

# ATONEMENT THEOLOGY IN CHURCH OF GOD THOUGHT

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## **Preface**

In 1950, at age 11, I attended a Church of God Bible School in South Bend, Indiana, taught by my grandmother Lulu Stilson, on “Types of the Tabernacle.” At that time I learned for the first time about the link between Leviticus and the sacrificial death of Christ, his present high priestly ministry, and “power in the blood” from the old gospel song by that name.

In the late 1950s, Alva Huffer, a Church of God pastor in Grand Rapids, Michigan, published his book *Systematic Theology* through the Church of God General Conference. He was a graduate of Oregon Bible College, Oregon, Illinois which was the recognized ministry training school operated by the Church of God General Conference.

Dr. Huffer said that the initial model for his book was *Lectures in Systematic Theology* by Henry Clarence Thiessen. Dr. Thiessen was a teacher at Wheaton Graduate School. Dr Huffer’s goal was to organize the agreed-upon teachings of the Church of God as systematic theology. The book is a helpful definition and description of the teachings of the Church of God. Due to the lack of any consensus, or wide discussion of the matter, Dr. Huffer gave a brief discussion of the theories of atonement found in church history, but preferred to discuss the biblical images of the various aspects of salvation such as justification, sanctification, redemption, reconciliation and propitiation.

It should be noted that *Songs of Truth #2*, published by the Church of God General Conference in 1961, contains twelve hymns and gospel songs that clearly teach the atonement ideas of the sacrificial death on the cross, the remission of sins, and reconciliation with God. The latter ideas match the English definition of the word “atonement” as found in standard dictionaries.

In 1963 I attended Oregon Bible College and took a course in Systematic Theology. The course was taught by William Wachtel, a recent graduate of Wheaton Graduate School. The textbooks were written by Alva Huffer and Henry Thiessen. In 1986 I took a Wheaton graduate course on the Historical Theology of Atonement. I read selections from ten authors from different periods of church history.

At this time, I became acquainted with *Christus Victor* by Gustaf Aulen. I came into dialogue with Anthony Buzzard regarding this work. His influence encouraged me to become better read in European theology, which I have continued to the present.

This chronicles my contact with atonement teachings in the Church of God over a forty-year period. Since that time I have read numerous books and articles that have influenced my thought on atonement. It is only fair that readers should know that I am a third-generation member of the Church of God. I was a Bible and Theology instructor at Oregon Bible College for about 17 years. My experiences are most representative of the Indiana and Illinois Churches of God. I pastored two Churches of God in Virginia, and have preached in numerous Churches of God throughout the United States and Canada.

Now in 2008, with the encouragement of my wife, Janet Stilson, a student and archivist of Church of God history, and Kent Ross, a pastor and teacher of church history, especially Anabaptist history, I have undertaken the task of describing the atonement thought of the Church of God in historical perspective. I was asked to look particularly at the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the formative period of the Church of God.

It should be noted that the Church of God perceives its teachings to be derived from the Radical Reformation. However, except for similarity in thought, no specific historical link to this

movement is known. Lutheran and Reformed churches rejected the sacramentalism of the Medieval Church, took their stand on the Bible, retained the creeds of the councils, and only went back to the 6<sup>th</sup>-century thought and liturgy. The Radical Reformation is a restoration movement that goes back to the Bible, the apostles, and early Christianity of the first century.

With this in mind, I arrived at the position that the atonement teachings of the Church of God are radical in some points and in agreement with conservative evangelicals on other points. Since the English word “atonement” literally means being “at one,” I begin the article with a survey of **approaches to God** through man’s history. This type of study was particularly popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with comparative religion and the history of religion school as important new developments. The first section, **priests and prophets**, puts the sacrificial system of Israel in a near eastern context, and the critical statements of the prophets introduce us to the issues that were popular in 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberal theology.

The second section on **reason** takes us from the Greek philosophers to the Age of Reason and to modern science. This material makes us aware of the positive and negative roles of reason in man’s coming to God. Of particular interest is the Gnostic material that became popular in the writings of Rudolf Bultmann in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This has had great impact on the interpretation of the gospel of John. The third section on **mysticism** deals with the questions of objective and subjective thinking, Gnostic and various forms of direct spiritual experiences in relation to God. This section concludes with **person**, which through Kant became the dominant philosophical system at the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This gave birth to depth psychology and the importance of personal decision. Personal experience became a priority among the Anabaptists, the 19<sup>th</sup>-century liberals, the revivalists, the holiness movement and the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Pentecostals. All were seeking a close relationship with God.

*The History of Christian Thought* by Paul Tillich<sup>1</sup> is most helpful in providing the philosophical background for such a survey. Tillich noted several contrasts which developed from the 17<sup>th</sup> to the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries: (1) Descartes versus Kant and Hegel; (2) Reason versus emotion; (3) Analysis versus synthesis; (4) Physical sciences versus life sciences; (5) Unchanging natural laws versus history and evolution; (6) Objective knowledge versus subjective knowledge; and (7) The concepts of intuition and personality. In the middle section of the article, I examine relevant texts from a biblical theology perspective. Biblical theology became popular in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

In the final section I describe Church of God atonement theology and place it within the general theological thought of that period. This is also organized topically. Germany and England dominated 19<sup>th</sup>-century theology, and these materials were read in America. By the 20<sup>th</sup> century America had become a full theological partner with Europe. In this survey and description, I find points of similarity and difference between Church of God thought and that of the larger theological community.<sup>2</sup> I conclude with a descriptive statement of Church of God atonement teachings as a logical set of articles of belief. I briefly indicate the rationale behind and between these propositions. This type of presentation has not previously been done in the Church of God. Its strengths and weaknesses will become evident as other writers do research along similar lines.

I believe that additional papers on Church of God thought need to be written which interact with both Christian thought and biblical theology. These areas of study offer rich tools for the study of Church of God thought and its development.

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<sup>1</sup> Harper & Row, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Those in the Church of God who have extensively read the archive material located in Morrow, GA can identify primary sources that will both sharpen this description, provide verification of some points, and suggest revision of other points.

## **The Biblical and Theological Basis of Protestant Atonement Doctrines**

**Introduction.** The English word “atonement” means “to be at one.” Sin and reconciliation are the two components. In Jewish and Christian theology, the fall of Adam created a gulf between a holy God and sinful man. The doctrine of atonement addresses the topics of the forgiveness of sin and the restoration of fellowship. There have been a wide range of theories of atonement. Our plan in this study is to start with an overview of the subject throughout history; secondly, to examine the biblical data; and lastly to examine Church of God beliefs against the background of 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century thought. The starting issue will be the necessary approach to God required to reach a state of oneness with Him.

### **Approaches to God Throughout History**

**Priests and prophets: The approach of sacrifice at the altar.** Abraham and Job led their families in sacrificial worship. Under Moses, sacrifice was conducted at the Tabernacle, and by the time of Solomon, at the Temple led by the priests. Samuel and King David made frequent sacrifices. This pattern is similar to the surrounding nations of the ancient Near East. Israel served a holy God, whereas the surrounding countries served idols and practiced both child sacrifice and temple prostitution. Elijah is noted for his contest with the priests of Baal. Up to the time of the Babylonian captivity, many of the kings of Judah fell into these practices (see Jer. 7:30-31; 32:35 for examples).

Biblical religion is in sharp contrast to ancient near eastern or Greco-Roman religion. There is one God, instead of many. God is a Person. God combines holiness, love and truth. God as Creator has the sovereign right to rule the world. This authority extends both to the physical world and to mankind. It was the original plan of God for there to be harmony between God and man, and for mankind to live together in harmony. It is evident that the world is not presently in a state of harmony. God’s will is not being done “on earth as it is in heaven.” The majority of mankind is in rebellion against God. John 3:16 is God’s first move towards atonement. God requires a response from mankind. Will we cooperate?

God has communicated Himself and the plan of salvation through His prophets. Both Abraham and Moses had prophetic messages from God. This communication was continued by the former and latter prophets of the Old Testament, and by Jesus and the Apostles of the New Testament.

The priestly, prophetic movement reached its high point in Jesus Christ. He is prophet, priest, and king. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was once and for all as demonstrated in the book of Hebrews. Christ is presently our high priest. Ancient men generally understood the idea of pollution or curse upon land, kings, and nations. They sought to remedy the situation by sacrifice. This is frequently called the cultic approach. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century there was debate regarding the view of the law and the prophets as to the importance of sacrifice in the approach to God. Liberal theology emphasized the social reform message of the prophets and minimized the cultic. Paul was brought into service in support of this distinction.

