

The Work of Christ *What Actually Happened on the Cross?*

2 Cor 5:20-21

20 Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God.

21 **For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him.** KJV

1 Peter 2:21-24

21 For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:

22 Who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth:

23 Who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously:

24 **Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree**, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed. KJV

There is no more precious doctrine to Grace people than the doctrine that concerns the Work of Jesus Christ in His Death, Burial, Resurrection, and Ascension. Our entire theology lives in and breathes the fragrance that comes off from that Magnificent Sacrifice that He made on behalf of His people. So, we have a vigorous ‘knee-jerk’ when anyone suggests that we might look at that Work or think about it in any way that is different from how we have learned it.

I want to assure you that it is not my attempt to in any way alter your theology from that which is orthodox, that which has been handed down to us across 2 millennia of Christian thought and scholarship. At the same time I do want to challenge your thinking concerning how we express our theology as we seek to teach it to people who do not have our same frame of reference, which would be almost anyone who comes to us either by profession of faith or by membership transfer from any fellowship outside of Sovereign Grace or Reformed circles. It might also include quite a few who would come to us from *within* those circles.

The reality is that people quite often do not understand the terms and words that we use and they are often embarrassed to admit that. As a result we end up with members in our pews who may only have a fragmentary understanding of the most wonderful and central part of our entire theology.

In addition to that, it may be that we ourselves are sometimes not as precise as we might be in our use of the terms that relate to the Work of Christ and that practice may further splinter and fragment the comprehension that our people have of the Work of the Savior.

And we know that this is the Most Important of All Things for them to understand. It is essential to intelligent worship as well as growth and development as a child of God.

Concerning the use of terms:

There are many good and valid terms which are used to describe the Work of Jesus Christ both in

scripture and in the literatures of Christianity. This message is not undertaking to attack any of them or their use but to point out that when terms are used that are not explained and about which the audience has no working knowledge, the process of explaining His Work is somewhat, and at times altogether, hindered. Even more damaging is that these terms can be used effectively in masking hideous errors when believers fail to hold fast the *reality* that they are meant to picture.

So, what is the reality? What Did He Do?

What happened on the Cross is literally a thing beyond human imagination much less human expression.

The Second Person of the Divine Trinity, enabled and strengthened by the Third Person of that Trinity, accepted the assignment, the transference, of all of the guilt of all of the Elect to Himself. He then submitted Himself to the Divine Judgment of the First Person of the Trinity Who poured out upon Him without measure, without consideration for the intimate relationship they eternally enjoyed, the Full Blast of the Fierceness of His Wrath against sin and so thoroughly judged that sin in the Person of the Son that Divine and Perfect Justice could look on that Transaction and be satisfied that the penalty of all of that sin had been paid so that those for whom the Work was being done could be considered, without compromise to Divine Holiness, innocent, justified, and without fault. Without considering the Mechanism by which the transference was accomplished, this is the Work that was done.

In His Resurrection and Ascension, in the restoration of the Glory that had been laid aside, those included in that Work were granted a further consideration. Their innocence was not enough to qualify them for full communion with the Godhead, so they were also granted the absolute holiness of Jesus Christ as their own spiritual garments.

The end result was that they were all dealt with as if they had never sinned but rather had always perfectly obeyed the Law of God. However, this was not merely a ‘journal entry’ on the accounting books of God. This all was a complete, perfect, infinite, and absolute reality. This was not God playing ‘make believe’ but was a perfect creation so absolutely and ingeniously configured that Divine Perfection and Infinite Justice could find not one flaw in the entire thing. A new reality had been created in which the people of God, those whom the Father loved, were truly holy before Him in love.

In the accomplishing of this New Reality, the Son had taken all of these into union with Himself in such an absolute way that they were literally made “the righteousness of God in Him.” Their identities are now forever tied up in the identity of the Son and they can never come into condemnation having passed from life into death.

Do I even need to say that this is an irreversible transaction? This work is a work of Divine Creation and can no more be undone than the enthronement of Christ be reversed or His Resurrection be revoked.

