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Propitiation

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LEADER'S GUIDE

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FOCUS

“Propitiation” is a relatively rare word in the New Testament. It only occurs twice as a noun (1 John 2:2; 4:10) and twice as a verb (Luke 18:13; Heb. 2:17), along with one other occasion when a different word is used that is often interpreted to mean propitiation (Rom. 3:25). However, its conceptual importance for Scripture as a whole far outstrips the frequency with which it appears. This truth is confirmed by the manner in which the Lutheran Confessions discuss it.

It is also a word that is often unknown or unfamiliar to our congregation members. It is not a term that they encounter often in everyday life. The familiarity they do have with it may include ideas that appear to contradict the Gospel.

The leader may initiate a brief discussion about how pastors think the word is understood by their congregation members.

This study will emphasize the importance of the word “propitiation” for understanding Scripture as a whole and consider how its importance goes beyond the handful of verses where it occurs in the New Testament. In the course of doing so, we will see that “propitiation” highlights two truths that are central to understanding the Gospel: (1) The wrath of God against sin, and (2) The exclusive and comprehensive sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for our sin.

SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROPITIATION

Basic considerations

Webster’s dictionary defines “propitiate” as “to make favorably inclined; appease; conciliate.”¹ It describes the act of gaining a favorable disposition from another, usually when something has been done against him or her that threatens this disposition.

1. Based on this definition, in whose direction does propitiation move and who is doing the action when dealing with God?

Under the normal meaning of the word, propitiation is something that people do in order to make God favorably disposed to them in spite of some wrong they have committed.

Propitiation assumes that something has happened that threatens God’s favorable disposition toward us. Normally this is some wrong that an individual has done. This wrong must be addressed in an appropriate manner so that God will be propitiated. This action is normally designated using the word “expiate.” Webster’s dictionary defines “expiate” as “to atone for; make amends or reparation for” where “atone” is “to make amends or reparation, as for an offense or crime.”²

2. What problems of vocabulary arise when we begin talking about propitiation?

The vocabulary of “propitiation” and “expiation” describe closely related ideas. Propitiation is directed towards God because of an offense. Expiation is directed towards an offense because God has been offended. The act of propitiating God will involve expiation; sometimes the former term is used when the latter one is really in view. Discussion of propitiation will usually involve expiation.

Hebrew Old Testament

The Old Testament basis for understanding propitiation is the Hebrew root *kpr*. It is used in the Piel to mean “atone.” This verb is used in conjunction with sin (using *min* and *’al*), people (using *’al* and *ba’adh*) and things (using *’al*).³

1. Lev. 4:26; 16:32–33 In these verses, we see atonement addressed to sin, people and things. What does this tell us about the Old Testament’s understanding of sin and the answer needed for it?

The Old Testament understands sin to involve not only offense to God, but also pollution. Atonement addresses the sin for which the individual is guilty, and it also cleanses all that sin has defiled.

¹ Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (New York: Portland House, 1989), 1153.

² Webster’s 502; 95.

³ F. Brown, S.R. Driver, and C.A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford, 1907), 497.

2. Ps. 5:4–6 What is the consequence of sin for the individual as he stands in relation to God? What is necessary to change this situation?

Sin is an affront to the holy God and evokes God's wrath. It ruptures the fellowship between God and man, and the offense must be addressed in order to restore fellowship with God. Atonement must be made in order to remove the sin that is blocking fellowship with God.

God provided the sacrifices that took place at the tabernacle and then the temple as the means of providing atonement to Israel. Through these sacrifices, He removed the sin that was blocking fellowship with God. The three kinds of sacrifice that involved the death of an animal were the whole burnt offering (*olah*) (Lev. 1:1–17), the sin offering (*khata'ah*) (Lev. 5:1–13) and the guilt offering (*'asham*) (Lev. 5:14–6:7). They are all described using the verb *kpr* in the Piel.

3. Lev. 1:4 In each of these animal sacrifices, the individual bringing the animal was directed to place his hand on the head of the animal to be sacrificed. What did this action mean?

The person bringing the sacrifice placed his hand on the animal's head to indicate the substitutionary character of the death.

4. Lev. 17:11 How does this verse explain the substitutionary character of the animal sacrifice?

In this verse we find clear evidence that the sacrifices were substitutionary. Lev. 17:11 says that life is in the blood and that through the use of the blood, an animal is given in place of the individual. Through the death of the animal in the place of the individual, God's wrath was averted. Atonement was made for sin, and God was propitiated.

5. Lev. 4:20 (see also 4:26, 31, 35) What was the outcome of sacrifice and the atonement it accomplished?

Leviticus is explicit in stating that the sacrifice atoned for sin, and that as a result of this, the person bringing the sacrifice received forgiveness.

The Old Testament sacrifices expiated sin. The life of the animal was given in place of the individual who had sinned as a death occurred in punishment for sin. This averted God's wrath and propitiated God. It caused God again to have a favorable disposition toward the individual. Language of propitiating the gods was common in Near Eastern religion as man sought to win the favor of his gods through sacrifices.

