

Dr. Sam Storms
Enjoying God Ministries

Four Views on Eternal Security
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Edited by
J. Matthew Pinson

Here we find yet another installment in the Counterpoints Series from Zondervan. There are now fifteen volumes, ranging in subject matter from miraculous gifts (to which I contributed) to women in ministry, from hell to the millennium, etc. Generally speaking, these have proven to be extremely helpful, as they provide the reader with brief, but competent, summaries of the many options on a particular topic, together with critical responses from each contributor.

This particular volume will no doubt prove popular, insofar as it addresses one of the most divisive issues in the history of the church: the perseverance of the saints. Do all those who come to saving faith in Christ persevere, or is it possible for a born-again believer to apostatize and forfeit his/her salvation?

I have mixed feelings about this volume. The contributions are uneven and differ widely in terms of the success with which they articulate their chosen views. Before I get to the heart of the issues at stake, a brief word about the format of the book is in order. There is a helpful introduction by the general editor, J. Matthew Pinson, President of Free Will Baptist Bible College in Nashville, Tennessee. The latter immediately reveals where Pinson stands on the subject at hand, although his summary is fair and well-written.

There then follows a chapter on the “Classical Calvinist” view by Michael Horton, associate professor of apologetics and historical theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, Escondido, California. The second chapter contains Norman Geisler’s defense of what he calls a “Moderate Calvinist” view. Geisler is president and professor of theology and apologetics at Southern Evangelical Seminary, Charlotte, North Carolina. The “Reformed Arminian” view is written by Stephen Ashby, assistant professor of philosophy and religious studies at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana. Finally, the “Wesleyan Arminian” position is defended by J. Steven Harper, vice-president and dean and professor of spiritual formation and Wesley studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. Each of these chapters is followed by a critical response from each author, as is the typical format in this series. The only thing lacking is a concluding chapter by the editor in which one would expect a final summation of the debate.

Let me make one initial observation. I was deeply disappointed by the brevity of Horton’s chapter, not least because he represents, generally speaking, the view that I embrace. His chapter is only 19 pages long, while each of the other three is at least 49 pages in length! Why Horton chose not to take advantage of the opportunity for an additional 30 pages to articulate his view is beyond me. There is so much that could, and should, have been said of the Calvinist view. I must say, however, that Horton’s critical responses to the other three are exceptionally good and quite insightful.

So let's begin with Horton's chapter. He is surely correct when he says that "merely to read Romans 8:29-39 is apparently to lay the whole debate to rest" (25). Interestingly, neither of the Arminian authors carefully investigates this text or responds to its unequivocal affirmation of the security and salvific safety of the believer. After briefly noting the so-called "Arminian texts" such as Hebrews 6 and 10, Horton turns to a discussion of Covenant Theology, believing that it provides a paradigm for interpreting all problem passages. His explanation of the covenants of redemption, works, and grace is superb, and reflects a traditional Reformed perspective.

Horton's argument is best seen in his treatment of the notoriously difficult Hebrews 6 passage. He contends that the blessings listed in vv. 4-5 are experienced neither by the "saved" nor the "unsaved" but by those persons who belong to the covenant community but who have not been regenerated or come to saving faith in Christ. Horton believes that a "covenant child" (i.e., the child of a believing parent who was baptized as an infant into the covenant of grace and thus is exposed to the "sanctified sphere of the Spirit's work"[37]) can experience everything mentioned in vv. 4-5 without being saved. In other words, by virtue of infant baptism, a person can become a "member" of the covenant without "truly embracing the word that is preached" (37). It is to such persons that the warning passages, threatening the consequences of apostasy, are addressed. Such a person "belongs to the covenant community and experiences thereby the work of the Spirit through the means of grace, and yet is regenerate" (37).

