

## CHAPTER 16

### PERSEVERANCE

Note the large work on this subject by John Owen, *The Doctrine of the Saints' Perseverance Explained and Confirmed*, which is Vol. 11 of his collected works.

#### Statement of the doctrine

WCF 17:1, “They whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace; but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.”

Cf. *Canons of Synod of Dort*, 5th Head (Schaff *Creeds* 3:592-95)

Perseverance applies only to those who are elected, redeemed, and justified, and who now are in the process of sanctification; it does not apply to all professing Christians.

Perseverance refers to the state of grace, not to the attainments of grace; “backsliding” is possible (WCF 17:3).

“Perseverance of the saints” is a better phrase than “eternal security,” for it emphasizes the necessary human effort and responsibility. “Eternal security” often places undue dependence on the initial experience of salvation, instead of the continuing life of saving faith.

#### Scriptural support for perseverance

##### *Perseverance is God's work through us*

[WCF 17:2]

1. The Father sets us free and places his unchangeable love on us.

Jer 31:3, “I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have drawn you with loving-kindness.”

2 Tim 2:19, “Nevertheless, God’s solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: ‘The Lord knows those who are his’”

2. The Son paid for us to save us, and now prays for us.

Cf. Luke 22:32 (Jesus prays for Peter)

John 10:28, “I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand.”

John 17:24, “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am.”

Rom 8:33-39, (nothing able to separate us from God’s love in Christ, because Christ died for us)

Heb 7:25, “Therefore he is able to save completely (ASV, “to the uttermost”) those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

3. The Holy Spirit abides in us.

John 14:16-17, “the Father . . . will give you another Counselor to be with you forever—the Spirit of truth. . . . he lives with you and will be in you” (“and will be in you” has UBS {C} rating; many MSS read, “and is in you”)

—Also 1 John 2:27; probably also 3:9

***Explicit Scripture teaching***

The Scriptures expressly state that the elect will persevere and be saved eternally.

- Rom 8:29-30, (the precisely same people who are foreknown, predestined, called, and justified, are the ones who are glorified)
- Phil 1:6, “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus”
- 2 Tim 1:12, “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day”

- 1 Pet 1:5, 9, “who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. . . . for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls”
- 1 John 3:9, (might fit here—cf. above under point 3. The “seed” could be the Holy Spirit in believers, or possibly believers who abide in God.)
- Jude 24, “to him who is able to keep you from falling”

### ***Covenant of grace (or of redemption)***

The terms of the covenant of redemption, sealed with Christ’s blood, demand the final salvation of all the elect.

All five points of Calvinism hang together.

“This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.” (WCF 17:2)

- Jer 32:40, “I will make an everlasting covenant with them [the new covenant]: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me.”
- Heb 9:12-15, “. . . having obtained eternal redemption . . . How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, . . . cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance”
- Heb 10:14, “by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy”
- Heb 13:20-21, “May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant . . . equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ”

## Backsliding

According to our standards (WCF 17:3), our experience, and our understanding of Scripture, we must recognize that Christians can to a large degree fall away from the pattern of Christian life and sanctification.

Two well-known biblical examples are David (one year's duration, 2 Sam 11:27; 12:14) and Peter (one evening, Matt 26:70, 72, 74). Both these examples are mentioned in the *Canons of the Synod of Dort* 5:4 (Schaff *Creeds* 3:593)

The Confession lists four possible causes for this backsliding:

- 1) Temptation of Satan
- 2) Temptation of the world
- 3) Remaining corruption in ourselves
- 4) Neglect of the means of grace

Likewise, the Confession lists seven results of backsliding:

- 1) God's displeasure, 2 Sam 11:27; Isa 64:5, 7, 9
- 2) Holy Spirit grieved, Eph 4:30
- 3) Losses of grace and comfort, Ps 32:3-4; 51:8, 10, 12
- 4) Heart hardened, Isa 63:17
- 5) Conscience wounded, Ps 32:3-4
- 6) Others hurt and scandalized, 2 Sam 12:14; 1 Cor 5:1
- 7) Temporal judgments, 2 Sam 12:14; Ps 89:31-32; 1 Cor 11:32

To these consequences of backsliding, we may add an eighth, loss of reward in the kingdom, 1 Cor 3:12-15.

Backsliding in a Christian is characterized as being temporary, and not complete.

## Objections to perseverance considered

### *Verses that introduce a condition in perseverance*

- Col 1:22-23, "But now he has reconciled you . . . if you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel."

- 1 Thess 3:8, “For now we really live, since you are standing firm in the Lord.” (ASV “if ye stand fast in the Lord”; Gk. ἐὰν *ean* + indic.)
- Heb 3:6, 14, “And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and hope of which we boast. . . . We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.”
- Rev. 2:10, “Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.”
- Rev. 3:5, “He who overcomes . . . I will never erase his name from the book of life.”

The Calvinist recognizes in these verses the doctrine of human responsibility—just as we are responsible to believe and commanded to believe, so we are responsible to persevere and commanded to persevere. This truth does not contradict the equally clear fact that God alone causes us to believe and to persevere.

The Lord uses these encouragements to faithfulness as means whereby we are confirmed in our perseverance.

### ***Verses that state a possibility of falling***

- Ezek 18:24, “But if a righteous man turns from his righteousness and commits sin and does the same detestable things the wicked man does, will he live? None of the righteous things he has done will be remembered. Because of the unfaithfulness he is guilty of and because of the sins he has committed, he will die.”
- 1 Tim 1:19, “holding on to faith and a good conscience. Some have rejected these and so have shipwrecked their faith.”
- 2 Pet 2:20-21, “If they have escaped the corruption of the world by knowing our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and are again entangled in it and overcome, they are worse off at the end than at the beginning. It would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than to have known it and then to turn their backs on the sacred commandment that was passed on to them.”
- 2 Pet 3:17, Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position.

These examples seem to deal with professing Christians who are not actually born again, as in 1 John 2:19, “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

—Cf. the cases of Matt 13:20-21 (seed on rocky soil), and Heb 6 and 10 in the next section

### ***Verses that warn against final apostasy***

- Heb 6:4-6, “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.”
- Heb 10:26-29, “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. . . . How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?”

The two passages in Hebrews should be taken together. The traditional interpretation used by Reformed writers is that both passages speak of those who profess Christianity, and even delude themselves with false assurance, but who finally turn away. On the other hand, some see in the descriptions clear evidence of genuine faith, and therefore consider this as a hypothetical case only: if a true Christian were to apostatize, he could never be saved again. (For survey of views on Hebrews 6, see commentaries on Hebrews by Westcott [165-67] and Homer Kent [111-14]).

We should note that these verses are equally, if not more, difficult for Arminians, since a second salvation is ruled out.