

The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement

Romans 5:1-11

(The following is the substance of an address given by David Silversides at an after-church meeting at Loughbrickland Reformed Presbyterian Church on 29th August 1999.)

The reasons for addressing this subject are quite simple. Firstly, it is of immense importance. Secondly, this biblical doctrine is widely denied within what professes to be the Christian Church. Thirdly, among those who use the scriptural language of 'cleansing through the blood of Christ' etc., it sometimes becomes painfully apparent that there is little understanding of what that language actually means. Indeed, the language, though biblical, can end up being used almost as a superstitious charm with no actual content and with no meaning in the mind of those who use it.

1. The Language of the Atonement

By 'the atonement' we mean, of course, the atonement made by our Lord Jesus Christ, the Great High Priest, in his own life, death and resurrection. The term 'atonement' in our English Bible is used in the Old Testament to convey the thought of covering - of a covering for sin, and occasionally in the New Testament it is used as the equivalent of the word 'reconciliation'. Let us look specifically at several biblical words connected with the doctrine of the atonement.

a. Obedience. In Romans chapter 5:17-19 we read, "For if by one man's offence death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ. Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one shall many be made righteous." There you see that it speaks of the disobedience of Adam and of the obedience of the Lord Jesus Christ, the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ on behalf of his people. In Philippians 2:7,8 we are told that the Lord Jesus "took upon him the form of a servant, ... and being found in fashion as a man, ... he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." In John 6:38 we read, "For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me."

Our Lord Jesus Christ was, then, obedient; Christ in his obedience both fulfilled the demands of the law of God and bore the penalty of the transgression of that law on behalf of sinners. This is sometimes called Christ's active and passive obedience. He actively kept all the commands of God, and passively, not in the sense of involuntary, he bore the wrath of God against the transgression of that law in order to provide a righteousness for his people, and in order for his death to be accepted he had to be the perfect and spotless Lamb of God. So Christ's active righteousness and his atoning death on behalf of sinners are reckoned to the account of sinners who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

b. Sacrifice. This word is used in a number of places. For example, Hebrews 9:26, “For then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Now if you look at verses 11 and 12 of the chapter you’ll see it is clear from the context that what we are being told is that Christ by the offering of himself as a sacrifice, fulfilled the pattern of the sin offerings of the Old Testament. When we read that he sacrificed himself in order to put away sin, it is in the sense of the removal of guilt; that might be obvious but it has to be stated. Christ’s sacrifice of himself was that he might take away the guilt of sin, the pattern being set in the types of the Old Testament sin offerings referred to earlier in the chapter.

c. Propitiation. We find this three times in Scripture, we find it in Romans 3:25, “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.” 1 John 2:2, “And he is the propitiation for our sins.” Chapter 4:10, “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.”

This word propitiation, however unusual in today’s speech, is a very important word; and the reason we object to some Bible versions on these verses, is because they remove this word ‘propitiation.’ The RSV replaces it with ‘expiation’, the NIV with ‘sacrifice of atonement’ or ‘atoning sacrifice’. It is true Christ’s death was an expiation of sin, it is true that his death was a sacrifice of atonement, but they are not the full meaning of the word ‘propitiation’ which is the accurate rendering of the Greek word in view. It is true that sin needs to be expiated and atoned for, but the word ‘propitiation’ tells us something more. The word ‘expiation’ is telling us what has to be done with sin; the word ‘propitiation’ is telling us that there is a person who must be propitiated. It indicates that the sense in which sin must be removed is that the active displeasure and wrath of God must be borne away. Expiation relates to a thing, sin, propitiation relates to a person who must be propitiated. So propitiation has a meaning that is lost even in these other terms which have their place but which are not an accurate rendering here. We must retain the word ‘propitiation’; sin must be expiated by propitiating an angry, holy and just God. We cannot afford to let the word ‘propitiation’ drop.

d. Reconciliation. Reconciliation means restoration to favour and removal of enmity, but when it is used in Scripture - whose enmity is it that must be removed, whose displeasure? It is true that as totally depraved sinners our carnal minds are at enmity with God. It is also true that when the Holy Spirit works in renewing the heart of a sinner, that natural enmity, in principal, is removed and the sinner is caused to repent of his sin and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. But when the term ‘reconciliation’ is used in Scripture, it is not the removal of the sinner’s enmity to God that is in view. It is the removal of the displeasure of God as the one offended against. This is what the term ‘reconciliation’ conveys.

