Salvation: Contrasting concepts and church conflicts

Thomas Finger

Why do people come to church? Various possibilities suggest themselves. Some may be attracted by the fellowship or friendships available. Others are drawn by desire for worship. Many parents prioritize education and peer relationships for their children. Still other folks participate mainly in outreach ministries.

What is that deeper something that most people desire? I propose that it is salvation, defined as deliverance from their deepest fears and wounds, and attainment of their greatest fulfillment, in this life and beyond.

Let me suggest, though, that whatever the ostensible reason, most people are drawn by something deeper. This deeper reason often surfaces when trouble strikes: a family member or friend becomes seriously ill, a close relationship becomes troubled, or someone is fired or loses a home. It is then that the other things that draw people—a church's fellowship or worship, its teaching or its capacity for outreach—become most meaningful, or else seriously fail.

What is that deeper something that most people desire? I propose that it is salvation, which I define, provisionally, as deliverance from people's deepest fears and wounds, and attainment of their greatest fulfillment, in this life and beyond.

Basic convictions

Anabaptist-minded churches do not always recognize this desire. Some, I suspect, lack a well-defined, or *explicit*, understanding of salvation. Vague, conflicting notions probably circulate among leaders and members. Nevertheless, I propose that even these notions influence most church activities, for they operate as *implicit* understandings[1] or basic convictions.[2] But what are they?

Most people suppose that beliefs are always explicit, clearly defined concepts. An implicit belief or basic conviction, though,

is a less formulated sense of what really matters in life. Basic convictions about salvation are about people's deepest fears and wounds and highest aspirations. Everyone, I propose, has some of these and therefore has basic convictions about salvation.

Most people, however, do not fully recognize what these convictions are. Some even believe and affirm explicitly something other than what they really believe implicitly. For instance, some people who think they believe in truthfulness lie when it is to their advantage. The implicit belief or basic conviction that guides their actions is really: Lie when it is advantageous.

Church conflicts

As any student of congregational conflict knows, the issues debated often differ at least in part from the real, underlying issues; that is, some underlying issues are implicit. They are neither fully acknowledged nor fully recognized by many participants. It is quite possible, then, that implicit theological convictions may be among these issues, and that some differences elude resolution because no one recognizes or deals with them.

Consider, for instance, these common situations: Some adults complain that education classes deal only with relational and social issues and never mention the Bible or pray together. Adults who like these discussions, however, complain that worship services contain too many emotional songs, long prayers, and pietistic expressions. The first group is concerned that the church's outreach ministries are only social. But the second group is uncomfortable with any emphasis on witnessing.

Such conflicts may have little to do with education, worship, or outreach, and much to do, at bottom, with salvation. In such cases, I propose, theology can help—if we understand theology not as debating explicit convictions but as the attempt to render implicit beliefs explicit.

Theology, as I understand it, emerges in the midst of church life, where much is being said and done, when questions arise about what, more specifically, members should say or do about certain issues. Suppose a congregation teaches that people are saved through a simple faith profession, and it receives many members who make one. But before long, most of these new "converts" cease attending. Church members might then ask,

What, more precisely, should we believe and say about salvation? They might then work out a theological statement, which would be grounded in scripture, but it would also be phrased in a way that resolved problems connected with their earlier understanding, and it could guide their future practice.

If we ask, What fears, hopes, practices, and (of course) scriptures gave rise to explicit theological formulations? we can glimpse the implicit concerns and questions lying behind them. We can appreciate the living concerns that gave rise to them. We will find, moreover, that well-known, explicit formulations of salvation express fairly well most of the implicit beliefs found in any congregation. That is, these concepts were not simply invented by theologians but articulate basic convictions held by many Christians. For this reason, these concepts can help us understand and deal with these convictions.

Basic concepts of salvation

To illustrate this dynamic, I will now look at four explicit concepts of salvation and indicate how they express basic convictions that underlie differences in many congregations. I begin with a brief story.

One day a young man who witnessed enthusiastically about his faith noticed an elderly gentleman wearing a clerical collar walking down a street ahead of him. Catching up, the young man called out: "Brother, are you saved?" The elderly cleric stopped, pondered for a moment, and then replied: "Yes, partially, and no." For once, the young man was baffled.

However opaque the cleric's response might seem, it corresponds closely to the biblical material. As we will now see, the Bible often mentions salvation as a past event of which we can be assured, but also as an ongoing process in which we participate, and even as a future event which we anticipate.[3]

Salvation as justification. This understanding of salvation was heavily stressed during the Protestant Reformation. Luther, Calvin, and others called justification by faith "the article by which the church stands or falls." These Reformers knew that salvation affects all stages of life and involves human activity. Yet they protested that Catholics were focusing too much on the human side and making "works" the cause of salvation. But God

alone, they insisted, brings salvation, and humans are entirely dependent on God's activity.

