

QUESTION 1

What Is the Origin and Meaning of the Word “Atonement”?

For God was in Christ, and made agreement between the world and himself, and imputed not their sins unto them: and hath committed to us the preaching of the atonement.¹

~Tyndale Translation of 2 Corinthians 5:19

Biblical translation is a form of interpretation that can have a lasting effect on the theological vocabulary and formation of its readers. Such an effect is exemplified in the work of William Tyndale (1494–1536), a sixteenth-century English Protestant Reformer whose crowning achievement is his translation of the New Testament into English.² Tyndale based his translation on Desiderius Erasmus’s 1516 critical edition of the Greek NT, Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, and Martin Luther’s 1522 German translation of the NT.³ Tyndale’s translation introduced some English terms that subsequently came to be associated with key theological concepts. One of those terms is “atonement,” which stems from his translation of the Latin noun *reconciliatio* (“reconciliation”) in 2 Corinthians 5:17, where Paul explains that God gave him a “ministry of reconciliation.”⁴ The term that stands behind Jerome’s *reconciliatio* is

1. *Tyndale’s New Testament*, ed. David Daniell, trans. William Tyndale (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 266.

2. Tyndale’s 1526 edition of the NT began in Cologne (Germany); however, when city authorities forbade the continuation of the work, Peter Schoeffer’s printing press finished it in Worms (Germany). Tyndale produced a revised translation in 1534. See David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 134.

3. For an account of how Tyndale translated from these sources, see Daniell, *William Tyndale*, 108–51.

4. Tyndale uses the phrase “the preaching of the atonement” (*Tyndale’s New Testament*, 266).

the Greek term *katallagē*. Moving from Paul to Jerome to Tyndale, we have *katallagē* → *reconciliatio* → *atonement*.

With this lexical progression in view, Tyndale’s choice of the English word “atonement” must be understood in the context of the sixteenth-century English language.⁵ The full meaning of the term is shaped by the adverb “at-one,” which means “at one assent” or “at one accord.”⁶ Therefore, the full term “at-onement” bears the sense of “being at one again.” Tyndale did not coin the term;⁷ nevertheless, his use of “atonement” is unique in the sense that he employed it to translate a NT term that is related to God’s reconciliation with sinners.

In this way, if we are to understand the meaning of the word “atonement” with its theological connotations, we must look to the biblical terms that stand behind it. We must specifically consider the terms that biblical writers employ to describe the way God reconciles himself to sinners. Three terms stand out in this regard.

Atonement Terminology in the Hebrew Bible

Kaphar in the Hebrew Bible often occurs in contexts defined by human agents who carry out divinely prescribed actions that restore a fractured relationship between God and the guilty party. The sense of *kaphar* in these contexts is often to “cover,” “make amends,” or “make atonement.”⁸ Most uses of *kaphar* occur in the Pentateuch, though not all are related to reconciliation.⁹ The many uses that are related to reconciliation occasionally involve a fractured relationship between human beings, but they most often involve a fractured relationship between human beings and God. An example of the former is the rift between Jacob and Esau stemming from a stolen birthright. As Jacob makes his return to Canaan, he thinks to himself that he must offer something to Esau to make amends for the wrong done to him: “And you shall say, ‘Moreover, your servant Jacob is behind us.’ For he thought, ‘I may *appease him* with the present that goes ahead of me, and afterward I shall see his face. Perhaps he will accept me’” (Gen. 32:20, italics added). The literal sense of *kaphar* in this verse is “cover his face” (translated “appease him”), which metaphorically refers to Jacob offering a present—in this case, hundreds of

5. See OED, s.v. “atonement.”

6. OED, s.v. “atonement.”

7. One of its earliest recorded instances in the English language occurs in Thomas More’s *History of King Richard the Third*. See Thomas More, *The History of King Richard the Third: A Reading Edition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 20–21. See also OED, s.v. “atonement.”

