

1. The Ordo Salutis

1. *What is understood under the ordo salutis, the “order of salvation”?*

The series of acts and steps in which the salvation obtained by Christ is subjectively appropriated by the elect. In Scripture σωτηρία, *salus*, has a double meaning, one more subjective and one more objective, according to whether it includes the act of saving or of being saved. In the first sense it naturally extends much farther than in the subjective appropriation of salvation. Christ is called σωτηρία not merely because He applies His merits but because He has likewise obtained them. His satisfaction was the principal act of salvation. In the second sense it is narrower in scope and in fact covers what one understands under the designation “soteriology.”

2. *What is further contained in the term ordo salutis, “order of salvation”?*

That the subjective application of the salvation obtained by Christ does not occur at once or arbitrarily. In the abstract, it would be possible for God to take hold of and relocate each one of the elect into the heaven of glory at a single point in time. He has His good reasons that He did not do this. There are a multiplicity of relationships and conditions to which all the

operations of grace have a certain connection. If the change came about all at once, then not a single one of these would enter into the consciousness of the believer, but everything would be thrown together in a chaotic revolution. None of the acts or steps would throw light on the others; the base could not be distinguished from the top or the top from the base. The fullness of God’s works of grace and the rich variety of His acts of salvation would not be prized and appreciated.

The opposite of all this is true. There is order and regularity in the application of salvation as well as in every other area of creation. The acts and operations each have their own fixed place, from which they cannot be uprooted. They are connected to each other from what follows and from what precedes; they have their basis and their result. Consequently, the Scripture gives us an ordered sequence (e.g., [Rom 8:28–30](#)). At the same time, this order shows us that even in what is most subjective the purpose of God may not be limited to the satisfaction of the creature’s longing for blessedness. If this were so, then the order that is slow and in many respects tests the patience of the children of God would be lost. But here, too, God works first of all to glorify Himself according to the principles of an eternal order and an immanent propriety.

3. *Does unanimity rule among the theologians in the identification of*

the different steps that belong to the order of salvation?

No, a great variety rules in sequence as well as in completeness. All do not enumerate the same steps. When they all have the same things, they are given in a different sequence. Different terms are used for one and the same thing.

4. Enumerate some points of difference that are important for proper differentiation.

- a) An important point is the varying and unclear definition of the concept of regeneration. For many theologians the locus on regeneration is completely lacking, although many federalists are an exception here. At the same time these theologians do of course know of regeneration, and its specific character has not escaped them entirely.

1. Some identify “regeneration” (*regeneratio*) with “conversion” (*conversio*). This is quite customary with the dogmatists of the 17th century. The Canons of Dort teach in chapters 3 and 4, article 11: “Furthermore, when God accomplishes His good pleasure in the elect or works true conversion in them ... He

not only powerfully illumines their mind by the Holy Spirit ... but by the effective power of the same regenerating Spirit, He penetrates to the inmost parts of the man, opens the closed heart ... infuses new qualities into the will, and makes the dead living ... (article 12) and this is that—so often proclaimed in the Holy Scriptures—regeneration, new creation, resurrection from the dead and making alive, *which God, without us, works in us.*¹ Owen also expresses himself in a similar way.

Some, however, sought to avoid the lack of clarity that may originate from this usage by a more precise distinction between two kinds of conversion. So Turretin makes mention of a double *conversio*. The first is habitual and passive. It consists in producing a habit or disposition of the soul: “Habitual or passive conversion occurs through the infusion of supernatural habits by the Holy Spirit.” The second conversion is called active and effective conversion. It is the exercising in faith and repen-

¹ Emphasis added by Vos.

- tance of the already implanted *habitus*: “Active or effective conversion occurs through the exercise of those good habits by which the acts of faith and of repentance are both given by God and elicited in man.” He then adds, however, that it is better to call the first kind of conversion “regeneration,” because it refers to the new birth by which man is renewed according to the image of his Maker, and to limit the term “conversion” to the second kind, since in it the activity of man is not excluded.
2. The majority by far summarize regeneration and conversion under the concept of internal calling. Wollebius says, “Particular calling is termed: (a) new creation, (b) regeneration, etc.” In the schools it is called (a) effectual election, (b) effectual calling, (c) internal calling. Accordingly, some speak first about calling, then about faith, then about conversion, so that calling apparently takes the place of regeneration (e.g., the Leiden *Synopsis*). Calling is often enough described as an implanting into Christ, a union with Christ, an indissoluble joining of the person of the elect with the person of the Mediator, all of them concepts that bring regeneration to mind clearly enough.
 3. Others take the concept of regeneration in a very wide sense, as almost completely synonymous with *sanctificatio*, “sanctification,” and under that notion understand the entire process by which the old nature of man is transformed into a new nature resembling the image of God. Calvin says (*Institutes*, 3.3.9), “Therefore, in a word, I describe *poenitentia* [repentance] as regeneration, of which the goal is none other than that the image of God, defiled and nearly wiped out in us by the transgression of Adam, is restored in us... And this restoration is not completed in one moment or in one day or one year; but with continual, yes, even slow steps God removes corruption from his elect.” Later we will see why this wider use of the term has a certain right.
 - b) Another important point that lacks clarity lies in the concept of calling. While for this concept some still have all the emphasis fall on the immediacy of the action and thus identify internal calling

with regeneration, others hold to the obvious thought that calling already presupposes a life and the capacity to hear, and so must be distinguished from the initial begetting of life.

- c) Also, the concept of *poenitentia*, “repentance,” is not always clearly distinguished. Sometimes this word is taken to mean long processes that accompany the whole of life here on earth, sometimes for instantaneous actions at a critical moment.

As seen above, Calvin identifies *poenitentia, regeneratio, sanctificatio*.

5. Does one also find here and there an attempt to divide the different stages of the way of salvation in an orderly manner?

Yes, we can find an example of that in the classification of Voetius. He distinguishes three kinds of acts of God as belonging to the application of salvation:

- a) Acts that only effect a change in our state in relation to God. To these belong *reconciliatio*, “reconciliation”; *justificatio*, “justification”; *adoptio*, “adoption as children.”
- b) Acts that are directed to the will of man with moral suasion but do not take hold or transform

inwardly and omnipotently, such as external calling and what belongs to it. Voetius calls these “moral acts.”

