



# Understanding Different Perspectives on Salvation

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## Abstract

Salvation is one of the widely bounded themes in the scripture that has gained traction under discourse due to the many perspectives under which it is viewed. This paper presents a discussion on the various perspectives of salvation both from a historical viewpoint and within the current theologies. The aim is to provide an understanding of salvation from different perspectives as observed by Augustine, Roman Catholic, Liberation, Secular, Evangelical and Biblical theologies. The study will promote reflection and debates among the scholars which will enhance problem-solving. The objective was therefore achieved through a review of various literary studies with biblical references to the term salvation and interview proponents of different theologies. The study, however, finds that despite the wide range of how different theologies view salvation, the only way to salvation is properly stipulated in the bible, thus it supports the biblical theory that salvation is by grace through faith, and furthermore, salvation is wholly an act of God. While this study was limited to the analysis of the term through a review of past studies, this paper recommends further study based on contemporary society collecting primary data on how different people view salvation.

## Introduction

The scripture, according to John 3:16, puts it clear that God's love for the world prompted Him in 'give his only begotten Son for whoever believes in him to have eternal life and not to perish. This, among others, is one of the benefits that salvation in Christianity bequeaths humankind. Salvation is a key term in the Bible. In general terms, salvation is delivered from evil. It, originates in God's divine decree in choosing those that He would rescue through 'giving' them to His son, as depicted in John 6:39.

This study seeks to discuss the different historical and current theologies of salvation. Soteriology is a branch of theology that, studies the doctrines of salvation. This paper has highlighted the historical views of salvation from the early centuries and medieval ages perspective of the doctrine of salvation.

## Patristic Views of Salvation

Ancient Christians did not have a theory of salvation, and we cannot find a systematic teaching about salvation among patristic theologians. Early Christians were most interested in understanding Christ as the Divine Giver of salvation. Irenaeus of Lyons is one of the most important Christian theologians



of the early centuries. According to Irenaeus, salvation is a perfect fulfilment of God's purpose in the creation: to make human beings in his image.

The Cappadocian fathers were important fourth-century theologians. They were born in Cappadocia, now modern Turkey. The three fathers, namely Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzu, were all responsible for precisely defining the doctrine of the trinity and clarifying the errors of Semi-Arianism. The Cappadocian fathers are best known for their stand against Arianism, which asserts that God created Jesus and that he is separated from and not equal to the Father. This view effectively eliminates the doctrine of the Trinity. The Semi-Arians taught that Jesus was created being and was of "like substance" to the Father, although not divine (Gonzalez, 2010). From this notion, we can establish that Arianism rejected Jesus as the Saviour.

Origen of Alexandria, also known as Origen Adamantius, was an early Christian scholar, ascetic, and theologian born and spent the first half of his career in Alexandria. Origen lived through a turbulent period of the Christian church when persecution was widespread. Origen is often considered a Universalist who suggested that all people might attain salvation, but only after being purged of their sins through divine fire. This might, of course, be his allegorical interpretation. He may mean not literal fire but rather the inner anguish of knowing one's sins. Origen believed that knowledge of God itself is enough to remove all taints of sins and ignorance from the soul (Origen, Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Saint Augustine was a bishop of Hippo (North Africa) and the most influential of all Christian theologians. He teaches that no crime is too great to be forgiven if a person truly repents. He also insists that we are all constantly sinning without knowing; therefore, the church's sacraments can assist in alleviating that inherent and perpetual human sinfulness. He affirms that believers receive faith and the Holy Spirit simultaneously as the converts. Without the ministry of the Holy Spirit, no one can understand and believe the promise of God for salvation.

Athanasius of Alexandria was born in Alexandria in 290 BC, a major focal point of education and the breadbasket for much of the East. It was a rare city with intellectual leaders from paganism, Hellenism, and Christianity. Athanasius believed that Jesus Christ had achieved our salvation because, in him, God had entered the human race. He wrote an important book on the incarnation of Christ in which he explained the biblical doctrine of the deity of Jesus. He realised that "Who is Jesus?" is intimately related to the question, "How shall we be saved?" If the son of God is a creature as established by Arius, salvation would be impossible. A creature cannot save a fellow creature: according to him, the incarnation of Jesus was the union of God and man. If Jesus, who is a saviour, is not God incarnate, there can be no salvation. Athanasius was firm in defending the deity of Christ because he believed that he was essential to the salvation of sinners (Dennison, 2020).

