Propitiation is the Biblical doctrine embodying the concept that the death of Christ fully satisfied the demands of a righteous God in respect to judgment upon the sinner. The doctrine is not found with great frequency in the New Testament, the word "propitiation" appearing only three times in the Authorized Version (Rom. 3:25; 1 John 2:2; 4:10) and four times in the American Standard Version (Heb. 2:17 added). One might be misled into the unwarranted assumption that this is a minor doctrine of the New Testament. A closer study, however, reveals four different Greek words related to this subject and a number of other passages where the idea is contained in the thought.

The four New Testament words related to this doctrine are all of the same root. The verb hilaskomai is used in Luke 18:13 in the prayer of the publican, which translated literally reads: "God, be propitiated for me, the sinner." Hebrews 2:17 refers to Christ becoming our High Priest "to make propitiation for the sins of the people." The noun form hilasterion, one of the most important references, is translated "a propitiation" in Romans 3:25 and "the mercy seat" in Hebrews 9:5. Another noun form hilasmos occurs twice (1 John 2:2; 4:10) in both of which passage it is stated that Christ is "the propitiation for our sins." A fourth word hileos is found in Matthew 16:22 in relation to the idiom of Peter: "Be it far from thee, Lord," and in Hebrews 8:12 where it is translated "merciful." Neither of these two instances apply directly to the doctrine of propitiation in Christ.

The doctrine of propitiation in theology has been complicated, first, by disagreement as to its actual meaning, i.e., does it mean (1) to expiate, (2) to reconcile, or (3) to satisfy? Modern writers have tended to dispute the traditional orthodox interpretation of the doctrine of propitiation by affirming that a loving God does not need the death of His Son to satisfy a principle of righteousness. They either argue that a God of love does not require satisfaction for sin or that the word "propitiation" itself as used in the Old and New Testaments should not be thus construed. The interpretation of propitiation pivots somewhat on the theological concept of the wrath of God in both pagan and Old Testament usage, and this must be defined before the New Testament doctrine of the wrath of God can be properly discussed.

Propitiation in the Old Testament

As Leon Morris demonstrates, most scholars recognize that in pagan usage the concept of propitiation is clearly that of appeasing a deity. Morris cites Smeaton concerning
hilasmos, "the uniform acceptation of the word in classical Greek, when applied to the Deity, is the means of appeasing God, or averting His anger; and not a single instance to the contrary occurs in the whole Greek literature." Modern writers such as C. H. Dodd, however, feel that this concept is a crude pre-Biblical point of view in which pagan worshipers attempted to placate a vindictive, arbitrary, and capricious God. Such a concept, they feel, is unworthy of the God of the Scriptures. Even orthodox writers such as Westcott feel that the Old Testament usage of propitiation is different from that found in non-Biblical writings.

In the effort to escape the idea of expiation of a vengeful deity, C. H. Dodd, however, seems to go too far in his attempt to eliminate the concept of the wrath of God entirely from both the Old and New Testaments. Leon Morris in his evaluation of Dodd’s discussion concludes: "However, when we have rendered our full tribute to the work of this great scholar we must be asked to be forgiven for wondering whether the last word has yet been said. We readily agree that pagan ideas of wrath and propitiation are absent from the Biblical view of God, but Dodd seems to say that all ideas of wrath and propitiation are absent from it." Morris goes on to demonstrate that the wrath of God is an important doctrine of the Old Testament, finding over five hundred eighty occurrences of this concept. He summarizes the Old Testament concept of the wrath of God in these words:

There is a consistency about the wrath of God in the Old Testament. It is no capricious passion, but the stern reaction of the divine nature to evil in man. It is aroused only and inevitably by sin, which may be thought of in general terms (Job 21:20; Jer. 21:12; Ezek. 24:13), or may be categorized more exactly as the shedding of blood (Ezek. 16:38; 24:8), adultery (Ezek. 23:25), violence (Ezek. 8:18), covetousness (Jer. 6:11), revenge (Ezek. 25:17), afflicting widows and orphans (Ex. 22:23 f.), taking brethren captive (II Chron. 28:11-13), etc. Wrath comes upon Israel because of the evil of Jeroboam as repeated by Jehoahaz (II Kings 13:3), and because of the evil of Manasseh (II Kings 23:26), while Moses feared that the desire of the two and a half tribes not to pass over Jordan would have a similar effect (Num. 32:14). Profaning the sabbath arouses wrath (Neh. 13:18), which comes also upon men who ‘have not told the truth about’ God (Job 42:7, Moffatt), and Gideon feared that his repeated testing of the Lord would also cause God’s anger (Judges 6:39).

