

of hearing the many terrible stories told by soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. ‘Compassion fatigue’ is another name for it, not to be confused with ‘combat fatigue.’ The effect is to absolve the guilty of their responsibility. Our age has a problem with identifying evil and owning guilt. Confession will not come easily to us or to our contemporaries.

John began his epistle with what he ‘heard from Him’ from the ‘beginning,’ and it was this: ‘God is light’ (1:5). Since God is light, we must ‘walk in the light’ (1:6–7). But what does that mean? The rest of chapters 1 and 2 elaborate: it means we confess our sins, we keep the commandments, we love our brethren, we overcome the evil one, we ‘love not the world,’ we believe Jesus is the Christ, and we discern the truth. We look at the first step: we confess our sins. We will look at what he says negatively (denying sin), positively (confessing sin), and, finally, the result (forgiveness and cleansing).

DENYING SIN

John is dealing with a denial problem not unlike our own. He appears to be quoting his opponents. ‘If we say,’ he says, as he cites their teaching, ‘If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us’ (1 John 1:8). ‘If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us’ (1 John 1:10). John has told us that we cannot walk in darkness and claim fellowship with God (1:6). The response of the false teachers seems to be, ‘We haven’t sinned.’ Some commentators see a difference between verse 8 and verse 10, the ‘no sin’ of the former referring to one’s sinful nature, the ‘have not sinned’ referring to particular acts. Probably this kind of distinction cannot be sustained because in verse 9 ‘sin’ becomes ‘our sins,’ i.e. particular

acts, and therefore interprets the meaning of verse 8 for us. Rather, in all three verses he probably is dealing with both, with sin in its totality, sinful nature *and* particular sins. Sin ‘refers to the inner principle of which sinful acts are the outward manifestation,’ says Morris.⁴⁰ Either way, they denied the sinfulness of the sins to which John was pointing. We’re not in darkness, they claimed, because we’re not sinning.

Remember the gnostics denied the relevance of bodily acts. The body is a prison, external to the real me. Bodily acts have no effect on one’s relationship with God. They believed they were somehow beyond the categories of good and evil.

John is dealing with those infected with a form of perfectionism. People then and now would play with definitions in order to deny any personal involvement in sin. They would redefine sin as non-sin. This, he says, is deception, stated emphatically so as to suggest ‘a deliberate refusal to face the facts.’⁴¹ ‘We are deceiving ourselves,’ he says (1:8). We’re kidding ourselves. ‘And the truth is not in us.’ We are devoid of the truth. We are refusing to face up to reality. A ‘profession of perfect holiness,’ says John Cotton, ‘is an error willful, pernicious, and dangerous.’⁴² In addition, ‘we make Him a liar’ (1:10). How so? Because God defines sin. His voice is the only one that matters. When we redefine the categories, when we call good ‘evil’ and evil ‘good,’ we implicitly accuse God of falsehood.

Think of the creative energy expended in devising euphemisms for sin. Now that around 50% of all Americans between the ages of 25 and 35 have ‘lived in sin,’ we refer to it as ‘cohabitation’ or merely ‘living together.’ The promiscuous are now the ‘sexually active.’ Adultery is an ‘affair,’ or worse, a ‘fling.’ Prostitutes are ‘sex-industry workers.’ Sodomy is merely one’s ‘sexual preference.’ Abortion is ‘terminating pregnancy’

and pro-death is 'pro-choice.' Lies are stories. Embezzlement and perjury: 'mistakes were made.' The list goes on and on, but the effect is the same – sin is sanitized and denied.

More creative energy is expended in medicalizing evil. This sometimes is referred to as the 'disease model' of human behavior. Over against a 'moral model' of behavior, which attributes behavior to the choices we make as moral agents, the disease model shifts responsibility for our choices to forces beyond our control whether external (e.g. drugs) or internal (genetic weakness). William Wilbanks, professor in the Criminal Justice Department at Florida International University, explains:

Today it would appear that any behavior that is labeled as compulsive and negative is termed an addiction: Those involved in 'compulsive' gambling are addicted to gambling; those who overeat are addicted to food; those who watch TV too frequently are TV addicts.

