

Letter to a Friend about Jesus as Savior, a Query for Disciples of Christ

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Herman Hesse did not consider himself a Christian, but in his writings, rather than calling Jesus by name, he referred to him as *der Heiland*, the Savior, because this is how Jesus is essentially represented in Western culture. If there is objection to the usage on behalf of other religions and beliefs or in the interests of pluralism, this is the substance of the objection.

1. A religious culture

It is called “the Christian conception,” by Simone Weil, and it is the theme re-worked by generations in the Christological interpretation of the Hebrew Scriptures and the theologies of the New Testament. It is there in Isaiah: “Say to the daughter of Zion, ‘Behold, your salvation has come.’” It is there in Matthew: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” It is the product of Eucharistic liturgy, mystic contemplation, and belief in the guidance of the Holy Spirit leading to the formulation of the Nicene-Chalcedonian confession of faith: “Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven.” It is sung in every Requiem Mass: *Agnus Dei, qui tollis peccata mundi*. Its antiquity is evident in the well-known code of the fish among first century Christians: ΙΧΘΟΥΣ (Ichthous): Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior.

For some of us, the usage has been cheapened by US middle class evangelicals, who make it individualistic and cultic. Ronald Osborn said once informally in an ADTD meeting that the use of the words “personal Savior” among Disciples of Christ, in extending the right hand of fellowship, dates from the televised evangelistic campaigns of Billy Graham. Until then the biblical Christological confession was decisive.

Nevertheless, Jesus as “Savior” cannot be dismissed as an awkward and questionable affirmation in liberal manifestations of the Church. It is utter trust in God’s love in this world and the next. It is at the heart of liberation theology, because it represents the identification of Jesus with the suffering and death of all human beings in the whole context of their concrete existence. In my opinion, it is a theological defect, not to say spiritual privation, to regard it deliberately as *passé*,

as much as to affirm it without sincerity. Equally problematic, although important for reflection, are re-definitions called for by critical analysis of patriarchalism and the sanction of violence in substitutionary atonement. (Rita Nakashima Brock has made a good point of this.) What follows does not address the personal experience of Christ as Lord and Savior, the inner presence of the Spirit, and consciousness of the grace of God. It is an attempt to begin a discussion on ways of thinking about it.

When members of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) join their voices to say, "We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and we proclaim him Savior of the world," this has nothing to do with dismissing other religions and their ancient cultures. There is no place in the Disciples' historic plea for unity, understood today as unity of the whole human family in respect, justice and peace, to presume that others are not "saved" in the purposes of God. Their convictions and spirituality need not be a threat to Christian believers nor, for the sake of Christ, should there be an assumption of superiority over other ways God draws men and women to the source of being and fulfillment. In the Christian view, Jesus opens the hope of eternity for all, but this is a preference and a consolation of our minority religion and does not warrant an attitude of imposing one's will on others. Such presumption is a sin against love and irreverence before God which Jesus exposed again and again. It need not occupy us further here.

2. The importance of soteriology

I would argue that the language of salvation reveals something to us of utmost importance theologically and ecumenically that is worth thoughtful meditation more than rational deconstruction, for the one is an opening to inspiration and imagination and the other is a mental barrier that is self-justifying and negative to begin with. With Jesus as Savior, we infer something about ourselves in a relationship with many reciprocities and which defines our attention to the Divine.

One reason for making light of Jesus as Savior is that the horrendous evils practiced daily in the world are known only distantly and in abstraction. To take evil seriously is to know the extent of human suffering and the limitations confronting efforts to combat radical evil. Not only Christians value the symbolic power of the cross as resistance to barbarity, spiritually and concretely. The Burakumin of Japan took as their symbol the crown of thorns in their struggle for human rights. One could argue cynically that *la condition humaine* needs a savior whether there is one or not. In fact, illusionary choices

of Messiahs have resulted in some of the most disappointing and tragic pitfalls of history.

In a sense, Anselm was right: there are some offenses that cannot be repaired no matter how sorry we are. Nothing can change the past. Both remorse and reconciliation remain imperfect, however sincere. That is why forgiveness and grace are so precious to us theologically and so necessary in intimate relationships dependent on love and friendship. The liberating icon of the absolute reconciliation which eludes us is the meaning of Jesus in history.

An example is racism, not deliberate discrimination which all people of good will repudiate, but the racial awareness that often generates inequities. Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw this as a psychological and sociological consequence of three hundred years of slavery that would never disappear. The human condition is finite and cannot resolve perfectly its contradictions. This is the problem facing the anti-racism and pro-reconciliation program of our church. We do not draw on faith's spiritual and theological resources, let alone Christian love as a power of Christ rather than an ethic. We seem to seek impossible solutions in place of proximate justice and sincerely responsible relationships. If Jesus as Savior means anything redemptive to our church, it is in this futile effort at total righteousness. We are saved by grace.

