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## THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

### *A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages*

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Irate! The word describes Calvinist Puritan John Owen in debate with Arminian Puritan John Goodwin. In *Redemption Redeemed* Goodwin had maintained that the saints could fall away from grace. Owen countered in 1654 with *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*. What inflamed Owen was not Goodwin's denial of believers' security; it was his misrepresentation of Reformed theology. Goodwin wrote:

It is a presumption that men may enjoy the love of God, and salvation itself, under practice of all manner of sin and wickedness; representing God as a God in whose sight a person is good who does evil; promising God's love, favour, and acceptance, as much as to dogs returning to their vomit, or to swine wallowing in the mire after their washing, as to lambs and sheep. This is a doctrine whereby it is possible for me certainly to know, that no matter how loosely, how profanely, how debauchedly, I behave, yet God will love me, as he does the holiest and most righteous man under heaven.<sup>1</sup>

Owen defended preservation, the view that God keeps his people saved to the end. Owen also taught what he considered a complementary truth — the perseverance of the saints, their continuing to believe the gospel, to love God and their neighbors, and to live godly lives. Goodwin had distorted Calvinism by saying it teaches preservation without perseverance. And that made Owen irate.

In previous articles I surveyed the literature dealing with perseverance and apostasy, and argued for preservation.<sup>2</sup> Here I stand with John Owen by insisting that perseverance complement preservation. Theological exegesis of four passages — viz., Col.

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<sup>1</sup>*The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold. (Carlisle, PA.: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), Vol. 11, p. 100. I have modernized the English.

<sup>2</sup>"Perseverance and Apostasy: A Bibliographic Essay," *Presbyterian* 16/2 (1990), pp. 119-125, and "Though All Hell Should Endeavor to Shake": God's Preservation of His Saints," *Presbyterian* 17/1 (1991), pp. 40-57.

1:21-23, Heb. 12:14-17, Heb. 3:12-14, and John 15:1-8 — will show that true believers continue to the end in faith, love, and holiness.<sup>3</sup>

## COLOSSIANS 1:21-23

### *A. Theological Exegesis*

In the immediately preceding context Paul affirms Christ's supremacy over creation (vv. 14-17) and over the new creation, the church (vv. 18-20).<sup>4</sup> In v. 20 Paul portrays Christ's saving work as a reconciliation of "all things...whether things upon the earth or things in heaven." Next he shows that Christ's cosmic reconciliation embraces the Colossians.

V. 21 "And you yourselves who once were estranged and enemies in your minds in your evil deeds,...."<sup>5</sup> Paul paints the background for reconciliation. Prior to the Colossians' conversion they had been in a state<sup>6</sup> of alienation from God. They were his enemies "in their minds"; in their thinking they opposed his will. And their thinking affected their manner of life — their mental hostility expressed itself "in evil deeds."

V. 22 "...but now he has reconciled (you) in his mortal body through death, in order to present you holy and unblemished and blameless before him...."<sup>7</sup> As is his custom Paul contrasts his readers' preconversion past ("once," v. 21) with their postconversion present ("now," v. 22) to motivate them to gratitude and obedience.

Christ accomplished reconciliation for the Colossian believers by dying for them in his physical body. When the Colossians were

<sup>3</sup>Unless otherwise indicated, translations of the respective passages are my own.

<sup>4</sup>For a summary of literary approaches to Col. 1:15-20 and argumentation that it represents Semitic-style chiasm, see Steven M. Baugh, "The Poetic Form of Col. 1:15-20," *Westminster Theological Journal* 47 (1985), pp. 227-244.

<sup>5</sup>Paul emphasizes the words "and you" (*kai humas*) by placing them first.

<sup>6</sup>Paul combines a participle from *eimi* with a perfect participle from *apallotrioo* to form a periphrastic perfect "to express still more forcibly the persistence of the new state of things" (F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the NT and Other Early Christian Literature* [trans. R. W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961], §352 [hereafter BDF]).

<sup>7</sup>Some manuscripts read "he has reconciled"; others "you have been reconciled"; still others "having been reconciled." For a discussion of the issues and a defense of the first option, see Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), p. 64 n. 16. *Tes sarkos* is a qualitative genitive and is equivalent to "by his physical body." Paul's references to reconciliation through Christ's blood (in v. 20) and his physical body (here) are aimed "at gnosticizing tendencies prevalent in the Colossian heresy" (Ralph Martin, *Colossians and Philemon* [New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973], p. 67).

estranged from God, Christ effected reconciliation through his atonement.

By his use of the infinitive *parastesai*, Paul shows that the purpose of Christ's reconciliation is to present believers eschatologically in God's (or Christ's) presence. The three following adjectives give a moral description of the Colossian believers as they will appear, "holy, blameless, and irreproachable." We are not to seek different shades of meaning in the three adjectives; they intensify the idea of holiness; their alliteration adds to the effect.<sup>8</sup> The goal of Christ's reconciliation of believers is to present them morally perfect before God (or Christ).<sup>9</sup>

V. 23 "...if indeed you persevere in your faith established and firm and not shifting from the hope generated by the Gospel which you heard, which has been preached in all creation under heaven, of which I myself Paul became a minister."<sup>10</sup> A condition is added to the preceding teaching about reconciliation. The condition is attached to the infinitive: "to present you...if indeed you continue...." The Colossians must persevere "in their faith" if they are to be finally saved. By implication "their faith" is based upon "the Gospel." This part of v. 23 serves as a warning to a Christian community under attack from false teachers. The two participles and one adjective that follow seem to be used as predicate adjectives to describe the 'continuing.'<sup>11</sup> The continuing is depicted as "established and firm and not shifting from the hope of the Gospel which you heard...." The apostle speaks of a steady perseverance, not a shaky one.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letter to Colossians and to Philemon* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1977), pp. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup>Like justification, reconciliation anticipates the positive verdict of God regarding believers at the Great Assize on the day of Christ" (Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon* [Exegetical Guide to the Greek NT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], p. 59). I disagree with Lohse (*Colossians and Philemon*, p. 65) who regards these words as referring primarily to the Colossian Christians' present lives.

