

New Life and Apostasy: Hebrews 6:4-8 as Test Case¹

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Staking Out the Issues

Hebrews 6:4-8 is a highly controversial passage in Calvinistic circles. This essay will not attempt an exhaustive interpretation,² but rather debunk some flawed readings of the passage that have become quite commonplace. After a brief examination of the passage, we will look at broader theological questions raised by our reading of the text and seek to understand how it fits into pastoral practice and systematic theology.

Basically, the problem is in reconciling the notion of ‘falling away’ with the Five Points of Calvinism, sometimes summarized by the acronym TULIP: Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace, and Perseverance of the saints.³ If God is sovereign in salvation, his elect cannot fail to persevere to the end. So what is going on in this troubling passage? What kinds of people are being described and what happens to them? Is apostasy real or illusory? What bearing does this passage have on Christian assurance?

Some Reformed commentators claim the warnings found here and elsewhere are hypothetical. This reading is hardly worthy of refutation. Why would an inspired writer use such terrifying language to scare his readers into avoiding something that could never come to pass anyway? Doug Wilson has humorously compared this approach to placing “Watch out for the cliff” signs in Kansas. Moreover, there are enough recorded cases of

¹ Thanks to Kris Lundgaard, whose thoughtful, probing questions provoked me to dig deeper into this passage and Joel Garver, whose writing on apostasy sets a new benchmark in Reformed theology.

² For example, I will not attempt to explicate the meaning of each of the blessings listed in verses 4-5. I will also ignore the once-and-for-allness of the apostasy in view since I think it very likely pertained to the unique circumstances of the first century audience. Ordinarily, apostates are not barred from repenting and returning to the church. In the situation facing the original readers of Hebrews, apostasy would be irreversible most likely because the apostates would die in the Jewish War of 66-70 A.D., defending their now obsolete temple against the Romans. For all practical purposes, if someone apostatizes and is cut off from the covenant community in excommunication, that person is always free to repent and return to the church and to the Lord. Indeed, we must recognize that one purpose of excommunication is the ultimate reclamation and restoration the wayward brother (1 Cor. 5, 1 Tim. 1:19-20). We see at least one such apostate repenting and returning to the church in Paul’s Corinthian correspondence. Traditionally, texts such as Mt. 12:31ff and 1 Jn. 5:16 have sometimes been used to deny the freedom of apostates to return. But this is a misreading of these passages. The unpardonable sin seems to be related to Jews who first had the ministry of Jesus and rejected him, and then also rejected his Spirit after the resurrection and Pentecost. It was a unique danger for Jews living at that peculiar, transitional time in redemptive history. They rejected God’s double witness to the Messiah. True, there may still be a form of aggravated apostasy from which one may not repent, but we shouldn’t try too hard to gauge if someone has committed this kind of sin. We should always seek the repentance and restoration of apostates.

³ Numerous expositions of Calvinism are available. See, for example, Edwin H. Palmer *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1972). The Five Points derive not from Calvin himself (though he certainly affirmed them) but from the Synod of Dordt, which convened from 1618-1619, and formulated a five part response to the Arminian movement.

actual apostasy in the pages of Scripture that we can put the hypothetical theory to bed (e.g., 1 Tim. 1:19, 20; Judas).

Other Reformed commentators claim the package of blessings in 6:4-5 is less than full regeneration. After all, if these persons were regenerate they would not fall away. The fact that they do (or may) fall away proves whatever grace they experienced was something less than full saving grace. This is true enough, perhaps. But there are still several problems with this way of reading our text.

Let us imagine for the sake of the argument that there is some qualitative difference between what the truly regenerate experience and what future apostates experience, *and* that this distinction is in view in Heb. 6:4-6. The question every believer has to ask himself, then is, ‘How do I know I won’t apostatize? How do I know I won’t fall away?’ Puritan John Owen, to take one example, says we must distinguish between merely ‘tasting’ (6:5) the heavenly gift (which future apostates may do) and really ‘feeding’ upon it (which the genuinely regenerate do). But subtle psychological distinctions of this sort are bound to make one hopelessly introspective, always digging deeper into the inner recesses of one’s heart to find some irrefutably genuine mark of grace. We are always left asking, ‘How do I know I am feeding on the heavenly gift, and not merely tasting of it? How do I know I’ve experienced *real* regeneration, and not its evil apostate twin? How do I know I have the real thing and not merely a counterfeit?’ One’s assurance is swallowed up in the black hole of self-examination.

As Scripture continually testifies, no man can know the depths of his own heart. Introspection has its limits. Frankly, our tools of self-analysis are not nearly as refined as the subtle linguistic analysis Owen and others apply to Heb. 6.⁴ Therefore, on this model, assurance becomes virtually impossible.

But there is a more serious problem with this way of reading Heb. 6. *Nothing in the text calls those warned to engage in a process of self-examination. Rather, Hebrews as a whole functions as an extended exhortation to perseverance.* In fact, the writer never calls into question whether or not he and his readers have experienced the grace of God. That is taken for granted. What is called into question, again and again, is whether or not they will *continue* in that grace. In terms of the theology of the book of Hebrews, the difference between the truly regenerate person and the person who will fail to persevere is not clear on the front end; rather, it only becomes clear as the one continues on in the faith and the other apostatizes.⁵ Hebrews does not call us to construct two differing

⁴ In light of Heb. 2:9, the ‘tasting’ vs. ‘feeding’ distinction looks very artificial.

⁵ Several biblical narratives bear this out. For example, the same terminology that describes the Spirit coming (literally, “rushing”) upon Saul in 1 Sam. 10:6 is used when the Spirit comes upon David (1 Sam. 16:13), Gideon (Jdg. 6:34), Jephthah (Jdg. 11:29), and Samson (Jdg. 14:6, 9; 15:14). But in four of these five cases (David, Gideon, Jephthah, and Samson), the man in question was clearly regenerated and saved by the Spirit’s work (cf. Heb. 11:32). This means that at the outset of Saul’s career, the biblical narrative itself draws no distinction between his initial experience of the Spirit and the experience of those who would enter into final salvation. Saul’s apostasy was not due to any lack in God’s grace given to him, but was his own fault. While God no doubt predestined Saul’s apostasy (since he foreordains all that comes to pass), God was not the Author of Saul’s apostasy (cf. WCF 3.1). From one perspective, at least, Saul

psychologies of conversion (or regeneration), one for those who will persevere and one for those who will not. Instead it calls us to look away from ourselves, to Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. We are assured, not by figuring out if we've received 'real' regeneration, but by keeping our eyes fixed on Christ, the One who persevered to the end (cf. Heb. 12:1ff).⁶

Heb. 6:7-8 are often ignored in the interpretation of 6:4-6, but in reality they are critical for getting at the meaning of the passage. The writer turns to a familiar Scriptural metaphor: His readers are like the earth (cf. Gen 2:7) that has been watered (an obvious allusion to baptism or perhaps the means of grace more generally). New life has sprung up from the ground. We might call this new life 'regeneration' in a generic, unspecified sense. There is no question the person has been made *alive*.⁷ The question is, What will this new life produce? Will it bring forth a useful crop, and receive God's blessing? Or will it produce thorns and thistles, that are only fit to be burned in the fires of God's wrath? The writer clearly does not know which category each of his readers will fall into. He expects them to produce 'better things . . . things that accompany salvation' (6:9). But the conclusion of the story has yet to be seen.

