

“If You Continue in the Faith” (Colossians 1:21-23): An Exegetical-Theological Exercise in Syntax, Discourse, and Performative Speech

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INTRODUCTION

A generation ago, when blacksmith shops were still common in villages, Robert Shank aptly observed that Colossians 1:21-23 is one of

several Scripture passages over which one could affix the sign: “All kinds of fancy twistings and turnings done here.”¹

Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation—if you continue in your faith, established and firm, and do not move from the hope held out in the gospel. This is the gospel that you heard and that has been proclaimed to every

creature under heaven, and of which I, Paul, have become a servant (Col 1:21-23).

For generations whether the apostle Paul’s words imply that it is possible for reconciled believers to apostatize and perish has incited theological battles. This popular question dominates consideration of the passage in sermons, essays, and commentaries. As long we preachers, teachers, or scholars allow this question to govern our exegesis, I submit that we will fall short of addressing the proper and necessary question. The question, whether a believer can apostatize, biases our interpretation of the passage so that we erect defenses to protect our theological system. This is true whether we are Reformed Calvinists, modified Calvinists, Arminians, Wesleyans, or any blend of these. How does the question warp our reading of the passage? It prejudices interpretation by redirecting our focus away from the intended function of the passage to speculating about a question the passage itself does not pose. The prevailing question dulls our hearing the admonition by displac-

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ing urgency of heeding it with detached cerebral theological cogitation which reinforces truncated doctrinal beliefs we already hold.

As long as we overlook the apostle's pastoral urgency, we will fail to apprehend that the passage functions as a biblical *admonition*. As an admonition, it is to be obeyed promptly, not ruminated academically. Cogitative speculation concerning Paul's pastoral exhortation calls for correction that restores proper hearing of the apostle's words as an urgent appeal to persevere in the gospel of Christ in order that we might be presented holy, blameless, and irreproachable before God in the day of judgment.

How we are to read or to hear the apostle Paul's exhortation stated in Colossians 1:21-23 is consequential and calls for careful attention. Therefore, this essay makes no effort to present a full exposition of the passage. The focus is restricted but significant as it concentrates upon the perennial difficulties Paul's first class conditional—*εἰ γε ἐπιμένετε τῇ πίστει*—poses for preachers, exegetes, and theologians.

RECONCILED TO BE PRESENTED HOLY

The three verses of Colossians 1:21-23 follow Paul's hymnic praise of Christ. As "the image of the invisible God," Christ is the preexistent one who reveals the very character of God to and among humans. As "the firstborn of all creation," he preceded creation and is supreme over it as Lord. For all creation, including everything "in heaven and earth, visible and invisible," including rulers of every class, were created through Christ and for him (1:15-16). More than this, Christ actively holds all of creation together so that nothing disintegrates (1:17). Then Paul's praise of Christ becomes more particular in its focus without losing sight of the larger cosmological realm. He focuses upon Christ's exalted headship over the church, the body of humans he has redeemed, for through his sacrificial death upon the cross God reconciled all things to himself, "whether things on earth or in heaven" (1:18-20). The implication is that with Adam's disobedience in Eden the entire created universe sustained disruption, thus

needing the Last Adam to reconcile it also to God.² At 1:21, Paul's praise of Christ centers even more particularly, now upon Christ's reconciling of the Colossians, "who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds." In his fleshly body, by his death, Christ has reconciled them to God. Paul tells the Colossians that God in Christ reconciled them for the purpose of presenting "you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast and without shifting from the hope of the good news which you heard, which has been proclaimed in all creation that is under heaven, of which I, Paul, became a minister." Paul reminds believers in Colossae that they participate in God's act of reconciliation in Christ Jesus, an act so vast that it entails the whole created universe but particular enough to encompass them individually. Paul adds that God's saving act toward the Colossians reaches beyond reconciliation to a purpose yet to be fully achieved in the implied day of judgment, for Christ's act of reconciling them was done with the goal of presenting them holy before God, "if indeed you remain in the faith, grounded and steadfast and without shifting from the hope of the good news." This first-class suppositional statement has been the focus of much exegetical and theological debate, especially since the Reformation, and is the focus of the remainder of this presentation.

IF YOU CONTINUE IN THE FAITH

A brief consideration of what Paul *means* by the combination of *εἰ γε ἐπιμένετε τῇ πίστει* is necessary before addressing the *function* he assigns to the suppositional clause in relation to the main clause which precedes it. What does he mean by using the word *ἐπιμένω*? With what meaning does he fill the dative *τῇ πίστει*? Is "the faith" subjective, the act of belief, or objective, the thing believed? Does "the faith" refer to the Colossians' belief in Christ Jesus (Col 1:4; 2:5, 12)? Or, is "the faith" referring to the object of belief, namely, the gospel?

The NIV reads, "if you continue in your faith," but the ESV translates, "if indeed you continue in

the faith.” James D. G. Dunn favors understanding “continue in the faith” as referring to the Colossians’ belief in the gospel though he acknowledges that, given the definite article (τῆ πίστει), it may be “an early example of the objectification of faith.”³ N. T. Wright thinks that Paul’s phrase entails both senses but accents what is believed rather than the activity of belief.⁴ Peter O’Brien takes “the faith” as “another description for the apostolic gospel rather than the subjective response of the Colossians to that gospel.”⁵

