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SALVATION AND THE ATONEMENT: A BIBLICAL- EXEGETICAL APPROACH

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Introduction

The theme of salvation and the atonement is generally considered as the central truth of the Christian gospel. The way we understand Christ's work of atonement expresses our view of God's character and His divine nature as well as of the essence of sin. No other topic of the Bible has received more vehement debate in the last 1000 years of the Christian church, especially since the rise of Protestant liberal theology in the last 100 years. Even within the SDA Church basically conflicting theories on salvation and the atonement have emerged and are presently being promoted, even by some of our denominational publications.

In order to lift this controversial theme above the level of a crusade of one school of theological opinion over against another, I propose to approach the topic from a biblical-exegetical point of view, that is, to sharpen the focus on the original meaning of the apostolic gospel proclamation. Aware of the fact that our theological systems do affect our interpretation, I am confident, however, that an unprejudiced exegetical approach of the total biblical witness can help us to overcome our incorrect alternatives or one-sided views. The authoritative teaching of Holy Scripture alone can persuade us to enlarge our vision of the atonement, until we become

excited by the wonder of it all. In *The Great Controversy*, p. 651 we read: "The cross of Christ will be the science and the song of the redeemed through all eternity. In Christ glorified they will behold Christ crucified."

An inventory of the basic data in the Bible shows us that we need to establish the biblical theology of the atoning rituals in Israel's sanctuary and specifically of the atoning suffering and death of the Servant of Yahweh in Isa 53. In the NT we need to ask for Jesus' own understanding of His messianic mission to be sent by the Father as a "ransom for many"¹ (Mark 10:45) and what meaning He attached to His sacrificial blood at His last Supper (Matt 26:28) and to His unique mental anguish on the cross. Then serious attention must be given to the relevant passages of the apostles Paul, John, Peter, and especially to those in the important Epistle to the Hebrews. Central in all biblical study of the atonement stands the solemn phrase "the wrath of God," the theological meaning of which is hotly disputed outside and inside our denomination.

A thorough treatment of all the biblical data would require a sizeable book. Such a treatise, made by exegetically and theologically qualified Bible scholars, would be a great service and blessing for our church membership. For our purpose, I must limit my inquiry to some representative Scripture passages.

The Self-testimony of Jesus

Jesus' own testimony concerning the meaning of His suffering, rejection, and violent death is of paramount importance for the NT gospel message. Immediately after Peter had confessed that Jesus indeed was the Messiah of Israel, Jesus began to announce that (as the Messiah) He had to "suffer much" (Mark 9:12) and *had to* die a violent death (Matt 16:21). Three times Jesus declared explicitly that He must [*dei*] be killed by Jerusalem's leaders (Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33). The fact that Jesus viewed His death as necessary ought not to be interpreted as meaning that He submitted to a natural law or to some inescapable fate, but rather that Christ saw His death as the intention and fulfillment of God's plan of redemption as it was revealed in the sacred Scriptures.

Jesus explained the necessity of His impending death by point-

ing to the predicted suffering of the Servant of Yahweh (Isa 53), saying: "and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me" (Luke 22:37). Jesus' appeal to Isaiah's prophecy makes it clear that He understood His whole messianic mission in the light of Isaiah 53. Christ's prediction of His ultimate rejection and His death and resurrection in Mark 8:31 and 9:12 forms an exact summary of what was prophesied about the Servant of God in Isa 53. Isaiah had used the term "many" four times to indicate that others would benefit from the vicarious death of the sinless Servant (Isa 52:14, 15; 53:11, 12). Jesus' explanation of the divine ordination of His death is directly derived from Isaiah 53. Christ attached to His voluntary death, therefore, a redemptive significance that will benefit "many." We will now consider the four most decisive sayings of Christ concerning His own death:

Ransom for Many (Mark 10:45).

For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many.

According to one NT scholar (Joachim Jeremias, *NT Theol I*, 1971, 277, 278) almost every word of this saying goes back to Isaiah 53. Jesus explains His mission to serve his fellow men not simply in terms of serving as a prophet to teach Israel, but as being sent by God with an unprecedented mission, to surrender His innocent life into a vicarious death. He explains His divine mission with the OT concept of "a ransom for many."

Jesus' use of the word "ransom" directs our attention to a specific statute of OT law, according to which a sum of money was to be paid to redeem one's life from death. Exodus 21:30 states that a man condemned to death for unintentional manslaughter "may *redeem* his life by paying whatever is demanded." Numbers 35:31 states, however: "Do not accept a *ransom* for the life of a murderer, who deserves to die." And Psalm 49 declares with regard to God: "*No man can redeem the life of another, or give to God a ransom for him*" (49:7).

In these passages the verbs "to redeem" and "to ransom" are used as synonyms. To redeem is identical with "to pay a ransom price." When Jesus calls His self-surrender into death a "ransom for man," he declares that His death has redemptive significance for many others. It will redeem many from the bondage to sin and

death for eternal life, because He alone can stand before God in the place of many. As Messiah, He alone can offer His sinless life for their sinful lives and thus redeem them. The in-depth meaning of Jesus' death as a ransom ought to be explained not only in the light of Isaiah 53, but also in the light of Israel's sacrificial cultus.

In Isaiah's messianic prophecy, the Servant is sent by Yahweh with the unique mission to die as "a guilt offering" [*'asham*] for the justification of many (Isa 53:10, 11). Isaiah explains the substitutionary nature of the death of this Servant by saying that Yahweh will transfer the guilt and punishment of many to this Innocent One.

But he was pierced for our transgressions,

he was crushed for our iniquities;

the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,

and by his wounds we are healed. . . .

and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all. . . .

Yet it was the LORD's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,

and though *the LORD makes his life a guilt offering*,

he will see his offspring and prolong his days. . . .

(Isa 53:5, 6b, 10a)

Isaiah announced the stunning message that God Himself is directly involved in the death of His Messiah. The Messiah must bear the punishment of the sins of many by the divine design of substitution and in this way to change man's alienation from God.

The fact that Christ explained His mission to be "a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) points to His divine initiative to redeem many sinners from eternal death by becoming their substitute. The redemptive significance of Jesus' death is not primarily that He wants to shock others into repentance, but rather that He places Himself as the sinless Son of God voluntarily in the place of sinners and accepts upon Himself what they deserved in God's judgment. His sinless life was valid as an acceptable ransom before God and satisfying to God's will as an atoning guilt offering (Isa 53:10) to redeem many from divine condemnation. That was Jesus' understanding of His messianic mission.

The Blood of the Covenant (Matt 26:28).

