

ATONEMENT
Romans 5:11
By Raymond White

To the Christian mind, atonement is the sacrificial saving act of the Jesus Christ. We use the word so frequently, and only in that context, that we see it as *the* title of that act as if there are no others. When a Christian is asked, “In a single word, what did Jesus do for you?” the answer will reflexively be, “atonement.”

Because of the importance of that word to us, we ought to (and do) try to understand it as well as we possibly can. And so, to that aim, here is my offering on the word atonement.

[1] THE ENGLISH WORD ATONEMENT

The word atonement is entirely English and has no roots in either Hebrew or Greek. It was not created by William Tyndale as some have thought but first appeared about a decade before Tyndale began his translation, just in time for him to make good use of it. The word was not used by Wycliffe.

The word at-tone-ment is a concatenation of “at” and “one” and “with” as Sunday school teachers frequently point out, and they are correct. The idea is to bring together.

The natural question is this: Does the word “atonement” properly translate the biblical meaning? And the answer (my answer anyway) is yes if we are not too disturbed by some inconsistencies.

[2] NEW TESTAMENT ATONEMENT: TO RECONCILE

This word “atonement” occurs only once in our English King James New Testament (following Tyndale’s lead) but not at all in almost all other translations. Tyndale (and the KJ) used atonement to translate the Greek word “katellagemen” (κατηλλάγημεν). That Greek word occurs seven times in five verses in the context of salvation. It is translated atonement only once while the other six occurrences are translated reconcile, which is the word’s proper meaning. So, to understand atonement we need to understand reconcile. Here are the verses.

***Romans 5:10** For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son...being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.*

***Romans 5:11** ...by whom we have now received the atonement.*

***2 Corinthians 5:18** ...God who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.*

***2 Corinthians 5:19** ...God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself...*

***Colossians 1:21** And you, that were...enemies...yet now hath he reconciled.*

What then does reconcile mean? It means two people who were once friends, then became enemies, then became friends again. Basically, they've made up and set their grievances aside. That's atonement.

To further clarify, the word does occur once in a non-salvation context and carries the same meaning.

1 Corinthians 7:11 But and if she depart, let her remain unmarried, or be reconciled to her husband...

The point being that if a husband and wife separate, they really should get back together and reconcile their differences. That's the meaning, as a favorite old Christmas song says, "God and sinners reconciled." Let's set aside our squabbles with God and be friends again.

It's an uncomfortable thought that we are God's enemies, but that is what Christians must come to grips with first before we can deal with reconciliation. If someone says to you, "I forgive you," your defensive reaction might be, "Forgive me? For what?" And that's where Christian thinking begins — at the "For what?"

[3] ENEMIES

That invites the question: When were God and man ever on friendly terms to begin with, so that they could become enemies?

Here are some possible answers. Take your pick.

Maybe we were innocent at conception but guilty at birth. It's ludicrous and I don't believe it, but still it's possible I suppose that learning in the womb made us guilty of something. That's not a lot of time between conception and birth to spawn a friendship with God and so quickly disrupt it merely by being born. I'm just throwing the possibility out there.

Or maybe it's referring to the fall of Adam and Eve as if atonement is applied to humanity as a whole, a collective event, and not to humans individually. In that view, Adam and Eve were friends with God from the creation, but the fall made them and therefore necessarily us, enemies of God. But wouldn't that mean that salvation is a collective event rather than individual events? Or maybe not. Maybe we are collectively damned but individually saved, like a crowd falling into a river from a broken bridge, and life preservers tossed to each person individually. But if that's the case, then we are collectively guilty — (Of what exactly, we're not sure, of being human? Is that a crime?) — and if collectively guilty, then individual guilt has no meaning, since what else can we possibly do to ourselves by sinning if we're already guilty just by being born?