Given Paul’s figurative uses of ἐπιμένω with dative nouns which signify the location or sphere in which endurance is sustained (cf. Rom 6:1; 11:22, 23; Phil 1:24; 1 Tim 4:16), it seems likely that in Colossians 1:23 he is using “the faith” (τῆ πίστει) in the sense of the gospel as the sphere or place of persevering residence. As such, “the faith” aptly stands by way of metonymy for the gospel which calls for faith (cf. 1 Tim 3:9; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 21). That Paul uses “the hope of the gospel” as a synonym to rename “the faith” seems to confirm this metonymical use of the dative τῆ πίστει. As such, “the hope” (τῆς ἐλπίδος) is also a metonymy for the gospel which presents and grounds hope. Furthermore, if “the faith” refers to the gospel by a figure of speech, it also seems plausible that Paul represents the activity of believing with the figurative use of “continue” or “persevere” (ἐπιμένω), for the very act of persevering which is the sustained act of belief for which the gospel calls. Once again, as he renames “the faith” with “the hope of the gospel” so also Paul renames “continuing in the faith” with “not shifting from the hope of the gospel.” Thus, he figuratively represents the activity of belief initially with “continue” (ἐπιμένετε) and then with “not shifting” (μὴ μετακινούμενοι). That which is believed, namely the gospel, Paul also represents figuratively initially with “the faith” (τῆ πίστει) and then with “the hope of the gospel” (τῆς ἐλπίδος τοῦ εὐαγγελίου).⁶ In other words, Colossians 1:23 is richly layered with figurative representations by way of word substitutions that feature the indispensability of sustained, unshif-

ing belief in the gospel of Christ Jesus in order to be presented holy before God.

TWO DIVERGENT INTERPRETATIONS OF PAUL’S CONDITIONAL: POSING THE WRONG QUESTION

The Greek first class conditional sentence of Colossians 1:22-23 consists of the protasis, “if indeed you continue in the faith” (εἰ γὰρ ἐπιμένετε τῆ πίστει) and the apodosis, “to present you holy, etc.” (παραστήσαι ὑμᾶς ἁγίους, κ.τ.λ.).⁷ Depending largely upon their theological presuppositions and grammatical assumptions, exegetes diverge widely when they interpret Paul’s supposition. Some argue that the intensive “if indeed” (εἰ γὰρ) signals the uncertainty of the believer’s salvation, thus, the possibility of apostasy. Expressing an opposite interpretation, others contend that the intensified conditional construction indicates the certainty of the believer’s salvation. Which interpretation does the grammatical evidence support? Or, are either of these two divergent interpretations correct?

Douglas Moo summarizes the two main competing views and opts for the view that tips toward the assured confidence of salvation.⁸

The precise nuance of the conditional construction that Paul uses here is debated. Some believe that the construction (*ei ge*) suggests uncertainty—“if, though I doubt it”—while others think it connotes confidence—“if, as I am sure.” Pauline evidence points in both directions, Galatians 3:4 falling into the former category and 2 Corinthians 5:3 and Ephesians 3:2; 4:21 into the latter. Since most of the parallels point to the idea of confidence, and because Paul expresses confidence in the Colossians elsewhere (see esp. 2:5), it is this direction that we should probably take here. Nevertheless, the condition is a real one, and it is very important not to rob the words of their intended rhetorical function.⁹

Concurring with Moo, James D. G. Dunn observes, “The confidence in the effectiveness of

the divine provision made for those estranged from God by their evil and for the blameworthy by Christ's death is qualified by a matching emphasis on human responsibility."¹⁰

One who holds the view that tilts in the opposite direction is I. Howard Marshall who tucks his comment on Paul's conditional construction into an endnote in his classic book on Christian perseverance, *Kept by the Power of God*.

The need for perseverance in faith is also stressed in Colossians 1:23...here the construction, "provided that . . ." (εἰ γάρ), allows, but by no means demands, the possibility that the condition may not be fulfilled. While the general tone is one of confidence that the Colossians will stand firm, it remains true that their standing on the day of judgement depends on their not shifting away from the hope contained in the gospel.¹¹

Informing his interpretation of Colossians 1:23 is the reasoning that prevails throughout the book—the believer's need for exhortations and warnings indicates the possibility that they may fall away and perish.¹² Even so, the point he emphasizes concerning this passage is the indispensable need for perseverance in faith in concert with Moo and Dunn.

Of particular curiosity is the ambivalence Robert Peterson expresses concerning the contingency when he states, "Col. 1:21-23 can be integrated into an Arminian systematic theology. But it can also be integrated into a Calvinist one."¹³ Peter O'Brien disagrees that Paul's supposition is ambivalent, for he states "The Greek construction εἰ γάρ, translated 'provided that,' does not express doubt," though he acknowledges that J. B. Lightfoot claims that Galatians 3:4 may leave a "loophole for doubt."¹⁴ O'Brien concludes, "So the words in this sentence may be paraphrased: 'At any rate if you stand firm in the faith—and I am sure that you will.'¹⁵

EXEGETICAL MISCUES TRACED TO GREEK GRAMMARIANS

Why do exegetes hold these divergent com-

peting interpretations and some even opting for ambivalence? Divergence and ambivalence are due to their varied readings of Paul's use of εἰ γάρ, readings that reflect unchallenged dependence upon Greek grammarians who have conveyed miscues concerning Greek first class conditional sentences. For example, Fritz Rienecker claims concerning εἰ γάρ in Colossians 1:23—"The particle introduces a conditional clause which the author assumes to be true."¹⁶ Judith Gundry Volf agrees and adds that "the indicative mood following εἰ γάρ suggests" that the apostle Paul is not doubtful but confident that the Colossians will remain steadfast in the gospel.¹⁷ That Paul's supposition uses the indicative mood is important, but Gundry Volf over-interprets its significance because she follows the misstep taken by many exegetes who conclude that the Greek first class condition *assumes the protasis to be true*.

Actually, whether εἰ or the intensified εἰ γάρ imply confidence or doubt or suggest impossibility or possibility is a moot point. A grammatical miscue, however, concerning Greek first class conditional sentences induces exegetes to labor needlessly over the question of certainty or uncertainty. This misstep is well illustrated from S. Lewis Johnson's essay of a generation ago when he contends that Paul's use of εἰ γάρ in Colossians 1:23 "introduces a first-class condition, determined as fulfilled. The apostle *assumes the Colossians will abide* in their faith."¹⁸ With this understanding of the Greek first class condition, he over-interprets the passage, concluding too much from the conditional clause by truncating the proper description of what the supposition assumes. The clause does not indicate that Paul "*assumes the Colossians will abide* in their faith." Rather, the apostle *assumes for the sake of the argument* that the Colossians will abide in the faith. How one expresses what the first class condition assumes is determinative of interpretation.

