Response to Reflections on *The Nonviolent Atonement*

J. Denny Weaver

I

I am grateful to the organizers of this forum for making it happen. I am honored that folks think enough of the book to discuss it. The fact that we are discussing a book published in 2001 indicates that it has gained some traction, which I appreciate greatly. And since the development of ideas is never finished, I am indeed grateful for this opportunity for further learning. My response in this paper circles around two foci: the supposed violence of God and issues related to the intrinsic violence of satisfaction atonement, which is a subcategory of the violence of God.

I begin with a brief autobiographical comment. I am a "recovering nonresistant Mennonite." I grew up in the tradition of absolute nonresistance, where Jesus' words "resist not evil," Matt. 5:39 in the King James Version, meant a completely passive response – to do nothing in the face of evil.

One example: I was growing up during the civil rights struggle of the 1950s and '60s. I was vaguely aware of prejudice against African Americans, I knew the name of Martin Luther King, Jr. and I had heard of marches and lunch-counter sit-ins. But what I knew most of all was that King and those African American marchers were wrong – wrong because they were resisting. My/our belief about what they were supposed to do was to keep suffering. It did not seem fair to me, but in order to be faithful to Jesus they just needed to keep suffering rather than resisting what white folks were doing, even if the deeds of white folks were wrong.

A second example: I was growing up during the Korean War and the Cold War and the supposed communist threat to our way of life in the United States. As a nonresistant member of a nonresistant church, I would never have consented to be part of the military. But along with a lot of other nonresistant Mennonites, I was glad for the U.S. army that operated in the God-ordained kingdom of the world to protect our country from

communism. I had a vague sense that it was not right to be glad others were in the army committing the sin of killing, but that was just what it meant to be a nonresistant Christian.

Both these examples involve sanctioning violence by someone else in the process of defending our own nonviolence as a nonresistant church. Although I have followed a long route with plenty of detours, one dimension of my career in theology has been about providing better theology than these violence-accommodating answers of the church of my youth. The material in *The Nonviolent Atonement* is a part of that "better theology."

Mennonites have a love affair with violence. It fascinates us. We stare deeply into its eyes and are mesmerized – so that we either cannot or do not want to get away from it. As much as we say that we are a peace church and oppose violence, we want to keep it around. Of course we don't like it, but it has its place and on occasion it seems useful. Besides, it is obviously "biblical." In their papers [in this CGR issue], we see Mark Thiessen Nation defending the violence of redemptive suffering and Tom Yoder Neufeld extending the practice of violence into Godself. But I dispute both their conclusions, as I dispute the violence-accommodating theology of nonresistance from my youth, and for the same reason: they all put a divine sanction on violence.

II

Yoder Neufeld identified one of my important beginning presuppositions, namely the logic which indicates that if God is revealed in Jesus and if Jesus rejected violence, then we should understand God as nonviolent. I have come to believe that Jesus' rejection of the sword demands we understand that God is nonviolent. Yoder Neufeld disagrees. His refutation of that starting point seems rather straightforward: just read the Bible and discover the violence of God the "fiercely angry judge and warrior," along with God the "gracious, law-giving, protecting, and liberating covenant partner." But I beg to differ, and I also read the Bible.

Of course we find stories of violence and claims of divinely sanctioned violence in the Bible. But there are other strands that Yoder Neufeld barely acknowledges. Start with the creation myths of Genesis 1 and 2. When

these stories are read over against the Babylonian account in the Enuma Elish, it is clear that the Bible begins with an image of a nonviolent Creator. Some stories of the patriarchs reflect conflict avoidance or nonviolent conflict resolution – Isaac walking away from fights over wells, Abraham dividing the land with Lot. There is exegetical and archaeological evidence to suggest that the conquest was by immigration and osmosis over against the stylized accounts of massacre in Joshua 1-12. There is Gideon's rout of the Midianite army with a small band, using trickery and confusion rather than massacre. 2 Kings 6 contains the account of Elisha's defanging of the threat from the Arameans: Elisha got them confused, led them into a kind of ambush where the king of Israel begged to kill them, but told the king to feed them. After they feasted, the Aramean force returned to their king, and the story concludes "And the Arameans no longer came raiding into the land of Israel" (2 Kings 6:23). Jump to Jeremiah's counsel that the captives should "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (29:7) and the stories of nonviolent cultural resistance of Daniel and his three friends. Such nonviolent narratives throughout the Old Testament also claim divine sanction.

