

No. 8926

REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON THEOLOGY

In Response to Resolution No. 8728,
"Concerning Salvation in Jesus Christ"

RECEIVED by the General Assembly. The General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), meeting in Indianapolis, Indiana, on July 28 to August 2, 1989, reaffirms our belief that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, and proclaims Him Lord and Savior of the world; and we acknowledge that no statement of faith can fully express the whole faith of the whole church. We offer the report as one resource to congregations, regions, general units, organizations, and institutions within the church for study and response. We urge ongoing dialogue and searching that we may grow in our understanding of the Lordship of Jesus Christ and in our freedom to embrace all who name Jesus Christ as Savior.

Preface

The words "Jesus is Savior" express a truth fundamental to the faith of the church. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) joins with the Christian community of all times and places in confessing that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth the saving love of God is made known. Resolution 8728 "Concerning Salvation in Jesus Christ" presents Disciples with a valuable opportunity to consider the meaning of its historic confession of faith for the life of the church in these days. The church is, among other things, a deliberative community in which Christians share their insights with one another. These insights are tested - confirmed, enriched, corrected - in the course of dialogue and deliberation, a process which contributes to the upbuilding of the church. In short, as a community of faith seeking understanding, the church engages in theology.

The following report is a theological statement written by the members of the church's Commission on Theology, which is intended to be helpful in determining what is and is not rightly meant when Christians confess that Jesus Christ is Savior. This proposal can no more than any other claim to be a full, definitive account of the topic. Here is an attempt made by Disciples "to account for the hope that is in us" (1 Peter 3:15).

In 1987 the General Assembly, meeting in Louisville, referred Resolution 8728 to the Commission on Theology with the request that the Commission submit a report to the General Board in the spring of 1989. The Commission devoted three meetings to discussion of the resolution (November 13-16, 1987, November 11-13, 1988 and January 28-29, 1989). Responses to the resolution from throughout the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) were collected and studied. Papers were prepared on the issue by six members of the Commission. In January of 1989, a summary of the Commission's work was shared with the Administrative Committee of the General Board. The final draft was subsequently sent to all congregations as well as to the persons holding leadership positions in the church.

The report that follows is in three parts: the first dealing with the church's need to confess its faith, the second with Scripture as source and measure of that confession, and the third with the center of the church's confession - the saving God who was in Christ and is ever present through the Holy Spirit.

I. The Church Confessing Its Faith

The church is a community that confesses faith in the Good News of God. It is a community called forth by the love of God made flesh in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; the church responds to this divine initiative with words and deeds that "confess" what it stands for, to whom it belongs. Christians confess their faith not because of external pressure but because of the inner joy, the thanksgiving for God's Good News, which leads us as a community to say "this we believe."

The ancient community of Israel, in which the church has its roots, felt this need to proclaim its faith. "Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut. 6:4). These words, still recited daily in synagogues and temples, are not intended to serve as a basis for judgment that divides the human family but to name the foundation of the community's life and to call for obedience to God.

The early church felt the need to confess its faith and did so through various affirmations recorded in Scripture, e.g., "Jesus is Lord" (1 Cor. 12:3) and "Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37). In a world filled with idols, in a world where humans repeatedly place themselves in bondage to limited realities, these simple statements are today - as they were for the early church - a way of confessing that God alone is the source of creation and redemption and that in Jesus Christ, Christians experience the living embodiment of divine grace.

Disciples, from our beginnings, have also felt the need to be a confessing community. Our movement has rejected the way historic "confessions" and "creeds" have, at times, been used to divide Christians into rival camps. But our founders were clear that the church must confess its faith. Their aim was to identify a biblical formula that expressed the faith of the apostles held common by all Christians. The one which has held special place among us is the confession of Peter recorded in Matthew

16:16: "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God." It is a confession of our very identity: we are disciples of Christ. It is a confession which calls us beyond individual beliefs and congregational preferences to the faith on which the whole church is built. It is a confession we repeat through symbolic acts each week as we hear the Word proclaimed and gather around the Lord's Table, giving thanks for the salvation offered by God and celebrating Christ's continuing presence in our midst.

Disciples today are aware, as we have always been, of the dangers of authoritarian power in the church which can unduly restrict the freedom of believers. Coercion violates the very nature of faith which is free response to grace. Beyond that, Disciples value the rich diversity of the church because we know that no individual, group or denomination has a complete grasp on the truth of God.

