

# The Atonement

John Murray

Atonement is the term that has come to be widely used to denote the substitutionary work of Christ which culminated in the sacrifice of Calvary. The term occurs frequently in the A.V. of the Old Testament as the rendering of the Hebrew root *kaphar* but only once in the New Testament (Rom. 5:11) where it refers to the reconciliation. The term itself is not adequate to express what is involved in Christ's vicarious work. In fact, no one term can express the manifold aspects from which, according to Scripture, this work of Christ must be viewed. Atonement, however, when understood in the way that usage has determined, is sufficiently inclusive to serve as a general designation.

**I. *The Source.*** Any doctrine of the atonement is misdirected from the outset if it does not take account of the fact that the atonement is the provision of God's love. "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son" (John 3:16). "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be a propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:10; cf. Rom. 5:8; 8:32; Eph. 2:4, 5; I John 4:9). The title "God" in these texts refers specifically to God the Father. So it is to the initiative of the Father's love that our attention is drawn when we think of the fountain from which the atonement emanates. And all that has been achieved by Christ's vicarious undertaking must always be subordinated to the design and purpose of the Father's love. This is the orientation which the classic exponents of Reformed doctrine have always recognized, and it is a caricature of their position to suppose that they represented the love and compassion of the Father as constrained by the sacrifice of Christ.

In this fact that the love of God is the spring from which the atonement flows we encounter an ultimate of revelation and of human thought. It is the marvel that evokes wonder, adoration, and praise. It is a love that arises from the unsearchable riches of God's goodness. But though an ultimate of revelation, the Scripture not only permits but requires further characterization of this love. The love of God is differentiating in respect of its objects. It is the love of God the Father that Paul has in view when he speaks of Him who "spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all" (Rom. 8:32). But it is within the orbit defined



by Romans 8:29 that this love must be understood, and the latter text speaks of distinguishing love that predestinates to a determinate end — conformity to the image of his Son. Ephesians 1:4, 5 is to the same effect. God chose a people in Christ and in love predestinated them unto adoption through Jesus Christ. It would annul the witness of Scripture if we ignored the differentiation which the love of God institutes and failed to construe the atonement as the provision of this distinguishing love and as that which secures the design of God's electing grace.

**II. *The Necessity.*** The love of God is the cause of the atonement. But why did the love of God take this way of realizing its end? This is the question of the reason as distinguished from the cause. Notable theologians in the history of the church have taken the position that there was no absolute reason, that God could have saved men by other means than by the blood-shedding of His own Son, that, since God is omnipotent and sovereign, other ways of forgiving sin were available to Him. But God was pleased to adopt this method because the greatest number of advantages and blessings accrued from it. God could have redeemed men without the shedding of blood, but He freely chose not to and thereby He magnifies the glory of His grace and enhances the precise character of the salvation bestowed (*e.g.*, Augustine, Aquinas, Thomas Goodwin, John Ball, Thomas Blake).

It might appear that this view does honor to the omnipotence, sovereignty, and grace of God and, also, that to posit more would be presumptuous on our part and beyond the warrant of Scripture. Is it not the limit of our thought to say that “without the shedding of blood” (Heb. 9:22) there is *actually* no remission and be satisfied with that datum? There are, however, certain things God cannot do. “He cannot deny himself” (II Tim. 2:13) and it is “impossible for God to lie” (Heb. 6:18). The only question is: are there exigencies arising from the character and perfections of God which make it intrinsically necessary that redemption should be accomplished by the sacrifice of the Son of God? It should be understood that it was not necessary for God to redeem men. The purpose to redeem is of the free and sovereign exercise of His love. But having purposed to redeem, was the only alternative the blood-shedding of His own Son as the way of securing that redemption? There appear to be good reasons for an affirmative answer.

A. Salvation requires not only the forgiveness of sin but also justification. And justification, adequate to the situation in which lost mankind is, demands a righteousness such as belongs to no other than the incarnate Son of God, a righteousness undefiled and undefilable, a righteousness with divine property and quality (*cf.* Rom. 1:17; 3:21; 22; 10:3; II Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9). It is the righteousness of the obedience of Christ (Rom. 5:19). But only the Son of God, incarnate, fulfilling to the full extent the commitments of the Father's will, could have



provided such a righteousness. A concept of salvation bereft of the justification which this righteousness imparts is an abstraction of which Scripture knows nothing.

B. Sin is the contradiction of God and he must react against it with holy wrath. Wherever sin is, the wrath of God rests upon it (*cf.* Rom. 1:18). Otherwise God would be denying Himself, particularly His holiness, justice, and truth. But wrath must be removed if we are to enjoy the favor of God which salvation implies. And the only provision for the removal of wrath is propitiation. This is surely the import of Romans 3:25, 26, that God set forth Christ a propitiation to declare His righteousness, *that He might be just* and the justifier of the ungodly.

C. The cross of Christ is the supreme demonstration of the love of God (*cf.* Rom. 5:8; I John 4:9, 10). But would it be a supreme demonstration of love if the end secured by it could have been achieved without it? Would it be love to secure the end by such expenditure as the agony of Gethsemane and the abandonment of Calvary for God's own well-beloved and only-begotten Son if the result could have been attained by less costly means? In that event would it not have been love without wisdom? In this we cannot suppress the significance of our Lord's prayer in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39). If it had been possible for the cup to pass from him, his prayer would surely have been answered. It is when the indispensable exigencies fulfilled by Jesus' suffering unto death are properly assessed that we can see the marvel of God's love in the ordeal of Calvary. So great was the Father's love to lost men that He decreed their redemption even though the cost was nought less than the accursed tree. When Calvary is viewed in this light, then the love manifested not only takes on meaning but fills us with adoring amazement. Truly this is love.

