

THE CHRISTUS VICTOR MODEL OF ATONEMENT¹

IKECHUKWU MICHAEL OLUIKPE, PH.D. CAND.

Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, Philippines

The biblical theme and doctrine of atonement has been very important in Christian history. It has been explained from two major perspectives: the objective and subjective views. One of the objective views is the Christus Victor model which presents the atonement as a conflict between Christ and the powers of evil. However, this model has been misinterpreted, misunderstood, and overlooked through time especially after the period of the Church Fathers. This article aims to evaluate this model based on the biblical theology of atonement. It also seeks to briefly show its relevance for Christian life and theology.

Key Words: Atonement, model/theory, Christus Victor, victory, Jesus Christ, evil

1. Introduction

The atonement is one of the most central themes in biblical theology. It revolves around the significance and extent of the varied roles of Jesus Christ in His work for the salvation of humanity from sin. There have been a variety of theories proposed for the atonement and each one has its area of biblical emphasis.² Of these models, the Christus Victor model is

¹ I am grateful to Dr. Woodrow W. Whidden under whose permission, guidance, and support I was able to research and write this article.

² These theories include among others the Socinian exemplary theory, the Moral Influence theory, the Governmental model and the satisfaction theory. Some of these will be mentioned or briefly explained in the course of this study. Detailed explanation of these and other theories can be found in the following sources: Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 800-817; Augustine H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan: Fleming H. Revell, 1907), 728-744, 747-750; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 384-391; John Miley, *Systematic Theology* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1989), 2:113-124.

noteworthy. It is known as the classic model since it dominated the church's thinking on the atonement until the time of Anselm and Abelard.³ Its emphasis is that the life and work of Christ on earth brought victory over evil and its demonic powers and this lead to the sinners' liberation from bondage of sin and Satan.⁴ This model sees the atonement as a divine conflict and victory in which Christ fights and triumphs over the evil powers of the world that hold humankind in bondage and suffering. Christ's victory over these powers brings a new relation (reconciliation) between God and humanity.⁵ It is also called the dramatic view because of its dualistic nature of conflict.⁶

However, there are certain aspects of this model that theologians have seen as illogical and unconvincing.⁷ Consequently, this model has been dropped in favor of others. Hence the questions: Is the Christus Victor model of atonement biblically consistent? How does it work with other models of atonement to help us understand Christ's work of salvation? What is the significance of this model of atonement for Christian life and mission? This paper aims to provide a basic biblical theology for the Christus Victor model of atonement. First, it will provide a historical survey of the Christus Victor model of atonement through church history from the apostolic times to the times of post-Reformation. Second, there will be a biblical evaluation of the above-mentioned model and finally, a presentation of this model's significance for Christian life and mission.

³ Erickson, 810; Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement* (trans. A.G. Herbert; New York, NY: Macmillan, 1969), 4.

⁴ Thomas N. Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 1:317-324.

⁵ Aulen, 4, 5; Richard Rice, "The Doctrine of Atonement in Contemporary Protestant Theology" in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies* (ed. W Richard Leshner; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), 480; Robert Letham, *The Work of Christ: Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1993), 161-162.

⁶ Aulen, 4; Erickson, 810.

⁷ These aspects will be discussed later in the study.

2. Historical Survey of the Christus Victor Model of Atonement

This section of the study will trace the Christus Victor model of atonement from the time of the Church Fathers to post-Reformation times.⁸

2.1 Early Church and Patristic Period

The Christus Victor model of atonement has been dominant throughout the early church period. It was the ruling idea of atonement for the first thousand years of Christian history.⁹ The first patristic writer to give a clear and comprehensive doctrine of atonement and redemption was Irenaeus.¹⁰ He held that the work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers, which hold humanity in bondage, the evil powers of sin, death and the devil. This victory creates a new situation, bringing their rule to an end and setting human beings free from their dominion. He believed that the incarnation was the necessary preliminary work to the atoning work of Christ because it was through it that God entered our sinful world as a man to save humans from sin. He emphasized that the obedience of Jesus Christ to the Father was the means of His triumph.¹¹ This victory was recapitulated in every human in whom the Holy Spirit lives and works. In addition, Irenaeus believed that though the death of Christ is central to the atonement, it is not to be seen in isolation from Christ's life work as a whole. For Irenaeus, atonement is solely the work of God in which God is the reconciler and the reconciled.¹² This was because no other power apart from God could deliver humankind from sin. Therefore God in Christ was the effective agent in the work of

⁸ The historical survey in this study will have as its main source the classic work of Gustaf Aulen earlier quoted in the study. Consequently this section of the study will draw largely from it. However it should be noted that Aulen had his biases on the topic. Therefore this study admits that his thesis needs to be critiqued for a more balanced view of the topic. Robert Letham does this briefly in his work quoted earlier. Letham, 162, 163.