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

These sacred words of Jesus, by which He instituted the sacrament of the Lord's Supper in His church, should be understood in their historical setting, against the background of the Jewish Passover sacrifice and meal that celebrated Israel's redemption from Egypt. When Jesus on this occasion calls the Passover bread "His body" and the Passover wine "His blood of the new covenant," then He replaces Israel's sacrificial lamb and its blood by His own sacrificial blood as the source of redemption for "the many."

As Messiah, Jesus established thereby His voluntary death as the foundational act of God's New Covenant. By eating and drinking of the Lord's Supper, the Christian believer by faith accepts the redemption from his sin and death in Christ's atoning death. The fruit or benefit of Christ's sacrificial death is divine forgiveness for our sins, or justification by faith in Christ. Jesus solemnly declared this in Matthew 26:28: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sin." (See further Luke 22:20; Mark 14:23-24). The Lord's Supper should not be misinterpreted. It proclaims on each occasion: Without Jesus' sacrificial death our forgiveness of sins is not possible with the God of Israel. This is the real offense of the Lord's Supper. Without the shedding of His blood we have no forgiveness with God.

During His last supper Christ promised that His shed blood would restore God's covenant fellowship with His people. Nowhere else did Jesus declare in such unmistakable terms that His death was the atoning sacrifice that would bring reconciliation between God and man. The Lord's Supper is, therefore, not a sacrament that commemorates our wickedness and our condemnation, as if it were a sacrament of doom, but is the celebration of our redemption through the ransom of Christ's atoning death. This sacrament thus dramatically represents the essence of the gospel of salvation and atonement. It immortalizes the blood of Christ as the source for our freedom to live at peace with God and with one another and with ourselves.

The best cure against all speculation about Jesus' death would

be to be silent at the foot of the cross of Christ and to ponder what it meant to Him when Jesus cried out in utter despair.

The Cry of Dereliction (Matt 27:46).

"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Was this mental agony of Jesus caused by man's sin of forsaking Christ? Or was it caused by God's act of forsaking Christ? To whom did Jesus address His words? Not to His enemies, not to the Jews, and not to the Gentiles. The cross of Christ is thus more than a demonstration of human wickedness. The piercing cry to His God, "Why have you forsaken me?" must be taken very seriously at face value.

Christ's cry is evidence, not of God's noninvolvement in His excruciating death, but rather of God's active involvement! Christ experienced not simply a passive hiding of God's face, but the reality of His Father's wrath against the sins of the world, the Father's delivering His Son up to the powers of darkness and death. Jesus experienced on the cross God's hidden but real "exchange," the divine transference of the sin of the world to the Lamb of God.

That is the dramatic depth-dimension of the cross of Christ! To remain silent on this divine involvement is to ignore and deny the essence of God's grace. Hebrews 2:9 explains that Christ "by the grace of God" was allowed to "taste death for everyone." It was that ultimate or "second death" as the curse of God that Christ tasted for the benefit of every one. He died our eternal death. This death should not be explained as man's natural death or as a mere quantity of time but as the unique quality of real separation from God. Christ drank the cup of the unmixed wrath of God. He had come for this very purpose: "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18:11; cf Job 21:20; Ps 75:8; Ezek 23:32-34; Jer 25:15-29).

We should not limit our view of Christ's atonement by thinking that Christ suffered only a small portion of the penalty of the law of God or of God's wrath. Jesus did not merely feel God-forsaken. He actually experienced in His soul the unprecedented dreadful separation from His Father. Jesus expressed this horror of God-forsakenness as the greatest pain of His heart by exclaiming the words of Psalm 22:1. To fully realize the value of our salvation, we

need to understand what it costs, what the price was to the Holy Trinity. In the words of E. G. White:

The wrath that would have fallen upon man was now falling upon Christ. It was here that the mysterious cup trembled in His hand . . . The sins of the world were upon Him. He was suffering in man's stead as a transgressor of His Father's law (2T 207).

The sword of justice was now to awake against His dear Son [see Zech 13:7] (2T 207).

When Christ committed Himself into the Father's hands, He exclaimed with His departing breath: "It is finished."

The Cry of Victory (John 19:30).

"It is finished."

That final cry of triumph does not suggest that His enemies had finished their brutal deed, but that Christ had completed what His Father had sent Him to accomplish as Heaven's Passover Lamb: to endure the judgment of sin in our place and to establish a new covenant between God and mankind. The chief covenant blessing for us is that God forgives our sins in His saving righteousness.

The Father's acceptance of His Son's accomplished mission was demonstrated in two dramatic acts: The curtain of the temple, which symbolized the alienation of sinners from God, was suddenly torn in two from top to bottom (Matt 27:51). The way into God's presence is now open to man. The greatest proof, however, that God accepted Christ's death as the atoning sacrifice for all men was the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. The Father was satisfied with the ransom price (See *The Great Controversy*, p. 652).

The Essence of Paul's Gospel

Paul claimed that he preached no different gospel than what he had received from the original apostles. He summarizes his gospel message as follows: "For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:3). Paul thus identified the death and the resurrection of Christ with the gospel.

We now ask, Why did the apostles attach redemptive significance to the death of Jesus Christ? It was certainly not assumed by

them immediately after the crucifixion (see Luke 24:31-32). The answer is implied in the emphatic words that Christ died for our sins and rose again from the dead "according to the Scriptures," referring to the OT. The risen Lord had already pointed the perplexed disciples back to the Hebrew Scriptures with His question: "*Did not the Christ [Messiah] have to suffer these things, and then enter his glory?*" (Luke 24:26). This preordained necessity of the Messiah's suffering and death was revealed in both types and prophecies.

Paul adopted Jesus' self-understanding when he writes to Timothy that Christ's death was a "*ransom for all men*" (1 Tim 2:6). He developed this gospel of the atoning death of Christ in his letters to the Corinthians, to the Romans, and to the Colossians.

"For Our Sins" (Rom 4:25). The central expression of Paul's gospel message is the phrase that Christ died "*for our sins.*" Paul elaborates on the redemptive meaning of Christ's death several times. We consider Rom 4:25; 2 Cor 5:14 and 21: *He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.*

Our first observation must be that Paul indirectly sees God Himself as the acting Person of delivering and raising up Christ. Paul states directly in Romans 8:32, that God did not spare His own Son, "but delivered Him up for us all" (NKJV). In other passages he states that Jesus "gave himself up for us" (Gal 2:20 and Eph 5:2). In Paul's message it was primarily God who had delivered over Jesus for our sins. The preposition "*dia*" (Rom 4:25) can be translated also as "*because of*" our sins (NKJV, NASB). It may not be weakened to say "as a consequence" or "by" our sins, as if Paul would point to the misdeed of human hands. Such an interpretation would twist the meaning of Paul's words, because he insists on God as the acting Person in both Jesus' dying and rising again in Romans 4:25 (twice "*dia*"). The same divine activity is taught in Isaiah 53. The many spectators of the Servant's suffering were appalled when they were told that it was *Yahweh* who had crushed the Servant and had made His life a guilt offering (Isa 53:10). They then confessed: "*The LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all*" (Isa 53:6).