He faults the other views for failing to recognize "a category for a person who is in the covenant but not personally united by living faith to Jesus Christ" (37). Such persons, "born into the covenant of grace, like all of Abraham's offspring, . . . must nevertheless be united to Christ through faith. The warnings that Jesus and the writer to the Hebrews issue are challenges not merely to belong to the covenant externally but to embrace the reality that the covenant promises and conveys by the Spirit through the word and sacraments" (37-38). This is evidently why Horton feels no need to exegete in detail the many passages that speak of "falling away" or "making shipwreck of faith" or the like. All such folk who "fall" in this way are unregenerate "members" of the covenant by virtue of their baptism as infants of believing parents who, in the final analysis, utterly reject the promises of cleansing and forgiveness that both baptism and the Eucharist proclaimed.

Perhaps at another time I can respond at length to this application of covenant theology, but I'll only say here that, as a thoroughly convinced baptist, I find it entirely unpersuasive. There is no indication in the New Testament that anyone was regarded as a member of the New Covenant (as promised in Jeremiah 31 and instituted by Christ at the last supper) apart from a personal, conscious act of faith in the redemptive work and resurrection life of Jesus Christ. I readily grant that children of believing parents, or adults who first make contact with the church at a later stage in life, can become recipients of the non-redemptive blessings that flow from "common grace", all the while remaining in unbelief. In fact, I think that is precisely what is in view in Hebrews 6. But Horton's attempt to connect this with the supposed spiritual benefits of infant baptism (one of which he identifies as the "sealing" of the Spirit [37]) is perhaps the principal flaw in all forms of traditional covenant theology. Horton is an extremely competent theologian and I'm glad to have him on "my side" in this debate, but appealing to covenant theology in this way to substantiate his reading of the "problem" passages is, in my opinion, weak.

Geisler's response is minimal. He makes no attempt to interact with Horton's appeal to covenant theology and how it provides a way to interpret the warning texts. Not only here but throughout his entire contribution to this volume he seems content merely to compare and contrast the various options, pointing out where classical Calvinists agree or disagree with his position, or where his position agrees or disagrees with one of the two Arminian options. If Horton disappoints in writing so little, Geisler disappoints in saying so little while writing so much.

Ashby's response to Horton is more substantive. While he acknowledges that a "covenantal structure" is present in Scripture, he finds Horton's appeal to a three-fold paradigm as a way of accounting for the "apostasy" texts "rather speculative" (50); i.e., it is an example of "the tendency to allow dogmatics to take precedence over one's exegesis" (54). Ashby argues, correctly in my opinion, that "to say that a large body of individuals, that is, the children of the covenant, are included in the covenant of grace through paedobaptism would seem to me to be dismissive of all those Calvinists who do not baptize their infants" (52).

Briefly, Harper is no more convinced by Horton than is Ashby. "As far as I know," writes Harper, "all Christians would understand God's grace (if, in fact, that is what Horton means by 'the circle of the covenant') as being wider than simply *saving* grace. Yet the covenant theology Horton describes ends up creating a third category of people who are essentially 'hypocrites' (the term he himself uses to describe them), because they accept the benefits of the covenant without offering their commitment to it" (58). Harper says this fails to address the subject of the book, namely, whether "saints" (not "hypocrites") persevere or fall from grace.

Perhaps the strangest thing about Geisler's essay is the title: "A Moderate Calvinist View," given the fact that there is virtually nothing Calvinistic about it. Why Geisler insists on calling himself a "moderate Calvinist" is baffling. He is, at best, what my mentor S. Lewis Johnson used to call, "a Whiskey Calvinist": he only takes a fifth! That is to say, of the historical five points of Calvinism, Geisler embraces only the concept of eternal security.

