

## Salvation:

### Mapping the Salvific Themes in Christian Faith

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From biblical times to the present, the discourses and practices of the Christian church have pivoted around the central conviction that the God of Israel, the Creator of the world, became incarnate in the life, death, and resurrection of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth for the salvation of the world. It is this central conviction that gave content to the joyful belief that there was a *Gospel*—good news about the salvation of the world. Drop out this conviction and this Gospel and the discourses and practices of the church lose their coherence and continuity. But having firmly said this, I must acknowledge that the meaning of the word ‘salvation’ has been more variegated and multidimensional than the church has often been willing to admit.

The purpose of this chapter is to explore the various uses of salvation language in the life of the church, identifying some differentiated uses and their interconnection with other doctrines or teachings, and to propose some ways of understanding how the church might understand salvation in relation to who God is, what it means to be human and sinful, and how the church is to witness to the salvific work of God.<sup>1</sup> I am hopeful that this chapter will provide a diagnostic and constructive map of how salvation language properly should work in the discourses and practices of the church’s life and witness.<sup>2</sup>

#### Some Orienting Remarks and Distinctions

While the church, even in biblical times, talks much about *salvation*, that word is related to other words and uses, such as deliverance, liberation/freedom, redemption, reconciliation, atonement, sacrifice, rescue, justification, righteousness, forgiveness, sanctification, regeneration, justice, restoration, and healing.<sup>3</sup> All of these words play

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<sup>1</sup> It will not have escaped the reader’s notice that I do not think the topic of ‘salvation’ can be explored without discussing, at least and minimally, the doctrines of God, humanity, sin, christology, ecclesiology, and eschatology, topics also discussed in other chapters of this book. Perhaps it might be interesting to discern ways in which there is agreement and disagreement among the various authors of the essays in this book.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the issues discussed in this essay have been more extensively discussed in my two-volume systematic theology, *A Grammar of Christian Faith: Systematic Explorations in Christian Life and Doctrine* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002), hereinafter referred to as GCF, and in a collection of my writings published as *On Being the Church of Jesus Christ in Tumultuous Times* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2005), hereinafter referred to as BCJC. An earlier essay, “Schematic Reflections on Salvation in Jesus Christ,” explored many of the themes and issues in this chapter and is reprinted in BCJC, pp. 104-22.

<sup>3</sup> Useful studies of many of these biblical words can be found in: *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 4 vols., ed. George Arthur Buttrick (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1962); *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abridged edition, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrichs, edited and translated by Geoffrey

differentiated and interconnected roles in the church's discourses about salvation, or what we might now call *soteriology*: how is it that persons and communities come to be saved. And none of this could be discussed without reference to God's love, grace, judgment, and forgiveness.

To gain some traction on these matters, let us recall how biblical words in Hebrew and Greek are initially rooted in ordinary language. In such ordinary language we can discern that salvation-type words have their meaning in relation to a presupposed contrasting condition. To be saved is to be *saved from* some perilous and threatening condition and thereby *saved to* or *saved for* some safer or more hopeful condition. This basic contrastive character of salvation talk stays with us even today: 'I was saved from death by the rapid response of the emergency room staff.' It should be lucid to us as well how such words as *liberation* and *freedom* have similar contrasting conditions: to be liberated or freed is to be liberated or freed *from* some oppressive or restraining condition. Notice also how *deliverance* language fits neatly into salvation language: a person or a community of persons is delivered *from* a perilous situation *to* a safer situation. We can carry these diagnostic comments further by imagining the contrastive conditions that make reconciliation and redemption intelligible to us.

It will be helpful in our further discussion to keep this contrastive character of the many types of salvation language in mind. Of course, in ordinary language the characteristics of the contrasts are so numerous as to defy exhaustive definition. However, in the church's discourse we can gain some leverage on the nature of the basic contrasts by recognizing that they pivot around the many ways in which humans are being *saved from sin and the consequences of sin*. We need, therefore, to have some grasp of sin and its consequences in order to understand the sort of salvation themes that are central to Christian faith. We must understand that the relevant concept of sin is a *theological concept*, which means that it cannot be articulated without identifying who God is and what it means to be a human being living before God.