The notion that Greek first class conditions "assume truth" and thus express certainty or confidence concerning the thing supposed in the if clause (protasis) seems to derive from the confusing classification of first class conditional sentences as, "Deter-

mined as Fulfilled,” by A. T. Robertson and from his less than careful definition: “This class of condition *assumes* the condition to be a reality and the conclusion follows logically and naturally from that assumption.”¹⁹ In subsequent discussion he restates without adequate clarification what he means by “assumes” and “assumption” when he states, “This condition, therefore, taken at its face value, assumes the condition to be true. The context or other light must determine the actual situation.”²⁰ He makes his qualification clearer when he directs readers to consider the protasis of Matthew 12:27—“If I by Beelzebub cast out demons ...”—as instructive concerning the first class condition because “the assumption is untrue in fact, though assumed to be true by Jesus for the sake of argument.”²¹

Given Robertson’s influence upon study of Koiné Greek, it is understandable how his not so lucid explanation of the first class condition continues to obscure exegesis of New Testament passages. This is especially so because some influential Greek pedagogical grammars lay claim to Robertson as their authority even as they transgress beyond his vagueness when they identify $\epsilon\iota$ + indicative verb conditionals as causal constructions that can be translated “since,” and they spread this misunderstanding to students of elementary Greek like a contagion. For example, Ray Summers claims,

The first class condition *affirms* the reality of the condition . . . “ $\epsilon\iota$ μαθηταὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἔσμεν σωθήσεται” ... This construction is best translated, “Since we are disciples of the Lord, we shall be saved.”²²

William Mounce correctly affirms that first class conditional sentences “are saying that if something is true, and let’s assume for the sake of the argument that it is true, then such and such will occur.”²³ In the first two editions of his textbook his next claim slips into muddle: “Sometimes the apodosis is clearly true, and you can translate” the protasis with “since.”²⁴ Even intermediate Greek grammar textbooks sustain this confusion.²⁵

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO THE EXEGETICAL MISCUE

Despite grammarians’ correctives concerning Greek first class conditions, why does this confusion persist among preachers, teachers, and exegetes, and even translators? Surely, much is due to received elementary Greek grammar teaching that does not receive correction but reinforcement when using Greek language tools and commentaries. My own experience in working through this issue suggests at least three factors worthy of mention.

First, after teaching Greek for many years, I have discovered that like myself, students universally have been subjected to a truncated and misleading notion that the indicative mood is the mood of fact, so it makes a statement of fact. This semantically ingenuous notion, ably critiqued by many, assumes an immediate correlation between language and reality.²⁶ That liars exploit the indicative mood destroys the naïve assumption of direct correspondence between reality and language. Instead, the indicative mood is the conventional mood of choice when someone wants to *present* something as factual or real. Speakers and writers principally choose the indicative mood to present what they regard to be a conventionally known state of affairs. Nevertheless, false ideas once deeply embedded in the memory from childhood are difficult to eradicate, including errant notions concerning the relationship between language and reality.

A second factor that contributes to misinterpreting Greek first class conditions as though they indicate causality, translated “since,” or to express the truncated idea, “assumed true,” is the uneasiness that a conditional sentence such as Colossians 1:21-23 brings to bear upon one’s theological beliefs. This is why many who embrace the believer’s security in Christ tend to emphasize Paul’s use of $\epsilon\iota\ \gamma\epsilon$ in passages that assume confidence or certainty. It also explains why many who believe that it is possible for believers to apostatize and perish tend to emphasize Paul’s use of $\epsilon\iota\ \gamma\epsilon$ in passages that they suppose assume doubt or uncertainty.

A third factor that aids and abets misunder-

standing of Greek first class conditions is the impact of modern English versions that translate several passages with “since” or “because” and some with adverbs—surely, when, or now—rather than with a conditional conjunction. Everyone knows that students in beginning Greek use standard English versions as guides for translating the Greek New Testament. Here, particularly worthy of comment is the New International Version. Given the wealth of discussion of the grammatical, semantic, aspectual, and speech act dimensions of Greek first class conditionals during the past three decades, it is curious that the NIV2011 still translates first class conditions causally as “since” in numerous passages or sometimes as “because” for εἰ γὰρ, emphatically as “surely” for εἰ γὰρ, and even temporally as “when” or “now.”²⁷ Prior to and since publication of the NIV1984 significant efforts have been made not only to banish causal translations of first class conditionals but also to categorize all Greek conditionals with greater clarity and accuracy.²⁸ Long ago, Maximilian Zerwick said it well: “It is an astonishing fact that even scholars sometimes overlook ... and seem to forget that, εἰ even in a «real» condition still means «if» and not «because» or the like.”²⁹

CORRECTING MISREADINGS OF FIRST CLASS CONDITIONALS

Several scholars have offered correctives for this errant grammatical contagion concerning Greek first class conditions. As part of his larger study of conditional sentences in the Greek New Testament, James Boyer contributes significantly toward correcting misunderstandings concerning first class conditional sentences.³⁰ Boyer challenges the prevalent notion that the Greek construction, εἰ + indicative verb should be understood as “assumed true” and be translated “since” as some prominent grammars have argued, an error widely propagated by sermons, exegetical essays, and commentaries.³¹ He emphasizes that the first class conditional sentence in the Greek New Testament features the *logical con-*

nection between “the condition proposed in the protasis and the conclusion declared in the apodosis,” and which means “precisely the same as the simple condition in English ‘If this ... then that...’” implying absolutely nothing as to “relation to reality.”³²

