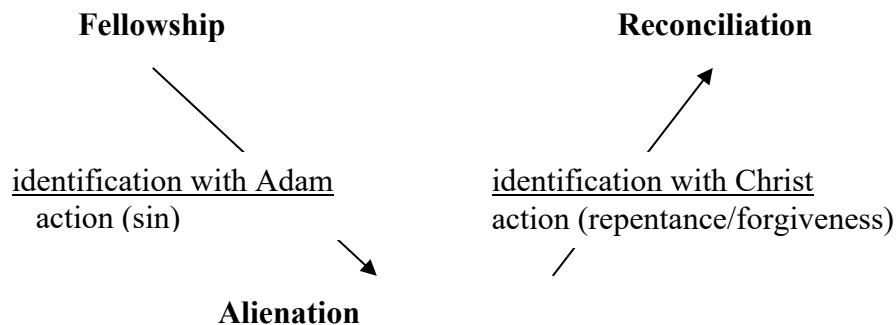


THE NATURE OF SALVATION

Virgil Warren, PhD

Salvation as reconciliation is the most distinctive feature of Christianity. Herein lies the primary difference between the gospel, on the one hand, and the Law, wisdom literature, and the prophets, on the other. In this respect, Christianity differs from the purposes of previous divine economies and from the goals of other religions and human agendas. In Christ, God is concerned with more than letting people know that he exists, what he is like, what his moral standards are, and what his expectancies are within his purposes. Salvation is not simply from ignorance, as by revelation; it is not deliverance from physical existence as in Gnosticism and Eastern dualism; it is not a deliverance from individuality as in Hinduism. Salvation is reconciliation from alienation and from all the negatives that come from separation from God and other people.

In keeping with interpersonalism as the distinctive characteristic of the Christian worldview, the following diagram summarizes under reconciliation the nature and pattern of “salvation” as based on 2 Corinthians 5:14-21. It applies to both the individual and corporate mankind.



Paul’s use of “reconciliation” to summarize his ministry (5:18-19) and the content of his message (5:18-20) implies several things simultaneously.

1. “Reconciliation” implies that salvation addresses an interpersonal problem; it aims to correct a breakdown in social relations. Since God and mankind are both interpersonal, there are vertical and horizontal dimensions to this issue. Reconciliation is the reality involved in “salvation.”

2. Alienation is the problem since that is the opposite of reconciliation in the interpersonal category.

3. “Salvation” means that a problem already exists by the time the Christian message enters the picture. The concern is not prevention but cure. It is not just a matter of telling people how to live or what to hope for, which was the role of the Law plus wisdom literature and prophecy respectively. Salvation corrects what has gone bad, and it is always harder to straighten out a condition than to prevent it.

4. We know from experience that alienation comes about from sin, that is, from behavior contrary to a shared standard for behavior and action contrary to positive social relations. Scripture says the same thing: “*Your sins have separated me and you*” (Isaiah 59:2; cp. Amos 3:3). Not only does the Bible use *sin* as a term for (a) behavior contrary to a shared standard for behavior, but also for (b) the state of estrangement that results from such behavior, and (c) the psychological condition of bondage to sin as ingrained sinful habit.

5. Reconciliation assumes that God and man are both ethical beings, responsible for their actions.

The evolutionary format differs from the diagram above by not starting with an ideal situation from which people historically fell, but with an animal existence that did not have interpersonal characteristics and capacities.

I. Aspects and Images of “Salvation”

The reality in salvation is reconciliation. In that connection, scripture speaks of metaphors for salvation, aspects of it, and consequences of it. The terminology below includes expressions for (a) different aspects of the same larger whole and (b) different figures, or word pictures, for that whole or some aspect of it. In our explanation of the ideas, we give first the biblical usage and then note other concepts that have become attached to these words in the history of Christian thought—ideas that at times are more technical concepts and at other times seem foreign to the biblical viewpoint.

Salvation itself is really one picture of the subject it labels. It refers to restoring relationships as retrieving from an unwholesome condition or circumstance—saving. The Bible also uses “saving” imagery for political deliverance, deliverance from physical danger, and medical cure.

Reconciliation is the opposite of alienation, estrangement, divorce, separation. It refers to restoration after broken relationships. As such, reconciliation is most precisely what “salvation” is all about. The latter term does not necessarily conjure up “saving” from broken relationship and its subsequent problems. More likely it brings to mind being saved from guilt, temporal punishment, physical death, destruction in hell, and so forth. Consequently, reconciliation is a

richer term because it focuses on persons, relationship between persons, restoring lost relationship between persons.

Healing likens reconciliation to physical healing. Healing imagery is also applied to exorcising demons, removing moral faults, and resolving a country's political defects.

Regeneration looks at the “starting over” element involved in reconciliation (John 3:5 Titus 3:5). In historical theology this imagery has been loaded with a further concept that derives from the idea of natural depravity. Regeneration in this sense refers to the Spirit’s work of fixing the defective nature that we supposedly inherit from our first parents by physical birth.

Conversion addresses the “change” involved in becoming a Christian—a change of belief, perhaps, but more importantly a change of attitude and motive and behavior that accompanies reconciliation. If we hope to enter back into fellowship and continue in it, we need to discard ways of acting that caused separation in the first place.

Repentance is a change of the mind, attitude, motives, and feelings that lead to a changed life—conversion. It is a change that arises from sorrow for sin and leads to reformation of life. Its value in restoring relationship lies in separating the sinner from his past acts as far as he himself is concerned. Repentance says, “*That is no longer the kind of person I am or want to be. I turn my back on such attitudes, motives, and deeds.*”

Forgiveness means no longer holding past sins against the sinner; the one sinned against ceases to allow previous behaviors to impact present relations. Forgiveness says, “*That is no longer the kind of person I view you as being or wanting to be.*”

Remission is an alternative translation of the Greek word ἀφεσίς (*aphesis*), “forgiveness.”

