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A Critique of Aulen's *Christus Victor*

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ONE of the most significant theological books published in recent decades is *Christus Victor* by Gustaf Aulen. In it he suggests that there are three main ideas or theories of the atonement: the classic, the Latin, and the subjective-humanistic. That which makes the book both significant and controversial is the author's contention that the authentic Scriptural doctrine of the atonement is the classic idea, that Luther was an exponent of the classic idea, and that therefore the orthodox Lutheran doctrine of the atonement differs markedly both from Scripture and from Luther. Aulen asserts that "the doctrine of Lutheranism became a very different thing from that of Luther."¹ The translator in his preface informs us that "Dr. Aulen shows how sharp is the contrast between Luther and the Lutherans" (p. ix). Hence *Christus Victor* faces us with an insistent challenge to seriously re-examine and re-evaluate the "traditional" Lutheran doctrine of the atonement. That the question cannot be avoided is made clear by Edgar Carlson's assertion that Aulen's view of the atonement is in the main taken for granted in present-day Lundensian theology (*Seminarian*, pp. 36 f.).

This article is only incidentally a defense of the doctrine of the vicarious satisfaction. It is primarily a criticism of the methodology and theology presented in *Christus Victor*. This critical position does not mean that this reviewer finds nothing to commend in the book. In it there is much for which to be thankful. It rejects the subjective, humanistic views of the atonement. It stresses that God is the Reconciler and the Reconciled. It stresses the reality of the devil. It stresses the victory of Christ over the powers of evil.

Yet it is possible to overemphasize one aspect of truth to the point of distorting the truth. This is the basic fault of *Christus Victor*. It exaggerates one truth of Scripture to the neglect—denial almost—of another truth of Scripture without which Christ's "victory" would not be real.

This study will first consider Aulen's methodology in the book, then his theology as it is presented there. To emphasize the

¹ For a description of the works cited see the appended Bibliography. The numbers in brackets refer to the 1945 edition of *Christus Victor*.

fact that this critique is not a lone voice, we made considerable use of the findings of others.

The classic idea of the atonement is defined thus:

Its central theme is the idea of the Atonement as a Divine conflict and victory; Christ—Christus Victor—fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the "tyrants" under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself. . . . It describes a work of salvation, a drama of salvation; but this salvation is at the same time an atonement in the full sense of the word, for it is a work wherein God reconciles the world to Himself, and is at the same time reconciled. The background of the idea is dualistic; God is pictured as in Christ carrying through a victorious conflict against powers of evil which are hostile to His will. This constitutes Atonement, because the drama is a cosmic drama, and the victory over the hostile powers brings to pass a new relation, a relation of reconciliation, between God and the world; and, still more, because in a measure the hostile powers are regarded as in the service of the Will of God, the Judge of all, and the executants of His judgment. Seen from this side, the triumph over the opposing powers is regarded as a reconciling of God Himself; He is reconciled by the very act in which He reconciles the world to Himself. (Pages 4 f. [20 f.])²

To bring the problem into sharp focus, Aulen says that the victory is the satisfaction, while "traditional" Lutheran doctrine says that the satisfaction is the victory.³ According to Aulen's

² Cf. also Aulen's book *The Faith of the Christian Church*, translated from the 4th Swedish edition by Eric H. Wahlstrom and G. Everett Arden (Philadelphia: The Muhlenberg Press, 1948), pp. 223 ff.

³ Leander S. Keyser defines it thus: "The evidence indicates that the Lutheran doctrine is, first, that Christ wrought out a perfect righteousness for us by His active keeping of the law, His fulfilling of it both in the letter and the spirit; and this perfect obedience is the righteousness which is imputed to us when we accept it by faith; second, by His sufferings and death, that is, His passive obedience, He endured the punitive consequences of our transgressions in our stead, and thus upheld and satisfied the law of eternal justice which had been violated by man's sins; third, the whole gracious plan of atonement had its origin in the paternal love of God, and was carried out in time through the winsome power of His love. Christ did not make atonement for sin to win for us God's love, for it was divine love that sent the only-begotten Son into the world and that sustained Him in His atoning work; but the atonement was meant to uphold God's moral universe founded in absolute righteousness, and thus prevent an antinomy between divine love and justice" (pp. 28, 29).

classic idea of the atonement, Christ died to defeat the powers of evil and thus to secure for man deliverance from them; the "traditional" doctrine holds that Christ died to make satisfaction for man's sin to the demands of God's holiness and thus to secure for man forgiveness and eternal life. Two such radically different interpretations of the meaning of the death of Christ involve far-reaching consequences. Which interpretation is correct?

