

## The Perseverance of the Saints

The believers' assurance of salvation is a great truth in the Bible. It is one of the precious bequests of the New Testament, and it is a pleasant subject of which to speak. Since the light of this truth has shined from the pages of the Bible, it has also been one of the basic tenets of the preaching of the gospel of salvation to sinners. However, the breadth and scope of salvation and the extent to which a believer can be assured of his salvation have never been, nor are today, universally agreed upon by all students of the Bible.<sup>1</sup> In fact, a number of passages in the Gospels, Epistles, and Revelation may be read so as to make the believers' persistence in grace and assurance of salvation anything but clear. The dialogue over this issue is often characterized, or perhaps stereotyped, as part of the centuries-old debate between Calvinism and Arminianism. In this article we will first provide a brief background of the great conflict of the two movements of Protestantism called by the names of Calvin and Arminius. In our historical survey, we will touch only on those objective facts known to many students of the subject. Our main burden overall is to bring into view certain passages of the Scriptures that have been perennially misunderstood and have thus sparked the ancient controversies. Then we will show how a unified understanding—neither Calvinistic nor Arminian alone—places these truths in the context of God's economy as revealed in the New Testament. As we will see, these difficult passages of Scripture comprise what the apostle Paul called the "word of righteousness" (Heb. 5:13), the truth concerning the believers' responsibility and accountability to God for their life and work in the church age.

### The Calvinistic System: Calvin and the *Institutes*

Although the name of Calvin is for the most part equated with the issues of election and predestination, the contribution of John Calvin to Christian thought and practice is far greater than one issue, or a few issues, alone. If Martin Luther is the major prophet of the Reformation, Calvin may be considered its greatest systematic theologian. The *magnus opus* of Calvin's extensive writings, of course, is his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Growing from six chapters in its first edition in 1536 to four books of eighty chapters in 1559, the *Institutes* comprehends the whole of Calvin's thought. His purpose in writing it was to provide a direct and complete roadmap to all things scriptural, in

order to assist the reader in an unhindered study of the Word of God and the life of godliness.<sup>2</sup> The result is universally considered a milestone classic of Christian exposition. In addition, it is the authoritative expression of Reformed theology, or at least the great beginnings of what Reformed theology was to become. The titles of the four books of the *Institutes* express the breadth of his purpose:

Book I: On the Knowledge of God the Creator

Book II: On the Knowledge of God the Redeemer in Christ, Which Was Revealed First to the Fathers under the Law and Then Also to Us in the Gospel

Book III: On the Way the Grace of Christ Is to Be Received; What Fruits Come to Us from It and What Effects Follow

Book IV: On the External Means or Helps by Which God Invites Us into the Society of Christ and Keeps Us in It

Roughly speaking, the subjects of the four books are, respectively, God (and His witness to man), Christ (His person and work), the Spirit (in salvation and the life of the believers), and the church (spiritual and civil government). Accordingly, the theological issues and practical soteriology which are inextricably bound to Calvin—election, predestination, and eternal security—do not figure into the structure of the *Institutes* until the end of Book III, after he has concluded the major doctrinal section of the work. Their elevation to any sort of primacy is due to Calvin's successors, who share with him the authorship of what we now call Calvinism.

The brilliance, if not genius, of Calvin's teaching is that it is an all-comprehensive philosophical system, comprising not only theology but also politics, society, and culture. The fundamental principle and central thought of this system is the great thought of God, His absolute sovereignty in the natural and moral spheres, and His absolute supremacy in the administration and distribution of all things. This principle rules the theology of Calvin; it is the central truth from which all truths trickle down as necessary consequences. Predestination, election, and eternal security—as well as all issues and matters—follow as subordinate corollaries to divine sovereignty. One must

understand this to grasp the true spirit of Calvinism. Because of Calvin's emphasis on the total depravity of the human race and the sovereign grace of God, Calvinists define this comprehensive system as the one in which God is most highly glorified and man is most deeply abased (Meeter 16-23).

### Arminius and Arminianism: The Minority Theology

The Dutch Reformation was established in the Netherlands only late in the sixteenth century, in the generation following the death of Calvin. It was during this time that Jacob Arminius served as a Reformed minister in Amsterdam and professor of divinity at the University of Leiden. Unfortunately, since he wrote no formal systematic theology, much of what has been published concerning Arminius comes from Calvinist authors. Far from being the heretic anathematized

by later Calvinists, Arminius was a highly esteemed, orthodox Dutch Reformed theologian. He believed in the supremacy of the Scriptures and held the orthodox faith concerning the Trinity and the person and work of Christ. At first a strict Calvinist, he studied under Theodore Beza, the Reformed patriarch and Calvin's successor at Geneva. Arminius frequently quoted from Augustine (the father of the soteriological system now known as Calvinism), and he highly recommended Calvin's *Institutes*, esteeming them more highly than the writings of the early Patriarchs. In fact, a properly excerpted statement of his beliefs on salvation, justification, sanctification, and many other major issues might be easily received by an unwary Calvinist reader. Even staunch Calvinists admit Arminius to have been an earnest believer, a man of genuine humility and profound learning (Custance 195), mild, liberal, and tolerant, forced into controversy against his own choice, choosing rather to hold to those teachings that tended to edification and peace among Christians (excepting, of course, that he sought no reconciliation with papal Catholicism). A number of the errors and deviations from the truth later to be found in Arminianism find only a seed in the original teachings of Arminius. So mild was he in the statement of those positions now called "Arminian," that he is accused of having "hedged" on them and tending toward the "equivocal" (195).

Arminius's split with the established Calvinism of the Reformed Church began with the debate between Reformed ministers and the Dutch humanist Dirck Coornhert, the acting Secretary of State.<sup>3</sup> On being asked

to contribute to the debate, Arminius studied the issues of predestination and free will and found himself in disagreement with the teachings of Calvin. His opposition to strict Calvinism resulted in four significant disputes—with Perkins of Cambridge and Plancius, Junius, and Gomarus of Leiden—primarily concerning predestination. These views earned Arminius unending condemnation from Reformed teachers. He is most often accused of reviving the ancient heresy of Pelagius, who denied the fallen condition of mankind and affirmed man's innate ability for good. The anathema of Pelagianism, or semi-Pelagianism, stems from the accusation that to diminish the Calvinistic view of predestination and sovereign grace is to deny

human depravity, thus to deny the necessity of grace and exalt the human will above the divine, shifting the merit of salvation to man's free will and power. Says the notable Reformed spokesman Loraine Boettner,

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Arminianism in its radical and more fully developed forms is essentially a recrudescence of Pelagianism, a type of self-salvation. In fact, the ancestry of Arminianism can be traced back to Pelagianism as definitely as can that of Calvinism be traced back to Augustinianism. (47)

Custance, like many other Calvinist apologists, inverts the timeline of church history, calling the heresy of Pelagius "pre-Arminius Arminianism." He says, "Long before Arminius left his personal impress upon the Church of God, Arminianism had swept the early Christian world," until Augustine awoke God's people to

...the creeping disease of Christian humanism which was evident even then from the successes of Pelagius in Rome and from the growing "Arminianism" which was reflected in the writings of Chrysostom and Jerome and many other Christian theologians by the end of the fourth century A.D. (vii, 21-22)

In actuality, Arminius regarded Pelagius as a heretic whose teachings were "diametrically opposed" to the words of Christ (Arminius 257). Arminius was also wrongly associated with the Italian Socinus, who—besides denying the Trinity, the eternal deity of Christ, and His atoning work—taught that eternal life could be attained through study of the Scriptures and mere works of obedience. As the founding father—willingly or otherwise—of a minority theology, Arminius has suffered much in denunciations and anathema.