Overcorrection often follows sustained errors. This seems apparent when Boyer appeals to Classical Greek grammarians who reacted to the standard understanding traced to Gottfried Hermann, a German classicist.³³ Boyer reduces the first class condition to a *simple condition* as Goodwin does who states, “When the protasis simply states a particular supposition, implying nothing as to the fulfillment of the condition, it has the indicative with εἰ.”³⁴

Others embrace Boyer’s challenge as they do their own original research to test Boyer’s work and to offer correctives and clarifications.³⁵ D. A. Carson reinforces Boyer’s correction that the protasis of first class conditionals does not mean “since” but emphasizes that the condition expresses that something “is assumed true for the sake of the argument,” and he adds that the thing “assumed to be true for the sake of the argument” may or may not be actually true as he demonstrates with the supposition in Matthew 12:27.³⁶

More expansive is the measured discussion of the Greek first class conditional offered by Daniel Wallace within his full consideration of Greek conditional sentences.³⁷ He reaffirms Boyer’s convincing demonstration that the εἰ + indicative verb protasis does not mean “since,” but he cautions against concluding that the Greek first class condition is “just a simple condition” that expresses “If this ... then that...” with no implication at all in “relation to reality.”³⁸

ASSUMED TRUE FOR THE SAKE OF THE ARGUMENT

If many who misunderstand Robertson extract too much from the presence of the indicative verb in the protasis of a first class condition, Boyer, following Goodwin, suppresses the significance of the indica-

tive verb. That the Greek first class condition uses indicative mood verbs is not irrelevant but significant. For the indicative mood, correctly understood, is the mood of choice when one wants to portray something as in keeping with reality. As stated earlier, for this reason liars use the indicative mood to present falsehood as truth and truth as false.

The Greek first class conditional $\epsilon\iota$ turns portrayal of reality into a supposition concerning reality. This does not mean that the thing being supposed is always true. Rather the thing supposed is being *assumed to be true for the sake of the argument that is being made*. Clearly, this is what the conditional means, for after all, Paul uses the first class condition seven times in 1 Corinthians 15:12-19, with six of the uses expressing suppositions that assume things to be true for the sake of his argument which he is fully convinced are factually contrary to the very argument that he makes.³⁹

Given Paul's leading question in 1 Corinthians 15:12, a teaching which may have been a precursor to the "shipwrecking" message Hymenaeus and Philetus taught (cf. 2 Tim 2:17-18) seems to have caught the fancy of some in Corinth, namely, that there is no resurrection of the dead. Paul argues against the error. In order for his use of first class conditions to have persuasive impact, Paul roots his suppositional argument in reality, in the way things really are, in the firmness of his apostolic eyewitness of the Christ whom he proclaims as raised from the dead. So, first in the series of seven conditionals is his use of a suppositional query to set up the subsequent suppositional reasoning: "Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead?" (v. 12). Paul poses this conditional question not to satisfy his own curiosity. Rather, he designs his suppositional query as a modified rebuke, not to sting the Corinthians but to persuade them against embracing the false teaching. Instead of issuing a direct apostolic rebuke, twice he softens it, first by framing it as a supposition and then by casting the supposition as a question. He effectively makes his point, not

with a direct scolding but with reasoned appeal.

Paul does not use simple indicative statements to declare the truthfulness of the resurrection of the dead. Instead, he invites the Corinthians to reason with him through a series of interlinking first class suppositions in vv. 13-19 that have great rhetorical effect.⁴⁰ His suppositions draw readers or listeners in to participate with him in a discourse of reasonable belief, because the belief for which the gospel calls is not irrational nor rationalistic. His series of first class conditionals call upon readers, for the sake of the argument, to accept as truthful each negative assumption linked with corresponding negative conclusions. For if each of Paul's suppositions hold true, then the propositions of each main clause also hold true, and the truth prevails.

Paul reasons, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised" (v. 13). Expanded for clarity, this means, "Assume for the sake of the argument, which I am presenting, that there is no resurrection of the dead; then not even Christ has been raised from the dead." Abstracted by themselves, neither what Paul assumes for the sake of his argument in the protasis nor what he concludes in the apodosis are actually true. Nevertheless, the whole of Paul's suppositional statement asserts truth. It is true that if there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ also has not been raised from the dead. As a unit, his protasis and apodosis work together to affirm what logically coheres and corresponds to the reality which Paul shares in common with the Corinthians. His argument appeals to the state of affairs that govern human reasoning, for apart from the existence of the large set (resurrection of all from death), a subset of the larger cannot exist (resurrection of one from death, namely, Christ). Thus, the apostle shows skill in using a powerful language convention, the Greek first class condition, to persuade.

PAUL'S APPEAL TO THE COLOSSIANS, PERFORMATIVE SPEECH

Others have accented the nonsense that results from accepting the notion that Greek first class

conditionals of 1 Corinthians 15:12-19 can be legitimately translated “since” because the thing supposed is “an assumed fact.”⁴¹ Most assuredly, Paul does not argue, “Now since there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised.” Likewise, in Colossians 1:22-23, Paul does not reason that God will “present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him *since* indeed you continue in the faith.” The NIV does not translate the verse this way but correctly reads “if you continue in your faith...” even though the passage uses εἰ γέ, an intensified form.

Nevertheless, in passages adjacent to Colossians 1:22-23, the NIV translates two uses of εἰ without the intensive γέ as, “Since you died with Christ” (εἰ ἀπεθάνετε σὺν Χριστῷ; Col 2:20) and “Since, then, you have been raised with Christ” (εἰ οὖν συνηγήρθητε τῷ Χριστῷ; 3:1). These translations change suppositional clauses into simple declarative clauses. This alters the function of the apostle’s words. Function concerns what scholars call “speech act” or “performative utterance.”⁴² Paul’s suppositions are performative. They function dialogically, for they require readers to participate in faith’s cognitive process by pondering their relationship with Christ as the premise for the question (2:20) and for the command (3:1).⁴³ To translate εἰ with “since,” transforms the two suppositional clauses into a different kind of speech act, namely, an authoritative monologue that removes the cognitive process from readers and substitutes assertion that the Colossians have died with Christ and have been raised with him as the premise for the question of 2:20 and for the imperative of 3:1.

