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# Soteriology in Evangelical Practice: A View from the Street

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## Abstract

This article discusses the difficulties experienced by evangelical missionary practitioners in the West from the perspective of soteriology. This is done ‘from below,’ that is, based on recent empirical studies. First, the ‘benchmark soteriology’ of evangelicalism is presented. Second, based on an analysis of recent field studies of missionary practices in Europe a series of challenges for evangelical evangelism are listed. It appears that evangelical practitioners often experience ‘speechlessness’ in terms of witness. This leads to various forms of frustration and disappointment. After offering some suggestions for an explanation of this speechlessness, the article concludes with a tentative description of a new paradigm of evangelism emerging from missionary practices in the West.

## Keywords

soteriology – evangelicalism – evangelism – salvation – mission – West

## 1 Introduction

In this article I set out to explore the soteriology of evangelical practices of evangelism, and the challenges posed by a Western and secular context. My focus here is not on systematic theology but rather on the tension between

idealistic soteriological notions inherited from the evangelical tradition and the experiences of practitioners<sup>1</sup> in the field. I will discuss these tensions, based on recent empirical studies of mission in the West and sketch the outline of a revised soteriology emerging from contemporary practices of mission. While such a 'lived' or 'espoused' soteriology may not always be as subtle and balanced as formal doctrine, it is likely to exert much more influence in evangelistic practice. This observation is rendered even more plausible by the fact that missionary practices in the West are predominantly populated by practitioners who are currently evangelicals or have been raised as evangelicals.<sup>2</sup>

In this discussion, I will build on two assumptions: (1) Mission in general and evangelism in particular are intimately linked to beliefs about salvation, and (2) evangelistic practices have become strained due to an increasing contextual mismatch between traditional evangelical soteriological beliefs on the one hand and Western culture on the other. While I will take the first assumption for granted,<sup>3</sup> the second will be substantiated throughout this article.

First, I will present the 'benchmark soteriology' of the evangelical tradition. Second, I will discuss some problems with this soteriology based on recent fieldwork studies of missionary praxis in the West. Third, some possible explanations of these problems will be presented. Finally, I will sketch contours of an emerging soteriological framework.

## 2 'Benchmark' Evangelical Soteriology

Even though many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century evangelicals rejected (a strong doctrine of) election, most accepted the soteriological tenets of the Reformation age, such as the geography of heaven, hell and the last judgment, and the importance of doctrinal knowledge especially of Jesus' atoning death, justification by faith alone, and conversion.<sup>4</sup> Evangelicalism's own constructive work has concentrated on the emerging individual believer in this traditional

1 In this article, I use the term 'practitioners' in a broad sense: all those who are involved in missional practices. This includes ordained and lay people, and both theologians and those with other professions.

2 Philip R. Wall, *Salvation and the School of Christ: A Theological-Ethnographic Exploration of the Relationship Between Soteriology, Missiology and Pedagogy in Fresh Expressions of Church* (PhD diss., King's College London, 2014), 39.

3 David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 393; Stephen B. Bevans & Roger P. Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2011), 34.

4 David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1989).

soteriological framework. Salvation is received through individual affirmation of certain doctrinal truths, particularly those related to Jesus' saving death and resurrection, and applying them to oneself. There is no salvation outside personal belief in Jesus, and therefore this message of salvation needs to be proclaimed to as many 'lost' people as possible.

Two defining features of this formal discourse in evangelical evangelism seem to be quite universal, judging by recent field studies. First, "[t]he foundational assumption of evangelical mission and theology is that the world is lost and in need of redemption."<sup>5</sup> Second, and related to this, is the need of personal conversion, which is demonstrated in a change of lifestyle, regular churchgoing, and Bible study. Such expected behaviours assume a reasonable level of literacy and a stable life-rhythm.<sup>6</sup> Also, they assume initiation into a culture with great respect for preaching, teaching, and theological authority. "[The] understanding of a relationship with God shaped by words and knowledge is still central within conservative evangelicalism," observes Anna Strhan in her ethnographic study of an evangelical church in London.<sup>7</sup>

Philip Wall, in his field-study of missional pedagogies in fresh expressions, describes evangelical missional practice as motivated by a 'Reformed soteriology,' leading to a pedagogy which is "didactic, Word-centered and unilinear."<sup>8</sup> Wall identifies evangelical soteriology with a redemption-centered view of reality, that is, the assumption that the world is essentially 'lost' and 'in need of radical transformation' or even 'replacement.' Since, according to evangelical soteriology, the world is under God's wrath and lacks the power to redeem itself,<sup>9</sup> the church's core mission is focused on individual and other-worldly salvation. In his ethnographic study of new churches in Seattle, Christopher James describes evangelical churches that draw from this theology as "a task force – a missionary team called and aided by God to make disciples."<sup>10</sup> People are saved through faith alone, which implies appropriating and confessing true beliefs about God, Jesus, salvation, the Bible, and so on. In fact, as a leading evangelical theologian claims, "[m]ost of our problems in life come from a lack

5 Anna Ruddick, *Reimagining Mission from Urban Places: Missional Pastoral Care* (London: SCM, 2020), 114.

6 Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 115–16; cf. Anna Strhan, *Aliens and Strangers? The Struggle for Coherence in Everyday Lives of Evangelicals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 125.

7 Strhan, *Aliens*, 118, 122–23.

8 Wall, *Salvation*, 46.

9 Christopher B. James, *Church Planting in Post-Christian Soil: Theology and Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 158; cf. Strhan, *Aliens*, 209–10.

