

Is the Doctrine of the Second Coming Too Negative? An Essay on the Feminization of Postmodern Western Culture

As most thinking and informed Americans know, there is a debate at the popular level (and scholarly level as well) about the cause and solution to modern terrorism, especially of the Islamic variety. Is America to blame for the rise of such terrorism? Is Israel to blame? Or both? Or can we identify the entire Western culture as the culprit that is responsible? Questions from that side of the debate tend to anger political and moral conservatives who see such questions as at best peripheral and at worst a missing of the point entirely in such a way as to make the solution to Islamofascism harder to come by. Are not, such conservatives ask, the terrorists themselves the guilty parties? Are they not responsible for their own actions? From this side, there should be no switching of the victims. The Islamic radicals are not the victims. They are the predators who prey intentionally upon innocent civilians, including women and children, believing there to be no such thing as true civilians when jihad is in the air (and it always is). Conservatives would caution those who would want to turn such wicked men into the real sufferers:

Woe to those who call evil good, and good evil;
Who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness;
Who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter;
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes
And clever in their own sight...
Who justify the wicked for a bribe,
And take away the rights of the ones who are in the right!
(Isaiah 5:20-21, 23)

Conservatives would point out that those who are “soft” on terrorism sometimes give the impression that Islamofascists can be reasoned with and dealt with like an ambassador dialoguing and negotiating a peace. Sigmund Freud would be proud.

I know that at the outset my presentation is coming across sounding like an op-ed piece for some newspaper (probably not the *New York Times* which would have little interest in my conservative outlook). But the issue of “softness” versus “hardness” in our culture is what I want to get at. Another way to say it is “positive” versus “negative” in our understanding of certain features that make up the public square and its ongoing debate about directions and doctrines for the future of Western Civilization. To look explicitly at the American scene, the concern I have is that the red state-blue state dichotomy is partly over this very issue. As numerous polls have shown, most red staters would agree that the Democratic Party is perceived to be *soft* on terrorism and national defense while Republicans score better on that point.

Furthermore, at the heart of this issue I wonder (no doubt controversially) if attitudes of such softness come from the downplaying of certain strengths that men, as opposed to women, bring to the issues of life. Men tend to be more decisive and have been, for good and ill, the “warriors” and “providers” of the world. Women have been looked upon as the nurturers and the ones with deeper capacities for emotional expression. I heard Luther cited as saying that a woman has more nurturing capability in her pinky finger than a man does in his entire body. From that angle, the soft response would be feminine and the hard response would be masculine. By themselves, the softness and

hardness aspects are neither good nor bad. They are just different. Each can shine as a positive in diverse life contexts. Of course, the modern feminist movement has tried to do away with any such distinctions in our thought patterns. It is a useful exercise to ask if their course of action has been wise. Sure, we have to be careful not to over generalize. Women can and have done a good job of being “mean” and being good fighters when events called for it. Western men have, on occasion, shown a depth of emotion and nurturing capability that goes beyond the general tenor of their makeup and at times have shown great compassion. God has created all human beings with wonderfully crafted capabilities often untapped.

Thus, I have brought two issues together by way of introduction to highlight my interest – softness relative to Islamic terrorism and a potential out-of-balance gender focus (feminine) that may contribute to Western culture’s oftentimes ineffective responses to the terrorist threat. In light of the recent attacks in London and elevated concerns in the United States, the issue gains significance. However, my ultimate concern is how theological understanding plays into all of this. So as I approach this issue with a theological framework in mind, we will look at a few doctrines where a certain kind of “softness” lends itself to wrong teaching that can in turn impact the culture in harmful directions, including perhaps the intensification of gender imbalance. As we begin our doctrinal overview, it might be surprising what biblical teaching comes to the top, even at a popular level, when discussing the issue of attitudinal softness.

The Second Coming of Christ

I had never associated Tim LaHaye with Islamic terrorism until I was forced to do so when reading a recent *New York Times* editorial that caught my attention.¹ LaHaye is co-author of the highly successful *Left Behind* series, founder of the Pre-Trib Research Center, author of scores of books, and perhaps the most influential evangelical Christian of the present generation. The hard-hitting editorial by Nicolas Kristof entitled “Apocalypse (Almost) Now” begins with the words, “If America’s liberals think they have it rough now, just wait until the Second Coming.” Admittedly from a liberal perspective, Kristof begins with the complaint that if LaHaye’s approach to the Second Coming is accurate, it will not be a positive experience for most, including himself: “The ‘Left Behind’ series, the best-selling novels for adults in the U.S., enthusiastically depict Jesus returning to slaughter everyone who is not a born-again Christian. The world’s Hindus, Muslims, Jews and agnostics, along with many Catholics and Unitarians, are heaved into everlasting fire.” So much for a positive, loving encounter when Jesus comes. As Kristof sarcastically notes “Gosh, what an uplifting scene!”

