

Mediating the War between Arminians and Calvinists on Election and Security: A Stone–Campbell Perspective

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When discussion between Arminians and Calvinists focuses on the economic revelation of redemption, the means of faith and the christocentric nature of salvation, their differences on election and security recede into a theoretical background as common ground emerges in theology and practice.

The relationship between the early Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement and the Baptists is historic. The Restoration Movement was born tethered to the Baptist movement, especially the Regular Baptists of Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky. Their relationship has sometimes been appreciative, often hostile, and always stormy.

The Regular Baptists were fundamentally Calvinist in theology.¹

1. I am aware that Southern Baptists are currently engaged in a discussion about how central Calvinism is to their theological heritage. On one side are those who distance themselves from “hyper-Calvinism” (as they call it) and even Calvinism altogether; see Fisher Humphreys, “Southern Baptists and Calvinism,” *Theological Educator* 55 (Spring 1997) 11-26, and Paul A. Basden, ed., *Has Our Theology Changed? Southern Baptist Thought Since 1845* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994). On the other side are those who believe that Calvinism is the authentic heritage of the Southern Baptists; see Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), and the numerous articles in the *Founders Journal* available at wwwFOUNDERS.org, such as Tom Nettles, “The Rise and Demise of Calvinism among Southern Baptists,” at wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ19/article1.html and Timothy George, “Southern Baptist Theology: Whence and Whither?” at wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ19/article2.html. There are calls for a re-Calvinization of the Southern Baptists; see R. Albert Mohler, Jr., “The Reformation of Doctrine and the Renewal of the Church: A Response to Dr. William R. Estep,” at www.sBTS.edu/mohler/estep.html, and Thomas Ascol, “Southern Baptists at the Crossroads,” at wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ19/editorial.html.

The Stone-Campbell Movement was not, though its relationship with Calvinism is also historic. It is essentially a free-church Reformed movement without the TULIP. Its first leaders (Barton W. Stone, Alexander Campbell, and Walter Scott) were Presbyterian. Their religious cultures and ideas were shaped by Reformed theology.² Indeed, it appears that Alexander Campbell still believed the Reformed doctrine of election in 1817, and his father, Thomas, was still willing to call himself a “Calvinist” in 1828.³ Nevertheless, they eventually rejected the TULIP. Stone rejected it in the context of his revivalism, Campbell in the light of his definition of faith, and Scott in favor of an evangelistic agenda that called for a response of faith.

Their main issue with Calvinism was the nature of assurance. Because both Stone and Campbell had spent time on the proverbial mourner’s bench waiting for some special sign of their election, they rebelled against any notion that people should wait for an inward work of the Spirit before they secured their assurance through trusting in Christ. Scott inaugurated a method of invitation (“Arise and be baptized for the remission of sins” instead of “praying through” on the mourner’s bench) that accentuated the active role of faith in the conversion moment. The Stone-Campbell Movement rejected Calvinism primarily because it did not provide assurance and left people who believed in Christ waiting at the mourner’s bench for God’s special call. Instead they called penitent believers to be immersed for the remission of sins and to rest assured in the grace of God’s work in Christ which baptism pledged to them.⁴

2. For example, concerning Walter Scott, see James O. Duke, “Walter Scott, Theologian,” in *Walter Scott: A Nineteenth-Century Evangelical* (ed. Mark G. Toulouse; St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1999) 61-78. On the current situation, see Allan J. McNichol, “Is the Stone-Campbell Movement an Identifiable Theological Tradition,” *ResQ* 41 (1999) 65-70.

3. Alexander Campbell, *Views of Mr. Alexander Campbell Concerning the Doctrines of Election and Reprobation as Embodied in the Circular Letter Addressed to the Churches in Connection with the Redstone Baptist Association, in 1817* (Fulton, MO: T.L. Stephens, 1856), available at www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/acampbell/etc/VACDEAR.HTM. The public statement by Thomas Campbell, made at a Mahoning Baptist Association meeting, is remembered by Aylett Raines in an 1868 letter published in A.S. Hayden, *A History of the Disciples on the Western Reserve* (1875; repr., Indianapolis, IN: Religious Book Service, n.d.) 167.

4. See John Mark Hicks, “‘God’s Sensible Pledge’: The Witness of the Spirit in the Early Baptismal Theology of Alexander Campbell,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 1 (Spring 1998) 5-26, available at www.stonecampbelljournal.com/pledge.html.

According to these early leaders, the TULIP prevented seekers from obtaining assurance except by their own subjective experiences for which they waited in agony and doubt. Consequently, the favorite target of early Reformers was the effectual calling of the Holy Spirit (as understood by the Regular Baptists). The Reformers called for faith and when faith was professed, they immersed those believers in the full assurance that God would remit their sins as he had promised. The TULIP, in their perspective, undermined that assurance. Instead, they emphasized the ability of all hearers to respond to the gospel, the active role of faith, and the role of baptism as an empirical assurance of God's promise to believers.

Theologically, the intersection of Baptists, Calvinists, and the early Stone-Campbell Movement is located in the nature of assurance.⁵ This evidences itself in two major ways. The first is the origin and nature of faith in relation to the work of the Holy Spirit. The second is the function of immersion in the conversion narrative. The TULIP, though not the only factor, deeply shapes how one addresses those theological questions. In turn, it will shape how one answers the pressing existential questions of assurance: When was I saved? How do I know I am saved? How do I stay saved?

