

Appendix C

Eternal Security: *Another perspective*

Eternal security is a doctrine that is held dear by many, many people and I fully grasp how threatening it is to hear that there may be another, possibly more biblical, view. Please hear me out before you put your hands over your ears. If you've made it this far, you can probably handle this one, too.

By way of introduction, I would first like to describe the doctrine of eternal security as I understand it, so that we are sure we have a clear basis for discussion. "Eternal security" means that once you make a sincere profession of faith in Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, your sins past, present and future are permanently expunged from the record and are no longer at issue. Period. Consequently, you can never, ever be lost, no matter what you do or don't do in the future, including deliberate unrepentant ongoing sin, outright rebellion or any other form of apostasy or backsliding. God has absolved future sins in advance, so to speak,¹ so they cannot affect you.

Another view says that God will not permit you to fall away because this would mean that His sovereignty and power were inadequate to keep what had once been entrusted to Him. So in essence, you lose your volition in matters of faith once you *profess* faith. The door does not swing both ways. Once you're in, you can't get out, even if you want to. This is, basically, one of the tenets of the doctrinal system called Calvinism, in which it is espoused that God chooses before the foundation of the world individuals that He will save, and He does so without regard to any "dignity or indignity in them." That is, it is unconditional.

They have nothing whatever to do with His sovereign choice. Therefore, since they had nothing to do with

¹ Many would argue here that anyone who sincerely commits to faith in Christ *will not* ever fall away or deny Him. If they do, it is an indication that they were never actually saved to begin with. Unfortunately, this undermines the very security this doctrine claims to provide. If a person who lives, talks and walks like a Christian for many years but later renounces their faith, or denies Christ, was never saved to begin with (i.e., was never actually a believer), then how does *anyone* know they are saved? And how does one ever know if one's lifestyle is the fruit of one's faith and the resident Holy Spirit and not just works? How do you know *you* are saved? What's to prevent you from falling away in the future, like they did even though they walked and talked like a Christian, too? 1 John gives us the criteria to look for in our lives to know if we are *in* Christ: 1) We love the brethren in deed and truth; 2) We walk in the light, confessing our sin; 3) We keep His commandments, practicing righteousness; 5) We do not love the world and the things of the world; 6) We confess Jesus the Christ as Lord. "If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father." (1John 2:24b) The Bible speaks of those who used to follow Christ, but who left and returned to the world, with no indication that their faith was false to begin with. It also speaks of false brothers, those whose faith *is* false. And it speaks of those who were once "with us" but whose leaving proved they never were really among us. In God's mind, this is always the case. God knows who will persevere and who will not. But this does not mean that perseverance is automatic or accomplished by God entirely on our behalf.

it in the first place, they do not have the power to undo it. There are many more ways of describing this doctrine, but this is the basic idea.

Let me start by saying that, as a born-and-bred Catholic, I am very familiar with the process of indoctrination. In fact, I have been indoctrinated twice in my life: the first time as a very young child into the Roman Catholic Church. Much later, I was indoctrinated into the faith of John Calvin, or a slightly modified form of it, but which included a strong emphasis on eternal security.

Interestingly enough, these two theological constructs are at opposite ends of the Christian spectrum in at least one important respect. While Catholicism teaches a “works” salvation in which you must keep yourself saved by various rituals and practices, Calvinism teaches that you have nothing whatever to do with your own salvation, or your final destiny, and in fact can do nothing to either contribute to it or to thwart it. Even your very faith itself is a gift from God.²

As a Catholic, I was very insecure and perfectionistic. I was performing day in and day out, trying to secure my salvation. Even later, as a genuine born-again believer,³ I labored under the burden of perfectionism, trying constantly to please God in the flesh and earn my way to heaven.

