

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

**PayPal**

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *Vox Evangelica* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_vox\\_evangelica.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_vox_evangelica.php)

## ***The Propitiatory Element in the Atonement***\*

**J. Clement Connell**

[p.28]

By 'propitiation' we mean that element of the work of Christ directed towards God by which the wrath and condemnation of God resting on guilty man is removed and the way is opened for God to receive man into fellowship with Himself. If to propitiate means to appease, to pacify, to persuade a person to be gracious, then it would seem that it is quite out of place to speak of propitiating God, who is essentially and always gracious. It is with such a conclusion in mind that many Biblical scholars today decline to use the term propitiation in relation to the God who is known as the gracious Father of Jesus Christ, and the most they will concede is to speak of expiation. Thus for example, wherever the RV has 'propitiation' the RSV substitutes the word 'expiation'. But in expiation man's sin is the object of the action, whereas in propitiation God Himself is the object. Something takes place in relation to God, which makes it possible for Him to remove His sentence of judgment against men and to receive them into fellowship with Himself. Sin is expiated, but God is propitiated.

It is the purpose of this article to show that the fact of propitiation is essential to the Biblical revelation of the atoning work of Christ, and that a fuller appreciation of the character of both God and man, of Divine holiness and human sin, as presented in the Scriptures should remove any fear that we cast a slur upon God's person by asserting that He has been propitiated.

Aversion to the concept of propitiation is due partly to confusing the Biblical presentation of it with the crude ideas current among the pagans. Indeed, if the same meaning of the word were to be retained in the context of the Bible as in pagan mythology, then there would be good reason for finding some alternative explanation of its use in Scripture. But the true God is infinitely different from the deities of the heathen. They are neither just nor gracious, their anger is arbitrary and capricious, and their favours may be purchased at man's expense. It is far different to buy off the spite of a self-centred heathen god and to plead with him to show kindness, than for the Holy One in grace to give His Son to atone for the sins of men and so to avert His righteous judgments against them. Any words and concepts used in relation to a person take a distinctive connotation according to the nature of the person to whom they refer. Propitiation in relation to the one true God is quite distinct from propitiation in relation to the supposed deities projected from man's warped imagination.

### **I. GOD: THE HOLY SOVEREIGN**

a. *Not only Holy Father.* Basic to all study of the ways of God is the fact

[p.29]

that He is the Holy Sovereign. In an age when theologians were reducing the majesty of God to the level of a benevolent administrator, R. T. Forsyth called the Church back to the awareness of God's holiness. Central to his theology is the title, 'Holy Father', but in considering God's relation to mankind as a whole 'Holy Lord' or 'Holy Sovereign' is to be preferred. Jesus, it is true, addressed God in His prayer as 'Holy Father' (John xvii. 11), but

---

\* This article is an adaptation of the Annual Public Lecture of the College, 1959.

the prayer concerned Himself alone and those who believed on God through Him. He never spoke of God exercising the Father relationship towards any but to Himself and to those who through Him become God's children, but on the other hand the keynote of His *public* preaching was the Kingdom of God, e.g. in Mark i. 14, 15 (RV), 'Now after that John was delivered up, Jesus came into Galilee, preaching the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye and believe in the gospel.' His first call, therefore, was not to trust in the Father's love, but to repent before God who was establishing His kingdom. These facts need to be stressed in view of their relevance to propitiation. A man can call God his Father only because propitiation has been made for the sin which he has committed against God as his Sovereign. Once he is thus reconciled to God through propitiation he stands within the son-Father relationship, in which there is still a place for the Father's chastisement and the son's repentance for sins thereafter committed, but not a place for propitiation which has already been completed.<sup>1</sup>

It is therefore only after we have been reconciled to God and adopted into His family that we can rightly regard Him as our Father. To this some may object that the father of the parable (Luke xv) still regarded the prodigal as his son, even before the prodigal returned and confessed his sin, but to others the parable appears to be consistent with the other two of the trilogy and with the rest of Scripture, only if we regard it as designed to illustrate the grace of God, and not to present the theology of the Fatherhood of God. Against this view Vincent Taylor maintains that 'it is just because God is our Father while we are sinners, and because we are His sons, though disobedient, that the rich paternal and filial relationships described in the New Testament, and exemplified in present Christian experience, are possible.'<sup>2</sup> He agrees that, 'in the deepest sense of the word God cannot be our Father until we become His sons.' 'But', he continues, 'we are under no necessity to suppose that His Fatherhood depends on our faith and that His sons are created *ex nihilo*.'<sup>3</sup> To this one may reply that however far the logic of philosophy may declare that Fatherhood in God is a potential relationship made actual when men turn to Him in repentant faith, the fact remains that Scripture ascribes fatherhood only to God's relation to Christ and to His redeemed: to the rest, while He loves them none the less, He stands as the sovereign Judge.

It is true, as P. T. Forsyth repeatedly emphasizes, that God's holiness requires judgment, even when He is regarded as the Father, but to make 'Holy Father' the supreme title of God may obscure both His sovereignty and His grace, for we naturally expect mercy from a father, but a judge is not obliged to be gracious. God's grace is the grace of the sovereign Judge. Since it is unmerited, His grace stands out in greater contrast with what we deserve and expect from One in such a position. In a human family, a rebellious son may be restored simply by the father's welcome to his penitent child, but more than

[p.30]

this is needed for those who would be restored to *God*.<sup>4</sup> This does not leave out of account the fact that in 1 John ii. 1, 2 it is 'with the Father' that Jesus Christ the righteous is declared to be

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. H. Montefiore, *Journal of New Testament Studies*, iii., 1956, 41.

