

**Life or Death:**

**Was It the Life Christ Lived or the Death Jesus Died?**

By Sharene Gossen

Senior Religion Thesis

Spring 2002

Advisor: Mary Solberg

## Contents

Acknowledgements   iii

Introduction       1

1. The Problem—What is keeping humanity from experiencing the “good news?”   4

*Love Your Neighbor*   5

*The Glorification of Suffering*   6

*The Spiritualizing and Removal of Salvation From the Here and Now*   12

*Summary of the Problems*   14

2. Salvation—What is it? Why do we need it?   15

*What do we need salvation from?*   15

*What is salvation?*   17

*Salvation as Humanization in Our Daily Lives*   22

3. Views of Christ and Jesus—A Revised Christology   27

*The Relational Nature of Christ as Shown Through Jesus*   29

*Christ in an Ever-Changing World*   35

*Christ in Our Ever-Changing Relationships: Brock’s Christa/Community*   40

*The Importance of Christa/Community in My Life*   43

Conclusion   44

Bibliography   48

## Contents

Acknowledgements   iii

Introduction       1

1. The Problem—What is keeping humanity from experiencing the “good news?”   4

*Love Your Neighbor*   5

*The Glorification of Suffering*   6

*The Spiritualizing and Removal of Salvation From the Here and Now*   12

*Summary of the Problems*   14

2. Salvation—What is it? Why do we need it?   15

*What do we need salvation from?*   15

*What is salvation?*   17

*Salvation as Humanization in Our Daily Lives*   22

3. Views of Christ and Jesus—A Revised Christology   27

*The Relational Nature of Christ as Shown Through Jesus*   29

*Christ in an Ever-Changing World*   35

*Christ in Our Ever-Changing Relationships: Brock’s Christa/Community*   40

*The Importance of Christa/Community in My Life*   43

Conclusion   44

Bibliography   48

### Acknowledgements

This has been an exciting, hard, but overall fulfilling process. I could not have done it without the support, insight, and encouragement of many people. First, I want to thank Faith Kirkham Hawkins who had a big influence on my pursuit of a religion major. From the first day I set foot in her class, I knew that she was going to challenge me in ways I could not even fathom. This thesis, as the culmination of my religion major, is in many ways a result of her insight and care for me as a person both in and out of the classroom.

I also could not have done this without the valuable input from my advisor, Mary Solberg. She has forced me to stand head-to-head with some of the difficult questions that I would have rather avoided. She has pushed me to think outside the box in her questioning and our conversations of theologizing. I also have to attribute some of my precise wording and impeccable grammar to her.

Thank you to Chaplain Rachel Larson who took time out of her busy schedule to look over a draft of my thesis and give me feedback. I also may not have been introduced to Rita Nakashima Brock if it had not been for Marit Trelstad. I also want to thank her for introducing me to process theology and helping me begin to understand it.

My friends have been great encouragers on this journey. I especially want to thank Ambryn Melius for putting up with my whining, frustrations, and joys. Angela Janda also has been a valued conversation partner in this process. She has been vital to helping me articulate what is going on in my head.

Finally, I want to thank and commend all my fellow religion thesis writers at Gustavus. It has been a challenging but rewarding road and I thank you all for your insight and conversations. The mutual support, encouragement, and venting were also necessary parts of the process. Without you all, the journey would not have been nearly as entertaining and valuable.

## Introduction

The Christian religion is built on, and in its best moments embodies and draws its life from, what it calls the gospel.<sup>1</sup> What the “good news” is has been translated, transformed, and articulated throughout time in many ways and languages by Christians, based on their culture and experiences. These various translations and articulations have influenced many church doctrines over the past 2000 years, since Jesus Christ preached the “good news” to the people of his time. The barest bones of the gospel center on a first-century Jew who lived in Palestine—this person was Jesus of Nazareth. The people who initially wrote what we consider the gospel were concerned with keeping his message and memory alive. They wrote about the transformation of life that they saw and experienced through Jesus’ life and death. As they told it, “Jesus saves.”

Christian views of salvation take many different forms, and those views and forms reflect the philosophies and cultures of their times as well as the personal experiences of individual Christians. But one thing all these different ideas about salvation have had in common is the presupposition that we human beings need to be saved from something. Traditionally, Christians have claimed that we humans need to be saved from our sin, and that salvation from sin is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. How this actually happens remains one of the most perplexing Christian mysteries, despite nearly 2000 years’ worth of theological reflection about it.

---

<sup>1</sup> The Greek word that “gospel” comes from is “euangelion,” which is translated into English as, “the good news.”

What does Christianity offer the world? What is this "good news" that Christians—in their best moments—talk about and enact? Perhaps it is "salvation"—not that Christianity offers, but that Christians throughout their checkered tradition have claimed that God offers, and that somehow this offer becomes apparent in the story of Jesus of Nazareth and its impact on those around him.

This thesis in one sense is about what Christianity claims God offers the world—often verbalized as salvation. It is also about the problems within Christianity that have caused it to get in its own way of salvation, much of which has been justified rather than recognized and debunked by individual Christians, theologians, and ecclesiastical doctrines and traditions. It seems clear that what gets in the way of salvation was not invented by Christians, but has slowly seeped into Christianity and has become part of many Christian beliefs. Christians, given the example of Jesus—and the divine grace said to be manifest in him—could have in the past and should work in the future, to dismantle, sweep aside, or transform that which stands in the way of salvation.

Much of what has inspired me to think about and question this notion of what Christianity offers has been my personal experience as a Christian, as a woman, and as a student with a liberal arts education. As I have grappled with these issues, I have found understanding and resonance in the work of feminist and process theologians. Feminist theologians have raised many of the same concerns that I articulated above—what exactly is salvation and what is the "good news" that Christianity claims God gives the world—as well as other concerns that I will articulate more extensively in Chapter 1. Process theologians offer what I might call a "metaphysical framework" within which it is somewhat easier for me, as a scientist, to

think about this 2000-or-more-year-old story so that it makes sense of a 21<sup>st</sup> century world, in which nothing is static. It challenges the notion that reality and history are linear and helps account for the changing interpretations of sin and salvation in an ever-changing and pluralistic world. So, I turn to these thinkers to help me re-think "salvation."<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> I have chosen some theologians from among what is clearly a variety of traditional, feminist, and process theological communities to help sort out these issues.

## Chapter 1:

### The Problem—What is keeping humanity from experiencing the “good news”?

One of the questions that sparked this research was: Why would Jesus—upon whose work and person Christians stake their claim to salvation (leaving aside for the moment the question of what salvation is)—live for 30-some years, if the whole point of his incarnate, divine existence was to die? Beverly Wildung Harrison writes,

Orthodox Christological interpretations imply that somehow the entire meaning of Jesus' life and work is to be found in his headlong race toward Golgotha, toward crucifixion—as if he sought suffering as an end in itself to complete the resolution of the divine human drama once and for all.<sup>3</sup>

I will argue that there is more to the historical Jesus—and what makes Jesus special, his work salvific, his story live-giving—than his death and resurrection. In fact, his life is an often untapped resource that can be probed in order to experience salvation in our lives today.

Most Christians think of “Christ” as intimately tied to Jesus and as result of this connection, they believe “Christ” is historical figure in the past that allows us to have salvation after we die. However, I have struggled with the exclusion of “Christ” from the present as well as delayed salvation (which I will address later). According to the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Jesus of Nazareth was usually referred to as Jesus Christ—Jesus being his personal name and Christ being a title assigned to him by early Christians based on the messianic role that was attributed to him.<sup>4</sup> This suggests to me that there is more to Christ than just Jesus—namely, Christ is a spirit

---

<sup>3</sup> Beverly Wildung Harrison, “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love,” in *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*, ed. by Carol S. Robb (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), 18.

<sup>4</sup> Ben F. Meyer, “Jesus,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary (ABD)* 3:773-96.



that allows us to embody God's will and in turn, assists us in the experience of salvation.<sup>5</sup> In this paper I would like to propose that "Christ" can be used to describe an ongoing spirit or process that allows us to experience and participate in salvation while Jesus is the historical person from Nazareth who was only one part of Christ.<sup>6</sup> Jesus embodied Christ, but Christ is not limited to Jesus.

In order to support new ways of thinking about Christ, I will first explain three main problems I see that keep Christianity from experiencing the "good news." The first problem is that Christianity does not always put into action what it teaches; the example I will use is the command to "love your neighbor as yourself." The second problem is the glorification of suffering based on Jesus' suffering and death. The final problem is that while the world is not static, interpretations of salvation and the significance of Jesus have become static.

