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Nkunidie Christology: An Akan contextual expression of the *Christus Victor* motif of atonement

ABSTRACT

The Akan community of Ghana has a large Christian following. Nonetheless, many Akan believers still consult traditional priests for protection, wealth, and power. This happens not because these Christians doubt the theological fact that Christ offered an atonement, but because they do not consider the atonement as providing them with adequate protection against evil forces. This situation makes the quest to closely investigate their concept of Christ fairly urgent and useful. To address the issue, there is the need to project Christ's power over evil forces. One of the models of atonement that is helpful in this regard is the Christus Victor which emphasises the victory that Christ won over Satan and his host through his death on the cross. This research, therefore, aims to give contextually express the Christus Victor motif of Christ's atonement from an Akan Christian perspective. This research is based on literature involving theological and ethical analyses of, and reflections on the Christus Victor model of atonement and how it can address the Akan Christian need for spiritual protection and economic liberation. The resulting theology is a contextual theology that incorporates the biblical world view, the Akan world view, and the Christus Victor model of atonement. Thus, the article seeks to bring about positive reforms in Akan religio-ethical beliefs and practices, and hence empower Akan Christians not only to discontinue their reliance on traditional powers, but also to have complete trust in Christ's atonement alone as means of providing them with all their physical and spiritual needs.

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the questions with which Christians in many parts of Africa (more so, Ghana and some other parts of West Africa) have battled since the inception of Christianity in Africa is the question as to how the church in Africa can affirm its uniqueness (in terms of African identity and experiences) and yet be faithful to the beliefs and practices of the Christian religion (Amevenku & Boaheng 2021:xv). How one answers this question is very significant because contextualised Christianity is essential for the survival of the church in every part of the world, more so in Africa. Despite the importance of the contextualisation of Christianity, it is only in recent times that African scholars began to engage the issue critically and scholarly. The need for a contextual approach to theologising attracted scholarly attention in the early post-colonial era (in the late 1960s and early 1970s) when African scholars began to work out pragmatic ways of interpreting the Scriptures in a way that takes the African world view seriously (Ossom-Batsa 2007:91-94).

The works of African theologians such as Byan Kato, Kwame Bediako, Kwesi Dickson, and Bolaji Idowu have contributed to the meaningful expression of the Christian faith from the African sociocultural viewpoint. Yet, there are still aspects of the Christian faith that need further study and a more contextual expression within the African setting. For the Akan community of Ghana, one of such areas is the doctrine of atonement, particularly the protection that the atonement offers to the believer. Even though Christianity is the largest religion in contemporary Akan, many Akan Christians still make sacrifices to gods to seek protection, wealth, peace, power, fame, and longevity, among others. The entrenched world view of the Akan causes most of the Akan Christians to entertain the fear that evil spirits can still affect their lives negatively in spite of their status as disciples of Christ (Ekem 2009). Obviously, most of the Akan Christians do not acknowledge Christ's atonement as a perfect fulfilment of what any sacrifice purposes to achieve. The vast majority of Akan Christians have not appreciated well the meaning of the atonement for the Akan community and how this understanding should inform religious beliefs and practices. This paper, therefore, investigates how a contextual expression of the *Christus Victor* motif of the atonement of Christ, from an Akan perspective, functions to encourage Akan Christians to rely solely on Christ for their spiritual and physical security.

2. GUSTAF AULÉN'S *CHRISTUS VICTOR* THEORY

Gustaf Aulén (1879-1977) is credited with the early development of the *Christus Victor* (Latin for "Christ the Victor") renaissance in the post-modern era. The *Christus Victor* is based on the idea that God and his kingdom are in battle with evil forces that attack humankind. This model of atonement presents a central metaphor depicting a struggle between Christ and the devil, in which Christ defeats the devil and his pomp and, by so doing, frees their prey (that is, lost humanity) from their grips. The scene of the triumphant victory is the Calvary cross. The *Christus Victor* motif holds that, by his death and resurrection, Christ triumphed over the evil forces of the universe which held humanity in bondage, rescued his people, and established a new relationship, "a relationship of reconciliation" between God and the universe (Aulén 2003:5). Christ's service, love, meekness, and sacrifice demonstrate his victory in the battle.

