

“FRIENDS” OR “SONS”? IMPLICATIONS FOR PERSEVERANCE

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“He’s God’s friend.” That is about the nicest thing a person can say about someone. In the mouth of God himself, Isaiah says, “*Abraham, my friend*” (Isaiah 41:8; cp. James 2:23; 2 Chronicles 20:7). Friendship implies several things about our relationship to God. Jesus tells us what he is doing—revelation (John 15:15); so “friend” better describes us than “slave” or “servant” does. Besides, he cares about us—a lot, enough even to die an excruciating death for us (John 15:13-15; Romans 5:6-8, *etc.*). That implies doing for us whatever else we need and cannot do for ourselves; that is what a friend does (Romans 8:32; 1 John 3:17). Friendship with God separates us from people that are at cross purposes with him: “*Friendship with the world is enmity with God*” (James 4:4); so we have the same values and purposes that he does. Experience shows us a number of points that help us understand what ideal friendship is like.

Plain List of Implications

This point about friendship clarifies and simplifies a host of matters in Christian belief and practice, not the least of which are several aspects of salvation. Friendship sets the character of associated topics within it:

- what the relationship is and what it is based on,
- what values and behaviors are relevant to this relationship,
- what lostness is and what causes it,
- what salvation is and how it occurs,
- how Christ saves us,
- how salvation is both universal and limited,
- why we cannot save ourselves,
- who sets the “terms” of salvation,
- what kinds of acts are relevant to renewal of friendship,
- why human responses are necessary but not efficient,
- why salvation cannot be dispensed through third parties,
- how salvation is both permanent and reversible,
- what assurance of salvation is like,
- how neither perfection nor lawlessness is the case,
- how perfection is involved yet not possible,
- Christ’s role in our continued relationship to God,
- what things are irrelevant.

Once over lightly

Our first effort unpacks significant characteristics of friendship that relate to salvation matters. Then we will return to several of these issues and see how biblical revelation confirms what we can already deduce, starting with what it means to be a friend.

Definition

A. What the relationship is and what it is based on

Friendship implies what values and behaviors are appropriate: (a) positive interpersonal relationship (not selfishness) and then which ones are appropriate to (b) this friendship and what behaviors are appropriate to (c) relationship with other friends of God. It shows what matters are (d) irrelevant or indifferent.

Friendship describes our intended relationship to God. We live, not in chaos, but amidst order and form. That means we live in relationships, including person-to-person ones, especially interpersonal relationship with God. God intends that association to be a close positive personal relationship, a friendship.

Friendship requires shared values and purposes as expressed in behavior. People we know about, acquaintances we have met, neighbors and fellow workers we are around, and even relatives are not as close as friends. Friendships arise through intangibles held in common and positive interaction in terms of them. The issue is not simply behavior, but person-to-person behavior, specifically behavior toward the friend and even more specifically behavior that reflects shared values and purposes.

B. What lostness is and what causes it

What friendship is implies what lostness is—estrangement, alienation, division, separation. Loss of friendship comes from behavior inappropriate to the friendship—from “sin.” So lostness is not caused by third parties, birth, inheritance, race, social status, or state of being, but by behavior contrary to positive relations.

C. What salvation is

What lostness is implies what salvation is. Salvation is reconciliation—deliverance from the estrangement caused by bad behavior. So it does not deal with other kinds of deliverance as from states of being, natural, social, legal, or otherwise. *Saved* and *lost* are correlative terms that correspond with *reconciled* and *estranged*.

Basis

D. How salvation occurs

Reconciliation comes by identification with the other person and by recommitting to common values and purposes. That process consists of a repentance-forgiveness process—repentance on one side and forgiveness on the other. The repentance is for breaching the friendship and resolving again to operate appropriately to the kind of friendship that can exist between people and God.

Reconciliation is not accomplished by just one side. The offender does not just decide that the fellowship is “on” again; the offended person may not be willing to take him back—perhaps because the sin was too extreme to forgive, because its “too late.” Either side may take the initiative, but the offended person finalizes. Choice occurs on both sides. The offender may decide to initiate reconciliation, but the offended must decide to accept. The offended may decide to initiate, but the offender must decide to accept.