One further argument for this reading is discovered if we turn the warning of apostasy inside out. Remember, the threat of Heb. 6:4-6 does not ensure that those who have received these blessings will fall short of salvation. It only says such falling away is a *possibility*. But if the author intended the blessings in verses 4-5 to be understood as less than full regeneration, then shouldn't he have said '*when they fall away*' rather than '*if they fall away*'? How could a partially regenerate person *avoid* falling away? We simply *must* assume the writer did not intend for us to distinguish the blessings described in these verses from 'real' regeneration. It is an open question for the writer, and we must beware of making finer theological distinctions than he has intended to give us. What is at stake is not what these potential apostates have experienced in the past, but whether or not they'll persevere into the future in the grace that is already theirs (cf. 2 Cor. 6:1).

This also refutes those who would take the blessings attributed to apostates in an ironic or sarcastic sense.⁸ We certainly must acknowledge the presence of irony in the Scriptures.⁹ But here it is simply impossible to suggest the text has an ironic counter-meaning. Again, the blessings are undifferentiated. Presumably, some of those persons described

received the same initial covenantal grace that David, Gideon, and other saved men received, though God withheld from him continuance in that grace. At the same time, his failure to persevere was due to his own rebellion. In retrospect, looking at the story of Saul's life as a whole, we can say something was wrong from the beginning. For those who fail to persevere, that lack of perseverance qualifies their entire experience of God's grace. Herein lies the great mystery of God's sovereignty and human responsibility (cf. WCF 3.1, 8).

⁶ Note further that Heb. 10:32 uses the same word ("enlightened") to describe true conversion as found in Heb. 6:4 of those who might apostatize in the future. Again, the difference is not between two kinds of enlightenment, but those who *abide* in the light they've received and those who do not.

⁷ Cf. Mt. 13:20ff.

⁸ For example, this is Fowler White's approach in his unpublished essay, "When Words of Praise Implied Reproach: A New Strategy for Interpreting Hebrews 6 and 10" (a paper presented at the 1984 national meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society).

⁹ See, e.g., my unpublished paper, "The Ironic Gospel."

in Heb. 6:4-6 will apostatize while others will not. But the passage cannot speak ironically to some and genuinely to others at the same time! There is a “rhetoric of reproach” in the Bible, to be sure, and there is a great deal of mocking laughter at the expense of the wicked. But irony simply does not explain the way this text actually works. Invoking irony to save a theological system (e.g., the TULIP) simply isn’t sound exegesis. Apostates are ridiculed in Scripture, but not in this manner (e.g., Ezek. 16:15ff).

A Real Apostasy

Clearly, then, Heb. 6:4-8 teach the possibility of a real apostasy. Some people do indeed fall away, and it is a *real* fall *from* grace. Apostates actually lose blessings they once possessed. Apostasy is so terribly heinous precisely because it is sin against grace.

So how can this be reconciled with the TULIP? All that is needed to satisfy the doctrinal requirements of Calvinism is that we insist that all those God elected to eternal salvation will receive the gift of perseverance and will not fall away. Meanwhile, non-elect covenant members sooner or later will turn away from Christ and will perish because God withholds from them the gift of perseverance. The TULIP remains important because it reminds us that *all* of our salvation, including our perseverance, is a gift of God’s grace. Those who fall away have no one to blame but themselves; those who persevere have no one to thank but God. He is the Sovereign Lord of salvation as well as apostasy.

Five significant lessons follow from this reading of Heb. 6:4-8 (and similar passages):

First, the biblical warnings never call into question whether or not the church members they address have received God’s grace. Nor do they typically call church members to examine themselves to determine if they’ve received real saving grace, or just partial, non-saving grace. They simply do not make the fine distinctions that Owen and others attempt to read into them. The take for granted the covenant community’s objective standing in grace.

It is critical for our spiritual health that we recognize this because it reminds us that the antidote to the danger of apostasy is *not* ever-deepening self-examination, but looking away from ourselves to Christ. Even the very troubled Corinthians are addressed as the recipients of God’s grace. But they are called to make sure they do not receive this grace *in vain* (2 Cor. 6:1). They are called to examine their works, not their hearts; in other words, the self-examination called for is ethical, not ontological (2 Cor. 13:5-7). The objectivity of the covenant of grace provides sure footing for faith’s grasp of the divine promises. The question is not, “Am I elect? Am I truly regenerate?” The question is “Am I believing the promises and embracing the benefits God has given me as a covenant member?”

Second, this is not to say that there is no actual difference between the grace that the truly regenerate receive and the grace that future apostates receive. No doubt, there *is* a

difference, since God has decreed and made provision for the perseverance of the one and not for the other (Eph. 1:11).¹⁰ Systematic theologians certainly have a stake in making such distinctions a part of their theology, so the TULIP must stand unchallenged. Whatever grace reprobated covenant members receive is qualified by their lack of perseverance. Augustine rightly distinguished ‘predestination unto grace,’ which was only temporary, and did not lead to final salvation, from ‘predestination unto perseverance,’ which did issue forth in eternal life. Perseverance is not merely the caboose on the end of the salvation train (to quote Doug Wilson once again); rather, its presence or absence qualifies one’s whole participation in the *ordo salutis*.

The point here, however, is that this qualitative difference is not in view in warning passages such as Hebrews 6, and it is an illegitimate move to make it a part of one’s exegesis. These passages simply speak of the *undifferentiated* grace of God.¹¹ Moreover, such a distinction is of no pastoral significance since it is one of the Lord’s secrets (cf. Dt. 29:29). It is simply impossible to determine who has persevering grace apart from the unfolding of time.¹²

Third, none of this exegesis undermines a properly grounded assurance. In fact, the writer of Hebrews makes assurance internal to the act of faith itself (Heb. 11:1, 6). The necessity of perseverance is a promise, not a threat, so long as we keep our eyes focused on Christ. It is only when we mix in some degree of self-reliance that we begin to doubt if we’ll persevere. Those who look to Christ have every reason to believe that the promises of Jn. 10:28-29 and Rom. 8:31ff are for them. As Calvin said, Christ is the “mirror of our election,” and as we look to him through the means of grace, we have utter confidence in our standing before God. Just as we trust Christ to save us from past sins, so we trust him for the future grace of perseverance.

