
A stubborn and provocative controversialist, J. Denny Weaver has long argued all-but-violently that nonviolence is integral to the gospel, has insisted that Christian orthodoxies must be judged accordingly rather than serve as the ultimate bar of judgment, and has thus refused to go unnoticed. *The Nonviolent Atonement* represents the maturing of his arguments, and this work is stronger and more convincing for its measured, systematic, and considered tone.

Central to Weaver’s project is his advocacy of a “narrative Christus Victor” conception of atonement. Based upon the earliest Christian views of atonement but correcting for flaws in the classic version of Christus Victor, this theology would entirely displace the other two major atonement theories, if Weaver had his way. Anselmian “substitutionary” atonement is his main target, but even Abelardian “moral influence” atonement suffers from the insoluble problem in Anselm’s theory: Since God the Father is in some way made the cause of the Son’s suffering, violence is portrayed as necessary for salvation. Christian theology and practice thus become more prone to condone violence, not only in war but also against oppressed groups. Meanwhile, the Christian ethic of nonviolence as Jesus taught and embodied it becomes marginal.

Narrative Christus Victor not only avoids the dynamic that feminists have provocatively labeled “divine child abuse” but fulfills the book title’s promise to show that God’s saving work is nonviolent — and thus that active nonviolent love is the power that truly moves the cosmos. God’s sending and Jesus’ coming were not an elaborate scheme to produce the innocent death needed for a metaphysical exchange of debt and forgiveness, but were to announce and embody the ultimate victory of God’s Reign over the powers of evil in which all humanity is in some way complicit. Because evil and injustice do not readily concede their hold, conflict was inevitable and ultimate confrontation resulting in Jesus’ death was predictable, but that does not mean God intended Jesus’ death. God’s intent was to expose the injustice of the powers and inaugurate God’s just and loving alternative, even at the cost of death. The resurrection (which, tellingly, other atonement theories hardly treat or need) was God’s vindication of Jesus’ nonviolent resistance to and victory over evil, empowering God’s people to live already according to God’s Reign.

Unlike the other atonement theories, narrative Christus Victor is thus richly biblical. At first, Weaver’s heavy reliance on what many consider a
marginal text of the canon — the book of Revelation — might seem to complicate that claim. That book demonstrates how the drama of salvation moves on the cosmic-yet-historical stage. Though God makes “war” on the powers that structure our world through injustice, the battle is nonviolent, for the victor worthy to unlock the scrolls of history is the slain and bloodied Lamb. Also commending this motif are its ecclesiological implications, for the martyrs who overcome through their own nonviolent suffering, and indeed the entire faithful Church, are active participants in the cosmic drama of salvation.

Weaver also demonstrates the Christus Victor motif at work in the gospels, Paul, the letter to the Hebrews, and the history of biblical Israel. Weakest, perhaps, is his treatment of Pauline theology. Weaver contends that narrative Christus Victor is present and compatible with Pauline thought, but he overextends his argument when he implies that Paul’s atonement theology is exclusively Christus Victor. Still, by the end (226), Weaver has reason to conclude that “narrative Christus Victor is much more than an atonement motif.” After all, it “poses a comprehensive way to see God working in the world, and thus suggests a reading of the Bible’s story from beginning to end.”

Weaver’s core advocacy of narrative Christus Victor appears in the first three chapters, along with his more direct engagement with Anselm and his defenders in the final chapter. In between, Weaver includes a chapter each on black, feminist, and womanist theology, in order to marshal support for his critique of mainstream Christian orthodoxy. Anselm’s atonement theory relied on what Weaver considers the abstract Christological formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon. According to the liberationist theologians he surveys, those formulas marginalized the life and ethic of Jesus, and thus allowed slavery, racism, and patriarchal domination of women.

Weaver is surely correct that theologies emerging from particular situations of oppression have no less a right to address all Christians with normative truth claims. The use that white liberals make of them does sometimes seem faddish; Weaver is not so fawning, for his appropriation of these theologies is critical when necessary. It is instructive, however, that he goes into far more detail in surveying black, feminist, and womanist theologies than he needs for his own argument. One wonders whether these contemporary theologies, which at points owe as much to Enlightenment philosophy as to authentic voices of the oppressed, are serving Weaver as a kind of reverse (underside) Christendom — the bar of theological judgment
before which he feels he must pass for approval.

