

Theo 2301: Person & Work of Christ Essay  
Tutor Genevieve Canty

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Due 11 May 94

3200 words

(Cover note)

Schillebeeckx claims that our situation affects our understanding of salvation. The New Testament, as well as recent theologies of liberation appear to bear him out. It is therefore inevitable that my approach to salvation should reflect my life situation. Even if I could remain totally objective and academic in my approach, I would not want to.

All theological essays have an audience in mind. Usually this is an academically equipped, biblically aware and theologically educated tutor. In this case, however, it is a friend of mine studying the third year of a B.Sc. majoring in anatomy, who is almost totally biblically illiterate and whose theological education (God help her) is almost entirely derived from talking with me in the early hours of the morning.

One night in the pub she asked of whether God would send her to hell, given that she was basically a good person, and what I thought the minimum necessary was to get into heaven. This essay is an attempt to answer her question, it is written to her and I will be giving her a copy. My aim is to not only educate her about what is required for salvation, but to convince her that this thing we call "salvation" is not a thing at all, but a relationship well worth entering. I have tried to minimise the audience-specific allusions.

Dear Carly,

Well here it is at last, my attempt to answer the question, "What must we do to be saved?"

I want to start with the much easier question, "What *can* we do to be saved?" The Bible is full of answers to this, and many Christians have affirmed them throughout history. The New Testament writers call us to repent (that is, turn away from a life without God to a life with God) and believe the message about Jesus the Christ, the Son of God (Mark 1:15, Acts 2:37<sup>1</sup>). If we call out to God we will be saved (Romans 10:13). If we believe that Jesus rose from the dead, and accept that he has a claim on our lives, we will be saved (Romans 10:9). If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, we have eternal life through the Holy Spirit whom Jesus sends to us (John 20:30, Galatians 4:6).

I have pages of verses about salvation, but the broad picture they paint is that:

- : Jesus is central to, and essential for our salvation.
- : Salvation has its origin with God, who reaches out to us
- : Salvation is a relationship with God through Jesus. It must be maintained, it isn't a 'thing' that happens to us and can then be forgotten.

Deciding what we *must* do to be saved is much more difficult—how much can we get away with before we miss out on salvation, where is the line, if there is one? This is something people have struggled with for thousands of years, and if you're expecting the definitive answer here you're going to be really disappointed.

There are at least two areas to cover before getting to the main question: What are people like (how does God see us), and what

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<sup>1</sup> Biblical notation works like this; Mark 3:4-6 means the book of Mark, third chapter, verses 4-6.

what is salvation anyway?

Then we can look at what we must do to be saved *now*, that is, on this side of the grave, and what we must do to be saved for eternity, to gain eternal life.

**What are people like?**

Aulen<sup>2</sup> claims that theology lives in seemingly incompatible opposites. Perhaps that's not surprising since we ourselves seem to be made up of them. The news shows us people risking their lives by entering burning buildings to rescue their pets, then follows with stories of Rowandans macheteing each other to death. Zulus and Afrikaaners hug in one part of Johannesburg while in another both white and black extremists are willing to kill their own people to derail the election. There was a time when I was one step away from thumping the daylights out of my brother, yet I would have risked death to protect him from anybody else. We have such a great capacity for good and evil, and we cannot pretend that we are wholly one or the other.

Of course, some do, taking one of two extreme views. The doctrine of original sin basically says that we are born wicked, empty of good and full of all manner of evil, making us the objects of God's wrath<sup>3</sup>.

Liberal Christianity was the modern expression of the other extreme, focussing on the fact that we are created in the image of a loving, compassionate, good, God. Jesus functioned not so much as a saviour from evil and sin, as a powerful moral example of what can be achieved if we live out our humanity to the full<sup>4</sup>. Whilst WWI put an end to liberal Christianity<sup>5</sup>, few modern Christians

<sup>2</sup> Aulen, G., *Christus Victor* p. 155.

<sup>3</sup> George, T., *Theology of the Reformers* pp. 213-215 summarises Calvin's position. Wesley agrees, "Sermon XLIV Original Sin" in *The Works of John Wesley* vol 6, pp 55,63-4.

<sup>4</sup> Aulen pp. 146,148.

<sup>5</sup> Dutney, A., *Lecture Series*, Parkin-Wesley College 1994.

Obey  
differs from  
Calvin's  
we should  
respect;  
our equality  
to respect  
woper etc  
grace.

Christians want to return to a totally negative view of humanity either.

The truth lies somewhere in between. We rejoice that we can do good, but acknowledge the appalling evils committed throughout human history, as well as our own capacity to lie, steal, gossip etc., and the selective conditionality of so much of our 'love'. We are all bad enough to need God to save us, but valuable enough that this is precisely what God wants to do (1 Timothy 2:4).

