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**5 – Eternal Security and the Early Saints: Are the
First, Second and Third Century Christian Beliefs a
Reliable Basis for Determining Soteriological Truth?**

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Introduction

The Protestant tradition is ambivalent about the early Christian writers. This is seen in various ways. Is St. Augustine, really St. Augustine, or is he merely Augustine? Protestants sometimes consciously drop the honorific adjective of “Saint” afforded the great leaders of the Church by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions because Protestants prefer to follow the Apostle Paul rather than the counsels and decrees of the Church. For after all, didn’t *Saint* Paul declare, “To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 1:1.)? The point here is that St. Augustine is a saint

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precisely for the same reason that every “faithful” believer “in Christ Jesus” is a saint. Our sainthood is our holiness through union with Christ.

This Protestant ambivalence toward the early saints of the Church is seen not only in regard to their title, but it also appears with respect to their honor. It has been well said, that when Protestants agree with the Fathers, they are revered as fathers; but when they disagree with them, Protestants regard them as only children.

This tension of honor reaches a critical point when Protestant theology moves beyond the ancient tradition’s ecumenical dogmas of theology proper and Christology. Trinity and Hypostatic Union are clearly the doctrines of the Church’s Fathers. But when Protestants scrutinize the Patristic Saints’ doctrines of sin and grace through the lens of biblical exegesis, a more critical assessment ensues. Protestants begin to wonder if the Fathers’ doctrines of salvation are the musings of children rather than the wisdom of fathers. The Protestant insists that even the Patristic Saints must bow before the Scriptures and the priesthood of all believers, or perhaps more apropos here, the sainthood of all the saints.

A. Doctrine of Salvation in the Apostolic Fathers

The earliest of the Church’s saints are usually called the Apostolic Fathers. Their dates are usually considered to be around A.D. 100-150. D. F. Wright explains that they are “A group of early Christian writers believed at one time to have had direct contact with apostles.”² In fact, this title, used often since the post-reformation era, has a history that goes back to the sixth century. Wright says,

J. B. Cotelier’s edition (1672) of the Epistle of Barnabas, 1 and 2 Clement, the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistles of Ignatius and Polycarp spoke of “the Fathers who flourished in Apostolic Times,” while L.T. Ittig published Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp as “Apostolic Fathers” in 1699. Severus of Antioch had used the phrase similarly in the sixth century. Other works have featured among later collections: the fragments of Papias and Quadratus, the Epistle to Diognetus, the Didache, and the Martyrdoms of Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp.

² D.F. Wright, *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church* (ed. J.D. Douglas; Zondervan, 1975): 59.

Recent editors have generally omitted Quadratus, the Martyrdoms except for Polycarp's and often the Epistle to Diognetus.

But the title of apostolic may well be misleading. Wright avers,

The designation "apostolic" is problematic in every case, but is most appropriately applied, if at all, to Clement, Ignatius, and Polycarp. As used today of the earliest noncanonical writings of the late first and early second centuries, it is more conventional than descriptive.

The theology of the Apostolic Fathers is less than ideal since it does not recognize the Pauline writings on a par with the Old Testament Scriptures, and at times, it seems to have an inadequate emphasis on grace. Wright summarizes this as follows:

In emphasis they are broadly pastoral and practical rather than theological or speculative, concerned with the internal life of the Christian communities moving toward "early Catholicism." Their alleged decline from apostolic Christianity (e.g. T.F. Torrance, *The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers*, 1948) appears less flagrant when their limited aims and changed circumstances are taken into account, but remains inescapable. They frequently recall NT books, especially the Pauline epistles, but not always as Scripture on a par with the OT.

In spite of these theological weaknesses, however, the Apostolic Fathers' doctrine of the saving work of Christ as taught in the Scriptures was not lacking.

The soteriology of the Apostolic Fathers is skillfully summarized by William G. T. Shedd.

