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PRIMITIVE CHRISTIAN SOTERIOLOGICAL THEMES

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WHAT FOLLOWS is a working hypothesis, a provisional synthesis. It is not difficult to test the elements of such a hypothesis and to come to judicious conclusions as to the strengths and weaknesses of a proposed synthesis; the author would take it as a great kindness if shortcomings were called to his attention. But some such synthesis as this is desirable in the current state of theological discussion, and it may not be too early to try. After a long period in which questions of basic soteriology received little attention, perhaps because it was assumed that we knew all that was necessary, theologians are showing a renewed interest in talking not only about how we may appropriate salvation but also what this salvation is which we are offered.

Robert Gregg and Dennis Groh, in their recent book on early Arianism,[1] have gone a step beyond the usual *pro forma* acknowledgment that questions of Christology reflect and depend upon questions of soteriology. They attempt to portray the soteriologies which they think were at stake in the Arian controversy and to show how they gave rise to the theological constructions of reality which characterize the main antagonists' thought. In this article their attempt is not at issue; but both their project and the problems attendant on any critical evaluation of it point up the shortcomings in our map of early Christian soteriological ideas. Edward Schillebeeckx offers us a list of key concepts in New Testament soteriology,[2] but the word-study approach to biblical theology has weaknesses, and the list is so long that it gives only limited help in clarifying what salvation was thought to be. James Mackey has taken a bolder tack in his identification of the experience of the Spirit and the kingdom of God, first in Jesus himself and then, by a sort of contagion, in the disciples.[3] Mackey is certainly onto something important, but liberation theologians and others could reasonably feel that his simplification has obscured or omitted essential themes of salvation which are found not only in the

[1] Robert C. Gregg and Dennis E. Groh, *Early Arianism—A View of Salvation* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981).

[2] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ The Experience of Jesus as Lord* (New York: Seabury, 1980) 468–511.

[3] James P. Mackey, *Jesus The Man and the Myth* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 97–120, 159–61, 187–93.

New Testament but in other early Christian writings.

Theological thinking about soteriology has not been the same since Gustaf Aulén's *Christus Victor*,[4] which called attention to what Aulén named the "classic" or "dramatic" idea of the atonement, and contrasted it with the dominant scholastic developments from Anselm's scheme. Though Aulén has been criticized on various points, his book remains useful and widely used. It raises a question which is too seldom raised in other Christological works; it asks not so much what the effects of Jesus' saving action in us are, or even how we may lay hold of that action for ourselves, but *what was that action*? What did Jesus do that saved us, and how did that make so great a difference? Deafness to that question, or at least to the variety of answers which early Christian writings preserve, is responsible for a certain monotony and even aridity in conventional theological writing.

The best standard work in the field, at least in English, is another slender occasional piece, H. E. W. Turner's *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption*.[5] Turner draws the connection between redemption and Christology very explicitly when he names his four classes of soteriological ideas "Christ the Illuminator," "Christ the Victor and the Doctrine of the Recapitulatio," "Christ the Giver of Incorruption and Deification," and "Christ the Victim." Any reader of it, and particularly of Turner's sage cautions at the end, cannot help but be enriched not only for the reading of patristic theology but for the study of Christology in general. Still, a certain dissatisfaction remains after the reading of Turner, less because of what he says than because he slights the interplay of motivation, theological implications, and social circumstance which we have come to realize is so important for the understanding of any doctrine. Also, the four basic ideas are connected only loosely to the New Testament and to one another, as if soteriology had evolved as a way of glorifying Christ rather than as the grounds for glorifying him.

If discussion of Christology in terms of soteriology is to become more fruitful, we need an updated and clearer map of the early Christian soteriological options than we at present enjoy. The hypothesis expressed in this article is an attempt to provide such a map, at least temporarily, until the various problems can be resolved on a larger scale. This is not an attempt to catalogue all the soteriological themes which could be identified in patristic literature or even in the New Testament; it is doubtful whether that would clarify anything, and even whether it would

[4] Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (New York: Macmillan, 1969); originally the Olaus Petri lectures at Uppsala in 1930, published in an English translation by A. G. Hebert in 1931.

