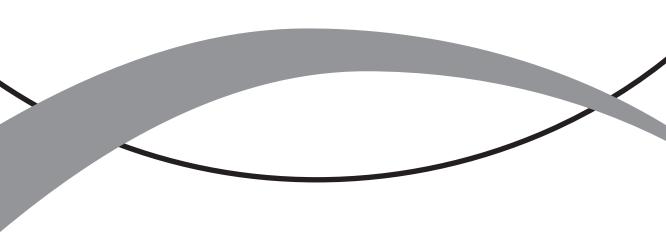
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EXTRACT

SALVATION, DISCIPLESHIP AND EVANGELISM



Salvation as Liberation: (Re)Imagining Hope in a Time of Crisis

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Abstract

It is not uncommon for people in the Uniting Church to avoid discussion of salvation and to recoil from evangelisation. In part, this occurs because ideas of salvation that focus on sin and atonement are considered questionable, or potentially harmful, by many. This is problematic. The problem is not that people are uncomfortable with a soteriology that focuses on sin and sacrifice. Rather the issue is that people have not been made aware of the diversity of New Testament and early church understandings of salvation. In this paper the soteriological understanding of Jesus' liberation from cosmic evil will be discussed and investigated for potential resources for responding seriously to the myriad threats to flourishing that face humanity and the earth.

Introduction

"I am an atheist. Why are churches full of crosses? I can't stand all this talk of sacrifice." This was how a stranger responded when they discovered that I was a Uniting Church minister. Surveying our architecture, our artwork, and the language of many of our hymns and worship songs, it is understandable to assume that sacrifice is the integral feature of Christianity. Indeed, in Protestant circles often the impression is given that sacrifice – regularly accompanied by ideas of sin and atonement – is at the heart of understandings of Christian salvation. This is problematic. While there are Uniting Church people for whom a soteriology of sacrifice is meaningful and life-giving, there are many, both lay and ordained, who recoil from this construction of salvation. The idea of God requiring God's Son to sacrifice his life, in order to appease God's wrath, or to fulfil the requirements of divine justice, is as abhorrent to them as it was to the person I conversed with. However, the problem is not that many people within and beyond the church reject this construction of soteriology. After all, the Apostles' Creed and Nicene Creed make no mention of atonement theology, as they seek to safeguard the core foundations of Christian faith. Rather, the issue is that people within the church have not been given access to the diversity of understandings of salvation embedded within the New Testament. It is a false dichotomy to assume that people must choose between accepting a form of sacrificial soteriology or rejecting convictions that in Christ Jesus there is salvation. Earliest understandings of soteriology are complex and dynamic. In the pages that follow one of these soteriological understandings will be retrieved and explored. In the earliest church salvation was commonly understood to be accomplished through Jesus' liberation of humanity, or all things, from cosmic evil. While, perhaps, far removed from contemporary Uniting Church proclamations of faith, it will be demonstrated that within this soteriology there are resources for responding with seriousness, vitality, and hope to the diffuse threats to flourishing that confront our global village and the very earth.

What's soteriology have to do with it?

Soteriology matters. There is a direct relationship between constructions of salvation and the potentiality of evangelism. If we have convictions that make sense within our lived experience, about how Jesus is good news, we will find it easy to tell about it. However, if we cannot abide the theology of salvation that we have inherited, and have nothing, or little, to replace this with, we will struggle to find words to share about why there are good tidings in Jesus the Christ – even if we sense that this to be true. Instead, we will be tempted to define our faith by what we do not believe: "we are not like them"; or "we don't believe those old ideas about the cross"; or "it is not about sacrifice". Such statements may be authentic, and integral to our ecclesial identity and sense of belonging. However, these words offer little in the way of hope to those within and beyond the church who are trying to make it through the day, are enduring tragedy, or who are wondering if life has any meaning.

