

# **“THE SOTERIOLOGICAL IMPACT OF AUGUSTINE’S CHANGE FROM PREMILLENNIALISM TO AMILLENNIALISM”**

## **PART TWO**

by

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Our purpose in this study is to demonstrate how a significant change in one area of systematic theology can cause significant changes in another area. By definition a system is coherent and consistent. Changes in one area of the system will most likely cause changes in other areas of that same system, which is why we have likened systematic theology to a spread sheet. In the first installment of this study we chose Augustine as a case in point. His change in eschatology from premillennialism to amillennialism caused significant changes in his soteriology, especially in the area of perseverance of the saints. Specifically, his reinterpretation of Matthew 24:13 (“he who endures to the end will be saved”) as a spiritual salvation instead of a physical salvation (to enter and populate the Millennium) caused drastic changes in his soteriology. Perseverance of the saints (faithfulness until the end of one’s physical life) became the *sine qua non* of his soteriology. One could believe in Christ, have the fruit of the elect, but prove he was not elect if he should not persevere in faithfulness until the end of his physical life. In this second installment of our study we would like to see how this change in Augustine’s eschatology affected the soteriology of John Calvin and the soteriology of modern Christianity.

### **The Soteriology of John Calvin**

As we have already noted, the concept of *simul iustus et peccator* was passed on to Martin Luther by Philip Melancthon, and John Calvin hitch-hiked with Martin Luther. When John Calvin first published his *Institutes* in 1536 there were only six chapters. He defended forensic justification by faith alone from Romans 4. He understood that one could be declared righteous at a moment in time when a sinner’s faith intersected with God’s offer of the free gift of eternal life through His Son Jesus Christ. As such, no sins

past, present, or future could bar the sinner-turned-saint from entrance to God's Kingdom.

So much for *iustus* (being just). But what about *peccator* (being sinful)? How can the sinner-turned-saint be declared just by God when in his character he is still so far short of God's holiness, that is, still sinful? Initially, the Reformers saw a divorce between what they called justification and what many theologians today call progressive sanctification. Justification took place at a moment in time in heaven's court room; sanctification was the transformation of one's character and walk to conform to that of Christ. But justification did not guarantee sanctification.

However, the Council of Trent formed in 1545 as the rebuttal of the RCC to the doctrine of the Reformers. This Council continued to meet until 1563. They attacked the Reformers doctrine of justification as preaching license. To tell people their future sins are already forgiven in Christ is to tell them they can live any way they want and still go to heaven when they die. This kind of preaching will promote loose living, the Council accused. These attacks needed answers. So John Calvin continued to write. When he finished his *Institutes* in 1559, there were eighty chapters. And under pressure from the Council of Trent, Calvin remarried justification and sanctification. "You cannot possess Christ without being made partaker in his sanctification. . . . in our sharing in Christ, which justifies us, sanctification is just as much included as righteousness."<sup>1</sup> What was Calvin's basis for this remarriage? The influence of Augustine.

Yes, the long arms of Augustine reached right across the "Dark Ages"<sup>2</sup> (411-1000) into the Medieval Period of church history in the West (1054-1500). After the Dark Ages, the Medieval scholars went back to the Fathers. In the West it was natural to go to the Latin writers. Hence, the starting point for most medieval thinkers was to ponder the

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<sup>1</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes*, III.16.1; 11.1.

<sup>2</sup> The "Dark Ages" are thought to be the period between the defeat of Rome (A.D. 410) by Alaric up to A.D. 1000.

writings of Augustine. The “Great Schism” (1378–1418) was a time of competition between Rome and Avignon in France for the seat of the papacy, and during this time Augustine and Ambrose became a focus of study in the universities in and surrounding Paris.

Peter Lombard produced the *Four Books of Sentences* for his students in Paris in 1140. It was a topical listing of verses and patristic quotes. His assignment to solve the apparent inconsistencies in the Bible and the Fathers with plausible answers caused his students to wrestle with the thinking of Augustine. Lombard’s book was the most important publication of his age. Every theologian was required to comment on it. And in time the University of Paris became the most important center for learning in Europe. College de la Sorbonne became known as “the Sorbonne” and synonymous with the University of Paris. This college produced Erasmus and John Calvin.

