

# Salvation in Hispanic Protestant perspective

Jose Ortiz

**H**ispanic Protestants don't have a long history in defining the Christian faith tradition, and the practice we have had has been experiential and embedded in oral tradition. Our understanding of concepts such as salvation is emerging, and the most I can offer are some descriptive landscapes.

My own pastoral sojourn is an effort to balance the biblical text, the headlines in the media, and a spiritual discipline to

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sustain our newly acquired faith. Our confessional community exhibits a high view of scripture and a romance with biblical stories so colorful in the Spanish language—especially those with clear salvation themes.

It took hundreds of years to develop the salvation motifs of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Jesus is the central figure in the salvation agenda. The book of Acts provides cases rather than definitions. In the book of Revelation, a body of literature speaks to a realm beyond human history. And

this panorama evident in the New Testament all emerged within the first hundred years of Christian history. Salvation language is revealed and refined in these texts, and then we enter the journey.

## **Balancing the biblical text and the existential**

In doing theology from a non-European perspective, I approach themes from real life as issues emerge in or burst upon the daily press. In doing so, I do not intend to devalue a historical approach to scripture, or to deny the value of biblical exegesis, both basic components of respectable biblical inquiry.

Traditionally, biblical study starts from the biblical text, surveys opinions on how the text has been treated historically,

and concludes with contemporary applications to the Christian life. In contrast, third world writers are likely to follow the call to be existential or to respond to the here and now as they feel the pulse of changing circumstances. The existential moment creates the context for theological discussion and biblical interpretation. Writers taking this approach are making a statement that this moment is what people care about most as they survey biblical themes in the search for meaning. These writers are my mentors.

At the beginning of this century, economists were studying Latin American economies that were going bankrupt. These scholars were doing their research, publishing, forecasting, and projecting their data. The popular press reacted by labeling them *economistas perfumados* (perfumed economists), thinkers whose work seemed remote from the real life import of the realities they studied. We cannot afford to be perfumed biblical interpreters, engaged in writing abstract theological treatises about salvation. The topic is timely, and the need is urgent.

The trail of salvation as a theme is an intriguing one. From colonial America we still hear the echo of Jonathan Edwards preaching on “sinners in the hands of an angry God.” In the 1920s, Aimee Semple McPherson is said to have roared down the aisle of her temple in Los Angeles on a motorcycle, shouting “Stop! You’re speeding to hell!” Later Billy Graham in a more subdued mood invited people “to come to Jesus ... just as you are.” The 1970s challenged Americans from all walks of life to “be born again,” as President Jimmy Carter had been. Hollywood entered with a warning not to be “left behind” and asking us to witness the drama of *The Passion*. Now the call to Christian commitment is couched as pursuit of a purpose-driven life.

### **Windows with a view**

One window on salvation opened for me when I was conducting a Bible study for emerging Christian believers. An assertive young man asked, “Salvation from what?” and “Salvation for what?” His questions awakened me to the need to refine the definitions of salvation for emerging believers, for myself, and for those with seniority in the pews.

Another window on the issue of salvation opened for me when the religious press covered a multinational gathering of Christian

theologians in Bangkok in the mid-1970s. Press releases and the assembly's summary statements indicated that traditional definitions of salvation were in need of an overhaul. The concept was overburdened with the baggage of the missionary movement, which was regarded as colonialist, from its beginnings with Cristóbal Colón ("Christ bearer" Christopher Columbus), to the latest missionary movements at the close of the century. The appetite for statistics within sending missionary agencies and the church growth movement had tipped the scales in favor of salvation understood in

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terms of individuals and the afterlife, and suited to accounting and reporting to constituencies back home.

At Bangkok, the problem was how to view salvation in light of political systems that oppress masses of people who face poverty, exploitation, lack of necessities of life, and inadequate access to health care and education. To expect to develop healthy and responsible Christians in the midst of social injustice is utopian, but in an egalitarian society salvation is also an open agenda. The population of Japan is skilled, economically stable, and politically mature, yet their society has a high rate of suicide, year after year. What is the meaning of salvation today to a well-orchestrated society like theirs? What is its meaning in Canada or the U.S.?

A third window on salvation opened in my post-seminary days when I read *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, by Dean Kelley.<sup>1</sup> His thesis was simple: for conservative churches, salvation is the agenda. In the years when Kelley's research was done, salvation was often equated with the promise of a supernatural life after death. Mainline churches were enticing people by offering recreation, opportunity for acquisition of skills, and comradeship; they provided services and facilities for bringing people together. The modern megachurches have gone a step farther by supplying services and activities from the cradle to the grave. They grow, buy land, build temples, and pave parking lots as never before. And the emphasis is not on belief but on belonging. Denominational loyalty is at a low, and theological heritage is of little interest. Salvation calls for a new set of definitions for emerging believers as the new century begins to unfold.

