

A CRITIQUE OF GUSTAF AULEN'S DOCTRINE OF THE ATONEMENT

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In his book *Christus Victor*,* Gustaf Aulén attempts to give an historical account of the three different views of the Atonement. He says that the “subject of the the Atonement is absolutely central to Christian theology” (p. 29), and he feels that this doctrine is — or was when he wrote *Christus Victor* — in desperate need of revision. By discussing the various traditional views of the Atonement, he hopes to point the way to a return to what he considers to have been the true idea of that doctrine.

The three ideas of the Atonement that he presents are: (1) the “Classic” (Dramatic), (2) the “Latin” (Satisfaction), and (3) the Subjective. Although Aulén claims that the intention of his work is not that of an apology for any one but, rather, an historical account (p. xxi), it is very evident that he does, in fact, defend and argue for one particular concept — that of the Classic idea of the Atonement. He uses comparisons both with the Latin and Subjective theories as means whereby he attempts to support his own belief in the ultimate correctness of the Classic or Dramatic view.

Most of Aulén’s book is given over to describing the Classic idea and attempting to prove that it was the concept of the Atonement present in the New Testament and believed by the Christian church during the first millennium of its existence. Briefly stated, the Classic idea of the Atonement is as follows: mankind, because of sin, has been placed in bondage to sin, death and the devil. (Aulén later includes the Law and the wrath of God). These are *objective*, external forces that rule humanity. Mankind has been alienated from God by these evil powers. God is at war, and in total opposition, to them. Therefore, he is filled with divine wrath which, in turn, is opposed by his divine love. His love wins out (as it must), and God, through his grace, moves towards mankind to reconcile him-

* Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Ideas of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1980)

self with the world by the destruction of the powers of sin and death. This results in a change in the relation of the world and a change in God's attitude towards it. According to Aulén, the key to this Dramatic view is that it is *God* who reaches out to humans through his divine grace rather than they who reach out to him. Thus the Incarnation and Atonement go hand in hand. There is, from this standpoint, no sense of humanity's need to give satisfaction to God's justice. Rather it is God himself who is both the subject and the object: he reconciles and is reconciled. Through God's victory we are justified.

Aulén is very definite in pointing out that in this dramatic view there is no sense of legalism or need for a juridical payment on the part of humanity. Although legal terms may be used, these (at least according to Aulén) convey a very different meaning than that of a legalistic or Old Testament idea.

One very interesting and essential aspect of the Classic view is its dualism. God is seen as at war both with the forces of evil and also with himself (i.e., divine love versus divine wrath). While the powers with which God is at war are by definition evil, they are also shown to be the "executants" of his will. They are the way in which mankind suffers for its sin. The death and resurrection of Christ are seen as God's victory over the forces of evil. This divine victory becomes the Atonement which is continued in the work of the holy spirit.

Aulén feels that the Classic idea of the Atonement was the one found among the early church Fathers. He cites Irenaeus as one of the first to give a clear doctrine of the Atonement and clearly sees him as an early exponent of the Classic or Dramatic view. He then moves back to the New Testament, especially Paul's writings, where he tries to show that, again, the Dramatic view was expressed scripturally. Finally, Aulén jumps ahead to Luther and attempts to show that he, also, accepted the Classic tradition of the Atonement. Aulén has, therefore, picked three of the strongest sources of authority for Protestant Christianity that he could — the New Testament, the early Fathers of the church, and Martin Luther — to attempt to prove his thesis that the Classic idea represents the *truth* for the Christian tradition.

Aulén states that the “Latin view” grew out of the western church and had its beginning with Tertullian. It later became more clearly developed with Anselm of Canterbury. This Latin theory of the Atonement is one of *satisfaction*. Accordingly, mankind, through sin, has alienated itself from God. Thus God’s divine justice requires satisfaction or payment from us humans in order to restore the perfect order of creation. However, since mankind is imperfect and sinful, our own compensation could not be sufficient. For this reason, God became man, and *as man* paid back what is owed to God on the cross. Christ, in his suffering and death paid our penalty, and we are reconciled to God. According to Aulén, this view has been the most prominent one in the church for the last 1000 years and continues to be so.

Finally, we have the Subjective theory of the Atonement. In a sense this concept goes back to the medieval scholar Abelard, but it was developed primarily out of the thought of the European Enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Humanists thought that it was intolerable that God should be regarded as needing to be propitiated through a sacrifice of satisfaction offered to him. They saw God as totally loving and benevolent; and thus from his standpoint, no such Atonement was necessary. Jesus’ death was seen, then, as a “vindication of the moral order of the universe — as a lofty example of symbolic expression of God’s readiness to be reconciled.” Christ is the “ideal man” and “perfect example,” and through him God sees mankind in a new light. Sin becomes little more than an infirmity, and the hostility of God to evil is lessened. God’s part in salvation is secondary: it is mankind, through Christ, who reaches toward God and is therefore justified.

Aulén severely criticizes both the Latin and Subjective views of the Atonement and points out many problems inherent in both theories. However, by stressing them, he seems to try to prove that the Classic idea must be the only correct view. While attempting to look carefully at what he sees as “opposing” views, he is not nearly so clear-sighted when considering the Classic idea.