- c) Acts that bring about a real and inherent change in the subject. Regeneration, glorification, etc., are counted among them.

As we will see, the main features are drawn quite correctly here.

6. What distinctions must we make with a view to arriving at a clear overview of these different acts in their mutual connection?

- a) The first great distinction that needs to be kept in view is the one between *judicial* acts, which change a judicial relationship of man, and *re-creating* acts (in the widest sense of the word), which bring about a change in the actual condition of man. An act of the first kind, for example, is justification; one of the second kind is sanctification. The first kind changes the status; the second changes the condition of the one regarding whom or in whom it takes place.
- b) Another distinction of equally great importance teaches us to divide between what occurs *under*, and *in*, or *for* the consciousness of

the sinner. Some acts in the application of salvation derive their meaning completely from the fact that they are executed in the light of the consciousness, be it by God or by the man in whom God works. Others, by their nature, can only affect the deeper essence of man that does not appear in the light of the consciousness. Accordingly, they occur without man himself being able to understand and observe them. An example of this latter kind is regeneration. A sinner is as little conscious of his rebirth as a child is conscious of its birth, apart from the consequences by which it makes itself known. An example of the other kind is justification, consisting in a communication to the sinner's consciousness of acquittal and the merits of Christ.

- c) Next, one can distinguish between the removal of the old and the establishment of the new in man. Sin is not a mere lack. If it were this, it could suffice for the Holy Spirit to make up what is lacking, and the distinction in view here would make no sense. Sin, however, is more—a positive power that must be removed and destroyed—and in its place must be introduced a positively operating principle of good. Regenera-

tion, preferably, is an act that belongs to the establishment of the new. Repentance, by contrast, we can better reckon to the removal of the old, although here, as in the two earlier cases, we cannot sharply separate the two. Rather, these two—removing the old and establishing the new—accompany each other at every point of their way.

- d) Finally, one must carefully distinguish between the beginning, the sudden breakthrough, of an act of grace and its further impact and development. The beginning of God's work of grace always has something distinctive by which it is sharply delineated from the development that follows. Now, in a certain sense one can maintain that regeneration and sanctification are parts of a great process of renewal that begins where the Holy Spirit first lays a hand on someone and ends where the heaven of glory is reached. Still, regeneration and sanctification are essentially distinguished. No less different from each other are the initial crisis in the conscious life of man that one is accustomed to call conversion and the further killing of the old man that continues throughout the whole of life.

7. What may be established further concerning the relationship between these different groups?

- a) Our first principle is that the judicial relationships are the basis on which the moral acts of re-creation rest in their entirety. However, one should be completely clear what is intended here: it is not that justification as it takes place in the consciousness of the sinner must precede his regeneration in time. This would presuppose an impossibility. Justification surely occurs by faith, and faith as an expression of life in no way tolerates separation from the principle of life that is imparted in the essence of man. Believing without regeneration is no more conceivable than consciousness in a child without natural birth. So, in relation to time, the change of the unconscious condition certainly precedes the change in the conscious state. In contrast, it is completely otherwise if we ask about the logical relationship and put the question as follows: Is someone justified because he is regenerated, or is he regenerated because he will be justified? The answer here according to all of Scripture and according to the Protestant principle can only be the latter.

For God, justification in His view is the basis, regeneration the consequence. If wrath and a relationship of punishment continued to exist, no new life would be able to germinate. God cannot communicate subjective habitual grace unless objective satisfaction of His justice is offered with specific application to the individual person. And not only does God, in infusing habitual grace, have in view the judicial relationship, restored or to be restored, but also in his conscious justification the sinner receives the insight that all that is habitual, which is already or will be worked in him, has its basis and origin in acquittal for the sake of Christ. And, accordingly, in the consciousness of God and in the consciousness of the sinner what occurs outwardly in the sphere of justice precedes what occurs inwardly in his moral condition.

- b) It is equally necessary to hold firmly that for habitual grace, action on the unconscious essence precedes action on the conscious life. This is but an application of the general rule that what lies on the surface of life stems from the hidden impetus of the depth of life. From the root comes the mysterious life that is at work in the stem and the branches and

causes fruit to ripen. So, if we place regeneration and conversion, or regeneration and faith, next to each other, conversion and faith cannot be first in time; on the contrary, regeneration precedes. If one sometimes hears the opposite sequence defended, this rests on a misconception to which we will have to return later.

- c) One certainly needs to pay attention to the fact that the two distinctions, of acts that fall within the sphere of justice and acts that fall within the sphere of habitual grace, on the one hand, and of acts of grace that affect the root and acts of grace that affect the branches, on the other, do not run in parallel. Certainly, a saving act that falls in the judicial sphere is always a conscious act, in the original sense for the consciousness of God, in a derivative sense for the consciousness of the sinner. An act that produces habitual grace, however, is not always an act that works in the unconscious life. It can do so, and does, for example, in regeneration, but it need not do that and does not in sanctification and glorification. These two distinctions intersect each other.

8. What questions need to be addressed regarding each step of the

order of salvation?

- a) Is this particular act of God a judicial act or an act that effects subjective grace?
- b) If the latter, is it an act that works beneath or in the consciousness?
- c) Is its purpose the removing of the old man or the bringing to life of the new man?
- d) Is it an act that stands at the beginning of a long development and produces a crisis, or does it include a long series of similar acts?
- e) Is it an act that is executed by God immediately or an act in which He works mediately?

9. Are the distinctions made here based on Scripture or are they merely human attempts to bring about an order in the multiplicity of phenomena of the work of grace?

They are based on Scripture and not only have practical significance but also reflect real relationships that exist between the different virtues of God. Therefore, one cannot change them without the greatest danger, for what one changes is not a subsidiary viewpoint, a perspective, but the fundamental conception of religion. That can be shown in particular on each of the points advanced above.