<sup>10</sup>"If indeed," *ge* added to *ei* (so Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, F. Wilbur Gingrich, Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* [2nd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979], p. 152 [hereafter BAGD2]). *Epimeno* means "continue, persist (in), persevere" and takes the dative (BAGD2, p. 296). By "faith" Paul could be referring to the Colossians' personal faith in Christ or to the Gospel. Ultimately there is little difference since either implies the other. I am indebted to Harris's translation (*Colossians and Philemon*, p. 62) of the subjective genitive "gospel" (*euangeliou*).

<sup>11</sup>I reach this conclusion from studying the description of the use of the adjective *hedraios* ("firm, steadfast") in BAGD2, p. 217; it is used with "to be" (*ginomai*) to mean to "be firm." It is used with "to stand" (*histemi*) to mean to "stand firm." Here BAGD2 says it means to be "steadfast in the faith." Apparently "to stand" or "to continue" can take predicate adjectives.

<sup>12</sup>"For faith is not like a mere opinion, which is shaken by various movements, but has a firm steadfastness, able to withstand all the machinations of

Paul concludes v. 23 by telling of the spread of the Gospel throughout the Roman world and of his part in that work. Paul seeks to authenticate his ministry by contrasting its universality with the restricted audience of the secret message of the heretics he opposes.<sup>13</sup>

### B. Conclusions

This passage teaches that perseverance is a condition of final salvation. Specifically, it is perseverance *in faith* that is taught here. Moreover, v. 23 implies that perseverance in faith can be defined as continuing to believe the Gospel. Continuing to believe the Gospel is indispensable to final salvation.

This immediately raises theological questions. Is it possible for someone to believe the Gospel, not persevere in faith, and so be lost? Arminian systematic theology answers this question in the affirmative. And some interpreters argue that this very passage teaches that someone can fall from grace. Frederick Brooke Westcott is a good example. Speaking of the bliss of entering Christ's presence (v. 22) he wrote: "This blessed consummation can only be attained provided they maintain faith unimpaired. To lose that is to lose all. Therefore the proviso [of v. 23] follows."<sup>14</sup> F. B. Westcott was overly ambitious in dealing with this text. I. Howard Marshall is more careful when he writes:

The need for perseverance in faith is also stressed in Colossians 1:23 ...; here the construction, 'provided that ...' (*ei ge*), allows, but by no means demands, the possibility that the condition may not be fulfilled.<sup>15</sup>

Marshall is correct. Col. 1:21-23 can be integrated into an Arminian systematic theology. But it can also be integrated into a Calvinist one.

Some Calvinist interpreters assert that appeal to the Greek removes their difficulty in v. 23: "The particle [*ei ge*; 'if'] introduces a conditional clause which the author assumes to be true."<sup>16</sup> This thesis works for Eph. 3:2 and 4:2, but not for Gal. 3:4 where Paul says: "Have you experienced so many things in vain? *If it really (ei ge) was in vain.*" Paul is not here assuming that the Galatians really were unsaved. The thesis that *ei ge* assumes certainty does not hold up

hell" (*Calvin's NT Commentaries. Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, and Colossians*, trans. T. H. L. Parker, eds. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965], p. 315).

<sup>13</sup>So Martin, *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 68.

<sup>14</sup>*Colossians. A Letter to Asia* (Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981 [orig. pub. 1914]), p. 75.

<sup>15</sup>*Kept By the Power of God. A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969), p. 243, n. 64.

<sup>16</sup>Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1976), p. 569. Peter T. O'Brien (*Colossians, Philemon* [Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1982], p. 69) argues the same way.

under scrutiny. The Greek of Col. 1:23, therefore, does not prove the Calvinist position correct.

Nevertheless, Col. 1:23 can be incorporated into a Reformed theology. Consider William Hendricksen's comments on the verse:

Divine preservation always presupposes human perseverance. Perseverance proves faith's genuine character, and is therefore indispensable to salvation. To be sure, no one can continue in the faith in his own strength (John 15:5). The enabling grace of God is needed from start to finish (Phil. 2:12, 13). This, however, does not cancel human responsibility and activity. Yes, *activity*, continuous, sustained, strenuous effort (Heb. 12:14).<sup>17</sup>

Col. 1:21-23 can be assimilated into either an Arminian or a Calvinist systematic theology, but the passage alone demands neither theological system. Appeal must be made to other texts to discern patterns of teaching that Col. 1:21-23 alone does not provide.

Although we must study other passages to develop a systematic theology of preservation and perseverance, this passage does serve a related function. It sets up a test of the reality of salvation, as F. F. Bruce notes:

Perseverance proves faith's genuineness and is therefore indispensable to salvation.... The saints are those who finally persevere — in Christ. Continuance is the test of reality.... Indeed, to hold fast to hope is throughout the NT an indispensable condition for attaining the goal of full salvation to be revealed at the *parousia* of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

## HEBREWS 12:14-17

### A. *Theological Exegesis*

V. 14 "Pursue peace with all and holiness without which no one will see the Lord."<sup>19</sup> The writer to the Hebrews gives a double command to his readers. First, "Pursue peace with all." In the preceding verses he taught them that by submitting to the Lord's

<sup>17</sup>William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Exposition of Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1964), p. 85. Peter T. O'Brien (*Colossians, Philemon*, p. 69) agrees, "If it is true that the saints *will* persevere to the end, then it is equally true that the saints *must* persevere to the end. And one of the means which the apostle uses to insure that his readers within the various congregations of his apostolic mission do not fall into a state of false security is to stir them up with warnings such as this."

