A Jesus-Centered Peace Theology, or, Why and How Theology and Ethics are Two Sides of One Profession of Faith

J. Denny Weaver

Introduction

In 1991 the Mennonite Central Committee published *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (hereafter, *Panorama*).[1] It was an effort to bring clarity to an increasing variety of positions on peace and nonviolence within the broad Mennonite tradition in North America. With material reworked from an earlier conference, *Panorama* described ten types of peace theology. Much has happened in the world since 1991. As well, in these past twenty-five years Anabaptist theologians have engaged in vigorous debates about the orientation and content of acceptable theology for Mennonites. It is thus appropriate to ask to what extent the descriptions in *Panorama* are still relevant, and even whether the category of "types" is still useful.

This essay contributes to the discussion of *Panorama* and Mennonite peace theology in two ways. Its first and primary agenda is to sketch and advocate a type of peace theology not found in that document. I use the narrative of Jesus to develop an atonement motif with Christological implications. The result is a theological motif that has rejection of violence as an intrinsic element and provides a theological justification for nonviolence. Two of my books and several articles are the most significant examples to date of the results of deriving theology from the narrative of Jesus;[2] the present essay offers a brief sketch based on these writings. It is a theology

[1] John Richard Burkholder and Barbara Nelson Gingerich, eds., *Mennonite Peace Theology: A Panorama of Types* (Akron, PA: Mennonite Central Committee Peace Office, 1991).

[2] J. Denny Weaver, "Narrative Christus Victor: The Answer to Anselmian Atonement Violence," in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 1-29; J. Denny Weaver, "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God," in *Stricken by God? Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 316-55; J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011); J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2013).

The Conrad Grebel Review 34, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 5-27.

that can guide the Christian life, a theology for what the Anabaptist tradition calls discipleship.

Stated another way, the narrative of Jesus from the New Testament is the norm of both theology and ethics. Deriving an atonement motif from this narrative produces theology and ethics that cannot be separated, and in fact neither is properly developed without reference to the other. The theology of this sketch has affinity with the type that *Panorama* called "Pacifism of the Messianic Community" as well as the types emphasizing active pursuit of social justice. However, methodology and outcome place my sketch in a new category.

As a seemingly new way to do theology (but with methodological roots already visible in the NT), my work has generated some opposition. Demonstrating that my approach can withstand such challenges is an important part of articulating and defending it. It is also important to identify validating, supportive voices. Thus, in this essay I respond to three challenges and identify two supportive statements from what may seem like surprising sources.

That theology and ethics are developed from the narrative of Jesus identifies a norm. However, the Bible's text is not an absolute, the narrative comes in several forms and is subject to interpretation, and actually applying the narrative is open to critique. Thus the narrative is a functional, rather than an absolute, norm. Virtually every theology and ethic developed within contemporary Anabaptist and Mennonite or peace church circles also claims to be "biblical." The discussion below compares the result of the narrative as a functional norm with the functional norms from the three conversations I engage. The comparisons result in a suggestion for revising what *Panorama* called "types" of Mennonite peace theologies.

Theology Derived from the Narrative of Jesus

There is space here for only a brief, thematic sketch of Jesus' life and ministry. My sketch highlights Jesus' social agenda, and emphasizes the activist and at times confrontational dimensions of his ministry—challenging opponents, teaching, plucking grain and healing on the Sabbath, traveling in Samaria and interacting with a Samaritan woman, speaking against making an idol of wealth, forgiving rather than condemning a woman taken in adultery, and

cleansing the temple. These actions provoked hostility, and the action in the temple precipitated a plot to have Jesus killed. He was tried and condemned, and executed by crucifixion. Three days later, God resurrected him from the dead.

With the confrontational element in mind, this narrative can be read as an atonement motif in the general category of Christus Victor—the idea of a cosmic confrontation in which Christ is victorious over Satan with the resurrection—but a Christus Victor located on earth and in terms of the events of Jesus' life. Since Jesus embodied and made present the reign of God on earth, his life and his deeds confronted the powers of evil, the spiritual dimensions of structures in the world.[3] However one understands the evil powers, God has triumphed over them with Jesus' resurrection—hence the motif I call "narrative Christus Victor."

As an atonement motif, narrative Christus Victor differs markedly from the inherited images. The classic version, which exists in several variations in the writings of the early church fathers, pictures the confrontation as a cosmic battle without specific earthly application. Narrative Christus Victor, in contrast, locates the confrontation on earth in the events of Jesus' life. When we recognize that the evil powers which killed Jesus still abound in the world, Christians who live in the story of Jesus continue this confrontation and participate now in the victory of God's reign wrought by Jesus' resurrection.

Some version of the "satisfaction" atonement theory has been dominant for perhaps the past eight centuries. Its first full version was in *Why the God-Man?* published by Anselm of Canterbury in 1098. Anselm assumed the outlook of Norman feudalism, in which order in the realm depended on the feudal lord's ability either to punish an offender or to exact satisfaction. Anselm pictured God as the ultimate feudal lord, with Jesus' death as the satisfaction that restored the order of creation after human sin had offended God. The feudal system has long disappeared, but the idea

[3] Walter Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament*, The Powers, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984); Walter Wink, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces That Determine Human Existence*, The Powers, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986); Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*, The Powers, vol. 3 (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992).

of Jesus' death as offering some kind of satisfaction to God remains. In the 16th century, Protestant reformers shifted the object of Jesus' death from satisfying an offended God to paying the penalty demanded by divine law.