The expanding concept of addiction is part of what I call the New Obscenity. I do not refer to any four-letter word but to a philosophy that is summarized in four words. The four-word phrase is obscene because it denies the very quality that makes us human and not simply animals. The four words are: 'I can't help myself.'⁴³

In each of the cases he cites a 'victim,' as we would call him today, who is saying this item / phenomena / experience overpowers me. 'I cannot help myself, so I am not responsible.' If I am not responsible, I have not sinned, and drunkenness, gluttony, gambling, and adultery are not sinful. Lacking the internal mechanism with which to cope with it, I am not responsible for failing to do so.

Let's not leave blame-shifting out of the discussion. A classically distressing statement of blame-denial was made a few years back following what was called a 'wilding' rampage in Central Park in which a 28-year-old jogger was raped, knifed, bludgeoned with a pipe, and battered nearly to death. A man described as a specialist in adolescent behavior said, 'There seems to have been some socio-economic factors involved.' Of course. Poverty, socio-economic disparity, racism, domineering mothers, absentee fathers, lack of education, lack of opportunity, and other disadvantages all 'cause' criminal behavior. Like Pavlov's dogs, we are conditioned by our environment to sociopathic behavior, and are no more responsible for our crimes than they were for their saliva. The fact is the whole modern world denies the reality of personal guilt. We are *Beyond Freedom and Dignity*, as B.F. Skinner said. We have no freedom. Elite modern thought is thoroughly deterministic. It says we are determined by either nature (e.g. our genes) or nurture (our environment). Regardless, we cannot help ourselves. We have no sin. We have no guilt.

Columnist George Will says of this unbelief, 'it is a form of flinching.' 'It is a failure of nerve.' He goes on:

The ambition of the modern mind is to spare itself a chilling sight, that of the cold blank stare of personal evil. The modern program is squeamishness dressed up as sophistication. Its aim is to make the reality of evil disappear behind a rhetorical gauze of learned garbage.⁴⁴

There are other forms of rationalizing and blame-shifting. If we say, 'I *had* to do it,' or 'he *caused* me' to do this or that, or 'he *made* me' or 'he *provoked* me,' or 'he had it coming,' we are avoiding our

personal guilt. We are invoking the ends to justify means or appealing to provocation to deny liability. ‘It’s my fate not my fault,’ we say. All manner of evil is justified in this manner. We kid ourselves. Sin excused is sin denied. It, too, is a form of self-deception.

Finally, we deny sin through silence. Churches decide not to talk about sin, thinking it’s unpopular, or too negative. Sin never gets mentioned in favor of positive, uplifting, helpful talks.

The problem with this, of course, is that we cannot be saved, cannot be delivered from either the penalty or power of sin unless we first admit our responsibility and guilt. Don’t rationalize. Don’t justify. Don’t blame shift. Don’t say, ‘yes, but...’ Admit personal culpability. Admit guilt.

If we deny this, John says, we are deceived. We are devoid of the truth. ‘His word is not in us.’ ‘He who says he has no sin,’ says Cotton, ‘is a liar against himself and against God, a blasphemer, and a heretic.’⁴⁵ So what is the answer? We move on.

CONFESSING SIN

The way to deal with sin is not to deny it, nor is it to become morbid and preoccupied with it. The answer is to confess and forsake it. John says, ‘If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness’ (1 John 1:9). To ‘confess’ (*homologeō*) means ‘to say the same thing.’⁴⁶ To ‘sin’ means ‘to miss the mark,’ to fall short of the standard. One confesses one’s sin by saying the same thing about sin as God says about sin. We can dissect a confession of sin as follows:

1. *It means to acknowledge that sin is sin.* It’s not merely a mistake or a weakness. To ‘confess’ is to admit that my behavior is evil. Sin is ‘lawlessness,’ the Apostle John will go on to say (1 John 3:4). It is a transgression of God’s law, a violation of

