

# Conceptions of Salvation

## **Liberation Theologies**

### Emphasis:

The basic problem of society is the oppression and exploitation of the powerless classes by the powerful.

Salvation is deliverance (or liberation) from such oppression.

### Favorite Scriptures:

Psalms 146:9; Isaiah 1:17; Zechariah 7:10; especially the Exodus

### Nature of salvation:

They do not think of salvation primarily as life after death.

The Bible, it is contended, concerns itself much more with achieving the kingdom of God in the present age.

Eternal life is placed in the context of a new social order, and consists not so much of being plucked out of history as being a participant in its culmination.

They will seek to bring about their definition of salvation by any means necessary.

## **Existential Theology**

### Emphasis:

The aim of human life is “authentic existence”—being what we are meant to be, living in such a way as to fulfill our potential as humans.

“Inauthenticity” is the failure to exercise one’s ability to make choices and act freely—going along with the crowd—and also the unwillingness to accept the fact that one has acted freely and is therefore responsible.

Humans are driven by two tendencies:

- Self-orientation—Our chief aim is to fulfill our desires for happiness and security, usefulness and profit. We are selfish and presumptuous, and tend to deny God, or deny that he has a right to our obedience.
- We tend to believe we can gain security by our own efforts.

### Nature of salvation:

What God and the gospel call us to is our “true selves,” our destinies.

The word of God calls man away from selfishness and away from his illusions of security.

Salvation is not, then, an alteration in the substance of the soul (regeneration), nor is it a forensic declaration of us being declared righteous in the sight of God when we accept Christ’s payment for our sins (justification), but rather a fundamental alteration of our *Existenz*, our whole outlook on and conduct of life.

## **Secular Theology**

### Emphasis:

People once needed God and religion to explain the mysteries of life.

This primitive “grasping” has been replaced by the advancements in understanding brought about by science.

We live in a post-Christian era.

The Church can have two possible responses to this:

- One is to see Christianity and secularism as competitors, alternatives to one another.
- The other, embraced by some modern theologians, is to regard secularism not as a competitor, but as a mature expression of Christian faith.
- Dietrich Bonhoeffer—“religionless Christianity”:
  - God has educated his highest creature to be independent of him.
  - So God has been at work in the process of secularization.
- “Death of God”

#### Nature of salvation:

Secular theology rejects the idea that salvation is removal from the world and reception of supernatural grace from God.

Rather, salvation is not so much *through* religion as *from* it.

The true meaning of salvation is:

- Realizing one’s capability and utilizing it
- Becoming independent of God
- Coming of age
- Affirming oneself
- Getting involved in the world

## **Contemporary Roman Catholic Theology**

Examining contemporary Catholic theology is complicated by the fact that, whereas there was once a more uniform, official position within Roman Catholicism on most issues, there is now much greater diversity.

Official doctrinal standards remain; but they are now supplemented—and in some cases, seemingly contradicted—by later statements (for example, the Second Vatican Council and the published opinions of individual Catholic scholars).

These statements must be seen against the background of the traditional stance of the Catholic church.

### **Emphasis:**

The official Catholic position has long been that the church is the only channel of the grace of God.

This grace is transmitted through the **sacraments of the church**.

Those outside the official or organized church cannot receive it.

Union with the official Catholic church is necessary for salvation.

This stance has been modified in modern times:

- Vatican Council adopted a position that the people of God are not limited to the visible, hierarchical church.
- This is not to say that some of the people of God have no involvement with the Catholic church, however. “The people of God” are divided into three categories:
  - Catholics who are “incorporated” into the church
  - Non-Catholic Christians, who are “linked” to the church. Their position is not as secure as that of Roman Catholics, but they are viewed as having genuine churches, and are not completely separated from God.

- Non-Christians, who are “related” to the church—  
“anonymous Christians.”
  - The fact that these “anonymous Christians” are outside the visible Catholic church (or any Christian church) does not mean that they are apart from the grace of God.

### Nature of salvation:

Originally, Catholic theology merged what Protestant theology terms “justification” and “sanctification” into one concept, **sanctifying grace**.

Christ’s grace comes into a person, enabling him to live in such a way that will merit salvation.

## **Evangelical Theology**

### Emphasis:

The traditional orthodox or evangelical position on salvation is tied closely to the orthodox understanding of the human predicament.

The relationship between the human being and God is the primary one. When that is not right, the other dimensions of life are adversely affected as well.

The Scriptures are understood by the evangelical to indicate that there are two major aspects of the human problem of **sin**:

- First, sin is a broken relationship with God.
  - The human has failed to fulfill the divine expectations, whether by transgressing limitations

set by God or by failing to do what is positively commanded.

- Deviation from the law results in guilt, liability to punishment.
- Second, the very nature of the person is spoiled as a result of deviation from the law.
  - Now there is an inclination toward evil, a propensity for sin.
  - The rupture in our relationship with God also results in disturbance of our relationships with other persons.

Sin takes on collective dimensions: The whole structure of society is corrupted, and injustice and hardship results.

#### Nature of salvation:

Certain aspects of the doctrine of salvation relate to one's standing with God.

The individual's legal status must be changed from "guilty" to "not guilty."

This is a matter of one's being declared just or righteous in God's sight; this is called **justification**.

This only happens by being brought into legal union with Christ, who fulfilled the requirements of the law perfectly.

However, more is required than merely the remission of guilt.

Intimacy with God was lost when we sinned, and this is restored by **adoption**, in which the person is restored to favor with God and has the opportunity to claim the benefits provided by the loving Father.

In addition to the need to reestablish one's relationship with God, there is also a need to alter the condition of one's heart.

This basic change in the direction of one's life from an inclination toward sin to a positive desire to live righteously is called **regeneration**, or, literally, new birth.

An actual alteration of one's character is involved, an infusion of positive spiritual energy from God.

This, however, is merely the beginning of the spiritual life.

There is also a progressive alteration of the individual's spiritual condition—one actually becomes holier. This process is **sanctification**.

Sanctification finally comes to completion in the life beyond death, when the spiritual nature of the believer will be perfected. This is **glorification**.

The individual's maintaining faith and commitment to the end by the grace of God is **perseverance**.

What are the means of salvation, or more broadly put, the means of grace?

The Word of God, whether read or preached, is God's means of presenting to us the salvation found in Christ; and faith is the means of accepting that salvation.

1 Peter 1:23, 25; Ephesians 2:8-9