

REFLECTIONS ON J. DENNY WEAVER'S *THE NONVIOLENT ATONEMENT*

Introductory Comments

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J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement* was published in 2001 by Eerdmans, and has been widely reviewed and discussed. We have the advantage at this point of taking stock after the book has had a chance to "settle" a bit.

At the Mennonite and Friends Forum at the 2007 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion and Society of Biblical Literature held in San Diego in November, three Anabaptist scholars shared their reflections on Weaver's book. Weaver responded. The following written versions of this exchange capture only some of the liveliness of the conversation. Unfortunately, we do not have a written record of the stimulating discussion that followed the presentations. Hopefully, though, what we are able to provide will help further the on-going task of reflection on how peace theology speaks to issues of atonement and salvation.

Since probably at least some readers of this journal have not yet read the book, I offer the following as a brief synopsis of Weaver's main ideas.

In *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Weaver has identified Christian beliefs about atonement, about how Jesus brings together human beings and God, as a key arena where theology leaves open the door (or perhaps even itself opens the door) for violence as an expression of God's will.

In taking our thinking about atonement in a more peaceable direction, Weaver develops what he calls a "narrative Christus Victor" view of atonement. For this view, Jesus' victory over the powers involves his pacifist and countercultural life and teaching that modeled freedom from the powers, his refusal to retaliate as they conspired to kill him, and, crucially, God's nonviolent raising Jesus from the dead that validated Jesus' way of life as God's way and exposed the powers as rebels against God.

Weaver understands narrative Christus Victor to be clearly in the

Christus Victor family of atonement images, but its biblical foundation makes it their forerunner. It bears some resemblance to the “cosmic battle” version of Christus Victor, but it brings the battle down from the cosmos and locates it first of all in the confrontation between Jesus and the forces of evil embodied, for example, in the Roman Empire that executed him.

For Weaver, therefore, the death of Jesus is not something needed by God; the object of Jesus’ death is not God or God’s law (as in the “satisfaction” view of the atonement) or humanity (as in the “moral influence” view). Narrative Christus Victor differs from the “ransom” view in seeing the opponent from which Jesus frees the believer not in terms of a personal devil but rather – following Walter Wink – as a constellation of principalities and powers.

Weaver’s God is free to forgive without the mechanistic constraints of honor, holiness, or retributive justice. Jesus’ victory is seen not in a violent murder that God needs, but in Jesus’ life of freedom from the powers and his exposure of their true nature and ultimate weakness in his faithfulness unto death and resurrection. Understood this way, the atonement becomes a model for discipleship, for following Jesus in the ways of peace and trusting in God’s victorious love.

Weaver assumes that theology has ethical consequences, and thus nonviolence is an indispensable criterion for evaluating *all* theological convictions and doctrines. He also emphasizes the *contextual* nature of all theology; no theology transcends its own particular human context. Our views of God and Jesus, for example, are to be weighed in relationship to how they are in harmony or in tension with pacifist convictions.

Weaver reads the Bible as a *story*. He finds in the book of Revelation and in the gospels a portrayal of God and salvation presented in narrative form that points toward “narrative Christus Victor,” that is, the story of Jesus’ saving victory won through persevering love.

Weaver has a broader understanding of sin than is found in the satisfaction views. For him, sin specifically includes distorted social relationships, in contrast to satisfaction’s primarily vertical understanding of sin as the violation of God’s commands or God’s honor.

Jesus’ resurrection stands directly at the center of the salvation story Weaver sees in the New Testament. The salvation Jesus brings depends upon

God raising him from the dead, thereby vindicating Jesus' way as the way of truth. This centrality of resurrection contrasts with its apparent marginality in the satisfaction view.

Weaver rejects the satisfaction view because: (1) it is not actually supported by the biblical texts often raised on its behalf (e.g., Paul, Hebrews, Old Testament sacrifices); (2) it misrepresents the God of the Bible as a God who requires an act of retributive violence at the heart of things rather than using thoroughly peaceable means; and (3) it is complicit in the ages-long oppression of vulnerable people (explicitly, in Weaver's argument, African-Americans and women).

Whether or not we agree with Weaver's moves and conclusions, we do have enough evidence from the past few years to support Rosemary Radford Ruether's blurb on the book cover: This is "an important book for contemporary Christological theology." Thanks to Weaver and his respondents for advancing our conversation of this important work.

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