- 4 I thank my God always on your behalf, for the grace of God which is given you by Jesus Christ;
- 5 That in every thing ye are enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge;
- 6 Even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you:
- 7 So that ye come behind in no gift; waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ:
- 8 Who shall also confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. KJV

This Work is so Massive and so Multi-faceted that we are forced to use symbols and short-hand expressions to describe it but in doing so we expose ourselves to multiple dangers, the greatest of which is the ***reduction and diminishing of the Work*** in our minds and in our explanations of it.

Let me give a couple of examples of what I mean. Baptism is given to us as a symbol, a representation in visual form, of the Work which Christ did. In immersion we are given a representation of His death, burial, and resurrection and our participation in that. Additionally, we are given the image of washing and cleansing. Both of these ideas are connected with what Jesus did for us in His Great Work and symbolized in Baptism.

But if we are not careful, this wonderful symbol, the beautiful picture, can become something else. If we allow it to become ***disconnected*** in our minds from what Jesus did it can become a mere religious formality with no real meaning or connections for us. On the other hand, if we allow the connections to ‘drift’ and ‘morph’ in our minds, the symbol can ***seem to become a reality*** to us as if the rite itself somehow ***actually connects us to*** and accomplishes for us that which was actually done by the Lord in His Work on the Cross. By allowing the picture to become either less or more than it was originally intended we can distort it and bring confusion rather than clarity of understanding to the minds and hearts of the people to whom we minister.

The same thing happens with Communion when the connections between the symbols and the realities pictured by the symbols are not handled with discipline and focus. It either becomes a meaningless rite, a formality, or it becomes (in our minds) an instrument through which saving grace is actually conveyed. Either of those things is an error, but it is an error because the ***symbol*** was not kept in exactly the place that it was intended.

In a similar way, I would submit, ***words*** are also symbols and shortcuts for us to reference that ***Massive Work*** without going through a lengthy summation of it. They can be extremely useful helps in giving us mental pictures that are associated with the labors of Christ but there is inherent danger in them as well. The problem is that either they become meaningless sounds that communicate no idea whatsoever of the thought intended, or, and maybe worse, they come to convey an idea that is deeply flawed, or false.

Consider, for example, the word ‘***expiation***.’ The word appears nowhere in the Authorized Version of the scriptures but it appears often in our theology. What does it mean? What ideas does it convey? I would take an educated guess that in the minds of many church-going people, even if we limit the group only to those who attend Sovereign Grace and Reformed churches, the word conveys little or no meaning at all because the people do not know what is intended by it.

Many might make the assumption that it has something to do with the Great Work on the Cross but, beyond that, they would understand little.

Webster defines the word this way: “The act of atoning for a crime; the act of making satisfaction for an offense, by which the guilt is done away and the obligation of the offended person to punish the crime is canceled... Among Christians, *expiation* for the sins of men is usually considered as made only by the obedience and sufferings of Christ.” But the root of the word, *expiate*, had a primary sense of appeasement and pacification, allaying resentment...“to extinguish the guilt of a crime by subsequent acts of piety or worship.”

While this may define many acts between human beings wherein offense is allayed and resentments soothed, by what construct is the Work of Christ *expiation*?

The reality is that in an absolute sense it is not. Jesus did not *appease* Divine Justice for the sins of His people *He met it's demands, submitted to it's sentence, and endured it to the end, to the finality of all that it required*. The sentence was not set aside, it was endured. The reason that Justice has nothing now to condemn in the believer is that it is *satisfied* with the fact that all of it's penalty has been born completely and perfectly.

Therefore, while the word *expiation* is a good and useful word, it cannot convey the proper image of the Work of Christ unless we associate the word with that Work for our audiences.

We use the word 'Propitiation'

But what do we mean when we use it? Often, I have observed, it is used as a general, but not specific, reference to the work of Christ. We know that it appears in our Bibles referencing Him, so it must be an important word.

Rom 3:25

25 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, through the forbearance of God; KJV

1 John 2:2

2 And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. KJV

1 John 4:10

10 Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. KJV

Maybe you also know that this was the word used in the Greek OT (LXX) to speak of the Mercy Seat, that golden lid of the Ark of the Covenant on which the blood was sprinkled on the Day of Atonement for the sins of the people of Israel. It was there, between the wings of the facing angels, that the Shekinah, the Glory of God, would appear to signify that the sacrifice had been accepted and that Israel's sins, in a figure, had been forgiven. But it was only symbolic then, the blood of bulls and goats could never take away sin, according to the writer of Hebrews (10:4). Used in this way, the Mercy Seat was the *place* of propitiation, but we still have not defined our

term nor described why this word is used in connection with the Massive Work of the Savior.

