

A Book Review: Free Will Revisited

I tend to talk about Dr. Robert Picirilli in sycophantic tones. I suppose it is hard not to come across that way even though I am sincere in my praise of him and his influence in my life. I actually had him as a professor at a small school with intimate classes. Beyond that, he has been humble enough to answer my emails about Greek long after I graduated. And then there's his published works, which have a special place on my bookshelves.

I've read all of his works at least once, and *Grace, Faith, Free Will* at least 20 times—mostly because it takes many, many readings for a man like me to absorb the fire hydrant of material. And even then I do not think I understand it all. Anytime I feel like I'm getting a little too proud of my intelligence, one chapter of that book will bring me down a notch.

So it was with great joy my Senior Pastor told me not to buy Dr. Picirilli's new book, *Free Will Revisited*, because he already had a copy for me. And despite it being a slim 135 pages, it still took me days to get through it. Because this treatment of a crucial difference between two major branches of orthodox Christianity cannot be discussed simplistically. The reasoning gets into deep waters at times. I will be rereading.

I want to say up front that yet again, just as with *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, Picirilli goes to admirable lengths to make sure he presents his opponents views accurately and fairly. Like a champ, he takes on three of the heaviest weights of the last 500 years of church history in Martin Luther, John Calvin, and Jonathan Edwards. And he spends probably 35-40% of the book trying to express their views in their own words.

There are no straw men being batted down. In stark contrast to the Social Media Debate Generation, Picirilli reads to understand, articulates the other position, and does not jump quickly to his responses. And by all means note the subtitle of this book is a “respectful” response to Luther, Calvin, and Edwards. I implore all of us to take a note from Picirilli’s format and approach. Listen or read carefully. Do not misrepresent your opponent’s views. Be humble and respectful.

As far as the content itself, there are times where Picirilli makes a more simple and straightforward argument against the writings of these three men opposing human free will. As when he notes that it is very difficult to get around teaching that God coerces us if we believe our will is completely against God prior to salvation and that God by his grace changes our will to His. Yet there are other times Picirilli shows how complex the debate can get, as on pages 86-87 when he talks about how things that are certain are not “necessary” and how God’s knowledge of the future is like our knowledge of the past. He dealt with this in the early part of *Grace, Faith, Free Will* but I believe Picirilli to be a very self-aware man, knowing that many of his readers would have read that volume and in my opinion avoids rehashing that part of his previous book but instead explains it with a fresh perspective.

[In the past I have written for REO on Arminius’s own words and how much overlap there is to Calvinism and Arminianism.](#) I did so based on what my professors, like Picirilli, have taught me. Here again, he accomplishes the same goal. He does not cite Arminius yet he still makes the point plainly and necessarily that Arminians believe that man is totally depraved, that God draws us to Himself by grace, that man does zero to contribute to his salvation in a way that could be called “works” and that God is completely sovereign over all creation, including human will. The difference lies, in large part, on the focus of the book. Do Christians accept salvation like a drowning man who realizes he cannot swim and chooses to

take a rope to save him or are they saved completely void of any free, self-determined choice?

Tribalism can be dangerous in politics and Christianity. I consider myself an Arminian because I think the doctrines are important. Yet I attended a Calvinist seminary, have close Calvinist friends and will gladly lock arms with them in worship and ministry any day. But I consider this topic important enough to read and write about a couple of times a year. And I am thankful yet again to Dr. Picirilli for the impetus to think about, react to and create in the sphere of theology. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to have their mind stretched, even if it is by Jonathan Edwards more so than Robert Picirilli. Because the point of the book is to debate, not pontificate. I only wish the other three men were alive to respond.

REO Pays Tribute: Tom McCullough

REO maintains a consistent publishing schedule highlighted by the Friday Five each week. Today in lieu of a Friday Five we are respecting the passing of Mr. Tom McCullough by re-sharing our tribute to him from last week. We felt this was our way to honor this man who taught many on our staff while in college and means a great deal to us and countless others around the world.

I majored in Youth Ministry in college. Yet the head of the

Missions department at Welch College was a man that impacted me deeply. I only had one class where he was the actual professor, but he was so influential on campus that through a hundred big teaching moments and a thousand small gestures, he altered the trajectory of my life and ministry.

This is not an exaggeration.

