

**STRIVING FOR THE PRIZE OF
ETERNAL SALVATION:
A REVIEW OF SCHREINER AND
CANEDAY'S *THE RACE SET BEFORE US***

ROBERT N. WILKIN

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas R. Schreiner teaches NT Interpretation at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He is the author of numerous works on Paul, including a nearly 1,000-page commentary on Romans in the *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* series.

The co-author of this book is Ardel B. Caneday, professor of Bible at Northwestern College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The subtitle gives more specificity to the subject of the book: *Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance*. The authors state their aim in this way, “Our objective is to lay out the biblical evidence and offer an interpretation consistent with that evidence that will help readers integrate it into a coherent and consistent whole.”¹ They feel the three main views of perseverance and assurance today fail to do this. Thus their aim is to forge a new view of the fifth point of Calvinism that might aid people of all traditions to better understand and apply the Scriptures.

There are three emphases in their book that separate it from existing views:

First, eternal salvation is already-but-not-yet (see esp. Chapter 2). Schreiner and Caneday suggest that there is a tension here which we must recognize and accept (p. 143). They feel that other views wrongly attempt to explain it away.

¹ Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 11.

Second, the warnings in Scripture are the means by which believers are moved to persevere and gain final salvation (see esp. Chapter 4). They suggest that the other leading views either “superimpose God’s warnings on the promises or the promises on the warnings.”² They advise that the “[warning] passages must be granted their full force without qualifying them with God’s promises.”³ This means they don’t speak of losing eternal life or of proving one was never saved in the first place. They feel there is a biblical tension here that God does not intend for us to eliminate. The promises are one thing; the warnings another.

Third, their view of assurance is a modification of the position found in the Westminster Confession of Faith. On the one hand, they argue for Westminster’s three legs of assurance: “God’s promises, the fruit of the Spirit and the witness of the Holy Spirit.”⁴ On the other hand—unlike Westminster—they say that “every leg is important for Christian assurance, but the promises of God are the most important of all, for God’s promises are the foundation of all Christian assurance.”⁵ Thus their three-legged stool has one big leg and two small legs.

Though this sounds confusing, this book is intriguing and will be fascinating to *JOTGES* readers.

II. A SURVEY OF FIVE VIEWS ON PERSEVERANCE AND ASSURANCE

The first chapter is entitled, “What Is There to Win or Lose?” In it the authors survey four views before laying out their view. Of the views, all but the loss-of-rewards view considers the prize to be eternal salvation. In other words, the authors show that the rewards view is the only one that maintains that we need not strive and work in order to get into the kingdom!

Whereas many authors appear to be a bit reluctant to come out and call eternal salvation a prize to be won by endurance in obedience, Schreiner and Caneday do not share this reservation. I found it refreshing to see someone clearly admit they believe that eternal salvation is a

² *Ibid.*, 142.

³ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵ *Ibid.* See also Chapter 7.

prize won by ardent effort. While it grieves me to see someone garble the gospel in that way, I am happy that they at least do so openly.

Here are their titles and brief descriptions of the four views other than their own:

Loss-of-salvation view. They say, “The racetrack represents salvation. Christians may abandon the race and lose salvation. The prize is eternal life.”⁶ This is Arminianism.

Loss-of-rewards view. “The racetrack represents salvation.⁷ Christians may abandon the race and lose rewards. The prize is not salvation but rewards.”⁸ This is the Free Grace position. The authors cite Grace Evangelical Society, Zane Hodges, *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, R. T. Kendall, Charles Stanley, Erwin Lutzer, Michael Eaton, John Hart, and me as advocating this position.⁹

Tests-of-genuineness view. The authors say that this is “one of the most common views in evangelicalism today.”¹⁰ “The racetrack represents salvation. To abandon the race proves one was never saved. Christians run with their back toward the goal¹¹ to assess their progress on the track. The prize is salvation, eternal life.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ The reason they call the racetrack *salvation* is probably because they see the end as what they call final salvation. However, since in this view the end is not final salvation, but the prize of eternal reward, they should have identified the track differently. A better designation would be that the track represents *the Christian life, progressive sanctification, or discipleship.*

⁸ *The Race*, 29.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 24-29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 29. This struck me as odd, since the first view is obviously that of most denominations and churches, including Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and most Protestant denominations. Yet concerning the first view the authors said, “Some insist that these warnings and admonitions indicate that believers can and sometimes do abandon their faith and consequently lose their salvation” (pp. 21-22).

¹¹ This suggestion is well meaning, but confusing. Obviously no one can run toward a finish line by running away from it! The authors seem to mean that the runner runs toward the prize while looking back all the time to see how well he has done so far in the race. This is like the runner who looks back to check out his competitors. However, in the graphic they give with this view, the runners are clearly running away from the finish and toward the starting line!

