Weaver and Nonviolent Atonement: A Response

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I

I'm honored to be one of the respondents to J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement*. I'm aware that any issues I raise have likely been raised already and much better by others. Weaver himself anticipates a good number of the concerns in his work. But since I have been asked to respond, I will do so, but I will restrict myself to only a brief sample of the issues.

Weaver's project is to oppose an Anselmian (and to a lesser degree Abelardian) understanding of atonement marked by substitution and satisfaction, in which Jesus substitutes for us in taking our just deserts upon himself, thereby satisfying God's demand for justice. Weaver opposes this view for several interrelated reasons. The first is that it casts God and atonement in the vocabulary and categories of violence as the solution to sin. The second is that Anselm's understanding of atonement is both rooted in, and underwrites, a retributive justice system that institutionalizes violence.

In contrast, since Jesus has already in his life and teaching revealed that the reign of God is nonviolent, his death should not be seen in any way as God's act, which would constitute an act of violence, but rather as a demonstration of nonviolence, "making visible the nonviolent reign of God." Most important, it is not the death of Jesus that is efficacious, but the resurrection, the apex of the drama of atonement. Since Jesus models this nonviolent nature of God's reign in his life, teaching, and death, he is to be followed by those who have benefited from atonement. Indeed, that is how they benefit from it; they participate in God's nonviolent reign. Weaver calls this counter-proposal "narrative Christus Victor."

I heartily concur with Weaver's rejection of an atonement that can be accounted for apart from transformed and transforming living. Reducing atonement to a forensic transaction leaving life unchanged, only now accompanied by impunity, is heresy, pure and simple (Bonhoeffer called it "cheap grace"). I agree with Weaver's insistence on placing the atonement

in inextricable relation to both Jesus' ministry and teaching, and into the larger apocalyptic drama of the remaking of creation. I applaud his efforts to bring resurrection into the discussion, sorely missing from too much of Anabaptist theology in recent times. Incidentally, I also applaud his refusal to allow the resurrection to serve as no more than a cipher for indomitability. Resurrection is not simply a symbol of hope for Weaver; it is the decisive cosmos-altering act of a gracious God.

I deeply appreciate Weaver's passionate commitment to nonviolence, which suffuses his efforts to rethink the atonement in light of it. (More about my accompanying discomfort with this shortly.) I was heartened by his efforts to place his thinking into conversation with circles not usually a part of Mennonite conversation: Black, feminist, and womanist theologians. It's not clear to me how deeply they inform his thinking so much as he wishes to bring his convictions into a wider circle of discernment, and for that I commend him.

II

As much as I affirm Weaver's commitment to getting it right, as it were, and as much as I reject together with him a simple forensic calculus of atonement, I am deeply restless with his project. Much of that restlessness is related to what happens to the biblical story in light of Weaver's desire to recast atonement in line with nonviolence.

For one, it appears that methodologically his starting point is less the story or narrative the Bible tells than a criterion of nonviolence which comes to serve as a canon over the canon. The logic with respect to atonement, in particular the cross, is fairly straightforward: punishment cannot possibly be a part of atonement since punishment is violence, and God has been shown by the ministry and death of Jesus to be nonviolent. Jesus' death can therefore only be the work of his enemies and not in any sense an act of God, however atoning, since that would make God violent.

But that is not how the Bible narrates the relationship of God to humanity. In the story the Bible tells, in both testaments, to be sure, God is a gracious, law-giving, protecting, and liberating creator and covenant partner, but also a fiercely angry judge and warrior. Humanity is depicted

as sometimes faithful, but far more often unfaithful, grieving its maker, incurring the "wrath" of God, and therefore in urgent need of mercy and grace. God responds in anger and also in unimaginable mercy. The biblical narrative reflects this in all its searing pain and startling wonder. Suffusing the narrative are attempts at atonement and reconciliation, both on God's part and on the part of errant humanity. Human efforts come via confession, repentance, and sacrificial offerings, born out of a sense that sin, oppression, and rebellion have shattered the wholeness of shalom. A debt has been incurred that must be paid in order to re-establish the divinely willed equilibrium of wholeness (note the repointing of *shalom* as *shalem* and *shillum*: requital).[1] The law provides a means by which to measure indebtedness, the full amount of which will be exacted at the final judgment. God the judge is to be feared. For those who have suffered innocently at the hands of oppressors, God can be trusted to make things right, even if only after death or at the end of the age: that is what resurrection promised Jesus' contemporaries.

