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Violence in Christian Theology.(Critical Essay)

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It is not difficult to see why discussion of the relationship of violence and Christianity is controversial. [1] When asked whether Christianity supports violence and is a violent religion, does one answer "Of course -- look at the crusades, the multiple blessings of wars, warrior popes, support for capital punishment, corporal punishment under the guise of 'spare the rod and spoil the child,' justifications of slavery, world-wide colonialism in the name of conversion to Christianity, the systemic violence of women subjected to men, and more"? Or does one respond, "Of course not -- look at Jesus, the beginning point of Christian faith, who is worshiped as 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace' (Isa. 9:6); whose Sermon on the Mount taught nonviolence and love of enemies; who faced his accusers nonviolently and then died a nonviolent death; whose nonviolent teaching inspired the first centuries of pacifist Christian history and was subsequently preserved in the justifiable war d octrine that declares all war as sin even when declaring it occasionally a necessary evil, and in the prohibition of fighting by monastics and clergy as well as in a persistent tradition of Christian pacifism"? But these answers are apparently contradictory. Does one of them trump the other? Or might there be yet another answer?

This essay addresses the relationship between violence and Christianity by examining aspects of Christian theology. Specifically, it examines violence and assumptions of violence in the classic formulations of the central Christian doctrines of atonement and Christology. While this analysis finds classic theology in large part guilty of accommodating and supporting violence, the essay also points to a specifically nonviolent Christian answer.

I am using broad definitions of the terms "violence" and "nonviolence." "Violence" means harm or damage, which obviously includes the direct violence of killing -- in war, capital punishment, murder -- but also covers the range of forms of systemic violence such as poverty, racism, and sexism. "Nonviolence" also covers a spectrum of attitudes and actions, from the classic Mennonite idea of passive nonresistance through active nonviolence and nonviolent resistance that would include various kinds of social action, confrontations and posing of alternatives that do not do bodily harm or injury.

Atonement Motifs

The standard account of the history of doctrine lists three families of atonement theories or images. The first round of observations about the violent elements of these atonement images will emerge from the description of their development and their historical relationship to each other.

Christus Victor, the predominant image of the early church, existed in two forms, each of which involved the three elements of God, the devil or Satan, and sinful humankind. In the ransom version of Christus Victor, the devil held the souls of humankind captive. In a seemingly contractual agreement, God handed Jesus over to Satan as a ransom payment to secure the release of captive souls. The devil killed Jesus, in an apparent victory for the forces of evil. The devil is deceived, however. In raising Jesus from the dead, God triumphed over the devil, and the souls of humanity were freed from his clutches. This victory through resurrection provides the name Christus Victor or Christ the Victor.

A second version of Christus Victor pictured the conflict between Satan and God as a cosmic battle. In this struggle, God's son was killed, but the resurrection then constituted the victory of God over the forces of evil, and definitively identified God as the ruler of the universe. This cosmic battle imagery constitutes another Christus Victor atonement image.

Satisfaction atonement has been the predominant atonement image of the present time as well as for much of the past millennium. It suffices for present purposes to sketch two versions of satisfaction atonement. One reflects the view of Anselm of Canterbury. In 1098 he published Cur Deus Homo, which constitutes the first full articulation of satisfaction atonement. Anselm wrote that Jesus' death was necessary in order to satisfy the offended honor of God. Human sin had offended God's honor and thus had upset divine order in the universe. The death of Jesus as the God-man was then necessary in order to satisfy God's honor and restore the order of the universe.

A change in this image of satisfaction occurred with the Protestant Reformers. For them, Jesus' death satisfied the divine law's requirement that sin be punished. Thus with his death, Jesus submitted to and bore the punishment that was really due to us -- humankind -- as sinners. Jesus was punished in our place. Jesus substituted himself for us, and died a penal substitutionary death.

The third atonement image is moral influence. In this image, the death of Jesus is a loving act of God aimed toward us. God the Father shows love to us sinners by giving us his most precious possession, his Son, to die for us.

Deleting the Devil from Atonement

These theories did not develop as isolated entities. Each emerged as a response to a previous one. In the first book of Cur Deus Homo, Anselm specifically rejected the idea that Jesus' death was a ransom payment to the devil. Satan has no contractual rights that would obligate God to make such a payment. And even though humankind deserves punishment, Satan has no right to inflict that punishment. These considerations make it unworthy of God to deal with Satan via a ransom. Thus Anselm deleted the devil from the salvation equation. [2] Rather than seeing human beings as captive to the devil, Anselm made them directly responsible to God. Humans sinned against God; sin offended the honor of God, and thus threatened order in the universe. The death of Jesus served to restore God's honor and thus restore order in the universe.

Abelard's school followed Anselm in rejecting the idea of Jesus' death as a ransom payment to the devil. But Abelard also rejected the idea of Jesus' death as a payment to God. It made God seem vengeful and judgmental. Instead, Abelard saw the death of Jesus aimed not at God but at sinful humankind. It was a loving act of God designed to get the attention of sinners, and reveal the love of God for sinners while they were yet sinners. Its impact on the psychological or moral character of humankind identifies this view as the moral influence theory of atonement.

Thus historical relationships exist among these atonement theories. Anselm's satisfaction motif succeeded ransom, and was subsequently modified by majority Protestantism. Abelard's moral theory posed an alternative to Anselm's satisfaction theory while retaining Anselm's critique of the ransom motif.

Each of these images attempts to explain why "Jesus died for us." But recalling the object or "target" of the death of Jesus makes clear that these images suggest entirely different approaches to understanding the death of Jesus. For ransom and cosmic battle motifs the death of Jesus has the devil as its object. For Anselm, it is aimed at God's honor, while for penal substitution, the object is God's law. Finally, for moral influence, the death of Jesus targets "us," sinful humankind, as its objects.

Two More Questions

The description of the history of atonement thus far has followed the standard account. Two questions cast additional light on these images and bring to the fore the violent elements they contain.

First, a nuance appears when we shift from asking about the object of the death of Jesus to inquire, Who or what needs the death of Jesus? For the ransom theory, one might say that the devil clearly needs the death--it fulfills God's part of the bargain when the devil releases the souls of humankind. For the cosmic battle image, the question makes little sense. For the satisfaction theories, it is God's honor or God's law that needs the death. Without it, the debt to God's honor remains unpaid or unsatisfied, or the penalty required by God's law remains unmet. Finally, for the moral theory, one might say that "we" -- sinners -- need the death since that is what enables us to perceive the Father's love shown for and to us.