My own religious upbringing tended to cast any spiritual inquiry in future terms. I was raised in one of the barrios of Coamo on the island of Puerto Rico. The timber of my grandparents' old house was used to build the local parish church on a piece of land that belonged to our family farm. The young nun who prepared us to receive our first communion taught us the answers to the questions the priest would ask. We learned that the next part of our examination would come at death, when we would need to respond in like manner to God's testing of us. My first exposure to faith construed it as a cognitive exercise. Faith and salvation—the right religious answers—were stored for future use. The here and the now, that was another agenda.

### **Encountering salvation themes in Old and New Testaments**

I have learned that the Hebrew Bible understands salvation as liberation or emancipation. By implication, salvation points to acts of God that liberate humanity from the power of sin and death. Sometimes God uses instruments (Samson, for example) to deliver the blessings of salvation and liberation, but at other times God acts directly to save (Exod. 14:13, 15:13). Spiritual and political aspects of salvation intermingle (see, for example, Judg. 3:9, Neh. 9:27). The Psalms and Job contain poetic tributes to this liberating God; "I know that my Redeemer lives" (Job 19:25) is a classic confession of confidence in divine deliverance from the midst of trauma. By the time of Isaiah, messianism emerges, and apocalyptic overtones begin to be woven into the fiber of religious expression about salvation, as in Isaiah 53.

God's plan for saving humankind begins with God's choice of a people to be a blessing to others (Gen. 12:1-3). God calls Abraham to leave Ur and begin a faith journey. Signs of redemption of a people eventually surface more clearly in the Exodus from Egypt. Messianic and prophetic initiatives continue to form a people with a sense of a destiny.

This brief survey of Old Testament understandings of salvation takes me to my years as a student in the Instituto Bíblico Menonita in La Plata, Puerto Rico. Early in 1959, the students at the Bible institute were euphoric when Fidel Castro entered Havana. The *barbudos* (bearded ones) had arrived in Cuba's capital, the Fulgencio Batista dictatorship was removed, and a

new cadre of leaders took charge of the national reconstruction program. This salvation enterprise seemed to come from the pages of the Old Testament. Forty-five years later, Castro is still in power, and the Cuban revolution is an enigma to the pundits.

Mortimer Arias, writing about the kingdom from a Latin American perspective, develops his themes by describing the coming of the Sandinistas to Managua, to save the republic. I visited Nicaragua in the mid-1980s, and at the Sandino airport the slogan in big letters read, *Bienvenido a Nicaragua, territorio libre de América* (Welcome to Nicaragua, free country of America). As in Cuba, national heroes take over, salvation is at hand, and

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### **Jesus as Savior in the New Testament**

The term *salvation* is linked to the Hebrew name *Joshua* (JHWH saves), the Hebrew form of the name *Jesus*. Jesus is the centerpiece of salvation history in the literature of the Gospels. A transformational salvation story comes from Luke the historian as he de-

scribed the exchange between Jesus and Zaccheus (Luke 19:1-10). Jesus takes the initiative and declares to Zaccheus that “today salvation has come to this house” (v. 9). And he continues, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (v. 10). Was salvation the result of a request from Zaccheus? Was salvation the message or the messenger?

The story begs for definitions and details. What we can say is that in it a corrupt person encounters Jesus, makes restitution for sinful behavior in the past, and is declared saved. The use of words of salvation, the casual atmosphere, and the human side of the story call us to speak of salvation in simple terms and acknowledge that people respond to the message of Jesus and to the language of salvation. The salvation experience need not be a convulsive event associated with trauma and manipulation. It may even happen through the Christian education curriculum in a low-key mode that does not lead the one saved to identify a place, a date, or the person who led them to the Savior.

As a young pastor in my early twenties, I was leading a Bible study in a home. The father of the family would get drunk on weekends and thus became a nuisance for our neighborhood and an embarrassment to his wife and children. In the course of our conversation in the living room, we came face-to-face with the reality that the salvation story appeals to those searching for meaning in life. I asked the head of the household if he was willing to consider accepting Jesus as Savior. His response, “Why not?” took me by surprise. That evening, salvation came to that home, and on Sunday he ushered his family into church. His salvation from bondage to alcohol caught the attention of the community and became a witness to a God who acts to save. Is this picture simplistic?

A second New Testament story of salvation is more typical of Protestant religious revivals in North America, and of evangelistic campaigns in Latin America today. The conversion of the Philippian jailer is portrayed in Acts 16:16-34 in living color, complete with sound effects! It provides a classic line: “What must I do to be saved” (v. 30). The response is also a classic in some religious circles: “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved” (v. 31).

