



Reformation
REVIVAL
JOURNAL

A Quarterly for Church Renewal

VOLUME 14 · NUMBER 1 · 2005

Salvation and Theological Pedagogy



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Theological issues tend to be mixed up in various ways with hermeneutical ones. Open theist writers, for example, often complain that the traditional view of God comes from a scholastic hermeneutical method that gives too much weight to Greek philosophy. They claim that we would come to a different view of God's foreknowledge, for example, if we were to look at the Bible more historically, less philosophically, and watch closely how God interacts with human beings in time. The scholastic, according to the open theist, says that God must have exhaustive knowledge of the future, because he is completely sovereign. So passages that might seem to suggest divine ignorance have to be taken as mere anthropomorphisms. What the open theist proposes is that instead we take the divine ignorance passages simply as they are and adjust our understanding of God's nature to those passages. If in Genesis 18:21 God *seems* to express ignorance about the extent of the sin of Sodom, then, says the open theist, we should simply accept that he is ignorant. Then we should reconstruct our overall doctrine of God to include the proposition that God's foreknowledge is limited by the non-existence of the future, the free will of rational creatures, and perhaps other factors as well.

The question about Genesis 18:21, then, requires us to do

some thinking about hermeneutics and, perhaps more broadly, theological method. That is also true of questions about law, gospel, justification, faith, works, and many other theological questions. God has given us the Scriptures to make us "wise unto salvation" (2 Timothy 3:15). So our methods of reading Scripture, indeed, affect our basic conception of what salvation is. The traditional *ordo salutis* sees salvation as a series of divine acts and human responses that takes place in the personal experience of each Christian. The more recent emphasis on *historia salutis* sees salvation as a historical process beginning after the fall, continuing through God's covenants with Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus, accomplished in Jesus' death and resurrection, and completed in his return in glory. Other theological methods may well present salvation in still different ways or, as I would prefer to say, from different perspectives.

In this article, I will describe in broad terms some of the theological methods used and advocated in contemporary orthodox Reformed theology and the perspectives on salvation they illuminate. Each, I think, has some value and presents some dangers; so I will also make some evaluative comments. In the spirit of the conference at which I first presented this paper, I will also indicate how, as I see it, these hermeneutical differences bear on the relation of law to gospel, obedience, and trust.

ORDO SALUTIS

Of the various descriptions of salvation in Reformed theology, *ordo salutis*, order of salvation, is the earliest. The purpose of the *ordo* is to list the events in the life of every saved person that join them to Christ. Typically, the list of events looks like this: effectual calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and glorification.¹ In effectual calling, God summons the elect person out of sin and into union with Christ. This gives him a new spiritual birth, a new heart, or regeneration. That regenerate heart enables the redeemed person to believe or trust in Christ (faith) and to repent of sin. Repentance is the

opposite side of the coin from faith. Faith is turning to Christ, and repentance is turning away from sin. You can't do the one without doing the other. Justification, God's imputation to us of Christ's righteousness, is by faith, so it follows faith and repentance in the *ordo*. Those whom God justifies, he adopts into his family. Then there is sanctification, which means both that we are separated from the sphere of the world into the sphere of God's kingdom ("definitive sanctification"), and also that we become progressively more and more holy by the work of the Spirit within us ("progressive sanctification").² This new life within enables us to persevere in faith and love until the consummation of all things when our glorification is complete.

This list describes in general a temporal process. Certainly effectual calling comes in time before our complete glorification. But many regard regeneration and faith as simultaneous, since it is difficult to imagine someone who is regenerate, but unbelieving. Similarly, faith and repentance, and faith and justification, are evidently simultaneous, as are the triad justification, adoption, and definitive sanctification. So the principal ordering feature of the *ordo* is not temporal sequence.

At points along the line, the sequence describes efficient causality: effectual calling is the cause of regeneration, regeneration of faith. But if faith is the cause of justification, it is not so in the efficient sense, but in what theologians have called an "instrumental" sense. And it is not evident that justification is the cause of adoption, or adoption of sanctification; rather, justification, adoption, and sanctification are all equally benefits of regeneration and faith, reinforcing one another in different ways.

So the *ordo salutis* is not consistently a temporal order or a causal order. Theologians have sometimes described it as a "logical" order, but it is not clear what "logical" order means if it is not temporal or causal. Perhaps, though theologians have been hesitant to put it this way, the *ordo* is actually a *pedagogical* order: a useful way of instructing people about the benefits of salvation. We can understand, though, why theologians have not been eager to characterize the *ordo* as pedagogical. A

pedagogical order is never definitive. One pedagogical order may be best for one audience, another for another. Reformed theologians, rather, have wanted to think that there is only one *ordo salutis*, and that it is an objective fact, not a subjective reconstruction of the biblical data for pedagogical purposes.