### *Love Your Neighbor*

The primary ethical commands of Christianity taken from the Bible are, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind....You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39).<sup>7</sup> The second part of this statement is where I see a problem. While Christianity promises to offer love and inclusion, the reality is that many Christian doctrines and practices instead exclude. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, excludes women from ordination, claiming that since the priest is supposed to be a representation of Jesus

---

<sup>5</sup> The rest of this thesis will unpack this statement.

<sup>6</sup> While I do not think "Jesus" and "Christ" are mutually exclusive, I also do not think they are exactly the same. The rest of this paper will use "Christ" to represent this ongoing spirit and "Jesus" or "Jesus Christ" in reference to the historical figure.

<sup>7</sup> All biblical references are taken from the NRSV.

and since Jesus was male, only males can be priests. However, the Roman Catholic Church does not require that a priest be Jewish. Age, race, class, nor ethnicity are official criteria for ordination in Catholicism.<sup>8</sup> Another example is the condemnation and exclusion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) people from Christian communities. Some congregations are beginning to welcome GLBT people as members, but few denominations allow them to be ordained.<sup>9</sup>

These are just two examples of ways in which the Christian church has hurt and excluded people. Iris Young calls this form of oppression "marginalization," or "the deprivation of cultural, practical, and institutionalized conditions for exercising capacities in a context of recognition and interaction."<sup>10</sup> The church has kept these groups of people from participating in activities that will allow them to exercise their full potential; it has used its doctrines to keep people out and hinder them from participating fully and usefully in the church community. The Church is not acting in accordance with what the gospel tells us and is therefore standing in its own way of experiencing the "good news."

### ***The Glorification of Suffering***

Traditional Christian doctrines about the salvific effects of Jesus' death and resurrection have also been used to legitimate suffering, such as the suffering of the

---

<sup>8</sup> Even though the criteria I have mentioned are not official, this does not mean that they have not been used unofficially at various points in the history of the church.

<sup>9</sup> The ELCA is doing a study right now on this very issue. Currently, they do not allow GLBT people who are in committed relationships to be ordained.

<sup>10</sup> Iris Young, "Five Faces of Oppression," in *Justice in the Politics of Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 55.

poor as well as the domination of women.<sup>11</sup> Christianity has been traditionally filled with the message that suffering is good because it brings one closer to God. In suffering, people often think that they cannot depend on themselves, and many times they may not have the resources they need. Thus, they tend to put more trust in God—or that is at least what many people perceive. Putting more trust in God is the equivalent in many people's minds of being closer to God. Moreover, many Christians argue that if one suffers more on earth, they will be rewarded in heaven.

Since Jesus suffered and died—and then was raised to life by God—it is acceptable, and even good, to suffer here on earth; our reward will be gained later in heaven. The poor and women are not the only people who have gotten this message; but it turns out that the poor and women tend to suffer more, so they may hear the message more often from the church. “Until this [20<sup>th</sup>] century,” writes Rita Nakashima Brock, “the main Christian message to the brokenhearted was the promise that, if we could bear our suffering with fortitude and faith, a new life in Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection would manifest itself beyond this veil of tears.”<sup>12</sup> This traditional Christian message is a problem because, even as it exalts suffering, it also deters people from trying to overcome suffering. If those who suffer can just endure their suffering now, they will be better off in the long run. Many people are suffering needlessly, sometimes as a result of embracing this idea. Women who are in abusive relationships, for example, may think they are “getting what they deserve” and therefore do not think that they can or should try to change

---

<sup>11</sup> These are just a couple of examples of suffering—the most commonly cited ones that I have read about—but throughout history there may have been other ways that suffering has been legitimated.

<sup>12</sup> Rita Nakashima Brock, *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), xi.

their situation. Salvation is delayed, and as a result, the world is full of harm, hate, and discrimination; salvation is not fully realized in the world.

If the church "cannot heal and liberate the brokenhearted now," in Brock's words, it should at least seek to become "a redemptive, transforming power."<sup>13</sup> Changes are in order. There is a need to revisit traditional interpretations of the Christian story—especially the life, death, and resurrection of Christianity's central figure—Jesus—for the sake of making some of these changes. We particularly need to examine the ways in which the interpretations of the story have affected how we behave in our practices both in and out of church.<sup>14</sup>

Symbols and stories function.<sup>15</sup> They function in both positive and negative ways, and therefore it is crucial for us to look at the ways the symbols and stories the church uses function. We need to examine our symbols and work toward the development of symbols which function in ways that are helpful for all creation. When we question the interpretations of the stories we are used to hearing, and ask who or what the stories represent, we can in turn use the answers to these questions to shape the ways we act.

The central Christian symbol, the cross, implicitly if not explicitly exalts pain and suffering. The church's interpretation of Jesus' crucifixion—his suffering and death—has taken it "out of its lived-world context in his total life and historical

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> The way the "good news" has been interpreted through doctrine and practice has a powerful effect on the ways we behave as a church.

<sup>15</sup> "The symbol of God functions." Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 4, 5, 36. Johnson talks about the images and language used to point to God. These images and language of God form the basis for the entire Christian religious system, because they form the way we think and talk about God. In the same way, our stories help us talk about sin, salvation, Jesus, Christ, etc.

project.”<sup>16</sup> In doing so, the church has put so much emphasis on his suffering and death—thereby elevating the value of suffering for ordinary people—that the church has over-looked the examples Jesus gave in his life.

Traditional atonement theories assert that Jesus died as atonement for humanity’s sins. As a consequence, they focus on Jesus’ death and glorify it and in turn glorify suffering. Atonement theories rest on the idea of original sin, “in which humanity is believed to be born with a tragic flaw.”<sup>17</sup> Trinitarian atonement doctrines stress God sacrificing “his” son to repay the debt of sin. These doctrines declare that human suffering is removed by divine suffering and humans are passive recipients of this benefit. Brock argues, the problem with atonement doctrines is that

...interdependence and mutuality [are missing]. We are not called to embrace our own suffering, to touch the deepest pain we feel about not having been loved and respected, and to discover the gifts of grace in our connectedness to ourselves and others. Instead we are enjoined to look to a suffering and power outside us, both greater than ours.<sup>18</sup>

By embracing our suffering, we acknowledge it and avoid ignoring it. By recognizing it we can begin to confront and change what makes us suffer. Granted, varying degrees of suffering are inevitable in our world today; however, the suffering we inflict upon one another is suffering we can and should do something about.<sup>19</sup> While we cannot completely escape suffering, we should not justify unneeded suffering

---

<sup>16</sup> Harrison, 19.

<sup>17</sup> Brock, 55.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth examination of suffering, see Ellie Roscher’s and Dana Anderson’s thesis.

inflicted by others. Acknowledging, or as Brock puts it, “embracing” our suffering can help effect positive change.<sup>20</sup>

Brock rejects the notion that one heroic figure, to whom we are all indebted and rely on, could overcome death, injustice and evil for everyone. Relying solely on the death of Jesus for our salvation—and (not incidentally) on God’s raising him from the dead—we forget that we live in a relational world today made up of many people who enhance our experience of God. We experience God’s salvation through experiencing Christ in one another and by working to eliminate the suffering we inflict and also endure.<sup>21</sup>

As I have mentioned, traditional Christian doctrines, particularly atonement theories, assert that Jesus Christ, taking sin upon himself, suffered, was crucified, and rose again in order to reconcile sinners with God.<sup>22</sup> However, the way in which

---

<sup>20</sup> Harrison makes a similar argument in “The Power of Anger in the Work of Love.” She believes that anger can be channeled and used positively to change ideas, structures, relationships, etc. For more discussion of the positive possibilities for anger and pride, see Tracy Vicory’s thesis.

<sup>21</sup> I will explain this more in the latter parts of this paper.

<sup>22</sup> Patristic theologians believe that humans are in bondage to the devil (the powers of evil) and can be essentially released from prison by paying a “ransom.” They consider Christ to be the ransom for humans’ sin and bondage to the devil. Origen (183-253 C.E.) developed a ransom theory of atonement. He argued that Christ ‘propitiated’ sin by offering himself to God—in turn, the cross wipes away sin as a ransom to the devil.

In the eleventh century, Anselm thought of God as a feudal overlord and of humans as God’s subjects who had offended God by dishonoring God through sin. Humans had to either restore their relation to God by honoring God or suffer the punishment of eternal death; they had no way of paying restitution to God for their sins. Christ died as a perfect man, offering his life to God as a form of honor to pay humans’ debt.

