

Salvation Today: Some Reflections on the Christian Doctrine of Salvation

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Salvation is not just one of the many topics of Christian doctrine but the fundamental perspective from which all the different aspects of the Doctrine are interpreted. It is the inclusive term for what the Scripture declares that God has achieved for the world in Christ. Yet there is no consensus in the Christendom today on the meaning and implications of salvation. The present attempt involves a brief survey of the understanding of salvation in selected major trends of Christian theology today, an overview of the biblical material related to salvation, and an evaluation of both as the conclusion.

Some Contemporary Approaches

Existential Theology: Salvation is defined in the existential theology in terms of the realization of authentic existence. The transition from inauthentic existence to the authentic existence is caused by divine grace.

In this approach, salvation is not an objective event in the past but an existential event in which we recognize personal freedom.¹ According to Bultmann, the foremost representative of existentialism, man encounters "the Christ-event" — the possibility of freedom in the preaching of the cross. In the act of accepting the fact that we are accepted, we become free from sin and we receive a true understanding of ourselves. In this decision making, the historical dimension of the "Christ-event" is not important at all.² The cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ are properly symbols. Historical Jesus is only a symbol of the Christ-event that breaks into our lives in the moment of our decision.

The existential theology errors in reducing the biblical affirmations on salvation to the values they have for individual life. Thus it has resulted in rampant individualism. Its strength is in its basic acceptance that the biblical data has no meaning for us unless there is personal appropriation in faith.

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Liberation Theology: Liberation theology may be looked at as the convergence of several movements like political theology, third world theology, black theology, feminist theology and so on.

Salvation is defined in liberation theology in terms of political, social, and economic liberation. The Old Testament narrative of the Exodus is considered as a paradigm of salvation.³ And Jesus is the herald of a new social order marked by justice and freedom, and hence his death is looked at more or less as a political event. God is at work in all events of liberation in history. The knowledge of the Gospel is one that is achieved through identification with the oppressed and it can never be a propositional knowledge.⁴

The strength of this view is its emphasis on holism in which man is conceived of as a unity. So salvation encompasses both body and soul. Thus liberation theology recovers the biblical teaching of man. But on the other hand, it reduces the Gospel to ethics. This aspect stands out as the main defect of the liberation approach. The approach also seems to neglect or under emphasise the depth-dimension or the transcendental aspect of faith and life.

Process Theology: For process theology, the basic theological problem today is the need for a new life-and-world-view that is in accordance with the scientific revolution. God is perceived as the creative process within nature driving men to seek the maximum enjoyment. As God includes all of reality within his own being, God himself is enriched when men realize their potential for happiness.⁵

In process thought, salvation signifies self-realization and creative innovation. The optimum realization of the creative urge towards novelty is the essence. Salvation has been described as a growth in qualitative meaning, which can be accomplished through union with the creative process within and around us. In Alfred Whitehead's theology, 'Eros' is the dominant principle. Eros is self-love, not in the sense of selfish love; it is love of all which give value to the self.⁶ Salvation would then mean the realization of these ideals that were manifested in Jesus.

The concern of the process approach to salvation is an endaeomonistic ideal of personal well-being while the biblical ideal is of self-sacrificial service. This soteriology cannot motivate one for self-giving service in the world. Moreover, in this strand of thought, God is emptied of his transcendence, as God here is like that of Plato's who tries to bring together the eternal ideals of abiding values and our concrete world.⁷

Evangelical Theology: Evangelicalism is more often identified with fundamentalism. Yet it must be recognised that there are various strands within the general umbrella of evangelical theology.

Salvation is understood as restoration of a broken relationship with God through the forgiveness of sin. The focus of the theological emphasis is the work of Christ. This may be considered as the rallying point of all evangelical stands of soteriology. Biblical metaphors for salvation like justification, reconciliation, adoption, expiation and redemption are considered adequate explanations of the concept of salvation. It re-affirms the traditional themes: substitutionary atonement, forensic justification, the necessity for new birth of individuals, sanctification as a process, and heaven and hell.

In opposition to the old fundamentalism, neo-Evangelicalism is open-minded towards biblical criticism and is willing to accommodate insights from other brands of thought, while affirming the traditional themes against the growing modernism.⁸ The strength of evangelical theology is with its concern to take up the biblical categories seriously. Its weakness lies in its under emphasis of the man-ward dimension of salvation.

The Biblical Data

Old Testament Teaching: The principal Hebrew term for salvation is *yasa* which is basically rendered as "bringing into a spacious environment" (cf., Pss. 18:36; 66:12). It carried from the very beginning the metaphorical sense of "freedom from limitation"; deliverance from factors which constrain and confine. It can be referred to as deliverance from disease (Is. 38:10; cf., v.9), from enemies (2 Sam. 3:18), or from any trouble (Jer. 30:7). In vast majority of cases, God is the saviour. At the same time, judges, leaders and kings were also considered saviours. But in all these cases it was clearly accepted that the salvation actually come from God himself (Judg. 2:18; 1 Sam. 9:16).

The Exodus event was the mould into which all the subsequent interpretation of Israel's history was poured. The notion of salvation emerged from the Exodus stamped with the dimension of God's mighty acts of deliverance in history. A multi-dimensional pattern is clear in the Exodus event; social, economic, political and spiritual.

