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. 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 many 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 While significant as an historical document, the Nicene Creed reflects the Christian teaching that salvation is closely related to the person and work of Jesus Christ.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 to explain what that means has been debated throughout the tradition.
What are we to make of it? This book is 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 theologians and an investigation of these views, primarily their similarity and difference and how they are employed.

The topic of salvation is complex and multi-layered with numerous implications both for 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’ 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 these questions; 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.
In this book the phrase “theologies of the salvation” is used to refer to these expressions of salvation throughout church history. There has been a wide range of theologies of salvation that 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. In this book, contributors address various theologies of salvation, each bringing their own expertise to bear on theologies of the salvation as expressed in specific theologian and historical periods of church history.

This book has four parts. Each part presents particular theologies of salvation in four different historical eras. Each part begins with an introductory chapter that presents 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, Irenaeaus, Augustine, Athanasius, and the Cappodocians. D. H. Williams begins Part I with an overview chapter. He demonstrates 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 overviews the differing approaches regarding salvation 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.
Thomas P. Scheck, in his essay on Origen, 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 essay 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 essay, noting that Athanasius believed that though man is fully dependent on grace, this grace is received by directing the mind towards God. Athanasius believed that the primary purpose of God becoming man in Christ, Yocum explains, was to do away with death and give way to life through the resurrection for those who are in Christ.

Andrew Radde-Gallwitz writes in his chapter 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 between the members at points, is relatively unified under the ideas of the believer’s salvation being 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 begins with an essay on 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’ views on salvation are primarily rooted in both the internal liberation from sin whereby the soul is renewed and justified by grace, and 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 concerning 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 follows with his essay 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 believer 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, cover 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 of time 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 re-examine 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 18th 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 in 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 essay 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 exists in their conception of the person, distinctive views of sin, and the scope of the reconciliation of God in Christ.

Michal Edward Lee, in the last chapter of this section, seeks to explain the soteriology of Gustavo Guitiérez, one of the founders of liberation theology. Guítierrez’ theology of salvation is centered around 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 goal is that the reader may 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 lead to fruitful dialogue between Christians of different perspectives.

Notes

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*, 159-160; Justin S. Holcomb, *Know the Creeds and Councils*, 33-40.
Part I. Patristic