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Christian Theologies of Salvation

A Comparative Introduction

Instructor's Guide

Salvation – redemption or deliverance from sin – has been a key focus of Christian theology since the first days of the church. Theologians from St. Augustine to Karl Barth have debated the finer points of salvation for nearly as long, offering a bewildering array of competing and often contradictory theories.

Christian Theologies of Salvation explores the ways in which pivotal theological figures have attempted to answer these questions, tracing doctrines of salvation from the first century into the twenty-first century. Each chapter focuses on a different major theologian, first presenting the theologian's doctrine of salvation, then highlighting how the doctrine makes a distinct contribution to the church's overall dogma. The volume offers a comparative focus, including doctrines of salvation that reflect the historical development of Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant views.

By illuminating the ways in which doctrines of salvation have evolved over the church's history, Justin Holcomb takes us across the teachings of Origin and Augustine, John Calvin and Martin Luther, and eventually to the more modern theologies of Karl Barth and Gustavo Gutiérrez. A much-needed map to the options and implications of different theologies of salvation, this book is essential reading for students and scholars of Christian thought.

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Patristic Theologies of Salvation Chapter 1

D. H. Williams begins part I with chapter 1 by demonstrating that, although the patristic era of the church never produced a unified or systematic theory of salvation, the ancient writers were diligent to articulate pastoral and practical doctrine helpful to their congregations, which certainly included teaching about salvation. In this first chapter, Williams reviews the differing approaches regarding salvation that the early theologians constructed, while explaining how the early church writings focused primarily on the giver of salvation through Christ rather than on the receiver of salvation in the individual.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain why one may make the general observation of the early Church's approach to salvation that God's salvation for humanity was less important than the God who was the ground of that salvation.
2. What is the importance of an emphasis on the power of God that cannot be thwarted by the power of sin or the will of any creature to the theocentric understanding of salvation found in the patristic era?
3. What is the difference between pagan religious demands for salvation and what is/was required for conversion to Christianity?
4. What does the statement mean "salvation is more of a line than a point?"

Origen of Alexandria Chapter 2

Thomas P. Scheck writes in chapter 2 on Origen and notes that though Origen lived through a period with little to no doctrinal consensus, he produced a rather organized and consistent theology (for his time) in the face of strong opposition from the Gnostics. Scheck explains that Origen's beliefs regarding salvation lie in the outcome of the believer's fight in the struggle to choose virtue or vice once the divine Word has been introduced to the soul.

Discussion Questions

1. What are the similarities and differences between Origen's theory of original sin and that of Augustine?
2. Explain why, for Origen, the doctrine that Paul teaches in his epistles cannot be severed from the teaching of Jesus in the Gospels.
3. What is meant by the French theologian C. Verfaillie's comments on Origen's text when he writes, "Origen speaks as a moralist here, but his psychology leads to a theology?"
4. What is the connection between Origen's understanding of the Pauline term "works of the law" and the so-called new perspective in Pauline interpretation?

Irenaeus of Lyons

Chapter 3

John Behr continues in chapter 3 with a recounting of the theology of Irenaeus of Lyons, an early church father who understood salvation in the gospel to be a recapitulation of all that God had done before Christ. For Irenaeus, salvation coincides with God's creation as the perfect purpose and will of God, fulfilled in the perfect image of God in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Why would Irenaeus's understanding of salvation be considered jarring to modern theology? Why might his understanding actually be consequential and coherent?
2. What is meant by Irenaeus's use of "type" as it relates to Adam?
3. Contrast the two modes of life that Irenaeus reads in Paul: animation and vivification.
4. Explain the "arc of the economy" of God highlighted by Behr. What is the connection of Adam and Christ in this arc of God's economy?
5. What is the effect of the "sign of Jonah" in finding salvation according to Irenaeus?
6. What connection is there between the human race and Adam? What happened to the human race because of Adam according to Irenaeus?

Saint Augustine Chapter 4

In chapter 4, David Vincent Meconi shows how Augustine's theology of salvation is rooted in conformity to the incarnate Christ. Augustine believed that when one becomes conformed to God in Christ, he or she is cut off from this world and transformed into a lover of God.

