

THE PROBLEM OF APOSTASY IN NEW TESTAMENT THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

It may seem slightly odd that someone who knows Dale Moody only through the printed word and who has had no particular associations with The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary should take part in this symposium in Dr. Moody's honor, when there are doubtless many others who have a better claim than I. The basis for my invitation to contribute to this volume is that Dr. Moody and I share a common interest in the subject of apostasy and have both written on it. Thus, I have been asked to write on the topic of apostasy and to do so in the light of Dr. Moody's work. I am well aware that the topic can easily raise theological hackles, and I trust that what follows will be taken as an attempt to understand the Word of God in the Scriptures, since they alone can constitute our supreme authority in faith and in practice.

Perhaps an autobiographical word may be helpful as an introduction to the subject. In 1969 I published a book entitled *Kept by the Power of God* with the subtitle *A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*.¹ The book was

¹I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth Press, 1969).

a shortened and somewhat simplified version of a thesis I had completed for the University of Aberdeen six years earlier. I did not find it easy to interest a publisher, a fact which may indicate that, quite apart from the shortcomings of the book in itself, the topic was not one of general concern to the theological public. The publisher for his part may have regretted his rashness in undertaking the assignment; he did not print a lot of copies and not many of them were sold, with the result that the book was withdrawn from circulation after a comparatively short time. Yet it found one "convert." My friend, Professor Clark H. Pinnock, confessed that my book had exercised a decisive influence on his thinking in this area, and as a result of his enthusiasm in exposing the North American evangelical constituency to its arguments the book was republished with some slight revisions in 1975.²

The line of thought I developed was not, of course, original. The distinguished scholar whom we are honoring in this volume had come to similar conclusions at an earlier date. He in turn was dependent on the great Baptist scholar, A. T. Robertson. He has developed his position in one of the chapters of his comprehensive study of Christian doctrine, *The Word of Truth*.³ Another scholar who has also defended the same general position is Robert Shank in his books *Life in the Son*⁴ and *Elect in the Son*.⁵ A similar position was taken earlier by scholars of the Arminian persuasion, including John Wesley.

The reaction of scholars in the strict Calvinist tradition is to reject the position of writers like Moody and myself. They find the position indefensible on three grounds.

First, they regard the texts in the New Testament which appear to teach the final security of the believer as representing the clear and central teaching of Scripture. They say that other passages which may appear to teach differently, for example, by suggesting the possibility of apostasy, must be interpreted in line with the first texts on the grounds that scriptural teaching by definition is consistent.

Second, the systematic formulation of Christian dogmatics by Calvinist theologians leads to a set of basic and mutually related principles which include the final perseverance of the saints. If one grants that God determined from all eternity to save the elect, then the final perseverance of the elect follows logically. Similarly, if it is agreed that Christ offered an efficacious sac-

²Ibid., (Minneapolis MN: Bethany Fellowship, 1975).

³Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth* (Grand Rapids; William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1981) 348-65.

⁴Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Springfield MO: Westcott Publishers, 1961).

⁵Ibid., *Elect in the Son* (Springfield MO: Westcott Publishers, 1970).

rifice and wrought a full salvation for the elect, then it is inconceivable that this salvation does not contain the element of perseverance.

There is a third reason that is also important, although it does not stand on the same level as the other two. This says that the thought is not congenial that I, a believer, may possibly fall away from my faith and my hope of ultimate salvation. Modern sociological study has shown us how much we need a sense of security if we are to cope with life and its problems, and the importance of a secure basis for early life in the caring love of parents has received the stress it deserves. If we need security on the human level, how much more do we need to be able to trust in God to keep us for time and eternity. How important it is that in our Christian life we have the security provided by God, and the knowledge that, whatever we do, nothing can separate us from his love or thwart his purpose for our lives.

