

Arminian Responses to Calvinist Arguments

Apart from Scripture, there are several arguments that Calvinists give in support of unconditional security or to counter conditional security. Sometimes these are put into a statement or in the form of a question. These arguments will be placed in **bold type** and the response(s) will follow from Arminian theologians.

If one could be removed from the body of Christ, Christ's body would be maimed.¹

Scripture does not teach that he is complete in us, as such an argument would imply; rather, Paul says that we are complete *in him* [i.e., in union with him] (Col. 2:10).²

If one is a child of God, then no matter what happens one cannot cease to be a child of God.³

This argument proceeds thusly:

Premise: Your name is Stephen M. Ashby, right?—Yes.

Premise: Your father was Hobert C. Ashby, right?—Yes.

Conclusion: Well, no matter where you go, no matter what you do, you cannot cease to be the son of Hobert Ashby.

There is a problem with trying to make an absolute correlation between a spiritual relationship and a natural relationship. For if a spiritual relationship can never be broken, then it would be impossible for anyone ever to be saved. Note the following verses, where Jesus said, "You belong to your father, the devil (John 8:44). Again, "This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:10). In Ephesians 2:1-3 (KJV), Paul characterizes the unsaved as those who have walked according to the prince of the power of the air, as children of disobedience, and as children of wrath. If it is true that a spiritual relationship cannot be broken when applied to a "child of God," then logical consistency would demand that "children of the devil" must always remain children of the devil. Thus, no one could ever become a child of God. "Once a child, always a child" is simply an invalid argument.⁴

¹ Stephen Ashby, *Four Views on Eternal Security*, "Reformed Arminianism," 167.

² Ashby, "Reformed Arminianism," 167.

³ Ashby, "Reformed Arminianism," 167.

⁴ Ashby, "Reformed Arminianism," 167-168.

Robert Shank responded in this way:

A popular and serious error is the assumption that an equation somehow exists between physical birth and spiritual birth: whatever is intrinsic in physical birth is equally intrinsic in spiritual birth; whatever may be predicated of one may likewise be predicated of the other. Laboring under such erroneous assumption, many have concluded that spiritual birth, like physical birth, is necessarily irrevocable. "If one has been born," they ask, "how can he possibly become unborn?" "I may be a wayward, disobedient son," say they, "but I must forever remain my father's own son." In defense of what seems to them to be an obviously logical conclusion, they have proceeded in good conscience to impose unwarranted and fanciful interpretation upon many simply discourses of Jesus and upon many plain, explicit warning passages in the New Testament. After all, the Scriptures must agree! But consider three essential differences between physical birth and spiritual birth:

1. Physical birth effects the inception of the life of the subject *in toto*, whereas spiritual birth involves only a transition from one mode of life to another.

(It may be objected that spiritual birth is not a transition from an old life to a new life on the grounds that, when one is born of the Spirit, he passes "out of death into life," becoming "a new creation in Christ." This is true; but only within the limits of the total definition of the Scriptures. For it is also true that the man who is "dead in trespasses and in sins" is nevertheless a rational spiritual being who is personally accountable for his life and his sins and who, except he repent, must answer before God in solemn judgment. What is depicted as "death," for the reason that the sinner is "alienated from the life of God," is nevertheless *spiritual life* on a degenerate plane—a spiritual life for which the lost must answer to God in judgment. The New Testament contains many references to the old life of Christians before conversion, which references have to do with the *spiritual* lives of men in an unregenerate state.)

2. In physical birth, the subject has no prior knowledge and gives no consent, whereas in spiritual birth, the subject must have prior knowledge of the Gospel and must give consent.

(It may be objected that, in view of John 1:13 and James 1:18, the spiritual birth of men is by the will of God, rather than the will of men. Such an objection proceeds from the old fallacy of "either . . . or," a ridiculous assumption unwittingly entertained by many sincere Bible scholars. Actually, the spiritual birth of men is by the will of both God and man. "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth." Yes, but not apart from the consent of our wills. Of his own will, the groom takes a bride; but not apart from the will and consent of the bride. God was under no constraint to bestow spiritual birth upon men, at such frightful cost to Himself, other than the constraint of His own love and grace. "Of his own will," therefore, the Father of lights gives good gifts to men and begets as His own dear children all who believe His word of truth. The initiative is with God. But God's initiative demands a response from man. Men are not born of the Spirit apart from a prior knowledge of the Gospel [Rom. 10:8-17] nor apart from their own consent [John 5:40].)

