

# Teaching the death and resurrection of Jesus to children

Carrie Martens

**W**hat do we believe about how Jesus died? What do we understand about how Christ's death relates to our daily lives? When asking ourselves these questions, we often neglect to examine underlying presuppositions about God and Jesus that we developed as children, and to consider how those assumptions influence our adult understandings of the atonement.

A child's concept of the divine is formed early in life through interactions with family and environment. Our early understand-

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ings form the basis for future learning and are often remarkably resilient. If the church is concerned with how adults understand the atoning work of Jesus, then we must be equally concerned—if not more concerned—with how Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are taught to and understood by children.

Popular theologies of the atonement, such as *Christus victor* and Anselm's satisfaction theory (which includes the language of substitution and sacrifice), have dominated the theological landscape for centuries. Many contemporary theologians have pointed to problems in these formulations. Yet these

theories remain prominent in Christian children's materials. As we consider the impact these theories have on adult experience, we must also ask ourselves how these theories might shape a child's understanding of God and relationship to the divine.

In the discussion that follows we will consider the *Christus victor* model as well as Anselm's satisfaction theory as they relate to the faith formation of children. Then we will consider J. Denny Weaver's narrative *Christus victor* as an alternative model for teaching children about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. Each

of these theories will be examined in light of the spiritual needs, cultural context, and overall development of children. I will not deal with their merit in terms of biblical interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

### **Christ the victor**

The Christus victor model deals primarily with the cosmic battle between good and evil and was the prevailing view among theologians in the early church. This model sees Jesus as a casualty of the war between God and Satan, and his death appears to indicate the victory of evil over good. But God raised Jesus from the dead, turning defeat into victory and freeing humanity from the power of sin and death. This model has also been presented in altered forms, such as the ransom model, in which Christ's death is payment to Satan in exchange for sinners' freedom, or as a battle in which God practices deception, hiding Jesus' divinity in order to trap the devil.<sup>2</sup>

When children who love Spiderman and other superheroes are trained in the Christus victor model, they may connect Jesus to an ideology of winning at all costs. This explanatory framework may contribute to a justification of battles involving coercion, retribution, and violence. It may also teach children that human life can be used as payment, and that God does not regard us as beings of immeasurable worth. In churches that "welcome" children simply as a means to bringing in adult members, or in order to project an image of vitality, a ransom view of atonement may, unfortunately, mirror a child's experience of being treated as a commodity.

### **Christ's death as satisfaction**

Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement focuses on the sin of humanity which has offended God and brought injustice into the world. In order for harmony to be restored, a debt must be paid to expiate sinners' guilt. Thus Jesus' death both atoned for the sin of individuals and satisfied God's need for justice. This model can also be viewed as analogous to a system of penal justice in which violation of the law demands the imposition of a penalty. In this view, then, Jesus receives punishment on behalf of sinful humanity;<sup>3</sup> in consequence, he is both a sacrifice made to God to restore justice and a substitute who takes the punishment sinful humans deserve. This theory of atonement has not only been affirmed by

Protestants; it has become the dominant view in the Western world.<sup>4</sup>

While there is certainly a place for teaching children to recognize their sin, an emphasis on sin has negative effects. I have seen

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a young child, having heard that Jesus died because of our sins, cry inconsolably—convinced he had killed Jesus. And children in North America are in an awkward position. They are implicated in a consumer culture that oppresses and exploits (which warrants confession), while they also suffer because that same culture fuels perpetual dissatisfaction.<sup>5</sup> Our children grow up with the understanding that they fall short of God's

intended purpose in things they do; in addition, they feel that they simply are not good enough for anyone, including God. Alongside their feelings of guilt and inadequacy is the image of an angry God who punishes us by killing his only son, making things right in the world through violence.

### **Narrative Christus victor**

*Confession of Faith in Mennonite Perspective* gives support for several views of the atonement, including Christ as victor and Christ as substitute, as well as the moral influence theory (which I have not been able to touch on here).<sup>6</sup> I am grateful that this confession recognizes the multiplicity of images present in the biblical text. We do our congregations a disservice when we advocate only one image of the atonement when the Bible includes a richness of imagery that invites each of us into the text in different ways at various times in our lives.

Images of Christ as victor over death, as sacrifice, as substitute, and as a representation of love are all present in the biblical text. This being said, not all images are helpful for children. One version of the Christ-the-victor view, which Denny Weaver characterizes as “narrative Christus victor” seems to me to hold out good possibilities as an alternative way to introduce children to the atoning work of Christ.