The goal of Abelard’s “moral influence” theory of atonement was to change human attitudes and morals. It was based on the motivation of the love of God. Abelard believed that the life and death of Jesus renewed the love of humans for God and required a personal change for the people who believed in God. He believed that the cross urged humans to repent and enabled them to love God. In Abelard’s view, the cross expresses God’s love for sinful humanity even in light of the violence humans directed at Jesus, God’s son and the bearer of the cross.

During the Renaissance, John Calvin believed God’s law was infringed upon by human sin. He believed that Christ paid humans’ debt to God as a stand-in for sinful humanity. Calvin interpreted biblical texts, such as Paul, through the lens of justice of his time period. People had to suffer a penalty if they harmed someone or if they broke they law. In Calvin’s theory, the penalty God would have issued to sinful humanity (who had harmed God) was transferred to Christ. [Information taken from Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1989).

Jesus Christ was able to take sin upon himself is unclear. How would one do that? Traditional atonement theories are not sufficient any more in explaining how this works. There may be different ways of representing the salvific significance of Christ at work in Jesus.

Atonement theories are not just ideas that have no real influence on peoples' lives. Instead, these theories, which interpret the story of Jesus' death and resurrection and their significance for Christians in theological terms, have profound social, political, and cultural consequences for a lot of real people. We need to reconsider how we have interpreted these stories and the way they have been used negatively.<sup>23</sup>

According to most Protestant theology, through Jesus' death and resurrection, we humans receive free grace.<sup>24</sup> In the Roman Catholic tradition, however—the tradition I was raised in—works have also played a part in the process of salvation. I believe that because we receive free grace, we have a moral imperative, which leads to an obligation to act with justice toward our fellow human beings.<sup>25</sup> I do not think grace alone or works alone are mutually exclusive ways for one to experience salvation. The idea that because we have received grace, we no longer have anything to worry about is too simple. This is a static idea of grace, but neither the world, nor our lives as individuals and communities, is static.

---

<sup>23</sup> Delores S. Williams rejects the view of Jesus as "surrogate" who died in place of humans. She believes this idea of a surrogate role has been used to justify the surrogate roles that many black women were forced to fill during slavery. She believes "this image supports and reinforces the exploitation that has accompanied [black women's] experience with surrogacy." According to Williams, many black women cannot find the idea of Jesus as a surrogate salvific because surrogacy has been used to oppress and harm them. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 162.

<sup>24</sup> I see grace as a gift given to us by God, and salvation is the experience of that gift.

<sup>25</sup> For more on this idea, see Becky Potter's thesis.

### *The Spiritualizing and Removal of Salvation From the Here and Now*

Our lives are part of an ongoing process of interrelatedness among people, nature, and influences from the past; all these facets influence our daily lives in ever-changing ways. Process theologian Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki explains that the most influential relationship in our lives is the one we have with our immediate past, which in turn influences the present; as a result, our life is constantly being recreated by the new decisions we make, based both on the immediate past and on the present options and future hopes.<sup>26</sup> She expands, "The process of integrating relationships produces reality. This process is dynamic, ever giving rise to new relations, new integrations, new realities."<sup>27</sup> Process theology helps us overcome the stasis that is present in so many of the interpretations of the Christian story. The world is not static; therefore, a static conception of salvation, as something that was taken care of once-and-for-all through the suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, does not work.

We can recognize that the world is not static by recognizing our interrelatedness. Traditionally christologies fail to recognize or acknowledge that by our nature, we humans are interrelated. We cannot go through life without interacting with other people and entertaining their viewpoints.<sup>28</sup> Christianity has traditionally been used to limit these interactions by limiting the knowledge we can gain from them because many of the views outside Christianity have been written off as wrong, without giving them a chance. However, there can be great insight and

---

<sup>26</sup> Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 10.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> We also are constantly interacting with nature, but those relationships are beyond the scope of this thesis.



learning from our fellow human beings. Similarly, salvation traditionally has meant the delayed promise of heaven; but I believe that there is more to salvation than that. Later I will explore ways we can experience salvation in the here and now—particularly through our interrelatedness.

Mary Daly believes that we can begin to overcome dichotomies, hierarchies, and the static nature that the church has adopted, by viewing both God and Jesus as verbs, which have ongoing action instead of as static nouns. She uses the word “Being” to represent God and Christ this way.<sup>29</sup> Using a verb gets away from the idea of a static entity and gives us instead the sense of having real participation in God and what I call Christ. This participation with God may not be direct, it is based more on the fact that God is responding to the circumstances and the needs of the people and the world, and therefore in some respects, we have indirect influence on God’s action. Participation in Christ becomes an active part of our lives. We become and enact Christ to one another.<sup>30</sup>

Shelia Greeve Davaney urges us to consider our lives and our world in terms of “becoming” rather than “being,” which (unlike Daly) she believes hinders our perception of the world, even our perception of the world as Christians. “...[W]ithin [the] traditional vision,” she writes, “[being] has been elevated over becoming, static over dynamic activity, independence and self-completeness over interdependence and relatedness.”<sup>31</sup> Many of the traditional doctrines and ideas have outlived their

---

<sup>29</sup> Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 34, 71. These are the first of many times that this term is used throughout her book.

<sup>30</sup> I will more thoroughly explore this idea in Chapter 3.

<sup>31</sup> Sheila Greeve Davaney, “Introduction” in *Feminism and Process Thought: The Harvard Divinity School/Claremont Center for Process Studies Symposium Papers*, ed. by Sheila Greeve Davaney, (New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981), 2. Most feminist and process theologians share these basic criticisms of traditional theologies.

usefulness and it is time for us to rethink our approaches to theology based on present experiences. "Theological systems...carry a longing for an unreal past [and] tend to prohibit our honest grounding in and real acceptance of our life experiences."<sup>32</sup> Theology needs to take into account the varied experiences and perspectives of the whole community.

### ***Summary of the Problems***

I have presented some of the ways I see Christianity getting in its own way. The first is that Christianity does not practice what it teaches. Christianity stands in its own way when it teaches that we should "love our neighbor as ourselves," but excludes and oppresses many people. Many Christians also tend to think of Jesus as a historical figure who is limited to the past and died once for all as atonement for our sins. This has caused most Christians to focus almost solely on Jesus' suffering and death, which has been used to legitimate needless suffering in today's world. Limiting Jesus, and in turn the event that many people believe brings about salvation (the death and resurrection), to the past fails to acknowledge that we are part of an ongoing, ever-changing, interrelated universe. Keeping in mind these problems, I will explore different ways of thinking about salvation and Jesus' and Christ's role in salvation.

---

<sup>32</sup> Brock, 54.

## Chapter 2:

### Salvation—What is it? Why do we need it?

#### *What do we need salvation from?*

Christianity is predicated on the need for salvation from sin and evil. Humans do not show always love and kindness to themselves or their fellow human beings—this idea has traditionally been called “sin.” Sin is the primary way that theologians use to explain the presence of human evil in the world. A very simplified notion of sin is that sin is anything that separates a person from doing what God wills—thus leading to evil—and very generally can be thought of as anything that brings harm to another living being.<sup>33</sup>

We feminists tend to “understand sin as historically and socially produced, which requires us to take responsibility for understanding and stopping oppression and suffering.”<sup>34</sup> This may be on an individual level, as well as on the community or worldwide level. Process theologians echo this claim that “sin is the violation of relationships, whether those that contribute to us or those to which we contribute.”<sup>35</sup> Sin is a way of talking about actual events that have real consequences, large and small. Thus sin is a way in which we are injured and in which we injure others because of our unavoidable connections and relationships to others.<sup>36</sup> Another way to verbalize this is that sin is separation from God’s will.

Our universe and state of existence is always in flux. All the experiences of the past influence our present situation. Taking the past into account, process

---

<sup>33</sup> The notion of sin I am suggesting is different from many notions of sin in that it is other-centered, rather than primarily having a self-centered focus on guilt (which often accompanies sin and is said to be an outcome of sin).

<sup>34</sup> Brock, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Suchocki, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Brock, 7.

theologians argue, God presents us with options for our present, which will then affect our present decision and the future. The decision we make, once it's made, then becomes part of the past that will influence our next decision. Suchocki describes sin as "the power of the demonic" which pervades the world today through past influences. "That which was done in the past has an internal effect upon the present, adding a determining power to the present."<sup>37</sup> A determining power is in reference to the way the past has a powerful influence on the possibilities available in the present. The "ongoing-ness" of past ideas and structures that deny well-being: that is the power of the demonic, and this is what we need salvation from. However, the negative experiences of the past can be transformed to create positive change in the present and future. "The richness of the present is the degree to which it incorporates its past in a positive movement into the future."<sup>38</sup>

For Rita Nakashima Brock, "sin is a sign of our brokenheartedness, of how damaged we are, not of how evil, willfully disobedient, and culpable we are."<sup>39</sup> Sin emerges when our relationships with others, God, or ourselves cause damage to one of the parties involved. "Sin is not something to be punished, but something to be healed."<sup>40</sup> This does not mean that people should not be held accountable for their actions, but punishment tends to only perpetuate negative action, whereas healing begins to get to the core of the problem and prevents future harms from happening. Thus, we need salvation to bring about healing in our lives for acts that we have done as well as acts that have been done to us. Salvation is a source of empowerment,

---

<sup>37</sup> Suchocki, 19.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>39</sup> Brock, 19.