Concerning the first, the distinction between judicial actions and re-creating

acts of grace, on this point the Roman Catholic and the Protestant churches diverge. The former thinks that the changed judicial relationship must have for its basis a change in the moral condition of the sinner, and so with that reintroduces the principle of justification by works that the Apostle Paul so powerfully combated. The latter maintains that all improvement and conversion must have acquittal in God's tribunal as its starting point, and so, on the contrary, makes works a consequence of justification. In the first case, man gets part of the honor for himself; in the second, God gets all the glory. But danger threatens here not only from the side of historic Roman Catholicism. There is a neo-Romanism that unconsciously honors the same principle. The endeavor is fairly common at present to deny the necessity of change in the judicial sphere as a condition for moral improvement. Almost all the emphasis falls on the ethical, on the reformation of man, as if there is no need to take account of God's justice. This is the opposite of antinomianism; it is a denial rather than a misuse of free grace. The character and capacities of man are elevated as a measure of the favor of God, and moral perfection is insisted on with full force. One would characterize this direction as moral legalism and distinguish it, as such, from the ceremonial legalism of the Jews and the Roman Catholic legalism that coincides with it. Under the appear-

ance of holding high the moral ideal, it is in fact active in attacking this ideal at its heart, for only one who has a thorough sense of the guilt and inner accursedness of evil can possess an unadulterated appreciation and admiration of the good, which is a normal consequence of the former. Whoever preaches transformation without justification does not have the right conception of sin and improvement. He reckons only with the external side of sin under a utilitarian aspect; its deeper spiritual significance totally escapes him. By far the greatest part of the ethics presently preached from pulpits is of this kind. It demands a sanctification under which the indispensable foundation of justification is utterly lacking. From this, in part, is to be explained the ease with which some, despite the clear witness of Scripture, eliminate the doctrine of eternal punishment. The foundation of this doctrine is lacking in the conscience—namely, a deep sense of the necessity that God's justice be maintained. And the end of all this will be the weakening and falsifying of all moral distinctions.

It is almost superfluous to show that Scripture never loses sight of the order indicated above against Roman Catholicism and neo-Romanism. Paul's entire teaching rests on this distinction between sanctification and justification. A Christian loves much after much has been forgiven him, not the reverse: that much has

been forgiven him because he loves much. The lost son received forgiveness before anything else. And the same thought recurs everywhere, so strongly in Paul that his opponents could take the occasion to hurl at him the recrimination of antinomianism (cf. [Rom 6:1ff.](#)), and he was forced to show expressly how moral transformation infallibly followed imputation—indeed, how in one and the same baptism both were pictured and the images of both fused together.

Also on the second point, Scripture does not leave us in the dark. It always distinguishes between what occurs *beneath* and *in* the consciousness. [Romans 8:28–30](#) presents the chain of salvation with its different links. The practical purpose that the apostle has with this is to strengthen the believer in the consciousness that future glory cannot elude him. In line with that, he now enumerates precisely the acts of salvation that fall within the light of the consciousness, which enable looking forward and backward—namely, calling and justification as lying between election and glorification. This is a proof, therefore, of the genuinely biblical character of the distinction made, for what moves Paul here to limit himself to calling and justification is nothing other than the principle of that distinction that while some operations of grace are recognizable by the consciousness, others are not.

This principle, too, is of utmost

weight. Whoever doubts that, along with the influence of grace in the conscious life, God's acts of grace intervene much more deeply and affect the inner essence of man, can do so only on the basis of a superficial view of sin. To allow everything to terminate in conscious life presupposes a Pelagian view of sin and all that is connected with it. What occurs in the consciousness naturally works mediately, persuasively, countering resistance. Only insofar as it surges from the inside out is grace entirely grace, a supernatural operation of power, an exclusive work of God.

The distinction between foundational acts of grace at the outset, which intervene in a creative manner at critical moments, and the further ongoing uniform activity of grace is in no need of demonstration as scriptural. It is necessary, however, to emphasize that distinction because here, too, some seek to substitute slow development from natural causes for a sudden change worked by God.

10. What points must be examined in general before we proceed to discussing the particular acts of grace?

- a) The relationship between these operations of grace and the work of the Holy Spirit in the sphere of nature.
- b) The relationship between the oper-

ations of special grace and common grace, *gratia communis*.

- c) The relationship between special grace and Holy Scripture.
- d) The relationship between special grace and the person of the Mediator and the person of the Holy Spirit.

11. *What is the nature of the relationship between the work of the Holy Spirit in the sphere of nature and that of grace?*

- a) A relationship of *analogy* or *correspondence*. In the kingdom of nature the Holy Spirit has His specific task, as well as the Father and the Son. He is the person who by His working leads things to their destined goal and development—who creates and maintains life in the realm of the organic, the rational, the reasonable. Likewise, in the kingdom of grace the Holy Spirit is the one who leads the elect sinner to his destined goal and development by creating and maintaining new life in him.
- b) A relationship of *subordination*. What God does for someone through the Holy Spirit in the sphere of nature is not unconnected with what He intends for him in the kingdom of grace. The

entire life of the elect, including that part that precedes their implanting into Christ, is ordered by God with a view to its final destined end. It is not immaterial how and where someone is born, which influences work on him, how he is raised, which direction the development of his life takes. Since the place to be occupied by someone in the kingdom of grace is determined by God and coheres closely with all of his earlier development, the latter cannot be left out of consideration in determining the former.

- c) Notwithstanding this analogy and this subordination, there exists an essential difference between the working of the Holy Spirit in the sphere of nature and in the kingdom of grace. The latter is a new order of things that cannot be explained by the former, but rests on an immediate intervention of God's Spirit. Grace is not nature. It is certainly true that one also calls grace the natural guiding actions of God, with which He deals with the elect before their regeneration (*gratia praeparans*). But taking the word in this broad sense is not meant to deny the specific difference between the operations of the Spirit in nature and in grace. The word "grace" still has a twofold

sense: (1) An attribute in God is called grace; (2) an influence on man that transcends natural influence bears that name. If now something that falls within the sphere of nature is called grace, then it is because the gracious purpose of God adheres to it. One and the same act can occur with respect to two persons and be grace in this sense for the one but not for the other. Still, the act remains specifically the same, and by this purpose is not set outside the sphere of nature. It is absolutely necessary to maintain the sharpest contrast between nature and grace.