Those who think that in pursuance of God's saving purpose the cross was not intrinsically necessary are, in reality, not dealing with the hypothetical necessity of the atonement but with a hypothetical salvation. For, on their own admission, they are not saying that the actual salvation designed and bestowed could have been enjoyed without Christ but only salvation of lesser character and glory. But of such salvation the Scripture knows nothing and no good purpose can be served by an imaginary hypothesis.

**III. Nature.** The nature of the atonement is concerned with the ways in which the Scripture characterizes Christ's vicarious undertakings and accomplishments. The most basic and inclusive of these categories is obedience. And there are four categories that are more specific — *sacrifice, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption.*



A. *Obedience*. Obedience does not define for us the specific character of the other categories but it does point us to the capacity in which Christ discharges all phases of his atoning work. No passage in Scripture provides more instruction on our topic than Isaiah 52:13-53:12. It is in the capacity of Servant that the person in view is introduced and it is in the same capacity he executes His expiatory function (Isa. 52:13, 15; 53:11). The title "Servant" derives its meaning from the fact that He is the Lord's Servant, not the Servant of men (cf. Isa. 42:1, 19; 52:13). He is the Father's Servant and this implies subjection to and fulfillment of the Father's will. *Servant* defines His commitment, and obedience the execution. Psalm 40:7, 8 points in the same direction. Our Lord Himself confirms what the Old Testament foretold. "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38; cf. 4:34; 10:17, 18). The pivotal events of redemptive accomplishment He performed in pursuance of the Father's commandment and in the exercise of messianic authority. Paul's witness is to the same effect as that of the Old Testament and of Jesus Himself. Most important is Philippians 2:7, 8. For this text in respect of the capacity in which Jesus acted attaches itself to Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and represents the climactic event of Jesus' commitment, the death of the cross, as an act of obedience. And Romans 5:19 expresses that it is by the obedience of Christ that many are constituted righteous. This evidence shows that our thought respecting the nature of the atonement is not biblically conditioned unless it is governed by the concept of the obedience of Christ in His capacity as the Servant fulfilling the Father's commission.

We must not view this obedience mechanically or quantitatively. It did not consist simply in the sum-total of formal acts of obedience. Obedience springs from the dispositional complex of motive, intention, direction, and purpose. And since our Lord was truly human and fulfilled the Father's will in human nature, we must appreciate the progression in knowledge, understanding, resolution, and will which was necessary to and came to expression in the discharge of the Father's will in its increasing demands upon Him until these demands reached their climax in the death upon the cross. This explains the word in Hebrews 5:8 that "he learned obedience from the things which he suffered." At no point was He disobedient. But the demands of obedience were so expansive and progressively exacting that he had to learn in the furnace of trial, temptation, and suffering. Since His obedience thus attained to the perfection and completeness required for the discharge of His commitments to the fullest extent of their demands, He was made perfect as the captain of salvation (Heb. 2:10) and "being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him" (Heb. 5:9). This is but saying that it was by obedience that he accomplished the salvation of the many sons who are to be brought to glory, and we see how integral to salvation secured is the obedience of Christ.



**B. Sacrifice.** There is abundant evidence in the New Testament to show that Christ's giving of Himself is to be construed in terms of sacrificial offering (I Cor. 5:7; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 7:27; 8:3; 9:14, 23, 25, 26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14, 26). And it is not only these express statements which support the thesis but also references which can only be interpreted in terms of the altar of sacrifice (*cf.*, e.g., Heb. 13: 1-13). The notion of sacrifice entertained by these New Testament writers is that derived from the Old Testament, for the allusions to the sacrificial ritual of the levitical economy make it apparent that the latter provided the type in terms of which the sacrifice of Christ was to be interpreted. The Old Testament sacrifices were expiatory of guilt. This is particularly true of the sin-offerings, and these are specifically in view in some of the New Testament passages (*cf.* Heb. 9:6-15, 23, 24; 13:1-13). The idea of expiation is the removal of the liability accruing from sin. Sacrifice is the provision whereby this liability is removed — it is the substitutive endurance of penalty and transference of liability from the offerer to the sacrifice.

The Old Testament sacrifices were truly typological of the sacrifice of Christ. Isaiah 53:10 expressly applies to the self-sacrifice of the Servant what was figuratively represented by the trespass-offering, and in New Testament passages, as indicated above, the levitical offerings provide the analogy after which Christ's sacrifice is to be understood. But of more significance is the fact that the sacrifice of Christ is the archetype after which they were patterned — they were patterns of the things in the heavens and only figures of the true (Heb. 9:23, 24). Christ's offering is the heavenly exemplar. This is additional confirmation that what was signified in shadow by the ritual offerings, namely expiation, was transcendentally and really true in the sacrifice of Christ. The shadow portrays the outline of the reality. It is, however, this truth, that the sacrifice of Christ is the heavenly reality, that insures the efficacy and finality and perfection of His sacrifice in contrast with the obvious shortcomings of the levitical offerings (*cf.* Heb. 9:9-14, 24-28). "By one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14).

It is the work of Christ, viewed in terms of sacrifice, that thrusts into the foreground the high priestly office of our Redeemer. It is the prerogative of the priest to offer sacrifice and only in the exercise of His prerogative as the great high priest of our profession did Jesus offer Himself. He was "called of God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek" (Heb. 5:10). Here the uniqueness of Christ's sacrifice is further demonstrated. He offered Himself, and the sacrifice He offered was Himself. He acted as both priest and offering (*cf.* Heb. 7:27; 8:3; 9:14, 25; 10:59) and thus purged our sins. The transcendent perfection, efficacy, and finality of His sacrifice reside in the transcendent character of the offering and the dignity of His priesthood.



