



Cross Words

The Biblical Doctrine of the Atonement



Paul Wells



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For Valin and Jonathan

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'Meet me in Montana'

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Paul Wells teaches systematic theology and has lived in Aix-en-Provence in the south of France since 1972. After studying French at Liverpool University and a stint at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia, he became one of the founder members of the Faculté libre de théologie réformée together with Pasteur Pierre Courthial and Dr Peter Jones. His doctoral thesis at the Free University of Amsterdam, *James Barr and the Bible. Critique of a New Liberalism* was published by Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. in 1980. Books in French include works on the doctrine of Scripture, the words of Christ from the cross, the Christian life, commentaries on the Lord's Prayer and the Apostles creed, and more recently a general introduction to the Christian faith for students (*La foi chrétienne en libre accès*, 2001). Paul Wells has been editor of *La Revue réformée*, a leading evangelical journal in French, since 1981. He is also responsible for Editions Kerygma, which has published Calvin's *Institutes* and New Testament commentaries in modernised French and new editions of classics such as the *Heidelberg Catechism* and the *Westminster Confession*. He is married to Alison who teaches adult English and they have three children who live in Spain and the English Midlands. Together they are involved in church planting in Gardanne, a mining town between Aix and Marseilles, where there is no other Protestant church. Their free time might find them walking in the Lubéron or, in winter, enjoying the beauty of the Mediterranean coast.





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An Impossible Undertaking?

Atonement is about right relationships. Its past speaks of brokenness, alienation, and the death of love. Its present sees restoration, healing, and wholeness. Its future holds hope for deepening friendship and mutual confidence.

For human beings endowed with a sense of right and wrong, the question of how to repair broken relationships is a continual concern. Every day we run the risk of estrangement, hostility, and conflict. Sometimes they arise because of thoughtlessness; sometimes as the result of a calculated act. Something may be so attractive that we will endanger our standing with others to get it. They can suffer the consequences, and if we experience a certain discomfort... the end justifies the means.

Some issues of life and death lead to totally broken situations. Certain kinds of behaviour—lies, betrayal, and violence—are deemed irreparable by those involved and by society as a whole: nothing can atone for the wrong done, nothing return the counter to zero. There is no way back. Forgiveness is impossible. The cancer of resentment fosters anger and aggression, so that withdrawal seems preferable. A bad day at the office can be shrugged off, but if the problem involves a wrong that cannot be made good, how is it possible to go on? Can we live with the knowledge that things will never be the same again and nothing can be done about it? What value can life have, once ruined beyond redemption?

These questions bring the Christian message of atonement into sharp focus as good news. Business as normal can be





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resumed with God and our fellows. The abrupt start to Mark's Gospel illustrates how this message of hope breaks into situations of despair in a dramatic way: 'The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God... Jesus went into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news' (Mark 1: 1, 14–15). It is not by chance that Mark's opening word, 'beginning', echoes the first words of Genesis: 'In the beginning God'. God's good news intercepts lives characterised by emptiness—deserts 'without form and void' (Gen. 1: 2, Mark 1: 2). Radical new beginnings are possible. Life can be recreated. The kingdom promise is return from exile to order and happiness.

The Christian good news majors in 're-' words: rebirth, redemption, reconciliation, renewal, and finally re-creation. Atonement is the process and the state of restoration. In a narrower sense, the appearing of Jesus—his person and work, his alienation in death—introduces a radical new beginning for human hopes. Jesus himself experienced the dregs of human brokenness. 'Despised and rejected, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering', he was cut off from life (Isa. 53: 3, 8). But out of despair and defeat come new life and victory over death in resurrection. The focus of Christian experience becomes being raised from death to newness of life, which is renewal, entering into a life of different and positive relations. Salvation involves repair of past traumas, but it is also the personal and spiritual satisfaction of a transformed life. The end of Isaiah's fourth 'servant song' speaks about the joy issuing from suffering, when the victim sees his days lengthened and prosperous in the light of life (Isa. 53: 10–11).

This is just what our contemporaries do not want to hear. Taking the absence of God for granted, their overriding attitude is: 'I can get along very well without God, thank you. Problems are of human making and have human solutions. God is not the question or the answer; man is. So why should a relationship with God interest us? How could it help practically?'

