
Toward a Christology of Peace

The Narrative Christus Victor of
J. Denny Weaver and Its Implications
for Political and Ecclesial Situations in Ethiopia

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Theologians throughout Christological scholarship have developed numerous atonement theories to comprehend why God became a man—Jesus of Nazareth. Among these theories, three are prominent: (1) the classic Christus Victor theory, (2) the Satisfaction model and its Protestant version, the Penal Substitutionary atonement theory, and (3) the Moral Influence theory. A review of these theories points out that violent political and religious philosophies in their context have influenced them; thus, they have had dangerous implications for generating Christian violence in the past and present.

Of the three theories, an investigation of the narrative Christus Victor atonement model shows it to be a unified theory of atonement that is faithful to the New Testament's teaching and that constructively addresses soteriological, social, and political issues. The theory has profound practical implications for Christians of all ages to continue the mission of Jesus by living in His story with their lives, thus witnessing the reign of God on earth.

Revisiting Atonement Models in a World of Violence and Injustice

Jesus was born and taught in the first-century Roman province of Judea. He suffered and was killed at the hands of the Jewish religious and Roman political authorities, and God raised Him from the dead. These were core themes of the life of Jesus for the first-century New Testament Christians and in the writings of the early church fathers, in theological debates of the medieval church, and in the contemporary post-Reformation churches.

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The New Testament epistles are the early church's reflections on the fullness of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus in their social, political, and religious contexts. Both the Western and the Eastern church fathers theologized the life of Jesus in their contemporary Greek and Roman paradigms. Theologians in Medieval and Reformation periods also reflected on the significance and what they thought were "objective purposes" of the fullness of Jesus's incarnation, life, death, and resurrection.

Prominent models of atonement from these eras are the Christus Victor theory of the early church along with the Ransom theory; the Satisfaction theory of Anselm along with its Protestant version, the Penal Substitutionary theory; and the Moral Influence theory of Peter Abelard. The Christus Victor model was the mainline atonement model for the church fathers until it was marginalized with the emergence of the Anselmian Satisfaction model. Gustav Aulén (1879–1997), a Swedish Lutheran Bishop of Strängnäs and a systematic theologian at the University of Lund, revitalized it.¹ Since then, theologians have given extensive attention to engaging with this atonement model.

In recent years, North American Mennonite systematic theologian J. Denny Weaver has advanced Aulén's Christus Victor model and introduced the narrative Christus Victor (NCV). According to Weaver, all the atonement models of a Christological scholarship were not faithful to the narrations of Jesus: violent political and religious philosophies of their context influenced them.² For him, these models have had dangerous implications for generating Christian violence in the past and present.

Weaver's argument is valid as we review these prominent theories throughout the Christological scholarship. The central theme of ecclesiological atonement theology is to proclaim the reconciliatory death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Thus, one of the major tasks of theology is to develop a contextual message of the gospel in an era; however, political and religious paradigms of these eras should not distort theology to the point it loses its faithfulness to the message of the gospel.

As the death and resurrection of Jesus are central truths of Christian belief and praxis, a right understanding regarding the fullness of Jesus's story is essential in Christian engagement in a contemporary world of violence, hate, war, and structural and social injustices. The way we perceive what the scriptures convey

1 Aulén has undertaken a strictly historical criticism of conventional Christianity and argued that Christus Victor was the model for the early church fathers. Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Herber (New York: Macmillan, 1969).

2 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2011), 19.

about the truths regarding God, His essential attributes, and relations with us and the world can affect our convictions and practices.

As an Ethiopian theologian who has an obligation to develop a contextual message of the gospel to my contemporary Christians, and lead a community of faith, I have observed that the salvific work of Jesus has lost its potency and genuineness in influencing the community of faith, particularly in the arena of sociopolitics. Partaking in ethnic rivalries, mass atrocity, normalized gender marginalization, and active participation in systemic operations have become norms for the community. Furthermore, I observe that these pressing issues in Ethiopia have made the community of faith identify themselves with certain discriminatory political and social ideologies above the reign of God among them.

It is therefore imperative for theologians in Ethiopia to ensure that our understanding of the gospel is in line with the teachings of Jesus, which promote peace, unity, justice, and love beyond social constructs. Only through a renewed understanding of these teachings can we begin to build communities where the reign of God is paramount and where we all feel loved and cared for, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, and sociopolitical leanings.

In this article, I argue that NCV of J. Denny Weaver rereads an entire history of God's people, considering Jesus's incarnation, earthly life, death, and resurrection. It emphasizes the resurrection of Jesus as the culminating revelation of the reign of God in history and as God's nonviolent victory against the evil powers that killed Jesus. This atonement model has profound nonviolence implications for Christians living in the story of Jesus, the fullness of Jesus's life in His social, religious, and political contexts.

Methodology

This article is undertaken with a deductive method of investigation. Writings related to atonement theories of the Christus Victor model, the Satisfaction theory, and the Moral Influence theory have been surveyed. Special emphasis is given to the works of J. Denny Weaver concerning his NCV. By analyzing and appraising mainly his two major works on atonement—*The Nonviolent Atonement* (2001)³ and *The Nonviolent God* (2011)—implications of NCV for contemporary ecclesial and political situations in Ethiopia are developed.

