"THEY SHALL NEVER PERISH": POSSIBLE WORLDS AND

THE PROBLEM OF ETERNAL SECURITY (Revised and Updated)

by

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Christians within the faith have widely disputed the classical doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. Generally, we have recognized this doctrine to be closely (if not exclusively) associated with John Calvin's categorization of interrelated actions of God and of men. No doubt the most popular codification of such beliefs that has been encapsulated in the term TULIP (Total Depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the Saints) represents a wide target audience within the Reformed tradition.[1] The Perseverance of the Saints doctrine itself has undergone a considerable amount of terminological refining (since Calvin) throughout the years from Molina to Bañez in the context of God's sustaining grace. When assessing the question of whether or not the Perseverance of the Saints is true, as classically understood to be the intrinsically sustaining grace of God such that one cannot lose her salvation under any circumstances, we generally surmise that eternal security just is an uncompromising feature of the believer. The Westminster Confession of Faith states:

> They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.[2]

There are those who maintain that salvation is sustained through the medium of apostolic warnings given in the New Testament.[3] Such supporters see God's operative network of causal relations causing the perseverance of each believer who would not choose to defy their soteriological gift.[4] But this implies that such supporters see God's operative network of causal relations as *extrinsically* causing the perseverance of each believer who would not choose to defy their soteriological gift. But this implies the possibility that (at least for some believers):

    1. If the apostolic warnings had not been given, the believer would have fallen away.

Some Calvinistic theologians will typically denounce this as a counterfactual of creaturely freedom since whatever *would have been* just is what God would have determined it to be. But there are Calvinist theologians who do take the New Testament warnings very seriously and are not dismissive of their inclusion as the traditional rank-and-file Calvinist might be. For example, the Calvinist systematic theologian Louis Berkhov writes:

> There are warnings against apostasy which would seem to be quite uncalled for, if the believer could not fall away . . . . But these warnings regard the whole matter from the side of man and are seriously meant. They prompt self-examination, and are

instrumental in keeping believers in the way of perseverance. They do not prove that any of the addressed will apostasize, but simply that the use of means is necessary to prevent them from committing this sin.[5]

In a similar vein, the Calvinist theologian and darling of the modern neo-Calvinist movement among the youth, John Piper, explains in a sermon:

> It is written that *the saints will persevere* to the end and be saved. Those who have become sharers in Christ by the new birth *will* hold their first confidence to the end and be saved. But one of the evidences that you are among that number is that when God reveals in his holy Word the *means* by which you will persevere, you take him very seriously, you thank him, and you pursue those means. This text makes it very clear that the means by which God intends to guard us for salvation … is Christian community. Eternal security is a community project. Not just prayer, not just worship, not just the sacraments, not just Bible reading, but daily exhortation from other believers is God's appointed means to enable you to hold your first confidence firm to the end.[6]

In summarizing the austereness of the warning passages, to the chagrin of the unsophisticated holders of the doctrine of Perseverance, the Covenant Reformer theologian Michael Horton bluntly states:

> Calls to perseverance are replete in Scripture and must be taken seriously. In our estimation, many of those who defend 'eternal security' do not take these passages seriously enough. … [T]he warnings that are cited by Arminians are real.[7]

Non-Calvinistic theologians and philosophers believe that a positive answer to this claim entails that one is freely capable of losing his salvation while a negative answer to it must regard human freedom as either illusory or compatibilistic. The affirmation of one's inability to choose losing salvation over maintaining it is said to entail theological determinism or fatalism.[8] But this assumes a property of "falling away" that some have objected is not inherent in the phrase itself:

> 2. Falling away is such that one no longer retains salvation.

Many will find this to be an unwarranted conjecture where "falling away" might not imply a final state of salvation loss. It seems that one can deviate from his original faith as to disable certain desserts initially due him, but the idea that salvation loss is the envisaged feature of falling away is not necessarily the right interpretation. In the original version of this paper, I took this traditional Calvinistic stance. As an exercise in modal logic, I argued (given this assumption along with the assumption that there is a *best possible world*) that such a world would not have any believers who were able to lose their salvation. But since I find those assumptions untenable[9] and that the endgame of believers not losing their salvation is the same in both the intrinsic and extrinsic models, I no longer think that the Calvinistic approach is to be the preferred view.