Discussion Questions

1. According to Augustine, what is the connection between human sin and salvation? That is, what do humans need saving from?
2. Briefly explain how Augustine envisions the process of healing, especially as it relates to the wholly gratuitous and thus ineffable nature of God's grace.
3. What is the importance of the "unification of natures" according to Augustine's analysis of the incarnation? Following Augustine's understanding of the incarnation, what is the effect of the dual-nature of the God-man on humans?
4. Augustine speaks about the deifying transformation of people, stating, "For God wishes not only to vivify, but also to deify us." Based on this statement, what does Augustinian salvation look like? Secondly, how would you explain the way in which Christ incorporates the human sinner into his own body?

Athanasius Chapter 5

John Yocum outlines the theology of salvation of Athanasius in chapter 5, noting that Athanasius believed that though man is fully dependent on grace, this grace is received by directing the mind toward God. As Yocum explains, Athanasius believed that the primary purpose of God becoming man in Christ was to do away with death and give way to life through the resurrection for those who are in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare Athanasius' view of the transcendent and philanthropic God and the nature of the human being created for relationship with God.
2. Athanasius argues that the human race was created teleologically, with an orientation toward God and self-transcendence through the knowledge of him, however, in sin, that changed. Because of sin, humans turned away from God and "began to do everything in reverse." What is meant by this phrase and how does it help us understand Athanasius' interpretation of sin and its consequences?
3. How would you explain Athanasius's "divine dilemma" and its importance to his understanding of salvation?
4. According to Athanasius, what is the cause of the Word joining himself to humanity through the appropriation of what is "closest" to humanity: a human body?
5. Explain the role of the Holy Spirit in the salvific plan, according to Athanasius.

The Cappadocians

Chapter 6

In chapter 6, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz writes about the Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. The theology of the Cappadocians, though with disagreements among the members at points, is relatively unified in the idea that the believer’s salvation is collective, that it is our nature that is saved.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare and contrast the theology of salvation of Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus.
2. What is the distinction between teaching about Christ “in the mode of theology” and teaching about Christ according to “the reasons of the economy” as found in Basil’s *Against Eunomius*? Why is this distinction important as it relates to the theology of salvation?
3. What is meant by Gregory of Nazianzus’s “mixture” in salvation? And, how does this compare with the Stoic doctrine of “complete mixture?”
4. Gregory of Nyssa focuses a great deal of Biblical language on the Spirit as the giver of life. If the Spirit gives life, then, how would you explain Christ’s role in salvation by Gregory’s account?
5. Summarize the three themes that emerge in Gregory of Nyssa’s theology about the eschaton and the fruit of Christ’s saving work being borne in the future age.
6. How is the soteriology of the Cappadocians different than that of Eunomius, Apollinarius, and the Pneumatomachians?

Theologies of Salvation in the Middle Ages

Chapter 7

Part II covers the Middle Ages and includes chapters on Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Julian of Norwich. In chapter 7, David Hogg provides the overview of this section, recounting the development of the theology of salvation through this period, where the life of Christ as the payment to the devil for the souls under his authority became an increasingly popular notion. Over the course of the Middle Ages, this doctrine became known as the harrowing of hell, due to the belief that when Jesus rose from the grave, the righteous were let out of hell itself.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain Anselm's position in soteriology that "God is our greatest enemy."
2. What are the main differences between Anselm and Peter Abelard's views of the atonement?
3. According to Thomas Aquinas, how does justification affect the "interior disposition" of the believer?
4. Why does Julian of Norwich fall short in popularity compared to Anselm, Abelard, and Aquinas? What about her theology was different than these three?

Anselm of Canterbury

Chapter 8

Giles Gasper, in chapter 8, writes about Anselm of Canterbury, one of the most important thinkers in Christian history. In contrast to many who came before him, Anselm's view of salvation did not consider the devil to be a major figure, but instead focused on humanity's culpability and the atoning work of Christ in salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain this statement by Anselm as it relates to his theology of salvation, "he would prefer to be placed in hell, although innocent, than to be allowed to dwell in heaven, even faintly tainted by sin."
2. How does Anselm use Scripture to guide his thought and writings?
3. Compare Eadmer's description of the Genesis of Anselm's Proslogion with Anselm's own description. In what ways are the two descriptions different and what is the effect of one over the other?
4. It is significant in Anselm's theology of salvation that there is a complete removal of the devil from any part in human sin. What is the result on Anselm's economy of salvation by the devil's absence?
5. Explain the role of ecclesiastical authority in salvation according to Anselm.
6. Summarize Anselm's ongoing influence on Christianity.