This is true even of man-to-man relations. In Matthew chapter 5:23, we read, “If thou bring thy gift to the altar and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee; leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then

come and offer thy gift.” It is clear that here the worshipper who is bringing his gift to the altar remembers that his brother has something against him; it is the justifiable displeasure of the other person which needs to be removed by the worshipper being reconciled to him. In other words, the man is told to be reconciled to his brother, but it is not the displeasure of the former or his antagonism that has to be removed, but the justifiable displeasure in the other offended brother. When he is told to be reconciled to his brother, it means he is to take those steps to remove the indignation of the second brother against him. So the one who is told to be reconciled is the offender who has to remove the grounds of antagonism in the one against whom he has offended.

When we consider reconciliation to God this is also the case; “And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ’s stead, be ye reconciled to God” (2 Corinthians 5:18–20). This reconciliation to God is to be effected by God’s not imputing trespass to the sinner who is reconciled; so that the reconciliation that is preached is the way whereby a sinner can be delivered from the just displeasure of God against him for his sins through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. Reconciliation to God is not first and foremost the removal of our enmity towards God; it is the removal of God’s just displeasure toward us. Again in Romans chapter 5:8-10, “But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, being now justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.” Here again reconciliation is parallel to justification by his blood and salvation from wrath - God’s wrath and the removal of God’s just antagonism or enmity toward us. So reconciliation to God is to be seen in terms of the removal of God’s righteous displeasure and offence and wrath against us. This is important, as we shall see below.

e. Redemption. Redemption conveys the thought of 'buying back', 'purchase' or 'ransom'; Christians are said to be redeemed from the curse of the law. “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law being made a curse for us for it is written cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree” (Galatians 3:13). We are redeemed from the curse of the law and the bondage of sin and the power of Satan. But the ransom is not to Satan but to the justice of God. God does not owe Satan anything. The payment that God has provided is a debt to the justice of God; it is not a payment to Satan since he has no right to anything.

2. The Source of the Atonement.

The reason that there is an atoning work that has been wrought by our Lord Jesus Christ is to be traced to the good pleasure of God. “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). “He that spared not his own Son but delivered him up for us all” (Romans 8:32).

We must never think of Christ persuading the Father to be merciful. God gave his Son; God spared not his Son. “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). The Father sent the Son; it is in the eternal counsels of God that the atonement of Christ was decreed. We must never represent the persons of the Godhead at odds as though God the Father were reluctant. The Father sent his Son to be the propitiation. It is this offended God who sent his Son to be the propitiation.

3. The Nature of the Atonement.

The atonement, then, was a satisfaction of Divine justice and it was a vicarious or substitutionary atonement. “Even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). The word ‘for’ is the word ‘anti’ which is often used in the sense ‘in stead of’; it is a substitutionary bearing of God’s wrath against sin. This stands in contrast to various other views of the atonement. One view is that propagated by Origen in the early centuries of the Church: the ransom-to-Satan theory (mentioned above); the idea that a price was being paid to Satan to rescue sinners from his clutches. This is entirely false; the ransom paid was provided by God to satisfy his own inflexible justice. Another theory, the older liberal theory, is that known as the moral influence theory (closely allied to that is the example theory); which, roughly summarised, is the idea that God sent his Son as a display, a gesture of love that would make us feel ashamed and turn from our sins and follow Christ’s example. There is no idea of satisfying God’s justice, purely a gesture of Divine love to influence men and women to turn from sin and to follow God. This is just one of the various liberal theories that see Christ’s death as meant to effect a change in men without any fulfilling of the demands of Divine justice as there is no Divine justice requiring satisfaction. Now you begin to see, perhaps, the importance of understanding words like ‘reconciliation’, ‘propitiation’ and what they actually mean.

4. The Necessity of the Atonement

If God were going to save sinners, did he have to do it this way; by means of an atonement? God didn’t have to save sinners, but if he was going to save sinners, is this the only way it could have been done? Liberals simply deny that there is justice in God, in the sense of punitive justice.

Others argue that God did it this way because he chose to display his justice but he didn’t have to. They object that there can be no restriction on God, therefore if God had wanted to take away the guilt of men without satisfaction of justice as an act of mere good pleasure, he could have done it. This view seems to be defending the freeness of God and the sovereignty of God.

