

# Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal

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## Introduction

One of the most difficult issues in reading the scriptures is explaining the tension between warning passages and texts that promise assurance.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, the warning passages, such as are found in Hebrews, James, or Revelation 2-3, are incredibly severe, even frightening. They seem to warn believers that if they abandon the faith, continue to do what is evil, and fail to persevere until the end, the only prospect is eternal judgment and hell. On the other hand, the texts on assurance, such as John 10:28-30, Romans 8:28-39, and Philippians 1:6, seem to guarantee that God will continue the good work that he has started in believers, and he will see to it that those whom he has elected to salvation will make it to the end. Believers will persevere to the end, not by virtue of their own strength, but due to the power of God.

The tension between these two kinds of texts is immediately evident, though the resolution is not. Nor can we say that the issue is of little importance and avoid the whole discussion. One's understanding of these texts has tremendous pastoral implications. For instance, should we warn people that if they fall away they would go to hell? Or, should we assure them that God will keep them until the end and that nothing (including their own choices) will prevent them from enjoying their eternal destiny? If we focus upon the warnings in preaching and counseling, we can be confident that we have taken seriously the

threats contained in the scriptures. But then we wonder if we have robbed people of the assurance needed to live the Christian life. Conversely, if we focus upon God's promises to sustain his people, then our hearers will likely have a robust confidence in the God who called them to himself and will sustain them to the end. And yet if we concentrate on God's promises, have we done justice to the severe warnings found in the scriptures? Have we given our people a false assurance, one that does not take seriously the warnings found in the scriptures?

I am not, of course, the first person to raise such questions. Scholars and pastors have wrestled with the relationship between the warnings and promises in the scriptures for a long time. Therefore, before proposing my own view, I will investigate how others have tried to resolve the tension between God's threats and promises. First, I will explain the major views relative to warnings and assurance. Second, after setting forth the various interpretive positions, I will critique each one in turn. The critique will give readers a preview of my own understanding. Third, I will explain my own understanding of how the tension between God's threats and promises is resolved.

## Major Views on Warnings and Assurance

### *Loss of Salvation View*

A number of scholars argue that the

warnings are addressed to believers, and that believers can and do abandon their salvation. John Wesley's comments on Romans 8:30 illustrate the typical Wesleyan use of warnings as the baseline for understanding election and predestination. Wesley contends that Paul's words in Romans 8:28-39 must be understood in the light of Romans 11:22. "He does not deny that a believer may fall away and be cut off between his special calling and his glorification (Rom. ix. 22)."<sup>2</sup> Wesley insists that election and predestination are not ultimate, for both election and predestination are conditional and can be overturned by lack of perseverance.

In Southern Baptist circles the loss of salvation view has been extensively and passionately defended by Dale Moody.<sup>3</sup> He argues, for instance, that the parable of the sower teaches the possibility of apostasy and says, "It is amazing how preconceived dogmas blind so many to the realism of this parable."<sup>4</sup> Paul warns those who think they stand to beware lest they fall (1 Co 10:12) and cautions his readers against failing the test on the last day (2 Co 13:5). Moody believes it is obvious that such texts teach that believers can turn from the faith forever and says, "Yet cheap preaching and compromise with sin have made such texts forbidden for serious study."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, says Moody, Paul's severe warnings against the Galatians (e.g. 4:8-11) are beside the point if apostasy is impossible.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, apostasy cannot be relegated to the hypothetical sphere, for Moody observes that Paul specifically mentions those who made shipwreck of their faith, including Hymenaeus, Alexander, and Demas (1 Ti 1:19, 2 Ti 4:10).<sup>7</sup> The warnings in Hebrews also obviously teach that believers can apostatize.<sup>8</sup> Moody describes Herschel Hobbs' attempt to explain Hebrews so that it fits with eternal security as

"exegetical hop-scotch" and "special pleading," and with regard to the warning in Hebrews 10:26-31 Moody remarks, "There seems to be no language that Hobbs is unable to tone down."<sup>9</sup>

Moody takes the language of warning very literally. Thus one may wonder how he explains the texts which promise that God will keep his own until the end. Moody follows Wesley's lead and qualifies the texts that refer to God's keeping and sustaining by those which emphasize the conditions believers must fulfill. The freedom of the human will, not divine sovereignty, is ultimate.<sup>10</sup> As long as we remain in Christ we are predestined for glory, but we may choose to repudiate our salvation. Nor can people flee to John 6:37 to defend eternal security by citing Jesus' words that those who come to him will never be cast out. Moody remarks that these words do not rule out apostasy, for Judas Iscariot who was given by the Father to the Son abandoned Jesus and was cursed.<sup>11</sup> Calvinists often appeal to 1 John 2:19 to say that those who leave the Christian community were never part of it in the first place. Moody, however, says that the verse should be translated they "went out from us because they were no longer of us."<sup>12</sup> Moody's solution to the tension is straightforward. In his mind there is no tension. The scriptures clearly teach believers can apostatize and all those texts which appear to promise assurance of final salvation have been misunderstood. In every case, the passages which assure believers of salvation must be qualified by a condition which may or may not be fulfilled. Believers will obtain their heavenly inheritance *if they persevere to the end, and we cannot know that they will persevere until the end.*

Scot McKnight has also analyzed Hebrews' warning passages recently.<sup>13</sup>

McKnight's essay is probably the best exegesis of the warning passages in Hebrews from those who support the loss of salvation view. McKnight's aim is to demonstrate that the warnings in Hebrews are addressed to believers, and that the author threatens believers with eschatological judgment if they forsake the faith. Salvation in Hebrews is mainly conceived of in future terms, and the author is concerned that readers who have begun the journey of faith may wander from the path before experiencing eschatological salvation. The apostasy envisioned in Hebrews is a deliberate and willful rejection of the Christian faith. The unique contribution of McKnight's article is that he uses all the warning texts in Hebrews (2:1-4, 3:7-4:13, 5:11-6:12, 10:19-39, 12:1-29) to discern the nature of the threat and to determine whether those addressed are believers. So often scholars have restricted themselves to the famous text in Hebrews 6 to explain the warning in Hebrews. McKnight insists, however, that such an approach is inadequate. Hebrews is a homily addressed to a community that desperately needs to hear the author's admonition. In order to understand the warning passages in the letter one must study all of the warning texts together, for they mutually interpret one another. When one takes all the warning passages into account, it is clear that the threats are addressed to believers and that these believers are warned that they will perish if they forsake their salvation.

I. Howard Marshall has written a significant exegetical work on the believer's responsibility to persevere until the end and God's promise of sustaining grace.<sup>14</sup> Marshall's work is characterized by careful exegesis and a humble attempt to submit to the wording of the text. He

concludes from his exegetical labors that apostasy is indeed possible for believers.<sup>15</sup> The warning passages seem to be evacuated of meaning if believers cannot forsake salvation. On the other hand, Marshall takes seriously the passages which promise God's persevering power. Believers should derive tremendous comfort from such texts, for they indicate that apostasy is the exception rather than the rule. Marshall even says that logic breaks down in trying to reconcile the two themes and understands the relationship between God's promises and threats as paradoxical.<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, his ultimate conclusion is that believers may choose to abandon salvation. Not all of those who are foreknown and predestined (*per* Ro 8:28-29) will necessarily be glorified. The chain which extends from foreknowledge to glorification can be broken by the believer.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, he agrees that nothing can separate believers from Christ's love (Ro 8:35-39). Yet believers, because they have a free will, may choose to separate themselves from the love of Christ.<sup>18</sup> In the final analysis, therefore, Marshall is in the Arminian camp.

### *Loss of Reward View*

The second view is quite different from the first, for the fundamental texts which dominate its exegesis are the assurance texts. No believer, it is argued on the basis of John 6:37-44, 10:28-30, Romans 8:28-39, Philippians 1:6, etc., will fail to have eternal life, for all those who believe are saved and will certainly enter into heaven. To say that one must do good works to enter into heaven, or one must persevere until the end to obtain eternal life, is contrary to the message of grace which permeates the whole New Testament. If salvation is truly by grace through faith,

then works can play no role in the outcome (Eph 2:8-10). Those who introduce works at the back-door are subtly reintroducing legalism into the churches. The emphasis of those who support such a view is found in the title of their books: *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* by Charles Stanley,<sup>19</sup> *Once Saved, Always Saved* by R. T. Kendall,<sup>20</sup> *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* and *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* by Zane C. Hodges,<sup>21</sup> and *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* by Michael Eaton.<sup>22</sup> These authors insist that those who teach that believers must do good works to be saved are actually proclaiming a different gospel, for the biblical gospel only requires faith for salvation, and good works play no role whatsoever in salvation. If works of any kind are necessary, then the gospel is no longer free and salvation is no longer a gift. Nor can anyone have genuine assurance, for their salvation is conditioned upon their works and thus they should always be worried about whether they were “really” Christians.

How do these scholars and pastors handle the warning passages? Like the previous view, they agree that the warning texts are addressed to Christians. But if texts like Hebrews 6 are directed to believers, then is it not possible that believers will apostatize and forsake their salvation? Those who espouse this second view firmly reject such a conclusion. They understand every warning text to speak either against the loss of rewards or the failure to enjoy a fruitful and happy Christian life here and now. Believers are never warned that they will lose their salvation if they do not persevere, for it is absolutely impossible to ever lose one’s salvation. Any text which demands works or perse-

verance in the life of believers relates to fruitful service in this life or to rewards above and beyond eternal life in the world to come.