A second question shifts the nuance again and produces a much more controversial answer. Observe what happens when one asks, Who arranges for or is responsible for the death of Jesus? Or put most crassly, Who ultimately killed Jesus?

With the two forms of Christus Victor, it is obvious that the devil killed Jesus. But God the Father certainly does not look good-handing the Son over for death as a ransom payment to purchase freedom for God's other children, or as a debt payment to Satan, who possesses rights in a contractual arrangement with God. One can easily sense Anselm's distaste for this motif.

But the situation is not ameliorated when one poses the question for satisfaction and moral theories. Satisfaction atonement pictures a debt owed to God's honor. God's honor not only needs the death. God also arranges for Jesus to die to pay the debt to God's honor. It really looks as though God has Jesus killed in order to pay the debt to God's honor. Here is where we very pointedly see the result of Anselm's deletion of the devil from the three-cornered relationship involving the devil, sinners, and God. With Satan deleted, remaining in the equation are God and the sinners who have offended God. But these sinful human beings cannot save themselves by repaying God themselves. Thus it is merely an extension of the interior logic of Anselm's own move that leads to the conclusion that God is the only one left to orchestrate the death of Jesus in order to pay the debt owed to God's honor. [3] In penal substitution, Jesus is punished by death, in place of killing us. Thus God's law receives the necessary death t hat it demands for justice. But again, since sinners cannot pay their own debt, God is the one who arranged to provide Jesus' death as the means to satisfy the divine law.

One might ask, Weren't the devil or the mob or the Romans responsible for killing Jesus? But answering "yes" to that question within the framework of satisfaction atonement points to a strange juxtaposition or non sequitur. Jesus, who is innocent and who does the will of God, becomes sin, subject to punishment. And the evil powers who oppose the reign of God by killing Jesus -- whether the devil, the mob, or the Romans -- are the ones who are actually doing the will of God, by killing or punishing Jesus to provide the payment that God's honor or God's law demands. The strange implication is that both Jesus and those who kill Jesus would be carrying out the will of God. In fact, asserting that both claims are true is nonsense. Avoiding the implications of such mutually contradictory claims by cloaking it in a category such as mystery, or by claiming that the acts of God are too big for our categories to contain, renders meaningless any attempt to use theology to express Christian faith.

The moral theory fares no better. Remember that while Abelard rejected the idea that Jesus' death was a payment directed toward God's honor, Abelard agreed with Anselm in removing the devil from the equation. The result is an atonement motif in which the Father has one of his children -- the Son -- killed in order to show love to the rest of the Father's children, namely to us sinners.

These observations about the implied role for God the Father in satisfaction and moral atonement motifs help explain why a number of feminist and womanist writers have claimed that atonement theology presents an image of divine child abuse. [4] While none of the classic motifs escapes, the sharpest feminist and womanist critique falls on satisfaction atonement. The Father arranges the death of one of his children for the benefit of the rest of God's children.

I cannot fault the feminists and womanists who call these atonement motifs an image of divine child abuse. The two questions (Who needs the death of Jesus? Who authors or arranges the death of Jesus?) reveal some problematic dimensions of traditional atonement theology. This observation is particularly true for satisfaction and moral theories, which have occupied most atonement discussions until quite recently. And one of the most important points to remember is that those observations are not the result of feminists or pacifists just being radical. Most fundamentally, the observations about the role of God in satisfaction and moral atonement motifs result from drawing out the implications of Anselm's own move to delete the devil from the atonement equation.

The conclusion from our first round of observations about classic atonement doctrine is that they portray an image of God as either divine avenger or punisher and/or as a child abuser, one who arranges the death of one child for the benefit of the others. Does it surprise that through the centuries, folks following a God of this stripe, where violence belongs intrinsically to the divine working, might end up justifying violence, under a variety of divinely anchored claims and images?

Retribution in Atonement

The first round of analysis worked on implications drawn from Anselm's deletion of the devil from the atonement equation. This section follows a quite different route to similar conclusions.

The various versions of satisfaction atonement function with the assumption that doing justice or righting wrongs depends on retribution. Sin creates imbalance. Satisfaction atonement assumes that the imbalance is righted or balanced by the punishment of death.

One contemporary version and one historic version of this assumption make clear its presence in satisfaction atonement. The criminal justice system of the United States operates on the principle of retribution. This system operates under the assumption that doing justice means to inflict punishment, which is understood as violence. The assumption is that small crimes require small penalties, while a big crime requires a big penalty. The biggest punishment, namely death, is reserved for the most heinous crimes. The assumption that doing justice is equated with punishment appears in the public disapproval when what is perceived as a big misdeed receives only a "wrist tap" as punishment. With an apparent imbalance between deed and punishment, it seems that justice was not done. The assumption of retributive justice -- that doing justice means meting out punishment -- is virtually universal among North Americans and throughout much of the world. [5]

The assumption that doing justice means to punish underlies satisfaction atonement, and in particular the image of penal substitutionary atonement. This image assumes the necessity of punishment, with innocent Jesus punished in our place. As our substitute, Jesus bore the punishment we deserve.

The motif of Jesus as the substitute object of punishment, which assumes the principle of retribution, is the particular image that feminists and womanists have found very offensive. It portrays God as the chief exacter of retribution. God punishes -- abuses -- one of God's children for the sake of the others. And the Jesus of this motif models passive submission to innocent and unjust suffering for the sake of others.

The contemporary assumption of retributive justice has a medieval counterpart in the feudal system. I follow R. W Southern's description of the feudal system and how Anseim's image reflects his feudal world view. [6] The feudal world was hierarchical. A lord at the top held the hierarchy together. Stability of the system depended on maintaining the honor of the lord at the top of the hierarchy. An offense against the lord's honor incurred a debt that threatened his authority and thus the stability of the system. In order to restore honor and stability, the debt had to be repaid. Inability to collect the debt challenged the honor and authority of the lord.

A modern equivalent might be a teacher who is sassed by her student. Her authority as teacher is threatened if she cannot enact punishment on the disrespectful student. The object of dealing with the student is not punishment per se. It is rather that some kind of compensation for the offense is necessary in order to maintain the integrity and stability of the teacher's authority in her classroom. Or perhaps the perceived sense that stability of the social system demands retribution is like a governor who refuses to pardon an inmate on death row. In the governor's perception, pardoning a death-row inmate would threaten the integrity of the criminal justice system. If one who has violated the law is pardoned, it appears that the system itself is threatened. Again here, one sees punishment as the means to maintain the integrity and stability of the system.

