



Desperate Assurance: Preface; Chronology of Escrow & Election; History of the Limited Atonement View

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DESPERATE ASSURANCE

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Preface:

A recent conversation with one of my parishioners brought to my attention a doctrine that when completely understood may be considered as the tragic flaw of Protestant theology as it is observed and practiced historically by some denominations in the United States of America. This doctrine is known by several titles: The doctrine of Limited Atonement, hyper-Calvinism; five-point Calvinism; supralapsarianism; experimental predestinarianism, and Lordship salvation among others.

The basic premise of this theology is that Christ only died for the elect. The elect are defined as a group of people who were identified by God in eternity past as those He would predestine to salvation. To these individuals, God would at some point during their lives impute the "gift of faith." When this event occurs in the life of preselected recipient, he is said to automatically believe in Christ. This is the result of what is referred to as "irresistible grace." Since his faith in Christ is irresistible then it is implied that his own free will was not independently involved in the mental process of *evaluating* the gospel and *determining* that Jesus is the Christ.

The conclusions that are reached from this theological position are: (1) there are only a predetermined few who are among the elect, (2) these few are predestined to be saved, and (3) their salvation is the act of divine sovereign will alone and human free will contributes nothing to the process.

In addition, it may be deduced from these positions that the person who dies as an unbeliever was not among the elect. Although on the surface this is an obvious statement, the application goes much farther. Not only is this individual not among the elect, he could never be even if he wanted to because those who are among the elect were determined by God in eternity past.

Only the elect are imputed the "gift of faith" which results in "irresistible grace" and free will is not an essential element. This concept finds its origin in an inaccurate exegesis of:

Ephesians 2:8 - (NASB) For by grace you have been saved through faith and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God;

v. 9 - not as a result of works, that no one should boast.



The hyper-Calvinists' error has to do with the pronoun **οὗτος, houtos**. They make the mistake of designating as its antecedent the word faith, **πίστις, pistis**. This error causes the verse read this way:

Ephesians 2:8 - (Hyper-Calvinist translation) For by grace you have been saved through faith and that faith is not of yourselves, it [this faith] is the gift of God.

However, "faith" (**πίστις, pistis**) cannot be the antecedent of "that" (**οὗτος, houtos**) as we will demonstrate. The verse is introduced by the instrumental of means from the singular feminine noun:

χάρις, charis - "by means of grace"

Note that the word is in the instrumental case and is feminine gender.

The next two words are verbs and form a *periphrasis*. This construction is carried over in the Greek language from the Attic dialect. It indicates that the writer cannot get all the details in one verbal form, therefore he uses two. In the Greek it forms a forceful and powerful affirmation of the principle being stated.

The Greek perfect periphrastic in Ephesians 2:8 is composed of two verbs. We will note first the perfect passive participle of:

σῶζω, sōzō - "saved"

perfect: Intensive; emphasizes a present state that exists as the result of a past action. The past action is faith in Christ. This indicates that the act of salvation was completed "by means of grace" and "through faith" as is stated in context.

The intensive perfect is the tense of the "finished product." It directs special attention to the results of the action. Consequently, the stress placed upon the existing fact is intensified: "you stand saved forever."

passive: At the point the sinner expresses faith alone in Christ alone, he receives the action of the verb. The action is an act of the Holy Spirit through efficacious grace in which He saves the person's soul in a moment of time.

Verbs in the passive voice are generally intransitive as is the case here. There is no direct object here and therefore this verb makes a complete affirmation of the finished results which are: "By grace you have been saved in the past with the result that you keep on being saved forever."

participle: Circumstantial; indicates an attendant circumstance.

The second verb in the periphrasis is the present active indicative of:

εἰμί, eimi - "have been"

present: Static; expresses a state or condition that perpetually exists and thus becomes a universal doctrine that can never be changed. "You have been saved in the past with the result that you keep on being saved forever."

active: The believer produces the action of this verb by being in a perpetual status of salvation.



indicative: Declarative; a dogmatic statement of biblical fact. Combined with the perfect passive participle of **σώζω, sōzō** forming the periphrasis, this construction denotes a completed action with eternal results.

What is instrumental in bringing about this absolute status comes next, the ablative of means from the preposition **δία, dia** plus the genitive case of the feminine singular of the noun:

πίστις, pīsits - "through the instrumentality of faith."

We are saved by means of grace through the instrumentality of faith. Grace is God's part in the package while faith is our part." In human history the sovereignty of God and the free will of man must coexist by divine decree.

