



The “Christus Victor” View of the Atonement by Greg Boyd

God accomplished many things by having his Son become incarnate and die on Calvary. Through Christ God revealed the definitive truth about himself (Rom 5:8, cf. Jn 14:7-10); reconciled all things, including humans, to himself (2 Cor 5:18-19; Col 1:20-22), forgave us our sins (Ac 13:38; Eph 1:7); healed us from our sin-diseased nature (1 Pet 2:24); poured his Spirit upon us and empowered us to live in relation to himself (Rom 8:2-16); and gave us an example of what it looks like when we live in the kingdom (Eph 5:1-2; 1 Pet 2:21). Yet, I believe all these facets of Christ’s work can be understand as aspects of the most fundamental thing Christ came to accomplish: namely, to defeat the devil and his minions (Heb 2:14; 1 Jn 3:8). He came to overcome evil with love.

This is known as the Christus Victor (Latin for “Christ is victorious”) view of the atonement. In this essay I will spell out why I believe it expresses the biblical view of Christ and why I think this is important.

Hostile Waters, Monsters and Gods

The Christus Victor view of the atonement cannot be understood without an appreciation for the broader spiritual warfare motif that runs throughout Scripture. Though the motif of spiritual warfare is rarely given its full due, the biblical narrative could in fact be accurately described as a story of God’s on-going conflict with, and ultimate victory over, cosmic and human agents who oppose him and who threaten his creation. (1)

In the Old Testament, this warfare is usually depicted in terms of God’s battle with hostile waters and vicious sea monsters that were believed to surround and threaten the earth. Whereas non-Israelites looked to various deities (e.g. Marduck, Baal) to resist these sinister cosmic forces, the Hebrews declared that it was Yahweh alone who warred against, rebuked, guarded, and trampled on the malevolent waters and who vanquished the cosmic monsters (e.g. Ps 29:3-4, 10; 74:10-14; 77:16, 19; 89:9-10; 104:2-9; Prov 8:27-29; Job 7:12; 9:8, 13; 26:12-13; 38:6-11; 40:-41; Ezek. 29:3; 32:2; Jer 51:34; Hab. 3:8-15; Na 1:4). We also read a great deal about rebel gods with whom God and his heavenly host must do battle. As is the case with the hostile waters and cosmic monsters, ancient Israelites never separated battles that took place on earth from battles that took place among the gods (e.g. 2 Sam 5:23-24; I Chron 12:22; Judg. 11:21-24). (2)

These depictions are obviously heavily influenced by standard Ancient Near Eastern mythological imagery, but they nevertheless powerfully communicate the understanding that the earth and its inhabitants exist in a cosmic war zone. Order in the cosmos and the preservation of Israel depend on God continually fighting against these evil cosmic forces. It's clear biblical authors understood Yahweh's victory over these forces to be praiseworthy precisely because they believed these opposing cosmic forces were formidable and that the battles in the spiritual realm were real.

Satan in the New Testament

Owing to a number of historical factors, the understanding that the earth is a war zone between good and evil cosmic forces intensified significantly among Jews in the two centuries leading up to Christ, commonly referred to as the apocalyptic period. (3) All indications are that Jesus and his earliest followers shared, and in some respects even intensified, this worldview.

For example, the role given to Satan by Jesus and his followers is without precedent in previous apocalyptic writings. According to John, Jesus believed that Satan was “the prince of this world” (Jn 12:31; 14:30; 16:11). The word translated “prince” (*archon*) customarily referred to “the highest official in a city or a region in the Greco-Roman world.” While Jesus and his followers of course believed that God was the ultimate Lord over all creation, they clearly viewed Satan as the functional lord of the earth at the present time.

