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Reformation
& Revival



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Evangelical obedience is fully a condition of justification but not a cause of justification.

Sam Logan

A Christian man is free from all things; he needs no works in order to be justified and saved, but receives these gifts in abundance from his faith alone.

Martin Luther

Justification supplies the only efficient motive to obedience.

Ernest Kevan

No amount of good deeds can make us good persons. We must be good before we can do good.

Chester A. Pennington

The Original Promise Keeper: The Doctrine of the Final Perseverance of the Saints

Mark DeVine

“Are not five sparrows sold for two cents? And yet not one of them is forgotten before God. Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Do not fear; you are of more value than many sparrows” (Luke 12:6-7).

“Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you” (1 Peter 5:6-7).

Recently I found myself seated on the front porch of our home in Kansas City. My wife was away. I was home alone with my two boys, six-year-old Drew, and Sam, who is two. Sam was aggressively making rows on the front lawn with his toy mower while Drew was inside at work on his latest book. I lifted Sam into my arms, walked no more than fifty-five feet into my next door neighbor's house where I spoke to my friend, Vernon, for no more than eight minutes—eight minutes during which my six-year-old did not know where his daddy was—eight minutes of terror for Drew. I returned home to a son who needed comfort, and, I believe, deserved an apology. Drew deserved an apology because the one who had promised to take care of him, the one he looked to for protection, the one who owed him that care and protection, had let him down.

The doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints addresses the question of the nature, the extent, and the duration of the care and protection promised to Christian believers by their heavenly Father.

Our understanding of the nature of salvation, indeed, of the very character of God is at stake in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. No dimension of the Christian life is left unaffected by answers given to the questions raised—questions such as: Has our heavenly Father

promised to take care of us? Does our Lord desire that we look to Him for the care and protection of our souls forever?

The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints represents the conclusion of many believers across the centuries who have felt compelled by the Holy Scriptures to answer these questions with a resounding and grateful *yes!* Our God can, does, and will take care of His children to the end. To suggest otherwise is false, ungrateful, and certainly is *not* the Good News of the Christian gospel.

Sadly, the historic church has not yet been able to speak with one voice on this great issue. In fact, even evangelical Christians have frequently found themselves heading in opposite directions when it comes to this matter.

Among Protestants, Arminianism represents the sharpest and most persistent denial of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. We think especially of the celebrated Dutch professor at Leyden, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609), and also of the truly magnificent founder of Methodism in the eighteenth century, John Wesley (1703-91). Out of a genuine desire to respond to Arminian teaching I have structured this paper around three enduring Arminian challenges to the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints.

That the Doctrine Is False

From the Synod of Dort (1618-19) to the *Westminster Confession* (1644-46) to the *Second London Confession* (1689) and beyond, Reformed Protestants have formally affirmed belief in the final perseverance of the saints. A representative definition by a Southern Baptist is that of Timothy George for whom such teaching involves “the doctrine that the truly elect despite their temptations and lapses into sin, are faithfully preserved by the grace of God unto the end.”¹

Clearly, the most serious objection to this doctrine is that it is scripturally and therefore theologically false. Later Arminian teaching relied heavily upon the so-called apostasy

texts in Scripture and flatly rejected the perseverance of the saints. Compared to such boldness the classic and original denial of perseverance set forth in the *Remonstrance of 1610* seems conspicuously restrained—

... whether [those who are incorporated into Christ by a true faith] are capable, through negligence, of forsaking again the first beginnings of their life in Christ, of again returning to this present evil world, of turning away from the holy doctrine which was delivered them, of losing a good conscience, of becoming devoid of grace, that must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our minds.²

Surely the *Remonstrance* is right to warn against teaching final perseverance unless such doctrine be “particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture.” Certainly because of our sin, but perhaps even more fundamentally, because God’s sovereignty extends to the knowledge of Himself, we cannot presume to *tell ourselves* of the nature and extent of God’s keeping power. No, in this as in all matters of doctrine, we must be told by God through the Scriptures under the illuminating power of the Holy Spirit what is true.

