

Blogs on Atonement Posted from January through April, 2013

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by Jon Paulien

What really happened at the cross?

What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary? Questions like these have been widely debated under the topic of the atonement. An additional issue has to do with the meaning of the word atonement. Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross?

English dictionaries feature both meanings of the word, it is not an either/or situation among the major linguists. For example, *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* notes under theological meanings both "the saving or redeeming work of Christ wrought through his incarnation, sufferings and death," and "reconciliation between God and men, especially, as effected by Christ." The *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* also gives two theological meanings: 1) the "redemptive life and death of Christ," and 2) the "reconciliation of God and man as brought about by Christ." NT scholar Joel Green agrees with this assessment of the biblical materials in saying, "In doctrinal statements in the Christian tradition, (atonement) typically denotes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. . . In the biblical materials, however, the concept of "atonement" refers more broadly to various means by which particular persons (or humanity) are restored to right relationship with God."

In a series of blogs I want to share some of my recent research on what the Bible has to say about atonement, particularly at the cross. To get a full picture we need to begin with the English word "atonement." That will be the topic of my next blog.

The English Word *Atonement*

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In this blog I will address the English word "atonement" and how it has impacted people's approach to this issue in the English-speaking world. The word "atonement" does not originate in ancient or biblical languages as many other theological words do. It is a compound word constructed from English components. It seems to have originated early in the 16th Century with the word "onement," then came "at onement," and by the end of the century appeared the full form as we know it, "atonement."

The closest root meaning of the word atonement is “reconciliation.” Elaborations of the root meaning of atonement include “restoration of friendly relations,” “the state or act of bringing into concord,” “the condition of being at one with others,” “the action of setting at one after discord or strife,” and/or “amends or reparation made for an injury or wrong.” To “atone for” wrong is to take an action that cancels out the ill effects of alienation and restores harmonious relationship. In addition to reconciliation, however, the word atonement in the English has developed and extended meaning of “propitiation, expiation.” This extended meaning focuses on the basis or means by which reconciliation takes place.

Use of the word in English can reflect both a process and a state. Atonement can be the process of righting wrongs, making amends and bringing people into friendly relations with each other. On the other hand, atonement can mean a state of being in harmony, or at one with others. The English word “atonement” originally meant primarily the state of being at one, modern usage focuses almost entirely on the process by which the hindrances to reconciliation are removed. When it comes to atonement, as noted in the previous paragraph, the basic root meaning of reconciliation has tended to expand in the direction of propitiation and expiation.

It is clear from the major English dictionaries that linguists see a two-fold application of the word atonement in the arena of theology. On the one hand, atonement refers to the redeeming work of Christ achieved by His life, suffering and death. But the word atonement is also recognized to apply to what follows the cross in effecting reconciliation between God and the human race. So it is not an either/or situation in terms of the English word. Atonement occurs both at the cross and in the application of what the cross achieved. We must be very careful in doing theology that we do not unintentionally distort the biblical text on account of changes in the meaning of the English words that we use/have used to translate the biblical text.

Greek and Hebrew Words Translated *Atonement*

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In the King James Version of the English Bible the word “atonement” occurs 81 times in the Old Testament (11x in Exodus, 49x in Leviticus, 17x in Numbers, 2 Sam 21:3, 1 Chr 6:49, 2 Chr 29:24, and Neh 10:33) and only one time in the New (Rom 5:11). Of the 81 occurrences in the Old Testament 77 are clustered in the section of the Pentateuch that focuses primarily on the regulations for the Hebrew tabernacle (from the second half of Exodus through the first half of the book of Numbers). All of them belong to the *kpr* Hebrew word group. Fifteen of the occurrences are in Leviticus 16, which describes the services on the Day of Atonement.

The root meaning of *kpr* in the Hebrew is to cover (as in cover one’s face) or cover up (trouble or

sin). It has the extended meaning of making amends, and providing reconciliation, expiation, cleansing and atonement. An expanded noun form of *kpr* is *kapporeth*, which is used 23 times for the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant. The Ark, of course, played a central role in the services on the Day of Atonement.

When you look at the context in which these words for atonement are found you find some interesting things. The passage that seems to most clearly define atonement is Leviticus 17:11, KJV: “For the life of the flesh *is* in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls: for it *is* the blood *that* maketh an atonement for the soul.” This passage could easily leave the impression that “atonement” in every case is focused solely on blood and its manipulation. And this is certainly true of the Day of Atonement, in which the blood of a bull (Lev 16:14) and a goat (Lev 16:15) is applied in front of the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies and also on the horns of the altar in the Holy Place (16:18-19), thus making atonement for the Most Holy Place (16:16) and the whole assembly of Israel (16:17). But the larger picture of the word group’s usage in the Old Testament requires us to qualify this impression.

Atonement in the Old Testament is not always made by sacrifice and application of blood, but can be granted on the basis of a number of other actions as well. Atonement can be granted on the basis of application of oil (Lev 14:29), burning flour (Lev 5:11-13), burning incense (Num 16:41-50), payment of money (Exod 30:11-16), execution (Num 25:1-13; 2 Sam 21:1-6), gifts of jewelry (Num 31:48-54), the release of a live animal (Lev 16:10) and simple appeals to God (Exod 32:30), through words. In the Psalms, sin is put right largely in the absence of sacrificial or atonement language. In the non-ritual texts of the Old Testament, the proper atonement for moral wrong doing is repentance and renewed obedience (Psa 40:6-8; 51:16-17; 141:2; Prov 21:3; Hos 6:6). Sacrifice can also be used for purposes other than atonement.

