

# Evangelical Review of Theology

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Volume 28 · Number 2 · April 2004

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical  
theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by



**PATERNOSTER PERIODICALS**



for  
WORLD EVANGELICAL  
ALLIANCE  
Theological Commission

# What Does it Mean to be Saved?

Rikk Watts

**KEYWORDS:** *Creation, divine image, incarnation, Exodus, temple, priests, restoration, destiny*

I'VE ALWAYS STRUGGLED with the idea of what it means to be a Christian, and it is not because I did not think God was real. I was brought up in the Pentecostal church. I knew God was real, but there was some sense of dislocation between my Christian experience and the life of the world around me. The more travel I have done, the more I realize that for many Christians there is a deep sense at a profound level of not knowing why we are here.

In my tradition the primary goal of Christians was to get away from this world as quickly as possible, so we made films about that like 'Left Behind'. However, we need to ask ourselves the question, 'What does it mean to be saved?' I remember when I was working at IBM this was often satirized. A poster in a friend's cubicle said, 'Jesus saves—at First National'. I remember at first being greatly

offended by this, but with the passage of time I began to wonder if we haven't deserved it. Because after I calmed down I began to realize how odd the language must sound to a late 20th or early 21st century person.

It was only when doing some work on an article by Craig Evans about the influence of Roman political thought on the prologue to Mark's Gospel that it began to dawn on me that we were using a word that really did not mean what it meant back then. 'Saviour' was in fact a well-known political term. There is a famous inscription (the Priene Inscription) where they speak of Caesar Augustus;

It seemed good to the Greeks of Asia and in the opinion of the High Priest to say the following: 'Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as

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a saviour (soter), both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things. And since he, Caesar, by his appearance, excelled even our anticipations, and surpassed all previous benefactors, not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done; the birthday of the god Augustus marked the beginning of good tidings (*euangelion* the gospel) of his coming ...'

The inscription goes on to suggest an offering of thanks for the coming of Augustus.

Now I want you to pay attention to some of the language here. No one is talking about going to heaven. No one is talking about sins forgiven. The language 'saviour' has to do with concrete changes in the lives and the world in which people of the first century were having their social existence and seeking to bring up their families. There is nothing here about somewhere beyond the blue. Being saved by a saviour had a well-known economic and political meaning; it was a word from everyday life, and sat very nicely alongside the title 'benefactor'. Augustus was considered the people's 'saviour' because he had done just that—he had restored peace to the empire.

Now it seems to me we have made the kind of mistake that no decent misanthropologist would make today—we have hung on to the word and lost the meaning. Perhaps we ought to be going for the meaning and think about changing the word, otherwise we might find other posters about Jesus saving at First National.

## Understanding salvation

So what does it mean to be saved? Let us track the imagery that Genesis gives us in order to understand salvation. In my tradition we have spent a lot of time talking about salvation but we really did not understand why God cared in the first place. Why should he want to save us anyway? Of course that means that you cannot really talk about salvation until you talk about creation. There is a reason for beginning in Genesis.

One of the striking things about the Hebrew Bible's conceptualisation of creation is its use of the following kind of language—*'the foundations of the earth... the pillars of the heaven ...the beams of God's upper chambers... stretching out the heavens like a canopy (or a tent)... the windows of the heavens... storehouses...'* This is architectural language. The thorough-going conception in the Hebrew Bible is of creation as some kind of architectural construction. Now what kind of building is this?

Nowadays we really do take culture seriously, so we want to pay attention to the way language is used in the surrounding cultures. In many of the ancient near-eastern traditions the act of creation was seen as an act of the gods building their palace. This is not a new idea. The word for palace in Hebrew is the same word that is used for temple. That is exactly how Israel sees creation. Note Isaiah 66:1: 'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool.' Where do you find a throne and a footstool? In a palace. What do you call the palace not of the king but of a god? You call it a temple.