By 1500 Augustinian thinking was pervasive in the scholastic circles of Europe. Erasmus helped facilitate this with his editorial work on the writings of Augustine. But even before Erasmus the “Augustinian School” had developed in Great Britain as well as Paris. Thomas Bradwardine reacted to the Pelagian approach to justification at Oxford. He retreated to the teachings of Augustine for support. There was not much cross current between England and the Continent because of the Hundred Years War. But Gregory of Rimini at the University of Paris was Bradwardine’s counterpart in Europe. He was a member of the Augustinian order, which claimed Martin Luther some years later. All this to say when John Calvin developed his *Institutes* he could claim that his theology was thoroughly Augustinian.

But if Calvin’s theology is thoroughly Augustinian, what can we say about his soteriology? Certainly Calvin’s understanding of forensic justification was a major departure from the life-long process of justification advocated by Augustine. Or was it? Unfortunately, under pressure from the RCC via the Council of Trent John Calvin felt forced to come up with an answer to the accusation of license stemming from his “moment in time” justification.

The RCC church had adopted Augustine's doctrine of life-long justification wholesale. At the Council of Trent the RCC defined justification as the *process* of becoming righteous, but even justification had to be augmented if one wanted to get to heaven.<sup>3</sup> A mortal sin could cancel out any accrued justification, but through penance one could be restored. And the RCC continued in Augustine's belief that it is not possible to know if one is going to heaven before death: "No one can know with the certitude of faith, which cannot admit of any error, that he has obtained God's grace."<sup>4</sup> The best one can attain to in this life is hope mixed with "fear and apprehension." God rewards the good works of His saints even though He is the power source behind these works, and these rewards help pry open the gates of heaven.<sup>5</sup>

The Council of Trent put a curse on anyone saying justification is not increased by good works.<sup>6</sup> A further curse was put on anyone who believed good works were not meritorious for entrance to heaven.<sup>7</sup> The concept of "imputed" righteousness was believed to be a serious threat to moral effort. B. Demarest sums up the RCC approach when he says:

Traditional Roman Catholics, in other words, trust in God's infusion of a new nature and plead the worth of their God-enabled works. Justification in Catholic theology is a comprehensive term that includes, among other things, what Protestants understand by regeneration and sanctification. For Rome, justification is not divine-wise an objective *pronouncement* of righteousness but is human-wise a lifelong *process* of becoming righteous.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Council of Trent, X.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., IX.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., XVI.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., Canon 24.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., Canon 32.

<sup>8</sup>D. Demarest, *The Cross and Salvation* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1997), 350.

With this kind of pressure Calvin needed plausible answers to the accusers of antinomianism. His defense was to claim that one truly justified in God’s court room at a moment in time would most certainly go on to maturity in Christ (progressive sanctification), given sufficient time in this world before physical death to do so. In other words, justification guaranteed sanctification—or, Matt 24:13. Only those who persevere in the faith to the end of their physical lives will be eternally saved. Once again, Augustine’s understanding of Matt 24:13 became the bench mark of the elect. If one was truly elect, he would persevere; if he did not persevere, he was not elect.

Of course, this drove Calvin into the same kind of contradictory casuistry Augustine developed. What are we to say of those believers who have all the characteristics of genuine Christianity, but they fall away from the faith before they die? Many evangelicals today would simply use the “professing but not possessing” retreat. They profess to be believers, but, indeed, their faith is not saving faith because it is only intellectual assent. Thus these professing believers are not genuine believers at all. They profess faith but do not possess faith. But this is not what Augustine did. Nor Calvin.

Augustine said the non-elect can have genuine faith. Augustine said the non-elect can be legitimately regenerated by the Holy Spirit. But because they have not received that most necessary of all gifts, the gift of perseverance, these regenerated believers are non-elect. Forget the fact that the Scriptures never suppose that one who is regenerated is not also elect (cf. 1 Pet 1:1, 3 and Tit 1:1; 3:5). When pressed on this matter, as previously stated, Augustine explained this contradiction as “a mystery.”