### **Identifying God, Human Being, and Sin**

It is a basic Christian confession that God the Creator of all things has been normatively self-revealing and self-manifesting in the election and liberation of Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, and in the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in the summoning of the church into life. It is this understanding of God as having an interactive Life with the world that has entailed for the church identifying God in triune ways: God the Creator of the world; God the incarnate Reconciler in Jesus Christ; God the Redeeming Spirit. It is this triune God that the church has always confessed is the *Savior of human beings otherwise lost in sin*.<sup>4</sup>

What sort of being, then, is human being? I propose that Christian discourse's understanding of human being can be usefully understood in these interrelated ways. First, human being is *creaturely being*, created by God as a creature among countless other creatures. To be a creature is to be interdependent with other finite, embodied creatures under the temporal and spatial conditions of life: no human exists without this

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W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985); *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6 vols., ed. David Noel Freeman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> See GCF, chapter 4, pp. 149-232, for a fuller discussion of the doctrine of Trinity.

interdependence upon other creatures. Further, to be a creature means that human being is not God.<sup>5</sup>

Second, human being is a peculiarly *personal being*, but intimately formed by social interdependence with other persons. As a person, human being is an *I*—a subject, a self—that can construe a world through language and is thereby capacitated to speak to and listen to other persons. Personal being is endowed with the gift of finite freedom to make decisions and can encounter other persons as subjects who also can make decisions. While no person is simply reducible to relations to other persons and creatures, no person exists without some interdependence with other persons and creatures.<sup>6</sup>

Third, human being is *spiritual being*, that sort of creaturely embodied person who is made in the *image of God* and thereby summoned by God to live in obedient relationship with God and in loving mutuality with other humans, now construed as *thous*. It is the human spirit, as originally endowed by grace, that can discern and hear God's summons into authentic community, in which mutual flourishing is possible and the plentiful creation is the scene of joyful and peaceful begetting, laboring, sharing, and friendship. As spiritual being, a human can grasp her life as a gift from God and therefore as one loved by God. In short, human spirits are created and summoned to enjoy life together in the Kingdom of God as friends of God.<sup>7</sup>

While these points are only briefly noted here, they are deeply encoded in the distinctive discourses and practices of Christian communities. We should not suppose, however, that these concepts are the common property of the secular discourses today that propose to tell us what it means to be human. Christians construe human being in ways often different from—sometimes in conflict with—the regnant theories and opinions of the secular world.

We are now ready to identify the characteristic respects in which humans are sinners in need of God's salvific interaction. Sin is that absurd corruption of God's purposes in creating a world of creatures, of persons, and of spirits. Sin is that disruption and disorder that penetrates into the human individual and social life and thwarts those conditions of fulfillment and gladness ordained by God. Sin disrupts the human relationships to God, to other creatures and persons, and to oneself that were intended by God in creating human being.

At the heart of human sin is *unbelief*—that devastating practical refusal to believe in God in which humans rebelliously want life on their own terms, utterly un beholden to God. From this basic rebellion and unbelief, Christian discourse has identified the following faces of sin: 1) *pride or hubris*—that incessant self-centeredness and selfishness in which the individual and/or the individual's social group are the center of all valuing of life and death; 2) *concupiscence*—that disordering of desire in which the goods that can confer blessing and peace are rejected under the urgency and compulsion of the quest for immediate sensual satisfaction; 3) *sloth*—that unwillingness, that despair about being a self accountable to God and summoned into a future of responsibility; 4) *lying*—that refusal to care about the truth and that willful telling of lies about others and oneself.

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<sup>5</sup> See GCF, chapter 6, pp. 293-364, for a fuller discussion of Human Being as Created and Sinful. See esp. pp. 296-99 on creaturely being.

<sup>6</sup> See GCF, pp. 300-22 on personal being.

<sup>7</sup> See GCF, pp. 322-36 on spiritual being.

The consequences of sin—the sin that individuals enact and the sins of others that are enacted against them—are in their multiple forms and faces *socially systemic* and corruptive of human life. Humans are incessantly stalked by their own alienation from God, their alienation from their own created nature, and their alienation from other creatures and especially other person-spirits. Rivalry for goods thought too scarce to be shared provokes enmity, violence, and deadly conflicts, resulting in much subjugation and oppression of others. Fear of death and the consequential fear of others who might harm or kill become the dominating dispositions and passions of human life in its individual and social forms.<sup>8</sup>

It is this shabby and frightful life that Christian discourse identifies as life under sin and its consequences, which stands under the *judgment* of God as that condition that is powerless to confer the goodness and blessing the Creator intended from the beginning. This is *not* how life was created to be, and it is a life, which left to its own devices, is a living hell. God says ‘no’ to sin as that human quest to determine on its own what creaturely powers are the real keys to life and death and therefore are worthy of their loyalty and obedience. Idolatry is the irrepressible urge of human life in and under the powers of sin.

