

The Ancient Doctrine of Once Saved Always Saved

By Kevin Cauley

We all know people who believe the doctrine of “Once saved, always saved.” This is the idea that once a person becomes a child of God, there is no sin that they can commit to lose their salvation. Many people today find this doctrine to be of great comfort, because it in essence relieves them of all personal responsibility in their relationship with God. After all, if I am saved, and there is nothing that I can do to be lost, then it doesn’t really matter how I behave or act, so I need not worry that much about it. The truth is that this is a most dangerous doctrine when it comes to matters of religion, because it deceives people into thinking that their relationship with God is secure, when it really is not.

Interestingly enough, this false doctrine has been around for quite a long time. In fact, early Christians had to deal with it in the 1st and 2nd centuries. During that period of time, there was a false doctrine known as Gnosticism. Of the Gnostics, one sect taught the doctrine of once saved, always saved. A Christian named Irenaeus lived during the 2nd century A.D. (130-202). He wrote a book titled, “Against Heresies” in which he called attention to this particular fact. In this work (Book I Chapter 6) he said the following regarding Gnostic teaching:

But as to themselves, they hold that they shall be entirely and undoubtedly saved, not by means of conduct, but because they are spiritual by nature. For, just as it is impossible that material substance should partake of salvation (since, indeed, they maintain that it is incapable of receiving it), so again it is impossible that spiritual substance (by which they mean themselves) should ever come under the power of corruption, whatever the sort of actions in which they indulged. For even as gold, when submersed in filth, loses not on that account its beauty, but retains its own native qualities, the filth having no power to injure the gold, so they affirm that they cannot in any measure suffer hurt, or lose their spiritual substance, whatever the material actions in which they may be involved. Wherefore also it comes to pass, that the “most perfect” among them addict themselves without fear to all those kinds of forbidden deeds of which the Scriptures assure us that “they who do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”

And committing many other abominations and impieties, they run us down (who from the fear of God guard against sinning even in thought or word) as utterly contemptible and ignorant persons, while they highly exalt themselves, and claim to be perfect, and the elect seed. For they declare that we simply receive grace for use, wherefore also it will again be taken away from us; but that they themselves have grace as their own special possession, which has descended from above by means of an unspeakable and indescribable conjunction; and on this account more will be given them.

Now, let’s compare what was stated regarding Gnosticism with some more recent quotes. Notice the following quotation from Billy Graham in answer to the question, “Will I lose my salvation if I sin?”

*When we do sin, God does not reject us or disown us. Our fellowship with Him may be broken, but our relationship is not; we are still members of His family if we have truly committed our lives to Christ”(h**p://www.billygraham.org/qna/qna.asp?i=484)*

In response to another question, “How big a sin do you have to commit before you lose your salvation?” Billy Graham said:

*I am convinced that once a person sincerely and honestly trusts Christ for his or her salvation, they become a member of God’s family forever — and nothing can change that relationship.(h**p://www.billygraham.org/qna/qna.asp?i=1777)*

Edward Hiscox in “The Standard Manual for Baptist Churches” says it this way:

We believe that the scriptures teach that such as are truly regenerate, being born of the Spirit, will not utterly fall away and perish, but will endure unto the end; that their persevering attachment to Christ is the grand mark which distinguishes them from superficial professors; that a special Providence watches over their welfare; and that they are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation (Hiscox, pg. 67, 1939).

The Westminster Confession of Faith states regarding the perseverance of the saints:

I. They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.II. This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

III. Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevelancy of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their perseverance, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God’s displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

The point of these quotations is not to prove that Calvinists teach this doctrine, because they freely admit it. The point is to show the similarities between what the Gnostics taught and what Calvinists teach. There are some differences, but the essence of the teaching is the same.

- If a person is saved, it is not by means of his own conduct, but on account of his nature. While Gnostics and Calvinists differ in the origin of that nature, the doctrine is still the same. Gnostics say that it is due to a special spiritual nature. Calvinists say that they are infused by the nature of Christ.
- One is saved on account of one's election to be saved. The Gnostics said that they were of the "elect seed." Calvinists say that they are elected by God. Both agree that being elected precludes their actions from affecting that election in a negative way.
- While one may willfully sin in the flesh, that does not affect the relationship that one has to God and salvation. The third part of the Westminster Confession of Faith (as quoted above) makes it plain that Christians may even live in sinfulness, yet not affect their salvation. The Gnostics just went one step further and stated that it was their desire and practice to do so.
- Grace overcomes all sins regardless of the individual's attitude toward sin. Calvinists state that grace is irresistible and the Christian cannot help but fall under it. Gnostics say that regardless how much sin they willingly commit, grace flows upon them freely for every sin they commit.
- Both agree that there is nothing that can cause the one who is saved to lose their salvation. Gnostics take this to the ultimate conclusion and pursue their own lusts and passions without constraint. Calvinists, however, take another approach. They say that the Christian who is saved generally won't choose to live like that, even though if they did, they couldn't lose their salvation. In essence giving mere lip service to practicing righteousness.

The parallels are striking. How many times have we heard the person who believes in this doctrine of "once saved, always saved" say that the child of God cannot fall from grace? How many times have we heard those who believe this doctrine say that the child of God cannot lose their spirituality? How many times have we heard them say that the child of God cannot sin in such a way so as to lose his salvation? The similarities between this form of Gnosticism and the doctrine of "Once saved, always saved" are too numerous to ignore.

It was indeed the teaching and practice of the apostles to reject the doctrines of Gnosticism, including this doctrine. The book of Colossians was written by Paul in rejection of Gnosticism. John's account of the gospel of Christ and his epistle of 1 John were also written as a response to the doctrines of Gnosticism, and particularly, 1 John was written to refute the idea of once saved, always saved. One cannot honestly read through this book and ignore that conclusion. In addition, the following passages in the New Testament clearly indicate that Christians may sin so as to fall from grace: [Galatians 5:4](#); [Hebrews 6:4-6](#); [Hebrews 10:26](#); [2 Peter 2:20-22](#).

If you know of someone who believes this doctrine, then I urge you to take this article to them, invite them to study it with you and help them to come to understand that believing this doctrine is not in harmony with God's word. If one truly believes this doctrine they will be eternally lost, because they will not regard sin as the awful and terrible thing that it truly is. A Christian may be forgiven after having committed sin based upon repentance and confession, but one will not be forgiven while actively pursuing a life of sin. Yes, friends, the Christian can so sin as to fall from grace.