Faith is the instrument or means utilized by man to respond positively to the revelation of the gospel under common grace. Salvation is accomplished by means of the Holy Spirit by means of efficacious grace.

Next comes the controversial near demonstrative pronoun, the nominative neuter singular of:

οὗτος, houtos - "that"

Hyper-Calvinists refer this pronoun back to the word "faith." However, the syntax of the sentence does not allow this. The pronoun "that" is in the *neuter* gender while the noun "faith" is *feminine*. The same can be said for the word "grace" which is also a *feminine* noun in context. Instead, the *neuter* pronoun refers back to the periphrastic verbs, **σώζω, sōzō** and **εἰμί, eimi**: "you have been saved in the past with the result that you keep on being saved forever."

It is the doctrine of salvation that is referenced by the pronoun **οὗτος, houtos** not grace or faith. Why is this so important? Because of what follows next in the verse. What comes next is the identification of the source of salvation. We first learn who is not the source and then we find out who is. The negative:

οὐκ ἐξ, ouk ex - "not from" plus the ablative plural of source from:

σὺ, su - "yourselves"

You can now see the problem that occurs when the antecedent of the preposition "that," **οὗτος, houtos**, is said to be "faith," **πίστις, pīsits**. Here is the way the verse would read under this assumption:

Ephesians 2:8 - (Hyper-Calvinist translation) For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that faith is not from yourselves; that faith is a gift from God.

From such a translation is how the false doctrine of the "gift of faith" was derived. It makes it appear that the predetermined few – the elect – are saved by grace by means of the imputation of a special gift from God called "faith." Those who do not receive this "gift of faith" cannot express efficacious faith in Christ and thus remain in reprobate status. Any expression of faith in Christ by the nonelect is considered to be "temporary faith" and thus nonefficacious.

However, this is not the correct translation. The following recognizes the perfect periphrastic, the feminine gender of "grace" and "faith" and the neuter of the pronoun "that":

Ephesians 2:8 - (ETL) For by means of grace you have been saved in the past with the result that you stand saved forever through the instrumentality of faith, and that salvation not from the source of yourselves, the gift of God;



v. 9 - not from the source of works that anyone should boast.

Note the ellipsis at the end of verse 8. There are no verbs. A smooth English translation would read, "and that salvation is not from the source of yourselves, it is a gift from God."

The absence of the verb "to be" is dramatic and places emphasis on who *is* and who *is not* the source of salvation: "and that salvation ... not from the source of yourselves, ... the gift of God."

But according to hyper-Calvinism, the person who is not among the elect cannot be saved. Even if he expresses faith in Christ, this faith is said to be "temporary faith" and as a result grace is made "ineffectual" for salvation.

The doctrine that emerges from these conclusions is "double predestination": the elect are predestined for salvation but at the same time the nonelect, classified as the "reprobate," are predestined for the lake of fire.

The question that immediately arises is: Divine sovereignty has determined and divine omniscience has known who the elect are from eternity past, but how does an individual determine and ultimately know who the elect are? The heretical conclusion submitted is that "we shall know them by their fruits."

However, this presents its own set of problems. First of all, when a person expresses personal faith in Christ how is he to know whether or not his faith was "irresistible" or "temporary"? If "irresistible" then he is saved. But if "temporary" it was nothing more than energy of the flesh and he not only remains lost in his sins but he is reprobate with no hope of salvation. Surely such an individual would like some clarification in order to acquire either assurance of his salvation or confirmation of his condemnation.

The answer provided by hyper-Calvinism is very complicated and quite involved but in the end it does not provide the individual with any assurance. It is all guesswork based on assumptions arrived at by "human reasoning" not "biblical revelation."

The hyper-Calvinists assert that if a person is truly among the elect then he will be saved. He will know he is saved by the fact that he not only produces the "fruit of the Holy Spirit" but that he will "persevere" in such production until physical death.

Conclusion: those who "persevere" are the elect and may conclude they are saved on or about the day they die. Those who "do not persevere" are *not* the elect and may conclude, once they find themselves producing "works of the flesh" (for example Galatians 5:19-21), that they are reprobate and predestined to the lake of fire.

Although the hyper-Calvinist insists that salvation is through "faith alone in Christ alone" this phrase does not mean the same to them as it does to those who subscribe to unlimited atonement. Faith alone in Christ alone for the proponent of limited atonement does not stress human free will but rather "irresistible grace." Only those who are the elect have this provision and it is only made effectual by the "gift of faith."