<sup>18</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984), p. 79. Cf. Ralph P. Martin, *Colossians: The Church's Lord and the Christian's Liberty* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1972), pp. 58-59: "[Col. 1:23] is a needful addition which saves Christian salvation from slipping into an experience inalienably guaranteed and certified to any who once professes the faith and imagines that thereafter he can live as he pleases."

<sup>19</sup>*hagiasmos* means "holiness, consecration, sanctification" (BAGD2, p. 9). In this verse it is the antecedent of the relative pronoun "which" (*hou*).

discipline they would reap “righteousness and peace” (12:11). Now he commands his readers to be peace-makers, actively to seek harmony with others in the church.

Second, he commands his readers to “pursue” (by ellipsis) “holiness.” Recalling his reference to God’s holiness (in v. 10) he directs them to live godly lives. The relative clause which follows explains the importance of their doing so: “...without which no one will see the Lord.” The predictive future “will see” (*opsetai*) points to the outcome of salvation, the beatific vision. No one will be finally saved who does not live a holy life.

V. 15 “See to it that no one be excluded from the grace of God, that no bitter root grow up and cause trouble, and through it many be defiled.”<sup>20</sup> Following the double command of v. 14 is a single one designed to grab the readers’ attention and warn them. The words “See to it” introduce the threefold purpose of the warning. The readers are to “see to it”: 1) “lest anyone be excluded...”; 2) “lest any root...cause trouble...”; and 3) “lest anyone be a fornicator...”

First, “See to it lest anyone be excluded from God’s grace.” Being “excluded from God’s grace” means falling short of true salvation (by failing to persevere in holiness, for example). It speaks “of the absolutely disastrous eventuality of cutting oneself off from the grace of God.”<sup>21</sup>

Second, “See to it...that no bitter root grow up and cause trouble and through it many be defiled.” The writer is referring to Deut. 29:18:

Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the Lord our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. (NIV)<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>I interpret the participle *episkopountes* (BAGD2, p. 299, “look at, take care, see to it”) as providing attendant circumstances to the main verb *diokete* (“pursue”) in v. 14. Hence in effect *episkopountes* serves as an imperative, “See to it ...” As such *episkopountes* governs three purpose clauses introduced by *me* in vv. 15-16. *Me* goes with: 1) the adverbial participle of purpose *hysteron*, 2) the subjunctive *enochle* (both in v. 15), and 3) the elliptic subjunctive of *eimi* in the beginning of v. 16. *pikrias* is a qualitative genitive. The participle *phyousa* is used in attendant circumstances to *enochle*, “cause trouble,” or as an adjectival participle modifying “root.”

<sup>21</sup>Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 538. I disagree with I. Howard Marshall who holds that the use of the verb *hystereo* “indicates that an erstwhile believer is meant,” *Kept by the Power of God*, pp. 149, 249. BAGD2 (p. 849) correctly defines *hystereo* “to miss, fail to reach, be excluded.” The verb alone doesn’t indicate whether the apostate is a true or false believer.

<sup>22</sup>The writer to the Hebrews’ citation of this text constitutes a knotty problem. For discussion and a possible solution, see Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 539 n. 143.

Thus, the bitter root is a person rather than an attitude.<sup>23</sup> The writer warns his readers against apostasy as does the OT passage. He fears that one who apostatizes can morally defile others by his bad example. Such “trouble” destroys the peace the readers were commanded to seek in the preceding verse.

V. 16 “(See to it) that no one be sexually immoral or godless as Esau, who for a single meal gave up his birthright.”<sup>24</sup> Here is the third clause governed by the participle *episkopountes* in v. 15. The writer warns against sexual immorality and apostasy and he uses Esau as an example of both.<sup>25</sup> Esau’s immorality is recorded in Gen. 26:34-35 where he married two Hittite women (contrary to the prohibition later set down in Deut. 7:1-7) who were a source of grief to his parents.

The selling of his birthright, an act of apostasy, is well known (see Gen. 25:29-34). “In so doing, he proved himself to be ‘godless’ (Heb. 12:16), since at the heart of the birthright were the covenant promises that Isaac inherited from Abraham.”<sup>26</sup>

V. 17 “For you know that even afterwards when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he did not find a place for repentance, although he sought it [the blessing] with tears.”<sup>27</sup> The writer reminds his readers that years later when Esau wanted to avoid the consequences of his folly, he was unable. Although he desperately wanted to inherit the blessing belonging to the firstborn, his father Isaac had already irreversibly given the blessing to Jacob (Gen. 27). Ultimately this was rejection by God (Isaac spoke God’s judgment, Gen. 27:33). Esau’s change of mind did him no good.

<sup>23</sup>Harold W. Attridge (*The Epistle to the Hebrews*, ed. Helmut Koester [Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1989], p. 368) errs when he considers it an attitude.

<sup>24</sup>“Be” is implied and takes two predicate adjectives: “sexually immoral” and “godless.” These two predicates could be taken as substantives: “a fornicator or godless man.” The word “for” in “for a single meal” is *anti* which according to BAGD2, p. 74 means “in behalf of, for,” replacing the genitive of price.

<sup>25</sup>Not all commentators agree. Some do not regard Esau as an example of immorality, but only of apostasy (e.g. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], pp. 366-67). Others think immorality here has the OT “metaphorical meaning ... of worshipping other gods” (so Davies, *A Letter to Hebrews* [The Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: University Press, 1967], p. 123). For a defense of my opinion see Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 540.

<sup>26</sup>Ronald Youngblood, *NIV Study Bible*, note on Gen 25:34.

