J. Denny Weaver


The most basic Christian confession is that Jesus Christ is both Savior and Lord. Specifically, that Jesus Christ saves us from our sins. As Paul wrote: “in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us” (2 Corinthians 5:19). But the question is: how is this accomplished? The writers of the New Testament provide a variety of images or metaphors which over the centuries have become theories of the “atonement”—the means by which human reconciliation with God is made possible. In _The Nonviolent God_, J. Denny Weaver argues for an atonement theory based on the narrative of Jesus’ life, death and especially resurrection which, he claims, reveals the nonviolent character of God. What saves humankind is not Christ’s death but rather the resurrection, which vindicates his nonviolent life. This understanding, Weaver goes on to argue, provides the basis for living a truly nonviolent Christian life in the world today.

Weaver is professor emeritus of religion at Bluffton University and has written widely on Christian theology from an Anabaptist perspective. This work builds in particular on arguments advanced earlier in _The Nonviolent Atonement_ and _Defenseless Christianity: Anabaptism for a Nonviolent Church_. This work is divided roughly into two parts. In the first half, Weaver makes his case for the nonviolent character of God as revealed specifically in the ministry and teaching of Jesus. This forms the basis of what he calls the “narrative Christus Victor” image of the atonement. This, in turn, grounds his criticism of other theories in which God seems to require the suffering and death of Jesus in order to accomplish reconciliation. In the second half of the book, Weaver describes what it means for believers to live out the narrative of Jesus and continue his work of nonviolence. His goal is to develop a “lived theology,” which means not only a “practical” theology but one that advances the cause of life over death.

The first part of Weaver’s argument is that “rejection of violence belonged intrinsically to Jesus’ witness to and making present of the reign of God.” Nonviolence is the way Jesus “identified with and pursued justice for the suffering and oppressed.” Because Jesus’ life and teaching challenged the religious and political authorities, they put him to death. But Jesus’ death is not the end of the story, and, according to Weaver, it is not Jesus’ dying that saves. Rather, the resurrection is the climax of Jesus’ story, in which “God identifies with Jesus’ life, including his rejection of violence” (p. 21). Thus, Weaver argues
that “resurrection is the real saving act of God,” because it is God’s victory over death and the vindication of Jesus’ life and witness (p. 26). Salvation is accomplished by the Christ who is victorious over evil and death (Christus Victor). The saving nature of his life is further exemplified by his teaching of nonviolence (narrative Christus Victor).

After describing Jesus’ life, teaching and ministry as one of nonviolent resistance to the powers of evil and death, Weaver then turns to other portions of the New Testament for support of this picture. Particularly notable is his lengthy discussion of the Book of Revelation. Here, he argues that “the victory of the reign of God reveals a nonviolent God who conquers evil and violence via resurrection—the restoration of life—in contrast to the death-dealing forces of evil symbolized by the dragon as empire” (p. 54). Revelation is a work written precisely to encourage believers to continue living in the face of imperial persecution, confident that God’s victory has already taken place in the resurrection of Jesus.

This was the predominant view of the early church, Weaver argues, but it was eventually eclipsed by other atonement theories that began to emphasize the suffering and death of Jesus rather than resurrection. Rather than being raised as a sign that evil has been defeated, the message became “Jesus died for our sins.” Weaver argues that this view came later during the post-biblical period and that earlier works, such as the writings of Paul, were wrongly viewed through that lens. Absent from his discussion, however, are texts such as First Peter 2:24 (“He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed.”) and others which reflect on the death of Jesus as related to the act of redemption.

Weaver is correct, however, that “substitutionary atonement” is the view that came to dominate Western Christianity. Most clearly articulated by Anselm of Canterbury in 1098, this theory holds that human sinfulness violates both the law and the honor of God. Because humans are not good enough to make restitution for our sin, a “sinless victim” is required who can take our place. In sacrificing his life, Jesus bears the punishment that God’s justice requires to set things right.

The problem with this (and most traditional atonement theories, according to Weaver) is that it “leads to a violent image of God. God emerges as the chief avenger or the chief punisher. God is in charge of retribution” (p. 65). And Jesus “models being a voluntary, passive, and innocent victim, who suffers for the good of another” (p. 66). The social, political and human consequences of these ideas have often been horrific. Jesus’ suffering has all too often been