

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41607-8 - Self and Salvation: Being Transformed

David F. Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

‘Health’ is the root sense of the word ‘salvation’, and this has an immense range of meaning. Health can be physical, social, political, economic, environmental, mental, spiritual, moral and so on. If it is understood to have to do with a God of creation then none of its dimensions can be ignored. That is the first problem in undertaking a single volume on salvation in a series on Christian doctrine. How can the topic be made manageable? Salvation is not really one doctrine at all in most works of Christian theology. It is distributed through treatments of God, creation, human being, sin, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, atonement, justification, sanctification, vocation, church, ethics and politics, worship, sacraments, spirituality, ministry and eschatology: in fact, through all topics. This all-pervasiveness gives it a potentially integrating role, but also risks overwhelming vastness.

1

I make what David Tracy¹ calls a ‘journey of intensification’ through all this. This book can be seen as an ‘articulated essay’. Years of teaching and writing systematic theology have fed into it, and it tries to be true to that discipline in its rationality and in its alertness to the ways in which each major topic in theology is interrelated with the others. But its form is not in line with other systematic monographs, let alone textbooks. It is custom-made for the journey it takes, and later in this introduction I will give a guide for the reader. My hope is that it will attract readers who want, not a variation on previous systems and dogmatics, but something gentler, more suggestive, and more inviting into the urgencies, perplexities and joys of the task of working out an understanding of salvation today.

1. *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (SCM, London 1981), pp. 125, 175.

Writing the book over eight years has helped to change my own thinking considerably, and the form of it has been conceived partly in order to allow the reader to go through a comparable learning experience. Several of those from whom I have learnt most over a far longer period of time make major contributions. I have been engaged for over twenty years with Emmanuel Levinas, Paul Ricoeur, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Thérèse of Lisieux and Eberhard Jüngel, and even longer with the Bible and the eucharist. I am also fascinated by the way in which form and content go together, and by the challenge to match theological thinking and imagining with the appropriate genre. So another reason for the unfamiliar ‘essay’ form of the book is that it articulates together various theological genres: meditation, critical dialogue with philosophers and theologians, biblical exegesis and hermeneutics, practical theology, historical and doctrinal discussion, theological biography, and poetry.

The interrogative field

Theology, like other intellectual disciplines, is pervaded by the interrogative mood. The deepest questions are rarely satisfactorily answered, but there is impoverishment if they are not continually being pursued. It is the questions behind this essay on salvation that give it its most obvious coherence. There are six interconnecting questions.

1. The heart of Christian identity?

One basic question has been: can this theology of salvation go to the heart of Christian identity? Another way of posing that might be: how can an approach to salvation act as a focus for the gospel story in its biblical setting while also having universal implications? The definiteness yet openness of the gospel and of Christian identity both need to be affirmed. ‘Identity’ as a term tends to be more associated with definiteness, and concern to do justice to this runs through the book. One name, Jesus Christ, indicates the face at the heart of this vision of salvation. Yet that face is understood to be turned to all human beings and in that sense to be universal. The dynamics of Christian life are explored primarily through the worship of God and the transformation of the self before God, and the most illuminating interpretations of Christian identity are found in particular lives marked by joy and sacrificial responsibility.

2. An accessible salvation?

A second basic question, leading on from the openness of the gospel and of Christian identity, asks: can this theology of salvation be widely accessible today, and related to imaginative, intellectual, emotional and practical concerns? Because the range of salvation is as broad as creation itself, I have had to be very selective. The main access is through discussion of the self in transformation, drawing as much as possible on the experience of ordinary life in enjoyment, responsibility, desiring, suffering, communicating and worshipping. The dialogue partners are chosen partly for their breadth of engagement with the problems and possibilities of human existence, and their willingness to wrestle with practical, aesthetic and intellectual questions. There is no attempt to be exhaustive; but this may be an advantage, since the reader's own context-specific improvisations on the themes of the book may be helped rather than hindered by the themes not being overspecified.²

3. A key image?

Is it possible to focus on self and salvation through a few symbols, images or metaphors, or even have one which is primary? A theology of salvation needs intensity and gripping power. It needs to have the capacity to go to the depths, to help interrogate yet also integrate selves and groups in vision and in living, and to relate strongly to our situation.

In Christianity the death of Jesus is the central example of this. It is striking how the most powerful ways of thinking about the death of Jesus have generally been shaped by one primary image. I have in mind imagery taken from the religious cult (sacrifice), the law court (guilt, judgement and justification), warfare (victory), the marketplace (exchange, redeeming slaves or prisoners), the family (parent-child relationships, adoption), medicine (healing, saving), history (exodus, exile), politics (satisfaction in relation to the honour of a superior, liberation from oppression), friendship (laying down life) and nature (light and darkness, seeds dying and bearing fruit). Many of these have been followed through with great intensity in imagination, thought, feeling and practice.

