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How Does One Interpret the New Testament Warning Passages While Affirming the Irrevocable Nature of Salvation? - Catholic Epistles

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Abstract

Interpretation of the warning passages in the Catholic Epistles in relation to the notion of the irrevocable nature of salvation is a hard and contentious exercise. However, when the passages are studied in relation to the other passages in the New Testament on the nature of the new birth (salvation), especially the words of Jesus Christ in the gospels, the interpretation of those passages becomes manageable. Therefore, the paper discusses the key warning passages in the Catholic Epistles after a discussion on the view of Jesus as recorded by the gospel writers, as well as the views of other New Testament authors,

such as Paul and the author of Hebrews, about salvation. Needless to belabor this point, the two renowned and ongoing conflicting views on whether salvation is permanent or relative (temporary) play a key role in the minds and words of the respective interpreters as they tackle the warning passages. As I write this article, I vouch for the permanence of salvation. The reasons for my view are clear within the paper.

Introduction

Interpretation of the New Testament¹ warning passages while affirming the irrevocable nature of salvation is a subject that has great interest to me personally. This is especially because, from when I committed my life to Jesus Christ for salvation on September 23, 1975 until April 1980, I lived in a state of constant doubt and fear that I could lose my salvation whenever I committed sin. Nobody had informed or guided me, nor had I read any Bible passages, on the permanence of salvation. For this reason, to say the least, the warning texts, both in the Old Testament² (such as Exodus 32:32–33; Ecclesiastes 11:9—12:7 and Psalm 69:27–28) and in NT (such as the statement that, only “he who stands firm to the end will be saved,” in Matthew 10:22 and 24:13, and others in the writings of Paul and other NT writings, including the Catholic Epistles, and Revelation 3:5) were very scary to me. This was especially so when anyone challenged me on whether I was sure if I died at that time I would go to heaven. I did not have much confidence to affirm my assurance of salvation.

However, things changed for good for me when I joined seminary in April 1980. That happened as were doing a course by the title, ‘Christian Life’ at Scott Theological College (now call Scott Christian University) in Machakos, Kenya. As I was reading Lesson 1 in the book titled, *First Steps in the Christian Faith*,³ I got to know that a believer can be sure that he or she is genuinely and permanently saved after believing and accepting Christ as his or her saviour. That lesson is titled “Assurance of Salvation.” Among others, the texts that captured my attention and gave me great assurance and joy are John 5:24 and a

¹ From here onwards, the New Testament will be referred to as NT, for convenience.

² Similar to NT, from here onwards, for convenience, the Old Testament will be referred to as OT.

³ Lessons prepared by staff of Moody Correspondence School, *First Steps in the Christian Faith: A Home Correspondence Course*, Christian Living Series, Book 1, (Nairobi, Kenya: Kesho Publications, with permission of the Moody Correspondence School of Chicago, Illinois, 1979? (but the reprint I am citing is dated 1984)), 6–14.

passage in one of the Catholic Epistles, specifically 1 John 5:13, in fact, starting from 1 John 5:11. John 5:24 says, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." 1 John 5:11–13 says, "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life." The section of verse 13 that says, "so that *you may know that you have eternal life*" (the italics are mine for emphasis) is what caught my attention, because, as stated above, since when I gave my life to Christ until that time I did not know I could be sure that I had eternal life, and that I would live forever in heaven.

My faith and assurance was reinforced further when I read Step 1 in the book titled *10 Basic Steps toward Christian Maturity* by Bill Bright⁴ in the same course at Scott. Step 1 is titled "The Christian Adventure" and the first main point in that Step is titled, "The Christian's Certainty." Through reading it, my new-found assurance that salvation is a permanent reality was strengthened. Assurance of Salvation is also strategically located as the first of five lessons in Bill Bright's follow-up book in 1994 titled, *5 Steps of Christian Growth*.⁵

A. Epistles of the New Testament

Without counting Revelation as an epistle, although chapter 2 and 3 are exclusively specific letters to particular churches in Asia Minor, NT has twenty-one epistles proper. The classification of the epistles begins with the thirteen epistles by Paul (the accepted and the disputed letters), namely Romans to Philemon. The Pauline epistles are followed by the letter to the Hebrews. Hebrews is then followed by the Catholic Epistles, after which comes Revelation.

B. The Catholic Epistles

The view of the majority of Bible scholars is that the epistles that qualify to be classified as 'Catholic' are seven. The seven are: James, 1 Peter, 2 Peter, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Jude. The seven epistles

⁴ A complete online version of the *10 Basic Steps toward Christian Maturity* can be accessed at www.tenbasicsteps.org.