The task of this study is to explore the doctrines of election and perseverance among those of the Stone-Campbell Movement in the context of the existential concern for assurance. First, representative views on election and perseverance will be surveyed. Second, some broad biblical-theological principles will be introduced that will provide a launching point for a proposal beyond the impasse. Third, major differences will be compared and contrasted in the hopes of proposing a way beyond the impasse.

5. As a result the consistent topics for debates between representatives of Baptists and the Stone-Campbell Movement were unconditional election, apostasy, and baptism for the remission of sins. On unconditional/conditional elections, see Benjamin Franklin and John A. Thompson, *An Oral Debate between Benjamin Franklin and John A. Thompson* (Cincinnati: Franklin & Rice, 1874); T.W. Brents and E.D. Herod, *A Theological Debate* (Cincinnati: Guide Printing & Publishing, 1887); Thomas R. Burnett and T.S. Dalton, *Debate on Salvation: Is It Conditional or Unconditional?* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1897); and Gus Nichols and J.D. Holder, *Nichols-Holder Debate* (Jasper, AL: Gus Nichols, 1954).

STONE-CAMPBELL HISTORICAL THEOLOGY

Election

The historic perspective, articulated by Walter Scott in the early years of the Stone-Campbell Movement was that the “disciples themselves were never spoken to on this matter as persons who had believed, because they were elect, but rather as those who were elect because they had believed.”⁶ Faith is the means of election and the “principle” of election is that those in Christ are elect. Christ is the Elect One, and all persons must be found in him “before they are elect.”⁷ Scott opposes the Calvinism in which he was born.⁸ His main concern is soteriological. Election is not dependent upon the arbitrary choice of the hidden will of God, but rather is offered to human beings through the gospel. Faith, as “a power of action in human nature,” is available to all through the gospel invitation.⁹ According to Scott, one does not preach election, but one preaches Christ and people are elect by faith in Christ.

Those of the Stone-Campbell Movement have generally followed Arminian lines of discussion regarding election. We have never given much attention to the topic and what attention we have generated has been polemical and reactive. It is rare to see a positive exposition of election, especially in the first 150 years (1809–1959). Nevertheless, where we have spoken, we have clearly been Arminian, and we have either opted for a corporate (general) election or the election of individuals through God’s foreknowledge.

Corporate Election. God elected the way of salvation, or the plan of salvation, but he did not elect specific individuals. He predestined a class: he predestined all those who are in Christ. This has been popularly represented as God predestines the “plan, but not the man.” Election

6. Philip [Walter Scott], “Migrati Coloni,” *Christian Baptist* 6 (March 2, 1829) 178. This is the first of a four-part series; “Election—No. II,” 6 (5 May 1829) 240-243; “Election—No. III,” 7 (5 October 1829) 69-73; “Election—No. IV,” 7 (5 October 1829), 73-77, available at www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wsconfig/cb/election.htm.

7. Scott, “Migrati Coloni,” 179.

8. *Ibid.*, 243: “I only observe here that Calvinistic election exhibits the divine sovereignty in a point in which it by no means obtains in christianity.”

9. Scott, “Migrati Coloni,” 73.

is corporate, not individual. This appears to be Walter Scott's understanding.¹⁰ J.W. McGarvey is also a major representative.¹¹ God elects the church, but not the individual, unconditionally.¹² The most well-known defender of this approach to election is Robert Shank.¹³

One variation of this understanding denies that God foreknows the future. In order to preserve human freedom, God chooses not to know the future (or that God cannot know the future). Since, according to this position, whatever God foreknows must necessarily happen, the action cannot be free or contingent. Consequently, God does not know who will be saved or who will be lost. He has elected no individual person. He has only determined to save as many as he can through Jesus Christ. T.W. Brents popularized this understanding as well as the denial of absolute omniscience.¹⁴

Individual Election. While the former position is the most dominant, the original vision of Arminius himself is embraced by some. Representatives are scattered throughout the history of the Stone-Campbell Movement, including Moses Lard,¹⁵ James A. Harding,¹⁶ and Roy H.

10. Walter Scott, "Calvinism—No. 2," *The Christian* 1 (April 1837) 89, says, "1st. God did decree from the beginning to elect or choose (in Christ) all that should believe to salvation. And this decree proceeds from his own goodness, and is not built upon any goodness in the creature. 2^{dly}. God did from the beginning decree to reprobate all, who should obstinately and finally continue in unbelief."

11. J.W. McGarvey and Philip Y. Pendleton, *Thessalonians, Corinthians, Galatians and Romans* (Cincinnati: Standard, n.d.) 366-367.

12. Robertson L. Whiteside, *A New Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Saints at Rome* (Denton, TX: Whiteside, 1945) 190, and Jimmy Allen, *Survey of Romans* (Searcy: Harding College, 1973) 82: "He determined that a *class* of people would be foreknown, predestined, called, justified and glorified. That class is composed of those who love him (8:28)."

13. Robert Shank, *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election* (Springfield, MO: Westcott, 1970).

14. T.W. Brents, *The Gospel Plan of Salvation* (16th ed.; 1874; repr., Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1973).

15. Moses Lard, *Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Romans* (1875; repr., Delight, AR: Gospel Light, n.d.) 281-282.

16. James A. Harding, "Unconditional Election and Reprobation," *Gospel Herald* 2 (October 1, 1914), 1, and "Unconditional Election and Reprobation. The Ninth Chapter of Romans," *Gospel Herald* 2 (5 November 1914) 1-2. These articles also appeared earlier in the *Gospel Advocate* 28 (1 December 1886) 760, and 28 (8 December 1886) 776.