Calvin fell into a similar trap. Pressed into a remarriage<sup>9</sup> of justification and sanctification, he had to have a way of explaining how some can bear all the good fruit of the elect yet prove they were not elect because they did not persevere to the end of their lives on earth. His answer was “temporary faith.” He based his understanding of temporary faith on his interpretations of the parable of the sower, the warning of Hebrews

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<sup>9</sup> We call this a remarriage because the original marriage took place in the theology of Augustine with his view of life-long justification, a justification which would obviously subsume sanctification.

6, and the warning to the people saying, “Lord, Lord . . .” in Matthew 7.<sup>10</sup> Here, for example, is what Calvin said concerning Heb 6:4-5:

I know that to attribute faith to the reprobate seems hard to some when Paul declares it (faith) to be the result of election. This difficulty is easily solved. For . . . experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected by almost the same feeling as the elect, so that even in their own judgment they do not in any way differ from the elect.<sup>11</sup>

Hence, the people in Hebrews 6 could have been enlightened, have tasted the Word of God, the heavenly gift and the power of the age to come, but still fall away and prove they were never elect. Calvin called this operation of the Spirit an “ineffectual” calling, “an inferior operation of the Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

Calvin seemed to think that allowing the reprobate such full experiences of God justified His rejection of them for eternity. Dillow explains:

The central claim of this teaching is that God imparts supernatural influences to the reprobate which approximate, but do not equal, the influences of effectual calling. He is illuminated, he tastes, he grows, and he has similar feelings as the elect. However, it seems God is deceiving this man into believing he is elect so that God can be more than just in condemning him when he finally falls away. After all, the man had these “tastes.”<sup>13</sup>

Apparently, such deep experiences with God make the reprobate all that much more inexcusable when they do not *really* believe. At least this theodicy goes a step beyond Augustine’s standard cop-out for an inexplicable contradiction: “mystery.”

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<sup>10</sup>Dillow, 254.

<sup>11</sup>Calvin, *Institutes*, 3.2.11.

<sup>12</sup>Calvin, *Commentary*, Lk 17:13; *Institutes*, 3.2.12; 3.2.11.

<sup>13</sup>Dillow, 254.

But imagine the implications of a statement like this for assurance: “Experience shows that the reprobate are sometimes affected in a way so similar to the elect, that even in their own judgment there is no difference between them.” So, here we have two groups of people who look like the elect, and both groups “in their own judgment” are elect. However, according to Calvin, some of those who look like the elect (meaning they have the same fruit as the elect) and think they are elect, are not in fact elect and will prove this fact by falling away some time before they die. This poor class of people are the reprobate who think they are elect but are self-deceived. Can it be more transparent? With such a teaching no one could know he was one of the elect until he dies. Of course, that is precisely what Augustine taught, and Calvin would have admitted the same had he been consistent within his own system. Alas, he was not.

Because of the terrible possibility that one might actually be one of the reprobate when he thought he was one of the elect, Calvin says, “Meanwhile, believers are taught to examine themselves carefully and humbly, lest carnal security creep in and take the place of assurance of faith.”<sup>14</sup> So now we have a distinction between “carnal security” and “assurance of faith.” Calvin is now stretching as far as he can to maintain the Reformed doctrine of instantaneous justification in an amillennial system of theology, which says the just must persevere until the end or they were never just in the first place. “In the elect alone He implants the living root of faith, so that they persevere even to the end.”<sup>15</sup>

Apparently, Calvin even thought some of those in the parable of the sower who produced fruit were not elect: “. . . just as a tree not planted deep enough may take root but will in the process of time wither away, though it may for several years not only put forth leaves and flowers, but produce fruit.”<sup>16</sup> He must have realized the implications of some of his teachings because he sprinkles his writings with answers to supposed objections which only confuse the issue more. Take this one, for example:

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<sup>14</sup>Ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