Forgiveness makes sense only within such a construal of moral reality; forgiveness presupposes indebtedness. Witness the Lord's prayer, in which the forgiveness of debts and trespasses are virtually interchangeable.[2] To put it crudely, the fact of sin requires that something be made right. And the Bible gives witness to that in myriad ways, including punishment, judgment, restitution, repentance, and forgiveness.

Weaver is right to point to the apocalyptic framework of New Testament understandings of atonement. But that framework, as understood in Judaism, does not dispense with but, if anything, accentuates the judgment of God on sin and sinful humanity. The reign of God is typically to be feared by all except by the innocent remnant.[3] Interestingly, the followers of Jesus were very much at home in this apocalyptic narrative and frame of reference. Both John the Baptist and Jesus came announcing the reign of God with an urgent summons to repentance. In Jesus' parables the warning about not being ready, about the dire consequences of saying no to the kingdom, is everywhere present; but so is the offer of reconciliation to those who turn around, who repent. At no point is the offer of mercy and forgiveness lifted out of this moral universe.

If I understand him correctly, Weaver offers what amounts to a counter-narrative, one in which judgment as punishment is absent, or, lest God be

accused of violence, present only as the inexorable outworking of cause and effect. While I share his discomfort with this aspect of the biblical narrative, I'm not sure what this recasting of judgment solves, since within the context of human life the effects or consequences of sin are as often as not visited on the victims of sin, not the perpetrators – hardly a nonviolent judgment by a loving creator, let alone a fair form of judgment. It is for exactly this reason that the issue of theodicy emerges in the Bible. The answer to why the wicked prosper and the innocent suffer is that consequences within the "normal" course of events are not the final word on sin. God responds with judgment, both liberating and punitive judgment; the resurrection is the final word of vindication for those who have suffered unjustly.

That much would not have come as news to either Jesus' companions or his detractors. What was not anticipated was that the divine judge and warrior would shock his enemies by turning their most intense rebellion into God's own means of reconciliation. Their murder of Jesus became God's love offering. Their murder of God's messenger and son became God's own sacrifice on their behalf. This is truly "news," very good news, *euaggelion*.

How else, given the biblical narrative of rebellion and brokenness of sin, can the wonder and surprise of that miracle of grace be articulated than that Jesus died "for us" as the "lamb of God," vicariously offered on our behalf – not *by* us but *for* us, by the aggrieved One? Perhaps Anselm's vocabulary of "substitution" is clumsier than the biblical narratives of atonement, but does it not point to exactly that feature of the biblical narrative? To Weaver's question as to whether the death of Jesus was necessary as a means of atonement, I think the answer is yes; it was "necessary" for those who killed him. Jesus "died for" his murderers. The cross reveals the full nature of human treachery and rebellion; precisely because of that it also reveals the full extent of divine love.