Those who subscribe to the doctrine of unlimited atonement assert that “faith alone in Christ alone” involves an academically lucid understanding of the gospel to which human free will responds in association with a personal belief that the information is true. The verb “to believe” is transitive and therefore must have an object that the individual agrees is qualified and trustworthy to accomplish what is proposed. This “belief” is a firm conviction that Jesus is the means by which one’s sins are forgiven, salvation is gained, and eternal life is acquired. This conclusion is reached under the ministry of the Holy Spirit called “common grace.” Once faith is expressed, the Holy Spirit takes this faith and makes it effectual for salvation. This is referred to as “efficacious grace.”

When it is understood that Jesus died for the sins of the entire human race and not just a predetermined few, then it may be safely concluded that anyone who simply believes in Christ will be saved. Faith alone in Christ alone confirms to the believer that He was among the elect in eternity past. This enables him to dismiss all uncertainty about his eternal future and concentrate on executing the spiritual life of the Church Age.

However, if we conclude instead that Jesus died only for the elect, we are forced to further conclude that (1) only the elect can be saved and thus all others are reprobate, (2) the latter’s reprobate status was decreed in eternity past, and (3) it is predestined to remain so forever. The doctrine of the “gift of faith” makes the act of faith dependent upon a divine provision that cannot be resisted. Thus, “faith alone in Christ alone” is true but only for the elect.

After having expressed faith in Christ the hyper-Calvinist must then turn his attention to proving to himself and others that he is among the elect and therefore saved. Until he does he can have no confidence that his “faith” was made possible by the “gift of faith” but must wonder instead if it was only “temporary faith.” He is told that he may verify this not by appealing to Scripture for assurance but rather by focusing his attention and efforts on producing “fruits” which may be described as “good works.” These efforts are energized by a false motivation. Divine good is designed by God as the legitimate method by which the believer may serve, praise, and glorify Him and in the end receive rewards and blessings for doing so.

Thus, there is no way that a person can perform legitimate divine good when the source of his motivation is to prove to himself, and often to others, whether or not he is among the elect. His emphasis for doing “good works” becomes self-validation, not service to God. Whatever fruit he produces automatically becomes human good at best.

The controversy between the camps of limited and unlimited atonement began following the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century. Our time together is not sufficient enough for us to engage in an exhaustive study of this still-continuing debate. However, I do think it will be helpful if we will spend our time establishing the origin of the limited atonement view and how its prominence among the settlers of this country has contributed to a two-century drift by American Protestants toward the dark side of morality. Further we will note a number of principles that discredit hyper-Calvinism and examine some of the passages referenced by them as justification for their beliefs.

I have entitled our study *Desperate Assurance*. The dictionary defines “desperate” as some act done in a nearly hopeless situation. Human good production does not, in the end, result in a complete confidence of salvation. Thus the search for assurance by means of “good works” is desperate and produces no confidence about one’s eternal future.

In the course of our study I will quote from several books that address this subject. A complete bibliography is provided on the final page of the published notes of this series.



I. Chronology of Escrow & Election

NOTE: It is not our intent to study escrow blessings but to use the passage that teaches about them to introduce you to the doctrine of election. If you are interested in this study you may get the tapes by requesting *Joshua* lesson numbers: 611 through 619.

1. The word “escrow” is a legal term that is used as an illustration to explain the mechanics by which God transfers rewards to believers.
2. The concept is found in the Greek of Ephesians 1:3-4:

Ephesians 1:3 - Worthy of praise is God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ.

3. All the elements of an escrow are found in this verse:
 - a. God has blessed us thus He is the First Party or the Grantor.
 - b. The words “has blessed” refer to the action taken by God in creating the escrow contract.
 - c. The pronoun “us” refers to believers who are the Second Party or Grantees.
 - d. The contents of the escrow deposit are noted in general terms by the phrase “every spiritual blessing.”
 - e. The Depository, or the place where the escrow’s deposit is kept, is said to be “in heavenly places.”
 - f. The Third Party, called the Depository or Escrow Officer, is identified as Christ Jesus.

Ephesians 1:3 - Worthy of praise is God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Who [Grantor] has blessed [aorist active participle of the verb: εὐλογέω, eulogēō; creation of the escrow] us [believers, Grantees] with every spiritual blessing [the contents of the escrow] in heavenly places [the Depository] in Christ [the Escrow Officer or Depository],

4. Verse 4 reveals to us precisely when this escrow contract was put on deposit in heaven under the supervision of Jesus Christ as Escrow Officer.

