

ARTICLE 5

Salvation

God's Initiative

We believe that God is at work to accomplish deliverance and healing, redemption and restoration in a world dominated by sin. From the beginning, God's purpose has been to create for Himself a people, to dwell among them and to bless them. Creation and all of humanity are without hope of salvation except through God's love and grace. God's love is fully demonstrated in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

God's Plan

Throughout history, God has acted mightily to deliver people from bondage and draw them into a covenant relationship. Through the prophets, God prepared the way of salvation until finally God reconciled the world to Himself by the atoning blood of Jesus. As people place their trust in Christ, they are saved by grace through faith, not of their own doing, but as a gift of God. God forgives them, delivers them from sin's bondage, makes them new creatures in Christ, empowers them by the Holy Spirit, and seals them for eternal life. When sin and death are finally abolished and the redeemed are gathered in the new heaven and the new earth, God will have completed the plan of salvation.

Humanity's Response

Though Jesus entered a world ruled by sin, he chose not to submit to its allure and broke its domination. Through his obedient life, his death on the cross, and his glorious resurrection, Christ triumphed over Satan and the powers of sin and death, opening the way for all people to follow. Convicted by the Holy Spirit, people turn from sin, entrust their lives to God, confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and join the family of God. All who receive Christ are born again, and have peace with God, and are called to love one another and live at peace with their neighbour. Those whom God is saving no longer live for themselves, for they have been set free from sin and called to newness of life.

Exodus 6:1-8; 15:2; 20:2; Psalm 68:19-20; Isaiah 43:1; Matthew 4:1-11; Mark 10:45; John 1:12; 3:1-21; 13:34-35; 16:8-11; Romans 3:24-26; 5:8, 12-21; 8:18-25; 10:9-10; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Ephesians 1:5-10, 13-14; 2:8-9; Colossians 1:13-14; 2:15; Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:12; 5:7-9; 9:15-28; 11:6; 1 John 4:7-11; Revelation 5:9-10; 21:1-4.

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COMMENTARY

Salvation is the most inclusive term used to describe God's program and action in response to the desperate needs of humankind and all the rest of the creation. Scripture accounts for and illustrates these problems beginning with the sinful actions of our first human parents. In our world, we continue to see that humans are alienated from God, one another, their fellow creatures, the rest of creation, and even themselves. Just as sin is individual, corporate, and cosmic, so God's salvation addresses each area of God's purpose which has subsequently been damaged.

Salvation *From* and Salvation *To*

God saves from physical threats (Deuteronomy 26:5-9; Matthew 8:25), from disease and physical maladies (Exodus 15:26; Psalm 103:3; Mark 5:28, 34; James 5:15), and from spiritual dangers such as God's wrath (Romans 5:9-10), Satan (Acts 26:18; Ephesians 6:11), and demonic oppression (Luke 8:36). The most common New Testament use of salvation, though, has to do with sin; indeed, Jesus' name was given because he would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). God's people are saved from the penalty (Luke 7:48-50), power (Romans 6:12-14), and practice of sin (1 John 3:9-10). It is instructive to recognize that the New Testament writers frequently employ the same terms for salvation from matters such as illness and demon possession as they do from sin (e.g. Luke 7:50; 8:48).

The goal toward which salvation works is described in Scripture by three major images. First, there is *liberation* or *liberty*. Freedom for the formerly oppressed enables them to fulfill the law by loving and serving (Galatians 5:1, 13-14). Second, an important part of God's liberty involves *health* and *wholeness* as evidenced by Jesus' ministry in these areas (Mark 2:17). Third, the term *shalom*, found especially in the prophetic writings, is used in descriptions of a peaceful and just society where people live together harmoniously and where "nation will not take up sword against nation" (Isaiah 2:2-4, see also 9:6-7; 32:15-18; Micah 4:1-4; Zechariah 2:6-12).

