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Preaching (as) atonement

Pleizier, Theo
Protestant Theological University, Groningen, The Netherlands
t.t.j.pleizier@pthu.nl

Abstract

Atonement is a central doctrine in Christian theology. Even though preaching is not about doctrines, doctrine does operate in and through preaching. In this essay the relationship between atonement and preaching is explored. Based upon a contemporary theological analysis of atonement by Eleonore Stump, two homiletic aspects of the relationship between atonement and preaching are presented: atonement *in* preaching and atonement *through* preaching. As a study in homiletical theology, the essay challenges common binaries in homiletics, such as between proclamation and poetics, and presents a way of dealing with fundamental Christian doctrines in the theory of preaching.

Keywords

Preaching; atonement; performance; doctrine; homiletics; Christology

1. The folly of the cross …

The front cover of Johan Cilliers' book *The living voice of the gospel* (2004) displays a famous painting: the Wittenberg predella, the bottom part of the so-called "Reformation altar" (1547). The piece was designed and painted by the two Reformation painters, father and son Cranach, and is the central piece of art in the city church of Wittenberg, Germany. It shows Martin Luther preaching the gospel of the crucified Christ.

On the left side of the picture we see the listening crowd. A congregation of young and elderly, male and female, some seem very attentive hearers of the sermon, while others seem to suffer from an all too common loss of concentration. Hence, the pictures illustrate the diversity that Paul describes in Galatians 3:28. On the right side, we see the preacher, Martin Luther. His left finger follows the Biblical text, while his right finger points

to Christ.[1] All the attention is drawn to the centre of the picture, the crucified Christ. The space of grace belongs to him. The picture signals that Christ, especially his cross and thus his atoning suffering and death, in accordance with Reformation teaching, is at the centre of true preaching.

It is hardly surprising that in Reformed theology atonement and preaching became closely associated. First, in preaching, the three classic tenets of the Reformation (Scripture, faith, and grace) come together in one single, pivotal religious practice. In preaching, *Scripture* presents itself as the living voice of God (*viva vox Dei*). Through preaching the Word of God *faith* is shaped by the faithful receiving of the Word of God. This happens according to Heinrich Bullinger's famous dictum: The Divine word must be received in faith (*a fidelibus recepi*) (Bullinger 1931:237). According to the Reformers, to preach is to make available God's *grace*, God's free acceptance of sinners that is grounded in the saving work of Christ. The renewed focus on soteriology in the Reformation was intrinsically linked with the spiritual question of personal salvation. What does it mean for "me" that Christ suffered and died? How is God's saving activity in Christ available for me as a human being that lives today? If atonement summarises the heart of Christian soteriology and preaching communicates the gospel of the Crucified One, the close connection between preaching and atonement in Reformed religious practice is evident. The practices of the early Reformers as well as the codified documents (confessional standards) express the theological conviction that the proclamation of the gospel mediates God's grace. Preaching communicates the merits of Christ's suffering and death.

Despite the fact that the Reformation talks about "Word and Sacrament" as the two means of grace (*media gratia*), the sacrament of the Eucharist was not conceived as equal to preaching, but to the sacrament of baptism.[2] The sacraments were defined as visible signs of the divine promise, while

1 See also Kathrin Oxen's contribution on the Wittenberg predella in the conference proceedings of the 10th international conference of Societas Homiletica (Hermelink and Deeg 2013:11–12).

2 See for instance the parallel definitions in the Heidelberg Catechism of both Baptism and Holy Communion, Questions 69–74 (Baptism) and Questions 75–82 (Holy Communion). The structure is like this: how does the sacrament (Baptism/Eucharist) assure you … (69/75); what is the meaning of washing / drinking of Christ's blood (70/76); what did Christ promise … (71/76); do the elements really become … (72/77), etc.

the promise "as promise" exists primarily as spoken words: the sermon. In the Protestant practice, the Eucharist became a visible enactment of what was already given in preaching: the promise that in Christ the unity of God and humanity is restored. Therefore, in hearing the gospel, the hearer takes part in this restored unity. In celebrating the Eucharist, the believer sees and tastes what is first communicated verbally: trust in God's faithful love. Following Paul, the Protestant Reformation has put the folly of the cross in words. We have nothing "but a word in the midst of a world shaped by armies, by technology and economy, by principalities and powers […] Up against all of that, preachers speak for a few minutes from the pulpit" (Campbell and Cilliers 2012:18).

