

PROPTIATION: THE VERY CENTRAL HEART OF THE GOSPEL

Is Propitiation an *abandoned* doctrine that needs to be resurrected in our churches and witnessing?

This paper is certainly not exhaustive on this subject, and there is much more that can be said about it but the answer is yes; that is, that the church has fallen away from the central heart of the Gospel. This statement may cause some raising of eyebrows, but the gist of the matter, when examined under the light of the Holy Word is that it is critical for a better understanding on the whole of Scripture and needs to be central in our preaching and teaching lest we “unwittingly” be found guilty of preaching “another Gospel”.

What is Propitiation?

It is a sacrifice that averts “wrath” through expiating sin and canceling guilt. “It is the appeasement or turning away of God’s wrath against sinners by means of an atoning sacrifice. In Romans 3:25 Christ is said to be a propitiation. The Greek term is *hilasterion*, which is translated “mercy seat” in Hebrews 9:5. The LXX used the same word for *mercy seat*. There are some who hold that such should be the rendering in Romans 3:25, but the AV translation of a propitiation, or a *propitiatory sacrifice*, is preferable. The mercy seat was sprinkled with the blood of atonement* and is therefore called the *hilasterion*, the “propitiatory,” or place of propitiation, because when the blood was sprinkled, *God’s wrath was turned away*. That is what Romans 3:25 teaches. Christ by the shedding of His blood, turned away God’s wrath. Cognate words are used in Heb. 2:17, 1 John 2:2, and 4:10 showing that the Lord Jesus, by the shedding of His own blood, has propitiated God and delivered His people from divine wrath.

The whole idea of the wrath* of God is discountenanced by modern skeptical theologians. C.H. Dodd is a case in point: “He denies that “the wrath of God” denotes anything more than a process of cause and effect whereby disaster inevitably follows sin” (Leon Morris). But all the arguments of men of Dodd’s persuasion cannot shake the fact of the “**wrath of God revealed**” (Rom. 1:18) in the inspired word. John Owen, “the prince of Puritan divines,” lists four essential elements in any propitiation:

1. An offence to be taken away.
2. A person offended who needs to be pacified.
3. An offending person; one guilty of the offence.
4. A sacrifice or some other means of making atonement for the offence.

Propitiation proves that the atonement is objective, that it makes its primary impression on God, not man.” (Dictionary of Theological Terms, Dr. Alan Cairns, p.282)

Propitiation is not merely Expiation or Satisfaction for sin:

Expiation means only *half* of what propitiation means. Expiation is an action that has sin as it’s object; it denotes the covering, putting away, or rubbing out of sin so that it no longer constitutes a barrier to friendly fellowship between man and God.

Propitiation, however, in the bible, denotes all that expiation means, “and the pacifying of the wrath of God thereby.” [We are “by nature the children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3) and all unbelievers have the wrath of God abiding on them *now*]. (John 3:18; 36*) (Knowing God, J.I. Packer, p.182)

The doctrine of the propitiation is precisely this: that God loved the objects of his wrath so much that he gave his own Son to the end that he by his blood should make provision *for the removal of his wrath*. It was Christ’s so to deal with the wrath that the “loved” would no longer be the objects

of wrath, and love would achieve it's aim of making the children of "wrath" the children of God's good pleasure. (John 3:16, 18, 36, 17:2, 9; Matt. 11:25, 27) John Murray, *The Atonement*, p. 15

The very central heart of the Gospel is this: *The basic description of the saving death of Christ in the Bible is as a "Propitiation," that is, as that which quenched God's wrath against us by obliterating our sins from his sight.* No version of that message goes deeper than that which declares man's root problem before God to be his sin, which evokes wrath, and God's basic provision for man to be propitiation, which out of wrath brings peace.