This view is not right. When we say that the atonement was necessary or essential we are not talking about any external restriction imposed by God’s creatures upon God. There was

no externally imposed restriction on God and no benchmark outside of God. Nor is it a restriction on the power of God; God can always do whatever he wills to do, but he will never want to do what is contrary to his nature. There is no undermining of the sovereignty or of the omnipotence of God, but God always acts according to his own character. So in Titus 1:2 we read of God 'that cannot lie', now this is not a restriction from outside of God, as if anything outside of himself restricts what God can do and so he cannot lie; he will never want to lie and so never will. Such is the character of God that although he can do whatever he pleases to do, he will never will to lie. So, in Psalm 145:17, "The Lord is righteous in all his ways, and holy in all his works." God acts as he is, he never wills to sin because he is holy; and he will never fail to punish a sinner without a substitute because he is just.

The God who saves is invariably a "just God and a Saviour" (Isaiah 45:21). It is not a restriction of God's freedom to will whatever he pleases, nor is it a restriction of his power, it is simply saying that the character of God is such that he never would save guilty sinners without the satisfaction of his own justice. The same idea is in Galatians 2:21, "for if righteousness come by the law, then Christ is dead in vain". There was no other way in which it is conceivable that God would save the guilty. All sin that is ever forgiven is forgiven through this atonement and that includes sins of Old Testament believers. Just one reference will suffice, Hebrews 9:15, "And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance" (Hebrews 9:15). That tells us that the sins of those who lived under the old administration of the covenant were forgiven through Christ's redemptive work which actually took place under the new administration of the covenant of grace. Both administrations (old and new) teach the same way of salvation – that we must trust Christ, the coming Saviour in the Old Testament and the accomplished and returning Saviour in the New. The blood that truly cleanses was shed in the New, while the blood of animals shed under the old directed sinners to look forward in faith to the Saviour promised.

6. The Extent of the Atonement

For whom did Christ die? The question here is not the value of the atonement but a question of the intended effect. Christ's atonement in itself is of infinite value, but what was the intended effect of the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Firstly, the omnipotence of God ought to tell us that Christ died for the elect. An almighty God is not frustrated. An almighty God does not try to do things and not accomplish them. On the very surface of Scripture it is obvious that not all men are saved, therefore God did not intend that all men will be saved. If we believe in an almighty God how could it be otherwise? The idea of a God who tries to save everybody but is only partly successful and partly fails should be unthinkable; such a God is not almighty. But the living God is almighty; what he has purposed, none can effectively hinder.

Secondly, the justice of God ought to tell us Christ died for the elect only. If Christ bore the punishment of all the sins of all men, then all men would be saved. Why would the God of

justice punish sins in hell that were already punished on the cross? If God leaves no sin unpunished, equally God does not punish the same sin twice. You say, "but that's because some don't believe." Leaving aside the question of who determines who believes and who doesn't (it's actually God who gives faith to some and not to others); why should unbelief prevent the salvation of anyone? Why should it prevent the forgiveness of the sins of the unbeliever that Christ has atoned for? Why should they be punished again because of unbelief? In any case unbelief is a sin, so if Christ died bearing all the sins of all men then he also atoned for the unbelief of the unbeliever. So if Christ died for all the sins of all men then all men would be saved; but they are not. So Christ died not for all the sins of all men but for all the sins of some men; that is for the elect of God who are saved by the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, the Scriptures explicitly teach limited atonement. The Scriptures teach 'limited atonement' in the sense of Christ dying to bear particularly the sins of those chosen to salvation. In Isaiah 53:8 we read concerning the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, "He was taken from prison and from judgment: and who shall declare his generation? For he was cut off out of the land of the living: for the transgression of **my people** was he stricken." Verse 11, "He shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied: by his knowledge shall my righteous servant justify many; for he shall bear their iniquities." There you have Christ accomplishing redemption by bearing the sins of the people of God and in its application in verse 11, he shall see of the travail of his soul and shall be satisfied; those for whom he bore iniquity will be justified, for they shall be brought to faith in him.

