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SIN AND SALVATION

SALVATION AND THE CHURCH

THE WRITERS

Walter Rauschenbusch
(1861-1918)

A key figure in the Social Gospel movement, he defined the Kingdom of God as a world of justice and egalitarianism.

Jacob of Serugh (451-521)

A Syriac Christian bishop known for his hundreds of metrical homilies and poems.

Ignatius of Antioch (died c. 110)

The bishop of Antioch, martyred in approximately 110, is remembered for seven letters warning against false teachings and encouraging Christian unity.

Tertullian (c. 155-220)

An early Christian apologist who has been called “the founder of Western theology,” his works influenced Cyprian of Carthage.

Francis of Assisi (1181-1226)

The founder of the Franciscan and Poor Clare orders, Francis promoted a life of poverty and charity.

Patrick of Ireland (5th century)

A Romano-British missionary and bishop, Patrick is credited with successfully spreading Christianity in Ireland.

Christians have a reputation for prioritizing their belief systems over anything and everything else. This is not entirely undeserved—Martin Luther even proclaimed, setting the standard many people follow, that “the pure doctrine takes precedence before charity, apostles, or an angel from heaven.” While *what we believe* is very significant, of course, the Bible also emphasizes *how we live*: God blesses those who lovingly serve others, because doing so is serving God himself (Mt 20:34-40). In other words, while faith is important, love is even greater (1 Cor 13:13).

There are many scriptural passages underscoring this point. Christians are called to gather together to encourage each other with love (Heb 10:24-25; cf. Eph 2:19-22), meeting with “unity of spirit, sympathy, love for one another, a tender heart, and a humble mind” (1 Pet 3:8). This is vividly demonstrated in the communal concern and support found in the early church in Jerusalem (Acts 2:44-47).

The Christian church is called to two purposes in the world. As seen in Walter Rauschenbusch’s prayer, we are empowered by God to engage and relieve suffering in the world, bringing people true freedom and light. At the same time, the church is more than a social relief agency—we are a people worshiping God and growing in relationship with him. Jacob of Serugh therefore reminds us that each service is “good,” “sweet” and “full of comfort,” and the blessings we receive from worship are spiritual gold and precious pearls. It is only possible to fulfill these purposes, however, when we are united in our lives and work. We thus need, as Ignatius of Antioch says, to “labour together with one another.”

The Christian emphasis on providing for the poor is constant throughout church history. In 362 the Roman emperor Julian, criticizing his non-Christian priests in Galatia for ignoring the poor, complained, “It is disgraceful that, when no Jew ever has to beg, and the impious Galilaeans (i.e., Christians) support not only their own poor but ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us.” Tertullian shows Christians were providing for the poor two centuries earlier, engaging in noble “deeds of love.”

This love is not restricted to Christians, nor even to humans alone, but should extend to all the world. Francis of Assisi’s beloved *Canticle of the Sun* proclaims the natural world as brother, sister and mother, freely sharing beauty, splendor and sustenance in which we can all delight. As glorious as the natural world can be, our delight in it—as well as our concern to nurture it—is enhanced when we remember that God is present in every aspect of creation. The *Breastplate*, an Old Irish prayer of protection traditionally attributed to Patrick of Ireland (but likely written 300 years later), asks Christ to be fully present and active in every aspect of life: in the physical world, in buildings and transportation, and in every sense and faculty of every person we encounter. The call of the church is to experience and love God in everyone and everything.