It is important to know not only *what* conclusions a research scholar has reached but also *how* he has reached them. It is significant that Aulen's *methodology* in this book is characterized by several grave faults. In the first place, his book abounds in sweeping, bold assertions without adequate proof. For example, he asserts that the classic idea of the atonement dominates the whole of Greek patristic theology from Irenaeus to John of Damascus as well as the thinking of the Western fathers (p. 37, 39 [53, 55]). Obviously space does not permit here an analysis of the patristic writings; so the testimony of other scholars is brought forward as evidence. Writing before *Christus Victor* appeared, A. A. Hodge (pp. 273—282), Alfred Cave (p. 332), and George Foley (pp. 15 ff.) deny that the church fathers taught primarily the classic idea. Writing after its appearance, and taking cognizance of it, Theodore Dierks (pp. 153 f.; cp. pp. 44 f.) and William J. Wolf flatly deny Aulen's assertion. The latter declares that "Aulen's *Christus Victor* theme is only one of perhaps four chief themes that relate salvation and atonement to each other in this period. . . . It is obvious that no one concept can be singled out as 'the classic idea.' Aulen misleads us when he implies that it had a definite content, with widespread agreement as to its nature" (pp. 94, 102).

The foundation of Aulen's classic theory is the assumption that it dominated the patristic period. His argument in his survey of the New Testament is based on the a priori probability "that *if* [italics in original] the classic idea of the Atonement dominated the whole patristic period . . . *then* [italics in original] it is altogether likely that the classic idea will be found to be firmly rooted in Apostolic Christianity. It would be in the last degree improbable that an idea of the Atonement which was unrepresented in the Apostolic Age should suddenly emerge in the early church and

there win universal acceptance" (pp. 77 [61 f.]). But that classic idea did *not* dominate the patristic period; it did *not* win universal acceptance. Is it unfair to use Aulen's own argument to conclude that the further conclusions he reaches are much to be doubted?

A second example of Aulen's use of sweeping assertion is seen in his attack on the "Latin doctrine." For instance, he asserts: "Thus the implication of the Latin theory, that the work of God in the Atonement is interrupted by an offering made to God from man's side, is radically opposed to that which is the very centre of Luther's thought—namely, that there is no way by which man may go to God other than the way which God Himself has made in becoming man" (p. 121 [137]). But in his defense of Anselm, who according to Aulen first fully developed the Latin theory, John McIntyre of Australia declares: "It is *sola gratia* that is St. Anselm's theme, and only the most unsympathetic and superficial reflection upon his argument could yield any other conclusion. . . . For St. Anselm the Atonement was an outflowing of Divine Grace, unmerited by man and granted as God's greatest gift to him in Jesus Christ" (pp. 199, 203).

Both McIntyre (pp. 196 f.) and Leonard Hodgson charge that *Christus Victor* presents a docetic Christology. The latter, who is Regius Professor of Divinity at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford, affirms that "Bishop Aulen succumbs to the besetting temptation of transactionists, the temptation so to emphasize the godhead of the Redeemer as to reduce the manhood of Christ to a passive, indeed to a docetic, role. . . . The result is . . . a docetic Christology" (p. 147).

A third example of the use of sweeping assertions by Aulen is seen in his discussion of Luther, of whom he asserts that he "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. Thus 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" (pp. 121 f. [138]).

Aulen admits that generally Luther has been regarded until

recently as an exponent of the "traditional" view of the atonement, but he asserts that now it is being discovered that this is not true. Hence it is significant that such recent writers as Sidney Cave (pp. 179—184), Philip Watson (pp. 124 f.), and Edgar Carlson (*Reinterpr.*, pp. 178—180), men who are sympathetic to Aulen's view of the atonement, agree that it is not correct to hold that Luther taught only the classic conception of the atonement. Gordon Rupp takes a position contrary to Aulen by quoting with approval the statement by Zeeden that "the orthodox view of Luther in the seventeenth century did remain in an unbroken tradition of faith, with the age of the Reformation. . . . With all its one-sidedness, it comes fundamentally closer to the real Luther than all the modern 'Luther Renaissance' with its many-sided source criticism" (p. 16).

