

## **Election and Security: An Impossible Impasse?**

**John Mark Hicks  
Lipscomb University**

I remember that I was shocked by the question. I had usually asked it in reverse. In my Doctrine of Christ class with Professor Strimple in 1978 a student at Westminster Theological Seminary asked a soteriological question: “Can an Arminian be saved?” I had usually asked the question along the lines of whether a Calvinist could be saved. Professor Strimple’s answer was simple, but profound: “if he trusts in Christ.”

I have told some, including my doctoral committee at Westminster Theological Seminary, that I was converted at Westminster. I became an Arminian. That was not exactly the goal of Westminster’s faculty but given the fact that I was once a Pelagian, it was considered progress. My undergraduate training and my formative church tradition held a high view of the human being and was, as I view it now in my mind’s eye, clearly Pelagian. My experience at Westminster reshaped my Pelagianism into a form of Arminianism (more along the lines of Arminius himself).<sup>1</sup>

There are renewed discussions about Arminianism and Calvinism in our time. “Open Theism” has generated much of this. But, in addition, there are growing calls for various groups, especially among the Southern Baptists, to return to their Calvinistic

---

<sup>1</sup>See my dissertation concerning the development of 17<sup>th</sup> century Arminianism, “The Theology of Grace in the Thought of Jacobus Arminius and Phillip van Limborch: A Study in the Development of 17th-Century Dutch Arminianism” (Ph.D., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1985). A succinct summary is available in “The Righteousness of Saving Faith: Arminian versus Remonstrant Grace,” *Evangelical Journal* 9.1 (1991), 27-39.

theological heritage.<sup>2</sup> Tensions seem to be rising, and Roger Olson highlighted this with his 1999 *Christianity Today* article entitled “Don’t Hate Me Because I’m Arminian.”<sup>3</sup>

My task is to explore the doctrines of election and perseverance in the context of the existential concern for assurance in order to discern some theological unity and common ground between Arminianism and Calvinism. First, I will introduce some broad biblical-theological principles that will provide a launching point for a proposal beyond the impasse. Second, I will compare and contrast major differences in the hopes of bypassing the impasse. My conclusion will propose a way beyond the impasse.

### **Biblical Themes**

Several biblical themes provide a framework for articulating a common ground that can propel us beyond the impasse. I do not claim any theological ingenuity or originality here. Quite the contrary, these theological principles are common ground between believers. It is precisely because this is true that they may provide a way to unpack a common theological framework.

#### *Divine Initiative*

Whatever the doctrine of election means, it at least insists that God took the initiative in the redemption of fallen humanity. God made the first move. We love because he first loved. We believe because he first acted. We are redeemed because he accomplished redemption for us.

---

<sup>2</sup>Tom Nettles, *By His Grace and For His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), and the *Founders Journal*, which is available at <http://wwwFOUNDERS.org>.

<sup>3</sup>Available at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/9ta/9ta087.html>; first published in the September 6, 1999 issue of *Christianity Today*.

Initiative involves not merely the first act (as if God acted first and then passively sits back to see how we respond), but that God continuously acts as he unrelentingly pursues a people for himself. God's love pursues us, engages us and moves us.

Further, this entails that all boasting is negated. We have nothing about which to boast except what God has done in Jesus. Election means that God has removed all grounds for human merit and has located the ground of salvation in his gracious and loving acts.

### *Christocentrism*

Christ is the Elect One (Ephesians 1). God chose Christ as the savior of the world. He is God's chosen vessel for redemption. Both Calvin and Arminius emphasized this point, and it has been powerfully renewed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century by Karl Barth. Election is Christocentric since Christ is God's Elect One.

Whatever election we have, we are elect because we are in Christ. Before we become steeped in the theoretical underpinnings of election, we must not lose sight of this foundational soteriological insight: God has chosen us in Christ because he has chosen Christ. We are only elect through Christ. His election is logically and ontologically prior to our own. We cannot think biblically about election if we do not first acknowledge that our election depends on the election of Christ.

### *Economic Revelation*

The election of Christ, of course, is a revealed point. We only know that God has acted decisively in Jesus as the Elect One because God has revealed himself in history

and interpreted his actions in Scripture. We only know our election in Christ because God has revealed his Elect One.

Paul makes this point in 2 Timothy 1:8-11. God “has saved us and called us to a holy life,” and the ground of this salvation and calling is not our own works, but God’s “purpose and grace.” We know this grace by God’s decisive act in Jesus. Even though it was hidden before creation, “it has now been revealed through the appearing” of Jesus.