Lanier, Sr.¹⁷ Its most recent defender is Jack Cottrell.¹⁸ In his commentary on *Romans* Cottrell argues that Rom 8:29 envisions the predestination of persons rather than a plan. Specifically, “God foreknew those who would love him.”¹⁹

In addition, there is a faint minority position that only views election in terms of service. Romans 9, consistently (though not unambiguously) is interpreted in terms of temporal election to service rather than soteriological.²⁰ Cottrell argues this extensively in his recent commentary.²¹ But others have extended this hermeneutical move to all election. Consequently, all election is election to service and nothing is soteriological in character. Though I have heard this verbally on several occasions, I can only document one published account. Benjamin Franklin, an Indiana preacher and editor in the mid-nineteenth century, apparently held this view. He argues that “no elect” are in the New Testament “but the apostles and prophets” who are the object of Paul’s discussion in Eph 1:4-12 and John 17:2-20.²² They are elected to divine service but this does not guarantee their salvation.

Assurance

Since assurance has always been a critical concern for those among the Stone-Campbell Movement, what it means to stay saved has always been a topic of discussion. While we have normatively thought that people are saved by grace through faith at baptism, heirs of the nineteenth-century movement disagree about how assurance is maintained once

17. Roy H. Lanier, Sr., *The Timeless Trinity* (Denver: Lanier, 1974) 142-143.

18. Jack Cottrell, *What the Bible Says about God the Ruler* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1984) 338-343, and “Unconditional Election,” in *Grace Unlimited* (ed. Clark Pinnock; Minneapolis: Bethany, 1975), 51-73.

19. Jack Cottrell, *Romans* (vol. 1; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1996) 505.

20. McGarvey, *Thessalonians*, 390: “Moreover, Paul is not discussing salvation, or foreordination as to eternity. There is not one word on that subject in the entire ninth chapter.”

21. Cottrell, *Romans* (vol. 2; Joplin, MO: College Press, 1998) 31-43, for his introduction and overview.

22. Benjamin Franklin, “Predestination and the Foreknowledge of God,” in *The Gospel Preacher* (vol. 1; 4th ed; Cincinnati: 1869) 255-279, which is available at www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/bfranklin/TGP11.HTM.

one is saved. A common stock phrase, derived from Rev 2:10, is that one must be faithful unto death.

But what does it mean to be faithful? The answer to that question is a watershed. It separates “grace-oriented” believers who seek assurance through faith from “works-oriented” believers who seek assurance through faithful obedience.²³ It is important to understand the difference between these two groups, not only for the understanding of assurance but also in the way in which the two groups understand the salvific significance of immersion.

Assurance through Faith. The means of assurance is faith as a submissive orientation to the will of God. Faith is directed toward Christ, yearns for his will and seeks his will. Faith is a trusting willingness to obey even though we do not always obey or even do the best we can. James A. Harding (d. 1922), the cofounder of Lipscomb University and the namesake of Harding University, is an example of this approach.²⁴

Fundamentally, faith is viewed as a means of salvation and works as evidence of faith. Works are secondary but important (even necessary). But they demonstrate faith rather than constitute righteousness. They testify to the life of faith. If faith is a means of salvation (and thus assurance), works are the means of faith. This would be the standard Reformed conception that faith is the root and works are the fruit. Both are important, but they must be properly correlated. Works bear witness to the genuineness of faith, but faith is the critical means of both salvation and assurance.

Assurance through Works. The means of assurance is works of obedience. Obedience becomes a means of salvation rather than just an evidence of faith. One’s salvation is measured by the “perfection” of his works. Saving righteousness depends, in some sense, upon works of righteous obedience. Indeed, the works of righteousness themselves con-

23. For a detailed discussion of these two camps see John Mark Hicks, “K.C. Moser and Churches of Christ: A Theological Perspective,” *ResQ* 37.4 (1995) 193-211, and “K.C. Moser and Churches of Christ: An Historical Perspective,” *ResQ* 37.3 (1995) 139-157. The original lecture on Moser may be accessed at johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=3898.

24. See John Mark Hicks, “The Gracious Separatist: Moral and Positive Law in the Theology of James A. Harding,” *ResQ* 42.3 (2000) 129-147.

stitute part of the righteousness by which one stands before God. Therefore, one is only assured if there is a sense that one's life is "right."²⁵

Consequently, the measure of assurance is the measure of works, that is, their quality, number, and comprehensiveness. Works do not simply serve as evidence of faith, they are the righteousness of salvation. They do not simply testify that we are "right" with God, but they make us "right" with God. Works, in this view, have an independent value. It is not simply a "faith that works," but it is rather "faith and works" where they stand in equal relation to each other as means of salvation and assurance.

Two Attitudes toward "Calvinist" Theology

Condemnation. The general attitude among those of the Stone-Campbell Movement has been condemnation. Calvinism, according to the rhetoric, destroys assurance, undermines ethics, and slanders God. Most would probably see Calvinism as a damning heresy. A recent example among the Churches of Christ (a cappella) would be the 1998 Houston College of the Bible Lectureship entitled *Calvinism*.²⁶ Generally speaking, "Calvinism" has an ugly ring in the ears of the vast majority of people in Churches of Christ.