Upon my graduation, I decided to do youth ministry in an international city for a home missions church plant. While never in my title, I have felt like a missionary from day one of living here. I find no pride in this. I owe it to the passion Welch College had for biblical missions. The Global Mission Fellowship was extremely active on campus, leading prayer times, community events and spiritual life retreats. Their students were among the brightest and most spiritually mature. Their department was thriving. And Mr. Tom McCullough, who served from 1979 to 1994 as a missionary in France, was the heart of it all.

I could not be at that school and escape the fact that my life should be about God's grace in making Jesus's name great among the nations. I could not know Mr. McCullough and not be disciplined by him.

Additionally, take the following quote from a sermon he preached in Grand Rapids, MI at the National Association of Free Will Baptists in July 2015:

"God is not American or Mexican or Bulgarian or Korean. God is not a Republican. God isn't even a capitalist. God does not salute the American flag (that doesn't mean we shouldn't). God's first language is not English or Spanish. God is not white, brown, or black. God does not play favorites. God is God and he has no political agenda. He cares not about the color of a man's skin, but the condition of his heart. And when by our speech, by our tweets, and by our Facebook entries we show more concern about a political agenda, or we

contribute to the racialization of our culture, we are, in effect, limiting access to the Gospel! We do it by alienating those who don't share our political, economical, or social views. And this happens because we've traded the "Pearl of Great Price" – The Kingdom of God – for a scaled down and deformed view of whom and what we think God should value and favor and what the church should look like politically, socially, or racially... The world is too small for us to stay in our insular, parochial, homogeneous communities."

I am sincere when I say that Mr. McCullough wasn't just a huge reason that I moved to Chicago after graduation. He was instrumental in why eight years after moving here I transitioned from doing youth ministry in my church to being the point person to helping the church become a bilingual church. Even though I was never "his" student in school, my mind was absolutely transformed by his influence. After I preached the sermon at my church nine years ago to cast the vision for bringing English and Spanish speakers together in worship and community, I emailed him to thank him because he was the first person I thought of when God first put the idea in my head.

That was just one of the many times Mr. McCullough and I corresponded after I graduated. A few years ago I was reading *Intentional Integrity* by Dr. Garnett Reid and came across a Mr. McCullough quote from a time of grieving over his late wife: *"God help me not to forget in the dark what I know to be true in the light."* I shared that with my Spanish Sunday School class the next week and it sparked a significant time of teaching, discipleship and sharing in that class. It was emotional and poignant as many of the people were at that time overwhelmed by the darkness. They were so thankful for this quote and expressed it to me through tears where you could see sorrow and joy collide. I emailed Mr. McCullough to let him know. By impacting me, he impacted a church community hundreds of miles away.

Then there was the time I emailed him before I got married two years ago to ask for advice. I had asked about 30-40 couples or individuals about this and he was someone I strongly wanted to hear back from. And he said something that that no one else did that I will never forget. He said, *"When you marry you MUST realize it's not about YOU anymore. It's about the both of you, under God's direction. Love her sacrificially, unconditionally. Let her be herself, under God's authority, not what you want to make her into."* The first part of that I had heard many times but still needed it. But the last sentence struck me like a sledgehammer. Wanting my wife to be what I want her to be in the picture perfect world in my head has been an issue I have had to work through the last two years. Thank God for Mr. McCullough's wisdom in helping me see it ahead of time. I love him for that.

But beyond the quotes, the advice and the sermons, Mr. McCullough was just a walking evidence for how the Kingdom of God is for the "poor in spirit". He was truly a humble, God-dependent person who considered others more important than himself. When he taught and preached he exuded meekness and did not give off one ounce of arrogance. I never felt he used knowledge as a platform as many educated Christians do. I remember a time he preached about nationalism vs. patriotism and was deeply concerned that he said what he said in a balanced and fair way and expressed this to me and other students afterward. You could see in it his face how much he cared about doing what was right God's Word and by us.

There are thousands of other things that can and have been and will be said about Mr. McCullough and I am thankful for them. There are many who knew him much better than I do, many of whom were his students during his time at Welch. And many have spoken profoundly on his Facebook wall over the years. If you are on that site I encourage you to read them if you can. His imprint has been so strong in my life, I felt it appropriate to add one more. He touched people outside of the normal

spheres of influence, including me. And he is worthy of honor in our words, but also in actions that make Jesus's name great among the nations.



REO Pays Tribute: Dr. Robert Picirilli

There are probably very few in the Free Will Baptist denomination who have never heard about Robert Eugene Picirilli. And if you haven't, well, why haven't you? Have you been paying attention at all? You need to get to know about this living legend pronto. In my mind, he and Leroy Forlines are the very epitome of today's Free Will Baptist theology. One of my great regrets is only managing to have Picirilli for

one class in college (and Forlines not at all). The one Dr. Pic course I had was Fundamentals of Philosophy and unfortunately, my immature college self didn't fully appreciate this great man and did not pay enough attention in that one course. But since then, I have grown to truly recognize his theological genius and denominational significance.