⁵ Bill Bright, *5 Steps of Christian Growth Study Guide*, Five Steps Series, (Okeene, Oklahoma: New Life Publications, 1994).

have been referred to as ‘Catholic’ since the time of Origen (c. 185-254 AD) and Eusebius (c. 260-340 AD) until today. They are also called the ‘General Epistles,’ and the ‘Universal Epistles.’ They are called ‘General’ and ‘Universal’ because, except for 2 John and 3 John, they are not addressed to any particular individual recipient or any particular local congregation or group of specific congregations. For example, the epistle by James is addressed “To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion” (James 1:1).⁶ Although 2 John and 3 John are addressed to particular individuals,⁷ the Early Church included them among the ‘Catholic Epistles’ because, in the view of many Bible scholars, when closely examined, it is implicit and possible that they were intended for the universal church. They were addressed to individuals in order to protect the larger church from the ongoing persecution against Christians in the first century AD. Another view about classifying 2 and 3 John as ‘Catholic Epistles’ is that, it was more convenient to put these two short letters close to the longer one by the same author. Both views are viable. Nevertheless, I regard the first hypothesis as more plausible than the second.

Each of the Catholic Epistles was written for a definite purpose or set of purposes and bears the unique characteristics and settings of the respective individual author. Each also takes into account the respective contexts of the intended recipients. For example, one of the profound purposes of 1 John, which is explicitly in support of one part of the central theme of this paper, namely ‘the irrevocable nature of salvation,’ is given in 1 John 5:11–13 (especially verse 13). The passage says, “And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. ¹² He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. ¹³ I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” As seen in this example, and others that will follow in this paper, the Catholic Epistles address various issues on Christian doctrine and practical life in simple and understandable concepts. Comparing them with the Pauline epistles, Schaff says that the Catholic Epistles “do not enter into theological discussions like

⁶ Unless otherwise indicated, all the English Bible quotations in this paper are taken from the New International Version (1984 US edition).

⁷ 2 John is addressed “To the chosen lady and her children” (2 John 1:1), and 3 John is addressed “To my dear friend Gaius” (3 John 1:1).

those of Paul, the learned Rabbi, and give simpler statements of truth, but protest against the rising ascetic and Antinomian errors, as Paul does in the Colossians and Pastoral Epistles.”⁸

C. Warning Passages in the Pastoral Epistles in Relation to the Teaching of Jesus Christ and the Teaching of Paul

The discussion on interpretation of the warning passages in NT in relation to the affirmation of the irrevocable nature of salvation cannot be tackled justly without basing it on the teaching of Jesus in the gospels on the permanence of salvation. In the Gospel according to John, Jesus is cited as having affirmed explicitly that salvation is permanent and eternal. The most prominent statement affirming the permanence of salvation is John 10:25–30 (especially verse 28–29). John 10:25–30 says, “Jesus answered, ‘I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father’s name speak for me,²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep.²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me.²⁸ *I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.*²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; *no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand.*³⁰ I and the Father are one.” (The emphasis in italics is mine.) Verse 28 and 29 have the clearest and most reassuring and indisputable statement on the permanence of eternal life in the believer when one believes and accepts Jesus Christ as his saviour. Just as Nicodemus stated implicitly to Jesus in John 3:4 in reference to the impossibility of a person becoming unborn after he or she has been born physically—and Jesus did not refute that fact—so also is the case with the spiritual birth. When a sinner believes and is born again he cannot become unborn again. The repetition in the two clauses in John 10:28 and 29, “*no one can snatch them out of my hand*” and “*no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand,*” is meant for emphasis on the impossibility of anyone or anything annulling salvation once it is imparted into a person.