Against the background of these historical and theological connections between preaching and atonement, this essay searches for a deeper understanding of the relationship between the two. Rudolf Bohren's *Predigtlehre* is well known for the three tenses of God's Word in preaching: remembering, promise and presence. In these chapters Bohren is particularly interested in the paradoxical tension of realised salvation and salvation as it is still being realised ("das geschehene und geschehende Heil") (Bohren 1993:170). Exactly this perspective deserves continuing interest by homileticians, because "when God speaks, we hear the gospel of salvation" (Cilliers 2004:51–64).

This essay proceeds as follows. First, I introduce the doctrine of atonement. As my starting point I take a recent study on atonement by the analytic theologian Eleonore Stump (2018).[3] In the second part of the essay I explore a twofold relationship between the doctrine of atonement and Christian preaching.

3 Obviously other choices could be made. Ben Pugh gives an overview of theories of atonement (2014) and Vincent Brümmer analysis atonement in relation to interreligious dialogue (2005). In a recent article, Guus Labooy and Maarten Wisse, present a new argument for the coherence of penal substitution as element in theories of atonement (2019). It is clear that the doctrinal discussion is still very lively. For practical-theology a limited approach is valid, as long as it presents a contemporary understanding of an ancient Christian doctrine. Eleonore Stump's book provides a solid and wise guide in that respect.

2. The Doctrine of Atonement according to Eleonore Stump

In her recent monograph on *Atonement* (2018) Eleonore Stump provides an elaborate analytical interpretation and theological reconstruction of the central Christian doctrine that through Christ's suffering and death we are saved from our sins. In the first chapter, she lists the questions that she addresses in her study, two of which are especially important for the relationship between atonement and preaching. First, what exactly must be understood by the saving power that is realised in through Christ's suffering and death? Further, how does the Christian understanding of atonement connect the historical events surrounding Jesus' suffering and death with contemporary human beings?

Both questions are deeply relevant for any homiletical theology. First, if preaching performs the "good news" (the *kerygma*) of Jesus Christ, the question of the salvific effect of Christ's suffering and death is vital. If preaching has to do with performing the gospel, then the salvific power of Christ's suffering and death is presented in and becomes a reality through preaching. Next, in order to understanding atonement Stump engages deeply with Scriptural narratives (Stump 2018:143–75; 233–89). She provides an implicit argument for enhanced homiletical skills to preach Scriptural narratives with the aim to present God's saving reality in the present. Finally, her explanation of atonement addresses the important practical-theological question how Christian doctrines shape human experiences and understandings. How is atonement realized in concrete human lives and how does it touch our psyches and change our social relationships?

In Stump's account of atonement, three lines of thought are of specific importance: atonement brings about unity (or: love); atonement repairs the post-fall condition of human beings; religious practices help to give up resistance against God's love and to persevere in the life of grace.[4]

In the life of faith, which Stump in the post-fall human condition consequently refers to as the "life of grace", the believer needs a constant

4 These themes are interwoven in the book, but distinctly dealt with in chapter 2 and 4 (on love and union); chapter 6 (on the post-fall human condition); chapter 9 (on perseverance).

seduction towards the good. Religious practices are needed for this. In a radical anti-Pelagian approach to human freedom, she argues how post-fall human beings are drawn towards rejection of God's grace and towards a life that is cut off from the unity and the love of God. What we need, Stump says, are practices that help us to get deep into the narrative of Christ's suffering and death. The Eucharist is the most prominent and promising ritual that enables us to do that. In the ritual of the breaking of the bread and the pouring of the wine, the realities of Christ's suffering and death are made concrete and real before our eyes, and in tasting bread and wine, we are made one with Christ's suffering and death. In partaking in the Eucharist, the human soul is softened and remains in the state of non-resistance towards divine grace. Even more, following a Thomistic line of thinking, Stump explains how the Eucharist is one of the means for sanctification: the will is strengthened and willing to accept grace, and thus grows in closer union with God.

Stump repeatedly shows the importance of the biblical narratives for understanding the person and work of Christ for understanding atonement. Jesus' cry of dereliction on the cross clarifies the reality of the Son's experience of the lost union with the Father, respecting the boundaries given by the Trinity, the unbreakable unity of the Divine persons. At the same time the cry of dereliction shows his complete solidarity with the human condition for in Christ's human mind all our guilt and shame are present. Further, in her reading of the stories of the temptations of Christ, Stump demonstrates how resisting the temptations was vital for Jesus to accept his role as Messiah and not to shy away from the suffering and death that was before him. Stump's emphasis on the importance of the narratives for moving the human will towards God's grace, has homiletic implications, even though she does not mention them herself. These implications will be spelled out below in more detail, yet two further clarifications are needed. First, what does atonement "repair" and second, what does atonement "bring about"?