Adiaphora. Others, however, see Calvinism more as a theory than a damnable heresy. As a theory, it might be a strongly held opinion, but that does not disrupt fellowship between believers as long as the opinion does not lead to sin (an immoral lifestyle). McGarvey is an example:²⁷

In like manner, I can imagine a man believing some lies in religion, which, though they may injure him some, and I suppose there are very few that would not, might yet fall far short of proving fatal to him. I think that the doctrine of election as taught in the old creeds is false in the extreme; but

25. See n. 23 above. Rusty Stark, "The 'Treadmill of Trying Hard' Is Good Exercise," *Seeking the Old Paths* 12.2 (February 2001) 12-13, provides a contemporary example ("Whatever else we say, we should first admit that God wants us to work in order to receive and maintain the salvation he has offered us."), available at www.tsixroads.com/~ecorinth/stop201.htm#TTOT.

26. David P. Brown, ed., *Calvinism* (Spring, TX: Bible Resource Publications, 1998).

27. J.W. McGarvey, *Sermons, Delivered in Louisville, Kentucky, June-September, 1893* (Louisville, KY: Guide Printing and Publishing, 1894) 334, available at www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/texts/wmgarvey/sdlk/SDLK24.HTM.

I think that many a man has believed it all his life, and then gone to heaven when he died. What, then, is the distinction? It is to be traced out by remembering that there is only one thing that can keep men out of heaven, or keep them estranged from God in this life. That one thing is sin. Nothing else does or can stand between God and any man. If the belief of a lie, then, leads a man to commit sin, it will prove fatal unless that sin shall be forgiven. It was thus with the young prophet. The lie which he believed led him to disobey God. His disobedience was the immediate cause, while the belief of a lie was only the remote cause of his death.

McGarvey's perspective was probably the dominant one in the nineteenth century, except where the assurance of salvation was at stake (as in discussions of baptism), but his opinion has been overwhelmed by a hostile attitude toward Calvinism in the twentieth century.

BIBLICAL THEMES

Several biblical themes provide a framework for articulating a common ground that can propel us beyond the impasse. This study makes no claim to any theological ingenuity or originality here. Quite the contrary, these theological principles are common ground between believers. It is precisely because this is true that they may provide a way to unpack a common theological framework.

Divine Initiative

Whatever the doctrine of election means, it at least insists that God took the initiative in the redemption of fallen humanity. God made the first move. We love because he first loved. We believe because he first acted. We are redeemed because he accomplished redemption for us.

Initiative involves not merely the first act (as if God acted first and then passively sits back to see how we respond). God continuously acts as he unrelentingly pursues a people for himself. God's love pursues us, engages us, and moves us.

Further, this entails that all boasting is negated. We have nothing about which to boast except what God has done in Jesus. Election means that God has removed all grounds for human merit and has located the ground of salvation in his gracious and loving acts.

Christocentrism

Christ is the Elect One (Ephesians 1). God chose Christ as the savior of the world. He is God's chosen vessel for redemption. Both Calvin and Arminius emphasized this point, and it has been powerfully renewed in the twentieth century by Karl Barth. Election is christo-centric since Christ is God's Elect One.

Whatever election we have, we are elect because we are in Christ. Before we become steeped in the theoretical underpinnings of election, we must not lose sight of this foundational soteriological insight: God has chosen us in Christ because he has chosen Christ. We are only elect through Christ. His election is logically and ontologically prior to our own. We cannot think biblically about election if we do not first acknowledge that our election depends on the election of Christ.

Economic Revelation

The election of Christ, of course, is a revealed point. We only know that God has acted decisively in Jesus as the Elect One because God has revealed himself in history and interpreted his actions in Scripture. We only know our election in Christ because God has revealed his Elect One.

Paul makes this point in 2 Tim 1:8-11. God "has saved us and called us to a holy life," and the ground of this salvation and calling is not our own works, but God's "purpose and grace." We know this grace by God's decisive act in Jesus. Even though it was hidden before creation, "it has now been revealed through the appearing" of Jesus.

Debates about the "secret" will of God are unprofitable exactly because that will is "secret." We know our election through the revelation of God in Christ. God has revealed his election through Christ, and we have no other access to it. Consequently, we ought to think about election within the salvation history of God's story, that is, within the revealed history of God in Israel and Christ. Thinking about the election of God in terms of the "eternal" mind of God is speculative, but thinking about divine election in the light of Jesus Christ is rooted in God's historical revelation.

We perceive our own election only through the revelation of that election in Christ. When we step outside of or seek to go beyond this historic revelation, we enter worlds, which our minds have created

rather than what God has revealed. Election and assurance are economically tied to Christ. There the focus should begin and end.

Means of Faith

Faith is the means of both justification and sanctification. When we make justification dependent upon sanctification, then we begin a never-ending journey since we will never be sure whether our sanctification is sufficient (in terms of its depth, amount, comprehensiveness and quality). When we sever the relationship between justification and sanctification, we become antinomian and discredit the role of sanctification as evidence of justification. The way to avoid legalism on the one hand and antinomianism on the other is to see faith as the principle that unites justification and sanctification.²⁸

We are justified by faith and we are sanctified by faith. Faith is the means by which we are accounted righteous before God, and faith is the means by which the Spirit transforms us. Faith is both the means of salvation and the means of assurance. We are elect, then, through faith in Christ. Faith functions as an instrument, not as a meritorious act. It is the means by which we come to know our own election.

BEYOND THE IMPASSE?

