

THE WARNING IN COLOSSIANS 1:21–23

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COLOSSIANS 1:21–23 HAS BEEN USED BY SOME to support an Arminian theology and by others to support the Reformed Calvinist theology of perseverance of the saints.¹ Both of these views affect the Christian’s assurance of salvation, because if salvation can be lost (the Arminian view) or must be proved genuine (the Reformed view), it would seem to undermine the idea that the Christian can know with certainty that he or she is saved forever. Colossians 1:21–23 relates specifically to one’s concept of hope, assurance, and the Christian’s accountability. This in turn informs one’s understanding of the gospel itself.

Though the certainty of salvation is usually discussed in connection with the subject of assurance, the word “assurance” is not often used in the New Testament in relation to salvation. However, the *idea* of assurance of salvation is often referred to in the New Testament. The understanding of faith as persuasion or confidence about something argues that some measure of assurance of salvation is inherent in faith in Jesus Christ as one’s Savior.² It seems

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¹ The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is set forth in the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in this way: “They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace: but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 17:1).

² The general idea of assurance is sometimes conveyed by the words πίστις (Acts 17:31, translated “assurance” in the NKJV, “proof” in NASB, NET, and NIV); πιστεῦω (2 Tim. 3:14, “been assured of” in NKJV, “become convinced of” in NASB and NIV, “confident about” in NET), and πεῖθω (1 John 3:19, “assure” in NASB and NKJV, “convince” in NET). More in relation to salvation, πληροφορία is used and usually translated “full assurance” as in the NASB and NKJV (Col. 2:2, “deep conviction” in NET; 1 Thess. 1:5, “full conviction” in NASB, “much assurance” in NKJV, “deep conviction” in NIV and NET; Heb. 6:11, “full assurance of hope” in NASB, “to make [your hope] sure” in NIV, “fulfillment [of your hope]” in NET; Heb. 10:22, “full assurance” in NASB and NIV, “assurance” in NET).

obvious that if one has believed, then by definition he has become persuaded that something is true, even if for a moment. “Unbelieving faith” or “false faith” is by definition self-contradictory and therefore nonsensical. Faith, even in the amount of a mustard seed, claims a promise as trustworthy and true.

But a theological perspective of assurance may not always translate into experience, for one’s assurance can be lost or compromised by sin, false doctrine, legalism, errant philosophy, or some other threat that reduces one’s confidence in the Lord. The Colossian believers lived under such threats. Paul warned them in Colossians 1:21–23 that they were in danger of losing something. What did his warning mean and was it real or hypothetical? What were the Colossians in danger of losing?

THE SETTING OF COLOSSIANS

Two important issues about the letter to the Colossians should inform one’s interpretation of 1:21–23. To whom did Paul write? What was the nature of the danger they faced?

THE STATE OF THE READERS

Were it not for the passage under consideration, there would be little question about the status of the readers in the Colossian church. Paul called them “saints and faithful brethren in Christ” (1:2), and he said they had a reputation for faith and love (v. 4). They were people whose faith was bearing fruit (v. 6), who heard and understood the gospel of grace (v. 6), who loved in the Spirit (v. 8), who had been delivered from the power of Satan into the kingdom of Christ (v. 13), and who were redeemed, forgiven (v. 14), and reconciled (vv. 21–22).

Nowhere did Paul address an unbelieving element in the church, unless it is in this warning. However, that seems unlikely in view of the immediate context and the affirmations that follow it. The Colossians’ former state (v. 21) was in clear contrast to their present position (v. 22). It would be inconsistent and confusing if Paul told the readers that they were reconciled to God in verse 22 and then made it uncertain or conditional in the very next verse. Furthermore Paul spoke of the “stability of your faith” (2:5) since they “have received Christ Jesus the Lord” (v. 6) and were “firmly rooted and now being built up in Him” (v. 7). Paul affirmed that they were complete in Christ (v. 10), that they were circumcised spiritually by Christ (v. 11), and that they were buried with Him in baptism and raised with Him (v. 12). Christ had made them alive and had forgiven all their sins (vv. 12–14).