**Reason as the approach to God:** Plato believed that the world of the senses was an illusion, and that true reality could only be found by reason. God was the ultimate idea. Gnosticism claimed to have special knowledge by which man could get to God. These ideas were present at Ephesus and Egypt during New Testament times. Material of this type has recently come to light in the discoveries at Nag Hammadi.<sup>3</sup>

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries rejected priestly and prophetic approaches to God, and looked to natural theology. The design of the world is best explained by a Creator as the Master Builder. By the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the theory of evolutionary replaced the creator. Whereas the ancients had a religion based on the agricultural cycle, the evolutionists had a religion based on the evolution of nature. The Greek view was static; the evolutionary view was dynamic and goal oriented. The

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<sup>3</sup> See Excursus Two for details.

19<sup>th</sup> century believed that science and education could establish a perfect world by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Plato had taught that if a man *knew* the good, he would do it. Failure to do good was due to ignorance which could be corrected by education. Descartes believed that the only sense of reality available to us was our ability to think. Thus he said, "I think; therefore I am." Man's reason in itself has not been able to bring him to God. Immanuel Kant, in his book *Critique of Pure Reason*, brought an end to the futile rationalist attempts of the Middle Ages and the age of reason to reach God by human reason.

Ironically, the atomic age, which promised free energy, also provided the means to destroy all life. The certainty of scientific law has been replaced by the principle of uncertainty. Many modern thinkers have drawn the conclusion that nothing can be known. Ecologically, the planet is doomed. Hope has turned to despair. Man's reason is not the way to atonement.

**Mysticism, an intuitive approach to God.** Aristotle, in his analysis of Greek grammar, described the pronouns "I," "you," and "he" as the distance between the subject and object. This became important in modern thought as objective vs. subjective. On the one hand, the Reformers, Luther and Calvin, tried to establish objectively what Jesus did on the cross. They regarded atonement as the work of Christ, and our experience as salvation. They also recognized that a subjective experience must happen in the heart of the believer. This is a first-person experience with God. This became prominent in the Anabaptist movement.

The way of knowledge for 17<sup>th</sup>-century man was either by the senses or by the power of reason. We are unable to penetrate the minds of either men or God. This pushes man into an "I-it" view of the world. Man is alone, isolated in his private thought, and unable to truly know either God or his fellow man. He can only speculate what is in the heart of God or man. This was the plight of rationalism.

The alternative to this was to move to an intuitive mode of knowing. It is interesting that the words "insight," "theory," and "intuition" all carry the idea of seeing something from the inside. As we are able to search our own private thoughts and feelings, so the Spirit of God searches us from the inside. Presently, in a limited way, man is able through the Holy Spirit to experience the oneness between Christ and the body of the Church. Jesus demonstrated the ability to see the heart of man during his earthly ministry. In the resurrection Christians will be able to truly see. The ground is now laid to understand examples of the mystical approach to God.

Mysticism seeks an immediate sense of oneness with God. We find examples in Medieval monasteries through meditation, in Anabaptist prayer and Bible study, the pageantry of romanticism, the born-again experiences of the 18<sup>th</sup>- and 19<sup>th</sup>-century revivals, and the Pentecostals of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. What they had in common was the desire for a direct sense of meeting with God. But again we must say that mystical experience alone is not an adequate theory of atonement. It needs the balance of reason. It is only an aspect of the larger teaching.<sup>4</sup>

**Person.** In modern Western thought we emphasize individual freedom of choice and the whole person. Ancient society, including Jewish society, was corporate, with great limitations on individual freedom. The necessities of the environment and the demands of kings dominated everything. There was little difference between the slave and the free. The position of women and children was even more limited.

Christianity had great impact on the value of the individual and the breaking down of barriers in society. The idea of free will is found in Christian thought from Pelagius on, and teachings along this line can be found in the Old and New Testament. The effect of free will on atonement is the requirement of voluntary acceptance and partnership in what God is doing in our lives. Atonement theology regards the death of Christ as a voluntary, free will decision.

Still, a lot of questions remain as to how atonement works. Did Christ die for all or for the elect? Is atonement limited or unlimited? Is grace irresistible? Is man bad or good or a mixture?

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*.

Will everyone eventually be saved? Does man have the power to do good, and will this save him? Is punishment the way to reach God? Will God forgive us anyway? What is the balance of love, holiness, justice, truth, forgiveness, and judgment? What is everlasting judgment? Is man immortal by nature? Can man die?

Jewish theology, in the period between the Testaments, developed the two-impulse idea of human behavior. God will weigh the good and evil deeds on the Day of Judgment. Good intentions count even if man fails out of his human weakness.

Jesus and Paul taught that if we are guilty of one point, we are guilty of the whole. This statement of Paul is the basis of the Augustinian doctrine of total depravity. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century Immanuel Kant took a mediating position between faith and reason, seeking to find a bridge between the two camps. Man is a living person who is able to make moral decisions. Kant believed that God rewards good decisions, but it may be in the afterlife. He believed that it was a necessity for the soul to be immortal. Otherwise, good men would never receive what they deserve. This would violate justice. Man is a living person, and he has inside information about his thoughts and feelings. He has consciousness of who he is. Basically he is the same person yesterday and today, due to the fact that personality is stable in mature people. In theology, the claim that God is a Person is the recognition that God has a center, just as man has a center. God is a Person, and He seeks to relate to man as a person. We can depend on God being the same God today and tomorrow. Personality theory asserts that personality underlies the outward appearance and behavior of man. Freud went on to develop depth psychology. Man is more than reason. He is a living being. He is part animal and part spiritual in nature. These ideas had profound influence on 19<sup>th</sup>- and 20<sup>th</sup>-century religious thought. The psychology of religion developed out of this movement as another dimension of our relationship with God. But again, atonement must be more than psychological experience.

Liberal theology was weary of the endless skeptical and reason dominated debates. They hungered for history, tradition, emotion, experience, life, wholeness, and artistic beauty. They rejected the ideas of original sin and absolute Sin, and reduced the importance of blood sacrifice either in the Old Testament or on the cross.

During this same period the History of Religion School developed in Germany out of data gathered from comparative religions that had recently come to Western awareness. Since higher criticism was unable to come to doctrinal consensus after a century of debate, they turned from a *theology* of the Old Testament to the *religion* of the Old Testament. But this religion was restructured according to anthropological theories of the evolution of religion with animism to polytheism to monotheism. The material in the Old Testament was rearranged in the order taught by anthropologists as the four stages in the evolution of religion found in primitive cultures. The higher critics denied the historical existence of Adam, Abraham, and Moses. They believed the tabernacle in the wilderness was a legend created during the Persian period of their history. The book of Leviticus was written in the Post-Exilic period, and reflected Persian, or Iranian thought. A number of “pan” theories developed as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, and Canaan each in turn became the latest sensation. In each case much of the Bible was viewed as borrowed or adapted from these cultures.

Now, in light of the fact that “atonement” is an Old Testament concept with Leviticus as the primary statement, this state of affairs was devastating to atonement theory in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Since that time, we have seen the appearance of biblical archaeology and Old Testament biblical theology, and a revival of interest in the Old Testament. The Catholic Church and the mainline denominations are revising their liturgy to place a balance on the Old and New Testaments, and are seeking to find the bridge that connects the two.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> See Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought*; John H. Hayes and Frederick Prussner, *Old Testament Theology: Its History and Development*, John Knox Press, 1985.

## Biblical and Theological Data

**Introduction:** Having discussed four major aspects of 19<sup>th</sup> century thought in their approaches to God, the Bible, and religious experience, we will consider the biblical theology and historical theology approaches to the doctrine of atonement.

**Method:** In what follows we must explore the Hebrew and Greek terms for atonement. The English definition of atonement is accurate. The error has been in taking too narrow a view of the term. Just as salvation is not exhausted by the term “justification,” so likewise “atonement” is not exhausted by either “removing sin” or “reconciliation.” Lexicons list about 30 English words to translate the Greek and Hebrew terms. Let us work through these words. Most of the Old Testament texts are found in Leviticus.<sup>6</sup>

A brief overview of historical theology is helpful.

**Major theories of atonement:** Alva Huffer in *Systematic Theology*<sup>7</sup> lists the various theories of atonement from the early Church to the present. There are three basic types:

**1. Classic theory of atonement: Origen.** The sin of Adam brought all mankind under the control of Satan. When Christ died on the cross, he ransomed us and freed us from slavery to sin. Two aspects of the Day of Atonement must be considered: (1) Blood sprinkled over the cover of the Ark of the Covenant for atonement, and (2) the scapegoat that carried sin outside the camp.

**2. Satisfaction theory: Anselm.** Because we have sinned against God, justice requires that we pay the price and penalty for our sin. The penalty is death. What we could not pay, Christ has already paid. Other names for this type are satisfaction, substitution, penal, and vicarious. The emphasis is upon the death of the sacrifice. The title of the book on atonement by Anselm makes us aware of the theological issues connected with this view: *Cur Deus Homo?* (Why did God become a man?) Anselm believed that Jesus must have died as a God-man in order to bring satisfaction.<sup>8</sup>

**3. Moral influence:** The love and suffering of Christ gives us moral uplift. Consider the “aroma with a soothing effect” and the fellowship meal. Liberal versions of this theory only require that Jesus be a good man and a religious genius. Historically, Abelard debated this position against Anselm. Both were critics of the classic or ransom theory of atonement, which was the standard position of the church fathers in the first two centuries of the Church.