Despite narrow preoccupations in recent centuries, the seismic intrusion of the Christ event could never be contained by one theology of salvation. This is reflected within the New Testament. The incarnation, the disruptive teaching and healing, the non-retaliatory dying, and the shocking and peace-bestowing resurrection of Jesus defy the bounds of one neat summation of why this is salvific. Alongside cultivating communities of rigorous engagement, contemplation, and testimony, it behoves us at this time to wrestle afresh with questions of soteriology. Through inviting people into the richness of early Christian soteriologies, we may yet discover resources for giving language and imagery to the hope that stirs within us.

Is it queasiness about the blood?

The arguments in favour of atonement theologies are well rehearsed and need little explication.² However, as noted above, for many theologians and congregants, theories of atonement are increasingly unsatisfactory. This concern is not simply due to Western, or middle class, sensibilities that recoil from ideas of self-sacrifice, nor is this the result of squeamishness about the blood. Rather theologians from diverse contexts demonstrate that this soteriology does not adequately address the problem of evil. In contrast, this understanding of salvation often provides the foundation for violence, particularly violence against women and other minorities, to be legitimised and emboldened. As Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza observes, in relation to Anselmian framings of soteriology:

If one extols the silent and freely chosen suffering of Christ, who was "obedient to death" (Phil. 2:8), as an example to be imitated by all those victimized by patriarchal oppression, particularly by those suffering from domestic and sexual abuse, one not only legitimates but also enables acts of violence against women and children. ³

¹ For further discussion of rigorous engagement, contemplation, and testimony see my article "Say What? The Ineffable within the Theological Culture of the Uniting Church" *Uniting Church Studies*, vol 26, No. 1. (2024). 7–16.

It is important to note that there are diverse understandings of sacrifice in both Old and NewTestament texts. While some NewTestament texts may reflect understandings of atonement as salvation, many do not. Furthermore, constructions of atonement theology are diverse within the Christian tradition.

³ Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza Jesus: Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet, Critical Issues in Feminist Christology (London: SCM Press, 1995), 106.

For nearly one thousand years, deeply influenced by Anselm (b. 1033 C.E.), a soteriology of sacrifice has dominated the imagination of Western Christianity. However the impacts of this soteriology are not culturally bound. Over the last millennia, this construction of theology has spread around the globe, especially in more recent centuries, due it pivotal place in the modern missionary movement, aligned as it was to European colonisation. Reflecting on the impacts of this theology in the Philippines, Virginia Fabella states:

In the course of time and movement across cultures, the positive meanings of Jesus' death became lost or distorted. In the Philippines, we have developed (or inherited) a dead-end theology of the cross with no resurrection or salvation in sight. Most of the women who sing the "pasyon" during Holy Week look upon the passion and death of Jesus as ends in themselves and actually relish being victims. This attitude is not uncommon among other women outside the "pasyon" singers, and it is not helped when priests reinforce the attitude through their homilies.⁴

Similarly Chung Hyun Kyun observes the way in which Jesus' suffering is employed to justify the suffering of women:

The church's teachings about Jesus are very similar to what Asian women's fathers, husbands, and brothers say to them, rather than what Jesus actually says in the gospels. The church tells Asian women: "Be obedient and patient as Jesus was to his heavenly father. He endured suffering and death on the cross. That is what good Christian women are supposed to do. When you go through all the suffering, you too, like Jesus, will have a resurrection someday in heaven..."

Despite the contemporary prevalence of soteriologies that hinge on sacrifice, when Anselm was writing he was intentionally seeking to displace dominant understandings of soteriology that had held sway since the earliest church. In doing so, Anselm was seeking to bring the shocking Christ event into dialogue with the problems, and symbolic world, of his own day. In order to be honest and faithful in our own rapidly changing contexts, we need to do this work afresh.

