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**Reading the New Testament Warning Passages
in Light of Systematic Theology**

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Introduction

Throughout the history of Christianity, but particularly since the emergence of Reformed theology as a variety of Christian thought that has privileged God’s sovereignty with respect to salvation, Christians have debated the appropriate way of balancing apparently contradictory scriptural verses that seem to explain salvation as a product of human choice, and salvation as a product of divine grace. The question, when transposed onto the time-bound life of a human being, can be raised in several ways with respect to the conversion of an individual. Thus, one can argue on the basis of verses like Matthew 11:28-30, where Christ tells those who would follow to come to him, that there is something within each person by which they can respond to these and other Biblical calls to repentance and faith, while others argue on the basis of such verses as John 6:44 that no one can come unless the Father draws that person. Each side then attempts to offer an

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alternative interpretation of the verse put forward by the other position such that each side can make sense of the testimony of Scripture as a whole. These debates, when discussed in the context of conversion, lead to debates concerning whether grace is irresistible, whether human beings contribute to salvation or are hindered by their depravity, and whether election is unconditional or conditioned by some inclination within the elect. The same question can be asked with respect to the continued life in faith of the Christian: can a Christian lose salvation through some operation of the will, or is each Christian sure to obtain the full fruits of the promise once they have believed? Debaters on either side of this question will then turn to specific texts in support of their position. So, Romans 11:17-24, Hebrews 6:4-6, or 2 Peter 1:10 are presented as evidence that humans must act in a certain way or maintain their faith to a certain degree in order to remain saved, while others present John 6:37-40, 1 Corinthians 1:7-9, or Hebrews 10:14 to argue that God ensures that the saints persevere until the end, retaining their faith and their right relation with God.

In order to make sense of the two sides offering two different interpretations of the texts, it is of course quite important to turn to Biblical commentaries, exegetical experts, and original languages in an effort to make sense of what the Scriptures intend in these apparently contradictory verses so that a reader can reach a clear understanding. This is certainly a necessary step toward developing any soteriology that rightly proportions human and divine roles in salvation. However, in turning to the texts, it is possible to forget the help that other areas of Christian study such as systematic theology, philosophy, or church history can provide in terms of reaching a sound understanding. These sources are not helpful because they are equivalent in authority to the Scriptures. Far from it! However, these other disciplines do often mediate Scriptural truths and ideas to us in a different manner than they are presented in pure exegetical studies. These alternative mediations of Scripture are helpful precisely insofar as they are Scriptural in a way that may help to shed new light on seemingly intractable debates over exegetical meaning. This possibility stands in the background of this essay.

Given the long historical debates over possible ways to unite numerous Scriptural passages dealing with human and divine roles in

salvation, it is worthwhile to see what contributions systematic theology can make to the discussion. This essay will explore this question with particular reference to the question of the perseverance of the saints. I will argue that a proper systematic understanding of divine transcendence and the doctrine of concurrence can provide a helpful hermeneutic key for interpreting many Scriptural passages where the security of salvation appears to be in question in a way that allows for a stronger defense of the doctrine of perseverance. To make my case I will first clarify the role of systematic theology in scriptural exegesis through a discussion of the rule of faith, making clear how systematic theology contributes to such discussions. Next, I will develop a non-contrastive view of divine transcendence and immanence coupled with the doctrine of concurrence to provide one systematic element of a rule of faith. Then I will apply this standard to three particular texts that are often cited as evidence that salvation can be lost by the faithful to show how this systematic key to interpretation might be helpful for reinterpreting the passages.