Debates about the “secret” will of God are unprofitable exactly because that will is “secret.” We know our election through the revelation of God in Christ. God has revealed his election through Christ and we have no other access to it. Consequently, we ought to think about election within the salvation history of God’s story, that is, within the revealed history of God in Israel and Christ. Thinking about the election of God in terms of the “eternal” mind of God is speculative, but thinking about divine election in the light of Jesus Christ is rooted in God’s historical revelation.

We perceive our own election only through the revelation of that election in Christ. When we step outside of or seek to go beyond this historic revelation, we enter worlds, which our minds have created rather than what God has revealed. Election and assurance are economically tied to Christ. There the focus should begin and end.

### *Means of Faith*

Faith is the means of both justification and sanctification. When we make justification dependent upon sanctification, then we begin a never-ending journey since we will never be sure whether our sanctification is sufficient (in terms of its depth, amount, comprehensiveness and quality). When we sever the relationship between justification and sanctification, we become antinomian and discredit the role of

sanctification as evidence of justification. The way to avoid legalism on the one hand and antinomianism on the other is to see faith as the principle that unites justification and sanctification.<sup>4</sup>

We are justified by faith and we are sanctified by faith. Faith is the means by which we are accounted righteous before God and faith is the means by which the Spirit transforms us. Faith is both the means of salvation and the means of assurance. We are elect, then, through faith in Christ. Faith functions as an instrument, not as a meritorious act. It is the means by which we come to know our own election.

### **Beyond the Impasse?**

#### *Election*

**Traditional Arminianism.**<sup>5</sup> Election is the effect of faith. There is an election independent of faith, and this is God's own election of Jesus Christ. God took the initiative to redeem and elected Jesus Christ to save the world. In that sense election is not the effect of faith, but in the application of redemption, faith functions as a means by which election is known. It is also a cooperative, dynamic relationship between God and humanity. Faith is synergistic in the sense that God yearns for reciprocal and authentic relationship between himself and his people. In this sense election is the effect of faith where faith functions as a means to election. God has elected Christ, and we are elect in Christ through faith where faith is understood as a free response to God's gracious work in Christ.

---

<sup>4</sup>See my "An Historical-Overview of the Grace-Works Issue," in *Grace, Faith, Works: How Do They Relate? Annual Preachers Forum 1992*, ed. C. Philip Slate (Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs, Inc., 1992), 5-28, available at <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=3912>.

<sup>5</sup>A recent Arminian exposition of the doctrine of grace is found in Thomas C. Oden, *The Transforming Power of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993).

**Traditional Reformed.** Faith is the effect of election. People come to faith because they are elect and no one else comes to authentic faith. Election decrees faith; or election selects those who will have faith and God gives them faith by his own free grace and initiative. God is the sole cause of faith and faith comes irresistibly to those whom God has elected.

**Theoretical Reconciliation?** Is there a theoretical construct that can encompass both? Can we retain the priority of election and human responsibility for faith together? Can faith both be a sovereign gift of God irresistibly given to the elect and also a human act of trust in God's offer of salvation?

Some will live with mystery here.<sup>6</sup> Some will seek to remove as many cognitive difficulties as possible through compatibilism though recognizing mystery remains.<sup>7</sup> Others believe that there is a solution in some theoretical construct such as Molinism.<sup>8</sup> I will not pursue these here except to say that perhaps some theological construct can reconcile the biblical tensions so that both Calvinism and Arminianism are preserved. I do not see it at the moment, but I would not deny it to the infinite God and I would not discourage attempts to seek it as long as the historic work of God in Christ is still primary.

There are nuances that each can accept in the other. Arminians, for example, can say that election is the cause of faith in some senses (e.g., divine initiative and the enabling work of the Spirit). Calvinists can say that election is the effect of faith in some

---

<sup>6</sup>Gerald L. Borchert, *Assurance and Warning* (Nashville: Broadman, 1987).

<sup>7</sup>D. A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) and "Reflections on Christian Assurance," *Westminster Theological Journal* 54 (1992), 1-29.

<sup>8</sup> William Lane Craig, "Middle Knowledge, A Calvinist-Arminian Rapprochement?," in *The Grace of God, the Will of Man: A Case for Arminianism*, ed. Clark Pinnock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 141-64 and "'Lest anyone should fall': A Middle Knowledge Perspective on Perseverance and Apostolic

senses (e.g., faith as a means of salvation and faith as the revelation of election). But there is still a fundamental chasm. Perhaps it comes down to the question “why do some believe and others do not?”