### What is salvation?

So what is salvation? You talked about avoiding hell, and this 'afterlife' aspect of salvation has certainly been an important component since before the New Testament. As I've said before, though, salvation starts *now*. As Desmond Tutu said, "Salvation is not *only* 'Pie in the sky when you die.'"

Salvation has been understood in different ways throughout Christian history. Even the New Testament presents many different pictures of salvation, each one being shaped by the experience of the community at the time. This is not to say that there is no consensus amongst the different views, but that they pick up on different aspects. Here I can summarise only what I see as the central core of the biblical writers and later theologians' view of salvation.

Salvation is a process which begins now and continues for eternity<sup>6</sup>. It is a relationship with God<sup>7</sup>. The greek and hebrew words which it translates are closely associated with healing, wholeness and rescue from danger<sup>8</sup>. Heaven is therefore seen as a place where we live as healed and whole people in loving

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<sup>6</sup> Luke 17:19; Acts 2:27; Wesley, "Sermon XLIII The Scripture Way of Salvation" p. .

<sup>7</sup> Romans 8:14; Edwards, D., *What are they saying about salvation?* p. 79, and quoting Athanasius p. 15, Gutierrez p. 38, Moore p. , Schillebeeckx p. ; Webb, P., *Salvation today* p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Schillebeeckx in Edwards p. ; Webb pp. 7-8.

relationships with God and each other, no longer restricted by our own selfishness and fears (e.g. Revelation 7:15-17, 21:3-4). Earthly salvation implies the possibility of relating to God in a meaningful way here and now, of being moved toward that wholeness which is fully realised in heaven. It means liberation from sin and death.

Salvation has both a personal and societal dimension. It means the liberation of the oppressed, and the reconciliation of oppressor and oppressed. It means to be restored to what a true human and a true society is meant to be<sup>9</sup>.

In summary, we have turned from God both as a society and as individuals. Being cut off from the only true source of love dehumanised us and caused us to withdraw our unconditional love from each other. Salvation is repenting (turning away) from this to be restored to the people God desires us to be: people who live in a loving relationship with him and others. The crux of Jesus' mission was to bring this about (e.g. Matthew 22:34-40).

I hope you see that salvation is a positive thing. Even if you don't believe it's true, it should be clear that it is a wonderful thing that Jesus points us to. Jesus calls us to humanisation and liberating love for God and others, not a list of rules that must be obeyed. Christianity is a call to a saving relationship with God through Jesus. But what must we do to enter that relationship?

**Salvation Today**

How do we enter a relationship with God here on earth? When we started going out I told you how I felt about you, and you (thank God!) responded. But how does it work with someone we can't see or touch or hear? Continuing to think in terms of our relationship may cast some light on entering a relationship with God.

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<sup>9</sup> Gutierezz in Edwards p. 35; Webb pp. 3,6.

*What do you mean?*

Before we even talked there was the attraction that we both felt, and feel. There was nothing intellectual about it, nothing verbalised, but we felt drawn to each other without being able to precisely say why. There was a period for me where I felt drawn to God. I didn't know what God would be like, but I was drawn to 'someone' beyond what I had so far experienced, and I know that God was attracted to me my whole life, like a secret admirer. It was a feeling not easily described, but something like, "Wouldn't it be great if there really was a God who loved me." Not that dissimilar to, "Wouldn't it be great if Carly was as attracted to me as I am to her?"

*easier to believe if you know her*

You believe in me, you believe that I exist, that I am a person you can relate to and a person you can trust. This is the sense in which we are called to believe in God. Without belief (faith) there can be no relationship. Now it's easy to believe that I exist, though it takes longer to believe that I am trustworthy, and needs a different set of evidence. God does not expect anyone to believe in him without evidence, Jesus constantly called people to judge his words and deeds for themselves, to see if his claims were believable. He reappeared to the disciples, and especially Thomas, to provide them the evidence they needed to go out and proclaim his message against often severe opposition.

*Yes*

Many people didn't believe in Jesus, and in the gospels it is especially the self-righteous people, those who believe in their own self-sufficiency that were the most resistant. The ostracised people, the ones well aware of their need for wholeness and healing, were the ones to whom Jesus gave evidence, and were the ones who responded to his good news. In the same way today, I think, we need to examine ourselves honestly, to decide whether we can be trusted to be the masters of our own lives, whether there is any evidence that we can be the consistently loving and caring people we want to be without help. When I realised that I wasn't living up to what I believed to be right, that I couldn't control my own destiny, that I had no power over death, then I was ready to turn to the God who claimed to be able to do that for me. Over the

the next few months, and years, God has provided more and more evidence that this is the case, that he is guiding me and bringing me to wholeness, that he has saved and is saving me.

