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**Apostasy and Security**

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Is Eternal Security Compatible with the Fact of Apostasy?

**A. The Doctrinal Context**

This brief essay is intended to account from Scripture for two Bible teachings that may appear to conflict. The first is that the Bible contains both warnings and descriptions of people professing faith in the God of the Bible who turn from God and are finally lost. We refer to this as the doctrine of “apostasy.” At the same time, Scripture plainly teaches that those who are truly born again, and have savingly believed in Christ as their Savior as he offers himself to sinners in the Gospel, cannot be finally lost but will be kept by God’s power so that they persevere to the end and are infallibly saved. This is often referred to as “once saved, always saved,” or “eternal security,” or more historically, “the perseverance of the saints.” Bluntly put, does what the Bible says about the danger of apostasy mean that some real believers can be lost after all? If so, clearly “eternal security” is nonsense.

## B. Two Historical Groups

Before the Reformation, the Catholics taught that although we are born again (being regenerated to spiritual life in our baptism), our free will still enables the Christian to neglect the sustaining grace of the sacraments, or otherwise to lapse into unbelief and eventually be lost. In fact, any unconfessed “mortal sin” can cause this to happen. In Catholic theology, since justification had long been merged into sanctification, in practical terms, a believer had to add good works to his acts of saving faith to secure his own salvation. We are not here concerned to refute this view, but to look at the Biblical material which may appear to conflict on the topic of security. After the Reformation, two “evangelical” groups arose who denied the security of the believer.

The first were *most Lutherans* after Luther, and the second the *Arminians* after Calvin. Because of their doctrine of the sacraments as the necessary “means of grace,” most later Lutherans gave up Martin Luther’s doctrines of double predestination and the total depravity of the sinner (the enslaved will), and developed a form of “synergism” in which the naturally free will cooperated with the saving grace of the sacraments to secure the believer in faith *in the present*, without guaranteeing security for the future. Effectively, the Lutherans had returned to the semi-Pelagianism that Luther had attacked so stridently in his *Bondage of the Will* in 1525. There was also a strain of “orthodox” Lutherans who tried to maintain the contradiction of free will and predestination as a “paradox” or “mystery” of the Faith, doctrines we must believe because (as they claim), the Bible teaches both. Some rejected Luther’s *Bondage*, while some retained a form of it while also denying eternal security. All of this was because they believed in baptismal regeneration, and had to account in some way, for young believers “falling away” in later life. Their conclusion was that regeneration is not enough to secure salvation. The number of the Elect is therefore a smaller group than the Regenerate. It would seem that anyone who believes in baptismal regeneration would naturally draw this conclusion. The theology of Francis Pieper represents modern conservative Lutheran opinion rejecting eternal security.

The second group were the Remonstrants, later called Arminians. Following the lead of James Arminius, this Dutch movement rejected

five doctrines characteristic of the Calvinist National Church of Holland. The Calvinists had taught five key doctrines that the Arminians questioned. They taught,

- 1), that the Fall affected *the whole of human nature, including the will*, which is a slave to sin. The unregenerate can do *nothing* to please God or prepare themselves for faith in Christ. All good works of the believer are the product of God's Grace.
- 2), that God elects some for salvation without regard to "foreseen faith." Faith is *a fruit of regeneration*, not a natural act which God bases election on. Election is *unconditional*.
- 3), that Christ's atonement was *designed* to satisfy the Law *for the sins of the elect only*. It purchased all the elements of salvation for that specific group chosen and ever known to God.
- 4), that the grace of God as sovereignly applied to the heart-need of the elect cannot be resisted by them forever, but *will eventually overcome any and all sinful resistance* and secure both initial saving (and final persevering) faith in the hearts of all and every one of those on whom he has set his electing love.
- 5), that it follows from all this that *the groups of the elect and of the regenerate are coextensive*, and that all who are truly born again will certainly persevere, to be finally saved.

Arminius and his followers first thought they could retain point 5) on eternal security, while denying the other four points, but after their expulsion from the Dutch Reformed Church at the Synod of Dordt in 1619, they realized that in the interest of consistency, eternal security must also be abandoned. They realized that eternal security depended logically on the other four points. Today, those Evangelicals holding Arminian views, sometimes inconsistently retain the final fifth point of Calvinism, and sometimes, more consistently, reject it. To this day, Lutherans and Arminians usually reject eternal security. Their principal reason is that "*the Bible* teaches that real believers can apostatize." The rest of this essay will attempt to refute this view.

