WHAT IT MEANS TO BE SAVED

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Acts 2:47. "praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved."

Some weeks ago a music review appeared in Life magazine in which the reviewer commented on several recent recordings of the old revival song, "Amazing Grace." The reviewer, Albert Goldman, used this assignment as a launching pad for a general attack on what he felt was a return to religious hysteria, especially among young people. The point he makes is that frightened, restless people whose lives are empty and disoriented will try to lose themselves in anything at all so long as it produces great intensity of feeling. It doesn't much matter whether it is dope, or acid rock, music, or evangelical Christianity. Writes Goldman:

> Man must feel rock beneath his feet. That much is certain. Music, dance and mass meetings confirm the individual's sense of being. It matters not whether these meetings be those of the Nazis at Nuremberg or the Rolling Stones at Madison Square Garden. "Enthusiasm" - that good old 18th-century word that applies equally to Amazing Grace, Billy Graham and Mick Jagger - is, like mysticism, a quality of experience independent of religious doctrine. You can be an enthusiast of any faith or even of atheism. You can clap and stomp and work yourself into a fit at a football game, a religious convocation or a rock concert - all staged in the same arena. What really matters is the rapture. The feeling of being "saved."

Now there are distortions and historical inaccuracies in Mr. Goldman's article. But the concern he raises is timely and the distinctions he implies are valid. It is true that the same kind of mob psychology often seems to prevail at rallies of political extremists and at certain types of religious revivals. It is true that music, dope and religion are all mixed up in the youth culture and that they often seem to perform the same functions in the lives of individuals. It is true that dogmatic fanaticism under whatever name or sign is still dogmatic fanaticism. It is true that being saved is not the same as working yourself into a fit.

But Mr. Goldman put the word "saved" in quotation marks. So perhaps the word itself may be saved. Suppose we ask ourselves what it means to be saved in mature and contemporary Christian understanding. In answering that question, I should like to suggest three other words for interpreting the meaning of being saved. These other words are: Liberated, United, and Renovated.

Let's start with liberated. To be saved means to be set free, to be rescued. If we ask, liberated from what?, we might answer in contemporary language, from our human hangups. And that would be true so far as it goes. But we are not talking about a process of psychological therapeutic. We are concerned with those fundamental spiritual hangups that certainly do involve our physical and mental health, yet which transcend any individual's mental state.

The kind of liberation the New Testament has in mind when it speaks of being saved is liberation from the tyranny of death and the fear of death.

It is liberation from guilt, not just sick guilt but the real guilt that every person knows who stands before God. Being saved means liberation from allegiance to wrong values and subservience to false gods. Being saved means liberation from the emptyness that comes to individuals and to societies that lack a sense of purpose that transcends their own selfish desires.

In each period of human history some hangups receive more emphasis than others. The United Church Statement of Faith reflects a characteristic emphasis of our time in the line:

"He seeks in holy love to save all people from aimlessness and sin."

It is the word aimlessness that sticks out there. When the Women's Fellowship discussed this statement of faith recently, that word produced a good deal of reaction, some of it negative. But the authors of that statement felt that we live in a time when many people feel that life has no purpose or meaning. So aimlessness is something from which we need to be saved.

But perhaps we could sum up the entire predicament by saying that we need to be liberated from the trap of our own self-centeredness. "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" asks Paul (Romans 7:24). Who will help the real me get free of those forces that cut me off from myself and from God? That is everybody's question.

And the answer which the Christian message brings is that we are saved when our lives receive a new focus in God. We are saved when we get free of preoccupation with our own hangups and our own feelings and begin to center our living in a Power beyond ourselves.

So then if we are truly being saved, we won't always be concentrating on our own feelings, not even on the good feelings. What kind of emotional experience we go through is not the essential thing. That we should go around trying to convince everybody that we are happier than other people is not our true ministry. So long as we are hung-up on our own feelings we miss the point of being saved. To be saved means to be liberated from self-centeredness and to lead a life of God-centeredness.

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The second word I suggested for interpreting what it means to be saved is the word united. Our words save and salvation come from the Latin salvus, meaning soundness or health. The Greek terms in the original New Testament bear a similar meaning. When Jesus says to a sick woman, "Your faith has healed you," he uses the same words as he does to a woman of bad character in a passage customarily translated, "Your faith has saved you." To be saved means to be made whole. It means to be re-united with yourself and with the source of your life.

It is probably true to say that most religion, certainly all highly developed religion, is concerned with a vision of unity. The religious person is the person who sees life whole and in that whole finds meaning and beauty that is not present to people who see life only in bits and pieces. To be religious in a broad sense means to join your life to that power that "puts it all together."

There is a saying of Reuel Howe in his popular book, MAN'S NEED AND GOD'S ACTION, that I have often quoted because it sums up so well the fundamental spiritual impulse in man. Dr. Howe writes:

Some of our wants are superficial;
Some of them are deeper;
But the deepest one of all is the desire to be at one with someone,
To have someone who can be at one with us, and through whom we
can find at-oneness with all.

And we may put the Christian viewpoint very simply by saying that in Jesus Christ people do find someone who is at one with us and through whom we find atoneness with all.

