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**“If” – Conditionality and Unconditionality
in the Biblical Doctrine of Assurance**

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Debates concerning salvation, grace, assurance, apostasy, holiness, are endless. Whole schools of thought emerge within the Christian churches, depending on different beliefs with regard to such

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matters. The discussion has continued for centuries. Can anything new be said? It might help our thinking if we pick out particular words and ideas and examine them one-by-one in a slightly fuller manner than is usual. For the moment, my chosen point of exploration – a small one – is the word “If”.

I. A Suggested Study

There are a number of places in the New Testament where some kind of climax or reward is promised to the Christian but the climax or reward concerned is conditioned upon the lifestyle or the obedience or the persistence of faith in the Christian. In such cases it often happens that the word ‘if’ (*ei*) or ‘provided that’ (*eiper*) is used. The blessing is conditioned upon something else. This clearly is important for the Christian’s assurance of final blessing or assurance of salvation. Is the Christian secure in his or her salvation or is there a big ‘If’. What exactly is the nature of the conditions that are being presented to us when Paul or the author of the letter to the Hebrews brings in his ‘if’. It might be worthwhile studying these passages as a group, in the hope that clarification of the biblical doctrine of assurance will arise as we do so. The question is: what is the place of conditionality in the biblical assurance that final salvation and rich blessing are in store for God’s people? Let us consider eight of them where the conditionality is conspicuous.

II. Eight Scriptures

Romans 8:17

We are children of God, says Paul, and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ — provided that we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him.

On the whole Romans 8:1-39 does not have much emphasis on any kind of conditionality. The section as a whole seems to argue that our freedom from condemnation is absolute. True, there is a variant reading in Romans 8:1 that tells us that the freedom from condemnation is for those ‘*who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit*’. But it is almost universally agreed that the extra phrase is a late addition. Nearly all commentators and most modern translations leave the phrase out and have the simple unconditional statement. *There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*

However the variant reading in 8:1 is quite helpful, although it is to be rejected (despite the KJV and NKJV) for it underlines the point that the absoluteness of the promise might be difficult for some readers to accept. It seems that some early scribes noted the unconditional nature of the statement in 8:1, but did not like it and thought it might be dangerous. Romans 8:1 gives the impression that we shall *never* be condemned and clearly there were scribes who thought the Christian *could* be condemned if he did not ‘walk according to the Spirit’ and they felt obliged to add the extra precaution against our feeling more secure than they believed was right. We need only note that Paul himself did not feel so worried about the ‘dangerous’ nature of grace, and that his statement is absolute.

The remainder of Romans 8:1-39 is reinforcing the opening programmatic statement. But there are reasons for thinking that Romans 8:1 must be taken both objectively and subjectively at the same time. Romans 8:1 is dealing partly with ‘objective’ truth – the sheer fact that is true in and of itself whether we feel it or not. Yet it is also dealing with ‘subjective’ experience - the way we feel things and sense them, the way we know things within ourselves. In Christ, we Christians are not condemned as a matter of sheer fact and we never shall be. The word ‘therefore’ points back to what Paul has said earlier. Because of the cross of Jesus (Romans chapter 3), because of our transfer to a kingdom of grace (Romans chapters 5-7), there is ‘therefore’ no condemnation.

But Paul is concerned about something *subjective* as well. If we grasp hold of what he has been saying we shall not have any *experience or feeling* of being condemned either.²

There are two reasons for understanding it this way. Firstly, this is the meaning of *katakrima*. It is ‘a legal technical term’ (as the Friberg *Analytical Lexicon*³ says) ‘for the result of judging, including both the sentence and its execution’. It means both the sentence of doom, condemnation as a fact, and it also means the experience of

² See further, M.A. Eaton, *Romans* (Sovereign World Trust, 2010) for a fuller exposition; and M.A.Eaton, *Everlasting Assurance* [Romans 8] (Africa School of Leadership, Pietermaritzburg, 2010), for one fuller still.

³ Barbara and Timothy Friberg, *Analytical Greek New Testament* (Baker, 1981), vol.4, under *katakrima*.

punishment, penal servitude. As a verb it is used in Mark 14:64, ‘they condemned him to death’. There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. He was condemned so that we might never be condemned. There is no need for the *experience* of being condemned, no torture, no experience of being guilty, no penal servitude. The *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* says the same thing. It is ‘divine condemnation, including its execution’, ‘the divine sentence but also to its actual results’.⁴

A second reason for taking it this way is that this is the way Paul develops the point. In Romans 8:1 Paul lays down a basic statement: there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ. Then he says ‘For...’, and goes on to argue his point in a number of small paragraphs showing why there is no condemnation. We have been released from the law (8:2-4), we possess the Spirit (8:5-17), sufferings will outweigh glory (8:18-25), the Spirit helps us in weakness (8:26-27) and God has a determined purpose to bring us to glory (8:28-30). At that point he asks a question (‘What therefore shall we say to these things?’, 8:31a). He argues out our security further, answering all possible difficulties (8:31b-37) and then he comes to his great climax and conclusion (‘For I am persuaded ... Nothing is able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord’). The whole argument from 8:1 to 8:39 has been a development of the point that we can never and shall never be condemned. As he develops this matter he does so both ‘objectively’ and ‘subjectively’, in terms of facts and in terms of spiritual experience. It is a fact that the law has been dealt with, we are in the Spirit, God has predestined us to glory, and so on. But also it is a matter of experience. The Spirit leads us. We know how to pray in the Spirit with groanings too deep for words. We have the Spirit of adoption and cry ‘Abba, father’. God is not laying upon us any experience of being sentenced to imprisonment or bondage.

There is an ‘if’ in Romans 8:9. Here it is generally thought that the *eiper* means ‘if (as is the case)’. It is not throwing doubt on the

⁴ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (eds.G.Kittel, G.Friedrich, 1964-1974, electronic edition, Logos Research Systems, 2nd ed., 2001), vol.3, p.950.

divine indwelling, says Leon Morris⁵. Douglas Moo agrees⁶ but thinks there is a different usage in Romans 8:17.

This note of absolute and unconditional assurance continues through Romans 8:2-16, but at verse 17 the word ‘if’ comes in again twice. We are children of God, says Paul, *and if* (Greek *ei*) *children, then heirs...* There is clearly no real conditionality in the first ‘if’. It means ‘since we are children of God’. It is the second ‘if’ that perhaps introduces a note of uncertainty and a genuine condition. We are children of God, says Paul, *and if children, then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ—if we suffer with him so that we may also be glorified with him*. Here is the point where our glorification is dependent on something else. It is regarded as indispensable that we shall suffer with the Lord Jesus Christ.

How is this conditionality to be understood? There are roughly three options. There are those who identify ‘inheritance’ with final glorification and the ‘if’ suggests the possibility of a lost salvation. Robert Shank takes the verse in this manner. Our sonship remains conditional and we are heirs only if we suffer with him. He quotes H.P.Liddon to the effect that sonship depends for its continuance upon man’s obedience⁸. For want of a better term I shall occasionally call such people ‘Arminian’ but I do not use the word as a term of disparagement; I merely use it to designate an exegetical position that is often maintained. Often I simply use the term ‘Group One’!

Then there are the predestinarians, the ‘Reformed’; I shall occasionally call them Calvinists but again only for purposes of classification. I also call them Group 2. They are people who think that it is 100% certain that all the regenerate people of God will reach final glory and therefore the ‘if’ of Romans 8:17 cannot be seriously

⁵ L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, IVP/Eerdmans, 1988, p.308. On the other hand John Murray thinks the clause emphasizes (and therefore warns?) that ‘a person not having the Spirit ... is outside the fold of Christ’s called ones’ (*The Epistle to the Romans* (2 vols., NICNT, Eerdmans, 1959, 1965), 1.p.288; Charles Hodge speaks of it as a ‘decisive test’ (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, various reprints, 1882, p.257).

⁶ D. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1996), p.490. Schreiner says it is a ‘fulfilled condition’ (*Romans*, BECNT (Baker, 1998), p.414.

⁷ The word *eiper* clearly means ‘if (as is the case) in 2 Thessalonians 1:6 and it means ‘if and only if’ in 1 Corinthians 15:15. The word itself cannot determine the heaviness or otherwise of the condition.

⁸ R. Shank. *Life in the Son* (Westcott, Springfield, 1961), p.96-97, citing H.P. Liddon, *Explanatory Analysis of ... Romans*, p.132.

suggesting that there is any possibility of withdrawn of justification or loss of regeneration or abolition of our sonship in relation to God.

If Group 2 are correct what is the point of the ‘if’? Sometimes this view is pushed to the point where it is denied that there is anything conditional about the ‘if’ at all. Lloyd-Jones says that the whole exegesis depends on a right understanding of this ‘if so be’ and complains that the New English Bible seems to suggest that our heirship is conditional upon our suffering. ‘There is nothing conditional about the expression’, he says⁹. It has the same force as in verse 9. We must, he says, get rid of any notion of conditionality here. C.E.B.Cranfield’s view is similar¹⁰

Then there is a group of expositors whom I could call ‘Encouraging Calvinists’. They include people who in much of their thinking are traditional Calvinists but have some variations that depart from it (perhaps in connection with the baptism with the Spirit or rewards or the Mosaic law); others are included who hold strongly to the ‘eternal security’ of the Christian but whose grasp of Reformation theology as a whole is minimal. There are different kinds of ‘Calvinists’!¹¹. I will consider this subsection as a whole and call them Group 3. They are similar to group 2 in holding to some kind of doctrine of security but there are differences between group 2 and group 3, and sometimes some quite severe sibling rivalry between them!

This ‘Group 3’ tends to stress the genuine and thoroughgoing conditionality in the verses I am considering but they do not think it implies loss of salvation (that is, loss of initial justification-regeneration-sonship). Douglas Moo (whom I would normally put in group 2 and whose general position is predestinarian) stresses the

⁹ D.M. Lloyd-Jones, D.M. *Romans: The Sons of God* - Romans 8:5-17 (Banner of Truth, 1974), p.427. He finds a similar meaning in Romans 8:9.