3. In physical birth, the individual receives a life independent of his parents. They may die, but he lives on. But in spiritual birth, the subject receives no independent life. He becomes a partaker of the life and nature of Him who begets—a participant, by faith, in the eternal life of God in Christ “who is our life.”

In view of obvious essential differences, it cannot be considered strange that spiritual birth, unlike physical birth, is not irrevocable. It is folly to assume that an equation exists between physical birth and spiritual birth, and that whatever is intrinsic in physical birth is equally so in spiritual birth. Physical birth and spiritual birth are equally real, but essentially different. While an analogy exists between the two, there is no equation whatever.⁵

One who is born again can never become unborn.⁶

If a person becomes an apostate, that person does not become unborn—*he or she dies!* Prior to conversion people are spiritually dead (Eph. 2:1). Through apostasy, one returns to that spiritually dead state.⁷

The believer is said to have eternal life as a present possession; it would not be eternal if you could lose it.⁸

Many texts are used to make this argument (e.g., John 3:15-16; 3:36; 5:24; 6:54; 10:28). . . . These verses speak of eternal life. Thus we must ask ourselves what eternal life is. The answer may seem obvious, but is it really? Is eternal life a quantity of life? Does it merely mean that I am going to live forever? Further, do unbelievers have eternal life? Not according to the Bible! There is not a single verse of Scripture that attributes eternal life to an unbeliever. Of course, unbelievers are going to exist forever. But that is not what the Bible means when it speaks of eternal life. Several verses from the apostle John are helpful:

- John 1:4: “*In him was life, and that life was the light of men.*”
- John 5:26: “*For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself.*”
- John 5:39-40: “*You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.*”
- John 10:10: “*I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*”
- John 12:50: “*I know that his command leads to eternal life. . .*” The entire context of verses 44-50 is important here. Belief in Christ is obviously the key to eternal life.

⁵ *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, 89-91.

⁶ Ashby, “Reformed Arminianism,” 168.

⁷ Ashby, “Reformed Arminianism,” 168.

⁸ Ashby, “Reformed Arminianism,” 168. Reformed Calvinist Louis Berkhof rhetorically asks: “Can we proceed on the assumption that eternal life will not be everlasting?” (*Systematic Theology*, 548)

- 1 John 5:11-13: Here John says that “[eternal] life is in [God’s] Son” and that “he who has the Son has life.” He concludes by saying that the key to having the Son, and thus eternal life, is believing in the Son of God.

Faith in Christ is what places one in Christ. Eternal life is not merely perpetual existence; it is the very life of God. I participate in that life because I am forensically *in Christ*. No one who is outside of Christ has eternal life. The life of God was eternal before I got it, and it will continue to be eternal, even if I were to forfeit it by rejecting Christ Jesus.⁹

If eternal life can be terminated, how then is it eternal?¹⁰

Such a question proceeds from a fundamental misapprehension. It rests upon the erroneous assumption that, at conversion, God somehow implants a bit of eternal life within the soul of the individual in such a way that it becomes his inalienable personal possession *ipso facto* [by the fact itself]. Certainly eternal life is *eternal*. But the Bible declares that eternal life—the very life of God Himself—can only be *shared* with men. It cannot be possessed by men apart from a living union with Christ, in and through whom that life is available to men. [Alexander] Maclaren has well said:

Union with Christ by faith is the condition of a real communication of life. “In Him was life,” says John’s Gospel

No man can breathe into another’s nostrils the breath of life. But Christ can and does breathe His life into us; and this true miracle of a communication of spiritual life takes place in every man who humbly trusts himself to Him.

Maclaren’s thesis is fully substantiated in the Holy Scriptures. Consider the following passages:

He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. (John 6:56, 57)

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me. (John 14:6)

Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. (John 11:25, 26)

. . . Christ, who is our life . . . (Col. 3:4).

The gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 6:23 ASV).

⁹ Ashby, “Reformed Arminianism,” 168-169.

¹⁰ Shank, *Life in the Son*, 52.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us. . . . And this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He that hath the Son hath life; and he that hath not the Son of God hath not life. . . . Let that therefore remain in you, which ye have heard from the beginning. If that which ye have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, ye also shall remain in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that he hath promised us, even the eternal life. (1 John 1:1, 2; 5:11, 12; 2:24, 25)

There can be no question whether eternal life will endure. It cannot cease. But the point of the many solemn warnings in the New Testament is that our privilege of *participating* in that eternal life is directly dependent upon our continuing to abide in Him in whom, alone, that life is available to men. If we fail to abide in Him, the eternal life continues; but our participation in that life ceases. We share that life only as we continue to abide in Him “who is our life.”¹¹

The warning passages concerning apostasy are God’s *means* of ensuring that believers will not fall away.¹²

Many apologists for the doctrine of unconditional security, in an attempt to reconcile the warning passages with their *a priori* doctrine, explain them as being only God’s means of *ensuring* that believers shall not fall away from the faith. The essence of the arguments of many is as follows: The mere fact that travelers are warned that there is a ditch alongside the road does not mean that they will fall into it. The warnings must not lead us to suppose that they will or can. God warns believers simply because, as rational beings, they are so constituted as to require motivation. He therefore appeals to their fears to keep them on the path. But the warnings do not prove that believers will fall; on the contrary, they are God’s means of ensuring that they shall *not* fall.

