

# Schematic Reflections on Salvation in Jesus Christ

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1. It is obvious that the term "salvation" is subject to various and different and even conflicting uses and interpretations in the contemporary life and discourse of the church. In this brief essay I will attempt to identify a general schema or model of how soteriological themes hang together in Christian discourse. And then I will sort out two different, even competing, ways of interpreting the model. I will argue that one of these interpretations is more adequate to the distinctive themes of the Christian Gospel centered on Jesus Christ. Throughout, my aim is to be diagnostic, acute, and illuminating, if not exhaustive and complete. The issues being identified and argued require much more elaboration and dialectic than can be mustered in this limited and concentrated presentation. Hopefully what is presented will not be without usefulness and merit to concerned thinkers and to the church.

Before elaborating the model, it is important to note my belief that biblical language does not contain one, uniformly consistent theory of salvation. There are several terms, emphases, and images for salvation, including deliverance, freedom, redemption, reconciliation, justification, liberation, resurrection, and eternal life. There is no simple congruence in how these terms are used in Scripture, and when we get into the larger church traditions of interpretation, we find multiple accents and theories. There are indeed **thematic continuities**, but there is hardly universal agreement about the details and explanations. In this sense, then, every generation of the church has had to wrestle with how the Gospel is to be understood for its time; this is **faith seeking understanding** and is a necessary feature of the life of faith. In our time it is internally important to wrestle with the Gospel and the full meaning of salvation, given the multifarious ways of speaking of salvation in the church's contemporary life and discourse.

2. A **general schematic model of salvation** issues and accents can be garnered by considering the following questions and their possible answers:

- a. **What is the condition from which persons need saving?**
- b. **Who is the agent who does the saving?**
- c. **How does the saving agent accomplish the saving?**
- d. **What is the condition to which persons are saved?**
- e. **Who is saved?**

Let us now look at the various ways in which the **first question** has been answered. There is general agreement that in some sense **the condition from which persons are to be saved is sin and the effects and consequences of sin**. But what is sin? However analyzed, sin is at least rebellion against the rule of God who is the Creator of all things. It is understood that the persons who rebel are responsible for their rebellion. And what are the consequences of sin? Various stated, the consequences are alienation from God, other humans, and one's proper good and fulfillment as human. These consequences of sin are destructive of human life and well-being, of which death looms as the most threatening destruction and annihilation.

Shifting the emphasis somewhat, we can ask as well about being saved from the effects upon us of the sins of others, such as Israel being saved from the evil Pharaoh who had oppressed them. This is a saving or liberating from the conditions of injustice and oppression created by the sins of others. This sort of saving from oppression and enemies is the primary focus of the so-called liberation theologies that are prominent today. Where one places the emphasis between **my sins** and **their sins** will make a big difference in how

one talks about salvation. Yet it can be argued that a complete understanding of sin and its consequences will grasp both the individual embrace of sin and the systemic sin of social structures, relationships, traditions, and powers that oppress people and seek to destroy human well-being.

The **second question**, "**Who is the agent who does the saving?**" has been persistently answered by pointing to God. **God is first and last the One who saves**, and here the accent is typically on the mercy, grace, and love of God. God's saving can be contrasted with all those other attempts by humans to save themselves by their own efforts. Only God can save and such saving is the free grace of God. Yet even though this answer is virtually unanimous in mainstream Christian traditions, how the third question is answered opens up considerable room for disagreement.

We turn now to the **third question**, "**How does the saving agent accomplish the saving?**" But this cannot be answered without specifying **what** the saving agent **does** that is efficacious in accomplishing the saving. It is here that the church typically centers on Jesus Christ, and because only God can save, the church had its basic reason for saying that Jesus Christ is divine. Yet answers and their nuances offer significant variety. Notice at least the following **differing accents as to what the saving agent does**:

- a. God out of love forgives the sins of those who repent.
- b. God becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ to overcome the sins of the world and defeat the powers of evil.
- c. God acts in Jesus Christ to reconcile the world to Godself.
- d. Jesus Christ atones for the sins of the world.
- e. Jesus Christ exemplified and enacted the new path to follow in order to be saved and fulfilled.
- f. Jesus taught a new set of commandments, a higher righteousness, the following of which leads to salvation.
- g. Jesus proclaimed and exemplified the grace of God which is always available to all humans.
- h. God acts ever and always in and through the powers of righteousness to overcome the injustice which oppresses people.