Aulen's method is seen in his extensive quotation from Luther's exposition of Gal. 3:13 (pp. 105 ff. [121 ff.]). In making the quotation he omits the portions that speak of Christ as our Substitute, who makes satisfaction to the Father for us. It is a basic principle of hermeneutics that a passage of Scripture is to be interpreted in its context and in the light of the whole. This principle is equally valid and necessary in the study of Luther's writings.

No one can read much of Luther's writings without discovering that he speaks much of Christ's conflict and victory. But how, according to him, did Christ gain His victory? Luther answers in 1539:

Luther wants good works, but they are not to have glorious, divine *idiomata*, so that they make satisfaction for sin, reconcile God's wrath, and justify sinners. These *idiomata* belong to Another, Whose name is "Lamb of God, that beareth the sins of the world." Yea, verily these *idiomata* should be left to the blood and death of Christ. (V, 231)

The pope . . . should . . . hold with us that even the good works done according to God's commandments cannot help men to righteousness, to the blotting out of sin, to the attainment of God's grace, but that this can be done only by faith in Christ, who is a king of righteousness in us, by His precious blood, death, and resurrection, whereby He has blotted out sins for us, made satisfaction, reconciled God, and redeemed us from death, wrath, and hell. (V, 260)

This emphasis is *not* lacking in his exposition of Gal. 3:13. In fact, it is so marked that the framers of that statement of orthodox Lutheran doctrine, known as the Formula of Concord, conclude the discussion of justification by directing everyone "for the proper explanation of this profound and chief article" to "Dr. Luther's beautiful and glorious exposition of the Epistle of St. Paul to the Galatians" (FC, SD, III, 67).

A second characteristic of Aulen's methodology in *Christus Victor* is his peculiar exegesis of Scripture. He dismisses such passages as Mark 10:45, Eph. 1:7, and 1 Peter 1:18 with the remark that they are variations of the idea of Christ's conflict and victory. He declares that Hebrews teaches the classic idea of the atonement because of 2:14 ("that through death He might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil"), and because of the fact that it presents Christ's sacrifice as God's act of sacrifice. He ignores the fact that 2:14 is only a passing reference and does not express the dominant theme of Hebrews. The theme which is emphatically set forth and developed in the letter is stated in 2:17: "Wherefore it behooved Him in all things to be made like unto His brethren, that He might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (ARV).

A highly remarkable feature of Aulen's discussion of Paul's teaching on the atonement is that he scarcely mentions, and that only in passing, justification by faith. The same silence is found in his discussion of Luther. Yet he asserts explicitly that Paul and Luther regard atonement and salvation as one and the same thing (pp. 71, 119 [87, 135]).

Aulen makes it plain that one of the superior features of the classic idea of the atonement is that in it God transcends, breaks through, breaks in pieces, the order of justice and merit (pp. 71, 79, 113 [88, 96, 129]). Therefore Rom. 3:24 ff. gives him trouble. He admits that it is a crucial passage, but argues that it does not support the Latin doctrine of the atonement, because it lacks "the idea that the Divine justice was to receive adequate satisfaction for man's default, through the payment made by Christ on man's behalf. According to that doctrine the offering is made to God from man's side, from below; in Paul it is the Divine Love itself that

makes the redemption" (p. 72 [88 f.]). In a footnote he quotes Wrede as saying that the passage contains nothing inconsistent with the fundamental Pauline thought, that "it is God's own Love itself that, the enmity being ended, brings to pass atonement and peace." The point of that quotation is that something else has brought to an end the enmity between God and sinners, and that Christ's redeeming work follows upon that to bring to pass atonement and peace. But the simple sense of Rom. 3:24 ff. is that it was Christ's propitiatory sacrifice that effected the reconciliation. The Anglican scholars Sanday and Headlam unequivocally affirm:

It is impossible to get rid from this passage of the double idea (1) of a sacrifice; (2) of a sacrifice which is propitiatory. . . . And further, when we ask, who is propitiated? the answer can only be "God." Nor is it possible to separate this propitiation from the Death of the Son. Quite apart from this passage it is not difficult to prove that these two ideas of sacrifice and propitiation lie at the root of the teaching not only of St. Paul but of the New Testament generally. (Page 91)

How different this is from redemption by triumph. This crucial passage does not support the classic theory of the atonement.