3 J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2001).

Narrative Christus Victor of J. Denny Weaver: An Overview

Thematic Development of Narrative Christus Victor

Narrative Christus Victor (NCV) developed out of the classic Christus Victor, which was a dominant view of the early church, as argued by Gustav Aulén.⁴ It significantly diverges from the classic Christus Victor picture of Jesus's confrontation in cosmic-battle imagery, focusing instead on the historical context and narratives of Jesus's life and ministry. For NCV, the accounts of Jesus's public ministry had a social and political agenda—that is, inaugurating the kingdom of God among humanity.⁵ This kingdom of God was opposed to the values of the kingdoms of the world during Jesus's earthly life and still today; and by raising Jesus from the dead, God demonstrated the victory of Jesus's way of life over the sinful, violent structures of the world.⁶

At its heart, NCV sees Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection as a nonviolent confrontation of the powers of sin and death. For the model, Jesus's life and ministry are equally relevant as His death and resurrection for the salvation of humanity: thus, the whole story of Jesus is salvific.⁷ Weaver sees these parts of Jesus's story as a package: His ministry is connected to His incarnation, and without His fervent and radical ministry, He would have not been killed.

Therefore, Jesus was executed for His faithfulness to His mission of making the reign of God visible in the world. God's response to the powers of evil that killed Jesus was to resurrect Jesus. In doing so, God's overcoming of death puts on sharp display the contrast between God's *modus operandi* and that of the forces of evil.⁸ The forces of evil inflicted death on Jesus as the solution to their supposed problems, whereas God's response is the overcoming of death, the restoration of life. For Weaver, "God saves, not by taking life but by restoring life."⁹

In the development of NCV, Weaver sketches Jesus's story as a social agenda.¹⁰ The story emphasizes the activist and, at times, confrontational dimensions of His ministry. Weaver starts his analysis of Jesus's narratives in the Gospels from the beginning of Jesus's public ministry with His appearance in the synagogue in Nazareth when He reads from Isaiah 61:1–2. Jesus's words indicate that His ministry had a strong social component.¹¹ Here, Jesus speaks of preaching good

4 Aulén, *Christus Victor*.

5 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

6 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

7 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 14, 27.

8 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 32.

9 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 32.

10 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 23.

11 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

news to the poor, healing the sick, and liberating the imprisoned. Thereafter, Jesus's ministry is filled with actions of social importance: He goes to where the poor live; He frees those who are oppressed under demonic influences; He cleanses lepers and embraces prostitutes and other outcasts of society. Jesus's ministry is antithetical to the status quo of His historical context.¹²

As Jesus deliberately confronts the social elements of His context, which were antithetical to the kingdom of God, He is confronted by the powers of His society. His deliberate choice of these confrontations includes His defense in John 8 of a woman caught in adultery. At this juncture, the Jewish religious code commanded stoning for such offenses. However, Jesus consciously elevates the protection of this woman's life above the strict enforcement of the religious code. He prioritizes protection for the vulnerable and chooses restoration rather than condemnation.

Jesus's confrontational but nonviolent activism in making the rule of God visible provoked hostility in both social and political spheres, as He was perceived as an enemy both by the palace as well as temple authorities. In Luke 23:2, the temple authority accused Jesus of subverting the nation against Caesar. Matthew also tells us that the Jews accused Jesus of blasphemy (26:57–68). These accusations against Jesus led Him to be tried, condemned, and executed by crucifixion.

In these confrontations of Jesus with these powers, God's purpose was to expose the injustice of the powers of evil and inaugurate His just and loving alternative kingdom, even at the cost of Jesus's death. Weaver emphasizes the resurrection as God's victory, which, tellingly, other atonement theories hardly treat or need. In the confrontational narration of Jesus, His resurrection was God's vindication of Jesus's nonviolent resistance to and victory over evil, by empowering God's people to live already according to God's Reign. This is evidenced in Peter's preaching in Acts 2. As he declares, God raised Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24). Peter also describes Jesus's resurrection as the vindication of how Jesus lived and embodied God's kingdom (see Acts 10:38). Paul also affirms that the resurrection of Jesus is the ultimate victory of God against the forces of evil that killed him, and Jesus continued His victory through His church (see 1 Cor 15:53–55, 2 Cor 2:14).

After his ample analysis of the Book of Acts and some writings of Paul, Weaver analyzes the book that theologians consider one of the most violent—the Book of Revelation. He argues that the story in Revelation is a nonviolent act of God's salvation, with the same message as the Gospels, written in the symbolic and confrontational language.¹³ In Revelation, yes, God makes “war” on the powers that structure our world through injustice, but the battle itself is nonviolent, for

12 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 19.

13 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 48.

the victor worthy to unlock the scrolls of history is the slain and bloodied Lamb (Rev 5:1–10).¹⁴

The resurrection is the key and climactic event in NCV. Weaver declares the victory of Jesus: “The restoration of life in the face of violence constitutes the ultimate victory of the reign of God over the forces of evil. . . . It is thus an invitation to all people to identify with Jesus and to share in the resurrection’s victory.”¹⁵ Evil is defeated not through mirroring violence but by the vindication of Jesus in the resurrection.

NCV further asserts that these narrations of Jesus in the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation are invitational.¹⁶ Salvation happens as those who are invited to live in the story of Jesus accept the invitation and start to live in it. This is the heart of the New Testament’s incessant call for *metanoia*, a radical change of mind that leads to a transformed way of life. The Father’s sending of Jesus and Jesus’s coming to proclaim the reign of God are not pictured in a way as an innocent victim but as God’s action in Jesus reconciling the world to himself.

The Hermeneutics of Narrative Christus Victor

In his development of NCV, Weaver applies Eric Seibert’s Christocentric hermeneutics in his readings of the Gospels, Pauline writings, Revelation, and selected Old Testament texts. Seibert argues that “the God Jesus reveals should be the standard, or measuring rod, by which all Old Testament portrayals of God are evaluated.”¹⁷ In reading the Old Testament stories, Seibert suggests the reader should distinguish between “the textual God and the actual God.” It is “the person of Jesus” that reveals the “moral character” of the actual God.¹⁸

Weaver makes striking arguments for the nonviolence of God in the Old Testament, despite narratives in which God is involved in violent killings of innocent and powerless people. He contends that identifying the nonviolent character of God requires rereading the Old Testament and re-prioritizing its nonviolent images and practices.¹⁹ Weaver’s apparent rejection of violent narrations of God in the Old Testament may bring a solemn criticism against his model.