Ransom from cosmic evil within the New Testament and early church

The dominant understanding of salvation in the New Testament, within the earliest church, and for centuries afterwards, was not hinged upon the necessity of sacrifice in order to appease God, or address human sinfulness. Rather, soteriology was centered in Christ's liberating victory from cosmic evil. As Nicholas Lombardo states:

For the first thousand years of Christianity, the metaphor of ransom supplied the dominant interpretative category for making sense of Christ's crucifixion. By allowing himself to be crucified,

⁴ Virginia Fabella "Christology from an Asian Woman's Perspective" in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. E Johnson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 124. Brackets original.

⁵ Chung Hyun Kyun "Who is Jesus for Asian Women?" in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. E Johnson (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 104. For discussion of the impacts of this within the Australian context, see my article "I desire mercy not sacrifice": How Soteriology Constructs Discipleship – A Test Case', *Colloquium*, December (2019): 44–60.

it was understood, Christ offered a ransom (in Latin, a *redemptio*), and this ransom liberated humanity from the devil and the powers of sin and death.⁶

We can miss the internal architecture of the metaphor of ransom in the West. In part this is because many recoil from notions of cosmic evil. However, this is also because we are no longer familiar with the realties that lie behind the imagery. Unlike in many parts of this world, in Western countries kidnap and slavery are not daily threats, at least for those who are white, or have immigration papers. Language of ransom is dependent upon the understanding that there are those who are held captive. As in many places in our global village today, within the ancient world kidnap was common place. When the forces of the empire stormed towns or cities, those who were not killed, were regularly made captives, and turned into slaves. In addition to this, when a person fell into debt, they could be made a slave, or if they had the means, and the predilection, they could sell a family member into slavery in their stead. Only if an enslaved person was fortunate enough to have a wealthy patron, relative, or friend, could they be ransomed and released from slavery.

Drawing from the world around them, New Testament writers, again and again, use the language and imagery of ransom in order to give expression to their convictions about Jesus' liberative salvation. This understanding is reflected in Colossians. Here the author proclaims that in the God of Jesus Christ there is victory from these powers for: "He has rescued us from the power of darkness and transferred us to into the Kingdom of his beloved son" (Col 1:13; see also Rev 1:17–18). Likely drawing from a liturgical fragment, the author of 1 Timothy makes a similar proclamation:

For there is one God; There is also one mediator between God and humankind Christ Jesus, himself human, Who gave himself a ransom for all (1 Tim. 2:5–6).

John the Revelator depicts those before the throne singing a new song to the Lamb, with lyrics that echo this conviction:

You are worthy to take the scroll and to open it seals,

For you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation. (Rev 5:9)

The author of Hebrews makes plain that this ransom is understood to be from cosmic evil:

Since therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. (Heb 2:14–15).

⁶ Nicholas E. Lombardo The Father's Will: Christ's Crucifixion and the Goodness of God (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 181. Brackets original.

In Ephesians, the power of these cosmic forces, and the even greater power of salvation in Christ, is graphically depicted:

Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his power. Put on the whole armour of God, so that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armour of God ... (Eph 6:10–13; see also 14–17).

Within the earliest gospel, the theology of ransom from cosmic evil is integral to the proclamation of salvation. After contesting with Satan in the wilderness (Mark 1:12–13), in Mark's Gospel Jesus' first salvific action is to liberate a person from an unclean spirit (Mark 1:21–28). Jesus' power over cosmic evil, that frees people, continues as the dominant theme throughout the Gospel (see Mark 3:20–30; 5:1–20; 6:7; 7:24–30; 9:14–29). In a key dispute with the religious elite about whether he is in league with Satan (and thus able to cast out demons), the Markan Jesus images himself as the One who binds the "strong man" – that is, Satan (Mark 3:20–27). When the Markan Jesus goes on to proclaim his salvific purpose the centrality of ransom is made explicit. After telling the disciples plainly three times that, counter to their hopes for glory, he will be handed over, betrayed, killed, and then raised (see Mark 8:31–33; 9:30–21; 10:32–34), the Markan Jesus states "the Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45).

