

## [Theologians on infant salvation](#)

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A few months ago, I ran a series of posts that argued that infants who die are rescued by God, and are now in eternal glory (part [one](#), [two](#) and [three](#); and a sermon combining them is [here](#)). I listed 26 verses that say as much, and I obviously think the weight of the argument is insurmountable.

What surprised me the most from this study is that historically this topic was viewed as a debate between Calvinists and Arminians. Shockingly, through history it has been the Calvinists who have argued for infant salvation, while it was the Arminians who were forced to deny that the scriptures taught such a thing.

Today, it seems like the sides have switched. In the past it was the Calvinist who would say, “salvation does not depend on man who wills or runs, so it completely fits within God’s saving nature to rescue infants.” Meanwhile, it was the Arminians who would stammer, “I know it sounds unfair, unjust, and unloving, but salvation depends on a person making a decision for Jesus, and an infant simply wasn’t old enough to be able to make that kind of decision...”

BB Warfield explains the reasoning behind the divide:

“If only a single infant dying in irresponsible infancy be saved, the whole Arminian principle is traversed. If all infants dying such are saved, not only the majority of the saved, but doubtless the majority of the human race hitherto, have entered into life by a non-Arminian pathway” (*Two Studies on the History of Doctrine*, 230).

It strikes me though that in the last 20 years or so, it seems like the sides have flipped. Now it is often the Arminian who says that infants are saved, without realizing that it flies in the face of their entire system. So today I thought it would be interesting to look at what theologians through history have taught on this topic.

The oldest evidence of this debate I found is in Calvin's *Institutes*, where Calvin condemned Servetus. He said that Servetus' theology was so twisted that it stressed free will to the point that if you followed him, you would be forced to conclude that even infants who died were damned to hell because they were not able to exercise their will to believe in saving faith (*Institutes IV, 16, p 31*). In that same section, Calvin addresses John 3:36, and argues that it points to infant salvation, as infants were not able to exercise willing unbelief, so they do could not possibly stand condemned.

Calvin often taught on this issue, and in one instance he even preached a sermon (on Isaiah 14:21) where he explained that reprobation (pre-destination for hell) was true of infants, but that God would allow all of them to grow to a condition of sinful accountability so that they could secure their own damnation (here is [a long but fascinating paper](#) which takes an in-depth look at all Calvin taught on this subject).

After Calvin and Luther died, their followers went in different directions on this issue. Calvinists stressed the salvation of infants, while Lutherans (and later Methodists) went on to claim the salvation of baptized infants, while remaining largely silent on the fate of others. The Westminster Catechism seems to track with the Calvinists, by arguing that infants who die are in glory (ch. 10, sec. 3 says those "dying in infancy are regenerated and saved by Christ").

Loraine Boettner explained why the doctrine of infant salvation must be uniquely Calvinistic:

"The doctrine of infant salvation finds a logical place in the Calvinistic system; for the redemption of the soul is thus infallibly determined irrespective of any faith, repentance, or good works, whether actual or foreseen. It does not, however, find a logical place in Arminianism or any other system. Furthermore, it would seem that a system such as Arminianism, which suspends salvation on a personal act of rational choice, would logically demand that those dying in infancy must either be given another period of probation after death, in order that their destiny may be fixed, or that they must be annihilated." (*Unconditional Election*, 145).

BB Warfield had earlier written something similar:

"Their destiny is determined irrespective of their choice, by an unconditional decree of God, suspended for its execution on no act of their own; and their salvation is wrought by an unconditional application of the grace of Christ to their souls, through the immediate and irresistible operation of the Holy Spirit prior to and apart from any action of their own proper wills . . . And if death in infancy does depend on God's providence, it is assuredly God in His providence who selects this vast multitude to be made participants of His unconditional salvation . . . This is but to say that they are unconditionally predestinated to salvation from the foundation of the world" (*Two Studies on the History of Doctrine*, 230).

Charles Hodge agreed. He wrote, "All who die in infancy are doubtless saved, but they are saved by grace" (*Systematic Theology*, ii, 11).

But by the late 1800's, it seems that there were already some hyper-Calvinists who had begun to adopt

the teaching Arminian view of the damnation of infants. Spurgeon responded to this change with this rebuke (from a sermon appropriately titled “Misrepresentations of Calvinism cleared away):

“Among the gross falsehoods which have been uttered against the Calvinists proper, is the wicked calumny that we hold the damnation of little infants. A baser lie was never uttered. There may have existed somewhere, in some corner of the earth, a miscreant who would dare to say that there were infants in hell, but I have never met with him, nor have I met with a man who ever saw such a person. We say, with regard to infants, Scripture saith but little, and, therefore, where Scripture is confessedly scant, it is for no man to determine dogmatically. But I think I speak for the entire body, or certainly with exceedingly few exceptions, and those unknown to me, when I say, we hold that all infants are elect of God and are therefore saved, and we look to this as being the means by which Christ shall see of the travail of his soul to a great degree, and we do sometimes hope that thus the multitude of the saved shall be made to exceed the multitude of the lost. Whatever views our friends may hold upon the point, they are not necessarily connected with Calvinistic doctrine. I believe that the Lord Jesus, who said, “Of such is the kingdom of heaven,” doth daily and constantly receive into his loving arms those tender ones who are only shown, and then snatched away to heaven.”

Later in that same sermon he went on to say:

“It is plain that Arminians and Pelagians must introduce a new principle of election; and in so far as the salvation of infants is concerned, become Calvinists. Is it not an argument in behalf of Calvinism, that its principle is uniform throughout, and that no change is needed on the ground on which man is saved, whether young or old?”

I pass along all of these quotes because I want to make clear that this teaching is not new, and it is not Arminian. Obviously, it was held by Calvin, the Westminster divines, Hodge, Spurgeon, Warfield, and Boettner. In our own life time it has been ably defended by [John MacArthur](#) and [John Piper](#). I want to give you confidence in God’s goodness, and assure you that your confidence is not contrived from theological niceties, but rather it has its foundation in the deep and saving nature of God.

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