There is an awful story of propitiation told in Numbers 25 concerning the anger of the Lord that was stirred against Israel for their immorality with the Moabites.

Num 25

- 1 And Israel abode in Shittim, and the people began to commit whoredom with the daughters of Moab.
- 2 And they called the people unto the sacrifices of their gods: and the people did eat, and bowed down to their gods.
- 3 And Israel joined himself unto Baal-peor: and the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel.
- 4 And the LORD said unto Moses, Take all the heads of the people, and hang them up before the LORD against the sun, that the fierce anger of the LORD may be turned away from Israel. KJV

Now, this was a propitiation. An act of judgment was done which had the effect of propitiating God, turning away His fierce anger against the sins of Israel.

To ‘propitiate’ is to conciliate, to render an offended one favorable. Now, again, this is a very useful word to help communicate one element of the Work of Christ but it is also, to some degree, inaccurate. The end result, of course, is that God is shown to be favorable. However, as Dr. Gill points out in his commentary on Romans concerning 3:25, God had always been favorably disposed toward His people. He had written their names in His book before the foundation of the world and Jesus had stood as their Slain Lamb from all eternity. What His Work did, by literally satisfying His Justice in bearing the actual punishment for their guilt was to remove all hindrances to that favor of God being revealed upon them. Because of Christ and His Work, the Father could not be accused, or seen as having approved, any thing or any one who was guilty of sin and, therefore, unclean. The effect was the same as propitiation though no actual propitiating was done.

Therefore, Christ is the propitiation for the sins of the whole world of the elect, ***but only as it is seen in light of the Work that He did.***

Substitution

This is a popular word in the English speaking world that is often used to speak of the Work of Christ. Our own Sovereign Grace Messenger this issue features an article taken from Horatius Bonar’s book, “God’s Way of Peace,” and is titled “The Person and Work of the Substitute.

But, of course, the word itself is not used in the Authorized Version (KJV), in any of its forms. It is used, to describe one of the many elements of the Work of Christ, the fact that He died ***for*** His people, a thought that is often expressed.

The word is an attempt to describe one particular aspect of the Work that Christ did, interposing Himself, as it were, on our behalf and enduring the judgment of God instead of us, dying the

death that should have been ours, specifically death under the judgment and condemnation of God. There are many scriptures which reference this particular aspect of Jesus' labors including:

Rom 5:8

8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Rom 8:32

32 He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?

1 Cor 5:7

7 Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened. For even Christ our passover is sacrificed for us:

Gal 3:13

13 Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us:

Eph 5:2

2 And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweetsmelling savour.

But some (or shall I say 'many') use this term in such a loose way that no one is really sure what is meant by it. Did Jesus merely "take our place," and if so, how does that solve our problem with God? Is the Infinite God, the very Definition of Justice and Judgment content merely to have the interposition of Another and that be the satisfaction of our debt of sin?

Charles Dickens, in his masterpiece 'A Tale of Two Cities,' told just such a story. If you recall, the story was set in the time of the French Revolution when mob justice prevailed and the mere accusation that one was sympathetic with the nobility was sufficient to bring one to trial and often to have him executed. One such man was accused, a member of the nobility but a good man who had done much good for his people. His lawyer was a worthless sort, a drunkard and a generally unsavory character. But as it turns out the two men were nearly identical in their appearance and after the lawyer failed to make his case, his client was condemned. To save him the lawyer assumed his identity and the nobleman was allowed to escape, thus a real substitution was effected and the lawyer was killed instead of the other.

Justice, if we can call it that, in this case was satisfied but only because it was deceived. Had the charade been discovered the condemned one would still have been executed and the substitute would have died in vain. The reason is obvious, justice demands the death of the guilty party, not just that someone die. Yet in the careless way that the gospel is often presented it seems that God was willing to accept the death of His Innocent Son in the place of sinners without any concern to the relative guilt or innocence of the parties. It almost seems, to hear many speak, that it was as if God had said, "Well, so long as someone dies, I don't care." Jesus died and the guilt was removed by a simply stroke of the pen.