10 James, *Church Planting*, 104, 159.

of proper orientation to the gospel.”<sup>11</sup> As salvation is bound up with having correct beliefs, this approach would therefore focus on enhancing the level of orthodoxy among its recipients through text-based instruction (sermons, catechesis, courses, pamphlets) by theological experts.<sup>12</sup> The dominant missiological drive “is to instruct believers in correct, scriptural doctrine and to teach against false belief, be it heresy within the church or falsity outside of it.”<sup>13</sup>

This does not mean that love and service are unimportant, far from it. It is believed that the gospel bears fruit among believers, which is demonstrated in acts of love and service.<sup>14</sup> Also, to serve and love people is a necessary preparation for the gospel. The context is looked at strategically as a place where the church should be present and serve to gain credibility and sympathy among outsiders.<sup>15</sup> As such, the context is essentially not a place to learn from. Non-Christians are primarily seen as ‘targets,’<sup>16</sup> even though this instrumentalizing view is mitigated by the genuine hospitality that is often found in such communities.<sup>17</sup>

### 3 Evangelical Soteriology in Missional Practices in the West

#### 3.1 *A View from the Street*

There is no doubt that this sketch of evangelicalism’s operant soteriology is highly idealistic. Missiologists cannot avoid the question how all this works out in practice. Anna Ruddick, in her field-study of missional pastoral care in London, claims that “much of the narrative of evangelical mission has been shaped by its key leaders, within a leadership culture that values charisma and authoritarianism.” But, “[w]hat is missing in many evangelical leaders’ understanding of mission is the view from the street.” She describes a practice where the ‘ordinary Christian’ is often caught between normative accounts of what is supposed to happen in evangelism on the one hand and the unresponsive reality of a secular society on the other.<sup>18</sup>

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11 Timothy J. Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 51.

12 Wall, *Salvation*, 48; James, *Church Planting*, 156.

13 Wall, *Salvation*, 54.

14 Wall, *Salvation*, 49–51.

15 James, *Church Planting*, 157.

16 James, *Church Planting*, 156; Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 115.

17 James, *Church Planting*, 157.

18 Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 183.

In what follows I will present evidence that the normative soteriological narrative sketched above runs into difficulties in secular contexts. The main reason for this, or so I will argue, is that this soteriology is not the universal narrative that it is cracked up to be. Like all theology, it is rather rooted in specific socio-cultural circumstances, circumstances that no longer obtain in most cultural contexts in the West. It has emerged from and developed within certain missional practices that are currently often felt as somewhat outdated and authoritarian. Or, to put this in a different way, if missional practices have significantly changed – from tent revivals and evangelistic tracts in the nineteenth century to Alpha Courses and fresh expressions in our times – evangelical missionaries should face the question whether the implicit theology of contemporary evangelistic practices still resonates with a normative soteriological discourse that emerged from practices long gone.<sup>19</sup>

### 3.2 *Tensions on the Ground*

“The dominant evangelical missional narrative,” writes Anna Ruddick, “left my participants ill-equipped to see the gifts of their urban mission or to engage with its challenges.”<sup>20</sup> Ruddick describes this ‘evangelical missional narrative’ as a soteriology that is predicated on the ‘lostness’ of the world and the pre-conversion self. This ‘conflicted relationship to context and to subjectivity’ may lead to spectacular conversions, but it can also lead to distress and ultimately to de-conversion. The perceived lostness of the world corresponds with a sense of subcultural isolation, while the rejection of the pre-conversion human self easily slides into a psychology where the self is constantly challenged rather than affirmed. Conversion can then come to mean a loss of self, or alienation from self, with its social pendant of ‘a complete turnaround’ and the rapid appropriation of a completely different lifestyle of churchgoing and immersion in the new Christian community. This psychology of denial of our personhood, Ruddick argues, is destructive and unsustainable. One might predict that this pattern will inevitably lead to “burnt-out and dependent disciples who are not able to sustain their own faith or weather the challenges that life may bring.”<sup>21</sup>

Various studies show that the perceived ‘lostness’ of the world in evangelical soteriology indeed corresponds with a sense of subcultural isolation, the perception of a virtually unbridgeable ‘gap’ between the Christian community and its vocabulary on the one hand and the target audience on the other. In her

19 Cf. Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 153.

20 Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 137.

21 Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 118–23.

study of an evangelical church in London, Anna Strhan describes how evangelical believers in a secular environment experience cultural isolation, even if they participate in urban life to a high degree. “My informants frequently reiterated that evangelicals are stereotyped in the media and in the popular imagination as intolerant, judgmental, sexist, homophobic, and Islamophobic, and sermons also reflect this consciousness.” Evangelicals, says Strhan, expect the ‘world’ to ‘hate’ them. With this corresponds a missionary ideal of (mostly verbal) witness in “what is perceived as an oppressively secularist setting.” Given the expected hostility of the surrounding culture, a lack of response is almost routinely assumed. Thus, evangelical witness is transformed into a countercultural rhetoric aimed at reclaiming the public square.<sup>22</sup>