⁹ Aulen, 6; Miley, 106. It was also known as the ransom theory and it flourished in the patristic period and held its position until the 11th century A.D.

¹⁰ Aulen, 17.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹² *Ibid.*, 32, 33.

redemption.¹³ This is the Christus Victor model of atonement according to Ireneaus.

The Eastern (Greek) Church Fathers, Origen, Athanasius, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Cyril of Alexandria, Cyril of Jerusalem and Chrysostom, followed the classic view of the atonement, though they differed in thought and philosophy. They had a similar underlying agreement of the work of Christ and this showed that, despite the influence of philosophy, this model of atonement was deeply rooted in their teachings.¹⁴

On the side of the Western (Latin) Church Fathers, Ambrose, Augustine, Leo the Great, Cesarius of Arles, Faustus of Rhegium and Gregory the Great, the classic view also prospered especially through the works of Augustine (on Christ's incarnation) and Gregory the Great (in his profuse use of imagery from the classic view). However, some of the Western Fathers, such as Tertullian and Cyprian, began to lay the foundation for the satisfaction model of atonement. They only made tentative suggestions and not an all-out, open attack on the classic view. In that case, the classic view was dominant for both the Western and the Eastern Fathers.¹⁵ While the Church Fathers agreed on the role of the incarnation and the divine love in the atonement,¹⁶ there were a variety of responses on the aspect of Christ's dealings with the devil in His work of atonement.¹⁷ This will be discussed in detail in the biblical evaluation of this study.

2.2 The Middle Ages

During this period, there was a major transition on the model of atonement, from the classic model to the satisfaction model. The foundation for the satisfaction model had been laid by Tertullian and Cyprian of the Western Church Fathers and later championed by Anselm of Canterbury.¹⁸ The satisfaction model was based on the merit and satisfaction concept from Roman law applied by Tertullian to the practice

¹³ Aulen, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 41-47.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 81-84.

of penance.¹⁹ Anselm held that the transgression of humanity required satisfaction made by humans to God. A human cannot make the necessary satisfaction because he/she is sinful. If a person cannot do it, then God must do it. However a human and not God must make the act of satisfaction. Therefore God became human.²⁰

The strengths of the satisfaction model over the classic model include its rational and juridical character. Since it is based on the law and justice of God, it is moral, ethical and legalistic in nature and this appealed more to the church of the medieval times.²¹

In addition to the satisfaction model, Peter Abelard, a younger contemporary of Anselm, championed the exemplary model of atonement.²² He attacked the classic and satisfaction models alike and emphasized that Christ was the great example to arouse responsive love for God in humans, which is the basis for reconciliation and forgiveness, the basis of atonement. It is on this basis that Abelard became the father of the subjective model of atonement.²³ However this model did not have great influence or gain much of a hearing during the Middle Ages, perhaps because this model does not place any special significance on Christ's death in an age where the passion of Christ was highly emphasized in theology and practice.²⁴

These models, the satisfaction and exemplary models, began to dominate the church's view of the atonement in the medieval period and consequently, the classic model, as a whole, began to disappear. However parts of this model were still preserved in the hymns, art, Easter sequences, liturgy and poetry of the Middle Ages.²⁵

2.3 Reformation and Post-Reformation Periods

It is interesting to note that though the classic model of atonement mostly disappeared in the time of the Middle Ages it reappeared on the stage of

¹⁹ Gerald O'Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical and Systematic Study of Jesus Christ* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1995), 199.

²⁰ Aulen, 86; O'Collins, 199, 200. This is fully explained in Anselm's classic work *Cur Deo Homo?*

²¹ Aulen, 87-92.

²² *Ibid.*, 95.