In discussing Paul's doctrine, Aulen asserts that the latter counts the Law among the tyrants which hold mankind in bondage (pp. 67 ff. [83 ff.]). Ragnar Leivestad pointedly comments:

The law is not in any respect on a level with sin and death. Paul indignantly refuses to coordinate the law and sin (Rom. 7:7). The law is certainly "the power of sin," "apart from the law sin lies dead" (Rom. 7:8), but what fully reveals the sinfulness of sin is precisely the fact that it could cause the death of man by means of that which is essentially good (Rom. 7:13). It is exactly when the law is seen in its aspect as "the power of sin" that its holiness and righteousness are most emphatically stressed. . . . It is an exaggeration to count the law as an essentially evil power, allied with sin and the devil. Even as a tyrant the law represents the justice of God. (Pages 153 ff.)

There are incidental statements in Leivestad's book which are regrettable, but the primary material reveals solid and careful study. His conclusions conflict strongly with Aulen's contentions. His book is neither an examination of, nor an answer to, *Christus Victor*. But on the basis of his detailed examination of Scripture

he specifically declares that "this 'classic idea of the Atonement' does not by any means play such a prevalent part in New Testament thinking as Aulen has contended in his famous study" (p. 302, n.).

Similar is the conclusion of another contemporary scholar, the English Methodist Vincent Taylor: "The idea of a victorious conflict over hostile powers . . . recently has found renewed expression in the writings of G. Aulen and S. Cave. Each of these theories represents only a part of St. Paul's teaching, and, as we have seen, one which is not integrated with his main contentions, with the result that their adoption, as the basis of a modern theory, entails the neglect of the greater and more important part of his theology" (pp. 100 f.).

The conclusion from the above evidence — and much more that could be adduced — is that Aulen's methodology in *Christus Victor* has been tried and found wanting. It is also the contention of this review that the *theology* presented in the book is deficient. One of the key statements of the book is here examined in more detail. It reads thus:

It is important, above all, at this point to see clearly that this work of salvation and deliverance is at the same time a work of atonement, of reconciliation between God and the world. It is altogether misleading to say that the triumph of Christ over the powers of evil, whereby He delivers man, is a work of salvation but not of atonement; for the two ideas cannot possibly be thus separated. It is precisely the work of salvation wherein Christ breaks the power of evil that *constitutes* [italics in original] the atonement between God and the world; for it is by it that He removes the enmity, takes away the judgment which rested on the human race, and reconciles the world to Himself, not imputing to them their trespasses (2 Cor. 5:18). (Page 71 [87])

The decisive phrase in this statement is: "It is precisely the work of salvation wherein Christ breaks the power of evil that *constitutes* the atonement between God and the world." It is decisive, because it poses the crucial question, "Why did Christ die?" "Traditional" Lutheran doctrine and Aulen agree that Christ died to redeem man. But why did man need to be redeemed? The former declares, "Because he was a guilty sinner who has to face a holy God."

Aulen answers, "Because he was an unfortunate victim of the powers of evil." The former affirms that atonement, redemption, reconciliation, consists in this, that Christ died as man's Substitute to make satisfaction to a holy God for man's sins. Aulen answers that atonement, redemption, reconciliation, consists in this, that Christ died to defeat the powers of evil. The former holds that there is no triumph over the powers of evil apart from Christ's satisfaction for man's sin and that this satisfaction is the triumph. Aulen answers that no satisfaction for sin is needed but that the triumph over the powers of evil is the atonement: "It is precisely the work of salvation wherein Christ breaks the power of evil that *constitutes* the atonement between God and the world."

Does it? Not according to Scripture. An integral part of the Second Corinthians passage referred to by Aulen is verse 21. This verse is Scripture's statement as to *how* God accomplished — that is, what *constitutes* — the work of atonement and reconciliation. Here is the statement: "Him who knew no sin He made to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (RSV). Christ as our Substitute took our sins upon Himself that God might be able to reckon us righteous. This is the reason why God is reconciled to the world and does not reckon unto men their trespasses. Even word studies lead to this conclusion. Herman Cremer states that