I suggest that the OT has an ongoing conversation about God and how God works. Parts of that conversation visualize a violent God, while other parts present other images of God and place divine sanction on other ways of acting. Christendom's centuries-long sanctioning of violence has mostly obscured this latter side of the conversation. But it is still important to ask, which parts of this conversation most truly reflect the character of God? I do not think that we can answer that question by putting our finger on one or another of these accounts. However, we have a criterion for answering it. If we are Christians, that criterion is the story of Jesus, in which the narrative of the OT finds its fulfillment. If we take seriously the confession that God is revealed in Jesus who is the culmination of the story that began with Abraham, I consider it very questionable that we should be vigorously defending the idea of a violent God on the basis of OT narratives.

This means, of course, that Sharon Baker is correct in pointing out that Nicea's linking of Jesus to God links the nonviolence of Jesus to the character of God. Nicea's calling Jesus *homoousios* with the Father is certainly correct if one wants to describe the continuity of God to Jesus in that Greek philosophical category and lodged in a fourth-century cosmology.

I would only add that there are other categories for discussing the continuity of Jesus to God, as when John Howard Yoder told us in an Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary class more than 30 years ago that we live in a different world view and use a different philosophical system than the bishops at Nicea, and that perhaps for us the category of continuity might be "ethics or history." And for Mark Thiessen Nation's benefit, without further elaboration, I will call attention to the fact that deriving the character of God from the story of Jesus is also an application of trinitarian theology.

As Baker reiterated, traditional theories of atonement, and in particular satisfaction atonement, are intrinsically violent with the "image of a violent God, heaven bent on balanced cosmic books." Its image of divine violence is one reason I reject satisfaction atonement. When Yoder Neufeld began his paper by disputing my view of God, he actually made a roundabout affirmation of an important aspect of my understanding of atonement theology. More than an analysis of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, atonement is about our understanding of God.

There is an application of Trinity that seeks to absolve God of the charge of divine child abuse, or of having Jesus killed. It is this application that Nation had in mind when he accused me of having a deficient view of Trinity. This argument is that since God was identified with Jesus, as Nicea and Trinity doctrine proclaim, it could not be that God was abusing Jesus, that Jesus on this side was suffering to offer something to God over on that side. Rather than Jesus suffering to supply a need to God, the argument goes, God was actually suffering and dying with Jesus on the cross in order to supply the divine need. This particular argument does supply one kind of answer to the charge of divine child abuse. However, it does not remove the intrinsic violence of satisfaction atonement, it merely gives it a different look. God is now pictured as having Godself beaten up in order to supply the death needed to balance the cosmic books. The image is still that of a God whose modus operandi employs violence.

Arguing that God suffers with Jesus is one effort to defend satisfaction atonement against the charge of "divine child abuse." A related defense is to acknowledge that there "may be" "some views … that are subject to this critique," but then suggest that many are not. Penal substitution and the Protestant Reformers are the frequent culprits, with the defender of satisfaction atonement then referring us back to the real Anselm or a

specific emphasis within Anselmian atonement. Thus one finds the emphasis shifting from restoring God's honor to restoring the order of creation to restoring obedience. There is a denial that Anselmian atonement involves any economy of exchange at all, with the claim that Jesus' death restores true worship of God.

