

# When an Immunization Becomes Fatal

## Thoughts on Perseverance in Faith

Copyright 2000, Robert L. Hamilton. All rights reserved.  
<http://www.geocities.com/bobesay/devotionals.html>

Acknowledgement: I want to thank my pastor, Don Burnett, for a sermon he preached several years ago which caused me to begin thinking in earnest about the ideas dealt with in this essay.

Before leaving the United States to come to Taiwan, our whole family dutifully went to the health clinic to receive a full battery of immunizations. Actually, we had to go back several times, for some of the immunizations (the one for typhoid comes painfully to mind) had to be taken in installments, once every several months. These visits to the clinic, as you can imagine, were not exactly the highlight of our preparations for moving overseas, especially for the children. The first visit was not too bad, only because Amy and Wesley didn't really know what was in store for them. The second, third, and fourth, visits, however, were like the proverbial visit to the dentist, only worse. (I should say that in real life, our visits to the dentist haven't been too bad; Wesley has even had two cavities filled here in Taiwan without any anesthesia, and he hardly whimpered. This was not the case, unfortunately, when he received his shots at the health clinic.)

These pre-departure immunizations were necessary due to the variety of deadly germs that eagerly anticipated our arrival in Taiwan. We have so far disappointed them, thanks no doubt in part, to the effectiveness of those immunizations. Now imagine what might have happened if we had gone to the health clinic and asked for the necessary immunizations, only to receive (without our realizing it) injections of sugar water (or some similarly harmless but ineffective substance-- I'm just guessing that sugar water would do the trick). In that case we would have stepped onto Taiwan soil quite unprepared for the onslaught of exotic viruses, bacteria, and other microscopic members of our welcoming committee. Perhaps the saddest part of this scenario is that we would not have even realized our peril, for we would have brought with us to Taiwan a false confidence in the effectiveness of those bogus immunizations. This false assurance would likely have prevented us from taking additional protective steps (such as getting genuinely valid immunizations or taking other preventative measures) that could potentially save our lives. There are many churches in the United States that, like the imaginary health clinic in the scenario above, are unwittingly administering "sugar-water" immunizations to their members. These churches teach that salvation is best viewed as a one-time event (not unlike an immunization) which, once it really happens, will ensure the spiritual security of a person even if his spiritual condition stagnates or takes a significant turn for the worse in the years following this salvation event. This is often taken so far as to say that even if a one-time believer at some future point loses his faith in Christ entirely, that person's continuing security in Christ is never in doubt, so long as he can point back to some genuine salvation experience in the past.

Despite their other differences, responsible Calvinists and Arminians alike have both criticized this event-based view of salvation, noting that the Bible clearly conditions salvation on a persevering faith in Christ. Persevering faith not only begins at some point in time, it also continues into the future. Calvinists, of course, argue that genuine persevering faith in Christ, once begun, can never stop, because its ultimate outcome has been preordained by God. Arminians counter that genuine faith in Christ can be subsequently revoked, in which case the security of one's salvation is forfeited. But both of these views have in common that they rightly see salvation not primarily as an event, but as a process of faith-begun and faith-continued. And both responsible Calvinists and responsible Arminians would rightly question the present spiritual security of a person who is currently a professed unbeliever and yet claims to have been saved at some past point in time. (Calvinists might question whether such a person was ever genuinely saved in the first place, whereas Arminians might be open to the additional possibility that the person was once genuinely saved but has since forfeited that salvation through unbelief.)

The event-based view of salvation founders on the many passages in Scripture in which believers are exhorted to persevere in their faith and be on guard against influences that might erode their confidence and hope in Christ. Consider first Jesus's own exhortation for us to "abide" in Him (from the Greek verb *meno*, better translated "remain" or "stay"):

### **John 15:4-6**

Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. 5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. (NIV)

"Remaining" (*meno*) in Christ as the term is used here clearly refers to an action involving our volitional choice, as well as to a persistent state of being "in" Christ, not simply a one time event. If indeed this persistent state referred to in the passage is equivalent to salvation, then John 15:4-6 offers security in Christ only in the context of persevering faith, in which case the passage provides solid evidence against the event-based view of salvation described above.

There is a longstanding tradition, however, according to which "abiding" in Christ in John 15:4-6 is interpreted merely in terms of "fellowship" with Christ, as an issue pertaining strictly to progress in one's sanctification (in the narrow sense of the word) but not to the status of one's salvation. According to this view, believers may at times abide in Christ (i.e., fellowship closely with Him) and at other times not abide in Him (due to unconfessed sin, etc.), and yet all the while remain believers.

