

Systematic theology from a Mennonite perspective as a separate discipline has only developed very recently. As one of the fruits of this emerging field we can count the proposal for a Mennonite soteriology, as it was presented by J. Denny Weaver in his book *The Nonviolent Atonement* in 2001. This research critically assesses Weaver's proposal – based on the revised edition of 2011 – and tries to answer the question to what extent Weaver's atonement model, which he has called *Narrative Christus Victor*, could function as a Mennonite contribution to the discourse on atonement, with the rejection of all forms of violence as point of departure. Weaver's proposal will be assessed in the light of the major atonement models, as they have been identified by Gustaf Aulén in his work *Christus Victor*, which has become a standard in modern systematic theology. The result will be a concept of a soteriology from a Mennonite perspective, based on both a critical evaluation of the proposal of Weaver and the study of several of the most important atonement models in the Western Christian tradition.

Weaver develops a model that does not put the cross at the centre, but takes its starting point in the narrative of Jesus, that comprises his life, teachings, death and resurrection. Jesus did not come to die, he came to proclaim the reign of God. Jesus' death, according to Weaver, is produced by the evil powers, that experience his message as a threat to their power. In the resurrection the evil powers are overcome in a nonviolent way. Anyone who puts his trust in that narrative and who is inspired by the example of Jesus lives his life according to God's intentions – a life of justice and peace, where there is no room for violence – will know himself reconciled with God. The starting point for Weaver is the Book of Revelation, that tells how Jesus confronted the evil powers, both at a cosmic and an earthly level. At a cosmic level, he is the slain lamb who overcomes the evil powers in a nonviolent way. At an earthly level, Revelation reflects the story of the Early Church and the way it confronted the evil of the Roman Empire.

The Constantinian fall, according to Weaver, was the start of the demise of the original narrative Christus Victor motive of atonement, that called for a new life under the reign of God. The development of the Nicean-Chalcedonian Christology, that is void of the nonviolence of the Early Church and the resulting model of satisfaction atonement both prove that the church has lost sight of its original calling to embody the reign of God, according to Weaver. Relying on alternative readings of the theology of Paul, Weaver tries to show that his narrative Christus Victor model fits the biblical evidence. Apart from that, Weaver extensively treats examples from black theology and feminist and womanist theology, to demonstrate how his criticism of the dominant tradition of satisfaction atonement resonates with other theologies from the margins.

The proposal of Wever has several vulnerable points. Nonviolence seems to be the paradigm that predetermines his position, rather than the result of his exegesis. This raises criticism about his God image and his paradigm as such. He is inconsistent in his Christology, rejecting the traditional Christological models, but meanwhile appealing to them to defend the image of a nonviolent God. His criticism of the traditional atonement images is based on secondary literature, which results in superficial criticism and sometimes an incorrect representation of these images. And his concept of the evil powers needs more attention, as does his interpretation of the cross. A further study of the traditional atonement models should shed a new light on the criticism of Weaver on the traditional interpretations of the atonement. Meanwhile it should become clear which elements from the wider tradition could contribute to a soteriology from a Mennonite perspective.

With the publication of his book *'Christus Victor'* in 1931, Lutheran theologian Gustav Aulén brought back to the attention the atonement motif of the Early Church of the victory of Christ over the evil powers. According to Aulén, this model was the dominant interpretation of the atonement in the first millennium of Christianity. The central elements of the model according to Aulén are as follows. The model is a model of both redemption and reconciliation. God in Christ conquers the devil and liberates mankind from the power of the evil one. This victory is a cosmic event, the atonement is an objective atonement, not an event that causes any change in the individual believer. Aulén talks about a double reconciliation. God not only needs to be reconciled to humanity, he also needs to be reconciled to himself, as he had delivered mankind into the hands of the evil powers, by way of punishment for sin. The fulfilment of the atonement takes place through work of the Holy Spirit, Aulén signals, but he hardly pays attention to this element in his description.

