

Once Saved, Always Saved?

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ONCE SAVED, ALWAYS SAVED?

Within the Body of Christ there has been serious disagreement over the matter of “eternal security,” also known as “security of the believer” or “perseverance of the saints.” Casual discussions of eternal security in Christian circles frequently escalate into emotional arguments as the theological ramifications individual positions are examined. Woven into any construct on eternal security is a tapestry of other theological beliefs and themes including but not limited to; election, assurance, grace, atonement, justification, and sanctification. Consequently, as people discuss eternal security they locate themselves and their conversation partners within the theological spectrum.¹ Discourse on eternal security is not new; it began in the early days of the church, but has drawn a crowd in the past 400 years.

Augustine developed his doctrine of perseverance of the saints within the context of his struggle with Pelagius over grace, original sin, and predestination; Augustine based his understanding of final perseverance on God’s sovereignty in election and predestination.² Thomas Aquinas addressed the subject of perseverance inside the framework of his appreciation of free will. By its very nature, free will is changeable, and this characteristic is not lost under grace.³ Martin Luther’s concept of believer security

¹ Michael S. Horton, Norman L. Geisler, Stephen M. Ashby, and J. Steven Harper, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2002), 7.

² John Jefferson Davis, "The Perseverance of the Saints: a History of the Doctrine," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no. 2 (June 1991): 213.

³ *Ibid.*, 215.

was cast in the mold of assurance; assurance that is foundational to Christian life.⁴ These and other historical figures in the Church entered into the perseverance conversation, but the real debate began in response to John Calvin and the Reformed thought of those who would follow him.

Central to Calvin's understanding of final perseverance was his doctrine of divine sovereignty and election. Those whom God had predestined to be among the elect will certainly persevere to the end; God's purposes will not be thwarted by allowing His chosen to fall. Hence, regeneration is irreversible for the elect, and by logical consequence, the reprobate are unredeemable. James Arminius saw John Calvin's preservation of divine sovereignty as dialectically opposed to universal grace and the freedom of the human will.⁵ In reply Arminius taught a conditional understanding of predestination; divine foreknowledge of the contingent acts of the human will. With all having equal access to divine grace, human decision becomes the decisive factor in determining who will accept the Gospel and who will reject it.⁶ After Arminius' death, proponents of his thought would formalize their position in the *Remonstrance*; in response Calvinistic orthodoxy solidified their thought at the Synod of Dort. From here the radically different tapestries of Calvinism and Arminianism would emerge; each developing unique patterns of eternal security with their own distinctive theological threads of election, assurance, and perseverance.

⁴ Ibid., 215-216.

⁵ Ibid., 221.

⁶ Ibid., 222.

Calvinists begin their notion of unconditional eternal security from their bedrock commitment to predestination and the election of believers. By nature of the sovereignty of God, salvation is understood as an unconditional gift to those who God has elected.⁷ It is God's mysterious prerogative who he chooses for election and who is chosen for damnation. Since believers do nothing to get in the state of grace, there is nothing they can do to get out of it. Grace is irresistible before conversion and remains so afterward.⁸

Relating to election distinction is made between the visible and the invisible church.⁹ Those in the visible church who appear to be redeemed and have "fallen away" were in fact not Christians in the first place.¹⁰ This concept of "false confessors" was also held by Augustine who concluded that if the elect were to fall away, God would insure their repentance and return to the church.¹¹ In the visible church it is not humanly possible to distinguish between the truly regenerate and those who are not. Within the invisible church, known only to God in his sovereignty, the elect will endure to the end while the reprobate will be uprooted.¹²

Assurance of one's salvation in the Calvinistic view is a main benefit of perseverance through election.¹³ The very nature of conversion and regeneration assures

⁷ Horton, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 65.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁹ Davis, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 217.

¹⁰ Erwin W. Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide: A Fresh Look at the Historic Doctrines that Separate Christians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1998), 228.

¹¹ Henry M. Knapp, "Augustine and Owen on Perseverance," *Westminster Theological Journal* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 67.

¹² Davis, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 217.

¹³ Knapp, "Augustine and Owen," 66.

the believer, providing them confidence they have actually “believed.” Calvin held that faith and assurance could not be separated. Those who have come to God will be certain that God loves them as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit, and the seal upon their hearts.¹⁴ Calvin understood genuine believers may experience doubt, yet in their core conviction, they know they are saved.¹⁵ The believer is also provided assurance through unconditional election and the realization that “no one can snatch them out of the Father’s hand.”¹⁶ It is unthinkable to the Calvinist that sheep unconditionally given from the Father to the Son will not be in the fold at nightfall.¹⁷

Augustine did not promote the possibility of assurance out of concern for holiness and pridefulness.¹⁸ Augustine’s attitude reflects a common objection to the combination of assurance and unconditional election. Many conclude that the Calvinist approach of unconditional security lends itself to carnality in the Christian life.¹⁹ In fact true Calvinists see good works as confirming evidence of regeneration and in no way contributing to the free gift of salvation.²⁰ This evidence of regeneration confirms the believer’s assurance. The warning passages in Hebrews and other places in the Bible are

¹⁴ Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 275.

¹⁵ Ken Keathley, "Does Anyone Really Know If They Are Saved? A Survey of the Current Views on Assurance with a Modest Proposal," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 15, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 40.

¹⁶ John 10:27-29

¹⁷ Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide*, 234.

¹⁸ Knapp, "Augustine and Owen," 65.

¹⁹ For example, Proponents of the Free Grace Movement lean heavily on assurance of the believer tying it exclusively to “saving faith,” and detaching any support for transformed life. See Donald A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54, no. 1 (Spring 1992): 6.

