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Robert R. Cook

Apostasy: Some Logical Reflections

Dr Cook, who formerly taught at Scott Theological College, Kenya, and is now at Redcliffe College, London, makes a welcome return to our pages (see his 'Søren Kierkegaard: Missionary to Christendom', EQ 87:4, 1987, 311-327, with this stimulating discussion of philosophical aspects of the Calvinist/non-Calvinist debate.

Christians brought up in the Reformed tradition would automatically concur with the maxim, 'Though Christians are not kept from altogether falling, yet they are kept from falling altogether'. But this doctrine of the *perseverantia sanctorum* has been thoroughly questioned by I. H. Marshall in his recent paper, 'The Problem of Apostasy in New Testament Theology'.¹ Marshall's carefully argued essay has sparked off some thoughts of my own, not in the realm of New Testament exegesis which would be beyond my competence, but in the area of philosophical reflection. Using Marshall's discussion as a starting point, I will endeavour in this short article to develop some simple logical arguments in order to loosen up some of the doctrinal log-jams bequeathed by biblical scholars from both Calvinist and non-Calvinist (e.g. Arminian and Wesleyan) persuasions, and to challenge the following three deeply entrenched assumptions: 1. Non-Calvinism entails the possibility of Christian apostasy; 2. Calvinism offers greater assurance of salvation than non-Calvinism; 3. Scriptural warnings against apostasy are best understood as hypothetical.

I Non-Calvinism entails the possibility of Christian apostasy

Undoubtedly Calvinism logically entails the certainty of Christian perseverance as Marshall reminds us: 'If one grants that God determined from all eternity to save the elect, then the final perseverance of the elect follows logically'.² Many would go on to

¹ In I. H. Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour—Studies in New Testament Theology* (London, 1990), 306-324.

² *Ibid.*, 307.

argue the opposite as well, namely that if I am free to accept or reject Christ, if I am at liberty to reject preventient grace as the non-Calvinist insists, then once I become a Christian I am always free to turn away and apostatise and thus lose my salvation. In other words, it is assumed that non-Calvinists must reject the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

It is interesting to notice first that historically this is not actually the case. In the fifth article of the *Remonstrants* drawn up by the early Arminians in 1610 the question is left open for 'this must be the subject of more exact enquiry in the Holy Scriptures, before we can teach it with full confidence of our mind'.³ But were these scholars being illogical, not recognising the consequences of their position on human freedom? I think not, and I believe a clue as to why not may be found in an insight of Paul on the paradox of freedom. In 1 Corinthians 6:12 he writes 'No doubt I am free to do anything, but I for one will not let anything make free with me' [*New English Bible* translation] which might be paraphrased, 'I will not use my freedom to lose it'. The basic insight is unassailable. I can freely choose, say, to sample heroin, but before long such an activity will lead to volitional bondage and I will have become a hopeless addict. In fact every choice logically excludes alternative choices, sometimes irrevocably, for example once I achieve the status of becoming a father there can be no return to being childless (barring the death of the child) even though I disown my offspring. Again and again in life we use our freedom to lose it in specific areas. Sometimes this is a catastrophe as in the case of the addict but at other times it can be a blessing as with fatherhood.

Now this insight can be carried over to the issue of our commitment to God. T. S. Eliot offers a suggestive metaphor in the poem *East Coker* where he writes, 'The wounded surgeon plies the steel' reminding us that to deliver oneself over to Christ involves inviting him to embark on radical soul-surgery as he works to regenerate and instigate the sanctification process. Before an operation the patient freely signs a declaration form handing over responsibility to the expert surgeon and if a general anaesthetic is involved, the patient will be oblivious of what happens next; he has used his freedom to lose it and thus be healed. It would therefore be quite logical to argue that the non-Calvinist has a correct interpretation of the conversion experience as the free response of the soul to God's resistible grace and that the resultant miracle of regeneration is irreversible; the Christian has gloriously used his freedom to lose it. As Kierkegaard wrote,

³ H. Bettenson (ed.), *Documents of the Christian Church* (Oxford, 1967), 269.