A Saudi Version of *Left Behind*

The tie to Islamic views comes into focus when Kristof goes on to claim that “if Saudi Arabians wrote an Islamic version of this series, we would furiously demand that sensible Muslims repudiate such hatemongering. We should hold ourselves to the same standard.” I am not sure who the “we” is in his statement. He seems to want at least to include evangelical Christians who think like LaHaye. However, his huffing and puffing leaves the impression that he feels himself qualified to be a

¹ Nicholas Kristof, “Apocalypse (Almost) Now,” *New York Times*, 24 November 2004; Internet; <http://donswaim.com/nytimes.apocalypse.html>; Accessed 7 July 2005. I had run across the article last Fall but accessed it recently for the purposes of this response. In particular, Kristof reacts to statements in Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, *Glorious Appearing* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2004).

mind reader and soothsayer who can predict what we would do if the Saudis wrote an Islamic counterpart. Actually, I, for one, would be quite pleased. A contribution of everyone's predictive view of the end of the world would be fine to get out on the table. If Kristof's view is ultimately agnostic (which is my suspicion), his particular novel would be short and comprised of empty white pages, so it probably will not make the *New York Times* best seller list. How many pages do you need to say, "I don't know"? The plot line might be a little thin. Perhaps he could call Jerry Jenkins for some help.

Beyond such sideshows, there really lurks a profound misunderstanding on Kristof's part. Although Kristof does not directly address terrorism, he indirectly raises the question with his reference to Saudi views. In my opinion, there is little doubt that Kristof wants to damage LaHaye and Jenkins by the means of guilt-by-association. The thoughtful reader would naturally ask, "What is the difference between *Left Behind* and radical Islam?" I believe that Kristof is probably sincere in believing the two are similar. He is right, of course, at one level. Moslem teaching generally holds that Christians will end up in hell and born-again Christianity has predominantly taught with a tear in its voice that those who deny Jesus Christ are rejecting the only cure for their sinful condition. However, in light of the militant history of Islam from its beginning until now, Christians should be forgiven if they have doubts about whether the Moslem belief carries a "tear in its voice."

Kristof's terse comments unfortunately slide right by some significant differences between Islam and Bible-believing Christianity. First, conversions according to evangelical Christianity come through the preaching of the truth. There is no conversion by the sword. There is no beheading of infidels when they fail to heed the message. It will do no good to throw the Crusades in the faces of LaHaye and Jenkins. We are talking about Bible-believing Christians living in postmodern America who believe sincerely, following the teaching of Jesus, that the Gospel is spread through proclamation and that alone. This is the evangelical way. It is God who works in men's hearts when they hear the message of truth. It is not the tip of a sharp sword that brings the change.

Second, I doubt if the *New York Times* editorialist has come to grips with the fact that the biblical understanding found in LaHaye's portrayal of the Second Coming is something that God Himself through Christ brings about and not men. Kristof can reject a God who judges if he wishes (we will talk more about this later), but he should not avoid the truth that evangelicals today shun the practice of taking judgment into their own hands as Christians. In other words, we do not believe that present action as described in Second Coming passages is something we should imitate in today's world. There are certain prerogatives that belong to God alone. This appears to be somewhat counter to the Koran-believing Moslems who implement judgment upon those who disagree with them as a matter of course in the present time. There is no waiting until God comes to make all things right. This difference in message and method is something that should not be glossed over in any comparison between the two.

Judgment, Hell, and Exclusivism

Behind all of the blustery language, what is Kristof's real beef with the *Left Behind* series? His sincere concern is that the Second Coming of Jesus is portrayed as an event of *judgment*. In fact, he believes that it is impossible actually to love people if we believe this picture of Jesus' coming. It would be a kind of *hatemongering*, to use one of his words. There is a certain kind of softness in his understanding that is common in various facets of our postmodern, truth-denying culture. Kristof rejects LaHaye's understanding of the Second Coming (which by the way *is* the biblical view and the tradition of the Church for almost 2000 years) largely because it is too harsh. Bible-believing

Christians should not back down from the challenge. Second Thessalonians 1:6-10 teaches the following:

For after all, it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. And these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power, when He comes to be glorified in His saints on that day.

This passage says it all. Kristof does not like three different aspects of this doctrine. First, there is the actual judgment that is caught up in the event itself. Other passages are just as explicit. Revelation 19:11-21 pictures Christ as a Warrior Lamb and not as a sweet little lamb upon his return. He will smite the nations and rule with a rod of iron (v. 15). He is clothed with a robe dipped in blood (v. 13) and treads the wine press of the fierce wrath of God (v. 16).² Clearly, the biblical portrait of Christ's return is not entirely "sweet Jesus." It is a time when in righteousness He judges and makes war (v. 11). Such judgment scenes are plentiful in the biblical record. The harshness of such descriptions does not easily square with much of the cultural mentality, especially from the liberal side of the spectrum, which downplays personal accountability and judgment. Love to them is, whether they understand it or not, a sentimental notion whose optimism in human nature at best borders on naivety. In such a state of mind, God can only be portrayed as a skyward grandfatherly image sitting in a rocking chair waiting to shower gifts upon his grandchildren.