Also the ethical admonitions in chapters 3 and 4 are based on the fact that the addressees were not only raised with Christ, but also were hidden with Christ in God (3:1, 3) and that they were new people (v. 10) who had been chosen by God (v. 12). Paul contrasted the Colossian readers with “outsiders” who were evidently unbelievers in need of the gospel (4:5). The designation “outsiders” indicates that they were not among the recipients of this epistle.

Apart from 1:21–23, only two other verses in Colossians could even conceivably indicate that Paul was addressing a mixed group of believers and unbelievers. The first is 2:18, in which he warned readers not to let anyone defraud them of their “prize” through false teachings. If the prize is eternal salvation, then this would suggest that some readers were about to be saved but could be diverted by error. The other verse is 4:12 in which Paul wrote that Epaphras was praying “that you may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God.” Some claim that this perfection and full assurance is the salvation that some readers needed, but this view seems very unlikely. These two verses can best be understood in the context of the problem facing the Colossians.

THE PROBLEM FACING THE READERS

Clearly the epistle’s emphasis on Christ’s supremacy, preeminence, and sufficiency for salvation and the believer’s completeness was Paul’s doctrinal defense against the danger facing the Colossians. Jesus Christ is preeminent in His position and totally sufficient in His redemptive work so that those who believe have a sure future in heaven (1:5). The doctrinal dimension of the danger involved entanglement in persuasive arguments (2:4) that advanced deceptive philosophies (v. 8) with repercussions of Judaistic ritualism (vv. 11, 16–17), legalistic asceticism (vv. 20–23), and the worship of angels (v. 18).

The consequence of being misled is that they would be moved away from the hope that is in the gospel (1:23) and defrauded of their prize (2:18). Was Paul suggesting that prospective believers would be derailed in their pursuit of the truth and that salvation would therefore be lost to them?

Such an interpretation seems unreasonable in light of his strong statements about their possession of the benefits of salvation, as already noted. It is important to note that they would be moved away not from their *salvation* but from their *hope*. This suggests that their movement would be in relation to their confidence in the gospel’s promise, not their objective standing or position before Christ. If Paul spoke of moving away from eternal salvation, then his language was obscure and indirect. To be moved away

from hope is not the same thing as losing or forfeiting potential salvation, if hope is understood in its biblical sense (as will be discussed later). The Colossian believers would lose their hope in the sense that their assurance would be subverted. Likewise the prize jeopardized in 2:18 (“Let no one keep defrauding [καταβραβεύτω] you of your prize”) does not fit eternal life. The word καταβραβεύω means “to be robbed of a prize,” “to condemn,”³ or “to withhold the victor’s prize.”⁴ It is formed from the verb βραβεύω (“to award a prize, to judge, to rule”) or the noun βραβείον (“prize of conflict”).⁵ Nowhere in the New Testament is salvation or eternal life represented by the terminology of a prize won by human effort.⁶

Epaphras’ prayer that the Colossians Christians “stand perfect and fully assured [τέλειοι καὶ πεπληροφορημένοι] in all the will of God” (4:12) speaks not of their salvation, but of their Christian maturity⁷ and their confident living in God’s will, in other words, their subjective assurance.

What seems to have been at stake in the Colossian church was their hope and therefore their assurance.

HOPE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT AND SPECIFICALLY IN COLOSSIANS

Hope and assurance merge in Colossians 1:3–8, and understanding how hope is used there helps one interpret verses 21–23. But before discussing hope in Colossians, hope in the New Testament as a whole needs to be noted.

³ Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed., rev. Frederick W. Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 515.

⁴ Ethelbert Stauffer, “Βραβείον,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 638.

⁵ *Ibid.*; and Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 183.

⁶ The two occurrences of the noun βραβείον in the New Testament do not indicate final salvation. In the contexts of both 1 Corinthians 9:24 and Philippians 3:14 Paul wrote from the confidence that he belonged to Christ and was saved (1 Cor. 9:19–22; Phil. 3:12). For him to voice uncertainty about his eternal destiny would be contrary to his testimony. He spoke instead about his future reward.

⁷ The verb τελειόω is commonly used for Christian maturity or full development in a moral sense (Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 996).