In missional practice, it may thus be very difficult to balance a soteriology that is predicated on the ‘lostness’ of the world with humble and bold witness about Jesus. Such witness is, after all, likely to become confrontational very soon. If the role of Jesus and his atoning death is primarily that of the remedy against God’s wrath and our ‘lostness,’ then the articulation and experience of lostness becomes a necessary condition for the relevance of this message. Cultural shifts aside, it would require an immense amount of creativity, relational skills, and sheer luck in any ordinary conversation to bring up somebody’s ‘lostness’ without causing an immediate temperature drop. This may be the reason why many missionary practitioners among secularized audiences in the West find it difficult to speak about Jesus.<sup>23</sup> They sense that warm relationships are hard to combine with the cold shower of a ‘guilt-trip,’ while the audience may associate any mentioning of Jesus and his atoning death with a message that reduces persons to their lostness. If witnessing about Jesus is framed within an ontology of wrath, lostness and atonement that is no longer acceptable or even intelligible to most people, then speaking about Jesus in any salvific sense may be experienced as embarrassing. Evangelical practitioners may force themselves to do it anyway, out of a sense of duty or a desire for heroic martyrdom, but all this is very unlikely to be experienced as *good* news. Such dutiful evangelism overlooks the deeper problem, that is, its dependence on an uncritically accepted gap between Christian witness and a ‘lost’ world, a gap that may reflect a modern secularized mindset more than evangelical writers care to admit. More on this below.

22 Strhan, *Aliens*, 26, 88–89.

23 Wall, *Salvation*; Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (London: Routledge, 2020), 137–38; Annemiek de Jonge, *Als een madeliefje tussen de straatstenen: Soteriologische en ecclesiologische opvattingen van practitioners in evangelicale missionaire gemeenschapsvorming* (Amsterdam: Buijten & Schipperheijn, 2022), 179.

This problem may be related to a second one that affects relationships even more. As Mattias Neve explains in his study of missional churches in urban Sweden, many practitioners coming from an evangelical background struggle with the ‘us-and-them mentality’ in the redemption-centred narrative of their inherited tradition. In this struggle they “seek to move beyond unhelpful evangelistic practices that contribute to this mentality; for example, by reducing people to ‘evangelistic projects’ to be converted or encouraging contentious attitudes towards non-Christians.”<sup>24</sup> Several studies point out how evangelical believers have a hard time indeed to ascribe theological value to any effect of their mission short of conversion. Hans Riphagen, in his study of neighbourhood mission in Utrecht (the Netherlands), mentions how his evangelical respondents lack a theology that appreciates ‘ordinary neighbourliness.’ As relationships are largely seen as instrumental to conversion, and most daily contacts and friendships are not leading to conversion, “talk about mission represents a strong narrative of failure for ... evangelical Protestants.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, many practices of engagement with the neighbourhood are not seen as ‘mission’ at all, since this is almost exclusively associated with evangelism. “Thus, ... the only legitimising missional identity narrative is that of an individualistic fixed gospel, that puts everything under an instrumental ‘spell’ however authentic and relational they want their witness to be.”<sup>26</sup> Similar frustrations with a lack of results emerge in Ruddick’s study of the Eden network in the United Kingdom. “The sense that ‘not enough’ was happening featured in a number of my interviews with team members.” She relates how her evangelical informants felt this as a ‘loss’ and that it was a “part of the challenge to their inherited theological narratives.”<sup>27</sup>

In conclusion, we see two important interrelated problems in evangelical missional practices: a gap between the ‘saved’ Christian community and the ‘lost’ world, and a gap between the daily reality of mission and the supreme goal of conversion. While the first dimension produces a sense of subcultural isolation, the second undermines relationships between Christians and non-Christians, as these are often instrumentalized and subsequently become a source of frustration. What is lacking here, in theological terms, is a ‘middle-ground,’ that is, a soteriologically relevant relationship between the ‘religious’

24 Mattias J. Neve, *In Pursuit of Proximity: A Missiological Study of Four ‘Emerging Church’ Communities in Sweden* (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2021), 190.

25 Johannes Riphagen, *Church-in-the-Neighbourhood: A Spatio-Theological Ethnography of Protestant Christian Place-Making in the Suburban Context of Lunetten, Utrecht* (PhD diss., Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, 2021), 204.

26 Riphagen, “Church,” 205; cf. De Jonge, *Als een madeliefje*, 179.

27 Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 105–106.

and 'other' dimensions of life. An entire domain of praxis thus seems to lie outside the reach of salvation. In the next section I will propose some possible explanations for this.

## 4 Towards Explanation

### 4.1 *The Crumbling of Foundational Beliefs*

In a study of 'ordinary soteriology,' Ann Christie and Jeff Astley present the soteriological views of forty-five Anglican churchgoers who have received little or no theological education. Their questions concentrated on the "meaning, if any, the interviewees attached to the death of Jesus and the claim that Jesus is saviour."<sup>28</sup> As a general observation, the researchers conclude that traditional atonement language is "a stumbling block for many. Some find it offensive, others are simply puzzled by it." The evangelical respondents, however, were somewhat of an exception to this pattern. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they all subscribed to the substitutionary theory of atonement. It should be noted, however, that they were the only ones. "No other person in the sample speaks about the cross in the same way as the evangelicals."<sup>29</sup> Moreover, Christie and Astley observe two important facts among their evangelical interviewees: (1) their references to the substitutionary death of Jesus were largely formulaic and seemed the result of socialization rather than ongoing reflection ("I just accept it"), and (2) their respondents were generally unwilling to discuss these statements further. For example, when the researchers asked their opinion about contemporary critiques of substitutionary atonement, the interviewees admitted that such critiques had something going for them but that it would be 'threatening' to their faith if they would accept them. Altogether, they seemed to accept substitutionary atonement as "the required theory for every true Christian."