The understanding of Christ's liberation from cosmic forces continues to be integral in the early church. Justin Martyr (b. 100 C.E.) does not elaborate a detailed soteriology, yet his conviction that in Christ Jesus there is salvation is clear. In the *First Apology* Justin writes about the power of demons, and in particular their lies and deceptions, and warns readers that demons "strive to make you their slaves and servants" (*The First Apology*, 14). Justin goes on to make this claim about the experience of Jesus communities we "after our conversion by the Word have separated ourselves from those demons and have attached ourselves to the only unbegotten God, through his Son." (*The First Apology*, 14). Justin then details the salvific impacts of this separation from the demons through Christ. According to Justin, now Jesus communities are freed from the deceptions of idolatry and violence, and begin to live in compassion for one another, even among those who were former enemies (*The First Apology*, 14).

Drawing from the Markan imagery of binding the strong man, Irenaeus (b. 120-140 C.E.) also understands salvation in Christ as being achieved through ransom from cosmic evil (see *Against Heresies*, Book 3.8.2; 18.6–7). With tenderness, Irenaeus describes the impacts of this liberation through Christ. Through this liberation, humanity is led "back to friendship and concord" with God (Against Heresies, Book 3.18.7).

Within his commentary on Romans, Origen (b. 185 C.E.), states:

See John R Donahue and Daniel Harrington, The Gospel of Mark, Sacra Pagina Series, Vol 2. (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 37.

⁸ As Elizabeth Struthers Malbon states "Satan's kingdom is falling, not because it is divided against itself (with Jesus casting out demons form within Satan's domain), but because Satan (as the strong man) has been tied up and his house is being plundered as part of the in-breaking kingdom of God." Elizabeth Struthers Malbon Hearing Mark: A Listener's Guide (Harrisburg: Trinity Press International, 2002), 27. Brackets original.

If then we have been bought at a price, as Paul also confirms, undoubtedly we were bought from someone whose slaves we were, who also demanded the price he wanted so that he might release from his authority those whom he was holding. Now it was the devil who was holding us, to whom we had been dragged by our sins (*Commentary on Romans*, Book 2.13.29.

The centrality of ransom soteriology within Origen's understanding of the good news is reflected throughout his writings (see for example *Commentary on Romans* 3.7.14; 4.11.4; 5.3.7; 5.10.9–12; *Commentary on Matthew*, 16:8; Homily on Exodus 6.9).

The risks of re-engaging with ransom soteriology

It seems likely that discussion of the devil, Satan, or cosmic forces will be even less popular in many Uniting Church circles than discussing atonement theology. There are valid concerns about retrieving this language and imagery. Therefore, it needs to be underscored at the outset that in seeking to reclaim this ancient soteriology, it is not being advocated that we adopt literalist constructions of cosmic evil. When New Testament and early church writers engage with this theological idea they do not do so from a position of quaint superstition or primitive ignorance. Diverse New Testament and early church writers utilise this imagery as they engage with metaphor, symbol, and story. As Lombardo rightly states:

Patristic authors usually discuss the devil's ransom in homilies and sermons, literary forms in which the use of metaphor is natural and expected, or while commenting on sacred scripture, which itself is replete with metaphor and symbolic language... Consequently, patristic descriptions of the devil's ransom should be taken in a fluid, metaphorical sense, and not as straightforward theological assertions.⁹

While New Testament and early church writers are able to engage with ransom soteriology "in a fluid and metaphorical sense", in recent centuries the pursuit of objective reason, and, an often, reductionist scientific approach have corroded our capacity to engage seriously with the power of symbol and story *as sources* of truth and meaning. Compounding this problem, within popular culture both comical and terrifying images of personified evil proliferate, making it difficult to engage with understandings of cosmic forces with subtlety or maturity. Our hyperlinked technological age further complicates the possibility of serious reclamation and reworking of this ancient cosmology.