If Weaver wants wide acceptance for narrative Christus Victor he might have given at least as exhaustive attention to the ways that Christus Victor establishes the grace and forgiveness of God for the believer, guides Christians through the thorny question of free will versus predestination, holds together the justice and mercy of God, and requires ethically transformed Christian lives while avoiding the trap of works-righteousness. Weaver attends to these topics in part of chapter 3, and again more briefly in chapter 7, but many readers will wish he had said more.

Weaver’s secondary objective remains to de-legitimize “theology in general,” that theology which claims to be the self-evidently universal starting point for all Christian reflection because it enjoys the mantel of catholic orthodoxy. Here, his success is mixed. One may accept his point that all theologies are particular, even dominant ones, but conclude instead that Christians thus need to seek, sift, and own the widest and most catholic theological wisdom possible, as discovered through many centuries, cultures, and experiences.

Atonement theology itself provides examples. Insofar as Weaver has aimed *The Nonviolent Atonement* toward an ecumenical audience, he has made a successful (and certainly not heterodox) case for narrative Christus Victor. Yet he has probably overplayed his case against the substitutionary and moral influence theories. His stubborn refusal to concede even an inch to them may actually have weakened his case. Surely he must recognize that moral influence dynamics play a role in contemporary nonviolent actions and the power of the cross. But what about substitutionary atonement?

It is sad for the Christian community and unfortunate for Weaver’s own project that his animus toward the work of fellow Mennonite theologian Thomas Finger has kept him at such a distance from Finger’s chapters on atonement in his *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*. There, Finger argued that Christus Victor provides the best overarching framework for atonement theology, but also accounted for a properly substitutionary dimension within Christus Victor along with a moral influence dynamic. Weaver may well have improved on Finger’s case for Christus Victor, and he may be right to reject Anselm’s version of substitutionary atonement altogether. Yet he could have scored all of his points against Anselmian doctrine and still recognized the biblical truth that Anselm expressed poorly or dangerously.

This truth is that Jesus Christ does stand in for us, *Deus pro nobis.*
Weaver acknowledges in passing that Jesus’ death constituted a vicarious sacrifice “for us” (75-76). He explores “sacrifice” not merely as suffering but as self-offering (59-60), a meaning which Protestant theology has generally obscured though Catholicism has never lost. He mentions the power of stories in which parents and missionaries have willingly died for others (211). If he were not so reticent to employ the word “substitutionary,” then, Weaver might have strengthened his case, done a better job of appropriating Pauline theology, and drawn on additional texts such as Isaiah’s portrayal of the Suffering Servant — all by naming the ways that the Christus Victor narrative itself moves dramatically forward through the substitutionary faithfulness by which God enters human history to stand in for God’s people when they fail to fulfill God’s calling.

Weaver will not have the last word on these matters (cf. 228), or on the many additional issues of historiography and philosophy, as well as theology, that his work provokes. First among these, his project could benefit from a debate that clarifies the sense in which God, in every Person of the Trinity, does exercise judgment and vengeance even if nonviolently, through blessings that feel like tortuous “coals of fire” to those who refuse them (Rom. 12:14-21). Again, Weaver’s case would be stronger if he would acknowledge the legitimate claims of “classical” Christian theology that God is Judge, precisely in order to circumvent violence-justifying appropriations of what is an inextricably biblical motif.

This book, a pleasant surprise and a pleasure to read, is accessible for use in college classes, should be required reading in seminaries, and will profit any adult Christian education class serious about theological literacy. Weaver’s interlocutors should use his arguments in *The Nonviolent Atonement* to improve their own, just as he has used their objections to earlier monographs to improve upon his.

