

Mennonite perspectives on atonement

A review article

Rachel Reesor-Taylor

Questions about atonement—how the life and death of Jesus save us—keep asking to be answered. They lie at the heart of the Christian faith, but they are challenging because there is a mystery, and because something wonderful arises from horrible violence. The history of the church offers some compelling and beautiful explanations, and some that are not so beautiful. These answers are often divided into three categories: satisfaction models, *Christus Victor* models, and models of the moral influence type. Recent Mennonite perspectives on atonement have followed the trend that is critical of the satisfaction theory and happy to explore other options, especially the *Christus Victor* model. But most contemporary Mennonite theologians have

stopped short of rejecting the satisfaction model entirely, suspecting that it has something to offer alongside other images.

Much Mennonite discussion of atonement takes place within the framework of the typology developed by Gustaf Aulén, who subjected the satisfaction view to critique and made a case for the recovery of the *Christus Victor* view.

The three types

This threefold typology of how Jesus' life and death accomplish salvation, or why his death was necessary to save us, was developed by Gustaf Aulén in his influential work that subjected the satisfaction view to critique and made a case for the recovery of what he termed the classic or *Christus Victor* view.¹

There are variations within each of these types, but much of the recent Mennonite discussion takes place within this framework.

Aulén's contribution in the 1930s was to break open an argument that was proceeding along tired lines, between satisfaction and moral influence; he offered a third alternative in the *Christus Victor* model. The dominant explanation of the significance of

the cross for salvation had been for centuries one that used the language of satisfaction, expiation, and often penal substitution. At the start of the twelfth century, Anselm of Canterbury wrote *Cur Deus Homo* to explain why God became human. This work is usually regarded as the basis of the satisfaction theory, although there have been many versions, and some that have changed it in substantial ways.

Anselm's explanation focuses on human guilt and need for restoration, accompanied by the impossibility of God simply forgiving humanity. Humanity and creation needed to be restored. The debt humanity owed God needed to be paid, but humanity was in no position to make satisfaction for the debt. Only God-become-human could do on behalf of humanity what humanity needed to do. In living and dying innocently, obediently, voluntarily—in offering himself as a sacrifice—Jesus made the ultimate gift and provided what humanity owed. Of course, God would want to reward such a supreme offering, but there was nothing that Jesus did not already have, and it was only fitting that his reward would be passed to his kin, the humanity for whom Jesus lived and died.

Anselm most explicitly declared that the reason Jesus had to die was in order to make satisfaction, because if satisfaction were not made for sin, then punishment would be necessary, according to justice. But who could withstand punishment? The incarnation was necessary because what God wanted was not that humanity be punished but that humanity be restored. It is strange that the satisfaction theory has been confused with a theory of penal substitution; the focus on satisfaction rather than punishment reveals a restorative notion of justice rather than a retributive one.

In the nineteenth century, many people reacted against atonement theories that depicted God as a petty tyrant whose pride was injured and who needed to punish, even shed blood, in order to rectify things. Fortunately for humanity, the guilty ones did not need to pay the penalty, or suffer death, because Jesus, the innocent God-human, could suffer in our place. His death made up for our sin, and we could be forgiven. The love of God seemed to be eclipsed by the wrath and justice of God. The critique of Anselm that Peter Abelard had articulated in the twelfth century became

more popular with the optimism of the nineteenth century. Liberalism understood the human problem not as guilt but as ignorance: humanity's need is not so much for forgiveness as for revelation. The transforming power of Christ's love, revealed on the cross, became the focus. How did Jesus' death save us? By revealing to us his great love, which transforms and saves us.

By 1930, Aulén found both of these models inadequate. The moral influence view answered the problem of individual conversion but did nothing to offer hope about the world as a whole. It did not seem to take seriously enough the reality of evil and guilt and the need for forgiveness, nor did it deal with past sin. On the other hand, the satisfaction view, although it purported to deal with human evil, did so by portraying Jesus as the merciful one who appeased God, the wrathful judge.

Aulén proposed that the earliest model the church used to explain salvation was the model of victory over sin, death, and the devil. How did Christ save us? By rescuing us from these forces. This was powerful and hopeful news for people in a world where chaos and evil appeared to be winning. Aulén called this the Christus Victor model.

Mennonite interpretations

John Howard Yoder. John Howard Yoder's discussion of atonement in his *Preface to Theology*² subjects all three types to criticism, suggesting that none is adequate to the biblical witness and inviting efforts to improve on them.

Because of its popularity, Yoder gives most attention to the satisfaction theory. He finds the most problems with it but also seems to see it as the most serious option. He approaches the question from the point of view of biblical studies, systematic theology, and ethical commitments. In Yoder's view, the weaknesses of Anselm's theory are evident in an excessive preoccupation with guilt rather than future obedience, and a depiction of God as unwilling to forgive without the payment offered by the Son as our substitute. This transaction between members of the Godhead suggests a fractured Trinity. Furthermore, God becomes the object rather than the agent of the reconciliation, so that salvation is a result of human efforts and payments, even if real human beings (apart from Jesus) are not required to be obedient.

