

Atoning for the Atonement

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“atone”: [From at one]. 1. Obs. To reconcile or make reconciliation. 2. To make amends, as for an offense or deficiency, to expiate.

“at one”: In concord of friendship; in agreement; agreement.

--*Websters New Collegiate Dictionary*.

“atone”: v.i. -- for: expiate, make up for.

“at one”: in harmony or agreement (with).

--*Pocket Oxford Dictionary*.

What’s in a word? Surely the meaning is obvious to all. Especially in matters of religion, where language has been developed and refined over the years into creeds and catechisms, definitions and formulas.

Take a simple, essential word like “atonement.” Everybody knows what that means, right? A shorthand expression for “the vicarious sacrifice of Christ by which payment for transgression was made so that justification can be imputed.”

Just saying that gives pause for thought. Take any one of those “technical” words, and consider. What is the real meaning here? Or has the very repetition of such terms made them seem essential to faith, religious clichés that are as much belief as the word of God?

Creedal formulas

It almost seems to challenge such dogmatic definitions is the vilest heresy! As if what we believe is enshrined in “magic” words and creedal shibboleths. Just try it some time. Suggest that you are not particularly happy with some specific formulation of words, and you are viewed as a near relative of the Devil himself.

Almost as if the church is at the stage in which we search the creeds (or “Statements of Belief” if you prefer) because we think that in them we have eternal life. The result? If we’re not careful, a profession of faith, but not the true power of trusting belief in God. For statements of belief describe our relationship to God, but are not the belief itself. “God ideas” cannot be formulated once and set in concrete forever after.

Back to that word atonement. A handy receptacle into which is thrown all the accumulated ideas of salvation. Half-baked notions, rusty theories, traditional dogmas. Just call whatever aspect of the gospel of salvation the “atonement” and then all is well. For atonement is an essential keyword that guarantees approval.

Look again at the word atonement. We may all think we know what it means, and how it relates to God’s salvation. But do we?

The trouble with words is that they mean different things to different people, especially to different people separated by time and culture. The meaning of words changes as language alters. Words like “gay” have experienced a great change meaning even in recent years. Extend the period of time and the problem gets worse.

Where “atonement” came from

So what of the word atonement? First used in 1513, it was soon employed by Tyndale in his translation of the Bible in 1526. The word atone, from which atonement looks like it was derived, did not come along until 1555, through “back formation” from atonement.

So what did it mean? The story you’ve heard is true: atonement really means at-one-ment. The idea of being at one, in harmony. It is a “made-up” word, formed by running at and one together, as the rather free writers of the time were fond of doing. To quote *An Etymological Dictionary of Modern English*: “atone. Originally to reconcile, from adverbial phrase at one, and preserving the old pronunciation of the latter word, as in only, alone.” That’s why we say atone and at one differently today, which disguises their commonality. But in reality, and when they were first used, they meant the same thing.

The *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* describes the word atonement: “the condition of being at one with others; concord, agreement.” There is no concept here of some necessary paying of penalty, of appeasement or placating a hostile person. It is simply “one-ness”. The same source gives a further definition: “3. Spec. in Theol. Reconciliation or restoration between God and sinners. 1526 (Tyndale).” and then adds the note “Atonement is variously used by theologians in the sense of reconciliation, propitiation, expiation. (Not so applied in any version of the N.T.)”—an interesting “theological” comment from a work not particularly concerned with matters religious!

This is a far cry from the meaning the word atonement has assumed in the present: that of doing something in the form of payment or penalty to “atone” for some wrongdoing; a very “legal” word in which recompense is made and obligations met. As the *Chambers Universal Learners Dictionary* puts it: “Atone. To do something good to show that one is sorry for doing something bad.”

Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary also well illustrates the changed meaning: “atonement. 1. Archaic. Concord; reconciliation. 2. Satisfactory reparation for an offense or injury.” The archaic meaning was the original sense, the second definition is the meaning most often used today.

In this way then the word atonement has shifted considerably from its first meaning of one-ness and the state of “one-ment”. Tyndale, who introduced the word into his Bible translation, saw it in its simple meaning. Jesus came to make us one with God: “One God, one Mediatour, that is to say aduocate, intercessor, or an atonemaker, between God and man.” “One mediatour Christ,..and by that word vnderstand an attonemaker, a peacemaker.” (Tyndale, *Works*, p.158, p.431, cited in *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language*, art. *atone*.)

The original meaning also comes through in the various early Bible commentators. Note Udal’s comment on Ephesians 2:16 which makes the intended meaning of *at one* crystal clear: “And like as he made the Jewes and Gentiles at one betwene themselves, euen so he made them bothe at one with God, that there should be nothing to break the attonement, but that the thynges in heauen and the thinges in earth should be ioined together as it wer into one body.” [While it is clear that such writers were “no great spellers”—even spelling the same word differently in the same line as it took their fancy—the intention is obvious. Atonement (or attonement!) is state or situation of being at one—two parties in agreement.]

