



Chapter 8

Salvation

The gospel is the good news of salvation through Jesus Christ: forgiveness of sin, and healing from separation, brokenness, and the power of violence and death. This healing is for individuals, human societies, and all of creation. This new life is the loving gift of God's grace that becomes ours through faith and repentance. Baptism is how we initially express our commitment to lifelong discipleship. As we yield our lives to Christ in baptism we enter Christian community (the body of Christ) and have the promise of salvation. We experience salvation through Jesus Christ, but affirm that God's grace has no bounds, and God's love is greater than we can know.

Introduction

Christianity is a religion of redemption. Salvation is its central theme. Even Jesus' name in Hebrew means "The LORD is salvation." However, in many contexts today "salvation" has become an empty word. Billboards or pamphlets warn readers to be "saved." They offer heaven and threaten with hell. Christians in some denominations demand to know, "Have you been saved?" They believe salvation is a single event that happens in a specific way and at a specific time (even though this belief has little basis in the Bible). Others equate salvation with deserting the earth and its challenges for an otherworldly heaven, or they think of salvation as release from the body, as if our bodily life were inconsequential to God. Some think of salvation as the reward for

believing the right list of ideas. Others think of salvation as a special promise of protection or divine guarantee of prosperity in this life if you only have the right amount of faith. In all these ways and others, salvation has become a word laden with unhelpful meanings. What sense can we still make of this term, which remains crucial to Christian faith?

In Christian theology, salvation refers broadly to God's action of delivering from a negative state of affairs. God "saves" by bringing about a new situation of well-being for individuals or a community, or the whole creation. Terms like "redemption," "restoration," "healing," "reconciliation," and "new creation" give glimpses into the layers of meaning "salvation" tries to convey. Salvation can be liberation from real, physical conditions. For example, we may need deliverance from injustice, from a tyrannical ruler or system, from disease, or from the unfair distribution of wealth. But salvation is also deliverance from less tangible, though no less debilitating, attitudes, like selfishness, greed, racism, or hatred of others. Salvation is both a present experience, and a future one. It is personal, corporate, and even cosmic. In its broadest sense, salvation is God's response to all that harms the good creation, especially humanity's sin. If the term "salvation" is to have any meaning for us today, it must refer to God's action in Christ to overcome human selfishness in its many forms.

The Basic Beliefs statement identifies Jesus Christ as the one in whom we experience salvation. He embodies what the Bible calls "shalom": God's peace, healing, and justice for the whole creation. Christ offers the gifts of hope in the midst of loss and despair, forgiveness for our individual and social failings, and a vision of a new future for the earth. We follow Christ in the way of peace and so experience "all of the dimensions of salvation" (Doctrine and Covenants 163.2a). The Holy Spirit in our midst, which according to John's gospel Christ breathed on his disciples (John 20:22), energizes the church to live the coming reign of God as a present reality. This Spirit is also the foretaste, or as Paul described it, the "first fruits" (Romans 8:23), of salvation in its fullest, cosmic sense: the ultimate future of the whole creation.

Biblical Foundations

The word "salvation" appears more than 125 times in the Bible, and forms of the verb "to save" occur more than 375 times. God's action as one who delivers is clearly a central theme of scripture. The God of the Hebrew Bible is truly the "hope of Israel, its savior in time of trouble"

(Jeremiah 14:8). It is helpful to understand some of the images of salvation from the Hebrew Bible because these shaped the understandings of Jesus' early followers. In most of the Hebrew Bible, people experienced salvation as a this-worldly phenomenon. The classic story of salvation in the Old Testament is the Exodus from Egypt. Salvation originates in God's compassion: "I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians..." (Exodus 3:7–8). God calls Moses and sends him and Aaron to help free God's people from bondage. Instructively, the Hebrew Bible makes no distinction between the "spiritual" and the "political"; the Exodus from Egypt is both. The Old Testament also portrays salvation as part of practical, everyday life. Salvation is connected to living in safety (Jeremiah 33:16) or not making a careless promise to one's neighbor (Proverbs 6:3); it relates to the experience of God's daily support (Psalm 68:19).

