

Propitiation or Expiation?

During this great season of Lent leading to Holy Week and Easter our focus is especially upon the Cross of Jesus Christ and the significance of what took place on that Cross. There are many “Bible words” that we use to define and describe what Jesus did for us. We speak of sacrifice, redemption, reconciliation and justification.

One word that is frequently used is *atonement*. While the etymology of the English word atonement is “at-one-ment” and would thus be equated with reconciliation, the word atonement, as a translation of the Greek word *hilasmos*, means more “the process that led to reconciliation” or *what was necessary to bring God and man back together again*.

While the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament frequently uses the word *hilasmos* to translate the Hebrew word for “atonement,” it is used only on two occasions in the New Testament – 1 John 2:2 and 4:10.

It is interesting to note how *hilasmos* is translated in our English versions of the Bible.

The *New International Version* (NIV) translates 1 John 2:2, “He is the **atoning sacrifice** for our sins.” While this is accurate, the word “atoning” is not defined.

The *King James Version* (KJV) together with the *American Standard Version* (ASV) and most other English versions, translate the same verse “And He is the **propitiation** for our sins.” St. Jerome’s fifth century Latin *Vulgate* translates the Greek *hilasmos* with the Latin *propitiatio* – or “to propitiate.” Luther translated *hilasmos* with the German *Versöhnung* which also means to conciliate or propitiate.

BUT, the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) translates the verse, “And he is the **expiation** for our sins.”

(You will find the same consistent translations in 1 John 4:10 and also in Romans 3:25 where the word *hilasterion* is used, which actually means the cover over the Ark of the Covenant - the “mercy seat” or the “atonement lid.” [Luther – *Gnadenstuhl*])

The question is, “Is the atoning sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross an **expiation** or a **propitiation** – or both?” What is the difference?

Expiate means to make amends or pay reparation for sin or wrong-doing. Sin is the object of expiation. If you get a ticket for speeding, you pay your fine in order to *expiate* your wrong doing. There is nothing personal about it. The judge is not angry at you. It is an unemotional legal exchange. According to the RSV, Jesus is the *expiation* for our sins. He paid the required price for our sin to be removed.

On the other hand, *propitiate* means to appease or conciliate and avert the wrath of the offended party. The object of propitiation is God. We have sinned against God. It is personal. God is angry with sinful mankind and is appeased through the death of Jesus. His wrath is set aside.

So, what definition of the “at-one-ment” process would you prefer? Did Jesus **expiate** your sins and remove them or did Jesus **propitiate** the wrath and anger of God against you?

Translating the Greek word *hilasmos* as expiation rather than propitiation was first proposed by the British New Testament scholar C.H. Dodd in 1935.

Dodd felt that it was not a good idea to give the impression that the sacrifice of Jesus on the Cross appeased or placated an angry, vindictive God. This notion, according to Dodd, was too closely aligned with paganism. Much of so-called “liberal” theology accepted Dodd’s interpretation. Thus you have the 1948 *Revised Standard Version* consistently, in opposition to all other English translations and the Latin *Vulgate*, translating the word for “atonement” as expiation rather than propitiation.

It seems rather clear that the suffering and death of Jesus on the cross produced *both* expiation, our sin was paid for, *and* propitiation, the wrath of God against us was averted. By bearing our sins, Jesus removed them from us as far as the east is from the west. It was an act of expiation. Our sins, which separated us from God, were paid for. Reparation was made. As a result, God has been propitiated. A former theologian at Concordia Theological Seminary in Fort Wayne once wrote, “The wrath of God burned itself out on the corpse of the dying Messiah.” Because our sins were *expiated*, and the God against whom we have sinned was thereby *propitiated*, “at-one-ment” or reconciliation has taken place.

It is too bad that theologians have set the words expiation and propitiation against each other. Both concepts are necessary. Much of modern day Christianity, following the lead of liberal theology, has rejected the reality of propitiation, that the death of Jesus on the Cross appeased the wrath of God. A so-called gentler and kinder society shuns the notion that God, in addition to being a God of love, is also a God of wrath. Yet Scripture is very clear. We read in John 3:36: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”

The Good News is that God is no longer angry with you, and it is not because you are such a sweet, nice person. It is because the death of Jesus on the Cross has paid the price for your sins and turned away the wrath of God against you. The Gospel really is Good News! We have been saved *by the grace of God from the wrath of God.* †

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