Jesus also indicated that there is a kind of ‘falling away’ that is not ‘falling away from the faith.’ That is what he meant when he said in Matthew 11:6 in reference to those who were offended by the way he was doing things and fell away from following him. He said, “Blessed

⁸ Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church: First Century*. Volume 1: Church History Series, (eBook by Revelation-Insight Publishing Co. , 2011), 596.

is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” The Greek phrase that is used in Matthew 11:6 is *skandalisthē en emoi* (σκανδαλισθῆ ἐν ἐμοί). The word *skandalisthē* is a verb that is aorist in tense, in the subjunctive mood, passive voice, and singular in number. It is derived from *skandalizō*. Concerning the term *skandalizō*, the UBS dictionary says that when it is used without the preposition *en* it means to “cause (someone) to sin, cause (someone) to give up his faith (pass. give up one's faith, be led into sin, fall into sin.)”⁹ However, when the passive form of the term is used with *en*, as in Matthew 11:6, it means, to “reject, desert, have doubts about.” It also means, to “anger, shock.” Concerning Matthew 11:6, in support of the fact that this falling away was not in reference to falling away from the faith that the followers of Jesus had in their hearts, France says, “Many were ‘put off’ by Jesus, when his style of ministry failed to tally with their expectations, and even offended against accepted conventions.”¹⁰ He explains further that those were put off by Jesus’ unconventional method of doing ministry are those “who found Jesus hard to take.” This means that they had not yet believed in Jesus and thus could not have fallen away from the faith.

In reference to Matthew 11:6 and other related cases, Danker says that if someone falls away because of Jesus, it means that the person refuses to believe in him or becomes apostate from him and falls into sin.¹¹ Concerning the person who becomes apostate and falls into sin, this does not mean that he or she becomes an unbeliever by losing salvation. The person falls away from the Christian way of life and lives as an unbeliever, while remaining a born-again person. In my view, such a person is what Paul refers to in 1 Corinthians 3:10–15. In verse 15, he says that, in the final judgment such a person will be saved from eternal condemnation, but his works will be burned up. Verse 15 says, “If it [what he has built on the foundation of salvation in Jesus Christ] is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself *will* be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.”

⁹ Kurt Aland, et al. eds. *The Greek New Testament* (with Dictionary), Third Edition (Corrected), (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1983), the word σκανδαλίζω, page 163 of the dictionary section.

¹⁰ R.T. France, *The Gospel according to Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary*, (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press & Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985), 193.

¹¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, Third Edition (Revised and Edited Based on Walter Bauer’s Lexicon), (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), under the word σκανδαλίζω, page 926.

Concerning the term *skandalizō*, Liddell and Scott say it means to “cause to stumble, give offense or scandal to any one.”¹² They give the meaning of the passive form, as used with *en* in Matt 11:6, as “to be made [by anyone] to stumble, take offense [in anyone].”¹³ Stumbling is not falling out of salvation, or losing it altogether.

The same view as has been used to explain Matthew 6:11 can also be said when he used the same concept of falling away to refer to what Peter and the other disciples would do during his arrest, trial, and death. In Matthew 26:31 Then Jesus told them, “This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’”¹⁴ This did not mean that Peter and the rest of the disciples who would ‘fall away’ for a while from Jesus would cease to belong to the flock of clean sheep that he had given eternal life (John 10:28). According to Jesus’ statement during the Last Supper, in John 13:10–11, Judas was among the twelve disciples, but he was not clean. It is not clear what Jesus meant when he said that all of the disciples were ‘clean’ except Judas Iscariot who would betray him; whether he meant that they were born-again except Judas. Therefore, Judas’ falling away cannot be confidently described as falling away from salvation because it is not known whether he was born-again.

The same can also be said about the description of Jesus in the Parable of the Sower in Mark 4:2–20, especially verse 16–17 concerning people who hear the word of God and receive it at once with joy. However, “when trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (Mk 4:17). The clause in verse 16 that says that they ‘at once receive it [the word] with joy’ has two possible interpretations. It may mean that when these people hear the word of God they understand and believe in the gospel message and are born-again. It may also mean that they hear the word of God but do not believe and become saved. If by receiving the word, it means that they believe and are saved, the falling away means that they become apostate but do not lose their salvation. For the second group that hear and receive with joy without actually believing and being born again,

¹² H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon: With a Revised Supplement*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), under the word σκανδάλ. – η, page 1604.

¹³ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, 1604.

¹⁴ This OT quotation is found in Zechariah 13:7.

the falling away does not mean that they fall away from salvation. This happens many times in the church from the early church days until today. Many hear the word of God and receive it with great enthusiasm, and even join the church as members. However, this does not mean that they are born-again. Therefore, when they fall away for one reason or another, it cannot be said that they have fallen out of salvation.