But Disciples today are also aware, as perhaps never before, of the dangers of fragmentation. The church can easily become narrow-minded, and misguided; and it is frequently lukewarm. Our freedom in Christ is not a license to believe and act as we individually see fit. It is a freedom for holiness, a freedom to grow in knowledge of the truth through mutual nurture in a loving community which constantly struggles to express its faith.

Thus, the concern, even anguish, of those who drafted and supported Resolution 8728 is understandable. The church must confess its faith boldly. The church must confess to itself and the world that its life is centered on God's revelation in Christ. At the same time, the concerns of those who found they could not support the whole of Resolution 8728 is also understandable. The church must confess its faith humbly, leaving final judgment in the hands of God. While centering its life on faith in Christ, the church must not insist that all its members interpret the biblical witness in the same way.

Part of the difficulty we face is that the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) lacks adequate means for speaking on such issues. How do Disciples teach and confess the faith with authority without being authoritarian? What is the role of our representative bodies, particularly the General Assembly, in articulating the faith by which we live? Are Assembly resolutions an adequate way of handling such matters? While such questions are not the focus of this document, the Commission on Theology is committed to addressing them in its future work. For now, we stress the importance of dealing with the issue of what and how we confess as a community of love. "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:35). The world will come to believe less by the "purity" of our confessions than by the visible love which binds us to one another, even when we disagree.

II. The Foundation of the Church's Confession

The biblical witness to God's revelation is the basic source of the church's confession and the standard by which this confession is measured. The Old and New Testaments are the primary witnesses to God's unique and authoritative revelation in Jesus Christ. The Bible is the Word God speaks to the church.

The Bible is always received in the church through interpretation of that Word. As the church interprets, it must always be careful to note the original contexts of the biblical witness and be slow to trust in isolated proof texts. Yet, the interpreters of the church must also report God's Word to the contemporary world in which it exists. The church in any age is tested by its faithful witness to God's action in Jesus Christ.

The rich diversity of Scripture, written by different authors in different settings, reminds us that the reality of God in our lives is beyond the ability of anyone or any community to express fully. Thus, as we study the biblical witness we find that the scripture presents the basic confession of faith in Christ in a variety of ways.

In some places, the New Testament seems to state that only through Jesus is salvation possible. For example, Acts 4:12 says: "There is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among people, by which we must be saved." As the context shows, the name is "the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth" (Acts 4:10).

Paul speaks of "salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 5:9), and says things such as the "word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God" (1 Cor 1:18). And in the Gospel of John, there is the affirmation that those who believe in Jesus are "not condemned," but those who do not believe are "condemned already," for they have "not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18). A similar theme is stated in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father, but by me."

Elsewhere the confession is expressed in other terms. For example, Paul says that the Gentiles who have not had a special revelation still are able to receive God's "eternal power and deity" (Rom. 1:20). Through Christ, God has created a whole new humanity: "As in Adam all shall die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22). Further, as one person's trespass led to condemnation for all people, so one person's act of righteousness leads to acquittal and life for all" (Rom. 5:18).

In Matthew, Mark, and Luke, salvation appears to depend more on conduct than confession of faith in Jesus. The parable of the Good Samaritan is introduced by the idea that eternal life will be granted those who observe the two great commandments (Luke 10:25-37). The lawyer who has made this correct observation then raises a question in regard to the meaning of the second commandment, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus responds with the parable which declares that one acts like a neighbor by showing mercy toward any who are in need, regardless of their race or religion. And more, the Samaritan was one outside of the accepted faith.

In Mark, when the rich young man claims to have kept all the commandments from his youth, Jesus tells him that he lacks one thing: "Sell what you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me" (Mark 10:21). Zachaeus, sharing a meal with Jesus, declares that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and pay back four-fold those he has defrauded. On the basis of this declaration, Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:8).