### **C. Free Will Assumed**

If we define free will the way the Arminians do, the term means that the will is equally free to choose either of any two alternatives presented to it by the mind. There may be certain influences and tendencies and motives impinging on the will, but in the final analysis, the will is ultimately autonomous from causation and can always overcome any influence on it. In particular, "*God* never rides

roughshod over the human will.” Arminians call this “our natural freedom of indifference.”

It follows that if the will is free in this sense, it was essentially unaffected by the Fall, and is certainly not “depraved” by the Fall. In fact, *the will is essentially neutral*, or “indifferent” to alternatives before it. Also, the will is *naturally free to resist God’s grace* at all times, and God chooses whom to elect to salvation by looking forward into history to see who will believe and persevere. *Man provides by a freewill choice*, what God requires as *the human condition for election*. The Atonement is intended only to make salvation *possible for all upon the condition of faith*, and secures or guarantees the salvation of nobody specifically. It follows that if we have free will before regeneration, it will be even more free after it, and *we can reject Christ just as easily as we accepted him*, should we see fit. It will be obvious that this libertarian theory of freedom is logically incompatible with all five points of the calvinistic view of salvation, and effectively makes the idea of the apostasy of at least some of the truly regenerate not only possible, but virtually inevitable.

We shall see in the following examples of exegesis that the libertarian freewill theory, presupposed without proof, is the real motive cause of resistance to the Biblical evidence for eternal security. The Bible of course, says nothing of libertarian freewill and never mentions free will as an explanation of anything. In fact, it has been often shown that the libertarian freewill theory came from the Stoics, but that’s another topic.

#### **D. Key Verses On Apostasy**

There are many verses supposed by Arminians to teach that true believers can be finally lost. Dozens of them were thoroughly analyzed by Dr. John Gill in *The Cause Of God And Truth* (1734-38), but we will consider here only three of the most popular ones. They will illustrate that not only that the Bible does indeed warn about apostasy, but that there is no indication that the Bible allows for the apostasy of real believers. By “apostasy,” we mean the departure from a profession of faith in Christ, into final unbelief and eternal loss.

**Hebrews 6:4-6** reads, For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and

the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame

This description of what the apostates are falling away *from* is taken to be a description of people who are certainly born again, although it is never said that this is so. A Calvinist might be happy to agree that upon a superficial first reading, these verses might possibly describe a real believer, but this would have to be proved. It is not enough that a verse be quoted in favor of a particular teaching without serious consideration of whether it *necessarily* supports that view. A vague suggestion of a possible meaning does not amount to proof. At the same time, if a more thoughtful analysis reveals an alternative view, the first must be relegated to the merely possible. If a verse can be quoted in support of opposite opinions, it cannot “prove” either of them.

The following considerations show that the Arminian reading of these verses may not be correct. The term for “enlightened” might reasonably include those who hear the Gospel with some understanding of it without really trusting the Savior (see 4:2), as did the “temporaries” of Matthew 13:21. The term for “partakers” is the usual term for a companion, and does not imply or require regeneration. Then, “tasted the heavenly gift” and the “powers of the age to come” might only mean a passing acquaintance with spiritual realities, such as those might have had who saw miracles (as at Pentecost and later in Acts), without becoming believers (3:16-19). It must be stressed that there is nothing in the verse to guarantee that these people about whom it is said that they are in danger of “falling away,” were really committed believers in the first place. None of the usual Pauline language about the elect (such as the expressions of Rom 8:28-39) is used of them. It is not said they were born again, adopted, predestined to be in Christ’s image, “in Christ,” etc. If it cannot be exegetically *demonstrated* that they are born again, the Arminian use of these verses is moot. All successful Christian assemblies contain religiously-minded hangers-on, and some do not stand the test of time, especially when a Christian community is threatened with persecution, as was this church to which Hebrews was addressed. Such hangers-on are compared throughout Hebrews with

the mixed multitude that left Egypt with the Jews in the Exodus, many of whom apostatized in the wilderness (Heb 3).

