

Salvation

The branch of theology dealing with salvation is soteriology, which is based on the Greek word for salvation (*soteria*). Soteriology encompasses the entire breadth of God's saving work in us and for us, from the first effects of **grace** to the **resurrection** of the body and eternal life.

One aspect of salvation is conversion—the turning of our lives away from sin and to God. Many Christians experience evangelical conversion as a momentary event; however, there is a larger work of conversion that takes place over one's entire lifetime and begins with God's **prevenient grace**, even before we are distinctly aware of God. Through this grace God strives with every human heart to bring about faith and obedience. This grace creates in us conscience (the awareness of God's moral law), illumination (the beginning of our awareness of God) and awakening (the first awareness of our sin). Wesleyans regard these initial moments of spiritual life as part of God's saving work, even when they precede evangelical conversion.

Conversion continues as the Holy Spirit leads us into a life of repentance, which involves sorrow and change of life and is a life-long exercise in humility and self-examination. Repentance is, accordingly, an essential condition of salvation, for without repentance—without feeling sorrow for our sin—we cannot respond positively to God's grace.

Alongside repentance, the Spirit creates us anew, initially in **regeneration** (the new birth) and over time in **sanctification**. Regeneration denotes the fact that, whereas in a state of sin we were spiritually dead, in Jesus Christ we have been brought back from the dead and now live again in the presence of God. Sanctification signifies our growing separation from sin's power and our increasing renewal in the image of God. Although sanctification is completed in the perfection of love, God's grace continues to lead us into a life of increasing knowledge, faith and obedience.

Besides conversion, salvation encompasses all that God does for us in Jesus Christ, including:

- **Atonement**, which describes salvation in terms drawn from the sacrifice of a goat on the day of atonement, a sacrifice that covers the sins of the people. This view emphasizes the shedding of Jesus's blood and his vicarious death.
- **Reconciliation**, which portrays salvation as a movement from alienation to friendship and from wrath to peace.
- **Justification**, which depicts salvation as God's act of putting us in the right by virtue of Christ's blood, Christ's obedience and our faith. In this view, salvation consists in God making us righteous.
- **Adoption**, which represents salvation as a matter of becoming God's children and a part of God's household.

Each of these metaphors provides a distinctive insight into the way in which those in Jesus Christ stand in a new relationship to God. As we are united with Christ through his body, the church, we enjoy forgiveness of sin and peace with God and receive the gift of God's righteousness.

Salvation has a temporal structure. First, there is an important sense in which salvation is God's work, already accomplished, as when Paul noted that we *have been* justified and reconciled (Rom. 5:9-10) and when Hebrews affirms that Christ's death *has* perfected all those who are holy (Heb. 10:14). Because of God's decisive act in Jesus Christ, salvation is an accomplished fact. At the same time, salvation has an eschatological dimension, as when Paul declared that we will be saved (Rom. 5:9-10) from judgment and wrath at the eschatological day (1 Th. 1:10). It is also in the eschaton that

our salvation is completed by the resurrection, in which our bodies come to share in the new creation and in which the final effects of sin on human nature will be erased. The temporal structure of salvation is grounded in the eschatological nature of the kingdom of God, for while the Kingdom has already arrived with power God does not yet rule over everything. Although in one sense salvation is a finished deed, in another sense its completion awaits the eschatological culmination of history.

Finally, salvation has a cosmic dimension. All of creation will eventually share in the glory and salvation of the children of God; in Jesus Christ all things in heaven and earth are being reconciled to God. Salvation, then, is not merely a human reality. On the contrary, it is God's new creation, which remakes the entire created world.