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**The Prayer of Jesus in John 17 and the  
Security of the Believer**

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**Chapter 4 – Perspectives on Eternal Security**

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Foreword by Michael G. Maness (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock,<sup>3</sup> c2008)

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One of the most impressive qualities about the Gospel of John is that it beckons us to contemplate the pre-temporal counsels of the Almighty. John 17 is no exception, setting before us decisions made between the members of the Godhead before the foundation of the world. Although such esoteric considerations may appear quite unconnected to the issue of a believer's assurance of salvation, this

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<sup>2</sup> See [www.bham.ac.uk](http://www.bham.ac.uk).

<sup>3</sup> See <http://wipfandstock.com>.

paper will argue that the exact opposite is the case.<sup>4</sup> In order to do so, it will begin by considering a dispute which arose in the early church.

### **An Early Controversy: Origen vs. Heracleon**

John's gospel has often been entangled in controversy. One of the first involved Origen and a Gnostic named Heracleon, who wrote what is the earliest known commentary on the Gospel of John.

Heracleon's commentary argued, among other things, that the Gospel of John discusses human anthropology, and particularly the question of belief and unbelief, in terms of what Jeffrey Trumbower has helpfully called the "fixed origins of human beings."<sup>5</sup> By this phrase, Trumbower explains that Heracleon held that in John's Gospel belief was a matter determined by one's origin—that is, by whether one was "born from above," or "of your father the devil"; whether one is "of the world" or "not of the world"; and so forth. These origins, Heracleon believed, were fixed prior to Jesus' coming and incapable of change.

Origen argued in his own commentary on John against Heracleon. To Origen, the views of Heracleon wrongly denied the freedom of human beings to choose either to accept or reject, to follow or not follow, Jesus.

The controversy, though forgotten today, is a useful one on account of what it teaches us. For one thing, it draws attention to the curious language and themes found in John. Expanding slightly upon the Origen–Heracleon debate, we find in John the following themes or ideas:

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<sup>4</sup> In preparing this essay, the following commentaries were consulted: Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. and ed. Ronald E. Heine (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1989–1993); John Chrysostom, *Commentary on Saint John: The Apostle and Evangelist*, trans. and ed. Sister Thomas Aquinas Goggin (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1957); Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1988–95); Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea; Commentary on the Four Gospels, collected out of the works of the Fathers* (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1845), vol. 4, part 2; John Calvin, *Commentary on the Gospel according to John*, trans. and ed. William Pringle (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982). It is apparent that there are innumerable commentaries on John which we could have been consulted. These, however, are surely some of the best ever produced by the Christian Church.

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Trumbower, *Born from Above: the anthropology of the Gospel of John* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr/Paul Siebeck, 1992).

**Regarding Jesus and the Father:<sup>6</sup>**

Jesus has come from above, having been sent by the Father to complete a task—3:31; 13:1, 3; 16:28; 17:8, 18

More specifically,

Jesus received commands from his Father—10:18; 12:49; 14:31; 17:4

Jesus did not come to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him—5: 30; 6:38

Accordingly,

Jesus did not honor himself, nor seek his own glory—8:49–50, 54

Jesus' teaching was not his own—7:16; 12:49; 14:24

Jesus confessed that the Father was greater than him—14:28

Jesus pleased the Father—8:29, 46

When he finished his work, Jesus would be glorified—17:1, 4–5

**Regarding Jesus and believers:**

Jesus knows who will come to him and who will not—6:64

In fact, believers are given to Jesus by the Father—6:37; 17:2, 6

Accordingly, all those who are given to Jesus come to him—6:37—and those who are of the truth (his sheep) hear Jesus' voice—10:4–5; 18:37

In keeping with this, Jesus says he does not pray for the world but for those who believe, or would in the future, believe in him—17:9

As for the world, it hates Jesus—7:7; 15:18–19

Jesus is not of the world—8:23

Also believers are not of the world—17:16

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<sup>6</sup> This twofold structure—Jesus and the Father, and Jesus and believers—was suggested to me by Donald Macleod; see his *A Faith to Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine* (Brooklyn: Christian Focus Publications, 2002), 119–32.

Similarly, people are described in a variety of ways: “born of God”—1:13; “born from above”—3:3; “from below”—8:23; “of the world”—8:23; “not of the world”—17:14; “of your father the devil”—8:44; “my sheep” or “not of my sheep”—10:26–27; “of the truth”—18:37

Many of these themes open for us a window into the counsels of eternity. Of course a number of them are not exclusive to the Gospel of John. Nonetheless they are expressed in a particularly powerful way in John.

Secondly, by drawing attention to these ideas, this controversy beckons us to consider the divine counsels towards the end of understanding them and being edified by them. The Gnostics, represented by Heracleon, sought to understand these counsels. The Christian church, however, has argued that they did so wrongly and has sought to articulate a correct understanding of them. What, then, is this understanding? How ought these themes and issues arising in John to be understood? Once this general question is answered, attention can be turned to John 17.