It not difficult to see that Anselm's image of the atoning death of Jesus reflects the feudal world view. Human sin has brought imbalance and disharmony into the universe. The restoration of harmony, order and balance requires a payment to satisfy the offended honor of God. Anseim understood Jesus' death as the debt payment that satisfied the honor of God, and thus restored balance and order in the universe. The logic of satisfaction atonement can be understood with all the feudal imagery removed from Anselm's argument. As was previously noted, for example, the modern criminal justice system constitutes an arena that assumes and models retribution. There is thus no need to dispute Southern's conclusion that feudal society supplies the motif that Anselm elevated to an ultimate image of the way that God maintains order in the universe. [7] Maintaining order in the universe depends on maintaining the honor of God, which necessitates a debt payment -- the death of Jesus -- to cover the offense to God's honor tha t was enacted by human sin.

Although Anseim's understanding of satisfaction atonement differs significantly from penal substitutionary atonement, each assumes some form of the idea of retribution. Whereas penal substitution pictures retribution in terms of punishment exacted by divine law, for Anselm it was the offended honor of God that required retribution in the form of the payment of death.

Anseim's satisfaction atonement clearly differs from the penal substitutionary image, in which God punishes Jesus as a substitute for punishing sinful humankind. One recent strategy for defending satisfaction atonement makes a great deal of this difference. The first point of this defense is to acknowledge that feminists and womanists are correct that the images of God and Jesus in penal substitutionary atonement are unhealthy for persons in abusive and oppressive conditions, namely a Father God who punishes an innocent Son, and a Jesus who passively submits to his Father's abuse. The second point is to claim that the image of penal substitution is not true satisfaction atonement as articulated by Anselm. Thus, the would-be defender of satisfaction atonement blames early Protestant reformers for the unhealthy images, and appeals for the true satisfaction motif to the medieval Anselm, where we do not have an angry God who punishes, but rather an image concerned with a defense of God's honor. [8] This God seem s not so concerned about Godself as about addressing the disorder and disharmony in the universe produced by human sin. In this view, the argument goes, the death of Jesus is not about having Jesus bear punishment actually merited by human beings, but about restoring order and harmony in the universe.

While clear differences do distinguish these two versions of satisfaction atonement, appealing to Anselm does not absolve satisfaction atonement of its inherent violence. To illustrate that point, visualize atonement in terms of a debt payment to God's honor, and consider again the questions posed earlier.

What is the object of the death of Jesus? The answer is not God but rather the honor of God. However, can God's honor exist apart from God? I think not. And it is clearly evident that although this image does not picture the death of Jesus in terms of punishment, the death of Jesus is still directed Godward, and needs to be directed Godward. If it is not directed Godward, then nothing salvific has happened. Then, Who orchestrates or arranges the scenario that produces the Godward-directed death of Jesus that pays the debt to God's honor? The devil is not allowed as an answer since Anseim removed him from the equation. And in any case, putting the devil in charge would align his action with the will of God, which constitutes a logical impossibility. Further, it cannot be sinful human beings who arrange the scenario - if it were, they would be saving themselves. Thus the only remaining answer is that it is God who has arranged the scenario that produced the Godward-directed death of Jesus in order to repay the honor of God and restore order in the universe. The answers to these questions make clear that just as surely as does penal substitution, the image of payment of a debt to God's honor is a scenario in which God is left as the organizer of Jesus' death. God is the only one who can arrange salvation, who arranged the plan by which the Son pays the penalty of death that results in the salvation of sinful humankind. And further, the assumption underlying this atonement motif is that doing justice or righting wrong depends on the violence of punishment.

Although Anselm uses different language from penal substitution, his motif of Jesus' death as a payment to God's honor has the same assumption of retributive violence and the same implication that God killed Jesus as are present in the penal substitution version of satisfaction atonement. Anselm's language merely camouflages this violence. Claiming that Anselm's language avoids the intrinsic violence of satisfaction atonement is like arguing that capital punishment is not about killing people, but rather about "doing justice" or "upholding the law." The conclusion is inescapable that any and all versions of satisfaction atonement, regardless of their packaging, assume the violence of retribution or justice based on punishment, and depend on God-induced and God-directed violence.

Satisfaction atonement accommodates violence in a third way. It structures the relationship between humankind and God in terms of an ahistorical, abstract legal formula. Thus it concerns a relationship that is outside of human history. Further, when visualizing the birth, life and teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus, quite obviously satisfaction atonement actually needs or uses only the death of Jesus. These elements--positing a transaction outside of history and involving only the death of Jesus--make satisfaction atonement an image that (with one exception treated below) implies little or nothing about ethics, and contains nothing that would challenge injustice in the social order. It is an a-ethical atonement image--it projects an understanding of salvation that is separated from ethics. That is, salvation in satisfaction atonement does not envision a change of status in history or in life on earth; rather it envisions a change in one's status outside of or beyond this life. This a-ethical orientat ion makes it quite compatible with exercise of the sword, or with accommodation of slavery and racism. And as will be explained shortly, it actually contributes to one kind of violence in history.

The particular significance of these observations about the ahistorical and a-ethical dimensions of satisfaction atonement appears when they are considered against the backdrop of the changes in the church that are symbolized by emperor Constantine. These changes began already in the second century and extended through several centuries in evolutionary fashion. The end result of this evolution was that the church ceased being perceived as a dissident minority group and came to identify with the social order and make use of and express itself through the institutions of the social order. Rather than posing a contrast or a challenge to the social order, church officials could now use imperial structures as allies if political authorities sided with the particular officials on the issue in question. Of course they opposed them when the political authorities disagreed with churchly officials. There came to be a marked change in the status of the church. No longer was it a minority, oppressed structure. With empe rors and lesser political officials now taking sides in theological disputes and backing the decrees of church councils, the church came to encompass the social order as a whole. A kind of culmination was reached when Emperor Theodosius made the results of the Council of Constantinople the official theology of the empire. It is the situation that is anachronistically called a "Christian society." Among other things, the exercise of the sword can represent the change in the status of the church from a contrast to an accommodation of the social order. Whereas before, Christians did not wield the sword and pagans did, now Christians wielded the sword in the name of Christ. Rather than defining what Christians did on the basis of what Jesus said or did, the operative norm of behavior for Christians became what was good or necessary to preserve "Christian society." And in determining what was good for society, the emperor rather than Jesus became the test case. [9]

I suggest that satisfaction atonement reflects the church after Constantine that had accommodated the sword rather than the early church, which was primarily a pacifist church. Its abstract, ahistorical, a-ethical formula permits one to claim Jesus' saving work while wielding the sword that Jesus had forbidden. Similarly, James Cone, founder of the black theology movement, notes how the abstract formulas allowed slave owners to preach a salvation to slaves that preserved intact the master-slave relationship. [10] In other words, stated generally, satisfaction atonement separates salvation from ethics. In contrast, the atonement motif presented in what follows both reflects the nonviolence of Jesus and understands ethics as an integral dimension of salvation.