R. T. Kendall explicates this view clearly. According to Kendall, the person who has become a Christian “*will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith*” (italics his).<sup>23</sup> Kendall asks, “What if a person who is saved falls into sin, stays in sin, and is found in that very condition when he dies? Will he still go to heaven? The answer is yes.”<sup>24</sup> He concludes, “I therefore state categorically that the person who is saved—who confesses that Jesus is Lord and believes in his heart that God raised Him from the dead—*will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith.*”<sup>25</sup>

Charles Stanley articulates a similar view, for he writes, “The Bible clearly teaches that God’s love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand.” He adds, “Even if a believer for all practical purposes becomes an unbeliever, his salvation is not in jeopardy.” Furthermore, he argues that “believers who lose or abandon their faith will retain their salvation, for God remains faithful.”<sup>26</sup>

How should we understand, then, the texts that say (cf. Gal 5:21, 1 Co 6:9-11) that we must do good works to enter the kingdom of God? Kendall argues that the kingdom of God in such texts does not refer to heaven at all. It refers to the extent to which God dwells in our hearts here on earth, the manifestation of God’s life through us in the present world. We will receive rewards based on our works, but such rewards must be distinguished from eternal life, for the latter is given regard-

less of good works.<sup>27</sup> Kendall understands the warnings in Hebrews 6 similarly. Those described in that passage had already fallen away.<sup>28</sup> But the author was not saying that they were thereby unsaved. Those who had fallen away had lost their rewards and were not fruitful in their Christian lives, but they were believers and would experience eternal life.<sup>29</sup>

Zane Hodges may be the most well known advocate of such a view in the United States. His comments on Galatians 6:7-8 illustrate his understanding of the warnings in the scriptures:

'Everlasting life,' Paul asserts is the direct consequence of sowing to the Spirit, of doing good. Corruption is what you reap if you do evil.... Nothing is plainer than that the 'everlasting life' of which Paul speaks is not free, but based on the moral merits of those who reap it. To deny this is to deny the most obvious aspect of the text.... Naturally Paul knew that eternal life was freely given.... But Paul is not speaking about what the Galatians already *have*, but about what they may *yet receive*. Herein lies the key to the text.... Here it should be clearly stated that in the New Testament eternal life is presented both as a free gift and as a reward merited by those who acquire it. But one important distinction always holds true. Wherever eternal life is viewed as a reward, its acquisition is assigned to a time in the future. But wherever eternal life is presented as a gift, its acquisition is assigned to the present.... If Galatians 6:8 is construed as speaking only of a man's final salvation from hell, then it teaches clearly that this final salvation is by works!<sup>30</sup>

Hodges maintains his view by regularly distinguishing between salvation and discipleship.<sup>31</sup> All believers are saved, but not all are disciples, nor is there any certainty that those who are disciples will continue to be such. Indeed, if persever-

ance is necessary for salvation (which Hodges contests), then the Arminians would be correct, for Hodges is sure that many believers do not continue in the faith. This is clear by his response to those who insist that perseverance is necessary for salvation. He states,

God, they say, guarantees the believer's perseverance in the faith. Unfortunately, this dogmatic claim does not have the support of the Bible. On the contrary, the New Testament is altogether clear that maintaining our faith in God involves a struggle whose outcome is not guaranteed simply by the fact that we are saved.<sup>32</sup>

The way out of this dilemma is to recognize that fruitfulness or discipleship is not a condition of salvation. Thus, James 2:14-26 does not teach that we must do good works to be saved from hell.<sup>33</sup> When James says that faith without works is dead, he means that we experience the deadly consequences of sin in our everyday lives if we do not follow God. James is not teaching that one must do good works to enter heaven, for that would contradict the message of grace in the New Testament.<sup>34</sup>

#### *Tests of Genuineness View*

The third view agrees with the previous one that the promises of scripture are such that no one who is elected, called, and justified will fail to be glorified. All of God's chosen will be saved, and his promises are inviolable so that no one who is genuinely part of the people of God will ever be lost. This view differs from the above in that perseverance in faith and good works are considered necessary for salvation. Such good works do not merit salvation but are the necessary evidence that salvation is genuine. Thus, when

James says that faith without works is dead, the good works demanded necessarily accompany saving faith. Scholars of this persuasion would repudiate the view of Hodges *et al.* that the good works required in James relate only to rewards or to a fruitful life on this earth. Instead, they would maintain that good works are inevitably connected with genuine faith. Nor would they believe that their view was some kind of works-righteousness, for the good works in the lives of believers are the fruit of faith. Good works are not separated from faith as if believers are justified by good works *and* faith. Rather, genuine faith is the root and good works are the fruit. Perseverance (Mt 24:13) is requisite for salvation, but perseverance simply reflects the genuineness of the faith which was exercised at the inception of the believer's life. In this sense, view number three is quite similar to view number one, for both believe that good works are crucial for eternal life. The difference between the two interpretations, however, relates to the possibility of forsaking or losing salvation. View number one says that good works are necessary for eternal life and maintains that true believers can forsake their salvation. View number three insists that good works are necessary for eternal life, but goes on to argue that all true believers will necessarily do such good works. Those who fail to do the required good works reveal thereby that they were never believers at all. As John asserts, "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they were of us, they would have remained with us. But they went out in order that it might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (1 Jn 2:19). Some people who appear to be believers and who have even made a decision of faith are not genuinely believers,

and we know that they are not genuine believers because they do not persist in faith until the end.

At this juncture one of the distinctives of this view should be observed. The warnings in the scriptures are understood as tests by which one can discern whether one is a genuine believer. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. illustrates this viewpoint in his exposition of Colossians 1:21-23, which says that believers will be presented as holy and blameless before God on the last day "if you remain in the faith."

But what about the "if"? we hear someone say. Is not the whole program in jeopardy? Does it not all depend upon us ultimately? Suppose our faith fails? Now, we must not dodge the "ifs" of the Word. They are tests for professors. If faith fails, that is the evidence that the faith was not valid saving faith (cf. 1 Jn. 2:19). On the other hand, the genuine believer will persevere in faith, not by human strength, but by divine strengthening. . . . The *ei* (AV, "if"), it may be noted, introduces a first-class condition, determined as fulfilled. The apostle assumes the Colossians will abide in their faith.<sup>35</sup>

In Johnson's understanding, the warnings are really retrospective. The function of warning passages is to help us discern whether we are genuine believers. They serve as tests of the validity of our profession.

Another distinctive of the tests of genuineness view emerges with the interpretation of a passage such as Hebrews 6. We have already seen that views number one and two understand the warning to be addressed to Christians. View number one draws the conclusion from this that believers can and do apostatize, while view number two relates this text only to rewards. Those who promote the tests of

genuineness view, on the other hand, explain this text in a different way. Three primary representatives of this view are John Owen, Roger Nicole, and Wayne Grudem.<sup>36</sup> All three argue that in the last analysis the experiences described in Hebrews 6:4-5 are not those of the regenerate. One may be enlightened, taste of the heavenly gift, become a sharer of the Holy Spirit, taste the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and still not be a believer. For instance, Nicole says that the experiences “may have been chosen by design to describe those who have received the greatest possible external exposure to the truth, including a temporary profession of allegiance to it.”<sup>37</sup> Such people are “almost” Christians, for they have had experiences which have ushered them into the very vestibule of the temple as it were—without actually being made part of God’s household.

The influence of Owen’s exegesis is apparent in reading Nicole and Grudem.<sup>38</sup> Owen argues that though the readers were enlightened, they had not been savingly transformed by the light.<sup>39</sup> The tasting of the heavenly gift does not refer to a full ingestion of the things of God.<sup>40</sup> We taste and then determine whether or not to accept or reject what we have tasted. Thus, tasting refers to an outward experience of the things of God and not their inner power. Partaking of the Holy Spirit relates to an experience with the gifts of the Spirit, and not the actual reception of the Spirit.<sup>41</sup> Those who tasted the good word of God were affected by the truth but have never actually obeyed it.<sup>42</sup> And the powers of the coming age are again the gifts of the Holy Spirit but not a saving experience of the Spirit.<sup>43</sup>

A summary of Grudem’s view will be

instructive since he has written an extensive and recent defense of the view advocated by Owen and Nicole. Grudem remarks that the better things which accompany salvation in Hebrews 6:9 are elements that are superior to what is described in verses 4-5, and they are superior because the list of experiences in verses 4-5 do not constitute salvation.<sup>44</sup> These better things are comprised of qualities like faith, hope, love, and service in verses 9-12. Thus, being enlightened, tasting of the heavenly gift, sharing of the Holy Spirit, etc. in verses 4-5 are not the definitive marks of salvation. There are better things than these, things which clearly indicate that one is saved—contrary to the uncertain things mentioned in verses 4-5. Furthermore, Grudem notes that the list in verses 4-5 contains no element which would definitively prove that those addressed in Hebrews were saved.<sup>45</sup> Grudem lists eighteen marks of genuine salvation in Hebrews and argues that the experiences noted in Hebrews 6:4-5 do not clearly match genuine salvation. Some of the eighteen qualities listed by Grudem include forgiveness of sins, cleansing of the conscience, the law written on the heart, a holy life, being pleasing to God, being enlightened, having faith, hope, and love, obeying God, persevering, entering God’s rest, knowing God, sharing in Christ, etc. However, Grudem does not understand all the items in this list necessarily to involve salvation. For instance, one must be enlightened to be a believer, and yet one can still be enlightened and be an unbeliever, for all the word enlightened means is that one has heard and understood the gospel.<sup>46</sup> One certainly must hear and understand the gospel to be saved, and yet there are unbelievers who have heard and understood the gos-

pel (they are therefore enlightened), but they are not saved. Those described in Hebrews 6:4-6 could possibly refer to Christians, says Grudem, but the language is ambiguous enough to also refer to unbelievers. If the author had said that those described had faith, hope, or love or if he had said their consciences were cleansed or their sins were forgiven, then we would know that those described are believers. In Hebrews 6:7-8 unbelievers are clearly in view, for these are people who experienced the blessings of God but never produced any fruit.<sup>47</sup> And since there was no fruit, they were clearly bad ground, i.e. people who were never part of the people of God.

One might think that those described in Hebrews 10:26-31 must be Christians since they are said to have received knowledge of the truth and are described as sanctified. Grudem replies that receiving the knowledge of the truth is equivalent to being enlightened in Hebrews 6:4.<sup>48</sup> It means that someone has heard and understood the gospel, and it even involves agreement with the teaching of the gospel. Yet, says Grudem, it does not follow from this that such people have actually trusted Christ personally. Neither does the word "sanctify" indicate a reference to believers according to Grudem.<sup>49</sup> After all, the word "sanctify" is often used of outward and ceremonial cleansing in the scriptures (Heb 9:13, 1 Co 7:14, Mt 23:17, 19). Grudem concludes that a ceremonial sense is probable here since the author compares the work of Christ with Levitical sacrifices. In other words, the sanctification in view in Hebrews 10:29 is not a saving sanctification, but an outward type of cleansing, which seems to be experienced in hearing the proclaimed gospel.

According to this third view, the warn-

ing relates to eternal punishment as in view number one. Grudem and others reject the idea that the readers would merely lose rewards or would be less fruitful in their everyday lives. But view number three differs from view number one in seeing the people addressed as those who have experienced many of the blessings of the Christian faith without being Christians themselves. Grudem argues that those who have fallen away were never believers in the first place.<sup>50</sup> Thus, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is maintained. True believers will certainly persevere to the end. The warnings function as a test by which one determines if one genuinely belongs to the people of God. Those who commit the sin of apostasy, which the warnings admonish us to avoid, reveal that they were never genuinely Christians. Thus, the warnings regarding apostasy are not addressed to genuine believers, for if that were the case, then genuine believers could lose their salvation. The warning against apostasy functions retrospectively. If one apostatizes, then it serves as evidence that one was never part of the people of God. How can one assess whether one is part of the people of God? By how one responds to the threats contained in the scriptures. Those who respond in obedience to such admonitions demonstrate that they are truly part of the people of God.

#### *Hypothetical View*

A fourth view could be described as the "Hypothetical Loss of Salvation" view. According to this interpretation believers who fail to persevere will not be saved. Still it is impossible for believers to commit apostasy, and therefore the punishment which is threatened will never become a reality in the life of any believer.