¹⁰ C.E.B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans* (ICC, T & T Clark, 1975), p.388.

¹¹ We may distinguish (i) Calvin’s Calvinism, (ii) ‘high Calvinism’ [Westminster Confession, Synod of Dort], (iii) hyper-Calvinism (no evangelistic ‘offers’ of salvation, (iv) four-point Calvinism (bishop Ryle, the English representatives at Dort, (v) ‘encouraging Calvinism’ [modern Calvinistic charismatics who emphasize inheritance, freedom from the law, an experiential baptism with the Spirit which is not identical to or part of regeneration]. Eaton’s *Theology of Encouragement* (now in a 2nd edition, *No Condemnation*, Piquant, UK, 2011) put forward some aspects of this approach, and his *Romans* (Sovereign World Trust, 2010) takes an infralapsarian view of unconditional, individual election to salvation and conformity to Christ. Zane Hodges was a kind of ‘one-point Calvinist’ [holding to eternal security but not much else that could truly be called ‘Calvinism’]. My list is not complete.

genuine conditionality in what is said in Romans 8:17. The Greek *eiper*, he says, is ‘stating a real condition with emphasis, perhaps, on the condition’¹². This suffering ‘is the condition for the inheritance’¹³. Moo does not really discuss what this might mean for the Christian’s view of his security. Since Moo urges that the conditionality is genuine he cannot accept Lloyd-Jones’ view that the suffering is guaranteed and there is no real conditionality here. So does it mean that if the Christian does not suffer he proves himself not to be Christian after all? Or does it mean that if the Christian does not suffer, something of the inheritance is lost but not everything? Or is the whole question to be left as a mystery? These seem to be the options but they are not discussed.

René López is more emphatic. He puts great emphasis on the conditional nature of the promise of inheritance. ‘To be joint-heirs with Christ occurs *only* if indeed believers suffer with him’¹⁴. It is ‘an indispensable condition of future glory’. An interesting point has to do with use of the Greek *men ... de*, which Lopez wants to translate ‘on the one hand *heirs of God*, but on the other hand *joint-heirs with Christ*’. He argues that in Romans the *men ... de* construction is ‘always ... contrastive never conjunctive’¹⁵.

Let us leave the three possibilities for the moment and press on to survey some other ‘ifs’, after which the possibilities of interpretation that are open to us might be clearer.

1 Corinthians 3:14

In 1 Corinthians Paul was concerned to put down worldly wisdom (1:18–2:5) and to speak of the wisdom that comes from above (2:6–16). He rebuked the carnality of the Corinthians (3:1–5). In 3:5–4:5 his concern was to develop the points he made in 3:4. Christian preachers are simply servants. The Corinthians must grasp the true idea of the church, In this connection Paul uses two illustrations. The church is God’s field or garden (3:6–9a), and the church is God’s building (3:9b–11). The workers in the garden each receive a reward, varying according to faithfulness.

¹² D.Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1996), p.506, n.50.

¹³ Moo, *Romans*, p.506.

¹⁴ R.A. López, *Romans Unlocked* (21st Century Press, USA, 2009), p.173.

¹⁵ López, *Romans*, p.175.

In applying the building illustration, Paul says that the foundation in Corinth had already been laid. But the church needs superstructure as well as foundation, and the church's 'superstructure' may be of varied quality. The 'superstructure' is what is built upon Christ, the further work of the Christian life, including character and ministry, after the foundation has been laid. It is possible that the superstructure of the church could contain in it poor and shabby materials: wood, hay, straw. Judgment day is a time when the superstructure of the Christian life and ministry will be examined, evaluated and hopefully rewarded. Paul is still using picture language, still comparing the church to a building. At the time when Jesus comes again there will be a judgment by fire. The fire is the fire of God's holiness, the fire of God's extermination of rubbish. Judgment day will be like a house with many possessions in it catching fire.

God's holy fire will not be judging our saving faith; it will be judging our works of faith. God's judgment will not touch the foundation of the church; it comes upon the superstructure of the church. Some Christians will receive a reward on that day. Paul says, *If any person's work which he has built upon the foundation remains, that person will receive a reward.* One might want to ask: what is the reward? It is certainly honour from Jesus. It may include the further privilege of serving him. It will be the truth of what we have done for Jesus being known for ever and ever. Some Christians will suffer loss in the judgment day. Paul says: ¹⁵ *If any person's work is burned up, he or she will suffer loss, but the person himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.* He is still using picture language. The person rushes out of the building. He saves his life but everything he possesses is lost.

There is a note of severe warning here. After his warning concerning judgment day (3:6–17), Paul appeals to the Corinthians to abandon worldly techniques altogether (3:18–23).

There is of course much that invites discussion in these comments of mine on 1 Corinthians 3:14,15. But in one respect there is little to discuss. It is agreed on all sides that the 'ifs' of 1 Corinthians 3:14,15 are genuine conditions. The reality of reward is clear. Even those who seem to dislike the notion of reward do not deny it here. The possibility of loss without the loss of salvation

receives its ‘proof-text’ at this point! At the point of *conditionality* the commentators do not disagree with each other.

1 Corinthians 15:2

In 1 Corinthians 15 Paul begins to re-establish the Corinthians’ faith in resurrection by establishing that they must and surely do believe in Christ’s resurrection (15:1–11). It will then be illogical for them to doubt their *own* resurrection. What happened to Jesus will (he says) happen to them.

Paul writes, ¹Now I make known to you, brothers and sisters, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which you stand, ²through which you are being saved if you hold fast to the word in which I preached good news to you – unless you believed in vain. There are two points here at which some kind of doubt or conditionality is being considered here. Calvin says, ‘These two conditional clauses have a sharp sting in them’¹⁶. They are (i) if (‘assuming that?’) you hold fast to the word; and (ii) unless you believed in vain. The second phrase is not so relevant to our discussion because it clearly means ‘unless you believed but to no purpose because there is no resurrection’. It is referring not to spurious faith or lost faith but to a hypothetically spurious gospel. It is the first phrase which is more relevant for us: by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you. Guy Duty has no doubts about the matter. Loss of salvation is in view here. ‘The salvation of the readers depends on their holding fast the word preached’¹⁷

The International Standard Version seems to hold the view that they could (i) disown the faith they once had (‘by which you are also being saved if you hold firmly to the message’) or that (ii) their faith could be whole worthless in the first place (‘unless, of course, your faith was worthless’). The worthlessness could be for one of two reasons. It could be that their faith is not genuine. Or it could be that their faith was worthless because the resurrection they believed in was not a reality. Although Paul is speaking hypothetically, it is clearly the latter option that he has in mind. He is not thinking of as spurious faith; he is thinking of a hypothetically spurious gospel.

¹⁶ J. Calvin, *The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p.313.

¹⁷ G. Duty, *If Ye Continue* (Bethany), p.113.

As we might expect the interpretations of the commentators divide into three. In Group 2 we place Simon Kistemaker. His view of the ‘if’ is to suggest that there is a possibility that there are false Christians whose ungodliness makes it clear that there are not Christians at all. ‘Paul writes a conditional clause ... but he knows that the activity of holding fast is a fact’¹⁸. True Christians *will* persevere. The Corinthians are saved but they must ‘demonstrate this in their conduct. Otherwise their faith will be hollow and worthless’. If this is not the case the Corinthians have believed in vain. ‘Believers who continue to hold on to Christ and obey God’s Word are safe and secure’. ‘People who at one time believed but subsequently refused to hold fast to God’s Word provide evidence that they have broken faith with God’. Kistemaker is not very explicit as to what this involves precisely, but it seems that his view is that those who do not persevere were never saved. He mentions but does not expound Matthew 7:22-23 where Jesus says to such people ‘I *never* knew you’. Calvin puts this view with clarity: ‘a collapse as sudden as theirs was proof that they had never grasped what had been taught them or that their knowledge had been only a frail, fragile thing...’; ‘they are wasting their time and breath in *professing* allegiance to Christ, if they do not hold on to this fundamental principle of the faith’¹⁹.

Roy Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner refuse to commit themselves ‘Those who believe in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and those who reject that doctrine both agree that people who do not persevere in the gospel have no true claim on its promised blessings...’²⁰. This in effect refuses to adjudicate between group 1 and group 2.

In *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, David Lowery says the present tense of the verb *saved* focuses on sanctification. ‘Believing the gospel includes holding *firmly* to belief in Christ’s resurrection’ but if the grasp on bodily resurrection is weakened such faith will

¹⁸ S.J. Kistemaker, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Baker, 1995). p.528.

¹⁹ Calvin, *First... to the Corinthians*, p.313. ‘Ye are saved if ye persevere’ is Charles Hodge’s paraphrase (*A Commentary on 1 & 2 Corinthians* (1857, 1859), reprinted in one volume by Banner of Truth, p.312).

²⁰ R.E. Ciampa, B.S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians, Pillar Comentary* (Eerdmans, 2010), p.744.

become ‘without cause’ or ‘without success’.²¹ One can see here that Lowery does not think that true faith will be lost, but doubting faith will either mean the faith was always (hypothetically) pointless or that it will not achieve ‘success’ in the life of sanctification. The ‘if’ is serious but loss of salvation is never involved.

