THE MEANING OF THE DEATH OF JESUS:
A VIOLENT MEANS TO A NONVIOLENT END
PART 2

JEFFREY FLETCHER

We now give consideration to a theory of the Atonement that is both ancient and post-modern — Christus Victor, the classic idea of Atonement. According to Robert Webber, Christus Victor was "the dominant interpretation of the work of Christ for the first thousand years of history."[1] In the Reformation, Martin Luther was a notable adherent of this theology. Webber notes that in his death and resurrection Christ achieved a victory over the powers of evil. He writes that this view "presupposes a strong awareness of the principalities and powers, a sensitivity that we find in the New Testament writings and in the liturgies and teaching of the ancient church."[2] In one of his classic hymns, Luther gives evidence of his belief in Christus Victor: "The prince of darkness grim/We tremble not for him/His rage we can endure/For lo, his doom is sure/One little word shall fell him" ("A Mighty Fortress Is Our God").

In the post-enlightenment era with the trend moving towards rationalism, and little place for supernatural forms of evil in Satan and the demonic, it should not surprise us that an idea of the Atonement that takes seriously the powers of evil should fade into distant memory.

We owe thanks to Gustaf Aulen for bringing the concept back into awareness in 1930 in the publication of his book *Christus Victor*. As Aulen conceptualizes this theory:

> Christ — Christus Victor — fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the "tyrants" under which human beings are in bondage and suffering. In Christ, God reconciles the world to Himself. The most marked difference between the classical or dramatic type and the so-called objective or Anselmian type lies in the fact that it represents the work of atonement or reconciliation as from first to last a work of God Himself, a continuous divine work; whereas according to the other view the act of atonement has indeed its origin in God's will, but is, in its

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[1] Robert Webber, *Ancient-Future Faith*, Baker Books, 1999, 43.
[2] *Ibid.*

carrying out, an offering made to God by Christ "as man and on man's behalf" and may therefore be called a discontinuous divine work.[3]

The Christus Victor or social theory of the Atonement has been embraced by a diverse range of post-modern theologians, from Professor Robert Webber of conservative Wheaton College to liberal Christian pacifist Walter Wink, who observes that:

> The Christus Victor theology fell out of favor, not because of intrinsic inadequacies, but because it was subversive to the church's role as state religion. The church no longer saw the demonic as lodged in the empire, but in the empire's enemies. Atonement became a highly individual transaction between the believer and God; society was assumed to be Christian, so the idea that the work of Christ entails the radical critique of society was largely abandoned.[4]

Here we see Wink linking a theology of the Atonement with the shifting relationship between Christianity and the state. It has been previously documented that the formulation of the doctrine of the nature of Christ was influenced by the politics of the day.[5] Is it difficult to imagine that politics could have played a role in the theology of the death of Christ as well?

It is noteworthy that the emergence of the substitutionary or Latin theory of the Atonement came to replace the Christus Victor theory of the Atonement following the major split in the church between the Western (Roman) Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Church. We note that while the satisfaction theory became predominant in the Latin Western Church, Christus Victor continued and continues to this day to be the dominant understanding of Atonement in the Eastern Church.

> Where Orthodoxy sees chiefly Christ the Victor, the late medieval and post-medieval west sees chiefly Christ the Victim. While Orthodoxy interprets the Crucifixion primarily as an act of triumphant victory over the powers of evil, the west — particularly since the time of Anselm of Canterbury (?1033-1109) has tended rather to think of the cross in penal and juridical terms, as an act of satisfaction or substitution designed to propitiate the wrath of an angry Father.[6]

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[3] See Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor*, Wipf & Stock, 2003, 4.

[4] Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, Augsburg Fortress, 1992, 150.

[5] I.e., Emperor Constantine's embracing of the Christian faith to unite his political empire. See Richard Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, Harvest, 2000.

[6] Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, Penguin Books, 1993, 229.

Both church and civil politics undoubtedly play a role in the primacy of Atonement theories.