**C. Propitiation.** The language of propitiation is clearly applied to the work of Christ in the New Testament (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 2:17; I John 2:2; 4:10). Plausible attempts have been made to interpret propitiation in terms of expiation and thus avoid the *prima facie* import of propitiation. The fallacy of these attempts has been successfully demonstrated by scholarly and painstaking study of the biblical data (see bibliography). The reason for the attempt to relieve the work of Christ of its strictly propitiatory character is obvious. To propitiate means to pacify, to conciliate, to make propitious. It presupposes that the person propitiated is angry and needs to be pacified. If Christ propitiates, it must be God whom he propitiates. And surely, it is alleged, we cannot think of God as needing to be pacified or made propitious by the blood of Christ. If the atonement springs from the love of the Father and is the provision of His love, as has been shown above, is it not contradiction to maintain that He is conciliated by that which is the expression of His love? If invincible love is antecedent, then no place remains for the pacifying of wrath!

There is deplorable confusion in this line of reasoning. To love and to be propitious are not convertible terms. Even in the human sphere the unique object of love may at the same time be the unique object of holy wrath and displeasure. It is the denial of God's holiness in relation to Sin, as the contradiction of what He is and demands, not to recognize that sin must evoke His wrath. And just as sin belongs to persons, so the wrath rests upon the persons who are the agents of sin. Those whom God loved with invincible love were the children of wrath, as Paul expressly says (Eph. 2:3). It is to this fact that the propitiation made by Christ is directed. Those whom God loved were the children of His wrath. It is this truth that enhances the marvel of His love, and if we deny it or tone it down we have eviscerated the greatness of His love. The doctrine of the propitiation is precisely this that God loved the objects of His wrath so much that He gave His own Son to the end that He by His blood should make provision for the removal of this wrath. It was Christ's to deal with the wrath so that those loved would no longer be the objects of wrath, and love would achieve its aim of making the children of wrath the children of God's good pleasure. It is a cabined perspective that can dispense with the necessity and glory of propitiation.

The disposition to deny or even underrate the doctrine of propitiation betrays a bias that is prejudicial to the atonement as such. The atonement means that Christ bore our sins and in bearing sin bore its judgment (*cf.* Isa. 53:5). Death itself is the judgment of God upon sin (*cf.* Rom. 5:12; 6:23). And Christ died for no other reason than that death is the wages of sin. But the epitome of the judgment of God upon sin is His wrath. If Jesus in our place met the whole judgment of God upon our sin, He must have endured that which constitutes the essence of this judgment. How superficial is the notion that the vicarious endurance of wrath is incompatible with the immutable love of the Father to Him! Of course, the



Father loved the Son with unchangeable and infinite love. And the discharge of the Father's will in the extremities of Gethsemane's agony and the abandonment of Calvary elicited the supreme delight of the Father (*cf.* John 10:17). But love and wrath are not contradictory; love and hatred are. It is only because Jesus was the Son, loved immutably as such and loved increasingly in His messianic capacity as He progressively fulfilled the demands of the Father's commission, that He could bear the full stroke of judicial wrath. This is inscribed on the most mysterious utterance that ever ascended from earth to heaven, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Ps. 22:1; Matt. 27:46; Mark 15:34). God in our nature forsaken of God! Here is the wonder of the Father's love and of the Son's love, too. Eternity will not scale its heights or fathom its depths. How pitiable is the shortsightedness that blinds us to its grandeur and that fails to see the necessity and glory of the propitiation. "Herein is love," John wrote, "not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son a propitiation for our sins" (I John 4:10). Christ is truly the propitiation for our sins because He propitiated the wrath which was our damnation. The language of propitiation may not be diluted; it bespeaks the essence of Calvary.

**D. *Reconciliation.*** Just as *sacrifice* has in view the exigency created by our guilt and *propitiation* the exigency arising from the wrath of God, so *reconciliation* is concerned with our alienation from God and the need of having that alienation removed. In the Scripture the actual terms used with reference to the reconciliation wrought by Christ are to the effect that we are reconciled to God (Rom. 5:10) and that God reconciles us to Himself (II Cor. 5:18, 19; Eph. 2:16; Col. 1:2-22). Never is it expressly stated that God is reconciled to us. It has often been stated, therefore, that the cross of Christ, insofar as it contemplated reconciliation, did not terminate upon God to the removal of His alienation from us but simply and solely upon us to the removal of our alienation from Him. In other words, it is not that which God has against us that is dealt with in the reconciliation but only our enmity against Him. It is strange that this contention should be so persistent, that scholars should be content with what is, to say the least, so superficial an interpretation of the usage of Scripture in reference to the term in question.

It is not to be denied that the reconciliation is concerned with our enmity against God. Reconciliation, like all the other categories deals with sin and the liability proceeding from it. And sin is enmity against God. But, when the teaching of Scripture is properly analyzed, it will be seen that reconciliation involves much more than that which might appear at first sight to be the case.

When in Matthew 5:24 we read, "Be reconciled to thy brother," we have an example of the use of the word "reconcile" that should caution us against a common inference. In this instance the person bringing his gift to the altar is



reminded that his brother has something against him. It is this grievance on the part of the other that is the reason for interrupting his act of worship. It is the grievance and, in that sense, the against of the other that the worshipper must take into account, and it is the removal of that grievance, of that alienation, of that against," that the reconciliation which he is required to effect contemplates. He is to do all that is necessary to remove the alienation in the mind and attitude of the other. It is plain, therefore, that the situation requiring reconciliation is the frame of mind or the attitude of the other and what the reconciliation must effect is the change of mind on the part of the other, namely, the person called the brother. Thus we are pointed in a very different direction from that which we might have expected from the mere formula "be reconciled." And although it is the "against" of the brother that is in view as requiring a change, the exhortation is in terms of "be reconciled to thy brother" and not at all "Let thy brother be reconciled to thee." By this analysis it can easily be seen that the formula "reconciled to God" can well mean that what the reconciliation has in view is God's alienation from us and the removal of that alienation. Matthew 5:23, 24 shows how indefensible is an interpretation that rests its case upon what, at best, is mere appearance.