Within this multilayered context, the risk of being misinterpreted is extreme. It therefore needs to be explicitly stated that it is not being suggested that we take these forces literally, by trying to identify cosmic evil within people, or institutions, or that we become fixated on cosmic battle. There are significant risks when churches of any, or no, denomination, allow their attention to be focused on the demonic, and ignore the weightier and non-negotiable teachings of Jesus to love God (Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27), love neighbour (Mark 12:31; Matt 22:39; Luke 10:27), love enemy (see Matt 5:5:43–48; Luke 6:27), and pursue

⁹ Lombardo, The Father's Will, 209.

justice and mercy (Matt 23:23; see also Matt 9:13; 12:7). ¹⁰ Just as early church writers engaged with metaphor and symbol in order to speak of the realities of systemic and experiential evil and the liberative inbreaking of Christ's alternate reign, I am seeking to do the same.

Evil in contemporary contexts and the Johannine Jesus

In our era, in the wake of two World Wars, the Cold War, the climate emergency, contemporary conflicts, unchecked consumerism, the weaponisation of racism, extreme poverty, the expanding power of the obscenely rich, the caustic attention economy, increasing levels of violence directed at women – now amplified due to lurching technological "advances" – and the far reaching dismissal of religious sensibilities, we need robust and rich soteriology that will speak meaningfully into the extraordinary challenges that we face. In short, any construction of salvation in our own contexts needs to seriously address, and equip us in the work of standing against, the realities of evil. That is, not only must Christians directly address the realities of peoples' lived experiences of evil, but also explain why there is hope in Christ. From the perspective of ransom soteriology, there is potential good news to share.

In the process of working more deeply with early church understandings of salvation from cosmic evil, John's Gospel has come into sharp focus. The Johannine Jesus' describes the devil, stating:

He was a murderer from the beginning and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks according to his own nature, for he is a liar and the father of lies. (John 8:44)

Here it is revealed that lying and violence coalesce as inseparable features of cosmic evil. This claim speaks into the realities of history. Through deception, atrocities are enabled. Over the last century we have seen this at devastating scale. By constructing Jewish people as non-human, the Nazi's were able to convince a nation that millions of people deserved to be tortured and eliminated. In 2025, the Trump presidency has deployed a similar strategy, labelling all people who have entered the United States without papers as "criminals", in order to dehumanise and justify their arrest and expulsion. In these lands called Australia, through the blatant lie of *Terra Nullius* – that this was "land belonging to no one" – the invasion of First Nations countries was legitimated, and as a consequence nations, families, cultures, languages, and traditions were pulverised.

From the global, let us to turn to the local and consider the lies and violence that saturate our own lives. The advertising industry bombards us with the message that we are not enough, and that in order to be whole, we need to consume or experience the new "new" at each and every each moment. We are now so drenched in the mechanism of this lie that we have taken to manufacturing the deceptions ourselves on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Tik Tok. People endlessly feel pressure to perform, presenting a glossy image, while tucking away their struggles, failures, and fears, as they post about their

¹⁰ A recent movement illustrates the dangers of severing Christianity from the life and teachings of Jesus (and the wider church) and instead devoting energy to literalist interpretations of cosmic evil. See Stephanie McCrummen "The army of God comes out of the shadows" *The Atlantic*, February 2025: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2025/02/new-apostolic-reformation-christian-movement-trump/681092/, accessed 11/02/2025.

#greatest day, meal, relationship, or holiday, and keep tally of the likes they gain. Concurrent with the work of maintaining these false narratives, people are pressured to consume everyone else's lies. As a result the deceptions of scarcity and unworthiness are perpetually reinforced. Since the advent of smartphones rates of depression, anxiety, and self-harm, particularly among younger people, have skyrocketed. Parallel with these increases, attention spans are decreasing, as grimly reflected in Oxford University Press 2024 Word of the Year brain rot. The Johannine Jesus discloses the inner workings of evil in which deception and violence are symbiotic. The evidence of both history, and contemporary life, bears this out.