Or maybe we were born innocent after all and became guilty through childhood as we learned selfish thinking. But that strains from the tug of two objections. *First*, we don't like to think of children as guilty of anything. And *second*, there are these annoying bible verses: ***Psalms 51:5*** *in sin did my mother conceive me*; ***Isaiah 48:8*** *called a transgressor from the womb*; ***Romans 3:23*** *all have sinned*. So if guilt is from birth, then how could we grow into it?

Mormons have a different explanation, courtesy of Hugh Nibley. Mormons believe in preexistence, that we lived with God before we were born. And in that pre-mortal life we were indeed on friendly terms with God. Then we came to earth and that was a good thing, except that we also became enemies of God and that was a bad thing, and therefore we had to be

reconciled. So we are talking about individual guilt, but because of our collective nature (*Ether 3:2, D&C 93:3*, and more). Whether you're inclined to believe in a pre-existence or not, you have to admit that it does give sense to the notion of reconciliation.

It's time to put this New Testament atonement into the context of the Old Testament.

[4] OLD TESTAMENT ATONEMENT: TO COVER

New Testament atonement is a different thing than Old Testament atonement. The word atonement appears in the Hebrew Scriptures dozens of times and comes from two different Hebrew words Kafar and Kippurim. You've heard of Yom Kippur certainly. That's the Jewish Day of Atonement, that one day each year where the priest offered one offering for the entire nation.

These two Hebrew words, Kafar and Kippurim, mean nearly the same thing: Kafar "to cover" and Kippurim "to cause to cover." To use a modern idiom, to sweep sins under the rug. However, it's not so trivial as that. "To cover" was a Hebrew idiom for "forgive" as we see in

Proverbs 16:14 *The wrath of a king is as messengers of death: but a wise man will pacify it* [appease, γῶ·κᾰρ·πῶ·ren·nāh, :נָפַךְ, נָפַךְ].

The point is, Hebrew atonement didn't get rid of sin, it covered sin, hid sin. But that was good enough, and that covering was the supreme act of God's love to us, as we should cover other people's sins and forgive.

Proverbs 17:9 *He that covereth a transgression seeketh love...*

The amazing thing about Hebrew sacrifice is that it actually worked.

Numbers 16:47 *And Aaron took as Moses commanded, and ran into the midst of the congregation; and, behold, the plague was begun among the people: and he put on incense, and made an atonement for the people. :48* *And he stood between the dead and the living; and the plague was stayed.*

That is awesome power. Death was sweeping across the people and everyone was dying. The priest, Aaron, ran into the middle of that carnage, made an atoning sacrifice, and the dying stopped right there. That priest and his sacrifice stood between the living and the dead. Now that's impressive. Don't tell me you're not impressed.

But still, those sins were only covered, hidden from God's view by the sacrifice of an animal. Eventually they had to be gotten rid of entirely, not with the sacrifice of an animal but with the sacrifice of the Son of God which Paul called katallage (κατηλλάγημεν), and William Tyndale called atonement — not to hide sins, but to reconcile.

[5] OTHER NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

But reconcile doesn't tell the whole story. Friends might reconcile after a trivial dispute about nothing, that doesn't mean they were enemies. Tyndale did not want to entirely lose the

Hebrew notion of covering sin so he picked the word atonement to kind of bridge the two ideas. Atonement has since been abandoned by almost all other English translations acquiescing to the word reconcile, and maybe that's a loss.

However, the Old Testament idea of atonement, the priestly sacrifices that covered sin, does slip into the New Testament, sort of, but with a different word. The Greeks had a word, *ilamos* or *hilamos*, that meant satisfaction or appeasement, which our bibles translate to propitiation, which means reconciliation or atonement or to regain the good will of someone.

Here are some verses.

Hebrews 2:17 *to make propitiation for the sins of the people.*

Here Jesus is the priest who makes a sacrificial offering for us. He makes the atonement.

