

Salvation – a conservative evangelical view

Introduction

The conservative evangelical understanding of salvation is driven by the big idea that salvation is by God's grace alone for God's glory alone.¹ It combines two convictions: **our complete inability to save ourselves** with the conviction that **salvation is possible by the glorious grace of God**. This leads, on the one hand, to a concern to avoid all schemes of salvation that trust in human merit or potential as contributing in any way towards our salvation and, on the other, to a deep desire to rely completely on God's grace and give God the sole glory for saving us.

This perspective stems from understanding that this is the great message of Scripture. It is given as God's gracious revelation to sin-blinded humans to be the supreme and sufficient source of our knowledge of salvation".² It considers that this is the Bible's focus: the gospel of salvation³ understood in terms of God's gracious initiative and our grateful acceptance. It might sum up the Bible's teaching about God and how we are to respond to Him in terms such as these: "All doctrine is grace and all ethics is gratitude".⁴

This idea runs through all classical evangelical devotional life. Its classical hymnody asks "What mercy this, immense and free, for, O my God, it found out me!" and declares "To God be the glory, great things He has done!" Its modern songs proclaim that salvation is "In Christ alone" and ask "Who O Lord could save themselves?"⁵ Its great allegory *Pilgrim's Progress* describes how Christian, on reaching the Celestial City, hears men singing with a loud voice "Blessing and honour, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne and to the Lamb, forever and ever."⁶ In liturgy, the *Gloria* in the BCP Communion service comes after we have remembered His grace at the Cross by receiving bread and wine; it is a response of gratitude for what He has done. In experience, as well by conviction, we know that salvation is literally 'being saved', being rescued, when we were completely undeserving of rescue and incapable of helping ourselves – so that now we might live for the praise of His glorious grace.⁷

¹ One historic, summary of Reformation doctrine consist of five "solas" – that salvation is:

- *Sola Fide*, by faith alone.
- *Sola Scriptura*, by Scripture alone.
- *Solus Christus*, through Christ alone.
- *Sola Gratia*, by grace alone.
- *Soli Deo Gloria*, glory to God alone.

² Canon A5: "The doctrine of the Church of England is grounded in the Holy Scriptures, and in such teachings of the ancient Fathers and Councils of the Church as are agreeable to the said Scriptures." In particular such doctrine is to be found in the Thirty-nine Articles of Religion, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Ordinal. Article 6 – Of the Sufficiency of the holy Scriptures for salvation

³ 2 Timothy 3:15-17. (All biblical quotations from the NIV). See also the Collect for the second Sunday in Advent (BCP).

⁴ A common classical evangelical summary of biblical teaching.

⁵ Hymns and songs quoted are: "And can it be", Charles Wesley; "To God be the glory", Fanny J Crosby; "In Christ alone", Stuart Townend; "Who O Lord could save themselves?", Matt Redman.

⁶ The Pilgrim's Progress para 904 quoting Revelation 5:13.

⁷ Ephesians 1:6, 12 & 14

1. Our complete inability to save ourselves

The first main conviction is that we cannot save ourselves. This is first and foremost because God has closed the door against us because of our sin. Although He continues to pour out His common grace on all people, at the level of personal relationship He has rejected us because we are deeply unworthy to come into His presence. This is the greatest problem we have and the greatest problem with our sin. The supreme person in the universe is God and, therefore, the supreme issue in human life is whether we are a right relationship with Him. Our greatest problem is that, by nature, we are not in that relationship – because of our sin.

Sin is described in many ways in the Bible, but could be summarised as our self-glorification in God's universe. The Bible teaches us of a historical Fall of the human race⁸ -- since when, all the descendants of Adam have had self-glorification as our fundamental spiritual attitude.

God's response to our sin can be described as twofold: judgement and grace. "Grace" is where we are headed. But "judgement" must come first. It is impossible to understand grace unless we see it against the backdrop of the reality of God's judgement. This is the verdict of his holy and righteous anger against all that this self-glorification involves: our rejection of His love, pollution of His gifts, rebellion against His rule, culpable ignorance of His wisdom, and narcissistic establishment of ourselves as god in our own lives.

Instinctively we balk at this because we naturally misunderstand and massively underestimate his holiness. The Hebrews used repetition to emphasise and to create superlatives. But only once in the Hebrew Bible is there a threefold repetition⁹ -- in Isaiah's vision of God in Isaiah 6

"In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;
the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke."¹⁰

In our modern or post-modern world, in which human goodness so easily creates an upper limit for the meaning of the word "holy", we run the great danger of failing to see the utter, overwhelming, glorious perfection of the God of the universe -- which is his holiness. No

⁸ Romans 5:12-21

⁹ Tyndale OT commentary on Isaiah, Alec Motyer IVP 1999

¹⁰ Isaiah 6:1-4

surprise, therefore, that Isaiah responded as he did to this vision -- showing a response which should also be naturally ours:

“Woe to me!” I cried. “I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty.”¹¹

In his holy perfection, God neither can nor will allow such sin to go unpunished, and His judgement against us is to hand us over to what we have chosen both in this life and the next. In this life, this means being given over to a form of living spiritual death. This is provisional in the sense that salvation from it is still possible, but it is also preliminary to judgement beyond this life, which means being given over to the eternal loss and punishment of hell, from which there is no return.