A number of Greek words are used to translate *kpr* in the Greek Old Testament (LXX). The most common translation is by the verb *exilaskomai* and the noun *exilasmos*. And the Hebrew word *kapporeth* (– mercy seat) is normally translated *hilastêrion*. On occasion, the LXX translates *kpr* with the Greek word *lutron*, which means ransom or redemption. Since variations of these words are found in the New Testament, they will assist us in understanding how New Testament writers understood the atonement that occurred at the cross.

Atonement Language in the NT

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In Romans 5:11 according to the King James Version of the New Testament atonement is clearly in the context of the cross: “. . . We also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we

have now received the atonement.” While the KJV wording (“we have now received”) can be read in terms of the ongoing process of intercession in the heavenly sanctuary, the aorist indicative form in the Greek (*elabomen*) points to a singular conclusive action in the past, at the cross of Christ, the benefits of which are now (*nun*) made available to those who are rejoicing (present continuous tense– *kauchômenoi*) in Him. So a full picture of the atonement language in Scripture should warn us against an either/or approach.

Romans 5:11 is at the heart and pivot of the whole chapter. Romans 5:11 defines atonement as follows: Through the death of Christ people have been restored from a state of hostility into a peaceful relationship with God. This builds on verse one of the same chapter (NIV), where believers, “having been justified by faith. . . have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” The hostile state of alienation from God introduced by the first Adam is overcome by the death and resurrection of the last Adam (Rom 5:12-21).

It is interesting that the KJV translates only the noun form of the word for “atonement” (*katallagên*) as “atonement.” Verbs forms of the same word occur in verse 10 (*katallagên*– “were reconciled,” *katallagentes*– “having been reconciled”) and are translated as “reconciled.” So the King James translation actually masks the fact that the “reconciled” in verse 10 is a different form of the same word as “atonement” in verse 11. The more modern translations, therefore, are correct in using the English term “reconciliation” instead of “atonement” in Romans 5:11. Furthermore, since the translators of the King James used “atonement” for the noun form but translated “reconciled” for the verb form, it is clear that they understood “atonement” as a synonym of “reconciliation.”

Extended Meaning of The Greek Word *katelassô* (Reconciliation)

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The root meaning of the verb form *katelassô* (“reconciliation”– see last paragraph of previous blog) is difficult to determine, but it has a basic idea of “change” or “exchange.” From there it isn’t far to the idea of “reconcile,” as in “exchanging hostility for a friendly relationship.” When applied to God, the verb is always active, when applied to human beings it is always passive. So reconciliation is something that flows from God to us, not the other way around. The natural state for sinful human beings is hostility toward God (Rom 8:7-8). Reconciliation with God is only possible because God reaches out to us (see next blog for an expansion of these last two sentences).

The noun form *katellagê* corresponds to the meaning of the verb, with the sense of “exchange” or “reconciliation,” the reestablishment of an interrupted or broken relationship. Surprisingly, both the noun and verb forms of *katelassô* are extremely rare in the LXX (Septuagint, the best-

known ancient Greek Old Testament). In fact, within the canonical books, *katellagê* is found only once in Isaiah 9:5, and in that one instance its meaning is obscure. So we need to understand the noun and verb forms of *katelassô* from their usage within the New Testament, which is what I plan to do in the next blog.

Reconciliation in the New Testament

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

The Bible begins with the assumption that humans from the beginning were designed to be in harmonious relationship with God (Gen 1:26-28). But a radical breach has broken this unity (Gen 3:22-24; Isa 59:1-2 Rom 5:12; Eph 2:1). So human beings are alienated from God (Eph 4:18), estranged and hostile to God and each other (Col 1:21; Rom 5:10; 8:7). This is not only true of Gentiles (Rom 1:23ff.), but also of Jews (Rom 3:9-20, 23). The cause of this estrangement is human disobedience toward God and His law (1 John 3:4) arising out of a lack of trust (faith) in who He is (Rom 14:23). This is where the concept of “reconciliation” comes in.

The concept of reconciliation is grounded in the realm of personal relationships, severed and restored. In contexts where there is enmity, distrust or broken relationships of all types, reconciliation is about the healing and restoration of those relationships. So atonement in the New Testament has primarily to do with how the cross of Jesus Christ heals the breach between God and the human race.

As is evident from the first paragraph above, the theme of reconciliation in the New Testament centers particularly in the writings of Paul. In fact, Paul is the only writer of the New Testament who uses the terminology of reconciliation (Rom 5:8-11; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Eph 2:11-16; Col 1:20-23), and it is central to his understanding of the cross. But reconciliation is implied in many other parts of the NT, such as Luke 15:11-31 and Matthew 5:23-24. A related concept is the word “peace,” which describes the outcome of the reconciliation process. Those in Christ have peace with God and also with others (Acts 10:36; Rom 5:1; 8:6; Gal 5:22; Eph 2:14-17; Col 1:20).

To gain a clearer understanding of reconciliation we will look briefly at the main texts where this word group is used, beginning with Romans 5:8-11. Each of these main texts (Rom 5:8-11; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Col 1:19-22; Eph 2:11-16) will be subject of a separate blog.

Reconciliation in the New Testament: Romans 5:8-11

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the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary? When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research. As part of the larger project, this is the first of four blogs on each of the four main texts on reconciliation (Rom 5:8-11; 2 Cor 5:14-21; Col 1:19-22; Eph 2:11-16) in the writings of Paul.

Paul declares in Romans 5:8 that the death of Christ, which occurred at a time when we were still sinners (before we turned to God), demonstrates God's own love toward us. That reconciling love goes all the way to eternity past (John 17:6ff.; Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9-10) but was made visible in a tangible way at the cross. At the time when the cross took place, we were not only sinners but enemies of God (verse 10), and the death of God's Son reconciled us to God. Sin was the root cause of the enmity, since humans were unable to remove it, God put it out of the way at the cross. Paul's use of "were reconciled" clearly places the reconciliation in the past rather than the present from the point of our experience. As a passive, the word also makes it clear that the reconciliation that took place on the cross was entirely God's work, we had no part in it. It is objective, outside of us.