The hypothetical view has been understood in various ways. Some scholars have identified B. F. Westcott as espousing the hypothetical view in the sense described above.<sup>51</sup> Concerning Hebrews 6:4-6, Westcott states, "The case is hypothetical. There is nothing to show that the conditions of fatal apostasy had been fulfilled, still less that they had been fulfilled in the case of any of those addressed. Indeed the contrary is assumed: vv. 9ff."<sup>52</sup> A careful reading of Westcott reveals, however, that he did not think apostasy was impossible.<sup>53</sup> He was merely pointing out that the warning was hypothetical in the sense of being *prospective*. The text was a warning, which does not assume that the readers had already committed the sin in question. Westcott did not deny, though, that the sin may have been committed.

The sense in which I am using the word "hypothetical" here is well conveyed by Hewitt. He says,

The writer is dealing with supposition and not with fact, so that he may correct wrong ideas. If such a falling away could happen, he is saying, it would be impossible to renew them again unto repentance unless Christ died a second time, which is unthinkable.<sup>54</sup>

Hewitt maintains that the text is hypothetical because otherwise the admonition would contradict God's electing and preserving grace.

#### *Irresolvable Tension View*

The final view can be explained very briefly. This interpretation is presented in a dynamic way by Gerald Borchert.<sup>55</sup> Borchert maintains that there is a tension between the assurance passages and the warning passages which must be maintained. In fact, he claims that all attempts

to resolve the dilemma posed by these two different kinds of passages ends up negating either the assurance or the warning texts. To be biblical, therefore, we must admit that we cannot explain how the tension between God's promises and his threats is worked out. When we try to resolve the ambiguity, we either compromise the statements of assurance or we omit what the text says by way of warning. God's intention is not to help us settle the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. Instead, both warning and assurance texts must be given their proper role and place. As the people of God we need both admonishing and comforting. To neglect either is to shunt aside part of God's word, and all parts of the scriptures are vital for our faith and growth in godliness. A genuine biblical theology, therefore, lets both of these messages stand together, proclaims both truths, and does not attempt to resolve how they fit together. Such resolutions are inadequate, for they inevitably compromise either God's promises or his threats.<sup>56</sup>

### **Critique of the Viewpoints**

#### *Critique of Loss of Salvation View*

The strength in this position is that the warnings are taken seriously as warnings. This view is also correct in saying that eternal life and eternal judgment are at stake (for a defense of this see the critique of the next view). Dale Moody's language is very colorful and strong, but he is right in saying that some people who latch onto eternal security do not take at all seriously the warnings and threats in scripture. He is also correct in saying that some of the exegesis set forth by those who uphold eternal security is rather outlandish. I also

believe (*contra* view #3—see below) that this view is correct in saying that the warnings are addressed to those who are believers. The strengths in this view, therefore, are truly remarkable. The threats are grasped as genuine threats. The danger is rightly appraised to be eternal judgment, and the warnings are rightly discerned to be directed to believers. It is no surprise that many believers have adopted this view in the history of the church. Though this view has much to commend it, a satisfactory solution of the passages on assurance is not provided. Scot McKnight, for instance, does not even venture to explain other texts, and this is excusable since his intention is to provide an exegesis of the texts in Hebrews. Wayne Grudem rightly complains that a full orbited solution has to explain all the texts in a satisfactory manner.

Dale Moody's arguments are more one-sided. He takes the warning passages seriously, but his treatment of the passages on assurance and God's promises is inadequate. He injects into any text which teaches assurance the notion that our salvation is secure *if we persevere*. His method is no different from the Calvinist who washes away all the warning passages by insisting in advance that no one could possibly lose their salvation. Of course, we all need to account for texts which call into question our synthesis, but Moody makes it sound as if the task is remarkably easy. I cannot examine Moody's view on predestination here, so I appeal to the volumes I co-edited with Bruce Ware for a thorough response to his objections.<sup>57</sup> His explanation of foreknowledge is rejected by most commentators, and a much more satisfactory treatment is given in the essay by Stephen Baugh.<sup>58</sup> The bias in Moody's view becomes apparent when he

examines 1 John 2:19. He opines that the sense of the verse is that those who left the community were "no longer" with us. Such an interpretation is hardly persuasive, for the word "no longer" (*ouketi*) is not found in the Greek text. What John says is that "they were not (*ouk*) of us." No indication is given that John considered those who left the community to be genuine believers. Instead, he says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us, for if they were of us, they would have remained with us. But they went out in order that it might be manifest that they all are not of us." Clearly, John teaches here that those who have left the community were never part of the church of Christ. By leaving the church, they revealed that they were bogus from the beginning. We can conclude that Moody seriously reckons with the warning passages, but he does not have a satisfactory explanation of God's promises relative to perseverance.

Marshall's is a much more nuanced Arminian interpretation, yet his notion that genuine believers can apostatize is also unconvincing.<sup>59</sup> Peter says that believers are being guarded by the power of God through faith for a salvation which is ready to "be revealed in the last time" (1 Pe 1:5). The salvation envisioned here is eschatological since it will "be revealed in the last time." The terms "being kept" (*tetēremenos*, 1 Pe 1:4) and "being guarded" (*phroureomenos*, 1 Pe 1:5) are simply alternate ways of communicating the idea that God preserves the inheritance for believers.<sup>60</sup> Of course, the text says that we are protected by God's power "through faith." We can conclude, then, that no believer will finally be saved who does not continue to exercise faith.<sup>61</sup> Peter does not restrict himself to the initial act of faith but conceives of a faith that lasts

to the end. Is the verse saying, then, that God and human beings play coordinate roles? God guards people by his power, and human beings exercise faith. Can we conclude, then—as some do—that there is no guarantee that our faith will persist until the end, for faith is our contribution to the process of salvation? We must be very careful here, for faith is certainly something we exercise as human beings. The text also teaches that faith *is a condition* for obtaining the eschatological inheritance. It is a mistake, however, to conclude that we can ultimately separate God's power in keeping us from our responsibility to believe. Surely, *we* must believe, but the question is, "Does God's power play any role in our continuing to believe?" If it does not, it is difficult to decipher what his power actually accomplishes since 1 Peter informs us that believers are not spared from persecution, suffering, and death. The very point of 1 Peter 1:5 is that God's power is the means by which we continue to believe. Otherwise, his power is reduced to a cipher that accomplishes nothing. Ernest Best rightly says that God must be the one sustaining our faith, for otherwise the reference to God's power "is unnecessary and provides no assurance to the believer since what he doubts is his own power to cling to God in trial."<sup>62</sup> Arminians are right in insisting that we must continue to exercise faith to be saved, but they fail to see that God promises to sustain our faith until the end.

John 6:37-40 is another crucial text on the preservation of believers. There Jesus declares that all who are given by the Father to the Son "will come" to the Son. This *coming* to the Son is equivalent to *believing* in the Son, for John 6:35 says, "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty." The parallelism

establishes that *comes* and *believes* are synonyms. Thus, to say that those given by the Father "will come" to the Son also means that they "will believe" in the Son. Since *all* do not believe in or come to the Son, it follows that *only some* are given by the Father to the Son. And it is precisely those who are given who will believe and be raised on the last day (Jn 6:39). The resurrection on the last day in this context refers to the age to come, heaven itself. This same theme is stated from another perspective in John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day." In John 6:37-40 it is emphasized that those who do come and believe do so because of God's grace. Here Jesus remarks that those who *do not come* have not experienced the drawing power of God's grace. Only those who received the latter come and believe and experience the saving resurrection of the last day.

Is it genuinely the case that *all* those given by the Father continue to believe until the day of the resurrection? Does not the case of Judas prove that some who are chosen apostatize? After all, Jesus himself says that Judas was chosen and that he was a devil (Jn 6:70-71). A closer look at the case of Judas reveals that he is not really a genuine exception. After the bread of life discourse, John provides an editorial comment to explain Jesus' perspective upon those who had ceased following him. He remarks that Jesus knew all along who would forsake him and who would betray him (Jn 6:64). Such a remark seems to indicate simple foreknowledge, and would at first glance support the Arminian view. But John 6:65 clarifies *why* Jesus knew some would abandon him. The close connection between verses 64 and 65 is forged by the words "for this

reason" (*dia touto*). The reason Jesus knew in advance who would defect is because he knew from the beginning to whom God had granted the ability to come to Jesus. Verse 65 verifies this interpretation, "And he was saying, 'For this reason (*dia touto*) I said to you that no one is able to come to me unless it has been given to him by the Father.'" In other words, the power to believe in and come to Jesus had never been dispensed to Judas and the others who deserted Jesus.

The foot washing incident in John 13 provides additional support for the notion that Judas was never genuinely part of the people of God. When Jesus washes the disciples' feet, it symbolizes the cleansing of their sins. Peter's refusal to be washed is no trivial matter, for Jesus says to him, "Unless I wash you, you have no part with me" (Jn 13:8). That is, Peter's saving inheritance (*meros*) is conditioned upon being washed. The symbolic character of the activity is revealed by the words after the washing, "'And you are clean, but not all of you.' For he knew the one who would betray him. For this reason he said, 'Not all of you are clean'" (Jn 13:10).<sup>63</sup> Obviously, Jesus did not mean that he did a poor job in washing some of the disciples' feet! Even though Judas was washed by Jesus, he was not really clean, for Jesus knew from the beginning who was not truly part of the people of God. John emphasizes that Judas' betrayal fulfills scripture and what God predicted would occur (Jn 6:64, 13:1-3, 18-19, 17:12, 18:1-4, 9-11). Judas was pre-ordained to betray Jesus. John does not conclude from this that Judas is exempt from responsibility for his actions. The biblical writers never draw the conclusion that if human choices are pre-ordained, then we are not responsible for what happens (see Ac 2:23, 4:27-

28). To sum up, Judas is not a genuine exception to the promise that God will sustain in the faith all those that are given by the Father to the Son. Instead, Judas reflects the truth of 1 John 2:19. By leaving the band of Jesus' disciples he reveals that he was never part of the true people of God.<sup>64</sup>

A number of texts could be cited from Paul regarding our preservation. The one who began a good work will continue it until the final day (Php 1:6). The one who called us initially into fellowship with the Son is faithful to preserve his work until the end (1 Co 1:8-9; cf. 1 Th 5:24). All of those who are foreknown, predestined, called, and justified will be glorified (Ro 8:28-30). Nothing intervenes to break the links of "the golden chain." Those who are justified will certainly be spared from God's wrath on the last day (Ro 5:9). Those who are sealed by the Spirit will surely obtain eschatological redemption (Eph 1:14; 4:30). Of course, Arminian interpreters inject qualifications into all these promises, but such qualifications are unpersuasive.

