

What does salvation mean for your local community?

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Most people agree that ‘salvation’ is at the heart of the Christian faith. But too often our use of phrases like ‘being saved’ sounds like religious jargon, easy to use within church culture but difficult to translate in our mission work in the community. Christian Community activists need to think carefully about salvation and how it relates to what they are doing. What do we mean when we sing and pray about salvation and how does it refer to the work to make our communities better places?

Is the salvation the Bible speaks about primarily about what happens when someone dies? Is it just about ‘resting in eternal peace’ and securing a spiritual home for our soul in heaven? Does it mainly concern a private deal made between an individual and Jesus? Many people today, including many Christians, believe that this is the primary meaning of salvation. I believe that this misunderstanding has done enormous damage to the Church’s mission, especially in bringing good news to the poor.

Jim Wallis has written that Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom of God has been misunderstood. He wrote that the Church ‘has *individualised* it by restricting it to the inner recesses of the heart; they have *spiritualised* it by removing it entirely to heaven; or they have *futurised* it by speaking of it only in connection with apocalyptic events at the end of time.’¹

The effect of this ‘individualised, spiritualised and futurised’ gospel is religion that is no longer good news to the poor. Instead of wanting to see communities transformed, it focuses on individual destiny and fulfilment; instead of challenging oppression, it sees it as irrelevant to its spiritual mission; instead of service and compassion now, it promises heavenly blessings.

This kind of religion does not address the problems in our world - and it’s not the salvation that we see incarnated in the life and message of Jesus.

The meaninglessness, loneliness and violence that we see in our communities ask questions that demand answers from those with faith. What will save our communities from violence and destruction? What will stop injustice and suffering? Can we have hope in a better future?

¹ Jim Wallis *Agenda for Biblical People* (p.93)

The fullness of salvation

The whole of the Bible could be described as salvation history of how a loving Creator God is redeeming the whole of His creation. The effects of sin have infiltrated all aspects of human life but God's mission is to restore and renew. Supremely in Jesus, God has acted within human history to mend our broken world and offer the way to true fullness of life. And we believe that God will complete this work - and fully complete his work of restoration and renewal.

The biblical picture of salvation is rich and multi-faceted. But within this big picture, there are four ways of describing salvation - all of which involve both personal and social change.

1) *Salvation as wholeness*

In the Bible, salvation centres upon restoring the whole person, not just the 'soul', to a proper network of relationships. It embraces forgiveness in relation to each other and God, as well as healing and a proper attitude to the whole of creation. A good example is when Jesus declared that 'salvation had come to this house' when Zacchaeus rejected his previous lifestyle and prioritised restoring relationships in his community (Luke 19). His *personal* conversion showed itself in *social* change; biblically salvation is never seen as a purely individualistic concern.

In Jesus' overall ministry, healing and wholeness go hand in hand. The healings of individuals are the signs of the kingdom where people are fully restored into community (e.g. Luke 4:31-37, 8:26-39).

All around us today we see the need for 'wholeness' both in individuals and in our communities. The nature of 21st century life is demanding for so many, frequently causing anxiety, mental illness and exclusion of people with differences. It is wonderful when churches provide community for so many people who struggle to be included elsewhere. Surely this is a key role for the church: as the grace and generosity we have experienced in Christ gives us the resources to include and be generous to others.

This role of building community is highly relevant today where there is such concern about 'community cohesion' and where relationships between groups are often contentious. As well as 'binding' groups of believers, Christian community projects can be excellent 'bridgers' in reaching out and bringing together a wide range of people in terms of ethnicity, age or class whether 'believers' or not. In doing this work we are working against the damaging divisions that can so easily deepen between people or groups based on geographical boundaries (as we see with urban gangs). The salvation we have in Christ cuts across these divisions for in Christ 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28).

2) *Salvation as liberation*

Salvation entails liberation from oppression. This is most clearly illustrated in the Exodus story when Israel are liberated from the injustice and oppression of slavery. And the theme continues throughout the Old Testament when the prophets, such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Micah² frequently denounce the way the powerful are oppressing the poor.

On a more personal level we see the liberation that comes to those who receive healing and restoration. In Philippi (Acts 16:16-40), we see God working through Paul and Silas to bring liberation to a slave girl who is being manipulated by her owners for financial gain. This transformative act leads to their flogging and imprisonment and ultimately challenges the authorities.

Today, in our communities, we see the need for liberation for those who are imprisoned in by debt, low pay, unemployment, immigration status, gang culture and poor housing. We see the way that people are imprisoned by drugs, alcoholism and low self-esteem. Oppression is caused by unfair lending schemes, poor landlords, drug dealers, and those who perpetuate domestic violence.

In many brilliant Christian community projects people are being offered liberation out of these oppressive circumstances - a chance to face up to the issues that condemn them to misery and have the necessary help and support to change their situation.

