

WIND AND THE “HOLY WIND”: DIVINE ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

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While the wind is itself invisible, it produces effects that are seen and felt. So the work of the Spirit upon the soul will reveal itself in every act of him who has felt its saving power.

—Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 173

About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation.

—John Wesley, *Journal* 2, May 24, 1738

The stone streets of Jerusalem carried the steps of a prominent member of the Jewish clergy to meet with Jesus one evening. This would be an advantageous time to have a private conversation because Jesus was always surrounded by clamoring crowds of people during the day. Introduced as a Pharisee in the Gospel of John narrative, Nicodemus is portrayed as a conscientious follower of Jewish tradition. Also called “a ruler of the Jews” (John 3:1), Nicodemus was likely a member of the Sanhedrin. His nocturnal audience with Jesus probably was to protect his professional reputation. After all, Jesus was not of the established clerical aristocracy, having never earned professional Jerusalem credentials. And His ministry was just getting started. But Nicodemus had heard of (and perhaps seen) Jesus performing miracles and could not doubt His impressive power.

He addresses Jesus: “Rabbi, we know that You are a teacher come from God; for no one can do these signs that You do unless God is with him” (John 3:2).¹ Using the esteemed title “Rabbi,” Nicodemus shows respect and perhaps seeks to put himself in as good a light as possible. With the plural “we,” Nicodemus perhaps includes himself within a group of those who were impressed with the young Galilean.

Jesus ignores Nicodemus’s introductory niceties. Instead, He reveals His divine nature by addressing the heart of His guest.² “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again,³ he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).⁴ The “verily, verily” with which Jesus begins calls for serious attention.⁵ The final destiny of Nicodemus will depend upon how he accepts these words: “I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” This is a categorical, uncompromising statement and some of the most solemn words Jesus will ever utter. The “new birth” is the absolute foundation of any hope for salvation and thus for eternal life. It constitutes the fundamental ABCs of true religion.

In all likelihood Nicodemus had not expected this turn in the conversation. He is a devout Pharisee, well versed in the Levitical code, and feels assured of God’s favor. Surely all his years of study and zealous obedience of the law should count for something. Perhaps he is slightly irritated that such sentiments should be applied to him, wondering why Christ is not

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the New King James Version*. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved. Italics in Scripture quotes reflect emphasis added by author.

2. Ellen White writes poignantly of this moment: “Instead of recognizing this salutation, Jesus bent His eyes upon the speaker, as if reading his very soul. In His infinite wisdom He saw before Him a seeker after truth. He knew the object of this visit, and with a desire to deepen the conviction already resting upon His listener’s mind, He came directly to the point, saying solemnly, yet kindly, ‘Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born from above, he cannot see the kingdom of God,’ John 3:3, margin,” *Desire of Ages* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2006), 168.

3. The Greek, *anōthen*, can mean either “again” or “from above.”

4. The King James Version is used for this quotation to catch the phrase “Verily, verily,” which is a translation of the formulaic Greek “*Amèn, amèn*.”

5. Three times in this conversation with Nicodemus Jesus uses the authoritative “verily, verily” (John 3:3, 5, 11), underscoring the supreme importance of this discussion. Nowhere else in the Gospels does Jesus speak of the new birth so comprehensively.

complimenting his elite position as a religious leader in the capital city of Jerusalem. By virtue of his birth as an Israelite, moreover, he is assured of a place in the kingdom of God. Yet to this prominent Jewish ruler Jesus insists, "You must be born again." If He had said this to some obvious sinner, Nicodemus would have agreed, "Yes, *that* person *needs* to be converted." However, Nicodemus was one of the revered people in the Jewish religion. He had come to discuss other matters. Instead, Jesus "laid bare the foundation principles of truth," speaking of the need for "spiritual regeneration."⁶ Instead of more theological knowledge, a new heart is absolutely necessary. Unless this dramatic change takes place, entering the kingdom of God will not be possible.

Jesus keeps reiterating this vital point in different ways: "unless one is born again" or "born of the Spirit" (John 3:3, 6). Improvement in outward behavior, keeping the law more earnestly, is not what is necessary. Something more radical is called for. Jesus also expresses the "unless clause" other times: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5); "Unless you are converted, and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 18:3); "Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:20). All these "unless" clauses really mean the same thing.

What is "regeneration," the "new birth," that Jesus insists on? It may be easier to describe what it is *not*. It is not going to church or even serving the church in various offices. Christians may pride themselves on regular church attendance, and attending church is a good thing. But it is not necessarily proof of regeneration. Others say, "I am trying to do what is right. I am attempting to keep the Ten Commandments." But according to Christ's definition to Nicodemus in John 3, this is not the "new birth." Nor does baptism guarantee regeneration. Because, sadly, a person may be baptized into the visible Church and still not be reborn. Baptism is essential, but it cannot replace the need for the new birth: "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3).

Other believers may urge that they always participate in the Lord's Supper. And this is commendable. Jesus affirms this practice: as often as believers do it, they commemorate His death till He comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

6. Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View: CA, Pacific Press, 1940), 171.

But even this does not ensure that the new birth has occurred. Jesus states it so plainly that there can be no mistake: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God” (John 3:3).

Another person might think that regular prayer life indicates regeneration. Though it will surely be a part of a regenerate person’s life, prayer does not ensure that the new birth has happened. The solemn nature of Christ’s statement to Nicodemus, who had not even outwardly asked for clarification, allows for no misunderstanding. Nicodemus didn’t look like the type of person who needed the new birth. He wasn’t a drunkard, a gambler, or a thief. He was an honorable member of the Sanhedrin, which was a high religious position. He was satisfied with “salvation by works,” but now he hears that salvation is a gift of God. It is not brought about by anything a person does—just as a person can do nothing about his or her natural birth. Jesus insists: “Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”

The human heart is evil by nature. Paul quotes numerous passages from the Psalms to back up this point in Romans 3:10–18:

*“There is none righteous, no, not one;
There is none who understands;
There is none who seeks after God.
They have all turned aside;
They have together become unprofitable;
There is none who does good, no, not one.”
“Their throat is an open tomb;
With their tongues they have practiced deceit”;
“The poison of asps is under their lips”;
“Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.”
“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
Destruction and misery are in their ways;
And the way of peace they have not known.”
“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

Augustine of Hippo, commenting on the nature of the human in Romans 5, decries, “From the moment, then, when ‘by one man sin entered into the world, and death by sin, and so death passed upon all men, in whom all sinned,’ the entire mass of our nature was ruined beyond doubt.”⁷ Jacob Arminius expresses similar inability of fallen humans: “In his lapsed and

7. Augustine, *On Original Sin*, 34; NPNF, First Series, 5:248.

sinful state, man is not capable, of and by himself, either to think, to will, or to do that which is really good.”⁸ Arminius goes on to assert that only through renewal by the Holy Spirit can the human do good: “It is necessary for him to be regenerated and renewed in his intellect, affections or will, and in all his powers, by God in Christ through the Holy Spirit, that he may be qualified rightly to understand, esteem, consider, will, and perform whatever is truly good.”⁹ In a similar vein, Ellen White confirms that what Nicodemus needed was not an improvement of his abilities, but a complete transformation by the Holy Spirit: “The Christian’s life is not a modification or improvement of the old, but a transformation of nature. There is a death to self and sin, and a new life altogether. This change can be brought about only by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit.”¹⁰

So what *can* a person do? That was the question that Nicodemus asked. According to Jesus, it is absolutely impossible to bring about the new birth on one’s own. There must be a new creation, new life—and this demands the work of the Creator. During the Creation (Gen. 1 and 2), human beings did not just suddenly appear. No human help was needed—or possible. The Creator brought human life into existence. It is the same with the creation of new life. It is just as impossible for people to create themselves out of nothing as it is to make themselves holy before God.