In human-divine friendship, not only is God willing for all of us to come back, but he has taken the initiative; yet we must accept the offer. If choosing to accept is not involved, the result would be something besides friendship. So, salvation as reconciliation is conditioned on accepting it.

Salvation then calls for a reversal of what caused the estrangement—a reversal of behavior and its motive and attitude. That means salvation as reconciliation does not come by acquiring special knowledge (metaphysics) or by the authority in a legal process (law). Nor does it come about by a change in creatable nature, the “stuff” we are made of (ontic, hypostatic, substantive). Causes produce results after their own kind. What causes reconciliation necessarily involves changed interpersonal behavior that caused the alienation.

E. How Christ saves us into relationship to the Father

In reconciliation through Christ, he is not really a third party along with us and the Father. For one thing, he himself is deity; but beyond that, he is Son of God in the sense that he is like God—righteous, the One in whom the Father is “well pleased,” one who shares the Father’s values and purposes. Identifying with him amounts to identifying with the Father as when we say, “*A friend of yours is a friend of mine.*” Christ and the Father stand united on the same side of the friendship across from us. That amounts to saying Christ is not a third party. The holy God is willing to count us a righteous if we are willing to identify with his Son, the Messiah, who is holy like the Father he is an incarnate extension of.

F. What behaviors are appropriate to renewing friendship

Most basic is being sorry for offending behaviors and the intention not to repeat them. Past sin itself cannot be changed, but the past is not the problem. The real issue is what a person is like in the present. Although the past cannot be changed, it can be removed from

impacting friendship now. Repentance on one side combines with forgiveness on the other. The offender says, “*That is no longer the kind of person I am or intend to be. I separate myself from that kind of living.*” The offended says, “*I accept your repentance and no longer consider you the kind of person you were. I will not hold your past against you.*” With both sides separating the offender from his past behavior, nothing stands between the two to void their friendship.

G. Who establishes the “terms” of salvation

Within the repentance-forgiveness format, the offended party sets the conditions of reconciliation. Not only does the offender not just decide to renew the friendship, but he is wholly dependent on the choice of the other. The offended party is sovereign in friendship renewal as to whether it can happen and what the terms of it are.

Application

H. Why we cannot save ourselves

Reconciliation is brought about by the offended party. Since a friendship has two sides, it takes two sides to re-establish it. The offender is in no position “set things right” on his own, and the offended party is under no obligation to take him back. Being sorry does not reconcile, even though it is necessary for reconciliation. The offender is at the mercy of the grace of the offended. Besides, friendship has theoretically a perfection standard, and once perfection is broken it cannot be overcome.

I. How the scope of salvation is both universal and limited

The universal and limited aspects of salvation correspond again to the two sides of the relationship. On the divine side, God has opened salvation to everyone. On the human side, individuals limit the possibility by rejecting the universal offer. Universal option lies on the divine side; limited acceptance lies on the human side.

J. Why and how responses are necessary but not efficient (cause *vs.* condition)

As noted above, repentance-plus-forgiveness separates the offender from his past. The primary “condition” for forgiveness is repentance: where there is no repentance there is no forgiveness unto reconciliation. Repentance includes both repudiation of the past and resolution toward the future. In addition, it leads to restitution when possible.

Those things that comprise repentance (and the trust it rests on) do not produce the result. Repentance is not a cause, but a condition. Conditions are not done to the result, but to the person that gives the result. If the result is goodness, no human act or set of them can produce the goodness subsequent to sin because perfection is always the standard for goodness in any relationship; and once perfection is broken, it cannot be overcome.

More to the point, the result is not goodness *per se*, but reconciliation. As indicated already, in reconciliation the result has to be given by the offended party, and the act of one is not (efficiently) caused by another—because of what volitional personhood is. “The quality of mercy is not forced.” Causes are done to results; conditions are done to other persons. Neither perfection nor reconciliation is the kind of result that can be caused by an offender.