A. The Rule of Faith and Systematic Theology

Before I can move to present elements of systematic theology that can help in the interpretation of passages that seem to call into question the continued perseverance in a state of salvation of the elect (passages I will refer to primarily as warning passages), I need to lay down some foundations that explain why systematic theology is even relevant in the study of scripture. After all, many understand systematic theology as arising out of biblical exegesis as a second step in the process, certainly not as something that contributes to the interpretation of Scripture itself. Such an understanding of systematic theology only understands half of the picture. It is certainly valid to restrict systematic theology within biblical parameters, and any good systematic theology should draw from the scriptural tradition. At the same time, we must remember that systematic understandings of what God was doing or had promised were critically important to the task of interpretation within the Bible itself. When Jesus Christ encountered the disciples after the resurrection on the road to Emmaus, he interpreted Moses and the Prophets in light of his own ministry, death, and resurrection, so that the texts could be rightly understood (Luke 24:27). Similarly, when

Philip encountered an Ethiopian Eunuch reading Isaiah 53, he interpreted the text through the lens of the gospel, allowing the broad good news of Jesus' advent, crucifixion, and resurrection to make sense of older texts (Acts 8:26-35). Given that the texts of the New Testament were not yet written or collected at this point, these accounts are instances of theological truths (arguably in a systematic form since they were not yet recorded in a text) guiding the interpretation of a Scriptural passage.

What are we to make of such examples? Here the idea of a *regula fidei*, or "rule of faith," is helpful. The idea emerged among early Christians as a basis for rightly interpreting the Scriptures in the face of potential heretical interpretations and is often understood as a sort of proto-creed. A rule of faith is simply a standard by which doctrine can be evaluated as orthodox or heretical. Something of a rule of faith is already present in the New Testament canon. John writes in his first epistle: "Every spirit that confesses that Jesus has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God" (1 John 4:2-3). Prior to a fixed canon, it was critical to test the spirits, correctly identifying the Spirit inspiring the scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16) as well as those that would lead the Church astray. In the early church we see numerous theologians advocating such a rule. For example, Augustine of Hippo claimed the rule of faith, which includes for Augustine teaching about the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, and the broad narrative of Scripture, can be used to clarify confusing points in scripture. For example, Augustine uses the rule to help with interpretation of John 1:1 against those who would read the passage to indicate something other than Christ's full divinity.² Likewise, Irenaeus of Lyons presents the rule of faith as a means of resisting heretics,³ but he also suggests that the entirety of his summary of the faith, the early systematic text entitled *Preaching of the Apostles*, served a similar purpose.⁴ This illustrates how the rule of faith was in a sense proto-systematic theology just as it was proto-creed. Thus, by the time of the

² Augustine of Hippo, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), book 3.

³ Irenaeus of Lyons, *The Preaching of the Apostles*, trans. Jack N. Sparks (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 1987), §3.

⁴ *Ibid.*, §1.

Reformation, we see confessions and catechisms such as the Helvetic Confession, Heidelberg Catechism, or Westminster Catechism arising as a basis for orthodoxy, but we also see Calvin explaining the purpose of his systematic text, the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, in a similar fashion to earlier understandings of the rule of faith. Calvin himself clearly states in the epistle to the reader of the 1539 edition of the *Institutes* that the entire manual is written:

To prepare and train students of theology for the study of the sacred volume, so that they might both have an easy introduction to it, and be able to proceed in it, with unflinching step... to ascertain both what he ought principally to look for in Scripture, and also to what head he ought to refer whatever is contained in it.⁵

Systematic theology has become for Calvin a basis for Biblical interpretation. This does not in any way suggest that Calvin did not base his systematic texts on the Bible. Rather, it indicates that the relationship between systematic theology and Biblical exegesis is more complex than a one directional linear relationship from exegesis to theology.

The relationship between systematic theology and Biblical exegesis or theology is in fact quite complex. The rule of faith (and like it systematic theology) is quite a complicated thing. It is not a simple distillation of Scripture insofar as it tends to avoid addressing the ethical commands within the Bible. Further, it is not chronologically ordered but tends to instead be ordered according to theme.⁶ The form of the rule of faith (again like systematic theology) varies. In the writings of Irenaeus, for example, it can be presented at times as primarily didactic, primarily narrative, or as a mix of both.⁷ Therefore, while the rule can facilitate reading parts of Scripture in light of the

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), xxxvii.

⁶ Paul L. Gavriluk, "Scripture and the *Regula Fidei*: Two Interlocking Components of the Canonical Heritage," in *Canonical Theism: A Proposal for Theology & the Church*, eds. William J. Abraham, Jason E. Vickers, and Natalie B. Van Kirk (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 34.

