

EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY

VOLUME 23

*Articles and book reviews original and selected from
publications worldwide for an international
readership for the purpose of discerning the
obedience of faith*

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Published by
PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS



for
WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP
Theological Commission

Volume 23 • Number 3 • July 1999

Kreuz?, (Wuppertal: Brockhaus Verlag, 1998) a collection of essays by faculty members of Bengel Haus, edited by Volker Gaeckle. Unless otherwise noted, all translation is by James Louis Kautt of Tübingen.

Salvation from an African Perspective

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Keywords: Salvation, culture, sin, healing, deliverance, liberation, ancestors

Not all African theologians share the same views or belong to the same school of thought concerning salvation, notwithstanding the fact it is a key theme in the Christian message. This is not surprising, for in Christian tradition the theme of salvation proliferates in many facets of meaning and colourful interpretations. So it is to be expected that African theologians could not have a unanimous grasp of this key concept. While some Africans have not explored its meaning beyond the theology of the missionaries who introduced them to the Christian faith, others have wrestled with the meaning of salvation within their respective African contexts.

This paper is written from the perspective of an African Baptist Christian who believes that African Christian theologies must be rooted in the cultural, social, political, religious and economic context of African life and thought. Cultural and societal differences are so intrinsic to human nature and inculturated in human existence that theology has to be contextual.¹ The contents of this paper are reflections of one among many African Christians who are wrestling with what it means to be an African Christian.

The discussion of salvation from an African perspective is appropriate and proper, because African voices which are often excluded from theological conversations must be heard and acknowledged as being legitimate. African theology is often viewed as being radical, reactionary, or novel, and not to be taken seriously. A growing number of missiologists, however, are giving credence to the authenticity of Africa's viewpoint of the gospel, its scope, its message and its meaning.²

It does not take much research to show that from the time of the early church to the present, people have always come to Jesus out of their varied experiences, contexts and needs.³ Their reading of the scriptures have been coloured by different traditions and experiences. It is therefore appropriate that the discussion about African perceptions of salvation be taken seriously from African traditional viewpoints of wholeness and well-

¹ 1. Every theology is always someone's theology. All claims to a pure universal biblical theology are illusory and unsustainable.

² 2. A survey of standard texts in systematic theology in the West simply ignore any theological reflection from Africa.

³ 3. See Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985). He presents eighteen 'images' of Jesus that emerged in the history of Christianity.

being which helped Africans to appreciate, appropriate and interpret the theme of salvation preached by missionaries from EURICA (Europe and North America).

1. SALVATION IN TRADITIONAL AFRICA

It is crucial that we be specific in any treatment of salvation. In order to avoid such methods of generalization, I will refer more specifically to the Shona for African perspectives. It is important to realize that in any discussion about salvation in African traditional religions (or any other religion for that matter) we should not assume that what is considered to be crucial in Christian thought necessarily carries the same weight in other cultures and religions. Salvation in Shona religion, for example, does not relate specifically to the afterlife. Shona religion is anthropocentric; it is life affirming. This worldly religion is concerned about protection, restoration, preservation, survival and the continuance of human, societal, and environmental life in this world.⁴ John Mbiti had this to say on the subject:

In these religious considerations of the concept of *salvation*, we take note that salvation in African religion has to do with physical and immediate dangers (of the individual and more often of the community)—dangers that threaten individual or community survival, good health and general prosperity or safety. This is the main religious setting in which the notion of salvation is understood and experienced. Salvation is not just an abstraction, it is concrete, told in terms of both what has happened and is likely to be encountered by people as they go through daily experiences.⁵

