

# Thoughts on Eternal Security

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All turns at last on the answer to that fundamental question: "What think ye of Christ?" The true solution of this question is the radical refutation of every error.<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

Jacob Harmenszoon ("Arminius"; 1560-1609) was a Dutch pastor, who in his youth studied theology in Switzerland at the University of Geneva under Theodore Beza – hand picked successor to Jean (John) Calvin. In 1610 followers of Arminius published a five-point remonstrance against certain teachings associated with Calvin. The Calvinists, for their part, answered with five points of their own. The Arminian position was considered and rejected at the Synod of Dort (1618-19). The Calvinist answer to it has come down to us in English under the acronym, TULIP.

Table 1  
Calvin's TULIP

	Term	Meaning
T	Total depravity	Mankind is wholly incapable of doing good.
U	Unconditional election	God's choice of who will be saved precedes faith.
L	Limited atonement	Christ died only for the sins of the elect, not for others.
I	Irresistible grace	God's decision to lead someone to faith cannot be resisted.
P	Perseverance of the saints	Once saved, always saved.

Actually, there is a question about Calvin's own position on two of the above points – (L) limited atonement and (P) perseverance of the saints. Calvin, who died in 1564 some 54 years before the above Synod, makes statements which could be taken to mean that he believed Christ died for the sins of the whole world. For example, in dialogue with the Lutheran theologian, Georgius Calixtus (1586-1656), he says,

From all which we conclude that although reconciliation is offered unto all men through Him, yet, that the great benefit belongs peculiarly to the elect, that they might be "gathered together" and be made "together" partakers of eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Eerdmans, n.d.), 1:567. The present paper is a slightly reworked version of a sermon given at the South Carroll Seventh-day Adventist church in Sykesville, MD, on July 5, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Institutes of the Christian Religion, p. 156.

When Calvin says, "reconciliation is offered unto all men through Him," that sounds like something less than a ringing endorsement for the concept of (L) limited atonement put forward in TULIP.

Another point on which Calvin may have left room for further discussion was (P), the perseverance of the saints.

Even the reprobate, writes Calvin in his commentary on Heb 6:4, may "enjoy some taste of his grace." The Spirit can produce some initial stirring "even in the reprobate, which afterwards vanishes away, either because it did not strike roots sufficiently deep, or because it withers, being choked up." A person may experience feelings of remorse for sin, make a public profession of faith, and yet not be truly regenerate, according to Calvin. Such temporary faith is not to be confused with the genuine saving faith that endures to eternal life.<sup>3</sup>

My problem with a strong form of point P (the perseverance of the saints, or once saved always saved) is that it does not involve persevering. Calvinists make this a work of Christ rather than of the individual, which is good, and yet the practical effect is all the same. Once a person has been saved, this fact renders any subsequent actions irrelevant as regards salvation. It is at this point that the doctrine becomes positively dangerous.

We can argue against Calvin's views (if they really were his views) on the perseverance of the saints, but when we have finished doing this, what remains? Is there a biblical security we can support once we have removed what we believe is an unbiblical security that we cannot support? I believe there is.

## Two Models

### Wrong model

*Biblical background.* If there is an ideal state of security, surely the Pharisees attained it. We see this in their interactions with both John the Baptist and Jesus. John the Baptist tells the Pharisees,

And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. (Matthew 3:9, NIV)<sup>4</sup>

These words can only be taken as an effort on John's part to moderate the Pharisees' false sense of security. We see the same type of security – and the same response to it – in the following exchange with Jesus, where He makes two seemingly

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.bringyou.to/apologetics/a133.htm>. The words of Calvin in this statement are quoted from his *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> English Bible quotations are from THE HOLY BIBLE: NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION®. NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House.

contradictory statements about the Pharisees' relationship to Abraham. Both statements must be studied together in order to understand either of them correctly.