Some version of satisfaction remains the dominant motif today, with multiple suggestions for what Jesus' death satisfies. A minority opinion against Anselm still current among some liberal Protestants is the "moral influence" motif. Here Jesus' death is not directed toward God but is aimed at sinful humankind. It is said that when rebellious humans see that God loved them enough to send the Son to die, they will cease rebelling and return to a loving God.

Violence serves divine purposes in both the satisfaction and the moral influence images of the atonement. These images picture a God who sanctions violence for God's purposes. In the satisfaction motifs, God sent Jesus to die to satisfy a divine need or to pay what God's law required. In the moral influence motif, God needed Jesus to die in order to show God's love for sinful humankind. In both, this divine need for death makes God the ultimate agent behind Jesus' death. God's need for Jesus to die not only shows God's sanction of violence, it puts the people who kill Jesus in the position of both opposing the reign of God by killing God's Son, and in a way helping God by killing Jesus to supply the death that was needed. The example posed by Jesus in these images constitutes a serious problem, in that he models passive submission to abuse perpetrated by an authority figure. This model is unhealthy and even dangerous for women in an abusive relationship and children in an abusive home, as well as for people living under oppressive regimes and military occupation, or in conditions of systemic violence such as racism or poverty.

In contrast to these inherited motifs, narrative Christus Victor is a nonviolent image. The violence that killed Jesus was perpetrated by people. It is not attributed to God or needed by God. Neither does God require the suffering of Jesus for redemptive purposes. The death of Jesus does not do anything to or for God, whether satisfying God's honor or in any other way serving God's purpose of redemption. Rather than emphasizing Jesus' death, narrative Christus Victor focuses on resurrection as God's saving act. I sometimes call this motif "nonviolent atonement."

This sketch of Jesus' life in no way denies that he suffered. My objection is to the idea that Jesus' purpose was to suffer, or that suffering

itself has a salvific quality. Rather, suffering was the consequence of Jesus carrying out his mission. He could have avoided suffering by forsaking it, but since he chose to be faithful to it, he accepted the inevitable suffering that resulted from it. This point is important for discussions of living in the narrative of Jesus, which Anabaptists traditionally call discipleship, and for understanding the character of the God revealed in Jesus. The sketch of Jesus' life, his death and, most important, his resurrection identifies Jesus as one in whom God is fully present. The resurrection validates him as God's very presence and reign on earth. Thus, alongside the possibility of identifying this narrative as an atonement image, it is also the beginning of a narrative-based Christology linking Jesus to God. There is yet more.

If one accepts that God and God's reign were present in Jesus, the narrative description of Jesus, culminating with the resurrection, also identifies God. Classic language displayed the link between God and Jesus with the claim that Jesus "was one substance with the Father." When the slain but resurrected lamb in Revelation 5 and 6 is the only being able to open the sealed scroll in God's hand, and the heavenly host breaks out in glorious adoration, that is a another statement that Jesus reveals God and is equal to him. Whatever language one uses to say that Jesus' life makes present God and God's reign on earth, the narrative says something important about God: God does not use violence. In contrast to the evil powers which annihilate enemies by killing, the resurrection makes clear that God's way is to give life and to restore life. If God is revealed in Jesus, then Jesus reveals a nonviolent God.

Identifying the nonviolent character of God requires rereading the Old Testament. Alongside the frequently referenced fact that the OT pictures a God who resorts to violence, the OT has a number of nonviolent images and practices as well. These include the refusal of patriarchs Abraham and Isaac to fight about territory, Gideon's defeat of the Midianites with trickery, Elisha's turning away an invasion with divine assistance and a feast, the nonviolent cultural resistance of the Hebrew exiles in Daniel, and more. The conversation about the character of God in the OT is not resolved by citing a specific story but by recognizing which side of the conversation is continued by the narrative of Jesus, the Messiah who is a son of Israel.[4]

[4] Using the narrative of Jesus to resolve the OT's conversation about the character of God is

Theology and Salvation

The narrative of Jesus is a saving story. Telling it displays God's reign in the world. Those who would participate in that reign then live in this narrative. They are saved. In line with Paul's paradox of grace (1 Cor. 15:10), the resurrection constitutes a grace-filled invitation, paradoxically to live in God's reign, which we cannot accomplish on our own but which nonetheless engages our own volition. Resurrection also includes the promise one day to experience the restoration of life that has occurred for Jesus.

Identifying this story as the story of salvation reflects what is reported in the book of Acts. When questioned in whose name or whose authority they acted, the Apostles told this story (see Acts 2:14-41; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:29-32; 10:36-43; 13:17-41). God sent the resurrected Jesus "to bless you by turning each of you from your wicked ways" (3:26). The story is identified with salvation (4:12). On the day of Pentecost, those who welcomed the message were baptized (2:41), and following verses describe the new way of life that they entered. To those who hear the story, it is an invitation to join in, and live in it as saved people.

People are saved by identifying with Jesus and living in the story. They "find God" by living in the story of Jesus, the one who makes God and God's reign visible on earth. In this light, salvation and ethics are inseparable, two sides of the proverbial coin. To ask "Who is Jesus?" requires telling this story. And asking how a Christian, a follower of Jesus, should live requires telling it. To answer either question is to provide the basis for answering the other.