In addition, Kristof reacts negatively to the doctrine of hell that is associated with the assignment of men and women (as he understands it) to everlasting destruction when Jesus comes. It is not judgment in general but the aspect of everlasting fire that Kristof alludes to twice in his piece with language that shows his contempt: "Jesus intends to *roast* everyone...because they weren't born-again Christians" (emphasis added). He accuses LaHaye and Jenkins of being enthusiastic about the future slaughter of unbelievers and apparently in an earlier article had charged them with celebrating that fact. However, most evangelical Christians react to the doctrine not by celebrating it, but by taking actions of love to share their faith so that others can escape the future judgment. Kristof has simply caricatured LaHaye on this point. Furthermore, it is not clear to me how there can be ultimate accountability without an after-life judgment like the hell of the Bible.³

The third aspect of the doctrine of the Second Coming that irritates Kristof in conjunction with its implications of judgment and hell is the exclusive nature of salvation in Christ that the doctrine entails in the *Left Behind* series (and in the Bible).⁴ Consistent with his postmodernism, Kristof rejects these exclusive claims made by evangelical Christians concerning Jesus and acceptance of Him. The *New York Times* essayist responds to a prior email from Jerry Jenkins by noting "I'd forgotten the

² For a scholarly exegesis of Revelation 19:11-21, see Robert L. Thomas, *Revelation 8-22* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 380-401.

³ I do not have the luxury of space and time here to give an in depth defense of the doctrine of hell. One avenue that would need to be discussed would be the association of rejection of hell with a light view of sin. Generally speaking, how can human beings decide that Hitler's sins in the holocaust were more serious than anyone's rejection of the Creator's purpose for their lives (unbelief)? The light view of sin actually stems from a man-centered view of all the issues rather than a theocentric vantage point. For a thorough defense of the biblical doctrine of hell, see Robert A. Peterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 1995).

⁴ For a discussion of the inclusive-exclusive debate over the nature of Christian soteriology, see Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995).

passage in the Bible about how Jesus intends to roast everyone from the good Samaritan to Gandhi in everlasting fire, simply because they weren't born-again Christians." Such a comment would be laughable if its consequences were not so serious. Kristof does an obvious job of critiquing someone else's view from within his own world view rather than showing inherent problems with the other view.

Included in this attempt to dissuade, Kristof overtly blunders in his use of the Bible. I can see why he would use Gandhi as an illustration since Gandhi's soft Hinduism allowed for the postmodern "truth" of all other religions. However, where does he get the "good Samaritan?" In the Bible, Jesus' story about the good Samaritan does not identify this man as a Christ-rejecting bad person (Lk. 10:25-37). In fact, the passage is not even remotely about eternal life, being born again, or hell. Why does Kristof use this example? I believe the worst here. More needs to be said than "I'd forgotten the passage..." You can't forget something you have never read. Someone critiquing the biblical view of any issue should take the time to read what they are attacking. In the end, his critique *only* makes sense if the Bible is not true and Jesus is not who He claims to be. There is a lot at stake.

Cheap Shots

Kristof's complaints about judgment, hell, and exclusivism are the thrust of his analysis. However, there are a few other things that we should mention in passing for the sake of completeness. About one-third of his article is taken up with the cheap shot about the lucrative nature of sales for the *Left Behind* series. There might be some things about the marketing side of the popular series that even some evangelicals would do differently. However, the personal attack is unwarranted. One wonders if he would be willing to criticize Dan Brown's financial profit from *The Da Vinci Code*, the hostile attack upon traditional Christian teaching about Jesus.

Kristof also continues to show his ignorance of biblical doctrine when he seems to assume that LaHaye and Jenkins would believe that giving your money to the poor would help get them into heaven. I think he sees an apparent contradiction in their lives. However, most evangelicals believe that someone is forgiven through simple faith and trust in the finished work of Christ on the Cross and not by doing good deeds. Therefore, he shows a total unawareness of the evangelical worldview which he is criticizing that makes it hard to take him seriously. This is especially true when he preaches the need to dialog about faith among different groups and seemingly sees the lack of this on LaHaye's part. In the end he is guilty of what he accuses others. I am always a little leery of those who quickly pull out the loaded term *bigotry* in religious discussions as Kristof does in his rant. Its use predictably cuts off dialog, the exact opposite of what he preaches. He is somewhat aware of this when he correctly notes that "this column will seem pretty snooty." His self-awareness is beyond his understanding of conservative, biblical Christianity.

The Authority of God's Word

Another wrong turn from an evangelical point of view comes to the surface when Kristof addresses the biblical authority upon which LaHaye and Jenkins base their views of exclusivism. He comments, "I accept that Mr. Jenkins and Mr. LaHaye are sincere. (They base their conclusions on John 3.) But I've sat down in Pakistani and Iraqi mosques with Muslim fundamentalists, and they offered the same defense: they're just applying God's word." Kristof's point is often made in popular culture, but it is not logically defensible. The thrust of it is to suggest that there can be no assurance of any religious truth simply because there are competing claims of authority. However, on the contrary,

there exist no rational grounds for saying that both of the competing claims are wrong. It is logically possible that one set of claims is true to reality. However, Kristof assumes that the mere statement of the competing claims makes his point. He can only make the attempt because he has bought the Kantian assumption (without realizing it) that religious truth claims involve a different and unknowable domain than other claims.

