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Editorial

Karl Koop

Central to Christian expression is the conviction that through Jesus Christ, God has brought salvation to the world. We preach sermons, lead Bible studies, and remind others about this salvation as we work and serve in the church. And for all of us, undoubtedly, salvation is also a personal longing.

As Christians who are located at different places across the theological spectrum, we will not always use the same language to express our convictions about how God saves. Our language and our expressions will be influenced by factors such as our religious upbringing, educational formation, life experiences, and present circumstances. In our time, we do well to recognize the diversity among us. Equally important is that we recognize the identifiable threads that hold us together.

To help us reflect on the meaning and significance of salvation, this issue of *Vision* offers a rich sampling of perspectives.

To help us reflect on the meaning and significance of salvation, this issue of *Vision* offers a rich sampling of perspectives. We begin with two articles that examine salvation in scripture. In his investigation of Paul, Tom Yoder Neufeld observes that salvation has a wide range of meanings, and that God's ways of working cannot be limited by our finite imaginations. Lydia Neufeld Harder's study of the witness of women to the cross and empty tomb likewise points to the multifaceted mystery of God's salvation, and she encourages us to listen to scriptural voices that have often been ignored.

The contributions by Thomas Finger and Rachel Reesor-Taylor take stock of the various images of salvation and atonement that have emerged in the Christian church, and they also examine those images that have resonated in Anabaptist communities. Both authors observe that Mennonites have been deeply shaped by theological expressions of the wider Christian world, and they

note further that Mennonites have made their own unique contribution to the church's understanding of salvation.

The next several articles illustrate how our various views of salvation are manifest in the life of the church. Claire Ewert Fisher reminds us that proclaiming salvation is not easy work, and that our first task is to listen for the stories and metaphors that communicate God's intentions most clearly. April Yamasaki makes the striking observation in her sermon that knowing something about salvation will make a difference in how we live—in other words, our theology really does matter. Marilyn Houser Hamm reminds us that much of our theology is most easily recognizable in the songs that we sing. And Jose Ortiz brings into view the degree to which our understandings of salvation are dependant on our cultural background and life experiences.

The final two contributions in this issue focus on matters surrounding evangelism and witness. Some of us may wonder how our local congregations may become more inviting to those who have not grown up with the church. Perhaps, in having been influenced by our multireligious context, we also harbour feelings of ambivalence about the Christian confession that Jesus is the only way to God. Jim Loepp Thiessen shares some of his experiences of leading people to faith. He indicates that evangelism is not a matter of following a particular formula but has much to do with prayer, patience, cultivating relationships, and our openness to the Spirit's leading. Wilbert Shenk develops a theology that speaks to how Christians might relate to the other religions, and he concludes that if indeed we have experienced salvation, we have no right to withhold our witness.

The articles that appear in the following pages do not exhaust what we could say about salvation in Christ, but I am grateful for the wide-ranging way the various authors have contributed their perspectives on this topic. I trust that readers of *Vision* will also benefit from these thoughtful and thought-provoking reflections.

Are you saved?
Paul and salvation

Tom Yoder Neufeld

If we could ask Paul, "Are you saved?" I suspect he would respond, "How much time do you have?" Here I can do no more than sketch in rough strokes what Paul might have to say about salvation. But a sketch has several virtues: it gives us the outlines of what needs to be fleshed out more fully, and it leaves open that fleshing out in a way that respects the wide variety of contexts in which the gospel of salvation needs to be heard. Such sketching, incidentally, is exactly what Paul did in his letters, which were always context specific and thus serve as a model for us as we reflect on salvation in our contexts.

Salvation's wide horizon

Today terms such as *salvation, save,* and *saviour* carry largely religious meaning. Not so in Paul's day: one might be saved by a saviour from disease, natural disaster, oppression, or war. When Paul himself uses salvation (*sōtēria*) and related terms, they are usually related to God, or more specifically to Christ, and sometimes even to his own activity as an apostle of Christ. But the term would have continued to enjoy rich and varied associations, thereby ensuring that salvation would have signalled a wide horizon to Paul's hearers and readers.

Salvation is best understood against the background of hopes and promises for the whole world, even as a closer look shows that particular communities and individuals are caught up in God's grand scheme.

Several features mark out this horizon. As a Jew, even before becoming a messenger of Jesus, Paul shared a fervent hope that God would at some point act to bring this dark age to a conclusion and usher in the day of salvation (2 Cor. 6:2). As an apostle of Christ, Paul was convinced that salvation is indeed breaking in or out and will soon come in full. It will bring an end to sin, yes, but it will also bring an end to

oppression by the powers that are holding humanity in a sleeper hold. Finally, salvation will mark the end even of death itself (1 Cor. 15:26). What characterizes Paul's thinking most distinctly is the startling news that such liberation will benefit not only God's chosen people, Israel, but also non-Jews who respond in faith to that news.

Salvation is thus best understood against the background of a large tapestry of hopes and promises for the whole world, even as a closer look at the weaving shows that particular communities and individuals are caught up in God's grand scheme of salvation.[1] The answer to the question of what we are saved from becomes for Paul a wide-ranging one, because the world and its inhabitants are broken and enslaved in so many ways.

However encompassing and multidimensional salvation is, at the center of it is a saving God, and more specifically the agent and means of salvation, Jesus Christ. The decisive initiative in bringing about salvation is not *our* faith, as critically important as that is, but the faith—faithfulness—of Jesus.[2] This faithfulness encompasses not only Jesus' servant-like ministry (Phil. 2:6-11) but especially his self-offering for us, who were at that time still helpless sinners at enmity with God (Rom. 5:6, 8, 10). This faithfulness is nothing less than the strange justice[3] of God at work (Rom. 3:21-26).

Surprise is written all over Paul's account of God's saving initiative. The resurrection of Jesus is a shattering intrusion of hope into hopelessness, an invasion of the new creation into the old age marked by sin and corruption. But perhaps the most shocking of surprises is the cross. The cross was in Paul's day the symbol of Rome's state terror. Through God's inscrutable ingenuity, the torture and execution of his son at the hands of rebellious rulers (1 Cor. 2:8) becomes the power to save (1 Cor. 1:18). Human rebellion is transformed into God's own initiative to save and to reconcile. Or, as Ephesians 2:16 puts it, the stake on which Christ was hung became the means by which he lethally drove the stake through the heart of hostility and enmity. To cast that event as a legal transaction risks making it conform to the wisdom of this world's forensic calculus, empty of the moronic newsworthiness Paul sees in it (1 Cor. 1:20, 3:19). This event was and is always news—gospel.

For such creativity, one word will not do. Multiple terms and metaphors for salvation are found in the Pauline letters: ransom or manumission (1 Cor. 7:23; 1 Tim. 2:6); justification—not just forgiveness or a declaration of innocence but the transformation of the offender (Rom. 10:10; 1 Cor. 6:11); sacrifice or self-offering for others (Rom. 5:6-11); defeat of the powers or liberation (1 Cor. 15:23-25); even murder—Christ's murdering enmity through his own death (Eph. 2:16). Some of these are combative, even violent, images of liberation. What is crucial is this: we are not saved from a violent and vengeful God; we are saved forcefully and decisively by a loving God. Whatever "wrath" means (and it does mean divine judgment), and salvation for Paul does include being saved from it (Rom. 5:9; 1 Thess. 1:10), it is salvation emerging from the heart of a sinner-loving God. We are not saved from God's justice, but by God's justice.

> **We must find vocabulary for salvation that expresses restoration, creation, enlivening, and empowerment. Then the focus moves from what we are saved *from* to what we are saved *for*.**

What we are saved for

For this reason, we must find vocabulary for salvation that expresses restoration, creation, enlivening, and empowerment. Then the focus moves from what we are saved *from* (bondage, oppression, sin, death) to what we are saved *for:* new creation (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17); participation in the body of the Messiah (1 Corinthians 12); living a life of justice, doing good works, practicing love and peace, being sons and daughters of God and brothers and sisters of one another, at home together with God (Ephesians 2).

Nothing brings this restorative dimension of salvation into clearer focus than Easter. The resurrection of the one crucified by imperial power signals that the God of Abraham is acting to mend the world! The day of (full) salvation is getting nearer and nearer (Rom. 13:11; 2 Cor. 6:2)! Those dead in sin (Eph. 2:1-3) are being raised to new life! If Jesus was not raised, then all this talk of salvation is worthless; then we are the most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). Paul views the resurrection of Jesus as the first instalment of an earth-shattering revolution that will climax in the recovery of creation. It will culminate in the resurrection of all the dead

and the full revealing of the Lordship of Christ, and finally the full integration of God with his creation (1 Cor. 15:20-28).

If any further proof were needed that this new day is dawning, that the new creation is already taking hold, Paul can point to the communities of Jews and Gentiles, which had been estranged and even hostile to each other, now together in one body, breathing the same breath of a saving God, the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12).

We refer to such communities as *church*, too quickly loading it with the burdensome freight of all our associations with the term. Paul sees these assemblies as communities of salvation. Here are Jews and gentiles, men and women, rich and poor, slave and free, learning to eat together, to pray together, to call one another brother and sister, and to confess Jesus as Lord together (1 Cor. 12:3). Here are communities, as vulnerable and weak as their Lord, who by their very existence, by their sometimes halting faithfulness, are informing the culturally, religiously, economically, and politically entrenched powers about who is boss (Eph. 3:10). That they suffer for their freedom from these powers is as predictable as it was for their Lord. They are participating in the divine craziness that transformed the suffering of Jesus into the means of reconciling a hostile world (1 Cor. 1:18-31). Paul knows about himself that power is made perfect in weakness (2 Cor. 12:9-10); he wants his cells of salvation to know the same (1 Cor. 1:26-30).

Salvation, grace, and works

We can go further. Paul believed these communities of believers to be in some mysterious but real sense a part of the risen Messiah, his body (see Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12-14, 27), called to live out the newness of life (Rom. 6:4) in the midst of an old but passing age (1 Cor. 7:31), even as they eagerly await Christ's full appearing (1 Cor. 15:23). They are to let Easter take them to the cross.[4] To be members of the Saviour's body is not only to be recipients of hope, members of a community looking forward to the day of salvation. It entails being drawn into the process of salvation as that is already happening. How else can we understand Paul's instructions to believers to put on *God's* armour, including the helmet of salvation, worn by God (Isa. 59:17) to bring liberation to the victims of oppression?[5] Recall Paul's description of himself

as a coworker with God in spreading the good word about salvation (2 Cor. 5:18–6:2), or the startling phrase in Colossians 1:24 about completing what is still lacking in the sufferings of Christ.

This activity is not about earning salvation; it is evidence of salvation, and it is participation in salvation. It is not hubris; it is God's transforming salvation at work through those who are being saved (1 Cor. 1:18, 15:2; 2 Cor. 2:15). We are saved by the mercy of God for good works (Eph. 2:10). It is not of our own doing; it is for our doing! And there is no better work than participation in the activity of the Saviour. There is no higher calling than to be an integral part of God's saving intervention in and through Christ. We are, after all, members of that saving Christ's body. This body is alive, breathing with holy wind, the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 12; Galatians 5; Romans 8; Ephesians 4). If salvation is God's justice at work, we should not be surprised that Paul refers to us as the justice of God (2 Cor. 5:21).

Not only is Christ's faith (faithfulness) pivotal for salvation, but as those who are in Christ, our faith (faithfulness) is also pivotal. We hear the gospel and accept it in faith. That is, we trust the news, thereby letting that salvation take hold of us and shape our lives, enlisting us in its global agenda. In Paul's view, as we have seen, our faith is inseparable from our faithfulness. Through our faithfulness we become part of the story of salvation.

To be members of the Saviour's body is not only to be recipients of hope, members of a community looking forward to the day of salvation. It entails being drawn into the process of salvation as that is already happening.

Perhaps rather than claiming only that we have been saved, or that we will be saved, we should also say that we are being saved—as individuals, communities, peoples, indeed as world (1 Cor. 1:18, 15:2; 2 Cor. 2:15). We are works in progress, nudged and prodded by the one who works salvation in us (Phil. 2:12-13), and through all those who are in Christ.

Are we not saved by grace rather than works? Absolutely. But God's grace is so enormously gracious that it not only forgives bad works but also enables good works.[6] *Grace* must not be translated as impunity, as the Protestant heresy has it. Justification is not just a declaration of innocence but also transformation, rendering us capable of doing justice.

That said, grace is by its nature difficult to control. Paul knows enough not to calculate the reach of an enemy-loving God's grace in relation to sinners (Romans 5, 9–11), even as we have no right to presume upon grace or to undercut the certainty of judgment. Grace is love relentlessly at work to save, intended to restore us to full humanity and thus to living in keeping with the will of our creator.

Salvation, Jews, and empire

There are, finally, two aspects of Paul's reality that have come into sharp focus in recent years: Jews and empire. What of Paul's fellow Jews? Does he think they will be saved? Put bluntly, Paul—a Jewish messenger of God to gentiles—cannot conceive of salvation as not including his fellow Jews, as much as the rejection of Jesus by many of them grieves him terribly. If salvation is about mending the rifts in humanity, between slaves and free, men and women, it must include Jews if it is to be true salvation (Rom. 1:16, 10:12; 1 Cor. 9:20; Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). That is precisely what Paul addresses in the important central section of his letter to the Romans (chapters 9–11). God refuses to be counted out and even uses rebellion to serve salvation. Who could have guessed (11:32-33)?[7] Paul knows what Jonah knew about the gracious unreliability of God, only Paul thinks it's good news.

Paul could not, in his darkest nightmares, have anticipated the enormity of the betrayal of salvation in subsequent Christian history, culminating in the holocaust. What if Christians had shared the disposition of Paul, who was willing to be cut off from Christ for the sake of his people, if that would further salvation (Rom. 9:3)?[8] To ask this question is not to blunt the scandal of the cross, God's shocking generosity to gentiles, nor the call to faith and trust in Jesus as Messiah. It's just that Paul refused in his day to count God out, and so should we today. That is what it means to wear the helmet of the hope of salvation (1 Thess. 5:8).

Paul undertook his advocacy of salvation in the context of an omnipresent empire and the Hellenistic culture it had absorbed, led by rulers who arrogated to themselves the divine capacity to ensure true peace and salvation (1 Thess. 5:3). Paul's words about salvation must be heard as a direct challenge to these imperial pretensions. Pitted against this overweening reality are Paul and

his far-flung network of salvation communities—small, often poor, weak, socially diverse, and conflicted circles of adherents of the risen Jesus, preaching and living out a gospel of power through weakness, salvation through the death of a saviour who fell victim to state terror. How absurd to think these communities represent the beachhead of salvation and a challenge to the empire and its powers.

As sons and daughters of God (thereby denying that claim to Caesar!), these communities exercise this powerful weakness by publicly living an alternative to the patron/client, lord/slave violence patterns of their society. So they strut their stuff by walking humbly, chasing after their enemies with hospitality and blessing, and living peaceably with all, at least to the extent that it depends on them (Romans 12; Eph. 4:1-3). They exercise their emancipation by becoming slaves to Christ, to justice, and to one another (Rom. 6:15-19, 14:7-9; Phil. 2:3-4). In such socially subversive, culturally transformative, militant counterliving, salvation is invading the world of darkness (Rom. 13:11-14; Eph. 5:3-16). The powers have no idea that their callous act of violence in apparently terminating that insignificant troublemaker from Galilee is at the very same time their own undoing (1 Cor. 2:8). Nor are they able to appreciate the stealth with which salvation is invading their realm in these small messianic communities (1 Thess. 5:1-11). But Paul knows that for this purpose God has chosen what is not wise to bring to naught the wisdom of the powerful (1 Cor. 1:26-29). Weakness is God's subversive power at work to save (2 Cor. 12:9-10).