2. I once heard Nigel Swinford, Director of the New English Orchestra, respond to a paper by Jeremy Begbie on doing theology through music. Swinford told of experiments with his orchestra in encouraging them to improvise together. He found that he usually overestimated the length of theme he needed to give the musicians. It went much better if he gave a shorter theme and trusted them to develop it.

There are theologies which take a rather superior attitude to this range of imagery and make a virtue of the way in which they assess the advantages and disadvantages of each. That can be useful, but it often misses a vital point. There is something about the reality of salvation that resists an overview. Attempting to deal evenhandedly with all the approaches can even seem distorting if it does not risk involvement in the depths of one of them. How can justice be done to the definiteness, specificity and urgency of Christian salvation? ‘For an idea to stick’, says Peter Brook, ‘it is not enough to state it: it must be burnt into our memories.’³

Undoubtedly the image that has gone deepest and is most pervasive in this book is the subject of the meditation in chapter 1, facing. It is not a usual focus for salvation, but I hope that it emerges by the end of the book as worthy to play at least a minor role alongside the others in the tradition. At least it is scriptural, widespread in the Christian and other traditions, relevant to everyone, and a focus for some fascinating contemporary discussion. It interweaves through the book with two other key images, those of abundance (linked mainly with flourishing, joy, blessing, thanks, overflow, love, infinity, singing, polyphony and feasting) and substitution (linked mainly with responsibility, love and sacrifice), and all of them converge in the book’s leading concept, the worshipping self.

4. Conceptual richness?

How conceptually rich is this understanding of salvation? Can the work’s concepts help in interpreting the Bible, tradition and life as a whole, in relating the range of doctrines to salvation, and in linking various fields of study to this topic? Can these concepts have heuristic value, inspiring a diversity of investigations and discussions, acting as a framework for creativity, encouraging a new look at familiar problems, ambiguities and dilemmas, and opening fresh lines of dialogue with other soteriologies? Meeting all those expectations is unimaginable, but the questions do at least orient the mind and underline the need for hard conceptual work in this most practical of areas.

Ricoeur has written, ‘the symbol gives rise to thought’,⁴ and my key images of facing, abundance and substitution are conceptualised in

3. Peter Brook, *The Shifting Point. Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration 1946–1987* (Methuen, London 1989), p. 54.

4. *The Symbolism of Evil* (Harper and Row, New York 1967).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41607-8 - Self and Salvation: Being Transformed

David F. Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

various ways. I coin some concepts, and borrow others from theologians, philosophers, biblical writers, historians and others, taking advantage of the labour that has gone into developing them. The ones I have found most fruitful include: joyful responsibility; ‘oneself as another’; the series of characterisations of selfhood that are found in the titles of chapters 2–6 – hospitable self, self without idols, worshipping self, singing self and eucharistic self; God as ‘more than necessary’; substitution; attestation, witness or testimony; analogy; passivity; the logic of superabundance; *parrhesia*, *pleroma* and *praites* in Ephesians; improvisation and nonidentical repetition; eucharistic time; carnal generality; saintly singularity; the *disciplina arcani*. I hope that the ways they are used go some way towards responding to the expectations of the previous paragraph.

5. Practical fruitfulness?

Does this theology have practical promise of fruitfulness in the three main dynamics of Christian living: worship and prayer; living and learning in community; and speech, action and suffering for justice, freedom, peace, goodness and truth? The concerns of the first four questions – Christian identity, wide relevance and accessibility, imaginative gripping power and conceptual richness – are all taken up into these three interrelated sets of practices. I focus particularly on worship, but with the intention of showing how it shapes and is shaped by the imperatives of loving and learning in community, and of practical realisation in all spheres. Above all, the realisation is seen in the way lives are lived, as exemplified in Jesus, Thérèse and Bonhoeffer. But whether all this amounts to a theology which will actually bear good fruit is not for me to say.

6. A defensible theology?

Finally, are my suggestions defensible against diverse attacks, and are they able to anticipate and deal with the main criticisms and alternatives? Self and salvation is a topic where deep divisions, passionate debates and strong prejudices are normal. There are obvious and not so obvious massive differences between the various worldviews, religions and ideologies. There is no possibility of doing justice to even the objections among fellow Christian theologians to my positions, let alone the critiques that the other main religions, worldviews and philosophies might

apply to my suggestions. Recognising this impossibility, my strategy has been fivefold.

First, there is a range of explicit debates running through the book. But they are only the tip of the iceberg.

