

God's Wrath-ending Sacrifice

In medicine, law, and even car mechanics technical terms are used that are not always readily understood by those not involved in the study of that particular field. If a person finds himself faced with a medical problem he will need to ask his doctor or search dictionaries for the definitions of some words. If his car breaks down, he might need to get a book of automotive terms to help him understand that for which the mechanic is charging him.

As with any other field of expertise, there are also technical terms used in the Bible. These terms are not always readily understood even by mature Christians, and must be examined, defined and studied.

One of the most noticeable changes made in many modern versions of the Bible is found in the use of Biblical technical terms. Some modern translators do away with technical terms in order to improve 'readability'. In doing so they attempt to retranslate or define those terms in such a way that the Bible reads like a newspaper or a book for early learning readers. The problem is that more often than not their attempts do not accurately reproduce what the Biblical word means.

These terms have been a part of theology and Bible reading, but have been changed or redefined to the point that they no longer convey what the original word meant. Words such as 'justification', 'righteousness', 'grace', 'mercy', 'reconciliation' and 'atonement' are but a few which are changed, redefined and modernised. This deletion of technical Biblical terms is seen very clearly with the word 'propitiation' (Romans 3.25; 1 John 2.2, 4.10).

Definition

‘Propitiation’ has the idea of appeasing the wrath of God. Leaving aside the finer aspects of the Greek, let’s look at the English word itself. *Webster’s English Dictionary* (1828),¹ which often uses the Bible in its entries, defines the word as:

‘1. The act of appeasing wrath and conciliating the favor of an offended person; the act of making propitious. 2. In theology, the atonement or atoning sacrifice offered to God to assuage his wrath and render him propitious to sinners. Christ is the propitiation for the sins of men. Rom 3. 1 John 2.’

A Bible dictionary or encyclopaedia may be useful in understanding the word, as well as word study books and systematic theologies. Leon Morris’ *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1982) has two excellent chapters on the word group for ‘propitiation’. The Bible student may want to dig deeper and use a conservative Bible commentary such as the *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary On the Whole Bible*, which says about the use of ‘propitiation’ in 1 John 2.2:

‘...He is to us *all that is needed for propitiation* “in behalf of our sins”; *the propitiatory sacrifice*, provided by the Father’s love, removing the estrangement, and appeasing the righteous wrath, on God’s part, against the sinner.’²

Of course, one might ask why the Bible student should go to all that trouble when the modern versions provide definitions right in the text. The problem is, what kind of definitions do they provide?

Propitiation in the various versions

‘Propitiation’ is variously translated in 1 John 4.10 as ‘expiation’ in the Revised Standard Version; ‘expiate’ in the New Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible (both Roman Catholic translations); ‘atoning sacrifice’ in the New International Version, the World English Bible, the Weymouth New Testament, the International Standard Version, the New English Translation and the New Revised Standard; ‘a sacrifice to take away our sins’ in the New Living Translation; ‘the sacrifice by which our sins are forgiven’ in the Contemporary English Version; and ‘a sacrifice to clear away our sins and the damage they’ve done to our relationship with God’ in the Message.

It is difficult to see how ‘expiation’ would be an improvement if the desire of the translator is to make the text more readily understandable. ‘Sacrifice’, too, could be problematic in many circles, since its Biblical meaning is often downplayed in current

society. In the case of the NIV's rendering, a person who is new to Bible reading or does not understand what 'propitiation' means will probably have trouble with the concept of 'atoning sacrifice' as well.

The word is correctly translated 'propitiation' in the Authorised Version, the New King James Version, the English Standard Version (correctly revising the RSV reading), the American Standard Version, the New American Standard Bible and the Holman Christian Standard Bible. Rather than giving an interpretation or resulting definition, the more formal versions use the proper word 'propitiation'.

The problem stated

As seen above, a formal equivalence translation (which is basically literal but which also carefully renders idioms and figures of speech) will more than likely retain the historical term 'propitiation'. The more dynamic or paraphrased versions, on the other hand, will often use the translator's definition of the word. Thus the NIV retranslates it as 'atoning sacrifice' and the Message uses a lengthy definition rather than a single word.