Here, then, are three strong reasons for (1) criticizing a position which acknowledges the danger of falling away from the faith, and (2) for arguing that it rests on an unacceptable and false interpretation of Scripture. Some Calvinists will reject the position more or less out of hand. Others, however, recognize a genuine problem of biblical interpretation. Here, special mention must be made of two scholars. The one is Donald A. Carson, whose book, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension*, published in 1981, tackles the problem with particular reference to the Gospel of John and at a profound and scholarly level.⁶ The other is Judy Gundry-Volf, whose dissertation on the problem of perseverance in the writings of Paul, although not yet published, bids fair to be the most detailed and acute study of the topic thus far.⁷

What follows now is an attempt to look again at apostasy from an exegetical point of view using Moody's contribution as a starting point. In the course of the discussion I shall, for sake of convenience, refer to theologians who believe in the final perseverance of the elect as "Calvinists." I shall refer to those who do not accept this doctrine in the way in which it was formulated at Dort⁸ as "non-Calvinists," since many of us who are unhappy with Dort are not happy to be lumped together as "Arminians."

⁶Donald A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives on Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981).

⁷Judy Gundry-Volf, "Perseverance and Falling Away in Paul's Thought," (Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorwürde der Evangelisch-theologischen Fakultät an der Eberhard-Karls-Universität zu Tübingen, 1987).

⁸At the 1618-1619 church synod held at Dort in the Netherlands the doctrines of the Remonstrants (the followers of Jacob Arminius) were condemned in a statement which outlined five key doctrines of Calvinism: the total depravity of mankind; God's unconditional election of those whom he chooses to save; the limitation of the saving efficacy of the atonement to the elect; the irresistibility of God's grace in saving the elect; and the infallible preservation of the

While it is true that an important part of my own upbringing has been in the Methodist Church, I am by no means a "dyed-in-the-wool" Methodist and I owe a great deal to Christians in many other churches. My primary loyalty is to the Word of God written in Scripture and not to any human denomination or theological group. My concern, therefore, is to establish what Scripture actually says, and I am grateful for the impulses from theologians of all camps who open my eyes to see things that otherwise any personal bias might prevent me from seeing. I hope that it is not inappropriate for me to regard it as part of my theological task to help other people to shed their blinders.

SOME MORAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL PROBLEMS

First of all, however, let us mention briefly some of the theological and philosophical problems that the issue raises.

The upholders of the possibility of apostasy are not of course unaware of passages in Scripture which promise that God's people will persevere, but they make the point that these promises are for those who continue to abide in Christ and keep on following the Lord. But the Calvinist will ask whether that is an adequate form of assurance. It is some comfort to know that even if I turn away from the Lord, I can always turn back to him and find him willing to forgive. But knowing how fallible I am, I want the assurance that I can never turn away from the Lord to such an extent that I cannot turn back to him.

And here comes the problem. On the Calvinist view, the possibility of a return means that the Lord himself must so work in my life that I am preserved from the possibility of falling away by his overruling of my sinful will. Thus we find that perseverance depends on a divine determinism that overrules what I myself apparently do in freedom. And so, although the Lord may let me fall into sin, he never lets me sin to such a degree that I become totally deaf to his voice. He overrules my will so that I remain faithful. Indeed, he overruled my will in the first instance, so that I freely turned to him and became a believer.

To be sure, we all believe in the influence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to transform our stubborn, sinful wills, and we insist that "every thought of holiness, and every victory won are his alone," but this way of looking at things does raise some problems.

elect to final salvation. It is the last of these points which is under discussion in this essay, but upholders of Dort would insist that all five points stand or fall together. For a brief account of the Synod see (for example) W. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984) 331f.

(1) The Calvinist position cannot explain why it is that the converted sinner still sins some times and to some extent, and why God does not sanctify him entirely at conversion. In effect, God is left deciding to allow the convert to sin on some occasions (but never to the point of apostasy), and at other times to do good.

(2) This means that in the end it is not the preaching or reading of God's Word or any other external means of warning and persuasion that ultimately causes our salvation and holiness, but rather salvation all depends on the secret influence of the Spirit of God on our wills in accordance with a divine plan.

(3) Consequently, the Calvinist view deprives the individual of real will power. When the person does wrong, it is because evil has control of him, rather than God. He is reduced to a mere automaton, apparently free to choose, but in reality at the mercy of the power of evil or the power of good. However, the believer does not know this, and perhaps it does not matter, because he acts as though he were free. The Calvinist can thus insist that divine determinism and human freedom are compatible. However, this view does seem to deny the reality of the personhood of God's creatures. Above all, it does not do justice to those passages in Scripture which clearly show that God treats people as free agents, able to decide for themselves.