After Arminius's death in 1609, his doctrinal successors

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included the Dutch John Uytenbogaert, Simon Episcopius, John Van Oldenbarnevelt, and Hugo Grotius. At this time, three controversies still lingered in the Dutch Reformed Church—the problem of state control of the church, the revision of the Heidelberg Catechism and the Belgic Confession of Faith as the accepted creeds of the Dutch churches, and the issue of predestination. In 1610, Uytenbogaert and a gathering of Arminian ministers drew up a protest against Calvinist doctrine, known as the Remonstrance, and submitted it to the States General of Holland. Although the theology of Arminianism has never been as systematically set forth as that of Calvinism, the Remonstrance may be considered as concise a statement of that theology as we have. In brief, the five articles of the Remonstrance state, in contrast to the five tenets of Calvinism: 1) Conditional Predestination—God has decreed from eternity to save those who by grace believe in Christ and by the same grace persevere in the obedience of faith. Thus, God’s election is conditioned by His foreknowledge of each man’s belief or unbelief. 2) Universal Atonement—Christ, the Savior of the world, died for all men—those who believe and those who do not—extending the possibility of salvation to all. 3) Saving Faith—Man in his fallen state is unable to attain to faith or to any good thing, but through regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit he is so enabled. In other words, it is equally true that apart from Christ we can do nothing and that by abiding in Him we can bear much fruit (John 15:5). 4) Resistible Grace—Grace is the beginning, continuation, and end of our spiritual life, apart from which man can do no good. However, a man must cooperate with grace and not resist it. 5) Uncertainty of Perseverance—Although grace is sufficient and abundant to preserve the faithful and keep them from falling, the Scriptures do not assure us that a man, once endowed with saving grace, cannot lose it again. This latter statement, though soft at the time of the Remonstrance, was hardened in later generations into the definitive stance that a believer can certainly lose his salvation.

Thus was Arminianism as it emerged from the early seventeenth century. More recently, the most notable spokesman for Arminianism was John Wesley, whose journal was first called *The Arminian Magazine*. Arminian influence can still be seen, at least nominally, in Methodist and Episcopalian doctrine. In one or more of its aspects, it can also be found among the Mennonites, Free Will Baptists, Nazarenes, Pentecostals, and other “Holiness” groups.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Synod of Dort: The Formulation and Triumph of Calvinism**

The sixteenth and early seventeenth century was a time for the proliferation of creeds. This was deemed necessary since the doctrinal controversies even within

Protestantism raged with as much passion and violence as the trinitarian and christological debates had done in the Nicene age. In response to the Remonstrance, the Counter-Remonstrance was submitted by Calvinists in the same year. Over the next few years, several attempts at resolution between the two parties resulted only in bitter controversy. As a result, the States General of Holland convened the National Synod of Dort (or Dordrecht) in 1618, the largest synod ever held by the Reformed churches. The synod, an unprecedented assemblage of learning and talent, concluded in the following year with a complete triumph for Calvinism and the elucidation of the Canons of Dort.<sup>5</sup> The five major doctrinal points of the Canons appear in four articles. For practical purposes, these are redivided into what is now accepted as the Five Points of Calvinism, which are summarized as follows: 1) Total Depravity—Through the fall, man is utterly dead in sin and thus has in himself not even the power to believe unto salvation. 2) Unconditional Election—By a sovereign, immutable, and eternal decree, God predestined and elected some men to salvation; by an equally immutable decree, He elected others to reprobation and damnation, that is, the condemnation that is righteously due them. 3) Limited Atonement—The saving efficacy of the atoning death of Christ extends to all the elect, but only to the elect. That Christ died “for all” means that He died for all the elect. 4) Irresistible Grace—All those whom God has elected to salvation are called by Him so effectually so as to be unable to resist His grace. 5) Perseverance of the Saints—God, having conferred grace to the elect apart from their ability, is also faithful to preserve them unto eternal life; although they may suffer the taint of sin for a season, they will eventually inherit eternal life. These five expressions (known by the acronym TULIP) are the main pillars upon which the superstructure of Calvinism rests, the “crystallization of the theology of grace” (Custance 84). Until this day, the Canons of Dort, the Belgic Confession, and the Heidelberg Catechism are called “the three forms of unity,” the uniting theme of the Reformed faith.

**I**t is important to see that the five points of Calvinism are to be taken as a single whole under the name of Absolute Sovereignty. Since God is absolutely sovereign, He predestined some to salvation; this He did according to the good pleasure of His will. Likewise, He elected some to reprobation; this He did according to an unimpugnable righteousness. Since man is absolutely depraved, he can bring nothing to God, not even repentance and faith, needless to say cooperation for his salvation. Therefore, his receiving of grace is attributable only to the irresistibility of the grace conferred to the elect. If salvation, therefore, is absolutely of, by, and due to God’s grace alone, there remains nothing of man’s virtue or ability either to receive it or sustain it. As a consequence, his salvation is eternally secure—to the glory of

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God and the humbling of man. Thus, the Calvinistic system stands and coheres from the beginning to the end.

To complete our brief history, we note that after presenting their arguments, the Arminian defendants were expelled from the Synod of Dort. After a brief period of repression and persecution, the Arminians, under the name of the Remonstrant Brotherhood, were allowed to coexist with the Calvinists under limited state protection. Thus, the events from 1609 to 1625—after the death of both Calvin and Arminius—may be considered as the solidification and clarification of both Calvinism and Arminianism.

### **The Perseverance of the Saints: The Definitive Calvinist Statement**

The apex of the debate between Calvinism and Arminianism is and always has been predestination and election, or the role of Sovereign Grace, as it is called. However, we said at the beginning of this article that we will narrow our discussion of these two great schools to the subsidiary issue of the believers' assurance of salvation, or eternal security. The language of the Canons of Dort is crystal clear on this point. Articles III through XV of The Fifth Head of Doctrine, "Of the Perseverance of the Saints," say,

Art. III. By reason of these remains of indwelling sin, and the temptations of sin and of the world, those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace if left to their own strength. But God is faithful, who having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end.

Art. IV. ...Converts...must therefore be constant in watching and prayer, that they be not led into temptation. When these are neglected, they are not only liable to be drawn into great and heinous sins by Satan, the world, and the flesh, but sometimes by the righteous permission of God actually fall into these evils. This the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints described in Holy Scriptures, demonstrates....

Art. VI. But God, who is rich in mercy, according to his unchangeable purpose of election, does not wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from his own people, even in their melancholy falls; nor suffer them to proceed so far as to lose the grace of adoption and forfeit the state of justification, or to commit the sin unto death; nor does he permit them to be totally deserted, and to plunge themselves into everlasting destruction....

Art. VIII. ...With respect to God...his counsel can not be changed, nor his promise fail, neither can the call according to his purpose be revoked, nor the merit, intercession,

and preservation of Christ be rendered ineffectual, nor the sealing of the Holy Spirit be frustrated or obliterated....

Art. XV. ...This doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, and the certainty thereof...Satan abhors it; the world ridicules it; the ignorant and hypocrite abuse, and heretics oppose it. But the spouse of Christ hath always most tenderly loved and constantly defended it, as an inestimable treasure.... (Schaff 3:593-595)

No further proofs are necessary to demonstrate the traditional Calvinist position. We should only mention that the historical Reformed doctrine has alternated between two emphases: the *perseverance* of the saints and the *preservation* of the saints. The latter expression is preferred by many Calvinists since it points more directly to the grace of God as the cause of perseverance. To some, the former hints at cooperation on the part of the believers, which opens the door to Arminianism, or semi-Pelagianism as it is called. To the milder Calvinist, the two may be blended into one. Says Custance,

*Perseverance of the Saints* denotes what today is commonly referred to as the eternal security of the believer. A more suitable expression might be the "Preservation of the Saints" since this is more precisely what is involved. The security of the believer is bound in with the sovereignty of God, the unchangeableness of his purpose, and the constancy of his good pleasure. It is the faithfulness of the Lord Jesus Christ and not the faithfulness of the believer that guarantees this security. (84)