Colossians 1:23

God’s plans for his people involve presenting them to the Father, says Paul. He will present them holy and without blemish and free from accusation before God (1:22). Then Paul says, This is what he will do if you continue in faith, grounded and steadfast, and not moving away from the hope of the gospel which you heard. At this point in Colossians, Paul introduces a condition. ‘If you continue...’. There is this big ‘If’. He is only speaking to Christians. Jesus wants to present us to the Father, as a holy people. For the Word Commentary ‘standing irreproachable’ in judgment day ‘is conditional upon their remaining firmly grounded and established in the faith’. But actually for O’Brien the condition is not so real after all because the ‘if’ means ‘if you stand firm in your faith – and I am sure that you will’²². If the Colossians do not continue in this way they prove themselves never to have been Christians in the first place. ‘Continuance is the proof of reality’. The saints will persevere to the end. The very warning the apostle gives them will stir them up to continue’²³. This last point (one often made) is difficult to follow in practical detail, and yet it is of major importance. We should ask how realistic it is. It seems to be saying that the saints will persevere to the end if they are given a warning that there will be final and total condemnation for them if they do not! But this is saying that they will persevere to the end if they believe that they might not persevere to the end and so take action so that they do persevere! It is a view which strikes me as incoherent and contradictory. A Calvinist result will follow if an Arminian belief is followed! Arminians should be happy with it! But this hardly makes for coherent theology. O’Brien says the Colossians must not fall into a state of false security, but it

²¹ *Bible Knowledge Commentary* (eds. J.F. Walvoord and R.B. Zuck, Wheaton, 1983; electronic version, Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems), p.542.

²² P. O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (WC, Word, 1982), p.69.

²³ O’Brien, *Colossians*, p.69.

seems that a true security (for O'Brien) involves not having a sense of security. If one believes one might fall away, then one will not fall away. As I understand it, O'Brien thinks of himself as a Calvinist but is this not Arminianism? Still, despite the slight incoherence, it is clear O'Brien belongs in group 2. It is certain that all the regenerate will reach final glory and therefore the 'if' of Colossians 1:23 is not suggesting anything different.

Douglas Moo – the commentator on Romans 8:17 – is also a commentator on Colossians 1:23. *Ei ge* could – he thinks – mean 'if, though I doubt it' or it could mean 'if, as I am sure', and there is evidence for both meanings.²⁴ So (if I might paraphrase his thought) Colossians 1:23 means 'If you continue in the faith, as I am sure you will, you will be presented holy and blameless and without reproach...'. On the other hand Moo is sure the warning is real; 'salvation depends on their remaining faithful'. This is 'human responsibility' side in the biblical teaching²⁵.

A more vigorous Arminianism is found not in the commentaries so much as in the more subject-orientated writings. Shank thinks this is so clear a reference to lost salvation that he thinks those who hold to any different view are ingenious in their 'fancy twistings'²⁶.

Norman Geisler who considers himself a 'moderate Calvinist' argues that Colossians 1:23 'is best taken as implying that, if we so continue walking in the Christian faith, we will be rewarded'²⁷.

Derek Williams touches upon all three of these possible lines of thought, in his extra note on Colossians 1:21-23 in *The Bible Application Handbook*²⁸. The Arminian view is disparaged ('We cannot begin with grace and continue with "works"'). A reward-view is mentioned and apparently accepted ('We will not be received into heaven because of what we have done, but we will be 'rewarded' in some way within heaven for our labours'). Also 'Paul ... in Colossians 1:23 ... distinguishes between real and counterfeit...A sign

²⁴ D.Moo, *The Letter to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Eerdmans, 2008, p.144.

²⁵ Moo, *Colossians*, p.144.

²⁶ Shank, *Life*, p.67.

²⁷ N.L. Geisler, A Moderate Calvinist View, in *Four Views on Eternal Security* (ed. J.M. Pinson, Zondervan, 2002), p. 85.

²⁸ Derek Williams and J.I. Packer (consulting editor), *Eagle* (UK), 2001.

of genuine faith is seeking to be faithful...'²⁹. So Williams repudiates the Arminian view but allows both of the other options as equally valid. More professional scholarly exegetes might perhaps consider such combinations more than they do.

2 Timothy 2:11-13

In 2 Timothy Paul has been encouraging his younger colleague; his main purpose is to urge him to stand firm in the face of suffering, and in this context he introduces one more of the 'faithful sayings' that are found throughout the pastoral letters.

The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; ¹²if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; ¹³if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself.

William Mounce believes that the 'if' of 2 Timothy 2:11-13 is very serious. It means 'If we endure, and that is not to say that we will, then...'³⁰. The words are addressed to *believers* but if they commit apostasy Christ will claim that he *never* knew them. Line 3 speaks of apostasy but line 4 looks to a different situation and speaks only of *temporary* faithlessness³¹. 'It appears that the hymn is trying to deal with the different responses to conversion'³². G.W.Knight does not discuss the conditionality nor does he enter into any theology of warning. He thinks the warnings here are about 'sad possibilities ... in *this* life'³³, but 'comfort is offered to the disciple who is unfaithful by assuring him that Christ will remain faithful to him'³⁴. For William Hendriksen line four means 'If we are faithless God is faithful *in carrying out his threats!*' This may lead us to pose the question: is the word 'faithful' ever used in this way elsewhere in the New Testament? Faithfulness to one's threats is not a very convincing kind of faithfulness and is generally not thought of as faithfulness at all! But he thinks it is 'hardly necessary' in connection with this passage to refute the notion that God is faithful to us in

²⁹ *Handbook*, p.54.

³⁰ W.D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, WBC (Nelson, 2000), p.516.

³¹ Mounce, *Pastoral*, p.517.

³² Mounce, *Pastoral*, p.518.

³³ G.W. Knight, *The Pastoral Epistles*, NIGTC, Eerdmans/ Paternoster, 1992, p. 408, my italic.

³⁴ Knight, *Pastoral*, p.408.

giving us eternal life³⁵. The contrast between Hendriksen and his fellow-Reformed expositor G.W.Knight is great! Hendriksen is in my group 2 (for he presumably thinks the Christians is proved to be unauthentic rather than apostate); Knight is closer to group 3. A strident member of ‘group 1’ is D.Pawson, who without discussion of other possibilities insists that the ‘if’ of 2 Timothy 2:11-13 demonstrates that ‘a disciple once owned by Christ will be disowned by him’ in final judgment³⁶. Similarly for Lenski, to be ‘faithless’ is to give up believing and so the lines refer to apostasy on the part of one who was once a genuine Christian³⁷.

Hebrews 3:6

In Hebrews 3:1-6 the writer is comparing and contrasting Moses and Jesus. Moses was faithful, but Jesus has an altogether greater place in God’s purposes. There are at least five contrasts in these verses. (i) Moses builds a material house. Jesus builds a spiritual house. (ii) Moses’ house was a testimony pointing forward; Jesus’ house is the final reality. (iii) Moses is a servant; Jesus is a Son. (iv) Moses is a participant in Jesus’ house; Jesus is the Son and heir, exercising lordship over the house. (v) Moses’ work is completed and only ‘testimony’ remains. Jesus’ work continues. He ‘ever lives’ to reign over his house, and minister to his people. He does that work with perfect faithfulness.

The words ‘firm to the end’, in some translations, represent Greek words found in later manuscripts but not in the earlier ones. Quite likely an early scribe wanted to have the thought more strongly expressed. The thought is legitimate but our writer is concerned about what his readers should be doing every day, more than what will happen to them in the long-distance future.

Hebrews 3:6b adds a word of explanation. *We ourselves are his house if we hold on to our boldness and our joyful delight in our hope*. It is always difficult to know how to handle the word sometimes translated ‘boast’. I translate it ‘joyful delight’. It does not mean ‘boast’ in the way that we normally use the term. It means ‘glory’ in

³⁵ W. Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Baker, 1957), p. 260.

³⁶ D. Pawson, *Once Saved Always Saved* (Hodder, 1996), p.68.

³⁷ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of ... Colossians... to Philemon* (Wartburg, 1937), p.975

something, ‘make something my supreme delight’, ‘rejoice within myself’, ‘rejoice in greatly’, ‘take great pleasure in’.

It is this sentence that is about to lead into the warning passage of Hebrews 3:7-4:13. The house is the people who are being used as God’s living temple. A condition is introduced. ‘We ourselves are his house if...’. It is this ‘if’ that leads into Hebrews 3:7-4:13.

As we would expect some take this to be a warning about loss of salvation. Few commentators speak bluntly about losing salvation; this kind of language tends to be found more in theological or topical books than in exegetical works. I.H.Marshall’s *Kept By the Power of God* takes this approach. Hebrews 3:6 means that membership of God’s household (which he takes to be salvation) is conditional upon perseverance; backsliding leads to exclusion from God’s promises³⁸. This might want to make us ask the question, ‘What is God *promising* those who *already* are justified?’ When God spoke to Abram there were many promises which were given to him. There are eight phrases which have promises in them. We have reference to (i) ‘...the land which I will show you...’. God says (ii) ‘...I will make you a ... nation’ (iii) ‘...I will bless you’ (iv) ‘...I will make your name great’ (v) ‘...you shall be a blessing’ (vi) ‘...I will bless those who bless you’ (vii) ‘...the one who curses you I will curse’ (viii) ‘...in you all the families ... shall be blessed’. But justification was not one of the promises! Abraham was justified by believing the promises but the obtaining the promises would come later - even after he was dead! By unbelief and impatience he could have lost them; by faith and patience he ‘obtained’ (Hebrews 11:33) them. Is losing the promises identical to losing justification? Or was justification the basis of receiving an inheritance which was distinct from justification (as Paul implies in Romans 4:13, where one comes through the other)?

Another group of commentators think the question is not ‘Will your faith continue?’ but ‘Was your faith genuine?’ Interestingly R.C.H.Lenski who generally argues aggressively for the possibility of lost salvation here refers more to ‘lack of the actual divine realities’³⁹. Ray Stedman reckons that ‘the statement here is more likely *descriptive* than *conditional*’; he agrees with Bruce that ‘continuance

³⁸ I.H. Marshall, *Kept By the Power of God* (Minneapolis, 1969), p.140.