HOPE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The word hope (ἐλπίς), as it is used in these verses as well as in most of the New Testament, is not to be understood in the popular English sense of a subjective desire (a noun), as in “His hope is to catch a big fish,” or to want something very much (a verb), as in “He hopes to catch a big fish.” There is no assurance attached to a desire to catch a big fish (as many fishermen can attest!). The biblical idea of hope, however, can be expressed in the simple formula *hope equals desire plus expectation*.⁸

This use of hope is very close to the idea of faith in English and New Testament Greek. *Webster’s New World Dictionary* gives one definition of the noun, which it labels archaic, as “trust, reliance.”⁹ Not surprisingly in the New Testament hope is often attached to God’s promises (Acts 26:6–7; Rom. 4:18; Titus 1:2; Heb. 6:18; 10:23). The close relationship of hope to faith is especially evident in Romans 4:18, which states that Abraham “in hope believed” (ἐπὶ ἐλπίδι ἐπίστευσεν). Those who have hope wait for God’s promise with perseverance (8:25). Hope, like faith, is induced by the Scriptures (15:4). The Christian’s hope is sourced in God and is infused in believers by the power of the Holy Spirit (15:13). Hope is used as a virtual synonym for faith in 1 Corinthians 15:19, which refers to “hope in Christ.” Hope is forward-looking faith; faith is “the substance of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1). The believer’s “faith and hope are in God” (1 Pet. 1:21).¹⁰

Thus in the Bible hope expresses the assurance that believers will realize what God has promised. When Paul wrote that “hope does not disappoint” (Rom. 5:5), he referred to hope not as a desire that can be thwarted, but as an assurance of faith that something promised will come to pass. In Hebrews 6:11 assurance and hope

⁸ In Philippians 1:20 hope is coupled with “earnest expectation” (ἀποκαρδοκία).

⁹ *Webster’s New World Dictionary of the American Language*, ed. David B. Guralnik (Springfield, MA: William Collins & World, 1976), 676.

¹⁰ James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 58. Dunn says that hope “is closely related to faith, confident trust in God” (ibid.). Bultmann shows that in the Old Testament “to hope” is essentially “to trust,” and Rengstorf continues, “The NT concept of hope is essentially governed by the OT” (Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, “ἐλπίς,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2 [1964], 521–23, 530). Hoffman notes that in classical Greek Horace called faith the companion of hope, in the Septuagint ἐπιζῶ translates verbs of trusting, and in the New Testament “*pistis* and *elpis* are most closely connected . . . Faith gives ‘substance’ to our hope (Heb 11:1)” (E. Hoffmann, “Hope, Expectation,” in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986], 2:239–40, 243).

are joined in close relationship in the phrase “full assurance of hope.”¹¹ One could say that *faith* is the *basis* for assurance, and *hope* is the *expression* of assurance.

This objective basis for the believer’s hope is the focus of many passages in the New Testament. It is an expression of faith in a worthy object, and as such, it expresses the assurance of that faith. Faith (in relation to salvation) looks *backward with assurance* to what God has done and promised to do, and hope looks *forward with assurance* to the realization of blessings that were procured through faith. Thus the objects of hope are salvation (1 Thess. 5:8), righteousness (Gal. 5:5), resurrection from the dead (Acts 23:6; 24:15), eternal life (Titus 1:2; 3:7), the glory of God (Rom. 5:2), and Christ’s coming (1 John 3:3).

Hope is a unique aspect of Christianity. In Ephesians 4:4 “one hope” is listed with “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” as a factor that should identify and unite Christians. Just as there is no other legitimate Lord, faith, or baptism, so there is only one legitimate hope. Hope is as indispensable to the Christian experience as Jesus Christ Himself. In 1 Timothy 1:1 Paul called Him “the Lord Jesus Christ, our hope.” The uniqueness of hope concurs with the uniqueness of Christian grace, since no other “gospel” but the gospel of grace can give hope and assurance. Thus in Colossians 1:27 Christ dwells in believers as “the hope of glory.”¹²

In the New Testament a “living hope” (1 Pet. 1:3) and hope in future grace (v. 13) is essential to the Christian’s spiritual growth, maturity, and well-being.¹³ It is not surprising that 1 Thessalonians 5:8 lists the believer’s helmet as “the hope of salvation” (cf. Eph. 6:17). To move away from the confidence of hope is to move away from the realm in which the Spirit works in a believer. Hope is “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil” (Heb. 6:18–19). Paul realized that Christians could be “ignorant” and grieve as others “who have no hope” (1 Thess. 4:13). Those without hope grieve the consequences of

¹¹ This is the translation in the New American Standard Bible and the New King James Version. But the New International Version translates τὴν πληροφορίαν τῆς ἐλπίδος “make your hope sure,” though the phrase πληροφορία πίστεως in Hebrews 10:22 is translated “full assurance of faith.” Hope and faith are closely allied.

