

IS BELIEF IN ETERNAL SECURITY NECESSARY FOR JUSTIFICATION?

by
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INTRODUCTION

“Has anyone ever taken a Bible and shown you how you can know for sure that if you died today you would go to heaven?” This is one of the opening questions utilized by Evangel Ministries to present the gospel. I believe it is an excellent question. In fact, at the outset of this discussion let me clearly state that I believe the best way to present the gospel is with a statement concerning one’s assurance of salvation. I have been training people that way for decades, and my church has been the poster church for utilizing Evangel materials in our evangelistic training. So I believe opening a gospel presentation with the issue of assurance and ending the presentation with the same is the very best way to evangelize. For me, that is not the question. The question is whether that is the only way. Must the issue of assurance be addressed in order to lead someone to Christ? And a corollary question might be, must one believe in eternal security to be justified?

Someone will say, “Wait a minute, you just changed the discussion midstream. Assurance of salvation and eternal security are not necessarily the same.” And I would agree. But in recent months the discussions on justification I have overheard have morphed from “assurance is of the essence of faith” to “belief in eternal security is a *sine qua non* of justification.”¹ At a recent conference I attended a question was asked after a statement. The statement was, “I trusted Christ as my Savior and asked forgiveness for all my sins four years before I came to believe in eternal security.” The follow-up question was, “When was I justified?” The answer? “When you believed in eternal security.”

So in this paper I wish to address the issue of eternal security in its relationship to justification head on; then, I think a distinction needs to be made between giving someone assurance of his salvation and leading him to believe in eternal security. First of all, the teaching that one must believe in eternal security to be justified will be addressed. I am suggesting that this teaching is based on Insufficient Historical Theology, Insufficient Biblical Theology, and, therefore, Insufficient Systematic Theology (since Biblical Theology + Historical Theology = Systematic Theology).

¹ Now, March 22, 2007, the terms have changed twice again: 1) Jesus is the guarantor of eternal life = eternal security; and 2) Justification is irrevocable = eternal security. It’s hard to hit a moving target. The first nuance just stated shifts the discussion to what one understands about the word “guarantor” or “guarantees.” The second statement is merely a substitution of terms. Anyone who believes in eternal security believes that justification is irrevocable. But now the question is whether one must believe that justification is irrevocable to be justified. This study will stick with that which is in print, ie, an unregenerate person must believe in eternal security to be justified.

Insufficient Historical Theology

The real issue in eternal security is what happens to our sins after we have trusted in Christ as Savior. It seems the post-apostolic church saw water baptism as the laver of regeneration which covered all sins leading up to water baptism. Post-baptismal sins were another question. They were to be handled by confession, contrition, and penance. Improper dealing with post-baptismal sins led to loss of salvation.

Thomas F. Torrance did a dissertation for Basel entitled “The Doctrine of Grace in the Apostolic Fathers.” It was his claim that the doctrine of grace was lost after the apostles, not to be reclaimed until the Reformation. Although he tends to lump all the apostolic fathers together and makes too many generalizations, a case could be made that none of the fathers addressed the issue of eternal security or assurance of salvation. Au contraire, most of them taught against these doctrines.

2 *Clement*, for example, tells us that if we don’t keep our baptism pure and undefiled, we will not enter the kingdom of God (6.9), and salvation “in the end” comes only to those who practice righteousness (19.3). *The Epistle to Barnabas* certainly did not teach any kind of assurance. This writer tells us that we are “hoping to be saved” (1.3). No one can take the attitude that he was “already justified” (4.10). If faith makes one a new creature, works keep him in the kingdom:

Each person will receive according to what he has done: if he is good, his righteousness will precede him; if he is evil, the wages of doing evil will go before him. Let us never fall asleep in our sins, as if being “called” was an excuse to rest, lest the evil ruler gain power over us and thrust us out of the kingdom of the Lord (4.12, 13).