"... and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). So Christ wasn't coming to try to save everybody and the outcome was uncertain; he shall save his people from their sins. "As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep" (John 10:15). Also verse 26, "But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me." It is quite clear that Christ says to these Jews that they are not of his sheep but he lays down his life for the sheep. He lays down his life for some and not for others. The Saviour says, "I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me" (John 17:9). He intercedes for the elect just as he gave his life for the elect. "If God be for us, who can be against us? ... Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God" (Rom 8:31 & 33-34). The elect are sure to be justified by God because Christ died and rose again and intercedes for them. In Acts 20:28 the elders are told, "Feed the flock of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood." In Ephesians 5:25 we read, "Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it."

When John the Baptist said "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world", the word 'world' must be understood in the sense of sinners of all nations, because he says the Lamb of God actually takes away their sins. If the word 'world' meant every individual then it would teach that Christ actually takes away the sins of every individual, and that every individual would be saved. It would teach more than what Arminians want as it would teach universal salvation. But he actually takes away the sin of those for whom he died; he does it; it is effective; it is not a stab in the dark or an effort to make men savable; he

actually does save an elect multitude which no man can number. So, Christ's atonement is a vicarious and substitutionary satisfaction of God's justice that was necessary and effective and which proceeded from the good pleasure of God to save sinners.

7. The Importance of Clarity Concerning the Atonement.

Many can use certain phrases of a generally evangelical sound and yet not believe this biblical doctrine of the atonement. Liberals can speak of Christ dying and rising again for us, and not mean anything like what the Bible means by such words. They have no idea or concept, no intention of conveying the thought of Christ satisfying the demands of the justice of God. We mentioned the moral influence theory; a liberal who believes in the moral influence theory and who doesn't believe that God punishes sin at all, can still say Christ died and rose again for us. He doesn't mean what we mean or what the Bible means; he doesn't believe God punishes sin or that Christ bore the wrath of God, and yet can still say that Christ died and rose again for us. He can even say Christ died for sinners, but he doesn't mean what the Bible means.

The so-called 'Jehovah Witnesses' speak of Christ as a 'ransom sacrifice', by which they mean that Christ's death gets us back to the starting line. Christ's death gives us a fresh start and then we are justified by 'faith' by which they mean 'faithfulness', not faith in the sense of trust in Christ, but loyalty to God shown by submission to what they regard as 'God's organisation' which is the Watchtower body; that is the Jehovah's Witness' view of the death of Christ. They believe Christ's death is a ransom that gets us back to where Adam was and then we have to do a better job than Adam did and we thus will be justified by our faithfulness to God via the Watchtower organisation. They can talk of Christ as a ransom sacrifice but they don't mean the same thing as Evangelicals at all.

Roman Catholicism can say, 'we believe Christ died for sinners', and they do say that but it means something very different from what the Bible means. They mean Christ merited the grace of justification, but the Roman Catholic view of justification is not that it consists of a sinner being declared righteous by Christ's merits being imputed to him. The Roman Catholic doctrine of justification is the idea of actually being made righteous and purified, in other words, what the Bible calls sanctification; and this process of being made actually righteous and purified is through the ordinances of the church and then continued after death in purgatory as necessary. It is a process of being actually sanctified or made righteous that ends in our justification when completely purified. They don't distinguish between justification and sanctification. Justification, on their view, is not being declared righteous on the basis of Christ's merits, it is being actually made righteous by a process, through the ordinances of the church, and purgatory afterwards (shortened by masses said by the living on their behalf), which process has been, they say, secured by Christ and the repeated offering of Christ. So, Rome can speak of Christ dying for sinners but not mean the same thing as the Bible means at all.

The prosperity gospel preachers like Kenneth Copeland, apart from all their other false teachings, teach that Christ's work of redemption did not take place on the cross but in hell

after Christ died. They teach that Christ was born again in hell, since Satan had taken him there illegally (because he wasn't a sinner), and this gave God the opportunity to speak 'faith-filled' words to bring him out. Now this is blasphemous nonsense, but when they say that Christ is the Redeemer of sinners, they mean nothing remotely like the Christian Gospel: their teachings are worse than even Origen's ransom-to-Satan theory. Yet professed Evangelicals sit and listen to Copeland and sit open-mouthed while this man spews out his heresies and blasphemies.

So then, let us be clear, Christ's death was substitutionary; it was to satisfy the justice of God; it was to do so effectively for the elect of God who will surely be saved; and it was a unique and complete atonement for sin. Be sure, be clear; if you're not, pray, study, think, ask until you are. "Hold fast the form of sound words, which thou hast heard of me, in faith and love which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Timothy 1:13). Amen.