

Response to Denny Weaver's "Violence in Christian Theology"

Part I: The biblical basis of the violent atonement on the cross

In his article entitled, "Violence in Christian Theology,"¹ Denny Weaver argued that the view of a satisfaction atonement was derived from a post-Constantine church which embraced the violence of the Roman Empire [8]. It is noteworthy that Weaver did not use any scripture [God's revelation] in his attack on the classic satisfaction atonement theology [1-10], just his own sin-corrupted human reasoning. Whatever the influence of the times might have had on theologians over the ages, Scripture clearly teaches a satisfaction atonement through the violent death of Jesus on the cross. It would be impossible to remain faithful to Scripture in theologizing a non-violent atonement.

Scripture clearly teaches that Christ's violent sacrificial death was planned by God the Father, regardless of its execution by godless men [Isaiah 53.6, 10; Acts 2.23; Romans 5.6-9; 8.3, 32; 2 Corinthians 5.21]. As well, Christ himself undertook to suffer a violent death as a sacrifice to God for the benefit of others [Isaiah 53.2; Mark 10.45; Luke 22.19-20; Ephesians 5.2; Galatians 1.4; 2.20; 1 Timothy 2.6; Titus 2.14; Hebrews 7.27; 9.14].

Scripture clearly teaches that Christ was the sacrificial lamb, bringing atonement, which is reconciliation with God, for believers [John 1.29, 36; 1 Corinthians 5.7; 1 Peter 3.18], like an Old Testament guilt offering [though more lasting; Isaiah 53.10]. Other verses speak to Christ's blood bringing propitiation, or appeasement of God, for believers [Romans 3.25; 1 John 2.2; 4.10], and righteousness [justification, positional sanctification] before God, for believers [Romans 3.25-26; 5.6-9; 2 Corinthians 5.21; Hebrews 10.10-14]. Also, Christ's blood purchased or ransomed people for God [Mark 10.45; Acts 20.28; 1 Timothy 2.6; Revelation 5.9].

Scripture clearly teaches that Christ's blood brought cleansing, healing, and release from sin [Romans 6.6-7; 1 Corinthians 15.3; Hebrews 9.14; 1 Peter 2.24; 1 John 1.7; Revelation 1.5; John 1.29], as well as redemption and forgiveness for sin [Isaiah 53.5-12; Romans 8.3; Ephesians 1.7; Titus 2.14; Hebrews 7.27; 9.15; 10.12; 1 Peter 1.18-19; 3.18]. Christ's blood brought redemption from the curse of the Law [Galatians 3.13] and a rescue for believers from the present evil age [Galatians 1.4]. Christ's blood ushered in the prophesied New Covenant [Luke 22.20].

Thus there is a great body of scriptural evidence in support of the orthodox view of a satisfaction atonement obtain by Christ's violent death on the cross, and that this satisfaction atonement cannot be obtained in any other [non-violent] way.

Part II: Weaver's non-violent atonement

Weaver claimed his non-violent "narrative Christus Victor" atonement theory was based on the gospels and the book of Revelation [10]. However, he had a preterist view of Revelation [that the events in Revelation have taken place already; 1 Iff], and he never actually referred to any

¹ J. Denny Weaver, "Violence in Christian Theology," accessed on 05.27.08, at <http://www.crosscurrents.org/weaver/0701.htm>. Numbers in brackets represent page numbers as printed out from this website.

specific scripture in the gospels. Instead, he relied on the book of Revelation to provide the hope of victory for the rule of God over evil in the resurrection [12].

Weaver said the gospels, like the book of Revelation, make clear that the victory of the reign of God is “on earth and in history” and accomplished not by sword and military might but nonviolently [13]. His earthly-historical view of victory was supposed to contrast with the satisfaction atonement view, which he interpreted to provide victory only after earthly death, without a change of status in history or in life on earth, but just a change in status beyond this life [7]. This is a misrepresentation of satisfaction atonement theology, however, which includes an earthly-historical victory over the power of sin [John 8.32-33; Romans 8.1-2], a victory that results in the new life that begins now [1 Peter 1.3; 2 Corinthians 5.17], the indwelling of the Holy Spirit [Romans 8.9; 1 Corinthians 3.16], and the transformational sanctification process [Romans 12.2; 2 Corinthians 3.18].

Weaver said Jesus was “an activist here to make the reign of God present in this world in his person and in his teaching, and to invite people to experience the liberation it presented” [13]. It is hard to see how this offer of liberation from worldly oppression was to come to fruition. As noted, Weaver wanted an earthly and historical victory – and faulted the satisfaction atonement theology for providing victory only after death – but he did not give any experiential basis for the victory he claimed Christ brought. He said Christ’s resurrection was the victory, but did not explain how that brought victory to the oppressed [13]. He said people today were to join the struggle for “liberation from the forces that bind and oppress” [13], which gives the impression we do not yet experience victory from the resurrection, but must achieve it [and specifically by passive means, of course]. He said Jesus was “a model of liberation” [15], and, “What the victorious Christ has done is to rescue us from the forces of evil and allow us to be invited into and to be transformed by the rule of God” [14]. This apparently would include some sort of justification and sanctification, but still there is no evidence of the earthly deliverance from oppression. One might ask how this “rescue” was accomplished by the resurrection. He said that God invites us [13], but did not explain how this invitation is based on Christ’s resurrection.