Saint Thomas Aquinas Chapter 9

In chapter 9, R. Jared Staudt continues part II by covering the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Staudt demonstrates that Aquinas's views on salvation are primarily rooted in the internal liberation from sin whereby the soul is renewed and justified by grace, and in the cause of said justification, which is participation in the justice of the soul of Jesus Christ himself.

Discussion Questions

1. Central to Aquinas' theology of salvation is justification. How would you Aquinas's understanding of the nature of justice?
2. What does "interior justice" according to Aquinas mean?
3. Describe the connection between justification and charity as Aquinas describes it. Secondly, explain Aquinas's assertion that one merits eternal life as a reward.
4. Explain how justification, in Aquinas's theology of salvation, culminates in deification.
5. How would you explain the meaning of Christ's mediation, the uniting of God and humanity, stated in Aquinas's Summa? Why did Christ become incarnate?
6. While Christ's resurrection completes the work of salvation, what else is required, according to Aquinas, to accomplish salvation?

Julian of Norwich Chapter 10

In chapter 10, Kerrie Hide completes this section by examining the life and thoughts of the English mystic Julian of Norwich. Julian's unique life of suffering shaped her understanding of theology, in which salvation is part of the journey of the individual, in which salvation occurs not as a result of humanity running from God, but a great "oneing" between Divinity and humanity.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the meaning of "oneing" and how does it relate to salvation in Julian's theology?
2. Explain how Julian's experiences of suffering and contemplative visionary experience of Christ contribute to her theology of redemption.
3. What is meant by "beholding" in Julian's theology? What is the importance of "beholding" to her theology of salvation? What is the connection between "beholding" and "oneing?"
4. Compare Julian's exploration of sin with that of others, such as, Thomas Aquinas, Anselm of Canterbury, or the modern view of sin in evangelical Christianity.
5. Define the four modes of "oneing" that Hide presents in this chapter.

Theologies of Salvation in the Reformation and Counter-Reformation Chapter 11

In Part III, we turn our focus to the theologies of salvation during the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, which covers Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the “Catholic Reform.” Frank A. James III provides an overview in Chapter 11 by discussing both the theology of the Reformers, in which God’s declaration of righteousness is based solely upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and the ensuing Catholic Counter-Reformation, in which salvation had happened, is happening, and is yet to come.

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by “the metaphor of justification became the primary expression of salvation” in the sixteenth-century reformation?
2. What was the result of *Anfektionen* and Luther’s development of salvation? What is the connection between his definition of justification and salvation?
3. Compare and contrast the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation.
4. What fear did the Council of Trent have for those who bought into Luther’s definition of justification by faith alone?

Martin Luther

Chapter 12

In Chapter 12, Carl Trueman writes about Martin Luther, the most important figure in the Protestant theology of salvation. Trueman explains Martin Luther's understanding of salvation as the justification by grace through faith in Christ so fundamental to Protestant and Reformed theology, as well as the implications involved in such a theology, including the sacraments, church authority, and the split from Roman Catholicism.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain how the development of the “pactum idea” helps one to better understand Luther in terms of his Medieval background.
2. What was the effect of Luther's struggle with the existential question, how could he, a sinner, stand before a righteous God, on his theology? What changed about his theology as a result of this struggle?
3. Why does Trueman highlight “humility” as playing such an important role in Luther's theology of salvation? How you explain the way in which “humility” has shaped Luther's faith and practice?
4. What is the difference between Luther's Ninety Five Theses Against Indulgences and the Heidelberg Disputation?
5. Why was Luther's treatise in 1525, entitled *On the Bondage of the Will*, considered the most elaborate expression of the theology of human impotence and divine agency?

John Calvin Chapter 13

J. Todd Billings, in chapter 13, focuses on John Calvin, who, with earlier Catholic theologians, champions the work of the Spirit's indwelling, transforming, and glorifying human beings in Christ, as well as his understanding of the gospel as the double grace of justification and sanctification accessed through union with Christ, received through faith.