### **The Unerring Word of God: The Reassuring Scriptures**

The New Testament repeatedly testifies that the believers are saved not with ambiguity or uncertainty but with assurance and security. Our salvation is secured in the following twelve ways (Lee, *Conclusion* 1463-1468). First, it is secured by the invariable God Himself, "with whom is no variation or shadow cast by turning" (James 1:17). God, the unchangeable One (Mal. 3:6), has saved us, and our condition and situation cannot affect His nature or change what He has done for us. Second, God's eternal salvation is secured by the unchanging will of God. Ephesians 1:5 tells us that we were saved according to the good pleasure of God's will. In John 6:39 the Lord Jesus says, "And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all which He has given Me I should lose nothing but should raise it up in the last day." The will of God concerning our salvation is that none whom the Father has given Him be lost. Although heaven and earth may be removed, God's will remains forever. Third, the salvation we have received of God is also secured by God's inseparable love. First John 4:10 indicates that it is in the higher and nobler love of God that He sent His Son as a propitiation for our sins,

and Romans 8:35 to 39 reveals that nothing is able to separate us from the love of God. Once God loves us, He loves us forever with an eternal, inseparable love. Such a love does not derive from us or depend on us but is derived from God and depends on Him. Moreover, because the love of God is “in Christ Jesus our Lord” (v. 39), His love is upon the righteous ground of Christ’s redemption, giving us the forensic, judicial assurance that nothing can separate the elect from it. Fourth, God’s salvation is also secured by His irrevocable calling, which is based on His selection. God selected us before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4); it was not we who selected Him but He who selected us (John 15:16). Moreover, God has called us not according to our works but according to His own purpose and grace (2 Tim. 1:9). Since “the gracious gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (Rom. 11:29), God’s calling is the security of our salvation. Fifth, our salvation is secured by God’s unchallengeable justification. Romans 3:26 says, “With a view to the demonstrating of His righteousness in the present time, so that He might be righteous and the One who justifies him who is of the faith of Jesus.” For the showing forth of His righteousness, God justified us who believe in the Lord Jesus. Since His righteousness is the foundation of His throne (Psa. 89:14), our salvation, being secured by God’s righteousness and His unchallengeable justification, is unshakable. Sixth, the believers’ salvation is secured by God’s almighty hand. In John 10:29 the Lord Jesus says concerning His sheep, “My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all, and no one can snatch them out of My Father’s hand.” Seventh, our salvation is secured by God’s eternal life (3:15-16, 36; 5:24; 6:47). The Lord Jesus says, “I give to them eternal life, and they shall by no means perish forever” (10:28). The divine life we have received is eternal—in quality, extent, and time—and something eternal cannot be changed. Eighth, our salvation is secured by the unbreakable covenant of God (Heb. 8:8-13). It has definitely been covenanted that He has written the law of life within us and that He will never remember our sins. In Psalm 89:34 the Lord declares, “I will not profane My covenant, / Nor will I change what has gone forth from My lips.” As the faithful God, He will never break His covenant. Ninth, our salvation is secured by Christ’s perfect and complete redemption. Our condition may change, but Christ’s redemption, being perfect and complete, cannot be changed. Christ died for us (Rom. 8:34), and the redemption accomplished by His death is an eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12). By offering Himself once to God, Christ has perfected us forever (10:14). Thus, Christ is able to save

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us to the uttermost, not only in extent but also in time (7:25). Tenth, the believers are saved with security by Christ’s eternal salvation. Hebrews 5:9 tells us that Christ is the “source of eternal salvation.” All the effects, benefits, and issues of this salvation are of an eternal nature, transcending the conditions and limitations of time. Such an eternal salvation is based on the eternal redemption Christ accomplished for us. Eleventh, we are secure in our salvation by the Son’s mighty hand. John 10:28 says, “No one shall snatch them out of My hand.” Not only the Father’s hand but also the Lord’s hand will keep us from perishing. Thus, we are secured by two divine hands, the Father’s hand of love and the Son’s hand of grace, both of

which are powerful to keep. Twelfth, our salvation is secured by Christ’s unfailing promise. The Lord Jesus says, “All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and him who comes to Me I shall by no means cast out” (6:37). The Lord Jesus promised that He will never reject

or forsake anyone who comes to Him. The foregoing clear and unambiguous proofs demonstrate that the believers’ salvation is assured in the Word of God itself, the title deed of our eternal salvation (1 John 5:13). Therefore, all the believers in Christ may have the proper faith to believe that God’s salvation is eternal.

### **The Arminian Response: Seeing Darkly the Twofoldness of Divine Truth**

As we have pointed out, Jacob Arminius is notable for his gentle approach even to controversy. Concerning the perseverance of the saints, he says honestly,

Though I here openly and ingenuously affirm, I never taught that a *true believer can either totally or finally fall away from the faith, and perish*; yet I will not conceal, that there are passages of Scripture which seem to me to wear this aspect; 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 [of unconditional perseverance] which are worthy of much consideration. (254)

His followers were less gentle. In December of 1618, Episcopius and the Arminian defendants at the Synod of Dort submitted the Opinions of the Remonstrance, the first and only formal argument allowed them in the synod. In opposition to the Counter-Remonstrance declaration of the assured perseverance of the saints, paragraphs 3 and 4 of Article IV of the Opinions state,

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3. True believers can fall from true faith and fall into such sins as cannot be consistent with true and justifying faith; and not only can this happen, but it also not infrequently occurs.

4. True believers can through their own fault fall into horrible sins and blasphemies, persevere and die in the same: and accordingly they can finally fall away and go lost. (Vance 605)

These declarations of the Arminians stand in stark contrast to the scriptural proofs for the eternal security of salvation offered in the previous section. They are, however, an indirect tribute to the twofoldness of divine truth in the Bible. Concerning any point of contention in the Bible, there is no honest student who, while holding tenaciously to one side of an argument, is unable to admit that there at least “seem” to be portions of Scripture that support the opposing side. So it is with the eternal security of salvation. The only question, however, is how far to the opposite extreme will one go in interpreting the disputed passages. Arminianism clearly went all the way. Perhaps the clearest and boldest proponent of the Arminian view is John Wesley. An ardent foe of Calvinism, Wesley split with George Whitefield mainly over the issue of predestination. Concerning the perseverance of the saints, Wesley asserts,

If a believer make shipwreck of the faith, he is no longer a child of God. And then he may go to hell, yea, and certainly will, if he continues in unbelief....He who is a child of God to-day, may be a child of the devil to-morrow. (Wesley 297-298)

His “Serious Thoughts upon the Perseverance of the Saints” may be considered as the definitive Arminian refutation of many of the proof texts for eternal security. It is everything on the subject that Jacob Arminius never quite said. After twenty-five arguments, he concludes by saying,

If the Scriptures are true, those who are holy or righteous in the judgment of God himself; those who are endued with the faith that purifies the heart, that produces a good conscience; those who are grafted into the good olive-tree, the spiritual, invisible Church; those who are the branches of the true vine, of whom Christ says, “I am the vine, ye are the branches;” those who so effectually know Christ, as by that knowledge to have escaped the pollutions of the world; those who see the light of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, and who have been made partakers of the Holy Ghost, of the witness and of the fruits of the Spirit; those who live by faith in the Son of God; those who are sanctified by the blood of the covenant, *may nevertheless so fall from God as to perish everlastingly.* (298, emphasis added)

“If the Scriptures are true...” Wesley argues. What Scriptures are these? One chief passage cited by Arminian apologists is Hebrews 6:4-8, which says,

For it is impossible for those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and yet have fallen away, to renew themselves again unto repentance, crucifying again for themselves the Son of God and putting Him to open shame. For the earth, which drinks the rain which often comes upon it and produces vegetation suitable to those for whose sake also it is cultivated, partakes of blessing from God. But if it brings forth thorns and thistles, it is disapproved and near a curse, whose end is to be burned.

To the Arminian, this passage requires little exposition. On the contrary, a once-saved-always-saved Calvinist must work rather hard to gather these verses into the fold of his theology. We will address this passage further in subsequent sections below. Another chief passage is Romans 11:17-22. These verses say,

But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them and became a fellow partaker of the root of fatness of the olive tree, do not boast against the branches....Do not be high-minded, but fear; for if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will He spare you. Behold then the kindness and severity of God: on those who fell, severity; but on you, the kindness of God, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off.

