

Contemporary Views on Salvation

By

Glenn Giles

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There are varying views on salvation among those who call themselves “Christians” today. The following enumerate some of those views:

- (1). **The Normative Religious Pluralism View:** This view “maintains that the major world religions provide independent salvific access to divine Reality”¹. For Christians, Jesus is the way. Others “have their own independent insight into God” and find salvation that way. So knowing Jesus is not absolutely necessary. Also, evangelism is not important either as there are many ways to God (however you define him). No personal relationship with Christ is necessary. This is an extreme liberal view. John Hick has become one of its main proponents.
- (2). **The Inclusivist View:** This view says that Jesus Christ is the normative fulfillment of all religion. “The salvation offered in Jesus Christ is available not only for those who hear his name; saving grace *must be* universally available in all cultures, without regard to geography or age”. The “requirement for salvation is simply trust in God—under whatever form God is known—and obedience”. It is even stated that “perhaps some believers will receive an explicit knowledge of Jesus Christ and the basis of their salvation only later, after death”. “For inclusivists, God’s saving grace has pervaded the cosmos from the beginning, always offering love. Consequently, Jesus is viewed as the one who perfectly acts out God’s ever-present love for creation, mirroring the nature of God reaching out to a rebellious humanity through the cross”. In this view Jesus becomes just the “sent one” from God and not “the actual Savior of the world”. Though there are many variants on this approach, one approach (by a person who calls himself an “evangelical” (Clark Pinnock) actually rejects “the propitiatory view of Christ’s atoning work”. Jesus is the “clearest expression of God’s universal grace” but Jesus does not seem to be the one who establishes God’s grace through his life, death and resurrection. Jesus just models or expresses God’s grace but is not the instrument through which it comes or is received. This (and its many variants) constitute the liberal Protestant view and the Catholic view after Vatican II.

¹ The quotes here and the summary of views 1 through 3a come in part from Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 7-26.

(3). The Particularist (also called exclusivist or restrictivist) View:

This view is the “hallmark of the salvation-history scheme, the oldest enduring tradition in Christian theology”. This view generally holds (although there are variants to this view also) “that only those who hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and explicitly trust in him in this life can be saved, while all others are swept into a lost eternity.” People are not saved apart from “explicit faith in Christ and acting accordingly”.

Various expressions of this view include:

- (a) Those who believe that one is saved by grace through “faith alone”. It is claimed that no works or actions what so ever (including baptism) have a part in one’s salvation. One enters into a “saved” state by simply praying the “sinners prayer” or “praying Jesus into your heart”. This position includes most conservative evangelicals who see baptism, for instance, as an “outward sign of an inward grace” and not connected with saving faith. Salvation is secured with a mere act of praying without regard to the response God states he desires in the Bible. This brings about a type of relationship which can be called *transactional* as opposed to *intimate*. It is a relationship based on *superficial* outward actions, the content of which are determined by the person praying not by God. Although there can be some “heart feelings” experienced by the one “accepting” Christ, it does not ensure that Christ experiences them in an intimate salvific relational way. It ensures only good feelings on the part of the person praying. This is because forgiveness takes place in the heart of the one offended (God) not in the heart of the offender (man). Until forgiveness happens in the heart of God, one is not saved no matter what he or she “feels” or “thinks”. Here salvation is equated basically with “good feelings” and based only on the “faith” Biblical passages
- (b) Those who believe that one does have to do works (i.e. “be good”) to be saved. This is more a works-salvation based on merit. Lip service may be given for grace but in the end one depends on his performance for salvation.
- (c) Those who believe that one is saved by grace and that actions (including baptism) are expressions of faith. Baptism is considered the *point* of salvation (where one receives the forgiveness of sins and the Holy

Spirit). This is represented by the Restoration Movement groups and others. This too has several variations:

- (1) Those who believe that one does not have to believe *during* baptism that one's sins are washed away, (i.e., retroactive faith after baptism is permissible). This in essence becomes a type of transactional relationship with God, one in which the person who is baptized may experience some of God's grace (i.e. he knows God loves him or her) but God does not necessarily experience (know) him or her intimately on a contrite heart level. It is like going through the actions of a marriage ceremony without knowing one was getting married. The heart and a loyalty pledge was not there during the ceremony. The "I do" meant something different than an "I do" in a bonafide marriage ceremony.
- (2) Those who believe that one must in faith submit to baptism for the purpose of having one's sins forgiven but who do not require the baptism candidate to "repent" or decide to "surrender all" to God before baptism. Lip service is sometimes made with respect to "repentance" and making Jesus "Lord" but the candidate is not helped to see of what he needs to repent nor what it means to make Jesus "Lord". No cost is counted. This too is more of a transactional relationship, a relationship in which one who is baptized experiences some of God's grace in his mind (i.e., knows that God loves him) but one in which God does not necessarily receive or experience (know) him or her on the heart level in return. This creates a superficial and more intellectual one-sided relationship than a heart or whole being relationship. Intimacy is lacking. Only a *transaction* takes place.
- (3) Those who have repented, have taken Jesus as Lord, and have become a disciple, but when he or she is baptized, is not specifically aware that the baptism ceremony is the point in time of salvation.

Baptism then to them is just a “ceremony” without salvific meaning.

- (4) Those who believe that one must in faith submit to baptism for the forgiveness of sins, to be joined with and placed into Christ, and receive the Holy Spirit. These also believe that a person must repent, be cut to the heart, and decide to surrender all to Jesus out of love for God. These believe that baptism is the point of initial salvation. These also believe that a God directed response is necessary as that response brings one into the position of allowing God to *know* him or her. This ensures forgiveness is happening in the heart of the offended (God). This is not a transactional relationship but a real bi-directional intimate heart relationship. The person baptized knows (experiences in a saving way) God and God knows (experiences in a saving way) that person. Intimate relationship is restored. Superficial transactional relationship is avoided.