The first endeavour of the orthodox mind, in opposition to these heretical opinions, was, consequently, to exhibit the nature and purpose of the sufferings and death of Christ. So far as their nature is concerned, they were uniformly and distinctly affirmed to be the sufferings and death of a theanthropic Person, — i.e., a being in whom Deity and humanity were mysteriously blended in their unity of a single personality. With respect to their purpose, the point with which we are more immediately concerned, we shall find less distinctness in the earlier than in the later periods of the history of this doctrine; yet at the same time, an unequivocal statement that the purpose of Christ's death is judicial, and expiatory of human guilt.

In the writings of the *Apostolic Fathers*, we obtain the views of the Church upon the doctrine of the Atonement during the first half century after the death of the last inspired apostle (A.D. 100-150). Examining

them, we find chiefly the repetition of Scripture phraseology, without further attempt at an explanatory doctrinal statement. There is no scientific construction of the doctrine of Atonement in the writings of these devout and pious disciples of Paul and John; yet the idea of vicarious satisfaction is distinctly enunciated by them.

Polycarp († 168), the pupil of John, writes in his Epistle to the Philippians: “Christ is our Saviour; for through grace we are righteous, not by works; *for our sins, he has even taken death upon himself*, has become the servant of us all, and through his death for us our hope, and the pledge of our righteousness. The heaviest sin is unbelief in Christ; his blood will be demanded of unbelievers; for to those to whom the death of Christ, *which obtains the forgiveness of sins*, does not prove a ground of justification, it proves a ground of condemnation.” “Our Lord Jesus Christ suffered himself to be brought even to death *for our sins*; . . . let us therefore, without ceasing, hold steadfastly to him who is our hope, and the earnest of our righteousness, even Jesus Christ, ‘who *bare our sins* in his own body on the tree.’”³

Ignatius († 116), the pupil of John, is perhaps somewhat less urgent than Polycarp, in respect to the point of vicarious satisfaction. He seems more inclined to consider the work of Christ in reference to the sanctification than the justification of the believer. It is a favourite view with him, that the death of Christ brings the human soul into communion with Christ. It is the means of imparting that principle of spiritual life which was lost in the fall. Christ’s redemptive work is a manifestation of love, of self-denying and self-imparting affection on the part of the Redeemer, by which a corresponding affection is wrought in the heart of the believer. And yet the *expiatory* agency of Christ is explicitly recognized by Ignatius. In one passage, he speaks of Christ as the One “who gave himself to God, *an offering and sacrifice for us*.” In another place, he remarks that “if God had dealt with us according to our works, we should not now have had a being;” but that now under the gospel, we “have peace *through the flesh, and blood, and passion of Jesus Christ*.”⁴

In *Barnabas*, the pupil of Paul, we find a clear expression of the atoning agency of the Redeemer. Such phraseology as the following contains the doctrine of justification as distinguished from sanctification: “The Lord endured to deliver his body to death, that we might be

³ Polycarpus, *Ad Philipos*, 1, 8.

⁴ Ignatius, *Ad Ephesos*, 1; *Ad Magnesios*, 10; *Ad Trallios*, Preface.

sanctified *by the remission of sins which is by the shedding of that blood.*"⁵

Clement of Rome, a disciple of Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthians speaks, generally, more of Christ's work than of other parts of the Christian system, and dwells particularly upon his death. The view of Christ's sufferings, he says, consumes pride, teaches us humility, and draws us to the death of penitence (c. 7). Hence it is a chief sign and duty of a Christian continually to have the death of Christ before his eye. His meaning in this, says Dorner, is not merely that Christ has presented us an example of humility and patience, though this thought is not foreign to Clement (c. 16); but his death is the principle, or efficient cause of true repentance, —i.e., works that repentance which in faith receives actual forgiveness of sins. For "his blood was given for us, was poured out for our salvation; *he gave*, by the will of God, *his body for our body, his soul for our soul*" (c. 49). Every explanation of these passages, continues Dorner, is forced, which does not find in them the idea of vicarious substitution, and this not merely in the sense of a subjective disposition, like that which led Christ to suffer for the good of others, but an objective work producing objective results, in reference to the Divine nature and government.⁶ Hence, the name so frequently given to Christ in the Epistle to the Hebrews of "high priest" is very common in Clement. The following extracts exhibit the distinctness with which Clement discriminated justification from sanctification: "Let us look steadfastly to the blood of Christ, and see how precious his blood is in the sight of God, which being shed for our salvation hath obtained the grace of repentance to the whole world.... We are not justified by ourselves, neither by our own wisdom, or knowledge, or piety, or the works which we have done in holiness of heart, but by that faith by which almighty God hath justified all men from the beginning."⁷ In the statement that "we are not justified by the works which we have done in holiness of heart," the most subtle form of the doctrine of justification by works is precluded, fourteen centuries before its enunciation at Trent.