The Hebrew prophets especially knew God as Israel's savior (Habakkuk 3:18; Jeremiah 3:23). Typically, they understood salvation as God's deliverance of Israel or Judah from national foes or from the disastrous power of their own disobedience. No prophetic book speaks of salvation more than Isaiah. It is fitting that salvation is a constant theme of the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem (8th century BCE), since his name in Hebrew means "Yahweh is salvation."¹ The two anonymous sixth-century BCE prophets whose sayings make up chapters 40–66 of this book constantly echo their predecessor's theme. As in much of the Hebrew Bible, the message of the Book of Isaiah links salvation and faith. Trust in God is vital to experiencing God's saving action: "if you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (Isaiah 7:9).

Israel's later hope for a messiah—an anointed king in David's line who would bring final national deliverance—arose from the oracles of Isaiah of Jerusalem. Isaiah 40–66 reflects the later setting of the Babylonian Exile, the years immediately after (587–538 BCE). In this time of living as refugees with little hope for the future, the anonymous prophets in Isaiah's line declare that Judah's salvation lies in the promise that God is true to God's character. As God saved their ancestors from Egypt, God will soon make "a way in the sea" and "do a new thing" (Isaiah 43:16–19). God does not wish chaos and homelessness for God's people but will

¹ "Isaiah," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 2, ed. George A. Buttrick (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 731.

bring them “everlasting salvation” (Isaiah 45:17). That salvation will come in the form of a glorious return to the homeland.

The Hebrew Bible also links the call for justice with salvation. To push aside the needy (Amos 5:12), to trample and cheat the poor (Amos 2:6, 5:11), to abandon the vulnerable (Isaiah 1:23), and to ignore the cries of the poor (Jeremiah 8:19–21) are contrary to the fullness of life God wants for God’s people. The prophets relentlessly warn the people to practice justice, which in the Hebrew mind includes compassion for those with little means and for those who are aliens. When lives do not flourish, there is no shalom. Peace in its broadest sense is what many texts in the Old Testament mean by salvation. The Jewish scriptures also know God as a God of forgiveness. In spite of God’s anguish at injustice and faithlessness among God’s people, God is always ready to forgive and lead them to fullness of life. The Hebrew Bible consistently sees deliverance as a gift of divine faithfulness, love, and grace. Human striving, power, scheming, and military might do not bring God’s salvation.

Until the second century BCE, the Hebrew Bible understood salvation as experienced in this life. The Book of Daniel, however, is the first writing in the Hebrew Bible to envision final salvation as beyond present experience in a resurrection of the dead into a new creation. This book was written during the Maccabean Revolt, perhaps around 165 BCE. Its author faced the problem of unjust suffering and the murder of faithful Jews during the Syrian king Antiochus IV’s reign of terror. The level of suffering stretched to the breaking point traditional Old Testament beliefs that faithfulness yielded rewards in this life. How could one now think about salvation, if within history obedience to God brings death while injustice and violence bring life, not punishment?

The Book of Daniel represents a new theological answer to that problem in ancient Judaism. It addressed the problem of death and injustice by reinterpreting salvation as the conquest of death by the divine gift of resurrection. Salvation in the ultimate sense lies beyond current history in a new time. This new understanding of a future life will become important both to Judaism and to the New Testament authors. At the same time, it is important that over against the views of Daniel, the Hebrew Bible vigorously maintains that salvation includes justice, well-being, and peace within history.

The New Testament echoes the approaches to salvation we see in the Hebrew scriptures but enlarges on them with rich new insights. Redemption is still the present experience of a new way of life. For example, the tax collector Zacchaeus responds to Jesus by declaring his

intent to redistribute half his wealth to the poor and repay those he has defrauded fourfold (Luke 19:1–10). Jesus declares of Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9). But New Testament writers also think of salvation as a future universal event, in which transformation will come to the whole creation, including our bodies (Romans 8:18–25; Philippians 3:12–21). Salvation is personal and this-worldly: Jesus responds to a desperate father’s plea and heals his son (Mark 9:14–27). It also involves promise of life beyond death: the crucified Jesus assures a dying thief of a place with him in paradise (Luke 23:39–43).

Salvation, further, has a social dimension. The breaking down of ethnic-religious walls between Jewish and Gentile disciples (Ephesians 2) is a clear example. We also see the social dimension of salvation in Paul’s subversive way of undermining the Roman system of slavery by the application of his principle that all are one in Christ (Philemon). And it appears especially in Jesus’ table fellowship with sinners and outcasts. Salvation includes the forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:36–50) and the restoration of persons to community (Mark 1:40–45). Importantly, the New Testament connects salvation not simply to Jesus’ death, but to his life and resurrection as well.