Propitiation verses: Romans 3:21-26; Hebrews 2:17; 1 John 4:8-10; 1 John 2: 1,2

In Romans 1:18 Paul sets the stage for his declaration of the Gospel by affirming that the "wrath of God" is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men. *"The wrath of God that is being revealed from heaven is dynamically, effectively operating in the world of men and it is as proceeding from heaven, the throne of God, that it is thus active."* (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1, p. 34). In the rest of Romans 1, Paul traces out the present activity of God's wrath in the judicial hardening of apostate hearts expressed in the thrice-repeated phrase ("God gave them up" vv 24, 26, 28 KJV). [emphasis mine]

In the first part of Romans 3, Paul carries on his argument to prove that *every person Jew and Gentile alike*, being "under sin" (v. 9) stands exposed to the wrath of God in both its "**present**" and "future" manifestations. Here, then, are all of us in our natural state, without the Gospel; *the finally controlling reality in our lives, whether we are aware of it or not is the active anger of God* (Ps. 5:5, 7:11). But now, says Paul, acceptance, pardon, and peace are freely given to those (the elect) who hitherto were "wicked" (v.5) and God's "enemies" (5:10) but who now put faith in Christ Jesus, "whom God set forth to be **a propitiation** ---by his blood." And believers know that "much more then, being now justified by his blood, shall we be saved from the *wrath* of God through him." (5:9 RV)

Paul reminds us:

"What if God although willing to demonstrate his wrath and to make his power known, endured with much patience *vessels of wrath prepared for destruction?* And He did so in order that He might make known the *vessels of mercy, which He prepared beforehand for glory.* Even us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles." (Rom.9: 22-24)

"For this reason I endure all things for the sake of those who are chosen that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus and with eternal glory." ---"with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth, and that they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil having been held captive by him to do his will." (2 Tim. 2:10, 25, 26)

"For the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved"--- "and as many as were ordained to eternal life believed."---"even as many as the Lord our God shall call to himself." (Acts 2:47b, 2:39b, 13:48)

Consider this: The N.T view of the cross involves more than is sometimes realized. That the Apostolic writers present the death of Christ as the ground and warrant of God's offer of forgiveness, and that we enter into forgiveness through repentance and faith in Christ will not be disputed. But does this mean that, as a loaded gun is only potentially explosive, and an act of pulling the trigger is needed to make it go off, so Christ's death achieved only a possibility of salvation, needing an exercise of faith on our part to trigger it off and make it actual?

If so, then it is not strictly Christ's death that saves us at all, any more than it is loading the gun that makes it fire; strictly speaking, we save ourselves by our faith, and for all we know, Christ's death might not have saved anyone, since it might have been the case that nobody believed the Gospel. But

that is not how the N.T. sees it. The N.T. view is that the death of Christ *actually* saved “us all.”--- (*all without distinction, not all without exception, in other words, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles*),--- that is to say that God foreknew, and has called and justified, and will in due course glorify. For our faith, which from the human point of view is the means of salvation, is from God’s point of view part of salvation, and is as directly and completely God’s gift to us as is the pardon and peace of which faith lays hold.

Psychologically, faith is our own act, the theological truth about it is that it is God’s work in us, (John 3:21; 6:28-29) our faith, and our new relationship with God as believers, and all the divine gifts that are enjoyed within this relationship, were all alike secured for us by Jesus’ death on the cross.

“For the cross is not an isolated event; it was, rather, the *focal point* in God’s eternal plan to save his elect, and it ensured and guaranteed first the calling (the bringing to faith, through the Gospel in the mind and the Holy Spirit in the heart), and then the justification, and then finally the glorification, of all for whom, *specifically and personally*, Christ died. The saving purpose of God, from eternal election to final glory, is one, and it is vital for both our understanding and our assurance that we should not lose sight of the links that bind together its various stages and parts.” (Knowing God, J.I Packer, p. 264-265)

John Piper states it succinctly; he said:

“So to save sinners, and at the same time magnify the worth of His glory, God lays our sin on Jesus and abandons Him to shame and slaughter on the cross. The clearest and most important biblical statement of this truth is found in Romans 3:23-26. If I were asked, “What is the most important paragraph in the Bible?” I think this is the paragraph I would name. It goes to the very root of the Christian gospel and lays bare the heart of God like few other texts. If there is a moment in the symphony of biblical revelation when the contrasting themes of justice and mercy come together into a magnificent orchestral statement of unity and harmony and peace, it is here in Romans 3:23-26.”

23) All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; 24) they are justified by his grace as a *gift*, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, 25) whom God put forward as a *propitiation* by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; 26) it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus. (The Pleasures of God, p. 162)

Romans 3:25 teaches: Christ by the shedding of His blood, turned away God’s wrath.

Propitiation in the Bible means the same thing as Reconciliation and Atonement. In Hebrews 2:17 it is translated as Atonement in the NIV; as Reconciliation in the KJV; and as Propitiation in the NAS. So, we must understand that these words are synonyms.