Consequently, my initial exposure to Calvinism’s eternal security was like a breath of fresh air. What a relief to hear that I was constantly being cleansed automatically by the blood of Christ (without repenting) and that nothing I could *ever* do would ever be able to separate me from God. Since “all things, including my own sin, rebellion, and backsliding,” were working together for my good, then my sanctification was assured regardless of my own participation or attitude. God Himself would see to that. How freeing it was to be released from the relentless pressure to perform and from the constant fear of failure. On an emotional level, I grabbed onto this new perspective as if it were a life preserver in rough seas.

² As in so many other areas, Satan warps the truth, pushing it to both extremes.

³ This is not to say that there are not genuine born-again Catholics. There are. I, however, was not one of them. I did not hear the gospel (salvation by grace through faith in Jesus) until I left the Catholic Church.

But intellectually I had to be convinced. Eternal security seemed inconsistent with the many warnings and admonitions to the brethren to stand firm, not to be arrogant but fear, to wrestle against the flesh and to flee temptation. I spent two years challenging this doctrine from Scripture before I finally acquiesced to it, despite my continuing discomfort with contrary passages and unresolved questions. I accepted it partly out of the desire for an ironclad guarantee against my own frailty, and partly in deference to my teacher whose 50 years in the faith and superior knowledge of scripture made continued resistance seem like arrogance.

I have to say that a profound emotional insecurity was at the root of my acceptance of the doctrine of eternal security. I had not been able to apprehend God's love or receive it into my heart, and frankly, I *needed* this doctrine, or so I thought, to get through the day. Eventually, my marriage to a godly Christian man who was able to demonstrate the love of God to me on a daily basis began to heal my deep insecurity and enabled me to reexamine this doctrine from a position of emotional health.

I have since renewed my examination of God's nature and character, and His plan for salvation. I have attempted to let God speak from His own word, without allowing traditional theological systems to control my perceptions. I also have taken a fresh and objective look at the various arguments of reputed teachers, weighing their words carefully against those of God Himself.

This exercise has led to a deeper, and I believe more accurate, understanding of the entire matter of salvation: what it is, how it was accomplished, how it is maintained and where it is leading us. I have come to the conclusion that eternal security based on a one-time, albeit genuine, profession of faith is not consistent with the comprehensive message of scripture. There are many reasons why I no longer hold this view. I will share two of them with you.

Proponents of eternal security often make these or similar statements (and I made them myself):

“God saved you a sinner. You certainly can’t lose your salvation because you continue to sin. In fact, you will continue to sin. Which sin is it that puts you out of the faith? How many sins can you commit before you lose your salvation?”

Or “God saved you when you were dead in trespasses and sins. Can a corpse save itself? You had nothing to do with it. How can you *undo* what you couldn’t *do*?”

These are very effective questions and on their face, they sound logical and correct. However, they miss one very significant fact:

God doesn’t save sinners.

What?!

No, it’s true. God doesn’t save sinners.

He saves *repentant* sinners and only repentant sinners.

God only saves those who accept both His offer and His *method* of reconciliation. We must come to Him in faith for forgiveness. And we must be willing to turn from our wicked ways. Nothing else will do. We cannot have both God and Satan. Otherwise universalism would be true and all would ultimately be saved.⁴

So if we must come to Him as repentant sinners, then surely repentance and faith are *conditions* of salvation. They are not “works” by which we earn salvation, but they are the channel through which grace is dispensed.⁵ They cannot be forsaken. God does not absolve the unrepentant (even though He did die for their sins).

⁴ Though an appealing doctrine, universalism leaves us with several problems. In effect, it means that unrepentant, heinous law breakers (murderers, thieves, adulterers, child molesters, etc.) will be in heaven, making it something much less than the perfect, safe, sinless environment it is reputed to be. Unless these individuals are somehow changed, by edict or by mind control or by being turned into robots, they will continue to act out of their fallen nature and character, subjecting all those who did repent to their carnal deeds. And it would make this life completely unnecessary. Why put us through this time of testing if our behavior and responses in this life make not one whit of difference in our eternal destiny? Why not just make a bunch of mind-numbed robots and fill heaven with them from the get-go?

