

On the Throwing of Rocks: An Objection to Hasty and Un-careful Criticisms of Anselm's Doctrine of the Atonement

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In much contemporary debate concerning the meaning of the atonement, Anselm's Cur Deus Homo is caricatured, simplistically summarized, treated only with respect to its historical influence, and/or quickly dismissed. This article seeks to defend Anselm's doctrine of atonement from some of the primary criticisms typically raised against it. It focuses on four criticisms expressed in the writings of Gustav Aulen and J. Denny Weaver. First, it argues that, far from focusing on Christ's satisfying death at the expensive of his entire incarnate life, Anselm views Christ's death within a larger framework of Christ's entire saving work as restoring human nature. Second, it argues that Anselm's argument is not logically reducible to his living in a feudal society. Third, it argues that Anselm's atonement theology is neither rationalistic nor legalistic, but situates the legal element of salvation within a broader motif of restoration to the happiness and flourishing lost at the fall. Fourth, it disputes the charge that Anselm's theory of atonement sanctions passive submission to violence. An important insight which recurs throughout the article, but especially in arguments one and three, is that Anselm's understanding of the incarnation bears certain resemblances with an Athanasian/Ireneae theme of recapitulation, in which the Word's very assumption of human nature at the Incarnation unites it with divinity and incorruptibility. The presence of a recapitulation theme in Anselm opens up intriguing avenues of thought for contemporary constructive models of atonement that seek to draw from the church's reflection on the atonement throughout the centuries.

“No major Christian thinker has suffered quite so much as St. Anselm from the hit-and-run tactics of historians of theism and soteriology.”¹

Introduction

Perhaps no theologian in the history of the church has been more influential with respect to the doctrine of atonement than St. Anselm of Canterbury. Anselm's atonement theology, however, has become a frequent victim of caricature and/or dismissive critique. If atonement theories are compared to different houses on the same block, Anselm's would be like the old, worn-down mansion, at which it has become fashionable to throw rocks as one passes by on the sidewalk on the way to one of the newer, sleeker homes. In many popular treatments, it is trotted out in a historical sketch of the development of the church's doctrine of atonement, summarized for its influence upon subsequent Western thought, and then discarded with minimal or passing engagement of its content. Where it is engaged in more detail, Anselm's atonement theology is often interpreted in terms of its medieval setting (especially feudalism), with the implication

¹ John McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics: A Re-interpretation of the Cur Deus Homo* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1954), 2.

frequently drawn that it has no further meaning or relevance in post-medieval society. Along the way, it is often criticized as violent, legalistic, individualistic, a-historical, and/or unethical.²

An important catalyst in redirecting the church's reflection on the doctrine of the atonement away from Anselm, and modeling an all-too-easy dismissal of Anselm, was Gustav Aulén's 1931 *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of Atonement*.³ It is difficult to overstate the impact of Aulén's book. It is largely responsible for what has become the standard three-fold taxonomy of major atonement theories—indeed, part of the book's appeal is that it presents the *Christus Victor* type as a “third way” beyond the old, tired antithesis of objective (Anselmian) and subjective (Abelardian) views. In addition, Aulén presents the *Christus Victor* not as a contemporary innovation, but as a return to the mainstream view of the early church (hence the terminology, the “classical” view). For those satisfied with neither objective atonement views in the tradition of *Cur Deus Homo* (hereafter *CDH*) nor subjective views, either in the liberal, revisionist tradition, or of the classic Abelardian type, Aulén presents the *Christus Victor* motif (hereafter *CV*) as a way out of the dilemma—and one which does not require the abandoning of the church's historical reflection on the meaning of atonement.

Throughout Aulén's book, Anselm serves as something like a whipping boy. He traces the development of atonement theory throughout the history of the church, contrasting Anselm's “Latin” view with the “classical” view, which allegedly held prominence for the first 1000 years of church history and was then revived by Luther. He argues that Anselm's theory of atonement is narrowly juridical, separates Christ's death from his broader saving activity, and obscures the extent to which atonement is the work of God, not Christ *qua* man.⁴ Though few contemporary theologians have followed Aulén's historical sketch in all its details (his depiction of Luther has been subjected to particularly strong critique),⁵ this general portrait of Anselm has retained great influence. J. Denny Weaver, for example, a contemporary proponent of the *Christus Victor* theme, has recently re-iterated many of Aulén's concerns in his case for what he terms “narrative *Christus Victor*” (hereafter *NCV*).⁶ His case for *NCV* contains a sustained critique of Anselm's

² To cite one example of an almost strangled caricature of Anselm's atonement theology, consider the characterization of Adolf von Harnack, who spoke of Anselm's “mythological conception of God as the mighty private man who is incensed at the injury done to his honor and does not forego his wrath till he has received an at least adequately great equivalent” (cited in David Brown, “Anselm on Atonement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Anselm*, ed. Brian Davies and Brian Leftow [Cambridge University Press, 2004], 291).

³ Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Sketch of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, translated by A.G. Hebert (1931; reprint, Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003).

⁴ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 81-92, 145-159.

⁵ Cf., e.g., Ted Peters, “The Atonement in Anselm and Luther: Second Thoughts about Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor*,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 24 (1972), esp. 308-314, and Timothy George, “The Atonement in Martin Luther's Theology,” in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Theological, and Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles A. James and Frank E. Hill III (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2004), 272-275.

⁶ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011). Weaver distinguishes *NCV* from classical *Christus Victor* for its insistence upon non-violence, and its emphasis on Christ's entire life and ministry, particularly in its cosmic dimensions after Christ's resurrection (e.g., 23). As it turns out, however, there are other significant differences between Weaver's *NCV* and classic versions of *Christus Victor*—not least Weaver's denial of the existence of a personal devil or demons, which is casually brought into discussion relatively

atonement theology,⁷ which Weaver especially faults for its feudalistic background, and for its alleged dependence on the notions of divinely sanctioned violence and retributive justice.⁸

In this article I will defend Anselm from some of the primary criticisms of Aulén and Weaver, which in many respects are representative of larger trends of thought in contemporary debate about the meaning of the atonement. I will argue that, while Anselm's theology may need to be rounded out by other atonement theologies at certain points, it nevertheless is richer and more nuanced than popularly portrayed, contains lasting insights that are not reducible to Anselm's feudal social context, and is untouched by the frequent charges of endorsing violence and being narrowly juridical. It may be an easy target for rocks, but those who actually take the time to leave the sidewalk and walk inside it will find it a more stable home than they expected—even if they decide not to live there.