Some of Christus Victor's fiercest critics come from feminist theology:

> The believer whose thoughts and feelings have been shaped by a tradition that teaches or ritualizes in liturgy the Christus Victor view may interpret her or his suffering in this light. In response to suffering it will be said, Be patient, something good will come of this. The believer is persuaded to endure suffering as a prelude to new life. God is pictured as working through suffering, pain, and even death to fulfill "his" divine purpose. When suffering comes it may be looked upon as a gift, and the believer will ask, Where is God leading me? What does God have in store for me? In this tradition, God is the all-powerful determiner of every event in life, and every event is part of a bigger picture — a plan that will end in triumph. When people say things such as, God has a purpose in the death of the six million Jews, the travesty of this theology is revealed. Such a theology has devastating effects on human life. The reality is that victimization never leads to triumph. It can lead to extended pain if it is not refused or fought…It can lead to actual death. By denying the reality of suffering and death, the Christus Victor theory of the Atonement defames all those who suffer and trivializes tragedy.[7]

Some of the extreme feminist theologians call for radical reinterpretation of the death of Jesus:

> Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering. Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of the culture is of "divine child abuse" — God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son? If Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from this theology. We must do away with the Atonement, this idea of a blood sin upon the whole human race which can be washed away only by the blood of the lamb. This bloodthirsty God is the God of the patriarchy who at the moment controls the whole Christian tradition. This raises the key question for oppressed people seeking liberation within this tradition: If we throw out the Atonement is Christianity left?[8]

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[7] Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, "For God so Loved the World?" in *Violence against Women and Children, A Christian Theological Sourcebook*, Carol Adams and Marie Fortune, eds., Continuum International, 1996, 40.
[8] *Ibid.*, 56.

In their "Christianity without Atonement," "Jesus' death was an unjust act done by humans who chose to reject his way of life and sought to silence him through death. The travesty of the suffering and death of Jesus is not redeemed by the resurrection. Suffering is never redemptive, and suffering cannot be redeemed. The cross is a sign of tragedy. God's grief is revealed there and everywhere and every time life is thwarted by violence."[9]

Another extreme reaction to the violence of the Atonement is articulated in the universalist position:

> Most ancient peoples believed divine favor could be purchased only in blood. Both Judaism and Christianity accepted this assumption with little critique. Judaism, though rejecting the sacrifice of humans, still adopted this view of the cosmos and approach to salvation. God kept Abraham from killing Isaac, but a ram still had to die. This God said "the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life" (Leviticus 17:11). Only blood could atone for sin and restrain the wrathful hand of God. Early Christianity, influenced by its Jewish roots, interpreted the death of Jesus through this same lens. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb who atoned for the sins of the world. Rather than emphasizing the love of the Heavenly Father, early Christianity portrayed God doing precisely what He forbade Abraham to do: God sacrificed His son. Though rejecting the efficacy of animal blood, Christianity defined salvation as the result of human sacrifice. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22). Only in the death of Jesus was God's wrath satisfied.[10]

Unable to accept a God who would demand the violent death of His son, universalism, like feminist theology, abandons entirely the notion of blood atonement, with the added caveat that God will save everyone. While there certainly is an appeal in believing that God will save everyone, we must ask if such an extreme reaction to the notion of blood atonement is consistent with Scripture. We have to wonder: Is this fierce reaction from feminist and universalist theology a reaction against the Gospel itself, or against some of the flawed Atonement theories?

Gully and Mulholland do raise an important subject to which we now turn — the sacrificial lamb and/or scapegoat.

In the law of Moses, Leviticus 16, a prescription was given for the atonement of the people. Two goats were to be selected by the high priest to be used for a

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[9] *Ibid.*, 57.

[10] Philip Gulley and James Mulholland, *If Grace Is True: Why God will Save Every Person,* Harper San Francisco, 2004, 31-32.

sin offering. The two goats were brought to the entrance of the tent of meeting and lots were cast, one for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat. The one whose lot fell to the Lord was sacrificed on the altar as a sin offering. The other was presented alive before the Lord and used to make atonement by sending it alive into the desert to serve as a scapegoat. The high priest was to take his hands and place them upon the live goat and confess over it all the sins of Israel. It was then sent out to the desert to carry with it all the sins of the people.

Some scholars believe this ritual was first introduced to Israel by the Canaanites.[11] Savage refers to it as the miasmic principle. Sir James Frazer, a Scottish anthropologist of the 19th century, documents the practice of scapegoating in numerous cultures.[12] In some cultures the victim was not an animal, but a human being. The general principle involved is that the evils of a village/community are transferred to a representative, and then the victim is either sent away or killed. This event was recurrent, often seasonal or annual.