Picirilli was born in North Carolina in 1932. In 1949 he left his home state to become a student at Free Will Baptist Bible College where he received his B.A. in 1953. But he was only getting started. During those first years at FWBBC, he had made a commitment to God to dedicate his life to the school. So in order to be qualified for a college professorship position, he determined to pursue his higher education. To this end, he earned an M.A. in theology from [Bob Jones University](#) in 1955 and a Ph.D. in New Testament Text from the same institution in 1963. In 1967, Bob Jones University awarded him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree.

While still at Bob Jones, he made his move to return to FWBBC as a member of its faculty. As he recalled it in an interview by [The Helwys Society Forum](#), after attaining his M.A. he felt a pressure to apply for teacher status a little sooner than expected in order to support his growing family. (At the time he and his wife had three daughters and would later have two more.) So just after attaining his M.A. in 1955, he approached Dr. L.C. Johnson about it. It is very fortunate for the entire denomination that this other great Free Will Baptist man wisely decided to give Picirilli the position in 1955.

He has been involved with the workings of FWBBC (now [Welch College](#)) ever since. Before retiring, he had various roles including professor, registrar, academic dean, and many other crucial school-related positions. But the college is not Picirilli's only area of impact. He has also had a profound influence on the denomination and the Christian world as a whole. He is today considered one of the most respected and

influential writers, teachers, and thinkers in Free Will Baptist history. Among his best literary works are Book of Galatians; Romans; Paul the Apostle; Grace, Faith, Free Will; and Discipleship. He has also been involved with the Southeastern Section [formerly Southern Section] of the Evangelical Theological Society to which he has presented numerous papers and serving twice as the society's chairman. He has been a fellow of the Institute for Biblical Research and a member of the Research Commission of the American Association of Bible Colleges. He also frequently contributes to denominational works of discipleship, biblical instruction, and scholarship.

Picirilli retired a number of years ago and continues to reside in Nashville. In his retirement he continues to be extremely active in various ministries. He attends [Cofer's Chapel Free Will Baptist church](#) where he frequently teaches classes on various topics and regularly teaches a Sunday school class. He also remains involved with Welch, frequently engages in various scholarly studies, is a much sought after revival preacher at churches all over the country, and currently serves as chairman and treasurer of the Free Will Baptist Historical Commission.[1. He even contributed to an article for [Rambling Ever On.](#)]



Paradise Deserted: Can a True Christian Renounce Their Faith? (Apostasy Part 3)

I will not conceal, that there are passages of scripture which seem to me to wear this aspect (of a believer departing from the faith); and those answers to them which I have been

permitted to see, are not of such a kind as to approve themselves on all points to my understanding. *On the other hand, certain passages are produced for the contrary doctrine which are worthy of much consideration.*[1. The Writings of Arminius, 1:458] [Jacobus Arminius]

For Part One that introduces this series of essays, Go [here](#).

For Part Two that discusses Hebrews and 2 Peter, Go [here](#).

ONE POINT CALVINISM...

In the previous essay, I looked at two books in the Bible that I believe teach that true believers need to be warned against the possibility of falling away from their faith. But as Arminius himself noted, there are passages that seem on the surface to teach that a believer is unconditionally secure in Christ. Interestingly, there are many Christians that I have known or heard of that believe that a person comes to Christ by their free will in response to grace, but that cannot apostasize after entering that relationship. I am sure the passages we will look at in this essay are part of why.

YOU ARE ETERNALLY SECURE, FROM EVERYTHING BUT YOURSELF...

Before I get to them, I will say as a blanket statement on these passages that I do not think they are talking about persevering in faith. I think passages like the ones below are meant to teach us that nothing external can take us away from God, that God's love is more powerful than external forces and that God will not retract his promises to us. These things are different categories of theology to me than apostasy and persevering by faith.

To illustrate, if coming into relationship with God is like being put into a spiritual safe house, God through Scripture makes strong assurances that nothing in this world outside of that safe house can take us out of it. Not even Satan himself. That is God-level protection. He also promises He will do his part to keep us there because he loves us so much. We have no reason to fear. None of these things teach that if I want to leave, I can or cannot. Hebrews, 2 Peter, John 15, etc. are all speaking to the issue of choosing to get out. And they are clear to me that if I choose to, I can. Because if I choose to, God will remove me.