When Jesus cried out on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30), something extraordinary happened! Salvation was assured. The task of His children is to accept His finished work. There is no hope for any as long as they try to work out salvation by what they do. Well they might ask with Nicodemus, “How can these things be? You mean, all the good things that I work at so hard don’t help? Aren’t we supposed to work out our salvation ‘with fear and trembling’?” (Phil. 2:12). However, the position Jesus takes never varies. He insists that His children must receive salvation first before they can work it out.

In attempting to explain this spiritual principle, Jesus uses the analogy of wind. Perhaps He and Nicodemus are feeling a strong breeze that night as Jesus speaks: “The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear the

8. (Jacob) James Arminius, *The Writings of Arminius*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1956), 1:252.

9. Ibid.

10. White, *Desire of Ages*, 172.

sound of it, but cannot tell where it comes from and where it goes. So is every one who is born of the Spirit” (John 3:8). No one understands the wind. It may be blowing southward close by, and a hundred miles further south, blowing northward. No one can fully explain wind currents. No one can control the wind. It acts independently of human control. But just because a person cannot explain the wind doesn’t mean he or she denies that it exists—claiming there is no such thing as the wind. It would be foolish to try to persuade anyone that wind doesn’t exist, because everyone has seen its effects.

Some of the best known conversions in history include a dramatic point in time: Paul and the blinding light in Acts 9, Augustine and the call to “pick it up and read” in *Confessions* 8.29,¹¹ and John Wesley’s Aldersgate experience where his “heart was strangley warmed.” These famous conversions may well be the exceptions rather than the norm for Christian conversion. In the context of the story of Nicodemus and the Holy Spirit acting on the heart, Ellen White suggests that,

A person may not be able to tell the exact time or place, or to trace all the circumstances in the process of conversion; but this does not prove him to be unconverted. By an agency as unseen as the wind, Christ is constantly working upon the heart. Little by little, perhaps unconsciously to the receiver, impressions are made that tend to draw the soul to Christ.¹²

There are many different ways impressions are made, even though a person may not realize it. Then, at a time the Holy Spirit knows is best for that individual, He comes with an appeal that brings the person to surrender to Jesus. Conversion then becomes apparent to the person and those around him or her.¹³ This wooing by the Spirit of God and the results are as unexplainable as the wind. The wind cannot be seen, but its effects can be. The reality of the

11. Maria Boulding, trans., *Saint Augustine: The Confessions*, 2nd ed. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2012), 206.

12. White, *Desire of Ages*, 172.

13. Steven Guthrie writes eloquently about the Holy Spirit’s power: “The Spirit moves in ways we do not expect and acts with a power we cannot easily describe. . . . When we remember that the Spirit is the *ruach*, we remember to be humble before a sovereign God, whose thoughts are higher than our thoughts and whose ways are higher than our ways,” *Creator Spirit: The Holy Spirit and the Art of Becoming Human* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 10.

new birth will be revealed in the newborn person’s life—apparent to the person and those around as the “Holy Wind,” the Holy Spirit¹⁴ blows His saving power through the soul. Ellen White’s description is graphic:

When the Spirit of God takes possession of the heart, it transforms the life. Sinful thoughts are put away, evil deeds are renounced; love, humility, and peace take the place of anger, envy, and strife. Joy takes the place of sadness, and the countenance reflects the light of heaven. No one sees the hand that lifts the burden, or beholds the light descend from the courts above. The blessing comes when by faith the soul surrenders itself to God. Then that power which no human eye can see creates a new being in the image of God.¹⁵

The Apostle Paul also encourages Titus:

But when the kindness and the love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior, that having been justified by His grace we should become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3:4–7)

The precise way it happens Jesus does not explain. Even so, He assures that the effects of the new birth will be experienced and seen. God does everything that He can to bring salvation to everyone who wants it. The prophet Isaiah quotes God’s wistful words: “What more could have been done to My vineyard that I have not done in it?” (Isa. 5:4). He sent His prophets—many were rejected and some killed. God then sent His beloved Son, and He was murdered. Now the Holy Spirit has been given to convict humanity of its need for salvation and to bring about the new birth because the only way to get into the Kingdom of God is to be “born” into it. No one need worry that God has in reserve something else to make salvation possible.

God’s intent is a saving intent, and the scope of his salvation is worldwide. His love for the whole human race expresses itself in the giving of his only Son to die on the cross ([John 3:]16). This “giving” is more specific than “sending” (v. 17). God “sent” his Son into the world (the Incarnation), but he **gave** his Son in death (the Passion) so that the world might be saved and

14. The same Greek word *pneuma* can mean “wind” or “spirit.”

15. White, *Desire of Ages*, 173.

not condemned (v. 17). The universality is qualified, however, by the phrases **everyone who believes** in verse 15 and **whoever believes** in verse 16. To gain eternal life, a person must believe, just as the Israelites had to look at the bronze snake in order to be healed (Num 21:8–9).¹⁶

Jesus also employs a striking Old Testament event to help Nicodemus understand this vital truth. This is something to which this learned man could better relate. When the people of Israel were dying from deadly snakes in the wilderness, “the LORD said to Moses, ‘Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he looks at it, shall live’” (Num. 21:8). Concerning these fiery serpents, the lifted up image, and the method of the cure, John Wesley comments, “This method of cure was prescribed that it might appear to be God’s own work and not the effect of nature or art.” Wesley continues, quoting Paul in Romans 8:3, “The serpent signified Christ, who was ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh,’ though without sin.”¹⁷ Augustine shares a similar insight: “Now there is this difference between the figurative image and the real thing: the figure procured temporal life; the reality, of which that was the figure, procures eternal life.”¹⁸ Ellen White drives this message of the power of God through Christ home:

Many Israelites had regarded the sacrifice in the temple service as being able in itself to set them free from sin. God desired to teach them that it had no more value than the brazen serpent. It was to lead their minds to the Savior. Whether needing healing of their deadly wounds or pardon of their deadly sins, they could do nothing for themselves except show faith in God’s provision.¹⁹

16. J. Ramsey Michaels, *New International Biblical Commentary: John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers and Paternoster Press, 1989), 59, emphasis in original.

17. John Wesley, *Wesley’s Notes on the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1987), 127, comments on Numbers 21:8.

18. Augustine, “Lectures or Tractates on the Gospel According to St. John,” *NPNF*, First Series, 7:85; comments on John 3:6–21.

19. William Hendriksen is sensitive to this point: “Now, in John 3:14 the words ‘As Moses . . . so must the Son of man’ clearly indicate that the event recorded in Numbers 21 is a type of the lifting up of the Son of man. . . . The following points of comparison are either specifically mentioned or clearly implied in 3:14, 15 (cf. also verse 16):

- a. In both cases (Numbers 21 and John 3) death threatens as a punishment for sin.
- b. In both cases it is God himself who, in his sovereign grace, provides a remedy.

Those who had been bitten by the serpents might have questioned how there could be any help in that brazen symbol. They might have demanded a scientific explanation. But no explanation was given. They must accept the Word of God to them through Moses or else perish without looking.²⁰

The same happens with the new birth—humanity must look and live.

The light shining from the cross reveals the love of God. His love is drawing us to Himself. If we do not resist this drawing, we shall be led to the foot of the cross in repentance for the sins that have crucified the Saviour. Then the Spirit of God through faith produces a new life in the soul. The thoughts and desires are brought into obedience to the will of Christ. The heart, the mind, are created anew in the image of Him who works in us to subdue all things to Himself. Then the law of God is written in the mind and heart, and we can say with Christ, "I delight to do Thy will, O my God" (Psa 40:8).²¹

Does humanity today need to grasp the same truth of the uplifted serpent that Jesus used to teach Nicodemus? Paul tells us that we are justified by faith apart from observing the law (Rom. 3:21–8). It cannot be obedience to the law of God, but faith in the blood of Christ that brings each of us a just justification. Commenting on verse 27, Wesley says, "The law of faith is that divine constitution which makes faith, not works, the condition of

c. In both cases this remedy consists of something (or some One) which (who) must be lifted up, in public view. [Many commentators add something like this: as the uplifted serpent was not an actual serpent but one of brass, so also Christ is not really a partaker of sin but only "made in the likeness of sinful flesh."]

d. In both cases, those who, with a believing heart, look unto that which (or: look unto the One who) is lifted up, are healed.

