

THE CHRISTUS VICTOR IN AFRICA
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I. Introduction

Sub-Saharan Africa is still considered by many as the “Dark Continent” because of the atmosphere of fear, superstition, and belief in the spirit world pervading every aspect of the society. Most African Christians are aware of their forgiveness from sins, but very few are freed from the fear of death, demons, and Satan, a freedom Christ obtained by defeating these three enemies. The Christus Victor perspective of the atonement viewed as Christ’s destruction of sin and defeat of Satan and death is a solution to the needs of African Christians.

In the content of sermons and songs in churches, one notices an insistence on Jesus’ victory over Satan. A constant opposition exists between Jesus and Satan, and African churches celebrate the cross by using terms like victory, destruction, authority, domination, and binding. However, churches heavily influenced by Western missionaries rarely mention the victory of Christ over Satan, even though this is ever-present in the worldview and life of Africans. This has created a void and leaves African Christians needing adequate answers from the Bible, Christian traditions, reason, and experience.

The symbolism of Christus Victor – Christ’s victory over the demonic powers – may overcome this deficiency. This paper examines the biblical and historical aspects of the Christus Victor model of the atonement, demonstrating its crucial place in the African worldview and closing with applications of the Christus Victor concept in the life of Africans.

II. Christus Victor motif in Scripture and Christian heritage

Ronald Muller observed: “When man sinned, three great conditions came upon mankind. When man broke *God’s law*, he was in a *position of guilt*. When man broke *God’s relationship*, he was in a *position of shame*. When man broke *God’s trust*, he was in a *position of fear*.”¹

Likewise, William Greathouse observed:

The New Testament regards Christ’s work on the cross (atonement) in at least three ways: as propitiation, as redemption, and as reconciliation. As sinners we are guilty and exposed to the wrath of God; in Christ God propitiates his wrath and expiates our guilt. As sinners we are in bondage to Satan and sin; Christ’s redemptive act delivers us from bondage and sets us at liberty. As sinners we are alienated and estranged from God; we are reconciled to God by the death of his Son.

¹ Muller, 21; italics added.

The marvellous work of Christ on the cross answers the most basic and common needs of every human being. Guilt is answered by innocence (propitiation); shame is answered by honour (reconciliation); and fear is answered by power (redemption).²

Gustaf Aulén coined "Christus Victor" to express this truth.³ He demonstrated that the atonement – Christ's redemptive act that delivers from bondage and brings freedom – is captured by the Christus Victor motif. Aulén maintained that the atonement was Christ's victory over sin, death, and the devil, and is the dominant New Testament view. Further, all the Greek fathers from Irenaeus (late 2nd century) to John of Damascus (early 8th century) held this position. Aulén observed: "The central idea of *Christus Victor* is the view of God and the Kingdom of God as fighting against evil powers ravaging mankind. In this drama Christ has the key role, and the title *Christus Victor* says the decisive word about this role."⁴ He added: "The work of Christ is first and foremost a victory over the powers which hold mankind in bondage: sin, death, and the devil. These may be said to be in a measure personified, but in any case they are objective powers, and the victory of Christ creates a new situation, bringing their rule to an end, and setting men free from their dominion".⁵

According to William Greathouse, Christus Victor "...furnishes the most solid basis for a dynamic biblical doctrine of sanctification." However, the approach to the holiness doctrine should be viewed in light of 1 John 3:8: "Christus Victor, moreover, not only defeated Satan; he destroyed sin itself. 'The reason the Son of God was manifested was to destroy the works of the devil.' John means that Christ came to destroy the principle of lawlessness (*anomia*—1 John 3:4), which was the devil's chief work in humankind."⁶ This concept is lacking in the African Independent Churches (AICs) as they usually focus on the victory over Satan. Teaching Christus Victor from the perspective of overcoming lawlessness can be the Wesleyan contribution to the African church.

² William M. Greathouse, "Sanctification and the *Christus Victor* Motif," in *Africa Speaks: An Anthology of the Africa Nazarene Theology Conference 2003* (Florida, South Africa: Africa Nazarene Publications, 2004), 12.

³ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931). Aulén was Bishop of Strängnäs in the Church of Sweden and professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Lund. See "Gustaf Aulén, in *Theopedia*; accessed 10 May 2013, http://theopedia.com/Gustaf_Aulen.

⁴ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, ix.

⁵ Aulén, *Christus Victor*, 20.

⁶ Greathouse, 14; italics added.

III. John Wesley and Christus Victor

In his *Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament* and in three published sermons, John Wesley acknowledged the Christus Victor concept:

John Wesley spoke of the devil as “the first sinner of the universe” (*Notes*, 1 John 3:18) who “transfused” his own self-will and pride into our first parents, thus becoming the “origin of evil” in the world (*Notes*, Matthew 13.28; John 8.44). By sin and death Satan gained possession of the world, so that it was “Satan’s house” (*Notes*, Matthew 12:29; John 12:31). “Man’s guilt (*and shame and fear*) gave him over to Satan’s power, and man’s corruption takes Satan’s side in temptation. *Satan thus enjoyed a right, a claim and a power over man*” (*Notes*, John 13.39, Romans 6.14). In his notes, Wesley shows that Satan’s right over man was overcome by Jesus’ destruction of sin. Satan’s claim over man was destroyed by God’s own reconciliation to man through Jesus, and Satan’s power over man causing him to live in fear was defeated by the Christus Victor.⁷

Finally, though Wesley mentioned Christ's final victory in the last day, Greathouse lamented: “By ignoring the objective victory of Christ, Wesley opens the door to *a subjective, individualistic type of holiness*. The message of sanctification would have been more vigorously positive and biblical if he had sounded with clarity *the note of Christ’s historic conquest of sin.*”⁸

IV. Christus Victor in African Christologies

Holiness is often understood in theological schools in Africa as *a subjective, individualistic type of holiness*. There is inward victory over sin, but little focus on Christ's victory over Satan. In African cultures with fear of spirits and belief in the supernatural, the Christus Victor motif viewed in the sanctification doctrine is needed.

John Mbiti taught that Jesus as Christus Victor is significant to African Christians. He insisted:

The Christian message brings Jesus as the one who fought victoriously against the forces of the devil, spirits, sickness, hatred, fear, and death itself...He is the victor, the one hope, the one example, the one conqueror, and it makes sense to African peoples, it draws their attention, and it is pregnant with meaning. It gives their myths an absolutely new dimension. *The greatest need among African peoples is to see, to know, and to experience Jesus Christ as the victor over the powers and forces [from] which Africa knows no means of deliverance.*⁹

⁷ Greathouse, 20; italics added.

⁸ Greathouse, 21; italics added.

⁹ Cited by Diane B. Stinton, *Jesus of Africa: Voices of Contemporary African Christology* (Orbis Books. Maryknoll, New York. 2004), 105; italics added.

Colossians 2:15 states: “And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (NIV). In Wolof (a major language of Senegal), Colossians 2:15 affirms: “*Futti na kilifa yi ak boroom sañ-sañ yi, weer leen ci kanamu ñépp, sèkkal leen niy jaam ndax ndam la Kirist jële ca bant ba.*” It portrays the three actions of the Christus Victor. “Futti na” uses the image of Jesus with authority and by force undressing the power of Satan and the demons. “Weer leen” is the idea of making Satan’s schemes public and known to every believer. Finally, “sèkkal” portrays Jesus harassing Satan and making him retreat until there is no way out!