Along the same lines, Satan is depicted as possessing “all the kingdoms of the world” — to the point where he gives authority to rule these kingdoms to anyone he pleases (Lk 4:5-6). In fact, the various kingdoms of the world can be described as a single kingdom under Satan's rule (Rev. 11:15, cf. Rev. 13). John goes so far as to claim that the entire world is “under the power of the evil one” (I Jn 5:19) while Paul doesn't shy away from labeling Satan “the god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4) and “the ruler of the kingdom of the air” (Eph. 2:2). It is because of this pervasive and oppressive diabolic influence that Paul, in typical apocalyptic fashion, depicts this present world system as fundamentally evil (Gal 1:4; Eph 5:6).

Everything Jesus was about was centered on vanquishing this empire, taking back the world that Satan had seized, and restoring its rightful viceroys – humans – to their position of guardians of the earth (Gen. 1:26-28, cf. 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 5:10). Each one of Jesus' many healings and deliverances were understood to diminish Satan's hold on the world and to liberate people, to whatever degree, from his stronghold. (4) Peter succinctly summarized Jesus' ministry to Cornelius when he said that Jesus “went about doing good and healing *all who were oppressed by the devil...*” (Ac 10:38, emphasis added). Gustaf Wingren captures the point well when he writes:

When Jesus heals the sick and drives out evil spirits, Satan's dominion is departing and God's kingdom is coming (Mt 12:22-29). All Christ's activity is therefore a conflict with the Devil (Acts 10:38). God's Son took flesh and became man that he might overthrow the power of the Devil, and bring an end to his works (Heb 2.14f.; I John 3.8). (5)

The Battle Against The Powers

Intensifying the apocalyptic view of the time, Jesus and New Testament authors saw demonic influences not only in demonized and diseased people, but directly or indirectly in everything that was not consistent with God's reign. For example, swearing oaths, temptation, lying, legalism, false teachings, anger, spiritual blindness and persecution were all seen as being satanically inspired. This ought not surprise us since, again, Jesus and his followers all believed the devil had significant control over the entire world (I Jn 5:19). For this reason Paul taught that whatever earthly struggles disciples found themselves involved in, they must

understand that their real struggle was against “the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12, cf. 2 Cor 10:3-5). The kingdom of the roaring lion (1 Pet 5:8) was an ever present reality to Jesus and his earliest disciples.

This last Pauline passage brings up a final and very important aspect of the New Testament’s apocalyptic worldview. Beyond the frequent references to Satan and demons throughout the New Testament, we find Paul (and others, e.g. 1 Pet 3:21-22) making reference to other spiritual powers, most of which have their counterpart in the apocalyptic literature of the time. Thus we read about “rulers,” “principalities,” “powers” and “authorities” (Rom. 8:38; 13:1; 1 Cor 2:6, 8; 15:24; Eph 1:21; 2:2; 3:10; 6:12; Col 1:16: 2:10, 15) along with “dominions” (Eph 1:21; Col 1:16), “cosmic powers” (Eph 6:12), “thrones” (Col 1:16), “spiritual forces” (Eph 6:12), “elemental spirits of the universe” (Col 2:8, 20; Gal 4:3, 8-9) as well as other spiritual entities. (7) For the sake of brevity, I shall simply refer to this vast array of cosmic powers as “the powers.” Most scholars agree that these powers are closely related to the destructive spiritual force of various social structures and people groups – e.g. nations, governments, religions, classes, races, tribes and other social groups. (8)

Christ’s Victory Over the Powers

According to the New Testament, the central thing Jesus did was drive out the “prince of this world” (Jn 12:31). He came to “destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn 3:8). He came to “destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” in order to “free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death” (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus lived, died and rose again to establish a new reign that would ultimately “put all his enemies under his feet” (1 Cor 15:25). Though “the strong man” was “fully armed,” one who was “stronger than he” had finally arrived who could attack and overpower him” (Lk 11:21-22). While the cosmic “thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy,” Jesus came into the world to vanquish the thief so that all “may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Jesus “disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them...” (Col 2:15). In a word, Jesus came to end the cosmic war that had been raging from time immemorial and to set Satan’s captives free (Lk 4:18; Eph 4:8).