Paul reiterates his point in verse 11, but from the standpoint of the converted person rather than pre-conversion. Through our Lord Jesus Christ "we have now received the reconciliation (or atonement— KJV)." The "now" in verse 11 is in contrast with the time of the believer's enmity and sinfulness. Paul moves from the time of the cross (in verses 8 and 9) to the moment when that past act of atonement is applied to the new believer (verse 11). Reconciliation is something to be "received" (*elabômen*), it exists objectively before we experience it, it is outside of and prior to our response.

A beautiful corollary of Paul's doctrine of reconciliation in this passage is what it tells us about God the Father. In Paul there is no breach between the God of the Old Testament and the Jesus of the New. If you have seen Jesus you have also seen the Father (John 14:9). Arising out of God's love, the cross was God's act of reconciliation and atonement which is applied to human beings through the preaching of the gospel. While Jesus Christ is the active agent of reconciliation, the Father is its author. According to Juergen Moltmann, "The grief of the Father is as important as the death of the Son." The death of Christ, then, somehow made it possible for a holy God to do for sinners what otherwise He could not have done.

Reconciliation in the New Testament: 2 Corinthians 5:14-21

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In 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, Paul grounds reconciliation completely in the death of Christ. The

crucial act is that “one died for all” and so there is a sense that all have somehow died in that action (2 Cor 5:14). Then Paul gives his classic statement about reconciliation in verses 18-20. Reconciliation comes from God and God here (verse 18) is clearly distinguished from Christ, so God the Father is in view. Through the actions of Jesus Christ at the cross, God is reconciled to us and gives us the ministry of reconciliation.

Paul elaborates in verse 19. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. J. I. Packer expressed this beautifully: “The two loves, love of Father and Son, are one.” That reconciliation is grounded in “not reckoning to them their sins” (my translation). The message regarding that reconciliation is then committed or entrusted to “us.” This last point is elaborated in verse 20. Paul and the apostles have become God’s ambassadors to invite others to participate in that reconciliation.

The passage in 2 Corinthians 5 makes several critical points. First, it clearly distinguishes the work of Christ on the cross from the prior purpose of the Father to provide the reconciliation. Christ does not change the heart of the Father by the action he does at the cross, the Father Himself was acting in our behalf through the work of Christ (see also John 3:16; 14:10). Second, God and Jesus are the subjects of the atonement, not its object. If God were the object, Jesus would be giving up His life to appease God. If Jesus were the object, God would be punishing Jesus in His death. But the atonement is never expressed in the latter two ways, here or anywhere else in the New Testament.

Third, there is a “now and not yet” aspect to reconciliation. It is a completed action at the cross, outside of us, once for all (indicative past in the Greek). On the other hand, reconciliation is also a task humans are to do (verses 18-19), it has not yet happened in the fullest sense. In verse 20 this is expressed with an aorist imperative (*katallagête*), which means it does not fully happen until humans respond to what God has done. So reconciliation is not only an established fact, it is an invitation to human response. It is only complete when human beings respond to what God has already done. Fourth, there is a strong sense of exchange or substitution in the passage, although the Greek words for substitution is not used (as we have noted in an earlier blog, there is a strong sense of exchange in the word reconciliation itself [*katallagê*]). Through one death “all died” (5:14, NIV, NKJV), and the one who knew no sin was made sin so “that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (5:21, KJV).

Reconciliation in the New Testament: Colossians 1:19-22

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In Colossians 1:19-22, the concept of reconciliation is expanded beyond the human race to the entire universe. Christ is the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), pre-eminent (1:18), and one in whom all the fullness of God dwells (19). Through Him everything in heaven and earth is reconciled (aorist infinitive [*apokatallaxai*], a point rather than a process), making peace through the blood of the cross (20). What happened on the cross, therefore, provides atonement not just for the human race, but for the entire universe. In verse 21 Paul steps back and addresses the condition humanity was in before the cross. Human beings were alienated (estranged), hostile (enemies) in mind and doing evil deeds. These very same people were reconciled (aorist indicative [*apokatêllaxen*], a point in past time) in the body of His flesh through death (22). The end result is human beings who are holy, blameless and unapproachable in God's sight.

The passage in Colossians 1 brings out a number of important things. The focus in this passage is not on the Father (as was the case in 2 Corinthians 5), but on Jesus Christ, who carries the fullness of God in Himself and thus is qualified to be the agent on God's side of the reconciliation process. The one-time death of Jesus Christ on the cross has reconciled (made atonement) to God not only the human race, but in some sense the entire universe. While not denying the biblical teaching about continuing atonement in the heavenly sanctuary, Paul is clear in this passage that the decisive act of atonement occurred on the cross. And atonement does not end at the cross, but results in transformed lives.

Reconciliation in the New Testament: Ephesians 2:11-16

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The final text that centers on the language of reconciliation is Ephesians 2:11-16. The focus there is not on God's side in the atonement, but on its impact upon humanity. Before their conversion the Gentiles are described in verse 12 (ESV) as "separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." But "now" (2:13) in Christ, those who were afar "have been brought near" through the blood of Christ, a reference to the cross. In the flesh of Christ on the cross (2:14), He brought an end to the hostility (enmity) between God and humanity and also the "dividing wall" (2:14, ESV) between humans. Through Christ Gentile and Jew have become one. Christ acted on the cross as He did in order that He "might reconcile" both Jew and Gentile to God and to each other (16). The impact of the cross included "killing" (2:16, ESV) the enmity between God and human beings.