As we work our way through the church fathers to Augustine nothing changes with regard to their view of post-baptismal sins, and Augustine did nothing to clear the murky waters. Of course, he never taught assurance of one’s salvation in this life or eternal security, and his justification was not viewed as a change of one’s standing before God (forensic), but a progressive change of one’s condition on earth. The elect would not be identified until physical death. Augustine became the *summa pater* of Western Christianity. His teachings, after some initial resistance, won the day in the West and were not contradicted until the Reformation. It was the Reformers who introduced the concept of all sins (past, present, and future) being dealt with at the cross, meaning at the time of initial faith in Christ. And even this forensic understanding of justification did not come all at once in a news flash. Luther first understood the righteousness of Christ as something external to the believer which God puts around the new believer like a cloak in 1516. It was not until ten or more years later that Melancthon developed the forensic view of a declaration of righteousness pronounced in the courtroom of heaven. As Alister McGrath points out:

In his earlier phase, around the years 1515–19, Luther tended to understand justification as a process of becoming, in which the sinner was gradually conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ through a process of internal renewal. In his later writings, however, dating from the mid-1530s and beyond, perhaps under the influence of Melancthon’s more forensic approach to justification, Luther tended to treat justification as a matter of being declared to be righteous, rather than a process of becoming righteous. Increasingly, he came to see justification as an event, which was complemented by the distinct process of regeneration and interior renewal through the

action of the Holy Spirit. Justification alters the outer status of the sinner in the sight of God (*coram Deo*), while regeneration alters the sinner's inner nature.²

These men, the Reformers, were the pioneers (post Paul) in this concept of forgiveness of future sins, an absolute necessity if one is to believe in eternal security. And it dawned on them rather slowly. But here is the point. If God is building His church and the gates of hell cannot prevail against it, then there had to be a witness from AD 100 to AD 1500. In other words, there had to be genuine, born-again people living through-out this era. But we have no written record (help me if I am wrong) of anyone teaching forgiveness of post-baptismal sins once and for all at a point of faith in Christ. Hence, none of them taught eternal security or assurance of salvation.

If either of these doctrines or even both of them was/were required for justification, then we could say that none of the writers during these centuries between the Apostles and the Reformation was justified. One might claim that born-again people existed during these centuries, but they came in under the written radar. This is an argument from silence. Yet God continued to build His church, and that organism is comprised of only people baptized by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:13), that is, born-again people. But did any of them believe in eternal security or assurance of salvation? Perhaps so, but there is no written record of which I am aware. To say that the people born-again during era had assurance at the moment of regenerating faith but lost it later due to bad teaching is another argument from silence. So, unless Christ built His church on an organization of unbelievers, I would conclude that the teaching that belief in eternal security as a requirement for justification is based on insufficient historical theology. The Church flourished. Yet there is no record of anyone who believed in eternal security or had assurance of their salvation. Are we really ready to say that all the people of whom we have a written record between the Apostles and the Reformers went to hell? The Historical Theology which would claim such is both inconsistent and insufficient. But more than just the Historical Theology behind this position is insufficient; so is the Biblical Theology.

Insufficient Biblical Theology

The argument from biblical theology that one must believe in eternal security or some guarantee of eternal life that can never be lost is based on a number of assumptions:

- 1) John is the only NT book written to unbelievers. Hence, it is the last word in matters of evangelism.
- 2) The authorial intent of John is evangelism.
- 3) Eternal life = Eternal Security.
- 4) Other NT books are written to believers for the purpose of edification. Hence, anything they say related to the gospel assumes a preunderstanding of gospel truth that does not need to be spelled out in complete form.

We would like to challenge these assumptions one by one.

² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994), 444.