(4) The Calvinist position also has serious consequences for the doctrine of God, for it considers the individual's conversion purely an arbitrary act of God. The convert had been a sinner because sin had taken control of him—he had been dead in trespasses and sins from the time of his conception. But God acted to take control of his life and to deliver him from sin. However, no reason can be assigned as to why God chooses some individuals and rejects others (or, if you prefer, passes them by). Thus the problem is that God appears to be capricious in granting his love. He may be steadfast in his love to the elect, but his choice of the elect is arbitrary. Of course, one may reply that God is free to show or to withhold mercy as he chooses, and so he is. But is it just to show mercy only to some? Shall not the judge of all the earth do right?

(5) Finally, there is a philosophical problem in that this view presents God as the prisoner of his own predestining purpose. Were it merely a case of God's determining what other persons do, the problem would not be so great. In fact, however, predestination affects not only what God's creatures do but also what he himself does in relation to them. God decides whether or not he will act to save them. A solution to this problem may be to say that within God purposing and acting occur simultaneously since God is outside time, and therefore the idea that God first purposes and then acts is a mistaken one.

But the determinist view does seem to me to make God the prisoner of his own will.⁹

The effect of these comments is to suggest that in the concept of predestination (whereby everything we do is predetermined) the basis of final perseverance contains moral and logical difficulties and leads to antinomies.

On the other hand, the non-determinist view also has problems. It does not explain how it is that God undoubtedly moves us at times by the working of his Spirit independently of our own wills. Also, it has to come to terms with those passages in Scripture which suggest that salvation from start to finish is the work of God who acts according to his own will. The non-determinist position also shares with the determinist view the problem of explaining the relation of God to evil.

Thus there are problems for both Calvinists and for non-Calvinists. I believe that these difficulties are inherent in any attempt to explain both the actions of God, who is not bound by time and space, and the way in which his actions impinge upon the world he created. Even though we cannot understand in principle how the eternal God functions to cause events in this world, I have the impression that the Calvinist has the greater set of problems. However, I am not philosopher enough to take the matter any further, and therefore I would not want overly to emphasize the fact that I find the greater difficulties in the Calvinist position.

WARNINGS AND ENCOURAGEMENTS TO PERSEVERE

I therefore turn to the area where I feel more at home, namely asking what the New Testament says. A brief review of the textual material discussed by Moody affords a good starting point for this investigation.

In regard to the Gospels Moody is content to appeal to Luke 8:9-15. He is on strong ground in this passage. The interpretation of the Parable of the Sower indicates that there are people who receive the Word but do not persevere or continue in faith. Commentators have seen two ways to apply the lesson of the parable. On the one hand, it may be seen as a warning to its hearers to beware of the temptations to give up believing and to stand firm against them. On the other hand, it may be seen as an explanation for the disciples of what will happen to different groups of people who respond to their mission. Either way we have a clear warning against the danger and therefore the possibility of accepting the Word and falling away.

There are various ways of avoiding this conclusion.

⁹For a fuller discussion of some of these points, see C. H. Pinnock, ed., *Grace Unlimited* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1975).

(1) It can be argued that the presence of this and similar warnings in Scripture is part of the means by which God effectually keeps believers from falling away. The purpose of a warning such as this is not to describe actual cases of believers falling away but to describe the fate of hypothetical apostates in such terms that all believers who hear will be persuaded to remain in the faith. In other words, one of the means by which God enables his elect to persevere is through warning them in ways like this.

Now, if one holds that these warnings work in this way, one must also hold that God creates in the elect the correct response to these warnings and that his hidden action in the heart is what leads to perseverance in the end of the day.

But where is the evidence that this is the actual intent of Scriptures such as the present one? And is it not unreal to paint a picture of the fate of hypothetical apostates when such people do not and cannot exist?

