



Christus Victor: A Holistic Approach to the Incarnation and Atonement of Jesus Christ

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When evangelicals speak of the exalted Lord, they often do so in terms of strength, might or power. Rarely do we allow ourselves to be taken aback by his wisdom, his trustworthiness or his infinite intelligence. When our eyes gaze intently at the cross, however, we begin to get a glimpse of the awesome intuition of our God. The incarnation of Christ, coupled with his life ministry, death and resurrection, accomplished multiple objectives in one fell swoop: it satisfied the wrath of God, freed humanity from the bondage of sin, restored the world to its rightful owner, served as an example for us to follow, and defeated Satan and his demons.

Much more could be said but the point is clear: God's initiative in entering our

world and his willingness to die for the very ones who were crucifying him accomplished more than we can ever hope to fully understand. That fact, however, certainly has not stopped us from trying.¹

"Given the multifaceted design of Christ's life, death and resurrection, it is not at all surprising that over time the church created a diversity of conceptual models of the atonement."² These conceptual models branch off into even more specific versions of themselves until the amount of sheer atonement data, theories and literature is overwhelming. Many of the models have suffered due to over-complexity and a desire to press for details where few or none are to be found. What I desire to accomplish in this short paper is to present a lean model of atonement based on a Christus Victor paradigm. I will argue that though Christ accomplished many things through his incarnation, death and resurrection, they are best understood when seen in light of an overall framework provided by the Christus Victor model of atonement. Finally, having established a model of atonement with which to work, I will relate Christus Victor to what I perceive to be the metaphysical necessity of the incarnation.

Christus Victor

The central truth of the Christus Victor model of atonement, also known as the ransom theory, is that "through the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ, God defeated the devil."³ Everything else that was accomplished on the cross (salvation for mankind, appeasement of God's wrath, etc.) should be seen in light of the glorious victory that Christ won over sin, death and Satan. Though this model of the atonement may be very new for some, it claims a very long and diverse background of scholarship by the Christian church.

Christus Victor in Scholarship

Few would deny that Christ Victor was the dominant view in the early church. Roger Olson writes,

*The earliest theory or model of atonement in Christian history was the so-called ransom theory (Christus Victor). It is first found in somewhat definite form in the second-century speculative Christian theologian and church father Origen of Alexandria. It appeared repeatedly in the early Christian writings and gradually became the most popular explanation of how Christ's death on the cross saved humanity.*⁴

Indeed, great church fathers and thinkers throughout the first millennium of church history held this view almost exclusively. Origen, Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa and Irenaeus all shared this view of the atonement and wrote about it at great length. Though it saw a decline in support after the publication of Anselm's *Cur Deus Homo*, a renewed interest has been taken in Christus Victor over the last seventy years. More recent proponents of the view include Gustaf Aulén, Gregory Boyd and C.S. Lewis. N.T. Wright has recently suggested that we give priority "to those Pauline expressions of the crucifixion of Jesus which describe it as the decisive victory over the 'principalities and powers'"⁵ and Hans Boersma believes that Christus Victor is "the most significant model of the atonement."⁶

Though the history of the church's thought on any given theological construct is important, theology must not be finally decided by tradition or by majority rule. With that in mind, it is now to the model itself that we move with an emphasis on how the Bible describes the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ.

"To Destroy the Works of the Devil"

"The Son of God," we read in 1 John 3:8, "was revealed for this purpose: to destroy the works of the devil." This passage, when it stands alone, is reminiscent of the opening scene of a Quentin Tarantino film: it's somewhat startling, yet we have no idea what led up to the series of events being depicted. In order to make sense of the scripture and of the film, we have to go back to the beginning. If Christ's primary work on the cross consisted of overcoming the devil, when did this warfare start and where else is it

depicted in Scripture?⁷

The Old Testament depicts a warrior God who is constantly fighting against the sinister supernatural and cosmic forces of the universe (e.g., Psalm 29:10; 74:10-14; Job 26:12-13). These are often "depicted in terms of God's battle with hostile waters and vicious sea monsters that were believed to surround and threaten the earth." For the ancient Hebrews, water was seen as a menace: a mysterious and unknowable realm "where forces were hidden from human understanding."⁸ God Himself uses the analogy of controlling the sea in Job 38. Referring to the dawn of creation He asks Job, "Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb . . . when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, 'This far you may come and no farther?'" Creation is shown as being predicated on God's ability to control the waters from bursting forth and overtaking the land and His entire earthly establishment.