In the end, Yoder deems the satisfaction theories the most serious answers found in the history of Christian theology, and their merits are that they answer the question of piety; make sense in prayer; and call forth praise, gratitude, and commitment. At the same time, Yoder insists that they are not biblically adequate.

Yoder does not spend much time discussing the other models. He notes that the classic Christus Victor model does not explain why Jesus had to die: Why could he not have been spared death in God's victory? About the moral influence view, Yoder remarks that if God had already forgiven humanity, and if Jesus' death only revealed what was already always true, then the question remains: In what way does Jesus' death demonstrate love for humanity? How could his death reveal love for us if it was not essential in order to save us? Still, Yoder contends that this subjective approach has something to offer.

John Driver, Mark Baker, and Joel Green. Some scholars, such as John Driver, Mark Baker, and Joel Green, have emphasized the need for many images of salvation. Driver draws on his experience in mission to take up one aspect of the challenge set by Yoder. In *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, he provides a study of all the biblical images of atone-

John Driver reminds us that the Bible contains not just the motif of expiation but also of conflict-victory-liberation, vicarious suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom, redemption-purchase, reconciliation, justification, and adoption.

ment.³ His analysis of the atonement models follows Yoder's, and throughout the book he returns to problems with the satisfaction views.

In exploring the many biblical images used to express salvation and reconciliation, his work contributes to the need to open up thinking that has become too fixated on one (albeit biblical) image. He reminds us that the Bible contains not just the motif of expiation and the wrath of God but the motifs of conflict-victory-liberation, vicarious suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom, and redemption-purchase. There are themes of reconcili-

ation, justification, and adoption. He cautions that no one image would be adequate. Instead of trying to develop one theory, he advocates faithfulness to all of the biblical images. More recently, Baker's discussion of atonement, coauthored with Joel Green,

again highlights the need for many models appropriate to many different contexts.⁴

C. Norman Kraus and Thomas Finger. Norman Kraus and Tom Finger have both contributed discussions of atonement in Anabaptist perspective. I note especially Kraus's *Jesus Christ Our Lord* and Finger's *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, as well as the exchange between the two authors that followed the publication of Kraus's book.⁵ Kraus attempts to talk about salvation in a way that addresses the problem of shame rather than that of guilt.

Both Kraus and Finger point out problems with the satisfaction theory, and Finger expresses appreciation for the Christus Victor view, but they reveal differing degrees of comfort with certain language and models. Kraus rejects the language of substitution and legal terminology. Finger is more afraid of adopting a moral influence view and, by contrast, points to substitution as part of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.⁶ He is less troubled by the legal language, because he wants to assure that justice is part of the equation. Kraus and Finger agree that both love and justice must be included in a way that does not place them in contradiction.

While Kraus does not advocate one theory, and Finger warns against adopting just one, Finger seems to favour the Christus Victor motif. He points out that Anselm and the moral influence theories rely on rationality, while the classic model is better able to accommodate the rich diversity of biblical imagery.

Gordon Kaufman and Gayle Gerber Koontz. A variety of other publications also reveal this appreciation for the classic model, indicating just how widespread this trend has become. Gordon Kaufman's *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* proposes a demythologized, historical-personal version of this model, which he hopes will be meaningful in his time.⁷

Gayle Gerber Koontz opts for Kaufman's model in "The Liberation of Atonement," finding the liberation motif appropriate to a liberationist and feminist perspective.⁸ She also reminds us that various aspects of the human condition must be addressed, including the abuse of power and suffering powerlessness.

J. Denny Weaver. A more exclusive proposal has come from J. Denny Weaver, most fully articulated in his book, *The Nonvio-*

lent Atonement.⁹ In choosing the Christus Victor model to work with, he fits with the trend of his time. It is in advocating a single theory that he stands out. Weaver not only outlines his version of the model, calling it “narrative Christus Victor,” but he argues that Anselm’s satisfaction theory is incompatible with a commitment to nonviolence.

While Weaver’s earlier works on atonement include a treatment of Anselm that is reminiscent of Yoder’s, his more recent discussions focus the critique more sharply. The problem is not that Anselm’s satisfaction theory does not require an ethic derived from Jesus; Weaver contends that *Cur Deus Homo* does assume an ethic, but it is not a Christian one. In Weaver’s attempt to articulate a contemporary atonement theology, he concludes that Anselm’s satisfaction theory of atonement is “based on divinely sanctioned, retributive violence” and the assumption that “doing justice means to punish.” Anselm’s doctrine of atonement must therefore be rejected by Christians who are “uncomfortable with the idea of God who sanctions violence, a God who sends the Son so that his death can satisfy a divine requirement.”¹⁰

Weaver’s narrative Christus Victor tells the story of Jesus, who conquered the evil powers not by killing them but by bearing the evil even unto death. What the cross reveals is how victory is won. The resurrection shows that the powers of death and sin have been defeated. The one who was slain has conquered. For Weaver, this narrative has the advantage of not pitting God against human beings, or against Jesus. It is not God who demands Jesus’ death for the salvation of humanity, but the devil who requires it. Or, to put it even more acutely, this model is unlike the satisfaction view in that it is not God who kills Jesus, or organizes Jesus’ death, but sinful people who kill him. We have a choice about what role we want to adopt in the continuing narrative. Salvation comes to people when they choose to be on the side of Christ and to follow in his way, rather than being on the side of those who work against Jesus and put him to death.