Assurance is thus a function of faith in Christ, not our own ability to gut it out to the end. But this full assurance does not make us immune to the warnings of Scripture. The paradox of assurance is that we can only be assured of our salvation against the backdrop of our possible damnation. It is the ever-present danger of apostasy that drives us to continually cling to Christ as the one in whom saving grace and full assurance are found. When God warns his people against apostasy, he’s not playing games with them.¹³

¹⁰ In this sense, I can affirm WCF 10.1 and 10.4, that only those actually predestinated unto life are effectually called and that the reprobate never “truly” come to Christ. There are numerous passages which differentiate the grace of the elect and the reprobate within the covenant (e.g., Jn. 8:35, Rom. 8:29-30, etc.)

¹¹ In some warnings, this is inescapably obvious. There is no way the writer of Hebrews intends for his readers to distinguish between the kind of objective sanctification received by the genuinely regenerate and those who will apostatize (10:29). See also Gal 5:4, 2 Pt. 2:1, 20-21, Rev. 22:19, etc. The WCF speaks of blessings that are “common operations of the Spirit,” shared by both the elect-unto-salvation and the reprobate covenant member (10.4).

¹² The systematic perspective is fine so long as we are dealing with a timeless, abstract system. But when we start to deal with actual persons and lived history, it becomes inadequate.

¹³ Note that WCF 14.2 teaches that one function of saving faith is to ‘[tremble] at the threatenings’ of Scripture. Many modern Calvinists assume glibly the warnings do not apply to them, but this is an unconfessional attitude.

Fourth, the warnings force us to come to grips with the strong covenantal language of the Scriptures. Calvinists are used to speaking in terms of God's decree. When we speak of the elect, the regenerate, the sanctified, and so forth, we always have reference only to those who enter into final salvation. This decretal perspective is biblical and is important to maintain. But it is not the Bible's primary way of speaking. More often than not, the Bible speaks covenantally and does not draw immediate distinctions between those in the covenant who are eternally saved and those who will someday apostatize. The Bible is a pastoral book and uses direct, personalized language to remind covenant members of their privileges and responsibilities.

A simple glance at Romans will show this. Paul can assuringly call his readers elect (8:31ff) and then warn them about being cut off a few chapters later (11:20ff). This explodes ordinary Calvinistic logic. In modern Calvinistic parlance, if someone is elect, they cannot fall away. But Paul is viewing election through the lens of the covenant, so he can give, in very direct language, both promises and threats. Biblically, there is no problem addressing the entire covenant community as elect, regenerate, sanctified, etc., even though (sadly) some of these covenant members will apostatize.¹⁴

Fifth, the Bible consistently presents apostates as moving through three phases, with their final end worse than their beginning. In the first phase, they are spiritually dead, without hope and without God in the world. Then they are "made alive" after a fashion (e.g., Mt. 13:20), and experience blessings within the context of the community (e.g., Heb. 6:4-5). Finally, they forsake the Lord of the covenant and lose those blessings. This three chapter story of spiritual death, temporary spiritual life, and final spiritual death is confirmed by Jude's description of apostates as "twice dead" (12).

Apostates are judged more severely than other unbelievers precisely because they entered into God's gracious covenant and then broke that covenant. In the same way that Israel's civil law punished adultery with harsher penalties than fornication, so those who were once members of the bride of Christ and have deserted him can expect to end up in the

¹⁴ This point is obviously of immense significance for pastoral ministry. We should not hesitate to speak to our fellow covenant members the way Paul addressed his churches. We can say to our fellow churchmen, 'You're elect! God loves you and Christ died for you! You're forgiven and regenerated!' Covenantally, these things are true of them. Until and unless they apostatize, their covenant membership must be taken as a sign of their eternal election. This point is also critical for liturgics, for in the liturgy we speak the direct, personal language of the covenant, not the abstract language of the decree. The Bible is a liturgical book and we should imitate its language. When we say in the liturgy, 'We are gathered in the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit' we are speaking covenantally. Without this covenantal perspective, a consistent Calvinist would have to say 'Those of us here who are elect are gathered . . .' Not exactly the stuff of beautiful worship! Another example is the pastor's declaration of absolution. A pronouncement to the congregation, 'Your sins are forgiven!' is very powerful, much more so than, 'Whoever here is elect and regenerated and penitent is forgiven!' The conditions and qualifications are true enough, but they all too easily point us in the wrong direction. Given the Puritan obsession with predestinarian theology, at the expense of the covenant, it is not surprising most Puritans rejected liturgical worship forms. A decretal theology, abstracted from the covenant, cannot support liturgical language. The liturgy speaks the language of the covenant, not the language of the decree. In Calvinistic churches, a good many pastoral problems related to assurance are due to a failure to properly relate covenant and election. We need to learn to use terms such as 'elect,' 'regenerate,' etc., not just in a narrow decretal sense, but also in a broader covenantal sense, as they so often function in Scripture.

hottest places in hell. They are condemned not merely as unbelievers, but as unfaithful spouses, disinherited sons, and traitorous citizens. Their latter end is worse than their beginning (2 Pt. 2:20).

A Brief Excursus on Bible Reading and Systematic Theology

We now have our interpretation of this passage before us. Heb. 6:4-8 describes the real blessings that every covenant member receives. Some persevere in those blessings by grace through faith and enter into final salvation. Others do not and perish. The blessings listed in 6:4-5 can be applied to both those who will persevere and those who will fall away. We have shown that this reading is compatible with the TULIP because the sovereign plan of God undergirds both perseverance and apostasy. Those who are saved will revel in the grace and mercy of God for all eternity. No merit or self-contribution is involved in their salvation. Those who are lost will only have themselves to blame for their failure to persevere.

But some will wonder if this reading can be integrated into the wider framework of Reformed systematics. I will deal with that question straight on at the end of this paper, but for now I want to make a few auxiliary comments about how we approach texts like this, and indeed the Scriptures as a whole.

Some have objected to the exegesis offered here. They have insisted that not every member of the covenant community is really a recipient of grace. They argue that the elect are a subset within the covenant community. When Scripture speaks of the covenant community as a whole as “elect” or “united to Christ,” it is making a judgment of charity, not describing what is in fact the actual case of every baptized person, head for head.

Those who reason this way have logic on their side, at least in some sense. After all, if one is truly united to Christ, and all blessings are found in him, surely that includes perseverance, precluding the possibility of apostasy. Those who do apostatize were never *really* united to Christ, blessed with the Spirit’s presence, etc. In other words, those who reason this way treat “union with Christ” or “election” as theological axioms from which deductions about perseverance are drawn. If Bob Smith is united with Christ, he will persevere because, after all, perseverance is found in Christ alone. If Bob Smith is regenerate, he will persevere because, after all, regeneration is a link the “golden chain of salvation.” There is no such thing as a genuine falling away from grace. There is no exit ramp from the *ordo salutis* super highway.