²³ *Ibid.*, 95, 96.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 96, 97.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 98,99.

church history through the teachings and writings of Martin Luther with an even greater intensity.²⁶

Though some theologians have regarded Luther as a proponent of the satisfaction view of atonement because of his use of the terms "merits," "satisfaction," and "sacrifice" a careful study of his writings shows otherwise.²⁷ Apart from the fact that Luther loved to use the imagery of the classic model with great force, the heart of his teaching was Christ's victory over the tyrants that hold humankind captive.²⁸ This is reflected in his catechisms, commentaries and even in his hymns.²⁹ He upheld the main pillars of the classic model: (1) Atonement is completely divine because the one power able to overcome the tyrants is the omnipotent God. Atonement is God reconciling and God reconciled;³⁰ (2) incarnation is central to the atonement because God came to dwell in humanity through Christ;³¹ and (3) atonement is dualistic and dramatic since it involves a conflict between God and the powers of evil. In addition, Luther, who championed justification by faith during the Reformation, believed that justification through Christ is the same as Christ's victory over sin, death and the devil.³² Indeed Luther had returned to the patristic view of atonement with greater intensity.³³

However, Luther's successors did not uphold the classic model that he had strongly heralded. Melancthon and some of Luther's contemporaries reverted back to the satisfaction model and this became the established Lutheran (Protestant) Orthodoxy.³⁴ It is interesting to note that though there is a similarity between Anselm's satisfaction model and that of the Protestant Orthodoxy their views on satisfaction differ. While Anselm stated that Christ's death provides satisfaction for humanity's atonement, the Protestant Orthodoxy saw the whole fulfillment of God's law throughout Christ's life as satisfaction.³⁵ Christ's life of perfect obedience

²⁶ Aulen, 99, 100.

²⁷ Ibid., 101, 102, 116.

²⁸ Ibid., 103, 104.

²⁹ Ibid., 104-106.

³⁰ Ibid., 107.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 121, 122.

³⁴ Ibid., 123, 124.

³⁵ Ibid., 129.

must satisfy the law and His death must pay the penalty to satisfy the justice of God.³⁶ Therefore the retributive justice of God and the law are central factors to be satisfied for reconciling atonement of humanity in the view of Protestant Orthodoxy. While both Anselm and Protestant Orthodoxy accept the satisfaction model, atonement in Protestant Orthodoxy is a more developed theory of the Anselmic doctrine.³⁷

After Melanchthon developed and established the atonement view in Protestant Orthodoxy, the classic model was completely suppressed in the realm of theology.³⁸ There was also further suppression of the classic model as a result of the subjective humanistic views of atonement, which arose in the period of the Enlightenment. These were in conflict with the Protestant Orthodox view of the atonement. Thus during the Enlightenment, the subjective views of the atonement gained ground. The basic assumption of these views was that God did not need atonement to be made. Sinful humans are the ones who need change. When a person repents, he/she changes God's attitude and He responds by giving him/her happiness and salvation.³⁹ The central idea of the subjective views is anthropocentric and moralistic.⁴⁰

The nineteenth century brought with it continuous controversy between the subjective and the objective views of atonement.⁴¹ In conclusion, the classic model of the atonement (Christus Victor) has since been lost in this controversy.

3. Evaluation of the Christus Victor Model of Atonement

3.1 Illogical Aspects

As stated earlier, the Church Fathers of the East and West agreed on the role of the incarnation and divine love in the atonement. However, in the aspect of Christ's work in relation to Satan, there is disagreement. The classic view of Christ's dealing with the devil has two controverted parts,

³⁶ Aulen, 129, 130.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

the ransom paid by Christ to the devil and the deception of the devil by Christ.

The aspect of the ransom paid by Christ to the devil was championed by Origen.⁴² He held that Satan is now the governing power of the world and all humankind is enslaved to him because of sin.⁴³ To get humanity back to God, a ransom price had to be paid. Origen asks: "From whom were we bought? To whom was the ransom paid?"⁴⁴ According to him, it was obviously to the devil, the one whose servants humankind is. He named the price. He determined and accepted the ransom that Christ paid for humankind.⁴⁵ Gregory of Nazianzus rejects the idea of a transaction with the devil and dismisses the idea of a ransom altogether.⁴⁶ This continued to meet strong criticism, but the ransom theory became firmly established in the church.⁴⁷

The second controverted aspect of the classic model, the deception of the devil by Christ's humanity, had Gregory of Nyssa as its main proponent.⁴⁸ In direct relation to the ransom aspect, this view held that Christ was given to the devil as a ransom, but Christ's divinity was enveloped by human flesh. Hence Satan was deceived by God because Christ's deity was deliberately concealed from him so that he could accept Christ as a ransom.⁴⁹ Using the analogy of fishing, Gregory of Nyssa claims that the devil was the fish, Christ's humanity was the bait, but Christ's divinity was the hook.⁵⁰ Rufinus, Gregory the Great and even Augustine all likened the cross to a bait, a net or a trap, along the same lines as Gregory of Nyssa.⁵¹ In addition, Gregory of Nyssa justified God's deception of the devil by claiming that the deception was just and right because it was motivated by love and it gave the devil back his fair due, a taste of his own medicine.⁵² However, Gregory of Nazianzus, John of

⁴² Erickson, 810; O'Collins, 198, 199.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Erickson, 810, 811.

