

A Reformed Perspective on Salvation

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Reformed Institute of Metropolitan Washington

David H. Kelsey

It is unmistakably clear that the New Testament's Gospel offers good news about salvation. But what is 'salvation'? Let me introduce my reflections on that question by making two points.

First, Christian creeds that are affirmed by the vast majority of Christian Churches do not include any one standard of 'orthodox teaching' about just what 'salvation' is. The creeds do include a standard of orthodox teaching about God: God is Triune, One God, three Persons. I have in mind here the Nicene Creed and the Apostles Creed. And those creeds include a standard for orthodox teaching about who Jesus Christ is: The eternal Son of God Incarnate, fully divine and fully human. And they include a standard of orthodox teaching about what God does through Jesus: In being Incarnate the Son 'came down from heaven,' was crucified, died, was buried, and rose again 'for us and for our salvation.' But those ecumenical creeds don't identify any one truly 'orthodox' way of explaining what 'salvation' is. There are no generally accepted creedal rules guiding what we ought to say about 'salvation.'

Instead, the only generally accepted standard of what Christians mean by 'salvation' is the New Testament story about what God was doing in and through the life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. And that story is told in four somewhat different ways: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There's no doubt that in some way it is a story about the concretely particular and strange way God goes about freely

relating to us in Jesus Christ to save us. But just how does that work? What is going on in that story? Every attempt like this one to explain what we mean by ‘salvation’ is an attempt to throw light on what is going on in that story and it has to be adequate to the particular things that happen in that story. That’s my first introductory point.

What does it mean that my comments about salvation come from a ‘Reformed’ perspective? That brings me to my second introductory point. The ‘Reformed’ tradition is the branch of the Reformation whose roots lie in Switzerland and France, in contradistinction to the Lutheran tradition whose roots lie in the Reformation in Germany. Now there is nothing specifically ‘Reformed’ about saying that in love God freely relates to us in and through Jesus Christ to save us. However it seems to me that Reformed explanations of salvation are distinctive in heavily emphasizing four things:

- i) God’s freely relating to us in love comes before anything we can imagine, think or do. It is ‘prevenient’ (pre: before; venio: to come). That lies behind the famous Reformed emphasis on election and pre-destination.
- ii) God’s relating to us freely in love isn’t just a one-on-one relation, God-to-me, God-to-you. It creates a new environment. It creates the context in which we all live whether we believe it or not, respond to it or not, appropriate it or not.
- iii) God’s way of relating is free and has no pre-conditions, but it is not cheap; it will cost you your life, so called.
- iv) God’s way of freely relating in love is so rich, complex, creative, and unpredictable that no one explanation of it can grasp it all; so our explanations of ‘salvation’ sometimes have to be modified and changed. In theology as in all else the Reformed Tradition is at one ‘reformed’ and ‘always reforming.’

These aren't the only themes that are distinctively emphasized in the Reformed Tradition. But they are Reformed emphases that seem to me particularly important in explanations of the idea of salvation.

The Story Relies on Key Metaphors

A story moves. As it unfolds it becomes clear that it is moving toward some ending and that it has some sort of inner dynamic that is moving it toward that end. In a general sort of way it seems clear that the New Testament story about God's strange way of freely relating to us in Jesus through Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection is a story that moves toward the end that just is our salvation fully accomplished. But what is going on in that story? How does the story it tells of Jesus culminate in the salvation of the world?

I think we only begin to get a handle on what is going on in that story when we notice that it has two levels, each of which is moved by a conflict. On one level it is a story of Jesus' way of relating to God: His trust in God is unbroken; his faithfulness to the work God calls him to do is unbroken; he enjoys an unprecedentedly close relationship with God, so close that he seems sometimes to be equating his personal presence with God's own presence; he does all this while entering fully into the everyday life of oppressed and suffering people, social outcasts, and also their oppressive enemies. This generates a conflict with political and religious authorities that seems inevitably to drive toward Jesus' arrest on charges of sedition, his suffering, his crucifixion, and the extremity of his sense of separation from God ('My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?'), followed by the astonishing reversal in Jesus' resurrection.