Luke's additional description of the same group of people who hear and receive the gospel with joy but quickly fall away is what gives some interpreters trouble. Luke 8:13 says, "Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." The statement that says, "They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away" is especially the hardest to interpret. The Greek verb that Luke used for their falling away is *aphistantai* (ἀφίστανται), which is in the present tense, indicative mood, middle voice (but with active meaning), and is in third person plural form, from the word *aphistamai* (ἀφίσταμαι). The UBS Greek Dictionary gives the intransitive meaning of the term as to "leave, go away; desert, commit apostasy; keep away." Although it may sound controversial, my understanding is that, if they truly have believed and fallen away, this does not mean they have lost their salvation. Otherwise, this interpretation is directly contrary to the words of Jesus on the subject of losing salvation, such as in our prominent verse, John 10:28.

Danker says that verb *aphistēmi* (active form of the related deponent verb *aphistamai* that is used in Luke 8:13) is used "of action that results in the distancing of pers. or thing from pers., thing, place, or condition."¹⁵ He says that the middle form, *aphistamai*, means "to distance oneself from some pers. or thing"¹⁶ or "to go away, withdraw ... keep away ... abstain."¹⁷ In reference to Lk 8:13, he says that it means "fall away ... become a backslider."¹⁸ This means that the person withdraws from active profession of the faith or backslides. However, this does not mean the backslider loses his or her faith.

¹⁵ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, under the word ἀφίστημι, page 157.

¹⁶ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, under the word ἀφίστημι, page 157.

¹⁷ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, under the word ἀφίστημι, page 157–158.

¹⁸ Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, under the word ἀφίστημι, page 157.

Among other meanings, Liddell and Scott give the intransitive sense of *aphistēmi* as, to “stand away or aloof from, keep far from, ... depart from, object to right proposals ... be deposed from office ... resign ... withdraw from ... have done with ... have done with ... giving up all claim to ... avoid, shrink from ... recoil ... desist ... [be] a runaway ... be separated.”¹⁹

D. Prominent Warning Passage in Hebrews

Before discussing the warning passages in the Catholic Epistles in relation to the temporal nature versus the permanent or irrevocable nature of salvation, it is expedient to discuss briefly the most prominent of the five warning passages in Hebrews.²⁰ The five warning passages in Hebrews are: 2:1–4; 3:7–4:13; 5:11–6:12; 10:19–39; 12:14–29. Among these five passages, I view the short section in Heb 6:4–6 as the most outstanding in relation to the subject of this paper. Bible scholars have various views about the interpretation of this passage, especially the meaning of the three clauses in verse 4 and 5 that say, “... who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,⁵ who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age.” To some, the meaning is that, this refers to those who have once been born-again but have ‘fallen away’ from salvation, thus, those who have once been saved but have now become unsaved. To others, the interpretation is that these are people who have been enlightened on the gospel and on spiritual matters although they have never committed themselves fully to Christ, thus, they have never been saved at all. Therefore, to this second group of interpreters, the meaning of falling away is the abandonment or neglect of the only way of salvation that has been presented to them, as stated in Hebrews 2:3. To them also, those who ‘have fallen away’ are those of whom John says in 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

The *New Scofield Reference Bible* also enumerates various interpretations on the warning passage in Hebrews 6:4–6, as follows:

¹⁹ Liddell and Scott, *Greek-English Lexicon*, under the word ἀφίστημι, page 291.

²⁰ The Epistle to the Hebrews is regarded by some Bible scholars as belonging to the cluster of Catholic Epistles because it is circular in nature and is not explicitly addressed to a particular individual or congregation in a particular geographical location. Nevertheless, some view it as a Pauline epistle that is addressed implicitly to the Jews in particular.

(1) The warning is directed to some of the Jewish people who professed to be believers in Christ but stopped short of true faith in Him after advancing to the threshold of salvation. (2) The admonition presents a hypothetical case: if one could “fall away” (v. 6), it would be impossible to renew him again to repentance; for in such an instance, it would be necessary for Christ to be crucified a second time. Obviously, this will not occur (Heb. 10:12, 14); thus to fall away is impossible. (3) The warning is directed towards believers who have fallen into sin to such an extent that they have crucified to themselves the Son of God afresh (v. 6) and are therefore disapproved and will lose their reward (see 1 Cor. 9:27, *note*). And (4) the warning is to those who are believers in the Lord Jesus Christ and are in danger of falling away, through unbelief or sin, and losing their salvation.²¹

The Scofield Bible does not leave the interpretation hanging but goes on to elaborate further for clarification. It says:

