

# **Atonement, Violence and the Will of God:**

## **A Sympathetic Response to J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement***

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*Abstract:* In the past generation, criticism of "satisfaction" theologies of atonement has grown in intensity, especially among feminist, womanist and black theologians. Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver has recently added his voice to this chorus of criticism, arguing that satisfaction atonement theology "depends on divinely sanctioned violence that follows from the assumption that doing justice means to punish." In its place Weaver proposes a new, nonviolent model of atonement called "narrative Christus Victor," which takes the nonviolence of Jesus as its starting point. This article sympathetically reviews Weaver's proposal, then seeks to measure it against the witness of the New Testament. It argues that Weaver is correct in rejecting the violent presuppositions of satisfaction atonement, but wrong in concluding that Jesus' violent death was neither willed by God nor essential to the work of salvation.

Exposure to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has been one of the most formative influences on my Christian life. My encounter with Anabaptism began with reading key books by Mennonite authors during my student days in New Zealand in the early 1970s. It developed during my four years of doctoral research in Britain in the early 1980s, when my wife and I were members of the London Mennonite Fellowship. It was deepened further by sabbatical leaves at Mennonite institutions in the United States in the early, and then again in the late, 1990s. And throughout the past 25 years it has been continually enriched by fellowship with Mennonite friends and scholars around the world.—

From my contact with the Anabaptist tradition, I have come to believe that a commitment to nonviolence is an essential feature of Christian discipleship. At first I saw a peace commitment largely in connection with questions of war and militarism. It is a commitment to forswear lethal violence because it is incompatible with the worship of a crucified God. But I have since learned that violence is systemic and institutionalized, not just episodic and personal. Violence is arguably the primary social manifestation of sin (cf. Gen 4:1-16, 23-25; 6:11); it is all-pervasive in human experience. It shapes the way we view the world and influences how we exercise moral and theological discernment.

Those who take seriously Jesus' call to nonviolence must learn to read the Bible, do theology and think about God in light of this basic commitment, which is by no means easy. The Bible itself is full of violence, much of it ascribed directly to God. Also, the long history of Christian theological interpretation has been affected by the Church's profound compromise with violence, both in sanctioning the violence of the State and also in authorizing violence in pursuit of its own interests. This compromise has rested upon, and has strongly reinforced, a view of God as a violent and punitive deity who gets his own way—whether in the short term, through crusade or inquisition, or in the long term, through eschatological judgment and everlasting torment—by use of overwhelming coercion.

Such a God is increasingly hard for people to believe in. Many people today

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[1] . See C. D. Marshall, "Following Christ Down Under: A New Zealand Perspective on Anabaptism," in *Engaging Anabaptism: Conversations with a Radical Tradition*, ed. John D. Roth (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2001), 41-52. [Return to Text](#)

[2] . Clark H. Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2001), 1-2 [Return to Text](#)

[3] . Deut 32:35; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30. See Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), esp. 275-306. [Return to Text](#)

[4] . Cf. Mt 5:9, 43-48. [Return to Text](#)

[5] . Col 1:15; Heb 1:1-4; Jn 14:8-13. [Return to Text](#)

[6] . C. D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). [Return to Text](#)

[7] . See Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 38-69. [Return to Text](#)

[8] . J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2001). [Return to Text](#)

[9] . See, for example, G. Aul, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1931); Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1985), 1:303-48. [Return to Text](#)

[10] . Some scholars seek to address this problem by blending all three approaches. The problem is that each model rests on differing presuppositions and the resulting synthesis still tends to favor one approach over the others. [Return to Text](#)

[11] . "Satisfaction atonement assumes that the sin of humankind against God has earned the penalty of death, but that Jesus satisfied the offended honor of God on their behalf or took the place of sinful humankind and bore their punishment or satisfied the required penalty on their behalf. Sin was atoned for because it was punished vicariously through the death of Jesus, which saved sinful humankind from the punishment of death they deserved. That is, sinful humankind can enjoy salvation because Jesus was killed in their place, satisfying the requirement of divine justice on their behalf."-Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 3; cf. 16-17, 179-224. [Return to Text](#)

[12] . See, e.g., J. I. Packer, *What Did the Cross Achieve? The Logic of Penal Substitution* (Leicester: TSF Monograph, 1974); L. Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1966), 382-88. [Return to Text](#)

[13] . T. Smail, "Can One Man Die for the People?" in *Atonement Today*, ed. J. Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 75. [Return to Text](#)

[14] . See P. S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1989), 96-104. [Return to Text](#)