One thing is clear, then, to enter a relationship with God you must believe that God exists, but this is *not* something that occurs is the face of a mountain of evidence to the contrary. Rather, God will provide the evidence (though not the absolute proof) necessary for anybody who really desires to believe, and these pieces of evidence will be different for different people. For me it included travelling with Cathy from South Africa, the disaster with Thiruni, and going camping with Adz, and further pieces are continually being added. For you it might include meeting an otherwise intelligent (dare I say brilliant!) tutor who, despite topping his honours class decided to become a Christian. You do not, as Lewis Carol put it, have to believe six impossible things before breakfast.

The other implication is that there must be a response on our part. The most dedicated lover cannot build a relationship with a totally apathetic partner. What sort of response do we need? Karl Rahner believes that people respond to God, even without realising it, through their actions. For example people who love their neighbour show an implicit faith in God<sup>10</sup>. Rahner's biggest problem is that he ignores the evil we do, and that our upbringing will, to a large extent, determine the type of behaviour we will exhibit in our lives. Rahner's work was an attempt to show that salvation was open to people outside the Christian church. Although this is noble, I think he is wrong, and it is better to acknowledge that, in this life at least, many people will not enter a loving relationship with God.

To be saved here, then, we need to enter a relationship with the God who was revealed to us in Jesus Christ. This involves turning away from trying to run our own lives and inviting God in.

<sup>10</sup> Rahner in Edwards p. 89.

*You sound very  
sure, but I think  
it is a problem with the  
proofs*

It is not a matter of observing a set of church rituals, or of doing good things, or merely of believing in God<sup>11</sup>. Anybody can perform rituals, anyone can do good things for selfish motives, and believing that somebody exists is not the same as having a relationship with them. I believe that Paul Keating exists, but I don't have a personal relationship with him! As our love for God and others increases, we will increasingly do good things, we will enjoy some of the church's rituals, but these come after, not before salvation.

So if not everyone is saved on this side of death, what is the ultimate fate of humanity? What will happen to you if you die outside of a relationship with God?

### Heaven

The afterlife is decreasingly emphasised in recent theology, infact the lecturer for this course appears to not believe in it at all. While I agree that it is essential to acknowledge that our relationship with God begins here and now, I cannot accept that this is the sum total of our existance. The afterlife to me is not a radical departure from this life, but the culmination of it. Now I am being humanised, then I will be fully human. Now I am becoming more loving and open, then I will *be* loving and open. The friendships I have begun now I will be able to develop fully then, the universes I can only dream about now I will explore at leisure.

If some Christians are correct, not everybody will share this paradise with me. Those who haven't entered a relationship with God through Christ in this lifetime will never have the chance to enter it<sup>12</sup>. And here is my problem, heaven just wouldn't be heaven if *you* weren't there, or Mum and Dad, or Sam, or even the

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<sup>11</sup> E.g. James 2:19; Wesley, "Sermon XLV The New Birth" p. 72; Calvin in George, T. pp. 224-5

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Revelation 14:12; Wesley, "Sermon XLV" p. 72; Rahner in Edwards p. 20.

*to save souls before 3rd day?*

or even the people I used to hate passionately.

I can't enjoy myself at a party if I see even a total stranger who is obviously feeling dejected or suffering in some way. How could I ever enjoy even the party of heaven knowing that those I *love* aren't there? More to the point, how could God ever enjoy it? How could Jesus, who came to seek and save the lost, who wept over people's refusal to humbly call on God, party on knowing that millions, even billions, of people were on the outside. Jesus had a special compassion for those ostracised by Jewish society in his day, how could he become the ostraciser?

There may be answers to these questions. Certainly if God wanted to kill lots of people it would be hard to argue that it wasn't fair, he made us so surely he can do what he wants with us (Romans 9:20ff). But is God like that? Is that the picture of God that we see in Jesus? No way, hoze'<sup>love</sup>'<sup>13</sup>!

Surely it would be irresponsible of God to leave such an important thing as our eternal salvation in our own hands. This point has been the basis for a dispute traceable back to the Bible. Calvin and others argued that God predestines people, choosing whether they will go to heaven or hell'<sup>14</sup>. The benefit of this is that it means we don't have to do anything to be saved, the problem is that it implies that God makes some people specifically to go to hell'<sup>15</sup>! In reaction against this, Wesley and others argued that humans are indeed responsible for accepting the gift of salvation,

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<sup>13</sup> There is quite a bit, especially in the Old Testaments, that suggests the answer is actually "yes". Obviously I disagree but I haven't got room to deal with that here, except to say that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of how God wants to relate to us.

<sup>14</sup> George, T., *Theology of the Reformers* pp. 226-227.