⁴⁵ Aulen, 49; Erickson, 811.

⁴⁶ Aulen, 50.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Erickson, 810, 811; O'Collins, 199.

⁴⁹ Erickson, 811.

⁵⁰ Aulen, 52; Erickson, 811; O'Collins, 199.

⁵¹ Aulen, 53; Erickson, 812.

⁵² Erickson, 811, 812.

Damascus and Athanasius found the whole idea of Christ who offered to the devil definitely repugnant.⁵³

It is this aspect of the classic Christus Victor model, of Christ's dealing with the devil in the atonement, which has attracted so much criticism and rejection since it appears to be unconvincing and not worthy of serious consideration.⁵⁴ It is also because of this aspect that this model is called the ransom-to-Satan theory of the atonement.⁵⁵ As a result of this aspect of the classic theory, many have dismissed this model altogether as ethically intolerable.⁵⁶ This explains why it disappeared from the spotlight in the history of the atonement as stated earlier.

As seen in the historical overview, the Christus Victor model of atonement thrived from a period of time in church history. However, it began to fizzle away because of what could be called its illogical aspects propounded by Origen and Gregory of Nyssa. Was Jesus a ransom paid to the devil (as held by Origen) or does the Bible say otherwise? Did God deceive the devil by hiding Christ's divinity under His humanity (as held by Gregory of Nyssa)? This section will evaluate these aspects from the biblical perspective of the atonement.

3.2 Biblical Perspectives

To fully understand and appreciate the illogical aspects of the Christus Victor model of atonement mentioned above, there is a need to look at the biblical picture of one of the most primary models of atonement known as the penalty substitution-satisfaction model. This model stands out as the view of atonement with the highest biblical support. Its imagery can be seen from the Old Testament all through to the New. It begins with the symbolism of the Old Testament sacrificial system⁵⁷ where the life-blood of an innocent animal is offered as a sacrifice for sin as a substitute for the life of the sinner-offerer. This satisfied the just penalty for sin, which is death. Therefore the blood atones for the sinner and it is accepted as a substitute to satisfy the penalty for sin (Lev 1:3, 4).

It is important to mention here that all sacrifices offered in the Old Testament sacrificial system pointed to Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God (John 1:29). Directly related to this is the concept of substitution and

⁵³ Erickson, 812, 813; O'Collins, 199.

⁵⁴ Aulen, 47.

⁵⁵ Miley, 106.

⁵⁶ Aulen, 47.

⁵⁷ Berkhof, 377.

sacrifice in Isaiah 53. The verses in this chapter clearly state the role of the Messiah as the Suffering Servant and Lamb of God. He was to be a substitute and a sacrifice by bearing the grieves, sorrows (v. 4), wounds, bruises, chastisement, stripes (v. 5), iniquity and transgression (vv. 6, 8) among others for the sinner, that is for His people. Just as the sins of the sinner were transferred symbolically to the sacrificial lamb, our sins were transferred to Jesus, as the text makes clear.⁵⁸ This vivid imagery can more naturally be understood in terms of just satisfaction of legal penalty through vicarious substitution.⁵⁹

The Gospel narratives go along the same line in the penalty substitution-satisfaction theme. The Gospels make it clear that Jesus saw His life and death as a fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, especially of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 as the sacrificial Lamb of God (Matt 17:12; Mark. 8:21; Luke 22:37).⁶⁰ In addition, He saw His death as a ransom (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45) and Himself as a substitute (John 15:13).⁶¹ It is important to note here that the work of Jesus Christ was the work of the Father, because Christ was sent by the Father (John 3:16,17; 6:38; 10:36).⁶² His work was not independent of the Father.