Now we are quite happy to see

heaven as God's temple, but the point of Isaiah is that the earth is his footstool, the earth is right there in the very throne-room as well. And he then goes on to say: 'What is this house that you build for me?'—and in language reminiscent of Genesis 2:2-3—'where is the place that I can take my rest?' This is exactly the language that is echoed on the seventh day where Yahweh rests in his temple palace, in his cosmic pavilion. This is the first century Jewish perspective as well. Josephus talks about the temple in cosmic terms. Philo goes on to say 'the whole universe must be regarded as the highest and in truth the holy temple of God'.

How do you think about creation? What do you know about a temple? Is it not a holy place? However, when you think of creation, do you think of it as a sacred and holy place? Tragically when we say things like that there is likely to be a kind of knee-jerk reaction, 'This is New Age'. Whether it is or not, it is biblical. It is a tremendous affirmation of the created world.

It seems to me that for too long we have been living in this Platonic tradition that has denigrated the goodness of the physical world. God gets excited about timber. It is miraculous. There are some very odd things that happen at the sub-atomic level. Things are in two places at the same time. They behave in very odd ways. Maybe it is right to say that the God of all creation through his word has imposed order upon this and he loves this stuff. 'It was good.' In my tradition we believed the only reason God made this place was to burn it up, and the sooner we were out of here the better. The rapture was the great hope. It was a bit of a shock to realize that later on while I am

going up there, I am passing Jesus on the way down!

An unparalleled seven times in Genesis 1, God says 'This is good'—finally, he says, 'very good'. Note that John 3:16 states, 'For God so loved ...' not our souls, not even human beings, but the cosmos. Do I love the cosmos? I started to realize—no wonder I was having trouble being a Christian, because I really did not understand the way God thought about his world.

### The divine image

What about Adam and Eve in all of this? What is the last thing that is put inside a temple? The image of the deity. What's the last thing God creates in Genesis 1? The divine image: 'let us make humanity—male and female—in our image' (Gen. 1:26-27). It all moves towards the formation of the image-bearers and their placement in the Garden of Eden.

Several features emerge from this image language. One is that we cannot get away from the physicality. Whatever else 'image' means, it involves our physicality. We must understand that images in the ancient world were never intended to depict the deity's appearance. When Israel makes the golden calf (if that is meant to be the image of Yahweh), it is not suggesting that Yahweh moves around on all fours lowing in the heavens. No, the images portray the function and attributes of the deity. They are pictograms, if you like, rather than portraits. The reason you choose the young bull is because of the power and virility it symbolizes.

Somehow our physicality is essential. It says something about what it means to be the image of God in the

temple he has created for us. One of those is that we have completely opposable thumbs. This gives us the kind of dexterity that enables us to imitate Yahweh in this small realm of the cosmos he has given us by carrying out his creational work, imitating him. Far from being inanimate objects, these images were indwelt by the very life of the deity and became the very focus of his presence upon the earth. That is what it means to be human, from the biblical point of view.

We are living pictographs of Yahweh the creator, enlivened by his breath, and ultimately his indwelling spirit. (We start to realize that the central focus of the NT is not 'Christ died for sins'—that's important, but not the centre.) Our job is to imitate him—and that is what Adam and Eve do. They do the work of the garden and they protect it, guarding the sanctuary. Imitating God in their creational activities, as it were, little gods enthroned between the knees of Yahweh the great God, imitating him.

What is going on here? Partly there is a polemic against idolatry. We do not build temples for Yahweh—he made one for us, and it is called creation. We do not form Yahweh in our image, but he makes us in his. We do not open his eyes and ears. He gives us sight and hearing, and ultimately fills us with his breath. Neither do we provide for him—he provides lavishly for us in a garden called Eden, which means 'the light'.

