

## Can Arminians Be Assured of Their Salvation?

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One of the first things I learned about the church in Taiwan was that, compared to the church in America, a relatively higher percentage of Christians in Taiwan believe that one can (potentially) lose or forfeit one's salvation. This touches on one aspect of the longstanding debate between *Calvinists* (who believe, among other things, that once salvation has been truly experienced it can never be revoked) and *Arminians* (who believe, among other things, that one's salvation can be forfeited under certain conditions).

Recently I was talking with a fellow SEND missionary here in Taiwan who pointed out one practical result of this theological tendency toward Arminianism in the Taiwanese church. He noted that because more Taiwanese Christians believe one can lose one's salvation, more Taiwanese believers struggle with gaining *assurance* of their salvation.

Unfortunately, this is not the first time I have heard this observation made about Arminians. And yet, it seems to me that there is nothing intrinsic to Arminian theology that need cause believers to doubt their salvation. My own experience bears this out: I have been a believer in Christ for over twenty years, roughly half of that time as a Calvinist and half as an Arminian. As far as I can tell, my personal assurance of salvation has been just as firm under Arminianism as it was under Calvinism. I believe that the problem lies not with Arminian theology per se, but with certain popular distortions of Arminian theology, particularly in regard to what are the conditions of salvation. Let me explain.

In a biblically-defensible Arminian theology, salvation is conditioned solely on faith in Christ, or what I have elsewhere described as an ongoing *allegiance* to Christ (see the essay on "Allegiance: What Must I Do to Be Saved?"). God in His grace--not based on any human merit achieved by works of the Law--offers to save whoever bears a genuine faith-allegiance toward Christ. The only way that this salvation can be forfeited is if the sole condition for salvation is no longer met; that is, if one intentionally revokes his faith-allegiance to Christ and consequently does not remain ("abide") in union with Christ (John 15:4-6). As Paul states:

"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 . . ." (Colossians 1:21-23)

(See also 1 Corinthians 15:1-2; Colossians 1:21-23; 1 Timothy 4:1,16; 2 Timothy 2:12; 2 Timothy 3:13-15; Hebrews 3:6,14; Hebrews 10:38-39; 1 John 2:24-25, among others. I will not attempt an extended defense of the Arminian view of salvation, but for an excellent treatment see

Robert Shank's *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., Westcott Publishers, Springfield MO, 1960, 1961. I believe that this and its companion volume *Elect in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Election* have been republished and are currently available through Bethany House Publishers.)

Such a revoking of one's faith in Christ may be the end-result of a gradual hardening process arising from repeated, willful sin (e.g., Hebrews 3:12-14), or it may accompany the acceptance of false teaching in one form or another (e.g., 1 Timothy 4:1; Galatians 5:2f). In either case, it is the *loss of faith-allegiance* that compromises one's salvation, not the commitment of a certain number of sins or of a particular type of sin (other than the fundamental sin itself of turning away from one's faith-allegiance to Christ).

In contrast to the biblically-defensible Arminian view above, popular distortions of Arminian theology (often embraced in the pews and sometimes preached from the pulpit) condition salvation on one's ability to avoid the more "serious" sins and maintain a given level of obedience. Just how much obedience is enough to maintain one's salvation is generally not clear. Consequently, assurance of salvation is understandably hard to come by, because in this distorted view of Arminianism one can never be sure at any given moment that one has been "good enough" to maintain one's salvation. This view has been rightly criticized as smacking of "works salvation," or the false idea that one can (at least in part) merit God's acceptance by keeping the Law of God.

It is important to see the contrast between this distorted view of Arminianism and the biblically-defensible Arminian view. In the distorted form of Arminianism just described, one's continuing salvation directly depends on one's ability to *keep God's Law* (arguably a form of works-salvation). In the biblically-defensible form of Arminianism, one's continuing salvation directly depends on one's *perseverance in faith-allegiance to Christ*. To properly appreciate this contrast, it is critical to recognize that faith-allegiance is emphatically *not* a merit-based "work of the Law" by which a person "earns" salvation. This is made clear in passages such as Galatians 2:16, in which faith in Christ is contrasted to meritorious works of the Law:

"Nevertheless knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the Law but through faith in Christ Jesus, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we may be justified by faith in Christ, and not by the works of the Law; since by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified. (Galatians 2:16)

This is not to say that works of obedience are unimportant, or that one can have faith-allegiance to Christ without any obedience whatsoever. Not only James ("faith without works is dead"), but also Paul, Peter, John, and Jesus all taught that one's underlying commitment of faith-allegiance to Christ, if it is genuine, will naturally flow into particular acts of obedience (see my separate essays on "Allegiance" and "Assurance" for detailed discussion). My point above, however, is simply that acts of obedience are secondary to and flow from an underlying faith-allegiance, which is the sole encompassing condition of salvation.

So then, as an Arminian who recognizes that my salvation is contingent on my continuing perseverance in the faith, my assurance of salvation is not diminished each time I sin. I am secure, so long as my fundamental, underlying commitment of allegiance to Christ remains stable.

But doesn't the possibility that I might someday revoke my faith-allegiance to Christ dampen my present ability to have full assurance of eternal salvation? Not at all. Consider an analogy to marriage: though there is no *absolute* guarantee that Pam and I will remain married until we are parted at death, I certainly do not sit around worrying whether we might divorce before that time. My assurance is based on my present commitment to her and her present commitment to me. We have been married for nearly 13 years as I write this, and I have no intention of turning away from her now or in the future. Indeed, I intend to cultivate and expand my love and commitment to her with every passing year.

Similarly, my assurance of salvation is based on God's faithfulness to me and my desire to remain ever loyal to Him. I must not merely rest on the sufficiency of a commitment to Christ made over 20 years ago. Instead, I must actively seek to renew and deepen my allegiance to Christ on a daily basis. I believe that this is what Peter was getting at in his second epistle:

“Now for this very reason also, applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in your moral excellence, knowledge; 6 and in your knowledge, self-control, and in your self-control, perseverance, and in your perseverance, godliness; 7 and in your godliness, brotherly kindness, and in your brotherly kindness, love. 8 For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 For he who lacks these qualities is blind or short-sighted, having forgotten his purification from his former sins. 10 Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; 11 for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.” (2 Peter 1:5-11)

Peter is not teaching a works salvation here. Rather, he is teaching us to actively cultivate an ever-deepening allegiance to Christ, so that there will be no fear of our ever revoking that allegiance. A thriving allegiance yields joy, security, and assurance.

This does not mean that God leaves it entirely up to us to cultivate our allegiance. As the apostle Paul taught, God is active as the divine Enabler throughout the course of our salvation:

“So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; 13 for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure.”  
(Philippians 2:12-13)

As we “work out” the obedience that flows from an ever-deepening allegiance to Christ, God is at work in us, forming the nature of Christ within us. In this arrangement there is assurance, even for Arminians.

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