

Soldier On! W/ Leroy Garrett
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"Once Saved Always Saved" At Issue

"ONCE SAVED ALWAYS SAVED" AT ISSUE

The doctrine of the impossibility of apostasy of the believer has taken on different names through the centuries. While more commonly identified as "once saved always saved," it is dressed more formally as "eternal security," or "the security of the believer." Since it is one of the five fundamentals of Calvinism it is the "P" in the well-known acrostic TULIP -- Perseverance of the saints, the others being Total depravity, Unconditional election, Limited atonement, Irresistible grace. It affirms that once one is truly a believer he cannot be lost, for he is eternally and unequivocally saved, even if he turns to a life of sin.

The late Baptist scholar Dale Moody, longtime professor of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, in his definitive theological treatise *The Word of Truth* has an extensive treatment of "Salvation and Apostasy." Though a Baptist, he insists that "once saved always saved" is a false doctrine and a Baptist heresy. He claims that while the doctrine is historically part of Calvinism, it is not true Baptist teaching. Among the authorities he quotes to prove this is the eminent scholar A. T. Robertson, one of that church's luminaries, who taught the possibility of apostasy on biblical grounds.

Moody makes an impressive claim: Every book in the New Testament has a warning against apostasy except Philemon, which has no doctrinal discussion at all. Some of the more persuasive texts that he references are as follows:

"These are the ones who believe for awhile and in time of temptation fall away (Luke 8:13).

"From among yourselves will men rise up speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:30).

"You have become estranged from Christ, you who attempt to be justified by the law: you have fallen from grace" (Galatians 5:4).

"Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12).

"He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life" (Revelation 3:5).

On and on it goes. Moody points out that warnings like Beware! or Take heed! are meaningless if it is impossible for the Christian to fall. He sees the same force in the use of if, as in Hebrews 3:14: "We have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end."

He sees Paul's concern for his own salvation as especially relevant: "I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I should myself be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:27). Here Moody again quotes from Robinson to the effect that the apostle's "wholesome fear" is better than the "smug complacency" of those who take sin lightly. I agree with the Baptist scholar that a "wholesome fear" of falling into sin may actually strengthen one's assurance of salvation, If we distrust our own strength, and have a healthy fear of sin, and heed the biblical warnings, we will thereby "overcome" to the end.

It is something like rattlesnake hunting in west Texas. The hunter who takes his prey lightly and goes at the task complacently is far more likely to feel the fangs of the dreaded snake than the one who respects the power of his prey. The one who has a "wholesome fear" of the snake -- such as Paul had of sin -- is the one who will be confident that he can go hunting without falling prey to the snakes. It is the snake handlers, who claim to have no fear, who are guilty of "smug complacency" and who often pay with their lives.

In the same way it will be the man who has a "wholesome fear" of the sin of adultery -- along with an awareness of his own vulnerability -- who will "Take heed lest he fall" and avoid marital infidelity. On the other hand, the man who flirts with women and with sin, throwing all caution to the wind, is the one headed for trouble, even if he is "once saved always saved." Sometimes even children fall prey to such ones.

This issue recently made the front page of both our local paper and a Dallas metropolitan paper. Two Baptist ministers, pastors of different congregations, were accused in law suits of sexual abuse of young girls some twenty years ago. The victims, now in their 30s, said they were too frightened and traumatized to divulge it to anyone at the time. In one case the abuse went on for five years. In the other the girl became pregnant, and was forced to go before the church and confess to being pregnant and unwed, but she was not allowed to reveal that it was the minister of the church that was the father of her child.

The ministers have confessed to what they did, and in one case the suit has been settled by way of a pay-off, well into six figures, to the victim. When a reporter of our local paper pursued these stories, she was pressured not to publish them lest she "destroy the ministers and the cause of Christ." This called for an editorial by the editor, who opined that "Blind Faith" -- as he titled the editorial -- in preachers only compounds the problem. As for the Baptists pressuring the media not to tell on them, he stated that he could not understand such an attitude. He concluded that since the Catholics had learned their lesson in reference to the exposure of sexual abuse on the part of priests, perhaps the Baptists would learn as well.

It was when the editor revealed that the Baptists were defending the ministers and criticizing the paper for exposing them, and that the pastors were still filling their pulpits, that I decided, as a concerned citizen, to get involved. I wrote the following as a "Letter to the Editor," which was published on the editorial page.

The story about Baptist ministers' abuse of young girls not only received front page coverage in the Record-Chronicle but on the front-page of the Metro Section of the Dallas News as well. It was reminiscent of the recent sexual scandals of priests in the Catholic Church. If some of us saw the Catholic doctrine of celibacy as a possible cause of priestly sexual abuse of children, we might also wonder if the Baptist doctrine of "security of the believer" or "once saved always saved" might help explain the behavior of the Baptist ministers, along with some members who are not all that outraged over what they did. If one believes he is eternally saved, irrespective of his behavior, it might well lead him to take sin less seriously than one who sees salvation dependent upon responsible moral conduct.

We also notice that while priests were defrocked and/or went to prison for their misdeeds, the Baptist ministers are still in their pulpits, and some of their members criticize the press for exposing the ugly affair!

Where is the outrage? One would think the Baptists would be embarrassed to see a minister in the pulpit who should be in prison for sexual abuse of minors, and who would be in prison except for the statute of limitation. Where is the outcry against such gross sin in the church?

If the minister where I go to church confessed such sin against children, once he was found out, and then presumed to fill the pulpit, I would show my outrage with my feet. I would walk out in disgust.

Leroy Garrett
Corinth

Should the issue of the influence of "once saved always saved" upon the sexual sins of Baptist ministers be further discussed, I would again cite the conclusions of the late Dr. Dale Moody, the Baptist theologian. When he was in a unity meeting in Conway, Arkansas, where I too was present, he revealed that there were numerous instances of marital infidelity on the part of Baptist ministers in Arkansas -- who were still in their pulpits -- and he was persuaded that this dangerous doctrine was one reason for it. He also revealed that because of his position on apostasy leading Baptists in Arkansas pressured Southern Baptist Seminary to fire him! It didn't work.

I remembered this when the Baptist General Convention of Texas issued a statement in the local paper -- in reference to the recent revelations -- that they were "concerned about the increasing number of incidents of clergy sexual misconduct." . They revealed that they kept a list of such ministers, which was confidential but not private. If a church is considering hiring a minister the Convention will reveal to that church whether the candidate is on their list.

Well, I may be wrong -- and Dale Moody may have been wrong -- but I wonder if the Baptists had never bought into "once saved always saved" would they have this problem to such a marked degree. I am aware that this is a problem in all denominations, but apparently to a far lesser degree. And I still wonder if the pope had allowed priests to marry if they would have had the problem that they have had with sexually errant priests in such abundance.

This is not only about Baptists and Catholics. We would all do well to have a substantial dose of "wholesome fear," and to heed the warning of holy Scripture: "If anyone thinks he stands, let him take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

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