Salvation in Christ

Christ is the true Saviour sent from God (Acts 13:23), and salvation in the New Testament is described in terms of union with him. The believer is "in Christ" and thus a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). Christ is portrayed

as the vine, with believers being the branches (John 15:1-10). Christ is described as the cornerstone of a building (Ephesians 2:21-22), and as head of the body (Ephesians 5:23). Furthermore, “Christ in you” is the hope of glory (Colossians 1:27), and Paul can say that “it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20 NRSV).

It is evident from all the above that God’s salvation is holistic, embracing all that God originally intended for the entire creation, including that which was subsequently lost or damaged. Salvation encompasses both material (caring for the sick, hungry, naked) and spiritual matters (Mark 2:1-12). Jesus’ earthly ministry demonstrates this breadth (Luke 4:18-21; Matthew 11:4-6), and he calls his followers likewise to embody it (Matthew 10:5-8; Luke 14:2-14).

Receiving Salvation by Grace through Faith

God’s initiative in salvation is motivated by His unfathomable love (1 John 4:7-11). The term *grace* is used to describe the marvellous reality that God freely saves, through no work or merit of their own, those who will repent, which means a radical turning from sin and turning to God (Acts 2:38; Ephesians 2:8-9). Repentance involves a new attitude toward one’s past life and actions, a rejection of trust in anything or anyone but Christ as Saviour and Lord, and a commitment to behaviour that reflects obedience to Christ.

Acceptance of God’s gift of salvation, described as a “new birth” (John 3:1-21; 1 Peter 1:3, 23), occurs as individuals voluntarily receive it by faith. Whether a person is gradually nurtured through the believing community or experiences a crisis conversion, genuine faith indispensably involves each of the following: embracing a set of basic beliefs (John 20:31; 2 Timothy 3:14-15), a commitment of trust in Christ and Christ’s work (Romans 4:18-25; Galatians 5:2-11), and actions which reflect such belief and commitment (James 2:14-26). Christ has instructed that those who become disciples should be baptized (Matthew 28:18-20). Mennonite Brethren understand this to be a public statement of identification with Christ and his body, and a symbolic act of receiving God’s cleansing from sin and the gift of the Holy Spirit. We do not baptize infants because they are not able to make an informed choice for Christ and against the world and Satan.

God’s grace not only accepts but also equips (Philippians 2:13) and transforms (2 Corinthians 3:18) the believer and believing communities, who are then enabled to accept and serve others as God did them. The life of discipleship is not merely a response to God’s salvation, but constitutes a “working out” of that salvation (Philippians 2:12). Scripture also exhorts that salvation must not be “neglected” (Hebrews 2:3) but rather must be “held firmly” (1 Corinthians 15:2). Believers have died with Christ in baptism so that as Christ was raised they “too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4 NRSV).

Salvation Involves Past, Present, and Future

The Bible describes salvation in terms of past, present, and future. The past, objective dimension is presented with the imagery of redemption (Deuteronomy 13:5; Mark 10:45), justification (Isaiah 43:25; Romans 8:1), adoption (Exodus 4:22; Hosea 11:1; Galatians 4:5-7), and reconciliation (Colossians 1:21; 2 Corinthians 5:19). These images are used of each believer's relationship to God, but they also (particularly adoption and reconciliation) reflect the corporate and communal implications of salvation for God's people. Salvation means that we are becoming a family (Hebrews 13:1; 1 Timothy 5:1), a body (1 Corinthians 12:12-31), and a building (Ephesians 2:20-22; 1 Peter 2:4-6). We are breaking down walls of hostility between us and reconciling ourselves to one another (Ephesians 2:14-16; Galatians 3:27-28).

This communal dimension is an important aspect of salvation's present, ongoing nature (Acts 2:47) and has been a consistent emphasis of Anabaptists regarding salvation. Jesus' teaching employed the images of new birth (John 3:3-7; 1 Peter 1:23) and the new covenant (Luke 22:20; 2 Corinthians 3:6; Jeremiah 31:33). The psalmist speaks of a continuing process in which hearts are made pure (Psalm 51:10). This experience of sanctification is also described in terms of a "new person" who puts off the old nature and puts on the new nature (Ephesians 4:23-24) and is transformed by being renewed in mind (Romans 12:1). By the power of the Spirit, believers are expected to act differently as disciples of Jesus (Galatians 5:25) so that true faith is evident by outward actions (1 John 3:9; James 2:24).