¹² Whether ἐν in the phrase ἐν ὑμῖν, “in you,” means “in” or “among” does not detract from this fact. The New American Standard Bible and New King James Version are probably correct in translating the first ἐν in Colossians 1:27 “among the Gentiles” and the second ἐν “in you.”

¹³ First Peter 1:13 begins with “Therefore” (Διὸ), which resumes the theme of hope in verse 3 as the basis or reason for Peter’s call to holy living.

death in desperate uncertainty, but better things are expected of Christians.

HOPE IN COLOSSIANS

Hope is a unifying theme in Colossians 1. The book opens with mention of it, and one's understanding of its role will help interpret the warning in 1:21–23.

Hope is the basis for spiritual fruitfulness. In Colossians hope is first mentioned in 1:5, where Paul wrote that it is the basis or cause of the Colossians' faith and love. The triad of faith, love, and hope can be found in other Bible passages, but in 1:5 Paul linked hope to faith and love in a causative way. Their faith and love is "because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."¹⁴ While the causative sense of this phrase (διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα) is not overwhelmingly clear in the original language, to some commentators it is obviously so here.¹⁵ The Colossians' faith and love are the *result* of the firm assurance that hope gives them.

A believer who has a sure hope will more readily trust God, because he knows that if the future is secure, then God will surely provide in the present. Likewise a sure hope that God will provide in the present and the future will also free the believer to be more concerned with the needs of others and to meet those needs with an unselfish love.

In strong words of assurance Paul told the Colossians that their hope was "laid up for you in heaven" (1:5). The word translated "laid up" (ἀπόκειμαι) denotes certainty and was used in the ancient world for something that was put away, stored up, or reserved.¹⁶ The idea of something reserved in heaven for believers

¹⁴ Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 58; and Murray J. Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 17. This is also reflected in the New International Version, "the faith and love that spring from the hope" (and other translations, including the GNB, NEB, NET, REB, and RSV).

¹⁵ Herbert M. Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 31; Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 11; Handley C. G. Moule, *Colossians and Philemon Studies* (reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 41–42; and A. S. Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 497.

¹⁶ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 113. This verb was also used in Jesus' parable of the talents to describe the one talent that was hidden in a handkerchief to preserve it (although wrongly) for the master (Luke 19:20). Paul spoke of the crown of righteousness that was "laid up" for him and would be given to him at the Lord's appearing (2 Tim. 4:8).

conveys assurance of its realization. Paul assured his readers that their final salvation was awaiting them in heaven in the very presence of God (cf. Matt. 6:19–21).

Hope, or assurance, not only stimulates faith and love. It also is the foundation of sanctification and Christian maturity in other respects. Hope gives joy (Rom. 5:2; 12:12), encourages boldness of speech (2 Cor. 3:12), brings believers closer to God (Heb. 7:19), and motivates purity (1 John 3:3).

Hope is grounded in the gospel of grace. Another important fact about hope in Colossians 1 is that it is grounded in the true gospel of grace. The Colossians had heard the truth about this hope of heaven through Paul's gospel (v. 5). Any other gospel could not give hope, because the true gospel is according to grace, which Paul noted in verse 6 ("the grace of God in truth").¹⁷ Only grace can assure a believer of his or her eternal destiny because it makes salvation unconditional instead of subjecting it to the conditionality of one's performance. Commenting on hope and assurance of salvation, Rengstorf writes, "Hope arises when man learns to see that he can do nothing for his own salvation, but that God can do everything and that the aim of God is to lead man to salvation, not by the way of attainment, but by a gift *sola gratia*."¹⁸

