Salvation is Facilitated when People are Saved from Oppressive Structures and Systems, and are Saved for Work in Liberating Organizational Structures and Systems

According to Max Weber, the question of suffering, and thus of salvation, has been central to the origin and development of religion throughout the history of humankind. For him salvation refers to transcendent ways for humankind to be liberated from suffering. He notes that the meaning of salvation has changed through the course of history both within and across religions, and that people’s understanding salvation informs how they manage and organize (and vice versa).¹

In a paper with my coauthor Elden Wiebe, we trace how changing views of salvation within Western Christianity over the past two millennia have been manifest in changes in organization and management practices.² We suggest that humanity’s age-old pursuit of salvation pervades the contemporary management literature, though it is rarely referred to in religious terms, nor typically called “salvation.” Rather, it is more likely to be called “emancipation,” escaping the “iron cage,” “self-actualization,” “empowerment,” and so on.³ Even ideas like “sustainable development,” and “corporate social responsibility” have echoes of the ancient ideas of “salvation”—that is, they address how people can reduce the suffering associated with the status quo.⁴

What is Salvation?

Despite it being a central feature of Christianity, there is a lack of consensus on the meaning of salvation⁵ and it has been oft-noted that there has been great variation in how the meaning of salvation has been interpreted over the past two thousand years. Similar to the KOG, there are four basic dimensions or questions of how salvation can be interpreted that are of particular importance for our study. Again, this analysis will present these four dimensions as “either/or” statements in order to draw attention to differing emphases in the first versus the twenty-first centuries, but the dimensions could also be thought of as “both/and” statements (e.g., salvation is
concerned with both a future and the present life).

1. Is salvation primarily concerned with the afterlife, or is its emphasis on the present?
2. Does salvation refer primarily to a spiritual realm, or is it also relevant in the earthly realm?
3. Is salvation something provided to passive recipients, or does salvation involve the active participation of those who are saved?
4. Is salvation primarily a personal (individual) concern, or is it a social (corporate) phenomenon?

A popular twenty-first-century understanding of salvation would lean toward the first interpretation along each of these four dimensions. Thus, from a popular twenty-first-century perspective, the understanding of salvation is evident in the following paraphrased interpretation of John 3:16: “God loved the world so much that God sent Jesus—God’s only son—to die on the cross as an atonement for people’s sins, so that every individual who believes in Jesus will have everlasting life.” In this paraphrase the emphasis is on the afterlife and a spiritual realm (Jesus brings everlasting life), on a passive role for recipients (Jesus died for humankind and people simply need to accept this), and on individuals (every individual who believes is saved).

However, this twenty-first-century interpretation would have been quite foreign to people in first-century Palestine, especially readers of Luke, who might begin by noting the implications of oikos6 embedded in John 3:16: “Just as Jesus left his Father’s oikos to bring salvation to people (especially for the ‘lost’) via setting up KOG structures and systems, so also Jesus calls his listeners to leave their childhood oikos and establish new forms of inclusive oikos (especially for the ‘outcast’) consistent with the KOG.” Compared to the more popular twenty-first-century understanding, such a first-century understanding places greater emphasis on the present and the earthly realm (salvation provides community for everyone, especially marginalized people), on an active role for recipients (Jesus demonstrates a new way of living as a model for followers), and on social groups (salvation is evident in new oikos structures and systems). Let’s look at each dimension in turn.

First, the majority of Luke’s references to salvation indicate that it is already visible and present (e.g., Luke 2:30; 7:50; 8:48; 17:17; 18:42; 19:9).7 This emphasis on the present is especially notable in the meaning of healings Jesus performs, where he saves people from their illnesses and thus their social marginalization. It is underscored by expressions like “this day” a savior is born (Luke 2:11) and “today” salvation has come to this oikos (Luke 19:9).8

Second, as in the case of our discussion of the meaning of the KOG, the tendency in the twenty-first-century to separate spiritual ideas like “salvation” from everyday life would have been foreign in the first century. In the first century, salvation would be expected to be evident in everyday life. This is not to deny the spiritual nature of salvation, but simply to note again that in the first century people did not segregate spiritual religious matters from everyday economic matters. For example, the Roman emperor was commonly called the “Savior” thanks to him providing so-called Roman peace (pax Romana) to his conquered peoples.9 Thus, when first-century listeners heard about Jesus described as “Savior” it would have been entirely natural for them to contrast his salvation with the kind of “salvation” they were currently experiencing under the Romans. In other words, they would have expected Jesus to provide an alternative to the current regime’s structures and systems. In particular, the Jews had been waiting years for a Messiah to help them escape from...