Salvation in contemporary contexts and the Johannine Jesus

What do lies and violence have to do with Jesus, and how do these relate to understandings of salvation? To these questions we will now turn. In John's Gospel, not only does Jesus reveal the internal dynamics of evil. What is equally striking is that the Johannine Jesus discloses the inner contours of divine reality. On the night that Jesus is betrayed this is amplified. In John's Gospel there is no institution narrative, instead Jesus washes the disciples' fetid feet, commands them to love like this (John 13:1–15; 34), eats and talks with them, and prays for them (John 13:16–17:26). On this long evening, in response to a question from Thomas, the Johannine Jesus – who in this gospel is the Word "who was with God" and "was God" (John 1:1) – states: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). In this gospel Jesus embodies divine truth and life. The dripping irony is that within a few hours, when Pilate asks "what is truth?" (John 18:38), even though he does not see, the truth stands before him enfleshed in skin and bone.

We have done damage to, and with, the Johannine Jesus' statement "I am the way, and the truth, and the life". Often these words are sliced out of their original context, and carved into incendiary tests for belonging. This can make the content of this declaration hard to hear. However, when we read these words within John's Gospel we discover that they are not abstract divine qualities. After making clear that cosmic evil is inherently deceptive and violent, Jesus proclaims that there is a greater power. While the movement of evil is always towards deception and death, the movement of the divine is always towards truth and life. What is more, John's Gospel proclaims that this life is "the light of all people" and "cannot be overcome" (John 1:4–5).

If we take seriously that in Jesus, divine "isness", truth, and life reside we need to wrestle with the question of what this means in the face of lies, violence, and evil. To put this bluntly, how can this be salvific? If it is true that in some deep-down gnarly way, Christ Jesus embodies divine reality – the truth at the heart of the universe – then in this Holy Human One dwelling with us, and teaching, feeding, challenging, healing, and washing our feet, *and* in this One's non-retaliatory dying, *and* in this One's disruptive resurrection, the balance of power is irrevocably changed.

See Johnathan Haidt The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness (Westminster: Penguin Press, 2024).

Brain rot is defined by Oxford University Press as "Supposed deterioration of a person's mental or intellectual state, especially viewed as a result of overconsumption of material (now particularly online content) considered to be trivial or unchallenging. Also: something characterized as likely to lead to such deterioration", https://corp.oup. com/word-of-the-year/, accessed 04//02/2025.

The whole Christ event

In reclaiming ransom soteriology I am inviting us into an expanded vision. Here the cross is not the sole location of salvific power. Instead, the whole Christ event – the incarnation, the life, the murder, and the resurrection of Christ Jesus – invite us into the strange, unfolding, and ultimate victory of God over evil. In this One the divine kingdom is breaking into our world. Within the confines of space, we will turn briefly to consider each of these movements of the Christ event.

If the *incarnation* cradles divine reality – if it is true that in Jesus we behold God face to face (see John 1:1; 18; Col 1:15; 2:9; Heb 1:3) – then there are very serious implications. It necessarily follows from this conviction that in the *life* of Christ Jesus, as proclaimed in the Gospels, we are confronted with who and how God is. In Jesus' words and actions we are challenged by the truth that the divine is love (see 1 John 4:7–8). In this One we discover grace that consistently longs to free us, feed us, challenge, and forgive us – and others. Here we discover that we each have value beyond our striving, and apart from our abilities, mistakes, gender, cultural background, or status – or lack thereof. In this One we can finally stop competing and pretending, and acknowledge our hunger and brokenness, knowing that the divine longs to heal and restore us by nourishing us with the gift of very self (John 4:14; 6:35; 57). Confronted with this reality we discover that the call to love neighbour and enemy, is not a nice idea or a particular moral prescription, but a call to abide in the truth of who the Composer is (see Matt 5:43–48; 1 John 4:7–8). If Jesus is the image of God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3), all of the images of God that we construct that are not loving are revealed to be lies.