The vivid scene of Matthew 25:31-46 depicts the separation of the sheep from the goats. Those who will enter into the kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world are those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, and visited the sick and imprisoned. Actually the king, who seems to symbolize Jesus, asserts that these good deeds have been done to him. Those who are judged are amazed, totally unaware of the truth that doing good to the lowly is equivalent to doing good to Jesus. Those who fail to show mercy to the needy are surprised, too. They are like those who with self-conscious confession cry, "Lord, Lord," but fail to do what he taught - obedience to the will of God. (Luke 6:46; Matt. 7:21)

According to the biblical witness, the confession of faith in Christ is confession of God. For example, in Colossians Christ is presented as the image of God, the pre-existent being through whom all things were created. In him the fullness of God is embodied. Through him, the whole cosmos, everything in heaven and earth, is reconciled to God - a reconciliation accomplished through Christ's sacrifice on the Cross (Col. 1:15-20). Much the same message is found in Ephesians 1:3-22. And in Timothy, there is the assurance that through the one God and the one mediator (Christ Jesus), salvation is offered: "We have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe" (1 Tim. 4:10). In Christ, "the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all people" (Titus 2:11).

An even clearer confession of this faith in God is found in John 1:1-14, where we read that "in the beginning was the Word . . . ; all things were made through him And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus is the incarnation of the eternal Word of God, the agent of creation and redemption in all times and places.

The hymn of Philippians 2:6-11 ends on the triumphant note of the universal recognition of Christ: "At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." This triumph is itself transcended in the final victory of God. After God subjects all things to Christ, then Christ will be subjected to God, so that "God will be all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28).

One of the strongest and most important passages in the New Testament dealing with salvation is found in Romans 11:26-36. Paul asserts that "all Israel will be saved" (11:26). In regard to election, these Jews "are beloved for the sake of their forefathers" (11:28). The "gifts and call of God are irrevocable" (11:29), and God has consigned all people "to disobedience, that God may have mercy upon all." Paul affirms that salvation belongs to the ultimate triumph of God.

There are yet many other New Testament references to salvation. We should see that the common element under all of the New Testament expressions of faith about salvation is that God is the author of salvation. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the pivotal disclosure and realization of God's redeeming and saving action of gracious love on behalf of a sinful humanity.

III. A Theological Statement on the Church's Confession

The conviction that God is the author of salvation is the fundamental truth of the words "Jesus is Savior." This confession is familiar to Disciples from the New Testament, the Good Confession made in the local church, and the Preamble to The Design of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). To affirm this truth by confessing this faith is not merely to recite these words. Its meaning must be discerned, and then reexpressed, in all that the faithful say and in all that they do.

The diverse reference to Jesus Christ and the act of salvation found in the New Testament are testimonies to the Gospel, God's Word of Good News for the world. For this reason, all of them are properly understood to be first and finally statements about God. Though they, like every statement of faith, may speak in many ways of many matters, they direct those who hear or read them to give heed to the Word of God. They confront us with the God of a radically free promise and a total claim upon us, and call us to respond to God's initiative toward the world.

Thus to confess, in accord with the apostolic witness, that Jesus Christ is "Savior" is to speak—because of the Gospel—not only of who Jesus is, but who God is, and who we are in relation to God. The confession declares this: God reveals in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth that the very being of God is gracious love for all creation. Who is God? The God of Israel, maker of heaven and earth, whose very being is gracious love. Who are we? Those who have been brought to understand themselves, and all creation, to be utterly reliant upon the gracious love of God. Who is Jesus Christ? The one through whom, by God's grace, we have been brought to this understanding.

Who Is God?

For Christians, the Gospel in Jesus Christ is decisive for understanding the reality and will of God. The revelation of God in Jesus Christ for the benefit of the world cannot be fully understood in isolation from the history of Israel and the testimony of the Old Testament. The story of Israel and the Christ story are alike God-centered, and the saving power of which these stories speak is that of the God whom Jesus called "Abba," the God of Israel, creator and savior of the world. Like the law, Jesus Christ is a gift of God.

At the heart of the Christian life is the conviction that by this gift the very being of God is disclosed as gracious love. Christians cannot think about God, worship God, or seek to obey God as though God were something other or different than the love revealed in Jesus Christ. Thus we praise the name of Jesus, which means "God saves."

Implied here is the view that God is not remote or detached from the human scene, but fully present and active in the world on behalf of humanity and indeed for the whole of creation. The common sense context of salvation is that something or someone is retrieved from a desperate situation. Salvation is the rescue, the overcoming, or the healing of this lost situation. In the Christian context the use of the word is controlled by the sense of the reality of God and hence is used to describe the human situation in light of that reality. God's action in Jesus Christ is a mission on behalf of all who are in need of rescue from sin, misery, evil, and distress.

