

ORTHODOX BOOKLETS

Basic substantial teaching on what Orthodox Christians believe



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WHAT IS SALVATION?

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WHAT IS SALVATION?

The early church never defined salvation. This was because for them salvation was a word so rich in meaning, so broad, so deep, that they realised it would be quite wrong to try and pin it down in a few words. The Christians of the early church were much more at home in regarding big things such as mysteries, like God himself, like Christ, like the sacraments. They preferred first to acknowledge a mystery, to live with a mystery and let it grow on you. Then they might indeed say a few words, not with the aim of defining it as illuminating it.

Salvation has been set forth in many images: those of revelation, forgiveness, justification, deliverance, redemption, righteousness and adoption. Each can be looked at for the contribution that image makes to our overall understanding. Salvation however is not to be equated with any one of them.

When any human beings disobey God there are consequences. When Adam and Eve disobeyed God they were cast out of Paradise. However God already had the solution: that solution is called 'salvation'.

The Gospel is 'the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith' (Rom 1.16). The Creed of Nicea says Christ 'came down from heaven and was incarnate (made flesh) of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man', 'for us men and for our salvation.' However no suggestion was given as to how this was so, nor was there any explanation given at any time later.

However there was a Saviour. Irenaeus said 'to follow the Saviour is to participate in salvation, and to follow the light is to perceive the light'.

We have to hear the words of the Saviour, acknowledge the works of the Saviour, follow the Saviour through his suffering and death and meet him in his resurrection.

We do that, as the early Christians did, by participating in the liturgical worship of the church, by being baptised, by hearing the Gospel read out in church, and by receiving him in the mystery of the Body and Blood. This is how to access salvation and participate in Christ. In the deepest possible sense this is salvation. However in the process we have to be conformed to him in every respect, with an inner as well as an outer participation.

It is said that in the early church, beginning with Clement of Rome, Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, Christ was most often spoken of as our teacher and example; however these words should not be understood in a way separately from the appropriation of our salvation within the church. They were not speaking of any kind of morality apart from that gained through living in holiness in Christ.

Irenaeus said that in becoming man Christ passed through every stage of human growth, consecrating and redeeming them by his obedience. He thus 'recapitulated', i.e. went over the whole of human existence anew. In doing so all that had happened to the first Adam in terms of sin and death – and this includes everyone who had lived until the coming of Christ - was undone by Christ as the new Adam. Sin was destroyed

and death abolished. This is what enables us to now 'imitate' Christ as our teacher and example.

This is quite different from the 'imitation of Christ' developed much later in the West. Rather as the early church saw it as we participate in Christ's divine life in the church Christ works such a change in us that we imitate him and become like him. This is God's solution to the disobedience of Adam.

Clement of Alexandria says we imitate Christ within the church because it is there we receive incorruptibility and salvation. The word incorruptible is important.

Each and every one of us, from birth, builds an identity around the choices made by the self according to its likes and dislikes. We build a self-centred life and because this is sin i.e. separate from God, God has had to put a limit to this separate existence by physical death. Then the self cannot lead a sinful existence any longer.

Death, in St Paul's words, is 'the last enemy'.

Salvation involves forgiveness of sin and deliverance from sin but ultimately what we are saved from is death. The life we receive - here and now as we live in Christ - is incorruptible and eternal.

God gives life. Jesus said (Jn 10.10) 'I came that you might have life.' Our existence, our health, and our future depends on whether we choose death or choose life. We choose in the daily struggle with self as we turn away from the spiritual death it offers us if we obey it, preferring rather to stand in the conflict involved in standing against

it in the victory of Christ.

St Ignatius of Antioch saw human existence in terms of this choice. Because Christ lived and died in the flesh and rose again in the flesh, we too can live a life of selfless love. Christ's victory over death in the flesh is the ground of our victory, in our flesh, over death, the world and the Evil One.

The source of the triumph of love in our lives is our union in Christ. He has changed human existence. He brings about a new personal existence in each one of us as he changes us and brings about a new spiritual and ethical life in the flesh.

This goes against any natural attempt on the part of humans to be good. Many people say they cannot see any difference between being a Christian and not being a Christian. The results are much the same. They conclude that there is no need to be saved and no need of the church. Ignatius says such thinking leads to death and leaves us still in the grip of death and of the Evil One.