Atonement is about repair. Salvation is central in understanding religion, as the sociologist Martin Riesebrodt, argues (Riesebrodt 2010:71–91). In Christianity salvation is about repair of wrongdoing. Repair of something that has been lost. Though Eleonore Stump contrasts the Anselmian and Thomistic approaches to the question of what needs repair and what kind

of repair is needed, central in both approaches is repairing the post-fall condition of humanity.

There is a chasm between God and humans and therefore between God and creation, as well as many chasms between human beings. The doctrine of atonement provides an elaborate answer to the question how repair of the divine-human relationship takes place, namely through the suffering and death of Jesus Christ. But this is only half of the answer. Atonement is not a switch that has been turned on in the universe when Jesus died upon the cross and everything thus got changed. Through Christ's eternal divinity, the reality of God's forgiveness due to Christ's atoning death, is available to all who lived in the past and to all who will live in the future. But this does not answer the question how we participate in this reality. There is something *in* a human being that needs repair. The human will need to be changed. To move into a state of grace, a human being must be put right with God. Two theological notions are important here: justification and sanctification. Though there is a whole history behind these concepts, Stump elegantly distinguishes between the start of the life of grace (*justification*) and the perseverance and growth in the life of grace (*sanctification*). These are personal qualities. That is, justification and sanctification are not predicated to the human race as a whole but are realised in individual human lives. Both concern a change of heart, more precisely, an act of the will. Yet the human will, as anti-Pelagian theology affirms, lacks the strength even to surrender to God's offer of grace.

The repair that atonement realises thus includes this subjective, inherent, human defect. Christ's life, suffering and death is the only means through which God can bring us in a state in which we at least - passively - give up active resistance against his love and to surrender the will in some kind of "quiescence" (Stump 2018, 206–10). The humiliation of Christ's birth and his suffering and death upon the cross are the means through which our guilt and shame are healed. It is one thing to understand the inner theological logic, but to turn this into an existential reality, however, we need more. We need "something that gently disarms a human person's resistance to love, so that she is willing to accept the forgiveness that is always there for her in God's love" (Stump 2018:288). According to the Reformation we need the preached gospel. Is preaching a way of disarming post-fall humans?

In repairing the broken human condition, atonement also brings about something positive. Atonement restores unity and brings about unity. In surrendering to God's love, there is a renewed unity with God. One of the ways of understanding unity is, again, by pointing to the will. Willing what God wills, however, is not precise enough. There should at least be a second act of the will, that safeguards that "willing what God wills" is not the result of force but of something freely chosen. Unity therefore, includes the will to will what God wills. For Stump Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane exemplifies the unity between the incarnate Son and the Father, when Christ's prays "not mine but your will be done". It seems that Jesus' will dissolves into God's will. Yet there is a strong second order will in Jesus to will this. This focus on the will, does not necessarily imply an exclusive interest in ethics. Willing what God wills does not only consist in ethical behaviour, but includes a strong affective reality, called "love". In other words, atonement, glues together individual persons, divine and human, in the bond of love. We need to consider in more depth what it means to experience this bond of love through spoken words. Is this account of atonement also helpful to heal the chasm in twentieth century homiletical theology between "proclamatory" and narrative styles of preaching?

We have seen that a theological reconstruction of atonement includes three elements: (1) it is historically grounded in the suffering and death of Jesus Christ; (2) atonement is not a once and for all declaration about the entire world, including its past and future inhabitants, but concerns concrete humans in their post-fall relationship to God that are in need of repair; (3) atonement is realized, both in its start and its continuing outworking, through specific religious practices of which Stump singles out the Eucharist while Protestants most likely add preaching for the same reasons: bring people into the narrative of Christ's suffering so that they surrender to God's love in order to be transformed. This third element gives a more precise approach to the homiletical question how atonement and preaching might relate.

To answer this question, we have to distinguish between two different levels. First, the level of "content": atonement as the content of preaching. Secondly, the level of "performance": does preaching somehow bring about union between God and humans? So first we look at atonement *in* preaching, and next I consider atonement *through* preaching.

