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Adventures in Missing the Point: How the Culture-Controlled Church Neutered the Gospel
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MISSING THE POINT:
Salvation

Brian D. McLaren

Are you saved?

For people who come from evangelical and fundamentalist backgrounds (as I do), life is about being (or getting) saved, and knowing it. I was taught that the ideal Christian could tell you the exact date—and maybe even the hour and minute—when he was saved, when he experienced salvation. *Are you saved?* was a question that everyone understood meant one or all of the following:

- You had accepted Jesus Christ as your personal Savior.
- You believed that Jesus died on the cross for your sins, and you believed his death, not your good deeds, made it possible for your sins to be forgiven.
- At the end of a church service, during the “invitation,” you had said “the sinner’s prayer,” then during the “invitation” walked to the front of the church—this was the “altar call”—or perhaps only raised your hand to acknowledge your conversion.
- You gained an assurance that you were going to heaven after you died.

I assure you, I think it’s good to be saved in this way. Yet I also think that the Bible has less to say about these four things than many Christians may think. Consider:

- The phrase *accept Christ as your personal Savior* is not in the Bible. Even *personal Savior* is absent from the pages of the Bible. In fact, the Bible seems to make the focus of salvation on *us* as a people, not on *me* as an individual.
- Having your sins forgiven is no doubt a part of (or a prelude to) salvation. But in the Bible salvation means much more than that: if anything, being forgiven is the starting line, not the finish line, of salvation.

- Nowhere in the Bible is the term *sinner's prayer* mentioned, and no one in the Bible ever says it—at least not in the form that prospective converts are taught to say it today. And it wasn't until the last 150 years or so that Christian services included “invitations” or “altar calls.” Furthermore, no one has ever or will ever walk down an aisle or raise a hand to “get saved.” Invitations, altar calls, and sinner's prayers are wonderful and often useful traditions or rituals—I just don't think that salvation lies in them.
- If you had asked the apostle Paul, “If you were to die tonight, do you know for certain that you would be with God in heaven?” I'm certain Paul would have said yes. But he probably would have given you a funny look and wondered why you were asking this question, because to him it missed the point. To Paul the point of being Christ's follower was not just to help people be absolutely certain they were going to heaven after they died. Paul's goal was to help them become fully formed, mature in Christ, here and now—to experience the glorious realities of being in Christ and experiencing Christ in themselves.

So if we are missing the point about salvation, what is the point?

For starters, in the Old Testament the Hebrew word that is translated *salvation* means *rescue*—especially rescue from sickness, trouble, distress, fear, or (this especially) from enemies and their violence. You see this meaning clearly in passages like this one, in which the people rejoice that God has saved them from the Egyptians who had violently oppressed them as slaves for generations:

*The Lord is my strength and my song;
he has become my salvation.
He is my God, and I will praise him,
my father's God, and I will exalt him. (Exodus 15:2)*

Or take David, who expresses the same joy over being rescued from violent people—in this case, King Saul:

*My God is my rock, in whom I take refuge,
my shield and the horn of my salvation.
He is my stronghold, my refuge and my savior—
from violent men you save me. (2 Samuel 22:3)*

A Jewish priest named Zacharias understood salvation in this same sense. At the birth of his long-awaited son (who would be known as John the Baptizer), Zacharias sang a song about salvation—but the enemies *he* sang about were certainly the Romans, who oppressed the Jewish people and denied them their full freedom:

*He has raised up a horn of salvation for us
in the house of his servant David
(as he said through his holy prophets of long ago),
salvation from our enemies
and from the hand of all who hate us—
to show mercy to our fathers
and to remember his holy covenant,
the oath he swore to our father Abraham:
to rescue us from the hand of our enemies,
and to enable us to serve him without fear
in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:69–75)*

It's clear that in these passages the speakers aren't talking about being saved from hell. They're talking about being saved from the Egyptians, King Saul, the Romans—about being liberated from violence and oppression and the distressing fear they engender.

Not that being saved from hell is unimportant or unbiblical. It is only that I think we sometimes jump to that interpretation of *salvation* too quickly—and in so doing, we miss the full point of salvation.

