

Jesus the Saviour: When the Gospel makes a special offer

Can it really be true that salvation is found in Jesus Christ, and in no one else?

When John the Baptist first saw Jesus walking toward him on the banks of the Jordan River, he called out, “Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.” John knew immediately that he was looking at the Saviour.

John was not the only one in the pages of the New Testament to bear witness to the Saviour. When a group of Samaritans had the chance to investigate Jesus personally, they testified, “...we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world.”

Jesus himself said, “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” The New Testament witness is summed up well by the words, “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners....”

The New Testament offers a sophisticated and profound diagnosis of the human situation and then offers a remedy to fully fill the prescription. It employs a wealth of imagery to attempt to describe the benefits of God’s active salvation in history. It presents Jesus as the atoning sacrifice for human sin. Through the death of Jesus on the cross, God redeems people and removes their sins. God rescues people from darkness and leads them into the light-filled authority of the Son He loves. God delivers people from the magnetic force of sin, liberates them from the law of sin and death, frees them from lifelong bondage to the fear of death. Through the shed blood of Jesus God reconciles people to Himself. He restores the relationship. He breaks down the walls of hostility

between people, and brings people of different backgrounds into fellowship. In Christ, God regenerates and transforms human lives. He gives a new start.

This and much more is the New Testament witness to God's salvation. Since the earliest days of the Church, Christians have accepted this witness and have based their lives on it. Peter proclaimed in the presence of the leaders of the highest religion of his day not only that is there salvation in the name of Jesus, but also that there is salvation in no other name.

In today's era of World Christianity, when the centre of gravity of our faith has shifted back south- and eastward, the vast majority of Christians hold tightly to the New Testament witness. Where there is doubt about that witness, it has largely come among Christians in western cultures in the face of some powerful ideologies. One of the most influential of these is the philosophy of religious pluralism, which relativizes religious claims and sets them in orbit around an indeterminate centre.

But what if Peter's claim is indeed true? A helpful answer to this question must combine the Gospel witness with research into world religions. This brief exploration concerns a major religion in the world today, Islam. Similar investigations could be done on other religions and on other themes, such as peace, law, or the love of God.

Islam has very little to say about salvation, especially in the terms in which the New Testament describes it. "The first problem which the scholar of Islam faces when dealing with the subject of salvation," writes Duke University scholar Frederick Denny, "is the fact that Muslims have not traditionally spoken much about it."

In Muslim scripture, for example, the Arabic noun for salvation, *najāt*, appears only once. The verb “to save” usually refers to the deliverance of prophetic figures in the distant past. Only rarely does the verb refer to salvation for people in the present, and in most of those cases salvation means escape from hell through obedience to the law. The Qur’an also seems to negate the concept of vicarious atonement.

There is no indication in the Qur’an of the active salvation of the New Testament in which God himself rescues humankind from the power of sin. When Muslims do talk about “salvation,” it is generally with the vocabulary of success, achievement, or guidance.

The low profile of salvation in Islam has attracted the curiosity of a number of non-Muslim scholars. Israeli scholar Hava Lazarus-Yafeh expressed surprise that although Jesus is mentioned in the Qur’an, nowhere is he described as a redeemer. “It seems that Islam...felt no need for redemption and therefore did not develop this notion—neither in its beginning, in the Qur’an, nor in later theology.”

In his discussion of the vocabulary of atonement in Islam, British scholar G.R. Hawting writes, “...there seems to be no idea of a general act of atonement for guilt which is shared by the whole community or the whole of mankind as exists in Judaism and Christianity.”

The great Dutch professor of religion Hendrik Kraemer concluded, “There is hardly any surmise, either in the Quran or in its standard theologies, about the stirring problems of God and man that are involved in the terms sin and salvation. The whole drama of salvation between God and the world...is entirely absent.”

Muslim scholars do not deny the silence of Islam on God's active salvation. Rather, they tend to deny the *need* for that salvation. In a friendly dialogue with Mennonite scholar David Shenk, an African Muslim scholar said, "Islam does not identify with the Christian conviction that man needs to be redeemed. The Christian belief in the redemptive sacrificial death of Christ does not fit the Islamic view that man has always been fundamentally good, and that God loves and forgives those who obey his will."

Muzammil Husain Siddiqi writes, "The idea of the transference of the punishment of sins or vicarious punishment is not accepted by the Qur'an. But it must also be noted that, according to the Qur'an, the punishment is not the necessary and unavoidable consequence of sin."

Another highly-regarded Muslim scholar, Isma'il al-Faruqi, made the following statement in the midst of a Christian-Muslim consultation: "Islam holds man to be not in need of any salvation. Instead of assuming him to be religiously and ethically fallen, Islamic *da'wah* ["call"] acclaims him as the *khalīfah* ["deputy"] of Allah, perfect in form, and endowed with all that is necessary to fulfill the divine will indeed, even loaded with the grace of revelation! 'Salvation' is hence not in the vocabulary of Islam. *Falāh*, or the positive achievement in space and time of the divine will, is the Islamic counterpart of Christian 'deliverance' and 'redemption.'"

Additional statements could be cited from non-Muslim and Muslim scholars alike. These scholars conclude that God's active salvation is not on offer in Islam.

How does this short study help us deal with the original question?

In this case at least, Peter's claim in Acts 4:12 is true. Emboldened by that confidence, Peter and John initiated a witness to Jesus the Saviour which reached to the ends of the earth. What is it that makes some western Christians today hesitate?

Popular messages that religions are all the same deserve a healthy dose of scepticism. Scholars who study religions discover and document their particularities. Even when different religions use the same terminology, it does not mean they are talking about the same qualities. As Hendrik Kraemer explained, different religions spin on their own axes, and the meaning of any specific concept derives from the total system.

People who do not know Jesus are not enjoying the benefits of salvation which the gospel offers. This seems a reasonable inference from both the New Testament and religions. The burden of proof would seem to rest with those who claim that people outside of Christ are experiencing that same salvation. Until that is clearly demonstrated, Christians should consider holding true to their confession.

Those who profess faith in Jesus face a test of integrity. If Muslims themselves deny that Islam is a way of salvation, what can it mean to withhold from them the good news of Jesus the Saviour? When religions do talk about salvation, their concepts of salvation tend to be very different. However, if another faith should indeed claim to offer salvation on similar terms, and in another name, then the question would be whether this claim is in fact true. Why should the first Christian impulse be to accept competing claims without investigation?

Our respect for—and kindness toward—people of other faiths will be reflected in our readiness to share with them the salvation which we enjoy. As Lesslie Newbigin put

it, if the New Testament affirmations about Jesus are true, to hoard this good news is treason to our fellow humans.

Christians need to move away from pronouncements about religions from the outside toward patient study of the religions in their sourcebooks and in the words of their adherents. We also need to reaffirm our confidence in the gospel—a ‘proper confidence’ based not upon our own goodness or intelligence, but only upon the love of God and the faithfulness of the Lamb.