3. Atonement in preaching, or: Preaching atonement

In the previous section "atonement" has been explained in relation to Eleonore Stump's recent reconsideration of the doctrine. We have seen that it comes with at least three elements, (a) the reference to Jesus' suffering and death; (b) the importance of atonement for the post-fall repair of the union of God and humans; (c) the actual realisation of this union in current believers. If atonement is central for Christian theology and if it is realised through religious practices, the question should be raised: how we preach "atonement". The first step to answer this question is to think through the *content* of preaching.

In many textbooks the content of preaching is rightly identified as Scripture. We preach the Scriptures. However, this also presents a conundrum[5] that is typical for homiletics as a practical-theological discipline: do we preach Scripture as a series of distinct texts – symbolised by the weekly readings of a lectionary, or do we preach a central "message" that is hidden in the Scriptures? This question opens up an entire array of issues such as hermeneutics (how to read and interpret Scripture), Dogmatics (how confessional standards function in sermons), and biblical theology (is there a common theme in Scripture). These issues deserve a much more nuanced analysis than I can provide in this article. Important for my topic, though, is that atonement is not just a dogmatic topic that arises when dealing with particular Biblical texts that specifically address the atoning work of Christ or its effects in persons and communities. If it is central in Christian theology to understand the relationship between God and humans in the post-fall condition, the theological content of atonement runs through sermons and determines the very nature of Christian preaching.

Studying atonement as "content" of preaching, at least three types of questions emerge: how do sermons speak about post-fall humanity? Second, how do sermons speak about God's will to forgive to repair for the damage between God and humans? Thirdly, how do sermons communicate the process of transformation from the broken relationship to a renewal of the union of God and humanity? These three questions point to elements

5 The concept of conundrum can be used as methodical tool to open up dimensions of practical theology (Mercer and Miller-McLemore 2016).

that belong to the "basics of homiletical theology". Hence, one could say, it is about theological anthropology, about the nature of God, and about spiritual transformation. Let us consider these three aspects briefly.

Theological anthropology: Implied Audience

First, like any type of speech, a sermon entails attitudes towards, views and expectations of the audience. Communication scholars argue that the audience that always implied in a speech can be at odds with the "real audience" (McQuail 1997). Due to the specific character of preaching, though, another question is as pressing as the construction of audiences in discourse, namely the question "whose" audience is it?

In the sermon the congregation hears God's Word. As the famous dictum goes: preaching the Word of God is the Word of God (*predicatio verbum Dei est verbum Dei*).[6] This may be the perennial paradox of homiletics: how can human words such as sermons, count as Divine discourse?[7] It is sufficient to note here, that following this maxim, the audience in preaching is not just the preacher's audience. The sermon constructs an audience before the face of God. The fundamental difference between preaching and other instances of human speech, is that in hearing a sermon, listeners do not just engage with what the preacher has been saying but engage with the Scriptures and beyond the Scriptures with their primary author, the Triune God. If so, then the audience is a theologically qualified audience: to speak about the audience of sermons as "creatures", puts the hearers before the Creator; to speak about the audience as "in need of salvation", puts the hearers before God the Redeemer; or to address the audience as "in the process of transformation", relates them to God the Renewer. Sermons thus relate the listeners to God.

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6 Obviously, to dismiss this question as just an issue of human authority or as a way of equating human and divine speech which indeed would be a blasphemy, is simply begging the question. The issue is precisely *not* to equate the two, yet to recognize the problem of relating our human speech with God's own Word. A quick dismissal of this question neglects the core issue of homiletical theology and turns the discipline of homiletics in a subdiscipline of communication or social studies.

7 For the expression "counts as" in relation to human discourse and divine discourse, see Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Divine Discourse* (1995).

Drawing from the Augustinian analysis of the divine-human relationship, the Christian tradition has formulated four "base" positions or "states" (*status*). First, the pre-fall condition of human beings, in which complete harmony exists between God and humans. Second, the post-fall condition in which sin entered into and fundamentally changed the relationship between God and humans. Thirdly and fourthly, there are the state of grace and the state of glory, both resulting from an act of divine restoration, the latter being the eschatological state of humans. Within these four positions or states, atonement is about restoring a human being from the post-fall condition into the life of grace.

