

# Order of salvation: Roman, Lutheran, or Reformed?

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Geerhardus Vos eloquently confessed this problematic order of salvation in 1891:

“According to the Lutheran, the Holy Spirit first generates faith in the sinner who temporarily still remains outside of union with Christ; then justification follows faith and only then, in turn, does the mystical union with the Mediator take place. Everything depends on this justification, which is losable, so that the believer only gets to see a little of the glory of grace and lives for the day, so to speak. The [Reformed] covenantal outlook is the reverse. One is first united to Christ, the Mediator of the covenant, by a mystical union, which finds its conscious recognition in faith. By this union with Christ all that is in Christ is simultaneously given. Faith embraces all this too; it not only grasps the instantaneous justification, but lays hold of Christ as Prophet, Priest, and King, as his rich and full Messiah.”<sup>1, p. 256</sup>

Taken at face value, that sounds very much like [the error of Osiander and Nevin](#). In the order of salvation, Vos put union with Christ before faith, in spite of John 1:12-13 and Gal. 3:26-27. He seems to make justification simultaneous with union, but that would then put justification before faith, contrary to the Westminster Confession, and, more importantly, contrary to Paul's doctrine of justification by faith (not faith by justification). Perhaps, however, when Vos spoke of a faith that reflects on a prior justification, he did not mean to deny a prior faith that was the instrument of that justification, but in that case much of the distinction he saw between Lutheranism and “covenantal” Calvinism would be lost.

In a 1903 paper, Vos expressed an *ordo salutis* much more in line with Pauline (and Lutheran) soteriology:

“Paul’s mind was to such an extent forensically oriented that he regarded the entire complex of subjective spiritual changes that take place in the believer and of subjective spiritual blessings enjoyed by the believer as the direct outcome of the forensic work of Christ applied in justification.”<sup>2, p. 384</sup>

Did Vos later move toward Protestant orthodoxy, or are the 1891 and 1903 statements somehow compatible? If they *are* compatible, then what aspect of Luther’s soteriology was Vos criticizing?

## [Comments](#)

## References:

(1) Vos, G. In *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*; Gaffin, R.B., Eds.; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.: Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980; [PDF](#).

(2) Vos, G. In *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*; Gaffin, R.B., Eds.; Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co.: Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1980; [PDF](#).

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