Identifying with Jesus means making a commitment to him. Ethics is the lived expression of that commitment; theology is the words used to describe the Jesus of that commitment. Theology and ethics should proclaim the same message, but they neither properly match up nor worship the God revealed in Jesus when we profess faith in the Jesus who rejected violence but accommodate the use of violence by a nation's military forces. This critique includes all versions of two-kingdom theology, which presume that

in line with the approach of John Dominic Crossan, *God and Empire: Jesus Against Rome, Then and Now* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 94-95; Jack Nelson-Pallmeyer, *Jesus Against Christianity: Reclaiming the Missing Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2001), chapters 19-25; and Eric Seibert's distinction between the "textual God and the actual God" in determining that Jesus reveals the character of God: see Eric Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), 185.

although nonresistant Christians do not participate, military engagement by government is appropriate and the discussion of policy decisions is best left to the US State Department and social scientists at elite eastern universities.[5]

Ethics that matches theology is reflected in the constructions of this essay. Narrative Christus Victor proposes a way to understand the saving dimensions of the story as participation in it. Identifying the nonviolence of God means that nonviolent practitioners are working with God's purposes revealed in the nonviolent life of Jesus. This profession of a nonviolent God thus counters two common appeals to a violent God: the assertion that Christians may use violence to assist God's cause, and the claim that because God uses violence, the followers of Jesus need not resort to it.

Nonviolent Ethics

An ethic derived from the narrative of Jesus is intrinsically nonviolent. "Nonviolent" or "nonviolence" are here not abstract terms with a transcendent meaning apart from that narrative. When referring to the "nonviolence" of Jesus I use it as a descriptive term to include both Jesus' rejection of the sword as a means to advance God's reign and his active confrontation of injustice without mirroring it. A "nonviolent ethic" has nonviolence as an intrinsic element. It should be a contradiction in terms to have a Christian ethic without nonviolence as such an element. Further, a nonviolent ethic derived from the narrative of Jesus engages the world we live in. It is a social justice-oriented ethic.

We can readily see that Jesus did not kill anyone or try to obtain power behind a military force. Nonviolence is thus directly derived from him, not an abstraction read back into the story. A statement at his trial demonstrates that his rejection of a military uprising was a principled action. He told Pilate, "My kingdom is not from this world. If my kingdom were from this world, my followers would be fighting to keep me from being handed over to the Jews.[6] But as it is, my kingdom is not from here" (John 18:36). Since Jesus

[5] For my response to two kingdom theology, see J. Denny Weaver, "Living in the Reign of God in the 'Real World': Getting Beyond Two-Kingdom Theology," in *Exiles in the Empire: Believers Church Perspectives on Politics*, ed. Nathan E. Yoder and Carol A. Scheppard (Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006), 173-93.

[6] This kind of reference to "the Jews" has been greatly misused in the course of Christian history. It is sufficient to say here that "the Jews" does not mean all Jews or the Jewish religion.

engaged in a great variety of social activities, this latter phrase cannot mean that his kingdom was an inner, spiritual kingdom. It means that the values and orientation of his kingdom differed from the values and orientation of Pilate's kingdom.

In addition to these specific instances of rejecting violence, consider Jesus' teachings that convey nonviolence. These include the well-known sayings from the Sermon on the Mount, which in the King James Version commanded that "ye resist not evil." In the Mennonite world I grew up in, these statements taught "nonresistance"—meaning stand passively, offer no resistance, and go out of your way to do more than was required. Now, as a "recovering nonresistant Mennonite," I follow an activist interpretation of the texts of Matthew 5. When Jesus said not to resist evil, he meant not to resist with similar evil. He gave three examples of nonviolent resistance: refuse to accept an insult by turning the other cheek; expose an exploitative debt holder by handing him your last stitch of clothing to act out being stripped naked; and turn the tables on a soldier by carrying his pack farther than regulations allowed, which might get him in trouble with his commander. The culmination was love your enemies.[7] Love of enemies is not to be confused with romantic love. It means "do not respond to evil with more evil." As Walter Wink has said, in responding to violence with equal violence "we become what we hate." A violent retaliation to a violent attack merely continues the cycle of violence. To reduce evil, to respond to an enemy with love, means to act in such a way as to change the situation, to stop a cycle of vengeance and retaliation.

Jesus' three examples suggest ways to respond to a provocation without mirroring evil. Paul follows Jesus' line when he writes,

> Do not repay anyone evil for evil. . . . If your enemies are hungry, feed them; if they are thirsty, give them to drink; . . . Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good (Romans 12:17, 20, 21).

1 Thessalonians 5:15 and 1 Peter 3:9 offer similar statements.

Examples from the narrative of Jesus illustrate changing the situation.

As used in this essay, it designates one of the several religious parties in Jesus' time.

[7] For this interpretation, see Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 175-84.

For example, consider his response to the woman taken in adultery (John 8:1-11). Rather than compound the sin of adultery with a death, he changed the situation in a way that exposed the sin of the accusers as well as giving the woman a chance to change her life. Jesus' meeting with Zacchaeus is a confrontation that changed circumstances (Luke 19:1-10). As a tax collector employed by the Romans, Zacchaeus would have been despised by the local people. In addition, his position allowed for graft and thievery. But rather than express hostility, Jesus spoke to him with respect and suggested staying at his house. The result was a radical change in Zacchaeus's outlook. He promised to give half his wealth to the poor, and he would restore four-fold—that is, principal and generous interest—to those he had defrauded. When Jesus broke through social tension by treating a dishonorable man with respect, Zacchaeus changed his life. In modern terms, it is an example of "restorative justice."