They answered him, "We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves of anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?"<sup>34</sup> ¶ Jesus replied, "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.<sup>35</sup> Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever.<sup>36</sup> So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.<sup>37</sup> I know you are Abraham's descendants. Yet you are ready to kill me, because you have no room for my word.<sup>38</sup> I am telling you what I have seen in the Father's presence, and you do what you have heard from your father."<sup>39</sup> ¶ "Abraham is our father," they answered. "If you were Abraham's children," said Jesus, "then you would do the things Abraham did.<sup>40</sup> As it is, you are determined to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. Abraham did not do such things. (John 8:33-40)

First Jesus says, "I know you are . . ." (vs. 37), and then, "If you were . . ." (vs. 39). He acknowledges that the Pharisees are Abraham's descendants (*sperma*), but denies that this fact makes them Abraham's children (*tekna*). Here Jesus, like John, calls in question the basis for the Pharisees' security. And if faith were not an issue, one would have to say that they had excellent grounds for confidence – just as Paul did before his conversion.

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more:<sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee;<sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Phil 3:4-6)

The word "confidence" (vs. 4) is especially resonant just here. Paul was confident during his life as a Pharisee. And yet the New Testament nowhere makes this an article of faith. If it has that status now, it is because we decided it should be so.

How would we describe Paul's sense of security before and after conversion? We could say that before conversion he had bad reasons for feeling secure, whereas after conversion he had good reasons. But none of this has anything to do with how secure he felt in these two situations. A Pharisee's sense of security, such as Paul had prior to conversion, would surely rival anything Calvin might have aspired to. Indeed, if Paul's experience is any indication, one can feel too secure. One can feel secure for the wrong reasons – reasons that in the end prove misleading.

*The Calvinist viewpoint.* Let us begin by pointing out that there is not just one Calvinist viewpoint. There are nuanced, theologically sophisticated positions within Calvinism, and some that are quite extreme. In many cases these two characteristics are combined. Sam Morris is a name quoted frequently by opponents of eternal security.

We take the position that a Christian's sins do not damn his soul! The way a Christian lives, what he says, his character, his conduct, or his attitude toward other people have nothing whatever to do with the salvation of his soul . . . . All the prayers a man may pray, all the Bibles he may read, all the churches he may belong to, all the services he may attend, all the sermons he may practice, all the debts he may pay, all the ordinances he

may observe, all the laws he may keep, all the benevolent acts he may perform will not make his soul one whit safer; and all the sins he may commit, from idolatry to murder, will not make his soul in any more danger . . . . The way a man lives has nothing whatever to do with the salvation of his soul" (Morris, *A Discussion Which Involves A Subject Pertinent to All Men*, pp. 1-2).

Sam Morris was pastor of the First Baptist Church in Stamford, Texas. One could say that his views are extreme because they are those of a person who is uneducated or unsophisticated, but this is not true. At one point in his life Dr. Sam Morris taught Bible at Hardin-Simmons University. And he did much good opposing alcohol.

Whatever history's verdict on Sam Morris might be, one certainly can't question the qualifications of Dr. Charles Stanley – author of perhaps two dozen books and twice president of the Southern Baptist Convention. Stanley says,

And so, sometimes out of ignorance or whatever it might be, they attempt to gratify and meet those needs the same way they did before they were saved, and therefore, you can't tell a carnal believer from a lost man. That is, you can't tell the cold from the carnal because the truth is, they're both acting the same way. Now, one of them is in Christ and one of them isn't. One of them is lost and the other one is in Christ. One of them knows about God and knows him in the experience of salvation; the other doesn't know him at all." ("Spiritual Vs. Carnal," Study in 1 Corinthians, Tape #8, PQ092)

In the final analysis, quotations such as the ones I have given above are unnecessary. The seeds of all such positions are already present in the Westminster Confession of Faith. Here is the entire text of article XVII, entitled "Perseverance of the Saints":

- I. They, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.
- II. This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.
- III. Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>[http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/index.html?foot=/documents/wcf\\_with\\_proofs/XVII\\_fn.html#fn0](http://www.reformed.org/documents/wcf_with_proofs/index.html?foot=/documents/wcf_with_proofs/XVII_fn.html#fn0)

All three of the quotations I have offered above are very much in the spirit of TULIP, because of their consistent monergism – or emphasis on a completely efficient work of God and a completely passive spiritual posture of mankind.