In this life this is a matter of separation from God, leading to spiritual ignorance, powerlessness and ruin.

We are separated from God both from His side and on ours. From His side, He has handed us over to sin as a way of life. Lives of sin are themselves, therefore, part of the punishment of God.¹²

On our side, we live our sin out either in self-rule in which we reject the God of the universe (either openly or with a veneer of religion and respectability), or in self-reliance (in which our religious deeds and respectability become means of worshipping ourselves rather than God). There is an older as well as the younger brother in the parable of the Prodigal – and in many ways his is the more devastating problem of the two. He is particularly condemned by Jesus and his form of sin is particularly deceptive – being disguised by its own righteousness. The tax collector rather than the Pharisee is more typically the one who ends up saved in the Gospels. The Prodigal son ends up in relationship with his father. We are not so sure about his brother.¹³

What we are sure about is that self-reliance and self-righteousness will never save us. The NT emphasises that our good works do not contribute to our being accepted by God – partly because of their inadequacy (we could not make ourselves good enough for the thrice holy God¹⁴), but also because of their intrinsic self-glorification – the Pharisee prays “about himself”,¹⁵ worships himself and remains separated from God.

As a result of this separation, we are ignorant of God. This is not just because our limited minds cannot grasp what He is like, but also because God has handed us over to self-glorifying spiritual blindness. As a result, we have a constant spiritual tendency to climb the ladder of our understanding to try to declare what God is like. But when we do this, we only make God in our own image, or the image in which we want Him. Being blind we claim that we can see – yet our

¹¹ Isaiah 6:5, see also Luke 5:8

¹² Romans 1:18-32

¹³ Luke 15:11-32

¹⁴ Isaiah 6:3

¹⁵ Luke 18:11

supposed sight merely demonstrates our blindness.

Further, we are powerless: our will is in bondage; we are unable to change our desire to glorify ourselves; captive to the cravings of our own sinful nature; to the power of the devil (the ruler of the kingdom of the air); captivated by the ways of this world – powerless to such an extent that we can be described as “dead” in our transgressions and sins.¹⁶

As a result, our lives are full of the ruin which comes from rejecting God’s good ways and living according to our own wisdom and our own resources. Although there is much creation goodness still left in our world and in our lives, both are ruined by the fall of humanity and God’s rejection of us. Externally, our lack of forgiveness, love, purity and self-control (for instance) often leads to damage in our relationships. Internally, we are often beset by deep anxiety, guilt, regret, loneliness or a sense of emptiness which seems to rob our lives of meaning. These things cause immeasurable misery across individual lives, communities, nations and the entire world.

Beyond this life, though, there will be a full and final Day of judgement at the return of Christ.

Naturally speaking, there is no hope for any of us on that day – all indisputably and inescapably guilty of breaking the law of God and naturally facing the appalling and eternal reality of hell.

Probably the majority of conservative evangelicals¹⁷ conclude, with trembling, from the Bible that hell is a place of awful and eternal punishment.¹⁸ Biblical images are not generally seen as literal but that does not lessen their enormity. Hell is understood as involving the terrible, final and full version of the misery that sin brings in this world: full and final separation from God and therefore from all which is good; full and final handing over to the folly of our own wisdom, and to completely uncontrolled egotism, self-worship and self-glorification – in us and in others.

All this is what **we need to be saved from** - and it is at the heart of conservative evangelical spirituality to recognise first and foremost that this is personal to me. This is what I have needed to be saved from *myself*. Against, my over-whelming natural tendency to glorify myself, I need to see that I personally am so bad as desperately to need forgiveness and salvation. I am in the same bag as Newton, the wretched slave-trader, whose tombstone proclaims him to have been “an infidel and libertine”,¹⁹ we personally are “miserable offenders” and we have “no health in us”. With Toplady, we want to sing personally “Nothing in my hand I bring”; with Charles Wesley, “Depth of mercy, can there be, mercy still reserved for me”²⁰; with John

¹⁶ Ephesians 2:1-3

¹⁷ There has been an increase in conservative evangelical discussion on the real meaning of hell in recent decades, not least because John Stott (the closest thing Anglican evangelicals have had to a unifying leader in the last hundred years) clearly stated himself to believe that hell involves total destruction (annihilation) rather than everlasting torment.