**Argument for punishment: The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ.** This line of thinking underlies the medieval penance system and various penal theories. I have included the immediate response of those who are critical of this view.

1. When we do wrong there is generally a consequence. *That is if we get caught.*
2. If we learn from this, we won't do it again. *It doesn't seem to work that way.*
3. Yes, there are always new ways to do the wrong thing. *This is true.*
4. What we need is a change from the inside, a transformed mind and heart. *Agreed.*
5. The world needs to be cleaned up too. *More than that, we need a new beginning.*<sup>9</sup>

**Old Testament Bible study:** Let us examine what the Bible says about “atonement.” *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* says that “atonement” in the Old Testament is mainly found in Leviticus, and comes from two similar Hebrew words, *kpr*, *kppr*, meaning “cover.”<sup>10</sup> We are familiar with Yom Kippur, meaning “Day of Atonement.” This is found in Leviticus 16.

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<sup>6</sup> Gordon Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (NICOT), Eerdmans, 1979.

<sup>7</sup> Church of God General Conference, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> See Excursus One for a discussion of substance and essence arguments. These ideas are assumed by Anselm.

<sup>9</sup> See Excursus Five for a discussion of the theology of sin and Excursus Six for details of the methodology of the Bible study.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Jewett, “Atonement,” *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia*, Eerdmans, 1976, Vol. 1.

Leviticus 1-4 describes four basic kinds of sacrifices that are connected with atonement. I believe that an analytical approach has limited study to the sin offering, and has failed to consider the combined force of all four viewed as a package in the Leviticus text. They are important for our understanding of atonement in the New Testament. They link with worship, communion, baptism, the cross, the Christian life today, and the events described in Revelation at the end of the age. I believe the larger context of atonement extends from Genesis to Revelation, and has a great deal in common with salvation history. The implications of this point will become evident as the study progresses.

**Burnt offering: Lev. 1.** When an individual brought a sin offering to the entrance of the tabernacle, he confessed his sin, placed his hand on the head of the sacrificial animal, and killed the animal. The priest sprinkled the blood over the altar, and burned portions on the altar. God accepted the offering, and the sinner was atoned. Note the word “atonement” (v. 4), and the expression “A food offering for the Lord which has a soothing aroma” (v. 9).

**Reason for burnt offering:** “The wages of sin is death. The gift of God is eternal life” (Rom. 6:23). Note the many similarities between Leviticus 1 and a worship service, particularly on Communion Sunday.<sup>11</sup>

**Cereal offering: Lev. 2.** Again we note the expression “soothing aroma.” The near eastern idea of cereal offerings is “tribute.” The New Testament term is *thysia* or “sacrifice.”

**Meaning of cereal offering:** “The dedication of a man’s life and work to God.”<sup>12</sup>

**The peace offering: Lev. 3.** This is a fellowship meal very similar to the Lord’s Supper. This is another of the “soothing aroma” sacrifices. The basic idea was “gift.”<sup>13</sup>

**Purification offering: Lev. 4:1-5:13.** This is another “soothing aroma” sacrifice. Also “The priest shall make *atonement* for him and he will be *forgiven*” (Lev. 4:31). “When he feels guilty in any of these matters, he must *confess* how he has sinned. The priest shall make *atonement* because of his *sin* and He will be *forgiven*” (Lev. 5:5, 6, 13).

Now we are in a position to appreciate the combined force of Leviticus 1-4 as a religious experience. A worshiper came before God bringing his life and sin to the altar of God. He also came bearing tribute of his life and work. He received an assurance of forgiveness and atonement. He and his family and the priest and his family shared in the peace offering in which they celebrated community. If he became conscious of a transgression, he brought this to the Lord and found atonement. This package has far-reaching implications for the remainder of the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation.

**Day of Atonement: Lev. 16.** The burnt, cereal, and peace offerings were presented as before, on behalf of the priest and the congregation. What was different on the Day of Atonement was that the blood was taken before the Ark of the Covenant. We have the term “mercy seat.” Two meanings are associated with the cover of the ark. One is that of a lid, suggesting the idea of covering. Our sins are covered by the blood of sacrifice. The second possibility is that the lid is a seat in the sense of a “throne.” From this we get the New Testament terms “throne of grace” or “mercy seat.” This was the meeting place where the presence of God was in the midst of the camp of Israel. The blood and smoke bring to mind Mt. Sinai where Moses met with God and received the Ten Commandments, the directions for the Tabernacle, and the principles of worship. These materials are treated as types in the book of Hebrews. These symbols are also found throughout the New Testament. They are the language of salvation.<sup>14</sup>

**New Testament:** The Hebrew word translated *atonement* does not have a single equivalent. Several terms must be examined: propitiation, expiation, reconciliation, forgiveness, throne of grace, washed, sprinkled with blood, baptized, and remission. Instead of the Day of Atonement

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<sup>11</sup> Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> See Excurses five and six for additional discussion of this section.

we have baptism, the Lord's Supper, Easter, Bible study and prayer meetings, and personal devotions. Consider two aspects:

**Now:** Accept Christ as Savior. He died for our sins. Be baptized for the remission of sins. Live pure lives in obedience to the Lord.

**Kingdom:** Jesus will eat in fellowship with us, as he did with the disciples. Righteousness will fill the earth. We will walk with God.

**Some terms and texts:**

**1 John 2:1-3:** "My little children, these things I write to you, that you sin not. And if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the propitiation [*hilasmos*] for our sins [*hamartion*]; and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world. And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments."

**1 John 4:10:** "Herein is love [*agape*], not that we loved God, but he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation [*hilasmon*] for our sins."

**Rom. 4:7-8:** "Blessed are those whose iniquities are forgiven [*aphethesan*]...Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not impute [*logisetai* = reckon] sin [*hamartian*]."

**Rom. 3:25:** "Whom God has set forth to be a propitiation [*hilasterion*] through faith in his blood [*haimati*] to declare his righteousness [*dikaiousunes*] for the remission [*piresin tow progegovoton* = previously occurred] of sins [*hamartematon*]."

**Reconciliation: 2 Cor. 5:18-21.** "And all things are of God, who has reconciled [*katallaksantos*] us to himself by Jesus Christ, and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not imputing their trespasses to them; and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 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. For he has made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

**Throne of grace=mercy seat=hilasterion.** Rabbinic writings thought of two divine thrones: justice and grace. Hebrews combines both in Christ at his second coming in the terms "throne of grace" and "mercy seat." The exalted Christ is granted rule over thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers in heaven and earth (Col. 1:16). This links the ideas of "throne" and "grace." "Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace [*charitos*], that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need [Eng. idiom for *eukairon*= just at the right time]."

**Additional texts:** Looking only at Leviticus and Hebrews would give a distorted view of biblical teaching. Please see Excursus nine for many additional texts.

**Study of Hebrews.** Hebrews sees the Aaronic priesthood fulfilled by Jesus Christ as our high priest. The plan of the book is to show the superiority of Jesus to these former things: Past revelations, 1:1-3; angels, 1:4-2:18; Moses and Joshua, 3:1-4:13; Aaronic priesthood, 4:14-7:28; the old covenant and tabernacle, 8:1-10:18. Some view the theme of Hebrews as "our approach to God." Several texts are listed below that link with the Tabernacle, the lid of the Ark of the Covenant, the Day of Atonement, the cross and the blood of Jesus.

**Heb. 2:9:** "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the *suffering of death, crowned* with glory and honor; that he by the *grace of God* should *taste death for every man.*"

**Heb. 2:14:** "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 has *the power of death*, that is, the Devil."

**Heb. 4:16:** "Let us therefore come boldly to the *throne of grace*, that we may obtain *mercy* and find *grace* to help in time of need." Note that *throne* and *grace* are paired. The two meanings of the lid of the Ark of the Covenant are (1) the place of atonement, and (2) the throne, or seat, of the holy one who ultimately forgives sin. Thus the problem and the reconciliation of atonement are covered. Leviticus, Psalms, and Hebrews draw this link. This theme was used in atonement hymns in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Heb. 7:25:** “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost [*panteles* = literally *pan*, all + *telos*, end] that come to God by him seeing he ever lives to make *intercession* for them.” Note the eschatological judgment day link.

**Heb. 8:10, 12:** “I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts; and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness and their sin” (compare with Jeremiah’s new covenant). Note both the sin and reconciliation ideas.

**Heb. 9:5:** *Mercy seat* of the ark of the covenant: *hilasterion*. The presence of God upon or over the seat is described as “the cherubim of glory shadowing the mercy seat.” The Psalms view this as a way to express God’s presence. Several commentaries take the “seat” as a throne, as in “throne of grace.” Thus we see Jesus as both “king” and “savior.” This all goes back to the significance of the “cover” of the ark in Leviticus. Hebrews also uses Melchizedek, literally “king of righteousness,” to identify Christ as the priest-king.