John—the only NT Book Written to Unbelievers

This may or may not be true. It cannot be proved. For example, one third of the NT was written to Theophilus. The consensus of scholarship is that Theophilus was a Gentile God-fearer who was drawn to Judaism, but felt out of place in the all-Jewish community. This new brand of Judaism was his answer—Christianity. It is not at all a proven fact that Luke-Acts was written to believers. As Donald Nolan suggests:

Indeed, I thought then, and think now, that the ideal first-century reader for much of the Gospel of Luke (and of Acts) is a God-fearer; one whose birth is not Jewish and whose background culture is Hellenistic, but who had been attracted to Judaism, drawn to the God of Israel Such a God-fearer would have experienced the ambiguity of his situation in Judaism: welcomed, but at the crucial divide still considered to be an outsider to the promises of God. . . . now he stands at the crossroads. On the one hand Christianity is being offered to him as the completion and fulfillment of the Judaism to which he has been drawn, . . . On the other had there are his Jewish friends . . . who urge our God-fearer to make the break and to abandon his Gentile identity once and for all and to come all the way into Judaism, to become a Jew.³

And Darrell Bock in his commentary on Luke makes a similar statement when he says:

It is debated whether Theophilus is already a Christian or is thinking of becoming one. Theophilus appears to be a man of rank (Luke 1:3) who has associated himself with the church, but doubts whether in fact he really belongs in this racially mixed and heavily persecuted community.⁴

Thus it is tenuous at best to categorically declare that the Gospel of John is the only NT book written for unbelievers and, therefore, the final word in the NT on evangelism.

The Authorial Intent of John is Evangelism

And what about John? How do we even know it was written to unbelievers? Who were they? Did they reside at Rome or somewhere in Turkey? Was this a long gospel tract (which would require the death of many valuable goats to produce a copy) passed out to unbelievers as they entered the Coliseum? If they didn't have a printing press to produce thousands of individual tracts, how did they get the unbelievers together to hear the Gospel of John read?

Again, we have unproven assumptions. The usual evidence marshaled to try to prove that John was written to unbelievers comes from Jn 20:31—"But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name." It is explained that we have gotten to the end of the Gospel of John, and the purpose statement is given. But if that is true for John, it should be true of 1 Jn 5:13—"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." Both verses come at the end of their respective books; both use *tauta* for "these" or "these things"; both use the verb *graphō*. If Jn 20:31 is the purpose statement of John, then 1 Jn 5:13 should be the purpose statement of 1 John, especially when reading the same author. But

³ John Nollan, *Luke 1–9:20*, in *Word Biblical Commentary*, 35A (Dallas: Word Books, 1989), "Introduction."

⁴ Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1–9:50*, in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, 3A (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1994), 14-15.

no, people in the free grace movement do not want to claim 1 Jn 5:13 as the purpose statement of 1 John since that would make the book one about the tests of life, exactly what is claimed by those who hold to perseverance theology.

In order to get out of reading 1 Jn 5:13 as the purpose statement of 1 John, the argument is made that the *tauta* (these things) is a reference to what immediately precedes, and the purpose statement of the book is exactly where you would expect to find it, that is, at the beginning (1 Jn 1:3-4). It's a book about fellowship, not assurance. But, if that is sound argumentation for 1 John, it should be sound for the Gospel as well. The *tauta* (these) of Jn 20:31 refers back to the eight signs John has chosen to write about in his Gospel and referenced in Jn 20:30. And these eight signs were written about in order to persuade unbelievers to believe. But the material containing the eight signs hardly comprises the entire book. There is an entire section written about Jesus' interaction and revelation of intimate truth for believers (the Upper Room Discourse, John 13-17). In that section of John the unbeliever (Judas) is sent out because that which was to be shared was not for him. Why include this section in a book written to unbelievers?

Now the Upper Room Discourse could be explained as a *leit motif* in John, or a parenthesis not germane to the argument of the book as so many do with Romans 9–11. But in sound exegetical hermeneutics, if one part of the proposed whole (the heuristic genre, *a la* E. D. Hirsch) does not “fit,” then one does not understand the correct whole (the intrinsic genre). Back to the drawing board. We need to find something which incorporates truth to unbelievers and truth to believers. Might that not be found exactly where it would be expected, that is, in the introduction to the Gospel (Jn 1:1-18). Jn 1:4 says, “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” Perhaps this reference to “life” incorporates both the concept of quantity (eternity) and quality (a richer, “abundant” life). If so, then “life” in John is broader than just post-resurrection life. It would include truth for unbelievers and truth for believers.