Another example points in the same direction. It is Romans 11:15. "For if the casting away of them be the reconciling of the world, what shall the receiving of them be, but life from the dead?" The "casting away" is that of Israel and the "reconciling" (reconciliation) is that of the Gentile nations. The "casting away" is contrasted with the "reconciliation" and the meaning of the latter is to be discovered from this contrast. The "casting away" is also contrasted with the "receiving," that is, the receiving of them back again. The "casting away" can be nothing other than the rejection of them from the divine favor and blessing they once enjoyed and the "receiving" is the restoration of them again to the divine favor and blessing from which for a time they had been excluded. It is apparent that in both words the thought is focused upon the relation of Israel to God's favor and saving blessing. Reconciliation, being in contrast with casting away, must, therefore, mean the reception of the Gentiles into the favor of God and the blessing of the gospel; it is the relation to God's favor that is expressed. Hence it is upon the change in the disposition of God and the change in the resulting relationship of God to the Gentiles that thought is focused in the word "reconciliation." This demonstrates that the term can be used with reference to a change that takes place in God's mind and relation with reference to men. And we are thus prepared for the appreciation of the teaching of Scripture on the reconciliation accomplished by Christ in His death.

Any proper assessment of the nature and liabilities of sin shows that sin separated us from the favor and fellowship of God (*cf.* Isa. 59:2). Sin elicits not only the wrath of God but also its complement, alienation from Him. This alienation is the result of our estrangement from Him. The latter is sinful and



constitutes our sin but the former is holy as is God's wrath. It is that holy alienation that reconciliation contemplates and it is directed to its removal. This is the gospel of the reconciliation, and what a hiatus there would be in the atonement if it did not provide for this exigency of our sinful state!

If reconciliation consists merely in the change that takes place in the heart of man, the change from enmity to penitence and love, then the reconciliation *itself* is something inward; it is a change in the subjective disposition and attitude of man. It becomes impossible to adjust the teaching of the two most relevant passages to this conception. These passages are Romans 5:8-11; II Corinthians 5:18-21.

1. In Romans 5:8 it is the greatness of God's own love towards us that is being accented. This love is demonstrated by two considerations (1) that Christ died for us and (2) that He died for us while we were yet sinners. Our attention is directed to what God did when we were still in our sinful state and, therefore, when we were estranged from Him. This verse, furthermore, enunciates the essence of what follows in the next three verses. For the clause "Christ died for us" (vs. 8) is expanded in verse 10 in the words "we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son." Hence it is reconciliation through the death of Christ that was accomplished *while we were yet sinners*. How nullifying this would be if the reconciliation were conceived of as consisting in the change of our hearts from sin and enmity to love and penitence! The whole point of verse 8 is that what God did in the death of Christ took place when we were still sinners and did not consist in nor was it premised upon any change *in us*. To introduce the thought of change in us is to contradict the pivot of the declaration.

2. Verses 9 and 10 are parallel to each other; they express the same substantial truth in two different ways. More specifically, "justified now in his blood" is parallel to "reconciled to God in the death of his Son." "Justified" and "reconciled" must, therefore, belong to the same orbit; they must express similar concepts. But the term "justify," particularly in this epistle, has forensic meaning. It does not mean to make righteous; it is declarative in force and is the opposite of "condemn." It is concerned with judicial relations. "Reconcile" must likewise have the same force and cannot refer to an inward change of heart and attitude. The same conclusion is derived from II Corinthians 5:19: "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them." Not imputing trespasses is either explanatory of the reconciliation or it is the consequence of the latter. In either case it shows the category to which reconciliation belongs and is far removed from that of a subjective change in us.

3. Both passages emphasize the historic once-for-allness of the action denoted by reconciliation. It was in the death of Christ reconciliation was accomplished,



and this was once for all. The tenses indicate the same thought — “we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son” (Rom. 5:10); “all things are of God who reconciled us to himself . . . God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself” (II Cor. 5:18, 19). But a change of heart in men is not a once-for-all accomplished event; it is being continuously realized as reconciliation is applied.

4. In II Corinthians 5:21 we are pointed to the kind of action involved in the reconciliation spoken of in the preceding verses. It is that ‘him who knew no sin he made to be sin for us.’ This unquestionably refers to the vicarious sin-bearing of Christ and belongs to the objective realm; it has no affinity with a subjective change registered in our hearts.

5. In Romans 5:10 it is all but certain that the expression “when we were enemies” reflects not on our active enmity against God but upon God’s alienation from us. The same term enemies occurs in Romans 11:28: “concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes.” “Enemies” here must mean alienated from God’s favor for two reasons. (1) What Paul is referring to is the rejection of Israel, their being disinherited for the present from the covenant privileges. (2) In the same verse “enemies” is contrasted with “beloved.” But “beloved” is certainly beloved of God. Hence “enemies” must reflect on God’s relation to them, the casting away of them (*cf.* vs. 15). This sense is well suited to the thought of Romans 5:10. For what the reconciliation accomplishes is the removal of God’s alienation, in that sense His holy enmity, and the argument is that, if when we were in a state of alienation from God, He brought us into His favor by the death of His Son, how much more shall we be saved from the wrath to come by the resurrection of Christ. If, however, the term “enemies” here means our active enmity against God, then the thought is similar to, and has the same force as, that of verse 8, noted above.