Warnings and admonitions call for retrospective and introspective self-examination to assess whether one is already saved.”¹² This is the traditional Reformed view, also known as Lordship Salvation.

Hypothetical-loss-of-salvation view. The authors do not devote much space to this view “because this interpretive viewpoint emerges principally in discussions of warnings in Hebrews.”¹³ This view is a mix between views one and three. “The racetrack represents salvation. One who is already saved cannot abandon the race. The prize is salvation, eternal life. Warnings and admonitions only caution what would happen if one could fail to endure to the end.”¹⁴

The authors call their view “God’s means-of-salvation view.”¹⁵ They describe their view in this manner:

God’s means-of-salvation view. The racetrack represents salvation. If one abandons the race one will not receive the prize. The prize is salvation, eternal life. Warnings and admonitions call for faith that endures to receive the prize.¹⁶

We will analyze this view carefully. However, for now suffice it to say that it regards eternal salvation as the prize that believers are striving to attain.

The means-of-salvation position sounds like the Arminian view. After all, Arminians also see the warnings as the means God uses to get people to the kingdom. However, since they deny the possibility of loss of salvation, it is not exactly the same as the loss-of-salvation view.

In other ways it is hard to distinguish the means-of-salvation view from the Reformed position. The tests-of-genuineness view also sees the warnings as the means God uses to get people into the kingdom. However, since they say that those who fail to persevere prove they were never saved, and the means-of-salvation position does not, it is not precisely the same as the tests-of-genuineness view either.

¹² *The Race*, 34.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 40. The full title is “God’s means-of-salvation view of warnings and admonitions.” I have abbreviated it since the authors themselves do so as well (see, for example, p. 45).

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

In a sense, it appears to be a sort of hybrid between the two. Since both those views see perseverance as a condition of eternal salvation, this is not as surprising as it might seem. There is much in common between Arminians and Calvinists—if by Calvinists we mean those who accept the Reformed Lordship Salvation position.

Let us now consider the various components of the authors' view.

III. ALREADY-BUT-NOT-YET: A LINEAR VIEW OF SALVATION?

The authors use the eschatological expression “already-but-not-yet,” extensively in this book. This is becoming increasingly common in soteriological discussions.

They never make it crystal clear—to this reviewer—what it means for salvation to be already present, but not yet realized.

I have taken several steps in order to understand what the authors mean by already-but-not-yet salvation. Both authors were given a prepublication copy of this review, and I have received three detailed email responses from Tom Schreiner and about seven from Ardel Caneday. In addition, at Caneday's suggestion, I have read Chapter 2 five times in an effort to better grasp what they are saying about already-but-not-yet salvation. I think I have it.

Already-but-not-yet salvation is only understood if we avoid trying to resolve the tensions in their view. The tensions must be maintained to keep the scriptural balance.

Salvation that can never be lost is ours already; yet if we do not persevere, we will not be saved on the last day. Keep the tension.

True believers can be assured that they are eternally secure now. Real believers will heed the warnings, persevere, and enter the kingdom. However, certainty that one is a true believer is not possible prior to death. Since only true believers will enter the kingdom, certainty of final salvation is not possible prior to death. Keep the tension.

In their view one who fails to work hard until the end of his life will fail to gain eternal salvation, or *final salvation*, as they prefer to call it. While they believe in eternal security, they also believe in a modified form of perseverance. All who are truly saved persevere. Yet this is not quite automatic.

The means by which God causes regenerate people to persevere is through the many warnings in Scripture. Fear of eternal condemnation

spurs believers to persevere. Thus believers must be very diligent to make it into the kingdom. Yet the faith, works, desire, and diligence are all gifts of God, hence they feel their view is not accurately described as teaching works-salvation.

With that as an overview, let us now examine precisely what the authors say on this key subject.

In Chapter 2 Schreiner and Caneday discuss in detail this already-but-not-yet tension in soteriology. It is vital to realize that in their opinion, passages dealing with *already salvation* are proportionally much less frequent than those dealing with *not-yet salvation*:

Almost all Christians think of salvation exclusively in terms of the past. Believers often say, “I have been saved,” or ask someone else, “Have you been saved?” We will argue that most evangelical Christians do not use the word *salvation* as it is usually used in the Bible, where the term denotes our future salvation. Hence, the emphasis of the biblical text often gets lost when we speak about salvation.¹⁷

Why is this so important to them? The reason is because for them salvation (*sōtēria* and *sōzō* in Greek) almost always refers to eternal salvation from hell. Thus if people who are already saved need to be saved in the future, this means to them that one cannot relegate perseverance to the realm of eternal rewards. Nor can one safely rest on his past salvation as though his entrance to the kingdom will occur with or without diligent effort on his part.

