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A Philosophical Analysis of the Notion of the Irrevocable Nature of Salvation with Practical Implications

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Abstract

One of the controversies concerning believers' salvation has to do with whether or not such salvation is irrevocable or unconditional. Opinions are sharply divided on this issue. There are those who strongly believe that believers' salvation is unconditional. By contrast, there are others who claim that believers' salvation is conditional. In light of this, the goal of this paper is to analyze some of the arguments put forth for and against the notion of an irrevocable

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salvation. This paper is divided into five parts. Part I gives a brief survey of the major approaches and distinction with respect to the notion of an irrevocable salvation and points out the common areas of agreements among these approaches. Part II discusses some of the issues that feed into the persistent and seemingly to the non-ending controversies that surround the idea of an irrevocable salvation. Part III discusses some of the epistemic limitations we face with respect to identifying people who fall under the label ‘irrevocably saved’. Part IV suggests some ways to think about the idea of an irrevocable salvation and argues that ultimately salvation must be irrevocable. Finally, I conclude that the existing models proposed to argue for or against the idea of an irrevocable salvation are not problem free.

I. Major Approaches and Distinctions

The notion of an ‘irrevocable salvation’ has been and still is a much debated subject matter. Evangelical Christians have taken at least four distinct approaches in dealing with the notion of an irrevocable salvation. Norman Geisler² describes them as follows. First, there are those who believe that the ‘elect’ are secured in their salvation even though they (the ‘elect’) at present cannot be certain whether or not they are among the ‘elect.’ So, to ensure their membership in the family of the ‘elect,’ believers need to persevere to the end. This position is known as Strong Calvinism (SC). Second, there are those who believe that the ‘elect’ are eternally secured, and at present, they can also be certain about it. This position is known as Moderate Calvinism (MC). Third, there are those who believe that a person can lose his/her salvation if he/she commits the sin of apostasy or deny Christ altogether as his/her savior. This position is known as Classical Arminians (CA).³ Fourth, there are those who believe that a person can lose his/her salvation if he/she commits any serious intentional sin. This position is known as Wesleyan Arminians (WA).⁴

² Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3 (Bethany House, 2004). In the literature, SC is also referred to as Classical Calvinism. CA is referred to as Reformed Arminianism. See, e.g., J. Matthew Pinson, ed. *Four Views on Eternal Security* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). Chaps. 1 and 3.

³ This is the view which was first proposed by Jacob Arminius (1560-1609).

⁴ This is the view which was advanced by John Wesley (1703-1791).

SC, MC, CA and WA are all well represented and argued positions in their own right.⁵ In this paper, I do not wish to rehearse in any direct way the arguments given for or against each of these positions. However, for the present purposes, I would like to group the above four positions under two main categories. So let us call the first two positions, viz., SC and MC as Calvinist. Similarly, let us call the latter two positions, viz., CA and WA as Arminian. The rationale in grouping these distinct positions under the two categories (Calvinist and Arminian respectively) is not to deny the distinctions that hold among the four positions nor does it overlook the significant disagreements that the proponents of each position have against their counterpart positions. Rather, the rationale behind grouping the positions under two main categories as shown above is simply to point out the common premise the proponents of SC and MC on the one hand and the proponents of CA and WA on the other hand accept. We may ask what such a ‘common premise’ would be. As I see it, the proponents of SC and MC, endorse the claim that for the ‘elect,’ salvation is irrevocable. By contrast, the proponent of CA and WA endorse the claim that there are no privileged ‘elect’ whose salvation is irrevocable. That is, salvation is contingent or conditional. I will say more on this at a later time.

Putting aside the other differences, both Calvinists and Arminians *prima facie* are committed to endorsing the following four claims:

1. Salvation is only available via Jesus (e.g., John 14:6; Acts 4:12).
2. Salvation is a free gift of God (e.g., Eph. 2:8-10).
3. Salvation is initiated by God Himself (e.g., John 3:16).
4. Salvation is a remedy for human spiritual predicament (e.g., the redemptive story of the entire Bible, i.e., Old Testament and New Testament).

Before we proceed in our discussion, it is crucial to have a clear grasp of some of the important terms related to our topic. We start with the very term ‘salvation.’ Alister E. McGrath remarks that the term ‘salvation’ could carry with it various meanings. For example, ‘salvation’ could have a specific Christian reference of a sort stated in (1)-(4) or else, it could also simply mean an attempt to bring about economic stability and political emancipation for people who suffer under tyranny (e.g., oppressive regimes). Moreover, as McGrath

⁵ See, e.g., J. Matthew Pinson, ed. *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 2002.

further notes, the concept of ‘salvation’ is also used in other religions with their own specific definitions of the term or concept of ‘salvation.’⁶ But for present purposes, we won’t belabor this point. That said, in the present context, the term ‘salvation’ is exclusively linked with the work of Christ on the cross, including his life and resurrection.