In view of the abundant evidence in the Old Testament describing God as a deity who must bring judgment upon the sinner, a serious question may be raised as to whether the attempts of modern writers to eliminate the idea of the wrath of God entirely from the Old Testament is a justified procedure. It is more accurate to conclude that the doctrine of the righteousness of God is coupled with the love and mercy of God in the Old Testament. The harmony established between these attributes by the doctrine of satisfaction for sin is embodied in propitiation.

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2 Morris, ibid., p. 129.
3 Ibid., p. 131.
Leon Morris summarizes his extensive research in the doctrine of propitiation in the Septuagint by agreeing on the one hand with “the verdict of such scholars as Westcott and Dodd in their demonstration that in the Old Testament there is not the usual pagan sense of a crude propitiation of an angry god.”4 On the other hand, he feels they have gone too far when they say in effect ‘when the LXX translators used ‘propitiation’ they do not mean ‘propitiation,’ it is surely time to call a halt. No sensible man uses one word when he means another, and in view of the otherwise invariable Greek use it would seem impossible for anyone in the first century to have used one of the hilaskomai group without conveying to his readers some idea of propitiation.”5

Morris further concludes, based on Old Testament usage: "Where there is sin, the Old Testament teaches that there is wrath; but this does not mean that all men are to be consumed, for that wrath is the wrath of a loving father Who yearns for His children to come to Him."6 The Old Testament concept of propitiation, therefore, elevates it above the crude pagan idea of placating an unreasonable deity and introduces a high concept of divine righteousness which is satisfied by a propitiation from a loving God who desires to provide a proper basis by which the sinner can come to Himself. If this is the proper understanding of the Old Testament doctrine, it provides a broad platform upon which the New Testament concept can be understood.

Propitiation in the New Testament

The New Testament doctrine of propitiation is an extension of the Old Testament doctrine, but with the tremendous added revelation embodied in Jesus Christ, His Person, and His work. In the New Testament the same God as found in the Old Testament is revealed, a God of infinite righteousness who is also a God of infinite love. Though the term "wrath" (Greek, orge) does not occur frequently in the New Testament, it is found in such significant contexts as Romans 1:18 which is a logical introduction to the doctrine of propitiation found in Romans 3:25. C. H. Dodd is certainly ignoring much evidence to the contrary when he attempts to eliminate the idea of wrath in the New Testament. It is expressly mentioned in Mark 3:5; Luke 21:23; Matthew 3:7; Luke 3:7; John 3:36; Romans 9:22; Ephesians 5:6; Colossians 3:6; Revelation 6:16; 11:18; 14:10; 16:19, and 19:15.

The word thumos (meaning anger or wrath) is linked with the idea of wrath in Revelation 14:10, 19; 15:1, 7; 16:1, 19, and 19:15. Other references dealing with the anger and wrath of God are Romans 2:5; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; Ephesians 2:3; I Thessalonians 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; II Thessalonians 1:7-9, and Hebrews 12:29. In addition to this, the New Testament abounds with warnings of divine judgment upon sinners who do not avail themselves of the mercy of God.

The use of hilasterion. One of the most important references to propitiation in the New Testament is found in Romans 3:25 (A.S.V.) where it is stated of Christ Jesus: "Whom

4 Ibid., p. 155.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid., p. 159.
God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God." The only other instance of this particular word in the New Testament is found in Hebrews 9:5 where it is translated "mercy seat." Because of the Hebrews usage, it has been argued that propitiation in Romans 3:25 should be considered the place of sacrifice rather than the sacrifice itself. From this have emerged two concepts in the interpretation of Romans 3:25: (1) the literal view, that the meaning is the place of sacrifice where blood is sprinkled to make what was a place of judgment a mercy seat; (2) the concept that propitiation in Romans 3:25 has the sacrifice itself in view rather than the idea of a place where sacrifice is made.