Nevertheless, what does it mean today to call Jesus "Savior" and particularly "Savior of the World"? Conscientious and intelligent people are found to be asking, "Saved from what? Saved how and why? What about people of other or no religions?" It seems to me we should think about this, and here is my understanding to begin an exchange among friends. It is a not just a question of the Jesus of history and the cross. The Magnificat shows the heart of the matter: "My spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Always, the sense is that the God of Israel is Savior. From this comes faith as the grasp of a cosmic reality, the power of forgiveness and love, and eschatological trust in historic justice, the community of blessing, and, simply put, immortality.

3. A period of insouciance

The use of the word "Savior" was not common among liberals of mid-20th century America. It had too much of an "after death" connotation. "Saved from the torments of Hell" was not the content of their preaching or pastoral counseling. It did not lend itself to the language of Reinhold Niebuhr or Paul Tillich, much less in Harvey Cox's or Bishop Robinson's acknowledgement of cultural

secularization. I find that I wrote a paper in 1951 that drew a likeness between salvation and psychotherapy. The Christian Churches (Disciples of Christ) Panel of Scholars Report called *The Reconstruction of Theology*, edited by Ralph G. Wilburn in 1963, sees Jesus as Lord, but “salvation” does not even appear in the Index.

I suspect salvation would not be found in our vocabulary much until well after the Bangkok Conference of the WCC’s Commission on World Mission and Evangelism in 1972-73, where the theme was: “Salvation Today.” It remained detached from metaphors of heaven and hell and implied a social and historical dimension, in keeping with Old Testament meanings of salvation: existential security, justice for the poor, and the promised Kingdom of God on earth as in heaven.

Biblical scholars did word studies on the Hebrew *שׁוּב* signifying “to be broad, spacious, enlarged.” Our word “liberation” fits it, or “deliverance” (Psalm 34:6.). Even “victory” (Exodus 14:13). God gives “saviors” to Israel in the time of Judges (Nehemiah 9:27). It was the sense of Psalm 27: “The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” It is equally expressed in the poetically redundant: “The Lord is the strength of my life, of whom shall I be afraid?” Salvation is dynamic, personal, and down to earth.

Professor Calvin Porter of Christian Theological Seminary wrote an article of New Testament exegesis on salvation in *Encounter* in Spring, 1974, but it was a new hermeneutic illustrating the power of Jesus to heal or free people in the critical issues of life, as the liberating eschatological sign of the coming and already existent Reign of God. This was equally the point of Jesus’ ethical and apocalyptic teaching. To save from sin was not to prepare individuals for the last judgment. It was the realization of the last judgment presently in the ultimate victory by the spirit over sin and death in a new creation of persons and community to the glory of God. The last judgment is not a time for moralism but ecstasy.

4. Existential congruity

Various definitions come to mind. To be grasped by the power of Jesus’ spirit is to be saved from our egotism, saved from our materialism, saved from our exclusion of the poor and the different, saved from the disfunctions that generate guilt and alienation, saved from despair and pessimism, saved from the worship of modern idols, saved from our fear of fate and our neurotic fascination with death. Sometimes it happens concretely, sometimes it is only potential and a struggle, but it is always a fundamental break with finality because of

grace through the cross of Jesus and a changed personal relation to God. How does that happen? Not by satisfaction of God's wrath but by faith.

Nonetheless, salvation as life after death cannot be treated with indifference. Eschatology is such a part of all relationship and obedience to the God of Israel that ultimate spiritual communion is the final grace. It was already a part of Jewish thinking in Jesus' time. He argued it with the Sadducees in the three Synoptic Gospels (e.g. Mark 12:27). Maimonides says that the question of St. Paul, "How are the dead raised?" was a preoccupation of the Pharisees. How can we ignore 1 Corinthians 15 and the assurance that "in the Lord your labor is not in vain"? Miguel de Unamuno wrote: "May you not 'rest in peace' but in glory."

But life after death was not the Greek separation of the soul from the body; it is the resurrection of the dead in the Messianic reign. With Jesus, life after death is the paradise on earth as in heaven of the coming kingdom of God, the "new heaven and new earth." It is the only explanation of the extravagant depiction of Matthew 27:52-53 that the dead came forth from the tomb at Jesus' death and were seen after his resurrection. The ecstatic vision of heaven in the Book of Revelation makes this the highest good of humanity and the celebration of glory over a world of sorrow and persecution: "These are they who have come out of the great ordeal; they have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (7:14).