The book of Hebrews is a biblical masterpiece that shows the antitypical fulfillment of the sacrificial system in the life, person and work of Jesus Christ. In this epistle, Christ is also presented as sacrifice (9:6-15; 10:5-18) and substitute (2:9; 9:28).⁶³ The epistles of Peter and John also agree with Hebrews that Christ is the substitute (1 Peter 2:24) and propitiation (1 John 2:2).⁶⁴

The Pauline corpus agrees with the testimony of the Old Testament, the Gospels and the above epistles on the penalty-substitution-satisfaction model of atonement. A careful consideration of the epistles of Paul reveals some major basic points along this line. First, atonement is the work of love of both the Father and the Son (Rom 5:8; 8:3, 32; 2 Cor 5:14, 19).⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Erickson, 823; Berkhof, 377.

⁵⁹ Woodrow Whidden, *Class Syllabus (Notes)/Course Outline for Seminar in Christian Theology and Church History* (Adventist International Institute of Advanced Studies, Silang, Cavite, December, 2008), 36.

⁶⁰ Erickson, 824.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*, 823, 824.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 829-831.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 830.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 826.

They are not independent of each other. Second, the death of Christ was God's sacrifice offered to God for us (Rom 5:8; 8:32; Gal 3:13; Eph 5:2; 1 Thess 5:10).⁶⁶ Third, Christ's death is the satisfaction of God's wrath against sin (Rom 3:21-26).⁶⁷ God's wrath is His hatred for sin and His just activity to make a complete and final end of it and all that adheres to it, out of His divine love for His children.⁶⁸ His holiness and justice require that there be atonement if the condemned condition of sinners is to be overcome. The love of God provides that atonement.⁶⁹

Numerous Pauline passages, which speak of God's wrath against sin, are evidence that Christ's death was not simply a covering and a cleansing from sin (expiation), but it was a necessary appeasement (propitiation) of a God who hates sin and is radically opposed to it (Rom 1:18; 2:5,8; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4-5; Eph 2:3; 5:6; Col 3:6; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; 5:9).⁷⁰

The Bible is very clear that every sinful human can be forgiven and reconciled to God only because the just penalty of sin, which is death, has been paid and satisfied by the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus Christ. This provision for atonement has been made by God Himself out of His love for sinful humanity. It is from this point that all other models of atonement, including the Christus Victor (ransom) model, will be understood and appreciated.⁷¹ However, this brings us back to the question, "How can the penal-substitution-satisfaction model give a clearer understanding of the classic Christus Victor model especially as it relates to the two "illogical aspects" ransom and deception mentioned earlier?"

In regard to the ransom aspect, the Bible makes it clear that Jesus Christ gave Himself as a sacrifice and ransom to God (Eph 5:2) to meet

⁶⁶ Erickson, 826

⁶⁷ Ibid., 827.

⁶⁸ Edward Heppenstall, "Subjective and Objective Aspects of the Atonement" in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies* (ed. W. Richard Leshner; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), 678, 679.

⁶⁹ Erickson, 826; Finger, 346; Heppenstall, 681, 689.

⁷⁰ Erickson, 828, 829.

⁷¹ Through the penalty substitution-satisfaction model, it is clear how the death of Christ shows that the law of God is righteous and that breaking it has serious consequences (the governmental model), how the death of Christ is a demonstration of His love to draw sinful humankind to salvation (moral influence model) and how this death is an example of how we should live (the exemplary model). Erickson, 836-838.

God's just requirements not those of Satan.⁷² It is interesting to note that theologians have spoken of satisfaction for atonement in different ways, namely, satisfying the devil's demands, satisfying God's law, honor and justice, and satisfying the moral order of the world. However, though these formulations are true in different degrees, they place a limitation on God by representing Him as subordinate to these things, controlling His actions, being accountable to them and unable to free Himself from them. It is therefore, important to note that it is God Himself "in His inner Being who needs to be satisfied and not something external to Himself."⁷³ The law, honor, justice and the moral order should only be "seen as expressions of God's own character. Atonement is a 'necessity' because it 'arises from within God Himself.'"⁷⁴ This, therefore, supports the fact that Jesus' life as a ransom was given to satisfy God's inherent demands for justice against sin and not to meet the devil's demands.

