Don't Need No Satisfaction: Rolling the Stone Away with J. Denny Weaver

Sharon L. Baker

I

As a recovering conservative Southern Baptist**,** I am fairly new to the Mennonite Community. So *please allow me to introduce myself*. I am a sinner saved by the work of Jesus as articulated in the penal substitutionary model of atonement. In my mid-twenties, entrenched in a society infiltrated with retributive theories of justice, penal substitution provided me with the inner peace and *emotional rescue* I needed to soften my *heart of stone*. What can I say; a *long, long while* ago that narrative worked for me.

In an article entitled "Communicating the Gospel in Terms of Shame," Timothy Boyle draws attention to the importance of telling the Gospel story in ways relevant to the socio-cultural and psychological world-structure of those brought up in Japan. The differences between the Eastern shame-based society and the Western guilt-based society figure prominently in effectively communicating the work of Jesus during his life, death, and resurrection. Because of this, Boyle suggests recounting the story of Jesus to the Japanese people in a fashion that interfaces with the Eastern shame-based mindset. For instance, rather than expressing the passion event in terms of sin and forgiveness of sin, Boyle uses concepts of shame, articulating sin as the "original shame" and atonement as the "covering of shame."[1] Mennonite scholar and minister C. Norman Kraus communicates the gospel for Asian peoples in terms of the vicarious suffering of Jesus who identified fully with human shame. He writes that "[Jesus'] identification with us in our shameful situation enables us to identify with [him] in his realization of the 'glorious liberty of the children of God'" (Rom. 8:21).[2]

We see many instances of this story-telling technique in the Christian tradition. Throughout history faithful theologians reinterpret the passion of Christ according to their contemporary situation and their interpretation of scripture. For example, Irenaeus, one of the earliest advocates of the

Christus Victor theory, lived in conflict with the social structure of his day. Christianity was an illicit religion and Caesar was lord. Irenaeus related the earthly conflicts between Caesar and Christianity to a cosmic battle between celestial powers.[3] Several centuries later, Anselm communicated the story of salvation by drawing from the feudal social structure common during his lifetime. By providing his hearers with a common nomenclature, an idiomatic metaphor to which they could relate, the satisfaction theory of atonement gained in popularity and became the traditional *modus operandi* for the work of Christ in effecting salvation.[4]

Later, Abelard interprets the atonement according to the notions of "courtly love" and the new humanist culture just emerging in his society.[5] Eventually, with the assimilation of Aristotle, Aquinas interprets the atonement according to and in harmony with the Aristotelian philosophical categories and ethical principles of his day.[6] With the growth of the nation state in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, judicial power was transferred from the community to the state, which brought about a focus on punitive measures and the popularity of penitentiaries. As a result of being embedded in this culture obsessed with sin, guilt, and penal justice, the reformers, especially John Calvin, interpreted the atonement through the lens of punishment and justification.[7]

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, liberal-minded social theologians reinterpreted atonement according to the Enlightenment's positive humanistic attitudes and the new scientific discoveries that appeared to undermine faith in an invisible, non-verifiable God. They developed theories of atonement, void of mythic content, that appealed to the intellect.[8] After the devastation of two world wars, theologians like Karl Barth reinterpreted atonement for a world reeling from profound suffering and disenchantment with humankind. His incarnational theories of substitution and representation combined the two natures of Jesus from the Chalcedonian discussions with the two states of humiliation and exultation in Calvin and Luther. The liberation theologians, concerned with making the Gospel of Christ relevant for the scores of thousands of innocent people oppressed, abused, and murdered by empires, wars, and crooked governments, reinterpreted the atonement for their suffering communities.[9]

The layers of reinterpretation in both the biblical texts and in the history

of Christian doctrine lead to the realization that the tradition *is* to reinterpret the tradition. We reinterpret continually, repeatedly, with a repetition of reinterpretation that preserves the relevance of the living and active Word of God. In contemporary culture, the prevalence of violence executed under the guise of divine sanction is *out of control. Too much blood* has been shed. The responsibility to reinterpret the character and heart of God, from that of violent to anti-violent, looms before us as we work toward a theology of peace, reconciliation, and restoration through Jesus Christ.