Even Jn 20:31 doesn't have to be understood as only evangelistic. The promise is “life,” just as it was in Jn 1:4. When unbelievers initially believe, they receive life. But after initial faith, there are more opportunities to believe and our quality of life gets better and better as our faith grows. For example, in Jn 1:50 Jesus recognized and stated that Nathaniel “believed” in Him. But in Jn 2:11 Nathaniel believes again. In Jn 2:22 we have another record of the disciples believing in Him subsequent to their initial belief. Even at the end of the Upper Room Discourse we find the disciples believing again: “Now . . . we believe that you came forth from God. Jesus answered them, ‘Do you now believe?’” This isn't to say that on going faith is a requirement for justification. But it is a statement that on going faith is a requirement for “life,” an existence in which the emphasis is not so much on quantity as quality. After all, everyone exists forever, assuming linear time continues.

Eternal Life = Eternal Security

Part of the confusion over plugging eternal security into the justification equation is that the biblical use of “eternal” and ours are not necessarily the same in every instance. When we say “eternal” security, “eternal” has reference in our minds to linear time. But there are many biblical uses of “eternal” even when descriptive of “life” that have nothing to do with linear time. Eternal life can be laid hold of by fighting the good fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12) and by giving money (1 Tim 6:17-19 as well as Gal 6:6–9). In Titus 1:2 eternal life is connected with the full knowledge of truth and presented as a hope instead of a guarantee. In Titus 3:7 people who have

been justified are looking forward to an inheritance (often understood as a reward in Paul) and the hope of eternal life that goes along with such inheritance. A similar use is in Matt 19:29 where inheriting eternal life is presented by Jesus as a reward to those who have forsaken things in this life for His kingdom cause. And in Rom 6:23 eternal life is presented (note the syntactic parallelism with the word for a daily ration from a commanding general to his mercenary soldiers—*opsōnia*) as the daily experience of being free from the tyranny of our sinful natures, not some sort of existence that lasts forever in linear time. As S. Lewis Johnson used to say when he taught Romans, Rom 6:23 is the gospel to saints, not sinners.

The point is that “eternal security,” as we understand it in modern theological circles (once saved always saved) is not an apt and equivalent substitution for “eternal life” in many, many biblical examples. Even in John’s Gospel “eternal life” does not always refer to the gift of life forever in linear time. Sometimes it does (Jn 3:15, 16, 18; 4:14, 36), and sometimes it does not (see Jn 12:25, where the reference is to self-sacrifice and following him as in Matt 16:24–27, and eternal life refers to rewards). We need to be careful in our biblical theology to use words biblically. Even when we say “guarantees eternal life” instead of eternal security, most people are thinking of linear time. When John wants to make linear time perfectly clear, he uses *eis tous aiōnas tōn aiōnōn*, “with a view to the ages of the ages,” usually translated “forever and ever” (Rev 4:9, 10; 5:14; 10:6; 15:7).

Another problem with equating eternal life with eternal security is that the latter conjures up all sorts of questions and doubts not raised by the promise of eternal life:

- 1) “Yes, I believe eternal life is a gift from God, but that doesn’t mean He can’t take the gift back again.” How many times have we heard this one?
- 2) “Yes, I believe eternal life is a gift from God, but that doesn’t mean I can’t give the gift back.” Chuck Smith and his followers teach this.
- 3) “Of course, when I believe, God gives me eternal life through Christ, but what if I stop believing?”

The questions go on and on, none of which was probably in the mind of the new believer when he first believed God’s promise(s).