Paul emphasized that grace is not to be compromised by works (Rom. 4:4–5; 11:6; Eph. 2:8–9). If grace is subverted by works, the gospel is subverted. And if the gospel is subverted, hope or assurance is subverted. If assurance is subverted, the very foundation and motivation for faith toward God and love toward others is subverted. Paul stressed the subject of hope in his opening words to the Colossians because they were threatened by false doctrine and legalists who evidently opposed the grace of the gospel. Donelson notes, "The author has potent reasons for focusing upon hope. As we will discover later in the letter, it is exactly this question of hope, of the surety of our salvation, of the adequacy of the power of Christ to overcome all other powers, that is being attacked."¹⁹ Such subversion would prevent confident assurance of their future acceptance by God that had so far fueled their faith toward Him and their love toward others.

¹⁷ See also 2 Thessalonians 2:16, which says Jesus Christ and God the Father gave believers "eternal comfort and good hope by grace," and 1 Peter 1:13, which encourages believers to "fix your hope completely on the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ."

¹⁸ Rengstorf, "ἐλπίς," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 2:529.

¹⁹ Lewis R. Donelson, *Colossians, Ephesians, First and Second Timothy, and Titus* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1996), 15–16.

FIVE VIEWS ON THE WARNING IN COLOSSIANS 1:21–23

The significance of hope in the New Testament and in the opening words of Colossians can now be applied to the interpretation of 1:21–23. To “continue in the faith” is to be “not moved away from the hope of the gospel.” As seen in verse 5, hope as Christian assurance is the key to the Colossians’ sanctification and spiritual life. What is the consequence of the possible loss of hope for believers in this passage? Five views are given in answer to this question.

A WARNING OF LOSING ETERNAL SALVATION

This Arminian view, which holds that faith in Christ can be abandoned and eternal life lost, loses its credibility by definition. If one’s salvation could be lost, then it was not *eternal* salvation. So there never was any real hope in the biblical sense of a sure expectation. This view is rejected in light of the many passages that guarantee never-ending life to those who believe in Christ (e.g., John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47). Many Bible passages do not allow this option (e.g., 10:27–30; Rom. 8:29–39; Eph. 1:13–14; 4:30).

A WARNING OF A HYPOTHETICAL LOSS OF SALVATION

In this view the words “if indeed” (εἰ γὰρ) in Colossians 1:23 have such certainty attached to them that the warning is only hypothetical. This view says that Paul assumed that the Colossians would indeed continue in their faith in Christ, and since they would, there is no doubt that they would receive their final salvation. In this view of the Greek conditional statement, the construction, “if indeed” (εἰ γὰρ) followed by the indicative “you continue” (ἐπιμένετε) expresses confident certainty, not uncertainty.²⁰ In other words Paul was saying, “If . . . and I’m sure you will. . . .” The conditional-sounding “if” has the more certain meaning of “since.”

However, the certainty claimed for this form of conditional statement is ably disputed by some who say that the conditional statement is only assumed true for the sake of argument. It could

²⁰ Henry Alford, *The New Testament for English Readers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 3:1290; O’Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 69; Peake, “The Epistle to the Colossians,” 513; Archibald Thomas Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman, 1931), 4:483; Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1963), 115; and Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1990), 197. This construction is sometimes called the first-class condition or simple condition. Occurrences of εἰ γὰρ followed by the indicative in the protasis expressing confidence are seen in 2 Corinthians 5:3; Ephesians 3:2; and 4:21.

actually be contrary to fact or highly unlikely.²¹ In view of the flexible use of this conditional construction, it is not the best key to unlocking the meaning of this warning.

A WARNING OF A FALSE SALVATION

This view claims that not all of Paul's readers were Christians. Those who continue in the faith will prove their genuine salvation, while those who do not continue in the faith fall away from the hope of the gospel, thereby proving that they were never really saved.²² The warning thus refers back to their reconciliation with God. They will prove to be reconciled to God if they continue in the faith and are not moved away from the hope which the gospel *could* give them.²³ The difficulty in this view is the overwhelming evidence that Paul was writing exclusively to believers, not false professors, as previously shown. It would also be odd that the immediate context, which affirms that they were reconciled to God (1:21), should then bring that reconciliation into doubt. Another difficulty with this view, if "the faith" is taken subjectively, is that an unbeliever by definition has no faith in which to continue; and if "the faith" is taken objectively, then it is difficult to understand what it means to continue in the faith since the starting point of the Christian faith is Jesus Christ Himself.

