

LOOSENING 'THE HELMET OF SALVATION'

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It was not long ago that I found myself passing out gospel tracts on a San Diego street corner with some well-meaning Christians carrying signs conveying such messages as “Turn or Burn!” and “Heaven or Hell?” A few others carried crosses on their backs as they preached threats of hellfire and damnation. “If you were to die tonight”, they exclaimed, “Would you be certain that you would go to heaven?” Reflecting back on that experience, I have been led to question whether this was really what the biblical concept of ‘salvation’ is primarily about: life after death, getting into heaven when I die, and enjoying “Pie in the sky, in the sweet by and by.”

A biblical survey of the theme of salvation, however, immediately disqualifies such narrow caricatures and gross simplifications of the ultimate Christian hope. After glimpsing the beauty and grandeur of God’s purposeful plan revealed in his Story from the Creation to the Cross to the New Creation, one can only feel a sense of shame and sadness at the narrow, simplistic, and, at times, awfully inadequate definitions of ‘salvation’ the church has preached, promoted and propagated to the world around us.

Paul urges Christians to put on the “helmet of salvation.” Yet, in many quarters, the helmet has been shrunken down so small and tight, to fit our rigid formulas and simple slogans, that it is beginning to cut off the circulation of Christ’s eternal-life-giving blood. We need to loosen the helmet of salvation so that it is large enough to fit

all of the blessings and benefits that God has accomplished for the world through Christ.

The current essay is an attempt to loosen the helmet, to broaden our understanding of salvation. After building a brief case for the need of a more holistic and multifaceted understanding of salvation, I will argue more specifically for two dimensions of salvation often overlooked but being recaptured more and more today: that is, salvation as (1) *invitation into the Christian Story* and (2) *incorporation into the Christian Community*.

BROADENING OUR CONCEPTIONS OF SALVATION

In attempting to grasp the full meaning of salvation, we must (1) be faithful to the wide-range of metaphors used in scripture to express the concept of salvation and (2) make sure our meaning is broad and comprehensive enough to address the condition the world finds itself in.

Scriptural Considerations. In attempting to do justice to the vastness and fullness of the biblical witness to the concept of salvation, we might begin with the apostle Paul who, perhaps more than any other, stretched his imagination and vocabulary to find human words and metaphors sufficient to describe such a divine reality. J. D. G. Dunn catalogues the many metaphors Paul draws upon. Among them are justification, redemption, liberation, freedom, reconciliation, citizenship, or community membership, and inheritance.¹ Other biblical metaphors expressing the goal of salvation include: forgiveness, healing, adoption, peace, sanctification, new creation, and God’s renewed presence with his people. The fact that Paul and the other biblical authors chose to use such vivid metaphors points us to the almost inexpressible nature of salvation and should caution us against

¹ See James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 328-9.

trying to simplify or narrow its meaning into more convenient theories or formulas. A. Richardson's critique is right on:

Paul offers us not theories but vivid metaphors, which can, if we let them operate in our imagination, make real to us the saving truth of our redemption by Christ's self-offering on our behalf... It is an unfortunate kind of sophistication which believes that the only thing to do with metaphors is to turn them into theories.²

While the list of biblical metaphors of salvation could be significantly extended, we can sufficiently conclude already (even without drawing out the distinct nuances represented by each metaphor)³ that salvation is at least broader than simply "going to heaven when we die." And if our Christian forefathers resisted the temptation to simplify the message into short, catchy bumper-sticker slogans, then we too should be weary of the same folly.

Furthermore, Paul and the other NT writers did not select their terms arbitrarily, as if drawing words from an ancient lexicon or thesaurus readily at hand. Rather, they drew their thoughts from the OT scriptures and the community's collective memory of past experiences where God had intervened to save them from their plight. Most notable is how the themes of *redemption* and *freedom*, drawn from God's miraculous intervention in liberating Israel from slavery in Egypt—the Exodus—reemerge and fuel the NT hope that God would someday initiate a "new exodus" so that the

entire "creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (Rom 8:21). This helpfully reminds us that salvation was not some new, abstract idea growing out of creative and cavalier NT speculation, but was always about the fulfillment of God's covenant promises to Israel, and thus the world, which the OT prophecies pointed toward all along.