Through God's action in Jesus Christ, we see God's very being and learn that the love of God is grace, sheer and sure. Sheer, in that it is not due to any claim that humans make upon God from who God is. Sure, in that there is nothing else or other, in God or in creation, to defeat this love. Sin, misery, and catastrophe cannot be the final word about the world and those who inhabit it. It is God, and none other, who speaks the final Word on what human life, and the entire creation, really amount to. God is the Alpha and Omega, the ultimate judge of the reality and meaning of creation and human life and God has revealed God's self as gracious, powerful, and redeeming love.

Who Are We?

The question of who we humans are, viewed in light of who God is, is at the same time the question of salvation. The Gospel announces that God is loving and merciful. Humans do not need to live under the self-destructive burden of sin; we are loved despite our sin. This news is at the same time a call to human beings to accept that this reality determines our own identity before God. This acceptance is called faith. Thus the Gospel confronts humanity with the alternative between living by faith or living by sin, even though living by sin has no ultimate standing before God. This alternative is serious, and it has profound implications for and applications to human life.

To say "yes" to the Gospel is to enter into newness of life. By the power of the Spirit, the weight of sin is lifted, alienation from God and the neighbor overcome, the sting of death removed. Freedom is given to those held captive to the principalities and powers of this world, whose claims to control human destiny are shown to be illusory. The "old life" of arrogance, confusion, indifference, or despair gives way to a "new life" faith, hope, and love. This new life is filled with a joy derived not from the ebb and flow of history but from the mercy of the eternal God.

To say "yes" to the Gospel is also to enter a life of obedience, striving - with aid of God's grace - to speak and act in accord with God's loving purpose for the world. Christians are to witness to the Gospel to the whole world. This witness takes many forms. It is worship. It is evangelism, that is, an open invitation to know and to share in the life of faith. It is caring, acts of private and public service on behalf of the well-being of others both near and far. It is opposition to injustice and every evil. In short, it is a life patterned upon the unfailing love of God disclosed in Jesus Christ. Precisely for this reason the New Testament often indicates that the Gospel is a narrow way, a scandal and a folly, that only few will risk.

Because life in faith brings such benefit and life in sin such misery, Christians are keenly aware that one's response to the Gospel is a matter of great consequence. We earnestly desire to be faithful witnesses to God's gracious love for the world, and we earnestly desire our witness to be the means by which this love may be known, and enjoyed, by all.

Yet many ignore the gospel. Some take offense at it. Many will never hear it because the church expresses it in ways that do not seem to be words and deeds of unfailing love, or open invitations to share, or signs of caring, but implausible, insensitive, or perhaps even self-serving and arrogant claims of a given social group or culture. As good as the news of the gospel is, many will be left just where they have been all along, and the world remains much as it was.

At stake in the acceptance or rejection of the call of the Gospel is not merely deciding to say the words "Jesus Christ is Savior" and to enroll as a member of a local congregation. Human beings are by our own actions involved in sin and therefore alienated from the reality of God. We resist acknowledging that it is God, and not we or someone or something other than God, who gives meaning and direction to life. We do not live as though we have a God who is our Creator and Savior. The Gospel is news of God's gracious love. Yet real human lives lived out in history fail to experience the benefits of faith's joyful response to God. This is dismaying, and not lightly to be dismissed. How is the church to interpret, and respond to, this fact?

One appropriate response on the part of the church is a readiness to reexamine the authenticity and effectiveness of its own witness. Reexamination alone, however, does not make the question go away, and the church's response must be made in light of careful theological consideration. Here there is a tension in the Christian tradition.

One line of interpretation, appealing to certain biblical precedents, takes the view that God's judgment falls on those who condemn themselves to sin and alienation. This is often spoken in terms of divine reward and divine punishment based on human merits and human demerits. Because of sin, human beings deserve punishment; if we were free of sin, or at least sufficiently free of it to decide to change our ways, we would deserve reward. Thus it is said that those who accept Christ merit salvation and those who do not merit damnation.

This view, prominent as it has been in the church, is countered by another line in interpretation, no less significant in the tradition. The New Testament abounds in images showing that God responds to the human situation not in terms of reward and punishment, but in terms of unmerited mercy and boundless love. In Jesus Christ God acts toward sinful humans in such a way that our sin is not given final power to determine our ultimate destiny. Refusing to hold our sin against us, God breaks the logic of reward and punishment, merit and demerit, by acting in sheer grace.