We should also distinguish between two questions related to the notion of the assurance of salvation on the one hand and various terms used to refer to the same notion of the assurance of salvation on the other. Here I follow Norman Geisler’s excellent outline. Geisler makes a distinction between the objective question (hereafter OQ) and the subjective question (SQ) respectively. “The first question is, can a truly regenerate person ever lose salvation? The second question is, if such a person *cannot*, then can he or she have assurance of salvation in this life?”⁷

As Geisler also points out, the notion of assurance of salvation is also referred to as *the perseverance of the saints; eternal security; once saved, always saved; and the assurance of the believers*. In a nutshell, perseverance is the idea that the ‘elect’ will persevere in their faith until the end. Eternal security is the idea that a true believer never loses his/her salvation. Once saved, always saved is the idea that a true believer’s salvation is irrevocable. The assurance of the believer is the idea that a believer can have a present assurance of salvation.⁸ So the assurance of salvation, as Geisler points out is the subjective side of the issue whereas eternal security pertains to the objective side. Put differently, assurance deals with the sense one has of his/her own salvation while security pertains to the ultimate fact of one’s salvation.⁹ We can then understand *assurance* as an a posteriori truth, i.e., based on experience whereas *security* as an a priori truth, i.e., independent or prior to experience. In light of such qualifications, our concern in this paper is to look at the differences that exist

⁶ Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology*, 2 ed. (Cambridge: Blackwell Pub., 1997), 386-87. For information on the major teaching of world religions, see Huston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (CA: Harper San Francisco, 1991); Winfried Corduan, *Neighboring Faiths* (IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998).

⁷ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology*, 300.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 300-301. Even if, both Calvinists and Arminians grant that the present assurance of salvation is possible, the Arminians openly hold that a believer can lose both the assurance of salvation as well as eternal life.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 301.

between Calvinists and Arminians with respect to the issue of whether or not salvation can be lost. In this paper, we will not be engaging in Bible exposition or other matters related to exegetical issues except for the purpose of examples. Other essays in this volume have taken up that task. So, the present work is concerned only with issues of philosophical interest with respect to the notion of an irrevocable salvation within the context of the major claims advanced by both Calvinists and Arminians.

Returning to claims (1-4) as stated above, what can we say in favor of them? Given (1), we can say that there is no other way available except via Jesus, for humans to be saved. That is to say that God has provided not one of the ways; but the only Way for humans to be rescued from their sins. And that Way is Jesus Christ. However, some have argued against taking (1) in such a literal and straightforward manner. For example, John Hick advances a pluralist view of salvation, according to which the major world religions that focus on bringing change on human existence from being ‘self-centered to being God-centered,’ can be deemed as equally salvific as any other.¹⁰ So, for Hick, Jesus cannot be the only savior. According to Hick’s proposal, salvation is effort centered whereby a person via a religion he/she follows brings herself or himself from a state of, for example, (a) self-centeredness to a state of being (b) God-centered. Hick’s idea of salvation then is rooted in the transformation of one’s character or attitude towards what Hick calls ‘the Real’ or what we commonly call ‘God.’¹¹ Other people, who call themselves Christian inclusivists, also argue that even though Jesus Christ is a linch-pin of salvation, salvation is not exclusively channeled via Jesus Christ. In this regard, Christian inclusivist Clark H. Pinnock claims that since God’s grace is universally available for all man-kind, Jesus’ death on the cross for sinners somehow rescues humans regardless of what kind of faith they have.¹² By ‘faith’ here I simply mean an adherent of

¹⁰ See further John Hick, *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* in Stanley N. Gundry, Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan 1995, 1996), chap. 1.

¹¹ See Alvin Plantinga’s excellent critique of Hick’s construal of the notion ‘The Real’ in terms of God being unknowable and Hick’s denial of the possibility of any form of literal talk about God, *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 43-63.

¹² Also see Clark H. Pinnock in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, chap. 2.

a certain religion, Christianity or otherwise. For Christian inclusivists, Jesus Christ is “the normative fulfillment of all religions.”¹³

In light of Hick’s and Pinnock’s proposals, must we then revise (1) above? To revise (1) at least would commit us to the negation of (1), which would amount to (1’) salvation is not only available through Jesus Christ. That means that Jesus Christ is *hardly the only way to salvation* as assumed in (1). Rather Jesus Christ turns out to be *one of the ways to salvation*. Here, Hick, as a religious pluralist happily endorses such a revision. Yet, I assume that Pinnock might take an issue here. For example, Pinnock might say that his position does not presuppose the negation of (1) as shown above. Rather Pinnock might simply say that while (1) can be taken without any revision, its application is multifaceted. More precisely, for Pinnock, the death of Jesus Christ is equally applicable for others who are outside of Christian faith in virtue of the gracious God, making available such access to salvation. Remember that for Pinnock, the savior is Jesus himself. But for Hick, while Jesus Christ can be taken as a savior in Christian faith, others can equally claim their own savior to do the same job for them, that is, save them. As I see it, however, both Hick’s and Pinnock’s proposals turn out to be deeply incompatible with Jesus’ own claim as described in John 14:6. As Jesus himself claims, if he is the way, the truth and the life, and no one can come to the Father except via him, then it follows that salvation can neither be pluralistic nor inclusive. In light of Jesus’ claim here, it is obvious that Hick’s position stands in direct contrast to how Jesus sees himself as a savior. Jesus sees himself not as one of the ways but *the only way* to salvation. So, one can only buy into Hick’s position, if one is prepared to deny the sole centrality of Jesus Christ in redeeming humans from their sins. My own view is that there are no compelling reasons to opt for Hick’s position.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 15.

¹⁴ Jesus’ construal of salvation, first and foremost, is premised upon God’s plan of salvation for the whole world which is culminated in Jesus’ own work on the cross, i.e., death and resurrection. If this is true, then Jesus’ construal of salvation is not a hypothesis which waits for some kind of more verification as new evidence comes up. Instead, Jesus’ construal of salvation is rooted in historically attested facts as both the predictions of the Old Testament and the fulfillment of those predictions in the New Testament indicate (see for example, Robert L. Thomas, “The New Testament Use of The Old Testament,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 13/1 (Spring 2002): 79-98; also see Robert’s “The Principle of Single Meaning,” *The Master’s Seminary Journal* 12/1 (Spring 2001): 33-47; for three distinct approaches on this issue, see Kenneth Berding and Jonathan Lude, *Single Meaning, Unified Referents: Accurate and* [Footnote continued on next page ...]