The first messianic prophecy given in Scripture — indeed, the first prophecy given, period — announced just this: a descendant of Eve would crush the head of the serpent who originally deceived humanity into joining in his rebellion (Gen. 3:15). (9) It is therefore not surprising that the original disciples expressed what the messiah accomplished in terms of a victory over the ancient serpent.

The very first Christian sermon, according to Luke, centered on this cosmic victory. After the Holy Spirit was poured out on the day of Pentecost, Peter stood up and preached:

This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear. For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he himself says,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,
“Sit at my right hand,
until I make your enemies your footstool.” ’

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Ac 2:32-36).

The central thing Jesus did, according to Peter, was fulfill Psalms 110:1. Jesus had been raised to a position of divine power (the Lord’s “right hand”) over his defeated and

humiliated enemies (who are now his “footstool”). In an apocalyptic Jewish context, this is simply what it meant to say that Jesus brought the kingdom of God. To say the kingdom of God has come was to say the kingdom of Satan has been defeated.

This theme of victory over cosmic foes pervades the entire New Testament. Indeed, **Psalms 110** is the most frequently cited passage in the New Testament, and it always, in a variety of ways, is used to express the truth that Christ is Lord because he has defeated God’s enemies (e.g. **Mt 22:41-45; Mk 12:35-37; Lk 20:41-44; I Cor 15:22-25; Heb 1:13; 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:11, 15, 17, 21; Heb 10:12-13**, cf. . **Mt 26:64; Mk 14:62; Lk 22:69; Ac 5:31; 7:55-56; Rom 8:34; I Cor 15:25; Eph 1:20; Col 3:1; Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12-13; I Pet 3:22; Rev. 3:21**).

The significance of this is difficult to overstate. In the words of Oscar Cullman:

“Nothing shows more clearly how the concept of the present Lordship of Christ and also of his consequent victory over the angel powers stands at the very center of early Christian thought than the frequent citation of **Ps. 110:1**, not only in isolated books, but in the entire NT.” (10)

Through his incarnation, life, teachings, death and resurrection, Jesus manifested the power of God over Satan, demons and the entire spectrum of rebellious principalities and powers. The one who created “thrones...dominions ...rulers...[and] powers” (**Col 1:16**) became incarnate, died and was resurrected in order for God “to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross” (**Col. 1:20**). This is what Christ accomplished. In the words of Karl Heim, the cross is “God’s final settlement of the Satanic opposing power which has arisen against God.” (11)

Salvation as Deliverance From the Devil

Because the main thing Christ accomplished was that he defeated the devil, we are not surprised to find that salvation in the New Testament is frequently depicted as freedom from the devil’s power. For example, the message Paul received when he first encountered Christ was that he was being sent to the Gentiles,

“...to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (**Ac 26:17-18**).

Through Paul, God was going to free Gentiles from “the god of this age” who had “blinded the minds of the unbelievers” (**2 Cor 4:4**) and thereby set them free from the power of Satan and bring them into the power of God. Because of this – and note closely the logical order – they would be in a position to “receive forgiveness of sins” as well as a place among the community that is set apart (sanctified) by God. Salvation clearly involves forgiveness of sins, but this forgiveness is itself rooted in a person getting freed from Satan’s grip.

A multitude of other passages capture the same dynamic. Salvation is most fundamentally about escaping “from the snare of the devil, having been held captive by him to do his will” (**2 Tim. 2:26**). It is about being “set free from this present evil age” (**Gal 1:4**) and liberated from our “enslavement to the elemental spirits of the world” (**Gal 4:3**, cf. **Rom 6:18, 8:2; Gal 5:1; Col 2:20; Heb 2:14-15**). It’s about being “enabled ...to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light” by being “rescued...from the power of darkness and transferred...into the kingdom of his beloved Son” (**Col 1: 12-13**). This inheritance involves receiving “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (**Col 1:14**), but we have this inheritance only because we’ve been “transferred” from one domain to another.