Geisler's contribution is so riddled with caricature of what he calls strong Calvinism that I couldn't even begin to list the examples. Horton does a good job in his response of pointing out a number of them. One example is Geisler's assertion that according to strong Calvinists "a person receives the gift of salvation against his or her will" (66). Again, he says that moderate Calvinists "are convinced that God's irresistible grace is effectual on the *willing* (the elect) but not on the *unwilling*" (66). I'm still trying to figure out how grace that is "irresistible" is not "effectual"! After once again listing ways in which the various interpretations either agree or disagree with each other, Geisler proceeds to comment on twenty-seven passages that he believes teach the security of the believer. I would agree with his interpretation of several of these texts, but I don't think anyone will be convinced that Job 19:25-26; Eccles. 3:14; John 3:18; 5:24; Romans 4:5-6; 11:29; 1 Cor. 12:13; 2 Cor. 5:17,21; Eph. 1:4-5; 2:5-6; 2 Tim. 4:18; or Heb. 12:2 can be used to settle the dispute. Geisler also responds (with moderate success) to both the exegetical and theological arguments used by Arminians in their denial of security, something I wish Horton had done.

Horton is unflinching in his response: Geisler's "entire paradigm, to my mind, rests on a remarkably ill-informed understanding of both Calvinism and Arminianism" (113). Horton also responds to several of Geisler's caricatures of historic Calvinism and does a good job of demonstrating the fallacy of libertarian freedom that lies at the heart of Geisler's view.

Ashby's chapter on "Reformed Arminianism" is quite illuminating in some respects. He does a good job of articulating what Arminius himself actually believed: total depravity, forensic justification by faith alone, penal substitutionary atonement, and imputation ("the sins of humanity were imputed to him so that his righteousness [both active obedience – i.e., his sinless life – and passive obedience – i.e., his substitutionary death] might be imputed to those who are *in him*" (142). Ashby's view may be summed up in this one paragraph:

"Since God has chosen to deal with his human creation in terms of their personhood, by influence and response rather than through cause and effect, he allows us to resist his grace – though he has enabled us to receive it. However, our personhood, along with God's method of dealing with his free creatures, does not end at the moment of salvation. He requires that in order to be brought into Christ, we must believe in him. If, however, as persons, we exercise our God-given, personal freedom after salvation and reject the Christ who saved us, then logically we must admit that it is possible for one who has been *in Christ* to exit by the same door that God has ordained as being the way into union with Christ" (155-56).

Let me mention only two critical points. First, Ashby argues that one is secure in Christ only so far as one continues to believe in Christ. I, as a strong Calvinist, couldn't agree more! But where I differ from Ashby is my belief that Scripture teaches that God preserves his elect in the faith which he first granted them as a gift. **The perseverance of the saints is merely a function or fruit of the preservation of the Savior.**

Second, Ashby's entire system is dependent upon the concept of "prevenient grace" (see my studies on Divine Election and the discussion there). Ashby asserts that the human will is bound by sin "until it is drawn, enabled, and excited by grace" (158). This "grace" that draws, enables and excites does not necessarily save. It merely overcomes the debilitating effects of the fall and restores in all people the possibility of belief. But here's the catch. Ashby fails to provide so much as one single biblical text that speaks of or describes the notion of prevenient grace. And for good reason. There **are** no such texts! Although I applaud Ashby for doing what few Arminians do, namely, retaining belief in imputation, forensic justification, penal substitution, in the final analysis his system is only as good as the biblical evidence for prevenient grace. In the absence of the latter (and it **is** absent), the former fails.

I turn now to the final installment, J. Steven Harper's exposition of "A Wesleyan Arminian View." After devoting the initial ten pages to a discussion of the Wesleyan approach to theological method (which he takes up yet again toward the close of his chapter), Harper, like Ashby, appeals to prevenient grace. Also like Ashby, he fails to provide any credible biblical support for the doctrine. He speaks of a measure of free will "supernaturally restored" to all mankind, thereby making it possible for people to say either "yes" or "no" to the gospel. But again, like Ashby, he fails to provide a single text that teaches this doctrine.