<sup>2</sup> V. Taylor, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 1956, 94.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. D. L. Edwards, *God's Cross in our World*, 1963, 91, who, when discussing the idea of Christ's death as reconciling the Father to us, states, 'Such pictures portray the Eternal as morally inferior to any human father, who reaches the modest standard of self-control and sympathetic understanding advocated in contemporary ethics.'

our advocate and the propitiation for our sins, but, as Westcott points out in his comment on this verse, 'The ideas of "advocacy" and "propitiation" are distinct, and yet in close connection. The latter furnishes the basis of the former: the latter is universal, while the former, so far as it is revealed, is exercised for believers.'<sup>5</sup> Jesus Christ the righteous made propitiation for the sins of the whole world, when it was still under the condemnation of God. On the basis of that propitiatory action, once accomplished by Him, those who believe are brought into fellowship with the Father (cf. 1 John i. 3) and on the basis of that same propitiation Jesus Christ is the advocate with the Father for those who are now God's children, when they fall into sin.

b. *The Sovereign God as Judge.* As the holy and sovereign Creator, God must maintain the principles of righteousness consistent with the character of His own being, and with the right ordering of the universe which He has created. In the exercise of this sovereignty He must judge sinful persons, and in this judgment two factors are involved.

(i.) *Condemnation and Penalty.* Firstly, God must condemn them for their violation of the law of righteousness and require the penalty which is the just retribution upon the guilty. Reluctant as many have been to accept the fact of retribution in God's punishment of sin, it cannot be avoided without minimizing the justice of God. To make the punishment of sin anything other than the just retribution which is the sinner's due, not only detracts from the sovereignty of God, against whom man has rebelled, but also is unfair to the man himself, for, as R. W. Dale has shown, 'He must deserve to be punished, or the law has no right to punish him.... The only conception of punishment which satisfies our strongest and most definite moral convictions, and which corresponds to the place it occupies both in the organization of society and in the moral order of the universe, is that which represents it as pain and loss inflicted for the violation of a law. If the law is a righteous law, if the severity of the penalty is not out of proportion to the magnitude of the offence, the punishment is just, the offender deserves whatever he suffers.'<sup>6</sup> This view is endorsed by H. Wheeler Robinson: 'The principle of retribution is part of the moral structure of the universe.... The fundamental justification for penal law is desert not philanthropy.'<sup>7</sup>

H. R. Mackintosh appears to emphasize overmuch the corrective and disciplinary value of punishment when he writes, 'All sins are punished by God, and they are punished with a view to their being forgiven. The punishment is an essential in the very grace that effects reconciliation at its own cost.'<sup>8</sup> Moreover, 'To impute vindictive fury to God is pagan: to believe that His love corrects our faults by pain is part of Christianity.'<sup>9</sup> Yet he rightly maintains that punishment is invalid if it is not deserved 'if we grant the validity of the conception of the Divine pardon, we must own that the pardon was necessary, and that the pardoned sin was rightly the object of condemnation. It is condemnable in and by itself.'<sup>10</sup> He

---

<sup>5</sup> B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 1902, 44.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Dale, *The Atonement*, 1892, 383.

<sup>7</sup> H. W. Robinson, *Redemption and Revelation*, 1942, 268.

<sup>8</sup> H. R. Mackintosh, *The Christian Experience of Forgiveness*, 1941, 164.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 170; cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, English translation, 1960, 259, 'This connection between God's anger and human sin is a standard element in the religious beliefs of all civilized peoples among whom the deity is worshipped as the guardian of justice and keeper of the laws.... Israel's experience of the divine wrath was associated increasingly with the idea of offence against the covenant or its Creator.... God's wrath is retribution for the sins men have committed.'

continues that if the pardon is not accepted, then the punishment becomes eternal separation from fellowship with God.<sup>11</sup>

God truly loves the very sinner whom He condemns, but the condemnation

[p.31]

is not itself an activity of love, as Mackintosh seems to suggest. It is not the reaction of pure love towards the evil in the loved one, nor is it love's instrument to bring the loved one back to itself. God condemns the sinner because sin deserves to be condemned. When David cried, 'Against Thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest' (Psa. li. 4), he was acknowledging God's absolute sovereign right to condemn this sin against Himself. He remembered God's love, but did not regard it as the source of the judgment and punishment which he knew to be his desert: God's love was the source of the mercy upon which he cast himself as the only hope of deliverance from the destruction he deserved.

The first factor, then, in God's judgment of men is the absolute justice of the penalty imposed on them for their violation of the Divine law of righteousness.

(ii.) *The Personal Quality of the Divine Law and Wrath.* The second factor in God's judgment is that God is Himself not only the representative of the law, as is the judge in a human court, but the very Person from whom the law emanates, of whose being it is the expression, and against whom the lawbreakers rebel. The 'Eternal Law of Righteousness', to use R. W. Dale's phrase, is essentially bound up with the Person of the Holy Sovereign. It is not an impersonal law external to Him, a kind of fate to which He must of necessity conform, for He is the Creator of all Law and Sovereign over all things; nor is this 'Law of Righteousness' an arbitrary fabrication of His Will, as if to say that had God commanded us to tell lies, then lying would be right. Whatever is right is right, both because God commands it and because it conforms to and expresses His own holy character.<sup>12</sup> Sin, therefore, is not the breach of an impersonal law, nor is it the waywardness of a child grieving his loving father. Sin is violation of the 'Eternal Law of Righteousness', in rebellion against the Person of the Holy Sovereign. Sin is personal because it is an attitude of rebellion harboured by persons against the Person. Hence the judgment which He pronounces upon the guilty must take the personal form which is described in Scripture as *wrath*.