This brings to fore the second illogical aspect of the Christus Victor model: Did God deceive the devil by covering Christ's divinity with humanity as taught by Gregory of Nyssa? Absolutely not! This goes against God's just and honest character. It will not be wrong to say that the devil was self-deceived but not intentionally tricked by God. He was deceived by either of two reasons: Either, he misunderstood the humble servant nature of Christ's messianic kingdom and reign which was evident in Christ's human nature. Therefore he was deceived by his wrong assumptions about the nature and power of the kingdom of God present in the life and ministry of Jesus;⁷⁵ or, "Satan was a victim of his own pride, for he thought that he could overcome and hold Christ, when in reality he had no such power. Because Jesus had never sinned, and therefore was not liable to death, he was not under Satan's control."⁷⁶

The biblical evaluation of the Christus Victor (or classic) model of atonement reveals that certain aspects of it (as proposed by some Church Fathers) are not consistent with the biblical picture of atonement.⁷⁷ These aspects, which include Christ's death as a ransom paid to the devil and the deception of the devil by God, fall short of the biblical picture of the

⁷² Erickson, 839; Berkhof, 375.

⁷³ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 123.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ Finger, 333.

⁷⁶ Erickson, 812. The quote is an explanation of Augustine's reaction to the 'deception of Satan' aspect of the classic model of atonement.

⁷⁷ The classic view of the atonement was dismissed because of the incongruous nature of the theory in addition to its lack of biblical consistency. Berkhof, 385; Miley, 107.

atonement. When all the theories of atonement are viewed as an integrated whole, it provides a good basis to evaluate each one in the light of the whole biblical picture of atonement. Though the theories of atonement are generally divided into objective and subjective theories, each with its own biblical support and emphasis, each becomes more meaningful and helpful when it is viewed as complementary to others rather than in exclusion or opposition to the others.⁷⁸ Therefore “one theory is supplementing the others by filling out the fuller picture of what the death of Christ can accomplish in the redemption of estranged sinners.”⁷⁹ The classic Christus Victor model is a case in point in this study. It is better understood and appreciated when seen in the light of other theories.

However, it is important to stress here again that though atonement can be seen as subjective, it is primarily objective.⁸⁰ While the subjective theories focus on the moral influence of Christ’s death on sinful humanity, the objective theories emphasize Christ’s death as the satisfaction of the demands of divine justice and mercy inherent in God’s nature and character.⁸¹ It can be logically said that the objective views provide the basis for the subjective views of atonement since they deal with the primary cause for the atonement, the sin problem. The penal substitution satisfaction and classic models of atonement are objective since they address the objective factors that explain the sin problem and God’s solution to it. This objective basis provides a good foundation for the understanding of all the other models of the atonement especially the subjective ones. This shows that atonement can be better appreciated when all its theories or views are seen as a biblical whole.

4. Significance of The Christus Victor Model for Christian Life And Mission

Theology affects faith and practice. Therefore, how can the theology of this classic model of atonement help the Christian in life and mission?

⁷⁸ Whidden, 31.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Berkhof, 373.

⁸¹ The objective view states that the atonement must first do justice to God and to the account God gives of Himself in relation to the sin problem. Heppenstall, 667; Whidden, 32.

Here are a few implications of the Christus Victor model of atonement for the Christian life and mission.

1. Christus Victor as a theological motif/theme throughout the Bible. More than just seen as another theory of atonement, the Christus Victor model of atonement is best seen as a motif or theme running through the Bible.⁸² "The Christus Victor model can better handle the broad, rich diversity of the Biblical data on these themes. . . it is better able to allow the different emphases of Scripture to make their own witness and to point beyond all models to the unfathomable mystery of Christ's atonement itself."⁸³ Seeing this model from this perspective prevents theologians from limiting it to just a mere rational theory.

John R. W. Stott calls this model of atonement "the Conquest of Evil" and as mentioned above traces the key manifestations of this theme through biblical history. He presents it as follows: (1) The conquest predicted: the protoeuangelion; (2) the conquest begun: the incarnation; (3) the conquest achieved: the cross; (4) the conquest confirmed and announced: the resurrection; (5) the conquest extended: the mission of the church; and (6) the conquest consummated: the parousia.⁸⁴

It is important to point out here that the above list focuses on the conflict between good and evil especially as it is prominent in the life, ministry and death of Jesus. However, the Great Controversy theme, which is the cosmic conflict between Christ and Satan, covers and goes beyond the key events listed above. It begins from the war in heaven (Rev 12:7) and ends after the millennium (Rev 20:7-15; 21:3, 4). The Christus Victor model of atonement, when presented within the bigger picture of the Great Controversy theme, helps to show the great significance of the work of Christ in biblical history. Hence the Christus Victor motif can be better appreciated within the broad context of the Great Controversy theme which takes into consideration the whole biblical picture of salvation history from its beginning to its end. It can thus be said that the Christus Victor motif celebrates and points to the centrality of the cross in the larger picture of the Great Controversy, which runs through salvation history.