Perhaps this fact can be best illustrated by a closer look at one of the texts in which Paul teaches the preservation of believers until the end. In Romans 8:35-39 Paul celebrates the inviolability of the believer's relationship to Christ.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall affliction or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.' But in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor rulers, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor any other crea-

ture, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul deliberates upon what could possibly sever us from Christ's love, and those things which are most likely to remove us from his saving grasp are introduced: the pressures of life, persecution, lack of food and clothing, the prospect of death, angelic powers, etc. The worst that life can throw at us is contemplated, for it is precisely these things which would be most likely to detach us from Christ's love. Paul affirms with confidence, however, that none of these things will prevail over the love of God and Christ. He is convinced that there is nothing in the created world that can uncouple us from Christ. Indeed, we are "more than conquerors" through Christ. We are "more than conquerors" because God turns our enemies into his servants and uses them for our benefit. A God who uses even the most terrible things for our good will see to it that none of these things remove us from his love. Indeed, he will use them to make us feel his love more profoundly and deeply.

Some object to the interpretation proposed by saying that none of these external things can separate us from the love of Christ, but we ourselves with the power of our free choice can detach ourselves from his love.<sup>65</sup> Such an interpretation is flawed because Paul reflects upon the very things which would propel believers to deny Christ. Paul introduces persecution, famine, the possibility of martyrdom, and present and future troubles because these are the elements of life which conspire to snuff out the faith of believers. These are the things that taunt believers with the horrible thought that God does not care, that Christ does not love them. A departure from faith does not occur in a

vacuum. The sufferings of everyday life and its pressures are the things that could cause believers to renounce Christ. Paul's point here, however, is that the most terrible things which one can conceive of will not have that effect in the lives of believers. They will never deny Christ nor shrink back from him. They will "hang on" not because of the strength of their will and their indomitable courage in the midst of difficulties and sufferings. They will persist because the love of God will never let them go. They will persevere in the faith because God's love has grasped them and will hold them securely in the midst of the vicissitudes of life. If this passage merely says that God loves believers no matter what happens, but we may still depart from his love, then it is cold comfort indeed. Our prime concern is not that God will cease loving us. We know he will be faithful to the end. What worries us is that we will deny him, that we will turn our backs on the faith, and renounce our first confession. This text assures us that we will not do so. We will remain true to God, not because we are so noble—but because Christ is so loving. Nothing, not even ourselves, can ever cause us to renounce the love of God which has invaded our lives.<sup>66</sup>

In conclusion, the loss of salvation view is unpersuasive because the scriptures plainly teach that those who are chosen will never apostatize. What God has started he will complete. Those who leave the community of faith were never part of the people of God.

#### *Critique of Loss of Rewards View*

The loss of rewards view is correct in maintaining that assurance is of the essence of faith, and they rightly argue that the gift of salvation is inviolable. They

make a very serious mistake, however, in separating persistence in faith and good works from salvation. The loss of rewards view teaches that repentance is unnecessary for salvation, but the early Christian *kerygma* argues otherwise. When Peter proclaims the gospel in Acts he calls for repentance “for the forgiveness of sins” (Ac 2:38) and “so that your sins might be wiped away” (Ac 3:19). Paul summons the Athenians to repentance (Ac 17:30) and includes repentance in the message he proclaims to the other Gentiles (Ac 26:20). The most plausible and common sense way to understand these texts is to take them at face value. Repentance is necessary for eternal life (cf. 2 Ti 2:25).

The loss of rewards view also suffers from an inability to grasp the already-but-not-yet character of New Testament eschatology, in which the gifts of the end time have penetrated the present evil age. Thus, they are forced to argue that the same term “eternal life” has different senses, so that sometimes it refers to heaven and sometimes to a fruitful life on earth or reward in heaven. Of course, words may vary in meaning according to context. Yet, it seems that the definitions offered by those supporting the loss of salvation view do not spring from a careful evaluation of the context in which terms are used. What drives them in positing the different definitions is a prefabricated theology. Thus, “eternal life” cannot refer to heaven in any passage which links eternal life with works, for in their view that would compromise the gracious character of salvation. They thereby they blunt the force of the warning in Galatians 6:8-9, which threatens destruction upon those who sow to the flesh, while promising eternal life to those who sow to the Spirit. No convincing *con-*

*textual* reason is adduced why “eternal life” does not bear its usual meaning in this text. Hodges, as we have seen, merely objects that such a reading involves merit. The objection reveals that his definition of eternal life is not contextually grounded here. The most natural way to read the text is to see the contrast between “destruction” and “eternal life” as indicating that heaven itself is at stake in this warning, not merely rewards or fruitful Christian living. Clearly, the need to sow to the Spirit for eternal life is not any more “meritorious” than the need to believe to be saved.

The lengths to which advocates of this view will go to preserve their theology are remarkable. Thus, the insistence of James (2:14-26) that faith without works is dead and idle (vv. 17, 20, 26), that faith without works will not *save* (*sōsai*, v. 14) and that faith without works does not *justify* (*dikaioō*, vv. 21, 24, 25 and *dikaiosynē*, v. 23) are understood to refer to the death-dealing consequences of sin in this life. This is an astonishing move since salvation and justification are typically associated in the New Testament with entering heaven. And one suspects that a hermeneutical *a priori* dictates the exclusion of such in James. Eaton even argues that the description of Abraham’s faith in Romans 4:17-22 relates to rewards and not eternal life since the text emphasizes the persistence and unwavering quality of his faith. Romans 4:17-22, the very text in which Abraham’s faith serves as a model of the kind of faith which is saving, is now relegated to a text on rewards. Such an exegesis violates the character of chapter four, for even in Eaton’s scheme the first part of the chapter describes Abraham’s *saving* faith and the last section the faith which gave him a reward. A simpler read-

ing is to be preferred. In the first part of Romans 4 Paul explains that Abraham was saved by faith and not meritorious works, and in the latter part of the chapter the nature of Abraham's *saving faith* is explained.

Similarly, the loss of salvation view shears discipleship off from salvation, so that discipleship relates to rewards and a fruitful Christian life. Good works are necessary to enter the kingdom of God (Gal 5:21; 1 Co 6:9-11), but the kingdom of God is understood to refer to rewards and significant progress in the Christian faith in this life. Examining each text which is used to defend such distinctions would require at least a book. At this juncture the text about the rich ruler in Mark 10:17-27 can function as a brief test case (Mt 19:16-30, Lk 18:18-30). The ruler asks what he can do to "inherit eternal life" (10:17). Jesus summons him to obey the commandments and cites some commands from the second table. When the man replies that he has kept such commands, Jesus says that for him to have treasure in heaven he must sell all, give his possessions to the poor, and follow Jesus. Some have understood treasure in heaven (v. 21) to refer to rewards, but the subsequent narrative rules out such an interpretation. Jesus, reflecting on the ruler's refusal to give up all, comments that it is very difficult for the rich to "enter the kingdom of God" (vv. 24-25). The disciples are stunned by Jesus' words and ask, "who is able to be saved?" (v. 26). If Jesus held the loss of salvation view, we would expect him to say, "Don't confuse the issue. We are not talking about salvation here, but rewards. Certainly this man is saved. But he will not live a very fruitful life and experience the rewards of other Christians." Of course, Jesus says none of

these things. He replies to the question of his disciples by saying, "With men this is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God" (v. 27). In other words, salvation is a miracle of God which causes people to love God so much that they are willing to put him first in their lives. Notice that the terms "eternal life" (v. 17), "kingdom of God" (vv. 24-25), and "save" (v. 26) are all synonyms in this text. There is no evidence whatsoever for distinguishing between them. Indeed, in this passage "treasure in heaven" is also a term for eternal life (v. 21). It is interesting that Hodges interprets the passage in terms of rewards, and says that Jesus is being subtle here, sending the man away to reflect on what is necessary to gain rewards above and beyond eternal life.<sup>67</sup> In reply, I cannot imagine why Jesus would be so confusing if he held Hodges' view. He had a golden opportunity to distinguish clearly between rewards and getting to heaven, and he sent the man away without clearly drawing the necessary distinctions. Indeed, he gives the impression that the rich man must give up his possessions for eternal life, entrance into the kingdom, and salvation! *Contra* Hodges I suggest that such an impression is given because Jesus meant exactly what he said, and in the mind of Jesus (and Mark) such statements did not compromise the gracious character of salvation.

Another test case for the loss of salvation view are the warning passages in Hebrews. They rightly argue that the warnings are addressed to believers, but also maintain that the punishments described relate to loss of rewards rather than the loss of eternal life. It is precisely here that McKnight's study is so valuable, for he correlates the warning passages so that they function in a mutually interpre-

tive fashion. That is, one should not study the warnings in isolation. One should read them together to discern what the author means. McKnight is also correct in saying that the warnings relate to hell, to eternal destruction. Doubtless not all will be convinced when such controversial texts are in view. For my part, I find it impossible to believe that the punishment is anything short of hell if one “tramples under foot the Son of God, considers defiled the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and insults the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29). If one tramples the Son of God in disgust, considers Jesus’ blood to be defiled, and mocks and scorns the Spirit of grace, then the penalty is eternal judgment. The fierce vengeance of God (Heb 10:30) and his consuming fire (Heb 12:29) are descriptions of eternal punishment. If one crucifies the Son of God and puts him to open shame, then he or she does not belong to God (Heb 6:6). To be “unapproved” (*adokimos*—Heb 6:8) is to be destined for the curse. And note that it is not merely the fruit which is burnt (Heb 6:8), but the land (*hēs*) which produces the crop. The destiny for the righteous is nothing less than God’s rest (Heb 3:11), which God’s people now enjoy and will inherit in full at the day of salvation (Heb. 4:3, 9).

The loss of rewards view is attractive because it gives great security to the believer, but it destroys the inseparable connection between faith and works, it introduces improbable and strained exegesis into text after text, and minimizes the awesomeness of the warnings in the New Testament. It is also the case that this view does not rightly interpret the retrospective texts in the New Testament, and so false assurance may be given to those who are heading for eternal destruction. We are dealing here with the very heart

of the gospel, the relation between faith and works, and by saying that there is no need at all for works they deny what the scriptures insist is necessary.

#### *Critique of Tests of Genuineness View*

Although I am offering a critique of this view, it is in some ways the closest to my own, and so I believe it is in some ways the strongest of the alternative positions. Those supporting this interpretation rightly teach that the promises of God are unbreakable. Those whom he has elected, predestined, called, and justified will certainly be glorified. No genuine believer will ever apostatize, not because of his own strength, but because of God’s sustaining grace. The relationship between faith and works is also helpfully explained. Faith and works are ultimately inseparable, for works are the fruit of which faith is the root. Thus, James demands works in order to be justified, but these are works which flow from faith. No compromise or contradiction with *sola fide* or *sola gratia* is involved in insisting that works are an evidence of genuine salvation. Finally, the retrospective character of some of the texts in the New Testament is incontrovertible. When John considers those who have left the saved community, he clarifies that they were never truly part of the people of God (1 Jn 2:19). Similarly, Paul observes that Hymenaeus and Philetus have “upset the faith of some” (2 Ti 2:18). But ultimately, the faith of those who have left is superficial and not genuine, for “the Lord knows who are his” (2 Ti 2:19). Perseverance is the means by which we discern whether a profession of faith is authentic. John’s gospel supports the same thesis. Some “believe” in Jesus (Jn 2:23-25, 6:60-71, 8:31-59), but that the faith is not genuine sav-



ing faith is manifested by their failure to abide in Jesus. The tests of genuineness view rightly discerns that persistence in faith is the evidence that one truly belongs to the people of God. When one apostatizes, it is because they were never genuinely Christians. These texts grant us a retrospective perspective so that we can look back and discern the true state of affairs in the lives of those who have abandoned the faith.