In addition to battling the watery forces and mythic sea creatures, God and his angels are often depicted as battling lesser gods. Perhaps one of the more startling occurrences of this is found in Daniel 10. After three straight weeks of praying to receive clarity for a vision Daniel had been given, an angel of the Lord finally appears to him. The angel explains to Daniel that there was a supernatural reason that a response to Daniel's many petitions was delayed:

Since the first day you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes, came to help me, because I was detained there with the king of Persia (Daniel 10:12-13).

This unusual window into the heart of spiritual warfare on a plane that we cannot see has a telling impact: God and his angels are truly at war with the demonic. In this case it appears that the fight was against a territorial demon in the Persian Empire, but regardless the truth of Daniel 10 remains the same: the warfare that transpires in the spiritual realm has a direct affect on the earthly realm because heaven and earth are intimately connected.

In the New Testament this warfare is ratcheted up to even greater heights. Satan is depicted by the biblical authors as having a significant amount of power over the dominion of the earth. John writes that the "whole world is under the control of the evil one" (1 John 5:19), and Christ calls Satan the "prince of this world" (John 14:30).⁹

When Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness by offering him "all the kingdoms of the world" (Luke 4:5), Jesus does not deny that he has the power to do this. This is notable because Satan, knowing full well that Jesus was God

incarnate and understanding that bluffing would not work with Christ, demonstrates the truth of his rule by making the offer anyway.

In Ephesians 2:2 Paul refers to Satan as the "ruler of the kingdom of the air." Athanasius feels that this fact is a significant hindrance in keeping man from God:

Again, the air is the sphere of the devil, the enemy of our race who, having fallen from heaven, endeavors with the other evil spirits who shared in his disobedience both to keep souls from the truth and to hinder the progress of those who are trying to follow it.¹⁰

It is against this backdrop of spiritual warfare and a world dominated by the "powers" and "principalities" of demonic forces that Jesus enters into the human race and sets to work on what the New Testament authors wholly confirm is nothing short of a deathblow to sin, death and the devil. Christ is depicted as binding the "strong man" (Satan) in order to "plunder" his home (Luke 11:21-22). The Satan's objective to "steal and kill and destroy" is directly juxtaposed with that of Jesus to "come that (we) might have life, and have it to the full" (John 10:10). How does he accomplish this? By "destroy(ing) the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" (Hebrews 2:14-15). For the New Testament writers, the cross is "God's final settlement of the Satanic opposing power which has arisen against God."¹¹

Far from being centered only on the anthropological effects of the atonement, the Christus Victor model recognizes that Christ's victory over the devil's dominion has had cosmological significance. Once again, Boyd explains it well:

The implication of the cosmic conquest for us is that we are rendered "irreproachable" or "free from accusation" (Colossians 1:21-22). Since our sins are atoned for, "the accuser" has no more claim on us, and hence we are set free (Romans 8:1, 31, 33; Colossians 2:13-15). But it is crucial to note that this freedom is a function of a victorious enthronement, the significance of which far outruns what it does for us. The cross and resurrection are anthropologically significant only because they are first cosmologically significant.¹²

The point is not to take attention away from the freedom from sin and restored relationship with God that the atonement accomplished. Rather, by drawing attention to the cosmological shift that occurs when Christ defeats death we do proper justice to the magnitude of his victory. Due to his victory, God has indeed now "rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves" (Colossians 1:13). We are free indeed!

A Public Spectacle

Up until this point I still have not tackled the question of how it is that Christ's death on the cross was able to defeat the devil. Though space does not permit a rigorous examination of this aspect of the Christus Victor model, I will briefly give some background as to how it has been explained by some of our church fathers and conclude with a summary of Gregory Boyd's recent revision.

