

Olive Branches

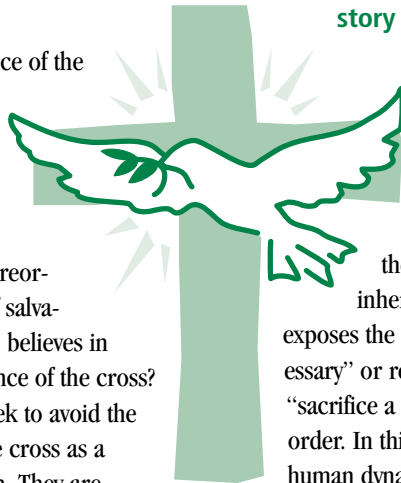
The Cross of Nonviolence: A Lenten Reflection

by Leo Hartshorn

Lent is the season when the church takes a liturgical journey toward the cross. During the celebration of Lent Christian peacemakers will again be confronted with the paradox of God's salvation for the world coming to us by means of an extreme act of human violence. During Lent we can reflect on the role that the violence of the cross plays in our understandings of salvation and our call to be peacemakers in the world.

The link between the violence of the cross and salvation of the world has become problematic for some Christians. The traditional doctrine of atonement says that the violence of the cross was necessary, even preordained by God, as the means of salvation. So, how does the one who believes in nonviolence deal with the violence of the cross? The following brief sketches seek to avoid the link between the violence of the cross as a direct means of our redemption. They are meant to help Christian peacemakers look at the cross of Jesus through a new lens.

The cross was an instrument of political terrorism. In this view of the cross crucifixion is understood as an act used by imperial Rome to terrorize the populace against any kind of revolt or resistance against the empire. Jesus was a victim of the power, violence, and terrorism of the state. From this perspective the violence of the cross is not viewed so much as a symbol of redemption as it is a symbol of violent political power that continues to claim victims. Redemption comes through those who resist the violence and terrorism of the state and seek to liberate its victims, as did Jesus.



The cross calls us to solidarity with the suffering and oppressed. In this perspective the cross is not simply a statement about the human Jesus. In the cross God identifies with the crucified and suffering Jesus and with all those who are oppressed. The saving power of the cross is in God's and our solidarity with the suffering, oppressed, and victims of systemic violence.

The cross sheds light on the human story of acquisitive desire, rivalry, vengeance and scapegoating. The narrative of the crucifixion is a dark drama that reveals the human tendencies to want what others have, to end up in rivalry, to seek vengeance, and then to blame others for the violence inherent within ourselves. The cross exposes the lie at the heart of the myth of "necessary" or redemptive violence and the need to "sacrifice a scapegoat" in order to keep social order. In this view the cross uncovers the human dynamics of desire and violence, potentially transforming our ways of living in the world.

The cross reveals the ultimate nonviolent example of Jesus. This view of the cross is centered in the nonviolent response of Jesus as an example to follow. The crucifixion is the culmination of Jesus' nonviolent teachings and lifestyle. Jesus endured the cross rather than avoid it through violent resistance. Jesus serves as an example to follow that can transform how we deal with violence.

The cross is an irredeemable symbol for salvation. Due to traditional views of the cross, which link violence and redemption, some
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Christians see the teaching of the cross as a saving event or as an example to be imitated not simply as problematic but as dangerous and “irredeemable.” The violent image of a heavenly Father, who offers his beloved Son to be abused and killed for the sins we have committed is troubling. Some have described this image as “cosmic child abuse.”

The cross is victory over evil powers. A once held view of the cross as Christ’s victory over the powers of dark-

ness has been revived. This updated version connects the narrative of Jesus’ nonviolent life with the victory of God’s reign through the cross. Jesus lived the nonviolent way of God’s reign unto death. By raising Jesus from death, God has manifest the way of Jesus to be victorious over the powers of darkness.

For the full article go to the PJSN website: <http://peace.menolink.org>

Leo Hartshorn is Minister of Peace and Justice, Mennonite Mission Network.

Book Review

by Malinda Berry

J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001).

In the introduction to his most recent book, Bluffton College professor of religion J. Denny Weaver describes a “long-running” conversation about christology and atonement. For Weaver, confronting “images and assumptions of violence” that are basic to and dominate this conversation is a responsibility that ought to be borne by Mennonite theological reflection. Such confrontation is an important goal of his book.

He works toward this goal in two ways. First, Weaver’s own theological, ethical, and biblical concerns as a Christian pacifist committed to nonviolence come into direct conversation with both the contextual voices of feminist, womanist, and black theologies and the voices of Christendom using his own atonement model: narrative Christus Victor. Second,

Weaver looks at the questions and criticisms of traditional atonement models that these theologies have raised in recent years. These voices offer what he calls contextualized critiques and are important because they expose the problems of the “received theology of Christendom.” This tradition gives violence a central place in the life-story of Jesus Christ.

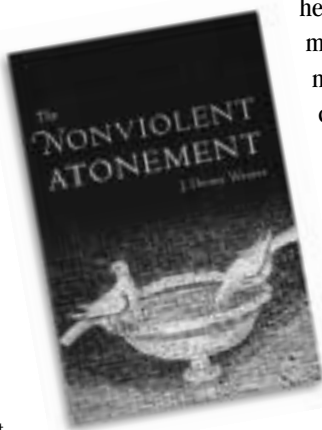
Readers who are new (and not so new) to the academic side of the atonement conversation will find Weaver’s survey

of traditional atonement motifs helpful as he sets up his own model. The development of narrative Christus Victor is a creative approach to difficult issues. On the one hand there are issues of real and personal violence Jesus experienced through his very violent death by crucifixion.

How are we to talk about this violence as Christians who hold Jesus’ death as

sacred because we believe

that it saves us? On the other hand are issues of systemic violence that contextual critiques describe as theological problems. How does Jesus’ person and work confront and save us from social injustices like white privilege, sexism, racial discrimina-



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tion, militarism, and so on?

In the end, Weaver’s work stands as an important contribution to an on-going conversation because of his tenacious refusal to allow the violence in our Christian imagination to go unchecked.



Olive Branches is a publication created by Peace and Justice Support Network to inspire creative thinking and action in our collective peace and justice work. Published twice a year, *Olive Branches* is a companion piece to Dove Tales, PJSN’s biannual newsletter. **PJSN Reference Committee:** Leo Hartshorn, Susan Mark Landis, Valerie Weidman, Dick Davis, Malinda Berry, Titus Peachey, Mark Frey, Yvonne Diaz Keeler, Andy Peifer Nissley, and Jorge Vielman. **Editor:** Leo Hartshorn, Minister of Peace and Justice, Mennonite Mission Network. **Designer:** Cynthia Friesen, volunteer. **Send your ideas to:** 202 South Ann Street, Lancaster, PA 17602, 717-399-8353, LeoH@MennoniteMission.net. **Web site:** <http://peace.menolink.org>