

## Hebrews 2:17

It was early in his treatise on the new covenant that the writer of Hebrews spoke of propitiation:

Since therefore the children [that is, the elect] share in flesh and blood, [Christ] himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery. For surely it is not angels that he helps, but he helps the offspring of Abraham [that is, the elect]. Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people (Heb. 2:14-17).

Several Bible versions – KJV (but not NKJV), NIV,<sup>1</sup> Christian Standard – hold back from ‘propitiation’ in Hebrews 2:17, but ‘propitiation’ is what *hilaskesthai* means, and, therefore, ‘propitiation’ it is. Of course, Christ’s death was an expiation – but it was an expiation in order to appease God’s wrath; hence ‘propitiation’ is the proper word.

It’s not just me that’s saying it.

Albert Barnes:

The word here means properly to ‘appease’, to reconcile, to conciliate; and hence, to ‘propitiate’ as to ‘sins’; that is, to propitiate God in reference to sins, or to render [God] propitious.

Jamieson-Fausset-Brown:

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<sup>1</sup> NIV is weak: ‘...that he might make atonement for the sins of the people’. As I have already said: ‘Expiation alone does not adequately deal with the concept of propitiation, with what Scripture means by propitiation. And expiation cannot replace propitiation – neither as a word nor a concept. Far from it! The atonement needs to an expiation and a propitiation’.

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To make reconciliation for the sins – rather as Greek, ‘to propitiate (in respect to) the sins’; ‘to expiate the sins’. Strictly divine justice is ‘propitiated’; but God’s love is as much from everlasting as his justice; therefore, lest Christ’s sacrifice, or its typical forerunners [that is, the old-covenant shadows], the legal sacrifices [that is, the sacrifices required under the Mosaic law], should be thought to be antecedent to God’s grace and love, neither are said in the Old or New Testament to have propitiated God; otherwise Christ’s sacrifice might have been thought to have first induced God to love and pity man, instead of (as the fact really is) his love having originated Christ’s sacrifice, whereby divine justice and divine love are harmonised. The sinner is brought by that sacrifice into God’s favour, which by sin he had forfeited; hence his right prayer [that is, the prayer of the tax collector in the parable] is: ‘God be propitiated (so the Greek) to me who am a sinner’ (Luke 18:13).

But why did the writer of Hebrews bring up this matter of ‘propitiation’? We know why Paul argued for it in Romans (Rom. 3:25); he had to – it was the punch line of his argument. After all, he had devoted verse after verse driving home the reality of God’s wrath for every sinner. Nothing less than propitiation would do. Without propitiation, Paul would have had no gospel to preach, no gospel to set out in his letter to the Romans. Without propitiation, there would have been no gospel, full stop.

But why did the writer of Hebrews feel it was imperative that he brought up the matter of propitiation?

Well... look at the way he opened his treatise. It did not take him long to turn to the coming day of judgment. He did this in setting out a conversation between the Father and the Son in eternity past:

Of the Son [the Father] says: ‘Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever, the sceptre of uprightness is the sceptre of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’.

And: ‘You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they

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will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment, like a robe you will roll them up, like a garment they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will have no end’.

And to which of the angels has he ever said: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet’? (Heb. 1:8-13).

Moving into what we now know as the second chapter, the writer plunged straight into his comparison – contrast – of the two covenants; in particular, he spoke of the lessons to be learnt from the way the Jews failed under the Mosaic covenant, applying those lessons to sinners in the day of the new covenant. See how he addressed the work of Christ, the new covenant, the gospel, and the response of the individual sinner to that gospel:

Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For since the message declared by angels [that is, the old covenant] proved to be reliable, and every transgression or disobedience received a just retribution, how shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation? (Heb. 2:1-3).

Do not miss his penetrating question, a question put to every individual reader of the treatise: ‘How shall we escape if we neglect such a great salvation?’ (Heb. 2:3).

Leaping over the rest of his treatise, notice how the writer of Hebrews saw the need to return to the point before he finished:

See that you do not refuse him who is speaking [that is, God]. For if they [that is, the Jews at Sinai] did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven (Heb. 12:25).

‘Escape’ is the word to latch onto.

Barnes, commenting on Hebrews 2:3, stated:

How shall we escape? [That is,] how shall we escape the just recompense due to transgressors? What way is there of being saved from punishment if we suffer the great salvation to be neglected, and do not embrace its offers? The sense is that

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there is no other way of salvation, and the neglect of this will be followed by certain destruction.

John Gill, likewise: 'How shall we escape... the righteous judgment of God, and eternal punishment'.