Logically the authors seem to believe that eternal salvation does not occur at a point in time. Rather, like Luther, they seem to believe in a linear view of conversion. In this way a person can be on the way to final salvation, fail to obtain it due to a failure to persevere, yet not really lose eternal life.

I say that they *seem to believe* this because Caneday has directly denied this in emails to me. Indeed, he indicated he was not even familiar with *a linear concept of salvation*.

Judge for yourself. The following citations are instructive both for what they say and do not say. Note how each remark is different from what the loss-of-salvation or tests-of-genuineness views would say:

¹⁷ Ibid., 48, italics theirs, underlining mine.

The Scriptures call on those who are wandering to repent and to turn again *in order to be saved!* Such an admonition does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that these people were not saved before! The admonition, however, is directed to where a person is now in his or her walk with the Lord.¹⁸

Note first of all the two uses of exclamation marks. Clearly the authors are trying to call attention to something unique about their view. Notice also that they say that this wandering person who needs “to repent and turn again in order to be saved” may already be a saved person. How can this be if the authors believe that eternal salvation can’t be lost? The answer is that this is a biblical tension that must not be swept under the rug. They do not speak of losing eternal salvation or of failing to prove you had it in the first place.

Again, consider this quote:

The exhortation of Romans 8:13 [“For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live”] is still needed for Christians. Paul warns us that if we succumb to the desires of the body we will die. In order to live, that is, to obtain eternal life, we must slay the deeds of the body by the power of the Spirit.¹⁹

Christians will die spiritually if they “succumb to the desires of the body.” In order for believers “to live, that is, to obtain eternal life” they “must slay the deeds of the body by the power of the Holy Spirit.” Thus here, as in most places, they are emphasizing the not-yet part of salvation. One cannot obtain eternal life before he perseveres in a life characterized by slaying the deeds of the body by the power of the Holy Spirit. Note well that they avoid speaking of either loss of eternal life or proof one never had it in the first place. The key is to keep the tension. As long as we keep our eyes on the prize of eternal salvation and keep on persevering, we will obtain eternal life in the end.

Similarly, note these words:

Paul does not guarantee that believers will inherit the kingdom regardless of how they live. He warns that those who succumb to the flesh will not enter the kingdom.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 310, italics added.

¹⁹ Ibid., 300.

²⁰ Ibid., 294.

If we aren't careful, we will understand the authors to mean that kingdom entrance is not guaranteed for believers. Yet they believe it is. What they actually say here, if you read it with their idea of tension in mind, is that entrance is not guaranteed to believers *regardless of how they live*. In other words, true believers will take the warnings seriously. They will live right and will enter the kingdom. They will not succumb to the flesh since they know the consequences are deadly.

But what of those who do succumb to the flesh? Keep the tension. They will not get into the kingdom.

Righteous living is necessary to obtain entrance into the kingdom of Jesus Christ.²¹

Entrance to the kingdom is not really certain until one perseveres in righteous living. Of course, this is once again looking at the not-yet part of salvation. There is no mention of proving one was never saved in the first place or of losing already salvation.

James also conceives of salvation as future. He exhorts his readers to "humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you" (Jas 1:21 NIV). *The idea is not that they are saved but that the Word is able to save them. Apparently, the work of salvation is not completed, since the Word planted in them must be given free reign so that they will ultimately experience salvation.*²²

Saying that "the work of salvation is not completed" fits perfectly within a linear view of conversion. If one must give God's Word free reign in one's life in order to ultimately experience eternal salvation, then clearly salvation is not yet an accomplished fact. In light of quotes like these, it appears that for the authors the *not-yet* is so prominent as to make the *already* practically meaningless.

The following quote shows how they include election in their system:

Yet we must not nullify the biblical tension [between faith and works] and omit the need to do good works... We must run the marathon to the end to win the prize. We must gut it out and make it over the finish line. But those who make it over the finish line know that they have made it over the line because God has appointed them to run. He is the one who has given them the grace

²¹ Ibid., 290.

²² Ibid., 52, italics mine.

and energy and strength to run until the end, so he gets all the glory.²³

This is fairly standard Reformed articulation. This is about as close as they come to saying that those who fail to persevere never were saved in the first place. Of course, the authors do believe that the tests-of-genuineness approach is a valid way of explaining those professing believers who fail to persevere and gain kingdom entrance. For example, they write, “It is true that the Bible teaches that the people who failed to persevere by remaining in the church proved by their departure that they never were truly Christians.”²⁴ What they object to is viewing the warning passages from that grid.²⁵ Warnings are given to true believers as the means by which God moves them to persevere.

Those who persevere are elect. Those who do not will not win the prize that is eternal life. Striving for eternal salvation is the key to the Christian life.