To prioritize God's work and distinguish it clearly from ours, they conceptualized salvation's basis in legal terms. In human affairs, someone can be guilty but be declared innocent by a legal verdict—and even be granted favors instead. Consequently, if we conceive salvation resting on a divine verdict—that people are righteous when they are not yet personally righteous—then salvation, at its core, can be understood as entirely God's work. God's initiating work, moreover, can be clearly distinguished from human works, for it alone makes the latter possible.

The Reformers accordingly highlighted biblical texts where righteousness is "reckoned" or granted "apart from works."[4] This righteousness was received "by faith," which they portrayed as quite passive. When someone accepted the verdict of righteousness which God "reckoned" or "imputed," that person was "justified by faith."

Luther, Calvin, and others taught that anyone who was truly justified by faith would produce good works. This continuing process of salvation they called *sanctification*. They also realized that many Christians experienced justification and sanctification not as two distinct realities but as aspects of the same process. Nevertheless, they sharply differentiated the actualities and concepts of justification and sanctification. They feared that if these were not distinguished, people would mix up God's work with their own and suppose that salvation depended on the latter.

Nearly two centuries later, evangelical revivals arose. By now, many evangelists equated justification with an identifiable conversion experience. But they still phrased their message in legal terms. They first made listeners aware, often vividly, of God's guilty verdict. Then they exhorted people to accept God's decree of forgiveness—to receive the righteousness reckoned or imputed through Christ.

Many evangelists understood this transaction within a Calvinistic framework. They thought that everyone who responded by faith had been predestined to attain salvation and could never fall away from it.[5] For most practical purposes, then, justification equaled salvation. Promoting it through conversion became many a church's main task. For Christians, this event lay in the past.

Such an understanding is usually assumed when people speak of salvation as a one-time event, or ask, When were you saved?

The Bible, indeed, often describes salvation as a past event, and as God's act: "By grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works."[6]

In today's churches, what kind of people equate salvation with justification, at least implicitly, and consider it extremely important? Usually, such people strongly desire God's acceptance in this life and beyond and sense their inability to attain or deserve it. They are convinced that salvation alone makes Christian life possible and that it depends on something definite that only God can do.

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Consequently, when their congregation seldom or never mentions this transcendent event, they worry that it is neglecting—or even denying—salvation. Such people access this transcendent realm through prayer and scripture reading. If these practices appear only perfunctorily in church life, they worry that salvation's source and reality are being dangerously obscured. When they hear or think they hear only about good works on interpersonal and social levels, they fear that their church is promoting false confidence in human ability.

But when such people criticize social ministries, they may not really suppose that those programs are bad. When they criticize Christian education or worship, they may not be complaining as much about what happens as about what does not.

Moreover, if we take seriously biblical texts where salvation originates with God and is accomplished in the past, we realize that such people are calling attention to something important, however indirectly they may express it. Nonetheless, if they equate salvation, explicitly or implicitly, with justification, they are overlooking important aspects which others may be stressing.

Salvation as sanctification. Considered as justification, salvation is primarily deliverance *from* something: judgment and hell, or low self-esteem and failure, for example. It *restores* people to Eve and Adam's original state. The biblical narrative, however,

points forward, toward a climax: the coming of a new heaven and earth (Revelation 21–22). Salvation is also liberation *for* something. It *transforms* people for God's future.

Salvation, then, was not entirely completed in the past. People who overstress the past dimension of salvation may miss God's main reason for delivering them in the first place. Salvation in scripture is also a present, ongoing process involving human activity. Paul encouraged his readers to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you" (Phil. 2:12-13).[7]

While the Reformers, to underline God's priority, distinguished this process from justification and called it sanctification, Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism had long interrelated divine and human activity more closely. But in the West, the issue of whose action is prior arose in the fifth century, and Catholics resolved it another way than the Reformers did.

According to one party, called semi-Pelagians, humans must take the first step—must prepare for grace—so that God will respond.[8] But the semi-Augustinians objected: the semi-Pelagian position implies that we can deserve grace. Because of sin's strength, however, we cannot prepare ourselves adequately. God must take the first step, solely by grace, to enable us to respond. This divine action frees us enough to begin obeying God, and it continues if we keep depending on God's initiating activity.[9]

People who equate salvation with sanctification are convinced that a so-called salvation that does not transform individuals or situations, and that requires no human involvement, cannot be salvation.