With this in mind, the Shona use a number of words for the concept of salvation or redemption. All these words used to translate salvation or redemption have to do with preserving and sustaining the life of the individual or community in this present life. Their concerns are not with detached abstractions of ontological distance. This is borne out in the Shona word *ruponeso* which is commonly used to translate salvation. It comes from the verb *kupona* which means to give birth, to survive, to sustain life, to rescue, or to deliver a baby.⁶ Not only among the Shona is this the case. In his discussion about salvation among the Akan of Ghana, Abraham Akrong has pointed out that the central soteriological concern of the Akan has to do with protection, preservation of life both physical and spiritual from the threats of evil doers like witches, sorcerers, vengeful spirits and all those who seek to destroy life.⁷ He continues,

Salvation, therefore, means the condition, context or space in which human well-being and the ultimate fulfillment of the individual destiny are made possible. It means the absence of everything that threatens and destroys human life or disturbs the conditions that guarantee prosperity and well-being. Finally, salvation means the conditions that

⁴ 4. For a fuller discussion see Henry J. Mugabe, 'Tilling With Our Own Hoes: Shona Religious Metaphor for An African Christian Theology', (Ph.D dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1993).

⁵ 5. John Mbiti, 'Some Reflections on African Experience of Salvation Today', in *Living Faiths and Ultimate Goals* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1974), pp. 1–138.

⁶ 6. Mugabe, 'Tilling', pp. 184–185.

⁷ 7. Abraham Ako Akrong, 'An Akan Christian View of Salvation from the Perspective of John Calvin's Soteriology' (Ph.D dissertation, Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago, 1991).

preserve or restore the harmonies of creation so that the 'rhythm of life' may go on undisturbed in order that human beings may have the space to be human.⁸

Like all African people I know, the Akan have a holistic view of salvation which encompasses all aspects of life in this world. Akrong goes on to point out the following aspects of salvation in an African traditional context. (1) Salvation is viewed as the ideal condition for human well-being and ultimate self fulfilment; (2) It also has to do with protection from evil forces of destruction; (3) with preservation of cosmic and social order and harmony; and (4) with restoration of the broken life.⁹ Those Christians who claim that there is no salvation in African traditional religions do so only because they fail to appreciate that salvation means different things to different religious systems.¹⁰ In fact, the reason why many African Christians embrace both Christianity and African traditional religions is because they perceive traditional religion as being able to meet real needs in procuring salvation in this real world of ours, while Christianity merely concerns itself with the hereafter. An understanding of salvation that is preoccupied only with the salvation of souls from eternal damnation has left this impression on the bulk of African people.

Then again the concept of sin, *chivi* to the Shona, is any and all anti-social activities that are aimed at hurting individuals and communities. Although sin includes evil thoughts, Africans do not view sin and evil in abstract metaphysical terms. Sin has to do with real life situations. For the Shona there is no idea of a fall or of original sin. Children are born without sin and get maladjusted only as they grow. Sin is committed in this present life, so it is in this life that sin must be dealt with. There is no place for punishment in the afterlife. Anxiety about judgment in the hereafter is not part of African experience. 'There are no punishments to be avoided nor rewards to look forward to in heaven or paradise.'¹¹ This being the case, sin is dealt with in terms of appeasement, by compensating the person or community that has been wronged here and now. To many Africans, sinful acts are those which destabilize or destroy the community, and threaten the well-being of one's neighbors. David Bosch rightly observed that

The word used for 'sin' in several African languages means to 'spoil', particularly to spoil or harm human relationships. The witch is sinner par excellence, not primarily because of his or her deeds, but because of the evil consequences of these deeds: illness, barrenness, catastrophe, misfortune, disruption or relationships in the community, poverty, and so on.¹²

This being the case, salvation for an individual means being integrated into the community of ancestors and becoming one. Hell in the after life means having no children to commemorate you when you are gone.

⁸ 8. Ibid., p. 193.

⁹ 9. Ibid., pp. 157–198.

¹⁰ 10. African traditional religions have never claimed to offer the kind of salvation taught by Christians; see T. Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition*, (Nairobi: Evangel Publishing House, 1979). For a contrary view see S. Maimela, 'Salvation in African Tradition Religions', *Missionalia*, 13 (1987), pp. 63–77.