Ephesians 1:4 - since He Himself has elected [main verb: ἐκλέγω, eklegō] us in Him before the beginning of the world [creation, Genesis 1:1] that we should be holy and blameless in His presence.

5. In verse 3 the phrase “has blessed” is the aorist active participle of the verb:

εὐλογέω, eulogēō - the creation of the escrow account

aorist: Culminative; views the escrow deposit in its entirety but regards it from the standpoint of its existing results. They are on deposit awaiting fulfillment of the escrow agreement in time by the mature believer.



active: God produces the action as Grantor.

participle: Circumstantial; expresses attendant circumstances, i.e., the volitional decisions of the believer related to fulfillment of the Escrow Agreement.

6. A question arises: When did God the Father as Grantor actually create the escrow and place it on deposit with Christ as Trustee? The verb **εὐλογέω, eulogeō**, “has blessed,” is an aorist active participle. And the action of an aorist participle always precedes the action of the main verb.
7. What then is the action of the aorist participle? It is the creation of the escrow account and placing it on deposit in heaven.
8. We will learn when this occurred if we can learn when the action of the main verb occurred. First what is the main verb? It is the one that is in the indicative mood and that sends us to verse 4 and the aorist middle indicative of the verb:

ἐκλέγω, eklegō - “He Himself has elected us”

aorist: Culminative; contemplates the action of the verb in its entirety and regards it from the viewpoint of existing results. Those who are determined by omniscience to believe in Christ are the elect.

middle: Direct; it refers the action of the verb directly to the subject with reflexive force: “He Himself has elected us.”

indicative: Declarative; a dogmatic statement of doctrinal fact.

9. The English word “election” translates the Greek verb **ἐκλέγω, eklegō** but in the middle voice it means literally: “to choose something for oneself,” or “to make one’s choice” (TDNT, 4:144). More precisely we note:

The Analytical Greek Lexicon. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 125:

ἐκλέγω, [In the middle voice] *to choose out* as the recipients of special favor and privilege. [Noun form] *election to privilege by divine grace.*

10. An important distinction needs to be made between our election and our salvation. An excellent synopsis is provided by:

Thieme, R. B., Jr. The Divine Outline of History: Dispensations and the Church. 2d ed. (Houston: R. B. Thieme, Jr., Bible Ministries, 1999), 106:

God elected for salvation every human being who would ever believe in Jesus Christ. **Election is not the cause of salvation.** Instead, God sovereignly chose to accomplish all the work for man’s salvation and to institute nonmeritorious faith in Jesus Christ as the sole remaining criterion for obtaining salvation. Because divine omniscience is not limited by time, God knew in eternity past who would believe in Christ and in eternity past chose each believer to be the recipient of eternal salvation. In other words, He chose to make salvation a reality in the soul of anyone who actually would believe in Christ. Therefore, every believer of every dispensation can be described as elect in regard to salvation.

11. Election is God’s choice of those whom He, in His sovereign will, determined to save. Omniscience perceived the reality of each person in human history who would believe “before the foundation of the world.”



Ephesians 1:4 - since He Himself has elected [**main verb**] us in Him before the beginning of the world [**Genesis 1:1**] that we should be holy and blameless in His presence.

12. Consequently, every person in human history who has responded to the “sole remaining criterion” for “obtaining salvation,” namely “to believe in Jesus Christ,” was known to God in eternity past at which time He elected that person to “special favor and privilege by divine grace.”
13. The initial imputation of our special favor and privilege is stated in Ephesians 1:3, “every spiritual blessing.” This is the Escrow Account. It was established by God as Grantor before He elected us to privilege in eternity past.
14. Thus please observe that the escrow blessings are imputed to every believer in eternity past before he could perform anything meritorious to receive them.
15. The reason that these blessings were given but placed in escrow is so that believers could resolve the angelic conflict by the performance of divine good as opposed to human good and evil.

