

What does Salvation (Soteriology) mean for Paul?

For Paul 'salvation' means being saved from something - from sin; which is a demonic power that enslaves people. In Romans 7:25 Paul writes that nothing good dwells in the flesh and Paul is controlled by the sin in his body. Paul is, "*rescued from the law of sin and death .. I am a slave to the law of sin*". Perhaps this tells us more about Paul's emotional state than about Jesus' saving power.

Finlan asks the question, "How did it come about that the core message of salvation is an interpretation of the crucifixion and resurrection, while the teachings of Jesus himself become a secondary body of information?" We note that in the Apostles' creed we move from Jesus' birth to his death without mentioning his teachings. Crossan and Borg in their book "The First Paul" pose the scenario of Paul attempting to convert Lydia "The seller of purple" an intelligent, competent person by telling her about Jesus' death and resurrection and she asking "but what was Jesus like as a person?" and Paul replying that doesn't matter, we are only concerned about his death and resurrection. "He was the Son of God who was crucified and died for your sins" (p126). This response would make no sense without knowing something of the impact of his life on others. Jesus death and resurrection only have significant meaning when we know something of who he was, what he said and what he did.

Jesus died the death of a criminal, but was intended to be the messiah and victor, so it became urgent to explain how this occurred. Paul was able to link the martyrdom theme, so meaningful to Greeks and Romans, to Jewish monotheism. Thus gentile martyrology and Jewish piety were joined in the idea that, "Christ died for the ungodly." The gentiles poured into the church, whilst a majority of Jews hardened their hearts.

Paul's metaphors imply a selfless messiah, but also a God who must be paid off – Salvation is not free. These metaphors imply a transaction by which salvation is bought with a price (1 Cor 6:20) "*For you were bought with a price.*"

If it is the death of Jesus that brings salvation for Paul what role does the exercise of faith play for the person seeking salvation?

In his essay "Did Paul Teach the Doctrine of the Atonement?" emeritus professor John Cobb Jnr. examines Paul's letter to the Romans, and in particular Romans 3:21-26, to analyse this question. This is a text often cited by those who propose that Paul taught the doctrine of the atonement.

Cobb raises a further question by asking – "Have we misread Paul by incorrectly translating from the Greek text?" In the process of examining the Greek translation Cobb discovered that there was an alternative translation, one which would be consistent with Paul's thinking. It is only in Romans 3:21-26 that it indicates Paul is inferring that Jesus' death is sacrificial. This is particularly raised in verse 25, "*whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins*

previously committed.” Therefore attacking the basis of the doctrine of the atonement in Paul’s letter, really hangs on this verse.

Whilst there are variations on the term atonement all these translations basically agree that God sacrificed Jesus so that people could be reconciled to him through faith.

The Greek word “*pistis*” is usually translated into the English word “faith” and all translations assert that ‘*pistis*’ or faith belongs to those who are sinners, for whom Jesus died. But according to Cobb the Greek reads as easily, if not more easily, if the reference is to the ‘*pistis*’ of Jesus rather than the ‘*pistis*’ of others directed towards Jesus. There is a footnote in the NRSV, which supports this alternative translation.

Cobb also suggests that the word ‘*pistis*’ refers more to “faithfulness” rather than faith, because faith is an inner subjective state, whereas ‘*pistis*’ is a way of being in the world – it is the action of faith.

Cobb concludes that ‘*pistis*’ refers to the “faithfulness of Jesus”, and if we translate ‘*pistis*’ as faithfulness, then it reflects the righteousness of God, which has been revealed in the faithfulness of Jesus.

Therefore what liberates us is Jesus revealing God’s justice and being faithful, even to death. For Paul, Jesus’ death is an indication of the radical character of his faithfulness. Cobb suggests that the translation should be: “God is just and God justifies those who participate in the faithfulness of Jesus.”

We are transformed by our participation in the faithfulness of Jesus. Cobb concludes that Paul does not support or teach that God sacrificed Jesus as the price for justifying us. Jesus saves/transforms us by being radically faithful, and this faithfulness shows us the true character of God’s justice.

If Cobb is correct in his examination of the text then we are being encouraged by Paul to believe, not that the death of Jesus is a saving act, but that his faithfulness is the redeeming feature of his life. It is possible that this is the saving/liberating and transforming activity of Jesus’ death.

Do Paul and Jesus differ on their understanding of Salvation?