¹⁸ Matthew 13:42&50, 2 Thessalonians 1:9, Revelation 20:15.

¹⁹ John Newton’s gravestone in Olney Churchyard reads in full - "John Newton, Clerk, once an infidel and libertine, a servant of slaves in Africa, was, by the rich mercy of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, preserved, restored, pardoned, and appointed to preach the faith he had long laboured to destroy."

²⁰ Hymns; “Rock of Ages”, AM Toplady; “Depth of mercy”, Charles Wesley.

Wesley, to declare ourselves to be nothing but a “brand plucked from the burning”²¹; with Paul, to say that we too in a sense are the “worst of sinners”²² – not because we think that quantitatively we have sinned more than all others, but because we know that qualitatively we have the seeds of the worst sins within us, that in different circumstances we might well have committed them, and that in our hearts and lives there is no merit that can contribute to our salvation.

2. Salvation is possible by the glorious grace of God

Wonderfully, though, we have a second conviction: that salvation is possible - entirely by God’s grace and therefore entirely to His glory. It is found supremely in **what He has done for us in Christ**, in **His choice of us** that we might believe, in **His work in us** by His Spirit, and in **the means of grace** given to us to strengthen us in our salvation.

The grace of God for us in Christ

The message of the gospel is that God, in His incomprehensible and glorious grace, has reached out to the sinners He has rightly rejected – to make salvation possible through Christ. The gospel consists in the great saving deeds of Christ done for us, together with the apostles’ interpretation of them:

- Advent – His Coming to bring final salvation to His people
- Christmas – His first coming to prepare the way for salvation through His sinless life
- Good Friday – His offering of Himself as a sinless substitute to satisfy the wrath of God
- Easter – God’s stamp of approval on the work of Christ raising Him as the first fruits of the Resurrection life into which He will bring all those who trust in Him
- Ascension – Christ’s Coronation as King and Ruler – now perceived only by His people, one day to be bowed down to by all
- Pentecost – His gift of His Spirit to empower His people for His service in preparation for His Coming

These events find their focus on Good Friday as the heart of the gospel. Just as our greatest problem is our offence against God, so the great and focal act of rescue is Christ’s death in which He has dealt with that offence. He did this by offering Himself as a sinless substitute to pay the penalty we deserve. He did this once for all²³ so that through faith, all our sins are imputed to Him, and all His righteousness is imputed to us. As believers we have, therefore, been justified in His court, redeemed from sin, God’s anger against us propitiated and atoned for – so that we are now reconciled to Him. Then, as those reconciled to Him, all the other blessings of the gospel are ours: resurrection life; living under His rule; His intercession for us;

²¹ An image it is said that he culled from his experience as a child of having to be rescued from the top floor of a blazing inferno, when his father's Rectory in Epworth, Lincs, went up in flames.

²² 1 Timothy 1:15

²³ "... a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world;" BCP Prayer of Consecration.

the gift of His Spirit; His promised return to take us to Himself.

It is the Cross, therefore, which is our emblem. With Paul we can say that we wish to “know nothing ... except Christ and Him crucified”.²⁴ Salvation comes to those who respond to Christ crucified with repentance and faith – seeking acceptance with God only through His death.

His grace in choosing us to believe

Not only has He given us the gospel – even our ability to receive it has been given to us by the grace of God alone. In the powerlessness of our spiritual death, and the bondage of our wills, we are unable to repent and believe. We want to keep our lives of rebellious self-rule or religious self-reliance and are unable to choose Christ. Here again, we cannot contribute anything to our salvation: even our choice of Christ.²⁵ The NT emphasises that believers were chosen to be in Christ before the beginning of the world. Far from being embarrassed or ashamed of this belief, the NT rejoices in it as showing the glory of God’s grace.

His gracious work in us by His Spirit

As a result of His choosing us, we have been born again, or regenerated by the work of His Spirit²⁶ who has caused us to be convicted of our guilt before God, and our need of the gospel. He has given us “new hearts”, so that for the first time we can love Him, want to serve Him and glorify Him.²⁷ This is the beginning of the gradual work of sanctification in our lives, too often slow, fitful and inconsistent but ongoing as the Spirit slowly re-fashions our lives after the pattern of Christ.

From our perspective, this begins with our initial repentance and faith, and continues with a life of repeated and increasing repentance and belief from that point on – turning from all forms of self-glorification towards the glorification of God, both in adoration and action. The Spirit is also the One who equips us for God’s service. It is He who gives us gifts for the building up of the church and for the spreading of the good news to others. Just as we need to rely completely on the death of Christ for His forgiveness, we need to rely upon the work of His Spirit for our empowering (though this is an active, rather than a passive reliance).²⁸

The means of grace given to us

In His kindness God has also given us means of grace to strengthen us along our path.

