

Christ in his unique suffering

Egbert Brink

The Reformed theological faculty of Aix-en-Provence invited me to give some lectures on catechetics and pastorate in March 2009. While I was there I took advantage of the opportunity of speaking to Prof. dr. Paul Wells, professor of dogmatics and church-planter in France, about his book: *Cross Words*. A resume of this interview now follows. The Dutch translation of the aforementioned book came out recently but the original had already been published in 2006 by Christian Focus Publications Ltd. ISBN 9781845501181.

Paul Wells had been meaning to write a book on this theme for quite some time. He noticed that the classic doctrine of atonement was in danger of being moved more and more to the background. His purpose in writing this book was threefold.

In the *first* place simply to explain the words describing what Christ has accomplished at the cross: what does it mean to pacify justice, to offer a sacrifice, to bear God's wrath, to work reconciliation, etc. The meaning of these words is often unfamiliar and can therefore have an estranging effect on our society today.

In the *second* place he wishes to show the readers that Jesus' suffering on the cross is much more than an example of a suffering messiah-figure. Christ is the unique Mediator between God and mankind. Yet this notion is ignored and rejected most by modern Christianity. As a result, Christians fall prey to pluralism (different truths existing alongside each other) and syncretism (mixing religions together). When Jesus says that He is the way and the truth and that nobody can come to the Father than through Him, this cannot even be considered separate from His atoning work at the cross.

In the *third* place he tries to bring forward new perspectives for today's times, bearing in mind modern man with his specific problems and questions. He thinks in particular of today's ever-increasing aggression and violence. God shows us that he takes human violence and injustice very seriously. Yet He does not answer with aggression, but stops the spiral of violence by taking our injustice and violence upon Himself. He steps into the victims place. God does not *take* victims but becomes victim in our place, showing His unique love. It is a case of the strong God being willing to become weak. This is very topical because history and politics have shown us that answering violence with violence is a never-ending spiral. God does not, in the first place, demand sacrifices, He gives Himself totally in the Sacrifice.

Paul Wells is aware of the discussion in The Netherlands concerning Ton de Ruiter (a former GKV minister) who distanced himself from the doctrine of atonement as satisfaction of God's justice. In his opinion God also forgives without atonement. This conviction reminded Paul Wells of Steven Chalke, who also claimed that God's grace requires no payment, referring to, amongst others, the parable of the lost son. Of course it is true that God's grace is free. But that which is free, has been paid for by someone else! It is free because Christ has paid in our stead! Animal blood flows in the entire Old Testament, because atonement is not possible without blood. A form of grace without payment makes God's grace cheap. In inter-human relations we also find it completely normal that evil is recompensed, and in a case of injustice, that justice must be done. That is a moral principle in every relationship. God taking away our guilt: it can only be done by substitution. Isaiah 53 is perfectly clear on that. In addition the notion: 'He in our stead', is also a clear line throughout the New testament. You only have to think of the institutionary words of Christ at the Last Supper.

On top of this, forgiveness *without reason* gives no hold whatsoever. We need a concrete manifestation in the form of the cross, which shows us God's love in an awesome but concrete way. The atonement cannot be proclaimed and explained enough. He died for us when we were still sinners. That is much more than an example of someone who sacrificed himself on a road of suffering. Christ actually takes our place as our representative.

How does Paul Wells explain the difficulty which people have with the doctrine of reconciliation through atonement and substitution? It could be related to the unattractive idea of blood flow and the offensiveness of the crucifixion. That will always be a shocking and terrible event. In addition, romantic thoughts on what love is, seem to gain much ground, as does perfectionism of love. Romantic love is usually shallow, has no depth, demands little or no sacrifice. The commitment on the cross is not very plausible to this romantic and sentimental idea of love for this love stays out of evil's way. The cross of Christ, however, shows how deep his love goes by descending into the very depths of evil.

The following can be added to this. We are inclined to see the Cross in the light of our suffering. As we suffer, so Christ also suffered. Yet it is the other way around, we must learn to see our suffering – especially suffering without visible cause – in the light of Christ's suffering. What He went through brings sympathy and compassion with our suffering. He suffered in patience and obedience, but also with perspective that there will be an end to suffering. Against all hope, He held onto the liberation, looking ahead to the resurrection. The unity with Christ enables us to share in the hope that finds its conclusion in a new world where all suffering comes to an end once and for all.

As a final point, that sanctification is brought more to the fore these days is only right. It cannot be denied that this has received too little attention in reformed sermons. Because of this there has always been a reaction in the form of the ever recurring reveilles throughout the centuries. Although a reveille is something positive, it often races on into subjectivism and a new legalism. It is of great importance never to separate sanctification from justification. Calvin spoke of the two graces, that are not separately attainable. Only through unity with Christ (living connection with Him) do both justification and sanctification receive their place. There are no justified Christians who are not sanctified and there are no sanctified Christians who are not justified. That is not the destination of Christian life, but the foundation. Here too, perfectionism on the moral terrain plays a substantial role (cf Pelagius – contra Augustine). But one should not forget that the certainty of salvation is at stake here. How can you ever receive certainty if you do not have the promise of perfection in Christ? The justification looks upon Christ and longs for his acquittal. The sanctification makes itself dependant on His Spirit and His plea for us as Mediator and longs for renewal in connection with Christ.

You could concern yourself with lesser items! The commotion and discussion surrounding atonement, teach us anew to familiarise ourselves with the greatest of all values. Recognition of Christ's work as Mediator is, and remains, crucial.

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