I realize that connections between atonement theory and social violence cannot be established with certainty, for causes and their effects are often difficult to prove. Yet, if traditional atonement theory lends legitimacy to social and personal violence in any way whatsoever, it must be rethought.[10] We need new metaphors that speak to contemporary issues: metaphors that express the Good News as good news. And, so, to cries of protest that seek to save tradition from sliding, *like a rolling stone,* down the slippery slope of easy grace into the pond of "anything goes," Denny Weaver attempts to reinterpret atonement theory in his book *The Nonviolent Atonement*. True to his Anabaptist roots, he is taking on the theology of the church where that theology contributes to oppressive, abusive structures and behaviors. He does not come at tradition like *a street fighting man,* desiring nothing other than to *paint it black,* with broad careless strokes of a brush. Rather, he seeks to establish a theological and religious alternative to the established ecclesiastical authority.[11]

As Weaver makes clear, traditional theories of atonement, especially those of Anselm, Abelard, Calvin, and Luther, provide an image of a violent God, heaven bent on balanced cosmic books. *When the whip comes down* and an innocent Jesus takes a hard *one hit* with the gavel of divine justice, he becomes our *beast of burden* so that God can let us *off the hook.* That's certainly r*ough justice*! Though Jesus, through parched, bloody lips, utters in painful triumph from the cross, "*it's all over now,*" it seems the violence has only just begun. We've read about it in the history books; we've seen it happen; traditional atonement narratives, although not promoting it in themselves, allow the church to accommodate human violence. In imitation of God, we have let violence bleed into our notions of Christian piety and influence our actions, manifested for example in the Spanish Inquisition, the

Crusades, the Reformation, the Anabaptist persecutions, the Salem witch hunts, the Troubles in Ireland, the slave trade, the Holocaust,[12] and violence against gays. To counteract the violence rather than to *let it bleed* unebbed, Weaver desires to open the way to envision other potentially appropriate models of atonement that make the accommodation of human violence more difficult.[13]

Weaver reaches back beyond Anselm into the Christian tradition and resuscitates the Irenaean *Christus Victor* theory of atonement and its notions of defeating the devil. Where Anselm revokes the devil, Denny revives him. This revival does not stem from any *sympathy for the devil* on Weaver's part. In actuality, he breathes new life into the luciferian personality only to defeat *the nature of his game*. With the narrative Christus Victor theory, Weaver constructs an alternative metaphor that explains the function of Jesus on the cross. He focuses not on his death but on his resurrection; not on the taking of his life as a payment for sin's debt but on the giving of his life as a protest against systemic evil and violence. Using the Gospels and the book of Revelation, Weaver crafts the story of God's reign coming peacefully to earth to disarm evil, to reconcile hostile principalities and peoples, and to restore harmony to ruptured relationships. Weaver reminds us that, even though the ruling satanic powers that kill Jesus seem to prevail over the compassionate powers that rule in God's reign, God does not *love in vain.* The stone rolls away and a resurrected Jesus reveals the nonviolent victory of the kingdom of God over the dominion of the devil.

As in any theological construction that upsets the traditional status quo, Weaver's narrative Christus Victor is not without its critics. True, as Douglas Farrow infers, Anselm with his satisfaction theory was most likely not concerned with practical implications of divine violence and retribution; but that doesn't mean *we* must function wearing the same blinders. Yes, satisfaction theory, à la Anselm, rests on restoration rather than on retribution; but no matter how passionately we try to save it, the theory still depends upon the violence of God in securing forgiveness.[14] I concur with David McWilliams that Weaver's exegetical and historical work is at times selective and forced; but consciously or not, all theologians and biblical scholars hold to their own form of a biblical or historical canon within the canon.[15] Thomas Finger makes a valid case against Weaver by working to

retain the language of substitution; but theologians must also work to re-interpret the notion in a manner that relieves it of its penal baggage.[16]

II

These critiques aside, we have much to benefit from Weaver's re-reading, re-evaluating, and re-interpreting the traditional theories of atonement. Our global community needs theologians willing to challenge and to re-work the system in ways that promote peace. Notions of justice prosecuted through violence have us stuck between a *rock and hard place,* which if not changed put us in danger of self-destruction. In the words of Christopher Marshall, "[t]he real challenge is to find ways to understand and articulate the salvific character of Christ's death and resurrection that makes sense to our generation – ways that [stand] in continuity with the rich diversity of images New Testament writers use when they speak of the cross and ways that do not depend on discreditable views of God nor the sanction of violence of any kind."[17]

Weaver constructs a creative and scripturally viable model for atonement. In answer to those who arraign his theory for deconstructing notions of justice as punishment, I argue, with him, that narrative Christus Victor provides a more consistent picture of divine behavior. Although theologians holding to traditional penal or satisfaction theories would not articulate it as such, the ramifications of their views lead to an interpretation of God as a loving parent who viciously attacks when provoked and then tells the children to "do as I say, not as I do." The images of the violent retributive justice of God the father and the pacifist reconciling justice of Jesus the son create inconsistencies within the divine nature and in theological constructions. Weaver attempts to harmonize the God who liberates us from sin and evil with the Jesus who loved God and others through peaceful means and who taught *us* to live and love nonviolently.