Similarly, Peter notes that baptism saves believers “through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and

powers made subject to him” (I Pet 3:21-22). The ordinance of baptism has meaning, Peter says, not because it is a literal washing (v. 21) but because it connects the believer with the death and resurrection of Christ. And the foremost thing that the death and resurrection of Christ accomplished, we see once again, was the subjugation of all cosmic powers under him. In baptism, therefore, believers express and participate in Christ’s cosmic victory. Indeed, Peter seems to suggest (however cryptically and controversially) that because of the cosmic significance of what Christ has accomplished, even some who “in former times did not obey” can now be set free (I Pet 3:19-20).

So too, Paul writes that a disciples’ trust in Christ means that we “die to the elemental spirits” in Christ (Col 2:20) and grow into the fullness of Christ who now is “the head of every ruler and authority” (Col 2:10). Through the cross and resurrection, Christ disarmed and defeated these powers, to the point of making them a “public example” (a term used when military leaders would parade defeated officials through the their town). Consequently, all who trust in Christ are incorporated into Christ and therefore share in this cosmic victory. This is the essential meaning of “salvation” in the New Testament. Everything Satan and the diabolic powers had on us — all the sin that put us under their oppression — has lost its power and we have been set free from the power of sin and its condemnation (Col 2:14- 15).

Salvation as a Cosmic and Anthropological Reality

The New Testament concept of salvation does not first and foremost mean “salvation from God’s wrath” and/or “salvation from hell” as many western Christians take it to mean – often with negative consequences for their mental picture of God and/or antinomian consequences for their life. Rather, it is a holistic concept that addresses Christ’s cosmic victory and our participation in it. As James Kallas says,

“... since the cosmos itself is in bondage, depressed under evil forces, the essential content of the word “salvation” is that the world itself will be rescued, or renewed, or set free. Salvation is a cosmic event affecting the whole of creation... Salvation is not simply the overcoming of my rebellion and the forgiveness of my guilt, but salvation is the liberation of the whole world process of which I am only a small part. (12)

Christ has in principle freed the cosmos from its demonic oppression and thus freed all inhabitants of the cosmos who will simply submit to this new loving reign. The cosmos that had been “groaning in labor pains” because it was subjected to “the bondage of decay” has now been, and is yet being, set free (Rom. 8:19-22). And we who were the originally intended viceroys of the earth (Gen 1:26-28) have also been, and are yet being, released from bondage and reestablished to our rightful position as co-rulers of the earth with Christ (2 Tim 2:12; Rev. 5:10). (13)

We are saved from the power of God’s archenemy, saved from the destruction that would have been the inevitable consequences of our sin, saved from our fallen inability to live in right relatedness with God, saved from the idolatrous, futile striving to find “life” from the things of the world, saved from our meaninglessness and saved to forever participate in the fullness of life, joy, power and peace that is the reign of the triune God.

Love Conquers Evil

This brings us to a final aspect of the Christus Victor motif, one that was largely absent in the early church’s thinking about Christ’s conquest over evil but that has been justifiably receiving a good deal of attention in recent years by advocates of the the Christus Victor view. (14)

When we understand Calvary and its conquest of the devil as the culmination of Christ’s whole ministry, it becomes apparent that Jesus wasn’t only pushing back the kingdom of evil

during his lifetime with his healing and exorcism ministry. Rather, every aspect of Christ's life must be understood as a pen-ultimate expression of the victory that Calvary accomplished, for every aspect of his life reflects Calvary-like love.

When Jesus broke religious taboos by fellowshiping with tax collectors, prostitutes and other sinners (e.g. [Mt 11:19](#); [Mk 2:15](#); [Lk 5:29-30](#); [15:1](#), cf. [Lk 7:31-37](#)), and when he forsook religious traditions to lovingly heal and feed people on the Sabbath ([Mt 12:1, 10](#); [Lk 13:10-18](#); [14:1-5](#); [Jn 5:9-10](#)), in the light of Calvary we can understand him to be waging war against the powers and exposing the systemic evil that fuels religious legalism and oppression. He was conquering evil with love.