I am not saying that it is impossible to accommodate all these in a single complex interpretation. But notice that a and h do not require any reference to Jesus Christ. Also, e, f, and g do not require that Jesus be divine. While h does not require Jesus, it may at least include Jesus among the powers of righteousness. b, c, and d in some sense require that Jesus be divine, as well as human.

Yet another question is implied in this third question, namely, "**Does the saving agent save completely or partially?**" That is, in the requisite sense of saving, does God alone achieve the saving or does it require human response and cooperation? Of course, every interpretation says that humans should respond positively to God's gracious acts, but the nuances of meaning come in their analyses of how the response is related to the saving. That tradition from Augustine through Luther and Calvin tended to say that God's grace is the necessary and sufficient condition for salvation. Other traditions indicate that God initiates the offer of grace but humans have to accept the offer before the saving is complete. In this sense, then, God's grace is a necessary but not sufficient condition of salvation. Hence, it can sometimes be said that one must repent and be baptized in Jesus' name in order to be saved. When this latter emphasis is decisive, we have positions similar to e and f. The logic of this strand of tradition is this: God through Jesus offers grace; humans must accept the offer in order to be saved, whether that means following his example or his teachings or some other specification of what is involved in an authentic accepting and following. God goes so far, then humans must go the rest of the way.

We turn now to the **fourth question**, "**What is the condition to which one is saved?**" Again nuances to answers vary, saying one is saved to the condition of:

- a. freedom from the effects and consequences of sin;
- b. experiencing the love and forgiveness of God;
- c. faith as living trust in God;
- d. being justified before God;
- e. being obedient to God's rule;
- f. flourishing and well-being;

- g. social peace, justice, and love;
- h. being freed from social oppression;
- i. a future historical fulfillment;
- j. a future transhistorical fulfillment.

By "historical" I mean what can be described in some spatial and temporal frame, while "transhistorical" refers to that which transcends space and time. We can quickly see that the condition of being saved can be described in various ways, from an emphasis on i) a present quality of a person's life, irrespective of social conditions, to ii) a present historical social condition, to iii) a future historical social condition, to iv) a trans historical future condition. These need not be mutually exclusive, and different combinations are possible. For example, the saved condition of faith may be thought of as itself a necessary condition of being saved in some transhistorical future. Or, one can reject a transhistorical future and emphasize only being saved in present and/or future historical conditions.

The very mention of future in this connection shows that we are inextricably dealing with **eschatology**, the doctrine pertaining to the ultimate and final aspects of human and world destiny. Here I use "**destiny**" to refer to both the **process** and the **end** toward which the world and humanity are moving. Here "end" includes both *telos* (goal or fulfillment) and *finis* (what is final or conclusive). Sometimes this is thought of as a **dual destiny**, namely, the destiny of the saved and the destiny of the damned.

But this moves us to face the **fifth question**, "**Who is saved?**" The question of who is saved is first a conceptual question, not a simple factual question. That is, we are asking for the identifying traits of the logical class of the saved, even though we may not be able in concrete fact to determine who has the traits. As we consider the question of who is saved, we see that the **answers to the first four questions will already determine the answer to this question**. If, for example, we say that God saves by revealing in Jesus a path of higher righteousness, then those who follow that path are the saved, whether now or in the future. If we say that God's saving act is freeing people from oppression, then those who are so freed are also the saved.

In order to see the interrelated logic of various answers to the question of who is saved, however, we need to make some further diagnostic distinctions. Under the rubric of "salvation" we are dealing with several distinct but related issues. Hence, we need to distinguish **three senses or foci of "salvation"**. First, we will say **Salvation I** refers to **what the saving agent does**. So, it might be said that Jesus Christ, the God-man, atoned for the sins of the world. Or, one might say that God gave a path of higher righteousness in Jesus. On their face, these seem to be different "whats". Second, let us call **Salvation II** the receipt and appropriation of Salvation I in the life of some person's or persons' historical experience. Third, **Salvation III** refers to the ultimate future or ultimate destiny, however that may be characterized. Hence, the question of who is saved may be answered differently according to which salvation one is talking about.

Before leaving this general schema on salvation, it can be pointed out that it is conceivable to have a contrast at all three foci of salvation between the saved and the unsaved (damned or rejected). What this contrast comes to in the three foci is a crucial question.

