

Church & Scripture 2

I. Introduction

During the Middle Ages, the fourfold interpretation of Scripture became the dominant paradigm. John Cassian (mid-5th century) said that when you see "Jerusalem" mentioned in the Bible, there are four different senses that should be understood:

literal	Jerusalem
allegorical (typological)	church
tropological (moral)	soul
anagogical (spiritual)	heaven

The tendency was to disconnect the latter three senses from the literal, historical sense. During the later Middle Ages, many theologians began to question some of the flighty interpretations that resulted. The Reformation insisted that the literal sense was the only true sense of Scripture--but this did not result in the elimination of the other three senses. Rather, they continued to utilize typology and moral application, and even resorted to allegory at times; but they always grounded these interpretations in the literal, historical sense.

Turn to Confession of Faith 1.9:

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture is the Scripture itself: and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any Scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it must be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly.

The Westminster Divines insisted that each text of Scripture has but one sense. You cannot say that in one sense it means one thing, but in another sense it means another. But, notice how they put it: they speak of the true and full sense of Scripture. To say that the Scripture has one meaning is not to say that there are no complexities about the meaning of Scripture. They are simply insisting that when you have finished unpacking the true and full sense of any Scripture, you will see that there is one meaning. Scripture does not contradict itself.

II. The Covenant Theology of the Westminster Standards

Part of the reason why the Reformers rejected the fourfold sense was because of the development of a more historical approach to the Scriptures. One of the leading emphases on humanist scholarship in the late Middle Ages and Reformation era was the study of ancient texts in their original languages. The result was greater attention to history. For the sake of time constraints, I will present only a condensed sketch of that history.

One of the first and greatest results of this emphasis on history was the rediscovery of the biblical conception of covenant. By the seventeenth century,

Reformed theology had begun to integrate a covenantal understanding of redemptive history into their theology. The Westminster Standards again provide the model:

Can anyone tell me what the [ordo salutis](#) is?

Election
 Effectual Calling/Regeneration
 Faith and Repentance
 Justification
 Adoption
 Sanctification
 Glorification

It is interesting to me that the Confession does not follow this pattern. Instead, the Confession starts with election, and then moves to [historia salutis](#). The Confession is concerned to ground the logical order of salvation in the history of salvation. Or, as John Murray has put it, the *application* of redemption is grounded in the *accomplishment* of redemption.

The Confession of Faith

- Chapters 1-2** God and his Word.
Chapter 3 The Decree
Chapters 4-9 The History of Salvation (Creation, Fall and Redemption)
Chapters 10-13 God's Work in the Application of Redemption (Note especially that sanctification is not tied to justification, but to effectual calling; sanctification is not dependent upon justification, but is parallel with it.)
Chapters 14-24 Man's Response in the Application of Redemption
Chapters 25-31 The Church
Chapters 32-33 The End

The Confession tends to divide between the individual and the church, with the church only mentioned in Chapter 25. The Catechisms, however, have a much cleaner structure.

The Shorter Catechism

- Q 1-3** Introductory
Q 4-38 What man is to believe concerning God
Q 4-8 God and his decree
Q 9-28 The History of Salvation ([historia salutis](#))
Q 29-38 God's Work in the Application of Redemption ([ordo salutis](#))
Q 39-107 What duty God requires of man
Q 39-81 The Ten Commandments

Q 82- 107 The way of salvation ([*via salutis*](#))--faith, repentance, and means of grace

(The Larger Catechism blends the [*via*](#) and the [*ordo*](#) in an attempt to show how they fit together.)

So back in the 17th century, we see an emphasis on grounding the application of redemption ([*ordo salutis*](#)) in the accomplishment of redemption ([*historia salutis*](#)). But the pastoral challenges of the 17th and 18th centuries often blurred that emphasis. A tendency to emphasize individual conversion pre-empted the older covenantal understanding of the Reformers, resulting in an over-emphasis on the [*ordo salutis*](#) (application of redemption), without sufficient attention to how it is grounded in the covenant.

III. The Effects of a "Runaway [*Ordo*](#)"

I will indulge in only one historical example. We often hear of the glories of the Great Awakening under Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield. We tend not to hear as much about what happened in the next generation. We don't hear about it, because it's not as pleasant! The emphasis on the importance of individual conversion led some pastors to teach that baptized children were not really in the covenant. Joseph Bellamy, one of Edwards' disciples, declared, "Your baptism gives you not the least right to any one of the peculiar blessings of the covenant of grace...but you are now, this moment, in fact, as liable to be struck dead and sent to hell by the divine justice, as any unbaptised sinner in the land." How different is this from the traditional Reformed doctrine, which stated that baptized persons had a "right to and interest in the covenant"--which right they should exercise by faith. The difference is simple. Bellamy viewed the covenant in terms of election. If you are not elect, then you have no right whatsoever to any of the peculiar blessings of the covenant of grace. But traditional Reformed theology insisted that baptism did in fact convey the rights of the covenant--along with the obligations!

