The (Non)Violent Reign of God: Rethinking Christocentrism in Light of the Ascension

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Introduction

Increasingly commonplace in Anabaptist-Mennonite theology is the integration of a commitment to Christian nonviolence with a belief in the essentially nonviolent character of God. This integration is often performed to such an extent that to claim Christian nonviolence as integral to discipleship while neglecting the claim of God's nonviolence is to invalidate both claims. However, not everyone is convinced that one claim relies on the other for credibility.[1] The issues underlying this debate include the nature of Scripture and (or as) revelation, historical-critical approaches to the New Testament and their reconstructions of the man Jesus of Nazareth, and others. Most germane to the debate in the broader Anabaptist-Mennonite community of faith is the issue of what it means to read Scripture Christocentrically.

A generally accepted definition of a Christocentric hermeneutic is that it is a way of reading the whole of the Scriptures with the conviction that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus definitively reveal not only God's intentions for humanity in the past, present, and future, but also God's true character. This hermeneutic presents a problem to Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians who wish to assert that God is nonviolent, since many characterizations of God in Scripture conflict with the depiction of a nonviolent Jesus. The solution most often taken is to claim that the 'nonviolent' Jesus trumps the 'violent' God. In this case, a characterization of God in the Scriptures has authority only inasmuch as it corresponds to the nonviolent life of Jesus as the definitive revelation of God and God's rule.[2] This is one way to apply the

[1] For an introduction to the current state of the debate, see the many responses to Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2009), found in *Direction* 40, no. 2 (Fall 2011): 134-206. For an earlier summary of the debate, see Willard M. Swartley, "God's Moral Character as the Basis for Human Ethics," in *The Covenant of Peace: The Missing Peace in New Testament Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006), 377-98.

[2] Stuart Murray, *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition* (Kitchener, ON: Pandora

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general definition of Christocentric hermeneutics to a particular theological issue.

The primary assumption in this approach to a Christocentric reading of Scripture is that the NT witness to the revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth is, among other things, a revelation of his nonviolent divinity by virtue of his divinity's unity with his nonviolent humanity. In this essay I engage with J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent God* in order to challenge that assumption, which is employed throughout this book.[3] Weaver upholds the claim of God's nonviolence through appealing to the story of Jesus, which he interprets as a story of God's salvation "through the power of resurrection and the restoration of life."[4] I argue that naming God nonviolent on the basis of the story of Jesus is a mistake, because it fails to offer a robust enough account of that story.

The story or narrative of Jesus witnesses not only to the revelation of the nonviolent God-man but also to the revelation of the ascended man-God, whom the narrative declares reigns at the Father's right hand in a way or character of being not fully revealed to us. With the help of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder and Catholic theologian Douglas Farrow, I will show how the ascension, as a central apostolic witness to the revelation of God in the person of Jesus, is an essential narrative component to consider in discussions of Christocentric hermeneutics, a component largely ignored in Weaver's book. By broadening Christocentric hermeneutics through renewed attention to Jesus' bodily ascension, I contend that claims as to *God's* nonviolence are problematized, as the character and activity of the human Jesus is not fixed solely in his story during his time on earth. I will end the paper by arguing that Christian discipleship is nevertheless a call to nonviolent living, and offer a constructive proposal for a chastened Christocentric hermeneutics.

Weaver's Nonviolent God and the God of Jesus' Story

In his most recent book, J. Denny Weaver appeals to a particular kind of

Press, 2000), 74-75.

[3] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

[4] Ibid., 2.

Christocentric hermeneutic in order to argue for a "nonviolent God."[5] He contends that "[i]f God is revealed in Jesus . . . then God should be considered nonviolent as a reflection of the nonviolence of Jesus."[6] While the Scriptures as a whole characterize God in both violent and nonviolent ways, and thus present the discerning reader with both an offence and an apparent contradiction, Jesus is the "arbiter"—the "reference point that can serve as judge"—adjudicating between conflicting images of the divine throughout the Bible.[7] Since the Bible "contains the origins of the people of God" but is not a "transcendent source of rules that dictate theology," Christians today must seek to live from the source of their origins, and that source is Jesus, his particular life, and his living story.[8] Further, as Weaver has stated elsewhere, each generation must discern in its own way how Jesus alters their understanding of the relationship between God and the world, rather than relying on a single, unchanging, and authoritative Christian cosmology.[9] In effect, in *The Nonviolent God* Weaver attempts to show how Jesus challenges present-day cosmologies, Christian or otherwise, that rely on a deity who effects or sanctions violence in order to achieve divine or human ends.