K. Not dispensed through proxies, or third parties.

Friendships are established directly by the persons involved. Third parties have no place in effecting the reconciliation any more than third parties have a place in effecting the estrangement in the first place. Such matters are decided only by the friends themselves.

Friendships are established directly by the persons involved. Authority cannot create personal results. Authority cannot be delegated to proxies who thereby have a right to pronounce reconciliation on behalf of others. That is so because of what friendship is; it is always and only direct, and it is always and only by personal choice. Legal process would be external to the persons; it would be neither direct nor personal because it would be done by others by authority, miracle, or enlightenment.

Continuation

Continued salvation is based on the same principles as initial salvation (vs. Galatianism, perfectionism, antinomianism)

L. How salvation can be both permanent and reversible

When people enter into a friendship, there is no thought about time. By their very nature, friendships are open-ended and permanent, and there is no reason for them to end; they never “wear out.” If a person enters a relationship as something temporary, he probably has ulterior motives, but friendship does not abide selfishness. On the other hand, even though no one gives any thought to how long a friendship will last in its beginning, friendships nevertheless do end because of subsequent inappropriate behavior, incompatible purposes or lack of continued interaction. As marriage—a specialized kind of friendship—is “till death do us part,” yet there is divorce. Although friendships have potential permanence, they can be undone.

Just as it takes two sides to establish a friendship, it takes two sides to maintain it. Neither person alone maintains the unity. It would not be possible to guarantee permanence of friendship without overriding the will. If one side were to override the will of the other, it would cease to be a friendship; it would be a person-thing or person-animal relationship rather than a person-person one.

M. The kind of thing assurance of salvation is (on our side):

continued growth in understanding, fellowship, and service to all mankind—Hebrews outline; on God's side: total dependability—faithfulness

N. How neither perfection nor antinomianism are appropriate;

based most specifically on continued identify with, friendship with; friendships do not require absolute righteousness

We cannot “presume on this friendship.”

The dynamics of friendship avoid the extremes of perfectionism and antinomianism. As to the perfection extreme, in personal relationship perfection remains the goal and aspiration, though it is not an achievement. Actual, achieved perfection is not inherently necessary to a friendship because repentance-forgiveness removes the foreign and contrary elements from affecting the ongoing relationship. Actions in a relationship are done to the other person (condition) rather than to a standard (cause). Consequently, the past can be escaped. It is not the past act but the present relationship that matters, because the other person can say that it no longer affects the relationship. It is not simply the cumulative actions of the person by himself relative to the standard, but the effective relationship with the other person that is the goal. Repentance (on one side) and forgiveness (on the other side) override any failures that come up between the friends. The other person says that past acts do not affect present relationship as long as he believes that the actions of the first person are now repudiated. The concern is motive and attitude exemplified by pattern of behavior more than individual actions. Thus perfection is involved as a goal, but not achievable as an accomplishment. Inasmuch as we do not want to displease a friend in any respect, we are saying that perfection is the common standard between us. In our failures, we understand that in friendship with God lostness as well as salvation is conditional rather than causal because the process passes through the decisions of the other person. As John puts it, “The blood of Jesus Christ continues to cleanse us from all sin” (1 John 1:7).

As to the antinomianism extreme, we know that behavior affects friendship negatively as surely as it does positively. We also know that the extreme/absolute bad behavior is no more acceptable than extreme/absolute good behavior is necessary. Antinomianism looks sensible (Romans 6:1) only if “salvation” is regarded as something other than positive interpersonal relationship or as something selfish. With friends, we have no inclination to look for loopholes, short-cuts, substitutes, outward appearances, half-heartedness, two-facedness, disinterest. We do not “play the system,” “use” the other person, presume on the relationship, or treat it as finished business. We are not in the friendship for what we can get out of it even though we want the sense of social and psychological fulfillment that it naturally produces—spiritual benefits. Friends avoid all forms of selfishness and feel outwardly directed toward the

other. Friendship embodies all the great features and products of faith, hope, and love as well as such personality traits as those enumerated in 1 Corinthians. Any “benefits” beyond these are potential, not necessary.