Aulén arranged the various atonement views into three groups, namely the "classic", the "Latin" (satisfaction or objective), and the "ethical" (Aulén 2003:5-6). The classic idea is the presentation of the atonement in terms of the victory won by Christ over Satan. The Latin view is the "Anselminian" view that the atonement was meant to satisfy God's justice. Aulén (2003:14, 38) describes the Latin view as "legalistic" and problematic and traces its roots to medieval scholasticism and the medieval concept of "penance", which required human beings to make an offering or payment for sin, in order to satisfy God's justice (Aulén 2003:38). The ethical (or subjective) view refers to the "Abelardian" view that the atonement signifies God's reconciling love toward humanity. This view, according to Aulén (2003:19), denies both the dramatic concept of God struggling with Satan and overcoming him at the cross as well as the concepts of satisfaction, propitiation, and substitution which are key to the Latin understanding of the atonement. Aulén (2003:137, 139) criticises the subjective view of atonement for being anthropocentric and ineffectual, with its main weakness being the teaching that

the forgiving and atoning work of God is made dependent upon the ethical effects in human lives; consequently, the Divine Love is not clearly set forth as a free, spontaneous love. ... the active hostility of the Divine Love toward evil has faded away and the dualistic outlook has been banished by the monism which dominates the view.

Aulén (2003:6-7) argues that he is not introducing any new doctrine because the idea of atonement as victory prevailed in the early church and, although scholars of the middle ages sidelined/downplayed it (although one finds traces of it in their art and literature), it was rediscovered by the Reformers. For Aulén, the classic view was dominant in both the Latin and Greek Fathers.

Aulén (2003:10-11) contends that Paul espoused an atonement theology that aligns itself neither with the Latin view nor with the humanist view; Paul's view of the atonement belongs to the classic view. Aulén (2003:17) describes Irenaeus as "the first patristic writer to provide us with a clear and comprehensive doctrine of the Atonement and redemption". The idea of atonement as "divine conflict and victory" dates back to patristic times but was abandoned during the Enlightenment era when Christian scholars became enemies of orthodoxy (Aulén 2003:4). For example, Irenaeus (cited in Aulén 2003:19) asks the question: "For what purpose did Christ come down from heaven?" and answers: "That he might destroy sin, overcome death, and give life to man."

The *Christus Victor* motif was also present in the teachings of Luther and Calvin. Luther (cited in Ngien 2018:286), for example, emphasised the "magnificent duel" between Christ and Satan, in which Christ won a victory over Satan and his hosts and gave this victory to his followers. Consequently, even though these enemies may accuse and terrify believers, they cannot drive true believers into despair and/or condemn them because Christ has won victory over them and has also become the righteousness of his followers (see Rom. 4:25). Christ's victory means that he

takes away the law, kills my sin, destroys my death in his body, and in this way empties hell, judges the devil, crucifies him, and throws him down into hell. In other words, everything that once used to torment and oppress me Christ has set aside; he has disarmed it and made a public example of it triumphing over it in himself (Kolb 2009:122).

Christ's death not only liberates the conscience of the sinner and makes the believer deaf to

the voice of the law that lingers, directing attention to past sins, [but also] knocks out the teeth of the law, blunts its sting and all its weapons, and utterly disables it (Kolb 2009:122, 123).

Luther (cited in Kolb 2009:123) personifies sin as

a powerful and cruel tyrant, dominating and ruling the entire world, capturing and enslaving all people ... a great and powerful god who devours the whole human race [who] attacks Christ, but in dueling against it, conquers and kills [it], so that righteousness prevails and lives.

Luther (2018:article II) also expresses the *Christus Victor* motif in his *Large Catechism*, article 2, which reads:

He has redeemed me from sin, from the devil, from death, and all evil. For before I had no Lord nor King, but was captive under the power of the devil, condemned to death, enmeshed in sin and blindness.

Therefore, in this motif,

atonement is portrayed as a salvation battled for, a powerful, real adversary overcome and a *war* actually won by the Victor God (Smith 2016:132).

Calvin (1992:85; see also Edmondson 2004:104) also expresses the *Christus Victor* motif of the atonement when he avers that to undergo God's wrath means that Christ "also grapples hand to hand with the armies of hell and the dread of everlasting death". For Calvin (1992:85; see also Edmondson 2004:104), not only does Christ atone for human sins, but he is also the champion sent out to overcome the enemies under whose bondage we have been. Calvin (1992:517; see also Edmondson 2004:134) considers the Hebrew text that mentions that human beings are

through fear of death subject to lifelong bondage [Christ] by his wrestling hand to hand with the devil's power, with the dread of death, with the pains of hell, he was victorious and triumphed over them, that in death we may not now fear those things which our Prince has swallowed up.