Matthew Poole on Hebrews 12:25:

'For if they escaped not who refused him that spoke on earth': [The writer] enforces his caution by a rational motive of the danger of their refusal, arguing from the lesser to the greater; that is, their ancestors escaped not the vengeance of God when they refused to hear, believe, and obey the legal [Mosaic] covenant, which he spoke on earth from Mount Sinai, and wrote on tables of stones, and delivered to Moses on the mount, and by him communicated it to them (Heb. 2:2; 10:28,30,31; Deut. 33:1,4; Acts 7:51,53; 1 Cor. 10:1-10).

'Much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaks from heaven': Much more and greater sinners are all such who turn aside scornfully from Jesus, and receive not his voice and the revelation of God's gospel covenant by it, who is God's only begotten Son, and brought it down from the Father's bosom in heaven (Heb. 1:2; John 1:14,16-18; 3:13), and ratified it with his own blood on earth: and as the sin is beyond compare greater, so will the punishment be, and the certainty of its infliction both for time and eternity (Matt. 11:24; 2 Thess. 1:7-9; Heb. 10:26-31); there remaining no more sacrifice for such sin and sinners.

Vine on 'escape', *ekpheugō*:

'To flee out of a place' (*ek*, 'out of')... is said of the 'escape' of prisoners (Acts 16:27), of Sceva's sons 'fleeing' from the demoniac (Acts 19:16), of Paul's escape from Damascus (2 Cor. 11:33), elsewhere with reference to the judgments of God (Luke 21:36; Rom. 2:3; 1 Thess. 5:3; Heb. 2:3; 12:25).

What is all this about? As we saw, Adam, when he sinned, brought down upon his head the wrath of God, and as a result he died; he died spiritually. And all his descendants died in him and with him. And unless he is changed, the sinner will suffer the punishment of eternal death. 'Escape' in this context is clear: it does not mean 'made happy', 'eased of guilt', 'made comfortable', 'delivered from a sense of shame', or somesuch. It

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means ‘rescued from the wrath of God which spells death – eternal death’. As God promised in Genesis 3, he would send his Son – the seed of the woman – who in a struggle to the death would redeem his elect. All who trusted the triumph of the seed of the woman over Satan would ‘escape’ the ultimate penalty of the wrath of God.

When God was about to drown the world, how could sinners ‘escape’? That is, how could sinners be saved from drowning under the wrath of God? By entering the ark! The ark – if they were in it – would protect them from God’s wrath.

As we have noted repeatedly, God – in his love – sent his Son into the world, ‘gave him’ to sacrificial death, so that all who believe will never perish under the wrath of God (John 3:16). But unbelievers remain under that wrath, and are condemned already (John 3:18-19,36).

Only those who are determined not to see the point can miss it. The writer to the Hebrews knew that apart from Christ, every sinner is bound to suffer the eternal wrath of God. And the only way of deliverance is by trust in Christ and his finished work – his sacrifice of propitiation. By the death of Christ, the wrath of God is satisfied, the sinner is washed clean, he is made a new creature by the Spirit, and the broken relationship between God and man is restored.

And that is why the writer raised the subject of propitiation in Hebrews 2:17. Like Paul, he had to! Without it, no salvation, no gospel, no new covenant!

The sinners which God desired and willed to save and take into fellowship with himself were, of course, human. So God decreed that his Son should become incarnate, to live and die as a man, in order, as a substitute for the elect, to propitiate the wrath of God on their behalf. Thus we see the wrath and love of God absolutely in concert, meeting in Christ. God appointed Christ to be both priest and sacrifice so that by his priestly work, offering his blood, he might propitiate the Godhead on behalf of the elect.

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Above all, we need to remember that this passage (Heb. 2:17) appears in Hebrews, the treatise of all the New Testament documents which gives the fullest exposition of how Christ fulfilled the old covenant, how the old-covenant shadows have been embodied and made real and actual in the new covenant, the covenant which Christ himself introduced. And at the very heart of Hebrews we have atonement by Christ's priesthood based on his blood sacrifice, and that sacrifice being the propitiation which, from eternity, God had designed.<sup>2</sup>

What does Wright say about all this? What does he say about Hebrews? In his book, *Following Jesus*,<sup>3</sup> he entitled his opening chapter 'The Final Sacrifice: Hebrews'. Excellent, though I would have preferred 'The Final and the One and Only Effective Sacrifice'. What an appetite-whetter! Christ's sacrifice as a propitiation – that's what we need to hear about. Is that what Wright majored on?