Election

Traditional Arminianism.²⁹ Election is the effect of faith. There is an election independent of faith, and this is God's own election of Jesus Christ. God took the initiative to redeem and elected Jesus Christ to save the world. In that sense election is not the effect of faith, but in the application of redemption, faith functions as a means by which election is known. It is also a cooperative, dynamic relationship between God and humanity. Faith is synergistic in the sense that God yearns for reciprocal and authentic relationship between himself and his people. In this sense

28. See John Mark Hicks, "An Historical-Overview of the Grace-Works Issue," in *Grace, Faith, Works: How Do They Relate? Annual Preachers Forum 1992* (ed. C. Philip Slate; Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs, 1992) 5-28, available at johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=3912.

29. A recent Arminian exposition of the doctrine of grace is found in Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993).

election is the effect of faith where faith functions as a means to election. God has elected Christ, and we are elect in Christ through faith where faith is understood as a free response to God's gracious work in Christ.

The difference between Arminianism **A** and Arminianism **B** (see below for categories) is the role they assign to works. Arminianism **A** believes that faith alone is the principle and means of election, but **B** believes that works are also a means of election. The former affirms a faith that works, but the latter affirms faith *and* works as the means of election.

Traditional Reformed. Faith is the effect of election. People come to faith because they are elect and no one else comes to authentic faith. Election decrees faith; or election selects those who will have faith, and God gives them faith by his own free grace and initiative. God is the sole cause of faith, and faith comes irresistibly to those whom God has elected. This is the common ground of Calvinism.

The difference between Calvinism **C** and Calvinism **D** is the role of perseverance. Calvinism **C** believes that perseverance is necessary—only the elect persevere and all the elect will persevere in faith. Calvinism **D** believes that the elect do not necessarily persevere though they are elect through a moment of faith at some point in their lives.³⁰

Theoretical Reconciliation? Is there a theoretical construct that can encompass both? Can we retain the priority of election and human responsibility for faith together? Can faith both be a sovereign gift of God irresistibly given to the elect and also a human act of trust in God's offer of salvation?

Some will live with mystery here.³¹ Some will seek to remove as many cognitive difficulties as possible through compatibilism though

30. Not all who believe the specific point of Calvinism **D** described above are Calvinists in the technical sense. They may deny the whole TULIP but yet affirm the specific point that distinguishes Calvinism **C** from Calvinism **D**. Indeed, most advocates of "Calvinism **D**" are, in fact, anti-Calvinists (they do not believe the TULIP or only affirm a few of its points), so there is a sense in which my classification is a misnomer. See Philip F. Congdon, "Soteriological Implications of Five-Point Calvinism," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 8 (Autumn 1995) at www.faihalone.org/journal/1995ii/Congdon.htm. For a harsh critique of dispensational soteriology as a warped version of Calvinism, see John H. Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth: A Critique of Dispensationalism* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1991).

31. Gerald L. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

recognizing mystery remains.³² Others believe that a solution can be found in some theoretical construct such as Molinism.³³ I will not pursue these here except to say that perhaps some theological construct can reconcile the biblical tensions so that both Calvinism and Arminianism are preserved. I do not see it at the moment, but I would not deny it to the infinite God and I would not discourage attempts to seek it as long as the historic work of God in Christ is still primary.

Each can accept certain nuances in the other. Arminians, for example, can say that election is the cause of faith in some senses (divine initiative and the enabling work of the Spirit). Calvinists can say that election is the effect of faith in some senses (faith as a means of salvation and faith as the revelation of election). But there is still a fundamental chasm. Perhaps it comes down to the question “Why do some believe and others do not?”

Calvinists want to avoid any hint of human merit by construing faith as an irresistible gift to the elect. God graciously elected them to believe. Thus, faith is wholly located in God’s electing grace and sovereign work. This preserves God’s glory and it excludes all human boasting. This is the motive that drives Calvinism’s doctrine of election.

Arminians want to avoid locating the damnation of any human being in the “secret” will of God. Arminians answer the question “Why are some lost?” with “because they did not believe.” The reason why some believe and others do not should not be located in the intent of God, for he is, in a revealed sense, willing that all believe. Calvinists rightly argue that the damned are damned because of their own sin and that, were it not for the grace of God, everyone would be damned. But even though it is humanity’s fault that they are damned, the Arminian cannot see why, on the Calvinist understanding of things, it is not God’s fault that everyone does not believe. If the question the Arminian seeks to answer

32. D.A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), and “Reflections on Christian Assurance,” *WTJ* 54 (1992) 1-29.

33. William Lane Craig, “Middle Knowledge, A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?” in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism* (ed. Clark Pinnock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989) 141-164, and “‘Lest anyone should fall’: A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic Warnings,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 29 (April 1991) 65-74, available at www.leaderu.com/offices/billcraig/docs/lest.html.

is “Why are some lost?” the further question they want the Calvinist to answer is “Why does not everyone believe?” The Arminian motive, then, is to absolve God of responsibility for unbelief. The Arminian seeks to preserve the faithfulness of God to his own relentless love.

Theoretically, then, reconciling these opposing positions is not possible. Both have a biblical emphasis and laudable motives. As long as Calvinists stress human responsibility and as long as Arminians stress divine sovereignty, perhaps we can live with the biblical tension as a mystery beyond our finitude. But is there a practical theology that preserves both without resolving the theoretical tension?