Guilt By Association

A final way in which Kristof shows a lack of precision is his historical analysis which is in fact a guilt-by-association argument. He accuses LaHaye of being a wild date setter in the mold of the nineteenth century Millerites, Hal Lindsey's *Late Great Planet Earth*, and the booklet "88 Reasons Why the Rapture Will Be in 1988." Other predictions have all been wrong, so LaHaye's predictions are wrong also. But what exactly are LaHaye's prophetic insights? Kristof quotes from the *Left Behind* website which notes that LaHaye and Jenkins "think this generation will witness the end of history." That Kristof makes so much of this statement is problematic. It is one thing to make wild predictions about specific dates. It is quite another to believe that the stage is set for the end time events. While personally I would have used the expression "may witness" rather than "will witness" in the website statement, it is still important to recall that the *Left Behind* novels never make any specific predictions about the time when Jesus will return. Kristof's exaggeration is unfair even if more predictable than the Second Coming. Perhaps as in the case of the Bible, he has not read the *Left Behind* series as much as he should.

Summary: Softness or Harshness?

In our analysis of Kristof's editorial, the main point still stands. He rejects the biblical view of the Second Coming as portrayed by LaHaye and Jenkins because it is an act of judgment which is related to the casting of people into hell who have rejected Christ. In other words, such a God is pictured as being tough-minded and meting out punishment. Kristof's view represents a large cultural pocket of Westerners who reject the classical Christian faith because it is too harsh at points like these. The increase of such "softness" in the West in the last two centuries cannot be said to have produced less harshness in the real world. In fact, softness about sin along with unrealistic views of the world has perhaps made a harsher world a more dangerous reality. I recently read an anthology of the writings of Gandhi, someone mentioned in Kristof's article. Gandhi was a man who can be genuinely admired by Christians for his love of peace and nonviolence. However, as I read his writings, there were many times I wrote in the margin the word *naïve*. That is how I felt when reading Kristof's short piece. The depraved world is worse off than he knows, but God will return one day to make all things right, even if such a coming is not according to Kristof's script.

The Nature of God

The article by Kristof in the end raises the question, not directly addressed, of the nature of God Himself. So now I will turn to another expression in pop culture to discuss "soft" attitudes relative to theology proper or the doctrine of God. The cultural expression I want to evaluate is the famous *Star Trek* phenomena. I know some of you non-trekkies will moan when I say this. But the truth is the television series in all its various forms along with the generated movies has paid much attention to the

issue of religion and used the forum to explore spirituality. In fact, an entire book has been written about the religions that appear in *Star Trek*.⁵ Therefore, it makes a good source of information for popular thought about God. In particular, I have chosen to look at a scene from the fifth movie, *Star Trek: The Final Frontier* (1989).

The plot of the movie moves along simply. Sybok, the mystical and estranged Vulcan brother of the rational Mr. Spock, thinks he is getting messages from God to go find Him beyond the great barrier of the galaxy. To do so, a plot is hatched to hijack a starship which just happens to be the *Enterprise* with Captain Kirk, Mr. Spock, and all the famous crew members aboard. When they cross the barrier and get to the planet from which the messages had been sent to Sybok, they encounter a being that at first they think is God, but in the end turns out to be a hostile, alien creature, which had been imprisoned on the planet and was luring someone to help him get off. In the end, predictably the creature is destroyed and the day is saved so that it was possible to make the *Star Trek VI* movie.

Classical Theism

Interestingly, while many of the religious notions that surface in *Star Trek* are decidedly mystical and Eastern, this movie at the beginning seems to view God in somewhat of a classical Western sense; that is, what we call classical theism. They are not expecting God to be the sum-total of all things as in *Star Wars*. He is no impersonal force identified with the universe as in Hinduism. Instead, the characters in the movie are expecting a single being who is the Creator of the universe. This classical sense of monotheism is striking until the very end of the movie. After their disappointment in finding out that the being was not God, the show near the end has Captain Kirk commenting that maybe God was not out there, but was in here (pointing to his own heart). Thus, a more Eastern concept of God emerges in the end which is in harmony with liberal versions of Christianity in the West. This may be a major point being made in the movie. The classical God of the Christian West does not really exist; you find God in your own thoughts and hearts – perhaps we craft God after our own image.

Nonetheless, before the shift at the end of the movie, there are several revealing comments as the characters of the movie face the being who they think for a time is God. In the dialog between the characters and the alien being, there are several ways that the characters come to the conclusion that the being is not this Creator God that they had hoped he would be. The first hint is the fact that the alien needs a starship to get off his planet. This was particularly bothersome to Captain Kirk. The captain is viewing things either through the prism of omnipresence or omnipotence or both. The true God, although localized in heaven (the planet they were on), because he was omnipresent could project Himself anywhere in the universe if he wanted. There were no limitations for him. It could be that the script writers had the omnipotence of God in mind. The God who created the universe should be powerful enough to get Himself off a planet without the aid of a starship. The second hint that this being is not God comes when he does not know who Captain Kirk is. The lack of omniscience on the part of the being, coupled with his need of a starship, convinces Kirk and Spock that the being is not God. Thus, the divine characteristics of omnipresence, omnipotence, and omniscience may be part of the dialog.

⁵ William Cassidy, Susan L. Schwartz, and Ross Kraemer, *Religions of Star Trek* (New York: Basic Books, 2003).

Harshness in God

At this point there is nothing in the characters' expectations about God that would be inconsistent with the biblical view of God. However, the last reason the characters of the movie realize the alien is not God goes to the heart of my concerns in this article. Because of the rebellious doubting of Kirk and Spock, the angered alien shoots an energy bolt from his eyes to knock down and injure both of them. Turning to Dr. McCoy, who sometimes in the series uses the term "sweet Jesus," the alien asks him if he too doubts. McCoy's answer could not be clearer: "*I doubt any God who inflicts pain for his own pleasure.*" The last evidence that this being could not possibly be God is that he was not sweet enough. He was a God who was harsh and meted out severe forms of judgment to doubters. In the plan of the movie, such a being could not be the one true and living God, if such a God existed.

We could argue about the expression "for his own pleasure" in McCoy's line. The Bible does teach in general that it is a good thing for God to judge the wicked. Obviously, such judgment would be something about which God is pleased in some way or He would not hand out retribution. God does not consider that He is wrong in doing so. It is clear that unbelievers are vessels that ultimately demonstrate the riches of the glory of God regardless of their destination and the experience of His wrath (Rom. 9:21-24). However, we should stop short of viewing this as if God were an eight-year old boy who enjoys tearing the wings off of flies. There is nothing trivial about God's judgment upon the wicked. The Bible says that God takes "no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Eze. 33:11; cp. Eze. 18:23). There is an emotion of regret that should be in the heart of every true believer over the ultimate destiny of unbelievers, but also a confident knowledge that it is a right thing for them to be judged by the Lord.

Sweet Jesus

Let me illustrate this issue of harshness from a different direction using an anecdote from my past. Once while a seminary student and during my aerospace engineering days, I was making a technical presentation to my engineering group of around 25 people. I took about one hour for the overall presentation, but in the middle of it, my boss stopped me to ask a question. I was expecting from him some inquiry about the airborne software I was working on. However, I was a bit shocked when he asked, "Is the God of the Old Testament the same as the God of the New Testament?" Everybody there knew I was a seminary student. It was probably an attempt to embarrass me, although he may have been struggling with some questions. I politely told him the last time I read the Bible they were the same and went on with my presentation.

Behind this question, which I had heard before from others, was the heresy dating back to Marcion in the second century.⁶ In that scheme, the God of the Old Testament was viewed as a hateful God while Jesus, the God of the New Testament, was a sweet and loving God. Jehovah and Jesus could not be reconciled. I encourage those who struggle with such questions to read the Psalms and see some of the Old Testament grace and love of God. Then I ask them to follow up by finding in the Bible the person who describes the teaching of hell most often and thoroughly. They will surprisingly find out it is "sweet Jesus" (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 11:23; 16:18; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43-47; Luke 10:15; 12:5, 16:19-31; cp. Rev. 19:11-21; 20:11-15).

⁶ See Tim Dowley, *Eerdmans' Handbook to the History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 102-103. The early third century church father Tertullian wrote *Against Marcion* to refute these false notions.

It is easy to see that the nature of God as a judge bothers some people and makes them reject the biblical view of God. Again, Christians should be honest about the judgment and justice side of God's nature. We should reject the effeminate portraits of Jesus that make Him look like he just came out of a beauty parlor and wouldn't step on an ant. The Bible teaches that God is both Judge and Lover. Without the former, you end up with a "Mush" God who cannot stand up to evil. Without the latter, you end up with a harsh God. Churches have erred on both sides. God must always be presented as both – the God in balance whose ways are always right even when His nature leads to the judgment of men (Rev. 19:2).

The Atonement

Unfortunately, the Second Coming of Christ and the nature of God do not stand alone to represent doctrinal areas in which "soft" attitudes have damaged both theology and life. A third area that needs to be examined is the doctrine of the atonement, in particular, the nature of the atonement-- what happened when Jesus died on the Cross. By soft approaches in this area, I refer to the removal of judgment or violent aspects of the atonement because of their harsh nature. Although soft approaches have abounded throughout history, there seems to be a resurgence of them in our day with new twists that need to be explored.⁷

Various Views of the Atonement

There have been several views of the atonement that have been advanced throughout the history of the Church. One early view in church history was the recapitulation theory of Irenaeus (second century) which suggested that Jesus' life more than His death atones for sin by providing the restoration of what Adam had lost. Other Christians early on like Origen (d. 254) posited a ransom-to-Satan view in which Jesus died to pay off the devil who held men hostage. While this view dominated much of the early Middle Ages, the main contenders for the attention of Christians since then have been the Abelardian, governmental, and Anselmic views. The Abelardian view of the atonement, named after Peter Abelard (1079-1142) can be described as an example or moral influence view of the atonement. Jesus died as an example of sacrificial love that can spur us on to better lives. This kind of approach is current in much of liberal theology in various forms.

Being codified by Hugo Grotius (1583-1645), the governmental view of the atonement teaches that Jesus died to satisfy public justice. Jesus' death thereby becomes a deterrent to sin, the structure of moral government is restored, and sin is punished not because it deserves to be but because of the demands of moral government. Charles Finney, the famous evangelist of the Second Great Awakening in nineteenth-century America held to a form of this view, which continues to be the basic understanding for many classical Arminians.

