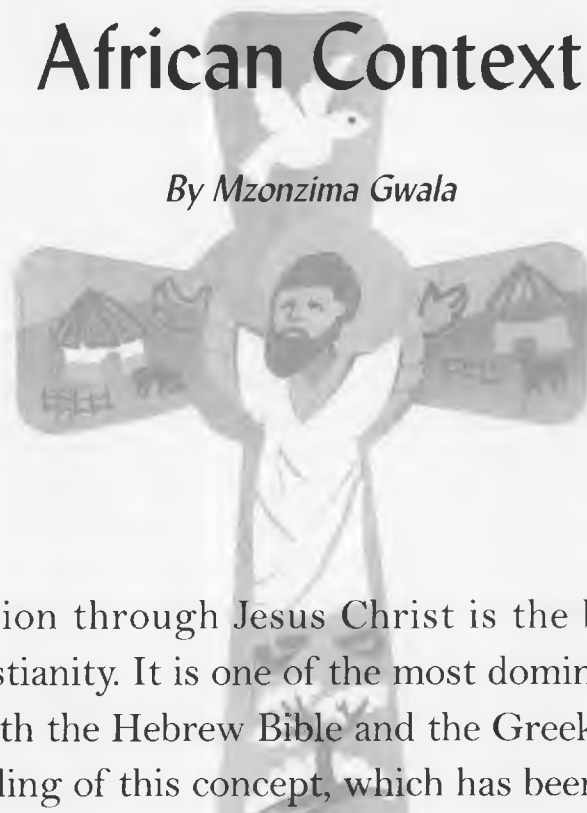


Discussed: ransom, atonement, propitiation, Greek words, names, kings, global tasks,  
culture, personal witness

# The Meaning of Salvation in African Context

*By Mzonzima Gwala*



Salvation through Jesus Christ is the basis of Christianity. It is one of the most dominant themes in both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek text. A clear understanding of this concept, which has been conveyed in a variety of biblical models, may enhance the witness of Adventists worldwide. When these models are correctly understood and implemented, they will point people to Christ. Said Jesus, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). Unfortunately, these models have not been fully implemented in Africa, which suggests a need for reevaluation if they are to be used in a continuing dialogue that will make sense to Africans.

## Models of Salvation

According to McIntyre (1992), models of salvation current among today's Christians are comprised of a mixture of biblical terms such as the Son of Man, Son of God, Jesus, and the Lamb of God, as well as certain metaphysical terms like *hypostasis* and *physis* that originated in Greek thought and were enshrined in Christian traditions through the Chalcedonian Creed.<sup>1</sup> As a result, associated imagery, figures, concepts, and metaphors associated with these models are not entirely biblical in character or origin.

Here are some major models of Christian salvation.

- **RANSOM** (Matt. 20:28, Mark 10:45). In this model, the term *ransom* should not be understood in political, transactional, or commercial terms, as if someone is bought off. Instead, exposition of this term requires the central soteriological notions of sacrifice and expiation. And from whom or what are sinners ransomed? It appears that they are bought from the power of sin and death rather than from the Devil.
- **REDEMPTION** (Eph. 1:7, 14; Col. 1:14). This model of salvation is generally understood as offering the best interpretation of what the death of Christ accomplished. According to McIntyre (1992:32), there is very little linguistic justification to draw a distinction between the Greek words translated as redemption (*lutrosis* and *apolutrosis*), on the one hand, and the word translated as ransom (*lutron*), on the other.
- **SALVATION** (Acts 4:12) and the related words *save* (Heb. 5:5) and *savior* (2 Pet. 1:11). All three of these terms apply to Christ and deal with the question, From what? In Pauline terms, we are saved from the wrath (of God) (Rom 5:9). This model also carries the message that Christ's death saves us from sin, death, and the law, and that it also yields forgiveness, life everlasting, and a new range of wholesome relationships that especially involve God (McIntyre 1992:33). From the Greek term for salvation comes the branch of theology called soteriology.
- **SACRIFICE** (Heb. 5–10). According to Hebrews chapters 5–10, many of the purposes of sacrifice apply to the death of Christ: to cleanse the worshipper from unrighteousness, to seal a covenant, and to give an offering to God. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews juxtaposes the sacrificial system of the old covenant, according to which the priests offered a recurring and incomplete sacrifice, with the once-and-for-all sacrifice of Christ, who offered himself.<sup>2</sup>

- **PROPIATION** (1 John 2:2). The word *propitiation* has dropped out of almost all modern translations of the Bible, probably because it originally had harsh overtones. The term could be taken to suggest that God's wrath needed to be placated before he could overlook the wrongdoings of sinners, and that innocent blood needed to be shed to achieve this goal.<sup>3</sup>
- **EXPIATION** (Rom. 3:25 and 1 John 2:2–4). This word does not appear in classical New Testament soteriological texts except in the King James and Revised Standard Versions. There it appears as a replacement for the word *propitiation*. This model points toward humans, suggests reparation, and implies retrospection in regard to things done wrong or sins committed, with the result that guilt is extinguished and forgiveness secured.<sup>4</sup>
- **ATONEMENT** (Rom. 5:11). The word *atonement* does not appear in any modern translations of the New Testament, nor does the New Testament use this term to describe Christ's death. Most modern translations use the word *reconciliation* instead. In the King James Version, *atonement* appears only in Romans 5:11. In Greek, the root word for this concept is *katallage*, whereas the Hebrew counterpart from the Old Testament is *Kippur*.
- **RECONCILIATION** (Rom. 5:10). Reconciliation of sinners with God through the death of Christ was previously one of the incontestable convictions of the Christian



faith. Nowhere in the New Testament do we read that God needs to be reconciled with us, but Romans 5:8 tells us that we are to be reconciled with him.

## Contextualization

How can these models be contextualized and presented? Consider Matthew 28:18–19: “And Jesus came and said to them: ‘Authority given in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all

many Adventists. Adventists need to develop these concepts in ways that resonate with Africans, taking into account differences in culture, language usage, historical background, and geographical features.

In the text of Matthew 28:18–19, a cluster of main words should be noted: authority, name, go, baptize, and teach. Jesus has authority in heaven and on earth, just as the king in African communities has authority over his people. In the African mind, Christ’s authority will have meaning when Christ is seen as a king.

Furthermore, one’s name itself has meaning in the

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nations baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (NRSV). This text deals with global or worldwide witnessing. How can the gospel be made relevant to the people in Africa or other southern parts of the world?

Let’s look at the concepts of royalty and kingdoms. Despite growing interest among Africans in the modern idea of liberation theology, they tend to be very well acquainted with the more ancient concepts of *kings* and *kingdoms*. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said about

African mind. A name is given to project onto its recipient the wishes of the name giver; a name is always connected with an event or an experience; a name represents one’s character.

For instance, my name is Mzonzima, which in my language can be translated as “respectable home.” When I was born, my parents wanted their family’s home to be respectable. In Africa, one’s name characterizes the experiences one will go through in pursuit of parents’ wishes.

Adventists in Africa need to be aware of such correlations as they witness to their communities. This applies not only to pastors, who have received formal theological training, but also to every member. Furthermore, before one goes forth, a member should have found meaning in life through Christ, the savior of the world. All of us are to go, baptize, and teach.

Witnessing in the Adventist Church is a global task that includes every member. The authenticity of what Christians do or say encompasses their conceptual ideology of salvation through Christ, as well as the experience of walking with him in their life. Regardless of how they shape their words, the most important part of their mission will be their own personal witness.

## Notes and References

1. John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology: Studies in the Doctrine of the Death of Christ*. (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1992).
2. *Ibid.*, 34.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*

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