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**How Does God's Sovereign Grace
Guarantee that Salvation is Irrevocable?**

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Abstract

Introduction

A. Jesus Christ Has Made the Way of Salvation

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Abstract

Many discussions of the doctrine of assurance centre on the human predicament, seeking reassurance in terms of what believers have done in turning to Christ and in walking with him. This has the tendency to encourage inward and backward looking glances which can serve to foment the very anxiety the advice is intended to quell. In this paper, we shall show how a proper assurance of salvation might be based on the work of the crucified, risen and ascended Christ. He it is that offered himself once for the sin of the world, and he it is that now presents that offering from the right hand side of his Father in heaven on behalf of sinners. It is on this basis that we can have assurance of salvation based on God's sovereign grace made known to the world in Jesus Christ and by the Holy Spirit.

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² See www.tsm.edu.

Consequently [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25, ESV)

Introduction

When anxious thoughts arise in the minds of Christian believers about our salvation, attention can quickly turn to ourselves. Have I truly repented of my sin? Am I a child of God, living by faith in Christ? Do I actually have the Spirit of the living God living in me, securing my eternal salvation? Am I actually ‘ransomed, healed, restored, forgiven’?³ Can I really look forward to eternity in the glorious presence of the Holy Trinity in the new heaven and new earth? These dark questions can settle upon us and drain away the quiet assurance attested in 1 John 5:13, ‘I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that have eternal life.’

In this paper, I propose a response to such questioning of our salvation that directs attention away from such troubling introspection to the secure source of our hope: Jesus Christ crucified, risen and ascended to the Father’s right hand side.⁴ This is to look at our salvation in terms of the sovereignty of God’s grace in Christ. By drawing attention to Christ, we do not wish to suggest that there is no place for an examination of the interior life. This is surely part of the process of sanctification that is a proper part of both our private spiritual formation and our public worship, whether in the personal encounters with the Word and Spirit of God, or in the corporate formation of the liturgical seasons of Advent and Lent. Nor is it to suggest other issues may be set aside, like the possibility of falling

³ From the hymn, ‘Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven’ (based on Psalm 103), by Henry F. Lyte, 1834.

⁴ The Puritan Anglican divine, William Perkins, offered three grounds of assurance that were later taken up by the Westminster Confession: ‘the promises of God, the testimony of the Holy Spirit and the evidence of fruit and graces on one’s lifetime’ (‘William Perkins on Assurance of Faith’ by Geoff Thomas available at www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_print.php?707). The questions raised in this introduction relate to the second and third of these, while the argument presented in this paper will focus on the first. As such we are returning to Augustine’s focus on the objectivity of God’s will and grace and on the conviction that if it is God’s will that someone come to faith, then it must be that this same will shall purpose perseverance. Augustine, *A Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance* chapters 4 and 33. Martin Luther also advised those struggling with such anxiety to look to Christ. See his sermon on ‘True and False views of Christ’s sufferings’ section 13, available at www.ccel.org/ccel/luther/sermons.iv.iv.html.

away from Christ (Heb 6:4-6) or of a concern for evidence of the Spirit's presence (Gal 5:16-26). It is, however, to affirm that whilst arrogant self-assurance has no place in Biblical Christianity, humble confidence that the work of Jesus Christ enables sinners to be united to him by faith expressed in repentance and baptism is a proper, in fact necessary, aspect of Christian living. Without that, how are we to be Christ's witnesses in the world, making disciples of all nations?

The argument that I shall be making in this paper is that the Christian hope of everlasting salvation for sinners rests not on the sinner but on the savior, Jesus Christ, and looks back to his work on the cross, remembers his advocacy in heaven and only in the light of them looks ahead to his final judgement. In other words, it grounds hope in the activity of the ascended Son of God, who pleads for us on the basis of what he has already done for us and who will make our defense on our behalf when he comes again as judge. The paper may therefore be summarized in terms of the text with which we began: 'Consequently [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them' (Hebrews 7:25). It might, indeed, be seen as a theological exposition of that verse.