(2) It can be argued that the descriptions of people who fall away are in every case descriptions of people who had never in fact believed. They may have accepted the message with joy, but they did not believe. However, this explanation comes to grief on the wording in Luke. The presence of the word "believe" in verse 13 and the contrast with verse 12 indicate that these are people who believe for a time. It is necessary, therefore, to claim that a distinction may be drawn between real and temporary or half-hearted belief. Or the distinction is between those who merely believe on a human level and those in whose hearts the Spirit kindles true belief. However it be expressed, this interpretation would be that such passages as the present one do not describe the elect but rather those whose faith was never of the saving variety.

Of these alternatives the second would appear to be the easier to defend. But let us note clearly what is happening. What this exegesis amounts to is that Luke teaches that a person will not be saved unless his faith is marked, positively, by holding fast the Word, bearing fruit and demonstrating endurance, and, negatively, by not ceasing to believe in times of temptation or by not yielding to temptations. In other words, the parable is about the attitudes that believers must show: they are commanded to persevere, and they are told that, if they do not, they will be lost, just like those people who never believed at all. Thus, in the end of the day it will be seen that they did not have saving faith, since their faith did not last and was not strong enough to overcome temptation. It would appear, however, that up to that point they did believe.

The parable says that saving faith is persevering faith. But this surely carries the implication that at any given moment it is impossible to say of a person that he has saving faith; the only proof of saving faith is that the person persevered in the faith and died believing. (We can ignore the problem of people who died at a point when it was not possible for them any longer to

demonstrate conscious faith. No one is going to deny salvation to such people.)

If we put the point in this way, we have stated precisely what the defender of the possibility of apostasy is stating. For the parable does not teach that people will infallibly persevere in faith; it simply describes the fact that there are people who do. Certainly I cannot look at my faith at this moment and say, "Yes, so far my faith has lasted, withstood temptation and brought forth fruit, and therefore I can be confident of my future salvation," for I do not know what tomorrow will bring—at least so far as this parable is concerned.

The Calvinist interpreter, then, is saying: people who do not bring forth fruit and persevere show that they were not of the elect and that they never had saving faith. A typical presentation of the position is: "Men must hold themselves responsible to persevere; but if they do so, it is God's grace upholding them; while if they fall away, *they demonstrate that they were not true disciples in the first place.*"¹⁰ The non-Calvinist says: if people wish to attain to final salvation, they must persevere in faith, and only at the end will it be seen whether they persevered. For the Calvinist there is a quality in the initial faith which guarantees perseverance (or, God who inspired the faith will enable it to persevere), so that we can say that such a person was and is "a true disciple." The non-Calvinist, while not disputing that one can distinguish broadly between nominal and true believers, insists that perseverance is not so much a quality inherent in true faith at the point of conversion, as it is simply the lastingness of faith that is shown from moment to moment throughout the Christian life.

Thus one can read the parable from a Calvinist perspective. But one must insist: (a) that this perspective is not necessary for understanding the parable in itself; (b) that the parable (and similar teaching) does not *prove* the Calvinist interpretation.

Hence such a parable as this does not *teach* final perseverance. To the Calvinist and the non-Calvinist believer alike it says: see that you persevere! Of itself it does not convey to the believer the assurance that he will persevere. We shall find that this is true for the "warning" passages in general.

Moody briefly notes two passages in Acts which favor his position. One is the Ananias and Sapphira story (Acts 5:1-11). However, I do not think that any conclusions regarding the ultimate fate of the two sinners can be drawn from this passage. The Acts 20:30 text is a warning to the church that fierce wolves will draw disciples away after them. Again, the Calvinist may claim that those who are drawn away were not "true" disciples, but in order to do so it is necessary to demonstrate that Luke (or Paul) distinguishes between true and seeming disciples.

¹⁰Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 195; italics are mine.

If the latter are meant, then (on Calvinist premises) the warning would appear to be futile because the seeming disciples do not belong to the elect. If it be argued that the purpose of the warning is to help any of these seeming disciples who are elect but not yet regenerate to come to true faith, then it must be remarked that this is a peculiar form of wording for the purpose. If the former group is meant, then the passage is being interpreted on the hypothesis that those who persevere to the end and do not become the prey of wolves are in fact the elect, and that they persevered because they were predestined to do so.