When we examine the canonical gospels we discover that for Jesus the way to God is already open. Six times Jesus tells people “*Your faith has saved you*”. He uses the past tense, indicating that the action of being saved happened in the past and that its results continue into the present. Their faith, or in the case of the paralysed man lowered through the roof, the faith of friends, has already saved them.

Jesus does not put the act of salvation as being contingent on his soon to come execution and death. In Jesus we find no mention of a sacrificial death, rather faith saved people because it allowed God to reach into their lives and heal them. It is God who does the saving. Finlan says “people who related to Jesus knew that God’s saving power was already available, they did not have to wait

for Jesus' death". Finlan supports his claim by quoting Luke 12:32 *"For it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*

This approach also supports the notion that we have immediate access to God, and that the people who related to Jesus also had this access. It is false humility to condemn this as being insufficiently dependent on God's grace. Augustine's attack on Pelagius is an example of the criticisms this approach brings. "Pelagius born in 354 CE was a theologian and an ascetic who denied the need for divine aid in performing good works. He claimed that humans were not wounded for Adam's sin and were perfectly able to fulfil the law apart from any divine aid", which flew in the face of Augustine's Doctrine of Original sin. (Wikipedia)

The teaching of trust is a core message of Jesus, and is recorded in the gospels (Luke 7:50, 8:48, 17:19, 18:42 and Mark 5:34, 10:52). Unfortunately this approach does not become the core message of the Christian gospel.

So to understand the message of Jesus, we need to discard the concept of sacrificial thinking. Jesus' practice supports the Hosea principle, when he claims that God says *"I desire steadfast love, not sacrifice."* We see Jesus supporting this principle in his opposition to the purity laws, particularly when they are used to attack people who are doing God's work. Jesus is inferring that the laws have become more important than the welfare of people. (Matthew 12:7 *"I desire mercy and not sacrifice"*).

Whenever we fail to understand the Hosea principle and put ritual minutiae before people we commit an injustice. In Matthew 5:24 we read that ritual cannot proceed if personal relationships are not restored, indicating that relationships are more important than ritual.

Reconciliation occurs through right relationships and not ritual, even with the practice of the Eucharist, where the blood acts as a covenant sacrificial blood. There is scholarly debate regarding these verses, (Luke 22:19-20) because they are absent from the oldest western Greek manuscripts, and from the oldest Latin and Syriac versions, indicating that these verses were added later. The Revised English Bible drops the "body" and "blood" passages altogether, and leaves us only with an intimate farewell scene. Finlan believes this is consistent with our understanding of Jesus' words and action.

Finlan also claims Jesus believes *"salvation and wholeness are freely available without any mediating transaction, that faith means trusting in God's straightforward generosity, and forgiveness is conditioned only by one's willingness to forgive others"*. (Page 114)

The atonement is intertwined with many important and essential Christian teachings, such as the divine incarnation and the certainty of the ritual vindication of the just, so many people will feel the loss of these beliefs if we surrender the atonement.

Both Jesus and Paul taught salvation by faith leading to spiritual rebirth and alliance with God's purposes. For Jesus this was freely available from God but for Paul salvation had to be arranged – there was a mechanism of salvation – Christ had to be made sin and handed over for our transgressions. For Jesus faith is primarily trust. This is also present in Paul but what dominates is an intellectual component, namely belief. *“Believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead.”* (Romans 10:9)

For Paul, faith means accepting certain meanings of the messiah's death and resurrection. Salvation does not come from Jesus' teaching and ministry, but from believing certain formulae about his death. For Paul Christ is a mediator not a proclaimer of salvation. Paul never says your faith has made you whole, as Jesus did. For Paul the pure in heart could not see God (as Matthew proclaims) because there are no pure in heart. Access to God requires an intervening transaction on behalf of wretched humanity.

Finlan assures us that in Jesus and Paul we are dealing with two entirely different instincts about God and about access to God. Jesus with fully adult know how and lack of illusions is able to say that *“... a sincere and child-like faith opens the portals of heaven.”* (Matt 5:6-8).

There is no denying that Paul's approach is a practical success. Through his metaphors he blends the ancient psychology of atonement with the new gospel by using a spiritualising interpretation.

The open hearted message of faith and sincerity that is Jesus' central teaching seems to be brushed aside by intense emotions of repentance and yearning, and the mental construct of offering certain soteriological formulae - formulae that embodied propitiation and persuasion because they worked with the people. The winning of converts was the all-consuming motive of Paul; *“I have become all things to all people that I by all means might save some”* (1Cor 9:22)