St Ignatius says to live in life is to live in the unity of faith, to be obedient, and to live in the unity of love in the church, always preferring others to ourselves. Make no mistake about it this is very different. It means to receive the Body and Blood of Christ as the church celebrates the death and resurrection of Christ, that we may receive from him the means to live this life worthy of him.

For St Ignatius this is witness of the Christian

The supreme example of this witness is the martyr.

The Christian already has incorruptible life in him. That is why the martyr despises death and defeats the Evil One. An incorruptible one has no fear of either of them.

Unity with each other in love is 'a type and evidence of immortality'.

'All these things together are good if you believe with love'.

'Faith is to 'be gathered together (in church) for God'.

'Jesus Christ is sung in concord and harmonious love'.

Spiritual life, ethical life, liturgical life and life in the church form one whole maintained around the altar of the bishop. This is salvation.

The greatness of our salvation cannot be underestimated. It involves the restoration of permanent and normal communion between God and man.

Salvation cannot be reduced to a theory about the cross, though the cross itself is of absolute importance.

Salvation must involve the real resurrection of man by God. God, in his self-less love as Trinity, brings human beings to participate fully in his love by enabling humanity to live in self-less love. This can only come about by a real sanctification. This is the work of Christ as he communicates his own divine life and immortality to us. That is why 'the drink of God, namely His Blood, ... is incorruptible love and eternal life'.

Ignatius did not think the soul was immortal. Only God's

gift of himself to us can make immortality real.

Christians, he says, are 'God-bearers', 'temple-bearers', 'Christ-bearers'. They are so because, through God's gift of salvation, they have become holy and made effective in their obedience to all God's commandments.

People ask: what is the place of the cross in salvation?

The death of Christ clearly plays a decisive role in each of the Gospels, as well as in St Paul and other writers. The importance of the cross was made absolutely clear to the church by the association, made by Jesus on 'the night in which he was betrayed', of the cross with the offering of the Eucharist. This importance is clear because when the church met to celebrate the Eucharist every Sunday, 'whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes' (1 Cor 11.26).

In the ancient world, both Jewish and pagan, sacrifice and worship were inseparable. This was also true for Christians. However the sacrifice in their worship they saw as quite different from those of Jews and pagans. It was an unbloody sacrifice. Christ himself had already fulfilled every type of sacrifice there by his sacrifice on the Cross. This radical stance is clear in the letter to the Hebrews. All the Fathers interpreted all the scriptures in the Old Testament referring to sacrifice in the same way.

The East never got into the idea of the Cross as a propitiatory sacrifice.

The emphasis of the early Fathers however was not on

the sacrifice but on the results: Christ had abolished disobedience, defeated sin, destroyed death and corruption and thereby vanquished the Evil One. In defeating these Christ was the victorious one who had triumphed over his enemies. The emphasis in the Eucharist was always on the victory and the celebration of the resurrection.

It has been said that the victory of Christ was 'the classic theory' of the atonement in the early Fathers. However the early church was not working at the level of theories. The power of the risen Christ and the communication of his divine life to our humanity in his Body and Blood was experiential. The experience of prayer and in particular of the corporate liturgy in the church was the true source of its doctrinal teaching.

The place of the Cross and sacrifice therefore, like salvation, are fully integrated into the whole work of God's creation and redemption.

Indeed the Cross is the fulcrum on which the story of the relationship of God and humanity turns.

God always had the solution to man's disobedience. God always had the love by means of which he could reconcile man to himself. The Cross showed the depths to which the greatness of God's love for humanity could go and was the cross was the means by which that love could touch repentant sinners so they might themselves turn back to God in love.

There were many levels of meaning in the word sacrifice as understood by the early Fathers. This gave the word a

depth and breadth which the West tended to obliterate when it took on board juridical theories of substitution.

Sacrifice comprehends everything from God's own humility and condescension in becoming man to man's response to God's selfless love in prayer and obedience by means of which he opens himself to God's work of reconciliation and sanctification.

The understanding of sacrifice, both as God's condescension and man's return, was not seen as something that only belonged to one phase in the relationship of God and man but is present always as a fundamental constituent in the church's worship and prayer.

God is always sacrificially pouring out himself in love for humanity and humanity is always sacrificially giving the life it receives from God back to him.

This is the reality in each and every celebration of the Eucharist and of continual prayer in each and every moment of time.