That eternal security is a doctrine to be nailed down post-justification is evidenced by the Book of Romans. While many treat Romans 9–11 as some sort of parenthesis on the sovereignty of God that does not really advance the argument of Romans, I would suggest that these chapters form the climax to the first thrust of the book. According to Larry Crabb, and even Abraham Maslow, man’s two greatest needs are for security and significance. We usually grab on to all sorts of things in this world to meet these two needs. But ultimately they can only be met by God. In Romans 1–11 God shows us how He will meet our need for security; in Romans 12–16 He shows us how He can meet our need for significance.

At the end of Romans 8 the imaginary Jewish objector, who has been dogging Paul throughout the epistle and serves as a foil to raise significant questions which may seem problematic for Paul’s theology, challenges Paul’s last point. Paul has just claimed that nothing can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus. But the objector raises his hand and says, “Wait a minute. God has rejected the elect before, and He can do it again. Just look at Israel. They were His chosen people, but He has cast them away because of their unfaithfulness.” Ah, a challenge to eternal security. The next three chapters answer that objection. Paul seals the doctrine of eternal security when he punctuates his argument with, “The gifts and calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29).

But here is the point. This granddaddy of the epistles takes us from the unbeliever to the fully devoted and serving follower of Jesus Christ. The point on security comes long after the teaching on justification and even progressive sanctification. Yet its positioning before Romans 12–16 is paramount. Before one can serve with the proper motive, he must know that he is secure. But one does not need to know he is secure to be saved (justified). If he did, Paul would have inserted the teaching on security immediately after the teaching on justification, or, better yet, simultaneously. Someone will say, but security is implicit in the teaching on justification. If so, why include it at all? Just leave it out of the book entirely. To say it is implicit in their understanding of the faith required for justification flies in the face of the carefully constructed order of the book, and, again, it is an argument from silence.

NT books other than John presume a fuller understanding of the gospel than presented.

Speaking of arguments from silence, one of the more egregious is the claim that because a book or epistle is written to believers, they had a preunderstanding of gospel truths to the extent that expressions of the gospel contained in these writings are insufficient to justify the hearers. Of course, this is an argument from silence, but, as already pointed out, it assumes that a book like Acts was written to an unbeliever, an improvable assumption. Take the preaching to Cornelius as a case in point. Here we have a God-fearer (a Gentile attracted to Yahweh—10:22). Peter, who ought to know, says Jesus and the disciples went around Israel preaching *peace* (a “what,” not a “how” or a “why”). He goes on to preach the resurrection (10:40), forgiveness of sins (10:43), and faith alone (10:43). Never does he mention “eternal life” or even the word “life.” And he certainly doesn’t reference anything that might be construed to be tantamount to eternal security. To suppose that eternal security comes out of the concept of resurrection is a major leap. Resurrection doesn’t prove eternal security. Spiritual life with God doesn’t prove eternal security. The fallen angels had spiritual life with God, but not eternal security. They were cast away—out of His presence forever.

Nevertheless, the Holy Spirit fell upon these Gentiles at the house of Cornelius while Peter was preaching the message of forgiveness of sins. To argue that we do not have the complete message given by Peter, which might have contained a fuller expression of the gospel and specifically words pertaining to “life,” is another argument from silence. Peter makes it clear that the Holy Spirit fell upon and baptized these hearers who believed (11:15–17) when he “began to speak.”

Paul preached a similar message at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13). When he gets to the good news about Jesus, Paul camps on resurrection truth (13:30–37). He then preached “the forgiveness of sins” and that anyone who **believed** in Jesus was **justified** (13:38–39). Then Luke tells us that these believers received “eternal life” (13:48). To say that Luke did not give a complete rendering of what was said to the Jews and Gentiles listening to this message just because the readers of Acts were believers with a preunderstanding of what the complete message was stretches credulity like a bungee cord. We either have an accurate record of what was said or we do not. All those who believe in the inspiration and inerrancy of the Word will concede that we have an accurate record. But to say that preaching “the forgiveness of sins” is an insufficient gospel presumes that we have an incomplete record of what was preached. Another argument from silence.

