

## THEORISING A QUAKER VIEW OF THE ATONEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

Gustaf Aulén described a classical view of the atonement, in which God through Christ triumphs over the forces of evil: ‘Christus victor’. Denny Weaver’s narrative Christus victor developed this view into a fully developed theory, spelled out as biblical narrative. A biblical theology framework provides a context for integrating this theory with Larry Shelton’s theory that God in the atonement establishes and maintains a new covenant community with humanity. Christus victor/covenant atonement incorporates biblical values of nonviolence and restorative justice; satisfaction and substitutionary theories are rooted in retributive justice and violence. George Fox was committed to a Christus victor view of Christ’s atonement. Lamb’s war writings of Fox, Burrough, and Nayler gave a powerful and original extension of that view. These Friends foreshadowed the combination of narrative Christus victor theory with covenant theory of the atonement.

### KEYWORDS

Christus victor, George Fox, restorative justice, narrative, mighty acts of God, covenant.

One consequential issue in Christian theology—and in Quaker thought—is the meaning of the atonement. What was the work that God actually accomplished in the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ—in that greatest of the mighty acts of God?

In his book on the atonement, *Love, Violence, and the Cross*, Presbyterian theologian Gregory Anderson Love has spelled out clearly the tests that any attempt to answer this question must pass. Any theory of the atonement must be adequate ethically, evangelistically, and methodologically.

**Ethically**, the theory must take seriously the high personal and social ethical challenge presented by the Hebrew prophets, Jesus, and the Christian apostles—the message of justice and peace.

**Evangelistically**, the theory must reflect the ‘shocking logic of grace’ (Love 2010: 51); it must be ‘a message filled with hope’ (2010: 50) for those who despair: ‘deep at night, we long for mercy’ (2010: 51).

**Methodologically**, atonement theory, as a part of Christian ‘theology draws its content from four sources: scripture, the Christian theological and practical traditions, reason, and contemporary human experience (which includes the sciences)’ (Love 2010: 48). Drawing on these sources,

Every theologian also uses three criteria to judge the adequacy of a theological statement:

1. Does the theological position cohere externally with Christianity’s Scriptures and traditions?
2. Is the position internally coherent; in other words, do the various parts of the argument cohere, or do they clash?
3. Is the position externally coherent with lived human experience? (Love 2010: 63).

Since my aim is to propose the outlines of a Quaker theory of atonement, a key criterion will be coherence with Quaker tradition—and not simply the tradition looked to by any one of the competing branches of Quakerism. Perforce that takes us back to the seventeenth century—to the first generation or two of Friends. This is presumably the only moment in our tradition that commands respect and recognition among all groups of Friends today.

The immediate problem is that these early Friends only rarely paid direct attention to Christ’s atonement or to any theory of the atonement. We have to tease out what they thought about the atonement from incidental comments which they made while discussing other issues. It is hardly surprising that Quaker scholars have been far from agreeing on what such Friends as George Fox, Robert Barclay, and William Penn actually believed regarding the atonement—the work of Christ.

In studying seventeenth-century Friends, Dean Freiday, Walter Long (in passing), and I have explicitly used a typology developed by Gustaf Aulén. Aulén was a twentieth-century Swedish Lutheran bishop and theologian. He proposed that there have been three types of ideas (or theories) about Christ’s atonement. Arthur Roberts and Lloyd Lee Wilson have used similar typologies, without specifically mentioning Aulén.

Aulén calls one type the Latin type. This type of atonement theory was first fully developed by St. Anselm of Canterbury (ca. A.D. 1033–1109) and has been popular in Protestant orthodox thought, from John Calvin on. Basic aspects of this type of theory are that sin requires a heavy penalty, and that satisfaction must be made for sin (Palmer 1999: 12).

This satisfaction could only be made by a human; and so Christ, who was fully God, became a human being. By enduring the punishment for our sin, he provided the needed satisfaction on our behalf. Our sins were imputed, or transferred, to Christ, and so Christ’s righteousness is imputed to us.

The second type, according to Aulén, is the ‘subjective’ type, including various ‘moral influence’ theories of the atonement. This type of theory was first developed, in opposition to Anselm, by Peter Abelard (A.D. 1079–1142). It has become popular among ‘liberal’ Protestant thinkers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The emphasis in these theories is on the subjective impact of Christ’s work on the hearts and behavior of men and women (Palmer 1999: 12–13).

Aulén argued that there is a third type, which he called the ‘classic’ idea of the atonement. The early Church Fathers often described Christ’s death as a ransom paid to the devil. Sometimes they even used the image of Christ as the bait which deceives the devil into being caught on a fishhook and so being taken captive by God.

This type of view may be described...as the ‘dramatic’. Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—‘Christus Victor’—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself (Aulén 2003: 4).

‘Cosmic drama’ is the literary form it actually employed, and the classic type’s theme is a great struggle by Christ to overcome the forces of evil... In this struggle, the earthly actions of Christ have repercussions on evil in the celestial sphere, and on the invisible powers that have kept women and men in bondage (Freiday 1986: 17).

How would seventeenth-century Friends fit into this typology? Lloyd Lee Wilson has suggested:

Early Friends did not pay nearly as much attention to atonement as they did to other points of faith, but when they did they seem generally to have followed what are called the classic atonement theories. I have been able to find only two places where Robert Barclay used the word atonement in his writing. Once he appears to adhere to ransom theory, and once to substitutionary penal atonement. George Fox also mentioned atonement very rarely (Wilson 2010: 12).