Paul’s uses of εἰ in 2:20 and in 3:1 entail performative utterances that call for cognitive and behavioral responses. He exhorts his readers to process his words and to act accordingly. His use of the first class condition functions to engage readers to think, for his suppositions call for readers to ask themselves, “Have I died with Christ to the elementary things of the world? If so, then is not Christ my new master? Have I been raised with Christ? If so,

then I must seek the things above where Christ is enthroned.” Paul’s suppositional clauses beckon readers to respond in keeping with the gospel’s call to be united with Christ by belief that transforms conduct. This is how his two *assumptions for the sake of the respective arguments* form the premises for Paul’s question (2:20) and imperative (3:1). The apostle formulates his appeals to stir sustained belief among the Colossians.

Paul structures his exhortation in Colossians 1:22-23 differently from that of 2:20 and 3:1. In both 2:20 and 3:1 he places the suppositional clause at the front of his sentences. Positioning the conditional clause as the cognitive frame of reference features the contingency of the main clause that follows.⁴⁴ Placing the supposition forward establishes the premise, the specific state of affairs to which the question (2:20) and command (3:1) of the main clauses, respectively, correlate.⁴⁵

In 1:22-23, Paul places the suppositional clause after the main clause which diminishes the desired emphasis of the conditional clause, for the main clause reads like a simple declarative or assertive statement until one comes upon the condition or directive statement at the end. Because of this, Paul rarely places the conditional clause after the main clause, but he does so in 1:22-23—“But now he has reconciled you in his fleshly body to present you holy and blameless and irreproachable before him, if indeed you continue in the faith.” Because Paul places the conditional after the main clause he immediately adds the emphatic particle γέ to the conditional conjunction εἰ just as he does in four other passages where he places the main clause before the conditional clause (cf. 2 Cor 5:3; Gal 3:4; Eph 3:2; 4:21; Col 1:23).⁴⁶ Addition of γέ as a syntactical marker is needed to restore the emphasis that is otherwise mitigated by placing the conditional clause after the main clause instead of preceding it as in Colossians 2:20 and 3:1. The discourse function of Paul’s syntactical marker to emphasize the conditional as indispensable should redirect the misguided debate as to whether the presence of εἰ γέ implies confidence or

doubt.⁴⁷ Rather than implying certainty or uncertainty, the syntactical function of εἰ γὰρ is to intensify the supposition.⁴⁸ The emphasis Paul assigns to the conditional clause in 1:22-23 alerts readers that the directive supposition must hold true for the primary assertive proposition to hold true. So, “if indeed” (εἰ γὰρ) emphasizes that to “continue in the faith” is indispensable, not optional. How one responds to Paul’s directive expressed in the conditional clause has consequences that are invariable, inviolable, and eternal. Perseverance in the faith is essential to being presented holy, blameless, and irreproachable before God.

If response to Paul’s exhortation has inviolable consequences, does this imply that failure to persevere in the faith will have the consequence of not being presented holy and blameless before the Lord in the Day of Judgment? Many years ago a fervent youthful logician admonished me that according to the rules of logic the inference is invalid. He accused me of committing the logical fallacy of “denying the antecedent,” a fallacy that consists in faulty reasoning symbolized in this manner:

If A then B
Not A
Therefore, Not B

The zealous logician reasoned that the supposition and consequence of Colossians 1:22-23 cannot legitimately be read as saying, “If you do not persevere in the faith you will not be presented holy before God.” He took a step further to say that it may be true that God will not save those who do not persevere in the faith, but we have no way of knowing this from Colossians 1:22-23; if you can find another passage that actually says so, then fine. Is he correct in his application of logic’s rules to Paul’s exhortation? No. He had command of logical fallacies, delightfully popping what he thought were logical fallacy balloons. However, he had an inadequate command of Scripture.

Two elements within the context validate the legitimacy of inferring the inverse of the supposi-

tion and consequence in Colossians 1:22-23. First, Paul’s exhortative conditional (1:23) attached to his assertive declaration (1:22) concerning what God has done for us in Christ Jesus is hardly a statement devoid of context. The exhortation is embedded within the context of a letter but also within the context of a large collection of letters in which Paul labors to argue that salvation is found exclusively in Christ Jesus. Christ’s singularity as the one through whom God reconciles all things to himself by establishing peace through his sacrificial death on the cross is extolled with hymnic praise (1:18-20) from which the apostle seamlessly transitions to include believers as recipients of God’s reconciliation and peace-making in this same Christ. Paul leaves no ambiguity for his readers, whether in Colossae or elsewhere. Universally, salvation is received exclusively in Christ Jesus, for there is no other gospel to be proclaimed “in all creation under heaven” (1:23). Expressed another way, as Paul states the matter, only those who persevere in the faith will be presented holy and blameless and irreproachable in the presence of God. Thus, failure to persevere in the faith will result in God’s condemning judgment.

A second element within the context, even in 1:23, legitimates inferring the inverse of Paul’s supposition. For, following the positive exhortation—“if indeed you continue in the faith, established and firm”—he adds a negative, “not shifting from the hope of the gospel which you heard.” As shown earlier, to “continue in the faith” is to be “not shifting from the hope of the gospel.” Does not Paul’s portrayal of perseverance with the negative imagery indicate that he induces readers to ponder the legitimacy of inferring the inverse of his conditional? “What will happen if I do not continue in the faith?” Is not the necessary response self-evident? Thus, the notion that the inference—if I do not persevere in the faith I will perish—is a fallacy because Paul did not pen his own explicit statement of negating the antecedent is symptomatic of the rigidified cerebral reasoning some bring to Scripture, but it is incorrect. If we fail to persevere in the faith, we will be lost eternally.

