

## ***SALVATION IN THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH FATHERS***

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The best definition of salvation I have ever found was in the words of one of the Coptic Orthodox contemporary churchmen, the Blessed Father Bishoi Kamel (1931-1979):

“The Christian concept of salvation does not consist merely in commandments, or in teachings, or in promises; it is rather the descent of God and his union with us. The Savior then is God who united with us and walks with us.”

This is the core of the biblical teaching on salvation, which the Fathers have kept in their writings from the early Christian centuries, and which remained till our times. However, the Western Fathers and theologians gradually shifted away from this simple biblical Tradition especially since the Middle Ages. In recent years, thanks to the huge work of many biblical and patristic scholars, there is a growing tendency in many churches to return to the teaching of the early Church on salvation.

Part I of this study is a general historical survey of this issue in which the teaching of the various Fathers is introduced in chronological order in both the East and West. Subsequent chapters deal with Scholastic Theology and how it affected the teaching in most churches till the Middle of the twentieth century, after which there has been a resurgence of the patristic Tradition.

Part II deals with the doctrine of salvation, as we know it from Scripture, Liturgy and Church Fathers. In the light of all these main sources of Tradition, we will see how the problems and questions raised by scholasticism have no real basis and are the wrong questions to ask from the beginning. I do not intend to enter into theological arguments since the study addresses primarily the general reader, with two aims in mind. The first is how does all this relate to our spiritual life, which is, to quote St. Athanasius, a life directed to the Father, in, through and with the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. The other aim is how to bring this patristic Tradition to what we teach in Sunday Schools, how the biblical dynamics of salvation as taught by

the Fathers and lived in the Liturgy can help everyone in 'the road of salvation' (to quote the Coptic Liturgy of St. Basil).

## *Part I*

### *A Historical Overview Elements of the Patristic Teaching on Salvation*

Christians throughout the centuries have confessed the Lord Jesus as Savior, but what does this really mean? In both the Old and New Testaments, God is the Savior; salvation is a result of his saving act (Ex. 3:8, 5:23; & 12:27; Ps. 44:3,4; Is 43:11, 60:16, 61:10; Habakkuk. 3:13 & 18; Matt. 1:21; Luke 1:47, 68 & 2:11; Heb. 3:16, 18; 2 Pet 1:1). This has been an essential teaching of Christianity since the very beginning. Christians quoted the biblical verses and data without raising the theological question of how does God save us. The Church still uses the same OT psalms and great hymns that recall the salvation of God. The four songs, known as the 'Hosses', that start the Daily Office in the Coptic Church illustrate this. The Nicene Creed, acknowledged by all Christians, says that the Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten son of God, 'for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was made flesh...and became man' From the beginning of Christianity, the Incarnation has been an essential doctrine, essential for our salvation. The New Testament starts with it. It has its place in every Creed and every baptismal formula since the apostolic times. But why did God become man? The Church Fathers did not leave for us a sophisticated system or an elaborate theology of salvation. Unlike the doctrines of Trinity and Christology where controversy forced the Church to have exact definitions, redemption did not become a battle-ground for rival schools till the 12th century. The christological teaching of the Fathers and their defense of Christ's full divinity (against Arianism), and His full humanity (Against Appollinarianism), and of the union of the two natures into one (against Nestorians and Chalcedonians) always included a stereological basis. The definitions they reached in those areas were worked out in close connection with a quite definite view of Christ's redemptive work. That no soteriological pronouncements came from the myriad of Councils held during the patristic age is testimony, not to a lack of interest in the 'doctrine' of salvation, but to the fact that 'Jesus Christ is Savior' was the one doctrine, which served as the irreducible platform for all other doctrines.

The early Fathers in the first two centuries looked at the role of Christ in our salvation from different aspects , all taken from Scripture:

- 1 - As a 'Teacher', Christ enlightens our minds and opens our eyes to the true knowledge both by his words and by the example of his life.
- 2 - By 'Recapitulation' redeemed humanity has Christ and not Adam as its Head (Rom.5: 12-19, 1 Cor. 15: 22 & 45-50).