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by “double grace of union through Christ” as it relates to Calvin's theology? Why is it important to understand what is meant by this?
2. What is the difference in Calvin's understanding of “union with Christ” in his early works, compared to later when he completed his exegesis of Romans?
3. How would you explain Calvin's doctrine of justification?
4. How would you describe the role of the book of Romans in Calvin's theology of justification and sanctification and union with Christ? In what ways did he use Romans as his study of Scripture continued in his ministry?
5. Explain how Calvin engaged the writings of the church fathers on the themes of union with Christ and double grace.
6. Briefly describe the debate (controversy) between Calvin and Andreas Osiander.
7. Summarize Calvin's theology of salvation based on the information provided by Billings in this chapter.

The Catholic Reform

Chapter 14

In chapter 14, Donald Prudlo closes out part III of the Theologies of Salvation with the ensuing Catholic Reform, in which the Catholic Church, through the Council of Trent, speaks of justification as both an event and a process through which all believers must go. The Council of Trent argues that one can never be certain of one's salvation and that believers grow in holiness through the performance of good works, perfected by grace.

Discussion Questions

1. Explain how salvation, according to the Council of Trent, is both an event and a process. How would a premodern Catholic answer the question, "Are you saved?"
2. What is meant by the form of philosophy born in the 1300s by the name of *via moderna*?
3. What was the cause of the Catholics moving to clearly define the terms used to describe their theology?
4. What was the result of the Catholics and Lutherans working together to articulate the document entitled, "Double Justification?"
5. Highlight the differences between the theology of the Tridentine Council and the theology of Luther, specifically as it relates to justification, extrinsic imputation, concupiscence, salvation, and baptism.
6. What was the result of the Council's six-month discussion about justification?
7. How would you summarize the nature and content of justification as decreed by the Council?

Theologies of Salvation from the Eighteenth- to Twenty-First Centuries

Chapter 15

Part IV, on theologies of salvation from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, covers John Wesley, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Gustavo Gutiérrez. In chapter 15, Ryan Reeves provides an overview of this section and explains that the unique context of this period provides an intriguing backdrop for competing theologies of salvation. The dawn and subsequent growth of modernity and the rise in rational, empirical thinking in this time period reveal the need for theologians to reexamine both the nature and effects of salvation.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the importance of Wesley's theology, specifically, the sanctification of the Holy Spirit, on the tone of theology during the eighteenth century? In what ways were his teachings different than those of Friedrich Schleiermacher?
2. What was the result of advances in science and technology in the nineteenth century on traditional claims about Christianity?
3. How would you explain Barth's approach to salvation?
4. Explain how and why Rahner and Balthasar reacted against neo-scholastic training.
5. What is meant by Liberation Theology and who was its main proponent?

John Wesley Chapter 16

Thomas McCall begins this section with chapter 16 and an examination of the teachings of John Wesley, one of the most influential men of the eighteenth century. McCall writes of Wesley's theology of salvation, though not unique in Christian history, as an important and unmistakably Protestant view, rooted in the theology of the early church, though with an emphasis on God's universal salvific will together with unlimited atonement.

Discussion Questions

1. What makes John Wesley's doctrine of salvation "eclectic" according to Thomas McCall?
2. Wesley says, "God is love: accordingly man at his creation was full of love . . . God is full of justice, mercy, and truth; so was man when he came from the hands of his Creator." How would you explain the theological framework of Wesley's doctrine of salvation?
3. What are the major differences between Wesley's understanding of the doctrines of election and predestination and the Reformed views of election and predestination?
4. Compare Wesley's view of the doctrine of justification with the Protestant doctrine of justification.
5. For Wesley, what is the connection between regeneration and justification?
6. Explain how Wesley communicates Perseverance and Assurance in the Christian life.
7. What is the importance of "social justice" as it relates to Wesley's theology?

Friedrich Schleiermacher's Theology of Salvation

Chapter 17

In chapter 17, James Gordon provides an account of Friedrich Schleiermacher's theology of salvation. Schleiermacher's theology of salvation was unique, directly confronting the challenges posed by modernity, positing that the solution to the sin problem in man is found in the reality in the removal of sin and the incorporation of the believer into the corporate life of "blessedness" in Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by Schleiermacher's "mystical" view of Christian salvation? How is this view different than the "magical" view or the "empirical" view?
2. Explain how Schleiermacher approaches his treatment of sin and redemption.
3. For Schleiermacher's theology of salvation, what is the connection between sin and God-consciousness?
4. Schleiermacher understands sin as originating within oneself and outside of oneself. Compare his understanding of "original" sin and "actual" sin.
5. As noted in chapter 17, Schleiermacher writes, "In this corporate life which goes back to the influence of Jesus, redemption is effected by Him through the communication of His sinless perfection." What does he mean by this statement as it relates to Christ and the corporate life of blessedness?
6. What is the importance of the states of God-consciousness existing in Christ as it relates to Schleiermacher's treatment of Christ's person?
7. Explain how the individual experiences that redeeming and reconciling activity of the Redeemer as explained through Schleiermacher's doctrines of regeneration and sanctification.