For just a minute or two, box up your understanding of *salvation* and *saved* long enough to listen to a story, as if it were the first time you ever heard it.

Back in about 1400 B.C., the Bible tells us, the Jewish people were slaves in Egypt. They prayed for relief, and God sent them Moses, who led them to freedom. Moses didn't take the credit, though—he knew it was God who saved the people from slavery. After the people escaped Egypt and settled in Palestine, many of their neighbors would brutally attack them—the Philistines, the Amalekites, and others. Again and again, they would pray—and sure enough, God would send them a deliverer (or savior) to save them (or bring them salvation).

They eventually faced their most dangerous enemies of all. To their north and east, the powerful and brutal Assyrian empire attacked and destroyed Israel's northern tribes. Some years later the Assyrians were replaced by a Babylonian regime, and *they* attacked Israel's southern tribes. They prayed for salvation, but they were not spared. They weren't destroyed, either: many were carried away as exiles, or prisoners of war, to be used as servants in the Babylonian empire. When they arrived in Babylon, the Jews kept on praying for salvation—this time, salvation from their exile.

Later, yet another regime—the Medo-Persians—replaced the Babylonians, and the Hebrew exiles were allowed to return to their promised land of Israel. The Greeks soon ruled over Judea, and after the Greeks, the Romans. It seemed the Jews were destined to remain under the control of larger, more powerful empires.

When would their salvation come? When would their liberation come?

After many centuries, the question *When?* gave way to the more vexing question *Why?* Why didn't God save them this

time? Their history was full of stories of God's salvation, but now he seemed deaf to their cries. Why?

A group of pious, devout people known as the Pharisees had an answer: the reason God didn't save the people from oppression (not from hell) was *because of their sins*. If the people would just become more holy and devout, then God would surely save them. The Pharisees dedicated themselves, therefore, to purity—not only for their own sake, but for the salvation of their people (from oppression and violence).

Perhaps for the first time, *sin* became a major concern—it was the answer to the *Why doesn't God rescue us?* question. The Pharisees consequently resented anyone who was obviously sinful: prostitutes (who sinned sexually), tax collectors (who cooperated with the oppressors), the drunks (who lacked self-discipline), the gluttons (who, unlike the Pharisees, didn't fast to prove their piety). "It's *their* fault we are oppressed," the Pharisees said. "It's *their* fault we are not being saved."

At last, an obvious answer to the *Why?* question.

Then came the remarkable conception of a young but faith-filled Jewish girl:

But after [Joseph] had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:20-21)

Did you notice the profound shift? He will save his people from their *what*? For the first time in Jewish history, a promised salvation was not liberation from political oppression and religious persecution. Instead, as the angel informed Joseph, the rescue of people from their sins would be the prerequisite to any rescue from oppression. Save the people from their sins, as Gabriel promised that Jesus will do, and salvation from oppression would inevitably follow.

Can you see now why the Pharisees, who were working hard to pressure the obvious sinners to change their ways so the Messiah could come and bring salvation—can you see why they would be upset with Jesus? Instead of joining the Pharisees in their disdain for the supposed sinners, Jesus was kind to prostitutes, ate with tax collectors, spoke too much about forgiveness and not enough about judgment (except, ironically, when he was talking about the Pharisees), and was gracious even to Roman soldiers, Samaritans, and Syrophonecians. He *couldn't* be the Messiah. If anything, he was the anti-messiah. No wonder they wanted to kill him.

“You people are completely focused on political salvation of your people to the exclusion of everyone else,” Jesus essentially told the Pharisees. “Don’t you remember? God’s promise to Abraham was not limited to Abraham’s descendents: his promise was to bless Abraham and *make him a blessing*, to make Abraham’s descendents a great nation, *so they could bless all other nations*. So by being preoccupied only with your own blessing, your own liberation, your own concerns—you are missing the whole point about salvation.”

Jesus’ message and manner infuriated the Pharisees, of course, turning their expectations to confetti.