Jesus’ followers had traditional, inherited ideas of what salvation should be like. However, he dismantled their ideas and, in his life and ministry, demonstrated that salvation was to be imagined in the broadest possible way. The salvation Jesus brought did not include destroying enemies. Neither was it for those who were “good enough.” Jesus defied widely held expectations by welcoming all, especially women, the sick, and outsiders into companionship with him. He proclaimed a kingdom completely unlike the empires of the world, a kingdom for the lost, the maligned, and the poor, and a kingdom with no borders. As one New Testament writer put it, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power;...[and] he went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him” (Acts 10:38). Nevertheless, a close companion betrayed Jesus and Rome executed him next to common criminals. Many of his followers abandoned him. A few women saw where he was buried, and then “on the third day” found the tomb empty. They proclaimed this good news and within days the disciples regrouped, convinced Jesus was alive.

It all sounds familiar to Christians, but this was not the triumphant victory story many first-century people hoped for. Yet the New Testament authors look to these pivotal events to discover the meaning of salvation. God had acted for the sake of all creation in this series of events. Salvation

is not a success story if measured by standards of common wisdom. But for the first Christians and for the church ever since, the salvation Jesus brings is breathtakingly more than we could ever imagine or hope for.

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke Jesus' parables and sermons and his encounters with people—both the suffering and the self-righteous—illustrate this wider meaning of salvation. Jesus' teachings, healings, words of forgiveness, and self-offering on the cross reveal God's mercy and saving action, for they portray God as entering into the fray of human experience. Jesus portrays salvation with images like a table shared with sinners, a lost coin found, a despised outsider binding a stranger's wounds, and a father's joy at the return of a wayward child. Above all else, Jesus came to declare that the reign of God had drawn near. It was visible in all Jesus did and taught, for those with eyes to see it. Indeed, as one great historian of Christianity, Adolf von Harnack, once observed, Jesus was in his own person what he taught. In other words, he embodied the very things he proclaimed. The kingdom of God is clearly depicted in Jesus' memorable words in the synagogue in Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. —Luke 4:18–19

The church's teaching about salvation would be completely deficient if it neglected these words, which are Jesus' description of his mission.

John is the most symbolic of the Gospels. It frequently portrays salvation as "life" and especially as "eternal life." Much later Christian tradition has commonly interpreted "eternal life" to mean life after death in heaven. John actually means something else. A scene from Jesus' last night with the disciples illustrates what John means by eternal life. Jesus offers a prayer for his followers. In the prayer he acknowledges that his authority to give the gift of eternal life comes from God. Then he says, "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). Eternal life for John focuses on present experience. To know God in Christ is *already* to have "life." Jesus is already the "resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). God's own indestructible being is available in Jesus Christ, and to believe in Christ is to participate in God's life in the here and now. This, too, is salvation.

For the Apostle Paul, the gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith” (Romans 1:16). Paul has different terms for salvation, which he sees primarily as a future cosmic reality anticipated in the church’s present experience. For Paul salvation in the final sense is about the liberation of all creation from its bondage to death (Romans 8:18–25). He uses terms for this future reality like “resurrection of the dead” (1 Corinthians 15), “imperishability” and “immortality” (1 Corinthians 15:50–54), “transform[ation]” (Philippians 3:21), and “glory” (Romans 8:18; Philippians 3:21). Paul inherited this language from the apocalyptic Jewish traditions one sees in Daniel. But he differs from these Jewish traditions in that, for Paul, the Messiah has come and is now at the center of God’s work of salvation.

Salvation for Paul is both yet to be (Romans 13:11) but also a present process (1 Corinthians 1:18). In the church “new creation” is already visible (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ has already reconciled us to God (2 Corinthians 5:18–19). In 1 Corinthians 1:30 Paul notes that the community already experiences Christ as “wisdom” (meaning, as one who reveals God’s purpose), “righteousness” (meaning, as one who brings us into a renewed and sound relationship with God), “sanctification” (meaning, as one who sets others apart to serve God), and “redemption” (meaning, as one who liberates from bondage). Yet all these present realities, Paul insists, are partial. They are the “first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23) or a kind of “first installment” (a financial term that meant a “down payment”) of final salvation (2 Corinthians 1:22). And most importantly for Paul, everything Christians experience in the present is unfinished (1 Corinthians 13:8–12). These “puzzling reflections in a mirror,” as the New English Bible puts it (1 Corinthians 13:12), are pointers to a future culmination.