For Weaver, the theological argument for God's nonviolence is not intended as an abstract statement about God's being and attributes. Indeed, he seeks to avoid abstract language when describing God as the one God who has become incarnate. When speaking of God's character as nonviolent, he is not imagining nonviolence *in abstracto*. Rather, nonviolence names a concrete way of being in the world exemplified by Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Lord. Since Christian theology is about this incarnate one and his particular human life, theological statements regarding Jesus' character necessarily map directly onto his divine character. That is, arguing for a nonviolent God is arguing for nonviolent *human* living.[10]

Theology or, more to the point, Christology is not fundamentally a form of dogmatic reflection but a way of "living," an ethics, and the Gospel is a "lived narrative," not simply an account of what happened more than

[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid., 125.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Ibid., 274.
[9] Weaver, "A Believers' Church Christology," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 57 (1983): 116.
[10] Weaver, *Nonviolent God,* 3.

two thousand years ago summarized into creedal form and handed down as pure doctrine.[11] Because of this lived nature of theology, the image or characterization of God that one seeks to live *from* matters. Living from the images of a violent God necessarily empowers, or at the very least sanctions, human violence.[12] For Christians, the definitive image of God has been revealed in the person of Jesus, who "makes visible God's reign on earth."[13] For Weaver, Jesus makes it visible nonviolently.

While there is much to commend in Weaver's approach, it must be closely questioned. And although a compelling case can be made, based on NT documents, that Jesus lived and taught in ways that could rightfully be described as nonviolent, it is not clear from these documents that it is appropriate to map Jesus' nonviolent actions and teachings onto his humanity or his divinity as such. Rather, this is an interpretive theological and philosophical move that Weaver has to make with reference to the narrative and theological accounts of Jesus. Beyond just showing how, from the beginning until the present, Jesus' life is characterized by nonviolence, he must also persuade readers as to why the language of nonviolence should be accepted as an essential characteristic of God without qualification. Adequately testing Weaver's hermeneutical claim about God's nonviolence thus requires evaluating the narrative of Jesus and the theological statements that Weaver employs.

First, we must ask critical questions about the scope of the narrative of Jesus that Weaver appeals to. Is his narrative Christocentric enough to make the case for a nonviolent God revealed in Jesus? Does this narrative incorporate *all* the significant components of the NT witness regarding Jesus in his divine-human person? If it can be shown that the narrative contains key elements that make ambiguous Jesus' human identity as a nonviolent person, it would problematize Weaver's account. Recently, W. Derek Suderman critiqued Weaver and others for failing to consider Jesus' own use of scripture when making statements about God's nonviolence.[14] Suderman

[11] Ibid., 170-86.

[12] Ibid., 2.

[13] J. Denny Weaver, "Narrative Theology in an Anabaptist-Mennonite Context," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 12, no. 2 (March 1994): 172.

[14] W. Derek Suderman, "Assyria the Ax, God the Lumberjack: Jeremiah 29, the Logic of the Prophets, and the Quest for a Nonviolent God," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 32, no. 1 (Winter

observes that Jesus drew upon "the judgement motif" that undergirds the characterizations of God's 'violence' that Weaver rejects.[15] Suderman's point reminds readers of Jesus' story to think more broadly about all that is entailed in reading scripture Christocentrically. Christocentric readings look not only at what Jesus did but also at what he said and, by consequence, at what he seemed to believe about God.[16]

With Suderman's insight in mind, we can now consider another underappreciated aspect of the revelation of God in Jesus' story as Weaver tells it: the ascension of that same man from Nazareth. What effect does paying concerted attention to the narrative feature of Jesus' bodily ascension have on Christocentric hermeneutics? Before answering this question in relation to Weaver's *Nonviolent God*, I should briefly discuss the ascension as it has been understood in various streams of Christian theology. While space does not permit a broad analysis of Christian thinking on this subject, I will examine two modern theologians' accounts of it.[17]

In Mennonite theological discourse, we need not look far to discover significant engagement with the meaning of the ascension. Throughout his writings, John Howard Yoder drew attention to it, and *The Royal Priesthood* contains an essay on the significance of both the epiphany and the ascension for the discourse of theology.[18] In addition, key sections of *The Priestly Kingdom*,[19] *The Christian Witness to the State*,[20] and *The Politics*

2014): 44-66.

[15] Ibid., 58-59.

[16] Weaver also states that God is revealed in the "teaching" of Jesus: Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 2. However, how far he gives a fair hearing to the teachings of judgment attributed to Jesus would be a subject for another paper.

[17] For a survey of early Christian thinking on the ascension, see J.G. Davies, *He Ascended into Heaven: A Study in the History of Doctrine* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1958).

[18] John Howard Yoder, *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiastical and Ecumenical* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 140.

[19] See John Howard Yoder, "But We Do See Jesus: The Particularity of the Incarnation and the Universality of Truth," in *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, IN: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 46-62.