¹¹ 11. Maimela, 'Salvation', p. 65.

¹² 12. David B. Bosch, 'The problem of Evil in Africa: A Survey of African Views on Witchcraft and of the Response of the Christian Church' in *Like A Roaring Lion: Essays on the Bible, the Church and Demonic Powers*, edited by P.C.R. de Villiers, (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1987), p. 50.

2. AFRICAN CHRISTIAN PERCEPTIONS OF SALVATION

In their understanding of salvation, many Africans are influenced in their mindsets by their African cultures and their understanding of scripture. For many of them, Christianity in its biblical representation appears to be significantly African. An African does not have to read far into the Old Testament before realizing that this is familiar territory. A great deal in the scriptural understanding of salvation is analogous to much of African outlook and expectation. For example, the biblical teaching on salvation does include rescue, healing, liberation and being delivered from physical danger. Missiologists such as Daneel and Bosch have perceptively pointed out that one of the major weaknesses of western missionary communication of the gospel in Africa had been the dichotomizing of the horizontal and vertical relationship in human spirituality. Individual sins against God were played off against sins committed against a neighbour. 'God was imported to forgive a burden of sin of which Africans were not persuaded, while the actual evil in their experiential world was never addressed'.¹³ Salvation was equated with 'soul winning' rather than with the salvation of the whole person. As the missionaries and their African protégés preached about a Jesus who saved only souls, other Africans began to wonder where the salvation of their whole lives was going to come from. As they read the Bible for themselves, Africans found the corporate and holistic dimensions of salvation to be prevalent in scripture rather than the rescuing of souls. New Testament theologies of salvation are diverse and use a number of metaphors for salvation such as redemption, expiation, justification, liberation and salvation. The Greek verb (*sozo*) (to save) has the idea of being snatched away from peril, of being healed, of being preserved in health and well-being.¹⁴ This wholeness is expressed in the All Africa Baptist Ibadan Declaration which speaks of the whole church with the whole gospel, for the whole person, in the whole of society, for the whole world.

However defective the preservation of the gospel in the missionary preaching may have been, Christianity nonetheless brought a new understanding of salvation wrought in God through the life and death of Jesus Christ. It broadened the parameter and the perspectives of traditional African concerns with a preoccupation of salvation which they present.

3. ACCEPTING CHRIST AS LORD AND SAVIOUR

In the words of Gabriel Setiboane, we cannot resist Jesus because he has 'bewitched' us. Many African Christians bear witness to how their lives have been transformed by Jesus Christ. Many Africans equate accepting Jesus Christ in their lives with salvation. This emphasis is on the transformation that their experience brought. The one who has accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour (*Kutambira Jesu salshe Nomponesi*) has been captivated with hope in this life and in the world to come. For those who have experienced Jesus' salvation, there is no one else comparable to him. Many of the African choruses bear witness to this.

Those who have accepted Jesus as Lord and Saviour live by the rules of the kingdom of God. Their primary allegiance is to Jesus Christ. This is a celebratory allegiance. Most of

¹³ 13. See Robert Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?: Afro-Cultures and God-talk* (Minneapolis: Fortress press, 1990). He lists the kinds of things Africans need to be saved from. See also K. Enang, *Salvation in a Nigerian Background*, (Berlin: Verlag von Dietrich Reimer, 1979).

¹⁴ 14. Denis Edwards, *What are They Saying About Salvation?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1986).

this African theology is heard in songs and prayers. Although it is not necessarily written, it is very real to its practitioners within the communities of Christians.

4. SALVATION AS HEALING AND DELIVERANCE

The healing ministry of Christ features strongly in African Christianity. Jesus Christ is the healer par excellence. It is not uncommon to hear Christians address Jesus Christ in prayer as '*Nanga Yedu*' that is 'Our Healer', literally our traditional healer/diviner. It is for this reason that a number of African theologians are using the metaphor of the *nanga* (traditional medicine person) for articulating an African Christology.