Here, as always, the Antitype far transcends the type. In Numbers the people are face to face with *physical death*; in John, mankind is viewed as exposed to *eternal death* because of sin. In Numbers it is *the type* that is lifted up. This type—the brazen serpent—has no power to heal. It points forward to the *Antitype*, Christ, who does have this power. In Numbers the emphasis is on *physical healing*: when a man fixed his eye upon the serpent of brass, he was restored to health. In John it is *spiritual life*—everlasting life—that is granted to him who reposes his trust in the One who is lifted up.

The lifting up of the Son of man is presented as a 'must.' . . . It is not a remedy; it is *the only possible* remedy for sin," *Exposition of the Gospel According to John*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953), 138, emphasis in original.

20. White, *Desire of Ages*, 173.

21. *Ibid.*, 175.

acceptance.”²² Every sinner, like Nicodemus, must allow the gentle work of the Holy Spirit to bring us to a willingness to recognize our sinful need and be saved by our lifted up Saviour. In the words of Ellen White, “Through faith we receive the grace of God; but faith is not our Savior. It earns nothing. It is the hand by which we lay hold upon Christ, and appropriate His merits, the remedy for sin.” The message of prevenient grace flows down the centuries: humans cannot even repent without Him.²³ The struggle of Augustine is a case in point: “I was groaning in spirit and shaken by violent anger because I could form no resolve to enter into a covenant with You, though in my bones I knew that this was what I ought to do, and everything in me lauded such a course to the skies.”²⁴ Augustine’s will held back, powerless, until, empowered by God, he allowed himself to trust God. “Repentance comes from Christ as truly as does pardon.”²⁵

Even though Adam’s fall wrought us all natural sinners, if a person is lost, it will not be because Adam fell, but because the gift of salvation is refused. If a person is lost, it will not be because a person is a sinner but because the “remedy” was spurned: “How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Heb. 2:3). For one who had been bitten by the deadly serpents in the wilderness, it would have done no good to look at the wound. Likewise it does no good to focus on the wound of sin. It is only the Savior who has power to save. Looking at the pole which held up the brazen serpent was not enough. A person must look beyond the pole to the Crucified Savior—who “takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Jesus has provided the only remedy for sin—and it is offered to the whole world. “He ‘must’ be lifted up. There is no other way for God or for human beings to alter the drastic sin situation of humankind except that Jesus be ‘lifted up.’ He *must* die. There were no other alternatives even for God. . . . And His giving of His Son demonstrates ‘the reality, enormity, and salvific power of the love of God for a sinful world and this human race which lives in that world of sin.’”²⁶

22. John Wesley, *Notes on the Bible*, 498, comments on Romans 3:27.

23. Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1908), 26: “We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken the conscience than we can be pardoned without Christ.”

24. Augustine, *Confessions* 8.19, quoted in Boulding, *Saint Augustine*, 200.

25. Ibid. Cf. Acts 5:31.

26. Beauford H. Bryant and Mark S. Krause, *The College Press NIV Commentary: John*,

The sacrifice of Jesus for our sins is clearly taught throughout the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the truth of salvation provided by the actions of God for a sinful humanity is also taught. Isaiah recognized the universality of human sinfulness: "But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags" (Isa. 64:6). David illustrates the need for God's action to change us: "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps. 51:10). Ezekiel describes the work of the Holy Spirit within a human long before Paul wrote Romans: "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezek. 36:26–27).

A person can be lost, but not because he or she is a sinner. That person will be lost because he or she doesn't accept salvation. Roger Fredrikson is right:

Here is the great paradox, the two-edged meaning of Jesus' coming. He came in love to save, to heal, and to offer spiritual birth. He did not come to condemn or judge. But His coming sharpens the issue. Now we must decide! There is both wondrous possibility and great peril in Nicodemus's coming to Jesus. If he chooses to lay aside all his preconceived ideas and learning and accepts Jesus as the One who has come down from heaven, he will be born again! But if he chooses to turn aside, to leave, to work out his own salvation by his own stubborn efforts, however noble, he stands under condemnation and will perish.²⁷

The new birth comes by accepting Christ, taking God at His Word. The astonishing promise of John 3:16²⁸ may have dimmed through familiarity,

NT Series, ed. Jack Cottrell and Tony Ash (Joplin, MO: College Press Publishing Company, 1998), 97.

27. Roger L. Fredrikson, *The Communicator's Commentary: John*, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1985), 86. Fredrikson then brings the analogy home: "Here is the mystery of evil, that darkness which keeps each of us from accepting the great gift, that rebellious pride which will not allow us to go through the water of repentance and receive the empowering of the Spirit. There is an egocentricity in each of us that constantly insists I can work out my own salvation. It is the cross, the lifting up of the Son of Man, that finally unmasks this ego and thus becomes the agent of discrimination and judgment (1 Cor 1:18)," *ibid.*

28. "The verb 'loved' has the prominent position in the sentence. Jesus wanted all to know that it was God's love that was bringing eternal life to the world. The Son of Man who descended from heaven and is in heaven has brought to us the truth of this assertion ([John] 3:13; 1:18).

but all people can trust this precious promise of God more than they can rely upon their own hearts. If people still have confidence in each other, human beings who frequently are deceptive, why should they not believe God's amazing promise?

Faith simply believes God's testimony. It is not a leap in the dark. God has never asked anyone to believe without giving that person something to believe in. Just as the wind gives evidence of its presence, so does salvation. The evidence is revealed over and over again in the lives of those who experience the new birth. To be born again, or "born of the Spirit," is not an intensification or more determined resolution to be good. No, something brand-new commences: having "one's life radically transformed by the power of God. It is like beginning life over again, with new perceptions and new relationships."²⁹ Ellen White speaks eloquently of the power of the Cross to bring about the new birth:

I marvel that professing Christians do not grasp the divine resources, that they do not see the cross more clearly as the medium of forgiveness and pardon, the means of bringing the proud, selfish heart of man into direct contact with the Holy Spirit, that the riches of Christ may be poured into the mind, and the human agent be adorned with the graces of the Spirit, that Christ may be commended to those who know Him not.³⁰

How does one generate faith? The glorious assurance is that, while individuals cannot generate it, faith itself is a gift from God. So is the air itself, but a person has to breathe it. The food everyone eats is also God's gift, but each person has to eat it. "Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word

"God's motive (love), action ('gave'), and gift (His Son) are one inseparable unit. Love could not be love without its expression and its gift. Love such as this is a high, holy love that is a noble expression of God's nature and will. . . . Both verb forms, 'loved' and 'gave,' are in the historical aorist tense to emphasize the act as a definite fact." Thoralf Gilbrant and Tor Inge Gilbrant, *The New Testament Study Bible: John*, ed. Stanley M. Horton (Chicago, IL: Donnelley and Sons, 1987), 71.

29. Michaels, *New International Biblical Commentary: John*, 55. Ellen White also refers to the new birth experience: "It is impossible for finite minds to comprehend the work of redemption. Its mystery exceeds human knowledge; yet he who passes from death to life realizes that it is a divine reality. The beginning of redemption we may know here through a personal experience," *Desire of Ages*, 173.

30. Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, Sept. 24, 1902.

of God" (Rom. 10:17). This is not describing a person sitting down and waiting for faith to come with some kind of strange mystical sensation. Rather, this text speaks of taking God at His Word, that He is empowering both the individual's will and actions. A glass of water will refresh a thirsty person, but not just by looking at it. There may be a fresh loaf of bread on the table and a person may acknowledge that it is there. But unless the bread is eaten, that person will still be hungry. As the body needs and feeds on water and food, so must the soul feed on Christ. If a drowning person sees a rope thrown out for rescue, looking at the rope will do no good. It must be taken hold of. Looking at a medicine bottle will not help the healing process—the medicine must be taken. The dying Israelites might have believed that the brazen serpent was lifted up—but unless they looked at it, they could not live.