To sum up, both Paul and Isaiah teach the same theological truth: it was God Himself Who gave up the Messiah to suffer and

to be crushed for our sins, so that by His punishment for our sins we could be healed or justified. Our text teaches that God acted both times in the delivering of Christ over to death for our sins and in the *justification* of us by raising up Christ. Paul's gospel in this passage is thus in essence God's act of judicial imputation and not simply one of moral renewal.

Both parallel lines of Romans 4:25 contain the judicial concept of imputation or reckoning. As God imputed our sins to Christ in His death, so He reckons Christ's resurrection to us as our justification or acquittal from sin. This is the Hebrew idea of the priestly exchange of righteousness for sin. For this covenantal concept Paul appeals to God's acts of justifying Abraham and David. He argues, "What does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness'" (Rom 4:3). This was a divine act of judicial imputation. Paul continues: "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works" (Rom 4:6). Here Paul interprets the forgiveness of David's sins (Ps 32) to be more than a mere pardon or amnesty. Paul interprets forgiveness in the sense of a divine act of justification, in which God credits righteousness to the repentant sinner. Paul then applies this covenant motif of divine imputation to every present believer in the crucified and risen Messiah. He concludes:

The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him [Abraham] alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead (Rom 4:23, 24).

Paul distinguishes sharply between our own moral righteousness and God's imputed or judicial righteousness. Paul even goes so far as to state the morally scandalous idea that "God justifies the wicked" (Rom 4:5). Paul definitely believes in the necessity of our act of faith in Christ and in our moral renewal. But in Romans 3-5 his central focus is not on our faith and morality but on the proclamation that God has reconciled to Himself all His wicked enemies through the death of His Son (Rom 5:6, 8, 10). How can they be reconciled to God when they are still His enemies? Paul answers: By not imputing their sins to them but instead to His own Son (2 Cor 5:19). This gospel of Paul is still foolishness to human

wisdom and a rock of offense to Jews. But this is not Paul's peculiar legalistic construction. It is rooted in both Isaiah 53 and in Jesus' own teaching.

Substitution and Imputation (2 Cor 5:14, 21). In 2 Corinthians 5 Paul further develops the gospel as the fulfillment of Isaiah 53. We consider first verse 14, "*We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.*" Paul's statement that Christ "died for all" could by itself be interpreted as meaning a martyr's death for the general benefit of all. But his emphasis on the fact that "one" died "for all" points to the pregnant sense of a *representative substitution*. This implication is made explicitly by Paul's subsequent declaration: "therefore all died." This statement can mean only that One represented all men in His death before God. Or, stated simply, One died the eternal death of all.

Paul explains this also in Romans 5:18, 19, where he contrasts Christ with Adam. He contrasts Adam's sin and the resulting condemnation of all men with Christ's obedience and the resulting justification of many. Paul adopted the Hebrew concept that One can represent inclusively many people before God. In 2 Corinthians 5:14 Paul proclaims that Christ is the One to whom God judicially imputed our sin and death, so that He died our death, and when He died, "all died."

Paul bases our moral renewal and motivation to live for Christ on this judicial, redemptive act of God. He explains the divine reconciliation in judicial terms, saying that God did not count or impute men's sins against them (2 Cor 5:19). He summarizes the heart of his gospel with this clear allusion to Isaiah 53 in verse 21: *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

By general consent of NT exegetes, Paul alludes here to Isaiah's prediction that "Yahweh has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa 53:6). Paul's central gospel focus is, therefore, on God's judicial exchange: Christ's righteousness for our guilt. Paul's point is not that God gave His Son up to die under the power of human wickedness. His specific point is that God Himself made the sinless One "to be sin," that the innocent One is made the guilty One judicially, that God placed Him under His judgment for our sins.

Paul is not speaking here in ethical, but in specific judicial categories.

The essential core of Paul's doctrine of justification in 2 Corinthians 5 is not that God tries to change us by some shock therapy in confronting us with our own wickedness. When Judas realized the evil he did, he came to despair and committed suicide. The gospel of the cross is rather that God acquits us from our trespasses and guilt by imputing them to Christ and by crediting to us Christ's righteousness. The apostle, himself, cites directly from Isaiah 53 to confirm the sinlessness of Christ and His vicarious death. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet 2:22, 24). Peter's mention of the "tree" instead of the cross suggests that he referred to one under the curse (Deut 21:23). Peter thereby implies that Jesus endured God's curse when He suffered and died on the cross. Yet, for Peter the gospel of substitution was not an abstract legal transaction which did not affect us. "By His wounds you are healed," that is, forgiven and restored with God.

On the basis of God's atoning act in Christ, the apostle Paul now urges all people: "Be reconciled to God!" (2 Cor 5:20). Our response can be positive or negative. Our reconciliation with God, however, is effective in us only through faith in Christ's ransom death and in His intercession.

The Wrath of God

The question we should ask is, Is man's alienation from the Creator due exclusively to his own sinning, or is God's reaction to and condemnation of sin a barrier that also must be removed before fellowship can be restored? Paul writes about the wrath of God both as a present and as a future reality. He declares that "the wrath of God" is still to come on all whose lives are not hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3-6). He says to the Ephesians: "Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath," that is "God's wrath" (Eph 2:3; 5:6).

The phrase "the wrath of God" is apparently not just an abstract metaphor but symbolizes God's hostility and curse on all that is evil. This reality was expressed by Jesus when He announced that in the final judgment the King will say to the wicked, "Depart

from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Matt 25:41). For Christ, His Father's reaction to wickedness was a terrible reality which He described as "hell" (see Matt 5:29, 30). The Apocalypse associates wrath even with the risen Christ, when it threatens the coming "*wrath of the Lamb*" (Rev 6:16) on the rejecters of His mercy. Paul likewise warns the impenitent ones: "You are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed" (Rom 2:5).

The wrath of God was the OT standard phrase for God's judgment on sin, for His indignation against wickedness. The wrath of God is no less real than the love of God! God is present both in His love for the sinner and in His anger against sin. They are not mutually exclusive in Holy Scripture; they coexist in the Holy One. The relationship between God and man in this larger God concept includes, therefore, both God's love and His wrath. These attributes of God are not simply identical with the impersonal laws of nature, but are expressions of God's action toward man.