Various efforts have been made in the history of the church to resolve the tensions between these lines of interpretation, the one speaking of reward and punishment and the other, of grace. The task is exceedingly complex. If, however, the church takes as its point of departure God's self-revelation of mercy, grace, and love in Jesus Christ, it will be led to note that every reference to reward and punishment must be qualified by the assurance that the gracious love of God is unfailing and unsurpassable. The Gospel is good news because it discloses that God's favor does not depend on human efforts to win that favor. It is God's free gift.

It is appropriate, then, to make a distinction between the power unto salvation experienced and enjoyed in the course of the earthly life of each individual and the salvation which is God's ultimate judgment upon that individual. Christians know of no other way to enjoy the power unto salvation which we have experienced except through the means by which God has provided in Jesus Christ. But precisely because of what we have received in Jesus Christ, we know that the means by which God's purpose for creation will be accomplished are limited only by the unlimited love which is God's very being. This distinction has important implications for the church's understanding of salvation.

The first is that though the church experiences resistance to the good news as real, neither that experience nor that resistance can be said to be ultimate. The church is grounded in the confident faith that it is God who renders ultimate judgment on human life and destiny. Nothing can separate humanity from the final reality of God's love. Important as it is for an individual to live with a self-conscious awareness of God's love as shown in Jesus Christ, that awareness itself forbids the church to think that the course of an individual's life is the final meaning and reality of that life. Not the church, but God, decides who shall be saved. Because of the Gospel, the church affirms with confidence that the God who decides is the God who grants unmerited mercy to sinners.

The second point is that because God is who God is in Jesus Christ, Christians have reason to trust that, by God's mercy, no human being is ultimately rejected and nullified by God. This is not to say that how life is lived is unimportant. The change (*metanoia*) or failure to change from a life lived as though one were unaware of or resistant to the love of God, and hence as though one were "lost," to a life lived in faithful reliance upon God's love, that is, as one which experiences the power unto salvation, is of tremendous consequence. It affects not only the life of the individual but through that life, the condition of others on planet earth. Yet Christians cannot say that the consequence of this change is ultimate, for we know that God is merciful to sinful humans.

Who is Jesus Christ?

It should now be clear that Christians cannot rightly speak of who God is and who we are without speaking at the same time of who Jesus Christ is. We believe that Jesus Christ is the self-revelation, the very action and being, of God. From this self-revelation of God we have been led to an awareness of God's all-inclusive love. We call ourselves Christians because to confess Jesus Christ is central to the life of faith.

Christians have every reason to know of God's all-inclusive love and to thank God for unmerited grace. We have not been, and are not now, holy ones who can boast that we are without sin. It took nothing less than God's action in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth to lead us to accept the fact that the gracious love of God, and not we or someone or something else, is the final word on our lives, the lives of others, and the whole creation. Even so, the pull of sin on us is such that we must engage in constant repentance, rely on the power of the Holy Spirit, and trust our ultimate destiny to God's mercy. We do not indeed we would not and could not—beg forgiveness, receive the power of the Spirit, or trust to God's mercy except for the grace of God in Jesus Christ. We are like the last workers in the vineyard who have received far more than human judgment, even their own, would say we deserved. No one was or is in greater need of God's saving power than we. Thus we confess that Jesus is God's Christ, the saving power of God, Savior of the world.

The experience of saving power which leads Christians to confess our faith comes as a gift of God, and the love of God which gives rise to that experience is the gift of God's very being. So it is that our confession is, properly understood, a joyful and compassionate witness to that gift.

This means that the gift must not be thought of or turned into something that is to be earned. The church is called to witness to the Gospel without shame or hesitation. But it cannot and must not make its witness in such a way that it turns God's gift into a prerequisite for the receipt of the gift. Confessing that Jesus Christ is Savior is not a test which one must pass before God will show merciful love but a means which God has provided so that the experience of that love can be known and enjoyed by all.

It also means that the witness of the church must be free of every trait of self-righteousness. Throughout the Scriptures are found two prominent themes in the witness to God made by the people of Israel and the church. The one, which may be called the prophetic, is a repeated reminder that God is the God of all, not only of this particular community. The other is a repeated reassurance that God is indeed the savior of this particular community.

