

## THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS: A HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE

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### I. AUGUSTINE

The first extensive discussion of the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is found in Augustine's *Treatise on the Gift of Perseverance*, written in A.D. 428 or 429 in the context of the controversies with Pelagius on the issues of grace, original sin, and predestination.<sup>1</sup> At the very outset Augustine affirms the grace of God as the ultimate basis for the believer's final perseverance: "I assert . . . that the perseverance by which we persevere in Christ even to the end is the gift of God."<sup>2</sup> From a human perspective it is inscrutable why, given two pious men, one should be given the grace of final perseverance and the other not. From a divine perspective it must be the case that the individual who perseveres is among the predestined while the other is not.<sup>3</sup> The one who fails to persevere has not been called according to God's plan and chosen in Christ according to God's purpose.<sup>4</sup>

God's sovereignty in election and predestination, then, is the basis for Augustine's understanding of final perseverance. The grace of God "which both begins a man's faith and which enables it to persevere unto the end is not given in respect of our merits, but is given according to His own most secret and at the same time most righteous, wise, and beneficent will; since those whom He predestinated, them He also called, with that calling of which it is said, 'The gifts and calling of God are without repentance.'"<sup>5</sup> It is clear for Augustine, based on his understanding of the Pauline texts in Romans, that God's elect will certainly persevere to the end and attain eternal salvation.

Unlike Calvin and those in the later Reformed tradition, however, Augustine does not believe that the Christian can in this life know with infallible certitude that he is in fact among the elect and that he will finally

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<sup>1</sup> Citations of the treatise are from *The Works of Aurelius Augustine*, vol. 15, *Anti-Pelagian Works* (ed. M. Dods; Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1876). The Latin title is *De Dono Perseverantiae*, "On the Benefit of Perseverance."

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 172 (chap. 1).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 187 (chap. 21).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 188 (chap. 21). The references are to Rom 8:28; Eph 1:4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* 200-201 (chap. 33). Augustine cites Rom 8:30; Rom 11:29 in relation to God's predestining the elect.

persevere. According to Augustine "it is uncertain whether anyone has received this gift so long as he is still alive."<sup>6</sup> The believer's life in this world is a state of trial, and he who seems to stand must take heed lest he fall.<sup>7</sup> It is possible to experience the renewal of baptismal regeneration, and the justifying grace of God,<sup>8</sup> and yet not persevere to the end. The recognition of this possibility should make the believer's confession of faith "lowly and submissive" and lead to continued dependence on the grace of God.

Augustine's understanding of perseverance, then, reflects his understanding of the eternal predestination of God, the warning passages addressed to believers in the NT, and his sacramental theology of grace and baptismal regeneration. He held that God's elect will certainly persevere but that one's election could not be infallibly known in this life—and that in fact one's justification and baptismal regeneration could be rejected and lost through sin and unbelief. Augustine's understanding set the parameters for Aquinas, for the Council of Trent, and for the Roman Catholic tradition generally down to the present day.

## II. THOMAS AQUINAS

In the *Summa Theologica* Thomas Aquinas discusses the doctrine of perseverance in several places, once under the rubric of "The Necessity of Grace" and again in relation to "Virtue, and Vices."<sup>9</sup> He builds upon the thought of Augustine and attempts to integrate it with the ethical insights of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and his own philosophical understanding of the freedom of the human will.

Aquinas distinguishes three senses of the term "perseverance." In the first instance it refers to a disposition or habit of mind whereby "a man stands steadfastly, lest he be moved by the assault of the sadness from what is virtuous."<sup>10</sup> A second sense, also ethical in nature, focuses on the intentionality of the moral agent: Perseverance is the inclination whereby "a man has the purpose of persevering in good unto the end."<sup>11</sup> In a third and more strictly theological sense, perseverance is "the abiding in good to the end of life"—that is, "final perseverance."<sup>12</sup>

Like Augustine, Aquinas believes that one who has been justified by grace stands continually in need of the grace of God, since the justified can turn away and be finally lost. "For to many grace is given to whom perseverance in grace is not given."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 172 (chap. 1).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 201 (chap. 33). The reference is to 1 Cor 10:12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 188 (chap. 21). For Augustine, justification and regeneration (through baptism) are spiritual graces that can be rejected and lost.

<sup>9</sup> Citations are from the *Summa Theologica* translation of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger, 1947).