12. What is the relationship between the operations of common grace and the special grace of the Holy Spirit?

To understand correctly the difference between these two in connection with the preceding distinction, we must move out of the sphere of nature into the sphere of revelation. This revelation is itself the product of a wholly supernatural act of grace. The announcement of the truth of God and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit lie both beyond and above nature. At the same time, however, that truth is given in natural forms. It is expressed in words written with letters, words that can be heard by the natural ear and read by the natural eye. As we hope to see, it is not

the most proper and highest end of the truth to accomplish its work outwardly in this way; rather, it reaches its proper goal only when an entirely supernatural work of the Holy Spirit accompanies it. That it works *in this way as well*, however, no one can doubt. The only question, though, is how? If it were simply directed to man and nothing more, this encounter would only result in opposition and reaction from a soul that is sinful and hostile to God. That this nevertheless does not occur, but that even in those who are not regenerate the moral power of the truth is manifested, shows that there is an accompanying working of God's Spirit. That working of the Spirit is given to all in greater or lesser degree. It comes down, then, to separating it sharply from special grace, in which only the elect share. So that the distinction would already appear in the term, it has been called *common* grace, and what contrasts with it, *special* or *particular* grace. One further needs to give attention to making distinctions on the following points:

- a) Common grace brings about no change in the nature of man as special grace does. Whatever may also be its external manifestations, it does not regenerate man.
- b) A second distinction is connected with this. Common grace is also limited to making man receptive to the influence of the truth that

works on him from his consciousness. It works persuasively, by offering motives to the will and by making use of inclinations that are already present, not by creating new habits in man. It can certainly bring the external good still present in man to development, but it cannot produce what is spiritually good from that. It can cause a seed of external righteousness to germinate, but it is not capable of implanting the seed of regeneration.

- c) All that works in this manner can also be resisted. Since it is directed toward individual motives from outside, the possibility always exists that the unrenewed nature will overrule all these motives and render common grace powerless. It is otherwise with efficacious grace. It does not offer motives for doing good to a will that in its nature is evil, but transforms the will itself from the innermost recesses of its nature, not by countering it but by re-creating it. Hence, common grace is termed resistible; efficacious grace, with a somewhat oblique label, irresistible.

13. Does one sometimes also speak of “common grace” in a still broader sense?

Yes, one sometimes also applies the word to the restraining action of the Holy Spirit that, where revelation is not known, is joined with the natural knowledge of God and hinders the breaking out of sin in its most dreadful extremes.

14. From what may we discern in some measure what should be ascribed to the operation of this common grace?

We have seen in the doctrine of election that God’s Word rightly ascribes the hardening of sinners to the withdrawal of common grace. It calls this being given over to a perverse mind and shows from experience what dreadful dimensions sin assumes where this hardening sets in. On the other hand, it also describes for us the fate of the lost who are devoid of common grace. Consequently, everything that hinders the process of death that sin brings in producing the complete dissolution of moral and social life for the individual and for society is to be ascribed to *gratia communis* in the broadest sense of the word.

15. Can you show that Scripture teaches such an operation of the Holy Spirit?

Yes, it is said of the generation that lived before the flood that God’s Spirit contended with them and contended in vain,

that the patience of God at the time of this contending held back His punishment, but that finally this operation of grace ceased since it was resisted and scorned (Gen 6:3; cf. 1 Pet 3:19–20; 4:6). Stephen cried out to the Jews, “You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you” (Acts 7:51). Also, Isaiah 63:10 mentions a grieving of the Holy Spirit.

16. How far can this common operation of the Holy Spirit go?

We must assume that it always remains distinguished specifically from regenerating grace. So, concerning the operation itself, one really cannot speak of it approaching the grace of regeneration. What lies between these two is not a gradual but a principial difference. Whatever else one may do to a dead person, one cannot say that actions are performed on him that *bring him close to life*. Since, however, the infusion of life eludes our sight and we can judge it only by its outward manifestation, so the possibility always continues to exist that common grace reveals itself in forms that are hardly to be distinguished from the actions of the regenerate. Temporary faith, of which Scripture speaks in very strong terms, must be counted among these cases. And often the sole criterion for recognition lies in the passing of time itself.

17. Are the effects of common grace

divorced from any connection with regenerating grace, which works only in the elect?

No; if by common grace someone has received a certain measure of insight into the truth prior to his regeneration, be it then also in a nonsaving way, its fruits are not lost. When saving grace comes upon us, it imparts new worth to all the old that was already present with us earlier. It only must be maintained that it never is the old as such that continues to work after regeneration, but the old is placed in a new light and with completely new qualities. The knowledge of saving faith is very much connected with historical knowledge that someone gained prior to his regeneration, but it would still certainly be wrong to maintain that a regenerate person does not know, in his faith, in an essentially different way than the unregenerate person.

18. Has the doctrine of common grace also been misused?

Yes, some have wished to find in it a solution to the question why saving grace befalls only some and not all—in other words, an explanation of God’s sovereign election. Shedd says the following: “The nonelect receives common grace, and common grace would incline human will if it were not defeated by the human will. If the sinner should make no hostile oppo-

sition, common grace would be equivalent to saving grace. To say that common grace if not resisted by the sinner would be equivalent to regenerating grace is not the same as to say that common grace if assisted by the sinner would be equivalent to regenerating grace. In the first instance, God would be the sole author of regeneration; in the second He would not be.” Yet in another place he maintains, “Regeneration rests upon God’s election ... upon special grace and not upon common grace.” Thus it is not very clear what he intends. If, of themselves, all sinners already resist common grace, then it makes no sense to say that it would regenerate them if they did not resist it, for nonresisting means the same as being no longer sinful. If, on the other hand, a sinner is able to resist and not resist common grace, and some are really in the latter category, then for them, according to this conception, regenerating grace becomes completely superfluous. Common grace should work on them and regenerate them. This idea is completely false. God’s election lies above every consideration of the use of common grace. One can only go this far: Those who resist common grace such that God withdraws it do not belong to the elect. They are then abandoned to the hardening from which salvation is no longer possible. On the other hand, it cannot be maintained that a good use of common grace always leads to receiving saving grace or is even a

characteristic of election. Certainly in a negative sense, if someone resists common grace, then this is a bad sign. But we may not go further.