As we have said the idea of Christ's death as a satisfaction was only developed later in the West. The word satisfaction was however first introduced into theology by Tertullian. He applied it to the confession of sins after baptism. This idea may have come to him from his knowledge of Roman law. It reflects the preoccupation of Christians in North Africa with the issues of sin, guilt and punishment.

The idea of Christ's passion as a ransom however was

rooted from the beginning in both from the Old Testament, especially Isaiah, but also in Christ's own words.

This idea appears in the Letter to Diognetus. But there is no speculation about the one to whom such a ransom was paid. It was Origen who raised the possibility that the ransom was paid to the devil because it was he who had the power of death over humanity. Later, in the fourth century, this was felt to be unsatisfactory. The more theologians focussed on the relationship of Christ to the Father, they saw the cross as the offering of love which the Son made to the Father.

The descent of Christ into hell, mentioned by both Justin and Irenaeus, was seen as the means Christ chose to restore our forefathers to life. This further enhanced the cosmic and historical dimensions of Christ's victory and therefore of salvation. Only later, in the West, was this teaching attached to the death of Christ as a sacrifice.

The liturgy of the church has always been a driving force for faith and doctrine. The development of doctrine led in turn to developments in liturgical worship. The One who saves us from death is also the One who is the End of all things. In the liturgy Christ therefore comes to us as the power of the End to give us healing so that we may be effectively united to him for ever.

When we receive Christ as our Saviour in his Body and Blood he heals our present condition. What will be, at the End, is brought to bear on us here and now. The medicine of immortality enters our mortal frame and changes our mortal lives. As healing progresses we walk

on the way of holiness. The healing changes us by saving us from the sin that still afflicts us and the corruption which still affects us.

Irenaeus said that when Jesus forgave sin he healed the person. We are saved from sin and corruption and we are saved for sanctification, that is, to be made holy as God is holy.

Or, as Clement of Alexandria put it, we are saved for 'deification'.

The great patristic drumbeat was that God became man that man might become God.

The doctrine of deification could only be clarified after the relationship between the divine nature and the human nature of Christ had been clarified. However the teaching of Ignatius, of Irenaeus on recapitulation, and of Clement and Origen, already set out the basic framework of the precise teaching of St Gregory Palamas.

The cosmic setting of salvation from the beginning to the end of time is the background for understanding the sanctification of humanity in Christ.

St Paul had said that we are saved, we are being saved and that we shall be saved. That we are 'being saved' is the healing which takes place in the way of holiness.

Salvation is experienced on a daily basis. We stand in the spiritual conflict with the self and the world and find that through obedience in dying to self and prayer to the Risen Christ we are – without fail - being saved from the

power of death and made alive with him.

As we apply ourselves to this struggle the Risen Christ brings to bear the power of his Resurrection in our lives. As we make a thousand little choices each day, as we turn away from self to Christ, we are truly able to grow each day. We discover that the thousand little choices faithfully made in our will add up to one enormous change taking us further along the way of holiness.

God has always been teaching people about daily obedience and being saved and healed in the process. Mapping out the way of holiness did not take place until the fourth century when people like Evagrius and John Cassian began to put the teaching of the Desert Fathers into writing. Since then there has been a living tradition of Fathers who have been able to teach the way of holiness accurately.

God himself is at work all the time drawing all Christians to the way of holiness. God is at work every time Christians listen silently in their hearts to Christ when they listen to the Scripture. God is at work in every celebration of the Eucharist. God pours out his grace by day and by night drawing people closer to him if they will.

The realities of 'being saved' do not alter. The healing of our souls is a gradual process whereby God applies the medicine of immortality to our lives.

Some Christians however, taking a cue from what they think Jesus did in Galilee, have thought God must heal them dramatically and instantly in order for a 'cure' to be valid. That does not follow at all.

What is overlooked is that many who were healed walked away and never gave thankful obedience to God by taking up the cross each day. Their bodies may have been healed; but did it make any difference whatsoever to their souls? Even today I have seen people undoubtedly healed of serious conditions but no other change is manifest in their lives and they continue to walk in the ways of the world.

The healing of the disciples was surely their daily obedience and so it is for most of us.

God's work is to build a profound change into our souls and bodies. For that he requires the steady consent and application of the will. That is why walking the way of holiness requires time, humility and much patience. The healing of our souls will then be secure and permanent.

When the Christian walks and grows each day in the mystery of salvation, salvation, far from being the object of theories, becomes alive - an ever present reality both by day and by night.

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