Thus, we can conclude from Scripture that (1) salvation is multi-dimensional in meaning and the benefits of which are too broad to be captured in just one or two metaphors. And (2) the nature of salvation is not a NT novelty, but finds precedence in the OT promises and hopes of God's liberation, as evidenced by, for example, the cherished story of the exodus. Bearing in mind these scriptural findings, we must next address the fallen condition the world finds itself in as we seek to understand what God has done in Christ to begin the process of healing and restoring it.

Existential Considerations. Without space to explore in any detail the nature and ramifications of the Fall of Genesis 3, I agree with Stanley Grenz in his assertion that the fallen condition of humanity and creation reflects fundamentally a *relational crisis*, distorting our communion with each other, with our natural environment (creation), and with God. According to N. T. Wright, "This rebellion reflects cosmic dislocation between the creator and the creation, and the world is consequently out of tune with its created intention."⁴ Grenz argues that

² Dunn, 332-3, quoting A. Richardson, *An Introduction to the Theology of the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1958), 222-23. Cf. Dunn: "The impact of a piece of music or the distinctions among different wines can often be so intensely personal and intangible as to be beyond communication in terms of logic. Still more so with regard to experiences which are so life-transforming. To attempt to dispense with metaphors or to reduce their poetry to the prose of clinical analysis would be as great a disservice as any that theology could be guilty of" (333).

³ See also Jacob A. O. Preus, *Just Words: Understanding the Fullness of the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2000), who helpfully interprets and applies the gospel through six metaphors and their various expressions: (1) **Creation:** Birth, Life, Salvation, Light, Bread, and Water; (2) **Commerce:** Ransom, Redemption, Property, Forgiveness/Remission; (3) **Legal:** Justification, Intercession, Adoption, Inheritance; (4) **Personal:** Reconciliation, Peace, Forgiveness, Marriage; (5) **Sacrificial:** Expiation/Priestly Meditation, Sacrificial Lamb, Hallowing/Cleansing; (6) **Deliverance:** Salvation, Liberation, Victory.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *New Testament and the People of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992), 132-33.

God's created intention for humankind was to be his "image-bearers" in the world. The character of the God we are to image is a triune community of self-giving love. Life lived within these divinely-ordered parameters paints a beautiful picture:

As we live in love—that is, as we give expression to true community—we reflect the character of the Creator. And as we reflect God's love, we also live in accordance with our own true nature. Only by being persons-in-community do we find our true identity—that form of the "world" in which we are truly "at home."⁵

Yet, as one ponders the world as it is now, it seems we are still light years away from such a "home." God's vision for a worldwide community characterized by selfless love has turned into a world of communities driven by selfish gain waging war against each other. Instead of finding our true identities in the perfect image of God, we fashion our own gods to reflect our own distorted identities. Into this dark and rugged landscape, the message of salvation must clear a path and shine its light. The gospel of Christ must address our dysfunctional relationships, bringing a message of reconciliation and peace where there is conflict and hostility. The message must bring a renewed and positive sense of identity rooted in the image of the all-loving God to a world where confused and negative self-images abound. As Joel Green argues,

If our exploration of the theme of salvation is to be faithful to the Bible and meaningful for our lives, it must be sufficient to account for the human cry for healing what is wounded, in personal, communal, and even global terms; and it must provide a vision of salvation that can be reckoned and related genuinely as good news.⁶

How does the Christian message of salvation bring real and meaningful healing to such a condition? This leads to the main proposal of this essay. Following the likes of Stanley Hauerwas⁷ and Stanley Grenz,⁸ I propose that God's overarching purpose for healing and restoring his creation involves the interrelated mediums of *story* and *community*. Salvation, I will argue, necessarily involves (1) *an invitation into the Christian Story* and (2) *incorporation into the Christian Community* that embodies and indwells this story.

SALVATION AS INVITATION INTO THE CHRISTIAN STORY

Every human being lives his or her life according to some controlling story, or worldview.⁹ Stanley Grenz calls it our "interpretive framework" defined as "a set of basic categories, beliefs, or fundamental ways of speaking" about the way the world is.¹⁰ Each story provides a different window through which one views reality. Each story will

⁵ Stanley Grenz, *What Christians Really Believe and Why* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998), 34.

⁶ Joel B. Green, *Salvation* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 3.

⁷ See e.g. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (North Dakota: University of North Dakota Press, 1981) and *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

⁸ See e.g. Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994) and *Revisioning Evangelical Theology: A Fresh Agenda for the 21st Century* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993).

⁹ Cf. Stephen Crites' classic study, "The Narrative Quality of Experience," in *Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology*, edited by Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 65-88.