19. *What is the connection of special grace to Holy Scripture?*

A very close connection. It is not the destiny of man to be re-created in his nature without there being knowledge of God and his relationship to God in his consciousness. Man is a rational being, and there must be for him an objective knowledge of the truth, besides the operation of grace that affects him below his consciousness. The rule, then, is that the saving grace of God works only where Holy Scripture, the Word of God, is present. Here it is like natural birth. God does not allow children to be conceived and born into a world without light, air, or food. Neither does He regenerate His children without a divine Word that can supply them with the content requisite for consciousness.

This, however, does not imply at all that regenerating grace only occurs mediately through the Word. To maintain this would evidently lead again to confusing saving with common grace. Regeneration does not occur without the Word—that is, where the Word is not present—but just as little by the Word as a *causa efficiens* [efficient cause]. Air, light, and food are necessary conditions for the birth of a

child, but no one will maintain that they are sufficient active causes for birth. Again, a child is not born without the involvement of father and mother, but a creationist does not therefore believe that father and mother as secondary causes can give rise to the soul of the child. Creating the soul is the prerogative of God's omnipotence in the kingdom of nature; re-creating the soul is the exclusive work of His sovereign omnipotence in the kingdom of grace. And that He is independent of the Word can best be seen when one considers the regeneration of children. Those who die at a young age and enter heaven have most certainly experienced the saving grace of God, and for them there surely cannot be talk of a mediate working by God's Word. Since their consciousness is still dormant for the most part, regeneration need not be preceded and accompanied by the preaching of the Word.

20. Does the rule strictly apply for adults that there is only regeneration where the external Word of God is preached?

We do not have the slightest reason to depart from this rule. It conflicts with every analogy that God would engender life where all further conditions for the feeding and development of life are entirely lacking. One could only ask: Is it absolutely necessary for God to fulfill

those conditions by means of Holy Scripture? Can He not set the necessary truth directly before the consciousness outside the sphere of the dissemination of Scripture and outside the bounds of the church or of its influence, and then bring about regeneration in connection with that? There have been some Reformed theologians, specifically Zwingli, who have been willing to leave open the possibility of something like that in order not to judge the pagan world too harshly.

If, however, we read Scripture in an unprejudiced way, then we will have to agree that the basis for such a view is lacking. Paganism is always presented as a state of absolute darkness, into which no ray of light penetrates. Those who do not have the gospel are without hope and without God in the world, without a share in the citizenship of Israel and strangers from the covenant of promise [cf. [Eph 2:12](#)]. Naturally, we must let God be free and can arrogate for ourselves no judgment on what He *could* do. At issue here is only the question what He, as far as we know, actually does. Also, all Christian zeal for missions presupposes that grace closely follows God's Word and cannot be detached from the ministry of the Word. With election itself God has established the means of election, and even what happens with someone in the kingdom of nature is regulated with that in view. So, if He had willed to elect pagans, He certainly could have had them born under

the light of the gospel.

Some have pointed to the conversion of Paul and to similar facts. Paul, too, was not acquainted with the gospel through the ministry of the Word that already existed in the church but received an immediate revelation accompanied with internal renewal (Gal 1:12). So, it is thought, God can also do that with a Socrates, a Plato, or with other pagans, and we are advised not to be too narrow in our thinking about them. Especially the broad outlook of our century, which spans worlds, can no longer be satisfied with the old, narrow particularism of national election.

There is only one answer to all that: God's Word does not teach us otherwise. The case of Paul is not at all suited to derive something from it. That he received an immediate revelation was not, in the first place, necessary for his personal renewal but primarily for his official calling as apostle, and only in connection with that for the work of grace. At that time, too, Paul was in no way outside the sphere of revelation but was a Jew of the Jews [cf. Phil 3:5], a member of the covenant nation, one of the great branches from the stem of Israel that was not cut off when the rest fell and into which the pagans were grafted.

21. Between what extremes does this legitimate Reformed conception of the connection between Scripture and the

operation of grace lie?

Between, on the one hand, the mystical conception that, without prior contact with objective truth, has manifestations of grace emerging everywhere—manifestations that themselves create conscious content in a capricious way. The truth, then, emerges from the subjective working of grace, and no means remain to test the latter. We, on the contrary, hold that Scripture is not only a necessary condition for the growth of spiritual life, and to that extent also for its creation, but moreover that the experiences of this life can be gauged as legitimate only by Scripture. What does not accord with the objective Word and in its general features is not approved by it and is false experience.

The opposite extreme is that of rationalism, which ascribes everything to the common operation of the Word. This is deism applied to the personal relationship between God and man. As God works in nature from without through second causes and not immanently, so too He works in man through moral and religious truths and not from within, in the heart. In this deistic standpoint one cannot even grant the operation of common grace, for this already lies on the line of immanence; much less, then, regenerating grace.

We say: not without the Word, but also not exclusively through the Word.

22. *How do Lutherans think about the connection between the Word and saving grace?*

They, too, reject all mysticism that detaches grace from the ordained means of grace. At the same time, however, they fall into the error that God works instrumentally through the Word at every point, both in regeneration and otherwise. Now, to avoid all misconception in a rationalistic sense, they teach that there is latent in God's Word a power higher than moral power—a supernatural power. A human word works by generating certain thoughts and setting in motion a certain series of ideas, but it is not therefore able to create something new in the soul. With God's Word it is otherwise, according to the Lutherans. It works through a *vis inhaerens*, “an inherent power,” operative on all who come in contact with it. Lutherans certainly do not maintain that this supernatural power of grace is resident in the written letters or the audible sounds of the Word, but in the ideas that are expressed and represented thereby. Between the latter and grace there exists a *unio mystica*. This, then, is also transmitted from the Word, and by means of the Word to the sacraments.