This perspective helps us understand what the scriptures mean when they speak of Hymenaeus and Alexander as having shipwrecked their faith (1 Ti 1:19-20), of Demas as forsaking Paul and loving the present world (2 Ti 4:10), and of Hymenaeus and Philetus as forsaking the truth of the gospel (2 Ti 2:17-18). Such verses should not be understood to say that these people have apostatized, that they were truly Christians who have renounced the faith. The language Paul employs is phenomenological, for those in question gave every indication of being part of the redeemed community. Their failure to continue in the truth, however, reveals that their “profession” of faith was invalid. Retrospectively we perceive that they were never part of the people of God. Nonetheless, Paul speaks of a shipwreck of faith and forsaking the truth because they gave some indications of genuine conversion. The tests of genuineness view rightly perceives that there are some in the church who have experienced a number of blessings and had some experience of spiritual things—without ever having been saved. Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the sower (Mt 13:18-23) bears out this understanding. Some initially respond to the word with joy and receive it as truth, but they fall away when persecution and the cares

of the world impinge upon them. Such people, though giving initial evidence of conversion, were never part of the people of God. Only those who persist in the faith and bring forth good fruit are truly part of the redeemed community. The tests of genuineness view rightly says that perseverance is the sign of genuineness, and that such a test should be applied retrospectively. When we gaze back upon those who have ceased to run the race, we perceive that they were wolves in the midst of the sheep.

In terms of its overall coherence and persuasiveness the tests of genuineness view surpasses all the others. Nonetheless, a serious weakness emerges in this view, which renders it unpersuasive in terms of its understanding of the warning passages. This weakness can best be detected by responding to S. Lewis Johnson’s interpretation of Colossians 1:21-23 and the interpretation proposed for the warning passages in Hebrews. Colossians 1:21-23 says that one will be presented before God’s presence on the last day *if* one remains in the faith. Johnson understands this word as a test for those who profess faith. Those who do not fulfill the warning reveal that they were never believers. In other words, the warning functions *retrospectively* to determine whether one’s initial profession of faith was genuine. I have already indicated that such retrospective texts are indeed in the scriptures. The error Johnson makes here, however, is the assumption that Colossians 1:21-23 is to be understood retrospectively. Colossians 1:21-23 is a *prospective* text. It does not say, “Your perseverance reveals that you are really part of the people of God.” It merely says, “If you remain in the faith, you will be presented before God’s presence blameless.”<sup>68</sup> By inverting the text, Johnson fails

to communicate the function of the warning, for Paul does not summon us to look back and see if we are genuinely Christians. He calls us to remain faithful to Christ in the future and threatens us with eternal destruction if we apostatize.<sup>69</sup> The tests of genuineness view subverts the function of the warning texts in the scriptures by robbing them of their prospective role. Paul in Colossians 1:21-23, and many other texts, warns believers that if they do not persist in the faith, they will be damned. Contrary to the tests of genuineness view, I believe Paul means exactly what he says: "If we fall away from Christ, we will face eternal destruction." That message should be preached from our pulpits, taught in our seminaries and colleges, and reflected upon in private devotions.

The warning passages in Hebrews also function as a point of divergence between me and those who espouse the tests of genuineness view. Investigating these texts is useful, for how we handle the warnings in Hebrews is paradigmatic for other warning texts in the scriptures. We saw that Wayne Grudem is a particularly eloquent defender of the view that those warned against apostasy are "almost Christians." He shows that such a reading is a *possible* reading of the warnings. In the short space granted here I can hardly respond in detail to Grudem's fine defense of that view. I can only indicate why Grudem's interpretation, though *possible*, does not seem to be the most *plausible* reading of the passage. A number of interpretations, after all, may be possible, but our task as interpreters is to select the interpretation which is most probably intended by the author. The heart and soul of Grudem's view is located in his explanation of the terms used to describe the readers in the warnings in Hebrews 6:4-6

and 10:26-29. The readers have been sanctified, have come to know the truth, are enlightened, have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, have tasted the heavenly gift, the word of God, and the powers of the coming age. Despite all these advantages, they are not, according to Grudem, genuine Christians. If the author had intended to say clearly that they are Christians, he would have said their sins are forgiven, their consciences are cleansed, etc.

In response, I cannot help but think that Grudem has rigged the categories so that those described in Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-29 are excluded as genuine Christians. He erects two different categories in which one set of terms certainly refers to believers and the other set of terms does not necessarily describe true Christians. Methodologically, the basis upon which Grudem places items in the certain or uncertain categories is unclear and unpersuasive.<sup>70</sup> On what methodological basis can we say that those who have received forgiveness of sins, exercised faith, hope, and love, and have been cleansed in conscience are certainly Christians, but those who are sharers of the Holy Spirit and sanctified are not? Could not the test be turned around to say that some of the Hebrews have exercised a little faith, hope, and love, but their "faith, hope, and love" are not saving since they did not persist in the faith?<sup>71</sup> For example, Grudem suggests that the sanctification described in Hebrews 10:29 is outward and ceremonial since it occurs in a context where it is compared with Levitical sacrifices.<sup>72</sup> But a similar argument could be made regarding the cleansing of the conscience (Heb 10:22), for the author contrasts the cleansing of the conscience with that provided by the Levitical system. Thus, on Grudem's own terms it is methodologically possible that

the cleansing of conscience is also *external and not saving*. In my view, however, Grudem misinterprets the reference to the believer's sanctification in Hebrews 10:29. The contrast with Levitical sanctification is intended to emphasize the superiority of Christ's work. The contrast and comparison with the Levitical system does not indicate that the sanctification provided by Christ is merely external, for throughout Hebrews the old covenant outwardly symbolizes what is now an inward reality through Christ. Grudem, by relegating the sanctification in Hebrews 10:29 to ceremonial sanctification, actually contravenes one of the major themes of Hebrews, namely, what was anticipated in shadowy form in the Old Testament has now become a reality in and through the sacrifice of Christ. The main point being made is that there is no firm basis upon which we can say that the descriptions of the audience in Hebrews 6:4-6 and 10:26-31 are distinct from the terms used to describe the readers as Christians in Hebrews. It is likely that Grudem introduces such a distinction to preserve the idea that believers cannot lose their salvation. Unfortunately, the text of Hebrews itself does not support the idea that those addressed in the warning passages are "almost Christians." When the text says that the readers have been enlightened, been made partakers (sharers) of the Holy Spirit, have come to the knowledge of the truth, and have been sanctified, the intention is to say that they are Christians.<sup>73</sup>

Whether the text is addressed to Christians is very important for how one interprets and applies the warnings. In the tests of genuineness view the warning is not really for genuine believers at all, for those addressed are not really believers. According to this view, if the warnings were indeed addressed to believers, then believers

could apostatize. But since they are convinced that those who are elect never apostatize, they conclude that the warnings are for those who *almost became believers, who have had many powerful spiritual experiences without being saved*. Thus, the function of the warnings is twofold for those who hold this view. First, the readers are called upon to discern whether their conversion is genuine. Second, the warnings again function retrospectively. If you do apostatize, you reveal that you were never a genuine Christian. I believe that both of these themes are found in the New Testament. Second Corinthians 13:5 says to examine whether we are genuinely believers, and I argued above that retrospective texts are present in the scriptures. The warnings in Hebrews have neither of these functions, so we are robbed of the contribution of the warnings to the canon if we swallow them up in the previous two themes. The threats in Hebrews are not designed to force us to consider whether our conversion experience was real, nor are they designed as *retrospective* tests of our salvation. The warnings are *prospective*. Hebrews warns believers that *if* they apostatize, then they will be damned. It is interesting to see that some writers, such as Nicole and Grudem,<sup>74</sup> argue that some of the readers have already committed the sin of apostasy warned against in Hebrews. Such a conclusion is a serious error. The text nowhere says that any of the readers *have committed* apostasy. It warns them *against doing so*. To read the "if's" as if they meant "since" violates the basic rules of grammar. The conditional "if" is the language of supposition and hypothesis. The author warns the redeemed that *if* they commit apostasy, they will be damned. He never says *that they have* committed apostasy.

In summary, the tests of genuineness

view perceives many elements of the biblical teaching correctly. Their understanding of the warning texts, however, is unconvincing. They apply retrospective glasses to prospective texts, and they fail to see that the warning passages are addressed to Christians.

### *Critique of the Hypothetical View*

The hypothetical view under consideration is that presented by Thomas Hewitt Marshall, though saluting the work of G. C. Berkouwer, places him in the same category as Hewitt.<sup>75</sup> Berkouwer ultimately sees the warnings and admonitions as hypothetical, but the function of the warnings is understood in a manner radically different from Hewitt, and thus Berkouwer should be placed in a different category from Hewitt. Berkouwer fits better in the “means of salvation view.” Hewitt’s own understanding is completely inadequate, for the warning functions only to correct “wrong ideas.” If the author desired to correct the readers’ ideas, he had vehicles other than admonition and warning to accomplish his purpose. A simple explanation that apostasy was impossible would have been sufficient.<sup>76</sup> The only function of the warnings in Hewitt’s view is an intellectual one, and thus the reason for their presence is difficult to discern. I think it can be safely said that Hewitt’s understanding of the warnings will never gain many adherents. No compelling function is assigned to the admonitions, and thus their presence remains something of a mystery.

### *Critique of the Irresolvable Tension View*

This view, proposed by Gerald Borchert, is one of the most attractive. The advantage of the view is that neither the

warnings or the promises are toned down. Both are allowed their function, and the logical relationship between them is acknowledged to be mysterious. Believers take both the threats and promises of the scriptures as God’s word to them, and they do not cancel one side of the biblical witness in order to sustain the view which is most attractive. It must also be said that we are prone to construct a system where the scriptures do not. Thus, we must be open to the possibility that no resolution to the tension between warning and assurance is available. To say this is not to embrace irrationalism. We simply acknowledge that the scriptures teach some truths which go beyond our present rational capacities, realizing that God never intended to explain everything to us fully in this world. Other biblical doctrines, such as the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, are mysteries. Such doctrines are not irrational but suprarational. Similarly, it is possible that the relationship between God’s promises and threats is beyond our rational comprehension. Of course, we should not opt for mystery the moment biblical doctrines become difficult to grasp, for it is important to locate a mystery at the place where the biblical testimony does so. Otherwise, we may find ourselves appealing to mystery before completing the hard work of thinking through the biblical teaching, and we may be guilty of positing a mystery where one does not exist. It should also be noted that Borchert in a private conversation has told me that he is convinced that genuine believers will never apostatize. He points out, however, that the Johannine literature indicates that it is often difficult to pin down when someone is truly a believer.<sup>77</sup> For the purposes of my critique, I am going to address the issue of whether the

tension between the promises and threats cannot be reconciled.

