

Christus Victor

by Gustaf Aulén

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Topic: the book argues for the 'Christus Victor' view of Christ's atoning work, also known as the 'classic' or 'dramatic' view.

Originally written in Swedish. The following paragraph is from the translator's preface:

"This book is strictly an historical study; it contains no personal statement of belief or theory of the Atonement. Its important and original contribution is its strong delineation of the view of the Atonement which is summed up in such phrases as 'Christus Victor,' and 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself'—the view that sets the Incarnation in direct connection with the Atonement and proclaims that it is God Himself who in Christ has delivered mankind from the power of evil. As soon as the meaning of this view is grasped, the patristic teaching at once stands out as a strong, clear, and consistent whole, and it becomes impossible to doubt that it is this view which also dominates the New Testament; it has therefore every right to be called the typical Christian view, or, in Dr. Aulén's phrase, the '**classic**' idea of the Atonement."

Views of the atonement

1. The '**objective**' or '**Latin**' view. **Anselm** was its main proponent. In this view, God is the object of Christ's atoning work, and is reconciled through the satisfaction made to his justice.
2. The '**subjective**' view. **Abelard** was its main proponent. In this view, the atonement consists in a change taking place in people, rather than a changed attitude on the part of God. This view grew to its peak in the Enlightenment.
3. The '**classic**' or '**dramatic**' view (the **Christus Victor** view). Here, the atonement is seen as a divine conflict and victory. Christ fights and triumphs over the evil powers of the world and in him God reconciles the world to himself.

Conflict between the objective and subjective views marked the whole of the 19th century.

- *Classic vs. objective:* The objective view sees the atonement's origin in God's will but it is, in its carrying-out, an offering made to God by Christ *as man* and on man's behalf. But the classic view sees it as from first to last a work of God himself.
- *Classic vs. subjective:* The subjective view focuses on a change in man. The classic, a complete change in the situation, in the relation between God and the world, and a change in God's own attitude.

The classic view is **dualistic**: '[The term] is used in the sense in which the idea constantly occurs in Scripture, of the opposition between God and that which in His own created world resists His will; between the Divine love and the rebellion of created wills against Him. This Dualism is an altogether radical opposition, but it is not an absolute Dualism; for in the scriptural view evil has not an eternal existence.' (p5 fn)... 'In reality it is an integral and necessary element in primitive Christianity, and in the early church too. It is impossible to eliminate it without representing early Christianity as something quite other than it actually was.' (p12)

The classic view is **the dominant idea of the atonement throughout the early church period—for the first 1000 years**—reflecting its dominance in the NT. Because it shares a lot of vocabulary—like 'sacrifice' and 'substitution'—with the objective view, many wrongly believe they are basically the same, but they are not. Care is needed with the language, for the two views use terms in quite different ways. Supporters of the objective view tended to look down

on the classic view because it never achieved a clearly formulated systematic format. Subjective view supporters despised it as 'mythological' because of its lurid language and metaphors, and in any case they looked down on dualism.

Luther marked a return to the classic view after the medieval period.

'The Latin type of Christian doctrine turns out to be really a side-track in the history of Christian dogma—admittedly of vast importance and influence, but still only a side-track; and the proud claim of Roman theology to represent the continuity of Christian doctrine cannot be substantiated. The history of the doctrine of the Atonement shows clearly that just at this central point the Latin view definitely deviates from the classic Christian view. The main line in the development of doctrine is continued, not by Anselm and the mediaeval scholastics, but by Luther.' (p14)

Brief history of the doctrine

Irenaeus

'His strength lies in the fact that he did not, like the Apologists and the Alexandrians, work along some philosophical line of approach to Christianity, but devoted himself altogether to the simple exposition of the central ideas of the Christian faith itself.' (p17)

'The Latin doctrine always involves an opposition, expressed or implied, between the Incarnation and the work of Christ. But the opposition becomes meaningless as soon as the "classic" idea of the Atonement receives due consideration; for in this type of view the Incarnation and the Atonement always stand in the closest relation to one another.' (p19)

'In Irenaeus's thought, the Incarnation is the necessary preliminary to the atoning work, because only God is able to overcome the powers which hold man in bondage. and man is helpless. The work of man's deliverance is accomplished by God himself.' (p20)

Irenaeus closely associates sin and death. Alongside these he ranges the devil. He says: 'The Word of God, who is the creator of all things, overcame him through man, and branded him as an apostate, and made him subject to man. See, says the Word, I give you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions, and upon all the power of the enemy.' (p26)

Irenaeus likes ransom imagery. In his writings, the ransom is paid to the powers of evil, to death, or to the devil.