### **Views of Salvation in the Middle Ages**

Medieval Christianity emphasised the idea of original sin, in which all human beings are born sinners and must go through the appropriate steps to reconcile themselves to God, such as baptism, confession of sin, and prayer. From the third century until the eleventh century, the concept of Jesus' death as a ransom paid to the devil became popular in understanding salvation. Origen and Irenaeus believed that this ransom was to the devil. Anselm of Canterbury asserts that the greatest struggle in creation was not between God and the devil but between God and sinful humanity. According to him, salvation means liberation from the devil's bondage and the power of death. In his theory about humanity, he emphasised that humanity is indebted to God for violating God's honour; hence salvation means that humanity is not saved from the devil but rather from God. In the *Cur Deus*



*Homo*, Anselm states that Jesus paid a ransom to God, not the devil, on behalf of sinful humanity. Just like Anselm, Thomas Aquinas also believed that God alone could make the unrighteous righteous through the atoning work of his Son on the cross. According to Aquinas, justification is removing sin from the ungodly and not forgiveness alone. He goes on to say that the infusion of grace remits the guilt of sin. Nevertheless, Aquinas understood justification as “an ongoing process in people” – a subject rejected by the Sixteenth-century reformers.

Over time, the medieval church specifically linked salvation with the sacraments. Baptism was the first act of salvation, removing the guilt of original sin. The sacrament of penance was the second act of salvation, which involved the sinner confessing to a priest and performing satisfactory acts of penance equal to the gravity of the sin. If the sinner died without fulfilling penance for their sins, they would be punished in purgatory. Martin Luther led a Protestant movement that opposed this justification by works. Luther argued that justification is not based on one's righteousness but on righteousness extrinsic to the sinner. He also asserted that justification is by faith alone. These two arguments meant that justification is all about God's grace and has nothing to do with human merit (Holcomb, 2017, p. 184).

In the 1530s, Philip Melancthon, a humanist reformer theologian and an educator, refined Luther's doctrine and said that the sinner is declared righteous in justification based on the imputed righteousness of Christ. Melancthon emphasised the difference between justification and sanctification. This led to the division in the church between Catholics and Protestants. Luther's theology sparked further reformations, leading to two branches of Protestantism: Lutheran and Reformed. The Reformed branch was a second generation of Protestants that included John Calvin, Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, and Peter Martyr Vermigli.

### **Different Theologies of Salvation**

There are different theologies of Salvation, which are very important because the form beliefs and beliefs form the way of life. We are going to focus on five theologies, namely, Augustine's theology, Roman Catholic theology, Liberation theology, Secular theology, and Evangelical Theology.

#### ***Augustine's Theology***

In dealing with the theology of salvation, Augustine refers to Pauline's metaphor on the means of salvation and argues that when Paul said that each person's work must be tested through the fire, he said that a person is purged or cleansed to attain salvation through faith. Augustine taught that no sin is too big to be forgiven, if a person repents sins and receives mercy from God. He said that an individual receives the grace necessary for salvation. His views on salvation are based on human fallen will; no one comes to God unless he initiates. During conversion, God restores the human will of man. Therefore, Christ played a big role in man's salvation through his sacrifice on the cross, and entry into heaven is the culmination of Christian salvation (Clifford & Anatolios, 2005).

For Augustine, grace is efficacious because God's decrees are efficacious, and God is efficacious because He is sovereign. Augustine taught the election of the saints in Christ; in one man, Christ was predestined, so many are predestined to be members. Augustine's view of sovereign grace had positive implications for his teachings. He saw that God used preaching to save sinners by giving them faith. Man's work and goodness are precluded from salvation. Salvation is, therefore, by faith, and faith is the gift of God.

Augustine's view of salvation flows logically from his understanding of fallen human will. Since the will of man is already inclined toward evil, man cannot understand salvation; therefore, God must initiate salvation. Upon conversion, God restores human's free will, he forgives sins, and God begins



to restore the convert from the sickness of sin. While this process is occurring, the believer remains in a struggle between flesh and spirit. While transformation includes the believer's obedience, Augustine attests that the power to accomplish good works comes from God. The process of gradual transformation continues until Christ's return.