I keep wanting to ask, "Will the real Anselm stand up?" In each case, there is an effort to say that the particular version being advocated avoids the problems of the previous suggestions. But we do not need to provide a definitive answer as to the real Anselm in order to see that none of these shifting answers successfully avoids the problem of the intrinsic violence of satisfaction atonement. That is easily seen when one poses a couple of simple questions to any suggested version of satisfaction atonement. Who needs or benefits from the death of Jesus? And the answer is God. And then ask, Who is the actor with agency in the equation? Who arranged the scenario to supply the death that God needed? Again, the answer is God. With God arranging the scenario to supply the death, it is clear that no version of satisfaction avoids its intrinsic violence.[1]

For another look at why the shifting emphases do not and cannot absolve the satisfaction motif of its intrinsic violence, consider the many potential defenses of capital punishment. It is not about killing, one can argue; it is about doing justice, or upholding the rule of law, or doing something for the family of a murder victim. But when one asks how those various goals are met, the answer is always, "by killing a person." In a satisfaction motif, the answer to how the variously defined divine goals are met always returns to "by killing Jesus." Baker's observation is most certainly correct when she says that even if the emphasis in Anselm shifts from retribution to restoration, the motif still depends on the violence of God in securing forgiveness.

Nation suggested that my approach does not take sin seriously. Apparently that charge comes from the fact that I do not see God as orchestrating the death – the killing – of Jesus as the way to satisfy the divine need, that is, God as sanctioning violence to get God's due. I can comment on sin in the category of what I have sometimes called "restoring Anselm's deletion." Anselm removed the devil from the salvation equation, and made sinful humans directly responsible to God. My atonement motif restores the devil, but understood as the evil powers represented by Rome.[2]

Reintroducing the powers/the devil into the equation makes clear the source of the evil that killed Jesus, and it takes sin most seriously because it makes us responsible. In fact, to be sinful means to be in league with the powers that killed Jesus, and that we are in fact guilty of participating in Jesus' death. Killing Jesus is our human doing, not God's doing.

Salvation occurs when we switch sides, from the side of the powers arrayed against the rule of God to the side of the reign of God. This switch in sides engages our own responsibility. It is represented by Jesus' call, "Follow me," which is presumed in the Anabaptist emphasis on "discipleship." On the other hand, as many traditions emphasize, we cannot save ourselves, we cannot successfully oppose the powers of evil on our own. We need help. That help is the transforming action of God to grab us and change us to the side of the reign of God in spite of ourselves. To put that in trinitarian language, this transforming action is the Holy Spirit transposing us to the side of the reign of God. This would be an application of John Howard Yoder's description, many years ago in an AMBS class, of the Trinity as a time problem – understanding that the God of Israel is the same God who raised Jesus and is the God who is still immediately present to us today.

The idea that we cannot successfully oppose the powers of evil on our own most certainly takes sin seriously. The idea that we are individually responsible yet move to the side of the reign of God only through an act of grace is an expression of Paul's paradox of grace: "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them – though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10).

III

Yoder Neufeld is comfortable projecting an image of a God who resorts to violence. This God responds in anger and exercises violence to restore divinely willed equilibrium. Final judgment is the place most of all where this judgment will be enacted. This final judgment smacks down the perpetrators and offers vindication by resurrection for those who suffered. It is in the context of this violent judgment that he suggests forgiveness makes sense. Although Yoder Neufeld does not say it quite this way, God can forgive

freely and fully because God has first balanced the cosmic account through the violence of punishment on Jesus and in anticipation of the violent punishment of final judgment. This view of atonement presumes a God who has exercised, and will exercise, violence as the means of righting wrongs.

The idea that God kills is pervasive in popular culture, although it usually goes by another name. Among many, many such easily accessible examples is a comment in the midst of a story in *Sports Illustrated* about Mike Coolbaugh, the first base coach in a minor league baseball game, who was hit in the head by a line drive and died almost instantly. According to the family, "God plucked him."[3] Recall the line-up of violence by Christians mentioned by Baker. Think of the many instances of statements like "God needed an angel" when someone is killed by a drunk driver. Recall the debates after 9-11, the tsunami in southeast Asia, and Katrina – debates about who God was punishing. Common to all these debates is the assumption that God kills.