It is in keeping with the attitude which regards benevolence as the supreme attribute of God that many have followed the theological fashion which refuses to allow that God directs His wrath against men. C. H. Dodd sums up this view in his commentary on Romans, 'In the long run we cannot think with full consistency of God in terms of the highest ideals of human personality, and yet attribute to Him the irrational passion of anger.'<sup>13</sup> This betrays a misunderstanding of the meaning of anger remarkable in so careful a scholar as C. H. Dodd. Human anger may be irrational passion, but even in men it is by no means always the outburst of uncontrolled feeling. Vincent Taylor intimates that by *wrath* Paul means no passionate

---

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*, 361 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. E. F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law*, 1964, 62 ff. on law as a transcript of the holiness of God.

<sup>13</sup> *Moffatt N. T. Commentary, Romans*, 1932, 24.

irrational anger, but the judgment which falls upon sin in the moral world over which God rules.<sup>14</sup>

In this definition account is taken of the union of morality and law, in which the Divine order is superior to the human, for in the latter legality and morality may be divorced. In a case in the Queen's Bench Division where damages were awarded against a firm whose negligence was judged to be the cause of the death of three men, the Judge said that although in law the defendants were to blame for the deaths of the three men, 'very different considerations arise in

[p.32]

relation to moral obligations.' 'Mr. Hopkins was a decent and truthful man. It would be wrong for him to go through life weighed down by the thought that he is morally as well as legally responsible.'<sup>15</sup> The impersonal character of human legality is possibly a reason why theologians have rejected the concept of legality in the Divine order, but one must remember that to break God's law involves moral responsibility as well as legal, legal as well as moral. Neither element must be disregarded.

Vincent Taylor's definition of the wrath of God is, therefore, more accurate than that of C. H. Dodd who says that 'Paul retains the concept of "the wrath of God" not to describe the attitude of God to man, but to describe the inevitable process of cause and effect in a moral universe.'<sup>16</sup> Dodd allows for the moral character of the universe, but denies the personal character of God's attitude to sin. Vincent Taylor's phrase, 'the judgment which falls upon sin in the moral world over which God rules' appreciates more than that of Dodd the direct activity of God in judgment, but still comes short of realizing the fully personal quality of the wrath of God. For God's wrath expresses not only His verdict of judgment but also His personal attitude, and it is directed not only against sin but also against the sinner. Granted that statements are found in Scripture where God hates the sin itself, e.g. Jeremiah xlv. 4, 'Oh, do not this abominable thing that I hate', but even so it is not sin in the abstract which is the object of God's hatred, but rather sin in association with the persons who commit it. Moreover the word 'wrath' or 'fury' is used, not in relation to the sins, but only to the sinners. Wrath expresses relationship and relationship concerns persons. H. R. Mackintosh has made this clear, 'To be angry with a thing—and sin abstracted from sinner is no more—ranks as a moral absurdity. The man who spitefully kicks the stool over which he has tripped in the dark has for the moment become irrational. Anger, the anger of moral love, can only be directed upon moral beings. If, therefore, it is permissible to speak of God's wrath, it is with sinners—with ourselves when we defy love—that His wrath has to do.'<sup>17</sup>

D. E. H. Whitely has examined the use of the word ὀργή (wrath) in the LXX and in Paul, to discover whether the New Testament presents the wrath of God as an *affectus* (personal feeling) or an *effectus* (impersonal effect). He finds that ὀργή frequently has the sense of

---

<sup>14</sup> V. Taylor, *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 1945, 62; cf. G. Stählin, *Bible Key Words from Kittel's Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament: Wrath*, 1964, 82. 'The meaning of ὀργή can be defined more exactly by observing the terms with which it is used together or in contrast in the NT. The fact that it stands beside ἐκδίκησις (Luke xxi. 22; Rom. ii. 5) and διακρισία (Rom. ii. 5) excludes the idea of unbridled and therefore unjust vengeance when it is applied to God.'

<sup>15</sup> Reported in *The Daily Telegraph* 22 July, 1958.

<sup>16</sup> *Op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, 166.

'retribution', whether suffered in the present time or at the last judgment, and concludes his survey: 'The wrath of God, then, His *orgē* is an *effectus* which is ultimately under the control of an *affectus*, and this *affectus* is His love'. By this he means that 'the reality referred to, the wrath of God, is an impersonal *effectus* due to a personal God.'<sup>18</sup>

Mackintosh, like P. T. Forsyth,<sup>19</sup> stresses the personal activity of God in His wrath, while Whitely regards the wrath itself as an *effectus*, but all three present it as the anger of moral love. Yet can it truly be said that God's wrath arises from His love? We must, of course, hold fast to the truth that God loves the sinner even while He is angry with him, without allowing the wrath to minimize the love in the least; just as Mackintosh asserts that, 'in God indignant antagonism to the sinner and his ways may co-exist with love.'<sup>20</sup> Yet he seems to fall into the error that love is the ruling element in God's character, in the sense that every other attitude is derived from His love, and therefore that it is our defiance of His love that provokes His wrath.

