

Emerging Voices | Two Images of Salvation

What is salvation and how is it received?

Scripture continually holds two images of salvation in tension with one another, with neither image neglecting the other.

First, our tradition is correct in portraying Jesus as the spiritual savior.

Especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells us that left to our own devices we “die in our sins.” The personal wrongs we have committed and the communal systems with which we have participated to break God’s good world inherently lead to death (John 18:24).

It is not so much that God is an easily offended deity who frets over how often we cuss, but that we have all personally broken and participated in systems that break God’s kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven” (Luke 11:2).

Jesus does not picture the resulting death as God physically damning us in hell, but rather, a death that our own sin has brought about. Later in the same verse, Christ explains that the antidote to this death is belief in the Lord Jesus.

Through Christ, we are saved from the damning things we do to ourselves, saved to eternal life with God in this existence and the next.

Second, the authors of the Scriptures refuse to present us only with a spiritual

salvation.

Divorcing promises of salvation in the Bible from their physical and social implications creates a milquetoast religion of smugly saved individuals neglecting God's world, interested only in conversions and baptisms.

Instead, the Scriptures offer us a compelling vision of spiritual and physical salvation.

In one of Jesus' very first sermons, he claims to be the fulfillment of God's promises in Isaiah 61: Jesus declared himself the present fulfillment of good news to the poor, liberty to the captive and sight to the blind (Luke 4:14-21).

Therefore, Christ has called us to salvation not for personal comfort as we wait for heaven, but so that we might continue to fulfill his dreams for creation on earth.

Walter Rauschenbusch (1861-1918) was a Baptist social reformer who popularized social justice and the social gospel during the 20th century.

In his book, "A Theology for the Social Gospel," he phrased it well when he declared "any religious experience (salvation) in which our fellow men have no part or thought does not seem to be a distinctively Christian experience."

In Rauschenbusch's estimation, emotional religious experiences are fine for mystics and other spiritualists, but Christ followers will care for and about the world in which he incarnated.

Therefore, salvation is a holistic redemption of human beings for the purpose of

practicing Christ's resurrection in the world: for faith without works is dead (James 2:17).

How then would salvation be received?

In one sense, it is very easy: The Apostle Paul declares that "if you confess with your mouth 'Jesus is Lord' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (Romans 10:9).

In another sense, theologians have parsed salvation into multiple categories: regeneration, justification, sanctification and glorification to name a few.

Though modern evangelicalism tends to focus on our response and our action in salvation (praying a sinner's prayer, walking an aisle during the invitation, being baptized and so on), our earliest examples in the faith reminded us continually that salvation is God's work.

Irenaeus (c. 130-202), bishop of Lyon, writes in "[Against Heresies](#)" that because Christ "passed through every stage of life," he has sanctified whatever moment we are experiencing right now.

He goes on to explain that through Christ's presence, Jesus gives "us incorruption through the communion which we have with God."

In the incarnation, God made a choice to live among the world: showing us the way.

In the crucifixion, God died for the sake of humanity, saving us from ourselves.

In the resurrection, God defeated death, assuring salvation.

In communion, Christ makes us his own resurrected body on earth, spreading this resurrection in every dark situation.

How is salvation received?

Salvation is received all at once and bit by bit: In Christ, we are resurrected and regenerated; in faith, God justifies us through no work of our own; in our worship and work for justice, we are sanctified to become more like Christ; and one day we too will rise in glory to our heavenly home.

We are saved by the work of Jesus so that we might do good works. We receive salvation by participating in the resurrection life of God in faith and justice to the world.

Praying a sinner's prayer is a wonderful starting point of recognition for the work God has already done in you. Living a resurrection life is wonderful fruit of your salvation in a dying world.

Editor's note: This article is part of an ongoing series, "Emerging Voices," designed to feature writings from the next generation of faith leaders. A [version](#) of this article first appeared on Brenton's [website](#). It is used with permission.