

Section 137

Soteriology (so te ri ol o gy) is theology about salvation. Christianity's soteriological problem is based on three premises:

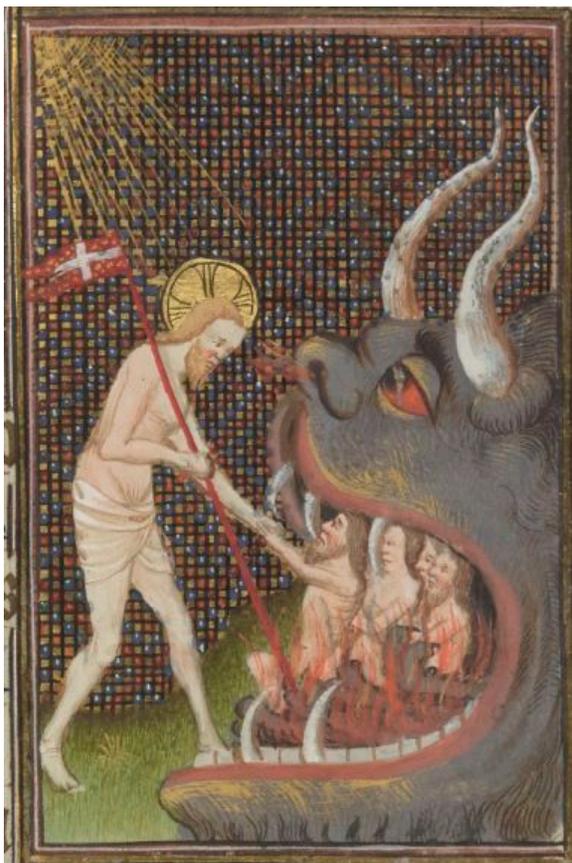
1. God loves all people and desires their salvation (1 Timothy 2:3–4).
2. Salvation comes to those who knowingly and willfully accept Jesus Christ as their Savior (John 3:16).
3. Most people live and die without accepting Christ or even knowing that they could or should.

The problem says that all three premises are true, but they can't be reconciled. Proposed solutions tend to discredit one of the premises. Maybe God doesn't desire the salvation of all people. Or maybe Jesus saves people who don't knowingly and willfully accept Him.

The first Christians didn't have this problem because they didn't make the unstated assumption that makes it a problem in the first place. In other words, the first Christians didn't believe that death was a deadline that determined a person's salvation. Peter taught that Jesus Christ preached His gospel to the dead so they could be judged as justly as the living (1 Peter 3:18–20; 4:6). Paul taught that Christians could be baptized for the dead (1 Corinthians 15:29).

Jeffrey Trumbower's very cool book *Rescue for the Dead* (Oxford 2001) traces the doctrine of redemption for the dead through Christian history. It turns out that it was Augustine, not Jesus or his apostles, who decided that death should be a deadline that

determined a person's salvation. But Augustine's view prevailed in Christ's church, at least in the West. Many medieval Christians continued to believe that (after his death and before his resurrection) Christ opened the spirit prison. They called this event the "harrowing of hell," and they created a lot of art depicting it.¹ My favorite images are the ones in which hell is an awful monster, and Christ causes it to cough up its captive dead (as in 2 Nephi 9). However, the Protestant reformers, for all the good they did, generally followed Augustine on this point. Then along came Joseph Smith.



Grandes heures de Rohan. I got it from jessehurlbut.net. He got it from gallica.bnf.fr Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, Latin 9471, fol. 76r.

He was immersed in Protestant culture and assumptions. His big brother died painfully in 1823. The loss was heartbreaking to Joseph. It stung even worse when Reverend Benjamin Stockton implied pretty strongly at Alvin's funeral that he would spend eternity in hell. Joseph couldn't reconcile Alvin's goodness, Reverend Stockton's doctrine, and a just and merciful God.

Fast-forward twelve years to 1836. Joseph now knows from the Book of Mormon that unaccountable infants who die are not damned, but as distasteful as Reverend Stockton's doctrine still sounds, Joseph doesn't know that adults who die before embracing the Savior's gospel are not automatically damned. Sincere and devout but mistaken theologians have caused this problem.

¹ David L. Paulsen, Roger D. Cook, and Kendel J. Christensen, "The Harrowing of Hell: Salvation for the Dead in Early Christianity," *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19:1 (2010): 56–77.

If you're the Lord Jesus Christ, how will you solve it? How will you inform a world that has already decided otherwise that your saving grace reaches beyond death and saves all who choose to embrace your gospel? Joseph hasn't even thought to ask. He is so thoroughly acculturated by Protestantism. So how do you get him to become open to it? How do you help him become aware of things he doesn't know that he doesn't know?

You show him a vision of the future, and of heaven, and you make sure he sees Alvin there. That makes him marvel and wonder. How will Alvin get past the flaming gates of God's kingdom? Having purposely provoked the question, you answer it:

All who have died without a knowledge of this gospel, who would have received it, if they had been permitted to tarry, shall be heirs of the celestial kingdom of God—also all that shall die henceforth, without a knowledge of it, who would have received it, with all their hearts, shall be heirs of that kingdom, for I the Lord will judge all men according to their works according to the desires of their hearts (D&C 137).²

Desire, not death, is the determinant of salvation through Jesus Christ. He saves all who desire to be saved by Him once they know that good news. Which side of death they are on makes no difference. By removing the assumption that death determines salvation, Jesus resolved the soteriological problem for Joseph and for everyone else. There is no conflict between the premises now.

² “[Visions, 21 January 1836 \[D&C 137\]](#),” 136–137, The Joseph Smith Papers, accessed December 7, 2020.

upon me the blessings of Moses, to lead
 Israel in the latter days, even as Moses
 led him in days of old. - also the blessing
 of Abraham Isaac and Jacob. - all of the
 presence laid their hands upon me
 and pronounced upon my head many
 prophecies, and blessings, many of which
 I shall not notice at this time, but as
 Paul said, so say I, let us come to visions
 and revelations. - The heavens were opened
 upon us and I beheld the eternal King-
 dom of God, and the glory thereof, whether
 in the body or out I cannot tell. - I saw
 the transcendent beauty of the gate ~~that~~
~~was~~, through which the heirs of that King-
 dom will enter, which was like unto circling
 flames of fire, also the blazing throne of
 God, whereon was seated the Father and
 the Son. - I saw the beautiful streets of
 that Kingdom, which had the appearance
 of being paved with gold. I saw father
 Adam, and Abraham and Michael and
 my father and mother, my brother Alvin
 that has long since slept, and marvelled
 how it was that he had obtained ~~the~~
 an inheritance ⁱⁿ that Kingdom, seeing that
 he had departed this life, before the
 Lord. ^{had} Let his hand to gather Israel the
^{second time} and had not been baptized for the
 remission of sins. - Thus said came
 the ^{of the Lord} voice ^{unto} me saying all who have

Joseph Smith's journal entry for January 21, 1836, is the source text for D&C 137, the vision of Alvin in heaven, and the restored truth that desire, not death, determines salvation through Christ. Image is courtesy of josephsmithpapers.org.