

Foreknowledge, Predestination, Election & the Final Destiny of the Believer

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Introduction: Statement of Doctrine

1. The question before us

Are those who have been eternally set apart unto salvation by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and regenerated and converted by the Spirit invariably able to persevere so as to be absolutely secure in their salvation?¹

2. The pitfalls to avoid in seeking the answer to the question

As with all questions of doctrine, one must appeal to some final authority. Needless to say, any appeal to human opinion or human experience will certainly be filled with problems and errors. We shall endeavor to approach this study by appealing solely to the Scripture as it is God's infallible and inspired Word. If one does not possess a high view of Scripture, all discussion of the doctrines of grace is irrelevant, having no authority.

Another dangerous ground with respect to one's approach to interpreting the Word of God is unwarranted literalism. When one believes that the Bible is the Word of God, that its message is plain, and that its teaching are to be taken literally, it is easy to isolate sentences and phrases, reading into them what one supposes they mean. All false doctrines make use of "proof texts" to support them, leaning on the mere sound of words. In light of this, there are several texts used to support the possibility of one's falling away from salvation. We will examine some of these references, demonstrating how all such texts should be handled. Before we do so, however, we shall lay out a brief survey of the history of the doctrine.

I. History of the Doctrine of Perseverance

A. The Synod of Dort and the Perseverance of the Saints

In the history of the doctrine of perseverance, four general views developed. It should be noted, first, that this doctrine came into controversy due to the rise of Arminianism. The "perseverance of the saints" is the fifth doctrinal point in the so-called "five points of Calvinism." These five points, forming an acrostic that spells TULIP, summarizes the Reformed view of salvation—the "doctrines of grace." These doctrines are fully explained in the Canons of Dort, the response of Reformers to the "Remonstrance of 1610." Scholars from eight countries were called to the city of Dordrecht in the Netherlands to convene a synod from November 13, 1618 through May 9, 1619. This synod considered and refuted five points of difference that Arminian Remonstrants had with the doctrines of John Calvin, Theodore Beza, and Reformed Church. These objections were published as the "Remonstrance of 1610." The response published from this synod to the Arminian document was the Canons of Dordt or Dort.

As noted, it is the fifth head or point that concerns this article; however, one must realize that no point stands alone. Neither do the five points fully delineate the Reformed faith. On top of that, we may tend to oversimplify the issue by limiting the discussion to the narrow confines of a single idea or text of Scripture if we are not careful to keep the whole in view. Needless to say, one short article is not ample to cover every aspect of the question before us. Yet, at the risk of oversimplifying, we may say that the heart of question over which the Arminians revolted from Calvinism had to do with how much responsibility fallen humans have with respect to their salvation.

B. The Heart of the Issue—Is Salvation Synergist or Monergistic?

Nearly every Christian holds to the necessity of divine initiation and grace in the salvation of sinners, believing the fall has rendered mankind incapable of saving itself. The question that separates believers into their various camps is how and how much do God and the sinner each contribute to the process of

¹ Pastor Kit Culver, *Notes on the Doctrines of Grace*, Article V, "The Perseverance of the Saints," (Masters Bible Church website)

salvation. The Reformers took the position that salvation is all of God, or “monergistic.” The Remonstrants or Arminians held that, though fallen, God enables human free will sufficiently to cooperate with grace in both saving and keeping the sinner. Thus Arminian theology is synergistic.²

If salvation is monergistic—all of God, the obviously, He is able to keep and preserve all whom He saves to the end. If salvation is a synergism, then, logically, there must be a limitation of God’s purpose due to the free choice of the sinner either to cooperate with or refuse God’s purpose. This freedom should also include the freedom to renege or abandon his first choice to be saved.

C. Four Views of Perseverance and Assurance

1. The Sacramental View

Catholics and Lutherans hold to a sacramental view of saving grace, being parceled out over the life of the Christian who faithfully perseveres in the teaching and practice of his faith. The sacraments administered by the church are regarded as the *means of grace* unto salvation. However, there is no sacrament that immediately and permanently conveys this saving grace. Thus, one must faithfully make use of these means, or he is thereby effectively cut off from his hope of eternal life.

No Roman Catholic has absolute assurance of salvation because salvation is never reached until after a life of faithful obedience. Roman Catholics teach that the sacrament of baptism washes away original sin. The sacrament of Confirmation completes the grace of baptism by which one receives the Holy Spirit and establishes one’s place in the church. The sacrament of Penance, then, provides the means of forgiveness and absolution from venial sins.³ Penance involves confession, and prepares one to receive Holy Communion in the Mass.⁴ Finally, one hopes that he may receive the sacrament of Extreme Unction from a priest in his dying moments, which is his final absolution of venial sins in life. However, a Catholic has no assurance of heaven even here, as he may be required to suffer in Purgatory for sins that have not been fully absolved in life. At any point in life, one may fall away from grace by committing moral sin, neglecting the sacraments, or leaving the church.