Rock #1: Anselm separates Christ's atoning death from his broader incarnate life

Aulén argues that Anselm's theory separates Christ's work of atonement from the incarnation. He claims, "the Latin view always involves an opposition, expressed or implied, between the Incarnation and the work of Christ,"⁹ and later, "it is . . . essential to the theory of Anselm that the Incarnation and the Atonement are not organically connected together, as they were in the classic view."¹⁰ Related to this, Aulén argues that atonement in Anselm's thought is the work of Christ *qua* man, not Christ *qua* God, and that God is not the one directly responsible for the atonement. A lengthy quotation will show his meaning here:

It is, indeed, true that Anselm and his successors treat the Atonement as in a sense God's work; God is the author of the plan, and He has sent His Son and ordered it so that the required satisfaction shall be made. Nevertheless, it is not in the full sense God's work of redemption. If the patristic idea of Incarnation and Redemption may be represented by a continuous line, leading obliquely downwards, the doctrine of Anselm will require a broken line; or, the line that leads downwards may be shown as crossed by a line leading from below upwards, to represent the satisfaction made to God by Christ as man. Then, too, the double-sidedness characteristic of the classic idea has disappeared. God is no longer regarded as *at once* the agent and the object of the reconciliation, but as *partly* the agent, as being the author of the plan, and *partly* the object, when the plan comes

late in the book. Weaver defines the devil or Satan as "the accumulation of earthly structures which are not ruled by the reign of God," and states that "this devil is real, but is not a personified being" (306).

⁷ It's interesting to observe that, at least by my reckoning, Weaver spends about twice as much time arguing *against* satisfaction theory (*Nonviolent Atonement*, 113-320, and variously before) as he does arguing *for* NCV (see especially 20-106), although of course there is overlap between the two.

⁸ See especially, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 16-18, 113-128, 221-9ff.

⁹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 19.

¹⁰ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 87. For Aulén, the incarnation and atonement together comprise one inter-related work: "the Incarnation is the necessary presupposition of the Atonement, and the Atonement the completion of the Incarnation" (151).

to be carried out. . . . The work of atonement is no longer seen as directly the work of God.¹¹

And again: “the classic type showed us the Atonement *as a movement of God to man*, and God as closely and personally engaged in the work of man’s deliverance. In the Latin type God seems to stand more at a distance; for the satisfaction is paid by man, in the person of Christ, to God.”¹² Elsewhere Aulén explains this alleged weakness in the “Latin view” in terms of its overemphasis on law and justice: “the classic idea shows a continuity in the Divine action and a discontinuity in the order of justice; the Latin idea, a legal consistency and a discontinuity in Divine operation.”¹³

Weaver likewise argues that satisfaction atonement separates Christ’s death from his earthly life and resurrection. According to Weaver, Anselm’s model “appears to reduce the life of Christ to an elaborate scheme whose purpose was to produce his death.”¹⁴ He also claims, “Anselm’s satisfaction atonement has no necessary role for the resurrection.”¹⁵ In fact, Weaver argues, in order to understand Anselm’s atonement theology, no knowledge of Christ’s teaching, deeds, or nonviolent ethic is required—one can simply leapfrog past the bulk of the gospel narratives.¹⁶ At one point Weaver goes so far as to claim that satisfaction atonement is even “ahistorical” because it takes place between the Father and the Son outside of the creational realm.¹⁷ Nor is this hyper-focus on Christ’s death an occasional or accidental error among proponents of satisfaction theology: for Weaver, it is *impossible* for satisfaction theory to appreciate the earthly and heavenly life of Christ. As he later puts it, in dialogue with Miroslav Volf’s *Exclusion and Embrace*: “the focus on death rather than resurrection . . . is *intrinsically the case* for satisfaction atonement.”¹⁸ In response to this criticism of Weaver and Aulén, several things must be said.

(1) First, a close reading of *CDH* reveals that Anselm views Christ’s *satisfying death* within a larger framework of Christ’s *entire* saving work as *restoring human nature*. His summary of the argument of *CDH* in the preface, for example, claims that what is established in Book II of *CDH* is that “human nature was established in order that the whole being, both body and soul, should at some time enjoy blessed immortality” and that, in order for it to achieve this creational intent, “it was necessary that everything we believe about Christ should take place.”¹⁹ And then in Book 1, Chapter 1, Anselm sets up the question on which the whole book hangs:

¹¹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 88-89, italics his.

¹² Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 154, italics his.

¹³ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 91.

¹⁴ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 85.

¹⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 56.

¹⁶ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 100, 116-117.

¹⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 100.

¹⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 252, italics mine.

¹⁹ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* (hereafter *CDH*) preface, in *Anselm: Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Thomas Williams (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2007), 238-239. Unless otherwise indicated, the translations of Anselm throughout this paper are those of Williams. Any Latin text used in this paper is taken from the critical edition of F.S. Schmitt, *S. Anselmi Cantuariensis Archiepiscopi Opera Omnia*, 6 vol. (1938; reprint, Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1946).

“given that God is omnipotent, by what necessity and reason did he assume the lowliness and weakness of human nature, in order to restore human nature?”²⁰ What is striking about these important summary statements early on in the book is not only the absence of guilt and recompense themes, but also this repeated emphasis on the restoration of human nature, and Christ’s entire incarnate work. If Anselm himself summarizes his project as concerning the restoration of human nature to its creational intent of blessed immortality through the *entirety* of what is believed about Christ, one is already suspicious of characterizations of Anselm focused exclusively on Christ’s death as the reparation for guilt. And a careful reading of *CDH* turns this suspicion into conviction.

In fact, one must get well into the bulk of *CDH* before one is able to locate a systematic explanation of why Christ’s *death* was the fitting mechanism for human redemption (one must wait until 2.11; even 2.6, which I take to the climax of the argument, does not focus specifically on Christ’s death). In the earlier sections of *CDH*, Anselm’s focus is much broader and, intriguingly, bears certain continuities with an Athanasian/Irenaeian theme of recapitulation, in which God’s very assumption of human nature at the incarnation unites it with divinity and incorruptibility.²¹ So he claims, for example, in 1.4: “It was fitting that just as death entered the human race through the disobedience of a human being, so too life should be restored by the obedience of a human being.”²² One thinks of Irenaeus’ assertion, “as our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death.”²³ Or compare Anselm’s statement in 1.8: “There was [not] any degradation of God in his incarnation; rather, we believe that human nature was exalted.”²⁴ This hardly sounds like Anselm views Christ’s life as Weaver’s “an elaborate scheme whose purpose was to produce his death.”