Our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition values discipleship. Discipleship, or as Paul likes to call it, Spirit-driven imitation of Christ, is nothing less than participation in salvation, even as such participation anticipates the coming day. It is willingness to take up our cross with Easter firmly in mind. Easter precedes our Good Friday, just as surely as we anticipate the great Easter to come (1 Corinthians 15; 1 Thess. 4:13-18).

What would Paul say to us?

I suspect Paul would be sorely grieved by the business of salvation in our society. He would be shocked by the way his gospel of salvation has been taken hostage by an ideology that has severed

grace from transformation, mercy from the response of suffering love, forgiveness and justification from the good works they are intended to make possible (Eph. 2:10; 2 Thess. 2:13; Titus 3:8),[9] and salvation from social transformation. He would be baffled by our success in pulling the teeth of the gospel vis-à-vis our own imperial realities. He would be puzzled by how little we settle for and how little we expect of ourselves as the beneficiaries of salvation.

On the other hand, as his Corinthian correspondence illustrates, Paul would not give up on us. Like an apostolic coach at halftime, he would give us sharp, critical, and at the same time enabling and empowering exhortation. He would demand of us that we neither reduce the cross to a formula nor dismiss it out of embarrassment. Salvation was, is, and will be costly in the extreme. He would further urge us to remember Easter as we work out our salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12).

Paul would exhort us not to turn away from evangelism, however much it was and is vulnerable to hucksterism and trivialization and thus insulting to the grandeur and scope of salvation. He would ask us, as recipients of salvation, to gratefully and enthusiastically recover its wonder, its scandal, its foolish power, the weakness that vanquishes the powers of enslavement and oppression. Evangelism is nothing less than participation in salvation (1 Cor. 9:16-23) by finding and using the language, lived and spoken, that communicates the wonder and ingenuity of God's salvation in Christ.

Paul would want us to wear the helmet of salvation (1 Thess. 5:8; Eph. 6:17), not for ourselves, and not against blood and flesh (Eph. 6:12), but as a weapon of liberation, wearing it into the trenches of oppression, violence, and alienation from God. That such a helmet leaves the participants in God's salvation vulnerable—as vulnerable as was the archwarrior of salvation, Jesus—is being illustrated at the time of this writing by the four members of Christian Peacemaker Teams being held as hostages in Iraq.[10] The power of such weakness is being demonstrated with equal clarity as people of diverse faiths and political persuasions are finding a common voice in pleading for their release.

Paul knew that the heart of the gospel is the power of salvation only because it proclaims the crucified Saviour, and because it engenders communities of new creation, who themselves imitate

their crucified and risen Lord in living humbly and courageously the way of suffering love in a broken world; who live a Jesus-like justice that reconciles, restores, and remakes human life, and do so subversively at the heart of an arrogant, power-hungry world.

Notes

[1] Nowhere is the sweep of salvation more visible than in Paul's letter to the Romans, culminating in chapters 9–11 with Paul's musings on God's unsearchable strategies of salvation that intend the reconciliation of sinners to God, the healing of the rifts in humanity, and indeed, the restoration of creation. For an excellent recent treatment of this theme in Romans, see John E. Toews's Believers Church Bible Commentary, *Romans* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2004).

[2] *Pisteōs Iēsou Christou* (Rom. 3:22 and Gal. 2:16, 3:22; see also Rom. 3:26) is often translated as "faith in Jesus Christ." I agree with those who translate it more carefully as "the faith(fullness) of Jesus Christ." See Richard B. Hays, *The Faith of Jesus Christ: An Investigation of the Narrative Substructure of Galatians 3:1–4:11* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1983). So also Toews, *Romans*, 108–111, and the literature cited and discussed there.

[3] Biblically, "justice" and "righteousness" translate *dikaiosynē* equally well.

[4] See my article in the first issue of *Vision*, entitled "Anastatic Anabaptists: Made alive and empowered to preach peace," *Vision* 1 (Fall 2000): 57–65.

[5] 1 Thess. 5:8; Eph. 6:17. See my *'Put on the Armour of God!' The Divine Warrior from Isaiah to Ephesians* (Sheffield, UK: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 86–91, 141–42; and *Ephesians*, Believers Church Bible Commentary (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002), 302–303.

[6] This point is the whole burden of Eph. 2:1-10. See also Romans 6 and "slavery to justice."

[7] See worshipful celebration of this divine strategy in Eph. 2:11-22; see Yoder Neufeld, *Ephesians*, 106–37; and my essay, "'For he is our peace': Ephesians 2:11-22," in *Beautiful upon the Mountains: Biblical Essays on Mission, Peace, and the Reign of God,"* ed. Mary H. Schertz and Ivan Friesen (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2003), 215–33.

[8] See John Howard Yoder's efforts over the years to grapple with this possibility. Some of his essays are collected and responded to in *The Jewish Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. Michael G. Cartwright and Peter Ochs (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

[9] The likelihood that these cited passages are found in later, quite possibly post-Paul writings does not invalidate their faithfulness to Paul's own understanding of the relationship of grace and "works." See Romans 6! Paul the Jew could not have imagined immunity as sufficient good news for sinners. That is why *justification* means more than a declaration of innocence; it means being made capable of doing justice, that is, the will of God (Rom. 8:4).

[10] Members of a CPT delegation to Iraq, Briton Norman Kember, Canadians James Loney and Harmeet Singh Sooden, and American Tom Fox were abducted in Baghdad on November 26, 2005.

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The witness of women
Dying to sin and rising to life

Lydia Neufeld Harder

As the sun rises and sets each day, a crystal hanging in my office window refracts the light in ever-changing patterns. Its various facets catch the light, and rainbow colours flicker across the walls of my study, sometimes behind me, often beside me, and at times in front of me. To me, this crystal is an image of the multifaceted Bible that casts rainbows of hope on and around us as we read its various witnesses and interpret its texts in the community of the faithful. To be effective, the crystal requires the sun—the source of illumination, a symbol of the Spirit—to shed its light first on one facet and then on another, separating into sparkling hues of red, blue, green, and yellow.

The crystal hanging in my window is an image of the multifaceted Bible that casts rainbows of hope on and around us as we read its various witnesses and interpret its texts in the community of the faithful.

One set of biblical witnesses to the good news of salvation are the women at the empty tomb. As we overhear their witness, rainbows of hope surround us. Though we do not have much information about the ongoing testimony of these women, we can note two contexts within which they experience the cross. These contexts will serve as two facets through which the meaning of Jesus' death for our salvation is illuminated. The image of dying to sin and rising to life will connect these two contexts with the action of God in our own lives. Yet the contexts and analogies that we will explore can only be pointers to the much larger, multifaceted mystery of God's salvation for all of us.

The context of violence and pain

Unlike some of his followers, these women did not run away but stayed to witness the brutality of Jesus' death and then watch as his body was placed in a tomb. They knew firsthand that death by

crucifixion is cruel punishment for a crime considered treason by the Roman rulers and blasphemy by many Jewish leaders. No gentle death to close a rich and full rabbinic life, this was undeniably a violent and humiliating end for the one who had pointed them to the kingdom of God.

At first glance, this context for an interpretation of the cross suggests Jesus' solidarity with all people in suffering, and especially with those who undergo violent death because of commitment to a just cause. Yet there is a more personal, theological angle involved in this death. For these women, Jesus was not a distant heroic figure. He was their leader, their friend, whom they had experienced as a powerful healer and teacher. He was their Lord, the one who had often been a guest at their tables, the one they had accompanied even to a place of terror: these women "used to follow him and provided for him when he was in Galilee" and had now "come up with him to Jerusalem" (Mark 15:41).

The perspective of these women on Jesus' death was probably markedly different from that of the rulers and officials or even of the crowd who sometimes followed Jesus and sometimes fled. Their first response would probably have taken the form of agonized questions. How could the power of the officials have overcome the power of love exhibited throughout his life by their leader? How could they go on without the one who had pointed them to God's kingdom? How could a righteous God let this calamity happen?

Mary's words of accusation when she encountered the angels at the empty tomb point to confusion, pain, and anger: "They have taken away my Lord, and I do not know where they have laid him" (John 20:13). Though few of these women's words are recorded for us, we can sense the political, personal, and theological issues of salvation that had arisen in the face of the violence of the cross. Likely, these first interpretations of Jesus' death were direct responses to the injustice of his execution, their horror at the sacrifice of a good and innocent life, and the separation from Jesus and God that this catastrophe seemed to entail. The women may have feared for their own lives, knowing that they too were implicated in Jesus' "guilt" because they were followers of this king. Their decision to anoint his body despite the large stone protecting the grave testifies to their courage but also points to

fear and a sense of weakness and aloneness in the face of such violence. One can only imagine their questions about the God who would allow this horror to happen to their leader.

Again in our day, the violence of the crucifixion has given rise to women's critical questions about lofty theories of atonement and redemption. The image of Jesus as a victim who accepted violence meekly for the sake of salvation has created doubt and anger triggered by women's feelings of powerlessness in the face of a similar violence. Mary Daly was one of the first women to express these questions directly: "The qualities that Christianity idealizes, especially for women, are also those of the victim: sacrificial love, passive acceptance of suffering, humility, meekness, etc. Since these are the qualities idealized in Jesus 'who dies for our sins,' his functioning as a model reinforces the scapegoat syndrome for women."[1]

For many women today, theories of salvation that glorify sacrifice do not foster hope in the face of the violence they know best, the context of abuse against women and children. If Jesus' death was redemptive, is all human suffering also redemptive? Does obedience to God mean that women should negate themselves and willingly accept the violence enacted against them? Is this the path to salvation? These questions are further complicated in a theological framework that asserts that God the Father willed that his child be killed. How does this act model loving parenthood?

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These women point out the insidious effects of the notion that atonement for human sin can happen only through the bloody sacrifice of God's own son: this view supports the sacrifice of innocent lives even in our day, and it can be converted to the belief that suffering and death are necessary to ensure the kind of life we wish to live. Power politics and reckless consumption require victims who willingly accept their suffering. Therefore it is not difficult to understand how the glorification of innocent victimhood, and of redemption as freely chosen suffering, prepare women psychologically to acquiesce in their suffering. To believe that God willed Jesus' cruel death is to see God as violent. For

women caught in a web of violence, this understanding may even suggest that God abandons those who suffer.

Mennonite women theologians have entered the conversation at this point. They agree that some emphases in our salvation theologies, including our peace theology, have had a subtle influence on women's readiness to accept violence against them. As Carol Penner and Mary Schertz assert, the notion of sacrifice has taught women to "be content to suffer" and has contributed to and increased the danger of family violence among us.[2] For these women, the personal-political dimension of the cross is related to the theology of redemption that demands the sacrifice of an innocent person.

Other women respond by seeing in the cross the solidarity of Jesus with women in their suffering. Theologians such as Luise Schottroff no longer view the cross as an atoning sacrifice but rather as a political punishment not restricted to Jesus but suffered by all who act against injustice. Others realize that struggle for God's reign and commitment to God's will often lead to rejection and even death. As Kwok Pui Lan eloquently writes, "It is the very person on the Cross that suffers like us, who was rendered as a nobody that illuminates the tragic human existence and speaks to countless women in Asia.... We see Jesus as the God who takes the human form and suffers and weeps with us."[3] What image of God do we embrace? Do our theories of atonement point to a God who demands violent sacrifice?

Gayle Gerber Koontz speaks to this question of atonement by beginning with an understanding of sin that includes the sins that contribute to violence. She suggests that the sins of the weak and the sins of the powerful need to be confronted by the cross. Pride, overreaching, exploitation, and self-aggrandizement characterize the sins of the powerful, while self-hatred, shame, humiliation, uncleanness, and worthlessness characterize the sins of the weak. She goes on to suggest that sin can be defined in terms of human failure to embody Christ-like relatedness to God, neighbour, and earth. She thus sees salvation as the "restoration of Christ-like relatedness between humans and God," a wholeness that includes new life in all its fullness and rejects violence against another.[4]

How does the cross achieve this wholeness? Koontz opts for the image of the victory of God over the powers that begins with the

liberating and atoning work of Christ throughout his life. This victory is ultimately the work of a Christ who incarnates a divine power that does not compel but rather empowers and invites. Jesus' healing and teaching ministry has already pointed the way. The cross becomes the ultimate symbol of reconciling love, a demonstration of the divine love that continues to love enemies even while they are sinners. We can enter into salvation by embracing this way of life as we receive a new identity in Christ. Thus we too can die to the sins of self-negation and of pride and be empowered to struggle against the evil of violence and domination. In addition, we can be drawn into a liberating community that is not bound by the evil powers. For Koontz, salvation is both social and personal, and it includes rejecting the violence that put Jesus on the cross, as well as the self-denial that would embrace sacrifice out of a sense of worthlessness and self-negation.

Koontz admits that this view of salvation only makes sense if there is reality beyond this world and beyond history, and if God's power is ultimately victorious over death and evil. In order to trust in this view of salvation, we must therefore go on to the second context: the women at the empty tomb.

The context of hope and new life

It was women who were the first to be given a surprising new context in which to interpret the meaning of Jesus' death: the context of new life and therefore hope. However, this shift in context also created confusion and fear. In Mark's account, when the women encountered the empty tomb, they fled, too afraid to say anything. Why this fear? Luke gives us a hint: when the women did speak, "these words seemed to [the apostles] an idle tale, and they did not believe them" (Luke 24:11). And why would they? After all, these were women who had a role to play in anointing a dead body but not as witnesses to a new reality. Yet when Jesus encountered the women on the way, they received the mandate, "Go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going ahead of you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mark 16:7). And eventually the women were able to bring the good news of Jesus' risen presence to the rest of the disciples.

What created this readiness to speak with joy? First, the women had seen with their own eyes that Jesus was no longer in the tomb.

The empty tomb signified that Jesus was alive and present. Second, they were told that Jesus was going ahead of them to Galilee, a reminder of Jesus' powerful words and actions in Galilee. If Jesus would be present in their futures as promised, they could testify to the empty tomb. And third, they had met Jesus as the resurrected one. In Mary's case, meeting the risen Christ and receiving the surprising news that Jesus was to ascend to the Father—"to my God and your God"—created the clarity she needed. Now she could say with confidence: "I have seen the Lord" (John 20:17-18). All of the women thus knew that his ignominious death had been transformed into life, not only for Jesus but also for them. The resurrection signified the vindication of the suffering but also the vindication of the message of the reign of God which Jesus had proclaimed and lived. They had not followed him in vain. The power already exhibited in Jesus' life was stronger than the power of death.