These excerpts from Jesus' life and teaching illustrate the basis of an intrinsically nonviolent ethic rooted in the NT narrative. These incidents and others from Jesus' life become the basis for discipleship. To be identified with Jesus means to live in his story, which means to embody its nonviolent dimensions. And beyond the intrinsic nonviolence of this narrative are broad social connotations. Jesus' interactions with women and Samaritans have implications for how the church today speaks to racism and the treatment of women. Other stories have implications for forgiveness, economics, the justice system, and more.

Christian ethics—how Christians live—is the lived expression of theology. Not only is the narrative the basis of a nonviolent, social-justice oriented ethic, it is the beginning of a nonviolence-shaped theology. This theology is an atonement image that invites us to salvation without any kind of satisfaction to God. When we take seriously that God is revealed in this narrative, it opens a view of God's nonviolence. This is theology and it is ethics, an integrated statement of theology-ethics with the narrative of Jesus as normative.

In a sense, the term "peace theology" in the *Panorama* document's title now takes on new meaning. As used for that publication's original focus, "peace theology" referred to the theological justification of peace, nonviolence, and social justice. My discussion has rooted this justification

in the narrative of Jesus. In addition, I argue that theology as usually understood—namely, discussion of such topics as atonement, Christology, and the nature of God—should be theology in which peace and nonviolence are intrinsic elements.

The Difference It Makes: Three Recent Conversations

Posing the narrative of Jesus as the norm of ethics and theology raises the question of other possible ethical and theological norms. The significance of this question becomes clear in conversation with three kinds of challenges to my approach. The analysis below concerns types of peace theology and their potential to accommodate violence.

Stanley Hauerwas

The first conversation is with Stanley Hauerwas. One of his major contributions is his determined defense of pacifism. But, as reported by Peter Dula, one of his Mennonite students, Hauerwas objects to the idea of developing theology that specifically reflects the peace church or Anabaptist traditions. He has expressed rather strong objection to my approach to Christology and the consequent move to address nonviolence in theology and ethics. Dula writes that Hauerwas worries about the "reduction of theology to ethics" in my work. The example cited for this supposed reduction is *The Nonviolent Atonement*, described as making nonviolence "a principle reigning over all dogmatic assertions or scriptural exegesis."[8] Further, as a self-proclaimed "high church Mennonite," Hauerwas also objects to efforts "to purify Anabaptism of any Catholic, Creedal or magisterial Protestant influence." The example of this alleged purifying is a quotation from *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity*, in which I suggested that Anabaptists, Mennonites, or the peace church might have a "specific perspective on theology," and that such a stance "might produce a different view of classic questions from that of the majority Christian tradition."[9] Hauerwas is said to object to the kind of approach just sketched,

8 Peter Dula, "For and Against Hauerwas Against Mennonites," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 84, no. 3 (July 2010): 178 and n11.

[9] Ibid., 379 and n15, citing J. Denny Weaver, *Anabaptist Theology in Face of Postmodernity: A Proposal for the Third Millennium* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US, co-published with Herald

which poses a theology for the peace church that is in conversation with, but not beholden to, the classic tradition of Nicea and Chalcedon.

Hauerwas favors a "high church Mennonite" ecclesiology, described as "Catholicism for which pacifism is a cultural norm."[10] He fears that a church without "a hierarchical teaching office or a robust account of sacramentality" and a theology not beholden to Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition has been, or will be, captured by "Harnack's Hellenization thesis: namely that the essence of the Gospel was distorted almost beyond recognition by the influence of Greek philosophy and the growth of the medieval church." The result, Hauerwas believes, will be the error of stripping away a "husk" with only "peace" remaining as the ethical kernel, a "peaceful version of liberal Protestantism" associated with Kant and Harnack.[11]

Rejecting the idea of a distinct Anabaptist perspective assumes that the standard or classic tradition is the norm, the only acceptable way to discuss the nature of Jesus and his relation to God. The implication is that the Anabaptist tradition speaks from only a particular, limited perspective, whereas the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition, backed by the teaching authority of the church of Christendom, is a universal stance transcending historical particularity. I suggest that Hauerwas's critique arises from a failure to recognize that the classic tradition, equally as much as an Anabaptist orientation, speaks from and reflects a particular place and context.

Excursus on the Contextual Character of Christology

Stepping out of the main conversation for a moment, in order to analyze the contextual nature of formulas from Nicea and Chalcedon, will clarify the issues at stake with Hauerwas, and by extension the two conversations to follow. As enshrined in the Nicene Creed, Jesus was proclaimed *homoousios* or "one in being with" or "of the same substance" as the Father. In the formula of Chalcedon, the *homoousios* phrase was repeated for Jesus and the Father and then also applied to Jesus and humanity, which produced the claim that Jesus was "fully God and fully man" or "truly God and truly man." This language has been handed down as the supposed universal norm

Press, 2000), 13.

[10] Dula, "For and Against," 383.

[11] Ibid., 380.

for discussions of Christology. These time-honored expressions deal with questions posed but not answered specifically by the NT: "How does Jesus relate to God?" and "How does Jesus relate to humankind?" If one wants the answer to these questions in language reflecting their context and worldview, these are the correct answers, even the best answers.