We should refrain from projecting any human capricious, irrational anger into the wrath of God. God's wrath is holy wrath, holy indignation against injustice and perversion. We create a false philosophical dilemma if we assume that in Scripture divine wrath and divine love are mutually exclusive. God's love is holy love by the fact that it does react in the strongest terms against every form of sin. One could say, therefore, that God's wrath is identical with the consuming fire of divine love in relation to our sins (see Heb 10:27).

This divine hostility to evil on God's side needs also to be dealt with if sinful man is ever to be restored to fellowship with the Holy One. It is the dynamic fusion of God's love for the sinner and God's wrath against sin that motivated God to send His eternal Son as a propitiation for our sin. This provides a forgiveness without condoning sin. The NT declares that Christ, as the divine propitiation, was a gift prompted by God's love. We read in 1 John 4:10:

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. (*hilasmos* = propitiation, NKJV, NASB).

The term "propitiation" should not be loaded with the false,

pagan idea that man's effort can change the mind of the deity in his favor. The unique feature of propitiation in the Bible is the fact that *God provides the propitiation for us*. Propitiation is God's own act to avert His wrath from sinful mankind. The gospel declares that the Son of God offered Himself without blemish through the Holy Spirit to the Eternal Father, while the Father in His love gave His Son up for us (Heb 9:14; Rom 8:32). The RSV translates *hilasmos* in 1 John 2:2; 4:10 by "expiation," suggesting that the sin problem is exclusively man's need for purging or cleansing of his heart and mind.

The question must be raised however, Why must sin be expiated from us? The answer in Scripture concentrates not just on man. If man dies in his sin, then he has to face God's final judgment, which is another way of stating that "God's wrath remains upon him" (John 3:36). Consequently, expiation of sin from man is necessary in order to avert the wrath of God! Expiation thus implies a Godward dimension and is not solely an impersonal purging process in man. The concept of expiation requires that God will avert His wrath from us.

Propitiation includes expiation, but denotes primarily the removal of God's condemnation of the sinner. The idea that God can never become angry at man is neither Hebrew nor Christian, but an abstract idea that is borrowed from Greek philosophy. The biblical portrayal of God's holiness is superior to all our philosophical constructs of God. Holiness explains God's wrath as the terrifying opposition to all that is opposed to holiness.

If the wrath of God is no reality in God, then the need for any atonement or ransom price is abolished. That is the essential hallmark or argument of Protestant liberal theology. On the other hand, the apostle Paul teaches that the second coming of Christ will rescue us "from the coming wrath" of God (1 Thess 1:10; cf. Rev 14:10; 15:1). But such confidence is based on the acceptance of Christ as our all-sufficient righteousness. Paul expresses this assurance of hope in Romans 5:9:

Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we all be saved from God's wrath through him?

Divine Judgment and Curse (Gal 3:13). Paul expresses his judicial understanding of the cross of Christ in different ways. In

Romans 8:3 he declares that God sent His own Son in the likeness of sinful man "to be a sin offering," and thus God "condemned sin in the flesh" (KJV). In other words, God judged and condemned our fallen human nature in Christ. Christ was the object of God's condemnation, of God's righteous judgment.

Christ's death for our sins meant to Paul that Christ paid the wages of our sin (Rom 6:23). The "wages of sin" is another expression for the penalty or punishment of sin. Paul teaches that God condemned our sin in Christ not only by His judicial sentence but also by His execution. Paul believed, therefore, that in Christ's death the full weight of God's wrath against sin had been executed. He expressed this in a stunning statement that stands unique in the NT. In Galatians 3:13 the apostle declares solemnly:

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree' [Deut 21:23].

No other apostle has written in this vein—that Christ became a curse. Paul's statement may be better understood if we remember that in his former Pharisaic hatred against the Christians he had viewed Jesus' crucifixion as the very proof that Jesus was a cursed pseudo-Messiah. For Jews, the idea of a crucified Messiah was scandalous (1 Cor 1:23). But in his Damascus vision Paul had come to see the "cursed" One as the true Messiah. Therefore, the Messiah's death on a tree could only be a substitutionary atoning death. He believed that Christ loved him and gave Himself for him (see Gal 2:20). That is, Christ received the curse in his stead.

In Paul's Hebrew thinking the death of One who knew no sin (2 Cor 5:21), was uniquely meritorious. The Messiah's death on the cross was, therefore, as he writes, a curse "for us" (Gal 3:13). Christ thus suffered an exchange curse! As Luther explains this text (Gal 3:13): Jesus "clothed Himself in our person, laid our sins upon His own shoulders and said: 'I have committed the sins that all men have committed'. . . Thus Christ became a curse for us, that is, a sinner worthy of the wrath of God. By this fortunate exchange with us He took upon Himself our sinful person and granted us His innocent and victorious Person." (*Lectures on Galatians*, LW 26, 283, 284).

Ellen G. White's interpretation of the cross stands unsur-

passed in Christian theology: "Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His" (*Desire of Ages*, p. 25).

The sinless Christ received the curse of God only for the purpose that God might bestow on us His blessing of divine acceptance (Gal 3:14). Galatians 3:13 is not a slip of Paul's pen; it constitutes the very essence of his doctrine of law and grace. It explains on what basis man is accepted by God. Paul is not referring to some human curse in Jesus' crucifixion, but to the curse of divine law. God's law brings "wrath" on the transgressor (Rom 2:5; 4:25).

To be "under law" is for Paul the opposite of being "under grace" (Rom 6:14, 15). He explains in Galatians 4 that "God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights as sons" (Gal 4:4, 5). Paul clarifies here what he meant in Gal 3:13. He points to the purpose of the incarnation of the Son of God, not merely that the Son may be exposed to human sinfulness but to place Himself in a substitutionary position under the curse and judgment of God! Paul's message in Galatians 3:13 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 can be identified as the gospel of penal substitution. This view of the cross of Christ is what Paul calls "the offense [or stumbling block] of the cross" (*skandalon*, Gal 5:11; 1 Cor 1:23). But this offense to man's reason and moral sensibility belongs, according to Paul, to the essence of the Gospel. Without this "*skandalon*" our faith in God is not the NT faith.

By bearing the curse, Christ has redeemed those under the curse of God. This exchange curse is the offense of Paul's gospel of the cross, the stumbling block of God's redeeming grace. For the apostle, the grace of God comes, not instead of, but through judgment.