The statement of J. Fichter that 'God's wrath springs out of his love and

[p.32]

compassion'<sup>21</sup> cannot be substantiated. Many examples are given by him from the Old Testament which show a definite association between the love, jealousy and wrath of God, but none of these proves that God's love is the source of His wrath. The generous breadth of God's gracious care and provision for His people intensifies the enormity of their sin in turning against Him, and therefore brings down upon them the greater severity of His wrath, as in Amos iii. 1, 2. Eichrodt, then, may well be correct in saying, 'It is Yahweh's wounded, holy love which arouses his wrath',<sup>22</sup> but to say with Fichter, 'God's wrath springs out of his love and compassion' is to confuse retribution with correction. A father chastens his son to correct him (cf. Heb. xii. 5-ii) and displays true anger in so doing, but God in His wrath expresses His judgments against those who violate His sovereignty. G. Stählin discusses the essential connection between wrath and justice and paraphrases the argument of Rom. iii. 4-6 thus, 'When a man knows himself to be a sinner who deserves to receive from God nothing but wrath, from the final judgment nothing but condemnation, he sees that God's judgment is raised high above all questionings; for he recognizes that God's wrath, being his repugnance against unrighteousness is simply an expression of his righteousness.'<sup>23</sup>

Love, then, is consistent and co-existent with wrath, but this does not require that wrath should be dependent on love. God's anger is directed against the whole personality of men, and that, not because He loves them (and love them He does), but because He is their Holy Sovereign, against whom they rebel. In breaking His laws they display their rejection of the Lawgiver; the laws are the expression of the sovereign majesty of the living God their Creator, King and Judge.

---

<sup>18</sup> D. E. H Whitely, *The Theology of St. Paul*, 1964, 72.

<sup>19</sup> P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ*, 1938, 243. In this addendum (pp. 239-245) the author presents a full and penetrating discussion of the personal quality of God's wrath, but writes, 'He can be really angry only with those He loves' (243).

<sup>20</sup> *Op. cit.*, 163.

<sup>21</sup> J. Fichter, *Bible Key Words*, *op. cit.*, 39 f.

<sup>22</sup> *Op. cit.*, 259.

<sup>23</sup> G. Stählin, *Bible Key Words*, *op. cit.*, 91.

## II. PROPITIATION: GOD'S PROVISION TO AVERT HIS JUST WRATH

Neither of these two factors which we have considered-neither the justice of the penalty nor the personal quality of God's wrath-implies that God is at all reluctant to receive men into fellowship with Himself. God is self-sufficient and was under no obligation to create man. The very fact that He did so is proof of His loving intentions towards man, and the history of His relations with the stiff-necked and rebellious nation of Israel illustrates the unfailing purpose of His love, that He should be their God and that they should be His people. The answer to the question how this God of judgment and of wrath can yet receive men into the intimate fellowship of His family lies in the work of propitiation, for propitiation is 'breaking down the barrier which sin interposes between God and man and enabling God to enter again into fellowship with him'.<sup>24</sup> Let it be emphasized that it is God Himself who makes the propitiation. It is not an act on the part of man calculated to make God willing to forgive, but an act on the part of God making it possible for Him to forgive in a way consistent with right personal relations between the holy Sovereign and the sinful subject.<sup>25</sup>

Such a statement is authorized by Romans iii. 19-26. The other New Testament passages in which the concept of making propitiation towards God occurs are consistent with the doctrine set out in fuller detail in Romans. These are

[p.34]

1 John ii. 2; iv. 10; Hebrews ii. 17 (RV) and Luke xviii. 13 where the cry of the publican, 'be merciful to me', is literally 'be propitiated to me'.

C. H. Dodd's careful study of the use throughout the Old and New Testament of the word group in which 'propitiation' is found, comes to the conclusion that the words cannot be used of God as their object. According to his interpretation we must not speak of propitiating God, but rather of God as the subject providing expiation for sin, forgiving sin; thus the biblical sense of the verb is 'to perform an act whereby guilt or defilement is removed;... but as religious thought advanced it came to be felt that, where the defilement was moral, God alone could annul it; and so the same verb is used with God as subject in the sense of to forgive'.<sup>26</sup> Thus, according to Dodd<sup>27</sup> Christ broke through the barriers set up by sin, and in this sense died for sin, not that anything done by Christ altered God's own relation towards men, but His coming represents the crucial phase of God's self-revealing activity in all history. This seems to mean that God has always been showing Himself as one who is reaching out to man, seeking to break through the barriers of man's sin, and that this movement towards man finds its focus and consummation in Christ crucified. There is no hint here of satisfying the righteousness of God, which man has violated. It is this view of the subject which has been adopted by so many of the present generation of scholars and has led the translators of the RSV to render every New Testament instance of the word as 'expiation' instead of 'propitiation'.

---

<sup>24</sup> S. R. Driver, *Hastings' Dictionary of the Bible* s.v. 'Propitiation'.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Stählin, *op. cit.*, 133, 'by Jesus' death deliverance from the wrath to come is guaranteed and therefore freedom from the present wrath is granted as well.... In him alone can we view as one whole the scandalizing tension between God's wrath and his love.'

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.*, 54.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.



On the other hand, Leon Morris has investigated the usage of the propitiation word group with equal care and, we suggest, with more consideration of the context in which each instance of the word occurs than does C. H. Dodd. From a thorough study of the usage of the word 'propitiation' little, if anything, could be added to Leon Morris's work in support of the conclusion that by propitiation we mean the averting of the just wrath of God against sinful man. In so far as the means of propitiation is provided by God Himself, not only is there no opposition between the concepts of propitiation and Divine Love, but rather the fact of propitiation proves God's love to man to be even greater than it would be were there no such requirement.<sup>28</sup> It was in order to demonstrate God's love that John wrote in his epistle, 'Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins.' (1 John iv. 10.)

