

Keeping Salvation Ethical

A Review Essay

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J. Denny Weaver, *Keeping Salvation Ethical: Mennonite Atonement Theology in the Late Nineteenth Century. Studies in Mennonite and Anabaptist History*. Vol. 35. (Scottsdale, PA and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1997). 280 pp. US \$19.99, Can \$28.50.

This book is number 35 in the series *Studies in Anabaptist and Mennonite History*. Its subject is the theology of atonement as articulated by late nineteenth century Mennonite leaders and writers. However, the agenda of the author is not so much the theology of his eight subjects as the present-day Mennonite enterprise of theologizing. The study is meant to keep us on the right track which is to keep salvation ethical.

Weaver begins with a history of the doctrine of the atonement and seeks to demonstrate that the Christus Victor theory, held by the church in the pre-Constantinian centuries, yielded after the sixth century to the satisfaction or substitutionary theories. The accompanying theme is that as this change took place, the church increasingly slid into the practice of deriving its ethics from the culture in which it lived rather than from Jesus himself. In this setting also arose the view of individualized salvation, ultimately most strongly represented in the evangelical Christianity of America in the nineteenth century and beyond.

That done, Weaver proceeds to the investigation of his eight subjects, all Mennonite and Amish leaders in North America in the second half of the nineteenth century. They are Jacob Stauffer (Old Order Mennonite), David Beiler (Old Order Amish), Gerhard Wiebe (Berghal Mennonite), Cornelius H. Wedel (General Conference Mennonite), Johannes Moser (Swiss Mennonite), John M. Brenneman (Mennonite General Conference), John Holdeman (Church of God in Christ, Mennonite), and Heinrich Egly (Defenceless Mennonite). He discusses their world views, the context of their theology of atonement, and then sketches out what specifically they said about it.

The heart of Weaver's work is this study of his eight subjects. His work is nuanced and carefully done, and while I have not read the writings Weaver uses as the bases of his conclusions, those conclusions bear the mark of authenticity. He picked his subjects from across the Mennonite and Amish spectrum (a notable omission are the Mennonite Brethren) and shows how similar they were in their understanding of Christian faith. Chapters 3-5 are an original contribution to the story of Mennonites in North America. The photographs of the subjects and their homes and churches are a welcome and significant feature of the book.

Weaver goes to considerable lengths to place the view of atonement held by his subjects in the broader context, both of the rest of their thought and of the North American religious and cultural milieu. The overall conclusion is that all the subjects held to a version of the satisfaction theory of the atonement as developed by Anselm of Canterbury in the twelfth century and adopted by the Reformers and their followers. This was combined with a believers' church ecclesiology and an unwavering commitment to traditional Mennonite biblical nonresistance. Weaver argues that they modified classic atonement theology by their lived faith. Unfortunately, he has not demonstrated this. The most one can say is that consciously or unconsciously they worked out a *modus vivendi* for holding them together. His claim that they understood Jesus in terms of his story in the Gospels rather than in terms of atonement theology can also not be substantiated.

Weaver correctly states that the Christus Victor Metaphor of the atonement dominated in the early centuries of Christianity. His explanation for the rise of Anselm's satisfaction theory is also accurate. It is, however, not accurate to say as he does on page 36 that the Christus Victor theory faded away gradually after the sixth century. It was still alive and well at the time of Anselm (eleventh century) and given expression by Rupert of Deutz and Peter Damian, both Anselm's contemporaries, and others. Similarly, the iconography of the church demonstrates this. Not only that, but the theme of Christ as victor in the resurrection was celebrated during these times in poetry and liturgy. Furthermore, Anselm was not attempting to replace the Christus Victor metaphor but to explain *how* the release of humankind from the slavery of sin was accomplished. Moreover, there is no suggestion in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo* that the atonement was the satisfaction of "the honor of an offended God" as Weaver asserts. Anselm should not be charged

with what the Protestant scholastics later did with his work. That work is far too sophisticated and rich to be reduced to slogans for a modern argument. A consequence of Anselm's work was that Jesus came to be seen more as victim than as victor, as subsequent Christian iconography clearly shows.

The author "protesteth too much" by constructing a straight line from Anselm through the Reformers to nineteenth century American evangelicals and Mennonites. At one point he even writes: "Although Beiler used biblical language, he seemed to assume here the Anselmian idea of Jesus being punished in place of sinful humanity" (p. 192. See also pp. 204 and 212). This is quite ingenuous; it is as much as to say that Paul, writing Romans 3:25 and Galatians 3:13 was an Anselmian, or that sundry Anabaptists were disciples of Anselm. The Mennonite leaders used the terms satisfaction, substitution, penalty, redemption, and ransom because they found them in the New Testament. They were not stating opinions of their own; their imaginations were informed by the Scriptures of both Testaments which, for all of them except C.H. Wedel, was virtually their only text book. Their writings tended to be Scripture passages strung together, and one needs to go no further than that to explain what they said about atonement. As the author says quite correctly, the Mennonite use of substitution or satisfaction language was non-polemical and unselfconscious. That these metaphors did not represent a distinctly Mennonite view of atonement is true; they are merely biblical.