From a biblical standpoint, from earliest times, the scapegoat was interpreted as a foreshadowing type of Jesus.

> [These things were done] that He might show that it was necessary for Him to suffer for them. How, then, ran the commandment? Give your attention. Take two goats of goodly aspect, and similar to each other, and offer them. And let the priest take one as a burnt-offering for sins. And what should they do with the other? "Accused," says He, "is the one." Mark how the type of Jesus now comes out. And all of you spit upon it, and pierce it, and encircle its head with scarlet wool, and thus let it be driven into the wilderness…And why do you behold the one that is accursed crowned? Because they shall see Him then in that day having a scarlet robe about his body down to his feet; and they shall say, Is not this He whom we once despised, and pierced, and mocked, and crucified? Truly this is He who then declared Himself to be the Son of God. For how like is He to Him!...Behold, then, the type of Jesus who was to suffer.[13]

While the practice of scapegoating animals and human beings was a primitive act, there is a psychological principle at work which can be observed generally in human relationships.

> Among a primitive folk who seemed to have more moral troubles than any other and to feel greater need of dismissing them by artificial means,

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[11] Dr. John Savage, "Congregational Corporate Pain," tape, 1996, L.E.A.D. consultants, Reynoldsburg, OH.
[12] *The Golden Bough*, Touchstone, 1995, vol. II, 182-217.
[13] See the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Chapter VII in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Hendrickson Publishers, 1994, vol. 1, 141.

there grew up the custom of using a curious expedient. They chose a beast of the field and upon its head symbolically piled all the moral hardheadedness of the several tribes; after which the unoffending brute was banished to the wilderness and the guilty multitude felt relieved. However crude that ancient method of transferring mental and moral burdens, it has at least this redeeming feature: the early Hebrews heaped their sins upon a creature which they did not care for and sent it away. In modern times we pile our burdens upon our dearest fellow-creatures and keep them permanently near us for further use. What human being but has some other upon whom he nightly hands his troubles as he hangs his different garments upon hooks and nails in the walls around him?[14]

Scapegoating [is a behavior which] takes another as its object…It reveals elements of self-aggrandizement and is therefore to be understood, psychologically and theologically, as narcissistic and sinful. It is motivated essentially by concern for oneself. It also has elements of both aggression (or violence) and anger insofar as the sacrifice of others represents an attempt to assert or restore one's own autonomy, pride, and integrity by attacking others rather than oneself. In this kind of action anger and aggression become necessary for self-definition, and the act of violence toward another is an attempt to defend the attacker from a sense of vulnerability, pain, anxiety, or annihilation. Thus the sacrifice of others is an attempt to overcome what it perceived as evil or threatening in order to establish the victimizer's survival and/or superiority. Typically, it also requires the distancing and depersonalization of the other, as studies of the attitudes of soldiers toward their enemies or of criminals toward their victims have shown.

　　Onto the scapegoat (a child, spouse, a group or a whole class of people) is projected the faults of many. A sense of exoneration is bought at the price of blaming the victim, trading the ambiguity and shared guilt for a false but reassuring simplicity. Scapegoating, understood from the perspective of individual psychology, is usually understood as the product of projection. On the other hand, scapegoating can be understood systemically as the sacrificing of weaker members of a minority group for the sake of stronger members and/or the majority of a particular group.[15]

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[14] James Lane Allen in *Mettle of the Pasture*, excerpted from the *Interpreters Bible*, 2:80.
[15] S.M. Anderson and A.R. Ostrom, "Sacrificial Behavior," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. Rodney J. Hunter, Abingdon Press, 1990, 1101.

There is a universal tendency among people to hide the truth about themselves from themselves. Carl Jung labeled this phenomenon "the shadow" portion of one's personality. The shadow contains those parts of ourselves that we fail to bring to consciousness. They are rooted in our denial systems. One unhealthy, but all too common, way that people deal with this shadow material is to project it on to others. If there are things about ourselves that we wish to deny or destroy, we will tend to observe them in other people. What we can't see in ourselves, we project on to others. If we do not believe ourselves to be trustworthy, we will tend to view others as untrustworthy and will become suspicious when we are around them. If we have areas of guilt that we don't want to accept, we will project that guilt onto another object, and then attempt to punish or destroy the object (usually a human being) in order to temporarily remove our guilt. This often takes the form of blaming others for our problems. This form of scapegoating is as old as Adam and Eve who blamed each other, the serpent, even God Himself, instead of taking personal responsibility for their actions. Scapegoating is deeply ingrained in our fallen nature.