CONCLUSION

We need to hear Paul's exhortation in Colossians 1:21-23 properly. This requires correct understanding of the Greek first class condition. It implies neither doubtfulness nor confidence of its fulfillment. The conditional does not "assume the supposition to be true." Rather, Paul assumes for the sake of his argument that the Colossians will remain steadfast in the Christian faith. Whether they would remain steadfast required them to heed the apostle's exhortation. In Colossians 1:22-23 Paul uses a condition as a softened form of an imperative to emphasize the invariable correlation of perseverance in the gospel in the present age with receipt of God's salvation in the age to come.

We need to allow the gospel's admonitions and promises to have their respective functions within their contexts, for each utterance has its own performative design. Therefore, we must conscientiously avoid superimposing our theological constructs onto Scripture's speech acts to master either promise or exhortation and warning to serve our systems of belief. We must not impose Scripture's exhortations onto divine promises as though they call into question God's assured promise of salvation to everyone who believes in his Son. Likewise, we must not force God's promises onto the gospel's admonitions to mute their urgent appeal to persevere in loyalty to Christ lest we perish. God relates to his children covenantally, not mechanistically.⁴⁹ Therefore, however much tension Scripture's juxtaposition of God's covenantal promises and exhortations may bring to bear upon us, belief in the gospel obliges us to submit, not to domesticate them. Christian faith embraces divine promises and divine admonitions as harmoniously functioning and not conflicting with one another.⁵⁰ This is true because gospel exhortations and warnings serve gospel promises.⁵¹ Promise of assured salvation in Christ grounds belief in God who keeps his promises and oaths on behalf of his children. Exhortations and warnings elicit enduring belief in the promise-keeping God who preserves his

children but only in Christ Jesus. Thus, gospel exhortations draw out the gospel's initial call by urging believers to remain steadfast in their initial belief in Christ Jesus.⁵² This is how exhortations serve the gospel's promise that God will safely deliver everyone into his presence who remains a loyal follower of Jesus Christ.

Humans imitate God. Parents make promises to their children that entail implicit and often explicit obedience. Subsequent parental exhortations and warnings do not contradict the initial promise but remind children of the behavior required of them, if they are to receive the thing promised. God's covenant keeping with his children, however, is not measured by promises human parents make to their children, for they are both able to break their promises and not able effectually to make their children obey. Dissimilar from humans, because he cannot lie, God's promise and oath of assured salvation in Christ Jesus are inviolable. Also, the Heavenly Father is able to secure effectively his children's obedience to the gospel through various means of which the primary is the gospel's call, whether through the initial appeal to repent and believe or through sustained entreaties to persevere in repentance, belief, and obedience by way of warnings and exhortations.

ENDNOTES

¹ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (2nd ed., 16th printing; Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1976), 67.

² Cf. Rom 8:81-25.

³ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon* (New International Greek Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 111.

⁴ N. T. Wright, *Colossians & Philemon*, (Tyndale New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 84. He accents "'the faith' as a 'place' ... where Christians must 'remain' rather than just the activity of believing. 'The faith' includes that activity, but goes beyond it to indicate the content of what is believed, and perhaps the whole Christian way of life."

⁵ Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary 44; Waco, Texas: Word, 1982), 69.

- ⁶ See *Ibid.*, 70, where O'Brien takes "the hope of the gospel" as "that hope which was the content of the gospel." He identifies εὐαγγελίου as a subjective genitive, but it would seem more likely to be an exegetical genitive, a genitive that renames "the hope," which is to say, "the hope" is "the gospel."
- ⁷ More than a generation ago, Willard M. Aldrich argued that the verb of the apodosis is not "to present" (παραστήσαι) but "reconciled" (ἀποκατήλλαθεν). He concludes that Col 1:21-23 is a "Scriptural test and proof of personal salvation." So he reasons that a future contingency (remaining in the faith) cannot alter a past fact (reconciled), so "What it must mean is that the past fact will be evidenced by continuing faith" ("Perseverance," *BibSac*, 115:457 (1958): 16). It seems apparent that Aldrich's theological commitments led him to adopt this reading, for he did not like what he considered to be the necessary implications, if he took the verb of the apodosis to be "to present" (παραστήσαι). Aldrich rejects the converse of the supposition—"if we do not continue in the faith we shall be lost." Against this, he asserts, "That is not what it says," but rather "you have been reconciled, if you continue." And the punch line of clear inference is that you have not been saved if you do not continue in the faith" (p. 16).
- ⁸ This essay does not engage one version of the interpretation that regards the first class conditional as implying doubt which is presented by Charles C. Bing, "The Warning in Colossians 1:21-23," *BibSac* 164 (2007): 74-88. Bing advocates a "loss-of-rewards" interpretation of the passage that calls for embracing Classic Dispensationalism's insistence that believers will be subjected to a judgment of their deeds at "the judgment seat of Christ" which has no necessary correlation to their receipt of salvation in the Last Day. For a critical assessment of this view see Thomas R. Schreiner & A. B. Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance & Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 24-29.
- ⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 144.
- ¹⁰ Dunn, *Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 110.
- ¹¹ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away*, (London: Epworth, 1969; Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1974), 243, n. 64. Marshall's note attaches to his discussion of 2 Cor 6:1 where he argues that "the possibility exists that Christians may receive God's grace to no purpose after conversion and so become backsliders" (p. 119).
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 125. See Marshall's conclusion concerning Paul's letters.
- ¹³ Robert A. Peterson, "The Perseverance of the Saints: A Theological Exegesis of Four Key New Testament Passages," *Presbyterian* 17.2 (1991): 98. See his fuller statement: "Fairness leads me to conclude from Paul's making final sanctification dependent upon Christians' perseverance in faith that one could deduce the possibility of their losing salvation. But it is important to note that the apostle himself does not draw that conclusion here. Frankly, Colossians 1:21-23 can be integrated into either an Arminian or Calvinist systematic theology. The passage by itself does not prove or disprove either theological system. Theologians must bring other passages to bear on their understanding of Colossians 1:21-23, including not only other warning passages but preservation passages as well. This passage, then, is inconclusive" (Robert A. Peterson, *Our Secure Salvation: Preservation and Apostasy* [Explorations in Biblical Theology; Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009], 133).
- ¹⁴ O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 69. Cf. J. B. Lightfoot, *The Epistle of Paul to the Galatians* (2nd American reprint ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1957), 135.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.* O'Brien also introduces additional theological claims: "But continuance is the test of reality. 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."
- ¹⁶ Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 569.
- ¹⁷ Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance: Staying In and Falling Away*, (Tübingen: Mohr[Siebeck]; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1990), 197, n. 231.