<sup>10</sup> *Summa Theologica* I-II, Q. 109, Art. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Thomas' teaching on perseverance reflects his understanding of the human will. Free will by its very nature is changeable, and this changeability is not taken away by grace. Consequently in the present life it is not in the power of the human will, considered in itself, even though "repaired by grace, to abide unchangeably in the good."<sup>14</sup> Though it is in the power of the will to choose the good, "it is often in our power to choose yet not to accomplish."<sup>15</sup> Aquinas seems to be saying here that good intentions do not guarantee good results. Nevertheless with the assistance of divine grace it is possible for the justified to continue to will the good and to persevere to the end.<sup>16</sup>

### III. MARTIN LUTHER

Luther's understanding of perseverance clearly bears marks of the Roman Catholic tradition and yet differs from it on the key point of the believer's present certitude of the experience of grace. In the context of a late medieval Church whose theology and practices mitigated against such certitude, Luther is horrified that the pope "should have entirely prohibited the certainty and assurance of divine grace."<sup>17</sup> The preacher's essential task is to make the hearers sure of their salvation. "If you want to preach to a person in a comforting way," urged Luther in a midweek sermon on Matt 18:21-22, "then do it so that he who hears you is certain that he is in God's favor, or be silent altogether."<sup>18</sup> Preachers who make their hearers doubt are "good for nothing." Assurance that one is presently in a state of grace is foundational to the Christian life. "I must be able to say, stated the great reformer, 'I know that I have a gracious God and that my works, performed in this faith and according to this Word, are good fruits and are pleasing to Him.'"<sup>19</sup> A sermon that assures the believer of how he stands with God is true and presents the pure word of Christ. A sermon that fails to do this is "a lie and the devil's doctrine," and such preachers may as well be the "devil's confessor" and a "preacher in the abyss of hell."<sup>20</sup> Luther was hardly one to mince his words on this point.

Like Augustine, Luther believed that regeneration occurred through the waters of baptism. "But," noted the Reformer, "all of us do not remain with our baptism. Many fall away from Christ and become false Christians."<sup>21</sup> In his commentary on 2 Pet 2:22 he writes as follows on apostates in the Church: "Through baptism these people threw out unbelief, had their unclean way of life washed away, and entered into a pure life of faith and

<sup>14</sup> *Summa Theologia* II-II, Q. 137, Art. 4.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Cited in J. Kostlin, *The Theology of Luther* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 2. 462.

<sup>18</sup> Cited in *What Luther Says* (compiled by E. Plass; St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 3. 1116.

<sup>19</sup> *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1961), 24. 218.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> Cited in *What Luther Says*, 1. 280.

love. Now they fall away into unbelief and their own works, and they soil themselves again in filth."<sup>22</sup>

One who has experienced the justifying grace of God through faith can lose that justification through unbelief or false confidence in works. "Indeed, even the righteous man," writes Luther in his comments on Gal 5:4, "if he presumes to be justified by those works, loses the righteousness he has and falls from the grace by which he had been justified, since he has been removed from a good land to one that is barren."<sup>23</sup>

Martin Luther shared with the Roman Catholic Church of his day the belief that the grace of baptismal regeneration and justification could be lost. On these points he was in agreement with Augustine and Aquinas. Where he differed was on the matter of assurance, being more confident than the Catholic tradition of his time that the believer could enjoy great certitude of his present state of grace.

Whether the believer, now in a state of grace, would remain in grace to the end was for Luther an open question. On the one hand, so far as God is concerned Luther believed that the heavenly Father desired the believer's eternal salvation in Christ. Nevertheless from the believer's side it is possible to turn aside from the grace of God and be lost, even after the pilgrimage has begun. Consequently the believer must always take heed lest he fall.<sup>24</sup>

This same tension on the matter of final perseverance—"secure in Christ, insecure in one's self"—is also reflected in the Lutheran confessions of the sixteenth century. On the one hand, article 12 of the Augsburg Confession of 1530 condemns the anabaptist teaching that once justified, the believer cannot lose the Spirit of God.<sup>25</sup> In the Lutheran view, final apostasy is a genuine possibility for the baptized and justified believer. On the other hand, while the contents of God's eternal decree of election are known infallibly only to God, the believer, by focusing on Jesus Christ as preached in the gospel and presented by the promises of Scripture, can find "sweet consolation" in "this most wholesome doctrine" of predestination, according to the Formula of Concord of 1584. Through present and lively faith in the Christ of the gospel "we are rendered certain that by mere grace, without any merit of our own, we are chosen in Christ to eternal life, and that no one can pluck us out of his hands."<sup>26</sup> There is paradox, then, in the Lutheran understanding of final perseverance. While the matter is theoretically uncertain, for a believer it can become existentially certain, to the extent that the believer maintains unwavering faith in the promises of the gospel and so grows in confidence that he has in fact been included in God's gracious election to salvation.

<sup>22</sup> *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), 30. 190.