8. See HALOT, s.v. “כָּפַר.”

9. See the use of *kaphar* in Gen. 6:14; 32:21; Exod. 29:33, 36, 37; 30:10, 15, 16; 32:30; Lev. 1:4; 4:20, 26, 31, 35; 5:6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 26; 6:23; 7:7; 8:15, 34; 9:7; 10:17; 12:7, 8; 14:18, 19, 20, 21, 29, 31, 53; 15:15, 30; 16:6, 10, 11, 16, 17, 18, 20, 24, 27, 30, 32, 33, 34; 17:11; 19:22; 23:28; Num. 5:8; 6:11; 8:12, 19, 21; 15:25, 28; 17:11, 12; 25:13; 28:22, 30; 29:5; 31:50, 33; Deut. 21:8; 32:43.

animals (Gen 32:13–14)—that would result in Esau being favorably disposed toward him.¹⁰

Many Pentateuchal uses of *kaphar* involve prescribed offerings offered by appointed agents who serve in designated locations and in an approved manner that results in God’s favorable disposition toward those who offer them. That is because, as John Hartley observes, the action “removes pollution” and “counteracts sin.”¹¹ For example, priestly instructions in Leviticus 1–17 include, “Thus shall he do with the bull. As he did with the bull of the sin offering, so shall he do with this. And the priest shall *make atonement* for them, and they *shall be forgiven*” (Lev. 4:20, italics added).

Kaphar also occurs in contexts when an unexpected need for atonement arises. For example, in the aftermath of Korah’s rebellion, God stands poised to consume the wilderness congregation as it continues to grumble against Moses and Aaron (Num. 16:41–50). Moses intercedes on behalf of the congregation by ordering Aaron to offer an atoning sacrifice: “And Moses said to Aaron, “Take your censer, and put fire on it from off the altar and lay incense on it and carry it quickly to the congregation and *make atonement* for them, for wrath has gone out from the LORD; the plague has begun” (Num. 16:46, italics added).¹²

Overall, OT writers most often use *kaphar* in contexts where a fissure between God and Israel requires action that would ultimately result in a restoration of the relationship. The action in question includes an offering prescribed by God and offered through agents appointed by him at a time, location, and in a manner approved by him. Israel needed the “cover” (*kaphar*), or protection, of a sacrifice that removed and counteracted sin. Without the restorative effect of the *kaphar*, Israel remained at enmity with God, which would ultimately lead to judgment against them.

Atonement Terminology in the LXX

Before assessing terminology related to Tyndale’s use of “atonement” in the NT, let’s briefly consider the Greek rendering of *kaphar* language from Israel’s Scriptures. After all, the OT in its Greek form often shapes the language of NT writers.¹³ In this regard, LXX translators consistently render the verb *kaphar* with *exilaskomai*. The latter term often bears the sense of “propitiate,” “expiate,” “make atonement,” and “purge.”¹⁴ For example, in the instructions for priests in Leviticus, a form of *exilaskomai* is used to translate *kaphar*: “And he will set his hand upon the head of the burnt offering, it is a thing acceptable

10. HALOT, s.v. “כפר.”

11. John E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, WBC 4 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1992), 64.

12. The chapter and verse in the MT are Num. 17:11.

13. On this point, see Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2000), 183–205.

14. GELS, s.v. “ἐξιλάσκομαι;” LEH, s.v. “ἐξιλάσκομαι.”

for him to *propitiate* (*atone*) for him” (Lev. 1:4 LXX). Based on the wider use of *exilaskomai* in ancient Greek, the verb highlights the propitiating and/or expiating effect of a sacrifice.¹⁵ While the NT does not use *exilaskomai*, it does use the cognates *hilaskomai* and *hilasmos*:

Therefore, he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to *make propitiation* for the sins of the people. (Heb. 2:17, italics added)

He is the *propitiation* for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. (1 John 2:2, italics added; see also 1 John 4:10)

Both examples stress that Jesus’s sacrifice “wipes out,” or expiates, sin, which in turn propitiates, or causes, God to be favorably disposed to sinners. As we shall see in subsequent discussions, the expiating and propitiating effect of Jesus’s death stands at the heart of reconciliation, or atonement.

Atonement Terminology in the NT

When we turn our attention to the NT, as noted above, the noun *katallagē* ultimately stands behind Tyndale’s use of “atonement.” The noun and its verbal cognate occur ten times in the Greek New Testament.¹⁶ All ten occurrences are found in Romans, 1 Corinthians, and 2 Corinthians.¹⁷ Key uses of *katallagē* and/or *katallassō* include:

For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are *reconciled*, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received *reconciliation*. (Rom. 5:10–11, italics added)

All this is from God, who through Christ *reconciled* us to himself and gave us the ministry of *reconciliation*; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of *reconciliation*. Therefore, we are ambassadors

15. BrillDAG, s.v. “ἐξιλάσκομαι.”

16. For Paul’s uses the noun *katallagē*, see Rom. 5:11; 11:15; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19. For his use of the verb *katallassō*, see Rom. 5:10 (x2); 1 Cor. 7:11; 2 Cor. 5:18, 19, 20. See BDAG, s.v. “καταλλάγη.” See BDAG, s.v. “καταλλάσσω.”