**3.** I next want to look at a set of concepts that frames many ways of answering the five schematic questions. Even when the set does not explicitly frame the answers, it continues to exercise strong sway over other possible answers. I call this set of concepts the "**Reward/Punishment — Just Deserts**" frame. It will become obvious that this frame is represented in much biblical language, and this has been used in the church to justify the frame.

The fundamental concepts are that human beings are responsible for what they do and what they do has deserved consequences. If what they do is good or right, then they deserve reward or blessing. If what they do is bad or wrong, then they deserve punishment. Aside from the general notion that doing good or right is to be obedient to the rule of God, I am not here interested in the further possible specifications of that good or right or obedient activity. The basic point is that persons are accountable agents who deserve certain consequences according to the moral or religious character of their activities.

God is understood as that agent who not only creates humans but lays down the standard for their lives and conduct. Further, God is the One who is the primary executor of the deserts of humans. God creates, commands, rewards, and punishes. In this sense God is **just** as the one who sets the standard and who metes out rewards and punishments. In other words, it is a matter of God's justice that persons are held accountable for their lives and conduct and that such accountability necessarily involves rewards and punishments. It is part of the just moral/religious order of God's world that the morally good be rewarded and the morally bad be punished. This moral/religious order gives clout to the following summary of the human situation:

1. **All humans have sinned in being disobedient to God's rule.**
2. **All humans deserve punishment by God's justice.**

Up to this point most of the traditions of the church agree with this analysis of the human situation. But how can humans be saved from this sin and consequent punishment? Within this frame, answers have varied. But typically they appeal to God's mercy and grace to provide another opportunity for humans to escape sin and their deserved destiny. However differently they may be analyzed, I am grouping all these theories together and calling them "**Second Chance**" theories. In the language of my previously developed schema, the Second Chance is anything which God has done (Salvation I) which requires an appropriate response from persons (Salvation II) as a precondition for a positive ultimate destiny (Salvation III). God graciously provides the Second Chance—that is, a second chance for sinners—but it is up to the individual to accept or reject this new chance. But here the frame is adamant and remains intact: if the individual accepts the second chance, then the individual deserves blessing and reward; if the individual rejects or ignores the second chance, then the individual deserves appropriate punishment. God's justice may be tempered by God's grace and mercy, but finally it is God's justice—as **retributive justice**—that frames and controls the destiny of humans in so far as they get what they deserve. (Note: nothing logically changes in this interpretation if there are more chances than a second one.)

We could fill in the details of some differing interpretations that employ this basic Just Deserts framework. But no matter how the details may vary and differ, **this frame requires that persons finally receive what they deserve, and in this sense their destiny is decided by their own lives and conduct, decided by themselves.** God may supply a Second Chance and be the executing power of justice, but it is the life and conduct of persons that crucially determine whether they are rewarded and saved or punished and damned. Hence, it is the person's doing or working in appropriating the Second Chance that is the destiny determiner under God's justice. However nuanced we may strive to make this position, in the final analysis it is a matter of **works righteousness**, scorned by Paul, in which our acts **achieve** for us the worthiness to be loved and saved by God. Even though this Second Chance position, framed as it is by Just Deserts, wants to speak of God's grace, I will contend that it finally dissolves into lip-service grace in as much as the **real destiny determiner is the character of the life of the individual.**

**Most theories of dual destiny are rooted in this framework: according to God's justice, some are saved and some are damned.** And it is clear that obedient response to the Second Chance is a necessary precondition for a positive, saved ultimate destiny. But we could also point out that this justice scheme could be skewed by saying that it is God's sovereign free grace which of itself decides who shall be saved and who not, which is the position of some Calvinist predestinarians. For them, all humans deserve punishment because of sin, but God graciously decides to save some, through no merit of their own, and to allow the rest to perish. The saved are saved by grace alone, and the damned are damned by Just Deserts.

4. I will now briefly sketch an **alternative frame that is centered in Jesus Christ and the Pauline-Reformation principle of salvation by grace alone.** In answering the five diagnostic questions and showing an interpretation of the three foci of salvation, I hope it becomes clear how much this position varies from the Just Deserts frame previously discussed.