Using this grid to analyse homiletical anthropology, the question then is: how do sermons speak about human beings in their post-fall condition? If we analyse atonement as "content" of preaching, we have to look into the ways sermons speak about post-fall conditions of individual human beings and societies.[8] This also includes the ways sermons address sin as a reality in the relationship between God and humans, according to a homiletical hamartiology as proposed by Block (2012). Pietistic preaching may have reduced the entire enterprise of preaching to the issue of "God and the individual soul", but when we lose this aspect in homiletics, we neglect a fundamental theological question: is there any need for atonement, and if so, what does it imply for how we talk about us human beings in relation to God?

4. God-talk: Referentiality

In as much as preaching entails a theological anthropology, sermons are foremost "God-talk", "Rede von God" to use a famous saying of the German homiletician Rudolf Bohren (1993). Hence, the second element in our analysis of atonement in preaching, concerns the way sermons talk about God. To be more precise, sermons should not just be "about" God as if preaching is some kind of religious lecture. Sermons nonetheless mention God, refer to God's nature and actions, and they do that in such a

8 I realize that I move from the individual to the communal. It requires separate analysis to combine the individual and communal perspectives, both in relationship to the post-fall condition as well as in reference to preaching. Ioannis Zizioulas traces the problem of the individual in community back to exactly the post-fall state (2006).

way that the presence of God may emerge in the performance of preaching. Preaching salvation, so Johan Cilliers helps us to distinguish, is both a word about God and a Word of God (Cilliers 2004:55–58). Hence, to preach atonement, is to name certain characteristics of God (a word about God) and to speak in such a way that atonement is spoken of as result of divine activity (a Word of God).

That God reaches out to this post-fall world, to redeem and to renew, signals loving kindness. Here we need some kind of kerygmatic theology, preaching as proclaiming the good news. The message that God takes care of a lost world is both "good" and needs to be communicated. It is the combined "no" against sin and "yes" towards the world (Campbell 2016). God's grace manifests itself in an attitude of forgiveness, an attitude that does not require any action, not even an act of remorse, on our side. God does not become merciful only when an individual human being demonstrates repentance. This would make God's nature and his attitude dependent upon our human actions. It would also locate the primacy of redemption in our human efforts to repent and show remorse. As if we would be able to change God into the benevolent being that God already is. Instead, the gospel presents an entirely different picture: the suffering and death of Christ signals God's eternal forgiveness. When it comes to atonement, God-talk in preaching includes the forgiving nature of God as well as the sacrificial death of Jesus on the cross. Building upon Eleonore Stump's analysis, it is hard to see how sermons could be about atonement without referring to Christ's suffering and death. Through presenting the narratives of Christ's suffering and death on the cross, we are invited into a gracious space and to surrender to God's love.

Renewed Union: Kerygmatic Speech?

This brings us to the third element of preaching about atonement. How can preaching contribute to the process of transformation, to bring a post-fall human being back into the life of grace? Two routes seem blocked. The way of ethics, since atonement is not realised in the life of human beings when preachers paint the correct way of living the life of faith, to help people to follow Christ, to live a Spirit-breathed life or to walk in the commandments of Israel's God. The second route towards salvation would be a "hard" inclusivist route, the position that Christ's suffering and death

redeems humankind unconditionally and without the need for repentance, conversion, and faith.[9] The world, including humankind, is not changed in an instant with Christ's sacrificial death on the cross; nor is salvation the result of human effort.

In Protestant theology Romans 10 verse 17 has been central in understanding the relationship between preaching and faith. Faith in God's promise of forgiveness comes through hearing the gospel as it is preached. In other words, the gospel needs to be presented and accepted to be effective. In the presentation of the gospel and its acceptance, God and man are reunited. It is in the moment of presenting the gospel, that the human heart is moved towards accepting the free offer of grace.

Essentially, atonement is being united with Christ. Due to the hypostatic union in the incarnation Christ unites fallen humanity with God.[10] What then, unites us with Christ? According to Stump, both human suffering and partaking in the Eucharist may be seen as ways for human beings to unite with Christ and to persevere in the union with Christ (2018:Ch. 9). A Protestant would add "preaching". In hearing the gospel, our hearts are softened to receive the promise of forgiveness. Precisely because in preaching the story of Christ is told and retold. The vivid and lively presentation of the gospel is the means through which Christ is offered to us and accepting the gospel unites us with Christ, which – again following Stumps line of reasoning – is not our merit but due to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. The preached gospel stops us in our tracks of resisting God's grace. Through the Biblical stories we encounter God's loving kindness and his merciful forgiveness (Lischer 2005:89–128). Preachers have a whole range of methods at their disposal, they use imagination, they employ rhetorical devices, and they engage with narratives. Homiletics is the true art of atonement.