14 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 49.

15 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 51.

16 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 26.

17 Eric A. Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior: Troubling Old Testament Images of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009), quoted in Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 114.

18 Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, quoted in Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 114.

19 Seibert, *Disturbing Divine Behavior*, quoted in Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 118.

Unlike Marcion, who rejected the Old Testament God as a violent monster who cannot be regarded as the Father of Jesus Christ,²⁰ Weaver does not discard these violent readings of the Old Testament as uninspired and fallible stories. Rather, he argues that the Old Testament presents not one unique representation of God and violence, but multifaceted representations.²¹

Weaver compellingly argues that “the conversation about the character of God in the OT is not resolved by citing a specific story but by recognizing which side of the conversation is continued by the narrative of Jesus, the Messiah who is a son of Israel.”²² He sees Jesus as the hermeneutical key for reading scripture faithfully. Images of God that do not correspond to the account of Jesus should be regarded as distortions.²³

NCV differs from other atonement models in the way it deals with the object of the death of Jesus, the purpose of Jesus’s death, and its overall imagery of atonement.²⁴ In contrast to other atonement models, NCV redirects the death of Jesus toward the violent earthly powers in social, religious, and political arenas perpetrated by people.²⁵ The model rejects the death of Jesus as an instrument of God to satisfy Himself from His wrath toward humanity. It rejects Jesus’s death as a ransom paid to Satan to release the souls of humanity held captive by him. It also rejects the idea that God’s way of influencing humanity is through His love in killing His Son to show them the extent of His love toward them.²⁶

The exclusive focus on Jesus’s death in alternative atonement models has negative implications for the Christian life. For example, it leads people to neglect the social aspects of Jesus’s ministry, like opening the eyes of the blind, freeing the oppressed, casting out demons, and cleansing the diseased. For Weaver, theologies that emerged from these models and practices are more prone to condone violence, not only in war but also against oppressed groups. Meanwhile, the Christian ethic of nonviolence, as Jesus taught and embodied it, becomes marginal.²⁷

20 James Dunn, “The Apostle of the Heretics’: Paul, Valentinus, and Marcion,” in *Paul and Gnosis: Pauline Studies* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 105–18.

21 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 96.

22 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 113.

23 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 114.

24 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 75; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 70.

25 Acts 2:23, 4:10, 5:30, 10:39–40; Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 85; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 74.

26 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 86; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 74.

27 Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*, 108, 122, 157.

Implications of Narrative Christus Victor for Contemporary Political and Ecclesial Situations in Ethiopia

In the previous section, I discussed the central tenets of NCV, emphasizing that this model sees Jesus's story—His incarnation, ministry, death, and resurrection—as a nonviolent confrontation and victory over the powers of evil. In this narrative, God is fully present and stands against violence, broadly characterized to include ethnocentrism, sexism, war, poverty, and psychological harm. As such, Jesus's story presents strong social, political, and evangelistic implications for contemporary Christians as they continue Jesus's story and the history of God's people.

In this section, I examine how NCV can be contextualized for Ethiopian society, exploring its potentialities for the contemporary ecclesial and sociopolitical landscape. I argue that NCV has three primary potential implications for the Christian praxis of nonviolence and active participation in the construction of a peaceful Ethiopia.

In the first implication, I argue that NCV demands that Ethiopian Christians firmly oppose violence and warfare, endeavoring to embrace nonviolent responses in the face of pressing sociopolitical challenges. NCV obligates us to serve as ambassadors of peace and reconciliation within our community.

In the second implication, I argue that NCV necessitates that Ethiopian Christians resist patriarchal structures that impede or prohibit the full participation of women in church and societal leadership roles. As agents of change, Christians must work vigorously toward gender equity and the eradication of patriarchal systems that obstruct women's progress and contributions.

In the third implication, I argue that NCV requires Ethiopian Christians to liberate ourselves from self-centrism and cultivate a posture of empathic concern toward our fellow beings, especially toward victims of structural and cultural violence. In essence, Ethiopian Christians must espouse the principles of altruism and dedicate ourselves to enhancing the fortunes of others, particularly those who are disadvantaged, irrespective of arbitrary social constructs like ethnicity or religion.

Implication 1: Narrative Christus Victor Calls Us to Oppose War and Struggle for Nonviolent Solutions to Sociopolitical Conflicts

NCV presents the story of Jesus as a deliberate proclamation of the reign of God mostly in confrontational but nonviolent ways.²⁸ From this, it can be logically deduced that Christians, who are called to live in the story of Jesus, should continue the mission of Jesus by living in His story with our lives, thus witnessing the reign of God on earth. Weaver argues that NCV is theology for living, a

²⁸ Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 12.

theology that is lived by Jesus and His apostles in their embodied witness.²⁹ What defines this witness is its constant call to participate in the reign of God until it is fully present on earth, in a lifestyle that is (1) deliberate, (2) continual and practical, and (3) confrontational but nonviolent.

NCV invites all contemporary Christians who are living in the story of Jesus to confront the evil powers that killed Jesus and that are still roaming in the world posing the same level of challenge toward them, as they participate now in the victory of God's reign wrought by Jesus's resurrection. Christians are called to join with and follow Jesus in His mission of witnessing to the gospel, the peaceable reign of God. Since being a follower of Christ is to live in His story, the narration of Jesus demands that we choose Jesus's ways over the ways of the enemies of Jesus. Jesus deliberately and nonviolently confronted His enemies, which the early church continued.