Each theme has its proper function, depending on the context. In those moments when the community lacks rightful concern for the well-being of others, the prophetic theme is a word which reorders its life in light of God's love for all. In those moments when the community feels overwhelmed by the powers of evil, the theme of reassurance is a word of comfort and hope. When these two themes are split apart, two equally bad results occur. The prophetic theme, apart from the theme of reassurance, says to the community that God loves everybody else, but not you. The theme of reassurance, without the prophetic, says to the community that God loves you and nobody else. In the one case, the community becomes not pluralistic but tribalistic; in the other, not loyal but idolatrous. Taken together and rightly understood, the two themes signal that to confess that Jesus is Savior is to confess that God does indeed care for the community of faith, and for all others in the world as well.

In confessing its faith that God's salvation comes in Jesus Christ, the church speaks out of humility, gratitude, and genuine compassion for others. It claims nothing for itself, and all for God. This is a confession to be made by a community of people who identify themselves with the lowly, the oppressed, and outcasts, and the "lost" of the world, who join in and indeed initiate action in keeping with God's will for a world of freedom, justice, reconciliation, and peace, a people who know from their own encounter with God's love in Jesus Christ that there is Good News for all.

This encounter has at times led Christians to confess not only that Jesus Christ is Savior, but the "only" Savior of the world. That added word may carry a number of meanings, some legitimate and apt; others, misleading and even false. The church is well-advised to consider when this form of its confession does and does not properly express the call of the Gospel and a sense of humble confidence in its validity. Several meanings of the word "only" deserve careful evaluation.

1. The word "only" may be used simply to make the claim that "only" those who do some good work can be saved and that those who fail to do this good work cannot be. No matter how the good work may be defined, whether it be the good work of believing or that of moral acting, this is a form of self-righteousness which is inappropriate to the Gospel. It turns the gifts of God into preconditions apart from which God is not free to be gracious. It is not up to Christians to make such decisions for God. We are called to be faithful witnesses to God's gracious love for the world, exhibiting in all that we say and do something of the power unto salvation in Jesus Christ, which is God's Good News for all peoples.
2. When Israel is said to be God's only love, the statements are made in the service of reminding Israel of God's commandment that justice be done to each and all of those whom God loves. That is, the people of Israel are singled out for service and/or called into judgment. "You only have I known of all the families of the earth; therefore, I will punish you for all your iniquities" (Amos 3:2). Here, God's gracious election of Israel is referred to in order to recall the community to the way in which God wishes it to walk. Obviously, it would be proper for Christians to refer to Jesus Christ as the "only savior" in this sense, as the one through whom God's love for all has been disclosed to us and through whom we are called to respond with love for God and works of love for the neighbor.
3. Sometimes, and especially in confessional statements such as those in the Bible and elsewhere, the word "only" is best understood as an expression of doxology or praise. Here the community of faith is in ecstasy with thanksgiving for the overwhelming, awesome character of God's love disclosed in Jesus Christ, and responds appropriately by saying no one else elicits such praise. Doxology expresses a powerful reality. It is not merely poetic license. But neither is it a definition which curtails the freedom of God to be gracious.
4. Since statements confessing Christ are also statements about God, "only" may function to make the claim that the God whose very being is disclosed in Jesus Christ is the only God there is. The one who in Jesus Christ saves us is the only God there is, and the only one who can save. This statement too, of course, is an appropriate witness to the Gospel, so long as Christians remember that God alone is savior and that the assurance of God's saving will for those who accept the Gospel in Jesus Christ is also an assurance of God's unending love for all people.

When Christians seek to explain why we confess that Jesus Christ is Savior and what we rightly mean by our confession, we are by no means dealing with abstract theories. Our confession wells up from the very depths of our Christian experience. The power unto salvation which is experienced in Jesus Christ is the experience of God's gracious love poured out upon an unworthy sinner. God's grace is so amazing, God's love so awesome, God's mercy so sweeping in its embrace, that even I — one who was myself utterly lost am included in it. We are sometimes tempted to feel that as Christians we deserve God's grace, and we then wonder why others fail to be as deserving as we are. But in our best moments, humbled by our awareness that God's all-inclusive love has extended even to us, we utter prayers of thanksgiving to God.

The Commission on Theology

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