



Three Visions of Salvation

Salvation (Greek: *soterion*) is a term found in Luke 2:20; 3:6; Acts 28:28; Ephesians 6:17 and Titus 2:11).

Do you remember back when God’s people all agreed about what “salvation” meant and how it is achieved?

Me neither.

But amid the roiling ocean of competing interpretations, we do discern currents—popular themes surface through the cacophony and congeal into doctrinal streams.

Allow me to identify three perspectives on salvation that compete for our attention and form our practices. Since one’s image of salvation affects our real life of faith and prayer, it’s worth pondering.

1. TRANSACTIONAL SALVATION

Formula: “If you _____, then God will save you.”

Metaphors: Legal contract or economic deal-making.

Theological Uses: Atonement theory, revivalism, intercession.

Salvation is transactional when viewed through legal or economic metaphors in which God is viewed as a judge whose justice needs to be satisfied or a creditor who needs to be paid.

In atonement theory, the two metaphors are typically combined as a debt paid through punishment. Only on

receipt of this debt is God willing, able and just to forgive.

Transactional religion makes sense in the context of “old covenant” blessings and curses (e.g. Deuteronomy 28). If we’re good, God pays us back with blessings. When we are bad, God pays us back with curses. Because we were not good enough, Jesus had to pay God off with obedience and God had to pay Jesus back with punishment. By satisfying both God’s commands and God’s wrath, Jesus frees God to forgive humankind. But *only if* they repent and believe (another transaction).

From beginning to end, transactional religion makes us the subject and God the object. We’re the actors and God is the reactor. Transactional salvation is a mechanistic, legal fiction where even “grace” and “forgiveness” are dividends contingent on a successful transaction.

For much of Christian history, transactional religion attained dominance, whether through Catholic indulgences, forensic atonement theories or revivalist preaching. But having been thoroughly burned by bad trips through transactional salvation, reformers through the centuries have pushed back with an emphasis on grace that

transcends deal-making and makes God the primary subject, sometimes to a fault. This leads us to our next vision of salvation:

2. UNILATERAL SALVATION

Formula: “God saves you and you do nothing.”

Metaphor: Resurrection.

Theological Uses: Grace alone, “finished work,” unconditional election.

Augustine of Hippo (400AD) and the great Reformers (16th century) saw through the perils of transactional religion that make one’s salvation and assurance dependent on our own goodness or faith. They saw how human efforts to amass merits to pay down the debt of sin or pay off God with good deeds consistently lead to deluded self-righteousness or spiritual anxiety and despair.

They rightly preached that salvation begins and ends with God. They saw that God’s love and forgiveness precede our response. God alone initiates every saving work prior to our faith or love for him. Christ died for us (or at least “the elect” . . . uh oh!) while we are yet sinners.

Their foundational metaphor is found in Ephesians 2:1-5:

“As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, . . . by nature deserving of wrath. But

because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved.”

The “unilateralists” reasoned that all humanity is born dead—a mass of buried corpses, rotting in one global cemetery. Dead people cannot save themselves. They cannot even respond to God. If they rise, it will only be because God in his mercy sovereignly resurrects *some* from the spiritual grave. Any response of faith is nothing more than obedience to God’s command that we arise and come forth from the tomb.

Who saves us? In transactional religion, somehow it always came down to us. But in grace alone salvation, Christ is the sole author and finisher of our faith. Our salvation was totally up to him—and he did it! “It is finished!”

“Grace alone” salvation provides a necessary pushback to transactional religion. That said, in our reactivity to “salvation by works” and by totalizing one biblical metaphor, we are prone to stumbling into new errors.

Consider: If salvation is God’s unilateral act, we don’t move one spiritual muscle in the salvation process—we mustn’t! Unilateral salvation suspects any expectation of a response to God’s love as a legalistic obligation and dead works.

The collateral damage of this perspective is that authentic freedom, trust and love aren’t really involved—either in the fall or in our salvation. We’re born dead and come to life only if Jesus says so. While unilateral grace is a great gulp of fresh air to those smothered in transactional religion, it’s always in danger of negating the necessary ingredients to every real relationship: freedom, trust and love—in other words, a “reciprocal relationship of willing love.”

3. RECIPROCAL SALVATION

Formula: “We love God because God first loved us.”

Metaphors: Patriarchal or marriage covenants of divine caregiving and mutual faithfulness.

Theological uses: Freely given, mutually responsive love between the Father and Son (the Incarnation) and between Christ and his bride (covenant).

A common mistaken notion is that God’s “covenants” are legal contracts. No, the covenant metaphor describes God’s relationship to his people as a spousal relationship. Within that metaphor, God is forever the faithful spouse, idolatry is spiritual adultery and exile is estrangement. The “new covenant” signifies our reconciliation to the heavenly Husband (as in Hosea’s prophetic marriage to an unfaithful wife).

God’s unfailing love and faithfulness are truly unilateral but our relationship with God was obviously never meant to be one-sided. *God alone saves us but that salvation establishes a reciprocal relationship that is intrinsic to salvation.* Now, “We love him because he first loved us” (1 John 4:19).

When viewed through the prism of covenant monogamy and willing affection, the ravished bride of Song of Solomon demonstrates this reciprocal love. She’s nothing like Lady Hillingdon, whose 1912 journal says, “When I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, open my legs and think of England.”

Yes, the “Savior work” rested entirely in Christ’s (the Bridegroom’s) hands. But this salvation was FOR something—we “married into” a reciprocal relationship of willing love.

Salvation is more than a wedding already accomplished for us—it’s the fullness of an active marriage in which we’re participants. It’s not just that we *were united* to Christ but that we *are now in union* with him. Christ is more than a wedding day bridegroom—he’s our eternal Husband!

“Finished work” salvation rightly points to all Christ forever accomplished at the Cross. It emphasizes our new identity in Christ. But let’s not understate how our spousal union to Christ (present and continuous) is the reason, the context and the ongoing blossoming of our salvation. Salvation is an ongoing marital relationship to Christ.

I understand sensitivities to transactional religion that led to our grace-alone commitment. I am also pressing us to see that grace-alone salvation leads to a reciprocal relationship in which a responsive bride is the norm and her loving faithfulness is not condemned as works. In short, salvation bears this fruit: “We love because he first loved us.” □