2. Christus Victor and spiritual warfare. In Christ's life and ministry, during the incarnation, it was evident that He was always in conflict with the enemy. His wilderness temptations (Matt 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-11) and His struggle at Gethsemane and Judas' betrayal (John 13:27) are just a few examples of how Satan waged war against His soul. However Christ

⁸² Aulen, 157.

⁸³ Finger, 348.

⁸⁴ Stott, 227-251.

triumphed over the enemy as He healed sicknesses, cast out demons and delivered captives from the bondage of sin (Matt 4:23; Mark 1:24; Luke 10:17-20). Christ's victory over the devil is summarily illustrated in a riddle-like parable in which the stronger man overcomes the strong man, takes away his armor, divides his spoil and liberates his slaves (Mark 3:23-27; Luke 11:17-22). The strong man is the devil but the stronger man is Jesus Christ.⁸⁵

The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ were very significant in heaven's victory over sin, Satan, and death. At the cross, Jesus died without sin completely resisting all the devil's temptations to sin and obeying the Father's will (Phil 2:8). By so doing, He defeated Satan and the powers of evil stripping them of their arms, exhibiting them as powerless and showing them of as His captives (Col 2:15). In addition, the resurrection of Jesus announced and confirmed His victory on the cross. Because sin and Satan had no hold on Him, death could not hold Him back since it had already been defeated. This victory at the cross and resurrection led to Jesus' exaltation over all the principalities and powers and made them all subject to Him (Phil 2: 9-11; Eph 1:20-23; 1 Pet 3:22).

The victory of Jesus Christ is to be personally experienced in the life of the individual Christian. The victory He won in the flesh can be claimed, recapitulated and enjoyed by each Christian through the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ overcame the devil and his works (1 John 3:8), which include the curse and condemnation of the law (Rom 8:1-3; Gal 3:13), sinful flesh (John 8:34, 36; Rom 6:6; 8:3), the world (John 16:33; Gal 6:14) and death (Heb 2:14, 15).

It is important to note that though Christ has defeated these powers, He has not destroyed them. Since they have not been completely destroyed, they still exist and remain a continual threat to the Christian. This makes the Christian life a struggle, a conflict, a "fight of faith" (1 Tim 6:12) which is described in the New Testament as striving (Luke 13:24), wrestling (Eph 6:10), pulling down (2 Cor 10:3, 4), enduring (Matt 24:13), pressing on (Phil 3:14), resisting (James 4:7; 1 Pet 5:9) and standing firm in the strength of the Lord (Eph 6:10, 11, 13, 14; 1 Pet 5:9). Thus every Christian continues in this warfare of faith against sin, carnal self and the world depending on divine power until the promised day of the blessed hope of Christ's second advent which will mark the beginning of the end of these evil powers. Until then, the Christian life is not only one of conflict but of victory just as Christ was victorious.

The victory of Jesus Christ is also to be extended through the life and mission of the church. As noted above, Christ extended the kingdom of God by casting out demons, healing the sick and preaching the gospel.

⁸⁵ Stott, 232.

The church is to carry on His ministry of victory by proclaiming liberty to the captives and setting free those who are oppressed by the evil powers (Isa 61:1, 2; Luke 4:18, 19). This is clearly seen in the book of Acts as the disciples continued this work (Acts 2:43; 5:12-16; 6:8; 8:12, 13, 34, 36-42; 14:8-10; 16:16-18; 19:11-20; 28:1-9). In addition, the church today is to present Jesus Christ as *Christus Victor* supreme over every spiritual rule and authority. Since He is victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly over the evil forces, He is the powerful protector against these forces and their powers. Thus Christians today are to exercise the power and authority of Jesus over demons and evil powers that oppress and hold captive human lives in the world when the need arises (Matt 28:18-20; Luke 10:18-20) just as the disciples did in the Acts of the Apostles.

3. *Christus Victor* as an eschatological perspective. Christ's victory over the evil powers at the cross will be complete with the beginning at the parousia. It has been noted above that though Christ has defeated the evil forces of sin at the cross, they have not yet been destroyed. The book of Revelation points to the time when all sinners, evil dominions, authorities and powers, death, Hades and the devil will be annihilated in the lake of fire (Rev 20:10, 14). This will be the completion and ultimate fulfillment of Christ's victory on the cross.