How about Pinnock's position? Is it compatible with Jesus' own view of salvation as stated above? The answer must be no. But this is not to deny that as Pinnock rightly argues that God can manifest himself to people regardless of the kind of faith they have. Of course, we also do not want to deny that God's grace is available for humans. But how does it follow from such affirmations that salvation is inclusive in a way Pinnock argues? Affirming God's ability to reveal Himself to people of other faiths is one thing. But to take a Christian construal of salvation based on Jesus' claim as indicated above is a different matter altogether. To my knowledge, there is no clear and uncontentious Scriptural evidence that supports Pinnock's inclusivism, which is based on mere inference that because God's grace is available everywhere, it must be the case that people in other religions can encounter saving grace. If God had chosen to do that, perhaps he would have made that clear enough for us in His word. I would add to that Jesus himself would have qualified his statement by saying something like this: 'I am the savior of all humanity, therefore in whatever faith tradition people are in, they can get me if they seek me'. If this kind of qualification or any other in the neighborhood, was something Jesus had said, who would want to take any issues with Pinnock's inclusivism (even with Hick's pluralism for that matter?). But the problem is that Jesus never qualified his own absolute necessity for salvation in a way that Pinnock's inclusivism presupposes. Pinnock's position is far too stretched. He himself seems to have realized the contentious nature of his inference. As Pinnock

Authoritative Citations of the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub., 2007). But Hick may reject such a response altogether. This is because Hick believes that the historic teaching of the Bible regarding Jesus being the only way to salvation (e.g., John 14: 6), Jesus' deity, incarnation and the like core and decisive notions for Christian understanding of salvation are all nothing but human creations of the ancient church. In this regard, Hick claims that the majority of New Testament scholars are on his side. This is not a place for me to engage with full force Hick's baseless claims. Contrary to what Hick says, a number of respected New Testament scholars and philosophers have advanced decisive cases for the historical reliability of the New Testament in general and the Gospels in particular. For example, the leading New Testament scholar, Craig Blomberg makes a book length case for the historical reliability of the Gospels *The Historical Reliability of the Gospels* (IL: InterVarsity, 1987). A notable philosopher William Lane Craig also advances rigorous, philosophical arguments pointing out why the Hick's type denial of the reliability of the New Testament account (and the Gospels in particular) not only flies in the face of abundant historical evidence, but such objections also fail on their own ground. See *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (IL: Crossway Books, 1994). Chaps.6-8. Alvin Plantinga also gives a devastating critique of Hick's conception of 'God' which shows that Hick's position is manifestly incompatible with the entire Christian conception of God, as a personal and knowable God. See Plantinga's *Warranted Christian Belief*, 43-63.

puts, “the inference is more controversial, though I think it only draws out what is inherent in the premise.”¹⁵

Well, the issue is precisely whether there is a good reason(s) to endorse Pinnock’s premise before we endorse his conclusion. If people have hunger for God regardless of wherever they are (e.g., outside of the Christian faith) then the proper thing to do is to direct those people to Christ so that they can make a conscious decision to follow him. In fact, this is precisely what Jesus’ own view of salvation should motivate us to do. So it simply won’t do as Pinnock assumes that somehow the death of Christ magically (my own term) transforms such people wherever they are. Pinnock’s view inevitably leads us to a highly questionable theology of the possibility of people passively getting saved without even knowing about it, with complete disregard of making an explicit confession of trust in Jesus Christ.¹⁶

¹⁵ Clark H. Pinnock in *Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World*, 98.

¹⁶ Here by no means I am belittling the difficulty as well as the controversial nature of this issue. For example, what can we say about the case of little children who die before they even become self-conscious, will they be saved or lost? How about the case of some people who suffer from some kind of sever disorder (e.g., mental retardation, severe form of autism) who cannot make any conscious decisions to do anything serious in their life, let alone to make a decision to follow Christ? While wild speculations can be given to try to figure out the fate of such people, to my mind no one can settle such matters to any degree of satisfaction. We have so many things we still do not have a clue about. In fact, in some situations, it is an intellectual virtue to admit one’s cognitive limitations and guard against unwarranted speculations. But this does not mean that we have to deem every such like issues as mystery and stop thinking altogether. By no means; my point is only to emphasize the difficulty at times we face in thinking about the scope of Christ’s salvific work and the way of its application.

