

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE ADMONITION TO PERSEVERE (PART II)

Before continuing on in our study of the warning passages in Hebrews, I want to stop and examine the Biblical/theological support for the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

I. FOCUSING ON THE DOCTRINE HISTORICALLY

The doctrine of eternal life, or as it has been called historically, “the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints,” is one of the five points of Calvinism or, more accurately, of the Reformed doctrine of salvation. The five points were responses to the Remonstrants, antecedents of Arminianism, who objected to aspects of Reformed theology in the seventeenth century. The Remonstrants were members of the Reformed Church in the Netherlands. They objected to the prevailing doctrine of their church regarding predestination, the human will and other matters. The issues led to the Synod of Dort in 1618—19, where the Contra-Remonstrants, or the Calvinists prevailed. The Canons of the Synod of Dort summarized the orthodox position and affirmed the doctrine of total depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption (commonly and erroneously called, “limited atonement,” since both Arminians and Calvinists limit the atonement, the former limiting its efficacy, the latter its design), irresistible, or effectual, grace, and the perseverance of the saints. This orthodox teaching is represented in the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Westminster Confession, as well as such Baptist creedal statements as the London and Philadelphia Confessions of Faith. The Remonstrants, the followers of Arminius, believed that man was depraved, but not totally, that God elects on the basis of foreseen faith, that Christ died with the intent of saving all men, that divine grace may be effectually resisted, and that the perseverance of the saved was not clearly taught. Before we begin our defense of the doctrine of eternal life, or the perseverance of the saints, we must clarify the issues a bit. In the first place, many believers have echoed the sentiments of Charles Haddon Spurgeon who said that he believed not so much in the perseverance of the saints as in the perseverance of the Savior. That squares with Professor Louis Berkhof’s contention, “It is, strictly speaking, not man but God who perseveres.”¹

II. A CLARIFYING DISTINCTION AND DEFINITION

- A. AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION. We must properly distinguish the assurance of salvation from perseverance in salvation. The doctrine of assurance has to do with our certainty of the possession of salvation now. The doctrine of perseverance, or of eternal life, has to do with our certainty of the possession of salvation now and forever.
- B. A DEFINITION OF THE DOCTRINE. It is extremely important for us to define the doctrine accurately, for much of the misunderstanding that surrounds it is the product of the failure to really understand the doctrinal teaching itself. Let us first set out a negative caveat. The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, or of eternal life, is not a teaching that a professed believer in the Lord Jesus Christ is saved no matter what his practices in life may be. Unfortunately this is the view that many have of the doctrine and, since they have it, they have some sensible objections to it. The Scriptures make it very plain that the genuine believer in the Lord Jesus Christ must produce spiritual fruit (either before God or before man). That is the divine design of salvation (cf. Eph. 2:8-10; Tit. 3:8). Therefore, the Bible teaches that a

truly regenerate man possesses a renewed nature and cannot live as he lived before his saving experience. A further point that ought to be made is that a believer, if he falls into sin, brings himself under the spiritual discipline of his heavenly Father. For this reason, too, he cannot persist in moral disobedience without suffering the heavy hand of spiritual and physical discipline from a caring Father (cf. 1 Cor. 11:29-30). The idea that, once saved, we can live as we please because we believe in our perseverance in the possession of eternal life, also overlooks the biblical teaching on the spiritual rewards of a believer for faithful service (cf. 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 5:41; Rev. 2:7, 10-11, 17, 27-29; 3:5, 12, 21).

III. THE BIBLICAL DEFENSE OF THE DOCTRINE

A. THE BELIEVER IS SECURE BECAUSE OF THE PURPOSE OF THE FATHER. There are numerous passages that support this, but we shall concentrate on only a few. Our first passage is Romans 8:28-30, where Paul writes, “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: And whom he called, them he also justified: And whom he justified, them he also glorified.” The purpose of God, mentioned in verse twenty-eight, is the cause of the divine continuing providence mentioned in the verse, whole the loving of God is the human condition for the enjoyment of the providence. The divine purpose is expounded in verses twenty-nine and thirty, and it involves five sovereign acts. The first two, mentioned in verse twenty-eight, God’s three mentioned in verse thirty, God’s calling, justification, and glorification, are temporal acts. All are grounded in Him alone. The final act, seen in the word, “glorified,” is put by Paul in past time, although it is a future act, simply because it is so certain to take place.²