O. Christ’s role in our continued relationship to the Father
(intercessor, “blood continues to cleanse”)

P. The kinds of benefits we can expect in friendship with God

There are natural blessings that arise from relationship itself: sense of acceptance, sense of belonging and identity; sense of being loved, cared about, and looked favorably upon; sense of worth, meaningfulness, and fulfillment; sense of security, sense of innocence in the eyes of the other. These matters of present experience (existential) serve as a foundation for future hope (eschatological). They are spiritual, or psychological, benefits of positive relations.

There may also be over-and-above benefits that a person chooses to bestow on a friend. These added benefits are possible, but not necessary or uniform. People do not become friends in order to “get” things or “use” someone. If they do, they are not looking for a friend, but a handout. If selfish motives arise, they weaken or destroy the good thing that friendship is.

Q. Friendship and other types of things

Aside from “blessings,” other types of things can exist along with a friendship. If something legal, material, or metaphysical is added, however, it must be added in such a way that it does not vitiate the nature of friendship.

R. Observations on the continued Christian experience

There are degrees of friendship; so there can be growth and atrophy in it—sanctification and backsliding; “*love can grow cold*” (Matthew 24:12); there can be different depths between multiple friendships with the same person. The growth comes from reciprocal action between inner intent and outer expression as well as between one friend and the other. As friendship is not just categorical but has degrees (both in absence and its presence), so also salvation is not uniform across the saved or static within any one of us.

Friendship involves both inner and outer factors. Outward actions express and show the inner attitude and motive. The inner cannot exist relevantly by itself because it is not of sufficient kind and degree as to erupt outwardly. By itself the outer is not desirable by the recipient or fulfilling to the giver.

A friend does not try to remove all distractions that would work against friendship. Instead, distractions are allowed to provide an occasion for strengthening the relationship—by letting the other being faced with choices to leave but not leaving because this friendship is known to be better than taking what would interfere with it. The prodigal knew “home” was better than the “far country” offered.

If one person were to go too far in retaining a friend, he would (a) be fostering selfishness in the other and perhaps be moved by selfishness in himself. His efforts would stem from crushed pride in not getting a love response from someone shown love—much as a spurned suitor who won’t let the other person go and in effect becomes a stalker. God does not seek to be our friend because he needs us (Acts 17:25); he created us as ones on whom he could bestow himself.

Instead of overwhelming people to keep them “friendly,” we give sufficient basis for friendship. We might imagine divine activity short of miracle-on-being (some kind of impersonal, miraculous force), but we do not experience such things, see them in others’ experience, or witness them in scripture. Paul’s experience near Damascus and Jonah’s flight to Tarshish are about the closest examples of such a thing. But these exceptional calls to special mission draw attention to the rule in scripture and experience that in conversion and perseverance God gives people up to the consequences of their own disinterest in friendship with him.

As there comes a limit in time for opportunity to become friends (Revelation 10:6), so also there is a limit in degree (sliding scale) as to how much one person does appropriately to win back friends alienated by their “sin.” Instead of bowing someone over with attention and reasons to accept friendship (called “flooding”), we put a limit on how hard we try to win them back. That limit lies at least short of overriding their wills.

Evaluating the Terminology Method

Out of the issues surveyed above, we can look at the apostasy question in greater detail. The first question is why we choose “friend” to characterize salvation and thereby gain access to its implications. That expression does not prove, for example, that salvation can reverse; we could choose “son of God” instead and thereby gain access to something that does not reverse. Choosing “friend” does not prove the point; it merely reflects it—or so it could be said.

That observation is true, because an expression may compare rather than identify, be analogous rather than real, be an illustration rather than an example. A label may be used because it is like what it labels only in certain respects. It may name a feature in one system that corresponds to a feature in another one: Jesus may be called a king because he is to the church what Solomon was to a nation even though the church is not a national entity.