⁷ D. Jeffrey Bingham, "Evangelicals and the Rule of Faith: Irenaeus on Rome and Reading Christianly," in *Evangelicals and the Early Church: Recovery, Reform, Renewal*, eds. George Kalantzis and Andrew Tooley (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2012), 161.

whole context of Scripture,⁸ this is not its only function. Insofar as the rule of faith leaves out elements, it serves to interpret individual texts within broad themes present across the canon. While the rule of faith has a unitive function, providing, for example, a hermeneutic standard by which to unite the Old and New Testaments against Marcion's antinomian interpretation,⁹ the unitive function need not unite all texts at all times. Indeed, in briefer versions of the rule of faith, significant aspects of both the New and the Old Testament are not explicitly referenced. Special focus is given to canonical themes seen as particularly important. The rule of faith is not, therefore, a straightforward means of allowing individual texts to be read in light of the whole of Scripture insofar as it is a means of allowing various canonical themes deduced from a broad range of texts to be brought to bear on interpretational questions in concerning texts where those themes would not have otherwise been brought to bear.

I suggested that the rule of faith was a sort of proto-systematic theology, so it is no surprise that the basic pattern evidenced in the rule of faith is also found in the relationship between systematic theology and Biblical exegesis. Though he does not point to the rule of faith, Kevin Vanhoozer describes the relationship between systematic theology and Biblical theology in a parallel fashion to the relationship I have articulated between the rule of faith and exegesis. In Vanhoozer's words,

Systematic theology is not simply a second step that follows biblical theology; rather, it is a partner in the exegetical process itself, explicating the text's meaning by penetrating to the level of judgments: moral, ontological, and theodramatic.¹⁰

For Vanhoozer, systematic theology seeks to identify patterns in the whole of the canon, articulating these patterns in what may be new conceptual terms, but seeking to ensure that these terms reach the same fundamental judgments about God and His revelation as the concepts

⁸ Ibid., 164. Here, even though Bingham admits the rule of faith can also be used as an interpretive heuristic for heretics and for culture at large (185), I think he still misses an important aspect of the rule of faith.

⁹ Gavriilyuk, 35.

¹⁰ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "Is the Theology of the New Testament One or Many? Between (the Rock of) Systematic Theology and (the Hard Place of) Historical Occasionalism," in *Reconsidering the Relationship between Biblical and Systematic Theology in the New Testament*, eds. Benjamin E. Reynolds, Brian Lugioyo, and Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014), 38.

present within the New Testament, all in order to provide insight into how the texts speak into our present situation. Applying Vanhoozer’s ideas about systematic theology to the question of seemingly incompatible texts of the sort found in the warning passages, we can conclude that the various patterns in the whole of the canon identified through systematic theology can then be used to help clarify the individual texts that appear to be contradictory. Certainly the broad narrative of God’s work of redemption may be helpful here, but other theological tropes derived from the Scriptures may be equally important. In this instance, I am convinced that a particular understanding of divine transcendence, coupled with the doctrine of concurrence, provides the needed insight for interpreting the warning passages, and so systematic theology has a significant role to play in defining these ideas in adequate terms and then helping to deploy them in relation to particular texts.

B. The Transcendence of God

Fundamental to any understanding of the action of God (of which God’s activity in the perseverance of the saints is a particular example) is the question of divine transcendence. God acts within the world as one who is transcendence to it, but what precisely does it mean to suggest that God possesses such transcendence? How does God’s transcendence relate to God’s immanence? And, furthermore, how is the transcendent God who “even heaven, even the highest heaven, cannot contain” (2 Chron. 2:6) related to the creatures that are very much contained within the created order? These sorts of systematic questions, even if unnoticed, lie in the background of any discussion of the perseverance of the saints, and therefore a basic understanding of transcendence is necessary for proper interpretation of the New Testament warning passages.