Mary Schertz's study of the atonement as presented by Luke suggests that the root metaphor for redemption is not death but life.[5] She studies Luke's view of "divine necessity" (*dei:* "it is necessary") and discovers that the Gospel writer introduces the idea of the necessary will of God first in Jesus' call to ministry. It was necessary for Jesus to study the Torah, to receive a strong sense of purpose to proclaim the coming kingdom of God. She then goes on to show how this necessity was present in his healing ministry, in his feeding of the hungry, and in his seeking and saving the lost. In a pair of texts at the climax of his ministry, however, Jesus chooses to remind himself and his disciples that his way of life is fraught with peril; it is not a triumphal march to claim conventional power. He warns his followers of his approaching fate (Luke 9:22, 13:33). It was necessary for Jesus to suffer and die.

The women knew that his ignominious death had been transformed into life, for Jesus and for them. The resurrection signified the vindication of the suffering but also of the message of the reign of God.

Schertz then points to the three instances of this term in the resurrection narratives. Each comes in the context of a teaching situation where the Gospel writer points out that it was necessary for Jesus to be betrayed and crucified (24:7), for Jesus to suffer and come into his glory (24:26), and for the scripture to be

fulfilled (24:44). The followers of Jesus are reminded and chided for not remembering these necessary aspects of God's will. Thus Luke shows us that suffering does not by itself define redemption; rather it is the whole mission of God that redeems; it is a mission that includes but is not limited to the tragedy of the cross. As summarized by Schertz:

> *For Luke, what is redemptive is the kingdom of God. People are saved and their sins blotted out when they stop resisting the kingdom and become, in turn, proclaimers and enactors of this kingdom. The conversion of individuals is possible because Jesus preached, taught, healed, exorcised demons, suffered, died, and was raised—all to announce and bring about the kingdom of God. Conversion of individuals comes about through the Holy Spirit and the faithfulness of believers who continue to proclaim and enact the kingdom of God in the name of Jesus.*[6]

Thus it is the turning to the life of the kingdom that creates the passion and the power to enact this kingdom in one's own life and community, even though this enactment may lead to suffering for the sake of the kingdom. When life becomes the root metaphor for salvation, death has lost its sting—as Paul's letters testify.

For the sake of our salvation

In Romans 6, baptism is understood as dying to sin and rising to walk in newness of life. Whether our primary sin is self-negation that willingly suffers, or pride that engenders violence and abuse, our old self needs to be crucified so that we will no longer be enslaved to sin. In solidarity with Jesus (who did not take up violence, nor did he negate his calling as Messiah), we are to consider ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Jesus Christ. Paul goes on to say that we are not to live unto ourselves. Rather, we become slaves of another power, the power of righteousness for sanctification. The final purpose of this sanctification is eternal life in Christ Jesus.

This turn to life is one that many women can embrace, for it does not deny the brutality of the cross but places it in the context of the abundant and eternal life that the kingdom of God

promises. It rejects sin in its many forms. Yet it commends a rising into a new power, the very power of love and righteousness that Jesus exhibited in his death on the cross and that God confirmed in the resurrection. This rising represents a new holiness, entering a process of sanctification that transforms our very life. This power can only be received as a gift of God freely given for the sake of our salvation.

Whether our primary sin is self-negation that willingly suffers, or pride that engenders violence and abuse, our old self needs to be crucified so that we will no longer be enslaved to sin.

The witness of women is often hidden until God's light creates such a rainbow of hope that no one can ignore it. The fact that women begin to play leading roles in the final scenes of the Gospel narratives is one of the surprises of the passion story. Today, rainbows of hope created by the witness of women who have read the gospel in the midst of violence are dancing across the theological landscape, giving hope to many caught in the web of violence. Let us not ignore these voices as though they told an idle tale, for they may point us to the saving power of God exhibited in the life and death of Jesus Christ.

Notes

[1] Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 77.
[2] Elizabeth G. Yoder, editor, *Peace Theology and Violence against Women*, Occasional Papers, no. 16 (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1992), 99. This collection of essays is a record of the first attempt of Mennonite theologians to name this concern.
[3] Kwok Pui Lan, "God Weeps with Our Pain," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 2 (1984): 230.
[4] Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 63 (1989): 172.
[5] Mary H. Schertz, "God's Cross and Women's Questions: A Biblical Perspective on the Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly* Review 68 (April 1994): 194–208.
[6] Ibid., 206.

About the author

Lydia Neufeld Harder's theological interest is in the interpretation of the Bible for the sake of salvation. Her primary scholarly teaching contexts have been Conrad Grebel College (Waterloo, ON), and Toronto Mennonite Theological Centre. She is enjoying retirement, with its opportunities to write; to preach, teach, and supervise students on occasion; and to spend time with her six grandchildren.

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.

What kind of people equate salvation with justification? Usually, such people desire God's acceptance in this life and beyond and sense their inability to attain or deserve it.

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

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Mennonite perspectives on atonement
A review article

Rachel Reesor-Taylor

Questions about atonement—how the life and death of Jesus save us—keep asking to be answered. They lie at the heart of the Christian faith, but they are challenging because there is a mystery, and because something wonderful arises from horrible violence. The history of the church offers some compelling and beautiful explanations, and some that are not so beautiful. These answers are often divided into three categories: satisfaction models, *Christus Victor* models, and models of the moral influence type. Recent Mennonite perspectives on atonement have followed the trend that is critical of the satisfaction theory and happy to explore other options, especially the Christus Victor model. But most contemporary Mennonite theologians have stopped short of rejecting the satisfaction model entirely, suspecting that it has something to offer alongside other images.

Much Mennonite discussion of atonement takes place within the framework of the typology developed by Gustaf Aulén, who subjected the satisfaction view to critique and made a case for the recovery of the Christus Victor view.

The three types

This threefold typology of how Jesus' life and death accomplish salvation, or why his death was necessary to save us, was developed by Gustav Aulén in his influential work that subjected the satisfaction view to critique and made a case for the recovery of what he termed the classic or Christus Victor view.[1] There are variations within each of these types, but much of the recent Mennonite discussion takes place within this framework.

Aulén's contribution in the 1930s was to break open an argument that was proceeding along tired lines, between satisfaction and moral influence; he offered a third alternative in the Christus Victor model. The dominant explanation of the significance of

the cross for salvation had been for centuries one that used the language of satisfaction, expiation, and often penal substitution. At the start of the twelfth century, Anselm of Canterbury wrote *Cur Deus Homo* to explain why God became human. This work is usually regarded as the basis of the satisfaction theory, although there have been many versions, and some that have changed it in substantial ways.

Anselm's explanation focuses on human guilt and need for restoration, accompanied by the impossibility of God simply forgiving humanity. Humanity and creation needed to be restored. The debt humanity owed God needed to be paid, but humanity was in no position to make satisfaction for the debt. Only God-become-human could do on behalf of humanity what humanity needed to do. In living and dying innocently, obediently, voluntarily—in offering himself as a sacrifice—Jesus made the ultimate gift and provided what humanity owed. Of course, God would want to reward such a supreme offering, but there was nothing that Jesus did not already have, and it was only fitting that his reward would be passed to his kin, the humanity for whom Jesus lived and died.

Anselm most explicitly declared that the reason Jesus had to die was in order to make satisfaction, because if satisfaction were not made for sin, then punishment would be necessary, according to justice. But who could withstand punishment? The incarnation was necessary because what God wanted was not that humanity be punished but that humanity be restored. It is strange that the satisfaction theory has been confused with a theory of penal substitution; the focus on satisfaction rather than punishment reveals a restorative notion of justice rather than a retributive one.

In the nineteenth century, many people reacted against atonement theories that depicted God as a petty tyrant whose pride was injured and who needed to punish, even shed blood, in order to rectify things. Fortunately for humanity, the guilty ones did not need to pay the penalty, or suffer death, because Jesus, the innocent God-human, could suffer in our place. His death made up for our sin, and we could be forgiven. The love of God seemed to be eclipsed by the wrath and justice of God. The critique of Anselm that Peter Abelard had articulated in the twelfth century became

more popular with the optimism of the nineteenth century. Liberalism understood the human problem not as guilt but as ignorance: humanity's need is not so much for forgiveness as for revelation. The transforming power of Christ's love, revealed on the cross, became the focus. How did Jesus' death save us? By revealing to us his great love, which transforms and saves us.

By 1930, Aulén found both of these models inadequate. The moral influence view answered the problem of individual conversion but did nothing to offer hope about the world as a whole. It did not seem to take seriously enough the reality of evil and guilt and the need for forgiveness, nor did it deal with past sin. On the other hand, the satisfaction view, although it purported to deal with human evil, did so by portraying Jesus as the merciful one who appeased God, the wrathful judge.

Aulén proposed that the earliest model the church used to explain salvation was the model of victory over sin, death, and the devil. How did Christ save us? By rescuing us from these forces. This was powerful and hopeful news for people in a world where chaos and evil appeared to be winning. Aulén called this the Christus Victor model.

Mennonite interpretations

John Howard Yoder. John Howard Yoder's discussion of atonement in his *Preface to Theology*[2] subjects all three types to criticism, suggesting that none is adequate to the biblical witness and inviting efforts to improve on them.

Because of its popularity, Yoder gives most attention to the satisfaction theory. He finds the most problems with it but also seems to see it as the most serious option. He approaches the question from the point of view of biblical studies, systematic theology, and ethical commitments. In Yoder's view, the weaknesses of Anselm's theory are evident in an excessive preoccupation with guilt rather than future obedience, and a depiction of God as unwilling to forgive without the payment offered by the Son as our substitute. This transaction between members of the Godhead suggests a fractured Trinity. Furthermore, God becomes the object rather than the agent of the reconciliation, so that salvation is a result of human efforts and payments, even if real human beings (apart from Jesus) are not required to be obedient.

In the end, Yoder deems the satisfaction theories the most serious answers found in the history of Christian theology, and their merits are that they answer the question of piety; make sense in prayer; and call forth praise, gratitude, and commitment. At the same time, Yoder insists that they are not biblically adequate.

Yoder does not spend much time discussing the other models. He notes that the classic Christus Victor model does not explain why Jesus had to die: Why could he not have been spared death in God's victory? About the moral influence view, Yoder remarks that if God had already forgiven humanity, and if Jesus' death only revealed what was already always true, then the question remains: In what way does Jesus' death demonstrate love for humanity? How could his death reveal love for us if it was not essential in order to save us? Still, Yoder contends that this subjective approach has something to offer.

John Driver, Mark Baker, and Joel Green. Some scholars, such as John Driver, Mark Baker, and Joel Green, have emphasized the need for many images of salvation. Driver draws on his experience in mission to take up one aspect of the challenge set by Yoder. In *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*, he provides a study of all the biblical images of atonement.[3] His analysis of the atonement models follows Yoder's, and throughout the book he returns to problems with the satisfaction views.

John Driver reminds us that the Bible contains not just the motif of expiation but also of conflict-victory-liberation, vicarious suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom, redemption-purchase, reconciliation, justification, and adoption.

In exploring the many biblical images used to express salvation and reconciliation, his work contributes to the need to open up thinking that has become too fixated on one (albeit biblical) image. He reminds us that the Bible contains not just the motif of expiation and the wrath of God but the motifs of conflict-victory-liberation, vicarious suffering, sacrifice, martyrdom, and redemption-purchase. There are themes of reconciliation, justification, and adoption. He cautions that no one image would be adequate. Instead of trying to develop one theory, he advocates faithfulness to all of the biblical images. More recently, Baker's discussion of atonement, coauthored with Joel Green,

again highlights the need for many models appropriate to many different contexts.[4]

C. Norman Kraus and Thomas Finger. Norman Kraus and Tom Finger have both contributed discussions of atonement in Anabaptist perspective. I note especially Kraus's *Jesus Christ Our Lord* and Finger's *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach*, as well as the exchange between the two authors that followed the publication of Kraus's book.[5] Kraus attempts to talk about salvation in a way that addresses the problem of shame rather than that of guilt.

Both Kraus and Finger point out problems with the satisfaction theory, and Finger expresses appreciation for the Christus Victor view, but they reveal differing degrees of comfort with certain language and models. Kraus rejects the language of substitution and legal terminology. Finger is more afraid of adopting a moral influence view and, by contrast, points to substitution as part of the sacrificial system of the Old Testament.[6] He is less troubled by the legal language, because he wants to assure that justice is part of the equation. Kraus and Finger agree that both love and justice must be included in a way that does not place them in contradiction.

While Kraus does not advocate one theory, and Finger warns against adopting just one, Finger seems to favour the Christus Victor motif. He points out that Anselm and the moral influence theories rely on rationality, while the classic model is better able to accommodate the rich diversity of biblical imagery.

Gordon Kaufman and Gayle Gerber Koontz. A variety of other publications also reveal this appreciation for the classic model, indicating just how widespread this trend has become. Gordon Kaufman's *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* proposes a demythologized, historical-personal version of this model, which he hopes will be meaningful in his time.[7]

Gayle Gerber Koontz opts for Kaufman's model in "The Liberation of Atonement," finding the liberation motif appropriate to a liberationist and feminist perspective.[8] She also reminds us that various aspects of the human condition must be addressed, including the abuse of power and suffering powerlessness.

J. Denny Weaver. A more exclusive proposal has come from J. Denny Weaver, most fully articulated in his book, *The Nonvio-*

lent Atonement.[9] In choosing the Christus Victor model to work with, he fits with the trend of his time. It is in advocating a single theory that he stands out. Weaver not only outlines his version of the model, calling it "narrative Christus Victor," but he argues that Anselm's satisfaction theory is incompatible with a commitment to nonviolence.

While Weaver's earlier works on atonement include a treatment of Anselm that is reminiscent of Yoder's, his more recent discussions focus the critique more sharply. The problem is not that Anselm's satisfaction theory does not require an ethic derived from Jesus; Weaver contends that *Cur Deus Homo* does assume an ethic, but it is not a Christian one. In Weaver's attempt to articulate a contemporary atonement theology, he concludes that Anselm's satisfaction theory of atonement is "based on divinely sanctioned, retributive violence" and the assumption that "doing justice means to punish." Anselm's doctrine of atonement must therefore be rejected by Christians who are "uncomfortable with the idea of God who sanctions violence, a God who sends the Son so that his death can satisfy a divine requirement."[10]

Weaver's narrative Christus Victor tells the story of Jesus, who conquered the evil powers not by killing them but by bearing the evil even unto death. What the cross reveals is how victory is won. The resurrection shows that the powers of death and sin have been defeated. The one who was slain has conquered. For Weaver, this narrative has the advantage of not pitting God against human beings, or against Jesus. It is not God who demands Jesus' death for the salvation of humanity, but the devil who requires it. Or, to put it even more acutely, this model is unlike the satisfaction view in that it is not God who kills Jesus, or organizes Jesus' death, but sinful people who kill him. We have a choice about what role we want to adopt in the continuing narrative. Salvation comes to people when they choose to be on the side of Christ and to follow in his way, rather than being on the side of those who work against Jesus and put him to death.

Weaver is content with a single model because it describes the story of Jesus. Because he speaks about a history, he does not see the need to use multiple images. In contrast, Finger and Driver see salvation and the cross as in some way a mystery that is inexpressible. Therefore, the New Testament and the church have

used many different images to testify to their experience of salvation in their encounter with the risen Christ. What was it about Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection—that brought salvation? The classic model, with its narrative nature, relates *that* the devil has been conquered, and so escapes certain problems that Anselm bumped up against when he tried to explain just *how* the devil has been conquered and why Jesus had to die.