It is evident from this examination of the very brief writings of the Apostolic Fathers, that they recognized the doctrine of atonement for sin by the death of the Redeemer as one taught in the Scriptures, and especially in the writings of those two great apostles, John and Paul, at whose feet they had most of them been brought up. They did not,

⁵ Barnabas, *Epistola*, 5.

⁶ Dorner, *Person Christi*, I. 138 sq.

⁷ Clemens Romanus, *Ad Corinthos*, 7, 32.

however, venture beyond the phraseology of Scripture; and they attempted no rationale of the dogma. Their unanimous and energetic rejection of the doctrine of justification by works evinces that they did not stand upon the position of legalism. The evangelical tenet was heartily and earnestly held in their religious experience, but it was not drawn forth from this its warm and glowing home, into the cool and clear light of the intellect, and of theological science. The relations of this sacrificial death to the justice of God on the one hand, and to the conscience of man on the other, - the judicial reasons and grounds of this death of the most exalted of Personages, - were left to be investigated and exhibited in later ages, and by other generations of theologians.⁸

Thus we find that the Apostolic Fathers are something of a theological challenge to categorize. They clearly understood the saving work of Christ's atoning death as presented here by Shedd. Nevertheless, there are elements of their thought that can be viewed as moving away from grace toward what Wright has termed an "early Catholicism."

B. Ante-Nicene and Nicene Fathers on Sin and Grace

Expressions of this early Catholicism becomes evident in the Christian writers both before and after the Council of Nicea held in A.D. 325. Writers before Nicea are often designated as the Ante-Nicene Fathers. This title includes the Apostolic Fathers, as it encompasses all who wrote before Nicea.

The struggle of the early Christian theologians to develop a doctrine of salvation from sin is well summarized by Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer.

The most famous controversies of the patristic period were concerned with the Trinity and the person of Christ. But ... the concern of the Fathers was to understand the persons of the Godhead in a way which safeguarded the reality of man's redemption. ...

Origen uses his Platonism as a key to understanding the data of Scripture. He argues for a pre-mundane fall of human souls as the only way in which God's justice can be squared with the apparent unfairness of differing human lots. This line of thought, however, did not commend itself to the Church as a whole....

⁸ William G. T. Shedd, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, (Vol II; Minnesota, Klock & Klock Christian Publishers, Originally published by Charles Scribner & Sons 1889, reprinted 1978): 207-212.

Gregory of Nyssa gives an account of the emergence of evil in the world in terms of man's free-will, without recourse to Origen's idea of the pre-existence of souls. ...the Platonist character of Gregory's thought is particularly clear. The argument is developed in a way which not only frees God from responsibility for that evil but also sets the scene for his redemptive grace.

That redemption was effected by the death of Christ. But why was that death the means by which God worked man's salvation? The patristic age offers no clear-cut agreed answer to that question.... Augustine's work on the Trinity, brings out the main thrust of much early reflection on that issue. The heart of Augustine's answer is that the salvation effected by way of the Cross represents the victory of divine justice rather than of mere power.