<sup>23</sup> *Luther's Works* (ed. J. Pelikan; St. Louis: Concordia, 1964), 27. 331.

<sup>24</sup> Kostlin, *Theology*, 2. 464.

<sup>25</sup> *The Creeds of Christendom* (ed. P. Schaff; New York: Harper, 1897), 3. 14.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 169-170: chap. 12, Formula of Concord.

## IV. JOHN CALVIN

Like Augustine, Aquinas and Luther before him, Calvin grounded the understanding of final perseverance on the doctrine of election. With respect to the gift of perseverance, writes Calvin, there is no doubt that God "applies this idea to all the elect."<sup>27</sup> According to Calvin, when Christ declares that "every tree that my Father has not planted will be uprooted [Matt 15:13], he conversely implies that those rooted in God can never be pulled up from salvation."<sup>28</sup> This comment reflects a distinction between the visible and invisible Church. While false confessors in the visible Church may be uprooted, the elect of God's true invisible Church will endure to the end.

Like Luther, Calvin believes that the Christian can enjoy moral certitude of his present state of grace. Calvin, however, has greater confidence than Luther and the Catholic tradition before him that the believer can also have great assurance of his election and final perseverance. When the Church father Gregory the Great, for example, "teaches that we are aware only of our call but unsure of our election, he is badly and dangerously in error."<sup>29</sup> Gregory's error was to make election depend upon the merits of works rather than transferring the believer's confidence to a trust in God's goodness.<sup>30</sup>

Calvin also differs from Luther in his understanding of regeneration. According to Calvin, once the Spirit brings a person to regeneration this reality cannot be lost. This view is apparent in Calvin's comment on 1 John 3:9 ("No one born of God commits sin, for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God"). Calvin argues that the apostle John "plainly declares that the Spirit continues his grace in us to the last, so that inflexible perseverance is added to newness of life."<sup>31</sup> Can the fear and love of God be extinguished in the truly regenerate? No, because "the seed, communicated when God regenerates his elect, as it is incorruptible, retains its virtue perpetually."<sup>32</sup> The "seed" is the presence of God's new life in the believer.

While regeneration is irreversible and leads to final perseverance, in the visible Church it is not humanly possible to infallibly distinguish the truly regenerate from those who are not. Even the reprobate, writes Calvin in his commentary on Heb 6:4, may "enjoy some taste of his grace." The Spirit can produce some initial stirring "even in the reprobate, which afterwards vanishes away, either because it did not strike roots sufficiently deep, or

<sup>27</sup> J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (ed. J. T. McNeill; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960) 972 (3.14.6).

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> *Institutes* 975 (3.14.9).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948) 214.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

because it withers, being choked up.”<sup>33</sup> A person may experience feelings of remorse for sin, make a public profession of faith, and yet not be truly regenerate, according to Calvin. Such temporary faith is not to be confused with the genuine saving faith that endures to eternal life.

Even though Calvin believes that regeneration is irreversible and that the believer can have assurance of his own election and final perseverance, he does not conclude that the Christian has any cause for spiritual complacency. Persevering in God’s grace requires, on the human side, “severe and arduous effort.”<sup>34</sup> From our human perspective the Christian’s circumstances are very uncertain, and the believer at times can feel that his life “hangs only by a thread, and is encompassed by a thousand deaths.”<sup>35</sup> The believer needs to continually feed his soul on the preaching of the Word and to grow in faith throughout the whole course of life.<sup>36</sup> Since it is easy for the believer to fall away for a time from the grace of God, there is constant need for “striving and vigilance, if we would persevere in the grace of God.”<sup>37</sup>

Calvin thus balances his theological certitudes with pastoral warnings. At the pastoral level, Calvin’s position does not greatly differ from that of Luther’s or the earlier Catholic tradition. The believer must continually exercise faith and obedience to make “his calling and election sure.”

#### V. COUNCIL OF TRENT

The definitive reply of the Roman Catholic Church to the Reformers’ teachings on the doctrines of grace was formulated at the Council of Trent. Earlier, in June of 1520, Pope Leo X had responded in a preliminary way in the bull *Exsurge Domine* to forty-one propositions of Luther relating to free will, original sin, penance, confession and other matters.

The sixth session of the Council of Trent, lasting from June 21, 1546, until January 13, 1547, was one of the most important and addressed the issues of grace, justification and perseverance. In chap. 12 it is affirmed that no believer should presume to have certain knowledge of his own predestination: “No one, so long as he lives in this mortal life, ought to be presumptuous about the deep mystery of divine predestination as to decide with certainty that he is definitely among the number of the predestined.”<sup>38</sup> It is in fact impossible, apart from a special revelation, to know whom God has chosen for salvation.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentaries on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949) 138.