An important dimension of Paul’s vision of salvation is his understanding of “justification by faith.” Paul draws this language from Jewish and Old Testament legal traditions. Justification refers to the act of making a broken relationship right. When Paul used this language in his letters, it was almost always linked to how Gentiles become part of a community that originated within Judaism and Israel’s covenant with God. The first Christians were Jewish. Very quickly, though, the message of Jesus attracted non-Jews to discipleship. Paul maintained that by their faith in Christ as God’s saving revelation, and not by following legal prescriptions, Gentiles became full participants in the church and heirs of the divine promises for the future complete renewal of the world. In this way Paul grasped the universal reach of God’s love as this was revealed in

the death and resurrection of Christ. Like the historical Jesus, who welcomed all to his table, Paul invited all to trust in God's generosity, which had now broken down traditional walls between Jews and Gentiles.

Faith as radical trust is the means by which God mends humanity's fractured relationship with God, as well as the great fissure that exists between human communities. For Paul, this entire experience is an astonishing gift. Our response to God's gift in Christ is a life of faith, hope, and love. Paul calls our response "faith working through love" (Galatians 5:6). Salvation in its complete sense remains primarily in the future: the full coming of the reign of God. But in the present, Christians participate in this final salvation in an anticipatory way. In a healed relationship with God, believers now give themselves in self-emptying service to others.

Sin and death are personal and structural for Paul, rather like an infection. Therefore, he believed salvation must come to all things. Paul linked the hope of salvation, experienced as a foretaste in the here and now, with a hope for the healing of the cosmos in Romans 8:19-23:

For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the children of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and will obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God.

We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labor pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies.

Just as a woman longs for her child to be born, Christ's followers, along with the whole creation, groan for the complete transformation of all that is. In Paul's view the whole creation is destined to participate in God's own freedom and glory (Romans 8:18-21). This vision gave Paul an invincible hope about the future, even in the midst of present suffering and sorrow.

Other New Testament books, especially Revelation, echo this conviction that salvation has a breadth that extends to the whole cosmos. In fact, in Revelation final deliverance is not about humans going "up to heaven," but about heaven coming down to earth. Final salvation is depicted in this book with the symbol of the New Jerusalem (Revelation 21): a city with open gates, sitting peacefully amid a renewed creation. The New Testament concludes with a reminder that salvation is not merely individual, but is communal and cosmic. The many-voiced biblical witness agrees. Salvation is not some kind of divine evacuation plan, but the work of God, in the present and the future, to bring all things to dwell fully in God's shalom.

Tradition

Salvation in the Christian faith has personal, corporate, and cosmic dimensions. The proclamation of the good news of salvation has thus taken many forms through the centuries. Often, however, overemphasizing a single theme has replaced the diversity of the Bible's rich imagery. In Western Christianity, many views of salvation have centered on the redemption of the individual soul from sin, guilt, and death, to the exclusion of the corporate and cosmic scope of salvation. Some of these views have unfortunately reduced salvation to believing in a particular theory of the meaning of Christ's death. Other interpretations have so emphasized the eternal aspects of salvation that they have excluded significant concern for justice within this world or have ignored the call to transform the world's structures. Some perspectives, on the other hand, have abandoned the future dimensions of salvation and focused only on historical life and experience. This ignores the reality of death and indeed the historic reality of mass death in the form of genocide and war, as well as the sheer limits that exist in human experience. One-sided approaches to salvation mean something of value will be lost.

Holistic interpretations of redemption have always had advocates throughout the history of the Christian church. In the second and third centuries, when Gnostic beliefs devalued the material creation and treated salvation as secret knowledge about the destiny of individual souls, important theologians combatted this view. Irenaeus of Lyon (130–202 CE) held that in the Incarnation God acts for the redemption of the whole embodied person. This includes the actual physical creation.² Perhaps few statements capture better an all-inclusive vision of human salvation than Irenaeus's famous maxim, "the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be what even he is himself."³ Salvation here is not a post-mortem reward, but a vision of the renewal and transformation of humanity. Irenaeus connects salvation not only to Christ's death but to the Incarnation, as well. Thus, he says that Christ came and restored humanity's freedom.⁴ Christ undoes what Adam did and gives humankind a fresh new start. Salvation affects the whole person because it

² See Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V.II.1–3 in *Ante-Nicene fathers*, vol. 1: *The Apostolic Fathers, Justin Martyr, Irenaeus*, ed. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995).