[5] H. E. W. Turner, *The Patristic Doctrine of Redemption* (London: Mowbray, 1952), based on lectures given at Lincoln during Passion Week 1949.

not beg a number of the questions which this article is trying to answer.[6] Nor should the reader expect to find laid out all the motivations which at the very first animated the faith of the disciples of Jesus. Rather, it is proposed here that certain soteriological themes, most of them prominent in patristic writings, can be traced in the New Testament as so pervasive or as stemming from such early strata in the tradition that no temporal priority can be assigned to any one of them over the others. These appear to be the primitive soteriological ideas which took root in the imagination of the first Christians and grew into the more elaborate constructions of patristic theology. They are different stories, or metaphors if you prefer, of what had really happened in Jesus to which the appropriate response was faith, repentance, and thanksgiving. What is experienced as salvation affects one's life globally and should be expected to require expression by different metaphors depending on the area of life upon which one's concern is chiefly focused. The metaphors are complementary rather than mutually exclusive, and the "mix" varies from one community, one writing, one set of personal or historical circumstances to another.[7] The themes set out below, therefore, ought not to be seen as dividing the early followers of Jesus among them; we may no longer dismiss the likelihood of quite sophisticated complexity in the thinking of both Jewish and Gentile communities, and indeed in the thinking of individuals.

The five themes are not given in an order of importance, since our evidence does not justify such an order. Even less is the order chronological, since, as stated above, they have equal claim to originality in early Christian thinking. The differences between them are of the nature of contrariety rather than contradiction, and some of the contraries complement each other better than others. Certain commonalities in all five themes will be pointed out at the end of this essay. Readers will notice that some aspects of this hypothesis resemble the ideas of Aulén and Turner, but that some major elements and distinctions are quite different. To begin with, three themes are distinguished in terms of what we are saved from: death, sin, and ignorance.

[6] The sparse references are not intended to be exhaustive nor even a representative sample of texts, but merely to provide readers with examples at points which may be unclear. The aim is not to evade refutation but to increase the clarity and impact of the article.

[7] Basil Studer and Brian Daley, *Soteriologie in der Schrift und Patristik* (Handbuch der Dogmengeschichte 3/2a [Freiburg: Herder, 1978]), is a mine of solid information and does not neglect themes such as those treated in this article. Limited space and a genetic approach, however, force Studer in particular to seek out what is unique or new in each author he treats. This sharply decreases the reader's sense of the interplay of traditional themes.

VICTORY

In his treatment of this theme, Turner expresses the distaste which some people may have for its "mythological" character.[8] Yet even with the rejection of mythology the experience of evil in people's lives has not diminished noticeably, and Death still rides with his servants sickness, fear, and coercion even in the lives of people who are determined to assign known visible causes to all of these things. But in the New Testament and patristic times, what opposed the good plan of a loving God could be denominated the Adversary or Death with no more hesitation about what was meant than we experience when we say "Wall Street" or "the Media." It seemed obvious to people that this world was an arena of conflict between God and that which prevents the divine plan from being realized, and the Qumran community was neither unique nor original in its choice of a conflict model of understanding.

Already during his ministry Jesus wields power in the battle against the Adversary. This is manifested not only in the exorcisms, where the conflict element is obvious, but also in the healings and raisings from the dead, and even the nature miracles. Critical to this theme is the understanding of the crucifixion of Jesus as the moment of most intense combat between God's champion, Life, and the Adversary, Death. The latter cannot be defeated in any remote or indirect way, but only on its own ground. When Death, which holds the human race prisoner, takes on Life itself, the author of life, it is Death which succumbs; the strong one is bound and despoiled of all he had. His fellow Jews and the Romans are not, in this theme, Jesus' real antagonists but merely the instruments of the inexorable evil which had dominated the world for ages. The gentle sadness which marks much of the Passion narratives as well as the acts of many of the early martyrs reflects this awareness that the real story is *mors et vita duello conflixere mirando.* The actual death of Jesus and its coerced character are necessary in order that the conflict may take place. Unless Jesus meets death as we know it, he cannot destroy it. Hence the embarrassment in early Christology as to whether Jesus was mainly willing or unwilling to undergo crucifixion. If he is portrayed as too willing, it may seem as if he faced not the terrible Adversary but a tame surrogate. If that were the case, we would still be under the yoke (as we would also be if it were not the savior but a surrogate who died[9]). Resurrection is the trophy of victory in this theme, an integral part of the defeat of death. As such, it is best celebrated in one single sweeping paschal celebration with the crucifixion, as was the custom generally in

[8] Turner, *Doctrine* 61.