Hebrews 2:17 states: “Therefore He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make *propitiation* (Reconciliation KJV) for the sins of the people.” NAS

In a book of sermon quotations preached by Forrest L. Keener, Bethel Baptist Church, Lawton Oklahoma, pastor Keener defines the term Propitiation as follows when he brought to light that the doctrine of limited atonement is a biblical truth when he preached this to his congregation in 1990:

“The word reconciliation in your Bible comes from exactly the same Greek word as the word atonement. The word atonement appears, in your New Testament, only in the 5th chapter of the book of Romans and verse 11 KJV. In the verses immediately surrounding it, we have the word reconciled appearing twice, and it comes from exactly the same Greek word as the word atonement, not just the same root word, but exactly the same word. Let me show you what I am talking about by reading Romans, chapter 5 and verse 10 and 11: ‘For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son,’ Now, look at that. He says we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son. Is everybody reconciled to God by the death of his Son? And you must answer, ‘No, there are many who are not reconciled to God by anything.’ ‘...We were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life, and not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the ATONEMENT.’ As we consider the word reconciled, and the word reconciliation that goes with it; *be informed, the word reconciliation is exactly the same word as the word atonement in this verse.* (Grace not Calvinism, Forrest L. Keener, p.181-182)

“May I say, that if you believe in hell, there is a clear and unmistakable sense in which you believe in a limited atonement. Many men, if they were told that they believed in a limited atonement, would fight you from now until doomsday, swearing they believe no such thing. But when you come to the true definition of what atonement is, you will understand that atonement means being reconciled to God by the death of Jesus Christ. And men who believe that there is a hell, and that there are men in hell, do not actually believe that those men in hell are reconciled to Jesus Christ. They may seem to say it, but they do not really believe that those men in hell are redeemed. They do not believe that those men in hell have their sins washed away by the blood of Christ. Therefore, they believe that the atonement or the reconciliation that is, *the propitiation*, is in some sense, limited.” (Grace not Calvinism, Forrest L. Keener, p.162) [emphasis mine]

What did Jesus say; is the Propitiation really limited?

“...Glorify thy Son, As thy hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him. And now, O Father, I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world; thine they were, and thou gavest them me; I pray for them: *I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine.*” John 17:1, 2,5,6,9

How does God see us in this unregenerate state and why is Propitiation needed?

[In our unregenerate state God himself must come to rescue us if we are to be saved; He must give us life from the dead]...“As it is written, There is no one righteous, not even one; There is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is none who does good, not even one.” Romans 3:10-12

We are in the unregenerate state “*dead in trespasses and sins*”...“*and by nature the children of wrath...*” ...“That at that time (before regeneration) ye were without Christ,...*having no hope*, and without God in the world...,” “...*condemned already...*,” “...not see life; [and] *the wrath of God abiding on [us]*.” [It is important to note especially that before regeneration, we had no hope, and the reason is because we were dead.] Eph. 2:I- 3; 12; John 3:18, 36

Therefore God must literally implant life into us in order to resurrect us from the dead in order to comprehend the gospel and come to Christ for salvation by the mercy of God....

“But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus...” “When you were *dead* in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you *alive* with Christ.” “....What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said... This is the work of God, that you believe on him whom he hath sent.” “for without me you can do nothing.”
 ...[therefore]...” “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” “If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed.” “even so the Son gives life to whom he wishes.” “For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.” “And as many as were ordained to eternal life believed.” “Blessed is the man whom thou choosest, and causest to approach unto thee...” “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.” 1 Cor. 1:30 NAS; Col. 2:13 NIV; John 6:28, 29; 15:5; 1 Peter 1:3 NAS; John 8:36; 5:21 NAS; Phil. 2:13; Acts 13:48; Psalms 65:4; 1Thes. 1:4

One more word that should be at least briefly considered is the word ALL. A word that is used by some without some serious consideration. Without going into a lengthy discussion, let us leave it to the reader's honesty to take God's word and see for himself how limited that little word ALL can be or how inclusive, depending on that which God has under consideration.

Webster says, that the word ALL means:

“The whole; the total; the actual aggregate of particulars or persons or those involved in any *particular consideration*.” etc.

What did John mean when he wrote: “The whole world” in 1 John 2:2?

