

I. Introduction: Paul's Warning About Other "Gospels"

In his letter to the Galatians, the Apostle Paul writes, *I marvel that you are turning away so soon from Him who called you in the grace of Christ, to a different Gospel, which is not another; but there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed.* (Gal. 1:6-9)

The Greek word used for "accursed" here is "anathema" and it carries a much stronger semantic impact in Greek than it does in English; in this context it is a call for God to damn those who provide a false gospel. This is stiff language, and it raises the question, *do we take the Gospel this seriously?* For Paul, the Gospel is a life-and-death matter. Some other questions also come to mind: *What is the true Gospel Paul was so emphatic to defend?* Answering this will be the focus of the remainder of this course, but it may be worth first asking, *how can we get the Gospel wrong?* Exploring this for a few minutes will underscore why we need to study the doctrine of salvation.

At a minimum, there are three ways Christians can get the Gospel wrong:

1. Mischaracterization. We do this by saying things like, "the Gospel is all about God's love," or "all about a personal relationship with Jesus," or all about individual and societal "transformation." There is some truth in these statements, but there is also gross oversimplification. What does it mean, for example, to say the Gospel is all about one thing or another? To characterize things in this way almost certainly will lead to distortions, erroneous notions, and ultimately a redefinition of the faith.

2. Truncation. We do this by taking a true aspect of the Gospel and narrowing it to be the primary or even exclusive focus. Salvation is complex. Scripture speaks about salvation as something God *has done* for us, *is doing* to us and *will do* for us. We typically correlate this threefold description to three categories of **justification, sanctification, and glorification**. Each major tradition of Christianity (Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox) acknowledge all three aspects in some way, but each goes on to fixate on a different particular aspect. When we overemphasize one aspect, it creates practical distortions in understanding the faith.

- *Protestants focus on what God has done in justification and Christ's atoning work on the cross.* This draws out God's grace and the assurance we have as believers in Christ Jesus, but if focused on exclusively it loses

Preparation

1. What would you identify as the key components of salvation in Christ Jesus?

Observation

2. What are three ways that we can get the Gospel wrong?

sight of the progressive aspect of Christian discipleship and lapses into antinomianism.

- *The Eastern Orthodox, on the other hand, focus heavily on glorification and how we will be transformed into the likeness of Christ.* The fixation on glorification—and with it, the emphasis of the Incarnation over the atonement—undercuts the relevance of the Christian life to the here and now. It can lead to moral indifferentism.
- *The Roman Catholics tend to fixate on sanctification, mingling it with justification and diminishing the prospect of glorification with the idea of purgatory.* Obscuring what God has done and will do, helps give Roman Catholicism a persistent sense of works righteousness. As such, it devolves into moralism and legalism.

3. Addition. This goes hand-in-hand with the previous two problems, usually in a subtle manner. Rarely will anyone come out and explicitly say that in addition to Christ one needs to do “X”. More likely they will say, “If you are not doing “X” (e.g., pursuing social justice or defending the unborn, etc.) then your commitment to the Gospel is in question. While the approach is different, the result is the same: the Gospel requires you to contribute something to your salvation; God does not do it all.

Much more can be said, but even what has been noted thus far is sufficient to show that we can get the Gospel wrong—seriously wrong—in several ways. It behooves us as Christians, therefore, to know the Gospel rightly. That is especially true in the contemporary world we live in. Decades ago, one could talk in our culture about the need to “get saved” and even if people were not terribly religious, they still had a sense of what that meant. There was a lingering cultural notion that somehow people needed to get right with God. Today, we cannot assume a Christian worldview on the part of those we interact with. We cannot assume that it is sufficient to tell people that they need to “make a decision for Christ.” They do not think there is anything that they need to be saved from. The Gospel, however, presumes a worldview radically different from what the world proposes. Consider the following:

- The Gospel assumes there is a God who created and transcends all things, as opposed to a god subject to limitations. By virtue of his transcendence and His absoluteness, He rightly has authority to judge all things.
- The Gospel assumes that there is a moral order to creation that is subject to this God and that mankind’s sins are an affront to Him personally rather than simply a reflection of our finiteness and imperfection.

Observation

3. What makes it hard for people to believe in the Gospel today?

- The Gospel assumes mankind cannot overcome its offense to God on its own, and thus needs a savior. The world, by contrast, sees people as able to overcome their imperfection by their knowledge, abilities, and will.

