

Reflection Paper: “Grace and Christ: Fundamental Theology and the Meaning of  
Salvation”

MY WORKING UNDERSTANDING OF SALVATION

Andrew J. Weiss  
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Facilitator: Sr. Jane Kerns, SHCJ

I was born and raised an Irish-German, American, New York Catholic who joined the military after high school and left the Church of my youth at the tender age of 20. My approach to life is experienced-based like Karl Rahner's existential approach to theology. I will explore three areas in this paper. First, I will use my experiences as a pre-teenage boy, as an American serving in the Air Force, as a cradle Catholic who left and returned to my Church and as a fully grown man falling in love to show how they have contributed to my understanding of God, salvation, human beings, Christ and grace. These understandings have grown, evolved and changed many times. Second, I will examine how my understandings are related to the historical understandings presented in the course. Finally, I will explore the effect of these understandings on my personal life and ministry.

I grew up an ordinary Catholic boy in a family with two loving parents, a brother two years younger, a sister six years my junior that we adopted from Vietnam and a large extended family. My brother and I were altar boys and all three of us made our sacraments of initiation with everyone else in our respective classes. I read books on various topics such as Einstein's theory of relativity, some of Isaac Asimov's writings, life after death experiences and UFOs. I had three significant experiences about age 12 that colored my understanding of life that I include in chronological order. The first occurred in confirmation class when I was in seventh grade. I called on my favorite Sister with the British accent, asking for clarification of meaning in one of the areas of study. Sister Margaret replied, "O, don't worry about that, just memorize it. That (understanding) will come later." Her words proved prophetic. In the second instance, I was on my paper route praying in this fashion, "...and since You don't exist, I'm just

talking to the air, so what am I talking for?" My Catholic education had taught me something, for I knew what an atheist was. I now was one! One week later as I was approaching the same house on that paper route, I blurted out, "Okay, so You exist! What now?" The final trip I would like to take with you down my personal amnesia lane happened one night when it was time for sleep. I closed my eyes and found myself in a tunnel with a light at the other end. I quickly opened my eyes and pulled the covers from over my head to make sure I was still in my room for this was a very real experience to me. I closed my eyes and to my surprise, it was still there, so I started down the corridor toward the light. I felt scared again and opened my eyes one more time, after which I closed them again. When I arrived at what appeared to be the end, I was looking out on the most beautiful sight I had ever seen. I thought in my heart that I was looking at heaven, or at least a representation of it. I sensed my mother's mother was there, knew that I could not enter in, but wanted to more than anything. Two of Karl Rahner's views have been assumptions I have made mostly unconsciously my entire life, starting when I was a boy. He broke down the artificial walls that separate the secular and the sacred so that I have a continuity and wholeness in life and he used the personal experience of existentialism as the basis for personal understanding and knowledge. The experiences I have related above teach me several lessons. First, religion is not a matter of information, but of understanding in the heart. Second, my own personal experiences in struggling to learn, doubting and abandoning my faith for a short time and glimpsing heaven show me grace working in me as a boy and without these experiences I would not have the deep faith I have today. Finally, these insights help me today to understand the passage, "but without faith, it is impossible to please him. Anyone who comes to God must believe that

he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him" (Heb 11:6, NAB). My deep, abiding faith enables me to be a more effective minister in RCIA as I sponsor people, sometimes teach classes and lead in scripture reflection groups after the Liturgy of the Word. This kind of faith is obvious and witnessed to in the lives of the people in RCIA. They see faith in action, as Saint James wrote, "Faith without works is dead as a body without breath" (2:26, NAB). My approach to the scripture discussion has changed as I come away from this course with a greater appreciation for how complex the issue of grace is and how much study we all have done to get the little appreciation we have for it.

In the Air Force, I was like many of the young people I served with: we worked very hard, played sports and drank far too much alcohol. At 20 years of age, I was in Southern Spain searching for a deeper faith, a closer relationship with God like the saints, while simultaneously considering that I might be drinking too much. Because I did not know myself very well, I considered going to Alcoholics Anonymous to see if they could help me learn if I had a problem. The day after a night of heavy drinking, before I had a chance to inquire about AA, a person I knew invited me to a Baptist Church peopled with mainly US Naval personnel. It was Wednesday and I had never been to any church except Catholic. My assumption that it could not hurt would prove the opposite.<sup>1</sup> They sang, the preacher preached, and my friend seemed contented and happy. The preacher had an altar call, to which this ill educated in his faith Catholic went forward out of curiosity. I entered a side room where a person opened his Bible and quickly ran through a succession of verses in Saint Paul's letter to the Romans. I would later know this as the 'roman road to salvation.' He then fell on his knees and started to pray a very abrupt, rushed petition. I knelt down gently, as every Catholic I knew did. When he was finished,