1 John 1:1 *He is the propitiation for our sins. 4:10 sent his son to be the propitiation.*
Romans 3:25 *God hath set him forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.*

Here Jesus *is* the sacrificial offering. He is the atonement.

The word is also translated mercy seat as in

Hebrews 9:5 *And over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat ...*

The mercyseat covered the ark of the covenant, and in the ark was the law. When the judge (God) was on the mercyseat, he dispensed justice. But when the priest performed a sacrifice and splattered the blood on the mercyseat, the judge dispensed mercy.

What changed was that in the New Testament, Christ was the priest and the offering.

So the Jewish notion of covering sin by sacrifice is not lost. Only the objects have been changed. The Jewish priest is now Christ. The sacrificed animal is now Christ. So Tyndale was right to use the word atonement, he just could have used it, I think, in a better place.

But back to Paul.

Paul does not restrict himself to just that one word, *katellage/reconcile*, to describe what Jesus did for us. He draws from a wide vocabulary for different words to paint a variety of images. Atonement or reconciliation is only one. Here is a list.

Reconciliation/Atonement

Romans 5:10 *...we were reconciled [atoned] to God by the death of his Son.*

This speaks of friendship. We were friends, then enemies, and now we are friends again.

Justification

Romans 4:5 *...believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly.*

This speaks of law and the courts. We were charged as criminals and we were acquitted.

Redemption

Galatians 4:5 *To redeem them that were under the law...*

This speaks of slavery. We were sold under sin, became slaves, and God purchased us and set us free.

Ransom (although many scholars believe that the pastoral epistles were not Paul's)

1 Timothy 2:6 *Who gave himself a ransom for all ...*

This speaks of paying off kidnapping. We were stolen by terrorists and held for ransom. God paid the ransom and we were released.

Adoption

Romans 8:15 *...ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father.*

This speaks of families. We are not servants in the house and not even guests. We are children, adopted into the most privileged position, and therefore equal heirs with God's one natural born son.

Forgiveness

Colossians 2:13 *...having forgiven you all your trespasses.*

This speaks of banks and finance. We owed a debt we could never pay. But rather than foreclose, this bank, God, just forgave the debt.

These are Paul's different ways to view salvation. That is not to say that only Paul used these words. Jesus did speak of redemption but in a different context referring to the end of the world and his second coming.

Luke 21:28 *And when these things begin to come to pass, then look up, and lift up your heads; for your redemption draweth nigh.*

That's not the same thing. Redeemed from eschatological disaster is different than saved from eternal damnation.

So these cafeteria ideas of salvation really do come from Paul — not Peter, not James, not John, not even Jesus discussed salvation in such ways, only Paul. Peter of course preached resurrection and salvation. But never atonement. Whatever Peter thought about atonement (and I'm sure he did), he never said. It was Paul's particular task to describe Jesus' death and resurrection in terms of atonement.

[6] THE FAR REACHING ATONEMENT

Why Paul? Maybe because he had so much to be forgiven of. He was, after all, the world's chief sinner, and therefore God had to reach further to rescue him than anyone else.

1 Timothy 1:15 *This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief. :16* *Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting.*

Some people want to defend Paul, “But he was really a good man, just misguided. He thought he was doing the right thing.” What is that supposed to mean? Hitler was misguided and thought he was doing the right thing, but we don’t say he was “really a good man, just misguided.” If we are to judge men by what they *do*, then Paul was not a good man, he was a genocidal maniac who murdered and tortured innocent people.

Don’t defend Paul. He doesn’t defend himself, he accuses himself — of being the world’s worst sinner because he was. He killed God’s people (*Acts 22:4 unto the death*) and tortured them (*Acts 26:11 compelled them*). Paul condemns himself, first, because it’s true and, second, because he uses his own guilt to make his point. If you insist that Paul “was really a good man,” you uncut Paul’s message, you rob Jesus of the credit he deserves for his far reaching love that saved even Paul, and you will probably draw an argument from Paul at his first opportunity. Paul doesn’t need your defense, he has Christ’s grace. What Paul does want is for you to teach Christ’s forgiving love and use Paul’s sins and forgiveness as your example.

