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Review of Schreiner and Ardel's "The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance"

Kent Yinger

George Fox University, kyinger@georgefox.edu

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The Race Set Before Us: A Biblical Theology of Perseverance and Assurance

by Thomas R. Schreiner and Ardel B. Caneday

(Downers Grove/Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2001. 344 pp. pb. \$21.99. ISBN 0-8308-1555-4)

This book combines well its pastoral and academic aims while seeking to resolve (theo)logical problems which have perennially accompanied discussions of perseverance and assurance: Must one persevere to the end in order to be saved, or can one from the beginning be assured of final salvation? This balanced and readable treatment is intended for theologically interested Christians and includes judicious examination of relevant NT texts along with evenhanded presentation of other positions. The authors' pastoral concern is evident throughout, and both teach in Christian higher education. (Schreiner is Professor of New Testament at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary [Louisville, Kentucky]; Caneday is Associate Professor of Bible at Northwestern College [St. Paul, Minnesota].) An earlier version of Schreiner's position was published as 'Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal', *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (1998), 32-62.

The first chapter ('The Race Set Before Us') lays out four dominant positions: (1). loss-of-salvation view (failure to persevere results in loss of salvation); (2). loss-of-rewards view (failure to persevere results in loss of rewards, not salvation); (3). tests-of-genuineness view (failure to persevere reveals false conversion); and (4). hypothetical-loss-of-salvation view (failure to persevere is meant as a serious, though [only] hypothetical, warning of loss of salvation). A footnote mentions a paradox-view (assurance and warning are simply held in logical tension, not resolved [38, note 55]), but gives it no further consideration. This is unfortunate since arguments for tension, or outright contradiction, in Paul's thought have notable adherents (see, for instance, the work of H. Räisänen). A chart of the four views (45) is overly cluttered. More helpful is the use of Mt. 10:22 ('the one who perseveres to the end will be saved') to show how each position differs. The authors' 'means-of-salvation' view is then briefly outlined.

Chapters two and three ('The Prize to be Won' and 'The Race to be Won') focus on biblical-theological issues underlying the discussion. The 'already – not yet' dynamic of salvation in the NT is set over against a more static view of salvation as either 'already' possessed or a 'not yet' future hope. The authors lament the fact that too many evangelical presentations know only of salvation as something already possessed, but fail to appreciate the sense in which it is not yet within our grasp. They are particularly concerned to urge active obedience on those who take assurance as an unconditional guarantee. Christian existence is a 'race' (hence, the book's title) in which both faith and faithful obedience are required. The fourth chapter ('Running to Win the Prize') is the largest and contains the most detailed exposition of the authors' view (more below).

Chapter five looks at NT instances of runners who fell (e.g., Judas, Demas, Alexander), and chapters six through eight address pastoral concerns.

'Drawing on God's Grace' (ch. 6) explains how the necessity of persevering obedience avoids becoming a form of works-righteousness. In 'Running with Confidence' (ch. 7) assurance of salvation is stressed, yet in a way that does not invalidate the calls to persevere. 'Running by Divine Appointment' (ch. 8) brings election into the mix. An appendix interacts with William Lane Craig's more philosophical challenge to a Reformed position. Author, subject, and scripture indexes conclude the volume. A running dialogue is kept up throughout with both sides of the 'Lordship/Grace Only' debate.

What distinguishes the authors' position is their consistent recourse to rhetorical function (see esp. 142-43). Rather than seeking a logical resolution of the tension between promises and warnings (asking 'what' these imply), their functions must be emphasized (asking 'why' they are given). Promises 'ground our faith in God' and 'assure us that God faithfully keeps his promises' (143). Warnings 'evoke faith that perseveres in holy devotion' (143) but are not given in order to imply a potential, future (negative) outcome. Warnings and assurances have primarily a 'motivational' function (see esp. 204-213). They are the means by which God leads believers on to their assured salvation (and should not be mined for further theological implications).

This hypothesis may appear to some as an artificial narrowing. For example, the warning – 'If you step in front of that bus, you will be killed.' – does function rhetorically as a means of shaping behavior ('Don't step in front of the bus!'). However, this does not eliminate the wider implication (the 'what' as they call it) – future death is a distinct possibility if one does not heed the warning.

The Race Set Before Us claims to represent a view 'that has been expressed clearly in prior generations but not recently' (14). However, only G. C. Berkouwer and two or three other interpreters are actually named as earlier exponents, and one might reasonably place them in a different category. Though not devoted to the same issue, Ernst Synofzik's study of judgment and recompense seeks similarly to restrict meaning to rhetorical function: *Die Gerichts- und Vergeltungsaussagen bei Paulus: Eine traditionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Göttingen, 1977).

As in most Calvinist systems, the unconditional promises of salvation are fundamental (206), and the believer's security is rooted in God's electing promise (ch. 8). Ultimate apostasy of a genuine believer is not possible. At the same time, a verse like Rom. 8:13a ('if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die' NIV) is to be taken with the utmost seriousness (i.e., as serious motivation but not as threat) and 'die' refers to eternal reprobation (against loss-of-rewards view).

To pastors and students of the NT who are wrestling with the tension between perseverance and assurance, this volume is well worth recommending as it seeks to bring some movement into this theological logjam. In spite of an introductory caveat (10) a more accurate subtitle would be 'A New Testament (instead of 'Biblical') Theology of Perseverance and Assurance'. Arminians will likely still prefer I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Minneapolis, 1969) or B. J. Oropeza, *Paul and Apostasy* (WUNT 2/115; Tübingen, 2000), while Calvinists will want G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance*

(Grand Rapids, 1958) or Judith M. Gundry Volf, *Paul and Perseverance* (Louisville, 1990). Those who want to hear various sides of the debate might consider J. Mathew Pinson (ed.), *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids, 2002).

George Fox Evangelical Seminary, Portland, OR

KENT L. YINGER