<sup>40</sup> Brock, 19.

healing, and renewal rather than a fear of judgment and punishment for wrongs we have done.

### ***What is salvation?***

Throughout the New Testament the word sōzō appears often.<sup>41</sup> Sōzō can mean, “save,” “keep from harm,” “rescue,” “heal,” or “liberate.” It can be translated as “salvation.” In the New Testament there are primarily three understandings of salvation.<sup>42</sup> The first view encompasses humanity’s need for deliverance from evil. The second is a ritual purification from sin. The third involves the formation of a new relationship with God. These three understandings are not mutually exclusive and are often interwoven.

Sometimes individual people are “saved” by God from physical danger, as Paul was on his way to Rome. However, salvation has predominantly meant “the common need to be delivered from...sin,” according to people who have interpreted the stories of the New Testament.<sup>43</sup> This interpretation of the term “salvation” in the New Testament also emphasizes that Jesus is the means of salvation (through his death and resurrection): “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). Paul’s letters portray salvation as something that is open to everyone, as long as they believe in Jesus and follow him.

Paul’s letters have been a big influence in focusing on the death and resurrection because they have been largely interpreted to say that he believes the

---

<sup>41</sup> Gerald G. O’Collins, “Salvation,” *ABD* 5:910. Sōzō appears 106 times in the NT, primarily in Paul’s letters and the synoptic gospels.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 907-14. The doctrine and study of salvation is called soteriology.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* Also see Matthew 1:21, Mark 1:5, Luke 1:79, and Acts 2:38.

death and resurrection are the source of salvation. Common interpretations of his letters assert that salvation involves being freed from sin and death. He writes, "The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 15:56-57). Paul believes "the death Christ died, he died to sin, once for all" (Rom 6:10). He writes that we are baptized into Christ's death in order for us to be united in his resurrection and "walk in the newness of life" (Rom 6:3-5). Paul writes, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:10-11). In short, Jesus died for us so that we can live with him (Phil 5:10). Paul believes that Jesus' death gave him grace from God:

I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God; for if justification comes through the law, then Christ died for nothing (Gal 2:19-21).

Paul focuses on the implications of the death and resurrection in his letters because he wants people to know how they can gain salvation—and in many interpretations it seems Paul believes it is through the death and resurrection. So in one response to the question of how one gains salvation, Paul writes people should "strive for righteousness...through faith" (Rom 9:30).<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> While many interpretations of Paul assert that the death and resurrection of Jesus are the way to attain salvation, there are also indications in his letters that the law is very important. It is actually very difficult to draw a conclusion about what Paul seems to think is more significant for salvation, Jesus' death and resurrection or following the law. For a more in-depth analysis of Paul's letters on this subject, see Mara Michaletz's thesis.

In the Synoptic Gospels, to be saved means to enter the reign of God.<sup>45</sup> This still begs the question of what exactly it means to “enter the reign of God.” Interpretations of the Synoptic Gospels in Christian doctrine focus on the earthly aspects of salvation, that is to say there is a practical aspect of salvation for Christians: to respond to the needs of others.<sup>46</sup> Still others believe there is also a spiritual dimension to salvation. “Jesus’ miracles not only physically heal men and women but also symbolize what he ultimately wants to do—namely, bring salvation to their whole person.”<sup>47</sup> Most often Christians think about the spiritual aspects of what Jesus was doing, and forget the importance of what he was actually physically doing. We can work to emulate what he was doing physically by helping others. While it is very difficult for us to have the same spiritual influence as Jesus did because he was divine, we should still strive to try to be like the human Jesus in his actions. Jesus even encouraged his disciples saying, “Very truly, I tell you, the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these...” (John 14:12).

Jesus has been seen as once-and-for-all, unique savior who stands in for us and gives suffering a good name and as a result is the vehicle for salvation because he came to take our place.

We see Jesus who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory,

---

<sup>45</sup> I want to acknowledge that any interpretation of the biblical account of salvation will be deeply affected by the view one holds of history, time, and the historical mediation of salvation.

<sup>46</sup> See Matthew 25:31-46.

<sup>47</sup> O’Collins, 911.

should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (Heb 2:9-10)

A common interpretation of this passage is that Jesus had to become human and had to suffer in order to understand our pain before he could experience death for everyone and bring salvation. The fact that God had to have part of God's self (Jesus) become human in order to understand what it is like to be human seems logical. However, it does not seem logical or possibly that Jesus could experience death for everyone (it is obvious that people still die physically). I am not sure what implications this may have, but I do know that Jesus was not the sole bringer of salvation.

Theories from the past were useful for explaining Jesus' death and resurrection for the people of the past. "The church fathers...had tried to articulate their religious self-understanding in a way that grew organically out of their own religious experience and out of their reflection upon Scripture."<sup>48</sup> However, these theories have been taken to extreme levels and the view of salvation that asserts through Jesus' death and resurrection, humans are able to attain grace (and as a result of this grace, salvation), has been spiritualized and does not sufficiently work in the world today because it does not account for the current experiences of the world. "We have not been good at getting at the living experiences, the lifeblood, underneath the formulas."<sup>49</sup> Protestants believe that God gives salvation as a free gift through Jesus' death and resurrection while Roman Catholicism, for example, still focuses on the works one needs to do to attain this grace from God.

---

<sup>48</sup> Patrick T.R. Gray, "Christology and Soteriology: Past Connections and Present Missed Connections" in *The Christological Foundation for Contemporary Theological Education*, ed. by Joseph D. Ban (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 68.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.



In many time-honored views Jesus Christ died as atonement for our sins. Humans are inherently sinful and in order to attain salvation from God, Christ, being fully divine and fully human, suffered and died in our place. In other words, the cross—namely Jesus' death on the cross—is seen as the vehicle to salvation. The cross also reflects God's love—God sent God's only son to die for us. In this view, salvation means sharing in the divine reign with God and having everlasting joy and happiness. Those who are not "saved" are cursed to eternal damnation.<sup>50</sup>

Christology in many church doctrines asserts that Jesus Christ is fully divine and fully human at the same time. This doctrine was developed at the Council of Chalcedon. While the doctrine of two natures is considered part of the foundation of Christianity, the humanity of Jesus has been overshadowed by the focus on his divinity. His death and resurrection have been the sole focus for salvation, and his humanity has been overlooked as another possible resource for salvation.

Instead of downplaying Jesus' humanity, we can begin to look at salvation from other perspectives that may be more productive today. I propose we start by adding some other words to describe salvation—fulfillment, meaningfulness, redemption, joy, peace, happiness, hope, health, ecstasy, beauty, humanization, and goodness. These are words can be used to talk about what salvation looks and feels like. All of them are earth-centered; salvation can be experienced in our everyday lives. Also notice that the problem for humanity is still sin, and the solution is still salvation, but the ways we think about these two realities changes. Salvation is an

---

<sup>50</sup> Much if not most of the theology that credits humanity's salvation to the work of God through Jesus' death is an example of "theology from above." This theology views God as a powerful being in a different sphere of existence than humanity, acting upon humanity.

ongoing process rather than a one-time event effected through the crucifixion and resurrection of one person in the first century of the Common Era.

### ***Salvation as Humanization In Our Daily Lives***

Gordon Kaufman sums up how evil and salvation relate to humanization very well. He writes,

Whatever tends to enhance and strengthen the culture-creating processes through which our original animality is transformed into humanity is good; whatever tends to corrupt, block or destroy these processes of humanization—in any human beings, regardless of race, class, nationality, or gender—is evil; whatever rescues us from or otherwise overcomes such evil processes, powers, or events is salvific.<sup>51</sup>

To reiterate, sin and evil are the problems affecting humanity, while salvation is the solution to the problems.

Salvation, I would argue, is not something we experience only after we die. We can experience the reign of God on earth. The liturgy of the church describes the Eucharist as a “foretaste of the feast to come,” indicating that we can experience the reign of God to some extent here on earth. The church needs to extend this notion beyond the celebration of the mass and into our lives. I argue that because God gives us the gift of free grace, we respond with good works and changed lives—no longer done to earn, but rather in response to the freedom of salvation. I argue that this is our way of experiencing salvation in the here and now.