[15] . For an excellent review of feminist, womanist and black theology, see Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, ch. 4-6. See also E. Moltmann-Wendel, "Is There a Feminist Theology of the Cross?," in *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering*, ed. J. Tesfai (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 87-98; N. J. Duff, "Atonement and the Christian Life: Reformed Doctrine from a Feminist Perspective," *Interpretation* 53:1 (1999), 21-33. On advocacy theology generally, see D. Patte, *The Ethics of Biblical Interpretation: A Reevaluation* (Louisville: Westminster Jn Knox, 1995). [Return to Text](#)

[16] . See, e.g., T. Talbot, "Punishment, Forgiveness and Divine Justice," *Religious Studies* 29 (1993), 151-68; Fiddes, *Past Event*, 83-111; T. J. Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance: Crime, Violence and the Rhetoric of Salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge U. Press, 1996); Smail, "Can One Man Die?," 84-86; R. D. Brinsmead, "The Scandal of God's Justice," *Christian Verdict* 8 (1983), 3-11; C. A. Baxter, "The Cursed Beloved: A Reconsideration of Penal Substitution," in *Atonement Today*, ed. J. Goldingay (London: SPCK, 1995), 68-70. [Return to Text](#)

[17] . The charge of divine child abuse is not leveled solely against satisfaction theology. Insofar as all the traditional models portray God demanding unquestioning obedience from the Son and imposing suffering on him in order to achieve some higher good, all have been accused of depicting abuse in a positive light. But the main target of the accusation has been satisfaction atonement. [Return to Text](#)

[18] . J. M. Hopkins, *Towards a Feminist Christology: Jesus on Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 50. [Return to Text](#)

[19] . On this see Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 179-95. [Return to Text](#)

[20] . See Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, 1-7. [Return to Text](#)

[21] . *Ibid.*, esp. 83-219 (quote from 140). [Return to Text](#)

[22] . Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 74. [Return to Text](#)

[23] . *Ibid.*, 69. [Return to Text](#)

[24] . *Ibid.*, 7, 12. [Return to Text](#)

[25] . *Ibid.*, 203, also 2, 17, 19, 72. [Return to Text](#)

[26] . *Ibid.*, 65-66. [Return to Text](#)

[27] . *Ibid.*, 202, 209. [Return to Text](#)

[28] . *Ibid.*, 223. [Return to Text](#)

[29] . *Ibid.*, 34-46. [Return to Text](#)

[30] . On the limitations and accommodationist impulse of Nicene-Chalcedonian christology, see *ibid.*, esp. 92-96. [Return to Text](#)