**Heb. 9:14:** “How much more shall the *blood of Christ*, who through the eternal Spirit *offered* himself without spot to God, *purge your conscience* from dead works to serve the living God?” (see also 9:26). “Now once at the end of the world he has appeared to *put away sin* by the sacrifice of himself.”

**Conclusions:** Thus far we see that atonement in the Leviticus images is a theme found throughout the Bible. God wants us back as His children, but sin has to go. The blood of Christ, understood from the language of Leviticus, is the key to dealing with sin. Hebrews explains how this works. When we confess our sins, accept Christ as Savior and are baptized, we come into a new standing before God. We continue to live in a sinful world, and we will experience struggles. Jesus promised his disciples, and also those in the future who would come to believe through their testimony, that they would not be alone in the world. Jesus will come again to this earth. Then he will begin the process of cleansing the earth. At the end of the 1000 years, the new heavens and earth will be established. Then there will be no more sin. Righteousness will fill the earth. At that time atonement will be an accomplished fact. We can begin to appreciate the fact that neither the Old Testament Day of Atonement nor the death of Christ on the cross is the full revelation of the Bible as to how sin is removed and oneness with God is established. We need to follow the salvation story from Genesis to Revelation. The promise was given in Genesis. The Old Testament laid the background that led us to the life and teachings of Christ, the cross, and the resurrection. It is artificial to make an analytical division of the work of God into the compartments of the objective atonement work of Christology and the subjective experience under salvation. The Lamb of God that died in the gospels, is also the exalted Christ at the right hand of God, the head of the Church. He is present in the lives of Christians, and ministers to us as our high priest and mediator. All that Christ is presently doing is directed to the goal of removing sin from the world and drawing us into a son/daughter relationship with our Father. Even when Christ returns to the earth he will continue to remove sin from the world and draw us to the Father. It is only in the new heavens and earth in Revelation that we see the two goals accomplished. Sin will no longer be found in the world. Satan will have come to final judgment. Death will be finished. Righteousness will fill the earth. God will walk with man upon the earth as He did in the garden in Genesis.<sup>15</sup>

## **Dialogue of Church of God and Atonement Theories in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries**

**Introduction:** Now that general outlines of Christian thought and biblical evidence have been presented, we are ready to examine six major 19<sup>th</sup> century theological issues that shaped theories of atonement. I will present each in dialogue with the teachings of the Church of God.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Excursus nine gives important additional texts from the Psalms, prophets, and the New Testament.

<sup>16</sup> Excursus eight gives an overview of the teachings of the Church of God.

These are original sin, free will, conditional immortality, Christology, the age to come, and judgment.

**Original Sin:** The 19<sup>th</sup> century was heir to all the theories to date on the nature of man and sin. There are proof texts in the Old Testament that support the idea of the sinfulness of all men. A difficulty is that an appeal is not made to Genesis 1-3 and Adam's sin at points where this might be expected. The fact that individuals are held accountable for their decisions would suggest that man is a mixture of good and evil. The idea of two impulses was well developed in the period between the Old and New Testaments. Paul revived the doctrine of original sin, and this was a major pillar of the theology of Augustine and Luther. It continued as one of the fundamentals of conservative belief during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The significance for atonement theory is the claim that sin separates man from relationship with God. If sin is not really a problem, then what is the purpose of atonement? Why did Christ die?

As a counter-movement to the conservatives, liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries denied original sin, and instead considered sin in its daily occurrences. This trend began with the 17<sup>th</sup>- and 18<sup>th</sup>-century skepticism of rationalism, and the Enlightenment rejection of theological absolutes and the supernatural. Romanticism regarded primitive man as innocent. Liberal theology believed that man was essentially good. He could be educated or could evolve to a higher moral state. This all goes back to the view of Plato on sin. If we know the good, we will do it. Sin is ignorance. At this same period of time, higher criticism reconstructed the gospels and reduced them to universal proverbs as a guide for positive living. Jesus was a religious genius. His teachings are the key to successful living. The emphasis of liberal theology is religious experience. The focus is on the individual. The law of the Old Testament is minimized, along with prophetic teachings. Proverbs, Psalms, and the social message of the prophets are preserved. Social reform is the highest priority.

Church of God members faced these issues during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. It is my assessment that the doctrine of original sin was the prevalent position in the Church of God. Evidence of this is the belief in a literal Adam and Eve and the fall in Genesis 3. There are questions about the mechanism by which original sin is transmitted. This became an issue in the birth of Jesus and his sinlessness. Along with this is the mechanism of the virgin birth. There have been divergent views in the Church of God.

In the history of theology, the optimism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was corrected by WW I and WW II in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Dialectic theology, also known as neo-orthodox theology, recognized the reality of sin, but largely addressed the social aspects of evil. The social Gospel movement is linked with this period.

The world view of the time minimized the duality between Satan and God. In its place they worked from personality theories and the depth psychology of Freud, which saw in the heart of man a ruthless animal, covered over with an appearance of rationality and masked by a cultural niceness of civilized behavior. In other words, evil comes from man, and not the Devil. Again we find diversity in the Church of God on the nature of sin and the Devil. The temptation of Christ can be viewed as an inner struggle between the will of Jesus and the will of his Father, or between loyalty to God or Satan. I suspect that many Church of God students who have attended the state-operated schools have worked out a solution to Bible and science that is essentially neo-orthodox, and may include theistic evolution. The conservative alternative is creationism. From all of this we see a movement away from the "old-time religion" of "power in the blood" atonement, grounded in the Old Testament, and a movement toward a softer, more positive view of the nature of man.

Our ministries are heavily influenced by psychology, social science, and management. This is not necessarily a bad thing, but it seems clear that the biblical foundations of atonement and the historical positions of the past, are diminishing in emphasis.

**Free Will:** The position of Augustine, the acronym TULIP, was essentially followed by Luther and Calvin. (TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement,

Irresistible grace, Perseverance of the saints.) Total depravity included the ideas of original sin, the denial of salvation based on merit or man's effort, and the denial of free will. Pelagius believed that man had to actively cooperate in receiving salvation. Catholic theology taught a balance of faith and reason, practiced penance, and believed that merit could be earned. The Reformation was a reaction to the penance and merit system of the Catholic Church, and went back to a Pauline and Augustinian theology.

Counter to this trend were the individualism and emphasis on reason of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. Both democratic revolutions and radical theology flourished in this period. Immanuel Kant believed that man was more than reason. Man was a living person who had the capacity to make moral decisions. His world view included the immortality of the soul. It was evident that good did not triumph over evil in history. A future existence was necessary for justice. Hegel went on to see history as moving spiritually towards a final goal. This has parallels in the ages of Daniel and the ages of anthropology. Utopianism was present in a variety of forms during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Modern western culture is deeply committed to freedom in every form. TULIP is counter to western thought.

The Baptists developed a middle position between grace, election, and believer's baptism. Closely akin to these influences is the congregational form of church government.

The Church of God is very similar to the Baptists in its idea of free will. We see salvation as a partnership between God and man. Alva Huffer's *Systematic Theology* outlines this position with seven Bible images of what God is doing, and the four steps on man's part, namely repentance, belief, baptism, and a walk in newness of life.

The Church of God has generally denied the sacramental view of baptism, but agrees with the Protestant affirmation of the two ordinances based on the work of Christ on the cross. Thus atonement is the foundation of both baptism and communion. Atonement is the significance of the cross.

The Church of God differs from Anselm in his belief that Jesus had to be God in order to provide satisfaction. Likewise, the Church of God disagrees with vicarious atonement in its standard evangelical form for the same reason: it is creedal and not fundamental to the Bible itself. The Church of God founds its belief on the language of Leviticus, Hebrews, and the various New Testament passages that support the significance of the sacrificial blood of Christ on the cross. The Church of God believes that additional texts must also be considered that are generally excluded from the discussion of atonement, and isolated under salvation or eschatology.

**Conditional immortality:** Adherents of the immortality of the soul can be traced back to Socrates and Plato in their duality of body and soul. The modern biblical theology movement has increased awareness of the Hebrew concept of man as a whole. This holistic view is more consistent with the doctrine of the resurrection of the body. This teaching is prominent in 1 Corinthians 15, and has recently been affirmed by the neo-orthodox writers Karl Barth and Oscar Cullmann during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rationalism of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries denied the immortality of the soul, and affirmed that man was mortal. Man did not have a future hope. Immanuel Kant of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany affirmed the immortality of the soul as the means to justice and reward of the good. It was during this same period that the emphasis on the Old Testament and its holistic view of the nature of man began. Modern personality theory is holistic and Jewish in background. Modern medicine is essentially holistic. This trend should be contrasted with behavioral psychology and social work which places the burden on the environment. In the midst of all of this, a tradition of conditional immortality has been present from the apostolic fathers down to the present time. The Church of God is part of that tradition. L.E. Fromm's *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers* is essential reading for awareness of this tradition.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Review & Herald, 1965.