A person may say, "I have no strength. If thrown a rope, I could not hold on." But Romans 5:6 promises, "For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly." Jesus has come to give strength to the weak. The Holy Spirit, as persistent as the wind, brings the conviction, the invitation, and the empowerment to accept.

Another may say, "I cannot see." Christ answers, "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). He came not only to give light but to "open blind eyes" (Isa. 42:7). Others may be afraid they will fall and their conversion will not hold. Then it is good to remember that it is God that does the holding: "My help comes from the LORD, who made heaven and earth. He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber . . . The LORD is your keeper. . . . The LORD shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul" (Ps. 121:2–3, 5, 7).³¹ It is the work of the shepherd to keep the sheep. And Jesus has promised that He is the "good shepherd" (John 10:11, 14).

And descriptions of new birth experiences found in Scripture can encourage everyone: Zacchaeus (Luke 19:1–10); the Ethiopian eunuch to whom Philip gave a Bible study in a chariot (Acts 8:26–39); Cornelius and

31. God must have been in earnest to be sure this point is understood! "Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you, I will uphold you with My righteous right hand" (Isa. 41:10). "Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy" (Jude 24). Jesus even expressed wonderment that Nicodemus did not understand: "Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?" (John 3:10).

his household (Acts 10). Jesus obviously wants the experience of the new birth to be accepted, for He repeats it many times: "Most assuredly, I say to you, he who hears My word and believes in Him who sent Me has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death unto life" (John 5:24).

Hence, the encounter of Nicodemus with Jesus in the gospel of John serves as the prototype for all encounters of those who dare to seek the uplifted One who alone can save us from sin through the regeneration of the Holy Wind.

In the interview with Nicodemus, Jesus unfolded the plan of salvation, and His mission to the world. In none of His subsequent discourses did He explain so fully, step by step, the work necessary to be done in the hearts of all who would inherit the kingdom of heaven. At the very beginning of His ministry He opened the truth to a member of the Sanhedrin, to the mind that was most receptive, and to an appointed teacher of the people. But the leaders of Israel did not welcome the light. Nicodemus hid the truth in his heart, and for three years there was little apparent fruit.

But Jesus was acquainted with the soil into which He cast the seed. The words spoken at night to one listener in the lonely mountain were not lost. For a time Nicodemus did not publicly acknowledge Christ, but he watched His life, and pondered His teachings. In the Sanhedrin council he repeatedly thwarted the schemes of the priests to destroy Him. When at last Jesus was lifted up on the cross, Nicodemus remembered the teaching upon Olivet: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of man be lifted up: that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have eternal life." The light from that secret interview illumined the cross upon Calvary, and Nicodemus saw in Jesus the world's Redeemer.³²

Like Nicodemus we may find ourselves walking in a spiritual night, seeking to know in darkness He who is the light of the world. The Jesus who visited with Nicodemus in the gospel narrative and was lifted up on the cross is today the same Savior and Lord who invites us to accept His salvation. With so great a gift also comes the gift of the Holy Spirit. Both divine gifts of love are really one gift bestowed on all who would dare to believe. For God so loved the world that He "gave."

32. White, *Desire of Ages*, 176-177.



ASSURANCE OF SALVATION: THE DYNAMICS OF CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE

Woodrow W. Whidden

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.

—1 John 5:13

The Seventh-day Adventist reactions to the issue of the believer's personal assurance of salvation definitely unfold in the setting of the Wesleyan/Arminian, synergistic tradition. The gist of this includes what Wesleyan Scholar Randy Maddox refers to as the dynamics of "responsible grace."¹ This explanatory concept emerges out of a marked involvement with sanctifying and perfecting grace. Thus one who is living the privileged life of victory over temptation and sin, through the grace of Christ, will not only demonstrate moral "responsibility," but his or her character will also feature the spiritual goal of living "responsively" to the calling, convicting, converting, justifying, and perfecting graces of Christ. Whatever grace that God has to offer, the believer will manifest patterns of responsiveness to it.

1. This expression is taken from Randy L. Maddox's survey of Wesley's theology entitled *Responsible Grace: John Wesley's Practical Theology* (Nashville, TN: Kingswood Books, 1994).

Now for many “evangelical Arminians” (be they Wesleyans, Free Will Baptists, or Seventh-day Adventists) such a vision of Christian discipleship is challenging enough. But Seventh-day Adventists have felt called (from their Bible study) to pursue the issue with some very challenging, even sobering, eschatological factors. The foremost of these is the doctrine of the Pre-Advent Investigative Judgment, which is chronologically followed by an apocalyptic period featuring “times of trouble” and an irreversible “close of probation” when every human case will be finally settled, “once and for all” for either eternal salvation or damnation. Thus the final settlement of every person’s eternal destiny will then be decidedly revealed at the second coming of Jesus. And thus the pressing, practical question is this: Can there be any genuine assurance of salvation when the eschatological stakes seem so imposing, even downright scary?

The answer given by Bible-believing, Arminian Seventh-day Adventists, formatively tutored by the writings of Ellen G. White, is that it is indeed possible to persevere through the above-mentioned closing events scenario. And this can be experienced by faith in Christ which can engender a balanced sense of saving assurance, preparatory to greeting Jesus in peace at His second coming. But before presenting the case for such an experience of genuinely assured salvation for the eschatologically conditioned believer, a bit of perspective from the larger Christian tradition on the very practical issues of Christian assurance will be helpful.

***SECURITAS, DESPERATIO, AND CERTITUDO*²**

Over the last two thousand years of Christian reflection, there has emerged a clear pattern of teaching regarding the tensions which have normally played out in the collective Christian search for personal assurance. Such tensions normally emerge between the extreme challenges called *securitas* and *desperatio*. Both extremes have been seen as inimical to genuine assurance.

2. The discussion which follows regarding these key terms is significantly informed by Keith D. Stanglin’s study of Arminius’s views on the assurance of salvation, *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation: The Context, Roots, and Shape of the Leiden Debate, 1603–1609* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007).

Securitas describes those who think they are assuredly saved, but who are in fact self-deceived. These are the Christians who have tended to attitudes of presuming on the grace of Christ and have fallen for the self-deceptions associated with cheap grace, indulging in various excuses for sinful lifestyles. And the long tradition of pastoral admonition has warned such believers that they are playing fast and loose with grace as they tread dangerously close to the very brink of damnation. Arminians have deemed this deadly concoction to be a false elixir and have warned that the Calvinist/Reformed preoccupation with perseverance has *de facto* indulged in this attractive concoction for way too long.

But many of the Augustinian/Reformed partisans in this long history of admonition have tended to see the dangers of *desperatio* as the greater contributor to a lack of Christian assurance. *Desperatio* refers to the condition of either creeping or utter despair when Christians have approached the point where their personal salvation seems practically impossible. This often results because of perceived failures to live a life of victory over temptation and sin. And thus it comes as no surprise that the Augustinian/Reformed advocates have leveled the charge that Arminian teaching (that salvation can truly be lost) is the greatest contributor to the evils of *desperatio*! In other words, they have claimed that unless one accepts their version of salvation (as the fruit of an irresistible grace that cannot be lost), there is no real antidote for Christian despair. Thus they claim that their version of assurance is the only viable alternative which can lead to genuine *certitudo*.

So who has the better part of the argument when it comes to the attainment of the alleged golden mean of *certitudo*, a balanced experience which effectively avoids both cheap grace and deadening despair? Contra the Reformed Calvinists, it seems clear that the Arminian/Wesleyan solution contains the best theological and practical path to the golden mean of the genuine article of Christian assurance—the *certitudo* of free grace. This latter alternative can also be identified with the longer Christian tradition of the freely chosen patterns of “responsible grace”! Thus what follows attempts to lay out the details of this dynamic path to the assurance of salvation, an assurance that can even surmount the rigorous terrors of a pre-Advent investigative judgment and the frightful scenarios of earthly history’s last great apocalyptic crisis—Adventist style!

