

Distinct but Inseparable Series, No. 1
“Historia Salutis and Ordo Salutis”

Romans 3:21-26

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I am reading vv. 21-26, but I am primarily interested in vv. 25 and 26.

Text Comment

v.25 The second half of verse 25 is a difficult statement. There have been those who have taken it to mean that the sins of believers in the ancient epoch were not forgiven or not as thoroughly forgiven as they are now that Christ’s atonement has been accomplished. But nowhere else is such a thing taught in the Bible and it is perfectly obvious that God did forgive sin in the ancient epoch. The most wonderful statements concerning God’s forgiveness found in the Bible are found in the first 39 books; what we call the Old Testament. It is there we read that God separates our sins from us as far as the east is from the west, that he remembers them no more, that he buries them in the deepest sea, that he tramples them under his feet, and though our sins are scarlet they shall be made as white as snow! Abraham was justified by faith, as Paul will say a few verses later. So, what does Paul mean?

Combining this statement with two more from Paul’s sermons reported in the book of Acts (14:16; 17:30), statements which say much the same thing in slightly different ways, the sense of “divine forbearance” seems to be that because God was patient with sinners, because he did not immediately and visibly punish the sins of mankind, it became possible for men to think that God condoned sin and would never punish it. Truth be told God did not then and does not today visit the sins of men with commensurate punishment; certainly not in this world, certainly not visibly for all to see. But he would not be the just God that he is if he were to have passed over sins indefinitely. Paul does not mean that the sins of unbelievers were forgiven; only that they were not fully punished in this life; they did not receive the full measure of God’s wrath that they deserved.

But God was able to deal patiently with sinful mankind, *without compromising either his justice or his mercy*, precisely because it was always his intention to deal with sin decisively and finally at the cross. There, in the death of the Son of God, it would be demonstrated for all time that there could be no forgiveness, there could be no averting of God’s holy wrath, his justice, apart from a sacrifice sufficient to turn his wrath away, the sacrifice of his Son on the cross. This explains the phrases “God *put forward*” and God “*showed* his righteousness.” The cross was the ultimate public demonstration of both the justice and the mercy of God. The point of this statement, then, is not that the cross made it possible for God to forgive sins – though that is certainly true – or that the cross proved that God is merciful – though that is also true – but that the cross proved his justice, which is then the point of the next verse, verse 26, which concludes the thought. Verse 26 says that the cross demonstrates that God can forgive sinners *without in anyway*

compromising his justice. Their sin was punished, completely, terribly on the cross. And that punishment is either the means of God's forgiveness *or* the demonstration of what awaits those who do not have faith in Jesus Christ. If God's patience obscured his justice in time past, all such confusion was put to rest and forever when Christ went to the cross and made a final and perfect atonement for sin. As the next verse goes on to explain, in view of the cross there can be no doubt about God's justice *even when he forgives sinners.* That understanding of Paul's remarks is the consensus of the commentaries.

This morning I am beginning a new series of Lord's Day morning sermons, six or eight at the most, each of which will consider two related biblical truths, indeed two truths so intimately related to one another that many times throughout Christian history they have been confused with one another. My point in each sermon will be that this pair of truths can and must be *distinguished* from one another if either one of them is to be rightly understood *but at the same time*, they must never be *separated* from one another. *Distinguishable* but *inseparable*. This is a key insight of biblical theology which, in turn, makes it a key insight of believing life. I could greatly increase the number of topics to which this *distinguishable but inseparable* principle can be applied, but I will limit myself to some of the most important ones, though not even all of them. I am not, for example, going to deal with the unity of God, on the one hand, and the triple personality of God on the other. Those two doctrines can be accurately represented from the biblical material – that is, we know that Holy Scripture teaches us that there is but one God and we know that Holy Scripture teaches us that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The two doctrines are certainly distinct, distinguishable: one is not the same as three! But, they may never be separated from one another. They exist in such intimate relation to one another that their individual meaning absolutely depends on that inseparability. There is but one God. *That* is biblical truth. God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *That* is biblical truth. But God is both *at one and the same time*. If those two facts about God are separated from one another, each must be fatally corrupted. And, of course, that has often happened and intentionally or not, Christians have come to believe either in three gods or a god of but one person. *Even if they are confessing the triune God, in fact, they are believing in either three Gods or a God of a single person.*

We might say the same thing about the deity of Jesus Christ and his humanity. We know who God is and we know what a man is. The Bible teaches us the deity of Jesus Christ and the Bible teaches his authentic, genuine humanity. It is maintaining the inseparability of these two distinct truths that has always been the church's challenge or, better, the church's problem. Most Christians, even believers in believing churches, if truth be told, think of Jesus Christ more as a superman than as the God/Man the Bible teaches him to be: fully the infinite God, fully a finite man at one and the same time. You see my point. Each doctrine can be defined accurately from the biblical data. *Jesus Christ is God; Jesus Christ is a man.* But if we do not hold those doctrines together, if we allow them to be separated from one another – in thought or in life – each doctrine is corrupted and becomes something less than what we are taught in Holy Scripture. But those distinct but inseparable truths are ones we have often talked about before. I want us to consider that principle – distinguishable but inseparable – with regard to some other important biblical perspectives.