<sup>34</sup> J. Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 5. 4 (comment on Ps 119:123).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. 143 (comment on Ps 10:6).

<sup>36</sup> Calvin, *Hebrews* 90 (comment on Heb 3:15).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 324-325 (comment on Heb 12:15).

<sup>38</sup> *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translations* (St. Louis: Herder, 1955) 238.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

If this is the case, then it follows that neither can one know with certitude one's final perseverance. "Let no one feel assured of this gift with an absolute certitude," it is stated in chap. 13, "although all ought to have most secure hope in the help of God."<sup>40</sup>

These positions are restated in the "Canons on Justification." According to canon 15: "If anyone says that a man who has been reborn and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is certainly in the number of the predestined, let him be anathema."<sup>41</sup> Likewise in canon 16 it is stated: "If anyone says that he has absolute and infallible certitude that he will certainly have the great gift of final perseverance, without having learned this from a special revelation: let him be anathema."<sup>42</sup>

Although occasioned by new historical circumstances—the teachings of Luther and Calvin—the statements of Trent in themselves are not essentially new but are restatements of the earlier positions of Augustine and Aquinas. Trent attempts to refute what it considers the presumptuous confidence of the Protestant Reformers while not denying a reasonable hope to the faithful believer. Pastoral caution is necessary, since the believer faces great spiritual opposition throughout his earthly pilgrimage. "Knowing that they are reborn into the hope of glory (cf. 1 Pet. 1:3), and not unto glory itself, they should be in dread about the battle they must wage with the flesh, the world, and the devil."<sup>43</sup>

As understood by later Catholic theologians, the teaching of Trent presupposes that final perseverance rests neither in the human will alone nor in God's grace alone but in the combination of both—that is, "Divine grace aiding human will and human will cooperating with Divine grace."<sup>44</sup> Yet even though the believer cannot infallibly know his own final perseverance, it would be erroneous to conclude that no efforts can be made toward that end. Final perseverance comes through the power of persistent prayer, as Francis Liguori, Francis de Sales and Catherine of Genoa have emphasized in various ways. Scripture gives assurance that God infallibly hears the prayers that seek the true well-being of the justified believer.<sup>45</sup>

## VI. ANGLICAN CREEDS

The *Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Church of England were promulgated in 1563 and are rooted in the various creedal discussions taking place among the English Reformers during the reign of Henry VIII. They represent a revision of the *Forty-Two Articles* of 1553, which were largely the work of Archbishop Thomas Cranmer.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 244.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 238.

<sup>44</sup> J. F. Sollier, "Perseverance, Final," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton, 1911), 9. 711.

<sup>45</sup> J. J. Connelly, "Perseverance, Final," in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 11. 155.

<sup>46</sup> *Creeeds of the Churches* (ed. J. H. Leith; Richmond: John Knox, 1973) 266.

Article 17, "Of Predestination and Election," states that those whom God has chosen in Christ for eternal salvation are not only called, justified, adopted and sanctified, but "at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity." Like Augustine, Aquinas, Luther and Calvin, this article teaches that God's elect will finally persevere to eternal salvation. On the question, however, of what degree of certitude the believer can enjoy in this life concerning his own election, the *Thirty-Nine Articles* are cautious if not ambiguous. The same article 17 states that a "godly consideration of . . . our election in Christ is full of sweet, pleasant, and unspeakable comfort to godly persons" and helps to "confirm their faith of eternal salvation to be enjoyed through Christ."<sup>47</sup> This seems to teach that a believer can have a meaningful degree of assurance concerning his election and perseverance and yet stay short of the certitude claimed by Calvin and later by the Westminster divines and by the Synod of Dort. This caution in theological expression reflects the character and purpose of the *Thirty-Nine Articles*, which were designed to provide a minimal creedal basis for a national Church that could accommodate both the Catholic and Protestant traditions.<sup>48</sup>

The *Lambeth Articles* of 1595 are a Calvinistic appendix to the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. They were endorsed by a number of English prelates meeting at Lambeth palace in London, November 20, 1595, but not officially sanctioned by Queen Elizabeth.<sup>49</sup> They were later incorporated into the *Irish Articles of Religion*. Article 5 states that a true justifying faith never is totally extinguished. It is further stated, in article 6, that the truly justified believer "is certain, with the full assurance of faith, of the remission of his sins and of his everlasting salvation by Christ."<sup>50</sup> This statement represents an explicitly Calvinistic position on the matter of assurance and final perseverance, a matter left more ambiguous in the *Thirty-Nine Articles*.