To this point, we have observed three levels of exhibiting or accommodating violence in satisfaction atonement. First, removing the devil from the atonement equation, as did Anselm and Abelard, leaves an image of God who saves by violence, and of an innocent Son who passively submits to that violence. That is, its image assumes God-orchestrated and God-directed violence. Second, satisfaction atonement assumes the violence of retribution. Finally, its abstract, ahistorical character does not challenge and in fact accommodates violence and violent practices in the social order. The moral theory and ransom theory display other dimensions of violence--different versions of the Father who arranges the death of the Son for the sake of the Father's other children.

Christology

The problem of violence accommodation in Christian theology is not ameliorated when we move from atonement to consider classic Christology. The formulas from the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and the Cappadocian Fathers' trinitarian terminology constitute the foundation of classic orthodoxy. These abstract formulas concern Jesus' ontology, and compare it to the ontology of God and of humankind. However, like the ahistorical and a-ethical formula of satisfaction atonement, the abstract, philosophical formulas of Nicaea, Chalcedon, and the Cappadocians say nothing about the life and teaching of Jesus. In other words, these formulas have separated theology from ethics. And they enable one to claim Jesus and to profess a Christian faith that says nothing about such issues as slavery or use of the sword. These formulas accommodate violence. Like satisfaction atonement, they reflect the church symbolized by Constantine that had undergone an evolutionary process of shifting the reference point for ethics from Je sus to the emperor. [11]

It is not as though the christological and trinitarian formulas are false in what they claim. For example, if in asking about the relationship of the Jesus of the New Testament to the God of Israel, one wants the answer in terms of fourth-century Greek ontological categories and a fourth-century world view, then Nicaea is probably the best answer. Nor do the christological formulas actively advocate violence. They do not. But neither do these formulas challenge violence, and their a-ethical character has long allowed the accommodation of violence by those who understood the formulas as the foundation of Christian faith.

Specific Applications

To this point, the argument has brought to the fore the intrinsically violent elements of classic atonement and christological formulas. The abstract, ahistorical formulas, whether of atonement or christology, do not challenge violence, which means that they accommodate it for Christians. This accommodation applies both to overt violence (exercised in war and in capital punishment) and to systemic violence (such as racism, sexism, and poverty). In a sense, all other discussions of violence accommodation and modeling provide specific instances of this claim.

The atonement formulas, and in particular the satisfaction motif, encompass the violent imagery of retribution. And asking who authors and who requires or receives the violence of retribution exposes the fact that Anselm's deletion of the devil leaves God as the only one who can direct the death of Jesus and who needs the death in satisfaction of offended honor. Eliminating Satan from the equation and subsequently making sinful human beings responsible directly to God exposes the way that God both arranges the retribution and is the recipient of Jesus' death thus produced.

If Anselm's satisfaction atonement reflected a cosmic image of feudal assumptions, in the modern world satisfaction atonement appears to project into the cosmic realm the assumption of the criminal justice system that justice depends on retributive violence, with the death penalty as the ultimate punishment. Focusing on the violence of retribution in satisfaction atonement brings to the fore the issue of the image or role of God. The logic of satisfaction atonement makes God the chief avenger or the chief punisher. In its worst case, as previously alluded to, it makes God a child abuser. This vengeful image of God led Abelard to reject the idea that Jesus' death was a payment to God's honor. However, the moral influence theory still leaves God the Father offering the Son's death to sinners as the example of Fatherly love. And classic Christus Victor has the Father hand over the Son as a ransom payment.

Some commentators have made a virtue of the parallel assumption of retributive violence in satisfaction atonement and in the criminal justice system. Because God has already accomplished the ultimate punishment in Jesus' death, it is argued, then our system of criminal justice need not focus on punishment and can shift its efforts to restoration and rehabilitation. [12] While I fully support elimination of the death penalty and shifting from retribution to restoration as the operative motif for the criminal justice system, those changes do not depend on defending satisfaction atonement. And as the following paragraphs indicate, that violent image poses other, very real social problems.

A further component of the violence in classic atonement images is the model of Jesus it presents. In satisfaction atonement, Jesus is a model of voluntary submission to innocent suffering. If the Father needs the death of Jesus to satisfy divine honor, Jesus as innocent victim voluntarily agrees to submit to that violence needed by the honor of God. Or as innocent victim Jesus voluntarily agrees to undergo the punishment deserved by sinful humankind in order that the demand of divine justice be met. Because Jesus' death is needed, Jesus models being a voluntary, passive and innocent victim, who suffers for the good of another.

Beyond the generalities, it is important to underscore for whom these images of Jesus as an innocent and passive victim may pose a particular concern. It is an unhealthy model for a woman abused by her husband or a child violated by her father, and constitutes double jeopardy when attached to hierarchical theology that asserts male headship. [13] A model of passive, innocent suffering poses an obstacle for people who encounter conditions of systemic injustice, or an unjust status quo produced by the power structure. Examples might be the legally segregated south prior to the civil rights movement, or de facto housing segregation that still exists in many places; military-backed occupation, under which land is confiscated and indigenous residents crowded into enclosed territories, called "reservations" in North America and "bantustans" in South Africa and "autonomous areas" in Palestine. For people in such situations of an unjust status quo, the idea of "being like Jesus" as modeled by satisfaction atonement means to submit passively and to endure that systemic injustice. James Cone linked substitutionary atonement specifically to defenses of slavery and colonial oppression. [14] Delores Williams calls the Jesus of substitutionary atonement, the "ultimate surrogate figure." After depicting numerous ways in which black women were forced into a variety of surrogacy roles for white men and women and black men, Williams says that to accept satisfaction or substitutionary atonement and the image of Jesus that it supplies is to validate all the unjust surrogacy to which black women have been and still are submitted. [15] Such examples show that atonement theology that models innocent, passive suffering does have specific negative impact in the contemporary context.