...the characteristic difference of emphasis between the Eastern and the Western Church. Chrysostom lays great stress on the priority of God's grace, but wants to set human virtue alongside it as a factor in man's salvation. Augustine also insists... that man has an active role to play, but he probes more deeply in his determination to do justice to the scriptural insistence on the absolute priority of the divine. That determination led him in the writings that belong to the last years of his life to develop the ideas of divine election and predestination in a more extreme form than is represented here.⁹

An example of an issue that highlights the question of eternal security in the early Christian theology is the possibility of forgiveness of sins after baptism. A striking example of the danger of post-baptismal sin is given in an Ante-Nicene work entitled, *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles*. It declares, "We do not therefore believe, brethren, that any one who has received the washing of life continues in the practice of the licentious acts of transgressors. Now he who sins after his baptism, unless he repent and forsake his sins, shall be condemned to hell-fire."¹⁰ Yet this same *Constitution of the Holy Apostles* will later provide a powerful prayer of assurance that seems to reflect the eternal security of the believer.

O our support, our powerful God, who dost not accept persons, be Thou the assister of this They people, which thou hast redeemed with the

⁹ Maurice Wiles and Mark Santer *Documents in Early Christian Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975): 95-96.

¹⁰ *The Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325: Ante-Nicene Fathers* Vol. VII (Hendrickson: Peabody, 1995): 398.

precious blood of Thy Christ; be Thou their protector, aider, provider, and guardian, their stone wall of defence, their bulwark and security. For “none can snatch out of Thy hand:” for there is no other God like thee; for on thee is our reliance. “Sanctify them by Thy truth: for Thy word is truth.” Thou who dost nothing for favour, Thou whom none can deceive, deliver them from every sickness, and every disease, and every offence, every injury and deceit, “from fear of the enemy, from the dart that flieth in the day, from the mischief that walketh about in darkness;” and vouchsafe them that everlasting life which is in Christ Thy only begotten Son, our God and Saviour, through whom glory and worship be to Thee, in the Holy Spirit, now and always, and for ever and ever. Amen.¹¹

The prayer of *The Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* seems to bring the assurance of eternal security, even quoting John 10:29, one of the great texts of eternal security, while its teaching on post-baptismal sin seems to teach that one can lose his salvation. The resolution of these two emphases is not found in early Christian theology.

C. Scripture over Tradition

The Protestant attitude to the Fathers that grows out of the doctrine of *sola scriptura*, or the final authority of Scripture over all human teaching and ecclesiastical tradition, is well captured in a prayer of Bishop Hurd: “May the eyes of the more candid and intelligent inquirers be opened, and the old principle be for ever established, that the Bible, and that only (interpreted by our best reason) is the religion of Protestants.”¹²

But the reformational perspective on the authority of the teaching of the early saints’ of the Church is not solely connected with the principle of *sola scriptura*. The Protestant critique of the Fathers is also due to the substantial misuse of the Fathers by the Roman Catholic tradition. Bishop Warburton explains:

The authority of the Fathers had for many ages been esteemed *sacred*. These men, by taking the Greek philosophers to their assistance, in explaining the nature and genius of the Gospel, had unhappily turned religion into an *art*; and their successors the schoolmen, by framing a body of theology out of them, instead of searching for it in the

¹¹ Ibid., 486.

¹² John Daillé, *A Treatise On The Right Use Of The Fathers In The Decision of Controversies Existing At This Day In Religion* (Trans. Rev. T. Smith, ed. G. Jekyll, 2nd ed.; London: Henry G. Bohn: 1843): xv.

Scriptures, soon after turned it into a *trade*. . . .When the avarice and ambition of the Romish clergy had, by working with the superstition and ignorance of the people, erected what they call their hierarchy, and digested an ecclesiastical policy on the ruins of Gospel liberty, for the administration of it, they found nothing of such use for the support of their lordly system as the making the authority of the Fathers sacred and decisive. For having introduced numerous errors and superstitions both in rites and doctrine, which the silence and the declaration of Scripture equally condemned, they were obliged to seal up those living oracles, and open this new warehouse of the dead.¹³

As the Roman Catholic tradition had elevated the Fathers over the Scriptures to defend teachings that were not found in the Bible, the work of reformation naturally was buttressed not only by appeal to Scripture, but by a critique of the misuse of the Fathers.