17. However, the use of *katallassō* in 1 Cor. 7:11 pertains to the reconciliation of a husband and wife.

for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be *reconciled* to God. (2 Cor. 5:18–20, italics added)

Paul’s thought in these two passages implies the meaning of reconciliation, or atonement, is robust in nature, for it serves as theological shorthand for *what* God’s work in Christ accomplishes and *how* God accomplishes that work in him.

The robustness of reconciliation language can be summarized in five points based on the inferences drawn from these key Pauline texts: (1) God reconciles himself to sinful human enemies through the crucified and risen Jesus; (2) the present gift of reconciliation through Christ is the assurance of eschatological salvation; (3) God’s reconciliation through Jesus is cosmic in scope; (4) cosmic reconciliation is shaped by Israel’s story; and (5) God entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to human agents carried out through the proclamation of a reconciling message (“the word of reconciliation,” 2 Cor. 5:19).

Summary

Tyndale’s use of the word “atonement” to translate *reconciliatio*, behind which stands *katallagē*, represents an attempt to capture the grandeur of God’s reconciling work in Christ for sixteenth-century English speakers. The term communicated to Tyndale’s readers that God’s work in Christ resulted in sinners “being at one again” (at-onement) with him. The scriptural terms standing behind “atonement” primarily include *kaphar*, *exilaskomai* (*hilaskomai*, *hilasmos*), and *katallagē*. In the wider contexts of their uses, the common theme that emerges is the need for a prescribed sacrifice that solves the enmity between God and human beings, because the sacrifice removes and counteracts sin in a way that makes God well disposed toward those who sin against him. Paul’s reconciliation language reworks this scriptural theme around the person and work of Jesus. Although the overall meaning of atonement within Christian theology cannot be reduced to the meanings of individual words, the contextual uses of these words clearly establish its primary focus, namely, reconciliation between God and human beings through the life and death of the risen and reigning Jesus.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What role did William Tyndale play in the origin of the word “atonement” as it relates to its use in Christian theology?
2. How is the OT word *kaphar* related to the meaning of atonement?

3. What does the word *exilaskomai* in the LXX often emphasize?
4. How is the NT word *katallagē* related to the meaning of atonement?
5. From a scriptural standpoint, what is the primary focus of “atonement”?

QUESTION 2

Why Is the Doctrine of Atonement Important for Christian Doctrine?

Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers.

~1 Timothy 4:16

When Paul admonishes Timothy to keep a watchful eye on his “doctrine,” he of course refers to what Timothy teaches. After all, the English term “doctrine” is derived from the Latin *doctrīna*, which Jerome uses to render the Greek term *didaskalia*, or “teaching.”¹ I make this obvious point because the term “doctrine” is often synonymous with official positions of Christian orthodoxy forged in the christological crises of the early church and the first seven ecumenical councils (ca. AD 325–787).² These positions are then taken up for defense, reflection, expansion, and supplementation in subsequent generations by various faith traditions and household names like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley. Such a development in doctrine is welcome and necessary. However, at its heart, doctrine simply refers to what the early church taught, what the church has taught since then, and what it teaches today.

The early church’s teaching had a robust soteriological purpose, just as Jesus modeled (see 1 Tim. 4:16; 2 Tim. 3:15). Jesus summarized the totality of his teaching along soteriological lines:

1. BDAG, s.v. “διδασκαλία.”

2. For a helpful account of these seven councils and their subsequent impact on Christianity, see Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019).

If anyone hears my words and does not keep them, I do not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save the world. The one who rejects me and does not receive my words has a judge; the word that I have spoken will judge him on the last day. (John 12:47–48)³

Along the same lines, when the apostles interpret the teaching, person, and work of Jesus, their message is thoroughly saving in nature, just as Peter pleaded with his audience at the end of his Pentecost sermon: “Save yourselves from this crooked generation” (Acts 2:40).⁴ NT letters are thoroughly concerned with eschatological salvation as well.⁵ This concern is neither secondary nor tertiary; it is definitive for all that Jesus and the apostles did. As Peter explains, salvation is “the outcome [*telos*] of your faith” (1 Peter 1:9). Even in James, where some suppose (wrongly) that soteriological concerns are at a minimum, we find an indispensable soteriological basis and focus for Christian wisdom: “Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to *save* your souls” (James 1:21, italics added). And, of course, the OT, which provides the theological substructure of the NT and remains its best commentary, has a clear soteriological thrust given the importance of the exodus from Egypt and the hope of a new exodus carried out by the “God of salvation” (Ps. 68:20).