From their perspective, looking back at our former progress has little if any benefit in helping us to strive for the prize. Our goal is ahead of us, not behind us. No matter how well or poorly we have done in the past, we must do well in the future to make it into the kingdom. Fear of missing eternal salvation is the means by which we can gain it. Therefore, it is absolutely critical that we keep our eyes on the prize of final salvation.

Of course, as we shall discuss in more detail shortly, in their view everything about our eternal salvation is a gift of God. This includes intellectual assent, volitional commitment, an ongoing desire to please God, the strength and motivation to put forth the ardent effort, and the strength and desire to persevere in faith and good works.

All people should be urged to come to Christ and to exert ardent effort to persevere and thereby gain the prize of eternal salvation. Those who find themselves able to do so will get into the kingdom. Those who do not will discover that they are among the unfortunate ones for whom eternal salvation was never a possibility.

²³ Ibid., 331.

²⁴ Ibid., 152.

²⁵ Ibid., 29-35.

IV. ARDENT EFFORT NEEDED TO GAIN FINAL SALVATION

Schreiner and Caneday are much more open than most Reformed theologians in speaking of the need of effort and even “ardent effort” to gain eternal salvation. While others may speak of effort needed, they are quick to give disclaimers that our best efforts are flawed, that we may have times when we are away from the Lord to some degree, and that the efforts are always because of God.

These men give less disclaimers. They feel that the striving is itself a means for us to gain final salvation. Note these remarks:

We must run the race with dogged determination to obtain the prize of eternal life, and it takes remarkable discipline and training to make it to the end.²⁶

[Commenting on Philippians 2:12-13] Note he does not say, “You are saved. Now work for your reward, which is in addition to salvation.” He summons the Philippians to bring to accomplishment their salvation! Effort, toil and energy are all communicated in this phrase [“work out your salvation”]. We are to use all the resources at our disposal in order to be saved on the last day. We must obey, pray, resist the flesh and yield to the Spirit to inherit salvation. No theology is acceptable that diminishes this call to work out our salvation.²⁷

Since the writer [of Hebrews] portrays the Christian life as a race needing gutsy endurance and a training ground in which discipline is meted out, we are correct in saying that obtaining the eschatological prize takes ardent effort. There is no call to passivity here!²⁸

Here we find once again the authors’ biblical tension. It should be noted that at times they do give disclaimers that our ardent effort and all associated with it (commitment, obedience, faith, and works) are gifts of God. We now turn to a consideration of those disclaimers.

²⁶ Ibid., 314.

²⁷ Ibid., 315.

²⁸ Ibid., 313.

V. WORKS-SALVATION IS NOT AN ISSUE

Schreiner and Caneday do not feel their system is one of works-salvation. These men are Reformed theologians. If our efforts and works are all gifts of God then there is no room for merit or boasting or works-salvation.

Here are two examples of this type of disclaimer:

We must consciously and intentionally put these [sinful] desires to death in order to reach our eternal destiny. Such a teaching is not works-righteousness, for Paul informs us that conquering sin in this way is “by the Spirit.” We must summon our wills and make decisions to triumph over the flesh, yet ultimately the subjection of the flesh comes from the power of the Holy Spirit.²⁹

Saying that we must run to the end can scarcely be called works-righteousness, since such persevering faith is ultimately the gift of God!³⁰

Of course, if all this is a gift of God, then why do we need to give “ardent effort”?³¹ If this view were correct, then full effort would automatically bubble up from the elect whether they wanted it to or not.³² No matter how hard an elect person tried to suppress this desire, he would be unable to do so. Just as saving faith is simply implanted in them, so would all the things that are a part of it, including the ardent effort needed to obey.

I would think the authors’ answer is that we need to remember the tension of already-but-not-yet. If we delve into questions of how anyone might lack the desire or might need to will up the effort, we are guilty of trying to answer questions the Bible does not wish us to ask. We must keep the tension.

²⁹ Ibid., 300-301.

³⁰ Ibid., 314.

³¹ In response to a prepublication copy of this review, the authors wrote here, “Do you think ‘gift’ and ‘effort’ are contradictory?” In a sense, no. One may need to strive to enter by the narrow way (Luke 13:24). However, unlike the authors, I would say that any effort needed concerns learning the truth of the gospel. The idea that one must exert ardent effort *to persevere in faith and good works* in order to gain eternal salvation in my estimation directly contradicts the idea of a free gift. Compare Rom 4:4-5.

³² The authors responded to the prepublication copy in this way: “Automatically bubble up? God does not work his grace in us automatically.”

The authors have a second defense to the charge that they are proclaiming justification by works. They turn the charge back against the eternal rewards position. They write:

The first error [in interpreting “Whoever loses his life for My sake will find it”] is to think that Jesus speaks of merit... Unfortunately Hodges imputes the notion of merit or “earning power” to Jesus’ call to be a disciple, a call that includes conditions or demands.³³

A footnote is given at this point in which they criticize Zane Hodges and Grace Evangelical Society by name:

Ironically, while Hodges and his associates with the Grace Evangelical Society argue that their view is the only one that avoids a system of works-righteousness, they introduce “merit theology” into the Christian life.³⁴

They back up this charge of “merit theology” by suggesting that the NT teaching on rewards as wages doesn’t really mean something which is earned.