Simultaneously, on a second level the New Testament story is a story of how God relates to Jesus: God always takes the initiative. In Matthew and Luke God even takes the initiative in Jesus' biological conception. In John God's priority is eternal, before all time, so that the Word who became flesh in the temporal life of Jesus is God's eternal Word. God calls Jesus to his ministry and gives Jesus his message: Judgment Day is near at hand and God's Kingdom of righteousness is about to invade this fallen and unrighteous world. God takes the initiative to identify Jesus publically at his baptism as God's beloved Son and sends on Jesus the Holy Spirit by whose power Jesus effectively proclaims the imminence of God's Kingdom through both preaching and healing. As an account of God relating to Jesus the New Testament stories' emphasis on God's initiative has the force of saying: All these things Jesus is doing and saying are things God is saying and doing. It is God who is at work here.

At work at what? Jesus' healings are particularly important here because they are consistently encounters in which Jesus, by the Power of the Spirit, overcomes and casts out evil spirits. What is happening here is a second level of conflict: Not just conflict between Jesus and religious and political authorities, but a cosmic conflict between God and larger-than-life dynamics that oppress, distort and bind human life at its social as well as individual levels. On this second level of the New Testament stories the crucifixion is the climax of this cosmic conflict and the resurrection is God's decisive victory over what Paul calls the 'powers and principalities.' At this point in the story God's identification with Jesus is so complete that it is difficult to tell from the Gospels whether we should say that God took the initiative to raise Jesus or that Jesus raised himself because that is the same thing as saying God raised Jesus.

In somewhat different ways the four Gospels tell four versions of this two-layered story. And the point of each telling is that in and through the interplay between the way Jesus relates to God and the way God relates to Jesus God is also relating to us. That too is a story, and the end toward which it moves is that we are ‘saved.’

But what does that mean? What is ‘salvation’? The stories are narrative witness. They do not offer theories that would explain what is going on in the story. Instead they invite us to reflect on what we see going on in their stories. In the New Testament Epistles we get just such reflections. They largely consist of extended metaphors that illuminate different aspects of the stories. They have become central to Christian thought about salvation ever since. No one metaphor by itself can claim to grasp the whole of what’s going on. But kept in conversation with one another they can help us tease out strands of the plot of these stories and help us see how the strands are woven together into the fabric of the story as a whole.

I will focus on three such metaphors: Salvation as ‘atoning,’ salvation as ‘reconciling,’ salvation as ‘redeeming’. They have all figured prominently in the Reformed Tradition, but their relative importance has shifted over time.

Salvation as Atoning

Although the word is rarely used in the New Testament, ‘atoning’ has probably been the dominant metaphor for salvation from the Middle Ages until the 20th century. The origin of the English word ‘atonement’ is the phrase ‘at onement.’ To ‘atone’ is to bring separated persons together as one. However, in ordinary usage ‘to atone’ for something is to make amends for an offense, or even to make reparations. Offending someone causes

separation. A gift, an offering, or even, if the offense is serious enough, a sacrificial offering may re-unite them.

Christians have used ‘atoning’ as a metaphor for what is going on specifically in the crucifixion of Jesus. His death is likened to offerings made to God in ancient Israel’s Temple worship by the sacrifice of animals. The most elaborated use of this metaphor in the New Testament is in the Letter to the Hebrews. The author likens Jesus’ crucifixion to the annual animal sacrifice that the High Priest had to make to atone for the entire nation’s sin. In the presence of the holiness of God the inevitable consequence of the people’s un-holiness would be their death. The High Priest sprinkles the blood of the sacrificial animal on himself and on the people gathered. The blood symbolizes the sacrificial animal’s loss of its life in place of the peoples’ loss of their lives. God accepts the animal’s death instead of the people’s death. The sprinkling of that blood on Priest and people symbolizes their ritual participation in the sacrificial animal’s death. The blood is said to cover their sin, so that their un-holiness in God’s presence is erased. English translations of the relevant law use the word ‘atone’ to translate the Hebrew for ‘cover’ (Rom 3:25)