One will not read long from advocates of the doctrine of unconditional security before encountering this “explanation,” of the presence of so many urgent warnings against apostasy so obviously addressed to believers. The folly of their contention is seen in the fact that, the moment a man becomes persuaded that their doctrine of unconditional security is correct, the warning passages immediately lose the very purpose and value which they claim for them. Strong quotes Dr. A. C. Kendrick on Hebrews 6:4-6: “The text describes a condition subjectively possible, and therefore needing to be held up in earnest warning to the believer, while objectively and in the absolute purpose of God, it never occurs.” But how can there be any “earnest warning” to the believer who is sufficiently “instructed” to understand that the “warning” is directed against an impossibility? How can something be subjectively *possible* for the person who knows it to be objectively *impossible*? The only possible

¹¹ Shank, *Life in the Son*, 52-54.

¹² Adapted from *Life in the Son*, 164.

circumstance under which the warning passages could serve the purpose and function which they claim for them would be the total rejection of the doctrine of unconditional security and inevitable perseverance.

The renowned Reformed theologian, Dr. G. C. Berkouwer . . . insists that perseverance is inevitable and “does not depend on us, but on God’s grace,” pleads for this bankrupt “explanation” of the warning passages. He asserts that “a central datum of the doctrine of perseverance” lies in the harmonious relation of “the gracious faithfulness of God” (which makes apostasy impossible and perseverance inevitable) and “the dynamic of the actual struggle of life” (in which it is quite necessary that we be constantly motivated by alarming threats and warnings of the dire calamity of apostasy which stalk us at every turn, so that we may continually be roused to activity, watchfulness, and prayer, and thus deliberately continue in faith).

Berkouwer declares that the admonitions “. . . have as their end the preservation of the Church, which precisely in this way is established in that single direction which is and which must remain irreversible—the direction from death to life!” Therefore, for the warning passages to perform their divinely ordained function in securing the perseverance and preservation of the Church, it is altogether necessary, according Berkouwer, that the warnings be regarded with sincere alarm:

Anyone who would take away any of this tension, this completely earnest admonition, this many-sided warning, from the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints would do the Scriptures a great injury, and would cast the church into the error of carelessness and sloth.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints can never become an *a priori* guarantee in the life of believers which would enable them to get along without admonitions and warnings. [Despite Berkouwer’s protest, this is precisely what Calvin’s doctrine of perseverance inevitably becomes for everyone who embraces it.] Because of the nature of the relation between faith and perseverance, the whole gospel must abound with admonitions. It has to speak thus, because perseverance is not something merely handed down to us, but it is something that comes to realization only *in the path of faith*. Therefore the most earnest and alarming admonitions cannot in themselves be taken as evidence against the doctrine of perseverance.

To think of admonition and perseverance as opposites, as contradictories, is possible only if we misunderstand the nature of perseverance and treat it in isolation from its correlation with faith. For the correct understanding of the correlation between faith and perseverance, it is precisely these admonitions that are significant, and they enable us to understand better the nature of perseverance.

Berkouwer insists that “perseverance is not something merely handed down to us, but it is something that comes to realization only in the path of faith.” He insists that there is a real necessity for “alarming admonitions,” for they are precisely the means which God has ordained for motivating believers and thus securing their perseverance. But when we become sufficiently “enlightened” to understand (as Berkouwer also insists) that perseverance is inevitable and does not depend upon us in any manner or degree, just how are we to manage to become alarmed by the admonitions and warnings?

It would be of interest to learn from Professor Berkouwer how recently he himself has experienced sincere alarm at the reading of any of the “alarming admonitions” with which the whole gospel abounds. If he experiences sincere alarm at the reading of the “alarming admonitions,” is it because he actually fears that he might turn aside from “the path of faith” and fall from grace? Or, if he does not experience sincere alarm, is it because he considers that, for himself (in contrast with all other believers), it *is* permissible for the Reformed doctrine of inevitable perseverance to constitute “an *a priori* guarantee” which enables him to “get along without admonitions and warnings”? . . .

The fallacy of Calvinism's absurd assumption [that men are to be sincerely persuaded that apostasy is impossible and, at the same time, sincerely alarmed by the warnings] . . . is constantly demonstrated in the tragic inconsistency in the personal ministry of pastors who entertain it. They profess to believe that, while all true believers will inevitably persevere, it is only within the context of the dynamic exercise of faith that the perseverance is unfolded. They profess to believe that the warning passages are designed of God to effect this perseverance by motivating believers to continue in faith and to fear apostasy, and that the perseverance is realized only as believers take solemn heed to the warning passages. These things they profess to believe (at least, when pressed to account for the presence of the warning passages). But their preaching and teaching seem designed to *prevent* the warning passages and “alarming admonitions” from accomplishing the purpose which they profess to believe God intends them to serve. They never miss an opportunity to “explain” the warning passages in such a way as to dispel any concern which their hearers might have for them, and they continually assure them that they are unconditionally secure for all time and eternity, with no contingency whatever. They constantly do their utmost to destroy the concern of their hearers for the warnings and admonitions which they acknowledge to be God's means of motivating believers to persevere. Those who do preach the warnings with earnestness and conviction they accuse of being “confused” and “doctrinally unsound,” and of not believing in salvation by grace. Wisdom is justified by her children; but only eternity will reveal the full measure of the tragedy of this popular fallacy and the inevitable inconsistency of all who embrace it.

Contrary to the assumption of some, the warnings were not given merely because there are not other motives by which believers may be motivated to persevere; for there are other motives, such as gratitude to God for His forgiveness and grace, increased joy through faithfulness, concern for the spiritual need of those who are influenced by our lives The warnings were given, not to supply a lack of any motive for perseverance, but because of the existence of a real and deadly peril with which we must reckon.¹³

¹³ Shank, *Life in the Son*, 164-167; 172-173.

If faith is a condition that *man* must meet in order to be saved, does that make salvation partly the work of man? Does faith, so conceived, become something man *does* (a “work”) that in some way *merits* salvation?¹⁴

1. That salvation is by God’s grace and not by man’s works is a conclusion justly drawn from Scripture. . . . Arminius was often at pains to deny that faith results from our own strength, and to affirm that it is “produced in us by the free gift of God.” He avowed, “I ascribe to grace the commencement, *the continuance and the consummation of all good . . .*”

2. Corollary to this, then, is this disjunction: “by faith” and “by works” are mutually exclusive—logically and Scripturally. “Faith” (rightly—that is, Scripturally—conceived) is not “works” and “works” is not “faith.” . . .

3. The Bible links salvation by faith and salvation by grace as complementary. . . . Paul makes this plain in passages like Ephesians 2:8, 9; Romans 4:2-5; 10:3; and especially Romans 4:16. . . . Important then: so long as one means what the Bible means by faith, salvation by faith is in perfect harmony with salvation by grace, and precisely contradictory to salvation by works.

4. The nature of saving faith is such that it carries absolutely no merit for the person thus believing. Biblically, faith stands in antithesis to works. The believer therefore gets no credit for faith; he is not rewarded for believing. Faith is nothing more (or less) than receiving a gift. It is therefore quite the opposite of earning, meriting, or deserving it. . . .

[Calvinist] J. I. Packer insists, “Faith is a matter first and foremost of looking outside and away from oneself to Christ and his cross as the sole ground of present forgiveness and future hope.” Precisely! And so as long as faith is looking away from oneself to Christ for salvation, it is by nature the opposite of merit.

5. Faith is, however, the personal attitude of the individual, reflecting that person’s mind and will. Faith means that the person is believing, not that God (or Christ) is believing for him. Any number of New Testament references to faith will confirm this:

Galatians 2:16 We believed in Jesus Christ in order to be justified.

Romans 4:3 Abraham believed in God and was reckoned righteous.

Romans 4:5 To the one believing, his faith is counted for righteousness.

Romans 4:25 is imputed . . . to us who are believing.

John 3:16 Everyone who is believing in Him has eternal life.

Luke 7:50 Your faith has saved you.

Romans 10:10 With the heart one believes unto righteousness.

Such a list might be extended indefinitely. Faith is personal, and the person who is regarded as believing is the human being exercising faith. Faith is . . . an active disposition of the mind and will that can be attributed to the person believing and to

¹⁴ Robert Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will, Contrasting Views of Salvation: Calvinism & Arminianism*, 161.

no one else—not even to God in that sense. That human beings are persons, not machines, implies this. More important, the Scriptural language leaves us with no other choice.¹⁵

Doesn't salvation by faith contradict salvation by grace? Doesn't salvation by faith imply, in some subtle way, salvation by works?¹⁶

Paul is the New Testament writer who addresses this question at greatest length.