- [31] . Ibid., 155, 147. [Return to Text](#)
- [32] . Ibid., 85. For an account of how this became reflected in Christendom's initiation processes, see A. Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1999). [Return to Text](#)
- [33] . Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 93. It should be emphasized that Weaver does not regard the Nicene or Chalcedonian formulas as wrong or invalid or superfluous to Christology, but says only that they are contextual rather than universal or timeless statements and that they are inadequate in themselves for a Christian peace theology. [Return to Text](#)
- [34] . Ibid., 94. [Return to Text](#)
- [35] . Ibid., 212-14. [Return to Text](#)
- [36] . Although scattered references to satisfaction can be found in earlier writings, Gorringer insists that "to all intents and purposes the theology of satisfaction begins with Anselm."-*God's Just Vengeance*, 90. [Return to Text](#)
- [37] . Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*, 49. [Return to Text](#)
- [38] . Ibid., 45. [Return to Text](#)
- [39] . Ibid., 211, also 132. [Return to Text](#)
- [40] . Ibid., 72. [Return to Text](#)
- [41] . Ibid., 133. [Return to Text](#)
- [42] . Ibid., 226 my emphasis. [Return to Text](#)
- [43] . See, for example, Mk 3:6; 12:12-13; 14:1-3, 10-11; 15:10; cf. 1:22; 2:7; 6:3; 7:1-5; 8:11-23; Lk 23:48; Jn 19:12. [Return to Text](#)
- [44] . Lk 22:3, cf. 22:31. [Return to Text](#)
- [45] . Lk 22:53, cf.23:45. On the symbolism of darkness in the crucifixion narrative, see C. D. Marshall, "Crime, Crucifixion and the Forgotten Art of Lament," *Reality* 9:49 (2002), 16-22. [Return to Text](#)
- [46] . Jn 13:2, 27. [Return to Text](#)
- [47] . Jn 14:30. [Return to Text](#)
- [48] . Jn 15:18, 25. The term "world" in Jn's Gospel, when used negatively, represents the sum of everyone and everything that sets its face against God's revelation in Christ. See S. B. Marrow, "Kosmos in John," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 64:1 (2002), 90-102. [Return to Text](#)
- [49] . Jn 13:19, cf. 1:11. [Return to Text](#)
- [50] . Acts 2:23,36; 3:13-15; 4:10, 26; 7:51-52; 13:27-29, cf. Lk 23:14, 20, 22; 23:47 [Return to Text](#)
- [51] . Acts 4:26-28, cf. 13:27. [Return to Text](#)
- [52] . 1 Thess 2:14-15. [Return to Text](#)
- [53] . 1 Cor 2:8; cf. Col 2:14. [Return to Text](#)
- [54] . Hebs 12:2-3. [Return to Text](#)
- [55] . 1 Peter 2:4,7. [Return to Text](#)
- [56] . Rev. 17:4. Weaver gives a helpful account of the nonviolent theology of the book of Revelation.-*Nonviolent Atonement*, 20-33. [Return to Text](#)
- [57] . Ibid., 210. [Return to Text](#)
- [58] . Ibid., 211. [Return to Text](#)
- [59] . Ideally the perspective of each gospel writer should be considered separately. But there is substantial enough narrative agreement between them in how they present the purpose and outcome of Jesus' mission to permit some broad generalizations about features common to each account. [Return to Text](#)
- [60] . It is often noted that the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1:11/Mt 3:17/Lk 3:22) unites the messianic designation of Psalm 2:7 with the identification of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 42:1, whose task involves suffering and rejection. There may also be an allusion to Gen 22: 2,12,16. [Return to Text](#)
- [61] . Mk 4:35-41/Mt 8:23-27/Lk 8:22-25; Mk 6:47-52/Mt 14:22-32/Jn 6:15-21; Lk 4:29-30; Mt 12:14-15 cf. Mt 2:13-15. See also Jn 17:11-12, 15. [Return to Text](#)
- [62] . Mk 14:35,41; Mt 26:55; Lk 22:14, 53; cf. Jn 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23, 27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1. [Return to Text](#)
- [63] . Mt 10:23; 24:15-20/Mk 13:14-18/Lk 21:2. [Return to Text](#)
- [64] . Mt 10:17-23, 28; 24:9-10/Mk 13:9-13/Lk 21:12-19; Jn 16:4. [Return to Text](#)
- [65] . Mk 2:19-20/Mt 9:15/Lk 5:35. [Return to Text](#)
- [66] . Lk 9:51-52. [Return to Text](#)
- [67] . Lk 13:31-33. [Return to Text](#)
- [68] . Mk 8:31-34/Mt 16:21-23/Lk 9:21-22, cf. 13:33; 17:25; Mk 9:9/Mt 17:9; Mk 9:12/Mt 17:12; Mk 9:22-23/Mt 17:22-23/Lk 9:44; Mk 10:32-34/ Mt 20:17-19/Lk 18:31-34. [Return to Text](#)
- [69] . Mk 10:38-40/Mt 20:22-23; Lk 12:49-50; cf. Jn 18:11. [Return to Text](#)
- [70] . Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28, cf. 1 Tim 2:5. [Return to Text](#)
- [71] . Mk 11:1-33; Mt 21:1-27; 23:37-24:2; Lk 19:29-20:8, cf. Jn 2:13-22. [Return to Text](#)
- [72] . Mk 11:18; 12:13; 14:1-2, 10-11; Lk 22:6. [Return to Text](#)
- [73] . Lk 22:6, 53. [Return to Text](#)
- [74] . Mk 15:2-5; Mt 27:11-14; Lk 23:8-12; Jn 19:8-10. [Return to Text](#)