The author of Hebrews uses this as a metaphor for what is going on in the Gospels’ stories about Jesus, but with a crucial twist. Jesus Christ fills the role of the High Priest. But what is going on in the Gospel stories is God taking the initiative to make the sacrifice that is the inescapable consequence of our offense against God: our own death. The High Priest, Jesus Christ ‘the exact imprint of God’s very being’ (1: 3), gives himself as the atoning sacrifice. He is at once High Priest making atoning sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. Furthermore, where the High Priest in the Temple had to repeat the

sacrifice every year, God's Incarnate self-sacrifice need only be done once for all time. So what is going on in the life story of Jesus is this: God Godself comes among us as one of us in the person of Jesus and in his crucifixion takes on himself the cost of re-uniting us to God. This is the context out of which comes the familiar Christian rhetoric about Christ 'dying for our sins,' our being 'saved by the blood,' and our being 'washed in the blood.'

In the Letters of Paul, the earliest Christian reflections we have on what is going on in the Jesus story, God's self-sacrifice in the crucifixion of Jesus atones, that is, 'covers' our sin so that on the day of judgment -- which Paul thought was coming soon -- we will be saved from the endless living death that would otherwise be the consequences of our sin (Rom. 3:25). The usual shorthand name for those consequences is 'burning in Hell.' That is primarily what we are saved from when the Jesus story is read through the metaphor of atoning. Notice that this 'salvation' is something future. It will happen when Jesus returns and the final judgment takes place.

Two things have to be in place for 'atoning' to work not only to illumine how God goes about saving us according to the Gospel's stories, but also to illumine those stories for us with power. One is that we who hear the Jesus stories need already to have a clear and lively sense of ourselves as sinners who most certainly will undergo the consequences of our sin at Judgment Day. To put it mildly, it is not obvious that in our culture such a clear and lively sense of deep sinfulness is widespread. We know we are all well-meaning folk, good enough in our own ways, and God will forgive us because that is what God does. Under those circumstances proclaimers of the Gospel's good news

are tempted first to lay on thick the bad news that we are sinners: judgment before Gospel. And the people quit listening.

The second thing that needs to be in place for the metaphor of ‘atoning’ to illumine the Gospels’ stories of how God goes about saving us in Jesus Christ is that we need to be knowledgeable about and comfortable with the practices and symbol system of Ancient Israel’s liturgical life. Christians in the earliest centuries often were. Let’s be honest: most of us aren’t. The relevant texts in Deuteronomy and Leviticus rarely if ever surface in the lectionary readings on which preaching is based or in Christian education discussions. That leaves the force of the metaphor pretty much in the dark.

In a moment I want to suggest that this metaphor has strengths that need to be recovered. When we reflect on what is going on in the Gospels’ stories we need the help of this metaphor in conjunction with the other two metaphors I’ll discuss. However, when ‘atoning’ is the only or the dominant metaphor by whose help the Gospels are understood it is dangerous. Let me suggest four dangers.

‘Atoning by a sacrificial offering’ is dangerously misleading if it is taken to mean that in his crucifixion Jesus takes on the punishment that an enraged God would otherwise take out on us. It is deeply misleading if it suggests that Jesus’ death is what it takes to propitiate God, to make amends to God whom we have offended so that God will then be pacified and begin loving us. The whole point of the metaphor is that, far from needing to be placated, God in love freely takes the initiative to exchange places with us in face of the inevitable consequences of our faithlessness to God.

The metaphor is also dangerous for a related reason. When it is taken to mean that Jesus’ crucifixion is the way God’s righteous anger is placated so that God can then turn

to loving us, it invites the view that God's justice is more basic to God than love is. Some Reformed theologians, I fear, have argued this way: God cannot be unjust, so the guilt of humankind cannot be ignored. They will be punished. If it is also true that God is merciful to some on the basis of Jesus' self-sacrifice, they are an exception to the demands of God's justice. That's what mercy is: an exception to the rule of justice. God may be merciful to some, but God would not be just if God declared a general amnesty covering all sinners. It seems to me that the Gospels' stories about God's way of freely loving us requires a rethinking of what 'justice' means in relation to 'mercy,' rather than assuming we already know what it would be for God to be just before we learn anything about God's mercy ('restorative justice?').