Calvinists want to avoid any hint of human merit by construing faith as an irresistible gift to the elect. God graciously elected them to believe. Thus, faith is wholly located in God’s electing grace and sovereign work. This preserves God’s glory and it excludes all human boasting. This is the motive that drives Calvinism’s doctrine of election.

Arminians want to avoid locating the damnation of any human being in the “secret” will of God. Arminians answer the question “why are some lost” with “because they did not believe.” The reason why some believe and others do not should not be located in the intent of God, for he is, in a revealed sense, willing that all believe. Calvinists rightly argue that the damned are damned because of their own sin and that, were it not for the grace of God, everyone would be damned. But even though it is humanity’s fault that they are damned, the Arminian cannot see why, on the Calvinist understanding of things, it is not God’s fault that everyone does not believe. If the question the Arminian seeks to answer is “why are some lost?,” the further question they want the Calvinist to answer is “why does not everyone believe?” The Arminian motive, then, is to absolve God of responsibility for unbelief. The Arminian seeks to preserve the faithfulness of God to his own relentless love.

Theoretically, then, I see no way to reconcile these opposing positions. I see the biblical emphasis and laudable motives of both. As long as Calvinists stress human

responsibility and as long as Arminians stress divine sovereignty, perhaps we can live with the biblical tension as a mystery beyond our finitude. But is there a practical theology that preserves both without resolving the theoretical tension?

*Assurance*

#### **Four Positions**

##### Faith: Instrument of Justification and Sanctification<sup>9</sup>

Theological Points	A	B	C	D
Faith And Works	Yes	No	No	No
Faith That Works	No	Yes	Yes	No
Faith Without Works	No	No	No	Yes

Pelagianism (A): Assurance through Works. The focus of assurance is not only faith, but works. We are assured through faith and works. An imperfection in the nature, number and quality of the works undermines the assurance of faith. Obedience is necessary, not just as an evidence of faith, but as a part of the constitution of faith itself. Works are not merely evidential, but they are instrumental. Obedience is necessary as a means of justification/sanctification as opposed to faith alone. Works, as the obedience of faith, stand alongside of faith in equal importance. Thus, moral imperfection in one aspect of sanctification condemns the believer. This is position “A” in the above chart.<sup>10</sup>

Arminianism: Assurance through Faith. The focus of assurance is not the number, quality and types of works. Rather, faith is exhibited in a willingness to seek

<sup>9</sup>A represents works-oriented Arminians, B represents grace-oriented Arminians (Arminius), C represents traditional Reformed theology (e.g., Calvin), and D represents views similar to the Grace Evangelical Society.

<sup>10</sup> William Woodson, *Change Agents and Churches of Christ: A Study in Contemporary Problems with Change Agents Among Churches of Christ* (Athens, AL: Sain Publications, 1994), pp. 187-280, argues that works are not only evidential but also instrumental for both justification and sanctification (p. 275): “If the good works God has ordained for the Christian are only evidential but also instrumental, they must be done



God's will in all things and to trust in Christ alone for salvation. This faith is not alone, but it is active. It is a faith that works. Nevertheless, faith is the means of assurance. Where there is no faith, there is no assurance. When unbelief crowds out faith, then there is no salvation since grace is through faith. This is the position "B" in the above chart.<sup>11</sup>

Calvinism: Perseverance of the Saints.<sup>12</sup> This is the traditional Reformed understanding of assurance as seen in Calvin and the Puritans, and it appears to be the traditional Southern Baptist position as well.<sup>13</sup> Only those who persevere in faith are elect and all the elect will persevere. Authentic saints (elect ones) will persevere and die in faith. Their persevering faith is evidence of their election and the evidence of their faith is good works. Works are viewed as evidential rather than instrumental. The Reformed position is designated as "C" in the above chart.

Sovereign Grace: Eternal Security (or, "Once Saved, Always Saved"). If any have ever genuinely and authentically believed at some point, whether they continue to persevere in faith or not, whether they ever evidence faith again or not, they are eternally secure. They have eternal life by virtue of that one moment of trust in the past.

Johannine realized eschatology is especially important for this perspective, particularly

---

or the Christian is violating the will of God and must repent and confess his sins to be forgiven; otherwise, his soul may be lost eternally."