However, their Christian experience was not centred on this theory. Rather, their 'faith energy' came from a sense of the daily presence of Jesus or God (often used indiscriminately). This presence was felt as an experience of "love, acceptance, assurance, healing, intimacy and companionship."<sup>30</sup> Since the non-evangelical respondents were even more puzzled than the evangelicals by

28 Ann Christie & Jeff Astley, "Ordinary Soteriology: A Qualitative Study," in Leslie J. Francis, Mandy Robbins & Jeff Astley (eds.), *Empirical Theology in Texts and Tables: Qualitative, Quantitative and Comparative Perspectives* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 180–81.

29 Christie & Astley, "Ordinary Soteriology," 193, 187; cf. Strhan, *Aliens*, 163.

30 Christie & Astley, "Ordinary Soteriology," 190.



the question how God saves us through the cross, Christie and Astley suggest that the Church needs “new stories of how Jesus saves – stories that address the religious needs of our contemporary world and that are credible and believable for modern minds.”<sup>31</sup> While one might dispute the claim that the Christian message of salvation should be “credible and believable for modern minds,” without also asserting its countercultural and prophetic character, it should give pause that traditional articulations of the salvific nature of the cross are unintelligible even for churchgoers.

A similar fate has encountered another building block of evangelical soteriology: belief in hell. This has declined even among evangelical churchgoers. In her brilliant ethnographic study of two evangelical communities in the United States, Tanya Luhrmann describes how belief in future salvation based on a final eschatological judgement has all but disappeared in the preaching and pastoral practice of the churches she has studied. God loves us as we are; the problem is that we don't. If we really believed in God's love, we wouldn't feel so shameful and unworthy. In this therapeutic approach of salvation, “[t]here is no threat of a fiery damnation.” While these churches may still formally accept the classic evangelical theodramatic narrative, in daily life heaven and hell as our final destination are fading in comparison with the here and now. “Your pain and suffering are now. Your joy and redemption – if you accept Jesus as your savior – are also now.”<sup>32</sup> If these communities represent the evangelical mainstream in the United States, then it seems that the evangelical message is no longer concentrated on eternal salvation and damnation. By contrast, an espoused theology has developed where everybody is ‘saved’ yet needs awakening to God's love. Only this will liberate us to our full human capacity.

Similarly, a recent case study of neighbourhood mission by a conservative Reformed church in the Dutch Bible Belt made it clear that the practitioners who were involved felt discomfort when talking about hell. While they did not reject ‘fiery damnation’ in theory, they had little use of it in practice. Constant exposure to non-Christian family members and a secular community made it difficult to proclaim (or even hold) such beliefs with sincerity. Agnosticism about hell seems to prevail and separation of those who are ‘lost’ and ‘saved’ is

31 Christie & Astley, “Ordinary Soteriology,” 193–94.

32 Tanya Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 106–107. Similar observations with regard to Hillsong are found in Miranda Klaver, *Hillsong Church: Expansive Pentecostalism, Media, and the Global City* (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2021), 100. Cf. De Jonge, *Als een madeliefje*, 148–49.

seen as God's prerogative.<sup>33</sup> Here we may see a parallel with belief in substitutionary atonement: while it is not denied in principle, it has become somewhat of an embarrassment in practice.

It thus appears that in a secular context the theological architecture of evangelical evangelistic practice is shaking. This may not just have to do with Christians caving in to the 'world.' It may be that the tacit assumptions of this practice are too bound up with a world that is no longer ours, leading to questions about a proper missional contextualization of soteriology in secularized Western contexts.

#### 4.2 *Spiritualizing Salvation*

While the contextual nature of Christian soteriology is common sense among historians and missiologists,<sup>34</sup> there is a certain reluctance against taking the 'contextual' dimensions of the gospel seriously among evangelicals. The message of individual salvation from God's wrath by acceptance of the truth of Christ's salvific death on the cross seems to be considered as somehow independent of time and place. "We proclaim an *eternal* gospel," says a prominent evangelical website.<sup>35</sup> This belief in the timelessness of 'the' gospel does not preclude attention to context, but typically 'context' is seen as receptive rather than productive. The missionary effort should focus on finding the right point of contact for a gospel that is essentially understood as supra-cultural. We have already seen that finding this point of contact has become increasingly difficult for an evangelistic approach that assumes a gap between Christians and a lost world. Additionally, it may be noted that our theological ancestors lived in societies that were far more authoritarian, violent, and dangerous than modern citizens of Western nations. A theological drama revolving around a violent scene of substitutionary atonement, combined with a pedagogy of fear (for eternal damnation) may once have made more sense on an intuitive, emotional level than it makes to most of us.

All that aside, the assumed supra-cultural nature of salvation ignores the fact that for Christians in the past and in other cultures salvation has been

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33 Gerben Bremmer, "Welke heilsopvattingen motiveren de vrijwilligers van de Protestantse Gemeente Rijnsburg in de wijk Kleipetten in hun missionaire buurtpastoraat?" (MA thesis, Theologische Universiteit Kampen, 2021).

34 For the assumption of Christendom as a backdrop of the evangelical revivals in Britain, cf. Andrew F. Walls, "The Evangelical Revival, the Missionary Movement, and Africa," in *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996), 79–101.