6. The statement in Romans 5:11, “through whom now we have received the reconciliation,” ill comports with the viewpoint being controverted. Reconciliation here is represented as a gift bestowed and received, indeed as a status established. The language is not adapted to the notion of a change in us from hatred to love and penitence. This kind of change is one that must enlist our activity to the fullest extent. But here (Rom. 5:11) we are viewed as the recipients. It is that representation that is in accord with the whole emphasis of the preceding verses. God has come to sustain a new relationship, and we have received this new status. This, likewise, agrees with the declaration of II Corinthians 5:19: “and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation.” The message of the gospel is the proclamation of what God has done, particularly that which He has done once for all in Christ. In terms of reconciliation it is the



proclamation of his reconciling action and cannot be construed as a change in our hearts. This latter is the fruit of the gospel proclamation. Love or penitence on our part is that to which the gospel constrains. Hence “the word of reconciliation” is antecedent and cannot consist in the proclamation of our change of heart. The import of the exhortation in II Corinthians 5:20 is also to be understood in this light. “Be ye reconciled to God” is often regarded as the appeal to us to lay aside our hostility. This is not of itself an improper appeal as the appropriate response to the gospel proclamation. But the evidence derived from the passages dealt with do not support this interpretation. It is rather an appeal to us to take advantage of that which *the reconciliation* is and has accomplished. It is to the effect: enter into the grace of the reconciliation; embrace the truth that “him who knew no sin he made to be sin for us, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (II Cor. 5:21).

The sum of the doctrine is, therefore, that reconciliation as *action* refers to what God has done in Christ to provide for the alienation from God which is the necessary consequence of our sin, and reconciliation as a *result* is the restoration to the favor and fellowship of God. It is the disruption caused by sin that made the reconciliation necessary, it is this disruption that the reconciliation healed, and it is fellowship with God that the reconciliation secured. At no point do the provisions of the atonement register its grace and glory more than at the point where our separation from God is the exigency contemplated and communion with God the secured result.

**E. Redemption.** No category is inscribed more deeply upon the consciousness of the church of Christ than that of redemption. No song of the saints is more characteristic than the praise of redemption by Jesus’ blood: “Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9).

Redemption views the atonement from its own distinctive aspect. Sacrifice views the atonement from the perspective of guilt, propitiation from that of wrath, reconciliation from that of alienation. Redemption has in view the *bondage* to which sin has consigned us, and it views the work of Christ not simply as deliverance from bondage but in terms of ransom. The word of our Lord settles this signification. “The Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28; cf. Mark 10:45). There are three propositions that lie on the face of this declaration. (1) The work Jesus came to do was one of ransom. (2) The giving of His life was the ransom price. (3) This ransom price was substitutionary in character and design. It is this same idea, by the use of the same Greek root in different forms, that appears in most of the New Testament passages which deal with redemption (Luke 1:68;



2:38; 24:21; Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; I Tim. 2:6; Tit. 2:14; Heb. 9:12, 15; I Pet. 1:18). In some other passages a different term is used. But it likewise conveys the thought of purchase (I Cor. 6:20; 7:23; Gal. 3:13; 4:5; II Pet. 2:1; Rev. 5:9; 14:3, 4). Hence the language of redemption is that of securing release by the payment of a price, and it is this concept that is applied expressly to the laying down of Jesus' life and the shedding of His blood. Jesus shed his blood in order to pay the price of our ransom. Redemption cannot be reduced to lower terms.

Since the word of our Lord (Matt. 20:28; Mark 10:45) sets the points for the doctrine of redemption and since He represented the giving of His life as the ransom price, we are prepared for the emphasis which falls upon the blood of Christ as the medium of redemptive accomplishment. "We have redemption through his blood" (Eph. 1:7; cf. Col. 1:14). "Ye were redeemed," Peter says, "not with corruptible things such as silver and gold . . . but with the precious blood of Christ" (I Pet. 1:18, 19). It is through His own blood that Jesus entered once for all into the holies, having obtained eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12). And Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant brought his death to bear upon the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first covenant (Heb. 9:15). The new song of the redeemed is, "Thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood" (Rev. 5:9). We cannot doubt then that, when Paul says, "We were bought with a price" (I Cor. 6:20; 7:23), the price is none other than the priceless blood of Christ. It is to the same truth that we are pointed in Galatians 3:13 where Christ's being made a curse for us is clearly to be understood as that which secured our redemption from the curse of the law. There can be no question then but the death of Christ in all its implications as the consequence of His vicarious identification with our sins is that which redeems and redeems in the way that is required by and appropriate to the redemptive concept, namely, by ransom price.

That from which we are represented as being released intimates the bondage that redemption has in view. As we might expect, there are several respects in which this bondage is to be construed. This diversity of aspect and the corresponding manifold of virtue belonging to the death of Christ are borne out by the witness of Scripture.

**1. *Redemption from Sin.*** That deliverance or salvation from sin is basic in the saving action of Christ needs no demonstration. It is sufficient to be reminded that this is the meaning of the name "Jesus" (Matt. 1:21). And the title "Saviour" is that by which He is frequently identified — He is the Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. The saving action comprehends much more than is expressly specified in the term "redemption." All of the categories in which the atonement is defined sustain a direct relation to sin and its liabilities. And, apart from express statements to this effect, we should have to understand that, if redemption



contemplates our bondage and secures release by ransom, the bondage must have in view that arising from sin. But the express intimations must also be appreciated. Christ Jesus, Paul states, “gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify for himself a people for his own possession, zealous of good works” (Titus 2:14). Though the relation to our sins is not as expressly stated, it is equally implied when redemption through Jesus’ blood is defined as “the forgiveness of our trespasses” (Eph. 1:7; *cf.* Col. 1:14). And similarly apparent is the reference to transgression in Hebrews 9:15 — Jesus’ death was unto the redemption under the first covenant. Since the reference to sin is overt in these passages we are compelled to infer that in others where sin is not mentioned it is, nevertheless, the assumed liability making redemption necessary and giving character to it (*cf.* Rom. 3:24; I Tim. 2:6; Heb. 9:12). And this reference to sin finds its Old Testament counterpart in Psalm 130:7, 8, that with the Lord is “plenteous redemption” and that “he shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.”