When Jesus boldly crossed racial lines, fellowshiping and speaking highly of Samaritans and Gentiles (e.g. [Lk 10:30-37](#); [17:11-16](#); [Jn 4](#); [Mt 8:5-10](#); [15:22-28](#)), and when he crossed other social barriers — fellowshiping with and touching lepers for example ([Mt 8:1-3](#); [Mt 14:3](#)) — he was resisting and exposing the evils of the powers that fuel racism and social marginalization. He was conquering evil with love.

So too, when in the midst of an extremely patriarchal culture Jesus treated women with dignity and respect ([Mt 26:6-10](#); [Lk 7:37-50](#); [8:1-32](#); [10:38-40](#); [13:11-18](#); [Jn 4: 7-29](#); [8:3-10](#); [11:5](#); [12:1-7](#)), in the light of Calvary we must understand him to be battling and exposing the powers that fuel sexism. He was conquering evil with love.

And when Jesus expressed mercy to people who knew they deserved judgment and whom the culture stipulated should be judged ([Mk 2:15](#); [Lk 5:29-30](#); [7:47-48](#); [19:1-10](#); [Jn 8:3-10](#)), he was resisting and exposing the powers that fuel social and religious cruelty and judgmentalism. It was, in fact, this on-going resistance to, and exposure of, the powers and those who do their bidding that evoked the wrath of the powers and ultimately led to Jesus' crucifixion. Hence we see that Jesus' life, death and resurrection cannot be separated from each other, not even theoretically.

Everything about Jesus' life must be understood as an act of defiance against the powers, precisely because everything about his life was an act of self-sacrificial love. He rightfully owned the entire cosmos, but in loving service to others had no place to lay his head ([Mt. 8:20](#)). Though he had all power in heaven and earth, John reminds us, he used it to wash the dirty, smelly feet of his disciples – the very ones who would abandon him in a couple of hours ([Jn 13:3-5](#)). When Peter cut off a guard's ear in self-defense, Jesus lovingly healed the attacker's ear and rebuked Peter ([Lk 22:50-51](#)). When he could have called legions of angels to fight for him, out of love Jesus instead let himself be crucified ([Mt 26:53](#)). Forsaking the use of power over others for the sake of expressing the power of love towards others — this is what the kingdom of God looks like. And when it is manifested, as it is most decisively on Calvary, it defeats the rebellious gods of this age.

The Calvary Teachings of Jesus

Jesus' ministry was centrally concerned with defeating demons and the devil, as we have seen. But his life and teachings were also permeated with a concern to demonstrate and teach an unprecedented kind of love. What has rarely been appreciated is the fact that these two themes are two sides of the same coin. While sickness and demons may need to be confronted with the healing and freeing power of God, the gods of the age, and the devil himself, can only be overcome through radical, Calvary-like, self-sacrificial love. Jesus says it with his death and resurrection. Jesus says it with his life. And Jesus says it with his teachings.

For example, few things in this demonically oppressed world feel as “natural” to humans as resorting to violence to defend ourselves and/or our country or retaliating against our enemies

when we are threatened or harmed. This sentiment is the cornerstone of how things operate in “this present evil age” (Gal 1:4) and the reason why human history is largely a history of mindless, diabolical, cyclical carnage. Indeed, it seems positively foolish to most people — including, sadly, most contemporary western Christians — to not engage in this violent quid pro quo activity under certain conditions. Yet, expressing that “secret wisdom of God” that defeats the devil, Jesus expressly forbids his followers to give into this “natural” instinct toward violence.

For example, Jesus says,

“You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also... You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Mt 5: 38-39, 43-45).