Aulén (2003) distinguishes the classic theory of atonement from the other views on three grounds. First, the classic theory regards God himself as the one who carried out the work of atonement. God is active not only in initiating the plan of salvation, but also in ensuring that the plan materialises. This makes the classic view different from the "Anselminian" view in that, in the former, the reconciliatory work is a continuous divine act, while, in the latter, although the reconciliatory act originates from God, in effecting the plan, Christ (as man and on humanity's behalf) makes an offering to God (Aulén 2003:5). Secondly, the classic view has a dualistic background in that it considers the reality of evil forces that are hostile to the divine will; these forces bring about the enmity between God and humanity. The dualistic view leads to a double-sidedness that makes God both the reconciler and the reconciled simultaneously. The world now stands in a new relation to God; God also stands in a new relation to the world (Aulén 2003:5). Thirdly, this theory, while considering the atonement as the work of God, does not lose sight of the fact that it is carried out in and through humankind. For example, the incarnation made the divine *Logos* enter into human flesh to accomplish God's saving work under the conditions of human nature.

Concerning demonic forces, Aulén (2003:85) writes:

The array of hostile forces includes also the complex of demonic 'principalities,' 'powers,' 'thrones,' 'dominions,' which rule in 'this present evil age' (Gal. 1:4) but over which Christ has prevailed. There is comparatively little direct mention of the devil, but he is without doubt regarded as standing behind the demonic hosts as their chief.

Aulén's proposal suggests that Christ, through his death and resurrection, won victory over the "evil forces" of the cosmos which have dominated the world. He identified the powers holding humanity in slavery as sin, death, the law, and demonic forces. Speaking about sin and death, Aulén (2003:67) argues that

[s]in takes the central place among the powers that hold man in bondage; all the others stand in direct relation to it. Above all, death, which is sometimes almost personified as 'the last enemy that will be destroyed' (1 Cor. 15:26 RSV), is most closely connected with sin.

In the New Testament, Jesus came to "destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8 RSV); 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); he lived, died and rose again to establish a new reign that would ultimately "put all his enemies under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:25 RSV).

Chalke and Mann (2003:182-183, 191-192) argue that all the evil powers planned to destroy Jesus, but although the cross was a "symbol of failure and defeat", the truth is that it was "a symbol of love" indicating "just how far God as Father and Jesus as his Son are prepared to go to prove that love". Drawing on Church Fathers such as Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Origen, Chalke (2003:43-44) considers Jesus' incarnation, life, death, and resurrection as his victory over sin and evil forces that fight against humanity, and so avows that,

[o]n the cross, Jesus does not place God's anger in taking the punishment for sin but rather absorbs its consequences and, as three days later he is raised, defeats death. It is the resurrection that finally puts the *Victor* in *Christus Victor!*

Boyd (cited in Smith 2016:129) opines that Jesus' incarnation, death, and resurrection ended the cosmic war that had existed from time immemorial. The *Christus Victor* interpretation has been called the dramatic view because of its vivid and poetic presentation of the eternal, cosmic battle between God and Satan together with Satan's evil spirits that stand in opposition to divine will and purposes for humanity (Aulén 2003:5).

3. NKUNIMDIE CHRISTOLOGY

The expression “*Nkunimdie* Christology” was coined in reference to the Akan Christian understanding of the atonement as victory over Satan and his hosts. This understanding has deep roots in the *Christus Victor* model of the atonement of Christ. An adequate understanding of *Nkunimdie* Christology requires a consideration of the nature and activities of Satan and his host from an Akan Christian perspective. This will help the reader appreciate Christ’s victory over these forces.

3.1 Akan Christian understanding of evil forces

In the traditional Akan world view, there is the existence of the Supreme Being (God), ancestors, lower divinities, and spirit powers, among others. The Supreme Being is the creator of all things. He cannot be approached directly; people need to approach him through intermediaries such as ancestors and lower divinities. Apart from the Supreme Being, ancestors are the most potent aspect of the African perspective of the spiritual world (McVeigh 1974:34; Pobee 1979:95). They are the spirits of dead people, who, having completed their earthly life, have gone ahead to the spirit world to be the elder relatives of the living who now live in the world of the dead (Pobee 1979:52). The Akan also believe in the existence of lower divinities and spiritual beings, some of whom are closely associated with the Supreme Being. They are regarded as representatives of the invisible God on earth responsible for conveying people’s requests to God and interpreting messages from God and the ancestors to the people. It is also believed that the universe hosts a multitude of spiritual entities living in places such as stones, tombs, haunted homes, trees, and mountains, among others (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:168, 179). These spirits may be benevolent or malevolent. Since one may be punished for not keeping a proper relationship with the spirits or be blessed for maintaining a good relationship with them, Africans try their best to maintain peaceful relationships between the physical and the spiritual worlds (Acheampong 2014:53).