35 See <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/get-eternal-vision-checked/> (accessed 27 May 2022). Italics added.

understood quite differently.<sup>36</sup> For example, in his study of popular Christianity in AD 200–400, *The Second Church*, historian Ramsay MacMullen describes how religion for North-African Christians in the late Roman Empire was “very much a thing of memorial worship and therefore most active and vital among the dead.” Christians gathered at the sites of deceased martyrs expecting that “such holy personages would not avail to save.”<sup>37</sup> What was this salvation? In an existence constantly threatened by disease, violence and poverty, the salvation they expected was very much a matter of encountering God’s power to heal and prosper, mediated by the saints. In short, they sought miracles and power. Salvation conceived as power to flourish and prosper is a common theme in many reports from the early Church and in so-called ‘mission fields’ all over the world. Reading such stories of evangelism and conversion may be an awkward experience for those who believe that salvation is ultimately about sin, forgiveness and going to heaven. To be clear, advocates of the evangelical model are often exemplary in their commitment to health and flourishing. Yet, I simply want to push home the fact that ‘salvation’ has not been understood this way by all Christians in all times. The very frameworks and vocabularies by which we understand and articulate salvation are rooted in socio-historical contexts, just like we are.

Much has been said in this regard about the context of democratization, individualization and beginning secularization in which the evangelical approach of soteriology took shape. Penal substitution, for example, is a model of atonement that has developed contextually and reflects the societal conditions of early modernity. As David Purves argues, the evolution of juridical versions of penal substitution cannot be separated from the increasing emphasis on law as constitutive of social reality. “The evolution and continued reception of this theory among revivalists and nonconformist denominations during the industrial revolution perhaps also reflects a sense of the empowerment of individuals.” Purves suggests that “understanding salvation as an economic transaction, where Christ’s death means people go to heaven if they undertake faith, may have resonated with ‘modern’ people with their focus on mechanistic transactions and economic exchange.”<sup>38</sup>

This concentration on individual, post-mortem salvation based on the ‘blessed transaction’ at the cross, dovetails well with a context of beginning

36 Cf. Justin S. Holcomb (ed.), *Christian Theologies of Salvation: A Comparative Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2017).

37 Ramsay MacMullen, *The Second Church: Popular Christianity A.D. 200–400* (Atlanta: SBL, 2009), 63–65.

38 David H. Purves, “Relating Kenosis to Soteriology: Implications for Christian Ministry amongst Homeless People,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 35 (2013), 74–75.

societal differentiation, that is, a context where the ‘religious’ and other domains are increasingly separated.<sup>39</sup> Again, the issue is not that evangelical evangelism has no interest in practical implications of salvation. However, by relegating the essence of salvation to the spiritual realm, the structural differentiation of society is mirrored in soteriology. The ‘real’ work between God and human beings happens in the ‘religious’ or ‘spiritual’ sphere. Social action ensuing from this may be important, but it does not belong to salvation per se. Part of the problem here, in terms of evangelism, lies in the increasing secularization of western societies since the Great Revivals. The evangelical model of evangelism may be at home mostly in a more or less Christianized society, where “Christendom, or Christian civil society, has eroded far enough to allow for toleration, dissent, experimentation, and the manifestation of nominal and sincere forms of adherence to faith, but not so far as to elide a traditional sense of Christian moral norms and basic cosmological assumptions.”<sup>40</sup> In more secularized contexts, however, the revivalist call may be experienced more and more as a call from a religious institutional realm without much relevance for ‘real life.’ Hence, the ‘gap’ experiences suffered by missionary Christians, as explained in section 3.

The problem with this absent ‘middle ground’ in soteriology is, however, not just a matter of advanced secularization of society. It may be a structural problem of this soteriology as such. I have already mentioned the frustration of missional Christians who cannot find soteriological relevance in ‘ordinary neighbourliness.’ In more Christianized societies this spiritualizing of salvation may have grave consequences in practice, as for example Lisa Bowens has demonstrated in her gripping study of African American readings of Paul. The concentration on post-mortem salvation at the expense of ordinary life can facilitate profound injustice. It is deeply sobering to read how enslaved people had to struggle for a liberating understanding of the gospel – salvation of their *bodies* – over against the spiritualizing and dehumanizing Christianity of their ‘masters.’<sup>41</sup> Listening to Frederick Douglass’s observation that “of all the slaveholders I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst,”<sup>42</sup> one cannot help wondering how such a practice could develop in a so-called Christian nation if not through the acceptance of a flawed soteriology.

39 Purves, “Relating,” 75.

40 D. Bruce Hindmarsh, “Patterns of Conversion in Early Evangelical History and Overseas Mission Experience,” in Brian F. Stanley (ed.), *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 2001), 97.

41 Lisa Bowens, *African American Readings of Paul: Reception, Resistance & Transformation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020), 301–302.