A modern-day psychological analysis of this process of scapegoating has been identified by family systems theory and its approach to counseling. According to this theory, a family system generally produces one member who carries around with him the symptoms of the family's stresses. This individual develops problems, physical, emotional, or behavioral, and the family system identifies this person as "the problem" and the one who is in need of "help." This person is known as the I.P. or "identified patient."

> The concept of the identified patient…is that the family member with the obvious symptom is to be seen not as the "sick one" but as the one in whom the family's stress or pathology has surfaced. In a child it could take the form of excessive bedwetting, hyperactivity, school failures, drugs, obesity, or juvenile diabetes; in a spouse its form could be excessive drinking, depression, chronic ailments, a heart condition or perhaps even cancer; in an aged member of the family it could show up as confusion, senility, or agitated and random behavior. In a congregational family it could surface as the drinking, burnout, or sexual acting out of the "family leader."
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> In a family emotional system, when an unresolved problem is isolated in one of its members and fixed there by diagnosis, it enables the rest of the family to "purify" itself by locating the source of its "disease" in the disease of the identified patient. By keeping the focus on one of its members, the family, personal or congregational, can deny the very issues that contributed to making one of its members symptomatic. [16]

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[16] Edwin Friedman, *Generation to Generation*, Guilford Press, 1995, 19-32.

The process behind this is called projection. In projection, the family/congregation/community displaces its stresses/issues onto one person (the identified patient) and then isolates that person to the margins of the family and makes him responsible for the group's problems. This is a modern, more subtle form of scapegoating, but it highlights the principle nonetheless.

We can see how prevalent this whole process of scapegoating really is in all cultures and in all times. It operated in the Salem witch trials, and in McCarthyism. It was certainly at work in Nazism during the holocaust, and it operates in families and churches and other communities.

> When Agamemnon waited on the beach with his ships and chariots and with the men who hungered to capture Troy, the winds remained hostile, and he asked a diviner what he should do. He had faith in his diviner, and the diviner had faith in his power to speak for the gods. He said he knew what the gods desired — the life of the king's daughter. And so Iphigenia came, summoned to her wedding in all the veiled finery of a bride. At the altar stood her father with the priest. But there was no young husband, only the great sharp knife poised to end her life…So great is the power of religion to lead us to evil.[17]

A king was willing to sacrifice his daughter to the gods to purchase their favor, so that he might be victorious in battle. In the violent bloodshed of a virgin to purchase victory are violence, power and religion — three primal themes.

A number of recent writers, including Rene Girard, Raymund Schwager, and Walter Wink, have identified the pandemic nature of violence and how closely related it is to religion. This is particularly evident in the process of scapegoating.

Dr. David Augsburger has reduced much research into the scapegoating process down to a basic mechanism:

1. Desire (mimesis) — we learn to desire certain things by imitating others whom we admire. We want the things that the people whom we approve of desire.
2. This leads to rivalry between the one being imitated and the one imitating. There is a conflict over limited resources.
3. This results in a crisis for the community, leading to a potential collapse in the social order. But it can be avoided if a scapegoat can be found.
4. A victim is chosen to bear the rage of the community. The victim is sacrificed and hostilities temporarily cease, which justifies the selection of the victim. Violence drains away from the group.

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[17] Lucretius, cited by Paul Woodruff, *Reverence, Renewing a Forgotten Virtue*, Oxford University Press, 2001, 14.

5. The victim is sacralized. While the scapegoat initially was considered accursed, he eventually is seen as the source of salvation for the community as his death leads to a cessation of violence and order being restored to the community.

6. The ritual becomes established. Future aggressions are diverted into the ritual reenactment of the sacrifice.[18]

This entire process is evident in various cultures and manifested in ways as diverse as sacrificial lambs, witch hunts and family projections onto identified patients. They all lead back to one common root — human sin, which results in alienation between man and God and man and fellow man, and the sinful tendency to blame others and place onto others our guilt and punishment, resulting in violence. This is well summarized in Genesis 6:11: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight and was full of violence." Were one to identify one major theme running through the Old Testament, it could easily be violence and sacred projections. How can humanity bring an end to violence and the practice of blaming and projecting onto innocent victims? Is there any end to it all?