23. *How do the Roman Catholics think of the connection between the external means of grace and the*

internal operation of grace?

They, too, accept an instrumental and not only an accompanying connection. Power is latent in the sacraments as such and is not to be obtained apart from them—and then in the sacraments as *res*, “things,” not in the Word that accompanies them, as the Lutherans intend. The *gratia praeveniens*, “antecedent grace,” in which adults share without any merits, works persuasively. It teaches an adult to know his sinful condition and the righteousness of God, consider the mercy of God, and be confident that God will be gracious to him for Christ's sake. Accordingly, he is enabled to cooperate with this grace, which disposes him to love God and brings him to the hatred of sin and the contrition that must precede baptism. Finally, this antecedent grace also moves him to desire baptism and to receive it for himself, and in baptism the actual re-creating power of grace appears.

One sees from this that Rome rejects semi-Pelagianism, at least in theory. Antecedent grace is necessary. Man cannot begin by himself. But this antecedent grace is still not re-creating in nature but is more of a persuasive kind. From that it is sufficiently clear that no account is taken of the impotence of man. Man cannot learn to abhor sin, practice true repentance, etc., by persuasive grace. These are always acts that cannot arise from the dead and unregenerate heart.

For children, there is naturally no need for these prior actions. They receive baptism without preparation.

24. Do all God's operations of grace have the same relationship to the Word of Scripture?

No, there is a difference here between one operation of grace and another. Concerning the begetting of life in the soul, regeneration, the external Word has only an accompanying connection with internal grace. It is impossible that the light and the things that appear in it would beget the capacity for sight or would be useful as means to that end.

It is otherwise once the principle of life is infused and manifests itself in the consciousness. Then it immediately comes into contact with the Word of God. Just as with a child the capacity for sight is developed and reaches its completion only by repeated seeing, so too the spiritual sight of the regenerate is sharpened by this contact with the truth. In fact, the latter here works instrumentally. God makes use of it to nurture life. And for all acts of grace that occur in the consciousness, it is the case that they are connected with Scripture. Justification and calling, for instance, occur in the consciousness. In both, God comes and speaks to man. In both, the content of the truth is introduced into his consciousness. The correct conception is that this truth is not the

product of a new, completely self-standing revelation. God does not call with an audible voice and does not express His judicial sentence through a special revelation, but in both cases He makes use of the once-for-all revealed Word of Holy Scripture, and surely He does this by a particular application of it to the consciousness, effected by the Holy Spirit.

Here, too, we must sail between the reefs of deism and mysticism. Calling and justification are more than the deducing of a consequence from a few general lines of Scripture. For God's work of grace, reasoning and reckoning in this way do not suffice. Neither, however, is it a mystical inspiration flowing from feeling or the will, detached from the objective truth of Scripture. They both rest on the truth of Scripture, made personal by the Holy Spirit. Grace in the consciousness is not independent of the Word. But the Word, in turn, is not detached from the Holy Spirit.

25. What kind of connection is there between the operation of God's grace in the special sense and the Mediator?

In this connection lies the most characteristic distinction between the operations of particular, saving grace and all that lies outside. Regarding God's purpose, saving operations and other operations of grace can sometimes coincide. Also, there can sometimes be agreement concerning

their miraculous and immediate character. One thinks, for example, of the miracles, all of which occur immediately, of supernatural revelation, of the inspiration of Scripture.

But all this is different from saving grace at one point: Saving grace effects at its onset a personal bond with the Mediator, Christ, and in its further realization rests on the continuation of that bond. The one in whom no saving grace has worked is apart from Christ; the one in whom this grace has in fact worked, or even begins to work, is joined to Christ. The bond with Christ brings saving grace with it, and where the latter is found the first must also be found. Consequently, we have here something objective by which particular grace can be delimited from all the rest. It is grace from Christ and to Christ.

26. What is the name that is given to this bond between persons in whom special grace works and Christ?

This bond is called the mystical union, *unio mystica*. It bears this name because it lies beneath the consciousness. It does not consist in a fellowship or exchange of thoughts, but in a real though incomprehensible fellowship of life. *Mystical* stands here in contradistinction to the rationally transparent. In a certain sense, all the deeper actions of life are mystical, mysterious, but this union is so in double

measure.

27. What in general is the significance of this union with Christ?

It serves to form a glorious body for the Mediator, of which He Himself is the head. For the Savior it is an honor as mediator to be so joined personally with those for whom He has become their surety and to live with them in a fellowship of destiny never to be dissolved. Coming into consideration here, however, is not so much the significance that this *unio* has for Christ as its meaning for the work of grace that takes place in the believer. Put more precisely, the question is this: Why does grace work from now on in the sinner from Christ and only in union with Christ?

In answering this question, one will need to guard against a great misconception. Many continue to propose that the bond with the Mediator is the legal basis on which God permits His merits to benefit the individual sinner. The reasoning goes as follows: Christ has certainly satisfied for sin and earned eternal life, but all this does not help me and is not valid for me as long as Christ is a stranger who is outside me. God cannot declare me just on the basis of what the Mediator did as long as the Mediator remains a stranger to me. Such a declaration of justice would be unjust. Thus God ensures that a real fellowship between Christ and

my soul is brought about. He implants Christ in me, and now declares in agreement with my actual condition that I am just. Indeed, by this implanting I have truly become a member of Christ's body, so that it is now the righteousness of the body, whose organic member I am, that is imputed to me. Union with Christ is, so it is thought, therefore the indispensable juridical basis for the justification of sinners.

This reasoning sounds fine, and has misled many by its attractiveness. Despite its fine appearance, it falsifies the fundamental element of the Christian doctrine of salvation: the element of justification by free imputation. Justification is always and everywhere in Scripture a declaration of God, not on the basis of an actually existing condition of our being righteous, but on the basis of a gracious imputation of God that is contradicted by our condition. While we in ourselves are unrighteous, God's judgment acquits us. Justification is a paradox. The old theologians, therefore, always rightly stood for the proposition that the sinner is justified *qua talis*—that is, *qua impius*, as sinner, as godless. His justification is an act of grace insofar as it concerns himself, not an act of justice. If, then, we must assume that it occurs on the basis of his actual being in Christ through mystical union, then it could only be a declaration of what really is, a taking note of the actual condition, and the element of grace would be lost.