If we who have accepted Christ as savior are to be faithful witnesses to Him in the dark and dying world we live in, then we need to rightly understand the Gospel in its fullness, so as to more readily recognize how the Gospel challenges the presuppositions of our surrounding culture.

II. The Full Scope of Salvation

There is the tendency among Christians to lose sight of just how extensive our salvation is. We quickly say, “Jesus died for my sins on the cross,” but this too easily becomes cliché and misses the point that our salvation began in eternity past in the internal council of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and looks forward toward an eternal future in communion with Christ our Lord. Capturing this broader narrative should not merely make us more precise about doctrine: it should help us see better what our Lord is doing now, understand how we are to live in light of His work, and draw us closer to Him in amazement.

To better understand the full scope of salvation, we need to look at what is called the “order of salvation” (*ordo salutis*) The clearest articulation of this can be found in Romans 8:29-30:

For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

Theologians of different Christian traditions have differed over the specifics regarding the order of salvation, but the key thing is that the order is logical and lays out the relationships between the different aspects of salvation. Other texts in Scripture about additional facets of our salvation can be related to these specific elements, either in preceding or following. Over the course of centuries Reformed theologians have reasoned out the following order:

- (1) God’s *foreknowledge* of those He intended to save
- (2) The *predestination, election, and union with Christ* of God’s people
- (3) Their *regeneration and effectual calling* by the Holy Spirit
- (4) Their *faith and repentance*
- (5) Their *justification and adoption* applied
- (6) Their *progressive sanctification* in holiness cultivated and
- (7) Their *vindication and glorification* established.

Observation

4. What is the *ordo salutis*? What are some of the elements of the *ordo salutis*?

A cursory perusal of this list also shows that while there is a logical progression to this order, there is also a chronological progression. Theologians have typically differentiated the chronological progression from the logical with the term, *historia salutis* (history of salvation). Understanding the *ordo salutis* and the *historia salutis* together, along with the complex of events surrounding the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ Jesus, is what gives us the narrative arc of salvation.

III. The Goals and Approach of This Course

The foregoing discussion has established why we should study the doctrine of salvation. We now need to turn to how we will do this over the course of the next ten lessons. There are five goals for this course:

- **Knowledge.** The foundational element of this course is to provide a sense of the full scope of salvation, elaborating on the *ordo* presented here, along with an understanding of the terminology associated with this.
- **Apologetics.** As we be witnesses to those around us, a fuller understanding of salvation better equips us to address questions or misperceptions that our friends, family, neighbors, and co-workers have about the Christian faith.
- **Spiritual Health.** The distortions mentioned a moment ago are not mere academic notions; they affect how we live. Rightly understanding how salvation works enables us to better avoid going down wrong paths.
- **Sustaining Hope.** As Christians, we will inevitably experience suffering in this life. Understanding the full scope of salvation allows us to keep our eyes on the goal of our salvation and be able to cultivate hope.
- **Devotion.** By understanding the full scope of salvation, you hopefully will come to a deeper appreciation of what God has done for you, why He needed to do that, and how He is bring everything together for His glory.

The lectures will focus on the first of these goals, but reflection questions we will use either in class or on your own outside will explore the other goals.

The course is divided into three parts, revolving around the following questions:

- I. **Why did God save us?** This will cover the next two lessons and look at the how God's covenant with Adam established the goal of man's communion with God and then how Adam's fall rightly necessitated God's judgment from which we needed to be saved.
- II. **How did God save us?** The salvation that was accomplished for us did not just involve Christ alone, but all three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. This section, which will only be one week, will look

at how salvation as necessitating the crucifixion, the resurrection, and Pentecost.

III. How does God apply this salvation to us?

This will cover the remaining six lessons of the course and will go through in more detail the *ordo* and *historia salutis* just previewed.

Although this course will draw on writings and insights from various Reformed theologians, historical and contemporary, the primary texts we will use in this course will be the Westminster Standards, specifically, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. The Standards do an excellent job at laying out the doctrine of salvation with precision, clarity, and in detail. Having your own copy of the Westminster Standards will be useful, but subsequent lessons will provide a harmony of the texts of the Standards so that one can more readily compare how the Confession and the Catechisms address a particular topic.

Reflection

5. How have you seen people get the Gospel wrong? How did that affect their Christian walk?

6. How has this introduction to the *ordo salutis* affected your concept of salvation?