There is, however, a counterforce to the myths, rituals, and religions that sacralize violence, Girard argues, a force that tends toward the exposure of the immortal lie of sacred violence, a revelation of the true nature of evil, and this is the Christian Gospel…This is a paradox of the greatest magnitude. One of the central features of the Gospels is the betrayal, arrest, trial, beating and scourging, condemning and bloody crucifying of the Son of God by the religious and civil powers of the day. This is a most extreme and grotesque example of sacred violence…This is a prime example of the evils of scapegoating. How is it possible, as Girard argues, that this exposes the "immortal lie of sacred violence"? In the arrest, trial, sentencing, and execution of Jesus the scapegoating mechanism is totally exposed, fully revealed for all who will see. The Gospels explode the scapegoat myth.[19]

The scapegoat mechanism/myth or "single victim theory"[20] is totally brought into the light by the crucifixion of Jesus. The Apostle Paul wrote of this to the Colossians: "having disarmed the powers and authorities, he [Jesus] made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross" (Col. 2:15).

The powers (Satan and all the forces of evil which derive their power from Satan) had been operating using violence and the single victim or

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[18] David Augsburger, *Helping People Forgive*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, 130-131.

[19] *Ibid*., 132-33.

[20] Rene Girard*, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, Orbis Books, 2001.

scapegoat, since the beginning of man. But he had been operating in the darkness. Humanity believed that they were operating in accordance with divine wishes when they operated in this way. They did not understand that they were operating in league with Satan's powers. Satan is most effective when he is operating in secrecy…he hates the light of truth and resists exposure. But the cross reveals their [the powers'] violent origin, which must remain concealed to prevent their collapse. This is what our text expresses in the image of the principalities and powers as a "public spectacle" as they bring up the rear of the procession that Christ leads in victory. By nailing Christ to the cross, the powers believed they were doing what they ordinarily did in unleashing the single victim mechanism. They thought they were avoiding the danger of disclosure. They did not suspect that in the end they would be doing just the opposite: they would be contributing to their own annihilation, nailing themselves to the cross, so to speak. They did not and could not suspect the revelatory power of the cross.

By depriving the victim mechanism of the darkness that must conceal it so it can continue to control human culture, the cross shakes up the world. Its light deprives Satan of his principal power, the power to expel Satan. Once the cross completely illuminates this dark sun, Satan is no longer able to limit his capacity for destruction. Satan will destroy his kingdom, and he will destroy himself.[21]

At the heart of Girard's understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus and the nature of the Atonement is the notion that Satan was "hoist with his own petard," meaning he destroyed himself with his own weapon. Some of the ancient church fathers suggested that Satan is "the mystifier caught in the trap of his own mystification."[22] Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2:8).

Satan believed that by crucifying Jesus, he would be bringing about a defeat of God. Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, the future King. Jesus was the seed of Eve, about whom it was foretold that he would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). No doubt Satan saw Jesus as his chief adversary and his death would offer a complete victory. Satan's kingdom was based upon violence and the destruction of one's enemies. This had been the way of man for thousands of years. Jesus preached a gospel of non-violence, a gospel of peace. By defeating Jesus on the cross, Satan would show the triumph of violence and force. "The

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[21] *Ibid*., 142.
[22] *Ibid*., 151.

kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force" (Matt. 11:12).

> Since the princes of this world were not in communion with God, they did not understand that the victim mechanism they unleashed against Jesus would result in truthful accounts. If they had been able to read the future, not only would they not have encouraged the crucifixion, but they would have opposed it with all their might. When the princes of this world finally understood the real import of the cross, it was too late to turn back: Jesus had been crucified, and the Gospels had been written…Western theology, in rejecting the idea of Satan tricked by the cross, has lost a pearl of great price in the sphere of anthropology. Medieval and modern theories of redemption all look in the direction of God for the causes of the crucifixion: God's honor, God's justice, even God's anger, must be satisfied. These theories don't succeed because they don't seriously look in the direction where the answer must lie: sinful humanity, human relations, mimetic contagion, which is the same thing as Satan. They speak much of original sin, but they fail to make the idea concrete. That is why they give an impression of being arbitrary and unjust to human beings, even if they are theologically sound.[23]

In Girard's theory of the Atonement, then, God does not demand the death of Jesus to satisfy His need to be appeased. Jesus is not the ultimate scapegoat who dies as a substitute for all sinners. Jesus is not a ransom paid to either the Devil or God. Jesus dies as a part of Satan's plan to continue his dominion of earth through violent means. But in dying on the cross, Jesus exposes the lie of the whole scapegoating enterprise. Jesus shows that the whole system of blaming, projecting, scapegoating runs completely counter to the ways of a loving God.