Elsewhere I argued that through “general revelation, God has revealed Himself to all people and at all places. More precisely, God has made himself known to all people through the created order, history and conscience. In this regard, the scriptures teach us a lot. For example, the Psalmist tells us that creation declares the handiwork of God (Ps. 19:1-4), Paul also argues that what can be known about God is made plain from creation and thus, people across the board are without excuse if they say that they lack information regarding God’s existence (Rom. 1:18-20; Acts 17:25-27), God has also planted a conscience in humans which gives them moral intuition about right and wrong actions (Rom. 2: 14-15). General revelation then makes possible basic knowledge about God’s existence and his nature to all people regardless of their religious, educational, geographical, economical background, etc. Unlike religion, where people seek for God, in revelation, God remains a sole initiator of communicating truth about himself. Since God’s general revelation has universal dimension to it, we can say that in some sense all humans have common revelation. Therefore, we can expect to see traces of God in other religions throughout the world. So, the question remains: are all religions equally true? To say that all religions are true is to say that no religion whatsoever is false. Here, the quantifier ‘all’ excludes the possibility of any single religion from being false. The claim, therefore, entails that no single religion has explanatory advantage, more consistent/coherent than the other religion. But this does not seem to be right for endorsing it will only lead us to contradiction. For example, suppose that two different religions, namely R1 and R2 endorse the reality of hell and the denial of the reality of hell respectively. Can we then say that what R1 and R2 teach regarding hell can both be true? Clearly the answer here must be negative for we cannot endorse the affirmation and the denial of something at the same time and in the same sense. Thus, it is contradictory to say that all religions are equally true. Instead, it is plausible to say that ‘all religions contain truth’, which is to say that there is a universal feature that all religions share in [Footnote continued on next page ...]

In light of the considerations made so far, our earlier claim (1) should stand, i.e., must not be revised. What can we say with respect to (2)? Remember (2) is the claim that salvation is a free gift of God. Here the point is that our salvation is not in any way something we deserve. We cannot demand it. We only receive it as God, graciously and lovingly offers it to us. If this right, then we have no ground to boast about it, but only to be grateful for it. Given (3) which is a claim about God being the sole initiator of salvation, all we can say is that we have done nothing to cause our salvation. If God had not first initiated a way of salvation for sinners like us, then our fate would have been total destruction. So the fact that God is the sole initiator means that salvation is entirely God's project. In short, God is the starter and the finisher of our salvation. So (4) is the claim that salvation is a remedy for human spiritual predicament. That means that the solution for deep human spiritual problem comes only from God. If this is true, then man cannot solve the problem of his/her own spiritual separation from the loving God. Literally, there is nothing that man can do to cure the spiritual death afflicted him or her, unless God Himself intervenes in such a desperate situation. But claims (1-4) should not be taken as a denial of human involvement in their salvation.

So, claims (1-4) can be taken as common areas of agreement between Calvinists and Arminians. However, there are serious disagreements between Calvinists and Arminians when it comes to salvation. The issues are very complicated, so we can only raise a few of them here.

II. Sources of Disagreements

Earlier we have distinguished between two main questions in relation to the notion of an irrevocable salvation: the first question is,

common, despite their external and internal differences. This universal feature is 'truth' that we find in all religions. As someone said: 'all truth is God's truth', which is to say that since God is the ultimate source of truth, wherever such truth is found, the ultimate owner of it is, God himself. In light of the above remarks, Christians can look for a common ground in conversation with non-Christian friends. Since both unbelievers and believers have access to general revelation, Christians need to acknowledge and endorse some truths in other religions. However, Christians should also be prepared to help unbelievers see the problem of endorsing the claim that all religions are equally true, which clearly leads to contradiction."

Taken from <http://studentlife.biola.edu/spiritual-development/spiritual-life/apologetics/apologetics-blog/can-we-find-truth-in-other-religions/> blog contribution by Mihrteu P. Guta.

can a truly regenerate person ever lose salvation? The second question is, if such a person *cannot*, then can he or she have assurance of salvation in this life? Recall the first question is an objective question (OQ); the second question is a subjective question (SQ). There are at least two main reasons for Calvinists and Arminians to disagree over both OQ and SQ.

A. Incompatible Answers

Calvinists and Arminians give two mutually exclusive answers to OQ as well as SQ. For Calvinists, once a person is truly regenerate, that is becomes a true believer, then the possibility for the person to lose his/her salvation is zero. Why? This is because Calvinists believe that a believer's salvation is prefixed by God. For example, Wayne Grudem defines the doctrine of election in these terms, "Election is an act of God before creation in which he chooses some people to be saved, not on account of any foreseen merit in them, but only because of his sovereign pleasure."¹⁷ So according to Grudem's characterization of the doctrine of election, (i) God chose some people before they were even born; (ii) those people whom God chooses for salvation do not deserve it; (iii) the reason God chooses some is for His own sovereign pleasure. It then seems that for Calvinists OQ and SQ can be settled easily.¹⁸

All of these three claims are very strong in a sense that they seem to leave no room whatsoever for human responsibility. Taken at face value, these claims could also be deeply offensive. This is because the claims imply that God's decision is totally arbitrary in that he chooses some for salvation while ignoring others. If one group is as undeserving as the other, what plausible reason would God then have, to favor some yet ignore others? In fact, an even more troubling implication would be the conjunction of claims (i-iii) would make God to be the direct author of sin. This is because, if God had already chosen some to be saved, then the fall must have been an inevitable consequence of God's own plan. If God had not somehow put in place the blueprint for human sin, then his choosing some before the

¹⁷ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 670.

¹⁸ But Strong Calvinists hold that a person must persevere to the end to have temporal assurance, since a person cannot be certain whether or not he/she is among the elect. But Strong Calvinists still hold the elect as eternally secure.

creation of the world for salvation makes no sense at all. Is there any way around such prima-facie disturbing implication? I would think so, but that is for later.