[20] John Howard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2002), 8-14.

of Jesus[21] include accounts of the meaning of the ascension for theology and discipleship.[22]

In the essay "To Serve Our God and to Rule the World," Yoder states that to do theology "is to be careful about one's words in the fear of God. To do moral theology doxologically is to watch our language in the light of YHWH's mighty works."[23] One of the "mighty works" he refers to is the ascension.[24] Yoder asserts that the ascension should cause us to be careful with our words, always discerning how appropriate they are for describing "the cosmos in terms dictated by the knowledge that a once slaughtered lamb is now living" (and, I might add, is ruling the world).[25] With Yoder I contend that discernment requires the inclusion of "multiple voices, contexts, and identities"[26] in order to prevent us from becoming careless with our language. If the form of Christocentric hermeneutics in contemporary and future Anabaptist-Mennonite discourse is to be broadened by paying special attention to the mighty work of the ascension, we do well to listen to those outside our circles who have thought long and hard about the significance of the ascension for theology and ecclesiology. With this in mind, I turn to the work of Catholic theologian Douglas Farrow.

The Ascension as the Open-Ended Narrative of Jesus

In *Ascension and Ecclesia*, Farrow notes "how little mention the ascension gets these days."[27] This lack of attention is partly due, he suggests, to a post-

[21] John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans), 246-47.

[22] Much more could be said about how Yoder views the ascension, but that is beyond the scope of this article. Below, however, I do return briefly to Yoder's engagement with the ascension in his *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2002).

[23] Yoder, *Royal Priesthood,* 140.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid., 128, 132, 139.

[26] This phrase comes out of a call for papers for "Wading Deeper: Anabaptist Mennonites Engage Postmodernism," the Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre graduate conference held in Winnipeg, Manitoba, May 30-June 1, 2014. The present article was originally delivered there in similar form.

[27] Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia: On the Significance of the Doctrine of the Ascension for Ecclesiology and Christian Cosmology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 9-10.

Copernican embarrassment with the image of the resurrected Jesus being transported above the clouds to, where, exactly?[28] The embarrassment is part and parcel of a larger embarrassment with Christ's bodily ascension in the history of Christian theology from early on. Farrow argues that forms of Gnosticism in the theology of Origen and Augustine, and later in the philosophy and theology of Kant, Schleiermacher, and Hegel (among others), reflect this embarrassment with notable intensity.[29]

According to Farrow, Origen understood the ascension as an "ascension of the mind since only the mind is capable of participation in the Logos."[30] Augustine used the ascension to justify a near dissolution of the bodily, ascended Christ into the church, thereby downplaying Christ's ongoing humanity, eventually empowering a triumphalist church.[31] Kant interpreted the ascension as our common journey to moral purity.[32] Schleiermacher argued that Christ's humanity had to be left behind in order that "his invisible and spiritual work in human society might succeed."[33] And, finally, Hegel equated the ascension with the cross, making the end of Christ's life the ascension of the "World Spirit."[34] For Farrow, all these interpretations uphold an overly abstract, spiritualized interpretation of the ascension, consistently failing to grapple with an essential tension created by the attestation of Jesus' bodily ascension.[35]

Farrow describes this tension as "eucharistic ambiguity," by which he refers to the ecclesial experience of both the presence and the absence

[28] Ibid., 166.

[29] Peter Widdicombe has critiqued Farrow's interpretations of the fathers, claiming that Farrow's reading of Origen and Augustine is simplistic or reductive, and does not account for their much more nuanced accounts of the ascension and the relation between God and creation. See Peter Widdicombe, "Ascension and Ecclesia and Reading the Fathers," *Laval théologique et philosophique* 58, no. 1 (2002): 165-76. A similar critique is offered by Robert Jenson in his review of *Ascension and Ecclesia* in *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 22, no. 1 (2001): 101-102.

[30] Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia,* 20.

[31] Ibid., 121-29.

[32] Ibid., 170.

[33] Ibid., 185.

[34] Ibid., 186-89.

[35] Ibid., 89-129, 168-91.

of Christ in our midst as we gather around the common table.[36] Jesus' ascension to heaven and the sending of the spirit is the act that founds the church, but the Holy Spirit sent at Pentecost "does not present himself but the *absent* Jesus."[37] "Ecclesial being" (Farrow's term) is thus constituted by its relationship to Jesus, who is both present and absent. Further, the absence of Christ represents the creation of a definite distinction between our history in the world and Jesus' ongoing history. "Jesus-history," as Farrow calls it, was once immediately present within our own history but is now hidden from our sight at the Father's right hand (Acts 1:9). "Jesus-history does not end with his ascension but only really begins there."[38] The human Jesus' life carries on.