Lutheran doctrine, as established after Luther and the Protestant Reformation, effectively opposed the Reformed position of John Calvin, seeing it as logically flowing from the decree of election. After a synergistic view of salvation became established in their doctrine, Lutherans began to teach that the elect could fall totally from saving grace, but differing from Rome, Lutheran doctrine also holds that the elect can never *finally* fall from grace.

2. The Reformed position

a. The teaching of the Reformers on perseverance

The Reformers taught that salvation was all of God. The Reformed view is particularly summarized in Calvin’s *Institutes*. In Book 2, Chapter 3, Calvin argues, “the intellect and will of man are so corrupted, that no integrity, no knowledge or fear of God, can now be found in him.”⁵ Thus, God must do whatever is necessary to restore man to fellowship with God, which is the substance of salvation. The work of grace in us converts our will from animosity toward God and good.

Calvin wrote,

² The term, *synergistic*, means to work together. When used in the context of salvation, it describes the belief that God cannot save anyone without securing the person’s cooperation. The argument is that one’s putting his faith in Christ allows God to save him. The reformers, such as Martin Luther, held a *monergistic* view of salvation—that God alone saves people, one’s *faith* being the evidence of his salvation.

³ Venial sins, as contrasted with mortal sins, which make the sinner the enemy of God and condemn him to the penalty of hell, are sins that can be absolved by a priest after confession and penance.

⁴ The mass is the perpetual sacrifice of Christ, and the communicants believe that they are eating the actual body and blood of Christ.

⁵ John Calvin., *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book 2, Chapter 3, Section 1, p. 305.

When the Apostle says to the Philippians, “Being confident of this very thing, that he which has begun a good work in you, will perform it until the day of Jesus Christ,” (Philippians 1:6), there can be no doubt that by the good work thus begun, he means the very commencement of conversion in the will. God, therefore, begins the good work in us by exciting in our hearts a desire, a love, and a study of righteousness, or (to speak more correctly) by turning, training, and guiding our hearts unto righteousness; and he completes this good work by confirming us unto perseverance.⁶

This “good work” is a process as is evident from Paul’s use of “begun,” “perform,” and the terminus—“until the day of Jesus Christ.” This work belongs to the Spirit of God, as we shall see. In no part can it be left to the believer for, due to the very nature of man, God’s “turning, training, and guiding unto righteousness” would certainly fall at that point.

Calvin ties the work of perseverance to God’s efficacious grace, which makes perseverance also the gift of God.

Perseverance is the gift of God, which he does not lavish promiscuously on all, but imparts to whom he pleases. If it is asked how the difference arises—why some steadily persevere, and others prove deficient in steadfastness, we can give no other reason than that the Lord, by his mighty power, strengthens and sustains the former, so that they perish not, while he does not furnish the same assistance to the latter, but leaves them to be monuments of instability.⁷

The *others* to whom Calvin refers are not His own elect, but those who, like the “mixed multitude” that came out of Egypt with Israel, tag along, but they do not have an interest in the heritage of the saints, not having been born again.

b. The Reformed confessions on perseverance

The Reformed view is clearly set forth in the reformed confessions such as the Westminster Confession of Faith, the Baptist Second London Confession, the Savoy Declaration, and the Belgic Confession of Faith. All these confessions follow the same biblical standard. The Westminster Confession of Faith in Chapter 17 reads:

1. They, whom God has 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.

The Second London Baptist Confession of Faith (1689) adds the following to article 1:

. . . seeing the gifts and callings of God are without repentance, (whence He still begets and nourishes in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit to immortality) and though many storms and floods arise and beat against them, yet they shall never be able to take them off that foundation and rock which by faith they are fastened upon: notwithstanding, through unbelief and the temptations of Satan, the sensible sight of the light and love of God may for a time be clouded, and obscured from them, yet it is still the same, and they shall be sure to be kept by the power of God unto salvation, where they shall enjoy their purchased possession, they being engraven upon the palm of His hands, and their names having been written in the book of Life from all eternity.

Both the Westminster and Baptist confessions continue:

2. 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 arises also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 314.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 339

3. Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve His Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

c. The Confessions explained

The first article or paragraph essentially sets forth the fact of perseverance as to the who, what, why, and how of it. The confession is very clear to correct a common misunderstanding that the doctrine of perseverance requires human effort in endurance of faith and obedience. Such a view reckons salvation as a matter of works. The Reformed confessions are clear on the point that from beginning to end, salvation is of divine origin and substance. All continuance in obedience is God-wrought in the believer; that very fact alone assures that the believer "shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved."

As to the question of *who*, perseverance assures that "they, whom God has accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit"—genuine born-again believers will never fully or finally fall from the grace of salvation.

As to the question of *what*, perseverance means that these believers "can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace," as to their salvation.