A Revelation of Holy Love (Rom 3:25-26). According to Paul, the cross of Christ reveals the fullness of God's love (Rom 5:8; Gal 2:20), and this love includes God's righteousness or justice. He develops this aspect of God's love in Rom 3:25, 26 as the center and heart of his whole epistle to the Romans.

It has become the popular trend in liberal Protestant theology since Schleiermacher and Ritschl in the 19th century to liberate theology from the metaphysical dimension. The result was to flatly deny in God's character the reality of any wrath against sin or sinner. That left a God who could only love with endless patience. But if we start from a human, sentimental concept of divine love, we are led inevitably to belittle God's justice. The biblical revelation of God's character is reflected more accurately in these words, found in *Desire of Ages*, p. 762:

God's love has been expressed in His justice no less than in His mercy. Justice is the foundation of His throne, and the fruit of His love.

In other words, the love of God is not at war with the justice of God. We simply do not know the depths of God's love if we accept only one preferred aspect of the biblical revelation of God. We must reject any reduced concept of God's love if we want to know its unsearchable riches and, "to comprehend with all the saints. . . the breadth, and length, and depth, and height" (KJV) of the love of God that "surpasses knowledge" (cf. Eph 3:18, 19).

The apostolic gospel nowhere else focuses as sharply on God's costly forgiveness as in Romans 3:25, 26.

God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies the man who has faith in Jesus.

In Romans 3 Paul offers the church a sufficiently clear interpretation of the death of Christ that should prevent us from speculating onesidedly about the love of God. It forbids us to operate with the incorrect dilemma that opposes God's love to His justice, and contrasts God's wrath to His grace. Romans 3:25 declares that God by His design presented Christ as a *hilastērion*, which is a "propitiation" (NKJV, NASB) or "propitiatory sacrifice" (Cranfield, *Romans, ICC*, Vol 1:216), in order to demonstrate God's righteousness.

We face the question, Why does Paul in his theology of reconciliation concentrate on the death of Christ as a divinely-provided

blood sacrifice? In 1 Corinthians 5:7 Paul specifies that "Christ, our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed." This cultus symbol of Israel spoke eloquently of how God had passed His judgment over each house that had the blood of a lamb on the doorposts. This OT background clarifies Paul's use of the cultic term *hilastērion* in his doctrine of divine atonement (Rom 3:25, 26). He explains that the blood sacrifice of Christ was by God's own design a demonstration of His righteousness, because He had left the sins committed by mankind beforehand unpunished! We read Rom 3:25 in the NASB:

Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed.

The apostle explains that God had not adequately punished human sin in the 4,000 years before Christ died. In His divine forbearance He had passed over the sins of human rebellion. He had patiently held back His wrath. But God did not pass over sins indefinitely. That would have meant to condone evil, to deny His holy nature, and to annihilate man's dignity as a morally accountable creature. Now, in the historic suffering and death of Christ on the cross, God finally did punish our sins to establish His righteousness. In His eternal purpose of grace, God Himself has "set forth" (Rom 3:25 NKJV) Christ's sacrifice as the sufficient *hilastērion*, as the divinely provided propitiation and expiation of sin. Paul thereby proclaims that God's judgment on sin has been finally realized in the shedding of Christ's blood. This was the fulfillment of Israel's sacrificial cultus, the theology of which was presented in Leviticus 17:11.

For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement (*exilaskomai*) for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement (*exilaskomai*) for one's life.

Twice in this text a compound of the verb *hilaskesthai*, the cognate of *hilastērion*, is used in the Septuagint. Paul employs the latter term in Romans 3:25. There can be no doubt that for Paul the blood of Christ was sacrificial blood, provided by God for the forgiveness of our sins. Divine forgiveness was costly, because God willed to forgive our sins in a manner consonant with His righteousness, that is, without condoning sin and denying man's account-

ability. Such a forgiveness is not cheap, but one worthy of God. God is thus not righteous only in Himself, in splendid isolation from His creation. Paul proclaims that God has chosen to show or demonstrate His righteousness dramatically in the death of Christ. That is essential to Paul's theology of God. But Paul's further specific point is that God is righteous, therefore, in justifying the repentant sinner. We read in verse 26:

For the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. (NASB)

Paul unfolds that the manifestation of God's righteousness in Christ's death was simultaneously condemnatory and redemptive. God demonstrated His holy love in both aspects: in His righteous wrath and in His merciful love. God willed to forgive sinful men in His holy love, that is, not by condoning sin, but by atoning sin. He directed His full righteous wrath against sin, no longer against sinful man, but "against His own very Self in the person of His Son" (Cranfield). In this way holiness atoned for our sins (cf. 1 *Selected Messages*, p. 368). The believer in Christ's substitutionary sacrifice is pardoned and justified by faith alone (Rom 3:26, 28). Here the cultic motif of atonement and the legal concept of justification unite in Paul's gospel of reconciliation. For Paul, the atoning self-sacrifice of Christ was God's means to achieve an eternal reconciliation. Christ thus vindicated both God's punitive and redemptive righteousness. That was, to Paul, the triumph of God's love.

The Cosmic Scope of Reconciliation

The divine plan of reconciliation has cosmic dimensions. Paul states:

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross (Col 1:19-20).

Paul establishes first the preexistence and the cosmic significance of Christ by designating Christ as the co-Creator of all things: "All things were created by him and for him" (Col 1:16). Christ is the supreme Lord and sustainer of the universe (Col 1:17). He is

also the supreme head of the church (Col 1:18). All believers depend on Christ for life and growth (Col 2:19), "for in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form" (Col 2:9). Christ is the dwelling place of the very essence of God.

Because a disruption or breach has occurred in heaven and on earth, the need of reconciling "all things" in heaven and on earth has risen. Christ alone is God's appointed Mediator, or agent of the atonement, to restore cosmic peace, because Christ alone is Lord of creation and Lord of His Church. Thus, God will ultimately "bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ" (Eph 1:10).

Paul states that God was pleased through Christ to reconcile heaven and earth "by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Col 1:20). This means that the cosmos has been reconciled to God in the sacrificial death of Christ; that the universe has been restored under its rightful head and that cosmic peace is established when Christ accepted the curse which was due to us. For Paul, the cross was the place of one under a curse (Gal 3:13). In Colossians 1:20, Paul does not simply use the verb *katallassein*, (to reconcile, carrying the basic meaning "to change"). Rather he uses here the compound form *apokatallassein*, which suggests an intensive force: to change completely, to change so as to remove all enmity. Paul unfolds that God's act of reconciliation was not intended for men only, but for "all things" in heaven and on earth (Col 1:20; Eph 1:10). This has the wider implication of a cosmic pacification.

