

Title: A book will be proposed (according to the guide above) by the student and approved by the Lecturer. The student will then hand in a two page summary and review as proof of completion. The book should be related to either Christology or Soteriology – either in classical or contemporary form.

Course: Christology & Soteriology

Lecturer: Rev Augustin Muthusami

Student: Scott Thong Yu Yuen

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DECLARATION

I certify that this ASSIGNMENT is my own work. I have acknowledged all material and sources used in it, and that I have not plagiarised in part or whole the work of others without stating the references.

Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (OR/USA: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), Perlego Edition

Gustaf Aulen in his now classic tome begins by laying out his main contention – that the early church held to a distinct view of the Atonement which he calls the ‘Classic’ view, that of ‘Christus Victor’ (p.4). He argues that this view was “the dominant idea in the New Testament” and “the ruling idea of Atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history” (p.6), which was superseded during the Middle Ages in favour of the ‘Latin’ theory (pp.81-83); then rediscovered by Martin Luther (pp.14-15, 101-111); but once again neglected by Luther’s successors (pp.123-124).

To this end, Aulen surveys the writings of various early church fathers to reveal their understanding of what happened on the cross – such as Irenaeus (pp.17-35), Gregory of Nazianzus (p.42), Athanasius (p.44), John of Damascus (p.45), Gregory of Nyssa (p.46) – and with other personalities name-dropped (pp.37, 39).

Aulen defines Christus Victor as Christ via the Atonement triumphing over the evil powers of the world which had enslaved mankind, thereby reconciling the world to Himself – a great epic, a ‘dramatic’ story of salvation (p.4). He rallies Scriptural support for this in by appealing to Paul’s frequent mention of “principalities and powers” (p.67); “‘Principalities,’ ‘Powers,’ ‘Thrones,’ ‘Dominions,’” (p.69); “all rule and all authority and all power” (p.70)’ and “the prince of this world” (p.74) – these being terms of “*geographical domain rulership*”¹, which Christ defeated through the cross.

Aulen take pains to distinguish Christus Victor from what he calls the ‘Latin’ or ‘objective’ view (p.8) developed and popularized by Anselm (p.84). The Latin view is the legalistic Satisfaction theory of Atonement (pp.33, 79, 83, 90, 146), and due to using some similar imagery as Christus Victor sometimes gets conflated with the Classic view (p.8). In reaction to the Latin view arose a third alternative, the ‘Humanistic’ or ‘subjective’ moral influence theory (pp.133-135) that arose with Abelard’s responses to Anselm (pp.138, 144).

¹ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham/USA: Lexham Press, 2015), 121-123.

Despite some passing similarities, Christus Victor is fundamentally different from the ‘ransom theory’ whereby God pays off the devil (p.57). The devil is instead a usurping robber (pp.27-28) who mistook Jesus for just another hapless human prey (pp.51-53, 103-104) – and sorely came to regret his self-hoisting by the petard. Some analogies used to illustrate this self-defeat are Gregory’s baited fish-hook (p.52), or Augustine’s mouse-trap (p.53) – with Christ as the irresistible lure. The devil was thereby overcome not by brute force, but by God becoming man to die in our place (pp.44-46, 57). As to whether the devil obtained any legal rights over humankind, the church fathers had differing views (pp.48-55).

Hence, Christus Victor is God becoming a man in order that mankind might obtain triumph over the otherwise foes of sin, death and the devil (p.59) – the Incarnation and Atonement inseparable, (pp.18-21, 32-34, 59, 108, 151); thus God is both “the Reconciler and the Reconciled” (pp.30, 35, 59).

Though Aulen states that his goal is not to promote Christus Victor over other theories of the Atonement (pp.158-159), in effect this is what is achieved by his calling it the Classic view and his appeal to the New Testament and earliest Christians amounts to: “...I would plead it is because the facts themselves point that way. For it can scarcely be denied that the classic idea emerged within Christianity itself, and on that ground alone cannot be refused a claim such as neither the Latin nor the subjective type of teaching can make, to embody that which is most genuinely Christian” (p.158). Nevertheless, various supporters of the Christus Victor view caution that it is by no means an exclusivistic theory – it can (and should) be held together with other theories of the Atonement.^{2 3 4}

² N. T. Wright, “N.T. Wright on Christus Victor AND Penal Substitution (both/and)”, *Scott Mercer* (accessed 29-Aug-2022): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bGeSQbLD7a8> [0:01 to 0:47]

³ William Lane Craig, “Is the Atonement Divine Abuse? Interview with William Lane Craig”, *Dr. Sean McDowell* (accessed 29-Aug-2022): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_O0eDaTc3Hw [24:53 to 25:23]

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, “Christus Victor vs Penal Substitution Atonement Theories”, *Bible Nerds* (accessed 29-Aug-2022): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GImuK3n2vZs> [1:30 to 2:31]

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