The relevance of all of this for atonement theory is the definition of the problem to be solved by atonement, and the way this fits in the timetable of salvation history. If man is immortal, then what is done during mortal life is merely the preface to what will ultimately be worked out in the afterlife. The Catholic Church provides purgatory as the opportunity to work out what was not accomplished during life on earth. Some view the millennium as a second chance to achieve the same goal. Those who adhere to universal salvation generally hold to the immortality of the soul or resurrection to a second period where these problems can be solved.

If man is mortal, then what is done in this life determines one's destiny. If atonement is viewed as a partnership between God and man, then, at a minimum, a decision for Christ is essential for any future hope. Many would add that baptism by immersion is essential, and adherence to certain doctrines is also essential for hope of immortality. It is difficult for any two denominations to agree on what these essential doctrines are. The Church of God has certainly had a difficulty finding any uniform position on this.

All positions have a difficulty dealing with infants, and regions of the world that have never heard the Gospel. The issue is one of fairness.

**Christology:** The problem here is whether Jesus is God or man or both. In the theology of Anselm the answer was both. In Anselm's view, which was the majority position in the Middle Ages, debt or punishment is seen as the primary issue. This seems to reflect the culture of the day and its legal system. Not enough emphasis is placed on God as a person, which is the emphasis of the Old Testament prophets popular in liberal theology. What is the place of love and forgiveness? Anselm's solution is too formal. Our relationship with God needs to be more personal. The Great Awakening, revivalism, and even the liberal social Gospel with its emphasis on the religious experience of the heart were reactions to clericalism, formalism, and sacramentalism. Thus 19<sup>th</sup>-century theology moved from emphasis on the death of Christ only to covenant theology with its emphasis on the entire life, teachings, crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Liberal theology denied the deity of Christ, and evangelical theology affirmed it.

The Church of God denies that Jesus is God, and thus rejects Anselm's theory of atonement. The Church of God affirms Jesus as the Messiah, Son of God, Son of Man, and our High Priest. All authority has been given to him over heaven and earth. The Church of God has leaned towards the evangelical vicarious atonement in its hymns and gospel songs. Emphasis is placed on the specific biblical images of Leviticus, interpreting them as types of Christ. The book of Hebrews, as well as passages throughout the New Testament, supports this idea. There are many similarities between evangelical and Church of God interpretation of these passages in the Old and New Testaments. However, it should be noted that the Church of God objects to the idea that God died on the cross, that his soul harrowed hell during the three days, and that he returned to the heavenly position which he had before he was incarnate during his earthly ministry. The Church of God affirms that Jesus began at his birth. He was foreknown in the mind of God before the foundations of the earth in his role as Son of God and Messiah. Jesus was born in Adam's race, but is unique in his sinlessness. Jesus is God's chosen one. From his birth he was destined to rule the world. Jesus was absolutely obedient to the will of God. Through his life and teachings he is the final revelation of God to man and the only way that man can come to God. Thus Christ is the key to atonement. What is significantly missing up to this point is the importance of the heavenly ministry of Christ at present, the second coming, the millennial work of Christ, and the age to come. To put it another way, the evangelical concept of atonement is mostly in the past, whereas the Church of God includes the present and the future in an eschatological sense. This will come to light in the section below.

**Age to Come:** Plato divided the world into the eternal, unchanging level of perfect ideas and the accidents of history. There is no sense of a goal in his view because there is no change possible in that which is perfect. History is an illusion, and it will pass away. Eastern religions regard escape from history and from individual being as salvation. Plato looked for escape from the body and eternity and pure thought as salvation.

The Bible is unique in its belief that salvation is historical, and involves both man in bodily form and the earth itself. The Old Testament contrasts the present evil age with the age to come. The progress of salvation is essentially a horizontal journey through history to the final goal of the new heavens and earth. The biblical theology movement of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries has revived an interest in Old Testament theology of the Age to Come. Such theology was the ground in which prophetic thought developed during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century the Dead Sea Scrolls and similar discoveries have led to a revival of interest in apocalyptic literature, which includes Daniel and Revelation.<sup>18</sup>

The relevance for atonement theory is the fairly literal hermeneutic approach to the types of the tabernacle, and a literal view of the age to come.<sup>19</sup> Biblical theology and biblical archaeology have reestablished a view that Abraham was a historical figure. Thus Moses, the Law, and the Tabernacle are more likely to be taken literally. The belief in the restoration of Israel has been confirmed by 1948. This has been widely proclaimed by the Dispensational movement in America. N.T. Wright has advanced global awareness of the new heavens and earth in our times. Thus there is a vast acceptance of Age to Come theology in our day. The Church of God lived in a transition period that flourished in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**Judgment:** All would agree on the idea of final judgment as found in the Old Testament. The definition of it is another matter. It is included in the Apostles' Creed and the creeds that followed. The Jews believed it would occur as the transition between the present age and the age to come. Those who believe in resurrection likewise place it at the transition between the two ages. The sheep and the goats in the gospels can be interpreted along this line. The book of Daniel describes the Great Tribulation and the millennial reign of Christ. Some interpret this as fulfilled in the time of Antiochus Epiphanes IV. Gleason Archer develops this futurist idea of a seven-year tribulation, the return of Christ to rule for a thousand years, the final judgment, and the new heavens and earth.<sup>20</sup> A similar exposition is presented by the dispensationalists John Walvoord and Charles Feinberg.

Such a line of futurist interpretation was present in the 20<sup>th</sup>-century Church of God and continues as the majority view. Also found are the historic pre-millennial position and the historic Millerite position with futurism at the end.

As this pertains to atonement theory, the possibility of the return of Christ at any moment creates an urgency to be ready. Now is the time to repent, believe, be baptized, and walk in newness of life. There is an urgency to tell the world about Jesus. It would seem to me that the Church of God of the 19<sup>th</sup> century felt a greater level of urgency about the return of Christ and the fulfillment of prophecy than during the last few decades. We are more inclined to listen to the ecological prophets of doom, warning us to save the planet, than the Baptist's "Prepare ye the way of the Lord" followed by the preaching of the Gospel of the Kingdom of God.

For the Church of God, this life is the time of decision. When the resurrection comes, the final verdict is already revealed by whether we rise in the first or second resurrection. The only question is about those alive when Christ returns. What will happen to the nations? Some believe that the wicked will be destroyed at the beginning of the millennium. Others believe this will happen at the end of the thousand years at the Great White Throne judgment in Revelation. It is not clear what the basis or criteria of judgment will be. Believers are atoned by the blood of the lamb. But what about the nations that will populate the millennium? Are they to be judged by their works, as were the sheep and the goats? There is much diversity of interpretation on this issue. It is agreed that only the righteous will inhabit the new heavens and earth.

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<sup>18</sup> See Excurses two on recent non-canonical literature.

<sup>19</sup> This can be found in the NICOT series.

<sup>20</sup> *Daniel, The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Zondervan, 1985.

### **Excursus one: Substance and Essence in Salvation**

Alexandria, Egypt was noted for a substance or essence approach to bringing God and man back together. From Greek philosophy they believed that every category had its essence. Consider cats. Outwardly they may look different, but there is something that makes them a cat. This is the essence. In biology we use the terms genus and species. In nature, cats can only produce cats. This is their nature or essence.

Since man reproduces, all mankind has the same nature or essence. Now if Jesus is born of woman we would expect him to have the nature of man. If Jesus is begotten of God we would expect him to have a divine nature. Thus in Jesus the divine nature and the human nature come into contact. Atonement has been accomplished between God and man. This is an ontological (being) approach that focuses on essence or substance, the first word from Greek, the second from Latin. Ontology is the study of being. Being has to do with the Greek *ousia*. In the Trinitarian debates, Athanasius believed that the Father and Son were the same in essence or being. Arius believed they were similar. The Council of Nicaea went with the view of Athanasius. In later councils the details of the divine and human nature of Christ, and the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son were worked out. During the Middle Ages, Anselm came to the problem of atonement from this background. He believed that the God-man nature of Jesus is what made it possible for his death on the cross to satisfy the Father. He could pay the price because he was divine.

This line of reasoning was continued with modifications by both Luther and Calvin. Another less-known movement, the Radical Reformation, observed that Luther and Calvin built upon the Bible plus the creeds. The Radical Reformers wanted to get back to the Bible, the Apostles, and early Christianity. They called for reform in both the doctrines and government of the church. Some of the Radical Reformers were anti-Trinitarian. They therefore rejected Anselm's theory of atonement. Some went in the direction of Unitarianism. This led to Universalism in which there was no need for atonement. The Church of God takes a middle ground. The Church of God does not trace itself historically to any specific person from the Radical Reformation. In our description of Church of God doctrine it is helpful to make comparisons.