His will. Sin is defined in relation to the holy and just laws of God. It misses the mark, is morally offensive to Him, and it brings down His curse. If I am to say of sin what God says of sin, then I cannot regard it as trivial, as unimportant. I cannot treat it lightly or flippantly. There is considerable sloppiness in our day, in our moral conduct, our attitudes, words, and behavior. We carelessly misrepresent truth, break promises, and immerse ourselves in the darker aspects of our world. God, by way of contrast, hates evil (Ps. 5:5; Prov. 6:16–19; Mal. 2:16). He likens it to the smell of an open grave (Ps. 5:9), to snake’s poison (Ps. 140:3), the vomit of a dog, a sow wallowing in the mire (2 Pet. 2:22), and menstrual impurity (Ezek. 36:17). He banished Adam and Eve from the garden on the basis of one sin, and promises that ‘the soul that sins shall die,’ that ‘the wage of sin is death’ (Ezek. 18:4; Rom 6:23). To ‘confess’ is to say sin is wicked, vile, dark, perverse, and worthy of condemnation and reproach.

2. *It means to accept responsibility.* To confess is to abandon rationalizations and excuses. I don’t say, ‘I did it but...’ I don’t say, ‘I couldn’t help it.’ I don’t call it a disease or an addiction. I don’t shift blame or retreat into silence. I finally stop with the excuses, call it sin, and say, ‘I did it.’ ‘I am responsible.’

3. *It means to accept guilt.* Finally, to ‘confess’ is to accept the guilt that goes with the responsibility. I am guilty. I was *wrong* for what I did. What I did was sin and I deserve God’s condemnation and judgment. Accept it. Own it. When one joins a Presbyterian church one acknowledges that one is ‘a sinner in the sight of God, *justly* deserving His displeasure.’

‘Confess’ is in the present tense, indicating that confession is the habitual practice of the Christian.⁴⁷ Confession is characteristic of the Christian. We know that we are sinners and

that we sin. We don't seek to evade this fact. We regularly confess this to God. It comes naturally to us. Habitually we confess our particular sins to God. We review our behavior and confess our harsh words, evil thoughts, twisted motives, our selfishness, envy, jealousy, unbelief, and foolishness. We bitterly lament our sin (Rom. 7:24). We strive against it (Heb. 12:4) and mortify it (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:24; Eph. 6:10-20).

The one who walks in the light sees the condition of his soul, which the one in darkness does not see. I worked in a high-priced, dimly-lit restaurant when I was in college. Everything looked fine when the lights were low. But when the lights were turned up, we could find filth everywhere. Remember what Jesus said, 'For everyone who does evil hates the light, and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed' (John 3:20). This is exactly what the light of God does. It exposes our evil deeds. This is why one who truly walks in the light is inevitably a confessor of sin. He sees sin for what it is. He sees it not as a small, excusable, understandable act, but as rebellion against a holy God and an offense to Him. So he hates and grieves his sin, confesses, and renounces it. Wasn't this Isaiah's experience? He was given a vision of the worship of heaven and of the seraphim praising God saying, 'Holy, Holy, Holy,' and he responded, 'I am a man of unclean lips!' He saw himself in the light of God's holiness and was therefore conscious of his sin. Robert Burns, the national poet of Scotland, said,

O, would some power the Giver give us,
to see ourselves as others see us.

I think we can do one better. O the grace to see ourselves as *God* sees us! Calvin begins the *Institutes* saying that all knowledge consists of two parts: the knowledge of God and of ourselves,

and that we only truly know ourselves when we see ourselves in relation to God: dependent, weak, foolish, and sinful. '...man is never affected by the awareness of his lowly state until he has compared himself with God's majesty.'⁴⁸ Do we claim fellowship with the God who is light? Then we can know that our claim is true and not spurious because we are confessors of sin.