### God's character and human joy

What is God like? Abundant joy char-

acterizes the Christian life, as we see in the letter to the Philippians. People are made for Eden, and for a God who is full of delights! In case you missed it, the first thing that Jesus does in John's gospel—the most theological of all the gospels—is to turn water into wine, 120 gallons of it. Oh that Nietzsche had understood that! We might not have had the terrible disasters of our age if the Lutheran church of his day had actually understood creation as Eden and the point of John's gospel and the opening mighty deed. God is not anti-body. He gives us good gifts—Eden. No wonder the Psalmist can say, 'Who are we, that you should be so mindful of us, crowning us with glory and honour?' (Psalm 8). To be human (Lewis has got it right) is an extraordinary gift. It's a glorious thing,

People say, 'I do these things like this—bend the truth, cheat,—because I'm only human'. No—a thousand times, no. We do these things not because we are human but because we are not human enough. That's what this is about. To be made in the image of God, to be a human-enfleshed being is a glorious and wonderful thing. May God grant us eyes to see this.

Genesis 1 is not about how long God took to do anything. The primary point is that this is his palace-temple built for human beings. The problem is what happens in the garden. When Adam and Eve take the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil it is basically an assertion of autonomy, a refusal to trust, a desire to take control. That is what destroys our marriages and our societies—autonomous living, where the issue is control and we will not trust. We refuse to be vulnerable, but we are worshipping a God

who is not some sort of blob of jelly radiating holiness somewhere. No, he is first and foremost a community of persons. This is relational, and you cannot have relationship without vulnerability, trust, and the willingness to give over control.

I think that is the garden story. And what happens? The moment we deny we are made in God's image and we will decide ourselves what it means to be human, we deny the very thing that we are. If an image-bearer denies the one whose image it bears, what is it? It's annihilation—'in the day that you do this you will surely die.' That is, in fact, what happens—the sad descent into the long night of Cain, Lamech who has two wives (one is not enough for him—someone insults him so he kills him) right down to sons of the gods who have as many women as they choose. Injustice runs riot and they call themselves 'sons of the Gods', so swollen to madness is their arrogance.

Creation is bound up in all of this, and it too stumbles into decay. Why? Because the image-bearer is no longer carrying out his job of guarding and doing the work, because he has no idea who he is. Human beings are designed to know who we are by looking into other people's faces. Yet only by looking into the face of God do we know what it is to be human. For scholars and pastors, that is our ministry. Sunday morning is about helping your congregations and students see the face of God. That's what will transform them.

### The new Eden

So Adam and Eve depart the garden. Notice this action—they are clothed as they go out. I am not sure this has any-

thing to do with anticipating sacrifice—it is more likely that clothing in the ancient world was highly significant, far more than it is for us. For example, taking on certain kinds of clothing indicated the acceptance or acquisition of throne rights. David strips off his robe before the Lord. That is significant—it is making a statement about who is the king. Adam and Eve go out with their little aprons, inadequate as they are, and what does Yahweh do? In a great act of mercy and grace, he clothes them. The Akkadian word for 'clothe' means to accede to the throne. As the rebels go out of the garden Yahweh clothes them as a way of affirming, 'I made this place for you—and by hook or by cross I will get you back here. This is for you.'

That is what the exodus is all about. Israel arrived in the darkness. The wind begins to blow over the stormy sea. Light appears as Yahweh comes—a column of fire. The sea divides and the dry land appears. Where have you seen that before? Where do you think Israel got its Genesis 1 story from? As they stood by the Red Sea, the Sea of Reeds, the Sea of Chaos, dwelling place of the chaos monster, they discovered there that it was not Tar or Atton, the great gods of Egypt, who had crushed the little people. No, it was Yahweh who brought these little people out of Egypt in a new creation.

He brings them to a new Eden—Canaan, flowing with milk and honey. In this process, what happens to Israel? Jesus is not the first person called 'Son of God' in the Bible. God says to through Moses to Pharaoh, 'Israel is my first-born son' (Ex. 4:22). Now that does not mean Israel is divine—that is not what sonship lan-

guage means. It is Wisdom language—good sons and good daughters imitate their parents. This is the re-formation of humanity in the image of God; it is part of getting us back to the garden.

When Israel accepts Torah, they are repudiating Adam and Eve's decision to be autonomous. The ten words of the Decalogue repudiate autonomous existence. In accepting it, Israel says, 'We trust you and hence obey you.' Listen to Psalm 19: *'The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The decrees of Yahweh are sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of Yahweh are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of Yahweh is clear, enlightening the eyes...'* That sounds like a deliberate echo and therefore a deliberate repudiation of Eve's assessment of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen. 3:6). So the answer is that Israel is going to discover what it means to live, not by reaching out to the tree autonomously but by accepting this Torah. Thus we begin to have the formation of the image of Yahweh.

