

# Christus Victor Read Today

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“GUSTAF AULÉN’S *Christus Victor* is in many ways worthy of the over-worked accolade ‘modern classic.’ For in the almost forty years since its appearance in English it has become the starting point for countless essays, articles, and books on the doctrine of the Atonement; and its title has established itself in the theological usage of Swedish, German, and English as a technical term in its own right, so that even those who have not read the book use the phrase.” (Jaroslav Pelikan, “Foreword to 1970 Edition”, p. xi- xix, in: Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An historical study of the three main types of the idea of the Atonement. Authorized translation by A. G. Hebert*. First published 1931. Large Paperback edition, with new Foreword 1970. London: S.P.C.K. 1983).

In hindsight, the above words by the late Jaroslav Pelikan, written forty years ago as a foreword to the 1970 edition of *Christus Victor*, equally well characterize the four decades that were to come as the four preceding ones. As a matter of fact, any serious writer on soteriology still takes this minor classic of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Lundensian theology as his/her point of departure. Paradoxically, however, the success of *Christus Victor* is a qualified one. Aulén’s typology, as well as his interpretation of sources, has been subject to criticism over the years. With regard to the Early Church, Pelikan in 1970 summarizes the post-*Christus Victor* discussion by saying that “the resultant history of the doctrine of the Atonement... is not as tidy as Aulén’s; but its very complexity is a testimony to the stimulus that the work of Aulén and others has given to historians of early Doctrine. On this count *Christus Victor* must be counted an impressive, if qualified, success” (p. xv). This verdict is even more applicable to Aulén’s treatment of Anselm and Luther, respectively, as can be seen from Pelikans comments, and has clearly been confirmed by the forty years of research since. Pelikan concludes his qualified laudation: “It is the criterion of a great work of theology that it sets the ground rules for discussion even if that discussion goes beyond the original argument. Measured by this criterion, *Christus Victor* looks better all the time” (p. xviii).

In 2010 – celebrating the 80 years in print of *Christus Victor* – the editorial board of this journal launched a contest for the best essay “which in a revolutionary and constructive way engages in a discussion with *Christus Victor*.” In this issue we are happy to publish the three prize-winning essays, with the addition of one further contribution to the contest. All four essays confirm clearly Pelikans judgement – *Christus Victor* might be subjected to detailed criticism from all corners, and yet it has undeniably succeeded in setting the ground rules for practically any discussion of the atonement. All four essays clearly go beyond Aulén’s minor classic, as for example the winning contribution by Anders Kraal, which conducts a thorough analysis of the “classical theory” as described by Aulén. By way of distinguishing different types of Classical and Latin theories, Kraal is able to refine and qualify the

analysis of Aulén in a sophisticated way. The combination of historical and systematic analysis that is so prominent a feature of *Christus Victor*, characterizes also this first prize-winning contribution to our contest. Hans Engdahl and Sten Hidal share the second prize, by engaging in rather different ways the discussion of *Christus Victor*. Engdahl makes a constructive connection between Aulén's soteriology and the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, showing the relevance of Christian soteriology even in a secular and political context. Hidal analyses *Christus Victor* from the perspective of historical theology, with special regard to the Swedish context in which Aulén was educated. In the article of Patrik Ljungh the author discusses divine and human agency in the typology of Aulén, and suggests that the concepts of relation and future might be used to dissolve the impasse he considers Aulén's emphasis on Atonement as "a *continuous* Divine work" to lead into regarding human agency.

The editorial board of the STK congratulates the prizewinners and contributors of this contest, and hope the readership will enjoy the issue. The contest has clearly shown that *Christus Victor* still functions as a stimulus for various constructive ways of conceiving Christian soteriology in new contexts. Notwithstanding the critical discussion and qualification of Aulén's typology, and his evident selectiveness concerning historical sources, *Christus Victor* has set the tone for the re-thinking of soteriology even in the 21th Century.