THE GRACIOUS RESOURCES FOR GENUINE *CERTITUDO*

The *A Priori* Category

The rich resources of God's redeeming power have been manifested in two important categories of grace. The first has to do with what has been called the *a priori* of God's provisions for salvation. Such factors include not only His irrepressible love for sinners, but such love's gracious provisions that inhere in the atoning work of Christ. In the Incarnate life, death, resurrection, ascension, and priestly intercessions of Christ, all that needed to be done to save the entire human race has been done.

Furthermore, this *a priori* of divine grace includes all that God has been doing and is still doing to effectively communicate the saving provisions of Christ's atoning work to all who will respond in faith to His gracious offers of redemption. And these communicating factors include the calling, awakening, or convincing power of the Spirit (prevenient grace), converting, regenerating (repentance and new birthing grace), justifying (forgiving grace), transforming (sanctifying and perfecting grace), equipping (spiritual gifting,) and glorifying grace (the gift of immortality at the second coming). And when any believer begins to reflectively ponder the wonders of these *a priori* privileges, one wonders how anyone could ever be lost!

Further reflection on the graces most relevant to genuine *certitudo* assurance indicates that all of these factors have inherently essential contributions to make to the genuine article of assurance. Yet what is pleasantly surprising is that there is a significant unanimity between the Reformed and Arminian versions of these assuring *a priori* factors of grace.

But the unanimity is not complete and where the real differences emerge, they relate to (1) the very nature of God's love and (2) the role that sanctification plays in the life of the assured Christian. One other factor which undergirds this whole saving sequence is the shared evangelical conviction that all are totally depraved by their experience with sin and nothing but God's grace can redeem and grant the assurance that salvation is real and possible. But again, it must be emphasized that the controversial factors center on how God's love is understood and how optimistic believers should view the ability of transforming grace to really and truly free believers from the power of sin before glorification.

With regard to God's love, the key contrasting perspectives revolve around whether love divine is persuasive and yet resistible (the Arminian position) or whether it is both limited to and only administered irresistibly to a select group called the "elect" or the "predestined" (the Augustinian/Reformed position). Regarding the effectiveness of sanctifying or transforming grace, the Reformed position has always been wary of most perfection emphases. In some marked contrast, Arminians have normally been more optimistic about what God's grace can do (this side of glorification) to make loving obedience a cardinal characteristic of the assuredly redeemed.

Later more will be said about these key, controverted components of saving grace when discussing the key factors which contribute to a genuine Christian *certitudo*. And such differences will make a significant contribution to the case that the Arminian way of salvation is inherently more efficacious than the Reformed version when it comes to any effectual experience of a balanced assurance of salvation. But returning to those factors, there is one other major set of graced components which factor into any legitimate experience of Christian assurance, namely, the *a posteriori* factors.

The *A Posteriori* Category

This category of grace includes such factors as the direct witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16) and that believers are God's adopted children of grace. This is a grace which emerges during and after conversion when believers sense that God is directly communicating to individual "spirits" (minds) that such believers are the children of God. This is a grace which is very closely akin to the believer's experience with the Spirit's illumination of the Word of God so that he or she can not only understand the great plan of salvation, but receive the studied conviction that this plan envisions the possible reality that every believer can be the beneficiary of the great redemption plan. Without such a deeply personalized conviction that the truths of the Bible are intended for each and every sinner, the plan of salvation will be merely a doctrinal wonder that one can only contemplate, but never truly experience.

Now this aspect of saving experience has been technically called by both the Reformed and Arminian advocates the *sylogismus mysticus*. This rather clumsy sounding Latin expression simply means that any individual

believer can actually, in a deeply mystical way, perceive that the Spirit of God has spoken to him or her directly that he or she is personally a child of God. The language of syllogism has reference to the fact that each person can logically conclude from his or her experience that he or she has been and is being personally and redemptively communicated with through the deep convictions and comforts of the Holy Spirit.

Now very closely related to this is a second *a posteriori* experience called the *sylogismus practicus*. Once again, this technical language has reference to the more practical manifestations of the “fruit of the Spirit” in the life of the believer. This factor is probably the one that is more familiar to Seventh-day Adventist Arminians. Simply stated, if one has experienced a personal rooting of faith in Christ, the Bible assures that individual that these manifestations of the Holy Spirit will not be lagging far behind in the life of saving faith. Put another way, if any believer does not actually manifest the fruit of faith, it is pretty good evidence that the root of faith is rotten at its core and is not the genuine article.

In addition to the specific qualities listed in Galatians, such fruit is often understood to include a whole array of spiritual phenomena. These normally include ethical consistency, attitudes of gratefulness to God for His mercy, patience with the foibles of others, an attitude of penitence and Christian humility as the normal daily meat and drink of the converted disciple of Christ, a love for the study of the Scripture and the place of prayer, attendance at corporate worship, zeal for Christian service, and a desire to contemplate and converse on matters having to do with Christ and eternity (to name but a few of the most important practical fruits of life in the Spirit and grace of Christ).

Implications of the *A Priori* and the *A Posteriori* Factors

Now what is really interesting is that both the Arminians and the Reformed believers and writers have all agreed that these factors, both the *a priori* and the *a posteriori* factors, are absolutely necessary for anyone to experience genuine Christian conversion and receive the gift of the assurance of salvation (the coveted *certitudo*).

Both the Reformed and the Arminian partisans agree that all of the graces of Christ must be factored into any genuine experience of Christ. Without the *a priori* provisions of salvation being effectively communicated

to the believer, there will be no real saving union with Christ by faith and no real chance to experience the blessing of genuine assurance.

Furthermore, there is general agreement that without the *a posteriori* experiential implications of the workings of God's grace in one's life, there will be no deep personal realization that any believer can know that he or she has actually become a converted child of the King! These *a posteriori* factors include both the "mystical" (*sylogismus mysticus*) and the "practical" (*sylogismus practicus*) experiences of grace. If these factors are not abundantly apparent, no believer can have any viable evidence that he or she is a believer (in the Arminian sense), or among the predestined "elect" (in the more Reformed or Calvinistic sense). So, what can be concluded about these factors in Christian experience?

The key issue at stake in this reflection is to simply make the point that all believers are dependent on not just the *a priori* factors, but also on the full panoply of the *a posteriori* factors in the experience of saving assurance. Thus it is safe to conclude that there are really no discernible advantages which are the unique privileges of the Reformed/Calvinistic believer. The only major differences between the Reformed and the Arminian experience of assurance do, in fact, orbit around the *a priori* of how any believer understands God's love (is it persistently persuasive or is it irresistible?). Therefore both camps are in the same evidential boat when it comes to the manner in which the possibilities of transforming grace can contribute to either the assurance of salvation or the lack thereof.

Now here is the interesting and informative bottom line regarding any supposed assurance advantages claimed by the Calvinists: If God's grace is irresistible, how can anyone know that he or she is inevitably going to be found among the elect, especially when it is patently apparent that no person has been specifically prophesied (in either the Bible or any other inspired documents) to be irresistibly placed among the elect! And why is this so? Simply because no such prophecy exists!

With these simple facts in hand, there is only one obvious conclusion—Reformed Calvinists do not have any real advantage(s) when it comes to their ability to detect whether they are among the chosen elect of God or not. Thus they are also practically obliged to search out the powerful factors inherent in the *a priori* factors of God's gracious provisions (and His ability to communicate them). Furthermore they also, along with their fellow Arminian pilgrims, must search the contours of their personal

experience of grace for any evidence of the *a posteriori* blessings that they are evidently and assuredly saved.

Once more it needs to be asked: Do the Reformed Calvinists truly possess any inherent advantages when it comes to their claim of the assuring comforts of the irresistible election teaching and their proclaimed privileges of irremissible perseverance (their salvation cannot be lost—thus “once saved always saved”)? Arminians are not convinced by the Reformed claims.