The *Irish Articles of Religion*, probably composed by Archbishop James Ussher, were adopted by the Irish Episcopal Church in 1615. They reflect the then prevailing Calvinism of that church and form an important historical connecting link between the *Thirty-Nine Articles* and the *Westminster Confession* as the chief source of the latter.<sup>51</sup> Those who are predestined to life do, by God's mercy, "attain to everlasting felicity," according to article 15. Article 37 affirms that a true believer "may be certain, by the assurance of faith, of the forgiveness of his sins, and of his everlasting salvation by Christ."<sup>52</sup> The similarity of this statement to the *Lambeth Articles* that preceded it and the *Westminster Confession* that was to follow it is quite evident.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 272.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 266.

<sup>49</sup> Schaff, *Creeds* 523.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 524.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 526.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 534.



## VII. JAMES ARMINIUS

James Arminius (1560-1609), from whom the Arminian theological tradition derives its name, studied under Beza at Geneva, served as a minister in Amsterdam, and was appointed professor of theology at the University of Leyden in 1603. While defending the Calvinistic position against the writings of Dirik zoon Koornheert he became persuaded by the arguments of the opponent and became a convert to the doctrines of universal grace and freedom of the will.<sup>53</sup> The ensuing theological controversy spread throughout Holland and ultimately led to the convening of the Synod of Dort in 1618, nine years after Arminius' death.

Arminius claimed that many of his positions had been misunderstood by his opponents. On the matter of the perseverance of the saints he wrote that true believers "possess sufficient powers to fight against Satan, sin, the world and their own flesh" so that those who call on Christ for help are preserved from falling.<sup>54</sup> Satan is not powerful enough to wrest the faithful believer from the hands of Christ. He states that he "never taught that a true believer can either totally or finally fall away from the faith, and perish," and yet he allows that there are Biblical texts that appear to indicate the possibility of a negligent believer falling away and being lost. He believes the issue is one for further investigation.<sup>55</sup> Arminius affirmed, then, that while he had not explicitly denied the Calvinistic position on perseverance he entertained the possibility that the contrary could be true, though he was not yet prepared to state explicitly that it actually was true.

After the death of Arminius the leadership of the movement passed into the hands of Simon Episcopius (1583-1644), his successor in the chair of theology at Leyden, and Janus Uytenbogaert (1557-1644), a preacher at the Hague. In 1610 the Arminian party, under the leadership of Uytenbogaert, formalized their position in *Five Articles*, also known as the *Remonstrance*. The fifth article, dealing with perseverance, stated that it was possible by God's power for the believer to persevere and that there was no necessity of falling away in spite of the power of the world, the flesh and the devil. "But whether," they added, it was possible for true believers to forsake life in Christ and become devoid of grace "must be more particularly determined out of the Holy Scripture, before we ourselves can teach it with the full persuasion of our minds."<sup>56</sup> Arminius' immediate successors thus maintained their leader's ambivalence on this point.

In his understanding of predestination, Arminius had concluded that God's decree of particular individuals to be saved depended on "the foreknowledge of God, by which he knew from eternity who . . . would believe, and in consequence of grace afterwards obtained, would persevere."<sup>57</sup> In

<sup>53</sup> Schaff, *Creeeds*, 1. 510.

<sup>54</sup> *The Writings of James Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1956), 1. 254.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* He also notes that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints has never been a universally accepted doctrine in the Church (2. 502).

<sup>56</sup> Schaff, *Creeeds*, 3. 548-549.

<sup>57</sup> Cited in M. Stuart, "The Creed of Arminius," *Biblical Repository* 1 (1831) 269.

this conditional understanding of predestination, God's decree is based on the divine foreknowledge of the contingent acts of the human will. God's grace is necessary for salvation but is not alone sufficient, apart from the cooperation of the human will. Given equal access to divine grace, the human will becomes the decisive factor that distinguishes those who accept the gospel from those who reject it. If the beginning of life in Christ is contingent upon the human will, and if its continuation is likewise contingent, it seems logically consistent that final perseverance is likewise contingent—and that falling away must be a genuine possibility. This implication of the conditional understanding of predestination, implicit in Arminius, was made explicit in the later Arminian tradition.

