

## **The Assurance of Salvation POSITION PAPER**

*In view of the biblical teaching that the security of the believer depends on a living relationship with Christ (John 15:6); in view of the Bible's call to a life of holiness (Hebrews 12:14; 1 Peter 1:16); in view of the clear teaching that a man may have his part taken out of the Book of Life (Revelation 22:19); and in view of the fact that one who believes for a while can fall away (Luke 8:13); New Life Assembly disapproves of the unconditional security position which holds that it is impossible for a person once saved to be lost. (Bylaws, Article IX.B.1)*

New Life Assembly affirms the biblical teaching that people enter into a personal saving relationship with Christ through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, who draws them to repentance and faith in Christ. Jesus described this initial salvation experience as “new birth” (John 3:3–6),<sup>1</sup> as did the apostle Peter (1 Peter 1:3). Likewise, Paul wrote, “He saved us through the washing of rebirth [*palinogenesis*, “rebirth” or “regeneration”] and renewal by the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5), also using “new creation” for this transformative saving event (2 Corinthians 5:17).

At the time of the believer's new birth, theologically designated “regeneration,” the Holy Spirit comes into them, bringing assurance of forgiveness of sins, spiritual renewal, and a personal relationship with God. “The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children” (Romans 8:16). This dynamic relationship with God by His Spirit, initiated and sustained through faith, undergirds the security of the believer.

The following biblical teachings sustain and guide the believer's growing maturity and perseverance in their relationship with Christ.

- Salvation is available for every person (Luke 19:10; John 3:16; Romans 10:11–13; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17).
- Salvation is received and assured through faith (Romans 3:28; Galatians 2:20–21; Ephesians 2:8; Philippians 3:9; Hebrews 10:38; 1 Peter 1:5).
- Salvation is an ongoing conflict with temptation and sin (Romans 1:32; 1 Corinthians 3:1–3, 5–8; 5:9–13; Hebrews 3:12–14; 12:1; 1 John 1:8; 3:8).
- The believer's salvation may be forfeited or abandoned by willfully turning away from Christ (John 17:12; 1 Timothy 4:1; 5:12, 15; Hebrews 6:4–6, 10:26–27, 38; 2 Peter 2:20; 1 John 5:16).

### **I. God Makes Provision of Salvation for Every Person**

God desires every person to be saved, a truth the Bible repeatedly sets out (Luke 19:10; John 3:16; Romans 10:11–13; Hebrews 2:9; 2 Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17). God's eternal saving purpose is expressed in Jesus' own words, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:10); that is, He desires to save all people. At the beginning of the Gospel of John, Jesus is presented as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of

<sup>1</sup>All biblical citations are from the New International Version (NIV) unless otherwise indicated.

the world” (John 1:29). The Gospel’s great theme follows, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

The Pauline epistles likewise reiterate God’s universal redemptive plan: “. . . God our Savior . . . wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth” (1 Timothy 2:3–4). “God . . . is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe” (1 Timothy 4:10). “For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people” (Titus 2:11). This is called prevenient grace, the grace God provides prior to salvation, drawing all people toward salvation and enabling them to either accept or reject His offer. After many such expressions of God’s universal offer of salvation, the Bible fittingly concludes with a closing invitation to all humanity, “Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17).

Unfortunately, some Christian traditions have come to a view of God’s sovereignty that asserts that only a limited number of humans are able to respond to God’s offer of salvation. Moreover, these traditions maintain that Christ’s atoning sacrifice is not intended for all. They assume that God sovereignly decreed from eternity past to elect only a limited number of persons to salvation. This belief is rooted in a number of biblical passages that do indeed emphasize God’s sovereignty in His saving activity. For example, Jesus’ words in the Gospel of John make it clear that the Father must act to draw humans into His electing purposes (6:37, 44, 65). Another commonly referenced text is Romans 9:11–18, that recounts God’s foresight of the lives of Jacob and Esau, and points out God’s sovereign election of Jacob rather than Esau. The biblical metaphor of the potter’s sovereign control over the clay follows in this passage and is often cited in support of God’s absolute sovereignty in effecting human salvation (9:20–21).

However, while these passages certainly teach that God is sovereign in all that He does, they are not a denial of human freedom in responding to the gospel. The election of Jacob over Esau entailed what God foreknew each of them would do. The sacred history in Genesis vividly recounts the story of Jacob’s own personal decisions as he struggled with God and haltingly responded in faith. The pottery image is an eloquent and powerful depiction of God’s sovereignty, but the potter’s singular effort to create a quality vessel is by no means intended to teach that God deliberately passes over certain people, thereby leaving them to be eternally lost. Such passages as these do not contradict the “whoever believes” of John 3:16 and God’s provision for all as so often expressed throughout the Bible.