- ¹⁸S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., "Studies in the Epistle to the Colossians: From Enmity to Amity," *BibSac* 119 (1962): 147. "Determined as fulfilled" is Robertson's category designation for Greek first class conditions. See note 15.
- ¹⁹A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), 1007.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 1008.
- ²¹*Ibid.*
- ²²Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville: Broadman, 1950), 108-109.
- ²³William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (1st & 2nd eds.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 330.
- ²⁴*Ibid.* In the third ed. (2009) Mounce modifies the statement from his first two editions: "Sometimes the apodosis is true, and you may want to translate *ei* as 'since.' ... This may be over-translating a bit, saying more than what the sentence actually means, but there are times when using 'if' adds an element of uncertainty that is not appropriate to the verse." Confusion persists, for "if," rightly understood, does not imply doubt or uncertainty (329). Stanley E. Porter, Jeffrey T. Reed, and Matthew Brook O'Donnell state, "Some think that first-class conditionals should routinely be translated 'since.' Although in some instances this may be true, it is best to avoid this formulation," given the example of Matt 12:27 (*Fundamentals of New Testament Greek* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010], 358).
- ²⁵See the less than clear discussion by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (40th printing 1955; Toronto: Macmillan, 1927), 287-89. Better is James A. Hewett, *New Testament Greek: A Beginning and Intermediate Grammar* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1986), 32-33. However, the revised edition (2009, p. 52), revised and expanded by C. Michael Robbins and Steven R. Johnson truncates and muddles the fuller and clearer discussion of the first edition.
- ²⁶For a critique, see Anthony C. Thiselton, "Semantics and New Testament Interpretation," *New Testament Interpretation: Essay on Principles and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 75-114.
- ²⁷See passages where NIV2011 over-translates *ei* in various ways indicating translations respectively NIV1984/NIV2011: 2 Cor 5:3 (*ei* $\gamma\epsilon$; "because"/"because"); Gal 4:7 (*ei*; "since"/"since"); 5:25 (*ei*; "since"/"since"); Eph 3:2 (*ei* $\gamma\epsilon$; "surely"/"surely"); 4:21 (*ei* $\gamma\epsilon$; "surely"/"when"); Col 2:20 (*ei*; "since"/"since"); 3:1 (*ei*; "since"/"since"); 1 Pet 1:17 (*ei*; "since"/"since"); 2:3 (*ei*; "now"/"now"); 1 John 4:11 (*ei*; "since"/"since").
- ²⁸See the extensive discussion of *ei* +indicative conditionals in Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek New Testament with Reference to Tense and Mood* (SBG 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 294-304. See also Richard A. Young, "A Classification of Conditional Sentences Based on Speech Act Theory," *Grace Theological Journal* 10 (1989): 29-49; and *idem*, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: B&H, 1994), 227-30.
- ²⁹Maximilian Zerwick, *Biblical Greek: Illustrated by Examples* (trans. by Joseph Smith; 2nd reprint 1985; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico, 1963), 104, §308.
- ³⁰James L. Boyer, "First Class Conditionals: What Do They Mean?," *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (1981): 75-114.
- ³¹See, e.g., two important reference grammars: Nigel Turner, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek* (vol. 3 Syntax; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1963), 115; F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (trans. and rev. by Robert W. Funk; Chicago: University of Chicago, 1961), 188-90.
- ³²Boyer, "First Class Conditionals," 82.
- ³³See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 692, n. 18.
- ³⁴W. W. Goodwin, *Greek Grammar* (rev. C. B. Gulick; Boston: Ginn, 1930), 294. Others follow Goodwin's over-simplification.
- "The protasis *simply states* a supposition which refers to a particular case in the present or past, implying nothing as to its fulfilment. ... Conditional clauses of the first class are frequently used when the condition is fulfilled, and the use of the hypothetical form suggests no doubt of the fact. This fact of fulfilment lies, however,

not in the conditional sentence, but in the context” (Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek* [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1897; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1976], 102.)

“When the Protasis simply states a present or past particular supposition, implying nothing as to the fulfillment or non-fulfilment of the condition, a present or past tense of the Indicative is used in the Protasis: any part of the finite verb may stand in the Apodosis” (H. P. V. Nunn, *A Short Syntax of New Testament Greek* [5th ed. reprinted 1965; Cambridge: University Press, 1912], 117).

“Simple present and past conditional sentences are sometimes called ‘neutral,’ because nothing is implied with regard to the truth of either condition or conclusion” (H. W. Smyth, *A Greek Grammar* [New York: American Book, 1916], 341). This statement follows one that is almost identical to Goodwin’s statement above.

“This form merely sets forth the nexus between the conclusion and the condition; it sets forth the conclusion as real, if the condition is real—but implies nothing as to the latter” (Adolph Kaegi, *A Short Grammar of Classical Greek* [St. Louis: B. Herder, 1914], 144).