<sup>27</sup>The adverbial participle “wanting” (*thelon*) could be temporal or possibly concessive. The conjunction “although” (*kaiper*) indicates that the participle *ekzetesas* is concessive. It is debatable whether the personal pronoun “it” (*auten*) refers to “repentance” or to the “blessing.” I favor the latter option. Esau didn’t seek repentance; he sought the blessing. His tears arose from sorrow over loss of privilege, not from sorrow over sin. Owen sees little difference between the two “for that which he sought for in repentance ... was the blessing also” (as reported by Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 541, n. 148).

### B. F. Westcott captures the gravity of Esau's rebellion:

Thus his profane irreverence was seen in a new form. He paid no heed to his own act, but wished to occupy the position which he had voluntarily abandoned. He had sold the right of the first-born and yet, as if that were a trivial thing, he claimed to inherit the blessing which belonged to it.... He asserted the prerogative of birth, a gift of God, when he had himself recklessly surrendered it.<sup>28</sup>

After urging his readers not to commit sexual immorality or apostasy, the writer reminds them that, as in the case of Esau, in rebelling against God there is a place of no return, a final apostasy. It is possible for someone to apostatize in such a way as to make repentance impossible.<sup>29</sup>

### B. Conclusions

We learned from Col. 1:21-23 that perseverance in faith is a condition of final salvation. Our study of Heb. 12:14-17 adds to our theology of perseverance. Believers must also persevere *in holiness* (v. 14) if they are to be finally saved.

Heb. 12:14-17 also teaches the doctrine of apostasy — i.e. deliberate defection from the true religion. This passage informs us that apostasy is a real possibility for someone in the covenant community. An important theological question must be asked at this point: Can true believers apostatize or is apostasy limited to those who profess falsely?

The passage does not directly answer this question. It does, however, use Esau as an example of an apostate (v. 16). Is he better regarded as a lapsed believer or as a person within the community of faith who was never saved? Interpreters are divided over the issue. Some hold the former view:

Our writer uses Esau as an example to his readers, who are in danger of his sin and its consequences. If they give up their birthright they will lose their blessing. That is, if they let their Christian sonship go, by apostasy, they will lose their heavenly salvation.<sup>30</sup>

And some maintain the latter:

To be *profane* meant to be completely concerned with temporal and material matters, with no thought for spiritual values. It describes those whose response to God was nonexistent. Esau was so involved in the immediate satisfaction of his momentary hunger that he treated as of negligible value his rights as a

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<sup>28</sup>*The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 [orig. pub. 1889]), p. 408.

<sup>29</sup>J. H. Davies concurs (*Hebrews*, p. 123). Cf. Heb. 6:4, 6; 10:26-31.

<sup>30</sup>Davies, *Hebrews*, p. 124; Grant Osborne agrees, "Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews," in *Grace Unlimited* [ed. Clark Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975], pp. 152-153.



firstborn son, and his responsibility as the heir to receive the blessing of the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>31</sup>

Although I incline to the latter view, the matter cannot be decided by studying this passage alone. Systematic theological considerations must be taken into account. Since this is an exegetical theological study and not a systematization, I will emphasize what is clear in Heb. 12:14-17: the indispensability of perseverance in holiness, the possibility of apostasy by a member of the covenant community, and the danger of irremediable apostasy (v. 17).

## HEBREWS 3:12-14

### A. Theological Exegesis

After demonstrating Christ's superiority to Moses (3:1-6) and warning his readers against hardening their hearts by quoting Ps. 95:7-11 (3:7-11), the writer to the Hebrews applies this warning in vv. 12-14.

V. 12 "Watch out, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart which apostatizes from the living God,...."<sup>32</sup> Warning his readers, "watch out," the writer addresses them as "brothers." Although "brothers" (*adelphoi*) in Hebrews sometimes signifies Jews (7:5; 8:11), in the light of 3:1 the meaning here is "brothers in Christ." He addresses them corporately just as the Lord did the Israelites in the wilderness and the people in David's day (Ps. 95:7-11).

"...lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart which apostatizes from the living God." It is possible for a member of the covenant community to turn away from the Lord. The writer sounds the alarm against unbelief, denial of the Christian faith. Such unfaithfulness is exposed as sin in the light of Moses' and Christ's faithfulness spoken of earlier in this chapter (vv. 2, 5-6).

This warning would be especially powerful if Yadin's suggestion concerning the occasion of Hebrews is correct. He argued that the Christian-Jews addressed in Hebrews had once belonged to the Dead Sea Scrolls Sect. This sect regarded itself as the true Israel of the

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<sup>31</sup>Homer A. Kent, Jr. *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), p. 268; so also William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary. Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), pp. 384-387.

<sup>32</sup>For the use of the future instead of the subjunctive after "watch out" (*blepete*), see Max Zerwick, *Biblical Greek* (Rome: Scripta Pontificii Instituti Biblici, 1963), §344. "Unbelieving" (*apistias*) is a qualitative genitive. Rienecker says, "the infinitive with the preposition is used here epexegetically indicating the content of an evil heart" (*Linguistic Key*, p. 673). The infinitive is *apostenai* which when followed by *apo tinos* as here means "fall away" or "become apostate" according to BAGD2, p. 127.

wilderness wanderings, awaiting God's judgment on the apostate Jerusalem priesthood and the sect's subsequent entrance into the Promised Land. "In the meantime they prepared themselves for this event, and lived as closely as possible to the way of life of Israel during the sojourn in the wilderness, according to their interpretation."<sup>33</sup>

Whether Yadin's proposal be correct or not, the message of Heb. 3:12 is plain: the readers are not to turn away from the living God as the Israelites in the wilderness had done; instead, they must continue on in their professed faith. Since Christ eclipses Moses (vv. 3, 6), rebelling against him is more devastating than rebelling against Moses. To reject Moses meant to be denied entrance into the Promised Land; to reject Christ means to fall away from the living God. The expression "the living God" implies the threat of divine retribution, as is later made explicit in Heb. 10:31.