I appreciate Baker's affirmation that it is important to construct a nonviolent image of God. I cannot prove in quid pro quo fashion that the image of a God who resorts to violence results in violence by human beings. However, there are significant correlations. Read Timothy Gorringe's book on the correlation between satisfaction atonement and the exercise of punishment in the practice of criminal justice.[4] Think of the recent research on how violent video games impact children, and put that with the continual references to a God who exercises violence. Recall what we know about advertising – how through repetition and projection of images it works to create a need we did not know we had – and then consider what it does to have before our minds the image of God, who encompasses all-in-all and who resorts to violence when things will get really serious about dealing with evil. I suspect there is a reciprocal relationship between imaging a God who uses violence and human resort to violence.

Incongruities accompany this view of God who uses violence. I already indicated that God's forgiveness under this system is not really free and unbounded; it happens because God first got the equation balanced through violence. The "miracle of grace" happens because God has already extracted the retribution that balances the scales of divine justice. Further, Yoder Neufeld and Nation both struggle to explain why the killing of Jesus is a heinous deed but also a good thing. Nation suggested that the killing

of Martin Luther King, Jr. was somehow within the will of the Lord to convince him (and the rest of us) of the evils of racism. But killing Jesus in order for God's justice to be restored required people to wield whips and drive nails into him, as we saw in *The Passion of Christ*. For Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death to be redemptive and within the "will of the Lord," as Nation suggested, it required a trigger man, whether James Earl Ray or the shadowy Raul that Ray ended up blaming, to do the deed. These remind me of the sinful killing performed in accordance with God's will for the kingdom of the world that was fully blessed by the nonresistant church in which I grew up.

Regarding human violence reflecting divine violence, think of Yoder Neufeld's statement that the innocent need not fear the apocalyptic, violent judgment that ends up in the reign of God. The uncomfortable thought that crossed my mind was the claim of the current [Bush] administration in Washington that we need not fear wiretaps and secret surveillance if we are innocent. Or the God who is patient with God's sinful creatures until such a time as final judgment, when God's patience ends and they are crushed – parallel to parents whose famous words are "I've warned you, and now …," and all manner of other changes from patience to outbursts, including the claim that our patience has run out and we are now forced to use military means to deal with weapons of mass destruction.

And then there is Yoder Neufeld's suggestion that we distinguish between the cutting of a surgeon's scalpel and that of a mugger's switchblade. For me, that analogy comes uncomfortably close to the standard arguments asking us to choose between good violence and bad violence – such as Hans Boersma's critique of my atonement theology in which he suggests that rejection of violence is one of my basic problems; I should just join the modern world and recognize that violence can be and is useful and a form of hospitality.[5] Baker is correct, I think, when she says that a God who uses violence, the penal God of satisfaction atonement, presents 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.'" But children do end up modeling the behavior of parents, and human beings do act in ways parallel to the violent actions described for God.

The argument is made that the word of divine love can "take any evil and use it for good." To me, this is uncomfortably close to something

like the old argument that although slavery was evil at least it enabled the transported Africans to encounter the gospel. I think that we can learn from evil, we can learn from the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., without claiming it is the "will of the Lord." God is revealed in the death of Jesus without saying God's agency is behind – engineering – that death to meet a cosmic requirement for justice.

There is a sense in which I can say that "God willed" the death of Jesus. Jesus' mission was to live his life as a witness to the reign of God. Since the confrontation with the powers of evil was an ultimate struggle, fulfilling his mission meant being faithful even unto death. It was "God's will" that Jesus be faithful even unto death, which is also our model. But the death understood in this way is not redemptive, and it does not satisfy a divine need of restored honor, a restored order of creation, restoring worship, or obedience to God, or meet any other divine need.

The major portion of Nation's response focused on suffering and its potentially redemptive character. Apart from three formulaic mentions of the "life, death, and resurrection" of Jesus, his response did not include resurrection in any meaningful way. This focus on suffering is the counterpart to a God who engineers the death of Jesus for divine purposes, a death to which Jesus obediently submits.[6] Following this passive Jesus, who undergoes redemptive violence, puts Nation in the neighborhood of the focus on redemptive suffering that is objected to and rejected by feminist and womanist writers. These writers object to theology that consoles suffering people in their suffering or considers suffering redemptive through comparison with Jesus' suffering.[7] These writers may include a critique of Martin Luther King, Jr., whom Nation used as an example of redemptive suffering. The response of feminists and womanists is to develop theologies that empower victims to develop strategies of resistance to the powers that oppress.