If soteriology then defines the heart of what Scripture teaches, and if Scripture informs Christian doctrine, it follows that Christian doctrine is thoroughly defined by soteriological concerns. Moreover, the doctrine of the atonement organizes and informs these soteriological concerns. Therefore, how one understands atonement has far-reaching implications for how related Christian doctrines will be understood and articulated. That is the broad answer to our question, “Why is the doctrine of atonement important to Christian doctrine?” Three specific examples are offered here.

Atonement Impacts Our Perception of God's Identity

“Identity of God” is a simple way of combining three interrelated doctrines: (1) the doctrine of God; (2) the doctrine of the Trinity; and (3) the doctrine of the person of Christ. Atonement theories, mechanisms, metaphors,

3. See also Matt. 10:22; 24:13; Mark 8:35; Luke 8:12; 9:24; 13:23; 18:26–27; 19:10; John 10:9.

4. See also Acts 2:21, 47; 4:12; 11:14; 13:26, 47; 5:1, 11; 16:17, 30.

5. See, e.g., the explicit soteriological emphases in Rom. 1:16–17; 1 Cor. 1:18–31; 2 Cor. 5:1–21; Gal. 2:15–21; 5:1–5; Eph. 2:1–10; Phil. 3:7–11; Col. 2:11–15; 1 Thess. 1:10; 5:1–11; 2 Thess. 2:13–14; 1 Tim. 1:12–17; 2 Tim. 1:8–11; Titus 3:3–7; Heb. 2:14–18; James 1:16–21; 1 Peter 1:3–12; 2 Peter 1:3–11; 1 John 2:1–2; 4:7–11; 1 John 5:5–11; Jude 1:24–25.

and emphases directly impact the articulation of these doctrines and thereby how one understands God's identity.⁶

To begin, one's atonement theory can influence how one conceives of fundamental issues within theology proper, such as the personal nature of God and his impassibility.⁷ The Christian tradition agrees that God is personal in the sense that he forges personal relationships with those whom he creates. Along these relational lines, satisfaction/substitution atonement theories (Questions 13 and 16) locate the cause of relational discord between God and humans in sin and guilt. By contrast, ransom and *Christus Victor* views (Questions 9 and 12) tend to locate this relational discord in inimical powers such as evil, sin, and Satan. Consequently, different points of emphases emerge to describe how God acts to reconcile himself to people.

With respect to divine impassibility, if God does not "feel" the misery of sinners, as Aquinas held, how are we to understand Christ's atoning suffering?⁸ Does he only suffer for sinners in his human nature, thereby leaving God unaffected/unchanged by the sinners' suffering? Or can God suffer vicariously through the atoning death of Christ without changing?⁹ How one understands atonement can affect how one answers such questions.

Next, how we view atonement can affect how we understand the Trinity with respect to issues such as relational unity and distinctiveness within the Godhead. Did the Father punish his Son to reconcile himself to sinners (Questions 6 and 25)? What would punishment imply about the eternal relationship between Father and Son? How are Father, Son, and Spirit involved in the work of atonement? Does favoring one view of atonement over another alter how we understand the triune nature of God (Question 32)?

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6. Some theologians prefer the term "mechanism" to "theory." As Oliver Crisp observes in discussing the meaning of atonement, "This issue has to do with the *mechanism* by means of which Christ reconciles us to God. Put slightly differently, if the atonement is that work of Christ that removes obstacles to communion with God (particularly with respect to human sin) and somehow makes it possible to be united with God in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, then how is that achieved? What has to happen in order for this goal to be brought about?" (Oliver D. Crisp, *Approaching the Atonement: The Reconciling Work of Christ* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020], 3). Additionally, Colin E. Gunton suggests that Christian theology has tended to treat atonement "metaphors" as full-blown theories of atonement, which Gunton argues they really are not (see Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement: A Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989]).
 7. For a discussion of these aspects of the doctrine of God and others, see Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 239–91.
 8. McGrath explains divine impassibility by way of the following conditions: "If God is perfect, change in any direction is an impossibility. If God changes, it is either a move away from perfection (in which God is no longer perfect), or toward perfection (in which case, God was not perfect in the past)" (*Christian Theology*, 249).
 9. On this point, see Daniel Castelo, "Impassibility (Divine)," in *T&T Clark Companion to Atonement*, ed. Adam J. Johnson (London: T&T Clark, 2017), 566.