All this fails to stand up to scrutiny, for the simple reason that modern man is bankrupt. Advanced modern knowledge, 'science', is incapable of curing humanity of greed, exploitation, violence, or its other ills. In fact, in some ways, the progress of knowledge makes the possibilities of manipulation and suffering



more subtle and sophisticated. Spiritual values must come from somewhere other than from technical development.

Besides this, the attitude of 'man on his own' assumes there is some order in life holding things together and giving them meaning, whereas, without God, human experience is made up of the accidental and unexpected. Man is like a gambler in the casino of life, who keeps on betting without knowing where the chips are coming from. Win some or lose some is not the question. If the end product of seventy or so years' good or bad luck is nothing but oblivion, there is no atonement, and it does not matter.

Christianity is often tempted to turn its wine into water when faced with modern feelings about the absence of God. An effort is made to humanize God by underlining the higher power's proximity, love, compassion, and weakness. Forget the shadow-side of a deity expressing anger, jealousy, or judgment! God identifies with situations of suffering and need; he becomes a God of proximity—man's fellow-sufferer.

From this perspective, traditional doctrines of the atonement do not fare well. They are, we are told, closely related to their social background and have been formed by the mentality of their time. They might have been impeccably logical in their arguments, but they have become highly doubtful in a religious sense. So John Hick can say: 'It is hardly necessary to criticise the penal-substitutionary conception (of the atonement), so totally implausible has it become for most of us.' The idea that guilt 'can be removed from a wrong-doer by someone else being punished instead is morally grotesque.'¹ For the likes of Hick, traditional atonement theories no longer perform any useful function. They can be relegated to the antiques museum of historical theology.

Like all doctrines, goes the conventional wisdom, ideas about the atonement are socially constructed in different universes of meaning. There is really no classical, traditional, or 'church' doctrine of the atonement. No universal 'theory' can join together the various strands in the meaning of the cross. The story of the life and death of Jesus is not a universally applicable narrative giving details of a transaction in which God, Jesus, and humanity are involved. The most we can get from the New Testament are some hints that may contribute in a variety of ways to changing our outlook on life.



Reconstructions of the atonement that seek to glean fresh biblical insights and contribute to the transformation of human expectations are not particularly encouraging. The meaning of the cross is a lot more than 'the restoration of a reciprocal relation of love between God the Father and the human race.'² If the Father took the trouble of sending his Son and the Son accepted the mission, if he actually became man, then it is hardly too much to hope there might be more than simple hints in biblical revelation on the subject. As J. I. Packer stated: 'All our understanding of the cross comes from attending to the biblical witnesses and learning to hear and echo what they say about it; speculative rationalism (and I would add, under diverse guises) breeds only misunderstanding, nothing more.'³ It is not hopeless optimism to expect there might be some coherence in the apostolic message of the cross.

The primary object of this book is, therefore, to look into why it was necessary for God in Jesus Christ to take on himself human nature, to redeem people from sin and death by dying for them in the flesh. To do this, we propose, in chapters two to six, to look at the situation existing between God and man that makes the cross necessary. What the cross discloses about God himself is as significant as what it accomplishes for man. God's nature is intricately connected to his way of salvation.

Chapters seven to twelve present 'cross words', which describe what the death of Christ entails, as seen through the preparation for the coming of Jesus, his life, and his death. The centre of the Christian drama is not the cross in itself, but the person of the crucified one and the unique way he stands between God and man as mediator. This is essential, as it closes the blind alley leading to an understanding of the cross that reduces it to a symbol of human suffering.

In chapters thirteen to seventeen the results of the work of the cross are examined. The finished work of Christ opens the way to freedom from sin and death, to new life in communion with God, characterised by obedience, love, and service. The atonement is more than just a change of direction—it leads to a relationship with a new master, it brings forth a new sense of belonging.

This undertaking as a whole is highly scandalous to the mentality of our day, within or without the church. We will





therefore begin by navigating these reefs in the following chapter.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ J. Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate* (London: SCM, 1993), 119 and his critique of R. Swinburne's *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989).
- ² M. Winter, *The Atonement* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 2.
- ³ J. I. Packer, 'What did the Cross achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution' *Tyndale Bulletin* 25 (1974), 20.