So, this morning I want to begin with two other distinct or distinguishable biblical doctrines and two corresponding historical realities that also must never be separated from one another in our

thinking or in the practice of our faith. What I am after in these sermons is a biblical mind, a habit of thought, a perspective of faith that keeps us living in the tension of biblical truth and biblical experience. As I said, this habit of distinguishing but not separating, is fundamental not simply to right thinking but to right living, not only to an accurate understanding of the Bible's teaching of particular doctrines but to the right practice of them in our lives. We are not talking about theoretical issues here, but about how we are to understand our place in the world and how we are to live out our faith in Jesus Christ.

This morning then these two distinct but inseparable truths and historical realities: *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*, the history of salvation and the order of salvation. Through the ages other terms have been used for these biblical teachings and these two horizons of the Bible's teaching of salvation, but I think this way of stating the distinction, though quite new, is most helpful and useful. The first use of these two Latin phrases *as a matched pair* is found in the work of the Dutch Reformed theologian of the 20th century, Herman Ridderbos. *Ordo salutis*, the order of salvation, as a theological term goes back much earlier, at least to the 18th century, and quickly became standard in both Lutheran and Reformed theology. But *historia salutis*, the history of salvation, matched with *ordo salutis*, the order of salvation, is found first in a Ridderbos essay first published in 1957. *If you would be a theologian, even such a theologian as any interested, serious Christian ought to be, the accurate definition and understanding of terms is essential.* And here are two important terms.

Ordo salutis refers to the experience of salvation in a believer's life, the distinct acts that occur as the saving grace of God penetrates a person's life in his or her own space and time. Think about how the Bible describes the salvation of a sinner. There is the new birth, also referred to as the new heart or new creation, the radical transformation of the inner life from which comes faith in Jesus Christ. There is, then, through that faith, the believer's justification, the forgiveness of his or her sins and acceptance with God. There is also sanctification, the transformation of a believer's behavior and his or her growth in the grace and the knowledge of God that leads to moral improvement. Then, skipping to the end of the process, there is glorification, when, at the resurrection, at the return of Christ, the process of salvation is completed when the believer is made forever perfect in body and soul. That is the history of anyone's salvation from beginning to end. Every saved sinner is born again, justified, sanctified, and will be glorified. That order of salvation, with many variations of course, is the way salvation is described in Christian theology. There are these steps and they occur in an order, the *ordo salutis*. Paul famously offers a somewhat condensed order of the steps of salvation in Romans 8:30: "those he predestined he also called and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified." *Ordo salutis*.

Now, if you study Christian theology you will know that the *ordo salutis* is more complicated than what I have just described. After all, the Bible uses a lot of different terminology and there have always been debates as to how one term relates to another, whether the same thing is being described or something different, and debates about the order in which the steps occur. For example, as we just read from Romans 8:30, the Bible talks about God's *calling* sinners to himself. You find that word *calling* frequently in the New Testament's exposition of salvation. Is that calling the same thing as the new birth or is it something else? Or think of adoption into God's family, which is another way our salvation is described in the Bible. Is adoption the same

thing as justification – in Reformed theology for several centuries after the Reformation adoption was discussed under the topic of justification by faith – or is adoption a separate step in the *ordo*? Some theologians have a very simple *ordo*; others a much more complicated one. And, of course, the *ordo* is different depending upon how one understands salvation. For an Arminian, for example, faith comes before the new birth; for a Calvinist it comes after, and so on. Nevertheless, we know that salvation takes place in steps and stages and that one thing follows another. We are forgiven before we are made perfect and so on. So, there is an *ordo salutis*.

But how does all of this – what happens in the salvation of a particular individual in his or her time and space (the new birth, justification, sanctification, and so on) – how does all of this relate to what Christ did, once for all, on the cross and in his resurrection from the dead? By *historia salutis*, the history of salvation, Prof. Ridderbos meant *that*: the once for all accomplishment of salvation by Jesus Christ. That took place nearly 2,000 years ago; it happened but once. But salvation is beginning, continuing, and even, so far as this world is concerned, ending every day all over the world in the lives of countless human beings. How is that related to what Jesus did once and for all two thousand years ago?