A careful look at the various references to "abiding" in Christ found in John's first epistle, however, show that this traditional view is widely off the mark (see discussion in Robert Shank's *Life in the Son*, Bethany House, Chp. 7). The 1 John references to abiding/remaining (*meno*) in Christ pertain not to sanctification but to salvation. This is seen by the fact that in these passages abiding/remaining in Christ is consistently conditioned (like salvation) on having faith in Christ, as expressed, for example, by one's willingness to confess Him. Consider carefully:

### **1 John 2:23-25**

Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. 24 As for you, let that abide [i.e., remain/stay] in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides [remains/stays] in you, you also will abide [remain/stay] in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is the promise which He Himself made to us: eternal life.

In the above passage, we are said to abide/remain in Christ if what we "heard from the beginning" (i.e., the message regarding the Son, Jesus, mentioned in vs. 23) abides/remains in us (i.e., if we continue to believe and confess it). Thus, abiding/remaining in Christ means to continue on in our *faith in and confession of Jesus*. Consider also:

### **1 John 3:23-24**

And this is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us. 24 And the one who keeps His commandments abides [remains/stays] in Him, and He in him.

Notice carefully the thought-relations in this passage. We abide/remain in Christ when we keep His commandments, and we keep His commandments when (see vs. 23) we *believe in the name of God's Son Jesus Christ* and, as a consequence, love one another (love being the natural outworking of a loyal faith in Christ, as John argues elsewhere in this epistle). Again, then, abiding in Christ is conditioned directly on our faith in Christ. Consider further:

**1 John 4:15**

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides [remains, stays] in him, and he in God.

Again, abiding/remaining in God is conditioned here not on any sense of optional fellowship with Christ, but rather on our fundamental willingness to *confess that Jesus is the Son of God*. Such confession is, of course, a basic condition of salvation (e.g., John 20:30-31).

Finally, consider the following passage:

**1 John 3:6, 9**

No one who abides [remains/stays] in Him sins . . . 9 No one who is born of God practices sin . . .

Putting aside the question of what John means here by "sins" and "practices sin" (see the separate essay on "Assurance" for discussion), the point to be made here is simply that in these two verses John equates abiding/remaining in Christ to the fundamental state of being "born of God," not merely to an optional state of fellowship with Christ.

Given these observations from 1 John, it seems evident that when Jesus spoke of "abiding" (*meno*) in Christ, the apostle John interpreted Jesus as referring to the perseverance of one's faith in Christ and confession of Christ. This is the very state that accompanies being born of God, salvation itself. Thus, to abide/remain/stay in Christ is not merely to enjoy optional fellowship with Him, but rather to maintain one's very spiritual life-connection to Christ, a connection which makes possible salvation and is conditioned on faith. Consequently, John 15:4-6 strikes a fatal blow to the event-based view of salvation that bases one's security of salvation on a past faith event rather than on one's present faith in Christ.

Consider now these additional representative passages in which we are warned to persevere in our faith in Christ:

**1 Corinthians 15:1-2**

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, 2 by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

**Colossians 1:21-23**

And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, 22 yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach-- 23 if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard. . .

### Hebrews 2:1, 3

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. 2 For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, 3 how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?

### Hebrews 3:6, 14

. . . but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end. . . For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end. . .

### Hebrews 10:38-39

But My righteous one shall live by faith;  
And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.  
39 But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

It is impossible to read passages such as those above without seeing the conditional relationship between salvation and persevering faith:

Christ will remain in you and you will bear much fruit only if you remain in Him. (John 15)

You stand in the gospel and are saved only if you hold fast to that gospel in belief. (1 Cor 15)

You will be presented before Christ holy only if you continue steadfast in the faith. (Col 1)

You will escape condemnation only if you do not drift away from what you have heard. (Heb 2)

You are a partaker of Christ and are of His house only if you hold fast your confidence and hope firm until the end. (Heb 3)

You will live, be pleasing to God, and your soul will be preserved only if you have faith without shrinking back. (Heb 10)

These conditional statements all have the basic structure [B, if A], where B stands for some version of the result statement "You are/will be saved" and A provides the condition for this result, which in these cases seems to boil down to the requirement to persevere in faith (see the separate essay on "Allegiance" for detailed discussion of the requirements for salvation). The *if*-relation in such biblical statements has generally been given two very different interpretations by Calvinists and Arminians. Calvinists tend to interpret the conditional *if*'s in these passages as carrying the sense of *given that* or *in view of the fact that*, so that the conditions "remaining in Christ," "continuing in faith," etc. are taken as **criteria** or **evidences** of genuine salvation. On this interpretation, the statements above are analogous to a statement such as "You (must) have paid your phone bill *if* you have a properly stamped receipt from the phone company." It is not that having the receipt in any sense has caused or brought about the payment of the bill; rather, having the receipt is proof or evidence that the bill has been paid.