'He does not think of the Atonement as an offering made to God by Christ from man's side, or as it were from below; for God remains throughout the effective agent in the work of redemption... The redemptive work is accomplished by the Logos through the Manhood as His instrument; for it could be accomplished by no power but that of God Himself. ' (p33)

Other patristic writers

'If now we ask how widely spread was the classic idea of the Atonement in the early church, it may be definitely laid down that it dominates the whole of Greek patristic theology from Irenaeus to John of Damascus, who is commonly regarded as marking the close of the patristic period... To mention only the most important names: Origen, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem, and Chrysostom.' (p37)

'Even those who are most strongly influenced by Greek philosophy, such as Origen and the two Cappadocian Gregories, take essentially the same view of the Atonement as the "unphilosophical" Athanasius.' (p38)

In the West, the Latin view first begins to appear in Tertullian, followed by Cyprian, but only in minor form and never fully worked out. The classic view remains dominant, among the Western as well as the Eastern fathers, found in Ambrose, pseudo-Ambrose, **Augustine**, Leo the Great, Caesarius of Arles, Faustus of Rhegium, and **Gregory the Great**. The two in bold type were enormously influential. Gregory was one of the authors most studied by Luther.

Re the conciliar formulae of the early church: 'It is not always clearly understood that the Christological definitions were worked out in close connection with a quite definite view of Christ's redemptive work, which, though it found no explicit place in the definitions, was present in the background throughout.' (p41)

Christ and the devil

'The most common view is that since the Fall the devil possesses an incontestable right over fallen man, and that therefore a regular and orderly settlement is necessary; but sometimes this view is traversed by another, which regards the devil as a usurper, as possessing no sort of right over men. Both forms of teaching can, however speak of the devil as having been deceived by God or by Christ; this idea enjoyed great popularity, and seems to have met with little serious criticism.' (p48)

The ransom was commonly viewed as paid to the devil. This view was challenged by Gregory of Nazianzus, who denied that the devil could have any real rights over people—it is not fitting that the devil, who is a robber, should receive a price in return for what he had taken by violence. We often read that the devil exceeded his rights in his treatment of Christ, and therefore was deprived of his rights and lost his kingdom. 'Augustine says that the devil found Christ innocent, but none the less smote Him; he shed innocent blood, and took what he had no right to take. Therefore it is fitting that he should be dethroned and forced to give up those who were under his power.' (p51)

The idea that the devil was himself deceived produces some realistic imagery. 'Christ appears as it were incognito, his Godhead being hidden under His human nature; hence the devil thinks that He will be an easy prey.' (p51) Augustine uses mouse-trap imagery: as the mice are enticed into the trap by the bait, so Christ is the bait by which the devil is caught. Always, God's dealings with the devil exemplify 'fair play'.

'...the double aspect of the drama of redemption. God is at once the author and the object of the reconciliation; He is reconciled in the act of reconciling the world to Himself.' (p56) Related themes are that of 'debt' (normally seen as paid to 'death', though a debt of honour is paid to God) and 'sacrifice'.

'The typically Latin view of the Atonement always regards the sacrifice as offered by man to God, and works this out in a logical theory; but the classic idea of the Atonement, whether in the East or in the West, is always marked by a double-sidedness. The Sacrifice is the means whereby the tyrants are overcome; yet there is a close connection between the tyrants and God's own judgment on sin.' (p57)

Augustine 'denies that God the Father can be in any way "placated" by the Son's death; for in that case there would be a difference of some kind, even a conflict, between the Father and the Son: but that is unthinkable.' (p58) 'The Latin doctrine...is in its very structure a rational theory; and from the point of view of this doctrine the classic idea must always seem to be lacking in clearness. It may be doubted, however, whether this demand for rational clearness represents the highest theological wisdom.' (p59)