### III. THE MEANS OF PROPITIATION: THE SACRIFICE OF JESUS CHRIST

When it is borne in mind that propitiation is required because God is the Sovereign Creator, the upholder of all right, who is both the Judge and Lover of guilty mankind, the means of propitiation is seen to be appropriate to such a God. The means which God provided is none other than 'Christ Jesus: whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, by his blood'. (Rom. iii. 24, 25, RV.) Inasmuch as the means of propitiation is the Person of Jesus Christ, God's Son, set forth in grace, it is appropriate to God's love. Inasmuch as the propitiation is effected 'by his blood', i.e. the sacrifice of Himself, it is appropriate to God's sovereign justice; and since it is received only through faith, it is appropriate to the quality of personality which still characterizes man, though he be guilty before God.

[p.35]

a. *Sacrifice Defined.* By the word 'sacrifice', by which we interpret the phrase 'by his blood' in Romans iii. 25, we mean that Jesus Christ offered Himself in that death in which He endured the penalty, the judgment of God upon sin, thereby removing the penalty from those to whom it is otherwise due. Sacrifice, as the bearing of the penalty due to another, is exemplified in the offerings, especially the sin offering, ordained under the Old Covenant.

b. *Alternative Views find no room for Propitiation:* (i.) Sacrifice not merely the gift of a pure life to God. Alternative views of the meaning of sacrifice frequently regard it as a gift presented to God, an interpretation which is often combined with the theory that the word 'blood' refers not to the death of the sacrificial offering, but to the release of its life. That this theory leaves no room for true propitiation will be seen from the expositions of Bishop Westcott, the chief exponent of the theory. The death of Christ, being the means by which His life blood is released, comes then to be no atoning sacrifice rendered to God in His justice, but the imparting of life to men to overcome their sin and thus to bring them to God. He writes, 'By dying on the Cross He made His life—His blood—available for all who believe in Him. The gift of God is eternal, divine, life 'and this life is in His Son' (1 John v. 11 ff.). The possession of such life is the destruction of past sin, and safety from sin to come (1 John iii. 9).'<sup>29</sup> In keeping with this view of Christ's death is Bishop Westcott's interpretation of ἰλασμός, propitiation, as something which is related not to God but to the sinner; 'the ἰλασμός, when it is applied to the sinner, so to speak, neutralizes the sin.... The believer being united with Christ enjoys the quickening, purifying, action of Christ's "blood", of the virtue

---

<sup>28</sup> L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, 1955, 183.

<sup>29</sup> *Op. cit.*, 40.

of His Life and Death, of His Life made available to men through Death.'<sup>30</sup> So propitiation is altered to purgation, which is surely an unjustifiable inversion of the meaning, especially since Scripture has also the concept of purgation and the appropriate terms for it, καθαρισμός and καθαρίζω.

Westcott's interpretation of 'The Blood' has determined the direction of several modern theories of sacrifice, notably that of Vincent Taylor, but A. M. Stibbs, in *The Meaning of the word 'Blood' in Scripture*,<sup>31</sup> demonstrates by a thorough examination of its Scriptural usage that 'The Blood' means atoning death, and Wheeler Robinson writes, 'The sin-offering was largely concerned with the removal of ritual offences by the peculiar manipulation of the blood and no more expressed the idea of the surrendered life than does the burnt offering, whilst the burnt offering itself is the completest form of gift to God and has no necessary suggestion of a life "dedicated and transformed".'<sup>32</sup>

(ii.) *Sacrifice as the Bearing not merely of Suffering, but of Penalty.* Yet Wheeler Robinson regards the practice of sacrifice as giving meaning to the death of Christ mainly as an expression of the giving of oneself to God. 'Hebrew sacrifices are too complex in origin to be explained by a single theory; if they had to be, the simple idea of a gift expressing homage is probably more fundamental in Hebrew thought.... The death of Christ on the Cross was the costliest of gifts to His Father, and so far as we are one with Him by faith... it is our gift too, a gift we could never have made without Him... the whole life of the offerer gives meaning to the death, and only as we are led to share that life can we claim to share in the offering of the death.'<sup>33</sup> For Wheeler Robinson, the rationale of the Old Testament sacrifices 'can be found in the actuality of the

[p.36]

event, the accomplishment of a tiny fragment of history in the miniature world of the offerer.'<sup>34</sup> Thus in the instance of the sacrifice of Christ He is fulfilling in actuality what has always been in the mind and purpose of God. The value of His self-offering lay in His obedience and consecration to the Father's purpose. The purpose thus fulfilled is to bear the suffering which springs from man's guilt. Wheeler Robinson denies that there is any hint of transactionalism between Christ and God, as though God needed to be reconciled by the endurance of a penalty, the payment of a ransom, the offering of a sacrifice on the part of Christ.<sup>35</sup>

We should respect and commend this scholar's reverent attempt to penetrate beneath the superficial interpretations of the atonement which so often mar our understanding of the personal quality of this infinite act of grace; but while he finely expresses the fact of God's personal endurance of suffering, rejecting all thoughts of an impassible God, he still fails to appreciate the fact that sinners are guilty, not only because they cause *suffering* to the One against whom they sin, but because they oppose themselves to the Holy Sovereign, the Divine Person in whom is invested all right and law. Therefore Wheeler Robinson's view leaves no place for propitiation. To him the Cross is the means by which Christ transformed the sinner's

---

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>31</sup> Tyndale Press, 1948 [[http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/blood\\_stibbs.pdf](http://www.theologicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/blood_stibbs.pdf)].