J. Denny Weaver's narrative Christus Victor tells of Jesus, who conquered the evil powers not by killing them but by bearing the evil even unto death. What the cross reveals is how victory is won.

René Girard discussion. Other thinkers who share Weaver's concern that what we say about Jesus and the cross must not function to condone violence are those engaged by the work of René Girard. The authors of the essays collected by Willard Swartley in *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking*, take a variety of positions on the traditional doctrines of atonement.[11] Some hold that, by contending that the Gospels uncover and reject the scapegoat mechanism, Girard provides an alternative doctrine of atonement and a rejection of a sacrificial view of the cross.

Marlin Miller maintains that Girard does not offer such an alternative; he argues that Girard's approach does not bring release from guilt and shame, nor does it empower believers to live a new life in Christ. Furthermore, it leaves unanswered questions about the final judgement.

Miller appreciates Girard's contribution to our understanding of God's goodness and human evil, but Miller maintains that it is necessary to acknowledge the paradox that remains between God's sovereignty and human freedom. He is not inclined to resolve a paradox that is scriptural; some biblical texts speak of an eternal heaven and an eternal hell, in tension with others that stress the sovereign goodness and power of God. The Bible includes suggestions of universal restoration even though such an eschatology does not seem to satisfy the demands of justice. In holding together the mercy and justice of God, the restoration of creation and a way of understanding forgiveness that does not overlook evil, Miller struggles with the very issues with which Anselm was working.

It seems to some that Girard's work makes it problematic to talk of Jesus' death as sacrificial, an argument that contributes to the case against satisfaction and penal theories. However, Marlin Miller and Willard Swartley warn against dismissing a sacrificial understanding. As Swartley indicates in his introduction, Girard himself does not reject the possibility of distinguishing between self-sacrifice and the sacrifice of another; Swartley notes that it is not a question of rejecting the language of sacrifice but of asking what sort of sacrifice is entailed.

Ted Grimsrud admits that the Bible includes a sacrificial theology, but he argues that sacrificial theology is not compatible with a thoroughgoing pacifism. He highlights instead other New Testament ways of interpreting Jesus' death, as exposing and revealing the deep violence of societal structures, and as modeling a way of life lived in the power of the Holy Spirit. Grimsrud's position again seems to be a combination of moral influence and classic views, without the sacrifice of the satisfaction theory or the violence of the penal view.

Robin Collins claims that Girard's theory suffers from the weaknesses of the moral influence theory. He proposes an incarnational theory that extends aspects of the moral influence and classic models. He too rejects the satisfaction and penal views. In his proposal and in what he rejects, Collins fits the trend we have observed.

Conclusion

The atonement theory that was once dominant—sometimes to the exclusion of other views—has been put in its place but not rejected. The perceived problems with the satisfaction type are that it presents God as petty and wrathful, the one who needs to be reconciled rather than the one who reconciles; God is seen within a legal framework, as unwilling to forgive without payment or without punishing someone. Critics argue that this view does not require human beings to follow or imitate Jesus. Furthermore, some have suggested that if the scenario is not that of a courtroom, then it is sacrificial—and no less violent.

Some combination of updated moral influence and classic models offers an objective story of liberation as well as room for a subjective response to the revelation of divine love. In this way,

recent Mennonite discussions have followed a broad theological trend.

The critique of the various satisfaction views has been necessary in order to remind us that they were not the complete word on the cross, and to distinguish between the various versions. Fortunately, most Mennonite discussions have acknowledged the difference between Anselm's theory and distortions of it, such as the penal substitution views, noting that much of the problem is with the latter and not the former. Wisdom lies with those who have managed to distinguish between penal substitution and Anselm's satisfaction theory, and have supplemented it rather than attempting to replace it, even when they have found it less helpful than other views. In my estimation, rereading Anselm's theory to discover its strengths would be fruitful.

Notes

[1] Gustav Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (London: SPCK, 1931).
[2] John Howard Yoder, *Preface to Theology: Christology and Theological Method* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazo Press, 2002).
[3] John Driver, *Understanding Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).
[4] Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000).
[5] C. Norman Kraus, *Jesus Christ Our Lord: Christology from a Disciple's Perspective* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1987); and Thomas Finger, *Christian Theology: An Eschatological Approach,* vol. 1 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985).
[6] Finger, *Christian Theology*, 344.
[7] Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner, 1968).
[8] Gayle Gerber Koontz, "The Liberation of Atonement," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (1989): 171–92.
[9] J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).
[10] Ibid., 225.
[11] Willard M. Swartley, ed., *Violence Renounced: René Girard, Biblical Studies, and Peacemaking* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press, 2000).

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Proclaiming salvation
A pastor's perspective

Claire Ewert Fisher

The potter's wheel in my workroom has often stood idle in recent years. I now spend more time shaping words into sermons than moulding clay into aesthetic and useful objects. But as a pastor, I often have the privilege of bearing witness to lives as they are shaped in encounters with the master potter.

The process of throwing a pot includes three related motions: the potter's hands move skilfully, the wheel rotates under the clay, and the clay responds to these movements. So it is with the proclamation of salvation.

The potter's activity

The first movement in forming and transforming lives is that of the master potter. The potter takes that lump of clay and skilfully guides and supports it as it is shaped into something beautiful. God recognizes the potential in the raw material, sees the utility in the unformed parts, and anticipates the reality in the re-formed life. God continually seeks to be our companion us as we struggle with, delight in, and perform the tasks of each day. The grace to accept God's creative activity is our salvation.

Preaching about salvation is not for the faint of heart. To preach the gospel of Jesus Christ is to proclaim a word that points us in a new direction, accessible through the powers of the imagination.

To understand salvation, we must first understand the nature of sin. For much of my early life, I saw sin as breaking the rules, acting in ways that are offensive to God. Sin so understood makes necessary Jesus' death on the cross to cover the punishment we deserve for these violations.

When I was a student at a Lutheran seminary, I began to understand sin more as a tendency to make choices against God, as idolatry or pride. The sinful self, seeking without limits, tends

to "draw the whole of reality into oneself";[1] it is curved in on itself. Sin is not so much a moral category, a set of actions opposed to the will of God. Sin is fundamentally about our relationship—or lack of relationship—with God. Sin is refusal to develop a relationship with the divine. When we are curved in on ourselves, thinking only about our own needs, doing things only to please ourselves, our attitudes and actions are sin-full.

Salvation is God's answer to humanity's preoccupation with self. Salvation is turning toward God. Menno Simons writes about salvation as *Gelassenheit*, yielding to God.[2] God continually seeks to be in relationship with us: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). Jesus is the person in whom we experience God present with us. And Jesus' Spirit continues to guide us into all truth. Jesus takes away the world's sin, because he makes it possible for the world to redefine its relationship with God. Jesus' death on the cross reveals the depth and breadth of God's desire for relationship with us (Rom. 5:6-10).

Resurrection demonstrates God's unstoppable intention to keep death from having the final word, and to establish and maintain relationship with an otherwise alienated humanity (Rom. 6:10-11). Jesus offers the world salvation by opening a new way to be in communion with God. We do not yet know this communion in its fullness, but we are given clear indicators of what life will be like in eternity.

Signs of God's activity are all around us. God is not stingy, and God will not overpower or coerce us. What we need are eyes to see God at work, ears to hear the still small voice of the divine, courage to respond to interior promptings, and grace to accept the gift of God's forgiving presence.

The rotation of the wheel

The second movement is the preacher's perception and sensitivity as she exegetes the biblical stories and the lives of those in the congregation. As the wheel moves under the clay, so the proclaimer seeks to understand the biblical text, the lives of the people, and the current context. The primary task of the one who speaks is to listen. All around us, God is communicating with us

in scripture, through prayer, in the lives of people, and in nature. A contemplative attitude, in prayer and in all of life, enables us to understand more clearly what God is doing.

And so the fashioning of the sermon begins. It begins by listening and thus providing a means through which God can communicate with God's people. Every congregation includes a variety of personality styles and ways of perceiving spiritual experiences. Given these differences, the preacher needs to provide a variety of ways to encounter God. Sermons will address a variety of topics and use a variety of preaching styles. But one constant in preaching is the communication of both grace and judgment. We do our best to present both, but in the end it is God and the hearer who determine which is which. Each person has a unique experience of salvation, of knowing God's presence.

We speak in the present tense, because God's saving presence is always in the present moment. The goal is not just to know about God but to know God. It is an experience of God that is transformative.

When we speak, we speak in the present tense, because God's saving presence is always in the present moment. The goal of any sermon, any counselling session, any meeting for spiritual direction, is to experience God; we seek not just to know about God but to know God. The saving presence of the divine is more than holding to the right doctrine about salvation or the correct theory of atonement; it is an experience of God that is transformative. Given my own spiritual sensitivities, my sermons seek to engage the imagination, and I season them with storytelling.

A young girl who lives with a foster family is in a state of distress. Her biological parents came to her foster home a few weeks ago and threatened to take her home with them. Now her foster parents are going on a holiday and leaving her with another family. She is fearful about what will happen to her. Then at school she has a run-in with another student. Reduced to tears, she spends the first period after break with the teacher's aid who talks to her about God's love and care for her. By the time school is finished, she can laugh and smile again. She tells her teacher that she has asked Jesus to come live in her heart. "God's angels are playing there right now."

The task and challenge of inviting another to experience salvation requires that our speech be capable of engaging the imagination, so that God's grace and freedom can enter our lives and surprise us. Imaginative speech enables us to entertain the possibility that reality includes a world beyond that of soap operas and the evening news. Imaginative speech recognizes that God's activity includes moral instruction and problem solving and doctrinal clarification, not in a wooden or rigid manner, but with energy and creativity. This speech creates an understanding that the real world is the world of loving relationships made possible by the God who seeks to be in loving relationship with us. This speech confronts evil, challenges established habits of behaviour, and encourages trust in and faithfulness to God. Just as the biblical text is able to summon out new life, so our speaking is to invite new possibilities, realities beyond our daily routines and relentless expectations.

Preaching about salvation is not for the faint of heart. Some may accuse us of speaking fiction, and others may brand our words with the label of heresy, but to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ is to proclaim a word that points us in a new direction, accessible through the powers of the imagination. Because with God there is always more, to follow God's lead will require more than a plodding dedication to the realm of facts. Salvation takes us to places beyond our knowing, pushing us beyond the norms of logic and leading us into a new and potentially dangerous territory of imaginative possibilities. The Gospels are rife with stories of God's salvific activity as Jesus and those he commissioned enact God's purposes on earth: some are healed of physical illnesses, others are freed from demons, and many are forgiven. People are invited to live a new reality.

When people are free to listen to the story, they will make surprising and appropriate connections. As we enter the story imaginatively, new insights and unexpected responses move us to change.

Our first task as preachers is to listen for the stories and metaphors that communicate God's intentions most clearly. The ones we choose need to be genuine enough to ring true, universal enough to speak to others, and deep enough to point toward God. Proclaiming is not easy work, but it is worth our investment. Through the Bible's witness

we know that God has been experienced in a burning bush, in a still small voice, in a wrestling match with a holy adversary, and in the breaking of bread; and the Holy Spirit is still at work in these stories with power to change our lives.

When people are free to listen to the story, they will make surprising and appropriate connections. As we enter the story imaginatively, new insights and unexpected responses move us to change an attitude, a behavioural pattern, a commitment. We remember visual material more accurately and longer than any other kind of material. When we do the work of picturing a story as it unfolds, we are drawn in. We become invested in the process of the sermon and open ourselves to its appeal. Narrative is the most natural form of human experience. Mystery, irony, complexity, and transcendence can all be communicated in a good story.

A preacher's wife dies. Her long life was filled with acts of kindness, service, and charity. The gospel of Jesus Christ made sense when she was around. But now she is gone, and of course there are memories, but there is also much loneliness. For those who grieve, where is God? Salvation is where God is. God is present and active right from the beginning as we are knit together in our mother's womb. As we respond to God's love, we experience forgiveness, and our lives are transformed. And not even death has the power to destroy that relationship with God. Jesus uses the beautiful word picture of his Father's house with its many rooms, and as we pass through death after him, he is getting them ready for us to inhabit. The acceptance of God's gift of endless love is also salvation.

Response of the clay

Some clay needs to absorb lots of water before it can hold a shape. Too much water reduces another kind of clay to an amorphous mass. Yet another kind of clay needs the addition of other materials before it is has enough structural integrity to be thrown on a wheel.

Just as there are varieties of clay, so there are varieties of people. In our spiritual sensitivities and modes of expression, we differ. We experience God's desire to be in relationship with us in a variety of ways. These spiritual paths are not mutually exclusive. We can find ourselves on a number of them at the same time.

Some Christians open themselves to God most comfortably when their minds are engaged. They value Bible study because it lifts out truths that provide coherence and direction for their lives. For these folks, God is accessible through intellectual processes.

Other Christians experience God most powerfully in high energy praise-and-worship experiences. An intense feeling of God's presence in these spiritual mountaintop events provides fuel for Christian life. A powerful image of salvation for such people may be that of being born again, an experience of radical transformation and yielding to God.

Still other Christians seek God in inner peace. They may have dramatic encounters with God, but the many quiet moments of awareness of God's presence will predominate. Spiritual disciplines provide sustenance for the life of faith. A relationship with God cultivated in this way may move toward mystical union with the divine.

Yet another group of Christians are activists who identify with Jesus as they work for justice and peace. They experience God through their relationships with other people, perhaps especially with those who are poor, oppressed, and at the margins of society.

Just as the potter works with different types of clay, knowing how much water to add and when to mix in other ingredients, so God can work with each of us. As proclaimers of the gospel, pastors seek to provide opportunities through which people with different spiritual preferences may encounter God and grow in relationship with God.

Our proclamation of salvation may find expression in a wide variety of activities, including organizing a service project, offering spiritual retreats, conducting praise-and-worship events, and leading Bible studies. As pastors of two rural congregations in south central Saskatchewan, my husband Garth and I have engaged in community development work in addition to our official church ministries. At Mom's Time Out every month, mothers of preschoolers share from their experiences and pray together. We have provided leadership for establishment of a thrift store and a restorative justice program in our community. A men's breakfast affords a comfortable setting in which men in the community can share their lives. A book club includes those who

like to read and exchange ideas. Parenting classes give young parents a chance to learn from one another. A golf tournament and a barbeque invite interaction with some who do not regularly attend Sunday worship. A Mennonite Disaster Service assignment provides opportunity to assist those whose lives are disrupted by a natural disaster, and community life is strengthened. Spiritual direction is offered to those who want to foster an awareness of God's work in their lives.

Conclusion

God initiates salvation. God continually seeks to be in relationship with us. Our task as people of God is to respond to God's unconditional love. And our work as followers of Christ—and more specifically as pastors—is to find ways to encourage people to turn away from self-preoccupation and toward God. Just as the potter's hands work with the unformed clay, so God is working with the raw material of our lives. As the wheel of life turns, we alert people in our congregations—and those who are not found in our pews—to God's desires for them. As people open themselves to God's desire to be in relationship, the possibilities for transformation are unlimited. "O LORD, … we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa. 64:8).