Penal substitutionary theory was the version of the Latin theory which was developed during the Reformation, particularly by John Calvin. Wilson’s first quotation from Barclay clearly referred to the atonement as a ransom: ‘Christ...offered up himself a most sweet and satisfactory sacrifice, as *the ransom, the atonement*, the propitiation for our sins’ (Wilson 2010: 29 n. 17, original emphasis). His second quotation, which he saw as supporting the substitutionary theory, was, in part,

*We do not hereby intend any ways to lessen or derogate from the atonement and sacrifice of Jesus Christ...we firmly believe it was necessary that Christ should come, that by his death and sufferings he might offer up himself a sacrifice to God for our sins, who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree* (Wilson 2010: 29 n. 17, original emphasis).

But Aulén himself made it clear that the language of sacrifice was used in both the Latin and the classical views of the atonement. Irenaeus was a strong proponent of the classical position:

This double-sidedness, of Divine activity and passivity, appears again when Irenaeus uses the analogy of sacrifice to interpret the work of Christ... On the one side ‘by His passion Christ has reconciled us to God’; on the other, it is God Himself who makes the sacrifice (Aulén 2003: 31).

The typically Latin view of the Atonement always regards the sacrifice as offered by man to God, and works this out in a logical theory; but the classic idea of the Atonement...is always marked by a double-sidedness... The idea that God receives the sacrifice is...that sacrifice stands in the Divine Economy as the means whereby the Divine will-to-reconciliation realises itself, and which also shows how much it costs God to effect the Atonement (Aulén 2003: 57-58).

And so Wilson's second quotation from Barclay could represent either the classical, Christus Victor view or the Latin satisfaction or substitutionary view!

Like Lloyd Lee Wilson, Arthur Roberts has found more than one view of Christ's atonement in the writings of early Friends:

The early Friends were eclectic insofar as particular theories of the Atonement are concerned... One might maintain that Fox holds to the 'ransom theory' because he makes reference to Christ having delivered us from the devil, or to the 'satisfaction theory' because he speaks of Christ paying all our 'debts of sin'. In his *No Cross, No Crown*, William Penn gives words which imply the 'moral influence theory' of atonement, as in the famous passage about Christ the 'victorious captain of our salvation', greater than all the leaders of the world, 'the most perfect pattern of self-denial' for us to follow if we would come to glory (Roberts 1961: 15-16).

The phrase 'debts of sin' can certainly fit the satisfaction theory: 'Anselm defined sin in terms of a debt toward God' (Shelton 2006: 176). But Aulén has argued that understanding sin as a debt to be paid can also be found in the ransom theory—particularly in the writings of Athanasius:

The image of the ransom-price naturally relates itself to the powers of evil, for it is to these that the ransom is paid. Yet...it can even at times be said that the ransom is paid to God... This double-sidedness is essential to the classic idea. Deliverance from the powers of evil, death, and the devil is at the same time deliverance from God's judgment on sin.

The same is true of the image of Debt, which is parallel to the image of Ransom... Athanasius speaks of the Word of God as by the offering up of His body 'paying the debt for all by His death', and that thereby death was 'satisfied'; he also connects this thought with the idea of sacrifice... The debt is regarded as paid primarily to death; but he can also say that a 'debt of honour' is paid to God... The payment of the debt is God's own act, carried out by the Logos, while at the same time it is God who receives the payment (Aulén 2003: 56).

In itself, then, the phrase 'debts of sin' could point to either the Latin or the classic type of atonement theory. We need to look at the context of this phrase in Fox's writing:

In the new covenant and new testament, the year of jubilee is proclaimed, blown and sounded with the spiritual gospel trumpets, throughout all the world; ...that by the spirit all flesh might see the glory of God, and Christ their salvation, who redeems them, and pays all their debts of sin; who was made sin that knew none, and so made it to be his; and so died for the sins of the whole world and the ungodly, to redeem them out of the sin, and ungodliness, and bondage, and captivity, yea, to set all the prisoners and captives at liberty, and to make the blind to see, by opening their eyes; and heals the leper, cripple, and the sick, and looses the tongue of the dumb. Here is the year of jubilee, the everlasting holy year, or day of Christ, who destroys the devil and his works, that hath made man and woman unholy, and kept them in bondage and slavery. And so Christ brings all his believers into his glorious liberty of the sons of God, and to an eternal redemption; yea, he takes off and destroys that which hath brought the oppression upon the creation. So an everlasting jubilee in the new covenant, and new testament, and new and living way (Fox 1990b: VI, 67).

In this passage we see nothing that would point us to satisfaction theory; we do see the Christus Victor imagery of the classic view of the atonement: Christ destroys the devil and releases humanity and the whole creation from his oppression—bringing us into the expansive liberty of the year of jubilee and the new covenant with God.

Arthur Roberts also wrote:

Along with Barclay and others, Fox...insisted that grace was not only imputed in forgiveness but also imparted in sanctification. Man's sinful nature may be changed... In speaking of redemption as 'one work of grace' George Fox shows holiness to be an integral part of salvation rather than something tacked on (Roberts 1961: 17).

The phrasing 'not only...but also' implies that Fox believed grace (and the resulting holiness or righteousness) is **both** imputed and imparted. But both Barclay and Fox **opposed** the concept of imputed righteousness:

They argue, That as our sin is imputed to Christ, who had no sin; so Christ's righteousness is imputed to us, without our being righteous. But this interpretation is easily rejected... The imputed righteousness of Christ, is not to be found in all the bible, at least as to my observation (Barclay 1908: 207-208 [Prop. VII, Sect. VI]).

Q. 'Whether a believer be justified by Christ's righteousness imputed, yea, or no?'

A. 'He that believeth is born of God'; and he that is born of God is justified by Christ alone, without imputation (Fox 1990b: III, 595).