The experience of Christ by most Christians in Sub-Saharan Africa shapes their view of Jesus. John Pobee rightly viewed Christology as pertaining to how

...people attempt to articulate and portray the Christ who confronts them or whom they have experienced or met on the Damascus Road. And they do that articulation from their being and as they are. So one...can expect different and varying emphases in that articulation, differences determined by one’s experiences, by one’s heritage, by one’s gender, by one’s race. The encounter on the Emmaus road is not identical with the encounter on the Damascus road.¹⁰

Diane Stinton has outlined several African Christologies. Under the rubric of "Jesus as healer," the Christus Victor motif is implied. Jesus as healer conveys the images of Jesus as: a) life-giver, b) the one who recreates wholeness in all aspects of life, and c) the one who has supremacy over every form of evil operating in the universe, whether manifested in the physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or social sphere of life. Jesus as healer overlaps with images like victor, conqueror, and warrior, or the one who what is life-negating and d) images related to significant roles as saviour, liberator, and redeemer.¹¹

Notwithstanding, Christus Victor as such is not among the major images of African Christologies. Further, theology in Africa is not limited to the scholars or educated Christians as there is no separation between the living and the written experience of God in cultures where the view of life is inclusive and holistic. Henry Okullu affirmed:

When we are looking for African theology we should go first to the fields, to the village church, to Christian homes to listen to those spontaneously uttered prayers before people go to bed... We must listen to the throbbing drumbeats and the clapping of hands accompanying the impromptu singing in the independent churches. We must look at the way in which Christianity is being planted in Africa through music, drama, songs, dances,

¹⁰ Stinton, 15.

¹¹ Stinton, 74.

art, paintings. We must listen to the preaching of the sophisticated pastor as well as to that of the simple village vicar. Can it be that all this is an empty show? It is impossible. This then is Africa theology.¹²

The Christus Victor motif is so ingrained in the daily experiences of the African Christian that it was never systematized because it is part of who they are and what they live, it is “contextual theology or accountable to the context people live in.”¹³

Contextual theology as related to Christus Victor is seen in a prayer from Madam Afua Kuma, an uneducated farmer in the forest of Kwahu (Ghana):

If Satan troubles us,
 Jesus Christ,
 You who are the Lion of the grasslands,
 You whose claws are sharp,
 Will tear out his entrails,
 And leave them on the ground
 For the flies to eat.
 Let us all say, Amen!¹⁴

V. African experience of Christus Victor

African theologians have stressed expiation as important for evangelism, focusing less on propitiation and reconciliation than on redemption that includes physical, spiritual, emotional, and cosmic deliverance as found in the victorious Christ. African Christologies are present in worship songs, prayers, and teachings of the African Independent Churches and Charismatic Churches. Those churches understand the fear most Africans experience and use the Christus Victor concept to answer their needs in sometimes-controversial ways. However, it is undisputed that those churches “provide protection from witchcraft, failure in business; they help people who need fruits of the womb and those who want to gain wealth or promotion in the work place” ... and they “challenge the adequacy of the pastoral responses of institutionalized churches by their more relevant responses to the human quest for wholeness and harmony, participation and

¹² Stinton, 17.

¹³ Stinton, 16.

¹⁴ Afua Kuma, *Jesus of the Deep Forest: Prayers and praises of Afua Kuma* (Accra, Ghana: Asempa Publishers, 1981), 46.

realization, on all levels of human existence and experience.”¹⁵ Those churches are scratching where most Africans itch.

It is ironic that the Christus Victor motif – which gives answers to fear-based cultures where superstition, worship of ancestors, and fear of the evil eye, evil tongue, and the spirit world are common – has not been directly addressed by most African theologians. It is left to practitioners who can misuse Christ’s victory as a tool based on a non-transformed African worldview. The result is fear of and veneration for “men and women of God” rather than freedom from the sin, Satan, and death provided by Christus Victor.

Books circulate across West Africa, such as *Your Foundation and Your Destiny*,¹⁶ addressing poverty, destroying the fortress, voice and destiny, the sleeping giants, one’s birth and deliverance, and explaining people’s dreams. Written simply and using the same structure as African traditional religions, these books enlist Christians in a never-ending fight between themselves and the Devil, with Christ as a juju man rather than the Prince of Peace.

The approach's success lies in its apparent answers to the African worldview with its fear of curses, belief in ancestors, and the overwhelming presence of evil spirits from birth to death. It addresses key issues in Africa that produce servitude, including polygamy, live-in-partnerships, blood alliances (symbolized by body scarification made by some ethnic groups), earth alliances (by pouring libations), inherited curses and burdens from ancestors, water spirits, evil altars, polluted thrones (especially in governments), nightmares, name manipulation, evil spiritual marriage, sacrifices, and the demon of poverty. Each topic concludes with a supporting Bible verse and a deliverance prayer.