A victim is controlled by forces and circumstances beyond himself or herself. A victim surrenders control to others and accepts the injustice imposed by others. Jesus in satisfaction and substitutionary atonement models victimization. When this atonement motif is the model for people who have experienced abuse or exploitation, this model underscores their status as victims. For them, being like Jesus means to continue to submit to unjust suffering, abuse or exploitation.

Seeking liberation means to assert control of one's own life by beginning to struggle against that oppression. Because one who struggles is no longer voluntarily submitting, he or she is no longer a victim. While liberation is not yet achieved, it has already begun in the struggle. For oppressed peoples, satisfaction atonement reinforces their status as victims rather than undergirding them in the struggle for liberation from oppression. And it should be obvious that since satisfaction poses an image of submission to oppression, it consequently poses no challenge to the acts of those who oppress and exploit.

Some writers have appealed to the Trinity to defend satisfaction atonement against the claims that it poses a harmful model for abused or oppressed people. According to this argument, the unity of the persons of the Trinity means that the Father suffers with the Son. Thus rather than having the Father cause Jesus to suffer, one has God the Father both identifying with the suffering of Jesus and also suffering for sinful humankind rather than exercising judgement. [16] In my view, this appeal camouflages but does not deal fundamentally with the abusive imagery of satisfaction atonement. Returning to the questions used earlier about the object of Jesus' death and who needs and arranges the death shows that the death of Jesus is still aimed Godward. This appeal does change the image, however, from the Father abusing the Son to the Father engaging in abuse of himself. Perhaps it is akin to what once was called patripassianism.

Narrative Christus Victor

What I call narrative Christus Victor [17] identifies the victory of Christ in terms of the narratives of the Gospels and Revelation and also distinguishes my formulation from classic Christus Victor. The final section of this essay outlines narrative Christus Victor as an approach to atonement and Christology that expresses the nonviolence of Jesus, that does not presume that justice depends on punishment, that does not put God in the role of chief avenger, that does not make Jesus a model of passive, innocent, voluntary submission to abuse, and that frees oppressors from their oppression. Narrative Christus Victor features an understanding of salvation that includes ethics, and that begins in but is certainly not limited to the historical arena in which we live. In other words, narrative Christus Victor avoids all the problems of violence identified for classic atonement and christological imagery.

Consider again the original survey of atonement images. In particular, note the "cosmic battle" version of Christus Victor, which has received little attention in this essay. Recall that this image featured the forces of God involved in a cosmic battle with the forces of Satan (or of evil) for control of the universe. When Jesus died, Satan won an apparent and momentary victory. But with the resurrection of Jesus, the reign of God emerged victorious, and the perceived authority of the reign of God was definitively and ultimately established. For present purposes, the important issue with classic Christus Victor is to recognize and understand what that "cosmic" battle consists of and where and when it took place.

The book of Revelation is replete with images of this cosmic battle, of images of the confrontation between the reign of God and the forces of Satan. While many vignettes in Revelation portray this confrontation, chapter 12 contains the specific image of a heavenly battle between the forces of Satan, represented by the dragon, and the forces of God led by the angel Michael.

But one of the most important points is to see that this confrontation between Michael and the dragon was not an actual battle waged in the cosmos. The imagery and symbols of Revelation, both in chapter 12 and throughout the book, refer to people and events in the historical world of the first century. In other words, Revelation's symbols refer not to the distant future nor to cosmic events outside of history but to events of the first century in the world that we live in.

In the case of the seven-headed dragon in chapter 12, most scholars recognize that the dragon refers to imperial Rome, whose eponymous city by legend was founded on seven hills, with the horns and crowns referring to a sequence of emperors. The "battle" depicted between forces of God and forces of Satan was really the confrontation in history between the church, the earthly institution that represented the rule of God, and the Roman empire, the earthly structure used to symbolize the rule of Satan. The so-called cosmic battle was really imagery that gave the cosmic significance of the confrontation between the Roman empire and Jesus and his church. Revelation uses cosmic imagery and symbols to depict the significance of the struggle of Jesus and the early church against the Roman empire.

The same kind of interpretation applies to the seven seals in chapters 6-7. One very plausible set of historical antecedents for the seven seals is the following. I suggest that the seals correspond to the sequence of Roman emperors from Tiberius (14-37 C.E., seal 1), under whose rule Jesus was crucified, through Caligula (37-40 C.E.., seal 2), Claudius (41-54 G.E., seal 3), Nero (54-68 C.E., seal 4), and Vespasian (69-79 C.E., seal 6), to the short reign of Titus (79-81 G.E.) or more likely Domitian (81-96 C.E., seal 7). Seal 5 coincides with the gap between Nero and Vespasian when three pretenders (Galbo, Otho, and Vitellius) carried the title but failed to consolidate imperial power.

Each seal contains a symbolic reference to elements from the reign of the corresponding emperor. The unsuccessful effort to conquer by the rider on the white horse -- he came out "conquering and to conquer" -- makes an oblique reference to the death and resurrection of Jesus that occurred during the reign of Tiberius. Since Jesus did not stay dead, the imagery implies, the rider -- Tiberius -- had a temporary victory, or a victory that consisted of appearance only. Following symbols are more obvious. The blood-red horse, the sword, and taking peace from the earth in seal two refer to the threats posed by Caligula. In addition to Caligula's provocations against the Jews, in 40 C.E. he sent an army to install a statue of himself arrayed as a Roman god on the altar of the temple of Jerusalem. This army posed a major threat to the city, but Caligula died before the threat was carried out. The symbols of famine in seal 3 refer to the famine during the reign of Claudius that is mentioned in Acts 11:28, while the do uble-ugly riders and multiple means of destruction in seal 4 portray Nero, whose infamy still lives. Changing the point of view from earth to heaven in seal 5 corresponds to the eighteen-month interlude between Nero and Vespasian, when the three pretenders each obtained the title but did not succeed in consolidating power as emperor. The multiple symbols in the first scene of seal six portray the breakdown of order and the overwhelming sense of despair and tragedy felt by the heirs of David when his city -- Jerusalem -- was sacked and destroyed in 70 C.E. by an army commanded by emperor Vespasian's son Titus. [18]

The entirety of chapter 7 also belongs to seal 6, which pointedly depicts the celebration of the two throngs as the counterpoint to the devastation of the first scene of seal 6, which I interpret as the destruction of Jerusalem. Twelve is the number of Israel's tribes, and 144,000 is the product of 12 times 12 times 1000. It is a large number that symbolizes the people of God as continuous with God's people Israel. In the first century, this number would have seemed much larger than it does for us in the computer age on the cusp of the third millennium. Its size should be read as a parallel to the "countless multitude," which includes people of every ethnic and national group in the people of God. These two throngs, which show that the people of God includes both Israelites and gentiles around the world, celebrate the victory of the reign of God over the forces of evil. For those who perceive the resurrection of Jesus, the celebration loudly proclaims, the rule of God has already triumphed over the accumulat ion of evil experienced under the rule of Rome. In the midst of the worst imaginable tragedy from an earthly perspective -- even the destruction of the holy city -- the two multitudes are depicted in celebration. For the reader of Revelation, the message of the cheering throngs is that for those who live in the reality of the resurrection of Jesus, the rule of God has already triumphed. And the people of God do not face ultimate despair, even when confronted by the accumulation of evil experienced under the rule of Rome, even when that rule culminates with the destruction of the temple and the sacred city of Jerusalem.