In going to the cross, Jesus lived out his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount: "love your enemies." Jesus taught his disciples to turn the other cheek and to forgive. On the cross, Jesus lived out, to the ultimate degree, his teachings. He loved his enemies. He forgave his enemies. He did not retaliate against his enemies. In doing this, he proved that Satan's ways are false. Jesus demonstrated that God's kingdom is a kingdom founded upon love and forgiveness. The paradox of the cross is that, through an act of unspeakable violence, God is able to show us that His way is a way of non-violence.

Walter Wink observes:

> Jesus' nonviolent response mirrored the very nature of God, who reaches out to a rebellious humanity through the cross in the only way that would not abridge our freedom. Had God not manifested divine love toward us in an act of abject weakness, one which we experience as totally non-

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[23] *Ibid.*, 150.

coercive and non-manipulative, the truth of our own being would have been forced on us rather than being something we freely choose. By this act of self-emptying, Jesus meets us, not at the apex of the pyramid of power, but at its base: "despised and rejected by others," a common criminal, the off-scouring of all things.[24]

We come back to one of the fundamental questions. Was a violent death necessary for Jesus to secure our salvation? Could there not have been some other way? Could Jesus have chosen a different path that didn't involve unspeakable torture? Jesus could have chosen to use violent means to secure the Kingdom. He could have led an armed resistance. He could have allowed his disciples to use weapons to defend him as they were obviously prepared to do in the Gospel accounts of his arrest. Jesus could have coerced the people, by offering them temporal bread, to be loyal to him. Who could resist a Messiah who feeds you, makes you well, and when you die, raises you to life? Using his power, Jesus could have fashioned an invincible army. Imagine an army whose commanding officer has power over the elements, who can keep his army fed with very little food, and who can raise up soldiers when they die in battle. No Roman army could have matched such a force. Imagine a general who could fling himself down from a high place and have 10,000 messengers of God bear him up. Jesus was tempted to use his powers to be that kind of Messiah. He could have used the worldly powers to defeat his enemies. But how would that have made him any different from any other king? How would that have brought an end to the cycle of violence upon the earth? It would not.

In order for God's Kingdom, which is a Kingdom that is "not of this world" and does not use this world's weapons, to be introduced, the Messiah had to identify not with the world's victors, who use violent means, but with the world's victims.

> The violence of the Bible is the necessary precondition for the gradual perception of its meaning. The scapegoat mechanism could have come to consciousness only in a violent society. The problem of violence could only emerge at the very heart of violence, in the most war-ravaged corridor on the globe, by a repeatedly subjugated people unable to seize and wield power for any length of time. The violence of Scripture, so embarrassing to us today, became the means by which sacred violence was revealed for what it is: a lie perpetrated against victims in the name of a God who, through violence, was working to expose violence for what it is and to reveal the divine nature as nonviolent.[25]

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[24] Wink, 142.
[25] *Ibid.*, 147.

Jesus came as a prophet of non-violence announcing the arrival of God's kingdom, which is not a kingdom inaugurated by violent revolution, but by love. Jesus also came as priest of this non-violent kingdom. He did not participate in the scapegoating system whereby others are selected to be the recipients of the collective guilt and then sent into exile or slaughtered, but rather he became a high priest of non-violence, who himself bore the brunt of sinful humanity. In doing so, he exposed the powers for what they are — usurpers of divine power. By his death on the cross, Jesus tricked the powers into self-destructing. And Jesus came as king to reign over a new realm, a kingdom not built upon the usurping of power through violent means. He is a king who identifies with all the victims of violence and those who have participated in the reign of the powers. He allows his disciples to enter a new kind of kingdom and a kingdom style of life which involves non-violent love.