I am not persuaded myself that the *ordo* is anything other than a pedagogical device. It is, however, a useful pedagogical device. It is a model that brings together a great deal of biblical data: the neglected truth of God's calling us into union with Christ, the necessity of being born again before we can see the kingdom of God, the truth of justification by faith alone, the importance of adoption, the family model of the New Testament, the two meanings of sanctification, and so on. When I studied the *ordo salutis* with John Murray, all sorts of lights went on, all sorts of strands in Scripture got connected for me.

To say that the *ordo* is pedagogical is not to deny the objectivity of the facts described in the pedagogy. Regeneration really happens; justification really happens, and so on. But there is a subjective dimension to the pedagogy itself. When you think about it, all theology is subjective in this way, for all theology departs from the actual text of Scripture to put it in a form more useful for teaching various audiences. Indeed, there is a similar subjective dimension to all human knowledge, for knowing itself is, from one perspective, a subjective process that goes on in the mind.

Of course, there is much about salvation that is not included in the model. Although the doctrine of adoption helpfully brings out the importance of our sonship, what about the model of our being re-created in the image of Christ? What about the equally biblical model of the church's marriage to Christ? Indeed, what about the corporate dimension of salvation altogether? The *ordo* says nothing about the church as such, or about worship, or about the sacraments. It says nothing about covenants. And, unbelievably, for a summary of salvation, it has nothing to say about Jesus' death or resurrection. John Murray regarded these as a distinct area of theology from the *ordo salutis*. For him, the atonement and

resurrection were "redemption accomplished." The *ordo* was "redemption applied." But at least we must continually remind ourselves that the *ordo* is not an order of salvation, but an order of *part* of salvation. It is a selection of biblical topics for, again, a pedagogical purpose.

The pedagogy of the *ordo* asks us to see the Bible as a description of what God does in each individual heart. This is what many people have in mind when they ask the question, "How does God save me?" The *ordo* purports to describe what salvation is, in an orderly way. The death and resurrection of Jesus and the covenant history are, of course, the foundation of the *ordo*. But the *ordo* purports to describe the blessings that Jesus died and rose to bestow on his people.

Indeed, the *ordo* describes the blessings that God ordained for his people before the foundation of the world. According to Romans 8:29–30, the *ordo salutis* blessings of calling, justification, and glorification are the result of God's eternal foreknowledge and predestination.³ So the *ordo* focuses not only on the believer's experience, but also on God's eternal decree of election. The *ordo*, we may say then, is like an ellipse with two foci: God's eternal decree, and his inner work in the individual heart. The decree determines God's eternal purpose for each of us; the *ordo* describes the working out of that eternal decree in our individual experience.

How does the traditional distinction between law and gospel look from the perspective of the *ordo salutis*? Well, there isn't very much law in that picture, at least at first glance. All the items in the list (even faith and repentance) are gifts of God, blessings of salvation, instances of God's grace. We may say that the *ordo* presupposes law, for repentance is necessarily a repentance for transgressions of law. And although justification is by grace apart from our works, the righteousness of Christ imputed to us is measured by the law of God. Further, our progressive sanctification is a growing conformity to God's law. In a still deeper sense, God in the *ordo* is himself conforming to a law, namely his own decree. It isn't easy to separate law and gospel, for gospel always presupposes law. But on the whole, the *ordo* is a description of God's blessings,

not his curses. It offers sure promises, not threats. It declares those blessings from which nothing can separate us, those blessings secured by God's eternal election, which cannot be lost through disobedience to God's law.

HISTORIA SALUTIS

The second theological model of salvation regards it as a historical process. The *ordo*, of course, is historical in that all the events it describes, from effectual calling to glorification, take place in space and time. But the events described in the *ordo* recur over and over again in history. Noah and Abraham experienced the events of the *ordo*, as did Moses, David, Paul, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, you, and me. The second model, *historia salutis*, however, focuses on *non-recurring historical events*. God made a covenant with Noah, for example. He never made that covenant again, and he never will make it again. That covenant continues while the earth remains. Same for the covenants with Adam, Abraham, Moses, David, and Christ.

Another feature of the *historia salutis* method is that it sees salvation less in individual terms, more in *corporate* terms. The covenants are made, not only with the covenant mediators like Noah and Abraham, but through them with their families. By the time of Moses, the family of God had become a nation; and with the institution of the New Covenant, it became a nation made of many nations.