Finally, this celebration leads to the seventh seal, which does not advance the chronology, but rather begins a new cycle of seven. Ceasing the count at seven and beginning a new series of seven places the time of the seventh seal in the author's present. According to my sequence, that would be perhaps during the short reign of Titus (79--81 C.E.) or more likely during the reign of Domitian (81--96 C.E.). [19]

Putting the declarations of cosmic victory together with the historical antecedents of the symbols shows that Revelation delivers a cosmic and eschatological perspective on events in the history of the first century. The image in Revelation 12 depicts the same history in another way. Rome, the seven-headed dragon, whose 10 horns and 7 crowns encompass the emperors and pretenders just mentioned, confronts the beautiful woman with a crown of twelve stars. She is Israel, who produced Jesus the Messiah, and is also the church, who is pursued by Rome. In this set of symbols as well, the resurrection of Jesus gives the victory to the earthly representatives of the reign of God over the forces of evil symbolized by Rome.

Identifying these symbols with Rome does not empty Revelation of contemporary meaning. On the contrary. The message of Revelation is just as true for the church today as it confronts structures and institutions not loyal to or shaped by the reign of God. It goes without saying that these evil powers would include Nazi Germany but also include any contemporary political state to the extent that it claims to speak and act in the name of God and thus puts itself in the place of the church as the earthly structure that witnesses to the reign of God.

The Gospels present the same story as that told in Revelation, but from a different standpoint. Revelation tells the story of Jesus from the perspective of the heavenly throne room and the future culmination of the reign of God. The Gospels narrate that same story from the earthly vantage point of the folks who got dust on their sandals as they walked along the roads of Palestine with Jesus. Both accounts locate the victory of the reign of God on earth and in history -- narrative Christus Victor -- and make quite clear that the triumph occurred not through the sword and military might but nonviolently, through death and resurrection. The intrinsically nonviolent character of the victory eliminates what is usually called triumphalism of the church. As intrinsically nonviolent, its stance to the other or toward those who differ and are different can only be nonviolent. To be otherwise is to cease to be a witness to the reign of God and to join the forces of evil who oppose the reign of God.

At the same time, reading that story in the Gospels shows that Jesus was not a passive victim, whose purpose was to get himself killed in order to satisfy a big cosmic legal requirement. Rather, Jesus was an activist, whose mission was to make the rule of God visible. And his acts demonstrated what the reign of God looked like -- defending poor people, raising the status of women, raising the status of Samaritans, performing healings and exorcisms, preaching the reign of God, and more. His mission was to make the reign of God present in the world in his person and in his teaching, and to invite people to experience the liberation it presented.

And when Jesus made the reign of God visible and present in that way, it was so threatening that the assembled array of evil forces killed him. These forces include imperial Rome, which carried ultimate legal authority for his death, with some assistance from the religious authorities in Jerusalem, as well as Judas, Peter, and other disciples, who could not even watch with him, and the mob that howled for his death. Resurrection is the reign of God made victorious over all these forces of evil that killed Jesus.

As sinners, in one way or another, we are all part of those sinful forces that killed Jesus. Jesus died making the reign of God present for us while we were still sinners. To acknowledge our human sinfulness is to become aware of our participation in the forces of evil that killed Jesus, including their present manifestations in such powers as militarism, nationalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism and poverty that still bind and oppress.

And because God is a loving God, God invites us to join the rule of God in spite of the fact that we participated with and are captive to the powers that killed Jesus. God invites us to join the struggle of those seeking liberation from the forces that bind and oppress. This invitation envisions both those who are oppressed and their oppressors. When the oppressed accept God's invitation, they cease collaborating with the powers that oppressed and join the forces who represent the reign of God in making a visible witness against oppression. And when the oppressors accept God's invitation, they cease their collaboration with the powers of oppression, and join the forces who represent the reign of God in witnessing against oppression. Thus under the reign of God, former oppressed and former oppressors join together in witnessing to the reign of God. [20]

One dimension of the image of narrative Christus Victor is that it is the undoing of Anselm's deletion. Anselm removed the devil from the salvation equation. Narrative Christus Victor restores the devil to the equation, but with a difference. In narrative Christus Victor, the image of the devil is not that of an individual, personified being. Rather "the devil" is the Roman empire, which symbolizes all the institutes and structures and powers of the world that do not recognize the rule of God. Thus "devil" includes ourselves. Following Walter Wink's understanding of the powers, this devil is the symbol for the accumulation of all that does not recognize the authority of the reign of God. [21] In his contemporary construction of Christus Victor, James Cone wrote that the powers of evil confronted by the reign of God include "the American system," symbolized by government officials who "oppress the poor, humiliate the weak, and make heroes out of rich capitalists;" "the Pentagon, which bombed and killed helple ss people in Vietnam and Cambodia and attributed such obscene atrocities to the accidents of war;" the system symbolized in "the police departments and prison officials, which shoots and kills defenseless blacks for being black and for demanding their right to exist." [22] 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. While that transformation is never complete, our participation in evil has now become involuntary and our lives take on the character of opposition to rather than cooperation with the forces of evil.