Do we really want to build our understanding of a sufficient gospel on improvable assumptions (Acts was written to a believer who had an understanding of the sufficient gospel)

and arguments from silence? This is Insufficient Biblical Theology if not outright erroneous and faulty. But Insufficient Historical Theology and Insufficient Biblical Theology lead to Insufficient Systematic Theology as well.

Insufficient Systematic Theology

As we have claimed in prior writing, a system of theology is only as good as its Historical and Biblical Theology, the two roots that lead to the tree of Systematic Theology. But a good system has other characteristics as well: consistency, comprehensiveness, congruency, and coherence. The better these four characteristics, the better the system. The teaching that belief in eternal security is a requirement for justification fails in the area of comprehensiveness.

When Paul tells us that justification is by faith and James tells us that justification is by works, we first try to establish what each author was saying to his audience (Biblical Theology), respectively, and then we try to harmonize the two, if there is an apparent contradiction, in order to understand the doctrine of justification. But even James and Paul are not the sum total about what the NT says about justification. We have to include Luke as well, for he tells us that the publican was justified who smote his breast and cried out for God's mercy for himself, a sinner. And, as already mentioned, Luke also tells us that justification came to those who believed in Paul's preaching on the forgiveness of sins. It's not adequate to dismiss these writers by saying they wrote to believers, an improvable assumption.

We need to do the same with the gospel. We need to include all the evidence. For example, John writes about the "everlasting gospel" in Rev 14:6-7. This is the same author of the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John. And it is his only use of the word "gospel" in all of his writings. But this gospel preached by the angel to reach those on the earth before the "hour of judgment is come" says nothing about eternal life at all. To say that the angel told them more if they responded may be true, but it is another argument from silence. Whatever we do with this passage, it must be incorporated into our understanding of Johannine theology (Biblical Theology).

Then, if we are going to speak about the simple gospel, it is incumbent upon us to look at the writings of the man who used the word far more times than any other author. This, of course, would be Paul. And in an epistle (perhaps Paul's earliest) written precisely to defend his gospel of grace, eternal life is never mentioned until he says you can buy it (Gal 6:8), a promise to believers. Then there is Peter and the writer to the Hebrews. Good Systematic Theology examines all the evidence; it is comprehensive. To derive our gospel from one book (John) and to camp on one statement in one chapter of John (11:25), based on the assumption that no other NT writings can adequately express the gospel because they are all written to believers, is incomprehensive, to say the least.

When all is said and done, might we not be guilty of trying to put God in a box when we become extremely narrow in our wording concerning how our great God is able to convict men of sin, righteousness, and judgment? Some things are very clear: 1) Sin separates us from God; 2) There needs to be a solution to the sin problem; 3) Without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin; 4) The shed blood of Christ is the solution to the sin problem of man; 5) Each person must believe in God's provision for man's sin in order to be justified.

But other things are not quite so clear. What does it mean “to believe,” for example? Is assurance *intra nos* (within ourselves—see Bell’s dissertation) or *extra nos* (outside ourselves)?⁵

The major thesis of this study is that, whereas Calvin taught that faith is fundamentally passive in nature, is centered in the mind or understanding, is primarily to be viewed in terms of certain knowledge, such that assurance of salvation is of the essence of faith, and is grounded *extra nos*, that is, outside ourselves in the person and work of Jesus Christ, Scottish theology, on the other hand, gradually came to teach that faith is primarily active, centered in the will or heart, and that assurance is *not* of the essence of faith, but is a fruit of faith, and is to be gathered through self-examination and syllogistic deductions, thereby placing the grounds of assurance *intra nos*, within ourselves.⁶

