

## INTRODUCTION.

- A. The English word “atone” is derived from the phrase “at one.” To be “at one” with someone is to be in a harmonious personal relationship with him/her. Similarly, “atonement” originally meant “at one-ment,” or “reconciliation.” In modern usage, however, “atonement” has taken on the more restricted meaning **of the process by which the hindrances to reconciliation are removed**, rather than the end achieved by their removal. “To atone for” a wrong is to take some action which cancels out the ill effects it has had.

In the OT the word “atonement” occurs frequently, even in the RSV. But it is not so in the NT. Even in the KJV the word occurs only once, and then to translate *katallage* at Rom 5:11, and in the RSV this is replaced by “reconciliation,” so that in the more modern versions of the NT there is no use of the word “atonement.”

The Bible as a whole assumes the need for some “atoning action,” if man is to be right with God. It is accepted as a fact beyond dispute that man is estranged from God, and is himself wholly to blame for this estrangement. His disobedience to the will of God—i.e., his sin—has alienated him from God, and this alienation must first be remedied if right relationships are to be restored. The barrier raised by man’s past sins must be removed [E].

The process by which these barriers are removed is atonement.

- B. Richardson [B] writes:  
The English word “atonement” is derived from the words “at-one-ment,” to make two parties at one, to reconcile two parties one to another. It means essentially reconciliation. In modern usage it has come to have a more restricted meaning, namely, the process by which the obstacles to reconciliation are removed. In current usage, the phrase “to atone for” means the undertaking of a course of action designed to undo the consequences of a wrong act with a view to the restoration of the relationship broken by the wrong act.

This is the meaning which the word “atonement” carries in a religious or Biblical context: to speak more precisely, it means the work of Christ culminating at Calvary. The term occurs frequently in the KJV of the OT as the rendering of the Hebrew root *kaphar* but only once in the NT (Rom 5:11), where it translates the word *katallage* which means here “reconciliation.” In the RV and in modern versions the word is rendered “reconciliation,” which means that the word atonement does not appear in modern English versions of the NT at all. Nevertheless, though the word is not there, the idea is expressed in many forms.

## I. TERMINOLOGY AND DEFINITIONS.

- A. Some definitions:
1. Colin Brown’s Dictionary of NT Theology (Vol. 3, page 166) puts the word atonement (*katallage*) in the same grouping with propitiation and reconciliation.
  2. W.E. Vine’s, Expository Dictionary of New testament Words (p. 85-86) says that “KATALLAGE, translated ‘atonement’ in the AV of Rom 5:11, signifies, not ‘atonement,’ but ‘reconciliation,’ as in the RV. See also Rom. 11:15; 2Cor. 5:18-19. ‘Atonement’ (the explanation of this English word as being at-one-ment is entirely fanciful) is frequently found in the OT. Corresponding NT words of *hilasmos* (propitiation) and *hilasterion* (mercy-seat) are found in the NT. These describe the means by which God shows mercy to inners.

## II. ATONEMENT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

- A. One purpose of the elaborate sacrificial system of OT religion was to provide such an “atonement,” and the word is frequently used in relation to sacrifice (Ex. 29:36; Lev. 4:20; 16:9-10).

(Ex 29:36) "And each day you shall offer a bull as a sin offering for atonement, and you shall purify the altar when you make atonement for it; and you shall anoint it to consecrate it.

(Lev 4:20) 'He shall also do with the bull just as he did with the bull of the sin offering; thus he shall do with it. So the priest shall make atonement for them, and they shall be forgiven.

(Lev 16:9-10) "Then Aaron shall offer the goat on which the lot for the LORD fell, and make it a sin offering.

10 "But the goat on which the lot for the scapegoat fell, shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make atonement upon it, to send it into the wilderness as the scapegoat.

- B. Atonement is therefore commonly associated with the death of a victim. It is not, however, exclusively so, for not only can the live scapegoat make atonement, but also the offering of money for the temple may be an offering "to make atonement for yourselves" (Ex. 30:15-16; Lev. 1:4).

(Ex 30:15-16) "The rich shall not pay more. and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to the LORD to make atonement for yourselves. 16 "And you shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel, and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves."

(Lev 1:4) 'And he shall lay his hand on the head of the burnt offering, that it may be accepted for him to make atonement on his behalf.

- C. Incense can be effective in making atonement (Num 16:47), and Moses seeks to make atonement through prayer (Ex. 32:30).

