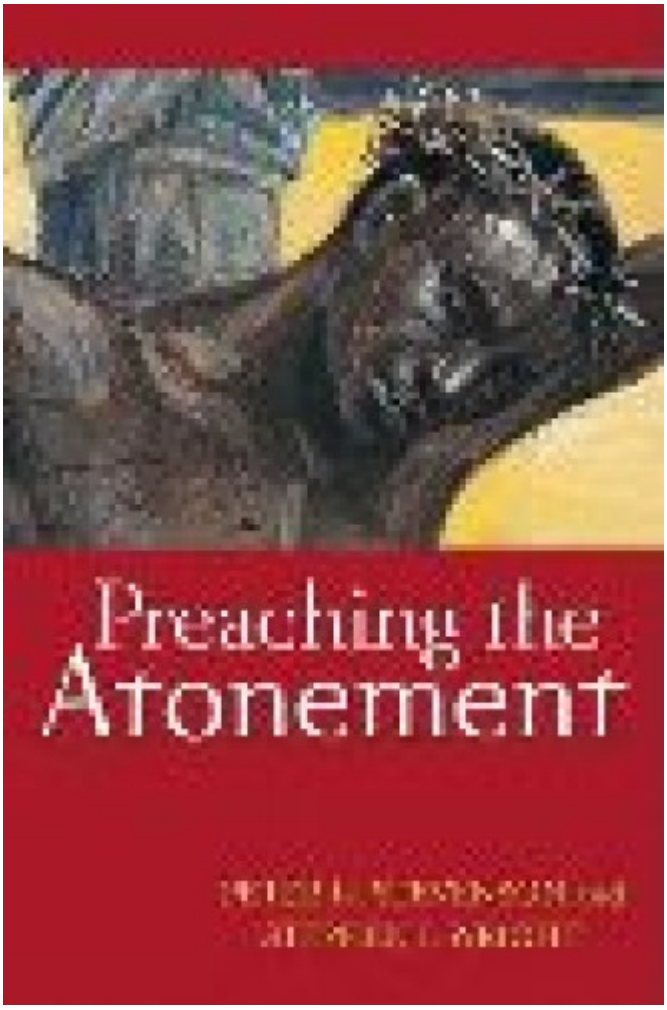
Preaching the Atonement

reviewed by James C. Howell in the November 3, 2009 issue

In Review



Preaching the Atonement

Peter K. Stevenson and Stephen I. Wright
Westminster John Knox

The very idea of preaching a single doctrine seems misguided, even though it’s far superior to preaching on neat themes that intrigue the consumers out there. So I

didn’t expect to like reading *Preaching the Atonement*. But Peter Stevenson and Stephen Wright immediately allayed my fears, recognizing that we do preach texts: “The Gospels preach no developed theory of the atonement. . . . Rather, they tell the story of the one through whom human beings would come to know that they were indeed ‘at one’ with God.”

Stevenson and Wright probe ten major texts, supplying a sample sermon with analysis thereof for each passage. For all their wisdom on “atonement-as-story,” they do not limit themselves to trendy narrative preaching. The most compelling chapter might be the one on the poetic Isaiah 52–53, and their discussion of a legal text, Leviticus 16, made me speculate that exposition of the law may be what best explicates the inner dynamics of a biblical view of atonement.

The opening section of each chapter offers us remarkably rich exegetical work, with theological reflections on the theological data embedded in each text. Humility is evident: Wright suggests that Christian preaching “will not pretend to have mastered a text which has perplexed scholars and theologians for centuries; nor will it shirk the hard questions it elicits from readers and hearers.”

The authors’ handling of atonement as a doctrine is subtle, not heavy-handed at all. Generally they bring their exegetical observations into conversation with classic theories of the atonement. They take a few jabs at simplistic theologies that transmute the Christ event into something consumable, something fun, the best deal ever: “When Jesus hung on the cross he didn’t die with a fixed evangelical grin across his face.” They imagine Paul in conversation with John Calvin, and Mark’s passion narrative in conversation with Luther’s deus absconditus. They never apologize for the oddness of the doctrine of the atonement in today’s world, but they portray it as alluring.