Weaver argues that the dominant Satisfaction theory—with its Protestant version of the Penal model—and the Moral Influence theory have contributed to justifying war and violence throughout the history of Christendom.³⁰ These atonement models supported, in part, the war, violence, and retributive justice systems because they were developed within violent politico-historical settings. Weaver illustrates this by arguing that the American exercise of “just war” has a strong theological ground from the Protestant Penal Substitutionary atonement model. Most Christians in the US supported the war against Afghanistan, Iraq, and other Muslim countries because they thought retribution must be served. For these Christians, their god is a god of retribution. He is a punishing god who takes vengeance on the breakers of his law and responds to the violence made against him with more violence.

We may see a similar situation in Ethiopia today. In the political climate of the 2020–2022 civil war in Ethiopia, we witnessed a troubling phenomenon in which many Christians who subscribed to the Penal Substitutional model of retributive justice supported either the Ethiopian government's retributive war or the backbiting atrocity of the Tigrayan People's Liberation Front (TPLF) against the Northern Command of the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) on November 3, 2020.³¹ The war has led to the displacement and victimization of

29 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 15–17.

30 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 71, 127.

31 Dorcas Cheng-Tozun, “Ethiopian Christians Take Sides Over Tigray Crisis,” *Christianity Today*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.Christianitytoday.Com/News/2021/July/Ethiopia-Tigray-Evangelical-Conflict-Abiy-Tplf-Orthodox.Html/>.

countless innocent individuals within the Tigray, Amhara, and Afar regions of Ethiopia.³²

As per Weaver’s observations, trying to serve retributive justice often replicates the same evil that instigated such a reaction, portraying the server as the hated antagonist.³³ In this regard, Ethiopia’s government mirrored the violence it detested from the TPLF by waging war against them, resulting in even more heinous atrocities against innocent citizens. It is indeed ironic that retributive response perpetuates killing to demonstrate the wrongness of killing—a misguided strategy that only perpetuates violence.

In response to Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed’s rallying call on November 18, 2020, a faction of Evangelical Christians, and the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church outside Tigray—together representing over 60 percent of the Ethiopian population—exhibited their solidarity with the Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) by appealing to “God” and beseeching divine assistance in the destruction of the “enemy” and the implementation of retributive justice.³⁴ Along the same line, the TPLF instrumentalized “ethnic autonomy” and framed themselves as defenders of their constituents against what they perceived as occupying forces—all but an act of aggression. Most Tigrayan Christians sided with the TPLF’s narrative and supported its armed aggression against the ENDF and its forced conscription of hundreds of thousands of youths who lost their lives during the war.

Notably, several of these Christians who supported either the government or the TPLF held positions of authority within their respective faith communities. This raises the pertinent question of whether their obedience to the Prime Minister’s and the TPLF’s call subverted the tenets of the reign of God and blocked alternative and creative countermeasures that may have curtailed the mounting crisis.

From the perspective of NCV, rather than following the TPLF’s and government’s call to arms through the dehumanization of ethnic and political “others,” Ethiopian Christians could have prioritized the mission of the church, which is to serve as agents of peace, justice, and reconciliation beyond social constructs. This necessitates urgent promotion of reconciliation between the government and the TPLF, as well as addressing the underlying ideologies that drove the conflict.

32 Kizzi Asala, “Ethiopia’s Prime Minister Orders Military Response to Tigray Attack,” *Africa News*, November 4, 2020, <https://www.africanews.com/2020/11/04/ethiopia-s-prime-minister-orders-military-response-to-tigray-attack/>.

33 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 164.

34 Temesgen Kahsay, “When Religion Goes Awry: The War on Tigray and the Perversion of Evangelical Christianity,” TGHAT, July 4, 2021, <https://www.tghat.com/2021/07/04/when-religion-goes-awry-the-war-on-tigray-and-the-perversion-of-evangelical-christianity/>.

Despite the challenging nature of these tasks, we must acknowledge that there can be no shortcuts in the pursuit of lasting peace.

NCV further challenges this flawed perspective on Christianity that promotes retribution, beckoning us instead to embrace the reign of God in our lives and adopt a nonviolent approach to combating social injustice. From NCV's stance, Christians are called to participate deliberately in peacemaking and to love our enemies. Therefore, in following Christ, Christians should say, "I interrupt the cycle of retaliation by acting in such a way as to convert my enemy into my friend."³⁵ This consciousness of love invites us to pause and ask: As a Christian who is living in the story of Jesus, am I acting to transform my "perceived" enemy into a friend? In our current situation, who we perceive as an enemy could differ from us in political, religious, and/or ethnic identity. Jesus's application of the concept of love demands that those who live in His story break a cycle of retaliation caused by mirroring evil, and work toward friending their enemy.

If Ethiopian Christians could have adopted NCV as a central paradigm of the gospel, our potential role in preventing the outbreak of war between the TPLF and the government could have been strengthened through urgent action toward promoting options for reconciliation, and advocating for political process to bring the perpetrators to responsibility. Addressing the deep-seated grudges and ideologies that fueled the conflict also would have been a critical step in this regard. Unfortunately, even Christians who claimed to be faithful in Ethiopia wavered and only resorted to prayers, effectively rendering themselves helpless when it was already too late to prevent the war. Despite this, rejecting any justification of further violence by the warring parties at the expense of bloodshed in favor of political solutions was within the realm of possibility for Christians after the outbreak of hostilities.

Drawing from Paul's exhortation to the Romans to live in peace with everyone whenever possible (Rom 12:18), Christians in contemporary Ethiopia should work toward a society that espouses values of peace, love, and nonviolence. While the effort required for this is extensive and not pre-packaged, it should begin with theologians and believers engaging in open dialogue with sociopolitical actors in their communities. This way, they can positively influence society's understanding of peace and enhance the nonviolent tenets of Jesus by incorporating them into educational curricula, human-rights-based frameworks, legal instruments, and political activism geared toward limiting the use of armed and unarmed violence in favor of dialogue and nonviolent activism.