What is God to do about the fact that humans live in such a way that they *deserve* the alienating consequences of their lives together? Enmity and violence, despair and fear, pain and suffering, the unrelenting dominance of death over life, emerge as the sad tale of human life under sin. Does the just God simply accept that the order of *justice* requires these devastating consequences of human sin: a destiny of the futile human efforts to attain peace and fulfillment? Is it simply the case that humans either get their act together by their own free striving and live in peace or they face endless conflict and alienation? Having created and summoned human spirits into relationship with Godself and fruitful fellowship with others, does God simply leave it all up to humans to achieve whatever relief or salvation might be achieved? How, then, shall we construe the salvific acts of God in Israel, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and in the movements of the Holy Spirit?

### **The Enactment of Salvation in Jesus Christ as the Incarnate Life of God**

The Bible is the primitive narrative of how the God who creates all things acts upon and in the created world to save the world, especially humans but not only humans, from sin and the consequences of sin.

In brief, we can identify the basic salvific acts of God—all of which are the acts of God’s grace—as the election of and covenanting with Israel, the incarnation of God in Jesus the Jew, and the empowering work of the Holy Spirit in calling the church as an alternative community witnessing to and living under the summons of God’s grace.

The primacy of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth must be understood as the fundamental self-revelation of God’s work of salvation. It is in Jesus

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<sup>8</sup> See GCF, pp. 343-64 on sin. Søren Kierkegaard and Reinhold Niebuhr are the great diagnosticians of sin in the modern world. See Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, *Kierkegaard’s Writings*, vol. 19 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980); and Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Scribner, 1949).

that the God of Israel decisively takes up the human peril under sin and enacts that gracious work that limits the effects of sin and opens up a new future. Essential to Jesus' salvific work is that the reality of his life, crucified death, and glorious resurrection from the dead are understood as also the work of God. Affirming that Jesus is both human and divine means that God has become active in and vulnerable under the conditions of the humanity of Jesus' life. God, living as a Jewish human being, is taking up the cause of humans living under those conditions that are the consequences of human individual and social sin. In affirming these claims about Jesus, we are affirming that the *Person* of Jesus is both human and divine.<sup>9</sup>

But merely to say 'Jesus is God incarnate' is not yet to characterize what he does that is salvific for humans, which the traditions have called the *Work* of Jesus. Yet the Person and Work cannot be separated: *Jesus is who he is as the one who does what he does*. What then does Jesus do that is salvific? I will use a reworked understanding of the three-fold offices of Jesus as *Prophet, Priest, and Victor*. In performing all of these offices Jesus is that human being loving God and loving other humans in the ways summoned by God in creating human life, and he is God loving humans in those reconciling ways of forgiveness and grace.<sup>10</sup>

As *Prophet* Jesus proclaims the coming Kingdom of God as that community of peacefulness and mutuality, not torn by enmity, jealousy, violence, and oppressive domination of one human by another. Since it is God who is bringing the Kingdom, Jesus does not summon folk to bring in the Kingdom by their own earnest efforts, though he does counsel folk about the sort of responses appropriate to the Kingdom's imminence: loving the enemy and the neighbor, renouncing violence, turning the other cheek, forgiving one another, refusing that exercise of power that intends to dominate and coerce others. Those who so respond to Jesus' prophetic invitation become his disciples and the vanguard of the Kingdom.

As *Priest* Jesus is the one who submits to the exercise of coercive and subjugating power by those principalities that rule in human empires perpetuating human oppression and domination. These powers claim to be the rulers that determine life and death and under what conditions humans are allowed to live. In the name of orderly peace and security against enemies, these powers enslave their subjects and murder unruly enemies. These powers murder Jesus on a brutal cross as a sign of his criminal status—he is an enemy of and a threat to the empire's 'peace and security.'