Interestingly and importantly, both what Christ did long ago and what God's grace does to and for us in our own time and space *are called salvation in the Bible*. Peter can say that we were *saved* by the precious blood of Christ" and Paul can say, "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you *will be saved*." In fact, the author of Hebrews can further say that Christ is coming again to bring *salvation* to all who are waiting for him. So, we can think of salvation as what Christ did for us 2,000 years ago, or what God is doing in us and for us today, or what he will do to us and for us when Christ comes again. But obviously those are not the same things. They may all be salvation in its different respects, but we aren't *redeemed* when we believe in Jesus or when Christ comes again; we were *redeemed* when the Lord died on the cross and came out of the tomb. In the same way, we weren't born again when Christ died on the cross; we were made new creatures in Christ when the Holy Spirit transformed our hearts.

Salvation has a once-for-all dimension and a personal, experiential dimension. The once-for-all Ridderbos called *historia salutis* – Christ's death and resurrection – the personal, experiential is *ordo salutis*, the new birth, justification, sanctification, and glorification. Christian theology, of course, always understood salvation as having these different horizons: the cross and the resurrection, on the one hand, and the work of God's grace in the individual heart and life on the other. But until Ridderbos there wasn't such a simple way to refer to these two horizons: *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*.

Now it is perfectly clear in the Bible that Christ's once for all work, the *historia salutis*, is the foundation of the *ordo salutis*. In other words, our forgiveness and the transformation of our lives happens *because of the cross and the resurrection*. The writers of the New Testament make that unmistakably clear. In fact, the relationship between Christ's work *for* us long ago and Christ's work *in* us in our lives today is so immediate and so impossible to disentangle or separate, that sometimes in the New Testament the biblical writer moves from one to the other so artlessly it almost seems as if the two horizons are being merged. Think of a passage like this one from Titus 3:

“But when the goodness and lovingkindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit...”

“When the goodness and lovingkindness of God appeared” is certainly a reference to the incarnation – the Son of God’s appearance in the world as a man – and his suffering and death on the cross, but “regeneration” and “renewal” obviously refer to what happens in our personal lives in our own space and time. Here it sounds as if we were renewed when Christ came and died for sinners, though, in fact, in our case some 2,000 years separate the two events. Or take this from Romans 5:

“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.”

Well, we take Paul’s point naturally enough, but you and I weren’t “weak” when Christ died for the ungodly. You and I didn’t even exist when Christ died for the ungodly, and we wouldn’t for another 2,000 years! And Paul goes on in the same vein:

“For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, *shall we be saved* by his life?”

Again, he writes as if time had stood still, as if past and present were one, as if we were present in the world when Christ died on the cross, and as if we were reconciled to God *at the moment of his death*, not when we believed in Christ two thousand years later. This collapsing of the *historia salutis* and the *ordo salutis* is characteristic of biblical teaching and reminds us of how intimate and necessary is the relationship between them: the first – the cross – leading inevitably to the second – our new birth, our faith in Christ, our justification and forgiveness, our sanctification, and our glorification. In a typical passage in 2 Corinthians 5 Paul can say that Christ reconciled us to himself and then turn to his audience and say, “We implore you...be reconciled to God.” Past and present together; once for all in the past and the exercise of faith in the present: *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*.

What Scripture makes clear is that all that has happened and will happen to us who are being saved was already present in the Savior’s atonement as a seed that would spring to life and flower and bear fruit in due time. These two historical horizons – past and present – are certainly distinguishable, but in the Bible, they are inseparable. The one entails and explains the other; without the one we cannot explain or account for the other. In fact, we cannot explain or understand either event – the cross or the grace of God in a person’s life – without both together, very different as each is in its own way.

These biblical doctrines, these historical events, these horizons of God’s grace have, of course, often been separated and always with fatal effect. For example, there have always been and there are in increasing numbers today those who want to believe that Christ’s death and resurrection have saved the world *full stop*. For them it is not necessary that a sinner be reborn, justified, or sanctified. *Historia salutis*, Christ’s once-for-all accomplishment is enough. This is one form of universalism that is again making its way into the church in our time. Christ saved everyone, no

matter what happens or does not happen in that person's life in this world. On the other hand, there are as many who have imagined that some form of personal response, some form of faith or good works – whatever they imagine the *ordo salutis* to be – is enough for God and that Christ's death on the cross, whatever it was for and whatever it may have meant, was not necessary for anyone's salvation. God can simply forgive our sins. He didn't have to punish them at the cross – *in other words they deny precisely what Paul asserts in Romans 3:25-26, that the cross made it possible for God to be just in justifying or forgiving the sins of his people*, that without the cross a holy God could not forgive our sins.