That is why you get striking language in Ezekiel 16, where the prophet contrasts Israel's adornment of her idols with God's adornment of Israel. As far as we know Israel was the only religion at that time that had no image in the temple. In the ancient world Egyptian temples were actually maps of the universe; in them they had their deities that they would clothe and feed every morning. But you do not have such images in Israel's temple. Crispin Fletcher-Louis has shown that the clothing of the high priest is actually very close to the clothing of the cult objects in pagan temples. So you have Israel's high priest as the only 'image' in Yahweh's temple. Why? Because the

high priest in the Holy of Holies models Israel's calling as Yahweh's holy nation-kingdom of priests (Ex. 19:6) living in their holy, sanctuary land, a new Eden. On a macro-cosmic scale Creation is his palace-temple and Israel is meant to be the image of God being priest between God and the rest of the world, for the blessing of the nations.

### Incarnated reality

Just as the great King reigned in his cosmic temple-palace in Sabbath rest, so his people incarnate this reality, living in the larger cosmic temple of the earth. They rest on their Sabbath day, keeping it holy both to remember the original Sabbath and to anticipate the destiny that God has for this temple palace that he has built, and seven times declared to be good.

What is the task of Israel, as a kingdom of priests, as those who adhere to Yahweh's way of being human and enjoying Yahweh's personal presence? To be the example of how to be human to the watching nations, who will look on them and say 'What a wise people!' This raises an interesting question: when was the last time a local chamber of commerce, or your local mayor or government approached your church and said 'We've been watching you—teach us how to be human.'? If that's not happening it is a good time to become a Christian. To be Yahweh's image-bearer means to look like him, and reflect Yahweh's justice, righteousness and compassion—that's the focus.

Of course, one of the implications of being made in God's image is that every act of abuse against the image of

a king is an act of high treason. Thus, every act of abuse against another human being is an act of high treason against God. It does not matter how often I go to church, how well I recite the catechism or whether I speak in tongues more than you all. The big issue is how do I treat people, and Jesus knows that. What are the commandments? The only two that matter are 'love God' and 'love your neighbour as yourself' That is the reason for which we have been saved!

The restoration of the image of God and the restoration of his creation is the focus, but Israel loses this, they lose direction. Why? Because they start to love the blessing more than people. Listen to Isaiah in his early chapters. Israel has this magnificent worship building—no expense spared—and brilliant worship team. They have conferences on prayer and they even fast. These people had got it all together, surely, and what does God say? *'Who invited you into my house to make this racket? I am sick to death of your solemn worship assemblies. I am tired of your conferences.'* Why? Because the church building is not made in God's image, neither is the worship service, neither is the prayer meeting, or even fasting. One thing only is made in God's image. You want to worship God? Then you clothe, feed, house, take care of his image. That's what it means to be saved. James says that: *Don't prattle on about having faith. Let me see it by what you do.*

No surprise then that Vincent Carrol and David Schiflett in their book on *Christianity on Trial* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002) mention that one of the key factors in the conversion of the Roman Empire was the extraor-

dinary generosity of the Christians. Where do we stand in relation to this? Some of us are saving up shekels for the wrong thing. You can't take it with you. Why don't you invest it in something that will change people's lives? That new car you were planning to get—do you really need it, is it more important to you than equipping young people for the work of the kingdom? The one great sin we in the affluent west do not talk about is our greed, which is the same as idolatry—because we put that stuff ahead of people. There is nothing wrong with a nice car and other possessions, but where is our heart in terms of the kingdom? Israel loved stuff more than people. It's interesting to see what happens.