The belief that Christ's righteousness is imputed to believers is an intrinsic part of the satisfaction and substitutionary theories. These arguments are clear evidence that Fox and Barclay rejected the Latin view of Christ's atonement.

Dean Freiday stated 'that Barclay is not dependent on the classic idea of the Atonement, which was derived from the early Church Fathers, or on the Anselmian doctrine' (Freiday 1986: 26). He suggested that George Fox and the early Friends paid little attention to any of the three major types of atonement theory. Rather, 'The unique thing about Fox's teaching on the Atonement, as elsewhere in his thought, is the virtually inseparable relationship between what happened in Jerusalem and what happens in or to the faithful today' (Freiday 1986: 28). Freiday did include a couple of quotations which pointed toward a Christus Victor motif in Fox's writings:

Unlike both Anselm's and Luther's fascination with the devil, Fox mentions him very rarely... At one point Fox does say that 'Christ's manifestation in the flesh', by which he means an interior spiritual manifestation, is 'to destroy the devil's works, yet to save the man and the woman, and through the death to destroy the devil, the power of death' (4:226) (Freiday 1986: 28).

He also quoted a long passage from Fox, which included the sentence: 'Through death [He] destroyed death and the devil, the power of death, and is risen' (Freiday 1986: 29).

I agree with Dean Freiday that it is

virtually impossible to find anything in Fox's writings that reflects the 'satisfaction' theory of the atonement... In contrast, ...I [have] no trouble finding examples of the 'victory' motif in Fox's writings. One typical example is this: 'Christ...bruises the serpent's head, and destroys the devil and his works' [Fox 1990b: II, 320] (Palmer 1999: 16).

Using the word search in Earlham School of Religion's Digital Quaker Collection, I find well over 200 locations in George Fox's writings where he used the phrase 'Christ [or the seed of the woman] bruises the head of the serpent', or close variations on that wording. A few of these explicitly identified the serpent with Satan. For instance:

Christ opened to me how he was tempted by the same Devil, and had overcome him and bruised his head (Fox 1952: 12).

Christ did not build his church upon Peter, ...nor upon satan, for he bruises satan the serpent's head; so he was not like to build his church upon him (Fox 1990b: VI, 368).

One striking use of the phrase was in this passage:

[In] the one head, Christ, the Seed, you are all of one family. Here is the Power of the Son of God known, all Power being given to him. Which Power and Seed bruises the serpent's head and breaks it... So all Power is given to the Son to rule, to subdue and to judge. So, live in the Power...live all in the Seed...which keeps a-top of the head of the Serpent, keeps his head down and brings it under (Fox 1990a: 79).

Further evidence is provided through

Hugh Barbour's and Canby Jones's treatment of the 'Lamb's War' theme in the thought of Fox, Edward Burrough, James Nayler, and other early Friends. As Canby Jones summarises this theme,

The final triumph of obedience is promised by the conquering Lamb who leads his obedient people to victory over all evil at the end of history. The early Quakers insisted that...they knew one another in the power of the Lord's resurrection. They saw themselves as the army of the Lamb marching triumphantly through history with the Lamb bringing the victory (T.C. Jones 1964: 37).

The whole concept of the Lamb's War is shot through and through with the Christus Victor motif, with the additional dimension that, though Christ's victory was in principle won in the events of Christ's ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection, the remnants of the struggle go on, and Christ's people participate actively in that struggle. That this added dimension is consistent with the classical view of the atonement is suggested by Aulén:

The classic idea of the Atonement, as it is set forth in the Fathers, is both clear and monumental... The power of evil is broken; that is to say, not that sin and death no longer exist, but that, the devil having been once for all conquered by Christ, His triumph is in principle universal, and His redemptive work can go forward everywhere, through the Spirit who unites men with God and 'deifies' them (Aulén 2003: 59).

Further, the Lamb's War theme, in showing how the faithful are drawn here and now into the redemptive, victorious work of Christ himself, may help to harmonise my perspective with Dean Freiday's insistence that Fox's emphasis is on 'the virtually inseparable relationship between what happened in Jerusalem and what happens in or to the faithful today' (Palmer 1999: 16-17).

In his book, *British Quaker Theology since 1895*, Martin Davie started out by summarising the theology of the early Quakers. He provided evidence for the points he was making by quoting from a number of seventeenth-century Friends, including George Fox, Edward Burrough, Robert Barclay, and William Penn. In his third chapter, Davie argued that, in contrast to Rufus Jones in the twentieth century, 'Early Friends...maintained that Christ's death on the Cross brought the enmity between God and Man to an end by paying the penalty for human sin' (Davie 1997: 107). Christ's paying the penalty for our sin is, of course, a central idea in the Latin theories of the atonement. In this book Davie did not provide evidence, by way of quoting from any early Friend, to back up this claim.

Moreover, Martin Davie has completely overlooked or ignored the decisive evidence that, in his *Sandy Foundation Shaken*, William Penn totally rejected the idea that Christ paid a penalty for sin. Penn devoted half of that work to refuting 'The Impossibility of God's pardoning Sinners, without a plenary Satisfaction' (Penn 1971: 129) (that is, 'The vulgar doctrine, of satisfaction' [1971: 139]) and 'The justification of impure persons, by an imputative righteousness' (1971: 145). Part of Penn's refutation of the satisfaction theory included listings of 'The absurdities, that unavoidably follow from the comparison of this doctrine with the sense of scripture' (1971: 142) and of 'Consequences irreligious and irrational' (1971: 144). The final irreligious and irrational consequence of this doctrine was:

That God's justice is satisfied for sins past, present, and to come; whereby God and Christ have lost both their power of enjoining godliness, and prerogative of punishing disobedience; for what is once paid is not revokeable; and if punishment should arrest any for their debts, it either argues a breach on God's or Christ's part, or else that it has not been sufficiently solved, and the penalty completely sustained by another; forgetting, 'that every one must appear before the judgment-seat of Christ, to receive according to the things done in the body; yea, every one must give an account of himself to God [Rom. xiv. 12. 2 Cor. xv. 10.]'. But many more are the gross absurdities and blasphemies that are the genuine fruits of this so-confidently believed doctrine of satisfaction (Penn 1971: 145).