This passage in Ephesians reiterates the one-time act on the cross as the decisive event in the atonement, but focuses more than the previous passages on the outcome of the cross, the ongoing

nature of the atonement in its effects on the Ephesian church. While there is no talk here of a heavenly sanctuary or Christ's ongoing intercession in heavenly places, the atonement on the cross and the ongoing atonement in the sanctuary are not in conflict with each other. They are two parts of larger concept. Reconciliation and atonement involve both an indicative (past, completed action) and an imperative (something that still needs to happen). In the words of N. T. Wright: "The cross is not just an example to be followed, it is an achievement to be worked out, put into practice."

Reconciliation in the New Testament: Conclusion

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Our examination of the English word atonement and its biblical equivalent, reconciliation, has led to some significant conclusions. First, while atonement is not limited to the cross, it is clearly grounded there in the biblical sense. It is a one-time objective act that removes all barriers to reconciliation except the human response. Atonement is complete, and it is complete now. Second, there is also a not yet sense to the atonement. The cross is an established fact, a one-time event in the past. But atonement and reconciliation don't end there, they continue in the work of Christ in heaven and in the ministry of reconciliation on earth. These continuing actions effect that human response that was not completed at the cross. So in one sense, atonement is complete at the cross, and in another sense it is not.

For the sake of Seventh-day Adventist readers it may be helpful to note that Ellen G. White offers a similar balance to that of Paul. While she can say "The intercession of Christ in man's behalf in the sanctuary above is as essential to the plan of salvation as was His death upon the cross" (EW 260), she is also very firm that "The sacrifice of Christ as an atonement for sin is the great truth around which all other truths cluster" (SDABC 5: 1137) and "the cross. . . is the means of man's atonement" (6T 236). In speaking about the cross she could say, "The conditions of the atonement had been fulfilled" (Ms 138, 1897).

Why is it so hard for human beings to maintain their balance on topics such as this? Because human beings are diverse. We respond to different metaphors of salvation, depending on our personalities and life experiences. And when it comes to atonement, the metaphors are many.

The Problem of Metaphor

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web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

When it comes to spiritual matters it is very difficult to use direct speech. Knowing God is like gazing into the sun (Eph 3:19; Rom 11:33-36; 1 Cor 13:9, 12). According to J. I. Packer, “It is a unique kind of knowledge which, though real, is not full; it is knowledge of what is discernible within a circle of light against the background of a larger darkness; it is, in short, knowledge of a *mystery*, the mystery of the living God at work.” God is real, yet in our everyday experience we do not see, hear or touch God (in the Bible, Moses and Jesus were notable exceptions). All talk of God involves the stretching of human language. So when it comes to spiritual matters, we generally speak about God using metaphors, analogies or other figures of speech.

When it comes to getting right with God, for example, the Bible frequently makes use of law court metaphors. The human condition is described in terms of guilt and condemnation. We are legally out of synch with God. Salvation is then described in legal terms such as justification, acquittal and vindication. On the other hand, if the human condition is described in terms of debt (a banking or financial metaphor), the appropriate salvation word would be forgiveness or possibly redemption.

People often treat such language as if it were scientifically precise with reference to our salvation (which itself is a metaphor based either in the realm of rescue operations or healing), but it is actually metaphorical, speaking about something beyond the five senses in the language of concrete, everyday existence (“concrete” itself is here a figure of speech!). Other well-known biblical metaphors are “the body of Christ,” “the fruit of the Spirit,” and “the bread of life.”

The Problem of Metaphor II

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When it comes to explaining how the cross of Jesus Christ reconciles us to God, we move immediately into the realm of metaphor. Metaphor is based on a similarity between something that we cannot describe directly and something that we know from our everyday experience. The analogy between the two conceptual worlds expresses something that is real and true, but it rarely does so in a complete way. There is both commonality and difference. To press any single metaphor into doing the job of explaining everything is to distort our understanding of the whole.

This does not imply some sort of post-modern “anything goes” approach to Scripture. Even God speaks in analogies and models, but they are “revealed models” or “controlling models.” God’s models are revelation, not speculation. They are ways of thought that God Himself has taught us in Scripture. The biblical metaphors operate as controls for unrestrained theological modeling. While we know only in part, what the Bible teaches us is adequate for both salvation and a living relationship with God.

Throughout history, Christian theology has often focused on one or another New Testament model of the atonement and tried to absolutize that metaphor, as if it explained everything. But that is never the perspective of the New Testament writers, as I will lay out in future blogs. We will best do justice to atonement at the cross if we are open to the great variety of metaphors and figures of speech that the New Testament writers used to express how God used the cross to reconcile the world to Himself. As one pulls different clubs from a golf bag, depending on one's location on the golf course, so different aspects of atonement are employed at different times as needed.

Coming back to Romans 5:8-11, which I discussed about six blogs ago, we note the wide variety of metaphors for the atonement that occur in that single passage. The language of sin and blood (verses 8 and 9) is drawn from the cultic context of the ancient tabernacle. The language of enmity and reconciliation comes from the realm of relationships. And the language of justification comes from the law court. Paul does not limit himself to a single metaphor to describe what happened at the cross and he can mix several metaphors into a single paragraph! When it comes to describing what God did for us in Christ, human language is exposed in all its weakness.

When it comes to atonement, the Word of God is expressed in human language! In the words of Ellen G. White (1 SM 21): "The Bible is written by inspired men, but it is not God's mode of thought and expression. It is that of humanity. God, as a writer, is not represented. Men will often say such an expression is not like God. But God has not put Himself in words, in logic, in rhetoric, on trial in the Bible. The writers of the Bible were God's penmen, not His pen. Look at the different writers.

