QUESTION #7 – What is the history of the doctrine of eternal security?

The historical development of this doctrine is both __interesting__ and __important__ . As near as we may determine, the doctrine of Eternal Security (although not necessarily specifically called by this title) stood as a precious, accepted, Biblically-based and taught doctrine for the first __400__ years of Christianity. We come to this conclusion based on three historical observations:

Historical Observation #1 - God's Word specifically and emphatically taught a non-__works__ salvation based only upon faith in Jesus Christ. **Romans 4:5; Galatians 2:16; Ephesians 2:8-9**

One who believes one may lose his salvation, claims that the actual loss of salvation occurs because one does not do the proper works after he is saved. Thus, in all reality, this makes the matter of having eternal life contingent upon some form of works system. The entire book of Galatians was written by the Apostle Paul to specifically combat this very issue. What this tells us is that even though true doctrine was being challenged, it was also being defended by the Word of God.

Historical Observation #2 - Historical records of the early Church indicate an __acceptance__ of the doctrine of eternal security.

Although we do not have the doctrine systematized until later in Church History, we do have record of those who lived shortly after the time of the apostles. These historical records show us some of the things that were taught and believed.

One such example was Ignatius, "the second to be appointed to the bishopric of Antioch in succession to Peter. Ignatius was sent to Rome from Syria to be executed because of his faith in Jesus Christ. While on his way to Rome, he stopped in Smyrna where Polycarp was then the pastor of the church. While in Smyrna, Ignatius wrote at least four letters to four different churches. One of the letters was to the church of Tome, which was the city to which he was headed. In that letter to the Romans, he wrote these words: "All the way from Syria to Rome I am fighting with wild animals on land and sea, by night and day, fettered to ten leopards - a squad of soldiers - whom kindness makes even worse. Their disgraceful conduct makes me still more a disciple, but **that does not justify me**" (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, pp. 145-146).

Notice carefully what this famous pastor of Antioch said – even his suffering and willingness to die did **not justify** him. One would naturally ask, what did these early fathers believe did justify them? What did the early Church teach about being right with a Holy God and about the doctrine of justification? They taught faith alone in Jesus Christ gives justification, not works **(Romans 3:24, 26, 30)**.

Eusebius, who has been called the Father of Church History, lived approximately 200 years after the apostles. He tracked down those who had learned directly from them and gives us an excellent look at the Church during the first 300 years of its existence. In describing the work of the early disciples, he writes these words: "Very many of the disciples of the time, their hearts smitten by

the Word of God … carried out the work of evangelists, ambitious to preach to those who had never yet heard the message of the faith and to give them the inspired gospels in writing. Staying only to lay the foundations of the faith in one foreign place or another, appoint other pastors and entrust to them the tending of those newly brought in, they set off again for other lands and peoples with the grace and cooperation of God …" (*Ibid*., p. 148).

Eusebius certainly alludes to what these disciples were teaching - a faith message based on God's grace. There is no hint they were teaching any message of works. Early historical records of Church History establish that the message that was communicated was when one believes on Jesus Christ, one is justified and has eternal life. This theme surfaces time and time again.

Historical Observation #3 - Historical challenges to the doctrine do not occur until _after_ the first 400 years of Christianity.

These observations logically lead us to conclude that the doctrine of eternal security was an accepted and believed and taught doctrine in the early days of the Church.

The first know theologian to actually systematize and carefully teach this doctrine was _Augustine_. Augustine was the great theologian and bishop of Hippo (A.D. 400). Augustine began with the premise that "man can do no true good without the help of grace." It was this thesis that prompted him to realize that the guarantee of eternal life was an unconditional work of grace. Augustine taught that a saved person must maintain salvation to the end of his life in order to be saved. That is what salvation is. He also taught that staying saved was not by works or merit - "perseverance which is also a result of grace and does not depend on human merits. Thus salvation is from beginning to end a work of grace" (Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, Vol. 1, pp. 45-46).

About the same time of Augustine, an ascetic theologian from Rome named _Pelagius_, began to attack the teachings of Augustine. How this all came about is carefully described by Gonzalez: "Pelagius … in A.D. 405, while at Rome, had his first encounter with Augustine's theology, against which he reacted violently because **it made everything dependent on God's grace and seemed to leave no place for human effort and participation**" (*Ibid*., p. 28). After this first encounter, Pelagius and his close friend Coelestius did everything they could to try and discredit Augustine's teachings. These two not only denied the doctrine of eternal security, but they actually taught that salvation is earned by good works and is maintained by good works. They taught that in order for one to be saved, one must keep the law and that it was possible for a person to reach a state of sinless perfection in this life (*Ibid*., p. 31).