⁵ We are saved by grace through faith, or through the channel of faith.

Clearly, from a biblical perspective, the propitiation (complete settlement) for all sin was accomplished at the cross, but the question as to when and how that propitiation is applied to our sin is the crux of this debate. Does God *apply* absolution to all sins, of believers and unbelievers alike, or does He merely make it available?⁶ Does He absolve *future* sins, those we have not yet committed, much less repented of? Indeed *can* He, without violating His own prescription for forgiveness (i.e., repentance)? And if He can and has, why do we need an Advocate (1 John 2:1-3) in a court where there is no longer any evidence against us?⁷

And is it even possible for us to repent for as-yet uncommitted sins? Does not repent mean to “turn from” or to change our mind? How can we turn from something until we know what it is? I do not see this as a valid concept in scripture.

Another reason to discard the doctrine of eternal security is that God is in the process of getting Himself a wife. The Church is His betrothed, but not yet His wife. She is making herself ready, and being made ready, for the wedding. The Holy Spirit has been given to us as a pledge, an engagement ring, if you will, and, as in human courtship, we are free to return it anytime during this life should we find a more appealing suitor. The life we are now living is our opportunity to say “yes” to God’s proposal of marriage. But our “yes” must stand firm in the face of trials, persecutions, *and temptations to choose another love*. (Hebrews 3:14, Colossians 1:23) God must have a wife who will be faithful for all eternity, and this crucible we call “life” is the perfect means to both test and purify our love.

Just as human engagement is an opportunity for both parties to test the relationship, get to know each

⁶ To say that all people are absolved (washed clean) of sin by the death of Christ would mean that all men were made righteous in God’s eyes, even without repentance. The truth is, all sin is paid for. God’s wrath is satisfied. But access to that payment comes through faith and repentance.

⁷ I.e., Why do we need to confess our sins if they are already all forgiven and God has no memory of them? Why do we need an Advocate with the Father if there are no sins on our record, past, present or future? John says “if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin....If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Well, what if we don’t confess our sins? What if we don’t walk in the light? These sound like prerequisites to having our sins forgiven. Otherwise these verses are meaningless. We contend that, after our salvation, we must repent of those sins that the Holy Spirit convicts us of. Refusal to repent leaves us at risk of apostasy. And it leaves the devil with legal rights to his footholds and that much more susceptible to temptation.

other, and find out if they are really willing to surrender all to the union for life, so this betrothal to God is a testing time. We (and God) discover just what our “commitment” is made of. Is it genuine? Is it sturdy? Will it stand the test of time and the trials of life? Can He trust it? Is it selfishly motivated? Are we just looking for what we can get out of it?

And just as true human marriage is a covenant requiring both parties to not only commit at the altar, but to continue in lifelong fidelity and relationship, so is our marriage to God. When our earthly vows are violated or offenses come, there must be genuine repentance and restoration. Otherwise, the marriage either deteriorates and dissolves or becomes a charade, something God will not be party to.

In short, biblical faith is not just mental assent to a few facts about God, although there are facts we must believe. Biblical faith is not an insurance policy. The sinner’s prayer is not magic. Biblical faith is a marriage contract, the beginning of a betrothal in which love and fidelity are pledged to our future Husband. That love and fidelity must be voluntary. God is not creating nor is He interested in marrying a robot. He wants a bride who is like Himself, able to freely give and freely receive genuine love. One who is faithful, righteous and proven. God will not marry those whose hearts are committed elsewhere.

How do we know we are His? Not because we uttered some magic words in time gone by. We are exhorted to examine ourselves, to see whether we are in the faith. 1 John tells us *how* to evaluate ourselves. (See footnote 1.) This is the key to our confidence and security. We came to Christ in faith and repentance. We must remain there.⁸

Trust and obey and you will find yourself joyfully escorted to the wedding chamber.

⁸ God will not be deceived or mocked. He will not accidentally let an imposter into the Bridal Suite.