³⁵See, e.g., L.W. Ledgerwood, III, “What Does the First Class Conditional Imply? Gricean Methodology and the Testimony of the Ancient Greek Grammarians,” *Grace Theological Journal* 12 (1992): 99-118 for detailed consideration and correction of grammatical confusion concerning first class conditions resulting from Robertson’s vague and untestable category designations and claims.

³⁶D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd ed. 1996; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 77-78.

³⁷See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 679-712.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 691. Wallace responds expressly to Boyer, “First Class Conditionals,” 82.

³⁹Six times Paul’s first class conditionals use the conjunction, εἰ (1 Cor 15:12, 13, 14, 16, 17 & 19); once he uses the intensified conjunction, εἴπερ (v. 15).

⁴⁰It is worth noting how Paul weaves his reasoning together by turning the apodosis of v. 12 into the protasis of v. 13 and the apodosis of v. 13 into the protasis

of v. 14. With v. 15 he begins another chain by turning the apodosis of v. 15 into the protasis of v. 16 and the apodosis of v. 16 into the protasis of v. 17.

⁴¹Cf. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 77. The fallacy to which he points is committed by W. Harold Mare, *1 Corinthians* (Expositors Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), 10.283.

⁴²See Richard S. Briggs, “Speech-Act Theory,” *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 763-66. See also the recent dissertation by Laurie L. Norris, “The Function of New Testament Warning Passages: A Speech Act Theory Approach,” (Ph.D. diss.; Wheaton College, 2011), 88-122. Norris observes, “While Schreiner and Caneday have similarly highlighted the functional dimension of NT warnings (as the means by which God causes the elect to persevere), they have not explicitly related their discussion to speech act theory or appropriated its helpful categories” (p. 8). Later, she also notes, “While adopting a decidedly more functional reading of these texts, they do not employ the specific language and constructs of speech act theory—terminology which actually is compatible on many levels with their interpretation” (p. 288, n. 34). Her observations are astute, for she alone has stated in written form an acknowledgment that in *The Race Set Before Us*, we do address the exhortations and warnings of Scripture with regard to function, which is a concern of speech act theory. We consciously avoided using the terms and categories of the field of study in order to keep the book as accessible as possible to a wide readership.

⁴³“Faith’s cognitive process” must not be confused with “detached theological cogitation,” “academic rumination,” or “cogitative speculation” mentioned earlier as improper responses to the gospel’s admonitions and exhortations. Saving belief necessitates cognition, for faith is not irrational. That saving faith entails a cognitive process does not render belief rationalistic.

⁴⁴Cognitive processing of the exhortation’s function is what Tom Schreiner and I refer to when we state, “Warnings and admonitions ... express what is capable of being conceived with the mind. They speak of things conceivable or imaginable, not of things likely

to happen. In fact, this is the objective of warnings and admonitions. They appeal to the mind to conceive how actions have consequences. Warnings and exhortations project a supposition that calls us to imagine that a particular course of action has an unequivocal and inviolable consequence ... They appeal to our minds to conceive of cause-and-effect relationships or of the relationship between God's appointed means and end. They warn us on the basis of God's inviolable promise and threat proclaimed in the gospel: salvation is only for those who believe to the end ... They do not confront us with an uncertain future. They do not say that we may perish. Rather, they caution us lest we perish. They warn that we will surely perish if we fail to heed God's call in the gospel" (*The Race Set Before Us*, 207-208).

⁴⁵On the significance of fronting the suppositional clause, see Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2010), 227-28.

⁴⁶Similarly, Paul uses εἴπερ Rom 3:30; 8:9, 17; 1 Cor 15:15; 2 Thess 1:6. 1 Cor 8:5 is one exception where εἴπερ occurs in the conditional clause which is placed first where the subject matter seems to call for the added emphasis.

⁴⁷Cf. Margaret Thrall, *Greek Particles in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), 82-92 for a discussion of whether εἴ γε indicates confidence or doubt.

⁴⁸The particle γε "normally follows the word which it stresses." See J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (2nd ed; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1946), 146.

⁴⁹As Marshall casts the situation, one can hardly disagree with him: "Paul, then, did not regard grace as operating in such a mechanical fashion that the believer is inevitably carried on to perfection with no effort on his part. The paradox of grace and freewill is not to be solved by emphasizing the former to the exclusion of the latter" (*Kept by the Power of God*, 125).

⁵⁰I. Howard Marshall says something similar: "To

reconcile these two strands in biblical teaching, the promises of eternal security and the warnings against falling away, is not easy. Our tendency is to push beyond the evidence to some kind of logical system which over-emphasises the sovereignty of God or human freedom. We have to learn not to go beyond the things that are written, and to be content with the full teaching of the Scriptures" (*Kept by the Power of God*, 12). Marshall's word choice implies that promise and warning need to be reconciled. Against this notion, see Schreiner & Caneday, *The Race Set Before Us*, 142-47; 194-95; 204-13.

⁵¹Concerning this relationship between divine promise and divine exhortation G. C. Berkouwer observes, "We will never be able to understand these words if we see the divine preservation and our preservation of ourselves as mutually exclusive or as in a synthetic cooperation. Preserving ourselves is no an independent thing that is added paradoxically to the divine preservation. God's preservation and our self-preservation do not stand in mere coordination, but in a marvelous way they are in correlation. One can formulate it best in this way: our preservation of ourselves is entirely oriented to God's preservation of us" (*Faith and Perseverance* [trans. Robert D. Knudsen; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958], 104).

⁵²Berkouwer expresses well the gospel function of exhortations, "The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints can never become an *a priori* guarantee in the life of believers which would enable them to get along without admonitions and warnings. Because of the nature of the relation between faith and perseverance, the whole gospel must abound with admonitions. It has to speak thus, because perseverance is not something that is merely handed down to us, but it is something that comes to realization only in the path of faith. Therefore the most earnest and alarming admonitions cannot in themselves be taken as evidence against the doctrine of perseverance" (*Faith and Perseverance*, 110-111).