This passage is clearly a warning against false security, of one kind or another. The Arminian school also reminds us that in the time of the decline and degradation of the church, some (presumably those who once held the faith) will become shipwrecked regarding the faith (1 Tim. 1:19-20), depart from the faith (4:1), turn aside from it after Satan (5:15), be led away from the faith (6:10), misaim regarding the faith (v. 21), and overthrow the faith of others (2 Tim. 2:18). Therefore, to reign with Christ requires our endurance through perilous times, for “if we deny Him, He also will deny us” (v. 12). Similarly, those who receive grace may do so in vain (2 Cor. 6:1), for having once received grace they may fall from it, being brought to nought and separated from Christ (Gal. 5:4). Because of this, we must look carefully lest anyone fall away from the grace of God (Heb. 12:15). Those who fall away are they who last only for a time, drawing back in time of trial (Matt. 13:20-21; Luke 8:13). Therefore, the believer is enjoined to suffer a lifelong struggle, for he who endures to the end shall be saved, and many who seek to enter through the narrow door will not be able (Matt. 10:22; Luke 13:24). Even the hope of eternal life

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is only conditional consolation to the Arminian because “narrow is the gate and constricted is the way that leads to life, and few are those who find it” (Matt. 7:14). Ironically, even predestination is no assurance since we must be diligent to make our calling and selection firm, or otherwise stumble (2 Pet. 1:10).

The above verses are a sampling of the Arminian “proof texts”; there are other passages that serve their purpose in varying degrees of effectiveness.<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, these are undeniably the words of the Lord and His apostles, the prophetic word to which we do well to give heed (v. 19), which we must receive in the light of the whole of God’s economy and in a good conscience. As we shall immediately see, however, the Calvinist’s reception of many of these texts is unenlightened, stereotyped, and unsatisfactory.

### The Calvinist Response to Ambiguity: The Darker Side of Calvinism

The verses cited above indeed pose a problem for the doctrine of assurance of salvation. The twofoldness of divine truth that they reveal creates an ambiguity which the Calvinist must deal with. The Calvinist response, however, is not consistent and certainly not satisfying. We will first consider the prompt, easy, and stereotypical answer to the Arminian “proof texts” in general; that is, that they speak of unbelievers or false believers. An elaborate case in point is Custance’s exposition of Hebrews 6:4 to 8, which we quoted previously. He begins, “This passage has particular reference to ‘the doctrine of Christ’...or, as this would be understood by the Jewish people, ‘the doctrine of *the Messiah*’” (214). The reader will already see the end of his argument—the Epistle to the Hebrews, he implies, was written not to Hebrew Christians but to “the Jewish people,” those who were still indecisive as to whether or not the Messiah indeed had come. He goes on to say that the applicability of this passage hinges on the meaning of *believer* in this context:

In short, at one moment the Jewish authorities “believed” He was the Messiah and the next moment they doubted whether He could possibly be....Consequently it is very important to understand that when we are told “many of the Jews believed on Him,” they were not necessarily exercising *saving faith*, faith in a personal Saviour as we commonly think of such faith, but *messianic faith*, confident that their dreams of national liberation were about to be realized in the Person of Jesus Christ. (217-218)

...Such Jewish “believers,” while saying they believed the Lord Jesus to be the Messiah after all, yet resorted once again to the old sacrificial system and thus demonstrated their lack of any saving faith and of any true comprehension of the role the Lord Jesus had played as the Lamb of

God....Messianic faith is in vain unless they also have a saving faith. (220-221)

Therefore, he calls the recipients of this Epistle “half-believers” (220), a dispensationally temporary status of a particular kind of unbeliever—Jews who waited for a Messiah but had not truly believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who without that extra faith would perish eternally in their unbelief. Therefore, in charging the reader to understand this passage “in the context of its intention” (221), he seeks to explain away its application not only to genuine Christians in the ancient time but to anyone at all in the present time. In conclusion, he purports to shut the mouth of Arminians (and presumably of Lutherans as well) in presenting the perseverance of the saints as the last of “the five great asseverations of the Pauline-Augustinian-Calvinistic system of Reformed Faith which together constitute a satisfying, defensible, coherent, and thoroughly biblical confession” (223).

We hardly find Custance’s exposition of Hebrews 6 satisfying, defensible, coherent, and thoroughly biblical. A quick look at Hebrews reminds us that the recipients of this Epistle are called “holy brothers” (3:1)—not national, religious, ethnic, or racial “brothers”—a designation reserved for those who were regenerated through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead (1 Pet. 1:3) and have entered into this holy status by saving faith. These brothers are the “many sons” of God with the divine life and nature (Heb. 2:10; 12:5-7), who are also the many brothers of the Firstborn and the many grains brought forth through the death and resurrection of Christ (Rom. 8:29; John 12:24). Romans 8 tells us that God’s work of grace upon us began with His foreknowing, passed through His predestination, calling, and justification, and will end with His glorification (vv. 29-30). Hebrews 2:10 indicates that the recipients of this Epistle as holy brothers of the firstborn Son of God were already on this course, being led into glory. They were also “partakers of a heavenly calling” and “partners of Christ” (3:1, 14), sharing with Him heavenly, holy, and spiritual things. Such are not unbelieving Jews, or Messianic “half-believers” as Custance calls them. Rather, the Hebrews to whom this book was written had believed in the Lord Jesus unto salvation, but they wavered in their steadfastness under persecution and were tempted to return to the outward practices of their former Jewish religion. While they were in such a condition, this Epistle was written to confirm to them the Christian faith and to warn them not to deviate from it. As such, the writer speaks to them not as unbelievers, false believers, or “half-believers,” but as genuine yet immature believers, partakers only of spiritual milk and not yet of meat, calling them to be brought on not to salvation but to maturity (5:12-6:1). Such an understanding renders the traditional Calvinistic treatment of

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Hebrews 6 as unsatisfying, indefensible, incoherent, and not at all biblical.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the hard words, the word of righteousness in this passage, must be interpreted in the context of failing believers who were in danger, by their willful sin of returning to Judaistic rituals, of insulting the Spirit of grace who dwelt and worked in them (10:29; 6:4), thus requiring the discipline of the Lord and the chastening of the Father that they might ultimately partake of His holiness, yield the peaceable fruit of righteousness, and be brought on to maturity (12:5-11).<sup>8</sup>

**W**e have used Custance's exposition of Hebrews 6 as an example of the unsatisfactory nature of the common manner of dismissing the Arminian proof texts. Such a categorical dismissal can be sustained only through dispensational and practical errors of the kind demonstrated here. In principle, similar errors can be found in many instances where the Calvinist sees an unbeliever or false believer in a passage that speaks of sinning or failing believers under the Lord's discipline. However, the Calvinist orientation goes beyond preserving the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints by means of mistaken identities. When taken to its extreme, such arguments become a frightening reversal of the whole spirit of assurance. Point Seven of the Counter-Remonstrance states concerning the Spirit's preservation of the believers,

Nevertheless the true believers find no excuse in this teaching to pursue carelessly the lusts of the flesh, since it is *impossible* that those who by a true faith are ingrafted into Christ should not produce the fruits of thankfulness. (Vance 600, emphasis added)

This notion of the impossibility of fruitlessness introduces a very dark consequence of the Calvinistic teaching of the perseverance of the saints. The disturbing question that we must ask is, "What then is the status of those Christians, of whom history and practical experience provide us with many examples, who do not produce the visible fruits of Christian living?" We need not speculate at the answer, for the authors of Calvinism provide the conclusion. Calvin taught, once again citing Augustine as his source, "Those who do not persevere unto the end, belong not to the calling of God, which is always effectual.... Such were never separated from the general mass of perdition by the foreknowledge and predestination of God" (41). Says Herman Hoeksema of the Theological School of the Protestant Reformed Churches,

The argument that, according to Scripture, there are examples of those that have fallen away from grace and from the faith is not difficult to contradict. To all such arguments certainly apply the words of the apostle John in I John 2:19. (555)

**T**his verse says, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out that they might be manifested that they all are not of us." Hoeksema claims that "all" Arminian proof texts are explained away by this verse. As we shall immediately see, however, the insistence on this principle eventually leads to the conclusion that if someone appears to be a believer, if he seems sincerely to have received the Lord Jesus, yet he eventually fails and manifests the fruits of sin, he never was a believer to begin with; he was never "of us." Stated simply, if someone by the demonstrable fruits of his living does not appear to be a genuine believer, he may very likely not be a genuine believer, which accounts for his lack of perseverance. In this ironic twist is the dark side of the Calvinistic perseverance of the saints: Perseverance seems to become a condition of salvation rather than the assurance of it. John Murray of Westminster Theological Seminary, who also wrote for *The Presbyterian Guardian*, claims,