Assurance

Faith: Instrument of Justification and Sanctification³⁴

Theological Points	A	B	C	D
Faith And Works	Yes	No	No	No
Faith That Works	No	Yes	Yes	No
Faith Without Works	No	No	No	Yes

Arminian Camp.

Assurance through Works. The focus of assurance is not only faith, but works. We are assured through faith and works. An imperfection in the nature, number, and quality of the works undermines the assurance of faith. Obedience is necessary, not just as an evidence of faith, but as a part of the constitution of faith itself. Works are not merely evidential, but they are instrumental. Obedience is necessary as a means of justification/sanctification as opposed to faith alone. Works, as the obedience of faith, stand alongside of faith in equal importance. Thus, moral imperfection in one aspect of sanctification condemns the believer. This is position “A” in the above chart. One contemporary example among those of the Stone-Campbell Movement is William Woodson.³⁵ While

34. A represents works-oriented Arminians, B represents grace-oriented Arminians (Arminius), C represents traditional Reformed theology (Calvin), and D represents Hyper-Calvinists (Grace Evangelical Society).

35. William Woodson, *Change Agents and Churches of Christ: A Study in Contemporary Problems with Change Agents among Churches of Christ* (Athens, AL: Sain, 1994) 187-280, argues that works are not only evidential but also instrumental for both justification and sanctification (275): “If the good works God has ordained for the Christian are not only evidential but also instrumen-

there may be some Southern Baptists that fit this category, I am not aware of any significant advocate such a position.

Assurance through Faith. The focus of assurance is not the number, quality, and types of works. Rather, faith is exhibited in a willingness to seek God's will in all things and to trust in Christ alone for salvation. This faith is not alone but is active. It is a faith that works. Nevertheless, faith is the means of assurance. Where there is no faith, there is no assurance. When unbelief crowds out faith, then there is no salvation since grace is through faith. This is the position "B" in the above chart. Contemporary examples of this position among those of the Stone-Campbell Movement are Rubel Shelly and myself.³⁶ Some Southern Baptists, such as Dale Moody and Frank Stagg, would fall into this category.³⁷

Reformed Camp.³⁸

Perseverance of the Saints. This is the traditional Reformed understanding of assurance as seen in Calvin and the Puritans, and it appears to be the traditional Southern Baptist position as well.³⁹ Only those who persevere in faith are elect and all the elect will persevere. Authentic saints (elect ones) will persevere and die in faith. Their persevering faith is evi-

tal, they must be done or the Christian is violating the will of God and must repent and confess his sins to be forgiven; otherwise, his soul may be lost eternally."

36. See Hicks, "An Historical-Overview," 5-28 (www.hugsr.edu/Hicks/gfw.htm) and Rubel Shelly, "Grace and Works in Romans 4-5 and James 2:14-26," in *Grace, Faith, Works*, 69-84, available at www.faithmatters.com/topics/grace2.htm.

37. Dale Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981); Dale Moody, *Apostasy: A Study in the Epistle to the Hebrews and in Baptist History* (Greenville, SC: Smyth & Helwys, 1991); and Frank Stagg, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1962).

38. A traditional, but recent and well-informed, Reformed presentation of this subject would be Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

39. The *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) reads: "All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the State of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, bring reproach on the cause of Christ, and temporal judgments on themselves, yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation" (from www.sbc.net/bfm5.cfm). This is consistent with other particular Baptist confessions, such as the London Confession of 1644, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1742, Abstract of Principles of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1858) and the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of 1925 (cf. www.baptistart.com/persev-quotes.htm).

dence of their election and the evidence of their faith is good works. Works are viewed as evidential rather than instrumental. Consequently, the understanding of faith is the same as that of position “B” above. This Reformed position is designated as “C” in the above chart. Some contemporary examples of this position among Southern Baptists would include Thomas Schreiner, Adrian Rogers, and the Founders Conference.⁴⁰

Eternal Security (or, “Once Saved, Always Saved”). If any have genuinely and authentically believed at some point, whether they continue to persevere in faith or not, whether they ever evidence faith again or not, they are eternally secure. They have eternal life by virtue of that one moment of trust in the past. Johannine realized eschatology is especially important for this perspective, particularly the present possession of eternal life in John’s writings. Consequently, works are not only unnecessary as means of assurance and salvation, but also as evidence. One can be eternally secure even if their lives are filled with evil works, much less lacking good works. This position is designated by “D” in the above chart. It is the advocacy of the Grace Evangelical Society.⁴¹ Some of its historic advocates have been associated with Dallas Theological Seminary.⁴² Some prominent Southern Baptists, such as Charles Stanley, defend this position.⁴³

40. Thomas R. Schreiner, “Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal,” *SBJT* 2 (1998), 32-62, and Adrian Rogers, “Biblical Faith—What It Is and How to Have It,” at bellevue.org/messages/msg16.htm, “How to Be Sure You Are Eternally Secure Part 1,” at bellevue.org/messages/msg3.htm, “How to Be Sure You Are Eternally Secure Part 2,” at bellevue.org/messages/msg4.htm and “How to Be Saved and Know It,” at bellevue.org/messages/msg2.htm. The Southern Baptist Founders Conference certainly follows traditional Reformed theology as is evidenced by the endorsement of John MacArthur’s advocacy of “Lordship Salvation” by Bill Ascol and Hershael York’s rejection of Dale Moody’s *Apostasy* at wwwFOUNDERS.org/FJ07/reviews.html. Also, the *Founders Journal* (at wwwFOUNDERS.org) has a series of articles by Ernest Reisinger which support the Lordship side of the controversy over against the Grace Evangelical Society.