Earlier it was shown how Anselmian atonement correlates with the ecclesiology of Christendom. It is now also possible to show that narrative Christus Victor belonged to, and in fact only makes sense when perceived within, the ecclesiological status of the early church in relation to the Roman empire and the social order. As is clear from the symbolism of Revelation, the church in that setting perceived itself to be different from the empire, to maintain itself as distinct from the prevailing social order. This sense of being distinct is true whether one argues that the church endured direct persecution, or more likely as has been recently argued, that the church perceived itself in crisis but did not actually face widespread, ongoing persecution. The church distinct from the social order constitutes the context in which Jesus' actions pose contrasts to prevailing practices and in which it makes sense to speak of confrontation between church and empire or church and social order. In fact, since the empire and the social order are considered pagan, it makes no sense not to speak of Jesus and the disciples and the early church as posing a contrast or a witness to the social order. And it seems almost self-evident that for those who call themselves Christians, Jesus is the orientation point for that witness. My reconstruction of narrative Christus Victor that makes visible the church in Revelation and the life of Jesus in the Gospels simply reflects the status of the church in the first century and beyond. I note without elaboration that this church is a pacifist church, whether that stance is because Christians did not wield the sword and shed blood or because of the idolatrous nature of the army's religious commitments. [23]

We noted previously the series of changes in the church beginning in the second century and extending through several centuries. The end result of these changes, for which Constantine is a symbol of the way things were moving rather than a cause, was that the church came to identify with the social order. Rather than a witness against it, the church came to support and to work through the institutions of the social order. This is the general context in which Ansehn's satisfaction atonement emerged.

Christus Victor eventually faded away, although instances of it can be found well into the middle ages and beyond, and Anselm clearly sensed a need to refute its ransom version. The standard reasons given for the demise of Christus Victor are several: objection to the idea that God would recognize certain rights of the devil, or that God would overcome the devil through trickery; objection to its dualistic world view; little evidence of the victory of the reign of God in the historical realm in which we live; incompatibility of the imagery of cosmic battle with our modern world view; distaste for the battle imagery.

However, I suggest a quite different reason for the demise of Christus Victor. This image makes sense only if the church, as a representative of the reign of God, confronts the world [24] or poses an alternative to the world. According to my hypothesis, Christus Victor dropped out of the picture when the church came to support the world's social order, to accept the intervention of political authorities in churchly affairs, and to look to political authorities for support and protection. With the historical antecedents of Revelation soon forgotten, all that seemed to remain was cosmic imagery of confrontation that did not match the political reality. Thus eventually the motif I have called narrative Christus Victor could fade away without a sense of loss, to be replaced by Anselm's satisfaction motif, which reflected the medieval social and ecclesiological conditions. That there are mixed atonement metaphors in someone like Gregory of Nyssa or that one can still find the motif after Anselm's became the predo minant one are not evidence against my hypothesis. Rather, these data merely show the evolutionary nature of the fall and rise of atonement motifs.

The image of narrative Christus Victor avoids all the problematic elements in classic atonement images, particularly those of satisfaction atonement. It reflects the ecclesiological world view of the early rather than the medieval church. It is grounded in assumptions of nonviolence -- the nonviolence of Jesus -- rather than violence. In particular, it does not assume retribution, or the assumption that injustice is balanced by the violence of punishment. It does not put God in the role of chief avenger, nor picture God as a child abuser. And it is abundantly obvious that God did not kill Jesus nor need the death of Jesus in any way. Jesus does suffer, but it is not as an act of passive submission to undeserved suffering. Jesus carries out a mission to make the rule of God present and visible, a mission to bring and to give life. To depict the reign of God as made visible by Jesus, it is necessary to make use of the entire life and teaching of Jesus, rather than focus only on his death. When this mission thr eatens the forces of evil, they retaliate with violence, killing Jesus. This suffering is not something willed by nor needed by God and it is not directed Godward. To the contrary, the killing of Jesus is the ultimate contrast between the nonviolent reign of God and the rule of evil.

Narrative Christus Victor understands Jesus as the one whose person and mission make the reign of God present in our history. It pictures Jesus as a model of liberation. Those who accept the invitation of God join the movement that witnesses to the nature of the reign of God in contrast to the forces of evil that bind. This motif thus features salvation that begins in history to the extent that the reign of God is present in history.

Earlier, one of the questions used to analyze the various atonement motifs was "Who needs the death of Jesus?" Bringing that question to narrative Christus Victor brings to the forefront the profound difference between it and satisfaction atonement. The question has a non-answer in narrative Christus Victor. God does not need the death because this motif does not make use of the idea of retribution. In narrative Christus Victor, the death pays God nothing and is not Godward directed. If anything or anyone "needs" the death, it is the forces of evil who kill Jesus. They "need" the death as the futile effort to annihilate the reign of God. The death of Jesus is thus very pointedly not something needed by God or God's honor. It is rather what the forces of evil -- the devil -- do to Jesus. Rather than a divine requirement, the death of Jesus is the ultimate indication of the difference between the reign of God and the reign of evil.

Rather than the death of Jesus, what sinners need, what the reign of God needs is the resurrection of Jesus. That is where the victory of the reign of God is. And this discussion shows one of the most profound differences between satisfaction atonement and narrative Christus Victor. Satisfaction atonement focuses on the death of Jesus, and uses and needs that death. And satisfaction atonement has God arrange things so that the death happens in order to satisfy the divine requirement. And it does not even talk about resurrection. Whereas for narrative Christus Victor, death has an entirely different meaning. The death of Jesus is not a divine requirement. Rather, the death is that which clearly distinguishes the rule of the devil from the rule of God. The rule of the devil attempts to rule by violence and death, whereas the rule of God rules and ultimately conquers by nonviolence.

The analysis of this essay has demonstrated the extent to which presuppositions of violence and overt violence are inherently a part of classic Christian theology. We have also observed that the abstract and ahistorical character of the classic formulas of atonement and Christology mean that they do not challenge injustice in the social order. This combination of intrinsically violent elements and lack of challenge to injustice in the social order mean that it has been possible throughout much of Christian history for Christians to profess allegiance to Jesus and to claim salvation as depicted in classic Christology and atonement, while simultaneously pursuing the violence prohibited by Jesus' teaching and life.

If Christians are uncomfortable with Christianity as a violent religion, the first step is to recognize the extent to which formulas of classic theology have contributed to violence both overt and systemic. This essay provided data for that acknowledgement. The second step away from Christianity as a violent religion would be to construct theology that specifically reflects the nonviolence of its namesake, Jesus Christ. As a suggestion in that direction, I offer narrative Christus Victor as both nonviolent atonement and narrative Christology. Finally, step three would be to live out the theology of its nonviolent namesake. That commitment is a call to every Christian.

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Notes

(1.) This essay draws on elements of my book The Nonviolent Atonement (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001).

(2.) Anselm, "Why God Became Man," in A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockham, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), 107-10.

