

Atonement, Reconciliation, Propitiation, and Justification

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Propitiation

Propitiation refers to the turning away of wrath by an offering. It is similar to expiation (making amends or reparation) and remission (canceling a debt), but expiation and remission do not carry the wrath connotation.

Theologically, the propitiation is the shed blood of Jesus on the cross. It turned away the wrath of God so that He could remit “sins previously committed,” (Rom. 3:25). He removed the wrath of God against us by taking our sins upon Himself and thereby also taking our penalty, the second death, upon himself. This second death He died as us (as our representative) while on the cross. This means that we don't have to die that second death—ever—unless we choose to.

Atonement

Atonement seeks to establish a congenial relationship between two opposing parties (“At-one-ment”). To atone means to make amends—to make reparation, to agree, to be in one accord.

Theologically, this would be between man and God. The Old Testament atonements offered by the priests were temporary and a foreshadow of the real and final atonement made by Jesus. Jesus atoned for the sins of the world by making propitiation (1st John 2:2). As human beings, it is critical to note that *we* do not make atonement to *God*, but that *God* makes the atonement *for us*. Jesus Himself, as the representative of the human race, *is* the atonement for the whole human race. (1st John 2:2. See Reconciliation, below).

Reconciliation

Reconciliation is re-establishing a correct relationship between two or more persons, similar to atonement.

Theologically, it is the same as atonement in that, in its final stage, it is the *end result* of the atonement. Reconciliation works in stages, however. *Complete* reconciliation places God and human beings in living connection with each other. This way, God can work uninhibited through His subjects. In the first stage, *God* is reconciled to *all human beings* through the death of Jesus. The sin has been remitted and the wrath against sin is redirected away from the sinner. At this point the reconciliation is only partial for the individual. Even though we have already been given salvation, we, as individuals, need to respond to make this reconciliation complete¹. We need to reciprocate by saying “yes” (yield, surrender) to God through a thankful heart full of appreciation for the gift, including the price God paid for our salvation. Then we are reconciled to *God* through faith, and the reconciliation is complete. Should we say “no” to God, we open ourselves to wrath by hanging on to sin. At some point, God's wrath against sin will later be addressed against that sin. If we are hanging on to sin, that wrath against sin must also pass to and through us. We become “guilty by association” in that we insist on continuing our association with our sin. We have refused God's gift of salvation and righteousness.

Justification

“Just” means “right”.

Theologically, justification means to be made right with God. Specifically, it is to be made *righteous*. And this is done only through the power of God, Himself. God has already *given* His righteousness to all of us. Individually, we begin to become righteous in our *experience* when we believe. Justification includes all aspects of propitiation, atonement, and reconciliation, at any of the different stages. It finally culminates in the Christian being able to stand in the full presence of a Holy God without needing a mediator.

Here is an example of how these four terms interplay:

Revelation 4:1 After this I looked, and, behold, a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which I heard was as it were of a trumpet talking with me; which said, Come up hither, and I will shew thee things which must be hereafter. 2 And immediately I was in the spirit: and, behold, a throne was set in heaven, and one sat on the throne. 3 And he that sat was to look upon like a jasper and a sardine stone: and there was a rainbow round about the throne,

¹ “Complete” is a big word. It is not the same as “completed”, however, the latter implying that our salvation is irreversible. Irreversibility does not happen until the “close of probation” when Jesus comes.

in sight like unto an emerald. 4 And round about the throne were four and twenty seats: and upon the seats I saw four and twenty elders sitting, clothed in white raiment; and they had on their heads crowns of gold. 5 And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunderings and voices: and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. 6 And before the throne there was a sea of glass like unto crystal: and in the midst of the throne, and round about the throne, were four beasts full of eyes before and behind. 7 And the first beast was like a lion, and the second beast like a calf, and the third beast had a face as a man, and the fourth beast was like a flying eagle. 8 And the four beasts had each of them six wings about him; and they were full of eyes within: and they rest not day and night, saying, Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, which was, and is, and is to come. 9 And when those beasts give glory and honour and thanks to him that sat on the throne, who liveth for ever and ever, 10 The four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, 11 Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created.

Let's look at this scene. It takes place in the first apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. We know this because the menorah, the seven lamps of fire, are burning before the throne (verse 5). This candlestick sits on the left side of the sanctuary as you enter the door. On the opposite (right) side of the room is the table of shewbread. This was the throne of God during the first apartment ministry—the daily ministry in the sanctuary. So God is opening the door (pulling back the veil) so that we can see into the heavenly sanctuary. As we stand at the door, poised to enter God's throne room, we see that on our left is the golden candlestick. On the right is the throne of God, the table with two stacks of shewbread, one stack for the Father and one for Jesus Christ.² Straight ahead is the altar of incense. From this incense emanates the smoke of the prayers of God's people going over the second veil into the Most Holy Place of the heavenly sanctuary. Inside the Most Holy Place we will find the Arc of the Covenant, the mercy seat, and the two covering cherubs. From this mercy seat is where Jesus ministers the cleansing of the hearts of God's people (This is **justification** by faith—His righteousness given to them in exchange for their sin³) and the cleansing of the sanctuary before He can come to earth and bring His people home.

