

Salvation. What is it Really?

Colleagues, A couple of you tweaked me a bit for last week's claim (ThTh 137) that in New Testament usage, the verb 'to save' was regularly in the future tense. One of you called my attention to many NT references where that verb is present tense or even past perfect. Thus the NT also says that for Christ-confessors salvation is already a done deal. You told me: "Salvation as future is unquestionably correct, if we are discussing Paul's glossary in Romans. Look especially to Rom. 5:9-10. However, 1 Cor. 1:18 speaks in the present tense, 'those who are being saved.' Ephesians 2:6,8 speaks in the perfect tense, 'y'all have been and continue to be saved (and presumably will continue for all eternity to be saved) by grace.' Titus 3:5 speaks of God in the aorist, 'God has saved us' through baptism. Let Mt. 9:22 exemplify the numerous times Jesus says, 'your faith has saved and continues to save you.'" Another respondent reminded me of the umpteen places in the Lutheran confessions where the same is true, and where the term "salvation" is used as a synonym for nearly all of the NT metaphors for the Good News, all of which are present realities: justification, reconciliation, adoption, gift of the Spirit, liberation, heirs of eternal life, peace with God, forgiveness of sins, deliverance from death and the devil. And then concluded: "If salvation is to be reconciled to God, have we not been given it? If salvation is forgiveness of sin, have we not been given it? If salvation is to be adopted as God's children and to be inheritors of eternal life, have we not already been adopted? Have we not already inherited eternal life by Christ's 'Last Will and Testament' going into effect at his death?" Some thoughts in response—

1. My mentioning "salvation as future" was almost a throw-away line in last week's posting. The topic under

discussion was Mark Heim's thesis about different salvations offered in different religions. Buddhist Nirvana is something else than the end-of-the-line that the Christian Gospel offers. And then, as an aside, I remembered a Seminex NT colleague who used to call our attention to Paul's use of "salvation" as a specific term for the good news at the end of the line.

2. Of course, Paul and other NT writers link it to the additional good news metaphors [and the Lutheran confessors follow suit]—justification, reconciliation, etc. in that laundry list above. But in terms of its linguistic specificity it signals rescue from God's own critique, an evaluation not complete until the last day, when God's final judgment occurs. The beginning of the Gospel is what God is doing for us in Christ. Salvation strictly speaking is a term for the good news at the end. In Romans 5:9f it comes out like this: "Now that we have been justified by his blood, we will be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." Note that the big terms, reconciliation as well as justification, are already a done deal. But the grand finale is not yet. "Wrath of God" in 5:9 is Paul's term for that final exam, God's operation "in the final analysis." The term wrath doesn't signal God's crankiness, but God's final No to sinners. For sinners it is indeed punitive judgment, and that's not good news. For sinners to survive that final settlement is Good News indeed. Call it salvation. Christ is the grounds for any and all who survive that exam, just as Christ is the grounds for all of those other good news terms. He is the one who makes it all happen—from beginning to end. But the end is not yet.
3. When Paul finishes by saying "we will be saved by his

life," he's linking salvation to resurrection, first of all Christ's resurrection and from that one ours as well. Salvation and our final resurrection get close to being synonyms. Surviving the final settlement and finally overcoming death—especially the "second" death—are two sides of the same coin. To locate all of that in the future is not to minimize its present impact. One of you said: "It is more of a comfort to my conscience to trust the promise that in Christ I have passed the final exam than to hope I will." Doesn't such sentiment downgrade the value of hope in the Good News? It seems to me that "hope" in the NT is also a good-news word, if you will, a "future-tense" noun. So "to hope that I will pass the final exam" is not second-class comfort. It's first-class, state of the art. Christian hope is faith-in-Christ focused on the future. It signals that what I'm trusting as valid for me now will continue to be valid from here to the end of the line—and even beyond. Hope for salvation is as solidly Gospel as faith is for justification. But hope's focus is up ahead. The end of the line is not yet. That's not necessarily a downer. It's just a fact.

4. Back to the many NT metaphors for the benefits of Christ. Even though they often get bunched together in Christian parlance, each has its distinctive focus. Some even more than one. Reconciliation (in Rom. 5 above) is enemies becoming friends. [In 2 Corinthians 5 reconciliation bears a second image, that of a commercial term, getting accounts to balance.] Freedom is prisoners having their shackles broken. Adoption is orphans getting parents. Forgiveness is folks getting their debts cleared up. Peace is restoration of rightness in all relationships—with God, with self, with others, with the world. Justification is sinners getting the justice they deserve and still coming out alive from the court room—and even more, from the

gallows. Salvation strictly speaking is the good news of Christ for the end of the line, when every nemesis, especially the "last enemy," the last critique is nullified. Well then, what about all those NT salvation references that seem so here and now?

5. In its OT rootage salvation is a health/healing term. That gets explicit in the NT healing that Jesus does, where we frequently hear his closing words: "Your faith has saved you (or healed you.)" In all those instances the Greek term is the same, "soozein." Why English translations sometimes render it as "heal" and sometimes as "save" in these healing stories, is not clear to me. But even so this side of the resurrection, no one's healing is complete. Even Lazarus' resurrection in John's gospel didn't render him death-proof. Full healing, final healing, is up ahead in the final resurrection when our mortality itself is healed. If the pay-off for sin is death, as God said, then trumping death is full healing, healing in the final analysis. Call it salvation.
6. What I should have done before launching on this excursus was to consult the newly published authority par excellence for such matters: Frederick W. Danker's "A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature," 3rd edition, just off the press from University of Chicago Press, 2000. [GO to your favorite book-seller to get your own copy. \$85 for 1108 double-columned pp.] All the more so should I have done this since our condominium is but two floors away from Fred and Lois Danker's dwelling in the same building here in St. Louis. Besides that we have our own autographed copy. Well, "Fred says" (p 986) in NT usage "salvation, with focus on transcendent aspects . . . is found only in connection with Jesus Christ as Savior. This salvation makes itself known and felt in the present, but will be

completely disclosed in the future.” So it’s already on the scene, but not the whole ball of wax. The final exam is still outstanding and comes under the rubric of salvation’s “complete disclosure in the future.” Mindful of that full disclosure yet to come Paul tells the Romans (13:11) in the old lectionary text for Advent I: “Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”

7. One way Bob Bertram used to talk about this at Seminex was to note that in the NT Gospels sinners were offered a chance to “scoop” God’s final judgment awaiting them at the end of the line. How? By trusting Jesus. It goes something like this: Jesus comes as friend of sinners, and on the cross gets treated as sinner par excellence. He gets the final “wages” due to sinners: death and God-forsakenness all in one package. The synoptic Gospels with their references to earthquake, eclipse, even corpses coming out of the tombs on Good Friday, are signalling that some sort of judgment day is happening here. It’s a proleptic (ahead of time) apocalypse before the final one. Jesus undergoes judgment day in his body on the tree. But since (as even the Roman centurion divined) “surely, this was God’s son,” for himself Jesus is no candidate for judgment day. So he’s enduring judgment day for others, for “real” sinners, and doing it willingly. Throughout his ministry he offers sinners the sweet swap: his judgment day in exchange for our own. Faith in him makes the swap effective. In one sense Christ-trusting sinners already have their own judgment day behind them and they are already home free. But there is still a “final” judgment day up ahead. Salvation still has one chapter to go. Christ-trusters have no Angst as that day moves toward them. For that final judgment will only ratify that their trust was indeed true. But it hasn’t happened yet. So

Christ-trusters lift up their heads when any apocalyptic signals appear. Fundamental to the faith is that salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

Peace & Joy!

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