The problem with gnostic interpretations of the ascension is that they draw the history of the human Jesus of Nazareth to a close, making the life, death, or even the resurrection the boundaries of that history: "[The] conflation of resurrection, ascension and heavenly session . . . shifts the focus away from what happens to and for Jesus, in his own humanity, to the question of his revelation to us."[39] Farrow's *Ascension and Ecclesia* thus takes seriously the ascension by paying special attention to the ongoing existence of the humanity of the ascended one, and all the implications it might have for the church.[40]

Renewed attention to Jesus' bodily ascension, such as is evident in Farrow's work, should sound attractive to Anabaptist-Mennonite ears for a number of reasons. For instance, much of the theology we are used to would reject, whether intentionally or not, the gnostic tendencies taken to task by Farrow. Against Origen, or rather a gnostic representation of Origen, Anabaptist-Mennonites see the divine-human Jesus as someone to follow in real, practical, earthy ways and not just as the way to transcend the mundanities of existence. Our bodies are not to be transcended but conformed to the human pattern of Christ's earthly life. Consequently, and against Augustine, we cannot conform our bodies to patterns of engagement

[36] Ibid., 2-3.
[37] Ibid., 257, 266, 271n59; emphasis added.
[38] Ibid., 247.
[39] Ibid., 248.
[40] Ibid., 13.

in the world that are triumphalist; the church in the world is supposed to be a separate and suffering church, not a "successful" church. Perhaps, like Kant, Anabaptist-Mennonites have traditionally valued moral purity, but they would not have seen such a goal possible apart from a real union between the believer and Christ in the church, experienced through rebirth and sealed in baptism. Against Schleiermacher, an early focus on the return of Christ and an ongoing emphasis on a distinction between the church and the world meant, for Anabaptists, denying that society was progressing into a utopia of God-consciousness. And against Hegel, the resurrection and ascension, for Anabaptists, were more than the emergence of a universal *Geist* and were rather the foundation for creating a community that anticipated the *parousia* of Jesus Christ.

Acknowledging that Farrow's critique of gnostic tendencies in the Christian tradition resonates with some traditional Anabaptist-Mennonite distinctives, there is good reason for contemporary Anabaptist-Mennonite theologians to exercise a similar focus on Christ's bodily ascension. Indeed, if the narrative of Jesus, his real, particular humanity, is the center from which we learn about the character of God's rule and our place as disciples under it**,** shouldn't we expect our theological discourse to take stock of the bodily ascension, with all the effects it may have on our theology and ecclesiology?

As noted above, John Howard Yoder is one who has paid attention to the significance of the ascension. In one of his substantial engagements with the subject, Yoder outlines its ecclesial implications and offers important suggestions about the form of Christ's lordship.[41] He points to Matthew 28, where Jesus declares that he has been given authority over heaven and earth. Following this declaration, Jesus calls his disciples to baptize, teach, and make disciples. The command reveals the way his authority is to be manifest in our history in the church. The "meaning and content of his kingship" resides in the fact that time has not stopped, and that an ecclesial task or, using Farrow's term, an "ecclesial being" is given to the church under the authority of the exalted Christ.[42] Understanding the significance of Christ's ascension is thus, at least in part, simultaneously a discovery of the church's identity and mission.

[41] Yoder, *Preface to Theology,* 248-49.
[42] Ibid.*,* 197.

This is not all that Yoder has to say about the ascended Christ. He also suggests that the ascended Christ rules over history in a two-fold form of activity. On the one hand, Christ rules "in a visible way through the servant church" characterized by, among other things, its nonviolence.[43] On the other hand, he rules "in a hidden way through the powers."[44] What does Yoder mean? Elsewhere, he talks about how "characteristic of the reign of Christ is that evil . . . is channelized by God, in spite of itself, to serve God's purposes."[45] While this way of putting the matter does not, strictly speaking, characterize Christ's reign in terms of violence, neither does it characterize that reign as nonviolent, with its co-option of evil powers for divine purposes. Ray Gingerich is thus partially correct in making a similar point about Yoder's interpretation of the "usefulness" of violence under the sovereignty of God.[46] Gingerich states that "for Yoder, God may do and does do morally what neither Jesus nor his followers are morally allowed to do."[47] I say that Gingerich is partially correct because, as I will show below, in light of the ascension what Jesus is "morally allowed to do" as the one sitting at God's right hand is an open question.