The second half of the 20th century in Disciples preaching was dominated by excessive modesty about the promise of life eternal, often even at memorial services. I have asked repeatedly for a celebration liturgy with the scrolling of the deceased ministers at our General Assemblies. The coming reign of God preached by Jesus, experienced eschatologically by the early church and embodied as *sobornost* in Eastern Orthodox worship surrounded by icons, is both the realization of God's victory for humanity in the world and the meaning of paradise in death. *Abundant life, eternal life, glorified life* are relationships to the triune God and to our neighbor which bear interpreting in the expanding global reality of technology, violence, and exclusion. On the brink of the Russian revolution, Pasternak has a character in *Dr. Zhivago* say: "We must remain faithful to immortality, faithful to Christ."

Biblical salvation is fulfillment and judgment in the coming of the Son of Man. We must not be afraid to interpret Jesus' words "weeping and gnashing of teeth" or the somber parity in the parable of Dives and Lazarus. The frescoes and icons of Eastern Orthodox churches show the broken doors of Hades and Christ resurrecting

Adam and Eve by outstretched hand. “Saved” eventually came to mean in Scholasticism saved from eternal punishment under the good Christ and the righteous God. There is depiction of both glory and damnation on the tympanums of Romanesque and Gothic churches and in the passionate art of the Renaissance. Today, with our middle class security from the grosser evils of the human condition and in view of the anxiety it produces, much is made of assurances that God forgives everybody everything.

My thought is simply that we must not pretend to know more about the common metaphor Hell than we do. Torture, domestic abuse, impoverished populations, cruelty to children and the creation force the argument. There is enough hell on earth and forms of brutality and evil to demand the image of us. When Campbell signed his photographs “In the hope of immortality,” he was serious about sin and forgiveness and the consequence of God’s unconditional will of love and justice for humankind. He showed the assent and trust it inspires. Why is the judgment of history not grace?

5. God was in Christ

I think that how we conceptualize the Atonement is a critical question for theology and faith in the 21st century. It must be a decisive and abrupt breakthrough of the human condition that cannot be reduced to dogma or psychology. It signifies an objective structural differentiation of reality experienced by faith. After the cross and reports of the empty tomb, everything has a different face. It is projected in the transparent mystery of ascension and the apocalyptic burst of Pentecost, which are one in a protracted resurrection-happening. The existential reality is not just seen differently but confronts us as a new set of circumstances and, sometimes, unlooked-for opportunities. Barton W. Stone told Alexander Campbell that we can’t say how the cross of Jesus affects God, only what it means to us. Jesus is Savior in his divinity, with the Holy Spirit, in the triune communion of Infinite Lovingkindness. The world achieves a direction towards what it always longs for in wisdom and truth. The director of the Canadian movie *Jesus of Montreal* called it the “ultimate image of the Western world.” It is not derived from Trinitarian doctrine but, rather, the reverse. Faith experience comes first, then theological inspiration.

The affirmation of faith which introduces the Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in the US and Canada, at the time of restructure in 1969, included the Good Confession of Martha (John 11:27) and Simon Peter (Matthew 16:16) in good Disciples

tradition: "We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God." Then, it adds uncharacteristically "and proclaim him Lord and Savior of the world," which is part of a lengthy theological addendum, the like of which had always been eschewed. Doubtless the ecumenical optimism of the time required a statement of faith, as it did an ecclesiastical structure, in preparation for membership in World and National Councils of Churches and for Protestant unity expected in the foreseeable future through COCU, the now moribund Consultation On Church Union.

As I understand it, it is a credit to William Blakemore, former dean of the Disciples Divinity House at the University of Chicago, that in formulating the draft Affirmation, he used the expression *Savior of the world*, although the eschatological allusion is vague. Certainly the hymnody of the church in English celebrates "Savior" more specifically than "Lord," from Charles Wesley to traditional Christmas carols. If we don't preach about eternal life, we sing about it.

The Promised End: Eschatology in Theology and Literature by Paul S. Fiddes provides a new approach to the nagging question of immortality in a context of postmodern thinking. It raises the question of closure and openness not only in Christian faith but in other religious and philosophical perspectives and in the whole range of literature which shows a preoccupation with endings, despair and hope. Eschatology should be back on our personal agenda about faith as the world changes and new intellectual perspectives are generated by post-20th century culture.

Today, the "proclamation" of Jesus as Savior is to be found in some Disciples of Christ church bulletins. Furthermore, it is heard in the receiving of new members for baptism or transfer of church membership. "Accept him as Lord of your life" replaces it with a less individualistic and pietistic outlook. I would argue that "proclaim him Savior of the World" is right ecumenically and theologically for Disciples; it has become the usage of our Church at General Assemblies. Our task is to make it spiritually fulfilling and ethically effective for love of neighbor, real peace, and social justice in the world.

Personally, I find "proclaim" somewhat aggressive and would prefer "acclaim" or "affirm." Perhaps "confess" or "witness to him as Savior of the world." We should not make a dogmatic statement out of it but rather a testimony respecting the Trinity. Jesus cannot be separated from the one he called *Abba* and the Holy Spirit. Would we agree that the Holy Spirit is the Savior of the world?