2 The logic of the shewbread representing God's throne being on the right side of the sanctuary as you enter the first apartment, and before entering the Most Holy Place, is that the candlestick is placed in front of the throne in the description provided in Revelation 4:5, clearly placing the reader in the sanctuary. Also, the throne of God is considered to reside “in the sides of the north”. Isaiah 14:13. Since the entrance to the sanctuary faced east, the shewbread, being on the right, would reside on the north side, and is the only piece of furniture in the whole sanctuary to do so. The logic of the two stacks of bread on the table seems obvious, especially when we understand that Jesus is the bread of life. John 6:33,35,48,51. One might ask why is there not a third stack, a throne for the holy Spirit? He is God also, isn't He? I reply that I believe the Holy Spirit voluntarily chose to subordinate Himself to both the Father and the Son. See Appendix J on the Godhead for details. The work of the High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary was the work of Jesus Christ, primarily. See *Early Writings*, Ellen G. White, p 54-56 for a metaphorical description of the move of both the Father and the Son from the first apartment to the second apartment in the heavenly sanctuary in 1844. As followers of Jesus, we want to follow their movements into the Most Holy Place and understand and appreciate the work of the heavenly High Priest in completely removing the sins of His people before He can leave the sanctuary to come get His people and take them home to heaven.

3 “Justification by faith” is this righteousness beginning to become part of their experience when they believe, that is, when they agree to the exchange.

In the earthly sanctuary, which is a *type*⁴ of the heavenly sanctuary, when a person committed a sin, He would come to the sanctuary, bringing a lamb as an offering. In the presence of the priest, he would kill the lamb. The priest would then take the blood of the lamb into the first apartment of the sanctuary and sprinkle it on the altar of incense. From here, the sinner's prayers would metaphorically ascend, through the smoke of the incense, into the second apartment on its way to the mercy seat. This would **atone** for the sin. It would place the sinner back into right relation to God temporarily. But, because it was an *earthly* lamb, it was metaphorical. It did not actually *remove* the sin or the guilt. The only sacrifice that could *actually* remove our sin and guilt was the death of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ Himself. The killing of the earthly lamb and the sprinkling of the earthly blood merely represented an act of God that would take place some time in the future. It was an object lesson, a visual aid, so to speak.

The death of Jesus Christ on our behalf, *actually* purged our sin(s) by taking our penalty for sin. Hebrews 1:3. This was the **propitiation**, whereby God *could* be **reconciled** to *us* because our sin is now gone. The **reconciliation** becomes *complete* when we, seeing what God has done for us, say “Yes” to Him and we are **reconciled** to *Him*. This sets up a situation where both God and the individual are reconciled to *each other*. We become God's children and full heirs, in connection with God, and God can begin dispensing assets⁵ from the trust fund of our inheritance that has been set up for us. We are now in right relation (connection) to Him and the **atonement** is fulfilled. When God's people are sealed, this **atonement** is completed and mutual **reconciliation** becomes permanent.⁶

The death of the lamb, the sprinkling of the blood, and the smoke from the incense in the sanctuary service represented the complete cycle of propitiation, atonement, and reconciliation, respectively. There were other aspects to this process that included burning the sacrifices, representing the cleansing or purging of sin. Some of each sacrifice was buried to indicate that God has placed our sin out of sight, to be remembered no more. Sometimes the priest would *eat* the sacrifice and thereby metaphorically carry the sinner's sin *in his body* into the sanctuary. This was also a type of Christ who bore our sin in His body to the cross. 1st Peter 2:24. (Eating the animal sacrifice was not done for health reasons. The original diet God gave to mankind was total vegetarianism. Genesis 1:29-30; 3:18. But the eating of *clean* flesh—after draining the blood—was permitted after the flood. This was because the flood completely destroyed all the vegetation. This new diet was to be temporary until gardens could be

4 A “type” is a model. The “antitype” is the real thing that the model represents.

5 Righteousness, eternal life, salvation, and temporal needs, constantly as we need them.

6 See Revelation chapter 7.

re-established. However, flesh was consumed at the cost of length of life, much as Christ taking our sins cost Him His life. Genesis 6:19; 7:2⁷; and 9:3-5. But today God wants to bring His people back to the original diet as much as they are willing to allow Him to accomplish in their lives. That way, they can be in the best possible health to be the best possible witnesses in His trial.)