And how else, if one is to stay within the narrative of the Bible, can this miracle of grace be depicted other than that the warrior intervened to save and not to wipe out his enemies? Interestingly, Weaver's choice of "Christus Victor" for his atonement proposal recognizes the importance of that narrative strain in the Bible. Weaver restricts it, however, to the resurrection, since he has removed the cross from the realm of God's agency. He thus misses an opportunity not lost on the author of Ephesians, for instance, to

talk of Christ as "murdering hostility" by means of the cross. That is the language of agency, not victimhood. Better said, amidst the victimhood of the crucified one is the strong agency of God.[4]

Such an account of the death of Jesus and its meaning for atonement requires, of course, that both human and divine agency be recognized and acknowledged as fully present. Pervading Weaver's proposal is an inability or refusal to allow for that interplay in the story. In Weaver's tight logic, since God is nonviolent, we cannot see God's agency in what is clearly a violent act, namely the torture and execution of Jesus. But the conviction that a sovereign God's agency is enmeshed in a world in which people do terrible evil is not only not a problem for a first-century Jew but rather a source of wonder and hope that pervades the biblical narrative from start to finish. Weaver's refusal to see God at work in the death of Jesus, to reduce the issue to a matter of violence, means that he is unable to distinguish the grace of a surgeon's scalpel from the brutality of a mugger's switchblade. But the gospel writers narrate the death of Jesus as both – at the same time – and thereby point to the fathomless persistence and inventiveness of divine love in the face of human rebellion and violence. What early believers in Jesus learned from the cross is that God will take the greatest evil and turn it into the greatest good.[5] God will take the sword of human brutality and beat it into a plowshare of atonement. That is why the narrative is called "gospel" – news.[6]

III

Weaver does not read the biblical story as a complex and in the end unfathomable interweaving of true human agency and true divine agency, a mixture that informs the narration of the passion of Jesus in particular. By melding nonviolence with a refusal to see God redemptively at work in what are patently human acts of evil, Weaver must expunge large parts of the biblical narrative from his own narrative, or alter them to fit his criterion of nonviolence. This forces a choice for him, and one he urges on his readers: between, on the one hand, a narrative in which God and his messenger are victimized, thereby demonstrating the nonviolence of God, a narrative in which the resurrection moves to center stage; and, on the other hand,

a satisfaction/substitution model that makes violence an intrinsic part of atonement, and moreover has no necessary place for resurrection within it. Weaver is clear that the only choice faithful to Jesus is the former. Weaver's narrative of divine agency thus becomes rather slim, and his atonement largely cross-less. In such a Bible, the covers virtually touch each other.

Is it perhaps in the very nature of the mystery of atonement, the mystery of how God is redemptively active within sinful human life, that getting atonement right at the level of theory might just elude our grasp? I suspect so, unless "getting it right" means finding the wherewithal to give voice to our gratitude by means of metaphors drawn from the experience of humanity. Much of the biblical vocabulary of atonement presupposes such settings as court, captivity, ritual, and covenant, reflective of the rich narrative of human experience the Bible contains, and thus employs metaphors such as ransom, manumission, liberation, sacrifice, mercy seat/expiation, scapegoat, and debt remission, and, yes, substitution. I take such metaphors not as theories or formulas of atonement so much as poetic attempts to point to the depth of what came and still comes as surprise, and what was and always should be heralded as news. I take "poetic" to mean that these metaphors for atonement are by their very nature not precise and definitive, but also that they are always witness to and evocative of much more than they can "say."

We should, in my view, avoid restricting ourselves to any of these metaphors.[7] Atonement is bigger than all of them, and bigger than all of them together, because the ingenuity of God's love knows no bounds. The various efforts, including "substitutionary death" and Weaver's "narrative Christus Victor," are at their very best poetic efforts to capture this wonder in some fashion and should be respected as such. These images and metaphors are the means by which we attempt to grasp the reality of atonement and the love of God that goes beyond being grasped (e.g., Eph. 3:19).