But does this really help? The fact is that no one can know for certain who are the true disciples and the false disciples. If a person is in the former group, he has still to heed the warning: only by so doing can he show that he is one of the elect. In other words, the Calvinist "believer" cannot fall away from "true" faith, but he can "fall away" from what proves in the end to be only seeming faith. The possibility of falling away remains. But in neither case does the person know for certain whether he is a true or a seeming disciple. All that he knows is that Christ alone can save and that he must trust in Christ, and that he sees signs in his life which may give him some assurance that he is a true disciple. But these signs may be misleading.

It comes down to a question of assurance. Whoever said, "The Calvinist knows that he cannot fall from salvation but does not know whether he has got it," had it summed up nicely. On this view the ground of assurance is the evidence of a changed life. But this can be counterfeit and misleading. The non-Calvinist knows that he has salvation—because he trusts in the promises of God—but is aware that, left to himself, he could lose it. So he holds fast to Christ. It seems to me that the practical effect is the same.

Moody then turns to the epistles of Paul. Here he notes the encouragements and warnings to Christians and the fear that some would fall. The issues here are in principle the same as in the passages already discussed. And in a sense the exegetes are in agreement. For the Calvinist the warnings and the promises are the means by which God urges the elect to faithfulness on the empirical, human level, while he works in their hearts so that they respond positively. For the non-Calvinist the same passages are equally God's means of urging believers to persevere. In both cases it is recognised that the Spirit is the means of renewal without which believers would be unable to respond to God's word. The question is whether the Spirit always operates irresistibly and positively in the lives of some but not of others. Whether I am a Calvinist or not, I must heed the encouragements and warnings, in the former case to show that I am a real and not a seeming believer, and in the latter case for fear that I might fall away from the real faith that I have.

Most important are the passages in Hebrews to which Moody gives special attention. There are five of these: 2:1-4 (we must pay close attention to

what we have heard, lest we drift from it); 3:7-4:13 (the danger of having an evil, unbelieving heart and thus falling away from the living God); 6:1-20 (the impossibility of restoring to repentance those who become partakers of the Holy Spirit and then commit apostasy); 10:19-39 (the punishment in store for those who sin willfully after having been sanctified by the blood of the covenant); and 12:1-29 (the warning not to be like Esau who was given no opportunity to repent after he sold his birthright). The first and second passages can be understood by Calvinists like the cases of seeming believers above, but this is not the most natural interpretation of them. The third passage (Hebrews 6:1-20) causes problems for the Calvinist because it is extremely implausible to interpret the passage as referring to people who were never genuine believers and then claim that the text describes a merely hypothetical danger. The same is true of the fourth passage, and (less clearly) of the fifth. That is to say, the view that the Hebrews passages speak of merely nominal believers is most unlikely. The Calvinist interpretation has to be that the dangers are purely hypothetical, since, it is claimed, God uses the passages effectively to warn all true believers against the danger of apostasy. But the passages in themselves do not require this interpretation, and it is safe to say that it would never have been offered except in the interests of a dogmatic theory that God will infallibly save a fixed group of the elect. However, even though the author of Hebrews emphasizes the faithfulness of God to his people, there is no suggestion in the text that the author shares this particular view of predestination.

ELECTION AND PRESERVATION

We now have on the one hand, a series of statements apparently addressed to believers, urging perseverance, warning against apostasy, and indicating the unpleasant consequences of apostasy. The believer must take these warnings seriously. But he is encouraged to persevere by the promises of the help of the Spirit of God, the fatherly love of God, and by other gracious inducements.

On the other hand, as Moody recognizes, there is another strand of teaching which speaks of God's election of his people and of his will to bring them to final salvation. This is found especially in the Gospel of John where we have the statements of Jesus that his sheep will never perish. Moody discusses John 3:3-8 (those who have been born again cannot be "unborn"); 5:24 (believers pass from death to life and do not come to judgment); 6:37 (all whom the Father gives to the Son will come to him); 6:39 (this is the will of God, that Christ should lose none of those given to him but raise them up at the last day); and especially 10:28 (my sheep shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand).