The clause rendered “and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit” (v. 4) might be paraphrased somewhat like this: “and were willing to be led toward the Holy Spirit.” The warning is issued to those who have been instructed and even moved by the Holy Spirit but have never committed themselves to Christ. The entire passage turns on the word “better” in v. 9. If all that is written in vv. 1–5 were equivalent to salvation, there could be nothing better. The experiences outlined may precede and even accompany salvation, but they do not always result in salvation. Scripture abundantly affirms the Christian’s eternal security; therefore this passage must not be interpreted as teaching that the believers in Christ can lose their salvation. See Jn. 3:15–16, 36; 10:27–30; Rom. 8:35, 37–39; Eph. 1:12–14; 4:30; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 10:12–14; 1 Pet. 1:3–5.²²

That is the understanding of the majority of evangelical scholars on the warning passage in Hebrews 6:4–6. What has been said above on the teaching of Jesus in the gospels, Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:15, and in Hebrews 6:4–6 concerning the interpretation of the warning passages in relation to the irrevocable nature of salvation can also be said of the warning passages in the Catholic Epistles.

E. Warning Passages in the Catholic Epistles

The Catholic Epistles contain several warning passages. However, I discuss briefly on the following few that I judge as the most prominent:

²¹ C.I. Scofield, ed. *The New Scofield Reference Bible: Holy Bible: Authorized King James Version*, with introductions, annotations, subject chain references, and such word changes in the text as will help the reader. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 1315.

²² Scofield, ed. *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, 1315.

1. James 5:19–20

James 5:19–20 (NRSV), which says, “My brothers and sisters,¹ if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another,²⁰ you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.” The people that James is addressing as *Adelphoi mou* (Ἀδελφοί μου), that is, “My brothers,” which means, “My brothers and sisters,” as in NRSV, are born-again Christians. On the surface, James may be understood as cautioning his readers that there is the possibility of born-again believers to wander away from the truth and becomes sinners who are at risk of dying in sin and thus lose their souls forever. The interpretation is that, some who wander away are helped to come back to the truth and thus their souls are saved from eternal damnation.

On the contrary, on careful reading of James 5:19–20, what James means by ‘saving the sinner’s soul from death’ is different when used in reference to a born-again believer (as in this passage) from when it is used in reference to a non-believer. When used in reference to someone who is already saved, the only possible meaning would salvation from ‘spiritual death’ which is not salvation from ‘eternal death.’ A born-again believer who wanders from the truth and lives in sin can be described as a ‘spiritually dead’ believer.

When used in reference to non-believers, and if what James means by addressing the readers as ‘brothers’ includes the non-believers, those who wander from the truth are people who abandon the true teaching of the gospel when they are in the process of being evangelized or taught the truth. If they leave the true teaching and follow lies, and no-one follows them up and brings them back to the true teaching, they are at the risk of losing their souls in eternal death. Although not specifically written mainly for academic purposes, Matthew Henry’s view is viable on this point. He says, “The soul being the principal part of the man, the saving of that only is mentioned, but it includes the salvation of the whole man: the spirit shall be saved from hell, the body raised from the grave, and both saved from

eternal death.”²³ Nevertheless, if the people that James is referring to in this passage are born-again believers, the first interpretation, that the death mentioned here is ‘spiritual death,’ which is possible but temporal for born-again believer, is consistent with the teaching of permanence of salvation in NT.

The scenario is just as Chrysostom explained it in his interpretation of James 5:19–20 using an analogy that is similar to interpretation of part of the parable of the sower concerning the seed that fell on the path and birds of the air ate it up (Luke 8:5–15, specifically verse 5 and 12). He says, “And how do you go about converting someone? It is like the seeds sown by farmers. They are sown once, but they do not survive forever unless they are carefully nurtured. Unless the tillers of the soul protect the seeds, they will be exposed to the birds and to every seed-eating creature. We are just like this, unless we protect what has been sown in us by constant care, for the devil will snatch it away and our own lethargy will destroy it.”²⁴ This interpretation understands the meaning of the ‘seeds’ as the words of the evangelists to the potential converts. The only difference between Chrysostom’s analogy and the interpretation of Jesus is that, in Jesus’ explanation the ‘seed’ is singular, which is the ‘word of God’ (Luke 8:11). In Luke 8:12, the explanation of Jesus is very clear, as he said, “Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.” Therefore, those who hear the word of God but it is taken away from them before they believe are not saved.

If this view is understood and adopted, one meaning of the warning passage in James 5:19–20 is that, those who wander away from the truth are born-again believers who backslide and are either led back to the truth or die physically in their apostate state. These will not experience the eternal death. The other

²³ Leslie F. Church, ed., *Commentary on the Whole Bible by Matthew Henry: Genesis to Revelation*, Electronic version, Comment on James 5:19–20.