### VIII. THE SYNOD OF DORT

The Synod of Dort (Dordrecht) met in 1618-1619 and marked the victory of strict Calvinistic orthodoxy within the Reformed churches of the Netherlands.<sup>58</sup> The synod had a somewhat international character, being composed not only of delegates from Holland but also of twenty-seven delegates from foreign countries. Under the "Fifth Head of Doctrine" the synod addresses the question of the perseverance of the saints and affirms, against the Arminian teaching, that God does not "wholly withdraw the Holy Spirit from His own people in their grievous falls," nor does he permit them to lose their state of adoption and justification.<sup>59</sup> The final perseverance of the saints is grounded in God's "unchangeable purpose of election."<sup>60</sup> On this point the synod shares common ground with Augustine and Aquinas. The synod goes on to say, however, that final perseverance is also grounded in the nature of regeneration. Even when believers commit serious sin, God "preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration" and prevents it from perishing or being totally lost.<sup>61</sup> 1 John 3:9 and 1 Pet 1:23 are cited as Scriptural support. This Calvinistic understanding of the nature of regeneration as a permanent state of the soul differs from both the Roman Catholic and Lutheran understandings.

The synod affirms that believers do obtain assurance of their final perseverance "according to the measure of their faith."<sup>62</sup> This "comfortable assurance" does not preclude all doubt and temptation and does not come apart from the Scriptures but from the witness of the Holy Spirit to the promises of God.<sup>63</sup> In a further pastoral note the synod also affirms that the saints do in fact persevere through the faithful use of God's appointed

<sup>58</sup> R. Seeburg, *Textbook of the History of Doctrines* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977) 424.

<sup>59</sup> *Doctrinal Standards of the Christian Reformed Church* (Grand Rapids: Publication Committee of the Christian Reformed Church, 1962) 61.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 62 (article 9).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.* (articles 10-11).

means of grace: the hearing and reading of God's Word, the exhortations and warnings it contains, and the right use of the sacraments.<sup>64</sup>

#### IX. THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

The *Westminster Confession* of 1646 was written by the assembly that met in Westminster Abbey during the English Civil War. The *Confession* and catechisms produced by this body became the dominant creedal standards of the Presbyterian churches in the English-speaking world and also influenced various Congregational and Baptist denominations in England and America.<sup>65</sup>

Chapter 17 of the *Confession*, "Of the Perseverance of the Saints," affirms: "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."<sup>66</sup> The final perseverance of the believer depends not upon free will but upon the immutability of God's decree of election, the unchangeable love of God, the efficacy of Christ's intercession, and the abiding power of God's Spirit and the seed of regeneration.<sup>67</sup>

In the following chapter, "Of the Assurance of Grace and Salvation," the *Confession* goes on to state that true believers "may in this life be assured that they are in a state of grace."<sup>68</sup> The answer to question 80 in the *Larger Catechism* is if anything even more explicit, stating that believers may be "infallibly assured that they are in the estate of grace, and shall persevere therein unto salvation."<sup>69</sup> The believer's assurance of the present state of grace affirmed by Luther is extended to assurance of final perseverance. A century after the Reformation the divines of Westminster gave to the positions of Calvin a degree of precision and comprehensiveness that has remained a theological benchmark for the conservative Reformed tradition down to the present day.

#### X. JOHN WESLEY

In the earlier part of his life, in 1743, the great Methodist Reformer said that he was "inclined to believe that there is a state attainable in this life from which a man cannot finally fall."<sup>70</sup> Wesley renounced this view in his later years.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 63 (article 14).

<sup>65</sup> Leith, *Creeds* 192.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 212.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. paragraph 2. The answer to question 79 in the *Larger Catechism* also adds "their inseparable union with Christ" as a ground of perseverance; cf. *A Harmony of the Westminster Presbyterian Standards* (Richmond: John Knox, 1951) 104.

<sup>68</sup> Leith, *Creeds* 212 (chap. 18).

<sup>69</sup> *Harmony* 107.

<sup>70</sup> Cited in W. Cunningham, *Historical Theology* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1960 [1862]), 1. 358.

In the treatise "Predestination Calmly Considered" Wesley observed that believers might infer from their own experience of grace that it is impossible to finally fall away.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, whatever assurance God might give to particular souls "I find no general promise in holy writ, 'that none who once believes shall finally fall.'"<sup>72</sup> Scripture, and not personal experience or inferences drawn from it, states Wesley, must be decisive in the matter.<sup>73</sup>

In his treatise "Serious Thoughts on the Perseverance of the Saints" Wesley allows that the apostle Paul—and many believers today—were fully persuaded of their final perseverance.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless such an assurance does not prove that every believer will persevere or that every believer enjoys such assurance.<sup>75</sup> Based on his reading of Heb 6:4, 6; 10:26-29; 2 Pet 2:20-21 and other NT texts, Wesley is persuaded that a true believer can make shipwreck of his faith and perish everlastingly.<sup>76</sup>

In the brief treatise "What Is an Arminian?" Wesley points to the integral connection between a given understanding of the nature of predestination and the nature of perseverance. The Calvinistic views of irresistible grace and final perseverance "are the natural consequence . . . of the unconditional decree," he observes. "For if God has eternally and absolutely decreed to save such and such persons, it follows, both that they cannot resist this saving grace . . . and that they cannot finally fall from that grace which they cannot resist."<sup>77</sup> In rejecting the view of unconditional predestination Wesley consistently rejected the consequence of infallible perseverance. Just as predestination was understood to be contingent upon the foreseen positive response of the human will to the gospel, so Wesley believed that final perseverance was contingent upon the continuing cooperation of the believer's will with the justifying and sanctifying grace of God.