Ontological arguments were popular through the Middle Ages, but modern theology is epistemological. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a blend of the two. As we face the issue of the nature of atonement and the nature of Christ, the epistemological problem was how man can come to an understanding. The variety of views indicates that this is a difficult question to answer. During the age of reason traditions and doctrines were challenged. Many writers during the 17<sup>th</sup> century rejected the Trinity on the grounds that it didn't make sense to them. It did not seem to agree with either the plain sense of the Bible or the everyday experiences of the senses. How can you have Jesus sitting at the right hand of God, and say they are really one? Is this the true meaning of the oneness of God? It looks more like two. Modern man relies on his five senses. He wants pragmatic, firsthand experience. He wants to handle and touch. This line of thinking in high probability was a contributing influence on the radical teachings of the Church of God in its view of the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and the atonement.

### **Excursus Two: Non-Canonical Approaches to Atonement**

Scholars during the Hellenistic period gathered around vast libraries that contained copies and translation of works from all over the known world. Some of these works are commentaries or supplements to books in the Bible. (Those who watch the History Channel are exposed to the wonders of this material.) Of special interest are the Gnostic redeemer myth, and the "heavenly man." The idea is that heaven has seven layers, and the earth three. God is at the highest level. So as to not come into direct contact with man, God works through a series of emanations. If we know how it works, we can journey through the seven gates, and get to God. What is required is secret knowledge, something like a computer password. Another part of the idea is that a representative of heaven came down to earth in human form, taught man, died, was resurrected,

and returned to God. Those who heard his teachings and followed his ways would be able to likewise reach God.

These writings became available in Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rudolf Bultmann, a 20<sup>th</sup>-century German theologian, believed that this Gnostic myth was the mythological basis of John chapter 1, which had been adapted to Christian form. It should be noted that Philo, a Jewish philosopher-theologian, had access to the ancient libraries and was also aware of this myth. He interpreted it in terms of the personified Word in Proverbs 8. James D.G. Dunn in *Christology in the Making* summarizes the myth and lays Philo and John 1 side by side in Greek.<sup>21</sup> C.H. Dodd makes a similar study in *Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*.<sup>22</sup> They both reject Bultmann's conclusions and affirm the idea that the background of John 1 is Jewish wisdom literature found in Proverbs 8. "The word became flesh" is the bridge. Jesus fulfilled the promises of the Old Testament.

The connection with atonement theory is found in the idea of Incarnation found in John 1. Incarnation literally means "in flesh." Orthodox teaching is that God became a man and came to earth, taught, died, and returned to God. He descended, ascended, and will descend. Through belief in Christ we find atonement. The one possibility is that John adapted the Bible, with its Jewish message, to Hellenistic forms of thought. The second possibility is that John's message is entirely Jewish and Old Testament-based. The third possibility is that it is a mixture, so that a Jew or Greek could find a common ground. C.H. Dodd takes this latter position.

Another approach to God is found in studies of near eastern symbols. In the Old Testament we have a three-layer world consisting of heaven, earth, and the underworld. Each is represented as a realm with boundaries, gates, thrones, and a ruler in charge. If man wanted to contact God he went to high places, hills, or mountains, as Moses did at Mount Sinai, David at Mount Zion, and Jesus at the Mount of Olives. Worship at high places was a problem when the Jews came into the promised land, because the Canaanites worshipped on high places in ways that were an abomination to God. Elijah had a contest with the prophets of Baal. Worship after the flood is another near eastern theme. After the flood, a mountain was the first place to become dry land. Noah offered a sacrifice. There are similar accounts in Babylonian literature. The Egyptians had their pyramids in place of mountains, but with similar meaning. The tower of Babel is a symbol of both man's reaching for God and man's pride in his accomplishments. God responded with judgment.

Atonement cannot be reduced to simply finding a secret, a door, a gate, etc. and showing up at God's door uninvited. In the Bible, atonement is costly. It demands our all. The old gospel hymn "I Surrender All" says this well.

### **Excursus Three: Objective and Subjective**

Aristotle's *Organon* analyzed the subject-predicate pattern of Greek grammar. This is still the basis of Greek, Latin, and English grammar and modern thought. The subject of a sentence is a category with attributes. The predicate either states the attributes of the subject, or carries an action from it to the object. The personal pronouns tell us the perspective of the sentence. "I" is from the inside of the subject. "He" is a more distant perspective. "He" can be the subject, but is distant from the point of view of the writer. "Him" can be the object, but is distant from the subject "I," etc. We also have moods, tenses, and voice. These elements can structure our thought or be tools in our communication.

A second issue is that the statement "God is truth" makes a lot of assumptions that we may not be aware of. Our dictionaries list a word such as "God" followed by "is" and followed with a definition. The definition asserts that it knows the inner nature or essence of the subject. Ontology believes that it has innate or intuitive knowledge of the inner nature. Epistemology, with its

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<sup>21</sup> James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Eerdmans, 1996.

<sup>22</sup> Cambridge University Press, 1963.

objective, reason and sense approach, objects that man cannot know the inner nature or essence. So the question comes down to a debate between intuition, faith, reason, and experience. Now all of these issues have a whole lot to do with the interpretation of the Bible as we move from the Middle Ages to the present.

Now what does this have to do with religion? 17<sup>th</sup>-century thought emphasized the objective mode of thought, processed by reason. The world is a machine. God is the designer of the machine. The world is governed by physical laws and natural laws. This was the time of astronomy, physics, and mathematics. It was the age of reason. This period challenged God, the Bible, miracles, and government. God was seen as an all-powerful, omniscient, omnipresent, and everlasting God. Christology was objective, and atonement was material. It was analytical in mode.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century was the Romantic age, with a love of history, art, and feeling. It was synthetic in mode, meaning “putting the pieces back together, and looking at the whole.” History has a goal. The world is organic. It is alive. It grows. It develops. It evolves. This was the time of the biological sciences and the social sciences — psychology, sociology, political science, and history. Religion became person-centered. William James in *The Psychology of Religion* probed the psychological nature of religious experience. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century we see Martin Buber’s *I and Thou*.<sup>23</sup> His key thought is that our relationship with God is more like a verb than a noun. It is I-You (subjective, person to person) rather than I-It (objective, person to thing). It is intimate. Religion was in the heart. It was experience. Movements that illustrate the subjective-experience approach to Christianity are the revivals, positive Christian living, liberal theology, social Gospel, gospel songs, church renewal, small groups, and the Pentecostal movement. In each of these there is an emphasis on person and feeling. The existential movement emphasized being or existence, and the desperate decisions we make in life. God demands decision. Karl Barth and Rudolph Bultmann are remembered for their powerful preaching and the call for decision. Barth is also noted for his role in dialectical and neo-orthodox theology of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with its renewed declaration of the sinful nature of man. All of these draw heavily on the message of Martin Luther.

I make the suggestion that Church of God theology took its Christology from material that is 17<sup>th</sup> century in style, developed its eschatology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, took its early form of worship from 19<sup>th</sup>-century America, and its present trends from dialogue with American and European evangelical thought. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century we were more aware of the larger theological community. During the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century we were in fundamentalist retreat, and during the latter half began to again seriously dialogue with the larger theological community. We are less aware of the historic doctrines held by the 19<sup>th</sup>-century founders, but they are not forgotten. We are more balanced in our overall church concept than our founders. Today we are both conservative and radical in our theology. We are especially eclectic in our ministry strategies. I do not see a strong integration of the core biblical theological system and the philosophy of ministry.

#### **Excursus Four: Sin Model**

Based on the grammar model of excursus three, we can now generate four perspectives on sin.

A. Sin as a Platonic or absolute idea. Plato contrasted the mathematical idea of a circle with any material circle that we can draw.

B. Sin in its accidental form, i.e. the material world in which we live. We distinguish A and B by “Sin” and “sin.” Now it has been proposed that Plato’s view is Sin, and Aristotle’s view is sin. The question is, what kind of sin is the Bible addressing in Leviticus? Or Jesus? Or Paul? Our understanding of A and B has a lot to do with what atonement must accomplish. What is the nature of the problem to be solved?

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<sup>23</sup> Touchstone Press, 1996.

C. Is sin subjective or objective? Is it a person or thing? At times sin looks like a thing in Leviticus. You can wash it away. At other times is the personal actions that come forth from the heart of man. In the Reformation, this distinction was considered by Luther and the Anabaptists. The subjective was the leading characteristic of the gospel songs of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Remember that 19<sup>th</sup>-century romanticism was characterized by feeling, person, and experience.

D. Are we sinners in the verb sense? The biblical theology movement of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the 20<sup>th</sup> century has become aware of the difference between the static Greek mode of thought and the dynamic Hebrew mode of thought. Martin Buber's *I and Thou* illustrates Jewish perspective.