We are to love indiscriminately — like the sun shines and the rain falls — without any consideration of the merit of the person we love. This is to be a distinguishing mark of the “children of [the] Father.” And it centrally includes expressing Calvary-like love to our worst enemies.

Now, as Walter Wink and others have noted, the word translated “resist” (*antistenai*) in the above passage doesn’t imply passivity in the face of evil. It rather connotes resisting a forceful action with a similar forceful action. (15) Jesus is thus forbidding responding to violent action with similar violent action. Instead, followers of Jesus are to respond to their “enemies” in ways that are consistent with loving them and blessing them (cf. Lk 6:28). Feeding our enemies when they’re hungry and giving them something to drink when they’re thirsty rather than retaliating against them is the only way we can keep from being “overcome with evil” and the only way we can “overcome evil with good” — both in ourselves and in our “enemies” (Rom. 12: 17-21). Our Calvary-like response to our enemies exposes the evil of what they are doing, breaks the tit-for-tat cycle of violence that keeps the demonically oppressed world spinning, and opens up the possibility that our enemies will repent of their ways (cf. I Pet 2:23; 3:13-18).

The point is that the meaning of Jesus’ death and resurrection cannot even theoretically be separated from the basic meaning of his life and teachings. They are all about one thing: overcoming evil with good. Which is to say, they are about establishing the loving reign of God while vanquishing the powers that resist it.

Jesus Substitutionary Death

Most evangelicals today understand Jesus’ death on Calvary in substitutionary terms (Jesus died in our place), not in Christus Victor terms. The Christus Victor model affirms that Jesus died as our substitute, bore our sin and guilt, was sacrificed for our forgiveness and was punished by the Father in our place (e.g Isa 53:4-5, 10; Rom 3:23-25; 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 2:17; 9:26; I Jn 2:2). But unlike the common substitutionary view espoused by many today, the Christus Victor view can affirm these important truths while avoiding a number of paradoxes that accompany the common substitutionary view — that is, without supposing that our individual sins, guilt and just punishment were somehow literally transferred onto Jesus and without supposing that Jesus had to literally placate the Father’s wrath.

In the Christus Victor view, Jesus died as our substitute and bore our sin and guilt by voluntarily experiencing the full force of the rebel kingdom we have all allowed to reign on the earth. To save us, he experienced the full consequences of sin that we otherwise would

have experienced. In so doing, he broke open the gates of hell, destroyed the power of sin, erased the law that stood against us, and thereby freed us to receive the Holy Spirit and walk in right relatedness with God.

Along the same lines, in the Christus Victor view, Jesus was afflicted by the Father not in the sense that the Father's rage burned directly toward his Son, but in the sense that God allowed evil agents to have their way with him for a greater good. This is how God's wrath was usually expressed toward Israel in the Old Testament (e.g. [Jud 2:11-19](#); [Isa 10:5-6](#)). It's just that with Jesus, the greater good was not to teach Jesus obedience, as it usually was with Israel in the Old Testament. Instead, God the Son bore the Father's wrath, expressed through the powers, for the greater good of demonstrating God's righteousness against the powers and sin ([Rom 3:25](#)) while defeating the powers and setting humans free from their oppression. (17)

So too, the Christus Victor model can wholeheartedly affirm that Jesus gave his life as a ransom for many, but without supposing that Jesus literally had to buy off either God or the devil ([Mk 10:45](#); [Mt 20:28](#); cf. [I Tim. 2:6](#); [Heb 9:15](#)). The word "ransom" simply means "the price of release" and was most commonly used when purchasing slaves from the slave market. (18) Hence, the Christus Victor model can simply take this to mean that Christ did whatever it took to release us from slavery to the powers, and this he did by become incarnate, living an outrageously loving life in defiance of the powers, freeing people from the oppression of the devil through healings and exorcisms, teaching the way of self-sacrificial love, and most definitively by his sacrificial death and victorious resurrection.