The notion that an intractable tension exists between God's warnings and promises cannot be dismissed, for certainly there is a tension between the threats and promises in the scriptures. It is unlikely, however, that the polarity is such that no logical resolution is currently available. Indeed, in this instance it is difficult to see how one can maintain both ideas without embracing a logical contradiction. For if both the warnings and promises are taken in such a way, it seems that one would have to say: 1) "Believers will never lose their salvation" and 2) "Believers can and do apostatize." If one were to inquire how both propositions are true, the reply would be, "It is a mystery or paradox beyond our understanding." In this instance, the appeal to mystery simply does not work. If genuine believers can truly apostatize and lose their salvation, then it is simply untrue that believers can never lose their salvation. Alternatively, if genuine believers can never lose their salvation, then apostasy is impossible. The situation would be different if one were to say that those who apostatized only *appeared* to be believers. But this is not the mystery position, for it argues that *both apostasy and security are true*. How can an individual, though, at the same time be assured that he will never apostatize, and also believe that he may commit apostasy? Inevitably, one side of the tension will emerge in the dominant position. I suspect that in most instances the teaching that apostasy is possible but rare will be what is taught. In other words, *in practice* the position will likely be quite close to what has been argued by I. Howard Marshall. To conclude, the irresolvable tension view is not credible because it

ends up embracing a contradiction.

### **The Means of Salvation View: A Proposal**

The interpretation I support is what I call the means of salvation view. A number of elements in my view are apparent from my evaluation of other positions and will not be defended in detail here. To summarize, I believe that those who are elected, called, and justified will certainly be glorified. No genuine believer will ever apostatize. Nonetheless, the warning passages in the scriptures are addressed to *believers*, and they are threatened with eternal destruction (not loss of rewards) if they commit apostasy. One might conclude from this that I espouse some form of mystery in relating God's promises and threats, but an appeal to mystery does not work in this instance since the notions that believers will never fall away and also may possibly fall away cannot both be true! Contrary to the hypothetical view as explained by Hewitt, the warnings in the text are real and serious. We must pay heed to the warnings in order to be saved on the day of the Lord.

The last point needs further elaboration. How do we as believers receive the warning passages? In our journey in the Christian life we receive them just for what they say. When we read the warnings in Hebrews, 1 John, Revelation 2-3, etc., we take seriously the threat that if we commit apostasy, we will be eternally damned. The warnings remind us that falling away from the living God has eternal consequences. They shout out to us "Danger!" They are akin to a sign on the road which says, "Go no further. Steep cliff ahead." Any driver who wants to preserve his life takes heed to the warning and

turns around. Similarly, the warnings and admonitions in scripture call out to us, "Danger! Do not fall away from the living God. If you deny him, he will deny you." It is precisely by taking the warnings seriously that we avoid eternal destruction.<sup>78</sup> The label "Poison!" on a bottle seizes our attention and awakens us to the peril which awaits us if we swallow its contents. Thereby we take special care when handling such a container and do not put it in the same cupboard with soft drinks. The warnings in the scriptures are also intended to arouse us from lethargy and propel us onward in the pathway of faith. They provoke a healthy fear (Heb 4:1!), so that we are not casual and relaxed about entering the heavenly rest. Of course, this fear is not the same thing as the paralyzing fear which suppresses all activity (1 Jn 4:18). It is the same kind of fear which causes us to put on our seat belts when we drive and which causes us to place railings where a fall would be deadly. Fear in these instances does not paralyze us but actually contributes to our confidence when driving or climbing. Similarly, hearing and obeying the warnings in scriptures does not sap us of confidence and assurance. It is the pathway for full assurance in the faith.<sup>79</sup>

What I am arguing, in other words, is that adhering to the warnings is the means by which salvation is obtained on the final day. Some protest that this is works righteousness, but such an objection fails to see that such perseverance is the fruit of faith and grounded in God's sustaining and electing grace. Yes, works are necessary to be saved. No, this is not works righteousness, for the works are hardly meritorious. The grace of God is so powerful that it not only grants us salvation apart from our merits, but also transforms

us. Christians are not only declared righteous but also experience observable and significant change in their lives. Those who propound the view that grace leaves us in the same state in which we are called have not really understood Paul (Gal 5:21; 1 Co 6:9-11), not to speak of James (Jas 2:14-26) and the message of the sermon on the mount (Mt 5:1-7:29). The life which begins in faith also continues in faith, for Christian existence is characterized by "the obedience of faith" (Ro 1:5, 16:26). Such faith is not confined to initial conversion but permeates the lives of those called by God's grace. Those who cry out "works righteousness" fail to see the dynamic and ongoing character of faith, for just as the faith which commences the Christian life is not meritorious, so too faith which continues on the pathway to the heavenly city is not legalistic.<sup>80</sup> Admonitions and grace are not foes but friends. Berkouwer rightly says, "For what is striking about the Scriptures is that the passages concerning the steadfastness of God's faithfulness and the passages with admonitions are inseparable. We do not encounter a single passage that would allow anyone to take the immutability of the grace of God in Christ for granted."<sup>81</sup> Jude calls on believers to "keep themselves in the love of God" (Jude 21). The imperative here reveals that this is our responsibility. To be spared from God's wrath on the last day we must keep ourselves in God's love, and yet such self-keeping is ultimately not our work but God's, for it is God who guards us from falling so that we stand before his presence with exceeding joy (Jude 24-25). Once again, Berkouwer explains clearly the relationship between these two different verses in Jude.

We will never be able to understand these words if we see the divine preservation and our preservation of ourselves as mutually exclusive or as in a synthetic cooperation. Preserving ourselves is not an independent thing that is added paradoxically to the divine preservation. God's preservation and our self-preservation do not stand in mere coordination, but in a marvellous way they *are* in correlation. One can formulate it best in this way: *our* preservation of ourselves is entirely oriented to *God's* preservation of us.<sup>82</sup>

God's preserving grace is certainly ultimate, and yet we cannot conclude from this that the exhortations and admonitions are superfluous. Nor is it legitimate to minimize the sense of urgency which pervades the warnings. Though God undergirds all our effort, it is still the case that we must do what the scriptures command.

Others may worry that the call to perseverance involves perfectionism. Perseverance and perfection, however, are scarcely the same thing. We all fall short in many ways (Jas 3:2). While we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin (1 Jn 1:7), so walking in the light can hardly involve perfection. Otherwise, there would be no need for cleansing of sin! Paul was keenly aware that he had not yet attained to the perfection that would be his in the *eschaton* (Php 3:12-14). It would also be a mistake, however, to adopt an all or nothing stance. Even though believers are not perfect, there are significant changes in our lives. The pathway of faith is described by Paul as "the obedience of faith" (Ro 1:5; 16:26). Our election and calling are confirmed when we live in a godly way (2 Pe 1:10-11). I am not advocating perfection but there is godly direction. Those who are called and elected continue in the journey of faith and manifest in substantial and significant

ways the character of their heavenly Father and elder brother, Jesus (Ro 8:29).

The most common objection is that the warnings can hardly be taken seriously if no one, in fact, can actually lose their salvation. My thesis is that the elect always, without exception, pay heed to the warnings and thereby obtain eternal life. Most respond by saying that the warnings are meaningless and beside the point if one cannot commit apostasy. We do not warn people about dangers that can never be realized. The words of Roger Nicole summarize this objection beautifully.

But, without wanting to minimize the significance of scriptural admonitions and their effectiveness in God's plan, it would appear odd that this one, and it alone, should be entirely efficacious, when other divine exhortations and warnings are in fact occasionally disregarded by man. This would be a very strange phenomenon. If, in fact, the sin contemplated in Heb. 6 simply cannot be committed, it would seem absurd for the author to dwell on it precisely at the time when he avows that he will 'press on.' When there is an insuperable barrier there is no need to give warning concerning dangers on the other side! This type of interpretation shows a wholesome regard for the strength of the scriptural doctrine of perseverance, but it tends to artificiality.<sup>83</sup>

*Contra* Nicole, I contend that the understanding proposed here is not artificial at all, for heeding the warnings is the means by which the promise is obtained. It is rather surprising that a Calvinist, such as Nicole, would raise this objection, since one would expect it from an Arminian. Arminians, after all, are convinced that the summons to belief in the scriptures indicate that believing is ultimately due to the human will. Calvinists, on the other hand, while not minimizing the human respon-

sibility to believe, insist that faith is ultimately the gift of God.<sup>84</sup> I am suggesting that the warnings work in the same way as initial saving faith. Human faith is the necessary means or instrument of salvation, but for the Calvinist such faith is certain in the lives of the elect, for God has chosen whom will have such faith before the foundation of the world.<sup>85</sup> Nonetheless, God's unconditional election does not bypass human means but employs them. That is, God's decision to elect some unconditionally becomes a reality in history through human faith. Moreover, when the gospel is proclaimed, the message that is proclaimed is not, "See if God has given you faith." On the contrary, the listeners are urged to "repent and believe." We are summoned to believe in Christ and to turn from sin. If saving faith is exercised, it is ultimately a gift of God (Eph 2:8-9), and there is not a single instance in which God's electing grace is frustrated. Those who are elect always exercise the faith needed for salvation. We do not deduce from this that the summons to saving faith is superfluous. Quite the contrary. God's electing grace always uses the means of human faith to secure salvation. So, too, the perseverance of the saints is sure because of God's preserving grace. It will not fail in a single instance. And the warnings and admonitions of the scriptures are one of the means by which this preserving grace becomes a reality in the lives of believers. To say that the warnings are besides the point and artificial if no one can commit apostasy is like saying the call to belief is a charade if all the elect will certainly believe. I can see why an Arminian would find this argument persuasive, but it should not win over any Calvinist.