<sup>11</sup> See my "An Historical-Overview," 5-28 (<http://www.hugsr.edu/Hicks/gfw.htm>) and Rubel Shelly, "Grace and Works in Romans 4-5 and James 2:14-26," in *Grace, Faith, Works*, pp. 69-84, available at <http://www.faithmatters.com/topics/grace2.htm>.

<sup>12</sup>A traditional, but recent and well-informed, Reformed presentation of this subject would be Anthony Hoekema, *Saved by Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989).

<sup>13</sup>The *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) reads: "All true believers endure to the end. Those whom God has accepted in Christ, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never fall away from the State of grace, but shall persevere to the end. Believers may fall into sin through neglect and temptation, whereby they grieve the Spirit, impair their graces and comforts, bring reproach on the cause of Christ, and temporal judgments on themselves, yet they shall be kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation" (from <http://www.sbc.net/bfm5.cfm>). This is consistent with other particular Baptist confessions, such as the London Confession of 1644, the Philadelphia Confession of Faith of 1742, Abstract of Principles of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (1858) and the Baptist Faith and Message Statement of 1925 (cf. <http://www.baptiststart.com/persev-quotes.htm>).

the present possession of eternal life in John's writings. Consequently, works are not only unnecessary as means of assurance and salvation, but also as evidence. One can be eternally secure even if their lives are filled with evil works, much less lacking good works. This position is designated by "D" in the above chart. It is the advocacy of the Grace Evangelical Society.<sup>14</sup> Some of its historic advocates have been associated with Dallas Theological Seminary.<sup>15</sup> Some prominent Southern Baptists, such as Charles Stanley, defend this position.<sup>16</sup>

### Shared Convictions.

The above chart illustrates the shared convictions of positions **B** and **C**. While neither **B** or **C** can theologically approve of **A** and **D** on the relationship between faith and works, **B** and **C** can live harmoniously with each other. The difference between **B** and **C** is illustrated below, but on this specific issue they share a common ground in opposition to **A** and **D**. This shared conviction between Arminianism and Calvinism over

---

<sup>14</sup>See their website at <http://www.faithalone.org>.

<sup>15</sup>The most recent and visible advocate is Zane Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege* (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1981), *Gospel in Eclipse: A Study on Eternal Rewards*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Dallas: Redencion Viva, 1987), *Absolutely Free! A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989). John MacArthur, Jr. has been the most vocal opponent of this development; cf. his *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word, 1993) and "Perseverance of the Saints," *The McMaster's Seminary Journal* 4 (Spring 1993), 5-24, available at <http://www.mastersem.edu/journal/j4mac.htm>. The extreme of this position is not a caricature. R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 19: "Whoever once truly believes that Jesus was raised from the dead, and confesses that Jesus is Lord, will go to heaven when he dies. But I will not stop there. Such a person will go to heaven when he dies no matter what work (or lack of work) may accompany such faith." Also, Robert N. Wilkin, "Saving Faith and Apostasy: Do Believers Ever Stop Believing?," *GES News* (November 1991), available at <http://www.faithalone.org/news/y1991/91nov2.html>: "While our salvation is guaranteed from the moment we trust in Christ, our faith is not."

<sup>16</sup>Charles Stanley, *Eternal Security: Can You Be Sure?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1990), 74: "The Bible clearly teaches that God's love for His people is of such magnitude that even those who walk away from the faith have not the slightest chance of slipping from His hand." Also *Understanding Eternal Security* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998) and his articles on the web at [http://www.intouch.org/INTOUCH/bible\\_says/eternal\\_security/](http://www.intouch.org/INTOUCH/bible_says/eternal_security/), especially "If Someone Stops Believing How Does That Affect Their Salvation?" at [http://www.intouch.org/INTOUCH/bible\\_says/eternal\\_security/stop.html](http://www.intouch.org/INTOUCH/bible_says/eternal_security/stop.html) where he writes:

against Pelagianism and the Grace Evangelical Society provides a good basis for dialogue.

*Common Ground*

**Theological Common Ground.**

Election Revealed in Christ. God's election (whatever it may be) is revealed in Jesus Christ. The election of God is, in this sense, historically conditioned. It is tied to the history of Jesus Christ. He is the elect one, and all those in him are elect. Election, then, should first be understood in relation to Jesus rather than in relation to the eternal decrees. Election should function as part of our Christology rather than our "theology proper." Calvin understood this. He placed his discussion of election in the context of assurance. Beza, who came after him, and Reformed theologians in general, placed the doctrine of election in the doctrine of God in conjunction with Predestination and the Divine Decrees. I think we can move beyond the impasse to some degree if we again see Election in its Christologically revealed history rather than in the eternal decrees of God. In other words, we need to view election through the lens of redemptive history (salvation history) rather than through the metaphysic of an eternal divine decree within the immanent Trinity.