Although Weaver suffers the critique that his focus on the structural character of sin reduces the gravity of personal sins, he devises a model that takes seriously the evil systems in which individuals are caught up and that operate to encourage personal sinful actions.[18] Narrative Christus Victor reveals the power of God's reign to annihilate corporate, institutional,

social, *and* personal evils that lead to sin on both a cosmic and an earthly level. The crux of Weaver's theological creativity is that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bear directly on our behavior toward God and others in the flux and flow of daily life. God rolled the stone away from the evil of death and the sin that entomb us, so that in the power of the nonviolent Christ, we too can confront sin and defeat evil, both personally and structurally.

In a roomful of possible critics, Weaver might want me to stop right here. He probably would welcome a response that offers only accolades. But, Denny, *you can't always get what you want.* I am going to put you *under my thumb* for a short time and offer a few good-natured critiques.

First, arguments over the dichotomy between justice and punishment puzzle me.[19] Weaver works hard to expose the weaknesses of a form of divine justice that requires punishment; yet he seems to fail to convince his detractors. Perhaps changing the metaphor might clarify the distinction. Rather than justice and punishment, might we talk about the relationship between forgiveness and punishment? Clearly, forgiveness precludes the need for punishment, does it not? If punishment must precede forgiveness in order to set right an offense, what need is there to forgive or to pardon? That God sacrificially forgives sinful humanity and reaches out to restore us to a love relationship without prior payback, satisfaction, or punishment – even of an innocent person as our substitute – is what makes the Good News good news. In the words of Hastings Rashdall, "forgiveness is an infinitely more convincing proof of love than punishment can ever be, and may, therefore, touch the heart as punishment will seldom touch it."[20]

Second, the soteriological content of narrative Christus Victor theory opens itself up to the same critique mounted against Abelard. It is too subjective. Although it conquers the evil powers in the cosmic realm as manifested by the triumph of Jesus' resurrection on earth, salvation from these powers depends upon the seeing and hearing subject. Granted, the addition of the "narrative" component in Weaver's Christus Victor model brings the victory down to earth and makes God's reign on earth visible by confronting evil with love. Still, salvation occurs only when individual subjects, empowered and enlightened by the Holy Spirit, decide to participate in God's reign through continuing the work of Jesus. I understand that

obedience plays a critical role in the Anabaptist tradition and appreciate that aspect of Weaver's thought. Yet, I am left wondering if a more objective component might benefit the theory, one that connects the victory of Jesus with the forgiveness of God.

For instance, how does divine *forgiveness* connect with Christ's defeat of the powers? Are forgiveness and victory two parallel yet separate aspects of God's work of reconciliation? Can forgiveness function as the objective, concrete bridge between victory over evil powers and restoration between humanity and God? Because forgiveness is the essential ingredient for a restored relationship with God, narrative Christus Victor may be strengthened by a more vigorous notion of divine forgiveness on an objective, cosmic level that interconnects with the victory over evil and human participation in God's reign. That is, a noteworthy movement of forgiveness from the minor into the major key equalizes forgiveness and victory in doxological harmony so that they resonate together in sonorous polyphony. God in Jesus conquers the forces of evil *because of* the divine sacrifice of forgiveness. Through sacrificial forgiveness, God in Christ protests the injustice of the powers of evil and of retributive violence that thrive on unforgiveness. God substitutes the unforgiveness with the justice of a love that forgives freely. Divine *love is strong* and God's loving forgiveness is strong enough to redeem even the violent powers of evil and to resurrect the possibility of repentance and total restoration with God.

Third, Weaver indicts and votes to execute the Nicene Creed for ignoring the earthly story of Jesus in favor of a metaphysical articulation of the triune God. I, along with theologians like Michael Hardin, vote to stay the execution. The troublesome miscreant creed and its accomplice *homoousios* can be absolved after all. A simple Aristotelian syllogism may litigate its pardon: If Jesus is of the "same essence" as God, and if Jesus is nonviolent, then God, too, must be nonviolent. Weaver, therefore, can retain the Nicene Creed in order to subvert images of a violent God. Narrative Christus Victor can form a partnership of sorts with the Nicene Creed in order to arbitrate for the anti-violent nature of God.[21]

As a postmodern theologian, whatever that is, I certainly do not want to lay claim to a universal, meta-theory of atonement that supersedes all others. I may not be a Christian were that the case. Because of the escalating

instances of religious violence generated under the guise of God's will, much too often religion, the Christian religion in this case, is considered the wound and not the bandage, the disease and not the cure. It is important, therefore, to construct alternate theories that align with contemporary cultural sensitivities and that maintain their relevance in a world constantly at war. In this regard, J. Denny Weaver's *Nonviolent Atonement* is *hot stuff*.