The shift from African traditional religion to Christianity hardly influenced the world view of Akan Christians. The latter acknowledge the existence of a spiritual battle between God, his angels and believers, on the one hand, and Satan, his angels and unbelievers, on the other (Dua-Agyeman 2011:2). The war started in heaven when Lucifer and other angels rebelled against God, attempting to take over God’s rule and position in the world (Ezek. 28:12-19; Rev. 12:9). Therefore, Akan Christians view themselves as being in a constant battle against unseen forces of the wicked kingdom of Satan. In Akan thought, demons (*ahonhommone*) are supernatural beings or fallen spirits of evil intentions. Common categories of demons identifiable from the Scripture

are rulers/principalities (the highest ranking spiritual entities), authorities (subordinate to principalities and act like regional heads), world rulers (who rule various villages, cities, or nations), and spiritual hosts of wickedness (wicked spiritual beings who serve as Satan's errand boys) (Eph. 6:10-11; Dua-Agyeman 2011:48-50). As spirits, demons materialise by changing from their spiritual form into a material form, which may include animals such as snakes, scorpions, millipedes, dogs, cats, and so on, as well as human beings and trees, among others. Reports about hunters who shoot and kill animals that later turn into human beings are not uncommon in Akan communities (Dua-Agyeman 2011:57).

Four kinds of demonic activities and influences may be identified, namely oppression, suppression (subjugation or subjection), obsession, and possession (Dua-Agyeman 2011:56). Demonic oppression refers to

suffering or frustrations in life, including insomnia, poor financial management, frequent illness, failure to receive business contracts or even lack of academic progress, all of which may be interpreted as resulting from satanic or demonic activity (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:167).

Through medical science, people acknowledge the fact that illness can be caused by medical factors such as lack of certain vitamins, hormonal imbalances, lack of enough sleep, exercise, and excessive stress. However, the Akan primal world view attributes most of the bodily and mental problems to the influences of spiritual forces. Some Akan-Christian deliverance workers consider deliverance to be the only solution for all illnesses; therefore, they do not encourage medical treatment (Dua-Agyeman 2011:60). Such faith healers do not accept even the non-observance of basic personal hygiene as a legitimate cause of illnesses (Amevenku 2015:87). Contrary to this position, there is no biblical text that condemns the use of medical science to cure diseases or denies the possibility of human behaviour such as uncleanness causing illnesses.

Demonic possession¹ has to do with

altered states of consciousness, conditions in which suffering or 'unnatural behavior' is deemed to be the result of an invasion of the human body by an alien spirit (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:167).

Unger (cited in Dua-Agyeman 2011:100) defines "possession" as

a condition in which one or more evil spirits or demons inhabit the body of a human being and take control of their victim at will.

1 "Possession" derives from the word *daimonizoumai* which means "possessed by a demon".

It is deducible from the above definitions that the possessed becomes the habitat of the evil spirit which not only influences the person's life but also thinks, speaks, and acts through him/her. Demonic possession affects the totality of the victim – body, soul, and spirit. One can be oppressed without being possessed, although possession and oppression usually go together.

Opinions are divided on whether a believer can or cannot be possessed by a demon. Some believe that a weak Christian can be possessed; others think that demons cannot dwell in what has become God's temple through the reconciliation that the atonement brings (Asamoah-Gyadu 2005:168). Arguing that a believer cannot be possessed, Dua-Agyeman (2011:101) asserts that the believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16, 19) and there is no way the Spirit will allow his temple to be occupied by another being. Tabiri (2004), however, maintains that believers can be possessed because of their contact with evil, even after coming to Christ. Some possible indicators of demonic possession listed by Dua-Agyeman (2011:103-112) include extraordinary strength, extreme annoyance, clairvoyance, and the speaking of unknown languages (similar to the Christian practice of speaking in tongues).