The NT teaching

The Latin view claims a NT base (like Rom 3:24), or at least that it was presupposed in both OT and NT. In reality, much of its 'scriptural proofs' support is from the OT. 'Paul...is not a scholastic theologian, and...the old assumption, that there is to be found in him a fully articulated theological system, is unsound.' (p63)

Paul mentions the devil much less than the Fathers; his focus is more on the 'principalities and powers' etc. He also includes the Law as one of the tyrants, unlike the Fathers (Rom 7:4; Gal 3:13; Col 2:14; Rom 10:4). 'The Pauline use of the idea of Sacrifice lies wholly within the limits of the classic idea.' (p72) 'The classic idea of the Atonement has never found more pregnant expression than in the great passage, 2 Cor. 5:18f: 'All things are of God, who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself, not reckoning unto them their trespasses, and having committed unto us the word of reconciliation.' (p73)

Hebrews has often been leaned upon by supporters of the Latin view. But Hebrews presents the same double aspect seen elsewhere as essential to the classic view, regarding 'the Sacrifice of Christ both as God's own act of sacrifice and as a sacrifice offered to God. This double-sidedness is always alien to the Latin type, which develops the latter aspect, and eliminates the former.' (p77)

Summary: 'New Testament teaching corresponds with that of the early church; it being understood that there is not to be found in either case a developed theological doctrine of the Atonement, but rather an idea or *motif* expressed with many variations of outward form... the New Testament does not reflect the special features of the Latin doctrine of the Atonement.' (p78) The latter grew up later in connection with the Latin idea of *penance*.

'The New Testament idea of redemption constitutes in fact a veritable revolution [compared with the OT], for it declares that sovereign Divine Love has taken the initiative, broken through the order of justice and merit, triumphed over the powers of evil, and created a new relation between the world and God.' (p79)

The Middle Ages

Tertullian and Cyprian are responsible for the development of the Latin view, based on the twin ideas of *satisfaction* (the compensation a person makes for his fault) and *merit* (the observance of Law)—both connected with penance. Penance is the acceptance of a temporal penalty to escape eternal loss.

Observance of the law is considered meritorious, but 'merit' in its special sense is linked with acts that are 'supererogatoria'—fasting, voluntary celibacy, martyrdom etc. That this stacking up of superfluous merit can be transferred from one person to another is an idea that comes in with Cyprian, preparing the way for the Latin theory of the Atonement. The overplus of merit is earned by Christ, whose work receives recognition from God as satisfaction.

'The whole idea is essentially legalistic; and... in speaking of Christ's work, the emphasis is all laid on that which is done by Christ as *man* in relation to God.' (p83)

The Latin view first appears fully developed in Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo?* He has been often misunderstood. 'It has constantly been said, especially in popular expositions, that Anselm taught that a direct change in God's attitude was effected by Christ's satisfaction; but this is not what Anselm said.' (p85) It is, however, Anselm's basic assumption that the required satisfaction for transgression must be made by man. He argues: 'Men are not able to make the necessary satisfactions because they are all sinful. If men cannot do it, then God must do it. But, on the other hand, the satisfaction must be made by man, because man is guilty. The only solution is that God becomes man; this is the answer to the question *Cur Deus Homo?*' (p86). He thus separates the Incarnation from the Atonement. The classic view sees Incarnation as vitally connected to it: God comes into the realm of humanity in order to free us from the tyrants and thus achieve what no human could do. For Anselm and the Latin view the question is where is the man who, free from sin and guilt, can thus offer himself (from below) as an acceptable sacrifice to God?

Anselm rejects the dualism of the classic view held by the Fathers. 'His whole emphasis is on the death as an isolated fact, and as in itself constituting the satisfaction; but, according to the classic type of view, the death had been the climax of a long conflict, and had constituted Christ's victory.' (p89) Anselm holds that the only alternative to satisfaction would be a unilateral forgiving of sins by God, which would indicate laxity of justice. The whole thing, in his view, is a *juridical system*. Man's relationship to God is entirely a legal one. 'To the classic idea, on the other hand, it is essential that the work of atonement which God accomplishes in Christ reflect a Divine order which is wholly different from a legal order; the Atonement is not accomplished by strict fulfilment of the demands of justice, but in spite of them; God is not, indeed, unrighteous, but He transcends the order of justice.' (p90)

