Abstract: In the past generation, criticism of "satisfaction" theologies of atonement has grown in intensity, especially among feminist, womanist and black theologians. Mennonite theologian J. Denny Weaver has recently added his voice to this chorus of criticism, arguing that satisfaction atonement theology "depends on divinely sanctioned violence that follows from the assumption that doing justice means to punish." In its place Weaver proposes a new, nonviolent model of atonement called "narrative Christus Victor," which takes the nonviolence of Jesus as its starting point. This article sympathetically reviews Weaver's proposal, then seeks to measure it against the witness of the New Testament. It argues that Weaver is correct in rejecting the violent presuppositions of satisfaction atonement, but wrong in concluding that Jesus' violent death was neither willed by God nor essential to the work of salvation.

Exposure to the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition has been one of the most formative influences on my Christian life. My encounter with Anabaptism began with reading key books by Mennonite authors during my student days in New Zealand in the early 1970s. It developed during my four years of doctoral research in Britain in the early 1980s, when my wife and I were members of the London Mennonite Fellowship. It was deepened further by sabbatical leaves at Mennonite institutions in the United States in the early, and then again in the late, 1990s. And throughout the past 25 years it has been continually enriched by fellowship with Mennonite friends and scholars around the world.—

From my contact with the Anabaptist tradition, I have come to believe that a commitment to nonviolence is an essential feature of Christian discipleship. At first I saw a peace commitment largely in connection with questions of war and militarism. It is a commitment to forswear lethal violence because it is incompatible with the worship of a crucified God. But I have since learned that violence is systemic and institutionalized, not just episodic and personal. Violence is arguably the primary social manifestation of sin (cf. Gen 4:1-16, 23-25; 6:11); it is all-pervasive in human experience. It shapes the way we view the world and influences how we exercise moral and theological discernment.

Those who take seriously Jesus' call to nonviolence must learn to read the Bible, do theology and think about God in light of this basic commitment, which is by no means easy. The Bible itself is full of violence, much of it ascribed directly to God. Also, the long history of Christian theological interpretation has been affected by the Church's profound compromise with violence, both in sanctioning the violence of the State and also in authorizing violence in pursuit of its own interests. This compromise has rested upon, and has strongly reinforced, a view of God as a violent and punitive deity who gets his own way—whether in the short term, through crusade or inquisition, or in the long term, through eschatological judgment and everlasting torment—by use of overwhelming coercion.

Such a God is increasingly hard for people to believe in. Many people today
Christopher Marshall teaches Theology at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand. Chris' specialties include the study of New Testament theology and ethics, peace theology and practice, and restorative justice - both theory and practice. He is also an expert in the study of contemporary Anabaptist theology. He presented this paper to the Wellington Institute of Theology Symposium "How Does God Do Justice in a Violent World?" St Paul's Cathedral, Wellington, New Zealand, May 25, 2002.


7. See Marshall, Beyond Retribution, 38-69. Return to Text

8. J. D. Weaver, The Nonviolent Atonement (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B. Eerdmans, 2001). Return to Text


10. Some scholars seek to address this problem by blending all three approaches. The problem is that each model rests on differing presuppositions and the resulting synthesis still tends to favor one approach over the others. Return to Text

11. "Satisfaction atonement assumes that the sin of humankind against God has earned the penalty of death, but that Jesus satisfied the offended honor of God on their behalf or took the place of sinful humankind and bore their punishment or satisfied the required penalty on their behalf. Sin was atoned for because it was punished vicariously through the death of Jesus, which saved sinful humankind from the punishment of death they deserved. That is, sinful humankind can enjoy salvation because Jesus was killed in their place, satisfying the requirement of divine justice on their behalf."-Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 3; cf. 16-17, 179-224. Return to Text


17. The charge of divine child abuse is not leveled solely against satisfaction theology. Insofar as all the traditional models portray God demanding unquestioning obedience from the Son and imposing suffering on him in order to achieve some higher good, all have been accused of depicting abuse in a positive light. But the main target of the accusation has been satisfaction atonement. Return to Text