Across the Gospels, Jesus chooses to use power for others not over others, and in the *cross* this divine emphasis reaches a crescendo. In the death of Christ Jesus, we are confronted with the truth that the divine will not participate in our violence. While we hurl verbal, emotional, and physical violence at the God One, culminating in an abhorrent state sanctioned execution, we are steadily met by the One who chooses to endure our violence, rather than inflict it. In the cross of Christ Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life, we are confronted with the divine who is love all the way down and, who therefore will not mirror our evil. While people of religion, including Christians, claim that God ordains, or desires, violence against God's own son, against women, against the LGBTQI community, against nations, or against strangers, in Jesus the divine definitively rejects violence in all its ugliness. Here we are challenged by the truth. The violence is ours. In the cross, the Source of all chooses to absorb our violence in order to set us free from its power.¹³

Without the *resurrection* of Christ there is little in the words above beyond a collection of potentially inspiring ideas. As Paul states "If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins" (1 Cor 15:17). Yet our faith proclaims that the story did not end on that tree. Testimonies from earliest times in the Jesus movement proclaim that something happened. Christ Jesus was unexpectantly raised and in the power of the Spirit continued to be present, vivifying communities. In the shocking rupture of the resurrection we discover that the divine's way and truth and life – all the loving and non-retaliation – are

As René Girard states as he reflects on Col 2:14–15: "The victory of Christ has nothing to do with the military triumph of a victorious general: rather than inflicting violence on others, Christ submits to it ... Christ does not achieve this victory through violence. He obtains it through a renunciation of violence so complete that violence can rage to its heart's content without realizing that by so doing, it reveals what it must conceal..." René Girard I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, trans James G. Williams (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 140.

more powerful than all the violence, lies, and toxic forces of evil (see 1 Cor 1:21–25). As René Girard states "The Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion." In the risen life of Christ Jesus, we are snatched out of the lie that brute force, trickery, and intimidation have the ultimate power, or final say.

Get up, stand up

These are not simply ideas to agree with or reject. From the beginning, amidst the precarity of seeking to survive under the occupation of the brutal Roman empire, followers of Jesus have declared that they are experiencing the inbreaking of this risen life, the kingdom coming, amidst the stench. They proclaim that they are seeing the "glory" and receiving "grace upon grace" from Christ Jesus' fullness (John 1:14; 16). They celebrate being infused with the fragrance of Christ, and bearing this in their bodies wherever they go (2 Cor 2:15–16). Amidst the ongoing threats and realities of violence, they celebrate the experience of being carried from the slavery of fear into the homecoming of divine love in real time (Rom 8:14–16).

Against the odds, and the optics, Jesus communities proclaim that liberation from the clutches of evil is happening. While the kingdom has not yet fully arrived, they testify to the kingdom breaking into the world. Through the potent energy of the Holy Spirit and the ongoing presence of the non-violent, victorious One, Jesus communities celebrate experiencing a shift within them, not only individually, but collectively. They are being moved from the grasp of darkness into God's marvellous light (1 Pet 2:9), and because of this they are living differently together. They are being enabled, slowly and falteringly, to break free from the web of lies – the terror, competing, and violence – as they discover new life growing within and amidst them, and are shaped by this radical grace into people of love and joy and peace (see Gal 5:16–26; Col 3:1–17), like Christ. Christ. Christ. They are being enabled to the control of the cont

Could we trust this to be true in our actual lived reality? Could this be an authentic proclamation of salvation? In a world that is drowning in lies and saturated with violence, could we cleave to Jesus who was and is and is to come the way and truth and life? In our global village in which we are told that we are each irrelevant atoms floating in the stratosphere, this is meaningful good news. In a world that tell us that we are unworthy unless we buy this product, or gain that status, this is liberative good news. In a world that encourages us to dismiss those who are different, or with whom we disagree, this is uncomfortable good news. In a world that prizes self-obsession and might, this is destabilising good news. This is good news because all of these cultural assertions are poisonous. In a world in which it looks like violence and wholescale deception are winning, Christ's disruptive defeat of cosmic evil, that is now and is coming, is the most astounding good

¹⁴ Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 189.