But let's look at some of these passages. I think we will see that by studying their contexts we will arrive at the opposite conclusion as Hebrews and 2 Peter: their contexts lead us away from these being passages about apostasy. Note direct Scripture quotations are in **bold**.

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John 10:27-28: My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.

A. IF YOU DIDN'T LOVE GOD, YOU WOULDN'T FOLLOW JESUS

Jesus is speaking directly to hard-hearted Jews, whom I believe had already rejected God before Christ came and so were naturally not going to accept him as God in the Flesh[2. F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest For Truth*, 387-88.] This explains why Jesus said in vs. 26, **You do not believe because**

you are not my sheep instead of the other way around. He was not teaching that only his sheep hear him in the sense that some people are called to God unconditionally, but that those to whom special revelation had been given and who had already rejected God were not going to accept Jesus, the Word of God incarnate.[3.

Robert Hamilton, [evangelicalarminians.org/files/Hamilton. The Order of Faith and Election in John's Gospel](http://evangelicalarminians.org/files/Hamilton.The%20Order%20of%20Faith%20and%20Election%20in%20John's%20Gospel) The whole section in John where Jesus has repeated showdowns with obstinate Jewish leaders testifies to this. In John 5:37, Jesus said, **And the Father has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form.** And the opposite in 6:45, **Everyone who has learned from the Father comes to me.** This explains why Jesus made it clear he and the Father were the same (John 5:19, 23; 8:28; 10:30-33) and that they had already rejected God through Moses (John 5:46-47). They rejected God the Father and, consistently, rejected God the Son. By rejecting one, you automatically will reject the other. If they had accepted God as Father prior they would have loved Jesus (8:42)

B. THE NON-SHEEP WERE ALSO THIEVES...

This matters because I think Jesus in 8:28 is saying plainly to these outside-of-the-covenant Jews that they could not take his true followers out of fellowship with him. They could try and they did. This section of chapter 10 is on the heels of Jesus teaching that robbers would not be able to steal sheep from him. I think this is exactly what the unsaved Jews wanted from the beginning of Jesus's ministry to the end—to take Jesus's followers since they deemed him a liar. But they could not. This is noticeably different than the warnings of Hebrews, where, to keep with the illustration, the sheep fall away because they have a sinful unbelieving heart. This passage is not explicitly about continuance in relationship to God by faith[4. James Leonard, arminianbaptist.blogspot.com/2015/12/eternal-security-and-

[prooftexts.html](#)]. Hebrews is, at least in significant part.

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Despite the passage not teaching continuance on faith explicitly, Arminius taught that continuance is implied in this passage: “Unless the sheep are in the hands of the shepherd, they can not be safe against Satan.”[5. *The Writings of Arminius*, III:499] This is an argument that can be used for several passages that appear to teach a believer cannot commit apostasy (see conclusion below). We are safe as long as we are his sheep (as long as we ‘are believing,’ etc.)

Romans 8:35-39: Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? Just as it is written, “For Your sake we are being put to death all day long; We were considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created thing, will be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

A. CONTEXT IS EVERYTHING

Romans 1-3 is making a case that Jews and Gentiles are equally sinful and separated by God, which at the time of transition from Old Covenant to New, was crucial to preach. Jews needed to be humbled and Gentiles needed hope that they were equal in God's eyes. Romans 4-7, among other things, is about the

supremacy of Christ in regards to our sinful state—how he is the object of our faith, how he died for us while we were enemies, how we can live resurrected from sin because of him and how he sets us from from the body of death.

B. ENCOURAGEMENT, NOT WARNING...

Chapter 8 is, in part, about encouraging Christians in their walk. 8:1 makes it clear **there is no condemnation in Christ**. Verses. 14-16 say, **The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father'**. Verse 34 asks and answers, **Who will condemn us? No one**. Note how he says implies that his audience is tempted to live in fear again because of the idea of being enslaved and condemned again. This is important to understanding vs. 35-39. He is writing this particular section to assure a potentially fearful people, not warn a potentially rebellious people. It is not the same context or focus as Hebrews.

If I am talking to woman who, because of abuse in the past, is struggling with fear that her husband won't love her forever and I know her husband well and that he loves her unconditionally, I will give an entirely different message than to a woman I am sensing is tempted to cheat on her husband. Romans 8 is not about continuing in your faith when faced with apostasy. The audience (at least at this part) needed affirmation of God's love; not warnings. Hebrews, while not exactly opposite (both books deal with the supremacy of Christ because this is the heart of Christianity), was still very different in this respect.