E. Liberal theology of the 19<sup>th</sup> century rejected the original sin emphasis of Augustine and Luther. The social Gospel minimized "Sin" and maximized "sins" in their social form. There was a general optimism about human progress through the combination of education, advances in technology and medicine, and the growing prospect of world peace in their time. The theologies of atonement that come out of these groups emphasize the force of the love of God and brotherly love as the final answer. It is well known in any handbook of theology that the historical realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century demonstrated conclusively the inadequacy of these assumptions.

F. Post-modernism is noted for relativity in all things. Casual observation of current events reveals the gulf between historic anything and modern instant moments. In spite of these conditions, the number of people who still look to the Bible for answers is very significant. The opportunity for theology still remains.

Challenge: Which of these models best describes the sin that atonement removes? Perhaps it is several of the above? What model did the Church of God follow in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? 20<sup>th</sup> century?

#### **Excursus Five: The Leviticus Model of Atonement**

A. An individual sinner came to the entrance before the altar of sacrifice. Verb.

B. He was conscious that he had sinned. Subjective thinking.

C. He expressed his sins in spoken words. He logically processed his sins in a form in which he could see them and evaluate them. He objectified sin and distanced himself from it.

D. He transferred his sin by placing his hand on the head of an animal with the consciousness that the animal now bore his sin. This is symbolic thought.

E. He killed the animal. The animal became sin, his sin, and he killed it. He served in the role of judge.

F. The blood of the animal was sprinkled over the altar of sacrifice, and the blood was poured by the side of the altar. The blood represented life, his life. His life was from God. He stood before the judgment of God. The life was given back to God. This is symbolic action. He took a passive position in this step. He could not carry it out. A representative, the high priest, an agent of God, did this for him. The animal on his behalf shed its life and blood.

G. He skinned the animal and chopped or ripped it to pieces. The fat and parts were placed on the altar. Sometimes the remainder was also burned. The ashes were carried away from the camp. The sin was removed and carried away. Verb action.

H. The priest, an agent of God, pronounced that God had accepted the offering, and atonement had been made for his sins. Frequently this was followed by a peace offering, which was a fellowship meal. He and his family, and the priest and his family could eat this offering. This has connections with both the Lord's Supper, and Jesus' promise to eat with the disciples again when he returned.

Application: The language of this model is found throughout the Bible. It is the basis of both Catholic and Protestant liturgy. The Psalms have words appropriate to the actions in Leviticus. The Apostles used this Leviticus language to explain the cross. Both music and art have richly presented the Leviticus account.

## Excursus Six: Sources for Study of Atonement

### A. Dictionaries, Lexicons, and Concordances.

1. “Atonement,” *Zondervan Pictorial Bible Encyclopedia*: The English meaning is “to make one.” “Sin” and “reconciliation” are the two parts of the English meaning.

The Hebrew terms are *kapar* and *kipper* with a basic meaning of “to cover.” Eighty-eight percent of the uses are from Leviticus, with most in Leviticus 1-6 and 16 in connection with the Day of Atonement, which in Hebrew is Yom Kippur. The lid of the ark can be understood as a lid, cover or seat. “Cover” connects with the idea that sin is covered by the blood sprinkled on the Day of Atonement. The “chair” idea is connected with the idea of God’s presence over the lid of the ark of the covenant. The other meaning of the *kpr* root is “gracious.” From this we get the combined ideas of “mercy seat,” “throne of grace,” and “expiation” or “propitiation.”

The Greek terms are *hilaskomai* and *katallasso*, meaning “reconcile.”

2. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. The Greek terms *hilaskomai* and *katallasso*, meaning “reconcile,” are discussed in greater depth in both Old Testament and New Testament usage. *Lasso* means “change.” The first is translated expiation or propitiation.

3. *Strong’s Concordance*. It is evident that Hebrews is the counterpart of the Leviticus texts. Second, the Hebrew word has been translated by a wide range of words including “forgive.” It is evident from the Old Testament passages from the Psalms and prophets that the *kpr* root does not exhaust Old Testament thought on the subject. This study focuses on the *kpr* root, but a sample will be given of other types of texts in the Old Testament. Third, it is noted that the New Testament idea must go far beyond the suggested two words. A narrative reading of Leviticus 1-6, 8-10, and 16 provides a variety of other words which have New Testament parallels. Examples are the “might” group and the “wash” group.<sup>24</sup> Examples of the “wash” group would be “sprinkle,” “pour,” and “wash,” all having to do with cleansing in Leviticus, and in the New Testament.

4. *Commentary*. I primarily used Gordon Wenham’s commentary on Leviticus to work through the details of Leviticus 1-6, 8-10, and 16. Other commentaries were consulted.

B. **Historical and biblical theology**: At this point I began to examine how this material has been interpreted in the theory of atonement. I found great diversity.

C. **Church of God**: Lastly, I tried to determine the view of the Church of God towards this subject.

## Excursus Seven: English and Latin for “Expiation” and “Propitiation”

A. “Expiation,” from Latin “expiate” — pluperfect stem of *expiare*, “to make satisfaction,” from *ex-* + *piare* to seek to appease (by sacrifice), from *pius*, devout.

1. Transitive: to avert (evil) by religious ceremonies; to avert the evil portended by (a prodigy or prophecy).

2. To cleanse, purify (a person, a city) from guilt or pollution by religious ceremonies.

3. To do away or extinguish the guilt of (one’s sin); to offer or serve as a propitiation for.

4. To pay the penalty of

5. To make amends or reparation for.

6. To make expiation for.

7. To extinguish (a person’s rage) by suffering it to the full; to end (one’s sorrows, a suffering life) by death.<sup>25</sup>

B. Expiate=*expiare* “to atone” from “make good.” *Piare*= “to propitiate.”<sup>26</sup>

C. “Propitiation” (1) from Latin *ex* = “from”+ *piare* = “to make amends”; (2) meaning: “to make amends,” “to atone.”<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> These are discussed in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Zondervan, 1975.

<sup>25</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 1969 reprint.

<sup>26</sup> *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*.

## **Excursus Eight: Church of God Theology of Salvation<sup>28</sup>**

1. A theology of atonement can only be understood as an aspect of a larger theology of salvation.

2. The Bible contains a great number of literal and figurative descriptions of salvation. Attention should be given to a balanced teaching of this full range from both the Old and New Testament. The error of church history has been to overemphasize a few terms, while neglecting others: e.g. “Justification” versus “sanctification,” or “the death of Christ” while neglecting “the resurrection of Christ.”

3. Salvation is primarily an issue between God and man. This is the sovereign right of God as creator. He alone has the right to give and take away. It is a well-established fact that God had a plan of salvation in the beginning, and that He has been working towards that goal throughout the history of mankind.

4. The larger scope of salvation is from creation to new creation. The primary issue is righteousness versus sinfulness. Man is in revolt. Man is unfaithful in his relationship with God. Man does not love his neighbor. The land is under a curse. The teaching of “restitution” is an eschatological position that the land, the nations, and individuals must be restored to the Genesis 1-3 conditions before the fall. This includes the “image,” “dominion,” and “walk with God in the garden,” unending life, etc.

5. The Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12 has land, seed, and dominion provisions. The promises extend to “all people.” This is consistent with the restitution idea of Genesis 1-3 and Revelation, “the new heavens and earth.” The Abrahamic Covenant provides a “promise” theme that ties the Old and New Testaments, with key points being the Deuteronomy treaty, David’s throne, Jeremiah’s new covenant, Jesus’ new testament, and Paul’s “Abraham’s seed and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29).

6. Leviticus chapters 1-5 and 16 are the basis of many of the symbolic terms in the Old and New Testament dealing with cleansing from sin, forgiveness, and restoration to fellowship with God. The English word “atonement” historically has focused on expiation of sin by the death of Christ and reconciliation with God. There is an ongoing European debate in atonement theology between a focus on the death of Christ alone, versus the life and teachings of Christ, including the cross and resurrection. This too falls short of the larger teachings of the Bible on salvation. It does not adequately consider the present work of Christ as our high priest regarding sin, or the present working of Christ in the Christian life and the Church. Secondly, it does not address the purpose of the return of Christ and the millennial reign of Christ. Atonement is really not finished until the heavens and earth have been made new.

7. The Psalms and prophets enlarge the scope of expressions for the removal of sin and the restoration of fellowship. They reveal the coming “Messiah” as a suffering servant, fulfilled in the gospel accounts, and look to “the age to come” when the Messiah will reign over the nations. Hebrews mainly applies the Leviticus images, but we must balance this with the words and pictures found in the Gospels, Paul, and the Bible as a whole from Genesis to Revelation.

8. Conditional immortality with our hope of bodily resurrection at the return of Christ, to reign with him on the earth, is foundational to the theology of the Church of God. The Abrahamic

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<sup>27</sup> Christinyou.com

<sup>28</sup> Author’s note on Excursus eight: See the suggested model of articles of faith that would seem to describe the atonement position of the Church of God. I would caution that this is my personal perception of the situation, and has not been seen by any official representative of the Church of God. I speak simply as a third generation member. The data at my disposal covers almost the entire organizational history of the Church of God General Conference in all of its historic forms. I would anticipate a certain amount of dialogue, and revisions may follow this initial effort to articulate the Church of God view of Atonement in the context of the general philosophy and theology of this period. Eugene Stilson. October, 2008.