---

<sup>51</sup> Gordon D. Kaufman, *God-Mystery-Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 93.

Luther said that good works result from justification, that good works are the inevitable result of God's good work for us and in us, that being "little Christs" to our neighbors becomes possible because of what God has done and continues to do for us through Christ.<sup>52</sup> In his commentary on Galatians 2:20 ("...It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me...."), Luther argues that Christ actually becomes part of Paul, just as Christ is part of all of us.<sup>53</sup> He believes that Paul is saying, "Christ and I are one."<sup>54</sup> Christ, acting through us, enables us to participate in and experience salvation in our lives.

Doctrines of soteriology often claim that we are saved from sin, and insinuate that this is somehow related to what happens to us after we die. However, these doctrines ignore the fact that freedom from sin can be very empowering our everyday lives. What would freedom from sin look like in an everyday context? As I will discuss further using feminist and process theology, freedom from sin (or as I would call it, salvation) would empower people to help in the humanization or mutual enrichment of others. Perhaps, salvation is overcoming what "most fundamentally threatens human existence" as well as the existence of the rest of creation.<sup>55</sup>

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus tells a King through a parable that those who act in righteous ways will be able to have eternal life. However, the author of this passage does not quote Jesus stating that salvation is limited to eternal life. Instead, salvation is also experienced by the righteous in their lives when they are working for the good of humanity—they are working to enrich and humanize another person. In

---

<sup>52</sup> Martin Luther, *Luther's Works*, vol. 26, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 167-170.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>55</sup> Kaufman, 92.

Matthew 19:16-17, Jesus states the same basic idea. Someone asks Jesus, "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" (19:16), Jesus responds, "If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matt 19:17).<sup>56</sup> Like Matthew, Mark's gospel includes many of the sayings, parables, and miracles of Jesus that clarify what Jesus understands "eternal life" to be.<sup>57</sup>

Works alone, or faith alone? Complete disregard of either one leads to an inadequate view of the possibilities opened up to us in salvation. As I stated earlier, there is an intersection of where free grace leads to an obligation to act with justice toward our fellow human beings. We cannot just "cheerfully go on running up a bill in the tavern of sin because Christ has already paid for everything."<sup>58</sup> This is where the good and righteous works mentioned in Matthew (19:16-21) come into play; because a person has received salvation, they have an obligation and should also have a willingness to act with kindness toward others in need. Salvation is regard for others while Christ is the spirit of God's will that enables us to act with this regard for others.

Focusing on the ways salvation can affect one spiritually help us see ways that salvation can be present in the world. As I stated earlier, Jesus' miracles help heal people and bring salvation to the whole person—he offers physical as well as spiritual healing. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza echoes this idea when she states, "The salvation of the *basileia* [the reign of God] is not confined to the soul but spells

---

<sup>56</sup> Granted in the two examples that I have cited Jesus is talking about eternal life. However, as I have alluded to, eternal life does not necessarily have a direct correspondence to salvation—salvation is bigger than eternal life. Also, notice in Jesus' response in Matt 19:17, he states, "If you wish to enter life..." (emphasis added). He slightly modifies the question and tells how to enter life, which is not necessarily the same as eternal life.

<sup>57</sup> See Mark 10:17-19, for example.

<sup>58</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990), 83.

wholeness for the total person in her/his social relations."<sup>59</sup> Salvation affects every part of one's life, including, and especially, one's relationships with other people. It is a healing for the entire person.

Insofar as Christian theology helps us to think about salvation as humanization in our relationships with others, it "remain[s] true to its claims that all human beings are created in the divine image, that divine power is love in its fullness, and that the community of divine power is one of justice and peace."<sup>60</sup> Love, justice, peace, and inclusiveness become essential facets of salvation, helping us face and transform the disconnection, pain, and injustice that we as human beings encounter so often.

If we have salvation we will be "rescued from the danger of destruction and from pain."<sup>61</sup> However, this does not mean that, if we still experience danger and destruction, we are not saved. If salvation were fully present throughout the world, no one would be harming anyone else; there would not be hate; there would not be discrimination. Instead, the world would abound in love and respect for ourselves and for others. However, we know that there is still pain and destruction; the full potential of salvation has not been realized in the world today. If sin is viewed as separation from God's will, then salvation can be viewed as being reunited with God's will. It removes the obstacles between God and humanity and allows humans to express God's will of unconditional love to one another. "Salvation is God's work but it is God's work done *in* us rather than *to* us."<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), 123. The *basileia* is a community where God is present.

<sup>60</sup> Brock, 50.

<sup>61</sup> Kaufman, 89.

<sup>62</sup> Jerry K. Robbins, "A Reader's Guide to Process Christology," *Encounter* 53, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 87.

To experience salvation means to work toward and experience freedom from oppression and to participate in the mutual enrichment and humanization of others. "Existence is a movement, a dance, of mutual enrichment."<sup>63</sup> All people have value in themselves and also for others; all people are valuable and self-creative subjects that can bring about the experience of salvation for themselves and for others with Christ working through them.<sup>64</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Suchocki, 25.

<sup>64</sup> Davaney, 4.

### Chapter 3:

#### Views of Christ and Jesus—A Revised Christology

*Jesus is Christ. Jesus is not Christ. Jesus is not not Christ.*  
-Angela Janda

How can we think about how to implement this idea of salvation as humanization into our lives? The answer lies in Jesus—not the usual Christian representation of the savior Jesus on the cross, but instead, Jesus living his life as an enactment of this salvation. I have already pointed out that many Christians today believe that the importance of Jesus lies in his power to save us from sin and death by his death and resurrection. However, I believe that focusing exclusively on Jesus' death, and excluding the importance and impact of his life, is one way Christianity is getting in its own way of really experiencing salvation.

Jesus is so important to Christianity, not only because he modeled an ethical system, but also because he truly embodied God and God was working through everything he did. Jesus physically embodied God, and therefore helps us gain a fuller understanding of what God is like. Therefore, Jesus is essential to Christianity, but not solely in the way Christians think he is. Jesus was Christ to the people of his time, and he showed us how to be Christ to each other. His death was the price he paid for his culturally subversive ministry.<sup>65</sup> His resurrection gave God the last word over death, that is, life. "In addition, the resurrection vindicates Jesus' message, ministry, even his person."<sup>66</sup> Feminist and process theologians propose different

---

<sup>65</sup> Elizabeth A. Johnson, *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 57.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

ways of thinking about Christ as an ongoing presence or spirit and Jesus as historical person who was one important part or ultimate example of Christ.

Feminist theologians and process theologians are beginning to take some of the focus off the death and resurrection of Jesus and help us focus instead on how Jesus' life plays a role in daily salvation. Jesus' life embodies God's all-inclusive love and justice, and, as a result, we can experience redemption from pain, suffering, and dehumanization daily if we strive to emulate the way Jesus lived. To do this we have to remember that Jesus was fully human.

The councils [of Nicea and Chalcedon] located Jesus' primary significance in who he was (the eternal Logos, consubstantial with the Father, in two natures: fully human, fully divine) rather than what he did (preached, prayed, taught, healed, befriended, and so forth). In establishing Jesus' essence as central to Christian faith, the church relegated his actions to a place of derivative and rather unremarkable significance.<sup>67</sup>

In other words, Christians often overlook Jesus' humanity and almost exclusively stress his divinity. However, Jesus was human, and to experience the "good news," Christians need to bring more attention back to Jesus' actions and acknowledge their significance in order to avoid spiritualizing Christ into something that has no active part in our lives. While Jesus was fully divine, he was also fully human and went through many of the same challenges and struggles we do, except he followed God's will and never succumbed to temptation and therefore was without sin. Jesus is one human who was a revelation of God, but he is not the only way God is revealed in the

---

<sup>67</sup> Isabel Carter Heyward, *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982), 32.



world. Therefore, we cannot excuse ourselves from (at the very least) attempting to live as Jesus did to reveal God in the world because, we say, he was the Son of God.