Notes

[1] Paul R. Sponheim, "The Nature of Sin," in *Christian Dogmatics*, vol. 1, ed. Carl E. Braaten and Robert Jenson (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1983), 367–83.
[2] "The Human Condition: Coming to a Knowledge of the Truth," chap. 2 in C. Arnold Snyder, *Following in the Footsteps of Christ: The Anabaptist Tradition* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004), 29–48.

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How we see salvation: What difference does it make?
A sermon

April Yamasaki

I'm what some people call a gas-and-go driver. I put gas in the car when the needle edges toward empty. I take it in for regular tune-ups. I clean the windshield when it's grimy. But most of the time, I just drive. And most of the time, that's enough. I don't need to know auto mechanics to get where I'm going.

When it comes to our relationship with God, for most of us, for most of the time, it is enough to know that we are brought into right relationship with God by faith in Jesus Christ. As Romans 10:13 says, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved." We don't really need to understand exactly how that works for it to be real in our lives. If we have faith in Jesus, "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 5:1)—whether or not we know how that happens.

What is it about Jesus that saves us? We don't have to know exactly how salvation works in order to experience it, but knowing something about salvation can make a difference in how we live it.

Sometimes, though, knowing how a car works can make a difference in the way we use it. For example, because I understand that leaving the headlights on when the car is parked will drain the battery, I turn the headlights off when I park my car.

The *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* says: "We receive God's salvation when we repent of sin and accept Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. In Christ, we are reconciled with God and brought into the reconciling community of God's people."[1] But how does that work? What is it about Jesus that saves us? We don't have to know exactly how salvation works in order to experience it, but knowing something about salvation can make a difference in how we live it. So let's think about how salvation works: What is it about Jesus that saves us? And what difference does that make in how we live our lives?

There's no one place in the Bible that answers these questions. Instead, part of the answer is in the book of Romans, part of the answer is in 1 Corinthians, and other parts of the answer can be found in other parts of the Bible. So in the history of the Christian church, instead of simply saying, "Here—read the Bible; it's in there somewhere," scholars have explained salvation in a more systematic way by pulling together answers from different parts of the Bible.

As a result, we can identify three main ways of understanding salvation. Each one draws on scripture, each one makes a difference in how we ought to live our lives, and of course, each one has its own fancy theological title. To help us understand each of the three, I've also given each one a name of my own, drawn from the world of sports.

Pacific Classic

I don't normally follow horse racing, but several years ago I saw on the news the Pacific Classic thoroughbred race at Del Mar, California. It was to be a historic race, because one of the horses—Cigar—was going for his seventeenth win in a row. That would have been a record-breaking streak for a North American–based horse in the twentieth century. The race took place before a record crowd of 35,000 people, with everyone's eyes on the favourite, waiting for Cigar to break the record winning streak.

It was an exciting race. Just past the half-mile pole, Cigar took the lead, and the crowd roared. He was still in front at the last turn, heading for home. But all of a sudden, from about fourth place, Dare and Go—a long shot—started to pick up the pace. He moved up on Cigar, drew even, and then went ahead to win by more than three lengths. For Dare and Go, the race was a struggle; it was a hard-run race that ultimately ended in victory.

This horse race helps me understand one of the oldest ways of thinking about salvation. I call it the Pacific Classic as a reminder that salvation is a drama, a struggle, a conflict that ends in victory. This classic theory, also called the dramatic view, was the most popular way of understanding salvation in the early history of the church, between the second and sixth centuries.

In this view, you and I are in a struggle with the forces of sin and evil. God sent Jesus to enter our struggle. From the Gospel

records, we know that Jesus faced temptation to turn away, and he met with persecution from those who opposed him. His mission was a struggle. And finally, when Jesus was arrested and tried and put to death on the cross, it looked as if he had lost the struggle. But three days later, in the final dramatic moment, God raised Jesus from the dead, and the victory belonged to Jesus.

In the Pacific Classic, it looked as if Dare and Go would never win, but in the drama and the struggle of the horse race, he came out ahead. In the classic or dramatic view of salvation, it looked as if we would never win over sin and evil, but Jesus entered our struggle. At first, it seemed that he would lose, too. But in the drama of the crucifixion and the resurrection, Jesus was the victor.

Now this classic or dramatic view of salvation appears throughout scripture. "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:57). In Acts 2:23-24, Peter says about Jesus: "This man, handed over to you by the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of those outside the law. But God raised him up, having freed him from the pains of death [notice the conflict and the struggle here], because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." In other words, Jesus triumphed over death. There was conflict, and there was victory.

Understanding salvation this way should make a difference in how we live. When we struggle, we know that we are not alone, because in Jesus Christ, God has entered our struggle. We can be thankful, because Jesus took on that costly struggle for our sake. God took the initiative in saving us. We cannot be victorious on our own power, but because Jesus has already struggled and triumphed, we can draw on the power of Jesus' resurrection as we struggle through our own lives. That's what it means to be saved.

National Hockey League

Around the end of the eleventh century, another view became important, and today this view has become the most popular among evangelical Christians. Scholars call it the satisfaction view. To help us understand it, I will call it the National Hockey League view. The NHL has a lot of rules: rules about being offside or onside, about icing the puck, about fighting, about how many players can be on the ice at one time. If a player or a team breaks

a rule, a penalty is called—a two-minute penalty for slashing, for example, or a five-minute penalty for fighting. Now if the goalie breaks a rule and gets a penalty, he doesn't actually sit in the penalty box. One of the other players on his team serves the penalty for him. That other player didn't do anything wrong. That other player didn't break any rule, but he takes the goalie's place anyway. He satisfies the penalty.

In the satisfaction view of salvation, life is full of rules that you and I have broken. Sin is seen not so much as a struggle with the forces of evil—that's the classic view—but as a set of rules that we have broken. We need someone to take our penalty. And the only person who hasn't broken a rule is Jesus. He's the only one qualified to take our penalty. Only instead of sitting in a penalty box, Jesus was nailed to a cross and put to death. He took that penalty for us. "He himself bore our sins in his body on the cross, so that, free from sins, we might live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pet. 2:24). According to 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin." Jesus as the sinless one took the penalty for us.

This view of salvation also makes a difference in how we live. It takes sin seriously, and so should we. It emphasizes salvation as a free gift from God. We don't have to do anything to earn God's forgiveness. All we have to do is accept it.

Inspired spectators

Like many other Canadians, I'm looking forward to the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, British Columbia. I won't actually perform in the figure-skating competition. Or fly down the slopes on a pair of skis. And neither will you, unless you have a hidden talent I don't know about. But you and I might still participate in the Olympics by watching our athletes and cheering them on.

Many spectators are inspired by the Olympics. Talented young athletes are motivated to train harder. Amateur and recreational athletes gain a new appreciation for their sport. One of my friends says watching the Summer Olympics inspired her own running. She'll never be in the Olympics. She doesn't even race competitively. But watching the Olympics inspires her to do her best.

There's a third view of salvation that dates from the beginning of the twelfth century. Scholars call it the moral influence view,

and I call it the inspired spectator approach. In this view, Jesus came into the world to show us God's love and to demonstrate how God wants us to live. In his life, death, and resurrection, Jesus' example is so inspiring that it awakens a response in us. It has a moral influence on us, inspiring us to repent and change the way we live.

In Romans 5:8, Paul writes: "But God proves his own love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Or 1 John 3:16 says: "We know love by this, that [Jesus Christ] laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another." In other words, in Jesus Christ, God shows us such great love that we are inspired to follow the example of Jesus. We are spectators of a divine demonstration of love that can change our lives.

This third view of salvation also makes a difference in how we live, because it emphasizes salvation as following Jesus' example and living as he did. Salvation is not just having our sins forgiven; it is also living a new life.

These three views of salvation are not better or worse than one another. They're just different. And they are all biblical. We need all three of them—and more—to understand salvation in its fullness.

Why we need more than one view

I've used three sports to describe three views of salvation: the illustration from the Pacific Classic emphasizes salvation as Jesus' victory over evil in his resurrection; the illustration from hockey emphasizes salvation as Jesus taking the penalty for our sin by his death; the illustration from watching the Olympics emphasizes salvation as the example and inspiration of Jesus' life.

Now some sports fans may insist that horse racing is better than hockey. Or that playing hockey is better than any spectator sport. In the same way, some theologians and Christians prefer one view of salvation over another, contending that the classic view is better than the satisfaction view, for example. Or the satisfaction view is better than the moral influence view. But these views of salvation are not better or worse than one another. They're just different. And they are all biblical. In fact, we need all three of them—and more—to understand salvation in its fullness.

For example, the satisfaction view of salvation, where Jesus takes our penalty, may be the most popular view of salvation

today. It emphasizes salvation as a payment for sin, and that's important, but it focuses so much on Jesus' death that it says little about his life or his resurrection. It says little about God's power to change our lives or about how we should live once we're saved. On the other hand, the moral influence view says a lot about how we should live out our salvation: we need to follow the example of Jesus' life, because salvation means living like Jesus. But it says little about Jesus' death or resurrection. The classic view says a lot about the power of Jesus' resurrection. That's not really there in the satisfaction view and in the moral influence view. But it's important—because Jesus didn't just live and he didn't just die, he also rose again. And now that Jesus has shown us the way to live, now that Jesus has paid our penalty, in him we also have the power to live a new life.

So we need all three views of salvation. In fact, if we were really to do justice to the richness of the biblical teaching, we wouldn't stop with these three views of salvation. One author identifies eight different views. Another identifies ten.[2] The three I've outlined here are broad summaries, and they're the ones that have received the most attention throughout history.

So what is it about Jesus that saves us, and what difference does it make? In the life of Jesus, God demonstrates great love that inspires us and calls us to live like Jesus. In the death of Jesus, God takes the penalty for our sin so we can experience forgiveness. In the resurrection of Jesus, God triumphs over evil and grants us the power to live a new life. That's what happens when we put our faith in Jesus, who lived and died and rose again by the power of God. Amen.

Notes

[1] "Salvation," Article 8 in *Confession of Faith in a Mennonite Perspective* (Scottdale, PA, and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 1995), 35.
[2] See, for instance, Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983) and John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1986).

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Singing our salvation

Marilyn Houser Hamm

The American revival movement that began with the crusades of Charles G. Finney, Dwight L. Moody, and Ira Sankey, and continued with the Billy Graham crusades, greatly affected the Mennonite church, even as we produced our own Mennonite evangelists.[1] As a young girl growing up in Berne, Indiana, I attended evangelistic services every year. The culmination of each service was the call to come to Christ as we sang "Just as I am," a hymn that seemed to be the definitive expression of what it meant to receive salvation, one through which I must have accepted Christ dozens of times before it finally stuck.

The beloved gospel songs of this era were identified as songs of salvation in many hymnals. But to see the revivalism of the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century as defining salvation for the Anabaptist faith community would be incomplete. For Anabaptists, the biblical understanding of salvation is broader, and our church music expresses this breadth of understanding.

Singing together calls forth spirit, resolve, intellect, and passion. The proclamation that emerges is the life and witness of the church. It is the song that calls us to God, to one another, and to our world.

The power of song among us has long been recognized but rarely analyzed or articulated. We just know what singing does as we experience it. Martin Luther once said, "'What then shall I say of the voice of human beings, to which naught else may be compared?' Music is to be praised as second only to the word of God because by music are all the emotions swayed."[2] What we sing is not to be taken lightly. Words of biblical truth and understanding find their home in our hearts and minds if they are given rhyme, meter, and melody. The durable music of the church can bear repetition, and what we repeat we learn by heart and internalize. And what we rehearse—

week by week, year by year—defines our identity and shapes our faith.

In the hymnals of the Mennonite Church USA and Canada (former General Conference Mennonite Church and Mennonite Church) in the past century, certain hymns stand out as those that define our faith—and therefore our salvation—in Jesus Christ. In what follows, I will identify these hymns as those through which we sing our salvation. The hymns have been included in a published body of material widely owned and used in congregational worship, and it is to this corpus of the church's song that I look to represent who we are as an Anabaptist faith community in North America.

Anabaptists have always understood that the church carries on the ministry of Jesus. To sing our salvation is to be open to the Christ who brings together those who were far apart.

Two German hymns

"Gott ist die Liebe."[3] "For God so loved us, he sent the Savior. For God so loved us, and loves me too." Four-part harmony, voices moving together in rich texture with folk-like simplicity, the revelation of a simple, yet profound truth: God loves all people, because God is love, and the God of the universe cares for each of us personally. Although the origin of this beloved children's hymn is Germanic, the message is not geographically confined. God does not love only us, or only those who are like us, but God's love calls to everyone. God's nature is love, and this love is made known and extended to us through Jesus Christ.

"Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe."[4] This testimony to the power of divine love forms an exquisite counterpart to the folk hymn above. It reveals the tender compassion of a loving God, primarily through the language of its music. The compelling love of Jesus calls forth an answering response from the depths of the human spirit: "To thee my life and soul be given; thou art, in truth, my highest good. For me thy sacred side was riven, for me was shed thy precious blood. O thou who art the world's salvation, be thine my love and adoration."[5] In this hymn, the life and heart of the singer are offered in loving service and devotion, which bring great joy. A central Anabaptist theme is evident in this highly personal text: the response to God's salvation is a life of loving and serving God in yieldedness *(Gelassenheit)*.

The Mennonite Hymnal

"I bind my heart this tide."[6] With our beloved "606,"[7] through *The Mennonite Hymnal* of 1969 emerged a new hymn from among us, composed by Hesston College professor J. Randall Zercher. This hymn stands alongside a number of hymns that marked a rediscovery of the hymnody of the early Anabaptists; a significant characteristic of this 1969 collection is its inclusion of some of these sixteenth-century hymns. The melody of this new hymn was plaintive, its harmonies hauntingly beautiful and of an ancient character. And its call is unmistakable: "I bind my heart this tide to the Galilean's side, to the wounds of Calvary, to the Christ who died for me." The words "I bind" speak a yes to God's salvation. But this yes to Jesus, whether one's experience of it is simple or profound, carries with it a yes to following Jesus. Here is the Anabaptist concept of *Nachfolge*. It is a yes to the way of Jesus, the teaching of Jesus, the vulnerability of Jesus, and the love of Jesus. This is the heart of the Anabaptist understanding of Christ and the scriptures.

In the words of the second verse, "I bind myself today to the brother far away, and the stranger near at hand, in this town, and in this land." Anabaptists have always understood that Jesus calls us to the here and now, that the church carries on the ministry of Jesus and the prayer of Jesus through the gift of the Spirit. To sing our salvation is to be open to the Christ who brings together those who were far apart—because of geographical distance, relational distance, cultural distance—and makes us one family. Salvation is a communal reality.