Satisfaction and substitutionary theories of the atonement are often classified as forensic theories, because they rely on the language and imagery of courts of law. I see a probable reference to these forensic theories in Melvin Endy's defense of Rufus Jones:

Rufus Jones was correct in observing at the very heart of Quakerism a Spiritualist objection to what Jones called 'forensic' Christianity, with its focus on the death of Jesus Christ as the means by which men were made acceptable to God through the imputation of Christ's righteousness to them (Endy 1981: 16).

I suspect that Endy had in mind these words of Rufus Jones:

The Quaker view of the moral and dynamic character of saving faith, the view that justification is a vital process and not merely a forensic scheme, is, in heart and essence, indistinguishable from the central teaching of these spiritual predecessors of the Quakers (R.M. Jones 2011: 268).

If Endy has accurately interpreted what Jones was getting at, both of them are correct in seeing that early Friends rejected the forensic theories of the atonement, even though neither of them provided specific evidence of this rejection in the immediate contexts of these quotations.

Howard Brinton made one example of this rejection more explicit. In *The Religion of George Fox* he claimed at the outset that 'Fox's religion comes through most clearly in his letters. In them he is not endeavoring to adapt his words to opponents or possible converts, but he speaks to his fellow Quakers' (Brinton 1968: 4). In this pamphlet Brinton declared:

We do not find in the epistles Saint Anselm's doctrine of the atonement according to which Christ offers himself as a substitute or sin-offering for men to appease the wrath of God. Fox prefers to write of 'the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world' (Rev. 13:8; quoted in Epistle 337 and elsewhere): that is, he thinks in terms of eternity rather than of time. Thus the death of Christ becomes a cosmic event (Brinton 1968: 27).

Margaret Benefiel objected at the outset to using Aulén's typology as a basis for comparing views of the atonement: 'Gustaf Aulén's interpretation of the history of the doctrine of the Atonement, in my judgment, is wrong' (Benefiel 1988: 21) The strength of her objection lies in Aulén's own admission that the classical view had never been spelled out as a fully developed theory:

I have tried to be consistent in speaking of the classic *idea* of the Atonement, never of the, or a, classic *theory*; I have reserved the word *theory*, and usually the word *doctrine*, for the Latin and the 'subjective' types. For the classic idea of the Atonement has never been put forward, like the other two, as a rounded and finished theological *doctrine*; it has always been an idea, a *motif*, a theme, expressed in many different variations... It has never been shaped into a rational theory (Aulén 2003: 157, original emphasis).

Margaret Benefiel proposed an alternative typology: The classic view of the early Church Fathers is an example of 'first-order reflection', which 'uses the language of symbol, image, myth, and story. Its purpose is to draw the reader into an experience, to re-create the experience about which it speaks so that the reader can have that experience, too' (Benefiel 1988: 22). The views of Anselm and Calvin are 'second-order reflection', which

uses the language of theory to ask the questions: 'What does my experience mean? Can I make a statement about God or Christ based upon my experience?' As it attempts to answer these questions, it works out careful distinctions and structures to express its conclusions accurately. It relies on logic and reason to build its theory (Benefiel 1988: 22).

Benefiel suggested that 'early Quakers make the first attempt at third-order reflection in the history of the doctrine of the Atonement' (Benefiel 1988: 24). 'Third-order reflection...reflects upon what is going on interiorly during the experience' (1988: 22). She drew the conclusion that the views of the Church Fathers and of Anselm 'do not necessarily conflict with one another, because they are doing completely different things' (1988: 22).



New developments in the twenty-first century have in effect rendered obsolete Margaret Benefiel's objections to Aulén's typology.

To begin with, J. Denny Weaver, a Mennonite theologian, has published *The Nonviolent Atonement*. In this book he developed a 'model of the life and work of Christ', which he called 'narrative Christus Victor' (Weaver 2001: 7). He spelled out this model in considerable detail and consistency, and successfully established his claim 'that narrative Christus Victor is much more than an atonement motif. It poses a comprehensive way to see God working in the world' (2001: 226). Here we finally have a version of the Christus Victor view of the atonement, which attains the status of a clearly formulated theory. And from the beginning to the end of his book, Weaver showed how his theory was totally contrary to satisfaction theories of the atonement.

R. Larry Shelton, a Free Methodist who teaches theology at George Fox Evangelical Seminary, has more recently published *Cross and Covenant*. The heart of the atonement theory which Shelton developed in this book was that 'the atonement of Christ serves a mediatorial role in initiating and maintaining God's new covenant with all humanity' (Shelton 2006: 83). He affirmed that 'the classic views, particularly as presented by Irenaeus and Gustaf Aulén, show significant consistency with the characteristics of the biblical covenant understanding of salvation' (2006: 171-72). Shelton was sharply critical of forensic theories of the atonement, and he concluded 'that the legal theory differs from the covenant characteristics of the atonement at several critical points' (2006: 199).