To his disciples Jesus' crucifixion initially appears as a sure sign that the Kingdom he proclaimed and lived is an illusory hoax brutally cancelled by the powers of human empire. Only in their encounter with the resurrected Jesus do the disciples come to understand that Jesus is the Priest who lays down his life, like the sacrificial lambs of the temple, for the sake of reconciliation. Jesus is the Christ, the divine/human reality that takes the full brunt of the powers of sin—as they presume to administer life and death—upon and into the divine Life itself, thereby depriving those powers of their claim to be the determiners of human life and destiny. The human pretence to live life in repudiation of the summons of their Creator—to live life on their own terms—is exposed as a lie. It is in Jesus' resurrection from the dead that his followers understand that he is indeed the

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<sup>9</sup> See GCF, chapter 7 on The Person of Jesus Christ.

<sup>10</sup> See GCF, chapter 8 on The Work of Jesus Christ.

*Victor* who finally and truthfully lives without sin and has overcome the consequences of sin, thereby ruling over life and death, over sin and the forgiveness of sin. Jesus is the one who enacts and reveals God's salvific grace in overcoming God's own alienation from the alienating lives of sinners.

Jesus' faithfulness, his love, his unwillingness to seize the sword against enemies, and his forgiving of enemies as they crucified him become that pattern of life that can repudiate sin as that way of life that is unavoidable and necessary to human beings in their sociality. Jesus' followers are summoned by the Spirit into a community of faith, love, and hope, living an alternative way of life to the ways of life of the world still bedeviled by sin—that is the summons of the Holy Spirit, as the Spirit of Christ, to be the church as the body of Christ in and for the world.

For Christians, then, talk of salvation will pivot around what God has done in Jesus Christ for the salvation of a world caught up in and being torn apart by the doing of sin and the being undone by sin. What we might call the *Way of Salvation* is intimately related to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and the calling of the church.

### **The Shadow of Dual Destiny**

Before proceeding further to examine the way of salvation, we must acknowledge what I will call a shadow that looms heavily over much of the past discourses of the church. As we have seen earlier in our discussion, salvation-type words always have a contrasting condition. This clearly implies that there is a crucial conceptual distinction between being-saved and not-being-saved. If we further assume that there must be persons who are in each category of saved and not-saved, we seem confronted with the conclusion that there is a *dual destiny* among humans: some persons are saved and some are not-saved or are damned. Dual destiny language then forces us to inquire about how it comes about that some persons are saved and some are damned.

Along this line of inquiry, the church invoked the language of God's justice wherein such justice is understood to be *retributive* in character: God administers to humans what they justly deserve, whether that be reward and blessings or punishment and rejection. This is justice as *just deserts*. When these concepts structure salvation language, it inevitably appears that those who are saved in some sense *deserved* their salvation, just as those who are damned deserved their damnation. This sort of salvation language is deeply hedged in by such concepts as *earning* or *winning* or *achieving* one's salvation. Yet what is it that the saved *do* that deserves or earns their being saved? It would appear, then, that this logic of salvation is veering in the direction of that sort of *works righteousness* that Paul and others thought denied that persons are saved by the *grace of God*.<sup>11</sup>

Not wanting to openly embrace a works righteousness understanding of salvation, we might retrieve some sense of grace by saying that Jesus met the just demands of God and satisfied God's judgment against sinners.<sup>12</sup> Hence, sinners no longer have to meet

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<sup>11</sup> See Gal 2.15-21 for Paul's incisive discussion of the issue of works righteousness under the law. See also GCF, pp. 513-19.

<sup>12</sup> St. Anselm undertook to explain the salvific work of Jesus along these lines in "Why God Became Man," in *A Scholastic Miscellany: Anselm to Ockam*, ed. and trans. Eugene R. Fairweather, *Library of*

God's just demands in order to be saved. But, how then do we avoid slipping into saying that all persons are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ because Jesus took the place of sinners before God and met God's just demands? Dual destiny thinkers, finding that belief abhorrent and presumptuous, rush in to re-establish dual destiny by saying that persons must do or feel or have an attitude that accepts Jesus as one's savior in order thereby to be saved. It is almost impossible for this line of thinking to avoid the subtle belief that salvation is finally up to the individual: either one accepts Jesus as savior and thereby *earns* being-saved or one refuses to accept Jesus—or just remains in ignorance of Jesus—and therefore *deserves* damnation. However this view twists and turns, the retributive justice image of God remains dominant and somehow something persons do determines their salvation. It remains obscure, then, just what it might mean to say one is saved by the grace of God. If grace is a free gift, then how could one also be said to have earned the gift? One earns rewards, not free gifts.