The book of Revelation presents a final end-time crisis in which the enemies of God persecute His people with economic boycott and the threat of death (Rev 13:15-17). The confederacy of evil, made up of the devil, the beasts, the kings and the people of the earth whose names are not in the book of Life, will gather to make war against God's saints and to annihilate them (Rev 12:17; 13:8; 17:2, 8). It is at this point that Jesus Christ appears as the divine warrior to deliver His people from this tribulation in the battle of Armageddon on the great day of the Lord (Rev 19:11-21; cf. 16:14, 16). This deliverance is the prelude to the complete destruction of all of God's enemies at the end of the millennium (20:1-10, 14, 15). Therefore the book of Revelation presents Jesus as *Christus Victor* – the conqueror of death and Hades (1:17, 18), of the devil and his agents which include the beasts, Babylon, the kings of the earth and their armies (13:17, 18; 15:2, 3; 17:14; 19:11-21).

The most significant victory of Christ in the Apocalypse is His victory on the cross as the Lamb of God (5:5). This victory is the basis for the final victory of God and the church over all enemies.⁸⁶ "It is in His death that Christ overcomes His enemies, the world – not on a bloody eschatological battlefield. . . . For him [John] there is only one victory of Christ; it was

⁸⁶ Matthias Rissi, *The Future of the World: An Exegetical Study of Rev. 19:11-22:15* (Studies in Biblical Theology, Second Series, no. 23; Bloomsbury Street, London: SCM Press, 1972), 8-10, 14-17, 26-27.

won in the past and resulted in the debilitation of all enemy powers, once and for all."⁸⁷ It was at the cross that the final eradication of evil was made certain and complete victory over sin was made sure.⁸⁸ The Apocalypse truly resounds with "the objective decisive victory of the Lamb over all the powers of darkness which He won when He shed His blood on the cross" – assuring all "that Christ has defeated Satan and will one day destroy him altogether."⁸⁹ Thus the Christus Victor model celebrates Christ's victory over the evil powers at the cross, which culminates in their destruction in the eschaton.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The Christus Victor model of atonement stands out as a classic and dramatic theory of atonement that defines Christ's death on the cross as victory over the evil forces that hold humanity captive and separate from God. This view of atonement was held and emphasized by the New Testament church, the early Church Fathers and by Martin Luther in the Reformation period. However, it was superseded by other theories of atonement such as the satisfaction, moral influence, and exemplary theories during the medieval and post-Reformation periods.

Though this model of atonement has some illogical aspects through its explanation by some Church Fathers, a biblical evaluation of this model reveals that it is biblically consistent as a theme or motif that runs through Scripture. This theory is fully appreciated when seen in light of objective and subjective theories alike. It is consistent with the Great Controversy theme that spans from the first war in heaven to the end of the millennium. The Christus Victor model of atonement celebrates the centrality of the cross in the Great Controversy theme.

In addition, the Christus Victor model of atonement points to the reality of Christ's victory on the cross over evil powers that are the real enemies of the world behind the scenes. This theory enables and empowers Christian believers to experience Christ's victory in their personal lives. They have victory over sin, self, the world and even demonic attacks in spiritual warfare all because of Christ's victory.

Finally the Christus Victor model of atonement presents the assurance that the evil powers that were defeated at the cross but are still a threat to

⁸⁷ Rissi, 9.

⁸⁸ Heppenstall, 688, 689; Ellen G. White, *The Great Controversy* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 503.

⁸⁹ Stott, 250, 251.

the Christian will be ultimately destroyed. Christ's victory on the cross determines the final fate of these powers of darkness and points to the time when they will be completely annihilated after the post-millennial final judgment. After their destruction, God and humankind will be perfectly and ultimately reconciled and the universe will be restored to total peace and harmony. This is the eschatology of atonement when God will dwell with redeemed humanity in the absence of sin and its effects (Rev 21:3, 4).⁹⁰ This final eschatological picture is made possible and sure only because of Christ's victory on the cross where He defeated the evil powers of darkness that alienated humanity from God. This assures us of the ultimate at-one-ment between God and humankind. This is the good news of the Christus Victor model of the atonement.

⁹⁰ Mario Veloso, "The Doctrine of the Sanctuary and the Atonement as Reflected in the Book of Revelation" in *The Sanctuary and the Atonement: Biblical, Historical and Theological Studies* (ed. Arnold Wallenkampf; Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1981), 411.