³⁹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of ... Hebrews and James* (Wartburg, 1966).p.109.

is the test of reality'⁴⁰ In such an exposition one tends to read the tenses as if they say 'We *shall be* God's house on condition we do not let go of the Christian faith', but Hebrews says 'We *are...*' and does not refer to what we *shall be*. David Gooding holds this viewpoint firmly: 'if your faith was true and genuine faith, you need have no uncertainty or doubt: your faith will endure'. But the question that must be asked is: 'did you truly believe ... Was your faith genuine?' How do we know? We have to 'keep up' our faith⁴¹.

It is worth noting the pastoral implications of such a viewpoint. It says we may have assurance of salvation provided we hold on to our faith to the end. This implies (i) that we cannot be totally sure of *future* salvation. Or it would imply (ii) if we *are* at present sure of our salvation (in a Romans 8:16 manner) then we do not have to take much notice of this verse because we have this assurance even before we have got to the end!

The third group takes the warning as a serious warning but one which does not deal precisely with final entry or non-entry into the everlasting kingdom. For such expositors these Hebrew Christians will *function* as God's living house only if they continue in faith. This is one of many appeals in this letter to the Hebrews for persistent and diligent faith. We shall find the same theme again in 3:12; 3:14 (which is very similar to this verse). The writer wants us to draw near to God with boldness and confidence (4:16; 10:19, 23-5) and not throw away our confidence (10:35-36). Unbelief forfeits usefulness. Persistent faith is needed.

I have put this view into print myself⁴². 'House' does not mean the elect or the regenerate or God's true church. It means God's *functioning* house. He is thinking experientially and functionally. The experience and the function of being used by God will cease if we draw back in unbelief. The point is being made throughout Hebrews that persistent faith results in achievement of God's purpose. Unbelief results in serious loss, not loss of 'eternal redemption' (which if lost would not be eternal redemption!) but loss of usefulness, joy,

⁴⁰ R.C. Stedman, *Hebrews* (IVPCS, IVP, 1992), p.50.

⁴¹ D. Gooding, *An Unshakeable Kingdom* (IVP, 1989), p.111.

⁴² See M.A. Eaton, *Jesus God's Last Word* (Frontier, Mumbai, 2002); *Jesus Cares* (Frontier, Mumbai, 2005); *Entering into God's Rest* (Frontier, Mumbai, 2007); *Hebrews* (Sovereign World Trust, 2009); *An Anchor Firm and Secure* (ASL, Pietermaritzburg, 2010).

sensitivity to God, rest, ‘crowning’ with glory. This approach was maintained by the popular broadcaster, M.R.De Haan⁴³, Zane Hodges⁴⁴ and others.

I find this a more convincing interpretation than the introspective one or the Arminian view. The writer actually twice uses the present tense. *We ourselves are* (now!) *his house if we are* (now!) *holding on to our boldness and our joyful delight in our hope*. He is not referring to final salvation or lost salvation. He is not referring to true or false salvation. He is referring to the *experience* and *function* of being a household of people who testify to the purpose of God in this world. The writer’s thought is about function not about status in salvation. The ‘house’ that Moses built - the tabernacle - gave forth testimony to Jesus. The house that Jesus builds has the same function. It also ‘testifies’.

But this particular function of the people of God is conditional upon persistence in bold faith and joyful hope. A people who lapse into unbelief and pessimism will not be functioning as a testimony to God’s grace. It is not necessary to think of Hebrews as warning against the loss of their ‘eternal redemption’, or loss of their being ‘sanctified for ever’ by the blood of Christ. What is being threatened is the loss of a function, the loss of a ministry, the loss of tabernacle-like testimony to God’s mighty salvation. Just as God said to Saul, ‘I have rejected you *from being king*’, so God might say ‘I have rejected you *as a house giving forth testimony*’.

We notice in this verse that the writer includes himself. ‘*We ourselves are his house if...*’ He is not doubting either the continuance or the reality of his salvation. He is including himself in what is necessary to remain a living reality as God’s house. We remember that a Levite could withdraw from functioning in the tabernacle. Indeed he was compulsorily retired at fifty years of age. Yet he remained a member of Israel. Something similar can happen to the Christian. Hebrews 3:6b foreshadows the well-known warning in Hebrews 6, and it is developed at great length in Hebrews 3:7-4:13. We shall see that the writer’s model is the Israelites in the wilderness. They never ceased to be Israel. They never became un-redeemed. But

⁴³ See M.R. DeHann, *Hebrews* (Zondervann, 1959, esp. p.52).

⁴⁴ *BKC*, pp.777-813, esp.p.786.

they lost the privilege of being used by God as the generation which inherited Canaan. There is the possibility of our being ‘compulsorily retired’ by God if we do not hold to our confident faith. Loss of salvation is not involved but nevertheless the loss is a great one. Saul is the greatest example. He was compulsorily retired from the kingship over Israel. In his death he went to be with Samuel, but the point had come in his life after which he was never used as king of Israel again. Similarly we shall in experience and in function be God’s priestly house - only if we persist in diligent faith. By unbelief and impatience we lose promises. By faith and patience we inherit promises.

Hebrews 3:14

For we share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. Expositors generally, and rightly, interpret verse 14 of Hebrews 3 as a repetition of the thought in verse 6, and so we need not consider them in any detail. Lenski is unusual in seeming to refer verse 6 to an unreal faith but verse 14 to refer to a ‘noble beginning’ which is lost before the end arrives⁴⁵. Although this is probably not correct it does raise an important point. Interpreters generally tend to expound all the ‘if’ passages in the same manner, but we might wonder whether this is correct. Although they are worth considering as a group yet still one must be ready for some texts to be making one point on one occasion and other texts to be making a slightly different point on another occasion, even within the same biblical book. It is especially worth considering whether some passages might concern *inauthentic* faith but others *lazy* and therefore unrewarded faith. My groups 2 and 3 are not completely incompatible. In this connection Robert Gromacki might be mentioned. He takes the warnings of 3:6 and 3:14 to refer to a faith that turns out to be unreal; turning away ‘demonstrates that he had never become a genuine partaker of Christ’. Yet his exposition of Hebrews 6 has to do with lost opportunities rather than lost salvation⁴⁶.

William Lane does not discuss conditionality in connection with 3:6 but in connection with 3:14 says that the *eiper* resumes what is said in 3:6 and ‘stresses the provisional character of the

⁴⁵ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of ... Hebrews and James* (Wartburg, 1966), p.121.

⁴⁶ R.G.Gromacki, *Stand Bold in Grace* (Baker, 1984), pp.60,61,66,67.

relationship'⁴⁷. Whether the relationship might turn out to be unreal or simply lost, he does not say.

Romans 11:22

The 'if-passage' in Romans 11:22 is in one respect different from the seven we have considered so far. It is the one warning among the eight which is conspicuously corporate, although it has to be said that this is not universally recognized. The 'Group 1' writers frequently quote Romans 11:22 as a proof-text for the possibility of apostasy among true believers. But this is surely unwarranted. Paul is not speaking of any *individuals* losing their salvation. On the other hand Walls and Dongell in their book, *Why I Am Not a Calvinist*, use the passage in a different manner. Since they agree that passage is obviously corporate they use it to argue that election must be corporate also. My own judgment is that one must recognise which passages are corporate and which are more individual. Ephesians 1:3-14 deal with blessings that come to us very individually. Romans 9:1 to 11:10 is also dealing with very much with individuals (the individuals who are true Israel in *contrast* to the total community). But Romans 11:11-32, as both the Arminians, Walls and Dongell, and the Calvinist Lloyd-Jones⁴⁸, agree, are conspicuously about *communities* being in and out of the olive tree. Accordingly it does not assert that any individuals were once saved but then come to be unsaved. He is referring to loss of corporate privilege as the professing people of God. Paul's point is that if the *unbelieving* physical descendants of Abraham were removed from God's kingdom, then *unbelieving* descendants of gentile Christians can be removed from God's kingdom. He is dealing with what might happen in the history of a community. If God did not spare unbelieving descendants of Abraham, he will not spare unbelieving descendants of Christians.

Our special interest, however, is not so much over the corporate or individual nature of the warning. Our concern is more with the nature of the condition, the 'if' in verse 22. There is reason to think the conditionality is utterly serious and can in no way be reduced or

⁴⁷ W.Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC, Word, 1991).

⁴⁸ See D.M. Lloyd-Jones' exposition of Romans 11:22 and decaying Christian communities in *Romans: To God's Glory* - Romans 11 (Banner of Truth, 1998), ch.18, pp.147-158.

toned down. The possibility of unbelief and anti-Semitism arising among the descendents of gentile Christians was surely a reality in Paul's mind. If the Jews of Paul's day (taken as a total community) were unbelieving and hostile to gentiles, should not a warning be given that one day the very opposite situation might arise and the descendents of gentile Christian (again, taken as a total community) should become unbelieving and hostile to Jews. Paul warns that it could happen and if it does the future descendents of gentile Christians will suffer the same fate as unbelieving Israel in Paul's day. They will be cut off from the professing people of God. *Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness. Otherwise you too will be cut off* (11:22). There are communities being considered here, and it is obvious and agreed by all that with regard to such communities the conditional nature of 'staying in the olive tree' is to be taken as having the utmost gravity. López makes a similar point. The argument does not concern 'individual justification-sanctification, but the relative position of Jews and gentiles'⁴⁹.

III. Wider Considerations

In the various discussions of the 'if-Scriptures' a lot seems to depend on some theological presuppositions. If, for example, inheritance is always eschatological and never in the here-and-now then certain interpretations of 'if-Scriptures' will be ruled out of court without any serious consideration, for reasons of preconceived theology. But some of these items of 'preconceived theology' ought to be explicitly discussed; they cannot be simply assumed. Let us consider some of them.

Aspects or stages?