First, the starting point for this frame, which we know only from the biblical testimony, is that the Creator God has acted in the history of Israel and decisively in Jesus Christ in a self-disclosive, self-revealing, and self-communicating way. Humankind is basically rebellious about its creatureliness and is confused about deity, apart from this definitive self-revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of

Nazareth, a Jew of Israel. Jesus is the life of God incarnate in the midst of finitude and sin in humanity's historical existence. **In Jesus we come to see truly who God is and who humans are.**

Second, in Jesus Christ, God is revealed as free, self-determining love who acts to save the world from its sin and the effects and consequences of sin. **What is done in Jesus Christ is the free grace of God acting on humanity's behalf.** God is not required by necessity or human merit to save the world; to say "grace" is to say that it is free, uncompelled, and unmerited.

Third, **in Jesus Christ God acts to take the sins of the world on Godself for the benefit of the world.** How does this happen? God's life is actively identified with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a specific, concrete, historical human person. This is what is meant in saying that God is incarnate in Jesus in a unique and singular way. Hence, Jesus' life and death are also God's, and in the terrible death on the cross, Jesus the Son of God experiences the full alienating and annihilating power of a sinner's death. This is death under the sway of sin, and God's judgment on sin is to allow it to traverse its course toward nothingness and alienation in death. Sin pretends to be the determiner of human destiny, to control what life comes to and means. **In Jesus' death on the cross God allows God's judgment on sin to fall on Jesus, one without sin and God's own Son, and therefore to fall on God's own self. And this judgment and death are met and overcome in God's life as manifested in Jesus' resurrection from the dead.**

These are the bare elements of a **doctrine of atonement or reconciliation in the event of Jesus Christ.** God reconciles the world unto Godself and does not count its sin against it. Humans no longer stand before God as sinners punishable in alienation from God and in death. Instead, **because of what is done in Jesus Christ, humans are forgiven and justified sinners: sinners who do not have to face the consequences ultimately of their sin before God.** We are obviously dealing here with Salvation I: God has acted in Jesus Christ to change the real situation of sinful humanity as requiring annihilation. This salvation is the event of Jesus Christ as incarnation, atonement, reconciliation, and justification, which is the self-revealing work of God.

Fourth, **God in Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit calls humanity—all humanity, for all humanity have a new situation before God's grace—to receive and acknowledge this new standing and justification.** It is God's Spirit that moves persons to participate in, to appropriate, to say "yes" to this prior work of God's grace. Here we begin to deal with Salvation II. It is the doctrine of the **Trinity** that is unfolded in trying to express adequately the fullness of the divine life that creates, reconciles, and redeems as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is self-revealed as One sovereign subject who lives in three modes of being and act as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **This triune God is infinite, free, self-determining love who has freely chosen in love to create the world, to become incarnate in it, and to call all humanity to the acknowledgment that God is for and with humanity and the world.**

Note carefully that **the Gospel is essentially this Good News of what God has done in Jesus Christ to save humanity.** The Gospel declares the priority of this objective happening as the self-revelation and self-enactment of God's being and life. In the life of Jesus, God has reconciled the world to Godself, and the world is no longer under the condemnation of its sin and God's justice. And **this is done on behalf of all humans and the whole world.** Salvation I is the foundation of Salvation II.

To elaborate now on **Salvation II**, it is simply persons coming through the Spirit to say "yes" to God's prior acts of grace to justify humanity. It is not that they will be justified and forgiven if they say "yes" to Jesus Christ. They are **already justified and forgiven in Jesus Christ** and now are called to live the whole of their lives in the manifest gratitude for this wondrous grace. One repents of one's sin because one has already been forgiven, not in order to be forgiven. This is the life of faith, love, and hope in which persons are baptized, accept the gift of reconciliation, receive the forgiveness of sin, receive the freedom of the Spirit to not be determined by sin, and strive to live the **ethics of grace.** This ethics is in contrast to an ethics of Just Deserts in which one strives to be good and therewith also to be worthy of being saved. Ethics of grace starts with God's gracious justification in Jesus Christ and then asks: "If God has done this, then how am I called to live?" It is the believer who lives daily by grace and confesses gratefully that Jesus is the very being of God and thereby Lord and Savior. The believer is called to live in community with the

neighbor, even if the neighbor is also the stranger or enemy.