However, the problem is that these classic answers do indeed reflect a context and worldview. They define the relationship of Jesus to the Father in terms of *ousios*, that is, ontology or being, which presumes a philosophical system that does not describe our contemporary reality. Further, these terms reflect a three-tiered cosmology, with God who resides in the upper realm manipulating events in the world below, and the essence or being of God above is the same as the essence or being of Jesus in the earthly realm. For an example of this three-decker universe, see Dante's *The Divine Comedy.* Canto XXVIII of *Paradisio* describes the nine circles of heaven with God located above them. The classic assumptions of reality and the accompanying cosmology do not describe our reality today. Our cosmology consists of an unfathomably large, still infinitely expanding universe. Pointing to the context of the classic formulas does not discredit the Nicene and Chalcedonian formulas in that context; their language reflects assumptions about reality at that time. These formulas reflect a context different from our own.

Questions immediately arise. Within our contemporary worldview, might there be other ways to deal with NT questions of the relationship of Jesus to God? The answer is yes. The classic language was developed by dominant men using the philosophical assumptions and accepted cosmology of their time. Is it appropriate to separate their language from its context and then to elevate it to the status of above-history, transcendent, universal givens applying to all contexts and worldviews from the 4th century to the distant future? I think not. Is a 4th-century phrase—*homoousios*—from the Nicene Creed the only way to assure ourselves that God was in Christ? I suggest it is not. I noted earlier that the resurrection validated Jesus' life as God's presence and reign on earth, with the slain and resurrected lamb of Revelation as another statement of Jesus' equality with God. It thus becomes clear that Nicea is one way to profess that God was in Christ, but that other expressions in other contexts and worldviews are appropriate.

Theology is never finished; it is always part of an ongoing conversation.

The narrative of Jesus locates him in a particular social location. Discussing the meaning of that narrative in other locations is always open-ended. Suggesting the possibility of different expressions in other worldviews of course requires caution. Although our picture of the infinitely expanding universe is the reality we know and the one in which we try to make sense of the God revealed in Jesus, this cosmology is nonetheless an image reflecting our particular "givens." However, one day our reality may be as outmoded as the three-tiered universe of Nicea-Chalcedon (and Dante) is now. Theology is always tentative. The given in our theologizing is the narrative of Jesus, to which we return continually to shape the theology that results from transporting that narrative into new and different worlds and cosmologies.

Acknowledging the narrative of Jesus as the given points to an additional problem posed by the classic creedal tradition. Nicea's formula of *homoousios* or "one substance with the Father" says nothing about the life of Jesus, and is therefore of little direct assistance for ethics. I will cite two examples. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas writes that while she learned in seminary to accept the Nicene-Chalcedonian debates and faith statements as part of the wider Christian tradition, she had long believed that "Jesus was Christ because of what he did for others, particularly the poor and oppressed." She noted aspects of the creedal formulation "that appear inconsistent with Jesus as he was presented in the Gospels." For example, using the incarnation to establish Jesus as Christ "diminishes the significance of Jesus' actions on earth. His ministry is virtually ignored." When the confession jumps from incarnation to the crucifixion, "The implication is that what took place between Jesus' birth and resurrection—the bulk of the Gospels' reports of Jesus—is unrelated to what it means for Jesus to be the Christ."[12]

After extensively discussing how imperial politics shaped the formulas of Nicea and Chalcedon, Joerg Rieger states that "It is hardly an accident that the life of Christ is not mentioned in the creeds; . . . The challenge to empire posed by the life of Christ would have just been too great." Rieger seeks to find the potential to subvert empire within the creeds, which is possible if "they are connected to the deeper realities of Christ's particular life." However, he concludes, "where the creeds without particular attention to the life of Christ

[12] Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 111-13.

are considered sufficient . . . the challenge is lost, which makes the 'orthodox' position so convenient for the empire."[13]

Return to the Conversations

With the contextual nature of the classic Christological tradition now in view, it is as legitimate to develop theology out of an Anabaptist perspective as out of the Nicene-Chalcedonian tradition. A primary characteristic of Anabaptism is its commitment to discipleship, which points back to the narrative of Jesus as the basis of theology and ethics.[14] From the perspective of peace and social justice as intrinsic to that narrative, this is a better place to begin theologizing than the classic formulas, which lack the narrative. As noted earlier, this approach is strongly biblical and explicitly Christological. It appeals to a robust view of the resurrection to validate God's presence in the life of Jesus. This is far from the bare peace kernel that Hauerwas fears. None of these assertions is acceptable to the liberalism that he dislikes and calls a "Kantian reduction of theology to ethics."

My excursus has pointed to the accommodation of the sword by the classic creedal tradition. As well, there are well-known arguments concerning the violence in the received atonement motifs, including the image of Jesus as a model of passive submission to unjust suffering that is offensive to women and people experiencing racial, colonial, or economic oppression; and the image of a violent God who demands blood or death as reparation for sin. Standing on traditional theology, with a wistful desire for a teaching magisterium to enforce it, makes Hauerwas vulnerable to such critiques.

However, an inconsistency in classic theology between a pacifist Jesus and violent images of atonement or accommodation of violence appears not to bother Hauerwas at all. In fact, Dula points out other contradictions in Hauerwas's theology—the "desire for Yoder and nostalgia for the papacy" and his rejection of Karl Barth's ecclesiology while making Barth the hero of the Gifford lectures. Hauerwas proceeds, says Dula, in line with the adage

[13] Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007), 96-97.