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9 The issue of exclusivism and inclusivism is much more complex. For the sake of brevity, I refer to a "hard" kind of inclusivism, while there are many "soft" inclusivist positions.

10 For supralapsaric approaches to the incarnation, such as in John Duns Scotus's theology, humanity is also united with God through Christ, but that does not involve the moment of sin and fallenness. For an account of such a supralapsaric Christology see Edwin van Driel, *Incarnation Anyway* (2008).

5. Atonement through preaching, or: Preaching as atonement

With these thoughts, we already moved from the content of preaching to the communicative function of preaching. Sermons should not just be "about" atonement. On the contrary, when preachers present the suffering and death of Christ, the sermon becomes a means through which atonement takes place. Sermons bring about atonement. Or as Barrett summarizes Paul's teaching in 2 Corinthians, "The preaching of the Gospel is part of the Gospel itself" (Barrett 1993, 99). Being part of the gospel, preaching is an integral element in bringing about atonement between God and humans. Therefore, we need a performative approach to articulate adequately this "bringing about". "Bringing about" refers to J.L. Austin's idea that in using language we perform certain actions (1975[2]).[11] Hence, the performative connection between preaching and atonement implies the idea that atonement occurs in the act (or event) of preaching.[12]

Gerardus van der Leeuw (1890–1950), a Dutch theologian and scholar of comparative religions at the University of Groningen, made an important comment on preaching in his study on the sacraments. According to Van der Leeuw that which does not count as "catechesis" in a sermon, is "absolution" (Van der Leeuw 1949:190). From a speech act point of view Van der Leeuw seems to suggest that preaching either proclaims the forgiveness of sins or instructs the hearers in Christian thinking or living (doctrinal and ethical teaching). The educational function of preaching is generally acknowledged in homiletics. For instance, according to Grady Davis, teaching is one of the "functional forms" of preaching (Davis 1958:120–38). Davis thus allows for the distinction between proclamation and teaching but rejects the idea, as expressed by C.H. Dodd in his famous book on apostolic preaching (1936), that true preaching consists of proclamation (*kerugma*) instead of teaching. Gerardus van der Leeuw

11 Austin's initial impetus was continued by John Searle in his influential theory of speech acts (1969).

12 The "act of preaching" usually refers to what the preacher does. In terms of speech acts, it is reasonable to analyse preaching from the point of view of the preacher. The "event of preaching" includes the reception of preaching by the listeners, moving away from the preacher as primary subject in the preaching event. The use of "event" language does justice to the fact that something happens in preaching that is outside the preacher's power – something like "atonement".

seems to have a slight preference for Dodd's insistence on kerygmatic preaching, yet Van der Leeuw chooses to use another term, "absolution". Absolution is the proclamation of forgiveness. Everything that does not fall under the category of teaching in the sermon, should sound like "your sins are forgiven". Van der Leeuw draws a strict line between moral teaching "Thou shall (not)" and opening a space in preaching for experiencing God's forgiveness. A call from the pulpit to reconcile with each other within the congregation or within larger society would counts as an example of (moral) teaching, while the announcement that "God has reconciled himself to us" exemplifies an act of absolution. Preaching does something. It announces God's forgiving attitude, grounded in Christ's life, suffering and death.

The distinction between absolution and catechesis, however, meets a twofold challenge. First, the anthropological "counterpart" of atonement does not allow for such a strict distinction. Two "anthropological" moments are identified by Eleonore Stump in her analysis of atonement as the post-fall (re)uniting of God and man. In the moment of *justification*, a human being starts to accept God's offer of grace in response to Christ's union with the shame and guilt of humankind. We can be blameless because Christ took all the shame and guilt of the world upon him, uniting himself in his suffering and death with all past and future human beings. Because God does not override our freedom, he does not force us to be united with Christ. But according to the orthodox position that rejects the Pelagian idea that humans are free to accept God's grace, humans are not capable of submitting themselves freely to God's offer of grace. The moment of justification, in Stump's reconstruction, entails a moment of inactivity on the part of humans: the moment of not giving in to the deeply ingrained resistance against God due to our sinful "natures"[13]. The only way out of the dilemma is that we give up our active resistance against God.[14] In his commentary to Paul's letter to the Romans, C.K. Barrett, provides a helpful image: justification can be seen as a moment of "standing still".