FORGIVENESS AND CLEANSING

Here is why this confession is so vital. 'If we confess our sins,' he says, then we receive forgiveness and cleansing. God will 'forgive us our sins and...cleanse us from all unrighteousness.' We find here a promise and a reassurance.

First, forgiveness and cleansing are promised. Forgiveness has in mind the *penalty* of sin. It is 'to free a man from sin and punishment,' Cotton explains.⁴⁹ Cleansing (*katharizo*), when paired with forgiveness, probably has in mind the *power* of sin. 'To cleanse from sin is to mortify sin and quicken grace,' says Cotton.⁵⁰ The commentators typically see this intention in John's use of this second word. 'All unrighteousness' or 'wickedness'⁵¹ is forgiven and its power is broken by the blood of Christ (1:7) through confession of sin in the name of Christ.⁵² John places the cross in the center of this transaction.

My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. (1 John 2:1-2)

This is the glory of the gospel. The true gospel does what so many false gospels fail to do. It starts with God, and magnifies His holiness: He

is 'light.' It takes sin seriously and demands that we not sweep it under the carpet, minimize it, or rationalize it, but confess it as sin, as wrong, as an offense against God. If we will do this, the sin problem, the problem of our inherent evil and actual offenses, receives its cure. It is forgiven. Its power is broken. We receive cleansing in our hearts and consciences and release – freedom from the tyranny of wickedness. There is in the blood of Christ, says Cotton, 'a destructive power to kill sin, as well as a meritorious power to pardon sin.'⁵³

Second, he reassures us of the promise on the basis of God's faithfulness and justice. The Apostle Paul directs us to the faithfulness of God so that we might be reassured of the certainty of His promise. God is true to His promises. His promises can be counted upon. God will forgive our iniquity. He will not remember our sin (Jer. 31:34). He will tread our iniquities under foot and cast all our sin into the depth of the sea (Micah 7:19). He will remove our transgressions as far as the east is from the west (Ps. 103:12). He will cast our sins behind His back (where He no longer sees them, Isa. 38:17). We can depend on this. All the promises of God find their yes in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). He has given His word. If we confess, we will be forgiven.

What does justice or 'righteousness' have to do with it? It is a reminder that forgiveness is costly. God doesn't just wink at sin. Justice had to be met before we could be released from the penalty of our sins. At the cross a ransom was paid, the price was met, and justice was served (Mark 10:45). God was 'propitiated' through the death of Christ, as the Apostle Paul insisted and the Apostle John will go on to say (Rom. 3:21–26;

1 John 2:2, 4:10). God is both 'just and justifier,' that is, 'just,' not compromising justice. He demands satisfaction. He is 'justified,' that is, the forgiver. He is both, not one at the expense of the other (Rom. 3:26). Forgiveness is costly. God doesn't forgive on a whim, and, therefore, we won't lose our forgiveness on a whim. Costly justice was served and we can, therefore, be sure of our forgiveness.

Remember, he says 'if' we confess we are forgiven. This is a conditional statement. We must be continually (again, the implication of the present tense) confessing our sins if we are to be saved. Someone might say, 'I thought the acknowledgment of our sinfulness was once for all. This makes it sound like a work.' No, John is saying that confession is the activity of one walking in the light. The light of God's fellowship is constantly showing us our sin, so we, naturally and habitually, are responding to these self-revelations by confessing and forsaking our sin. Only those who are characterized by continual confession are truly in the light and know the truth. We cannot be forgiven if we do not confess our sin. Confession is the means by which forgiveness is appropriated. 'If we do not admit our sin, it remains unconfessed and unforgiven,' explains Marshall.⁵⁴ It is by regular confession that forgiveness is received, and our fellowship with God is renewed.

Is this our experience? In Jesus Christ it can be. We can experience forgiveness and liberation from 'all unrighteousness,' no matter how bad or degrading. God has made the way for us. The key is, are we willing to walk in His light, and see ourselves as we truly are, as 'miserable offenders' in need of the cleansing blood of Christ.