he waited what seemed like a few seconds for me, after which he asked impatiently if I were going to pray. I responded affirmatively and asked him to give me a minute. Not having any idea what was happening and sensing the person's impatience would not last much longer I prayed this long, drawn out prayer, "Help!" When I exited the room, my friend was directly outside the door waiting for me with the question, "Are you saved?" "I don't know," I replied quickly, for I had no idea to what he was referring. He explained so that I would *really* understand, "You're either saved or you're not saved. Are you saved?" I figured if I told him I was not, the badgering would never cease, but if I told him I was, I might have a chance for him to quiet down. I chose the latter, yet this excited him so much that he could not shut up. This experience was valid one in that I had no urge to drink alcohol afterward. To these good Baptists, salvation was a future thing you knew you possessed assuredly from a specific moment in time after you had repented and *accepted Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior*. This view assumes we are all at enmity with God and in need of saving, yet this is only a once-in-a-lifetime experience. After this, one simply rededicates one's life to God when one feels a need. I think of salvation as a lifelong, ongoing process during which one is continually being saved in the present tense for two reasons. First, with God there is no time so all is present (Confessions, Book XI). Secondly, to judge the rest of my life by the first 35 years, I expect to need to be converted and saved many times in the future. The reason for this is because I am subject to the effects of original sin, as Augustine taught and as the Church teaches today. As Saint Paul, a father in the development of my faith wrote, "sin dwells in me" (Rom 7:20). I do not understand salvation as an experience outside self as these Baptists seemed to presume. Aquinas taught salvation is an ontological change in a person (Haight

61-63, 150; Ludwig 52-54). I believe salvation starts at baptism and is a life to live rather than an experience to have or recapture. Because the Baptists understand salvation as a one-time experience a person has, their debates with Pentecostals I witnessed that salvation could not be lost and the reply that it could be lost quicker than the SR-71 Blackbird<sup>2</sup> can fly are made much more understandable to me. It seems to me that both groups look outside themselves for their explanations exclusively, for they both had scripture to back up their contrary views. My belief that salvation is a process and that the assuredness of salvation does not come in the knowing, but in living the life called to, my approach to ministry in RCIA is affected by this conscious appreciation. Before this course of studies, I would tend to teach or lead the scripture discussion groups in a teacher-student relationship. My new appreciation makes me more open to dialogue with people and more accepting of how the scriptures affect the individuals' own story of their life. I also realize through the course that our experiences are a valid source of insight in my understanding of God, salvation, human beings, Christ and grace, among other issues. I have realized this more in this particular class than in any previous one in the program to this point.

People and the reasons we do things have always fascinated me. I used to own a record produced by an English Christian singer named Garth Hewitt. The design of the back of the album cover included the phrase scribbled on it, "Humans are fickle and ever changing!" I learned through my painful experiences with religion that human beings make many unsound judgments, some of which have hurt me very deeply. In my meditations and study of scripture that I did as a Protestant, I discovered the following in scripture, "May he preserve you whole and entire, spirit, soul, and body" (2 Thes 5:23).

This caused me to consider the human person as made in the image and likeness of God in terms of His Trinity, which gave me a different understanding of the human being than I previously had. When I thought about this connection, I drew a parallel between Father and mind (or soul), Son and body, Holy Spirit and spirit. While I was in the midst of this reflection after I returned to the Church in 1986, one knowledgeable friend told me no one in Church history had ever taught this and that Augustine had discussed the human being as body and soul. While I did not know the history of Church teaching and am not aware that the Church has ever taught on this subject specifically, my friend wasn't able to answer this thought to show me why it was wrong or provide reasons why I should not entertain this line of thinking. When I expressed this understanding to my spiritual director, Father Trevino warned me not to break up into pieces what God had made in unity. I shared with him the passage, in part, "God's word...penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow" (Heb 4:12). I explained this verse shows me that the spirit and soul have a relationship as do joints and marrow, meaning they are not the same but are in relationship to one another, and while God's word could divide the soul and spirit of a person, God created them to be in unity. I explained further that my intention was to understand how wonderfully and fearfully we are made, that I might see more clearly who God is in thinking about the human creation. This meditation has helped me to see the human as a creation, made in the image and likeness of God in a particular and beautiful way. This view is more Rahnerian in thought than Thomistic because of its "conception of the unity of the natural and graced orders of existence (Haight 166)." When I thought about a triune human being, I assumed that God's grace came built-in, that it could not be left out of the equation of life (Monbleau 2). This meditation also

showed me more of the depths of God in seeing such a similarity between the human being as a triune imitation of the Trinity. This directly affects what I teach because this meditation shows me that the human person is triune. This makes my attempts to *understand* God and to help others see easier.