[9] Contrast, e.g., *ActJoh* 97–101 and Irenaeus, *Haer.* 3, 18, 5–6.

the first centuries; for the combat is truly finished only when the winner is established. On the other hand, maintenance of the tradition of Jesus' rising on the third day has a function in this theme also, the delay serving to certify the death, and hence the genuineness of the conflict.[10]

Who is this champion? What is the Christological side of this model of salvation? He is certainly someone from God; his power over disease and death and demons places him on God's side in the conflict. The epic encounter in crucifixion and resurrection makes the best sense if he is Life, Death's opposite number and the chief of God's forces, not an underling. The nature miracles testify to a sense that even fate, the very structure and order of reality, is plastic to his power, which is thus revealed to be greater than any he would need for a single mission. This soteriological idea would work best with a savior who is God in person, but the firm monotheism of the first followers of Jesus would find such a figure impossible to incorporate; the paradigm shift did not take place overnight.[11] On the other hand, the champion must be human in every significant sense in which we are human. It is no accident that the victory theme is so prominent in early anti-Docetistic writers, for it gives equal and conjoint emphasis to human and divine traits.[12]

This model of salvation was widely used in early Christianity, since both Jews and Greeks knew a world dominated by hostile powers. Whether these powers and dominions were figures of apocalyptic or the ministers of inexorable fate, people chafed under their control, sought ways to circumvent it, and could understand what it might mean to be forever freed from them. This freeing appears to have been understood in early Christianity as having been achieved in an interior rather than an external fashion: those who are saved are incorporated in Jesus, whose life-giving Spirit courses through all who believe. We must die as he had to die, but in him and with his Spirit in us we too shall defeat death. All other sufferings short of death will overcome us only if they succeed in separating us from the love of Christ, so that Death would again become our lord; consequently, in defeating the latter Christ has also freed us from fear of all other types of suffering. In this theme spirit is not opposed to body,[13] for the Spirit of Jesus makes our bodies also proof against death so that we rise whole, like him. This point becomes harder

[10] As in Athanasius, *Inc* 26.

[11] One way the shift might have taken place is sketched plausibly by James Dunn, "Some Thoughts on Maurice Wiles's '*Reflections*,'" *Theology* 85 (1982) 97–98; Maurice Wiles and James Dunn, "Christology—The Debate Continues," ibid. 327–29.

[12] One might describe it as a "spondaic" model in comparison with heavier emphasis on humanity ("iambic") or on divinity ("trochaic").

[13] It is, of course, flesh—human nature as weak and doomed to die—which is the real contrary to spirit.

to maintain after Neoplatonic philosophy replaces Stoicism as the dominant approach among Christian thinkers.[14]