As to the question of *why*, the Baptists added to the confession what is assumed in the divine origin and substance of perseverance, that is, salvation is secure, "seeing the gifts and callings of God are without repentance."

As to the question of *how*, the confessions describe believers as "sanctified by His Spirit," meaning that it is the work of the Holy Spirit to fulfill whatever the Father purposed and the Savior purchased with respect to their salvation.

Article (or paragraph) 2 explains in greater detail the *means* of perseverance. Four arguments are given to support the doctrine of the certain perseverance of the saints. These arguments are based on the presupposition that grace precedes and moves the human will in accomplishing its saving work.

1) The immutability of the decree of election

First, the confession declares that the perseverance of the saints is based upon the immutability of the decree of election. Whatever God does, He does "that [*hina*, 'in order that'] the purpose of God according to election might stand [*meno*, in reference to time: 'to continue to be, not to perish, to last, to endure']" (Romans 9:11⁸). In eternity past, God purposed to save a people for His glory. Paul writes, "Just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that [*hina*, 'in order that'] we should be holy and without blame before Him. In love, having predestined us to adoption as sons by Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will" (Ephesians 1:4, 5). God declares His Word to us "in hope of eternal life which God, who cannot lie, promised before time began" (Titus 1:2). If any of His own should perish, then God's purpose is frustrated and His promise voided. That can never be.

Whatever God decrees in His holy and unchangeable will most certainly comes to pass. "God is not a man, that He should lie, nor a son of man, that He should repent. Has He said, and will He not do? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good [or 'accomplish it']?" (Numbers 23:19).

The "Golden Chain of Salvation," clearly presents the eternal purpose of the Father with respect to the salvation of His people. "Whom He predestined [chose in eternity past to be conformed to His Son], these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified [by the efficacious work of the Son in His death for them]; and whom He justified, these He also glorified [by effectual work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification]" (Romans 8:30). Thus the same ones He predestinated are the very ones who will be glori-

⁸ Scriptures used in this paper (unless otherwise indicated) are from the New King James Version (NKJV, NKJ), Copyright © 1982, Thomas Nelson, Inc. All rights reserved.

fied. Here is a great truth. The perseverance of the saints rests upon the eternal purpose of God to save a people, which He most certainly will do.

One further note is necessary due to the general confusion of *election* and *predestination*. It is often argued by those who oppose the Reformed teaching of the doctrine of election that predestination, which they confuse with election, is based on *foreknowledge*. Since it is clearly taught in Scripture that predestination is based on God's foreknowledge (1 Peter 1:1, 2; Romans 8:29), the argument is closed.

a) Two errors to address: 1. Limiting foreknowledge to mere prior knowledge

Two errors, however, must be addressed. First, *foreknowledge* is limited in this view to mere prior knowledge. God only *knows* before hand with certainty what His creatures will decide and do of their own free volition.⁹ God foreknows the choices that everyone will have concerning the gospel, and on that basis, chooses them to salvation.

There are three problems with this view. First, it makes foreknowledge passive. The Bible, however, treats foreknowledge with God as active. Acts 2:23 is a good example. Jesus, Peter told the Jews, was delivered over to them "by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God," whom they took by lawless hands to crucify and put to death. The Grandville-Sharp rule of Greek grammar applies here, which states that when two words are joined together by "and" and the first word has a definite article but the second does not, the second word means the same as the first. In other words, Peter uses "*determinate counsel*" to mean the same as "*foreknowledge*." Thus, in I Peter 1:2, Peter's use of *foreknowledge* is to be understood as God's plan, determined in the counsel of the Godhead before the world began (I Peter 1:20), to choose a people for Himself—election.

Another illustration of active foreknowledge is found in Romans 11:2, "God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew." The issue in Romans chapters 9-11 concerns Israel's rejection of Jesus and the gospel. This rejection, according to Paul's critics, proves either that Paul's gospel is false, or that God's purpose has failed. Paul responds by showing that Israel's rejection serves God's purpose rather than hinders it. What that purpose is, Paul takes up in chapter 11 where he begins by asking, "Has God cast away His people?" He immediately answers the question, "God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew." What follows is a discussion of a *remnant*—"a remnant according to the election of grace" (verse 5). Using the incident of Israel's apostasy under King Ahab (1 Kings 17-19), Paul cites Elijah's complaint to God that He is alone in his worship of Jehovah. The Lord responds by assuring the prophet, "I have reserved for myself seven thousand men who have not bowed the knee to Baal" (Romans 11:4; 1 Kings 19:18). "Even so," Paul continues, "at this present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace" (Romans 11:5). He concludes by saying, "What then? Israel [as a nation] has not obtained what it seeks [that is, righteousness (see Romans 10:1-10)]; but the elect [whom He foreknew] have obtained it, and the rest were blinded" (Romans 11:7). God is not passively foreseeing the believer's own faith, but by "reserving for Himself" elect persons who believe.