### **The Covenant of Redemption**

To answer this, we must examine the covenant.<sup>7</sup> Arising from the early work of theologians like Irenaeus, Augustine, and a host of others, was an idea which would be developed through the Middle Ages, with the *pactum* theology, *sine qua non* causality, and *meritum de congruo*, and would further mature during the Reformation and post-Reformation periods, from which emerged what is now known as covenant theology.

Traditionally, covenant theologians have spoken of three distinct covenants: a covenant of works, a covenant of grace, and a covenant of redemption. The precise number of covenants varies depending on which writer one consults. But for our purposes it is not essential that we settle, or even look at, the dispute.

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<sup>7</sup> Our thinking on this issue has been stimulated not only by Donald Macleod, but also by Michael S. Horton, “A Classic Calvinist View,” in *Four Views on Eternal Security*, ed. J. Matthew Pinson (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 23–42. For a fuller treatment of the covenant, see the standard works from the post-Reformation period such as Herman Witsius, *De oeconomia foederum Dei cum hominibus* (Utrecht, 1694) and *The Economy of the Covenants Between God and Man* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1990). The debate on the covenant between Voetius and Cocceius will be familiar to any student of the period and need not be entered into here.

The covenant of works, also known by other names such as the covenant of creation, originates in time between God and humankind in the Garden of Eden. Adam is given stipulations which he is to obey and which, if obeyed, will result in the confirmation of him and his posterity in everlasting life. Of course, he breaks these, as is recorded in Genesis 3, and brings the curses of the covenant upon his, and his posterity's, heads.

The covenant of grace is, as it were, God's response to Adam's fall. It has as its contracting parties God and the elect, or believers.<sup>8</sup> This is the covenant through which believers are restored, or brought back into relationship with God. It is, to put it another way, the covenant which promises salvation. It is a covenant which makes demands of human beings, namely, faith: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:30). It is likewise a covenant which makes demands of God.<sup>9</sup> In it God binds himself to believers. He promises to be their God. Accordingly, God and believers live in covenant with one another; a bond which will, quite literally, never be dissolved.

Then there is the covenant of redemption. This originated before time and represents, one might say, the background to the covenant of grace. The parties in this covenant are God the Father and God the Son. Notice that there is no creaturely representative in this covenant. The requirement is obedience, specifically the obedience of the Son, who obeys on behalf of his people. As Donald Macleod states:

The stipulation is that Christ will do everything that is necessary for the salvation of His people. What we receive freely in the Covenant of Grace Christ earned by His compliance with the Covenant of Redemption.<sup>10</sup>

What is understood here, then, is that before the foundation of the world God the Father elects and entrusts a people to God the Son, who will be their head. God the Son, of course, agrees to these terms.

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<sup>8</sup> It may also be, perhaps, that the contracting parties are God and Christ, as the second Adam, and all the elect in him. This is the position stated in the Larger Catechism (Ans. 31); see Macleod, *Faith*, 123–24.

<sup>9</sup> There has been considerable debate about the character of this covenant and whether it is unilateral or bilateral. For a sane consideration of the matter, see Richard Muller, *After Calvin: Studies in the Development of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>10</sup> Macleod, *Faith*, 126.

He will be the head of this people and their representative. He will obey on their behalf, will be their guardian and will ultimately die and rise from the dead on their behalf. By doing so, he will merit for them all the riches of salvation.

It is, of course, this covenant that seems to be alluded to in so many ways by the passages already cited above from John's Gospel. Or, stated in another way, the Gospel of John contains material which requires us to postulate the covenant of redemption. To give just one example, in John 5:30 Jesus explains, "I seek not to please myself but him who sent me." Here, in this one sentence, we have stated that Jesus was sent, that someone other than himself sent him (presumably God the Father), and that Jesus works to please the one who sent him. From the last of these points, we may easily infer that Jesus was given guidance (commands) on pleasing the one who sent him. From all of these points, we may infer that decisions on all these matters were taken, at the very least, before Jesus' incarnation and, given the character of other statements—both Johannine and extra-Johannine—found in Scripture (for example, Eph 1: 4), most likely before the foundation of the world. Thus the lineaments of a pre-temporal covenant between the members of the Godhead begin to appear even from this one sentence. Were we to have more time and space, a fuller account of this covenant of redemption could be outlined.

Although this introduction has been exceedingly brief, it shall have to suffice. Now John 17 can be taken up.

### **John 17 within the Context of the Covenant**

In John 17 we find Jesus speaking to his Father prior to Jesus' death. The topic of conversation, we discover, is the plans they had made before the foundation of the world—in other words, the covenant of redemption. A quick overview of the chapter reveals discussion of the following.