A major theme of the book is that the adoption of the satisfaction theory by the Christian church in the Middle Ages led to the separation of theology and ethics. One simply cannot let that pass. In the first place, by that rule the New Testament, from which satisfaction (expiation), substitution, and ransom come, stands condemned. Look, for example, at I Peter 2:24 where the substitution theory and ethics are immediately linked. Nor do the facts of Christian history bear out that claim. The example of Jesus for living was always accepted in the church despite the distinction between precepts and counsels. The great preachers of the Middle Ages, mostly Dominicans, preached from the Gospels and urged their listeners to follow Jesus' example. The dissenting movements from the twelfth century to the sixteenth, including Anabaptists in particular, appealed to the example of Jesus' poverty, humility, and powerlessness as the proper model for the church, and all this while Anselmian theory dominated the discussion of atonement. And what about the Calvinist-Puritan or the Pietist concern with ethics and a "lived faith," tightly linked or comfortably coexisting with a much stronger version of the satisfaction theory than Anselm's?

It is easy to thread a path through history in the conviction that it is the only one that leads to the truth. But history is not a single forward line of cause and effect; it goes, as it were, forward, backward and sideways. It is a weave rather than a single thread. It is complex and more often than not defies our attempts definitively and objectively to sort out cause and effect.

It appears to me that there is a serious problem with the conclusion on page 225. The theological villains throughout have been the satisfaction theory of

atonement, referred to as an abstract belief, and the crisis conversion of American evangelism. Yet both of these are solidly biblical. The conclusion to be drawn from Weaver's analysis of the eight subjects, contrary to his stated conclusion, is that satisfaction theory of atonement and what he calls "lived faith" can in fact be held together quite well as they were by all his subjects. He himself says that they linked "salvation theology (soteriology) [in each case substitutionary or satisfaction theory of atonement] with ethics." That there may be a problem with the ethical consequences of satisfaction theory is readily granted. But that is true of all other theories as well, including Christus Victor, which helped the church link a victorious emperor with the victorious God-Man. Whenever a biblical metaphor is used as a theological proposition, such results are bound to follow.

The problem is that Weaver virtually coalesces ethics with nonresistance, and that is his single, forward-moving ethical thread. That done and accepted, the whole patterns he presents makes sense. But then he also owes us a description of how nonresistance includes, for instance, Jesus' censure of wealth and hypocrisy. And what about modern conspicuous consumption and the wasting of our physical environment, the venality and mendacity in high and low places on corporation and government, and the ethics of sexuality? To raise these questions is not to minimize nonresistance. It is to say that the author has more careful work to do. I agree that the renunciation of coercive and dominating power is at the heart of the atonement. But I cannot agree with the simplistic conclusion that because most Christians have not been able to adopt such a stance they are deriving their ethics from the culture. The church did not sanction just any war, but only the just war, and that just war, as conceived by Constantine and Augustine, was a holy war, and therefore within the framework of Christian ethics as then understood.

In the very first sentence of the book the author indicts his faith community with not being comfortable with the discussion of what they believed to be systematic theology before 1980. In light of that it is instructive to look at the Dordrecht Confession of 1632, the document on which most subsequent Mennonite confessional statements are based. A cursory examination will show that it contains every major affirmation of the Nicene Creed in articles 1, 4, 7, 8, and 18. Interspersed, systematically, are the issues of church order especially important to Mennonites, and which were derived directly as implications from the major articles of faith. This is unquestionably systematic theology even if the rules of church order are part of it. Of course, it is not surprising that there should be this agreement, since both Nicaea and Dordrecht are based on Scripture. There were also systematic theological thinkers among sixteenth century Anabaptists: we know their names and we can read what they wrote, Hans Denck, Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, Menno Simons, Dirk Philips, and others. To hear that this systematic thinking began only "comfortably" in the 1980s is totally puzzling and totally wrong.

All that said, I agree with the author that certain explications of the satisfaction theory of atonement when pushed too far can be "unchristian" and a threat to ethics based on the mercy and loving kindness of God, and plenty of examples could be cited. He has not made the case that Anselm is one of them. I also agree that the Christus Victor metaphor is very powerful. Perhaps it is becoming more useful again because of the decline of Christendom, the growing over-againstness of church and secular society, and the reappearance of the chaos monsters of Revelation 13.

Weaver would have been on relatively safe ground if he had limited himself to the study of his eight subjects, which is an interesting and solid contribution to Mennonite scholarship. His real agenda got him into historical and theological quicksand. That is regrettable from a man who is so totally dedicated to the welfare of his people.