But given that the Perseverance advocate can suppose that his perseverance is *extrinsically* sustained, then God simply actualizes those external and internal causes such that one simply *would* not lost his salvation (all of this via His middle knowledge, viz., the doctrine of *Molinism*).[10] Given that many Calvinists understand those warning passages to be the means of that security, it seems to me that those Calvinists actually mean to affirm Molinism! Of course this implies that in some possible world a believer *can* lose his salvation. Even though a seeming contradiction appears between the Molinist (who can prefer this model and yet adhere to eternal security) and the Calvinist, it remains possible that *in the possible world that God actualizes* there is no believer who chooses to forego his salvation. So the difference appears to simply be in the *capability* of losing salvation where believers will simply lack the *willingness* to lose that salvation given God's extrinsically sufficient activity. In either the intrinsic or extrinsic Perseverance model, one can establish continuity with eternal security:

Either

> 3. This world is such that one *would* never will to lose his salvation.

or

> 4. This world is such that one *could* never will to lose his salvation.

So 3 and 4 both entail:

$$\text{C: } (\forall x) \ [Hx \ \& \ (Sx \ \& \ {\sim}Lx)]$$

In this case all human beings (Hx) who are properly saved (S) do not lose their salvation (L). Notice that this conclusion is *not necessarily* saying

$$\neg\Diamond[(\exists x) \ (Hx \ \& \ Lx)]$$

since this would only be consistent with 4. But, both 3 and 4 are consistent with C's quantified sentence *simpliciter* of which either disjunct is consistent with the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. So the question that naturally arises now is: *Can* one forego eternal security?

It appears that the Bible supports the view that once an individual is saved, his salvation is insured forever. The curious phrase uttered by Jesus that once saved "they shall never perish" (John 10:28) invokes either the willful impossibility of someone losing his salvation (4) or the intrinsic inability to lose his salvation (3). However, it could be noted that John 10:28 merely reflect the fidelity of Christ and His promise of eternal life against the backdrop of various pseudo-messiahs who were there one day and gone the next. But, for the sake of argument, we'll suppose that eternal security of some type is intended. In addition to such declarations, it seems to be true that God would not actualize any world where gratuitous events exist, viz., that God is sovereign. This seems to be the case given that "we know that all

things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Ultimately, God operates as to promote an optimal balance between the numbers of believers to unbelievers. Thus, the Calvinist might argue that it is subsequently true that it is better for God to create a believer in the knowledge that an unbeliever would result than to withhold from creating a believer whose nonexistence would prevent an unbeliever from being created. God would not prefer, so the argument might go, that believers remain uncreated so that contingent unbelievers would not suffer God's wrath. The believer's eternal bliss in the afterlife far outweighs the transworld damnation[11] the added unbeliever (~Bx) would experience should he be created. Thus

$$\Diamond(\forall x) \, [Hx \, \& \, (Bx \lor {\sim}Bx)] \rightarrow {\sim}Bx$$

In assessing whether or not one can forego salvation within one's own Christian life, the Calvinist could argue that since God does not create gratuitous incidences and seeks to optimize the world then the outcome would probably entail that both a final believer and a final unbeliever would be preferable to cause or allow some good result (y) over and above the same result that would otherwise be the consequence of one believer who believes and then loses his salvation. Both situations, one where two individuals are created in that one accepts Christ and the other never does and where one person accepts Christ and then rejects Him resulting in the expiration of his salvation, contain the same necessary cause for y. With this in mind, both situations can be seen in

$$(\forall x) \, [Hx \, \& \, (Sx \lor {\sim}Sx)] \rightarrow y$$

Since both situations account for y and (Bx ∨ ~Bx) → ~Bx, then we could see where both causes of y promote an optimal number of believers. In the case where someone accepts Christ and then rejects Him causing the loss of his salvation, there is no final believer in such a causal matrix. In the situation where one believer and one unbeliever are created to furnish the necessary conditions for y there is one final believer in the causal matrix. Since the creation of a believer for some effect (y) is presumably better than creating an unbeliever for the same effect then it seems preferable that God would actualize a possible world where believers cannot depart from their own salvation.