Second, there are all those discussions which implicitly feed into every decision as regards dialogue partners, sources, line of argument, field of imagery and so on. It is impossible (or extremely pedantic) to make all these explicit.⁵

Third, my choice of dialogue partners has borne in mind the need for justification on many fronts. The main partners are thinkers who have entered into wide-ranging debates and with whom, on the topics of most concern to me, I have a large measure of agreement. I have not attempted to rehearse again debates to which Levinas, Ricoeur, Jüngel, Dalferth, Bonhoeffer or some other partner has, in my judgement, contributed a convincing case.

Fourth, the infinite regress that would be required to meet all objections is well known to any thinker alert to the questions. One becomes especially aware of the increasing shift to second and even third order discourse so as to try to justify what one is saying in first order statements. That is legitimate, but the trouble is that the second and third orders are parasitic on the first, and we need to risk contemporary first order statements as well. It is usually safer in academic theology and religious studies to discuss such matters as method, epistemology, hermeneutical theory, contextual relativity, and the ways in which all sources and thinkers are conditioned and even compromised by their particular interests and biases.

It is riskier to come up with a constructive position, an attempt to design a habitable contemporary dwelling. At every step in the process one is aware of the immense power of the demolition experts with flourishing businesses, of the overcautious insurance and lending companies, of those who protest at one's building going anywhere near their own, of those who claim authority to make the regulations for this district, and those who seem quite content that no actual dwellings be built at all if they cannot meet their own impossibly ideal specifications.

This book is trying to make first order statements so as to offer a habit-

5. In the field of twentieth-century Christian theology the horizon of questions and debates within which I have been thinking is sketched in the second edition of David F. Ford (ed.), *The Modern Theologians. An Introduction to Christian Theology in the Twentieth Century* (Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1997).

able conception of self and salvation in a time of housing shortage. This inevitably limits the amount of justification that can be offered, but I hope that in relation to major problems there are sufficient hints indicating what the strategy of response might be. My main concern is that the design be 'good enough' as regards the second order concerns, and then to get on with the building.

Fifth, this is only one volume in the Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine. Many of the questions that can be raised about my position come more directly within the scope of other volumes in the series. I have been particularly helped by A. I. McFadyen who has been writing the volume on sin; by my Cambridge colleagues Daniel W. Hardy and Jeremy Begbie, who have been writing respectively on the church and on theology through music;⁶ and by an early draft by Bruce Marshall for his volume on the Trinity. Each of those works is closely related to mine, and it has been encouraging to know that work congenial to my own is being prepared for companion volumes, which will address many of the questions left hanging by mine.

Such, then, is the interrogative field within which this work has been conceived. Those massive questions can never be answered satisfactorily, but perhaps it is better to fail trying to do something worthwhile rather than set one's sights too low in the first place.

A guide to the book

Part I, 'Dialogues: Levinas, Jüngel, Ricoeur', begins with a meditation on facing which opens up the theme of self and salvation in a way that engages mind and imagination together. The self, as one key contemporary locus of identity, crisis and transformation, is symbolised by the dynamics of human facing. The aim of the meditation is to evoke the multifaceted nature of human selfhood as it touches on biology, the five senses, history, ethics, gender, communication, politics, institutions, the arts, sin, evil, salvation and God. There is complexity and subtlety but also simplicity, and any attempt at definition is overwhelmed by the abundance which is expressed at the end of the meditation through Ephrem's poetry.

The rest of Part I develops, through dialogue with Levinas, Jüngel and Ricoeur, an understanding of self that is both philosophical and theolog-

6. On the latter cf. chapter 5 below.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41607-8 - Self and Salvation: Being Transformed

David F. Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

ical. Is it possible to conceive self and salvation in a way which learns from leading twentieth-century philosophers and critically develops their thought in doing constructive theology? That is the leading question in these dialogues and I see it as a vital inquiry if theology is to have appropriate rigour and relate intelligently to other areas. It cannot, of course, mean that I construct a whole philosophical theology. Rather, I take just two philosophers, Levinas and Ricoeur, who engage broadly with the tradition of Western philosophy and in particular develop Husserlian phenomenology in ways which are hospitable to Judaism and Christianity respectively. As a catalyst between them I introduce Jüngel in order both to help work out what theology is and also to give to the emerging idea of self and salvation a content that is more explicitly theological while still being philosophically informed.

These aims are pursued in three chapters. Chapter 2 introduces the multifaceted description of human existence offered by Levinas, especially in his book *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*. He relates ethics to the ‘appeal in the face of the other’, and I interpret his account of enjoyment, responsibility and desire in terms of a ‘hospitable self’. Chapter 3 takes up his later work, which is more extreme in its concept of responsibility as sacrificial and substitutionary. This is brought into dialogue with Jüngel, and they are both seen as concerned to save us from the idolatries which get us in their grip. Can theology itself be justified? Where is God? How might a non-idolatrous self be conceived? What about death, love and substitution? The engagement between Levinas and Jüngel is continued in chapter 4, the major suggestion being that Levinas’s extreme notion of responsibility be combined with Jüngel’s extreme notion of joy. This is worked through in relation to God-language and love, and opens up the possibility of a ‘self without idols’ being also a ‘worshipping self’.