42 Quoted in Bowens, *African American Readings*, 144.

This spiritualization of salvation has come under attack from several directions. For example, new perspectives on Pauline theology have developed, focusing on the social and this-worldly dimensions of salvation in his letters. Since Paul's theology has always been a cornerstone of evangelicalism's soteriology, this is an important development.<sup>43</sup> From a different perspective, drawing from the insights of liberation theology and Pentecostalism, Miroslav Volf criticizes the 'non-material' character of salvation in the Protestant tradition. "Salvation is not merely a spiritual reality touching only an individual person's inner being but also has to do with *bodily* human existence." Volf does not advocate to abolish the traditional Protestant emphasis on the individual interior as the locus of redemption, but he proposes to integrate this emphasis with the contributions of these two other traditions, that is, salvation as liberation and salvation as healing and flourishing of the body. He adds a fourth dimension, not really in view in these three traditions at the time of his writing: the ecological aspect of salvation. "A soteriology that does justice to Jesus' programmatic sermon [Luke 4:18–21] must begin with the righteousness of the 'heart' but must also encompass justice and the integrity of the whole creation."<sup>44</sup>

#### 4.3 *Interim Conclusion*

The evangelical model of evangelism, while containing important soteriological notions, is rooted in specific (early modern and western) contexts that do not obtain in most times and cultures. In more secular contexts, moreover, the model suffers from its spiritualizing character, echoing the structural differentiation of modern societies. This spiritualizing nature has also led to serious moral consequences in various contexts, since a soteriology that limits the essence of salvation to the inner life and afterlife of the individual will find it difficult to include the body, society, and creation within its narrative of salvation.

Thus, we see a soteriological paradigm that echoes societal differentiation and subcultural isolation. 'Conversion,' ideally perceived as dramatic and sudden, is the bridge from one culture to the other, or from the 'world' to the 'religious' realm. It is a paradigm that allows for clear distinctions (e.g., between

43 Literature on this topic has exploded. Some examples include James D.G. Dunn, *The New Perspective on Paul: Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); N.T. Wright, *Justification: God's Plan and Paul's Vision* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2009); Idem, "New Perspectives on Paul," <https://ntwrightpage.com/2016/07/12/new-perspectives-on-paul/> (accessed 27 May 2022); Kent L. Yinger, *The New Perspective on Paul: An Introduction* (Eugene: Cascade, 2010).

44 Miroslav Volf, "Materiality of Salvation: An Investigation in the Soteriologies of Liberation and Pentecostal Theologies," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26/3 (1989), 448, 467.

the saved and the lost) and challenges (e.g., regular churchgoing as a mark of the truly converted). While this may be salvific in some contexts and for some groups, a high price is paid in leaving a huge territory of praxis (bodies, societies, ecology) outside the realm of soteriology. This spiritualization of salvation may easily lead to feelings of frustration and failure in secular contexts (since 'real' conversions are few and far between), and to dangerous immorality in more religious contexts (since 'real' salvation has little to do with the realities of work, war, and wealth).

## 5 What Next?

The 'benchmark' evangelical soteriology is bound up with socio-cultural conditions that have all but disappeared in most contexts of the late-modern West. It is at home in practices like revivalist preaching and door-to-door evangelism that are increasingly felt as awkward in societies where people are wary of authority claims and protective about their privacy. This raises the question whether any signs can be found of a new soteriology emerging from the missional practices we have discussed above.

### 5.1 *Evangelical Soteriology as a Contrast Motif*

To begin with, for many of the practitioners in the field-studies mentioned above traditional evangelical soteriology functions mainly as a negative benchmark, that is, a contrast motif. While many may not be all too certain or absolute about what salvation entails today, they do know which message they cannot share anymore. "Not once did [Christ] preach, 'Oh you've got to believe in me and my resurrection otherwise you won't go to heaven.' Did he?"<sup>45</sup> The evangelical model, or elements thereof, is often invoked as a model that is sub-cultural, formal, authoritarian, and exclusivist. A Dutch pastor says: "For me, [Jesus] is the source of inspiration. Redemption (Jesus died for my sins) is not my line, it's exclusivist. His path was salvific for me, following him is liberating for me. Jesus is very inclusivist." And another: "I am not of the sort who says that one *must* accept Jesus; for me all that is much too subjective. Jesus is there for everybody. I hope that you will step into that, but it does not all depend on it."<sup>46</sup> 'Soteriological agnosticism,' that is, a reluctance to say who is

45 Practitioner with an evangelical background, quoted in Wall, "Salvation," 137.

46 Sake Stoppels, "De weg heeft ook een berm: Missionaire *mindsets* van voorgangers binnen de Protestantse Kerk," *Kerk en Theologie* 72/3 (2021), 237, 241.

‘in’ or ‘out’ seems widespread among practitioners.<sup>47</sup> At the same time, as most of them are from an evangelical background, this struggle with benchmark soteriology can lead to uneasy consciences. Riphagen, for example, mentions an interviewee who constantly struggles with his heritage: “He keeps circling around the same fixed gospel, and tellingly confesses that sometimes this nagging voice keeps haunting him ‘Should I have evangelised more? Should I have warned people more about heaven and hell?’”<sup>48</sup>

An interesting paradox emerges. On the one hand there does not seem to be a decline in missionary zeal among the practitioners in at least some of the studies under review here. Sake Stoppels, in his study of Dutch Protestant pastors, comments with some surprise that, if anything, missionary intentions seem to be stronger among his respondents than they used to be among earlier generations of pastors.<sup>49</sup> Also, among Dutch missionary pioneers in mainstream Protestantism there seems to be little hesitance about key words like ‘proclamation’ and ‘evangelism.’<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, a new coherent narrative, capable of connecting the various strands of soteriology and building strong and inspiring connections between the life and ministry of Jesus on the one hand and contemporary experience on the other, has not yet been disclosed. Both Wall and James, based on their research in the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States, emphasize the importance of developing a soteriological narrative that fits new missional practices such as neighbourhood communities and pub churches.<sup>51</sup> Riphagen shares the story of some of his Dutch interviewees who “have started to doubt and question the normativity of the evangelical discourse,” yet “no revised theological narrative unfolds.”<sup>52</sup>

## 5.2 *Missio Dei and Creation-Centered Theology*

Even though a comprehensive soteriology is lacking so far, important building blocks can be found in contemporary missionary practices in the West. From a formal missiological perspective, the motif of *missio Dei* seems crucial for many missionary practitioners. In their cross-cultural study of church planters in deeply secular contexts, Marry Schoemaker and Stefan Paas define

47 Wall, “Salvation,” 19; Stoppels, “Weg,” 240.

48 Riphagen, “Church,” 203.

49 Stoppels, “Weg,” 241.

50 Stefan Paas, Sake Stoppels, & Karen Zwijze-Koning, “Ministers on Salvation: Soteriological Views of Pioneers and Pastors in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands,” *Journal of Empirical Theology* (forthcoming).