V. 13 "... but exhort each other every day, as long as it is called 'today' lest any of you become hardened by sin's deceitfulness."<sup>34</sup> The writer adds an exhortation to the strong warning of v. 12. He sees (at least some of) his readers in danger and writes to warn them of the seriousness of the situation and of their need to take action. They must not allow sin's deceit to turn them away from the Lord Jesus and back to Judaism. Instead they must encourage one another every day to continue in the Christian faith.

The expression "as long as it is called 'today'" from Psalm 95 applied to the time of the wilderness wanderings, to David's time, and to the first century. It is "today," the day of grace, the opportunity for them to believe. The implication is that this "day" will not last forever; a day of judgment will replace it. While there is still time, therefore, the readers must encourage one another to persevere in faith.

The purpose of the daily mutual exhortation is given next, "lest any of you become hardened by sin's deceitfulness." Sin is personified as devious. The professed Jewish-Christians might be fooled into thinking that reverting to Judaism was expedient to bring relief from persecution. The writer seeks to alert them to the dangers hidden in such thinking.

V. 14 "For we have shared in Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our confidence firm until the end."<sup>35</sup> The writer clarifies

<sup>33</sup>Yigael Yadin, "The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Epistle to the Hebrews," pp. 36-55 in *Scripta Hierosolymitana*. Volume IV, *Aspects of the Dead Sea Scrolls*, eds. Chaim Rabin and Y. Yadin (2nd. ed.; Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1965), p. 55.

<sup>34</sup>BAGD2, p. 212 shows the reflexive pronoun "yourselves" (*heautous*) is sometimes used for the reciprocal pronoun "each other." "Deceitfulness" (*apate*) is a dative of means and "sin" (*hamartias*) a subjective genitive.

<sup>35</sup>The first clause could be rendered "we have become partakers of Christ," if *metochoi* is to be taken as a substantive, rather than as a predicate adjective, BAGD2, p. 514.

his warnings. "We have shared in Christ." The verb is in the perfect tense, indicating completed action with ongoing results. The readers have been savingly united to Christ<sup>36</sup> if they satisfy the following condition: "...if [they] hold fast the beginning of [their] confidence firm until the end." They have shared in Christ if they persevere in faith. Montefiore misunderstands this statement:

This partnership with Christ demands faithfulness: we can only remain "partners if indeed we hold firm to the end the confidence which we had at the start." It is not uncommon for converts to begin with an initial flush of enthusiasm (cf. x. 32), only to flag, falter, and fail to persevere.<sup>37</sup>

On the contrary, their failure to persevere would indicate that they had never been joined to Christ. The last three words "until the end" indicate that final perseverance is in view.

Heb. 3:14, therefore, clarifies the warnings of 3:12-13. The writer teaches that people have become united to Christ, if they persevere in their confession of faith until the end. Perseverance is proof of union with Christ.<sup>38</sup>

### B. Conclusions

Heb. 3:12-14 teaches the necessity of perseverance in faith (v. 12) and holiness (v. 13). It thus confirms these same two truths we learned from Col. 1:21-23 and Heb. 12:14-17 respectively.

This passage also informs us that members of the covenant community can apostatize (v. 12). Therefore, they must be warned of this danger and must exhort one another to persevere in faith and holiness (v. 13). The peril of apostasy elicits the writer's pastoral concern for each individual, as Wayne McCown reminds us:

The author portrays a very real pastoral concern for his readers as indicated by the use of the word *lest* ten times in his epistle. His is a word of exhortation addressed from his heart to their point of need. Moreover, he is concerned for the salvation of each one in the community. There is need for a communal exercise of care and concern, especially for weak members. This epistle aims,

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<sup>36</sup>Some think that companionship or partnership with Christ is taught here rather than union with Christ. See Hughes, *Hebrews*, pp. 149-150 for a refutation of this position.

<sup>37</sup>Hugh Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Harper's NT Commentaries; New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 79. Cf. Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1950 [orig. pub., 1889]), p. 85.

<sup>38</sup>"The 'if' clause, then, does not tell us that we will become sharers of Christ ultimately if we hold fast long enough; but it tells us how we can recognize the true sharers of Christ," Kent, *Hebrews*, p. 75.

ultimately, to incite all of us to mutual exhortation and encouragement until Jesus comes.<sup>39</sup>

Heb. 3:14 takes us one step farther than the two passages we previously studied. Various writers correctly claim that Heb. 3:6 shows the necessity of perseverance in faith: "And we are his [Christ's] house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast" (NIV). They err, however, when they assume that Heb. 3:14 merely reinforces the teaching of v. 6. I. H. Marshall, for example, claims that these two verses teach that "membership of God's household is conditional upon perseverance."<sup>40</sup> Grant Osborne does the same:

One must conclude that the reward is conditional upon perseverance in "boldness and pride in our hope" (v. 6) and in "the beginning of our confidence" (v. 14). The danger envisaged here is that the deceitfulness of sin can progressively harden one's spiritual resolve and that this evil, unbelieving condition can cause one to "fall away from the living God" (vv. 12-15).<sup>41</sup>

D. A. Carson catches Marshall (and Osborne by implication) in a rare exegetical fallacy at this point:

I. Howard Marshall interprets Hebrews 3:6b and Hebrews 3:14 as if they say exactly the same thing, that "membership of God's household is conditional upon perseverance." In one sense, of course, that is correct; but close attention to the tenses in Hebrews 3:14 reveals an extra ingredient in this verse. We have become (*gegonamen*) — in the past! — partakers of Christ if we now, in the present, hold firmly to the confidence we had at first. It follows from this verse that although perseverance is mandated, it is also the evidence of what has taken place in the past. Put another way, perseverance becomes one of the essential ingredients of what it means to be a Christian, of what a partaker of Christ is and does. If persevering shows we have (already) come to share in Christ, it can only be because sharing in Christ has perseverance for its inevitable fruit.<sup>42</sup>