At a future time, God will bring this age to a close and complete the defeat of Satan and death (Revelation 20:10; 1 Corinthians 15:26). God's complete salvation is therefore a future hope (Luke 21:28; Romans 13:11; 1 Thessalonians 5:8-9). Though suffering may come, "the one who endures to the end will be saved" (Matthew 10:22; 24:13 NRSV).

A look to the future also alerts us to the cosmic dimension of salvation, when God will bring in the new heaven and the new earth (Isaiah 65:17-25; 2 Peter 3:13; Revelation 3:12; 21:2, 10). Scripture informs us that the purpose of all creation is to glorify God (Psalm 19:1; 69:34). While Jesus declares that human beings are worth more than the birds and the flowers (Matthew 6:26-30), he echoes the testimony of all Scripture that God cares for these creatures as well (Genesis 9:1-10, 12, 15, 17; Jonah 4:11; Hosea 2:18). The cosmos, presently "groaning" and "suffering," will one day be set free from slavery and the corruption it now experiences (Romans 8:20-21; Isaiah 11:6, 9).

In summary, salvation involves what God has already done, what God is doing, and the fullness God will ultimately bring.

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PASTORAL APPLICATION

Salvation lies at the core of the Christian experience. The gospel calls people to salvation—from slavery to sin into the freedom that comes through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Salvation begins with *redemption* from slavery to sin and involves *adoption* as believers are *born again* into the family of God. Salvation from past sin, however, is only the beginning. Salvation continues in the present as the redeemed children of God live the new life that results from that freedom. The redeemed are *sanctified*—set apart for God’s use in the present. Salvation in the future includes the promise of life in the new heavens and the new earth. The cosmic dimension of salvation reminds us that all creation will enjoy the fruits of God’s saving activity. Our understanding of salvation has implications for both the individual’s response to the gospel and the church’s involvement in the larger saving purposes of God.

Atonement

Atonement is a term which represents God’s accomplishment of salvation through Christ. Christians through the centuries have embraced several models of the atonement. The legal substitution model, probably the most common view among Protestants, focuses on the death of Christ as a substitute for the punishment which all humanity deserved. It emphasizes the truth that we could not accomplish our own salvation.

The moral influence model describes the change which occurs in human attitudes toward God when they recognize in the death of Christ how much God loves them. God takes the initiative in Christ to show us this love which results in breaking the barrier of mistrust between God and humans.

The example model puts the focus on the life and teachings of Christ. While this model rightly emphasizes that Jesus teaches and exemplifies what we are called to do in order to please God, historically it has often been associated with a position that denies Christ’s deity. In that sense, it fails to appreciate the depth of human sinfulness and the necessity of relying upon the Spirit for the life of faith.

Finally, the dramatic or Christ-as-Victor model, historically the earliest, depicts a drama in which Jesus defeats Satan, setting human captives free. A variation of this emphasizes the role of human beings enlisted by Christ to be part of the ongoing divine struggle with the evil powers that enslave people.

God's people participate in this ongoing struggle and thus their lives are also subject to death which brings victory over the powers of evil.

The model of atonement one adopts tends to shape one's understanding of salvation and approach to Christian living. It is important to balance such models with the whole counsel of Scripture. For example, the substitutionary model offers little in connection with Christ's call to discipleship, perhaps even implying that it is optional. But Jesus tells us only those who obey his Father will enter the kingdom (Matthew 7:21). Although early Anabaptists employed forms of the substitutionary atonement model, they also used other models such as Christ-as-Victor. Whatever the model, they emphasized that Christ's life and teachings demonstrate how Christians must participate in God's grace.

Personal and Corporate Faith

Faith is personal but not individualistic; people find their identity in the midst of a web of relationships with other people and among social structures. With gifts of the Spirit, God ministers to His people through other people. An important part of God's saving work is to form the church into a coordinated body, a family both ministering to itself and reaching out to receive others. In this growth, the local congregation should welcome the gifts that believers from other Christian traditions offer, as well as become more informed of its own heritage.