Those who argue this way will also usually make a case against the efficacy of the sacraments from logic. Baptism, so they say, cannot be an effectual means of salvation because so many of the baptized fail to bear lasting fruit. Passages about baptismal efficacy must be speaking of the “thing signified” rather than what God does in and through the sign itself. Of course, only a segment of those baptized actually receive the “thing signified” so the rite itself is merely a symbol. If baptism was indeed an effectual

means of uniting us to Christ, we'd have to infer that no baptized person is ever lost – clearly a counter-factual conclusion.

But there is a problem here. The problem is not so much with the application of logic or the theological formulations. The problem is with the way Scripture is being read and applied. The Bible is not a revealed “system” of truth from which conclusions are to be deduced.¹⁵ Rather, it is a pastoral/liturgical/covenantal book. It is a literary work, full of poetry and stories. It is the narrative record (and prophecy) of God’s great acts from creation to consummation. The Bible was not given as grist for the systematic mill. It was intended to function first and foremost in the community of faith, not in academic or philosophical settings. It was given to provide the covenant people with encouragement, comfort, and direction. We must beware of drawing illegitimate deductions from Scriptural premises. We must learn to bend our logic to the Bible, rather than the reverse. We must learn to reign in our logical extensions at times.¹⁶

Thus, promises about perseverance (e.g., Jn. 10:28-9; Rom. 8:31-39; Phil. 1:6) are not mainly theological axioms from which conclusions are to be deduced; rather, they are promises to be believed and claimed by faith. Scripture is not given first and foremost to provide logical exercises. It is given to feed and nourish our faith. We don’t deduce perseverance from a set of premises; we trust God in Christ to provide it. If we cannot figure out precisely how the pieces of the theological puzzle fit together (in this case, promises of perseverance addressed to the community as a whole vis-à-vis the threats of apostasy), so be it.¹⁷

¹⁵ This is not to say the Bible’s teaching cannot be translated into systematic theology. Behind Scripture stands the mind of God, which is perfectly consistent. God is Absolute Rationality (among other things). But that’s still quite a bit removed from claiming that we can actually reproduce the system of Scripture in our theology textbooks. In fact, while nothing in Scripture is irrational, to be sure, there is no doctrine that does not terminate in mystery for finite (and now fallen) minds. Systematic theology is useful in organizing our understanding of the Bible and erecting barriers to keep out heresy. However, it is also dangerous, unless we are willing to live with an “open ended” system. For an excellent introduction to “open ended” systematics, see Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1974). In dealing with the NT epistles (usually regarded as the most “systematic” writings within Scripture), we must always keep in mind the *ad hoc* nature of these documents. They were written to deal with various pastoral issues, not to provide a philosophical system or an ideology. They are pastoral letters addressed to communities of faith, not abstract treatises delivered to classrooms full of seminary students. The epistles can be transformed *into* systematic theology, of course, but should not be read *as* systematic theology.

¹⁶ WCF 1.6 acknowledges the use of logic as a hermeneutical tool. But even then, Scripture itself, not autonomous reason, is the “supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined” (WCF 1.10). In other words, Scripture itself controls our application of logic to Scripture.

¹⁷ There is a great deal of mystery here. For example, why would the Spirit inspire Paul to address the Ephesian community, “[God] blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before Him in love,” when some of those referred to as elect and blessed and beloved would not persevere? Paul’s declaration was not to be read as a head-for-head guarantee that every member of the visible covenant community in Ephesus would be eternally glorified. Rather, Paul tells them (head-for-head) who they are objectively as a way of encouraging and nurturing faith. It’s as though Paul said, “Don’t you see who you are? You’re elect in Christ and blessed with every Spiritual blessing in him. Live accordingly!” Col. 3:12 reflects the same logic. Paul moves from their objective status as “the elect of God, holy and beloved” to their duties within the covenant community to “put on tender mercies, kindness, etc.” The election Paul is

In the same way, if we cannot find a way to cleanly reconcile the Bible's robust teaching on sacramental efficacy¹⁸ with the indisputable reality of apostasy, we dare not deny one or the other of these facts. Instead of trying to create laser sharp theological categories, we must learn to live with fuzzy-edged mystery. The Scriptural warnings concerning apostasy are not there primarily to be theologically analyzed and worked into a dogmatic system; they are there to be heeded and observed, lest we perish.

In one sense, a good deal (though by no means all!) of the controversy taking place right now over covenant, salvation, the sacraments, and apostasy, is between those who are content to let loose ends dangle mysteriously and those who insist on tying up every last one. Are we willing to think "outside the box" of methodological scholasticism? Do we live by faith or by logic? Do we treat the promises of God as premises to be fed into syllogisms or as nourishment to feed our faith? I'm not necessarily saying we must choose between these two in every given case. The Bible can and should be the basis of a systematic theology. But I am saying there are significantly different approaches to the texts of Scripture. If we rush to systematize too hastily, we may fail to use the passages in the way God actually intended. The Bible was given primarily for purposes of pastoral care and nurture and must be used accordingly.

Where one side in the controversy sees a theological problem that must be solved in order to save the coherency of the system, the other side sees inscrutable mystery and lives with it by faith. Where one side sees axioms to be fitted into a logical system and from which deductions are to be drawn, the other side sees promises to be claimed and trusted. Our first task in approaching a passage such as Heb. 6:4-8 is not to try to reconcile it with a system of truth we already possess (though we must do that in the end). Instead, we must see what the Spirit is saying to the church in and through this living and active word of God. How does this passage comfort? challenge? convict? console? The passage's native habitat is the worshipping community; we must allow it to do its work there, rather than polishing off its rough edges in order to fit it into a dogmatic edifice we are busily constructing.

There are certainly hermeneutical and terminological issues to wrestle through in the current debate – most especially, the major divide between those Reformed theologians and pastors who read the Bible in a biblical-theological /redemptive-historical fashion and those who read it in a systematic/dogmatic fashion.¹⁹ But more to the point, the basic divide is between those who read the Bible as a "promise book" versus those who read it as a "theology textbook." We must ask ourselves: Is Scripture a Father's love letter (warnings included: "Do not run away from home!") to his children? Or is it a

attributing to the churches is not one of God's hidden things any longer (Dt. 29:29); in Christ, the decree of election has now been revealed. And yet not all who are united to the Elect One, Jesus Christ, remain in him. We have much to learn from Paul's pastoral practice.

¹⁸ On baptismal efficacy, see my essay "Baptismal Efficacy and the Reformed Tradition: Past, Present, and Future," available at http://www.hornes.org/theologia/content/cat_sacraments.htm.

¹⁹ That's not to say these two approaches are incompatible. But in our day, cross communication between those who favor one approach towards those who favor the other is quite difficult, given differing theological lexicons, different motivating questions, different methodologies, and so forth.

Professor's lecture notes to his students? That's really the question at the heart of this whole controversy.

Answering Objections

This view of apostasy obviously raises numerous questions. We would be remiss if we did not take up some of them here, replying to comments and criticisms.

