

THE CONCEPT OF SALVATION IN ROMANS
AS A RESPONSE TO POSTMODERN PLURALISM

NBTS
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OKECHUKWU NZENWA OKORIE
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ABSTRACT

In the book of Romans Paul argues that truth and salvation are completely dependent on understanding God's revelation of the true nature of reality. On the other hand, postmodern pluralism denies the existence of absolute truth and claims that the salvific claims of all the major world religions are equally valid. This study takes a critical look at the tension caused by these two differing points of view. This involves an investigation of the concept of salvation in postmodern pluralism and a thematic analysis of the concept of salvation in the Epistle to the Romans. The results of the analysis of Romans are used to respond to the challenge posed by postmodern pluralism to the Christian witness. This study employed the library research method.

The understanding gained through this study will help in the defense of the exclusivity of the gospel in a postmodern pluralistic world. It also re-affirms a biblical basis for missions and provides a framework for meaningful inter-faith dialogue.

This study discovered that Paul's thesis in Romans shows that the claims of postmodern pluralism are deficient in three major areas: the problem of sin, the concept of truth, and the perception of the centrality of Christ in the conception of salvation.

The implications of these findings are apparent. Firstly, they imply that Paul's first century response to pluralism is still relevant today thereby re-affirming the timeless value of the biblical revelation. Secondly, the results of this study show that there are sufficient grounds to accept God's gracious gift of salvation through Christ Jesus as real, efficacious and exclusive. Finally, this study has shown that the grounds for the postmodern pluralist challenge to the exclusivity of the Christian witness are shaky indeed.

Scriptures are full of exclusive statements about God's salvation. Salvation is full and free. Yet it comes only through God's uniquely ordained means, Jesus Christ.

Postmodern pluralism asserts that all the major religions are in truth answering the same questions. Therefore, they all share a common purpose. This means that the differences that exist between them are differences in method only. This also means that all religions are salvific in nature, saving man from "self-centredness" to Absolute-centredness. This means that mankind is being saved from natural selfishness to a focus on some nebulous Other. There is, therefore, no justification for exclusive salvific claims by any religion. This assertion hints at a meta-narrative, the very thing that postmodern pluralism rejects. A careful consideration of the religions will show that not all the religions are answering the same questions. Therefore, they cannot share a common purpose, and neither can they be all equally salvific.

Paul, the author of the letter to the Romans was a man uniquely suited to the task of responding to the pluralistic challenge of his day. His background suggests that he was at home in the porches and courts of philosophy. He understood thoroughly the arguments that raged all around him. Yet he insists in Romans that salvation is from God alone. He highlights the fact that the need for this salvation is as a result of God's wrath upon all those who by their lives 'suppress the truth' about God. He recognizes the fact that man is powerless to save himself. He proclaims God's gracious provision for salvation to all who accept his offer. Paul bears witness to Jesus Christ, the unique Saviour of the world; the new Adam who ushers in the new covenant between God and his fallen creation. Paul is emphatic that salvation is through Christ alone. There is no other way. The exclusivity of his salvific claim cannot be mistaken.

5.2 CONCLUSION

The challenge of postmodern pluralism is very real. It is conveyed in many forms. Information technology grants it easy access into every community in our fast shrinking world.

It seeks to win by force of argument and suggestion the hearts and minds of a new generation of people. It preaches a new gospel. This gospel is appealing: meaning can be self-determined. Truth is relational not absolute. Everything is relative. Therefore, there is no right or wrong except as determined by an individual or community. Salvation is simply less focus on self and more emphasis on community. The paradox is obvious.

In confronting Christianity, the challenge of postmodern pluralism becomes a threat. Christianity is dismissed as outmoded and intolerant, a relic of a bygone era. The need and purpose of the Christian witness is undermined. Missions and evangelism are discouraged. The doctrines of Incarnation, the Triune God, and Atonement are written off as undeserving of serious consideration. Not much would be left of the gospel if postmodernists had their way.

God inspired Paul to confront a pluralistic society two thousand years ago with a message that still rings true today. Truth and meaning are anchored in the knowledge of God. This truth has outlasted the ideas and philosophies of men. God's narrative is the true meta-narrative. This meta-narrative gives the best possible answer to the human problem. The human problem is sin. This sin includes every form of rebellion against the knowledge of God. Postmodern pluralism is rebellion against the knowledge of God. Paul also stresses the fact that the human problem makes it impossible for salvation to originate in mankind. God is salvation. In Jesus Christ God shows his loving-kindness as he takes upon himself the task of redeeming mankind from his own just wrath. This is unparalleled in any other religion. The very nature of God's saving act makes it exclusive. The pluralistic society of the first century took offense at this proclamation. However, this did not deter the witness of the early church. In two thousand years the gospel has been the best response to pluralism. It is still the best response to our postmodern world.

5.3 RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that evangelical Christianity must give careful consideration to the implications of inter-faith dialogue. The exclusivity of the gospel cannot be compromised. There is room for meaningful dialogue with others of different persuasion yet this dialogue cannot gloss over the differences in beliefs. Meaningful dialogue must include a respectful recognition of genuine differences.

Secondly, this study recommends that the concept of postmodern pluralism be taught in theological institutions in Africa. This will help ministers recognize the effects of postmodern pluralism in Africa. The insidious results of this new gospel can then be countered.

Finally, this study recommends that further study be done on this topic. This study is in no way a comprehensive consideration of all the salient issues that are part of this topic. Further study may touch on the fate of those who have not heard the gospel before they died, and the relation between universalism and the exclusivity of the gospel.