The fourth verse makes a final affirmation: "I bind myself to peace, to make strife and envy cease. God, knit thou sure the chord of my thralldom to my Lord! Amen." Here, we sing the great truth of God's salvation: to bind oneself to Christ is to bind oneself to peace; to commit ourselves to a life of peacemaking and peacebuilding. Christ's redemption of all things includes all peoples, and the restoration of the earth (Romans 8). It is the same truth Menno Simons wrote about in the mid-sixteenth century: "True evangelical faith cannot lie dormant. It clothes the naked, it feeds the hungry, it comforts the sorrowful, it shelters the destitute, it serves those that harm it, it binds up that which is wounded, it has become all things to all people."[8]

Hymnal: A Worship Book

What is this place?[9] The hymn that for many Mennonites has become a pillar of our song since the issuing of *Hymnal: A Worship Book* in 1992 is "What is this place." In this hymn of Dutch origin, the understanding of the song, and of singing the song of salvation, is that it is not sung in isolation. Nor is salvation lived out as a private expression of faith. Those who come to salvation become the body of Christ, the living presence of Christ on earth. This presence reflects the understanding that God's reign has already begun on earth, even as the church and all of creation long for that reign to come in its fullness.

We sing of "dreams, signs, and wonders sent from the past" (v. 2), the story narrated in scripture of God's saving acts from the beginning of time, which continues in the present. A full understanding of salvation is to be linked with a vibrant history of God's activity, which nurtures the church of the present as that story is retold.

To accept Christ—to accept the bread and the wine (v. 3)—is to be nurtured by Christ as the church lives and gives itself for the world in Christ's love. The church comes to Christ's table to receive what it needs to carry on the ministry of salvation that Christ gives it, the ministry of peace and justice.

Lord, you have come to the lakeshore.[10] At the Mennonite World Conference assembly in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in 1990, Mennonites came to know and love this simple, beautiful song from the church of Latin America. It soon found its way into both *Hymnal: A Worship Book* and the Mennonite Brethren collection, *Worship Together.*[11] For Mennonites, coming to faith often happens in the place where we hear Jesus' words and teachings, within the church. The response to Jesus is a natural one as Jesus' call is issued to all people. Again, strong Anabaptist themes are present in this text, which reveals the way of Christ as one of living simply and nonviolently: "My boat carries no gold and no weapons, but nets and fishes—my daily labor." The intentional inclusion of hymns and songs from the global faith community in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* reflects a firm understanding that God's revelation and wisdom are present in all peoples around the world who come to faith in Jesus Christ. Although American Christianity's popular song has spread to many places, especially in giving expression to salvation's personal dimension, we as a contemporary Anabaptist

community respect and value the diversity and richness of the many cultures that make up the global family of faith.

Sing the Journey

Our newest collection, *Sing the Journey,* carries forward the strong theme of the body of Christ present in the world.[12] The song is incarnational; it does not seek to escape to an otherworldly place. Rather, the song of salvation expresses the life and witness of Christ present here and now through the church. As long as our salvation remains purely personal, the church will never find its life and witness as a community of faith. Text after text in *Sing the Journey*, paired with tunes suited to congregational singing, support the voice of the faith community and nurture it as it proclaims God's salvation and Christ's ways on earth. A sensitive setting for "Just as I am," in a folk idiom, is a gift of this collection.

How shall we choose the salvation songs that we sing?

Scripture reveals to us the God who cares for each of us and yet seeks the reconciliation of all peoples and of creation to God's ways. We must look for the larger biblical story of salvation even as we nurture a deepening spirituality in our personal lives.[13] Second, we must nurture a corporate spirituality whose foundation is Jesus Christ and whose mandate is the ministry Christ has given the church: the ministry of reconciliation. We must take for ourselves the model and the understanding of the book of Psalms. As Eugene Peterson observes in *Answering God,* the expression of the individual (of the "I") in the Psalms is never an isolated exclusive statement. It is always understood as coming from within the community, as lodged within the community, and as influenced and nurtured by the community at worship.[14]

How one feels on any given day is influenced by many things in life's experiences. Expressing feelings to God or about Jesus can be a personal offering. But feelings have their focus in the experience of the individual. Worship's focus must be on God, on listening for and receiving God's word through the scriptures and through the Spirit. The spirituality we nurture must be one that can bear the weight of all of life's experiences, and the entire world. We will need to remember the words of the wise ones, such as these by Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel:

> *The words are often the givers, and we are the recipients.... We do not know what to pray for. It is the liturgy that teaches us what to pray for.... It is good that there are words sanctified by ages of worship, by the honesty and love of generations. If it were left to ourselves, who would know what word is right to be offered as praise in the sight of the God or which of our perishable thoughts is worthy of entering eternity?*
>
> *It is not enough, therefore, to articulate a sound. Unless one understands that the word is stronger than the will; unless one knows how to approach a word with all the joy, the hope or the grief we own, prayer will hardly come to pass.*[15]

Our sung prayer—of praise, adoration, thanksgiving, confession, petition, witness, and sending, needs more than we know. To learn to pray at all in worship will require our full-throated, full-bodied commitment. Unless we bring all the joy, hope, and grief we own, our praise and our prayer will become totally interiorized; it will not mature to its voice in the transformation of the world.

Song lives within our being and emerges from that deep place where spirit and will, intellect and passion come together. Singing is embodied and is the commitment of the whole body as it is engaged. Singing within the community calls forth spirit, resolve, intellect, and passion—focusing them with one heart, one voice, and one will. The single proclamation that emerges is the life and witness of the church. It is the song that calls us to God, to one another, and to our world. Singing must be understood as a powerful communicator and must be given careful attention in any setting for worship.

So let us sing our salvation, knowing the power of Christ, who is the Song living among us. Let us awaken our hearing, as St. Bernard wrote,[16] and train it to receive the truth. And let us have the courage to proclaim the truth in our song. Let it continue to transform our lives as we work out our salvation through the power and presence of Christ's Spirit living and moving among us.

Notes

[1] *The Mennonite Encyclopedia,* vol. 2 (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House; Newton, KS: Mennonite Publication Office; Hillsboro, KS: Mennonite Brethren

Publishing House, 1956), 269–73.
[2] Quoted in Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord: Good Singing in Church* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1991), 62–63.
[3] "For God so loved us," #167 in *Hymnal: A Worship Book* (HWB) (Elgin, IL: Brethren Press; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press; Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).
[4] "O Power of love," #593 in HWB. Text: Gerhard Tersteegen, *Ich bete an die Macht der Liebe*, 1757. Music: Dimitri S. Bortniansky, ST. PETERSBURG, *Choralbuch*, 1825.
[5] Verse 3.
[6] "I bind my heart this tide," #411 in HWB. Text: Lauchlan M. Watt, *The Tryst, A Book of the Soul,* 1907 (alt.). Music: J. Randall Zercher, 1965, *Mennonite Hymnal,* 1969.
[7] Singers using *The Mennonite Hymnal* (Scottdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing House; Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1969) came to refer to hymn #606, a 1830 Boston Handel and Haydn Society Collection setting of the doxology "Praise God from whom all blessings flow" simply as "606."
[8] *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 307.
[9] "What is this place," #1 in HWB. Text: Huub Oosterhuis, *Zomaar een dak boven wat hoofden,* 1968; tr. David Smith, ca. 1970. Music: Nederlandtsche Gedenckclanck, 1626, harmonized by B. Huijbers. Text and harmonization copyright © 1984 TEAM Publications.
[10] "Tú has venido a la orilla" (Lord, you have come to the lakeshore), HWB #229. Text and tune: Cesareo Gabaraín, 1979; tr. Gertrude C. Suppe et al., 1987. Translation copyright © 1989 The United Methodist Publishing House.
[11] *Worship Together* (Fresno, CA: Board of Faith and Life, General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Churches, 1995).
[12] *Sing the Journey* (Scottdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2005).
[13] Marcus Smucker, "A Rationale for Spiritual Guidance in the Mennonite Church" (unpublished paper, May 2002 revision). Seven themes cited in this article suggest seven areas of formation for Mennonites who seek a spiritual development congruent with Mennonite thought and life: (1) true spirituality bringing us into encounter with the fullness of God—God, Christ, and the Spirit; (2) following Jesus in life; (3) worship and prayer; (4) a discipleship of love and nonresistance; (5) living in community; (6) living in the global village; (7) a life a generosity and hospitality.
[14] Eugene H. Peterson, *Answering God: The Psalms as Tools for Prayer* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).
[15] Abraham Joshua Heschel, *Man's Quest for God* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 31–32; 27. Quoted in Gabe Huck, *How Can I Keep From Singing? Thoughts about the Liturgy for Musicians* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1989), 62–63.
[16] Quoted in Alice Parker, *Melodious Accord,* 99.

About the author

Marilyn Houser Hamm is a sessional instructor of music and worship at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, MB) and former director of worship and spirituality for Mennonite Church Canada. She served as chair of the music committee for *Hymnal: A Worship Book,* committee member and arranger-composer for the Hymnal Subscription Series and the new supplement series, *Sing the Journey* (2005) and *Sing the Story* (to be published in 2007). Marilyn teaches at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute in Gretna, Manitoba, and offers private instruction in voice and piano. She is a trained spiritual director.

Salvation in Hispanic Protestant perspective

Jose Ortiz

Hispanic 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 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.

> **The Hispanic Protestant 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 terms of individuals and the afterlife, and suited to accounting and reporting to constituencies back home.

For third world writers, the existential moment is likely to create the context for theological discussion and biblical interpretation.

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.[1] 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 reconstruction is the agenda. But in neither case could the expectation of national salvation pass the test of time.

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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 described 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.

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.

Religious 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.

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?"[2] 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.[3] 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

[1] Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Relgion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).
[2] John H. Westerhoff, *Will Our Children Have Faith?* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).
[3] Alan Jacobs, *The Narnian: The Life and Imagination of C. S. Lewis* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005).

About the author

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Saving encounters

Jim Loepp Thiessen

We had prayed and toiled for a year to get our new church off the ground. On a frosty January night, at the end of our first worship service, I was shaking hands with those who had come. A greeter brought a woman in her late twenties to me. Through her tears she told me, “I grew up in the church but threw it all away as a teenager. I married a nonbeliever. I decided to come to The Gathering after receiving information in the mail. I realized during the service that I need to turn my life back over to Jesus.”

I had not expected to witness such transformation on our first evening of worship! I prayed with Amy, though the prayer was really hers as she gave voice to an impulse long ignored. She and her two young children now faithfully attend our new church; she sings in the worship band and coordinates childcare. The experience of her conversion was heartwarming, and it made all we had done to prepare for that night seem well worth our investment.

But Amy is not typical of the people I have seen find salvation. Most of the stories related here come from my experience of leading an Alpha course for the past seven years. In this introduction to Christian faith, a small group gathers for ten evenings that include a meal or dessert together. The leader functions more as facilitator than teacher. A retreat in the middle of the course focuses on teaching about the Holy Spirit. The videos that are part of the course are led by Nicky Gumbel, a lawyer turned pastor of an Anglican church in central London. Alpha is a tool—only a tool—that opens a safe place for conversation about faith. It creates a nonjudgmental environment to which people can bring the messiness of their lives and their honest questions.

Those who have no experience of serfdom have trouble understanding the concept of *Lord*. I talk about the *leadership* of Jesus, though that language has limitations, too. The people with whom I walk offer their own pictures of coming to Jesus. “I never

realized it was that simple," one woman responded after comprehending that the gospel is not about adhering to rules, jumping through hoops, or making things right with an angry God. Salvation is a gift received; in grace we live our response to that gift. Another woman, having grown up in what she describes as a traditional, rule-bound faith observed, "Slowly the layers are being peeled back."

So how does salvation—healing, wholeness, redemption—happen for people today? I have noticed some patterns as I've accompanied many people along this path.

Salvation comes because of prayer

I believe our churches need to be charismatic in the best sense of the word: responsive to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Postmodern people are more likely to ask about Christian faith, Does it work? than Is it true? One woman said being prayed for marked a turning point for her. The Holy Spirit led me to intercede for her in certain ways, and the prayer spoke into her life. She told me, "I woke up through the night after that evening [of prayer], and the next morning felt like I was ready to move on with my life." Salvation's work of healing had begun.

Seekers may be willing to put up with the trappings of our tradition if they encounter meaningful community among us. But it's up to us to make our worship relevant to those who are searching.

Recently this woman had a deep experience of the Spirit in her life and has become passionate about her faith. She writes that "after an evening of group discussion, singing and prayer, I encountered the Holy Spirit during the night, alone in the darkness, as I prayed for what seemed like hours, and wept, and confessed, and raised my arms toward the Lord.... Well, I can hardly put in print the immediate sense of cleansing, relief, and joy that washed over me at that moment!"

The last several groups I have led included people who were distrustful, cynical, or turned off by what they have seen and experienced in the church. For these folks, healing prayer was a highlight of the course. By the last weeks of the Alpha journey, the participants have gotten to know each other, and those who are cynical or distrustful have—if they have stuck with the course—journeyed along the path to a place of hesitant openness.

Many have never been prayed for before, certainly not by a whole group of people. We invite the Spirit to lead our praying, and God gives wisdom about how to pray for those entrusted to us. A number of people have had significant encounters with God on the Alpha retreat, during which we invite them, if they so desire, to pray to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

Salvation happens slowly

People who come to Jesus may, like Amy, make that decision quickly, but often the process unfolds slowly. It happens gradually, because people in our culture often belong before they believe. It takes time, because they may have to work through a host of concerns that arise from their experience of Christianity. Some have to sort through issues around legalism. Some wonder, What about the preachers on TV, or the leaders who claim to be Christians and yet do things that seem hypocritical or at odds with the love of Christ?

Last week I listened as a woman exploring faith questions wrestled with the fact that George Bush calls himself a Christian and yet is responsible for the death of many Iraqis. After weeks of considering faith questions, she said, “I think I’m finally ready to come and explore your church.” This past Sunday she decided that enough of her hesitations had been addressed, and she chose to turn her life over to Jesus.

Some people struggle with issues related to the church’s role in history—the crusades, for example, or the centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. I find myself repenting on behalf of the church, and I have found that it releases something in people. With a Jewish woman who is exploring faith in Jesus, I recently expressed my regret and sorrow about the way Christians have treated Jews, and her tone changed. Whatever else is in store for her, she has let go of some of her stereotypes of Christians.

Salvation happens because of relationships

I never try to convince people that they need salvation. God has always done that for me. I’ve never told people they are sinners in need of God’s grace, though they have heard that in the Alpha course teachings, and they sometimes come to that realization through prayer.

Several years ago, I was convinced that one man in an Alpha group was making choices about substance abuse that were harming his family. After the evening that focuses on the Holy Spirit, he came to that conclusion on his own. In his view, God had revealed his error to him, and he experienced deep remorse. Had I told him, he probably would have become defensive.

People who come to Jesus may make that decision quickly, but often the process unfolds slowly. It happens gradually, because people in our culture often belong before they believe.

In my experience, people don't usually come into a relationship with Jesus because they are convinced of their sin but because they see something in the reign of God that makes sense of their longings and breathes clarity into their lives. They yearn for the Jesus they hear about and have met through others in their small group. We see God at work in their lives, helping them come to terms with their past. They experience salvation through having the eyes of their hearts opened and through love they experience from others. In the end, the Jesus way is incarnational. God is revealed among us as followers of Jesus live with integrity and passion; such lives are the best thing we have going to point people toward the God we serve.