By contrast, Arminians give negative responses both to OQ and SQ. A key for the Arminians is the place they give for human responsibility. That is, humans have a capacity to choose or do things otherwise. In the case of salvation, even if Arminians agree with Calvinists in endorsing claims (1-4) discussed in Part I, the Calvinist approach that seems to diminish human responsibility does not sit well with the Arminians. So, Arminians do not hesitate to give a negative response to both OQ and SQ. What would be the conditions, under which the Arminians give a negative response for OQ as well as SQ? The answer is simple. That is, if a person either commits apostasy or engages in persistent intentional sin, then Arminians do not see any good reason why a person cannot lose his/her salvation.¹⁹ So, Grudem type characterization of the doctrine of election hardly appeals to the Arminians. So, the issue of OQ and SQ cannot be that easily settled in the Arminian model.

But if as Arminians argue that one can lose his/her own salvation, then how can Arminianism make sense in light of the claims (1)-(4) as discussed in Part I? Those four claims we saw in Part I strongly presuppose God's sovereignty in mapping out human salvation. But if salvation is something which can be lost or gained based on human responses, would that not trivialize God's providential control on the one hand and His sovereignty on the other? How can a truly regenerate person lose his/her salvation, even if such a person sins? How many times can a person gain and lose his/her salvation, if every time a person's intentional sins, could be an occasion for him/her to lose salvation? Does this not seem to be somewhat bazaar? These are just some of the questions we can ask to make sense of the extent of human freedom or responsibility in our salvation. But things do not look good if everything is left for human responsibility. We will look at some of the implications at a later time.

¹⁹ Classical Arminians only take apostasy as a reason for a person to lose his/her salvation while Wesleyan Arminians emphasize intentional sin as a cause of the loss of one's salvation (unless a person repents of his/her sins).

B. Models

Both Calvinists and Arminians claim to have, *inter alia*, a biblical support for their models. So it is not uncommon to see each side appealing to various Bible passages to justify one's own model. This by itself is not problematic. But often times what fuels the controversy between Calvinists and Arminians is ready-made answers given against each other's position in an attempt to make one's own model more appealing or look more biblically sound. For example, Calvinists list a number Bible passages which they think support their model. In doing so, they reinterpret all other passages that their opponents (Arminians) cite to support their own position.²⁰ Likewise, the Arminians also take a similar approach to counter the Bible passages cited by their Calvinist counterparts.²¹ To give one concrete example, if an Arminian claims that salvation is for all, by which an Arminian means literally the scope of God's salvific call is for every single person, then the Calvinist comes along and qualifies the quantifier 'all' in the following way. Even if the Bible says that salvation is for 'all,' (e.g., 2 Peter 3:9) the scope of 'all' here does not encompass everyone but only those whom God has already chosen to be saved, as we saw earlier with Grudem's characterization of the doctrine of election. So 'all' must be understood as a general call to all humans for salvation, but in terms of its application, the 'all' is specifically effectual only on the 'elect.'

Since each side, gives an impression that one's Bible exposition or exegesis is better equipped to deal with the issue of irrevocable salvation than the other side, the debate between Calvinists and Arminians understandably ends often in stalemate. As philosophers sometimes say, 'one's modus ponens is another's modus tollens.' Or what one affirms is what the other denies. What is going on here? It seems to me that both Calvinists and Arminians alike fail to see the fact that models have their own limitations. Models are not flawless. It is a hopeless endeavor to assume that any particular model, whether that be in theology, science, philosophy or in any other discipline for that matter, can tackle every anomaly that crop up here and there with respect to a particular issue. Models are human constructions; thus,

²⁰ See for example, Geisler's attempt just to do that in his *Systematic Theology*, 304-336.

²¹ See, e.g., J. Matthew Pinson, ed. *Four Views on Eternal Security*, 2002.

they can and must be modified when that is appropriate. So in the case of whether or not a person can lose salvation, one can point out many instances in the Scriptures where they seem to be indicating under certain circumstances, a person may lose salvation (e.g., Heb. 2:1; Heb. 6:4-6).

On the hand other hand, the Scriptures also give us assurance of salvation (e.g., John 3:18; John 5:24). In fact, the debate between Calvinists and Arminians often gets very complicated because each side engage in detailed exegetical controversies that seem to be never ending, usually very boring indeed! Am I then suggesting exegesis is not important or giving proper care for biblical interpretation is irrelevant? Absolutely not! We must do everything we can to understand clearly the Bible message so as to construct a sound theology. But the debates between Calvinists and Arminians are not only based on straightforward exegetical matters, but they are also based on lots of philosophical assumptions as well. For example, how one views human responsibility, i.e., whether or not humans have freedom in a libertarian sense (e.g., the ability to do otherwise) or else as Calvinists argue in a more restricted sense (e.g., a one way freedom) makes a significant difference in terms of how one interprets various biblical passages and thus, the theology one constructs out of those passages.

So whether one is a Calvinist or an Arminian, he/she should not pretend that his/her model is flawless while the rest is riddled with flaws. Of course, each side might object to such a remark by saying that no one thinks that either the Calvinist model or the Arminian model is flawless. Here I can only say that it is easier said than practically shown. In fact, anyone who picks up standard literature on the debates between Calvinists and Arminians hardly fails to see the level of elevation each side gives for one's side often at the expense of belittling the other side. It might be argued that this is exactly what anyone who argues for any position does. So there is nothing wrong with the way the debate is often framed between Calvinists and Arminians. Here I beg to differ. My claim is not and has not been to deny how people feel with respect to their own position as opposed to others. That is clear enough to anyone. My point is simply to point out that there has to be a culture that allows us to exercise an intellectual humility by openly admitting that both the Calvinist and the Arminian

models are not fully equipped to deal with all the anomalies we face regarding the notion of an irrevocable salvation. I believe that it is the lack of such an open admission that is motivating each side to engage in one's 'model protecting' activity often by reinterpreting or twisting some Bible passages just to make them fit one's model. I suggest that even if models are wonderful conceptual tools for us to think in an orderly fashion about certain issues, our allegiance must not be paid to our models at the expense of trumping over the anomalies we should learn to live with.