I perceive some difficulties to this attempt at justifying eternal security with regard to those conditions necessary for y. Someone could suggest:

5. (Hx & Sx) may not refer to just *any* believer but only those whose existenceis necessary to yield y and, therefore, there may be another believer who does not cause y who loses his salvation.

But this objection perhaps misses the point for it is true that only those x that cause y are necessary, but out of all x there is a causal relation to y that is better served should x entail one who is a final believer and another distinct person who is a final unbeliever. So 5 is true but

only serves to narrow x to those whose properties of S and ~S that are necessary for y. Another may add:

6. It may be true that y differs from every x and so the causal properties of S and ~S are irrelevant.

This seems to revert back to an understanding about S and ~S that entails their gratuitous existence. But as we have noted God creates and permits every event for some good reason. The particular good reason produced by (Sx v ~Sx) is the result of the causal matrix under consideration here. Still:

7. There is another causal matrix satisfying y so long as backsliding entails the equivalent features of ~S so that $(\forall x)$ (Bx v ~Bx) $\rightarrow$ y leaving the existence of a person being a final unbeliever under other circumstances intact.

This objection fairs no better since a final believer still results in the cause such as the one promoted in the original argument. In the case where (Sx v ~Sx) represents one individual who loses his salvation, no final believer is produced. Secondly, ~S must have unique factors that differ from Bx such that Bx causes some other good result apart from y.

Now the Calvinist could rest-assured in saying that if there is an optimal world for God to create, then He just will create a world where believers never fall away. But the fatal errors here are too serious to ignore for we have already acknowledged that $(Sx \& \neg Sx)$ is consistent of both 3 and 4. So, the only derivation of this antecedent one can infer is that *being saved* and *being unsaved* bring about some intended consequent y. Why should we assume that those properties must belong to separate persons, or

$$(\forall x)(Hx \& (Sx_1 \& \neg Sx_2))$$

since the argument only presumes the antecedent necessity of S and ¬S without any regard to *how many people* those properties belong to? Secondly, the other fatal error is that the Calvinist would be equivocating on what it means to be an "optimal world." As previously noted, an optimal world is one where there is *on balance* more good (whether quantitative or qualitative) in it than evil. But *optimal* does not entail being the *best possible*. The Molinist only means to assert the truth of the superlative in comparison that

$$\text{God prefers that } (\exists x)[Wx \& (B_1, B_2, B_3, \ldots > \neg B_1, \neg B_2, \neg B_3, \ldots)]$$

but from this we *cannot* derive

$$\text{God prefers that } (\exists x)[Wx \& (B_1, B_2, B_3, \ldots \infty > \neg B_1, \neg B_2, \neg B_3, \ldots \infty)]$$

where ∞ refers to the termination point of all possible worlds.

In conclusion, it appears that one can hold to the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints on logical grounds if and only if we do not overdetermine the conclusion, viz., that one *cannot* lose his or her salvation as opposed to the equally consistent view suggested in Molinism that one simply *will not* lose his or her salvation. Once a person has been gifted with salvation then he or she shall retain it just in case the Bible affirms some form of eternal security – whether the means of retention be extrinsic or intrinsic. In evaluating the causal matrix necessary for the good reason produced by the existence of properties S and ~S, it might seem more plausible that in the best possible world no one expires their salvation. But, since we lack the reality of there being a best possible world and that we cannot overdetermine our conclusion, the rug from underneath the Calvinist – who chooses to argue modally for eternal security – has been yanked. The temptation in saying that God is omnibenevolent and, consequently, we should believe and expect that God has actualized the best possible world for us here seems ungrounded. Therefore, contrary to my original conclusion a decade and a half ago, the classical doctrine of eternal security is not a better justified belief on purely modal grounds.

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[1] For a good treatment of the Calvinist position on the representative TULIP acrostic, see Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1972).

[2] The Westminster Confession of Faith (1648) 17.1.

[3] Rom. 11.17-24; I Cor. 9.27; Gal. 5.4; Col. 1.23; I Thess. 3.5; I Tim. 1.19-20; II Tim. 2.17-18; Jas. 5.19-20; Heb. 6:1-8; 10:26-31; II Pet. 2.20-22; I Jn. 5.16, just to name a few.

