

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 2006

Presenting the Tenses of Salvation

Whenever I am asked the question "When were you saved?" I run up against a difficulty. Can salvation be so easily reduced to one specific date? Surely salvation is rooted in the past action of God, continues throughout the present life of the believer, and is consummated at the end of time. Of course, I am courteous enough to not belabor this point every time I am asked this innocent question. But it must be addressed.

I do not desire to answer this question in full here. Suffice it to say that **there are three tenses of salvation: past, present and future**. Although such an answer requires exposition, this threefold temporal schema ought to be self-evident. Given that salvation is a history of God's action for us and in us, it necessarily admits of temporal tenses. I have dealt with this matter in [simple](#) and more [advanced](#) ways elsewhere and will continue to do so. But here I am concerned with a different matter: the order of presentation.

The question on my mind is **how to present the tenses of salvation**. What is the best order of presentation? With which tense ought we begin? With which tense should we end? Which tense should come in the middle?

One might object that this question is irrelevant: "As long as you talk about all three tenses, who cares which order you use? We are talking about the mystery of salvation here!" But it has become clear to me that **the order of presentation does matter**. Whatever tense is mentioned first is given a slight priority. Whichever tense is mentioned in the middle becomes the hinge. Whichever tense is mentioned last is given finality.

For instance, **if one begins with the question, "If you died tonight do you know where you would be?" the future tense is given priority**. One might then proceed to discuss the past tense work of Christ as the means toward the end of future salvation. Then one would conclude a call for decision, assigning a certain finality and

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urgency to the present tense.

An alternative approach would be to discuss the tenses of salvation in chronological order. One might begin with the announcement, "Let me tell you about Jesus Christ!" This gives priority to the past tense. Next one could continue the story of salvation naturally into the outpouring of the Spirit and the experience of salvation here and now. This places the present tense as the hinge between past and future. Then one could conclude by noting future salvation as the ultimate payoff of this history of salvation.

There are a few other logical alternatives. But these are certainly two common outlines for proclaiming the gospel which suffice to make the point that order matters. The problem with both of these approaches (and likely many others) is **misplaced emphasis**. The first renders the Christ event as a past condition for a future reward guaranteed by a present action. The initiating action of God falls into the background. The second presentation is sensible, but it seems to lack the urgency of the gospel. One simply dangles big picture narrative and waits for another to bite.

My suggestion would be to try the following order: past, future, present. In my mind, such an order combines the strengths of the previous two approaches. First, one would tell the story of Jesus Christ. This gives the proper priority to the past tense action of God on our behalf. Then one would turn from the resurrection and ascension of Christ to the last judgment. Although this seems to be a leap, the two moments clearly go together: "he ascended into heaven and sitteth at the right hand of the father from whence he shall judge the quick and the dead." The story of Jesus properly concludes with the claim that he is the Lord and Judge of the universe, the one to reckon with at the end of time. This move preserves the significance of the future ala the first approach. Finally, one would turn to the present tense ("the time between the times") by inviting another to participate in this grand history in light of what has happen and will happen. By ending with the present, one retains the urgency of the first approach.

So that is my modest proposal: next time you are trying to communicate the gospel, **move from past to future to present.**

Any thoughts?

Can any one presentation really treat all three tenses of salvation fairly?

Does order matter?

How does my proposed order measure up?

What other orderings would you recommend?

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posted by JohnLDrury @ 4:42 PM

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9 Comments:

At [6:50 AM, March 16, 2006](#), [Ken Schenck](#) said...

Your ordering seems right theologically to me. One thing that this perspective helps focus, I think, is the whole question of salvation by faith or works. If we are asking, "What are necessary ingredients for the cake of salvation?" God's grace then Christ's atoning death then trust in what God has done in Christ and lastly the appropriate fruit of that trust all seem essential ingredients.

At [11:57 AM, March 16, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

Coming from a different tradition, I find the question, "When were you saved?" presumptuous. It assumes, or presumes, that you already know the outcome of your judgement, that you *will* be going to heaven instead of hell.

Your discussion on tenses reserves the outcome of judgment for the future to God.

You ask, "What other orderings would you recommend?"

None at all, but if pressed, I would go with past, present, and future. Salvation is an ongoing process with a beginning, a middle, all heading to a future. Being a disciple of Christ is a life-long transforming process.

To ask someone when you were saved is akin to asking someone when they were married. Are you not more married today than your wedding day? (That question only has meaning if you are married.)

At [9:00 AM, March 18, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

1. Salvation has happened.
 2. Salvation will happen.
 3. Salvation is happening.
- I like it...

At [2:15 AM, March 19, 2006](#), [Mark](#) said...

John! I stumbled upon your blog. Great thought. I will peruse your writing a little more as soon as I finish some mid-terms this week. I am back in St. Louis to finish up my MDiv. Hope you are doing well.

[Busters\)](#)

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Mark Peach

At [10:46 AM, March 20, 2006](#), [Mike Langford](#) said...

Remember my paper on present-tense salvation? It will be the featured piece in the next Koinonia.

I like to think of present-tense salvation as "spiritual salvation" or "third-person salvation," (or "Trinitarian salvation"?) referring to the role of the Holy Spirit in bringing salvation to us here and now.

I think that emphasizing present salvation is one of the most important theological issues for the church today.

- Mike

At [11:49 PM, March 21, 2006](#), [Tony Myles](#) said...

I was saved at the tree of knowledge when God didn't kill Adam and Eve but clothed them in their nakedness.

I was saved when all of creation's eggs were placed in Noah's ark-shaped basket instead of being obliterated.

I was saved when Abraham decided on a starry night that God would supply the needed Viagra.

I was saved when Moses took the baton from Joseph and handed it off to Jesus during the transfiguration.

I was saved at the cross of Jesus Christ.

I was saved at the empty tomb.

I was saved in the spectator-style seats of the old Willow Creek Community Church auditorium while wearing a baseball hat, a t-shirt, and 80's style acid-washed blue jeans.

I was saved during my baptism when I took public ownership of my faith.

I was saved when I let God break my heart on a mountain in California as I looked over the city and wept.

I was saved when I met my wife and heard the Holy Spirit speaking through her pure heart.

I was saved when I became a dad... twice... and learned all about unconditional love.

I was saved when I stood by the casket of a former student last week... and knew he was in heaven because I let God use me in his life.

I was saved at the tree of life when human history ended and eternity began... it hasn't happened yet, and yet it already has.

At [7:51 AM, March 22, 2006](#), [Tom](#) said...

I cannot improve on the eloquence of Mr. Myles. I can only say:

I was saved from the **penalty** of sin.
I am being saved from the **power** of sin.
One day I will be saved from the **presence** of sin.

At [10:36 AM, March 22, 2006](#), [Pastor Rod](#) said...

John,

Thought-provoking post. Any effort to "deconstruct" the simplistic questions and simplistic answers about the gospel help us to think more clearly about our faith.

I would add to your excellent comments an observation from Tim Keller at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in NYC. (You can find several links to his writing on my blog.)

The question, "When were you saved?" reduces the gospel to only one of three perspectives presented in the Bible.

In addition to the **Salvation Perspective** there is also the **Kingdom Perspective**, which is emphasized by the Emergents and N. T. Wright. A third description is the **Grace Perspective**, which is the emphasis of much of the spiritual formation movement, especially writers like David Benner.

It's amazing how we have taken such a rich and full concept and reduced it to a "decision" made at a particular time in the past.

Rod

At [7:03 AM, March 24, 2006](#), [Mark W.](#) said...

Instead of asking, "Are you saved?", shouldn't we be asking, "Are you

justified?"

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