

REFLECTIONS ON SALVATION
OR

“LET’S GET OUR CHRIST ON. LET’S KICK IT, JESUS STYLE.” – Pastor Skip in “Saved”

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As you listen to my words, I would ask that you would create an image in your head of an infomercial. Picture a stud or babe-like looking spokesperson convincingly telling, showing, and demonstrating to you the necessity of their product and why you should buy it. Now, take that image and tweak it a bit... imagine, the same infomercial displaying all the wonderful benefits of the product but it is communicated by a spokesperson who is a 100 pound weakling looking like everything but what the “product” is destined to produce.

The writer of this reflection is certainly a picture of this second image. Salvation, in my limited experience and estimation is the most glorious of concepts and I am the most pathetic of spokespersons. I would argue that any connection between this particular concept and this particular spokesperson is certainly absurd or strangely wonderful... or both. Some might even call it mysterious (Rom 16.25, Eph 3.6, 6.19).

There are elements of mystery and awe that I hope always moves me beyond the intellectual and the strategic and continues to grip me personally. In this context of absurdity, mystery and awe, I offer some brief reflections...

Where to start

Salvation defined must start with our understanding of God’s person. This is nothing new to us, but I think it is an important reminder that salvation, whatever we determine it to be, comes from one who chooses to reveal Himself and his purposes to his creation. If we were to ask why God would do that, my best answer is; “I don’t know.” Maybe that’s why words like grace and mercy and love are so significant to the Christian. These are embedded in the mystery and awe of the Creator revealing himself to his creation simply because he chooses to and we are dull, un-anticipating, non-seeking recipients who are awakened to God and his purposes completely and only through God’s efforts.

The real mystery

I propose that this is the true mystery of the Gospel. It is the mystery of God breaking in where God is not wanted or at least not known. This breaking in might be seen in grand pictures of revivals or underground churches, but I see it even more person by person. The breaking in is witnessed in the lives of everyday people and even in this one very pathetic infomercial spokesperson. The fruit of this breaking in is varied. God breaks in when one becomes aware of their depravity; God breaks in when a cup of cold water is given to the least of these; God breaks in when relationships are restored, when compassion is extended, when addiction is broken. The mess we get in is when we try to measure break ins or evaluate their legitimacy. We are tempted to talk about numbers saved or seek out the sexiest testimony because they bring the most attention or they sound best in prayer letters. When we try to quantify mystery, salvation and the gospel we begin to sound like an infomercial, creatively packaged in a 3-minute “testimony.”

The essential gospel

If we are able to embrace the mystery of God’s working in people’s lives and are comfortable with holding loosely what “salvation” looks like, even celebrating different expressions of it, I think we can be more comfortable with saying what the Gospel is. For though the fruit of the Gospel is multifaceted, the central message of the Gospel is evident. The Gospel cannot be the gospel without recognizing God as creator, people as rebels, God as pursuer, Christ’s incarnation, death, and resurrection, the Spirit’s ongoing presence, and a call to return to God and his community. The creeds and confessions give us the pathway for the essentials of a believing community and these, to me, are more than intellectual ascents, but are central to a revealed worldview that one embraces. They reinforce the elemental or essential teachings that one embraces as Christian (Heb 6).

Christian leaders shepherd people in responding to Jesus greatest command.... “Follow me.” Our task calls us to be theologians above managers, rock stars, activity coordinators, best buddies or leaders. Therefore, I offer the following considerations and implications...

Salvation/Gospel Considerations

Context of Salvation: God's Whole Story.

The message of salvation only makes sense in the context of the whole story of God. I do not use the word 'story' as some teaching form that is in vogue right now. I use it as a term of context as I am convinced that we cannot understand God's working, the centrality of Christ as hero, the necessity of the cross, the implications of the resurrection, the identity of the church, nor the our missional calling fueled by God's Spirit, apart from a clear, theological metanarrative.

Response to Salvation: One's whole life.

The message of salvation/Gospel makes no division between spiritual/non spiritual. The concept of salvation for a Jew was all-encompassing. It focused on God rescuing his people from Exile (physically yet, as it becomes apparent through Jesus teachings... exile rooted in heart) and on God restoring his kingdom where the entire world would be blessed through the people of God. The message of salvation to a Jew had nothing to do with "going to heaven" but was very much a present reality. One's repentance was that of returning to God and God's ways. The focus was on the here and now and the joining of what God has been doing, is doing, and will do.

Message of Salvation: A Declaration to the whole world.

The message of salvation/the Gospel was/is a declaration, not an option. Paul saw himself as a herald of great news. Jesus is King and Lord and the consequences of this are, to him, statements of reality, not suggestions for an alternative lifestyle.

Evidence of Salvation: Aloneness to Oneness.

Although there are individual implications, salvation is not individualistic, but is very much a pathway away from aloneness toward the oneness of fellowship (1 John). As a result, I agree with the church fathers that one cannot have God as their Father without the Church as their mother. This has implications with both local and global church participation.

Salvation/Gospel Implications

The Church is essential in salvation.