They are never "just" metaphors. In addition to being vessels for our grateful worship, they also have the capacity to educate us. Some of the metaphors, perhaps especially those emerging out of the courtroom, can inform us whose sense of the awful holiness of God or of our own sinfulness is faint of the costliness and undeservedness of atonement, thus opening us anew to the experience of wonder and gratitude.[8] Others of us with too keen a

sense of God as a condemning judge, for whom Christ has to run interference on our behalf, are informed by the multiplicity of metaphors that atonement is finally always God's initiative, emerging out of the Creator's fathomless love; it is always God's immeasurably costly effort to reconcile and restore humanity. This is a God whose justice is "satisfied" only by reconciliation and the rebirth of humanity in relationship with its creator.[9]

There is so much, in my opinion, that is right about Weaver's effort to articulate the meaning of atonement: his rejection of atonement as the appeasement of a vengeful God; his stress on the Jesus' ministry as a whole within the account of atonement; his emphasis on resurrection and its finding realization in the life of believers; and, finally, his emphasis on discipleship as participation in atonement. But I am deeply troubled with some central features of his attempt. While I see the images of substitution and satisfaction reflected in some important ways in the biblical accounts of the meaning of Jesus' death,[10] I am less concerned about whether we continue to use satisfaction or substitution language than I am with *how* Weaver wishes to expunge it, namely, by what looks to me like a truncated reading of the Scriptures by means of a hermeneutic that seems to be driven ideologically, even if it is called Anabaptist and its center piece is nonviolence. The cross was from the beginning a scandal, or as Paul puts it, "foolishness."[11] The mystery of that divine "idiocy" should not be "solved" by removing the cross from God's agency.

If I have misread my brother, I regret that deeply, and look forward to his correction.

Notes

[1] I stress this point of indebtedness and the need for repair not because it is the most important feature in the biblical narrative of atonement, but because it is one element that may provide some context for later "satisfaction" understandings of atonement.

[2] Compare the Lord's Prayer in Matt. 6:12 and Luke 11:4.

[3] Hence, for example, the despair in 4 Ezra 7 at the effects of the "gift" of the law on humanity, that, apart from a very few, will fall victim to judgment. There is no opportunity here to take up the pervasiveness of the theme of judgment and wrath that marks virtually every document in the New Testament, from the Gospels to Revelation. But to ignore it takes away the context in which mercy is mercy and not impunity, grace is gift and not a right, and forgiveness always a recognition of the cost borne by the one offering it.

[4] In Paul's way of saying it, the cross is the power of God for liberation or salvation (1 Cor. 1:17-25).

[5] Not for a moment do biblical writers of either testament take this melding of human and divine agency to exculpate human beings with respect to their own violence and oppression. This is reflected in the way in which Jesus' passion and death is narrated at the same time as a story of human treachery and the abuse of an innocent man and of God at work saving that treacherous humanity. This same mode of narration is present, for example, in Isa. 53 and in Rom. 9-11.

[6] I am reminded of Paul's words at the end of his lengthy rehearsal of God's ingenuity at redemption in Rom. 11: Who could give God advice? Who can trace God's ways? News is precisely not the "necessary" outcome of a calculation, and for the most part the biblical record does not rehearse it that way.

[7] John Howard Yoder makes exactly this point in his *Preface to Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2002), when he cautions against choosing among biblical images of atonement on the basis of "taste, feel, or history," arguing instead for accommodating them all (288).

[8] For many it is this that is learned via the metaphor of substitutionary atonement, even in its penal satisfaction mode (see Sharon Baker's opening remarks).

[9] It is instructive, for example, that in the classic text which refers to Jesus' death as God having presented him as a *hilasterion* (mercy seat, expiation) this is described as the work of God's justice (Rom. 3:21-26). It is mercy and redemption that are the full face of God's restoring justice (v. 24). And that merciful justice comes to full expression in "faithfulness of Jesus Christ" (vv. 22, 26) that is in his "blood."

[10] Rom. 5 is surely one of the most striking, where Christ dying "for us" is depicted as the enactment of God's love for enemies, not as a solution to God's hatred of enemies. At the same time, Christ dying "for us" – and, to be sure, living "for us" (Rom. 5:15-17) – is said to save us from "the wrath" (Rom. 5:9).

[11] 1 Cor. 1.

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