Other Complicating Factors of Christian Experience

Now that both Reformed and Arminian partisans have all been consigned to the task of searching out the contours of their respective personal experiences of salvation, there are a few other practical matters which all Christians need to keep in mind regarding the search for assurance. And such matters are usually associated with the common experience of what earlier Christians referred to as *lucta*. This phenomenon includes the wrestling that often transpires in the soul between the forces of the good and evil. These battles can become very intense, and in the heat of such tribulations it can be easily concluded that such exposed weaknesses mean that one is not really saved! This is especially troubling to those who naturally struggle with depression, especially when they are called upon to endure periods when the “witness of the Spirit” is not speaking all that emphatically or clearly.

One other relevant factor that must be mentioned is the teaching of John Calvin on “temporary faith,” which can easily lead to despair.³ As Keith Stanglin points out, “the reason that the category of temporary faith undermines assurance is the great correspondence between true and temporary faith.”⁴ Can a Calvinist really believe that such could be true? In fact, this is readily admitted by them, especially when persons who claim to be saved are not looking or acting all that Christlike. Once again, the common experience of both Calvinists and Arminians becomes quite apparent, leading to the obvious conclusion that both camps must come up with filtering factors by which they can discern between true and false faith (be it “temporary” or patently “false”) in Christian salvation experience.

3. See Stanglin's discussion on page 183 of *Arminius on the Assurance of Salvation*.

4. *Ibid.*, 184.

So, what can be practically concluded at this juncture? It seems that the key issues between Calvinists and Arminians regarding the assurance of salvation come down to the issue of who has the better theology of God's love. This is especially relevant when it comes to God's loving ways in election and predestination and His power to forgive and transform. Practically speaking, evangelical, Bible-believing Calvinists and Arminians are very similar in their views on forgiving and justifying grace for true believers. But as already mentioned, their respective views on election and sanctification do manifest significant variances. What should be concluded regarding these variances in teachings on assurance? First, the issues of election and perseverance will be examined.

ELECTION, "ONCE SAVED ALWAYS SAVED," AND ASSURANCE

Some Preliminary Observations on Irresistible Election

While the issue of perseverance (i.e., once saved, always saved versus the teaching that believers can lose their salvation) has been the most controversial issue, first some preliminary observations on the issue of "irresistible election" and how it informs the issue of the personal assurance of salvation must be addressed. Even though most contemporary Reformed/Calvinist Christians reject the idea of irresistible election, the issue remains pertinent to a significant number of Reformed Christians who still emphasize that election is irresistible. While they claim that such irresistible grace is a great boon to assurance, the facts are that the stakes for any ultimate realization of the assurance of salvation must be greatly reduced. And why does this seem to be the case?

The answer is very simple: If the vast majority of sinners are irresistibly predestined to damnation, this immediately and significantly reduces the "pool" of possible candidates for election to salvation, which is normally deemed to be but a small remnant anyway.⁵ When this concept is contrasted with the Arminian view, the results are quite instructive.

5. It is very clear that Calvin claimed that the pool of candidates for divine election to salvation included only "that little number whom he [God] has reserved for himself," or "only a few people." These quotations from Calvin are quoted in François Wendel, *Calvin: The Origins and Development of His Religious Thought* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), 279–280.

Since the Arminian view claims that the benefits of the atonement of Christ have always been intended to potentially save all sinners, it then becomes abundantly clear as to which teaching is inherently more optimistic about the possibility of a greater number of sinners being assuredly saved. In fact, it is safe to say that the classic Calvinistic doctrine, which teaches a great restrictedness in the number of possible persons who will be irresistibly elected, is thereby simply more inherently negative about the possibility of salvation for the many.⁶

To put it as bluntly as it can be stated: If the pool of candidates for salvation is already quite small, then the chances of anyone being among the elect, with its alleged assurances of salvation, are also proportionally quite minimal—to say the least! Therefore, even though Arminians also admit to a small pool of souls who will ultimately receive salvation, they at least teach that every sinner has a chance of ending up in the “saving pool” of the redeemed elect. This is simply due to the fact that Arminians understand the Bible to teach that the choice of salvation is ultimately contingent on the decisions of every individual person, not some secret decision unilaterally made by God. Thus the question must be asked: Is there or is there not an obvious contrast between the Arminian and the Calvinist positions, especially when the latter teaches that the decision for salvation and damnation is totally and irresistibly determined by the inscrutable wisdom of God? If the answer is affirmative, then it seems obvious that the Arminian believer will be much less prone to worry about reduced statistical chances or even arbitrary rejection (the Calvinists call it “reprobation”) since he or she is convinced that God lovingly and mercifully desires, even longs for, all persons to be saved.

Therefore, the Arminian believers should then simply be more optimistic about their chances to receive not only salvation, but also the assurance that such a great salvation (offered on such a universal scale) will prove so alluringly desirable that the saved will be loath to carelessly

6. Most certainly Arminians also need to admit that Christ's universal offer of salvation will be embraced, but only by a relative few (compare 1 Tim. 2:3–4, Tit. 2:11 and 2 Pet. 3:9). This admittance is based on the testimony of Jesus which clearly states that the vast majority of humanity will not positively embrace His gracious offer of redemption (Matt. 7:13–14). But this is a far cry from the Calvinist concept which claims that the small number is due to God's sovereign choice, not the choices of those who could have chosen to be in the Kingdom.

mishandle such a precious gift! Logically, then, Arminian believers should logically be the most assured Christians in the world!

While a significant majority of modern Reformed/Calvinists have given up on the classic doctrine of irresistible election and want to say, in good Arminian fashion, that all sinners can be saved, they continue on to offer the important qualification that the ones who do respond to God's universal offer will suddenly find themselves in His irresistible, saving clutches once they say yes to grace. In other words, once God lovingly hooks any responsive sinner, that person is in the Gospel boat to stay (whether he or she wants to stay or not).

The question then immediately presents itself: Why would God respect any believer's freely chosen decision to be initially saved, but then immediately deny that person the option of voluntarily choosing to leave His "loving" embrace? With this rather searching question, it only seems logical to make a further enquiry. What is it, then, that is truly at the heart of the "once saved, always saved" concept?

The Basic Rationale of the "Once Saved, Always Saved" Doctrine

At the risk of some repetition, all participants in the debates over Christian assurance need to be very clear as to the basic rationale which undergirds the thinking of the "once saved, always saved" position. What its partisans boldly and confidently assert is that God simply will not allow those who have responded to His call to salvation to slip from His grasp. Thus the Lord providentially makes it impossible for any of His initially responsive children, being defined as those who have accepted Him as their Savior, to fall away from their saving relationship with Him. This forceful retention of the saved has been represented by two basic versions that have received widespread, popular acclaim.

The first version teaches something to the effect that God will so forcefully hem in or surround the responsive believers with compelling, saving influences that they will find it impossible to backslide. Thus they simply will not, since they effectively cannot, renege on their salvation commitment to the Lord. Moreover, if any alleged believers should begin to stray from their saving relationship with God, the Holy Trinity will either irresistibly protect them from any temptation to apostasy, or chastise them with a chain of providential circumstances so as to discourage any ultimate slippage from their assured status among the redeemed.

But what about those alleged believers who give the appearance of losing their salvation or back sliding away from the Lord's irrevocable embrace? This question points to the most common explanation, which is effectively the second popular version of irresistible perseverance. What this version claims is that such believers were never really or truly saved in the first place. A good example of this conceptual claim has been articulated by influential, contemporary Reformed theologian Millard J. Erickson.

Erickson begins by clearly affirming "once saved, always saved:" "The practical implication of our understanding of the doctrine of perseverance is that believers can rest secure in the assurance that their salvation is permanent; nothing can separate them from the love of God. Thus they can rejoice in the prospect of eternal life. There need be no anxiety that something or someone will keep them from attaining the final blessedness that they have been promised and have come to expect."