Finally, all key pastors and teachers met in a special council meeting in A.D. 431 in _Ephesus_. It was concluded that Pelagius was a complete heretic and he was denounced as such.

History tells us: "Finally after a long series of African synods that condemned the doctrine of Pelagius … it was finally condemned in A.D. 431 by the Council of Ephesus" (*Ibid*., pp. 28-29). Ephesus had been the place of great Biblical teaching from Paul, Timothy, and John. It was only fitting that Pelagius finally be branded a heretic there.

ETERNAL SECURITY (15)

Shortly after this famous Council of Ephesus, the Catholic Church of Rome began to stress the concept of the "free-will" of man. The Catholic Church concluded that coming to salvation depended on the will of man, and maintaining salvation also depended on the will of man. By the end of A.D. 431, the Roman Catholic Church was teaching that eternal life was determined by the obedience of man.

Augustine died in A.D. 430 and from the moment of his death Rome began to dominate the world of theology with its distorted views and beliefs. After all, the great theologian Augustine, who could combat their system, was now gone. During the next 1000 years, doctrinally speaking, things were very __dark__.

The Catholic Church kept the truth of God from people and kept them committed to a manmade works system, which they said would earn them eternal life if they remained faithful. Catholic priests purposely kept teaching people that it was their works that would save them. All of that changed in A.D. 1517 with the surfacing of a man named __Martin__ __Luther__. It was Martin Luther who, through careful study of the Bible, was raised up by God to publically speak out and denounce the heretical teachings of the Church of Rome. One of the key doctrines that

Luther once again clearly reaffirmed was the doctrine of __eternal__ __security__. With Luther paving the way, the "Reformation" was in full swing and the Reformers, by the year A.D. 1560, had completely revived the precious doctrine of eternal security.

Another great theologian raised up by God during this time to help revive true doctrine was __John__ __Calvin__. Calvin, through his careful study of every book of the Bible, taught: "God, who is rich in mercy, from his immutable purpose of election, does not wholly take away his Holy Spirit from his own, even in lamentable falls; nor does He so permit them to glide down that they should fall from the grace of adoption and the state of justification; or commit the 'sin unto death,' or against the Holy Spirit; that, being deserted by Him, they should cast themselves headlong into eternal destruction. So that not by their own merits or strength but by the gratuitous mercy of God, they obtain it, that they neither totally fall from faith and grace, nor finally continue in their falls and perish" (Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology*, p. 485).

Just as with the case of Augustine, an opponent surfaced against Calvin who completely rejected his teachings. His name was __Jacob__ __Arminius__. It was not really Arminius, himself, who rejected the doctrine of eternal security, it was Arminius' followers who did.

The disciples of Arminius, in A.D. 1610, produced a document that attacked eternal security. This document was called "Remonstrance," which outlined their entire belief system called "Arminianism." In response to the "Remonstrance," a major synod meeting was held in the Dutch city of Dordrecht. Skilled pastors and teachers met to determine exactly what the Bible taught in view of what the Arminians were claiming. The result of this meeting was a document known as the "Canons of Dort" (A.D. 1618-1619), which clearly affirmed the doctrine of eternal security.

As one might expect, just a few years after the release of the Cannons of Dort, an opposing group who called themselves __Arminians__ , surfaced and this group emphatically denounced the doctrine of eternal security (A.D. 1625). These Arminians made eternal security totally dependent upon the __will__ and __works__ of men. It was a repeat of Church History and the battles between Augustine and Pelagius, between Protestantism and Catholicism.

This "new" system, known as Arminianism, became very __popular__ and very __powerful__ . By the mid-1700s, this doctrine swept through the United States, particularly with a group who called themselves "Wesleyan Arminians" (A.D. 1730-1740). John Wesley, according to Wesleyan historians, is said to have taught that a believer could lose his salvation, and as a result several churches sprung up, both Methodists and Wesleyans, who dogmatically taught the doctrine of eternal security was not Biblical (See Richard S. Taylor, *Historical and Modern Significance of Wesleyan Theology*, Vol. 1, p. 63).