VI. WAGES ARE NOT EARNED

I could find no discussion by Schreiner and Caneday on the word for reward, *misthos*.³⁵ It is the word used for *pay* in everyday Greek. However, once they do refer to the related word, *misthapodotes*, used only in Heb 11:6 (“He is a *rewarder*”). Here is what they say:

Though it is true that the word used in this verse literally means “one who pays wages” (*misthapodotes*), the author of Hebrews does not mean that we achieve the reward by meriting it.³⁶

And why is that? They go on to say that this is merely a figure of speech that is not intended to convey the idea of paying wages:

³³ *The Race*, 155-56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 156, n. 18.

³⁵ In addition to carefully reading the entire book and looking for references to “wages,” I consulted the subject index. Under “rewards, and wages,” the following pages are cited: 20, 90-92, 104-105. They confirm my contention that they never deal with *misthos* and *misthoō*. Essentially they assume their conclusion without mentioning or discussing the biblical evidence.

³⁶ *The Race*, 90.

While the employer pays wages out of indebtedness to the employee, God gives a reward to the believer purely out of grace, and the author of Hebrews certainly believes this (see, e.g., Heb 4:16; 12:15).³⁷

One might wonder whether the two verses they cite prove their point. Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.” Hebrews 12:15 says, “looking carefully lest anyone fall short of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble, and by this many become defiled.” Neither verse says or implies that “God gives a reward to the believer purely out of grace.”

The idea that rewards are unmerited gifts of grace is seemingly contradicted by Rom 4:4-5 and the many other uses of *misthos* and *misthoō* in the NT. Schreiner and Caneday do not discuss Rom 4:4-5 or other places in which these words occur.

Those words are used consistently in the sense of merited wages in the entire NT. So clearly there is merit, but not for justification.

Here are a few NT examples. The first two are the verb.

“A landowner . . . went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard” (Matt 20:1). “No one hired us” (Matt 20:7).

“Call the laborers and give them their wages” (Matt 20:8). “The laborer is worthy of his wages” (Luke 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18). “Now to him who works, the wages are not counted as grace, but as debt” (Rom 4:4). “Indeed the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out” (Jas 5:4). “Great is your reward in heaven” (Matt 5:12). “He . . . shall receive a prophet’s reward” (Matt 10:41). “Whoever gives you a cup of water to drink in My name . . . he shall by no means lose his reward” (Mark 9:41). “If anyone’s work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward” (1 Cor 3:14). “My reward is with Me” (Rev 22:12).

It is highly questionable, in light of the evidence, to argue that *misthos* does not refer to wages.

Let’s consider the question of desire since it is such an integral part of this system of thought.

³⁷ Ibid., 91.

VII. THE PLACE OF GOD-GIVEN DESIRE IN OBEDIENCE

Schreiner and Caneday say that God gives the desire to obey Him. This is part of saving faith. Thus this desire stays with the elect person from the moment of his new birth until he dies. He cannot be without it, for God guarantees it.

At least that is what they suggest whenever they speak of desire—every time, that is, except for once. They seem to contradict themselves when they ask about the believer who on a given occasion does not have the desire to do right.

Say a believer has a desire to do wrong? Is it acceptable to do the wrong because the desire is missing? Does this mean I am not truly regenerate, for if I were, wouldn't I have the desire?

Here is how the authors respond. After saying, "We receive both the desire and the ability to keep his commands," they give this illustration:

One of us knows of a person who kept having sexual relations outside marriage; his excuse was, "God in his grace has not given me the desire to obey him. It would be legalistic of me to keep his commands without the desire." This is a prime example of going beyond the biblical tension. We are called on to work, to obey and to exert our energy. The biblical writers inform us, however, that the work and desiring that we do on God's behalf finally and ultimately come from him.³⁸

They do not see the problem their illustration raises. If desire is an infallible gift from God, then when it is absent God does not expect one to obey. Indeed, how could a person obey if God removed the desire and ability to obey? The authors indicated both before and after this illustration that the ability and desire are given together as a unit. Thus it would seem impossible for someone to lack the desire and yet have the ability to obey.

Indeed, one wonders how any believer could ever sin if saving faith includes both the desire and ability to obey and saving faith never stops. Would not saving faith have to come and go for believers to sin under this definition of saving faith?