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book V. Preface.

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, Book III.V.3.

is the gift of the whole Christ: Incarnation, birth, life, teaching, ministry, death, and resurrection. God's preferred future is to draw all creation forward to share fully in God's own life. Salvation encompasses this life as well as the life of the age to come.

Medieval Christians were deeply occupied with the question of salvation. Their cultural and intellectual context is foreign to us today, which means we need to be careful not to deride medieval Christians' intense pursuit of eternal salvation. Our contemporary concern for the well-being of society and the environment was not their concern. Unlike postmoderns, medieval people lived in a world saturated with Christian symbols. These shaped every aspect of their lives, in a setting in which social structures were believed to be eternal. But their quest for the soul's salvation beyond death had positive social consequences. For example, many Christians in that period served Christ by caring for the sick. Seeking personal salvation contributed to the rise of hospitals in Europe.⁵ Others sought to follow Christ by helping the poor. St. Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) began life as son of a wealthy merchant but abandoned his life of comfort and luxury to care for the poor and sick. The Franciscan Order, which St. Francis began, embodied Christ's radical call to "sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mark 10:21).

Additionally, medieval theologians sought to bring all human knowledge into relationship with Christian doctrine. Two theologians deserve special mention: Albert the Great (1206–1280) and Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). These two thinkers helped reintroduce the ancient Greek thinker Aristotle's philosophy to the Western world. Without this philosophy, the rise of modern science is hard to imagine. In their search for eternal life, medieval Christians thus contributed important pieces to a more comprehensive view of salvation.

Many Christians in the late 1700s and early 1800s saw salvation not merely as a reward in the afterlife but as a way of life here and now. Various groups experimented with communitarian living. Following the biblical pattern from Jesus' ministry and the Book of Acts, they saw salvation as social and communal, not just individual. They experimented with sharing life in gathered communities: they held goods and property in common, and saw Christianity as embracing their life together now, as

⁵ See "hospitals" and "hospice movement" in *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd rev. ed., ed. F.L. Cross and E.A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

well as preparing them for life beyond death. Catholic and Eastern Orthodox monastic communities had already successfully followed this pattern for centuries. But new communitarian experiments, especially in the United States, arose among people of Protestant heritage. This communitarianism was a response to changing economic patterns, which arose from industrialization. But it was also a counter-response to the message of revivalist preachers that limited salvation to eternal life, understood as a gift received for making a certain kind of religious profession. Joseph Smith Jr. grew up in this context. His developing view of Zion as a gathered community shared much in common with other communitarian views of salvation. One could say that all these communitarian experiments had an instinct that something of the breadth of the Bible's view of salvation was missing from much religious experience.

Community of Christ emerged in a setting where the Christian doctrine of salvation had collapsed exclusively into concern about heaven and hell. It is to Joseph Smith's great credit that he was among those American Christians dissatisfied with the abusiveness and narrowed focus of this theology. The early Restoration movement was not alone in its concern to rediscover the broader vistas of salvation present in scripture. Joseph imagined that salvation was both a temporal and an eternal reality. It embraced the individual, the community, and ultimately Earth itself, and even included elements that would have been familiar to frontier Universalists. (Universalism held that all human beings would ultimately be saved.) In Joseph's early vision of salvation, God's grace is never seen as capricious and very few people are finally denied redemption. Salvation, too, as the early Restoration communities experienced it, had an intensely communal dimension to it. Joseph and the early church applied many communitarian ideals to their rethinking of scripture and tradition. "Zion," the city of God, which they borrowed from the Bible and from Puritan traditions of a covenant community, became an all-encompassing symbol of salvation for the early Restoration movement.

Yet this evolving early Latter Day Saint theology was not without problems. It increasingly came to interpret salvation as a commodity managed solely by the "right" church and therefore open to manipulation by human actions and special rites. Salvation became less the gift of a gracious God and more and more an achievement, magically tied to membership in and obedience to the church. The Reorganization eventually distanced itself from those developments, while retaining some

of the communal and this-worldly salvific emphases of the early Restoration.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries a theological movement arose that had direct consequences for Community of Christ's developing understanding of salvation. As noted in Chapter 7, industrialization brought misery to many workers in the cities of the United States. Horrible working and living conditions caused immense suffering for the urban poor. Many Christian churches ignored these social ills. Preachers urged people to seek salvation after death, which made Christianity irrelevant to the concerns of this life. However, some pastors and theologians, among them Walter Rauschenbusch, sought new ways to think about the Christian message of salvation. The Social Gospel movement arose in this context. It is in many ways a forerunner of contemporary theologies of liberation. Rauschenbusch was the chief thinker of this movement. After careful study of the Hebrew prophets and the message of Jesus, he concluded that the Christian churches had neglected, or even abandoned, the significant social dimension of salvation prominent in Jesus' message of the kingdom of God on Earth, and the Hebrew prophets' concern for justice to the poor.