Now it is easy to mistake the nature of this atoneness. We may think of it as a kind of drowning of ourself and all our responsibilities in God. There is something in us that wants that. I recall once a few years ago listening to a live rock group using electric guitars and organ. Their amplifiers were up so loud that it practically broke your eardrums. But after a while the music seemed to suck you in. You felt yourself being pulled into a swirling vortex of sound until you were at the point of being all swallowed up in it. This experience reminded me of the time I was given chloroform during the lancing of an infection when I was four years old.

There is attraction in that kind of experience. You just let yourself, your anxieties, your responsibilities, your very identity get lost in this great swirling thing. A good deal of what passes for religious experience is like that.

But I don't think that is the kind of at-oneness Jesus taught or that he brought to other people. He called people to decision, to responsibility, to a sharper sense of the moral choices, to a heightened awareness of their own personhood. Father Shea, President of St. Scholastica College gave an interesting talk some months ago in which he said it was the true mission of Judaism and Christianity to help people become more intensely aware of who they are as individuals before God. But, he said, there is always the temptation - and that temptation is strong today - to lose yourself in "the collective swoon" of primitive man.

To be saved means to be united with our true self, with the world and with God. But this union is not the union of sleep, or stupor or an orgy of strange sensations in which our individuality is obliterated. To be saved means to become more individually alive than we ever were before just because we are profoundly at one with the source of our being.

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The third interpretative word I used was renovation. "If anyone is in Christ," says Paul, "he is a new creature." He is a new person. Again and again in the New Testament we find this stress on newness and on radical transformation. This doesn't mean that people who believe in Christ change personality in the twinkling of an eye. It does mean that when one starts to center one's life in that saving power that flows from Christ, your life receives a radically new orientation. In New Testament symbolism the old Adam with his hangups is on the way to the cemetery. The new Adam centered in God comes to life. Out of his relationship with God a new quality of life appears which in the New Testament is called eternal life. It is something forever new, yet everlasting in scope.

People change through personal relationships. We often observe this in human life. For example, we may know a young girl who falls in love and becomes engaged. We note a change in her, sometimes a rather sudden and

dramatic change. She even seems to look different, to take on a radiance she did not possess before. And if her marriage is a good one, she and her husband will continue throughout their lives to grow into new people through their mutual love and faithfulness.

It is like that when Jesus Christ leads us into a saving relationship with God. What happens inside of us is transformed by this new relation with a Power beyond us. We enter into a process of life-long renovation.

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So then to put it all together -

To be saved means to be liberated from bondage to self by receiving a new center in God's love.

To be saved means to be united with the source of your life in God and thus to become at one with the real you and with all that is good and healthy in God's creation.

To be saved means to enter into a process of renovation, of becoming a God-centered person in every dimension of living.

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Now certain questions may leap to people's minds. One question is this: "Is being saved something that happens all at once?"

To that question I would answer, "No." People may come to dramatic turning points - when their faith suddenly catches fire. People may go through what psychologist Abraham Maslow calls "peak experiences" that bring the inner meaning of their lives more sharply into focus. The history of an individual may be like the history of Western man - B.C. and A.D. A person may be able to look back and say, "that's my personal Christmas, that's when God's Word was born in me."

I do not deny any of this. On the contrary, I affirm it. And I would say further that there is a danger in thinking of the Christian life entirely in terms of a slow process of growth. For that can make us complacent. It is so easy to hide from the fact that we are called to make a real, personal decision respecting God in Christ.

But to think that being saved is something that happens all at once is theologically and psychologically unsound. Every Christian who is not an egomaniac knows that he has a long way to go. We should not let ourselves be confused by people who think they got saved once and for all at exactly 9:27 P.M. on April 22, 1967. I think the article enclosed in your bulletin by a woman of mature Christian faith comes much closer to the meaning of Christian salvation.* Let us bear in mind that the literal meaning of that expression in Acts 2:47 which describes the first Christian community is not the saved ones, but rather the being-saved ones.

A second question is, "Must I believe everything the New Testament says about everything, and take all its symbolism literally in order to be saved?" Again I answer, "No." The New Testament interprets the impact of God's saving power on the lives of first century people. It speaks in terms of their culture, their science, their mythology. We are twentieth century

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*"How Can I Know I've Been Saved?" by Maida Dugan.

people. We must interpret God's saving power in terms of a contemporary understanding of ourselves and our world. Heaven forbid, that after a century of learning freedom in this regard, our Congregational churches should slip back into the crudities of an outworn fundamentalism.

A third question: "Does this mean then that we can no longer be saved through our faith in Jesus Christ?" I say, "No" to that too. That is, I say "yes" to the basic, core Christian affirmation that Jesus Christ is a channel of God's saving power for everyone who turns to him with repentance, trust, love and commitment.

This does not mean that God's saving power is only present in Jesus of Nazareth. That power comes to people in many ways, including people who never heard of Jesus and who never will. That includes most people, by the way.

But I believe that in Jesus we have a unique and decisive expression of God's saving power in a human life, saving power that was shared by those first disciples and which still flows down through history through the Word and the sacrament and Christian fellowship to us. And I believe too that the Spirit of Christ is still alive in the hearts of people today, leading them to a new and personal experience of God's saving power here and now.

That is the hard core, evangelical teaching on which I stand and on which I believe the church must stand.

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And so I say to you, as every servant of the good news is called to say: the saving power of God in Christ is real and it is the greatest thing in the world. You too can find there the love that will not let us go. You too can experience the Spirit aglow in your heart. You too can be set free, made at one, start becoming a new creation. You too can be counted among those who are being saved.