The authors' answer is seemingly simple, yet quite confusing:

To believe is to engage in strict self-discipline, to compete in the good competition of faith, to run, to land blows on oneself, to look

³⁸ Ibid., 316.

to the Son of God for life, to eat of his flesh and to drink of his blood, to hear and follow his voice. All these and more provide contour and texture to our understanding of what faith is. At once these metaphors call us to act in obedient faith to the heavenward call of God in Christ Jesus and provide a standard by which we may know that our faith is authentic, though not perfect.³⁹

If faith by definition results in perseverance, then anyone who does not persevere did not have authentic faith in the first place. This is standard Reformed thought. However, the statement, “to believe is to engage in strict self discipline,” is unusual by Reformed standards.

The authors are convinced that believers must try their hardest in order to persevere and gain final salvation. Yet, if believers sometimes do not have the desire to do so, they should strive wholeheartedly for the prize anyway because this is necessary for them to make it into the kingdom. In other words, if the desire isn’t present, do your best anyway.⁴⁰

VIII. ASSURANCE IS AND IS NOT CERTAINTY

In light of what’s been said thus far, one might think that Schreiner and Caneday teach that absolute certainty of one’s final salvation is not possible prior to death. However, the truth is that they are sensitive to this issue and take a moderating position.

There are some aspects of their view of assurance with which *JOTGES* readers will strongly agree. And there are others with which they will have strong disagreement.

Before we consider a series of references on assurance from the authors, it is vital that we realize what they are seeking assurance of. While in one sense the focus of assurance is entrance into the kingdom of God, the primary focus is really whether one will persevere in faith and good works.⁴¹

³⁹ Ibid., 140-41.

⁴⁰ The authors feel that “This is a less than fair representation of our view.” Yet I fail to see from the illustration given what is less than fair about my representation of what they wrote.

⁴¹ Notice in the quote immediately below (which ends with footnote #43) they equate “confidence and certainty about our status before God in the future” with “confidence that we shall finish the marathon in which we run.”

This is clear because when they discuss the role of God's promises in assurance, they start by saying:

The promises of God are of paramount importance because our confidence and certainty *about our status before God in the future* rests ultimately not on ourselves but on God himself. The fundamental reason we have confidence *that we shall finish the marathon in which we run* is not our strength, our godliness or our endurance. We are confident that we shall obtain our inheritance because God has promised that we shall do so.⁴²

The authors believe that perseverance in faith and good works is necessary to enter the kingdom. Assurance "about our status before God in the future" is parallel to assurance "that we shall finish the marathon." So no one can be sure he will be saved on the last day unless he is also sure he will persevere. How that is possible if even the apostle Paul was not sure of his perseverance (1 Cor 9:24-27) is unclear to say the least.

The following is a survey of their comments on assurance:

- Believers suffer from doubts, temptations, depression and uncertainty on occasion...Assurance is not a static entity, it can wax and wane for believers...Overall there is more certainty about our status with God as we run the race.⁴³
- Those who claim assurance of faith but fail to produce good works contradict their profession by their lives. There is no warrant for thinking that they truly belong to the people of God.⁴⁴
- There is no warrant for assurance if one is doing the works of the flesh and living contrary to the will of God.⁴⁵
- Failure to manifest good works demonstrates that our faith is false and that we are not really believers.⁴⁶
- All believers must preserve the tension between not relying on their good works as a basis for salvation and the necessity of good works to be saved on the final day. Similarly, the biblical tension regarding assurance must be preserved. Assurance is

⁴² *The Race*, 277, italics mine.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 276.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 293.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 298.

integral to saving faith, yet assurance is also strengthened and confirmed by walking in godliness. Whether such a tension is “inherently unstable” is debatable, for no logical contradiction is involved here. Human beings are prone to upset the balance and emphasize one side of the tension above the other, yet the gospel calls us to live in such a way that we preserve the tension between assurance being integral to faith and the need to confirm our assurance by keeping God’s commands.⁴⁷

- Those who desire assurance but reject the means by which assurance is maintained call into question whether they really want assurance, since they have separated assurance from the means by which it is preserved. The Grace Evangelical Society fails to grasp the distinctions we are introducing, and hence they merge the view proposed by us and Berkouwer with the popular retrospective view and the introspective Puritan view.⁴⁸
- Assurance is not an abstract entity that is ours regardless of what we do. That would contradict a massive amount of biblical teaching. No, our assurance in the faith is strengthened as we continue to run the race, persevering until the end to receive the prize.⁴⁹

Yet contrast those comments with these fascinating comments about the dangers of reading the Puritans:

The Puritans were right in forging a connection between assurance and the fruit of the Spirit (more on this below). Yet if the fruit of the Spirit becomes the fulcrum by which we discern our relationship with God, an unhealthy and destructive introspection is almost sure to follow. Despite the many strengths of the Puritans, those who become immersed in reading them today need to be wary of becoming excessively introspective and self-focused. The reason for this is that the promises of God may no longer be the fulcrum for our assurance in faith. Biblical assurance rests fundamentally on God and his promises.⁵⁰

This seems to contradict most of what they have to say about assurance. The solution is to see this as a disclaimer. While they

⁴⁷ Ibid., 299.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 308-309.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 311.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 277.

repeatedly say that our works are essential to have assurance, nonetheless they see a danger here. In their minds they feel that the Puritans were too introspective and too concerned about whether or not they would persevere. In addition, the Puritans ceased to see the promises of God as the primary means of assurance.