Demonic suppression (subjugation or subjection) means that demons control a person's life. The suppressed is like a slave to the demon suppressing him/her. Therefore, the suppressed has no willpower to be free. Dua-Agyeman (2011:83-84) lists some of the signs of mental subjection as persistent anxiety, unguarded thought life, memory loss, procrastination, indecision, doubt, scepticism, unbelief, self-condemnation, and discordant emotions such as hatred, resentment and unforgiveness. Other signs are abnormal behaviours such as hysterical laughs without any apparent reason, behaving foolishly, having an unfamiliar loud tone, inconsistent actions, speaking to oneself, abnormal bodily rigidity, as well as unclear speech and thought, among others.

In demonic obsession, evil spirits bind, blind, and confuse a person's mind (Dua-Agyeman 2011:77). The victim's mind is usually filled with fear, false ideas, scenes, and mental imageries that make the person distressed, insecure, and uncertain about life. Self-accusations and self-condemnation are some of the signs of demonic obsession. Demonic obsession can bring about diseases that defy any form of medical treatment.

Aware of the realities of all these demonic activities and influences in human life, the vast majority of Akan Christians live in perpetual fear. Therefore, a holistic view of atonement for the Akan community must emphasise Christ's victory over spiritual forces that militate against the life of the Akan Christian. This emphasis is not only culturally relevant but also biblically grounded. The Akan religious view of the existence of evil forces may not change. However, the belief that these forces still have control over the life of the Christian

is unbiblical and must be done away with. The Christian is expected to appropriate the victory won by Christ and allow this victory to manifest in his/her life when these powers come against him/her. The next section explains this victory and its relevance to Christian life.

3.2 Atonement as victory over death, evil forces, and economic hardship

The *Christus Victor* motif of Christ's atonement offers a significant solution to the Akan problem of the fear of death and evil forces as well as economic challenges. This section provides a contextual expression of the *Christus Victor* model of atonement to address the Akan need for a protector and economic liberator.

3.2.1 The atonement and the believer's victory over death

Romans 5 reveals that death came into the human world through the sin of Adam. Satan's dominion is death because he is the one who introduced sin (which brought death) into the entire universe. According to Agyarko (2009:41),

viewing Jesus as victorious over the spiritual realm and particularly over evil forces, answers the need for a powerful protector against these forces and powers.

Christ's death must be viewed as the destruction of sin and defeat of Satan and death. Kuma (2011:31) stresses Christ's power over death when she describes Jesus as

[t]he first-born Child who knows Death's antidote ... the wall which bars Death from entry and makes many hearts leap for joy ... one who shouted at Death, and death ran from his face.

Simply put, Christ's death made Satan (who is the lord of death) powerless.

Akan Christians must, therefore, understand Christ's death not only as a means of taking up the penalty of their sins, but also as God's acts of setting them free from the fear of death. Having dispossessed Satan of his weapon (humanity's fear of death), Christ is triumphant and has doomed Satan to be absolutely powerless. Kuma (2011:31) captures this beautifully when she describes Christ as "the one who shouted at Death, and death ran from his face". Christ is, therefore, the great warrior who fought victoriously against Satan and his hosts. This is what the writer of Hebrews (2:14 RSV) means when he mentions that Christ came as flesh and blood so that "through death,

he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil" and free all those in bondage to the power of death. Jesus not only defeated and vanquished Satan but also rendered death powerless through his resurrection (as expressed in the Bono-Twi saying, "*Wuo nso awu*", Death too is dead). While Satan believed that death could hold sway over Christ, Christ ultimately conquered and overcame death, rising triumphantly to free his followers from the power of death. This does not mean that human beings will not die, but that Jesus, through his death and resurrection, gives humanity the assurance that death is not the end of life; there is resurrection. The spiritual and eternal death that confronted humanity has also been catered for through Christ's sacrifice on the cross. In view of this, Kuma (2011:7) declares that Jesus "has tied death to a tree so that we may be happy".

3.2.2 The atonement and the believer's protection against evil forces

In the Akan setting, where the presence of perceived malevolent entities is a constant concern, there arises a need to transform the abstract idea of Christ's triumph over Satan and lesser deities into a tangible and immediate reality. This transformation is essential to ensure that Akan Christians can have unwavering confidence in their complete protection. Consequently, the significance of Christ's victory over Satan lies in its ability to provide practical assurance to Akan believers, assuring them that they are invulnerable to harm. Since the believer enjoys protection against evil powers based on Jesus' victory over these powers, it is important to first examine Christ's victory over evil powers, in order to provide the basis for a discussion on the believer's immunity against these forces.

