

Why I Keep Returning to an Old Book on Atonement

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I have one short bookshelf devoted to the most significant books of my reading life. I ponder long and hard before “promoting” a book to that lofty shelf, but Leon Morris’s *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* sits prominently on it. This may seem odd, given that I first read it for a systematic theology class more than 30 years ago. But its spot on that shelf remains non-negotiable and secure. I re-read it every so often, benefiting every time.

The Atonement examines our Messiah’s death and resurrection through a multifaceted lens of New Testament words—covenant, sacrifice, Day of Atonement, Passover, redemption, reconciliation, propitiation, and justification. The cumulative effect fits well under the banner, “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Indeed, Morris’s work is both worship-inducing and sanctification-accelerating.

Propitiation and Expiation

It’s helpful to know the contrast between Morris’s *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* and C. H. Dodd’s less-than-orthodox book *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments*. Morris’s book, in some ways, was a response to Dodd and was then rewritten for a wider audience as *The Atonement*. The response to Morris’s earlier work was so enthusiastic, many urged him to write a similar treatise for those without training in biblical Hebrew and Greek. I’m thankful for the second book that I can recommend to all Christians, regardless of their formal theological training.

Dodd argued for the term “expiation” to describe the atonement and insisted that the God of the Bible was not a God of wrath. Morris insisted on the term “propitiation” and showed that God must pour out wrath for sin and did so, amazingly, on his Son in our place.

Some may raise the question, “Does that really make a difference?” Morris would say, “Why, it makes all the difference in the world!” And that truth has far more importance than mere translation accuracy or theological hair-splitting. *The Atonement* helped me appreciate the magnificence of the cross, both cognitively and emotionally.

Kaleidoscopic Cross

A good writer serves readers by doing the heavy lifting of research, translation, and explanation. Morris delves deeply into etymology, theology (both biblical and systematic), and history so we can grow in wisdom, understanding, and gospel transformation. As a result of reading his words, we can more easily understand and more penetratingly apply truths to that might otherwise have gone unseen and unapplied.

Morris informs us of his purpose in the introduction:

While the New Testament writers are agreed on its [the cross’s] centrality, they do not all bring this out in the same way. Some prefer one kind of imagery, others another. . . . As we see what these words meant to those who used them originally, we shall be led into a fuller understanding of the depths of meaning they found in Christ’s cross. (12–13)

This led me to consider, *If God’s Word refers to the cross in varied ways, I dare not settle for a reductionist or incomplete view of this most crucial truth.*

For example, in his chapter on redemption, Morris helped me see the two-sided nature of that term. Redemption involves being rescued out of slavery *and* delivered into a place I was originally meant



to be. The transfer from one “ownership” to another involved a purchase of great price. Morris spends enough time exploring how the word—in the ears and minds of its original hearers—had a strictly economic meaning. In our day, we’ve watered down the term to mean only some vague transfer from one state (bad but not deadly) to another (good but not eternal). Consider how the term is used in the world of sport: “Last year, they had a losing record, but this year they found redemption and won the national championship.” Morris comments that “in antiquity the word was specific. It meant not simply deliverance, but deliverance in a particular way” (107), and that “[f]or them to be restored to the place where they belonged, they must be bought out of their captivity” (108).

The transformational result of sitting under Morris’s teaching, for me, is threefold. I feel a greater weight of how bad my situation was (slavery). I marvel at the enormity of the price paid (the death of God’s Son). And I experience a joy of gaining a status I was always meant to have (sonship).

Meditating on the Cross

My first reading of *The Atonement* probably remained in the realm of intellectual understanding. I learned a great deal of history and theology. All my subsequent re-readings have yielded growth to overcome a plethora of struggles and temptations.

Considering *propitiation* humbles me to grasp that God’s wrath should’ve been poured out on me instead of on Jesus. Meditating on *reconciliation* sparks delight for the intimacy I now enjoy with my heavenly Father. Reflecting on *covenant* prompts prayer throughout the day, not just at set devotional times. Remembering the reality of *Passover* carves out greater trust in God’s ability to get me out of tight jams.

I’ve also grown in my appreciation for the gospel through words Morris didn’t mention. Even in categories not addressed in his book, he models how to think about important truths in transformative ways. He offers no chapter on adoption, but when I feel rejected or unappreciated by others, my status as God’s adopted son dissipates the sting of alienation from people. He doesn’t discuss the Messiah as victor, but that truth sets me free from tendencies to ugly defensiveness or harmful arguments.

Good Addition

Paul prayed that the eyes of the Ephesians’ hearts might be enlightened in order to know the riches of God’s glorious inheritance in the saints (see *Eph. 1:18*). We should regularly rehearse that prayer for ourselves and for all other believers.

Morris’s book helps me to meditate in ways that propel that prayer toward fulfillment. After I read it once again, I’ll return it to that important bookshelf in my library. Perhaps it belongs on your shelf as well.