Faith as Means of Election. The instrumental nature of faith is a given in Protestant theology. Faith contains no merit. It is, as Luther said, the beggar's hand that receives what God freely gives. We can find common ground here even though Arminians and Calvinists might disagree about whether faith is the cause or the effect of

---

"Forgiveness/salvation is applied at the moment of faith. It is not the same thing as faith. And its permanence is not contingent upon the permanence of one's faith."

election. We can both agree it is the means of election within redemptive history and that faith is the evidence of election

The Theological Common Ground. Thus, it is Christ alone through faith alone that is at the center of the doctrine of election.<sup>17</sup> Here we can find theological common ground where we would find none in debating the speculative order or nature of the divine decrees before creation dawned. We do not have access to that eternal mind, but we do have access to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, and we are confident of our election in Christ through faith.

**Practical Common Ground.**

Both **B** and **C** agree that *those who persevere in faith are elect*. We may disagree about the theory that lies behind this statement, but we will not disagree with the statement. We may disagree about whether the elect persevere because they are elect or whether they are elect because they persevere. Whatever the theory, those who persevere are elect. **D** can agree with this statement as well, though they would add that all who have believed are elect whether they persevere or not. Even **A** might agree with this statement though they would add “works” to faith.

Yet, because **D** and **A** have these caveats, this is where common ground with them ends. There are difficult practical questions about living together when one theology insists that even those who do not persevere may be elect (**D**) and where another theology insists on a kind of perfectionism or legalism (**A**). The former subtly (and unintentionally) undermines holiness, while the latter subtly (and unintentionally)

---

<sup>17</sup>By “faith alone” I mean that faith is the only principle by which human receives the gift of salvation. The relationship of faith and baptism is the subject of another paper, though I would affirm that baptism is a means of grace through faith rather than a work which evidences sanctification or merely symbolic of salvation already received.

undermines grace. The former have assurance without evidence and the latter have no assurance despite evidence.

Nevertheless, there is still the practical common ground when the church maintains its holiness and disciplines those who do not persevere. Even **D** disciplines members, but they do so without making a judgment about their election. Practically, then, even those who believe in “eternal security” maintain holiness boundaries in the local church. Where discipline breaks down due to “eternal security,” however, I think that practical common ground is lost.

Practically, then, the key question for election and assurance is our historic relation to Jesus Christ. While some Augustinians in the history of theology have focused the question in terms of "Am I elect?," most have recognized that this is not the proper question. No one can see into the hidden will of God to discover in the abstract whether they are elect or not. Calvin believed that one who tries this "Am I elect?" question “casts himself into the depths of a bottomless whirlpool to be swallowed up; then he tangles himself in innumerable and inextricable snares; then he buries himself in an abyss of sightless darkness...Consequently, if we fear shipwreck, we must carefully avoid this rock, against which no one is ever dashed without destruction.”<sup>18</sup>

The key question is: do you trust in Christ? Calvin correctly says that the question is not, “Am I elect?,” but “Do I trust Christ?” Calvin spoke of Christ as “the mirror wherein we must, and without self-deception may, contemplate our own

---

<sup>18</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 3.24.4, in LCC series, ed. John T. McNeill and trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 2:968-9.

election.”<sup>19</sup> Faith is the means of election, and our only access into the electing decision of God is through faith. Through faith I see my election, and here **B** and **C** agree.

Assurance, then, is Christological--I am elect as I trust in Christ as the elect one. Election "from below" is mediated through faith in Christ. Here Augustinians and Arminians can agree. "If Pighius asks me how I know I am elect," Calvin writes, "my answer is that Christ is, to me, more than a thousand testimonies."<sup>20</sup> It is only in Christ that we are elect and pleasing to God and so it is to him that we must turn. He is the Elect One and mediates election. The critical issue is "do we trust Christ?" According to Calvin, Christ is the mirror of our election and when we look at Christ through faith we see our own election.

### **Conclusion: Can We Live with the Theoretical Differences?**

In conclusion, I wish to raise two points that will hopefully focus this paper. First, I build on I. Howard Marshall's suggestion that there is practical agreement between Calvinists and Arminians. Second, I call for a theological method that seeks unity through reflection on the economic realities of redemption rather than reflection on the eternal decrees of God.