When we turn to the Bible, what do we hear from our God? We find a rich array of divinely inspired verbs which teach us what to expect from our God and Christ—verbs such as “keep” (*terein*), “protect” (*phrourein*), “guard” (*phulassein*), “sustain” (*bebaioun*), “establish” (*sterizein*), and we learn that Jesus “loved [His own] to the end” (*eis telos egapesen tous idious*).

Jesus accomplishes His Father’s will, not by losing, but by keeping those given to Him by the Father so that “not one of them perished” (John 17:12). Paul was assured that God would “guard your heart and your minds” through Jesus

Christ (Phil. 4:7). Paul proclaimed to the Thessalonians that the Lord is “faithful, and He will strengthen and protect you from the evil one” (2 Thess. 3:3).

Use of the legal term “seal” (*sphragizo*) together with the inheritance language of Ephesians strongly supports the eternal security of every believer already made to sit with Christ in the heavenly places. It is certainly fitting that Christ the Savior Himself has been seen as the surest evidence against the possibility of believers falling and in favor of their eternal security.

Even J. R. Graves understood this in his 1876 debate with the Methodist Jacob Ditzler.³ Believers’ perseverance to the end was assured not because of anything in themselves but because of Him to whom they belonged—to Christ, the Good Shepherd who loses none of His sheep; Christ the Kinsman Redeemer who unfailingly saves those He redeems; Christ the Priest after the order of Melchizedek, who, so long as He lives, gives life to every one for whom He mediates; Christ the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls.⁴ Graves aptly concludes that “. . . to say that Christ will ever lose a sheep is to impeach His veracity, rob Him of power, and break Him of His office.”⁵

If we “desire to know whether God cares for our salvation,” Calvin suggests we “inquire whether He has entrusted us to Christ, whom He has established as the sole Savior of all His people.” Is not Calvin correct to understand that when Jesus prays that Peter’s faith not fail and directs him to strengthen his brothers we should learn from this “to trust that we shall ever remain safe because we have been made His once for all”?⁶

Against the challenge that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not true, we respond, compelled by the Scriptures, yes, it is true. Still the challenge to deal seriously and fairly with the so-called apostasy texts which carry so much weight for Arminians should be accepted.

I. Howard Marshall, who claims to move beyond such categories as Arminianism and Calvinism to a supposedly objective exegetical position, claims that “the New Testament refers in an admittedly small number of cases to Christians falling into apostasy.”⁷ After his “objective” treatment of these texts, Marshall concludes that “the possibility of genuine Christians falling into apostasy is not to be explained away.”⁸

According to Marshall, once the possibility of apostasy is recognized, the Bible becomes easier to read. Paul’s charge that the Galatians had “fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4) and warnings such as that found in 2 Peter 1:10—“be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble,” can now be read without the strain imposed by Calvinistic bias.⁹

Not every Arminian complaint is equally weak. The charge that Reformed exegesis fails to treat warnings against apostasy seriously should be answered. For example, is it really adequate to view biblical warnings against lapsing from the faith *merely* as God’s means for keeping the elect secure by His own power?

Still, the crucial Arminian weakness is the failure to recognize that the apostasy in view is from a false, not a true, faith. We can affirm that good seed falls on many kinds of soil with varying results while acknowledging that good seed on good soil unfailingly produces fruit (Luke 8:1-15). That some who were with us go out only reveals that they were not with us, otherwise “they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us” (1 John 2:19). Paul “knew” (*eidotes*) that the Thessalonian believers were “beloved by God” (*egapemepemenoi hupo [tou] theou*) and was sure of their “election” (*eklogen*) because the gospel came among them with power, and they had turned from idols to Jesus

who “delivers from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:4-10).

Recognition that perseverance in faith is the mark of election makes a Calvinistic reading of the apostasy texts at least plausible, especially since it meshes better with the numerous passages which emphasize eternal security and perseverance. The falling warned against is taken seriously inasmuch as its occurrence does indeed call into question one’s election.¹⁰ As John Dagg understood it, “the doctrine that grace in the heart will produce perseverance to the end; and where the effect is not produced, the cause does not exist.”¹¹

That the Doctrine Is Harmful

Arminians also maintain that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is harmful to believers. Not only does the Reformed teaching perpetuate the lie that true believers cannot finally fall from grace, but this falsehood threatens believers’ souls eternally while it simultaneously distorts the reality of their relationship to God as a whole.