First, it seems those who have argued against this position have canceled one another out. Some accuse this view of presumption, others of legalism. On the one hand, we are guilty of *presumption* because we insist that baptismal grace is universal. All those in the church are recipients of God's favor and have "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come" (Heb. 6:5). To be in the covenant is to be in Christ. It is to be enlightened and indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Heb. 6:4). On the other hand, we're *legalists* because we insist on the necessity of perseverance in faithfulness. There is no salvation apart from repentance and obedience (Heb. 5:9). Only those who stand firm to the end inherit the promises. Only those who persevere enter the final Sabbath rest of God (Heb. 3-4).

But the way to cut through these criticisms is to simply keep in mind the two-sided nature of the covenant. The covenant is structured in such a way that it includes *both* gracious promises *and* gracious responsibilities. We've been given grace in the form of union with Christ through the Holy Spirit. What is now objectively true of us obligates us to live a certain way. It is precisely because we have *already* received so great a salvation that we are to persevere to the end that we might enter into that salvation in its eschatological fullness. There is no presumption or legalism; just covenant grace and covenant faithfulness.

Also, some have wondered how those who possess all things "in Christ" can be vulnerable to falling away. If, after all, every spiritual blessing is found in him, including perseverance, how can we who are in Christ be in any danger of apostasy? How can those who have received the packet of blessings described in Heb. 6:4-5 fail to persevere? Frankly, this is a great mystery. In fact, it is a double mystery. At one level, this is simply the age old "problem" of God's sovereignty in relation to human freedom. Calvinists have always confessed that predestination's inclusion of human responsibility is a mystery insoluble by human reason.²⁰ Those who have left Egypt behind for the sake of Christ are "free" to return to their old slavery, just as a dog may return to its vomit. Neither sin nor salvation denude man of his ability to choose.

²⁰ It also misses to mark to suggest that emphasizing apostasy leads us to *over-emphasize* human responsibility. It's actually impossible to over-emphasize human responsibility because we are infinitely accountable to God. Only if we deny the Creator/creature relationship, and put human responsibility on a continuum with divine sovereignty, is it possible to think of one being emphasized at the expense of the other. It's not a matter of either/or but both/and. Of course, God's sovereignty is always the ground and presupposition of human responsibility. But we have maintained all along that salvation is a work of God's sovereign grace.

But there is a darker enigma here as well. Questions about apostasy are really questions about the origin of evil. Apostasy is the ultimate mystery within God's creation and providence, going all the way back to the fall of Adam. How could a man who was created good, in knowledge, righteousness, and holiness, turn away from God to follow the lies of Satan?²¹ How could Satan himself, originally an angel of light, apostatize? How could Israel, the elect and firstborn son of God, lose her kingdom inheritance (cf. Mt. 21:41, 43)? These questions are simply unanswerable by us. In fact, if apostasy were explainable, it would not be so utterly evil. We could rationalize it away.

It is clear that apostasy is part of God's eternal plan, however enigmatic that might be. The fall of 'new men' in Christ is of a piece with the mysterious fall of the first man Adam. If we cannot explain the fall of Adam in the garden, neither will we be able to explain the fall of those who were once united to the new Adam.²²

²¹ The analogy between Adam's apostasy and new covenant apostasy is entirely warranted, exegetically, theologically, and confessionally. The description of Adam's virtues (knowledge, righteousness, and holiness) given in WCS 10 is actually derived passages which describe our re-creation in Christ (Eph. 4:24, Col. 3:10)!

²² Adam and Israel, of course, are the standard paradigms, from which we must develop a biblical theology of apostasy. Interestingly, the whole biblical narrative turns on critical acts of apostasy. The apostasy of the first Adam and the crucifixion of the last Adam by apostate Israel are the key junctures in the biblical story. But it might be helpful to briefly survey another paradigmatic example of apostasy. The case of Saul is very instructive here (and has relevance even in the new covenant, unless we take a dispensational approach to soteriology). When Saul was anointed, the Holy Spirit came upon him in a mighty way. (This does not mean the Spirit had not been active in his heart prior to his anointing. No doubt the Spirit was active in the life of Saul prior to his full reception of the Spirit at his anointing/baptism.) Saul has already shown signs of piety, but now he is adopted by God in a special way and receives new creation life from the Spirit (1 Sam. 10:6-9). We see the fruit of this new heart in the following chapters as he displays faithfulness, humility, fights against the Lord's enemies, etc. However, in 1 Sam. 13, he begins to backslide, resulting in a threefold fall and his ultimate rejection by the Lord. His heart grows harder and harder towards the Lord, till finally he grieves the Spirit so deeply that the Spirit departs from him in 1 Sam. 16. Note that his fall involved a food test, as he sets himself in the place of God (14:24ff). Saul is thus the classic case of apostasy, of falling away from the Lord. David acknowledges this in his famous prayer of repentance when he prays, essentially, "Do not let me be a Saul!" (Ps. 51:11, alluding to 1 Sam. 16:14).

Of course, Saul may not be used as a counter-point to the teaching of Scripture elsewhere (and the confessions of the Reformed churches) that God is sovereign in salvation. Saul did not fall *in spite of* God's decretal attempt to save him; rather Saul's renewal as well as his apostasy were *both* part of God's sovereign orchestration of history. Theologically, we can even say God chose to withhold the gift of perseverance from Saul for his own wise and holy purposes. In an *ultimate sense*, then, Saul was not elect, not purchased by Christ, not fully regenerate, etc.

But Saul's case shows how far apostates can enter into God's grace before falling away. A snapshot of Saul's life prior to 1 Sam. 13 would give a picture seemingly identical to that of an elect person. Saul really did taste of God's mercy and love; he really did possess the Holy Spirit and the new creation life the Spirit brings; he really was adopted into God's family and really lived a godly, exemplary life for a time. But he failed to persevere. No doubt, there is a great deal of mystery in this, just as there is a great deal of mystery in the fall of the first man, Adam. Saul, as a new Adam figure, had been restored to God's image, but fell back into the corruption of the world. He experienced the powers of the age to come, but slipped back into bondage to the world, the flesh, and the devil.