For evangelistic preaching, John 3:16-17 is a cornerstone text. It is also the verse of the new convert on the street corner who feels an urge to preach. When I was a seminarian, I watched from my Philadelphia apartment as such a person took up the requisite big black Bible, megaphone, and American flag, preparatory to facing passersby on the sidewalk. Yes, those images are fading away. Should they? What can replace them?

### **Is salvation language a witness or a hindrance?**

When my family became part of the local Mennonite church, we received calendars at the beginning of each year. They had no pictures but only biblical texts printed in large letters. One of those texts was “Salvation is found in no one else” (Acts 4:12). Those who produced the calendar used a version of the Bible in antiquated Spanish, and the word *salvation* was replaced by the term *salud* (health). As a youngster, I had a hard time understanding the meaning of the verse. *Salvation* and *salud* were not synonymous, as I understood the words.

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As I considered that text, I observed the Mennonite workers. They came to La Plata and planted a hospital, built latrines, and developed an anti-tropical parasite program to improve the health of the *campesinos*, including my family. When asked why, they told us they were believers in Christ and were serving in Puerto Rico instead of participating in the war in Korea. As the Mennonite health program developed, missionary activity began, and the salvation agenda came into the picture. Workers evangelized and planted congregations in rural Puerto Rico. Salvation and health came together.

When I was teaching at Eastern Mennonite Seminary (Harrisonburg, VA), I confided to a local minister that some seminarians seemed to consider religious pluralism a valid expression of faith today. He reported seeing those tendencies among parishioners in mature congregations. In America now, people of other religious traditions are becoming our neighbors; we encounter them at school meetings, community gatherings, doctors' offices, and on the job. Pluralism has entered our daily life, and we feel pressure to be politically correct. Yes, religious syncretism is at our doorstep, and with it the suggestion that all religions lead to God. But such pluralism is not a new phenomenon. The Hebrew people struggled with the issue, and their encounter with it is one of the reasons we have the Ten Commandments and a canon. I believe that speaking assertively of our relationship with God as a salvation experience is a contemporary way to express our tradition of nonconformity to the world.

A second malaise affecting our churches is that we are increasingly biblically illiterate and uninterested in denominational loyalty. We have a multitude of Bible translations, access to resources in the Internet, and an abundance of religious audiovisuals, yet we lack familiarity with a core of biblical stories and texts that have been the bedrock of Christian thought. We have disposed of biblical absolutes, and relativism has become matter of course. In the 1970s, John Westerhoff asked, "Will our children have faith?"<sup>2</sup> The question now is, do we adults still have biblical faith at the beginning of this century?

In this new century, North American Christians have begun to borrow from the marketplace tactics for drawing crowds into our churches. Research on demographics leads us to select sites for large facilities, pave acres for parking, and watch as people fill the pews. We provide options: a Saturday service to fit in after shopping stops, a contemporary service for early risers on Sunday mornings, traditional services for seniors, and a Sunday evening service to catch the ones that don't fit another category. A movement that began with gatherings for the *paroikoi* (sojourners) has moved on to catacombs, churches, cathedrals, megachurches, and now metachurches of more than ten thousand members.

It is a success story, and who can argue with success these days? But have we embraced the American dream of a gospel without a cross? We should be prepared to give an account of our faith, of a salvation story that entails the cross and calls believers to be more than consumers of religious services as commodities. Salvation language, salvation symbols, salvation as passages in the lives of believers: these are at risk.

### **Confessions and a conclusion**

In Christian formation classes at Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor (Goshen, IN), I discover that new members still speak openly of coming to faith. They name the dates and circumstances of radical conversion experiences, and they identify the person who led them to faith. For many of them, coming to Christian faith has meant parting ways with relatives and with popular religion in their community. It has entailed choosing to gather with a small group of believers. These new believers display an almost countercultural assertiveness in witnessing to their new faith in Jesus as Savior.

C. S. Lewis throughout his life kept asking and answering the question, What have you been saved for? His answer: For service, ministry, and for my own transformation.<sup>3</sup> In accepting the saving grace of God, I discovered a center to gravitate toward as I faced the big questions of life. In light of my coming to Christ, I decided on a vocation. When I chose a wife with whom to raise a family, and in times of changing service options, my faith was my point of reference. As I face life as a senior and the prospect of physical death, my faith is very present. It continues to be an expression of



a commitment first made at a youth camp long ago. On that saving event I stand, I serve within the Christian church, and I wait for God's saving grace to continue to unfold in history.

### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

<sup>2</sup> John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

### **About the author**

Jose Ortiz is an interim pastor with Iglesia Menonita del Buen Pastor (Goshen, IN). He has served as pastor, teacher, and administrator with the Mennonite church in the U.S. and Puerto Rico.