The Methodist, Jacob Ditzler, articulated pervasive Arminian reasoning: “[The doctrine of perseverance] destroys all free agency and responsibility. It assumes that after conversion men are perfectly passive in God’s hand—have no free will, no choice, no action—are machines.”¹² Again from Ditzler:

It is not good for the moral and intellectual universe that man be deprived of the value, pleasure, and dignity of choice—of free agency. In it alone is there such a type of intellectual and moral dignity and grandeur, and such capacity for happiness and bliss as is pleasing to God, and compatible with His wisdom. The qualification for real mental and moral happiness is freedom of choice.¹³

Once such freedom of choice is undermined, says Ditzler,

believers may “lull to repose, ease, carelessness, presumption and ruin.”¹⁴

Belief in the eternal security and the perseverance of the saints need not and should never involve some easy believism, presumption or what Dietrich Bonhoeffer termed “cheap grace.” Charles Spurgeon called this doctrine a “great wonder,” since, as the Synod of Dort recognized, “those who are converted could not persevere in a state of grace if left to their own strength.”¹⁵ In fact, Dort admits, “with respect to themselves, [apostasy] is not only possible [but] would undoubtedly happen; but with respect to *God*, it is utterly impossible.”¹⁶

It is fitting that the title “perseverance of the saints” has direct reference to an event in the lives of believers—believers persevere. But it is also appropriate to recognize that the entire basis for confidence that the faith of the truly converted will endure is outside believers. It is highly instructive that the fifth head of doctrine at the Synod of Dort is as focused upon the God who preserves His elect as upon the perseverance produced by that divine preservation. Faithful response to the biblical insistence that God finishes the saving work He begins never recoils in upon itself but looks to and leans upon the original and only true Promise Keeper who keeps those He has promised to bring to glory.

Ditzler’s comment concerning machines is illuminative of a distinctive lack of exegetical subtlety which pervades much Arminian thinking. Only two options seem possible to deniers of perseverance—either free will obtains, or we are all robots.

The Arminian Holy of Holies. The first possibility—that free will obtains—involves what might be viewed as the Arminian holy of holies—that precious jewel, that value above all values which must be protected at all costs, namely, the right of refusal with respect to all gracious overtures of God. The same tenacity for the right of refusal which

leads many evangelicals to deny effectual calling at the point of conversion, leads consistent Arminians to deny God's power to preserve the truly converted to the end.¹⁷ Ditzler articulates the centrality of this negative prerogative of free will—"we say man cannot of himself turn, but he can refuse to receive grace, and help, and refuse to turn, and there is just where we are Arminian."¹⁸

But is it not the case that when the right of refusal and apostasy become the focus of discussion, a certain distortion of the biblical emphasis creeps into Arminian logic? Too often the discussion runs thus—"Can man fall?", to "Can the Christian fall?" Is not the prior question, the more urgent question, a different one? Namely—"Can man stand?"¹⁹ The question of falling is moot. Man's power to fall has advanced beyond the possible to the actual—He has fallen! O, how far he has fallen! He is blind! He is bound in sin! He is spiritually dead!²⁰

Now our attention is better focused upon the concrete reality on the ground. Can man, whose body, mind, and soul are mature and experienced at falling, stand again? And if so, can he remain standing? Can he stand eternally? If so—how? By what power? To whose credit? To whom the praise? To whom the glory? The short answer is—Yes, he can stand eternally because God is able to make him stand.²¹

Is it not fair to ask whether the right of refusal, which is seen as the genuine mark of true humanity and dignity at the point of conversion and throughout the Christian life, ought also to prevail in heaven as well? True Arminians, along with all who deny effectual calling, should be asked why the prerogative to spurn God's love loses its luster once the pearly gates have been traversed. If genuine human nature can flourish in heaven without the power to break free of God's love, why insist upon such freedom at any stage of man's existence? Unless, in the final analysis, man's faith, whether at conversion or in the course of the

Christian life on earth or both, is in fact viewed as in some sense meritorious. Arminians seem to treat the right of refusal not so much as a constituent element within human nature but rather as a test, a hurdle which, once cleared, may be left behind. For deniers of effectual calling, this hurdle is cleared at the point of conversion, while for Methodists it is overcome at death or at Christ's return, whichever comes first.