The bondage which sin entails for us is threefold, guilt, defilement, and power. All three aspects come within the scope of the redemption wrought by Christ. It would not be feasible to dissociate any of these aspects from the passages which reflect on Jesus’ redemptive accomplishment. But it may well be that thought is more particularly focused on one aspect in some passages and on another in other passages. In Romans 3:24, by reason of the context, it is no doubt provision of sin as guilt that is in view. The same is true of Ephesians 1:7. In Titus 2:14 it is probably sin as guilt and defilement that is contemplated. Because the aspect of sin as power is so frequently neglected it is necessary to devote more attention to this feature of the biblical teaching.

This aspect was, no doubt, uppermost in the mind of Zacharias when he said: ‘he hath visited and wrought redemption for his people’ (Luke 1:68). In the succeeding verses the references to the “horn of salvation” and to “salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us” (vss. 69, 71) indicate that the earliest New Testament expression of the redemptive hope is construed in terms of deliverance was understood in terms of redemption (*cf.*, also, Luke 2:38). Acquaintance with the Old Testament will show that the faith of Jesus which these earliest witnesses reflect was framed in terms of that same category which occupies so prominent a place in the religion of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is steeped in the language of redemption. It is particularly the deliverance from the bondage of Egypt that shapes the meaning of redemption under the old covenant. Though redemption applied to Abraham (Isa. 29:22) and though Jacob likewise could use the language of redemption (Gen. 48:16), yet it is the exodus from Egypt that constitutes *par excellence* the Old Testament redemption. The assurance given to Moses was, “I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will rid you out of their bondage, and I will redeem you with a stretched out arm, and with great



judgments” (Exod. 6:6), and the song of deliverance was, “Thou in thy mercy hast led forth the people which thou hast redeemed” (Exod. 15:13). Later books abound with allusions in similar terms (*cf.* Deut. 7:8; 9:26; 13:5; 21:8; 24:18; I Chron. 17:21; Ps. 77:15; 106:10; Isa. 43:1; 63:9; Micah 6:4). And God Himself has no name more replete with significance for the consolation of His people than that of Redeemer (*cf.* Ps. 19:14; Isa. 41:14; 43:14; 47:4; 63:16; Jer. 50:34). It is eloquent of the richness of the messianic promise that the Redeemer will come to Zion (Isa. 59:20). It is this Old Testament witness that provides the background for the New Testament faith expressed in Luke 1:68; 2:38. It should not surprise us, therefore, that in the New Testament the death of Christ should be represented as having direct bearing upon the archenemy of the people of God and upon the power of sin itself. Sin, as power, brings us into captivity, and Satan as the prince of darkness and god of this world wields his suzerainty and brings us into bondage.

With reference to Satan’s power we have explicit reference to the victory accomplished by Jesus’ death in John 12:31; Hebrews 2:14; I John 3:8. And Colossians 2:15 refers to the triumph secured over the principalities of wickedness (*cf.* Eph. 6:12). It is significant that the first promise should have been in terms of the destruction of the serpent (Gen. 3:15) and that the consummation should carry with it the casting of the old serpent, who is the Devil and Satan, into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:10). Although redemptive terms are not expressly used in connection with the destruction executed upon Satan, yet since they are used for deliverance from the bondage of alien powers and since Satan is the epitome of alien power, we are required to apply to the language of release (Heb. 2:15) redemptive import. The redemption from Egypt is the type of Christ’s redemptive work. The former was an act of judgment against all the gods of Egypt (Exod. 12:12), the latter an act of judgment upon Satan (John 12:31). If the former is construed as redemption, so must the latter be. Furthermore, we cannot dissociate the deception of Satan as the god of this world who blinds the minds of them that believe not (II Cor. 4:4) from the vain manner of life from which the precious blood of Christ redeems (I Pet. 1:18). At the center of Christ’s redemptive accomplishment, therefore, is emancipation from the thralldom of Satan’s deception and power.

We cannot dissociate the power of sin from the embrace of the redemption spoken of expressly in several of the passages already cited (*cf.* Titus 2:14; I Pet. 1:18). But when the power of sin is particularly reflected on, the consideration most relevant to deliverance is the truth that those for whom Christ died are also represented as having died in Him and with Him (Rom. 6:1-10; 7:1-6; II Cor. 5:14, 15; Eph. 2:1-7; Col. 2:20; 3:3; I Pet. 4:1, 2). Of basic importance in this connection is the fact that Christ in His vicarious undertakings may never be conceived of apart from those on whose behalf He fulfilled these commitments and, therefore,



when He died they were united to Him in the virtue and efficacy of His death. But when He died He died to sin once for all (Rom. 6:10). Those in Him also died to sin (Col. 2:20; Rom. 6:24; II Cor. 5:14), and, if they died to sin, they died to the power of sin. This is the guarantee that those united to Christ will not be ruled by the power of sin (Rom. 6:11, 14; I Pet. 4:1, 2). It would be artificial to construe this precise aspect of our relation to the death of Christ and of our deliverance from the power of sin in the terms of redemption. Yet at no other point may it more appropriately be introduced. Our death to sin is bound up with Christ's death on our behalf (*cf.* II Cor. 5:14), and to the latter the redemptive concept is clearly applied.

**2. *Redemption from the Curse of the Law.*** The curse of the law does not mean that the law is a curse. The law is holy and just and good (Rom. 7:13), but, because so, it exacts penalty for every infraction of its demands. The curse of the law is the curse it pronounces upon transgressors (Gal. 3:10). The law's penal sanction is as inviolable as its demands. To this sanction as it bears upon us redemption is directed. "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us" (Gal. 3:13). Nowhere in Scripture is the price of redemption more forcefully portrayed than in this text. It reminds us that the cost was not merely the death of Christ and the shedding of His blood but these in the circumstance of Golgotha's shame — He was "made a curse for us." We cannot measure the intensity of the reproach nor fathom the humiliation. To be unmoved before the spectacle is to be insensitive to the sanctions of holiness, the marvels of love, and the wonder of angels.