### *The Relational Nature of Christ as Shown Through Jesus*

Jesus' entire life was lived in relation to other humans, to nature, to God, and to himself. He is our connection to God—he gives us a glimpse of what God is like. Jesus helps us see God more clearly. He is “a man who uniquely embodied the relationship with God for which men and women were created.”<sup>68</sup> However, though Jesus embodied God, he is not the exclusive act or revelation of God.<sup>69</sup> There is more to God than Jesus. Jesus was special, however, because he truly let God work through him. Jesus' story is an answer to the question, “Who is God?” because he is “God with us.”<sup>70</sup>

Thus we do not love this poor Jesus of Nazareth because he was victorious or left the world behind, but rather because his manner of being there as the man-for-others touches us to the bottom of our heart.... Christ let us see into God's heart.<sup>71</sup>

According to the Gospels, Jesus spent his whole life healing the sick and befriending the outcast—caring for the people in society who were often disregarded. Jesus was there for others; and this is the “good news.” Through Jesus, God is there for other people and the whole of creation. The “good news” that Jesus embodies, and calls us to emulate, is the love, care, and humanization of all humankind regardless of

---

<sup>68</sup> John A. T. Robinson, “What Future for a Unique Christ?” in *The Christological Foundation for Contemporary Theological Education*, ed. by Joseph D. Ban (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988), 219.

<sup>69</sup> I will explain this further later in this chapter.

<sup>70</sup> Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 50.

<sup>71</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 96.

race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or health.<sup>72</sup> We are called to allow God to live in us.

"It is I—and God is with me." "It is God—and I am with God." Neither one nor the other, neither alone, but both together in relationship. It is, I believe, the secret that Jesus knew: what it means to be human in the fullest and most open way to God: an understanding of reality, relationship, and redemption...that Jesus attempted to convey to those who had hands and hearts and heads with which to follow his lead in the doing of God's work in the world.<sup>73</sup>

Jesus is not a superhero who makes all our pain and suffering go away magically.<sup>74</sup> Instead, Christ (as embodied in Jesus, for example) is ongoing, working through us—Christ is "that of God" in each of us. And as we allow God through Christ to work in our lives, we can experience salvation every day. "To redeem means to set free the power of God, 'that of God' in us; therefore the redeemed are those who insist on their human dignity."<sup>75</sup> Since we can think of salvation present in the world through humanization, and humanization—because it involves the humanization of one person by another—takes place in relationships, "Christ" must express a communal phenomenon. "If Jesus of Nazareth was the poor man from Galilee who was tortured to death, then Christ is that which cannot be destroyed which came into the world with him and lives through us in him."<sup>76</sup> If Christ is in us, then we all

---

<sup>72</sup> I am focusing primarily on the salvation of humanity; while I realize that the enrichment and salvation of all creation is also essential, this is beyond the scope of this thesis.

<sup>73</sup> Heyward, 198.

<sup>74</sup> Both Brock and Harrison (and I'm sure other theologians) argue that we should avoid thinking of Jesus as a once-for-all hero.

<sup>75</sup> Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 91.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

experience Christ through our relationships with others. Just as Jesus' life was relational, so are ours.

Some theologians who are developing new christologies are attempting to get away from "Christolatry."<sup>77</sup> Christolatry forgets that Jesus was a limited human being—it is docetic. Christolatry is present when people have a too high a regard for Christ and worship him rather than act on their convictions and follow Christ. They lift Christ so high that they cannot possibly even begin to embody Christ because it becomes too big a task. Christ becomes an idol rather than a presence in our lives. Christolatry is a form of what Sölle refers to as "high christology." "High Christology draws Jesus away from this world; he becomes unreachable, incomparable. And above all we cannot live as he lived—we shouldn't even try, because it's impossible anyway."<sup>78</sup> Arguing against this view, Sölle believes that instead we should remember Jesus' humanness and strive to follow his way of life.

Christ is present in the world; his presence is alive in us. The spirit of Christ is what allows us to express solidarity with human beings who suffer and endure struggles—everyone, to some degree. "Christ is the mysterious power which makes us into 'fools in Christ,' who, without hope of success and without an objective, share life with others. Share bread, shelter, anxiety, and joy."<sup>79</sup> Jesus says to us, "Come follow me!" He calls us to embody Christ to others and share in their joys and sufferings, while at all times working for justice and dignity. Sölle explains exactly how I see Christ changing the way one acts.

---

<sup>77</sup> The term "Christolatry" was coined, as far as I know, by Mary Daly (p. 69) and is also used by Dorothee Sölle.

<sup>78</sup> Sölle, *Theology for Skeptics*, 89.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

He makes people dear to me. Some of them are dear anyway, and many others are not. He tells me that he loves those who are alien, indifferent or even unattractive to me. In so doing he helps me to behave in a different way, to be capable of talking, listening to others as openly and seriously as I would like them to listen to me and take me seriously, never writing anyone off, never pronouncing a final judgment on anyone, always attempting new things with them in hope. In this way he extends my horizons towards those who are further afield: to those outside my milieu, to the needs of society, to the Third world. They all become my neighbours.<sup>80</sup>

This shows how Christ works through us and changes us. If everyone is our neighbor, and we all follow the second greatest commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," salvation is inevitable in the world as long as people realize that real love involves both giving *and* taking in mutual, reciprocal, and enriching relationships.<sup>81</sup> And at this moment Christianity would truly be spreading the "good news" that Jesus showed us in his time, and it will certainly be present in the world today in a new capacity.

I agree with Sölle and Carter Heyward, who are both feminist theologians, that love is the equivalent of justice. Showing authentic love for someone would mean caring for that person's well-being regardless of whether one really likes them as a person. Love involves doing something for the good of another person, not because one necessarily wants to, but because one has a moral obligation to act with love toward others. If someone acts out of authentic love, they are by definition also

---

<sup>80</sup> Sölle, *Thinking About God*, 105.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

acting with justice because they are acting with honesty and integrity, that may not always benefit themselves.

Love is justice. It is not necessarily a happy feeling or a romantic attachment.

Love is a way of being in the world, not necessarily an emotional affect....

Love can, and does occur here and now, in this world, at this time. It is important that love be experienced among human beings here on earth. My interest is not in any notion of a "love" or "justice" which is "postponed" or "withheld" or "veiled" as characteristic of a sacred realm to which we have no immediate access.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, just as I argued that there is more to life than always anticipating our afterlife, Heyward also believes there is much to be gained by living our lives in love and experiencing what I call salvation in the here and now. We need to think about living in the present, enjoying our lives, and not be solely focused on the future, namely our death. As Jesus states in John 10:10, "...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." We should strive to have full lives, acting in love and justice, and experiencing salvation on a day after day basis.

We cannot experience this love in isolation; instead we experience it through our relationships with others. "What [Jesus] did may be instructive in our understanding of the power in relational experience, a power discernable not only in Jesus' life, but also in the lives of...[others] in whose relations a compelling and creative power has been operative and strong."<sup>83</sup> As Jesus showed us, Christ is

---

<sup>82</sup> Heyward, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 33.

present in relationships that engender mutual love and respect—in our relationships between self and self, self and nature, self and others, self and God.<sup>84</sup>

Jesus did not die as our replacement; instead he is our representative. He represents the struggles we encounter, the ways we should strive to act, and what may happen to us if we truly do act with love and justice—we may be persecuted. Jesus is also God's representative. In turn we Christians are also called to be Jesus' representatives in the world today, following his example of living as God would have us live.

God has, through Jesus, shown humankind how to live peacefully, productively and abundantly in relationship. Jesus showed humankind a vision of righting relations between body, mind and spirit *through an ethical ministry of words...through a healing ministry of touch and being touched...through a militant ministry of expelling evil forces...through a ministry grounded in the power of faith...through a ministry of prayer...through a ministry of compassion and love.*<sup>85</sup>

This life that Christians are called to live is not necessarily easy. In fact, there will be many challenges. Jesus showed us the extreme, but also very real example of the persecution we may encounter by living the way God calls us to live; God's way is not the popular way of the world, and we may encounter challenges to our way of life. The way of relational life in the world is just, urgent, hard, unpopular; it is a way that requires trust, faith, and hope in one's self, in others, and in God.<sup>86</sup> One may not always see that one's actions are making a difference; one will also be chastised and

---

<sup>84</sup> Williams, 166.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>86</sup> Heyward, 200.

questioned for acting in ways that are so contradictory to the ways in which society is hierarchally structured. By questioning the way the world is set-up and working toward equality, justice, and humanization, some people in power may have to give up something, and therefore they resist change that may affect them negatively. As a result, one really has to have conviction and faith that what they are doing is right in order to withstand ridicule.

### *Christ in an Ever-Changing World*

So far in this chapter, I have focused primarily on the importance of Jesus embodying Christ in his relationships, citing some feminist theologians to help me articulate this idea. Now I am going to move on and explain how process theology can also help us to understand who Christ is for the world today. Humans' experiences in the world have differed throughout history; what made sense in terms of soteriology and christology 2000 years ago may not be adequate to address the human problems today. What Christ means as the answer to the questions of soteriology and christology changes.<sup>87</sup>

Process theology acknowledges that all humans are shaped by their past experiences as well as all the previous experiences of the world. The divine, or God, gives people possibilities in their present situation and allows them free will to make decisions for their future. Each decision takes into account the past experiences, and then each decision that is made becomes part of the past, which will be drawn upon in future decisions. The divine acts in response to the decisions humans make in the world and the general conditions of the world; God offers us options though

---

<sup>87</sup> John Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999), 21.