Kathryn Tanner’s *God and Creation in Christian Theology* has helpfully distilled a wide range of views on divine transcendence into two basic approaches. The first, which finds its origins in many non-Christian Hellenistic contexts, sees transcendence and immanence as

oppositionally related.¹¹ According to such a view, the more transcendent God is, the less God is engaged with the world. This view of transcendence might be termed “weak transcendence,”¹² an appropriate name insofar as this view is actually based in a diminished understanding of God’s transcendence. God may be somehow above or beyond the world, but not in such a radical way that a basic spatial understanding is abandoned. For God to be transcendent, there must be a sort of distance between God and the world that prohibits God from being simultaneously immanent to the world in the same respects or to a maximal degree. Such a view of transcendence still binds God to a spatial notion that God does not transcend, but if God is the creator of the universe (including space-time), then we can recognize that God is somehow beyond even space in such a way that we can say, with Emil Brunner, that space does not exist for God.¹³ We do not sufficiently radicalize the notion of divine transcendence if we constrain God within space in such a way that God is only transcendent from us in ways that God is not immanently present here, or only as God’s presence here is diminished.

Tanner distinguishes this first view of transcendence with a second, “non-contrastive” view.¹⁴ This view suggests that God is radically transcendent, but also radically immanent, in such a way that, “if divinity is not characterized by contrast with any sort of being, it may be the immediate source of being of every sort.”¹⁵ Because God is not a being of the same sort as created beings, God’s difference and transcendence is grounded in an ontological difference and not a spatial one such that God can still be immediately present to all things while maintaining a complete transcendence from them. This “strong transcendence” suggests that the way that God is somehow “above” or “beyond” the created order is in a manner quite distinct from how one created being would be “above” or “beyond” another being within the

¹¹ Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1988), 38-40. Tanner notes that Plotinus is a clear exception to this trend.

¹² The term is drawn from Alexander S. Jensen, *Divine Providence and Human Agency: Trinity, Creation and Freedom* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014).

¹³ Emil Brunner, *Dogmatics: Vol. 1 – The Christian Doctrine of God*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1950), 257.

¹⁴ Tanner, 43-4.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 46.

same ontological order. It is not space that separates God from creation, but a categorical difference in being.

The way one views transcendence has tremendous consequences for the way that one views the transcendent God's actions on immanent to the world. A non-contrastive view of transcendence allows for a simultaneity of divine and human action in a form that still understands the human action as entirely dependent upon and directed by divine action. Based on such a view, Tanner advocates a "principle of direct proportion": "The more one talks of the realization and perfection of created beings, the more one must be willing to talk of God's immediate creative working." Furthermore, "If power and efficacy are perfections, the principle of direct proportion requires that creatures be said to gain those qualities, not in the degree God's agency is restricted, but in the degree God's creative agency is extended to them."¹⁶ God's agency is not "added on" to the creatures,¹⁷ and "it makes as much sense to deny there are created powers and efficacy because God brings about all that is, as to deny there is a creation because there is a creator."¹⁸

What Tanner is describing as a non-contrastive view of transcendence vis-à-vis divine agency corresponds historically to the doctrine of divine concurrence. Though the notion originated in the Middle Ages among such theologians as Thomas Aquinas, concurrence became an important doctrine to many Reformers debating both Jesuit Molinists and Remonstrants. Thus, Calvin could teach that, "The Lord has furnished men with the arts of deliberation and causation, that they may employ them in subservience to his providence, in the preservation of their life."¹⁹ In other words, God has given men the freedom with which they can choose and cause particular outcomes precisely so that these choices and causes can be used by the divine providence toward a particular end. Commenting on the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus explains in greater detail:

¹⁶ Ibid., 85.

¹⁷ Ibid., 94.

¹⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), I.17.4.

Contingency is the order between a changeable cause and its effect: just as necessity is the order between a necessary cause and its effect.... But the same effect may proceed from a changeable and necessary cause in different respects, as is the case with all things which God does through his creatures; of which both God and his creatures are the cause. Thus in respect to God there is an unchangeable order between cause and effect; but in respect to creatures, there is a changeable order between the cause and the same effect.²⁰

Early Reformed theologians²¹ did not see transcendence in such a way that human actions had to be either free or caused by God's agency. Rather, human actions were free precisely because of God's agency. This doctrine of concurrence, also often called meticulous providence,²² is named for the simultaneous or concurrent nature of God's action and free, human action in all instances of human choosing and willing. Divine determination through providence was not seen as precluding human choices and decisions as mere occasions of divine action because God's transcendence was not seen in an oppositional manner. God's immanence within all human actions did not eliminate His transcendence above these same actions such that the acts could be both human and divine.

