

tion hold to a belief in the perseverance of the saints — eternal security. Where do Free Methodists stand on this matter?

## We Take God's Promises Seriously

We take the promises of God seriously. "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God" (Romans 5:1-2, NIV). This promise covers the whole range of life — forgiveness for the past, peace for the present, and hope for the future.

Free Methodists know that God's investment in His children is infinitely great. Christ died for us! More than that, He now lives to intercede for us at the right hand of the Father (Romans 8:3-4; 1 John 2:1-2, NIV). Also, the Holy Spirit who gives us new life dwells in us and prays for us "with groans that words cannot express" (Romans 8:26, NIV).

Beyond these, the Scriptures speak often of God's pursuit of His children even when they are rebellious. Consider Jeremiah's testimony while overlooking Jerusalem after God's judgment had fallen: "Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness" (Lamentations 3:22-23, NIV).

## But What About God's Warnings?

Even so, the Scriptures also contain warnings to God's children. At this point, Wesleyans are more inclined than Calvinists to take the warnings at face value. For example, consider Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches. "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fires and burned" (John 15:6, NIV). How can we reason such a clear warning out of existence?

## And What About Saving Faith?

So what is the nature of saving faith? Once we know we are saved are we forever secure whether or not faith continues to function? At the other extreme, is faith no more than

the exercise of our wills so that we are solely responsible at every moment to "hold on"? It is neither.

John Wesley made clear that faith is more than a mere act of the will. He wrote: "Of yourselves comes neither your faith nor your salvation. 'It is the gift of God,' the free, undeserved gift." That is, our believing is a testimony to God's grace. He enables us to exercise faith.

So grace is the source of our salvation, and faith is the condition. When the gospel is preached in power God enables us to believe. Saving faith is a gift. Yet we are responsible to exercise that gift though we claim no merit in doing so. All merit for our salvation is in Christ.

Such faith is a continuing condition of our salvation. That is, God sustains us as we continue to exercise a living trust in Him. One of the most solemn warnings of the Scriptures concerns departing from faith:

*Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called 'today,' so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end* (Hebrews 3:12-14, NRSV).\*

## All Believers Are Secure

Free Methodists believe in the Christian's security, but it is conditional, not absolute. Call it the security of believers. Believers are secure in Christ as they exercise God-given faith. They embrace all the rich promises God gives His children. But they know they must not trifle with the grace of God by returning to a life of sin. Their security is not grounded in an unconditional election made before the world even existed. *Their security is in Christ, now, by faith.* As the apostle John wrote, "Whoever has the Son has life" (1 John 5:12, NRSV).

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\*See also Hebrews 6:4-6; 10:26-31. Both are warnings to believers against a total desertion of the life of faith — called *apostasy*.

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# Does Doctrine Matter?

You're with a group of Christians from several churches. They're dedicated people — all of them. The fellowship is warm. Then an unexpected term drops into the conversation: *eternal security*. There's a lull. It's a barrier term. Some evangelical believers embrace it heartily. Some repudiate it. Others don't know what to think. What are the roots of this expression? And what do Free Methodists believe about it?

# *Can a person ever renounce faith and be lost?*

If you embrace the historic teachings of Methodism, you are an Arminian — a Wesleyan Arminian. But if you were not aware of this fact, you are an uninformed Wesleyan Arminian. A few minutes of thoughtful reading will help to clear things up.

## **What is an Arminian?**

Jacobus Arminius was a Dutch Reformed minister and professor of theology in Holland (1559-1609). Arminianism was first of all a reaction to the teachings of John Calvin, the great Protestant Reformer. Calvin's teachings are summarized in the "five points of Calvinism."

## **Calvinism's Five Points**

**Point one:** Even before creation God foreordained the fall of the human race. This was in order to show His mercy by saving a select number. These are the elect or those predestined to salvation. Obviously, those not included in this select number are predestined to be lost even before they exist and therefore before they can sin. This is double predestination.

**Point two:** The atonement of Christ includes only those whom God has already chosen to save. All others are therefore excluded. This is limited atonement.

**Point three:** The corruption of humankind by sin is complete so that no one is able to call upon God for mercy. This is total depravity.

**Point four:** Since God has already elected certain ones to salvation they are unable to resist His call. This is irresistible grace or effectual calling.

**Point five:** Finally and logically, those who are thus called and saved will be unable ever to fall away and be lost. This is the perseverance of the saints.

## **Cast-Iron Logic**

These five points obviously compose a cast-iron system of logic. But locked into it is a conception of God that

seems arbitrary and forbidding. One is saved or lost by eternal decree!

But in spite of its austerity, Calvinism spread. By the end of the 16th century it had spread from Geneva but was strongest in the Netherlands. There, something startling happened. A Hollander named Richard Koornheerts (Dutch Secretary of State) infuriated the Dutch clergy by attacking Calvinism in his writings.

The attack was challenged. A brilliant, trained young Calvinist, Jacobus Arminius, was asked to answer Koornheerts. He set about the task, but his study convinced him that Calvinism was indefensible. His thorough study of the Scriptures gave rise to an evangelical perspective different from austere Calvinism.

## **Arminianism's Five Points**

The five points of Arminianism are based on Arminius' extensive writings.

**Point one:** God's saving love reaches toward *everyone*. Those who respond to the call of His Spirit are the elect or the predestinated.

**Point two:** Christ died for *all*. The Atonement is adequate for the whole race generally and every person individually. Therefore, the Atonement is *universal* in its scope.

**Point three:** We all are corrupted by sin or totally depraved, but God extends grace to everyone, which enables us to answer God's call and turn to Christ for forgiveness. This is preventer grace — the grace that goes before.

**Point four:** Because God is not arbitrary and does not coerce, we may, if we choose, resist the grace of God. This is resistible grace.

**Point five:** We do not surrender our freedom even after we are saved; thus, we are able (though less likely than some imply) to renounce our faith and be lost.

## **What Is an Arminian?**

These five points are more than a mere answer to Cal-

vinism. They are a strong affirmation that God loves *everyone*, that Christ died for us *all*, and that *none* of us is excluded from salvation unless we exclude ourselves by *willful* unbelief.

This same truth gripped the hearts of John and Charles Wesley more than a century after the death of Arminius, even though they had not read the writings of Arminius prior to the formation of their theology. The fire in the soul of early Methodism was the conviction that God "is not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9b, KJV).

## **What About the Question of Security?**

The Arminian controversy left one doctrinal question still in debate — the fifth point of Calvinism. Back then it was called the perseverance of the saints; today we call it eternal security.

Followers of Wesley as well as followers of Calvin believe God's children are secure. But is that security absolute or conditional? Suppose a person has believed in Jesus Christ for salvation, has experienced an inner witness of the Spirit, and is showing the fruit of the new life in Christ. Can this person ever renounce faith and be lost?

## **Unconditional Election?**

Originally, those who said "no" based their answer on the doctrine of "particular or unconditional election." That is, before the world existed, God decreed whom He would save. This is called unconditional election. Once saved, such persons would be eternally secure.

Today, not much is said about unconditional election. Evangelists generally preach that salvation is for "whosoever will." Billy Graham, the world's best-known evangelist, regularly tells a packed football stadium that God loves and wants to save everyone present. This is an Arminian perspective.

Even so, many who do not believe in unconditional elec-