"It is not the words of the Bible that are inspired, but the men that were inspired. Inspiration acts not on the man's words or his expressions but on the man himself, who, under the influence of the Holy Ghost, is imbued with thoughts. But the words receive the impress of the individual mind. The divine mind is diffused. The divine mind and will is combined with the human mind and will; thus the utterances of the man are the word of God."

Why and How the Cross?

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

Though Christians generally agree on the facts of Jesus' death and resurrection, they differ widely on the "why" of the cross. Throughout Christian history churchmen and scholars have debated the meaning of the cross as atonement without coming to a settled conclusion. Most of these debates were grounded at one point or another on specific metaphors or models found in the New Testament. There was often the attempt to put forward a particular metaphor as if it were the only possible one. But, as we have seen, the full richness of the biblical testimony will be perceived to the degree that we take the entire witness of the New Testament to the meaning

of the cross into account.

I will close this series of blogs on atonement, therefore, with a survey of the main metaphors by which the New Testament writers expressed their understanding of what the atonement was all about. When it comes to the main metaphors of the atonement, scholars differ even on their number. Generally scholarly lists run anywhere from five to ten. In the broadest sense, there are at least 20 different metaphors for salvation in the New Testament. But focusing specifically on the issue of atonement at the cross, I have chosen eight on the basis of the following criteria. All of the eight metaphors are used by at least two different authors in the New Testament (multiple attestation) and they are firmly grounded in multiple passages within at least one of those authors. They use analogy to explain the writer's perception of who Jesus was and is. In most cases they are also based by NT writers on their usage in the Old Testament Scriptures (obviously the story of the cross as a model or pattern could only become relevant after the event happened).

You will note in the blogs which follow that "reconciliation" is not one of the eight metaphors discussed. One could argue that it should be, although it does not meet the criterion of multiple attestation (only Paul uses the metaphor). But since the goal of this series of blogs is an understanding of the "atonement" (an English word) and atonement is a translation of *katalassô* in Romans 5:11, it seemed appropriate to begin with reconciliation as expressing the fundamental meaning of what the translators of the King James Bible and the Adventist pioneers understood by atonement. Further aspects of the atonement at the cross will be discerned by looking at other metaphors of what God did on the cross, even though the word "atonement" isn't used there. The eight metaphors for atonement will be explored in the eight blogs that follow this one.

The Cross as a Sacrifice

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

The Hebrew words for atonement (*kpr*, *kapporeth*) are heavily associated with the Old Testament sacrificial system (Exod 29:36; Lev 4:20; Num 15:25). While sacrifice was a widespread concept in the ancient world, there were significant differences between pagan and Hebrew sacrificial understandings. In the Hebrew understanding there was no magical power in the sacrifice, its value was solely in the blessing of God. Sacrifice was also a common model of salvation in the non-Jewish world at the time of the apostles.

Given the nature of Christ's death and the above background, it is not surprising that the New Testament used sacrificial language to describe the cross. It is a major theme in Hebrews, where Jesus is described as the fulfillment and extension of that sacrificial system. Other explicit

references to the death of Jesus Christ as a sacrifice include 1 Corinthians 5:7 (KJV: “Christ our passover is sacrificed for us”) and Ephesians 5:2 (ESV: “a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”).

The cross as a sacrifice is also implied in frequent references to the blood of Christ (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Rom 3:25; 5:9; Eph 1:7; 2:13; Col 1:20; 1 Pet 1:18-19, cf. Lev 17:11). The implication of sacrifice is also there in John 1:29, where Jesus is described as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (NIV) For the writers of the New Testament, the great Old Testament text that led them to apply sacrificial language to the death of Christ was Isaiah 53, where the Suffering Servant was led as a Lamb to the slaughter (Isa 53:7), died as “an offering for sin” (Isa 53:10, KJV), and “bore the sins of many” (53:12).

Why the cross? The metaphor of sacrifice implies that death is the penalty for sin (Gen 2:16-17; Ezek 18:4, 20) and that the death of a sacrificial victim would substitute or be exchanged for the death of the sinner (2 Cor 5:14, 21). Since the book of Hebrews denies that the sacrifices in the OT sanctuary were the ultimate basis for remission of sin, the sacrifice of Christ is not one sacrifice among many, but the single sacrifice that was truly meaningful and put an end to all others (Heb 9:25-26; 10:1-14). Through the sacrifice of Christ, the sins of the world could be forgiven. **Unfortunately, the biblical texts concerning sacrifice never fully reveal the inner logic behind such ritual acts.** It is clear that sacrifice is effective in restoring right relations with God, how this is so is less clear. Jesus’ death was “for us” (1 Thess 5:10), “for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3), and “for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 14:24, NIV, ESV). Perhaps the meaning of sacrifice in biblical times was so self-evident to the ancients that it needed no explanation. That means this is one of those things we cannot fully explain today.

The Cross as a Ransom or Redemption

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

In an earlier blog we noted that in the LXX (Greek translation of the OT) the Hebrew words for atonement (*kpr*, *kapporeth*) were sometimes translated by the Greek word for ransom/redemption (*lutron*). So it should not be surprising if *lutron* and its derivatives (*apolutrosis* and *antilutron*) are used to explain the atonement in the New Testament. In any case, the language of ransom or redemption had a rich background in the First Century. In the Gentile world slaves and prisoners of war could be “redeemed” by paying a suitable ransom price. Among the Jews this language was grounded in the Israelite deliverance from Egyptian slavery at the time of the Exodus (Exod 6:6; 15:13; Deut 7:8).