<sup>32</sup> *Op. cit.*, 256.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

guilt by willingly bearing the suffering. 'In the high and holy place, as in the Cross below sin makes its impact as suffering.... The guilt of man actually consists in causing this suffering in the Holy One... His loving acceptance of it transforms it into grace, and removes the final obstacle to forgiveness.'<sup>36</sup> We may perhaps be pardoned if we fail to see any true meaning in this last sentence. Grace may, indeed, bear suffering, but how can suffering become grace? The most that it can signify is that by lovingly accepting the suffering caused to Him by sin, God shows how gracious He is towards the guilty and that He is ready to accept him without requiring any penalty.

We also would reject, with as much emphasis as Wheeler Robinson, any suggestion of mere transactionalism, any bare settlement of the requirements of justice by an external, almost impersonal act, yet it must be affirmed that the Lord did of His own free and loving will endure the penalty by which alone there could be any reconciliation between God and man. The guilt which estranges man from God, which bars him from all fellowship with God, lies not only in the suffering which he causes to God, but in the violation of God's sovereign law.

It was therefore by the sacrifice of Himself that Jesus Christ, Himself God, became the propitiation for our sins, bearing the guilt of them, and God's judgment against them, and thus averting the wrath of God against sinners, so that He who loves them eternally might justly bring them back into fellowship with Himself. The view expressed by Wheeler Robinson, considered above, sees in that sacrifice the act of God, but this theory appears to be inadequate because it does not make enough of the effect of man's guilt. In this view guilt causes suffering to God, but creates no judicial estrangement between man and God.

(iii.) *Christ more than Man's Sacrificial Representative; Propitiation not a manward work.* Another view of Christ's sacrifice which is widely accepted today, held, e.g. by Vincent Taylor, seems even less satisfactory in that it regards

[p.36]

that sacrifice as in effect an act, not so much of God as of man. This may seem an unfair estimate of the thought of this great scholar, who would be himself the first to declare that the sacrifice of Christ was indeed an act of God. He writes, for example, 'The statement of 2 Corinthians v. 19, that in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, must indicate a process only in the sense that the divine act in the Cross becomes effectual successively... a decisive act of God in Christ'.<sup>37</sup> Yet is it an unfair interpretation of Vincent Taylor's teaching to say that in effect this sacrifice is man's act because in this view it is as man's representative, not substitute, that Christ offered Himself? There is, indeed, a representative aspect of Christ's saving activity, as is clear from Romans v. 12-21, Hebrews ii. 5-18, to name but two examples, but in Vincent Taylor's theory representation is the main, if not the whole, element in Christ's work, for that work becomes complete only so far as men make it their own. Thus he writes in reference to the problem of the atonement, 'There is good reason to think that the best solution of the problem is one which sees in God's redemptive activity in Christ the perfect revelation and embodiment of the highest ethical values, of love, righteousness, and truth; an affirmation made in the name of mankind, which individual men, through faith, can re-affirm and make their own, thus finding in it the avenue of their

---

<sup>36</sup> V. Taylor, *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 1956, 76.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

approach to God.'<sup>38</sup> In another book, deprecating the use of the term 'substitutionary' and preferring the word 'representative', he says of the latter, 'Its weakness is that it does not so readily indicate a work of God in Christ for men, but rather a work of man in Christ directed Godwards.... It is apparent, therefore, that if we give preference to the word 'representative', we must use it to describe the work of God in Christ for man, which man cannot render for himself, but in which in a true sense he can participate through the power of faith.'<sup>39</sup> While Vincent Taylor, therefore, fully realizes that the work of Christ must be a work of God for man, yet it may be felt that his theory has not sufficiently satisfied this demand, and that it still presents Christ's sacrifice as rather a work of man in Christ, particularly in that it is something which is effective only in so far as man *participates* in it, which seems to mean in a sense *reproducing* it. To elaborate this element in Vincent Taylor's theology would lead too far from the present theme of propitiation. Perhaps sufficient has been said to show that the emphasis, according to his theory, is on the change wrought in man by the sacrifice of Christ, whereas in a proper understanding of the teaching of Scripture it is in *God's* relations to man that the change is wrought by Christ's atoning death—if we may use such a term as 'change' in reference to the unchanging God—and the effecting of this change is described as propitiation.

Vincent Taylor's view that it is in man that the work must be done is further illustrated by his account of the term 'enemies' in Romans v. 10; 'if, while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son'. The question, amply discussed by all writers on the epistle, is whether the word is to be taken as active or passive. Is it that man is at enmity with God, or is it that he is the object of God's enmity? Perhaps both elements are included in the term, as Sanday and Headlam suggest in their commentary,<sup>40</sup> but we must retain the faith that it does include the fact that men are the object of God's enmity. Vincent Taylor recognizes the passive as well as the active elements in the word in Romans v. 10, and declines, perhaps rightly, to use the word

[p.38]

'hostile' to describe this relationship, 'On the other hand, "hostile" limits the word too exclusively to man's attitude and suggests a colourless relationship of God to man out of harmony with His perfect holiness.'<sup>41</sup> He further asks, 'Is it psychologically possible, in a mutual relationship, for an enemy to exist without our recognizing and regarding him as such?' Even if we rise above all bitterness and every temptation to hatred, can we esteem him as friend? He sums up his interpretation by saying, 'We must conclude that in Romans v. 10 ἐχθροί describes, not only the hostile attitude of men, but also their character in the eyes of God. He sees them as enemies; and yet He reconciles them to Himself.'<sup>42</sup> This interpretation goes much farther than many in recognizing God's antagonism towards sin, especially when its author supports it by a reference to the wrath of God revealed in Romans i. 18-32; yet is there not, even here, a feeling that it is man who must be dealt with, without any satisfaction being made towards God? 'God sees them as enemies', implies that if their enmity can be overcome, He will no longer regard them as such. But from our understanding of Scripture we believe that, apart from any transformation wrought in man, a work of propitiation towards

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 1946, 87.