But, of course, that is not how justice works. The guilty must die and God has declared that.

Ezek 18:20

20 The soul that sinneth, it shall die. The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father,

neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him.
KJV

This seems to be the declarative statement of God on the matter. The sinner is to bear the consequences of his own sin and no one bears the iniquity of another. So, if Jesus' death is to be discussed as having been 'for' us and if He is going to be spoken of as our Substitute, there must obviously be more to the picture than many present. A bare Substitute will not suffice.

There is that mysterious concept of Redemption

Most of us know that the OT was a time in which many people were slaves. Some were slaves because they were born into a family of slaves. Others had been captured in war or kidnaped and stolen from their homes to be sold as slaves. Others, especially in Israel were Jews who had essentially gone bankrupt and the last thing they had to sell to pay their debts was themselves and sometimes even their families. Such slavery in Israel was limited in its scope and could be undone by a relative paying off the debt so that the slave might go free. It is this picture that is the most frequently associated with Jesus and His Work.

But many people have stumbled and continue to struggle with just how this allegory works itself out and how it is connected to one's salvation through the Cross. I remember hearing one fellow go so far as to say that Jesus, after His death, gathered up all of His blood and took it to Satan and used it to buy His people out of bondage. It was quite the elaborate story! However, it has no support in scripture. Nowhere is such a thing even hinted.

But that still leaves us with the question, "how is the Work that Jesus did pictured in the word 'Redemption'?" What was the thing that was paid? To whom was it paid? And, how did this payment bring my salvation to pass?

The answer, I believe, is to be found in the results rather than the details of the transaction. First of all, we know that an extraordinary thing was done which can very literally be thought of as a 'price' that was paid. God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son. God the Father paid a price in the separation that ensued between Him and the Son. The Son paid the price of His suffering and His death, not to mention the enduring of the shame and the awful agony of actually bearing the sins of His people.

There is no question but that His people were in a state of slavery and bondage.

Rom 6:17-18

17 But God be thanked, that ye were the servants of sin, but ye have obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine which was delivered you.

18 Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. KJV

Rom 6:20

20 For when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness. KJV

Heb 2:14-15

14 Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself

- likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil;
- 15 And deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. KJV

A price having then been paid, those who were once slaves were made free from that bondage. The New Testament expands that thought and teaches us that, having been purchased, we now belong to God.

1 Cor 7:23

- 23 Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men. KJV

In a literal sense, then, no exchange of currency or other valuables occurred between Jesus and someone else. In the same literal sense then there was no redemption.

However, a price was paid and a deliverance was effected. The result was the setting free of slaves, thus, we call it Redemption.

Then, there is that sacred cow of our theology, The Atonement

I do not say that to in any way disparage the doctrine of the atonement. I believe it in exactly the same terms as the great confessions of faith have expressed it. At the same time, I have come to think that at times we do disservice to the doctrine and to the Lord of the doctrine by handling it without taking proper care to explain it.

In simplest terms, the Hebrew expression means 'to cover' or 'a covering' and we encounter it first in scripture concerning the ark of Noah.

Gen 6:13-14

- 13 And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.
- 14 Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch. KJV

OT:3722 kaphar (kaw-far'); a primitive root; to cover (specifically with bitumen); figuratively, to expiate or condone, to placate or cancel:

KJV - appease, make (an atonement, cleanse, disannul, forgive, be merciful, pacify, pardon, purge (away), put off, (make) reconcile (-liation). (Biblesoft's New Exhaustive Strong's Numbers and Concordance with Expanded Greek-Hebrew Dictionary. Copyright (c) 1994, Biblesoft and International Bible Translators, Inc.)

This became the word that we most often find translated at ***atonement*** throughout the OT, especially in regard to the sacrifices of the tabernacle and the temple.

We find the word again, or at least one form of it, in the interaction between Jacob and Esau when Jacob was returning from his sojourn with Laban. You will recall that Jacob had fled Canaan because he heard that Esau had vowed to kill him after the death of Isaac. Now, Jacob

was returning and Esau had become a mighty man of power in the land. In his concern for his own as well as his families safety, Jacob arranged to offer and elaborate gift to Esau.