As I progressed through life with the pain that has broken me, I found that the groups I felt comfortable trusting were sometimes not exactly what some Catholic or Christian groups would consider acceptable because these groups were *outside the walls*. I read Taoist thought, which finds the practice of priestly celibacy to be incomprehensible and teaches that everyone ought to have sexual relations for it is the only natural way. I have Buddhist friends whose religion respects all life no matter if the life is human or other. Buddhists also have no injunction to convert others to their religion, making them open to other ideas and religions. I examined the Koran that teaches that God would never beget a son, as Christians believe of Jesus (Mary 19:29, page 34). I perused some Orthodox Church writings such as *The Way of a Pilgrim*, which tells the story of the Jesus Prayer<sup>3</sup>, which I tried for a couple of years, and *Hierarchal Divine Liturgy of Saint John Chrysostom*, that gives me a wider view of spirituality and a little understanding of the Eastern orientation. I listen to the music of Jews for Jesus<sup>4</sup> and read some of their literature, which gives my Catholicism a Jewish flavor. I savored Shusako Endo's *A Life of Jesus*, which is a retelling of the gospel story by this well-established Japanese author for a Japanese audience. Endo paints God with a female brush because in that culture the female is kind, loving and forgiving in that culture whereas the man as a symbol is generally harsh. I devoured *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, in which John Paul II generally provides a tolerant and accepting attitude toward other religions for his readers.



I really admire and respect this Pope. His expression in this book allowed me to explore these different ideas without fear. These friends, books and music, in their pluralistic diversity, opened my understanding of Christ and His identity as God and Man. At first, I thought Christ was part of Jesus' name, but I learned it meant the Anointed One, as Samuel anointed David when God revealed the new King of His people (1 Sm 16:12-13). David was anointed with oil, pouring the flask over his head, dousing him; Jesus was anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power (Acts 10:38). Some call Jesus a prophet, a good man, a revolutionary, a troublemaker, the Son of God. It was in this context that I compared the Jesus I found in Sacred Scripture to the Jesus I found others talking and writing about. I met Jesus as God in the many instances of healing the inner wounds that I had experienced through my painful leaving and returning to the Catholic Church. I found myself searching for Him more and more, voraciously reading books written about Him, going on retreats, attending daily Mass, talking with people of all faiths about their own experiences and sharing my own with them. I discovered great meaning in the course material examining Christ as ransom, sacrifice for sin because my awakening and ensuing life caused within me a realization of the gravity of my sins and as the illuminator inasmuch as He has taught and given me a certain understanding I did not have before my experiences. I also see Christ as the Divine Physician, anointing, binding and healing my wounds, which I see as related to Aquinas' explanation that grace affects us by healing our soul. He accomplishes this role as Physician through both the Eucharist, as Pope Gregory the Great wrote of this being a chief means of grace, and through other people (Ludwig 35-41). Hebrews 4:15 reads, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weakness, but one who was tempted in every way that we

are, yet never sinned" (NAB). This passage tells me that Jesus was also a man. In my brokenness, I clung to this image of Jesus as one tempted just as I am and that He understood and loved me. These powerful experiences of coming to know Jesus as God, Christ and Man continue to form my understanding: of God that He was interested in and loved me, of Christ that God came to be like me so He could make me like Him and of Man in that Jesus raised the dignity of the human being to the level of the divine so that it matters how I treat others. All of this led up to the consideration that if God is the Creator of all creation, then He transcends every religion and system of philosophy that man has ever thought of, from Confucius to Aristotle to Aquinas to Kant and everyone else. This understanding of God's transcendence of the world has caused me to reconsider the fundamentalism and denominationalism that I was involved in when I was a Protestant. I noticed that the one thing that is constant in all the religions I examined is the principle of love. By love, I mean the concept of truly caring for one another because we recognize that we are responsible to one another and for one another as was so eloquently penned by Saint Paul in 1 Cor 13. This love has become the cornerstone of my understanding of salvation and my focus in life with all its twists and turns. This has certainly affected the way that I live and minister to others because I am more compassionate to those to whom I minister. I find, in many instances, that the good people in the RCIA who are searching for truth and are aware they don't know about the Catholic faith, yet want it, are so eager to believe and do whatever I tell them. I seem to them to know what to do and believe and they are eager to live according to the Catholic way of life. This compassion for the people I help makes me only answer their questions if I am sure of the answer. If not, I tell them that I am not sure of the answer and proffer them my insights about the question

and assure them we can talk to a priest who will confirm what we talk about so we remain in the right. This is because I believe we are all traveling on the pathway to God.