(Num. 16:47) Then Aaron took it as Moses had spoken, and ran into the midst of the assembly, for behold, the plague had begun among the people. So he put on the incense and made atonement for the people.

(Ex 32:30) And it came about on the next day that Moses said to the people, "You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin."

### III. ATONEMENT IN THE NEW TESTAMENT.

Even though the word "atonement" does not occur in the NT, the meaning behind the word is constantly present. Here, however, it is no longer associated with the temple sacrifices, still less with payments of money, or incense, or even with prayers. It is related entirely to Jesus Christ and His coming to earth, and especially with His death upon the cross.

The NT declares that in Christ and His death is all that man needs in order to find his sins forgiven and his life reconciled to God; in Him is that which can cancel out the ill effects of sin, release man from the burden of its guilt, and grant him peace with God.

A. Man's need for atonement.

The NT teaches man's need to be put right with God, and his own helplessness to put himself right. Man's life in its natural state is in a condition of estrangement from God. Men are estranged and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds" (Col. 1:21), "without God in the world" (Eph 2:12), and "alienated from the life of God" (Eph 4:18). They are "enemies of God" (Rom. 5:10), and "hostile to God" (Rom. 8:7). This is true of both Jews and Gentiles (Rom. 3:9-10,23).

B. The cause of man's need.

The cause of man's estrangement from God is the sin of man, his persistent disobedience to the will of God. "God is not mocked, for whatever a man sows, that he will reap" (Gal. 6:7). This law of retribution is part of what is meant by the wrath of God which rests upon the unrepentant sinner (Rom. 1:18), and which finds expression in the solemn warning: "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23). Indeed, the sinner is already "dead through... trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1).

C. The means of atonement.

The atoning work of Christ is particularly associated with His death on the cross. "He came to give His life as a ransom for many" (Mk. 10:45). "We were reconciled to God by the death of His Son" (Rom. 5:10). "We have been brought near in the blood of Christ" (Eph. 2:13). "He himself bore our sins in His body on the tree" (1Pet. 2:24). Christ was "offered once to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28).

D. The source of atonement.

1. In the NT we find that the new means of atonement is proclaimed, unanimously and insistently, as the gift of God to man. Christ's coming to earth and His self-giving on the cross for man's sin

are all God's doing. Nor is it merely that God conceived and initiated the plan; God was, through Christ, carrying it forward to completion.

2. What Christ did for man, God Himself was doing in Christ. "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself" (2Cor. 5:19). "...Jesus Christ, whom God put forward as an expiation by His blood" (Rom. 3:25). "He... did not spare his own Son, but gave Him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32).

E. The consequences of atonement.

1. The immediate consequence of atonement is man's relationship with God is restored. "The Son of God appeared... to destroy the works of the devil" (1Jn. 3:8). "Christ... died... that He might bring us to God" (1Pet. 3:18). The way to God has been opened (Heb. 10:20). We are "justified by His blood", and reconciled by His death (Rom. 5:9-10). Christ "died... that... we might live with Him" (1Th. 5:10).
2. From this restored relationship with God come all kinds of other good things. The sinner's conscience is cleansed, and he is equipped with new moral power (1Pet. 1:18). Man is delivered from the tyranny of self and enabled to live for Christ, with Christ reigning as Lord in his life (2Cor. 5:15; Rom. 14:9).

F. The words and symbols used.

1. Sacrificial terms.

Not surprisingly, the atoning power of the death of Christ is frequently expressed in terms taken from the sacrificial practices of Judaism, where atonement was associated with the shedding of the blood of an animal victim and its consequent death. Christ's death is called a "sacrifice to God" in Eph. 5:2. The "blood" of Christ is often mentioned as of special significance.

2. Lamb of God.

Another metaphor which is usually understood as "sacrificial" is the title ascribed to Jesus: "Lamb of God." Paul speaks of "Christ, our paschal lamb," who has been sacrificed (1Cor. 5:7); and in Jn. 1:29, 36, Jesus is referred to as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."

3. Ransom.

Mark 10:45: "The Son of man... came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many." It may be argued, however, that the word "ransom" is merely a vivid metaphor by which our Lord is declaring it to be His purpose to set men free from their present bondage, as Paul declares in Gal. 5:1: "For freedom Christ has set us free." Also 1Tim. 2:6; Titus 2:14.