Yoder Neufeld suggested that a nonviolent image of God forces a choice between God and his messenger who do not fight back, or satisfaction atonement with no place for resurrection. Nation stated that I align myself with theology "that makes martyrdom unintelligible or even wrong, as well as in general cutting the nerve of a call to costly and sacrificial discipleship." Both these statements are just wrong. Narrative Christus Victor is intrinsically

an ethical motif that calls people to experience salvation by living within its story of Jesus. The Jesus in this motif confronts assertively but nonviolently the powers that opposed the reign of God. It resulted in his death. To be a disciple, to live in Jesus' story, is to accept and live with that same risk of death. This is explicitly a statement of willingness to face martyrdom, and it is anything but a passive messenger who does not resist. It is a Jesus who empowers victims to resist – to resist nonviolently – a Jesus who supports the demonstrators of the civil rights movement rather than telling them they were wrong.

Yoder Neufeld wrote that he is "deeply troubled" with some features of my argument. I am "deeply troubled" with these efforts to weave violence into, to use John Howard Yoder's expression, the "grain of the universe."[8]

IV

We have mentioned reinterpretations of the tradition and the task of projecting some new ways to think about atonement theology. As Baker suggested, this is a momentous time in the development of theology. The demise of Christendom and of the so-called "mainline" churches opens vistas and raises questions in ways that are unprecedented since perhaps the fourth century of the Christian era. When historians a hundred years from now point to our epoch – perhaps 1975 to 2025, to give a round number – it is quite possible they will identify a reshuffling and restructuring of theological lines in surprising new alliances and with ramifications as great as the reformation of the sixteenth century. Since we are in the midst of this time, we cannot see fully how it will shake out. Stick around, and see how the historians a hundred years from now say it comes out.

Meanwhile, some respond to this reshuffling by trying to refurbish the inherited tradition. I am with those who see new opportunities as we articulate the meaning of Jesus Christ for our generation. I certainly hope Baker is right that time is on my side, as this will mean that those are being heard who critique the violence of inherited theology and who seek to construct theology that makes visible the nonviolence of Jesus and the God revealed in Jesus. Of course Baker *is* right that these new efforts will not

get everything right the first time and will need some adjustment as we go along. But that is why we keep working at the task of theology, and why our conversation in this forum is important.

Notes

[1] In his notes, Mark Thiessen Nation recommends Peter Schmiechen's recent refurbishing of Anselm, *Saving Power: Theories of Atonement and Forms of Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005). In my view, Schmiechen's book is an example of attempting to solve the violence problem by shifting emphases within a satisfaction orientation. Posing the questions suggested in this paragraph reveals that several of his ten theories of atonement are actually variations on satisfaction, and retain the problems of violence identified here.

[2] My understanding of the "powers" follows Walter Wink's exposition.

[3] S. L. Price, "A Death in the Baseball Family," *Sports Illustrated* (Sept. 24, 2007), 57.

[4] Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

[5] Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004); Hans Boersma, "Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality: A Modified Reformed View," in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 47-69. This latter item also contains rejoinders between Boersma and me.

[6] Underscoring the focus on the suffering and death of Jesus, Nation emphasizes that in Revelation we have a "slaughtered Lamb." Revelation figures prominently in my construction of Narrative Christus Victor. Here there is space only to emphasize that the slain lamb in Revelation is a living, a resurrected lamb, from the vision of Christ in chapter 1 to the vision of the church as the New Jerusalem in chapter 21. The church living in the midst of empire, envisioned as New Jerusalem, has "the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb" as its temple, and it needs no external sources of light because "the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb" (21:22,23).

[7] Some examples are Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in *Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30; Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 55-57; Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), 60-83, 161-67, 178-99.

[8] John H. Yoder, "Armaments and Eschatology," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 1 (1988): 58.

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