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than to a woman I am sensing is tempted to cheat on her husband. Romans 8 is not about continuing in your faith when faced with apostasy.

Both Jews and Gentiles to whom Paul wrote had the potential to struggle in their confidence. Jews because the weight of the law, which Jesus came to fulfill and abolish. No one could condemn them on the basis of that any longer. Gentiles could struggle because they were not primarily God's chosen people in the previous covenant. But no one could condemn them either because Christ is sufficient for all peoples everywhere under a new, better covenant. This is the point of this section of Romans. It has essentially nothing to do with continuance in relationship to God by faith. Hebrews does. John 15 does. These are the places to go for a clear explanation of apostasy.

Philippians 1:6: "...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

This verse is teaching us that God is faithful to do his part in our salvation[6. Robert Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 202]. Just as if I asked Steve Lytle to help tutor me in Spanish and he promised to show up every week, fully prepared, fully patient and fully competent to help me achieve fluency and to help me work on it for the rest of my life, I have no doubt he could promise that and it would have nothing to do with whether I kept with it until the end.

Just as with Romans 8 and John 10, this verse and its context are not about whether believers can depart from the faith.

2 Timothy 2:15: If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

I do not believe this means "If we are faithless in our relationship to him, He is faithful in his part so that he keeps us in relationship". That is reading something in the verse that is not there from the verse itself or the context.

The previous verse says if we deny him, he will deny us.

That sounds clearer because it speaks more to the relationship itself. That God "remains faithful," I think, means that he will not deny his own character[7. Forlines, 272]. That is what the last phrase in vs. 15 is saying. He is faithful to respond with his just character, which means he will deny us as the previous verse says. Because God must judge sin, in this case a denying of him in relationship which is as serious and final a sin and judgment as their is. The teachings of 2 Peter, John 15 and Hebrews, coincide with this interpretation in a much clearer way.

IF YOU'VE EXPLAINED ONE, YOU MAY HAVE EXPLAINED THEM ALL...

There are other passages that are used and I will not treat them in detail. I will say that most of my points above apply to many of the other passages commonly cited for eternal security with no possibility of apostasy (like Romans 11:29 and 2 Thessalonians 2:3).

It is not my aim to make anyone obsessively fearful that their salvation is in jeopardy. That is why we have passages like John 10 and Romans 8. But it would also be intellectually dishonest of me to never warn people that apostasy can happen.

Some passage promise things like Jesus's followers have eternal life and never having to die and things like this (John 3:36, 5:24, etc). The idea with these is that thees things are true so long as the person continues to follow by faith. Picirilli explains in great detail how the English present continuous form of "is/are believing" can express the Greek correctly. This means that I as long as I "am

believing” there are numerous promises given to me as a child of God[8. Picirilli, 200-01].

WARNINGS ARE LEGIT, FEAR IS NOT...

It is not my aim to make anyone obsessively fearful that their salvation is in jeopardy. That is why we have passages like John 10 and Romans 8. But it would also be intellectually dishonest of me to never warn people that apostasy can happen.

Again, back to the different audiences—some people who are struggling need God’s promises that he loves us. Others who are dabbling too often in sin and doubt may need my second essay.

At the end of the day, I’m not trying to put a notch in my belt or “score one” for Arminianism as much as I am trying to teach the Bible. This is what I believe it teaches.

Paradise Deserted: Can a True Christian Renounce Their Faith? (Apostasy Part 2)

But whether they are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, *that must be more*

particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with full persuasion of our minds.[1. Taken from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 548-49] [Five Articles of The Remonstrance, Article 5, written in 1610]

Read Part One [Here](#).

TEACHING MORE THAN ARGUING

As a disclaimer, I plan to argue for why I believe the Bible teaches that a true follower of Christ can renounce their faith and be an unbeliever again, but I realize I'm not going to settle a 500 year debate over this. So my approach is simply to explain what a few important passages mean, not to delve into certain point-counterpoint aspects of Arminian v. Calvinist theology. No doubt a Calvinist will disagree with me, but I am not trying to represent that disagreement except where absolutely necessary. Space is too limited and I may not represent them well enough.