Should it be objected that believers have no stronger testimony to assure them of their adoption, I answer that there is a great resemblance and affinity between the elect of God and those who are impressed for a time with fading faith, yet the elect alone have that full assurance which is extolled by Paul, and by which they are enabled to cry, Abba, Father.<sup>17</sup>

That really helped. How is the believer (whether real or imaginary) to know if he has *full* assurance? Maybe his assurance is only part assurance, but how is he to know? R. T. Kendall recognizes the problem here when he writes:

And if the reprobate may experience “almost the same feeling as the elect,” there is no way to know finally what the reprobate experiences. Furthermore, if the reprobate may believe that God is merciful towards them, how can we be sure our believing the same thing is any different from theirs? How can we be so sure that our “beginning of faith” is saving and is not the “beginning of faith” which the reprobate seem to have?<sup>18</sup>

Calvin digs an even deeper hole by speaking of an inner assurance given by the Spirit to the elect, and then says the reprobate can have a similar sensation. With this kind of teaching one could never have assurance of his salvation. He could only know he is elect when he dies. The pressure from the RCC trapped Calvin into the very same fear of the eternal future inherent in the Catholic system that he was trying to escape. Dillow hits the nail on the head when he observes:

In the final analysis Calvin has thrown away the possibility of assurance, at least until the final hour. When he grants that the only certain difference between the faith of the elect and the faith of the reprobate is that the faith of the former perseveres to the end, he makes assurance now virtually impossible.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid.

<sup>18</sup>R. T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 24.

<sup>19</sup>Dillow, 258.

To summarize, we are trying to demonstrate Spread Sheet Theology. To change one ingressed doctrine in a system will most likely change other ingressed doctrines in that very system. When Augustine changed his eschatology, it affected his soteriology—drastically. Matt 24:13 (perseverance in the faith to the end of one’s physical life as a requirement for eternal salvation) became the cornerstone of his salvation system. Purgatory developed as a figment of his logic based on Matt 24:13 (what to do if one does persevere to the end of his life in the faith but still has vestiges of sin in his character—*voilà*, Purgatory). The RCC bought into Augustine’s theology, both in terms of eschatology and soteriology.

The Reformers like Calvin retained the eschatology of Augustine (amillennial), but tried to change the soteriology (forensic justification). But that was like pouring new wine into old wineskins. “Declared righteousness” could not dance with Augustine’s understanding of Matt 24:13. The latter won out. The remarriage between justification and sanctification, which Luther and Zwingli had fought hard to resist, took place in Geneva. And with the Geneva Academy, which trained pastors in the Reformed tradition, the errors of Augustine and Calvin have been perpetuated until today. Augustine’s understanding (an amillennial understanding) of Matt 24:13 continues to be a fly in the ointment of modern soteriology, which undermines one’s assurance of salvation at the least and teaches a works-oriented salvation at the most.

### **The Soteriology of Western Christianity Today**

The soteriology of Western Christianity today obviously falls into two categories: Roman Catholic soteriology and Protestant soteriology. The former has completely absorbed Augustine’s approach to justification, leaving the election of a professing believer in question until his death. The “making righteous” of the elect person continues through his life and even in Purgatory after death, if necessary. As discussed under “Augustine’s Soteriology,” persevering in the faith until the end of one’s life based on an amillennial understanding of Matt 24:13 was the basis for this approach to soteriology in general and justification in particular.

In Protestant circles John Calvin set the tone with the Geneva Academy, which did more to disseminate doctrine into the West than any other influence. With their amillennial stance and spiritual understanding of Matt 24:13, the modern industry of spiritual fruit inspecting flourished. The fruit inspecting of Theodore Beza, William Perkins, and the English Calvinists has been well documented by R. T. Kendall.<sup>20</sup> All of these adopted the “temporary faith” solution to the warning passages in Hebrews suggested by Calvin, when interpreted according to their understanding of Matt 24:13. If one has the fruit of the elect and the faith of the elect but does not persevere in the faith until the end of his physical life, then God must have given the believer only “temporary faith.” It must be noted that this is neither fake faith nor spurious faith. It is genuine faith, but alas, it is *temporary*. As such, the one who possesses genuine but temporary faith is non-elect.