Several qualifications are important at this juncture. First, concurrence must be articulated in a fashion that makes it clear that it is God's grace and God's grace alone that is the basis of salvation. Reformed theologians consistently rejected Arminian and Jesuit attempts to make God's concurrent action based on foreknowledge of human decisions in such a way that the human action was determinative of the divine. On the contrary, the human action which is concurrent with the divine action must be understood as entirely dependent upon

²⁰ Zacharias Ursinus, *The Commentary of Dr. Zacharias Ursinus on the Heidelberg Catechism* trans. G.W. Williard (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1985), 161-2.

²¹ Many authors critique the Reformed tradition, particularly after emerging debates around Arminianism and the Synod of Dort, for accepting an oppositional view of transcendence. While Alexander Jensen's claim that Calvin's understanding of salvation is rooted in "weak transcendence" seems too extreme to require extensive treatment, more nuanced critiques offered by theologians such as William Placher deserve a more detailed historical account of Reformed teaching on this matter than is appropriate for this essay. I hope to undertake the task elsewhere at a later date, and to merely acknowledge for now that Reformed views are neither universally nor necessarily rooted in a non-contrastive, strong view of transcendence. Jensen, 47. William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence: How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 156-8.

²² Oliver D. Crisp, *Retrieving Doctrine: Essays in Reformed Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2010), 13.

God's grace and action, and as such must be seen as neither meritorious nor self-redeeming.²³ Second, human freedom must be preserved as meaningfully free in order to maintain human responsibility.²⁴ Humans are responsible for their actions in such a way that they are meaningfully free. The precise nature of this freedom can be developed in a number of philosophical contexts²⁵ (a task outside of the scope of this work), but whatever context is chosen, the underlying theological reality is that humans are both morally responsible agents and utterly dependent upon God's grace for any particular action. The only way these two truths can be affirmed is through a non-contrastive view of transcendence where God is not merely one cause in the causal chain by which humans choose, but is somehow above this chain in its entirety. Finally, the doctrine of concurrence is not intended to suggest that God is responsible for evil. Throughout the history of the doctrine its advocates would consistently affirm this. Again, fully explaining this is beyond the scope of this essay, but it is important to clearly state what the doctrine does not entail.

Tanner's idea of non-contrastive transcendence and the classical doctrine of concurrence are both theological tropes distilled from the broad Biblical corpus that can then be used to make sense of particular passages that seem to be in conflict, as is the case with the warning passages and passages that appear to teach that salvation cannot be lost. Throughout the Old Testament, God is depicted as somehow above a creation (i.e. Ecclesiastes 5:2, Isaiah 55:9) that is utterly dependent upon Him (i.e. Job 12:10, Psalm 104:29-30). This transcendence does not preclude the immanence of God, who not only has written every day of our lives in His book (Psalm 139:16), but who establishes our very steps (Proverbs 16:9). Yet God is simultaneously transcendent while immanent in such a way that His determining of our lives and paths does not make our lives any less our own to freely live. Therefore, we see Scriptural examples of concurrence, be it the long process of Pharaoh hardening his heart (Exodus 8:32) while God was also at work

²³ For greater detail, see J. Martin Bac, *Perfect Will Theology: Divine Agency in Reformed Scholasticism as against Suárez, Episcopius, Descartes, and Spinoza* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 449-50.

²⁴ Jensen, 111. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1958), 173.

²⁵ Consider one intriguing example offered in Crisp, 19-20.

hardening the heart of Pharaoh (i.e. Exodus 9:12), the Lord's use of Joshua's brothers' intention to turn on Joshua as part of a divine intention for good (Genesis 50:20), or God acting through entire nations to punish Israel and Judah for their sins (i.e. Habakkuk 1:5-11). In these instances we see simultaneous human and divine actions and intentions fitting with the doctrine of concurrence and with a non-contrastive view of transcendence. Each human agent is dependent upon God for his or her very being and existence, just as each act or, to use the terminology of Proverbs mentioned above, each step is also radically dependent upon God.