These topics are part of the everyday of African Christians. They represent the "excluded middle" explained by Paul Hiebert:

The modern Protestant movement began in the eighteenth century when modernity and the Enlightenment had captured the minds of people in the West. Underlying these movements was a major worldview shift...After the tenth century, the Greek worldview was reintroduced through the Crusades and the universities in Spain. It made a sharp distinction between spirit and matter, mind and body. In this worldview, spirits, such as

¹⁵ Rev. Dr. J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu in an article presented at the Mission Conference, "Awaken to the World," Accra, Ghana, 2005.

¹⁶ D.K. Olukoya, *Your Foundation and Your Destiny* Mountains of Fire and Miracle Ministries. 2005. Nigeria.

angels and demons, exist in the realm of the supernatural, and humans and other material beings in the natural world, which is governed by natural laws.¹⁷

This distinction did not exist in the African worldview, creating a split-level Christianity, the gap filled by the theological responses mentioned above. The teachers in those groups view the enemy as every power, spirit, or force opposing God's will with little mention of the sinful nature in humans and the need for forgiveness and repentance. They addressed the main goal of the African, which Paul Mpindi identified as

Utilitarian in that it exists only in order to prevent the bad events which can destabilize the harmony in the life of the individual and the community. The African is known for being extremely religious. However, it is important to mention that his/her profound religiosity doesn't come from an attachment to the Supreme Being or to the spirits or ancestors. The African religion is utilitarian because the African invokes, prays, sacrifices, respects the taboos towards God or the gods and not because he loves them or wants to serve them.¹⁸

The worldview of most African Christians has not been converted into a Christian worldview, hence the syncretism we find in most of the books, teachings, and theologies circulating in Africa today. This approach is unbiblical and unhealthy, a misuse of the Christus Victor motif. It sees the Christian's relationship with God as a slave/client rather than a child in his/her Father's house.

VI. Toward a Balanced Application of Christus Victor in the African church

An African pastor recounted:

One day, I was walking in a street in my city when I saw a crowd running after a man and throwing stones and cursing him. In most cases, either that person is a thief or he is accused of being a witch. There were two groups of people running after that man. One was trying to kill him while the other group was trying to help him escape. As they were shouting, they were saying, 'This is not a man, it is a dog!' They finally caught him and stoned him to death, and when I came to see him, I found a dog rather than a man. I was horrified and with great fear I ran to the missionary who was teaching me at the Bible school and told him the story. I needed an answer to an experience that was not addressed in our teachings. He calmed me and confidently said, 'Don't worry; this did not really happen, it is only your imagination.' I was greatly confused with a lot of unanswered questions in my mind.

¹⁷ Paul G.Hiebert, R.Daniel Shaw and Tite Tiéno, *Understanding Folk Religion* (Baker Books, 1999), 89.

¹⁸ Paul Mpindi, "African worldview: The foundations of the traditional ethics in Africa," in Jack Robinson, *Ethics for Living and Leadership* (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Development Associates International, 2005), 26-27.

This story illustrates the gap between classroom theology and the reality of life. Mbiti told similar stories, observing: “To an outsider they sound more like fiction than reality; however, they cannot be dismissed as trickery, hypnotism or purely the result of psychological conditions of those who experience them. To my knowledge, there is no African society that does not hold belief in mystical power of one type or another.”¹⁹

When those people come to church, they find a great divide between the world of fear that they live in vs. the message, teachings, and songs at church. So how can we create a balanced Christus Victor view in the life of African believers?