## XI. BAPTIST CONFESSIONS IN AMERICA

Baptist creeds in America reflect both Calvinistic and Arminian influences. The *New Hampshire Confession*, commissioned by the New Hampshire Baptist Convention and published in 1833, reflects the moderate Calvinism of its time. Chapter 11, "Of the Perseverance of the Saints," states that "such only are real believers as endure unto the end . . . they are

<sup>71</sup> J. Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley* (New York: Carlton and Lamaban, 1825), 6. 24.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.* 50.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.* 51.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* 85.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 90.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 134. This same connection is noted by later Methodist theologians. "If the decree of [unconditional] election is true . . . , if grace is irresistible in its saving work," writes J. Miley, "then the doctrine of final perseverance must be true"; *Systematic Theology* (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1894), 2. 269.

kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.”<sup>78</sup> No mention is made of any connection between predestination and perseverance, and the article is silent on the matter of assurance of final perseverance.

Subsequent to the revival sparked by George Whitefield’s preaching, an Arminian group of “Free Will” Baptists arose in New England and later organized as a denomination. Their creedal distinctives were published in 1834 under the title “A Treatise of the Faith of the Freewill Baptists.”<sup>79</sup> According to chap. 11: “As the regenerate are placed in a state of trial during this life, their future obedience and final salvation are neither determined nor certain.”<sup>80</sup> This statement clearly presupposes the Arminian understanding of conditional election and affirms the possibility of a truly regenerate believer falling away and being finally lost. Nevertheless it is the believer’s privilege to be “steadfast in the truth, to grow in grace, to persevere in holiness, and make their election sure.”<sup>81</sup>

The “Abstract of Principles” was adopted by the Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1859 and represents a Southern Baptist interpretation of the *Westminster Confession*. Its Calvinistic orientation is clear in chap. 13, where it is declared that those “whom God hath accepted in the Beloved, and sanctified by His Spirit, will never totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere to the end.”<sup>82</sup>

In 1925, in the midst of the fundamentalist-modernist controversies, the Southern Baptist Convention issued its “Statement of Baptist Faith and Message.” Chapter 11 on perseverance states: “All real believers endure to the end. . . . They are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation.”<sup>83</sup> This language is reminiscent of the *New Hampshire Confession* of 1833 and reflects a Calvinism moderated by the Arminian influences within the Southern Baptist churches.

## XII. DISPENSATIONAL INTERPRETATION

Dispensationalist interpreters reflect the Calvinistic point of view in the matter of perseverance and eternal security. Lewis Sperry Chafer devoted two chapters to the subject in one of his books. He argued that certain passages such as Matt 24:13, thought to teach the possibility of the believer’s final apostasy, were “dispensationally misapplied” and applied to Israel alone, not to the Church.<sup>84</sup> Similarly a warning passage such as Heb 6:4-6 is directed toward Hebrews and does not describe a true Christian

<sup>78</sup> In Leith, *Creeds* 337.

<sup>79</sup> W. J. McGlothlin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1911) 308.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.* 321.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.* 321-322.

<sup>82</sup> In Leith, *Creeds* 342.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.* 342.

<sup>84</sup> L. S. Chafer, *Salvation* (New York: Charles C. Cook, 1917) 99.

experience of salvation.<sup>85</sup> Chafer appeals to the eternal purposes of God, the substitutionary atonement, the sealing of the Holy Spirit, the unconditional nature of the new covenant, the priestly intercession of the risen Christ, the eternal character of salvation, and the believer's heavenly perfection to argue for the certainty of a true believer's final perseverance.<sup>86</sup>

The dispensationalist point of view received wide dissemination in the notes of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. In the most recent edition the notes to Heb 6:4-6 state that v. 4, commonly rendered "and were made partakers of the Holy Spirit," should be translated "and were going along with the Holy Spirit." According to the editors the various experiences described in vv. 4-6 may "accompany salvation, but they do not always result in salvation." The Christian's eternal security is said to be taught in passages such as John 3:15-16, 36; 10:27-30; Rom 8:35, 37-39; Eph 1:12-14; Phil 1:6; Heb 10:12-14; 1 Pet 1:3-5.<sup>87</sup> The warnings in Heb 6:4-6 are directed toward those who have been instructed and even moved by the Holy Spirit but have never truly committed themselves to Christ.<sup>88</sup>

