

SALVATION: FOR WHAT AND BY WHOM?

By Michael A. Schuler
March 23, 2008 - Easter Sunday

TESTIMONIALS, ANCIENT AND MODERN

From First Corinthians, Chapter 15

Now, if Christ is preached as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised. If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain... If Christ has not been raised your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all men most to be pitied...

Lo! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality... and at that time shall come to pass the saying that is written:

Death is swallowed up in victory.
O death, where is thy victory,
O death, where is thy sting.

From an anonymous author, *The Sun* (February 2007)

The day after my high school graduation in 1963, I left an abusive foster home and ended up in long Beach, California, far from the small town where I'd spent my childhood. A Catholic-run thrift store hired me to gather hangers for a dollar an hour, but I desperately needed a better paying job. I hit the pavement with my one good outfit and pink high heels, and filled out endless applications. Unfortunately, no one would take the risk of hiring a skinny teenager with no work experience.

Then I answered an ad in the paper for a file-clerk position. The interviewer, a Miss Grannis, gave me hope. She didn't say I was too young or inexperienced. Instead, she said, "call me in a couple of days."

I called the next day, and the next, and the next, begging for the job until I wore her down. "O.K.," she said

at last, "Be here at one o'clock today and don't be late." I ran from the thrift store to my rented room to change clothes. I had seventy-five cents to my name, enough for three bus rides.

I hurried to the bus stop. Several buses passed but the Number 10 bus that I needed did not arrive. At 12:30 my anxiety turned to panic, and I raised my hand to hail a cab, just as I'd seen people do in the movies. I'd never been in a taxicab before.

When one stopped, I jumped in. "Where to?" the driver asked. I gave him the address and said, "Take me as close as you can for fifty cents." I needed to keep the other quarter for a bus ride home.

He stared at me in the rearview mirror. "Honey...you can't go anywhere for fifty cents."

Near tears, I blurted out my story about the job, how badly I needed it and how I had to be there by 1:00 or it would disappear. I offered him the whole seventy-five cents.

"Keep your money," he said, speeding away from the curb. I arrived in time to get my first real job, with the three coins still in my sweaty hand. The cabbie wished me luck and waved as I walked to the door.

I worked hard filing invoices and answering the phone. Miss Grannis taught me a lot about manners and grammar and how to dress properly - things you don't learn in foster homes.

It's too late to thank both the taxi driver and Miss Grannis for their help, but I'll never forget either of them. They ere the first of many people willing to help a scared kid become what I am now: a retired psychotherapist who has tried to help as many people as possible realize their potential - no matter what the odds.

** REFLECTIONS **

Last Tuesday **Barack Obama**, a candidate for the U.S. presidency, delivered a lengthy and rather unusual speech in Philadelphia that has since become the subject of considerable commentary.

What made it unusual was the candor with which it addressed an issue that has long complicated the American commitment to freedom and equality. Racial fears, racial resentments, racial mistrust have persistently colored our perceptions and clouded our political judgment. With **Senator Obama's** candidacy the issue has been brought front and center: will race be the determining factor in the

outcome of this year's presidential election, or will Americans be able, as **Martin Luther King** famously proclaimed, to judge a candidate not by "the color of his skin but the content of his character."

Americans have been stuck in a racial stalemate for years, **Obama** observed on Tuesday, and we can continue "to accept a politics that breeds division, conflict and cynicism" or we can "move beyond some of our old racial wounds...and find the common stake we all have in one another."

Obama's speech was as much about salvation as about politics - release from the curse of racial prejudice that has afflicted Americans for over two centuries and prevented us from confronting some of the country's most pressing problems. He presented himself as an embodiment of hope, a biracial man with roots in Kansas and Kenya who is in the optimal position to bind up America's racial wounds.

Obama asks us to believe in him - to allow him to lead us out of our captivity and join him, as he put it, "on the long march to a more just, more equal, more free, more caring and more prosperous America." Toward the promised land, in other words.

I offer the foregoing not as an endorsement of the man's candidacy, for that would not be kosher (nor have I made up my own mind). It is the subject of salvation that interests me, and **Obama's** speech helps us see that the subject is not as simple as we might initially suspect.