²⁴ John Chrysostom’s comment on James 5:20, as in the book by J.A. Cramer, ed. *Catena in Epistolas Catholicas*, (Oxford: Clarendon, 1840), as cited in the book edited by Gerald Bray and Thomas C. Oden, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament, XI: James, 1-2 Peter, 1-3 John, Jude*, (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 63.

view is that, those who wander away from the truth are those who hear the word of God but abandon it without believing and being saved. If such are followed up and are brought back to the truth and believe, they are saved. If they are never followed up and brought back to the truth to the extent of believing and being born-again, they die in their sins and their souls are lost forever, in eternal death.

2. **2 Peter 1:10–11**

2 Peter 1:10–11 that says, “Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, ¹¹ and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” This admonition is written to born-again believers, some of whom seem to have stagnated in their spiritual growth, as verse 9 indicates. I take the passage as being equivalent to Paul’s warning passage to Christians in Philippians 2:12–13 that says, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, ¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.” Philippians 2:12–13 is discussed in point number 5 below, in the discussion on Jude 1:24–25. 2 Peter 1:10–11 is also close to 1 Corinthians 3:10–15, which is discussed above under the subheading “Warning Passages in the Pastoral Epistles in Relation to the Teaching of Jesus Christ and the Teaching of Paul.”

What I need to add concerning this passage (2 Pet 1:10–11) is that, the warning that Peter gives to his readers to make their election and calling sure, in order never to fall, and so that they “will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” does not mean that any of the already born-again ‘elect’ of God will fall out of the election and thus fail to receive welcome into the eternal kingdom of Christ. If this were the case, such interpretation would be in direct contradiction Peter’s clear and strong view in his first epistle, in 1 Peter 1:3–5 where he says, “Praise be to the God

and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,⁴ and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you,⁵ who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.”

The interpretation that a born-again believer would fall from his or her ‘elect’ position would also be in conflict with the words of Paul in **Romans 8:29–30**, where he says, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified.” My understanding is that the ‘elect’ are those who respond positively to the call of God for salvation and believe in Christ and are saved, as John 3:16 says. Once they believe and are saved, they have eternal life and shall never perish. These are the ones whom God ‘foreknew,’ ‘predestined,’ ‘called,’ ‘justified,’ and ‘glorified.’ The hierarchy of these divine events in the life of the ‘elect’ is not at all broken midway. Those who are called and believe and are truly born again, but fall backwards along the way, will never fall out of salvation, but *they will not “receive a rich welcome* into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 1:11, with my emphasis in italics). My understanding is that they will receive a rather poor reception into the eternal kingdom of Christ, just as Paul implies in 1 Corinthians 3:15, as also highlighted earlier in this paper. 1 Corinthians 3:15 states, “If it [what he has built on the foundation of salvation in Jesus Christ] is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself *will* be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.” Therefore, the warning in 2 Peter 1:10–11 is for encouraging those who are born again to be serious in confirming the genuineness of their salvation by living a sincere and practical holy life. It is just as James says in James 2:1–26, that, genuine faith is evidenced by sincere good works.

3. 2 Peter 3:17

2 Peter 3:17 says, “Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.” As Peter approaches the end of his second letter to his readers whom he describes as “those who through the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ have received a faith as precious as ours” (2 Pet 1:1), he cautions them to be steadfast in their faith by living a godly life as they look forward to the coming of the day of God (2 Pet 3:10–11). In 3:17, he warns them not to be carried away by the deceit of morally corrupt people and thus lose their own stability in the true gospel teaching. Peter describes the addressees’ act of losing stability as *ekpesēte tou idiou stērigmou* (ἐκπέσητε τοῦ ἰδίου στηριγμοῦ, “you lose your own stability”). The verb ἐκπέσητε is aorist subjunctive active second person singular from *ekriptō* (ἐκπίπτω). The UBS NT Greek dictionary gives the meaning of *ekriptō* as to “fall off or away; lose, forfeit; run aground (of ships); fail, become ineffective.”²⁵ BDAG gives the meaning of *ekriptō* as “to change for the worse from a favorable condition.”²⁶ The lexicon also defines the NT term *stērigmos* (a word that is found only once, here, in NT, from where the genitive noun form *stērigmou* is derived) as a “safe position” or a “firm commitment to conviction or belief, steadfastness.”²⁷

From the above explanation, it is clear that the warning not to “fall from your secure position,” in 2 Peter 3:17, does not in any way imply a fall from the security of salvation. In reference to born-again believers, it means abandonment of the firm commitment to the Christian faith and thus becoming ineffective Christians. Adeyemo concludes it well when he says

²⁵ Kurt Aland, et al. eds. *The Greek New Testament* (with Dictionary), the word ἐκπίπτω, page 56 of the dictionary section.