ATONEMENT

For the previous theme the necessary presupposition was a sense of evil; the theme of atonement begins from a sense of sin. Sin connotes an already existing relationship with God, a relationship which has gone wrong. Without such a personal feeling for divine reality it is hard to talk about sin, and consequently hard to talk about atonement. As one might expect, this theme was readily comprehensible and appealing particularly in early Christian communities, where the Jewish sense of a covenant with God had formed most of the Christians' outlook. It is harder to reconstruct the story of the atonement than that of the victory. The basic New Testament datum is the fact that Jesus not only forgives sins but opens the forgiveness of sin to all who believe and repent. Even writers for whom atonement is not the dominant theme express the sense that Jesus saves in this fashion as a regular element of early Christian belief. However, the basis for this saving power of Jesus is not explicitly and consistently set forth. One might cast the story in the following terms: on the one hand, Jesus gives himself simply and totally in faith to God his Father, and is the beloved Son in whom the Father is well pleased; on the other hand, he loves and serves his fellow human beings and stands in perfect solidarity with them before God, in all their sin and weakness. This fundamental structure of atonement—the offended, the beloved, and the offenders with whom the beloved takes his stand—has biblical analogies. The beloved of God usually seemed to be able to save their nearest and dearest. With Noah were saved his wife and sons and daughters-in-law. Abraham got Lot and his wife and daughters out of Sodom after a moving dialogue in which God was repeatedly challenged to save the cities for the sake of fewer and fewer just. David tried in vain to save the life of the child of his adultery with Bathsheba, but this exception underlines the structure of atonement. Perhaps the most vivid exemplification of this structure is the scene in Exod 32 where the Lord says to Moses: "I have seen this people, and behold, it is a stiff-necked people; now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation." Moses begs God to remember the divine honor and repent—and descends to find the golden calf. The next day he says: "You have sinned a great sin. And now I will go up to the Lord; perhaps I can make atonement for your sin." So Moses returns to the Lord and says: "Alas, this people have sinned a great sin; they have made for themselves gods of gold. But now,

[14] Michel Spanneut, *Le stoicisme des Pères de l'église* (Paris: Seuil, 1957) 74, says that the transition took place increasingly from 230 on.

if thou wilt forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written."[15] The Lord's response is not important for us here; it is enough that the structure of mediation between God and a sinful people stands out clearly.[16]

Can this structure help us to understand how Jesus' forgiveness of sins during his ministry and his association with outcasts came to be taken as committing fully the mercy of God? Seen from this perspective, the crucifixion is a moment of high tension in which Jesus dies in solidarity with his brothers and sisters, forgiving them all and asking no special treatment (Matthew even has him waving off legions of rescuing angels) but also never breaking utter fidelity toward his Father. God does not abandon such a true and faithful son, and perhaps cannot; Jesus' proven faithfulness can only be fitly recognized by overwhelming proof of God's faithfulness in which Jesus placed all his hope. Yet, in raising up Jesus and accepting him, God also becomes committed to all those to whom Jesus committed himself in solidarity, those to whom he said "Your sins are forgiven" and those whom he forgave even the injuries which they were doing to him. A structure of mediation like this would make it clear how the crucifixion and resurrection confirm Jesus' power to forgive sins on God's behalf. When God accepts Jesus, the riffraff whom Jesus loves so stubbornly are also accepted. They may still be the old nation of stiff-necked sinners, but if God is going to make Jesus the start of a great new nation, it is with Jesus' friends that it begins. For the love which God bears Jesus, we are forgiven through him.

There is, therefore, a sort of substitutionary character to this theme of atonement, and one may ask whether its real model may not rather be found in the martyrs of 4 Maccabees or in theories of sacrifice. Such models might give Jesus' death a more direct and satisfying theological function, and for that reason if for no other it would be imprudent to exclude them altogether. The Maccabean martyrs, however, appear to hope that their fidelity to the law in the face of pressure to apostatize will lead God to take vengeance on the tyrant despite the Jewish people's infidelity—in that way their death may benefit others; but any suggestion of forgiveness of individuals' sins, especially the tyrant's own, is missing from 4 Maccabees. The passion of Jesus, on the other hand, is portrayed as simple injustice rather than as pressure to apostatize; it is hard to imagine a point at which Jesus, by being untrue to his faith, could have

[15] Exod 32:9–14, 30–32 (RSV).