Though it is difficult to determine with finality which of these two concepts is intended in Romans 3, the weight of conservative scholarship seems to be in favor of the second based on the context. All agree that the word is not a technical one which always means the mercy seat. The usage in Hebrews, therefore, is not the only possible usage, but one of many. It is probable that Hebrews was written after the Epistle to the Romans. Furthermore, the typology of Hebrews is not at all mentioned prior to Romans 3:25 in the epistle. The meaning of Romans 3:25, therefore, must stand upon its immediate context. The argument begins in Romans 1:18, and upon the revelation of sin, the doctrine of redemption and propitiation in Romans 3 is erected.

The argument of Paul in this section is an expansion of the doctrine of justification by faith. He points out the necessity of it being based upon the wrath of God against sin in all forms which is developed in Romans 1:18-3:20. The conclusion is that there can be no justification apart from faith. The doctrine of justification itself then is unfolded beginning in Romans 3:22 where it is revealed to be "the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ unto all them that believe." Justification is through redemption (v. 24) accomplished by Christ. In this connection, Christ is presented as "a propitiation" made effective through faith by or "in his blood."

It would seem from the argument of Romans, then, that what Paul had in mind was a general reference to propitiation or satisfaction by the death of Christ rather than to a place in which propitiation was accomplished. The alternative view of a place, however, has continued to intrigue modern scholars and is supported by frequent usages in the Septuagint of the word for the golden top of the mercy seat. Numbered among the adherents of this view are such writers as C. I Scofield, T. W. Manson, and Karl Barth. The expression "in his blood" which immediately follows the reference to propitiation would seem, however, to favor the concept that Christ is here referred to as the means of propitiation rather than the place of propitiation. The resulting idea in either case, however, is that of substitution and sacrifice, the shedding of blood accomplishing the satisfaction of the divine righteousness of God.

The word hilasmos, found twice in the New Testament, contributes to the doctrine by referring to Christ as "the propitiation for our sins" (I John 2:2; 4:10). Modern authors such as C. H. Dodd have objected to the translation "propitiation" here as found in the Authorized Version and the American Standard Version on the ground of their theory that
the Bible does not use propitiation in the same sense as in extra-Biblical literature. Morris cites Dodd in his discussion on this point as saying: "The common rendering 'propitiation' is illegitimate here as elsewhere." It has been previously pointed out that Dodd, speaking representatively for contemporary scholars who object to the traditional concept of propitiation, is partly right in that the Bible does use propitiation in a different sense than that of the pagans as it does not speak of appeasing a vengeful God. Biblical terminology in both the Old and New Testaments, however, does not sustain a complete departure from the basic concept of propitiation. It is rather that propitiation is the satisfaction of a God who is making just and righteous demands on the sinner based on His own holy character. These demands are met by the offering of His own Son on the cross.

An interesting commentary on Dodd's point of view is offered by a comparison of modern translations in these two passages. The Revised Standard Version substitutes the word "expiation" for propitiation, taking over the definition from pagan writers without variation and using a word that is somewhat stronger than the word "propitiation" itself. The New English Bible goes to the other extreme and substitutes the word "remedy" which is a much weaker word than propitiation and begs the question completely as far as theological definition is concerned.

Taking everything into consideration, there is no good reason for denying the use of propitiation understood in its Biblical sense of satisfying the proper demands of a righteous God for judgment on sin. It is significant that in the context of I John 2:2 God is referred to as righteous and in I John 1:9 is declared to be "faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins." In the verse itself (I John 2:2) the problem of sin and its judgment is immediately before us, as in the preceding verse it is recorded: "And if any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous." Here again Christ is referred to as the righteous One dealing with the righteous Father as our propitiation. It can hardly be disputed that the righteousness of God is the question and propitiation is the answer, and this on the highest possible Biblical plane.