The idea of concurrence and non-contrastive transcendence is thus a distillation of one trope of Old Testament thought put into a systematic form that can be helpful for interpreting other scriptural passages. These ideas also distill New Testament ideas. The transcendent Father whom no one has seen but the Son and those to whom the Son has revealed him (John 1:18) is also the God who is "not far from each one of us" and in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:27-28). Here again, transcendence is not contrasted with immanence in the broad contours of the New Testament canon, and each and every movement we have is somehow "in" God, concurrent with the divine action. This concurrence is particularly manifest in salvation: we are saved by our faith, our belief and trust, and yet somehow our actions of believing and trusting are radically dependent upon God, not "our own doing" but the "gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8-10). Though concurrence is not evident in every text, and the transcendence and immanence of God is only explicitly discussed in a handful of passages across the canon, there is general consensus in texts across the two Testaments that speak of such matters. The systematic ideas of concurrence and non-contrastive transcendence are derived from such consensus. Now the task is to determine whether these ideas, when applied to the warning passages, can help with the interpretative process and to what extent such help is forthcoming.

C. Reading the NT Warning Passages with Help from Systematic Theology

A number of passages are often cited to suggest that salvation can be lost under certain circumstances. I intend to focus on three

particularly significant passages: Romans 11:17-24, Hebrews 6:4-6, and 2 Peter 1:10. For each I will briefly interpret the passage and bring the ideas of non-contrastive transcendence and concurrence to bear on the text, allowing those broad canonical tropes to speak into contexts where the systematic ideas are not immediately present.

The first text to be considered is Romans 11:17-24, which reads:

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, although a wild olive shoot, were grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches. If you are, remember it is not you who support the root, but the root that supports you. Then you will say, “Branches were broken off so that I might be grafted in.” That is true. They were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast through faith. So do not become proud, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. 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. And even they, if they do not continue in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.

Douglas Moo suggests that the first and most obvious intention of this passage is a hortatory call to the reader to continue partaking of the tree that sustains them, as evidenced by the continued use of the second person singular throughout the passage.²⁶ Such hortatory emphasis implies that something is expected of the reader, namely “fear” instead of “pride,” “faith” rather than “unbelief.” Many exegetes take this warning passage to suggest that humans then bear a responsibility to act in a certain way to ensure that salvation is retained.²⁷ This idea can, in turn, be extrapolated to suggest that there is no security of salvation as indicated by the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. However, this need not be the case.

Suppose that we read this passage with a non-contrastive view of transcendence in mind. According to such a view, God being transcendent above human actions in some sense, thereby providing humans the freedom to answer such a hortatory call, does not require that God be somehow less immanent to any “standing fast through

²⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1996), 698.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 707. Moo suggests, “ultimate salvation is dependent on continuing faith; therefore, the person who ceases to believe forfeits any hope of salvation.” cf. Grant R. Osborne, *Romans* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 301. Hendrickson writes, “there is a sound, biblical sense, therefore, in which we can speak about salvation as being *conditional*.” William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Paul's Epistle to the Romans Vol II – Chapters 9-16* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1981), 375.

faith” (v. 20). Thus, the human acts of “standing fast” are parallel to the “kindness of God” (v. 22), while “unbelief” (v. 20) is parallel to the “severity of God” (v. 22). One approach to these parallels would require that one either reinterpret standing fast as something other than an action of an individual person, or, alternatively, the divine kindness whereby one is grafted in to the tree as conditional upon human action. Either option seems to reduce either the reality of the fact that it is the individual branch that fears and is steadfast, or that it is God whose kindness makes these very acts possible. This parallel therefore seems to make better sense when read in light of the doctrine of concurrence, fitting with a non-contrastive view of transcendence. The verse exhorts the reader to stand fast in the faith and fear God, and it is the reader who fears and who stands fast. However, in kindness God has given the reader such real capacities to fear and believe and has sustained the very acts of faith whereby one fears and is steadfast. This may be why the text exhorts to “continue in his kindness,” because the kindness is something active that God works through and which we must continue participating in, a concurrent action and not an emotional disposition.