It is no accident that popular Christianity embraces a dual destiny view something like this: human life in time is a trial—pivoting around accepting Jesus as savior—that will determine whether one is saved to a life beyond death or is damned to a life in hell.

Assuming, however, that we are committed to the dual destiny language but want to avoid a just deserts understanding of salvation, we could, with Augustine and Calvin, affirm that anyone who is saved is saved only by the grace of God. Since everyone already deserves the damnation inherent in sin, anyone actually saved from this damnation is saved only by the gracious and inexplicable decree of God. To try to explain why this person is saved and that person is not is impossible by appeal to any criterion of just deserts. But this view that salvation and damnation are already dually determined in God's eternal predestination seems strangely detached from any understanding of salvation being brought by Jesus Christ. The singular virtue of this view of salvation is its firm grasp that salvation is first and last the work of God's grace. Perhaps the conundrum we are facing here is rooted in the attachment to retributive justice, just deserts, and dual destiny as the baseline concepts for understanding salvation.<sup>13</sup>

### **On Resisting Some Recent Temptations**

In the last two hundred years—a period of wrenching critiques and disagreements within the theological discourses of churches—there has been a tendency to focus on one aspect of salvation language at the expense of other aspects. Hence, the rich diversity and interconnected language of salvation gets reduced to one defining image of what salvation really is. It will be instructive, I hope, to review briefly some of these temptations to reduce salvation to a single defining image.

*Salvation as Existential Authenticity:* Claiming that the eschatological vision of salvation as eternal life beyond death has been devastated by modern thought, Christian faith can still identify that feature of human existence that is determinative of the meaning of salvation, namely, the deep existential *how* of a person's life in time. Interpreting sin as inauthentic life manifesting itself in the all-consuming fear of death, the sinful *how* of a person's life results in much lying, self-deception, and deep despair.

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*Christian Classics*, vol. 10 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956), pp. 100–183. See GCF, pp. 443–45, 453–54 for a critique of Anselm.

<sup>13</sup> See GCF, pp. 709–24 for an extended discussion of issues involved in affirming dual destiny.

But in Jesus' call to faith and in the gracious bestowing of faith, persons come to live authentically, accepting God's forgiving grace as proclaimed in the gospel and candidly facing their own deaths without resort to the myths of immortality. Eternal life is, therefore, not some future life after death; rather it is that state or event in some individual's life in which authentic response to God's grace is realized. Salvation is to be identified precisely in this qualitative way in which a person puts her life together. Obviously, there is still a dual destiny, though not perhaps of just deserts: some receive the grace and are transformed and some do not receive and therefore are not transformed. This view of salvation is similar to all those views that collapse the whole meaning of salvation into a primary concern with the transformation in time of the individual's relationship to God. Yet this view lacks a vivid sense for the restoration of human community and the way in which the Gospel summons persons to live in liberating ways on behalf of their neighbors. Further, it too cavalierly repudiates life beyond death.<sup>14</sup>

*Salvation as Social Liberation:* Largely as a critique of existential individualism, the liberation theme emphasizes that Christian life is the liberation of persons from social oppression to a situation of justice and freedom. Where the powers of the world enslave persons and deprive them of their just share of society's goods, there is no justice and therefore no liberation and no meaningful sense of salvation. Liberation thinkers have helpfully discerned the many ways in which sin is a socially systemic problem and that political/economic realities must be engaged if there is to be actual social salvation for the oppressed. While this is a word that is needed by the church, it does seem to imply, when it is understood as the only or primary meaning of salvation, that the socially oppressed are simply in all respects determined by their oppression and therefore lacking any meaningful sense of salvation. This also implies that the oppressed of the past—who never knew liberation from social oppression—have somehow missed the saving work of God in the world. As a necessary theme in Christian faith, liberation from social oppression is uneliminable; yet, as the primary or defining theme of salvation, it is devastating to our understanding of the limits of God's salvation. It needs an appreciation of how Paul in jail and a host of oppressed Christians of the past felt also liberated by God's grace with a hope in God that transcends any particular conditions of human life in time.<sup>15</sup>

*Millennial Salvation:* This theme emerges out of the Book of Revelation [20.4–6] in which a thousand-year reign of Christ seems to be prophesied. While that notion itself seemed misleading to many in the first centuries of the church's life and even threatened the final inclusion of Revelation in the New Testament canon, it does reappear time and again in the life of the church. The central point of the millennial theme is that there will