We shall lay out our case in two main parts. The first focuses on the basis of our salvation: union with Christ; and the second on the outworking of our salvation: Christ lives to intercede for us. Both shall train our eyes on Christ, whether in his past work or on his present intercession, and both rest on God's decision to save sinners. It is on these that our hope for vindication at the last judgement rests. As such, the basis of assurance offered here are the sovereign promises of God and on his faithfulness, which never fail.

A. Jesus Christ Has Made the Way of Salvation

'Consequently [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him...' (Hebrews 7:25). The author of Hebrews makes it clear that salvation rests on coming to God the Father through Jesus Christ. It is the qualifications of the Son of God which are immediately brought under the spotlight rather than those of the lost and guilty sinners who need his mediation. Jesus Christ is the focus of attention from the first verses of the book of Hebrews, with the discussion of the supremacy of the Son of God, the need to turn to Jesus as the founder of the way of salvation, and the

explanation that he ushers in a new and better covenant than that of Moses and fulfils the promises of that covenant.⁵ This lays the groundwork for the exposition of the priestly role of Jesus that is under discussion in chapter seven.

Like Melchizedek, Jesus is a priest not by being a descendent of Levi, but ‘by the power of an indestructible life’ (v 16). It is the permanency of his life that enables Jesus to, ‘save to the uttermost’ (v 25). This contrast between the mortality of the sinful priests who repeatedly offer sacrifices not only for their people but also for themselves, and the immortality of a priest who can always offer sacrifices for others takes us to the heart of our concern. It is sin that separates us from God (Isa 59:2) and results in death (Rom 6:23) since we are disconnected from God the life-giver. Sacrifices for sin involve death; ‘without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins’ (Heb 9:22).⁶ The sacrificial victim stands in the place of the sinner, who deserves to die (e.g. Lev 4:4). The death of the sacrificial victim means that the sinner may go free. What is so striking about a priest who does not need to offer sacrifices for his own sin is that he does not need to cease from his duties due to his own death. This is evidence of a new order, a new law, and a new covenant. Jesus is the immortal priest who has those properties; it is he who now intercedes for sinners. That is what makes his work so unique.

Before we can see how this brings assurance of salvation, we should notice how access is gained to the mediation of this priest, indeed this high-priest. Confidence is given for entering the holy presence of God, ‘by the blood of Jesus’ (Heb 10:19). Jesus the High-Priest is also Jesus the sacrificial offering. The book of Hebrews assumes those who read it have already come to Jesus and it offers little indication as to how that came about. So the question must be raised: how could this sin-offering benefit the sinner, especially one whose life is lived after this great High Priest has ascended into heaven?

⁵ For discussion of the debate about the structure of Hebrews, see George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mi.: Zondervan, 1998), 27ff, and Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews, a Commentary on the Greek Text*, New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 50ff.

⁶ See also Lev 4-7, although this requirement was not to the exclusion of the poor who could not afford a sacrificial animal, nor even two turtledoves or pigeons (Lev 5:11)

Jesus and his apostles did not institute a priesthood who would in some way continue to offer sacrifices on his behalf. That is no longer needed, as we see in Heb 10:11-18:

And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, “This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds,

then he adds,

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more.” Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Paul and his fellow apostles appointed deacons (*diakonoi*), presbyters (*presbyteroi*) and overseers (*episkopoi*). They did not ordain priests, for their work was done.⁷ The temple was destroyed in AD 70, but already it had been replaced by Jesus himself (John 2:21). Those who were sent out by him to take his good news to the world were given a message and a commission to,

Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold I am with you until the end of the age. (Matt 28:19 and 20)

From now on the forgiveness of sins comes not from fresh offerings of sacrifice, but from appeal to the one great sacrifice which alone brings the forgiveness of sins (cf. Heb 10:4). Forgiveness of sins does indeed require the shedding of blood (Heb 9:22), but it is the blood of Jesus that secures it and that has been shed already.

