

CALVINISM AND PREACHING

(5) Perseverance of the Saints

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We have tackled the 'toughies.' Those who have difficulties with the doctrines of 'Calvinism' ordinarily have their problems with the doctrines of total depravity, unconditional election, irresistible grace and especially the doctrine of limited atonement. With those we have dealt in previous issues. Some, but fewer, have a problem with the fifth and last of the doctrines of 'Calvinism,' namely, the perseverance of the saints. Many who deny the previous four points of Calvinism profess to maintain the fifth. They say that that they hold to the preservation of the saints but they often speak of it as 'eternal security.'

It should be noted that these Arminians of today are inconsistent when they do not have a problem with the preservation of the saints. They ought to. Their spiritual fathers did and they let it be known that they did. The Remonstrants or Arminians in the Netherlands stated their doubts in the fifth of the five articles they presented to the Synod of Dordrecht in 1618. The old Arminians said there could be no certainty as to a believer's continuance in salvation and in the state of grace. It is obvious that if grace can be resisted, then there always remains the possibility that one who accepts grace today might resist it or not co-operate with it tomorrow. So the Remonstrants, or Arminians, concluded that it is not biblical to teach that true believers will persevere in salvation.

Just as the Five points of Calvinism stand or fall together, so also do the five Arminian positions stand or fall together.

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Consider with me the great and wonderful comfort which can be derived from being able to preach the perseverance of the saints, especially on the mission field and in the work of local evangelism.

Every convert to the faith soon finds that he begins to doubt his salvation. He joins every other believer in needing a reassuring and biblical answer to the doubts and fears he has about the reality of his salvation and about the possibility of his remaining saved. Sometimes he may even wonder whether he ever was saved. These doubts and fears arise because he finds sin remaining in himself.

It is the universal experience of the child of God that, though he is saved and forgiven, he still battles with sin. He believes that Christ gave His life a ransom for him but he is not entirely free from the ruts of sin. He knows that he is free from the dominion of sin but sin is still very much present in him. He knows that sinfulness clings even to his best works. Daily he must fight against sin. He recognises in himself the capability and possibility of falling into grievous sin, as did David and Peter.

The presence of sin and of this sinfulness can make the believer wonder whether he is really saved and whether he might not be destined for eternal damnation. The devil delights in nothing more than in giving the adopted children of God doubts about the reality or the continuance of their adoption.

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It is to this present reality of sin within every convert that the Calvinistic or Reformed missionary pastor has an answer. His answer will not leave the convert in a worse state than when he began with his doubts. He will not tell these converts that there is the very real possibility that some day in the future they might choose not to co-operate with God's grace and that they might fall from grace. Nor will he tell the believer who is frightened by his sin that he is not really as bad as he thinks, or that his sins are not to be considered serious. Such a response belittles the horrible nature of sin. It also errs by focusing attention on the sinning believer rather than turning and keeping one's attention fixed upon God. With respect to the question of giving or maintaining salvation, the Calvinist and Reformed pastor has been taught by the Scriptures to focus on the unchangeable and most merciful God.

The Reformed missionary will teach that every believer, *left to himself*, will easily stumble into specific sins and will certainly fall away from grace. This is as certain as the rising of the sun every day.

Also the Reformed missionary will be teaching, with an abundance of scriptural proof, that there are many reasons why

the believer is never left to himself and will never fall out of favour with God. Briefly, those reasons are: God's eternal plan cannot change; God's promises cannot fail; God's calling cannot be revoked; the merit of Christ's life and death cannot be destroyed; and the sealing of the Holy Spirit cannot be withdrawn. Simply put, the Calvinist who is active in the work of missions can and will proclaim the biblical and Reformed truth that God is the Almighty and ever faithful God.

God is Almighty. His power is the greatest. Therefore, those whom He is pleased to regenerate unto "an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled... reserved in heaven for you, who are *kept by the power of God* through faith unto salvation" (1 Peter 1:4-5). All who are born into the family of God shall gain their inheritance because not only is it reserved for them but also they are kept for it by the omnipotent power of the Almighty. God is the One who "is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless" (Jude 24). This is His power. Also, to Christ was given "all power" in heaven and on earth to save. As the captain of our salvation He has never suffered defeat. This is an integral part of the message of the Reformed missionary pastor.