The Practical Significance of the Christus Victor View

I'll conclude by sharing a brief word about the practical significance of the Christus Victor model of the atonement.

One of the foremost problems with the western church today is that people understand what Jesus came to accomplish in legal terms. God is viewed as an austere and angry judge who wants to send us to hell, we are seen as guilty defendants deserving of hell, and Jesus is viewed as our defense attorney who wants to find a way to "get us off the hook" from going to hell. So he works out an arrangement whereby the Judge gets to vent his wrath, receiving full payment for sin, yet the guilty defendants are freed from their eternal sentence.

Now, there's many problems associated with this legal-arrangement view of Jesus (such as, if the Father gets payed by Jesus' death, did he really forgive our sin?). But what concerns me most is that this view easily divorces justification from sanctification. That is, so long as a person believes Jesus died as their substitute, they're off the hook. How they actually live isn't central to the legal arrangement. Given this view, it's hardly surprising that there are millions of people in America who profess faith in Jesus but whose lives are indistinguishable from their pagan neighbors.

The Christus Victor understanding of the atonement avoids this completely. In this view, what Christ does *for us* cannot be separated, even theoretically, from what Christ does *in us*. One either participates in Christ's cosmic victory over the powers or they do not. If they do, their lives by definition will be increasingly characterized by the ability and willingness to overcome evil with good as they imitate the Calvary-quality life of Jesus Christ ([Eph 5:1-2](#)). (19) The idea that one is "saved" by intellectually believing in the legal transaction Jesus allegedly engaged in with God the Father can thus be dismissed as magic.

A related practical advantage of the Christus Victor view of the atonement is that, in sharp contrast to the hyper-individualistic outlook of most Americans, the Christus Victor model puts on center stage the easily-overlooked demonic dimension of all fallen social structures.

By calling on disciples to join Christ's rebellion against the ever-present powers, the Christus Victor perspective inspires disciples to live counter-cultural lives that are persistently on-guard against the demonically seductive pull of nationalism, patriotism, culturally endorsed violence, greed, racism and a host of other structural evils that are part of the spiritually polluted air we all breathe. This view motivates believers to take seriously the revelation that the devil has power over the whole world (I Jn 5:19), including all the nations of the world (Lk 4: 5-6) and thereby helps them guard against all forms of idolatry while motivating them toward radical, non-violent, social action. (20)

As Christ established the kingdom of God by the ways his life, ministry, teachings and death contrasted with the power-dominated kingdom of the world, so his followers are called to advance the kingdom of God by living lives that sharply contrast with the kingdom of the world. Instead of trusting the power of worldly force, we are to trust the "foolish" power of the cross and thereby proclaim its wisdom to the gods of this age (Eph 3:10). Following the example of our captain, we are to always overcome evil with good, trusting that when Easter morning comes it is goodness that will have won the day – and the entire cosmos.

The fact that the American Church contrasts with the broader culture so little in this all-important respect is to me a sure indication of just how badly we need to embrace the early church's Christus Victor understanding of the atonement.