In his chapter on Hebrews, Wright did not even mention Hebrews 2:17! Let that sink in! While he certainly emphasised the importance of the Old Testament – and, of course, this inevitably meant he had to speak about 'sacrifice' – Wright's understanding of 'sacrifice' came nowhere near the biblical revelation. In fact, what he said was nothing less than tragic! Actually, I would call it incomprehensible. Reader, judge for yourself.

Coming to the point about 'sacrifice', Wright opened thus:

First, sacrifice is part of what it means to be truly human.<sup>4</sup>

Having expanded on this point – which Wright considered fundamental – he began to get to grips with the heart of the matter; namely, Christ's sacrifice of himself. Wright offered a piece of history:

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<sup>2</sup> See my *Upper*.

<sup>3</sup> Wright: *Following* pp3-9.

<sup>4</sup> Wright: *Following* p8.

A generation ago [Wright was writing in 1994], liberal thought managed to get rid of sin; and, with sin, most theories of the atonement were dismissed as odd and unnecessary. But in our own generation we have rediscovered guilt; we have shame and violence in plenty; we have alienation at all levels. And we don't know what to do with it, either at a personal or at a corporate level. Cleansing of the conscience is what is required; and the only way to do that is by a total offering of the human life to God.<sup>5</sup>

Now we are getting to the nub of the question. But look carefully at the language, the small print. Do not be swept away by a barrage of words. Sin – yes, indeed! But notice how Wright slid from 'sin' to 'guilt... shame... violence... alienation'; Wright's emphasis has decidedly fallen on the human aspect of sin. While I do not for a moment deny the appalling reality of human 'guilt... shame... violence... alienation' in connection with 'sin' – both within and between individuals, notice what is missing from Wright's diagnosis. He says nothing about the fundamental aspect of sin. Where is the sinner's rebellion against God? Where is the sinner's offence to God? These are not idle questions. I am not nit-picking. Sin is far more than a breakdown between humans. God created man. He created him for a relationship with the Godhead. Man rebelled. God was offended. The relationship was shattered. And all this has to be put right before the human consequences of sin can be addressed.

Wright could do with listening to Lloyd-Jones on this point, Lloyd-Jones spoke of 'false views' with regard to man's need'. 'What is it?', he asked:

Well, negatively, it is not a mere sickness. There is a tendency to regard man's essential trouble as being a sickness. I do not mean physical sickness only. That comes in; but I mean a kind of mental and moral and spiritual sickness. It is not that; that is not man's real need, not his real trouble. I would say the same about his misery and his unhappiness, and also about his being a victim of circumstances.

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<sup>5</sup> Wright: *Following* p8.

These are the things that are given prominence today. [Lloyd-Jones was writing in 1971]... That is too superficial a diagnosis of the condition of man, and that man's real trouble is that he is a rebel against God and consequently under the wrath of God.<sup>6</sup>

Let me illustrate the danger of palliating symptoms but missing the root cause. I do so by repeating the illustration I used in a previous chapter:

The fundamental point about sin which must be grasped is that sinners sin because they are rebels against God, natural, defiant, deliberate rebels, and God is offended, and every child of Adam is under his righteous anger; in other words, his wrath. To miss this – or worse, to ignore this – is criminal. I use the word advisedly: it is as though a physician, in a delightful bedside manner, treated a patient's symptoms while ignoring the root cause of his illness.<sup>7</sup>

Wright, I submit, is guilty of this 'delightful bedside manner... while ignoring the root cause' of man's plight. And, it goes without saying, if a physician misses the root cause of a disease, his 'cure' may well prove to be a killer. Diagnosis wrong, prescription wrong.<sup>8</sup>

And this is Wright to a T. Hear him. He started by saying the only cure for human guilt, shame and so on, is:

...the total offering of the human life to God.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever does that mean?! Remember the context. We are talking about the repeated – but totally ineffective – Mosaic sacrifices being fulfilled and rendered obsolete by the one final and effective, finished sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. *That* is what we are talking about – or at least, *that* is what we *should* be talking about. *That* is what the writer of Hebrews *was* talking about!

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<sup>6</sup> D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, pp26-27.

<sup>7</sup> Slightly edited from 'The Wrath of God'.

<sup>8</sup> See Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching* p31.

<sup>9</sup> Wright: *Following* p8.



What was Wright talking about when he spoke of ‘sin’, and getting rid of it? What is this ‘sacrifice’ which will do it? Wright:

But that total offering [see above] isn’t something we can do for ourselves... Jesus himself is the one true sacrifice towards which all others point. The blood of bulls and goats... can’t take away sins; they point forwards to the one sacrifice that can and does purify us, that washes our consciences clean.<sup>10</sup>

Who can find fault with that? Excellent – isn’t it?