Denny, in defending your theory and in the attempt to stem the tide of violence through theological reflection and practice, you may sometimes feel like a victim of the Sisyphean rolling stone. But, you can say with confidence, "*time is on my side";* our tradition, traditionally, is not stagnant. It is not immune to the advances and fluctuations of time and culture but continues working to ground us in the good of the past, while enlightening us to remain relevant in the present and always encouraging us to reach out toward a better future. And, personally, I don't want no satisfaction. I am glad *I'm free* from the need for an innocent man to suffer for my sin. There's no justice in that. *Gimme shelter* in an objective, unconditional, restorative divine forgiveness, that overcomes the power of evil with the power of love.

Notes

Readers familiar with recent popular music will doubtless recognize certain allusions in this article. – Editor

[1] Timothy D. Boyle, "Communicating the Gospel in Terms of Shame," in *The Japan Christian Quarterly* (Jan. 1984): 41-42.

[2] C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 1987), 205-19.

[3] Joel B.Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 116ff.

[4] Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), 85-219; Anthony Bartlett, *Cross Purposes: The Violent Grammar of the Cross* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), 75-81. In addition to the influence of the feudal system, the view of God as just judge in Anselm's day also contributed to the content of his theological construction. Strict penance was expected of those who killed others in war in order to satisfy God. Anselm may have felt "cut off from all notions of a reconciling and loving God, rarely able to forget that one day he would be judged." See Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance,* 86-88.

[5] The poetic literature and music of courtly love produced a cultural shift that focused more

on the individual, self-examination, and the distinction between self and other that may have influenced Abelard's more subjective theory of atonement with its focus on the love of God. See Gorringe, 105-06. Gorringe explains that "to move from a legal metaphor (satisfaction) to the impact the suffering Christ makes on the soul is entirely in accord with the new sensibility, part and parcel of which is the new stress on human responsibility in sinning, and therefore before the law" (112).

[6] Gorringe, 118. Aquinas was heavily influenced by Aristotelian natural law and reason, which for him became human reason working simultaneously with the divine law inherent in God's rule where punitive measures restore the balance of divine justice.

[7] See Gorringe, 128-41; Bartlett, *Cross Purposes,* 89-90; Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 315. Weaver, 188. With the rise of the nation state, judicial power changed hands from the local community to the officers of the state, which relied more on punitive justice. Punishment tactics moved from torture to penitentiary and the growth of the workhouse. Crimes were punished savagely. For Luther, rulers are the ministers of God's wrath and have the right to inflict punishment, a theory that found its way into his atonement theory. The divine ruler inflicts the ultimate punishment on sinful humanity through Jesus. Luther rids himself of satisfaction but envisions an extreme model of substitution. Jesus becomes a curse for us; he was made a thief, murderer, etc. He bears all our sin in his body (Bartlett, 90).

[8] Gorringe, 211-16. The rational optimism of the time led Bushnell and Rashdall to advocate an "exemplar" theory of atonement. Rashdall believed that "[t]he picture of Christ in the gospels appeals to the mind and religious consciousness of humankind. All human love is in some degree a revelation of God." "[T]he incarnation was the atonement, and we should identify with that. Christ's whole life was a sacrifice which takes away sin in the only way in which sin can really be taken away, and that is by making the inner actually better" (Gorringe, 215).

[9] I realize the simplistic nature of this short summary of social cause and theological effect in Christian history. Of course, the story is more complicated and many other factors are involved. I use this section of the essay for illustrative purposes only.

[10] Gorringe.

[11] Christopher Marshall, "Atonement, Violence and the Will of God," in *MQR* (Aug. 1997): 72-73.

[12] James Carroll, *Constantine's Sword: The Church and the Jews* (New York: Mariner Books, 2001).

[13] Weaver, 96-97.

[14] Douglas Farrow, review of "J. Denny Weaver's The Nonviolent Atonement," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (Jan. 2004): 95.

[15] David B. McWilliams, review of "J. Denny Weaver: The Nonviolent Atonement," *Westminster Theological Journal* (Spring 2002): 218.

[16] Tom Finger, "Response to J. Denny Weaver" in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 39-40; Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 306-10; Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, *Stricken by God: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory*

of Christ (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008); Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, 219ff.
[17] Marshall, "Atonement, Violence and the Will of God," 75.
[18] McWilliams, 220. Marit Trelstad, "Lavish Love" in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006), 111ff. Of the 53 times Paul uses *harmartia*, 13 instances are singular and 40 are plural. For him, sin is structural; sin is a principle. For Weaver, the concept of sin is structural but his anthropology in soteriological terms is individual. Consistency is needed here.
[19] Weaver, 8, 180-88.
[20] Hastings Rashdall, *The Theory of Good and Evil* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1907), 312. See also Gorringe, 214.
[21] Willard Swartley, *Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006). Swartley adds a few lines to the Apostles Creed that take into consideration the life and teachings of Jesus, not merely his ontology of his nature.

Sharon L. Baker is an Assistant Professor of Theology and Religion at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania.