

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 in so far as Augustinianism was eventually judged orthodox as to later influence the Westminster Confession, and as Pelagianism was associated with New School Presbyterianism, as 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 *On the 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 in 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 in the treatise *On the Predestination of the Saints*.

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

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

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, it's 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*, ed. 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 keep in mind the Puritan "covenantal" context: civil privileges were associated with spiritual status such as to leave 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 (see context: **James 2:18**) **1 John 1:6-7** (see context **v.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 have it? Cf. Section 3: What did the divines mean, "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 Romans 5:1-5 give light to this debate? (Notice especially the role of the Holy Spirit in 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/he 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?