In the narrative Christus victor model, Jesus' death is not required by God; rather, it is required by the evil powers at work

in the world. Jesus' mission was to bring the reign of God into the world, and that mission brought Jesus into direct opposition to the evil powers.<sup>7</sup> In Jesus' submission to the cross he makes visible a kingdom that does not rely on violence. The victory of Christ does not come in his death. It comes in his resurrection, which demonstrates God's ability to overcome the violence of the evil powers.<sup>8</sup> Further, God is not the agent of the crucifixion, as is the case in satisfaction theory. In contrast to the older *Christus victor* model, God does not barter with, provide payment to, or attempt to deceive the devil.

As sinners, our role in the atonement is not simply to confess personal sin but also to acknowledge that we participate in countering the reign of God in the world. Rather than focusing on the necessity of Jesus' death for our individual sins, in this model we are invited to see that all the people in the stories of the crucifixion were really on one side, and that Jesus died trying to help them move to the other side. It was not the good disciples versus the bad Romans. All people are trapped in sin. And even though he was killed, Jesus offers forgiveness, loving us so much that he wants us to be a part of God's kingdom with him.

Children do need to learn to recognize and name personal sin, so that they too can experience the release from guilt that comes from forgiveness. That said, I think we have been overly concerned in the recent past with convicting young children of the things they have done wrong, while inviting adults to focus on their roles in a sinful world. It would be more helpful to present sin in a more corporate manner for children and allow for an understanding of individual sin to emerge as the self develops.

School-age children have a strong sense of and need for justice and fairness. They understand that the world is not a fair place and sometimes people get hurt or are treated badly. They also understand that those who have all of the "toys" may not want to give them up, and that sometimes those with more toys fight back when they are expected to share. We teach children that Jesus came to make things right and to show people how to bring about the kingdom of God through their loving actions. I believe that children are capable of understanding that Jesus was killed by those who were angered by his teachings. God is not a God who needs to be satisfied because he has been dishonoured. Rather

God is a God of love who desires that all humanity be in relationship with the divine and live as those who know the values of the kingdom. Though we stand with the evil that put Christ to death, we are invited by God to change sides and to stand with Christ, free from the powers that have enslaved us, free to live transformed lives in the reign of God.<sup>9</sup>

A final strength of the narrative Christus victor model is its emphasis on Jesus' life, death, and resurrection as "the culminating revelation of the reign of God in history."<sup>10</sup> When we consider only Christ's death, we are separated from any ethical implications for Christian living. Those ethics are precisely what Jesus died to make visible. We cannot consider Christ's atoning work apart from the broader biblical narrative in which God is at work in the world throughout history. In the story of the people of Israel we see their continuing attempts to understand who they are as God's people and how God's reign comes into being.<sup>11</sup> And in the narrative of Jesus' ministry we see most clearly what the kingdom of God is supposed to look like and how we are to follow Christ in life.<sup>12</sup>

In some churches we have been relieved of responsibility for dealing with Jesus' death as a part of this narrative simply because

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there is no Sunday school class on Good Friday. On Palm Sunday Jesus rides into Jerusalem, and on Easter he walks about, a risen Lord. But if we want our children to know Jesus, we have to also allow them to understand that Jesus really died, and we need to honour the love for Jesus we have nurtured in them by being honest about how he died. Our children need to learn about Jesus' commitment to nonviolence, which is a powerful counternarrative to the myth of redemptive violence that is a common theme

in today's culture. If we simply footnote for children on Easter Sunday that Jesus died for our sins—in some way apart from the Gospel narratives given to us—then we distort their understanding of the kingdom of God.

The narrative Christus victor model is not the one theory of atonement that we must embrace, but it is a strong foundation to

which further understandings and images can be added as children develop cognitively, emotionally, and spiritually into adulthood. I cannot find in the narrative Christus victor view concepts that would need to be unlearned as children grow in faith.

Children who have developed a strong image of Christ's mission in life, his nonviolent opposition to the powers, the work of God in history, and the loving and just nature of God may be able to better understand their own personal sin in relation to Christ's call to follow. And they may in fact choose to accept that call, knowing that the invitation comes from the God who loves them and who has been at work in them all along.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is not to say that biblical grounding is not important; indeed, it is the only place we can begin in formulating our theology of the atonement. However, the scope of this article simply does not allow for in-depth discussion on the biblical foundations for each theory.

<sup>2</sup> J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 50.

<sup>5</sup> Joyce Ann Mercer, *Welcoming Children: A Practical Theology of Childhood* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 259.

<sup>6</sup> *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 36. The confession affirms Christus victor, moral influence, and substitutionary theories of atonement, though not specifically the satisfaction theory presented by Anselm.

<sup>7</sup> Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 72.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 69.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

## About the author

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