Of course, despite their statement here, one fails to see why any sensible person would not be highly introspective and concerned under their system. And why would someone under their system look to God's promises as the primary basis of assurance, when they repeatedly say our works are essential?

Their view of assurance can be summarized as follows:

- ▶ Assurance has three grounds.⁵¹
- ▶ The most important ground of assurance is the promises.⁵²
- ▶ Good works are objective.⁵³
- ▶ Good works “strengthen and confirm” assurance.⁵⁴
- ▶ Doubts result even when things are going well.⁵⁵
- ▶ We can't know the spiritual condition of living lapsed believers.⁵⁶
- ▶ Believers who have died in a lapsed condition do not get into the kingdom.⁵⁷

⁵¹ Ibid., 276-77.

⁵² Ibid., 17.

⁵³ Ibid., 303.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 296. See also pp. 199, 297, 300. Of course, the GES *Affirmation of Belief* says that good works have a secondary, confirmatory value to our assurance. We might hope that is what Schreiner and Caneday mean. However, they make it crystal clear that good works do not merely confirm what we already know to be true. They *strengthen* and confirm it. Certainty cannot be strengthened. Thus they appear to mean something like this: *the more good works we see in our lives the greater likelihood there is that we will persevere and enter the kingdom*. Unfortunately, as they make clear, no amount of works can give one certainty that he will persevere and enter the kingdom.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 297.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 309.

⁵⁷ Ibid. “We do not believe it is our role to say one way or the other whether a lapsed brother or sister is saved!” At this point a footnote

IX. THE REWARDS VIEW ENCOURAGES PASSIVITY AND LAXITY

Near the end of the book the authors directly attack the rewards view. They begin:

To be faithful to Scripture we must preserve the biblical tension between our responsibility to exercise faith and run the race, and the truth that any faith and work we have is a gift of God. If we exclude our role as human beings [to continue to exercise faith and run the race], we encourage a passivity and a laxity that is contrary to the biblical calls to exertion and effort that we have been investigating.⁵⁸

What view *encourages a passivity and a laxity*? The authors now specify the rewards view as the culprit! Commenting on Phil 2:12-13, they say:

Note that he does not say, “you are saved. Now work for your reward, which is in addition to salvation.” He summons the Philippians to bring to accomplishment their salvation. Effort, toil and energy are all communicated in this phrase. We are to use all the resources at our disposal in order to be saved on the last day.

appears which reads, “Charles C. Ryrie falls into this trap. He agrees that believers are imperfect and then extends the argument from there, asking ‘how much’ believers can sin and still be saved. He implies that we can sin to a considerable extent and still belong to the people of God...But the very attempt to provide assurance to those who are straying is misguided, nor is it our role to pronounce definitively on those who are straying.” On the next page (p. 310) they strongly imply that those who fail to repent of their lapsed state will not enter the kingdom. “The Scriptures call on those who are wandering to repent and to turn again in order to be saved! Such an admonition does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that these people were not saved before!” At the end of that paragraph they conclude, “We do not know what their destiny is as lapsed ones, because we do not know how they will respond to the admonition [to repent and turn again in order to be saved].” The following remarks about assurance and lapsing are quite powerful: “There is no warrant for assurance if sin is dominant in our lives. We maintain our assurance by continuing to run in the race...Assurance is not an abstract entity that is ours regardless of what we do” (p. 311).

⁵⁸ Ibid., 314-15.

We must obey, pray, resist the flesh and yield to the Spirit to inherit salvation. No theology is acceptable that diminishes this call to work out our salvation.⁵⁹

At this point the authors criticize Zane Hodges for suggesting that this and other passages that call for works must be rewards passages.⁶⁰ There can be no doubt that the theology that they find “unacceptable” is the rewards view.

This came as a bit of surprise to me. They do not give such an appraisal of any of the other theological positions. The loss-of-salvation and the tests-of-genuineness views are never called “unacceptable,” nor are they singled out as promoting “a passivity and a laxity.”