So we agree that “friend of God” serves well for presentation purposes more than for proof. It has explanatory value; it describes a person’s association with God. Whether the explanation is correct is another matter that precedes this endeavor so far.

Before proceeding to the real issue behind the apostasy question, we observe that some evidential value does come from (a) the explanatory power that “friend of God” brings to salvation as a consistent understanding of issues across the board. What makes sense of the many tends to make sense of this one. Internal consistency is one test for truth; the various aspects of a view must harmonize with each other. Consistency constitutes a negative test in that a viewpoint

may be consistent within itself but not correspond to the reality it represents. Even perseverance may appear self-consistent without corresponding to the truth of the matter.

In addition, some proof value comes from (b) the credible clarity that “friend of God” brings to the subject. Apostasy gains its believable clarity from our experience with human associations. Though they represent the most complex reality there is, we understand how they work because we constantly participate with other people. Even within ourselves we sense what is appropriate and know how we want to be related to. What we know from “the horizontal” seems applicable to “the vertical” with the person in whose image we were created. As Jesus indicated, even we, being evil, understand in our hearts what is good, appropriate, natural in human relations (Matthew 7:11). We understand how personal relationships begin, develop, and end. Simplicity, clarity, credibility makes sense of Isaiah’s claim that a wayfaring fool need not err in the way of the Lord (Isaiah 35:8). Friendships can be reversed.

As to the expression “son of God,” it is true that sonship can have an irreversible element, but the irreversible element is physical. But physical sonship from Abraham or anyone else does not qualify anyone for relationship to God (Matthew 3:7-10). Saved people are not physical sons of God anyway. Creation is the closest thing to physical sonship with God, but being sons of God by creation is not the point of usage; otherwise, no one would be lost, because all people would then be irreversibly “safe.”

An irreversible element might come by way of legal fiat in which a son, though alienated from his father, might yet receive inheritance from his father. Again, Paul’s writings make it clear, especially in Romans and Galatians, that neither initial nor continued salvation comes by legal means, and reconciliation from alienation is precisely what the whole Christian enterprise is about (2 Corinthians 5:18).

Besides, there are adequate reasons for using the son of God expression aside from any idea of irreversibility. Since sons tend to be like fathers, to be the son of someone or something means to be like him or it. “Sons of darkness” are like people in the dark or people associated with darkness. Sons tend to resemble their fathers physically and behaviorally. Ideally, sons are close to their fathers and have a stronger sense of identity with them than with other men. We wonder whether a person typically has irreversibility in mind when he says, “Johnny is the son of Thomas Jackson.” Having several other reasons for being used, “sons of God” has less reason to highlight irreversibility than “friend of God” has to involve reversibility.

Bypassing the Hermeneutical Method

In moving from terms to topic, we have decided to adopt a handicap. We forgo attempts to decide the apostasy issue directly from individual scriptures. Investigating the question by appealing to relevant texts has its place, and certain texts sound particularly convincing to interpreters who use them. However, informed believers of either persuasion know about the passages used to advocate the alternative viewpoint; they have brought to bear certain

distinctions and accompanying considerations that for them neutralize their usefulness for that other position.

To illustrate the point, we need only recall several familiar ideas used to offset citations that favor the apostasy possibility. (a) The passage describes backsliding, not apostasy. In the other direction, (b) the text is describing someone highly exposed to the gospel, but not committed to the Christ of the gospel. To preclude departing the faith, (c) God supplies sufficient internal resolve to enable successfully dealing with temptations and trials, or (d) he reduces the external temptation sufficiently to guarantee perseverance. If nothing else, (e) God may take a person's life before backsliding becomes apostasy. Other proposals include the idea that (f) apostasy could happen under the Old Covenant, but not under the New Covenant. In Christ, (g) apostasy has become an "impossible possibility" because in his sovereignty God has willed by acts like (c), (d), or (e) to keep people from doing what they could otherwise do. Any passage apparently speaking of lostness after salvation is contemplating the situation aside from these further factors; it is talking only about what is humanly possible. The additional unspoken truth is that apostasy never becomes actual in a person once genuinely converted, hence, an unfalsifiable claim. (g) Such thoughts that guarantee irreversible salvation bring unshakable assurance about a person's eternal state, and so are desirable points to believe.¹