The Old Testament prophets spoke about salvation in relation to God's justice. Yahweh is not like Babylonian idols to depend on human help but is the righteous one who upholds the weak and cares for the helpless (Is. 40:18-21). Isaiah also indicates that Yahweh accomplishes his redemptive act through the suffering of the righteous one. Israel was expected to be the righteous community but in the event of her failure to fulfil this role, a future figure was envisaged which was later identified with Messiah.

Israel's experience of God as saviour in the past projected her faith forward in anticipation of his full and final salvation in the future. This world is filled with evil and so the final victory of goodness is not naturally assured. This necessitates God's supernatural intervention in the history at the end of the age. This future stage of salvation found its expression in terms of a 'Day of Yahweh' in which judgement and deliverance would be combined (Is. 25:6-8; Joel 2:1ff; Amos 5:18ff).

New Testament Teaching: In the New Testament, God's intent "to save" (Greek, *sodzo*, 'to rescue') is identified with the person and the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Salvation is tied to the cross. Jesus' death is related to his prior life and his previous career gives meaning to the cross. And the cross is integrally tied to the resurrection: the salvific quality of the cross lies in the Easter-event. Thus the salvation event comprises of the birth, life, ministry, death and resurrection, and the continuing ministry of Jesus. There is no dichotomy between the Jesus of history and the Christ of our faith. It is in Jesus born, died *and* risen that the New Testament finds God's offer of salvation.

The traditions about Jesus record various accounts of Jesus' acts of delivering people from forms of physical, spiritual and cosmic bondage to a condition of restored wholeness and soundness (eg. Mk. 2:1-12; 5:1-20; Jn. 12:3-7). To be "saved" is thereby seen as being "redeemed" in relation to God, oneself and others in community.

Paul presents his doctrine of salvation through some images: redemption, reconciliation, justification, sacrifice and so on. In redemption, the emphasis is on the cost paid and the liberty regained (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7) while in reconciliation, the accent falls on the restoration of a broken relationship - between man and God, man and man (2 Cor. 5:19). Justification is juridical term which expresses the notion of pronouncing a verdict: God pronouncing that the sinners are acquitted. Sacrificial images appropriates the efficacious significance of Jesus' death for those who receive it by faith (1 Cor. 15:3-7; Eph. 2:5-8).

"Christ died for us" is the crux of the salvation images in the New Testament. He died for us, not instead of us, because we all will have to die. He did not suffer instead of us, for we all will suffer definitely. Yet he represents us before God and represents God before us. Faith is the act of allowing Jesus to be our representative. For he suffered and died for us, we never die alone without representation, without hope for personal identity beyond the grave. The cross of Christ is a victory over the tyrants which oppress the world. Salvation must mean, therefore, liberation from the power of the evil one and all his works and ways.

The New Testament too preserves the eschatological dimension of salvation: salvation still lies in the future. It does not minimise the significance of salvation as a present reality, rather it talks about the incompleteness of our present experience of salvation. The New Testament actually talks about the past, present and the future aspects of salvation — the finished work of Christ in the past, our appropriation of salvation by faith in the present and the consummation of God's salvation plan in the future.

Evaluation

The common characteristic of the modern trends in general is the tendency to seek philosophical collaboration for faith as we find in the cases of existential and process theologies. In liberation theologies, the attempt is to look at salvation in the context of our socio-economic bondage while in the evangelical theology, salvation is made relevant to one's personal, spiritual/psychic struggles.

These concerns are valid and are imperative in themselves. Our theology of salvation has to be relevant in our philosophical, social, economic and spiritual context. But the danger lies with our tendency to absolutize one aspect or the other of the human life as *the* context. Rather than having an integrated and wholistic approach to human predicament, we exalt one aspect of the human problem as *the* problem that has to be solved out. Our theology of salvation must be multi-dimensional for it corresponds to the many dimensions of human existence in the world and all sorts of needs and conditions. No one theory of salvation can cover the whole story of the relationship between God and the humanity in Jesus Christ.

At the same time, our theology of salvation needs to be biblical. Biblical essentials should not be lost in our struggles to construct a concept of salvation that is relevant to our situation. Soteriology should not become a mere ideology. The kind of salvation that some theologians envisage is "something Marx in fact called for without reference to Jesus, something which will come about through human praxis without any necessary dependence on God's act in Christ."⁹

We must go for a biblical-oriented theology of salvation that is relevant to our context. Truthfulness to biblical notion and contextual relevance are not to be considered as antithetical. A multi-dimensional biblical concept of salvation can definitely address the burning issues and enslaving means of our context, in the social, economic, political and spiritual levels. Biblical categories may need re-interpretation in the articulation of such a theology, but the essential ingredients of the salvation event should not be neglected. Christian salvation is historical, multi-dimensional and eschatological

as we have observed in the overview of the biblical teaching of salvation. In short, what we need is a biblically justifiable and contextually relevant understanding of salvation.

References

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2. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
3. See, for example, G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll, 1973.
4. R. McA Brown, *Theology in a New Key*, Delhi, 1983, pp. 90-91.
5. S. Ogden, *The Reality of God*, London, 1966.
6. A.N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, London, 1929.
7. D.F. Wright, "Platonism", in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. by Sinclair B. Ferguson et.al., Leicester, 1988, p. 518.
8. The examples of T.F. Torrance in Systematic theology and J.D.G. Dunn in Biblical Studies would be adequate.
9. Carl E. Braaten, "The Christian Doctrine of Salvation", in *Interpretation*, vol. xxxv, No. 2 (1981), pp. 121-22.