Perhaps the most important of these bits of 'preconceived theology' has to do with stages in salvation. Some remarks of Schreiner and Caneday will again help us formulate the question. They are of the opinion that the various ingredients of salvation should be regarded as 'aspects', and they make much of the idea that different ingredients of salvation should not be called 'parts' or

⁴⁹ López, *Romans*, p.173.

‘aspects’ but not ‘stages’. They say, ‘the present and future dimensions of salvation should be viewed as two aspects of an indivisible whole’⁵⁰; ‘wholes instead of parts are in view’. Obviously one cannot totally disagree with this. A lot of theological issues are best done in a ‘perspectival’ manner.⁵¹ But ‘aspects’ and ‘stages’ are not mutually exclusive! Schreiner and Caneday’s presupposition (it could be called a ‘preconceived’ or ‘misconceived scheme’) is surely quite wrong and has implications which undermine biblical assurance. If salvation is always and only to be considered as a kind of ‘one lump’ with aspects but not with stages then there can never be much assurance of salvation! For there will always be aspects (sanctification, endurance to the end) that have not been completed and never will be completed during this life. If salvation is ‘one lump’ and certain aspects have not been completed then it follows from the logic of the situation that there cannot be any thoroughgoing assurance of salvation.

But I wish to argue that the presupposition is wrong. Aspects and parts are not contradictory. If in December I travel from Kisumu (on Lake Victoria) to Toronto in Canada, travelling first to Nairobi, then flying to London to join a connecting flight to Toronto, does my journey have aspects to it or stages? The answer is: both. One aspect of the journey is that it is tiring; I shall need to try to sleep at some points along the way. It has varied temperatures. It is hot in December in Kisumu. It is cold in December in Toronto. I shall need different types of clothing. I shall need to catch a bus from Kisumu, which will not take much time. But I shall have some long waits at two airports. It is one journey; I shall do it all in one lengthy trip with no breaks along the way. But it has several different ‘aspects’ to it.

However different ‘aspects’ of a journey – or of many other parts of life – might not exclude the fact that it has stages to it: Kisumu/Nairobi, Nairobi/London, London/Toronto are three different stages of the journey. Schreiner and Caneday are correct in saying we

⁵⁰ T.R. Schreiner, A.B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us* (IVP, 2001), p.47.

⁵¹ The writings of John Frame are helpful in the matter of ‘perspectival’ ways of doing theology. It is specially help in subjects like ‘body, soul and spirit’ (see J.E. Torres, ‘Perspectives on Multiperspectivalism’ and ‘Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith’ in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John Frame* (ed. J.J.Hughes, Presbyterian and Reformed, 2009), pp.111-142, 173-200. But Torres warns against multiperspectivalism being misused in the Calvinist/Arminian controversy (p.117).

can talk of aspects to salvation but incorrect in saying we must *not* talk about stages. It is important because (as they themselves say) in the end a different theology will be the result. They are *right* to make the point that steps and stages is crucial to the theology which they *reject*.

Salvation does have stages to it. This becomes most conspicuous when we think of the different pieces of imagery that are used to picture Christian salvation. The Bible often thinks of life as a *journey*, and the imagery has three *stages* to it. Think of the pilgrimage-imagery of the letter to the Hebrews. The history of Israel is - amongst other things - a shadow of the Christian life. The people are saved by the blood of the lamb, and by their faith, at the *beginning* of the journey. In this sense, they are not travelling *towards* redemption. They are the people of God already. No matter what happens to them nothing makes them cease to be the people of God. Once Israel, always Israel (although the nation can be ‘purified’ along the way). Redemption by the blood of the lamb is finished for ever. Israel will never go back to Pharaoh. They should not even consider it as a possibility. It is a *stage* which is complete. What is at issue along the way is whether or not they will inherit the promises of what God wants to do through them. Their *status* is secure and fixed and accomplished. Their *inheritance* is still a somewhat open matter. At the end of the journey there is ‘entering into rest’, successful achievement of all that God wants to do through them. We notice the three stages. They are quite distinct. Their first redemption from Egypt *qualifies* them for the journey. It is by faith that they leave Egypt. The whole nation are treated as heroes of faith in Hebrews 11:29, like everyone else mentioned in Hebrews 11.

But there is a stage two. They must *persist* in faith. They must hold fast to their first confidence (Hebrews 3:14). *For we share in Christ* [now!], *if indeed we hold* [stage 2 = holding; it happens now!] *our original confidence* [stage 1]. The Majority Text added ‘firm to the end’ and so made mention of stage 3.

In the *second* phase of salvation we must continue in faith. We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession (which we made at the beginning!) We made a bold confession of faith at the beginning. Now – says the writer in Hebrews 10:23 - *Let us hold fast the*

confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. The is surely a first-second sequence here. Here are ‘stages’! And of course Hebrews holds out the possibility of a third stage which he calls ‘entering into rest’ after the struggles of the journey. It is also a stage as well as an aspect.

If salvation is all one lump with aspects but no stages to it, then one does not have salvation until one has the whole lump! This is precisely what is said by those who like to talk of aspects. Our salvation is provisional but not certain. We do not get justified until the very end. There is no absolute assurance along the way. This is precisely the theology that will arise from a ‘one lump’ view of salvation. But is it right? On the other hand if there are steps and stages in salvation one might be sure about one stage but still have some concerns about the next stages! This (as I see it) is precisely what we have in the New Testament. Assurance at one stage is not quite the same as the assurance with respect to another stage.

The Race

We have considered the journey-imagery but much the same point might be made in connection with the image of the Christian life as a race. This is of course Schreiner and Caneday’s chosen picture-language in *The Race Set Before Us*. It is in this book that the Christian life is said to have aspects but not stages. But this contradicts the chosen imagery in the title of the book!

A race can be viewed as having three entirely distinct stages. First you have to be in the race; you have to be qualified even to start. This is precisely what is said in Colossians 1:12 concerning the Christian life. We have been qualified (*ikanoō* - make sufficient, qualify, make adequate or competent for something) to be runners in the race. Colossians 1:13-14 tell us what it is that qualifies the Christian to live the Christian life. It is a past and finished event in which *He rescued us from the power of darkness and brought us safe into the kingdom of his dear Son, by whom we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven* (GNB). These matters are all achieved and accomplished; they are expressed in past tenses. How can Schreiner and Caneday use running-a-race-imagery but then deny the Christian life has stages to it?

There is also a third stage that consists of winning the prize. Paul is quite explicit about it. Do you not know that in a race all the

runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. All the runners are completing. All are qualified to do so. Non-Christians are not in the race at all. The runners have a firm status in having a stage 1. They are not running in order to be qualified. They are not running to prove that they are qualified. If they were to fail to win the race it would not retroactively prove that they never were runners.

Stage 2 is to run the race. Stage 1 is over and done with. They are focussing on winning the race. They are not running in order to *become* runners; they *are* runners; they no longer have to worry about their being qualified. At the end of the race there will be a prize. This also is a clear stage in the race. When they are getting the prize or losing the prize, the race is over and finished. There are three clear stages here.

Engagement, Marriage

Much the same point might be made in connection with marriage-imagery. We are the bride of Christ. The ‘engagement’ has already taken place (and we remember how serious a matter was betrothal in Israel’s culture). The washings and ablutions, getting ready for the wedding day, are in progress; one day there will be a ‘stage 3’. What we have here is stages as well as aspects.

Building

The building imagery makes the same point. Stage one is laying a foundation, and the Scriptures think of the foundation-laying as something has been completed and so now the building of the superstructure can take place. What could more highlight the step-by-step nature of salvation? One major point in 1 Corinthians 3 is that the foundation-laying is finished. No other foundation can be laid other than that which has been laid. There is a finished work of Christ and there is an unfinished work of Christ. There is a finished work in the Christian (initial justification, new birth) as well as an unfinished work in the Christian (sanctification, inheritance, reward achievement for God, laying hold of that for which we were taken hold of). There is a finished work in the church (No one foundation can be laid....) as well as an unfinished work in the church (an ‘*until* we all come to the measure of the fullness of the stature....’). Anyone who had ever been involved in putting up a building knows what it is like when the

laying of foundations is complete; the builders give a sigh of relief and hold a special celebration and say ‘At least that bit is finished!’

This first-second sequence is often mentioned in Scripture. Even in Jesus’ parable there must first (*prōton*) be a powerful rescue of prisoners, and then (*tote*) a plundering of the whole house of the enemy can take place (Matthew 12:29; Mark 3:27).

Jude 5

The most striking example of the step-and-stages sequence is in Jude verse 5. For there the steps are virtually numbered. Verses 5–7 are Jude’s first use of examples from the Old Testament to warn his community against being influenced by loose-living troublemakers. The intruders evidently did not fear any kind of judgment. So Jude brings in three examples from the Old Testament, each of which shows the danger of God’s fearful judgment against sin. The story of the fall of the Israelites (verse 5) warns Jude’s Christian friends that even God’s people can be severely punished. *Now I want to remind you – although you knew all these things – that the Lord after he had once for ever saved a people out of Egypt, in the second phase destroyed those who did not believe.*

God’s people who were saved by the blood of the lamb were subsequently destroyed. We must note that Jude sees God’s people as progressing in their salvation in two stages. Consider the story of the Israelites. There were two parts to it. Stage number 1 was being rescued by the blood of the lamb. It required simple faith upon the part of the people of Israel. Stage number 2 was their travelling towards the land of promise, conquering it for God, and enjoying the results of their victory. It required *diligent* faith, *persistent* faith. The same kind of two-stage picture is presented to us in Hebrews and in 1 Corinthians 3 and 9 especially. The Christian is saved by faith in the blood of the lamb. His salvation is utterly secure. He never goes back. The Israelites who perished in the wilderness did not go back to the land of Egypt. They did not get un-redeemed.