Commenting on the differences between Calvinists and Arminians over the warning texts, Marshall writes:<sup>21</sup>

If a person is in the former group, he has still to heed the warning: only by so doing can he show that he is one of the elect. In other words, the

---

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 3.24.5 (2:970).

<sup>20</sup>Calvin, "The Eternal Predestination of God," in *Calvin's Calvinism*, translated by Henry P. Cole (London: Sovereign Grace Union, 1856), 137, available at <http://www.reformedreader.org/cctreatise08.htm>.

<sup>21</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 313. Marshall has earlier contributed a significant book to this discussion, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany Fellowship, Inc., 1969).

Calvinist ‘believer’ cannot fall away from ‘true’ faith, but he can ‘fall away’ from what proves in the end to be only seeming faith. The possibility of falling away remains. But in neither case does the person know for certain whether he is a true or a seeming disciple. All that he knows is that Christ alone can save and that he must trust in Christ, and that he sees signs in his life which may give him some assurance that he is a true disciple. But these signs may be misleading.

It comes down to a question of assurance. Whoever said, ‘The Calvinist knows that he cannot fall from salvation but does not know whether he has got it’, had it summed up nicely. But this can be counterfeit and misleading. The non-Calvinist knows that he has salvation—because he trusts in the promises of God—but is aware that, left to himself, he could lose it. So he holds to Christ. It seems to me the practical effect is the same.

This “practical effect” is crucial. I do not believe it is mere pragmatics, but it is the historic situation of the church in the history of redemption. This is where the church lives. We trust in Christ alone for our salvation by grace alone. We know our present salvation and we know the faithfulness of God to those who persevere in faith.

As Carson points out, despite the practical similarity, the “underlying structures” for the Calvinist and the Arminian are quite different.<sup>22</sup> But it is precisely these “underlying structures” that are matters of inference and are not rooted firmly in the history of redemption. These “underlying structures” project us into the eternal mind of God rather than locate us in the historic redemption God worked in Jesus Christ.

I call for a theological methodology that lives within the economy of redemption, within salvation history without speculating about the mind of God. When we leave speculation and theory outside of the discussion and we focus on God’s revelation in Jesus Christ, we can live together in theological and practical harmony by affirming that God initiated our redemption out of pure grace, that he elected us in Jesus Christ, that

---

<sup>22</sup>Carson, “Reflections on Assurance,” 21. Zane C. Hodges, “The New Puritanism Part 1: Carson on Christian Assurance,” *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 6 (Spring 1993), available at

Jesus Christ is the mirror of our own election and that persevering faith is the means of both recognizing that election and continuing in the assurance of that election.

Arminianism and Calvinism can live together if we focus on the economic revelation of redemption though we may still disagree about the theory which lies behind the origin of faith. The only major difference is the theory of election.

In fact, this is where Thomas Schreiner concludes his discussion. He finds the Arminian position that “believers can and do lose their salvation much more biblically coherent” but because he sees such a strong emphasis on “unconditional election” in Scripture that he cannot adopt it.<sup>23</sup> It is the doctrine of election that marks the watershed.

But that watershed is a theory of election rooted in the “secret” will of God. If instead we affirm the redemptive-historical themes of election (divine initiation, exclusion of human boasting, grace) and call believers to perseverance in faith (trusting in Christ’s election and submitting to his Lordship), we have the theological common ground to build a mutually-appreciative understanding between Calvinists and Arminians.

Calvinism and Arminianism debate the problem of the hidden counsel of God. But our access to that hidden counsel is only through God's historic revelation. We cannot approach God in his hiddenness, but only in his revelation. That revelation is Jesus Christ who is the Elect One. Calvinism and Arminianism both find their election in Christ through faith. There is no practical difference between the two.

---

<http://www.faithalone.org/journal/1993i/Hodges.html>, argues that the practical similarity demonstrates that Carson’s position is a compromise with Arminianism.

<sup>23</sup>Thomas R. Schreiner, “Perseverance and Assurance: A Survey and a Proposal,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 2 (1998), 56-57. While Schreiner camps on election, Clark Pinnock, formerly of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, has written that it was the crumbling of the doctrine of the P in TULIP that first altered him to his own shift away from Calvinism. See his “From Augustine to Arminius: A



I think Professor Strimple was correct. What matters is faith in Christ. What theory one may believe about the eternal decrees of God is secondary to faith in Christ, and therefore secondary to unity in Christ.

"Copyright © 2001, by John Mark Hicks."