“That’s right,” many modern Christians respond at this point. “Those Pharisees should have realized that Jesus came to save them spiritually from hell after death, not politically from the Romans in this life. They really missed the point.”

I think, though, Jesus would then say to us, “No, *you’re* missing the point, too. You’re missing the point about why *they* missed the point.”

Then we would be all confused, and then we would *really hear* what Jesus said to first-century Jews:

SALVATION DOESN'T MEAN SLITTING ROMAN THROATS AND GETTING POWER. SALVATION MEANS BEING LIBERATED FROM THE CYCLE OF VIOLENCE, LIBERATED FROM THE NEED TO BE IN POWER. GOD WANTS TO SAVE YOU FROM YOUR PRESENT LIFE OF HATRED AND FEAR, AND INSTEAD RECONNECT YOU WITH GOD'S ORIGINAL PLAN FOR THE DESCENDENTS OF ABRAHAM. EVEN AS AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE, YOU CAN BE A BLESSING. INSTEAD OF SLITTING A ROMAN SOLDIER'S THROAT, CARRY HIS PACK FOR HIM. INSTEAD OF CURSING HIM, PRAY FOR HIM. I AM HERE TO SAVE YOU FROM THE WHOLE SYSTEM OF INSULT AND REVENGE—NOT BY GIVING YOU POLITICAL VICTORY (AS YOU WISH I WOULD), AND NOT BY TELLING YOU TO GIVE UP ON THIS LIFE AND INSTEAD FOCUS ON SALVATION FROM HELL AFTER THIS LIFE (AS SOME PEOPLE ARE GOING TO DO IN MY NAME)—BUT BY GIVING YOU PERMISSION TO START YOUR PARTICIPATION IN GOD'S MISSION RIGHT NOW, RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE, EVEN AS AN OPPRESSED PEOPLE. THE OPPORTUNITY TO START LIVING IN THIS NEW AND BETTER WAY IS AVAILABLE TO YOU RIGHT NOW: THE KINGDOM OF GOD IS AT HAND!

So there's the ancient Jewish way of missing of the point (thinking salvation is only about politics in the here and now) and the modern Christian way of missing of the point (thinking salvation is only about escaping hell after you die). There's another approach: that salvation means being rescued from fruitless ways of life here and now, to share in God's saving love for all creation, in an adventure called the kingdom of God, the point of which you definitely don't want to miss. Plus, of

course, the wonderful gift of assurance that you will not perish after this life, but will be forever with the Lord.

Consider the Parable of the Race. Once upon a time, in a land of boredom and drudgery, exciting news spread: “There is going to be a race! And all who run this race will grow strong and they’ll never be bored again!” Exciting news like this had not been heard for many a year, for people experienced little adventure in this ho-hum land, beyond attending committee meetings, waiting in lines, sorting socks, and watching sitcom reruns.

Excitement grew as the day of the race drew near. Thousands gathered in the appointed town, at the appointed place. Most came to observe, skeptical about the news. “It’s too good to be true,” they said. “It’s just a silly rumor started by some teenaged troublemakers. But let’s stick around and see what happens anyway.”

Others could not resist the invitation, arriving in their running shorts and shoes. As they waited for the appointed time, they stretched and jogged in place and chattered among themselves with nervous excitement. At the appointed time they gathered at the starting line, heard the gun go off, and knew that it was time to run.

Then something very curious happened. The runners took a step or two or three across the starting line, and then abruptly stopped. One man fell to his knees, crying, “I have crossed the starting line! This is the happiest day of my life!” He repeated this again and again, and even began singing a song about how happy this day was for him.

Another woman started jumping for joy. “Yes!” she shouted, raising her fist in the air. “I am a race-runner! I am finally a race-runner!” She ran around jumping and dancing, getting and giving high fives to others who shared her joy at being in the race.

Several people formed a circle and prayed, quietly thanking God for the privilege of crossing the starting line, and thanking God that they were not like the skeptics who didn't come dressed for the race.