Second, by limiting God's predestination to passive prior knowledge of fixed events does not remove the problem of determination. The question merely shifts as to who actually determines choices since their being known fixes the certainty of them. This view makes God a simple bystander.

Third, prior knowledge would also be limited to events. If this were true, Paul would say, "*What* He foreknew, He also predestined," that is, He foresaw what choices would be made, then determined to act on those choices. However, Paul says, "*Whom* He foreknew . . ." Rather than events, God foreknew the persons whom He determined to predestine. This makes foreknowledge another word for election. It is these elect persons that are then predestined "to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Romans 8:29).

⁹ Even this definition is coming into disfavor by the new Arminian teaching that for humans to have a truly free will, all choices and acts must be unknowable. Since every decision results in contingencies that alter the flow of events, therefore, nothing future can be known with certainty. These theologians understand that for God to know with certainty all future events, the choices and acts of His creatures are, by necessity, fixed and unchangeable.

b) Two errors to address: 2. Confusing election and predestination

The second error of is that it limits God's right and power to do His will. When God declares, "My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure" (Isaiah 46:10), He cannot really mean it, because He can only act as He is given opportunity by the free acts of His creatures. He wills to save all, but His desire is hampered by the refusal of many to be saved. His only advantage is that He knows from eternity who they are that will choose to receive the gospel.

Election is not predestination. *Election* is the choice of God to save a people for His name. *Predestination* is the determination of God to fulfill all His purpose with respect to those whom He has chosen to eternal life. *Foreknowledge* is the personal knowledge that God has of persons whom He has chosen. Thus, predestination assures that those whom He foreknows in election will assuredly receive all the benefits He has ordained for them, including their perseverance unto the end.

2) The efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ

The certain final perseverance of the saints also rests on the work of Christ. All Christ's people will persevere to the end because Jesus effectively saves all that the Father gives to Him. To save them, (1) Jesus died for them as their substitute, taking all the punishment due to them for their sins; and (2) Jesus lives for them as their intercessor, defending them against all charges that might be brought against them.

a) Doing the Father's will necessitates the perseverance of the saints

Jesus Christ made it plain that He had come to earth for the purpose of fulfilling the Father's will. That *will* is plainly stated for all to read: "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will by no means cast out. For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will, but the will of Him who sent me. This is the will of the Father who sent me, that [i]fna - hina, 'in order that'] of all He has given me I should lose [avpo,llumi – apollumi, which means 'to utterly destroy,' or 'to render useless']¹⁰ nothing, but should raise it up at the last day" (John 6:37-39). In this passage, the Lord gives two duties which He must accomplish to do the Father's will: (1) He must lose none of those whom the Father gives to Him and (2) that he should raise them up at the last day—to resurrect them into their glorified state (see 1 Corinthians 15:16-26¹¹; John 5:24-29). These duties were part of His office as high priest "over the house of God" (Hebrews 10:21).

In His high-priestly prayer of John 17, Jesus makes it clear that God gave Him people that He will not lose. "Those whom you gave me I have kept; and none of them is lost except the son of perdition, that the Scripture might be fulfilled" (John 17: 12). This was Jesus' official prayer of intercession for those whom the Father had given to Him. Here the Lord declares that He accomplished the will of His Father for which He came to fulfill.

We must explain, first, for those who will bring up the exception of the "son of perdition," Judas. Did Jesus lose Judas? If so, then He failed in His work as high priest over the house of God (as expressed in John 6:37-39). However, here He declares that He accomplished what He was given to do. It should also be obvious from these texts that the work of salvation rests solely in the hands of the Savior. The Judas was lost, not because he fell from grace, for he never was saved. This is clear in that he is called "the son of perdition or destruction." Of Judas, Jesus said, "Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a

¹⁰ Thayer's Lexicon notes that, metaphorically, *apollumai* means "to devote or give over to eternal misery." Matt. 10:28; James 4:12; contextually, *by one's conduct to cause another to lose eternal salvation*: Rom. 14:15. The THAYER Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament is part of Bible Works version 5.0.038s (© Bible Works, LLC., 2001, P.O. Box 6158, Norfolk, VA 23508, or www.bibleworks.com. Being C. G. Grimm (1861-1868; 1879) and C. L. W. Wilke (1851) Clavis Novi Testamenti Translated, Revised, and Enlarged, by Joseph Henry Thayer, D.D., Hon. Litt.D., Professor of New Testament, Divinity School of Harvard University, 1889. Electronic edition was generated by and is owned by International Bible Translators (IBT), Inc., 1998-2000. Significant Greek formatting modifications (such as adding diacritical accents) and improvements made by Michael S. Bushell, 2001, to conform to lemma and inflected Greek forms and typeface.