Now, the most common conception of salvation is presented in the Easter message, which focuses on the eternal fate of the human soul and the hope Christians harbor in the redemptive capacity of Jesus Christ. From an orthodox standpoint, Easter is an exercise in hopefulness for a personal future beyond the grave and for the sense of personal security that accompanies such a conviction. As **Paul** himself effused in First Corinthians, "Thanks be to God, who gives us victory over the sting of death through our Lord, Jesus Christ." That's Easter in a nutshell.

But while this "good news" is proclaimed in a few places in the Bible - most notably in the letters of Saint Paul and in John's Gospel - it is by no means the only theory of salvation that Scripture offers.

Belief in the survival of the individual personality after death wasn't a part of ancient Hebraic religion. To be sure, the Old Testament speaks of an underground realm called **Sheol** where the dead reside, but without real awareness and beyond both pleasure and pain. According to

the author of **Ecclesiastes**, "The dead know nothing and they have no more reward."

Christian believers often point to well-known passages in the Old Testament, and particularly in the Psalms, that seem to support the standard interpretation of salvation. "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever," the 23rd Psalm concludes. Clear evidence, one might conclude, that the author believed in everlasting life.

But Biblical scholar **Robert Alter** argues that such passages give a false impression. Early English translators altered the meaning of many key terms in the Hebrew texts in an effort to bring them into conformance with Church doctrine. Thus, the Hebrew word that means "for many long days" or "a very long time" was rendered as "forever." The word **Sheol** became "Hell" and "rescue" became "salvation."

As a result of these and other alterations, a Jewish religion where heaven and hell, the soul and eternal salvation played no part was harmonized with Christian belief and doctrine. As a result, other possible meanings of the word "salvation" became obscured.

The idea that human beings possess a separable soul that survives death is a product of Greek rather than Jewish thinking. The Jews themselves believed in a God who saves lives rather than souls. He delivers his chosen people from famine, from slavery, from homelessness, from obscurity, from injustice, unrighteousness and lack of purpose. **Elohim** assures the Jewish people that they are a special object of his concern and that he is deeply invested in their future. This "saving knowledge" was communicated by figures like Moses and the Prophets and has been a staple of Jewish faith for over thirty centuries.

Salvation comes, then, in many guises. It responds to many human deficiencies and fulfills some of our most basic needs. The point of reference need not be a world beyond, but the world right before us, and it is clear from the Old Testament that communities as well as persons can be "saved." Indeed, a former minister of FUS, **Eustace Hayden**, once declared that "We should feel a sense of disloyalty (to our fellow human beings) in being saved alone."

Saviors themselves assume many forms, they serve in many different ways and often there is nothing metaphysical or magical about their message. According to philosopher and former FUS member **Max Otto**, salvation is not about the rescue of an immaterial entity in preparation for the life to come. Rather:

...it enables the creation of a type of personality...that has inner richness and ripeness, a sensitivity to truth, to beauty and to the dignity of life.

A sympathetic employer who gives a desperate teenager a job for which she really isn't qualified, who patiently mentors her and opens doors that otherwise would have remained permanently shut, is a bona fide savior.

When a young girl controls her fear, checks her assumptions and permits an appalling guest to experience acceptance and belonging, she serves as a savior. The Passamaquoddy story presented earlier offers a powerful lesson in love and compassion. Deprived of a supportive community, living as an object of fear and as an outcaste, any human will find his heart gradually turning to ice; the personality becoming cold and bitter. The terrible Chenoo figure in that Native American story speaks metaphorically to the fate that awaits those who dwell beyond the boundaries of human care.

The Chenoo was a creature of exceptional power, an object of respect and awe. But his life was so devoid of warmth that he was willing to surrender everything that had made him unique and impressive in order to be in relationship.

The 20th century poet, **W.H. Auden** insisted that real religion makes only one demand of us - to love our neighbor as ourselves. **Auden** was a committed Anglican but he rejected the idea that Christianity required belief in an immortal soul, in the resurrection of Christ or in any supernatural proposition. "Christianity is a way not a state, he insisted,

...and a Christian is never something one is, only something one can pray to become... I value my religion only insofar as it helps make it possible for me to love my neighbor as myself.

