



# Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology

*Richard J. Mouw , Douglas A. Sweeney , Willie Jennings (Afterword)*

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American theologians tend to focus on the great hope Christians have through Christ's resurrection, emphasizing Christ's victory while minimizing or ignoring his suffering. Through their engagements with Japanese Christians and African American Christians on the topic of Christology, Richard Mouw and Douglas Sweeney have come to recognize and underscore that Christ offers hope not only through his resurrection but also through his incarnation. The authors articulate a more compassionate and orthodox Christology that answers the experience of the global church, offering a corrective to what passes for American Christology today. The book includes an afterword by Willie James Jennings of Duke Divinity School.

## Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology Details

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# **From Reader Review Suffering and Victorious Christ: Toward a More Compassionate Christology for online ebook**

## **Dwight Davis says**

I was not as impressed with this book as I hoped to be. So up front, the actual text by Mouw and Sweeney is deserving of 2 stars, but the afterword by Jennings bumps the overall rating up to a three star book.

Mouw and Sweeney attempt to reclaim the doctrine of *Christus dolor* (that is, the suffering Christ) to hold alongside of *Christus victor*. In order to do this, they draw upon the traditions of Lutheranism and Calvinism as well as Asian theology and slave/African-American theologies. This is an admirable attempt for the most part, but I don't think that they were successful in what they were attempting to do. Much of the book was largely irrelevant to the overall thesis and structure of the work. I think the chapters on Pieper and Nevin could have been removed completely while the chapter on incarnational presence should have been greatly expanded. Comparing Sojourner Truth and Charles Hodge was a strange move to make in the chapter on slavery and African-American theology. Overall, much of the book fell into the trap of overly evangelical thinking, merely skimming the surface of the issue without actually adding anything to the conversation at hand regarding Christology and race. I don't think the authors achieved what they set out to do, that is, to lay out a more globally palatable, compassionate Christology.

The essay by Jennings at the end was incredible, however. Jennings calls for a rethinking of evangelical pedagogy in light of the new theological turns that we are experiencing away from colonialistic tendencies. I was actually shocked that the publisher included Jennings' essay in this volume because he goes after the authors pretty hard and voices a significant critique of their work, claiming that they still fall into the same traps that theologians have been falling into since the advent of colonialism.

Overall, this is an admirable effort to engage with global and non-white voices in theology to articulate a better Christology. I just think that the authors were too beholden to their traditions to really overcome their biases and hear the other voices they were attempting to interact with.

SIDE NOTE: Why did Mouw and Sweeney chose to put the words black theology in scare quotes when referring to James Cone? This seemed like an odd move in a book attempting to hear different voices and articulate a more compassionate theological method.

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## **Liz says**

Class reading. This book explores the different theological interpretations of Christ's victory on earth and his suffering alongside humanity (*christus victor* and *christus dolor*) and the tensions between embracing both his identities.

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## **Brent Merrill says**

I was skeptical upon picking this book up that it would prove to simply be another in the genre of "What Americans get wrong about theology." The texts thesis is a critique that "American" Christologies lack a

global scope. The Authors correction to this is the application of several uniquely "American" theological voices that broaden the scope of the traditional Christologies approach to Christ's suffering. These voices reflect well the various perspectives that arose from living in North America historically. At the end of this book I was still skeptical of the notion that anyone needs a "global" Christology but applying one's own historical tradition to correct enthusiasms towards one dimensional Christologies is warranted and very wise. The afterword or reflection on the authors text/success was overly harsh. The text is short. Undoubtedly a great deal more could have been done and said if this work was larger. For instance clear trinitarian distinctions might have been parsed better with the insertion of several chapters at the beginning of this work. However, if one takes the length of this text into account one just might have a bit more grace and admiration for the amount of engaging material the Authors managed to pack into this small but important work.

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## **Chris Woznicki says**

As evangelical Christians become more and more aware of the fact that Christian theology is not simply a western endeavor we will begin to see more and more interaction between American Evangelical theology and Non-Western theology, in other words we will begin to see that our American theology is also a contextualized theology. As we slowly begin to realize American theology is also a contextualized theology we will come to see that there is no such thing as "American Theology." Who do we mean by "American?" Do we mean Latino-Americans, African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans? What about people like me, who are mixed, with parents from different cultures and continents? How will traditional Anglo-American theology, specifically Christology address these segments of the Christian church? Douglas Sweeney and Richard Mouw provide us with an example of how that might go....