So where do the modern meanings of compensation, payment and expiation come from? In a word, the Reformation, especially the later “formulators” of creeds and systems and theories of the at-one-ment.

Legal models

Using highly-developed legal models of what Christ's death accomplished, such theories of the at-one-ment placed great emphasis on the need to provide God with compensation, guilt-payment etc. so that his judicial wrath would then be appeased. For some, the Cross became the legal formula by which God satisfied his need for man's punishment, and the blood of Christ the "currency" through which man's guilt was voided. This "transactional" concept of the reconciliation accomplished by Christ even appears to make God the problem: as if he is the one who needs to be reconciled to us, rather than us to God. ("God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself." 2 Cor. 5:19).

Other dangers of such a stress on the penal aspects include:

- suggesting God is not as willing to forgive as the Son
- presenting God as hostile, and needing appeasement
- making salvation a matter of accepting the right formula
- proposing that blood-payment is necessary as an absolute precondition to divine forgiveness
- indicating that the primary problem is legal guilt
- presuming that what is needed is the imputation of Christ's merit (close to the doctrine of Christ's supererogation of merits, which are "on tap" to supply human deficiency)

So the problem is not with the word *atonement* which still retains in its component parts the original words and original meaning. The change has arisen as a result of the way in which the word has been used as a description of systems which see salvation as having been effected by a kind of legal adjustment of the sinner's standing before God; some transaction that is carried out between Christ and God in which compensation is effected, punishment cancelled, and anger propitiated.

Re-uniting

So now comes the "atoning" (modern meaning!) for the "atonement" (original meaning!). Some "setting right" of the wrongs done to this beautiful word which describes so well what Christ came to achieve—the one-ness of all Creation, (one that they may be one etc.) the re-uniting of human beings back to God.

Not through asserting that someone is right when that person is not, but through the transforming power of God which is shown so clearly on the Cross. We are made one with God by God himself, not through some legal machinations. Man's need is not primarily to be forgiven (although that is also important) but to be changed—from rebellious enemies into trustworthy friends. That is the goal of the at-one-ment.

As A.G. Herbert puts it in his article on the Atonement: "But we have been baptized (washed, John 13:10), reconciled, united with Christ as members of his Body, thereby the root of sin, which is the pride and self-love of the ego, has been extracted, and the process of healing from the bottom initiated. Thus we share in the righteousness of Christ; and here we must banish any notion of a legal or forensic imputation of merit, for we are justified and made righteous, not in the sense of possessing a righteousness all our own (Phil. 3:9), but because we belong to Christ." (*A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, A. Richardson ed., p.26).

Relationship of harmony

This is the emphasis of the gospel: on being brought back into harmony, agreement and oneness with God by God; not so much by the provision of legal 'title deeds' but through a restored relationship—for that is what was broken by the Fall. Such a view is inherently

non-legal, since friendship is not based on the observation of rules and requirements. Love cannot be required, only pleaded for.

Thus atonement means that God is seeking to prove his truth and right, not by appeal to a judicial review but through personal experience with those who doubt him. Ultimately all may assent that God has been legally correct (which is indeed one aspect of the Great Controversy), but he will not be universally loved. At-one-ment is not primarily a decision on the facts of God's actions, but whether the individual wishes to respond to the kind of God revealed by such actions.

The at-one-ment is the means to achieve our agreement with God that he is loving, true and right, not from compulsion but from free choice; it is even the provision of the ability to make the choice, since in our broken relationship we are slaves to sin. But through the life and death of Jesus, God is revealed as he truly is, so that we may be won to trusting admiration of such a wonderful, reconciling God.

Harmony is restored not by creedal assent or due process of law but through loving agreement with God on his nature, character and actions. This is the answer to the Devil's programme of division and separation, of hostility and hateful lies.

Now we are in concord with God, no longer in lawlessness as rebels (for primarily sin has more to do with an attitude to God than the actual breaking of laws), but in harmony with all his will and ways.

Reconciliation

This is the reconciliation which God makes to bring us back to oneness to him:

“And all things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconciliation.” (2 Cor. 5:18).

“That he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby.” (Eph. 2:16).

“And, having made peace through the blood of his cross, by him to reconcile all things unto himself; by him, I say, whether they be things in earth, or things in heaven...” (Col. 1:20).

“For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life. And not only so, but we also joy in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom we have now received the atonement.” (Rom. 5:10, 11).

Receiving the atonement—by being reconciled to God as trusting friends instead of rebellious enemies. What is required for this true at-one-ment with God is not forgiveness and pardon but healing and change. Only by being transformed can hostile rebels find a place in God's presence—only by becoming God's friendly children—at one with their heavenly Father.

One with God! “I pray... that they may all be one; as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us.” John 17:21. This is the at-one-ment. Eventually all those who choose will be united with God, one with him (Revelation 21:3). But first we may need to “atone” (compensate) for our misguided understanding of God's atonement (making one).

May God reunite us to himself through all he has done to *at one* us!