The metaphor of 'atoning' taken alone is also misleading so far as it tends to illumine what is going on in the Jesus stories by focusing almost exclusively on the crucifixion. The emphasis of the metaphor of atoning risks shifting focus from the end to which the story moves to the means-to-that-end, from 'at-onement' to the 'sacrificial gift.' Read this way Jesus ministry tends to look like the backstory of the conflict that generates his crucifixion, and his resurrection looks like an unpredictable happy ending in which God affirms that Jesus' crucifixion really is what saves us. But the Gospels' stories about Jesus seem to make the entire story of ministry, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection as a whole to be how God goes about relating to us to save us.

Finally, this metaphor can be deeply misleading about the upshot of the Gospels' stories because it tends to focus on salvation as something that happens to individuals. Period. It tends to suggest that what is at stake is the 'salvation of our own souls,' and that Jesus' death saves each of us from the consequences of our own sins. However, we

are deeply inter-dependent creatures who are profoundly shaped by our shared social and cultural life, with the result that none of us can be saved in isolation from others. As a metaphor for salvation, atoning tends not to bring that out.

Metaphoric use of ‘atoning’ does, however, underscore some things about the Gospels’ stories that the other metaphors may not. I’ll mention two in addition to its stress on God’s prevenience. Both should be prominent in any Reformed understanding of salvation. One is its stress on God’s holiness. The force of the image of sacrificial offering depends on a deep sense of the awesome holiness of God. We are far more comfortable cultivating feelings of intimacy with God and with Jesus as our best friend. That is a sign of what theologian William Placher has called out culture’s ‘Domestication of Transcendence.’ When we fail to take seriously the dimensions of God’s holiness we lose all perspective on our own complacent complicity in the deep distortions of our common life. ‘Atone’ as metaphor for God’s saving us forefronts the holiness of the atoning God.

A second strength of ‘atoning’ as a metaphor for salvation is its stress that having one’s offences against God ‘atoned’ is deeply costly. Its cost to God is writ all over the crucifixion. Its cost to each of us is similarly deep. If we indeed live trusting that in his life and death Jesus atones for our offences before God, then it will lead to transformations of our lives. We will begin to undergo being ‘born again’ into life whose desires, loves and energies are disciplined and ordered in new ways. The traditional name for such transformation is ‘sanctification.’ It is a huge theme in the Reformed Tradition. It is the basis of the Reformed Tradition’s great stress on the discipline of the life of faith.

It means the death of older ways of being ourselves. It will cost us our lives as we have known them.

Salvation as Reconciling

Turn now to a second metaphor that Reformed understandings of salvation rely on to help describe what is going on in the Gospels' stories about Jesus: Salvation as reconciling. One example of how churches in the Reformed Tradition seek not only to be reformed but also to be always reforming is a shift in emphasis in some Reformed affirmations about salvation from primary reliance on the metaphor of atoning to the metaphor of reconciling as the central guide to what is going on in the Gospels' Jesus stories. Up into the 20th century most Reformed Churches tended to continue to privilege the metaphor of atoning. However, the UPUSA's 'Confession of 1967 and the PC(USA)'s 'A Brief Statement of Faith' of 1983 both shifted the emphasis in their affirmations about salvation to the metaphor of reconciling. Both the Confession and the Brief Statement are included in the PC(USA) Book of Confessions, along with nine others, as 'authentic and reliable expositions of what Scripture leads us to believe and do' (as ordained ministers, elders and deacons are required to declare; xxv). One by one each may be 'authentic and reliable' as far as it goes in its particular historical context, but sometimes in certain respects seriously one-sided.