- [75] . Mk 14:32-42; Matt 26:36-42; Lk 22:39-46. [Return to Text](#)
- [76] . Mt 26:42. [Return to Text](#)
- [77] . Mt 6:10, cf. 11:12. [Return to Text](#)
- [78] . Lk 22:42, cf. Matt 26:53. Even the writer to the Hebrews suggests that Jesus' prayers were heard by "the one who was able to save him from death because of his reverent submission . . . and obedience" (Heb 5:7-10). [Return to Text](#)
- [79] . For a full listing of the texts and how they are reflected in the passion narrative, see J. F. Jansen, *The Resurrection of Jesus Christ in New Testament Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 68-75. [Return to Text](#)
- [80] . See, e.g., Mk 14:27/Matt 26:31; Mk 14: 62/Matt 26:64; Lk 22:37, cf. also Jn 13:18; 18:9; 19:23, 28, 36; Acts 8:32-33. The place of Isaiah 53 in New Testament reflection on the meaning of Jesus' death, and especially its role in the mind of the historical Jesus, has long been debated. For a thorough, helpful and up-to-date review of this issue, see *Jesus and the Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 and Christian Origins*, eds. William H. Bellinger, Jr. and William R. Farmer (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press International, 1998). [Return to Text](#)
- [81] . Lk 18:31, cf. Lk 22:22, 37; Matt 26:24. [Return to Text](#)
- [82] . Matt 26:52-54, cf. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7. [Return to Text](#)
- [83] . Lk 24:26-27, cf. Acts 17:1-3. [Return to Text](#)
- [84] . Lk 24:44-47. [Return to Text](#)
- [85] . Jn 1:29. [Return to Text](#)
- [86] . Jn 2:4; 7:30; 8:20; 12:23,27; 13:1; 16:32; 17:1. [Return to Text](#)
- [87] . Jn 12:23, 27-28; 17:1-5; cf. 21:19. [Return to Text](#)
- [88] . Jn 3:16-17. [Return to Text](#)
- [89] . Jn 4:34, cf. 6:37-40; 12:27-28; 17:4-5. [Return to Text](#)
- [90] . Jn 12:32-33. [Return to Text](#)
- [91] . Jn 12:27-28. [Return to Text](#)
- [92] . Jn 13:18; 18:9; 19:23, 28, 36. [Return to Text](#)
- [93] . Jn 10:11, 14-18 [Return to Text](#)
- [94] . Jn 18:11, cf. 4-8 [Return to Text](#)
- [95] . Jn 19:11. [Return to Text](#)
- [96] . Acts 2:23. [Return to Text](#)
- [97] . Acts 3:17-18. [Return to Text](#)
- [98] . Acts 13:27-29, cf. 8:32-35; 17:1-3. [Return to Text](#)
- [99] . 1 Cor 15:3-4, cf. Rom 1:1-4. [Return to Text](#)
- [100] . cf. Eph 2:13; 3:11-12. [Return to Text](#)
- [101] . Rom 8:3; Gal 4:4, cf. 2:21; 3:13; cf. also Titus 3:4. [Return to Text](#)
- [102] . Rom 8:32. [Return to Text](#)
- [103] . Rom 3:25. [Return to Text](#)
- [104] . 2 Cor 5:21. [Return to Text](#)
- [105] . 2 Cor 5:19, cf. Rom 5:10; Col 1:20-21. [Return to Text](#)
- [106] . Rom 5:7. [Return to Text](#)
- [107] . Rom 5:6, 8; 1 Cor 15:3; 1 Thess 5:10; 2 Cor 1:5; 5:14; Gal 3:13, cf. Eph 5:2; Titus 2:14. [Return to Text](#)
- [108] . Rom 5:18-19. [Return to Text](#)
- [109] . Rom 15:3-4; Phil 2:5-8, cf. 1 Tim 2:6. [Return to Text](#)
- [110] . 1 Cor 1:20-25; 11:26. [Return to Text](#)
- [111] . Gal 2:19; 6:14; Rom 6:3-14; 2 Cor 1:5; 4:10; Phil 3:10; Col 1:24, cf. 2 Tim. 2:11. See further C. D. Marshall, "For Me to Live Is Christ': Pauline Spirituality as a Basis for Ministry," in *The Call to Serve*, ed. D. A. Campbell (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 96-116, esp. 111-13. [Return to Text](#)
- [112] . Rom 5:12. [Return to Text](#)
- [113] . Rom 5:21; 6:23; 7:7, 13. [Return to Text](#)
- [114] . Heb 2:14-15. [Return to Text](#)
- [115] . Gen 4:8. [Return to Text](#)
- [116] . Gen 3:6, cf. Rom 7:7-12; Mk 7:21-22. [Return to Text](#)
- [117] . Gen 4:7. [Return to Text](#)
- [118] . Jas 4:2. [Return to Text](#)
- [119] . Lk 23:34. [Return to Text](#)
- [120] . 1 Peter 2:23-24. [Return to Text](#)
- [121] . 2 Cor 5:21. [Return to Text](#)
- [122] . Rom 6:9-10. [Return to Text](#)

[123] . Rom 6:4. [Return to Text](#)

[124] . Cf. Rom 8:35-39. [Return to Text](#)

[125] . Lk 19:42, cf. Rom 14:1-15:13; Gal 3:25-29; 2 Cor 18-21; Eph 2:1-22. 100 The Mennonite Quarterly Review 99 Atonement, Violence and the Will of God 69