I've been reading a fascinating new study of Benjamin Franklin's religious life and thought. From the time he was a young man he had come to believe that moral virtue was the true and only purpose of religion. He believed in God; he believed in heaven – for the virtuous – he may have believed in hell. He even had something of a conversion experience that served to convince him to pursue moral virtue. So, there is in Franklin's thought some form of *ordo salutis* – think of it as conversion, sanctification, and heaven for the worthy. But there is no *historia salutis*: no incarnation, no cross, and no resurrection as the foundation of salvation or of true human goodness. Multitudes of Americans have followed Ben Franklin in thinking of salvation as the result of human moral effort and not the intervention of God. All *ordo*; no *historia*!

So much depends upon both the distinction between the once-for-all accomplishment of Christ and the salvation of sinners in their own space and time *and* the inseparable relationship between them. For one thing, it unifies the Bible and ensures that we will read the first 39 books of the Bible as Christian scripture. The cross and the resurrection may stand in the middle of history, but the application of them to human lives moves backward and forward with equal ease. In the same way that the cross lies behind us as the foundation of our salvation it lay before believers in the ancient epoch as the foundation of their salvation. God *was to deal* with their sin as *he has dealt* with ours in the death and resurrection of his son.

And so, it is that all the aspects of the *ordo salutis* familiar to us from the New Testament were already the experience of believers in the ancient epoch. The new birth or the new heart, the forgiveness of sins or justification by faith, sanctification or the transformation of life, and the hope of eternal life: these were the commonplaces of believing experience before the incarnation as they have been the commonplaces of believing experiences ever since. Jesus and his apostles used the OT repeatedly to explain precisely how salvation happens in an individual life and they could do that because salvation was the same thing then as it is now, founded as it was on the cross and the resurrection, even if those events had not yet occurred. They were certainties in God's plan and purpose and so could function prospectively as they now function retrospectively.

But, more than unifying the Bible, this interplay between *historia salutis* and *ordo salutis*, between Christ's once-for-all accomplishment and its application to individuals in their own personal history, *is fundamental to our own understanding, appreciation, and experience of salvation*. It is this distinction of these two horizons of salvation but, at the same time, the inseparability of them *that guards and preserves the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ in our salvation*. What Christ did for us 2,000 years ago is the reason for everything in our salvation today. If we have been born again, if new life has been planted in our souls, if we are new

creations *that is because of Christ*, because of what he did for us. “If anyone is *in Christ*, he is a new creation,” Paul says. Moreover, the forgiveness of our sins, our justification, Paul says, is because of what Christ did for us on the cross. We are, says the apostle, justified *by his blood*. Justification takes place in our lifetime, when we believe in Jesus, but it is by the blood of Christ shed long ago. What about the transformation of our lives, our sanctification? Paul reminds us in 1 Cor. 1 that Christ became to us sanctification and redemption. And then he says in Romans 6 that we died to sin and rose to new life because Christ did that for us. And we could go on and on. No wonder Paul – who spent so much time teaching us about justification and sanctification – the experience of salvation in each believer’s life – could summarize his entire message simply as “the word of the cross.”

You and I never met Jesus Christ in the flesh. We weren’t present in the world when he died and rose again. We never saw him, we never heard his voice. But absolutely everything, every part and parcel of our salvation is because he died and rose again *for us* those long years ago. The Bible teaches us what Christ did and why. It also teaches us how salvation happens in a human life; what it entails in our lives in this world and in the world to come. We can understand both things because they are taught so comprehensively and so clearly in the Bible. Explaining precisely *how* what Christ did long ago produces what happens in our lives today is not so simple. That is in fact one of the most difficult parts of Christian theology and why there are so many arguments about it. But that these two different things, these two very different things – the cross and the empty tomb, on the one hand, and the forgiveness of sins and the transformation of life on the other – I say but that these two different things must never be separated from one another could not possibly be taught more clearly or emphatically in the Bible.

Your salvation, every part of it, every step, from the new birth to your being made perfect in heaven, from the forgiveness of your sins to the transformation of your life comes to pass because Jesus Christ died on the cross for you and rose again from the dead for you. Two different times, two different places, two different events, two different dimensions of salvation, but never to be separated from one another. They can be and must be distinguished, but they must never be separated. Only in this way will Jesus Christ always be honored, loved, and served as our Savior from sin and death in our hearts and our lives!