The apostle Paul put God’s saving purposes in divine perspective as he wrote, “For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that

he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters” (Romans 8:29). In this crucial passage, God is not shown to deny humanity’s freedom and ability to choose. Rather, Paul shows that God has made provision from eternity for those whom He has foreseen would respond to the gospel and believe in Christ. The Greek term translated “to foreknow” (*proginōskō*) expresses God’s knowing people from eternity. It is also important to note that the verb “to know” (Greek *ginōskō*; Hebrew *yada*), when used of God with regard to people in both the Old and New Testaments, expresses a richness of love and mercy mirrored in the healthy marital relationships of God’s human creatures. An often cited

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passage to illustrate this is, “You only have I known [Hebrew, *yada*; Greek Septuagint, *ginōskō*] of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2, ESV)<sup>2</sup>, which expresses God’s loving foreknowledge and election of Israel. Inspired by the Spirit, Peter used the corresponding noun to this lovingly selective verb *proginōskō* when he addressed far-flung believers in the Roman Empire as “God’s elect . . . chosen according to the *foreknowledge* [*prognosis*, emphasis added] of God the Father” (1 Peter 1:1–2).

The foreknowledge of God is an exercise of omniscience (knowing everything) rather than omnipotence (being all-powerful). God’s knowledge of what will occur is not the same as making it happen without considering a person’s freedom of will. Assuming that God’s right to do something demands that He exercise that right (deliberately passing over and thus condemning certain people, as some teach) diminishes, rather than enhances, God’s sovereignty. This erroneous belief limits the holiness and justice of God; it does not reflect His gracious love and mercy toward all His human creatures.

Therefore, it is important to understand the difference between predestination, which is a biblical concept, and predeterminism, which is not. Predestination secures an eternal destiny for God’s people (the corporate body of Christ) whom He foreknew from eternity would respond to the conviction of His Spirit and accept His redemptive provision in Christ (John 14:2). Predeterminism, by contrast, asserts that God has decided everyone’s individual actions and fate in advance without noting their personal decision to believe. This distinction between these two terms is illustrated in Esther 4:13–14, where Mordecai warns Esther, “Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?” God had predestined that Israel (corporate) would survive, but had not predetermined Esther’s (personal) fate: that was in her hands. A plan of salvation or escape for the corporate people of God would be provided, but individual participation was a matter of personal choice.

In His gracious and merciful sovereignty, God determined from eternity past the conditions on which He would show mercy, and provided the plan of salvation whereby all can be saved (Hebrews 2:9). In this plan humanity’s free decisions, enabled by the

Holy Spirit, are taken into consideration so that believers are chosen in Christ on the basis of His foreknowledge (Romans 8:29; Ephesians 1:4). Salvation is available to whoever will respond in faith to the gospel and to God's universal provision of prevenient grace.

## **II. Salvation Is Received and Assured by Faith**

Being a Christian is certainly not a matter of good works. Salvation is solely by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8–9). Faith accepts the fact that Christ died in place of sinful humankind so that forgiveness of sins is available. By faith humans may rely on the mercy of God and accept Christ as Savior. Faith grasps the wondrous reality that believing and repentant humans are now the recipients of the righteousness of Christ, credited to them through no merit of their own (Philippians 3:9), and “given through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). Though “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God

<sup>2</sup> ESV refers to the English Standard Version of the Bible. <sup>3</sup>

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. . . all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (Romans 3:23–24; see also 5:1). Moreover, this gracious status with God is realized by the enablement of the Holy Spirit, who “testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children” (Romans 8:16).

Though justified and credited with the righteousness of Christ, believers are also “created in Christ Jesus to do good works” (Ephesians 2:10). Moreover, they are charged in their daily lives to be “filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ” (Philippians 1:11). So the actual working out of the righteousness of Christ in the believer is an ongoing process. It involves purposeful and progressive spiritual formation, as aptly illustrated in 2 Peter 1:5–8:

Make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. (See also Romans 6:12–13; 8:13; Colossians 3:1–5.)

