

We've been talking about the two types of Christianity. **The first Christianity was the one many of us grew up with.** It was based on the belief that we are born into sin and deserving of hell. It often relegated women and minorities to the back pews. **It customarily rejected the advances and insights of science, and gave the Bible, the church hierarchy, the priest or preacher, divine authority, tolerating no dissent.** It aligned itself with those holding political power, usually the wealthy, which meant it seldom had a good word to say to the poor. **It was the religion of empires, theocracies, and kingdoms, the religion of the status quo.** Though I speak of it in the past tense, it is still very much alive, still very much with us, still continues to exert much power.

But it is dying, and another Christianity is emerging. **Of course, during the past 2,000 years, Christianity has often undergone dramatic change at key moments—the birth of Eastern Orthodoxy, the Protestant Reformation, the Anabaptist Movement, the rise of the Enlightenment, the emergence of Pentecostalism.** While in some respects, Christianity has been very static and traditional, in other ways it has been very fluid and progressive, susceptible to changing cultures just like any other human institution.

In yesterday's newspaper, there was an advertisement for a Baptist church inviting people to be part of their "old-time religion." **The old-time religion they referred to is a relatively new-time religion, a product of the revivalism that swept this part of the country in the 1920's and 30's.** The Apostle Paul never said, "Now let's all turn in our hymnals and sing *Just As I Am*." **So while Christianity speaks about unchanging truths and traditions, it has at times been very flexible, very much a product of the prevailing culture.** This is certainly true in Quakerism. If our founder, George Fox, were here today, he would be appalled that you pay Jennifer and I to provide leadership, that we sing from a hymnal, and don't publish broadsides against other churches.

**Christianity is always changing.** Sometimes that change is glacial, and long years pass without any significant religious or theological change. **We called one such period the Dark Ages.** But at other times in history the understanding of what it meant to be Christian changed rapidly, swept through the Church like wildfire, causing much upheaval, but generally leaving the Church reinvigorated, more relevant, and gracious. **It is always exciting to live in such an era, and today we do.** Our understanding of what it means to be Christian is changing, growing, expanding. **This change is necessary, and long overdue.** I

see it as my job to help lead it, to help us through it, and to help create a more gracious and relevant Christian faith.

One thing that happens when Christianity undergoes change is that our definitions change. **I remember giving a talk at a church event and a man accused me of changing the meaning of the word *salvation*.** I agreed with him. It's always fun to agree with your critics. It catches them off guard.

Let's look at the word *salvation* and how the understanding of that concept has changed throughout history. **The early Israelites thought salvation was something you experienced by belonging to the right nation.** In this instance, their nation. (It almost always worked out that way.) They referred to themselves as "a chosen people." How do you know if you're in a right relationship with God? **How do you know if you're saved?** Easy. If you're a Babylonian, you're not saved. If you're an Israelite, you are.

**This understanding of salvation prevailed for a long time.** Vestiges of it still persist, which is why it is a relatively easy matter for political leaders to convince people that the wars they fight are God's will and carry God's blessing.

**Of course, it's inevitable that once you begin to meet people from other countries, this narrow understanding of salvation breaks down and you're forced to widen God's circle.**

This happened early on in Christianity, within twenty years after the death of Jesus. Since the first Christians were also Jewish, the old understanding of salvation still worked. **But when people from other nations became Christian, and didn't want to observe the Jewish rites, Christianity faced its first great theological disagreement.** Could Gentiles be in right relationship with God? They met in Jerusalem and hashed it out. You can read about it in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of Acts. **The Jerusalem Conference ended when the Apostle Paul, always a model of diplomacy, told people if they were so bent on being Jewish, they could go circumcise themselves.**

So the understanding of *salvation* began to change. Salvation was no longer about belonging to the right nation. **Now God's love could cross a nation's borders, but it was still confined to those persons in the right religion, in this case Christianity, and eventually, more specifically, the Roman Catholic Church.** So another kind of language began to emerge. We heard phrases like "the One, True Church." **We Quakers were not exempt from such elitism.** For many, many years, Quakers who married outside the meeting were disfellowshipped. **After**

**we lost half our membership, it occurred to us this was a really bad idea.** Now we don't care who you marry, just so long as you agree to help at the Fish Fry.

**The one thing all those understandings of salvation had in common was that God's love and favor were limited to a relatively small group.** That is where we are today. That understanding of limited salvation is rooted in an archaic view of God and the world. **It is the cornerstone of the first Christianity I spoke about earlier.** If you were to question it—if, for instance, you wrote a book suggesting God loves and saves all people—you would get nasty letters and people would try to take away your religious credentials.

**But you would also hear from many more people for whom those old definitions and understandings no longer made sense.** They are redefining who is saved, and also rethinking what we mean when we say someone is saved. Salvation is no longer about being God's elect, like the Calvinists believed. **Salvation is no longer about believing the right things about Jesus so we can go to heaven when we die, like many evangelicals believe.** Nor is salvation about belonging to the One True Church, as Quakers used to believe, and many Catholics still do.

Rather, for more and more people, salvation is their life-long journey toward grace, toward God, toward others. **It is the effort to become a whole and loving human being.**

**So I would say, "I am not saved by believing the right things about Jesus, but Jesus shows me what it looks like to be saved."**

So *salvation* is our life-long journey toward spiritual, mental, and emotional wholeness, toward love, toward God, and one another. **Many people throughout history have shown us what salvation looks like.** We Christians believe Jesus did that in an especially powerful and provocative way. When we act like Jesus, when we love the outsider, when we challenge corrupt power, when we heal the sick, bring good news to the poor, and expand human understanding, then we are models of salvation, too.

**There are examples of this salvation all around us.**

I have a buddy who's a minister. He crossed swords with some folks in his church last year and got the heave-ho. He couldn't find another job and was getting really depressed. He'd been in the Army before he became a pastor. **He told me, "The only two things I know how to do are kill people and be a pastor."** But he finally got a job as a night watchman at a residential home for senior citizens. Not the most

riveting job. He was really discouraged. **But as he stayed with the job and befriended the residents, he began to enjoy the work more and more.**

He noticed that people in that situation get overlooked. Children and grandchildren are often busy to visit. The churches seem more interested in young families. The telephone solicitors even stop calling. **So my friend asked the owner of the retirement home if he could start a worship service there on Sunday mornings.** The owner said, "Sure, go ahead." The retirement home is new, so there are only eight people there, all advanced in years, but they showed up and he told me it's the most fun he's had in a long time. **He's spent time in Texas and he told me the churches down in Texas know how to get people saved.** We joke about it. I told him he better hurry up and get those people saved before they died on him. He laughed. His understanding of salvation has changed in the past couple of years. He said, "You know, I'm not saving those folks. They're saving me."

**And that's salvation, when we move toward love, toward God, toward one another, becoming spiritually, mentally, and emotionally whole.**

Becoming saved isn't something we do one time at an altar after a sermon that made us feel guilty and scared. It is the decision we make every day to learn and love and grow.