Our problem is the relation between these statements and the former set. There can be only three solutions. The first is to give the election texts the primacy and to reinterpret the warnings to fit in with them by any of the means already discussed. This gives an unnatural rendering to the warnings. The second possibility is to recognize that there is a tension in the passages and not try to avoid it by twisting either set of statements. There is, of course, a third solution which is to give primacy to the warnings and to twist the election statements to mean less than they apparently say. This is probably the least satisfactory solution.

So the question is what we make of the election and preservation sayings. I begin with a comment on the Johannine material. The John 10:28 text says that there is a group of people who are the sheep of the Good Shepherd. Whoever does not belong to this group does not believe. What leads to belief is not seeing signs that prove that Jesus is the Messiah but hearing (that is, obeying) his voice and following him. Those who believe have eternal life and no one can take them out of the Shepherd's care—not even the Evil One. The reason no one can do this is that the Father who gave the flock to Jesus is greater than any other power.

It is surely one thing for the Devil to snatch the sheep away against the sheep's will—that cannot happen. It is another thing for the sheep to yield to temptation. How, then, is the activity of the Devil seen? Does he merely tempt or does he cause people to fall? Is his appeal irresistible? It would be easy if we could say that he merely tempts and that it depends on us whether we fall.

Now on the level of exhortation and teaching, do we tell people that the Devil is irresistible to Christians? Paradoxically, we do tell non-believers that they cannot avoid yielding to temptation, but since they are responsible they should not do so. The Christian schoolteacher does not tell his pupils that they cannot avoid doing what is wrong and that therefore he will not punish them if they commit wrong. Or do we tell people that the Spirit is irresistible, and that they can sit back and let the Spirit take control? Some may do so, but this attitude of "quietism" would probably be rejected by serious theologians. What we actually do is to tell believers to resist the Devil in the strength of God. They can win, but they will not win if they do not fight! Thus, whatever we believe about John 10:28, in practice we tell believers that they must resist the Devil, or else they will fall.

Next, we can consider the concept of election. The words "election" and "elect," like the concept, are used in a number of theologically relevant ways: (1) to refer to Jesus as the Chosen One of God; (2) in the plural ("elect") to refer to the church and its members collectively. The second is the most characteristic use. (3) "Election" also refers to the calling of individuals to special tasks such as apostleship (Acts 1:24; 9:15). (4) In the singular, the term "elect" refers to an individual Christian. There seems to be only one possible

case of the last usage, namely in reference to Rufus in Romans 16:13. The fact that Rufus is singled out in this way suggests that the word is used here in an unusual manner, perhaps to mean "outstanding" or something similar.

It is important to note that "elect" is always used of those who actually belong to the church, not of prospective believers. The one possible exception is in 2 Timothy 2:10, but there the expression means that Paul labors for the sake of believers so that they will attain to final salvation.

Next, we note that the term is ordinarily used to describe those who belong to the church in terms of outward profession, rather than to distinguish between those who really belong and those who are merely professors. Thus the term is not used of a group within the church secretly known to God. There is a possible exception in Matthew 22:14, but this verse simply refers to those who are invited to the wedding, some of whom are found unworthy; many are called, but only some of them respond and become part of the "elect."

Where then is the source of the idea of a secret group of elect individuals previously chosen by God to be saved and to persevere in salvation? This idea does not come from the use of the term "elect" but from other passages which may suggest that God has chosen some and passed by others. It is of course true that God chooses specific individuals for particular tasks—there is an element of particularity here that cannot be avoided. But are there authentic grounds for extrapolating from the principle of the calling of some individuals to service the conclusion that there is a predestination of those who are called to salvation? And does it in any case follow that those called to service will necessarily obey? Judas fell away from being one of the Twelve, and Paul gives the impression that he responded of his own choice (Acts 26:19). But it must be said that for a Calvinist the fact that somebody is said to respond to grace freely is no argument against effectual calling.

In John 6:64 Jesus states that there are some disciples who do not believe, for (says John) Jesus knew from the beginning who were the unbelievers and the betrayer. But there is nothing particularly problematic here: Jesus knows the hearts of people. Jesus goes on to say that no one can come to him unless it is given to him by the Father. He rejects the idea that people can "control" him. Only if the Father calls can people come. But this does not necessarily mean that if a person is called he will respond with faith.