¹⁰ Grenz, *What Christians Really*, 123-24.

likely provide differing answers to life's most basic questions.¹¹ According to Pinnock, "Stories are what give shape and meaning to all our lives. When people ask us to explain a concern we have, we tell them a story."¹² Stanley Hauerwas rightly ties our story to the community to which we belong:

We become who we are through the embodiment of the story in the communities in which we are born. What is crucial is not that we find some way to free ourselves from such stories or community, but that the story which grasps us through our community is true.¹³

This leads back to the identity crisis the world finds itself in. The crisis goes beyond just self-identity, since self-identity is shaped by our community-identity, which is itself shaped by the particular story the community has adopted in order to make sense of its meaning and purpose in the world. The entire course of world history—with its various religious, philosophical, social, political and economic movements—can be likened to a giant panel of storytellers, each presenting their particular version of the story, with the loudest voice generally winning the day irregardless of whether their version is true or not. The question a lost and hurting world must ask itself is twofold: (1)

Which story, or meta-narrative, am I living in and (2) is this particular story true? This leads to a key, but neglected, task of evangelism.

Before God's message of salvation can be good news to the world, the world must first know the Christian Story. The meaning of God's salvation is incomprehensible apart from God's story. Green insists that

we need a *storied approach to our understanding of salvation*, one that apportions profound significance to the canonical narrative of God and God's people. To be Christian is to belong to an ancient and ongoing story, whose aims, twists, and turns are shaped in relation to the God of Israel.¹⁴

In a world of competing and contradicting narratives, each crying out for one's allegiance, the Christian's task is to go and tell the true Story, the Christian meta-narrative, and to invite all those who are living according to the futile myths of this age (e.g. the American Dream) to bring their lives under the framework of the only story that can bring true meaning and lasting fulfillment to their lives. Green further argues that "This narrative, above all narratives, invites active participation. 'Come,' it beckons, as it seeks a people to dwell in its story, to have their lives determined decisively by it."¹⁵

¹¹ Cf. Wright, *New Testament*, 132-33, who identifies the four basic worldview questions as Who are we?, Where are we?, What is wrong?, and What is the solution?

¹² Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze: Finding Our Way Through Modern Theology From An Evangelical Perspective* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 165.

¹³ Hauerwas, *Community*, 148-149.

¹⁴ Green, 4.

¹⁵ Green, 144.

And, as Pinnock reminds us, this is no ordinary story: “The essence of the Christian message is quite simply that it is the greatest story ever told: epic in its scope, grounded in history, symphonic in truth, infinite in existential applications and transforming power.”¹⁶

A weakness of traditional approaches to evangelism is that they seem to assume that the lost and unbelieving world shares the Christian understanding of the world. They assume that all agree with the Bible’s diagnosis of the human condition, the problem of Sin and Death, broken fellowship with God and others, and the need for personal redemption and as well as cosmic renewal. Yet, as we know, many simply do not share these basic assumptions. Before we can hope to reach the world with the good news of salvation in Christ Jesus, we must first present them with the underlying narrative structure of reality, sharing first the good news that there is indeed an Author of history, and that He has a purposeful plot for his beloved creation, and all are welcome into this story to discover their intended role.¹⁷ Then, as we invite lost and weary sojourners—exhausted from writing their own futile stories or frustrated with the empty promises of the stories they have been living in—into the Story of God where they have a meaningful role, they will soon come to an understanding of their need for a savior.

The church, for far too long, has tended to boil salvation down to merely a confession of faith or

adherence to certain creeds or doctrines. According to N. T. Wright,

So many popular presentations are far too *abstract*: they take the whole event out of its context in history, in the story of God and his people, and imagine it simply as a nonhistorical transaction between God and Jesus into which we can somehow be slotted.¹⁸

Instead, we should view salvation as an adventure. As Hauerwas describes it, “When we are baptized, we (like the first disciples) jump on a moving train.”¹⁹ The train represents the community of God chugging full-steam together through the corridors of history, led along by the grace and truth of Christ, the Engine. Hauerwas expounds further on this narrative dimension of salvation:

As disciples, we do not so much accept a creed, or come to a clear sense of self-understanding by which we know this or that with utter certitude. We become a part of a journey... The story began without us, as a story of the peculiar way God is redeeming the world, a story that invites us to come forth and be saved by sharing in the work of a new people whom God has created in Israel and Jesus. Such movement *saves us by (1) placing us within an adventure that is nothing less than God’s purpose for the whole world, and (2) communally training us to fashion our lives in accordance with what is true rather than what is false.*²⁰