More recently, Philip E. Stoltzfus has taken up a similar line of questioning.[48] In response to Gingerich, he helpfully frames Yoder's use of the Old Testament by pointing out that Yoder's appeal to the biblical language of vengeance should be interpreted as an attempt to "decenter the ethical dualisms of his interlocutors."[49] Stoltzfus also points out the dialogical nature of the texts that warrant readings which question God's violence. However, he must be challenged on his assumption that the most effective, courageous forms of theological "suspicion" are those marshaled against readings that

[43] Ibid., 248.
[44] Ibid.
[45] Yoder, *Royal Priesthood*, 149.
[46] Ray Gingerich, "Theological Foundations for an Ethics of Nonviolence: Was Yoder's God a Warrior?" *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 (2003): 433.
[47] Ibid., 423.
[48] Philip E. Stoltzfus, "Nonviolent Jesus, Violent God? A Critique of John Howard Yoder's Approach to Theological Construction," in *Powers and Practices: Engaging the Work of John Howard Yoder*, ed. Jeremy M. Bergen and Anthony G. Siegrist (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2009): 29-46.
[49] Ibid., 33.

retain a "concept of God" which includes vengeance, as Yoder's does.[50] Might not Yoder's attempt to decenter ethical dualisms—by retaining the language of vengeance and wrath—be a more authentic form of theological suspicion than constructing from dialogical texts a monological language of God as nonviolent?

Indeed, the consequence of Yoder's description of Christ's ascended activity as manifested in a partially hidden, two-fold form is that the dialogical nature of scripture is retained rather than resolved through an overt form of theological construction. Stoltzfus states that in Yoder's writings, "the reader cannot tell" which image of God Yoder is going to stand on but "*should* be able to tell."[51] But Yoder's commitment to the dialogical nature of the scriptures explains why the reader cannot and should not be able to tell. For it is through this dialogical nature that affirming the distinction between creator and creature is retained. In light of this distinction it can still be said that the creator has drawn near to us, becoming a creature in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, and that through this event God has definitively revealed God's purposes to humankind. What must not be said is that the definitive revelation of God in the man Jesus Christ overcomes the distinction between creator and creature. By virtue of Christ's humanity, the church has been given a "*share in his kingship*," but only a share.[52]

To have a share in Jesus' kingship is thus to reject the notion of a total correspondence between divine and creaturely activity on the one hand, or a total human knowledge as to the moral character of divine activity on the other. The scriptures as a whole and Jesus' narrative in particular never allow such a move. Yoder's reading of Jesus' narrative seems to suggest there is still a dimension to Christ's reign that is "hidden," and while Christ has given clear commands to the church and even given it a particular form of existence corresponding to his own earthly history, the still embodied Jesus Christ now inhabits a history and is engaged in activities not given to the church to see. In seeking her own ecclesial tasks, the church need not agonize over the Christ-history that has diverged from her own, because she has been given her marching orders from the Lord. That such a divergence

[50] Ibid., 41.
[51] Ibid., 38; emphasis in original.
[52] Yoder, *Preface to Theology,* 248; emphasis in original.

has taken place should produce humility within ecclesial-being with respect to the church's relationship to, and words about, the Lord.

Yoder's account helpfully spells out the ecclesial implications of the ascension. Christ's ascension, exaltation, and endowment with authority reveal the church's role to be that of proclaiming the Gospel through service in the duration between Christ's leaving and return. Only briefly alluded to in Yoder, however, is a substantial recognition of "what happens to and for Jesus, in his own humanity" as a result of the ascension. The significance of Christ's "hidden" activity is left largely unexplored. In one sense this is appropriate, since to speak too readily about this hidden dimension is to claim such history as totally revealed and thus to resolve the still dialogical, open-ended character of the New Testament.[53] In another sense, deeper reflection on Christ's hidden activity, especially as Farrow has offered, may be equally important in providing the humility necessary to "be careful about one's words in the fear of God."

Re-thinking God's (Non)violence in Light of the Ascension

Returning to Weaver's *The Nonviolent God*, what becomes striking is its lack of explicit engagement with the significance for the church of Jesus' bodily ascension. This is odd, since Weaver consistently appeals to phrases like "the reign of God" or "the victory of the reign of God" throughout the book. Most telling is that these phrases are effectively shorthand for what God has accomplished in Jesus' resurrection. For Weaver, the reality and character of God's rule and God's salvation in Jesus are definitively disclosed there:[54] "It is because of the resurrection that Christians proclaim Jesus as Lord and claim immediate access to Jesus today."[55] The resurrection is the guarantee that Jesus' nonviolent life definitively characterizes God's reign.

Two dimensions to Weaver's statement deserve questioning. First, while without resurrection Jesus would not be declared Lord, doesn't the narrative of Jesus demonstrate that he is proclaimed as Lord not principally because of his resurrection but because he was witnessed ascending to the Father? Contrary to Weaver's claim that the resurrection and appearances

[53] It is exactly such a tendency that is argued against here.
[54] Weaver, *Nonviolent God,* 43, 160.
[55] Ibid., 23.

to witnesses are the climax or culmination of the narrative, the sermon in Acts that he refers to lists the exaltation to the right hand of God as the culminating point of God's victory (Acts 2:33).[56] If the climax of God's salvation and rule is to be drawn from the narrative of Jesus, his death and resurrection are not the climax. They are undoubtedly central, but they are not the complete picture.