[16] Martin Hengel, *The Atonement* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1981), gives a rather different account of atonement from that adopted in the present article, partly because of the way he reads Exod 32 as expressing Moses' offer to die *instead* of the sinful people rather than *with* them (ibid. 7), and partly because he tries to incorporate into atonement motifs which are here assigned to other complementary themes.

won a change of heart from his executioners. The apocalyptic martyr-traditions should be attached to the fourth theme below, where there is a role for the persecuted righteous at the Last Judgment. As important as sacrifice language is in early Christianity,[17] it is difficult to see it as the primitive ground for confidence in Jesus' forgiveness of sin and for the call to repentance. The sacrifice idea may, however, be a natural outgrowth of the structure of atonement outlined above. For those who feel themselves the beneficiaries of a forgiveness obtained for the love which God bears Jesus, everything which Jesus did and especially what he suffered is seen as having been for their benefit. Perhaps the imagery of the Suffering Servant or of the Paschal Lamb was called upon very early to express this aspect of Christian consciousness; eventually Jesus' death was also hailed as the sacrifice which made other sacrifices obsolete.[18]

The atonement theme has rather different Christological implications from those of the victory theme. Since the operative saving category here is not so much the life and power of the Spirit of God poured out through Jesus but rather a dialogue of unshakable love and faithfulness to promises between God and the beloved son, it is not strictly necessary for Jesus to be characterized as the *divine* Son. His type of mediation requires a faithfulness which is quite extraordinary, but one which is clearly creaturely in character. The result also differs in this theme, for rather than defeat of our foes it is the restoration of a broken relationship. Jesus was and is able to extend God's free forgiveness, backed by God's full faith and credit. The forgiveness passages in the Gospels take on a luminous irony as listeners to the gospel realize what the people in the story do not, namely, that when Jesus said "Your sins are forgiven," they really were forgiven. Among Jews and others who felt truly naturalized into a covenant with God, where a sense of relationship and hence of sinfulness was vivid and concrete, this theme of atonement and the forgiveness which flows from it was and still is powerful, even though the "mechanism" has become juridicized over the centuries as the theme developed. With or without those developments the theme was employed regularly by the Fathers in discourse within the community; for Gentile outsiders the rather different theme of the eschatological judgment tended to take its place.

REVELATION

The next theme is that of the overcoming of ignorance. Since the human race had lost all knowledge of God and had turned to idols,

[17] See, e.g., Frances M. Young, *Sacrifice and the Death of Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminister, 1975), and Robert J. Daly, *The Origins of the Christian Doctrine of Sacrifice* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978).

[18] Young, *Sacrifice* 50–51. She suggests the halting of the Temple sacrifices as a plausible *Sitz im Leben* for this development.

fictions, and the worship of forces opposed to God, it had begun to perish. Knowledge means here a real meeting of minds and hearts, with mutual recognition. When God is known in this way, there results a certain connaturality, a participation in wisdom and an ability to discern the divine power and plan in the midst of all reality. This knowledge and the accompanying insight had been characteristic of Moses, who spoke with God face to face, and of all the prophets, but the prophets were rejected by most of the people and for a long time the voice of prophecy was still. Into this situation came Jesus, speaking of God from intimate knowledge and opening the way to knowledge for others. But to know God has some of the same ambiguity as the Day of the Lord: Who shall stand when He appeareth, when God visits His people? To know God might mean life, but it could also mean death; for no one can see God and live. Scripture abounds in examples of this awareness, such as Jacob's wrestling by the ford of the Jabbok and the visits of the angel of God to the parents of Samson.[19] Under the auspices of Jesus, however, knowing God is less a cause for terror than for joy; it overflows in wisdom and spiritual insight for the benefit of all; it both characterizes and constitutes a new life, the life of a new people, the realization of the prophecy in Jer 31:31–34. Jesus saves by being the knower who makes God known, the fount of that knowledge for all as his Father shows him all things. His followers are given knowledge of God in three main ways: through Jesus' teaching, through knowing Jesus himself as Emmanuel, and thanks to the Spirit of Jesus poured out upon them after his resurrection.

In this connection cross and resurrection take on yet another aspect. The suffering and death of Jesus becomes a last and most difficult, yet most revealing, parable. The veil of the Temple is rent and we see God our life hanging before our eyes, welcoming us into an intimacy in which, if we will, we must both die and live. In recognizing that it is God who suffers and dies in our Jesus, we recognize the Father in him, and the riddle disappears leaving the plain and nearly incredible mystery.[20] Resurrection is the consummation and confirmation of the mysterious unity between Jesus and his Father, not so much the "after" to the "before" of the cross as the spelling out of its inner reality; it is also the occasion for the outpouring upon us of a double measure of his Spirit, so that knowing God as Jesus does we may ourselves be brought into that mysterious unity.