Aulén builds his interpretation of Christus Victor – which has come to be accepted widely as being the dominant interpretation in the Early Church – on his own interpretation of Irenaeus, whom he claims to be representative of the thinking about atonement of the Church Fathers. In fact, Aulén not only neglects the rich diversity in the atonement theology of the Church Fathers, he also misinterprets Irenaeus. In Irenaeus the victory of Christ in his humanity, exemplified by the story of the temptation in the desert, plays an important role, whereas Aulén claims that the atonement is a continuous divine work. Neither does Aulén pay attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in the work of Irenaeus and he does underestimate the role of the motive of recapitulation in Irenaeus theology.

Aulén puts too much stress on the element of victory, neglecting the variety of ideas about the atonement in the Early Church and the complexity of the ideas of Irenaeus on this subject. He

seems to have been driven by his Lutheran agenda, aspiring to prove that Luther's vision on atonement reflected the position of the Early Church, as a way to strengthen the authority of Luther. That several Church Fathers highlight the fact that God overcomes the devil in a nonviolent way is not noticed as relevant by Aulén, whereas from a Mennonite perspective this is a crucial element. This stress on the nonviolent character of the victory in the atonement as explained by the church fathers could contribute to a soteriology from a Mennonite perspective, that is meanwhile strongly embedded in the broader tradition of the church.

Anselm's *Cur Deus homo*, in which he develops his model of atonement is meant as a treatise to prove the necessity of the incarnation. Anselm claims that Adam, through sinning in the paradise, has dishonoured God – an offensive which God cannot overlook, because overlooking it would go against his just nature. Although Adam would deserve the punishment of eternal death, punishment would go against God's objectives. That means that God needs to find a solution to restore his honour in a just way, meanwhile enabling himself to fulfil the work he has started in creation.

The only way God's honour could be restored is by offering something to God, greater than which there is nothing to be found in the universe. And that turns out to be God himself. Meanwhile, the burden is with mankind, so the compensation for sin should come from mankind. For that reason, God became man in Christ. Christ, being fully human and fully divine, was the only one who could restore the honour of God, by offering his life, while doing it on behalf of mankind.

The image of God, underlying the model of Anselm, is that of a medieval feudal lord. The universe of Anselm mirrors a medieval society, in which a feudal lord could not bypass violation of his honour, without risking chaos in his kingdom. In neglecting the commandment of God, mankind in Adam refused to accept its place in God's creation. This refusal meant a disturbance of the order and beauty of the universe.

Although the idea of mankind accepting his position in the universe as God's creature resonates with Weaver's idea of the reign of God, there is a crucial difference, because in the paradigm of Anselm, God needs violence to restore and protect the order of the universe, whereas Weaver rejects any use of violence by God. Weaver however overlooks the richness of the metaphor of God's honour as an expression of man's relation as a creature to God the creator.

The model of penal substitution atonement, that originated with Calvin, resembles the model of satisfaction atonement of Anselm. However, it has a different rationale. In the modern version the assumption is that the sin of Adam was a violation of God's holy law and that God's holy nature requires him to punish mankind for this offense. Because God is not only a just and holy God, but

also a loving God, he chooses to suffer and die on the cross, taking upon himself the punishment due to sinful mankind, thus propitiating his wrath. John R.W. Stott, who gives a representative account of the model in his work *'The Cross of Christ'*, discerns four stages in the atonement: propitiation, redemption, justification and reconciliation. Propitiation, however, is the corner stone of the model.

The idea that God needs to be propitiated is largely founded upon the translation of the Greek term *ἱλαστήριον* (hilasterion), which then is translated as 'to propitiate'. However, the term *ἱλαστήριον*, in Pauline usage, reflects the use of the term in the LXX and the underlying use of the word **כַּפַּר** in Hebrew. The word **כַּפַּר** which is translated as 'to make atonement', however does not refer to the propitiation of an offended God. The correct translation of *ἱλαστήριον* rather seems to be 'to expiate', referring to sin, or it would refer to the place where God is present. Supporters of the penal substitution model intentionally neglect grammatical evidence that proves their translation to be mistaken.

Apart from the dependence on the incorrect translation of *ἱλαστήριον*, the model is largely based on an incorrect parallel that is being drawn between the death of Christ and the description of sacrificial ritual in Leviticus. Not differentiating between the different kinds of sacrifices that are described in the Old Testament, averting the role of blood in the Hebrew sacrificial rituals and downplaying the importance of the grain offering as a sacrifice of atonement for sins, representatives of the model of penal substitution atonement claim that Jesus shed his blood for the atonement of sins as in the Old Testament ritual. That however is not what is proven by their argument.