Indeed, while Weaver’s explanation of his theology was murky, one must conclude that he viewed Christ’s resurrection as an example or sign only, not a true action of atonement which accomplished the reconciliation of man with God. If the resurrection of Christ was an example or inspiration, the death of Christ was meaningless to Weaver: he said the forces of evil killed Jesus [13, 15], and the death did not accomplish anything [15]. This leaves Jesus still a passive victim of violence, an example Weaver criticized the satisfaction atonement theology for presenting [as noted previously]. Worse, in Weaver’s theology, Jesus is not only a passive victim of violence but apparently not sovereign either, as he could not avoid this violent but unimportant and non-accomplishing death at the hands of his enemies. If Weaver were to argue that the resurrection was necessary for his theory of “atonement” then he would be back to agreeing that God’s hand was in the death of Christ, for one cannot have resurrection without death.

Weaver said his theology was based on “the non-violence of Jesus” [15]. What he failed to distinguish was the difference between the teachings of Jesus for his merely human followers and the teachings of Jesus and other Scripture about Jesus himself, who is not merely human, but

divine as well. Since, as noted, Weaver had a preterist view of the book of Revelation, it is useful to put that revelation aside for the moment and find evidence elsewhere in Scripture, where it is revealed that Christ will return to deal out retribution of eternal suffering to non-believers [2 Thessalonians 1.8-9], wrathfully breaking and shattering the unrepentant kings and nations with “a rod of iron” [Psalm 2.9; 110.5-6], even filling them with corpses [Psalm 110.6; Zechariah 14.12], even of children [Psalm 137.8-9].

Addendum: Weaver’s other objections to the violent atonement

I offer the following remarks for the consideration of those who are interested and to rid myself of the frustration I felt in reading Weaver’s paper.

Weaver said it is nonsense to think both Jesus and those who killed Jesus could be carrying out the will of God [4]. This reasoning of his is the nonsense: there is no reason a sovereign God could not in omniscience and omnipotence use his enemies to carry out his will, even in coordination with the actions of the Son, and Holy Spirit [Acts 2:23].

Weaver objected to the idea that justice depends on punishment for sin [10], but this is clearly attested in scripture [Hebrews 9.22 and many Old Testament verses].

Weaver viewed the idea of atonement through the death on the cross as God having one of his children killed to show love to the rest of his children [4], and sympathized with the view that this constitutes divine child abuse [4]. He considered Jesus in this theology to be the passive sufferer of unjust abuse by his Father [5-6]. He thought these images of God the Father and Jesus were unhealthy for people in abusive and oppressive situations [6, 9], because it induced them to quietly continue to suffer in unjust situations [9-10] instead of encouraging them to struggle for liberation from oppression. This shows a distinct lack of theological understanding on the part of these victims and on the part of Weaver. First, Jesus willingly went to the cross, not as a passive victim [Isaiah 53.12; Mark 10.45; Luke 22.19-20; Ephesians 5.2; Galatians 1.4; 2.20; 1 Timothy 2.6; Titus 2.14; Hebrews 7.27; 9.14]. Second, Jesus died for the purpose of eternally saving souls through the gospel [which I would say includes mention of his atoning work on the cross]. In the satisfaction atonement theology, Jesus does set an example, one of going to any sacrifice for the sake of helping others come to faith in Christ through the gospel, a concept Paul emphasized [e.g. Philippians]. In contrast, it is in Weaver’s theology that Christ is the poor example, of one who allows himself to die violently for no good purpose. Third, satisfaction atonement theology is not a model for child abuse: no child is Jesus dying for the atonement of sinners, and no parent is God, all of which should be clear, and thus this “example” does not in any way sanction parental abuse or any other kind of abuse. Fourth, the purpose in this age of Christ and his gospel [and thus his atoning death] is not to release the oppressed from all oppression in this life, but to provide for their salvation; on his return, Christ can bring further justice, though it does not seem to occur to Weaver that such justice will be violent.

Weaver saw no hope for the oppressed in the satisfaction atonement theology [10]. This is amazing, since by his atoning death Christ offers an eternal salvation from just punishment, and an eternity in health, joy, peace, and the presence of God, making any earthly suffering more tolerable.

Though Weaver repeatedly emphasized the need to follow Jesus' pacifist teachings, he ignored Jesus' teachings on passive suffering for the gospel, which would be the very ethics Weaver frets are absent from the satisfaction atonement theology.

Weaver said a satisfaction atonement theory ignores the birth, life and teaching, and resurrection of Christ [7]. Yet the gospel associated with such teaching includes the resurrection at least [1 Corinthians 15.3-4], and usually the incarnation as part of Christ's identity, as well as the perfection of Christ's life as evidence of his purity for sacrifice. The gospel and the specific doctrine of satisfaction atonement might not include any details about the teaching of Christ, but that does not render the teaching unimportant in the theology associated with this doctrine and gospel. Each doctrine has its purpose, and the purpose of the satisfaction atonement doctrine is not to explain the teachings of Christ, except in that they pertain to the satisfaction atonement itself [which are those Weaver apparently ignored].

Weaver was concerned that satisfaction atonement theology does not involve ethics, nor does it challenge injustice in the social order [7]. He thought this view of the atonement has enabled black slavery among other violent evils [8]. Similarly, he criticized the conclusions of Nicaea and Chalcedon [8]. He said that if classic atonement and Christological theology does not challenge violence, then it in effect accommodates it [9]. This last remark is obviously fallacious: a system of thought can pertain to specific issues and not be all-inclusive without thereby advocating everything it fails to specifically forbid [or, for that matter, prohibiting everything it fails to condone]. As to the other issues, the argument against them is similar to the previous paragraph: the satisfaction atonement doctrine does not have ethics in its purview, but the theology associated with that doctrine sufficiently does.