*Gerald W. Schlabach*, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN


In *Jesus in Disneyland: Religion in Postmodern Times*, David Lyon, professor of sociology at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario, provides a
philosophically informed, theologically intelligent, sociological analysis of our current circumstance. In this volume, Lyon succeeds in showing how different the world has become and what a difference this makes for religious life. The cultural ground of everyday life has shifted — and the results have taken many sociologists by surprise. The surprise is chiefly to be seen in the unanticipated resilience, restructuring, and resurgence of religious life and practice: “Religious life is not shrinking, collapsing, or evaporating, as predicted by modernistic secularization theorists. Rather, in deregulated and post-institutional forms, the religious life draws upon multifarious resources with consequences, for better or worse, that are hard to predict, but that cry out for understanding” (19).

At the same time, religious leaders ought not to underestimate the challenge to religious life and practice internal to the conditions that now characterize our postmodern situation. In particular, Lyon identifies two principal, mutually reinforcing developments that bring to visibility the shift in the social setting of everyday life: one technological and the other economic. According to Lyon, “Above all, the postmodern relates to the development and diffusion of communication and information technology and to the growth of consumerism. These in turn both depend upon and stimulate global flows of communication, cultural codes, wealth and power” (37).

In this culture of conspicuous consumption and promiscuous communication, fundamental dimensions of everyday life are re-configured, namely authority, identity, time, and space. Because these dimensions of existence are central to religious life and practice, it follows that religious life will undergo significant revision. The central thesis of Lyon’s book is that “the postmodern places question marks over older, modern assumptions about authority, and it foregrounds questions of identity. It does so because at a profound social level, time and space, the very matrix of human social life, are undergoing radical restructuring” (11). The book becomes an exploration of these four dimensions of social existence and how they are being fundamentally re-configured by the proliferation of communication and information technologies (CITs) and by the rise of consumerism.

Lyon provides an account of our current circumstance that does not tell us things we already know but lack sufficient research to confirm. Rather, he brings into focus those realities that we are already experiencing but have not been able to name or articulate, let alone interpret. There is no argument
that change is occurring. What we lack is an intelligent, interesting, and compelling conversation about how the flow of change is re-ordering our days. For example, connecting the dimensions of time and space with the impact of CITs on everyday life surfaces our failure to comprehend the theological significance of the presence of technology in everyday life.

Lyon’s trenchant analysis and critique of the realities of CIT’s and consumerism is intended to evoke response, not to foreclose it. He claims that a dynamic internal to Christian engagement with culture gives it the capacity to act on its own terms rather than to run for cover into a fundamentalist enclave or capitulate to a “Disneyfied” culture that “trivializes truth, simplifies suffering, and sucks us into its simulated realities as extras in the spectacle” (148). Lyon helps us see how the break-up of modernity breaks open new arenas for religious life. “[F]ar from foreclosing the possibilities for appropriate Christian living, these conditions actually open the door to new variations, new combinations of authentic and responsible action”(143). Amidst the undeniable cracks appearing in institutional, conventional religious life, there is flowering and flourishing of religious life and practice.

Lyon concludes his account on a note that sounds far more sermonic than sociological: “The old story, after all, recounts how the most significant initiatives are not human ones and that ironic reversals — life out of death, strength in weakness, richness in poverty — are the real stuff of history” (147). Amen and amen.

David J. Wood, First Baptist Church, Gardiner, ME


Within a platform of dialogue with other Christian theological traditions, this volume celebrates some of the most important characteristics of Anabaptist theological discourse and community. The diversity of the contributors is a clear indication that the Anabaptist tradition is a resourceful conversational partner offering important lessons for other Christian theological contexts. Here one encounters perspectives from Baptist scholars (James Wm. McClendon, Jr., Glen H. Stassen); an Evangelical (Christopher D. Marshall);
United Methodists (Stanley Hauerwas, Richard B. Hays, Michael Cartwright); a member of the Brethren (Nancey Murphy); an Anglican (Christopher Rowland); an Episcopalian (Rodney Clapp); a Cistercian Brother (Eoin de Bhaldraithe); a Peruvian Baptist (Samuel Escobar); a member of the Reformed tradition (Richard J. Mow); and a Mennonite (Stuart Murray). Together and from their individual faith backgrounds they offer a mosaic of engagements with the theological richness of the radical reformation.