Remember all that language about idol imagery? Those who worship idols (Ps. 115, 135) will become like them, having eyes that do not see, ears that will not hear, mouths that cannot speak. We see the same in Isaiah chapter 5 where there are six woe oracles (5:8, 11, 18, 20, 21). They are actually patterned—three large ones, three small ones (as in Genesis 1). It concludes with the land having no light but only darkness in the midst of a roaring like that of the sea (5:30)—imagery which, to my mind, echoes the amorphous pre-creation at the beginning. In other words, the six curses of chapter five appear to be an ironic echo of the six days of creation but with Yahweh's word effecting instead the dissolution of the good order of Israel's new Eden-sanctuary land

Immediately after this, you find yourself in a temple (Is. 6). What is the biblical metaphor for creation? Temple! What happens in this temple? Isaiah is given a task: *'Preach to them, that*



*seeing they may not see, hearing they may not hear*'. What is going on? The ironic re-creation of Israel in the image of the idol she worships—and that is what leads to their destruction. Israel has become just like Pharaoh. To deprive one's fellow Israelites of the clothing, food and shelter necessary is to deny worship of Yahweh.

In the fourth century (if my data is correct) the church in Rome would regularly call for fasts in order that they might feed the hungry, providing one million rations a year. The monastery at Cluny fed 17,000 people a year. And what is this? This is what salvation is about—because physicality matters. The body matters. It is part of the bearing of the image. It is simply our Platonic attitude that thinks that only souls need to be saved. It is amazing how rare the language 'saving souls' is. In some ways it is not really Christian at all. It seems to relate to the immortality of the soul, but that is not a Christian doctrine. God made embodied beings, he is going to give us back our bodies, he thinks they are a great idea. When we are resurrected we are going to have them and they are going to be special, if the resurrected body of Jesus and Paul's word about 'spiritual bodies' (1 Cor. 15:44) are any guide.

The land becomes cursed and a desert—there it is, the loss of creation, the loss of the image. But because God loves this place he will not abandon his people in exile. He promises to bring about a return. He did not create the earth to be uninhabited (Is. 45:18) and he is going to bring back his people. That is what Ezekiel chapter 37 is all about—the resurrection of the dead, the body and the spirit, the re-formation of the image and the indwelling of

the Spirit. Back they come as true human beings, imitating the God in whose image they are made.

## Jesus—Creation and Exodus

I want to suggest that is exactly the focus of Jesus in his ministry. What are the most common things he does? He opens eyes, ears, mouths, restores limbs. He feeds people in the desert and tells the sea what to do—where have you seen that before? Isn't that the exodus? The feedings in the desert and Jesus' power over the sea also recall the exodus, and along with the marvellous provision of wine (Amos 9:13; Joel 3:18) and abundant catches of fish (Ezek. 47:9f), testify to the new creational activity of Yahweh among his people. It is therefore no surprise that the evangelists speak of mighty deeds, signs, works—exactly the language of creation and the exodus (Ps. 65:6; 101:25; Dt. 3:24; 4:34; Ps. 106:8; 44:1).

When Jesus calls his disciples he calls the twelve; this is not surprising for someone who himself has just gone through the waters, the Spirit has descended on him and called him 'my beloved Son'—and then sent him out into the desert for forty days. Who do you know who was called God's son, went through the water into the desert? Israel! Here is the formation of a new humanity. So now in Jesus we see God who comes among us as the Son of God, very God, but he is also Son of Man. How can you put those two things together? We wrestle with this—how can one be God and human? That is a problem for Platonists, for Paramenides, for Heraclitus, but it is not a problem for us because we are

made in God's image. What else would you expect? This is the destiny of his creation! He comes among us and shows us what it means—the great glory of being a human being.

The great threat of the origin stories in our present culture is that they denigrate being human. They say, 'You're an accident, you're a freak... you won't last... you have no meaning.' Then we wring our hands when our children behave just exactly like that. The older ones among us who probably do not care about our kids, wring our hands because companies like Enron do what they do and that hurts us where it really matters. More to our shame.

Jesus calls twelve to be with him, and they submit to his word. He teaches on a mountain. However, unlike the mountain in the exodus where they put a fence around the bottom because everyone had to be perfectly pure, in Matthew's gospel there's no fence around the mountain. Everybody can go up. Immediately after that Jesus does ten mighty deeds—but not plagues—acts that restore our humanity.