The Latin view is also highly *rational*. 'The Classic idea of the Atonement defies rational systematisation; its essential double-sidedness, according to which God is at once the Reconciler and the Reconciled, constitutes an antinomy which cannot be resolved by a rational statement.' (p91) 'The classic idea shows a continuity in the Divine action

and a discontinuity in the order of justice; the Latin type, a legal consistency and a discontinuity in Divine operation.’ (p91)

‘The Latin doctrine of the Atonement is closely related to the legalism characteristic of the mediaeval outlook. Therefore, it ought to appear as a really amazing fact, that the post-Reformation theologians accepted the Anselmian doctrine of the Atonement without suspicion, altogether missing the close relation between this doctrine and the theological tradition which the Reformation had challenged with its watchword of *sola gratia*. (p92)

Later, in Aquinas, the Latin doctrine is solidified. ‘The payment of satisfaction is treated as the essential element in Atonement and as accomplished by the death of Christ; the payment is primarily the work of Christ’s human nature, but it gains increased meritorious value on account of the union of human nature with the Divine nature in Christ. So Thomas Aquinas teaches explicitly: the human nature of Christ makes the offering, but, because He is God, the merit of His work is not merely sufficient, but super-abundant.’ (p93)

Later theologians argued that the merit of Christ cannot be infinite because he only suffered in his human nature—they had lost the classic view’s emphasis on the Atonement’s being the work of God from start to finish.

Abelard attacked both the dualism of the classic view and Anselm’s theory. He emphasised Christ as the great Teacher and Example, stirring love in people’s hearts—the beginnings of the subjective view. But he viewed that love itself as meritorious! He attached no special significance to Christ’s death.

Another mediaeval phenomenon was *Devotion to the Passion*, or passion-mysticism. We are to enter into the lifelong passion of Christ through meditation and imitation, according to Thomas à Kempis. It was an emotional reaction to the clinical rationalism of the Latin view. The two together ousted the triumphant note of the classic view. ‘What was lost was the note of triumph, which is as much absent in the contemplation of the Sacred Wounds as in the theory of the satisfaction of God’s justice.’ (p98)

The classic view lived on in the mediaeval period in hymnody and art, especially as associated with the Easter liturgy. But in the mystery plays the devil has become a half-comical figure, for the idea of Christ’s conflict with the devil was no longer taken seriously.

Martin Luther

People have wrongly assumed that Luther’s view of the atonement was of the Anselmian type. He certainly used Latin terms like ‘merit’ and ‘satisfaction’, but in a new sense altogether. His view was in fact a revival of the classic view of the Fathers, but given deeper treatment. The proof:

- ‘First, in those places where it is altogether necessary for him to express himself with the greatest possible care and the greatest possible exactness, as, for instance, in the Catechisms, he always returns to the dramatic idea.
- Second, he himself repeatedly assures us, with all possible clearness, that the statements of the meaning of the Atonement in dramatic terms give the very essence of the Christian faith; they are *capitalia nostrae theologiae*.
- Third, and chiefly, the dramatic view of the work of Christ stands in organic relation with his theological outlook as a whole.’ (p104)

Luther’s hymns reflect the classic view—*A mighty fortress is our God*, for example.

‘Those who deny Christ’s deity lose all Christianity and become mere heathens and Turks.’ (Luther, p107). His strong emphasis on Christ’s deity reflects his conviction that, in the end, it is *God* who achieves the work of redemption.

Luther’s work carries all the hallmarks of the classic view: a continuity of Divine operation; the Atonement closely connected with the Incarnation; the whole approach is dualistic and dramatic—Christ delivers us from sin, death, the devil, law and the wrath.

He writes about the Hidden God (*Deus absconditus*) as compared with the Revealed God (*Deus revelatus*). The great revealed God was present, hidden, in the despised man Christ. The devil thinks Christ an easy target, but this is God's 'deception', for the devil overreaches himself and his scheme backfires on himself.