Further light is cast upon this idea in I John 4:10 where propitiation is linked with the love of God: "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." The two facts that lift propitiation in the Bible above the pagan concepts in extra-Biblical literature are first of all that it is not the question of satisfying a vengeful God, but satisfying a God who is just and righteous and holy in all His dealings. Second, such a God, while on the one hand demanding complete satisfaction of His righteousness, is the same God who because of His love for lost mankind sent His Son to be that propitiation. The majesty and wonder of the plan of God in salvation as embodied in the attributes of righteousness and love as they meet in the propitiation of Christ is at the heart of Christian orthodoxy and Biblical revelation, and before such a revelation of grace objections to the idea of propitiation pale. It is not unfair to say that the concept today, even though supported by reputable scholars, is refuted by the doctrine of sin and condemnation as well as by the necessity for the righteousness of God being

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7 Morris, ibid., p. 178, citing Dodd, The Bible and the Greeks, p. 95.
satisfied before love is free to operate. The supreme demonstration of the love of God as well as the righteousness of God is found in Jesus Christ who in love offered Himself and shed His blood, thereby making Himself a proper propitiation and entitling Him to be the advocate of the sinner.

Another important word, hilaskomai, is used only once in the Bible to refer to the work of Christ (Heb. 2:17). Here it is stated in connection with the priesthood of Christ that He was the priest who made propitiation for the people. In the context it is speaking of the fact that as a man He died and as a man He suffered in becoming the author of our salvation (Heb. 2:10). This is said to be fitting in Hebrews 2:17: "Wherefore it behooved him in all things to be made like unto his brethren, that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (A.S.V.).

Considerable discussion has been aroused by the fact that the word for "the sins" (tas hamartias) is found in the accusative after the verb to propitiate. To avoid the awkward expression "to propitiate the sins," it is changed to what seems to be a normal translation, "to make propitiation for the sins of the people." With this the Revised Standard Version agrees in its translation "to make expiation for the sins of the people" and the New English Bible disagrees by making "sins" the direct object fo the verb "to expiate the sins of the people." As Leon Morris has shown in his thorough discussion of this, based on Old Testament and extra-Biblical usage, there is no good reason for avoiding the conclusions embodied in the translation of the American Standard Version that it is an accusative of general respect, i.e., that the propitiation is in respect to sin but actually objectively directed toward God and His righteousness. It may be concluded therefore that this passage confirms what has been previously revealed in other references to propitiation, namely, that Christ is the answer to the problem of the sinner who is justly under the condemnation of God. Christ is his propitiation, i.e., He satisfied the righteous demands of God completely.

A second reference to the same word is found in the New Testament in Luke 18:13 in the famous prayer of the publican: "God, be thou merciful to me a sinner" (A.S.V.). This does not refer, of course, to the propitiation in Christ, but is used in the same sense, namely, that the publican desires that somehow God will forgive his sins through a proper propitiation. The verse should be translated: "God, be thou propitiated to me, a sinner."

The word hileos, found twice in the New Testament (Matt. 16:22; Heb. 8:12), does not refer specifically to propitiation in Christ. In Matthew the expression is idiomatic where Peter says: "Be it far from thee, Lord," in relation to Christ's prophecy that He will be killed and raised the third day. Literally it could be translated: "May there be propitiation for thee, Lord."

In Hebrews 8:12 the word is found in a quotation of Jeremiah 31:34 and is translated: "For I will be merciful to their iniquities," i.e., "I will be propitiated in respect to their iniquities." This usage does not throw any additional light on the general doctrine of propitiation though it seems to be in keeping with the doctrine previously established.
Taken as a whole, the doctrine of propitiation as revealed in these New Testament references seems fully to sustain the orthodox concept that Christ in His death on the cross through the shedding of His blood and the sacrifice of His life constituted a satisfaction of divine justice which God accepts on behalf of the sinner making possible the manifestation of His love toward men and bestowal of righteousness through justification by faith. The necessity of such a propitiation is demonstrated by the sin of the race (Rom. 3:9, 23; 5:12), the righteousness of God (Ps. 119:137; 145:17; Rom. 3:25, 26), and the historic fact that Christ actually died for sinful man (Isa. 53:5, 6; I Cor. 15:3; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Eph. 5:2; Heb. 9:22, 28; I Pet. 1:18, 19; 2:24; Rev. 1:5).