2 Timothy 2:19 has also been cited in this connection (The Lord knew those who were his people. But this text is only a recognition that the visible church can contain plausible hypocrites who do not really belong to it, and no one denies that this can be the case.

More importance attaches to Romans 8:28-30. These verses say that the people who love God need not be afraid of tribulations (8:18) because the glory in store for them is greater than the tribulation; we can be confident that, no matter what painful experiences we have, all will be for the good of those

whom God has called, because his final purpose for those whom he calls is their glorification. We know that because of two things. First, God's purpose for those whom he "foreknew" was that they might share the image of Jesus, that is, share in his glory. Second, God has already started the process: God has called the people for whom he has this purpose. Calling was followed by justification, obviously of those who believed and thereby responded to the call. And justification is followed by a glorification that has already begun (2 Corinthians 3:18). Thus this passage is meant to reassure God's people that his final purpose for them is glorification, a purpose that will be carried out despite their sufferings. The passage is not a statement about the effectual calling of those whom God foreknew. It is a guarantee that those who have responded to God's call with love (and faith) can be fully assured of his purpose of final glorification for them.

Finally, there is a group of texts in Acts which point to election. In Acts 13:48 we find that when Paul preached in Antioch of Pisidia the Gentiles who heard rejoiced and all who were "ordained" to eternal life believed. In 16:14 the Lord opened Lydia's heart to attend to what Paul said. And in 18:10 the Lord assured Paul that he had many people in Corinth, that is, many people who apparently were to be converted. These verses appear to suggest a divine plan to be carried out by Paul involving the salvation of individuals. With regard to Acts 16:14, however, no one would deny that people can hear and respond to the gospel only if the Lord takes the initiative. Acts 18:10 indicates the Lord's foreknowledge of the progress of the gospel in Corinth. But the text could also mean that, since there were now many Christians in Corinth, God's purpose for Paul was that he should continue there to teach them and ground them in the faith. Acts 13:48 could well mean that those Gentiles who had already begun to search for eternal life (like Cornelius in Acts 10) believed upon hearing the good news that salvation was now at last being offered to them through Jesus. Or it might mean that the Gentiles believed inasmuch as they had (collectively) been included in God's saving plan.

We have no desire to empty these verses of their meaning. It is beyond cavil that the Bible teaches that God takes the initiative in salvation, that he planned the creation of his people from eternity past, that it is he who calls to salvation, and that his Spirit leads people to faith in a way that we cannot understand. Calvinist and non-Calvinist alike believe that it makes sense to pray that the Spirit will lead unconverted people to respond. But whether we can conclude from this that a secret predestining will of God always operates when people are saved is doubtful.

Nor is there any question whatever that the Bible clearly teaches the loving purpose of God who keeps believers by his grace (1 Peter 1:5). As Christians we can and do rely completely on Christ, the Good Shepherd, and we claim his promise that he will keep us and that he will not let us fall (Jude

24). We could not live the Christian life without these promises and their gracious realization in our lives.

It is this element of promise that needs to be emphasized to balance Moody's emphasis on the possibility of apostasy; Moody has deliberately offered a one-sided position in order to counterbalance a bias in the opposite direction that misinterprets important parts of Scripture.

CONCLUSION

It is time to conclude. In this essay I have argued:

(1) The New Testament contains encouragements to believers to persevere and warnings against the dangers of apostasy. These warnings are best understood as calls to believers to persevere in the faith in view of genuine dangers. They are not to be understood as calls which "true" believers will inevitably heed because God has predetermined that they shall do so. Warnings in that case would be empty threats, since no one will ever apostatize if predetermined otherwise. Nor should these be understood as warnings addressed to people who are not true believers. Again these would be unreal warnings, since such people would need to be told to repent and believe, rather than told not to turn away from a faith they do not even have.

(2) The New Testament also teaches that God takes the initiative in salvation and leads people to faith by the work of the Spirit. Those who respond to the Gospel become God's people, his "elect." But it is not clear that the New Testament teaches that God has predestined a limited group of people to salvation, and that he effectually calls them and does not effectually call other people.