D. John Daillé’s Critique of Catholic Use of Fathers

This Protestant Apologetic of critiquing the Catholic abuse of the Fathers reached its acme in the 1631 work, *A Treatise On The Right Use Of The Fathers In The Decision of Controversies Existing At This Day In Religion* by John Daillé, a professor at the French Reformed Academy in Saumur written during the relative peace of the Edict of Nantes. One of his most important criticisms, however, was not of the Roman Catholic use of the Fathers, but of the theology of the early Fathers themselves. Simply put, he claimed that the early Christian post-apostolic theology was anything but monolithic and harmonious in content. He writes, “It would be an endless task if I should here attempt to enumerate all the differences and contrarieties of judgment to be found in the Fathers.”¹⁴ Because of the inherent contradictions the Fathers had between themselves, Daillé emphasized that they could hardly be the judges of later theological debate:

We make no scruple in affirming that they have been of contrary opinions, on those other points of religion, which are not at all now controverted amongst us. How much greater harm for heaven’s sake would it be, if we should confess that they have not any better agreed among themselves, on these points now in debate? But we need not

¹³ Ibid., ix.

¹⁴ Ibid., 289.

press this matter any further: it is sufficient for us that we have proved that they were of different opinions in point of religion; so that it clearly follows from hence, that we ought not to admit of their writings, as the proper judges of our controversies.¹⁵

Thus in Daillé's mind, the Church fathers lacked the necessary authority to play the decisive role that the Roman Catholic theologians desired for them to have in the theological controversies of their day.

Thus, therefore, as we often meet with contrariety of judgment, as well in their expositions of the Scriptures as in their judgment, as well in their expositions of the Scriptures as in their opinions, we may safely conclude that they are not of sufficient authority to be admitted as the supreme judges of our controversies: that contradiction which is often found amongst them, evidently shewing that they are not *infallible* judges, such as it is requisite that they should be, for establishing all those points which are at this day maintained by the Church of Rome against the Protestants.¹⁶

Because the work of John Daillé is so little known today, and because it offers such a full consideration of the issues that emerge when one attempts to use the Fathers in theological controversy, a summary of his two books' perspective is given here.

1. John Daillé—Book the First, Summary

Chapter 1: On the Difficulty of ascertaining the Opinions of the Fathers in reference to the present Controversies in Religion, deduced from the fact that there is very little of their Writings Extant of the three first Centuries.

Chapter II: That those Writings which we have of the Fathers of the first Centuries, treat of matters very far different from the present Controversies in Religion.

Chapter III: That those Writings which bear the names of the ancient Fathers, are not all really such; but a great portion of them supposititious and forged, either long since or at later periods.

Chapter IV: That the Writings of the Father, which are considered legitimate, have been in many places corrupted by time,

¹⁵ Ibid., 288.

¹⁶ Ibid., 290.

ignorance and fraud, pious and malicious, both in the early and later Ages.

Chapter V: That the Writings of the Fathers are difficult to be understood, on account of the Languages and Idioms in which they wrote, and the manner of their Writing, which is encumbered with rhetorical flourishes and logical subtleties, and with terms used in a sense far different from what they now bear.

Chapter VI: That the Fathers frequently conceal their own private Opinions, and say what they did not believe; either in reporting the Opinion of others, without naming them, as in their Commentaries; or disputing against an Adversary, where they make use of whatever they are able; or accommodating themselves to their Auditory, as may be observed in their Homilies.

Chapter VII: The Fathers have not always held the same Doctrine; but have changed some of their Opinions, according as their judgment has become matured by study or age.

Chapter VIII: That it is necessary, but nevertheless difficult, to discover how the Fathers have held all their several Opinions; whether as necessary or as probable only; and in what degree of necessity or probability.