Penal substitution atonement not just presupposes an angry God. It also presupposes a paradigm of retributive violence in which the good is to be rewarded and the bad is to be punished. As God is considered to be the creator of the universe and the moral law, it is God himself who demands this punishment. This model does not seem to contain any elements that could contribute to a soteriology from a Mennonite perspective.

The model of atonement that originates with Peter Abelard is mostly called the subjective model of atonement or the moral influence model. His interpretation of the atonement is based on what he says in his *'Commentary on the Letter of Paul to the Romans'*, especially in his comment on verse 3,26. Abelard claims that God in Christ, by dying on the cross, demonstrated a love for sinful mankind that was strong enough to generate a love in man that would stimulate individual man to be reconciled with God. The underlying mechanism in Abelard's model is that through the sin of Adam

the rational will of man, by which he controls his carnal desires, has been weakened. Man is inclined to sin and through the love of God and the gift of the Holy Spirit, man's rational capacities are restored, to the end that man will turn away from his life of sin and can be reconciled with God. Abelard's argument is vulnerable for the accusation of Pelagianism, but Abelard stresses that the atonement is God's initiative and that man is fully dependent on God for his salvation.

An important question is why the death of Christ would kindle such a great love in individual man. The answer raises the question to what extent Abelard represents an objective model of atonement. The wider context of the *'Commentary'*, beyond Abelard's commentary on verse 3,26, shows that Abelard indeed considers the death of Christ as a way of bearing the punishment for the sins of mankind. This shows a tendency towards an objective model of atonement. However, according to Abelard, the death of Christ is not necessary for God to be able to forgive the sins of mankind. God can forgive sin as it pleases him. It is man who needs the death of Christ to be revealed God's love. In a way the model of Weaver parallels Abelard's, because in the model of Weaver the death of Christ plays a key role in making man aware of the nature of the evil powers. In both models the death of Christ is crucial for the awareness of man, although Weaver denies any parallel.

We can conclude now that a serious study of the traditional models of the atonement and the texts on which these models are based is necessary to develop a proposal that can answer the challenges that these models confront us with. The criticism of Weaver on the model of satisfaction atonement would have gained in depth, if he had studied the different versions of the model more thoroughly. A soteriology from a Mennonite perspective could build upon the insights of the Church Fathers – and especially Irenaeus – as well as on the insights of Abelard.

A further study of the tradition will contribute to a soteriology from a Mennonite perspective that can function as a contribution to the ecumenical dialogue on atonement, instead of being a rejection of the wider tradition.

A soteriology from a Mennonite perspective should start from the image that God atones in a nonviolent way, without the claim that God is absolutely nonviolent. That would link the model to the ideas we found in the writings of several of the Church Fathers. An important element in the God image that relates to the model of Anselm is the metaphor of God's honour. That metaphor explains what it means for man to accept the Reign of God.

The relation between God and Jesus will be expressed in terms of activity and not in the traditional terms. God makes himself known as a God who in Jesus overcomes the evil powers in a

nonviolent way. He gives himself in the death on the cross hoping to convince mankind to accept his reign. Meanwhile the cross also expresses the wrath of God: it is the consequence of the loyalty of mankind to the evil powers. Although the cross is not the instrument of God, it becomes the symbol of the victory of God. This is what gives the cross significance in a Mennonite soteriology.

We take free will as a point of departure for our anthropology. This way man is responsible for his choices and his deeds. Original sin is considered as a metaphor that explains how mankind is trapped in the reality he is part of. So we choose a social-constructivist explanation of original sin. God empowers individual man to liberate himself from the evil powers through the narrative of Jesus, which reveals reality and through the power of his Spirit that empowers man to choose Gods side. In eschatological perspective this however means that reconciliation is only present if man accepts the grace offered by God.

Evil originates in the free will of man and is the result of man's choice to reject the Reign of God. A further study of the origin and nature of evil would be recommended.

A soteriology from a Mennonite perspective starts from the idea that God in and through the narrative of Jesus reveals his intention for creation and invites man to start a new relation with God and a new life, which is made visible in the following of Jesus.