What does Anselm mean with his frequent language of “restoring/exalting human nature?” Anselm’s understanding of the incarnation here is tied to his understanding of the purpose of human nature being to attain what he calls “blessed immortality.” He claims that if Adam and Eve had not sinned, they would have been “transformed into incorruptibility,”²⁵ but they lost this because of this fall.²⁶ The incarnation occurred because “God will complete what he began in human nature or else he made so sublime a nature for so great a good in vain.”²⁷ So for Anselm, the incarnation accomplished what would have happened if Adam and Eve had not

²⁰ Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* 1.4, 246.

²¹ This accords with the historic occasion of *CDH*. Anselm did not set out to write an atonement theology *per se*, but to provide a rational defense of the doctrine of the incarnation in the face of the criticisms of unbelievers. In so doing he unfolds a theory of atonement, but his motivating concern is the necessity for the incarnation *as a whole*.

²² Anselm, *CDH* 1.4, 248.

²³ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* V. 21.1 (*Ante-Nicene Fathers: Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, 10 vols., ed. Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, vol. 1 [Peabody: Hendrickson, 1885, reprint, 2012]), 549.

²⁴ Anselm, *CDH* 1.8, 253.

²⁵ Anselm, *CDH* 2.3, 291.

²⁶ Anselm, *CDH* 1.22, 283.

²⁷ Anselm, *CDH* 2.4, 291.

sinned, namely, the completion/exaltation/transformation of human nature (body + soul) into incorruptibility—and it is in *this* context that satisfaction themes are introduced. He argues in 2.4, for example, that a “perfect recompense for sin” was required in order “that he complete what he began in human nature.”²⁸ Here and elsewhere, recompense for sin serves the larger purpose of restoring human nature to the blessed immortality for which it was originally designed. And this is true as a general observation of the structure and flow of argumentation of *CDH*: the satisfaction theme (focused primarily on Christ’s death) operates within a larger restoration theme (focused on Christ’s incarnation and obedience, *including* his death). So, for example, even towards the end of the book, Anselm can argue that, when Christ assumed a sinless human life from the sinful mass at the incarnation, “God restored human nature more wonderfully than he first established it.”²⁹ The presence of this broader recapitulation theme in *CDH* militates against the criticisms of Weaver and Aulén and suggests that Anselm views Christ’s life and death as one, single, inter-connected work of salvation.³⁰

In addition to viewing the incarnation as the exaltation of human nature, Anselm also attaches soteriological significance to Christ’s entire incarnate life. McIntyre draws attention to statements to this effect outside of *CDH*, particularly in *On the Incarnation of the Word* (which goes untreated by Weaver and Aulén).³¹ But even in *CDH*, Anselm can claim that there are many reasons “why it is extremely fitting for him to be like human beings and to have dealings with them, without sin” (emphasizing particularly his teaching and his example),³² and can devote a chapter’s discussion to “how by Christ’s *life* restitution is made to God for human sins.”³³ Here Anselm affirms that in his sinless life Christ not only gave an example of what it means to live justly, but that he “obediently preserved justice” and thus procured satisfaction for sin through his life as well as his death.³⁴ It is evident that Anselm does not drive a wedge between the obedience of Christ’s *life* and the obedience of his *death*, as Aulén suggests. For Anselm, they are of one organic piece. Further, contrary to Aulén’s claim that Anselm divorces atonement and incarnation, Anselm’s *entire book* can be read as an examination of their logical relation. In 2.7, for example, Anselm presents satisfaction atonement as a kind of commentary on Chalcedon: an explanation of *why* Christ had to be both fully God and fully man in one person with two natures (as opposed to various heretical alternatives).³⁵ It is evident that Anselm is self-consciously operating in the tradition of Chalcedon, and *CDH* is its attempt to explain how the doctrine of Christ’s *person*, which had been established by the early church, is logically connected to the

²⁸ Anselm, *CDH* 2.4, 292.

²⁹ Anselm, *CDH* 2.16, 309.

³⁰ The same can be said of other proponents of some species of satisfaction theology. E.g., John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2.16.3 (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; 2 vols; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006): “Now someone asks, How has Christ abolished sin, banished the separation between us and God, and acquired righteousness to render God favorable and kindly toward us? To this we can in general reply that he has achieved this for us by the whole course of his obedience. . . . From the time when he took on the form of a servant, he began to pay the price of liberation in order to redeem us.”

³¹ Cf. McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics*, 191.

³² Anselm, *CDH* 2.11, 304.

³³ Anselm, *CDH* 2.18, 319, italics mine.

³⁴ Anselm, *CDH* 2.18, 320.

³⁵ Anselm, *CDH* 2.7, 294-295.

doctrine of Christ's *work*. (One might have thought Aulén would have picked up on this from the title of Anselm's book.)³⁶

(2) Second, even if it had been the case that Anselm focused too narrowly on Christ's crucifixion (and it may be granted, at least, that many of his disciples have done this), this does not constitute a criticism requiring the *rejection* of satisfaction atonement, but merely its being broadened and being synthesized with other considerations about the meaning of the atonement. Aulén and Weaver's argument does not really constitute a criticism of satisfaction theology *per se*, but of satisfaction theology *when expressed as the exclusive meaning of atonement*, because there is nothing in satisfaction theology that is incompatible with other atonement theories which are more focused on Christ's life and resurrection.³⁷ The different atonement theories on the market are not so much mutually exclusive alternatives as they are overlapping, partial explanations. Doing good atonement theology is less about affirming one theory at the price of total rejection of all others, and more about explaining why and how one theory (or theories) has logical priority and explanatory power over other themes. In fact, it is actually difficult to find thoughtful theologians who held only to one of the standard theories. Already from a glance through the chapter titles of *CDH*, it is apparent that Anselm, for example, in addition to what we have said above about his view of the incarnation, affirmed that the cross was both a manifestation of God's love and victory over Satan. *CDH* 1.6, for example, is titled, "How unbelievers find fault with our statement that God has ransomed us by his death, and that he has, in this way, showed his love towards us, and had come to drive out the devil on our behalf."³⁸ Anselm speaks much of Christ's victory over Satan throughout *CDH*; it even plays an important role in the argument of why God had to become man.³⁹ This seems to run contrary to Weaver's repeated assertion that Anselm has "deleted" Satan from his account of the atonement,⁴⁰ or Aulén's that the *Christus Victor* motif in Anselm is "a mere relic of tradition."⁴¹ But it also raises a basic point: why can we not look at the cross and see both *Christus Victor* and *Christus Vicarious*—and, for that matter, *Christus Exemplar*? Why must one theory be set against others, and then faulted for not explaining all the data?⁴²