The Reformed missionary will also be teaching to fearful Christians the biblical truth of God's faithfulness. He who began a good work in them will not leave them until that work is fully done in the day of Christ's return (Philippians 1:6). God is faithful (1Corinthians 1:9) to His own eternal decree of election. The eternally determined decree of election cannot be frustrated by any weak creature. God is faithful to those whom He has spiritually adopted to be His own children, though they may fall into sin, even deeply and bitterly. Also, God is faithful to His just determination of righteousness when He declared them justified. So nothing will alter His judicial decree. God is faithful!

The Reformed preacher proclaims the good news of the Gospel, that He who gave the Holy Spirit will never take Him away, even though the spirit may be grieved by the sins of those in whom He dwells. The Spirit's presence in a believer is the "earnest," or guarantee, that full redemption shall be given (2Corinthians 5:5). Believers are "sealed with that Holy Spirit of promise, which is the earnest of our inheritance" (Ephesians 1:13-14). After all, the work of the Spirit is sovereign, irresistible and efficacious; so He and His work cannot be stymied or frustrated by any believer's fall into sin.

In addition, the Reformed missionary pastor will preach and

teach that God and Christ would never leave those for whom Christ died. If Jesus gave Himself unto death for those who were ungodly and sinners, how much more will He not, by His life at God's right hand, ever work to save them to the uttermost (Romans 5:10). He tells us that He gives "unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (John 10:28-29). What a comfort this knowledge is to the believer. This knowledge calms his fears and assures him of the certainty of his salvation.

The Reformed missionary pastor also can comfort those who are converted, because he can proclaim the God who is "rich in mercy" (Ephesians 2:4). There are no limits to God's riches. His riches are infinite. And so is His mercy. This mercy He extends to His people. And His mercy endures for ever (Psalm 136).

God's mercy is accompanied by God's "great love" (Ephesians 2:4), which never slackens and is unchangeable, though the manifestation of this love may vary. The security of the saint does not depend on the state of his feelings but on the great love of God. The Holy Spirit, through Paul in Romans 8, defies anything in heaven or on earth to separate a single object from this love of God in Christ. Is there any passage of Scripture which states our assurance of salvation more powerfully?

And the Reformed missionary tells those converted to God that when they begin to wonder whether they might fall away from salvation, they need not fear, for the honour of Christ's name (Matthew 1:21) is at stake. His name declares that He saved from all their sins every one of those the Father gave to him. The Saviour will certainly preserve those for whom He came to earth in order to save from their sins!

This is the comfort the Reformed under-shepherd proclaims to the sheep of the Shepherd and Bishop of our souls.

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It has been said that the Calvinistic doctrine is a dangerous doctrine. Some have made a caricature of this doctrine by re-defining it as "once saved, always saved." Then the beautiful doctrine of the preservation of the saints is presented as meaning that once someone makes a profession of faith, they can be assured of going to heaven regardless of how they live the rest of their life. It has been said that the preservation of the saints means

that things are so settled that we can enjoy the pleasures of sin. It is good to remember that this caricature is not new but was exactly the opposition the Arminians put up against the Reformed position at the Synod of Dordt. Note well, that those who wrote the Canons of Dordt deliberately identify the Fifth Head of Doctrine, not as the *preserving* but as the *perseverance* of the saints. The selection of this word was deliberate. And notice that this is called the perseverance of the *saints*, ie, the holy ones. Not everyone who professes to believe is a saint, for some deny their profession with a life and life-style which are contrary to it.

Those who are preserved by God in the faith do persevere in it. The true believer shows God's preservation by persevering. Those who sincerely profess a true faith, howbeit with weakness, will accept the responsibility of living a life of gratitude, a life worthy of his profession and of the God he professes to have saved him.

God preserves through the use of means. These means are the hearing and reading of God's Word and meditation on the exhortations, threatenings and promises of God's Word. Believers persevere by using these means. Saints are responsible to use the means that God has given to produce and to preserve faith. The saint will desire to use and will be diligent in using the means God has ordained for strengthening his faith and his walk of obedience.

The Reformed missionary will proclaim from the pulpit and in private conversation that anyone who would sincerely call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:13) and all who come unto Him shall in no wise be cast out (John 6:37). The Reformed missionary declares that anyone who says it does not make any difference how a believer lives is either not regenerated or does not know God's Word. Those who have faith live for Him who saved them. They will not say that it does not make any difference how they live.

The Reformed missionary is quick to point out that this, in turn, does not mean that the believer does not sin. We sin, even terribly! But while a Christian may be overtaken in sin, yet he mourns over it. He repeatedly repents and earnestly desires to flee from his sin. And he persists in using the means God is pleased to use for his perseverance.

Those chosen in Christ shall by grace certainly persevere!