While it does affirm the agency of the individual, when read in light of non-contrastive transcendence and concurrence, this passage does not diminish the dependence of the creature on God by making perseverance in salvation separated from divine agency. On the contrary, it is precisely through the concurrent agency of the individual as spurred on by verses such as Romans 11:17-24 that God secures the salvation of those who believe. In other words, such hortatory passages as this one do not contradict didactic statements like the one found later in the same chapter in Romans 11:29: “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.” Instead, hortatory passages are one means by which God maintains the gifts which are irrevocably given by acting concurrently through the faith of the believer prodded to perseverance through warning passages.

Hebrews 6:4-6 is another famous warning passage often put into contrast with verses that seem to indicate that salvation is eternally secure once present in the believer. In full it reads:

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have

fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt.

It is important to note that this passage is not clearly hortatory. There is not a clear parallel between the work of God and the work of human beings in this text in the same manner as is seen in Romans 11's parallel between standing fast and the kindness of God, or unbelief and the severity of God. Furthermore, discussions of transcendence and concurrence appear even further removed from this text than they do from Romans 11. In Romans 11, an allusion to providence and transcendence is found in the image of a gardener pruning a tree. The gardener has control over the tree and is beyond the tree, acting on it from outside when determining which branches will be grafted in or pruned. The allusion is minimal, but it does allow for easier connections to be drawn to ideas of concurrence and transcendence in Romans 11 than in Hebrews 6. I make this point to illustrate that while the various canonical tropes distilled into systematic doctrines can be expected to apply across the canon, it would be inappropriate to force the same trope to be the dominant voice in interpreting every Biblical passage. While it is certainly possible that God uses this text to providentially instill faith unto perseverance in the elect through concurrent action, this possibility alone does not clearly enough demonstrate why this passage ought not be interpreted to mean that some who have "tasted the gift" could have then "fallen away." In order to bring systematic theology to bear on this passage, doctrines surrounding the atonement, pneumatology, and Christology would need to be brought to bear. That is something beyond the scope of this work, but a task that can certainly be completed. For now it is sufficient to note that the doctrines of non-contrastive transcendence and concurrence are helpful, but are on their own are not the key to unraveling all apparently contradictory passages.

I will now consider a third and final passage often cited to suggest that salvation is not unconditionally secure: 2 Peter 1:10. The verse is often taken out of context, but must be interpreted in light of the broader pericope to be fully understood. Verses three through eleven must all be kept in mind:

3 His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, 4 by

which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire. 5 For this very reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with virtue, and virtue with knowledge, 6 and knowledge with self-control, and self-control with steadfastness, and steadfastness with godliness, 7 and godliness with brotherly affection, and brotherly affection with love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they keep you from being ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For whoever lacks these qualities is so nearsighted that he is blind, having forgotten that he was cleansed from his former sins. 10 Therefore, brothers, be all the more diligent to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these qualities you will never fall. 11 For in this way there will be richly provided for you an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Standing on its own, a phrase such as “confirm your calling and election” could be taken to suggest that humans must act to secure the salvation provided as a result of divine election, or else they may “fall” (v. 10). On an oppositional view of transcendence, if God is above the human act whereby calling and election are confirmed in such a way as to provide the freedom that would make this hortatory command meaningful, then God cannot also be active in and through these human acts. Instead, oppositional notions of transcendence understand God as a Being like other beings, one cause in the same series of causes and effects bringing about salvation. In such a view, either God is the direct and full cause of election, in which case this command to be “diligent” makes no sense, or else human beings, through their diligence, somehow ensure their own perseverance, in which case God is not fully the cause but at best only partially the cause of salvation being carried through to completion. This is precisely the sort of interpretation often offered by exegetes who suggest that election is due to divine “initiative” but requires a human “response” to be complete (a cooperative view of fundamentally similar agency).²⁸ If this response is not given, the delinquent would-be Christian falls.