I take it as presuppositional that any robust theory concerning the *meaning* of atonement

³⁶ Which, as McIntyre (*St. Anselm and his Critics*, 197-198) emphasizes over and against Aulén, is not, *why did God become man?* But rather *why the God-man?*

³⁷ Indeed, it is arguable that the combination of an Anselmian account of Christ's death with an Athanasian/Irenaeus account of Christ's life as a recapitulation of fallen Adam (and failed Israel) fit together in mutually explanatory ways. Anselm himself, of course, saw *CDH* in continuity with the church Fathers on the doctrine of atonement, claiming at the outset that the work was not strictly necessary because "the holy fathers have said what ought to be sufficient on this matter" (*CDH* 1.1, 245).

³⁸ Anselm, *CDH* 1.6, 249.

³⁹ Anselm, *CDH* 2.19, 324.

⁴⁰ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 229, 275.

⁴¹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 89.

⁴² Cf. Henri Blocher's analysis of the logical relation of *Christus Victor* to substitutionary and legal themes in "Agnus Victor: The Atonement as Victory and Vicarious Punishment," in *What Does it Mean to be Saved? Broadening Evangelical Horizons of Salvation*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 67-94.

must accord with the *facts* of atonement. The *theory* should fit together with the *events*. So, for example, why did Christ have to die, instead of just suffer on the cross for a few hours and then be vindicated? Why did he have to be buried? Why did he have to be born of a virgin and live a sinless life? Why did he have to be raised from the dead and then exalted to heaven? The meaning of these varied events in the life of the God-man is complex and multifaceted, and *no one theory can exhaustively explain them all*. To criticize one theory for not explaining all the data is like criticizing a wrench for not being a good hammer: that is not what it is designed to do. If satisfaction theology does not fully explain Christ's resurrection, for example, one could equally say that the CV perspective of Aulén (or Weaver's NCV) fails fully to explain Christ's crucifixion: why, after all, was it necessary that Christ's conquering of evil powers to take the specific form of death on a cross?

In this connection, we may observe a weakness of Aulén's CV (and implicitly, Weaver's NCV). Aulén claims that CV is not a "theory" or "doctrine" like the Anselmian and Abelardian views of atonement.⁴³ This seems to me to be true, but as a weakness, not a strength. CV does not stand alongside satisfaction atonement as an alternative of the same rank; it is a more of a summative statement of the atonement's *effect* than a theory of its meaning *per se*. By itself it can offer no explanation of the mechanism of the atonement: *how* and *in what way* does Christ's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection defeat evil powers? Why should Christ be the victor by means of crucifixion (or, for that matter, incarnation)? To the extent that Aulén's treatment touches on this question, only the most ambiguous suggestions come into play—as for example his claim that whereas Anselm's atonement satisfies divine justice, CV "transcends the order of justice."⁴⁴ (No, the statement is not clearer in context.) Thus, not only is it difficult to see CV as mutually exclusive with other atonement theories, but it seems (at least implicitly) to depend on one or more of them.

Perhaps if Aulén and Weaver had not confined their engagement with Anselm to his *CDH*, they would have recognized that Anselm did not view that book's satisfaction account of atonement as mutually exclusive with other views. In his later *On the Virginal Conception and on Original Sin*, Anselm gave an additional explanation for the necessity of the incarnation, particularly with a view to how Christ could be fully human and yet born without sin. In the preface of this work, he indicated that this second argument is different from that of *CDH*, and yet perfectly consistent with it: "there can be another explanation, besides the one I offered there, for how God took a sinless human being out of the sinful mass of the human race.... After all, nothing prohibits there being a plurality of reasons for one and the same thing, any one of which can be sufficient by itself."⁴⁵ Later in the book, after much argumentation for Christ's sinless incarnation from an extended discussion of original sin and the virgin birth, Anselm demonstrates an openness to still further reasons for the incarnation: "I do not deny that there may be some other reason, besides the one I have given here and the one I offered elsewhere,

⁴³ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 157.

⁴⁴ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 91.

⁴⁵ Anselm, *On the Virginal Conception and On Original Sin* preface, 329.

why God assumed a sinless human being from the sinful mass, as something unleavened from what is leavened. If someone shows it to me, I will accept it gladly.”⁴⁶ It appears that Anselm’s view of the work of Christ has a complexity and latitude that has not been appreciated by many of his critics. Anselm did not perceive, like they apparently do, that his satisfaction theory was at odds with other accounts of Christ’s work. In fact, he was happy to embrace multiple answers to the question *cur Deus homo?*

(3) Third, perhaps the strangest aspect of Aulén’s criticism is that Anselm’s atonement is not really a divine work, but only a work of Christ *qua* man. Even prior to reading *CDH*, the claim is puzzling, since such a view of atonement would be patently Nestorian in its division of the human and divine natures of Christ. (Indeed, Aulén’s 1968 preface to *Christus Victor*, responding to charges of monophysitism against his first edition, more clearly emphasizes the unity of Christ’s work as both God and man out of concern not to underemphasize the humanity of Christ.)⁴⁷ When one turns to the actual text of *CDH*, Aulén’s charge becomes positively unintelligible. It is unclear, for example, how Aulén can say that for Anselm “the merit of Christ cannot be infinite because He only suffered in His human nature,”⁴⁸ when in reality Anselm has argued precisely the opposite at great length.⁴⁹ In fact, the strong doctrine of divine impassibility which undergirds Anselm’s Christology⁵⁰ would make more intelligible the charge that Anselm *overplays* Christ’s deity, to the neglect of his humanity. As McIntyre notes, “the burden of St. Anselm’s work, as Aulén recognizes, though he does not appreciate the implications of such a recognition, is that man *cannot* make the satisfaction required of God.”⁵¹ Aulén’s criticism seems to rest upon a clear misconstruing of Anselm’s Christology and a failure to engage sympathetically with the actual text of *CDH*. Fairweather, who is one of those charging Aulén with monophysitism and who claims that his “classical theory is less than a truly evangelical theology of atonement,”⁵² draws attention to the continuity between Anselmian and patristic Christology. After quoting *CDH* 2.6-2.7, he writes:

