

Application of Perseverance

How should we respond to this doctrine?

With Christ-Centered Humility

Our blemished track record of personal piety inculcates humility in perseverance (Cod 5.2). The reason we do not fall from grace is because Jesus Christ "always lives to make intercession" for us (Heb. 7:25). Every day we must "flee for refuge to Christ crucified" (Cod 5.2). Our disregard for God's means of perseverance reminds us that we are still unworthy servants of God (Luke 17:10).

With Believing Prayer

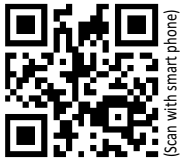
The perseverance of the saints drives us to our knees, praying that God would both preserve us from, and rescue us from backsliding (Cod 5.2). We *trust* that God will preserve us from falling from his grace but we must never *presume* that he will do so apart from our prayers. Prayerlessness is inconsistent with the doctrine of perseverance of the saints.

With Loving Gratitude

The ungodly despise this doctrine but the godly love and defend it (Cod 5.15). The Psalmist said, "You enlarged my path under me, so my feet did not slip" (Psalm 18:36). We thank the Lord for preserving us from slipping out of his hands into hell.

With Confident Obedience

Being confident "...that he who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:6), we "press forward to the goal of perfection, until at length, delivered from this body of death, (we) shall reign with the Lamb of God in heaven" (Cod 5.2).



(Scan with smart phone)

Reformed
Community
Worship Service
(& fellowship Time)

Jan. 19 | 6PM

Hope Church

4951 Biney Ave. Moosic | 570.451.7460

Non-Profit
U.S. Postage
PAID
Carbondale PA,
Permit No. 25

47 S. Church St.,
Carbondale, PA, 18407
570.282.6400
info@covenantrc.org
www.CovenantRC.org

Proclamation is Free upon Request. Please let us know if anyone who might like a subscription. To offer feedback or to be removed from the mailing list, please contact using info above. For archives, visit covenantrc.org. Cover art by Evan Hughes; EvanHughesArt.com.

PROCLAMATION

Promoting robust, religious thought in the tradition of orthodox, historic, Christianity
January 2014, Issue 55

THE FIVE POINTS OF CALVINISM (6)

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

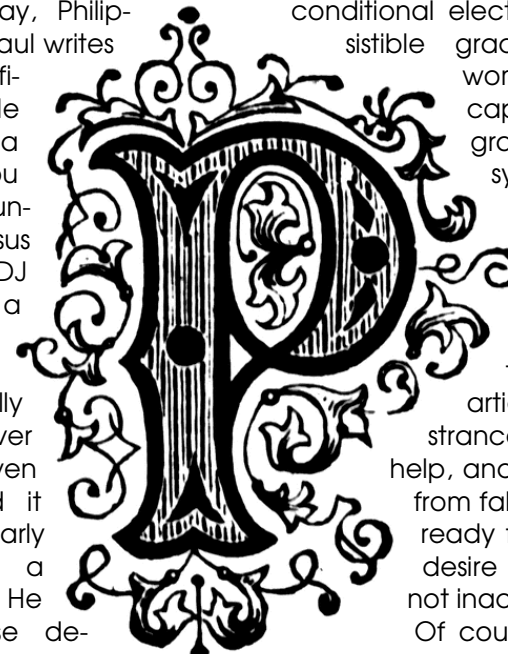
BY WILLIAM BOEKESTEIN

A number of years ago my wife and I woke up to our radio alarm, which was set to a local Christian station. As we began to revive from the night's rest, the radio DJ read the station's verse of the day, Philip-
pians 1:6. Here Paul writes that he is "confident...that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ." The DJ then offered a brief commentary that was so theologically shocking, I'll never forget it (even though I heard it through an early morning fog a decade ago). He said, "This verse describes a little doctrine we like to call the perseverance of the saints. It basically means *finish what you started.*"

The DJ failed to see in this verse the powerful persevering work of God and the confidence such work

evokes in his saints. Instead, he focused only on the need for human endurance. Sadly, this is often the focus of those who believe Christ died for everyone according to a conditional election to supply a resistible grace for men and women who are still capable of choosing grace. In the Arminian system, whether or not believers persevere to the end depends on their zeal to finish well. According to the Arminians' fifth article of remonstrance, God is ready to help, and will keep Christians from falling "if only they are ready for the conflict, and desire his help, and are not inactive..."

Of course, the relationship between God's sovereignty and man's responsibility in salvation, and in perseverance, can be a difficult issue. But the difficulties are not resolved by prioritizing the command to persevere over God's provision of perseverance.



If there is a perseverance enigma, the Canons of Dort (CoD) attempt to resolve it by interpreting the warnings to persevere within the context of God's sovereign and irrevocable election. True believers whom God has eternally loved, and graciously justified, cannot fall from this grace and become, once again the objects of his wrath (Rom. 5:8,9; 1 John 3:9; CoD Rejection of Errors (hereafter R.E.) 5.3). Certainly some who seem to have believed do fall into apostasy. But these are those described in Jesus' parable of the sower, in whom no work of grace actually took root (Matt. 13:20; Luke 8:13; R.E. 7). Because God preserves them, true believers persevere in godliness, dying to self and sin, rigorously seeking God's glory.