Through the centuries, Christian groups have taken several distinct approaches to the culture around them in recognition of the call to be "salt" and "light" both by embodying and witnessing to God's salvation. Those of the Anabaptist tradition have been hesitant to occupy positions of secular authority with the intent to manipulate structures toward the purposes of God. Nevertheless, Christians can have a significant influence within businesses and institutions, influencing them toward that which is in harmony with God's goals and values. Congregations need to equip their members as agents of God's transforming *shalom* without compromising the ways of Christ in doing so.

Salvation and Healing

In seeking to embrace and live out our salvation in Christ, the needs of individuals, families, and groups within the congregation can often be tremendous. In matters of healing and wellness, leaders should seek and welcome counsel from those who can assist them with godly wisdom. God equips some believers for ministries of direct healing and deliverance. God also equips physicians and therapists with skills and insights which can be of help to God's people. While caution is always appropriate when receiving assistance from those outside the Christian fold, we may recognize and be

grateful for whatever ways God's healing comes to us.

The ministry of exorcism has been recognized in the church since the New Testament period. Its appropriate practice, however, continues to be a matter of exploration and discussion among Mennonite Brethren. While we should not discount the reality of the demonic, caution and an avoidance of extremism should be encouraged. Awareness of demonic forces within institutions and systems is another matter for urgent investigation regarding the church's role in ministering salvation and healing in the larger society.

Conversion and Discipleship

The nature of salvation was one of the key issues leading to the founding of the Mennonite Brethren Church in Russia in 1860. It was the concern of the Brethren that salvation be a meaningful choice that resulted in a life of discipleship. This led them to form a new body of believers. Consequently "conversion" became an important part of Mennonite Brethren theology.

Salvation involves the past. One is saved from sin at the point of conversion when the need for salvation is recognized. When people realize their lost condition and understand the salvation Jesus offers, it is appropriate for them to respond in an attitude of repentance and commitment.

Salvation also involves the present. We are *being* saved. Present salvation is expressed in Christian discipleship and connection with the body of Christ, the church. Therefore it is important that new believers not only experience conversion but also grow in following the Lord.

Childhood Conversions

Conversion at an early age is a testimony of the presence of Christian teaching in the home and the church. Early childhood conversions raise pastoral issues concerning the nature of salvation. Children are spiritually sensitive and can respond to the work of the Spirit in their lives. It is important that their response be to the Spirit and not only to the desires or persuasion of parents or teachers.

Childhood conversions are often the God-given fruit of raising children in Christian homes. Conversion should be celebrated with children, their families, and the church. Parents and leaders must also help children and their families understand that conversion is only the beginning and that spiritual growth should follow.

One of the ways discipleship is often expressed is through baptism and church membership. Baptism is an important event in the lives of young people; however, it is not the end of the process. Discipleship expresses itself through a lifestyle that is characterized by obedience to the teachings of Christ, Christian service, and involvement in the local church.

In some congregations, the age of baptism seems to be lowering. The challenge for churches is how to affirm the desire of children for baptism yet encourage them to wait until they understand what it means to be accountable to the congregation. Since church membership is part of baptism, membership should call youth to a higher level of spiritual commitment involving tithing, praying for the church and its leaders, ministering in service and outreach activities, participating in worship services, and encouraging evangelism.

It is important that we validate, affirm, and celebrate childhood conversions. We do not want to hinder children from coming to Christ, for they are a part of the kingdom of God (Matthew 19:13-14).

Conversion and “Altar Calls”

Since salvation among Mennonite Brethren was traditionally associated with the dramatic event of conversion, opportunities were often given for this event to take place. As a result, revival and evangelistic services have had an important role in the history of the MB Church. Particularly in the past, altar calls were a significant way for people to express publicly their salvation. Those who responded knew people would be watching to see if their conversion was a life-changing experience. Though altar calls and other public demonstrations are not as common in our churches as they used to be, they can still provide opportunities to express new or renewed commitment to Jesus Christ.