Carson is correct. Heb. 3:6 shows that perseverance in faith is indispensable to final salvation. Heb. 3:14 complements this teaching by showing that perseverance in faith is inevitable for those united to Christ. Hebrews thus shows a tendency to systematic theology when it relates the indispensability and inevitability of perseverance. It teaches both the saints' perseverance and God's preservation in 3:14. This verse has great importance due to its early position in the letter-treatise; it is programmatic for understanding the warning passages in Hebrews. It implies that failure to persevere indicates that one has not been joined to Christ.

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<sup>39</sup>"Such a Great Salvation," in *An Inquiry into Soteriology from a Biblical Theological Perspective*, eds. John E. Hartley and Larry R. Shelton (Anderson, IN: Warner, 1981), p. 183. Montefiore agrees, *Hebrews*, p. 77.

<sup>40</sup>*Kept by the Power of God*, pp. 140, 152.

<sup>41</sup>Osborne, "Soteriology," p. 147. His endnote 17 on p. 161 reads, "The conditional particles in vv. 6, 14 are, respectively, *ean* and *eanper* which provide further evidence that the writer considers apostasy to be possible."

<sup>42</sup>*Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), p. 88.

## JOHN 15:1-8

*A. Theological Exegesis*

In the midst of his farewell discourse Jesus here uses Old Testament imagery to press home to his eleven disciples the importance of cultivating their relationship to him.<sup>43</sup> He gives the image of the vine and the branches in vv. 1-8 and provides commentary on it in vv. 9-16.

V. 1 Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-dresser." Here as often in John's Gospel Jesus replaces OT Israel. Although Israel was the Lord's vine or vineyard, she failed in her responsibility to produce good fruit. Jesus succeeds where Israel failed.<sup>44</sup> He is the true vine, the completion and fulfillment of OT Israel.

This is one of Jesus' seven "I am" sayings<sup>45</sup> and it portrays him as the source of eternal life. Jesus the vine vivifies the branches and produces fruit through them.

Jesus' saying, "My Father is the vine-dresser" indicates that the Father supervises the whole process and suggests the Son's subordination to him. Jesus the vine fulfills God's plan because the Father and Son work together.

V. 2 "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he removes, and every one that bears fruit he prunes in order that it might bear more fruit." Two kinds of branches are contrasted here: unfruitful and fruitful. I disagree with interpreters who understand the branches as two different kinds of Christians and see God's "lifting up" fruitless branches so they will become fruitful.<sup>46</sup> John's use of antithetical contrasts to distinguish believers from unbelievers precludes the

<sup>43</sup>The OT background includes: Ps. 80:8-16; Isa. 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Jer. 2:21; 6:9; 12:10-11; Ezek. 15:1-6; 17:5-10; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1; 14:7.

<sup>44</sup>Beasley-Murray says it well, "It is striking that in every instance when Israel in its historical life is depicted in the OT as a vine or vineyard, the nation is set under the judgment of God for its corruption, sometimes explicitly for its failure to produce good fruit.... The description of Jesus as *true* Vine is primarily intended to contrast with the failure of the vine Israel to fulfill its calling to be fruitful for God" (*John* [Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, Texas: Word, 1987], p. 272).

<sup>45</sup>Although there are seven "I am" sayings, there are only three different meanings: (1) Jesus is the revealer of God ("the light," and "the truth"); (2) he is the Savior ("the gate" and "the way"); and (3) he is the life-giver ("the bread of life," "the good shepherd," "the resurrection and the life," "the life," and "the true vine"). All three are embodied in Jn. 14:6. See my *Getting to Know John's Gospel. A Fresh Look at Its Main Ideas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), pp. 25-35.

<sup>46</sup>BAGD2, p. 24 correctly says that *airei* here should be rendered "'take away, remove' with no suggestion of lifting up.... [Rather:] Of branches 'cut off.'" D. A. Carson concurs (*The Gospel According to John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991], p. 518).

existence of fruitless Christians.<sup>47</sup> For John, therefore, only two possibilities obtain: either people are Christians or they are not. There is no middle position between fruitfulness and fruitlessness.

It is a mistake to understand “in me” in v. 2 to speak of union with Christ<sup>48</sup> (although the passage as a whole has much to say about union with Christ). The vine and branches is a corporate figure as was its OT antecedent. The fruitless branches in John 15 are not “apostate Christians” as some hold;<sup>49</sup> they are unsaved persons who have been “in the vine” — they have had close contact with Jesus. In fact, the unfruitful branch that Jesus immediately has in mind is Judas. He has acted outwardly as a disciple should; he has appeared to be a fruitful branch and has even fooled the other disciples (13:28-29). In reality, however, he is a fruitless one whose evil deeds will soon give him away. He has been a thief all along (12:4-6) and now has gone out to betray the Son of God (13:27, 30). Thus, one reason Jesus speaks of the vine and the branches is to prepare his disciples for Judas’s treachery.

The gardener will cut off the fruitless branches so that they can be gathered and thrown into the fire to be burned (cf. v. 6). This is a picture of the eternal torment which Judas and those like him will suffer. Conversely, the Father will trim the fruitful branches (sometimes causing believers pain) so that they will be even more fruitful.