Second, Weaver states that we can claim "immediate access to Jesus today." What is "immediate access"? Consider Weaver's strong focus on narrative or story as the foundation of Christian identification with Jesus. In a sense, an appeal to narrative is justified, as the narrative is a witness and invitation to life under God's reign. However, with his stress on the resurrection as the culmination of the narrative of Jesus, Weaver makes the resurrection the definitive word of that invitation. Yet that definitive word comes with the declaration of Jesus' exaltation and the statement about his place in heaven (Acts 2:33-36, 3:21). When the Holy Spirit comes, we are invited to live under the reign not only of the crucified, risen one but of the exalted one. Farrow says as much, stating that the Holy Spirit presents to us "the absent Jesus."[57] To say it is because of Jesus' resurrection that he can be "immediately accessible" to us, as Weaver does, begs the question as to Jesus' location, post-resurrection and ascension. Without carefully exploring Jesus' bodily ascension, Weaver leaves open the possibility of a Hegelian interpretation of the ascension. In turn, it becomes a real temptation to think of Christ's ascension and reign as something that happens solely on account of human participation in Jesus' narrative.[58]

Taken to its logical conclusion, a Hegelian interpretation allows the Christian to become "an extension of the incarnation" and to share in Christ's reign with a degree of equivalence inappropriate in light of Christ's exalted status.[59] This in turn produces the effect of displacing the body of Christ. In Weaver's view of an "extension of the incarnation," is there any room for "eucharistic ambiguity" in the church? Is there any recognition

[56] Ibid., 21.
[57] Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia,* 257, 266, 271n59.
[58] Ibid.*,* 187.
[59] Weaver, *Nonviolent God,* 171.

of the "continuing incarnation" of the absent Lord?[60] Farrow worries that by ignoring the absence of Jesus the church will misconstrue the presence, and when this occurs "the problem of the church's own identity is badly compounded; for it is no longer clear who it is that it confesses as Lord."[61] The next step, he notes, "is almost always to fix even more strongly on one or another aspect of its own structure or mission as a guarantee of its fidelity and continued relevance."[62]

Indeed, might God's "nonviolence" be just such an aspect, a guarantee of the relevance of Christianity? Jesus Christ, the nonviolent, social activist God, seems much more relevant to the modern mind than Jesus the ascended, exalted Jew.[63] What may be most scandalous here for Weaver is that Jesus "in his human particularity" is exalted.[64] The scandal of the God-man's exaltation is that it is proclaimed in language decidedly ontological, and it is precisely Jesus' "ontological deity" that Weaver finds unhelpful for "discovering and discerning Jesus in his human particularity."[65] Exaltation is further problematic because it simultaneously joins and severs human history and divine history, human action and divine action. This question must be therefore be put to Weaver: Is Jesus Christ immediately accessible to us today but not also inaccessible?

Though Weaver states otherwise at one point,[66] he gives the impression that Jesus' narrative and the people in whom it is incarnated become the primary *topos* of Christ, the one place where Jesus is truly and always accessible (present) and active. Indeed, where the story of God's rule in history had an "evolutionary trajectory," it is "reached with Jesus."[67] But where is the incarnate Jesus now? If Jesus-history has diverged from ours in an important way, is it ever appropriate to speak of God's rule being reached at any point before Jesus' history and ours become one again? Isn't God's

[60] The phrase "continuing incarnation" appears in the subtitle to Gerrit Scott Dawson, *Jesus Ascended: The Meaning of Christ's Continuing Incarnation* (New York: T&T Clark, 2004).
[61] Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia*, 272.
[62] Ibid., 13.
[63] Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 15.
[64] Weaver, "A Believers' Church Christology," 114.
[65] Ibid.
[66] Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 186.
[67] Ibid., 129.

rule still active in its own way, through the human Jesus' place beside the Father? Where Yoder was willing to intimate that the ascended Christ reigns in a way "hidden" and inaccessible from our absolute judgments, and that Christ's kingship is not totally equivalent to human participation in his death and resurrection, Weaver tends to equate Christ's kingship with any activity, within the church or otherwise, that corresponds to the rule of God as absolutely visible in the story of Jesus.[68] This produces a number of key tensions in Weaver's hermeneutical model that I will now address in light of Farrow's analysis.

First, in spite of his emphasis on lived theology, Weaver ultimately appears to give into some gnostic tendencies. He does so by conflating the ascension with the resurrection in articulating his version of a "narrative Christus victor," with the result that whatever it means for Jesus to have ascended, his bodily ascension, his ongoing history as the man from Nazareth, is no longer considered a factor in the lived narrative of Jesus and hence in any understanding of how God and God's rule might be characterized. For Weaver, it is the visibility of God's reign in Jesus that funds his account of the nonviolent God. Missing is the invisibility of God's reign in Jesus witnessed to in the ascension. By undervaluing this aspect of that reign, Weaver's Christocentrism is too narrow.