Finally, Jesus's atoning work defines his identity and thereby the identity of the one who sent him.¹⁰ Jesus's preexistence, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection, vindication, ascension, enthronement, return, and eternal reign all coalesce around his atoning work. Moreover, all divine attributes coalesce around Jesus's atoning work. To see the atoning work of Jesus is to see Jesus and thereby to see God as he really is (Question 40). It is no coincidence in his apocalyptic vision of eternity that John consistently refers to Jesus as the "Lamb."¹¹ The christological title in that context reminds readers that the eternal God is eternally defined by the atoning work of the crucified and risen Jesus.

Atonement Impacts Our Perception of the Doctrine of Salvation

As noted above, the early church's doctrine was thoroughly soteriological in its nature and focus. It promoted a "wisdom for salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15). Regardless of subsequent eras and shifts in culture, the church's teaching should preserve that soteriological aim for the sake of its own identity and its ministry to the world. With that said, while various stakeholders in Christianity might agree in principle that their teaching is soteriological in nature, they might disagree on what that entails, based on how they understand the atonement.

If Jesus's atoning work is primarily a shining example of self-sacrifice and love that inspires humanity to live in righteousness and holiness, as discussed in Question 10, then the accompanying doctrine of salvation would describe "deliverance" as a rescue from the evils of self-centeredness through means of Christlike charity, giving, and selflessness. Alternatively, if Jesus's atoning work is primarily a triumph over Satan and evil, then the doctrine of salvation would focus upon Jesus as the "Victor" over that which harms human beings and separates them from God (Question 9). Or if Jesus's atoning work demonstrates what God could do to sinners, and thereby exemplifies his moral government of the universe, the church would teach about salvation in terms of civil responsibility and just interaction between one another (Question 10). Or if Jesus's atoning work is perceived as a kind of satisfaction or compensation to God on the sinner's behalf, as discussed in Question 13, then a doctrine of salvation would accentuate how the crucified and risen Jesus meets the demands of God's holy and just nature.

Other examples could be mentioned here; however, the point should be clear. There is a direct correlation between how a church understands the atoning work of Christ and the kind of salvation in Christ the church teaches. The two issues are simply inseparable.

10. As Wolfhart Pannenberg asserts, "The divinity of Jesus and his freeing and redeeming significance for us are related in the closest possible way" (Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus, God and Man*, trans. Lewis L. Wilkins and Duane A. Priebe, 2nd ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977], 38).

11. See, e.g., Rev. 5:12, 13; 6:1, 16; 7:9, 14; 12:11; 13:8; 14:1, 4, 10; 15:3; 17:14; 19:7, 9; 21:9, 14, 22, 27; 22:1, 3.

Atonement Impacts Our Perception of the Doctrine of Human Nature

Christ's atoning work defines the identity of people in all places and times.¹² The crucifixion of the eternal Son of God diagnoses the human condition. If the rift between God and humanity requires such drastic atoning measures, then surely people are in the worst of predicaments. Scripture defines that predicament within the triad of "dead" in sins, enslaved to Satan, and under God's just wrath (see, e.g., Eph. 2:1–3; Question 5).

However, the death of Christ gauges the depth of that condition. To be dead in sin is not merely to do the wrong thing. It is the inescapable ability only to do the wrong thing. To be enslaved to Satan is not merely to be influenced by him. It is to do his will rather than God's. To be under God's wrath is not to face his temporal displeasure but eternal condemnation. Christ's atoning death then amplifies the pitiful depth of the human condition and makes its misery axiomatic.

Summary

Christ's atoning work impacts more doctrines than the ones discussed above. It, in fact, touches on every aspect of the Christian tradition, including pneumatology (Question 32), eschatology (Questions 38 and 39), and reconciliation between humans (Question 37). Therefore, atonement stands at the heart of what the church should preserve and teach, which is why we must think carefully about how we understand God's reconciliation of himself to humanity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What is "doctrine" in the simplest sense?
2. How are the church's teaching and salvation related to one another?
3. Why does atonement matter to the doctrines of God, the Trinity, and salvation?
4. What does Jesus's atoning work say about the human condition?
5. What other doctrines are shaped by our understanding of atonement?

12. Despite incessant talk about "generations" from Gen X to millennials to Gen Z, people do not change as dramatically as we sometimes think. From a biblical perspective, humanity has not fundamentally changed since Eden. People are still sinful. Satan still blinds and tempts. The earth is still cursed. And God's wrath remains upon his very good creation. In fact, the unchanging nature of humanity and Christ's atoning work at the cross for all those who believe, regardless of the historical era, work hand in hand.