NCV upends our paradigm of sociopolitical issues and exhorts us to inhabit the narrative of Jesus and discern the reign of God in our lives. It obliges the body of Christ to delineate itself through pacific ways of redressing injustices. Jesus's life serves as a rebuke to any endorsement of violence in the name of retributive

35 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 71, 127.

justice. The true significance of being a Christian is symbiotically linking with Christ and maintaining an unwavering commitment to manifesting His narrative through nonviolence.

This narrative of Jesus's life story mandates Ethiopian Christians to observe the reign of God in the same manner as Jesus did. The kingdom of God will manifest visibly in the sociopolitical community of faith when adherents perpetuate the nonviolent narrative of Jesus. Weaver postulates that "the Christian calling—the mission of the church—is to carry on Jesus' mission of witnessing to and making present the reign of God in human history."³⁶

By identifying His followers as the light and seasonings (Matt 5:13–16) of the world, Jesus beckons us to connect in our sociopolitical milieu in such a way that it redirects society toward greater visibility of the reign of God in the world. The contemporary Christian in Ethiopia can function as a peacemaker and reconciler in our society by eschewing the wrathful God of the Satisfaction model in favor of the nonviolent confrontational God depicted in the life of Jesus, thereby preventing further bloodshed and conflicts. As a faith community, we must adopt an unequivocal stance on war and conflicts, one that is comprehended by both the state agency and the Ethiopian community. This may necessitate theological reflection and chronological advancement.

Witnessing the reign of God involves the promotion and action of justice that can be developed amid the contemporary needs of Ethiopia and the world. The narrative of Jesus is clear that the Christian faith carries a responsibility of commitment to nonviolence, for the promotion of life and life values. This demands that we—the contemporary Christians—create context-sensitive transformative approaches to violence and conflict and discernment of practices that cultivate nonviolence and spiritual development.

Implication 2: Narrative Christus Victor Calls Us to Oppose Patriarchy and Promote the Full Participation of Women in Church and Society

Under this implication, first I shall expound upon NCV's hermeneutical framework, which endeavors to apprehend Jesus's treatment of women in the Gospel stories and parables. Through this hermeneutics, second I shall juxtapose NCV with three areas of violence that women in Ethiopia have been facing—namely, the structural constraint of women from leadership, structural sexism, and cultural violence.

One distinguishing feature of NCV is its reliance on the story of Jesus as its hermeneutical framework to comprehend biblical stories and to deduce contextual meaning from them. By applying Jesus's view about women as a standard for women's roles in societal and ecclesiastical affairs, NCV invites contemporary

36 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 26.

Christians to view Christianity and perceive the realities of oppression and marginalization against women. The hermeneutical questions that we need to ask in the light of NCV include the following: (1) What was Jesus's approach to women? (2) Did he accord them equal treatment to men, or did he regard them in the same manner that the Jewish conservatism of His context did? (3) How should contemporary theologians reconcile Jesus's practice with their current ecclesiastical and political situation?

The hermeneutical approaches to scripture that have been used in crafting other atonement models—chiefly, the Satisfaction model and Penal Substitutionary atonement—are inadequate to describe Jesus's views on women. These theories were developed using the historical, grammatical, and literary approach, which employs various techniques to understand the original author's intended message of a passage in its historical, grammatical, sociological, and literary settings. This hermeneutical approach has been invaluable in revealing the intended messages of the original authors of the scriptures. However, it fails to address overarching themes in the scriptures such as violence against women, slavery, and marginalization of the weak.

NCV sidesteps the limitations of historical criticism by asking the reader to use the story of Jesus as a frame of reference to even evaluate the stories in the Bible. For this model, God is perfectly embodied in the story of Jesus; hence, it is logical to evaluate the stories in the Bible using this ultimate hermeneutic—the life and story of Jesus. Applying this hermeneutic circumvents the spurious realities women have been told by male-oriented Christian conservatism that was predicated on violent passages in the scriptures.

In Ethiopia, women have been excluded from practicing religious leadership roles, and certain cultural and societal norms have been employed to deprive them of vital tools needed for socioeconomic empowerment. The lens of NCV looks at Jesus's ways of reframing social issues, and we can assume that this model will reconceptualize how Ethiopian women interact with religious, cultural, and societal norms to claim a humane space for self-actualization. It is plausible that an engagement with NCV will encourage a re-imagining of the religious response to the social oppression of women in Ethiopia.

In the following part of the subsection, I shall apply NCV presentation of Jesus's interactions with women and stories that emerge from parables to the most pressing issues about women in Ethiopian political and ecclesial circles.

When we refocus on the story of Jesus, as NCV leads us to do, we see women have a leading position equal to men. From His Incarnation, Jesus was born of a woman and had many connections with women during His ministry. The first witnesses of His resurrection were women (see Luke 24:10). He often deliberately confronted societal structures that undermined and removed women from the sociopolitical scene of His context.

The first widespread issue that affected women in Ethiopia was their structural restriction from ecclesial and political leadership.³⁷ From my experiences as an insider in the Ethiopian ecclesial circle—which broadly encompasses the Gospel Believers’ Churches Council,³⁸ in which the Ethiopian Hiwot Berhan Church (my denomination and the largest Pentecostal church in Ethiopia) and the Meserete Kristos Church (the largest national Anabaptist conference in the world) participate—women comprise less than 1 percent of the positions of leadership in these churches. Although women have achieved some progress in the political realm—with nearly 50 percent of positions at a federal level occupied by women after Prime Minister Abiy’s commencement of reforms in 2018—the same cannot be said for the ecclesial domain.³⁹

The crux of the problem, I argue, not only rests on the theological foundation that restricts the adoption of NCV’s Christocentric hermeneutic that espouses a traditional, patriarchal hermeneutical frame but also does not have a theology for living, which is practical and calls to action. I argue that by utilizing Christ Victor as a narrative for living, a new path can be constructed that eradicates praxis emanating from traditional theology that restricts women’s participation in ecclesial affairs, and instead emphasizes equality and full participation of women.