Such reliance on Matt 24:13 as the *sine qua non* of eternal salvation leaves very little difference between the Arminians and the Calvinists as it relates to the bottom line for getting into heaven. As J. L. Burns, who chairs the Systematic Theology Department at Dallas Theological Seminary, has told this author, “The most Arminian theologians in the world are Five Point Calvinists.”<sup>21</sup> R. T. Kendall echoes this sentiment when he says that when it comes to perseverance, the Calvinists of the Puritan persuasion and Arminians have the same position:<sup>22</sup>

If Perkins holds that the recipient of the first grace must obtain the second (perseverance) or the first [initial faith] is rendered invalid, there is no practical difference whatever in the two positions. If the believer does not persevere (whether Arminius or Perkins says it), such a person proves to be non-elect.<sup>23</sup>

As the fruit inspecting industry crossed the ocean to America, there is a familiar ring. C. Hodge typifies this group:

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<sup>20</sup>Kendall, *Calvinism*.

<sup>21</sup> Private interview.

<sup>22</sup>Kendall, 143.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 144.

Election, calling, justification, and salvation are indissolubly united; and, therefore, he who has clear evidence of his being called has the same evidence of his election and final salvation . . . **The only evidence** of election is effectual calling, that is, the production of holiness. And **the only evidence** of the genuineness of this call and the certainty of our perseverance, is a patient continuance in well doing (emphasis mine).<sup>24</sup>

Or, as J. Murray put it, “The perseverance of the saints reminds us very forcefully that only those who persevere to the end are truly saints.”<sup>25</sup>

And how does this understanding of perseverance differ from “the churches of Christ”? R. Shank, one of their chief spokesmen writes: “Obviously, it can be known only as one finally perseveres (or fails to persevere) in faith. There is **no valid assurance** of election and final salvation for any man, **apart from deliberate perseverance in faith**” (emphasis mine).<sup>26</sup> But Shank is a pure Arminian, who left the Southern Baptist Convention over the issue of eternal security. It is strange how alike aspects of these two systems become (Calvinism and Arminianism), when one studies their doctrines of perseverance based on an amillennial interpretation of Matt 24:13.

Yet surely the modern advances of exegesis under the scrutiny of the grammatico-historical method have cleared away the brush hiding the inconsistency of interpreting “the end” of Matt 24:13 differently from “the end” of Matt 24:3, 6, and 14. Surely. So let us take a contemporary NT scholar who teaches at a respected, conservative seminary as a case in point: Scot McKnight.

In a 1992 article McKnight addressed the warning passages of Hebrews.<sup>27</sup> The first question he had to settle was whether the recipients of the epistle were believers or

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<sup>24</sup>C. Hodge, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans* (1860; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), 212.

<sup>25</sup>Quoted by Dillow, 259.

<sup>26</sup>R.Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1961), 293.

unbelievers. Like a prospector panning for gold he sifted through the evidence very carefully. Page after page of research amassed the evidence and concluded the obvious—these are actual believers, not fake believers or professors/not possessors. He does not like the implications connected with Calvin’s solution of “temporary faith,” so he searches for another explanation as to how actual believers can wind up in hell (his conclusion).

McKnight is to be commended for not allowing his Reformed approach to perseverance to cause him to declare these recipients unbelievers. However, because he is convinced that only believers who persevere to the end of their lives are elect, he must make categories among those who have actually believed. So he distinguishes between “genuine, true, real, or saving” faith and what he calls *phenomenological* faith.<sup>28</sup> Those who are *phenomenological* believers are those who, from the human perspective, have been observed to have all the fruits of genuine faith, but from an ontological standpoint may have fallen short of the same.<sup>29</sup> Because these believers have genuinely experienced the Holy Spirit, the powers of the age to come, the taste of God’s Word, and so on, they have enjoyed spiritual *phenomena* which are genuine spiritual experiences shared by the elect.<sup>30</sup> But, alas, they are not elect. How do we know? Because they do not persevere in the faith until the end of their lives, and Matt 24:13 tells us that people who do not persevere until the end cannot be saved (notice that Hebrews never uses such terminology).