Character and Results of Propitiation

It has been long considered an essential doctrine of orthodox Christian theology that Christ in some sense died as a substitutional sacrifice for sin. The concept of substitution is inherent in the Scriptures in relation to the sacrificial system of the Old Testament and of course is revealed pre-eminently in the death of Christ on the cross in the New Testament.

Substitution in the Old Testament. The idea of substitution is prominent in the Old Testament offerings though it remained for the New Testament to give the full revelation of the doctrine of propitiation. The viewpoint of Scripture seems to be that the Old Testament offerings were only a temporary provision, a typical symbol of the propitiation that was to be fulfilled by the sacrifice of Christ. Old Testament sacrifices therefore were imperfect in their revelation of the satisfaction of divine justice embodied in the principle of propitiation. All of the Old Testament offerings which prefigured Christ have the element of substitution. The nonsweet savor offerings, consisting principally of the sin offering and the trespass offering, were representations of Christ satisfying the demands of God by bearing the guilt and judgment of our sin (John 1:29). The sweet-savor offering represented Christ satisfying the demands of God by presenting His merit for us (Eph. 5:2). In each case the offering was identified with the offerer by some religious act and the sacrifice was offered on behalf of another, usually the one who brought the sacrifice to the priest.

Substitution in the New Testament. The sacrifice of Christ, while fulfilling the Old Testament principle of substitution and the anticipation of propitiation, stands in contrast to the Old Testament doctrine in several particulars. (1) In contrast to the many offerings in the Old Testament, Christ was offered once and for all (Heb. 9:28). (2) Christ's sacrifice was a complete and an eternal satisfaction for sin, in contrast to the Old Testament offerings which did not offer any permanent satisfaction (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 10:4). (3) In the Old Testament the victims were animals, unintelligent and involuntary substitutes, while in the sacrifice of Christ one was offered who was willing to die and who intelligently accepted being a sacrificial substitute for sinners. The fact that Christ was a willing sacrifice prompted by the love of God, both in His offering by the Father and
in His own willingness to die, lifts the Biblical doctrine of propitiation far above the heathen concept.

Objections to the doctrine of substitution in propitiation. Many objections have been raised by scholars of this day against the idea of substitution in relation to the death of Christ which in turn have been answered by conservative scholarship at length—arguments which can only be briefly reviewed here. It has been argued (1) that there is no need for propitiation because God is a God of love whose nature is to be forgiving; (2) that forgiveness purchased is not true forgiveness. Along this line Henry Sloane Coffin argues: "Certain widely used hymns still perpetuate the theory that God pardons sinners because Christ purchased that pardon by His obedience and suffering. But a forgiveness which is paid for is not forgiveness. The God of the prophets and psalmists, the God and Father of Jesus' own teaching, forgives graciously all who turn to Him in penitence. . . . The cross of Christ is not a means of procuring forgiveness: the Father waits to be gracious."*8

Such objections of course are founded upon a concept of God which is not afforded in the Scriptures. It is true that God is a God of love and to this the Scriptures give abundant testimony. Contemporary thinkers are unwilling to face the fact that God is also revealed to be a God of righteousness manifested in His many judgments in the Old Testament and in countless pronouncements that He must judge sin. The argument that God is a God of love and therefore not a God of righteousness is playing one attribute against another in a way that is contrary to Biblical revelation.

The logic embodied in this point of view is faulty. Forgiveness by its very nature involves recompense. If the one sinned against forgives without recompense or justice, the one injured in effect bears the penalty himself. This is pre-eminently illustrated in the death of Christ who as God is the one sinned against, who as the sacrifice for sin bore the judgment which His own righteous nature demanded.

