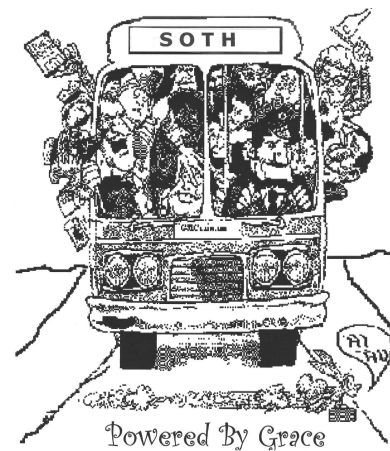


Salvation: Who's In and Who's Out?

Our congregation, Shepherd of the Heart (SOTH) Community Church recently began their summer vacation. Their bus, "Powered By Grace" is now rambling toward Colorado. It's a large bus with over 400 seats, one for each member, and several extras to pick up travelers along the way. The mountain terrain is nothing for her 10,000 horse powered engine. She moves with ease with power to spare. "Powered By Grace" gets less than three miles per gallon, but thankfully is powered by grace, which is free. In fact, the fuel seems to be endless!



While traveling through New Mexico, they came upon a hitchhiker thumbing a ride. Pastor Henry slowed down to see if he should pull over and offer him a ride. Mrs. Hinklemeier caught a glimpse of the hitchhiker out her side window and noticed he was a young bearded man caring a backpack. "You're not going to pick up that guy are you?", she said. "Look how dirty he is and God knows what's in that backpack! He could have a gun!" Hubert Lautenschlager, chairperson of the church Council disagreed. "He looks like a nice young man", he said, "let's pick him up." Other Council members nodded in agreement. "Powered By Grace" slowed to a stop and the hitchhiker ran up. As he entered, you couldn't help noticing his kind smile. "Thanks for stopping", he said and sat in the empty seat behind the driver.

Perhaps Mrs. Hinklemeier was right. His shirt and pants were torn and his tennis shoes well worn. He put his backpack on the floor and leaned it up against his knee. Henry looked in the rear view mirror only to find the hitchhiker looking back into his eyes. There was something about his penetrating eyes, almost frightening, yet peaceful. He seemed nice enough and "Powered By Grace" roared as it easily merged back with traffic.

Hubert Lautenschlager moved up a couple of seats so he could sit next to the young man. "Where you headed?" he asked. The hitchhiker said he'd been working at Christian camp but needed to return to Montana to be with a friend who's ill. "Pancreatic cancer", he said. "The doctors don't give him much hope, but I think he's going to be OK." "Pancreatic cancer?", Hubert said. "My Uncle Rudolph had that and didn't last six months. Sorry to hear about your friend." He reached out his hand saying: "My name's Hubert Lautenschlager. What's yours?" "Joshua", the hitchhiker said. "You know they live when they die", Joshua said. "What?", asked Hubert. "Your uncle", he said. "They live when they die. No need to worry about him."

Hubert was a little troubled by his comment, "They live when they die. Yes", he said to himself. "But where do they live? How do we know they're going to be O.K.?" He thought about his Uncle Rudolph, who died of cancer. He had little time for church or God. He chuckled as he remembered a joke Rudolph loved to tell: The devil went into the church one morning and yelled, "Get out of here!" Everybody ran out of the church...everyone, but Ole. Ole sat in the back pew reading his bulletin. The devil came up to him, pushed down his bulletin, stared into his eyes and said, "Do you know who I am?" "Ya, you betcha", said Ole. "You're the devil." "So why aren't you frightened of me?", the devil asked. "You ain't so tough", said Ole, "I've been married to your sister for 25 years!" Hubert couldn't help laughing when he thought about his uncle. He was always the life of the party. Then, he thought

again about Joshua's statement, "They live when they die". "Yes, they live", he thought. "But, where? Who gets into heaven? Who's in and who's out?"

As "Powered By Grace" roared down the highway, Hubert leaned forward to ask Pastor Henry: "What about salvation?" "What do you mean by salvation?", asked Pastor. "Well", Hubert said, "Who gets to go to heaven and who doesn't?" Pastor said, "It's not only about going to heaven. Salvation comes from the Latin *salve* meaning 'healing ointment'. Salvation has to do with healing of life's hurts and pains now. It's not only about the next life. Salvation is now! We encounter Jesus now! Focus on that and don't worry about what happens after death." "But," Hubert insisted, "I'm concerned about my Uncle Rudolph. He didn't seem to have much time for God in this life. Where will he be in the next? Joshua told me that we live when we die. But, does everyone? Where do they live?" "That's up to God", Henry said. "Do you take God's Grace seriously, Hubert?" "Yes, I do", he replied. Henry responded, "So does our church. He asked Hans Engelbertson to read what their denomination says about salvation. Hans read:

Will only Christians be saved?...The traditional medieval response followed Pope Boniface VIII's 1302 pronouncement, "There is no salvation outside the Church." Protestants were later to reject that claim and substitute an evangelical version of exclusiveness: "Apart from faith there is no salvation." Of course, this faith would come only from being baptized into the Christian faith upon hearing the claims of the preached Gospel. However, both Roman Catholics and evangelical Protestants provided various "loophole" theologies. There were second chances for those of "invincible ignorance" (Roman Catholic), or those "not accountable," e.g. infants, mentally retarded, etc. (evangelical Protestantism). Others would assert that Jesus – the valid avenue for Christians – is only one of many ways that lead to the God of the universe, and that other religions possess equally valid paths to God.

All of these views are based on a defective understanding of the New Testament. We approach all theological questions – by understanding God's grace, God's action in Christ. The Christian hope for salvation, whether for the believing few or the unbelieving many, is grounded in the person and meaning of Christ alone, not in the potential of the world's religions to save, nor in the moral seriousness of humanists and people of good will, not even in the good works of pious Christians and church people. There is a universalist thrust in the New Testament, particularly in Paul's theology. How else can we read passages such as 'for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ' (1 Cor 15:22) (See also Colossians 1:15-20, Ephesians 1:9-10, 1 Corinthians 15:28.)

Salvation in the New Testament is what God has done to death in the resurrection of Jesus. Through raising Jesus from the dead, God put death to death, overcoming the deadliest enemy of life at loose in the world. But what of faith? Isn't faith necessary for salvation? To say we are saved by faith alone means we let God-in-Christ do all the saving that needs to be done, apart from any works we can perform. What God has done in Christ is done for all; God's act in Christ is the way that all come to God. That is precisely how we understand Jesus' claim that, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me." (John 14:6) This Good News we are compelled to joyously share with all people: "God has acted in Christ, and you are the recipient of this loving act.

To those who often passionately argue that "while God offers grace and salvation to all, humans must accept it with deep repentance and a change of life," we caution against making salvation into a work that we accomplish by our response to God's offer. Will, then, all people be saved in the end? That is stored up in the mystery of God's own future. All God has let us know in advance is that he will judge the world according to the measure of his grace and love made known in Jesus Christ, which is ultimately greater than the fierceness of his wrath or the hideousness of our sin.

When Hans had finished reading, Hubert smiled and said, "I guess God's grace is not under our control! But, to be honest, I would feel more secure if it was." "Your security", Henry said, "is in knowing that you have been grasped by God in Christ and God will never let you go!

~ Henry