In addition it must be pointed out that the phrase “it is *impossible to renew them again* to repentance” is not much encouragement to an Arminian, since it seems to deny free will by stating that some are such that it is not possible for them to repent. If we have libertarian free will, what could stop a person from repenting and believing again after a period of apostasy if he wanted to? Further, verses 7-8 describe poor and unresponsive soil, similar to that described as “stony ground” in the parable of the Sower. If this is what the apostates are like, why would anyone think they were once good soil? Clearly, all soil is not alike. Finally, the writer says that he does *not* think his hearers will apostatize, although apparently some others in that community may have done so already. He says of his readers that he is “persuaded *better things of you.*” He is convinced that *they* will produce the things that “accompany salvation.” These encouraging verses (9-11) should be compared with what Paul says of the elect Thessalonians in 1 Thess 1. They do not comport well with the people represented by the poor soil of verses 7-8. The Puritans used to speak of people who had “temporary faith,” because Jesus spoke of such in Matthew 13:21. They also noted the reference in James to a superficial faith such as the demons have, according to James 2:19. Apparently there are fleshly forms of faith, and also a supernaturally-given “saving faith.” Apostates may seem to have the first, but not the second.

It is not always fully appreciated that God might design perfectly serious warnings in Scripture, which he then sovereignly applies to the hearts of the elect, so guaranteeing their obedient response. The function of such warnings then, is to direct the steps of God’s people in the path he has foreordained for them (Eph. 2:8-10), not to illustrate how the truly regenerate might lose their salvation. In fact, the warnings are a part of the *means* God uses to sovereignly *secure* the *end* of the salvation of his Elect. Reprobate sinners are not capable of hearing the warnings of Scripture, but “*My* sheep hear *My* voice, and they follow *Me* and *I* give unto them eternal life” (Jn 10:27-30), a promise not compatible with the regenerate “losing their salvation.” This saying of Jesus is “Christ-centered” if anything is !! These “sheep” are not left to themselves by their Sovereign Shepherd.

**2 Peter 2:20-22.** For if after they have escaped the defilements of the **world** by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and “A sow after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire.” (NASB)

This is another passage frequently used to show that born again believers might finally reject Christ and the Gospel. Such an application of these verses presupposes (without proof) that the “they” of the first sentence are regenerate saints. These verses speak very clearly of some who have become *acquainted* with the Gospel of Christ, but nothing is said to suggest that they were ever savingly committed to him. It is merely said that their knowledge of the Gospel had the effect of protecting them (at least, for a time) from certain of the world’s “defilements.” It is our common experience, that many people acquainted with the Gospel and with Christian morality, do in fact adopt a Christian moral lifestyle for themselves. In fact, many unbelievers are quite ready to assert that the “real value” of Christianity is the “moral effect” it has on society. This falls far short of saving faith, and is really nothing but pragmatism, recognizing the social usefulness of “religion.” Finally, the dual reference to the proverbs about the characteristic habits of a dog and a sow indicate that Peter is pointing to the *unchanged fallen nature* of these apostates and false prophets.

This is a very serious warning, and indicates an important scriptural principle, that we are the more responsible to God, the more knowledge we have of his truth. No doubt ignorance may be blamable to some extent, but rejection of truth once known only increases our judgement many-fold. Paul referred to this phenomenon in 2 Corinthians 2:14-17, where he notes that the Gospel is “a savor of death unto death” to unbelievers, for it only means that they will have to answer for this further sin of rejecting the Truth of Christ revealed to them by evangelism.

In conclusion, those referred to as “they” in verse 20, are clearly the false teachers and apostates described in such negative language in verses 12-19. How anyone could imagine that these enemies of Christ were ever regenerate is hard to imagine. Peter compares them

to the fallen angels, but there is no hint in the whole chapter, that they were ever born again of God's Spirit. The same comparison with the non-elect angels is found in the letter of Jude (compare Jude 4 and 6, with 1 Tim 5:21). The warnings against false prophets is thereby linked up with the doctrine of "reprobation," for if there are elect angels, there must by the same token, be non-elect angels also.

Philippians 2:12. Wherefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out you own salvation with fear and trembling --

Some expect us to believe on the basis of this verse, that Paul taught that some of his "beloved" might *not* manage to work their own salvation out, and would then be lost. But the context gives every indication that Paul thought the opposite of them. He characterizes them as those who in the past have habitually obeyed the Gospel, and he uses this as an encouragement to continue in "Gospel obedience," as the Puritans called growth in Grace, or sanctification. Further, the very next verse states that, "for it is God who works in you *both to will and to do* of [his] good pleasure," thus linking God's work in the believer's life with his sovereign will in eternity (Isaiah 46:10-11, Eph 1:3-6). If it is God who produces both the will and the act, who can reasonably deny that these Philippians will indeed persevere?