Read through the metaphor of reconciling, what's going on in the Gospels' stories of Jesus is something like this: In the person of Jesus of Nazareth, in and through the entire movement of his ministry, growing conflicts with political and religious authorities,

arrest, suffering, crucifixion, and resurrection, God Godself comes among us as one of us, sharing with us the full consequences of our estrangement from God in order to reconcile us to God. It is the story of God's Incarnation understood as a story of God entering into solidarity with us so that we are saved by being reconciled to God. When we have twisted our relationship with God, or tried to put ourselves entirely outside of it, God comes into solidarity with us precisely in our twisted relationship with God, even in our effort to get completely out of the relationship. It is not the crucifixion alone that is 'saving.' It is the entire movement of Jesus' Incarnate life, including his crucifixion of course, but equally his way of living with the socially outcast and marginalized and with socially hated oppressors, and his resurrection. Here God's provenience is stressed again: God takes the initiative to woo estranged children back to God by living among them as one of them sharing their common lot.

Behind this lies a profoundly relational view of the human condition. Who each of us is, i.e. our identity, is constituted by the ways we relate to others, to ourselves, and to God. When those relations are strained, frayed, twisted, or broken both our personal identities and our shared social and cultural identities are deeply distorted. The ultimate outcome of those distortions is a living death.

Looked at through this metaphor, what we need to be saved from is not just the ultimate consequences of our estrangements, but our distorted relationships themselves. The Gospels' stories about how God goes about relating to us in and through Jesus' life are stories of how God takes the initiative to draw us to be reconciled to God, one another, and ourselves by living among us by the power of the Spirit a truly reconciled

life. We are not only 'saved' from condemnation in a future Judgment Day; we begin to be saved from the effects of our estrangements here and now.

The metaphor of salvation as reconciling does not exclude or contradict the metaphor of salvation as atoning. It puts atoning in a broader context that helps ward off some of its inadequacies. After all, both reconciling and atoning lead to at-one-ment. The larger context is the entire story of Jesus' entire life as the life of Incarnation, God entering into solidarity with us estranged creatures. That includes Jesus entering into solidarity with us by taking on the utmost consequence of our estrangement from God in his crucifixion: God Godself sharing from our side our estrangement from God. In that way God shows with shocking power not just that God loves us while we are yet sinners, but how far God will go in identifying with us in love. By making vivid the specific character of God's love the Incarnation provides the context within which we can begin to get a sense of the character of God's justice. It's not that Jesus' suffering placates God's anger by righting the balance of the scales of justice. Rather, sharing in the deepest suffering our self-estrangement creates for us enacts God's way of loving us by being one with us. It is, we might say, God saving us by investing God's own self in a creation distorted by its estrangements. It isn't God who needs to be reconciled to us; it's we who need to be reconciled to God. To have that begin is to begin to be saved. And the Gospel stories of Jesus say it did indeed begin through the whole movement of Jesus' Incarnate life.

So the Jesus story as both a story of reconciling and a story of atonement is the story describing how God goes about relating to us to save us. But salvation as reconciling does lead to a shift in the connotations of salvation as atoning. The metaphor of atoning has tended to lead to a picture of our relation to God as a bookkeeping arrangement: Dire

consequences will come if at the end of history our demerits outweigh our merits – unless Jesus’ atoning death ‘covers’ our demerits. It tends to picture our relation with God as a relatively impersonal accounting transaction. The metaphor of reconciling, on the other hand, tends to lead to a more inter-personal picture of our relation with God as an interaction of God giving and we receiving gifts of love and welcome, on the model of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

Reading the Gospels’ stories about Jesus through the metaphor of reconciling shifts our understanding of salvation in a second way. The metaphor of atoning tends to lead to an individualistic focus on our interiorities: I have my soul saved, and you have your soul saved. But when the Jesus stories are read through the metaphor of reconciling it is the entire common shared context of our lives that is ‘reconciled,’ i.e., saved. ‘God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself.’ This theme has been especially, perhaps uniquely, prominent in Reformed understanding of salvation, expressed in the idea of Covenant. Entering into solidarity with us in the life of Jesus God creates in his death and his life a new Covenant with us who live as God’s enemies. It is a Covenant we cannot break. It is in fact the context in which we all actually live: A reconciled world. We are called to figure out how to live appropriately in that context, loving our enemies. We may choose to live at cross-grain to that reality. That will frustrate and distort our lives, but it won’t change the fact.