III. Epistemic Gaps and Other Issues

One of the most central term that Calvinists often refer to, to argue for the irrevocable nature of a person's salvation is the term 'elect.' As we saw earlier that for Calvinists, 'the elect' are those who have been chosen by God to be saved before they were born. But the big question is how can we tell who is among the elect and who is not? Is there any principled way to do that? Of course, we may say that the elect are those who are part of the body of Christ or are members of a believing community. The elect are those who believe what the Bible teaches and trust in Jesus Christ. The elect are those who explicitly follow Jesus Christ as their personal savior. The elect are those who demonstrate maturity in their Christian life, say for example, those who bear spiritual fruit in their lives (e.g., Gal. 5:22). The list goes on and on and on. Some of the things mentioned may be objected to as a basis for our knowledge of the elect while others may be conceded. Let that not worry us for now. But these and the like other things that can be mentioned to refer to people as 'the elect' are based on purely inferential knowledge or indirect knowledge or a set of inferences we make to establish a certain case. But some Calvinists claim that a believer not only knows that he/she is irrevocably saved; a believer can also be sure about the fact that he or she is saved. What is the basis for the Calvinists' claim? The basis of course is that there are a number of Bible passages where the Bible openly states that believers are eternally secured. And from such confirmation it follows, for Calvinists that the very elect are those who are called believers.

But what is the criterion for us to tell in any clear way, who is the elect and who isn't? Simply saying those who believe the Bible and do such and such things are the ones who are the elect is far from

being persuasive. Suppose for instance that Jones does everything a person who is believed to be the elect does, without believing in Jesus Christ at all. Perhaps, Jones may be motivated to do all the things that Christians or believers do for some kind of hidden personal agenda (whatever that might be). In this case, behaviorally Jones's attitude is indistinguishable from that of a typical believer. Jones goes to church, serves in a choir, reads the Bible, prays, and participates in various Church activities. In short, Jones is an active Church member. Given such strong outward indicators, even Jones's own closest friends, family members and even the pastor or for that matter any other church elders or members cannot tell whether Jones is not a believer. In this case, the Calvinists bold pronouncement on their knowledge of the elect turns out to be deeply implausible.

Of course, Calvinists have a response to this kind of remark. They might say that Jones is not the elect in the first place so the example used here is irrelevant to challenge their point. Calvinists can only make such a move, if they in the first place can show us how to distinguish the elect from the non-elect. In the absence of such knowledge, why should anyone take seriously the Calvinists' claim? No matter how strong our inferential knowledge with respect to 'the elect,' may be, there is always an epistemic gap or lack of access to a certain knowledge that cannot be narrowed down or filled up in any straightforward way. Adding a set of inferences upon other inferences will give us the same result without settling the matter in any way. So, the OQ we raised previously, although it is a necessary condition for our knowledge of the elect, certainly it is not sufficient. In the last part of this paper, I will argue that the answer for whether or not one is irrevocably saved, for the most part rests on the SQ so much more than on the OQ.

Moreover as Calvinists claim that the doctrine of election is causal. That is to say that God literally causes some and not others to be saved. Then their model turns out to be incredibly counterintuitive when it comes to moral responsibility. As William Hasker puts, "If an agent A deliberately and knowingly places agent B in a situation where B unavoidably performs some morally wrong act, the moral responsibility for that act is transferred from B to A, *provided that* the morally wrong act results exclusively from A's actions and is not the

result of an evil disposition in B which preceded A's actions."²² We then are helpless creatures at the hands of a God who plays with our lives. I refuse to go that route for there is nothing that has convinced me to do so. Thus, I doubt that moral responsibility makes any sense given the causal doctrine of election as Calvinists advocate. In the last part of this paper, I propose a more modest way to think about 'election,' which is perfectly compatible with the idea of an irrevocable salvation.

On the other hand, the notion of human responsibility is central to the Arminian model. Arminians believe that a person has freedom in a libertarian sense, which as Thomas Flint remarks, "refers to a family of views, a family all of whose members look alike in certain crucial respects."²³ As I see it, one of the certain crucial respects, which unites all Christian libertarians, is the idea that free human actions are not compatible with determinism. In a nutshell, determinism refers to the thesis that everything in the world, human action included, is under the control of the universal laws of nature. Psychological determinism refers to the thesis that our desires, purposes, needs etc., can motivate our behavior. Libertarians argue, therefore, that real freedom is the one that is undetermined by antecedent cause of some sort. If this is true, then agents with real freedom must have control over their own actions. Put differently, agents determine their own actions freely. Here, the Arminians' view of freedom rules out antecedent causes to be responsible for an agent's choice of action. Yet, libertarian view of freedom does not deny the role of desires and beliefs in influencing one's choice. But from this nothing follows that free acts are caused by antecedent factors in the agent. Libertarian view of freedom presupposes that agents have control over their own will (or at least have control to will to act). For example, if I am given a choice to eat an orange or go to school, nothing determines that either choice is made. Given that I am an agent, I can exercise my own causal power to do one alternative or refrain from doing it altogether. At this point Calvinists sharply disagree with libertarian view of freedom.²⁴

²² Willaim Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 131.