One of Aulén’s strongest proofs for the validity of the Classic view of the Atonement is that it is the one expressed in the New Testament, by the early church Fathers, and by Luther. While his

arguments seem very convincing, if one looks more closely there are some obvious problems. The three most important persons whom he picks as supposedly supporting the Classic view — Paul, Irenaeus, and Luther — have long been considered to be proponents of entirely different views on the Atonement. The quotes he gives from each of them seem to fit his ideas, but he totally ignores other parts of their writings which have suggested to most theologians other concepts on the part of these writers. To present a stronger argument for the Classic view, he should have addressed the areas where seemingly opposing views exist in the accounts of these men.

There are certain questions and difficulties which arise when one looks at the Classic idea itself. Aulén argues that one of the most important aspects of this idea is that of Incarnation, for through it God reconciled himself. It was a totally divine act. He contrasts this with both the Latin view, which he says downplays the role of God in the Atonement, and the Subjective view, which practically ignores it. While he may be partially correct in such assertions, he fails to recognize the problems in the Dramatic idea. Aulén does say, a couple of times in relation to the Dramatic view, that the work of salvation and Atonement was done through mankind, but the reason for this is never explained. Nor is it shown to be important. There is little or no idea of God, through man, taking part in the suffering of mankind and of Christ's taking of mankind's sins upon himself. Although Aulén considers the Incarnation — and hence Christ's humanity — as essential, it is in reality the divine nature of Christ which is important in his view. Certainly the life of Christ and even his death become secondary. It is his resurrection — the triumph over sin, death, and the devil — which is most important.

A continuation of this concept is the Classic idea that sin, death, and the devil are forces in and of themselves. They are seen as powers fighting against God and holding us in bondage. When God, through grace, vanquishes these foes, humanity is released from their power. This view tends to release people from a sense of personal responsibility for sin. Salvation somehow takes place without the need for mankind even to be present. While the Latin view tends to be overly legalistic, at least according to it humans must take responsibility for their sinfulness. Since we are unable to

affect an Atonement with God, Christ takes our sins and “pays the necessary price.” Here we see some sense to the scholastic idea that God had to become man, taking our sins and dying so that we might be reconciled with God.

Aulén is greatly opposed to the Latin idea of Atonement because of its legalism. He feels that grace and justice are mutually exclusive. Therefore, there can be no idea of humans having to give satisfaction to God’s justice. This theory of Satisfaction, he believes, negates the idea of grace. However, by looking closely at Aulén’s thesis, the matter can actually be argued from the opposite point of view. If, as in the Classic theory, mankind is not held accountable to God for its sins and no compensation needs to be given to him, where is the grace in salvation? God has simply chosen to save mankind from the forces of evil. On the other hand, where humanity is held responsible, God’s grace is evident when he sends his Son as the “ransom.” In other words, there is a price to be paid, but God — out of his grace and love — pays it for us. God’s love and mercy seem much more significant in relation to mankind in this light than when he — that is God — is seen, simply, as defeating humanity’s non-human foes, or even when his love is seen as triumphing over his wrath. In both these latter cases, we are distanced from God and his love.

Finally, in looking at Aulén’s view of *salvation* in the three areas studied, there are definite problems. He claims that only in the Classic view are justification and salvation related. While it is certainly difficult to find this idea in the Subjective view, it seems to be very evident in the Latin or Satisfaction theory. God accepts Christ’s sacrifice — the debt of mankind is paid and we are no longer under the pain of death. We are justified with God and gain salvation.

Aulén also says that only in the Classic idea does mankind have a part in the Atonement. He argues that in the Satisfaction theory of Atonement mankind has little or nothing to do. In neither of these instances does he give adequate examples to back his theory. From his previous arguments it seems clearer that mankind takes a lesser part in the Dramatic or Classic idea of Atonement. Everything is done by God for God without mankind taking any responsibility.

It would certainly be wrong at this point to suggest that all of Aulén's arguments are suspect or invalid. He does present certain ideas which seem to have a good deal of merit. He shows many of the problems that exist within a purely legalistic view of the Atonement which can lead to a lessening of the importance of salvation through grace. He also points to the prime importance of God's central position in the Atonement (although this is to the exclusion of mankind's position). It is God who reaches out towards mankind rather than mankind towards God. We look towards him in response to his grace. Finally, the central theme of the Classic idea of the Atonement is that of "Christus Victor" — God in Christ victorious over the powers of evil. Certainly this theme of victory as evidenced in the resurrection of Christ is essential to Christianity (whether or not one sees these powers as objective ones) and has existed throughout its history. However, it tends to ignore other aspects which have traditionally been a part of the theory of the Atonement. Although Aulén has attempted to give strong arguments against other views in support of the Classic idea, he leaves many questions unanswered.

Christus Victor gives one a good introduction into the various ideas of the Atonement. Aulén addresses many of the difficulties which exist with respect to this doctrine, and his work can be used as a basis for further study of it. However, he ignores and distorts — whether intentionally or not — much important information. So *Christus Victor* should, in no way, be read as the last word on the Christian doctrine of the Atonement.