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<sup>14</sup> Rudolf Bultmann dominated discussions about salvation during the 1950's and 60's. See his *New Testament and Mythology and Other Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. Schubert Ogden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

<sup>15</sup> Liberation theology is more variegated than this brief excursus suggests, ranging from Latin American liberation theologians, to African-American theologies, to feminist theologies. The common theme of all these theologies is that liberation from oppression is some state of affairs in human history in which justice is achieved and oppression is dismantled in all its forms. The concept of justice that functions as the goal of liberating and emancipating work often seems unstable and imprecise. See the sympathetic but sobering critique of Latin American liberation theology by Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (New York: Routledge, 2001). See also GCF, pp. 505, 528-36, 630-33, 699-709.



be a thousand-year reign of Jesus in *human history*. It is a vision of peace and well-being actually being lived out by humanity under the gracious reign of Jesus. Pre-millennialists believe that Christ will return and usher in the reign of peace, at the end of which the final judgment of all things will be rendered. Post-millennialists believe Christ will come at the end of the thousand years and judge all things. We should appreciate the emphasis of the millennialists on the concreteness of the kingdom in history, which is similar to the liberationists concern for tangible social justice. However, two perils lurk in millennialism: 1) it can devolve into emphasizing that the Christians must themselves bring in the kingdom by their righteous efforts or at least their righteous efforts will be the precondition for Jesus bringing in the kingdom; or 2) the beginning or the ending of the millennium becomes bathed in violence, either the violence of slaughtering the evildoers in order to bring in the kingdom or the violence of slaughtering at the end. This violence language seems inevitable when this vision of salvation rests primarily on the Book of Revelation, which is replete with violent language about the conflict between good and evil.<sup>16</sup>

All of these views, in their tendency to insist that the center of the church's understanding of salvation is defined by their particular emphasis, can mislead the church about the differentiated and interconnected range of meanings available in a full-orbed understanding of the salvific work of the triune God. The following section will propose a map of salvation issues and concerns that comprehensively fit together without obvious self-contradiction.

### **The Spheres of the Way of Salvation: A Proposal**

In the gospels' narratives, Jesus is confronted by a rich young man who asks: "Good Teacher, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life?" After the young man avers that he has kept "the commandments," Jesus summons him to sell his "possessions, and give the money to the poor...and come, follow me" to which the man goes away "grieving, for he had many possessions." The puzzled disciples ask: "Then who can be saved?" to which Jesus replies: "For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible." [see Mt 19.16-20; Mk 10.13-16; Lk 18.18-30]

In great proximity to this text, it is often asked; 'what must I do to be saved?' The accent is on *what must be done* in order to gain salvation, here understood as 'eternal life.' This picture of salvation and the earning-of-salvation has exercised a tight grip on much Christian imagination for centuries. That same picture, of course, ignores the

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<sup>16</sup> It is one of the strange silences among descendents of the nineteenth century Stone-Campbell Movement, that it has forgotten that Alexander Campbell, one of the pioneering movers, understood himself as a millennialist and for years he published the journal entitled *Millennial Harbinger*. Campbell did seem to believe that the restoration of New Testament Christianity that he was advocating was beginning to show signs of progress that suggested that the reign of Christ might be near historically. However, Campbell's millennialism completely lacked the emphasis on a violent return by Christ to destroy the evildoers, which seems so prominent in today's world. But the terrible conflict of the Civil War devastated Campbell's confidence that the movement of 'restoration Christianity' and the providential ordering of American democracy were harbingers of an almost 'imminent' kingdom of God. See the fine discussion of Campbell's millennial concerns in Robert Frederick West's *Alexander Campbell and Natural Religion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1948), esp. pp. 163–222.

further words of Jesus: “For mortals it [viz. inheriting eternal life] is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Salvation, inheriting eternal life, is impossible for mortals by the powers of their own actions? Many are the issues lurking in this passage, which we will now try to unfold.

To make sense out of this passage and to overcome some of the unsatisfying lacunae in the just deserts/dual destiny language, I propose to differentiate the language of salvation among the following spheres of salvation issues, while still grasping the deep interconnections of the theme of the triune God’s gracious salvation in Jesus Christ and the summoning of the church through the Spirit. It is through the language and realities of the spheres that we will be able to appreciate the complex and differentiated ways in which the church can talk about salvation.