²³ Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 24.

²⁴ For example, Paul Helm (a leading Calvinist) is a compatibilist in his view of 'determinism,' according to which freedom and determinism are compatible with each other and thus the truth of [Footnote continued on next page ...]

How does the notion of an irrevocable salvation look given the Arminian emphasis on human responsibility? While one can certainly appreciate a libertarian view of freedom, the Arminian idea that a person can lose his/her salvation because of sin has some unpleasant consequences. First of all, it seems deeply unattractive to think of one's salvation as something that can be gained and lost all on the basis of what one does. Suppose now that Jones is a committed believer. Suppose further that Jones struggles and indulges in some kind of habitual sin say for instance for a year. According to Wesleyan version of Arminianism, then Jones must have lost his salvation during the time period that he indulged in habitual sin because he has not repented his sins within that period of time. Suppose further that Jones repents the next year and becomes sober and then he again begins to struggle with persistent sin and thus, again slips back in the same old habitual sin. Can we say then that in the previous year Jones had lost his salvation and upon repenting he gained his salvation back and then when he starts again sinning loses his salvation once again? The whole thing becomes so absurd and

determinism does not exclude freedom. In light of this view, determinism can also be stated in these terms: for every event *E* that happens, there is an antecedent cause *C* such that given *C* nothing else could have happened. In light of this, if determinism is true, then every human action say, for example, raising my hand up in Dr. David Hunt's class to ask a question, is causally necessitated by prior events that already took place prior to my hand going up, which also includes events that existed before I was born. But Paul Helm rejects the idea that a person can be held responsible for those actions that are incompatibilistically free. An action is incompatibilistically free just in case that action is not predetermined by prior states or events but the agent spontaneously did it. But why does Helm think that the truth of the matter is the other way around? Helm in his essay, *Augustinian-Calvinist View*, provides three arguments. For example, Helm's first argument deals with a particular view of God's grace. Helm claims that his view of God's grace, if accepted, motivates a Christian to accept a compatibilist account of human action, according to which an agent's action is free in a sense that it is consistent with determinism. At this point, one can ask: in what sense is then an agent free? For Helm, agents are free in a sense that they have the ability to do what they want. The ability invoked here is a hypothetical ability, the idea that if, I am given a choice to do X or Y, then I freely will to do X. I did this, according to compatibilist, because I desired to do X. In other words, agents have a one way ability to act as they want as opposed to also having an ability to act otherwise as indicated above. So Helm's conception of free will is that, a person *p* is still "free" when it comes to choice *C* even if *p*'s choice is necessary. In most cases, such notion of compatibilism is linked with the idea that freedom is compatible with the kind of necessity entailed by causal determinism (see William Hasker, *Providence, Evil and the Openness of God* (London: Rutledge, 2004), 125. Universal causal determinism is the idea that in the words of Flint, "for any event *E* occurring at time *t*, the causal history of the world *H* prior to *t* and the laws of nature *L* are such that the conjunction of *H* and *L* entails the occurrence of *E*", see Thomas P. Flint, *Divine Providence*, 23. For Helm, an agent's freedom is closely connected with universal causal determinism (see Paul Helm, *Augustinian-Calvinist View*, James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, ed., *Divine Foreknowledge* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2001).

hard to make sense of here. Even more puzzling is to imagine this scenario from God's point of view.

Suppose that God has some sort of mechanism to activate and deactivate one's salvation based on what a particular person does. Suppose further that every time Jones sins and stays for a longer period of time without repenting his sins, God rushes to deactivate Jones's salvation and upon repenting activates and so on for the rest. In this case, most of God's time is going to be spent simply activating and deactivating the salvation of millions of people around the world. What would God do if Jones literally forgets a number of sins he committed but only repents the ones he remembers? Does God have to do something special about it? If so, what would that be? Is salvation something that can be gained and lost countless times? What about Classical Arminianism which claims that once a person commits apostasy he/she will not be able to regain his/her salvation? Whose teaching is this? Is God's grace a one time 'get it right or lose altogether type of thing?' How about God's sovereign rule over whatever events take place both in the life of the individual or the universe at large? Surely a libertarian freedom though it is absolutely necessary for moral responsibility or other related issues, it is far from being sufficient to ensure that everything falls on our shoulder when it comes to our salvation.

IV. Irrevocable Salvation Defended

The answer I give when someone asks me whether or not I am saved is not the same as the answer I give if I am asked to tell whether or not I think someone is saved. In my case, the nature of the question is QS whereas answering the same question in relation to other people becomes OQ. Recall QS stands for subjective question whereas OQ stands for objective question. As we already discussed, whatever conclusion I reach about others being saved is based on inferential or indirect knowledge I have about those people's behavior, etc. It is literally impossible for me to have their subjective experience. One's subjective experience is necessarily one's own and is not shareable to a third party. Here we should be extremely careful not to abuse the nature of such subjective experience. It certainly has nothing whatsoever to do with currently fashionable relativistic, subjectivist interpretations of the notion of truth. Here I am not implying in any

way that ‘anything goes,’ postmodern style argument, which I completely reject.