The corporate emphasis in the *historia salutis* leads to a focus on the *public* and *visible* aspects of salvation. The events described in the *ordo* are invisible, inward. They occur in the individual heart. The *historia salutis* occurs in public events. The covenants are publicly witnessed. God attests his covenant mediators by signs and wonders. The history includes deliverances from oppressors, victories in war, dramatic displays of divine power and grace. The crucifixion of Christ took place once for all, in a public setting; and his resurrection was visible to hundreds of witnesses.

Further, the history of salvation focuses on the visible church rather than, as the *ordo salutis*, on the invisible. In the Old Testament, the history of salvation is largely the history of

one nation, Israel. Israel is God's holy people. Scripture uses the language of election: God chose Israel alone of all the nations of the earth. But individually, and in their hearts, few Israelites were faithful to the Lord who delivered them from Egypt. In the New Testament, Christ gathers churches through the preaching of the Word and the power of the Spirit. But some are unfaithful; they apostatize. So New Testament writers warn members of the churches not to forsake the Lord. The *ordo salutis* analyzes the heart condition of church members and declares that those who are truly regenerate cannot apostatize. The *historia salutis* analyzes the empirical reality of the church in history. In its view, people enter the church through baptism, and they either continue in their allegiance to Christ or they renounce him.⁴

So *historia salutis* focuses on non-recurrent historical events of a corporate, public, and visible nature. As such, Scripture often describes it in *political* terms. The history of salvation is the coming of the kingdom, to allude to Herman Ridderbos's important volume by that title. God calls Israel to defeat by his power all the ungodly nations of Canaan. These are holy wars, and God promises victory to Israel when she is faithful to him. John the Baptist, and later Jesus, preached, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand." The apostolic church preached, "Jesus is Lord," *Kyrios Iesous*, a phrase with a deeply political meaning. The Roman emperors proclaimed their own lordship; the Christians proclaimed the lordship of Jesus. The Romans crucified Jesus, and later persecuted the church, because they thought Jesus presented himself as a rival Caesar. The Romans, of course, misunderstood Jesus' claims in some ways; but in other ways they were deeply insightful. The mission of the church was nothing less than to establish a new world order.

To summarize, *historia salutis* deals with salvation as a series of non-recurrent corporate, public, visible, political events. As a whole, it describes salvation as a movement of God to bring his lordship to bear on all the nations and institutions of the world.

As such, the *historia salutis* expresses a more obvious

integration between law and gospel than we saw in the *ordo salutis*. The gospel, the good news, is, "Your God reigns" (Isaiah 52:7). It is, "The time has come, the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). This is gospel, because it is good news. But it is also law, because it is the coming of a king, the imposition of his rule.

The *historia salutis* model is certainly a useful pedagogy, and, one can argue, it follows, more than the *ordo salutis*, the main emphases of the biblical writers themselves. But like the *ordo*, it tends to leave out certain things. If the *ordo* model fails to focus on redemptive history, so the *historia* model fails to focus on the decree of God or the salvation of individuals. Surely a full account of redemption should do both, because both are in Scripture. Although it would take too long to get into this, I am not impressed by attempts to read all the texts traditionally associated with subjective soteriology, such as John 3, Romans 8:29ff., and Ephesians 1:3–11 as redemptive history. I would rather develop a balance of various perspectives here.

In other writings,⁵ I have developed a "perspectival" approach to theology in which we can look at reality "normatively," as God's revelation, "situationally" as the course of nature and history under God's direction, and "existentially" as the experience of our personal relationship with God and the world. God's decree is the normative perspective, for it describes the rule that all of history follows. Individual soteriology is the existential perspective, redemption seen from the standpoint of the believer's subjectivity. And *historia salutis*, redemptive history, is the situational perspective, the objective environment in which salvation takes place. Neither is intelligible without the others, and each presupposes the others. So *historia salutis* cannot stand alone.

The *historia salutis* model also fails to do justice to the wisdom literature, as has often been noted. The Psalms don't fit easily into this model, for they certainly do more than narrate historical events. And as it is often presented, it is weak in the area of biblical ethics as well. Some of the more extreme proponents of the *historia salutis* model⁶ have insisted that in

preaching one should never apply biblical principles to the ethical lives of the congregation; one should simply set forth the narrative, the *historia*, and allow the Holy Spirit to make the applications himself. I think that is both unscriptural and a violation of the nature of the *historia* model. It is unscriptural, because much of the Bible is ethics: the law. And 2 Timothy 3:16–17 tells us that the very purpose of Scripture is that the man of God may be equipped for every good work: an ethical purpose. But this extreme redemptive historicism is also untrue to the actual nature of the *historia salutis*. For as I said earlier, the *historia* is a narrative of the coming of a king. Everything turns on our response to that king, whether in obedience or disobedience. That is ethics.