For NCV, Jesus’s parables, as one of the pillars of His teachings, have been an essential tool for the propagation of the gospel message. Parables are rooted in the power of storytelling, symbolism, and metaphor to transcend cultural barriers, evoke deeper levels of thinking, and reveal truth. As such, they offer compelling insights into the subversion and transgression levels of narratives that challenge the status quo and issue a call to action. In the context of Ethiopian society, where women face systemic exclusion from ecclesiastical and political leadership spheres, the parables of Jesus come alive as a powerful counter to patriarchy.

37 Nigist Melese, “Challenges and Opportunities of Women Empowerment in a Leadership Position in Ethiopia,” *European Journal of Business and Management* 11, no. 3 (2019), 38–44; Serawit Bekele Debele, “Females’ Subversive Interventions in the Religious Field in Ethiopia,” in *Female Leaders in New Religious Movements* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 189–207.

38 The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches is a fellowship of more than three thousand Ethiopian gospel-believing churches from more than fifty countries, representing over thirty-two million Christians both in Ethiopia and worldwide. The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches, The Ethiopian Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches, September 23, 2023, <https://www.ecgbc.org/about>.

39 Marijke Breuning and Gabriela Okundaye, “Half of the Cabinet: Explaining Ethiopia’s Move to Gender Parity in the Government,” *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 56, no. 5 (2021), 1064–78.

One of the most notable parables in this regard is that of the Leaven (Matt 13:33 and Luke 13:20–21). In this parable, Jesus uses the image of yeast mixed into flour by a woman to describe the impact of the kingdom of God on the lives of people and society. The fact that Jesus chooses an illustration of a woman mixing yeast as an illustration of how the kingdom of God operates speaks to Jesus's valuing of women in God's kingdom. As the yeast permeates the entire dough, the impact on society of the kingdom He preaches is transformative, bringing about changes in various spheres of societal and ecclesial situations.

Through this parable, Jesus subverts the norms of patriarchy and amplifies the role of women in His teachings, revealing the intrinsic value and dignity He bestows upon women beyond social constructs. Similarly, the Parable of the Ten Virgins (Matt 25:1–13) underscores that everyone has a role to play in the kingdom of God. The presence of five wise and five foolish virgins shows that no gender is inferior or superior, and everyone is equally important in God's plan. The teaching points to the intrinsic value of both men and women, emphasizing that everyone has a role to play in building the kingdom of God. These parables reveal a Christocentric hermeneutic that focuses on the kingdom of God and its transformative power, challenging the patriarchal systems that relegate women to secondary positions and highlighting the vital role of women in participating in God's kingdom.

Jesus's teachings through the parables resonate with the Ethiopian context, where women face systemic exclusion from ecclesial leadership spheres. This parable serves as a compelling narrative that reveals how Christ's teachings and actions challenge the status quo and call for radical change. Thus, NCV's hermeneutical framework—using the story of Jesus as a theology for living—offers a solution to the patriarchal systems that relegate women to secondary positions, by instead promoting gender equality and emphasizing the role of women in realizing God's kingdom.

The second widespread challenge against women in Ethiopia, which NCV compellingly addresses, is the issue of structural sexism. Structural sexism is an age-old problem that has continued to marginalize and oppress women in various spheres of life. In Ethiopia, women have been subjected to these forms of injustice, leading to prevalent cases of early marriages, domestic violence, and limited access to higher education, among other issues.⁴⁰ However, the gospel of Jesus Christ provides an alternative worldview, where the dignity and equality of women are emphasized. Through the use of parables, Jesus taught about the value of women in the kingdom of God and challenged the patriarchal structures of His time.

⁴⁰ Taddese Mezgebo, Tewelde Ghrmay, and Menasbo Gebru Tesfay, "Sexism, State, Market, and Society: Evidence from Rural Tigray, Northern Ethiopia," (July 19, 2019). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3370790> or <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3370790>.

For an illustration, seen through the lens of NCV the parable of the persistent widow (Luke 18:1–8) speaks to the problem of limited access to justice for women in Ethiopia. This is one of the strongest illustrations used by Jesus to teach His disciples about unswerving continuation in prayer and seeking His kingdom. In a culture where men are all heads and teachers of spiritual truths, Jesus’s employment of a woman as a model seeking God demonstrates that He had an understanding of women that was contrary to that of the religious leaders of His context.

This parable is situated in the wider context of the Gospel of Luke, which emphasizes the value and dignity of those who are marginalized in society, including women. The parable is an example of an exaggeration or hyperbole, a common narrative technique in Jewish literature that was also used by Jesus.⁴¹ The judge in the parable is meant to represent an unjust system that cares nothing for the needs of the vulnerable. Yet, even in the face of such a system, the widow persists in her pursuit of justice. For NCV, this is a part of the larger presentation of Jesus’s victory over the oppressive powers and structures present in the world, including Ethiopia.

One of the prevalent fruits of structural sexism in Ethiopia is an exponential proliferation of prostitution in the country, particularly after the war in northern Ethiopia. A study by *Tearfund Australia* shows that in 2017 an estimated one hundred fifty thousand women worked in the sex trade on the streets of Addis Ababa alone—one in ten females over the age of fifteen.⁴² Since the civil war in northern Ethiopia, this number has likely grown exponentially. It can be argued that prostitution in Ethiopia is pervasive and unchecked, perpetuating a cycle of exploitation and victimization primarily directed toward the vulnerable. The root causes of this problem can be traced back to societal structures that undermine women’s rights and promote gender inequality—including structural sexism, poverty, civil wars, child marriage, and a lack of access to education.