[4] Another traditional objection to those opposing a Calvinistic approach to the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is to deny that the intended recipients of those warnings are genuine believers. But in my own investigation on these passages (specifically Hebrews 6 and 10, Galatians 5, and James 5), that interpretation ranks in the minority of scholarly opinion so much so that the Calvinist theologian Robert Peterson admits, "These verses seem to describe believers; the burden of proof lies with someone claiming they do not" ("Apostasy." *Presbyterion*, 1993, 19, no. 1, p. 21); and again: "[T]he description of the addressees in [Heb.] 6:4-6 and 10:26-29 is very strong, so strong in fact that the burden of proof lies with Calvinist interpreters to show that the author does not teach that believers can fall away from grace" ("Apostasy in the Hebrews warning passages," *Presbyterion* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2008), p. 41). This observation is further bolstered by a host of Calvinist and non-Calvinist scholarly opinion on the subject. Regarding Hebrews 6:

> "If we were to read the four phrases of verses four and five in any other context, we would be comfortable preaching a four point sermon on the content of the Christian experience. . . . Our best interpretation takes the author at face value." (Wayne Kempson, "Hebrews 6:1-8," *RevExp* 91 (1994) p. 570).

> "Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed." (William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991), p. 141).

Martin Emmrich of Reformed Theological Seminary has done some extensive research into the background of Hebrews and provides quite a powerful argument for the proper contextual exegesis of Hebrews 6:

> "[T]he term *photisein* ("to enlighten," 6:4) constitutes an allusion to the pillar of cloud/fire, Israel's luminous guide on the wilderness trek. … Besides the pillar, Israel witnessed another daily reminder of God's presence during the desert trek, namely, the provision of manna. … According to Exod 16:4, God

"rained down" manna "from heaven" for the Israelites. Again, both Neh 9 and Ps 105 rehearse the daily provision of food and are keen on making explicit the bread's quality as a divine *gift* (Neh 9:15 [2 Esdr 19:15]; Ps 105:40 [104:40]; … *Second Baruch*, penned only slightly later than Hebrews, connects the coming of the messianic age with an eschatological gift of heavenly bread corresponding to the ideal past, and other texts confirm that this notion was a popular tradition among religious Jews of the first century CE. and beyond. … one that would have been known to both author and audience of Hebrews. … Participation in the Spirit bespeaks a genuine experience of God's presence that his people have (and in fact need) on their journey of faith. Thus, when read against the background of the pilgrimage motif, the phrase "partakers of the Holy Spirit" corresponds to God's placing of "Moses' Spirit" on the seventy elders to instruct their contemporaries during the wilderness trek (Num 11-.16-30). Like Israel during the exodus journey, the addressees of the Epistle to the Hebrews have experienced the Spirit's guiding agency in their midst. The remaining terms in 6:4-5 are "having tasted of the good word of God and the powers of the age to come." The close relation of these two ideas communicated by the particle *te* and their being conditioned by one and the same verb *geuesthai* ("to taste") is not accidental, and is meant to indicate that word and works of power went hand in hand in the experience of the readers. Together they signal the intrusion of the "age to come." … for Moses' contemporaries to call them "true/false Israelites" would have been as gratuitous as it is to discriminate between true and false believers among the readers of Hebrews. … Redemption in Hebrews is presented as a to-be-maintained dialogue, and there is no such thing here as "eternal security" apart from the believer's cooperation in cultivating the divine means of grace (cf. 10:36, 39)" (Martin Emmrich, "Hebrews 6:4-6 -- again! (a pneumatological inquiry)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 1, 2003, pp. 84-88, 90).

These reflections have been so pervasive and strong that Weslyan-Arminian adherents feel comfortable in stating the obvious that "[i]f this passage [Heb. 6:4-6] were found in Romans 8, we would all hail it as the greatest description of Christian blessings in the entire Bible" (Grant Osborne, "A Classical Arminian View," *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews,* p. 11).

[5] L. Berkhov, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969), p. 548.

[6] J. Piper, "Helping Each Other Endure to the End," sermon dated January 15, 1984.

[7] M. Horton, "A Classical Calvinist View," *4 Views on Eternal Security*, Zondervan, 2002, pp. 29, 35.