- 3 - From a third aspect, Christ has been looked at as 'Victor' since He conquered Death, Sin and Satan, together with all the powers of darkness (Rom. 7:4 Phil. 2:10. Col. 2:15).
- 4 - The concept of salvation as proceeding from the 'Sacrifice' of Christ on the Cross-is a central teaching of the New Testament and of all Church Fathers. In both we find a dualistic description of God's redemption of man. God in Christ combats and prevails over the tyrants who hold mankind in bondage (i.e. death, sin and the Devil; see Heb.2: 14). On the other hand God becomes reconciled with the world, the enmity is taken away, and a new relation is established with mankind. The deliverance of man from the power of death and the devil is at the same time his deliverance from God's judgment. God is not only the Reconciler but also the Reconciled. This double-sidedness appears in most of the aspects and images used by the Church Fathers to describe Christ's death:
- 5 - Death of Christ as a Sacrifice and the Image of the Ransom-Price. Till the second half of the fourth century, the death of Christ as a ransom (Matt.20: 28; Mark 10: 45) together with Origen's absurd 'theory of the deception of the Devil' was prevalent. People believed that human beings rightfully belonged to Satan because of their sin and that he had the right to receive their souls on their death. According to this theory, the death of Christ was the 'ransom' paid by the Father to the devil in order to redeem the captive humanity. Origen says:

To whom did He give his soul as a ransom for many? Surely not to God. Could it, then, be to the Evil One? For he had us in his power, until the ransom for us should be given to him, even the life (or soul) of Jesus, since he (the Evil One) has been deceived, and led to suppose that he was capable of mastering that soul, and he did not see that to hold Him involved a trial of strength greater than he was equal to. Therefore also death, though he thought he had prevailed against him, no longer lords it over him. Christ having become free among the dead and stronger than the power of death, and so much stronger than death that all who will amongst those who are mastered by death may also follow him, death no longer prevailing against them.

St. Gregory of Nazianzus refutes this theory saying:

...I ask to whom was this (Sacrifice of Christ) offered, and to what cause? If to the Evil One, fie upon the outrage! If the robber receives ransom, not only from God, but a ransom, which consists of God Himself... But if to the Father, I ask first, how? For it was not by Him that we were being oppressed; and next: On what principle did the Blood of His Only Begotten Son delight the father, who would not even receive Isaac when offered by his father? Is it not evident that the Father accepts him, but nei-

ther asked him nor demanded him; but on account of the Incarnation, and because humanity must be sanctified by the humanity of God, that He might deliver us himself, and overcome the tyrant, and draw us to himself by the mediation of his Son, who also arranges this to the honor of the Father.

- 6 - The Image of Debt. St. Athanasius says, “The Word of God naturally by offering His own temple and corporeal instrument for the life of all satisfied the debt by His death.” Athanasius also connects this with the idea of sacrifice, “By offering unto death the body He Himself had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from any stain, straightway He put away death from all His peers by the offering of an equivalent.”

## *Part II*

### *Fall and Redemption Between East and West in the Early Church*

#### *A - The Eastern Christian Tradition*

Since the third century, the teaching on man, his fall and redemption started to differ between East and West. The eastern Fathers believed that man, being created in the image of God, was a rational creature and had a free will. However, in Paradise Adam and Eve were not perfect, mentally, morally nor spiritually. They were still like children when Satan tempted them. St. Athanasius emphasizes that man, being created in God's image, has a special relation to Him that makes him the object of God's pity and responsibility when he falls. Athanasius, quoting Wisdom 2:23 and 24, says, “God made man for incorruption, and as an image of his own eternity; but by the envy of the devil death came into the world”

Eastern Fathers do not teach that the fall deprived man entirely of God's Grace, nor of the free will. In the words of Athanasius, the image of God in man was damaged, or became faint, but never destroyed by sin. He says:

For as, when the likeness painted on a panel has been effaced by stains from without, he whose likeness it is must needs come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood: for, for the sake of his picture, even the mere wood on which it is painted is not thrown away, but the outline is renewed upon it.

Athanasius keeps repeating that sin resulted in two major consequences: the change of human nature and the fall of man into the grasp of death. Any salvation, in order to be true of its name has to take care of both problems.

Although we inherited the changed human nature, with a weakened will and more inclination to sin, yet the Eastern Fathers never taught that we inherited Adam's guilt or that the unapprised children are doomed.