B. THE ARGUMENT FOR THE BELIEVER’S PERSEVERANCE FROM UNION WITH CHRIST.

We are going to continue now with our theological argument for eternal security, or eternal life. And our third argument is from the doctrine of union with Christ. The Lord Jesus is our federal or covenantal head and surety, and consequently He stands for all the saints in His saving work. Paul expresses the root of the matter when he says, “For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive” (1 Cor. 15:22). He, the substitute for His people, bears their sins and for them, having successfully paid their debt to the holy justice of God, now is seated at God’s right hand to secure for His people all the rights, privileges, and blessings He has at such great cost won. Thus, He stands for His people forever, for He lives forever. We abide in Him spiritually, and we live because He lives. Speaking to His apostles and for all in Him Jesus said, “Because closeness of the union with Christ the Apostle Paul uses words that express a union that is almost indescribably intimate. He said, “but he that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:17).

C. THE ARGUMENT FOR PERSEVERANCE FROM THE ORDINANCES.

The two indisputable ordinances, or sacraments, of the church are water baptism and the Lord’s Supper. Water baptism is designed to represent our entrance into the Christian life, while the Lord’s Supper represents our continuation in that life. For that reason the Christian Church has generally observed the ordinance of baptism once in the believer’s life, while the Lord’s Supper has been observed frequently. The early church and some churches today, following their example, observe the Lord’s Supper every Sunday. The reason that baptism has been observed only once in believers’ lives is simple and clear. That very universal practice implies that one enters the Christian life only once, and not many times, as if one could lose one’s salvation. In churches which have as their doctrine that one may lose his, or her, salvation, still the ordinance is practiced only once. It is almost as if, what they teach in word, they deny in practice. In fact, churches which do not teach the doctrine of eternal life, or the perseverance of the saints, often feel it necessary to explain why they do not baptize again when a believer, having lost his salvation by sin, is restored to fellowship with God. To meet this problem of *re-baptism* posed by the doctrine of losable grace, the Roman Catholic Church contends that the ordinance of baptism imprints an inerasible character, the Latin term is *character indelebis*, upon the person and may not be repeated. But why? No satisfactory reason is given, or can be given. In fact, the matter is only worsened, for to support an insupportable doctrine, losable grace, another insupportable doctrine is formulated, the doctrine of the inerasible character

of the act. In other words, the act of baptism is ineradicable, but the reality which it represents is not. Strange teaching!

D. THE ARGUMENT FOR THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS FROM THE DOCTRINE OF SIN ITSELF. Very few, if any, of those who hold to the possibility of the loss of salvation would hold to such a loss from any sin. Distinctions in sins are made by all who hold that one may lose eternal life. We have referred to such distinctions as made by the Church of Rome and the Lutherans, but others also make such distinctions. This, however, is unscriptural. While there is a genuine difference in degrees of sins, as our Lord taught (cf. Matt. 11:22-24; 23:23; Luke 12:47-48), nevertheless all sin brings guilt. It should be noted in the parable of the wise steward in Luke twelve, while some servants are beaten with many stripes and some only with few stripes, both types of disobedient stewards are beaten. The fact is, then, insofar as guilt is concerned, all sin brings guilt and judgment (cf. 1 John 3:4; 5:17). In Galatians 5:19-21 Paul states that all who practice the sins mentioned there shall not inherit the kingdom of God, but in the midst of the more flagrant sins, such as idolatry, murders, adultery, and witchcraft, one finds “envyings,” thought to be relatively mild by many believers. In John’s words, “Whosoever committeth sin transgresseth the law: For sin is the transgression of the law (lit., sin is lawlessness).