The Scriptures: The Bible is God’s inerrant Word by which we know His Living Word. We can neither rule ourselves, nor rely on our own wisdom and spiritual strength. Rather we need the revelation of God in the Scriptures, which is for us both spiritual food and light to live by. Here

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 2:2

²⁵ E.g. Romans 8:30, Ephesians 1:3-6, 2 Timothy 1:9-10, Article 17

²⁶ John 3:1-8 cf Ezekiel 36:25-6, Titus 3:5 etc

²⁷ There is some debate among conservative evangelicals about whether we now have two natures – the old and the new – or whether we remain fundamentally sinful in our nature but have been re-orientated within by the presence of the Holy Spirit working on our wills. There is thorough agreement, however, that a deep sinful nature remains within us.

²⁸ “...continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you” Philippians 2:12-13

we find God revealed, but also ourselves – so that by the Spirit’s power we may learn continually more about what it means to turn from self to Him.

Prayer: In making full and final atonement for us, Christ has brought His entry into the most holy place – so that we are commanded to approach the throne of grace with confidence so that “we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need”.²⁹ We are always in need – therefore we are called to pray continually. Conservative evangelicals tend to emphasise the privilege and need both of separate times of personal prayer and Bible reading (especially in the morning and evening) – as well as ongoing “communion with God” through the day.

The Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord’s Supper: Conservative evangelicals tend to understand these to be visual extensions to and equivalents of the Word of God. Just as we receive the benefits of the Word of God by combining it with faith (by believing it in such a way that leads to action) so Christ has mandated these visible signs, which we also benefit from as we combine them with penitent faith.

As we receive Baptism in faith, we are assured that regeneration is a once and for all fact in the life of a believer – once we are washed we are washed forever; once we have new life we have new life forever. In the Lord’s Supper we taste, through faith, our ongoing need for forgiveness and God’s gracious ongoing provision of it because of Christ’s death.³⁰

Both are of great benefit to the believer – but only to the believer. It is as we see the truths of the gospel symbolised in both, and through them put our faith in Christ, that they come to us as spiritual food, strength, encouragement, and grace. It is in this way that the sacraments are “outward and visible” signs by means of which we receive the “inward and spiritual grace” that they signify.³¹

The Church: the church is more than a means of grace – being, in part, a foretaste of final salvation itself. Nonetheless, it is a great means of our being strengthened here and now. “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another – and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”³²

All this is **how we are saved** – and it is at the heart of conservative evangelical spirituality to delight in the grace of God in saving us, and especially the work of Christ in dying for us. In the words of Brownlow North, the previously profligate son of the Earl of Guilford in the 19th century, who, having been converted and become a lay preacher, was confronted before preaching one evening by a letter detailing some of the foulest deeds of his past and who read out the letter at the beginning of His sermon and continued: “All that is here said is true. It is a correct picture of the degraded sinner I once was. And oh – how wonderful must the grace be that could raise me up from such a death in trespasses and sins and make me what I appear

²⁹ Hebrews 4:16

³⁰ “And the true eating and drinking of the said body and blood of Christ, is with a constant and lively faith to believe, that Christ gave his body and shed his blood upon the cross for us, and that he doth so join and incorporate himself to us, that he is our head, and we are his members and flesh of his flesh, and bone of his bones, having him dwelling in us, and we in him. And herein standeth the whole effect and strength of this sacrament”. Cranmer on the Lord's Supper - Book 1, Chap.XVI.

³¹ BCP, The Catechism

³² Hebrews 10:25

before you tonight, a vessel of mercy, one who knows that all his past sins have been cleansed away through the atoning blood of the Lamb of God. It is of redeeming love that I now have to tell you ..."³³ Victorian in style, very quaint to our ears but, at heart that is what we feel about ourselves – and wish we felt infinitely more strongly.

The blessings of salvation – what we are saved for

The blessings of salvation are described in a number of biblical categories in the Bible: eternal life, peace with God, relationship with God, adoption into His family, experience of His Kingdom heaven/the new heaven and a new earth, liberty from sin, being saved, knowing God, belonging to Him etc.

Eschatology is vital here and salvation should be seen in terms of the fact that we live in the overlap of the ages between the first coming of Christ (in which He inaugurated salvation) and His ultimate Coming (in which He will bring salvation in its fullness). This means that there is a future focus to these blessings – which should be understood, even in present experience, as the blessings of the new age. Those aspects of salvation which we experience now are in the category of realised eschatology – a foretaste of what is to come. Nonetheless, they are already certainly ours because of what Christ has already done. By His atoning death He has brought us back into relationship with God, so guaranteeing with certainty all the other blessings of salvation.