<sup>15</sup> There is a lot of apparent Biblical support for this idea (Matthew 11:27, 24:31; Acts 2; John 6:44; Romans 8-11; Galatians 1:5), but most of the passages claimed as support are actually dealing with entirely different issues altogether. The overall witness of the Bible, I believe, is the opposite.

of my...  
key  
scripture

key  
scripture

the gift of salvation, which God offers to everyone<sup>16</sup>. This in part removes the callous view of God, but opens up problems of people not having equal opportunity to respond.

My own view is that Wesley is right so far as this life goes: Jesus has reached out to us with the means to a relationship with God, and we either accept that or we don't. The problem of the lack of equal opportunity to respond is dealt with in that God has ultimately predestined us all to be saved. God will be victorious through eternity over evil not by destroying evildoers, but by reconciling them to himself. I reached this understanding mainly through thinking about the party stuff above combined with the fact that clearly not everyone comes to know God in this life. What surprised me was that according to the lecture today, this is basically Paul's understanding of salvation especially as reflected in Romans<sup>17</sup>.

Although Paul may be on my side, many of Jesus' words in the gospels are about us being judged after death, and the future reward or punishment of us all according to what we have done here on earth (e.g. Matthew 16:27, John 5:29). Of course, Jesus says a lot of things that we know not to take literally, such as his parables and his tendency to use hyperbole to make his point (e.g. Luke 10:25-37, Matthew 5:27-30)<sup>18</sup>.

One way out of the dilemma is the recent Biblical studies which suggest that sayings about judgment attributed to Jesus are not actually his words, but later developments by the church<sup>19</sup>. We could then say that Jesus himself doesn't contradict the above, but only the early church. If Borg is correct, I am much happier to agree with Paul and disagree with part of the early church than I

<sup>16</sup> Wesley, J., "Sermon XLIII The Scripture way of salvation" p. 48 and "Sermon LVIII On Predestination" p. 228.

<sup>17</sup> Alan Cadwalader, lecturer in Pauline Epistles, *pers. comm.* 1994.

<sup>18</sup> E.g. Borg. M. J., "A Temperate case for a noneschatalogical Jesus" in *SBL 1986 Seminar Papers*, p. 525.

\* lots of other scriptural passages support a universalist outlook  
eg Mt 18:12-14, Luke 19:10, Luke 7:30, John 12:32, Romans ch 8-11 etc

Arminianism  
Borg's  
easy

I am to disagree with Jesus, who should, after all, know a darn sight more about all of this than I do!

**Summary**

The evil, selfish things we do are grounded in our rejection of God and result in the dehumanisation of ourselves and others. The good things are a reflection of the fact that we were originally created in God's image, with the capacity for true love for God and others. God eagerly desires to restore us to wholeness, to true humanity, which is the state in which we are liberated from the need to conceal ourselves from others, and freed to love God and others as ourselves. This humanising relationship with God begins now and continues for eternity.

Since we are unable to save ourselves, we must enter our relationship with God through the work of his Son, Jesus Christ. Sadly, not everybody achieves this in this lifetime, limiting the expression of God's kingdom on earth.

Fortunately, Jesus' work is not limited by human failings, he lived and died for the sin of the *world*, and God is the saviour of *all* humanity. Ultimately, then, all will be saved, because the knowledge of the suffering of others would make impossible our, and especially God's enjoyment of eternal life. If you decide to wait until then, however, you are selling your-self short, and I'd love to know what is so great about your life that a relationship with the God who loved and created the world would not improve it. You should also bear in mind that I might be wrong, maybe there is a hell after all :-)!

Finally, I don't want you to love God because it earns me any points, or because it would make our relationship easier (remember Katrina!), but because I really believe that its the best thing that could ever happen to you, and I want the best for you. Money can be lost, a secure career can turn sour, friends may become enemies and once loving partners prove unfaithful, but God will never fail us. Loving God does cost: it may have cost me a few

Why do you  
want to be on  
safe with me?  
for whom?

Remember  
Jesus  
Money  
Jesus

friends (at least I thought they were), and it may have cost me a job, but I wouldn't swap it for the world. It has cost thousands of Christians their lives, but they obviously thought it worth it.

Of course if you totally disregard everything I've written here I'll still love you, and so will God. You don't *need* to do anything to be saved, God will eventually take care of it, but why leave it til then?

SECRET

Love as always,

Jason xo

References

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(DN)

Thank Jason. I really liked this approach. What does Carly think? Your message I agree is clear. You've distilled the essence of the Reformation to show you were. Delighted to see you drawing Calvin & Wesley into the conversation. I know (but Carly might correct me) you needed to get rid of some of the jargon - sin, salvation, heaven etc - if only because it is so overlaid with meanings contrary to your point of view.

I appreciate your transparency & the energy with which you pursue important matters and people.

Mark Adams