We now have firm evidence that the classical view of the atonement can be formulated as a fully developed theory and is therefore not restricted to 'first-order reflection'. It has also become clear that theories based on or consistent with the classical view do indeed conflict with the forensic or Latin theories of the atonement.

In summary: without doubt, George Fox, Robert Barclay, and William Penn rejected the satisfaction and substitutionary theories of the atonement. I add one more quotation as further evidence that George Fox's views were strongly consistent with a Christus Victor view of the atonement: 'Christ hath all power in heaven and earth given to him... The beast hath been long up, his marks, and his heads and horns, with his names, but the Lamb and the saints are trampling him to pieces under, and getting the victory over him' (Fox 1990b: III, 214).

Mindful of the criterion that a theological position should be internally coherent, I begin a summary of the theological stance, which underlies my proposal for a contemporary Quaker theory of atonement, with my finding that George Fox, Edward Burrough, and Margaret Fell 'entered empathetically into the biblical world and the history of the ancient Israelites and the early church' (Palmer 1993: 45), and that from this position of reading the Bible with empathy 'they were expecting and assuming that their Quaker readers were likewise standing within the Bible—within the thought- and life-world of the earliest Christians—and were looking out at the world through the window of biblical faith' (1993: 44). I go a step further by making the 'claim that the lynchpin of George Fox's understanding of Quakerism was his

*hermeneutical method*: his reading of the Bible with empathy, which led to an affective spirituality, grounded in biblical symbolism and metaphor' (Palmer 2006: 63, original emphasis).

My thinking on this point also includes what I have learned from 'the twentieth-century biblical theology movement: such scholars as Karl Barth, [J. Coert Rylaarsdam,] Bernhard W. Anderson, and G. Ernest Wright had insisted that the goal of all biblical criticism was to enable us to enter with empathy into the world and worldview of the biblical writers and their communities' (Palmer 2006: 64).<sup>1</sup>

Since the seventeenth-century Quaker movement and the twentieth-century biblical theology movement concurred in their starting point—reading the Bible with empathy—I make the presumption that the basic findings of the latter movement would be highly relevant to an attempt to construct a twenty-first-century position that would cohere with the seventeenth-century heart of the Quaker tradition.

Within the biblical theology movement we recognise that the writers of the biblical books present us with a variety of different worldviews and theologies. Nevertheless, from the findings of such biblical scholars as G. Ernest Wright (1952; Wright in Wright and Fuller 1960), Walther Eichrodt (1961), and Bernhard W. Anderson (1975) I have discerned some basic underlying themes that run consistently through these differing biblical outlooks. God communicates with humanity primarily through a series of events in history, in which he both reveals himself to us—his nature, his will, his purpose—and establishes his purpose, his kingship, his reign on earth. These events make up *heilsgeschichte*: 'salvation history' or 'holy history'.

We call these events the 'mighty acts of God'. Two of these events are primary: the Exodus (the escape of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt) and the ministry of Jesus Christ, culminating in his crucifixion and resurrection. Other mighty acts are recognised by the eye of faith: God's promise to Abraham, the victorious reign of King David, the exile of Judah to Babylon and the return from exile, the first Christian mission to the Gentiles. In these events God enters in person into history, calls a people to himself, establishes the beginning of his reign, his kingdom and power, on earth, wins decisive victory over the forces that oppose him. And many of the biblical writers also look forward to another, final mighty act of God, in which his rule over the world is fully established and his victory becomes complete. They use a variety of phrases to refer to this expected event: the day of the Lord, that day, the kingdom of God, the new Jerusalem, the coming of the Lord.

The next major theme of biblical theology is the Covenant. The mighty acts of God are covenant-making events. In them God has elected a people to be his own, established with them a compact of mutual faithfulness, and set forth the terms under which this compact is to be fulfilled. God takes the initiative in establishing covenant with a community, a people, not simply with separate individuals. But the covenant community is a community which itself gives meaning to the individual. Within the community, each individual is addressed directly by God, and so no totalitarian rule by any human monarch, no oppression of even the poorest and weakest member of the community is permitted.

I clearly must reject the Latin, forensic theories of the atonement. They do not cohere with the Quaker tradition: they were rejected by Fox, Barclay, and Penn. These theories also fail the ethical test. For example, they begin with the premise that God's justice must be satisfied. But their model of justice is retributive justice, not restorative justice. The aim of restorative justice is to repair the harms which have been done by persons to others or by groups in power, and to restore communities which have been damaged by unjust or hurtful acts. It contrasts with the more widely accepted retributive justice, which aims to punish individuals who have hurt other people.

In a chapter on the roots of restorative justice in the Christian tradition, Canadian authors Pierre Allard and Wayne Northey have argued 'that a Christian reading of the Hebrew Scriptures, the life and ministry of Jesus, and the overall witness of the New Testament, point to...a Restorative Justice model and practice in response to crime' (Allard and Northey 2001: 119–20). And yet the Christian tradition has strongly tended to endorse retributive justice as the proper response to crime (and sin). Allard and Northey quoted several times from a book by Timothy Gorringer, *God's Just Vengeance*, to show that Anselm's satisfaction theory of the atonement had a major influence on this shift to retributive justice: "'The penal consequences of this doctrine were grim indeed" [Gorringer 2002: 102]' (2001: 129).

Timothy J. Gorringer is an Anglican priest and professor of theology. In *God's Just Vengeance* he examined the assumptions which Anselm's theory of the atonement rested on: 'Two axioms are involved here: the first, that punishment must follow sin, and the second, that satisfaction may take the place of punishment' (Gorringer 2002: 94). These axioms were part of the basic structure of feudal society in the eleventh century. For Anselm, 'God's justice allows nothing but punishment as the recompense for sin. But this concern for justice is essentially a concern for the integrity of both the social order and the cosmic order which it mirrors' (2002: 95).