Salvation is a question of arrows, not boxes

Lining up with the leadership of Jesus isn't a matter of jumping into a box. Being a disciple of Jesus takes you on a journey that includes floundering, stumbling, moving ahead, stepping back. Sooner or later, people decide for or against living under the guidance of Jesus, but often that decision is realized and enacted over time. Innovative Christian thinker Brian McLaren observes that salvation is less like signing a contract and more like learning a language. It is not about crossing one big line but about moving across a series of lines, as we choose to move toward the overall leadership of Jesus in our lives. If our lives are arrows pointing toward or away from God, or somewhere in between, then lining up our lives with the leadership of Jesus is a process of redirecting those arrows, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly.

When people choose to take a step closer to Jesus, I see lights go on in their eyes. An openness to the spiritual world becomes

evident. One man who was completely unfamiliar with the gospel—"I have only been to church for weddings"—came to our Alpha course. During the course, he made a commitment to follow Jesus. "I'm telling everyone who will listen that I'm a Christian," he enthused. I asked him if there was a turning point in his journey. He said there were several; the first big one happened when he was told by the small group leader that God had a plan for his life. This man, who had suffered much, was completely awed by the thought that the creator of the universe has a plan for his life. What for Christians is a cliché—God has a plan for your life—became a point of entrance for this man.

In times past, people were expected to believe first, then behave fittingly, and belonging came as a final step in the journey. Now people often belong first, find their identity in the community of God's people, then start behaving as suits those living the Jesus way. Believing is often the last step on the journey. Often we have asked people to get their beliefs right first, when what we need to do is find ways to help them get connected with the body of Christ. As they begin to belong in that circle, the Spirit of Jesus leads them closer to him.

People don't usually come into a relationship with Jesus because they are convinced of their sin but because they see something in the reign of God that makes sense of their longings and breathes clarity into their lives.

Making our congregations more inviting

We need to create safe places, such as small groups, where people can encounter the Jesus story and ask any questions they need to ask. Even before people engage in such exploration, they need places where they can simply make connections and build relationships with others in the body of Christ.

Our ten-week Alpha course introduction to Christian faith is not particularly postmodern in its approach, but it does provide a safe place to explore issues of faith, allowing people to ask whatever is on their hearts, and inviting them to contribute. These times of exploration are profoundly spiritual. They are led by people filled with the Spirit of Jesus, who believe that Jesus is alive today, and who are in tune with the Spirit yet open to whatever participants bring. Often the leaders are themselves new believers.

The approach of the apostle Paul, in his conversation with the Athenians on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34), is the spirit we need to adopt as we engage our culture with the good news. Paul, a Pharisee, laid aside his tradition in order to speak with these Greeks about the Jesus story, in their language, on their terms. The people who come to explore faith have often dabbled in a host of spiritualities. Like Paul, we need to set aside cultural pieces that may be obstacles to their quest. I'm not trying to make people into Mennonites; I'm trying to invite them into a relationship with the leader of Menno's life, Jesus Christ. I don't start with denominational distinctives. I try to embody the values of Anabaptism in my character, words, and way of life.

I'm not trying to make people into Mennonites; I'm trying to invite them into a relationship with the leader of Menno's life, Jesus Christ. I try to embody the values of Anabaptism in my character, words, and way of life.

We need to see our worship and other activities as they would be seen by those who have not heard the story. Our worship is often faithful to tradition but incomprehensible to those who are not woven into that tradition. I have wandered into many Mennonite services and thought, "I know this is meaningful to you, but I would not bring someone here who is unfamiliar with this tradition." The way we use the Bible often implicitly says, "Here is a story you all know," and leaders assume that those assembled have a shared base of knowledge. The language and style of our worship music—the way we do church—communicates that this party is for insiders, not for those who do not yet know the story.

The claim God has on my life is reflected in the words of Isaiah 49:6: "It is too small a thing that you should shepherd my people.... I have called you as a light to the Gentiles." Seekers may be willing to put up with all the trappings of our tradition if they encounter meaningful community among us rather than a clubhouse for the likeminded. But it's up to us as leaders to make our worship relevant to those who are searching. The apostle Paul spoke his message in a way outsiders could understand, quoting the pagan poets of their day and weaving God into their story. He was deeply distressed by their idols, yet he moved to the center of that idolatry to tap the deep spiritual longings of these Greek

listeners; “I see that you are very religious in every way,” he told them.

Because people in our society learn visually, I draw on aids such as movie clips to illustrate what I’m speaking about. How to do so appropriately and effectively is a separate discussion. I don’t use this approach to be trendy or cute but because media is a language people understand, and I’m dying for them to hear the gospel in a way they comprehend. I always find that a teachable moment follows the showing of a clip. When those searching see me bridging gaps between my world and theirs, the effort speaks volumes to them.

Three times in the past two weeks I have witnessed as people have come into a living relationship with Jesus. Watching the joy on their faces and seeing the change in their lives is a thrill. I wish every follower of Jesus could experience the delight of looking on as people encounter the living presence of Jesus, and of walking with them as they grow in discipleship.

About the author

Jim Loepp Thiessen is pastor of The Gathering Church (www.thegatheringsite.ca), a new congregation in Kitchener, Ontario. Writing the stories in this article served as a reminder to him of the ways God has faithfully provided manna—one day at a time—in this adventure in church planting.

Is Jesus the only way to God?

Wilbert R. Shenk

The question, Is Jesus the only way to God? is provocative in our modern intellectual climate, which has intensified the issues surrounding questions of religious faith. But neither those who answer that question in the affirmative nor those who counter in the negative can prove that their answer is correct. I will argue that the answer to this question can only be a statement of faith.

The question, Is Jesus the only way to God? sounds presumptuous in a culture where religious and cultural pluralism is taken to be not just descriptive of reality but a normative value.

The relationship between religions has been at issue wherever religiocultural streams meet, and it has been contested from the beginning. Indeed, the Abrahamic faith tradition emerged amid the religions of the Chaldeans in Ur. Abraham's response to Yahweh's call involved a double leaving: he left Ur, and he left the gods of the Chaldeans. Abraham's leaving was in response to the call of Yahweh in behalf of the nations. The Abrahamic faith tradition is thus the prototype of missionary faith. A missionary faith introduces an alternative to the indigenous religions. Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam have never been primal religions. All have engaged in missionary witness. Each has been grafted into a preexisting indigenous religious environment.

The grafting of Abrahamic faith into ancient Palestine was problematic at best. The Israelites were continually tempted to abandon the covenant relationship with Yahweh by imitating their neighbors and appropriating their religious rituals and beliefs. Whenever the Israelites succumbed, the prophets spoke out against the people's apostasy; the Decalogue expressly forbade idolatry, and worship of the Baalim abrogated the Israelites' covenant with Yahweh. They could not maintain their identity as children of Abraham unless they kept faith with Abraham's God.

When the messianic movement led by Jesus of Nazareth emerged within Judaism, only a handful of Jews recognized him as Messiah. He was officially denounced and rejected. As a prophetic figure, Jesus represented a new-old message: he drew on the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew prophets, but his witness had an uncharacteristic authority and urgency that challenged the status quo. The Gospel of John presents Jesus as the one sent by God to the world, and this consciousness of being sent by God powerfully infused his identity.

As a missionary faith, Christianity wherever it has gone has challenged the truth claims of whatever religious reality was found on the ground. But in the West where the Christian movement became Christendom, a fully domesticated and established religion, it has largely lost its capacity to prophesy. We do well to recall the observation of Martin Buber, Jewish philosopher and theologian, when he contrasted Christianity and Judaism: "Christianity *begins* as diaspora and mission. The mission means in this case not just diffusion; it is the life-breath of the community and accordingly the basis of the new People of God."[1] Of course, the church can forget its beginning point, as history amply demonstrates. But without this life-breath, the Christian faith loses its birthright spiritual power and authority to contest the status quo.

Are we asking the right question?

Since 1983, discussion of Christian perspectives on the religions has been dominated by the typology suggested by Alan Race in *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.[2] Here Race characterized Christian responses to other faiths in terms of three groups: exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist. Scholars quickly accepted this taxonomy, and it has become shorthand for saying that *exclusivists* seek to guard the primacy of their religion, *inclusivists* acknowledge that other religions can point to God but Jesus Christ remains the ultimate source of salvation, and *pluralists* insist that all religions are on an equal footing as means of salvation. The last has the merit of guarding the dignity of all religions, a position with great appeal for those with a modern sensibility.

Some scholars have subjected this taxonomy to rigorous critique. Because it forces complex data into a simple analytical scheme, it is reductionistic. In fact, it was developed by pluralists

to show the weaknesses of other positions and the reasonableness of theirs.[3] The question, Is Jesus the only way to God? sounds presumptuous in a culture where religious and cultural pluralism is taken to be not just descriptive of reality but a normative value.

Modernity drilled into us a distrust of faith and personal experience; only rational argumentation can lead us to reliable knowledge. Matters of faith and experience are subjective and should be treated as private opinion only. Instead, the goal is to identify universal principles that govern all areas of human activity and thus are valid for all people everywhere.

This calculus has seemed to be the driving force in the work of John Hick. He has argued that the religions of humankind are manifestations of a single religious essence, what he has called the Real.[4] Hick's approach may be criticized on several grounds. First, it uncritically assumes that in the wake of the Enlightenment, modern thought has successfully established reliable universal principles. The thinking individual can stand outside the historical context, setting aside the messiness of the particular and the contextual. But post-foundationalist philosophy has shown this view to be untenable. Second, this position is abstract and does not pay attention to genuine differences between religions as living systems of belief, worship, and life experience. Hick has built an elaborate analytical structure without the benefit of empirical data to support his argument.

In conversation, Stephen Neill once made the point that those best qualified to speak about Jesus Christ are individuals who have had a personal encounter with the Lord. Neill said: "We must listen to the converts." By this he meant that those who have come to faith in Jesus as adults, with full awareness of what life is like pre- and post-Jesus, carry an authority that those who have been nurtured into the Christian faith cannot have. For such individuals, turning to Christ has often been a costly decision arrived at only after great struggle. Such a decision can be neither cheap nor easy.

One may extend Neill's point to Christians in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; for many the meaning of the gospel still has a freshness that Western Christians have largely lost. Max L. Stackhouse observed this contrast firsthand when he attended a meeting of Indian theologians in Bangalore. He also had opportu-

nity to meet ordinary Christians in their congregations and homes. Stackhouse was impressed that the Indian Christians he met in local congregations did not share the enthusiasm of the professional scholars for interreligious dialogue. Instead they were concerned with the lived reality and struggles of everyday life.

> *The pietistic Christian Dalits [self-chosen name for what others have called untouchables] that I met, both the Catholics and the evangelicals, were interested more in conversion than conversation….*
>
> *[One teacher at a South Indian theological school] expressed grave suspicion of those who are eager to engage in dialogue with Hindus and Muslims without studying the social implications of these faiths…. The more prophetic forms of Christianity that press toward human rights and social justice are precisely those most under attack by non-Christian militants at local levels….*
>
> *At Madras Christian College, students and faculty spoke of the explosion of independent Bible study and prayer groups that coexist in tension with the traditional churches…. This contextualization of Christianity was completely unanticipated and frequently opposed by the older churches and ecumenical leaders….*
>
> *[But] these groups are having a major social and economic impact in several respects. They seem to be caste-inclusive—a posture that all Christian churches officially aspire to but seldom attain….*
>
> *Their chief focus is on helping people develop a personal and saving relationship to Jesus Christ and to live in peace with their neighbors.*[5]

This passage reminds us that ethical concerns have frequently played a significant role in evangelization. This dynamic became clear in a major 1929–30 study by J. Waskom Pickett for the Indian Christian Council, published as *Christian Mass Movements in India*.[6] The issue that gave rise to this study was the uneasiness many Protestant missionaries felt when entire groups—family clans, social groups—had become Christian and sought baptism.

Indeed, such a movement had occurred already in the sixteenth century, but it became a more common occurrence in the nineteenth century and continued into the twentieth century. It was noted that these large-scale movements had uniformly taken place entirely among the marginalized classes of people—that is, aboriginals or unscheduled castes. The problem was that so-called group conversions did not jibe with Western evangelical expectations that had been shaped by modernity and put great weight on a rational *individual* decision.

Repeatedly, Pickett and his team of researchers heard the stories of these marginalized people who had been oppressed by landowners. The moral support of the missionaries had given them the courage to resist and protest. Here is a sample interview:

> *"Why did you become a Christian?" we asked a young man in Vidyanagar who had been baptized less than a year before. "All of us in this village became Christians together," came the quick response, and it was recorded that he had followed the crowd. "But you didn't have to become a Christian because these others were doing so." "No, I wanted to be a Christian." "Why so?" "So I could be a man. None of us was a man. We were dogs. Only Jesus could make men out of us."*[7]

Another theme revealed by the research was that the traditional religion seemed incapable of helping these peasants cope with the ever-present evil spirits. The traditional cosmology no longer commanded these peasants' confidence.

Missionary practice has by no means been uniform or consistent. Ethical issues are invariably complex and contentious. The way missionaries have worked out their responses has reflected the formation they have received in their own experience of the church. Michael Barnes has pointed out the differing attitudes and approaches taken by Roman Catholic and evangelical missionaries in response to the exceedingly complicated case of caste in India.[8] The Catholic tradition treated caste as a social rather than religious issue. William Carey set the precedent among evangelicals who regarded caste as integral to Hinduism, on the one hand, and irreconcilable with the gospel, on the other. From this viewpoint, social practice was a manifestation of religion. The

Catholic tradition saw itself as being inclusive of the whole culture, whereas evangelicals such as Carey came to India from the experience of being Dissenters in Great Britain, from having refused to submit to the established church. Dissenters knew what it meant to suffer civil disabilities because they did not conform to the state church. It was relatively easy for them to sympathize with people of the lower castes and the aboriginal people who were at the bottom of society. Theology and ethics were joined.

A scripture-shaped response to the question

Since the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648), who laid the foundations of Deism and argued for a natural religion, have made many attempts to work out answers to questions not answered by religion. They have sought alternatives to the Christian faith. Herbert was convinced that because of geographical exploration, Christendom was rapidly shedding its provincialism, and Christianity could no longer lay claim to being the sole source of salvation. Many others have joined him in this search for alternatives to Christianity.

While there is a place for exploration and speculative inquiry, we should not treat speculation as sure knowledge. We ought to cultivate the humility to admit that we do not have answers to all questions. We may grow in insight but can never pretend to have gained full knowledge. The caution of the Apostle Paul—"Now I know only in part" (1 Cor. 13:12b)—should not be forgotten.

Speculation is different from a sustained effort to understand the mind of God on contemporary issues by wrestling with the scriptures in prayerful study. As Michael Barnes writes, "Christians may be called to anticipate the working of the Spirit through discerning 'seeds of the Word,' the patterning of God's continuing self-revelation. But Christians speak always of what they know; they have to be careful about speaking of what they do *not* know, what always remains other and utterly mysterious."[9] This observation suggests three aspects of a scripture-shaped response to the title question: (a) the mission of the people of God to the peoples of the earth, (b) what the scriptures say about the religions, and (c) Jesus as model for relating to people of other faiths.