What is all this but the doctrine of Chalcedon and Leo the Great, of Sophonius and Martin, of the Lateran council and Constantinople III, and in very much the same terms? It is the divine Word who acts, but the Word has truly become flesh, and he acts *divine et humane*—in a divine and in a human manner. When Anselm so consistently and searchingly expounds the essence of man’s redemption as a divine-human work, it is this patristic and conciliar vision of the divine humility in the incarnation that dominates his thinking.⁵³

⁴⁶ Anselm, *On the Virginal Conception and On Original Sin* 21, 348-349.

⁴⁷ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, ix.

⁴⁸ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 94.

⁴⁹ Cf. Anselm, *CDH* 2.14 and 2.15.

⁵⁰ Cf., e.g., Anselm, *CDH* 2.12 or 2.13.

⁵¹ McIntyre, *St. Anselm and His Critics*, 198, italics his.

⁵² Eugene R. Fairweather, “Incarnation and Atonement: An Anselmian Response to Aulén’s *Christus Victor*,” *Canadian Journal of Theology* 7 (1961), 175.

⁵³ Fairweather, “Incarnation and Atonement,” 173.

Rock #2: Anselm's atonement theory is the product of medieval feudalism

A second criticism raised against satisfaction atonement, particularly by Weaver, is that it is the product of Anselm's medieval feudal setting.⁵⁴ Weaver goes on for many pages contrasting the early church's sense of confrontation with the world with its post-Constantinian transformation into an Empire.⁵⁵ Drawing from the work of Joerg Rieger,⁵⁶ he situates Anselm specifically within the centralized Norman Empire ruling England in the middle-late medieval era.⁵⁷ He argues that Anselm saw the king and the archbishop as co-rulers of English society, who were in turn under the pope and emperor as co-rulers of Western Christendom, who were in turn under God.⁵⁸ This pyramid of hierarchical relationships extended downwards from king and archbishop, through the nobility, etc. For Weaver, Anselm's satisfaction theology is a reflection of this feudal system, with God as a sort of feudal lord, owed honor by his creatures. He argues that *CDH* was not merely birthed in this context, but that its meaning is *limited* to this context: "Anselm's atonement imagery is specific to the medieval church and virtually irrelevant to the early church."⁵⁹ Furthermore, in Weaver's view, because of its inextricable connection to the Christian Empire in which it was birthed, satisfaction atonement also lent support to Christendom's violent tendencies, and particularly the Crusades. He calls its argumentation "a philosophical parallel to the power displayed in the first crusade,"⁶⁰ and he claims, "Anselm's satisfaction atonement reflects the church that accommodated the emperor's sword and eventually supported the crusades."⁶¹

What can be said about this argument? Weaver claims at one point that "empire provides the context for Anselm's argument the way 'water provides the context for fish.'"⁶² A fish cannot live outside of water; it is designed for water habitation only. Is Anselm's understanding of atonement similarly designed to inhabit medieval feudalism only? There are at least three difficulties with this interpretation of Anselm.

First, as a sort of preliminary consideration, it is worth pointing out that for all his focus on Anselm's social and cultural setting, Weaver does not seem to have an equally vibrant

⁵⁴ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 17. This criticism is quite common. Note the claim of Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in the New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), for example, that "(Anselm) used a framework and imagery taken, not from the Bible, but from the feudalistic system of his day" (156). Or note the dichotomy implicit in Grensted's assertion, "Anselm [regards] God no longer as a Judge, but as a feudal Overlord, bound above all things to safeguard His honor and to demand an adequate satisfaction for any infringement of it" (quoted in Gwenfair M. Walters, "The Atonement in Medieval Theology," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 246). Quotations to this effect could be multiplied *ad nauseam*, but we will focus on Weaver as a representative of this view.

⁵⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, especially 113ff., 228ff., 309ff.

⁵⁶ Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2007).

⁵⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 115.

⁵⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 233.

⁵⁹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 117.

⁶⁰ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 235.

⁶¹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 127, cf. 113-114.

⁶² Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 235.

appreciation of his own social and cultural setting. One wonders how Weaver would feel about his book being interpreted primarily as the result of its origin in a Western, egalitarian, liberal democracy. (In fact, it is arguable that at crucial junctures Weaver's pacifism and social views do seem to influence his interpretation of the data.) One also wonders whether, if this treatment of Anselm is permitted, any doctrine of the atonement can be interpreted as a result of its social context.⁶³ This whole method of critique requires greater caution. A theologian's social and cultural setting may influence his or her argument, but at the end of the day the argument should be considered on its own merits.

Second, and more to the point, Weaver's argumentation on this point is difficult to square with the text of *CDH*. Anselm's book can be read and understood without any conception of feudalism (or the penitential system, another association Weaver draws) coming to mind. One rather gets the impression that Anselm, having spent most of his life in a monastery, was far more shaped by theological interlocutions with fellow monks (and the objections of unbelievers) than by the larger societal realities of medievalism. While feudal concepts may have influenced Anselm's language and imagery at various points, Weaver has not demonstrated how the more general substructure of Anselm's argument is logically *dependent* on feudalism. It is one thing for an argument to be articulated within a feudal framework; it is another for its logic to be *reducible* to that feudal framework, such that translating it to another framework is like taking a fish out of water. It is not clear from Weaver why the central structures of Anselm's argument are any less meaningful in non-feudal societies. In fact, those aspects of feudalism which are most relevant to Anselm's theory seem to be those which are most easily transferable to other social arrangements, and frequently impinge upon basic relational concepts.