Clearly, **Auden** and that young Passamaquoddy girl were of like mind. This is a perennial theme in spiritual literature - the redemptive, "saving" power of compassionate connection. In **The Big Book** of Alcoholics Anonymous, one writer describes his deliverance from alcohol:

There is no more aloneness, with that awful ache, so deep in the heart of every alcoholic that nothing before could ever reach it. Now there is a sense of

belonging, of being wanted and needed and loved. In return for a bottle and a hangover, we have been given the keys to the Kingdom.

Much of Jesus' ministry treated salvation in precisely these terms. He invited outcasts of all stripes - tax collectors, adulterers, lepers, centurions - into his company and accepted them as kin. You, too, are precious in God's eyes, and members of my estate.

Salvation through connection and a sense of kinship might not even require the presence of another human being. In his famous poem, *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*, **Samuel Taylor Coleridge** introduces us to a sailor who is alone and living under the curse of his shipmates. They have tied a heavy, dead albatross around his neck and now he is eaten up with bitterness and despair.

Peering over the side of his becalmed ship one day, parched with thirst, the sailor notices water snakes coiling and writhing amidst the seaweed. A strange feeling suddenly wells up inside of him. "A spring of love gushed from my heart," the sailor reports, "and I blessed them unaware." Immediately the burdensome albatross drops from his neck, sinks into the sea, and he experiences a sense of inner peace and liberation. Compassionate connection to the sea-snakes has freed him.

Salvation of a sort also occurs when a shift in perception alters our understanding of the world and our place in it. Here we are said to be illuminated or "enlightened," and when this happens craving diminishes and acceptance of "what is" grows. Heart-felt concern for others replaces self-absorption. Anxiety gives way to equanimity.

For many people this happens gradually rather than suddenly, with a sense of well-being slowly growing as they practice mindfulness and cultivate compassion. The late Zen master **Shunryu Suzuki** once compared this process to the crossing of a river. "The goal is to reach the other side, Nirvana."

But the true wisdom of life is that in each step of the way, the other shore is actually reached. To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living.

For **Suzuki** and many other wisdom teachers, salvation from suffering, from ignorance, from the general unsatisfactoriness of existence is always a work in

progress requiring patience, confidence in ourselves and openness to what is. But if we are conditioned to think of salvation as something that happens somewhere off in the future, in the great by-and-by, we may be less likely to experience it in the here-and-now. "The present moment, entered into fully, **Philip Simmons** insists, "is our gateway to eternal life... For my part, I want eternal life now, before it's all over with."

Most of what I've said about salvation thus far applies to individuals, but there is also a collective dimension to be considered. The ancient Hebrews thought exclusively in terms of the people of Israel as a whole, whose fate rested on their ability as a nation to honor their sacred covenant obligations.

There is a widespread feeling today that America has slid off the rails - that we've lost touch with our founding principles and with the spirit of Washington and Lincoln. Like the people of ancient Israel, we've gone astray, genuflecting before the idols of materialism, imperialism and racism. In its vain attempt to gain the whole world, America has jeopardized its soul. Some current political candidates are aware of this, which is why they offer themselves as agents of change and apostles of hope.

Courageous, honest, intelligent leadership will surely be important as we move into the future, but if we expect the next president to be our redeemer we are likely to be disappointed. In a democracy, salvation must come from below, not from above. It is achieved when a critical mass of citizens resolves to be active rather than passive, enlightened rather than ignorant, compassionately rather than selfishly motivated.

Easter is ever and always about the idea of salvation, but too often the focus is on future prospects rather than present possibilities. As human beings we are bound to worry about our mortality and will always seek reassuring answers to the eternal riddle of life and death. But we should not allow this concern to become a distraction from and an abdication of our responsibility to this life. "Teach us to number our days," **Psalms 90** advises us, "hallowing each as a trust bestowed upon us."

I believe that the questions we should be asking ourselves are these: What can I do to make the most of this life - to make it as deeply meaningful and intensely relational as possible? What suitable role can I play in redeeming the human condition? Some would argue that we are saved by grace. I submit that most often salvation

begins with the committed self. It ends with the universal affirmation that life is, in fact, good and fully worth a chorus of "Alleluia."