How is it, then, that the blood of Jesus can have this effect? To answer that we must remember what sacrifice is. It is the remedy for the breakdown in the relationship between a holy God and a sinful

⁷ John Calvin’s work in the area (see his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 4.3.8) has proved widely influential, especially in Reformed circles in showing that the New Testament uses the terms presbyter and overseer/bishop interchangeably. See also, T.F. Torrance, ‘*Royal Priesthood*’ *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1955), 36f. The continuing use of the title ‘priests’ in Protestant denominations to denote those who preside at communion rests on its primary meaning as a contraction of the term ‘presbyter’. Whether that is what is generally communicated when the term is used is now, however, very doubtful.

people. The great Swiss Reformed Theologian, Karl Barth describes sacrifice as, ‘an attempt to deal with this discord’⁸ between humankind and God. He goes on to explain,

Offerings are substitutes for what [sinful man] really ought to render to God, but never does do, and never will. They are gifts from the sphere of his most treasured possessions which represent or express his will to obey, which symbolize the life which has not in fact been offered to God. (IV/1, 278)

So sacrifices offered by sinful priests cannot satisfy God as if they properly compensated him for what he is owed.

On the contrary, it is a question of attesting the Godhead as Godhead by an action which does not conform in the very least to His goodness or claim to satisfy Him, by a gift which does not even remotely correspond to the Giver, and of which He does not stand in the slightest need; of attesting Him as the Lord, to whom man owes everything, to whom he owes himself with everything that he is and has, to whom he owes it to give the glory which belongs to Him in the sphere of our humanity, the glory which He can receive if we do the best we can in His service.⁹

This brings Barth to the heart of the meaning of sacrifice,

God wills and demands the man himself, to make an end of him, so that the new man may have air and space for a new life. He wills and demands that he go through death to life. He wills and demands that as the man of sin he should abandon his life, that his blood as this man should finally be shed and fall to the ground and be lost, that as this man he should go up in flames and smoke. That is the meaning and end of sacrifice. (IV/1, 280)

Of particular importance to Barth here is the exposition of Psa. 40:6-8 in Heb. 10:5ff:

Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, “See, God, I have come to do your will, O God” (in the scroll of the book it is written of me).’

⁸ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics vol. IV, part 1* Trans. G.W. Bromiley, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1953/1956), 277. Further references will be abbreviated in the form: (IV/1, 277).

⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics vol. II, part 1* Trans. T.H.L. Parker, W.B. Johnston, H. Knight and J.L.M. Haire, edited by G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1940/1957), 218.

When the author goes on to say, ‘He abolishes the first to establish the second’ (Heb. 10:9), Barth draws out the decisive change that has taken place at this point. He says of God that,

In the person of His Son there has taken place the event towards which the history of the old covenant was only moving, which it only indicated from afar - the rendering of obedience, humility and penitence and in this way the conversion of man to God, and in this conversion the setting aside, the death, of the old rebellious man and the birth of a new man whose will is one with His. (IV/1, 282)

Christ alone can offer such an expiation of sin and remove the hostility between humankind and God. This is what his sacrifice achieved. In his perfect obedience, he made an offering that has brought about purification of sinful flesh so that relationship between humankind and God can be restored.

The task of the Church, then, is not to make an offering, but to announce that the offering has been made. And the response required by that announcement is not, ‘Come and bring an offering’ but ‘Come and receive the benefits of an offering once made.’ The call is still to repent, but it is repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38), not repent and make an offering. This is not to suggest that there is no place for offerings in Christian faith and practice, but those offerings are now to be understood as living sacrifices: human beings fully surrendered to their God (Rom 12:1). They are not to be made only by certain designated officiants, but by all believers, since in Christ’s kingdom all his people are priests (1 Pet 2:9); and those sacrifices do not secure a right relationship with God, but flow from the newly restored relationship with God that Christ has established.¹⁰

All this makes it clear that the basis on which the Christian may have confidence in their salvation, that their sins no longer separate them from God, that they are delivered from the second death and hell, is the work of Jesus and no work of their own. They have simply received by faith the free gift of the forgiveness of sins and of eternal life. Jesus has made the way of salvation.¹¹ It was entirely his doing; we can add nothing to it. Indeed, we need add nothing to it, for it is

¹⁰ Torrance captures this idea well when he points out that the Christian offers a thank-offering, not a sin-offering. *Royal Priesthood*, 18.

¹¹ See Rom 5:10, ‘For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.’

complete. The great High-Priest has made a once-for-all offering of himself. He has no need to offer further sacrifices and nor do we. It is entirely a matter of applying what he has provided.

