

WCF 17 & 18
Perseverance and Assurance

Chapter 17: Of Perseverance of the Saints

1. The Title of this chapter has an ancient lineage with great contemporary import. Dating all the way back to the fifth century A.D. St. Augustine penned his "On the Gift of Perseverance" in response to the teachings of Pelagius' in "On Nature and Grace" and "On The Possibility Of Not Sinning." The ancient controversy again surfaced in the 19th century between "Old school" and "New School" Presbyterians. To review this controversy is useful both because Augustinianism was eventually judged "orthodox" as to later influence the Westminster confession and Pelagianism was associated with New School Presbyterianism compared to Old School Presbyterianism, which has been historically identified with both modern liberalism AND fundamentalism by historians such as George Marsden in his *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience*, (Yale University Press; 1970.) Briefly therefore,

By 396 Augustine was already advocating that people were innately sinful and desperately dependent upon God's unmerited grace for salvation. (Augustine's *Ad Simplicianum* was finished in A.D. 396). At about the same time, the British Monk, Pelagius, while teaching in Rome began to circulate a "diametrically opposed doctrine of human nature" and the viability of free will and human responsibility unto salvation and sanctification.

According to Pelagius, since a primary feature of human nature was described as the innate "capacity" to do either good or evil, the "possibility of not sinning" for Pelagius was very real. Pelagius's doctrines pertaining to free will and his dispute with the doctrine of original sin in his "possibility of not sinning" is clearly the culmination of his theological system. In that God could not commission that which could not be obeyed, Pelagius asked, "how can we possibly refuse to accept that a man can be without sin, when we are ready to admit that nothing impossible has either been forbidden or commanded?" ("On the Possibility of Not Sinning" p.169) For scriptural support, Pelagius utilized the command in Leviticus 19:2, "You shall be holy for I the Lord your God am holy." And also, Pelagius used from the teaching of Christ Matthew 5:48, "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is Perfect." And finally, he employed the teachings of Paul in Philippians 2:14-15, "Do all things... that you may be blameless and innocent, as the children of God." (Ibid. p.169)

In contrast, Augustine spoke of perseverance rather than perfection in this life. He notes that "the perseverance by which we persevere in Christ even to the end is the gift of God." ("On the Gift of Perseverance"). For Augustine, "no one lives in this corruptible body, however righteous he may be, without sins of some kind. Therefore, the evidence of true election in Christ was not perfection but rather perseverance until death. Ultimately, Augustine grounded his doctrine of perseverance upon the doctrine of predestination. (Which explains why his treatise on the gift of perseverance is the "second book on the treatise "on the predestination of the saints.")

Biblical Passages on Perseverance: Phil. 1:6, 2 Cor.5:1ff, Rom. 5:1ff, Romans 8:16ff, John 10:27-30.

WCF 17

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

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 ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

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.

2. Section 1, the Assembly affirmed in very full language what is stated briefly in Philippians 1:6-- "being confident of this very thing, that He who has *begun* a good work in you will *complete* it until the day of Jesus Christ". When did the "work" begin? What are some ways that it will be completed? Is this the same as "once saved always saved"?
3. Section 2: Does the perseverance of the saints depend on the saints or on God? Specifically, upon what things does the perseverance of the saints depend? How does the confession ground this doctrine? Notice especially how this doctrine is "theology applied."
4. Section 3: Do persevering saints ever fall into grievous sins, or continue in them, for a time?
5. What are the consequences of saints falling into sin? What, if anything, do they (the elect) "lose?" Observe therefore the difference between "perseverance" and "assurance."

Chapter 18: Assurance of Grace and Salvation

1. Although hypocrites and other unregenerate men may vainly deceive themselves with false hopes and carnal presumptions of being in the favor of God, and estate of salvation (which hope of theirs shall perish): yet such as truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may, in this life, be certainly assured that they are in the state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope shall never make them ashamed.

2. This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.

3. This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

4. True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it, by falling into some special sin which

woundeth the conscience and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation, by God's withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ and the brethren, that sincerity of heart, and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may, in due time, be revived; and by the which, in the meantime, they are supported from utter despair.

By way of introduction, and especially in regard to the American context-- it has been argued that there were two different Puritan perspectives in America on the question of Christian assurance, and especially what the Christian ought to examine vis-à-vis their basis for assurance. It should be noted that both sides held to the doctrine of justification by faith alone—its rather how to interpret “but faith is never alone” in regard to Christian assurance that the debate centered. According then to Stephen Clark, in his “Jonathan Edwards: The assurance of Salvation and the Care of the Church” (*The Assembling of Ourselves Together... e.d John Vance*)

- One school emphasized “human works as playing a significant role both in preparation for and assurance of salvation.” (We should of course especially take in mind the Puritan “covenantal” context as related to civil privileges being associated with spiritual status such as churches filled with “nominal” Christians.)
Thomas Shepherd: (Series of weekly sermons on the ten virgins)
Object 4: *“But I look for Christ, and wait for him, and desire him, and all that are wise think well of me”*
Ans. *You may do all this, and yet you may be found foolish, for all this. Evangelical work, which is accompanied with salvation in some, it may be hypocritical in thee; and therefore take heed you do not take shows for substance (Works, 2:196)*
- The other school as illustrated by John Cotton, “placed an emphasis on the immediacy of God’s love.” And while he affirmed that sanctification was a necessary evidence of justification, “the one of them giving good evidence of the other...”, he all the same understood works as having a secondary role in the assurance of salvation.. (*Labor is the joyful return for grace already received*)
In the Gospel the promise is made to Christ, so that give me Christ and I claim my right to the promise and to all the comforts and blessings thereof...because all the promises are given to Christ, and all the conditions fulfilled in Christ, and the revealing of both is by the revealing of Christ given of grace so freely to the Soul.

1. What is the Biblical evidence that faith is never alone?

James 2:24 (c.f.Context: **James 2:18**) **1 John 1:6-7** (c.f. context 8-10)

2. What then is the Biblical evidence against examining any specific performance of works as a basis for assurance?

Gal. 3:11, 2Cor. 13:5, 1Cor. 11:28, Eph. 2:8-9

3. Read Section 1: Expressions such as “certainly assured” and “infallible assurance” are often the source of misunderstanding. These expressions may be understood either subjectively or objectively, and are often understood subjectively. What difference does it make if one understands them objectively? From the first clause in section 2, does it appear that the Assembly understood these expressions subjectively, or objectively?

4. Read Section 2: Does this infallible assurance so belong to the essence of faith that anyone who believes always or automatically has it? C.f. Section 3: What did the divines mean that “this infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith...?”

5. Section 2: The meaning of the "witness of the Holy Spirit to our spirits" has been much debated-- the key passage being Romans 8:15-16. As you reflect upon this passage, what do you think? How does Roman's 5:1-5 give light to this debate? (notice especially the role of the Holy Spirit and this passage in relation to the doctrine of perseverance)

5. Section 4: Can a person "lose assurance" according to the Confession? What are the things that may shake, diminish, or interrupt one's assurance of salvation according to the confession? What is the solution? How then do we respond to the popular idea of a "carnal (backslid) Christian"...

7. What does all this have to do with the Lord's Supper? If a person falls into some grievous sin, should he/she partake of the Lord's Supper that week? What then is the basis of our assurance. What exactly do we "examine" relative to the basis of our assurance—and how does the Lord's Supper assist us in this?