There are some differences between John Calvin's substitutionary theory of the atonement and Anselm's satisfaction theory: 'Where the restoration of order is central for Anselm, it is the vindication of the law...which matters for Calvin. For Anselm the background is feudal law and the church system of penance; for Calvin it is the criminal law' (Gorringer 2002: 139). The criminal law, in the newly emerging nation-states in Calvin's day, 'relied...on punitive justice' (2002: 128). But if social concepts underlay Calvin's atonement theology, his theology had in turn its own impact on social and legal attitudes: 'Wherever Calvinism spread, punitive sentencing followed' (2002: 140).

Forensic theories fail the ethical test in their underlying premises. J. Denny Weaver insightfully summed this up: 'Satisfaction atonement is based on an intrinsically violent assumption—restoring justice means punishment' (Weaver 2001: 201). These theories also have failed ethically in their practical impact on society.

Since George Fox's views were remarkably consistent with a Christus Victor view of the atonement, the presumption would be that a contemporary Quaker theory of the atonement would fit into that type. In his book, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, J.

Denny Weaver's 'narrative Christus Victor' model is just such a theory. It is worth careful consideration.

This model or 'motif...encompasses victory in both human historical and cosmic realms, as well as emphasising Jesus' life and ministry' (Weaver 2001: 22). Weaver cited the example of the seventy disciples whom Jesus sent out to proclaim the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. On their return they joyfully reported that they had even succeeded in driving out demons:

Their presentation of the reign of God involved a clash of competing powers. 'Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!' And Jesus replied, 'I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning' (Luke 10:17-18). According to Luke's language, in the people whom Jesus commissioned, the reign of God confronted and vanquished the reign of Satan. The teaching and the life of Jesus show that the objectives of the reign of God are not accomplished by violence (Weaver 2001: 35-36).

Denny Weaver surveyed a variety of texts to show

how the Gospel writers portray the mission of Jesus in terms of a visible manifestation of the reign of God, which confronts and poses an alternative to the powers of the world. This description of the teaching and life of Jesus from an earthly perspective puts the narrative within the framework of Christus Victor. Assuming that Jesus is of God and that the person of Jesus embodies the reign of God, this narrative pictures the reign of God in a confrontation or struggle with the reign of evil (Satan). In many ways the teaching and acts of Jesus pose the reign of God in conflict with the powers that oppose it. When Jesus was executed, the powers of evil enjoyed a momentary triumph—Jesus' very existence is removed. However, God raised Jesus from death, thereby revealing the reign of God as the ultimate power in the cosmos (Weaver 2001: 43).

Weaver insisted that this gospel narrative is an atonement narrative: 'In discussions of dogma, the classic questions of atonement concern the nature of sin and how Jesus' death saves humankind from that sin. Narrative Christus Victor accounts for these questions. It portrays sin as bondage to the forces of evil'. For Weaver, salvation—the outcome of atonement—'is to begin to be free from those evil forces, and to be transformed by the reign of God and to take on a life shaped—marked—by the story of Jesus, whose mission was to make visible the reign of God in our history' (Weaver 2001: 44).

The important thing for Weaver was that the central events of the atonement—crucifixion and resurrection—involved nonviolent action on the part of Jesus and of God:

When Jesus told Peter to put his sword away and then faced his accusers and confronted death without violence, Jesus was living out the way that the reign of God confronts evil. The resurrection of Jesus, God's act in history to overcome the ultimate enemy—death—puts God's stamp of approval on Jesus. Resurrection is God's testimony that in Jesus, the reign of God has entered into the world (Weaver 2001: 40).

Denny Weaver found evidence for narrative Christus Victor not only in the Gospels but also in the book of Revelation. He recognised that many of the symbols and images in that book were meant by the writer to stand for specific historical events and leaders in the first century CE. These images 'represent the institutions and

the sources of power and authority that are followed by those who do not acknowledge the rule of God' (Weaver 2001: 29). He went on to argue that these symbolic images concretely play out narrative Christus Victor themes: 'Confrontation between church and empire, between the earthly representatives of the reign of God and the rule of Satan. In each of these cases, however, the message is that the reign of God has *already* triumphed in the resurrection of Jesus' (2001: 31). In particular, we see in Revelation the close connection and parallel between a titanic struggle on the cosmic scene and concrete struggles in human history. What emerges in the book of Revelation

is the picture of the church as a social structure that poses an alternative to the social structure of the Greco-Roman empire. Each of these social entities solicits ultimate loyalty. The empire confronts and challenges Christians because they profess...loyalty to the resurrected Jesus rather than...the demands of the emperor... The symbolism of Revelation provides a cosmic dimension for this very earthly confrontation. This confrontation visible in Revelation constitutes the historical condition that is expressed in the atonement motif called narrative Christus Victor (Weaver 2001: 32).

Weaver pointed out clearly that, in spite of the warlike character of many of the symbols and images, the actual atonement theme comes out as an entirely nonviolent atonement:

The confrontation of church and empire depicted symbolically throughout Revelation is a nonviolent confrontation... Chapter 5 has both the lion and lamb as symbols of Christ, with the lion a symbol of victory and the slain lamb a symbol of the *means* of victory, namely death and resurrection. The figure of the lion appears only here in Revelation, while the slain and resurrected lamb continues as an enduring symbol throughout the book. Clearly the slain lamb indicates a nonviolent confrontation between reign of God and reign of evil, and a nonviolent victory via death and resurrection for the reign of God (Weaver 2001: 32).

