

The Propitiation of the Christ

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; Being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: 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 . . ." Romans 3:23-25a

The church, as dictated by the culture's prevailing mood, tends to ignore what theologians have labeled, "the dark side of God." Jonathan Edward's sermon *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* probably would not fly amongst contemporary Christians, who, in their ignorance, connect their concept of God *only* to the yellow circle of God's smiling face. Because God is always happy, or so it is presumed, His greatest desire is for us to be happy too! Thus any contemplation about God's dark side has been dismissed from the collective psyche of many modern Christians.

Scripture records persons hiding from God's wrath (Revelation 6:16-17). Hiding from wrath is instinctive to us. After all, who of us relished a spanking when we were kids? Yet the ominous personal side of God's wrath life remains, for it has been observed that Scripture has more to say about God's anger than it does about His love. **"For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men,"** wrote the Apostle Paul (Romans 1:18).

Yet regardless the semantics game played, whether Christ's atonement means *propitiation* or *expiation*, we're still left with having to explain Jesus' crucifixion. [1] A gruesome Cross admits to there having been a gruesome problem, and we know that problem involves sinners and their sinning against God. In His holiness God can never be kindly disposed toward the sins of sinners lest His absolute holiness and righteousness be compromised and He forfeit His place as the moral leader of the universe. When considered in its godward aspect, *propitiation* indicates that God does not look kindly upon evil or those (That's us!) who perpetrate it.

Propitiation is a great salvation word which communicates that sin is against God's essential being and that His necessary wrath toward believers is satisfied because of His Son's death on the Cross. *Propitiation* is thus a BIG word about a BIG truth about a BIG Savior with BIG grace from a BIG God for BIG sinners. [2] Though psychoanalyzed religion dismisses the thought of any anger to be beneath the divine dignity, any God refusing to respond in wrath against those who violate His benevolent moral order could hardly be considered loving. Any indifference to the pain caused by sinners in the lives of others would be unfair and unjust. [2] For reason of love, God is not indifferent. His loving-wrath demands propitiation. Thus John wrote, **"In this 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; Compare Romans 3:25.).

It was at the Old Testament mercy seat that both God's wrath and love found real expression. For sin unblemished lambs were sacrificed and sinners forgiven. In the New Testament both the

propitiatory (the Mercy Seat) and the propitiation (the sacrificial blood) met in Jesus. While appeasing God's wrath against us, Jesus also lovingly provides us access to God through the dismissal of our sins from God's sight forever (Psalm 103:12).

These lyrics from the second verse of *Before the Throne* written by Charitie Lees Bancroft, provide a picture of propitiation. [4]

When Satan tempts me to despair
And tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see Him there
Who made an end of all my sin.
Because the sinless Savior died
My sinful soul is counted free.
For God the Just is satisfied
To look on Him and pardon me.

ENDNOTES

[1] Leviticus 16 and the ancient Day of Atonement may well serve as the Old Testament backdrop for reconciling the "propitiation/expiation" debate. The sacrificial goat whose blood was, by the High Priest, sprinkled upon the mercy seat (hilasterion/expiation) appeased divine wrath. The counterpart goat upon whose head the High Priest confessed the sin of the nation was then dismissed (expiation?) into the wilderness. Both actions temporarily stayed God's wrath upon the nation.

[2] Adapted from statement by Bruce A. Ware, *Big Truth for Young Hearts, Teaching and Learning the Greatness of God* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2009) 131.

[3] Leon Morris remarks concerning "a false antithesis between the divine wrath and the divine love." See *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955) 181.

[4] Lyrics of *Before the Throne of God Above*, by Charitie Bancroft, posted at W. Travis McMaken's blog, *Der Evangelische Theologe*, <http://derevth.blogspot.com/2008/02/charitie-bancroft-before-throne-of-god.html>. McMaken's blog also posts this relevant quote to note:

The misunderstanding that must be avoided is that the substitution of Christ in our place

is somehow a trick that is played on God, or, to put it in more refined terms, that our redemption by the work of Christ in our place is a sort of fiction, whereby we are placed under a great 'as though', that is in fact not true. Such an error can arise only if we fail to take absolutely seriously the different elements that surround the Cross: the sin of man, the righteousness of God, the unity of the Father and the Son, and the true Incarnation of the Son of God. Sin must be seen as something so serious that man could not resolve it, but only God Himself. God's righteousness must be measured by His treatment of sin in the person of His Son. The unity of Father and Son must be measured by the perfect obedience of Christ, and the Incarnation must be taken seriously as a complete action, whereby Christ became a real man, like ourselves in all things, excepting sin.

See Paul van Buren, *Christ in Our Place: The Substitutionary Character of Calvin's Doctrine of Reconciliation* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002): 61.