But... don’t be fooled. Read on...

Starting with the entire human race, narrowing it to Israel, then to the levitical priesthood, then to Jesus, Wright said:

The sacrifice of Jesus is the moment when the human race, in the person of a single man, offers itself fully to the Creator.<sup>11</sup>

Really? Where, in Scripture, do we see that? Are we supposed to believe that in the death of the Lord Jesus Christ ‘the human race... offer[ed] itself fully to the Creator’? Nonsense! I would even use the word ‘blasphemous’. Creator? Yes, of course, God is the Creator. But at this point the writer of Hebrews was talking about Calvary not Eden. The cross is to do with redemption from sin, not creation. We should be talking about deliverance, release, redemption from the grip and pollution of sin, the appeasing of the wrath of God, the satisfaction of all the attributes of God – not least his wrath and his love. Wright’s talk is nothing but a smokescreen.

Specifically, Christ, the Son of God, offered himself – himself, alone – as the perfect sacrifice to propitiate the wrath of the Godhead, and do so effectively, once for all time, and all because of God’s love for his elect. Nothing – nothing – to do with sinners offering themselves to God!

Wright continued:

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<sup>10</sup> Wright: *Following* p8.

<sup>11</sup> Wright had ‘creator’ not ‘Creator’.

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The result is that now at last truly human life is possible.<sup>12</sup>

I really must intervene once more. Are we really to believe that when the Son of God died as a propitiation, the human race was not only offering itself to God – whatever that is supposed to mean – but that the result of Christ’s work on the cross (bolstered by the human race and its so-called offering) is ‘that now at last truly human life is possible’! Scripture makes it abundantly clear that from his birth to his resurrection – and beyond – the coming and the work of Christ was to do with sin and the saving of sinners (Matt. 1:21; 9:13; Rom. 5:8,19; 1 Tim. 1:15; Heb. 7:25, and so on). Can we take this teacher seriously? I have never read that Christ became incarnate, lived, died, was raised, ascended and intercedes for sinners so ‘that now at last truly human life is possible’ – whatever that may mean.

In any case, Christ did not live and die to secure the possibility of anything; he died to redeem, redeem effectively, and he completed his work – and all his elect were redeemed:

All that the Father gives me *will* come to me, and whoever comes to me I *will* never cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own *will* but the *will* of him who sent me. And this is the *will* of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the *will* of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I *will* raise him up on the last day (John 6:37-40).

Wright:

[In Hebrews] we find the news that millions in our society are desperate to hear: the news that the things which trouble us most deeply can be washed away through the blood of Christ... It explains that the moral deficit is already dealt with... Hebrews offers us, quite simply, Jesus. It offers us the Jesus who is there to help.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, according to Wright, Christ did not die to deal with sin, man’s individual rebellion against God, to deal with it

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<sup>12</sup> Wright *Following* p9.

<sup>13</sup> Wright: *Following* p9.

once and for all because it was an offence to God; Christ did not die to appease the holy, righteous wrath of God; but in Christ's death, God, as some kind of super-therapist acted like some well-meaning parent and – through Jesus – makes all things better for the sinner. (I really want to say 'kisses things better').

According to Wright:

The things which trouble us most deeply can be washed away through the blood of Christ.<sup>14</sup>

According to John:

The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (1 John 1:9).

According to Wright:

The moral deficit is... dealt with.

According to Paul :

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:1-4).

Reader, I said you must judge. Does Wright get close to what Christ meant in his triumphant, concluding outburst on the cross: 'It is finished', 'It is accomplished' (John 19:30)? What was finished? What was accomplished? According to Wright, 'the things which trouble us most deeply can be washed away... [because] the moral deficit is already dealt with'. As for me, I'll stick with P.P.Bliss:

*'Man of Sorrows!' what a name  
For the Son of God, who came  
Ruined sinners to reclaim!  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

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<sup>14</sup> Wright: *Following* p9.