Modern scholarship even among liberals does not necessarily follow the viewpoint of Henry Sloane Coffin. There is a growing tendency to recognize in the Bible the teaching that the death of Christ in some sense satisfied God, though often the viewpoint falls short of admitting a full-fledged substitution. The fact is that the Bible bears consistent testimony to the concept of substitutional propitiation as illustrated in the various usages found in the study of propitiation itself. It was the very act of dying on the cross which accomplished this propitiation (Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:5). Propitiation does not therefore arise in the nature of God, but rather in the work of God proceeding from that nature. Christ died for our sins, as the Scriptures plainly state, and all the attempts to explain it away cannot satisfy the heart that is yearning for freedom from the guilt of sin and seeking a peace with God. God pardons sinners because Christ died for them (Isa. 53:5, 6; Gal. 1:4; 3:13; Heb. 9:28; I Pet. 1:18, 19; 3:18; Rev. 1:5). Generally speaking, the attempt to minimize the death of Christ has been accompanied by destructive criticism of the text of Scripture or by attempts to prove that the Bible does not mean what the language normally would convey. Unfortunately too often scholarship obscures rather than clarifies

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issues of this kind.

The objective nature of propitiation. One of the problems facing an exposition of the doctrine of propitiation is found in differences of opinion on the relationship of propitiation and reconciliation. Though both spring from the death of Christ, different aspects of truth are in view. Based upon Scriptural usage, it may be concluded that propitiation is objectively toward God in contrast to reconciliation which is objectively toward man. The prayer of the publican (Luke 18:13) is in keeping with other Scriptural revelation.

Shedd has stated the matter concisely: "The objective nature of atonement is brought into the very phraseology of Scripture as the analysis of the Biblical term just made clearly shows. To 'cover sin' is to cover it from the sight of God, not the sinner. To 'propitiate' is to propitiate God, not man." Further discussion on this point will be proper in consideration of the doctrine of reconciliation where most of the confusion arises.

Results of Propitiation

God is justified in forgiving sin. The history of Christian theology has demonstrated that it is difficult for sinful man to realize the absolute necessity of a holy God judging sin. Propitiation is God's answer to this problem arising from His own heart of love. Through the death of Christ God has received satisfaction in full for every sin. On the basis of this sacrifice He can freely and justly forgive sin because the penalty has been paid. Forgiveness as found in God is not an emotion, nor is it directly a matter of expression of love and affection, but is rather one of divine justice. God is acting justly in recognizing that the judgment upon sin has been accomplished by the death of His Son. At the same time God acts in complete harmony and satisfaction in respect to His love which prompted the gift of His Son and the whole plan of redemption. The basis of the gospel invitation and of all divine mercy is found in the fact that the death of Christ is a propitiation for our sins.

God is justified in bestowing righteousness. The act of propitiation not only permits God to impute all sin to Christ, but also makes possible the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to the sinner. This is sometimes related to the sweet-savor aspect of Christ's offering as foreshadowed in the sweet-savor sacrifice in the Old Testament. The merit of Christ now has become the possession of the believer. In keeping with this freedom not only to forgive, but bestow righteousness, God can justify the sinner, and can proceed unhindered in all the program of salvation and sanctification. God, on the basis of the death of Christ, can take the foulest sinner and make him as pure in holiness as His own Son. This is the foundation of all effective gospel preaching which on the one hand fully sustains the concept that God is holy, and on the other that such a God is able to welcome sinners to Himself.

God is justified in bestowing all grace on sinners. Not only is forgiveness and imputation

of righteousness possible for a propitiated God, but there can come into the realm of the believer's possession an experience of the full blessings of God, though totally undeserved. All the blessings of God as manifested in spiritual enablement and ministry, prayer, fruit, spiritual food, illumination, service, sanctification, and glorification are possible. While the full measure of divine blessing is reserved for the eternal state, it is a fundamental factor of the spiritual life that God stands ready right now to bless abundantly those who come to Him. There is no withholding by God of any blessing that can be given. The doctrine of propitiation properly understood may be regarded as the open door to greater understanding of the person of God and His attitude of love and grace toward the world.