The early church seemed to grasp this important concept. They understood that they were called to share in the sufferings of Christ (see Phil. 3:12) and continued exposing the powers by suffering violence at the hands of the powers. The book of Acts catalogues, beginning with the martyrdom of Stephen, the ways of living out the reality of the death of Jesus and sharing in those sufferings. We see examples of conversion as individuals stepped out from under the influence of the powers of darkness to embrace the new kingdom of God. Cornelius, a Gentile and Roman centurion, came into the Kingdom through hearing and believing the message proclaimed by Peter (Acts 10). Saul, the great persecutor of the church, stepped out from under the influence of the powers of darkness into the Kingdom through meeting the risen Christ. He then changed from being an oppressor who caused the death of others, to a victim of repeated violence. He became the apostle of a non-violent kingdom.

The members of the apostolic church understood the nature of the death of Christ. They recognized that through his death Jesus had brought an end to all sacred violence. Jesus proved that the powers could be defeated by love and sacrifice. The early church shared in the non-violent message of the cross of Jesus. They lived as witnesses to the powers who were now shown to be powerless. Christ was victorious over the powers, and while the powers continued to fight back through persecution, the church remained strong in the face of that persecution.

Unfortunately, the church began to lose its way in the time of Constantine when it was granted recognition by the kingdoms of this world and began to ally itself with the powers. Suddenly, a kingdom built on non-violence began to use violence to punish those who did not embrace the church. The church came under the influence of the very powers whom she was supposed to be serving as a witness. Eventually the church would use practices every bit as cruel as the crucifixion to punish her enemies. Heretics were burned at the stake. There were Crusades against the infidels. The followers of the man who refused to

participate in the stoning of a woman taken in adultery, were willing to use all manner of weapons to destroy their enemies. In short, the church lost her way. How is this possible? The author believes that much of the violence that has come into the church can be blamed on the loss of understanding the basic message of the Kingdom and Christ's sacrificial death. When the church began offering alternative views of the Atonement — ransom, satisfaction, moral influence, etc. — she lost something essential to understanding the nature of the church and the Kingdom of God, and the very nature of God Himself.

To embrace a theology of the Atonement that suggests that a ransom had to be paid to the Devil, makes God too weak to be God. To embrace a theology of the Atonement that suggests that a ransom had to be paid to God or that God required blood to have His honor restored, makes God evil. To say that Jesus' death was simply an example for us to follow renders the future of the Kingdom questionable and subject to human willpower.

To embrace a theology that says that the powers caused Jesus to die, but in doing so brought about their own destruction by exposing the lie in the whole scapegoating/sacrificial victim system, and that God allowed it to happen because He knew that this would bring about the defeat of evil by exposing the powers and bringing an end to violence — this makes God not a wimp or a monster, but a God who practices what He preaches. It makes Jesus a prophet, priest and king with a message and life that are congruent. It takes seriously the death of Jesus and the atoning benefits of his death, and provides a strong connection between the teaching of Jesus on non-violence, the life that he lived and the death that he died. A disciple who embraces this theology of the Atonement takes seriously the sacrifice of Christ and recognizes that Jesus did have to die, and that his death was for our sins — but he is able to respond with non-violence, by embracing not only Jesus' death, but also his way of life and his Kingdom.

This author makes no absolute claims regarding this view. In truth, no single theory of the Atonement fully articulates the depth and breadth of the scriptural teaching about the death of Jesus. However, I believe that an understanding of the nature of violence and scapegoating in particular and the role that the crucifixion plays in exposing the lie of the powers, brings a cohesive understanding to a number of biblical themes and creates a much more consistent view of God as a loving Father. Thoughtful students of the Scripture will be responsible for considering this view of the Atonement for themselves and determining if it is consistent with the revelation given in the Bible. They will do well to examine verses that have, in the past, been used to support their particular understanding of the nature of the Atonement, and see if the Scripture can support an understanding of the Atonement centered in Christ's act of non-violent surrender to expose the powers and bring about their defeat.

Jesus fulfills the prophecy of the one of whom it was said, "kings will shut their mouths because of him. For what they were not told, they will see, and what they have not heard, they will understand" (Isa. 52:15). May we all aspire to learn from Jesus' preaching about non-violence, his kingdom and his example of non-violence as evidenced in his atoning death on the cross.