A particularly troubling aspect of this situation is the ecclesial role—by an institution tasked with upholding morality and promoting social justice—in perpetuating gender inequality and discrimination that drives the sex trade in Ethiopia. I am not referring only to the churches under the umbrella of the Council of Gospel Believers’ Churches, but primarily the Ethiopian Orthodox Tewahedo Church. Studies show that most women in the sex trade in Ethiopia identify as Christians and pay their tithes; yet, despite identifying as Christians and attending church, these women often find themselves the victims of an unjust

41 Marion L. Soards, “The Historical and Cultural Setting of Luke-Acts,” in *New Views on Luke and Acts*, ed. Earl Richard (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 33–47.

42 Tearfund Australia, “Off the Streets: Freeing Women in Addis Ababa from the Sex Trade,” accessed June 21, 2021, <https://www.tearfund.org.au/stories/off-the-streets-freeing-women-in-addis-ababa-from-the-sex-trade>.

system built on patriarchal attitudes, misogyny, and a disregard for gender equality. Even worse, the church's teachings and leadership structures can sometimes reinforce these harmful ideas, leading to an even greater sense of marginalization and disillusionment among women.

NCV directly speaks to this disquieting social ill as it underscores that the church is called to be a prophetic witness and a force for positive social change in the world, including in Ethiopia. For Weaver, the church's mission on earth is to continue the work that Jesus began through His life, death, and resurrection. Weaver proposes that Jesus's victory over sin and death offers a model for nonviolent resistance and a way to transform oppressive systems and structures that have led these women into prostitution. Accordingly, the church should focus on creating communities that embody the values of Jesus—such as love, justice, and compassion—and work to bring about God's kingdom of peace on earth. This includes challenging the powers and principalities that perpetuate structural sexism and injustice and actively seeking to create a more just and equitable society.

To truly create change, churches in Ethiopia must strive to become agents of social transformation, challenging the forces that maintain structural sexism and actively seeking to create a more equitable society. Participating in this type of activism requires pushing back against entrenched gender norms and working to dismantle the systems that promote gender inequality. Ultimately, churches in Ethiopia must recognize that their mandate is to create a world of love, compassion, and justice and that this requires a deep commitment to fighting the root causes of societal injustice, including the sex trade.

The third prevalent gender issue in Ethiopia is the issue of cultural violence toward women. In Ethiopia's ecclesial context, the widespread cultural violence toward women is a significant problem that needs to be addressed by society at large. Cultural violence against women in Ethiopia is a complex problem that stems from entrenched societal and ecclesial structures and their underlying imaginations, embedded within the culture of Ethiopia itself. These imaginations perpetuate the myth that men are naturally wiser and stronger than women and that women's worth lies only in their ability to bear children and serve men. This cultural violence limits women's access to education, employment opportunities, and full participation in the sociopolitical landscape. It is a persistent issue that seeks to diminish women's worth and undermine their role in society.

NCV emphasizes Jesus's victory over evil and oppression and can be applied to contemporary contexts to challenge oppressive structures and promote equality. In the parable of the Queen of the South,⁴³ Jesus demonstrates that wisdom is not limited to one gender or culture. The queen's example shows how women from foreign contexts can bring unique insights and ideas to their communities,

43 Matthew 12:42, Luke 11:31.

challenging patriarchal notions that women are inferior to men. Similarly, the parable of the widow of Zarephath⁴⁴ speaks to the plight of disadvantaged women in Ethiopia who struggle to provide for themselves and their families. This parable demonstrates that faith and trust in God's provision can lead to miraculous outcomes, empowering women and giving them hope in the face of adversity.

Further, Jesus's healing of a woman who was hopelessly bent for eighteen years underscores the importance of women's rights and worth. By publicly acknowledging her as a daughter of Abraham, Jesus affirms the woman's equal right to partake in the blessing of Abraham, regardless of her physical situation and gender identity. This act of Jesus is a deliberate nonviolent confrontation against the Jewish sacred custom that marginalized women and the weak, like this woman. This acknowledgment of Jesus was antithetical to the Jewish custom that does not count a woman as a valid line of generation. Thus, it possibly follows that Jesus had no convictions against women's capability of ecclesial and societal leadership. In this way, NCV avoids the problems that feminist theologians have identified in the Satisfaction atonement models.

These parables call contemporary Christians to treat and value women to the same degree as Jesus valued and treated them. Jesus is the ultimate authority to which His followers of every age look. His story thus must call His followers to reinterpret the role of women in ecclesial and societal affairs. The narrative of Christus Victor's focus on Jesus's whole story as a salvific work of Jesus enables us to see His treatment of women as equal to men. Only by promoting these values and affirming women's rights and worth can we create a just and equitable society that ensures equal opportunities for all.

Implication 3: Narrative Christus Victor Calls Us to Oppose Self-Centrism and Live a Life Characterized by Altruism

The third implication of NCV is that it calls Christians living in the story of Jesus out of self-centeredness and into the embrace of others as themselves. This is made evident in Jesus's command to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Mark 12:30–31), a theme that resounds throughout the Gospel and Acts.

Jesus was the quintessential man of the people who acted selflessly for the benefit of others and the glorification of His Father. Even in His call for His followers to "deny themselves" (Matt 16:24), however, He did not demand that they forego self-care. Rather, He enjoined them to treat others as they would treat themselves. It is not a matter of diminishing one's self-worth; rather, it acknowledges that a proper appreciation of one's worth demands an equal appreciation of other people's worth. Therefore, Jesus's disciples in Ethiopia are likewise called to nurture and love themselves so they can extend the same love to others.

44 1 Kings 17:7–16.