It was pounded in my head as a Protestant in the King James English, "For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast" (Eph 2:8-9, KJV, italics in the original). My Protestant friends used to quote this passage in discussing the evils of Catholicism and the *earn-it yourself salvation*, as they described it. I was as anti-Catholic as they were and agreed with the point that no actions of mine could save me. I still acknowledge the truth that God saves me, not I. Yet the more I ponder what they seemed to be saying, the more it seemed that some meant a person is saved by faith without works, almost making faith and grace synonymous. When Ludwig portrays the third central theme of Luther's theology of grace as "*Faith Alone (Grace Alone)*" (Ludwig 59), he seems to be referring to justifying faith and saving grace. I understand the Ephesians passage to not discount works as a means of justification. This same passage could just as easily be written, "For by grace are ye saved through works; and that not of yourselves: *it is* the gift of God: not of faith, lest any man should boast." I understand both faith and works as a gift because all things come from God, yet I have a certain control of both and they are both necessary from this vantage point. Paul plainly states that we are justified by our faith, but never says in this passage that our works do not justify us. When I contrast this to Jas 2:14-26, this line of reasoning appears to be solid. James writes that works (how we live) and faith work together in justifying a person (2:21-22) as is put bluntly in verse 24, "You must perceive that a person is justified by his works and not faith alone" (NAB). Saint Paul never wrote that a person was justified by faith alone. The issue here as I understand it is

that of sola fide that teaches we are saved by grace but justified by faith alone. Luther added the word 'alone' in his attempt to reconstruct Romans 3:28, "For we hold that a man is justified by faith *alone* apart from the works of the law (RSV; Luther's addition in italics)." Luther apparently also desired to get rid of the book of James because he could not reconcile justification by works (or salvation by grace through works) as Saint James clearly shows in the cases of Abraham, Rahab and states unequivocally. I believe our salvation and justification, as well as our lives and all we have are a gift from God, in other words, Gods' unmerited favor – grace. The way we realize our justification and our salvation is through our faith and actions. This means that I do not have to frantically work to do or believe anything in order to be saved or justified. This takes the panic out of the living of my life so that I am free to realize that God loves me and grow in that so I might love others as Jesus commanded (Jn 13:34). When I minister to people in RCIA, many are not sure about God's love for us and I can relate that same message that God really does love us and commands us to love one another. I find this gospel, this great news, really lightens the load of those I assist in RCIA as well as other ministries in which I am involved.

Falling in love is an experience that I have had once or twice before, but I never had the pleasure of enjoying that love blossom into the fruit of marriage. I have fallen in love and have realized the fruition of this love in the holy sacrament. This has had an effect on my life in several ways. A classmate, in doing the evaluations for this class, told me that he noticed that I have become "assertive with...ideas rather than aggressive (Rincon)." This reference reflects how the sharp, painful edge was dulled from my experiences in leaving and returning to the Catholic Church, a very painful experience,

by this love with which I have been blest. I no longer take certain topics for discussion to be an attack upon my faith or me personally, but feel more at ease in listening to an opinion and can listen fully before I provide my own insights. I used to think, not in terms of my own insights, but rather the truth that I knew, that others were trying to contradict, as I saw it. In relaxing, I can be a more effective minister to others in all the settings of my life. I have improved my teaching over the years since God dulled the edge of the intellectual aggressiveness that I had learned as a fundamentalist, anti-Catholic Protestant. God has been freeing me to be able to explore in trust and security instead of the panic-stricken fear from which I operated before. I use the term *panic-stricken fear* because my experience in leaving and returning to the Church had made me distrustful of others when it comes to religion and because we were afraid of going to hell. We seemed to believe unconsciously God wanted to send us there unless we were perfect. While this is not entirely gone from my life, this love has made me able to examine that area of my life so that I might be on a more even keel. I understand this experience of love with which I have been blest to come from God, my Divine Physician, who is healing me, repairing a broken vessel so that I might work more effectively for Him.

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<sup>1</sup> One of the members of this Baptist Church using Jack T. Chick tracts proclaimed the gospel of anti-Catholicism to me at the same time. This ended up creating bitterness and deep hurt within me that I am only very recently since the writing of this paper able to review and talk about without much animosity in my heart. It was an extremely painful experience.

<sup>2</sup> This United States Air Force reconnaissance aircraft's top speed is better than Mach 3.

<sup>3</sup> An explanation in order to fulfill the scriptural injunction to pray always (1 Thes 5:17).

<sup>4</sup> Jews for Jesus started in San Francisco, CA and makes music, books and religious pamphlets.