Faith is the aspect of reconciliation that “trusts” the person on the other side of the relationship. Faith trusts that the other will be gracious, forgiving, no longer reckoning sins. The sinner has to trust because, being the offender, he has no recourse to gaining the other person’s good will. The offended is under no obligation to overlook or forgive.

Grace is the aspect of reconciliation that refers to the positive, loving attitude the offended takes toward the offender. Grace withholds just punishment and even bestows positive good.

Fellowship is positive association with another person, a condition and pattern of interaction that results from the reconciliation process.

Adoption compares salvation to being given status in a family a person does not belong to.

Justification deals with the change that takes place in God’s eyes toward us. It is legal imagery for personal forgiveness by an offended party. It treats the removal of guilt as a pronouncement made by the executor of the law—a pronouncement that says the offender is viewed as just relative to the requirements in the standard of behavior.

Life is meaningful existence based on relationship to the superior Other and his purposes, all of which leads to his blessing and a sense of well-being in the creature.

Revelation is the objective effort of making the sinner aware of moral expectancies, of the “good news” that failure in moral expectancies is not a one-way, dead-end street.

Illumination, also translated enlightenment, is the subjective experience of profiting from revelation. It is the part of reconciliation that senses the truth now properly understood as well as the experience of the relationship itself along with its blessings.

Sanctification draws attention to the separation from all competing associations that must occur in reconciliation and identification. Sanctification pictures salvation as being set aside to special use and calling, the same word picture in the *holy, sacred, and saint*.

In historical theology “sanctification” became a technical word that stresses the quality of Christian living. Sanctification is a process of change by degrees within the reconciled state in contrast to justification, which is regarded as occurring at a point in time when the reconciled state begins. Justification is monergistic (something done wholly by the other “One”) while sanctification is synergistic (something done by God and person together). Justification is operating grace; sanctification is cooperating grace.

In Wesleyan theology sanctification is something also done only by God’s Spirit in what is called “*the second definite work of grace*.” That second work follows regeneration, which was the first definite work that removed enough inbred defect to enable initial response to the gospel; in sanctification the Spirit removes the last vestiges of inbred sin so the saved person can live a morally perfect life of love.

Atonement technically refers to Christ’s role in the reconciliation process, although its biblical usage has a broader reference. In the Authorized Version “atonement” rendered a Hebrew root (כִּפְרָה) that pictured the removal of sins as “covering” them up. In the New Testament the Authorized Version used “atonement” only in Romans 5:11, where it translated the Greek root (ἀλλάσσω, *allassō*) elsewhere rendered “reconcile/reconciliation.” “Atonement” carries a word picture for unification after alienation: “at-one-ment.”

Propitiation pictures as appeasement the removal of God’s displeasure, or “wrath,” at a person’s sin—an appeasement based on identification with the Righteous One.

Expiation, a more legal concept than propitiation, indicates the removal of guilt against the standard in an impersonal sense.

Redemption compares salvation to buying someone out of slavery. In this case, salvation redeems people from the stative and psychological bondage of sin.

Ransom, another translation for the Greek word rendered “redemption,” carries the notion of delivering someone from the slave state.

Election draws attention to the fact that the identity of those reconciled to God is based on God's "choice" to receive them rather than based on their deserving his favor.

Imputation means that righteousness is not so much resident in the reconciled one as viewed upon him by God, who accepts him back into fellowship and forgives sin.

Creation emphasizes the newness of a person's condition and the primacy of the divine activity involved.

These terms include metaphors, aspects, consequences, and reference to the general reality itself. The basic **reality** is reconciliation. The **aspects** are conversion, repentance, forgiveness/remission, faith, grace, revelation, illumination/enlightenment, sanctification, atonement, election, and imputation. The **consequences** are fellowship and life. The **metaphors** are regeneration, salvation, healing, adoption, justification, sanctification, illumination/enlightenment, propitiation, expiation, redemption, creation, and ransom.

In a sense, all the aspects and consequences could also be called metaphors in that all the terms have word pictures. In this listing, the difference is that interpersonal realities are aspects of the primary reality, reconciliation. Sometimes, as in "atonement," there is no word besides a word-picture term to refer to the aspect of the reality that is there; so we have to list that term with the aspects. That makes metaphors out of non-interpersonal verbiage used in connection with the whole reconciliation process with its divine and human aspects.

The list contains some paired terms, which correlate with the two sides of the divine-human interactions involved. Faith trusts in grace; illumination results from revelation; and repentance leads to forgiveness; repentance by the sinner is the condition for forgiveness by the Lord; alienation is resolved into reconciliation.

II. Alternatives to the Christian Concept of Salvation

Christianity conceives of mankind's primary problem as alienation; so, its solution is reconciliation. The means of solution is repentance, conversion, and identification with Christ, including commitment to his lordship, values, and purposes to the extent he carried them out. Other worldviews have different understandings of man's fundamental problem and consequently other understandings of the solution to it and different means of obtaining it. (See Virgil Warren, *What the Bible Says About Salvation*, pp. 10-12.)

The key point in evaluating the alternatives to the Christian analysis of the human predicament is determining what is central and what is less central. Several alternatives identify matters that are indeed problems, but the difficulty comes in (a) trying to make them central or in (b) the means by which they are supposedly solved.