Those who reject this approach unintentionally run into several problems. First, they challenge the integrity of God. Can God begin a work of grace but fail to bring it to completion? Is God telling the truth when he says to his people, "I will never leave you nor forsake you"? (Heb. 13:5). Second, they destroy the comfort of believers. Can Christians have confidence that God will abide with them? If so, are there conditions they must first meet? If so, how well must they meet these conditions? Finally, they accidentally invert the gospel. The gospel does not teach that Christ extends a hand to those who demonstrate a resolve to live godly. Instead, it is his hand, upholding weak and needy sinners, that enables them to abide to the end.

The Need for Perseverance

Scripture, by warnings and exhortations, is crystal clear on the believer's need to persevere (Heb 6:4-12).

But Scripture is equally clear on man's utter dependence on God to make perseverance a reality. Believers never shake the effects of the fall in this life. They are delivered from the chains but not the remains of sin. As John Murray said, in the believer sin remains but no longer reigns (Art. 1). The sin that still stains even the best works of believers drive us Christ (CoD 5.2). Believers are not capable, in their own strength, of persevering to the end. But God performs what man cannot (Cod 5.3).

Sadly, Scripture and history demonstrate that true believers are capable of great sin. By the righteous permission of God, and due to our own weakness, and the temptation of the flesh, the world, and the devil, believers can fall into great sins (CoD 5.4). Noah, who sinned through drunkenness, had found grace in God's eyes (Gen. 6:8). Abraham, who fornicated, "believed God and it was credited to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Moses, even while committing a grievous murder, was united to the suffering Christ (Heb. 11:24-26). Jonah blatantly disobeyed God even though he feared "the Lord, the God of heaven," (Jonah 1:9). Peter, although upheld by the prayers of the great High Priest, vehemently denied him (Luke 22:31-32). The effects of such sins are greatly damaging and only redressed through real repentance (CoD 5.5).

God's Provision of Perseverance

The perseverance of the saints is a work of the triune God. Perseverance is a fruit of the Father's electing love—the *elect* have obtained rest. (Rom. 11:7, 8:32-35; R.E. 5.1). It is a work of the intercessory ministry of Christ (John 17:11,15,20; R.E. 5.9). Up-

held by Christ's prayers, Peter fell terribly, not totally. (Luke 22:32). And perseverance is a work of the God's indwelling, abiding Spirit, the "incorruptible seed" by which we are born again once and for all (1 Peter 1:23; R.E. 5.8). Perseverance is not a 50/50 effort between God and man (1 Cor. 1:8; R.E. 5.2). Perseverance is a new covenant blessing, not a condition.

But if God is responsible for believers' preservation, what can be said about backsliding? In a few words, a believer's backsliding is limited by God's election and his plan for his own glory. According to his unchangeable purpose of election God does not allow the sins of believers to cause them to permanently fall from grace (CoD 5.6). In these falls, God preserves in the elect the new birth and works in them repentance (Cod 5.7). The work of God previously committed to the backsliding believer cannot be frustrated, thus preventing his permanent fall from grace (Cod 5.8). God keeps believers from committing the sin unto death (1 John 5:18; R.E. 4). As offended as God is by backsliding, he uses it for good. When God rescues his elect from backsliding, such rescue, far from giving them freedom to sin, produces in them a stronger resolve to seek his face and maintain the comfort which they had, for a time, lost (Cod 5.7, 13).

God's preservation of his chosen ones is also vitally connected to the use of means. God "preserves, continues, and perfects" his work of grace in the elect by "the hearing and reading of his word, by meditation thereon, and by the exhortations, threatenings, and promises thereof, (Cod 5.14), and by the use of the sacraments" (Cod 5.14).

Assurance and Perseverance

The question of perseverance is inextricably tied to the believer's experience of assurance of salvation. The Canons' treatment of the issue is practical, not speculative.

The Reality of Assurance

Believers may and do obtain assurance of their perseverance (Cod 5.9), without which we would be of all men the most miserable (Cod 5.10). Because of doubts and temptations believers do not always feel full assurance of faith and certainty of persevering (Cod 5.11). But God does not subject his children to more than they can bear (Cod 5.11).

The Means of Assurance

Believers must not expect assurance of salvation to spring from special revelation apart from God's word (Cod 5.10, R.E. 5). Instead assurance comes through trust in God's promises (Mark 9:21-24), the testimony of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:16), and a "serious and holy desire to preserve a good conscience and to perform good works" (1 John 3:24; Cod 5.10,12).

The Blessings of Assurance

The Scriptures nowhere teach the idea of carnal security or the praiseworthiness of doubt. The child of God shudders at unbiblical caricatures of Christian security: "Free from the law, O blessed condition; I can sin as I please and still have remission." "On the contrary perseverance is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and solid rejoicing in God..." (1 John 3:2,3; Cod 5.12; R.E. 6).