The healing that Christ brings is an integrative healing. Healing is interpreted in the broadest sense of inclusiveness, thus it is not limited only to physical ailments but to illnesses of oppression, racial discrimination, tribalism, joblessness, and all sorts of conflicts in one's life. It is holistic healing which does not make any distinction between the body and soul. When healing crusaders are held by faith-healers across the continent, attracting huge crowds, many Africans point out that infants who die of malnutrition do not need a faith healer, they need adequate nutritious food. Holistic healing among Africans treats suffering symptomatically and looks at the causes of deterioration in their health services. Such healing does not focus on the health of an individual at the expense of the whole nation.

In one of his writings about the comprehensive and holistic interpretation of salvation among the African Independent Churches in Zimbabwe, Daneel had this to say:

Pneumatologically, the work of the Holy Spirit comprises both eternal salvation for a redeemed humanity and a concretely experienced wholeness and well-being in this existence for those who place themselves in faith under his healing care. Hence the good news of eternal salvation is not superseded but acquires concrete and understandable contours through healing in this troubled and broken existence.¹⁵

Very significantly Matthew Schoffeleers has recorded the following chorus from one of the Pentecostal churches in Southern Malawi in which Jesus is depicted as *nanga*.

Jesu sing' anga;	Jesus, the medicine-man;
Halleluya, bwerani!	Halleluia, come!
Yesu sing' anga;	Jesus, the medicine-man;
Amachiza matenda.	Cures diseases.
Yesu sing' anga;	Jesus, the medicine-man;
Amachotsa ziwanda	Drives out evil spirits

¹⁵ 15. M.L. Daneel, 'African Independent Church Pneumatology and the Salvation of all Creation' *International Review of Mission*, 82 (1993), p. 153.

Although Jesus is a healer who brings healing, overemphasis on healing can be very dangerous for churches in Africa. Many of the faith-healers who hold healing crusades in Africa come from countries whose policies towards Africa contribute to the problems the faith-healers claim they are able to solve. Schoffeleers has rightly pointed out that churches that emphasize healing tend to exhibit an acquiescent attitude towards oppressive political rulers, and depoliticize the cause of societal illness by individualizing the healings.¹⁷

5. SALVATION AS LIBERATION

Many Africans testify that Jesus Christ is the liberator who has liberated them from such realities as sin, death, fear of demons and witches, self-centred life, materialism, prejudice and the love of power. All this is in line with the biblical notion of freedom. Mira Hore gives her testimony in the following powerful words.

The study of the life of Christ in the New Testament studies has changed my being. I am a liberated person in Christ. Wherever I go in this world I am *not just a person*, but a follower of Christ. I have given up the things of this world. *Thus there can be no accusations of witchcraft against me, and even if people should accuse me it does not matter, because I am saved, protected by God.*¹⁸

This powerful testimony comes from a woman who has experienced Christ's liberating power. More and more African women are refusing to be defined by other people as to their identity. They have found a new identity in Jesus Christ and they refuse to be given dehumanizing labels like 'witch', 'prostitute', and the like. They relate to the gospel of Luke, when Jesus inaugurated his ministry with the following words.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord ([Luke 4:18-19](#)).

In the synoptic gospels Jesus is depicted as the One who went about liberating people through healing, exorcisms and forgiving their sins. In John's gospel the life that comes from one's relationship with Jesus Christ is described as freedom. 'So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed' ([John 8:36](#)). The liberating work of God through Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit is not limited only to individuals but has cosmic dimension as well. The liberating work of Christ covers creation for 'creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and to obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God' ([Rom. 8:21](#)). Thus Christ does not only liberate and save human beings, but heals and protects the environment where nature also awaits its redemption ([Col. 1:15-20](#)).

16. Matthew Schoffeleers, 'Folk Christology in Africa: The Dialectics of the Nganga Paradigm' *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 19 (1989), p. 164.

