Introduction

Mapping Theologies of Salvation

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For us and for our salvation. . . .
—Nicene Creed

For many Christians, the Nicene Creed wonderfully encapsulates the fundamental teachings of historic Christianity and the entire good news of the gospel into a short and rich summary.¹ It describes the Triune God, who turns toward humanity in the person of Jesus, the God-man who suffered, died, rose again, and ascended. Additionally, the Creed goes on to express our future hope, which is a motivating factor in the Christian life.

As a creed recited in numerous churches every Sunday, many are very familiar with its contents. While significant as an historical document, the Nicene Creed reflects the Christian teaching that salvation is closely related to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Throughout the history of the Christian tradition, theologians have written, preached, and debated the doctrine of salvation. What is salvation? How is one saved? From what is one saved? The theologies of salvation in the Christian tradition encompass a wide variety of beliefs and practices.

Christian theology is reflection on the one whom Christians confess as Lord and Savior. This reflection has been informed by the interest in salvation. The role of soteriology is to show why and how Jesus is significant. All Christian theologians would agree that Jesus Christ is the one through whom salvation comes, but explaining what that means has been the subject of debate throughout the tradition.

What are we to make of it? This book provides a map through the maze of options and implications of the various theologies of salvation. It is an introduction to the theologies of salvation of the major theolo-
gians and an investigation of these views, primarily their similarities and differences and how they are employed.

The topic of salvation is complex and multilayered, with numerous implications for both the corporate church and the individual believer, a discipline that generates a myriad of questions.

How do you define “salvation”? How and why is one saved? From what is one saved? Is a particular theory of salvation primary, such as moral transformation, Christus victor, ransom, satisfaction, penal substitution, deification, or moral example? How is salvation accomplished? By what means is it applied? Faith? Baptism? Obedience? What is Jesus’s role in salvation? What is the scope of salvation? Individual? Collective? Cosmic? What about the afterlife: heaven, hell, purgatory, soul sleep, and annihilation?

To ask these questions about salvation is to set forth on a dark and winding path—there seems no end to the list of questions. But we are not the first to ask them; in fact, two thousand years of Christian tradition provide guideposts to mark our way and lampposts to illuminate our path. This book traces what the prominent Christian theologians have said about salvation. The goal of this volume is to map the terrain of the Christian tradition on salvation and let the contours speak for themselves. This is not a work of dogmatic or systematic theology that posits a specific doctrine of salvation that must be rigidly followed. Rather, this book investigates the history of Christian thought by looking at major figures in the tradition and describing their unique contributions to the lingering and over-arching questions about salvation.

The phrase “theologies of salvation” is used herein to refer to these expressions of salvation throughout church history. A wide range of theologies of salvation have emerged throughout church history, new theologies of salvation continue to emerge today, and even more theologies of salvation will likely emerge in the years to come.

Our investigation will find that different theologies of salvation exist, not because the Christian tradition is inherently contentious and cannot reach a consensus, but because each moment, era, and epoch raises different questions about the nature, means, methods, purpose, and effects of salvation. This volume’s contributors address various theologies of salvation, each bringing his or her own expertise to bear on theologies of
the salvation as expressed in specific theologians and historical periods of church history.

This book has four parts, each of which presents particular theologies of salvation in four different historical eras. Each part begins with an introductory chapter that provides an overview of the theologies of salvation in that era. The goal of the overview chapters is to provide readers with a broader context for understanding the more specialized studies of individual theologians that follow, and also to identify the concerns that bind their work together.

Part I, on patristic theologies of salvation, covers Origen, Irenaeus, Augustine, Athanasius, and the Cappadocians. D. H. Williams begins part I by demonstrating that, although the patristic era of the church never produced a unified or systematic theory of salvation, the ancient writers were diligent to articulate pastoral and practical doctrine helpful to their congregations, which certainly included teaching about salvation. Williams reviews the differing approaches regarding salvation that the early theologians constructed, while explaining how the early church writings focused primarily on the giver of salvation through Christ rather than on the receiver of salvation in the individual.

In Thomas P. Scheck’s chapter on Origen, he notes that though Origen lived through a period with little to no doctrinal consensus, he produced a rather organized and consistent theology (for his time) in the face of strong opposition from the Gnostics. Scheck explains that Origen’s beliefs regarding salvation lie in the outcome of the believer’s fight in the struggle to choose virtue or vice once the divine Word has been introduced to the soul.

John Behr continues part I with a recounting of the theology of Irenaeus of Lyons, an early church father who understood salvation in the gospel to be a recapitulation of all that God had done before Christ. For Irenaeus, salvation coincides with God’s creation as the perfect purpose and will of God, fulfilled in the perfect image of God in Christ.

David Vincent Meconi in his chapter on Augustine shows how Augustine’s theology of salvation is rooted in conformity to the incarnate Christ. Augustine believed that when one becomes conformed to God in Christ, he or she is cut off from this world and transformed into a lover of God.

John Yocum outlines the theology of salvation of Athanasius in his chapter, noting that Athanasius believed that though man is fully de-
pendent on grace, this grace is received by directing the mind toward God. As Yocum explains, Athanasius believed that the primary purpose of God becoming man in Christ was to do away with death and give way to life through the resurrection for those who are in Christ.

In the final chapter of part I, Andrew Radde-Gallwitz writes about the Cappadocian Fathers—Basil of Caesarea, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. The theology of the Cappadocians, though with disagreements among the members at points, is relatively unified in the idea that the believer’s salvation is collective, that it is our nature that is saved.