In either case Paul's questions, which seized the mind of St. Augustine, cannot be answered correctly—"Who makes you different from another? And what do you have which you did not receive? And if indeed you did receive it, how is it that you boast as if you did not receive it?"²² Once the slightest notion of merit penetrates our understanding of faith, a ground for boasting before God is established, and grace is no longer grace (Rom. 11:6).

Robotic Christianity. Still, Arminians maintain an intense protectiveness of this almost Herculean, inviolable right of refusal. Why do they do it? Part of the explanation is that for them, the alternative is robotic Christianity—a mechanical, coercive manipulation by God of the entire universe which includes the wills of human beings.²³

Happily, Reformed believers join Arminians in rejecting such a mechanical view of God's providential lordship over His creation and in His saving work. The Scriptures typically depict God as unfailingly saving His elect, not with the language of force and coercion but with the language of wooing, drawing, changing hearts, and transforming wills.²⁴

Calvinistic teaching has recognized and celebrated this fact. Calvin, whose high view of God's sovereignty is unquestioned, agrees that "man is not borne along without any motion of the heart, as if by an outside force; rather, he is so affected that he obeys from the heart."²⁵ James Petigru Boyce agreed that God does "not act independently of [Christians'] cooperation, but leads them unto salvation

through their own perseverance in faith and holiness."²⁶ Again, "salvation is secured only through the cooperation of the believer. It is not bestowed upon him in his sins. It is not merely preservation by God, but also perseverance of the believer, in faith and holiness, unto the end."²⁷

Christian teaching from Augustine to John Calvin to Thomas Goodwyn to Jonathan Edwards to J. I. Packer demonstrates that Arminian fears of mechanicalism have not been realized in the theologies of many prominent defenders of perseverance. On the contrary, the reservoir of instruction concerning Christian discipleship, obedience, sanctification, and what we might call heart religion in its broadest sense has been deep and rich among Reformed writers and teachers.

Unlike Arminians, Calvinists maintain the affirmation that true growth in obedience and the pursuit of holiness, while taking place in believers and truly involving their wills, are also received gifts, as Romans 6:22-23 indicates: ". . . now having been freed from sin and enslaved to God, you derive your benefit, resulting in sanctification, and the outcome, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

The Work of the Holy Spirit. Reformed reading of the Scriptures recognizes a third option which does violate the Arminian holy of holies but without resulting in robotic Christianity. This option affirms that God the Holy Spirit, non-coercively, yet unfailingly, vivifies, awakens, illuminates and effectually draws blind, dead sinners to enduring and, therefore, to saving faith in Jesus Christ. Against this view the Arminian understanding has the Holy Spirit restoring the human will to some sort of neutrality rather than bestowing, nurturing, and sustaining faith and the obedience of faith.

Yet even earthly parental love acts in the Calvinistic and not the Arminian way. When mothers and fathers know bet-

ter what will help or harm their children, love compels them to influence their wills toward the good. No reasonable person blames the parent who leads his children to live honestly, to work diligently, to avoid the dangers of drugs and promiscuous sexual activity. These efforts are neither tyrannical nor manipulative but are the plain duties of love.

Ah! but of course, children with contrary wills may and often do successfully resist the loving efforts of the parents. Yes, they do! But praise be to God, our Lord is better at persuasion than earthly parents. Our loving heavenly Father is perfect in all that He does, including this, and so accomplishes all things in accordance with the counsel of His own will, and not ours. Therefore John can attribute the new birth precisely to the will of God and just as pointedly not to the will of man (John 1:13; Eph. 1:11). Thus it happens that Jesus never loses one of those sheep given to Him by His Father before the foundation of the world, but raises him up at the last day (John 6:38-39; 10:16, 25-30). Arminian minds reject the possibility that God might draw sinners to Himself and keep them both unfailingly and noncoercively, and since the noncoercive element touches their holy of holies, perseverance must be denied.