The impossible possibility is most adept at removing proposed apostasy texts from the discussion, especially those in the Book of Hebrews. The discussion must then move back to where the impossible-possibility idea comes from. Apparently, it is not directly stated in scripture at least relative to the apostasy question. Rather, it originates in sanctified imagination as a way to preserve a doctrinal claim reached from some line of reasoning. Since it is not based in scripture, it is not subject to verification or falsification from scripture. At best, it is regarded as a necessary inference from some more basic framework of theological reflection. So the only way to deal with this issue is to deal with the whole theological system that yielded it as an inference.

As regards the grounds for perseverance, we note that individual texts give no adequate basis for the perseverance view. All specific references used to advocate it can be shown not necessarily to address it. So, perseverance cannot bear its burden of proof. Proper thinking calls for adequate evidence for any viewpoint. It is not the task of the opposing side to disprove a truth claim or face the need to accept it—even though disproof can sometimes succeed. From a burden-of-proof perspective, even if all texts supporting apostasy could be neutralized, perseverance is not thereby established. The claim, then, is that no text incapable of a different interpretation can be offered for the concept.

Appealing to texts and proposed concepts can be countered by other texts and concepts arising from sanctified imagination as illustrated above. Appealing to experience likewise fails to resolve matters. In apparent cases of apostasy, the idea is that the original conversion was not genuine, or it would have lasted. Perhaps apostasy is indeed apparent rather than real. God, who knows the heart, may not regard the person as having abandoned the faith. Human observers are not in a position to know such things.

In summary, appealing to terms, texts, and experiences leads to an impasse. Any apparent power in perseverance comes from the difficulty of disproving it. The burden of proof is paramount in previous considerations as well as in those that follow. As to terms, we have considered “friend” the reality and “son” a metaphor. “Son” terminology could bring in irreversibility and thus adjust the “friend” terminology, but there is no way to show that irreversibility is the reason for using “son,” especially since other adequate reasons exist for the term.

As to texts, without clear scriptural basis for even the strongest response to apostasy references (the impossible possibility), a foundation for perseverance is still lacking. The impossible possibility and its lesser like-principles may not be directly falsifiable, but that does not make them true or relevant. As a result, the discussion must get behind individual passages and ideas originating in sanctified imagination.

Invoking the Theological Method

Getting behind passages happens by theological method. The perseverance doctrine stands unmoved in the face of apostasy terms, texts, and experiences because it assumes a larger, silent framework that qualifies them from revealing the ultimate picture. Unless that framework can be shown to have no basis, the perseverance idea feels no compulsion to stand down.

At this point, because of time and space limitations, we lapse back into descriptive mode to create an overview of circumstance that can lead to productive dialog. There are four basic kinds of processes: interpersonal (actualized by influence), natural (actualized by force), legal (actualized by authority), and metaphysical (actualized by form). The Judaeo-Christian worldview (a) puts interpersonal reality and process in first place: “*In the beginning (the triune) God said . . .*” God as holy, sovereign, omnipotent, and so on, makes him ultimate. (b) Creating mankind in “our image” brings the interpersonal capacity into defining connection with us. (c) The great summaries of appropriate human behavior are all interpersonal: “*What does Yahweh require of you but to do justly, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God?*” (Micah 6:8; cp. Deuteronomy 10:12-13); The First Great Commandment, The Second Great Commandment (= The Golden Rule, The Royal Law). The central terminology in salvation is interpersonal and addresses the two sides of interpersonal relationship (grace/faith, promise, repentance/forgiveness, reconciliation, *etc.*). Likewise, what is most eternal is interpersonal: love (1 Corinthians 13:6-13). Interpersonalism is what is most original, most basic, most ultimate, most encompassing, and most eternal. Christianity has an interpersonal worldview.