In 1 John 2:2 it states that [Christ] is the *propitiation* for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world.” He meant: all without distinction, not all without exception, in other words, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.--- [cf. Rom. 9:22-24]. That “the world” in John 3:16 refers to the world of believers, (God's elect), in contradistinction from “the world of the ungodly” in 2 Peter 2:5), is unequivocally established.

Peter states in 2 Peter 2:12 : “But these as natural brute beasts, made to be taken and destroyed,...” (KJV). Contrast this with 1 Peter 1:3 where he states: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has *caused* us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead...” (NASB).

Does Scripture teach that Christ's Death was for each and every single individual in the world?

It is necessary to understand that if Christ died for ALL without exception, especially when the word *propitiation* is used in the context, and if this was the case, then there would be no one in hell today and every person who ever lived would have the wrath of God obliterated from them. This is unscriptural and contradicts the entirety of Scripture. Thus we must be careful that we do not take the attitude of some which say without consideration “ALL means all and that is the end of the matter.”

Compare the desire of God for people to “be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth” (in 1 Timothy 2 :4) with the gift of God that people “repent unto a knowledge of the truth” (in 2 Timothy 2:25). These two texts show us that we must certainly distinguish between what God would like to see happen, and what he actually does will to happen, and [that] both of these things can be spoken of as God’s will. (The Pleasures of God, John Piper, p. 317)

Someone might say at this point, well, doesn’t 2 Peter 3:9 say that God does not wish that any should perish but that all should come to Repentance? The question is really, Who is the *all* in this verse referring to?

As a comprehensive whole, and especially when read in context, the entire book of 2 Peter is written directly to the “Beloved”, that is, “to them that have obtained like precious faith” vs. 1:1. The beginning of chapter 3 verse 1 states: “This second epistle, beloved, I now write unto you; in both which I stir up your pure minds.....” emphasizing that the entire context of this chapter is especially and directly to the “Beloved.” The key to this answer is found right in verse 3:9 itself with the specific use of the term “*to us-ward*” referring to the verse directly before it in vs. 3:8, which is the “Beloved.” Therefore the term *to us-ward* in vs. 3:9 confirms that this is *not* for each and every person in the world, but for the elect only (1 Peter 1:1-5; 2:11; 3:12), that is, the “Beloved.” It could be paraphrased like this:

Vs. 2 Peter 3:8; “But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing,

Vs. 2 Peter 3:9 “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise as some men count slackness, but is longsuffering *to us-ward* [The Beloved], not willing that any [of The Beloved] should perish, but that all [of The Beloved] should come to repentance.”

It is important to understand that Scripture affirms a sharp distinction in the predestination of men by God, that is, that *some* men “were appointed to stumble at the word” (1Peter 2:8), and “as natural brute beasts made to be taken and destroyed” (2 Peter 2:12) “were ordained to condemnation” (Jude 4), while in direct contrast *some_others* were “chosen to salvation” (2 Thess. 2:13) and “ordained to eternal life” (Acts 13:48; 1 Peter 2:9).

Space forbids in this paper to embark here on a demonstration that the themes of sin, propitiation and pardon are the basic structural features of the New Testament gospel. But if an honest student of Scripture will thoughtfully go over Romans 1-5, Galatians 3, Ephesians 1-2, Hebrews 8-10, 1 John 1-3, and the sermons in Acts, he will find that there is really no room for doubt on this point. If a query is raised on the grounds that the *word* “propitiation” appears in the New Testament only four times, the reply must be that the *thought* of propitiation appears constantly. Similarly, when you are on top of the truth of propitiation, you can see the entire Bible in perspective, and you are in a position to take the measure of vital matters which cannot be properly grasped in any other terms.

Therefore, unless we insist on the reality of that spiritual separation from God, and the *totally* disastrous effect that it had on the entire human race that occurred in the FALL of Adam, we shall never be able properly to appreciate our real condition or our desperate need of a redeemer. Consider again what “holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost”.....

Romans 3:25 teaches: Christ by the shedding of His blood, turned away God's wrath.