The book’s first chapters explore the way to prepare a properly Christian sermon on an Old Testament text. The writers let the Old Testament speak but then profoundly lift up Christ, not in a merely analogous or illustrative way, but demonstrating the continuities in God’s heart and God’s long-saving purpose. Regarding the suffering servant text, Wright concludes that it is “not just that Jesus’ story is illustrated in interesting ways by Israel’s story. It is the continuation and climax of Israel’s story. Jesus is not the first ‘suffering servant,’ even though for us he is undoubtedly the greatest.”

The chapter on the suffering servant alone is worth far more than the price of the book. Wright's comprehension of redemptive suffering takes the old penal view of atonement as its conversation partner and exposes that view's "unhelpful" aspects.

Perhaps it is precisely this unhelpful, chilling perspective on God's action in the cross that explains why so very few sermons nowadays dare go anywhere near the atonement. In too many churches, syrupy sermons explore the love of God without pointing to the biblical revelation of and Christ's embodiment of that love. Preachers don't speak of sacrifice unless they are trying to meet the budget.

Suffering enters into many sermons in order for the preacher to apply a silly salve of words instead of directing listeners to the gruesome beauty of the heart of the gospel: the cross, the hidden but magnificent exposure of God's inner self and of our hope. Or suffering surfaces once in a while as a backdrop for a little theodicy salvo. But the Bible's handling of suffering is far from a theodicy. Suffering is the victory, and that victory is no denial or defense of suffering, but simultaneously the revelation of God's glory and the redemption of us sinners.

Wright's deft pedagogy on God's relationship to human suffering is profound. In his concluding thoughts on "Yet it was the will of God to crush him," he suggests that "suffering is taken by the God whom we know to be good as his responsibility"—and sends me scrambling back to the text and to a deeper consideration of issues of God's causation and the bearing of evil.

A similarly thought-provoking exercise on the Abraham and Isaac story is the prelude to a fresh, thoughtful sermon by David Southall, who probes the thoughts of Abraham, of Isaac's mother and even of God Almighty, comparing and contrasting Genesis 22 and the crucifixion of Jesus. Other preachers appear in this volume as well.

Most wonderfully—and for this reason alone I wish I could purchase the book for every practicing preacher—the writers espouse a robust view of atonement. Sin is not only revealed and forgiven, but also removed and healed. Inadequate conceptions of the atonement ignore the real transformation brought about in us by Christ. The authors revive the works of theologians from centuries ago, forgotten since our last church history quiz, and their thoughts about Christ dying to make us like him, to gift us with divinity, allow sermons to thrive and to speak the most hopeful word conceivable.

The dramatic image of Jesus as locked in mortal combat with evil, as One who came not to be nice and to set a good example but to wage war against the devil and win—and to do so for us—is painted so intriguingly that I can't wait to work it into my next sermon. Stevenson's chapter on John 1:1–14 graces us with a remarkably plain lesson on Athanasius, who believed that God was not constrained by any external requirement of justice and that God was not merely forgiving sin, which would frankly have been easier for God. What was at stake was a radical intervention by the only One competent to "stop the rot and recreate fallen humanity." Christ came to cure and to break the cycle of violence and sin. The atonement is about God imparting power to us, power to become children of God, something we might assume we are because we have a pulse, but something we are not by nature or on our own—something we can be only by the blood of Christ, which transforms us into "participants in the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4).

Were I gingerly to devise some critique of *Preaching the Atonement*, it would be this: while the authors wonderfully declare that preaching is connected to occasions, and while they do at times touch on a new item or some desideratum in modern culture, the occasion missed in every sermon is the life of the body of Christ, the community sitting right in front of the preacher. The best sermon is not a solo communication from the preacher to this individual and that individual; it is a family meeting at which people ask, What is God saying to us? What is God calling us to do together as the body?

But that is to nitpick. I have tagged my lectionary folder to the various chapters in the book, and I will not preach on any of these ten texts without returning to this superb volume.