Endnotes

- (1) For a fuller discussion of the spiritual warfare motif throughout Scripture, see G. Boyd, *God at War*.
- (2) For discussions, see N. Forsyth, *The Old Enemy: Satan and the Combat Myth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987); J. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988); C. Kloos, *YHWH's Combat With the Sea: A Canaanite Tradition in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986); M. Wakeman, *God's Battle with the Monster: A Study in Biblical Imagery* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1973); J. Day, *God's Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); P. Miller, *The Divine Warrior in Early Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973); E. T. Mullen, *The Assembly of the Gods: The Divine Council in Canaanite and Early Hebrew Literature* (Cico, CA: Scholars Press, 1980). See other references in Boyd, *God at War*, 73-142.
- (3) See Boyd, *God at War*, 172-76.
- (4) On the centrality of healings and exorcisms in Jesus' ministry, see Boyd, *God at War*, 171-214.
- (5) G. Wingren, *The Living Word: A Theological Study of Preaching and the Church*, tran. T. V. Pague (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1960 [1949]), p.53. I have argued that even Jesus' "nature miracles" (e.g. calming the raging sea, cursing the barren tree) are manifestations of the kingdom of God over and against the kingdom of Satan. See *God at War*, 205-14.
- (6) See e.g. Mt 5:37; Mt 6:13; 13:19, 38; Ac 5:3; 1 Cor 7:5; 10:20; 2 Cor. 2:7, 10-11; 4:4; 11:3, 13; I Thess 3:5; Gal 1:8; 4:8-10; Eph 4:26-27; Col 2:8; 1 Tim. 4:1-5; I Jn 4:1-4; 2 Jn 7.
- (7) For example, it's likely Paul is referring to demonic entities in Rom. 8:39. See J. D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, WBC 38A (Waco, TX: Word, 1988), p.513.
- (8) For an overview of the discussion, see P. O'Brien, "Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 16 (Oct. 1992), 353-84. No one has explored and developed this thesis more thoroughly and insightfully than Walter Wink in his acclaimed trilogy, "The Powers." See especially W. Wink, *Naming the Powers: The Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984). Unfortunately,

Wink denies the “powers” are in any sense personal, transcendent agents. See my critique of his view in *God at War*, 273-76.

(9) On the messianic interpretation of [Gen. 3:15](#), see R. A. Martin, “The Earliest Messianic Interpretation of [Genesis 3:15](#),” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 84 (1965), 425-27 . This reading seems to lie behind several New Testament texts (e.g. [Rom 16:19-20](#); [2 Cor 11:3](#); [Rev.12](#)).

(10) *Christ and Time*, trans. F. V. Wilson (London: SCM, rev. ed. 1962), p.193. For a thorough exposition of the importance of [Psalms 110](#) in the New Testament, see D. M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1973).

(11) Karl Heim, *Jesus the World’s Perfector: The Atonement and the Renewal of the World*, trans. D. H. Van Daalen (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1959), p.70.

(12) *The Satanward View: A Study in Pauline Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), p.74.

(13) Christ has “in principle” defeated the devil. Yet we obviously do not see this victory fully manifested. This is the well known “already-not yet” tension in the New Testament’s eschatology.

(14) For the following I am significantly indebted to W. Wink, *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992; J. D. Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001 and J. H. Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, rpt.2002 [1972])).

(15) As Wink notes, “Jesus...abhors both passivity and violence.” W. Wink, *The Powers That Be* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 111. See also 99-100.

(16) It is worth noting that the centrality of Christ’s teaching on, and example of, self-sacrificial love, especially toward one’s enemies, was largely abandoned, at least at an institutional level, with the advent of “Constantinian Christianity.” See G. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest For Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006). It can be argued that the Constantianian transformation factored into the eventual demise of the Christus Victor motif. See Weaver, *Non-Violent Atonement*, 81-92 and item, “Atonement for the NonConstantian Church,” *Modern Theology* 6, #4 (July, 1990), 309-11.

(17) For an insightful discussion of this understanding of how Jesus bore the Father’s wrath, see Finger, *Christian Theology*, 327-330.

(18) John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 176, and L. Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1983), pp. 106-31.

(19) On the inseparability of “justification” and “sanctification” in the Christus Victor Motif, see W. M. Greathouse, “Sanctification and the Christus Victor Motif in Wesleyan Theology,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* (Spring, 72), 47-58.

(20) Hence, a number of black theologians, liberation theologians and feminist theologians have been making explicit or implicit — but often insightful — use of Christus Victor themes, though usually in a demythologized form. See e.g. J. Cone, *The God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, rev. ed. 1997); D. K. Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*; T. Megill-Cobbler, “A Feminist Rethinking of Punishment Imagery in Atonement,” *Dialog* 35, #1 (Winter, 1996), 14-20. For a helpful overview and constructive proposal, see Weaver, *Nonviolent Atonement*.

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