The intended proposal must accordingly be rejected, and one must endeavor to be completely clear where the error in it is. It reverses the relationship between grace in the justice of God and grace in the life of the sinner; it makes the former rest on the latter. This cannot be. Concerning the legal relationship, being reckoned in Christ precedes, and only from that does being in the Mediator follow. The mystical union is not the basis on which I appear just before God but a gift that is extended to me from God's justification. When one reasons otherwise, one constantly reasons secretly in a circle. If all the actions of grace following upon the mystical union become mine on the basis of this union, the question must still always be asked: On what basis do I share in the *unio mystica* with Christ Himself? If it is true that no grace can come to me on the basis of Christ's merits as long as I am not in Christ, how is it ever possible that I would be implanted in Him? This implanting cannot occur on the basis of being in Christ, for it is precisely the implanting that effects being in Christ. One will thus be compelled to say that implanting occurs by way of anticipation in view of impending justification. A clear circle, for now we have justification on the basis of being in Christ and being in Christ on the basis of justification.

It rests on this misconception when some maintain that regeneration can only follow faith, for first faith unites to Christ

and the gifts of grace only come from Christ, regeneration not excluded. One need only ask where faith comes from. If from Christ, then one has in principle abandoned the thesis that all subjective grace rests on being in Him.

The correct conception of matters is as follows: The legal basis for all grace lies in being reckoned in Christ by the judgment of God. This actual relationship in the justice of God is reflected in the consciousness of the sinner when he believes, for by faith he acknowledges that there is no righteousness in himself, and that the righteousness by which he stands righteous before God is transmitted to him by imputation. Now as far as what is judicial is concerned, it could have remained at this. Without effecting a life-union between Christ and believers, God still could have transmitted His righteousness to them. Then, however, imputation would only appear in the consciousness. Grace would have only been revealed as grace to the consciousness, without its imprint having been stamped deeper into the life of the believer. Now, however, God acts otherwise. He does not stop with this acknowledgment in the consciousness that righteousness is transmitted and that, consequently, each gift of grace is given for Christ's sake. To strengthen this impression, He also has all grace actually come from Christ and establishes a life-bond between the Mediator and believers. The legal fellowship reflects

itself in a fellowship of destiny. All that the sinner receives flows from the living Christ. The result is that the sinner not only knows as an idea that he will receive everything for Christ's sake but also *experiences in life* how everything comes from Christ. He is regenerated, justified, sanctified, glorified, but all this is in the closest bond with the Mediator.

However, far from leaving him with the illusion that as a member of a great body he has a right to these things, this arrangement of God serves as a constant reminder of the fact that he personally had no right to them, that this right is earned by Christ, and that the right has been passed on to him in the judgment of God, just as the gifts have been passed on to him, both from Christ. We therefore reach exactly the opposite result. The mystical union is not ordained in order to eliminate the idea of free imputation but to keep the memory of this idea rightly alive. If the gifts of grace were distributed directly, the consciousness of their real origin would all too easily be lost. Now that possibility is cut off. The receiving of life from Christ reminds at every moment that that life is earned by Christ.

For Christians the doctrine of the *unio mystica*, correctly understood, is the best means of protection against salvation by works. It shows how foolish and unnecessary it is to bring the covenant of works back into the covenant of grace and to again allow the sinner to merit something

for himself. All self-meriting assumes the idea that a separate fountain of life exists in the meriting self. If Adam had merited eternal life, he would have had the fountain of life in himself. Now that, on the contrary, the fountain is in Christ, no one can doubt that the merits reside in Him as well. The Roman Catholics with their system of salvation by works have no place for the *unio mystica*.

28. *What can we establish further concerning this union with Christ?*

- a) It is not a unity that resides in the ordinary concursus of God. God is present in every creature by His co-action. And insofar as Christ as Logos sustains all things, He also has a certain immanent association with all created spirits. This, however, is a union of the Logos-God with the creature as creature. The mystical union is a union of the person of the Mediator with the regenerate person as such.
- b) Neither is it a unity that rests on an agreement of consciousness by which the doctrine of Christ is accepted in faith. Faith as an act of consciousness is only the surface manifestation of the unity of life that lies much deeper. Socinians and Arminians have such a concept of the union with Christ as is rejected here. The former think of

a unity of doctrine, the latter of a unity in love.

- c) It is also not a merging of being such that the separate existence of either Christ or the believer would come to an end. This was the error of the mystics. Some of them went so far as to teach the identification of Christ and the believer, and led the latter to say the words, “I am Christ Jesus the living Word of God; I have saved you through sinless suffering.” On the contrary, we believe that personal identity is not in the least impaired by mystical union, but first comes to its full right. Every believer is joined by a particular and distinctive bond to Christ, and only by that bond becomes what he should be and what God has destined him for. So little does the fellowship of life with the Mediator negate this distinctiveness that the apostle can say instead, “To a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:13). “But to each of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ” (Eph 4:7).
- d) It is not a union that can be wrought or brought about by any external means. Sacramentarians—that is, those who tie the essence of Christianity to the use of external, physical

means—maintain such a view. This is the grossest misconception of all. The *unio mystica* lies far beyond the scope of any material substance.

e) Concerning the essence of this union in a positive sense, we can say that it is:

1. An *organic* unity. Accordingly, Scripture compares it with the connection there is between the vine and the branches, the head and the body (John 15:1–6; 1 Cor 6:15, 19; 12:12; Eph 1:22–23; 4:15–16; 5:29–30). The essence of the organic consists in the fact that there is a reciprocal connection of goal and means between the differing parts of a thing that nonetheless has an abiding significance in itself. So it is with Christ and believers. He is there for them, yet they also are given to Him as instruments for His honor. And the body that they form with Him is not a creation of temporary duration by which a passing goal is to be reached; it will remain eternally in its organic connection. Also, it cannot be dissolved; no member having once been engrafted can fall from it (Rom 8:35, 39). Even those who die still die in

Christ, and even their bodies that are entrusted to the earth are not torn away from the organic connection with the *unio mystica* of the Lord, for they are sown (cf. 1 Thess 4:14, 17; with Rom 8:11; 1 Cor 15).