The pronouncement on the serpent after deceiving Adam and Eve includes the assertion that the seed of the woman would crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15). Paul identifies the serpent as Satan (2 Cor. 11:3-4, 14-15; see Rev. 12:9) and views Christ as crushing Satan under the feet of the church (Rom. 16:20). Paul then goes on to dramatise Christ's victory over Satan and his forces in Colossians 2:15: "He [Christ] disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (RSV). In this text, Paul draws on the Roman world to picture how rulers and authorities, having been defeated, are dragged along in Christ's procession. Adria (2006:1479) writes that, in the Graeco-Roman world,

when a city surrendered to a victorious general, the conquerors would stage a victory parade at which they would display their conquered enemies and all the goods they had plundered.

The Bono-Twi (Ghana) version of Colossians 2:15 is

*Na waatu mpanyinnie ne tumidie agu ayi be adi akyere pefee ya
badwam adi be so nkunim asennua he so,*

which literally translates into English as,

And he has uprooted principalities and powers and has revealed them
clearly in public as means of having victory over them.

The metaphor of a tree that has been uprooted, as shown in this Akan version of Colossians 2:15, underlines the powerlessness of demonic forces in the post-resurrection era. Predominantly farmers, the Akan are fully aware that a plant cannot survive without root to supply it with water and nutrients and to keep it firm in the ground. Therefore, to say that demonic powers are now like trees without roots is the best way of saying that demonic powers are powerless before Christ and by extension before the believer. Kuma (2011:19) makes a similar point:

Should the devil himself become a lion and chase us as his prey, we
shall have no fear; Lamb of God! Satan says he is a wolf – Jesus
stretches forth his hand, and, look: Satan is a mouse.

Also worthy of note is the public display of the defeated forces. To defeat someone and afterward drag the person to public view is a way of demonstrating how powerful the victor is. Jesus, therefore, deserves the title *Okatakylie* (the Brave one or the Hero), an appellation reserved

for war heroes who make a clean sweep of their enemies and return
from battle victorious. It is only a brave person and man of valor who
fights and covers his back while facing the enemy or does not turn his
back to the enemy in battle (Kuma 2011:1; Laryea 2000:80).

Nkunimdie Christology became a reality in the life of earlier missionaries who worked in Africa. In *Things fall apart*, Achebe (1994:149) recounts how Africans offered Western missionaries some portion of the evil forest with the hope that the missionaries who boasted about victory over death, would have “a real battlefield in which to show their victory”. The missionaries who were ignorant of this plan received the land with gratitude and began to explore it. The indigenes, based on their knowledge about how dangerous the evil forest was, thought that the missionaries would all be dead within a few days. Yet, none died! This made the people acknowledge the power of the White man’s “fetish” and started accepting the Christian faith. Consequently, “not long after, he won his first three converts” (Achebe 1994:149).

The Akan version of this Nigerian experience compares closely with the story of the Fante shrine of Nananom² Mpow (“the groove of the ancestors”). Nananom Mpow is believed to be the place where the remains of three great Fante leaders, namely Oburumankoma, Odapagyan, and Oson, were buried. Therefore, this sacred site became a powerful shrine, where traditional priests mediated on behalf of ancestors and supernatural powers. Fante oral tradition maintains that this site was the spiritual powerhouse (a form of refuge) for the Fantes which was key to the Fantes’ strategies for defence, survival, and political change during the era of the Atlantic slave trade (Essamuah 2010). However, a religious “battle” ensued between early Fante Methodists and the priests of Nananom Mpow which resulted in the conversion of Akweesi (one of the traditional priests) to Christianity. Akweesi cut down a tree in the grove, an act which was forbidden, and this led to a confrontation between the Christians and the traditional people. The Christians ultimately came out victorious, the interpretation being that the Christian God is more powerful than any local deity. Essamuah (2010:25) rightly points out:

The Christian significance of this victory over Nananom Mpow went far beyond the Fante collective cultural identity and religious coherence; it was the very usurping of the role played by traditional authorities in Mfantseman. Wesleyan Christianity was seen to have displaced the religious authority of the Nananom Mpow much as the new merchant class had displaced the financial and social authority of the chiefs.

In the Akan context, in which salvation has to do with deliverance from the physical and immediate dangers that fight against individual and communal survival and enjoyment of abundant life, the need to develop and promote *Nkunimdie* Christology cannot be overemphasised. Presenting Christ as the divine conqueror has the potential of dealing effectively with the challenge of idolatry in Akan Christianity. With Christ, the field marshal by their side, Akan Christians can now boast of full protection, a subject the study now considers in the next section.