Perhaps the greater danger in Weaver's approach can be articulated by comparison with Rudolf Bultmann's famous mythological reading of the resurrection: "Christ the crucified and risen one encounters us in the word of proclamation and nowhere else. And faith in *this word* is the true faith of easter."[69] That is, based on Weaver's account we might paraphrase Bultmann to say: "Christ the crucified and risen one rules through his narrative, lived through an extension of the incarnation and nowhere else. And faith in this narrative is the true faith of easter." Given Weaver's understanding of the narrative of Jesus, is it the narrative itself that functions as God's reign, or is it the God-man Jesus who reigns at the Father's right hand that is God's reign?

Weaver may respond that his account takes full stock of Jesus Christ reigning at the Father's right hand. But can he affirm that the man

[68] Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 186.

[69] Rudolf Bultmann, *New Testament and Mythology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1984), 39; emphasis added.

Jesus of Nazareth has an ongoing history at the Father's side that prevents theologians and Christians generally from making authoritative statements about his total character (the way Weaver has done, in arguing for God's nonviolence)? Based on the following quotation from Weaver that alludes to Jesus' nonviolent life, the answer must be No:

> If Jesus is "one in being" with God or "equally God" or "equal to the Father in respect of his divinity," these statements would certainly seem to support belief in a nonviolent God. Traditionalists who would preserve a prerogative of violence for God are put in the position of arguing for an interpretation of this language that applies Jesus' equality with God only to the incarnation and not to God in other settings and persons of the Trinity. Stated differently, they argue that there are attributes in the person of God that are not in the person of Jesus.[70]

However, if Jesus' incarnation, the scope of his actual narrative, encompasses and involves more than we can rightly say because of his bodily ascension—his ongoing life in the flesh—then the arguments of the "traditionalists" do not lack support. Put differently, they argue not that "there are attributes in the person of God that are not in the person of Jesus" but that there are attributes in the person of Jesus not fully revealed to us. Weaver concedes that we cannot know everything about God because God is infinite, but clearly he believes that we can know everything there is to know about the character of the man Jesus.[71] This seems implied in asserting God's nonviolence based on Jesus' nonviolent earthly life. The ascension, as the continuation of the incarnation in heaven, problematizes the belief that we know everything about the character of Jesus, including whether his role at God's right hand can be characterized as violent or nonviolent. Jesus' uniquely exalted person, his infinite humanity, cannot be so reduced.

Weaver's argument rests upon a critical assumption that must be challenged, namely that the revelatory character of the narrative of Jesus effectively ends at the resurrection, which for Weaver is the "ultimate

[70] Weaver, *Nonviolent God*, 160-61.
[71] Ibid., 5.

testimony" of God's reign.[72] Written out of this assumption is a recognition that a divine-human history continues meaningfully in the Godhead by virtue of the ascension. If this recognition is allowed, the possibility must be granted that the lived life of Jesus as Son of Man sitting at the Father's right hand is ongoing, and that it is beyond our grasp and definitive judgment. God's revelation to humanity in the divine-human person of Jesus is no less definitive, since God has identified with this one in our history, but this revelation is not total with respect to our knowledge of his character and activity. His humanity has also been exalted and now exercises a unique, hidden role at God's right hand. That is, Christ has revealed God's fullness but this fullness expresses, through the ascension, divine hiddenness as well. Revelation does not overcome this hiddenness but exposes its infinite depths. For Weaver, Christ's death and resurrection seal the meaning of Christ's character (posited in terms of nonviolence), whereas for Farrow it is Christ's ongoing life that has its own particular character—and this makes Weaver's position problematic.[73]

Constructive Proposal for Chastened Christocentric Hermeneutics

My argument has sought to demonstrate that any appeal to Christocentric hermeneutics on the basis of the narrative of Jesus must be chastened by the limit point in its own narrative base, and that this limit point is the moment where the man Jesus of Nazareth is "hid from our sight" (Acts 1:9). Using Christocentric hermeneutics to make claims about God's essential character is problematized on the basis of the hermeneutics itself, because Christ's narrative includes a hidden form of embodiment. In this light, we may question whether Christian nonviolence itself is normative to discipleship. After all, if the embodied, human-divine Jesus of Nazareth is involved in forms of activity that we can no longer see and make absolute ethical observations about, it might follow that Christian ethics and discipleship, based on Jesus' embodied life, is relativized or at least left ambiguous.

[72] Ibid., 160.

[73] For Farrow, the significance of the ascension is in its demonstrating Christ's ongoing life. Commenting on a statement from Hans Frei, Farrow notes that Jesus' history "is not reduced now to the history of faith" (*Ascension and Ecclesia*, 237). It is this reduction that is worrisome in Weaver's narrative of Jesus, even if Weaver understands this narrative to be "living."