After its sin, God treated the fallen humanity with love and took upon himself the responsibility of saving it from a condition people would have never been able to change, that is their subjection to sin and death. St. Irenaeus says, "He became what we are in order to enable us to become what He is". St. Athanasius elaborates more, saying that God, because of his goodness had to take the initiative to save man.

For it were not worthy of God's goodness that the things He had made should waste away, because of the deceit practiced on men by the devil. Especially it was unseemly to the last degree that God's handicraft among men should be done away, either because of their own carelessness, or because of the deceitfulness of evil spirits... And where were the profit of their having been made, to begin with? For better were they not made, than once made, left to neglect and ruin. For neglect reveals weakness, and not goodness on God's part--if, that is, He allows His own work to be ruined when once He had made it--more so than if He had never made man at all.

The early Church Fathers looked at salvation from different aspects since it is a divine action which no human theory or human word can define or limit. From the biblical data they saw Christ as the New Adam, the Teacher, the Victor and the Victim. In all the pictures they used, they were careful to avoid philosophical routes and theories that have no biblical theological basis.

The picture of a loving and redeeming God was basic in the teaching of the Eastern Fathers about salvation and is still very evident in the eastern liturgies that have reached us from the patristic period. The Coptic liturgy of St. Gregory the Theologian can illustrate this better than many monographs:

Thou, my Lord, didst convert my punishment into Salvation; Like a Good Shepherd didst hasten to seek that which had gone astray; Like a Good Father didst labor with me who had fallen; Didst bind me up with all remedies, which conduce to life. Thou it is who didst send forth the Prophets on behalf of me who was sick; Didst give the law for my help. It is Thou who didst minister Salvation to me, though I had transgressed thy law; Didst arise, as the true light, upon me who had erred and was in ignorance.

The Eastern Church Fathers stressed the role of the Sacraments in salvation. St. Ephrem the Syria says: "Again we would say 'If Adam died because of sin, He who removed sin had to take away death too.' But just as Adam was told 'The day you eat of the forbidden tree, you shall die,' but in fact he did not die; but rather he

received a pledge of his death in the form of being stripped naked of the glory and his expulsion from Paradise, after which he was daily pondering on death. It is exactly the same with life in Christ: we have eaten His Body in place of the fruit of the Tree, and His altar has taken the place of the Garden of Eden for us; the curse has been washed away by His innocent blood, and in the hope of resurrection we await the life that is to come, and indeed we already walk in the new life, in that we already have a pledge of it.”

## ***B - The Early Western Church Fathers and Salvation***

### ***(1) Tertullian***

When we come to the West we find ourselves in a totally different world. We cannot avoid studying it because since the Middle Ages and till the middle of the twentieth century, the teaching on salvation in all churches, East and West, whether Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, has been dominated by Western thinking. In the early centuries, Western thought on redemption conformed broadly to its pattern in the East, except for putting a greater emphasis on the Lord's death as a sacrifice. The West looked at salvation mainly from its legal or judicial aspect. Although this view became an elaborate system only in the 12th century, it appeared as early as Tertullian in the third century. Tertullian, an African lawyer, introduced legal terms in theology and his views sealed the whole western theology till modern times. He is considered the most important Western theologian in the early Church before Augustine. Tertullian was the first to coin the term 'satisfaction' to describe Christ's work, though not in the exclusive way in which it was used in the Middle Ages. His teaching about Penance centered on the satisfaction made by man and the merits he acquires. Satisfaction is the compensation that a man makes for his faults. He says:

How absurd it is to leave the penance unperformed, and yet expect forgiveness of sins! What is it but to fail to pay the price, and, nevertheless, to stretch the hand for the benefit? The Lord has ordained that forgiveness is to be granted for this price: He wills that the remission of the penalty is to be purchased for the payment which penance makes.

Merits are acquired by acts, which go beyond what is obligatory. According to Tertullian, they include such acts as fasting, celibacy and martyrdom. This teaching was the seed for the ideas of satisfaction and merit that plagued the West in future ages.