OUR ADVOCATE & SACRIFICE

1 John 2:1–2

John says that if we think we have no sin, we are self-deceived. The truth is not in us (1:8). We make God a liar (1:10). A person could conclude that it's futile to attempt to live the Christian life. Why pursue holiness? No matter how hard we try, we cannot live sinlessly. However much energy we expend, we will never reach perfection. So why keep striving against sin? Why not just give in to the inevitable? Why not just give up and let come what may, especially since all we have to do is confess our sin and God will forgive it (1:9)?⁵⁵

This is the implication of what the Apostle John says in 1:8–10, isn't it? Hardly, but his words could be twisted to mean this. I have heard similar things said a number of times. Perhaps the thought has crossed your mind as well.

To counteract this, John writes, 'My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin' (1 John 2:1a). He moves now from answering his opponents in verses 6–10, to addressing his people. 'My little children,' he says, an expression which communicates tender affection. His purpose in writing is not in any way intended to encourage sin. 'I am writing,' he says, 'that you may not sin.' Nothing that has been written should be twisted to justify sin. We are to flee sin (1 Cor. 6:19; 1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 2:22). We

are to abhor evil (Rom. 12:9). Sin is to be taken seriously. Nothing in the New Testament is meant to encourage us to take a light view of sin. Yes, all our sins may be forgiven in Christ. Yes, we will never be completely free of the stain of sin in this life. Still it remains a terrible thing to sin against a holy God. However, he goes on to say, 'And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous;' (1 John 2:1b). We are not to 'sin.' The present tense is used, indicating continuous, habitual action. Sin is not to be characteristic of us. But if anyone 'sins,' the plural indicating specific, individual acts, God has made provision.

What is that provision? John uses priestly categories to help us understand what Christ has done. He is both our 'Advocate' (2:1) and our 'propitiation,' or 'atoning sacrifice' (NIV) for our sins (2:2). As our priestly advocate, He intercedes on our behalf. Also as our priest, He continually applies the benefit of His death on our behalf.

OUR ADVOCATE

When we do sin, the news is very good indeed. We have one who comes to our defense. The title 'Advocate' (*parakletos*) comes from the



1 John 2:1-2

law court. He is our defender, our spokesman, our intercessor.⁵⁶ He 'speaks on behalf of the accused.'⁵⁷ It is also a title that John gives to the Holy Spirit in his gospel (John 14:16,26; 15:26; 16:7). The NIV translates, 'we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense.'

My wife Emily's father died when she was sixteen. I remember her periodically mourning the fact that she no longer had an 'advocate.' Her father was a fiercely loyal man, almost to a fault. No matter what, he would defend his girls. He would fight for them. He would make sure that they were protected. He would promote their well being and seek their advantage. She no longer had an advocate who was on her side.

We have such an Advocate 'with the Father,' in heaven, where it most counts. Who is He? John uses three names. He calls Him 'Jesus,' His human name. 'Christ' is His divine name. The 'righteous' underscores His unique suitability. He is without sin. He and no one else is qualified to stand in the presence of God on our behalf. It also carries the thought that He is fair. He is 'just,' as it could be translated.

Put this all together and it gives strong encouragement to the Christian. So we have sinned. Is this the end of us? Must we die and go to hell? Is God now our implacable enemy? He would be, but wait - we have an Advocate. He pleads on our behalf. Can He present our case? Yes! He is the God-Man. All the attributes of divinity labor on our behalf - His justice, His mercy, His goodness, His love, His omniscience, and His inexhaustible energy. But also, we have a Man on our side in heaven. There is a Man at the right hand of God. He is one who has suffered, and felt pain, and been tempted as we have. He knows what we are going through, and He is on our side. We read in Hebrews,

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted. (Heb. 2:17,18)

Our Advocate was 'made like His brethren in all things.' He knows what it is to be tempted and to suffer. Consequently, He is particularly suited to come to the aid of the tempted. And again,

For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need. (Heb. 4:15-16)

Our Advocate, who is also our 'high priest,' can 'sympathize with our weakness.' He knows what it is to be tempted and fight temptation. Once again, the point is that Jesus Christ is particularly capable of dispensing mercy and grace and help to those who are in need. We need not hesitate to turn to Him, but may 'draw near with confidence to the throne of grace.' Recall Luther's second stanza in 'A Mighty Fortress Is Our God.'

