



Mission and the Nature of Salvation

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The British Council of Christians and Jews' Assistant Education Officer debates Helen Fry's article on the same subject

Mission and the Nature of “Salvation”

by Jane Clements

CCJ's Assistant Education Officer (UK) debates [Helen Fry's article on the same subject](#)

When one stands back and examines the ground gained in Jewish-Christian dialogue, it is startling to consider just how far we have come together. Now, in an attempt to improve mutual understanding and tolerance still further, Christians of all denominations are being called upon to re-examine their theology with regard to other faiths and, in some cases, their approach to the reinterpretation of Scripture. For a large number, this presents no problem. Decades of Biblical criticism have opened people's minds to the possibility of alternative readings of the Gospels. In addition, many are perfectly happy to accept the notion that Christianity and Judaism (and, for that matter, Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism as well) offer equally valid paths to God. However, a great proportion of Christians, particularly those from an "evangelical" tradition believe that this is the ultimate barrier -- a line which they can never cross. The central doctrine in Protestant theology is the belief that salvation is essential to humankind and comes only through faith in the sacrificial nature of Jesus' death. Much as they desire with the Council of Christian and Jews "to fight the evils of prejudice, intolerance and discrimination" and "to work for the betterment of human relations", such Christians express caution as to where such a path may be asking them to go.

First, let us define our terms. John Martin, in his book *Gospel People?*^[1], stresses that, when we talk about "evangelical", we are referring to a Christian tradition which cuts across denominational boundaries. Baptists, Pentecostals, many Anglican and some Methodist and independent congregations would recognise the label, even if they do not specifically use it. Martin defines evangelicals in terms of a common "pattern of convictions and attitudes". This pattern involves a reliance on the Bible as the ultimate authority, rather than Church tradition, subsequent Christian writings or methods of "interpretation". Emphasis is also placed on an energetic, individualistic approach to religious duties and social involvement.

An evangelical reading of the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) presents the entirety of Creation, and especially humankind, as flawed. Human beings are condemned as a result of Adam (and, especially Eve)'s sin of disobedience. Christian doctrine states that it is in our nature to sin -- it is our destiny to perish. Atonement with God is therefore an urgent universal imperative and can only be achieved through the sacrificial death of Jesus who was God made flesh. For many Christians, therefore, dialogue with Jews (or even others whose salvation theology may differ) raises real problems.

Evangelical belief

It does not help when others suggest that a belief in eternal hellfire for all but the saved is a medieval fantasy. The pitchforks and red-tailed devils may be, but possible denial of God's

presence with all the pain and despair

that such a condition suggests, remains very real for many contemporary Christians. A belief in the basic goodness of humankind is absent from evangelical theology, and any hope that a "loving God" could not permit such a state of affairs is contradicted by the transcendence of the Cross. The kernel of evangelical belief is contained in a number of New Testament passages such as John's Gospel, chapter 3, verse 16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." Helen Fry demands in her article "Mission and the Nature of Salvation" (*Common Ground*, 1996 Number 3), that this salvation theology be jettisoned forthwith, since it is unhelpful and discriminatory. For many Christians, however, this belief is their "last ditch". If it is abandoned, forgotten or even "reinterpreted", there would be no purpose at all for them in being Christians.

How do those who wish to follow this apparently literal teaching of the New Testament engage in real dialogue? An immediate response might be "Why should they want to?" and yet, amazingly, many evangelical Christians do want to. They want very much simply to meet Jews, to learn about and from Judaism and to redefine their own liturgical practices in the manner of the first "Christians". Evangelical Christians nurse an often vague and undefined conviction that the Jews remain the Chosen People of God; they are passionate about the land of Israel. In Christian prophetic writings about the "last days", the people, the land and the cities of Israel figure prominently. And this, perhaps, is the first glimmer of light in the tunnel, for evangelical Christians also display a tendency to be experience-led.

Vibrant

Christians of any persuasion who are fortunate enough to engage in real dialogue with Jews soon come to realise that Judaism has not been rendered obsolete by Christianity but is vibrant and meaningful. This inevitably leads to a desire for a clearer expression of salvation theology which will help Christians to make sense of their dilemma. In the light of so much which has been written in the area of Jewish-Christian relations, this may seem a discouragingly modest beginning, but it has implications.

The Protestant church has always had to deal with problematic Scripture. The most notable is perhaps the passage in the letter of James (chapter 2, verse 14) which states plainly that a man cannot be saved simply by faith, but that good "works" are essential. It is particularly interesting, furthermore, to read in 1 Timothy 2, verse 15 that "woman will be saved through childbirth". Both passages are in apparent contradiction to the accepted Protestant view of salvation. For Christians for whom every word of both Old and New Testaments is Divinely inspired, it is interesting to see how these passages are dealt with. In fact, they are, firstly, placed firmly in literary and historical context. They are then interpreted and accorded weight by means of Christian experience.

On the other hand, questions have been asked in the light of Christian experience in the world -- for example, what about salvation for babies and small children? This question has elicited many ingenious responses, all deriving from human sentiment rather than Scripture, but has led to no universally accepted Protestant doctrine. Other points of discussion have included prospects for those ignorant of the Christian gospel and the question of whether the Jews are a "special case". In such circumstances, the unfathomable will of the Almighty and God's attributes of justice and mercy are generally cited, with selected backing from Scripture.

Salvation Theology

Salvation theology has undeniably been altered, adapted and refined since its conception, but it has not in recent times received the attention it deserved^[2]. It has, for many Christians, been

finally reduced to a crude, simplistic and analogous formula which in some congregations has swept aside all other practice and teaching. Liberal thinkers have been obliged to dismiss it altogether. But there is a case to be made for unpacking the concept of salvation further rather than abandoning it. The evangelical approach has much to say about the holiness of God, the unworthiness of God's people, the universality of God's unbounded lovingkindness, the need for a personal response, the possibility of God's intervention in history. There are further possibilities. In view of the Protestant churches' leading role in the promotion of literacy and Bible reading, it is ironic that knowledge of anything other than the plain text itself, in the vernacular -- and often with pictures -- is still by and large the preserve of the clergy. It is time that all denominations promoted and encouraged the informed study of all Scripture in its proper context and even in its original languages. Furthermore, and most importantly, it is essential that the ethical teaching of Jesus and the "social gospel" not be relegated to the role of poor cousin, but be recognised as an essential element of Christian witness. Finally, the Christian church must stress its emphasis on the universality of God, welcoming each person, whatever their official "Christian" standing as individuals and at face value, in keeping with the spirit of the Gospels. By these means, evangelical theology may shake off its narrow, judgmental image and, in the light of experience, rediscover a great deal that is in danger of being lost.

[1](#) SPCK, 1997, p9 & n4

[2](#) John McIntyre's *The Shape of Soteriology* (T&T Clark, 1992) is very helpful here. See also John Sanders' *No Other Name* (SPCK 1994)

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