²⁶ Walter Bauer, F. W. Danker, W. F. Arndt, and F. W. Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*. Third edition, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 308.

²⁷ Bauer, Danker, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 945.

that Peter is telling the believers to guard their “present secure position in Christ and continue to grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour.”²⁸ Thus, what is at stake in the destabilization of the secure position is not the salvation of the addressees but their basis on the true gospel teaching and thus their growth in the “grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Peter 3:18).

To the same verse (2 Pet 3:17), Hillyer applies the old cliché, “Forewarned is forearmed.”²⁹ He goes on to say what was at risk was that, false teaching was threatening the spiritual well-being of Peter’s addressees. He therefore warned them to “stand as an alert sentinel” over their “understanding and grasp of true doctrine, especially that which concerns the return of Jesus Christ.” He goes on to say that if the believers allowed themselves to be led astray by the false teachers, they would “face spiritual disaster, nothing less than a fatal **fall from your secure position** in Christ.” He offers a remedy from OT, that, “To guard against such spiritual poison threatened from without, there is one sure antidote: to go on making healthy progress in the Christian life that is within (cf. Ps. 1:1–3).” Thus, it is Christian growth that was at stake; not the security of the salvation of the readers.

4. 1 John 2:19

In his statement in **1 John 2:19**, John implies that those who fell away from the group of believers to which he belonged were never members of the group of true believers; thus, they were never born again. In fact, in verse 18, he calls them ‘antichrists.’ The verse says, “They [the antichrists] went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.” I infer two purposes of this statement. First, it was to explain to the remaining believers about those who had left; that they had never been genuine believers. Secondly, it was

²⁸ Tokunboh Adeyemo, “1 John,” in Tokunboh Adeyemo, ed., *Africa Bible Commentary*, (Nairobi, Kenya: WordAlive Publishers, 2006), 1528.

²⁹ This and the subsequent quotations in this paragraph are from Norman Hillyer, *New International Biblical Commentary: 1 and 2 Peter, Jude*, (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc., 1992), 225.

to serve as a warning to the remaining believers to ascertain the genuineness of their faith; that they would not turn out to be like those who had gone away.

Although it is not easy at times to distinguish between genuine believers and imposters, it can be argued that John had enough spiritual discernment to know that those who left the group had never been true believers. Later in the epistle, in 1 John 4:1–3, just as he himself implied he could distinguish between true believers from the false one, he also cautioned the true believers to distinguish between the true prophets (teachers of God’s word) and the false ones. It is likely that the ‘false prophets’ in 1 John 4:1 are the same people whom he referred to as ‘antichrists’ in 1 John 2:18. The possibility of distinguishing true and false believers and teachers may be compared to the fact that, just as a domestic cat (a mere cat) standing straight up vertically on its hind-legs in a group of meerkats that are of its size and skin colour (as depicted in a popular imaginative funny post on Facebook, Tweeter, and other social forums) does not make it a real meerkat, non-believers can be among Christians, sometimes for long periods without really becoming genuine believers in Christ. If they fall out of the group, it cannot be said that they fell out of the Christian faith.

Commenting on 1 John 2:19, Augustine of Hippo said, “It seems to us that all who appear to be good and faithful ought to receive the gift of final perseverance. God, however, has judged it better to some who will persevere with the certain number of his saints, so that for whom security in the temptations of this life is not helpful cannot be secure.”³⁰ In Augustine’s view, the genuinely born-again believers will never fall away. Therefore, John’s implicit warning statement in this verse should not alarm the genuine believers that they will fall away.

Still on the same verse, Bede said:

³⁰ Augustine said this in section 8.19 of his writing titled, *On the Gift of Perseverance (De dono perseverantiae)*, as cited in Gerald Bray and Thomas C. Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 187.