¹⁷ 17. Matthew Schoffeleers, 'Ritual Healing and Political Acquiescence: The Case of Zionist Churches in Southern Africa', *Africa*, 61 (1991), pp. 1-25.

¹⁸ 18. Source unknown.

In Zimbabwe some African Independent Churches have taken a lead in the development of a sacramental theology of the environment.¹⁹ Some thirty-five churches joined together to form The Association of African Earthkeeping Churches, whose objective is the liberation or restoration of nature through Christian principles. Some of the things the AAEC is suggesting include an annual tree-planting eucharist by churches in ecologically ravaged areas. These churches also try to combat ecological sins, for they threaten human survival and life itself. Daneel rightly points out that

the current response of the AIC's to the Spirit as earthkeeper and the resultant widening perspective on salvation as extending to all creation, instead of overriding the evangelistic outreach in the traditional sense, is incorporated into and enriches the individual conversion experience. It enhances hope in the future fulfillment of salvation.²⁰

6. SALVATION AS A PROCESS

In African Christian thinking salvation is a process which is initiated by an encounter with Jesus Christ. There is a tendency among many African Baptists to equate salvation with being given a handout. Conversion means getting a ticket to enter heaven and once you have it your eternal salvation is secure. Such an understanding of salvation is detrimental to sanctification. Salvation is not getting an inheritance, it is becoming God's heritage ([Ephesians 1](#)). (W.O. Carver, *The Glory of the Christian Calling*, Nashville: Broadman, 1949.) Many of the pastors have a deep suspicion about 'once saved, always saved' teachings. African believers take scriptural warnings against apostasy seriously. Many of them would agree with the position taken by distinguished Baptist theologian Dale Moody who has warned us that the Bible does not teach an unconditional security of the believer, but believers are promised security if only they hold their confidence firm to the end. ([Heb. 3:14](#)).²¹ Conversion is a change in allegiance in which Jesus becomes the centre of one's life with the person accepting the responsibility to serve God and to promote God's reign. Kuhn has defined conversion as follows:

Conversion means a 'turning' away from old ways toward new ways, a basic reorientation in premises and goals, a wholehearted acceptance of a new set of values affecting the 'convert' as well as his social group, day in and day out, twenty-four hours of the day and in practically every sphere of activity —economic, social, and religious.²²

Changing people's worldviews is a protracted process. Charles Kraft rightly points out that we are so used to the dramatic 'bolt-out-of-the-blue' type of experiences that we forget that Christian conversion is a dynamic process which involves commitment and growth. Justification by faith based on a static view of salvation has tended to make many Protestant Christians suspicious about good works. Justification is not separate from sanctification. Jesus made it clear that one is worthy to worship only after he or she has been reconciled to the wronged neighbour. ([Matt. 5:23-24](#)). For many Africans retribution is part of the reconciliation process. There is no reconciliation without facing the realities and needs of restitution.

¹⁹ 19. Daneel, 'African Independent Church', pp. 159–166.

²⁰ 20. Ibid., p. 166.

²¹ 21. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), pp. 308–365.

²² 22. As quoted in L.J. Luzbetak, *The Church and Cultures*, (California: William Carey Library, 1975), p. 6.

7. SALVATION AND ANCESTORS

One of the most crucial questions that is often asked by African Christians is about the fate of their ancestors who died without having heard the gospel. With the noted exception of a few Christians who believe that all such persons are condemned to go to hell, a lot of African people tend to commit them to the hands of a merciful God who will act justly according to the light they had. On the basis of [1 Peter 3:19](#) which says that Jesus went to preach to spirits in prison, John Mbiti has suggested that there may be a possibility of choice and change for the spirits of the dead, otherwise Jesus' preaching would be pointless. He writes

We venture to speculate that the opportunity to hear or assimilate the effects of the gospel is continued in the life beyond the grave (cf. [1 Peter 3:19f](#)), and that death is not a barrier to incorporation into Christ, since nothing can separate 'us' from the love of God (cf. [Romans 8:38f](#))²³