[The Lord Jesus] set up a criterion by which true disciples might be distinguished, and that criterion is continuance in Jesus' word....The crucial test of true faith is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his word. (189-190)

Although he definitely agrees that the elect can never be lost or perish, his criterion for disciples leaves much room for doubt as to who the elect really are. To one degree or another we find this same concept and utterance throughout Reformed literature. Therefore, it is evident that, at least to a certain school of Calvinists, the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not tantamount to the security of salvation, the doctrine of "once saved always saved." Says Murray,

In order to place the doctrine of perseverance in proper light we need to know what it is not. It does not mean that every one who professes faith in Christ and who is accepted as a believer in the fellowship of the saints is secure for eternity and may entertain the assurance of eternal salvation. (189)

The very expression, "The Perseverance of the Saints" in itself guards against every notion or suggestion to the effect that a believer is secure, that is to say, secure as to his eternal salvation, quite irrespective of the extent to which he may fall into sin and backslide from faith and holiness....It is not true that the believer is secure however much he may fall into sin and unfaithfulness....Only those who persevere to the end are truly saints. (192-193)

If this ambiguity is not enough, we should give further ear to the word of modern fundamentalists and evangelicals, who speak of "lordship salvation" synonymously with the

perseverance of the saints. In brief, lordship salvation affirms that when a person receives the Lord Jesus for salvation, he also receives Him as Lord, practically and really. Thus, believing in Christ and resolving to obey Him are not two acts but one. Says J. I. Packer, "Simple assent to the gospel, divorced from a transforming commitment to the living Christ, is by biblical standards less than faith, and less than saving" (MacArthur, *Gospel* ix). Representing this school, John MacArthur says, "There is no salvation except 'lordship' salvation" (28); "Anything less is simply unbelief" (30); "Multitudes...have been told that faith alone will save them, but they neither understand nor possess real faith. The 'faith' they are relying on...will not save" (170):

The fruit of one's life reveals whether that person is a believer or an unbeliever. There is no middle ground....Those who cling to the memory of a one-time decision of "faith" but lack any evidence that faith has continued to operate in their lives had better heed the clear and solemn warning of Scripture: "He who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." (178)

It is no wonder that MacArthur's *Saved without a Doubt* is a litany of doubt-ministering requirements for visible evidences of salvation. He says, "There is no such thing as a fruitless Christian" (32); "You are truly saved when you have been made a whole new person" (108); and "Salvation is not a transaction whereby God grants us eternal life no matter what our attitude toward Him is" (145). Those who hold this view in its extreme deny the existence of carnal Christians, asserting that a man can be either carnal or Christian, but he cannot be both. Ironically, this is precisely the argument of the Arminians. Wesley himself might be happy to see the state of this kind of Calvinism. By this we can see the intrinsic problem with the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints as it has been developed since the time of Calvin. It leads necessarily to the misapplication of 1 John 2:19 and ends in a confounding, confusing, and contradictory crossover of Calvinism and Arminianism—a tantamount denial of the assurance of salvation, at least for weak and failing believers, who may be the most in need of assurance. It places the security of salvation on the shifting sand of a believer's living, rather than on the eternal will of God. It is Arminianism cloaked as Calvinism.

### The Unerring Word of God: the Troubling Scriptures

There is still the need to examine more passages from

the New Testament. In the light of the holy Scriptures, we cannot agree with the Arminian tenet that a true believer, regenerated to be a child of God and indwelt by the Spirit, can be divested of the indwelling Christ, with whom he has been organically united as one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), and eternally lose his salvation. Nevertheless, we still affirm that to Arminius and his followers, through Wesley, and even until this day, we owe a certain debt of gratitude. We must honestly give them this credit: They did not, for the sake of conformity or convenience, follow the prevalent and "mainstream" thought of the day to quickly dismiss a significant body of Scriptures, the testimony of truth in the New Testament that fundamentally troubles the Calvinistic doctrine. Rejecting the extremes of the Arminians, we must nonetheless search to the heart of their Christian conscience and sensibilities to reexamine these troubling passages of Scripture.

**The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints as it has been developed since the time of Calvin....places the security of salvation on the shifting sand of a believer's living, rather than on the eternal will of God.**

It is undeniable that in His ministry among His own disciples (the elect), the Lord compared them to salt that can become tasteless and be "cast out" (Matt. 5:13; Luke 14:33-35). Although they were freed from the ritual and ineffectualness of the law, the disciples were nonetheless charged to live according to an even higher righteousness, the perfect righteousness of the Father (Matt. 5:48). In consequence, they were warned that those who do not live by the Father's nature in Christ's resurrection would be subject to a certain chastening likened to fire (v. 22), imprisonment (v. 25), and the destruction of their house (7:27), as well as exclusion from the kingdom (vv. 21-23). The Lord warned even the apostles, who were sent by Him to preach the gospel of the kingdom, that they might fail under persecution in their testimony for Him; if any were to deny Him, he would be denied by the Lord before the Father (10:33), even as the apostle Paul feared being disapproved, rejected, and found unworthy of the prize in his commission for the gospel (1 Cor. 9:27). Disciples, the Lord also told us, may be excluded from the kingdom due to stumbling and offenses with "your brother" and "the church" (Matt. 18:6, 15-17, 32-35), clearly Christian, not Jewish, concepts. The believers are as two who labor for the Lord,<sup>9</sup> one of whom is taken and the other left (not to perdition but to discipline, 24:40-41). They are a householder, whose house (the conduct and work one has built up in his Christian life) may be "broken into" by the Lord—caught unaware by His coming secretly, as a thief, for the watchful overcomers (vv. 43-44). They are slaves in the Lord's household, who may behave evilly and be cut asunder at the return of their Master (vv. 45-51). They are virgins<sup>10</sup> whose vessels are

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without sufficient oil and who are excluded from the marriage feast, to whom the Lord will say, "I do not know you" (25:1-13). They are slaves<sup>11</sup> who may be evil and slothful in handling the Lord's possessions and consequently be denied a co-rule with Him in the coming kingdom, and even be cast into outer darkness (vv. 14-30). They are also branches organically united with the vine, who may nonetheless be barren and thus be cut off from participation in the riches of the life of the vine and even chastised ("burned," John 15:6).

The believers are to walk according to the spirit, and by the Spirit they must put to death the practices of the body lest they "die" (suffer spiritual death, Rom. 8:4, 13). Moreover, they must "struggle" to enter through the narrow door, for many will not be able (Luke 13:24), and they must "be the more diligent" to make their calling and selection firm, knowing the possibility of stumbling (2 Pet. 1:10). The regenerated but immature and unstable Christians must "be diligent" to enter into the Sabbath rest, for many fall in disobedience (Heb. 4:11), and as we have seen above, even the "partners of Christ" and "partakers of the Holy Spirit" may become hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and fall away from the living God, resulting in the burning of their "thorns and thistles," the life and work that do not conform to God's New Testament economy (3:12-19; 6:4-8). These thorns and thistles are comparable to the "wood, grass, [and] stubble" built upon the foundation of Jesus Christ, that will be revealed by the fire of the Lord's judgment on the day of His second coming when He will judge all His believers, some of whom may "suffer loss" at that time but still be saved, "yet so as through fire" (1 Cor. 3:11-15). Finally, in the consummate book of the Bible, the Lord exhorts the believers in the seven churches to overcome, promising rewards to those who do (2:7, 10, 17, 26-28; 3:5, 12, 21) and implying discipline to those who do not: to be dealt with negatively after death and resurrection ("the second death," 2:11), to be caught unaware by the Lord as the "thief" (3:3), to lose their share of the enjoyment of the divine life and the divine blessings in the kingdom age ("erase his name out of the book of life," v. 5), and to be rejected by the Lord and lose the enjoyment of all that He is in this age and the kingdom age to come ("spew you out of My mouth," v. 16).