### Restoration of humanity

It seems to me that this is what it is all about. Salvation is not about the denigration of our human-ness. It is about its restoration. You and I will never be so human as when we are truly spiritual. We will never be so truly spiritual as when we are truly human. That is the narrative. It is picked up in the New Testament. Jesus is the only true image of the Father—the invisible God, the new Adam, our great high priest. See what that means! This is the one who bears the image, in the temple, our

great high priest imitating Israel's high priest, God present among us and in us. God in Christ causes the light to shine in the darkness (where have you heard that before?), transforming us from glory to glory, having the same mind as Jesus. We are in Christ, members of one another and his body. We are in fact indwelt by God's Spirit, nothing less than the very presence of God upon the earth.

Talk about a high anthropology! This is the glory to which Paul presses. He understands what we've been called for. Galatians 3:26ff is probably the most radical passage written in a good 300 years either side of the first century, in a world where men had all the power over women, masters held all the power over slaves, and Jews and Greeks traded insults about who was really the better off of the two. What does Paul say? *'In Christ—no longer male or female, no longer Jew or Gentile, no longer slave nor free.'* It is hard to imagine a more radical statement than that, and yet that is the Christian vision.

Now please understand those things matter, but do not forget the crucial matter in all this is the indwelling of the Spirit. Yet that is often our tension. We will go to one extreme or the other, with the emphasis on some sort of private spirituality or on some kind of fixation with social action; and we both end up making a mistake. Both aspects are required. That is the high point of the coming of the Spirit. That is what the gospel and the New Testament is about. You can have your sins forgiven in the Old Testament, but the Torah cannot do what the Spirit can. Even the prophets knew that, and said, *'I'm going to write the law*

*upon your hearts. I'm going to write the repudiation of autonomy, of control, of lusting after the power, I'm going to write the repudiation of that on your hearts through the Spirit.'* We are Spirit people. Those who walk by the Spirit are the true children of God, bearing his image. That is why in Galatians the fruit of the Spirit are nothing other than the character of God expressed in us, and the gifts of the Spirit are that same God at work. What are they doing? Restoring humanity!

### The destiny of creation

Now for my last point. If you watch what Jesus does, most of his focus is not on restoring creation. This is not because it does not matter! It is because Jesus understands the key to all of this. Paul does too. You see the destiny of creation is not to be burnt up. Romans 8:18ff makes it certain what the destiny is—and that is, its redemption. The key to that redemption is you and I being revealed as the true sons and daughters of God by living in step with the Spirit. What does this look like? Look at Jesus the cross-bearer. That is what changes the world. If you study the history of some of the early Christians, that is exactly what they did—imitating Jesus.

So Revelation 21 has it right—we are not going to heaven. That idea crept into the church in the second and third century from Platonists who

could not imagine God would ever care about this stuff that is the world. Yet God says, '*It's good, it's good. it's good...*' He loves it enough to send his son, and come in his son to reconcile this world to himself. Read Revelation 21—heaven is coming here. That is why it is the new Jerusalem.

There is something very odd about this new Jerusalem—there is no temple. Furthermore, it is a cube. What is cube-shaped in the Old Testament? The Holy of Holies in the tabernacle, and the Holy of Holies in the temple! There is no temple in the new Jerusalem, not because it has become the temple. No, the temple has the court of the Gentiles, the court of the women, the men, all of which is eradicated according to Galatians 3. No, the city is itself the Holy of Holies! And it's huge. Does it help, maybe, to know that the dimensions of the entire known world in the first century were approximately 12,000 stadia by 12,000 stadia (approximately 1,500 miles)?

The whole of creation is going to become the Holy of Holies. John, picking up the language that comes from the conclusion of the book of Exodus, states that God is coming here to live with us to be our God, and we will be his people. This is no surprise if you have read Genesis 1. He loves this place, and he loves the image-bearer. To be saved is to live that love out concretely with real people in this life. This is your moment. Seize the day!