Take the notion of "showing honor," for instance. In what society (or private social setting) is the showing of honor *not* important for the maintenance of order and harmonious relationship? It seems this dynamic is equally operative in relationships within feudal medieval Britain, as well as within, say, a ladies' tea party, a college fraternity drinking contest, or a motorcycle gang tour. Or take Anselm's definition of sin as "failing to pay back what one owes to God," with what one owes to God being further specified as the human will being subject to God's will.⁶⁴ (Later, he can collapse this to define sin simply as violating the will of God.)⁶⁵ While this definition of sin may borrow a bit from feudal language, it is difficult to imagine how its logic or meaning is not broad enough to be intelligible in any culture. In fact, since an understanding of sin as *debt* is an important biblical theme, one can sympathize with Brown's claim that in using this terminology Anselm is drawing more upon the New Testament than his feudal setting. Brown notes, as an example, the clause "forgive us our debts" in the Lord's Prayer (which in the Vulgate employs Anselm's characteristic term *debitum*).⁶⁶

⁶³ E.g., Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 42ff., interpret penal substitutionary models of atonement as the result of individualistic modernism.

⁶⁴ Anselm, *CDH* 1.11, 261.

⁶⁵ Anselm, *CDH* 1.21, 281.

⁶⁶ Brown, "Anselm on Atonement," 292.

Third, Weaver’s attempt to link satisfaction theory with medieval ecclesiology seems at times to strain the historical data. He argues that NCV fell away after the Constantinian synthesis between church and state, and the resultant loss of the sense of confrontation and antithesis between the church and the world.⁶⁷ Thus he argues that this enmeshment of church and state infected earlier, pre-medieval theology: for example, he faults Chalcedonian Christology for its reliance upon imperial power, for its Greek, hierarchical, philosophical categories, and for its inability to substantiate nonviolent ethics.⁶⁸ These are significant criticisms, for they stand not only against Anselm, but against most of the church’s theology between Constantine and Western modernity. But as Boersma objects, “if the Constantinian arrangement of the 4th century was indeed responsible for the demise of the *Christus Victor* theme, why did it take until the eleventh century for the Anselmian model to appear as a viable alternative?”⁶⁹ Boersma also shows how the Arian party was far more comfortable with the imperial powers of the day than the formulators of Nicaea and Chalcedon, and how the *Christus Victor* theme was retained in the church after Constantine.⁷⁰ One might also ask why satisfaction remains so popular today among those who may not be able to state exactly what feudalism is. A satisfaction view of atonement is, by Weaver’s own admission, the dominant view in the recent West. If the medieval Christian empire was the water in which Anselm’s argument could swim, as Weaver put it, why has it had such success in post-medieval Western history? Fish do not normally swim so well out of water.

Rock #3: Anselm’s atonement theory is legalistic and narrowly juridical

Aulén argues that Anselm’s association of forgiveness with satisfaction is legalistic and juridical. Speaking of Anselm’s view, he claims, “the whole idea is essentially legalistic,”⁷¹ and “the whole conception of Atonement is juridical in its inmost essence.”⁷² He situates Anselm’s theory within a more general “legalism characteristic of the medieval outlook,”⁷³ arguing that Anselm’s theory depends logically on the medieval penitential system,⁷⁴ and specifically on the notion of “excess of merit,” drawn from Cyprian and Tertullian.⁷⁵ In this connection, he also emphasizes that Anselm’s theory is rationalistic,⁷⁶ prioritizes divine justice over divine love,⁷⁷ and focuses on the consequences of sin (especially guilt) rather than sin itself.⁷⁸ Similarly, Weaver argues that Anselm’s focus is narrowly on the sinner’s legal status before God, not on our participation in the reign of Christ in history, and as a result his focus has no concern for the

⁶⁷ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 107.

⁶⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 120-126, especially 122.

⁶⁹ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 156.

⁷⁰ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 156-158.

⁷¹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 83.

⁷² Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 90.

⁷³ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 92.

⁷⁴ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 86.

⁷⁵ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 82.

⁷⁶ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 91, 157.

⁷⁷ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 156.

⁷⁸ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 92, 147-8. Aulén claims that Anselm’s theory therefore downplays the seriousness of sin.

ethical transformation of believers.⁷⁹ According to Weaver, Anselmian atonement is “irrelevant for ethical reflection other than to encourage passive suffering.”⁸⁰

First of all, it must be pointed out that many of the critiques of Aulén in particular feel too sweeping and dismissive (rather like lobbing rocks from the sidewalk). The charge of rationalism, for example, is often raised without any explanation of *how* specifically Anselm is rationalistic. When he does give a reason, the portrait he paints often smacks of caricature: for example, he claims that Anselm and the scholastics sought to “elaborate a theology which shall provide a comprehensive explanation of the Divine government of the world, which shall answer all questions and solve all riddles, not only of this world, but also of the world to come.”⁸¹ Anyone who has given *CDH* a sympathetic reading will immediately sense the unfairness of this characterization of Anselm’s method of theology. At the start of the book, Anselm insists on the imperfection of his understanding of atonement, exhibits hesitancy to enter into the question, and claims that “no matter what someone might be able to say on this topic, there are still loftier reasons for so great a matter that remain hidden.”⁸² And throughout the book Anselm shows a consistent willingness to leave certain questions to divine mystery. Concerning Christ’s assumption of a sinless nature, for example, he claims that “we should reverently tolerate the fact that in the hidden depths of so great a matter there is something we do not know.”⁸³ It is therefore difficult to understand Aulén’s assertion that Anselm seeks to “answer all questions and solve all riddles, not only of this world, but also of the world to come.”

A feeling of unfairness also arises in Aulén’s association of Anselm with certain doctrines of Cyprian and Tertullian. Because Anselm has had such a significant influence on the subsequent development of Western thought, there has been an all-too-easy tendency to judge him according to the evolution and impact of his ideas (and it is arguable that both Weaver and Aulén do this). But here Aulén seems to associate Anselm with *earlier* developments in the church. He summarizes Tertullian’s doctrine of *supererogatoria* (acts such as fasting, voluntary celibacy, and martyrdom, which contribute to an “excess of merit”), draws a connection to Cyprian’s doctrine that superfluous merit can be transferred from one person to another, and then concludes that from this development “we have here the whole essence of the Latin doctrine of the Atonement.”⁸⁴ (82). *What is lacking is any textual basis for the association of these ideas with Anselm.* Given that Anselm does not argue on the basis of a notion of “excess of merit” in *CDH*, explicitly rejects the association between penitence and satisfaction that Tertullian drew,⁸⁵ and probably never read Cyprian or Tertullian,⁸⁶ it is difficult to avoid the impression that Anselm’s theory is being read through the lens of these earlier thinkers and legalistic concepts.