²⁸ Norman Hillyer, *1 and 2 Peter, Jude* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1992), 169. See also Daniel J. Harrington, *Jude and 2 Peter*, in *Sacra Pagina Series*, vol. 15, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 250. Charles Bigg speaks explicitly of a “co-operation of the human will” because “Christ has called and elected the brethren; it rests with them to hold fast the gift.” Charles Bigg, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), 261.

It would be more appropriate to speak, as Michael Green does, of the “paradox of election and free will.”²⁹ Rather than suggesting that God initiates and human beings complete, a dichotomy that attributes the beginning of salvation to God and the end to human beings, a non-contrastive view of transcendence points toward God both initiating and completing salvation through the concurrent human actions that equally span the duration of the believer’s transformation. It is the human being who believes and who confirms their calling, but he or she does so through capacities that depend entirely upon God through specific actions of faith and perseverance that are possible only in and through the concurrent work of God. This warning passage, therefore, does not need to be explained away in order to defend the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Neither does its call to diligence diminish at all the complete and utter dependence of the human being upon God for all parts of salvation. Rather, the passage, interpreted in light of a non-contrastive view of transcendence and the doctrine of concurrence, demonstrates how God uses human diligence spurred on, perhaps, through texts such as these to sustain the faithful until the final day.

Here I must argue against J.N.D. Kelly’s claim that there is nothing in 2 Peter 1 parallel to “Paul’s insistence there that God is at work in us both in our willing and in our acting has no counterpart here.”³⁰ Peter’s terminology is clearly different than Paul’s, but his ideas are the same. According to Peter, God’s “divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness” (v. 3), where all things would surely include the diligence called for in v. 10. Through God’s promises, the faithful become “partakers of the divine nature” (v. 4), a particularly challenging phrase to understand that seems to indicate that believers are capable of resembling God by taking on similar attributes such as those listed vv. 5-7. In light of concurrence, a systematician would suggest that the believer’s actions also partake of the divine actions, where Christians can love, for example, only by participating in God’s love. Even if this interpretation of v. 4 does not stand, v. 3 is still

²⁹ Green suggests that this is characteristic of the New Testament. Michael Green, *Peter and Jude*, revised edition (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 83.

³⁰ J.N.D. Kelly, *A Commentary on the Epistles of Peter and of Jude* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1969), 309.

sufficient to demonstrate that the passage can be interpreted, on textual grounds, as an example of concurrent human and divine action, where the warning spurs humans on to faithfulness without dogmatically challenging the idea of the perseverance of the saints deduced elsewhere in the Scriptures.

Conclusion

The task of discerning how to resolve the apparent contradiction between New Testament passages that appear to teach, on the one hand, that salvation is guaranteed by God with those that appear to warn believers, on the other hand, of the circumstances under which salvation can be lost is one that takes a variety of tools deployed by a wise interpreter intent on preserving the integrity of Scripture and willing to trust in God's guidance. I have suggested in this article that one set of tools that such an interpreter should be willing to deploy consists of the distilled scriptural tropes that systematic theology preserves as doctrines. In particular, I have argued that a particular understanding of the doctrine of divine transcendence as non-contrastive, coupled with the doctrine of concurrence, renders a number of the New Testament warning passages compatible with texts that teach the perseverance of the saints. While these two doctrines alone are insufficient to fully resolve the complex series of texts that must be considered, they do provide tools for a major step toward resolution of an apparent contradiction. Under inspiration by the Holy Spirit, Biblical authors warn the faithful to spur them on to faith and obedience, a faith and obedience that properly belongs to the human subjects that are faithful and obedient. Nevertheless, non-contrastive transcendence and concurrence teaches us that these acts of faith and obedience are simultaneously acts of God in such a way that the human acts are entirely dependent upon concurrent divine acts. The elect do persevere in a faith that is their own partly as a result of the Spirit prompting them through New Testament warnings, but we must always remember that such faith and such perseverance is also fully the work of a gracious God that has given us freedom precisely so that He can use such freedom to bring about his redemptive purposes.