Denny Weaver showed, further, that Christians and the Church take part along with God and Christ in the struggle against the forces of evil. Christians also share in the nonviolent character of this struggle:

Christians contribute to the victory of the slain lamb by their testimony. 'But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death' (Rev. 12:11). Victory through testimony is clearly a nonviolent means of victory—through death and witness... The supposed battle scenes are not really battles at all... The beast and the kings and their armies are defeated not by violence and military might. They are undone—defeated—by the Word of God... It is by proclamation of the Word, not by armies and military might, that God's judgment occurs (Weaver 2001: 32–33).

The narrative in Denny Weaver's narrative Christus Victor theology was not confined to the ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the actions of his Christian followers. It also included events in the previous history of the people of Israel: 'Jesus' confrontation of evil and his eventual victory through resurrection thus do not appear as completely novel events in the history of God's people. It is rather the continuation and culmination of a mission that began with the call of

Abraham' (Weaver 2001: 67), and continued through such events as the exodus of the Hebrew slaves from Egypt and the exile of the Jewish people in Babylonia.

Denny Weaver has spelled out a fully developed theory: a theory formulated not in the static ideas of Greek philosophy or of feudal or national law, but in a narrative form which better fits the dramatic style of the biblical story.

I find Denny Weaver's narrative Christus Victor to be a highly satisfactory theory of the atonement. In the first place, his understanding of God's power as noncoercive power underscores the Quaker (and Mennonite) testimony that power should always be exercised without the use of violence.

Aulén had hinted at the role of the faithful in the victorious atoning work of Christ; Denny Weaver made it loud and clear, in his own examination of narrative Christus Victor in the book of Revelation. The similarities between his exposition of Revelation and the use of that book in early Quaker Lamb's war writings are numerous and noteworthy (see Weaver 2001: 12-13; Yoder 1972: 244). His description of the role of Christians in the struggle remarkably echoes Edward Burrough's portrayal of the weapons in the Lamb's war:

Carnal Weapons, ...Prisons, ...Persecutions, these are not the Lamb's Weapons, but these are Antichrist's and the Dragon's Armour and Weapons, which he makes War by, against the Lamb and his Followers: ...But the Lamb's Weapons are Truth, Patience, Long-suffering, Meekness and down-right Sincerity of Heart and Tongue; and by these things shall Antichrist be slain, and these Weapons shall Conquer his kingdom (Burrough 1672: 626).

Weaver's theory also corresponds well with the findings of the biblical theology movement. Although he did not use biblical theology terminology, the events in Israel's history which he included were ones which we would call 'mighty acts of God'. The close link which he made between the ministry of Jesus and his crucifixion and resurrection also fits into the biblical theology framework. Our definition of the mighty acts of God as events in which God wins decisive victory over the forces of evil connects directly with Weaver's description of Christ's work as God's triumph over these forces, through a series of events in history, coming to a climax in the crucifixion and resurrection.

Quaker attorney Walter Long has charged that

Atonement doctrines...mirror (and provide justification for) an accommodation with human violence. All Christian atonement doctrines, ...whether they articulate the ultimate purpose of atonement as penal substitution or the rescue of humanity from the clutches of the devil to sin, ...present God as an agent of Jesus's death... They all see the events of history unfolding under the guidance of God and presume that, if God is in command of history, then God is responsible for the execution of Jesus (Long 2010: 12).

Weaver helps me to see that Long has overstated his case. Denny Weaver showed that, in the crucifixion and resurrection, God (through Jesus) won the victory through his nonviolent **response** to evil actions in history. The underlying issue, as I see it, is that God's command of history does not lie in **preordaining** events, but in **transforming** them, bringing good, even salvation, out of the depths of horrendous

evil. Going even beyond Weaver, Gregory Love has insightfully reminded us of the place of paradox in Christian doctrine:

The salvation brought by God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit's power is a mystery, and as such it often demands saying multiple things at once, things that are paradoxical, seemingly contradictory, or that at the very least retain a tension (Love 2010: 120).

The journey to Golgotha reflects God's *circumstantial will* for Jesus in a world that resists God's saving presence, and not God's *intentional will* in the sending of the Son... The cross both is, and is not, the will of God (Love 2010: 128-29, original emphasis).

In one respect I would like to see further development on Weaver's theory. In the biblical theology movement we understand a mighty act of God to be an event in which God takes the initiative in establishing or renewing covenant with a community, a people of God. Can we integrate the idea of God's covenant with us into a narrative Christus Victor atonement theology?

Larry Shelton's atonement theory in his *Cross and Covenant: Interpreting the Atonement for 21st Century Mission* focused on God's work of establishing and maintaining a new covenant with humanity through the mission of Jesus Christ. Like Denny Weaver, Shelton insisted that, in Christ's work of atonement, his crucifixion continues and completes his life and ministry: 'Not only Christ's death, but also his life, is a revelation of God's love that works to mediate and reconcile an alienated humanity back to himself' (Shelton 2006: 83). Christ's life, death, and resurrection form a continuous whole.

Larry Shelton clearly asserted 'the relational and narrative character of the "divine expectations" of the biblical covenant concept' (Shelton 2006: 4). He affirmed that 'the covenant theme establishes the Christian community in the history of the people of God' (2006: 99). These emphases are remarkably close to Weaver's centering in on **narrative** Christus Victor, as told in the story of the history of Israel, Jesus, and the Christian community.

Shelton made it clear that he built on ideas from the biblical theology movement. He footnoted quite a few references to Karl Barth, Bernhard Anderson, and G.E. Wright as he developed his own interpretation of the Bible. He was especially fond of quoting from Walther Eichrodt's two-volume *Theology of the Old Testament* (1961).