### XIII. PERSEVERANCE IN RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

From the Calvinistic perspective the most comprehensive monograph in recent years was written by G. C. Berkouwer, who is concerned to highlight the "existential" dimensions of the doctrine so that belief in perseverance might not become a "theological gnosis" or mere logical conclusion deduced from a concept of divine predestination. Perseverance, stresses Berkouwer, "is realized in the frail and threatened lives of believers only through prayer and exhortation, through preaching and sacraments."<sup>89</sup> To separate the doctrine of perseverance from the actual life of faith would petrify it into a "mere play of concepts drained of all life."<sup>90</sup> This is Berkouwer's way of stating, given his perspective, that in the plan of God certain ends (the final perseverance of the elect) are ordained only in conjunction with specific means: the faith and obedience of believers. The "existential" emphasis has considerable affinity with the Lutheran insistence on present living faith as the key to the believer's assurance.

I. Howard Marshall has written a major treatment from a Wesleyan perspective. Marshall's work examines the OT and Jewish background and then in seven chapters discusses the relevant NT passages. He concludes that "while it is possible for a Christian to fail to persevere after a genuine experience of salvation . . . the main emphasis of the New Testa-

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.* 105.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.* 116-137.

<sup>87</sup> *The New Scofield Reference Bible* (ed. C. I. Scofield; New York: Oxford University, 1967) 1315.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>89</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958) 234.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.* 237.

ment is on confidence and assurance of final salvation."<sup>91</sup> The NT, he says, knows neither the "rigid logic of Calvinism" nor the "casualness of Arminianism" but "teaches us to put our trust in God."<sup>92</sup>

Robert Shank has provided the most comprehensive recent work on the subject from an Arminian perspective. Apostasy, he argues, is a genuine possibility for every believer, and the NT passages in his judgment teach that the believer's security in Christ is conditional rather than unconditional. John 10:28, for example, should be translated "I am giving them eternal life." Christ's giving of eternal life is contingent upon "their habitual listening and following."<sup>93</sup> Hebrews 6:4-6 describes actual, not hypothetical, apostasy.<sup>94</sup> With respect to Phil 1:6, another favorite "assurance" text, Shank comments that it was "on the ground of their steadfastness" that Paul felt that his confidence was fully justified.<sup>95</sup> The sum of the NT teaching, according to Shank, is that "eternal life in Christ is our present possession only on the condition of a present living faith."<sup>96</sup>

In a recent work Dale Moody addresses the issue of "Salvation and Apostasy." Based on his study of the NT passages Moody concludes that "superficial believers are not the only type" who fall away.<sup>97</sup> This conclusion is at variance with the official Southern Baptist position, but it is time, according to Moody, "to put the plain teachings of Scripture above all human traditions."<sup>98</sup>

#### XIV. CONCLUSIONS

This review of the history of the doctrine of perseverance has shown that the critical theological issues in the debate are (1) the nature of election, (2) the degree to which a believer can be certain of his or her election, and (3) the nature of regeneration as a permanent or potentially impermanent state. Calvin, Arminius and Wesley agreed that if election were unconditional, then final perseverance would logically follow as a matter of course. Augustine and Aquinas affirmed unconditional election but taught that believers did not enjoy infallible certitude of their election and hence of their final perseverance. Luther believed that the Christian could have certitude concerning the present state of grace but not concerning final perseverance. Like the Roman Catholic tradition that preceded

<sup>91</sup> I. H. Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God: A Study of Perseverance and Falling Away* (London: Epworth, 1969) 207.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.* Calvinists such as Berkouwer would question the terminology of "rigid logic," as many in the Arminian tradition would object to the epithet of "casualness."

<sup>93</sup> R. Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield: Westcott, 1960) 57.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 176.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 63.

<sup>97</sup> D. Moody, *The Word of Truth: A Summary of Christian Doctrine Based on Biblical Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans) 349.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* 365.

him and the Wesleyan tradition that succeeded him, Luther did not see regeneration as inextricably linked with final salvation. The Calvinistic tradition has understood election as unconditional, regeneration as permanent, and certitude of final perseverance as a genuine possibility for the believer. Further progress in the study of this doctrine calls for continuing exegetical studies of the pertinent Biblical texts on election, regeneration, and warnings of apostasy as well as new theological and epistemological analyses of the grounds and extent of assurance in the NT.