Mbiti's contention is that death does not rule out the possibility of the dead being able to choose salvation. Whether one agrees with Mbiti or not, the church has always confessed that Jesus 'descended' to the realm of the dead. He is the Lord of the living and the dead. One's worldview will affect how one interprets [1 Peter 3:19](#). An African reading of [1 Peter 3:19](#) cannot rule out the possibility of the living-dead having qualitative spiritual change, for physical death is not the end of the road. Furthermore, whatever else the passage means, it shows us the extent to which Christ is prepared to go for the salvation of humanity. Many Africans like me find it very difficult to be preoccupied with the joys we are going to have in heaven if a lot of our ancestors are going to suffer in hell elsewhere. For Devlo, salvation consists also of joining ancestors after death and being included into the ancestral community.²⁴

CONCLUSION

Africans do not see salvation only in terms of an escape from the wrath of God and the salvation of individual souls in the hereafter. The salvation which Christ offers in his incarnation, life, death, resurrection and parousia is a comprehensive salvation which involves the individual as well as the society, soul and body, present and future. Christians must work for the reign of God, calling persons to faith in Christ, with the culmination of salvation yet to come. Salvation in the African context, however, means wrestling with issues that hinder Africans here from reaching their full potential now. These include oppression, neo-colonialism, poverty, disease, ethnic tensions, starvation, and sexism and racism. Comprehensive salvation will not tolerate false dichotomies which divide the gospel between horizontal and vertical, spiritual and secular, personal and social, individual and corporate sin.

Salvation means the humanizing of people who have been dehumanized by societal evil and by personal sinning. Africans are sinners but they have also been sinned against. Jesus refused to separate the love of God from the love of neighbour ([Matt. 22:36-40](#), [Mark 12:28-31](#)). We can express our love for God only through serving our fellow human

²³ 23. John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 175.

² 2. A survey of standard texts in systematic theology in the West simply ignore any theological reflection from Africa.

beings. We cannot claim to love God in our hearts and at the same time to turn a blind eye to human greed, hatred, sexism, police brutality, racism, adultery, bigotry, child abuse, and all kinds of perversions which are part of human existence. It was to identify with these issues, that in [Matthew 25](#) Christ assumed the role of a prisoner, one of the little ones, a hungry and thirsty person. John N. Jonsson has pointed out that there is no dichotomy between humanization and the glorification of Christ in the gospel. In the New Testament glorification of Christ is not posed as a counter to humanization. The conflict is not between God and humanity but between God and the enemy of humanity, for human liberation. The conflict is between God and ego-centrism.²⁵ African Christian humanization for this reason means

an ongoing commitment to advance from the less human conditions of disease, hatred, crime, war, racism, poverty, oppression, faithlessness, hopelessness, etc., to human conditions of health, love, peaceful coexistence, equity, justice, community fellow feeling, faith, and hope.²⁶

These are not peripheral to the gospel, they are inextricable ingredients kernel to the gospel. It is a progressive humanization of society based on 'being more' rather than having more, thus restoring meaning and wholeness to society and to the entire universe. The best compliment you can give to an African is saying to her or him, *uri munhu* you are human. We are human only because others are human. Salvation makes people more and more human while human sinfulness makes them less and less so. It is as humanized persons that Africans like Abraham look forward to the city which has no foundations, whose builder and maker is God ([Heb. 11:10](#)). A new Pretoria, Harare, Nairobi, Lusaka Abuja Accra coming down out of heaven.

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Thinking Theologically About Evangelism

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(with later editing by author)*

²⁵ 25. John N. Jonsson, 'An Elliptical Understanding of Mission and Its Roles' *Missionalia*, 11 (1983), pp. 3–10.

²⁶ 26. George Omaku Ehusani, *An Afro-Christian Vision 'OZOVEHE' Toward a More Humanized World*. (Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1991), p. 243.