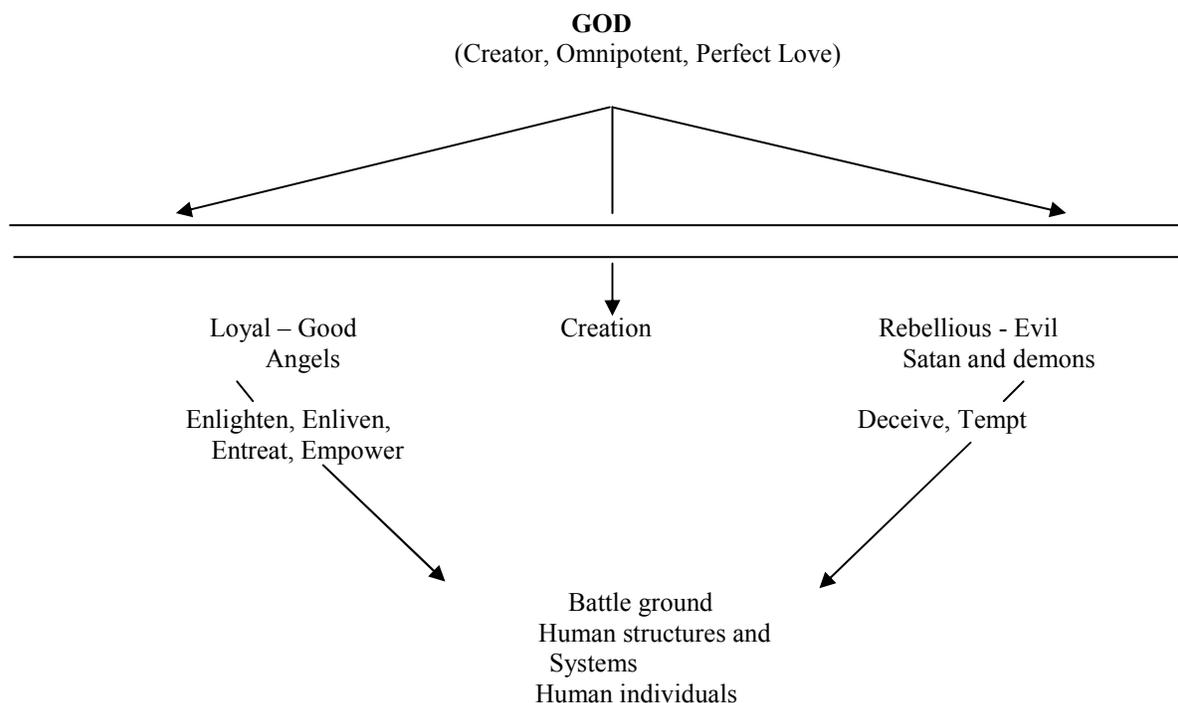
Paul Hiebert noted that the Bible depicts the Christus Victor motif (Ephesians 6:10-20, Revelation 19:19-20), describing it as spiritual warfare; however, it is neither a question of power nor of confrontation between God and the evil forces. It first and foremost clarifies in the minds of the African believers that God is above everything. Hiebert observed:

God is eternal and evil is contingent. The Bible is clear: God and Satan, and good and evil, are not eternal and coexistent...Moreover, God’s creation depends upon him for continued existence...Satan and sinners, like all creation, are contingent on God’s sustaining power. Their very existence in their rebellion is testimony of God’s mercy and love.”²⁰

¹⁹ S.Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970), 257.

²⁰ Paul G. Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections on Missiological Issues* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994), 209.

Worldview conversion begins with a biblical understanding of God and divine sovereignty as diagrammed by Hiebert:



Proper Christus Victor teaching underscores the dual existence of believers mentioned in Ephesians 2:6-7 : “...and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (ESV). Charles Talbert explained: “Unbelievers live in one world only, the earth, although their lives are impinged upon by the evil powers from the lower heavens. They are one-dimensional beings. Believers, however, live in two dimensions. They are alive upon the earth and alive in the heavenlies at the same time. They are two-dimensional.”²¹ This implies position and co-seating which make a huge difference in the worship of the African believer. As Greathouse affirmed: “He (Jesus) became what we are that we might become what he is. Such was the dominating theme of the Christology of the orthodox Fathers who fashioned the ecumenical creeds.”²² Thereby, Christus Victor presupposes that it was only by meeting the forces of evil on their own ground – in other terms, by entering the history where they were entrenched – that Christ could break their power: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and

²¹ Charles H. Talbert, *Ephesians and Colossians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2007), 61.