¹⁶ Pinnock, *Tracking the Maze*, 167. Cf. chs. 10 and 14. On “the story we tell”, see Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), chs. 8 and 9

¹⁷ Cf. Gerard Loughlin, *Telling God’s Story: Bible, Church and Narrative Theology* (New York: Cambridge, 1996), 29, 32-33: “The Medievals conceived the world as a book written by God, the plot of which is given in God’s other book, the Bible. Today, however, the world is plotted by different narratives, either humanly authored (modernism) or authorless (postmodernism). Now the world writes itself; or better, it is writing itself... It is against this background—of the world writing itself—that the church continues to tell the story of God’s Christ... In Christ the world is affirmed, *freed from the need to write itself*, loved simply as that which is written.”

¹⁸ N. T. Wright, *The Crown and the Fire: Meditations on the Cross and the Life of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 122.

¹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry For People Who Know That Something Is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 52.

²⁰ *Ibid* (emphasis mine).

Wright helps point out that this is not a new idea. In fact, he argues that this was the very approach used by Jesus and John the Baptist as they moved about the Palestinian countryside proclaiming the good news:

When Jesus announced the kingdom, the stories he told functioned like dramatic plays in search of actors. His hearers were invited to audition for parts in the kingdom. They had been eager for God's drama to be staged and were waiting to find out what they would have to do when he did so. Now they were to discover. They were to become kingdom-people themselves. Jesus, following John the Baptist, was calling into being what he believed would be the true, renewed people of God.²¹

Wright correctly emphasizes here that the essence of the gospel Jesus and the Baptist taught was *not* about a timeless system of salvation, a warning of hellfire and brimstone, or a sure-fire way for individuals to secure a place in 'heaven' when they died. Rather, the good news that Jesus (and later Paul) proclaimed was that the Messianic Age was dawning in their midst, that all and sundry were being welcomed into God's covenant community, that all who followed Jesus would be the true children of Abraham (cf. Matt 3:9; Rom 9:6-7) and share in the blessed inheritance of God's people. Of course, covenant membership would have implied security in the life to come as well. Or, as Wright candidly puts it:

In so far as [first-century Jews] thought at all about life after death, they believed that their God would look after them, and eventually give them new physical bodies in his renewed world...There is no sign that first-century Jews were walking around gloomily wondering how their sins were ever going to be forgiven. They had the Temple and the sacrificial system, which took care of all of that.²²

What did matter, however, and what should matter to Christians today more than wondering who is going to 'heaven', is *who belongs to the God's covenant community*—the true, renewed people of God. The big question asked by Jews from the OT period and into the NT was never "How do I get saved" in some western, individual sense, but rather, "Who is and How do I become a member of God's covenant community, the true Israel?"²³ This leads to a discussion of the communal dimension of salvation.

SALVATION AS INCORPORATION INTO THE CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

The Christian Story and its significance explored above is inseparable from the community which indwells and embodies that story. Yet, both the story and the community have Christ as their center and reference point. Jesus retold the Jewish story as if its great covenant promises were at last coming to fulfillment in and through him. His band of twelve disciples (symbolizing the restored twelve tribes of Israel) declared to all that the true covenant community of God was now being reconstituted around himself. Thus, Jesus and his story becomes the interpretive grid through which the Christian community views and interacts with the world. In the process, one's self-identity is reshaped in conformity with the communal identity, which is itself being renewed and transformed into the image of Christ's unique way of being in and for the world. Or, as Grenz describes it:

Jesus' story becomes ours as we derive our identity from his. When our encounter with the story of Jesus call into question our former attempts to make sense out of our lives, that is, when it has destroyed our old identity, Jesus' model life offers us a new

²¹ N. T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 43.

²² Wright, *Who Was Jesus?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 97-98.