This is particularly important in conservative evangelical theology because it brings (or should bring) present assurance of final salvation. This is intrinsic to the NT understanding of what it means to be justified, to have eternal life and to live a normal Christian life. In the NT these are experiences that we can know that we have now – and they transform our understanding of what it means to serve God out of love for Him. By nature we tend to serve God out of duty, or guilt – seeking to gain His favour in a self-reliant way. Now, we are set free to love Him and serve Him out of gratitude. Who would not love and serve a God who has died to rescue us like this?

Present blessings of salvation

In this life this is a matter of relationship with God, leading to knowledge of Him, power to live for Him and transformed lives. The blessings of salvation in this age can be seen as the very opposite of what has come to us through the judgement of God on our sin:

Instead of separation from God we are brought into relationship with Him.

From His side, He has welcomed us with open arms as the father welcomed the prodigal. Though He continues to discipline us for our ongoing sin, He delights in us as His children, He listens to our prayers, and He speaks to us through His Word. In all things He acts for our good (albeit a different good from the one we would often choose).

From our side, we have begun to love Him, and learning to love Him more, learning to live to the praise of His glorious grace. We are called to “glorify God and to enjoy Him forever”.³⁴ We

³³ Quoted in "A Fistful of Heroes" p116, John Pollock, Christian Focus 1998, 2001.

³⁴ Answer to Qu 1 of The Westminster Shorter Catechism 1646-7

are called to learn to do that – and increasingly to turn away from our continuing natural tendency to glorify ourselves.

As a result of this relationship, now we are given spiritual sight to begin to understand His Word – and for the first time the power to live for Him, resisting the world, the flesh and the Devil because, for the first time, we want in the depths of our being to live in His way. This does not change the fact that we still have a sinful nature and at any given point we may be inclined to all kinds of sin. We still naturally live to glorify ourselves. Nonetheless, for the first time – at the heart of things – we now want to glorify Him, out of love for Him and in gratitude for His grace.

As a result, insofar we live in God’s good ways, our lives experience the blessing of transformation – both externally and internally.

Externally, insofar as we obey Him, He transforms us to make us forgiving and loving and pure in self-controlled and patient and humble and kind and gentle – and our relationships are renewed and transformed by Him. This should be seen most especially in the church which, even beyond being a means of grace, is called to be “God’s new society”³⁵ here on earth – transformed as the innate grabbing tendency of self-glorification is replaced by the giving love that comes from obeying the commands of the God of giving love. As such, the church is in itself meant to be a foretaste of heaven – and insofar as we obey Him, it will be that foretaste in reality.

It should also be seen, however, in our attitude to the world outside the church. God’s heart of love for the world has been shown in sending His only Son for the world’s salvation. Christ’s love is shown in having obeyed His Father’s will and having gone willingly to the cross. It is inconceivable, if we are really Christ’s people, that we should have no similar concern for the salvation of the world. Evangelism, therefore, should flow naturally and continually from a biblical understanding of salvation. It is greatly to our shame that often it does not.

It should also be inconceivable, that we should seek to love the world (and obey the Bible) without showing practical concern for those in need in all sorts of ways. Wilberforce, Shaftesbury and Barnardo are conservative evangelical heroes in this area. Nonetheless, the greatest and most practical way of showing love must be to lead them to Christ and to eternal life.

Within ourselves, gradually God is working to give us peace in place of anxiety, joy in the place of sadness, purpose in the place of meaninglessness, hope in the place of regret, at times healing in the place of illness. Again, this is dependent upon our obedience and cooperation with Him. Moreover, it should not be seen out of the context of the fact that we still live in a fallen world and are still creatures affected by the Fall. We are therefore “amphibians”³⁶ – citizens of heaven and yet still part of this world – prone to ups and downs, sickness, depression, anxiety, the effects of broken relationships in the past, other peoples’ sin against

³⁵ Original title of John Stott’s Bible Speaks Today commentary on Ephesians, IVP 1979.

³⁶ “Humans are amphibians...half spirit and half animal...as spirits they belong to the eternal world, but as animals they inhabit time. This means that while their spirit can be directed to an eternal object, their bodies, passions, and imaginations are in continual change, for to be in time, means to change. Their nearest approach to constancy, therefore, is undulation – the repeated return to a level from which they repeatedly fall back, a series of troughs and peaks.” CS Lewis, The Screwtape Letters.

us, economic difficulty, war etc. And yet, salvation has started and salvation is real – and it is impossible to read about the normal Christian life in the NT without concluding that in the midst of these things it is meant to be a matter of joy.³⁷

Future blessings of salvation

Beyond this life, though, there will full and final joy. In the next world, salvation will be full, complete and overwhelmingly wonderful in the new creation – the new heavens and the new earth. There, our relationship with God, our knowledge of Him, freedom to serve Him and the rich blessings of doing so will be perfected. The supreme source of that blessing will be the fact that we will be face to face with Him “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and He will live with them. They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.” God is not a means to an end – the person we have to go through to get to “heaven”.³⁸ Rather, “heaven” will be God – and the end of all separation from Him. From that great fact will stem the end of sin “His servants will serve Him”, the end of all disunity and hatred, the end of suffering of every kind: “He will wipe every tear from our eyes”.³⁹ There each page of the story will be “better than the one before”⁴⁰ – and our response will be delightedly to live perpetually for the praise of His glorious grace.