There is a second stage, the stage of pressing on with God, the stage of overcoming hardships and testings. It requires continued faith, diligent faith, persistent faith. It is at this point that the Christian must not rest on his security as if there were nothing more to be done. His salvation is indeed secure; he cannot lose it. We cannot lose what God has *already* given us, but we can lose the remainder of our

salvation that God *wants* to give us. We do not lose what we have already got, but we might lose what we have not yet achieved.

‘The Lord...saved a people out of Egypt’. That salvation was *given* to them. Israel did not go back to Egypt. Israel’s national redemption was never destroyed. Even the crucifixion of the Son of God did not permanently end their status. But the Lord ‘in the second phase destroyed those who did not believe’. Israel never lost their redemption but they did lose what they were redeemed *for*. We notice the phrase, often translated ‘later’, which I have translated ‘in the second phase’. It is the Greek *deuteron* and is used in 2 Peter 3:1 (‘This *second* letter...’), in 2 Corinthians 13:2 (‘as if I were present, *the second time*’), in Matthew 26:42 (‘he went away again *the second time*’), in Mark 14:72 (‘*the second time* the cock crowed’), in John 3:4 (‘Can he enter *a second time* into his mother’s womb?’), and elsewhere. It always means ‘the second time’ or ‘on the second occasion’.

God does not destroy us by removing our redemption, but he may destroy us by removing our reward. God does not destroy us by refusing to have us as his people, but he may destroy us by refusing to let us make any further progress and leaving us ‘in the wilderness’ until we die. This is what Jude calls being ‘destroyed’ or ‘ruined’. It is not being sent to hell, but it is forfeiting Canaan, failing to receive what God wants to give us, getting stuck in the wilderness such that we make no further progress. Such people are ‘saved through fire’ (as 1 Corinthians 3:15 has it).

Many warnings of Scripture are concerned with what Jude calls ‘the second phase’. 1 Corinthians 3:15 refers to suffering loss; the loss is loss of reward – mentioned in 1 Corinthians 3:14. 1 Corinthians 9:27 refers to being disqualified; the disqualification is losing the prize mentioned in 1 Corinthians 9:24. Hebrews 10:27 refers to fiery judgment coming upon wilful sin; Hebrews 10:35 shows what it is, failure to be richly rewarded. These warnings are warnings about ‘the second phase’ of salvation. No one with true faith in his heart loses the first stage: redemption by the blood of the lamb. But God’s people are warned: the reward can be lost. Jude is warning his Christian friends. If they listen to the loose-living intruders, they may experience God’s anger and be ‘destroyed’. God will not take heaven (destined to be heaven on earth!) away from any true believer in

Jesus, but that does not mean blessing and inheritance are inevitable. If Jude's friends listen to the wicked intruders they might so get into sinful ways that God 'destroys' them and leaves them in the wilderness. They will not 'go back to Egypt', but they will not go forward to the full blessings of Canaan either. They might get stuck and stay in the wilderness for a long time. Jude says: do not let it happen. Go on believing. Contend for faith, and do not listen to the loose-living intruders. Israel was ruined because the nation did not persist in faith when faced with trials and temptations. Jude's friends are being tempted and tested by the presence of these intruders, but – Jude says – let them hold to their faith and not face God's destroying displeasure. It is interesting to note that the word 'once-for-ever' is found in different places in different manuscripts. The text of Jude is difficult in verse 5 and in verses 22–23⁵². I take it that NRSV makes the best textual decisions, and that Jude's point is *not* that they were 'once for ever informed' about what he tells them but that the Lord 'once for ever' saved them. In some manuscripts the scribes moved the word since they were puzzled that Israel was once-for-ever saved and yet destroyed! But the 'once for ever' and the 'in the second place' makes the teaching exceptionally clear. It also makes the doctrine of assurance clear. Stage 1 involves a high level of assurance. That stage of salvation is once-for-ever (*ephapax*). The warning has to do with 'the second phase'; Jude says so in lucidly clear language. There is no hint that failure in stage 2 retroactively cancels stage 1 and 1 Corinthians 3 explicitly denies it.

Inheritance

Another items of possible 'preconceived theology' which ought to be explicitly discussed is inheritance as reward. Some expositors – Arminian and Calvinist - show extraordinary hostility towards it. Mark Seifrid says 'to turn the theme of inheritance into reward is an exegetical and theological absurdity'⁵³ but he makes no mention of Paul's phrase, 'knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward' (ESV) or 'the reward of the inheritance'

⁵² See P.H. Davids, *The Letters of 2 Peter and Jude* (IVP, 2006), pp.47-48, and the references cited there). Davids think this is a hint that the false teachers will be destroyed, but if we consider the analogy more closely the warning is for the Christians and has to do with being 'stuck in the wilderness' not taken back to Egypt.

⁵³ M.A. Seifrid, *Christ, Our Righteousness* (IVP, 2000), p.124.

(KJV). Here are Colossian people who have Christ as their righteousness (as the title of Seifried's book suggests), who are opening to receive inheritance (for the tense is future), whose inheritance is explicitly called 'reward', and the reward has explicit connection not with 'faith only' but with 'serving the Lord Christ'. Is this really an 'exegetical and theological absurdity'? Is Wuest's paraphrase 'knowing that from the Lord you will receive back the just recompense which consists of the inheritance' so disastrously astray, or has Seifrid missed something in the New Testament teaching?⁵⁴ He apparently thinks Christian motivation *must* involve insecurity. We must not (he says) seek for 'a security in this world which God will not give us'⁵⁵. Arminius made much the same point. To believe that initial salvation (justification, new birth, initial sonship) is given permanently, in Arminius' view, engenders security, 'a thing directly opposed to that most salutary fear with which we are commanded to work out our salvation and which is exceedingly necessary in this scene of temptation'.⁵⁶ The struggle against the flesh which we sometimes summarise in the German word *Anfechtung*⁵⁷ (*tentatio*, temptation, trials, affliction, struggle?) seems for Seifrid to be a struggle amidst insecurity. I am no disbeliever in *Anfechtungen* but I think the Christian life is still one of *confident* conflict, full of joy because the final victory is sure. If justification-glorification and inheritance are identical or inexorably linked as 'one lump' this will affect the range of possibilities which are considered in interpreting the 'if-Scriptures'. In my judgment there is plenty of hard exegetical and expository evidence that inheritance and justification-glorification are sharply distinguished. The opposite view cannot be maintained simply by brandishing the name of Zane Hodges. The Schreiner-Caneday team assert that R.T.Kendall and M.A.Eaton are two British followers of Zane Hodges! It seems that anyone who can see the obvious differences between justification-and-its-correlative-glorification (on the one hand) and inheritance (on the other hand) must be a follower of Zane Hodges! There is some confusion here.

⁵⁴ K.W. Wuest, *The New Testament : An Expanded Translation* (1956-59); electronic version.

⁵⁵ Seifrid, *Christ*, p.124.

⁵⁶ J. Arminius, *Works of James Arminius*, vo1.2 (Longman et al. 1828), p.726.

⁵⁷ See David P. Scaer, The Concept of *Anfechtung* in Luther's Thought, *CTQ*, 47:1. pp.15-30.

The biblical evidence for the distinction is strong and clear, independently of the theology of Zane Hodges. Kendall and I myself both insist on it⁵⁸ but neither Kendall (an American!) nor Eaton (a Kenyan with British origins!) are followers of Hodges' theology. Eaton, Kendall and Hodges may have one point of overlapping belief (the distinctness of inheritance) but Kendall and Eaton (both 'four-point' Calvinists) did not get their theology from Hodges (who could be called a one-point Calvinist!) any more than Shreiner and Caneday did because they hold a similar view of (let us say) the inspiration of Scripture. The fact that a one-point Calvinist dispensationalist and two very different types of scholar all arrive at a similar view of 'inheritance' might mean not that one got it from the other but that all three got it from the New Testament; 'inheritance' needs to be more closely studied. It cannot be identified with justification or anything that is unbreakably linked to justification.

IV. 'Finished Work' of Justification vs. Future Inheritance

Our view of justification will very much affect our view of assurance. The great question is: is justification a finished work? Of course our exegesis affects our theology and our theology is likely to affect our exegesis. If we read the word 'justify' with a 'concordance mentality' and read the New Testament with the pre-conceived notion that there is only one kind of justification, we shall reach a resulting theology in which there is little room for assurance of salvation. If we think that Paul and James use the word 'justify' always with only one connotation, we are likely to be under pressure to modify Paul or modify James. If we think that 'justify' in Romans 2 has precisely the same impact as 'justify' in Paul's majority usage we again will arrive at a corresponding soteriology. But this matter of making the same word in different places have the same meaning can be overdone, and one notices that expositors seem to make words to be identical in meaning when it suits their theology but different in meaning when it does not suit their theology. Consider how non-charismatics are very insistent that *en henī pnemati ... ebaptisthēmen* must have the same

⁵⁸ See R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved Always Saved* (Paternoster, 1983); *When God Says Well Done* (Christian Focus, 1993); M.A. Eaton, *Return to Glory* (Paternoster, 1999); *Romans* (Sovereign World Trust, 2010); and in fuller detail in *God's Last Word* (Frontier, Mumbai, 2002), *Living A Godly Life* (Paternoster, 1998) and *No Condemnation* (Piquant, UK, 2011).

meaning as *en pnemati baptisthēsesthe* and so the baptism with the Spirit must be non-experiential!⁵⁹ Yet the very same exegetes do not always think that *tō(i) pneumatī zeontes* in Romans 12:11 has the same meaning as *zeōn tō(i) pneumatī* in Acts 18:25⁶⁰. The different approaches in different parts of Scripture obviously has something to do with prior commitments in theology. The correct procedure is to study each passage where similar phrases are used, for the moment acting as if the other passages did not exist. ‘Justify’ in Romans 2 and in James must be studied in its own context; the flow of thought in each place will give us the meaning more than reading in meanings from elsewhere. Only *subsequently* should Romans 2 be related to other sections of Romans. Let the results fall where they will⁶¹.