II. History of the Limited Atonement View:

- 1- It must be understood before we begin that the theology held by those who believe in both limited and unlimited atonement is considered to be Calvinistic. Those who subscribe to limited atonement are identified by many titles. I have chosen Hyper-Calvinism. I do so because *hyper* means “to be excessive.” It is transliterated into the English from the Greek word **ὑπέρ**, *hyper* which means “over and above,” or “above and beyond.”
- 2- Those who subscribe to unlimited atonement are often called Moderate Calvinists. These two terms are general and unless we need to be more specific these are the ones we will use in our study.
- 3- For the record, John Calvin was a French theologian who was among the reformers of the Protestant Reformation. He lived between 1509 and 1564. He established a theocratic government in Geneva in 1541 and it served as the focal point for defending Protestant theology throughout Europe. His writings established the first systematic theology for Protestantism.
- 4- The question that must be addressed at first is whether John Calvin was a “hyper-Calvinist” or a “moderate Calvinist.” If he established the principles of limited atonement then he must be regarded as the source for present-day hyper-Calvinism. If he established the principles for unlimited atonement then he must be regarded as the source for present-day moderate Calvinism.
- 5- To determine which his personal belief was, we simply consult his writings and his commentaries in particular. In Calvin’s commentaries we find sufficient documentation to claim with confidence that Calvin taught the doctrine of unlimited atonement. Our first reference is:

Kendall, R. T. “Bible Commentaries by John Calvin.” In *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*. New ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1997), 214-219 passim:

Isaiah 53:12c - (KJV) ... He was numbered with the transgressors; and He bore the sin of the many, and made intercession for the transgressors.



He bore the sin of many. I approve of the ordinary reading, that He alone bore the punishment of many, because on Him was **laid the guilt of the whole world**. It is evident from other passages, and especially from the fifth chapter of the Epistle to the Romans, that '**many**' sometimes denotes '**all**'. (*Isaiah*. See Kendall, p. 214.)

Indeed, our Lord Jesus **was offered to all the world**. For it is not speaking of three or four when it says: 'God so loved the world, that he spared not His only Son.' But yet we must notice what the Evangelist adds in this passage: 'That whosoever believes in Him shall not perish but obtain eternal life.' Our Lord Jesus **suffered for all** and there is neither great nor small who is not inexcusable today, for we can obtain salvation in Him. Unbelievers who turn away from Him and who deprive themselves of Him by their malice are today doubly culpable. For how will they excuse their ingratitude in not receiving the blessing in which they could share by faith? (*Isaiah*. See Kendall, pp. 225-26.)

John 1:28 - (KJV) The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world.

And when he says *the sin of the world* he extends this kindness **indiscriminately to the whole human race**, that the Jews might not think the Redeemer has been sent to them alone. From this we infer that the whole world is bound in the same condemnation; and that since all men without exception are guilty of unrighteousness before God, they have need of reconciliation. John, therefore, by speaking of the sin of the world in general, wanted to make us feel our own misery and exhort us to seek the remedy. Now it is for us to **embrace the blessing offered to all**, that each may make up his mind that there is nothing to hinder him from finding reconciliation in Christ if only, led by faith, he comes to Him. (*John*. See Kendall, p. 216.)

John 3:16 - (KJV) For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

That whosoever believeth on him should not perish. The outstanding thing about faith is that it delivers us from eternal destruction. For He especially wanted to say that although we seem to have been born for death sure deliverance is offered to us by the faith of Christ so that we must not fear the death which otherwise threatens us. And He has used a general term, both to **invite indiscriminately all to share in life** and to cut off every excuse from unbelievers. Such is also the significance of the term 'world' which He had used before. For although there is nothing in the world deserving of God's favour, He nevertheless shows He is **favourable to the whole world** when He calls **all without exception to the faith of Christ**, which is indeed an entry into life. (*John*. See Kendall, p. 217.)

John 17:2 - (KJV) As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.

Christ does not say that He has been placed in command of the whole world to bestow life indiscriminately. But He restricts this grace to those given to Him. But how were they given? For the Father has also subjected to Him the reprobate. I reply: Only the elect belong to His own flock, which He guards as a shepherd. Hence, the kingdom of Christ **extends to all men**, but it is **saving only to the elect** who follow the Shepherd's voice with willing obedience. (*John*. See Kendall, p. 219.)

- 5- These passages obviously do not provide conclusive proof that Calvin subscribed to unlimited atonement. That issue is one that must be decided by intensive research into his entire *opus theologiae*.



- 6- However, this research has already been done and published by Dr. R. T. Kendall in the work just quoted. Unfortunately, it is presently out of print. I believe this book should be regarded as a classic and thus never be found out of print. Hopefully some publishing company, perhaps Hendrickson Publishers of Peabody, Massachusetts, for example, might consider the project. Kendall presents irrefutable evidence that Calvin did not hold the limited atonement view but rather the unlimited view, and he documents this from Calvin's own writings.