McKnight’s entire article is a classic study in circular reasoning. He assumes what he is trying to prove. He assumes (from Matt 24:13) that anyone who does not persevere in the faith until the end of his life cannot go to heaven. But the evidence he amasses

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<sup>27</sup> Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages of Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions” *Trinity Journal* 13(Spring 1992):22–59.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 24, n. 12.

<sup>29</sup>Ibid., n. 10.

<sup>30</sup>McKnight recognizes these believers as regenerate, but for him regeneration does not necessitate perseverance and is, by his definition, a life-long process. So, much like Augustine, these believers can be regenerated but fall away from the faith and be eternally damned.

from Hebrews demonstrates the readers to be believers. Now the only way to keep these believers out of heaven is to say they lose their salvation (an Arminian option), they go to purgatory for further cleansing (a Catholic option), or there must be different categories of believers (his final option). On this basis, he understands only Joshua and Caleb from the redeemed “Egyptian” generation of Israelites to be with the Lord today (see below). How Moses appeared with the Lord at the transfiguration he does not explain. Why Michael the archangel contended with the devil over the body of Moses (Jude 9) remains a mystery.

Yes, McKnight recognizes the recipients of Hebrews as believers, but they may be only *phenomenological* believers who wind up in hell because of apostasy. He uses the severe language in the warning of Heb 10:26ff. to determine (by analogy of faith) that all the warning passages in Hebrews are alluding to the danger of hell-fire if one does not persevere:

The following logic is at the heart of the author’s exhortations: if willful disobedience and apostasy in the Mosaic era brought discipline and prohibited entrance into the Land (a type of the eternal rest), then surely willful disobedience and apostasy in the new era will bring eternal exclusion from the eternal rest.

In light of the final sense of several of these expressions (cf. especially the harsh realities of 10:31–31, 39) and the use of imagery in Hebrews that elsewhere is used predominantly of eternal damnation, it becomes quite clear that the author has in mind an eternal sense of destruction. The author of Hebrews makes it unambiguously clear that those who do not persevere until the end will suffer eternal punishment at the expense of the wrath of God. There is no escape; like the children of Israel who disobeyed, those who shrink back will be destroyed. The consequences for those who apostasize [sic] are eternal damnation and judgment; therefore, the author has exhorted his readers to persevere until the end.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., 35-36. His view of “fire” and “burning” is limited to hell-fire. But note Deut 4:24 and the consuming fire, the jealous God, and the utter destruction (the LXX uses  $\text{ἡ κατακαύσει τὴν γῆν καὶ τὸν λαόν}$   $\text{ἡ κατακαύσει τὴν γῆν καὶ τὸν λαόν}$  to emphasize the utter destruction to come upon Israel if she is unfaithful, and this is the same term used in Heb 10:39). Mal 4:1 also points to the fire, and this fire will destroy the Jews in the land. They will not prolong their days in the land.

Interpreters who object to the warning in Hebrews 10 as being a temporal judgment instead of eternal speak of the much worse judgment to come upon believers in Christ who apostatize as opposed to the judgment which came upon the unfaithful Israelites at Kadesh-Barnea. However, they overlook the fact that a judgment which affects one’s rest in the Millennium (1,000 years) is much worse than a judgment which affects one’s rest in the land for forty years.

Never mind the fact that the words “hell,” “lake of fire,” “eternal,” “everlasting,” “forever,” “damnation,” and the like never occur in any of these warning passages. He is convinced the language of 10:26–39 is so severe it must refer to eternal damnation. Does he conclude the same for Deut 4:24 where *apoleia apoleisthe* (utterly destroy) and *ektribe ektribesesthe* (utterly destroy) are even more emphatic than the *apoleian* (destruction) of Heb 10:39?<sup>32</sup> Not likely. The curses in Deuteronomy are temporal curses. God’s covenants with Abraham and David ensure an eternal relationship with Israel. The issue in Deuteronomy 4 and 30 is fellowship, not relationship. Then could the same not be said of the Hebrew Christians of Hebrews, especially when drawing on the warnings of temporal judgment given in Deuteronomy 32 (32:35 and 36 are quoted in Heb 10:30), the language of which is even more graphic than that of Heb 10:26ff.?