When Paul makes these claims he speaks in the plural, giving expression to the collective nature of these experiences across Jesus communities.

¹⁶ Origen reflects on the "already/not yet" nature of this kingdom stating: "For this is why we are taught to say in the Lord's prayer, "Your kingdom come!"... The present time, however, I would say seems not so much a time of reigning as of war. Through this war the future kingdom is being striven for. Yet Christ can be said to reign even in this time of war, since the dominion of death is now broken in part and being gradually destroyed, a dominion which had previously spread itself out to all men [sic]." Origen, Commentary on Romans, Book 5.3.7

¹⁷ This is the pattern that Justin Martyr describes unfolding within Jesus communities, see above and *The First Apology*, 14.

news. We, and all things, are loved. The current powers – that goad our attention, pollute our relationships, corrode our purpose, and demand our loyalty – do not have to dominate us, and they will not prevail.

While Christ's liberation from evil is good news, it is also costly. Reclaiming this early soteriology demands that we set aside ideas of salvation in which we are passive recipients waiting for the life to come. To enter into this way, as followers of the risen, crucified One, requires that we be slowly unravelled from the lies that we are embroiled in: the lies we fear may be true about God, the lies we cherish about others, and the despairing lies that we tell about ourselves. In this ancient understanding of salvation, becoming free is not a process of self-realisation. This is another lie. Instead, we are called to allow the Triune God to rescue us, each of us, from the particular nest of toxic deceptions that is ensnaring us on any given day. We are called to allow the Spirit of truth (John 14:17) to confront us, and advocate within us and on our behalf, against the father of lies. We are called to set aside appeasing God (this construction of love is yet another deception), and allow ourselves to be emboldened for love – like Jesus – so that we can expose the lies and violence, even when it would be far easier to keep our comfortable place in the mob. The Johannine Jesus says "the truth will set you free" (John 8:32). This is true. However, this process of liberation, of sanctification, of pruning (John 15:1–5), will be ongoing and often excoriating.

At the foot of the empty cross, with our hands in the hand of the risen One, our liberator, we are called to get up, stand up, and join the resistance against evil. We are called to pray for, and play our part now in, the kingdom coming like the dawn with all its subversive power. In living more and more into the grace and truth that we were born for and are returning to – divine reality as reflected in Christ's shimmering face (see John 1:14; 2 Cor 4:6) – we may yet relish and embody the scent of freedom and find words to share about it.

Conclusion

At this juncture in history, amidst myriad crises in which lies and violence proliferate, Christians often struggle to articulate their hope in Christ. We have work to do. In recognising that there are diverse soteriologies within the New Testament and early church, we are freed from the false dichotomy of choosing between a soteriology of sacrifice and silence. We are also given fresh resources for understanding and telling about the good news that we experience in the God of Jesus Christ. In this article the ancient soteriology of ransom from cosmic evil has been retrieved, examined, and experimented with. It has been demonstrated that within this strange symbol there are abundant riches that may yet speak into our local and global contexts. In returning to this early understanding of salvation as liberation there is much to be considered and tested. I offer this as a beginning.

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¹⁸ Girard, I See Satan Fall like Lightning, 189–90.

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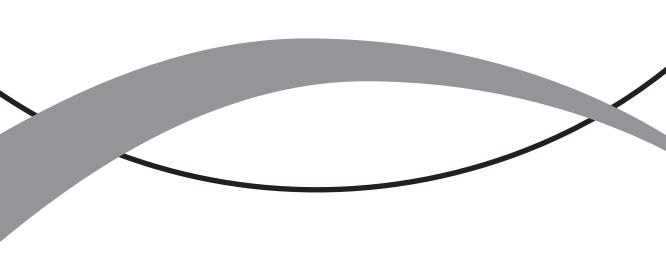
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