⁷⁹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 98-100.

⁸⁰ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 238.

⁸¹ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 156.

⁸² Anselm, *CDH* 1.2, 247.

⁸³ Anselm, *CDH* 2.16, 309.

⁸⁴ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 82.

⁸⁵ Anselm, *CDH* 1.20; cf. Peters, “The Atonement in Anselm and Luther,” 303.

⁸⁶ Richard W. Southern, *St. Anselm: A Portrait in a Landscape* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), esp. 53ff.

In addition, on the charge of being legalistic and juridical, many of the statements above concerning the presence of continuities between Anselm and Athanasius demonstrate a breadth to *CDH* which Aulén does not allow. For example, his summary of his argument in the preface speaks nothing of satisfaction or guilt, or even sin or forgiveness, instead focusing on the restoration of human nature to its creational intent.⁸⁷ And the early chapters of *CDH* depict the work of Christ as being to “restore life to the world,” saying nothing of satisfaction or recompense for individual sinners.⁸⁸ In fact, the word “guilt” does not appear until 1.11, well into the book. And even here, Anselm situates forgiveness of sins as a penultimate goal serving the larger aim of human happiness and flourishing.⁸⁹ In fact, the more one reads the actual text of *CDH*, the more awkward, simplified and caricatured representations of Anselm become. One finds, for example, in the longest chapter of the book, 1.18, concerning whether the number of redeemed human beings will outnumber the number of fallen angels, a robust focus on the resurrection of the universe as an important part of Christ’s atoning work.⁹⁰ Page after page passes with heaven, blessedness, and cosmic renewal being eagerly explored, with no question of the individual’s guilt in view. When Anselm addresses the problem of guilt, his discussion is situated in a context that seems more associated with Irenaeus, recapitulation, and Chalcedon than Tertullian, Cyprian, and penance.

Furthermore, in criticizing Anselm’s atonement as narrowly legalistic, neither Weaver nor Aulén seems sufficiently aware of the danger of a false dichotomy between the legal and the ethical dimensions of our status as God’s creatures. Weaver acknowledges that a sinner’s changed status before God could lead to ethical transformation, but faults this possibility for not situating ethics as an *intrinsic* element of atonement.⁹¹ But why must ethical transformation be an “intrinsic element” of atonement theology? Atonement theology, after all, has to do with the reconciliation of God and sinful human beings. Anselm did not set out to make a theory of ethical transformation *per se*. Similarly, both Aulén and Weaver claim that it is legalistic to tie forgiveness of sins to the satisfaction of divine justice, but they fail to demonstrate *why* this is the case, or to engage with *CDH* 1.12, where Anselm argues that divine forgiveness and human forgiveness are different because God is the judge and moral governor of the world.⁹² This makes it difficult for Weaver or Aulén to appreciate the extent to which, for Anselm, the satisfaction of justice is *itself* an act of divine mercy. As Peters writes,

God for Anselm is no less merciful, no less gracious, than is God for Luther or for Aulén. God created man out of love, and it was God’s purpose that men find fulfillment in eternal blessedness. And in the final analysis, God’s purpose is accomplished. His grace is victorious. But *en route* Anselm wants us to take

⁸⁷ Anselm, *CDH* preface, 238-9.

⁸⁸ Anselm, *CDH* 1.1, 245.

⁸⁹ Anselm, *CDH* 1.11, 261.

⁹⁰ Anselm, *CDH* 1.18, 272.

⁹¹ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 99.

⁹² Anselm, *CDH* 1.12, 278.

seriously the gravity of man's sin and the ultimate dimensions of God's historical activity. The legalistic structure of the relationship between God and men is not the last thing to be said about God. It is the means whereby God's mercy is shown to triumph.⁹³

Finally, while an adequate account of atonement must do more than address the problem of guilt, this problem should not be written off as the result of a legalistic medieval mindset. Guilt is a perennial aspect of our sinful condition.⁹⁴ This may explain (in part) why Anselm's atonement theology did not die out with the medieval penitential system, but became normative in Reformation theology, and remains dominant in the Western church today.

Rock #4: Anselm's atonement theory is violent and promotes violence

Weaver, following the concerns of several feminist theologians, argues that satisfaction atonement is inherently violent and thus justifies violence. At the beginning of the book, Weaver states that his "working assumption" is that "the rejection of violence . . . should be visible in expressions of Christology or atonement."⁹⁵ He argues that because Anselm's argument is premised in the notion of retributive violence, it serves as a justification for racism, slavery, sexism, exploitation of the poor and marginalized, and other various societal evils, all of which he understands to be expressions of violence.⁹⁶ Echoing the concerns of some feminist theologians, Weaver worries that Anselm's atonement theory upholds an ideal of passive submission to victimization, which has dangerous consequences for those living under abuse or oppression.⁹⁷ In this connection, Weaver also emphasizes the white, European, male-dominated nature of the satisfaction atonement tradition.⁹⁸

Two preliminary observations: first of all, on the issue of white, male, European influence for satisfaction theology, virtually *all* pre-modern theology, whether on the doctrine of atonement or any other doctrine, has a disproportionate influence of white European males. This is a problem for all who value the Christian theological tradition (and the Western intellectual tradition more generally) to grapple with, but it is not really an argument against satisfaction theory. (If it were, would it not equally apply to, e.g., *Christus Victor*?) Secondly, in criticizing the notion of retributive justice, Weaver is setting himself at odds, not only with traditional Christian theology, but with the philosophical underpinnings of Western judicial systems, and most penal codes throughout human history. One suspects, with Boersma, that Weaver's definition of violence, as that which causes harm, and his opposition to violence in all its forms

⁹³ Ted Peters, "The Atonement in Anselm and Luther," 305.

⁹⁴ Contra Green and Baker, who refer to "the huge populations of our world for whom guilt is a non-issue" (*Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 45). But if all cultures are fallen, how can guilt be a "non-issue" for any culture?

⁹⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 7-8.