Did we in our own strength confide,
Our striving would be losing;
Were not the right man on our side
The man of God's own choosing.
Dost ask who that may be?
Christ Jesus it is He,
Lord Sabaoth His name,
From age to age the same,
And He must win the battle.



We are being urged to draw near to such an Advocate. Have we sinned? This is the 'right Man' to have on our side. With human insight and sympathy He understands. He is inclined to help. With divine righteousness and power He is able to help.⁵⁸ What keeps us from Christ? He is the most perfectly suited Savior and Friend. Don't we need His help? He can save us! He can keep us! We have an Advocate.

Who will bring a charge against God's elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. (Rom. 8:33,34)

HIS SACRIFICE

And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world. (1 John 2:2)

It would be a mistake to imagine a situation where the loving Son is trying to convince the unwilling Father to forgive. The Godhead is single-minded in the purposes of redemption. 'God (the Father) so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son' (John 3:16). Yet in forgiving sin, justice must be met. The basis of forgiveness is not divine forgetfulness, but satisfaction. What is the basis of His help? Does He plead our innocence? Our goodness? Or our virtue? No, he pleads His own blood. John describes Christ's sacrifice as a 'propitiation,' a long and important word.

This century has seen an extensive debate over the meaning of *hilasmos* and its word group, translated 'propitiation' (NASB, ESV) or 'atoning sacrifice' (NIV). In ancient, non-biblical Greek the word always refers to the placating of an

angry god by the offering of a gift. Think of a husband sending flowers to his upset and angry wife as a 'peace offering,' hoping to turn away her anger. This is the idea in relation to the gods. The concept of blood sacrifice that puts away wrath and secures favor is to be found in nearly all the religions of the world. The classic example of this is Homer's *Iliad*. The Greek expedition in pursuit of Helen encountered contrary winds. Agamemnon, the General in charge, sent home for his daughter. Upon arrival, she was offered as a blood sacrifice to appease the gods. This produced the desired effect, and the winds once more favored the Greeks, who sailed on to Troy. More recently the Hindus were in the news because of an annual festival in which they slaughtered over 200,000 animals in order to curry the favor of their gods. 'People have deep faith in the goddess and they believe that sacrificing animals will bring them good luck and prosperity for their families,' said Mangal Chaudhary Tharu, a priest at the Gadhimai temple, according to news reports.⁵⁹ C. H. Dodd and others sought to limit the meaning of *hilasmos* to 'expiation,' meaning 'to cover,' the word used by the translators of the rsv. What is wrong with this translation? The problem is that expiation means only half of what propitiation means. Packer explains in *Knowing God*:

Expiation is an action that has sin as its object; it denotes the covering, putting away, or rubbing out of sin so that it no longer constitutes a barrier to friendly fellowship between man and God. Propitiation, however, in the Bible denotes all that expiation means, and the pacifying of the wrath of God thereby.⁶⁰

The ongoing discussion has exposed the motive for the proposed change. Dodd and other modern

scholars were not and are not comfortable with the idea of a God of wrath. Divine anger seemed to them to be a primitive, base, an unworthy disposition of God, and certainly inconsistent with the revelation of His love in Jesus Christ. Indeed, it has been more than the scholars who have balked at the doctrine of God's wrath. Our whole age is banking on the hope that the God who is there is a God of love, period. The topics of judgment and punishment are, if not outright denied, studiously avoided. 'To err is human, to forgive divine,' right? To merely 'cover' sin is a kinder, gentler sort of atonement.