*The Suffering and Victorious Christ* was birthed out of a Christology conference held in Japan in 2010. During the conference it became clearer that

"Western militarism led Americans to highlight God and Jesus' Christ's power, stringent holiness, and victory over sin far above their passion condescension to our weakness, and identification with human suffering" (2)

On the other hand Asian theologies have consistently emphasized the suffering and brokenness of Christ. Mouw and Sweeney say that they are "not convinced that violence, triumphalism, and denial of the suffering of God are essential to the Reformation traditions." With that they engage in a project of digging through their respective traditions (Reformed and Lutheran) for a more compassionate Christology. At the forefront of their minds is a missional concern, people need to hear that God identifies with them in their suffering, they don't *only* need to hear about God's wrath against sin....

Mouw and Sweeney mine their traditions for Christological gold, through the study of hymns, sermons, and personal narratives as well as more traditional theological resources, they show that the Reformed and Lutheran tradition can serve as a basis for a *Christus dolor*, not simply a *Christus Victor*. They set up their purpose in light of contextual theology. On page 9, they say that their question is

"How can we articulate a more compassionate and globally relevant Christology in terms that are faithful to and consistent with the Reformation traditions we claim, but are also disciplined by the concerns and experience of our Asian and non-European brothers and sisters?"

## Overview

In order to answer this question they begin by dealing with resources from their own theological heritages. Mouw begins by examining the Reformed theologian, John Williamson Nevin, a central figure in Mercersburg theology. Sweeney then devotes a chapter to Lutheran theologian Franz Pieper, who predicates suffering of God himself by talking about the suffering of God in Christ. This chapter is followed by a brief interlude on Roman Catholic theology and incarnational presence. After this interlude Mouw adds another chapter on Reformed theology and the suffering of Christ. Hodge, Berkhof, and Faber are the central foci of this chapter. Mouw argues that the seeds of a compassionate Christology were there, but what is needed is an emphasis on a compassionate Christology. Mouw and Sweeney then devote a chapter to a less traditional theological resource, narratives and hymns. They examine African American slave experiences of suffering and the role of Christ's suffering in their making sense of their situation. They point out that the slaves believed that Christ, and Christ alone understood their suffering. They believed that he suffered with them and like them. The *Christus dolor* is a Christ that suffering slaves could identify with. They conclude with some words of warning, stating that the exploitation of *Christus dolor* can be just as dangerous as the exploitation of *Christus victor*. We need scriptural guidance to form our Christology. In their conclusion they offer some words of encouragement for those who seek to form more global and compassionate Christologies.

## Assessment

In one sense this is an act of constructive Christology, yet in another sense it is a report of what different traditions have to say regarding a particular subject. Given that it is partially a constructive project and a report, it's difficult to assess this book. For instance, I have qualms with some parts of Lutheran Christology, but this is not the place to address those issues. Others will have issues with Reformed Christology, but again this is not the sort of critique that the book invites. The type of critique that this book invites is regarding whether or not the project that Mouw and Sweeney are engaged in is possible in principle and whether or not it is a worthwhile project. Some will surely respond that theology ought not be contextual. Theology is objective so speaking about contextual theology brings the subject into subjectivity. However I don't think that is the case. Mouw and Sweeney rightly point out that "diverse circumstances...require different emphases in the way they configure theology, they can – and should – nonetheless express as hared theology that unites them in the body of Christ. (91)" So there is certainly room for manifold theologies that have a different emphasis, yet talk about the same thing, because they are talking about Christ. So to those that say that contextual theology is in principle misdirected, I simply say "you are wrong." Regarding the second question, whether or not Mouw and Sweeney are engaged in a worthwhile project, we must answer that they are. The fact is that we Americans have often ignored the suffering Christ and instead have chosen to focus only on the victorious Christ...

The other day I was preaching on Matthew 5:10, I was preaching about persecution and how Christ identifies with us in our suffering and in our persecution. At the end of the sermon a college student who was visiting from another church came up to me to thank me for preaching on God's suffering. He said that he has never heard a sermon about that. We simply don't like to talk about suffering in church.

For some reason we Americans don't like to think about God suffering, maybe its because we think comfort is a mark of godliness.

Nevertheless it is a fact that the God-Man (however you want to cash that out, either in a Reformed fashion or a Lutheran fashion) suffered for us and in our place. *Christ was a man of sorrows, well acquainted with pain. And if we choose not to address that part of Christ's person and work we are missing a central part of*

*the gospel.*

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