51 Wall, “Salvation”; James, *Church Planting*.

52 Riphagen, “Church,” 203, cf. 191–95.

this motif as one of the most important sources of resilience for missionary practitioners.

Time and again, the church planters in this research emphasize how believing that it is God's mission and not ours helps them to prioritize, to accept failure, to trust God in difficulties, to open themselves up to divine guidance, and to find courage to cross boundaries. Moreover, this particular faith conviction seems pivotal in the building of a strong individual and relational spirituality.<sup>53</sup>

This emphasis on God's initiative in mission is underlined strongly in both policy documents, such as *Mission-Shaped Church* (p. 19), and by practitioners from various contexts in the West. Philip Wall defines it as one of the key theological dimensions of implicit mission theology in fresh expressions in the United Kingdom, while Anna Ruddick sees *missio Dei* theology as providing a "theological rationale for the urban experience of Eden teams, underpinning their affirmation of the world and the self as sites of God's activity."<sup>54</sup>

Together with this affirmation of God's activity in the world, preceding and independent of human missionary initiatives, a shift can be observed from verbal proclamation of salvation to a world that needs redemption towards mission as praxis in a world that is permeated by God's grace. This is emphatically the case in some of the communities studied by Wall in the United Kingdom and James in Seattle.<sup>55</sup> However, the trend is widespread. While maintaining their desire for people to become 'curious' and 'seekers,' Neve's missional communities in Sweden emphasize 'witnessing presence' as their favoured style of mission. A Christian community is a "sign of the Kingdom", where God's presence can be "experienced" through loving relationships and "holistic mission." It is a community that applies itself to "listening to" and "dialogue with" the context rather than proclamation.<sup>56</sup>

In so far as a theological narrative emerges from contemporary missionary practices in the West, it seems that this is a theology that is largely affirmative of the world, within the theological framework of *missio Dei*. A good and gracious God is working in the world, and he is not the tribal God of evangelicals. Moreover, the world is not 'outer darkness' or simply 'lost'; it is God's world. God

53 Stefan Paas & and Marry Schoemaker, "Crisis and Resilience among Church Planters in Europe," *Mission Studies* 35 (2018), 384–85.

54 Wall, "Salvation," 27–30; Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 125.

55 Wall, "Salvation," 63–77; James, *Church Planting*.

56 Neve, "Pursuit," 192–93, 195, 198–99.



can be heard and encountered in unexpected ways, and often through the lives and voices of those who do not confess his name. This is not merely confessed in the abstract, but practitioners try to perform this narrative on the ground. “The conversionist salvation plan of traditional evangelicalism,” writes Anna Ruddick, “is reframed ... as mutual life change through relationship with those we have previously called ‘other’ ... Both parties are changed in the course of the relationship, creating a kind of flourishing ...”<sup>57</sup> This exilic spirituality<sup>58</sup> resonates with missionary practices that focus on building community, listening to and learning from ‘others’ who are not Christians, respectful dialogue, and witness through engaged praxis rather than verbal proclamation. Rather than calling a ‘lost’ world to repentance from a subcultural Christian ghetto, a missionary practice develops where the ‘ignored middle’ of relationships, societal structures and bodies is accepted as a locus of salvation.

As said above, this narrative is not yet fully developed or even coherent. Not all practitioners experience the same problems with this model of evangelism. And those who do, are often struggling with the theological implications of this emerging narrative. For example, did Christ die to save us from God’s wrath? And if not, then why did he go to the cross? Does hell exist? Can people be involved in a Christian community without an explicit confession of faith? Shouldn’t we proclaim more? Will all be saved? Such insecurity is often expressed in forms of agnosticism (for example about the Last Judgement) or ambiguous language (for example about what exactly Christ achieved on the cross). Many practitioners seem reluctant to remove all those theological pieces from the board, even when they find it difficult to find a good use for them. Here a task may be found for professional theologians to develop this narrative further, including the question of how it relates to the key building blocks of older soteriologies and, more importantly, the New Testament kerygma.<sup>59</sup>

### 5.3 *Jesus*

It is hard to imagine a Christian soteriology that does not give a prominent place to Jesus. How then is Jesus – his life on earth, his death and resurrection, and his second coming – present in the emerging soteriological patchwork of contemporary missionary praxis in the West?

57 Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 138.

58 Cf. what Ruddick says about “shalom” (*Reimagining*, 140–41) with Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM, 2019), chapter 4.

59 Cf. Stefan Paas & Hans Schaeffer, “Reconciled Community: On Finding a Soteriology for Fresh Expressions,” *Ecclesiology* 17 (2021), 325–47.