That the Doctrine Is Indifferent

Surprisingly, the same Arminian teaching which finds the doctrine of perseverance untrue and harmful often insists that it is indifferent—that it does not matter whether one believes in perseverance or not! Once again Jacob Ditzler, in his 1876 debate with J. R. Graves, will serve as our representative Arminian.

Ditzler argues that one might affirm or deny the final perseverance of the saints, be equally pious and useful to the Lord, equally respect the Word of God, without endangering one's soul. After all, Ditzler reasoned with Dr. Graves, "we [Arminians] are safe any way . . . we stand if you do."²⁸

Whether a truly regenerate and adopted child of God might apostatize ought, according to Ditzler, to be left “to liberty of conscience and the right of private judgment.”²⁹

Graves responded that in the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints “the very foundation of Christianity itself” is at stake.³⁰ He was right. The nature of faith, one’s view of God’s character and of God’s glory are definitively shaped according to one’s understanding of perseverance.

Undivided Faith. Arminians rightly teach that faith obeys God, but it has difficulty emphasizing that faith leans, relies, and depends upon God’s grace alone for that obedience and for endurance in the obedience of faith to the end. Inevitably, Arminian faith must recoil in upon itself. It must depend for its salvation both upon God and upon itself to persevere. Since Arminians believe that God will undoubtedly do His part in offering help for perseverance, it is not surprising when disproportionate and isolated attention is focused upon the one variable which finally determines one’s eternal destiny, namely the Christian’s faith.

Do you see the zaniness, the impossibility of this picture? What we are talking about here is strikingly and disturbingly similar to one of the fundamental flaws which sabotaged Protestant liberalism from its beginnings in the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher and ensured its betrayal of the gospel. I am speaking of faith in faith. This is a nonsensical idea, but it prevails in the minds of many Christian believers.

The secular media can be counted on to speak of religion in this way. A case in point is the United States Air Force pilot, Sean O’Grady, who had to bail out of his airplane over the former Yugoslavia, but survived by eating plants and bugs until he was rescued. O’Grady gave God credit for his deliverance. But the newspaper headlines reported that he credited *his faith* for his recovery and that he leaned on *his faith*.

Faith and God must be sharply distinguished. Faith does

not exist in isolation. Faith lives from its object. Christian faith is not only not in itself, it is *precisely* not in itself—saving faith depends upon and credits God and God alone for salvation and for everything good, including faith. Faith is itself a leaning, a trusting, a dependence. To speak of unexercised faith as Arminians are prone to do is to speak of dead faith, of that which is not faith. To credit faith without reference to the God in whom it trusts is to rob God of His glory and ascribe it to believers themselves.

One New Testament scholar’s teaching illustrates the confusion which ensues once the perception of the inseparable relationship between faith and its object becomes clouded. He states that “in one sense, faith is God’s gift, yet it must be a gift received.”³¹ Do you see the confusion? Unintentionally, it seems, an additional step has been inserted into Christian conversion. Apparently God first offers the gift of faith to sinners which may be refused. Then Jesus Christ, together with His gospel, is offered to faith, which may receive Him or not, depending upon whether faith is exercised or not!

Do not the Scriptures treat faith as a bestowed gift, not as an offered gift? Just as we awaken to having received our name, to which we respond when addressed by it, so God’s elect, having received faith as a gift, receive Jesus Christ together with His gospel when offered. Likewise, the Lord’s sheep hear the voice of the Shepherd and do come when He calls (John 10:26-28, 6:45; Eph. 2:8).

Arminian understanding of faith is distorted in two ways. First, faith is understood as a human capacity which may or may not be exercised. This notion separates faith from its object, namely, the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ. Second, faith inevitably becomes divided. The believer rightly depends upon God who promises to save all who persevere to the end. So far so good. But then the believer must depend upon himself or, if you will, upon his own faith

in order to persevere. Where faith is divided, glory is divided, a ground for boasting is established, grace is no longer grace, and what was good news has turned into bad news, namely that it is up to sinners “to convert themselves” (*as convertendum se*) by their faith.³²

God’s Glory. Reformed Christians make much of God’s glory. *Soli Deo Gloria* is their motto. To God alone be glory. Which view gives God more glory on this point, the Calvinistic or the Arminian? The Arminian worships a God who has not promised that every true believer will be saved, and so he does not give God glory for such a promise. The Calvinist worships a God who has so promised and he praises Him for having done so. So, which conception gives God the most glory?