This **life-in-the-Spirit** of authentic Christian existence is a new creation and is a being-saved in the here and now of one's historical life. It makes a difference in **how** the believer lives and is in contrast to the life of the world. Yet there is still an incompleteness in the believer's situation. Though God has acted in Jesus Christ to defeat the powers of sin and evil and has in principle defeated these powers, the believer's life does not seem so complete and sin-free. The world is still in its historical existence bedeviled by destructive principalities and powers and human rebellion against God's rule. Even though in Jesus Christ the believer knows that these powers cannot finally determine one's being before God and one's final destiny, she still lives concretely in the midst of ambiguity and conflict. The Kingdom of God as the presence of peace, justice, and love among humans before God does not seem to be fully embodied in history. The believer says "yes" to God's grace, but the "yes" is not perfect or complete. Hence, the believer **hopes** in God's further work in the future in which the Kingdom might fully come.

Indeed the believer knows in her own life the inviting lure of God's future work and the foreshadowing of a completion yet to come. **God has been at work, is now at work, and will be at work in the future.** God is faithful to God's promises, and God has promised in the Spirit that nothing can separate persons from the love of God, come what may. Christians hope in God in at least two basic senses: hope for the historical future of the world and hope for an ultimate transhistorical future. For the historical future Christians trust in God's continuing salvific activity, however ambiguously evident or even unevident such activity may be, and they work with God to proclaim the Gospel, to free the sinful and oppressed, and to pursue concretely a Kingdom of peace, justice, and mutual love.

But this historical horizon of hope does not exhaust Christian hope. Christian hope also resonates to God's promise that death is not the last destructive word about life and that resurrection from the dead is resurrection to God's life. Further, **Christians look to a transhistorical future in which all things, the whole of creation, will be taken up into God's eternal life and fulfilled.** There are many images for talking about this ultimate situation, but human language has definite limits in trying to speak lucidly and truthfully about this ultimate future and destiny. **The Christian's hope is that God's grace will meet us in death and will meet the whole world in its final end.** This is destiny both as goal (*telos*) and as conclusion (*finis*) and is thereby the supreme fulfillment of human life in a transhistorical future. Our destiny -- the destiny of all humanity and the world -- is to be ultimately saved by God whereby none shall perish unto nothingness. **Ultimately before God, hell is empty.** These are the lineaments of Salvation III.

5. However briefly and inadequately, I have now sketched an alternative to the Just Deserts reading of salvation. Next I want to deal with some predictable questions and to elaborate some of my reasoning. Let me start by addressing the fifth question of the schema: "Who is saved?" In the focus of Salvation I, all humans are saved in the sense that their situation before God has been changed from one of condemnation to one of reconciliation and justification. This is not a changed situation only for those who repent of sin and accept Christ. That is, this changed situation is real before God and is not conditioned in its reality by any human response.

In the focus of Salvation II, it is obvious that not everyone says "yes" to God's reconciliation, and there are many who either reject God's offer of grace in Jesus Christ or live in actual ignorance of it. So, **not everyone is saved in Salvation II because not everyone says "yes" to God in Jesus Christ by the Spirit.**

We might inquire, however, in the sphere of historical existence, which is the sphere of Salvation II, **whether some non-Christians nevertheless know God and live faithfully before God and others.** This is a keen question in our age of pluralism, and it is not easy to answer wisely in this short space. But a few remarks will show the direction of my thinking on a cluster of complex issues. First, the very character of Christian existence is its acknowledgment of God in Jesus Christ; this is a specific cognitive intentionality and apart from this intentionality one's existence would seem to be something quite different. There is no 'real' God who transcends Jesus Christ and who is readily identifiable and intendable in some universal way. Second, I see no compelling reason to believe that human "religions" have something in common that could be considered salvific in any recognizable Christian sense of salvation.

Third, for the Christian, the devout Jew does stand in a unique situation. This Jew does know the grace of God in the election of Israel and the establishing of covenant and Torah. Yet this Jew does not acknowledge that the God of Israel was uniquely and singularly present in the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth. . While God has not broken God's covenant with Israel, Israel is not prepared to see God for Israel and the world in Jesus Christ as atonement and justification.

Fourth, is it possible to live justly, generously, and well, whether in a religion or not, without acknowledging God's grace in Jesus Christ? It seems to me that in some relative sense, persons can live more or less justly, generously, and well in the world and therefore live a real presentiment of the life in the Spirit of Jesus Christ. However, I do not want to identify this situation with the situation of the true, self-conscious yes-sayer to God in Jesus Christ, with its clear recognition of sin, grace, forgiveness, and hope before God.