Clearly, Jesus' life and ministry are seen by many practitioners as a paradigm of what it means to live in this world as a faithful presence. Jesus went out to the marginalized, he listened carefully, exemplified love to the full.<sup>60</sup> In this sense, Jesus is the best example of what it means to participate in the mission of God. Even more, Jesus' example is authoritative in the sense that his participation in the mission of God is also the paradigm for all his followers. Time and again missionary practitioners in all the studies under review point to Jesus as the role model for mission. There seems little doubt that Jesus is prominent in the minds and hearts of contemporary missionary practitioners in the West. "In the end it is about the love of the Lord Jesus," says one of Riphagen's interviewees.<sup>61</sup> His life and ministry are the model to imitate.<sup>62</sup>

But what about Jesus' death and resurrection? In his study of contemporary Protestant Dutch Lenten sermons, André Verweij observes that Jesus' death as substitutionary atonement is not a dominant theme in the weeks preceding Good Friday and Easter. While more traditional approaches of soteriology have certainly not disappeared, it appears that Jesus' suffering and death are mostly seen within the framework of 'redemptive proximity.' In his suffering, Jesus shares our human suffering, gives meaning to it, and offers us hope through his resurrection.<sup>63</sup> Jan Martijn Abrahamse, in his analysis of Lenten worship in Dutch missionary pioneer communities, makes the same observation: predominantly Jesus' suffering is presented as identification with a suffering world. Jesus' death on the cross is thus a declaration of God's love for and involvement with his world, but also a judgement of the world in the sense that on the cross Christ sides with the oppressed. Next to this motif of identification, Abrahamse describes two other motifs: Jesus' death as liberation (here classic echoes of the cross as ransom or victory over the powers are heard) and Jesus' death and resurrection as renewal (Jesus opens a new and hopeful way of life).<sup>64</sup>

As said before, practitioners are generally reluctant to approach Jesus' death and resurrection in an exclusivist way. Although different voices can be heard, including voices that fit the classic pattern, most practitioners either articulate the agnosticism I have mentioned or express the hope that God's love demonstrated on the cross will be so great that in the end all will be saved. "I sort

60 Cf. Wall, "Salvation"; Paas, Stoppels, Zwijze, "Ministers."

61 Riphagen, "Church," 193.

62 Cf. Ruddick, *Reimagining*, 138.

63 André Verweij, *Positioning Jesus' Suffering: A Grounded Theory of Lenten Preaching in Local Parishes* (Delft: Eburon, 2014).

64 Jan Martijn Abrahamse, "Goede Vrijdag en Pasen op afstand: Een praktisch-theologische analyse," *Kerk en Theologie* 72/3 (2021), 214–27.

of see it as ... when Jesus comes again ... God [is] coming to rescue the world and so even at that point, the people we think can't possibly go to Heaven because they have done horrendous things and whatever, they might still see God's glory and bend the knee and they will be saved and they will get into Heaven."<sup>65</sup> However, the hope that is expressed here recognizes that some people may have done 'horrendous things.' Clearly, practitioners are not altogether convinced that this will have no consequences at all. For example, a recent study among Dutch missionary pioneers suggests that about half of them keep the option open (in varying degrees of certainty) that some will be 'lost' after their death. However, for them too salvation and possible 'lostness' are realized predominantly in this life. For a minority this implies that the afterlife and 'eternity' are not relevant anymore. Mission is more about "the earth we are leaving to our children" than about "are we going to heaven or hell?". Most pioneers, however, emphasize the present as somehow participating in God's eschatological future.<sup>66</sup>

## 6 Conclusion

Recent empirical studies of missionary practices in the West show that the inherited evangelical soteriology makes less sense than it once did. I have argued that this has to do with a lack of contextualization due to the profound changes in Western societies. Part of the problem may also lie in a more inherent problem with this narrative, namely its definition of the world as 'lost' and its relegating of salvation to the individual interior, thus creating a soteriological void where our relationships, bodies and societal structures are. Especially in a context of advanced secularization this inherent weakness is exposed, since evangelical soteriological language increasingly makes sense only to religious subcultures, producing missionary frustration and ethical concern.

A revised comprehensive narrative has yet to surface, but its contours can be seen all over the contemporary West. It is a narrative built around the recognition of God's constant gracious presence in the world and participation in his kingdom mission towards eschatological *shalom*, following the authoritative example of Jesus' ministry of love and outreach to those who are marginalized, and drawing inspiration and hope from Christ's identification with a suffering world on the cross. Traditional themes of atonement and sacrifice are less prominent, but not entirely absent. The emerging narrative is strongly

65 'Pippa', in Wall, "Salvation," 218, fn. 148.

66 Stoppels, "Weg"; Paas, Stoppels, Zwijze, "Ministers."

inclusivistic, with universalizing tendencies, even though some form of last judgement or 'lostness' is not always ruled out in principle. Almost invariably, the non-Christian 'other' is seen as a site of God's action, somebody through whom Christ may be encountered. In this sense, the emerging narrative may be called 'Deutero-Isaianic,' in that it reflects an exilic spirituality that has abandoned a tribal idea of God, discovering God's saving activity even through a pagan king (Isaiah 45:1). Meanwhile, for many practitioners, salvation is found in daily life, in justice, restored relationships, experiences of health, dignity and self-worth, and in mutual learning. Sometimes this means that eschatology and the afterlife disappear out of sight (perhaps returning to an Old Testament identification of salvation with 'blessing'?), but more often this 'material' salvation is seen as a token of God's future reign.