

Book review

Mary H. Schertz

The Nonviolent Atonement, by J. Denny Weaver. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001.

Mennonite and Anabaptist readers typically have strong reactions to J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement*. I have heard it described both as a breath of fresh air and as heretical. To his credit, Weaver has done what few authors in our tradition can claim to have accomplished: he has us reading and talking about theology. That in itself is a gift of large proportion.

In *The Nonviolent Atonement*, Weaver takes the position that substitutionary theories of the atonement have not only failed to serve us well but are just plain wrong. He contends that such theories have contributed to some of the major sins of the western world—imperialism, warmongering, and oppression of various kinds. He argues instead for “narrative Christus Victor,” a variation of the Christus Victor theory. Narrative Christus Victor is a Christus Victor model because it understands the atoning significance of Jesus' death as rooted in his resurrection victory over the principalities and powers. It is narrative because it is firmly rooted in the biblical story of Jesus' incarnation, life and ministry, death and—especially—resurrection.

Weaver makes the biblical case for Christus Victor by rooting it in the Apocalypse and then working through the Gospels, the Pauline material, the Old Testament sacrificial system, the Epistle to the Hebrews, and the history of Israel. Even his ordering of the material makes clear that he is developing a theological argument from the texts rather than leading his reader through a chronological survey of them. Some readers will find that arrangement disconcerting: why use Revelation to present the case, since it is one of the least historically grounded texts in the New Testament? But it is Revelation that presents the most developed imagery of Christus Victor.

The heart of the book is chapter three, where Weaver spells out some implications of narrative Christus Victor for

understanding sin and salvation in their individual and corporate dimensions. Far from taking sin and salvation less seriously, as he has sometimes been charged with doing, Weaver sketches out a rigorous and demanding understanding of our need to repent of the evil we have committed against the reign of God and accept the power of that reign by answering Jesus' call to follow him (76–7). Reorientation as a salvation motif is one of the strengths of the book. After pointing out that Jesus' life and teaching are irrelevant to the substitutionary theory of atonement, he notes tellingly: "Without the narrative depiction of Jesus in narrative Christus Victor, one does not know what the reign of God looks like nor how those who would be Christian would orient themselves in the world" (80).

I am immensely grateful to Weaver for the work he has done here. He offers a long overdue critique of substitutionary atonement theory and the sway it has held over the church. I have participated in congregational discussion of his book and have used it in my own classroom. In both settings, *The Nonviolent Atonement* has sharpened our conversation and clarified our thinking. For that reason, I heartily recommend it to pastors and other church leaders.

But I am also cautious. With Christopher Marshall, I think Weaver is "correct in what he affirms but wrong in what he denies" ("Atonement, Violence and the Will of God," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77 [January 2003]: 82). Weaver's assertions that the resurrection, not the cross, is salvific, and that God did not will Jesus' death disregard important New Testament voices about the cross and God's role in it. That substitutionary atonement theories have unduly dominated the theological scene from Anselm forward seems a necessary and timely critique. Weaver's contention that these ideas have little root in New Testament thinking seems a denial of biblical reality. Weaver's book, surely not heretical, would have been more helpful with a more nuanced understanding and use of the New Testament writings.

About the author

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