Yet the problem with this position is that the wrath of God against sin is undeniably biblical. The work of Leon Morris (*The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*) and others (e.g. Roger Nicole) seems to have proven the linguistic case for propitiation. The decisive issue is context, and the context for the use of *hiliastos* in the Bible. Morris counts 580 references to wrath in the Old Testament alone. Wrath underlies the purpose behind sin offerings and guilt offerings in the Old Testament, as well as the day of atonement (Lev. 4:1-6:7; Lev. 16; cf. Num. 16:41ff.). In the New Testament there is no let-up. Jesus taught more about hell than any of the prophets, in fact, almost all we know about hell we learned from His lips. For the Apostle Paul, wrath is the beginning of the gospel (Rom. 1:18), and its propitiation the foundation of justification (Rom. 3:21-26). Wrath is the righteous response of God against sin, His 'strong and settled opposition to all that is evil...' says Morris, 'arising out of God's very nature.'⁶¹ It is 'His settled, controlled, holy antagonism to all evil,' says Stott.⁶² God's wrath is that attribute of God which guarantees the final destruction of all evil and the triumph of good. Through the outpouring of His wrath God ensures that justice will be done for all. God's wrath is a

fearsome thing. It is a thing from which we need to be delivered, and from which we must flee (1 Thess. 1:10; Matt. 3:7).

Propitiation is the means by which the justice of God is satisfied, wrath is turned away, and love is expressed. We do not placate God with a gift. God provides His own offering. Jesus offered Himself as a propitiating sacrifice, one which satisfies the justice of God for all who believe. The wrath, the punishment, the just anger that we deserved, were quenched in Christ's death on the cross.

Remember the ground over which we have traveled. We began with 'God is light' (1:5). Those who know this God walk in the light (1:6-7). The necessity of doing so leads inevitably to the awareness of one's sin and its confession (1:8-10). The search for mercy leads one to the Advocate, who presents His own work to the Father as the basis for our forgiveness (2:1-2). We are forgiven not because we confess our sins, or even because we believe in Jesus. *There would be no efficacy either to belief or confession if there were no sacrifice behind them.* As Marshall explains, 'In order that forgiveness may be granted, there is an action in respect of the sins which has the effect of rendering God favorable to the sinner.'⁶³ We are forgiven only because Jesus died on the cross and, by doing so, satisfied divine justice 'for our sins.' He died as our substitute, in our place, on our behalf. When He died, the wheels of retribution turned, justice was served, and wrath was quenched. The sacrifice of Christ, Marshall continues, 'has the double effect of expiating the sin and thereby propitiating God.'⁶⁴

Packer calls propitiation 'the heart of the Gospel.'⁶⁵ At the center of Christianity is a cross. On the cross God provided in Christ a substitutionary, propitiating atoning sacrifice for our sins. At the cross we see the human condition most clearly,

and the divine response. We were under the wrath of God. We could do nothing to escape that wrath. But Jesus Christ came and quenched it on our behalf. This is the gospel. This is where our faith must rest. Jesus Christ died to save me from the wrath of God! Christ is the propitiation 'for' or 'concerning' our sins (*peri*). God is propitiated and becomes propitious towards me. This is our gospel and this is what we must believe.

Finally, we must look at this final phrase: 'and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world' (1 John 2:2). What does he mean in saying that Christ is the propitiation for 'not only our sins' but also the sins of the 'whole world'? This is a difficult phrase, and one which we must be very careful not to judge too quickly. There are a number of interpretations. Let's deal with several of them.

1. John could mean that not only are the sins of Christians propitiated, but also the sins of everyone else who has ever lived. Thus John is teaching universalism, the view that everyone, whether they believe or not, shall be saved by the death of Christ. What this view has going for it is that it is the plain and simple reading of the text. That is clearly what John is saying, distinguishing Christians ('our sins') from that of the 'world,' a word which John usually uses to denote the fallen, godless sphere outside of Christ (cf. 2:15ff.; 5:19; etc.). However, not only does he distinguish them, he also joins them, placing them in the same relation to the propitiation of Christ. Thus, the sins of both the believers and the 'world' are propitiated by the sacrifice of Christ.