The Anselmic view is a satisfaction view. Anselm (1033-1109) held that Jesus died to satisfy the honor of God. While his satisfaction idea was correct, it remained for the Reformers (especially Calvin) to clarify that Jesus died to satisfy not the honor of God but the wrath of God upon sin. In

⁷ Christopher D. Marshall, "Atonement, Violence, and the Will of God," available from <http://www.goshen.edu/mqr/pastissues/jan03marshall.html>; Internet; accessed 16 July 2005. Marshall favors those approaches and would probably not accept my "soft" label. He has written the book entitled *Beyond Retribution: A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). He appears to be a faculty member of the Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand.

other words, the death of Jesus was a matter of retributive justice by substitution. Jesus was “punished” in our place. The satisfaction view goes back to the earliest church fathers. The *Epistle to Diognetus* in the Apostolic Fathers (early second century) contains it in seed form.⁸ This understanding could be called the penal satisfaction view.

The biblical evidence lines up with the penal satisfaction view.⁹ It is hard to take passages like Isaiah 53 and 2 Corinthians 5:21 in any other way. However, Christians must be honest about the harshness contained in the view, at least harshness as some would view the term. In the penal substitutionary view, violence is done to Jesus. Although the spiritual aspects of the atonement are not as obvious, Mel Gibson’s controversial movie *The Passion* shows with horrifying details the physical violence involved. That Jesus experienced such violence can not be doubted. Its record is in all the Gospels. However, the idea that Jesus did this as a substitution and that even in His spirit he experienced judgment (as Isaiah 53 notes) for the sins of others shows that the intent of the atonement is *punishment*, a harsh word to many in our culture. Michael Card, the contemporary Christian songwriter and artist, captures this sentiment perfectly in his song entitled *A Violent Grace*:¹⁰

So ruthless He loves us, So reckless His embrace
To show relentless kindness to a hardened human race
The joy that was before Him on the man of sorrow’s face
And by His blood He bought a *violent* grace

The Nonviolent Atonement

In opposition to the penal substitutionary view of the atonement, a recent presentation has been put forward and labeled as the “nonviolent atonement.”¹¹ One principal proponent who has written a book on the subject (*The Nonviolent Atonement*) is J. Denny Weaver, a religion teacher at Bluffton University in Ohio. The sentiment represented by this view is certainly not new. It is similar to the old charge that conservative evangelical Christianity taught a slaughterhouse religion due to its view of the sacrifice of Christ and its similarities to the Old Testament sacrifices that anticipated His work on the cross. In addition, Weaver’s approach is a refinement of the earlier Christus victor model of the atonement advanced in the early twentieth century by Gustaf Aulen.¹² That model is itself a refinement of the ransom-to-Satan view. Aulen summarized his view with these words: “Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights

⁸ The statement in question comes from The Epistle to Diognetus, IX.2-5: “But when our iniquity was fulfilled and it had become fully manifest, that its reward of punishment and death waited for it, and the time came which God had appointed to manifest henceforth his kindness and power...he did not hate us nor reject us nor remember us for evil, but was long-suffering, endured us, himself in pity took our sin, himself gave his own Son as ransom for us, the Holy for the wicked, the innocent for the guilty, the just for the unjust, the incorruptible for the corruptible, the immortal for the mortal. For what else could cover our sins but his righteousness?...O the sweet exchange, O the inscrutable creation, O the unexpected benefits, that the wickedness of many should be concealed in the one righteous, and the righteousness of the one should make righteous many wicked!” The Epistle to Diognetus, IX.2-5; In *The Apostolic Fathers*, The Loeb Classical Library, Vol. 2 translated by Kirsopp Lake (Reprint ed., Cambridge: Harvard University, 1976), 369-71.

⁹ Still one of the best detailed resources for explaining the biblical portrait of the atonement is Leon Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956). Morris later wrote a more popular version of great value entitled *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1983).

¹⁰ This is the chorus of the song “A Violent Grace” on Michael Card’s album *Soul Anchor* (2000) with Sparrow Records.

¹¹ J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

¹² Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor* translated by A. G. Hebert (Reprint ed., New York: Macmillan, 1969).

against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, ‘tyrants’ under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to himself.”¹³ While no one who holds the penal substitutionary view of the atonement doubts that the Atonement accomplished by Christ is a victory over Satan, proponents of the satisfaction view would reject the Christus Victor approach as diminishing the value of the Cross and being overly selective concerning New Testament passages which reflect upon the value of Christ’s death.

Weaver’s refinement of the Christus Victor view of the atonement adds the unique contribution of conversation with modern liberation and feminist theologies. The amazon.com website advertisement of his book notes: “sharp debates about the death of Jesus sparked by feminist and womanist theologians are the current cutting edge of discussions about Christology and atonement.”¹⁴ In Weaver’s understanding the nonviolent perspective of Christus Victor is much superior to the violent dimensions of the satisfaction view. One must be cautious here. He is not accusing those who hold to penal satisfaction as being personally violent people. He is suggesting that the view accommodates violence as a positive category which in turn yields the sanctioning of unacceptable social activity.