Salvation as Redeeming

Understood in terms of the metaphor of reconciling, the Gospels’ stories of Jesus’ Incarnate life are driven by a conflict between Jesus and political and religious authorities

that increases throughout his life and culminates in his death. That life and death is simply the strange way God goes about reconciling us to God by entering into solidarity with us in the full consequences to us of our estrangement from God. However, as I noted at the beginning, the same stories are driven at a second cosmic level by a conflict between God and trans-human demonic forces, which Paul calls the ‘powers and principalities’. This level of the Gospels’ stories comes into focus when the stories are understood through the metaphor of ‘redeeming.’

To redeem a pawned wristwatch is to pay back the loan for which it is collateral. To redeem a slave is to buy her freedom. To redeem some one is to liberate them. The metaphor of redeeming brings into focus the fact that the second level of conflict that keeps the Gospels’ stories moving is a conflict through which God is beginning to fulfill a long-standing promise to draw creation to a glorious transformation in which creation is liberated from oppressive distortions. The end of the conflict will mean the eschaton, the end of creation’s distortion and oppression by demonic forces and creation’s liberation into a ‘new creation.’ The conflict takes place throughout Jesus’ ministry, as symbolized by his casting out evil spirits. It comes to a climax in Jesus’ crucifixion by which the supra-personal forces of evil attempt to exterminate the one in whom God is in solidarity with us. And it is resolved in Jesus’ resurrection understood as God’s final and decisive victory over the powers and principalities.

Read this way, the Gospels’ stories of Jesus tell of how God goes about ‘saving’ creation -- and us with it -- from structures that organize our lived worlds, our social, cultural, economic and political worlds, and from dynamics that run them – structures and dynamics that bind creatures communal and personal lives in deeply distorting ways.

For much of the 19th and 20th centuries that sort of talk sounded mythological and superstitious. In church we marginalized it. However in the last half-century Feminist, Black, Latina/Latino, and Queer theologies have pointed out that the New Testament rhetoric of super-personal, trans-individual demonic ‘powers’ actually fits pretty well the experience of marginalized people. The ‘powers’ are social, cultural, political and economic arrangements of power that everyone takes for granted as ‘just the way it is,’ as though God had created them even though they structure and move our lived worlds in unjust and oppressive ways. They also pointed out that the upshot of this second level of conflict in the Gospels’ stories is that in Jesus Christ God has in fact already begun to overcome those powers, to redeem and liberate creation.

Begun, but only begun. The Gospels’ stories, read in the light of the metaphor of redeeming, culminate in Jesus’ resurrection as the beginning of God’s process of liberating and transforming creation. In Jesus’ resurrection God has actually begun to keep God’s promise to liberate and transform an oppressed and distorted creation. It has, we may say, been inaugurated. But it is not yet fully actualized. And we live in the middle.

As was the case with the metaphor of reconciling, so too when New Testament stories about Jesus are understood through the metaphor of redeeming they are read as stories about the common context of our lives: It is a world bound by distorting supra-individual forces in which God has already begun to actualize God’s long-standing promise of an ultimate liberation and transformation of creation. The context of our lives is a world in which a revolution is going on. So Jesus’ resurrection is the ground of our hope that what God has actually begun God will finally actualize. Jesus’ resurrection is also the ground

of our calling to celebrate those places and times where we find signs of God's liberating redeeming in the lives of many kinds of communities, and our calling to invest our energies and resources in programs and movements that we discern may lead to more manifestations of God's liberating redeeming. God has already taken the initiative and is always prevenient in saving creation by redeeming it from oppression. Our calling is to follow that lead, at whatever distance, looking for signs of God's redeeming presence.