I also take this approach to assure that my arguments are biblical instead of merely logical. A statement like "God loves people so he would not send them to eternal torment" is logical, but not biblical. It is far too easy on this topic to make "I just don't see how" statements when the Bible speaks clearly to tell us how. And by warning us that a true Christian can abandon their faith, as the passages below do, they are communicating reality. As Picirilli says, those who do not believe in the possibility of apostasy do not warn against it.[2. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 208]

So without further ado, let's dive right in. There are two New Testament books that deal with apostasy as a main point of the writing. Note that direct quotes from Scripture will be

bold.

“Those who do not believe in apostasy do not warn against it.” (Robert Picirilli)

HEBREWS: BE CAREFUL LITTLE HEART HOW YOU TURN

I'm convinced this book is in part a letter to warn true Christians about the dangers of apostatizing from the faith and the author is so concerned, he repeats this warning several times. In 2:1, after establishing Christ as superior to everything, he says, **For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.** What does it mean to drift away? Well I think as he continues to write, that answer becomes clearer.

In 3:12, after using the hardened hearts of the Israelites in the wilderness as an example of **going astray** he says, **Take care, brothers, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God.** Note two things: He says, **brothers** which means he is directing a warning to real Christians[3. For a more detailed account of the recipients of Hebrews please read James Leonard at Arminian.Blogspot.com "[Eternal Security and Exegetical Overview of the Book of Hebrews](http://Arminian.Blogspot.com)"] and secondly, that unbelief and falling away are linked. Faith puts you in covenant, so it follows that unbelief (inseparable from evil) would take you out.

But the clearest portion of Hebrews that speaks to who and what this “falling away” means is 6:4-6. Picirilli lays out his translation of these verses and separates the clauses in such a way so that you can see how they are related:

**For it is impossible for those
who were once for all enlightened**

and who tasted the heavenly free gift
and who became partakers of the Holy Spirit
and who tasted God's good word and the powers of the coming
age
and who fell away
To be being renewed again to repentance.[4. Picirilli, 216]

Picirilli lays it out this way so you can see the relationship between five clauses: four that have verbs explaining their relationship to God and a fifth with a verb to describe what they did after. They are all equal, coordinate clauses with the same grammar tense[5. Ibid, 221]. Translations often obscure the relationship between the clauses by adding words[6. Most infamously, the KJV adding "if" before the 5th clause, while not its intention, has led some to believe it is hypothetical. More on that below.].

However, first it is imperative to prove that the passage is talking about a genuine Christian, as opposed to someone who is not truly a follower of Christ. Dr. Picirilli says unilaterally that "There is no doubt those lives refer to genuine Christians." [7. Picirilli, *Perseverance* (a booklet), 20] The first clause uses the word **enlightened** which he also uses in 10:32 in a way that appears to refer to conversion. **Once for all** occurs several other times in Hebrews and means something like "once effectively" in the sense that it needs nothing added to it or to be repeated [8. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 217]. That communicates completeness.

The people described [In Hebrews 6:4-6] were entirely enlightened, intimately close to the Holy Spirit and had fully experienced God's free gift, among other things. It seems to me that the author is going above and beyond to make it clear these are people who knew God in relationship through his grace, Word and Holy Spirit. Picirilli concludes, "If you wanted a better definition of conversion, you could not find it!"

Two of the clauses use **tasted** which can be a misleading (even if precise) translation because it is a word used for full-fledged eating elsewhere (Acts 10:10) and also because in Hebrews 2:9 the word is used for Christ having **tasted death**[9. Ibid]. It follows that the people described here experienced **the free heavenly gift** and **God's good word** as intimately as Christ experienced death. Which is to say, totally. Any attempt to read too much into the use of the Greek genitive (which can explain what was experienced instead of the extent it was experienced) for the free gift clause here fails, as Hebrews 2:9 uses the Greek genitive for Christ tasting death[10. Ibid, 218].

The fourth clause is about being **partakers of the Holy Spirit**.

F. Leroy Forlines comments, "In Hebrews 3:14 we find a reference in which the same Greek word as partake in Hebrews 6:4 is used. It reads: **For we are made partakers of Christ**.

This would certainly refer to a close relationship." He goes on to compare the word to a companion or someone who is in agreement with[11. F. Leroy Forlines, *The Quest For Truth*, 278].