Are there any scriptural examples in which God's promise is unbreakable and

yet the warning is to be taken seriously? Of course, I would maintain that scripture is suffused with such examples. But perhaps it will help if we illustrate such a theme from a text which is not soteriological in nature.<sup>86</sup> The shipwreck story in Acts 27 is one of the most colorful in the scriptures. The storm struck with such fury that all aboard despaired of living (Ac 27:13-19). Paul, however, received a word from the Lord that every single person on the ship would be saved, i.e., every single person's life would be preserved (27:20-26). The word that all aboard the ship would live was a divine promise, pledging safety for all. Some of us might be inclined to relax and "take it easy" after receiving such a promise. Paul, on the other hand, did not think that such a promise ruled out the need for admonitions and warnings. This is clear as we read on in the narrative. The sailors feigned that they were merely lowering anchors, when actually they intended to lower the lifeboat and escape the ship (Ac 27:29-32). Paul responded by warning the centurion that if the sailors left the ship the lives of those on board would not be preserved. Why would Paul even bother to admonish the centurion about the scheme of the sailors? After all, he already had received a promise from an angel that everyone on the boat would escape with their lives. Paul did not reason the way many of us do today, "God has promised that the lives of all will be saved, therefore, any warning is superfluous." No, the urgent warning was the very means by which the promise was secured. The promise did not come to pass apart from the warning but through it.<sup>87</sup> This same approach should be applied to the promises and threats in the scriptures regarding our salvation. It is by means of taking



the warnings seriously that the promise of our salvation is secured.

A second example, from the eschatological discourse in Mark 13, may be useful. In this chapter Jesus emphasizes the intense affliction which will occur in the future. Indeed, the trouble will be so great that no previous affliction can compare with it (13:19). The disciples are urgently warned to beware (*blepete*) of being deceived since messianic pretenders will arise (Mk 13:5-6). In the light of the coming persecution Jesus again summons his disciples to be on guard (*blepete*—Mk 13:9). Surely, Jesus is warning his disciples against apostasy, for they will be tempted to align themselves with false Christs when suffering escalates. That salvation is at stake is confirmed by Mark 13:13 with the words, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved.” Eschatological salvation belongs only to those who persevere in faith until the end. Nonetheless, the Lord will make special provision for his elect, shortening the days so that they will be saved (Mk 13:20). The salvation described in verse 20 may be restricted to physical preservation; at least this is the view of many commentators. It seems, however, that their physical preservation is an emblem of the spiritual preservation of the elect. The Lord shortens the time of affliction so that the chosen will not apostatize.

Whether or not such a reading fits verse 20, it is certainly *apropos* in verses 21-23. “And then if someone should say to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ, look there he is, do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and they will do signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, the elect. But you be on your guard. I have told you all things in advance’” (Mk 13:22-23). Believers will be enticed to succumb to the claims of such

false Christs and prophets because signs and wonders are adduced to support their claims. If believers were deceived, this would hardly be a trivial matter, for adherence to false Christs and false prophets is nothing less than apostasy. No believer worships any Christ besides Jesus the Messiah! Still, Mark clarifies that the elect will not be deceived. If it were possible for God’s elect to be deceived, then they would be captivated by such false Christs. Such deception of the elect is *impossible*, however, and God’s chosen will certainly discern false prophets and messianic pretenders. Even though the elect will never be deceived and though it is impossible for them to be deceived, they are summoned to “beware” (*blepete*—Mk 13:23). The exhortation to “look out” is found in this text four times (13:5, 9, 23, 33), and we have already seen that only those who endure to the end are promised salvation (13:13). Mark’s eschatological discourse contains the urgent warnings, “look out, stay awake” (*blepete, agrupneite*—Mk 13:33). In verse 33 Mark uses another verb which means “watch” (*grēgoreite*), and the text concludes with the same verb, demanding constant vigilance, “That which I say to you I say to all, ‘watch’” (*grēgoreite*—Mk 13:37). Believers are exhorted to stay alert and be vigilant lest they commit apostasy and embrace messianic pretenders and false prophets in the future day of trouble.

We might be thinking, “But why are such warnings needed, since Jesus has already said that the elect will never be deceived by such false Christs? We do not need to be warned about something that can never happen!” Such musings are alien to the teaching of the scriptures, for Jesus himself says that the elect will never be deceived by false Christs, *and he admon-*

ishes his followers in the strongest terms not to be deceived by messianic pretenders. I conclude that the warnings are the means by which the future preservation of the elect is accomplished. Taking the warnings with the utmost seriousness is the pathway to eternal life. No philosophical *a priori* should cast away the warnings on the basis that the future salvation of the elect is certain. Those who say that the warnings are superfluous if believers cannot apostatize will have a hard time squaring this text with such a theory, for Jesus himself teaches that deceiving the elect is impossible, and he urgently warns believers to be on guard against falling away.

The scriptures are full of warnings and threats regarding entering the heavenly city. We need to remember that these admonitions are prospective. "If" you fall away, then you will be damned. We need not deny the strength of the apodosis in such sentences. If you or I apostatize, we will be damned. So too, if we do not believe in Jesus, we will not be saved. We need to beware of reading conditional statements as if they are a reality. The prospective statements of the scripture should be allowed to speak to people on their own terms. Thus, we should preach and teach the warnings for what they say. We should say what the scriptures say again and again, "If you apostatize, if you deny Christ, if you turn your back on the gospel, you will perish." Many will immediately think that we are denying the reality of perseverance. Unfortunately, they are turning the "ifs" of scripture into "thats." Turning hypothetical statements into indicatives is a serious grammatical and exegetical error. John 21:21-23 reveals that such an error has ancient roots.<sup>88</sup> Jesus speaks to Peter about John and says, "If I want him to remain until I come, what is

that to you?" (Jn 21:22). Some responded to such a saying by concluding that John would never die! (Jn 21:23). They read Jesus' "if" as though it were a "that." So John clarifies that Jesus did not say John would live until Jesus' return, but only "if I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you?" (Jn 21:23). I am not suggesting that no "ifs" ever become "thens." In some circumstances the condition is fulfilled, and the "then" becomes a reality. I am maintaining, however, that the grammar of an "if-then" statement in itself tells us nothing about whether the "then" is a possibility.<sup>89</sup> The function of an "if" statement is prospective, and it is a grammatical error to read it in other terms. Lest what I have just said is misunderstood, I am arguing that in the texts which speak of apostasy, the "if" never becomes a reality. The God who unconditionally elects preserves believers until the end, yet believers do not sail safely into the divine harbor without availing themselves of the means which God has supplied to do so. They heed the warnings so that they do not make shipwreck of their faith.

The position argued here has been defended by G. C. Berkouwer. He says that,

Anyone who would take away any of this tension, this completely earnest admonition, this many-sided warning, from the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints would do the Scriptures a great injury, and would cast the Church into the error of carelessness and sloth.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints can never become an *a priori* guarantee in the life of believers which would enable them to get along without admonitions and warnings. Because of the nature of the relation between faith and perseverance, the whole gospel must abound with admonition. It has to speak thus, because perseverance is

not something that is merely handed down to us, but it is something that comes to realization only *in the path of faith*. Therefore the most earnest and alarming admonitions cannot in themselves be taken as evidence against the doctrine of perseverance. To think of admonition and perseverance as opposites, as contradictories, is possible only if we misunderstand the nature of perseverance and treat it in isolation from its correlation with faith. For the correct understanding of the correlation between faith and perseverance, it is precisely these admonitions that are significant, and they enable us to understand better the nature of perseverance.<sup>90</sup>

The admonitions, as we have seen, are prospective. Of course, the retrospective passages are in the scriptures as well. Those who do not persevere were never truly part of the people of God. But we must not allow such retrospective texts to swallow up the prospective texts. Both are part of the biblical witness and both must be preached. I have emphasized the role of the warnings simply because their function is often given short shrift in the Calvinist scheme, whereas Calvinists often and rightly apply the retrospective perspective. We must allow the retrospective texts their proper function: those who apostatize were never Christians. At the same time, we also need the prospective texts. Our Father is so loving that he has admonished us about many false pathways on our journey to the heavenly city. We will be saved on the day of the Lord, not by ignoring these threats but by taking them with the utmost seriousness.

Let me make one personal comment about my theology at the conclusion. If I were not convinced of unconditional election, I would surely be an Arminian. The warning passages are so strong that I can understand why many think that believ-

ers can lose their salvation. What is interesting to me is that there are so many believers who reject unconditional election and yet they hold on to eternal security. Such a position, I would suggest, is the most inconsistent of all. I think it is maintained not by virtue of detailed exegesis but as a theological *a priori*. May I be pardoned for thinking that such a position flows more from the heart than the head. Such people want to believe so badly in eternal security that they leap over the warning passages and sustain their belief in eternal security. Personally, I find the Arminian view that believers can and do lose their salvation much more biblically coherent than such a position. Of course, I am convinced that both of the above positions are wrong, for I am persuaded that the scriptures do teach unconditional election, and that God's electing and sustaining grace is such that his sheep will never perish. They never perish precisely because they listen to the Good Shepherd's voice which effectively admonishes and warns them lest they fail to follow him and perish.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup>I must acknowledge the tremendous assistance I have received from Ardel Caneday on this whole subject. We are co-authoring a book titled *Run to Win the Prize: Perseverance and Assurance* which is due to be published by InterVarsity. Caneday has influenced my thinking significantly on this issue, and I am also grateful to him for some of the citations which appear in this essay.

<sup>2</sup>John Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament* (London: The Epworth Press, 1952) 551.

<sup>3</sup>Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Sum-*

- mary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981). See especially 337-365.
- <sup>4</sup>Ibid., 349.
- <sup>5</sup>Ibid., 350.
- <sup>6</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>7</sup>Ibid., 352.
- <sup>8</sup>Ibid., 353-355.
- <sup>9</sup>Ibid., 353 and 355 respectively. For a more recent and spirited defense of Dale Moody's views see his *Apostasy* (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys, 1991).
- <sup>10</sup>*Word of Truth*, 338-339, 341, 343-343.
- <sup>11</sup>Ibid., 356.
- <sup>12</sup>Ibid., 357.
- <sup>13</sup>Scot McKnight, "The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions," *Trinity Journal* 13 (1992) 21-59.
- <sup>14</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1969).
- <sup>15</sup>Marshall's conclusions are found on 191-216.
- <sup>16</sup>Ibid., 210-211.
- <sup>17</sup>Ibid., 103.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>19</sup>Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990).
- <sup>20</sup>R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983).
- <sup>21</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: A Study on Faith and Works* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1981); and *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1989 and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989).
- <sup>22</sup>Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995).
- <sup>23</sup>Kendall, 49.
- <sup>24</sup>Ibid., 50-51.
- <sup>25</sup>Ibid., 52-53. Cf. the comment of John F. Walvoord, "Having once accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, the believer is assured a complete salvation and eternal bliss in heaven on a gracious principle quite independent of attaining a degree of faithfulness or obedience during this life. The original condition having been met, the promise continues without further conditions" (*The Millennial Kingdom*, [Findlay, Ohio: Dunham, 1959] 149).
- <sup>26</sup>Stanley, 74, 93, and 94 respectively.
- <sup>27</sup>For the exposition of these views by Kendall see 125-130, 159-184. For a recent and similar defense of these views see Eaton 112-113.
- <sup>28</sup>Kendall, 177-178.
- <sup>29</sup>Eaton (216-217) proposes a similar understanding of Hebrews 6. He also suggests that inheritance language should not be equated with going to heaven, 178-179.
- <sup>30</sup>Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 80-82.
- <sup>31</sup>Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 67-88.
- <sup>32</sup>Ibid., 104.
- <sup>33</sup>Ibid., 124-126.
- <sup>34</sup>It is instructive that Eaton (180-185) argues that Abraham's persistence of faith in Romans 4 does not relate to salvation but only to rewards. It appears that a new way of understanding the tension between Paul and James is emerging in this view.
- <sup>35</sup>S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: IV. From Enmity to Amity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (1962) 147.
- <sup>36</sup>John Owen, *Hebrews: The Epistle of Warning* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1953) 96-98. This work is an abridgement by M. J. Tyron of John Owen's *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* originally published in eight volumes. Roger Nicole, "Some Comments on Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Doctrine of the Perseverance of God with the Saints," in *Current Issues in Biblical and Patristic Interpretation: Studies in Honor of Merrill C. Tenney Presented by His Former Students*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 355-364; Wayne Grudem, "Perseverance of the Saints: A Case Study of Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Other Warning Passages in Hebrews," in *The Grace of God, The Bondage of the Will: Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism, Volume One*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 133-182.
- <sup>37</sup>Nicole, 362.
- <sup>38</sup>Interestingly, Nicole maintains that those addressed have already fallen (355), "What is the sin that they have committed and which places them beyond recovery?" See also his comments on p. 359. *Contra* Nicole there is no evidence that the sin had already been committed. The text contains an admonition and a warning, and one should not read an "if-then" statement with the view that the "if" is already realized. The statement is grammatically hypothetical.
- <sup>39</sup>Owen, *Hebrews*, 96.
- <sup>40</sup>Ibid., 97.
- <sup>41</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>42</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>43</sup>Ibid., 98.
- <sup>44</sup>Grudem, 157-159.
- <sup>45</sup>Ibid., 162-168.