The problem with this view is that it is so obviously contrary to the rest of the Bible. There shall be sheep and goats in the judgment, and eternity does not fail to distinguish between the just and the unjust (e.g. Matt. 25). We may, therefore, be sure that this view is wrong, and we must look for alternatives. As we

do, we should notice from the outset that the only way to escape the universalism of the passage is by adjusting either our definition of 'propitiation' or of 'world.' One of these words must mean less than one normally would have thought. We'll look first at propitiation, then world.

2. John means that the sins of everyone are potentially propitiated, though only actually propitiated when one comes to faith in Christ. The strength of this view is that it does escape the universalism of the preceding view, while taking seriously the universal language that John uses. Thus He actually propitiates 'our' sins, and potentially propitiates the sins of the 'world,' if they would believe. The weakness is that it is contrary to the sense of the text. As we've seen already, John places the Christian and the world in the same relation to the propitiation of Christ. He also uses the present tense - 'He Himself is the propitiation,' i.e. God's wrath is quenched with respect to our sins and the world's sins. It is arbitrary to divide that which John is joining. Christ propitiates both our sins and the world's sins. This is clearly what John is saying. Evading this sense by introducing a potential propitiation weakens the concept of propitiation. In this view the cross only becomes significant when someone believes, and thereby actualizes it. This is to give away too much. The New Testament speaks of the atonement as an accomplished fact. 'He is the propitiation.' He doesn't become propitiation when we believe. 'Thou wast slain, and *didst* purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe...' (Rev. 5:9). A transaction took place at the cross, not a potential transaction. Christ 'did purchase.' A corollary to this view is to say that Christ did propitiate the sins of everyone, and that only the rejection of Christ sends a person to hell. The question, then, is, isn't the rejection of Christ a sin? If it is, then why isn't it

covered by the death of Christ? If that sin alone is excluded from the efficacy of Christ's death, why doesn't John make that clear?

3. John means that Christ propitiates the sins of all Christians everywhere. Thus 'our sins' refers to the sins of some particular group which John has in mind, and 'world' refers to Christians all throughout the world. He may mean:

- i. Not only Jewish Christian sins, but Gentile Christian sins as well;
- ii. Not only the sins of a few churches, but the sins of all Christians everywhere as well;
- iii. Not only the sins of Christians then living, but believers past and future as well. 'When John says that Christ died for the sins of the "whole world,"' says the ancient church father Hilary of Arles (c. 401-499), 'what he means is that he died for the whole church.'⁶⁶

Each of these arguments would be meant to combat the sectarianism of the heretics. Christ has propitiated all the sins of all believers across racial, cultural, ethnic, and generational lines, as well as across time. "Therefore under the word 'all,'" says Calvin, John 'does not include the reprobate, but refers to all who would believe and those scattered through various regions of the earth.'⁶⁷

B. B. Warfield, the great Princeton theologian, argues as well that John has in mind the world in its wholeness as converted and saved. Not that everyone who ever lived will be saved, but that Christ is 'the Savior of the world' (1 John 4:14), a worldwide Savior.⁶⁸ Why would He be called such if He does not save such? John is looking ahead to the completion of Christ's work and sees the salvation of the world, He sees 'the knowledge of the glory of God' covering the earth 'as the waters cover the seas' (Hab. 2:14; Isa. 11:9).

Let us return to our original point. What are we going to do with our sins? Are we going to hope that they're not important? Are we going to bear them ourselves? God has appointed an Advocate for us. There is only 'one Mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus' (1 Tim. 2:5). 'No one comes to the Father but by Me,' Jesus said (John 14:6). Those who come to God *must* come through the Mediator, or Advocate.

Jesus Christ is the lamb of God, whose sacrifice satisfied the justice of God. This sacrifice 'takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29). He is a great Savior. He is our Advocate and Defender. He is the all sufficient sacrifice for sin. Come to God in His name. Claim His benefits for yourself. Call upon Him by faith. You will find in Him all that you need for time and eternity.