The majority of Harper's essay is an explanation of Wesley's broader theological commitments. I enjoyed his essay and learned much about Wesley from it. Harper contends, unsuccessfully in my opinion (and in Ashby's opinion, as well, as he proves Harper misreads Wesley), that Wesley did not in fact believe that Christ's atonement applies only to past sins (and thus that forgiveness is only for past sins). He also argues that Wesley believed primarily in penal substitutionary atonement, not the governmental theory of subsequent Arminianism. One final note. Just as Geisler emptied the word "irresistible" of all meaning, Harper does the same with the word "security". Consider the following: "We are secure in Christ, even though we may differ as to the nature and extent of that security and whether or not there is anything that can cause us to lose it" (218). Excuse me? If you can lose it (irrespective of the cause), it isn't secure!

In his response to Harper, Horton makes the following incisive comment:

"As Harper reiterates throughout his paper, grace makes human decision for Christ possible. The atonement of Christ makes salvation possible; our faith makes it effective. Yet this is not to say 'God saved me.' It is to say instead that I could not have done the thing that saved me apart from God's clearing away the obstacles. Standing in a neutral position (by prevenient grace), capable of going either way, I decided to accept Christ. In normal conversation, we do not ordinarily allow the sentence, 'I made such-and-such possible' to be equivalent to the sentence, 'I did such-and-such.' If the effectiveness (not merely the reception) of redemption is at any point ascribed to human action, then salvation cannot be said to rest entirely on God's work and Christ's merit" (261).

I would simply urge my readers to carefully consider that last sentence by Horton.

Geisler's response, once again, is simply to cite areas of agreement and disagreement, a most unhelpful way of critically interacting with an opposing view. Ashby, on the other hand, does a good job in pointing out several flaws in Harper's essay. Before noting a few of them, I should mention one area where Harper and Ashby want to affirm the sovereignty of God together with their Calvinist brethren. Ashby approvingly quotes Harper to the effect that "God's fundamental designs of creation and redemption cannot be finally frustrated" (271-72). But if both men insist on the concept of libertarian freedom in humans (and they do), this simply isn't true. With libertarian freedom, the possibility always exists that humanity as a whole would reject and resist and repudiate the overtures of divine grace. No matter what God may "design" or "intend," humans with libertarian freedom retain the power and right of final veto.

As noted earlier, Ashby believes that it is Harper who has misread Wesley, not Calvinists. Ashby insists, contra Harper, that "Wesley did *not* subscribe to the Reformed view that through the believer's identification with the atonement of Christ, the condition of sin, not just past sins, is atoned for, indeed, remitted, and so the atonement does not have to be reappropriated every time a believer sins and gets forgiveness" (275). Ashby also argues that Harper uses "the *language* of imputation while emptying it of its content. . . . Wesley clearly did not mean by 'imputation' what Reformed believers have meant by it for almost five centuries" (276). Indeed, "both Wesley and Harper deny the imputation of Christ's perfect obedience to the believer" (276).

One final disagreement between our two Arminian authors is the issue of “the remediability of apostasy” (280), that is to say, whether apostasy, once committed, can be overcome and the individual restored to the salvation that he/she had lost. Reformed Arminians, such as Ashby, believe that it cannot. Harper, says Ashby, believes that “even when we fall *from* grace, we do not fall *beyond* grace. The Reformed Arminian position, conversely, believes that apostasy – that decisive act of defection from faith in Christ, the once-for-all sacrifice for sin – is without remedy” (280-81). Again, on the assumption of libertarian freedom, Harper would appear to have the upper hand on this point, but that is for Arminians to hammer out among themselves.

In the final analysis, I don't think this book advances the debate in the way that I had hoped it would. Perhaps Horton could have done so, had he chosen to avail himself of the space allotted to each contributor. The one thing we most needed, careful and insightful exegesis of specified texts (especially those typically cited in defense of prevenient grace), together with a more thorough-going analysis of the nature of human freedom, was distinctly lacking. Still, I enjoyed the book. Although I disagree with both Ashby and Harper, I did appreciate and learn from their forthright presentation of the views, respectively, of Arminius and Wesley.

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