X. HOW DOES THIS THEOLOGY IMPACT EVANGELISM?

Since this book is addressing a vital soteriological issue, it is valid to wonder about the evangelistic implications of the view expressed. Unfortunately, the authors do not give much insight here. I found no mention of evangelism anywhere in the book. Only in one place, mentioned below, did the authors give much of an indication of how they might evangelize:

In examining the book of Acts it is clear that conversion, repentance, faith and baptism are alternate and overlapping ways of describing coming to Christ for salvation (e.g., Acts 2:38, 41; 3:19, 26; 4:4; 5:14, 31; 8:12-13, 36-38; 9:18, 42; 10:43; 11:17-18, 21; 13:12, 39, 48; 14:1, 9, 15, 27; 15:7, 9, 11, 19; 16:31-34; 17:30, 34; 18:8, 27; 20:21; 24:24; 26:18, 20; 28:27). We do not need to detain ourselves long over these terms but will make a brief comment on conversion and repentance. Both of these words denote something humans do in response to hearing the gospel, namely, turn from sins and turn toward God. Both repentance and conversion depict the revolutionary alteration that has transpired in Christians.⁶¹

Several things are remarkable about this statement. First, there are four “alternate and overlapping ways of describing coming to Christ for salvation.” Does this mean, for example, that baptism, one of the four

⁵⁹ Ibid., 315.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 314-15.

⁶¹ Ibid., 64-65.

items they mention by name, is a “way of describing coming to Christ for salvation”? It would seem so.

Indeed, at another time the authors indicate that regeneration occurs at the point of baptism:

Titus 3:5 describes the new birth of Christians in terms of “the washing of rebirth,” *indicating that we should not divide baptism from regeneration.*⁶²

At this point a footnote appears which reads, “We believe this is an argument that points to believer’s baptism.”⁶³ I’ll say. Of course, is it really *believer’s* baptism if regeneration precedes faith (as they argue) and if one must be baptized before he can be reborn?

Since these men are both Baptists who indicate they believe in “believer’s baptism,” maybe they mean something else by their comments on Titus 3:5 and the above quote on the four alternate ways of describing coming to Christ for salvation. However, that is what their words seem to suggest. One would think how one comes to Christ deserves much more explanation.

Second, they are not only “alternate,” but also “overlapping ways of describing coming to Christ for salvation.” Again, more explanation would be helpful. In what sense can four things be alternate ways and also overlapping ways of describing coming to Christ?

Third, if repentance and conversion are “ways of describing coming to Christ for salvation,” then how can they also “depict the revolutionary alteration that has transpired in Christians”?

The authors do say that regeneration precedes faith (“God’s regenerating work precedes faith, love and a righteous life”).⁶⁴ However, that still does not explain how there can be any conditions to regeneration.

While the authors do not give much detail here, they say enough to allow us to draw some conclusions regarding how they would evangelize.

They would call people to come to Christ. How they would do that is not clear.

Their evangelism would surely include telling people the warnings of Scripture. They would warn the possible new convert that only those who endure to the end will be saved. They would be careful to tell them

⁶² Ibid., 76, italics mine.

⁶³ Ibid., n. 22.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 60.

of the already-but-not-yet tension, for only by persevering can anyone enter the kingdom of God. The key, in their minds, is to call people to exert ardent effort to persevere so that they might win the prize of eternal salvation.

XI. CONCLUSION

I really like two things about this book. First, it makes it clear that the theological grid of the Free Grace Movement is quite distinct. We alone see eternal rewards as the prize. Arminians and many Calvinists see the prize as eternal salvation from hell.

Why would I like to be singled out as holding a unique view of soteriology? The reason is that I want people to understand what we are saying. This book represents our view fairly, with the exception of the claim that our view promotes laxity and passivity. I imagine not a few people who read this book will get and read copies of books from our perspective. Some will likely be won over to our position through this book.

Second, I love the subject of this book. It talks about striving to win the prize. That is my aim in life, as it was Paul's (1 Cor 9:24-27). While I do not agree with the thesis of the book—that the prize is eternal salvation and the warnings are the means to get us to win eternal salvation—I do agree with the subject of the book. There is a prize to be won. Calling people's attention to it is a very good thing. Hopefully discerning readers will see it is the rewards position that best harmonizes the teaching of Scripture on this subject.

Finally, I appreciated the tone of this book. Schreiner and Caneday are not vitriolic. There is almost no bombast here.⁶⁵ That is unfortunately not the case in some of the books promoting Lordship Salvation.

I recommend this book, especially for pastors, deacons, elders, Sunday school teachers, and anyone who teaches the Bible.

⁶⁵ There are, however, a few times when the authors' irenic spirit seems to evaporate. For example, note these inaccurate and offensive words concerning Hodges's explanation of the Rich Young Ruler passage, "It is telling that Zane Hodges does not direct his readers to the fact that kingdom of God, eternal life and saved are used as alternate expressions of the same reality. Instead, he introduces the idea of belief from John's gospel *to silence what the text says*" (p. 81, italics added). Compare also p. 330 ("this *gambit* fails as well," italics added).