⁹⁶ These charges run throughout the book, but for an example consider his striking claim about satisfaction theory and black slavery (Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 320).

⁹⁷ Cf., e.g., Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 156.

⁹⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 151.

are ethically impractical in a fallen world.⁹⁹ Nor is it clear how Weaver can justify economic boycotts without inconsistency, for these clearly cause certain kinds of harm.

On the charge of violence against Anselm, Weaver does not convincingly demonstrate how the justification of violence follows logically from satisfaction atonement. His affirmation of the charge of child-abuse made by various feminist theologians fails to do justice to the Trinitarian nature of Anselm's atonement theology, Christ's willingness to suffer, or the redemptive purpose which lay behind Christ's suffering. Child abuse is neither willing nor redemptive, and the relationship between an abused person and his or her abuser is not comparable to the relationship between God the Father and God the Son, given their unity in the Godhead. All these points are underscored by Anselm—in fact, Anselm belabors the Son's willingness and initiative in his death frequently throughout *CDH* (cf. 1.9, 1.10, 2.17).¹⁰⁰ An atonement theology which idealizes passive submission to victimization is a serious pastoral concern, but it not a concern that involves Anselm, for whom Christ's atoning work was neither passive nor victimizing.¹⁰¹

In addition, it is unclear how Weaver's NCV is ultimately any less violent than Anselm's theory. The title of Weaver's book notwithstanding, violence is one of the indisputable historical facts which all atonement theories must deal with: the atonement involved crucifixion, and crucifixion is brutally violent. As Richard Mouw has recently written, "the cross is indeed a display of violence toward Jesus. No atonement theory can avoid that fact."¹⁰² It becomes apparent at various points in his argumentation that what Weaver really opposes is not a violent atonement *per se*, but an atonement which involves *divinely sanctioned* violence. Thus he emphasizes that the evil powers, not God, killed Jesus, and that Jesus' mission was not to die, but to make present God's kingdom.¹⁰³ But anyone who seeks to retain at least a minimal understanding of God's sovereignty over history must explain whether or not God allowed the death of his Son. Even if Weaver were an open theist, he would have to imperil God's omnipotence and sovereignty over historical events in order to remove completely any divine agency in Christ's crucifixion. Force of logic seems to bring a reluctant Weaver to this

⁹⁹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 45-46. One of Boersma's examples of justifiable violence is violently pushing a child away out of the street in order to save him or her from oncoming traffic.

¹⁰⁰ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 231, acknowledges this point, but does not draw out its relevance to the child abuse charge.

¹⁰¹ It is worth noting at this point that many of Weaver's charges of violence in Anselm would seem to be equally applicable to much patristic theology, and much of the relevant biblical data as well, which does not seem to be very conscientiously engaged in *The Nonviolent Atonement*. In a book so staunchly opposed to the notion of divinely sanctioned violence, one would expect some treatment of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the conquest of Canaan under Joshua, the imprecatory Psalms, Jesus' cleansing of the temple with a whip (John 2:15), or any of the other divinely sanctioned killings and wars throughout Israel's history. (What would Weaver think of David's killing of Goliath, for example? It was clearly violent.) Or when Weaver claims that Christ was not sent to die, one would hope for some discussion of Isaiah's assertion that "it was the will of the Lord to crush him" (Isaiah 53:10), Christ's statement just before his death that "it is for this purpose that I came to this hour" (John 12:27), or Peter's sermon declaring that Christ was delivered to crucifixion "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" (Acts 2:23).

¹⁰² Richard Mouw, "Why *Christus Victor* Is Not Enough," *Christianity Today* (May 2012), 31.

¹⁰³ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 90ff.

admission: “there is a sense . . . in which narrative Christus Victor can respond, ‘yes, God did will the death of Jesus.’”¹⁰⁴

So at the end of the day, how is NCV any less violent than satisfaction atonement? Both Weaver and Anselm affirm that Christ suffered violence through the agency of sinful men and demons. Both affirm that God in some sense willed this violent death for the salvation of human beings. Whether Christ submits to violence because of his witness to God’s kingdom, or to satisfy divine justice, are not the same pastoral concerns on the table? Could not a victim of abuse equally draw false inferences from Christ’s submission to violence at the hands of evil powers as he/she could from Christ’s submission to violence according to the will of the Father? All atonement theologies must address these questions because all atonement theologies seek to interpret a violent atonement. In fact, it is possible that Weaver’s attempt to extricate violence from the atonement has only exacerbated the problem of violence, since the mechanism or trigger in Weaver’s account of atonement seems to boil down to mere revelation. Weaver says that Christ’s death “reveals the full character of the powers that enslave sinful humankind and that oppose the rule of God, and it reveals what it cost Jesus to fulfill his mission.”¹⁰⁵ It is not clear exactly what is atoned for in this view (although it is important to Weaver to retain the term “atonement”),¹⁰⁶ and like other subjective accounts of the atonement, it seems unable to explain the basic historical event behind the atonement: why did Christ have to suffer and die in order to reveal the powers? Why was death by brutal, violent crucifixion a necessary part of this revelation? Because it cannot explain this necessity, Weaver’s account of atonement runs the risk of making Christ’s suffering appear arbitrary. It is presented as a “nonviolent atonement,” but it is difficult (for me, anyway) to understand how it is nonviolent *or* atonement.

Conclusion

Emil Brunner famously stated that the atonement “is the Christian religion itself; it is the main point; it is not something alongside of the center; it is the substance and kernel, not the husk.”¹⁰⁷ While some may quibble with this exact formulation, no one can deny the fundamental importance of the doctrine of atonement for the Christian faith. It is essential for the church to construct a doctrine of the atonement which is both intelligible in contemporary settings as well as rooted in the biblical and historical reflection of the church. In fact, an atonement theology’s ability to communicate in contemporary settings will likely be hindered if it is unable to appropriate voices from throughout the entire stream of church history. Among these voices is Anselm. Even those who decide not to live in his house owe it the courtesy of a careful walk-through, not lobs from the sidewalk. And those who decide to make it their residence may discover that it contains unexpected and intriguing alleyways to other houses on the street.

¹⁰⁴ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 91.

¹⁰⁵ Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 94.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. his critique of Stephen Finlan’s rejection of the concept of atonement (Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 290).

¹⁰⁷ Quoted in Frank A. James, III, “General Introduction,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 18-19.