Let me suggest that the question of more or less glory can be misleading. The more pertinent question is surely—Which view gives God *proper* glory? We have to do with the question of truth, not with an abstract demand from outside God’s revelation and activity which requires that God must be given the most glory possible.

Here is the point. If the God envisioned by the Arminian is right, then his praise of God is right and in that sense he gives God more glory than the Calvinist. If God has not promised to save every true believer eternally, the Calvinist in no sense glorifies Him by suggesting otherwise; in fact, the Calvinist is presumptuous in that case. Glory is as much a matter of character as amount. Thus, we sing—“To God be the glory, great things He has *done*.” The Calvinist gives God proper glory because God has indeed promised to save eternally every true believer.

The Character of Faith. Surely the fundamental character of the Christian life will turn upon our grasp of this doctrine. Calvin was right—the Bible does not contain everything which can be known, but only that which is profitable for us to know in order to trust Christ and to lay hold of His

benefits, only that which is necessary for us to glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.³³

It cannot be a matter of indifference for us that God was pleased not only to preserve and keep His children through Jesus Christ but also to tell us so. The Lord wills to comfort us with this promise and to evoke from us the thanksgiving, grateful obedience, worship, and love appropriate to His preserving activity.

Gratitude for the promise of perseverance belongs to the essential character of faith. Works which flow from a different faith do not praise God fully and properly because they do not credit to God even those works prepared beforehand that we should walk in them. Obedience flowing from true faith acknowledges that we ourselves are God’s workmanship created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10).

I. H. Marshall asks that we balance our teaching on perseverance and eternal security with teaching on apostasy. This word balance is not always helpful. We often hear of balancing divine sovereignty with human responsibility, and now of balancing perseverance with apostasy. What does such balancing really mean? Do we steal a little of God’s sovereignty to beef up human responsibility? Can the doctrine of perseverance be pared down to make room for apostasy? Surely not. Our goal does not involve a balancing of teachings so much as a right understanding of them, a right relating of them to one another.³⁴

A firm embrace of the doctrine of the perseverance nurtures a pursuit of holiness of a theocentric intensity and gratitude unnatural to consistent Arminianism. Perseverance-shaped faith agrees with Calvin that “not a whit remains for us to glory in, for the whole of salvation comes from God,” and with St. Augustine who gladly confessed that “grace alone brings about every good work in us.”³⁵ It is comfortable with God’s announcement to Ezekiel that when He had put in His people a new fleshly heart to replace their

stony heart He would *cause them to walk* in His statutes.³⁶ It does not flinch at Paul's insistence that "all things are of God who reconciled us to Himself through Christ" and that he no longer desired a righteousness of his own, for he considered himself dead and that Christ lived in him.³⁷ It offers the "Amen!" to Jesus' warning that without Him we can do nothing.³⁸

Much water will have to pass under the bridge before we come into full possession of that precious inheritance. The Devil will assault us. Sins will tempt us. Our desires will try to draw us from our Lord. Doubts will assail from all sides. And to whom will we turn? Not to ourselves. Oh, no. We cannot take care of ourselves. And praise be to God, our Lord knows that we cannot. He remembers that we are dust (Ps. 103:14). He delights both in telling us that He will take care of us and in actually doing so as we run to Him and cling to Him who is able to keep what we have committed unto Him against that day (2 Tim. 1:12).

Yes, my son, Drew, was owed an apology when the daddy who should have taken care of him abandoned him, if only for eight minutes. Our heavenly Father, the One who invites us to call Him Abba, will neither leave nor forsake us for a fraction of a second (Heb. 13:5).