41. See their website at www.faihalone.org.

42. The most recent and visible advocate is Zane Hodges, *The Gospel under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), *Gospel in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards* (2nd ed.; Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1987), *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989). John MacArthur, Jr. has been the most vocal opponent of this development; see *The Gospel according to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), *Faith Works: The Gospel according to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993), and “Perseverance of the Saints,” *The McMaster’s Seminary Journal* 4 (Spring 1993), 5-24, available at www.mastersen.edu/journal/j4mac.htm. The extreme of this

Shared Convictions.

The above chart illustrates the shared convictions of positions **B** and **C**. While neither **B** nor **C** can theologically approve of **A** and **D** on the relationship between faith and works, **B** and **C** can live harmoniously with each other. The difference between **B** and **C** is illustrated below, but on this specific issue they share a common ground in opposition to **A** and **D**. This shared conviction provides a good basis for dialogue.

Common Ground

Theological Common Ground.

Election Revealed in Christ. God's election (whatever it may be) is revealed in Jesus Christ. The election of God is, in this sense, historically conditioned. It is tied to the history of Jesus Christ. He is the elect one, and all those in him are elect. Election, then, should first be understood in relation to Jesus rather than in relation to the eternal decrees. Election should function as part of our christology rather than our "theology proper." Calvin understood this. He placed his discussion of election in the context of assurance. Beza, who came after him, and Reformed theologians in general, placed the doctrine of election in the doctrine of God in conjunction with Predestination and the Divine Decrees. We can move beyond the impasse to some degree if we again see Election in its christologically revealed history rather than in the eternal decrees of God. In other words, we need to view election through

position is not a caricature. R.T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody, 1983), 19: "Whoever once truly believes that Jesus was raised from the dead, and confesses that Jesus is Lord, will go to heaven when he dies. But I will not stop there. Such a person will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith." Also, Robert N. Wilkin, "Saving Faith and Apostasy: Do Believers Ever Stop Believing?" *GES News* (November 1991), available at www.faithalone.org/news/y1991/91nov2.html: "While our salvation is guaranteed from the moment we trust in Christ, our faith is not."

43. Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990) 74: "The Bible clearly teaches that God's love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand." Also Charles Stanley, *Understanding Eternal Security* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), and his articles on the web at security/, especially "If Someone Stops Believing How Does That Affect Their Salvation?" at security/stop.html where he writes: "Forgiveness/salvation is applied at the moment of faith. It is not the same thing as faith. And its permanence is not contingent upon the permanence of one's faith."

the lens of redemptive history (salvation history) rather than through the metaphysic of an eternal divine decree within the immanent Trinity.

Faith as Means of Election. The instrumental nature of faith is a given in Protestant theology. Faith contains no merit. It is, as Luther said, the beggar's hand that receives what God freely gives. We can find common ground here even though Arminians and Calvinists might disagree about whether faith is the cause or the effect of election. We can agree it is the means of election and that faith is the evidence of election.

The Common Ground. Thus, Christ alone through faith alone is at the center of the doctrine of election.⁴⁴ Theological common ground is possible here where we would find none in debating the speculative order or nature of the divine decrees before creation dawned. We do not have access to that eternal mind, but we do have access to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and we are confident of our election in Christ through faith.

Practical Common Ground.

Both **B** and **C** agree that *those who persevere in faith are elect*. We may disagree about the theory that lies behind this statement, but we will not disagree with the statement. We may disagree about whether the elect persevere because they are elect or whether they are elect because they persevere. Whatever the theory, those who persevere are elect. **D** can agree with this statement as well, though they would add that all who have believed are elect whether they persevere or not. Even **A** might agree with this statement though they would add “works” to faith.

Yet, because **D** and **A** have these caveats, common ground with them ends here. Difficult practical questions remain about living together when one theology insists that even those who do not persevere may be elect (**D**) and where another theology insists on a kind of perfectionism (**A**). The former subtly (and unintentionally) undermines holiness, while the latter subtly (and unintentionally) undermines grace. The former have assurance without evidence and the latter have little, if any, assurance despite evidence.

44. By “faith alone” I mean that faith is the only principle by which a human receives the gift of salvation. The relationship of faith and baptism is the subject of another paper, though I would affirm that baptism is a means of grace through faith rather than a work that evidences sanctification or merely symbolic of salvation already received. Cf. John Mark Hicks and Greg Taylor, *Down in the River to Pray: Revisioning Baptism as God's Transforming Work* (Orange, CA: Leafwood Press, 2003).

Nevertheless, practical common ground is maintained when the church maintains its holiness and disciplines those who do not persevere. Even **D** disciplines members, but they do so without making a judgment about their election. Practically, then, even those who believe in “eternal security” maintain holiness boundaries in the local church. Where discipline breaks down due to “eternal security,” however, that practical common ground is lost.

Practically, then, the key question for election and assurance is our historic relation to Jesus Christ. While some Augustinians in the history of theology have focused the question in terms of “Am I elect?” most have recognized that this is not the proper question. No one can see into the hidden will of God to discover in the abstract whether they are elect or not. Calvin believed that one who tries this “Am I elect?” question “casts himself into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he tangles himself in innumerable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness. . . . Consequently, if we fear shipwreck, we must carefully avoid this rock, against which no one is ever dashed without destruction.”⁴⁵

The key question is: do you trust in Christ? Calvin correctly says that the question is not “Am I elect?” but “Do I trust Christ?” Calvin spoke of Christ as “the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own election.”⁴⁶ Faith is the means of election, and our only access into the electing decision of God is through faith. Through faith I see my election, and here **B** and **C** agree.