God has placed the whole created reality again under the lordship of Christ. According to Colossians 2:15, Christ at the cross "disarmed the [spiritual] powers and authorities," . . . "triumphing over them by the cross," leading them in his triumphal procession to the throne of God. This indicates that the powers that were hostile to God and Christ were not surrendering willingly to God's lordship. They will be pacified unwillingly, even when they continue to exist inimical to man. In Romans 8:38, 39 Paul declares that now no hostile power "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Their ultimate overthrow is guaranteed. Christ "must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor 15:25). Consequently, divine reconciliation includes the subjugation of the hostile spiritual powers. Similarly,

all people will not accept the peace effected by the death of Christ, although they have been reconciled now to God from God's side. Ultimately, however, all men will bow their knees to Christ and acknowledge him as the supreme Lord (Phil 2:10, 11), some willingly, others unwillingly.

In Colossians 2:14 Paul further explains that because of Christ God "canceled the written code . . . that was against us and that stood opposed to us; he took it away, nailing it to the cross." This is a vivid way of saying that when Christ was nailed to the cross, all our sins were truly forgiven. God nailed His own accusation against us to the cross of Jesus! In this act God removed His curse on us at the cross. Therefore, all the hostile demonic powers and authorities in the cosmos were disarmed. They no longer have any accusation or authority over mankind. Between God and man a state of objective or cosmic peace has been restored by means of the atoning death of Christ. The apocalyptic dimension of this objective state of reconciliation implies the ultimate destruction of the evil one. Paul declares in Romans 16:20, "The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet."

The aim of divine reconciliation is certainly to change the hostility against God in the human mind, but the center of Paul's focus is God's own reaction to sin and His divine work of reconciliation in Christ on behalf of the whole created reality. Those who respond by faith in Christ are redeemed from accusation and restored to fellowship with the Holy One (Col 1:21-23).

Salvation and Atonement in Hebrews

The main burden of Hebrews is to proclaim that the self-sacrifice of Christ and His ongoing intercession fulfill Israel's prophetic sanctuary rituals. After the author has said that faith in God, repentance, and belief in the future resurrection and judgment belong to the more elementary or foundational teachings (Heb 6:1), on which Judaism and Christianity could agree, he explains that the more mature knowledge of Christ has to do with understanding the meaning of Christ's death and His present ministry. This is the theme of the highly important central section of the Hebrews' letter, chapters 7-10. He explains Christ's Person and work as being superior to the priesthood of Aaron and Melchizedek, because

Christ offers the perfect and final and all-inclusive sacrifice of Himself. Hebrews 7 concludes of the Son of God:

Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once and for all when he offered himself (verse 27).

This text teaches that Christ was both sin offering and priest who offered Himself on the cross: "Himself the priest, Himself the victim" (*Desire of Ages*, p. 25). Christ not only suffered death, but He "[tasted] death for everyone" (Heb 2:9).

In chapters 9 and 10 the author acknowledges that the blood of bulls and goats only reminded the worshiper of his sins, but could never take them away (10:4), or clear his guilty conscience (9:9). But Christ, the Son of God, has now appeared as the reality of all the types and shadows of Israel's covenant. And His blood has obtained or realized an "eternal redemption" (9:12). This eternal redemption was that Christ's self-offering has taken away our sins. This is said explicitly in 9:26 and 27:

But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. . . Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people.

In a majestic statement the purpose of Christ's accomplished mission is explained:

How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit *offered himself unblemished to God*, cleanse our conscience from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God (9:14; cf 10:22)!

This sacred text does not say that Christ's death was God's offering to man. It states directly that Christ offered Himself unblemished to God! Thus God is both the Provider and the Recipient of Christ's sacrifice. What then motivated the Holy Trinity to initiate such a solemn sacrifice? Hebrews 9 reverts to Israel's cultus for the answer: "without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (9:22). If this applied to the old covenant, how much the more to the blood of the new covenant. If Yahweh provided the sacrificial blood on Israel's altar (Lev 17:11), how much the more did He

provide the blood of His Son to take away our sins and to make us holy (10:10).

In this manner Hebrews proclaims the uniqueness of Christ's redemptive work. In other words, Christ's death was an absolute necessity! Without the shedding of His blood there is no forgiveness of sins. This is the timeless message of Hebrews that we still need to hear in order to find divine peace for our accusing conscience, real release from the burden of guilt and cleansing from the defiling power of our selfish nature. As our High Priest in heaven, Christ has immortalized Calvary by His resurrection from the dead.

Hebrews teaches emphatically that salvation is also a continuing process which ends with a dramatic vision of our future salvation (12:12-29). We read in Hebrews 7:25 that Christ is a permanent heavenly Priest:

Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

This present tense is important and announces that Christ saves us now by His work of intercession before God, a mediatorial work as priest and advocate that effectively sends support from Christ to us at each moment of trial. This priestly mediation of Christ is described in Hebrews 2:17 as a work of priestly atonement:

. . . that he might make atonement for the sins of the people (*hilaskesthai*, "to make propitiation for").

The NIV gives the alternative translation as: "that he might turn aside God's wrath, taking away the sins of the people." Propitiation is not only accomplished by Christ on His cross, He also applies the benefits of His propitiatory sacrifice to us as a present High Priest. It is the present working out of salvation in the believers (cf 1 Cor 15:2). He pleads our cause with the Father (cf 1 John 2:1), gives us assurance of salvation (Rom 8), and brings our prayers before God (examples in Luke 22:32 and John 17).

In the Levitical ritual this mediation was foreshadowed in the breastplate with the names of Israel's sons which Aaron as High Priest bore upon his heart when he entered the holy place (Exod 28:29, 43). Hebrews 2:17 states that Christ's intercession is "in service to God" [*pros ton theon*] that is, "on the Godward side" (cf Heb 5:1). Here Christ's work directed toward God is made a specific

point of importance. We can come to God only if our sins have been dealt with. Christ did not appoint Himself High Priest. God gave Him this appointment to the priesthood (Heb 5:5). Christ alone is able to enter the Presence of God on His own account and also on our account. The ones He purchased with His blood He can keep also by His priestly mediation. He is able to keep them from falling, from transgressing. He does what the OT priest could do only symbolically. He actually removed the barrier of sin between man and God, and provides constant and immediate access to God every day.

That teaching is found also in Paul (Rom 8:33, 34) and in John (1 John 2:1). Christ removes from us every sin acknowledged before God with a contrite heart (cf *Testimonies to Workers*, p. 93). "Centuries, ages, can never diminish the efficacy of this atoning sacrifice" (*Ibid.*, p. 92). Hebrews teaches that Christ is both our Redeemer and Mediator. He is now the one Mediator between God and man. Christ Himself is our great, sinless Propitiation. We must reject the popular idea that Christ now stands to plead our cause with tears and crying before a reluctant God. He does not stand as a mere petitioner before God. He functions as the victorious Priest-King Who asks what He will from a Father Who always hears and grants His request. As a conqueror He claims His victory.