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J.I Packer gives us a solemn reminder:

"The word "Propitiation" is the central heart of the Gospel; in the faith of the New Testament it is central. The love of God, the taking of human form by the Son, the meaning of the cross, Christ's heavenly intercession, the way of salvation----all are to be explained in terms of it as the passages quoted show and any explanation from which the thought of propitiation is missing will be incomplete, and indeed actually misleading, by New Testament standards. In saying this, we swim against the stream of much modern teaching and condemn at a stroke the views of a great number of distinguished church leaders today, but we cannot help that. Paul wrote, "even if we or an angel from heaven"- let alone, a minister, bishop, college lecturer, university professor, or noted author, - "should preach a Gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" ("accursed," KJV and RSV; "outcast," NEB; "damned," Phillips-Gal. 1:8) and a Gospel without PROPITIATION at it's heart is another Gospel than that which Paul preached." (Knowing God--- J.I. Packer, p. 180-199)

Jerry Bridges makes a clear point on this matter:

"It is difficult for us to think about the wrath of God. We prefer to concentrate on His love because this is far more congenial to our thinking. Another reason is we tend to view wrath in human terms. We think of it as strong and sometimes violent anger or fury. We envision a wrathful person as being out of control with his or her emotions.

Though we should never think of God's wrath as uncontrolled, violent passion, the Bible does use strong words to describe it---such as *anger*, *fury*, and *indignation*. Jeremiah 32:37 speaks of His "furious anger and great wrath." In Revelation 19:15 we see Jesus treading "the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty." To avoid a comparison to human wrath, God's wrath has been defined as His settled determination to punish sin. It is more than that; it's a determination to punish sin with a vengeance. Unrepentant people are said to be "storing up wrath [against] themselves for the day of God's wrath, when His righteous judgment will be revealed" (Romans 2:5). We know that God stores up goodness for those [the Regenerated] who *fear* Him (Proverbs 14:27), but the unrepentant stores up wrath for themselves.

We were all born "by nature objects of wrath"(Ephesians 2:3) because we all came into this world under the condemnation of Adam's sin (Romans 5:12, 18-19). The pretty newborn baby girl weighing seven pounds six ounces and measuring eighteen inches long comes into the world an object of God's wrath---not because of her own sin, but because of her identity with Adam in his. All of us then aggravate our condition by daily adding to it our own personal sin, which by its nature would provoke God's wrath if we were not in Christ." (The Joy of Fearing God, Jerry Bridges p. 103)

“Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour and another unto dishonour?

What if God, willing to show his *wrath*, and to make his power known, endured with much longsuffering the vessels of *wrath* fitted to destruction:

And that he might make known the riches of his glory on the vessels of mercy, which he had afore prepared unto glory,

Even us, whom he hath called, not of the Jews only, but also of the Gentiles.

For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.---Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth.---So then it is not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy.”

Romans 9:21-24; 15, 18, 16

Teachings such as the 4 Spiritual laws tract teaches, or that God loves everyone and loves the sinner but *just* hates the sin is unscriptural and is found sadly only in pamphlets or in the back of tracts and not found in the Bible. Psalms 5:5 and 7:11 state just the opposite:

“The foolish shall not stand in thy sight: thou *hatest* all workers of iniquity.

“.....and God is *angry* with the wicked *everyday*.”

Therefore, unless we insist on the reality of that spiritual separation from God, and the totally disastrous effect that it had on the entire human race that occurred in the FALL of Adam, we shall never be able properly to appreciate our real condition or our desperate need of a redeemer. The sobering truth is: “If we get the Fall wrong, we get it all wrong.”

Now, I ask you, with this in mind, is Reconciliation universal? Is the Atonement universal? Is Propitiation universal? Is there anybody in hell? Are the people in hell who John described in the book of Revelation as blaspheming and cursing God, reconciled to God? Are the men who are in hell today reconciled to God; that is, is Christ the Propitiation (Reconciliation) for those men in hell today, at this moment? This is a most critical issue with which serious and honest Bible students have to deal.*Remember the FALL.* -----“*If you’re wrong about the Fall, you’ll be wrong about it all.*”

“But by HIS doing you are in Christ Jesus”.....when you were *dead* in your sins and and in the uncircumcision of your sinful nature, God made you *alive* with Christ.”

.....“even so the Son gives life to whom he wishes.”

1 Corinthians 1:30 NASB; Colossians 2:13 NIV; John 5:21 NASB

*** Whenever there is sin or false teaching in the church you belong to, you should always try to correct it first as outlined in the word of God, before you consider leaving that church.**