V. 3 “You are already clean on account of the word that I have spoken to you.” Jesus does not threaten his disciples with hell-fire, but through paronomasia he lets them know that he considers them fruitful branches.<sup>50</sup> Although the Father cuts off (*airei*) unfruitful branches, he cleans (*kathairei*) fruitful ones. Therefore, when Jesus tells his disciples, “Already you are clean” (*katharoi*) “because of the word which I spoke to you,” he assures them that they are fruitful

<sup>47</sup>People are either children of God or children of the devil (8:42-44). They either believe in the Son of God or they do not (3:36). They either obey or disobey Christ’s commandments (14:23-24). They either have eternal life or they do not (5:24). They either love the light or hate it (3:19-21).

<sup>48</sup>Carson (*John*, p. 515) agrees and provides helpful discussion. For a different view, see Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI* (Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), p. 675.

<sup>49</sup>E.g. C. K. Barrett, *The Gospel According to St. John* (2nd ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), pp. 473, 475.

<sup>50</sup>This verse, therefore, serves a useful purpose within the metaphor — that of reassuring the disciples — and is not to be regarded as an editorial gloss (contra Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Gospel According to St. John* [Herder’s Theological Commentary on the NT; trans. David Smith and G. A. Kon; 3 vols.; New York: Crossroad, 1987], 3:98-99).

branches<sup>51</sup>. The disciples are forgiven through Jesus' efficacious and cleansing word; they contrast with Judas who alone is called "unclean" in 13:10-11.

Moreover, Jesus speaks of condemnation in 15:1-8 in the third person: "Every branch in me which bears no fruit he removes..." (v. 2); "If someone does not remain in me, he is thrown out as a branch and ... they are burned" (v. 6). In the surrounding verses, however, Jesus uses the second person to speak to the disciples: "You are already clean..." (v. 3); "apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5); "If you remain in me..." (v. 7). Jesus thus carefully distinguishes his disciples from the unfruitful branches which are headed for God's judgment.

**V. 4** "Remain in me, and I (will remain) in you. Just as a branch is not able to bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, so neither (will) you unless you remain in me." What does Jesus mean when he speaks repeatedly of abiding in the vine? Verse 9 provides a clue: "Just as the Father loved me, I also loved you; continue in my love." To abide is to remain in Jesus' love by loving him in return. Abiding is continuing in a personal relationship with Christ. Although Judas seemed to have such a relationship with Jesus, he really did not. The other disciples, however, are genuine fruit-bearing branches. They are to remain in the vine by continuing to love Jesus who first loved them. In so doing they will bear much fruit.

Just as a branch is not able to bear fruit unless it draws its life from the vine, so the disciples will only be able to produce fruit by remaining in Jesus, the giver of eternal life.

**V. 5** "I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him bears much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Jesus repeats the facts that he is the source of life ("the vine") and the disciples are dependent upon him (they are "the branches"). Apart from him they can bear no fruit "because he himself, as the stock of the vine, alone can channel the sap to the branches."<sup>52</sup> Continuing in a personal relationship with him characterized by love and obedience, they bear "much fruit."

**V. 6** "If someone does not remain in me, he is thrown out as a branch and dries up and they are gathered and thrown into the fire and they are burned."<sup>53</sup> Jesus applies a principle from Ezek. 15:1-8: a vine

<sup>51</sup>Bruce (*The Gospel of John* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983], pp. 308-309) after commenting on the paronomasia concludes, "Judas was the exception then; in terms of the present parable, he is an unfruitful branch that has to be removed."

<sup>52</sup>Barnabas Lindars, *The Gospel of John* (New Century Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), p. 489.

<sup>53</sup>"'Are gathered up and thrown' is literally 'they gather them and throw (them).' But this Semitic use of the third person plural is the equivalent of a passive construction..." (Barclay M. Newman and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's*

branch not producing grapes is good only for fuel. Shifting from the second to the third person, he uses vine imagery to warn of condemnation for branches (persons) that do not continue to love him. The verbs are a combination of gnomic aorists and gnomic presents,<sup>54</sup> describing the customary state of affairs.

V. 7 “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, whatever you want, ask, and it will be done for you.”<sup>55</sup> Jesus switches back to the second person to address the disciples. He promises answered prayers to those who love and obey him. Leon Morris aptly writes, “If a man is truly abiding in Christ then his prayers will certainly be ... in accordance with all that Christ stands for.”<sup>56</sup>

Instead of “You in me and I in you,” Jesus says, “You in me and *my words* in you.” How are we to account for this substitution? Raymond Brown answers, “Jesus and his revelation are virtually interchangeable, for he is incarnate revelation (the Word).”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, Jesus implies that there is a correlation between his disciples’ continuing in him and his words continuing in them. Invisible spiritual reality becomes visible in the disciples’ obedience. The disciples’ abiding with Jesus includes their believing and obeying his word.

V. 8 “In this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit, and prove yourselves to be my disciples.”<sup>58</sup> This sums up the main reason Jesus gave his disciples John 15 — since eternal life manifests itself in fruitfulness, they are to demonstrate<sup>59</sup> that they are true believers by bearing fruit. In doing so they will bring glory to God the Father.

What kind of fruit is Jesus speaking about? Carson shows that “fruit” here “represents everything that is the product of effective prayer

*Handbook on the Gospel of John* [New York: United Bible Societies, 1980], p. 483).

<sup>54</sup>BDF (§333.1) labels *eblethe* and *exeranthe* gnomic aorists. The present tense verbs are *synagousin*, *ballousin*, and *kaietai*. The change from aorist to present is best attributed to John’s penchant for literary variety.

<sup>55</sup>See BAGD2, p. 159, for *ginomai* meaning “be done” in response to faith or prayer.

<sup>56</sup>*The Gospel According to John* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), p. 672.

<sup>57</sup>*The Gospel According to John XIII-XXI*, p. 662.