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*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
In my place condemned he stood,  
Sealed my pardon with his blood:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

*Guilty, vile, and helpless, we:  
Spotless Lamb of God was he;  
'Full atonement!' – can it be?  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

*'Lifted up' was he to die,  
'It is finished!' was his cry;  
Now in heaven exalted high:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

*When he comes, our glorious King,  
All his ransomed home to bring,  
Then anew this song we'll sing:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

If I may be pardoned, I'll offer a tentative suggestion as to what Wright's devotees might like to sing:

*'**Man of the people!**' what a name  
For the Son of God, who came  
**Moral failures** to reclaim!  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

*Bearing shame and scoffing rude,  
**Along with every man** he stood,  
Sealed my **comfort** with his blood:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

***Moral defects** all were we:  
Spotless Lamb of God was he;  
'Full atonement!' – can it be?  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

***Expiation!** – can it be?  
'**Your troubles gone!**' was his cry;  
Now in heaven exalted high:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

*When he comes, our glorious King,  
All his **happy ones** to bring,*

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*Then anew this song we'll sing:  
Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

Leaving aside that piece of nonsense, the question is: Has Wright grasped what the writer of the Hebrews – and all the other post-Pentecost writers – told us about what Christ's death accomplished? If you were first-century Jew who had come to Christ but had defected back to Judaism – would Wright's teaching have convinced you of the superiority of the new covenant over the old? Would you have returned to Christ as the one who appeased God's wrath on your behalf?

My answers are patent! Reader, what are yours?

Having ignored the clear context, Wright went on, ploughing ever deeper into trouble:

We come to the eucharist [the Lord's supper] because we want this Jesus: 'Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need' [Heb. 4:16].<sup>15</sup>

And Wright is a leading biblical scholar! I may be a theological flea approaching a theological king-elephant, but what a travesty of interpretation this is! Wright cannot even face up to the text, and take the clear teaching of the words! He has replaced the doctrine of the sacred writers with Christendom waffle! The writer of Hebrews says nothing – nothing whatever – about coming to the Lord's supper. He does not speak of it in Hebrews 2; he never speaks of it in his entire treatise. The Bible never calls the Lord's supper 'the throne of grace'. What an appalling suggestion or change Wright has made! And the Bible never – never – tells us to come to the Lord's supper in order to be saved. Only the saved who are living consistently with their salvation can come to the table.

Rather, the writer of Hebrews was writing to believers – believers, please note – to those who were trusting the blood and righteousness of Christ as the propitiation that God set forth to

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<sup>15</sup> Wright: *Following* p9.

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appease his wrath. He was not writing to sinners who desired to be saved.

And it's not just the past tense. The writer of Hebrews tells believers that in their trials, they can – they must – go to God, who, though he is on his throne in all his holiness and majesty, is – as they know by personal experience through their trust in Christ – propitiated by the death of his Son, and therefore can, and will, give them grace and mercy to support them in their trials, their trials as believers. Believers, knowing that God in Christ has dealt with their Adamic consequences, can rest assured that God will never turn them away in their trials, that he will never withhold any good thing from them: 'He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? (Rom. 8:32), including help in trials. Having dealt with their sins and his wrath through the death of Christ (the much larger issue), is there anything good and needful thing (the lesser issue) that God will keep back from them? And as for Christ dying to provide 'help', words fail. If this is right, the angel's words to Joseph will have to be re-written:

You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21; see also Luke 1:31; 2:21)...

...will have to become:

You shall call his name Helper, for he will help his people get over their worries.

And so will many other scriptures. Scripture is explicit: Jesus means Saviour.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11).

Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! (John 1:29).

There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

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The God of our fathers raised Jesus, whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Saviour, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:30-31).

God has brought to Israel a Saviour, Jesus, as he promised... Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him everyone who believes is freed [that is, justified] from everything from which you could not be freed [that is, justified] by the law of Moses (Acts 13:23,38-39).

Try putting Helper instead of Saviour in such passages! What a diminishing of the decree of God and its accomplishment by the Son! Tragic! Evangelicals awake! Stand fast for propitiation, and never let it go!<sup>16</sup>

Let me close this chapter with an old chorus:

*He did not come to judge the world,  
He did not come to blame.  
He did not only come to seek,  
It was to save he came.  
And when we call him Saviour  
And when we call him Saviour  
We call him by his name!*

In light of Wright's doctrine, I cannot resist adding a verse:

*He did not come to help the world,  
To make things nice all round  
He did not only come to aid,  
It was to save he came.*

If we allow words like 'sin' and 'save' to be tampered with, we shall have no gospel at all. If we allow 'propitiation' to be watered down, ignored, or dismissed as pagan, we shall, to our eternal loss, be of all men the most wretched.

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<sup>16</sup> In his comments on Heb. 2:17 in his *Hebrews for Everyone*, SPCK, London, 2004, Wright got no closer to the biblical meaning. In fact, he was lamentable. In the entire book, he never once used 'propitiation'.