Every perversion of the Christian faith has been some kind of departure from its interpersonal nature and purpose. What has happened in salvation generally and perseverance specifically is sliding off into the legal category. Making the legal category the silent larger framework modifies every aspect of salvation in ways it would not be otherwise. It (along with Greek hypostatic thinking) allows into the (Judaeo-Christian) interpersonal picture elements that are artificial to it. Law is binding even if it does not correspond to the situation. However, The

Law of the Harvest requires that cause and effect have the same nature (Matthew 7:16-19; Luke 6:43-45; Galatians 6:7-8). Since salvation is an interpersonal result, its causes and processes must be interpersonal.

In perseverance and other salvation subtopics, legal process has often taken first place and interpersonal process conceived of as taking place within it and by means of it. So, any text that would speak to the interpersonal process gets qualified by that more inclusive context; legalism overrides what terms, texts, and experiences say. It eliminates “theology from below” and disenfranchises Isaiah’s “wayfaring fool.” It misconstrues God’s sovereignty, not as the right to establish an interpersonal system in Christ and carry through with its implications, but as the right to limit the interpersonal by legal authority.

That theological construct exactly reverses Paul’s analysis of law-promise relationship, *promise* being one of his code words for interpersonal like *grace* and *faith*. He indicates that God added the Law of Moses to his promise to Abraham (Galatians 3:19, 15-18). That means two legal is secondary to interpersonal and adding law to interpersonal happened in way that did not vitiate it (“annul,” Galatians 3:21). So, in salvation history, grace-faith preceded law, law was a temporary add-on to grace-faith (during the national stage of salvation history), and was then removed in Christ (during its universal transcultural stage till the end of the world/age).

Paul’s quarrel with the Judaizers centered on soteriological implications of circumcision (Acts 15:1), which put a person under law; and law necessarily requires perfection—personally doing everything in the Law all the time (Galatians 3:10-12 < Deuteronomy 27:26 LXX; Leviticus 18:5). Furthermore, law and interpersonalism (“faith”) are parallel systems as highest frames of reference (Galatians 3:11-12). Circumcision was not a problem under Jewish national identity (Acts 16:1-3), but it could not have salvation significance. “Galatianism” would have a person believe that initial salvation was through Christ and continued salvation through law keeping. That scenario resembles the idea that initial and continued salvation is by grace operating inside law rather than parallel to it. In effect, Christ died for nothing because achieving perfection from now on is no more possible than it was before (Galatians 5:2).

Jesus’ primary quarrel with Israel’s religious leaders amounted to the same thing. He did not teach that the Law was false and that he came to destroy (annul) it on that account (Matthew 5:17-20). He came to fulfill the reason for which law was added to gospel (Galatians 3:8): to define righteousness and sensitize to sin (Romans 5:20; 3:20; 7:7-8). Law never had a soteriological function (Galatians 3:21); that is why Christ’s death was for transgression under first covenant (Hebrews 9:15). All salvation regardless of dispensation is figured relative to the only One whose human righteousness extended to perfect obedience to the Father and extreme obedience to the point of violent death, including those before the Law (1 Peter 4:6; 3:18-20).

Using the Pastoral Method

Sometimes we do well to sidestep the complexities of a matter and deal with it in a way that serves practical need. People do not always have the time, readiness, patience, background,

or relevant capacity to work through the theory behind the practice—considerations like those we have attempted to outline above. So to speak, we can teach them how to drive without convincing them how an engine works. Grasping the theory of the system can become part of Christian growth.

In the meantime, we have to get on with calling people to relationship to God through Christ alone. Even the most intelligent among us, the most committed of us, the most scholarly around us will not necessarily come to understand salvation matters—including perseverance—as offered here. We just do our best in motive and attitude.