Recently I was with Alan Tomlinson, my colleague in New Testament, at the corner of Pennsylvania Avenue and Nichols Street in a shopping area of Kansas City called the Plaza. We both noticed a young blind boy of around six years stooping with the aid of an adult woman in order to run his hand across a recessed plaque in the sidewalk which depicted a scene from the Civil War Battle of Westport. I continued walking but Alan was frozen, his eyes welling up with tears and fixed upon the child.

In 1992, Alan contracted a flesh-eating strep bacterium which ate away at his body. He almost lost his right arm and shoulder. The doctors gave up hope of saving them. By

God's grace Alan's condition took an unexpected turn for the better and his shoulder and arm were preserved, though he suffered significant scarring and the loss of sensitivity in his hand. Alan now knows by experience the need to be cared for, both by others and by God for survival itself. Ever since his ordeal, the sight of anyone with an obvious disability seizes Alan with understanding, pity and love.

Sin has spiritually crippled every human being, exposing and perhaps deepening our utter dependence upon God for salvation and everything good, including perseverance in faith. But take note, sin did not create our reliance upon God. Grace was not a fallback position once works did not fly. We were created for dependence upon God's power and mercy from the beginning.

It is right for us earthly parents to encourage our children's maturity into adult independence. But with regard to our heavenly Father, maturity proceeds in reverse. With respect to God, independence is the lie, independence is the sin (Gen. 3:1-22; John 15:5). Before God, we are commanded and invited to mature into dependence! Forever children! In this light we begin to see how the doctrine of the final perseverance of the saints belongs to the very heart of all God's ways with His adopted children:

The steps of a man are established by the Lord; and he delights in his way. When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; because the Lord is the One who holds his hand . . . [the Lord] does not forsake His godly ones; they are preserved forever (Ps. 37:23-24, 28).

Author

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Endnotes

- 1 Timothy George, *The Theology of the Reformers* (Nashville: Broadman, 1988), 327.
- 2 Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990 reprint), 3:548-49.
- 3 J. R. Graves (1820-93), no friend to Calvinism, led what became known as the Landmark movement in the South and Southwestern regions of the United States. Graves, relying upon superb rhetorical and literary skills, his editorship of *The Tennessee Baptist*, and a great love for and competence in controversial debate, exerted lasting influence among Southern Baptists.
- 4 John 6:39; 10:16; 17:12; 18:9; Job 19:25; Psalm 19:14; Hebrews 5:5-10; 6:17-7:28; 1 Peter 2:25.
- 5 J. R. Graves and Jacob Ditzler, *The Graves-Ditzler: or, Great Carrollton Debate* (Memphis: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1876), 1139, 1141.
- 6 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., John T. McNeill, ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), book 3, chap. 24, par. 6, or 1:972-73.
- 7 Marshall identifies the most important as being Matthew 24:10-12; Mark 13:22; Luke 8:13, 12:10; Acts 20:29f.; 1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 11:30-32; Galatians 5:4; 6:13; Philippians 3:18f.; 1 Timothy 1:19f.; 4:1; 6:10; 2 Timothy 2:26; 4:10; 2 Peter 2:18ff.; 1 John 5:16; Jude 22f.; and Revelation 3:2.
- 8 I. Howard Marshall, *Kept By the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1969), 198-99.
- 9 Cf. *Graves-Ditzler*, 1122.
- 10 It is appropriate but still insufficient to insist that the high sovereignty, perseverance passages must govern one's reading of the so-called apostasy texts. We must move beyond "Scripture interprets Scripture" arguments to a genuine engagement with troublesome texts

on their own terms, notably Hebrews 6.