- <sup>46</sup>Ibid., 163-164.
- <sup>47</sup>Ibid., 172.
- <sup>48</sup>Ibid., 176-177.
- <sup>49</sup>Ibid., 177-178.
- <sup>50</sup>Ibid., 172-173, 179.
- <sup>51</sup>So Thomas Hewitt, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1960) 111; Nicole, 356.
- <sup>52</sup>B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (London: Macmillan; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977) 165.
- <sup>53</sup>Cf. Westcott, 151. Rightly suggested by Marshall, 146.
- <sup>54</sup>Hewitt, 110-111; cf. also Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 113-114. Actually, Kent explains his view in a way that is superior to Hewitt's. Unfortunately, he does not distinguish his view sufficiently from Hewitt's.
- <sup>55</sup>Gerald L. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).
- <sup>56</sup>Borchert has indicated in a private conversation that it was not his intention to resolve the tension between assurance and warnings in his book, and that ultimately true believers cannot lose their salvation.
- <sup>57</sup>See especially, *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will: Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism, Volume One*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995).
- <sup>58</sup>S. M. Baugh, "The Meaning of Foreknowledge," in *The Grace of God, the Bondage of the Will: Biblical and Practical Perspectives on Calvinism, Volume One*, ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Bruce A. Ware (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 183-200.
- <sup>59</sup>For a more extensive discussion see chapter 5 in the forthcoming book *Run to Win the Prize* (cf. n. 1 above).
- <sup>60</sup>J. Ramsey Michaels, *1 Peter*, WBC (Waco, TX: Word, 1988) 22.
- <sup>61</sup>Michaels rightly observes ( *1 Peter*, 23) that since faith is linked to our final inheritance, it is clear that faith is "understood as continuing trust or faithfulness."
- <sup>62</sup>Ernest Best, *1 Peter*, NCB (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 77.
- <sup>63</sup>There is a textual problem in this verse which makes it quite difficult to interpret, but the point we derive from the text stands regardless of how one resolves the textual problem or interprets the difficulty attending to it.
- <sup>64</sup>John 17 could also be adduced to teach the same truth. For reasons of space it will be omitted here. The text is examined in the forthcoming book *Run to Win the Prize*. See n. 1.
- <sup>65</sup>Marshall, 94, 114.
- <sup>66</sup>In support of the interpretation suggested here see Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying in and Falling Away* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990) 57-58; Eaton, 194. Gundry Volf's work is an excellent defense of the notion that God will preserve believers. Her explanation of the warning texts, in my opinion, is not as persuasive.
- <sup>67</sup>Hodges, *Absolutely Free*, 186.
- <sup>68</sup>The citation marks represent my paraphrase of the text. I am not intending an exact quotation.
- <sup>69</sup>Nor is Johnson correct in saying that the "if" assumes that the condition is already fulfilled. Conditional clauses have been the subject of intensive study since Johnson wrote, and the notion that first class conditions always denote a condition fulfilled has been decisively refuted (see especially the series of articles by James L. Boyer in the *Grace Theological Journal*, "First Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?" 2 [1981] 75-114; "Second Class Conditions in New Testament Greek," 3 [1982] 81-88; "Third (and Fourth) Class Conditions," 3 [1982] 163-175; "Other Conditional Elements in New Testament Greek," 4 [1983] 173-188; cf. also Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996] 679-712). Indeed, it is likely that rendering "since" for the word "if" is never fitting. For a defense of this view see the paper by Ardel Caneday presented at the annual 1997 Evangelical Theological Society meetings in San Francisco.
- <sup>70</sup>Grudem also argues, as we saw above, that "the better things which accompany salvation" in Hebrews 6:9 are to be distinguished from the ambiguous experiences recounted in Hebrews 6:4-5. *Contra* Grudem I understand the writer to be saying that "the better things which accompany salvation" are to be contrasted with the curse threatened in the previous context.
- <sup>71</sup>Lest the reader should misunderstand, this is a hypothetical statement, not my view of the text.
- <sup>72</sup>Grudem, 177.
- <sup>73</sup>I am not denying that there were some wolves among the sheep. My point is that the author did not in-

tend in the *warning* to raise such a subject. He wants to warn the entire community, and thus he addresses the whole church as believers in Christ.

<sup>74</sup>Grudem (173) says that “the people in this passage who experienced many blessings and then fell away had never truly been saved in the first place.”

<sup>75</sup>Marshall, 204-205.

<sup>76</sup>Hewitt (106-108) does not commit himself as to whether the warnings were addressed to genuine believers. On the other hand, his exposition of Hebrews 10:26-31 indicates his acceptance of the view of Owen *et al.* that those addressed were not really believers.

<sup>77</sup>The question of when belief is genuine is certainly one of the issues which must be taken into account in constructing one’s view of perseverance. I do not have space to interact with that issue here. John’s gospel does inform us that there are some who “believe,” and their faith is not saving (Jn 2:23-25, 8:31-59). On the other hand, John wants those who believe to know that they have eternal life (1 Jn 5:13).

<sup>78</sup>William Cunningham (*Historical Theology: A Review of the Principal Doctrinal Discussions in the Christian Church Since the Apostolic Age, Volume Two* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994 ] 500-501) argues a similar position regarding warnings, saying that “their proper primary effect evidently being just to bring out, in the most impressive way, the great principle of the invariableness of the connection which God has established between

perseverance, as opposed to apostasy, as a means, and salvation as an end; and thus to operate as a means of effecting the end which God has determined to accomplish, of enabling believers to persevere, or preserving them from apostasy; and to effect this in entire accordance with the principles of their moral constitution, by producing constant humility, watchfulness, and diligence.”

<sup>79</sup>The position maintained here is similar in a number of ways to that argued by Richard Baxter. See Timothy K. Beougher, “Conversion: The Teaching and Practice of the Puritan Pastor Richard Baxter with Regard to Becoming a ‘True Christian,’” Ph.D. dissertation Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1990, 77-104. Beougher (80), commenting on Baxter’s view, says, “Works, then, the prescribed expression of faith, are absolutely necessary for justification at the last judgment.” He also says (85) that Baxter emphasized “the necessity of continued acts of faith to bring us safely to the ultimate justification at the final judgment.” Baxter also says, “God by commanding faith and repentance, and making them necessary conditions of Justification, and by commanding perseverance, and threatening the Justified and Sanctified with damnation if they fell away; and making perseverance a condition of Salvation, doth thereby provide a convenient means for the performance of his own Decree, of giving Faith and Repentance and perseverance to his Elect; For he effecteth his ends by suitable moral means; and such is this Law and

Covenant, to provoke man to due fear, and care and obedience, that he may be wrought on as a man.” The citation is taken from Beougher, 94.

<sup>80</sup>G. C. Berkouwer adds, “From the foregoing it would appear that anyone who sees a contradiction between the doctrine of perseverance and the numberless admonitions of the Holy Scriptures has abstracted perseverance from faith. Faith itself can do nothing else than listen to those admonitions and so travel the road of abiding in Him.” (*Faith and Perseverance*, trans. R. D. Knudsen [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958] 116-117).

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 97. He goes on to say, “For in the Scriptures, then, there is apparently no unbearable tension or opposition between the gracious faithfulness of God and the dynamic of life, because it is in the thick of the dynamic of the actual struggle of life that Scripture speaks of perseverance in grace” (99).

<sup>82</sup>*Ibid.*, 104. He also claims, “Preserving ourselves does not imply that we contribute our part and that God contributes His. Our preserving is oriented to His, and it is included in it. Faith can never say, and will never say, ‘This is our part’” (105). He continues, “A rationalistic approach will never be able to understand this harmony. It will always end up with a view that places salvation ultimately in man’s hands” (106).

<sup>83</sup>Nicole, 356.

<sup>84</sup>I realize the argument given below would not convince any Arminian. My argument here is directed to those, like Nicole, who are Calvinists but find the theory proposed

here to be artificial.

<sup>85</sup>Berkouwer (90-91) rightly remarks, "If anything is certain, it is this, that according to the Scriptures God's grace does not stop short at the limits of human freedom of choice. Whoever claims this is bound to see faith and grace as two mutually exclusive and mutually limiting elements in salvation, and he is bound to emerge with a doctrine of grace that is synergistic in principle."

<sup>86</sup>This example was suggested to me by Ardel Caneday.

<sup>87</sup>I realize that those who believe that God does not know most of the future free decisions of human beings would explain this text in radically different terms. I do not have the space here to respond to such a position, one which is plagued with biblical and theological difficulties.

<sup>88</sup>This example was suggested to me by Ardel Caneday, and is a prominent part of his paper presented at the 1997 Evangelical Theological Society meeting.

<sup>89</sup>One could protest that second class conditions contradict my point. To be precise, I am only referring to second and third class conditions here. Second class conditions do not pertain to the controversy regarding warnings in any case.

<sup>90</sup>Berkouwer, 110-111. He also says, "These admonitions, too, have as their end the preservation of the Church, which precisely in this way is established in that single direction, which is and which must remain irreversible—the direction from death to life!" (121)