One sympathetic response to Weaver’s approach comes from Christopher Marshall who sees a connection between satisfaction theologies, the attitudes about God they produce, and the social ramifications that then ensue:

Those who take seriously Jesus’ call to nonviolence must learn to read the Bible, do theology and think about God in light of this basic commitment, which is by no means easy. The Bible itself is full of violence, much of it ascribed directly to God... This compromise [with violence] has rested upon, and has strongly reinforced, a view of God as a violent and punitive deity who gets his own way—whether in the short term, through crusade or inquisition, or in the long term, through eschatological judgment and everlasting coercion.¹⁵

Thus, according to this perspective, the satisfaction view of the Atonement is part of an interpretive matrix that yields a harsh God. Marshall states his rejection of the unsatisfactory bent of this state of affairs in stark terms: “Such a God is increasingly hard for people to believe in. Many people today prefer atheism or agnosticism or some vague form of pantheism to the violent deity of traditional religion. And who can blame them, especially in these days when violence is fueled by religious fundamentalism on the upsurge around the world.”¹⁶

However, since the Bible seems on the surface to teach the view that must be rejected how should a theologian respond if he is troubled by the Bible’s violent terminology? Marshall grounds his Christian nonviolence by seeking “to go behind the violent imagery used in the Bible to portray God’s work and to find a deeper, nonviolent reality beneath. My recent book *Beyond Retribution* attempts to furnish biblical and theological foundations for the so-called restorative justice movement. Its central thesis is that the biblical witness to God’s justice is better characterized in restorative or redemptive categories than in retributive or punitive ones.”¹⁷ The literalist would retort right away that this approach is nothing more than allegory. Marshall understands the seriousness of this issue when he

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Accessed 16 July 2005.

¹⁵ Christopher Marshall, “Atonement, Violence and the Will of God.” There are some disagreements between Weaver and Marshall, but overall Marshall concurs with most of Weaver’s innovative proposal.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

notes that “two of the biggest hurdles I faced in arguing for this thesis are New Testament passages about Final Judgment, which anticipate wrath and damnation on God’s enemies, and popular theologies of the Atonement, which attribute the salvific power of the cross to some cosmic act of substitutionary atonement.”¹⁸

The specific summary of criticisms of the penal satisfaction view that Marshall gives centers on four points. First, he points out that many feminists have charged satisfaction theology of using the language of “divine child abuse.” The Father is in an abusive relationship with His son Jesus, demands absolute obedience, and pours out unmerited suffering in order to “defend his own dignity.” This caricature ignores the voluntary nature of Christ’s involvement, His own position as a member of the Trinity, and the fact that His sacrifice was an act of love for others, not simply a defense of God. Methodologically, this feminist starting point is human sociology and not the text of Scripture. However, Marshall’s rendition of this point highlights the feminist intensification of “softer” notions of the atonement.

A second criticism of penal satisfaction is that this view like all others represents the interests of views of specific groups. In other words, there is the question of power that hides behind all theological statements. The particular problem with satisfaction theology is that it “reflects the ‘law and order’ priorities of those thoroughly identified with the prevailing system-ruling-class, white, male clerics.” What should be our response to this? We should reject the notion that to properly contextualize and state theological positions means to recognize power concerns in history. Sometimes, people really do hold to positions because the text of the Bible drives them to. This notion of power plays is a common one in postmodern times in which language has been reduced to references to advantaged states of affairs rather than to reality.¹⁹ But all language is not used in the way that certain politicians and media personnel use it. Honesty has not entirely disappeared from the world.

A third criticism of penal satisfaction according to Marshall is that it has “permitted the ruling elite to participate in systems of oppression without any sense of inconsistency with their Christian commitment.” In his mind, theology has been separated inappropriately from ethical commitment. He goes on to complain that “not only can satisfaction atonement accommodate violence, it may even *encourage* violence.” One particular culprit here in Marshall’s mind is Calvinism, which leads to excessive and harsh treatment of criminals. Again, the argument is methodologically flawed. One’s starting point is not ethical commitment. One’s starting point is the text of Scripture. It also cannot be maintained that proponents of satisfaction theory have been more evangelistic in spreading the “violent” faith. Wars and violence were just as much a part of the early Church and Medieval Period when the penal satisfaction view did not predominate in much of Christendom. Furthermore, I doubt that Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin held to the satisfaction view! The entire criticism is one of special pleading. The total depravity of man is a better starting point for understanding war and violence than satisfaction views of the atonement.

A fourth criticism of the penal satisfaction view which Marshall summarizes is that “its depiction of Jesus obediently accepting death without protest to meet some divine obligation represents an unhealthy pattern for other victims of oppression to emulate.” In other words, the penal view of the atonement discourages active resistance to injustice and exalts innocent suffering. Again, in this stunningly absurd criticism, a particular view of desired behavior is being read back into Bible statements about the atonement. Jesus’ death was not about giving an example of letting people

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ For a discussion of how the concept of power figures into much of postmodern thinking, see Millard J. Erickson, *Truth or Consequences: The Promise and Perils of Postmodernism* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 136-49.

practice injustice. It should be taken at face value and framed by the language and purpose which God gives it. The entire array of concerns as expressed by Marshall betrays a kind of theological fantasy world of overstatement, innuendo, and tenuous connections. One is reminded of U. S. Supreme Court justices who make the Constitution say what they want it to say based upon their prior ethical beliefs and concerns. I doubt that Weaver, Marshall, or any of the supporters of nonviolent atonement would want people to read their own writings in that fashion.