By using other verses and words in Hebrews, Picirilli and Forlines assure us that the words are being interpreted correctly and that we do not use any tortured exegesis to make them say something they do not mean. The people described were entirely enlightened, intimately close to the Holy Spirit and had fully experienced God's free gift, among other things. It seems to me that the author is going above and beyond to make it clear these are people who knew God in relationship through his grace, Word and Holy Spirit. Picirilli concludes, "If you wanted a better definition of conversion, you could not find it!"[12. Picirilli, *Perseverance*, 20]

But that leads us back to why the clauses are laid out by Picirilli the way they are. Could the "fall away" clause be hypothetical? Could the author be communicating something that could happen but will not? The grammar makes this

extremely unlikely. All five clauses have the same constructions as far as verb form and tense, aorist participles[13. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 227]. In other words, there is nothing in the text that even implies that the first four are real and the fifth is hypothetical. It is conclusive, to me at least, that if the first four are objective reality, the fifth one is too. They fell away just as surely as they tasted the heavenly gift.

To illustrate: Suppose I say, "Consider those who ate fast food every day. And who played video games all day. And who did not exercise. And who were unhealthy as a result". A natural reading says all of these things happened. The last sentence is just as factual as the first three. This is essentially what Hebrews 6:4-6 communicates. Greek has several ways to communicate hypotheticals. And even hypotheticals that cannot happen, like "I wish I were taller".

But aorist participles as they are used here do not communicate this. What he is saying in Hebrews 6:4-6 is what *did* happen, not what *could* happen. Additionally, it starts by saying "It is impossible" not "It *would be* impossible." [14. Ibid.] This eliminates, to me at least, the possibility that Hebrews 6:9 (**We are convinced of better things in your case**) is saying that what he says in 4-6 is something that could happen but will not. There isn't a shred of hypothesis in this passage. Only a real life indicative warning.

So what does **fall away** mean? I think it means exactly what the similar expression means in Hebrews 3:12 above. It means to fall away in the sense of having a sinful, unbelieving heart. The word in 6:6 isn't used anywhere else in the New Testament but is used in the LXX in places like Ezekiel 18:24, which also appears to describe apostasy founded in unrighteousness [15. Ibid, 220]. And lest there be any confusion, it follows by saying these people **cannot be renewed again to repentance**. That goes beyond merely suggesting these people are now lost. It's firm. They are outside of

repentance, one word used as the condition of salvation ('faith' being the other). This would mean the apostasy is final[16. Ibid, 222-24. For a contrary Arminian perspective, see Brian Abasciano, evangelicalarminians.org/brian-abasciano-my-argument-for-apostasy-not-being-irremediable-in-hebrews-6/ Note that Abasciano is not arguing against irremediable apostasy totally but that Hebrews 6 may not be teaching it.]

Suppose I say, "Consider those who ate fast food every day. And who played video games all day. And who did not exercise. And who were unhealthy as a result". A natural reading says all of these things happened. The last sentence is just as factual as the first three. Hebrews 6:4-6 explains what did happen, not what could happen.

Hebrews 10:26-29 in one sense completes the series of detailed apostasy warnings by affirming that **if we go on sinning willfully after we have received a knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment...How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?**

I am confident that using the word **sanctified**—which in Hebrews with one exception always refers to the sanctity of salvation[17. Forlines, page 280-81]—and even by saying **we** in the beginning, the writer is giving a real warning to other Christians, including himself. And what the person does by **sinning willfully and regarding Christ's blood as unclean** sounds like a person outside of covenant with God[18. For an explanation of how 'willful sins' in Numbers 15 equates with New Testament teachings on apostasy, please see Forlines, page 282-83]. Scot McKnight says, in reference to all of the Hebrews warning passages: "...the sin the author has in mind is

a willful rejection of God and his Son, Jesus the Messiah, and an open denunciation of God and his ethical standards.”[19. Scot McKnight, “The Warning Passages in Hebrews: A Formal Analysis and Theological Conclusions” (published in Trinity Journal), 39]. This can only refer to a person who has sinned so as not in covenant relationship with God. And the result is the same as 6:6: there is no more sacrifice (i.e., forgiveness) for sins, removing any doubt this person is now lost.

Hebrews offers a couple of more warnings of apostasy in 10:30 (**Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.**) and 12:25 (**See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.**). The repetition only enforces the reality of the danger of what can happen to a true Christian.