[8] William Lane Craig, "'Lest Anyone Should Fall': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings" (*International Journal for Philosophy of Religion*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 1991, pp. 65-74).

[9] Regarding the notion of *best possible world* see Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1974), pp. 33-34; 60-61. In this work, Plantinga identifies the "best of all possible worlds" to be a part of "Leibniz's lapse" since possible worlds could always have more dancing ladies in them or "deliriously happy sentient creatures." Since one could always add one more dancing lady or one more happy creature, the prospect of a *terminus* seems obviously out of reach. Regarding the scholarly reflections on what it means for Christians to "fall away," consider the following:

> "[T]he New Testament directs its admonitions and warnings to believers. … these warnings do not merely threaten believers with losing rewards but that eternal life itself is at stake" (Thomas Schreiner and Ardel Canedy, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance*, IVP, 2001, p. 179).

> "[R]eligious Jews of (roughly speaking) the first century virtually "grew up" with the notion that the Holy Spirit is acquired as a reward by anyone who is determined to excel in holy conduct. But the reverse of this teaching is equally well attested: sin causes the removal of God's presence. This concept is even more fully developed in the writings of the Rabbis." (Martin Emmerich of Reformed Theological Seminary, "Hebrews 6:4-6 -- again! (a pneumatological inquiry)," *Westminster Theological Journal* 65, no. 1, 2003, p. 92).

> "[T]he author of the warning passages [in Hebrews] exhorts his hearers to persevere to the end, that the consequences in the warning passages are salvation and blessing, on the one hand, and the danger of

hellfire, on the other. Attempts to interpret the warnings as speaking of loss of millennial rewards (Z. Hodges, T. K. Oberholtzer) or the destruction of Jerusalem (R. Gleason in *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews)* seem wrongheaded. … [T]he sin in view in the warning passages is the sin of apostasy and that the apostasy can be rightly characterized as intentional, Trinitarian, and ethical" (Calvinist theologian Robert Peterson, "Apostasy in the Hebrews warning passages," *Presbyterion* 34, no. 1 (March 1, 2008), p. 41).

"In [Galatians 5:4] Paul spells out the theological-existential consequences of vv. 2-3: to submit to righteousness by Torah observance means that they (1) have been severed from Christ (since by so doing Christ "profits them nothing" [v. 2]) and (2) have likewise fallen from grace (since by so doing they are now under obligation to live by Torah itself—all of Torah [v. 3]). While this sentence at least refers to the mutually exclusive nature of Christ and Torah, the explanatory "for" of v. 5, with its emphasis on eschatological realization, suggests further that anyone who capitulates really has abandoned Christ and thus does not have eschatological hope" (Gordon Fee, "Freedom and the Life of Obedience (Galatians 5:1-6:18)." *Review & Expositor* 91, no. 2 (March 1, 1994): 203).

Regarding the specific warning passage of Hebrews 6 alone, a majority of New Testament scholars (Calvinist and non-Calvinist alike) simply cannot avert the seemingly obvious understanding of "falling away":

"the Apostle speaks not here of theft, or perjury, or murder, or drunkenness, or adultery; but he refers to a total defection or falling away from the Gospel, when a sinner offends not God in some one thing, but entirely renounces his grace." (John Calvin, *Commentary on Hebrews* 6:3-6).

"['Falling away' is a] decisive, definitive turning away from God in apostasy" (G. L. Cockrell, *Hebrews: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Indianapolis: Wesley, 1999) 139.)

"The final aorist participle *parapesóntas*, 'fall away' . . . indicates a decisive moment of commitment to apostasy. ... a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God" (William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* (WBC; Dallas: Word, 1991), pp. 141-142)

"The context virtually requires a reference to apostasy here." (Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 322)

"The danger of apostasy was real, not imaginary, and the situation called for the gravest possible warning." (Philip Hughes, "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1973), p. 138)

[10] Middle knowledge refers to the "knowledge of a particular kind of propositions, now usually called 'counterfactuals of freedom,' . . . These propositions state, concerning each possible free creature God could create, what that creature would do in each situation of (libertarian) free choice in which it could possibly find itself" (Robert Audi, ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 492).

[11] This term comes from Alvin Plantinga. See his *God, Freedom, and Evil*, p. 49ff.