We cannot deal adequately with Saul's case if our only theological categories are elect and non-elect. We must understand the place of the covenant as well. It is not enough to say that Saul's fall proved he was non-elect. In some sense, he was, for a time, part of God's elect people in and through the covenant. When he fell he lost all the blessings of his covenant relationship with the Lord. He did not go to hell simply as a

Additionally, we should note that tension between the assurances and threats of the new covenant, however mysterious, is an *inner-biblical* tension. In other words the tension here is not simply the product of a theological system drawing unwarranted deductions; it is plainly on the pages of Scripture itself. For example, Peter reminds those who have been given “all things that pertain to life and godliness” (2 Pt. 1:3) that they must not succumb to false teaching and destructive heresies (2 Pt. 2:1ff). Paul tells the Ephesians in one place they have received every Spiritual blessing in Christ (Eph. 1:3). The entire community, head for head, is regarded as chosen and redeemed. But elsewhere, he warns these same Christians that apostasy will arise from within their own community (Acts 20:28ff). In Paul’s view, assurance of election and the possibility of apostasy are twin features of the church’s life as a pilgrim community on the way from initial salvation to final glorification.²³

If we decide to ignore the Bible’s teaching on apostasy for fear that it might upset people’s assurance or wreck their systematic theologies, we are pretending to be wiser than God. Pastors and teachers simply *must* be faithful to the Scriptures at this point. And they must not only deliver teaching *about* apostasy; they must actually warn their people in the way that Scripture warns them. Certainly, anyone issuing the covenant community warnings about apostasy should do so with humility and compassion. At the

non-elect person, but as a disinherited son, as an unfruitful branch, as a covenant breaker, as an unfaithful spouse of the Lord, etc. So long as Saul remained in covenant with the Lord, he had every right to think of himself as “elect” and “regenerate.” Those around him would have also considered him to be elect, since he had all the marks of one called by God to eternal salvation. But he sinned grievously, failed to manifest any genuine repentance, and was formally cut off from the elect/covenant community by Samuel. Saul became a defiled house for the Spirit, and so the Spirit departed from him.

The application to Christians should be clear: In terms of the “already” and the “not yet,” we are like Saul in 1 Sam. 10. We have received the Spirit and been adopted by God in our baptism/anointing. But now we must persevere. If we sin, we must not make excuses, blame shift, pridefully try to save face, etc., but must, like David, cry out in humble repentance and brokenness and move on knowing God has forgiven us. Like David, we beseech the Lord, “Do not take your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11; cf. 1 Sam. 16:14) because we do not want our stories to end as Saul’s did. Lest we fall into “soteriological dispensationalism,” we must acknowledge the reality of both Sauls and Davids in the new covenant.

²³ In the Bible, election is always presented as good news – as pure gospel – for the covenant people of God. Yet, in many modern Calvinistic presentations, the doctrine takes on an ominous, threatening character. It raises the question, ‘Am I elect?,’ a question anxious souls want to have answered. But we cannot peer into the eternal decrees of God to see his roll of chosen ones. Nor do we have spiritual X-ray vision (‘cardio-analytic abilities,’ as one theologian puts it) that allows us to gaze into the depths of our hearts to see if we are *really* regenerate. But here is a place where the Bible must be allowed to trump the deductions we might otherwise draw from premises provided by systematic theology. The inspired writers, after all, often speak of the covenant people of God as elect. The elect are not viewed as a “secret society” within the visible church. The biblical authors speak of the entire covenantal community as chosen by God. And surely this knowledge of who is elect cannot be due simply to the fact that the Spirit is working in them as they write. Continually, the apostles address real words of comfort and assurance to visible churches – often very troubled visible churches! – and this is to serve as a model for pastors today. As has already been suggested, our theology must allow us to speak the gospel in the first and second person, in a very personal and direct way. If Paul had been writing Eph. 1 as a modern scholastic Calvinist, he would had to have said to the community, “He chose *some* of us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame...” and then remain agnostic about the identity of the “some.” But Paul’s theology of election permits him to speak of the *whole* covenant community as elect in Christ, even when he knows some members of that congregation will apostatize.

same time, these *are* warnings, so they should also be delivered with appropriate rhetorical forcefulness. But let's not outwit ourselves. These warnings are commonplace in Scripture. If there is a staggering disproportion between the frequency of warnings in Scripture, and the infrequency of their being sounded forth in our churches, we must reform our teaching practices. On page after page after page, one finds the inspired authors threatening the covenant community. It seems, then, that warnings of this sort, terrifying as they may be, should be a matter of course, a regular part of church life. We should find ourselves continually encouraged with the promises we have received, but almost as often, find ourselves warned about what will happen if we spurn these promises.

This is the answer to the charge of nominalism as well. Our attitude should be like that of Paul, who knew infallibly he belonged to the Lord (e.g., 2 Tim. 1, 4:6ff), and yet lived in healthy fear of the danger of falling away (1 Cor. 9:24-27). Assurance must never lead to presumption, complacency, or carelessness. Part of the reason for provocative formulations is not simply to be faithful to Scripture (which uses deliberately provocative, envelope-stretching formulations), but to shock us out of our spiritual doldrums. Our pre-occupation with the decrees tends to make us rather complacent (the "frozen chosen"!). There is a fine line between biblically-based assurance and presumption.

When I've talked to people who have had their assurance shaken by this kind of teaching and warning, in virtually every case, after conversation with the person, it came out that the basis of their assurance was flawed. They had grounded their assurance on a past experience, perhaps, with the result that they became overly introspective: "Did I *really* mean that prayer I prayed?" Or, they were trying to make their assurance a matter of iron-clad logic: "Systematic theology requires that God deal with me in such and such a way." Knocking down these props for people is often painful, but has a good result in the end. It throws us back onto the loving arms of Christ, not just for salvation, but for assurance as well. Again, as Calvin said, Christ is the "mirror of our election," and only by looking to him within the community of his people can we know we are among God's chosen. In Christ, the hidden decree of predestination is manifested to us.²⁴

²⁴ It is important to remember that the TULIP is not an exhaustive biblical theology. The TULIP was formulated in response to a particular doctrinal controversy. It was never intended to serve as a systematic grid for interpreting the Scriptures. Systematic theological paradigms like the TULIP can serve as helpful checks on our reading of Scripture and can erect boundaries for orthodoxy. But they are like *Cliff's Notes* – they really only serve their purpose if you actually interact carefully with the text itself. Moreover, there is great potential for confusion since the terminology of our systematic theology and our theological slogans do not always match the Bible's own terminology. Indeed, the Bible has no systematic theological vocabulary; it speaks more in metaphor and imagery than technical terminology.

While allowing creeds, confessions, and the history of dogmatics to serve as hermeneutical tools, we should always be careful to not allow the demands of a theological system to override the exegesis of particular texts. Whatever problems apostasy might create for what philosophers have called the "theoretical intellect," there is no problem at all for the "practical intellect." I stand in fear of falling away, all the while trusting Christ to preserve me completely. I am spurred on by both the promises made directly to me as a covenant member, and the threats about the possibility of apostasy. Logically, we may have to fight to hold these things together, but practically there is no difficulty. Consider an analogy: Married persons usually feel no practical tension between a commitment to marital fidelity and guarding themselves

Finally, some have wondered if this teaching entails the conclusion that salvation can be “lost.” We’ve already dealt with objection to some extent, but revisit it here. In many instances, the biblical writers view salvation as an eschatological concept – in this sense no one is saved till the last day. This is particularly evident in Hebrews. But salvation can also be understood as a past reality (we are saved in eternity past when God chose us in Christ, or when Christ died on the cross for us, or when the Spirit converted us) and a present and progressive reality (e.g., we are in the process of working out our salvation in fear and trembling, Phil. 2:11-12). To be sure, no elect person can lose his salvation, however much he may backslide. This is the point of Jesus’ teaching in Jn. 10:29 – God the Father and God the Son will not lose their grip on those they have chosen for final salvation. The decree of God cannot be annulled or defeated. His promise to save his faithful people cannot be thwarted.