**(1Tim 2:6)** who gave Himself as a ransom for all, the testimony borne at the proper time.

**(Titus 2:14)** who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

4. Redemption.

It is clearly linked and should mean "deliverance by the payment of a ransom" (Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14).

**(Eph 1:7)** In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace,

**(Col 1:14)** in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

5. Propitiation or expiation.

It is claimed that the probable meaning in Rom. 3:25 is that Christ is the new mercy seat, His cross being the appointed place to which men may come to gain assurance that their sins are forgiven them.

6. "Bought."

This term is implying the payment of a price. It occurs in 1Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Gal. 3:13; 4:5. It belongs to the same context of thought as the payment of a ransom.

**(1Cor 6:20)** For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.

**(1Cor 7:23)** You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

**(Gal 3:13)** Christ redeemed us from the curse of the Law, having become a curse for us-- for it is written, "CURSED IS EVERYONE WHO HANGS ON A TREE"--

**(Gal 4:5)** in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

#### IV. THE THEORIES.

##### A. The Ransom Theory.

1. The theologians of the ancient church interpreted the death of Christ as a ransom paid to the devil. Irenaeus, Origen, Athanasius, Augustine were the chief expositors of this doctrine.
2. In rather crude ways they explained that Jesus Christ, by permitting Himself to become the victim of death and the devil, had destroyed their power not only by offering them the price of His life in place of that of mankind, but also by proving in His resurrection, His supremacy over them [F].

##### B. The Anselmic (or objective) Theory.

1. Also known as the judicial theory. The ransom theory dominated Christian thinking until the time of Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109).
2. Reflecting the spirit that dominated the church's practice of penance and possibly the spirit of feudalism, he argued that the death of Christ, the God-man must be understood as a reparation or "satisfaction" paid to God for the sins of mankind by which his honor is offended. This violation being infinite in character demands a retribution infinite in value. In Jesus, God became man in order to make this payment possible in His voluntary vicarious death on the cross which infinite in character constitutes a superabundant "satisfaction" for human sin [F].

##### C. The-Abelardian Theory.

1. This is also known as the subjective or moral, or exemplarist theory.
2. Abelard (Abailard?) advanced an interpretation of the death of Christ in which the weaknesses of Anselmic teaching were avoided. According to this view, the contemplation of the cross so moves the believer, that he will recognize in it the transforming power of God's sacrificial love and thus be led to repent of his sins, devoting himself henceforth to a life of sacrificial love. Hence, it remained customary to interpret the death of Christ as a "satisfaction" [F].

##### D. The Sacrificial Theory.

1. This is the only theory to have a systematic exposition in the NT, namely in Hebrews. There is an inescapable impression that Hebrews played a more important expository role among the (apostolic) Fathers than it has done in later times. It is worthy because of removing two stumbling blocks (in the other theories).
2. First, the OT sin-offering never meant the propitiation of God by the killing of a victim in the offender's stead. It was expiation of sin rather than propitiation of God.
3. Second, it could be explained that the real intention of the sacrifices for sin were the offering of an unstained, unblemished, sinless and pure animal life to God in death, so that man's defilement may be removed to enable him to commune with the pure and righteous God. These were offered strictly in accordance with God's expressed will through his chosen priesthood.

The only sacrificed life which could avail is one that has conquered sin and temptation. The blood of bulls and goats could never really cleanse the human heart. The real sacrifice must be freely offered in perfect obedience to God. Just as the true sacrifice cannot be sub-human, as an animal is, it cannot be super-human as a god, so to speak; the true sacrifice must have conquered temptation and sin in man's own nature. The perfect priest and perfect victim must be fully human to avail anything for man [B].

##### E. The Classic or Dramatic Theory.

This theory was revived by Luther (1483-1546), as Gustav Aulen (1879-?) has convincingly argued in his book *Christus Victor* (1931). It means essentially that Christ did battle with the Devil and defeated him once and for all. The victory has already been won, and Christian men now enjoy the fruits of that victory in sure and certain hope of life with Christ forever. It ensures the important sense that the atonement is throughout God's work and not ours, and that God's purpose was to reconcile the world to himself [B].

## **CONCLUSION.**

It is sin which has created the need for atonement, because sin, besides corrupting the heart and deadening the conscience and making man increasingly prone to sin again, causes man to be estranged from God, separated from God. The Atonement--that God has Himself prepared the way by which man may be reconciled to Him, and the means by which the evil consequences of past sin can be annulled. The Way is Christ. The Means is Christ [E].

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