Over and over again it is demonstrable that such words of warning and discipline are given to New Testament believers, not to unbelievers or "half-believers"; to the members of the household of God, the spiritual house where judgment begins (1 Pet. 4:17; cf. 2:5; Heb. 3:6; 1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:19), not to false believers in the apostate congregations of Christendom. Much of the confusion over critical passages in the New Testament—the "proof texts" of the Arminians, the perishing unbelievers to the Calvinists—is in the incomplete

understanding of several crucial terms. The first of these terms is *salvation* itself. In the New Testament, salvation refers not only to the salvation from God's condemnation that we receive once for all through faith but also to the continual process of sanctification that we undergo throughout the course of our life.<sup>12</sup> For this reason, Paul charges the Philippians to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). This is not eternal salvation from God's condemnation but the practical, daily, constant, and even moment-by-moment salvation that results from taking Christ as our inward and outward pattern. In 1:19 Paul says, "For I know that for me this will turn out to salvation through your petition and the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ." Alford prefers the following meaning of *salvation* in this verse:

From the context it must refer to *his own spiritual good*—his own fruitfulness for Christ and glorification of Him, whether by his life or death;—and so eventually his own *salvation*, in degree of blessedness, not in relation to the absolute fact itself. (159)

Salvation here is the working out of the salvation in 2:12; it means to be sustained and strengthened to live and magnify Christ (1:20). First Peter 1:9 in particular speaks of "the salvation of your souls." We are of three parts: spirit, soul, and body (1 Thes. 5:23; Heb. 4:12). Our spirit was saved through regeneration (John 3:5-6), and our body will be saved through the coming transfiguration, the redemption of our body (Phil. 3:21; Rom. 8:23). In 1 Peter 1:9, the apostle encourages the persecuted believers by reminding them that their souls will be saved through suffering into the full enjoyment of the Lord at His revelation, His coming back. For the sake of the salvation of our souls, we must deny our soul, our soulish life, with all its pleasures in this age, that we may gain it in the enjoyment of the Lord in the coming age (Matt. 10:37-39; 16:24-27; John 12:25). Thus, it is possible for a believer to not "work out" his salvation in this age and even to forfeit the full salvation of his soul in the coming age. Thus, he will suffer loss and be subject to discipline yet still be assured of his salvation from God's condemnation in the eternity afterward.

Second, we must also know the meaning of *kingdom*. The *kingdom of God* is a general term denoting God's general reign from eternity past to eternity future, comprising eternity without beginning, the chosen patriarchs, the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, the church in the New Testament, the coming millennial kingdom, and the new heaven and new earth with the New Jerusalem in eternity without end. The "kingdom of the heavens" is a specific section within the kingdom of God, composed only of the church today and the heavenly part of the coming millennial kingdom. Moreover, according to the Gospel of Matthew, the kingdom of the

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heavens is composed of three parts: its reality, its appearance, and its manifestation. The reality of the kingdom is the inward content of the kingdom in its heavenly and spiritual nature, while the manifestation of the kingdom is the practical coming of the kingdom in power in the coming age of one thousand years.

**I**n the church today, the saints exercise and enjoy the reality of the kingdom of the heavens (Rom. 14:17), and in the coming millennium the overcoming saints will enjoy the uttermost enjoyment of Christ and will co-reign with Him. Those genuine believers who are defeated and fruitless in this age do not enjoy the kingdom in its reality today and will not partake of its blessings in the next age, although they will eventually be perfected to participate in the kingdom in its future eternal aspect. Thus, the poor in spirit are in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in the church age and will share in its manifestation in the kingdom age (Matt. 5:3). Likewise, the faithful believers who pursue the growth in the life of Christ unto maturity and the development of the virtues of His nature will participate in His kingship in God's glory in the millennial age (2 Pet. 1:5-11). On the contrary, those believers who are overcome by the flesh and are characterized by the works of the flesh will "not inherit the kingdom of God"; that is, they will not partake of the enjoyment of the coming kingdom as a reward to the overcoming believers (Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 5:5).

Third, we must rightly know the meaning of the term *eternal life*. John 3:15-16, and 36, 5:24, and 6:47 all promise eternal life to those who believe. Eternal life is more than mere everlasting life. First John 5:11 and 12 say, "And this is the testimony, that God gave to us eternal life and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life." In John 11:25 the Lord said, "I am the resurrection and the life," and in 14:6 He told the disciples, "I am the way and the reality and the life." Eternal life is in the Son; it is Christ the Son Himself. It is the divine life, the uncreated life of God, which not only is everlasting with respect to time but also is eternal and divine in nature.

Matthew 7:14 says, "Narrow is the gate and constricted is the way that leads to life, and few are those who find it." *Life* here refers to the ever-blessed condition of the kingdom, which is filled with the eternal life of God. This life is in the reality of the kingdom today and will be in the manifestation of the kingdom in the coming age. Verse 29 of chapter nineteen speaks of inheriting eternal life: "Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for My name's sake shall receive a hundred times as much and shall inherit eternal life." To have "eternal life" as spoken of in Matthew differs from having eternal life as spoken of in

John. In John, to have eternal life is to be saved by God's uncreated life that we may live by that life today and for eternity. In Matthew, however, to have eternal life is to participate in the reality of the kingdom of the heavens in this age by God's eternal life and to share in the kingdom's manifestation in the coming age, thereby enjoying God's eternal life in a fuller way. Clearly verse 29 does not say, "Everyone who believes in Me shall inherit eternal life." Rather, it speaks of the overcoming living of the kingdom life, by being unentangled with the affairs of this life, which is impossible to men but possible by Christ, who empowers us to do all things (v. 26; Phil. 4:13). Such a living today will be rewarded in the coming age (Luke 18:30), in the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens, with an enjoyment of the divine life that is fuller than the enjoyment in this age. In Matthew 19 the Lord spoke of entering into the kingdom and of entering into life. The disciples, however, confused the Lord's word with their natural and common concept of salvation (v. 25).

**G**alatians 6:8 tells us, "He who sows unto his own flesh will reap corruption of the flesh, but he who sows unto the Spirit will of the Spirit reap eternal life." Here again the condition for reaping eternal life is not saving faith but a practice of sowing unto the Spirit, with the desire and aim of the Spirit in view, to accomplish what the Spirit desires. If a genuine believer persistently fails to sow unto the Spirit and instead sows with the desire and purpose of the flesh in view, he will reap corruption from the corrupted flesh and not have the full enjoyment of eternal life in this age or the next. Therefore, inheriting eternal life in the coming age, like inheriting the kingdom, is conditioned on our living and exercise today, although everyone justified through saving faith will partake of the river of water of life and of the tree of life in the eternal age (Rev. 22:1-2).

The fourth critical term we must understand is *grace*. John 1:14 tells us that the incarnate Word came "full of grace and reality," and verse 17 says, "The law was given through Moses; grace and reality came through Jesus Christ." These verses indicate that grace is nothing less than God Himself in the Son as our enjoyment to supply us with what God is to meet what God demands. Thus, grace is not only a favor or free gift, but it is the impartation and infusion of the Lord Himself into His followers to enable and empower them for their living and work for Him in this age. Thus, Paul said, "I labored more abundantly than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God which is with me" (1 Cor. 15:10). *Not I but the grace of God equals no longer I...but...Christ* in Galatians 2:20.

The grace that motivated the apostle and operated in him was not some matter or some thing but a living person,

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the resurrected Christ, the embodiment of God the Father who became the all-inclusive life-giving Spirit [1 Cor. 15:45], who dwelt in the apostle as his everything. (Recovery Version, 1 Cor. 15:10, note 2)

Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us therefore come forward with boldness to the throne of grace that we may receive mercy and find grace for timely help.” The throne of grace is the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1). The very Christ who is sitting on the throne in heaven is also now in us, that is, in our human spirit (Rom. 8:10; 2 Tim. 4:22). Since today our spirit is the place of God’s habitation, it is now the gate of heaven (Gen. 28:12-17; John 1:51), where Christ is the ladder that joins us to heaven and brings heaven to us. Hence, whenever we turn to our spirit, we enter through the gate of heaven and touch the throne of grace. Hebrews 12:28 says, “Therefore receiving an unshakable kingdom, let us have grace, through which we may serve God well-pleasingly with piety and fear.” To have grace is to take grace. For the Hebrew believers in particular, to take grace was to remain in the new covenant to enjoy Christ. Due to persecution from the Judaizers, however, the believers were wavering and on the verge of returning to the old covenant practices. Under the new covenant, the Hebrew believers had become partakers of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of grace (6:4; 10:29). If they were to return to Judaism, the Spirit of grace, who dwelled in them and worked in them, would have been insulted by their willful sin. Therefore, the writer of Hebrews admonished them to look carefully, lest any of them “fall away from the grace of God” (12:15). To fall away from grace is to be brought to nought, separated from Christ (Gal. 5:4), that is, to lose the enjoyment of Christ and be cut off from His blessings practically, making Him of no effect in our life in the present age, though never coming out from under the enduring covering of grace that assures the eternal state of our salvation. The writer of Hebrews emphasizes that to fall away from grace in this way would make the Hebrew believers subject to discipline (12:7), even “punishment” (10:29) from God, who is a consuming fire (12:29), until which time, by the far-reaching mercy of God, the fallen one is restored to grace in the eternal age.