²³ The Qumran community is a great example of a sect of Jews concerned primarily with establishing themselves as God's "true society." All who were faithful to the Law of God as interpreted by the Teacher of Righteousness and legitimate members of the *Yahad* would share in the blessings of the "New Covenant." Here, as in the NT, the focus is on *community membership*, not a list of beliefs. See *A Commentary on Habakkuk* (1QpHab) and especially *Community Rule* (1QS, 4Q255-264a, 5Q11).

paradigm. His story gives us a new set of categories through which we can draw the variegated strands of our lives into a single whole. Above all, the paradigmatic life of Jesus lifts us out of our isolation into the life-in-community—the life of fellowship with God, one another, and all creation—he pioneered.²⁴ Q

Similarly, Green argues that this form of discipleship—that of being incorporated into and shaped by the Christian community

entails a reconstruction of one's self within a new web of relationships, a transfer of allegiances, and the embodiment of transformed dispositions and attitudes. Such a conversion requires *re-socialization within the community being formed around Jesus*.²⁵

I argued earlier that the pre-Christian does not understand salvation or his or her need for salvation apart from knowing the Christian story. For much the same reason, the pre-Christian needs the Christian community to teach then the language of redemption. Robert Webber describes this well:

Unconverted people...don't have the language to identify their sinful condition nor to describe the redemption that is brought by Jesus. They need to learn the language of the faith—a *language that can only be known through an association with the church*... Through the various stages of evangelism, discipleship, spiritual formation, and Christian vocation, the church teaches the converting person the language necessary to enter into a vital relationship with God.²⁶

If Christian discipleship—the formation of a Christ-like identity—flourishes within the community and its definitive story, then we should not be surprised if the entire process of salvation, or more specifically *conversion*, also involves an interplay between one's self-identity and one's community story. I suggest that a person begins the

lengthy process of life reconfiguration only as they are called out of their Christless communities and false stories (if they were not born into the Christian community and story) and invited into the Christian community and its story. George Stroup states it brilliantly:

At that point where a person encounters the Christian community with its narratives, common life, and faith claims about reality, there is the possibility that the individual will begin the lengthy, difficult process of reinterpreting his or her personal history in light of the narratives and symbols that give the Christian community its identity. At that moment there is the possibility for what Christians describe as revelation—the experience of redemption and the beginning of the process called “faith.” It is at this point that identities, even worlds, may be altered and reality perceived in a radically new way.²⁷

This new life within the Christian community saves us then by (1) rescuing us from our alienation and isolation brought by the Fall, and (2) bringing us into the community where we can finally fulfill our divinely-intended purpose of being God's image-bearers in the world as our relationships reflect the selfless love of the triune God.

SYNTHESIS AND CONCLUSION

In summary, I have exposed the church's tendency to downsize and simplify the multi-dimensional nature of the Christian doctrine of ‘salvation’. I have suggested that both the biblical witness and the world's condition demand that we seek a fuller and more holistic understanding of salvation. As a part of this quest, I have proposed two essential, yet often overlooked, dimensions of what it means to be saved.

First, salvation involves *being invited into the Christian Story*. Being saved involves coming to a realization that the world is a battlefield of competing narratives, and only one story can be

²⁴ Grenz, *What Christians*, 96-97.

²⁵ Green, 131 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Robert E. Webber, *Ancient-Future Evangelism: Making Your Church a Faith-Forming Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003), 39 (emphasis mine).

²⁷ George W. Stroup, *The Promise of Narrative Theology: Recovering the Gospel in the Church* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 170-171.

true. The Christian community bears the responsibility of confronting cultures and their false stories, and inviting them to live their lives within God's great epic of human redemption and cosmic restoration written with the atoning blood Jesus Christ. Only as one begins to view the world through the interpretive framework of the Christian Story, do they come to realize the nature of their fallen human condition and their need for a savior. Through their knowledge of the Story, they are then, as John Navone puts it, "invited to share the same dynamic orientation that was Christ's creative way of imagining and experiencing the world; [they] are invited to accept his story as the structure or context for [their] faith's imagining and experiencing the stages of life..."²⁸

Second, salvation involves *being incorporated into the Christian Community*. Since our self-identities are shaped and molded by the communities we are a part, a person begins the process of Christian conversion—taking on a Christlike identity—as they are engrafted into the Christian community and exposed to the kind of life characterized by Christ's selfless love. Salvation then, repeating an earlier quote, "requires re-socialization within the community being formed around Jesus."²⁹

By expanding our conceptions of salvation to include these two dimensions, we will be better equipped to make known to the world in all its fullness, as Paul did, "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to and exemplified within the Christian Community...which is the image of Christ reflected in us, the hope of glory" (Col 1:26-26, my paraphrase).

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²⁸ John Navone, *Towards a Theology of Story* (Great Britain: St. Paul Publications, 1977), 21.

²⁹ Green, 131.

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