The starting place for the functional Christus Victor in the past has usually been Mark 10:45: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for man." "To whom was this ransom paid? Certainly not to God. He would not pay a ransom to himself. Rather, it must have been paid to the evil one, for it was he who held us captive until the ransom, namely, the soul of Jesus, was paid."¹³ How, exactly might this work?

It is at this point I must admit that the two most popular theories in patristic writings leave much to be desired and were probably somewhat responsible for the mass exodus away from the Christus Victor model after Anselm's publication.

The first theory maintains that God made a deal with Satan: the life of Christ in exchange for the lives of humans. However, after Satan had relinquished control of humanity, God essentially snatched Christ back from the dead and broke his end of the bargain. Two problems quickly arise with this view, however.

First and foremost, the scriptural evidence that backs up this elaborate theory is quite light. As is often the problem when we press Scripture too hard for details that it does not provide, we tend to come to conclusions that are mostly speculative.

Second, this view makes God look deceptive, which ultimately diminishes his infinite wisdom and might. It makes him out to be a cosmic David Copperfield: forced to use trickery because he lacks the intelligence or the brawn to defeat Satan in a fair fight. For these reasons, I reject the "deceptive God" version of Christus Victor.

The second, and even more popular, functional version of Christus Victor took a page from fishing and portrayed God the Father as using Christ as bait. Knowing that Satan could not resist trying to swallow Jesus up, God sends his Son into the world where Satan does assuredly attempt to swallow him whole. However, Christ is too powerful for Satan to stomach and on the third day he raises from the dead, escaping Satan's clutches and bringing enslaved humanity with him.

Though this model has some important things to say about Christ's victory, it

shares one of the major failures of its counterpart: it is based more on conjecture than on Scripture.

Boyd believes that the answers we can arrive at needn't be filled with "speculative and mythic features" of the first millennium understanding of Christus Victor. Boyd bases his approach on five Scriptural truths: 1) God kept the cross a mystery until after the crucifixion (Romans 16:25; Ephesians 3:9-10) 2) It's clear that Satan is instrumental in Jesus' death (John 13:27) 3) Paul tells us that if the "rulers of this age" would have understood the cross, they never would have had Christ crucified (1 Cor. 2:8) 4) It was by means of the cross that the "rulers" were defeated, and 5) "throughout Christ's ministry, demons seem to know who Jesus is but have no idea why he's come into their domain" (Mark 3:11; Luke 8:28, etc.).

Based on these five Scriptural truths, Boyd asserts:

The wisdom of God centered on Jesus dying out of love for the race that Satan and the powers had held captive for ages, and these powers, being evil, apparently lack the capacity to imagine action that is motivated by this kind of self-sacrificial love. The only thing the powers could understand was that, for whatever reasons, Jesus had in fact entered their domain, and this made him fair game. Working with cooperative human agents, therefore, the powers orchestrated Jesus' crucifixion, only to learn that by doing so they had played into God's secret plan all along. No wonder Paul says Christ not only disarmed the powers; he reduced them to a laughing stock.¹⁴

Though some questions still remain unanswered, it is important that we not stress the biblical data too much, lest we fall into the same snares as the earlier functional versions of the Christus Victor model. Suffice it to say, Christ's atonement on the cross made a way for us and freed us from the bonds of sin and death. How is it, though, that the atonement he made for the cosmos relates to his incarnation? Our attention now turns to that question.

The Incarnation and the Atonement

It is when stepping back and looking at the incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ as a unified whole that the Christus Victor model shines brightest. Understood properly, these aspects of Christ's ministry are inseparable, even on a theoretical level.