But the biblical language itself is more complicated. In one sense, all those in the covenant are “saved.” They have been delivered out of the world and brought into the glorious new creation of Christ. They have escaped the pollution of the world through the knowledge of Christ. But not all will persevere. Jude (5) speaks of the Israelites as having been saved, and then destroyed, because they did not persevere. The preface to the Ten Commandments addresses Israel as God’s redeemed people. But many of those redeemed did not continue trusting their Deliverer and perished (1 Cor. 10:1ff; Heb. 3-4). 2 Pt. 2 speaks of a similar class of people – fallen teachers who have been redeemed by Christ, who then deny him, and are destroyed.²⁵ To take yet another example, 1 Pt. 3 says eight people in all were “saved” from God’s wrath in Noah’s ark. But if we read the Genesis narrative, we find one of those saved, Ham, apostatized and came under a curse. Even today, there are “Hams” in the ark of the church. They were “saved” by God in baptism, but fail to persevere in that salvation and fall away.

What are we to do with these examples? Some might say, “Those are cases drawn from Old Testament types. Those were *pictures* of salvation – not the real thing. Salvation in the new covenant cannot be lost.” But the problem with this is that it draws a contrast precisely where the New Testament writers themselves draw a parallel. Paul, Peter, and Jude all use these Old Testament stories to warn new covenant believers, lest they too fall from grace. Imagine a reader of 1 Cor. 10 saying, “Well, those Israelites redeemed out of Egypt perished, but that was the old covenant. In the new covenant, it’s ‘once saved,

against the possibility of adultery. Promise and threat, assurance and vigilance, can go together quite easily in the real world!

For better *and* for worse, we have numerous popularizers of Reformed theology around today. The result is that what most of us think of as ‘Reformed’ is greatly truncated. American Reformed theology is like a bad cassette recording of the real thing. In this essay (and in this book as a whole), we are simply trying to recover nuances that were originally in the tradition, but have been lost.

²⁵ In 2 Pt. 2:1, the pattern of being “redeemed” by the Lord, then denying him, is simply a replication of Israel’s exodus (“redemption” is an exodus term after all), followed by her rejection of the Lord in the wilderness. Jesus exodused Israel (Lk. 9:31) in his cross; many who were “redeemed” by him rejected him. This typological model fits with the recurrent NT theme that Christians from 30-70 A. D. (and beyond, in several senses) were like that generation of Israelites after the Red Sea crossing: in danger of perishing in the wilderness as they trek on their way to the promised land of the new covenant in its fullness (cf. 2 Pt. 3).

always saved.” But Paul specifically says the record of the Israelites who failed to persevere and were destroyed *was* “*written for our admonition*” in the new covenant era. It is a narrative warning written for us.

Besides, as we have seen, the NT itself has many warnings which parallel the OT warnings. Thus, Jesus spoke of those in the new covenant who would be united to him, but then cut off because they did not persevere in fruit bearing (Jn. 15:1ff). If Jesus himself is salvation personified, then, in some sense, being cut off from him entails being cut off from the source of salvation. Paul says the Galatians have been adopted by God. But they are also in danger of falling from grace (Gal. 3:26-4:6, 5:4).²⁶

Again, there is no question that God’s elect, predestined for final salvation, will persevere to the end. They cannot fall away because God is determined to keep them in the path of life. But reprobate covenant members may temporarily experience a quasi-salvation. They were, in some sense, bought by Christ (1 Pt. 2:1), forgiven (Mt. 18:21ff), renewed (Mt. 13:1ff), written into the Book of Life (Rev. 22:19), etc., and lost these things.

Perhaps all this can be made more palatable and plausible if we learn to think of salvation in more relational, narrational, and covenantal categories, rather than metaphysical categories.²⁷ “Salvation,” in this sense, is not a thing we possess that can be lost and found, like car keys. Rather, it is a matter of relationship, of being rightly related to God. But relationships are not static, timeless entities. Rather, they are fluid and dynamic. Some marriages start well; the couple is really in love. But then things go sour. Our salvation covenant with the Lord is like a marriage. If we persevere in loyalty to Christ, we will live with him happily ever after. If we break the marriage covenant, he will divorce us. It may not be wise to call this “losing one’s salvation,” but it would be unbiblical to say nothing at all was really lost or rejected. That would simply be a denial of the reality of the covenant.

Final Thoughts: Integrating This Reading of Heb. 6:4-8 into Historic and Systematic Reformed Theology

The teaching offered here is not unreformed in any sense. Calvin is known for his doctrine of predestination, but he was also the covenant theologian par excellence. Calvin

²⁶ The biblical illustrations can help us understand the relational dynamics at work here. An adopted child has *all* the privileges that come with being part of the family. Some of those privileges are still future (e.g., inheriting the family fortune), but in principle they belong to the child (cf. Gal. 4:1). But what if the child runs away from home? What if he forsakes all he has been given and returns to the orphanage? He loses the future inheritance that was his, along with everything else. In the same way, a married person has all the privileges of marriage, including the promise of a future life together, companionship, children, etc. But if the spouse deserts or commits adultery, he loses everything, including the future. That, I would suggest, is analogous to what happens in cases of apostasy. It’s not just that blessings received in the past are lost; the promised future is forfeited as well. (Certainly the case of Adam’s apostasy reveals that as well.)

²⁷ See Peter Leithart, *The Priesthood of the Plebs: A Theology of Baptism* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), for some forays into recasting theology along these lines. Of course, I’m not suggesting a relational, narrational approach is devoid of ontology. However, the older, more rationalistic models of Reformed scholasticism generally factored relational change over time out of their soteriological formulations.

had a robust doctrine of apostasy. In various places, he speaks of apostates as those who had been formerly ‘reconciled to God’ and ‘adopted’ by him, joined in ‘sacred marriage’ to him, recipients of ‘illumination’ and ‘grace,’ having ‘faith,’ and so on. He says the eternally reprobate can, for a season, share in the special, effectual call of the Holy Spirit. Those who fall away have forsaken their salvation and forgotten that they were cleansed. He clearly says the warnings are for those elected by the Father and redeemed by the Son – in other words, they’re for us!²⁸

In more recent Reformed theology, John Murray has had quite a bit to say about the relationship of the work of Christ to common grace and the non-elect within the covenant. For Murray, many benefits from Christ’s work accrue to people who ultimately do not reach final salvation. And yet, the ‘L’ in TULIP (limited atonement) remains in tact because the atonement does in history precisely what God designed for it to do.²⁹ Following on the heels of Murray, Norman Shepherd sought to reformulate some Reformed doctrines, not to alter their substance, but to take into account more fully the Bible’s covenantal perspective. In particular, Shepherd points out that biblical writers frequently look at election through the lens of the covenant.³⁰