It would take us too far afield to attempt such studies here, but a basic starting point might be to accept that words like ‘justify’ and ‘save’ were not used by Paul (or anyone else in Scripture) as a piece of jargon with a strict and unvaried meaning. They can have varied meanings (as any lexicon will substantiate) and the meaning of each occasion must be allowed to arise from the context and the flow of thought in each incident. Schreiner and Caneday say ‘There is no indication that James uses the terms *save* and *justify* with a meaning different from Paul’s’ and proceed to fault Hodges, Eaton, Kendall, Calvin and Sproul for saying otherwise. This assertion will have a powerful impact upon one’s theology! But it is sheer assertion that arises from the *assumption* that some longstanding views of James and Romans 2 must be correct. In point of objective data James uses the verb ‘save’ as a transitive verb (save *another*) and does not use it as any kind of semi-reflexive (get oneself ‘saved’). Many expositors

⁵⁹ H.I. Lederle’s comments: ‘they all refer ultimately to what happened in Acts 2’ (*Treasures Old and New: Interpretations of “Spirit-Baptism...”* (Hendrickson, 1988, p.66). J.R.W. Stott’s *Baptism and Fullness* (IVP, 1975) basically pins its case to an exposition of 1 Corinthians 12:13. The exposition is admirable but it does not prove the exposition of other texts with similar language.

⁶⁰ Because of his principle J.R.W. Stott is forced in connection with Acts 18:25 to think that Romans 12:11 does not refer to the Holy Spirit (see his *Acts*, IVP, 1990), but this is not convincing and the commentaries disagree. F.F. Bruce on the other hand adopts the same principle with the opposite conclusion (*Acts*, Eerdmans, 1988, p.359-360). The phrase in Acts 18:25 must refer to the Holy Spirit, says Bruce, because of its obvious meaning in Romans 12:11 (but in Acts 18:25 Apollos had not yet received the Spirit!) One would do better to allow the similar phrases to have different meanings. Flow of thought has prior consideration above similarity of language!

⁶¹ For my own conclusions, see *Romans* (Sovereign World, 2010). I maintain (along with Augustine) that Romans 2:13 anticipates 8:4. Without the law gentiles fulfill the law and so are finally ‘vindicated’.

are quite willing to translate James 2:14 ‘Can *that* faith save?’⁶² – taking *he pistis* is a way different from other instances in James, and ignoring the rule that Greek abstract nouns take the article in a way that differs from English. Yet it sometimes happens that the same people who want to see two kinds of faith in James (for which there is no evidence) want James’ use of ‘justify’ to be 100% identical to Paul’s (for which there is contrary evidence). Paul’s justification generally has in mind what happened to Abraham in Genesis 15:6. James’ justification has in mind what happened to Abraham in Genesis 22. This is not someone’s skewing the text with a preconceived agenda; it is there in the text explicitly. Was not Abraham our father justified by works *when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar*? Surely this is a rather different statement from Paul’s ‘*Those whom he predestined he ... called, ... justified, ... glorified*’. Surely it will twist both James and Paul to insist that justify has the same connotation exactly in each case. Surely Romans 2:13 (in which it may be argued that the nuance of the word is ‘vindicate’) must not be used to twist the over-and-done-with justification that we have elsewhere in Romans and Galatians. Surely translators and expositors are correct to see a slightly different meaning of *dikaioō* in Romans 6:7 (‘legally release’) in comparison with Paul’s general usage.

Justification in Paul is (in his majority usage of the term) a finished work, the first *step* in a three-tense salvation which consists of justification-sanctification-glorification which are connected but yet work out in steps and stages. Space forbids the detailed argumentation for this assertion but I can at least ask that the proposition be tested as we read our bibles, confident that it will be seen to be true so long as we do not have a ‘one lump’ theology that does not allow us to see it. There is more than one way of muting the text of Scripture so as to disallow its witness. We all tend to think that others are doing it but not we ourselves. The remedy might be to be more stringent in demanding exegetical *evidence* both from others and from ourselves in the interpretations we take for granted.

There is such a thing as a finished work of justification. We are ‘justified by his blood’ and therefore permanently ‘saved ... from the

⁶² See for example J.A.Motyer, *James* (IVP, 1980), p.109.

wrath of God' (Romans 5:9). As a result justification is tightly correlated to glorification. 'Those whom God justified he also glorified'. Paul did not find it necessary to say 'Those whom God justified he also sanctified, and those whom he sanctified he also glorified'. His unbreakable link can pass from justification to glorification with ease. Much the same phenomenon is found in Romans 5:1-2. Since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (5:1). We have a standing in grace; we have an expectation of glory. Paul passes over anything which might come in-between justification and glory. If we have one we have the other.

Yet Paul explicitly says that the promise concerning inheritance comes *through* the righteousness of faith (Romans 4:13). If one thing comes through another thing the two are distinct! Inheritance is not the automatic correlative of justification in the way that glorification is the correlative of justification. Glorification is (according to Paul) given with justification but inheritance has to be gained by maintaining the kind of persistent faith that grows by glorifying God, as Romans 4:20-21 says. The faith is the same faith as justifying faith, but it is when it is persisted in that it inherits the promises.

Justification (and thus glorification which is tightly linked to it) is explicitly said to be given to us without works. Paul will even use scandalous language: 'To the person who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness'. It is quite shocking that Paul should say 'To one who *without works* trusts him who justifies the ungodly, such faith is reckoned as righteousness' (RSV) and that 'David speaks of the blessedness of those to whom God reckons righteousness *apart from works*'. It is startling to be told that we are justified, even while we are ungodly, by doing nothing and only believing in God's promise. It is a most extreme statement concerning a 'faith only' way of justification. It is this faith-without-works that Paul says gives us the confident expectation of glory. He says nothing about sanctification in Romans 5:1-2 (but comes to it *subsequently* in verses 3-4). Nor does he mention sanctification in Romans 8:30.

There is no way in which this justification-glorification can be identified with inheritance. Inheritance is not obtained 'apart from works'; it is obtained by faithfulness in godly character. One has to be

mee (Matthew 5:5). Sometimes God calls upon us to leave houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for the sake of Jesus (Matthew 19:29). When we do so for Jesus' sake, we receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life. Such inheriting will involve going beyond the Ten Commandments, and attending to the personal commands of Jesus (Mark 10:17–21; Luke 18:18–22), and going beyond the Ten Commandments in being like the 'good Samaritan' (Luke 10:25–37). A forgiving spirit brings inheritance. 'Do not repay evil for evil or reviling for reviling, but on the contrary, bless, for to this you were called, that you may *inherit* a blessing' (1 Peter 3:9). Sin must be conquered. 'The one who conquers will have this *heritage*, and I will be his God and he will be my son' (Revelation 21:7). It comes by serving the Lord Christ (Colossians 3:24). We have to be like Abraham who 'obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance'. He 'went out, not knowing where he was going' but obeying God. Suffering will be involved. We are fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him (Romans 8:17).

The final part of inheritance can be called 'salvation' since it is indeed the final part of the salvation God wants to give us (see Hebrews 1:14). Expositors are all well aware that 'salvation' has three tenses. We *have been* saved (forgiven, justified, born again, adopted as God's sons and daughters, transferred into God's kingdom). We *are being* saved (progressively delivered from the power of sin, having our character changed so that we are more and more like the Lord Jesus Christ). We *shall be* saved (taken from this world of sin altogether, given glorified bodies, and 'treasure in heaven'). 'Inheritance' is often identified with stage 2 and stage 3, but never with stage 1.

Inheritance is explicitly a reward. Justification-glorification is not a reward. Justification is *without works* and glorification is the immediate fruit of justification (Romans 8:30).⁶³ The Christian slave is told to be a good slave 'knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward'. There is no way Paul could have said '.... knowing that from the Lord you will receive

⁶³ For a sermonic treatment of the 'leap' from justification to glorification and its significance, see D.M. Loyd-Jones, *Romans: Assurance* - Romans 5 (Banner of Truth, 1971), pp.54-58.

justification as your reward’. He could have said ‘...knowing that from the Lord you will receive the resurrection as your reward’ but had he used such language (compare Philippians 3:15) it would have referred to a high level of honour in resurrection glory. This is not to say that inheritance is a *meritorious* reward. The reward is *always* of grace. J.I.Packer says of rewards ‘that when God rewards our works he is crowning his own gifts, for it was only by grace that those works were done’⁶⁴.

Space forbids an adequate exposition of the tenses of salvation. It flows through many of the key terms that the New Testament uses. We have entered the kingdom; we are entering the kingdom; we shall enter the kingdom. We have eternal life; we are laying hold of eternal life; we are seeking eternal life in its final phases. Schreiner and Caneday have no right (I may suggest but cannot argue here) to dismiss the theme of reward-distinct-from-justification simply because the reward is eternal life (as indeed it is). Eternal life in its final phase *is* reward (in the group-three sense of the term). Schreiner and Caneday argue that the identification of inheritance and eternal life prove that inheritance is salvation (which they treat as a unitary ‘lump’). But I may suggest it should be argued the other way. The identification of inheritance and eternal life prove that there is a phrase of eternal life which is reward. In the story of the rich young ruler the entire talk is about reward. The mere fact that it ends by saying ‘the first will be last and the last first’ proves that the passage is about some kind of reward. There are no levels of justification! No one is first or last with respect to justification. But there are levels of reward! The entire passage is about reward/inheritance and all the terms used in it (including salvation and eternal life) refer to that phase of salvation which consists of reward). All of this needs to be argued – and that cannot happen here. I merely make the point that Schreiner and Caneday argumentation fails in not confronting this exegetical possibility. They *assume* that salvation and eternal life is their ‘one unitary blob’ of salvation with no steps and stages. If that assumption is faulty (as it is) the argument fails.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ J.I. Packer, *Concise Theology* (electronic version; original Tyndale House, 1993).