²⁰ Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide*, 232.

interpreted as “litmus tests” for believers to confirm their election (and subsequent assurance).²¹ As such, the warnings are really a means to an end; through them believers are nurtured and brought more and more into conformity of the image of Christ.²²

Perseverance to the Calvinist is a foregone conclusion, again as a result of election. Augustine argued that perseverance was a gift from God and separate from any human merit.²³ Apostasy for the elect is impossible, as all true believers continue in the faith; the warnings of consequences are used simply to keep apostasy from happening. Faith itself is seen as perseverance, removing any danger present in the warning passages.²⁴ Recent Reformed thought by Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday has redefined perseverance in light of eschatological understanding of salvation. Schreiner and Caneday interpret salvation in an “already-not-yet” perspective paralleling New Testament teachings concerning the Kingdom of God.²⁵ In this sense true believers have eternal life now but will not possess it fully until the coming age.²⁶ Schreiner and Caneday conclude that all of God’s elect will persevere, stating the warning passages in

²¹ Keathley, "Does Anyone Really Know If They Are Saved," 49.

²² C. Norman Sellers, *Election and Perseverance* (Miami Springs, Florida: Schoettle Publishing Co, 1987), 190.

²³ Knapp, "Augustine and Owen," 87.

²⁴ Sellers, *Election and Perseverance*, 190.

²⁵ Schreiner, *The Race Set Before Us*, 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 66. It is interesting that their perspective on the future fulfillment of salvation is also espoused by noted Arminian author I. Howard Marshall. See also I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: a Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth Press, 1969; repr., Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany Fellowship, 1974), 53 (page references are to the reprint edition).

Hebrews are “road signs” pointing the way to salvation; Biblical warnings to not mean that the consequences will actually be experienced.²⁷

Arminian interpretation of predestination and election is based on foreknowledge. Since God knows everyone who will believe; He “elects” individuals only because he foresees their faith.²⁸ People do not believe because they are “predestined” to believe, on the contrary Arminians contend God foreordains those who believe to become holy and to be His sons.²⁹ John Wesley rejected any view of unconditional predestination which eliminated the participation of the believer’s will with the sanctifying and justifying grace of God.³⁰ Other Arminians such as Robert Shank argue that election is not in reference to particular individuals unconditionally but rather to the *ekklesia* or the corporate body of Christ. Shank defines those in union with Christ as being the “true elect.”³¹ In all cases, Arminian objection to unconditional election centers on a perceived absence of universal grace and human free will. Christ’s atonement was for “all” and God salvation is conditional – that condition being individual faith in Christ.³²

Assurance and perseverance are foundational for the Arminian view of conditional eternal security. Arminians certainly experience assurance in their salvation however this assurance is contingent upon ongoing fidelity to Jesus Christ. The

²⁷ Ibid., 206-202.

²⁸ Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide*, 181.

²⁹ Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, 53

³⁰ Davis, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 224.

³¹ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Springfield, Missouri: Westcott, 1961; repr., Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House, 1989), 366 (page references are to the reprint edition).

³² Horton, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 144.

continuum on which this fidelity is measured becomes a source of disagreement among Arminians. Some with a radical Arminian perspective entertain the notion that salvation is lost immediately upon sinning again after conversion. Others take a more moderate position that sin must be willful; the believer must be knowingly disobedient and refuse to confess the sin thereby continuing in disobedience in order to lose salvation.³³ And there are those who believe that only serious apostasy, willfully denying Christ, will result in lost salvation.³⁴ Irrespective of their position on departure from the faith, all Arminians know that apostasy – complete abandonment of the faith – poses an ever present danger to the professing Christian.

John Wesley concluded that believers can infer from their own experience of grace that it is impossible to finally fall away, but Scripture, not personal experience, must be decisive on the matter of assurance and perseverance. Wesley acknowledges that even though the apostle Paul was fully persuaded of his final perseverance, such assurance does not prove that every believer will persevere or that every believer enjoys such assurance.³⁵ Final perseverance then is contingent upon the continuing cooperation of the believer's will with the justifying grace of God.³⁶

Down through the years, theologians as well as lay people have taken opposing positions on eternal security, justifying their stance with Scripture.³⁷ It is notable that

³³ Lutzer, *The Doctrines that Divide*, 227.

³⁴ Horton, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 187.

³⁵ Davis, "The Perseverance of the Saints," 224.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Calvinists usually referring to John 6:37; 10:28; 17:6–11; Romans 8:31–39 and Arminians to Luke 8:9–15; Galatians 5:4; Hebrews 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 6:4–6

both viewpoints can find reasonably solid Biblical footing. D. A. Carson contends that the Biblical writers insofar as they reveal themselves on the subject, are without exception compatibilists.³⁸ Carson seeks middle ground allowing for God to function in his mystery, being both sovereign and allowing human responsibility.³⁹ Also pursuing *via media*, J. Steven Harper notes that although by different definitions, Arminians and Calvinists alike agree on the basic premises of: the Sovereignty of God, the freedom of humanity, the efficacy of the atonement, and some kind of perseverance of the saints. Harper reminds Christians that while perseverance of the saints is an important doctrine, no particular interpretation of it is required as an article of faith.⁴⁰ The tapestry of our faith has been woven by many generations. While weaving our own theological arguments, let us not pull so hard on our ideological threads as to ruin the beautiful piece on which so many have labored and we continue to work on together.

³⁸ Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," 22.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-25

⁴⁰ Horton, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 217-218.

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