### ***Roman Catholic Theology***

The Roman Catholic view states that man's salvation was accomplished through the death of Christ. Catechism believes Jesus atoned our sins and satisfied the Father for our salvation (Rewake & William, 1977). The Lord's Supper is a sacrifice; therefore, the Eucharist and Christ's sacrifice are considered one source, while in taking the Holy Eucharist, you embrace the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. The Catholic Church believes that as often as the sacrifice of the cross is celebrated on the altar, the work of redemption is carried on. It is through God's will that man was consecrated.

When Jesus Christ offered His body on the cross, this brought perfection and sanctification to those who consecrated themselves to God (Heb. 10:10). Believing in Jesus Christ. One who sent him is necessary for salvation, and baptism is necessary for people who heard the gospel proclaimed and took sacraments. It is believed that those who didn't hear the gospel can attain salvation through their efforts to seek God combined with works. Yet the Bible teaches that people are saved through faith alone, not by their works (Rom. 3:28).

According to Roman Catholic theology, baptism is necessary for the salvation of those to whom the gospel has been proclaimed and who have had the possibility of asking for his sacrament. Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or His church yet sincerely seek God and move by grace, strive by deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience (Abbott, 1966) However, the Catholic Bible disagrees with this view, it teaches salvation through faith alone.

When 12 members of the Catholic Church were sampled and interviewed. These were the findings with two members in Nairobi, Kenya, five in Kigali, and five in Lilongwe, Malawi. 6 members believed that salvation could be attained through the Holy Mary, and this belief should be demonstrated through good works. 4 members believed that salvation could be attained by observing the sacraments. 1 member believes that salvation is through Jesus Christ, and one last member is unsure how salvation can be attained. This shows that Roman Catholic members do not have the same view on salvation.

### ***Liberation Theology***

Liberation theology generally refers to a theology applied to the core concerns of marginalised communities needing social, political, or economic equality and justice (Mwalw'a). The Bible is to be interpreted considering the social situation of those on the margins. Liberation theologies are driven by praxis, with the expectation of concrete social change that will set the stage for developing liberation theologies among other groups, such as women and indigenous peoples, in other regions, such as Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. This theology emphasises the core injustice of modern capitalist exploitation of labour and resources, leading to widespread poverty and wealth inequality. Christianity ultimately demands supporting the poor and dismantling the oppressive political and economic systems that ensure their continued subjugation.

It is interesting how theologies have incorporated liberation theology into their theologies. Pastor Isaac Chiumia is a Pastor of an Evangelical Church in Malawi called Abundant Life Church; Malawi believes that our salvation should be holistic. Through Jesus, we have received both spiritual and physical freedom. Pastor Fedele Shinga, the Baptist Pastor in Rwanda, Kigali, said we should start



repealing the fruits of our salvation while on earth. All these notions agree with the liberation theology.

### ***Secular Theology***

Secular theology is a slightly counterintuitive branch of theology that developed mainly from the modernist movement in the 1960s due to the ubiquity of industrialisation and capitalism, viewing tradition through a critical lens. This revisitation of tradition reconstructed theology, focusing on modern thoughts, culminating in the new secular theology field (Smith, 2004).

Secular theology is an interdisciplinary field that draws on various disciplines, including philosophy, history, anthropology, sociology, and cultural studies, to explore questions about the meaning of life, the nature of the universe, and human existence.

Secular theology rejects the substance dualism of modern religion, the belief in two forms of reality required by the belief in heaven and hell. Secular theology accommodates the belief in God, like many other religions, but that He resides in the world and not separately. It holds that theism has lost credibility as a valid conception of God's nature. It rejects the concept of a personal God and embraces the status of Jesus Christ, Christology, and Christian eschatology as Christian mythology without the basis of historical view. It also suggests the legitimacy of seeking salvation outside the church and considers the church not to have the exclusive rights to divine inspiration (Smith, 2004, p. 245).