In contrast, Arminians tend to recognize a **causal** relation in these *if* statements, in addition to the evidential function served by the condition. The conditions (i.e., remaining in Christ, persevering in faith) actually *allow for* or *contribute toward* the salvation result. On this view, the statements above are analogous to a statement such as "You will attain 'Preferred Customer' status *if* you always pay your phone bills on time." By this statement one does not merely mean that a record of consistent on-time payments is evidence of Preferred Customer status, but rather that it is by making timely payments that this status is brought about.

Traditional Calvinists and Arminians, then, both have a way of making sense of the many statements in Scripture (such as the above) which condition salvation on persevering faith. In contrast to these two views, however, the event-based view of salvation described earlier has no clear way to interpret such verses, because it sees the conditional relationship between faith and salvation as necessarily true only at the initial moment of conversion. After that first moment, the necessary tie between faith and salvation is severed, so that the salvation state may (indeed must) continue unthreatened with or without the presence of faith. Of course, proponents of the event-based view would all forcefully argue that the Christian *should* continue in faith, but the fact remains that in their event-based interpretation of salvation there is *no absolute necessity* for perseverance in faith insofar as the security of the Christian is concerned. On this view, the terms "Christian" and "believer" are not necessarily synonymous.

A proponent of the event-based view of salvation might try to escape this problem by suggesting that if someone who is now an unbeliever has ever at some previous time truly experienced salvation, God will not allow that person to die in his present unbelieving state, but will certainly restore him to an active faith in Christ before the end of his life on earth. In this sense the person might be said to "persevere" in his faith; if, that is, one focuses on the beginning and ending states and overlooks the hiatus of unbelief in between. Such a person's security of salvation *during* the intervening period of unbelief would be based on the fact that in the *overall* picture he could still be considered a believer (again, given the assumption that God will in the future bring the person back to an active faith before his death).

This proposal, however, fails to take seriously the wording of the relevant Scripture passages, which clearly base a believer's spiritual security on the fact that he indeed *is a believer*, and has not *moved away from* (Col 1:23), *drifted away from* (Heb 2:1), or *shrunk back from* (Heb 10:39) this position of active faith in Christ. It is precisely by "holding fast" the message of the gospel (1 Cor 15:2; Heb 3:14) that the believer has a basis for security of salvation. The question whether or not God always restores genuine apostates to an active faith before their death aside (the historical evidence would seem to suggest not, but then again only God knows the human heart), the point to be made here is that from a practical standpoint, *while a person is an unbeliever* he has *no biblical basis for claiming any assurance of salvation*, regardless his inventory of past spiritual experiences (or conjectured future experiences).

The severe warnings in these passages to persevere in the faith ring hollow, then, if the event-based view of salvation is correct. I take it, therefore, that this event-based view is *not* correct, and that only those who are currently, actively, persevering in their faith in Christ have a valid basis for being assured of their salvation (regardless whether this perseverance is interpreted from a Calvinist or Arminian perspective).

This conclusion has an immediate, forceful application for all of us. Given the prevalence of "sugar-water" spiritual immunizations in the churches of our day, it is vital that each of us make sure we are not basing our confidence of eternal salvation *only* on a past salvation decision/experience. True, salvation must begin somewhere, and for most of us that "somewhere" will be a particular (and very special) point in time that we can remember first yielding our faith and loyalty to Christ. The Bible is clear, however, that this faith once begun must *persevere*. It therefore behooves each of us to take seriously Paul's advice in 2 Corinthians 13:5:

Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you--unless indeed you fail the test?

Paul does not exhort us to test to see if we *were once* in the faith. Paul is clearly concerned with the here and now, whether we *are right now* in the faith, meaning that we have a present, active faith in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ cannot be "in" us (and we in Him) if we have no such faith.