B. Jesus Christ Secures the Way of Salvation

“Consequently [Jesus] is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, *since he always lives to make intercession for them*” (Hebrews 7:25). Whilst the sacrificial work of Christ is now complete, the work of Jesus is not. He continues to make intercession for sinners. He presents us and our prayers to our heavenly Father.

Jesus knows well the frailty of human faith and how easily the candle of hope flickers in the slightest breeze. His promise of full and free forgiveness to all who truly turn to him is therefore not left on its own. The Lord has sent the Spirit to be our comforter, to bring us the reassurance we need that we truly are what the Scriptures declare us to be: forgiven and restored children of God who dwell in the heavenly realms (Eph 2:6). Jesus works for all his adopted brothers and sisters in his heavenly home as he prepares the new heavens and earth in which righteousness dwells.

It is in this respect that the priestly work of Christ continues as the God-man at the right hand side of the Father does his mediatory work, not by offering fresh sacrifices of himself, but by appealing to his one sacrifice once offered. As the Scottish Reformed theologian, T.F. Torrance puts it,

Christ was once for all sacrificed in our stead on the Cross but He has ascended into the Holy Place and ever lives to present Himself (and us *in Him* because of Himself *for us*) before the face of the Father. The sacrificial act of Christ once and for all performed and enduring in His endless life in the presence of God, is realised in the life of His people, not by repetition of His substitutionary sacrifice, but by the worship of self-presentation to God (Rom 12:1; 1 Pet 2:5).¹²

This is what enables the sinner to come into the presence of our heavenly Father, to be united to an ascended Christ, to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit. As Douglas Farrow says, “The permanent reception of Jesus into the heavenly sanctuary as the *leitourgos tōn hagiōn* [minister in the sanctuary] signifies that in him our humanity has been

¹² Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 17.

rendered truly presentable to God ('perfect' in the cultic sense) through the Spirit.¹³ It is this one sacrifice to which the Son points. He draws his Father's attention to it as he brings the prayers of his people to him, and he draws his followers' attention to it by the Holy Spirit, so that they may come with confidence into his presence.¹⁴

We have an advocate in heaven, Jesus, as well as an advocate on earth, the Spirit (John 15:16 and Rom 8:16). So it is both the Word of God and the Spirit of God, the two hands of the Father as Irenaeus called them,¹⁵ that uphold the believers in their fragile state here on earth, as they hear the Gospel word of forgiveness and new life and see all the ways in which they remain inveterate sinners. We are indeed *simul iustus et peccator* (at the same time justified and sinners) as Luther said,¹⁶ but we need great reassurance that we are '*iustus*'. The sinning is clear for all to see, and whilst the process of sanctification remedies certain sinful behavior, it also increases sensitivity to the Spirit who reveals our sin ever more starkly. So it is the justification that needs to be strongly illuminated so that the disciple of Jesus can truly know themselves to be who they are in Christ and live as faithful witnesses to him.

Here we can see the great benefits of the Gospel sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.¹⁷ The believer has a once-only baptism to look back on and the oft-repeated celebration of Eucharist to look forward to. He or she is surrounded by signs of the Gospel. Not only does the believer repeatedly hear the good news proclaimed (and without that there is no sacrament to look back on or to look forward to) but they also have the 'visible words' as Augustine called them¹⁸ of water, bread and wine to communicate to the fretful sinner

¹³ Douglas Farrow, *Ascension and Ecclesia* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 34.

¹⁴ For this to be so, it is vital that Jesus Christ be fully God and fully man as the Chalcedonian formulation has it. See T.F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life and Christ*, Ed. Robert T. Walker (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster; Downer's Grove, IL.: InterVarsity, 2008), 209.

¹⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 5.6.1 and 5.28.4.

¹⁶ Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans* commenting on Chapter 4 verse 7.

¹⁷ It is striking that this emphasis on the sacraments as a means of reassurance is strong for both Thomas Aquinas and for Martin Luther, leading theologians of Catholics and Protestants. See Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 3.56-59 and Luther's response to his own doubts; 'I am baptized!' (Roland Bainton, *Here I Stand* (New York and Scarborough, Ontario: Mentor 1950), 287. See also Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism*, XIII on Baptism).