One Akan voice that needs to be heard at this point is Kwame Bediako because of his strong advocacy for the contextualisation of Christianity within African contexts. Bediako believes that African Christians should engage with their cultural and religious heritage to create an authentic African Christianity that reflects the cultural diversity and richness of the continent. Ezigbo (2010:64) describes Bediako’s approach to Christology as a “culture-oriented Christology ... to re-express Jesus Christ in terms of indigenous cultures and religious thought forms”. Bediako’s Christology establishes a connection

2 The Fante or Akan word “Nana” (plural: *Nananom*) means elders, chiefs, grandfathers, and ancestors.

between Christ and the African ancestor, regarding Christ as the supreme Ancestor (Hartman 2021:80). His Christology also emphasises the use of mother-tongue terminologies that draw from African traditional spirituality (Hartman 2021:81).

Bediako (1990:22) preferred a *Christus Victor* model of atonement to a substitutionary model. On *Nkunimdie Christology*, Bediako (2000:33-34) opines that the purifying effect of the atonement places the believer on a higher plane to defeat evil forces. In his view, sin is the main reason why Satan holds the unsaved captive. He holds a communal sense of sin based on his Akan world view. Bediako's preference for the *Christus Victor* model of atonement might have influenced his communal view of sin which is consistent with this model. Bediako, like many other African evangelical Christologians, believes that sin is the main reason why Satan has control over the unsaved and why some believers may not appropriate the full benefit of the cross. Therefore, in order to empower humanity to attain victory over evil forces, the problem of sin had to be dealt with. To this end, Christ waged war against demonic spirits and evil forces and defeated them. This cosmic victory offers believers the power to overcome evil.

Bediako compares Christ to the purificatory sacrifice in Akan religious setting. Drawing from Hebrews 1:3b, Bediako (2000:33) asserts that the Akan *Odwira* (purificatory) festival depicts that Christ's sacrifice is not only effective, but also total and final, surpassing all annual sacrifices made during the *Odwira* festival. Consequently, Christ has the capacity to save those who place their trust in his redemption achieved on the cross. He argues further that all traditional sacrifices need to stop because the purifying impact of Christ's atonement renders all traditional sacrifices obsolete. Bediako's theology of the cross, therefore, underscores that Christ's atonement, marked by its completeness, perfection, and finality, necessitates the cessation of all sacrifices within any human society.

It is important to note that believers need to remain in Christ, in order to enjoy the benefits of the atonement. Nkansah-Obrempong (2006:1481) makes this point when he mentions that,

[w]hile Satan is active in the world through his agents, African Christians need to remember that witchcraft, sorcery and all forms of demonic activities have been conquered and rendered powerless by Christ through his death and resurrection.

Christ's victory over these powers makes them incapable of harming believers and the church. Yet, as noted earlier, remaining in Christ is crucial. Given this understanding, *Nkunimdie* Christology is expected to produce an ethical renewal among Akan Christians, whereby people are encouraged to rely solely on Christ for their well-being.

Apart from making believers victorious over death and protecting them against evil forces, Christ also liberates people from economic hardship. The next section considers this issue.

3.2.3 The atonement and the believer's financial breakthrough

The economic situation is dire in the vast majority of Ghanaian societies. Economic challenges, including poverty, soaring inflation, substantial budget deficits, rising fuel costs, inadequate social services, housing shortages, frequent labour disputes, and high unemployment rates are familiar to Ghanaians. Aderonmu (2010:201) underscores this, stating that, in Akan and many African communities, poverty is evident in the form of

poor infrastructure, women and children walking barefoot over long distances for water and firewood, students studying beneath trees, run-down and under-equipped healthcare facilities, and numerous other poverty-related issues.

The scourge of poverty, economic disparity, deprivation, and the suffering that characterises the continent touch everyone in the country. People's experience of economic difficulties makes the Akan perceive life as a battle and so they say *ɔbra ye ko* ("life is a battle"). Even though one may receive help from others, the outcome of the battle of life depends on one's own efforts. Therefore, the Akan say *ɔbra ne wo ara wabɔ* ("life is how you make it"). In this battle, one needs strategies to overcome. Given this understanding, it becomes obvious that the economic dimension of the atonement be discussed in this paper to give a more holistic theology for the Akan community. In this instance, economic breakthrough is perceived as victory in a battle.