For Larry Shelton, atonement and reconciliation are all about interpersonal relationships within the human race and between us and God.

In implementing the healing of salvation, the Spirit brings together the humanity that was divided from itself and from God and forms the community of those in Christ. The nature of this reconciliation with God is interpersonal, as is the understanding of the incarnation and the role of divine love in the entire process of redemption (Shelton 2006: 171).

The problem Christ confronts in his sacrifice is one of broken relationships that need healing... His sacrifice is a passionate expression of his profound love for and identification with humanity (Shelton 2006: 141).

*In Christ's identification with humanity, the covenant is renewed and the loving family relationship with God is restored* (Shelton 2006: 121, original emphasis).

Sin is essentially a matter of broken relationships:

Sin is not a thing to be removed, but a brokenness of self that must be recreated and healed through union with Christ in resurrection. It is a brokenness of the personal bond of fellowship with the God who offers salvation (Shelton 2006: 123).

Christ in his atonement establishes the new covenant: a renewed community in which these broken relationships—among humans and with God—are healed:

The atonement originates in the character of God, whose nature is love. Love is God's holiness in relationship. Love, not wrath, initiates the atonement. Since love is an interpersonal reality, so is salvation. It is not an 'it' that God offers, but a relationship he enters with believers... Forgiveness is a loving action that takes priority over all other principles (Shelton 2006: 107).

Larry Shelton extended his covenant understanding of the atonement even beyond the bounds of community relationships among God and human beings:

This theology of God's covenanting atonement and its divine expectations answers the questions often raised by natural science: 'How do living things, including human beings, exist in relation to one another in their common habitat?' The New Testament expressions of covenant community allow, and indeed require, the healing power of the atonement to reach beyond relations between God and humans and humans with humans to an ecological reconciliation and renewal of all things (Col. [1:]15-20) (Shelton 2006: 99).

The whole natural creation is included in the covenant which Christ has brought into being!

Denny Weaver's narrative Christus Victor theory adds a more extended narrative emphasis to the earlier classic views of the atonement and develops them into a more complete and consistent theory. I am convinced that Weaver's theory also coheres significantly with Shelton's view of the atonement as initiating and maintaining the covenant relationship. To read both of these views in the context of a biblical theology movement framework adds a strong systematic framework to this coherence. This framework brings in the understanding that the mighty acts of God are events in which God takes the initiative in forming the covenant with humans and establishing and upholding the covenant community. The victory over the forces of evil, which God gains (non-violently!) in his acts in history, results in the healing of all broken relationships and the creation of a new, loving community bond. This growing, healing bond is universal in its thrust. Its ultimate goal is *anakephalaiôsthai ta panta* (Eph. 1:10)—'to gather up all things in...Christ' (NRSV), 'bring everything together under Christ, as head' (NJB), 'all...might be brought into a unity in Christ' (NEB).

On turning my attention back to George Fox, I have discovered some interesting connections. 'Covenant' is one of the words Fox used frequently. Using a word search, I found that he at least once brought together the terms 'covenant' and 'atonement':

The new and second covenant is dedicated with the blood, the life of Christ Jesus, which is the alone atonement unto God, by which all his people are washed, sanctified, cleansed, and redeemed to God; so that their faith and testimony stands in the blood of



the Lamb, the life of Christ Jesus, foreordained before the world was, a Lamb without blemish, guile, spot, or sin, which cleanses from all spots and sin, and washes and makes clean the garments (Fox 1990b: V, 365).

In a brief tract titled 'Concerning Christ Jesus the Covenant of God', Fox also connected the idea of the covenant with a clear Christus Victor theme!

Christ Jesus, the covenant of God with all men, is peace, and life, and light, and salvation to the ends of the earth, which is our testimony to all men upon the earth, and is not to destroy men's lives, but to save them, which covenant destroyeth the devil and his works, who is the author of all murder, plots, and treachery, betrayers of which is of the devil's kingdom, out of the truth and innocency, and the covenant of light and life, which we have with God, and all people, which separates from sin and evil, and destroys it, and in that is our peace (Fox 1990b: IV, 267).

When Shelton emphasised God's love in the process of redemption and Christ's profound love for humanity, he was echoing the assurances which George Fox repeatedly gave to Friends in his letters:

The God of power and love keep all Friends in power, in love, that there be...pure refreshings in the unlimited love of God (Fox 1990a: 4).

Dear Friends, whom deaths, bonds nor the outward creature can separate from the Love of God in Christ Jesus, live in Peace and Love with one another (Fox 1990a: 183).

My desire is, that all Friends may prize the Mercies of the Lord, and live in humility, in his Power that is over all (Fox 1990a: 468).

Fox had even tied God's love to the victory which was won in Christ's atonement: 'Live and walk in the Lamb which has the Victory... In the Love of God all dwell... And this Love will enable you to bear all things whatever wicked men can do unto you' (Fox 1990a: 351).

George Fox was committed to a Christus Victor way of viewing the work of Christ. In their writings about the Lamb's war, Fox, Edward Burrough, and James Nayler came up with a powerful and original extension of that view. Fox, William Penn, and Robert Barclay realised that at least one major part of the substitutionary theory of the atonement was incompatible with the Quaker understanding of Christian faith and life. At the very least, these seventeenth-century Friends—especially George Fox—strikingly foreshadowed the combination of narrative Christus Victor theory with aspects of a covenant theory of the atonement, that I am here proposing in outline form.

## NOTES

1. See Wright 1952: 28; Anderson 1957: 12; Rylaarsdam 1957; Barth 1968: 17; Anderson 1975: 13-14.

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