The mission of the people of God to the peoples of the earth. Genesis 10 presents a "table of the nations" that affirms the unity

of all people. Genesis 11 reprises the scene in the garden of Eden. In a show of power, the people assert their autonomy by setting out to build a monument that will memorialize their achievements. God interrupts this plan by scattering the people and causing them to speak different languages, but God does not abandon humankind. Genesis 12 opens with the call to Abram to leave the land of Ur. God enters into a covenant with Abram, saying: "I will bless you … so that you will be a blessing … and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (12:2-3).[10] The identity of the people of God is profoundly linked to the nations. The salvation of the Abrahamic people is inextricably linked with that of the nations. The people of God are elected for the salvation of the nations.

What the scriptures say about the religions. The Bible offers neither a critique of religions nor a model of dialogue with religions as such. Yet religion and religions are found throughout the biblical canon. Religion is taken for granted; it is a constant of human existence. On occasion the Bible refers to the religion of a particular people, but the writers never offer a phenomenological description of religions, nor do they compare one with the other.

We can make two observations about the way scripture regards religion. First, the Bible recognizes the presence of many gods; each group has its own deities. The original relationship between God the creator and humankind has been replaced with worship of many gods. Second, when Moses comes down from Sinai, his first and second Words are: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God" (Exod. 20:3-5a). Yahweh calls the Israelites back to the original relationship with their creator by commanding them to abandon the worship of gods and idols. Yahweh's covenant with the Abrahamic people requires their undivided loyalty.

Jesus as model for relating to people of other faiths. Jesus the Messiah is the essential model for us in relating to people of all religions. Jesus says a good deal about religion, but the religion in question is that of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He engages in a radical critique of hypocrisy and formalism. By contrast, Jesus

allows other people to set the agenda. In his encounter with the Samaritan woman (John 4:7-42), Jesus was vulnerable—he needed water to quench his thirst and risked breaking social conventions to get it. Jesus did not engage in religious talk. Rather he piqued the woman's interest by pointing beyond the mundane and linking it to "the gift of God." The woman brought up the religion question ("Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain"), but Jesus refused to take the bait. He returned the focus to the worship of God and away from a particular place or ritual system. As a partner in dialogue, the woman came to know herself in a new way, as a person of dignity for whom God has infinite compassion. She and her fellow villagers discerned that salvation had come to them. Always Jesus responded to the needs of people, but God was central to the answer.

Conclusion

A scripture-shaped response to the title question will seek to draw on the spirit and teaching of the entire canon of scripture.[11] For example, in the Gospel of John and in Acts the writers wrestle sensitively with the particularity of salvation in Jesus Christ, on the one hand, and the universal scope of God's plan of salvation, on the other. In contrast to the triumphalism of too many Christians, which leads them to reject the possibility that other religions or systems of thought include anything of value, the scriptures do not deny what is positive in other religions. At the same time, these scriptures confidently affirm that it is through the work of Jesus Christ that women and men are restored to fellowship with God. The scriptures affirm both the finality of the work of Jesus Christ and the finitude of the church. The apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians that "We have this treasure [that is, the gospel] in clay jars [that is, the church]" (2 Cor. 4:7).

We need to hold together three dimensions. First, as noted above, God elected Abraham and his descendants to be servants of the nations: "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). This blessing of the nations is the permanent *apostolic* purpose of the church. Second, the role or stance of the church is that of *ambassador, intermediary,* or *reconciling agent.* The church is not self-important but has the function of representing God's mission before the watching world. Third, the church is

called to engage in this ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:15-20) in the spirit of *uncoerced concern.* The words of 1 John 1:2 ought to haunt modern and postmodern Christians: "This life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us." If we have indeed experienced this life, we have no right to withhold our witness.

Notes

[1] Martin Buber, *Two Types of Faith* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951), 10; Buber's italics.

[2] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983). Race credits this typology to John Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths* (London: Fount Paperbacks, 1977). Gavin D'Costa has subjected the pluralist paradigm to scrutiny in *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986); and *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990). See also Harold A. Netland, *Encountering Religious Pluralism: The Challenge to Christian Faith and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 46–54.

[3] See Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 8.

[4] Various scholars have criticized Hick's approach. See, e.g., Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 162–63, inter alia.

[5] Max L. Stackhouse, "Pietists and Contextualists: The Indian Solution," *The Christian Century* 110 (January 20, 1993), 56–58.

[6] J. Waskom Pickett, *Christian Mass Movements in India: A Study with Recommendations* (New York: Abingdon, 1933).

[7] Ibid., 158.

[8] Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions*, 169.

[9] Ibid., 231.

[10] This covenant structure, which has been called the original Great Commission, is reiterated three more times in Genesis: 18:18, 22:18, 28:13-14.

[11] See George R. Brunk III, "The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ," in *Jesus Christ and the Mission of the Church: Contemporary Anabaptist Perspectives*, ed. Erland Waltner (North Newton, KS: Faith and Life Press, 1990), 1–23. Republished in James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans, eds., *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 2: Theological Foundations* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 39–54.

About the author

Wilbert R. Shenk taught mission history, missiology, and mission to contemporary culture at Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA), 1995–2005. He served with Mennonite Central Committee, 1955–1959 and 1963–1965; Mennonite Board of Missions, 1965–1990; and taught at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, 1990–1995.

Book review

Jane Miller Leatherman

Not as the Scribes: Jesus as a Model for Prophetic Preaching, by Ryan Ahlgrim. Scottdale, PA; and Waterloo, ON: Herald Press, 2002.

Ryan Ahlgrim has served as pastor to several congregations and has earned a D.Min. in preaching. He writes engagingly, espousing his understanding of Jesus' model of preaching while demonstrating that model both biblically and practically. The book moves through Ahlgrim's personal journey with preaching, to an examination of the different ways the scribes and Jesus preached, to a closer analysis of how Jesus preached, to some suggestions for creating new parables (as Jesus did). The book ends with five of Ahlgrim's prophetic sermons and some concluding statements.

Prophetic preaching, Ahlgrim asserts, is the tool Jesus used and that today's Mennonite preachers can use to facilitate and encourage transformation.

Ahlgrim contends that there is the tendency in the church today to substitute the map (scripture), and learning about the map, for the real journey with the transforming Jesus. Prophetic preaching, Ahlgrim asserts, is the tool Jesus used and that today's Mennonite preachers can use to facilitate and encourage transformation. He defines *scribal preaching* as speaking "about a subject, seeking to explain it and apply it," and *prophetic preaching* as embodying "the subject so that it is experienced by the listener" (15). He lists three primary components of prophetic preaching: speaking for God, being an embodiment of God's Word in the present, and facilitating transforming encounter with God. According to Ahlgrim, Jesus preached prophetically rather than interpreting the tradition, but today's preaching for the most part attempts to interpret the Jesus tradition rather than encouraging an encounter with the living Christ.

In confronting the question of whether we ought to preach as Jesus did—with authority (an important Mennonite issue!)—Ahlgrim observes that Jesus passed on his authority to others (see Luke 9–10). Second, he notes that preaching is an authoritative act, and that Jesus encouraged mutuality by engaging his hearers in conversation and interpretation. Third, he notes that the character of the preacher is important in prophetic preaching.

Ahlgrim uses story after story in this book, and he effectively demonstrates the process of weaving story, metaphor, and images, a method he highlights in Jesus' ministry of preaching and enacting transformation. I wanted more explanation for Ahlgrim's inclusion of some of the stories. In the absence of clear connections in the text, several stories left me unsure about why they were there. Perhaps I think too concretely! Or perhaps some preachers—and congregations—need just a little more explanation.

A strength of this book is its challenge to the church and to preachers to embrace the eschatological and practical transformation of Jesus' message and ministry in proclaiming the reign of God in the world. As I read these pages, I found myself asking again and again: How is my church experiencing the reality of God today? What is God doing in my life that is transformative right now? Where do I need transformation and healing?

Don Wardlaw, who writes the foreword, suggests that the reader experience Ahlgrim's five sermons before reading the rest of the book. The last sermon in particular touched me deeply, reminding me that good preaching is a great gift to the church and inspiring me to do the work necessary to preach as Jesus did, in order to facilitate encounter with the God of steadfast love and kindness, who transforms and redeems us and the world.

About the reviewer

Jane Miller Leatherman works for hospice and does spiritual direction and pastoral counseling from her office in Goshen, Indiana. She has five adult children and eight grandchildren.

Book review

Joshua P. Yoder

God and Violence: Biblical Resources for Living in a Small World, by Patricia M. McDonald. Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2004.

God and Violence is the latest offering from Herald Press dealing with the problem (for pacifists) of war and violence in the Bible. McDonald does not offer a comprehensive survey of the Bible but a selective sampling of its books. The first books of the Bible, Genesis through Judges, get the most attention, with chapters on Isaiah, Mark, and Revelation following.

McDonald's basic approach is twofold. First, she wants to demonstrate that there is less violence in the Bible than many readers assume. The accounts of war and killing tend to stand out in our minds more than other materials, so we imagine they make up a bigger part of the Bible than they actually do. Readers also tend to see certain texts in militaristic terms when there is no warrant for doing so. We may view the sword emerging from Jesus' mouth in Revelation as a weapon rather than as a symbol for the word of truth, or regard the companies organized at the beginning of Numbers as military units although the people do no fighting until the next generation. Second, McDonald wants to draw attention to the many places where the Bible shows violence in a negative light or where potential violence is avoided. For example, she points out how the patriarchs generally take pains to avoid violence in conflicts with neighboring peoples, and her survey of Judges reveals many instances in which violence is viewed negatively.

McDonald's approach, then, is specific rather than systematic. She reads each text for what it has to say about violence, rather than trying to fit them all into an overarching pattern. Systematic approaches have suggested that the warrior God of the Old Testament is replaced by the pacifist God of the New Testament,

or that war represents God's "permissive will" while Jesus' nonviolence reflects God's true will. Instead, McDonald holds up texts in both testaments that disparage violence and promote nonviolence, even while acknowledging the narratives in the Bible that do endorse violence and war. I appreciate this text-by-text approach: better to acknowledge some violent tendencies but show the Bible's essential ambivalence by highlighting texts that reject it and present alternatives.

Particularly useful is the chapter, "Three Soundings," in which McDonald reviews three stories, from 1 and 2 Samuel and 2 Chronicles, in which characters refuse to respond to provocation, instead defusing potentially violent situations and acting to restore peace. This chapter serves as an important reminder that many biblical stories demonstrate peacemaking and nonviolent responses to conflict.

At times McDonald overreaches in her attempts to downplay the violence in the text and bring out elements of nonviolence or antiviolence. In her chapter on Judges, she writes, "Judges thus seems to suggest that the Lord is responsible for all manner of outrages, carried out by people whose behavior is at least questionable. Readers may want to check for irony.... For it may be that at least some of these narratives are intended to show people's propensity for blaming others (any others, including the Lord, if necessary)" (147–48). To suggest that we should see irony in the text's claims for divine support of the judges' military exploits seems to me to overstep the bounds of common sense, and to say that the Lord's Spirit is responsible for "all manner of outrages" raises the question of what should be considered an outrage.

I found most problematic the chapter on Joshua, "Receiving the Land as a Gift." McDonald points out that the book emphasizes not the military exploits of Israel but the way God gives them victory despite their inexperienced and inferior army and because of their fidelity to the covenant with God. At the end of the chapter, McDonald suggests that we "bracket out" the problematic aspects of the book in order to focus on its real meaning—that all we have is given by God, and that faithfulness to God is the most important ingredient in success (141–42). It is important not to lose sight of these positive lessons, but it is also

essential that we not sweep the unpleasant parts under the rug. We need to face these narratives squarely and name what we see: ethnic cleansing and genocide undertaken in the name of God and justified by demonizing the enemy and appealing to religious purity. To her credit, McDonald does not pretend that there are not "real problems" (141) in the book of Joshua. Yet in her efforts to bring out the helpful aspects, she comes close to suggesting that we overlook the harmful aspects. To do so would be to engage in denial about the shadow side of the Bible.

Pastors wanting to use the Bible as a resource for challenging violence and encouraging peacemaking will find much that is useful in *God and Violence*. Busy pastors may want to skip around in the book, reading the sections that particularly interest them. One of the most useful aspects of McDonald's book is that she engages some of the scariest parts of the Bible for pacifists, including Joshua, Judges, and Revelation. McDonald's treatment of these books should open up new vistas for pastors and encourage us to use these books in our preaching and teaching.

About the reviewer

Joshua Yoder has served as a pastor at Fellowship of Hope (Elkhart, IN) and is now studying Bible at the University of Notre Dame.

Book review

Korey J. Dyck

In Tune with God: The Art of Congregational Discernment, by Sally Weaver Glick. Scottdale, PA: Faith and Life Resources, 2004.

It seemed so simple. The church council invited a group of members to assess the current state of the church and give direction for the future of the congregation. But this "simple" task proved so challenging and confusing that the committee lost its sense of direction and vitality before it could meet the goals it set out to achieve.

Have you ever had this experience? If you have, this book offers direction and hope.

In Tune with God: The Art of Congregational Discernment, by Sally Weaver Glick, acts as a primer for those called to bring clarity to issues within a congregation; it outlines important concepts and practices to guide church leaders in their discernment processes. Glick believes that congregations have lost the art of aligning the church's goals with what God desires. Being "in tune with God" requires that church members start their discernment by creating space to hear God and by increasing their ability to listen to one another. Glick treats these themes by presenting biblical exegesis and examples of early church conflict, as well as by increasing the ways we listen to the Holy Spirit's guidance. This listening can be enhanced, she argues, through spiritual practices such as writing laments, journaling, scriptural meditation, and through the effective use of silence.

In Tune with God **acts as a primer for those called to bring clarity to issues within a congregation; it outlines concepts and practices to guide discernment processes.**

The book is arranged in eight chapters. Helpful appendices provide a one-day retreat outline, practical tips for using healthy

discernment, a leader's guide, and a short bibliography. *In Tune* begins by defining the term *discernment* and discovering our preconceived images of God. Then it moves into exploring the question, What is God's will for us? Chapters five and six consider what type of community the church is called to be in Christ and the actual process of discernment—with emphasis on our attitudes toward God, self, and others. Chapter seven details how a wise reading of the Bible produces a faithful adherence to scripture, and the final chapter discusses obstacles to and stories of congregational discernment.

Glick's primary audience is North American churches, and her education (M.Div. from Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary) and experience (thirty years in congregational leadership) make her well suited to writing this study. A pastoral tone is evident, and the pace and style of the chapters is welcome and relaxing. Each chapter begins with an amusing reader's theatre introducing the chapter's content, and reflection questions are interspersed throughout each chapter. They encourage readers to pause and reflect on their own experience, and to listen for the Spirit's leading in discernment.

A few minor editorial matters: The use of nonsense words such as *higgledy-piggledy* detracted from content already well stated, and occasionally a foreign term such as *portmanteau* could be replaced with a common English word without loss of meaning.

In a larger sense, *In Tune* names the challenges that are part of congregational discernment. It does not address the complexities of working with real people or offer a step-by-step outline for congregational discernment. Nor should it; that is another book. This book's value is twofold: it names what comes before our actual discernment, that is, opening ourselves to hearing God clearly, and it outlines ways to invite and value God's insight in the midst of our disagreements and misunderstandings. *In Tune* will resonate well with those in leadership positions.

About the reviewer

Korey J. Dyck is an instructor in the Peace and Conflict Transformation Studies Program at Canadian Mennonite University (Winnipeg, MB).