The incomplete strategy of this group of interpreters can easily be demonstrated. Telford Work summarizes Weaver's choppy presentation:

Weaver's selectivity can be jarring. In appealing to Lev 16's scapegoat ritual on the Day of Atonement, Weaver ignores the bloody scenes on both sides of it, in order to make the astonishing claim that "for the most serious and comprehensive sins, blood is not involved" ... Weaver cites Heb 10:1-18 but not 10:19-31. Isaiah's Suffering Servant, who pervades the New Testament, is passed over – as is Passover itself. Weaver blames the continuing theological power of retributive justice on Constantinianism and punitive Western and American structures of justice, but contrary biblical evidence is a more significant explanation for it, and for the appeal of something like satisfaction theory from as early as Athanasius (not just Anselm!) through today.²⁰

Thus, not only does the Weaver and Marshall camp use allegorical method, they ignore biblical information that does not fit with their view. Therefore, it is impossible to say their view is based on biblical theology.²¹

Pacifism or Just War?

Nonetheless, one must understand the larger concern of Weaver and those in his camp. He apparently is a liberal Mennonite pacifist. In an article entitled "Remembering the Future: September 11 and War with Iraq," Weaver argues that the United States was just as responsible for the terror attacks as the terrorists were because of support for Israel and so-called economic violence.²² He naturally disputes the cycle of wars or cycle of violence that occurs regularly in the human experience. Besides the current cycles of violence between the U.S.-Israeli axis and the Moslem world, he suggests that the cause of World War II can be found in the humiliation of Germany in World War I. Weaver's over selectivity surfaces here as it did in his use of scripture. Such a conclusion is quite a generalization. Although German humiliation would be a factor, it would be quite difficult to say it was the *cause* of the Second World War. Why is the cause not seen in one insane man's personal response to the first war rather than seeking to lay the fix on the war in general. Furthermore, I find it quite interesting that Weaver never recalls for his readers that the end of World War II, with its

²⁰ Telford Work, "Review of J. Denny Weaver's *The Nonviolent Atonement*," *Theology Today* 59 (October 2002): 510-13; available at <http://www.westmont.edu/~work/articles/nonviolent.html>; Internet; accessed 16 July 2005.

²¹ I find it a bit contradictory that Marshall's school website advertises his interest in biblical theology. See http://www.vuw.ac.nz/religion/staff/chris_marshall/index.html; Internet; accessed 25 July 2005. It is possible that they are using the term differently than I would. However, I do not see in this entire approach anything that approaches the desire to let a comprehensive discussion of the biblical categories as found in the text guide discussion. At too many places ethical concerns seem to hijack exegesis.

²² J. Denny Weaver, "Remembering the Future: September 11 and War with Iraq," *DreamSeeker Magazine* 3 (Winter 2003): 34-37; available at <http://www.pandorapressus.com/dsm/winter03/weavde.htm>; Internet; accessed 16 July 2005.

absolute victory for the Allies over Germany and Japan has produced sixty years of peace between those nations and the Allies along with democratization and demilitarization. His silence may be partly because of the difficulty that pacifism has relative to the Second World War. If there were ever a war that could be justified, this would be one. The traditional Christian position of just war theory acknowledges that war (with its associated violence) can be justified, but that compassion is expressed in conjunction with war by proper rules for the justification and proper means for its execution.²³

What does all of this have to do with a nonviolent atonement and the overall issue of harshness versus softness in theological doctrines? Have you noticed that in our discussion certain areas and views have converged: (1) *rejection* of the following – an atonement where God punishes His Son, an everlasting punishment in hell, the penal view since it is divine child abuse, domination of culture by white males, all forms of war, penal satisfaction view as a power play by adherents, and (2) *promotion* of the following – feminist theological insights, pacifism, atonement as victory over Satan and oppressors, restorative approach to the atonement. In all of these, there is a deliberate choice by those who hold the so-called non-violent view of the atonement to use softer language to describe life and doctrine. Hard masculine images are rejected in favor of softer, more feminine and nurturing descriptions. The warrior is rejected; the lover is embraced. The theological and ethical ramifications are everywhere.

CONCLUSION

I have discussed three general areas of theology: the Second Coming of Christ, the nature of God, and the Atonement of Christ. In particular I have tried to demonstrate that cultural and theological responses in these three areas have shown some aberrations in the direction of softness. A perceived hardness in each area is usually tied to some form of God's judgment whether involving deserving men or of Christ Himself on the cross. This hardness is then abandoned by those who prefer a sweetness in God and His actions and in man and his ways. Oftentimes the perceived harshness is viewed as flowing from political power plays and male dominance in history. It should be, according to this understanding, modified or replaced by insights from feminist and other advocacy groups. Without hesitation my response to all of this is to encourage Bible-believing Christians to stand their ground and not abandon the so-called hard sayings of God's Word. Jesus is returning to make all things right even when that coming includes judgment from God. There is a real hell of eternal destruction to be shunned. Jesus in space and time really did die a violent death, physically and spiritually. It was an event of unspeakable punishment. War is sometimes a viable option for the believer. God is the Lover-Judge in perfect balance. If it takes a resurgence of the hardness that male-warriors can bring to the table in order to revive theological balance as well as protect our families and nation, it would be a welcome development.

²³ See Mike Stallard, "The Biblical Basis for a Just War," *The Journal of Ministry and Theology* 6 (Spring 2002): 21-43.