The admonition is not to continue on the way to faith, on the path to faith, or in the direction of faith, but to continue "in the faith."²⁴ This is more likely a reference to ongoing faith during the

²¹ James L. Boyer, "First Class Conditions: What Do They Mean?" *Grace Theological Journal* 2 (spring 1981): 75–114; Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday, *The Race Set before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 192; L. W. Ledgerwood III, "What Does the First Class Condition Imply?" *Grace Theological Journal* 12 (spring 1991): 99–118; Joseph K. Pak, "A Study of Selected Passages on Distinguishing Marks of Genuine and False Believers" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2001), 279; and Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 690. As one clear example, the use of $\epsilon\dot{\iota}$ $\gamma\epsilon$ in Galatians 3:4 is purely hypothetical.

²² Whether "the faith" is taken as subjective or as objective does not change the meaning of the passage in this view, though the objective sense is preferred.

²³ Some who hold this view include Willard M. Aldrich, "Perseverance," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 115 (January–March 1958): 16–17; D. A. Carson, "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (spring 1992): 17; William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1964), 85; S. Lewis Johnson Jr., "From Enmity to Amity," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119 (April–June, 1962): 147; and Pak, "A Study of Selected Passages on Distinguishing Marks of Genuine and False Believers," 271–80.

²⁴ "In the faith" is a dative of location (Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *Colos-*

Christian walk rather than initial faith for salvation.²⁵ Even so, the foundation of Christian faith is knowing Jesus Christ as one's Savior. It should also be noted that it is not primarily one's position in the faith that is admonished, but the quality of that faith—"in the faith firmly established and steadfast" (τεθεμελιωμένοι καὶ ἐδραῖοι).²⁶ If unbelievers are included in this group, it is difficult to see how they can continue "firmly established and steadfast" in the Christian faith which they have not yet accepted.

A WARNING TO EMPHASIZE GOD'S PROMISES

This view has been proposed by Schriener and Caneday, who suggest that this warning, like those in Hebrews, should be understood in light of God's sovereign preservation of the believer *and* humankind's responsibility to persevere in faith. They note that the Bible speaks of God's promises about the believer's eternal security, but they also note that the Bible includes warnings about the consequences of not continuing in faith and good works. This tension, they say, must be accepted as one of the mysteries of the Scriptures.²⁷ They are not reticent in asserting the role of works in obtaining final salvation. They believe that God's grace insures the desire and will to obey, so that the works are not meritorious.²⁸ They are correct in saying the warning in Colossians 1:21–23 is forward-looking, not retrospective.²⁹ But it is difficult to see how this view can be reconciled with the strict exclusion of works taught in Romans 4:4–5; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9; and Titus 3:5.

sians, trans. Astrid B. Beck, Anchor Bible [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1994], 233; and N. T. Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986], 84).

²⁵ Wright, *Colossians and Philemon*, 84; and O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 69.

²⁶ Carson, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and Philemon*, 48.

²⁷ Schriener and Caneday, *The Race Set before Us*, 204–13. They write, "Therefore, God strengthens our faith both by assuring us that he will preserve us safely to the end and by warning us lest we perish by failing to persevere in steadfast loyalty to Jesus Christ" (*ibid.*, 213).

²⁸ *Ibid.* "However, biblical admonitions and warnings imply nothing about earning or meriting something from God. Rather, the unconditional promise grounds both the conditional promise and the conditional warning in God's grace, for the biblical testimony is that God's grace and love precedes and creates all human faith and obedience (Eph 2:10) and that perseverance is possible only through belief that is born from grace" (*ibid.*, 206).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

A WARNING ABOUT THE BELIEVER'S EVALUATION
AT THE JUDGMENT SEAT OF CHRIST

This view, not often mentioned, holds the best possibility for a consistent understanding of Colossians 1:21–23 as well as of the gospel itself. Paul declared that faithfulness in the Christian life and a sure hope in the promise of the gospel yield a holy, blameless, and irreproachable life at the judgment seat of Christ. This judgment, which will evaluate the Christian's faithfulness and conduct, is often mentioned in the New Testament as a motivation for Christian faithfulness and responsibility.³⁰

The key distinction of this view is that the conditional element in verse 23 does not refer back to the *reconciliation* mentioned in verse 22, but to the *presentation* mentioned in verse 22.³¹ Those who say the condition relates to the reconciliation say that reconciliation is conditioned on persevering faith.³² However, it is more natural to see the focus of the condition applying to the nearest antecedent, thus making the condition prospective (future presentation), not retrospective (past reconciliation).