This theme with its strong roots in Jewish tradition also made good sense to many people who were unfamiliar with that tradition. It lent

[19] Gen 32:24–30; Judg 13:2–22. The "man" in the first instance and the "angel" in the second are both simply God in the end. When God, who cannot be seen, *is* seen, there are bound to be conceptual problems. According to Justin Martyr, *Dial.* 128, the separate ontological status of angels was still controverted in the second century.

[20] Jn 14:8–9 and 16:29.

itself particularly well to elaboration along Platonist lines, with Jesus reawakening knowledge of God in minds darkened by superstition. Not only could his existence be understood as an ikon of and a ladder to the transcendent divine One, but the reawakening in us could take the form of the refurbishing of our inmost selves, where we are images of God by participation, beings with a dual citizenship in this world and in the world above. The Christian gospel would offer this vitalizing transformation not just to a few desiccated philosophers after years of study and ascesis but to everyone, if they accepted Jesus and the revelation of the true God which he inaugurated and communicated.[21] Both crucifixion and resurrection could be expressed in a Greek philosophical framework only with the greatest difficulty, however, and their positive function in this theme tended to be reduced to underlining the utter novelty and transcendence of this revelation of God. Marcion and the Christian Gnostics tried to develop this revelation theme independently of the other two we have described, but in early Christian soteriology in general the above themes did not circulate independently and were not elaborated in isolation from each other. Paul in particular shifted easily from one line to another and used them all as the occasion demanded. Several common features facilitated this coherence of rather different trajectories: the single figure of Jesus upon which they center;[22] the richness and polyvalence of the resources which Jewish tradition offered concerning the one God and the economy of salvation; and the similar but opposite polyvalence of the Adversary, for whom sickness and death, sin and ignorance all achieved the same end. Early Christian soteriology, therefore, should not be described as eclectic, as if components from different systems were being mixed. A better metaphor might be to call their soteriology "polyphonic," each line having its own integrity but all the lines together forming a complex whole which is greater than the sum of the parts.

Two other quite primitive and universally accepted themes remain to be described.

ESCHATOLOGICAL JUDGMENT

The identity of Jesus with the Messiah-judge who is yet to come appears to have served the early Christian mission as a powerful motivation for repentance as well as grounds for apocalyptic hope. As an idea it was fairly simple, and accessible to the religious sensibilities of anyone,

[21] The renewal of the inner self: Athanasius, *Inc* 13–14. The gospel's ability to succeed where philosophy fails: Origen, *Cels.* 1, 9–10.

[22] This point is brought out elegantly by James Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1977).

Jew or Greek, who believed that God punishes the evildoer and rewards the good. No prior sense of relationship deliberately or carelessly broken had to be presupposed to the presentation of Jesus as the judge to come. Those who are on his side will be at his side, executing justice on those who wreaked injustice on God's faithful in the present age.[23] Yet, simple as this theme is, it enjoyed a complex growth. At first it drew its further elaboration chiefly from the theme of atonement, in which Jesus as God's anointed Son has power to forgive sin in God's name, and from that of revelation, where the full manifestation of God on the day of visitation was recognized to cause destruction or beatification on the spot. But as the figure of the judge becomes seen as God's vicegerent in all things, the Jesus of the nature miracles merges into the theme, and there results the great Pantocrator familiar from the apsidal mosaics of Byzantine churches.

Central to this theme is resurrection, when Jesus is constituted the Lord to whom every knee shall bow. Crucifixion fits more easily than one might expect, however, as a motive for the appeal for the Jews to repent, and then as one of those concentrated symbols of which faith is so fond, God reigning from the tree. Like the atonement theme, this theme does not demand that Jesus be divine, and hence it seems more Jewish, more respectful of monotheism, than the themes of victory or revelation; but to see Jesus as himself truly God intensifies the religious impact of all aspects of his atonement and his eschatological judgeship. Though James the brother of the Lord and conservatives like him may have found these two themes especially congenial, they were not for that reason antipathetic to the Hellenists or to Gentile converts. But as a model of salvation, this judgeship of Jesus remains a future factor. We repent in view of it, but it is what Jesus will do, not what he has already done, which will purify us from our evil deeds.