E. THE ARGUMENT FOR PERSEVERANCE FROM THE DOCTRINE OF ELECTION. We have discussed the direct Scriptural support of the doctrine of perseverance, and certainly enough to satisfy me, but now we are turning to consider the theological and biblically logical support for the teaching. The teaching is of a theological type, but just as biblical in its force. The Bible speaks plainly of the election of the people of God from the mass of the world. We will not debate at this point the justification of God’s action. I will simply cite a few of the passages that clearly affirm the doctrine. For example, Paul writes to the Ephesians in Ephesians 1:4, “According as he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.” That is clear and to the point: The Ephesian believers had been chosen, or elected, by God. Using another of the words for divine election, predestination, which stresses the goal for which one is chosen, Paul writes in Romans 8:29, “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Finally, to simplify the matter, let me cite 2 Thessalonians 2:13, “But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen you to salvation through sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth.” Now it should be clear to a reader of God’s revelation, the Bible, that election is not simply election to the service of the Lord, surely a facet of the teaching, but election to salvation. That is the purpose of election, salvation, growth in holiness amid the service of the Lord, and finally glorification and enjoyment of the God of our gracious salvation throughout the ages of eternity. The barriers of sin and the human will are mercifully removed by God, and we are given *eternal* life. Election, then, is election to salvation, and not simply to privilege, or the enjoyment of the means of salvation, but through these means, to salvation itself. If this be the doctrine, and it is, then it follows inevitably that all who are elected to salvation shall obtain salvation. To suppose that persons elected to salvation fail to obtain salvation is to render election inconsequential and inoperative, a slander aimed at the glory of the sovereign and omnipotent God. The argument, therefore, for the doctrine of election is also an argument for the doctrine of perseverance. It is clear that these two points of the so-called Five Points of Calvinism stand together and are reciprocal. Every proof of election is a proof of perseverance, and every proof of eternal life or the perseverance of the saints, is ultimately a proof of election.³ An election, then, without involving a keeping power would be no real election.

F. THE ARGUMENT FOR PERSEVERANCE FROM GOD’S PLAN OF SALVATION. Evangelicals believe that the work of redemption by the Lord Jesus Christ is a finished work. Did not Jesus say, while bearing our sins on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30)? Well, now, if my salvation, which He is supposed to have purchased with His atoning blood, depends upon my keeping myself, then it cannot be said that He finished the work. It is unfinished, and under such circumstances it might be said that I have finished the work. God forbid!, to use Paul’s words. Salvation, then, would no longer be by grace, but by grace and works. That cannot be, as the Scriptures state (cf. Eph. 2:8-10).

G. THE BELIEVER IS SECURE BECAUSE OF THE PRESENCE OF THE SPIRIT. In John 14:16-17 in the Upper Room Discourse the Lord Jesus gave this marvelous promise to the apostles, “And I

will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counselor, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; you know him, for he dwells with you, and will be in you” (ESV). It is quite plain from this astounding promise that the believer—and all believers now possess the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:9)—is secure in the possession of eternal life. Notice the phrase, “forever.” The Spirit, our Lord affirms, will be with us “forever.” If that is so, then how can the saints ever lose their salvation? It is impossible.

H. THE BELIEVER IS SECURE BECAUSE OF THE PRAYER OF THE SON (John 11:42). In John 17 in that remarkable prayer, usually called our Lord’s High-priestly Prayer, Jesus twice prayed that the Father would keep the ones given to Him by the Father. His words were, “And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to thee. Holy Father, keep them in thy name, which thou hast given me, that they may be one, even as we are one” (cf. v. 15). Now one might ask, “Are the prayers of the Son of God answered affirmatively?” In answer to the question, look with me at John 11:41-44 as Jesus stands at the tomb of Lazarus and prays. “And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank thee that thou hast heard me. I knew that thou hearest me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that thou didst send me.’ When he said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out.’ The dead man came out...” (John 11:41-44). That answers the question. Our Lord’s prayers are always answered, and He has asked the Father to keep the ones given Him. We can be sure that we are being kept.⁴

Endnotes

¹ L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1973) p.546

² E. H. Gifford, *The Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans*. The author has some helpful statements in his discussion of Rom. 8:28-30. Among them are, “God’s eternal purpose embraces all stages in salvation from first to last.” And, on verse 30, “We here pass from the eternal counsel in its ideal process to its realization in time. Here also three Divine acts are specified, -- he ‘called,’ ‘justified,’ ‘glorified.’” And finally an important note, “Such a calling is of necessity followed by justification, even as justification by glorification. Otherwise, God’s foreknowledge and predestination would be falsified.”

³ Ralph Wardlaw, *Systematic Theology II* (Adams & Black, 1856) p. 550

⁴ The substance of these notes are derived verbatim from lectures on the subject from my former professor of theology at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, the late S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.