Paul and Christ are bookends, Paul on one end, the greatest sinner, and Christ on the other, the greatest forgiver. That’s why Christ picked Paul, to underscore the message.

Do you think your sins are terrible and unforgivable? Christ saved even Paul. That’s the point. Christ’s loving reach is long. And that’s why Paul is the “pattern,” to show the world just how far God’s love and Christ’s atonement will reach. It reached Paul, it can reach you.

[7] THE LASTING ATONEMENT

Another important difference between the Jewish atonement and the Christian atonement is that the Jewish atonement works only until your next sins. Then you had to atone all over again. While the Christian atonement, once done was forever.

Hebrews 7:27 Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people’s: for this he did once, when he offered up himself.

We get an image of this at the Last Supper when Jesus washed the disciples feet. Peter resisted, Jesus insisted, Peter conceded (“okay wash all of me”), and Jesus responded to that —

John 13:10 He that is washed needeth not save to wash his feet, but is clean every whit: and ye are clean, but not all [meaning Judas].

What Jesus is talking about is continuance. We don’t have to be bathed twice, or baptized twice, or come to Christ twice, or atoned for twice. Once done it’s done. But we do need the dirt knocked off our feet now and then, as in going to the Last Supper, to church, to receive communion or sacrament, to get clean again. We can’t walk through the streets of life without picking up some dirt. That’s just a fact. And when we do, some foot bathing is in order.

But Christian security, as the Evangelicals call it, lies in the permanence of the atonement and its eternal hold on us. This is of course a whole ‘nother subject. But just a couple of verses to leave you with the thought —

John 5:24 ... shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life ...

1 Peter 1:5 ... kept by the power of God ...

Finally, for my Mormon friends who fret: But once we're baptized and forgiven, we should never sin again. You know, *Mosiah 5:2 no more disposition to do evil*, that sort of thing.

Well, how's that working out for you? Have you lived a sinless life so far? Haven't, have you? You're just like Peter, have to get the dirt knocked off your feet now and then — right? So, what's to be done?

Here's the point: If you think you're going to live sinless from now on, then maybe you are sinning just by thinking that, because you are trusting yourself rather than trusting God. I'll make that point with a few verse —

Mosiah 4:11 ...even so...always retain in remembrance...your own nothingness...you, unworthy creatures... [But aren't we supposed to make ourselves worthy?]

Alma 38:14 ...acknowledge your unworthiness before God at all times. [Ever after you've repented and are baptized? That's what it says.]

3 Nephi 28:29 ... there was a change wrought upon them [3 Nephites], insomuch that Satan could have no power over them ... [If the 3 Nephites, the best of the best, had to be changed to throw off Satan, that means that before that change, they were hounded by Satan just like the rest of us.]

Moroni 4:2 And after...[baptism, holy ghost, living right, etc.] ... relying alone upon the merits of Christ who is the author and finisher of their faith. [Alone means relying on no one else's merits; no, not yours.]

Sounds Evangelical, doesn't it — to trust Christ and not trust yourself? Maybe the Evangelicals are onto something.

Does this sound despairing to you? Doesn't to me. I think it's unburdening. If perfection is what you are expecting of yourself and you think that you are hell-bound because you fail at times, then you live a very stressful life because you are trusting the wrong person. It's much better to live in God's grace. Live a right life, certainly, but don't let your failures consume your joy. If not that, then what do you suppose the atonement was all about anyway?

However, atonement is not license to sin. That of course is a whole 'nother subject, but on that I'll offer this one verse anyway.

1 John 2:3 Hereby we know that we know him if we keep his commandments. :5 Hereby know we that we are in him.

The word "keep" means to watch or guard over some precious thing. Commandment keepers, when they stumble, have an advocate with God.