Fifth, in all these reflections we must be absolutely clear that it is not a question of whether God loves the non-Christian or whether God is punishing the non-Christian. From my discussion of incarnation and atonement it should be clear that God loves all persons regardless of their own disposition toward God.

Sixth, I find undaunting the accusation of some ardent pluralists who contend that any exclusive focusing of God's grace in Jesus Christ means necessarily that non-Christians are ungraced and unsaved. My reasoning on these matters of salvation is intended at least to deprive this contention of its force and misleading analysis. Beyond these remarks I am not prepared now to go.

**6.** We come now to **Salvation III**, and we are faced with some compelling questions. Is the life of saying "yes" to God's work in Jesus Christ a precondition to any positive ultimate salvation? That is, are only those who live obediently in faith in Jesus Christ going to be ultimately saved in death and in world consummation? **I am denying that Salvation II is a necessary condition for receiving Salvation III.** Much harm has come to Christian witness and humility by refusing to sever the logical and ontological connection between the life of faith and ultimate redemption. **Because of the magnificence of God's atonement in Jesus Christ, we should resolve to see God's faithfulness in grace carried to its ultimate conclusion.**

More precisely, **what are my reasons for denying the linkage between faith and ultimate salvation and for affirming a single, universal ultimate destiny?** **First**, we do not know how to answer the question of when a concrete life is "faithful enough" to be a precondition for ultimate salvation. If this cannot be done, then in point of actual fact the Christian is trusting not in her own faithfulness but in the continued graciousness of God. If this is the case, then it should be realized that God's grace, as grace, is without conditions and is freely given. To be sure, grace cannot be acknowledged without recognizing that it gives directives for one's life. But the directives and the obedience to the directives are not the conditions for being graced by God, even though they may well be conditions for the personal acknowledgement and appropriation of God's grace.

**Second**, to posit a dual destiny means either falling back into a destiny determined by Just Deserts or a destiny determined by the arbitrary decision of God. The Just Deserts frame, no matter how subtly or nuanced it is stated, fails to carry through completely both the sufficiency and the ultimacy of God's grace as the real, final judgment on humanity. The arbitrary decision of God to save some and not others is not the God we know in Jesus Christ and does not appear to be even a just and loving God. Christians have idolatrously worshipped this *potentia absoluta* long enough, and it is time to give it up for the sake of the real triune God.

**Third**, one might advance a pious agnosticism that says, "Only God can ultimately decide who is saved, and we don't know what that decision is." But this position fails to confront its own logic seriously. God will appear to have three types of options: (1) to decide according to the Just Deserts frame, using some definite criterion for discriminating deserts; (2) to decide arbitrarily to save some and not others; or (3) to decide in love to save all. And if in the light of the Gospel there is good reason for rejecting the first two options as inappropriate to the God we know in Jesus Christ, then we are left with the third choice of

universally saving all. Pious agnosticism may be no more than a refusal to take with ultimate seriousness God's self-declaration in Jesus Christ.

We might next inquire **whether this universal salvation renders our historical lives pointless**. If, in spite of what we have done with our lives, God will nevertheless save us, then why worry about any moral seriousness, repentance, striving, and faith? But when it is put this way it makes it sound as though the only compelling and legitimate motive for moral effort is the desire to be rewarded for goodness. I have already suggested the inadequacy of this motive for Christian ethics and existence. Christians strive morally because of what they know about their own and others forgiveness in Jesus Christ. They are moved by gratitude and love, not by the selfish hope that it pays in the end to be good. For the Christian there is great point to her historical life precisely as the experience of sanctifying growth in Salvation II.

Further, I would argue that anyone who says, "Why be faithful if God will save all in the end?" does not in fact properly understand what the Christian means when she says "God", "faithful", and "saved by grace". What appears to be meaningful talk is in fact **empty of Christian intention, point, and content**.

But won't persons use this view as an excuse for ignoring the Gospel and the call of the Spirit, because it doesn't pay to believe the Gospel? Why be Christian if there is no dual destiny between Christian and non-Christian? But surely Christians are not believers in order to have some advantage over a non-Christian, and **Christians should have no interest in a salvation which logically requires that some others be damned**. Such motives and reasoning are the opposites of Christian humility, gratitude for grace, and love.