Catholics adopted semi-Augustinianism.[10] This position helps us understand how we can interact with God (sanctification) yet depend wholly on God's prior action (justification). Nevertheless, people who stress sanctification can assume that salvation always included their action or depended partly on them. They can become implicitly semi-Pelagian, or even reduce salvation to its human side.

During the Reformation, Anabaptists emphasized human interaction more than the Reformers. Anabaptists are often characterized as Pelagian or semi-Pelagian.[11] I have argued elsewhere, though, that most of them were, or were close to, semi-Augustinian.[12] At the Council of Trent (1546–1547), Catholics

responded to the Reformers by reaffirming semi-Augustinianism. In this respect I find Anabaptists closer to Catholics.

Later in the sixteenth century, Arminians affirmed similar views against extreme Calvinists. Arminianism loomed large among the Methodists and many subsequent evangelistic movements.[13] From the start, Arminians have been criticized as Pelagians and semi-Pelagians—like the Anabaptists and with similar inaccuracies.

Arminians also shaped current Anabaptist understandings of salvation, though more implicitly than explicitly. Most Anabaptists now call their version of sanctification *discipleship*. Before turning to church conflicts again, let us briefly consider this view.

Salvation as discipleship. In the 1940s, after centuries of scorning Anabaptists as Pelagian heretics, historians were viewing them more accurately. At the same time, Mennonites were migrating into mainstream America. To portray Anabaptism more accurately and acceptably, Harold Bender called it "consistent evangelical Protestantism."[14] Yet he highlighted not only continuity with the Reformers but also three distinct Anabaptists themes: discipleship, the church as a voluntary brotherhood, and "an ethic of love and nonresistance as applied to all human relationships."[15]

Bender assumed that salvation flowed from God's transcendent activity.[16] Nevertheless, all three distinctives could be and have often been understood as social-ethical practices, or as sanctification, without reference to God's prior action. We have noticed that while justification is inseparably linked to sanctification, the sharp conceptual distinction between them can in practice separate the first from the second. Similarly, although Bender considered discipleship intrinsically dependent on God's action, the first, if stressed by itself, can in practice be separated from the second. Today's Anabaptists can emphasize following Jesus so exclusively that they reduce salvation to its human side, to discipleship/sanctification.

In today's churches, what kind of people equate salvation with sanctification, at least implicitly, and consider it extremely important? These people usually value salvation's goal of personal and corporate transformation. They are convinced that a so-called salvation that does not transform individuals or situations, and that requires no human involvement, cannot be salvation.

Consequently, when congregational life overflows with pious prayers, emotional songs, personal testimonies, and scripture citations, but mentions social and ethical concerns only perfunctorily, these people can worry that salvation's concrete, transforming reality is being neglected or denied. If salvation seems to be restricted to people's past, they can fear that their church is not really focusing on the divine but on human experiences and self-fulfillment. When they hear, or think they hear, only about spiritual witnessing, they may feel unsupported in their desire to minister to social needs.

But when such people criticize worship or emotionalism, they may not really be questioning faith's personal and affective dimensions. They may be assuming it without question. But like many Mennonites of yesteryear, they may be reticent to speak of their faith or feelings. To do so, as they see it, is to focus on themselves, not on God and their neighbors. Like people who view salvation as justification, those who understand it as sanctification/discipleship may be complaining more about what does not happen in church than about what does happen.

If we take seriously biblical texts that describe salvation as ongoing transformation, these people are calling attention to something important, however indirectly they may express it. Nonetheless, if they equate salvation, explicitly or implicitly, with sanctification, they are overlooking important aspects that others may be stressing.

We must experience the dynamic intertwining of salvation's spiritual and ethical, divine and human dimensions. The concept of Christomorphic divinization might help us communicate salvation's wonder in a world that needs it badly.

Salvation as Christomorphic divinization. Salvation is something God initiates, that becomes a reliable past event, yet that transforms us through active involvement until God's reign fully arrives. The best conceptualization of this I have found may be called *divinization*, though it can misleadingly imply that humans literally become God.

Divinization really means "transformation by divine energies."[17] *Transformation* indicates the continuing process involving human activity. *By divine energies* indicates its origin in and accomplishment by God. This transformation is both thorough and divinely effected because the ener-

gies are God's own dynamic reality, not created powers that aid us indirectly.

Scripture often describes qualities such as righteousness, peace, and love as God's own, which in turn are sources of these qualities in humans. God's direct bestowal of them is most evident in the work of the Holy Spirit, God's own self, within us. Our bodies are God's own temple because God the Holy Spirit dwells directly within us.[18] Such an indwelling will surely transform us, yet it can only come from God.