<sup>40</sup> *International Critical Commentary, Romans*, 1902, 129 f.

<sup>41</sup> *Op. cit.*, 74.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

God on account of man's guilt is still required. It is God's enmity, to use Paul's startling word, which needs to be removed, as well as man's.

#### **IV. EXPIATION NO SUBSTITUTE FOR PROPITIATION**

We have discussed the foregoing interpretations of crucial Scriptures to illustrate the tendency of modern theology to interpret the work of Christ as dealing with man's sin rather than as satisfying God's righteousness. Such a direction of thought is summarized in the use of the word 'expiation' instead of 'propitiation'. Expiation is concerned rather with the removal of the guilt of sin, but propitiation with the averting of the righteous condemnation of God, His wrath.

Objections may well be raised to this distinction between expiation and propitiation. It may be argued that if sin needs to be expiated, it implies that it is under the condemnation of God, and, therefore, that the expiation of sin inevitably involves the removal of God's condemnation of it, which amounts to the same action as propitiation—the averting of God's judgment against sinners. Kenneth Lee objects even to the word 'expiation' on these very grounds, 'i.e. that it bears the same connotation as 'propitiation'. 'The word expiation... still carries the idea of "making amends for, paying the penalty for, or even seeking to appease"'. These are also the ideas conveyed by the word "propitiation", and we are trying to avoid this connotation.' He maintains that if the word 'expiation' is used at all, 'we shall look upon ἰλαστήριον as meaning that God put Christ forward as "the very personification of his grace", the supreme revelation of his love, the ultimate and final declaration of himself as one who forgives on the sole basis of repentance and faith.'<sup>43</sup>

In answer to such objections we may observe the following:

a. *Expiation relates to the Status of Man rather than to the Wrath of God.* Those who advocate the term 'expiation' as against 'propitiation' think of it as the removal of sin and guilt but, as Leon Morris has pointed out, sin and guilt are not things which can be objectively removed. 'Expiation can be given an intelligible meaning only when we move into the realm of personal relations....

[p.39]

Unless we are prepared to say that in expiation all that happens is a subjective change in man it would seem that we are committed to the view that expiation has a Godward aspect so that God now treats the sinner differently from before.'<sup>44</sup> In other words, if we take into account the full personal relation between God and man, the Sovereign and the rebel, then 'expiation' cannot stand alone as a sufficient explanation of the ground of man's restoration to God. Propitiation is involved in the very idea of expiation, but the two terms are not to be identified, nor is 'expiation' to be regarded as a superior alternative to 'propitiation'. 'Expiation' expresses that part of God's action which deals with the man in his sin and guilt, whereas 'propitiation' points to God Himself, to the satisfying of all that He in His righteous judgment demands, before He can receive the man again. Advocates of the term 'expiation' alone do not allow these two facets or elements in the process. To them man alone is dealt with, while God's relation to Him remains unchanged.

---

<sup>43</sup> K. Lee, *A Study in Romans*, 1962, 75.

<sup>44</sup> *Op. cit.*, 184.

b. *Expiation without Propitiation limits God to Grace without Justice.* The defenders of the view that expiation does not imply propitiation would probably deny that its meaning is as impersonal as Leon Morris suggests. Vincent Taylor, for example, describes expiation as 'the covering, cancelling, or annulling of sins which stand between ourselves and the blessedness of fellowship with God.'<sup>45</sup> It is in his view very much a matter of personal relationship with God, but he would surely not allow that after the expiation of sins 'God now treats the sinner differently from before.' He would say that God's attitude towards the sinner and His treatment of him is always the same, that of a gracious readiness to forgive, and it is only the sinner's resistance to that grace, his reluctance or refusal to repent, which prevents him from being received into full fellowship with God. 'Only when sins are annulled are the joys of forgiveness, justification, and reconciliation with God open to us as the amazing gifts of God's reconciling grace.'<sup>46</sup> Hence Taylor strongly repudiates any suggestion of the need for God to be propitiated: 'In claiming that the work of Christ is sacrificial we are far removed from propitiatory ideas which are sub-Christian in their character and implications'.<sup>47</sup>

In a later work,<sup>48</sup> Taylor questions C. H. Dodd's view that even in 1 John ii. 2, although in the immediate context 'it might seem possible that the sense of "propitiation" is in place', the wider context is against this interpretation. Dodd prefers to understand 1 John ii. 2 as presenting Christ as a sin offering, 'a divinely supplied means of cancelling guilt and purifying the sinner'. (This interpretation seems to lie behind the NEB rendering 'He is himself the remedy for the defilement of our sins'.) Taylor, however, feels that if forgiveness and purifying were all that is involved in 1 John ii. 2, and iv. 10, then the author would have used ἀφίημι and καθαρίζω as in 1 John i. 7, 9; ii. 12. Taylor therefore approves L. Morris' statement that the Biblical writers 'used the word group to signify a removal of the Divine wrath against sin by a process in which God's own holy will had the initiative'. However, Taylor does not cancel his previous teaching, which seems still to be reflected in the sentence 'through faith in Christ, men find their sins covered, so that they no longer rest under the judgment of God'.