But not surprisingly, Erickson then feels the need to face up to the nettlesome issue of the commonly manifested attitudes of sinful presumption which so often accompany the idea that such a salvation is so secure that it cannot be lost: "On the other hand, however, our understanding of the doctrine of perseverance allows no room for indolence or laxity. It is questionable whether anyone who reasons, 'Now that I am a Christian, I can live as I please,' *has really been converted and regenerated.*"⁷ In other words, if someone manifests persistent evidence of apostasy, that person was simply never truly converted in the first place. And with these interesting conclusions, Erickson has summarily made the argument almost impossible to deal with at any truly coherent, practical level. What is to be made of such logic?

An Arminian Response

First, it must be admitted, even from the Arminian perspective (which says that salvation can be lost), that it could well be true that there are believers whose tendency toward apostasy suggests that they were never genuinely converted in the first place. Jesus's parable of the sower clearly suggests that there are "believers" who are "way-side," "rocky," or "thorny"

7. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 1007, emphasis added.

ground types of professed Christians whose faith lacks lasting, deep roots. Furthermore, these wavering souls can ultimately give way to the cares of evil influences which normally plague their salvation pilgrimage (Luke 8:11–15).

But the line of argument mounted by the Calvinists attempts to deny the possibility of apostasy. Such a denial simply ignores the question as to whether any given believer can be genuinely converted, and then either heedlessly wander away by careless neglect or be led away by strong temptations and go on to openly renounce the saving power of God in his or her life. After all, Jesus did plainly say that the great Adversary works in such a way as to snatch the “word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved” (v. 12).

Furthermore, many Reformed teachers conveniently ignore the fact that our Lord also made the highly suggestive point that a person can “believe and be saved” (Acts 16:31). And finally, the context explicitly says that the seed which fell “on the rocks” did “receive the word with joy” and “for a while” did “believe”—strongly implying that their belief did effectually save them, if only temporarily (Matt. 13:3–8, 20–21).

Now if Jesus’s teaching about “believing” and being “saved” has any merit, the question then becomes: Does such an experience of belief, which ultimately fails or languishes, prove to be no belief at all? Or were Jesus’s “rocky” variety of believers simply mentioned in order to put forward a sensible, cautionary warning to all Christians to be watchful lest they carelessly fall into such “rocky” circumstances? For the Calvinist teachers (such as Erickson), the answer is that they were never saved in the first place!

For the Arminian interpreters, however, it seems obvious that such struggling believers could have been truly saved but just proved not to be vigilant enough in their walk with Jesus. Thus such a lack of vigilance is not inevitably caused by some secret will of the electing God, but it is simply due to a lack of attentiveness on the part of the careless believers who have the distinct possibility of finding healing for their back-sliding ways.

So what about believers who are at the stage of personal experience where their faith enters the stormy waters of intense struggle (i.e., the previously mentioned *lucta*—literally wrestling with or battling the world, the flesh, and the devil) and have not yet achieved the fuller or richer, settled trust of persevering children of God? Should such persons

be told that they were never saved in the first place? From an Arminian perspective, this approach is incomprehensible and such believers should be given the benefit of the doubt and then be strongly encouraged to look again to the Lord in faith for the healing of their propensity to backslide and ultimately fall away.

Thus the debate returns to the issue of who has the better response, the Arminians or the Calvinists? Put another way, it seems patently obvious that both the Calvinists and the Arminians need to be able to effectively discern the marks or evidences of their election to salvation if they are to be blessed with the gracious article of genuine assurance.

The avowedly Calvinistic Erickson immediately makes this point: Genuine faith manifests itself in the fruit of the Spirit. “Assurance of salvation, the subjective conviction that one is a Christian, results from the Holy Spirit’s giving evidence that he is at work in the life of the individual. The Spirit’s work results in conviction on biblical grounds that God will enable the Christian to persist in that relationship—that nothing can separate the true believer from God’s love.”⁸

Therefore, in the light of these considerations, the comments of Jerry Moon seem to be abundantly justified when he claims that the “doctrine of ‘once saved, always saved,’ is simply a theoretical guarantee of eternal security, not an actual guarantee, since in that theological system (Reformed/Calvinistic), *one cannot infallibly know that one was ‘once saved.’*”⁹ And once more, consider the common privileges and challenges of all (both Calvinist and Arminian) who would be united to Christ by a saving faith which justifies, sanctifies, and assures. Moreover, an important aspect of such privileges is that the Spirit of God will not leave any believer bereft of the illuminating power of the Spirit’s direct “Witness” and its more indirect working which sparks the “witness of our own spirit.”

8. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1007–1008.

9. These judicious comments by Moon are just one key point that he makes in his wonderful lecture regarding Ellen White’s true teachings on the issue of assurance of salvation. Part of Moon’s lecture has been adapted and included in my book *The Judgment and Assurance: The Dynamics of Personal Salvation*. See “Part IV: Special Adventist Challenges,” in the chapter titled “Ellen G. White on the Assurance of Salvation: Are Her Writings a Help or a Stumbling Block?” (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2012), 153–172.

SOME FINAL CONSIDERATIONS ON PERSEVERANCE

Probably the most important principles for experiencing the assurance of salvation relate to the issues that the believer's security in God is linked to (1) his or her faith-union with Christ and (2) the extreme importance of maintaining and not forsaking this relationship. Do not the Bible and personal faith testimonies of believers in Christ resonate with these important principles?

It seems that the Calvinistic brothers and sisters, in their longing for a secure relationship to Christ, have overemphasized the importance of the moment of redemption. And this imbalanced emphasis has inevitably led to the neglect of salvation's long-term relational dynamics. The long-haul relational dynamics, not so much the initial moment of the realization of redemption, are what truly generate the critical core of the issue of the Christian's salvation assurance. Most certainly the initial moment of conversion and justification and its deep commitments are absolutely foundational! This, however, does not immediately negate the personal choices of faith's ongoing responsibilities in the believer's saving walk with the Lord.

The initial moment of saving faith is the beginning of the Christian's pilgrimage, not an experience of being irresistibly hooked by Christ. To the contrary, it is the beginning of a lifetime of responsive and responsible give and take which steadily grows and deepens into the mutuality of a dynamic, loving relationship. Therefore, this more relational vision (version) of salvation seems closer to the biblical portrait that portrays a God who is lovingly self-giving in the interest of His children's reconciliation. This stands in clear contrast to the questionable vision of God as some sort of relentless "manipulator" deity who is intent on kicking in the doors of people's hearts and forcefully binding them to Himself. Thus it seems that the Arminius-inspired Carl Bangs was correct—"grace is not a force; it is a Person"!¹⁰

Now there is some truth to the fact that God's pursuit of humanity does have some sovereign aspects to it. Most certainly, God must always take the sovereign initiative in the salvation of His people. And, in this sense, He does

10. Bangs, quoted in Roger E. Olson in *Arminian Theology: Myths and Realities* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 164.

come knocking at the doors of His people's hearts—whether they want Him to or not. But the truth is that He simply does not knock down their doors! Instead of irresistible force, He offers winsome appeals and suggests motives that seek to elicit a positive, love-engendered response from His people.¹¹

Furthermore, many Arminians will readily attest that God's persistent pursuit of them can, on occasion, feel downright compelling (though it never ultimately forces anyone's will). Contemporary Methodist theologian Geoffrey Wainwright has sagely recalled an old truism: "When push comes to shove in Christian experience and witness, Arminians preach the assurance of salvation in a manner worthy of a Calvinist and Calvinists seek salvation through prayers which sound very much like those of a free-will Methodist."¹²

Indeed, many can testify to the persistence with which God has sought them and nurtured them; and it can, on occasion, feel like the solicitations of a watchful "mother bear." Moreover, the persistent, prayerful intercessions of many Calvinists evoke the need for human cooperation with God's providences in seeking the salvation of the lost. But neither of these positions necessitates either a doctrine of irresistible, deterministic election and perseverance, or some bald doctrine of humanistic, natural free-will.¹³

With a proper emphasis on the central importance of salvation being understood or conceived of as a complete process of co-operant interaction between the Savior and the individual believer—all the way from initial belief until glorification, here are some cautionary caveats regarding the "once saved, always saved" version of Christian assurance.