Chapter IX: We ought to know what have been the Opinions, not of one or more of the Fathers, but of the whole ancient Church: which is a very difficult matter to discover.

Chapter X: That it is very difficult to ascertain whether the Opinions of the Fathers, as to the Controversies of the present day, were received by the Church Universal, or only by some portion of it; this being necessary to be known, before their sentiments can be adopted.

Chapter XI: It is impossible to know exactly what has been the belief of the ancient Church, either Universal or Particular, as to any of those points which are at this day controverted amongst us.

2. John Daillé—Book the Second, Summary

This was subtitled: *The Fathers Are Not of Sufficient Authority for Deciding Controversies in Religion.*

Chapter I: The Testimonies given by the Fathers, on the Doctrines of the Church, are not always true and certain.

Chapter II: The Fathers testify against themselves, that they are not to be believed absolutely, and upon their own bare Assertion, in what they declare in matters of Religion.

Chapter III: The Fathers have written in such a manner, as to make it clear that when they wrote they had no intention of being our authorities in matters of Religion; as evinced by examples of their mistakes and oversights.

Chapter IV: The Fathers have erred in divers points of Religion; not only singly, but also many of them together.

Chapter V: The Fathers have strongly Contradicted one another, and have maintained different Opinions in matters of very great importance.

Chapter VI: That neither those of the Church of Rome nor the Protestants acknowledge the Fathers for their Judges in points of Religion; both of them rejecting such of their Opinions and Practices as are not suited to their taste: being an answer to two Objections that may be made against what is delivered in the Discourse.

The relevance of the Fathers' theology for the question of the eternal security of the believer is certainly an important question. But if John Daillé's concerns are attended to, their authority can only be conclusive if they comport with the written Word of God contained in the Scriptures.

E. Early Saints and Their Use of the Scriptural Texts on Eternal Security

If we seek to discover if the Ante-Nicene Fathers taught a doctrine of eternal security, we must provide a simple definition of the doctrine and offer some of the more important biblical texts that support the doctrine.

Eternal security might be defined as follows: God's salvation of the sinner is absolutely and unchangeably sure because salvation from first to last is entirely by His grace. Thus God keeps His forgiven children in His redeeming grace throughout their lives on earth until they arrive safely at their ultimate destination of Heaven. Various synonyms for this doctrine have been used, including: "once saved, always saved;" "the perseverance of God's grace"; "the perseverance of the saints;" "the preservation of the saints by God;" and "eternal security."

While there are many biblical texts to establish this doctrine, there are certain key texts that are foundational for the argument. Some of the more important of these are:

1. John 3:16—God gives eternal life to those who believe (not temporary life, or life that can be lost.)
2. Rom 8:33, 34—Divine grace in election makes salvation certain.
3. John 6:37, 39—Jesus will lose none of those given to Him by God the Father because salvation is God’s will and Jesus’ certain promise.
4. John 10:28, 29—God the Father and Christ, God the Son, keep us. Salvation is sure because it is more that *the Father and the Son are holding the believer* rather than *that the believer is holding unto God*.
5. Eph. 1:13, 14—The believer has God’s “earnest money”, namely, the Holy Spirit. When one does not follow through on a promise, he forfeits his earnest money. God will not change His Word of promise, for if He does, He will lose His earnest, the Holy Spirit. God will never give up His Holy Spirit. This means that for a true believer to lose his salvation, this would require the Trinity to cease to exist!
6. Phil. 1:6 promises, “Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.” God always finishes what He starts!
7. 1 Peter 1:4, 5—God Himself keeps our inheritance of salvation safe and secure and so guards us until we arrive in glory.