(3.) Anselm himself did not deal with the specific question of whether God wa responsible for the death of Jesus, although he does discuss whether the Father willed the death of the son. Anselm wanted to portray the necessity of the incarnation and of Jesus' death as a payment to God's honor, but without appearing to place limits or obligation on God. To deal with this dilemma and to absolve God of responsibility for seeming unjust acts, Anselm developed the category of "fitting" or fittingness" to describe what was necessary for God but without placing necessity or obligation on God. R. W Southern, Saint Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 201-2, 206 For Anselm's use of "fitting" and "unfitting," see Anselm, "Why?" 115-21.

(4.) Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God So Loved the World?" in Christianity, Patriarchy and Abuse: A Feminist Critique, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 1-30; Julie M. Hopkins, Towards a Feminist Christology: Jesus of Nazareth, European Women, and the Christological Crisis (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdrmans, 1995), 50-52; Rita Nakashima Brock, Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power (New York: Crossroad, 1988), 55-57; Carter Heyward, Saving Jesus: From Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What It Means to Be Christian (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 151; Delores S. Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness:

The Challenge of Womanist Cod-Talk (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 161-67.

(5.) For an analysis of retributive justice, with restorative justice as the suggested alternative, see Howard Zehr, Changing Lenses: A New Focus for Crime and Justice, A Christian Peace Shelf Selection (Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1990).

(6.) Southern, Saint Anselm, 221-27.

(7.) Ibid.

(8.) Catherine Pickstock pushes this argument the farthest, but it is also used by Margo Houts and Nancy Duff. See Catherine Pickstock, After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 155-57; Margo G. Houts, "Atonement and Abuse: An Alternative View," Daughters of Sarah 18, no. 3 (1992 Summer 1992): 30; Nancy J. Duff, "Atonement and the Christian Life: Reformed Doctrine from a Feminist Perspective," Interpretation 53, no. I (January 1999): 24.

(9.) The seminal treatment of the changes in the church symbolized by Constantine is John Howard Yoder, "The Constantinian Sources of Western Social Ethics," in The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame, 1984), 135-47, as well as John H. Yoder, "The Disavowal of Constantine: An Alternative Perspective on Interfaith Dialogue," in The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical, ed. and introd. Michael G. Cartwright, foreword Richard J. Mouw (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 242-61, and John H. Yoder, "The Otherness of the Church," in The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical ed. and introd. Michael G. Cartwright, foreword Richard J. Mouw (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 53--64. H. A. Drake has shown that Constantine himself pursued a policy of tolerance, and that the changes he symbolizes and the move toward enforcing one prescribed faith actually occurred in the decades following Constantine. H. A. Drake, Constantine and the Bishops: The Politics of Intolerance (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2000).

(10.) James H. Cone, God of the Oppressed, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis books, 1997), 42--49, 211--12.

(11.) See references in note 9.

(12.) Argument made by William Placher. William C. Placher, "Christ Takes Our Place: Rethinking Atonement," Interpretation 53, no. 1 [January 1999]: 15. Applying the assertion in the book of Hebrews that the death of Christ is the end of all sacrifice, John H. Yoder makes the same application of satisfaction atonement as does Placher. H. Wayne House and John Howard Yoder, The Death Penalty Debate: Two Opposing Views of Capital Punishment (Dallas: Ward Publishing, 1991), 158--60. However, Yoder does not thereby validate satisfaction atonement. In fact, he stated that he shared discomfort with the retributive assumptions of satisfaction atonement. But Yoder then argued that the psychic desire for punishment is so pervasive that in seeking to reduce the violence that comes with exercise of the death penalty, we would do better to accept the assumption of retribution and then argue that the death of Jesus ended the need for retribution rather than to challenge the assumption with alternative theology. John Howard Yoder, The Case for Punishment (John Howard Yoder's Home Page, 1995), ch. 5, 9, Accessed July 1, 2000, www.nd.edu/*theo/jhy/writings/home/welcome.htm. Regarding atonement, Yoder's purpose was to reduce the violence of capital punishment and his comment is neither a defense of satisfaction atonement nor a clear statement opposing development of a theological alternative to it.

(13.) Brown and Parker, "For God So Loved the World?"; Hopkins, Towards a Feminist Christology 50--52; Brock, Journeys by Heart, 55--57; Heyward, Saving Jesus, 151.

(14.) Cone, God of the Oppressed, 211--12.

(15.) Williams, Sisters in the Wilderness, 60--83, 161--67, 178--99.

(16.) For versions of this argument, see Placher, "Christ Takes Our Place," 16--17; Thelma Megill-Cobbler, "A Feminist Rethinking of Punishment Imagery in Atonement," Dialog 35, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 19--20; Leanne Van Dyk, "Do Theories of Atonement Foster Abuse?" Dialog 35, no. 1 (Winter 1996): 24; Houts, "Atonement and Abuse," 29.

(17.) Thanks to Leanne Van Dyk, who suggested this particular name for the motif that I was developing.

(18.) No scholarly consensus exists on the correlation of seals with emperors. While my particular suggestion here is quite plausible, the argument for narrative Christus Victor does not depend on accepting this particular interpretation. The vitally important point is to recognize that the antecedents of Revelation's symbols are located in the first century (however identified) and not in the distant future or our present age.

(19.) Without developing the historical analysis here, I suggest that the sequences of seven trumpets and seven bowls use different symbols and kinds of destruction, much of it drawn from the Old Testament, to cover the same seven imperial eras from Tiberius to Domitian.

(20.) This is an image of narrative Christus Victor, using the book of Revelation and the Gospels. For a much fuller development, as well as for discussion of how it fits with Paul and other literature of the New Testament, see my The Nonviolent Atonement (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

(21.) For the full description of the powers, see the first volume of Walter Wink's trilogy on the powers, Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament, The Powers, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

(22.) Cone, God of the Oppressed, 212-13.

(23.) David G. Hunter, "The Christian Church and the Roman Army in the First Three Centuries," in The Church's Peace Witness, edited by Marlin E. Miller and Barbara Nelson Gingerich (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994), 161-81; David G. Hunter, "A Decade of Research on Early Christians and Military Service," Religious Studies Review 18, no. 2 (April 1992): 87-94; David M. Scholer, "Early Christian Attitudes to War and Military Service: A Selective Bibliography," TSF Bulletin 8, no. 1 (September-October 1984): 23-24.

(24.) I am using the term "world" as a theological term that stands for all that is not oriented by the rule of God.

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