Romans 3:20–4:25 indicates what is at the heart of Paul's argument in all of *Romans*: faith, not works, is the condition for standing righteous before God. In 3:21, 22, righteousness is "apart from the law"; it is "by faith" (*dia* with the genitive). In 3:27, boasting is excluded—not by the "law" of works, but by the "law" of faith. In 3:28, justification is "by faith" (instrumental case, *pistei*) apart from the works of the law. In 4:2, 3, if Abraham were justified by works he might boast; instead, he "put faith" (aorist *episteusen*) in God and was accounted righteous. In 4:4, 5, for one who "works" any reward is reckoned by obligation, whereas for one believing his faith is reckoned for righteousness.

Romans 9:30–10:13 is at the heart of Paul's discussion of Israel's situation. In 9:32, Israel has not attained righteous standing before God because it was not sought by faith (*ek* with the ablative) but by works. In 10:5, 6, righteousness "of the (works of) the law" is directly contrasted with righteousness "of faith" (*ek* with the ablative).

Galatians 2:16 makes the contrast twice, stating it both in principle and experientially: justification is not by works of the law but by faith. . . .

Galatians 3:2, 5 . . . twice insists that the reception of the Spirit is by (the hearing of) faith and not by the works of the law.

Ephesians 2:8, 9 . . . sets "through faith" in contrast to "of works" as the condition or instrument of salvation.

Philippians 3:9 contrasts self righteousness, which is of (the works of) the law, with the righteousness that is "of God" and "by faith"

More passages could be cited, but these are adequate as a basis for an indisputable conclusion: "by faith" and "by works" are mutually exclusive. Faith (at least faith rightly conceived) is not works, and so "by faith" is not "by works." Logically or Scripturally, this disjunction holds up.

. . . The Bible provides direct statements that "by faith" is in perfect accord with "by grace."

Romans 4:4, 5 (above) makes clear that reckoning with man on the basis of works would be by obligation, while reckoning with him as a man of faith is by grace.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (above) explicitly states that salvation by faith is salvation by grace, in direct contrast to salvation by works.

Romans 4:2, 3 (and *Eph. 2:8, 9*) draws out the conclusion that salvation by faith eliminates man's boasting. And when man's boasting is excluded, that is clearly meant to exalt God's grace as unmerited favor; boasting implies merit.

¹⁵ Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will*, 161-163.

¹⁶ Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will*, 177.

Romans 10:3 makes salvation by faith (9:32) a matter of submitting to the righteousness of God provides rather than attempting to establish one's own righteousness. The elimination of self righteousness establishes salvation by grace.

Most importantly, *Romans 4:16* expresses precisely what is involved in all these: "It is of faith . . . that it might be by grace . . ." "By faith," so far from contradicting grace, is precisely "according to grace." It requires faith, and faith as a condition, in contrast to works, to establish grace as the basis for God's work of salvation. On this point Paul is very clear.

Certain conclusions are obviously justified, then.

1. *Faith . . . is not works.* To be sure, a "faith" wrongly understood to be something it isn't might be "works." But so long as one means what the Bible means by faith, the Bible itself is the basis for this absolute distinction.

2. *Then salvation by faith is not salvation by works. . . .* The very places we learn that salvation is not by works are the places we learn that it is by faith.

3. *And salvation by faith is in perfect harmony with salvation by grace.* Once again, it is the Scriptures that teach us this; indeed, salvation is by faith in order that it may be according to grace.

Faith can be a condition for man to meet without being a meritorious cause or ground of salvation.

1. What we have seen, so far, makes clear that faith is the person's activity. And the rich variety of ways that the New Testament presents faith as a condition gives added weight to the idea that *the person meets the condition by believing. . . .*

2. As [Calvinist Louis] Berkhof insists, faith is not the *grounds* of our salvation

3. Faith, as personal believing, is impossible apart from the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit. This provides another reason for saying that faith itself carries no sense of merit. The Arminian position . . . is that the sinner is so radically depraved that he cannot, of his own will and power, believe. The enabling, pre-regenerating ("prevenient") gracious work of God's Spirit to convince and persuade the sinner of the nature of his condition and of the truth of the gospel is required before faith. Only by that work has the sinner ability to put faith in Christ.¹⁷

¹⁷ Picirilli, *Grace Faith Free Will*, 177-181.