God is not in complete control of the world because we have free will to make a choice based on the options God gives us.

Thus, our reality is a process of becoming that involves input from the past, the realities of the present, and the options that God offers. In this way, God's love is responsive, persuasive, promotes enjoyment, and is adventurous. By giving human beings possibilities for action, God works through humans.<sup>88</sup> John B. Cobb, Jr., describes the importance of taking all past experiences of the world into account when one is working to enhance the future. Positive changes that take into account God's will as well as the experiences of the past, embody Christ in the world today.

The initial aim is at a relevant novelty rather than at reenactment. The novelty that is aimed at is one that allows maximum incorporation of elements from the past in a new synthesis. This novelty must struggle for actualization against habit, anxiety, and defensiveness. To whatever extent the new aim is successful, to that extent there is creative transformation. This creative transformation is Christ.<sup>89</sup>

As I stated earlier, Jesus was a revelation of God, but he is not the only way God is revealed in the world. Jesus embodied Christ, but Christ is not limited to Jesus. However, for most Christians, the meaning of Christ is inextricably bound up with Jesus even though we can also see Christ in the world apart from Jesus.

To see Christ in the movements of social, political, economic, ethnic, national, and sexual liberation of our time is to recognize...[Christ] in the process of

---

<sup>88</sup> This is a very basic and general summary of process theology based on my readings of John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*, and Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki, *God, Christ, Church*.

<sup>89</sup> Cobb, 76.



creative transformation of basic understanding and of the theology in which that is expressed.<sup>90</sup>

Rather than a static person tied to one particular time in history, Christ is liberated into the world and is experienced in an ongoing process. Christ is in part shaped by Jesus' acts in the world to transform, unify, redeem, and bring order and justice to humanity, as well as humans' ongoing acts that work toward the same ends.<sup>91</sup> It is important to note that creative transformation is present throughout Jesus' life and does not end with his death.

Since Christ is not tied solely to Jesus, even people who may have never heard of Jesus of Nazareth can experience Christ. "The drive toward redemption is universal, and Christ appears in the creative transformation of all life everywhere."<sup>92</sup> Some people may have different names for what Christians call "Christ," but creative transformation is a universal phenomenon, experienced in nature, in history, in our own personal experiences, and in our relationships with others.

Both John Cobb, Jr., and Mary Daly believe we should think of God as Being, a verb, an active presence in the world, rather than as a Being that is somewhere beyond this world. Most people think of God as a something that is somewhere out there, disconnected from the world. Instead, God is really in the world as a dynamic process. God and Christ interact with the world and the people in it, as everything is in flux. They can respond to the current needs of the world; God can give us choices that allow salvation to be present in today's world broken by violence, hate, and injustice. In turn, God enables Christ as creative transformation to be present in

---

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 57-8.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 57.

relationships that enrich the lives of others as well as our own lives. "Christ is a reality in terms of which one is called and empowered to act responsibly."<sup>93</sup> This does not mean that Christ prescribes how one should act in a particular situation. Instead, Christ is present in a different capacity in each situation, based on the circumstances of that particular situation.

What is so special about the person of Jesus, if Christ is what we can most readily experience today? Jesus truly embodies God and allows God to work through him. Jesus is the ultimate intensifying of God in human consciousness.<sup>94</sup> He gives us the best picture of what God is like, based on the limits of our consciousness. The more we incorporate God's will into our lives as Jesus did, the more fully we can experience God.

In [Jesus] the harmony of God is mirrored in the world, not dimly but in all of its wonder for us. The depths of God, the intensity of divine beauty, the vortex of divine harmony, all receive expression in Jesus, making him...Christ, anointed with God's presence and manifesting God's presence in, to, and for the world.<sup>95</sup>

While what Jesus reminds us is how to experience God, I return again to the point that the incarnation of God, while "it is to be achieved by a human person, ...cannot be a once-for-all happening, but must be a continuous process."<sup>96</sup> If a person truly were an incarnation of the divine, they would live their lives in perfect love and justice—as Jesus did. Jesus was important because he walked his talk—his actions reflected what he taught about the reversal of the negative values in the society he

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>94</sup> Suchocki, 88.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 92.

lived in. Jesus challenged the way many people in his society were treated. He accepted the blind, the lame, the deaf, the poor, and the women—he was open to the “least of these.” Jesus enacted inclusion—inclusion of *all* people.

Jesus calls the man and the woman alike to a new order, but his very call to them is from his embodiment of that order. Jesus *is* living in love; Jesus *is* openness to the other; Jesus *is* himself our judgment, calling us to our true mode of being. Jesus, extending a call to a new order, is himself that order, the instantiation of God’s reign, and therefore a true witness to its real possibility.<sup>97</sup>

Since Jesus embodied Christ, some of the above statements can be reformed replacing “Jesus” with “Christ.” Christ is living in love; Christ is openness to the other. Thus, “Jesus is Christ, Jesus is not Christ, Jesus is not *not* Christ.”

In the most basic terms, Jesus was the ultimate example of how to embody Christ in our lives. Jesus shows us what happens when people really do love their neighbors. And since Jesus is a revelation of God, we can get a glimpse of how God loves by looking at the way Jesus loves. He shows us that it *is* possible, but difficult, for humans to embody God’s love to one another. This love crosses the usual boundaries we construct that divide humans; it makes forgiveness and salvation possible. This love empowers Jesus to participate in relationships that truly embody giving and receiving. In fact, this love could help break down the barriers that we have created that keep us from fully experiencing salvation on this side of heaven.

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 97.

*Christ in Our Ever-Changing Relationships: Brock's Christa/Community*

Like feminist theologians, process theologians stress the importance of relationships. In process theology, injustice is the violation of a relationship. Justice occurs through mutually enriching relationships. I resonate with the importance of relationships in Rita Nakashima Brock's christology of "Christa/Community" in her book Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power and therefore, I will use her to back up my theologizing.<sup>98</sup>

Using feminist and process theologies, Brock—like Sölle, Williams, Heyward, Cobb, and Suchocki—insists that all human life is relational. Brock extends this idea and believes that Christianity should become a religion of the "heart." Brock defines "heart" as "a metaphor for the human self and our capacity for intimacy, [which] involves the union of body, spirit, reason, and passion through heart knowledge, the deepest and fullest knowing."<sup>99</sup> Heart is what some may associate with the soul, the most intense, vital part of our beings. As a whole, heart represents all the emotional and spiritual dimensions to our lives. In the simplest terms, heart is the representation of our true selves. By understanding our suffering and feelings, we are able to "live with heart" or be our authentic selves and appreciate our connectedness with other people. In turn we will be able to experience Christa/Community in our relationships and in community with other people.

Brock develops a christology that is not centered on Jesus; instead it is centered on Christ as Christa/Community, which focuses on relationships and

---

<sup>98</sup> According to Brock, Christology "examines the heart of Christianity...its understanding of divine love and redemption in doctrines about Christ," xii.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

interactions in the community as the "healing center of Christianity."<sup>100</sup> Brock uses "Christa" recalling a crucifix displayed in the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine in New York City. The crucifix had a woman on the cross and was labeled Christa. The term "Christa" allows us to begin to think of Christ as not solely identified with Jesus. Brock uses community to take the focus off the idea of Jesus as a sole heroic individual.

"Erotic power," Brock argues, gives people the capacity to participate in mutually empowering, nonhierarchical relationships.<sup>101</sup> Christa/Community comprises such relationships. We are liberated, healed, and made whole through our willingness to allow Christ to work in us to participate in mutuality.

A christology of Christa/Community is still inside Christianity. Brock acknowledges that "Christian theology [needs] to remain true to its claims that all human beings are created in the divine image, that divine power is love in its fullness, and that the community of divine power is one of justice and peace."<sup>102</sup> In the Christa/Community each person is valuable and divine love is experienced through relationships with other people. By using heart and erotic power we are more aware of our true feelings and true selves, and in turn we are able to see the suffering of others and begin to combat it and restore justice and peace.

---

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 41-2. "Erotic power is the fundamental power of existence-as-a-relational-process. Metaphysically, nothing can exist without the connections that make it what it continues to become through space and time. Connection is the basic power of all existence, the root of life. The power of being/becoming is erotic power. Erotic power leads us, through the human heart, toward life-giving cocreating.... Erotic power is the very foundation of life and the source of energy for human selves that compels us to search for the whole of life.... As the foundation of heart, erotic power compels us toward compassion, collective action, integration, self-acceptance, and self-reflective memory in our critical recollection of the past."

