaven and earth (Acts 17:22-34). What Paul was telling the learned men of his day is that all men, including them, inescapably face the God of the Bible at every point, act, word, and thought in their lives. *The fact that men do not believe in the Living God does not alter the fact that they are inescapably tied to Him in every facet of their existence or the truth that God has reconciled the world to Himself in Christ*.

Man’s existence, in philosophical terms, is a matter of ontology, a branch of metaphysics.³ Man’s sin, in philosophical terms, is a matter of ethics. By sin, man makes himself an enemy of God; he is ethically estranged from Him. But God has reconciled this moral estrangement in Christ! Even though man has declared himself as God’s enemy, he is still God’s creature and the object of His universal redemption so that, in spite of his sin and all of his objections (e.g., God does not exist, the Bible is full of errors, etc.), *man cannot escape from God and the conditions of his life and being as they are ordained by Him*. As we have seen, these truths formed the basis Paul’s Gospel command, “Change your minds about God ... be reconciled to Him” (Acts 17:30; II Corinthians 5:20). Why? Because the Good News is that in Christ God has reconciled the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them (II Corinthians 5:19).

³ The Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) coined the term metaphysics to mean “the study of the nature of reality or existence.” Ontology means the “study of being.” Paul corrected the erroneous ideas of the Stoic and Epicurean philosophers on Mars Hill by declaring to them that man is metaphysically the creation of God; i.e., man owes his past, current, and next breath, i.e., his existence, to the Living God of Scripture (Acts 17:28).

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In the previous essay, *Father's House*, we talked about the “inner torments of guilt” and that only a person released from this torment can truly rest; i.e. is truly free to serve God in terms of God’s empowerment and requirements. In contrast, those who refuse to be reconciled to God are those still under the unnecessary torment of a guilty conscience. They are “like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. ““There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked”” (Isaiah 57:20-21).

It is in this guilty unrest that the wicked attempt to “live, move and have their being” in God’s world. In their ethical separation from God they make the foolish attempt to separate themselves from Him determining for themselves, as their own god, right and wrong (Genesis 3:5). In spite of his foolish attempts to “be as god,” man is still God’s creature and everything he does will manifest that fact. Since expiation and atonement are inescapably linked to God’s order, man the sinner and transgressor of God’s law, will inescapably seek to make atonement. The man with the guilty conscience will seek atonement on his terms, not God’s terms. Man in sin seeks to be “god” the judge. Man fights off sin with every ounce of his strength and life in terms of either self-justification or “laying the blame or guilt” on others. This expiatory act of laying judgment on others is a manifestation of God’s judgment. Because sinful man owes his existence to God, in all of his being he will manifest God’s purpose and judgment, even as He resists God’s redemption accomplished in Christ. As guilty man judges others, in his waking or sleeping, in his thoughts and dreams, in his eating and drinking, in his work, rest, and play, he is really judging himself. This self-judgment is a manifestation of God’s love revealed in His wrath.

Let me repeat: *expiation and atonement are inescapable truths of God’s order*. Since these truths are inescapable, atonement must be made on God’s terms, not man’s terms; i.e., atonement must be legitimate in terms of God’s requirements. Since it is God’s law that sin violates, we must look to God’s law in order to understand the terms of reconciliation. The sinner has no moral grounds whatsoever to dictate to God terms of his forgiveness or reconciliation. If he does so, his attempts at reconciliation will be illegitimate. This illegitimacy will involve suffering and punishment not only for himself, but for others, far greater indeed than in legitimate atonement, but without true release from guilt or ensuing peace with God and between men.⁴

Hell is the end result of any and all attempts to make illegitimate atonement, to resist the love of God by self-justification and self-atonement. The wicked man is loved by God but, by his intent on doing things in the Sinatian “my way,”⁵ gives himself over to eternal self-justification. As we see in Luke 16:19-31 (cf. Mark 9:43-48; Isaiah 66:24⁶), hell is populated by the guilty ones, ones who are

⁴ Peace is a rich word in Scripture. In the Hebrew, it is pronounced shalom. It means completeness, wholeness, and soundness. It includes the nuances of welfare, health, and prosperity in addition to quiet, tranquility, and contentment. It means, above all, friendship with God, and, as a result, friendship with one’s fellow man.

⁵ A reference to Frank Sinatra’s (1915-1998) late 1960s song entitled “My Way.”

⁶ The valley of Hinnom (meaning “lamentation”) or Gehenna (Jeremiah 7:32-34) was a deep, narrow glen south of Jerusalem. It separated Mount Zion from a hill called “the hill of evil counsel.” In this valley (also called the “valley of slaughter”), in a place called Tophet, meaning “fire-stove,” idolatrous Jews sacrificed their children to Molech (II Chronicles 28:3; 33:6; Jeremiah 19:2-6). This valley afterwards became the common receptacle for all the refuse of the city. Here the dead bodies of animals and of criminals, and all kinds of filth, were cast and consumed by a fire kept always burning, an “eternal flame” if you could denote it as such. This valley thus, in the process of time, became an image of the place of everlasting destruction and it is used by Christ as such (Matthew 5:22-30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15-33; Luke 12:5). Those who populate this place in eternity have a “worm that does not die.” This worm, their worm in that it belongs to them as their just punishment, gnaws at them forever. Likewise, their fire, which burns constantly in Gehenna to consume the refuse, burns but is not quenched. These phrases are depictions of the horrors of the eternal

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totally past-oriented and past-bound, ones who endlessly rehearse and justify their own sins. There is neither community nor work in hell, only the fiery and bitter torment of endless memory and indomitable self-justification.⁷

Heaven, in contrast, is the end result of legitimate atonement. Heaven is above all a worshipping community populated by those whose guilt has been removed by receiving atonement by the blood, the expiatory sacrifice, of the Lord Jesus Christ. In heaven there is no condemning memory of sin in God's people or in God (Isaiah 43:25). Men destined for heaven are freed from the guilt of the past. Hence, they are inescapably future-oriented in terms of this world and eternity-oriented in terms of the world to come. Heaven-bound men are the *only* men who can *truly* work and live here and now in terms of God's requirements. They can truly *live*⁸ in terms of service to the living God because their personal enslavement to sin, death, and guilt have been truly *dealt with, penalty paid and truly cleansed*. It is knowledge of this truth that makes the redeemed man free (John 8:31-36). The reconciliation of God to man in Jesus Christ is total and real. In terms of a gracious and merciful blood-bought atonement, those who have chosen to be reconciled to God have become what God has always intended man to become. They enjoy face to face communion in the dance of the delight of the Triune God as His friends (John 15:9-17; Revelation 22:4).

devastations and judgments of hell, of the eternal consequences of the resistance of men and women to God's reconciling love in Christ. Hell is a necessary and required place in terms of both God's love and justice.

⁷ For a poetic, yet very sobering, description of the empty, vain, and rapacious tortures of the "coldness" of the self-orientation of hell, see Clive Staples Lewis, *The Great Divorce*.

⁸ According to the church father Irenaeus (130-202), "*Gloria Dei homo vivens*" (the glory of God is a human fully alive). Being reconciled, we are saved by His life, we are truly alive (Romans 5:10).