



## **Book Review of *The Nonviolent Atonement*, J. Denny Weaver, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001/2011. 246 pages**

While a student at Regent College in the mid-seventies, there was something I knew to be defective in my evangelical pietistic upbringing – glaringly absent actually in two previous years of evangelism on the streets of West Berlin. Clark Pinnock’s “The Politics of Jesus” course taught at inter-term supplied the first piece: the socio-political application of the Gospel. Pinnock also pointed towards, but did not fully present (and has since rejected), a second missing piece: a nonviolent reading of the atonement that was vigorously biblical, traditional, and Good-News-With-Teeth in a world drenched in violence. The book under review, at last for me, is that missing piece.

What the author argues is an understanding of atonement he dubs “narrative Christus Victor”. He readily admits its contextual particularity, saying:

It cannot be claimed that narrative Christus Victor is the ultimate atonement image and that our problem of how best to articulate the saving work of Christ has now been definitively solved for the remainder of life on earth (p. 228).

He writes at the outset:

The working assumption in development of this model is that the rejection of violence, whether the direct violence of the sword or the systemic violence of racism or sexism, should be visible in expressions of Christology and atonement.... Thus proposing narrative Christus Victor as a non-violent atonement motif also poses a fundamental challenge to and ultimately a rejection of satisfaction atonement (p. 7).

For similar reasons, namely their accommodation of violence in God, he rejects the other two best-known theories: “Christus Victor” and “Moral Influence”. He says:

It may seem audacious to challenge a centuries-long acceptance of Anselm and satisfaction atonement. And for some readers, it may feel like a challenge to salvation itself. But it has not challenged the fact of Jesus as savior. What the book has exposed is the centuries-long use of Christian theology to accommodate violence both systemic and direct (p. 225).

(The author defines his range of meaning of “violence” and “nonviolence” in the Introduction, pages 8 & 9.)

Besides the Preface, the book is laid out in seven parts. The first, “Introduction”, sketches the journey the book will take the reader on. The second, “Narrative Christus Victor: The Revisioning of Atonement”, presents atonement in dialogue with the other major theories (or “motifs”) mentioned above, the author’s reading of the Gospel story, and other sources brought into dialogue. For the reader to decide is his claim:

... I believe that the biblical survey establishes narrative Christus Victor as the dominant and preferred reading of atonement in the Bible (p. 69).

The third part, "Narrative Christus Victor: Some Comparisons and its Demise", cover a range of issues ethical and ecclesiological. Weaver writes:

These considerations point to the need for a theology that takes seriously Jesus and his work but renders much more difficult the accommodation of violence so evident in the theology of Christendom. This book offers narrative Christus Victor as such an approach to atonement and to Christology – one that emerges directly from the New Testament's narrative but does not pass through the violence-accommodating formulas and motifs of traditional theology of atonement and Christology (pp. 97 & 98)."

The next three sections interact with contextual theologies of atonement arising from the black male, the white feminist, and the black feminist (self-described "womanist") communities. In these chapters, the author explores atonement with reference to racism, sexism, and classism. He summons numerous dialogue partners, affirming here and challenging there, and asks in each case how specific issues raised would look with reference to his own biblical reading. He states:

I pose narrative Christus Victor as a conversation partner with black and feminist and womanist theologies (p. 228).

The seventh section, "Conversation with Anselm and His Defenders", posits three broadly defined and related strategies (p. 179).

in response to feminist and womanist critiques of satisfaction atonement. Weaver gently suggests that

the diverse and mutually contradictory strategies might indicate that the preeminent concern of these writers is more to defend satisfaction by any means available than to ask whether satisfaction atonement truly reflects biblical understandings of the life and work of Christ (p. 195).

He sums up:

Make no mistake about it. Satisfaction atonement *in any form* depends on divinely sanctioned violence that follows from the assumption that doing justice means to punish (p. 203).

Over against this, he asserts:

Above all, in narrative Christus Victor salvation and justice are no longer based on the violence of justice equated with punishment (p. 212).

The author undertook a very ambitious project: to propose an alternative, rigorously consistent nonviolent understanding of atonement that is true to biblical and early church understandings, consistent with the best of traditional Christology, and responsive to contextual theologies of peoples' crying out for the liberating power of the Gospel *within history* – as opposed to the Anselmian ahistorical construct. In this reviewer's opinion, the author accomplished his set task. That he could have engaged other dialogue partners is a given. I am surprised that three additional books were left out of the discussion: John Driver's *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (1986), Alistair Kee's *Constantine versus Christ* (1982), and Charles Bellinger's *The Genealogy of Violence* (2001). They would have strengthened and elucidated

aspects of his argument. Many other resources of course could be suggested. Throughout, the author remains respectful and consistently attentive to his dialogue partners' arguments, not just their caricature.

For this reviewer, keenly aware of his own tradition's massive unfaithfulness to the univocal New Testament witness to nonviolence, the book was exhilarating and hopeful. (He is also, professionally, deeply committed to a nonviolent, "restorative justice" response to crime.) There was enthusiastic resonance with the author's contention:

By this point, it should be evident that narrative Christus Victor is much more than an atonement motif. It poses a comprehensive way to see God working in the world, and thus suggests a reading of the Bible's story from beginning to end... As has been sketched in these pages, narrative Christus Victor suggests a new reading of the history and doctrines of atonement and Christology. It is a reading shaped by an explicit claim that rejection of violence is intrinsic to the narrative of Jesus (p. 226).

Surely in a world awash with violence alike from terrorism and "war on terrorism", both explicitly contradictory of Jesus' "Second Greatest Commandment" and his clarion call, "Love your enemies", the Christian community might benefit from a careful read of the author's challenge to *put into practice* narrative Christus Victor atonement theology.

## References

Bellinger, Charles K. (2001). *The Genealogy of Violence: Reflections on Creation, Freedom, and Evil*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Driver, John (1986). *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press.

Kee, Alistair. 1982. *Constantine versus Christ: The Triumph of Ideology*, London: SCM Press Ltd.