¹¹ Note that "perished" in verse 18 is avpo,llumi – apollumi. The resurrection unto life saves from perishing eternally.

devil?' He spoke of Judas Iscariot, the son of Simon, for it was he who would betray Him, being one of the twelve" (John 6:70, 71). Thus, it was only apparent that Judas was lost. In reality, Jesus did not lose him, for He never saved him.

Jesus effectually saves all whom the Father gave to Him. He said, "All that the Father gives me will come to me ... This is the will of the Father who sent me, that of all He has given me I should lose nothing" (John 6:37, 39). Those given to the Son are the objects of His redemption.

God declares in Isaiah 53:10 that His "pleasure" (His will) would "prosper" in Christ's hand, for He would "see his seed" (the fruit of Christ's labors, His children). A definite transaction was in view here. Samuel Rutherford (1634) argued:

It is a work of Christ as Mediator, and written in the commission His Father gave Him, that He should lose none, but raise him up at the last day (John iv. 39.) In Eph. v. 27, He presenteth His church to Himself, a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle. He shall get His bride, the church, all arrayed in His Father's clothes, in at heaven's gate, and slip her hand in His Father's hand, and say, Father, see her now! I have done my part; I have not laboured in vain.¹²

b.) The nature of the redemption necessitates the perseverance of the saints

The very nature of the redemption makes falling from salvation impossible, for Jesus became our substitute. Jesus took upon Him the sins of the sinner and gave the sinner His righteousness to. In this exchange, the sinner is made fully acceptable to God. All the sins of the sinner were then fully paid for by Jesus, so that there is no more charge that can be leveled against the sinner. "For He [the Father] made Him [the Son] who knew no sin to be sin for us, that [i[na - hina, 'in order that'] we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Corinthians 5:21).

Paul writes, "Much more then, having now been justified by His blood, we shall be saved from wrath through Him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life" (Romans 5:9, 10). Notice that we are saved, not by our life, but by His life. Was there anything in the life of Jesus that might put us in danger of judgment? Thus, if His life saves us, it saves us eternally.

When Paul asks, "If God is for us, who can be against us?" he explains, "He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is he who condemns? It is Christ who died, and furthermore is also risen, who is even at the right hand of God, who also makes intercession for us" (Romans 8:31-33). If God laid our sins on Jesus Christ and justified us from all our guilt, how could He then condemn us? If Jesus died for us, and lives to make intercession for us, how could He, as judge of all, condemn us? What a blessed thought. The judge who sits in final judgment of all is the one who defends all His own, declaring them guiltless of all charges. John declares, "If anyone sins, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1).

3) The permanence of the abiding of the Spirit of God within them

The work of the Holy Spirit in our salvation follows three lines; (1) in giving believers life through regeneration, (2) in sealing them, and (3) in enabling them to pursue holiness through sanctification. The very nature of His work in believers suggests that He is the key to their ultimate perseverance.

¹² Samuel Rutherford, *Communion Sermons* (Edinburgh, Scotland: James A Dickson, 1986, reprinted from the second edition, Glasgow: Glass and Co., 1877), p. 105. The quote continues:

Let them be confounded who take this glory from Jesus, and give it over to that weather-cock, free will. For, here is an argument that hell will not answer. The Father promised Christ a seed (Isaiah liii. 10). And a willing people (Psalm cx. 3). And the ends of the earth (Psalm ii. 8) to serve Him as a reward of His sufferings. Now, shall God crack His credit to His Son, and shall Christ do His work and get the wind for His pains, except free will say, amen? There is a bairn's bargain. No, it is a part of Christ's wages, that men's free will shall come with cap in hand, and bow before Him. He shall have a willing people.

First, the Holy Spirit gives life to the believer. He regenerates the soul that was dead in trespasses and sins. "According to His mercy He saved us, through the washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit" (Titus 3:5). Regeneration is actually the work of the Spirit. It is called the *new birth* in Scripture. "Unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God. ... Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5).

John further explains in his first epistle, "Whoever has been born of God does not sin [that is, does not make a practice of sinning], for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin [keep on sinning], because he has been born of God" (1 John 3:9). The Holy Spirit is the *seed* that remains (*me,nw – meno*, in reference to time: "to continue to be, not to perish, to last, endure"). Thus, the Spirit, in regeneration, permanently *remains* in the believer. Sin cannot disrupt this abiding due to the fact that he has been born of God the abiding *seed* makes the practice of sin impossible for the believer.

Believers are not only *born* of the Spirit, they are *sealed* with the Spirit. Paul wrote to the Ephesians that "having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Ephesians 1: 13). The sealing work of the Spirit implies ownership and security.

Believers are also enabled by the Spirit to pursue holiness through sanctification. No one is able to sanctify himself. Yet, the scripture places that responsibility on the believer. "Pursue . . . holiness, without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). Again, we read, "For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live" (Romans 8:13). Notice that while it is for believers to obey these commands, yet, it is only "by the Spirit" that any one has the ability to accomplish this work. This enabling work of the Holy Spirit makes it possible for the believer to persevere to the end.