We have to sympathize with fellow Christians that we would presume to teach the way of the Lord more perfectly on this matter. They have no more reason to suppose we are correct than those who taught them before, who exhibit the Christian walk as well as we do. We are not apostles and have little reason for supposing that we are “*teachers of babes*” (Romans 2:20).

Here is the suggested pastoral approach: start with the common ground and work toward expanding it. The apostasy and perseverance positions have important common ground: both encourage continued Christian living in the name of Christ to the glory of God, to the joy of others, and to people’s own sense of peace and fulfillment. Agreeing on that significant part of the picture and encouraging each other to love and good works can maintain us until we can attain something more.

We do have to observe one important caveat, however. There are two ways people have conceptualized irreversibility in salvation. One maintains people’s need to maintain commitment to God through Christ in belief and practice—perseverance of the saints. The other supposes that once people obtain salvation, their salvation is set even if their behavior and beliefs turn away from the Christian calling. Such people lose their witness to others and the blessings of Christian living, but supposedly never their salvation. This second type of irreversibility is variously called “eternal security” or “once in grace, always in grace,” a perversion that we cannot countenance.

One conceptualization might suppose that God’s authority delegated through the church can somehow be dispensed validly onto individuals irrespective of their initial awareness, choice, or belief; who go forward devoid of faith and Christian practice. Salvation at least necessarily involves personal relationship. Friendship with anyone cannot become or continue by authority, ritual, physical connection, or anything besides the behavioral involvement of those on both sides in the relationship. Benefits of the relationship come after it, not aside from it.

Appropriate behavior—not perfect appropriate behavior—must continue in any friendship. Considering it unnecessary or irrelevant runs counter to what even a wayfaring fool knows about friendship. More importantly, it runs counter to clear revelation. The unmitigated objection to Gnostic influences in the early church involved this very point. In Gnostic dualism, matter was evil and spirit was good. One inference by many was that what a person did with the material body had no effect on the spirit. That belief destroyed the whole purpose of the Christian enterprise. It changed the nature of salvation itself from personal alienation to salvation from material existence. It offered a kind of antinomianism, where behavior was irrelevant.

Eternal security does the same thing. It makes behavior at best secondary, if not irrelevant. It changes salvation from personal reconciliation to an impersonal state. It fosters present lasciviousness and counts on grace to abound. God forbid (Jude 4; Romans 6:1). It regards salvation as a future place (heaven) rather than another (hell)—as a state of being rather than a face-to-face relationship. Paul characterized all his work as a ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18-20) in which people reconcile to God and to each other (Colossians 1:20-21; Ephesians 2:16; Romans 5:10-11). In all these contexts, the call for righteousness abounds.

In continued salvation from alienation, the only things that count are appropriate behaviors in thanksgiving to Christ for our initial and continued fellowship with God—no substitutes for the real thing, no short-cuts, no going through the motions, no ritual, no considering it finished business, no dependence on the authority of third parties or on the efficacy of irrelevant acts of penance; no magic words, unmeant verbalizations or apologies. It is inconceivable that what got us lost in the first place would be irrelevant to continued friendship with God later.

Summary

“Friend of God” provides an understandable way of describing the nature and purpose of Christian faith. It is a characterization of salvation that we cannot leave out. While terms, texts, and experience may not satisfy a well-informed disputant, it makes the apostasy-perseverance question sensible to everyday people, because they know how friendships work. With those who may not be convinced that apostasy can happen, we can proceed with Christ’s work, but a limit has to be set that calls for continued faith and practice.

¹Much of the impetus for perseverance of the saints and eternal security lies in its supposedly giving “security,” that is, certainty about our eternal destiny. But in the case of perseverance of the saints, it does not provide that certainty for Christians along the way because we know of people zealous for Christ who have later turned their backs on the faith. We do not yet know that we are going to be an example of that same negative consequence.

In the case of eternal security, the later departure from the faith must still consider whether there was any genuine conversion earlier. But more than that, the later condition in life’s walk is no different from the typical unconverted person in the world, so why believe there is any such thing as salvation to feel secure about?