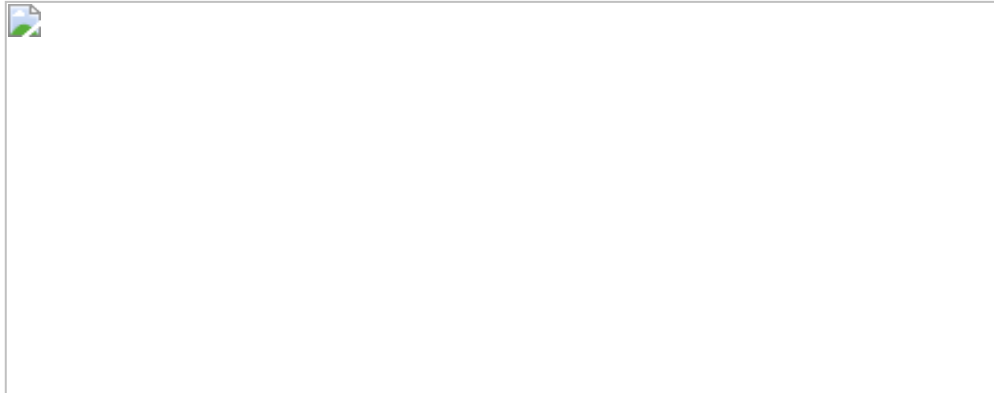
The result of this shift in New England after Edwards is instructive. In 1735 there were 23 Baptist churches in New England (12 in Rhode Island!). By 1800 there were nearly 350 Baptist churches in New England (140 in Massachusetts alone). The ministers and members of these Baptist churches had come out of the Congregational churches--and in their writings, they attributed their Baptist convictions to the teachings of Edwards, Bellamy and others regarding the covenant, and their emphasis on conversion. After all, if baptism conveyed nothing, what was the point of baptizing infants?

The heirs of the Puritans were becoming Baptists. But the Presbyterians from Scotland were much more resistant. There are lots of reasons for this, some probably cultural, but there is also a doctrinal reason. Well into the 19th century, Presbyterians retained a higher view of the church and a stronger understanding of the covenant. Rejecting both the New England view that baptism accomplished nothing, and the Roman Catholic view that baptism effected salvation, Presbyterians insisted that baptism was still a means of grace that God promised to use to save his people. (See my paper ["Visible Saints and Notorious Sinners"](#) to learn more.)

IV. The Development of Reformed [Biblical Theology](#)

I think that it was because this covenantal understanding was retained longest in the Presbyterian church, that it was Presbyterians that recovered the importance of the [historia salutis](#) (the history of salvation). In fairness, it should be noted that it was not American Presbyterians--but a Dutchman (Geerhardus [Vos](#)), and one of his students from Scotland (John Murray) that laid the groundwork for the [redemptive-historical](#) renaissance in the 20th century.

[Vos](#)'s central insight was that the work of Christ is [eschatological](#). The accomplishment of redemption ([historia salutis](#)) is the last-days [eschatological](#) judgment of God coming upon Christ. (See diagram below). Those who are united to Christ already share in the blessings of the age to come even as we live our lives in this present age.



What does this mean for our theology? [Vos](#)'s insights have been worked out more fully in the Netherlands by such Dutchmen as Herman Ridderbos and Klaus Schilder, and in the United States by John Murray and Richard Gaffin (and as Andy pointed out a couple weeks ago, they are spreading out even to the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville!). One of the most exciting examples is in the area of sanctification. In the [ordo salutis](#) model (which as we've seen is not supported by the Westminster Confession), sanctification flows from justification. The tendency is to view sanctification simply as a progressive putting to death of sin. Properly grounded in effectual calling (union with Christ) we recognize that there are two aspects to our sanctification. There is a progressive aspect, but there is also a definitive aspect. You ARE holy. In Christ, you have been definitively sanctified. Because the last days judgment of God has come upon his church, God has made you pure and holy in his Son. The progressive aspect of sanctification is simply becoming who you already are! This [eschatological](#) perspective also eliminates the "two-self" doctrine which sees my new nature warring with my old nature. Instead, we see that the old man is dead--crucified with Christ--and that we partake of the new creation in him (Rom 6:6; 2 Cor 5:17).

A [redemptive-historical](#) understanding of Scripture enables us to keep the individual and the corporate aspects of salvation together. Individual conversion is important--but it occurs in the context of the church.

Earlier I introduced the term [via salutis](#) (the way of salvation) when talking about the Shorter Catechism. Here's the simple way of understanding the relationship between these things.

- [Historia salutis](#) (history of salvation) describes how God accomplished our redemption in history, especially through the work of Jesus Christ.
- [Ordo salutis](#) (order of salvation) describes the logical relationship between the benefits of the application of redemption.

- [Via salutis](#) (way of salvation) answers the question "What must I do to be saved?"

Selected Bibliography

- Geerhardus Vos, *The Pauline Eschatology*
- Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology*
- Geerhardus Vos, *Grace and Glory* (a collection of sermons)
- John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*
- Richard Gaffin, *Resurrection and Redemption*
- Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*
- Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*
- Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery*
- S. G. De Graaf, *Promise and Deliverance* (a four volume walk through the Bible to help Sunday School teachers show their students how the Scriptures point to Christ)

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