καταλλάσσειν denotes the New Testament divine and saving act of ἀπολύτρωσις, insofar as God Himself, by His taking upon Himself and providing an atonement, established that relationship of peace with mankind which the demands of His justice had hitherto prevented. . . . It practically includes, though not in and for itself, the scripture ἰλάσκεσθαι, to atone, to expiate; and it signifies the reconciliation brought about by expiation. . . . While ἰλάσκεσθαι aims at the averting of God's wrath, *καταλλάσσειν* implies that God has laid aside or withdrawn wrath. . . . In *καταλλάσσειν*, stress is laid upon the truth that God stands over against mankind as ἀντίδικος, and as such nevertheless established a relation of peace. The subject of ἰλάσκεσθαι is not God as ἀντίδικος towards man, but man represented by Christ, God as He in Christ represents the world. . . . *Καταλλάσσειν* denotes the removal of the demands of God's justice; ἰλάσκεσθαι, that

satisfaction of them whereby their removal is attained. (Pages 92 f.)⁴

Aulen's error is not his claim that Scripture lays great stress on the triumph of Christ over the powers of evil and on the believer's triumph in Him. His error is his contention that this is the work of redemption. Scripture does not teach that Christ redeemed us merely by triumphantly overwhelming the forces of evil. It teaches that Christ redeemed us by taking the guilt of our sins upon Himself and dying for us, by suffering for us the wrath of God's holiness against sin. The problem was not the possibility that Satan had replaced God as the almighty one. The problem was *sin*. It was the sin problem that Christ settled by perfectly fulfilling God's Law on our behalf by His sinless life and by paying with His death the penalty for the guilt of our sins, the wages of which are death. Therefore when a sinner is united to Christ by faith, the holy God sees nothing to condemn, Satan has nothing to accuse of, and death has no further claim. Luther does speak of God's Law and God's wrath, together with sin, death, and the devil, as enemies from which Christ delivers mankind. Obviously they belong in the category of enemies, not because of inherent similarities — how blasphemous such a charge would be — but because of an external factor. This factor is man's sinfulness. Hence Christ triumphs over these enemies by what He does with man's sin. The substitutionary death of Christ is the atonement.

Any explanation of the atonement that fails to emphasize the fact that Christ by His death made atonement for our sins is not a full doctrine of the atonement. Four principal answers have been given to the question, "Why did Christ die?": (1) to atone for the sins of men; (2) to defeat the evil powers to which men are in bondage; (3) to reveal the incomparable love of God; and (4) to call men to repentance and to inspire them to noble living.

All these answers are found in Scripture. But any one of them apart from the others is incomplete. Sin is more than an evil power to be defeated, for sin makes sinners guilty before God. Until that guilt is atoned for, the triumph over evil powers is of no real value. Sinners need more than a demonstration of God's love; they need

⁴ An excellent study of these and other salvation words is found in Leon Morris, q. v.

to be delivered from the guilt of their sins. Sinners need more than a powerful inspiration to noble living; they need first of all salvation from their sins. The full statement of the doctrine of the atonement includes all these answers. But central and basic is the truth that Christ died to atone for our sins.

1 John 4:10 is a fundamental atonement passage. It reads: "Herein is love, not that we loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the Propitiation for our sins" (ARV). This is the reason why Christ came. Because He has made propitiation for our sins, God for His sake forgives sins. This is the promise of the Gospel as well as of the Sacrament: "This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt. 26:28). Rich in meaning is the word of dismissal, as found in the *Lutheran Hymnary* and spoken to those kneeling at the Communion rail: "Our crucified and risen Lord Jesus Christ, who now hath bestowed upon you His holy Body and Blood, whereby He hath made full satisfaction for all your sins, strengthen and preserve you in the true faith unto everlasting life" (p. 15). The blood reminds us, too, of the heavenly scene: "These are they who have come out of the great tribulation; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore are they before the throne of God and serve Him day and night within His temple" (Rev. 7:14 f., RSV). "And they have conquered him [Satan] by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death" (Rev. 12:11, RSV).

Certainly there is victory in the atonement, as the passages just quoted indicate. With Paul we exclaim: "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57, RSV). Insofar as the theme of victory has been slighted, let us be thankful that Aulen has re-emphasized it. In a day when "enlightened" people regard the devil as a figment of the imagination, let us be thankful that Aulen has reaffirmed his dread reality. Let us be thankful, too, that he knows and proclaims the victory of Christ over Satan and other evil powers. But the message of victory must not be given an exaggerated and improper place in the doctrine of the atonement. The essential aspect in this doctrine is that Christ took upon Himself the guilt and penalty of our sins,

as our Substitute, and by His death restored us to God's favor. This is the doctrine of the vicarious atonement, or vicarious satisfaction. This, and not the classic idea, is at the heart of the genuine Christian faith. It can never be separated from it.

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