Assurance, then, is christological: I am elect as I trust in Christ as the elect one. Election “from below” is mediated through faith in Christ. Here Augustinians and Arminians can agree. “If Pighius asks me how I know I am elect,” Calvin writes, “my answer is that Christ is, to me, more than a thousand testimonies.”⁴⁷ Only in Christ are we elect and pleasing to God, and so it is to him that we must turn. He is the Elect One and mediates election. The critical issue is “do we trust

45. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.4, in LCC series (ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960) 2:968-969.

46. *Ibid.*, 3.24.5 (2:970).

47. Calvin, “The Eternal Predestination of God,” in *Calvin’s Calvinism* (trans. Henry P. Cole; London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1856) 137, available at www.reformedreader.org/cctreatise08.htm.

Christ?” According to Calvin, Christ is the mirror of our election, and when we look at Christ through faith we see our own election.

CONCLUSION: CAN WE LIVE WITH THE THEORETICAL DIFFERENCES?

In conclusion, let me raise two points that focus this study. First, it builds on I. Howard Marshall’s suggestion that practical agreement between Calvinists and Arminians exists. Second, it calls for a theological method that seeks unity through reflection on the economic realities of redemption rather than reflection on the eternal decrees of God.

Commenting on the differences between Calvinists and Arminians over the warning texts, Marshall writes:⁴⁸

If a person is in the former group, he has still to heed the warning: only by so doing can he show that he is one of the elect. In other words, the Calvinist ‘believer’ cannot fall away from ‘true’ faith, but he can ‘fall away’ from what proves in the end to be only seeming faith. The possibility of falling away remains. But in neither case does the person know for certain whether he is a true or a seeming disciple. All that he knows is that Christ alone can save and that he must trust in Christ, and that he sees signs in his life which may give him some assurance that he is a true disciple. But these signs may be misleading.

It comes down to a question of assurance. Whoever said, ‘The Calvinist knows that he cannot fall from salvation but does not know whether he has got it,’ had it summed up nicely. But this can be counterfeit and misleading. The non-Calvinist knows that he has salvation—because he trusts in the promises of God—but is aware that, left to himself, he could lose it. So he holds to Christ. It seems to me the practical effect is the same.

This “practical effect” is crucial. It is not only pragmatics, but it is the historic situation of the church in the history of redemption. This is where the church lives. We trust in Christ alone for our salvation by grace alone. We know our present salvation, and we know the faithfulness of God to those who persevere in faith.

As Carson points out, despite the practical similarity, the “underly-

48. I. Howard Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990) 313. Marshall has earlier contributed a significant book to this discussion, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1969).

ing structures” for the Calvinist and the Arminian are quite different.⁴⁹ But it is precisely these “underlying structures” that are matters of inference and are not rooted firmly in the history of redemption. These “underlying structures” project us into the eternal mind of God rather than locate us in the historic redemption God worked in Jesus Christ.

This study calls for a theological methodology that lives within the economy of redemption, within salvation history without speculating about the mind of God. When we leave speculation and theory outside of the discussion and focus on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, we can live together in theological and practical harmony by affirming that God initiated our redemption out of pure grace, that he elected us in Jesus Christ, that Jesus Christ is the mirror of our own election and that persevering faith is the means of both recognizing that election and continuing in the assurance of that election.

This is especially true for **B** and **C**. We can live together if we focus on the economic revelation of redemption though we may still disagree about the theory that lies behind the origin of faith. The only major difference is the theory of election.

In fact, this is exactly where Thomas Schreiner concludes his discussion. He finds the Arminian position that “believers can and do lose their salvation much more biblically coherent” but because he sees such a strong emphasis on “unconditional election” in Scripture that he cannot adopt it.⁵⁰ It is the doctrine of election that marks the watershed.

But that watershed is a theory of election rooted in the “secret” will of God. If instead we affirm the redemptive-historical themes of election (divine initiation, exclusion of human boasting, grace) and call believers to perseverance in faith (trusting in Christ’s election and submitting to

49. Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 21. Zane C. Hodges, “The New Puritanism Part 1: Carson on Christian Assurance,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 6 (Spring 1993), available at www.faithalone.org/journal/1993i/Hodges.html, argues that the practical similarity demonstrates that Carson’s position is a compromise with Arminianism.

50. Schreiner, “Perseverance,” 56-57. While Schreiner camps on election, Clark Pinnoch, formerly of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, has written that it was the crumbling of the P doctrine in TULIP that first alerted him to his own shift away from Calvinism. See his “From Augustine to Arminius: A Pilgrimage in Theology,” in *The Grace of God, The Will of Man*, 15-30, available at http://home.rochester.rr.com/matthewl/predestination/freewill_pages/pilgrimage.htm.

his Lordship), we have the theological common ground to build a mutually appreciative understanding between Calvinists and Arminians.

Calvinism and Arminianism debate the problem of the hidden counsel of God. But our access to that hidden counsel is only through God's historic revelation. We cannot approach God in his hiddenness, but only in his revelation. That revelation is Jesus Christ who is the Elect One. Calvinism and Arminianism both find their election in Christ through faith. There is no theologically significant practical difference between the two.^{SCJ}



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