Under the influence of revivalism, much Christian theology of the era had lost a holistic vision of salvation. Many churches spoke only of eternal salvation. Turning away from social conditions created by business and industry gave religious validation to dehumanizing and unjust practices. The Social Gospel movement, on the other hand, sought to help Christian faith and practice rediscover all the biblical dimensions of salvation. Rauschenbusch argued that human beings cannot be separated from the vast and intricate social webs of which they are part. A doctrine of salvation must take this truth into account. God does not redeem the individual independently of these social webs. Therefore, God calls the church to "Christianize" the social order. The church does this by applying the biblical principles of love, compassion, and justice for the poor to society's problems.⁶ Frederick M. Smith had inherited beliefs and images of Zion from the earlier RLDS tradition. But in Rauschenbusch's theology, Fred M. found new insight and resources for a more expanded vision of Zion as a transformed society.

⁶ See "Social Gospel" in Van Harvey, *Handbook of Theological Terms* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 223–24, and "Social Gospel" in Donald W. Musser and Joseph L. Price, eds., *New and Enlarged Handbook of Christian Theology* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2003), 468–70.

To this day in Community of Christ, we generally think of the salvation of individuals as meaningful only when we also speak of the redemption of communities, society, and the whole creation. The liberating truths of the gospel” (Doctrine and Covenants 155:7; 164:8a) have both individual and social dimensions. Salvation in our theology is neither an escape hatch from responsible life in the world nor a tool of judgment, terror, or manipulation. Jesus’ name means “salvation,” not “horror,” and whatever does not align with his ministry and teaching, and with his loving concern for people, is not worthy of the term salvation.

Indeed, the church cannot fix all the world’s problems. But to preach salvation without working to alter whatever deforms life—racism, sexism, nationalism, poverty, exploitation, violence, and ecocide—is to become complicit in evil. As the great Civil Rights leader the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. remarked in a famous sermon titled “A Knock at Midnight,” people come to the church seeking love, peace, and justice, but too often have found the church sanctioning violence or hate, or defending the status quo.⁷ For Community of Christ, salvation in the individual, communal, and cosmic senses is fully the work of God’s grace, which empowers us to right these and other wrongs. We stand in and are informed by traditions that go back to Christian beginnings. But we also listen for the voice of the Spirit today, calling the church in our life together to express “all of the dimensions of salvation” (D and C 163.2a)⁸ for the sake of a wounded world.

Application for Discipleship

Community of Christ grounds its understanding of salvation in the full picture of Jesus Christ, who as the divine Word made flesh shares the burden of human sin and oppression, and calls us all to change for the sake of the reign of God. We believe Jesus is God’s visible “Yes!” to creation: and that means to refugees, the incarcerated, the marginalized, the poor, and to the planet. In Christ God affirms that creation is not disposable but the object of God’s loving outreach. The cross in particular

⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., “A Knock at Midnight,” in *A Knock at Midnight: Inspiration from the Great sermons of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. C. Carson and P. Holloran (New York: IPM/Time Warner, 2000), 71–72.

⁸ Doctrine and Covenants 163.2a: “Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God’s shalom, invites all people to come and receive divine peace in the midst of the difficult questions and struggles of life. Follow Christ in the way that leads to God’s peace and discover the blessings of all of the dimensions of salvation.”

reveals that salvation comes at an unimaginable cost to God: divine love pours itself out for broken creatures. Baptism immerses us into the way of Jesus, which includes both his life and death. Dying with Christ, we enter into solidarity with all who yearn for God's loving embrace. Raised with Christ, we join in hope with all who work for a just and peaceful world. Salvation is misunderstood if seen only as a future reward. For Community of Christ salvation is always a way of life characterized by self-giving love (Philippians 2:1–13). This way of life opens us in hospitality to those who are different, especially those of other religions. Salvation without grace, humility, and charity would not be the salvation Jesus came to bring.