Focus on Atonement in First John

First John shows that the points of conflict within the apostolic church in Asia Minor were concentrated on Christology and soteriology. The difference of opinion ran so high that a split took place in several church congregations around Ephesus. To this critical situation John addressed his three letters. In 1 John we can identify the doctrinal errors which are now characterized as docetism or an incipient Gnosticism. To refute the new theology of the errorists, John appeals emphatically to the original message of the apostles concerning the redemptive significance of the flesh and the death of Jesus and how we can have saving knowledge and fellowship with God. The challenging fact emerges from the false claims made by John's adversaries that both parties justified their opposite positions with terms derived from John's Gospel. In the judgment of John, "his adversaries were innovators or 'progressives'

who were distorting the tradition as it had come down from the beginning" (R. E. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, AB 30. Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983, p. 70).

This explains why 1 John opens with an appeal to the original gospel truth: "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life . . . so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship [*koinōnia*] is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:1, 2; cf 1:5; 2:7; 3:11).

At the center of the controversy was the true interpretation of John 1:14 and 3:16. These beautiful declarations about God's self-revelation in Christ Jesus could be misinterpreted. Was the real purpose of Jesus' earthly life solely to reveal God's character and His glory in human terms, but not to do anything new that changed the relationship between God and human beings? Did not Jesus say to Philip: "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9)? Was the purpose of Christ's coming solely His incarnation, in order to reveal God's love for sinners, as could be derived from John 3:16?

John hastens to clarify why God gave His Son, stressing that Christ's death is of crucial importance. In 1 John 5:6 he argues: "This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood." Here John explains God's love to those who misunderstood Christ's coming. He came not only to obey God in baptism, but also to die as an atonement for our sins. John 19:34 may be seen as the background for this stress on Christ's blood. Jesus shed His blood on the cross, says John, when a soldier pierced His side with a spear, "bringing a sudden flow of blood and water." The emphasis of 1 John is clearly on one misunderstood point: the redemptive value of the death of Jesus Christ. The Letter stresses that our fellowship or reconciliation with the Father comes only by way of the shed blood of Christ.

Christian believers have fellowship with God and each other only when "the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin" (1 John 1:7). John does not focus on the believer's first forgiveness of sins or his initial justification at baptism, but on his daily need for forgiveness of sins. His point is that if we try to walk in the light,

as Jesus walked (2:6), then the blood of Jesus still cleanses us from our present sins, because of Christ's continuing ministry as Mediator. It is important to notice that John uses the *present* tense of the verb to "purify" in John 1:7. John thus develops further the implication of John 3:16 by stressing the atoning quality of the blood of Jesus, as was taught extensively in the Letter to the Hebrews. John uses the sacrificial term *hilasmos* (atonement, atoning action) and thereby appeals to the priestly theology of Israel's sanctuary cultus. In the book of Leviticus the death of an offering by itself did not yet effect atonement or reconciliation.

If an anointed priest had sinned, the officiating priest had to consecrate the blood of the slaughtered sin offering by sprinkling it first seven times "before Yahweh" in the Holy Place. Then he had to put some of the blood on the horns of the altar of incense (Lev 4:6, 7). The theological meaning of this priestly ritual was explained in Lev 17:11, stating that God Himself had provided this blood for Israel on the altar as the means to make atonement for one's life [*exhilaskesthai*, in LXX]. This theology taught the exact opposite of the pagan atonement rituals, which all were based on the concept of salvation by works. In Israel it was not man who offered the blood to God, but Yahweh who provided and graciously accepted the blood or life of a substitute for the repentant sinner. This text (Lev 17:11) presents Yahweh as both the subject and the object of the atoning or propitiatory action for the redemption of man. Reconciliation or fellowship with God was realized by means of an anointed priest who presented the sacrificial blood as the atonement for the sinner. The reason why human guilt must be atoned by propitiation and expiation lies in the very nature of the Holy covenant God Himself.

The fact that the Holy One does not ignore or overlook the reality of sin reveals that He is not indifferent to the moral condition of man. The apostle John insists on this holy character of God as the motivation of God's love to send His Son "as an atoning sacrifice [*hilasmos*, propitiation and expiation] for our sins" (1 John 4:10). John's Letter emphasizes the ongoing need for Christians of a heavenly Mediator who is able to forgive and to cleanse their hearts and consciences.

John rejects the false claim of some erroneous believers that they were already now "without sin" because they "knew" God (1

John 1:8; 2:4). This claim suggests that such believers felt so illuminated by their knowledge of God that they asserted: "We are not guilty although we have sinned." In other words, their sins were not considered any threat to their fellowship with God. Such a superficial estimate of sin the apostle calls a serious self-deception (1:8). For John, the believer should not deny or ignore his guilt but rather confess it before God: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9). Here John reflects the cultic setting of Israel's covenant. "The priest will make atonement [*kipper; exhilaskesthai*] for man's sin, and he will be forgiven" (Lev 4:26, 31; 19:22).

John insists that God cannot treat sin in believers as nonexistent. He plainly urges us therefore: "My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin" (1 John 2:1). This moral standard echoes Jesus' counsel to the forgiven paralytic: "Do not sin anymore, so that nothing worse may befall you" (John 5:14, NASB). Paul is equally bold: "Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase? By no means!" (Rom 6:1).

Nevertheless, believers are not yet sinlessly perfect in this "flesh and blood" (1 Cor 15:50) and do stumble in many ways (Jas 3:2). Therefore, John points to the believer's sole assurance of God's fellowship: the heavenly mediation of the risen Lord. If a righteous one is overcome by sin, but does not conceal his sin and confesses and renounces it (Prov 28:13; 24:16), "we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One" (1 John 2:1). Jesus as the Paraclete (Helper/Intercessor, 1 John 2:1) stands before the Father both as our intercessor and our advocate, defending us against the accusations of Satan (Rev 12:10; 1 John 3:8).

This must not be interpreted as the effort of a loving Jesus trying to change the attitude of a righteous Father. Jesus Himself is presented rather as the "Righteous One" who acknowledges the believer's faith and claims forgiveness before the Father, because He presents His atoning blood as meritorious and propitiatory (see Matt 10:32). John, therefore, unites the court motif with the sanctuary setting:

He is the atoning sacrifice [*hilasmos*, atonement] for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1 John 2:2).