[14] See comments throughout Gerald J. Mast and J. Denny Weaver, *Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church* (Telford, PA: Cascadia Publishing House; co-published with Herald Press, 2009).

from Ralph Waldo Emerson: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of simple minds."[15] Instead of adjusting his theology to conform to a Mennonite pacifism that maintained itself without magisterium or sacramentality, Hauerwas proceeds to "ignore what he found incomprehensible."[16] To defend peace theology alongside the standard Nicene tradition, he ignores problems and contradictions. In contrast, I choose to rethink theology on the basis of the narrative of Jesus. It is misguided to label this effort as "reducing theology to ethics."

Darrin Snyder Belousek

Darrin Snyder Belousek believes that Jesus' rejection of violence is incumbent upon all Christians. Nonetheless, he seeks to defend the classic creedal tradition, traditional satisfaction atonement, and the idea of a God who resorts to violence, against those representing the new "ethical orthodoxy" adopted by "many Mennonite writers."[17] This new orthodoxy includes the development of nonviolent atonement and culminates with arguments for a nonviolent God. Belousek claims that his view is guided both by scripture and by the standard account of the Nicene-Chalcedonian creedal tradition and the Cappadocian language of the Trinity, which become his functional norm for interpreting scripture. The relationship of scripture and creed is self-referential: "Scripture is the criterion of the truth of the creed, and the creed is the criterion for the interpretation of Scripture."[18]

In his most recent article Belousek makes a false assumption concerning the new orthodoxy. He states that in John Howard Yoder's work and in my own recent writings, theology is reordered to serve the ethic of nonviolence. "To wit: beginning with the presupposition of nonviolence, one interprets Scripture through the prism of nonviolence, which interpretation

[15] Dula, "For and Against," 394-95.

[16] Ibid., 384.

[17] Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, "God and Nonviolence: Creedal Theology and Christian Ethics," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 88, no. 2 (April 2014): 234. See also Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace: The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 68-79; and Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, "Nonviolent God: Critical Analysis of a Contemporary Argument," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 29, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 49-70.

[18] Belousek, "God and Nonviolence," 239.

of Scripture supports the postulation of a nonviolent God, which theology reinforces the initial presupposition of nonviolence."[19] However, as the sketch at the beginning of this essay demonstrates, nonviolence is derived from the life of Jesus and is not a presupposition read back into that story.

The circular validation of scripture and creeds presents Belousek with a problem. At first glance, he acknowledges, linking Jesus the Son and God the Father as the "same substance" at Nicea and in Trinitarian doctrine would point to a nonviolent God. Thus Belousek uses a great deal of scholastic argument in order to maintain that Jesus taught and practiced non-retaliation (passive rather than active nonviolence), and that God is fully revealed in Jesus in line with the equation of God the Father and Jesus the Son in Nicene and trinitarian doctrine, while simultaneously preserving the biblical images of divine violence and the prerogative of God to use violence. To make the rejection of violence seen in Jesus' life a dimension of Nicea, Belousek argues that the creedal phrase "For us humans and our salvation" includes "not only the cross, but also Jesus' birth, resurrection, and ascension"[20] as well as Jesus' teaching and self-emptying, a claim challenged by Kelly Brown Douglas, Joerg Rieger, and others.

Establishing the creedal tradition as the functional, unquestioned norm apparently makes it nearly impossible to acknowledge the critiques made by feminist, black, and womanist theologians of the violence and harmful model posed by Jesus in traditional atonement imagery. Rather than respond directly to such critiques, Belousek restates satisfaction atonement, with only an incidental mention of the challenges. For him, the self-referential relationship of scripture and creedal tradition raises the creedal statements above context or historical particularity, and thus in his view the historical context had no impact on the Christological formulas. For a recent, seemingly total refutation of such a claim, see Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars*.[21]

Belousek and I agree that traditional theology has a God who can

[19] Ibid., 235.

[20] Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 14, and Belousek, "God and Nonviolence," 243-44, 263-64.

[21] Philip Jenkins, *Jesus Wars: How Four Patriarchs, Three Queens, and Two Emperors Decided What Christians Would Believe for the Next 1,500 Years* (New York: HarperOne, 2010).

resort to and sanction violence. However, Belousek employs scholastic argument to defend the classic creedal statements as the required theological norm, along with defending the various dimensions of divine violence in scripture, in inherited theology, and in satisfaction atonement, all the while claiming both that Jesus taught the nonviolence of non-retaliation and that God is revealed in him. In contrast, I pose a theology which is derived from the narrative of Jesus and for which that narrative serves as the functional norm. In this theology, it is assumed that God is revealed as nonviolent in the life of Jesus, who made visible God's reign in the particular history of first-century Palestine, and that the meaning of this story can be expressed in other contexts in ways not beholden to the classic creeds.

Ronald Sider

Ronald Sider rejects both my view of a God who does not resort to violence and my articulation of a nonviolent atonement image. He defends satisfaction atonement against the charge that it models violence and defends the idea of a God who uses violence.[22] His functional norm is a literal or flat reading of the biblical text, with the truth of the interpretation supposedly vouchsafed by inspiration of scripture. Appealing to inspiration is intended to stifle dissent from his view, but it only signals that he interprets the Bible differently than I do. For the question of divine violence, Sider assumes that citing biblical texts in a literal manner proves God's violence. He accounts for contradictions in the biblical images of God by asserting that we cannot know everything about God. He dismisses the argument that the character of God is revealed in Jesus with the claim that Jesus does not reveal everything about God.