Community of Christ envisions salvation in a comprehensive way. Every dimension of salvation points back to Jesus Christ. God's saving embrace of the world, we believe, calls us to "create pathways in the world for peace in Christ to be relationally and culturally incarnate" (Doctrine and Covenants 163:3a). The church's concern for the suffering of the poor and the travail of creation's natural systems (Doctrine and Covenants 163.4a–b) are consistent in every way with who Jesus is and what he proclaimed.

Some Christians ask, "Are you saved?" How should we answer? Community of Christ believes the broad witness of scripture: salvation is a way of life lived in communion with God. We believe that this way of life is, from start to finish, a gift. God generously gives us this path and God's grace enables us to walk it. Salvation is so much more than life after death. It includes the invitation to live in intimate relationship with the Trinity here and now (John 17:3), which means in an ever-expanding love. It includes seeking the reign of God on earth (Matthew 6:10, 33). It includes concern for communities but also for the deeply threatened ecosystem. Clearly a better answer to the question, "Are you saved," must include the biblical authors' views that salvation is both present and future. Are we saved? "Already, but not yet!" Already, we are loved. But the poor suffer, all creation groans, and we cannot ignore the cries. This is the answer of a community that knows God's boundless love in the present but prays and works for the reign of God on earth, where poverty and abuse, hatred and suffering have ended.

Others may ask us, "How do you think salvation happens?" Community of Christ places no limits on the ways God reaches out to human beings. For some people, God's love comes in a single, life-changing moment in which they welcome Christ as their savior. But to hold that a single "born again" experience is the only way salvation

“happens” is unfaithful to the full witness of scripture. It is also untrue to our corporate journey. Others experience life in communion with God as a process of gradual growth or in several experiences over time. And yet others find service in community as the way they come to know God. We respect and appreciate all these experiences. This is because we understand salvation as graced communion with God in which persons experience the Spirit of love in increasing measure. From Jesus’ parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) we learn that whatever brings people into communion with God is cause for celebration.

What we believe about salvation has consequences for both human beings and the planet we call home. If we see salvation as something that happens separate from our life in the world, then this home can be thrown away. But if salvation has to do with the here and now reality of the world, in all its injustice, struggle, and chaos, then being good stewards of the only world we know becomes an urgent matter of faithful discipleship.

In our world the poor and vulnerable need to be saved *now*, not in some hoped-for afterlife. For those who are hungry now, a promise of future salvation and relief outside this world is hollow comfort (James 2:14–26). To tell someone who is oppressed by poverty, violence, or illness (physical or mental) that their suffering is somehow necessary to their salvation is to wound and oppress by our words. To fail to confront the people and systems that sponsor oppression and racism is to turn the Christian doctrine of salvation into a mascot of abuse. In the Spirit of the Hebrew prophets, Jesus dealt with the suffering he saw. To abolish poverty and end suffering is in full alignment with the heart of scripture, and with Jesus’ life.

Indeed, Community of Christ’s hope is not limited to this world. The message of Jesus and the Spirit’s love expressed in community give us resources to face our own mortality. Salvation encompasses everything, including how we live and how we die. In Paul’s words, “whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living” (Romans 14:8–9). We and all creatures have been embraced in a love that will not let us go, and in that love we remain secure. This is what it finally means to be saved.

Conclusion

Many elements shape our view of salvation. But central to Community of Christ's faith is that Jesus Christ shows God's unreserved love for the world. Through this lens we glimpse God's redeeming action in the world. The Spirit of God works ceaselessly to conserve, restore, and transform God's good creation. God's extravagant generosity shows us the way to life in its fullest: in love, justice, and compassion. This way of life does not place its trust in what the world considers wisdom or in material success or human might. It looks to Jesus whose way is peace and whose name means "salvation." As the church responds to the way of Jesus Christ, it embraces God's intent to save, restore, and make whole the groaning creation.

For Further Reading

Douglas John Hall, *Why Christian?* (Fortress, 1998), chapter 3.

Peter C. Hodgson, *Winds of the Spirit* (Westminster/John Knox, 1994), Chapter 15.

Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), Chapter 8: "The Person and Work of Christ," 168–204, and Chapter 10: "The Holy Spirit and the Christian Life," 232–58.

Rosemary R. Ruether, *Introducing Redemption in Christian Feminism*, Introduction in *Feminist Theology 1* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).