However, divinization and even sanctification can be understood ethereally and vaguely. These terms can be thrown about abstractly, without specific content, without even referring to Jesus' teachings. In this respect, discipleship is preferable to both sanctification and divinization, because it includes this content.[19] To ensure that divinization includes this dimension, I add the term *Christomorphic*.

Early Anabaptists may have understood salvation more often as divinization than in any other way.[20] Many of them stressed becoming "participants of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4), and perhaps above all emphasized the new birth, which likewise involves divine origination and thorough human transformation. Their high ethical expectations arose not from Jesus' teaching and example alone but chiefly from this conviction about radical transformation which made faithful living possible.

To be sure, a new concept will hardly resolve church struggles arising from other notions of salvation. We must first experience a dynamic intertwining of salvation's spiritual and ethical, divine and human dimensions. But if we then reflect on it, the concept of Christomorphic divinization might help us clarify and communicate salvation's wonder in a world that needs it badly.

Notes

[1] "Implicit theology" is Robert Friedmann's term (*The Theology of Anabaptism: An Interpretation* [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1973], 21–22).

[2] "Basic convictions" is James McClendon's term (*Systematic Theology,* vol. 1, *Ethics* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986], 23).

[3] For future salvation, see, e.g., Matt. 10:22; Rom. 5:9-10; 1 Cor. 3:15; 1 Thess. 5:8-9; 1 Tim. 4:15; 2 Peter 1:4-5, 2:2; Heb. 9:28; Rev. 12:10. For past salvation, see note 6 below; for future salvation, note 7 below.

[4] Especially Rom. 4:1-12. Faith and works are also contrasted in Gal. 2:16, 3:1-14, and Rom. 3:27-31, 9:32, 11:6.

[5] Many other evangelists, such as John Wesley, were Arminians who challenged predestination and the absolute certainty that the justified could ever fall away. Still, even Wesley's movement included a strong Calvinistic wing.
[6] Eph. 2:8-9. "By grace you have been saved" also appears in verse 4. See also Titus 3:4-5: "When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy"; also Luke 7:50, 18:42; Acts 16:30-33; Eph. 1:11-14; 1 Tim. 1:13-16; 2 Tim. 2:8-10; Jude 3.
[7] Also see, for example, Luke 19:9; Acts 2:47; 1 Cor. 1:18, 15:2; 2 Cor. 6:1-2; James 1:21; 2 Pet. 3:14-15.
[8] Semi-Pelagianism was a modification of the more extreme view of the British monk Pelagius, that humans can basically obey God. Pelagius reduced God's role to creating us with a free will and conscience, and giving us commandments through Moses or conscience.
[9] Semi-Augustinianism modified Augustine's more extreme view which virtually made God, rather than us, the real agent of our good deeds. Augustine, whom the Reformers generally followed, also taught that God had predestined some people to salvation, and others to damnation, and that the first group could never fall away.
[10] They did so at the Council of Orange in 529. Although this remained the official Catholic position, the Reformers complained that most Catholics were actually semi-Pelagians (as a result of the process described next).
[11] On Pelagius, see note 8 above.
[12] Thomas Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 468–90.
[13] Cf. note 5 above.
[14] Harold S. Bender, *The Anabaptist Vision* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1944), 13; Anabaptism was "the culmination of the Reformation, the fulfillment of the original vision of Luther and Zwingli" (ibid.).
[15] Ibid., 20, 26–31. The most important was discipleship, which Bender called "the essence of Christianity" (20).
[16] Though he hardly mentioned this transcendent activity in *The Anabaptist Vision*, Bender stressed elsewhere that the church must be understood in light of "transcendent" phrases like "in Christ," which express "the utter dependence and close intimacy between Christ and the Church" (*These Are My People: The Nature of the Church and Its Discipleship according to the New Testament* [Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1962], 25). This Christ is "the living present Savior who accomplishes our present salvation and continues to be in us and to be in His church as it ministers the saving Gospel" ("Who is the Lord?" in *The Lordship of Christ*, ed. Cornelius J. Dyck [Elkhart, IN: Mennonite World Conference, 1962], 135).
[17] This is the common understanding of divinization in Eastern Orthodoxy, classically articulated by Gregory Palamas (1296–1359).
[18] 1 Cor. 3:16-17, 6:13-20.
[19] Orthodox and Catholic teachings on divinization, however, often present it as transformation into Christ's likeness, attained by following his example and teachings.
[20] Most who did not still viewed salvation as far-reaching "ontological transformation" (cf. Finger, *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology*, 113–32).

About the author

Thomas Finger is an independent writer and scholar who also repesents Mennonite Church USA in national and international ecumenical circles.