McKnight concludes that those who do not persevere until the end cannot go to heaven, since that is the “single condition”<sup>33</sup> for final salvation (whatever happened to believing in Jesus?). With the circle complete he warns his own readers that we should not be hasty in giving assurance of salvation to people who look like genuine believers. Why? Because they may only be *phenomenological* believers.

How can one know if he is a *phenomenological* believer instead of a genuine believer, since the observable fruit for each category is the same until the former falls away somewhere before the end of his life? Obviously, one cannot know which category he belongs to until the end of his life. Again, McKnight is to be credited for some consistency. That is, he warns us that no one can have assurance of his salvation in this life.

But is this not the very conclusion of Augustine and Calvin? Augustine never espoused assurance of salvation before death. Calvin did, but only initially. Assurance

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<sup>32</sup>When a verb in Hebrew or Greek is preceded by a noun with the same root as the verb, the action of the verb is being emphasized.

<sup>33</sup>Ibid., 59.

was of the essence of faith in his early writings, but not after his interaction with the Council of Trent. It would seem the apple does not fall very far from the tree.

## CONCLUSION

Once again, this has been a study in Spread Sheet Theology. By this nomenclature we refer to a system which has a high level of consistency, comprehensiveness, congruity, and coherence. Changing one doctrine ingressive to the system will most likely cause changes in other parts of the system as well. We have chosen the theology of Augustine as a case in point.

Though Augustine was a pretribulational, premillennial, dispensationalist in his early theology, a change in his eschatology resulted in a change in his soteriology. When he reacted to the eschatological feasting of the Donatists and their obsessive preoccupation with the dating of Christ's return to set up His kingdom on earth, Augustine used the heremeneutics of Tyconius to eliminate any future, physical, kingdom of Christ on earth. In this sense he became amillennial (though he did see a thousand year reign of Christ in heaven).

This change in his systematic theology caused a reinterpretation of some of Augustine's biblical theology. He no longer interpreted Matt 24:13 as a promise of physical salvation leading into the Millennium (since there was not going to be a physical Millennium in his new approach to eschatology). Now he saw Matt 24:13 as a promise of spiritual salvation. In his mind a new test for soteriology was born: one must endure in his Christian faithfulness until the end of his life. This verse became the driving force and final arbiter in Augustine's soteriology.

When the Reformers came along over a thousand years later, a revival in the study of Augustine's writings had been in vogue for over a hundred years. His eschatology (amillennial) still held. But the Reformers sought to make a change in soteriology. Justification could be declared in the court room of heaven at an instant in time. One

could be declared righteous by God in his position, yet still retain sin in his condition: *simul iustus et peccator*. This was a monumental change in soteriology, enough to effect the Reformation. If they had followed through on a good system of theology, the Reformers would have examined their eschatology to see how their new approach to soteriology might cause changes in their understanding of the future. But they did not develop a good system. Instead they tried to amalgamate Augustine's theology with their own. The result was an alloy of contradictions.

John Calvin, who began teaching assurance as of the essence of faith, wound up teaching no man could tell if he were elect or reprobate until he died. Matt 24:13 remained a cornerstone of the soteriology of the Reformers. Fruit inspecting flourished among the followers of Calvin. It came to America through the Puritans. Writers like John Owen wrote tomes on how to know if one was among the elect.<sup>34</sup> All of this was driven by an amillennial interpretation of Matt 24:13.

It might be argued that there were certainly other passages than Matt 24:13 which were marshaled to support the doctrine that one must persevere to the end in order to be saved. True. But Matt 24:13 remained the cornerstone on which the other passages were built because it is the only verse which includes both the word "saved" and the word "end."