### ***Evangelical Theology***

Evangelicals understand salvation from the perspective of God's love demonstrated by sending his Son Jesus Christ, to earn us salvation. They argue that no mere human's death can pay for their sins or other sins because all have sinned before God. Only Christ, the sinless one, was our substitute and paid the price for the sins of everyone. Evangelical theologians believe that the process of salvation includes justification, adoption, regeneration, sanctification, glorification, and perseverance (John, 2006, p. 508).

Evangelical theology is the set of doctrines held historically and traditionally by the church throughout its history. It is rooted in scripture and cannot contradict anything the scripture teaches. Evangelical theologians typically distinguish cardinal doctrines from doctrines of secondary importance. These cardinal doctrines are deemed essential to hold if one is to be evangelical in understanding God and his relation to the world.

According to Evangelical theology, human beings, male and female, were created in God's image. No other creature has the characteristics and dignity it involves. As Adam and Eve were righteous in that they had sinned. Sadly, they succumbed to Satan's temptation, became sinners, and dragged the whole human race into sin with them. As a result, every mere human born after Adam and Eve is guilty of their sin and possesses a morally corrupt nature. In addition, all humans have a propensity to sin and are guilty before God of sinning. Humans may sense their guilt but cannot remove it alone to have a saving relationship with God. Only by divine revelation in scripture can they know God's remedy, and only through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit can they choose to accept Christ's payment for sin on their behalf.

God sends his only son to earth because of his great love to procure salvation. Jesus showed what perfect, godly living is. However, the scripture is clear that the wages of sins is death; no mere human death can pay for sins, let alone sins of others, to remove the penalty. However, Christ; as perfectly sinlessly as our substitute, could and did pay the price for the sins of everyone who lived so that





humans can have their sins forgiven and establish a saving relationship with God if they choose by faith to accept Christ's payment for their sins.

Evangelical theology also maintains that the Holy Spirit is the third member of the Trinity; he convicts the world of sins and righteousness and judgment (John 16:8). He does so by moving the human will to accept Christ as the personal saviour from sin when they do turn to Christ as their saviour. The Holy Spirit regenerates them and gives them a new nature, he indwells them, and as they yield to the will of Christ, they grow in their faith as the Holy Spirit sanctifies them. Believers are also ordered to be filled by the Holy Spirit. This infilling does not make it impossible for humans to sin but enables them to obey and follow God, something they could not do independently. The Holy Spirit also shows believers what God wants them to do in general and in specific situations, and he enables and empowers them to do it. Evangelicals also believe that all who have placed their faith in Christ as Saviour are baptised into his body; this covers all believers in Christ both now and throughout church history.

#### *Biblical View*

The Biblical view on salvation is that the only way for mankind to attain salvation is by Grace alone, through faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. This is summed up in Ephesians 2:5-9 ESV, which says, "that before Christ we were dead in our trespasses, but because of His resurrection we were made alive together with Him. So that God might show the immeasurable riches of His grace towards us." Verse 8 states, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God. Verse 9 goes on to say that "it is not a result of works that no one may boast". These verses directly contradict other views by the Roman Catholic Church that claims that works are a necessary part of salvation whose beliefs result of misinterpretation of James 2: 26b ESV "Faith apart from works is dead." However, to understand this verse clearly, we must go back to James 2, 24 ESV, which says, "You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone." The key word here is justified. Justification is the process of sanctification, not of salvation. James is trying to tell us in prior verses of this chapter that work proves faith. Thus, good work is not a process of salvation but a by-product of faith.

#### **Conclusion**

The finding from this people is that throughout history, people have tried to find the way to salvation and developed many theories. This is due to differences in Hermeneutical principles, historical backgrounds, and cultures. Currently, people still have different perspectives on salvation. However, the good news is that with time, people strive to know the true way of salvation through studying the scriptures. This is making them realise that the only way to salvation is properly stipulated in the bible. This is why many denominations are establishing bible studies, some of which have grown to be Bible Schools to make their members understand the Bible. This study establishes that the Biblical view on salvation is found in the scripture and is wholly an act of God. Humans have no ability of their own volition. It is God's prerogative to save mankind. He chooses and saves them. Romans 8: 28 ESV says, "And we know that for those who love God, all things work together for good, for those who called according to His purpose".

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