Nicola Slee, *Faith and Feminism: An Introduction to Christian Feminist Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2003).

Testimony by Karin Peter

One evening when I called home from a summer reunion Ray told me that on his morning walk there was a homeless man with a Pitbull. As he passed, the dog lunged at him. Ray put out his arm to deflect the dog and ended up with a large gash across his hand. Ray wrapped his hand in

paper towels from the nearby convenience store, asked the homeless man for his identification, and notified the police.

When the officer arrived he took Ray's statement and then talked with the owner of the dog. At the end of the conversation the officer turned to Ray and asked, "Mr. Peter, what do you want to see happen here? How can this be resolved?" At first, looking at his wounded hand, what Ray really wanted was for this dangerous dog not to be around people. As he gave it more thought he realized this would mean the man would lose his dog. Without his dog for protection the man and his belongings would not be safe. All of this went through Ray's mind; then he answered, "I want this man to learn how to control his dog." The dog's owner agreed to control his dog more effectively and everyone departed.

The incident was over, but it was not resolved. Ray was concerned. How would the man learn to control the dog? Would the dog attack someone else and be taken away? Each day when he passed the same man and dog, he would offer to share some techniques for training the dog but each offer was met with a gruff "no thanks." Ray decided to try a different approach. He started carrying a dog biscuit with him each time we went out walking. Each day, with the owner's permission, he would give the dog a treat. Through this daily ritual he learned the man's name was Dan and his Pitbull is named Riot. Soon Riot began to watch for Ray and before Ray gave her the treat Riot learned to sit quietly and to gently take the biscuit from Ray's hand.

In the following months Dan and Ray began to see each other differently. Dan became concerned when Ray missed a day or two of walking. Ray was delighted when Dan found temporary employment. The incident that brought them together faded into the background as a relationship developed.

As we receive God's grace it changes how we treat those around us. We learn to extend grace to others by making choices based on the teachings and actions of Jesus. This allows us to consider the circumstances and desires of others as well as our own. Salvation becomes more than an individual event. It is the process of sharing that divine encounter with others, inviting them to reconcile, to be restored, and to be whole. While I do not think Ray set out that morning to purposely model salvation, I do believe that because he had experienced the restoring, saving purposes of God, he was able to live into a way of salvation that would bring healing and wholeness to Dan and Riot. It also challenges me to look anew at my interactions with others. How might I live the restoring purposes of God if I ask myself at each encounter: What do you

want to see happen here? How can this be resolved in ways that bring to life the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ?

Spiritual Practice: Circles of Salvation

This practice is inspired by the Buddhist prayer of loving kindness. In this prayer, one begins by blessing oneself and gradually expands outward from there, eventually wishing good intentions for the entire world and all beings, even our enemies. Likewise, in this Circles of Salvation, one begins by acknowledging the gift of salvation for oneself, and then moves to loved ones and friends, to all people, and to all of creation.

You may light a candle or sound a chime to indicate your intention to begin this prayer practice, which can be offered in a group or individually. Allow yourself to come reverently into the presence of the Divine. Find a comfortable position. Take several deep breaths, allowing your body and mind to relax and focus on prayer. Greet God in a way that is natural for you, and give thanks for this time of awareness of Spirit

Saving God, cleanse my heart. Accept the confession of my flaws and failures, and make me whole. Transform me, O God, that I may know and live into your saving grace and become whole once again. [*Pause for 20 seconds.*]

Saving God, I give thanks for all those whom I know and love, and those with whom I struggle, for each is created and loved by you. May I remember that salvation is theirs as well. May they know and live into your saving grace and become whole once again. [*Pause for 20 seconds.*]

Saving God, there are many of your children in communities around the world, both far and near, who have not yet learned that they too are part of your dream of shalom in this world. May all of your people come to know and live into your saving grace and become whole once again. [*Pause for 20 seconds.*]

God of all creation, stir within us a deep connection with everything you have created; make us aware of the sacred nature of all that surrounds us and lead us into deep reverence that cultivates nurturing actions. May all of your creation be saved from greed, violence, and senseless destruction. [*Pause for 20 seconds.*]

May these prayers of concern, compassion, and transformation for ourselves, others, all people, and the earth lead us into a world shaped by your unconditional love and eternal salvation, O God. Amen.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. How do you respond when someone asks if you have been saved? How is God's salvation more than about what happens to me as an individual?
2. From what and to what are we saved? What is your personal experience with salvation?