Karl Barth

Chapter 18

Part IV continues with Tom Greggs chapter 18 on Karl Barth, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. For Barth, Christ is both the electing God and the elected man, where the active and passive election of the Son provides the basis for the election of individual men and women. Salvation is primarily the gift of the God of salvation who has chosen to be God in a particular way: in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What is meant by “creation is the beginning of the Heilsgeschichte” and how does creation connect to salvation for Barth?
2. Explain how the term “in Christ” is central to Barth’s soteriology?
3. What’s the connection between Barth’s doctrine of election and his doctrine of God as it relates to his soteriology?
4. What is the importance of Barth’s doctrine of reconciliation to his view of sanctification?
5. What is the result of Barth’s soteriological objectivism on the extent of salvation for humans?

Friedrich Schleiermacher's Theology of Salvation

Chapter 19

In chapter 19, W. T. Dickens provides an account of the theology of salvation for both Balthasar and Rahner, eminent Roman Catholic, Jesuit theologians of the twentieth century. Dickens explores both the similarities between these two theologians, such as their disdain for the neoscholastic theological method, and their differences, which primarily exist in their conception of the person, distinctive views of sin, and the scope of the reconciliation of God in Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Compare the strategies that Balthasar and Rahner employed to ameliorate the effects of neoscholasticism.
2. How would you summarize Rahner's argument against neoscholasticism? What is meant by Rahner's "a priori possibility on man's part" of being oriented to God?
3. How was Balthasar's argument against neoscholasticism different than Rahner's argument?
4. Both Rahner and Balthasar rejected as simplistic the common notion of sin as a specific deed that violates a divinely ordained and ecclesiastically enforced code of conduct, but they also differed on their view of sin in some ways. What were their differences?
5. With so many similarities in their theologies, explain how Rahner and Balthasar could differ over how the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ reconciled the cosmos with God.
6. In your own words, explain how did Rahner and Balthasar envisioned the process by means of which someone can come to accept and act in accordance with the gift of forgiveness and deepening communion with God made available in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
7. What was meant by Balthasar's statement that humans are "the summit of the whole material and organic creation and its mouthpiece before God?"
8. What is meant by Rahner's "anonymous Christianity" and how does this connect with his view of the Catholic Church as inclusive?

Gustavo Gutiérrez Chapter 20

In chapter 20, Michal Edward Lee seeks to explain the soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of liberation theology. Gutiérrez's theology of salvation is centered on the communion of humans with one another and with God, found not necessarily in a forensic declaration, meritorious works, or exclusive claim to an economic transaction, but in relationship with God the Father who produces human flourishing.

Discussion Questions

1. Gustavo Gutiérrez offers a basic definition of salvation: “the communion of human beings with God and among themselves.” Explain how in the simplicity of this statement lies the complexity of liberation theology.
2. What is meant by “integral salvation” and how is this a move away from a quantitative view of salvation?
3. What was the result of Gutiérrez move to identify “three reciprocally interpenetrating levels of meaning” of the term liberation that demonstrate the complexity of the term and its usefulness in signifying what Christians mean by salvation?
4. What is the significance of the term “liberation” by the socioeconomic level meaning?
5. What is the connection between the socioeconomic level of meaning of liberation and the “utopian-historical” level of meaning?
6. Compare the third level of the meaning of liberation with the first two.
7. How would you explain the role of Jesus Christ in Gutiérrez's liberation theology?
8. According to liberation theology, what is the result of Jesus' resurrection and how is this important to the way in which Gutiérrez treats the subject of Jesus Christ?
9. Gutiérrez captures the material sense of poverty when he describes it as “death before one's time.” To that end, why is the preferential option for the poor an important aspect of liberation theology?