Sider accepts the inherited atonement motifs as unquestioned givens. His methodology is to fit individual biblical texts into inherited atonement images, accompanied by the claim that any other interpretation of these texts violates biblical truth. Internal problems and contradictions within the motifs are ignored or passed off as due to our inability to know, and problems with one view are compensated for by another view. Sider does not fathom alternative interpretations such as those developed by David

[22] Ronald J. Sider, "A Critique of J. Denny Weaver's *Nonviolent Atonement*," *Brethren in Christ History and Life* 35, no. 1 (April 2012): 214-41.

Brondos, who interprets the entire Pauline corpus to show that Paul does not support satisfaction atonement.[23] Sider also lacks awareness of the feudal background from which Anselm developed the idea of satisfaction as atonement, nor does he acknowledge the sequence in which Christus Victor was rejected by Anselm in favor of satisfaction, which was in turn rejected by Abelard. One can claim that these motifs are complementary rather than logically incompatible only by ignoring sequential, historical rejections, separating motifs from their contexts, and elevating motifs to the level of unquestioned givens.

Despite these major disagreements, Sider affirms my emphasis on the nonviolence of Jesus and on nonviolence as an intrinsic element of Christian discipleship. In effect, he agrees with me in seeing the problems of violent images of God, and of violence in traditional atonement motifs, but we disagree on how to respond. He preserves the violence of God and accepts contradictions by appealing to a literal interpretation of the Bible, with a claim of inspiration used to discount other understandings. In contrast, I suggest that the narrative of Jesus is the norm, and that biblical exegesis and critique of inherited images should conform to it.

Hauerwas, Belousek, and Sider represent three different approaches to defending inherited views of atonement, Christology, and a God who can resort to violence against challenges posed by the assumption that the narrative of Jesus is the norm for theology. Now we must consider two other conversations.

Fellow Travelers

Support for using the narrative of Jesus as the reference point for theology and ethics comes from quite diverse places. One example is *Servant God*, a book written largely by Seventh Day Adventists.[24] This volume's major premise is that if we take the incarnation seriously, then when we see Jesus, we see God. And when we observe that Jesus responded to all situations with love and mercy, it follows that God is a God of love and mercy. As the culminating

[23] David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

[24] Dorothee Cole, ed., *Servant God: The Cosmic Conflict Over God's Trustworthiness* (Loma Linda, CA: Loma Linda Univ. Press, 2013).

act of God's plan to achieve reconciliation with sinners, God came in Jesus. Jesus' mission was to "reassure us that the omnipotent God of the universe is exactly like Jesus in character: non-coercive, humble, and other-centered in his love. . . . to reveal that God's Kingdom is not defined by conquering our enemies in battlefields or courts of law but rather through our service and love for them."[25] When God's true character is seen, the writers believe, sinners need not fear returning to God. *Servant God* portrays the idea of a merciful God seeking reconciliation with sinful humanity throughout the Bible, down to and including the book of Revelation. There will be a last judgment, in which people's choice for or against God will be made final, but it will reflect God's merciful character made visible in Jesus.

The authors position this merciful God over against the traditional view of a wrathful God, "an angry and punitive deity" who will punish sinners eternally in a fiery hell. "This angry picture of God creates angry 'Christians.'" This "false idea about God," the editor continues, has contributed to most atrocities committed by Christians through history. "Our wrong conceptions of God have led us to treat our enemies just as our god would—burning, strangling, shooting, or bombing them, rather than staying faithful to Christ's way."[26]

Servant God might puzzle some readers. It assumes a so-called literal, six-day creation, that Adam and Eve were real people, and that the fall and the great flood were historical events. Satan is a real, supernatural being engaged in cosmic warfare with God. Fundamentalists might welcome these views but object to the book's rejection of substitutionary atonement and divine violence, its treatment of final judgment, and its nonviolent interpretation of Revelation. Chapter 8—"Inspiration (The Bible Says It, But That Doesn't Settle It)"—will not help: inspiration is not posed as a first principle with the intent of forcing acceptance of the views to follow. The writers do not assume that merely quoting a scripture text will settle a disputed question, such as the character of God.[27] Although the Bible is inspired, it still has to be interpreted, and the hermeneutical key is not the doctrine of inspiration but the story of Jesus.

[25] Ibid., xxiv-xxv.
[26] Ibid., xxiv.
[27] Ibid., 131.

If fundamentalists dislike the conclusions of this book, readers at the other end of the Christian spectrum, where I place myself, will not accept its assumptions about creation, Adam and Eve, Noah's flood, and Satan. However, I applaud *Servant God*'s solid critique of penal substitutionary atonement, and its understanding of God's judgment and God's character as merciful, loving, and nonviolent. I support its view that salvation means to cease rebelling against God and that reconciliation to God means to live within God's kingdom, which includes practicing the social activism and nonviolent resistance to evil made visible in the life of Jesus.

Servant God implies an important point beyond the authors' intention. That readers of my theological persuasion can agree with the book's conclusions, despite our rejecting its underlying assumptions about the Bible's mythological sections, demonstrates that the truth of Jesus is not defined by one particular methodology. It comes from the story of Jesus itself. A literalist approach and a historicist approach to the early chapters of Genesis and the Bible generally can reach similar conclusions on the larger question of the mercy and nonviolence of God, as long as the narrative of Jesus guides the methodology. Alongside *Servant God*'s assertion of God's nonviolence, equally significant is its demonstration of the narrative of Jesus, rather than any stripe of received creedal tradition, as the norm of Christian truth.