A first lesson is the centrality of the person of Jesus Christ in Anabaptist ethical values. Anabaptist theology represents a commitment to integrating all the dimensions of life under an “ethical christocentrism” (Marshall). In fact, it is the ethics of Jesus Christ, as described largely in the Sermon on the Mount, that provide the church with the pattern of proper Christian living. That is, all believers are called to active participation and involvement for the Kingdom of Jesus Christ (Stassen). In this case, living the Christian life enjoys primacy over dogma. Following Christ can only be expressed through concrete service for the poor and disenfranchised, making Christian discipleship a pattern of Christian life (Rowland).

Another notable feature of Anabaptist theology is its strong commitment to the biblical text. Anabaptist reading of the Scripture reveals a sophisticated hermeneutics that goes beyond literalist sentiments and hermeneutic methodologies which fail to take the biblical text seriously. This is a “hermeneutics of the people of God,” where members of the community are invited to participate in the interpreting of the text, and access God’s biblical message (Cartwright).

Perhaps one of the most commonly known characteristics of Anabaptist communities is their radical posture against violence and war as a legitimate Christian response in the presence of conflict. This commitment to pacifism becomes all the more relevant when one is confronted with the human toll incurred by war and violence (McClendon). One needs to keep in mind that Anabaptists do not conceive this commitment to pacifism as separate from the mission of the church. Pacifism is a concept that grows out of the community’s life. Thus, what we see in the Anabaptist pacifist outlook is a sophisticated ecclesiology that derives from its Christology (Hauerwas).

These key characteristics of Anabaptist theology make it a powerful partner in the development of social ethics among Evangelicals in Latin America. They open new horizons for understanding Christian life and mission in this world (Escobar). They show that the Anabaptists represent an opposition
to the status quo. This explains why they are identified as embodying a radical tradition, so called because it seeks to participate in the formation of a new reality, a new polis (Hays). On one hand, this is a healthy antidote to dissatisfying Protestant theological stances concerning war and peace. On the other hand, the emphasis on the communal element of the Christian faith makes it an appealing alternative to the modern individualistic approach (Murphy). The Anabaptists offer useful theological grounds for entering a true dialogue with emerging theological voices in other parts of the world, and with the growing Pentecostal movement (Murray). Therefore, the Anabaptist theological position is not something that can be easily ignored by other traditions. The challenge is to abandon previous attitudes of “Mennophobia” in order to create the groundwork for proper theological dialogue (Mouw).

Moreover, the Anabaptist practice of adult baptism opens the door for entering a fruitful conversation with other perspectives, which would be impossible otherwise. It is only in this way that a true ecumenical attitude will be developed among the various traditions, including the Anabaptist (Bhaldratthe). In sum, the conversations in Engaging Anabaptism intend to show the extent to which Anabaptist theology and practices have influenced other Christian traditions. They embody a growing attitude that seeks to create networks of conversation and mutual learning among diverse traditions (Clapp).

Despite the significant contributions of Anabaptist theology, some criticisms are worth noting. Concerning Anabaptist hermeneutics, one important limitation is the extent to which the Old Testament is perceived as fulfilled in — superseded by — the New Testament. According to Hays, this position is problematic for it fails to place the person of Jesus Christ — if one is to understand the work of God appropriately — within the context of God’s work in and for the people of Israel. Moreover, Mouw argues that Anabaptist theology conceives the death of Christ separate from its juridical-penal categories and runs the danger of reducing Christ’s death, and the attempt to follow him, into a moralizing interpretation of what happened at Calvary. Perhaps one of the most compelling criticisms relates to the Anabaptist pacifist stance: While it is understood as a nonconformist position, it may also result in an attitude of non-commitment to the world, turning pacifism into passivism in the face of injustice (Marshall). Finally, Anabaptist individualistic spirituality prevents the incorporation of a more eucharistic-sacramental celebration of worship within the community, (Clapp, Hauerwas).
This book provides a critical understanding of Anabaptist theology within the context of important concerns for other theological traditions. It demonstrates the profound impact the radical reformation has had since its birth in the sixteenth century.

_Néstor Medina_, Emmanuel College, University of Toronto

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