**F**inally, the fifth term we need to understand in the context of salvation is *faith*. Faith has both an objective and a subjective aspect. The faith (objective) is the contents of the complete gospel according to God’s New Testament economy (1 Tim. 1:4; 3:9; 4:6; 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7; Titus 1:4). Faith (subjective) is our act of believing in the gospel, in God, and in His word and deeds (1 Tim. 1:14; 4:12; 2 Tim. 2:22), which brings us into an organic union with the Lord. In this latter aspect, unfeigned faith (1 Tim. 1:5), faith without pretense or hypocrisy, purifies the heart (Acts 15:9) and operates through love (Gal.

5:6). The hearing of faith awakens our loving appreciation of the Lord, and the more we love the Lord, the more this living faith operates to bring us into the riches, the profit, of Christ. Thus, faith and love always go together as inseparable, excellent virtues of the believers in Christ. The objective faith is immutable (although some deny it and depart from it), but subjective faith abides in each believer in varying proportions.

First Timothy 1:19 mentions both the objective and subjective aspects of faith: “Holding faith and a good conscience, concerning which some, thrusting these away, have become shipwrecked regarding the faith.” This verse indicates that faith and a good conscience go together. Whenever there is an offense in our conscience, there will be a leakage, and our faith (subjective) will leak away. This is a particular danger during the time of degradation and decline in the church. Verses 1 and 2 of chapter four tell us that in later times, “some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and teachings of demons by means of the hypocrisy of men who speak lies.” The conscience of those hypocritical liars has lost its sense, as if branded with a hot iron. Although nothing in this passage indicates that departing from the faith means anything akin to losing one’s eternal salvation, there is still no doubt that a believer’s subjective faith can wither under the demonic influence of unhealthy teachers.

**T**he Word of God is very clear that a man is justified and saved through faith in Jesus Christ (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16; 3:8, 24; Eph. 2:8). It is equally clear, though—and well attested in experience—that in the weak believer subjective faith can fail, especially in the current of the church’s degradation, causing him to go so far as even to “depart from the faith” (1 Tim. 4:1). Such a stumbling one is certainly unable to effectively stand firm and overcome the downward trend and factor in the church. Concerning the failing of faith, Hebrews 10:38 says, “But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul does not delight in him.” There is no clear word in the Scriptures that the faithless, stumbled believer will lose his salvation. There is every indication, however, that such a one may suffer the “ruin” of the punishment mentioned in verses 27 through 31 and forfeit the gaining of his soul at the Lord’s coming back as a reward of the kingdom to His overcoming followers (v. 39).

### Reward and Works: The Calvinist Shortfall

First Corinthians 13:12 says, “For now we see in a mirror obscurely.” In Greek, *obscurely* is ἐν αἰνίγματι, “in an enigma,” a riddle. In this article we have presented a synopsis of the history of the debate over the perseverance of the saints between the schools of Calvinism and Arminianism. We hope that the reader will conclude

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from this that the truth concerning the security of our salvation is indeed a great enigma, a riddle seen obscurely, the full solution to which has been unveiled only gradually in the centuries since the Reformation. The cause for the enigma is that various portions of one and the same Bible can be understood to support both opposing voices. This was the nature of the central issues in early Protestantism, “issues which divided the Reformers into two factions that found it increasingly difficult to resolve their differences because Scripture seems to be equivocal, supplying proof texts for the advocates of both positions” (Custance 191). For this reason, we have endeavored to show deference, whenever we have been able, to the interpretations and inclinations of the sincere proponents of both sides of this great issue. The solution to the enigma, however, is not a captive of either opposing camp. To whatever extent the creeds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries served their purpose, we are mistaken to rigidly confine the truth to them or to any other decree of council or synod. As one hymn expresses, based on the famous sermon of the Puritan John Robinson, “The Lord hath yet more light and truth / To break forth from His Word” (*Hymns*, #817). To be sure, whenever there is an issue of such fundamental importance to the truth, concerning which the Bible is nonetheless “equivocal” to the point of yielding “proof texts” to advocates of opposite positions, we indeed have a divine enigma; and where there is such an enigma, there is the need for more light to break forth from His Word. We hope that this is the first conclusion to which the reader will consent.

**A**n enigma is defined as speech or a riddle that is puzzling, ambiguous, or inexplicable. We do not believe that the problem of the perseverance of the saints is inexplicable, but we must admit that it is puzzling and ambiguous until we see the explanation. We are not satisfied with the explanation provided by Calvinists, and indeed they are not satisfied with it either, for “Calvinism” itself turns out to be a continuum on the issue of the perseverance of the saints. Some concur with the Westminster Confession of Faith to say that a believer “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace” (Schaff 3:636), while others see in the living of a defeated believer evidence of the complete, final, and condemning absence of grace—and both call themselves Calvinists. The result certainly falls short of assuring, especially in the fearful pronouncements of Murray, MacArthur, and other teachers of “lordship salvation.” The only consistent evidence we see here is that the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not a definitive and satisfying statement of the assurance of salvation, even though this is one of the tenets for which Calvinism is known and appreciated. The contradictory state in which the Calvinist teaching results reveals that it is built upon a thin foundation—the one-sidedness of a

two-sided biblical truth. We hope that this is the second conclusion to which the reader will admit.

The teachings of Calvin and their later interpretations do not adequately address that body of Scriptures commonly expositied as proof texts for Arminianism, a number of which we have listed above. The common reaction of Calvinists is to say, “They went out from us, but they were not of us” (1 John 2:19) is not only all too often incorrectly applied to defeated believers but, as we have seen, does fundamental violence to the teaching of eternal security. Vance concludes well:

The error of both the Calvinists and Arminians is in discounting the judgment seat of Christ....The lost are promised salvation (John 3:18); the saved are promised rewards (1 Cor. 3:14). Salvation is a free gift (Eph. 2:8); rewards are earned by works (1 Cor. 9:25). Salvation is a present possession (John 5:24); rewards are a future possibility (2 Tim. 4:8). (571-572)

**T**he synthesis of the differing claims of Calvinism and Arminianism on this point is this: Those who are elect, chosen, and called receive salvation by God’s grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). In this, they are regenerated; that is, they are born of God as children of God, indwelt by the Spirit, and joined to the Lord as one spirit as partakers of the Holy Spirit and partakers of the divine nature (1 Pet. 1:3; John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:16; 1 Cor. 6:17; Heb. 6:4; 2 Pet. 1:4). Beginning from this time they are transformed through growth in the divine life by Christ’s making His home in their hearts (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Eph. 3:17), and they serve the Lord according to their portion as members of His Body (Rom. 12:4, 6; Matt. 25:14-15). The success of their living and the condition of their lives as believers, however, is not without consequence. Some genuine believers are stumbled and defeated in the course of their Christian life, while others overcome to mature in life and bear fruit (Eph. 4:13-14; John 15:5; 2 Pet. 1:8). When the Lord Jesus returns, He will set up His judgment seat to judge the believers according to their life and work in this age (Rev. 22:12; Rom. 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10). Consequently, the overcomers will be rewarded with the full enjoyment of Christ and the co-reign with Him in the kingdom age of one thousand years (Matt. 25:21, 23; Rev. 20:4). The defeated believers, however, will be excluded from the kingdom and be disciplined by the Lord (Matt. 25:10-12, 24-30). Finally, at the end of the one thousand years all the believers will enter into the eternal blessings of God in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:3-5).