Amid their economic challenges, Akan believers can find assurance in the provision that Jesus has made for their economic well-being through his atonement. Kuma (2011:37) alludes to the economic impact of the atonement when she refers to Jesus as *Kwaaɛ Kɛsɛɛ* ("big forest") "which gives us tasty foods". In agricultural settings like the Akan, the forest represents the source of livelihood, where water, food, game, and medicine are essential for human survival. The use of the adjective "*Kɛsɛɛ*" ("big") underscores the abundance of Jesus' provision, akin to a vast forest that supplies every fundamental necessity for those in Christ. Kuma suggests that Jesus has made economic provisions for those who abide in him to ensure their well-being. Kuma describes the food supplied by Jesus as "tasty", and underlines that Jesus is the provider of perfect gifts. Furthermore, Kuma's metaphor of the dense forest portrays Jesus as offering shade to alleviate the scorching effects of a hot midday sun. The economic aspects of life can be likened to a relentless

sun, particularly in regions such as Ghana and other parts of the world where poverty prevails. In such circumstances, Christ's provision serves as the remedy to economic woes.

In addition, Jesus is extremely generous in his provision. This fact is underlined by Kuma's (2011:10) reference to him as *Ɔdɔkɔtobonnuare*, "the hard-working Farmer, who gives food to the carefree in the morning." Again, Jesus is described as the weaver who supplies people with clothing, not simply any cloth but *adwinasa* (Kuma 2011:10). *Adwinasa* is one of the most expensive and highly ranked Akan clothes. Therefore if that is what Jesus supplies, then his supplies are the best for human needs. Kuma (2011:30) further pictures Jesus as "[t]he Chief of Christians whose shade-tree grows money". In Ghana, workers consider the day when salaries are paid as "rainy days", the day that money will fall like rain. Jesus does not rain money occasionally; he actually provides money in a similar way that a tree provides fruits. Kuma's point, therefore, is that Jesus changes the economic situations of his followers. "The Sea, which gives us fat fish" (Kuma 2011:31), Jesus takes care of the feeding needs of his people. That Christ is rich is depicted by these lines "What kind of rich man is this, that when you are with him, he spends seven hundred pounds on you!" (Kuma 2011:44). Christ is the "the Moon of the harvest month which gives us our food" and the one upon whom prisoners depend on just as the tongue depends on the mouth (Kuma 2011:12).

From the foregoing discussions, it is evident that the economic aspect of the atonement holds significance. Through the atonement, Christ has ensured economic betterment for Christians. Nevertheless, it is essential to exercise caution against an excessive emphasis on material salvation. While material blessings hold importance, it is crucial to recognise that the primary purpose of Christ's death was not for economic gain. Furthermore, while attributes such as beauty, power, influence, prosperity, fame, glory, and success may be part of the Christian experience, they do not constitute the ultimate reasons for Christ's sacrifice on the cross. The crucifixion exemplifies how divine weakness, shame, and powerlessness can be transformed into a narrative of triumph. It underscores that the crux of human existence lies in seeking and living in accordance with God's will and purpose. The passion was a means to Jesus' exaltation and glorification, just as it might be God's design for an individual to endure suffering for subsequent glorification. Therefore, in Akan Christianity, material wealth should not be portrayed as an entitlement for Christians but as a privilege and something that, while beneficial, is not indispensable for living a life that pleases God. In addition, it is crucial to acknowledge that not every Christian will attain material riches; hence, Christians should avoid being fixated on the pursuit of material wealth.

4. CONCLUSION

The *Christus Victor* atonement model offers a profound solution to the Akan people's challenges, including their fears of death, evil forces, and economic hardships. It emphasises that Christ's sacrifice not only forgives sins but also dispels the fear of death and diminishes the power of Satan. Furthermore, it addresses economic difficulties by presenting Christ as a benevolent provider of necessities. The primary goal of Christ's sacrifice is aligning with God's will, and believers must rely on Christ for protection from evil forces since he has triumphed over Satan. To find meaningful protection, Akan Christians should look to the cross, recognising Christ's superiority. Given the findings from this paper, the main conclusion is that to be meaningful and relevant to Akan Christians, Akan Christian soteriology must touch not only on liberation from sin, but also on such existential needs as liberation from spiritual forces and economic challenges. That is, Akan Christianity must adapt to local world views and address societal needs, such as Akan soteriology balancing both spiritual and practical benefits to address existential challenges in their society.

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