The **first sphere**, in the language of *incarnation, atonement, reconciliation, and justification*, emphasizes what was done—what was achieved—in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Something happened in this particular human’s historical career—what he did and what was done to him—that has a sovereign reality not simply dependent on the response of believers or followers. Indeed, who Jesus was and what he did—as have been identified in our previous discussion—are the fundamentals of whatever else the church might say about God, human life, and salvation.<sup>17</sup>

However, this sphere can fall into disarray if we do not hold together and appreciate the interpenetration of Jesus’ work as Prophet, Priest, and Victor. He is the Prophet of the Kingdom that is crucified on the cross and raised as the Victor over life and death. He is the vulnerable Priest who proclaims a Kingdom of peace and nonviolence and was murdered by the principalities and powers—imperial political and religious leaders—that murder in order to dominate and subjugate. He is the Victor raised from the dead who is the presence of and the forerunner of a Kingdom of peace. In all these offices, Jesus is the incarnate life of God graciously taking the sins of the world upon and into the divine Life and thus disarming them of their power to determine human meaning and destiny *before God*.

So, who is saved in this sphere? All humans are saved from the condition of being condemned by their sins before God to the condition of being graciously forgiven and justified in ways beyond their deserts. This gracious forgiveness stands there just on its own, independent of its acceptance and appropriation by any person, though its acceptance and appropriation bring the forgiveness and justification home to the believers.

The **second sphere** of salvation language pertains to the actual ways in which persons subject to sin find their lives forgiven, graced, healed, and transformed by the Spirit of Christ. The centering focus of this transformation is how persons *appropriate* in their lives and communities *what* Jesus revealed and accomplished for them. This is the sphere in which life in the church and the discipleship to Jesus become decisive themes. This sphere we will call *historic redemption* as what is taking place in what I will also call *historic destiny*: how life unfolds in the spatiality and temporality of human history. The special role of the church in historic redemption is that it is the body of Christ in the world and the bearer of the *means of grace*—embodied in its distinctive discourses and practices—by way of which persons come to know and appropriate the grace of God

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<sup>17</sup> See GCF, pp. 433-35, 473-80 for discussions of the benefits of Christ and human salvation.

revealed and enacted in Jesus Christ. Distinctive Christian life becomes an *ethics of grace*: given what God has done in Jesus Christ, Christians live under the summons to be peacemakers and forgivers, lovers of neighbors, strangers, and enemies. This is not an ethics of how to earn God's grace but an ethics of how to live in conformity to grace freely given and freedom conferring. Indeed, being liberated from the destiny determining power of sin, Christians can live for others without fear of death or the threat of death.

Hence, in its distinctive discourses and practices the church bears a witness to the gracious salvific acts of the triune God, intending in every way to be a alternative community of faith, love, and hope living for the benefit of the world otherwise entangled in sin. The church's life unfolds amidst the dynamic interaction of its *nurturing practices*—worship, communal care, and educational formation in faith—and in its *outreach practices*—evangelism, prophetic critique of the worldly powers of domination and oppression, and the actual engagement in works of love on behalf of the world. It is in these outreach practices that the church enacts a liberating dismantling of the many individual and social forms of sin in the world. It should be apparent that *all of these works of the church in historic redemption are from beginning to end salvific in character and purpose.*<sup>18</sup>

Having now affirmed this work of God in historic destiny, we must also admit that many are the individuals and the socio/political arrangements and communities that never respond to the work of forgiveness in Jesus and the work of transformation in the Spirit. In some sense, then, we must admit that in historic destiny, some folk know no healing and loving God of grace. If historic destiny is the complete *scope* of human life before God, we would have to admit that many are they who die in time having lived lives ravaged by sin—their own sin and the sins of others against them—without any apparent experience of God's salvific grace. Because the church believes that Jesus was raised from the dead and reigns as Victor over life and death, it also believes that historic destiny is neither the full scope of life nor the final determiner of life before God.

The **third sphere** of salvation language pertains to how we identify issues of *ultimate human destiny*. To ask about ultimate human destiny is to ask about the ultimate *end* of human life, meaning both end as *telos* or goal and end as *finis* or finality and conclusion. In discussing these issues we are entering upon the doctrinal theme of *eschatology*: what is God's ultimate determination of the meaning, reality, and scope of human life, indeed of the life of the whole cosmos. Is death simply what is final about human life, and now death under the shadow of sin? Or are there *transhistorical* possibilities and realities? In traditional language, notions of heaven and hell emerge in this sphere.