In this view the phrase "in the faith" (τῇ πίστει) refers to the believer's privilege within the truth that is in Christ, which begins with initial faith in Him for salvation. The believer must continue in the way that this truth teaches, which is consistent with his or her initial faith in Christ.³³ It refers to faith (or trust) that is needed for living the Christian life, not to faith for salvation.

In this view the *quality* of that presentation, not the fact of it, is conditioned. All believers will be presented before the Lord, but only those who persevere faithfully and hold firmly to their hope will be presented without reproach. That hope will inspire godly living that will result in a good evaluation at the judgment seat of Christ.

³⁰ See Matthew 6:19–21; 10:32–33; Mark 10:28–31; Romans 14:10–12; 1 Corinthians 3:10–15; 4:4–5; 5:5; 9:24–27; 2 Corinthians 5:9–10; 2 Timothy 2:12; 4:7–8; James 2:12–13; 5:9; 1 Peter 5:1–4; 1 John 2:28; 4:17; Revelation 22:12.

³¹ In agreement with this view at least grammatically are John Eadie, *A Commentary on the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Colossians*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh: Clark, 1884), 82; Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 60; and Peake, "The Epistle to the Colossians," 3:513.

³² Hendricksen, *Exposition of Colossians and Philemon*, 84–85; John MacArthur Jr., *Colossians and Philemon*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody, 1992), 66; and O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, 68.

³³ This idea is supported by the immediate context of Colossians 2:6–7 (cf. Rom. 1:17; Gal. 2:20).

The concept of being presented to the Lord is found elsewhere in the New Testament (2 Cor. 4:14; 11:2; Eph. 5:27; 1 Thess. 5:23; Jude 24), and in every case (except 2 Cor. 4:14), the quality of the presentation is in view. Romans 14:10 uses the same verb for “present” (παρίστημι) to indicate the believer’s appearance before the Lord for evaluation at the judgment seat of Christ. While a future presentation to the Lord is guaranteed for all believers, a *favorable* presentation before the Lord, in which they are holy, blameless, and beyond reproach, is stated as the desirable goal for all believers.³⁴ While all believers will be presented to Christ fully justified in position, not all will be blameless in experience (1 Cor. 3:13–15; 4:5; 1 John 2:28).

The phrase “before Him” (κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ) in Colossians 1:22 also speaks of the believer’s appearance before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ, where each believer will be evaluated and rewarded according to his or her deeds.³⁵ That such passages are written to Christians whose justification is settled shows that this is not a judgment about one’s salvation, but of the worthiness of one’s life and conduct for eternal rewards.

This presentation view is supported by several other aspects. First, it correctly and consistently assumes the saved status of the Colossian readers that is affirmed throughout the epistle, and especially in their reconciliation mentioned in the passage itself (v. 22). This immediate context should weigh heavily in one’s interpretation of the warning.

Second, this view does not make salvation dependent on the believer’s performance, but is consistent with the gospel of grace which Paul emphasized in verses 5–6 and mentioned in verse 23.³⁶

Third, this view reinforces the concept already expressed in verses 3–4 that the fruit of hope is sanctification (in the sense of the believers’ ongoing faith in God and their love for others). Progress in such sanctification will achieve a favorable judgment at the judgment seat of Christ.

³⁴ Not certainty, but intention, purpose, or possibility is also seen in 2 Corinthians 11:2; Ephesians 5:27; 1 Thessalonians 5:23 (a prayerful desire); and Jude 24. Of course the Scriptures also refer to a blameless condition that is guaranteed to all believers (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:8). This refers to the positional truth of justification that declares all believers righteous before God, and this must be distinguished from the accountability demanded for the subsequent life of the believer.