(3) The New Testament also teaches that God gives his grace and power to his people to enable them to persevere, and that with divine help there is no reason why they should ever fall away from him. Yet the possibility of falling away cannot be excluded. We do not know whether any will in fact fall away and be lost eternally, although there are some possible cases in the New Testament.

(4) It is better not to think of a group of people who at their conversion become "true" believers because of God's election and call and whose faith will therefore inevitably persevere. In fact, on the Calvinist view, no one can ever know for certain that he is one of the elect, and he must constantly seek to make his calling and election sure. Rather, we must say that the New Testament calls on all who believe in Jesus Christ to persevere in belief, that is, to keep on believing. Those who know that they are God's children and have the assurance that their sins are forgiven must go on believing and committing themselves to the saving and keeping love of Jesus. Their assurance of

final salvation does not rest primarily upon the evidence of election but rather on their Savior, and they know that the grace which has been openly revealed in Christ is not cancelled by a secret plan of God which may have excluded them from salvation, even though they have experienced some taste of it.

(5) It emerges that in practice the Calvinist believer is in no better position than the non-Calvinist. According to L. Berkhof¹¹ there is some difference of opinion among Calvinists as to whether faith includes assurance. Berkhof himself allows that true faith "carries with it a sense of security, which may vary in degree" and that believers can attain to a subjective assurance from contemplating their own experience of the work of the Spirit. But, while many believers in the Calvinist tradition undoubtedly do have assurance of salvation, both present and final (for mercifully God's gifts are not bound by what our theological systems allow him to grant), it is difficult to avoid the impression that a strict Calvinist can never be fully certain that he is one of the elect. As soon as he believes that he is one of the elect, he knows that he cannot fall from grace; but then might he not begin to trifle with sin, and thereby prove he never was elect? The non-Calvinist may believe that there is a danger of his apostasy, but he also believes in the revealed grace of God, and he knows that there is no secret plan of God which may conflict with his revealed will; on the contrary, he knows that he is included in the will of God to "bring many sons to glory," and consequently he knows that he can trust in God with complete confidence.

(6) On both views the possibility of apostasy exists at the experiential level. The Calvinist view allows that people may be seeming believers who in the end will not be saved; they will not persevere in faith because they never had the "real" faith which contains the virtue of perseverance. The non-Calvinist view also allows that people may believe and yet fall away because they did not persevere. But whereas the former view attributed "apostasy" to the fact that God did not elect these people to salvation, the latter view attributes it to the mystery of evil. It can be protested that neither solution is wholly satisfying. The former must allow that God does not show mercy to all, thereby suggesting that he acts immorally. The latter has to allow that, although God acts morally, for some mysterious reason he cannot always conquer the evil in human hearts; but the reason for this lies not in the reprobating will of God but in the mystery of evil. Perhaps, then, in the end it makes little practical difference whether we speak of the mystery of the divine will or of the mystery of evil. But on the theological level there is a serious difference. In both cases we face the problem of evil and admit that we cannot solve it. The former solution is problematic, because it questions the goodness of God and

¹¹*Systematic Theology* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1969) 507-509.

has to read into much of the New Testament a "hidden agenda" in the divine plan for salvation. The latter solution is also problematic because it appears to question the absolute power of God,¹² but it has perhaps fewer exegetical difficulties, since it does not require us to give an artificial interpretation of such passages as those cited from Hebrews above.

Thus we find that both Calvinists and non-Calvinists affirm the reality of God's preserving grace and both allow for the possibility of apostasy in the church. But an exegetical study of the New Testament makes it quite clear that in view of the complexity of the evidence and the impossibility of denying the reality of the danger of apostasy we are best advised to admit that there is a tension in Scripture on this subject. In the last analysis this tension is due to the impossibility of explaining both the mystery of divine causation and the mystery of evil. Therefore, we should recognize that the strict Calvinist approach offers an oversimplification and systematization of the biblical material. It is to the credit of Dr. Moody that he has expressed his unease with over-systematization of biblical theology and is content to live with mystery.

¹²For a helpful discussion of the philosophical problem see J. L. Walls, "Can God save anyone he wills?" *Scottish Journal of Theology* 38 (1985): 155-72.



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