Luther, like Paul, regards the *law* as in one sense altogether good, as an expression of God's will, and in another sense as altogether bad, an enemy overcome by Christ. And for him *wrath* is not just the final judgment, as in most mediaeval thinking, but God's continuous opposition to sin. He sees a conflict in God himself: the divine wrath versus the divine blessing. But he sees the love and blessing as the more essential nature of God, and it is therefore the wrath that has to give way. This shows Luther maintaining the dualistic outlook of the classic view. 'The fact that the Wrath is overcome means not at all that it is to be regarded as only a pretended wrath, or that it ceases to exist; rather, through the Atonement it is *aufgehoben*, transcended, in the Hegelian sense—that is, it remains latent in and behind the Divine Love, and forms the background of the work which the Love fulfils.' (p115)

Luther regularly uses the terms 'merit' and 'satisfaction', both commonly associated with the Latin view, but in ways completely consistent with the classic view. Satisfaction is made both *by* God and *to* God. His use of the term 'sacrifice', however, is exactly the way the Fathers used it, of God both making the sacrifice and receiving it—no hint of a man-made sacrifice offered to propitiate God. He shows how much the atoning work *costs* God.

The traditional text of Luther is not always to be trusted. Scholars have proved that, where he talks of merit and satisfaction, the text has been amended to bring it into line with the Latin doctrine. 'Therefore Luther stands out in the history of Christian doctrine as the man who expressed the classic idea of the Atonement with greater power than any before him. From the side-line of the Latin theory he bends right back to the main line, making a direct connection with the teaching of the New Testament and the Fathers. This is his claim to be regarded as in the true sense of the word, catholic. But he is a solitary figure. The doctrine of Lutheranism became a very different thing from that of Luther.' (p121)

Since the Reformation

'Luther's teaching on the Atonement was not followed either by his contemporaries or by his successors.' (p123) They reverted to the Latin doctrine. Melancthon was a key player in this. He was tidy-minded and couldn't cope with the tensions and seeming contradictions in Luther's thought.

'The controversy with Osiander [by Melancthon and others]...marks the chief turning-point on the road from Luther to Lutheran Orthodoxy, This controversy was concerned primarily with Justification, but it spread over the whole central field of Christian doctrine. Its result was to establish the authority of a view of God's righteousness and of law, which firmly fixed the accepted doctrine of the Atonement in the line of the Latin tradition... The result was the strange association of an anti-moralistic doctrine of *sola gratia* and a legalistic view of man's relation to God, which came as a result to be typical of Protestant Orthodoxy.' (p126)

'The mediaeval doctrine of the Atonement remained, in a slightly modified form, while the penitential system and the idea of penance on which it had originally been built up, had completely disappeared... Protestant Orthodoxy thus follows Anselm more closely than the usual medieval teaching. It states the problem in the same way; it repeats the contention that the payment of the satisfaction is the only alternative to a condonation of laxity. One or the other there must be; either a love which in forgiving violates the demands of justice or else satisfaction. No other alternative is regarded as conceivable.' (p128)

In the Protestant doctrine it is not just Christ's death that makes satisfaction but his whole fulfilment of God's law throughout his life—there can be no atonement unless man has fulfilled all God's commandments. Law is now a major element in the scheme of salvation; the OT is leant on for the main scriptural proofs, and some NT texts caused it difficulty. 18th century orthodoxy was completely uncomfortable with Luther's *contra legem*. In that century the heavy law element provoked a 'mystic' reaction as before, this time in the form of Pietism.

Arrival of the subjective view (humanistic)

The Pietists talked more about 'new birth' than about 'justification'—a more subjective imagery. The talk was of benevolence and goodwill on God's part (rather than the term 'love'), and the legal aspects of Latin theology were regarded as inappropriate. No atonement was really needed. 'Man repents and amends his life, and God in turn responds by rewarding man's amendment with an increase of happiness.' (p135) This was the idea of laxity on God's part that supporters of the Latin view had regarded as the only logical alternative. But the classic view interposes itself between the two!

Conflict between the objective and subjective views marked the 19th century. According to Schleiermacher (subjective) 'atonement' means just getting to know God better.

'It is particularly interesting to note the order in which the two ideas, Salvation and Atonement, are arranged. Wherever the classic idea of the Atonement is dominant, the two coincide; alike in the early church and in Luther, Salvation is Atonement, and Atonement is Salvation. With the Latin doctrine the case is different; Atonement is treated as prior to Salvation, a preliminary to it, making the subsequent process of salvation possible. But Schleiermacher reverses the order; Salvation (the change in the spiritual life) comes first, and Atonement (Reconciliation) follows as its completion.' (p136) Ritschl follows a similar line.