Besides, "work out you own salvation" is not the same as the Pelagian sentiment that salvation is mostly our work, Grace having been provided merely as a necessary condition of overcoming sin. On the contrary, one cannot "work out" a salvation that we do not already have. Clearly to work out a salvation already possessed is not the same thing as "working up" a salvation to be achieved in the future. On the Catholic-Arminian-Pelagian basis, "salvation" is a mere possibility for the future, which we can only make *more probable* by our autonomous efforts at good works. For the Bible-believing Christian however, salvation is the present possession of a supernatural gift of *eternal* life (Jn 5:21, 10:27-30), out of which the holiness of Hebrews 12:14 grows inevitably, for the good works of sanctification are just as certainly predestined for the believer, as his/her initial election was (Eph 2:8-10).

Therefore, the regenerate *work out the salvation they have already received*, by their perseverance in faith and obedience to the



end. And one of the means God uses to induce and guarantee this result, is the warnings and encouragements of the Bible, including these very verses of Paul. The unregenerate ignore them, while the true believer takes them to heart.

We must conclude that if these examples are representative, there are no “Arminian verses” in the Bible. Of course, if we *presuppose* an autonomous libertarian free will as part of human nature, no doubt some verses can be made to conform to such an assumption. But if assumptions and presuppositions are going to control our exegesis, these must in turn be brought to the bar of Scripture, and be made captive to Christ (Acts 17:10-11, 2 Cor 10:3-5), and the Bible never uses any freewill theory as an explanation of anything, not even once.

The reader is referred to John Gill and John Owen for more light on the exegesis of these and many other verses supposedly against final perseverance.

#### **E. The Argument From “Known Cases”**

It is always argued by those who deny final perseverance that everyone of us knows of cases of people who certainly *seemed* to be true believers at first, but who for some reason (not always apparent), gave up the faith. Those who believe in some form of eternal security (especially the easy-believism of some “once saved, always saved” evangelists), often insist that someone they know (often a family member with whom they have a close affiliation), having once “accepted the Lord,” but who has “fallen away for a time,” will certainly be “brought back” before they die. This interesting speculation reflects the person’s desire that their friend be saved “finally,” but no proof of this theory can be found in

Scripture. It is true however, that many who drift away from the faith of their youth and who often find faith later in life may seem to support this view, while Heb 6:6 seems to be against it (“it is impossible”). It is just as reasonable to propose that people who “give up” Christianity after an early profession, only to “return” later in life, were not really believers earlier, but have actually come later to believe for the *first* time. Arguments from someone else’s spiritual experience are likely to be unreliable, and must not be allowed to control our understanding of Scripture. We need to remember that arguments based on individual experiences are actually based on other peoples’ *reports* of re-interpreted *memories* of *past* experiences (often

of events many years past), which can no longer be examined in themselves. In the nature of the case, such anecdotes cannot provide reliable evidence of anything much. They certainly have no value in overthrowing careful exegesis of the Bible.

The main problem with this type of argument is that it presupposes that we *can* be certain of the genuineness of the faith of someone we know. The usual argument here is that “If my brother Tom was never a real believer, I don’t see how we could know that anyone was.” But this is false. We can never be certain that a person presently apostate was ever regenerate. *The flesh is incurably religious, and can always produce a religious answer when a spiritual response is called for.* Religious behavior is largely conditioned by cultural expectations, and anyone can sincerely deceive themselves and others into thinking that they are truly regenerate. These cases are much better subsumed under the rubric of “close hypocrites,” as the Puritans called those whose profession and external morality was intact as far as anyone could tell, but who had never repented and trusted the Lord for salvation. The other category of those apostates who once professed Christ but do so no longer, are accounted for by the warning John gives in 1 John 2:18-20, where some who “went out” from John’s own fellowship are said to have never been “really of us” in the first place. In other words, John states flatly that the fact of their apostasy is proof they were not born again. For John, apostasy is just evidence of unregeneracy. This passage makes it impossible to argue with any certainty that any particular apostate really “knew the Lord” earlier. We can’t see the heart, and we depend (as John did!) on the *results* to see what the real state of affairs was; “for if they has been of us, they would have remained with us” (v. 19).

If apostasy provides us with the best possible evidence of unregeneracy, we need to reform our view of what a true conversion looks like, and how to evaluate claims to conversion. The correct Reformed conclusion is that *election evidences itself in perseverance*; it is only the true “saints” who actually “persevere to the end.” The undeniable fact of apostasy from an *apparently genuine* profession is simply proof that we do not know the heart as God does, and that religious behavior is not proof of regeneration. In particular, trotting down the front of an evangelistic service in response to an

“invitation,” saying a particular “sinners’ prayer,” various emotional experiences, and going through the rituals expected of those who “join a church” (baptism, confirmation, etc.), are none of them proof that a person has truly and savingly believed. *Continuing to trust in God’s promises, visible growth in Grace, and perseverance in the Truth are, however, very good evidence that a person is indeed born anew, from above.* Individual occasions of sin, however, are not decisive either way.