2. A unity of *life*. The power of the new life that is in believers comes from Christ. Christ lives in them. Someone must show that he is a Christian by whether Christ is in him (Gal 2:20; 2 Cor 13:5). When the life of the Christian develops fully, then Christ is formed in him [Gal 4:19]. And it is said directly that Christ is *in* the believer (Rom 8:10). All these expressions can only have a single significance: The life of Christ exercises a secret action on the life of the regenerate sinner, in consequence of which the latter receives its direction toward God—that is, becomes spiritual life.
3. A *spiritual* unity. The *unio mystica* is wrought by the Holy Spirit: “For we are all baptized with one Spirit into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). The Spirit is called “the Spirit of the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:18. Indeed, verse 17 says directly, “Now the Lord is the Spirit.” In Romans

8:9–10, “to have the Spirit of Christ,” “to be in the Spirit,” and “Christ is in you” are parallel. Therefore Christ is in someone by the Spirit: “The one who is joined to the Lord is one Spirit with Him” (1 Cor 6:17). Consequently, it is not subject to any doubt that the bond between Christ and the members of His body is the Holy Spirit. Still, it must surely be observed that the Holy Spirit is present here, strictly speaking, as He is given to Christ at His exaltation and after that is poured out on the Church. It is the Holy Spirit as *gift* that we are to think of here. Before the Holy Spirit was poured out, He had already worked subjective grace in believers throughout the entire old dispensation. But still, the result of that work was not what could properly be called a mystical union. When Christ became the glorified Head, He took this gift and imparted it to all who are members of His body. Just because the indwelling of the Spirit is in Christ—what is referred to here—this mediate unity must at the same time hold true for the closest bond. The Holy

Spirit is in the human nature of Christ and works from there out on believers to dwell in them. By placing the emphasis on this, we also avoid imagining that there is an identification of being between Christ and believers. The unity between the divine person and human nature in the Mediator is a personal unity and therefore also immediate, not first wrought by the Holy Spirit. It is otherwise with the unity established between Christ and believers. This is not a personal unity in the sense that a unity of person would flow from it. Christ and those who are of Christ remain different persons, so that for that reason, too, the mystical union can never be the legal basis of their justification before God.

Rather, it is a unity of life that neither removes nor makes impossible the distinction of persons. And therefore it is wrought and maintained by the source of all spiritual and eternal life by God the Holy Spirit.

4. A *reciprocal* unity. Establishing this unity is of course a work of Christ. Man does not take the initiative here by taking hold of

Christ and drawing Him to himself or bringing himself to Him. The impossibility and inconceivability of that follows from what has already been said. How by any act from his side would man ever be able to make himself master of the Holy Spirit? It is entirely the reverse: Christ sends His Spirit, who, in the first grace that befalls man in the grace of regeneration, establishes the mystical bond. After this has happened and has also penetrated into the consciousness, one can certainly say that faith reaches out reciprocally to Christ, and the activity of faith and the nurturing of the spiritual life resident in union with Christ keep pace. But faith in itself, as subjective habit or subjective act, is not able to effect unity with Christ. It is one of the manifestations of the life of the Savior in us rather than the source of this life itself. When Scripture speaks of a union with Christ by faith, then this always applies to unity in the consciousness or the consciousness of unity: “so that Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith” (Eph 3:17), where, how-

ever, precedes, “so that He might grant you though the riches of His glory to be strengthened with power *by His Spirit* in the inner man.” The Spirit’s activity, therefore, is antecedent, and only as a result of it does Christ dwell in the heart by faith. It is the drawing power of Christ Himself that in our faith draws us to His life. In this sense, then, Scripture clearly teaches that a reception of life from Christ by faith is possible for us—indeed, is necessary (John 6:47, 51). There is not merely a life of Christ in us but also a life of ours for God in union with Christ. According to Romans 7:4, the believer knows himself to be as closely united to the Mediator as husband to wife, and according to 2 Corinthians 11:2, the church is viewed as a bride presenting herself to her bridegroom, Christ. “The Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come!’” (Rev 22:17).

5. A *personal* and thereby *corporate* union with Christ, the Head for all believers. Because they all are united with the exalted Mediator and engrafted into the same branch, in Him they also have a bond with each

other. Still, this may not be understood in the modern pantheistic sense, as if life resides in the church and is transmitted from the church to the individual. Everyone who is regenerated receives his life directly from Christ. A communication of life from one man to another is unthinkable. It is only the second Adam who has become a life-giving Spirit [1 Cor 15:45], so that He can cause power to issue from Himself in order to beget life in others. The communion of the saints is a fruit of grace, not a means of grace.

6. Union with Christ is a *transforming* and *conforming* union. Here, too, it appears how close the connection is with the person of the Mediator according to His humanity, for there can be no thought of conformity to the divine nature of Christ. What Christ effects in the members of His body is a likeness of what has taken place in Himself. They are buried with Him, rise with Him [Rom 6:5], are oppressed with Him and glorified with Him [Rom 8:17], are ordained to be conformed to His image and, as subsequently born brothers, to fol-

low Him, the firstborn [Rom 8:29]. But all this is not a mere similarity, for the apostle teaches in Romans 6:5 that one becomes one plant with Christ in the likeness of His death and in the likeness of His resurrection. That is, because it is one Spirit of life who works in Christ and us, so the likeness of His resurrection must also follow the likeness of His death: “That I know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His suffering, being conformed to His death” (Phil 3:10); “And in my flesh I fill up the remnants of the afflictions of Christ for His body, which is the church” (Col 1:24); “But as you have fellowship in the sufferings of Christ, rejoice” (1 Pet 4:13).