I have been told by extreme advocates of a redemptive-historical approach that the characters of biblical narratives are *never* intended as moral examples. That seems to me to be simply wrong. The characters of Scripture are not *mere* examples, but they certainly are examples for us. Hebrews 11 is clear that the heroes of the Old Testament are examples to Christians. And the concept of imitation, of God, of Christ, of the apostles (1 Corinthians 11:1), of pastors like Timothy (1 Timothy 4:12), of other church leaders (1 Timothy 3:1–13) is essential to biblical ethics. We are made in the image of God, renewed in the image of Christ. Of course, no mere human being is a perfect example for us. And, of course, our imitation must take the history of redemption into account. David is exemplary, but not as a brave boy who dares to attack a giant with a slingshot. In most cases, that behavior would be the sheerest foolishness. He is exemplary, because unlike Saul he takes seriously the responsibility of his anointing. It is in that way that he prefigures Christ and also serves as an example for those who trust in Christ.

I suspect that some advocates of a redemptive-historical approach are trying to maintain a law-gospel distinction such as that in the Lutheran *Formula of Concord*. On that approach, redemptive history is the narrative that shows what God has done in history to secure our salvation. As such it describes salvation as blessing, not law. But we have seen that such a

concept falsifies the very character of redemptive history, which describes not only a divine deliverance, but also the coming of a king with his law.

COMMUNICATIO SALUTIS

This third category is my own, but other authors have made the same point in different language. The omissions of the *ordo* and the *historia* models prompt the search for something more comprehensive. If man lives by *every* word of God (Matthew 4:4), and if *all* Scripture makes us wise unto salvation, then it is perhaps unwise to restrict our understanding of salvation only to God's redemptive decrees, our individual experience, or historical events. The wisdom literature and Psalms should also have their say, and biblical ethics. And, we might ask, if *ordo* and *historia* are sufficient, why so much repetition in the Bible? Four gospels, Kings and Chronicles, 2 Peter and Jude, Old Testament narratives given both in prose and in poetry, doctrinal repetition in the epistles. If salvation is only an *ordo*, then why doesn't God just give us the list and be done with it? And if it is only a series of historical events, then why did God not give us a pure narrative?

Part of the problem is that both the *ordo* model and the *historia* model focus, not on the actual nature of Scripture itself, but on events to which Scripture bears witness: events in eternity, in the individual, and in the world at large. It is not wrong to focus on those things. Scripture itself is not salvation; it bears witness to saving events outside itself. But the salvation it witnesses to is multifaceted, and its complexity is not easily grasped within the categories of decree, historical event, and individual experience, at least as these are defined by advocates of the *historia* and *ordo* models. At some point, we need to focus on Scripture as text, as the definitive, infallible *revelation* of salvation, the means God has chosen to *communicate* both *ordo* and *historia* and much else besides.

So my colleague Richard Pratt, in his introductory lectures on theological method, suggests that coordinate with *ordo salutis* and *historia salutis*, we need also to study the Bible as a group of literary units. In that study, genre plays a major role.

We come to understand Scripture not just as a dogmatic treatise (*ordo*) or a pure narrative (*historia*), but also as song, parable, epistle, apocalyptic, prophecy, love poem, court drama, confession, genealogy, lament, riddle, wisdom. All these genres, not just doctrinal propositions and narrative statements, communicate salvation to us, if Matthew 4:4 and 2 Timothy 3:15–17 are to be believed. Parables, for instance, make no historical claim, and they certainly are not dogmatic pronouncements. But they tell us truly and powerfully what the kingdom of God is like. The wisdom literature shows redeemed people how to live: not merely how to keep the letter of the law, but how the fear of the Lord works its way into all our conduct. The Psalms show, among other things, how a believer should express his emotions. It's not enough for Scripture to narrate the Exodus in prose. Salvation must also be narrated in verse, as already in Exodus 15 and frequently through the Psalms. We need models to express our praise, as well as our sadness, anger, and despair.

That too is salvation: a rich life of day-to-day personal interaction with God and his people. That blessing is part of the *ordo salutis*, under the category of sanctification. It is also part of the *historia salutis*, as we appropriate by God's grace the objective redemptive events of the past. But all this richness seems a bit too much to be easily accommodated to the other two models. So I suggest a third perspective: *communicatio salutis*, the whole biblical text as God's revelation to us of our covenant life in his fellowship. With a bit of rearranging of categories mentioned earlier, I can describe the three in a triadic pattern: *communicatio* is normative, for Scripture governs all of our conceptions about salvation. Then *ordo* is existential, with its focus on individual salvation, and *historia* is situational, with its focus on objective events. None of these is complete without the others. None can be fully or rightly understood without the others. *Ordo* and *communicatio* are parts of the *historia*, and *historia* and *ordo* are parts of the *communicatio*. *Historia* and *communicatio* are also parts of the *ordo*, for our subjective relationship to God feeds on redemptive history and all the other content of Scripture.