¹⁸ Augustine, *In Evangelium Johannis tractatus*, 80:3.

that they are truly loved, they are truly forgiven, they are truly united with Christ and part of his eternal family. As Torrance so aptly puts it,

Through His Spirit [the ascended Jesus] commands and enables the Church to administer the Sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper, but it is the Lord Himself who is present in the midst of the Church as our High Priest who cleanses the Church in His own Blood, feeds it with Himself, blesses it with His Spirit, renews it in the power of His resurrection, and presents it as His own Body to the Father.¹⁹

Such is the power of the Gospel sacraments to bring reassurance to the believer.

It is in the on-going proclamation of the word of God, representing the living words of the Father, Son and Spirit, that we experience the Lordship of Jesus Christ today. This is how we become aware that he is the risen, ascended king, ruling over all things, and await his final judgement when his kingdom will come in all its fullness. This is the mode in which he, as the head of the church, exercises his authority: through his Word and his Spirit. We are repeatedly reminded of what he has done for us and we are repeatedly invited to repent and come to him to receive the forgiveness that he promises not to withhold, along with all the other gifts that we need and he promises to give (Rom 8:32). It is the ascended king interceding for us that gives us the strength to stand before our heavenly Father, sinners that we are (cf. Ezek 2:1). It is by his Word and his Spirit. These are the strong hands that will not let us go and will not let us down.

It is in this context that the believer is called to, 'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,' knowing that, 'it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.' (Phil 2:12 and 13) There is a work to be done; the Spirit has been poured out for a purpose and those who receive this gracious gift are enabled to be transformed from one degree of glory to another (2 Cor 3:18). But it is not an anxious work, nor a work on which our salvation depends, but a work that our salvation secures. And it is a work that is

¹⁹ Torrance, *Royal Priesthood*, 38. Torrance also says, 'Baptism is the sacrament of our once and for all participation in Christ, and may be spoken of as the Sacrament of Justification, which is not to be repeated. The Eucharist is the sacrament of our continuous participation in Christ and may be spoken of as the sacrament of Sanctification, which is to be regularly repeated, until Christ comes again.' T.F. Torrance, *Space, Time and Resurrection*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998), 150.

carried out under the eyes of our loving heavenly Father whose only Son constantly intercedes for us.

Thomas Goodwin, one of the great Puritan theologians who devoted considerable energy to this question of assurance, was able to express just such a confidence as he faced his own death.

I am going to the three Persons, with whom I have had communion: they have taken me; I did not take them. I shall be changed in the twinkling of an eye, all my lusts and corruptions I shall be rid of, which I could not be here; those croaking toads will fall off in a moment... I could not have imagined I should ever have had such a measure of faith in this hour; no, I could never have imagined it.²⁰

Conclusion

The risen and ascended Jesus Christ is the basis of our assurance that we have been saved, that we are being saved and that we shall be saved. It is in him that God's sovereign grace guarantees that salvation is irrevocable. He it is, with his nail-pierced hands and feet, who comforts us with his word of forgiveness. He it is that has asked his Father for the Spirit to come to us and strengthen us with his presence. He it is that heads his Church and leads it in its mission on earth, proclaiming his Gospel by the mouths of his chosen servants, and calling all to repent and believe the good news. He it is that we, helpless sinners, are united to by faith and as such find ourselves seated in the heavenly realms. And he it is that shall come to be our judge at the last day, he who has given his life for us and ever lives to intercede for us. So it is to him that we look as we face our anxieties about our state before our God and king, and find ourselves greatly loved. This is not an excuse to ignore his call to examine ourselves, to admit our sin, to come to him, to obey his word, to take up our cross and follow him daily. But it is a call to do so knowing that he is also the one who has called us to cast our anxieties on him, because he cares for us (1 Pet 5:7).²¹

²⁰ Quoted in Guy Davies, 'Thomas Goodwin: His Life, Times and Quest for Assurance', p 12, available at www.puritansermons.com.

²¹ I would like to thank Rev Richard Bates, Rev John Locke and Dr Bill Witt for their assistance in preparing this paper.

See more

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