Two recent books on racism in theology also use the narrative of Jesus as the norm for theology and ethics. J. Kameron Carter and Willie James Jennings point to the disastrous results that followed when Christian theology separated Jesus from his Jewishness.[28] It is his Jewishness, they contend, that located him in a particular history, place, and time. Carter and Jennings argue that separating Jesus from his Jewishness led to the accommodation and eventual support of racism by standard theology. This separation began with the early church fathers and is seen in the standard Christological definitions of Jesus as "one in being with the Father" and as "truly God and truly man."

With Jesus located above history, European theologians could then

[28] J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2008); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2010).

define him in generic, supposedly universal terms, but in ways that in fact reflected themselves. Jesus became white, and European white identity became the norm. When slaves from Africa entered the picture, the idea of "pure" blood developed, with European white as the norm of purity. Deviations from this norm, whether in color or form of government, produced varying degrees of "lesser" or inferior, and gave Europeans a sense of superiority over other ethnic peoples. This sense characterized Portuguese, Spanish, and later French and English colonization efforts in Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Carter uses Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor to show that standard Christian theology could have avoided this disastrous path. He and Jennings issue a heartfelt call to rethink theology of any shade—whether the orthodox or standard tradition or otherwise—around the Jewishness of Jesus as the way to develop and/or restore theology that specifically confronts racism.

Earlier I said that understanding Jesus as the continuation of the story of Israel validated the nonviolent images in the OT as the truest picture of God's reign. This linking of Jesus to the OT means, most obviously, that Jesus was a Jew, which dovetails with the call of Carter and Jennings to construct theology around his Jewishness. Here I would add one element to their agenda. Since Jesus' rejection of violence continued a strand visible in Israel at least since the time of Jeremiah, I suggest that Jesus was a pacifist, an element that should be intrinsic to theology about the Jewish Jesus.

Conclusion

This essay has argued that the narrative of Jesus is the appropriate norm of both theology and ethics for Christians. If God is revealed in Jesus, then we should understand God in nonviolent terms. With the narrative of Jesus as the reference point, to ask how Christians should live requires telling his story as the basis for Christian ethics, and to ask who Jesus is requires telling his story, which makes it the beginning point for theology. Theology and ethics are inseparable; each is an expression of the narrative of Jesus. This linking is important. At least an indirect link exists between theology and the way people live. For example, note the correlation between strong belief in penal substitutionary atonement and the practice of harsh retribution in

the system of criminal justice.[29] I agree with the assertion in *Servant God* that the image of a punitive God leads people to treat their enemies in a punitive way as well. In this light, consider American civil religion, with its OT divine warrior orientation, and its self-proclaimed righteous wars against unredeemable enemies, whether yesteryear's communists or today's terrorists and "Islamic extremists."

My assumption is that the biblical narrative of Jesus locates him in a particular place in time. That place is the defining link in an ongoing history. Christians and churches today are the current leading edge of the narrative passing through Jesus. Recognizing it is an ongoing story means acknowledging that contexts change over time, and that taking Jesus' story into new contexts requires restating the meaning of Jesus in new terms. Recognizing this ongoing story means accepting that theology is always in process, always in the mode of continually returning to the narrative to ask again about its meaning in order to guide the story's contemporary trajectory. Narrative Christus Victor, *Servant God*, and the new black theology are three such examples. In contrast, Hauerwas, Belousek, and Sider each display a quite different orientation, locating the norm for interpreting the narrative either in later creedal statements or a flat Bible text and Anselm's satisfaction atonement image, with the assumption that theology's task today is to conform to these norms and to defend them against challenges posed by new contexts.

The strength of my approach is its posing of a consistently nonviolent picture—from commitment to Jesus to an understanding of God to living out those images as a Christian. Linking nonviolence to Jesus and to the God revealed in him directly challenges Christian support of violence. My project will not stop war and violence and oppression. But to the extent that it is heard, it proclaims that war, violence, and oppression are inimical to Jesus Christ and the God revealed in him. This is a missionary message relevant for people who are not Christians, and particularly for those experiencing war and occupation from the receiving end of weapons supplied by or wielded on behalf of a self-proclaimed "Christian nation."

In terms of the *Panorama* document's use of the language of "types," I

[29] For one example, see Timothy Gorringe, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996).

suggest refining the idea of a type so that it identifies the choice of functional norm that would shape a peace theology. Beyond the question of types, the more important question is whether the functional norm is allowed to compromise the rejection of violence visible in the narrative of Jesus, or whether the narrative's rejection of violence shapes the approach to the concern in question. I have identified three uses of norms allowing violence to remain integral to Christian theology. My choice of the narrative of Jesus as functional norm makes nonviolence or rejection of violence integral to Christian theology and ethics. It does not reduce theology to ethics or nonviolence. Rather it recognizes what becomes intrinsic to theology when theology is derived from the narrative of Jesus. A tongue-in-cheek response to the charge of reducing theology to ethics is this: theology whose beginning point is the classic Christological formulas as unquestioned givens is theology about Jesus separated from ethics based on Jesus.

J. Denny Weaver is Professor Emeritus of Religion at Bluffton University in Bluffton, Ohio.