There is such an integral connection between the believer and the Spirit so that it becomes virtually impossible for a real Christian to habitually practice sin. "Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God. In this the children of God and the children of the devil are manifest: Whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor *is* he who does not love his brother" (1 John 3:7-10). The seed of God makes sons of God who act like God in righteousness and cannot practice sin, but will pursue righteousness or holiness because they are like Him who is righteous.

4) The nature of the covenant of grace

The last proof used in the reformed confessions of faith for the perseverance of the saints is the nature of the covenant of grace. "And I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me" (Jeremiah 32:40). John Gill in his *Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* used this reference to support the final perseverance of the saints. I offer some of his argument because it is practically a chain of Scripture verses.

In which words [of Jeremiah 32:40] are more proofs of the saints' final perseverance. This may be concluded, from the perpetuity of the covenant made with them; which is not a covenant of works, promising life on doing; then their perseverance would be precarious; but of grace, sovereign and free; and so is a better covenant, and established on better promises, which are absolute and unconditional, not depending on anything to be performed by them; but which runs thus, "I will", and "they shall"; a covenant "ordered in all things", not one thing wanting in it, conducive to the welfare and happiness of the saints; in all spiritual blessings, for time and eternity, in both grace and glory, which are eternally secured in it, and therefore said to be sure; its blessings are the sure mercies of David; its promises yea and amen, in Christ; and the whole is ratified and confirmed by the blood of Christ, and sure to all the spiritual seed, to all interested in it; a covenant not made with them as considered by themselves, but with Christ, as their head, and with them in him; and it is kept, and stands fast with him for evermore. It is an everlasting covenant, flows from everlasting love, and founded on an everlasting purpose; consists of promises, which God, that cannot lie, made before the world began; and of grace, and blessings of grace, given in Christ so early, who was set up as the Mediator of it from everlast-

ing, from the beginning, or ever the earth was; and the covenant ones, with all their grace, were put into his hands; all which show the certainty of their perseverance; for as God knew so early, when he took them into covenant, and provided for them, what they would be, even transgressors from the womb, and do as evil as they could; and yet this hindered not his taking them into covenant; then it may be depended upon, that none of these things shall ever throw them out of it, for it abides to everlasting; God that made it, has commanded it for ever; he will never break it; it shall never be antiquated and made void, by another covenant succeeding it; its blessings are irreversible, and its promises are always fulfilled; its grace is sufficient for the saints under all their temptations, trials, and exercises, to bear them up, and bear them through time to eternity: covenant interest always continues; he that is their covenant God, will be their God and guide even unto death, and through it, to the world beyond the grave; and therefore they shall most certainly persevere, and be saved.¹³

3. The Arminian View

The Arminian view is based on the premise that the sinner must cooperate with God in his salvation. Even the believer is expected to maintain his faith. Here, the element of probation enters the picture. If the fickle human *will* has any thing to do with the final outcome, then, obviously, nothing is certain until the end. Arminians, actually following Roman dogma, teach that justification is not finalized until the end, because the believer is under probation until the end. Therefore, one may fall away from his faith and not be saved in the end. With respect to the possibility for a saint to fall away, Charles Finney argues:

If there were anything impossible in this [the danger of falling away], then perseverance would be no virtue. ... If regeneration consists in a change in the ruling preference of the mind, or in the ultimate intention, as we shall see it does, it is plain, that an individual can be born again, and afterwards cease to be virtuous. That a Christian is able to apostatize is evident, from the many warnings addressed to Christians in the Bible. A Christian may certainly fall into sin and unbelief, and afterwards be renewed, both to repentance and faith (Charles Finney, *Systematic Theology*, p. 138).

That last statement about being renewed after one has fallen away is debated. The Scripture would seem to teach otherwise, should it be possible to fall away (Hebrews 6: 4-6). We leave that for now and return to the discussion. Finney argues that while there is a certainty of knowledge with God as to the final state of any being (by prescience or foreknowledge). He continues, "The knowledge of this fact is not at all inconsistent with his idea of his continuance in a state of trial till the day of his death, inasmuch as his perseverance depends upon the exercise of his own voluntary agency (*Systematic Theology*, p. 568).

Thus, we may briefly summarize the Arminian position as being that because God must wait until the believer has passed his probation in the faith before he can finally be declared as "saved," there can be no "security" with respect to salvation because, at any time during this probation, the believer may change his mind and fall away from his faith.

There is, due to the nature of the issue, an uncertainty of one's status in the probation. One may ask, how many and what kinds of sins must one commit in order to forfeit his salvation? For this reason, Arminians have developed other means of security. First, there is a redefining of behavior that might otherwise be regarded as sinful. This inclination is easily observed. For example, this writer knew of a situation where a pastor committed adultery with the church organist, but justified his conduct as God's way rectifying his mistake in marrying his first wife. The organist, he reasoned, was actually God's choice for his marriage partner. Rationalizing and justifying one's behavior becomes a necessary skill for many who fear losing the grace of salvation.