It is Irenaeus who wisely points out that Satan's grasp on humanity was not

merely a blight on mankind, but an offense against God that could not be allowed to stand:

Man had been created by God that he might have life. If now, having lost life, and having been harmed by the serpent, he were not to return to life, but were to be wholly abandoned to death, then God would have been defeated, and the malice of the serpent would have overcome God's will.¹⁵

As Irenaeus shows, Satan's continued control over mankind would be more than a divide in the relationship between creator and creation: it would have constituted a defeat of God at the hands of the Great Deceiver. God, being perfect, just, and invincible then steps in not only for the sake of restoring the relationship but also for his name's sake. We can affirm, then, that Christ's redemptive work in defeating Satan still falls firmly within the overarching motivation for everything that God does: the preservation and exultation of his glorious name! God is not "forced" into a showdown by Satan or by the actions of sinful man. Rather, by his very decision to create and because of the goodness innate in his being, God has chosen to bind himself to his creation in such a way that when they inevitably fall privy to sin, he will engage in sacrificial battle in order to free them from the Satanic chains that they have chosen to shackle themselves with. Not because of any goodness in the heart of man, but because of the outrageous love of the Lord of Lords, God chooses to create and thus chooses to die a gruesome human death on a cross—inflicted by his creation.

And so the redeeming and victorious work of God is seen throughout every facet of the work of Christ. He takes on human flesh because it is necessary for him to live a life of perfect human obedience. In so doing, the "disobedience of the one man, which inaugurated the reign of sin, is answered by the One Man who brought life . . . The obedience is the means of His triumph"¹⁶ and is thus just as integral to the Christus Victor model as Jesus' death on the cross. So as Christ is living a perfect life in obedience to the Father, he is defeating the power of sin and refuting its stranglehold on humanity. As he is healing the sick and the afflicted and giving sight to the blind, he is ushering the authority of death from this world. As Christ is sharing his meals with tax collectors and prostitutes; as he is befriending Samaritans and providing a desperately needed affectionate human touch to the lepers he is tearing down the sinful social constructs and demonic barriers that have kept humanity from relationship with one another and with Him. And as Christ is having the skin ripped from his flesh with each crack of a whip, he is disregarding the shame because he knows it's only Friday...and Sunday is coming. The day of atonement, the day of reckoning, the day of restoration, and the day of victory for Christ Jesus is just around the corner and the cosmos will never be the same.

Whereas other models of the atonement tend to isolate the meaning of Jesus'

death from other aspects of his life, the Christus Victor model sees every aspect of Christ's life—from his incarnation to his resurrection—as being most fundamentally about one thing: victoriously manifesting the living kingdom of God over and against the destructive, oppressive kingdom of Satan.¹⁷

Conclusion

In my view, the incarnation simply cannot be divorced from the atonement in any way, whether in truth or in theory. The incarnation, life, death and resurrection of Christ must be taken together as the holistic way in which God defeated sin, death and the devil and freed us from the shackles we had willingly placed on ourselves. Christus Victor, as I have presented it here, is the only model of atonement that takes such a balanced and holistic approach to the relationship of the atonement and the incarnation. And, when taken seriously, it goes the farthest in detailing the Christ-like example that is best displayed when we, like him, choose to come against the demonic strongholds in this world with radical Kingdom of God love.

¹ This should not be misunderstood as a negative statement. God desires us to seek after him, and that is what theologians, pastors, and laity have been trying to do in gaining a better understanding of the atonement.

² Gregory Boyd, "Christus Victor," in *The Nature of the Atonement*, ed. James Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 23.

³ *Ibid*, 24.

⁴ Roger Olson, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 256.

⁵ N. T. Wright, *What Saint Paul Really Said*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 47.

⁶ Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004), 181.

⁷ I am greatly indebted to Gregory Boyd for what follows. Through his writings, sermons, and our personal discussions I have gained a much better understanding of Christus Victor and the warfare worldview of the Bible.

⁸ Leland Ryken, *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*. (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 201.

⁹ It is interesting to note here that Satan seems to have much greater power than a territorial demon. Whereas the "Prince of Persia" almost seemed to be bound by his geographical location, Satan clearly has dominion over "this world."

¹⁰ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1993), 55.

¹¹ Karl Heim, *Jesus the World's Perfecter*, trans. D. H. Van Daalen (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), p. 70.

¹² Boyd, *God at War*, (Downer's Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 250-251.

¹³ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2d ed., (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 1998), 811.–

¹⁴ Boyd, *Nature*, 36-37.

¹⁵ Irenæus, *Adv. Har.*, III., 21.10; 22.4

¹⁶ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, (Eugene, Org.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1969), 29.

¹⁷ Boyd, Nature, 40.

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