The problem is, the re-rendering of this word often reflects a theology which does not convey the meaning of the Greek in the same way 'propitiation' does. 'Expiate' and 'expiation' have the meaning of a covering for sin or possibly just a sacrifice for sin. The use of 'atoning sacrifice' especially in the NIV has removed the idea of satisfying the righteous wrath of God, which is necessary to provide redemption and reconciliation. The problem is that man is not only a sinner in thought, word and deed but, worse, all men were born dead in trespasses and sins. This came because of Adam's disobedience to the Word of God. As we see in Romans chapters 3–6:

- Adam's guilt was imputed to the race of men.
- Men therefore are born in sin and go downhill from there.
- The wages of sin is death.
- Death passed to all men because all have sinned.
- God's righteous and just anger burns against sin.
- The means of reconciliation and redemption is provided by God.
- The Lord Jesus Christ is God's own wrath-ending sacrifice which removes the guilt of the believer's sin forever.

Romans 3.23-26 speaks very plainly of the solution to this problem—'propitiation':

'For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: whom God hath set forth *to be a*

propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through the forbearance of God; to declare, *I say*, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just, and the justifier of him which believeth in Jesus.’

Regarding this propitiation, Calvin writes: ‘I prefer thus literally to retain the language of Paul; for it seems indeed to me that he intended, by one single sentence, to declare that God is propitious to us as soon as we have our trust resting on the blood of Christ; for by faith we come to the possession of this benefit.’³

The Apostle John also speaks of ‘propitiation’: ‘And he is the **propitiation** for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for *the sins* of the whole world’ (1 John 2.2).

Calvin says of this verse: ‘He calls him *just* and a *propitiation*. It is necessary for him to be both. . . . no one is fit to be a high priest, except he is innocent and separated from sinners. . . . *Propitiation* is added, because no one is fit to be a high priest without a sacrifice.’⁴

Candlish states that ‘It is not needful to settle in what precise aspect of the sacrificial service Jesus is here spoken of as the propitiation; whether with reference to the sacrificial victim slain, or the altar on which it was burned, or the mercy-seat on which its blood was sprinkled. Jesus is all three in one; the lamb slain, the altar of atonement, the blood-baptized mercy-seat’.⁵

The Apostle John continues: ‘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 4.10).

Here Calvin remarks, ‘But he again points out the cause of Christ’s coming and his office, when he says that he was sent to be a *propitiation for our sins*. And first, indeed, we are taught by these words, that we were all through sin alienated from God, and that this alienation and discord remains until Christ intervenes to reconcile us. We are taught, secondly, that it is the beginning of our life, when God, having been pacified by the death of his Son, receives us unto favour: for *propitiation* properly refers to the sacrifice of his death. We find, then, that this honour of expiating for the sins of the world, and of thus taking away the enmity between God and us, belongs only to Christ. . . .

‘And though the Apostle here speaks of the first reconciliation, let us yet know that to propitiate God to us by expiating sins is a perpetual benefit proceeding from Christ.’⁶

To Calvin and Candlish, and to many who study the Word of God, only ‘propitiation’ will do: both in saving their souls and also in explaining in the Scriptures what that salvation entails.

What does ‘propitiation’ mean to you?

When the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross, He quenched the wrath of His Father in His own blood. Christ kept the law of God perfectly for His people. He paid the eternal penalty for the sins of His people by both being the covering or atonement and also by being the necessary wrath-ending sacrifice. This happened two thousand years ago in an event that was not a ‘potential propitiation’ but an actual fact and historical event which purchased eternal salvation for sinners of all kinds, people just like us.

Those people who come to Jesus on gospel terms (repentance and faith) are declared ‘not guilty’ (justified). Those who refuse the gospel will have to pay for their own sins in eternal punishment. How can you know if your sins have been propitiated and you are reconciled to God? Remember the One ‘whom God hath set forth *to be* a propitiation through faith in his blood’ (Romans 3.25): He it is who has said, ‘Come unto me, all *ye* that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ (Matthew 11.28). ‘Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved’ (Acts 16.31).

Endnotes

[1] *Webster’s 1828 Dictionary*, Electronic Version by Christian Technologies, Inc. 2 June 2005 http://65.66.134.201/cgi-bin/webster/webster.exe?search_for_texts_web1828=propitiation

[2] Crosswalk.com, 2 June 2005 <http://bible.crosswalk.com/Commentaries/JamiesonFaussetBrown/jfb.cgi?book=1jo&chapter=002>

[3] John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: Romans*, John Owen, trans. and ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, USA: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1955), p. 143

[4] John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries: The Catholic Epistles*, John Owen, trans. and ed. (Edinburgh: the Calvin Translation Society, 1855), p. 171.

[5] Robert Candlish, *A Commentary on 1 John*, two volumes in one (Carlisle, PA, USA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973), 1.84.

[6] Calvin, *The Catholic Epistles*, pp. 240-241.