A Cautious Critique of Irresistible Perseverance

First, the believer's hope is in Christ, not ultimately in a once-for-all decision made in response to an altar call during some local church revival, evangelistic series, summer camp, or camp meeting. What is most important is that

11. Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1989), 22, 487, 759; idem, "The Compelling Message," *Review and Herald* (September 24, 1895), 609; "Serve the Lord with Gladness," *Review and Herald* (January 14, 1890), 18.

12. Geoffrey Wainwright, quoted in Woodrow W. Whidden, *The Judgment and Assurance: The Dynamics of Personal Salvation* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 2010), 125.

13. Ibid.

the believer remains constantly attentive by keeping his or her focus on Jesus and His abundant graces and nurtures the spiritual discipline of responsive sensitivity to the leading of the Spirit through the ministry of the Word.

Second, the focus of the Reformed version of perseverance is on faith itself. But important as faith is, its primary focus is not to be on itself. Faith is a gift of God that has no real virtue in and of itself, except that its great efficacy is found in the One whom it lays hold of.

Furthermore, saving faith is not to be primarily defined as an exercise in giving mental assent to an abstract theoretical guarantee of irrevocable assurance. Rather, biblical faith is better defined as a heartfelt trust in Christ that embraces Him as the One and only Person capable of keeping believers effectively convinced that their salvation is steadily assured. Herbert Douglass has succinctly expressed it this way: the “secret” of Christian assurance is that “we are not to trust in our faith, but in God’s faithfulness.”¹⁴

Therefore any present blessings of the assurance of salvation have much more to do with the believer’s current faith-focus on Christ than it does in what faith did in some supposed “once for all time” claiming of salvation during a particularly moving altar call. Any initial exercise of faith that claims salvation at the instigation of the Spirit during any altar call is of vital importance. But it is only a conscious beginning. Therefore, persevering assurance is much more the result of an ongoing focus on Christ rather than on faith itself and its past exercise.

Third, as has been acknowledged by Millard Erickson, the “once saved, always saved” version of assurance has been persistently vexed with a checkered history of presumption and antinomian attitudes on the part of many Calvinists. It was this troubling tendency that provoked John Wesley and the vast majority of later Arminian Christians to strongly and persistently oppose the Calvinistic version of Christian election, perseverance, and assurance.

Moreover, at a very elemental level of pastoral concern, many can personally attest to the wisdom of the long-standing Wesleyan/Arminian aversion to Calvinistic inspired versions of assurance. Such troubling cheap-grace attitudes are still all too evident among Reformed-oriented believers.

14. Herbert E. Douglass, *Should We Ever Say, “I Am Saved”? What It Means to Be Assured of Salvation* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2003), 26.

The idea that believers can go on knowingly transgressing God's law and still be considered saved is currently very much alive and well at the popular level among many professed believers who seek to excuse themselves from the duty of confronting their lingering propensities to indulge the habit of their "darling" sins. Furthermore, the issue includes not just indulgence in known defects, but an all-too-common refusal to embrace strong convictions of the Spirit's call to incorporate new moral and practical duties into their personal Christian walk. The fruit of the irresistible grace teachings is simply not good.

In the face of these persistently common attitudes of "cheap-grace," antinomian excuses for sin¹⁵ and the self-evident fact that the Calvinists have no real, built-in advantages (either theologically or practically) when it comes to the assurance of salvation, on balance, the Wesleyan/Arminian (and Adventist) version of the personal assurance of salvation is the preferred biblical, theological, and practical route for believers to take in their walk with the Lord.

DOES AN EMPHASIS ON SANCTIFICATION DESTROY ASSURANCE?

This question raises one more important query: What should be the resort for the struggling Christian who is led to doubt the assurance of his or her salvation? Should it be a preoccupation with how many victories she or he has had in overcoming his or her character defects? Probably not. But does that do away with sanctified progress as a factor in aiding the struggling Christian's attempt to regain assured spiritual equilibrium? Certainly not! But before briefly addressing these dynamics, it needs to be emphatically stated that the blessings of justifying and forgiving grace are the main default resorts for all believers, be they Calvinist/Reformed or Arminian.

The knowledge that Jesus is constantly standing as humanity's Advocate with the Father, moment by moment seeking to draw people to Himself and

15. We do want to make it clear that not all Calvinist/Reformed Christians manifest these attitudes; but it is all too evident in their corridors of influence, including the experiences of numerous Seventh-day Adventists who have been either implicitly or explicitly affected by the popular preaching and publishing venues of Calvinistic/Reformed teaching. We just sense that the Arminian venue offers, on balance, a better way.

reminding them that He is constantly reckoning penitent, responsive believers as perfect for the sake of Christ, is a wonderful tonic for any struggling sinner. But such considerations must never be isolated from the twin blessing of character transformation which is the fruit of Christ's transforming grace (a grace that He also mediates to humanity as the Advocating High Priest in the heavenly sanctuary). So, what is the assuring relationship between the justifying and sanctifying merits of Christ?

While there are no justifying merits in the fruitful obedience and character growth of the true believer, the very practical truth is that one of the very reasons why Jesus grants the twin blessings of justifying and sanctifying grace is so that every believer will be granted clearer spiritual perception when it comes to the preciousness and expensiveness of the merits of justifying grace. Sin and character defects always have a blinding effect on any believer. This is the reason that attitudes of presumption and cheap grace are so deadly to any genuine assurance of salvation.

But when the believer is growing in God's love through the grace of character transformation, and as his or her ability to perceive the awfulness of sin and the infinitely expensive, precious privileges of forgiveness and justifying grace increases, the more assured the believer will become. God's love, therefore, is expressed not only in merciful forgiveness, but also in gracious character transformation. The stronger the character, the more perfect will be the believer's perceptions of God's assuring love for him or her.

These reflections on forgiveness and transforming grace lead to the final consideration of this reflection: the positive, though reserved manner with which James Arminius embraced the issues of sanctification and the experience of Christian perfection. If character perfection truly does enable believers to more clearly grasp the privileges of God's merciful, loving forgiveness, why then should their thoughts turn negative any time some earnest "holiness" person (Adventist, Wesleyan, or Free Will Baptist) reminds them of the blessings of perfection and character change? The truth is that believers should be open to the following, wisely balanced counsels of Arminius.

"But while I never asserted that a believer could perfectly keep the precepts of Christ in this life, I never denied it, but always left it as a matter which has still to be decided." Thus, while Arminius was not preoccupied with perfection, he went on to offer sage counsel about disputes over the issue: "I think the time may be far more happily and usefully employed in

prayers to obtain what is lacking in each of us, and in serious admonitions that every one endeavor to proceed and press forward towards the mark of perfection, than when spent in such disputations.”¹⁶

CONCLUSION

Most certainly the personal assurance of salvation should be the privilege of every responsive and responsible believer in Christ. But what is becoming most apparent is that the Reformed/Calvinists do not possess any substantive theological or practical advantages over the Arminian/Adventist believers. In fact, if what has been discussed in this chapter has any ring of truth to it, the Arminian theological and spiritual resources are eminently more prone to be practically efficacious in generating the genuine article of true Christian assurance of salvation.

Therefore, with a balanced soteriology (the blessed *a priori's*) and a judicious, perceptive invocation of the privileges of Christian experience inherent in the enlightening power of the various witnesses of the Holy Spirit to their “spirits,” all sincere believers should be able to march forward to the kingdom of God with Christ’s “blessed assurance” providing spiritual steadiness to each step along the way.

Such appropriations of faith, enlightened and complemented by the transforming power of the “Spirit” of God, will assuredly carry any sincere believer through the trying times, be they fear of the investigative judgment, the close of probation, the personal and apocalyptic “times of trouble,” or even the latest challenging sermon on perfecting grace. Truly the resources are more than sufficient to carry each believer all the way to the eternal gates of glory. Amen and Amen!

16. Arminius, quoted in Carl Bangs, *Arminius: A Study in the Dutch Reformation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1971), 347.