That Jesus had come from the Father and was now returning to him—17:8, 11–13

Specifically, that Jesus had been sent from the Father to complete a task given to him by the Father—17:4

That Jesus had been given power in order that he should give eternal life to all those who had been given to him by the Father—17:2

The request to be glorified (17:1, 5), which Jesus makes on the basis that he had completed the work given to him by the Father—17:4

Some of the specific things Jesus had done at the Father's behest—17:6, 8, 12, 14, 19, 26

The faith of his people (17:25), who are continually identified as those whom the Father had given to Jesus—17:2, 6, and so forth

Assertions which point to a union between Jesus and believers—17:10, 14, 18–19

Prayers made on behalf of those whom the Father had given him—17:9, 11, 15, 17, 20–24

That all this fits perfectly into the outline of the covenant of redemption provided above should be evident. What is discovered here is that Jesus has been commissioned by the Father to give eternal life to a specific group of people, who have been chosen by the Father and entrusted to the Son. In keeping with this commission, the Son has been given commands by the Father which he has now completed. On the basis of this accomplished obedience, the Son is now requesting that he be rewarded. This is, one can only assume, in accordance with the arrangements made beforehand. The Father and the Son had agreed that if the Son obeyed perfectly, he would merit a reward. This is the reward he is now requesting. This reward is, of course, not won for himself but for those whom he represents and is, in effect, eternal life in all its fullness. Thus, Jesus has earned through his obedience the riches which he now requests from the Father and would lavish on his people. Jesus, moreover, as his people's guardian and shepherd, prays for their safety, that they would be guarded from danger, that the Father would keep them in his name, sanctify them, make them one, and bring them to join the Son at a later date in heaven.

### **The Security of the Believer within the Context of John 17**

Thus, as was stated in this essay's introduction, contemplation of the pre-temporal counsels of the Almighty, far from being a matter of no practical benefit to the believer, is in fact intimately connected to

the issue of a believer's assurance of salvation. This should be apparent from our brief consideration of the contents of John 17, and may be elucidated further by noting the simple truth that such contemplation highlights and impresses upon the conscience of the Christian the remarkable fact that her or his salvation is entirely the work of the Son of God. It is, to put it another way, the responsibility of the Lord Jesus to see to it that all believers are saved. That is at the very heart of the covenant of redemption, which was agreed upon before the foundations of the world. That, moreover, can be seen most plainly in the expressed intent of so much of John 17. It is evident there that Jesus' concern is to give eternal life to as many as the Father had given him (v. 2), and that what he is doing in this prayer is returning to the Father near the climax of his work on earth and requesting (making sure, as it were) that when he has completely finished the work of his Father, he and his people will receive the reward which was agreed upon. This is what he seems to mean when he declares: "I have finished the work which you gave me to do. Now, O Father, glorify me . . ." (v. 4). In other words, "Glorify me, the head of the church. Glorify the head so that the members may benefit." Admittedly he speaks of the work as already completed; exegetes, however, seem to concur with the idea that he is speaking of the matter as if it were an already accomplished fact, even though he had still to go through with his death, burial and resurrection.<sup>11</sup> Yet even though this is so, the force of his request is in no way diminished. Jesus plainly declares: "Father, I have finished the work; now reward me." And since he is earning that reward on behalf of the church, his gain is theirs; his recompense means payment for them.

Indeed Jesus can be seen to be at pains to ensure the safety and salvation of his people. So he is not only intent upon discussing the agreed-upon reward, but also adds a number of specific requests—that his people should be kept from the devil, sanctified, made one, and so forth—the sum of which is the safeguarding of his people. Not only, then, has he merited the salvation which he then gives to his people, but he acts as their guardian and shepherd in order to ensure that they are kept in the way of faith so that their salvation will not be a gift which they forfeit by falling away.

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Calvin, *Commentary on John*, 2:168.



In this regard, we can also note the tenderness of Jesus. For when he does turn to mention the obedience of his people, he simply declares that “they have kept your word” (v. 6)—a statement which is patently inaccurate, if a strict sense of “kept” is intended. For up to that point Jesus’ disciples had been as thickheaded and unbelieving as one could possibly imagine, and of course they were, in a matter of hours, going to disown and deny Jesus. These were remarkably flawed men. And yet Jesus glosses over all such flaws and declares simply that they had obeyed the Father. If one were, then, to attempt to oppose one’s disobedience with the salvation won by Jesus on his or her behalf—as if to say, “irrespective of what Jesus has done on my behalf, I am not worthy to have salvation because of my disobedience”—Jesus’ answer is ready: “they have kept your word.” That is to say, the church’s disobedience can never disqualify them from the reward earned for them by their head.

### **Conclusion**

Such then is the character of Jesus, and such the character of the security of all believers as it is treated in this passage from John’s Gospel. John 17, precisely because it opens up to its readers the secrets of the pre-temporal decisions made between God the Father and God the Son concerning the community of believers, provides a remarkably stable ground for assurance even in the midst of the deepest internal sense of sinfulness on the part of the believer. This is so because it reveals in the clearest possible way the fact that one’s salvation is not the result of (does not rest upon) one’s believing but of (upon) the work of the Son, who took it upon himself to be one’s representative head.