What I draw from these statements is that, within Calvinism, it's good to remain faithful, and really bad not to remain faithful, but at the end of the day it just doesn't matter what you do. Live as you please, heaven is your home. This teaching is not only wrong; it is dangerous, because – ironically – people could lose their salvation by believing that nothing they do could ever make them lose their salvation.

There is another problem here. For all the armor plated certainty that the Calvinist view seems to provide, there is room within it – as a natural outgrowth of the model – for all the doubt and uncertainty that any conditional model might provide. Here is the argument: If a person exhibits what looks like faith but is lost, that does not demonstrate that s/he had salvation and lost it, but that s/he never really had it to begin with. I do not accept this premise, but assuming for argument that it is true, how can I know with certainty that what looks like faith in my experience really is?

On p. 2 (above) Calvin is quoted to the effect that it is possible for something in a person's experience to look like faith which isn't. How can we tell the difference? We can't – not until the day of final reward, and by then it's too late. Within Calvinism I can look, act, and feel saved – talking about eternal security all the while – and still be lost. The system offers no defense against this possibility. Thus, an unconditional model shifts the problem from one place to another, but does not remove it.

### Right model

If one can feel secure for the wrong reasons, is it also possible to feel secure for the right reasons? Is there a firmly biblical way to approach the problem of security? I believe there is, but it does not take a form that anyone would anticipate.

We have seen that having the wrong model could make us believe we are secure with Christ, or without Him. That's too much security. Any model that excludes Christ to any degree, for any reason, is the wrong model. Consider the following passage.

He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup> God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful. (1 Cor 1:8-9)

By emphasizing different parts of the passage, adherents of any theological model could quote this statement supportively. The emphasis I wish to give it is "He" (vs. 8). Calvinists believe this too. In their model perseverance is the work of God, not of the sinner. But we might disagree on how "He" does this. I submit that God keeps us strong to the end by leading us to cling to Jesus until the end.

And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. <sup>12</sup> He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 John 5:11-12)

As a point of theory, if I separate from Jesus, I lose the benefits which follow from remaining in Him. If I have Christ, I have life. If I don't have Christ, I don't have life. This is not complicated, but it *is* Christ centered.

So how can I know that I'm still in relationship with Christ at any given point in my life? On one level I can't. But my basis for confidence is not in myself. I don't have to feel this for it to be true. Which is more important – security, or a feeling of security?

When I reflect on my lack of faith, it is my privilege as a Christian to come to Jesus and ask for greater faith. When I reflect on my hardness of heart, I can come to Him and ask for an entirely new heart. When I see weaknesses in my life, I can bring each one of them to Him and ask for corresponding strength. In doing this I'm acting like a branch attached to a vine. Vines cling to things – to a rock, a ledge, or some other support. They can't grow straight up on their own. In and of themselves they are helpless. All of which brings to mind the following words of Jesus, where He says,

"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." (John 15:5)

I don't aspire to have the security of a tree. Trees are strong, majestic, and perhaps secure in their strength, but they rely on nothing. I want the very insecurity that some Christians expend much effort trying to avoid. Is this a biblical position?

But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. (2 Cor 12:9)

I don't particularly want a security that is strong on the level of what we talked about in the first part of this paper. I would prefer to have, well, infinite strength. Since I have no strength whatever in spiritual things, that means associating myself with a source of strength outside myself – like Christ. He then will be my security, as He is also my life, my wisdom, my holiness, and everything else that concerns my eternal welfare. I have none of these things, but He has them all. As a Christian I can tap into that. That's the kind of security I want. And it has the advantage of being biblical.

If I don't know whether I'm calling on the name of the Lord (see 1 Cor 1:2) or merely saying "Lord, Lord" (see Matt 7:21-22; Luke 6:46), it's my privilege to go to Christ and ask for a clarification. If I doubt the sincerity of even the prayer with which I ask that question, I can ask Jesus for sincerity. At each turn I can take my weakness to Christ and in His hands it becomes strength. There's security in this kind of relationship. So why should I want to exchange what I have for a security that ultimately sets aside the issue of whether I have an ongoing relationship with Jesus or not? Having tasted the real thing, such substitutes hold no attraction for me.