An hour passed, and two. Spectators began muttering; some laughed. "So what do they think this race is?" they said. "Two or three strides, then a celebration? And why do they feel superior to us? They're treating the starting line as if it were a finish line. They've completely missed the point."

A few more minutes of this silliness passed. "You know," a spectator said to the person next to her, "if they're not going to run the race, maybe we should."

"Why not? It's getting boring watching them hang around just beyond the starting line. I've had enough boredom for one life."

Others heard them, and soon many were kicking off their dress shoes, slipping out of their jackets, throwing all this unneeded clothing on the grass. And they ran—past the praying huddles and past the crying individuals and past the jumping high-fivers. And they found hope and joy in every step, and they grew stronger with every mile and hill. To their surprise, the path never ended—because in this race, there was no finish line. So they were never bored again.

Is salvation for you a one-time experience? Or is it a lifelong journey? Is it about rescue from your uncomfortable circumstances (as it was for the ancient Jews), or rescue from this world after death (as it is for many modern Christians)—or is it about being rescued from a life that is disconnected from God and God's adventure, both in this life and the next? Is salvation about stepping across a line—or is it about crossing a starting line to begin an unending adventure in this life and beyond?

Brian is on target when he contends that the salvation Jesus preached was primarily for the here and now. Life in the next world is *not* where the attention of Jesus was focused. What Jesus offered to people, Brian points out, was a spiritual transformation that would make them into a new kind of people—a people delivered from the animosities, fears, and guilt that drain life of its joys. The salvation that Christ offers involves becoming new persons who live out love and justice in the world.

It's not just for the elderly that salvation from the threat of death is a big deal. From early childhood, Ernest Becker contends in *Denial of Death*, the subconscious fear of death permeates the consciousness and is at the root of phobias that can render us psychologically dysfunctional. Young people are more threatened by death than most of them realize. When we talk about salvation, we must highlight not only the transformation experienced in this life, but also the good news that in Christ Jesus death itself has lost its sting.

Furthermore, I wonder if Brian isn't used to presenting salvation to sophisticated people, to whom Satan may be more of a caricature than a reality. Nevertheless, Satan is real, and evil is personified in him. We must beware of Satan being reduced to some little demon that sits on our shoulders and whispers nasty temptations into our ears. The Bible makes it clear that he is a seductive beast that raises havoc in our personal lives as well as being incarnated in the principalities and powers (i.e., the political and economic systems, the educational and familial systems, and the media) with which we must wrestle every

day (Ephesians 6:12). Satan is a power that can nearly dominate human behavior, but in Christ we have the power to overcome the demonic: “The one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world” (1 John 4:4). To those of us who are consciously aware that we are struggling against the demonic, it’s good news that Christ saves us from the evil one and his legions.

Finally: yes, I concur with Brian’s contention that being saved is not a simple once-and-for-all decision to accept some doctrinal statements. Yet I believe that Brian does readers a disservice when he does not emphasize that there is indeed a specific decision time in every person’s life. Karl Barth declared—and I agree—that making an existential decision is key to becoming a Christian. Somewhere along the line, individuals must decide if they will make Jesus Lord of life—and that specific decision conditions all that is said and done from that moment forward.

As Brian himself writes, salvation is not just believing the doctrines. Salvation is a lifetime of asking, “What would Jesus do?” And don’t let all those lapel pins diminish the importance of asking that question constantly. Whether it’s going down the aisle of a crowded auditorium or down on one’s knees by oneself in a solitary room, there comes a moment to decide.

Discussion Questions

1. What does McLaren think salvation means? What does he think we're saved from and saved for? How does he think salvation happens?
2. What is salvation for you? Describe what you think we're saved from and saved for, and whether it's a one-time experience or a lifelong journey.
3. To what degree is salvation from the fear of death important to you? Salvation from the fear of Satan? Why?
4. What difference does it make to our behavior if we see salvation as the starting line of a race as opposed to the finish line?
5. To what extent does this describe you: "a new kind of people. . .delivered from the animosities, fears, and guilt that drain life of its joys" (page 28). Why do you think that's the case?
6. Specifically, how can you better live what you believe about salvation?