6. What made the Old Testament's sacrifices different from those of paganism?

They were different because Yahweh was the One who had provided them as part of the covenant into which He had taken Israel. They were the means He had provided and so were a matter of Gospel. They pointed forward to Christ and found their fulfillment in His death on the cross, which is the source of God's forgiveness.

The word *kipurim* provided the noun that expressed this idea (such as "day of atonement" in Lev. 23:27). The term *kaporeth*, "mercy seat," was used to refer to the cover of the Ark of the Covenant (Ex. 25:17–18).

7. Lev. 16:11–16 What role did the mercy seat (*kaporeth*) have in maintaining Israel's relationship with Yahweh?

Once a year, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and sprinkled the blood of sacrificed sin offerings (one for himself and one for the people) on the mercy seat as he made atonement for himself and his house (Lev. 16:11–14) and for the holy place because of Israel's sins (16:15–16).

Septuagint (LXX)

In the vast majority of instances, the LXX used *echilaskomai* to translate the Piel of *kpr*, and it conveys the same basic meaning. The noun *echilasmos* is used to translate "atonement," "to make a sin offering" and "sin offering." The verb *ilaskomai* occurs much less frequently. It translates "forgive" and the Piel of *kpr*. The noun *ilasmos* is used to translate "atonement," "sin offering," "guilt offering" and "forgiveness." With the exception of three verses in Ezekiel, every instance of "mercy seat" (*kaporeth*) is translated by *ilasterion*.⁴

Based on this evidence, what shift do we find in the way *echilasmos* and *ilasmos* are used to translate the Hebrew?

Both *echilasmos* and *ilasmos* demonstrate a broadening as they refer not merely to atonement, but also to specific sacrifices.

New Testament

1. Heb. 2:17; 9:11–12; 10:11–18 The writer to the Hebrews draws heavily upon the Old Testament background of

⁴ *echilasmos* for "atonement" (*kipurim*; Ex. 30:10; Lev. 23:27–28), "mercy seat" (*kaporeth*; 1 Chron. 28:11), "to make a sin offering" (Piel of *kht*; Ezek. 43:23) and "sin offering" (*khata'ah*; Ezek. 43:23); *ilaskomai* on five occasions translates "forgive" (*slkh*; 4 Kgdms 5:18; 24:4; 2 Chron. 6:30; Ps. 24:11; Lam. 3:42) and three times translates the Piel of *kpr* (Ps. 64:4; 77:38; 78:9). *ilasmos* for "atonement" (*kipurim*; Lev. 25:9; Num. 5:8), "sin offering" (*khata'ah*; Ezek. 44:27), "guilt offering" (*'asham*; Am. 8:14) and "forgiveness" (*silikah*; Ps. 130:4).

the tabernacle/temple and the sacrifices. Based on the material we have looked at, how would the statement in Heb. 2:17 normally be understood? How do Hebrews 9–10 completely change this?

Heb. 2:17 talks about Jesus as the high priest making propitiation for the sins of the people. The language is the same as the Old Testament's animal sacrifices. But in Hebrews 9–10 we learn that this forgiveness was won by Christ offering Himself in a single sacrifice that is the once and for all sacrifice for sin.

2. 1 John 2:2; 4:10 How does the Old Testament background shape our understanding of these verses? What new information does 4:10 add?

These verses lead us to understand that it is the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross in our place that averts God's wrath against sin and provides forgiveness. 1 John 4:10 adds that God the Father sent the Son to be the propitiation for our sin. Thus God Himself provides the sacrifice by which the offense of our sin is addressed.

3. Rom. 3:25 Paul says that God set forth Christ as an *ilasterion*, which in the LXX translates *kaporeth* or "mercy seat." What are the challenges for interpreting this verse? What is Paul saying?

In the LXX, the word *ilasterion* almost always refers to the lid of the Ark of the Covenant itself. Paul seems to be using the word in related sense of "means of propitiation." Paul is clearly describing Jesus Christ based on Old Testament sacrificial theology, just as seen in questions 1 and 2.

4. The suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 provides the most important means by which the New Testament understands the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ (53:4–5). In 53:10, the Servant is described as a guilt offering (*'asham*). While the word "propitiation" occurs only a few times, how does the concept provide the basis for understanding verses that discuss Jesus' death such as the following: 1 Peter 1:18–19; 1 John 1:7–9; Eph. 5:2; Mark 10:45?

The concept of propitiation underlies the New Testament language about Jesus Christ's sacrifice for us. Although the word itself only occurs a few times, the Old Testament theology associated with it provides the means for understanding what happened when Jesus Christ died on the cross.

CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF PROPITIATION

1. "Thus because faith, which freely receives the forgiveness of sins, sets against the wrath of God Christ as the mediator and propitiator, it does not offer up our merits or love" (Apology 4.46).⁵

What presupposition do the Confessions hold about the sinner's situation before God (*coram Deo*)?