Conservative evangelicals have very often, very fallibly, sought to live transformed lives in the present which are marked by God glorifying adoration and action – in the light both of the past and the future. I think it was JC Ryle, the 19th-century Bishop of Liverpool, who said that all obedience is gratitude for God’s grace. It is said that Richard Baxter, the 17th century vicar of Kidderminster, through whom that town saw deep spiritual transformation and who battled through imprisonment for his beliefs and long-term illness (chronic internal haemorrhaging), did so, not least, by half an hour a day spent meditating on heaven. Nonetheless, I wonder whether present day conservative evangelicals have such a clear focus on this transformation. I wonder whether we have sometimes allowed our focus on salvation past and future to supplant, rather than to stimulate, a right focus on salvation in the present.

³⁷ e.g. 1 Peter 1:8-9

³⁸ Describing the future as “heaven” has been criticised in some circles in recent times. Certainly, the NT finally thinks in terms of the New Creation. Nonetheless, the term “heaven” seems to be something that the NT writers are unembarrassed about – e.g. Philippians 3: 14 & 20.

³⁹ Quotations variously from Revelation 21:3&6, 22:3

⁴⁰ CS Lewis, *The Last Battle*

Conclusion

Finally, who is saved? It follows from everything said so far that salvation is found in Christ – and only in Christ. If only Christ can pay for our sins, there is no way of being saved apart from Him – and through faith in him. It is true that some evangelicals⁴¹ hold to the possibility that there may be people in different cultures who have not heard the gospel of Christ, but who respond to what they know of God with a desire for His glory and a submissive reliance on Him. In that case, it is thought, they are really believers in Christ and have his salvation. This is obviously an extremely attractive idea. Nonetheless, the NT nowhere tells us that this is so. Rather the emphasis is otherwise – and it doesn't seem to suggest that we should rely on implicit or unconscious faith. Peter is clear that salvation comes through the name of Christ – “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved”.⁴² Paul is clear “that if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.”⁴³

Historically this has driven conservative evangelical concern for evangelism. This is why Wesley crossed parish boundaries and preached in fields when he was convinced that people were not hearing clearly of Christ.⁴⁴ That is why the 19th-century missionary movement led to people going out throughout the world to save the “lost”. A Nigerian Christian friend comments that in his country they are told that the first missionaries to that part of Africa packed their belongings in coffins on the outward journey because they did not expect to return – and because they thought death worth it for the sake of preaching Christ to others. Whether or not that is accurate, there is no doubt of the dangers such missionaries faced. My friend asks whether current English evangelicals would do the same.

So what does it mean to have faith in Christ – and therefore to be saved? Perhaps, some negatives will be helpful before a positive answer. From a conservative evangelical understanding I would suggest:

- It cannot mean an immediate and perfect giving up of our self-glorifying tendencies. It must be decisive and yet it cannot be not final. The rest of our lives will be a matter of cooperating with God as He roots out these things.
- It does not necessarily imply becoming a Christian at a particular conscious moment. Although regeneration must be a point of crisis from God's perspective and Christians must be clear that they have been converted, a recognisable moment of salvation is not always necessary to salvation.⁴⁵

⁴¹ The writings of CS Lewis had been influential here, along with others such as David Watson the much used evangelist who died in the early 1980s

⁴² Acts 4:12

⁴³ Romans 10:9

⁴⁴ "In plain terms, wherever I see one or a thousand men running into Hell, be it in England, Ireland or France, yea, in Europe, Asia, Africa, or America, I will stop them if I can: as a minister of Christ, I will beseech them in His name to turn back and be reconciled to God. Were I to do otherwise, were I to let any soul drop into the pit whom I might have saved from everlasting burnings, I am not satisfied that God would accept my plea "Lord, he was not of my parish." John Wesley, Letters Volume 11 page 137.

⁴⁵ I suspect that conservative evangelicals have, at times, fallen into the trap of thinking this. But it does not seem

- Salvation does not necessarily go with always having been part of the church. It is quite possible to go to church all one's life and never come to Christ.
- Certainly it does not imply that we need to go through set forms of conversion experience derived from one particular church sub-culture – to pray one sort of prayer in one sort of setting in one sort of way – even if such patterns can be helpful.
- In a paper on salvation, it bears saying that it doesn't imply that we are saved by absolute doctrinal correctness – as if we are saved by our understanding of salvation. None of us should think, surely, that we have a perfect theological understanding. This would again be self-reliance – and self-glorification.⁴⁶

The NT says that salvation comes to us as we repent and believe the gospel. At its heart, this means turning away from all self-reliance and self-rule – and instead turning to Christ alone for His rescue and rule, relying on Him and submitting to Him out of grateful love. Put another way, it means turning away from all self-glorification – and, instead, beginning and persevering in⁴⁷ a lifelong process of learning to live for the praise of God's glorious grace.

“Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.”

to me to be intrinsic to the NT. Nor have conservative evangelicals always thought this. The Puritans seem to have thought that people would be converted through the ongoing weekly preaching of the Word of God in church rather than specific "guest services", evangelistic sermons and appeals. In our church life in Tooting, a number of those who have been converted have gradually come to a reality of faith as they have listened to sermons week by week. Presumably, from God's side there was a specific point of spiritual change – but they did not necessarily recognise it on the way through. Often there will be a clear-cut point of repentance and faith, especially for those coming from an overtly non-Christian position – but not always so.

⁴⁶ I think the best way of understanding things is to say that there is not necessarily a complete coherence between somebody's doctrinal formulations and their spiritual position. That does not mean to say there is no need for a *substantial* coherence – but we are not saved by being correct; rather by Christ.

⁴⁷ The NT holds in tension the fact that we can have assurance of salvation now, and also that we are warned that we must persevere if our faith is to prove genuine. "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13) but also "We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly to the end the confidence we had at first" (Hebrews 3:14).

Appendix - further reflections on salvation after presentation of the paper and discussion with the group.

I have adapted the body of this paper slightly after discussion -- but, for the sake of clarity, I thought it was best to address the main questions raised by group members in an appendix rather than weaving responses into the text. (My slight adaptations in the text were to address more fully the subject of God's holiness, and to clarify the conservative evangelical belief in an historical Fall).

In addition, the group briefly discussed the doctrine of election -- which was not generally popular with group members, despite Article 17⁴⁸. I have not adapted what I put in the text. It is worth commenting, though, that it tries to represent a classically Anglican evangelical view of election -- in which election is held to be true and vital, and indeed held to be essential to salvation -- but in which it is not the centrepiece of the gospel. That place belongs to the Cross.

Moving, therefore to the Cross -- the main objection by group members to my view of salvation was, unsurprisingly, the idea of God's judgement and punishment. Various things were said, for instance:

1. That this view of God was unrecognisable to group members - and would put people off.
2. That a number of group members would think that Christ's death was substitutionary, but reject the idea of *penal* substitution
3. That this view of God was "joyless"

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XVII. Of Predestination and Election.

Predestination to Life is the everlasting purpose of God, whereby (before the foundations of the world were laid) he hath constantly decreed by his counsel secret to us, to deliver from curse and damnation those whom he hath chosen in Christ out of mankind, and to bring them by Christ to everlasting salvation, as vessels made to honour. Wherefore, they which be endued with so excellent a benefit of God, be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity.

As the godly consideration of Predestination, and our Election in Christ, is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons, and such as feel in themselves the working of the Spirit of Christ, mortifying the works of the flesh, and their earthly members, and drawing up their mind to high and heavenly things, as well because it doth greatly establish and confirm their faith of eternal Salvation to be enjoyed through Christ as because it doth fervently kindle their love towards God: So, for curious and carnal persons, lacking the Spirit of Christ, to have continually before their eyes the sentence of God's Predestination, is a most dangerous downfall, whereby the Devil doth thrust them either into desperation, or into wretchedness of most unclean living, no less perilous than desperation.

Furthermore, we must receive God's promises in such wise, as they be generally set forth to us in Holy Scripture: and, in our doings, that Will of God is to be followed, which we have expressly declared unto us in the Word of God.

In turn:

1. That this view of God was unrecognisable to group members - and would put people off.

This points to the big debate which will lie behind all our debates: authority, hermeneutics and how we know what to believe about God.

It is of the essence of conservative evangelical Christianity to think neither that we should aim choose what we think God is like, nor that it makes sense to believe only what we find attractive. Rather, God has revealed Himself in the Scriptures where we find his supreme revelation in Christ. We are called to accept Him as He reveals Himself and not through the sieve of what we want to accept or think will be attractive to others.

2. That a number of group members would think that Christ's death was substitutionary, but reject the idea of penal substitution

This was a substantial point of discussion. To this objection, conservative evangelicals would respond:

If substitution is not penal -- in what does the substitution consist and what does it achieve? What was Christ acting as our substitute for, if it was not to take the penalty of our sins?

Conceivably, although it wasn't expressed, the idea behind the objection was a similar thought to that of CH Dodd⁴⁹ and others (including the RSV translation of the Bible) that the NT Greek word *hilasterion* (and related words) should be translated in terms of "expiation" rather than in terms of "propitiation". In that sort of understanding, salvation involves the offence of sin being wiped away (expiated) but does not involve God's wrath being propitiated/placated. So, to put the distinction in very mundane (and imperfect) terms, if I were to write offensive graffiti about someone on their front door - substitutionary expiation would be somebody else washing that graffiti off in my place. Substitutionary propitiation would be somebody else taking whatever punishment the householder's anger stipulated for my offensive act.