²² Greathouse, 16.

blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil” (Hebrews 2.14, ESV).

It is essential in Christus Victor for believers to know the locus of spiritual warfare. Paul Hiebert stated: “Prayer in Indo-European- and African- thought is a means to control the gods; in biblical thought it is submission to God. In prayer we give God permission to use us and our resources to answer our prayer.”²³ Prayer is not getting results but living in God’s *shalom*, beginning with a right relationship with God involving worship, holiness, and obedience. Hiebert continued, describing the locus of spiritual warfare not as

...a cosmic struggle between God and Satan (that) will determine who will rule...The battle rages within the human heart, which God seeks to win...What then is the nature of spiritual warfare in the Bible? Compared to Indo-European (or African) myths, there are few references to cosmic battles. *The central story is about the battle for the spirits of human beings. In this, humans are not passive victims of battles fought on a cosmic plane. They are the central actors and the locus of the action. They are the rebels, and ever since the temptation of Adam, self-worship has been the basis of their idolatry.*²⁴

Christ crucified is the conqueror of Satan, sin, and death. It is here that Aulén and Greathouse agree upon the interpretation of sanctification:

As the rule of sin is broken in the believer’s life, Christ’s victory for us becomes his victory in us by the indwelling Spirit (Romans 8.1-11). Christ’s victory is reproduced in us. In the Holy Spirit, Christ for us becomes Christ in us, recapitulating in our history his triumph over sin. This is the meaning of Christus Victor for sanctification. Every demon we meet is foredoomed in Christ. Sin itself has lost its power for the believer in whom Christ dwells (1 John 4.4; 5.4, 18). This victory is given to us in three stages – in conversion, in entire sanctification, and in glorification.²⁵

Christus Victor *completely and sufficiently* protects from fear or demonic attacks. This is important in the believer’s encounters with demonic oppression that can tempt him/her to ask: “What could be wrong with wearing a magical amulet or invoking magical names for *additional* protection?”²⁶ The confusion lies in the use of the name or the blood of Jesus as an amulet or protection over the evil spirits and the invoking of the Holy Spirit as a higher and more powerful spirit whose presence purifies the atmosphere from any evil presence or spirits. In spiritual warfare, believers should be aware that they “have been rescued from the ultimate enemy, the

²³ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 210.

²⁴ Hiebert, *Anthropological Reflections*, 211; italics added.

²⁵ Greathouse, 17, 19.

dominion of Satan and his evil powers. They have a present experience of the blessings of the future realm that enables them to deal with the on-going hostility of the supernatural principalities and powers.²⁷ As William Greathouse noted:

Christ's victory is complete but not final. We have been saved in hope – the hope of resurrection and glorification with Christ (Romans 8.15-17; Corinthians 15.22-28; Philippians 3.12-21). Meanwhile our sanctification has the character of spiritual warfare in which our victory over sin is assured as we permit Christ to live moment by moment in us (John 15.1-6; Ephesians 6.10-15; Philippians 1.6). This is the practical meaning of Christology for a theology of holiness.²⁸

VII. Conclusion

African Christians should write a balanced theology of sanctification with both a subjective and objective view of the cross. Christus Victor is the answer to fear, anxiety, and the need for protection and power among Africans. However, this work and teaching should not be limited to classroom learning; all African Christians in the dynamic of contextual theology should put it into practice. Christ is the victor, and His victory is complete. The teaching and the putting into practice of Christus Victor until the return of Christ will contribute to His complete victory.

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²⁶ Clinton E. Arnold, *Power and Magic: The Concept of Power in Ephesians* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1989), 167.

²⁷ Clinton E. Arnold, *The Colossian Syncretism: The Interface between Christianity and Folk Belief at Colossae* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books), 291.

²⁸ Greathouse, 19.

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