The Confessions express the biblical truth that the holy God exhibits wrath toward those who sin. Such wrath will condemn and destroy the sinner if nothing is done to avert it.

2. "Therefore whenever we speak about justifying faith, we must understand that these three elements belong together: the promise itself; the fact that the promise is

free; and the merits of Christ as the payment and atoning sacrifice (*pretium et propitiationem*). The promise is received by faith; the word "free" excludes our merits and means that the blessing is offered only through mercy; the merits of Christ are the payment (*pretium*) because there must be some definite atoning sacrifice for our sins (*certam propitiationem*)" (Apology 4.53).⁶

According to the Confessions, what is necessary in order to avert the wrath of God from the sinner and receive forgiveness and salvation? To what does this stand in contrast?

The merits of Christ who was sacrificed serve as the price that turns aside God's wrath. Christ and His saving work on the cross alone can do this and stand

⁵ Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2000), p. 127.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 128–129.

in contrast to every other merit that human beings may try to offer on their own behalf.

3. “But wherever works are mentioned, the opponents attach their own ungodly opinions: that we merit the forgiveness of sins through good works; that good works are the atoning sacrifice and payment (*propitiation ac pretium*) on account of which God is reconciled to us; that good works conquer the terrors of sin and death, that good works are acceptable in God’s sight on account of their own intrinsic goodness; and they neither need mercy nor Christ as the propitiator” (Apology 4.244).⁷

How did the opponents of the confessors think they were able stand before God? Did they reject the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ? What does this tell us?

The opponents were always pointing to their own works as the means and merits by which they could stand before God. They did not reject the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, but instead invented various ways by which Christ became the reason they were now able to perform works that had merit before God. This fact reminds us that fallen sinners who claim to be Christians do not explicitly reject Christ’s saving work. Instead, they find ways to interpret His work so

that they can insert themselves into a position of doing things to merit salvation.

4. “We are debating about an important matter, namely, about the honor of Christ and the source from which the faithful might seek a sure and certain consolation — whether we place our confidence in Christ or in our own works. But if we put it in our works, Christ will be robbed of his honor as our mediator and propitiator. And, faced with God’s judgment, we will discover that such confidence was futile, and consciences will then plunge into despair” (Apology 4.156-157).⁸

According to the Confessions, what two issues are at stake when we consider the word “propitiation”?

First, the honor of Christ is at stake because to attribute to our own works the ability to stand up before the judgment of God is to rob Christ of honor that He has earned. He was sent by God to carry out this role, and He alone has accomplished it in a way that saves from God’s judgment. Second, when we focus upon the merits of Christ as our propitiator, we have comfort and consolation because His fully accomplished work is reckoned to us as righteous by God’s grace through faith.

TEACHING AND PREACHING PROPITIATION

1. Consider the following sets of words: (1) holy, just, wrathful and (2) loving, gracious, merciful. Which set is emphasized in our world today? What will our teaching and preaching need to do with these two sets in order to help congregation members understand propitiation?

Our world wants a God who is described only by the second group. The biblical teaching about propitiation cannot be understood without both groups. Pastors will need to emphasize the biblical presupposition that God is holy, just and wrathful. Christ is the propitiation given in God’s grace and mercy in order to answer His just wrath.

2. Propitiation involves averting God’s wrath and causing God to be favorable. The idea of changing God’s disposition is sometimes described as being contrary to Christianity. What explanation must be provided?

In discussing propitiation, we can never fail to emphasize that it is God who offers the sacrifice of His Son in order to expiate our sin and thereby allow Himself to be propitious. It is all God’s initiative and God’s doing.

3. The New Testament’s teaching about propitiation assumes what the Old Testament says about the sacrifices of the tabernacle/temple. What challenge does this present to us today? How can we address this?

We live in a time of rapidly declining biblical literacy. Many people do not know the basic Old Testament narratives, much less specific details about the temple/tabernacle and the sacrifices. Since these things

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 157–158.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

provide the foundation for understanding propitiation, it will be necessary to explain them in teaching and preaching. We cannot make assumptions as to what the New Testament writers assumed, but instead must regularly explain them for our hearers.

DISCUSSION

1. Christians often say, “God hates sin but loves the sinner.” Based on Scripture’s teaching about propitiation, how would you respond to this?
2. When talking about propitiation, the confessors responded to the fact that their opponents, while believing in Christ’s death, included their own efforts in obtaining salvation. Discuss the following statement: In a different way, American evangelicalism does the same thing as the Roman Catholic Church by including human effort in the process by which we are saved.
3. The Lutheran Confessions repeatedly describe Christ as “mediator and propitiator” (Apology 4.46, 81, 387; 12.43, 76; 24.57). What is the relationship between these descriptions? How can these descriptions be used to bring comfort to Christians?