We believe that each person’s life of faith has a beginning point. However, not all believers have a dramatic conversion experience where they can point to a specific time when they were “saved.” For some, conversion has been a process in which they have grown in their understanding of salvation and faith. Although they cannot point to a moment when they were “converted,” they know conversion has taken place. We can affirm and celebrate a variety of conversion experiences, whether dramatic or gradual.

Assurance of Salvation

The certainty of one’s salvation is a common concern raised by members of the body of Christ, particularly among new believers and those in the latter stages of life. Such an inquiry into one’s spiritual status should not be viewed simply as a matter of doubt or a demonstration of “little” faith, but rather as a legitimate exploration into the nature and foundation of the salvation experience. Responding with sensitivity and encouragement to the questioning person can be a positive and edifying experience for both the inquirer and the one giving counsel. When believers express doubt over the assurance of salvation, the following may prove helpful.

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Remind them that such a question is not uncommon among believers.

Caution them not to allow present *feelings* to be the basis of whether or not one is saved. Feelings come and go and are not a reliable standard in gauging one's faith in Christ.

Encourage them to respond to doubts concerning salvation with the *facts* of their experience of conversion and the teaching of Scripture. The following questions can be considered:

Do I know the facts about the person of Jesus? Do I understand that Jesus is God's Son, that he took on human form, that he died on the cross for my sin, that he rose again on the third day?

Do I believe the facts about Jesus Christ? Do I trust that Jesus accomplished what was said of him in Scripture?

Have I asked Jesus to forgive my sins and come into my life? Have I asked Jesus to be in control of my life?

Do I consciously and deliberately strive to follow Jesus in my everyday life?

Those who answer affirmatively to such questions can be encouraged that they are most assuredly followers of Jesus Christ who have indeed received the gift of salvation. Questions answered negatively or with uncertainty should be responded to appropriately.

Those questioning their salvation can be reassured that the Holy Spirit lives in us to remind, teach, and assure us that we are indeed children of God. It can also be helpful to walk a person through the promises of Scripture concerning salvation, found in passages such as John 5:24; Romans 8:16; 10:9, 13; 1 John 2:3, 5, 6, 29; 3:13; 4:7; 5:10-13.

Age of Accountability

Are infants or young children who have died before accepting Christ as Saviour still recipients of eternal life? This can be a sensitive issue for parents and churches. We need to be sensitive to the emotions experienced by grieving parents, while remaining true to the testimony of Scripture on the matter of young children and their salvation.

Mennonite Brethren believe that there is sufficient biblical evidence to affirm the salvation of children who die before they are able to make a conscious choice for Christ. We believe that the atoning death of Jesus Christ is sufficient to provide for their salvation.

In Matthew 18:1-4, Jesus lifted up children as model participants in the

gift of eternal life. By their very spirit toward the Lord and the things of God, these little ones would gain entry into heaven: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 18:3).

Jesus welcomed and blessed the little ones who came to him. “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these’” (Matthew 19:14). Jesus declared that little children were heirs of eternal life without suggesting that they must first express a formal testimony of faith in him. It is true that we desire young children to make a formal profession of faith when they are ready to do so. However, the absence of such a declaration alone should not render them unsaved in our minds. Why? As Jesus said, “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.”

The Lord never taught that young children, unable to make a conscious profession of allegiance to the Lord, would experience anything other than a place in the kingdom of God. He held them up as those who would certainly be welcomed into the Father’s presence.

Such a position is consistent with Anabaptist theology. Menno Simons was a fervent preacher of conversion and voluntary discipleship. At the same time, he understood that children under the age of accountability were welcomed into God’s kingdom. To Menno Simons, these children were innocent, saved, holy, pure, pleasing to God and, as a result, partakers of the promise of heaven. “To innocent and minor children sin is for Jesus’ sake not imputed. Life is promised, not through any ceremony, but of pure grace, through the blood of the Lord, as He Himself says: Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not, for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (Simons, 131).

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