Even more one might sharply ask whether my position is the epitome of so-called '**cheap grace**'. But the point of 'cheap grace' talk is not that grace is really conditional. Rather, the target is that some folk speak of being saved by grace as though saying this has no concrete directives, or makes no concrete difference, for how they should live before God. Anyone who confessed salvation by grace alone but who did not actually live a transformed life would be cheapening the grace confession and would be misunderstanding the language of grace. Certainly we are not to think that the opposite of 'cheap grace' is 'earn your own salvation'.

7. Further, it might be asked, "**What about all of those biblical images that at least seem to posit a dual destiny and a real hell for the damned?**" I must admit that these images are there in some biblical texts, even as I contend that there are other images that lead in a different direction. And I will admit that mainstream Christian traditions have assumed, if not always emphasized, a dual destiny. Yet, in fear and trembling and joy, I think there is a central theme issuing from God's incarnation in Jesus Christ as the free gift of Godself to sinful humanity that has not received the riveting and consistent attention it should. At its best, **Christian hope has always been hope in God's grace and not a hope founded on confidence in one's own virtue or righteousness or religious correctness**. What is the logic of this hope? I have tried to make it explicit.

The biblical images of dual judgment and destiny can, however, be given an alternative interpretation. These images convey bluntly and graphically that sinful humanity, **left to its own devices**, cannot find fulfillment and instead is destructive of life and comes to an alienated end. These images can vividly drive home that human sin in itself is alienation and hell and has only the dismal prospect of more hell, of leading only to nothingness. But **in the Christian Gospel sinful humanity is not left to the wages of sin**. God takes up the human plight and in Jesus Christ acts to overcome sin as the determiner of destiny, of ultimate destiny. **God graciously in love gives humanity a new future**. Without the confidence and joy in what God has done, sinners are driven to despair and are without legitimate hope. Living in the Spirit of Jesus Christ is a concrete and definite saving and makes a difference in one's life. The images of hell and damnation remind us of the threatening potential of sin, while the teachings of hope in God's grace persuade us that **the domain of hell—however persistently it stalks and demeans our historical existence—is finally and ultimately empty!**

It should be pellucid by now that the ultimate universal salvation that I am espousing is to be sharply distinguished from any so-called universal salvation that liberally and optimistically considers humans "good enough" to achieve their own salvation or to deserve it. The universal salvation I posit is founded on

the atoning work of Jesus Christ as the authentic self-revelation and self-communication of God's reality. This gracious God has done this and is this and will be faithfully gracious in the future.

**8.** One problem with that particular trajectory of tradition, which emphasizes the sovereign efficacy of divine grace, is that it is repeatedly bound by a picture of dual destiny. With dual destiny as an indisputable requirement, this trajectory most often says only some will be ultimately saved by grace and some will be untouched by grace and thereby damned. And the dual destiny language seems to fit quite well the experiential judgment that some persons live profoundly and egregiously evil and unjust lives.

It should be clear that I am proposing that dual destiny language can be misleading and confusing to an adequate characterization of the foci of salvation. I am arguing that the logic of a radical incarnation/atonement view centered in Jesus Christ moves resolutely to the final conclusion that all will be ultimately saved by God's sovereign grace. With the universal efficacy of grace firmly secured in Salvation I and III, we can then understand some of the 'semi-Pelagian' talk about Salvation II: the "yes" of the believer to God's grace in Jesus Christ is a genuine human decision and a necessary constituent in the salvific movement of this focus of salvation. To be sure, the human decision is a grateful response to Jesus Christ and is enabled by the Holy Spirit and is therefore not quite so autonomous as the semi-Pelagian suggests. But here in Salvation II we can acknowledge a duality of historical destiny: some persons say "yes" to the Gospel and some persons say "no" or are ignorant of it. **We can thus be clearer and firmer about the real but penultimate importance of faith if we are clear about the universality of atonement and ultimate salvation by God's grace alone.** Yet this grace talk finally dissolves if we make the life of faith a necessary precondition for a positive ultimate destiny. And the talk of God's love dissolves if we make a dual destiny ultimately dependent on an arbitrary decision of God.