It is because we are ransomed from the curse of the law that we are represented as having died to the law (Rom. 7:6; Gal. 2:19), as put to death to the law (Rom. 7:4), and as discharged from the law (Rom. 7:6). We are released from the bondage of condemnation and are free to be justified apart from the law. The relation between redemption from sin in its guilt, defilement, and power and redemption from the curse of the law is intimate. For the strength of sin is the law (I Cor. 15:56).

In Galatians 4:5 it is redemption from the bondage of the ceremonial law that is specifically in view (*cf.* Gal. 3:23-4:3). It was by being made under this law that Christ redeemed those who were under it. He secured this release because He Himself fulfilled all the truth that was symbolically and typically set forth in the provisions of the levitical economy. These provisions were but shadows of the good things to come and, when that which they foreshadowed appeared, there was no need or place for the shadows themselves. This redemption has the fullest significance for all. By the faith of Jesus all without distinction enter into the full privilege of sons without the necessity of the disciplinary tutelage ministered by



the Mosaic rites and ceremonies. This is the apex of privilege and blessing secured by Christ's redemption — we receive the adoption.

On several occasions in the New Testament the term "redemption" denotes the consummation of bliss realized at the advent of Christ in glory (Luke 21:28; Rom. 8:23; I Cor. 1:30; Eph. 1:14; 4:30). This shows how closely related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus' blood is the final fruition of the saving process and how the glory awaiting the people of God is conditioned by the thought of redemption.

**IV. *The Perfection.*** This characterization is concerned with the uniqueness, efficacy, and finality of the atonement. There is no repetition on the part of Christ Himself. "By one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (Heb. 10:14). He "was once offered to bear the sins of many" (Heb. 9:28). And there is no participation on the part of men or angels. It was He Himself "who bore our sins in his own body upon the tree" (I Pet. 2:24). The offering of Himself was a high priestly function to which only He, by reason of His unique person and dignity, was equal (*cf.* Heb. 7: 2-28). Christ is indeed our supreme example and it is also true that His unique accomplishments are adduced to illustrate and enforce the sum-total of devotion required of us. Nothing less than the whole-hearted commitment to the Father's will exemplified in His obedience unto death is demanded of us (*cf.* Matt. 20:27, 28; Phil. 2:5-8; I Pet. 2:21-24). But nowhere are we represented as following Him in the discharge of that which constitutes atonement, and we are not asked to do so. We are to be obedient to the utmost of divine demands as they bear upon us. But by our obedience no one is constituted righteous (*cf.* Rom. 5:19). We may have to die in loyalty to Christ and His example. But we do not thereby expiate guilt, propitiate wrath, reconcile the world to God, and secure redemption. All these categories belong exclusively to Christ. The atonement was likewise efficacious. It was intrinsically adequate to the end designed. He purged our sins (Heb. 1:3). He reconciled us to God (Rom. 5:10). He accomplished redemption (Heb. 9:12; Rev. 5:9). He is the propitiation for our sins (I John 2:2). It was not a token obedience He rendered to God; He fulfilled all righteousness, and being made perfect He became the author of eternal salvation (Matt. 3:15; Heb. 5:9). It was not token sin-bearing that He endured; the Lord laid on Him the iniquities of us all and He bore our sins (Isa. 53:6, 11; I Pet. 2:24). The reconciliation He wrought was of such a character that it guarantees the consummating salvation (Rom. 5:9, 10; 8:32). He purchased the church by His blood and obtained eternal redemption (Acts 20:28; Heb. 9:12). The sum is that Christ by His own atoning work secured and insured the consummation that will be registered in the resurrection of life (*cf.* John 6:39).



**V. *The Extent.*** For whom did Christ die? Sober evaluation of the nature of the atonement and of its perfection leads to one conclusion. If it accomplished all that is implied in the categories by which it is defined and if it secures and insures the consummating redemption, the design must be coextensive with the ultimate result. If some fail of eternal salvation, as the Scripture plainly teaches, if they will not enjoy the final redemption, they cannot be embraced in that which procured and secured it. The atonement is so defined in terms of efficacious accomplishment that it must have the same extent as salvation bestowed and consummated. Unless we believe in the final restoration of all mankind, we cannot have an unlimited atonement. On the premise that some perish eternally we are shut up to one of two alternatives — a limited efficacy or a limited extent; there is no such thing as an unlimited atonement.

It is true that many benefits accrue from the redemptive work of Christ to the non-elect in this life. It is in virtue of what Christ did that there is a gospel of salvation and this gospel is proclaimed freely to all without distinction. Untold blessings are dispensed to the world for the simple reason that God has his people in the world and is fulfilling in it His redemptive purpose. Christ is head over all things and it is in the exercise of His mediatorial lordship that He dispenses these blessings. But His lordship is the reward of His atoning work. Hence all the favors which even the reprobate receive in this life are related in one way or another to the atonement and may be said to flow from it. If so, they were designed to flow from it, and this means that the atonement embraced in its design the bestowment of these benefits upon the reprobate. But this is not to say that the atonement, in its specific character as atonement, is designed for the reprobate. It is one thing to say that certain benefits accrue to the reprobate from the atonement; it is entirely different to say that the *atonement itself* is designed for the reprobate. And the fallacy of the latter supposition becomes apparent when we remember that it is of the nature of the atonement to secure benefits which the reprobate never enjoy. In a word, the atonement is bound up with its efficacy in respect of obedience, expiation, propitiation, reconciliation, and redemption. When the Scripture speaks of Christ as dying for men, it is His vicarious death on their behalf that is in view and all the content which belongs to the atonement defines the significance of the formula “died for.” Thus we may not say that He died for all men any more than that He made atonement for all men.