Our personal spiritual growth varies in excellence and maturity as we learn obedience to God’s Word and rely on the guidance and enablement of the Holy Spirit who dwells within. Yet, while still in the process of formation, imperfect though we may be, we remain justified through faith in Christ, never by good works. “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Spiritual growth also anticipates that the believer will be committed to following Christ in lifelong obedience to His teachings. The New Testament places great emphasis on faithfully walking through the tests of life and persevering in faith to the end of life. In the Parable of the Sower, Jesus said, “The seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering [*en hypomonē*] produce a crop” (Luke 8:15). James picked up both concepts of faithfulness through tests and perseverance as he wrote, “the testing [*to dokimion*] of your faith produces perseverance [*hypomonēn*] (1:3). Peter added, “These [trials] have come so that the proven genuineness [*to dokimion*] of your faith . . . may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed” (1 Peter 1:7). The writer of Hebrews concurred, “You need to persevere [*hypomonēs*] so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Hebrews 10:36).

The security of believers, then, comes through faith, both in the receiving of salvation and in continuing fellowship with Christ by His Spirit. With Paul, believers pray to “be found in him [Christ], not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith” (Philippians 3:9).

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### **III. Salvation Is an Ongoing Conflict with Temptation and Sin**

Temptation and sin are realities of life in a fallen world. While believers faithfully trust in and follow Christ, they are nonetheless subject to human frailty. Though granted justification and righteousness before God on the basis of the righteousness of Christ, they do not attain to sinless perfection in this world. “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2). “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us” (1 John 1:8).

Nonetheless, the Scriptures emphasize that Christian life is to be lived on a positive trajectory of spiritual transformation. As previously emphasized, believers have been “born again” by the Spirit of God (John 3:3–8), they are “new creations” for whom the old has gone and the new has come (2 Corinthians 5:17). So John confidently repeated in his later epistle, “No one who is born of God will continue to sin” (1 John 3:9). The same Holy Spirit who convicts unbelievers of sin (John 16:8) continues to convict believers of sin and to guide them into truth (John 16:13). “No one who lives in him [Christ] keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him” (1 John 3:6).

John added a further sobering note, “The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning” (1 John 3:8). Believers cannot keep on sinning the way unbelievers do. “Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?” asked Paul (Romans 6:1). The answer is an emphatic negative. Continuing sinful practices will adversely affect the believer’s faith, and, if they are not repented of, will finally destroy faith.

When believers confess that they have sinned and turn to Christ in repentance, they do so with the secure knowledge that as a child of God they have “an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ the Righteous One” (1 John 2:1). Further, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9). Thus believers are assured of the provision of God to strengthen and forgive them as they struggle with temptation and sin, never needing to doubt their salvation, which is based upon the righteousness of Christ accepted by faith.

It is also to be declared emphatically that believers are not in a revolving door, moving in and out of the grace of God! They are secure in the hand of God. “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:38–39). Their standing as justified believers in Christ is always by faith. Without faith in Christ, there is no longer a saving relationship with him. This is why Scripture admonishes believers, “See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart” (Hebrews 3:12).

#### **IV. Salvation May Be Forfeited or Abandoned by Rejecting Christ**

God, as a loving Heavenly Father, does not desire that any person fall away from the salvation He has graciously provided in Christ. “Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

But, the Bible also teaches that believers who have accepted Christ as Savior can be lost if they repeatedly disregard the teachings of Scripture, continue to resist the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and finally reach the point where they have turned away from their Savior. Jesus makes that point in the Parable of the Sower where, speaking of some who have become believers, He said, “They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away” (Luke 8:13). The writer of Hebrews wrote soberly of believers “who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away” (Hebrews 6:4–6).

The apostle Peter warned, “If they [new believers] have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and are overcome, they are worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred command that was passed on to them” (2 Peter 2:20–21).

The Bible surely warns against the possibility of forfeiting, or abandoning, salvation, but it never ceases to offer hope for anyone who will respond to the appeal of the Holy Spirit. Jesus’ invitation is without qualification. “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). The apostle Paul, with great assurance, declared, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”

(Romans 10:13). So Christians should never prematurely conclude that a struggling brother or sister is irredeemable. If the father did not give up on the lost son (Luke 15:11– 31), neither should the Church of Jesus Christ.

## **Conclusion**

The Christian faith is one of joyous, victorious life in Christ, in which spiritually transformed believers are informed by God's Word and energized by His Spirit. Christian faith does entail obedience to the commands of Christ and responsible participation in the life of His church and the broader community. It does sometimes lead through sufferings of various kinds. But perseverance in faith is certain as believers remain in relationship with their Lord. With great assurance, Paul's words remind us of our Lord's unflagging commitment that "he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).