The center of ultimate destiny language is the reality of the triune God: Creator, Reconciler, and Redeemer. We have affirmed that much pivots around what God did in Jesus Christ and its *benefits* for humanity. Not only does the incarnational narrative of Jesus' work include the cross as manifesting the vulnerable power of the divine Life in

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<sup>18</sup> For a more complete discussion of the church and salvation see BCJC, chapter 4, "The Church as Ark of Salvation." While I would not recommend a theological perspective that would reduce the role of the church in salvation to being one among many instances of religious communities conveying salvation, it must be admitted that the work of the Spirit of Christ is not restricted to the church. How and where it might be at work is a profound theological question. See GCF, 497-501.

taking the destined consequences of sin upon and into God's Life and thereby depriving them of their power to be the *determiners of human destiny*, but the resurrection of Jesus is the gracious opening up of life beyond death. But for whom is this life beyond death—what I am calling *transhistorical life*—made possible? Only for those who have faithfully followed Jesus and thereby *earned* the right to dwell eternally in God's grace? Were this the logic of life beyond death, then only the faithful will be ultimately redeemed and the unfaithful will be absent, either in absolute annihilation in death or in being raised to an everlasting life in hell! Is it possible that the crucified Jesus descended into hell—as that stark and devastating extremity of human alienation from God—and thereby emptied hell as the ultimate destiny of any human being?<sup>19</sup>

I am proposing that the Life of the triune God with the world is from beginning to end—as the Alpha and Omega of life and being—the life of a gracious Creator in search of the redemption of rebellious creatures and therefore precisely as Omega has, is, and will be the *Ultimate Companion and Redeemer* of all creatures. Hence, rather than being saved by their merits or condemned by their demerits, in this sphere of ultimate destiny, all will finally be saved by the grace of God. Being raised to life beyond death is a gift of God and is neither a natural attribute of being human nor an earned reward for righteous life. Christians above all, not only know the grace of God, they also are keenly aware of the repetitious ways in which sin clings to their own acts and feelings. This awareness thus disabuses Christians of trusting that the presumed stalwartness and extent of their faithfulness could earn them such eternal life. Christians are those who deeply and passionately encounter death—their own and the deaths of the many others—as a dying unto the sheer gracious love of God. Bluntly, Christians trust and hope in the grace of God, not in their own presumed achieved righteousness! When all things are subjected to the work of Jesus Christ, they will be subjected by the transforming power of the triune God who incarnately and ultimately refuses to count the sins of the world against it and who graciously redeems all creatures. Joyfully, God's power and grace are the final and ultimate determiners of the meaning and destiny of human life. God speaks and enacts an unceasing triumphant *yes* to the world.

Yet God's ultimate redemption is not only the destiny of human life; it is also the destiny of the whole creation, including all creaturely beings and powers. Affirming that the created world as created is finite with a beginning—which is the beginning of time and temporality—the world also has an end, both as goal and conclusion. At some point in the future, God will consummate the whole creation as a redemptive kingdom in which nothing good is lost and all creatures cease conflict and rest in peace. It is the ultimate *yes* of God that subverts every doctrine that claims God will ultimately *destroy* the world in a final act of violence.

The church must never forget nor neglect the belief that the triune God, who lives in freedom and love, is the Alpha and the Omega—the beginning and the end—of all creatures and all principalities and powers.

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<sup>19</sup> On the status of hell, see: Joe R. Jones, "Hell is Empty." *DisciplesWorld*, vol. 3, issue 9 (November 2004), pp. 13-15.

## Further Readings

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## Study Questions

1. Before reading this chapter, how would you describe your own understanding of salvation as an essential Christian theme? In what ways did this chapter challenge or confirm your view?
2. When Jones refers to ‘differentiated and interconnected’ meanings of the word ‘salvation,’ what is he bringing to our attention? Is this helpful? Discuss.
3. How does the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ bear on salvation themes and concerns? Explain. Is it important that Jesus be thought of as divine? Why? Why not?
4. How would you explain the concept of dual destiny? Is it helpful to think of salvation in these terms? Why? Why not? How does this concept depend on a notion of divine justice? Explain and discuss that concept of justice.

5. Write a short essay explaining and critiquing this affirmation: 'Universal ultimate salvation is at the heart of the Christian understanding of God and human destiny.'