In the New Testament, the cross of Christ is described in ransom/redemption language (Mark 10:45 and parallels; Rom 3:24; Heb 9:12, 15; Eph 1:7; 1 Pet 1:18-19). Paul can also write about

having been “bought with a price” (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Scholars through the centuries have debated this theme. Did God’s redeeming of the human race at the cross require the payment of a price or did it not? Whatever we make of this concept, there is a strong sense of substitution or equivalence in the Greek form *antilutron* (avnti, lutron: “ransom in place of,” see 1 Tim 2:6) and the way ransom is expressed in Mark 10:45 (“ransom [*lutron*] in place of [*anti*] many”—my translation). Ransom in the NT, however, may be less about a transaction than about the value that God places upon us.

If one understands that the New Testament points to the payment of a price, there is no indication there to whom the price was paid, whether to God, Satan or some other entity. What is clear from this language is that the atonement at the cross was costly to the godhead. The forgiveness that we receive is free to us through the cross, but it was not cheap to God. What Jesus endured on the cross was in behalf of, in place of, all of us.

The Cross as a “*Hilastêrion*”

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

A third Greek word associated with Old Testament atonement language is *hilastêrion* (i`lasth, rion), which was consistently applied in the LXX (Greek translation of the OT) for the mercy seat on the ark of the covenant (Lev 16:2ff., etc.). It is transliterated here because there is no settled English equivalent for it. In Hebrews 9:5 *hilastêrion* is used in common OT fashion to describe or name the mercy seat in the Most Holy place of the Hebrew sanctuary. But there is no direct theological meaning stated there.

The other usage of *hilastêrion* is in Romans 3:25 (related nouns and verbs are found in Hebrews 2:17 and 1 John 2:1-2 and 4:10.), and here it comes at the culmination of a process of reasoning that goes all the way back to the first chapter. After an introductory summary of the gospel (Rom 1:16-17), Paul speaks of the wrath of God being revealed against sin (1:18), but since sin has left the entire human race in a hopeless condition (1:18 - 3:20), a mighty intervention from God is needed. That intervention is described by means of multiple metaphors. It is the manifestation of the righteousness of God through the faith of Jesus Christ (3:21-22). It is justification by His grace through the redemption (*apolutroseôs*) which is in Christ Jesus (3:24). That redemption is further explained as a *hilastêrion* through His blood (3:25). So the word *hilastêrion* is a crucial part of the solution God offers on account of human sin.

Hilastêrion in Romans 3:25 is usually translated as “propitiation” (KJV, ESV, etc.) or as “expiation” (RSV, NAB, etc.). The NIV clarifies without clarifying by translating *hilastêrion* as “sacrifice of atonement.” In pagan Greek sources *hilastêrion* carries the idea of propitiation, to turn away someone’s anger, to conciliate, usually by the offer of a gift. In Jewish and Christian

sources the word usually means expiation, to cancel guilt or pay the penalty for a crime, to nullify sin and its effects. The first meaning sees *hilastêrion* in personal terms, the second sees it in impersonal terms. You can propitiate a person, but you expiate a sin or a crime. So what do we do with this idea today?

For starters, pagan views of wrath and propitiation are absent from the Scriptural view of God, He is not a capricious and vindictive deity whose mind must be changed by an overwhelming sacrifice. But in the context of Romans 3:25, wrath and negative judgment are too central to ignore in relation to the solution that God provides, so there is an element of propitiation in Paul's use of *hilastêrion*. How does one reconcile the love of God with His wrath against sin? And does such a perspective in the Bible encourage violence in the name of God?

God's holiness made the penalty for sin inescapable. But God's love endured the penalty of sin in our place. God took upon Himself the penalty of sin. In the words of Raoul Dederen: "What the holiness of God required, His love provided." At the cross both God's wrath against sin is revealed and His love for the sinner. There justice and mercy kiss each other (Psalm 85:10). Love does not gloss over sin, but effectively grapples with it. Whatever we understand by the phrase "the wrath of God," it is important to note that the wrath of God is not removed by human activity, its removal is due to none less than God Himself. He dealt with this while we were still sinners, so the way to reconciliation is completely open to us.

While it may be more comfortable for some to ignore this kind of language in the Bible, let's take a brief look at how a few well-known scholars wrestle with it. How do we reconcile this element of wrath and propitiation with the love and mercy of God? J. I. Packer argues that the wrath of God does not diminish the love of God, rightly understood it raises it to unimaginable heights. The divine withdrawal from Jesus on the cross was all the more intense because Jesus had experienced the full depth of the Father's love. For Packer, penal substitution demonstrated the depth of the Father's love, what He was willing to take on Himself to save humanity. Timothy Keller points out that when you love wounded or needy people, there is always a cost to yourself. God accepted that cost to reconcile Himself with wounded and needy people like ourselves. Philip Yancey points out that only someone who has been hurt can forgive. At Calvary, God chose to be hurt. So for these writers, the penalty of sin doesn't diminish the love of God, but highlights it all the more.

The greater the challenge that sin presents, the greater the action of love that was needed to overcome it. The challenge of sin highlights the love of God all the more. While *hilasterion* as a metaphor is challenging in today's world and easily misunderstood, for many it too provides a needed dimension for understanding atonement at the cross. But use with caution, especially in the sickroom.

The Cross as a Victory over Satan/Sin/Evil

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive*

meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary? When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

The idea of ransom/redemption recalls the Exodus, where God's redemption of Israel proved also to be a victory over the evil powers under Pharaoh. In fact, Israel's freedom could not have been obtained without such a prior victory. The language of victory is widespread in the New Testament. It presupposes a somewhat dualistic view of the universe in which spiritual powers and sin hold sway over the human race. Sin, for example, is described as a malignant power in Romans 7:7-11.