And as a result of this grassroots activism, the church can speak with authenticity at a political level to reform unfair laws and condemn immoral practices that allow the poor to be trapped and oppressed. Our mandate to work for justice is rooted in the biblical nature of salvation.

² E.g. Isaiah 3:13-15, Jeremiah 22:13-17, Amos 5:11-15, Micah 2:1-2

3) *Salvation as forgiveness*

A central biblical focus of salvation is on people experiencing forgiveness for their guilt in participating in wrong-doing. In line with the Passover, God has acted through Jesus to conquer and justly forgive the sin of humanity rather than simply ignore it. Forgiveness in Christ always involves the personal acceptance of guilt and the embracing of God's grace through forgiveness. It is not about ignoring the wrongs we have committed but acknowledging their reality.

Jesus' death on the Cross brings a deep reconciliation between humanity and God. But we do such damage to our witness to this grace when there is so much vicious division within the Church. Simply put: our experience of God's grace must overflow into our dealings with others, as Jesus' story of the unmerciful servant illustrates (Matthew 18:21-35).

The need for forgiveness and grace is profoundly important in communities because we see the destruction caused by unresolved disputes and the downward spiral of revenge. I am personally struck whenever I get my local bus by how much the conversation of young people focuses on retribution. I used to regularly cycle past the site of a knifing in Mitcham, South London where flowers and cards had been laid for the young man who was murdered. When I read the cards and rap lyrics left in his honour, the dominant thread was one of retribution and revenge for his death rather than appeals for peace or hope. I found reading them led me to feel profoundly depressed.

In Desmond Tutu's book, *No Future without Forgiveness*, he tells the story of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that helped bring forgiveness and repentance in the most challenging of contexts in post-apartheid South Africa. This is the saving nature of God's grace embodied in a political process which sought truth and forgiveness beyond the reach of the normal process of law. It is a stunning example of God's saving grace that can work beyond the lives of individuals and help the whole community.

4) *Salvation as personal affirmation*

The Christian story is deeply affirming for humanity. We are made in the image of the Creator God and his identity is imprinted on every person. It is this identity and worth that is affirmed through the saving action of Christ. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son' (John 3:16). Of course, this image of God is marred by sin but it remains present in everyone. The life, death and resurrection of Christ exposes and judges the world for its sin but also displays the astonishing extent of God's love for us.

We live in an age desperate for affirmation and acceptance. Anxiety is the spirit of the age and in many ways it is the default mode of the city. There is an epidemic of depression and the growth of disorders related to personal self-worth and appearance. The increasingly blatant marketing of plastic surgery plays on these anxieties in ways we could not have imagined even a decade ago. Again, we see the inseparability of personal and social issues: the demons of financial greed and corruption capitalise on the insecurity of the weak and vulnerable.

Seeing the transformation that has come over friends, family and the young people in my church youth group through conversion to Christ has been a deep joy. This thread of personal affirmation has been vital in the transformation process as people understand that the central event of history is deeply relevant to them *personally*. Reflecting on the threats and challenges he faced, Martin Luther King wrote that 'The agonising moments through which I have passed during the last few years have also drawn me closer to God. More than ever, I am convinced of the reality of a personal God, a living reality that has been validated in the experiences of everyday life. God has been profoundly real to me in recent years'.³

³ Martin Luther King, *Pilgrimage to Non-Violence* - taken from *Strength to Love*

Conclusion: salvation is dynamic

Salvation is dynamic because it always involves change. It is fundamentally about God’s power breaking into lives and communities and transforming them. Using the categories of salvation discussed above, we see this transforms brokenness and sinfulness into justice and joy:

<i>From:</i>	<i>To:</i>
Suffering and exclusion	Wholeness
Captivity	Liberation
Guilt	Forgiveness
Insecurity	Affirmation

These elements of salvation involve renewal in the ‘here and now’ but they all anticipate the ultimate renewal and restoration that God will bring about at the end of time.

The fundamental role of Christian mission is to point to what God *has* done, what he *is* doing and, crucially, what he *will* do. We do not undertake community mission work with a superficial optimism that everything will get better instantly or that we will put an end to all the problems our community faces. But we do work armed with hope - a hope rooted in our experience of Jesus Christ. We believe that ‘our labour in the Lord is not in vain’ (1 Corinthians 15:58) because a time is coming when everything will be fully restored; that the world will be finally put to rights because God will make ‘everything new’ (Revelation 21:5).

The crises facing our communities require us to display confidence in Christ and dynamism in our lives as individuals and as a Church. We are called, in our message and lifestyle, to be a Church committed to a mission that seeks to transform both individuals and the communities of which we are a part: to be people who speak confidently in our communities of the wholeness, liberation, forgiveness and affirmation that we know and experience in Jesus.