EXEMPLAR

This theme needs to be distinguished from that of revelation. There Jesus reveals God; and to the extent that he also tells us about ourselves, it is the fact that deep in our being there is an ikon of God which can serve us as the touchstone of God at work in all reality. Naturally that leads us to perceive Jesus himself as the great example of God at work, but in other regards we make our moral decisions not in imitation of Jesus but in accord with the principle of discernment implanted in us. In distinction to that way of understanding Jesus as the revealer of God

[23] This is the model of salvation which draws most directly on the martyr theology of 4 Maccabees. The martyrs' fidelity earns them seats at judgment where they can participate in the vindication of Israel from its oppressors; cf. Dan 7.

and of the divine in us, there was very early a recognition that Jesus could and must be imitated, and that the results of that imitation could take one a long way towards God. The imitation began already during Jesus' ministry and was sufficiently central to the life of the primitive community that they were known as followers of a "Way" of salvation; therefore any account of early soteriology must include this theme. There is a close connection between Jesus' role as exemplar and the theme of atonement, for the beloved of God can surely show us how we too may deserve to dwell upon God's holy hill. A less direct but no less real connection can be seen in the way that the power of the Spirit, in the victory theme, both demands and empowers a new life in keeping with the new birth into Jesus. The disdain for death which the martyrs displayed was founded directly on the imitation of Jesus and on the confidence which his power gave.

Jesus the exemplar points the way to virtue by his own way of life and by his teaching, which become commands to his followers. The authority to teach in this fashion and to be a model of justice accrues to Jesus from outside—from his appeal to a deeply spiritual understanding of Scripture during his ministry, and after the resurrection from his newly perceived status as victor, mediator, and revealer. Of course, his followers did not wait till his death to start to imitate him, but it is unlikely that this imitation was understood as the way of salvation or Jesus himself as savior in this sense until the implications of the death and resurrection began to be worked out in terms of the previous four themes. To the extent that the exemplar theme, even though it dates from the ministry, depends on the other themes, it needs to be subordinated to them in theology.

Jesus' example and teaching serve first as an answer to the question "How ought one to live now?" In other words, imitation and obedience are the key to being a follower of Jesus, a Christian. This first understanding matched a category in society at large, where "philosophy" was understood as a way of life in accord with the nature of reality and hence a way of life which leads to happiness. This offered a possibility for an elementary description of Christianity to outsiders. The value of a way of life approved by God was obvious, and that there should be a mystery behind the way of life, validating it, came as a surprise to no one at the time. Therefore the example of Christ was the key not only to being Christian but also to being human, to living before God in one's proper place in the order of things. In this way we could be approved in our turn. That notion of merit applied to us could then reflect back on Jesus himself: by living in the way which God approves, he himself is naturally approved as well, as he is seen retroactively to have met the standard

which he has provided for us and our salvation. In terms of this theme, the crucifixion is an act of obedience and the resurrection is its reward. What delivers this theme from circularity is the independent validation of Jesus' moral authority via the other major themes. If the judge who is to come does not exemplify and teach right living, no one can![24]

We ought not to forget that Jesus' pattern of life and his teaching were not perceived by his followers as a total novelty, by any means. On the contrary, they were seen as thoroughly in continuity with the grand lines of Jewish morality going back to Abraham;[25] in this respect Jesus was seen more as a restorer of what had already been revealed than as the inaugurator of a new order. This furnishes a second reason why this theme is portrayed here as subordinate to the others: as gospel, it was treated by the followers of Jesus as old news—good news, but nothing much that people should not have known before. Another characteristic of the exemplar theme is that it does not require Jesus to be divine, or indeed more than human. In Jewish milieus and among people who would balk at the sacrilege of bringing God into contact with the material world this theme was and remains unthreatening.