K. Lee, quoted earlier, is typical of those who exclude propitiation from atonement, because sin is said to be removed by God's free grace alone. No

[p.40]

other acknowledgment of His justice is required except the suffering incurred by sin and the repentance of the sinner. Taylor also categorically declares that Christ did not die in order that God might be able to forgive sins. 'The remission of sins is an act of God's free grace, whereby, in response to the cry of the contrite, He sets aside the barriers raised by our sins and makes possible our reconciliation to Himself.'<sup>49</sup>

It is not, according to this view, that repentance makes us worthy to be forgiven, but that even grace cannot forgive the impenitent without denying God's righteousness and truth. This last consideration makes the theory all the more attractive because it not only magnifies the grace of God but also, recognizes His righteousness. For this very reason, because it apparently

---

<sup>45</sup> *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, 198.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *The Names of Jesus*, 1959, 121 f.

<sup>49</sup> *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, 195.

takes into account the complete attributes of God, we need to emphasize all the more that any theory must be rejected which does not accept the doctrine of propitiation. We, no less than the advocates of the alternative theory, assert that God's grace is absolute, that it does not require to be purchased by any act of man or of God, that His grace is extended towards the sinner even while he is still under condemnation and wrath, but we maintain that because God is just, as well as gracious, He cannot remit guilt and receive the sinner into fellowship with Himself apart from the exercise of His judgment upon that guilt. We affirm that it was by grace that God gave His Son, but also that the work of the Son was to bear willingly that judgment and penalty as our substitute, lifting it from us and thus averting God's just wrath and opening the way for God, not to love us—for that He has always done—but to receive us. The death of Christ did something in relation to God as the Sovereign Judge, not only to sin and sinners. It was therefore an act of propitiation, not only of expiation.

## V. FALLACIES OF ANTI-PROPIATION THEORIES

a. *Representation instead of Substitution.* The fallacy of the theories, so widely accepted today, which reject propitiation, lies in their recognition of Jesus Christ as being man's representative, but not his substitute. These theories form variations on the theme, expounded so ably and persuasively by McCleod Campbell and Moberly, that Christ made a representative 'confession of our sins', or 'the sacrifice of supreme penitence'. P. T. Forsyth looks to God rather than to man and describes Christ's work as a confession of the holiness of God,<sup>50</sup> but he retains the concept of representation,<sup>51</sup> elaborated by H. R. Mackintosh, Vincent Taylor and H. Wheeler Robinson. Their view is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, expressed in action the eternal love of God by the sacrificial offering of Himself, in perfect obedience to God, in such a way that He shared in the suffering which is the penalty of sin, and perfectly uttered in this act the penitence due from the heart of man.<sup>52</sup>

b. *Faith-union with Christ as including Participation in His Atoning Work.* Essentially conjoined with this theory of representation is the doctrine of faith-union with Christ, by which men participate in His perfect self-offering and make it their own. Thus through union with Him they present to God what they could never do by themselves, namely, the perfect repentance and submission which open the way for the pardon of God to reach them, pardon which is kept away by nothing except the impenitent heart. This doctrine not only

[p.41]

contains the fallacy that it is repentance which removes guilt, but also the error that the work of Christ is accomplished by man's participation in it, tantamount to man's reproduction of it. There is no room here for 'the finished work of Christ', for the one offering by which he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified (Heb. x. 14.).

c. *The Theories concerned with Man rather than with God.* Again we can see why such theories reject the doctrine of propitiation, for it is man's condition with which they are

---

<sup>50</sup> *Op. cit.*, 149 ff.

<sup>51</sup> E.g. *op. cit.*, 164, 'I should, therefore, express the difference between the old view and the new by saying that one emphasizes substitutionary expiation and the other emphasizes solidary reparation, consisting of due acknowledgment of God's holiness.'

<sup>52</sup> Cf. V. Taylor, *The Cross of Christ*, 1957, 96, on the imperfection of man's repentance, 'It needs to expand its broken wings by resting upon a perfect penitence voiced by the Son of God, somewhat as our inarticulateness finds expression in great music and in great poetry.'

concerned, not the violated sovereignty of God. They indeed claim that they exalt the love of God far more than any doctrine which includes propitiation can do, for they say that God's love is eternal, His saving grace ever extended towards mankind, and that it was through the activity of the God of love alone that His Son actualized on the Cross what was ever in His heart. All this is true enough, but it still leaves the conclusion that it is only the unmoved heart of man that is the obstacle to his receiving the free pardon of God, and that Jesus Christ did not die to procure our forgiveness but to enable us to receive it.

## **VI. PROPITIATION PRESERVES THE FACTS OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN GRACE**

The doctrine of propitiation, on the other hand, far from robbing God of His love, reveals the depths of the Divine grace as no alternative theory can. We may learn much from those who teach the cost to God of man's redemption in His endurance of the suffering caused to Him by the sinful rebellion of His creatures (and who can ever count the price of that suffering?), yet when God set forth Christ Jesus as the propitiation in His blood, He declared the cost of redemption to be even greater than that demanded by suffering. God cannot be true to Himself unless He upholds His sovereign justice, unless the penalty for His broken law is paid. This penalty is no bare legal transaction, for, as we have seen earlier, the law of God is not a mere code, but the expression of the character of the Person of God Himself. What penalty can be great enough to match the guilt of resistance to such a Person, Eternal, Sovereign, the Father whose dignity and grace are both seen in His Son, Jesus Christ? The greatness of the penalty is beyond imagination, but that was the penalty which God Himself endured in the Person of His Son, to make propitiation for the sins of the world, to avert His own righteous and awful sentence against guilty mankind. Only infinite love can endure the infinite penalty, and it is this fact which the Biblical doctrine of propitiation preserves.

---

© 1965 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

(Prepared for the Web in January 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---