Covenant and the restoration of Israel are taken literally. There is an emphasis on the land provisions of the covenant. This view sees death as “sleep” in the sense that “the dead know nothing” (Ecc. 9:5). The “soul” is man as a whole “living being.” It denies Platonic duality and affirms the unity of man as “person.” Continuity is provided by the faithfulness of God and not by natural immortality. A key Old Testament text is Job 14:13-15: “Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, that You would conceal me until Your wrath returns to You, that You would set a limit for me and remember me! If a man dies, will he live again? All the days of my struggle I will wait, until my change comes. You will call, and I will answer You; You will long for the work of Your hands.” Jesus said in John 5:26-27 that he had been given life in himself, and that he would give it to whomsoever he will. The sovereign right to give eternal life, originally found only in the Father, has been given to Jesus Christ. Further, the judgment of life and death has been given to Jesus. The condition required by Jesus was belief that he is the Christ, the Son of God. Confession of Christ and obedience to Christ are the primary requirements. Consistent with this the Church of God teaches “believer’s baptism.” Bodily resurrection at the return of Christ is another teaching that connects these ideas. A balance between free will and grace places the Church of God in the Anabaptist camp. Other aspects above place the Church of God in the Adventist, premillennial camp. Some are “futurists”; others are “historicists” with some “futurist” tendencies.

9. In the Bible Christology begins with God in the Old Testament who had the plan of salvation in mind, and Jesus as the Messiah and agent of God is presented in the Synoptic Gospels. The images of Christ at the right hand of God found in Revelation are taken literally. Jesus was foreknown in the mind of God before the foundations of the world. In the fullness of time Jesus was born of a woman. The word became flesh. Christ is the second Adam. In his earthly life, Jesus lived out the conditions of all those in Adam, the difference being his obedience to God in contrast to the rebellion of Adam. In his resurrection Jesus was the first example of the new creation. Jesus is the Son of God. We are called to Sonship. In the resurrection we will be changed in nature. In the new earth, the earth will be changed. Jesus will submit all things to the Father. The Church of God believes that we will be able at that time to experience two separate beings, Jesus and the Old Testament God. The Trinity regards the oneness of God as compound; thus the Godhead is one, but there are three Persons who have existed through eternity. Atonement is then worked out within this structure. The Church of God does not take this approach. Instead the Church of God follows the literal salvation narrative of the Old and New Testament. In the garden Jesus prayed if it was possible to remove the cup from him. He was satisfied that it was the will of God that he die. In obedience, Jesus voluntarily submitted himself to the Romans and to death. Three days later, God raised Jesus from death and exalted him. Though we die, we too have the hope of resurrection and exaltation, at the return of Christ. Our day of “full atonement” is partially fulfilled in the millennium, and totally fulfilled in the new heavens and earth.

#### **Excursus Nine: Other Texts**

**New Testament:** The Hebrew word translated atonement does not have a single equivalent. Several terms must be examined: propitiation, expiation, reconciliation, forgiveness, throne of grace, washed, sprinkled with blood, baptized, and remission. Instead of the Day of Atonement, we have baptism, the Lord’s Supper, Easter, Bible study and prayer meetings, and personal devotions.

**Now:** Accept Christ as Savior; he died for our sins. Confess faith in Christ. Be baptized for the remission of sins. Walk pure lives in obedience to the Lord. Confess your sins to God. We are in Christ, and Christ is in us.

**Kingdom:** Jesus will eat in fellowship with us, as he did with the disciples. Righteousness will fill the earth. We will walk with God.

### Some texts beyond Leviticus and Hebrews:

**Psalm 103:12:** “As far as the east is from the west, so far has he *removed* our transgressions from us.”

**Isaiah 53:1:** “The *Lord has laid on him* the iniquity of us all.”

**Jeremiah 50:20:** “In those days, and in that time, says the Lord, *the iniquity* of Israel shall be sought for, and there shall be none; and the sins of Judah, and they shall not be found: for *I will pardon* whom I reserve.”

**Hosea 6:6:** “For I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and *acknowledgment of God* rather than *burnt offerings*” (see also Isa. 1:11-17; Amos. 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8; Matt. 9:13; 12:7).

**Rom. 3:25:** “Whom God hath set forth to be a *propitiation* [*hilasterion*] through *faith in his blood* [*haimati*] to *declare his righteousness* [*dikaiousunes*] for the *remission* [*piresin tow progegovoton = previously occurred*] of *sins* [*hamartematon*].

**Rom. 4:7-8:** “Blessed are they whose *iniquities are forgiven* [*aphethesan*]...Blessed is the man to whom the Lord will not *impute* [*logisetai= reckon*] *sin* [*hamartian*].

**1 John 2:1-3:** “My little children, these things write I to you, that you sin not. And *if any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father*, Jesus Christ the righteous: And he is the *propitiation* [*hilasmos*] *for our sins* [*hamartion*]; and not for ours only, but also for *the sins of the whole world*. And hereby we do know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.”

**1 John 4:10:** “Herein is love [*agape*], not that we loved God, but he loved us, and *sent his Son to be the propitiation* [*hilasmon*] *for our sins*.”

**Reconciliation: 2 Cor. 5:18-21.** “And all things are of God, who has *reconciled* [*katallaksantos*] us to himself by Jesus Christ and has given to us the ministry of reconciliation; namely, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not *imputing* their trespasses to them; and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. 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. For he has *made him to be sin for us*, who knew no sin; that we might *be made the righteousness of God in him*.”

**Throne of grace=mercy seat= hilasterion.** Rabbinic writings thought of two divine thrones: justice and grace. Hebrews combines both in Christ at his second coming in the terms “throne of grace” and “mercy seat.”

The exalted Christ is granted rule over thrones, dominions, principalities, and powers in heaven and earth (Col. 1:16). This links the ideas of “throne” and “grace.”

“Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace [*charitos*], that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need [Eng. idiom for *eukairon*= just at the right time].”

### Excursus Ten: Huffer Update, November, 2008

In the preface to this article, reference was made to Alva Huffer’s brief discussion of atonement in *Systematic Theology*. A conversation with Alva in November, 2008 gives an important update on his personal position, which affirms a belief in atonement. In sermons he uses the words person, place and price to present the doctrine of atonement. God out of love, mercy, and grace has initiated, in the fullness of time, atonement through the work of the cross. God, out of His sovereign will, has determined the person, place, and price by which atonement is made. Jesus died on the cross for our sins. In answer to the problem of one dying for many, Alva replies that Jesus as the Son of God is of infinite worth.

### Excursus Eleven: Works by Vincent Taylor

I obtained copies of these three works on atonement<sup>29</sup> after I had written this article. In the course of the article I began by considering the atonement under the symbols of Leviticus,

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<sup>29</sup> Vincent Taylor, *Jesus and His Sacrifice*, Macmillan, 1943. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*, Macmillan, 1941; *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, Epworth, 1958.

interpreted by Hebrews. I then enlarged the concept in light of the position of the prophets concerning love, and the correction given by Jesus. I next noted the use of a wide range of vocabulary words in addition to atonement throughout the Bible. This brought in the concepts of forgiveness, love, and reconciliation. This finally led me to the awareness that atonement is only correctly understood in the larger context of salvation history. In *Systematic Theology* it is presented in its parts in the discussion of God, Jesus, Salvation, Christian experience, the Church, and last things. In the larger sense, atonement is only achieved in the new heavens and earth. This perspective could be called restitution atonement, in which man and the cosmos are restored in relationship to the will of God.

It is at this point in my study that I became aware of the considerable work done by Vincent Taylor in his journey in life. He began his quest with an examination of the death of Christ in the Synoptic Gospels in *Jesus and His Sacrifice*. His next step was to recognize that behind the sacrificial death of Christ is *Forgiveness and Reconciliation*.

At this point he recognized the larger New Testament framework of atonement images in terms of Christian experience of personal relationship with God. In *The Atonement in New Testament Teaching*, he presents a comprehensive survey of all of the New Testament images that pertain to the removal of sin, and the establishment of relationship with God. He gives a helpful chart of all of the atonement theories, and the particular terms and images which they emphasize. He strives for a balanced view of atonement in light of the total evidence.

Taylor certainly makes reference to the eschatological aspects of atonement. In my conclusions I go further, with my literal understanding of the new heavens and earth as the restitution of all things in their Genesis 1-3 and Revelation 19-21 aspects.

Gustaf Aulen is another author who presents the larger past, present, and future implications of atonement thought. Previously we have noted his *Christus Victor*. Another important work is *The Faith of the Christian Church*.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Muhlenberg Press, 1960.