Instead, here the answer we give to QS emanates from the answer we give to OQ. In other words, one’s subjective experience with respect to one’s own salvation is grounded in the objective fact of the truth of the Gospel. So, we cannot simply appeal to whatever feeling we may happen to have and justify our sense of salvation on that basis. In this way, the answers we give to QS are rooted in the answers we give to OQ. Put differently, our subjective sense of salvation has an objective dimension to it in virtue of being the experience that is completely grounded in the teachings of the Scriptures. Remember, however, that what gives us assurance of our salvation is not necessarily our assent to a set of propositions which anyone can do. But more than that, the basis for one’s assurance of salvation is entirely one’s intimate relationship with God Himself. In my view, one of the best evidence for one to be certain about his/her own salvation is given for us in the Scripture. Here I have in mind Romans 8:16 where it says, “The Spirit Himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.” Without getting into any detail, here Paul’s straightforward point is that the Spirit testifies to each believer that he/she is a child of God. Moreover, such experience is person-specific as opposed to corporate experience. So, each truly born-again believer has a personal experience of the testimony of the Spirit that assures him/her that he/she is truly saved.

Who then are ‘the elect?’ Before we attempt to answer this question, first we need to settle the question: in what sense are we referring to the elect, causally elect or in some other sense? Here I personally do not take ‘the elect’ in the causal sense of the term as Calvinists do. Instead I want to understand the term ‘the elect’ from the perspective of divine foreknowledge that does not entail causal involvement.²⁵ Here I take the phrase ‘divine foreknowledge’ to refer to God’s complete knowledge of the past, the present and the future. For example, Augustine remarks, “...from the fact that to God the order of all cause is certain, there is not a logical deduction that there is no power in the choice of our will....The fact of the matter is that

²⁵ For different ways proposed to understand divine foreknowledge, see James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, ed., *Divine Foreknowledge* (Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2001). My own view is close to David Hunt’s and William Craig’s construal of the doctrine of divine-foreknowledge.

our choices fall within the order of the causes which is known for certain to God and is contained in his foreknowledge for human choices are the cause of human acts....”²⁶ David Hunt also argues in a similar way in his essay *On Augustine’s Way Out*: “divine foreknowledge does indeed imply a kind of necessity...Not every form of unavoidability is incompatible with free will....This premise would be true only if (the) world’s necessity (gets) derived from its being causally determined...in some other way explanatorily dependent on those factors that make it unavoidable....But divine foreknowledge makes the future unavoidable without causing or explaining it; whether or not God exists in time the causal or explanatory arrow runs in the wrong for omniscience to undermine agency.”²⁷ William Craig also gives a rigorous defense of the idea that divine foreknowledge does not entail in every case divine foreordination. Thus, human freedom is kept intact.²⁸ It seems to me then that since it is perfectly conceivable that God foreknows the actions of free agents without himself causing them, the Calvinist doctrine of causal election must be rejected.

If we accept the above amendment on the doctrine of divine election, then God’s electing before the creation of the world, those who would freely choose and accept His offer of the gift of salvation would be perfectly reasonable. It may be difficult for us to wrap our minds around it, but from the difficulty we face to understand it, nothing follows to the effect that the notion is false. In light of this, since God’s foreknowledge is complete, the elect’s salvation is absolutely secure and guaranteed. God knows absolutely who freely follows him to the end and who does not. Human freedom as conceived by libertarians has a crucial place in accepting or rejecting God’s free unmerited gift of salvation. So the answer to the question raised above regarding who the elect are, I would say that they are ‘invisible.’ What I mean by this is that no one can be absolutely certain about whether or not the other person is the elect or not. Of course, we may have insufficient indirect or inferential knowledge about who the elect are based on numerous inferences as we have

²⁶ Augustine, *On Free Choice of the Will (III)* as quoted in David Hunt, “On Augustine’s Way Out”. *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1999): 12.

²⁷ David Hunt, “On Augustine’s Way Out” *Faith and Philosophy*, Vol. 16, No. 1 (1999): 12.

²⁸ William Craig, *The Only Wise God* (Eugene: Eipf and Stock Pub., 1999), parts I-II.

already discussed earlier. But when it comes to one's own salvation, a believer can be absolutely certain about his/her own irrevocable salvation, given the work and the testimony of the Spirit in the life of the believer.

V. Practical Implications

Since God is the sole initiator of our salvation, the proper response to the gift of our salvation is worship. We must express our gratitude to God for His providential care and sovereign rule over our lives. Even if we may still have so many unanswered questions with respect to different aspects of the doctrine of irrevocable salvation, we can trust God and let the joy of the Spirit surround us. We do what we can to grasp things, but there is no pre-requisite that we should figure out every anomaly before we rejoice in our own salvation. We are not in the dark in any sense. The Bible is clear in its redemptive message. Those of us who have accepted this message and believed in our heart can take every step of the way to grow in our knowledge of God and come closer to Him. Our salvation should enrich our prayer life. Most importantly, it should ignite spiritual fire in us so that we will show to others God's mercy so that they too can be part of the blessings we have received.

Conclusion

In this paper we have tried to look at the two models, i.e., Calvinist and Arminian. Individually taken, each of the models fails to give us a complete picture with respect to the doctrine of an irrevocable salvation. But each side has its strengths as well as its weaknesses. In fact, this is true of any model whatsoever. But each side gives us crucial resources for us to make sense of the notion of an irrevocable salvation. Calvinists' emphasis on divine sovereignty is a crucial element that helps us to have confidence in God for our salvation. On the other hand, Arminian conception of human responsibility is preferable to that of the Calvinists' because of a wide range of explanatory advantage it has over human actions. In light of this, I conclude that the existing models proposed to argue for or against the idea of an irrevocable salvation are not free from their inadequacies. Yet we can pull out from each side elements of truth that will advance our knowledge of the doctrine of irrevocable salvation.



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