We can also parenthetically note now how vulnerable the phrase "justification by faith" is to ambiguity and misuse. It may be, and has been, interpreted as though it is the believer's "faith" which justifies her before God. So, then, without faith a person is not justified. But I am arguing that this interpretation easily deteriorates into works righteousness whereby "having faith" is something the person achieves and is therefore deserving of being justified. To preclude this unhappy development I am arguing that justification is rooted in the event of Jesus Christ in such wise that all persons, sinners that they are, are justified by Jesus Christ's atoning work, whether or not they have faith. Hence, **I prefer "justification by grace alone" to "justification by faith". The justifying is in the atoning grace not the faith.** And this is not to deny the real importance of a person "having faith", which is crucial for Salvation II. But a person has faith that she is justified by grace alone.

**9.** Have I dealt yet with the concerns of some **liberation theologians** with their focus on historical liberation from injustice and oppression? It seems to me that the Christian knows at least **two senses of historical liberation or freedom. First**, there is the freedom that comes, even in the midst of injustice, when a person acknowledges that she is loved by God and not determined in her standing before God by either her own sin or the sins of her oppressors. From Paul through the centuries, oppressed Christians have experienced this freedom and liberation: they are not defined and destined by the powers of the oppressors. **Second**, there is the freedom from actually being oppressed and unjustly treated in one's social setting. The Christian hopes, prays, and works for this liberation for herself and for others and looks to God for continual historical, social liberation. The ethics of the Christian life aims directly at working for justice and peace in the common public world.

But we should not allow the concept of this social liberation to be the sole meaning of salvation nor the condition of ultimate destiny. If salvation were to be reduced to only historical, social liberation, then we would have the unhappy logical consequence that most of the human population through the ages have been unsaved or damned in so far as they were oppressed. This would have the further consequence of giving to the oppressors the power to be determiners of others' ultimate destiny, a power which is God's alone. Many liberation theologians avoid this reduction, but it is a profound temptation in the midst of rhetorical "prophetic" exhortation in which the Gospel and the ethics of grace can be forgotten.

**10. Is Jesus Christ the only Savior of the world?** From my perspective how could it be otherwise? Jesus Christ is not a quasi-divine mediator that helps people and of which type there may be many other

mediators. Jesus Christ is God incarnate graciously acting to reconcile and redeem the world. God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and there is no other God. Hence, Jesus Christ is the only Savior of the world precisely because only God saves and Jesus Christ is of the very being of God as the One who graciously and universally loves all humanity. But this is a comment about Jesus Christ as Savior; it is not a comment about Christians alone being ultimately saved.

The Gospel of John has Jesus saying: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn 14.6 NRSV). Traditional interpretations tend to emphasize that Jesus is the only way to come to the Father and to infer that only those who have faith in Jesus will be saved. But this interpretation, powerful as it may be about Salvation II, tends, when isolated from other themes, to subvert John's prior declaration that Jesus is the Word made flesh and comes from the Father's love to a lost world. The way is first the way of the Son from the Father to a lost humanity, and then secondarily and derivatively the way of humanity to the Father. **There is no human approach to God that in itself is effective and saving apart from the encompassing actuality of God's gracious approach to humanity in Jesus Christ.** But the ultimate effect of what God has done in Jesus Christ through the Spirit is not limited to only those who have faith in Jesus.

So, **are only Christians saved?** All human persons are saved in God's atoning and reconciling work in Jesus Christ (Salvation I). Christians are those who gratefully acknowledge this and strive to live by the Spirit (Salvation II). This living by the Spirit makes a real difference in a person's life and is reason enough to witness before all humans to the wondrous things God has done on behalf of all. Christians also hope that all humans will ultimately be saved by God's sovereign resolve to be gracious and to gather all into God's own eternal life (Salvation III). **Narrow may be the way of salvation in the life in the Spirit, because few will know the freedom, suffering, and joy that come with following Jesus. But wide and universal is the way of God's grace in incarnation, atonement, and ultimate redemption.**

**11.** In conclusion, I hope my diagnostic schema helps us to understand salvation more clearly and complexly. The distinctions I suggest should enable us to ask sharper questions and to discern subtle but important differences, as well as similarities. To talk adequately of salvation in Jesus Christ requires that one see the range of meanings in which "salvation" works. I have argued for one way of connecting the foci of salvation talk and centering them on God's salvific work in Jesus Christ, which can only be explicated as the full work of the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.