The church is ordained as the vehicle for the redemption of the world. A real church exists where the community lives out the gospel message, embodying truth as their communal apologetic. Further, it is in community that the story of God can be taught and lived so that people might have a clear understanding of the Christian metanarrative and what, by the grace of God, they are be called to.

Robert Webber in [Ancient-Future Faith](#) brings a great commentary on the early church and the responsibility of the gathered community to teach, encourage and demonstrate the Gospel. People are brought into the believing community (Seeker, Healer, Kneeler, Faithful).

I believe all para-church organizations are only legitimate if they seek to work alongside, serving the missional purposes of the local church.

The message of the gospel will collide with culture... and potentially the existing church culture.

The declarative essence of the Gospel calls for his people to not follow culture but to stand against all that goes against God's person and purposes. Ultimately, in my estimation, this means that we need to worry less about our techniques and our mission statements and be more committed solid biblical understanding and good theology. I am haunted by Alan Wolfe's words in [The Transformation of American Religion](#), where he concludes that America has nothing to fear about Evangelicalism, because it has been assimilated into American culture.

["... I do wonder why doctrine plays so little a role in the way Americans practice their faith. Belief, after all, should involve belief in something. It is not that I have come to admire fundamentalists, who insist on the priority of truth (as they see it) over all other considerations; most of them, in fact, send a chill up my spine. Yet, especially when compared to the religious practices of other conservative Christians, I do respect their willingness to stand against the emotionality of American culture in favor of ideas- strongly held ideas, to say the least- about God who is and why he asks so much of us."

"Growth is the enemy of sectarianism. Religions committed to the principle that the world is irredeemably corrupt and the sin of human beings deeply etched may be content to watch their membership numbers stagnate as they gather into sects, but just about all other religions in America want to be attractive to the uncommitted and to retain the already committed. This adherence to growth can have its frustrations; watching sermons reduced to PowerPoint presentations or listening to one easily forgettable praise song after another makes one long for an evangelical willing to stand up, Luther-like, and proclaim his opposition to the latest survey of evangelical taste. Tacky as evangelicalism can be, however, sectarian it is not. Its problem, in fact, is the opposite- so strong a desire to copy the culture of hotel chains and popular music that it loses what religious distinctiveness it once had."

I do not want to see people alienated from the message of salvation because of our behavior, nor do I want to distort the message of salvation by our behavior leading people to believe in a God that really doesn't exist.

The gospel doesn't need alter calls.

While many of us chuckle at the thought, the "alter call" ethos still arises in our addiction to numbers. While numbers can be an indicator, it is not the indicator. Probably the most important commitment/decision one witnesses in the church will not be made by an individual who comes forward and is cheered by the community, but a commitment made by the believing community committing themselves to the individual and their community.

We need to rethink membership and it's emphasis of people "joining" the church and reconsider membership as someone willing to enter in to a community that commits to embrace them.

The gospel proclaims an anti-war message.

I am becoming increasingly convinced all war and revolution language must cease in the Christian community. What sounds radical to western ears leaves images of atrocities for the rest of the world. Yes, the message of salvation is a declaration. Yes, the Gospel challenges political, economic, and social powers, but the message of salvation must always be expressed in the spirit of Jesus. Our weapons are that of love and compassion. Our declaration is that of peace. Our position is that of a servant. Our retaliation is bent on absorbing injustice and returning hatred with kindness. Our destiny is to die rather than to fight, to spend ourselves rather than preserve ourselves.

Already... Not yet.

My infomercial image thankfully breaks down when we start talking about salvation as a product (though sometimes it's pitched that way). Salvation is not a "thing" and therefore it cannot be lost because it cannot be possessed. Salvation seems to be something that is entered into. John calls it light. It's a new state of living where we can see and be seen. Salvation cannot be an equation where it is the sum of grace plus mercy. Rather, salvation is an environment where grace and mercy sustain us like the air we breathe. It is not a possession, but an inheritance of which we mysteriously enter and then participate in the redemption of the world.

This kind of salvation makes our existence more than practice. It makes our world more than a prototype. It allows us to worry less about being left behind and more concerned of living here because it is our home. Our Christian story has a happy ending and is founded then, on an eschatological hope that God is accomplishing his purposes.

Language

I would propose then, that we rethink our own Christian language and redeem the essential words of our faith so that they might convey an accurate picture of the Gospel. For example, in my understanding...

Worship...	is a missional response that is directed toward the world (God glorified).
Discipleship...	is following Jesus in community.
Church...	is the tangible presence of Christ.
Theology...	is the language used to express the mystery of the Gospel.
Evangelism...	is the church community committed to the local and world community.
Church Calendar...	is a year-round reminder of God's story.
Worship Service...	is a consistent gathering of God's people to remind one another of creation, fall, redemption, and recapitulation.

React Now

An infomercial always tells the audience to "act now" and the church is tempted to proclaim, "make a decision now." But I am realizing that salvation is about God already acting and we will continue realize it, where two or three gather in His name.