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 50.

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus uses erotic power in his capacity to care, understand, and be open to outcasts including women. "He speaks to and is responded to by low-caste women because they represent the bottom of this status network and have the least stake in its perpetuation."<sup>103</sup> For Brock, the fact that Jesus does not give into repression, that he looks past societal norms and challenges social structures in order to help other people, demonstrates his power, as well as Christ working in him.<sup>104</sup> Encounters with the hemorrhaging woman and the Syro-Phoenician woman remind Jesus that he is supposed to be helping everyone, including women, Gentiles, and the outcasts. What Jesus learns from his relationships with the women, he applies to other experiences through ongoing relationships with the marginalized.

According to Brock, Mark's Gospel "hints at the relational nature of healing through the concept of faith, which the afflicted always bring to the healing event."<sup>105</sup> Jesus would not have power if the people did not support him, trust him, and have faith in his abilities. "The point is not Jesus' sole possession of power, but the revelation of a new understanding of power that connects members of the community."<sup>106</sup> For Brock, this is true power because it was not tied up in one person; it was shared among all people. For example, after the hemorrhaging woman touched Jesus cloak he said, "Someone touched me; for I noticed that power had gone out from me" (Luke 8:46). Jesus understands that this woman, like other humans need to be touched and healed; he understands that she needs power. This woman knows that through Jesus there is a flow of power that will make her well.

---

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 87.

She took the initiative to touch him. "To touch is to signify a relation that exists already. It is an expression of confidence in dunamis, the power in relation."<sup>107</sup> Through this relationship, the woman has been empowered. Brock argues, "Even solitary saviors and martyrs who give their lives for others have no power without those who want and believe in their powers."<sup>108</sup>

### *The Importance of Christa/Community in My Life*

The christology of Christa/Community—of mutually enriching relationships that encompass a power that connects all people, nature, and God in a healing and empowering community—helps me connect better with Christianity. It helps me really understand how people are co-creators with the divine, a concept I have believed but never have been able to articulate. This christology also places Christ in my everyday life—in my relationships with other people. It encourages me to find honestly my true self; finding "heart" does not require that I suppress the unglamorous parts of my life—my struggles, concerns, problems, qualms, etc.—as often encouraged by society.

As a woman I find it helpful to think of Christ apart from the historical male, Jesus. In this view, Christ is not even connected to one person. I am a person who finds my relationships with other people vital. To be able to experience Christa/Community in these relationships helps me feel closer to the divine.

---

<sup>107</sup> Heyward, 45.

<sup>108</sup> Brock, 28.

### Conclusion

In the first chapter I presented the ways I saw that we human beings were kept from fully experiencing the "good news." This thesis has shown that we can experience salvation as humanization in our lives with Christ as the driving force that enables us to act in accordance with God's will as Jesus emulated. These are ways for us to break down the barriers that are keeping us from the "good news." I will summarize here how the ideas I have presented deal with the problems I see in some Christian thought today.

*Problem:* Jesus Christ is a historical figure who is isolated to the past. He died as atonement for our sins once-for-all. This is a form of Christolatry or christology from above where humans are the passive recipients of God's grace and we have no active part in this type of salvation. Salvation is also spiritualized and delayed. Christ and salvation become static concepts that do not account for the changing experiences of individuals and of the world.

*Solution:* While Jesus embodied Christ, Jesus was only one part of the ongoing spirit of Christ that is the driving force behind our experience of salvation. We can experience Christ in our mutually enriching relationships with others working to align our choices with God's will. We become active participants in the experience of Christ and of salvation. If we view Christ as creative transformation or as Christa/Community, we can account for, include, and respond to the varied and changing experiences of individual people, as well as the changing needs of the world.



*Problem:* Christianity does not walk its talk. It teaches us, "love your neighbor as yourself," but then excludes people based on race, sex, class, sexual orientation, etc. In many ways, often without realizing it, the church marginalizes and dehumanizes people. One structure that excludes many people is that of patriarchy. Middle-to-upper class males have, almost exclusively, developed church doctrines. They do not have the same experiences as women or impoverished people and therefore exclude their experiences when they are developing the doctrines. This is a problem because the doctrines do not account for or explain how the divine connects with people who are marginalized and oppressed.

*Solution:* By realizing the salvation that Jesus showed us involved true love and justice, that is, humanization, we can better include the experiences and needs of all people in salvation and other church doctrine. Also, focusing less on the maleness of Jesus and more on his actions and the spirit of Christ, allows all people to be included and accounted for in Christianity. Christ is continuously transformed through the interactions of people, and since these interactions are shaped by the past experiences of people, all peoples' stories are included in the quest for salvation.

*Problem:* Christianity has in the past focused exclusively on Jesus' death and resurrection as the path to salvation. In turn, his suffering and death has been used to glorify and legitimate the suffering of people in the world today. This leads to the notion that it is all right to suffer because one will be rewarded later in heaven.

*Solution:* Looking to Jesus' life as an example, we see that God calls us to live in peace, justice, and love. We should work to include the outcast and the

downtrodden and help them overcome their struggles. By living in mutual relationship with others, we may help someone one day, and then another day, they may in turn help us overcome our own struggles. When perfect salvation is achieved, all people will have all their basic physical needs met, as well as their emotional and spiritual needs. Each person will be seen as fully human and valued for who they are. The reign of God will be at hand.

*Problem:* Christianity often fails to recognize our interrelatedness and often views salvation as an individualistic goal to be attained. Some Christians express it this way: "By accepting Jesus into your heart, you can be saved." However, this does not account for the fact that God and Christ live in each of us and that we live in a relational world.

*Solution:* We can experience the "good news" by recognizing that we experience God through other people and that Christ is present in our mutually enriching relationships. Remembering we are connected to each other and to God through relationship will change the ways we think about and act toward others.

In essence, we experience the "good news" of salvation by looking to Jesus' life as an example of how to live in mutually enriching relationships. This is how we are enabled to experience the love of God, of neighbor, and of self, and work toward the humanization of all people in our lives everyday. We need to follow Paul's call for us to live "in Christ"—or, as I would extend it, "as Christ"—to one another, and in turn we will be able to experience the joy of salvation in our daily lives. Our final moral imperative is to "act...on behalf of justice and participat[e]...in the transformation of

the world. [These] are [the] constitutive dimensions of the church's mission for the redemption of the human race."<sup>109</sup>

---

<sup>109</sup> Johnson, *Consider Jesus*, 79. Johnson's paraphrasing from (1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, 6).

### Bibliography

- Ban, Joseph D., ed. *The Christological Foundation for Contemporary Theological Education*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1988.
- Brock, Rita Nakashima. *Journeys By Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*. New York: Crossroad, 1988.
- Cobb, John B., Jr. *Christ in a Pluralistic Age*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 1999.
- Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.
- Davaney, Sheila Greeve, ed. *Feminism and Process Thought: The Harvard Divinity School/Claremont Center for Process Studies Symposium Papers*. New York and Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1981.
- Fiddes, Paul S. *Past Event and Present Salvation: The Christian Idea of Atonement*. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1989.
- Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1994.
- Freedman, David Noel, Gary A. Herion, David F. Graf, John David Pleins, Astrid B. Beck, eds. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Heyward, Isabel Carter. *The Redemption of God: A Theology of Mutual Relation*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982.
- Johnson, Elizabeth A. *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse*. New York: Crossroad, 1992.
- . *Consider Jesus: Waves of Renewal in Christology*. New York: Crossroad, 1990.
- Kaufman, Gordon D. *God-Mystery-Diversity: Christian Theology in a Pluralistic World*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.
- Luther, Martin. *Luther's Works*. 55 vols. Edited by Jaroslav Pelikan and Walter A. Hansen. St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1963.
- Robb, Carol S., ed. *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1985.
- Robbins, Jerry K. "A Reader's Guide to Process Christology." *Encounter* 53, no. 1 (Winter 1992): 78-92.

Ross, Mary Ellen. Review of *Journeys by Heart: A Christology of Erotic Power*, by Rita Nakashima Brock. *Theology Today* 46, no. 2 (1989): 206, 208.  
<<http://theologytoday.ptsem.edu/jul1989/v46-2-bookreview3.htm>>.

Sölle, Dorothee. *Theology for Skeptics: Reflections on God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995.

—. *Thinking About God: An Introduction to Theology*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990.

Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt. *God, Christ, Church: A Practical Guide to Process Theology*. New York: Crossroad, 1982.

Williams, Delores S. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

Young, Iris M. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990.