Neither Levinas nor Jüngel offers a satisfactory account of the worshipping self, so at this point Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy, which takes some account of both of them, is introduced in order to develop the pivotal concept of ‘oneself as another’. He offers a philosophy which mediates between a centred, self-positing subject and a decentred, shattered subject. The ‘other’ (a concept which need not for him only signify other people, but is also open to various accompanying construals – our bodies, the interiority of conscience, and even God) is integral to selfhood. The mode of truth appropriate to this self is attestation, testimony

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41607-8 - Self and Salvation: Being Transformed

David F. Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

or witness, which does not require certainty and also can resist pervasive suspicion and doubt. Ricoeur suggests that his philosophical account of the self is open to being intensified and transformed through biblical faith, and that is what I attempt in the later parts of chapter 4, taking up the main determinations of self in his *Oneself As Another* and pressing them towards a fuller theology than is hinted at in his religious writings. The result is my work's central idea: the worshipping self, before the face of Christ and other people, in an 'economy of superabundance'.

The dialogues in Part I may at times be rather difficult to follow for those not immersed in the writings referred to. Each thinker is in his own way complex and sophisticated, as is appropriate to the subject matter they treat. I hope my prose is more accessible than any of the three and that these chapters may even act as an introduction to aspects of their thought for readers not acquainted with them. Yet inevitably the task of trying to do justice to them means that there will be readers who find some sections heavy going. One option is to start with Part II, which should be far more immediately comprehensible and familiar, especially for those already at home in Christian thought and practice. But I would urge returning to Part I later because those dialogues are intrinsic to the Part II discussions and are, I hope, worth the labour of wrestling with them.

Part II, 'Flourishings', follows the exploration's journey of intensification through some of the richest areas for Christian understanding of the worshipping self: the singing of an early Christian community, the Lord's Supper (or eucharist, holy communion or mass), and the lives of Jesus and two modern Christians. The aim is to do theology in places where Christian selfhood has been most profoundly shaped – a biblical text, a sacrament, the person and work of Jesus Christ and the specific histories of two very different 'saints'.

The biblical text studied is the Letter to the Ephesians, which chapter 5 takes as testimony to God's 'economy of superabundance' being worked out in the ordinary life of an early Christian community. The letter's injunction to sing is taken seriously as a transformative practice of self, and it is linked to the transformation of communities and institutions. The quality of communication and living represented in this letter to a worshipping community is seen as a complex portrayal of salvation which can help to inspire improvisations on similar themes today.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-41607-8 - Self and Salvation: Being Transformed

David F. Ford

Excerpt

[More information](#)

The eucharist is the ritual which is probably most participated in and discussed in human history. What sort of self is shaped through participation in it? The self described in chapter 6 embodies a multi-dimensional ‘habitus’, formed through repeated celebration of the eucharist and interweaving that with the rest of life. I unite a social anthropological account of practice and apprenticeship with a theological account of imperatives, incorporation and time. The eucharist can enable us to face death, and participation in its prophetic drama can transform our ordinary lives, relationships and sense of time. As it is ‘non-identically repeated’ at different times of our lives and of the church year, and in different company and settings, the abundance of the eucharistic self is generated through being blessed, commanded, placed and timed.

The most distinctive mark of the eucharistic self is that it is oriented towards Jesus Christ and other people. Understanding it therefore requires understanding them. This is the reason for the next four chapters, which explore these ‘others’ who are part of the constitution of a Christian worshipping self.

Jesus Christ as worshipper and worshipped is at the heart of this book’s idea of the worshipping self, leading to a reconception of notions of worship, of God and of self. How can one person be related as God is to creation, history and the transformation of people? How does the God whose desire is for human flourishing face and bless people through Jesus Christ? These are the leading questions of chapters 7 and 8.

Dalferth’s christology is the starting point for exploring the meaning and truth of facing Jesus Christ. What does it mean to recognise the face of Christ? What about the ‘risen and glorified’ face and the ‘historical’ face? Is visual representation of his face appropriate? Is the focus on this face not dominating, imperialist and exclusivist? The answers to those questions lead directly into chapter 8’s opening focus on the dead face of Jesus on the cross. This is intensively reflected upon, and I reach back from the psalms quoted in the Gospel accounts of the crucifixion to explore the theme of the face of God in the Old Testament as a rich approach to self and salvation. Then the dead face of Jesus is seen as pivotal for transformed understandings of power, responsibility, worship and God. The culmination is a discussion of whether this face is being idolised by Christians. It involves above all an account of the significance and truth of the resurrection of Jesus, whose ‘logic’ is: God