The theory that we can always trust the evidence of our senses, the naïve conviction that things are indeed what they seem, is called “empiricism,” and it has proved to be a failed epistemology. One of the most important lessons of Western philosophy has been that empiricism makes rationalism invalid, while rationalism makes empiricism impossible. These two theories of knowledge cancel each other out, while failing to establish themselves. Facts and experiences *do not interpret themselves.* They require the framework of a whole world-view before they can be validly understood. For the believer, that world-view must come from the Bible, with its divinely revealed presuppositions, data, arguments and conclusions. “There is a way that seemeth right unto a man, but the end thereof is the way of death” (Proverbs 14:12). “Therefore, choose life” (Deut 30:19), says Jehovah.

### **Conclusion**

It will be apparent to the reader that these few passages, supposedly decisive in favor of the Arminian view of the believer’s apostasy, contain nothing that is inconsistent with eternal security, and offer nothing to confirm an Arminian in his view. It is only necessary that we show that they are quite capable of a reasonable exegesis on biblical assumptions, to remove them from the Arminian arsenal. The same goes for the whole list of fifty such verses treated carefully by John Gill and others. As long as the calvinistic understanding of them cannot be decisively refuted, they have no force for the Arminian case. It is not enough that the Arminian understanding of these verses *may seem possible on their own assumptions,* for to *prove* their case, it must be the *only possible* interpretation.

Most “Arminian verses” only appear to be such because we have heard them used that way for years without any alternative being

offered to us. That was certainly my own experience as a teenager growing up in Arminian-type churches in the fifties. Unless it is particularly challenged, the notion of human autonomy or free will, *is simply assumed without question*, and will naturally influence our understanding of the Bible. One is reminded of the common use of Rev 3:20 to prove free will, when it only illustrates our human responsibility for the free offer of the Gospel. It must be further proved that human responsibility requires libertarian free will, and that has never been done. I recall how startled I was myself when I encountered historical calvinistic exegesis for the first time, and developed a great admiration for such careful work. Reading John Gill's meticulous refutation of Dr. Daniel Whitby's treatment of some fifty "Arminian" verses is like watching a chess master defeat a novice. And Whitby was presumed at the time to be "unanswerable." Perhaps there may exist some Arminians who have read *The Cause Of God And Truth*, but no comprehensive answer to it is available. Gill's treatment of Matthew 23:37 is typical, and shows clearly Dr. Whitby's lack of attention to what the verse actually *says*.

However, as long as anyone presupposes a libertarian view of human freedom, it will always be possible to fall back on the *assumption* of "free will," in order to eviscerate any verse of Scripture that teaches Calvinism. Any verse can be simply agreed with formally, and then placed in a presumed freewill context to create the impression of a "balanced" view, or of an "unavoidable paradox" or "antinomy," or a "mystery of the Faith." In this way, logical self-contradictions can be plastered over and kept out of sight. The Calvinist must simply insist that so fundamental an assumption, on which the entire Arminian position stands or falls, should first be properly demonstrated from the Bible, before being required to bear the weight of an entire theological construction. But this cannot be done, for "free will" is simply not a Biblical category of explanation at all.

Our conclusion must be that the Bible certainly warns of some who will abandon Christianity after professing it, but the many verses which show that the truly born again Elect of God cannot be finally lost, remain unimpaired.

**A Note On Sources**

The reader is referred to such classic texts as John Owen’s *The Doctrine of the Saints’ Perseverance Explained and Confirmed* (in *Works*, Vol. 11), and John Gill’s *The Cause of God and Truth* (1735-37), often reprinted. Treatments of the “five points of Calvinism” explain the arguments favoring eternal security, as do all the Reformed systematic theologies. Those of the Presbyterian Robert L. Reymond and the *Integrative Theology* of Baptists Lewis and Demarest are good places to start. The great John Owen also wrote a valuable study of *The Nature And Causes of Apostasy*, which is reprinted in Volume 7 of his *Works* by the Banner of Truth Trust. The present writer’s *No Place For Sovereignty* (IVP, 1996) contains a brief defense of the five points, in the course of refuting Openness Theology.