- 11 J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology and Church Order* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Gano Books, 1982), 299.
- 12 *Graves-Ditzler*, 1122.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 1146. Is it not striking how clearly this statement has God prizing sincerity above righteousness in His creatures?
- 14 *Ibid.*, 1118.
- 15 Charles Haddon Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, Texas: Pilgrim Publications, 1979), 23:362.
- 16 Schaff, 594. My emphasis.
- 17 "Effectual calling" refers to the Reformed conviction that God effectually or successfully brings to saving faith every sinner He calls. "Effectual calling" is preferable to the more widely recognized "irresistible grace" because it better comprehends both biblical teaching and the language of the Synod of Dort. See Schaff, pages 587-92; and esp. Articles XI and XII, pages 566-700ff.—"*sed ejusdem etiam Spiritus regenerantis efficacia ad intima hominis penetrat, cor clausum aperit, . . . adeo ut omnes illi, in quorum cordibus admirando hoc modo Deus, certo, infallibiliter, et efficaciter regenerentur, et actu credant.*" It is interesting to note that the *Remonstrance* had repudiated the language of irresistibility in 1610—"quod ad modum operationis ejus gratiae attinet, non est ille irresistibilis. . . ." See Schaff, 547.
- 18 *Graves-Ditzler*, 1143.
- 19 Cf. Job 41:10; Ezra 9:15; 1 Samuel 6:20; Nahum 1:6; Malachi 3:2.
- 20 John 12:40.
- 21 Romans 5:2, 14:4.
- 22 1 Corinthians 4:7. *Diakrino* can mean "make superior" or "give an advantage," rather than merely "make different." This stronger sense certainly fits the context of 1

- Corinthians 4 where the issues of merit and boasting are in view. It is also difficult to see how the sense of the passage can be comprehended unless the idea of a bestowed as opposed to an offered gift is envisioned.
- 23 Ironically the great father of Protestant liberalism and, indeed, of modern theology, Friedrich Schleiermacher, actually held a view of divine sovereignty approaching the Arminian caricature of classic Calvinism. Schleiermacher could even speak of God as the "Author of Sin!" See his *The Christian Faith*, trans. D. M. Baille et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1986), 325f. Even though for Schleiermacher such an assertion has reference only to the content of the Christian self-consciousness, this represents one of several key emphases not bequeathed to later liberals.
- 24 See also, e.g., Irenaeus, *Against All Heresies*, 5:1:1-2 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 527-28.
- 25 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.10, 308.
- 26 J. P. Boyce, *Abstract of Principles* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1887), 426.
- 27 *Ibid.*, 431f. Were Boyce's Protestant credentials not so firmly established, his use of the word "cooperation" might be cause for raised eyebrows. Boyce's meaning must be strictly distinguished from Roman Catholic teaching as found, e.g., in the *The Council of Trent*, Session Six, Chapter 5, viz., "*ut, qui per peccata a Deo aversi erant, per ejus excitantem atque adjuvantem gratiam ad convertendum se ad suam ipsorum justificationem, eidem gratiae libere assentiendo et cooperando, disponantur*" (Schaff), 2:92. Instead Boyce's emphasis parallels that of many classic Calvinists (including Calvin himself) that God does not bypass His ordained means of repentance and faith in converting sinners to Himself, or, in the language of Karl Barth, the atonement accomplished

by Jesus Christ has existential reach.

- 28 *Graves-Ditzler*, 1117.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*, 1126.
- 31 Frank Stagg, *New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Broadman, 1962), 120.
- 32 See *The Council of Trent* in Schaff, 2:92.
- 33 *Institutes*, 1.10.2:98; 1.14.1-4:159-165; *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, 12 vols., David W. and Thomas F. Torrance, eds., T. A. Smail, trans. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 10:330-31; cf. Timothy George, *Reformers*, 198-99.
- 34 No objection is needed where calls for "balance" encourage due attention to biblical teaching on both sides of a given polarity. My concern is that a too hasty settling for the language of "paradox" or even of "antimony" may unwittingly validate unbiblical construals of the issues involved. I. H. Marshall's "balance," which would satisfy few convictional Arminians or Calvinists, is a case in point. The acknowledgement that we see through a glass darkly concerning certain aspects of doctrine need not discourage eager recognition of what the Bible makes clear. Danger lies not only in speaking beyond what is written, but also in speaking less than the Scriptures allow.
- 35 Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.6:298; Augustine, *Letters*, cxciv 5, quoted in John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.13:308.
- 36 Ezekiel 36:26-27.
- 37 1 Corinthians 5:18; Ephesians 1:10-11; Hebrews 2:10; 2 Peter 1:3; Philippians 3:9; Galatians 2:19-20.
- 38 John 15:5; Colossians 3:1-4; Ephesians 2:6; 1 Corinthians 13:12; 2 Corinthians 3:18; 1 John 3:2.