13 "Nature" is a difficult, ontological concept. In order to move beyond a discussion of human essences – which is needed to explain the concept of "nature", I understand "nature" for the sake of brevity in a more flexible way, leaving aside the metaphysical issues that would rightly be raised by speaking about "sinful nature".

14 This can also be analysed with help of modal logic: there is fundamental difference of willing "a" or not-willing "not-a", the latter being an example of permission or refraining from active resistance.

"Only when man is prepared to stand still and see the glory of God can he apprehend God's action as salvation." (Barrett 1991, 28). The other moment, *sanctification*, can be understood as the process of "staying in the life of grace". Not as a linear, progressive, almost evolutionary, process of stages in which humans grow towards higher levels of perfection into a saintly life. Sanctification is more like a bumpy ride because the life of grace is a life full of adversities, suffering, resistance and temptations. For preaching these two moments do not represent different modes of speech. Absolution and teaching should not be held in opposition, but both serve the moment to bring a human being to the point of giving up resistance (standing still) as well as the process of empowering a believer to remain in the life of faith, despite sufferings, temptations, and experiences that lead us astray from God's Kingdom purposes.

Second, proclamation is usually connected to the speech act of "announcing". Yet communicating the reality of God's forgiving nature in order to move people to faith or to help them persevere in the life of grace, may call for different – perhaps more biblical - communicative forms, such as narrative and poetics. Is atonement only realised through acts of proclamation, as Van der Leeuw and others seem to suggest? In my earlier research, based upon the study of listeners, I pointed to a multi-layered understanding of proclamation, a "proclamatory scale", according to the perceived level of authority in the communication by the preacher. On the one end of the scale we find moments in the sermon in which God's grace is communicated in a position *against* the listener. This usually consists of a presentation of the gospel in terms of conversion accompanied by a call to believe. At the other end of the scale we find moments in the sermon in which the preacher expresses God's grace *on behalf* of the listeners as "something we believe". The sermon confirms the listener's faith, rather than challenges it. Though this is not usually conceived as kerygmatic preaching according to homiletical theory, it certainly presents – even announces – the gospel. However, it does so in a style that is much closer to the listener's emotions and experiences (Pleizier 2010:221–23). In a similar way, performing atonement in a sermon does not require a particular rhetorical style. On the contrary, as we already saw, Eleonore Stump refers to the *narratives* of Christ's suffering and death that are meant to soften our hearts so that we

may give up our resistance and come in a state of "standing still". Again, teaching and absolution should not be put in opposition.

In becoming united with Christ, the post-fall human being comes in a state of non-resistance (justification) and needs to persevere in the state of grace over and over again (sanctification) through the impression that Christ's suffering and death make on the human mind. Preaching is a means to create this impression. Perhaps narrative and imaginative preaching is gentler in this process than logical argument is. Hearing that he did this for us, and realising that he did this for me, softens the heart and impresses upon the hearer the reality of God's eternal forgiveness, demonstrated in the death upon the cross by Christ.

This calls for a kind of preaching that is *imaginative* – it paints Christ on the canvas of our hearts; *narrative* – it tells the story of the suffering One so that we can empathise with Him who chose to share our broken and sinful minds; and *poetic* – it moves our hearts towards the mystery of God's love that is revealed in Christ, the one who is closest to our hearts while transcending us into God's eternal and divine existence.

6. … and the beauty of preaching

Atonement, a central doctrine in Christianity, is not something that preachers preach "about". It does not "happen" when it is just mentioned as a theological truth. There is, however, a subtle interplay between sermons that talk "about" atonement and atonement that happens "in" the event of preaching. When preaching unites us with Christ, atonement takes place. In any way, sermons should talk about, tell narratives, use poetry or other forms of art to refer to or hint at the mystery of atonement through the crucified One.

When a sermon invites us into the story of God who reconciles himself to us through the life, suffering and death of Christ, we enter a space that for the post-fall human being can only be experienced as a "space of grace" (Cilliers 2016:5–25). Here lies the true beauty of preaching, when our current time and space transcend into God's: Christ's time and Christ's space becomes ours and so the guilt and shame that fill our spaces and our times becomes his. It is ultimate folly, that kind of preaching that unites

us with the one who had no beauty (Is. 53:2). Yet it makes our faces shine with inexpressible joy and sets our hearts free to surrender to ultimate love.

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