John says that the antichrists have gone out from us but then adds the comforting words that they were never really with us beforehand. In fact, he is saying that no one except an antichrist would even leave us, for those who are not against Christ will cling to his body. In the body of Christ there are those who are still being healed and who will not be fully well again until the resurrection of the dead. But there are also others who are malignant tumors, and when they are removed the body is spared. Thus it is that the departure of such people is of great benefit to the church.³¹

This supports the view that, there are genuinely born-again believers in the body of Christ who are weak (not fully well), who may at some point become apostate and even physically (not spiritually) leave the church. These cannot be said they have gone away from the faith. Conversely, there are those who are never a genuine part of the body of believers. These are the antichrists. If and when they leave the church, it cannot be said that they have lost their Christian faith.

It is not easy to know whether those who fall away are non-believers or not. Therefore, it is better to follow the advice of Jesus Christ in the parable of weeds among wheat, in Matthew 13:24–30, especially in his response in verse 29–30 on whether to uproot the weeds in the early stages of growth. He answered, “No, ... because while you are pulling the weeds, you may root up the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: ‘First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn.’” The best precaution is for each believer to be sure of his/her salvation and leave the judging and weeding out to God on Last Day.

5. Jude 1:24–25

Jude 1:24–25 is in direct support for security of salvation. It says, “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy— ²⁵ to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.” This assurance does not at all negate the

³¹ Bede said this in his commentary *On 1 John (In epistulas septem catholicas)*, as cited in Bray and Oden, eds., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 188.

warning of Paul in Philippians 2:12–13 that says, “Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling,¹³ for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

In *Robertson’s Word Pictures*, the interpretation of the imperative clause “work out your salvation” (Phil 2:12) is that, this is an exhortation for “human free agency in the carrying on the of one’s salvation.”³² This is based on the Arminian theological perspective that the free will of each person plays an integral role in the salvation of the person. Therefore, the same free will is fully involved in the spiritual growth of the believer. Concerning the meaning of the phrase, “with fear and trembling” *Robertson’s Word Pictures* also says, “Paul has no sympathy with a cold and dead orthodoxy or formalism that knows nothing of struggle and growth.”³³ This is in no way saying that the person can do anything by mere human effort to accomplish spiritual growth. God’s sovereign will and involvement is what stimulates and spurs true believer’s will to confirm the reality of his or her salvation by working it out with hearty commitment. This also does not mean that the person who does not work out his salvation with fear and trembling will lose it. It means that the genuinely born-again believer has no other option than to seriously work at his spiritual growth. Otherwise, he or she stagnates and remains a spiritual baby, as was the Corinthian church, as per the words of Paul in 1 Corinthians 3:1–3. That is the same caution that Peter gives to the believers in 1 Peter 2:2 and 2 Peter 3:8.

Conclusion

From the discussion above, we can deduce that, interpretation of the warning passages in the Catholic Epistles, though challenging and easy to misunderstand, is a possible and

³² This and the following comments from the same source are taken from a soft copy of *Robertson’s Word Pictures* as an interpretation of Philippians 2:12, in “Resources” in BibleWorks 6. You may find it also at <http://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/robertsons-word-pictures/philippians/philippians-2-12.html>.

³³ See *Robertson’s Word Pictures* details in the footnote immediately preceding this one.

even enjoyable exercise. It is evident that those passages were mainly addressed to believers not to scare them that they were in danger of losing their salvation. Instead, they were exclusively aimed at spurring them to stand firm and continue growing in their faith and practice in Christ. The warning passages can be compared to Paul's stern warning and admonition in his first epistle to the Corinthian Christians. Although seemingly negative, the whose stern caution produced godly fear, genuine repentance, and even salvation to the recipients, as stated in 2 Corinthians 7:8–10. The passage says, "Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—⁹ yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰ Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death."

The salvation of genuine believers is sure and irrevocable. That is a fact that is explicitly and undeniable affirmed in the words of Jesus Christ, as recorded in the gospel records. The irrevocable nature of salvation is also affirmed by the writers of the NT epistles, including the Catholic Epistles. Even the stern warning in Revelation 22:18–19 (especially verse 19) is not really targeting born-again believers as such. In Revelation 22:18–19, John quotes Jesus as saying, "I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: If anyone adds anything to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book. And if anyone takes words away from this book of prophecy, God will take away from him his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book." Although more on a devotional note than interpretive argumentation, commenting on the passage, Henry says, "He that adds to the word of God draws down upon himself *all the plagues written in this book*; and he who takes any thing away from it cuts himself off from all the promises and privileges of

it.”³⁴ It is obvious that this warning is mainly aimed at false teachers who are mainly non-believers. False teachers who tamper with God’s words will have no access to eternal life. Those who already have or who will get eternal life through salvation will never lose it.

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