### ***(2) Cyprian***

St. Cyprian built further upon the ideas started by his master Tertullian. He adds that superfluous merit can be transferred from one person to another, and applied this principle to the surplus of merits earned by Christ's passion. Cyprian also stressed the idea that, 'God must act according to justice'. In other words

Cyprian stressed two points in his teaching: (1) A legal relationship between God and man, and (2) In speaking of Christ's work, the emphasis is laid on that which is done by Christ as man in relation to God. These points emphasized by Cyprian are different from the previous Tradition. They became the basis for further elaboration in the Middle Ages. The Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen in 1930 offered the theory that these changes were based on the Latin penitential system which started at the time of Cyprian. However, during this period it never became the dominant view in the West, but was combined with the prevailing biblical patristic Tradition.

### ***(3) Ambrose***

Ambrose, together with other Western Fathers in the fourth century, emphasized the solidarity of all mankind with Adam in his sin and accepted Origen's theory of the transaction with Satan, with his rights to have a price for surrendering mankind. But he also spoke about Christ's death as a sacrifice as the main purpose of the Incarnation. In this he combined the idea of recapitulation with that of substitution.

### ***(4) Pelagianism***

Pelagius, a British monk who taught in Rome in the late fourth and early fifth centuries, did not share with other Western Fathers especially Augustine their pessimistic picture of fallen humanity. He taught that man after the fall has a genuine free will and is able to choose to do right or wrong equally. Thus he has a genuine role in shaping his life and destiny without the aid of a special grace from God other than that which all have in Scripture. Pelagius believed in the merits of good works.

Pelagianism was condemned by the Council of Carthage (in 411), and the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (in 431). Its long-lasting effect on the Church lies in two things: First, it is the only heresy in patristic time that is concerned with salvation, and hence we have a lot of writings on the issue in the 5th and 6th centuries. Second, in the less extreme form as Semi-Pelagianism, which is a whole spectrum rather than a single entity, it infiltrated in some of the monastic writings. St. John Cassian, through whom we received the teaching of many of the Egyptian Desert Fathers, was stamped as Semi-Pelagian by the Western churches.

### ***(5) Augustine***

Augustine is considered the greatest of the Church Fathers. Although he died before any of the major Church divisions, yet he is not considered a saint in any Orthodox Church; he is not mentioned in the Synaxarion, his name is not cited during the liturgy in the diptychs, nor does he have a feast day in any of them. The reason was his last four treatises which he wrote before his death, 'Against the Pelagians', which dealt with the role of Grace and human agency for salvation. In

these treatises, there appeared a disruption of the traditional teaching of the Eastern Church Fathers of co-operation between Grace and human free will that results in merit and reward at the last judgment, and which was carried by monasticism to the West. According to Augustine, those who are predestined by God as 'elect' are given a special grace that helps them to turn their will to him and persist with him till their entrance into beatitude. With the doctrine of predestination, free will and final judgment ceased to have any reality.

Other key issues in Augustine's System about salvation deal with the fall and original sin. He attributes original rightness and perfection to the first man. He was in a state of justification, illumination and beatitude. His will was good and devoted to carrying out God's commands. From this high state, higher than the Eastern Fathers imagined, the first man fell to a much deeper abyss than what they have drawn. The result was the ruin of the entire race, which became in Augustine's words '*mssa damnata*' (a lump of perdition), sinful itself and propagating sinners. Augustine taught that all sinned in Adam (original guilt) and thus unapprised infants are damned. Also as a result of the fall human nature became terribly scarred and vitiated. Although we still have a free will, yet we can only use it to do wrong; we cannot avoid sin or do good without a special grace given only to the elect.

In spite of his mistakes we cannot ignore the value of Augustine in summing up the Western theology and delivering it to the Middle Ages. Regarding the work of Christ in salvation, Augustine stressed three elements

- 1 - Christ is the one true Mediator, who reconciled us to God, by the Sacrifice, in which He is both the offerer and the offering. In the passion of Christ lies the essence of redemption, to which all the OT sacrifices prefigured.
- 2 - Humanity is reconciled to God through its Head (recapitulation). Christ became Head of the Church by the Incarnation. He participated in our mortality so that we might participate in his immortality.
- 3 - Christ is our Teacher. Through his Person and his actions, He demonstrated God's love for us.