Part II covers the Middle Ages and includes chapters on Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and Julian of Norwich. In the overview chapter, David Hogg recounts the development of the theology of salvation through this period, where the life of Christ as the payment to the devil for the souls under his authority became an increasingly popular notion. Over the course of the Middle Ages, this doctrine became known as the harrowing of hell, due to the belief that when Jesus rose from the grave, the righteous were let out of hell itself.

Giles Gasper’s chapter discusses Anselm of Canterbury, one of the most important thinkers in Christian history. In contrast to many who came before him, Anselm’s view of salvation did not consider the devil to be a major figure, but instead focused on humanity’s culpability and the atoning work of Christ in salvation.

R. Jared Staudt continues part II, covering the theology of Thomas Aquinas. Staudt demonstrates that Aquinas’s views on salvation are primarily rooted in the internal liberation from sin whereby the soul is renewed and justified by grace, and in the cause of said justification, which is participation in the justice of the soul of Jesus Christ himself.

Kerrie Hide completes this section, examining the life and thoughts of the English mystic Julian of Norwich. Julian’s unique life of suffering shaped her understanding of theology, in which salvation is part of the journey of the individual, in which salvation occurs not as a result of humanity running from God, but a great “oneing” between Divinity and humanity.

Part III, on theologies of salvation during the Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation, covers Martin Luther, John Calvin, and the “Catholic Reform.” The overview chapter by Frank A. James III covers
both the theology of the Reformers, in which God’s declaration of righteousness is based solely upon the righteousness of Jesus Christ, and the ensuing Catholic Counter-Reformation, in which salvation had happened, is happening, and is yet to come.

Carl Trueman writes about Martin Luther, the most important figure in the Protestant theology of salvation. Trueman explains Martin Luther’s understanding of salvation as the justification by grace through faith in Christ so fundamental to Protestant and Reformed theology, as well as the implications involved in such a theology, including the sacraments, church authority, and the split from Roman Catholicism.

J. Todd Billings’s chapter follows on John Calvin, who, with earlier Catholic theologians, champions the work of the Spirit’s indwelling, transforming, and glorifying human beings in Christ, as well as his understanding of the gospel as the double grace of justification and sanctification accessed through union with Christ, received through faith.

Donald Prudlo closes out part III with the ensuing Catholic Reform, in which the Catholic Church, through the Council of Trent, speaks of justification as both an event and a process through which all believers must go. The Council of Trent argues that one can never be certain of one’s salvation and that believers grow in holiness through the performance of good works, perfected by grace.

Part IV, on theologies of salvation from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century, covers John Wesley, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Karl Rahner, and Gustavo Gutiérrez. In the overview chapter, Ryan Reeves explains that the unique context of this period provides an intriguing backdrop for competing theologies of salvation. The dawn and subsequent growth of modernity and the rise in rational, empirical thinking in this time period reveal the need for theologians to reexamine both the nature and effects of salvation.

Thomas McCall begins this section with an examination of the teachings of John Wesley, one of the most influential men of the eighteenth century. McCall writes of Wesley’s theology of salvation, though not unique in Christian history, as an important and unmistakably Protestant view, rooted in the theology of the early church, though with an emphasis on God’s universal salvific will together with unlimited atonement.
James Gordon follows with an account of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s theology of salvation. Schleiermacher’s theology of salvation was unique, directly confronting the challenges posed by modernity, positing that the solution to the sin problem in man is found in the reality of the removal of sin and the incorporation of the believer into the corporate life of “blessedness” in Jesus Christ.

Tom Greggs continues part IV with his chapter on Karl Barth, one of the most important theologians of the twentieth century. For Barth, Christ is both the electing God and the elected man, where the active and passive election of the Son provides the basis for the election of individual men and women. Salvation is primarily the gift of the God of salvation who has chosen to be God in a particular way: in Christ.

W. T. Dickens provides an account of the theology of salvation for both Balthasar and Rahner, eminent Roman Catholic, Jesuit theologians of the twentieth century. Dickens explores both the similarities between these two theologians, such as their disdain for the neoscholastic theological method, and their differences, which primarily exist in their conception of the person, distinctive views of sin, and the scope of the reconciliation of God in Christ.

In the final chapter, Michal Edward Lee seeks to explain the soteriology of Gustavo Gutiérrez, one of the founders of liberation theology. Gutiérrez’s theology of salvation is centered on the communion of humans with one another and with God, found not necessarily in a forensic declaration, meritorious works, or exclusive claim to an economic transaction, but in relationship with God the Father who produces human flourishing.

In mapping the theologies of salvation, this book serves as a guide to the variety of views about salvation found throughout the Christian tradition and can also assist us in developing theologies of salvation for our present and future contexts.

Certainly there are many different perspectives regarding theologies of salvation, and yet the recurring unifying theme is the role of the Trinity and the focus on the person and work of Jesus Christ. While this book does not advocate one theology of salvation above any other, the aim is for the reader to gain further knowledge about doctrines of salvation with which they are familiar, and also become further informed about other theologies of salvation, which in turn may foster a deeper
sense of humility and respect that leads to fruitful dialogue among Christians of different perspectives.

NOTE
1. The Nicene Creed should be called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, since later debates led to an expansion of Nicaea’s formula at the Council in Constantinople (381). Justin S. Holcomb, Know the Heretics (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 159–160; Justin S. Holcomb, Know the Creeds and Councils (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 33–40.