Nevertheless, a diametrically opposed practice to altruism has been ravaging contemporary Ethiopian ecclesial pulpits and practices through the proliferation of market-driven prophetic movements.⁴⁵ In recent years, because of pressing issues in the country—including poverty, recurring ethnic-based conflicts, and low job market—most Ethiopians are dissatisfied with their lives and are seeking comfort, primarily from the “prophetic” movements. Moreover, the proliferation of social media has made accessible how people in different economic and political contexts live, and this has created a sense of frustration in the Ethiopian public.

In response to this scenario, in Ethiopia and most parts of sub-Saharan Africa, a profitable industry of fashionable miracle “prophets” has been ravaging these people by manipulating them and promising them a better life if they obediently consume their miracle prophecies that supply them with a divine power to change their life instantly. Ironically, these predatory practices are mostly reflections of the social, political, and spiritual evil forces Ethiopia has been experiencing as a nation for the past few years. Subconsciously, the Ethiopian society has gravitated toward these miracle “prophets” as an answer to the impasses in which they find themselves. However, despite the posturing of these “prophetic” markets, they are symptoms of the spiritual ills they claim to remedy.

It makes sense that these miracle “prophets” have flourished in Ethiopia at a time when people have lost faith in state and non-state institutions to provide them with a decent life—when young people who were promised a better future if they worked hard and obtained a college degree now find themselves in an increasingly difficult job market or with no employment prospect. But these miracle “prophets” disregard all these prospects and tell their followers that through the consumption of their service, they can overcome these problems.

Now, NCV calls on contemporary Christians in Ethiopia living in the story of Jesus to firmly expose and challenge these predatory practices and nurture a spirit of altruism that puts others before themselves. It calls for the prioritization of the interests of others over oneself, providing a powerful counterpoint to the selfish and exploitative logic of the market-driven “prophetic” movements. By fostering a spirit of service and love, and by promoting justice and human dignity, the Ethiopian church can challenge and overcome the predatory practices of these movements.

Moreover, NCV invites contemporary Ethiopian Christians to embrace a vision of society in which the government serves the people and individuals are able to reach their full potential. This vision is rooted in a deep commitment to justice and fairness, which recognizes that every individual is endowed with inherent worth and dignity, irrespective of their social or economic circumstances.

⁴⁵ Andreas Heuser, “Charting African Prosperity Gospel Economies,” *HTS: Theological Studies* 72, no. 4 (December 2, 2016), 1–9.

In this way, the challenge facing contemporary Ethiopia is not simply a religious or spiritual one but a philosophical and ethical one. It requires a fundamental reorientation of our values, priorities, and commitments, and a renewed commitment to the common good and the flourishing of all members of society. Only by pursuing this path can we hope to overcome the predatory forces of the market-driven prophetic movements and create a just and equitable society for all Ethiopians.

Another powerful illustration from NCV that speaks to the ecclesial and political situation in Ethiopia is the well-known parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). In the parable, Jesus exposes the challenges of racial and ethnic discrimination and stereotypes in His context of first-century Israel. He praises the Samaritan man who helped an injured Jewish man found lying on the road. The leaders of the religious establishment walked on the other side of the road, passing by the man. The Jews of Jesus’s day regarded Samaritans as being of mixed ethnic origin rather than as Israelites. As a result, Samaritans were despised and experienced discrimination. According to the strict purity code, they were unclean.⁴⁶ Jesus had this in mind when he told this parable.

These kinds of discrimination are very alive in our contemporary Ethiopia, where ethnic, racial, and class discrimination and stereotypes are taken as norms. Most of our contemporary Christians in Ethiopia are not even aware of these discriminatory norms and that they are often unwittingly taking part in and furthering them. The irony in the parable is that the Jewish religious leaders were the bearers of their people to God; yet, they despised and looked down upon the object of their very service to God. The religiously and ethnically despised and perceived enemy—the good neighbor, the “Samaritan”—had become the object of love, the one whom the lawyer had just been told to love as himself (Luke 10:27).⁴⁷

This parable challenges us Ethiopian Christians to see beyond our preconceived duplicitous ethnic, religious, and political prejudices and embrace people unconditionally. If the parable were told in today’s Ethiopia, it might feature several examples of discrimination in our society. The Samaritan might be a shoe cleaner on the streets of Addis who came from a minor ethnic group to the city in search of survival. In Amhara or Oromia regions, the Samaritan may be a former Tigrayan combatant. This story is at the heart of NCV as it exposes the ethnic, religious, and racial evils of Jesus’s society.

46 Daube David, “Jesus and the Samaritan Woman: The Meaning of *συγχράομαι*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* (1950), 137–47.

47 Weaver, *The Nonviolent God*, 20.

Living in Alignment with Jesus's Mission

The thrust of this essay has been to delve into narrative Christus Victor (NCV) and its implications for contemporary Christians in Ethiopia. NCV posits that Jesus's ministry, death, and resurrection were a nonviolent confrontation of the powers of sin and death. This study has identified three practical implications based on their relevance for ecclesial and political situations in Ethiopia:

1. First, NCV requires that Christians in Ethiopia become agents of reconciliation and peace in their respective societies. It demands that they oppose war and struggle for nonviolent solutions to sociopolitical conflicts.
2. Second, NCV demands that Christians oppose patriarchy and promote the full participation of women in the church and societal leadership. As agents of change, Christians should work toward gender equality and the dismantling of patriarchal structures that hinder women's growth and contributions.
3. Third, NCV demands that Christians refrain from self-centrism and instead love others with the same intensity with which they love themselves. Christians in Ethiopia, upon learning to love and nurture themselves, must assume an empathetic posture and strive to improve the lot of others, especially the less fortunate.

In essence, NCV necessitates that Christians become agents of change in their respective societies, promoting justice, equality, and freedom for all. It is only by committing to these core claims that Christians can live lives that are in alignment with Jesus's mission.