Though Bell tries to make the case that Calvin’s followers went from *extra nos* (Calvin) to *intra nos*, the evidence contradicts this conclusion from the get-go. Calvin argues that we must look to Christ for our assurance in one breath, and then says we must examine ourselves in another.⁷ He says more about heart faith than head faith.⁸ He claims one is a true believer only if he anticipates his salvation with undoubting confidence, on the one hand, and then turns around and says that eternal security is the fruit of faith, not part of faith.⁹ He says more about “feeling” in connection with assurance than understanding. He even says if we don’t “feel” the witness of the Holy Spirit testifying that we are the sons of God, then we simply are not elect.¹⁰ His source of assurance is *intra nos* and *extra nos*, just like his followers (with the exception of John McLeod Campbell¹¹). On 1 Jn 2:3–4 he says that the professing Christian who does not “strive” to keep God’s commandments does not “know” God in the sense of being elect. Lest he be misunderstood, he says that “godliness and holiness of life distinguish true faith from a fictitious and dead knowledge of God” (emphasis mine).¹² Does this sound like *extra nos*?

In fact, are we not guilty of supporting an *intra nos* approach to assurance when we tell people they are not justified until they have believed in eternal security? That drives people back to when they thought they trusted Christ as their Savior to see if their faith was sufficient faith, that is, did it include belief in eternal security. It would seem that we are telling people to put faith in their faith instead of faith in Christ. That’s as *intra nos* as it gets.

And why do we feel so compelled to align with Calvin anyway? Here is a man whose theology is thoroughly Augustinian, teaches the double decree, supralapsarianism,¹³ God caused the fall of Adam for His own pleasure,¹⁴ temporary faith, perseverance theology, amillennialism, and so on. Do we really want to rest on his shoulders for soteriology in one area (assurance) and not others (perseverance)? More pertinent is, what does the Bible say? Is assurance of the essence of faith? Perhaps. That’s what Hebrews 11:1 would seem to tell us. “Faith is the

⁵ M. Charles Bell, *Calvin and Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: The Handsel Press, 1985), 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ John Calvin, *Calvin’s Institutes*, III, 2.11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, III, 2.8, 34, 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*, III, 2.16.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, III, 2.39.

¹¹ Bell, 183.

¹² John Calvin, *Calvin’s Commentaries*, 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), 245–46..

¹³ Calvin, *Institutes*, III, 21.5.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, III, 23, 7. Notice his appeal to Augustine for support. Compare Opusculs, Sp. 2054: “Cependant je recognoy ceste doctrine pour mienne, qu’Adam est tombé non seulement par la permission de Dieu, mais aussi *par le secret conseil d’iceluy . . .*” [emphasis mine].

substance of things hoped for, the assurance/confidence of things not seen.” But the “assurance” understanding of the word *ὑπόστασις* was a completely new meaning given to the word by Luther at the insistence of Melancthon. As Helmut Köster of Harvard notes:

Whereas all patristic and medieval exegesis presupposed that *ὑπόστασις* was to be translated *substantia* and understood in the sense of *ουσία*, Luther’s translation introduced a wholly new element into the understanding of Heb 11:1. Faith is now viewed as personal, subjective, conviction. This interpretation has governed Protestant exposition of the passage almost completely. . . . Yet there can be no question but that this classical Protestant understanding is untenable.¹⁵

He goes on to argue that *ὑπόστασις* should be understood in light of its other uses in Hebrews and concludes that “*ἐλεος* and *ὑπόστασις* do not describe faith but define the character of the transcendent future things.”¹⁶

Nevertheless, if Melancthon and Luther are right, then assurance, by definition, is of the essence of faith. But even so, it is always attached to the promise given. In Hebrews 11, there is no discussion of eternal life. Yet it is the Hall of Faith. Each example is someone who had assurance that one or more promises from God were true. Of course, we are not claiming that the promises from God referenced in Hebrews 11 were promises that could justify if believed. We are just establishing that assurance is of the essence of faith, and that this assurance principle applies to any and every promise of God listed in the Bible. If the faith is in a promise dealing with forgiveness of sins, we are assured that our sins are forgiven, if we believe the promise. Thoughts of eternal life or eternal security may not even be on the radar screen when one trusts in Christ for forgiveness of sins. But if the promise is one dealing with life with God forever (Jn 11:25) and assurance is of the essence of faith, then faith in that promise includes the assurance that one will live with God forever.