The most tremendous thing which has been granted to man is: the choice, freedom. And if you desire to save it and preserve it there is only one way: in the very same second unconditionally and in complete resignation to give it back to God, and yourself with it.⁴

To those non-Calvinists who want to insist that the possibility of apostasy must be part of the Arminian theological package the question of the likelihood of post-glorification fall should be raised. There are very few who would follow Origen in allowing for that possibility so they must assume that God settles and firms the disposition of those populating heaven. Now if the miracle occurs at glorification, why could it not happen earlier at conversion? I conclude that non-Calvinism does not logically entail the genuine possibility of Christian apostasy.

II. Calvinism offers greater assurance of salvation than non-Calvinism

It is often assumed that the Calvinist can rest in the sure knowledge that he can never lose his salvation because he has been chosen before the foundation of the world, whereas the non-Calvinist should worry that he might commit the act of apostasy some time in his life and thus lose the prospect of heaven. However, Marshall has argued that they are in fact on a par for,

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. On this view, the ground of assurance is the evidence of a changed life. 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.⁵

I would like to go one stage further and suggest that assurance of final salvation should not be a problem for a non-Calvinist even if he believes in the possibility of apostasy (if not on logical grounds then perhaps on exegetical grounds), whereas it should be much more of a concern for the Calvinist.

Firstly, lack of assurance should not be of concern to the non-Calvinist. I take apostasy to be the deliberate and emphatic repudiation of Jesus Christ. The writer to the Hebrews warns, 'Think how much more severe a penalty will be deserved by anyone who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was consecrated, and insulted God's gracious

⁴ R. Bretall (ed.), *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton, 1956), 428.

⁵ I. H. Marshall, *op. cit.*, 313.

Spirit!' (10:29; *Revised English Bible*). Apostasy is therefore a radical act of choice. Now surely it is a very strange state of affairs for me to be worried that I might make a consciously suicidal choice. Such a suggestion is reminiscent of self-referential paradoxes such as it being possible for you to be able to say of me, 'He is not speaking' but I not being able to say it of myself. Similarly, to say, 'I am scared that my wife hates Christ and will therefore be excluded from his lovely presence' makes perfect sense as does my wife uttering a similar fear about my attitude to Jesus, but it is logically extremely odd for me to assert, 'I am very afraid that because I despise Christ I will be excluded from his delightful presence'!

The objector might reasonably complain at this point that I have made the non-Calvinist's fear nonsensical because I have used the present tense; however the proposition, 'I am afraid that one day in the future I may choose to despise Christ and thus finally be excluded from what I now realize to be his beautiful presence' makes perfect sense. But does it? As Wordsworth observed, 'The child is father to the man' and what attitudes I adopt in a moment's time are completely up to me, and if that is true of the next moment, by extrapolation so is my attitude next year and so on throughout the rest of my life; every second it is I who choose who I am to become. Rob Cook in ten years time will not be an unknowable, alien person to me, rather he will be none other than a temporal extension of myself! And if I cannot trust me, who can I trust?! Certainly I may become mentally ill sometime in the future and suffer from bouts of blasphemy induced by brain disease, or I might be subjected to brainwashing by an unscrupulous future New-Age government, but surely God would not hold me responsible for these involuntary states. Nor, fortunately, does he hold me responsible for my feelings and it can even be argued that he cannot take me to task for my intellectual beliefs and religious convictions since they are beyond my rational control. I cannot choose to be convinced by the Christian worldview but I can choose to put my life into Christ's hands once I am persuaded that his claims are true; *fides* is not up to me but *fiducia* is. In other words, what I am responsible for is what I choose to will, for as R. Swinburne correctly observes, 'An agent is held to be morally responsible for what he does intentionally, for what he chooses to do'⁶ and apostasy is a conscious and volitional act as has already been noted. Admittedly the account so far has been rather Pelagian and it must be buttressed with an emphatic declaration of the Christian belief in the active presence of the Holy Spirit in one's life and the promise that God will not allow the Christian to be

⁶ R. Swinburne, *Responsibility and Atonement* (Oxford, 1989), 34.

tempted beyond what he can bear (1 Cor. 10:13). Since God genuinely desires the salvation of everyone including me, since he is faithful, and since salvation depends on one's ongoing willing choice, there is therefore no reason for the non-Calvinist to lack assurance or peace of mind.