Second, one may look for, or, even produce certain "signs," such as ecstatic feelings, Spirit manifestations, miraculous events, or such to assure themselves that they are safely on track for salvation. For example, John Wesley developed the doctrine of *entire sanctification*, a state whereby the believer no longer sins and, thus, is no longer in danger of falling away. Still, the question arises as to how one may

¹³ John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity*, London: M. & S. Higham, 1839, digital version by The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc. Version 1.0 © 1999.

know that he has arrived at that state of complete sanctification? It would be quite easy for someone to deceive himself in this area.

Usually, however, most quiet their fears by confessing their sinful tendencies and trusting that their continued interest in spiritual things as sufficient warrant against the ever-present danger of falling away.

4. The Eternal Security View

Most modern evangelicals reject both the Calvinistic *perseverance of the saints* and the conditional salvation of Arminianism. However, some do believe somewhat in the fifth point of Calvinism with reservations. One writer put it, "This is truly in accord with scriptural teaching, although the terminology here is most unfortunate."¹⁴ These evangelicals prefer the doctrine of *eternal security*, teaching that once someone has trusted Christ, he is saved forever, no matter how he may live afterward—"once saved, always saved." This concept is opposed to "perseverance of the saints," which stresses that salvation is always evidenced by the believer's pursuing a holy life.

Most evangelicals agree with Arminian theology, teaching that salvation is the result of the free choice of the sinner. Why then do they hold to *eternal security*—that God alone keeps and preserves the believer unto eternal life? I believe that there are two reasons. First, the Bible clearly teaches, "once saved, always saved." Peter states that believers "are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation" (1 Peter 1:5). Second, many evangelicals have failed to recognize that *perseverance* in holiness is a requirement for salvation, a point on which both Arminians and Calvinists agree.

One fundamentalist puts it:

The Bible teaches, and I believe in, the eternal security of the born-again believer. The man who has trusted Jesus Christ has everlasting life and will never perish. But the eternal security of the believer does not depend upon his perseverance. I do not know a single Bible verse that says anything about the saint's persevering . . . No, The saints do not persevere; they are preserved.¹⁵

To the contrary, it is not difficult to prove biblically that saints will and must persevere in their faith. "And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and above reproach in His sight — *if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard*" (Colossians 1:21-23, note the portion in italics). "I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, *if you hold fast that word which I preached to you — unless you believed in vain*" (1 Corinthians 15:1, 2, see also 2 Timothy 2:11, 12; Revelation 2:7, 10, 11, 17, 25, 26; 3:5, 11, 12, 21).

We should also remark on the comment we cited above that "the saints do not persevere; they are preserved." We heartily agree that the saints are preserved. Jude writes, "To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ" (Jude 1). We disagree, however, on the means God uses to preserve His saints. This brother, illustrating his point with a jar of peaches, believes that God *cans* his saints so that down road they, like his peaches, will be just as fresh and good as they were the day they were put into the jar!

Yes, God preserves his saints, but He does so through their perseverance in holiness. "Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it." (1 Thessalonians 5:23, 24). The mistake that many make is that since perseverance is the duty of every believer, it must also depend on their power to persevere to the end. We would be clear that final perseverance, while necessary, does not *depend* on human power. We persevere only because His seed remains in us and His Spirit enables us to "pursue holiness." Believers "are His workmanship, created in Christ

¹⁴ Robert L. Sumner, *An Examination of TULIP* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Biblical Evangelism Press, 1972), p. 10.

¹⁵ Curtis Hutson, *Why I Disagree with All Five Points of Calvinism* (Murfreesboro, Tenn.: Sword of the Lord Publishers, 1980), p.16.

Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). The faith that saves is a continuing and an enduring faith that is wrought by God and sustained by His Spirit and His Word. Those who have first confessed their faith in Christ, then have fallen away into sin and apostasy, simply demonstrated that their faith was not saving faith. “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us” (1 John 2:19).

On the other hand, if, as most evangelicals teach, that salvation requires that one respond in faith of his own initiation, then it would be logically consistent that the believer ought to have the right to change his mind. What if he decides it is too much trouble to be a Christian? Must he be forced to see salvation through to heaven? Would it not be cruel to force a man to go to heaven simply because he “accepted Jesus,” but would actually be miserable going there? The fact is that eternal security is completely out of sync with a synergistic view of salvation.

II. A Brief Examination of Biblical Texts

In closing this paper, it would be appropriate to examine at least one of the texts of the Bible used by both Calvinists and Arminians to support their positions. This is far from being an exhaustive treatment. But as we cautioned at the beginning of this paper, “proof-texting” is dangerous, because it often relies on the mere “sound of words.”