Perhaps the clearest text asserting victory over the evil powers is Colossians 2:14-15. While parts of this passage are truly difficult to understand, the main message of these two verses is clear: The cross of Jesus Christ has "disarmed the powers and authorities" (Col 2:15, NIV) through the cross, resulting in forgiveness of sins for the human race (2:13). The language of powers (*archas*) and authorities (*exousias*) translates Greek words that have consistent reference to the demonic realm (see Rom 8:38; 1 Cor 15:24; Eph 3:10; Col 2:10). A further clear victory passage is Revelation 12:9-11, where Satan is cast down from heaven as the accuser of the brethren, and is overcome on earth by "the blood of the Lamb" (see also John 12:31; 16:11; Rom 8:35-38; 1 Cor 15:24-25; Phil 2:9-11; Heb 2:14; 1 John 3:8; Rev 5:5-10). The ultimate victory, of course, is the victory over death won by Christ at His resurrection (1 Cor 15:57) and culminating in the resurrection of those who believe in Christ (1 Cor 15:20-22). This theme often puts more emphasis on the cosmic significance of Christ's death than on its role in human salvation.

Why the cross? Because it was needed to defeat the powers of sin and Satan, freeing human beings to return to God. Jesus is our champion (substitute again?) who defeats Satan for us (cf. 1 Sam 17:8-11). Exactly how the cross defeats Satan is less clearly worked out, but may be hinted at in the next metaphor for how the cross effects the atonement.

The Cross as a Revelation of God's Character

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

While the previous New Testament models of atonement all focus on what God has done to pave the way for human beings to be reconciled to Him, this model of the atonement focuses on the human side of the equation, the effect the cross has on human beings. The human condition is portrayed in terms of ignorance or darkness. Jesus is the one who brings light and knowledge and reveals the true character of God. This perspective is particularly prevalent in the Gospel of John.

In the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, the coming of Jesus reveals the knowledge of God (John

1:14). Jesus' intimate relationship with God enables Him to rightly "exegete" (*exêgêsato*) God (1:18). Jesus is the "light of the world" (8:12; 9:5) who not only reveals God but exposes the true character of human beings as well (3:18-21; 13:1-17). Helping His disciples to know God is at the core of Jesus' mission (17:3). And at the center of that "making known" is the cross, which in John is described as a "lifting up" which enables all to see the glory of God (17:1). The cross of Christ is, therefore, the supreme moment of revelation.

In the Gospel of Mark everyone, including the disciples of Jesus, struggles with who Jesus is from the beginning almost to the end of the story (Mark 1:27; 2:6-7; 3:21; 4:10-13; 8:13-21). It is only at the moment Jesus dies that the centurion recognizes what the narrator and God have been saying all along; Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 1:1, 9-11; 9:2-8; 15:39). It is the cross that reveals who Jesus is.

This focus on knowledge is not gnostic in character, rather Jesus echos the Hebrew concept of knowledge as involving close personal relationships (Gen 4:1, 17, 25; Deut 34:10; 2 Chr 33:13; Isa 55:5; Hos 6:3; 13:5). Why the cross? To provide human beings with the kind of knowledge that will draw them back to God.

This model of the atonement seems most effective when combined with one or more of the objective models of atonement like sacrifice, ransom or victory. The cross best reveals the love of God if it was necessary, if it had a purpose other than revelation as well. As Ivan Blazen illustrates, a parent racing into a house to save a child demonstrates love for that child. Racing into an empty burning house to "demonstrate love" is not nearly as effective. At Loma Linda University Graham Maxwell powerfully combined the revelation model with the victory model. The issue of God's character is bigger than just this earth. God's demonstration of character impacts the entire universe, not just this earth.

The Cross as a Pattern/Model

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

While "What would Jesus do?" is a common enough phrase, we are not here addressing Jesus' life as a model for human beings to imitate, but specifically His death on the cross. The New Testament frequently encourages believers to imitate the crucified Christ. The cross as a pattern or model for Christian behavior is explored by scholars in terms of "missional suffering" and "cruciformity." This is a relatively new perspective although clearly grounded in the New Testament. There are multiple passages that call believers to self-sacrificial suffering after the pattern of Jesus' suffering on the cross.

Perhaps the best-known call to "cruciformity" is found in the gospels. In Mark 8:34 (NAB) Jesus

said, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me” (cf. 8:35-38, cf. Matt 16:24-27; Luke 9:23-26). It is in the context of the cross that Jesus invites the first to be last and to become servant of all (Mark 9:30-35, cf. Matt 17:22-23; 18:1-5; Luke 9:49-50; 17:1-2). The cross sets a new standard for leadership; servant leadership (Mark 10:42-45; Matt 20:25-28). Jesus invites His followers to follow him in the context of the cross (John 12:26, cf. 20-25), then sets the example by washing the disciples’ feet (13:12-17, cf. 34-35; 15:12-13). Hebrews 12:1-2 describes Christian life as a race looking ahead to the crucified Christ as a model. John exhorts the believers that if they know Jesus laid down His life for them, they should do the same for each other (1 John 3:16). And nowhere in the New Testament is this message clearer than in 1 Pet 2:21 (ESV): “For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.”

Paul delights in becoming one of Christ’s “fools” and urges the Corinthians to follow his steady and constant example of living the cross (1 Cor 4:8-17; 11:1). For Paul, this is not so much a doctrine as a “cruciform way of life.” This cruciform teaching becomes explicit in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 where he urges that one died for all so that we may be constrained to live no longer for ourselves, but for the one who died for us (cf. Gal 5:24; 6:14,17; Eph 5:1-2). This teaching reaches an exalted height when Paul counsels the married in Ephesians 5:25-28 (KJV): “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it.” So for Paul it is clear that the self-sacrificing love of cross provides the model for every aspect of life.

The Cross as a New Covenant

This is one of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* When the series is finished, I plan to post on the web site the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

This model comes last for two reasons only. First, it has only received attention in the last few years as a model of the atonement, and, second, I realized in reading the work of others that I had written on this model years before but without connecting the idea to “the atonement.” This is probably my favorite model of the atonement because it is so solidly biblical and clearly goes back to Jesus Himself.