Scot McKnight's article on the warning passages in Hebrews was offered as a case study in the effect a "spiritual salvation" understanding of Matt 24:13 can have on interpreting an entire book. His understanding of Matt 24:13 (endure until the end of one's life in order to go to heaven) as the single (and surely he must mean the single most important) spiritual condition which must be met in order to separate the sheep from the goats guides him throughout the maze of twists and turns in Hebrews.

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<sup>34</sup>J. Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 16 vols., vol. 3: *A Discourse concerning the Holy Spirit* (1677; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965), 45-47, 226-28. This particular volume was over 650 pages dedicated, according to Owen, to helping professors of Christ determine if they were possessors of Christ.

Rather than allowing his interpretation to emerge from the words of the text, McKnight uses a point of reference (Matt 24:13) outside the text of Hebrews to determine his understanding of Hebrews itself. His “*phenomenological* believer” concoction, in which the epistle is addressed to actual but not genuine, observable but not ontological believers, must stand as one of the all-time examples of creatively “forcing” the text when one comes to the end of an exegetical *cul de sac*. How much simpler to change one’s eschatology back to the pre-Augustinian days of premillennialism when Matt 24:13 could have a physical reference and the “rest” in Hebrews could refer to the Millennium (as the early Fathers taught) rather than the eternal state.

The appeal of this study is really a warning. It is dangerous to mix theological systems. By definition, mixing systems will create contradictions. We must be careful when we pick and choose that which seems appealing from one system and try to fit it into the constructs of another system. Those who claim to be Dispensationalists should be careful not to introduce ingressive doctrines from Reformed theologians into their system and vice-versa. These are two mutually exclusive systems. This author agrees with R. C. Sproul when he claims there is no such thing as a “four point” Calvinist, when the points are defined by classic Dortian Calvinism.<sup>35</sup> One is either a “five point” Calvinist or none (although being a “no point” Calvinist does not make one an Arminian). Dortian Calvinism is a system. To pull just one point out of the system destroys the entire system.

On the other hand, to incorporate one point from Dortian Calvinism into Dispensationalism can also destroy the entire system.<sup>36</sup> If the Dortian view of perseverance of the saints is correct (the view taught by Augustine), then the spiritual view of Matt 24:13 is also correct. If the spiritual view of Matt 24:13 is correct, then amillennialism is true. If amillennialism is true, then there is no distinction between Israel

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<sup>35</sup>R. C. Sproul, *Willing to Believe* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1997), 193.

<sup>36</sup>It must be pointed out that dispensationalists like L. Sperry Chafer redefine the “points” of Dortian Calvinism to fit their system. Chafer, for example, limited the perseverance of the saints to eternal security in his *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976), 267–354. For the sake of clear communication, it might be better to stay consistent in our definitions.

and the Church. If there is no distinction between Israel and the Church, then Dispensationalism is false.

We applaud the emphasis on Biblical Theology in recent decades. This approach to theology accentuates the strength of grammatico-historical exegesis. However, let us not lose sight of the fact that Biblical Theology stops with what the text said to its original recipients, as opposed to Systematic Theology, which starts with the original audience but does not stop there. A good systematic theologian must not only contextualize; he must also decontextualize and recontextualize. That is, he must find out what the text said to its original recipients, look for the timeless truths which transcend cultures and centuries, and transfer those timeless truths into the respective contexts of differing modern societies. Systematic Theology speaks to us today.

Furthermore, Systematic Theology incorporates Historical Theology in its quest to understand how the theology of today developed. Both Biblical and Historical Theology feed like tributaries into the river of Systematic Theology. When we focus on one of the tributaries to the neglect of the other or of the main river itself, we get stuck in St. Louis when we are trying to go down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico.

Finally, let us remember, Systematic Theology is like a spread sheet. Changes in one of the major points of the system will most likely cause changes in other points of the system as well. This could be good. It could lead to a new system with a greater degree of consistency, coherence, congruity, and comprehensiveness. But if it leads to increased contradictions or fails to incorporate all the evidence, perhaps the proposed change is invalid. We believe that Augustine's eschatological change from premillennialism to amillennialism led him and his followers into a theological labyrinth of contradictions in soteriology which persists until today.