³⁵ In Romans 14:10 Paul wrote that “we will all stand before [παραστησόμεθα] the judgment seat of God,” and 2 Corinthians 5:10 says believers “must all appear before [φανερωθῆναι δεῖ ἑμπροσθεῖν] the judgment seat of Christ.”

³⁶ See also Romans 4:4–5; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8–9; and Titus 3:5.

Fourth, this view is consistent with the sense of spiritual maturity expressed as the apostle's goal in verse 28: "that we may present [παραστήσωμεν] every man complete in Christ Jesus." This presentation is not to qualify a person as saved, but to qualify him or her as complete or mature (τέλειος).³⁷ Paul's labor in his ministry for the Colossians (v. 29) was not related to their forensic justification or their final glorification; his ministry focused instead on their progressive sanctification. The qualitative terms "holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (v. 22) are not used forensically or of sinless perfection, but of sanctification, and they represent the goal of Paul's work on behalf of the Colossians. These three terms are used in the same way similar terms are used for the qualifications of elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1–10; Titus 1:5–9).

The achievement of this goal, that Jesus Christ would present the Colossian believers to Himself "holy and blameless and beyond reproach" (Col. 1:22),³⁸ depends on their not being moved (μετακινέω) from the hope that came to them through the gospel message they heard (v. 23).³⁹ Earlier Paul wrote that they had heard and accepted this hope in the gospel (vv. 5–7); thus the warning was that they not shift away from the position they presently enjoyed.⁴⁰ Hope was their anchor for spiritual maturity. Hebrews 6:19 speaks of this hope as "an anchor of the soul," which allows believers to live in God's presence, the safest place possible. The Colossians could reach this spiritual goal of holy living in God's presence only if they were not moved from this safe harbor, but instead remained firmly anchored to their hope in Christ Himself.

³⁷ Bauer, Arndt, and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 995.

³⁸ Ephesians 5:27 uses similar words in speaking of Jesus presenting believers to Himself.

³⁹ Here hope refers to objective truth, not merely a subjective attitude, as seen also in verse 5 where it "is laid up for you in heaven." On this view of hope in verses 5 and 23 see Robert G. Bratcher and Eugene A. Nida, *A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Helps for Translators (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1977), 10, 34; and R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians, to the Thessalonians, to Timothy, to Titus and to Philemon* (Columbus, OH: Wartburg, 1946; reprint, Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1961), 23, 70–71. On Colossians 1:23 see also B. F. Westcott, *Colossians: A Letter to Asia Being a Paraphrase and Brief Exposition of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Believers at Colossae* (reprint, Minneapolis: Klock & Klock, 1981), 75.

⁴⁰ Bratcher and Nida translated this "having been placed and remaining on a foundation" (*A Translator's Handbook on Paul's Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 33). The perfect tense of the verbs "firmly established and steadfast" relates to "continue in the faith" (Harris, *Colossians and Philemon*, 23).

CONCLUSION

Popular Arminian and Reformed Calvinistic views of the warning in Colossians 1:21–23 do not adequately reconcile the context of the immediate passage, the occasion of the epistle, and the concept of hope in the New Testament. However, when the scriptural teaching of the judgment seat of Christ is understood as a background for the warning, theological and textual conflicts are resolved.

When Colossians 1:21–23 is studied in the context of the entire epistle, it is clear that Paul wrote to believers who were in danger of having their assurance undermined by the false and legalistic doctrines of certain teachers. If they moved away from the truth of the gospel and the hope that is based on it, they would lose the prospect of a good presentation and therefore a good evaluation before the judgment seat of Christ, because hope is inexorably related to the believer's practical relationship to God and others.

This preferred view treats hope as the certain expectation of a future promise and is thus consistent with the biblical view of hope. It also keeps the gospel totally uncompromised by any mixture of works or merit, while also recognizing the strong biblical theme of the believer's accountability before Christ at His judgment seat.

The warning in Colossians 1:21–23 shows that Christian assurance can be subverted by false doctrine and legalistic tendencies. When such hope is undermined, so is the basis for a strong faith in God and a fruitful life toward others. Christians should not be like "others who have no hope" (1 Thess. 4:13), but should live and die confidently as they look expectantly for the realization of their future hope.