The *communicatio salutis* emphasizes that law and gospel are in an important sense coextensive. The whole Bible is gospel, good news. Its whole purpose is to present Christ. Jesus himself says, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me" (John 5:39). But the whole Bible is also law. It is authoritative, given to be believed and obeyed. God does not bring his good news to us as a mere offer. Rather, he commands us to accept it, on penalty of sin. As we saw in our earlier discussion of the coming of the kingdom, accepting the good news is our obligation. This point does not imply salvation by works. Our obedience to God's Word is not an act that merits the blessings of salvation. But it is an obligation, an obligation that comes with the good news and inseparable from it.

APPLICATIO SALUTIS

But we have talked so far of divine acts and revelations, not much about theology. That is odd, because our motivation for discussing the different models has been to determine how to carry on the work of theology. The Bible itself doesn't use an *ordo salutis* model, or a *historia salutis* model. It is simply the Bible. It is what it is, order, history, and much more. But we are not the Bible. We are theologians, people who teach, preach, and witness the content of Scripture.⁷ So we should seek to relate our previous discussions to the work of theology.

The nature of theology, I have argued,⁸ is to apply the whole Word of God to all aspects of human life. It is not simply to describe God's decrees, or individual soteriology, or the events of redemptive history, but to present the whole Bible, the whole *communicatio* as it applies to our lives and situations today. It will present law as needed, gospel as needed. Jesus focused on law with the Pharisees and the rich young ruler, on God's gracious gifts with the woman of Samaria and the man born blind. We need God's wisdom and his Holy Spirit to know what needs to be said at a given time (Colossians 4:6; 1 Peter 3:15).

Theologians need models, to be sure. But I think it is best

that they use a variety of models, rather than just one. If they must use one, it should be one that is open to the full, rich complexity of Scripture itself. I have proposed⁹ greater use of the model of divine lordship as a way of gathering diverse resources of Scripture together in a unity. For God's lordship includes his controlling power over all things (situational), his authoritative speech (normative), and his covenant presence with his people to bless and curse (existential). Yet no model, not even the lordship model, is identical to Scripture. All theological models abstract from the content of Scripture in order to teach that content to different audiences at different times. So the theologian should be one who is humble enough to know that he himself constantly needs the grace of God to accomplish anything for God. By God's grace, he needs to appropriate for himself the fullness of the *historia*, the *ordo*, and the *communicatio*, and then communicate that knowledge to others.

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Notes

1. I am following the account of John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955) and his *Collected Writings 2* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 161–317. When I was a student in Murray's class, he made "union with Christ" the second item on the list, following effectual calling, so that our calling was specifically into union with Christ. I believe that later in his career, however, he came around to the view that union with Christ was a broader concept, embracing all the elements of the *ordo* and more, so that the *ordo* as a whole is a description of our union with Christ. I believe this was a profound insight on Murray's part, not always noted in Reformed descriptions of the *ordo*.

2. Again, Murray is my guide. See his article, "Definitive Sanctification," in *Collected Writings 2*, 277–304.
3. This is the standard proof text for the legitimacy of the *ordo* as a theological principle. It does mention calling, justification, and glorification, three traditional elements of the *ordo*. I don't think, however, that the passage can be stretched to require us to use the *ordo* model. All it says is that those people whom God foreknows and predestines are the same people he calls, justifies, and glorifies. Consider the problems that would arise from taking "you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified" as a normative theological sequence in 1 Corinthians 6:11.
4. In my *Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 2002), 317–334, I distinguish between "historical" and "eternal" election. Historical election, like that of Israel in the Old Testament, does not guarantee that every elect person will be eternally saved. Eternal election, like that described in Rom. 8:28–39 and Eph. 1:3–14, does guarantee final salvation.
5. See my *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1987). I have summarized the essentials in my *Perspectives on the Word of God* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 1999).
6. I have in mind here many articles in the publication *Kerux*.
7. I don't deny that there is theology of a sort in Scripture itself. Each biblical writer applies past Scripture and present divine revelations to his own situation. So he functions in his own time both as Scripture and theologian.
8. Also in *Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*.
9. Especially in *Doctrine of God*, 21–115.



OH, IT'S OKAY—WE'RE UNDER GRACE.