The term *hilasmos* used by John means "atoning action," with the implication of both propitiation and expiation. Propitiation is primarily directed toward the Holy One who cannot tolerate evil (Hab 1:13), while expiation is directed toward the defilement in the sinner. It is helpful to see that Psalm 130:3, 4 in the Greek version (LXX) uses *hilasmos* (propitiation) for the divine act of forgiveness and of redeeming mercy (vs 7). Zechariah 8:22 uses the cognate verb [*exhilaskesthai*] for seeking to obtain "favor" from Yahweh by the Gentiles.

Micah specifically points out the rationale for the possibility of divine propitiation when he explains: "He does not retain His anger forever, because He delights in mercy" (Mic 7:18 NKJV). The OT witness indicates that atonement [*hilasmos*] has primarily a Godward effect (mercy) which results in the forgiveness and cleansing of the repentant sinner (Dan 9:9).

God expressed His love not only in accepting Christ's meritorious sacrifice for us, but primarily in providing His own Son as man's Substitute and Mediator. This important insight in the nature of God's love is, for John, the heart of the gospel. God actually sent His Son for one supreme purpose: to become His appointed atonement [*hilasmos*] for our sins and in this way to "take away our sins" (1 John 3:5). It seems more adequate to translate *hilasmos* by *atonement* rather than by either propitiation or expiation (R. E. Brown, AB 30:221).

Atonement includes both the Godward and the manward aspects, both propitiation and expiation. As man's only Mediator, Christ bestows on His followers forgiveness and cleansing from the Presence of the Father. Through this priestly work of Christ before the Father, it is possible for us to have communion or fellowship [*koinōnia*] with the Father and with His Son (1 John 1:3).

John's interpretation of the atoning blood of Christ presents the larger view which includes both Christ's death on the cross and the application of its merits by Christ as our High Priest in the Presence of the Father. John calls the risen Lord Himself "the atonement" [*hilasmos*] for our sins (1 John 2:2). We continuously need Christ's atoning, mediatorial ministry with the Father, be-

cause we still are affected by and fall into sin. We can never claim to have no sin or no guilt. Ellen White has explained our abiding need for Christ's Godward ministry in terms that consider the weight of sin beyond our natural comprehension:

The religious services, the prayers, the praise, the penitent confession of sin ascend from true believers as incense to the heavenly sanctuary, but passing through the corrupt channels of humanity, they are so defiled that unless purified by blood, they can never be of value with God. They ascend not in spotless purity, and unless the Intercessor, who is at God's right hand, presents and purifies all by His righteousness, it is not acceptable to God. All incense from earthly tabernacles must be moist with the cleansing drops of the blood of Christ. He holds before the Father the censer of His own merits, in which there is no taint of earthly corruption. He gathers into this censer the prayers, the praise, and the confessions of His people, and with these He puts His own spotless righteousness. Then, perfumed with the merits of Christ's propitiation the incense comes up before God wholly and entirely acceptable. Then gracious answers are returned (*Selected Messages*, Book 1, p. 344).

The revelation that true believers still need the atoning ministry of Christ can also be perceived in John's Apocalypse, which portrays Christ as both Priest and "a Lamb looking as if it has been slain" (Rev 1:12, 13; 5:6). His sacrificial blood will cleanse all believers till the end of time (Rev 7:14) and will provide their victory over Satan, "the accuser of our brethren" (Rev 12:10, 11, NKJV).

The question whether God cannot forgive without any sin offering arises not in Scripture, but in our philosophical speculation about a different God concept. In Holy Scripture, it is the very love of God that provides Christ as the Lamb or atoning sacrifice for us (1 John 4:10; Rom 5:8-10). This atonement is not in conflict with God's love, but is the most profound manifestation of His love. While such divine love expresses infinite love for the sinner, it exposes at the same time God's inexorable rejection of sin. The holy One reveals that sin cannot be tolerated before Him and has no place in His universe. If God would pardon man's sin without an atonement, "sin would have been immortalized" (E. G. White, *RH Apr*, 23, 1901; in *Question on Doctrine*, p. 668). Scripture does not explain the fullness of the atonement in one particular formula or

in a single text or parable. God's holy love is portrayed in the majestic righteousness of His law, or in His forgiving mercy for the sinner. We may be tempted to absolutize a preferred motif or attribute of God, or a particular parable of Jesus (e.g. "the lost son"). But such fragmentary use of Scripture leads inevitably to a reductionism of the revelation of God and to a mutilation of the apostolic gospel. The biblical view must be allowed to broaden and correct our limited views. This alone will give all glory to God and will raise in our consciousness the infinite value of the human soul before God.

Summary

Our study aimed to present a disciplined reflection of the biblical revelation on salvation and the atonement. We intended to find the authentic, original meaning of the message of Christ and of His apostles, by means of a responsible exegesis.

Christ Himself first attached redemptive significance to His expected violent death. He explained that His divinely appointed mission was to realize in His life and death the messianic prophecy of Isaiah 53. He, therefore, called His voluntary death a ransom price that would redeem many from sin's bondage and its divine curse. More than that, He consecrated His blood as the true sacrificial blood of God's new covenant, shed for the forgiveness of sins. Jesus saw His death as the bitter cup from His Father which He had to drink for our salvation. His cry of forsakenness by His "God" indicates that Christ experienced the unspeakable bitterness of a real separation from God so that we may again be restored into favor with God.

From Paul's letters we learned that divine reconciliation comes not by a mere declaration of God or by the teaching of Christ only, but through the propitiatory sacrifice of Christ and the shedding of His blood as our Substitute. Paul's most decisive passage in Romans 3:25, 26 teaches with clarity that God was actively involved in the sacrificial death of Christ on the cross, by displaying Him publicly as the receiver of God's punitive righteousness. Thus, for Paul, the cross of Christ demonstrates *God's costly forgiveness*. God forgives our sins without condoning them.

This apostolic teaching, that reconciliation is achieved by

means of Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross, is also found in the writings of Peter and John, and most elaborately in the letter to the Hebrews. They all apply Israel's sanctuary types to Christ as the Lamb that God provided for the satisfying propitiation for our sins and to Christ as our only High Priest in heaven to provide justification by grace and cleansing from the accusings of our troubled consciences. Only the acceptance of Christ's death for us puts an end to all legalistic enticements to merit our own salvation (Gal 3:1). Regarding this way of salvation through Christ's atonement the apostles allowed no alternative gospel, no other way of salvation. Rather, they warned all who would seek a different gospel: "How shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?" (Heb 2:3).

Endnotes

¹ NIV is used in this paper.