On the other hand, the Calvinist is in a much less happy position for he cannot finally know if he is one of the elect. In his evangelistic campaigns the late David Watson used to liken the act of becoming a Christian to a kind of marriage ceremony whereby the Saviour is asked if he will take the sinner into an eternal relationship with himself, and the sinner can always be assured that Christ will inevitably say, 'I will' so that it is then up to him to respond with the same answer to the question of whether he will take Jesus to be his eternal Lord and thus the 'marriage' is sealed. The consistent Calvinist, however, cannot share this assurance for if the sinner is non-elect, then Christ will respond negatively to the above question. The curious sinner can never be sure that Christ loves and wants him.

On the issue of assurance, Calvin himself urges that the believer should not look inward to see how much faith is there or whether her life shows signs of the fruit of the Spirit, nor should she vainly attempt to discover whether she is predestined, but rather she should look outward to the promises of God as expressed in Scripture and apply them to herself (*Institutes* 3.2). But how can I be certain these promises apply to me, for the assurance that God will justify and glorify applies exclusively to the elect? And if I am tempted to fall back on the feeling that I am amongst the saved, I need to be reminded just how fickle feelings can be. I must remain ultimately baffled, therefore, before God's inscrutable and finally unknowable choice of who is predestined to be saved and whether I am one of them.

To a large extent, Calvin's views on this matter were an expression of Augustine's before him and Augustine actually believed that a man may receive 'operating grace' (both prevenient and efficacious) which ensures his initiation as a Christian and 'cooperating grace' which enables him to will and do the good, and yet fail to receive *donum perseverantiae* so that he would inevitably fail to persevere and thus be damned. Not much comfort there!

Since according to the Calvinist, God's mind is opaque to me for it consists of 'the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth' (*Westminster Confession*, III.7), it would surely be safer to be able to depend ultimately on my own decision to accept God's gracious offer of salvation as the non-Calvinist believes. I conclude, therefore, that

contrary to popular belief, non-Calvinism offers greater assurance than Calvinism.

III. Scriptural warnings are best understood as hypothetical

As Marshall reminds us, one of the standard moves of the Calvinist is to contend that the biblical passages warning against apostasy are merely hypothetical but he objects, 'is it not unreal to paint a picture of the fate of hypothetical apostates when such people do not and cannot exist?'⁷ Marshall is right to object but surely he is objecting for the wrong reason. Certainly if something could not logically exist it would be redundant to warn against it existing. For example, it would be absurd to warn bachelors against the folly of becoming married bachelors. On the other hand it would be perfectly sensible to warn against something which could exist but as a matter of contingent fact, as a result of the warning never will.

To probe a little deeper, let us take the analogy of the parent teaching the child not to walk in the road. The child is warned, 'If you wander into the road you will be run over!' but unbeknown to the child the parent has resolved to keep a constant eye on her so that if she were to walk into the road he would immediately reach out a hand and stop her. It would be hoped that the child would gradually develop a sense of responsibility so that eventually the parent would never have to intervene. The outcome would thus be character development within the child. Similarly, it is argued, God desires that we get to the stage that we never want to apostatise but when we are tempted to do so, he providentially blocks our path using various means including bringing the dire warning passages from Scripture to our attention and thus we are stopped.

Now again the problem with this approach to the warning passages is a rational one. The father's strategy would hopefully work if he warned the daughter and only informed say, the mother of his secret plan to rescue her in every case, but if he both warned the daughter and assured her that ultimately she would be safe whatever she chose to do, she would never develop a responsible attitude. Yet many Calvinists want us to conclude that God has revealed to mankind both the dire warnings and also the soothing reassurances that no Christian can finally be lost. Surely, however, the outcome can only be confusion. I conclude that it is highly unlikely that the warning passages are only hypothetical. Either, therefore, it must be genuinely possible to lose one's salvation, or the warnings are directed at nominal Christians, or the warnings are of a fate other

⁷ I. H. Marshall, *op. cit.*, 311.

than Hell itself. I leave it to the New Testament scholars to inform us which, but I suspect that even with this noble confederacy it remains true that one's destination often depends upon where one is coming from!

Abstract

As a simple exercise in philosophical theology this article challenges on rational grounds three common assumptions found amongst scholars regarding the matter of Christian apostasy. These assumptions are firstly that, to be internally consistent, non-Calvinist theologies of an Arminian or Wesleyan persuasion must maintain the possibility of Christian apostasy. Secondly, that the Calvinist theological system with its doctrine of unconditional election should provide greater assurance of salvation than non-Calvinism. And thirdly, that scriptural warnings about the dire consequences of apostasy are best understood as merely hypothetical.