The metaphor of redeeming no more excludes the metaphor of reconciling, than the metaphor of reconciling excludes the metaphor of atoning as a lens through which to understand salvation. However, 'redeeming' does have this important difference from 'reconciling': 'Reconciling' is an inter-active, inter-personal relationship. It is intensely subjective. The parties involved are highly conscious of what is going on and why it is going on. 'Redeeming,' on the other hand is often a quite impersonal relation. Our consciousness of needing to be redeemed, of needing to be liberated from oppressive powers, may be intense. But the processes through which the liberation comes about often take place beyond our range of awareness. Redeeming processes can be brought about by agents who do not know us and whom we do not know. They are changes in various kinds of social dynamics and structures that are themselves inherently impersonal. Ours is a culture that highly values and is very comfortable with the reality of 'personal' relations and psychological dynamics. It tends to fear and devalue as 'dehumanizing' relations with impersonal social and cultural dynamics. But impersonal social and cultural dynamics are part of God's good creation too. And they are absolutely necessary aspects of our own lives as communities and individual persons. The metaphor of redeeming is important because it brings into focus this more 'impersonal' dimension

of what God is doing and how God goes about doing it when God sets out to save us, as witnessed in New Testament stories about Jesus.

Throughout its history the Reformed Tradition has repeatedly emphasized the importance of Christian responsible social action. And its record has been terribly ambiguous. It has provided strong theological justification for the institution of chattel slavery in this country and Apartheid in South Africa. It has also provided strong justification for resistance to Nazi policies regarding both the German church and German Jews and strong theological arguments against Apartheid. I can only speculate here, but I wonder whether part of the reason for that ambiguity has been that Reformed interpretation of the Gospels' stories of how God goes about saving us in the person of Jesus was for so long governed by the metaphor of atonement with all of its individualistic connotations. At any rate, we may hope that an understanding of salvation through the metaphors of reconciling and redeeming may yield less ambiguous guidance for social action because of their stress on the theme that salvation is also a matter of God placing us in new social and public contexts.

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In summary: A Reformed interpretation of 'salvation' is based on the conviction that the New Testament's various stories of Jesus of Nazareth faithfully tell of the concrete, particular, and very odd, way in which God goes about relating to us to 'save' us. What we say about salvation will be running commentary on what is going on in those stories.

I've tried to suggest that the New Testament itself provides three major metaphors for salvation that bring out important strands in what is going on in the Gospels' Jesus stories: atoning, reconciling, and redeeming. Atoning focuses attention on the unrighteousness and burden of guilt for which each of us is accountable. It underscores that we are saved from our self-exclusion from God's holy presence by God taking on Godself the consequences to us of our sin in the crucifixion of Jesus. That 'saving' happens in the future at the Last Judgment. Reconciling focuses attention on the Incarnation itself as God's way of reconciling us to God by entering into an interpersonal relation of solidarity with us in the most extreme consequences of our estrangements from each other, ourselves, and God. Reconciling saves us from estrangement and its consequences beginning here and now, relocating us in a new Covenant, a new shared social context of reconciled enemies. Redeeming focuses attention on the Resurrection of Jesus as God's decisive victory over powers that oppress and distort creation. We are being saved as we are liberated from oppression and distortion by those powers. Jesus' resurrection is the inauguration of God fulfilling a promise to bring creation into a gloriously transformed new creation; but it is not yet fully actualized. It relocates us into a shared public context of constantly changing impersonal social and cultural structures and dynamics defined by God's ongoing relating to fully actualize the promise of a new creation.

And I've suggested that those three metaphors guide a reading of the Gospel's stories about Jesus that bears several marks of theology in the Reformed Tradition. They require a strong stress on God's initiative or 'prevenience' at every moment in God's relating to us to save us. They require a strong stress on God's holiness and our unrighteousness.

They require a strong stress on human accountability for their own unholiness and estrangements. Together they require a balance between affirmation of salvation as a future event and salvation as going on here and now. They require emphasis on ways in which undergoing salvation, while free and given by God in love, will cost you your life. They require stress on the theme that God relating to save us not only saves our individual innermost souls but also relocates us into a new social and public context marked by both inter-personal reconciling and ongoing resistance to impersonal oppressive powers.

Each of these metaphors has its limitations. When relied on in isolation they can yield misleading and even dangerous interpretations of the Gospel's stories of God relating in the person of Jesus to save us. What I'm urging is that relied on together as a kind of interpretive network they do help keep in focus and in balance the complex of strands that make up those Gospel stories.