Going back behind the Reformation, everything set forth here can be found in Augustine. This great church father was certainly the most significant influence on Luther and Calvin. Augustine taught that believers, called by God, and regenerated (in some sense) by him, might still fall away. This is obviously identical to our exegesis of Heb. 6, terminological differences aside. Of course, Augustine also taught unconditional election: All those chosen in Christ from the foundation of the world to receive eternal salvation will indeed do so. God’s purposes cannot fail. Perseverance is a gift given to the elect alone, and it ensures their entrance into final salvation. Augustine felt no contradiction between these two poles of election and apostasy; in fact, he felt it was necessary to keep them together in order to be faithful to Scripture.³¹

²⁸ I am drawing from Calvin’s discussion of apostasy and temporary faith in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 3.2. See also his commentaries on various “apostasy” passages such as Heb. 6 and 10, Jn. 15, Rom. 11, 1 Pt. 2, etc. Of course, Calvin also differentiates between what the reprobate experience and what the elect experience.

²⁹ See John Murray, “The Atonement and the Free Offer of the Gospel,” 59-85 in *Collected Writings of John Murray*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1976). The theology of apostasy laid out in this paper can be thought of us as simply unpacking of Murray’s provocative statement on page 63: “Many benefits accrue to the non-elect from the redemptive work of Christ.” We are not abandoning effectual atonement; we are making nuances within its parameters.

³⁰ See Norman Shepherd, *Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Covenant and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2000).

³¹ Specifically, see Augustine’s *A Treatise on the Predestination of the Saints*, *A Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance*, *A Treatise on Rebuke and Grace*, and *A Treatise on Grace and Free Will*, all available in Philip Schaff, ed., *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers* (first series; 14 vols.; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974). Of course, Augustine also integrates a robust doctrine of sacramental efficacy into his soteriology. He knew that God’s salvation was applied through outward means. But unfortunately, Augustine failed to fit a fully biblical doctrine of assurance into his understanding of predestination, salvation, perseverance, and apostasy. On that score, this paper may be regarded as a corrective to traditional Augustinianism.

In terms of systematic theology, I do not think it is all that difficult to incorporate a stout view of apostasy into our decretal, covenantal dogmatics. Briefly sketched out, it looks something like this (with the admission that is not the final word, only a word on the way to a longed-for better understanding of these issues):

God, in eternity past, elected in Christ a great multitude to salvation. This election was wholly gracious and unconditional, having its source only in the free mercy and good pleasure of God. Those the Father elected to eternal salvation, he sent his Son to die for. His atoning work is fully sufficient for their salvation and completely accomplished their redemption. The Holy Spirit works in these same chosen ones to apply Christ's saving work to them and keep them faithful to Christ their whole lives. Because of the hardness of their hearts in sin, this work of grace must be, ultimately, irresistible. No elect person can be lost and no non-elect person can attain salvation.

God's eternal decree to gather his elect into a people for his name is worked out in history. We do not emphasize God's action in eternity at the expense of his work in history, or vice versa. Nor do we pit individual election versus corporate election. Chosen individuals only come to realize their election in the context of the elect community. One's election becomes manifest in the administration of Word and sacrament, as one responds to the gospel and enters the church in baptism. Christ is present in his church by his Spirit, to see to it that all his elect ones are brought to faith in him.

However, God mysteriously has chosen to draw many into the covenant community who are not elect in the ultimate sense and who are not destined to receive final salvation. These non-elect covenant members are actually brought to Christ, united to him and the church in baptism, receive various gracious operations of the Holy Spirit, and may even be said to be loved by God for a time. They become members of Christ's kingdom, stones in God's living house, and children in God's family.³² Corporately, they are part of the chosen, redeemed, Spirit-indwelt people, just as Israel was God's elect people until 70 A.D. But sooner or later, in the wise counsel of God, these individuals fail to bear fruit and fall away. They do persevere in the various graces they have received; their faith withers and dies. In some sense, they were really joined to the elect people, really sanctified by Christ's blood, and really recipients of new life given by the Holy Spirit. The sacraments they received had objective force and efficacy. But God withholds from them the gift of perseverance and all is lost. They break the gracious new covenant they entered into at baptism.

Thus, the covenant is a true revelation of God's salvation, for in the covenant community, all God's people, elect and non-elect, find gracious blessings. The covenant really is gospel – good news – through and through. The administration of the covenant really is salvific. Yet only those who continue to persevere by grace in loyalty to the covenant and the Lord of the covenant inherit final salvation. Those who fall away lose the temporary covenantal blessings they had enjoyed. Ultimately, this is because God

³² Confessionally, I find all of these things embedded in the WCF's description of the visible church in 25.2.

decreed that these covenant breakers would not share in the eschatological salvation of Christ. Everything happens according to the counsel of his. Of course, these apostates cannot blame God for their falling away – it's their own fault, since God's overtures of love towards them in the context of the covenant were sincere. And those who do persevere to the end cannot claim any credit or make any boast – all they have done has been because of God's grace at work in them to keep them faithful.³³

All covenant members are invited to attain to a full and robust confidence that they are God's eternally elect ones. Starting with their baptisms, they have every reason to believe God loves them and desires their eternal salvation. Baptism marks them out as God's elect people, a status they maintain so long as they persevere in faithfulness. By looking to Christ alone, the preeminently Elect One, the one who kept covenant to the end and is the Author and Finisher of the faith of God's people, they may find assurance. But those who take their eyes off Christ, who desert the church where his presence is found, who forsake the external means of salvation, will make shipwreck of their faith and prove to have received the grace of God in vain. The requirement of perseverance is non-negotiable. But it is not a threat to us; rather, it is a promise to be claimed in Christ. A passage like Jn. 10:28-29 is not given to make us wonder, "Am I one of those the Father and Son are holding?" Rather, this is a promise to be claimed by faith: "God you've promised to keep me in your grasp! For the sake of your name, do so!"

This, then, is the biblical picture. The TULIP is still in place, but has been enriched by a nuanced covenant theology. By framing the issues as we have, we are able to preserve God's sovereignty in salvation and hold covenant breakers accountable for their own apostasy. Plus, we can do justice to the Scripture's teaching on the nature of the church and efficacy of the sacraments, as well as the genuineness of the covenantal promises and threats. Nothing has been lost by our reformulation of the popular Reformed picture, and a great deal has been gained.

³³ Calvin's discussion of election in the *Institutes* begins with the empirical observation that not all who hear the gospel respond in faith. The differentiated responses are traced back up into the sovereign decree of God. The view offered here simply extends Calvin's logic past conversion to perseverance.