The restriction which applies to the extent of the atonement is borne out not only by the evidence pertaining to the nature of the atonement but also by passages which define its design. Nothing should be more obvious than that Jesus came into the world to save. He did not come to make salvation merely possible nor to make men salvable. Such a notion would contradict the express declarations of Jesus Himself and of other inspired witnesses (*cf.* Luke 19:10; John



6:39; Luke 2:11; John 3:17). The word of the angel to Joseph, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21) implies the certitude of salvation and not mere possibility. And this certitude must, therefore, inhere in that by which He wrought salvation, namely, the atonement. Even John 3:16, so often appealed to in support of universal atonement, points to this same certitude and security. The purpose of giving the only-begotten Son is stated to be "that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." The import is that He makes infallibly secure the salvation of all who believe, and there is no suggestion that the design extended beyond the securing of that end. When Paul says that "Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it" (Eph. 5:25), he is alluding to Christ's sacrificial offering. But he also states the design: "that he might sanctify and cleanse it . . . that he might present it to himself a glorious church" (vss. 26, 27). The love spoken of here, the reference of the sacrificial offering, and the design are all restricted to the church. The design will certainly be fulfilled, and so the love and the giving of Himself achieve their object in the glorifying of that to which they were directed. It is impossible to universalize the reference of the sacrifice of Christ alluded to here; it is severely limited to those who will finally be holy and without blemish. Differentiation belongs to this text and therefore limitation, in a word, limited designed. In Romans 8:32, 34 we have references to the death of Christ and to its implications. The atonement is in view in the delivering Him up for us all (vs. 32) and in the clause, "Christ Jesus is the one who died" (vs. 34). But it is impossible to place these references to the intent and effect of the death of Christ outside the ambit so clearly established by the context and defined in terms of those predestinated to be conformed to the image of God's Son (vs. 29), the elect (vs. 33), and those embraced in the love of God which is in Christ Jesus (vs. 39). Besides, the delivering up (vs. 32) is that which insures the free bestowal of all things, the "all things" specified in the context as the blessings of salvation culminating in glorification. And the scope of the atonement cannot be more embracive than those other actions with which it is coordinated, namely, justification (vs. 33), the intercession of Christ (vs. 34), and indissoluble participation of the love of Christ (vs. 35). Much more evidence could be adduced directly from Scripture passages. These, however, suffice to show that the extent of the atonement cannot be made universal.

Universal terms are frequently used in connection with the death of Christ, as also in connection with the categories which define its import (*cf.* II Cor. 5:14, 15, 19; I Tim. 2:6; Heb. 2:9; I John 2:2). It is surprising that students of Scripture should with such ease appeal to these texts as if they determined the question in favor of universal atonement. The Scripture frequently uses universal terms when, obviously, they are not to be understood of all men inclusively and



distributively or of all things inclusively. When we read in Genesis 6:13. “The end of all flesh is come before me,” it is plain that this is not to be understood absolutely or inclusively. Not *all* flesh was destroyed. Or when Paul says that the trespass of Israel was the riches of the world (Rom. 11:12), he cannot be using the word “world” of all men distributively. Israel is not included, and not all Gentiles were partakers of the riches intended. When Paul says, “all things are lawful for me” (I Cor. 6:12; *cf.* 10:23), he did not mean that he was at liberty to do anything and everything. Examples could be multiplied and every person should readily perceive the implied restriction. An expression must always be interpreted in terms of the universe of discourse. Thus in Hebrew 2:9 the expression “every one on whose behalf Christ tasted death must be understood as referring to every one of whom the writer is speaking, namely, every one of the sons to be brought to glory, of the sanctified, of the children whom God has given to Christ and of whom He is not ashamed (vss. 10, 11, 12, 13). And it must not be overlooked that in II Corinthians 5:14, 15 the “all” for whom Christ died do not embrace any more than those who died in Him “one” died for all: therefore all died.” In Paul’s teaching to die with Christ is to die to sin (*cf.* Rom. 6:2-10).

The atonement is efficacious — it accomplishes redemption, it makes purification for sin, it reconciles to God, it secures the salvation of those for whom it was intended. Only on this premise is He the Saviour. Only on this basis is He freely offered as Saviour to all without distinction. It is not as Saviour He would be offered to all men if He did not actually save (*cf.* Matt. 1:21).

**Conclusion.** The atonement springs from the fountain of the Father’s love; He commends His own love towards us. We must not think, however, that the action of the Father ended with the appointment and commission of the Son. He was not a mere spectator of Gethsemane and Calvary. The Father laid upon His own Son the iniquities of us all. He spared not His own Son but delivered Him up. He made Him to be sin for us. It was the Father who gave Him the cup of damnation to drink. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. Here is love supremely demonstrated.

No stronger expression appears in Scripture than this that God made Christ to be sin for us. We fall far short of a proper assessment of Christ’s humiliation if we fail to appreciate this fact. It was not simply the penalty of sin that Jesus bore. He bore our sins. He was not made sinful, but He was made sin and, therefore, brought into the closest identification with our sins that it was possible for Him to come without thereby becoming Himself sinful. Any exposition of ours can only touch the fringe of this mystery. The liability with which the Lord of glory had to deal was not merely the penalty of sin but sin itself. And sin is the contradiction of God. What Jesus bore was the contradiction of what He was as



both God and man. The recoil of Gethsemane (Matt. 26:39) was the inevitable recoil of His holy soul from the abyss of woe which sin-bearing involved. And His “nevertheless not as I will, but as thou wilt, bespeaks the intensity of His commitment to the extremities of Calvary, the bitter dregs of the cup given Him to drink. Here is love unspeakable; He poured out His soul unto death. Psalms 22 and 69 are the prophetic delineature of His agony, the gospel story is the inspired record of fulfilment, the apostolic witness the interpretation of its meaning. We cannot but seek to apprehend more and more of the mystery. The saints will be eternally occupied with it. But eternity will not fathom its depths nor exhaust its praise.

*Professor John Murray was born in Scotland and was at the time of this writing a British subject. He was a graduate of the University of Glasgow (1923) and of Princeton Theological Seminary (1927), and he studied at the University of Edinburgh during 1928 and 1929. Professor Murray was called home by his Lord on May 8, 1975.*