Weaver is content with a single model because it describes the story of Jesus. Because he speaks about a history, he does not see the need to use multiple images. In contrast, Finger and Driver see salvation and the cross as in some way a mystery that is inexpressible. Therefore, the New Testament and the church have

used many different images to testify to their experience of salvation in their encounter with the risen Christ. What was it about Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—that brought salvation? The classic model, with its narrative nature, relates *that* the devil has been conquered, and so escapes certain problems that Anselm

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bumped up against when he tried to explain just *how* the devil has been conquered and why Jesus had to die.

René Girard discussion. Other thinkers who share Weaver's concern that what we say about Jesus and the cross must not function to condone violence are those engaged by the work of René Girard. The authors of the essays collected by Willard Swartley in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, take a variety of positions on the traditional doctrines of

atonement.¹¹ Some hold that, by contending that the Gospels uncover and reject the scapegoat mechanism, Girard provides an alternative doctrine of atonement and a rejection of a sacrificial view of the cross.

Marlin Miller maintains that Girard does not offer such an alternative; he argues that Girard's approach does not bring release from guilt and shame, nor does it empower believers to live a new life in Christ. Furthermore, it leaves unanswered questions about the final judgement.

Miller appreciates Girard's contribution to our understanding of God's goodness and human evil, but Miller maintains that it is necessary to acknowledge the paradox that remains between God's sovereignty and human freedom. He is not inclined to resolve a paradox that is scriptural; some biblical texts speak of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell, in tension with others that stress the sovereign goodness and power of God. The Bible includes suggestions of universal restoration even though such an eschatology does not seem to satisfy the demands of justice. In holding together the mercy and justice of God, the restoration of creation and a way of understanding forgiveness that does not overlook evil, Miller struggles with the very issues with which Anselm was working.

It seems to some that Girard's work makes it problematic to talk of Jesus' death as sacrificial, an argument that contributes to the case against satisfaction and penal theories. However, Marlin Miller and Willard Swartley warn against dismissing a sacrificial understanding. As Swartley indicates in his introduction, Girard himself does not reject the possibility of distinguishing between self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of another; Swartley notes that it is not a question of rejecting the language of sacrifice but of asking what sort of sacrifice is entailed.

Ted Grimsrud admits that the Bible includes a sacrificial theology, but he argues that sacrificial theology is not compatible with a thoroughgoing pacifism. He highlights instead other New Testament ways of interpreting Jesus' death, as exposing and revealing the deep violence of societal structures, and as modeling a way of life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Grimsrud's position again seems to be a combination of moral influence and classic views, without the sacrifice of the satisfaction theory or the violence of the penal view.

Robin Collins claims that Girard's theory suffers from the weaknesses of the moral influence theory. He proposes an incarnational theory that extends aspects of the moral influence and classic models. He too rejects the satisfaction and penal views. In his proposal and in what he rejects, Collins fits the trend we have observed.

Conclusion

The atonement theory that was once dominant—sometimes to the exclusion of other views—has been put in its place but not rejected. The perceived problems with the satisfaction type are that it presents God as petty and wrathful, the one who needs to be reconciled rather than the one who reconciles; God is seen within a legal framework, as unwilling to forgive without payment or without punishing someone. Critics argue that this view does not require human beings to follow or imitate Jesus. Furthermore, some have suggested that if the scenario is not that of a courtroom, then it is sacrificial—and no less violent.

Some combination of updated moral influence and classic models offers an objective story of liberation as well as room for a subjective response to the revelation of divine love. In this way,

recent Mennonite discussions have followed a broad theological trend.

The critique of the various satisfaction views has been necessary in order to remind us that they were not the complete word on the cross, and to distinguish between the various versions. Fortunately, most Mennonite discussions have acknowledged the difference between Anselm's theory and distortions of it, such as the penal substitution views, noting that much of the problem is with the latter and not the former. Wisdom lies with those who have managed to distinguish between penal substitution and Anselm's satisfaction theory, and have supplemented it rather than attempting to replace it, even when they have found it less helpful than other views. In my estimation, rereading Anselm's theory to discover its strengths would be fruitful.

Notes

¹ Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931).

² John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazo Press, 2002).

³ John Driver, *Understanding Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

⁴ Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).

⁵ C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987); and Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).

⁶ Finger, *Christian Theology*, 344.

⁷ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner, 1968).

⁸ Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (1989): 171–92.

⁹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹ Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000).

About the author

Rachel Reesor-Taylor lives in Winnipeg, Manitoba, where she is a contract faculty member at the University of Winnipeg in the Department of Religious Studies, and an educational assistant at École Provencher.