Every text must be carefully evaluated in light of both the history and the nature of the passage. Also, the nature and character of God must be carefully guarded in one’s interpretation. Whatever dishonorably reflects on God must be rejected and, conversely, whatever honors Him must be considered. For example, Scripture declares that God is immutable. “For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob” (Malachi 3:6). Here is a text in which the nature of God and the security of His people are clearly linked. It is because He does not change that His people are safe against His ultimate wrath.

In the context, the Lord declares that His “day” is coming (Malachi 3:1). It will be a day of judgment: “who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears?” (vs. 2). Yet, He declares that in this day He will purify the priests, the sons of Levi, to enable them to offer acceptable sacrifices (vs. 3). By this means the offerings of the whole nation will be pleasing to the Lord (vs. 4). These “offerings in righteousness” are God’s provision against His wrath exercised against evildoers (vs. 5). It is in this context that He declares to them that it is His immutability that preserves them and not their faithfulness (vs. 6, 7).

We have here the principle that the purpose of God and not the conduct of the people insure their continuance in His favor. Their unfaithfulness is clear: “from the days of your fathers you have gone away from my ordinances and have not kept them” (v. 7). If their conduct were the basis of their continuing relationship as the people of God, then they must certainly be cast away. However, it is not their faithfulness, but God’s purpose that preserves them. On the other hand, their behavior is not acceptable and must change: “Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts” (v.7). Thus, we see the tension between what His people actually do in light of what He expects and what He will do in order to assure that what He purposes to do shall be done.

Or, consider the wisdom of God, which is seen in all his works of nature, providence, and grace. Every wise man devises and makes use of every means, as he is able, to affect his plan. The Lord also has a clear end in view, which He has fixed with respect to his people, that is, their eternal salvation. It would not be consistent with His wisdom to make use of insufficient means, nor to make those means effectual in that purpose. In other words, if any of those whom God has purposed to save should perish, then we have reason to question His wisdom with respect to the means He has provided to save them. Therefore, the wisdom of God is a strong argument for the final perseverance of all His children.

Therefore, as we examine texts which seem to say that one who has eternal life is threatened with losing it, should his behavior fail to meet God’s standards of holiness, we must consider whether our first reading should reflect negatively upon God’s perfections, purposes, plans, or promises.

A. Ezekiel 18:24

A text that seems to contradict what we have previously said is found in Ezekiel. "But when a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and commits iniquity, and does according to all the abominations that the wicked man does, shall he live? All the righteousness which he has done shall not be remembered; because of the unfaithfulness of which he is guilty and the sin which he has committed, because of them he shall die" (Ezekiel 18:24).

When one considers the context of this passage, he will learn that the text is part of God's response to allegations against His providential dealings with His people. The Lord asked them, "What do you mean when you use this proverb concerning the land of Israel, saying: 'The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge'?" (vs. 2). Temporal judgment was determined against the nation because of their unfaithfulness and idolatry. The peoples' response was that they considered God unfair to punish them for their father's sins. The Lord replied by reasserting the principle of His justice that "The soul who sins shall die" (vs. 4).

The error that is often encountered in the interpretation of this passage is that righteousness is assumed to be eternal salvation. The issue, however, is obedience to God's requirements with respect to occupation of the land. They sinned with impunity and expected that God would bless them in the land that God promised to Abraham. Note Ezekiel 33:24-27:

Son of man, they who inhabit those ruins in the land of Israel are saying, "Abraham was only one, and he inherited the land. But we are many; the land has been given to us as a possession." Therefore say to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: you eat meat with blood, you lift up your eyes toward your idols, and shed blood. Should you then possess the land? You rely on your sword, you commit abominations, and you defile one another's wives. Should you then possess the land? Say thus to them, "Thus says the Lord GOD: as I live, surely those who are in the ruins shall fall by the sword, and the one who is in the open field I will give to the beasts to be devoured, and those who are in the strongholds and caves shall die of the pestilence."

It should be clear that God was punishing his people with temporal judgment, not eternal damnation. Besides, one need only consider that the righteousness of which the prophet speaks consist of deeds that can never justify the sinner before God. Only the work of Jesus Christ can accomplish perfect righteousness that secures eternal for those who are affected by it. And this righteousness cannot be earned with works, but is acquired only by faith.

Conclusion

We close this discussion with a listing of texts that are used by those who teach the eternal security of believers. Again, the focus of one's concern must be how our reading of the text reflects on God's perfection. What position best glorifies His name?

"For the LORD will not cast off His people, nor will He forsake His inheritance" (Psalm 94:14).

"And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from me" (Jeremiah 32:40).

"And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:28).

"Who will also confirm you to the end, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord" (1 Corinthians 1:8, 9).

"Who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter 1:5).

"Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified" (Romans 8:30).

“Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that His hour had come that He should depart from this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1).