2 PETER: ONCE YOU ESCAPE, THE ENEMY KEEPS PURSUING

The beginning of Peter establishes that he is writing to fellow Christians (**those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ**) and is encouraging them to live well. And he concludes by telling them make their election sure. Dr. James Leonard comments on the first ten verses of 2 Peter 1: “Thus, the letter was written to urge believers to grow in Christ so that they will not stumble, and so that they may successfully complete their pilgrimage to their eschatological reward. Of course, it would be wholly tautological to urge believers to make every effort to confirm their calling and election if they were, in fact, unconditionally secure therein.”[20. James Leonard, arminanbaptist.blogspot.com “[Exegetical Overview of 2 Peter and Eternal Security: Forewarned Not to Fall From Your Secure Position](#)” This reminds me of this quote I read recently

by Matt Pinson writing about Daniel Whitby on fwbtheology.com: "If God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30) and preordains a state of affairs in which some men are not divinely enabled to obey His command, then there is a disjunction between His command ("Repent!") and His intent ("I have no intention of enabling you to repent; in fact I have predetermined the universe in such a way that you can never repent").]

"It would be wholly tautological to urge believers to make every effort to confirm their calling and election if they were, in fact, unconditionally secure therein." (James Leonard)

2 Peter 2:1 adds the theme of conditional security by saying, **But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.** The fact the **Master** had **bought them** sounds very much like Christian redemption in covenant relationship (2 Cor. 6:20; 7:23). And **denying** is a strong verb of relational rejection (cf. Matt. 10:33, 2 Timothy 2:12). And from here throughout this section of the letter, Peter is warning against false teachers who can tempt a believer to defect from the faith.

It is the last part of chapter 2 that speaks most forcefully to apostasy of the genuine Christian. In verses 18-22 there are three phrases that describe the people Peter is referring to.

1. They **have escaped from the pollutions of this world.**

The quoted phrase can be found in vs. 20 here and in 1 Peter 1:4, where Peter is describing their salvation experience[21. Picirilli, 230].

2. They escaped **by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.** In his commentary on 2 Peter, Picirilli

makes the case that the word for knowledge (*epignosis*, a compound verb that goes beyond mere head knowledge) is often a conscious attempt to communicate saving knowledge of Christ one gains at conversion[22. Picirilli, *Commentary on 2nd Peter*, 285-92]. It is the knowledge used twice times in the first few verses of 1 Peter to describe genuine Christianity.

3. They **have come to know the way of righteousness**. The word “know” is the verb form of “knowledge” in point 2 and “the way of righteousness” refers back to two very similar phrases in 2:2 and 2:15, both of which seem to refer to salvation[23. Picirilli, *Grace, Faith, Free Will*, 230-31]. It is at least possible the use of “the way” in all three of these 2 Peter 2 verses is a reference to the name the first Christians used in Acts to refer to themselves as the true sect of Jesus Christ (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22; cf. John 14:6).

“If [the people described in 2 Peter 2:18-22] were never saved, how could they be ‘again’ entangled?”

So what did these people do? They were **overcome and again entangled by the pollutions**. The word ‘again’ is notable since the pollutions are what they were saved from. They were right back where they were before they were saved. (And If they were never saved, how could they be ‘again’ entangled?) Secondly, they **turned away from the holy command handed to them**. And their destiny seals the case for their present condition: **their last state is worst than the first and they would have been better off not knowing the way of righteousness**. This can only be a group of people that is no longer saved and whose judgment is finally determined as in irremediable apostasy.

And as if all that were not clearly enough explained, he closes in 3:17 by saying, **Therefore, dear friends, since you**

have been forewarned, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of the lawless and fall from your secure position. It is very hard to try to make that mean something other than what it seems to say, especially in view of the rest of the book. It's entirely in context with its naturally read meaning.

As much as I would love it if the writer of Hebrews and Peter had used a simple word like "Christian" or "true disciple" (those these words are vehemently implied by the use of words like "brothers") to describe these apostates, the books are too rich in detail. Yet I am confident the detail makes the case even stronger that these were people of legitimate conversion.

BUT THERE ARE SO MANY MORE...

I wish space allowed for a detailed treatment of John 15, Colossians 1:21-23, Revelation 1-3, and a few verses from the letters to Timothy and other passages. But suffice it to say that when a Biblical writer is addressing a group of Christians and makes statements like **if you continue in your faith** or **if you don't abide in me, you will be thrown away** or **if you endure to the end you will be saved** then I think he is speaking to conditional perseverance. Conditioned on faith.

And I believe that Paul names names to Timothy of people who did in fact apostasize from the faith. Finally, both the idea of a sin that cannot be forgiven (Matt 12:32) and a sin that "leads to death" (1 John 5:16) make more sense to me within the teachings of apostasy.

But the case rises and falls on Hebrews and 2 Peter. If it can be proven—and I think it can—that these two authors truly believed the people they were writing to could forfeit their faith and therefore were warning them, then I think we must

teach that apostasy is real for the true Christian.

Part 3 can be read [here](#).