A fair question that we might ask, then, is, do the early Christian writers discuss these texts in their writings? Given the fact that there are nine large volumes of about 600 pages each comprising the Ante-Nicene Fathers, as well as an excellent general index that makes a statistical study relatively simple, this question can be answered. The statistics are as follows in regard to these seven classic texts on eternal security in the Ante-Nicene Fathers:

1. John 3:16—twice.
2. Romans 8:33-34—once.
3. John 6:37, 39—four times.
4. John 10:28-29—twice.

5. Ephesians 1:13-14—seven times.
6. Philippians 1:6—zero.
7. 1 Peter 1:4-5—zero.

The evidence is clear—eternal security was not a doctrine that was carefully considered by the uninspired founding fathers of our Christian tradition. It is hard to believe, but in over 5,000 pages of the Ante-Nicene writings, John 3:16 is only cited twice! These facts lead me to agree with William Cunningham who concludes:

On most of the other points involved in the evangelical or Calvinistic system, it can scarcely be said that the fathers of the second and third centuries have given any very distinct or explicit testimony. That these great doctrines were not very thoroughly understood, were not very prominently brought forward, and were not very fully applied, is but too evident.¹⁷

But since this doctrine of grace was not carefully developed, neither can we properly conclude that it was denied. Again Cunningham is correct when he asserts:

That they had been wholly laid aside, and that an opposite set of doctrines had been substituted in their room, is what cannot be established. Calvinists and anti-Calvinists have produced sets of extracts from the writings of the fathers, professing to find in them full support for their respective opinions.¹⁸ But upon a careful and impartial survey of this matter, it is evident that all that these collections of extracts, when taken together and viewed in combination, really prove, is that these fathers had no very clear or definite conceptions upon the subject, that they did not very well understand what they meant to teach, and that from ignorance and confusion they not unfrequently fell into contradictions. All this, however, —which is clearly the true state of the case as a matter of fact—does really, when viewed in connection with the fact that, with the progress of time, the Calvinistic testimonies became less full and clear, and the anti-Calvinistic ones more so—i.e., till we come down to the era of the Pelagian controversy—furnish presumption in favour of Calvinism; for there can be no doubt that the tendency, from the apostolic age downwards, was to corrupt the simplicity of the Gospel, to introduce into the doctrines of the church

¹⁷ William Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (vol. I; London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969): 182.

¹⁸ Whitby on the Five Points, and Gill's *Cause of God and Truth*.

mere human speculations, and to accommodate them to the tastes and prejudices of irreligious men.¹⁹

So then, the reality is that we must continue to emphasize the principle of *sola scriptura*.

Conclusion

If the Scriptures teach eternal security, then we as believers should do so as well, even if the earliest Christian writers were unclear or inconsistent on this important doctrine. Once again Cunningham makes the point well.

The testimony, then, of the church of the first three centuries cannot be said to be very clear or explicit either for or against the doctrines of grace. But these doctrines are far too firmly established by the testimony of God's own word, and by the experience of His people, to be affected by a circumstance so insignificant as this. In place of the uncertainty and ambiguity of the testimony of the early church, with regard to the doctrine of grace, shaking our confidence in their truth, it only proves that no reliance is to be placed upon the testimony of the fathers, and of the early church, as a rule or standard in the formation of our opinions; for, finding clear evidence in Scripture that these doctrines were taught by our Lord and His apostles, and finding clear evidence in ecclesiastical history, viewed in connection with Scripture, that they have been embraced in substance by the great body of those who, in every age and country, have given the most satisfactory evidence that they were living under the influence of personal religion, we are fully warranted in holding that the measure of the extent to which men individually or collectively have enjoyed the teaching of the Holy Ghost, and have been guided to a correct knowledge of God's revealed will, is to be tested substantially by the clearness, fullness, and firmness with which they have maintained these fundamental doctrines.²⁰

So may I then conclude with the previously cited prayer of Bishop Hurd: "May the eyes of the more candid and intelligent inquirers be opened, and the old principle be for ever established, that the Bible, and that only (interpreted by our best reason) is the religion of Protestants."²¹ In God's Word, as well as in God's grace, we remain eternally secure!

¹⁹ Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 182-83.

²⁰ Cunningham, *Historical Theology*, 183-84.

²¹ Daillé, *A Treatise On The Right Use Of The Fathers*, xv.