But saying assurance is of the essence of faith is not the same as saying saving faith includes belief in eternal security. If the promise is forgiveness of sins, then to believe this is to have the assurance that one’s sins are forgiven. It says nothing about future sins, the key issue when speaking of eternal security. To be sure, when Mary believed Jesus’ words to her concerning His being the resurrection and the life, she had assurance that she would be raised and live with Him forever. The assurance is linked to the promise given. To say one must believe in eternal security to be justified brings us back to the question as to whether the only clear statement on what is required for justification comes in the Gospel of John and whether the life John references is always an indication of linear time. The issue is not whether assurance is of the essence of faith. Heb 11:1 says it is, maybe. The issue is whether or not there are other promises outside of John which are adequate to transfer us from death to life. The suggestion here is that to limit these promises to the Gospel of John seems a bit narrow, that is, incomprehensive or insufficient.

And, by the way, since this is Chafer Seminary, I would like to point out that Lewis Sperry Chafer did not equate assurance of salvation with eternal security:

In the general signification of the doctrine, assurance is confidence that right relations exist between one’s self and God. In this respect it is not to be confused with the doctrine of eternal security. The latter is a fact due to God’s faithfulness whether realized by the believer or not,

¹⁵ Although see Helmut Köster, *TDNT*, 8 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 585–86.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 587.

while the former is that which one *believes* to be true respecting himself at a given time. (Sys Th, vol 7, p 21).

Need I add that in the DTS doctrinal statement Article X regards eternal security and Article XI deals with assurance. The two are not equated. The assurance section presents assurance as the “privilege” of all who are born again, not a requirement to be born again.

The conclusion is made, therefore, that the Systematic Theology which says one must believe in eternal security in order to be justified is insufficient. The Historical Theology upon which claim is based is insufficient in that it completely ignores fourteen centuries of church history and does a questionable job of representing Calvin’s views. The Biblical Theology behind this view is insufficient because it limits the discussion to Johannine theology and limits even that to the Gospel of John. With roots (Historical and Biblical Theology) so shallow, it should not surprise us to find that the tree (Systematic Theology) is somewhat withered.

CONCLUSION

Interestingly enough, one of the most famous Arminians, John Wesley, describes his own coming to faith in this way:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther’s preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt that I did trust in Christ alone for salvation, and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.¹⁷

This instance would seem to argue powerfully for the claim that assurance is of the essence of saving faith, although one could not prove from this testimony that John Wesley ever believed in eternal security. This study argues that assurance is one thing, while eternal security is quite another. The case for assurance being of the essence of saving faith is not exactly air tight, and the equation between assurance of salvation and eternal security suffers from failure to launch. It seems to me that when we define the limits of the gospel so narrowly, we are in danger of limiting God Himself. What are we going to do with the gospel of Rev 14:6, which mentions neither eternal life nor Christ, yet it is called the “everlasting gospel”? What are we going to do with the sinner who was “justified” (perfect tense) in Luke 18 when he merely cried out for God to be merciful to him?

For those who believe that aborted babies and miscarriages are real people who are covered by the blood of Christ and will be with God for eternity, is the Author of their salvation so restricted that He cannot penetrate the heart of an “accountable” hearer with the message of grace outside the parameter of believing in eternal security? To be sure, the message of eternal security brings the point of Christ’s finished work home, and there are many who have come to initial saving faith through that wonderful message. And, coming back to where we began, I truly believe that the best way to present the gospel is with the issue of assurance. But is it the only way? There are too many improvable assumptions and

¹⁷ As quoted in Charles W. Carter, ed., *A Contemporary Wesleyan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 344.

arguments from silence to persuade me that a belief in eternal security is a *sine qua non* of justification.