What is known is that Methodism was **never** established by John Wesley. In fact, "Methodism was never established as a separate, organized dissenting group until 1808 following the deaths of both Wesleys" (Kenneth Osbeck, *Singing With Understanding*, p. 176). What is also known is that both John and Charles Wesley were prolific writers of hymns and many of their hymns do seem to promote the doctrine of eternal security, i.e. "Jesus Lover of My Soul."

In response to this movement, once again, several serious preachers and teachers of God's Word were forced to carefully search the Bible in an attempt to again understand precisely what the Bible taught concerning this doctrine. By now, these men were well aware of the controversy between Augustine and Pelagius and Calvin and Arminius. Primarily they carefully studied both the "Remonstrance" and the "Canons of Dort" to see which system was most Biblical. Out of this study, once again, the Reformed and Presbyterian theologians confirmed that the doctrine of eternal security was a Biblical doctrine that was to be believed and taught and defended (A.D. 1740).

As of today, generally speaking, churches fall into one of two theological camps, either classifying themselves as Arminians or Calvinists. A better historical perspective would be to use the classifications of Pelagian or Augustinian. From this brief historical sketch we may make the following objective observations:

(Observation #1) - The history of the belief system that one may lose salvation is dark. The roots lie in the Roman Church, who to this day teaches a works system of salvation. It is a known historical fact that the Church of Rome literally imprisoned and executed many faithful believers. To accept the doctrinal belief system of a group that has the historical track record of corrupting doctrine and executing those of the faith is to accept a system that is highly suspect and corrupt.

(Observation #2) - The man who initially rejected the doctrine of eternal security, Pelagius, was deemed to be a heretic by the greatest Bible teachers who were alive. To hold to the views of Pelagius, is to hold to the views of one judged even and corrupt by those true teachers who lived in his era.

(Observation #3) - Those, who continued to defend the doctrine of eternal security throughout history, did so as a result of a careful study of God's Word. Augustine, Martin Luther, and John Calvin were known and still are known for their serious and systematic study of the Bible. In fact, all three still have their writings and commentaries preserved to this very day. The conclusions that these men came to were obviously based upon careful analysis of God's Word, whereas, we know in the case of Pelagius that his conclusions were primarily based upon his emotional reaction to Augustine.

(Observation #4) - Great defenders of the doctrine of eternal security have generally been recognized as some of the greatest Bible students and teachers who have ever been used by God. All of the great defenders of the doctrine of eternal security were known for their serious and systematic study of the books of the Bible and of the doctrines of the Bible. For example, we have already cited Augustine's teachings from *City of God*. Martin Luther is known for his famous commentaries on Romans and Galatians and God used Luther to begin the Reformation. John Calvin wrote a commentary on practically every book of the Bible, and he also wrote a famous Systematic Theology, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. We would be foolish if we did not ask why is it that men such as Donald Grey Barnhouse, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, H. A. Ironside, Lewis Sperry Chafer, C. I. Scofield, J. Vernon McGee, Jonathon Edwards all concluded that the doctrine of eternal security was not only a correct doctrine, but one that needed to be taught? In answering this question, we must also observe that every one of these men were very serious and dedicated students of the books of the Bible and doctrines of the Bible. Why is it that so many who carefully and systematically study the Bible conclude that the doctrine of eternal security is a valid doctrine? Why can't we find great expositions of the Bible by Pelagius or Arminius? Why is it that today's recognized systematic teachers of God's Word defend the doctrine of eternal security? Men like John Walvoord, Charles Ryrie, Chuck Swindoll and John MacArthur. We cannot help but observe that those who systematically study the Bible and Bible doctrines seem to come to the realization that the doctrine of eternal security is an important, true, valid doctrine of the Bible.

(Observation #5) - Those who reject the doctrine of eternal security are not generally recognized as being serious students of God's Word. We must ask, could it be that this neglect to systematically study the Bible is the reason for the rejection of eternal security?

Based upon the history of the doctrine, one is on very solid historical ground when one accepts the doctrine of eternal security. Some of the great names of Christianity have adhered to this doctrine. On the other hand, we also observe that when one rejects the doctrine of eternal security, one enters a very unstable theological arena.