We agree and assert that all the saints will indeed persevere, or perhaps we should say be preserved, unto their final salvation. The finality of our salvation is assured by many proofs, as we have listed above. What we have

presented here concerning the “word of righteousness”—the revelation of the judgment seat of Christ and the accountability, reward, and punishment of the believers—does not disrupt the basic principle of perseverance. Our eternal salvation is entirely apart from works done before or after we believe. To disagree with this is to turn back the calendar of God’s revelation five hundred years and return to the medieval salvation of works and indulgences. Moreover, our continuance in the faith and even our overcoming life and work are by the grace of God. Thus, the apostle Paul declared, “But by the grace of God I am what I am; and His grace unto me did not turn out to be in vain, but, on the contrary, I labored more abundantly than all of them, yet not I but the grace of God which is with me” (1 Cor. 15:10). As Calvin says, “Does not the Spirit of God, everywhere self-consistent, nourish the very inclination to obedience that he first engendered, and strengthen its constancy to persevere?” (McNeill XX:306). Both the inclination and power to obey God find their source in the grace of God and nourishment of the Spirit. Therefore, we too like Paul are required to labor, even to overcome, and then to say, “Yet not I but the grace!” However, it is evident that not all believers are well nourished by the Spirit; not all manifest the grace of God in their life and work. For this reason, we assert that not all believers overcome in this age, and not all will be rewarded as overcomers in the next age, though all who have believed into Him will be finally and ultimately saved.

Concerning the perseverance of the saints and the assurance of their final salvation, the “word of righteousness” may be considered a bridge spanning the great gulf between Calvinism and Arminianism. Rather than float over the chasm, however, it is anchored at either end, at least to the extent that each opposing school, respectively, provides solid ground for footing.<sup>13</sup> To Calvin and his followers we owe a great debt in that in this system we find much of the truth needed to build the strongest case for the eternal security of the believers. Yet to Arminius we owe this debt also: that he did not allow himself the ease of dismissing a large body of Scripture that did not seem to support the Calvinist doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. Concerning the troublesome Scriptures that we have cited here—the passages that run contrary to the Calvinistic system—he said, “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” (254). Despite the excesses of his followers, we must learn from the conscience and sensibility of Arminius not to neglect those passages of Scripture that cannot be made to conform, in any enlightened or satisfying way, to the theological system of the day. With all respect due to Calvin, Arminius, and the great men who have followed them, the Lord has granted that in the centuries following the Reformation more light and truth to break forth from His Word. This is the

illumination of the “word of righteousness,” the truth of the responsibility and accountability of the believers after they are saved, in the light of the judgment seat of Christ and the kingdom reward.

by John Campbell

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>By this we do not mean that all students of the Bible have adequate ground for their various, diverse, and even peculiar viewpoints. We do acknowledge, however, that many serious students of the Bible have found, in one and the same Bible, the basis for differing views of even this most precious subject. This apparent paradox is the motivation of this article.

<sup>2</sup>This ambitious purpose is expressed in the full title of the first edition of the *Institutes*, which begins, “Institution of the Christian Religion, Embracing Almost the Whole Sum of Piety and Whatever is Necessary to Know the Doctrine of Salvation....”

<sup>3</sup>Due to the intimate relation of church and state, the debates of the Reformation thrived at the top levels of society and government, creating the political overtones for which the movement has since been recognized by history.

<sup>4</sup>In this article we present the historical controversy of the perseverance of the saints as a dichotomy between Calvinism and Arminianism. We should not neglect to mention that Lutheranism occupies a possible third position, in that it lines up perfectly with neither side. Luther had pioneered the recovery of the truth of salvation by grace through faith, and Lutherans saw sovereign election as the eternal origination of salvation. Their view toward the perseverance of the saints, however, tended to modify their understanding of election. They placed more emphasis on the need of the believer to exercise continually in order to make his calling and election sure. Custance summarizes (from the Calvinist side), “To the Lutherans [God’s] Election hinges upon [the believers’] foreseen Perseverance; to the Calvinists Perseverance hinges upon Election” (193). For this reason, he places the Lutherans and Arminians in one category, again reducing the controversy to a dichotomy—Calvinism versus all else. All this, of course, is on the Protestant side. In this article we do not have the space to address the Roman Catholic view.

<sup>5</sup>Non-Calvinists are quick to point out that the Arminian cause was doomed from the beginning of the synod. The republican sentiments of the Arminian leaders had already alienated the ambitious Prince Maurice. Both the president and first secretary of the synod were strict Calvinists, and no Remonstrants held official positions as delegates; Episcopius and twelve supporters appeared simply as defendants. In short, the Arminians had no fair hearing. After the synod, about two hundred Arminian clergymen were deposed, and on political grounds Oldenbarnevelt was beheaded and Grotius condemned to life in prison. The Synod of Dort was “a complete triumph” for orthodox Calvinism. At the mention of the synod, one delegate ever

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after would uncover his head and exclaim, “*Sacrosancta Synodus!*” (Schaff 1:514-515). The persecution of the Arminians continued until the death of Maurice.

<sup>6</sup>A number of the Arminian proofs are certainly less effective. Some of their improper citations may be classified in at least three ways. First, some are dispensationally misplaced. The goats in Matthew 25:31 to 46, for example, are not believers but the “nations” (v. 32), the living unbelievers who will be judged by the Lord immediately after His coming in glory to establish His kingdom rule in the millennium. Second, some citations refer to false believers, such as the tares in Matthew 13:40 to 42, who are sown by God’s enemy among the true believers. A third category of questionable “proofs” are grammatical retrofits. Among these are John 3:16, 6:47, and 1 John 5:13—all of which speak of believing unto eternal life. The dubious argument here is that the use of the present participle form of *believe* implies that the continuation of the possession of eternal life is dependent on the continuation of the believing; or conversely, any abeyance in believing immediately results in an abeyance of possessing. The grammar does not adequately support this conclusion.

<sup>7</sup>The faithful Calvinist should also be loath to believe that God would approve the good works of the “half-believing” Jews, encouraging them to diligently continue in them without sluggishness (Heb. 6:10-12)! Nor would the good works in chapter thirteen to which the writer of this Epistle commends the readers be appropriate for those who had not yet demonstrated saving faith. That Hebrews was written to unregenerated Jews is indefensible and definitely not coherent with the whole book.

<sup>8</sup>May the reader be patient with our brief treatment of such a controversial passage. The Epistle to the Hebrews is a rich source of revelation concerning the discipline and chastening of the believers. We will no doubt have to revisit this book in later installments of this department.

<sup>9</sup>That the two men in the field, the two women grinding at the mill, the householder, and the slave in the Lord’s household are genuine believers in Christ has been demonstrated by us in previous installments of this department. Please see “Just as the Days of Noah Were,” *Affirmation & Critique*, VI.2, October 2001, pp. 61-68.

<sup>10</sup>The ten virgins represent the genuine believers, viewed from the aspect of life, who gain a certain portion of the Spirit (the oil)—some more, some less—before they sleep in the Lord prior to His coming. Please see “The Parable of the Ten Virgins,” *Affirmation & Critique*, V.3, July 2000, pp. 39-48.

<sup>11</sup>The slaves represent the believers, viewed from the aspect of service, who are committed with the Lord’s possessions and gifted with a spiritual gift to accomplish what the Lord intends to accomplish. Please see “The Parable of the Talents,” *Affirmation & Critique*, V.4, October 2000, pp. 41-47.

<sup>12</sup>By this we do not mean “initial” and “final” salvation of which the Arminians speak, the second of which, they say, one

can forfeit. The Bible speaks of salvation with several meanings. Watchman Nee points out six kinds of salvation mentioned in the Bible, the first of which is eternal salvation and the last, the salvation of the soul (195-204).

<sup>13</sup>It is not necessary to accept any theological system *in toto* in order to build upon the truths found in it. Both Calvin and Arminius advocated infant baptism, for example—a fact that in itself has never discredited their teachings on other subjects.

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