## Discussion

A monergistic teaching of security is actually the opposite counterpart of biblical security - a philosophical bulwark against it. We only have true biblical security by falling

helplessly on Christ. If we feel secure, can we also feel helpless? If we no longer realize our need, why should we keep coming to Jesus to supply it? "Who hopes for what he already has" (Rom 8:24)? And yet if I separate from Him, I separate from my only Source of life. These are fundamental issues for the Christian.

One problem with the doctrine of eternal security, as it comes down to us in TULIP, is that it works. It makes people secure – too secure, secure with Christ or without Him. In this way it makes sinners secure in their sins. By teaching that, at the moment of conversion, we receive everything we will ever need from Christ, we remove an important motivation for staying close to Him. If we don't think we need anything from Christ after conversion, we probably won't ask Him for it. If we don't ask, we won't receive. In this model salvation becomes a memory of a precious but momentary experience, rather than an ongoing reality.

## Conclusion

Is there any real security in a conditional model such as the one I've described? Yes, there is. Where does it reside? In Christ. Not in me. In myself there is only weakness and inadequacy. But anyone who falls before Christ, broken and empty, bringing only his or her need, can be sure that never in all eternity will He ever drive such a person away (see John 6:37).

## Appendix

The following additional remarks bring us back to the quotation from Baptist pastor Sam Morris that appeared above on p. 3 (above). In Rom 6:23 Paul says.

For the wages [*opsōnia*] of sin is death, but the gift [*charisma*] of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom 6:23)

Paul here draws a clear distinction between the wages of sin as contrasted with the free gift of life. Here we focus on the first of the of two. Greek *opsōnia* occurs in various forms four times in the New Testament (Luke 3:14; Rom 6:23; 1 Cor 9:7; 2 Cor 11:8). In one case it refers to donations, but in a context resembling that of taxation.

I robbed other churches by receiving support [*opsōnion*] from them so as to serve you. (2 Cor 11:8)

I'm not suggesting that Paul's offering for the poor in Jerusalem was obtained by force, but merely point out that he spoke of it this way in order to make a point. "I robbed" [*esulēsa*] is his expression, not mine.

Whatever we might say about 2 Cor 11:8, the two remaining occurrences have to do with a soldier's pay, and that was certainly not a gift. It was something they earned.

Then some soldiers asked him, "And what should we do?" He replied, "Don't extort money and don't accuse people falsely- be content with your pay [*opsōniois*]." (Luke 3:14)

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense [*opsōniois*]? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk?

With this much as background (see also 1 Cor 9:7), let me clarify that not everything Morris says in the statement quoted on p. 3 is wrong. When he says,

All the prayers a man may pray, all the Bibles he may read, all the churches he may belong to, all the services he may attend, all the sermons he may practice, all the debts he may pay, all the ordinances he may observe, all the laws he may keep, all the benevolent acts he may perform will not make his soul one whit safer;

that's true. They won't. But when he goes on to say,

and all the sins he may commit, from idolatry to murder, will not make his soul in any more danger . . . .

that part is not true. In Rom 6:23 Paul goes out of his way to make clear that a gift is different from a wage. We cannot earn life, but we can earn death. The one is a free gift from God, to which we add nothing; the other is a wage that we bring on ourselves by what we do. There is nothing unfair in this. Those who are eventually punished for their own sins, deserve it. They earned it.



So one problem with Morris' statement, and with others like it, is the assumption that punishment and salvation are somehow comparable. They are not. At least Paul says they aren't in Rom 6:23. A Christian's good deeds cannot save him, but his sins can indeed damn his soul, if he refuses to confess and forsake them.

ANother problem is that no biblical precedent exists for confessing first and then sinning later. The thought that this might be possible makes a mockery of confession. Confession is all about separating from sin, not protecting ourselves from guilt so that sinful behaviors can be indulged with impunity. Notice John does not say, He was faithful and just and forgave us all our sins. That's close, but there are more words in what he actually says. Notice especially the first clause:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

We must continue confessing our sins and continue seeking forgiveness in order to fulfill the condition laid down in this verse. We must continue walking with Christ to remain in Him, as John 15:5 tells us. To be saints, we must persevere.