<sup>58</sup>“Is glorified” (*edoxasthe*) is the proleptic or dramatic aorist; see Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, §257. *hina* here takes the place of an exegetical infinitive (Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, §410) and is translated “that.” The variants *genesthe* or *genesesthe*, aorist subjunctive and future indicative respectively, are sometimes interchangeable after *hina*. For discussion of this difficult textual problem see Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 519.

<sup>59</sup>On *ginomai* here meaning “that you prove to be,” see Max Zerwick and Mary Grosvenor, *A Grammatical Analysis of the Greek NT* (rev. ed.; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1981), p. 332; cf. BAGD2, p. 160. Bruce agrees, *The Gospel of John*, p. 310.



in Jesus' name," and criticizes reductionist views.<sup>60</sup> The fruit of which Jesus speaks includes believing and following his word (v. 7), obedience to his commands (v. 10), experiencing his joy (v. 11), love for him and other believers (vv. 12-14), and witness (vv. 16, 27).

### B. Conclusions

This passage teaches the perseverance of the saints. True believers continue in a personal relationship with Jesus. This relationship is marked by belief in the truth (having Jesus' words remain in them, v. 7), by obedience (keeping his commandments, vv. 10, 14), and by love for Jesus (v. 9) and for other believers (vv. 12, 17). That is, genuine believers persevere in faith, holiness, and love.

John 15 focuses primarily on the disciples' human responsibility. But not exclusively. In 15:16 the accent shifts to divine sovereignty — the Son of God's election and preservation of his saints. There Jesus says, "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you might go and bear fruit and that your fruit might remain ...." At times in the fourth Gospel Jesus speaks of his choosing the twelve for discipleship. This is the case in 6:70 where Jesus says, "Did I not choose you the twelve, and one of you is a devil?" Jesus' choosing the eleven in 15:16 is different, however. It is an election unto salvation, as v. 19 demonstrates: "If you belonged to the world, the world would love (you as) its own; but because you do not belong to the world, but (because) I chose you out of the world, for this reason the world hates you." Jesus could not say these words to Judas; the world did not hate him. Jesus' choosing in 15:16, 19 is a choosing of his people out of the world so that they no longer are the world's; now they are his.

John 15:16 not only teaches election; it also teaches preservation. Jesus chose the eleven and *appointed them to bear lasting fruit*. The disciples cannot take credit for fruitbearing. Underneath all of their efforts are the everlasting arms. If John 15 teaches the indispensability of perseverance in faith, love, and holiness, it also teaches the inevitability of such perseverance. Said differently, divine preservation (here given in the language of fruitbearing) undergirds the perseverance of the saints. Arminian exegetes have not paid sufficient attention to v. 16 in their treatment of John 15.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup>Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 517.

<sup>61</sup>Osborne fails to deal with v. 16 when he summarizes Calvinist attempts to defend the doctrine of preservation in the light of the warnings of Jn. 15 ("Exegetical Notes on Calvinist Texts," in *Grace Unlimited* [ed. Clark Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975], pp. 172-73, 186-87, n. 23). Marshall (as Osborne) claims that John 15 "indicates that the disciples stand under the threat of being lost." He mentions v. 16 but does not consider the view set forth in this article (*Kept by the Power of God*, p. 184).

Apostasy is taught in vv. 2 and 6. Those (like Judas) who profess to have a personal relationship with Jesus but who do not remain in it — do not live a life characterized by love, obedience and belief in the truth — reveal that they are fruitless branches, apostates who will be condemned in the last judgment.

Carson says it well:

If we must think of “branches” with real contact with Jesus, we need go no further than Judas Iscariot. Indeed, there is a persistent strand of NT witness that depicts men and women with some degree of connection with Jesus, or with the Christian church, who nevertheless by failing to display the grace of perseverance finally testify that the transforming life of Christ has never pulsated within them (e.g. Mt. 13:18-23; 24:12; Jn. 8:31ff.; Heb. 3:14-19; 1 Jn. 2:19; 2 Jn. 9).<sup>62</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Theological exegesis of Col. 1:21-23, Heb. 12:14-17, Heb. 3:12-14, and John 15:1-8 has demonstrated the necessity of the perseverance of the saints. Specifically, perseverance in faith (Col. 1:23; Heb. 3:12; John 15:7), love (John 15:9, 12, 17), and holiness (Heb. 12:14; Heb. 3:13; John 15:10, 14) is a condition of final salvation. Professed Christians must continue to believe the Gospel, to love God and fellow-believers, and to live godly lives, if they are to see the Lord.

These passages also teach that apostasy, deliberate defection from the true religion, is a real possibility for members of the covenant community (Heb. 12:15-16; 3:12; John 15:2, 6). Church members must be warned of this danger and must exhort one another to persevere in faith and holiness (Heb. 3:13).

In the contexts of Heb. 3:12-14 and John 15:1-8 we noticed a systematizing tendency. Heb. 3:14 and John 15:16 demonstrate that perseverance is inevitable for the true people of God.<sup>63</sup> Our study of perseverance thus confirms the fact that God preserves his saints. Scripture shows a tendency to systematic theology when it combines the indispensability and inevitability of perseverance.

Several conclusions follow. Since union with Christ results in final perseverance in faith, perseverance is proof of union with Christ. Failure to persevere, therefore, indicates that one has not been joined to Christ. Furthermore, the correlation between preservation and perseverance sets up a test of the reality of salvation: Perseverance proves faith’s genuineness. The people of God do continue in faith, love, and godliness. It is no wonder, then, that in response to John Goodwin’s distortion of Reformed theology John Owen became irate.

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<sup>62</sup>Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, p. 515.

<sup>63</sup>They are designated as those united to Christ in Heb. 3:14 and as those whom Jesus has chosen in Jn. 15:16.



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