⁶⁵ If I were to make my argument more complete I would have to add some study of eschatology. It can be argued that ‘inheriting the kingdom’ has two phases to it and can be more a present-life experience that some expositors consider. To treat all the aspects of inheritance as futuristic will not [Footnote continued on next page ...]

Conclusions

My conclusions are now obvious. How will our eight texts look when a wider range of theological possibilities is allowed, and a preconceived theology that automatically disallows some possible exegeses is itself discounted?

The entire argument of Romans 8 is designed to give the Christian strong assurance of final salvation. Most of it is without any hint of anything conditional, especially in its opening statement (8:1) and its final conclusion (8:31-39). The strongest indication of anything conditional comes at the point where inheritance is mentioned. It is surely a brief reminder that suffering will be necessary if the final inheritance is to be gained. It can scarcely be suggesting that final salvation could be blocked, for that would go against the entire argument of the chapter. It is a hint which is not developed that there is something conditional about inheritance, and it is not altogether identical with the glory which is already secured. It suggests that something could be lost if suffering is altogether rejected and an easier but compromising lifestyle is chosen.

The same point is much clearer in 1 Corinthians 3. There will be gain or loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ, according to the quality of our involvement in the superstructure of the church. The theme of reward is sharply and explicitly distinguished from the gift of final salvation. The 1 Corinthians 15:2 mentions the *assumption* that Christians (initially at Corinth, but now wherever they are found) have believed in a true gospel (the final clause of 15:2 anticipates 15:13-14); and it *warns* that such a message must not be damaged by doubts because resurrection faith is necessary for the *further* experience of salvation. The present tense of *sōzesthe* suggests that what is in view is the continued working out of salvation in sanctification and the attaining of high levels of resurrection glory – which is further mentioned in 15:41b-42 and implied in the final challenge of 15:58). Such outworking of salvation is conditioned upon bold and confident resurrection-faith.

stand up to examination. Even 'seeing God' can be a this-life event (as Hebrews 11:27 makes clear). Schreiner and Caneday tend to push the promises of God into the eschatological future. Believers become blameless on the last day. The language of inheritance, they say, 'casts its eyes towards the future'. 'Inheritance 'focuses on the not-yet dimension' (*The Race*, p.69). One question that might be asked is: which of these interpretations is the more inclined to antinomianism and which is inclined towards godliness, that which we feel to be far-away or that which we feel to be near?

Colossians 1:23 envisages a kind of presentation-day (somewhat like a graduation ceremony) when the immense progress of the Christian in holiness is given universal publicity and acclaim. It is defined later as having a heavenly orientation (3:1-4), as the mortification of old sins (3:5-11), the putting on of the new self (3:12-17), newness of life in the family and household (3:18-4:1), prayerfulness and wisdom in public life (4:2-6). Such honour given by the Lord Jesus Christ in the last day is a major aspect of the reward for Christian godliness. It is conditioned upon and absolutely requires persistence in faith and a confident, assured, forward-looking expectation of this last phase of Christian salvation.

2 Timothy 2:11b-13 will add its contribution, underlining the definite conditions attached to the promises of life and sovereignty, and yet also (in its surprising turn of thought in 2:13b) giving deep encouragement in the promise that though much may be lost Christ cannot *totally* disown his people any more than he can disown himself. It is because the Christian is 'in Christ' that there is such an assurance. Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; the one who is in Christ is also dead to sin and alive to God, never to die again. There are *some* conditions to final reward but Christ's faithfulness to Christians is not *totally* dependent on their faithfulness to him. Who could think otherwise without despair?

How we interpret the immense encouragements of Hebrews alongside its severe warnings will depend much on what we think are the themes of the entire letter. Is it really about not losing salvation? Or is it about double-checking our salvation lest we are merely 'enlightened' but no more? Or is its theme connected with *inheriting* further promises on the basis of an already received eternal redemption. Are not the tenses of Hebrews 9:11-16 significant: an eternal redemption secured (aorist participle), a daily cleansing of the conscience to be enjoyed (future tense), an inheritance which 'the called' may (subjunctive mood) obtain – by faith and patience. If so Hebrews 3:6 and 14 may perhaps be read accordingly. We shall have the *experience* of being a house testifying to the grace of God and the *experience* of enjoying Christ's presence only if we persist in the faith we had at first.

Why should the idea of distinct inheritance-reward cause such difficulty? I suppose the reasons are: (i) It sounds as if it takes us

back to justification by works. (ii) It seems too self-centred as if our service in the kingdom of God is motivated by personal ambition for our own gains. (iii) A more subtle objection might be: it takes us back to the same introspection that is to be found in other views, only it is not fear of lost salvation or false salvation but fear of lost reward. Is one kind of agony – it might be asked – any better than the previous kinds of agony?

But it is not difficult to reply to such problems. As to the first, the truth is even our rewards are of grace! There is no need to bring merit into this subject or deservings or earnings. God is supremely generous to us when he rewards us. He is crowning his own work in us! Fee rightly says, ‘the “reward” is not deserved, even though it is according to “works”⁶⁶.

As to the second difficulty, it may be said first: we must not try to be more spiritual than Jesus! Jesus is the one who talks about reward more than anyone in the New Testament. But the difficulty should disappear when it is realized that the rewards are themselves spiritual! The reward is more of Jesus! Can it ever be wrong to want more of Jesus? We must not think of the Christians’ reward as being a mansion in the sky, or –even worse – material blessing in this world. The reward is Jesus’ ‘Well done!’. It is the joy of seeing what has been done for God.

As to the third, the way the New Testament answers the objection is as follows. It says to us ‘Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom’ – and then goes on to tell us of the level of sacrifice that will lead to ‘a treasure in the heavens that does not fail’ (Luke 12:32-34). A major theme of Hebrews is concerned to answer this very difficulty. The basic redeeming work of the cross is finished and accomplished. Protestant expositors will agree with that in Hebrews, of all places, and maybe other expositors as well. But Hebrews is concerned more with the *unfinished* work of Christ. Jesus is at the right hand of the Father to intercede. He is touched by our weaknesses. He himself lived a life of faith. He is our brother determined to bring us not to *atonement* (the ‘cleansing of sins’, which is already accomplished) but to *glory*, the rewards of persistent obedience of faith. It takes extreme rebellion to lose the

⁶⁶ G. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Eerdmans, 1987), p.143.

land flowing with milk and honey and even then the rebels are not 'taken back to Egypt'. This is what the New Testament encouragements are all about.

When we are being urged to live the Christian life is it sheer gratitude and nothing else? This is what "Group 2" of my expositors above seem to want to say. But is this in accord with the New Testament? Does the New Testament motivate us *only* with reference to gratitude. Gratitude is certainly a theme in the New Testament. 'Let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken', says Hebrews 12:28. The call to give thanks is common. But actually when the New Testament is telling us what to *do* and the way in which we should *live*, it more often tells us of the blessings that we shall reap back if we do so. The motivation is not always *sheer* gratitude. There is encouragement concerning reward, and there is warning concerning loss of reward. 'The wrongdoer will be paid back'! Are we always to assume the wrong-doer is someone other than ourselves? Are we not *ourselves* to realize that our wrong doing will bring loss? But what is the loss? A lost justification? A lost regeneration? That we are no longer the children of God? I cannot find *such* warnings in the New Testament.

There is a pastoral application to all of this. I do my theologizing and scholarly work in a practical setting and have no interest in theology which is not life changing! My preaching with its strongly theological backbone is done in the slum suburbs of Africa and the small Bible-schools and the villages of 'the developing world' (as we call it). Humble people in Mumbai or the refugee camp in Kenya's north-western region or in Addis Ababa or Kibera or the rural areas of west Kenya or southern Sudan know me more than the scholars in Cambridge or Harvard. The good works which 'justify' us – bringing down God's 'Well done' – are works of 'saving' the poor, and it cannot be done by 'faith only'? I constantly am forced to ask myself the question: is this clear enough for ordinary people who have few other theological resources beyond what I am giving them now? Am I really producing a godly people. Will they be my 'hope or joy or crown of rejoicing before our Lord Jesus at his coming' (1 Thess.2:19). Theology governs even our theology! Preachers and theologians will stand before the judgment seat of Christ; no greater question can be asked than 'What kind of theology will lead to a

godly people that I can rejoice over in the day of the Lord?’ The particular questions we are discussing should be considered in the light of such questions. What will be the pastoral application of the various types of theology? (i) The apostasy-theology will tend to have a simplistic evangelism. On this view people are very easily treated as Christians. They are saved by their freewill! When they fall away we take it they lost their salvation. They come into the church easily; they go out of the church easily. (ii) The prove-your-salvation-*to-yourself-by-your-good-works* theology will constantly be warning people that maybe they are not really regenerate. We shall take dozens of texts as warnings about an unreal salvation which turns out to be not salvation at all. We shall hardly do any building for we shall be always digging up the foundations to see they are secure. We shall not have much assurance ourselves! (iii) What if we have the theology that says warnings are given but they will be heeded by God’s elect so that we have an Arminian style of warning but we reckon there will be a Calvinist result? Practically such an approach would be identical to that of the Arminians. But (iv) what if we have immense assurance of salvation, joy unspeakable and full of glory even before we reach glory, but alongside this and building upon it we are challenged by strong and powerful statements that the superstructure of the Christian life has to be attained and that we must press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. It is strange that such an exposition or anything like it could ever be called ‘a trick of antinomian hearts’⁶⁷. Nothing could be further from the truth. ‘Love so amazing demands my soul, my life, my all’⁶⁸.



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⁶⁷ A phrase John Fletcher used for the highly-motivating assurance that comes with the knowledge of the protecting imputed righteousness of Christ (*The Works of John Fletcher*, vol.1, 1829 (reprinted Schmul, 1974), p.198.

⁶⁸ As Isaac Watts might say (as in the hymn ‘When I survey...’).