However, the above response relies upon a theological and anthropological assumption that must be simultaneously affirmed and challenged in light of our analysis so far, namely that God's character as revealed in Jesus Christ is a character that we can be empowered to grow in likeness to. There is an obvious truth to this assumption that is rooted in the New Testament (Romans 13:14 and Ephesians 5:1 are two examples). In the NT there is also a strong sense in which imitating Christ is not only imitating his earthly form but also participating or partaking in God's inner life or divine nature (2 Peter 1:4). If Christians are called to imitate Christ's nonviolent earthly life and partake of the divine nature, but the divine-human Christ is now also involved in activity that could be construed as violent, isn't this a contradiction? Must a choice not be made between a violent God and hence a Christian ethic that has space for violence, or a nonviolent God and hence a Christian ethic that refuses violence?

The proposal that I am presenting now is that, in light of the ascension, there is a third way of proceeding. Jesus Christ's earthly life, death, resurrection, and ascension demonstrate that the church, as a fundamental responsibility, must participate in the reign of God nonviolently, based on the example and commands Christ has set for her. Out of his earthly life, the church has been born, has taken shape, and is called upon to participate in Christ's kingship in the way appropriate to the "ecclesial-being" he has given her as the one with authority over heaven and earth. Imitating Christ and living under his lordship is possible because of the ascension that results in sending the Holy Spirit with power (Acts 1:8). However, what the ascension does not result in is a conflation of our share in his kingly authority with his kingship as such. As the ascended and glorified one, Christ is the singular human person for whom it is true that he is divine Lord and human agent without contradiction. Christians cannot say the same thing of themselves, and thus they cannot imitate Christ or assume a total moral equivalence with him.

This is not to say there is no relation, or only a minor relation, between the church and the ascended Christ. Far from it. Christian theology has from the earliest times recognized an intimate relation between the church and Christ post-ascension. Indeed, the author of Ephesians goes so far as to say that God "raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places

in Christ Jesus" (2:6). That Christians occupy a seat "with him" through the power of the Holy Spirit does not mean they exclusively occupy his seat at God's right hand or that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to them. Those who follow Jesus are, mysteriously, to be "his body," but the body is never to presume to be "the head" (Colossians 1:18). God is God, and we are not, regardless of the fact that God is also now and forevermore *incarnatus*.

The lived theology of Jesus of Nazareth is thus simultaneously something his disciples can imitate and something they simply cannot attain. They can imitate Jesus' life because he is truly human; they cannot imitate Jesus because he is fully God. His humanity must never be thought to exhaust his divinity, even as his humanity expresses his divinity, in time and post-ascension, in eternity, without contradiction. While it may be legitimate on the basis of the incarnation to state that God acts or has acted nonviolently in history, it is not legitimate on the basis of the continued incarnation in heaven to use this statement to exclude the biblical language of God's wrath or vengeance in order to say that God is nonviolent. Christology and Christocentric hermeneutics need not require a binary choice between a violent or nonviolent God. The better option, as Willard Swartley has contended, is to reject this "misconceived duality" in the first place.[74]

In light of the ascension, which as Yoder argued is the foundation for a proper distinction between Christ's rule and our share in it, we have biblical and conceptual tools to reject the duality of violence and nonviolence in discussions of God's character. With these same tools we can still affirm the requirement of nonviolence for disciples of Jesus. In this way, the final chapters in Weaver's *The Nonviolent God* dealing with the importance of the practice of forgiveness for restorative justice, or the call to cross racial and ethnic boundaries in pursuit of reconciliation, are important and helpful. Scripture demonstrates that these activities are part of our share in Christ's rule. But as we have seen, a defense of a nonviolent God is not clearly necessary to empower the lived theology appropriate for disciples who take seriously Jesus' earthly example and commandments.[75]

[74] Swartley, *Covenant of Peace*, 396.

[75] See Weaver, *Nonviolent God*: "Atonement, Violence, and Forgiveness," 201-22, and "Race, Gender, Money," 223-53.

The church's language about the ascended and glorified one must therefore be tempered and nuanced, not with respect to what Jesus has commanded in his call for us to be people of peace, but with respect to the claim that if God is to be one with Jesus, God must be essentially nonviolent. Developing Anabaptist-Mennonite theology in the setting of Jesus' ascension to the Father's right hand will make it less necessary to argue for a hermeneutic of God's nonviolence. Indeed, the latter may be seeking too much control of the scriptures within which we find God's living story—that is, asking for a resurrection without bodily ascension, a presence without absence, and a revealedness without hiddenness—that we must not ask for in light of the risen, ascended man from Nazareth.

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