19. On this see Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 179-95. Return to Text

20. See Gorringe, God's Just Vengeance, 1-7. Return to Text

21. Ibid., esp. 83-219 (quote from 140). Return to Text

22. Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 74. Return to Text

23. Ibid., 69. Return to Text

24. Ibid., 7. 12. Return to Text

25. Ibid., 203, also 2, 17, 19, 72. Return to Text

26. Ibid., 65-66. Return to Text

27. Ibid., 202, 209. Return to Text

28. Ibid., 223. Return to Text

29. Ibid., 34-46. Return to Text

30. On the limitations and accommodationist impulse of Nicene-Chalcedonian christology, see ibid., esp. 92-96. Return to Text
8. Although scattered references to satisfaction can be found in earlier writings, Gorringe insists that "to all intents and purposes the theology of satisfaction begins with Anselm."-"God's Just Vengeance," 90. Return to Text
9. Weaver, Nonviolent Atonement, 49. Return to Text
10. Ibid., 45. Return to Text
11. Ibid., 211, also 132. Return to Text
12. Ibid., 72. Return to Text
13. Ibid., 133. Return to Text
14. Ibid., 226 my emphasis. Return to Text
18. Jn 13:2, 27. Return to Text
19. Jn 14:30. Return to Text
24. 1 Thess 2:14-15. Return to Text
25. 1 Cor 2:8; cf. Col 2:14. Return to Text
27. 1 Peter 2:4,7. Return to Text
29. Ibid., 210. Return to Text
30. Ibid., 211. Return to Text
31. Ideally the perspective of each gospel writer should be considered separately. But there is substantial enough narrative agreement between them in how they present the purpose and outcome of Jesus' mission to permit some broad generalizations about features common to each account. Return to Text
32. It is often noted that the voice from heaven at Jesus' baptism (Mk 1:11/Mt 3:17/Lk 3:22) unites the messianic designation of Psalm 2:7 with the identification of the Servant of Yahweh in Isaiah 42:1, whose task involves suffering and rejection. There may also be an allusion to Gen 22:2,12,16. Return to Text
35. Mt 10:23; 24:15-20/Mk 13:14-18/Lk 21:2. Return to Text
37. Mk 2:19-20/Mt 9:15/Lk 5:35. Return to Text
38. Lk 9:51-52. Return to Text
39. Lk 13:31-33. Return to Text
40. Mk 8:31-34/Mt 16:21-23/Lk 9:21-22, cf. 13:33; 17:25; Mk 9:9/Mt 17:19; Mk 9:12/Mt 17:12; Mk 9:22-23/Mt 17:22-23/Lk 9:44; Mk 10:32-34/Mt 20:17-19/Lk 18:31-34. Return to Text
42. Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28, cf. 1 Tim 2:5. Return to Text
45. Lk 22:6, 53. Return to Text
46. Mk 15:2-5; Mt 27:11-14; Lk 23:8-12; Jn 19:8-10. Return to Text


Matt 26:52-54, cf. 21:42; Acts 4:11; 1 Peter 2:7. Return to Text


Lk 24:44-47. Return to Text

Jn 1:29. Return to Text


Jn 3:16-17. Return to Text

Jn 4:34, cf. 6:37-40; 12:27-28; 17:4-5. Return to Text

Jn 12:32-33. Return to Text


Jn 10:11, 14-18 Return to Text

Jn 18:11, cf. 4-8 Return to Text

Jn 19:11. Return to Text

Acts 2:23. Return to Text


1 Cor 15:3-4, cf. Rom 1:1-4. Return to Text


Rom 8:3; Gal 4:4, cf. 2:21; 3:13; cf. also Titus 3:4. Return to Text

Rom 8:32. Return to Text

Rom 3:25. Return to Text

2 Cor 5:21. Return to Text

2 Cor 5:19, cf. Rom 5:10; Col 1:20-21. Return to Text

Rom 5:7. Return to Text

Rom 5:6, 8; 1 Cor 15:3; 1 Thess 5:10; 2 Cor 1:5; 5:14; Gal 3:13, cf. Eph 5:2; Titus 2:14. Return to Text

Rom 5:18:19. Return to Text

Rom 15:3-4; Phil 2:5-8, cf. 1 Tim 2:6. Return to Text

1 Cor 1:20-25; 11:26. Return to Text


Rom 5:12. Return to Text


Heb 2:14-15. Return to Text

Gen 4:8. Return to Text

Gen 3:6, cf. Rom 7:7-12; Mk 7:21-22. Return to Text

Gen 4:7. Return to Text

Jas 4:2. Return to Text

Lk 23:34. Return to Text

1 Peter 2:23-24. Return to Text

2 Cor 5:21. Return to Text

Rom 6:9-10. Return to Text
Rom 6:4. Return to Text