Gen 32:19-20

- 19 And so commanded he the second, and the third, and all that followed the droves, saying, On this manner shall ye speak unto Esau, when ye find him.
- 20 And say ye moreover, Behold, thy servant Jacob is behind us. For he said, I will appease him with the present that goeth before me, and afterward I will see his face; peradventure he will accept of me. KJV

Here we have the first allegorical use of the word. The gifts that Jacob were offering to Esau were being given in the hope that his disposition toward Jacob would be altered *as if* his face (or his eyes) had been covered concerning the awful way that Jacob had treated him and this became the sense of the word as used religiously by the Jews. The sin offerings were seen both as ‘covering’ the sin as well as ‘covering the eyes’ of God that He might not look with disfavor upon the sinner. This is the basis of the concept of atonement.

But if we take the word literally we realize that nothing can be covered where God cannot see it nor can His eyes be covered to prevent Him from seeing everything. Our sins are not in a lead box somewhere guarded by Kryptonite. God still sees them all.

So, why do all of our words come up short?

They come up short because we are dealing with concepts in the Work of Christ that human language was never designed to handle. Our language is built around our experiences, things that we know, ideas that we comprehend. Ideas like Perfect Justice, Infinite Holiness, the Trinity, the Dual Natures of Jesus Christ, and His Union with His People are not things of human experience nor do they have corollaries in our world. We only encounter these ideas in the Word of God and can only effectively grapple with them as the Holy Spirit of God assists us.

The so-called Christian Theology of our day leaves most people with the impression that God will set aside His Justice and bestow Mercy upon sinners, that He will simply forget, dismiss, and put away their sins. There is a failure to see that God has locked humanity as well as His dealings with them into an inescapable system of Law and Justice which He will not compromise because that would call His Holiness into question.

Every sin must be reckoned and Just Punishment must be meted out for every one of them. Nothing escapes, He dismisses nothing, every sin is either borne by Jesus Christ or borne by the sinner who committed it. The system and His records are absolutely perfect. The punishment due each one must be suffered.

What Jesus did was to actually bear those sins by taking all of His people into union with Himself along with their guilt. He did it in such a way that His Own Righteous Self was not

stained by them though He experienced the agony of them as well as the suffering due them. Where is the word that can catch all of that in two or three syllables?

Then, He placed Himself under the Perfect and Infinite Justice of His Holy Father Who would not reduce the penalty due for those sins one ounce, even for His Own Son, and He suffered that which was due, all of it, perfectly, completely.

The union was so complete that even people who became believers later (such as Paul) would be able to say with complete integrity, "I was conjointly crucified with Jesus Christ" and be able to argue our deliverance from the power of sin based on that union, Rom. 6.

That union was sustained to the grave, the resurrection, and the ascension, so that Paul could also say that we were "raised up together and made to sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus."

The effect was so complete, so thorough, that God Himself could take these people into Communion with Himself and not compromise His Perfect Holiness in any way.

He could behave in a *Propitiatory* way toward them. They belong to Him through a purchase, hence they can be said to be *Redeemed*. They did not and will not die the death that Christ died, so He can be said to be their *Substitute*. And, since their sins are recorded to the account of Jesus Christ, thus totally and completely paid for, there is a real sense in which they are 'covered' from the eyes of God, at least in regard to the individual believer, *Atoned*.

So, to conclude, I am not arguing against the use of any of these words nor any of the others that might be appropriate (Justification, Sanctification, etc.). I do make the appeal for all of us to keep in mind the reality that these little word pictures are painting for us and lose ourselves in the Great Work of the Savior, not the terms and phrases by which we attempt to describe that Work.

The Second Person of the Divine Trinity, enabled and strengthened by the Third Person of that Trinity, accepted the assignment, the transference, of all of the guilt of all of the Elect to Himself. He then submitted Himself to the Divine Judgment of the First Person of the Trinity Who poured out upon Him without measure, without consideration for the intimate relationship they eternally enjoyed, the Full Blast of the Fierceness of His Wrath against sin and so thoroughly judged that sin in the Person of the Son that Divine and Perfect Justice could look on that Transaction and be satisfied that the penalty of all of that sin had been paid so that those for whom the Work was being done could be considered, without compromise to Divine Holiness, innocent, justified, and without fault. Without considering the Mechanism by which the transference was accomplished, this is the Work that was done.

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