Many people can accept the idea that Christ's death was to wash away the stain of our sin, but object strongly to the idea that God is angry with that sin and that He must be propitiated.

Again, though, the question is begged -- exactly how does Christ wash away the stain of my sin by his death on the Cross?

To this people might reply that the atonement is a mystery. And certainly there must be much that will always be beyond our understanding in what Christ achieved on the Cross. However, that ignores the fact that the whole Bible is shot through with the idea of propitiation -- and penal substitution:

⁴⁹ The Bible and the Greeks / by C.H. Dodd – 1 Jan 1935

- The Fall -- and the rejection from the garden at the end of Genesis 3 -- God casting out Adam and Eve from his presence.
- The Passover -- the blood of the substitutionary lamb had to be on the door posts or the Angel of death would have punished the firstborn of each family.⁵⁰
- The entire sacrificial system -- focusing in on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 -- which makes it clear that there is no access to God for the people of Israel without blood sacrifice -- or, as the letter to the Hebrews will put it, "...without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" -- and in the light of that ... " Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people"
- Isaiah 53 (quoted so often in the NT in relation to the death of Christ) -- "But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed."⁵¹
- And then all the NT teaching about the Cross -- which depends not only on the clear evidence that the *hilasterion* word group should be translated in terms of propitiation⁵², but which in all the dimensions of its teaching makes it clear that penal substitution is in view. Justification, for instance, Paul's main model for the atonement, is all predicated on the deep conviction that without Christ death we do not have "peace with God" -- and the without Christ death we face "condemnation".⁵³

It is true, of course, that God is, depicted in a few places simply in terms of His open arms of grace - notably in the parable of the Prodigal. However, we should surely not be tempted to build our doctrine on a parable, when the rest of the NT speaks otherwise. That parable certainly emphasises God's greatest desire -- which is not to judge, but to save. That does not change the fact that the NT is crystal clear that His salvation is - salvation from His judgement.

Two further comments are worth making:

- Without believing in a God who punishes sin, it is difficult to see how we can believe in a God who is moral or just. Joseph Mengele, one of the foulest Nazis at Auschwitz, died a free man in South America, despite his appalling crimes... all the evidence being that he was completely unrepentant.⁵⁴ Are we to believe that God will simply welcome unrepentant mass murderers like that into his heaven? And, if not, we believe in judgement -- even if we blench at calling it that. And if we believe in judgement -- then we have the problem of the fact that we have no basis for "pointing the finger" even at the worst of sinners. Who are we to say

⁵⁰ Exodus 14

⁵¹ Isaiah 53:5

⁵² Apostolic Preaching of the Cross, Leon Morris -- 1 Sep 1965

⁵³ See further -- The Cross of Christ, John Stott - 1986

⁵⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Josef_Mengele

that they should be judged and we should not? Surely, if we have any spiritual sensitivity at all we know that the roots of all kinds of foul sin spring up in our hearts, and too often in our lives. So, we should face judgement too -- and we too desperately the penal substitutionary death of Christ.

- It is interesting how often the doctrine of "penal substitution" is thought to be somehow un-Anglican. It is as if people ask -- how can anyone believe that and be an Anglican nowadays? However, it is clearly the doctrine of the Prayer book

ALMIGHTY God, our heavenly Father, who of thy tender mercy didst give thine only Son Jesus Christ to suffer death upon the Cross for our redemption; who made there (by his one oblation of himself once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world;⁵⁵

and the Prayer book, along with the Articles and the Ordinal are clearly the focus of what Anglicans are meant to believe.

3. That this view of God was "joyless"

This can only be because it appears to be so negative about us as human beings. A definition of grace used at a diocesan symposium some years ago was "God affirming the good in us". In this view of the Christian faith, as I understand it, joy comes from God affirming us -- and the good that he sees in our lives. But this is tragically to miss out -- because we need to be rescued not affirmed -- and, paradoxically, in that is our joy.

The Bible sees grace in exactly opposite terms from the definition above. Grace is when God recognises that there isn't anything good and attractive in us, naturally speaking -- and still loves us so much that He has reached out to us in salvation, supremely in his Son, and still by his Spirit.

It is impossible really to see the beauty and lustre of the Pearl of great Price unless you see it against the black velvet of the doctrine of God's judgement. Against that background, salvation is a matter of great joy and amazing grace.

⁵⁵ Book of Common Prayer -- Prayer of Consecration in THE ORDER FOR THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE LORD'S SUPPER OR HOLY COMMUNION