According to the Synoptic Gospels, Jesus offers His own interpretation of the cross in His comments at the last supper (Mark 14:24; Matt 26:28; Luke 22:20). In all three versions, the cup represents the blood of the covenant and Luke clearly adds the qualifier “new”: “the *new* covenant in my blood” (I am working with the evidence of the standard Greek text, various translations of Matthew, Mark and Luke privilege different manuscripts). Jesus’ (new) covenant blood is “poured out for many” (Mark 14:24), “for the forgiveness of sins” (Matt 26:28), or simply “for you” (Luke 22:20).

When Jesus says “*the covenant*” He could only be talking about the one and only covenant of the Old Testament, grounded in the fundamental event of Israel’s history, the Exodus. After all, Jesus was presiding at a Passover meal as He spoke these words, and a review of the events of the Exodus was part of the Passover ritual. *The covenant* of the Exodus was the covenant with Abraham, which is grounded in the language of Eden. Clearly, Jesus saw His upcoming death as the decisive event in all of Israel’s history, and by extension, the history of the whole human race.

The language of Jesus’ comments over the cup at the last supper echoes the covenant-renewal blood in Exodus 24:6-8 in particular and the atoning sacrifices of Leviticus more generally. The connection with forgiveness of sins (Matt 26:28) also connects the death of Jesus with the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 and the new covenant promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Jesus’ death is the means by which the people of God are liberated, forgiven and brought into a new covenant relationship with God.

In the only New Testament account of the last supper outside the gospels (1 Cor 11:23-25), Paul passes on a similar tradition, “this cup is the new covenant in my blood” (verse 25). In the book of Hebrews, the word “covenant” appears 16 times, nearly half the 33 occurrences in the New Testament as a whole. Jesus is there described as the mediator of a new (Heb 9:15; 12:24), eternal (13:20) or better (8:6) covenant that is made effective by His blood or by His death (10:19; 12:24; 13:20, etc.). Not only that, the new covenant promise of Jeremiah is quoted twice in the book (Heb 8:8-13; 10:16-18).

What makes this line of interpretation exciting is that covenant is not only a major category throughout the New Testament, even where the word “covenant” is not used, but this model has the potential of drawing a common thread through nearly all of the previous models. In summary, the new covenant promised in the Old Testament (Jer 31:31-34; Ezek 11:17-20; 36:23-28) was to be a transforming, creative act of God that would generate a renewed covenant people of God. They would be liberated, restored, forgiven, empowered and permanent. The New Testament writers understood that transforming act of God to have occurred at the cross.

Conclusion to “Why the Cross?”

This is the last of a series of blogs on the atonement. They seek to answer questions like *What is atonement? Does the term refer only to the cross or are there broader and more extensive meanings in relation to work of Christ both before and after the cross? What really happened at the cross? Was the cross absolutely necessary?* Watch the main page of the Armageddon web site for a posting of the original scholarly article which will include the many references and sources that were involved in this research.

We have seen that there are a wide variety of metaphors for the atonement in the New Testament. Not only are these metaphors diverse, but they tend to be intertwined with each other, making it difficult to impossible to separate them and to favor one over the others. The more we understand and respect these various metaphors, the more people can be reached with the

message of the cross, as people of a variety of personalities tend to be drawn to one or the other of them. And as the gospel is present to a variety of cultures, we may be led to new biblical metaphors that we had overlooked before or even be led by the Spirit to express the cross in a way the New Testament writers had not thought of. Over time, and as a result of misuse or misunderstanding, some biblical models of atonement may need to be used with caution, if at all. But in all thinking regarding the atonement, we need to be guided by the inspired models placed for us in the Scriptures.

What conclusions can we draw from this brief survey of the relationship between the atonement and the cross?

1) The English word for atonement is most closely related to the concept of reconciliation. Atonement provides the means and the incentive to reconcile human beings to God.

2) In the New Testament atonement is clearly focused on the cross, but in Hebrews the principle of the atonement continues in the heavenly work of Jesus Christ.

3) The human race is in great need of atonement, being unable to save itself. There are barriers between the human race and God on both sides of the equation. Because of sin, reconciliation is first of all very costly to God, He cannot set aside its implications lightly. Also because of sin, human beings need to be drawn away from rebellion and back to relationship with God.

4) Although sin is a barrier between God and the human race, the purpose of sacrifice is not to change God's mind with regard to the human race, instead He Himself lovingly provides the sacrifice/ransom/atonement needed to reconcile all to Himself.

5) Human beings are called to respond to God's reconciling action with an action of their own.

6) Although God allows humans to reap the consequences of their own sinful actions, He continually desires fellowship with sinful humans. His love provides all that they cannot perform in order for atonement to take place.

7) The atonement made at the cross is not limited to some humans or even all humans, but in some sense affects the entire universe.

8) The New Testament offers a variety of models to explain the atonement. It does not set one view as normative over against the others, and various models could be mingled in a single sentence of paragraph.

In my daily experience and that of the people I know and love life often becomes overwhelming and even depressing. Were we left to ourselves, self-medication might seem the only way out. In the words of a young person I know, "life sucks." It is filled with tragedy, pain, suffering, and rejection. Into this mess God Himself came down to us and tasted a depth of tragedy, pain, suffering and rejection that exceeds any we have known. And however we describe what happened on the cross, it makes all the difference. Because we have been saved, redeemed, expiated, acquitted, rescued, taught and brought into a new covenant with God, we can begin to see the good, the true, the beautiful, and the just that God has poured into this world. And in seeing the down payment of these things, we also hope in the greater glories to come.