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Two common factors in all these themes (in addition to the fact that they were not used independently of one another) ought to be underlined. First, they all have roots in the Old Testament and in the wider Jewish consciousness of the first century. Scripture, taken in a loose precanonical sense, constituted the "set" of all that God had revealed concerning the divine plan for the world; if the events of which Jesus was the center were to be understood in God's terms at all, it would have to be done in terms of the light which a search of the Scriptures could shed upon them.[26] Salvation by divine victory over the adversary, by the atoning offices of a just and beloved figure, by the admission of intimates into the light of the divine presence, are themes with deep scriptural roots. The same can be said for the promised/threatened divine judgment and the existence of a right way of faith and piety. One need not go beyond the Jewish milieu to find all the materials needed for the construction of

[24] The alternative to validation by the other themes would have to be some sort of moral intuition or inspired insight on the part of Jesus' followers. The hypothesis presented in this article does not deny such an influence; but it does avoid trying to systematize it, preferring to let it "blow where it will."

[25] The classic expression of this idea is in Eusebius, *H.E* 1, 4.

[26] The relative importance of this factor, and its undervaluing by some scholars, are signaled by Morna Hooker, "In His Own Image?" in M. Hooker and C. Hickling, ed., *What about the New Testament? Essays in Honor of Christopher Evans* (London: SCM, 1975) 28–41.

these themes. That is not to say, however, that factors in a wider Greek society did not affect the development of these themes in diverse and important ways, almost from the beginning.

Second, all of these themes have ties not only to Christology but to pneumatology. The victory is won because Christ the champion overflows with the very life and power of God, the Spirit. It is that life and power which he communicates to those who are in him, transforming not only mind and heart but this weak body of ours into a spiritual body as the whole world comes more and more under the influence of the Spirit. The beloved for whose sake atonement occurs is precisely God's anointed one, the one on whom the Spirit of God is poured out. The connaturality by which we are raised through Christ to the knowledge of God is encompassed not by a purely external process but by the Spirit of God in our hearts who cries out "Abba!" in the recognition of our relationship in Jesus to his Father. The discernment by which Christ will judge the world on the last day is already in our midst with the power to discern and judge which the community experiences in the gift of prophecy, a gift which is not for the destruction but for the building up of the community of the saints. And the piety and faith which we learn from Jesus is itself the fruit of God's Spirit in us.

On the other hand, the common factors and the contemporaneousness of these themes in the early consciousness ought not to lead us to overlook the fact that, as metaphors, the first three themes are conducive to different kinds of theological development. The theme of victory, for example, is pre-eminently a Spirit theme, since it is only the life and power of God which can overcome our enemies and the internal weakness which ages of sin have induced; conceiving the divinity of Jesus in terms of the indwelling Spirit of God is very natural in this theme. The atonement insists more than the others on the nonidentity of Jesus and his Father, and consequently seems less threatening to monotheism than some; ironically, the title "Son of God," which has a functional sense in this theme, becomes bound up with consubstantiality with the Father during later Trinitarian debates. Finally, it is in the theme of revelation that the figure of Jesus has the strongest tendency to be absorbed into the God whom he is revealing, as his followers intuit that God cannot be truly revealed by what-is-not-God. This and to a somewhat lesser degree the victory theme draw Jesus' followers to recognize him as divine with less and less qualification, and the problem of how to restructure belief in the one God to embrace Jesus and the Spirit begins to arise. That development and its attendant difficulties lie outside the scope of the present hypothesis.

The hypothesis offered here is already ambitious enough. It attempts

to mark out the field of soteriology in a way which is both historically plausible and theologically useful because of the clarity and appropriateness of the distinctions which are made. One must not forget that the data retain all their infinite variety no matter how we divide them up, and that orthodox theology in early Christianity always employs most or all of the themes described here. Contemporary constructive Christology would do well to try to use as much of this repertory of soteriological motifs as possible, since each theme has implications which contribute to the richness of the construction. Finally, if this hypothesis has accurately identified where most of the main issues lie, the revival of soteriology itself may advance more confidently to the point where tentative syntheses such as this one are no longer needed.