

PERSEVERANCE: IT AIN'T OVER TILL IT'S OVER

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INTRODUCTION

To quote Charles Dickens:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to heaven, we were all going direct the other way - in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.¹

This quote captures the times in which we find ourselves concerning the state of theology in our world and even in the Free-Grace Movement. We certainly find fault with the system developed by the Roman Catholic (RC) Church. One may believe that the Protestant Church has completely corrected RC theology and brought us back to biblical accuracy. It is further thought, by many, that Luther and the other Reformers reclaimed the theology of the NT writers. Upon closer examination, it appears that they made it back to 80+% of NT teachings, but not all the way.

Although the watchwords of the Reformation were *sola gracia* (also spelled *sola gratia*), *sola fide*, *sola Christi*, and *sola*

¹The opening sentence of *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, referring to the time of the French Revolution. *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy, Third Edition*, Edited by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Joseph F. Kett, and James Trefil. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2002)

Scriptura, the Reformers did not completely break away from Roman Catholic (RC) theology. For example, following Calvin's death there was a meeting at Dort to answer the followers of Jacobus Arminius in their declaration called the Remonstrants. We have come to call that response TULIP.

This paper is attempting to address the fifth point of TULIP—Perseverance of the Saints and its similarity to the RC view of the same issue. The Reformed view has a system that gives no assurance. One never knows until they die. And the RC system has hope (although false) after death. To the RC, at least, it ain't over till it's over! The Free-Grace Movement has struggled to embrace TULIP (sometimes by re-defining the 5 points so that we can agree with them). We ought to proceed very carefully and allow the Text of the Bible to determine our belief; and *not* allow any system to determine our belief—no matter how close it may come or not to truth.

The doctrine of perseverance is the *logical* outcome of the other four points of Calvinism and of the particular view of God's sovereign will which underlies them all. If one holds to total depravity in the sense of total inability, then the system requires unconditional election. If one holds to unconditional election, then one needs atonement that is particular, or limited to those who are unconditionally elected. In order to guarantee that the elect will come to faith, one needs irresistible grace. And irresistible grace leads to the doctrine of perseverance of the saints (a true believer's sins ought to be "few and far between"; if that is not the case, he or she is not part of the elect or has the wrong kind of faith).

Surely, this sounds reasonable. But is it accurate? Is it Biblical? Should it be accepted because it has been held for most of Church history? What if Church history is wrong? What if the creeds of the churches are not a result of careful Biblical exegesis but simply a consensus of opinion? What if the "orthodox" view has been unduly influenced by the Greek philosophers by way of Augustine and Aquinas? Like any doctrine taught today, the doctrine of perseverance of the saints needs to be carefully evaluated on the basis of Scripture.

In the "Introductory" to the first of his Hibbert Lectures, 1888, Dr. Hatch presents the following comparison of the Sermon on the Mount with the Nicene Creed:

The one belongs to a world of Syrian peasants, the other to a world of Greek philosophers.

The contrast is patent. If any one thinks that it is sufficiently explained by saying that one is a sermon [sermon on the mount] and the other a creed, it must be pointed out in reply that the question why an ethical sermon stood in the forefront of the teaching of Jesus Christ, and a metaphysical creed in the forefront of the Christianity of the fourth century, is a problem which claims investigation.

It claims investigation, but has not yet been investigated. There have been inquiries, which in some cases have arrived at positive results, as to the causes of particular changes or developments in Christianity—the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, or the theory of a Catholic Church.

In investigating this problem, the first point that is obvious to an inquirer is, that a change in the centre of gravity from conduct to belief is coincident with the transference of Christianity from a Semitic to a Greek soil. The presumption is that it was the result of Greek influence.²

Sadly, this evaluation captures well the differences between the Scripture and the creeds of the early Church.³

It appears that throughout the Church history the philosophers had a much stronger influence on the development of systematics than did the exegetes. The converse should have been true. Systematic theology should have emerged from the process in which the first step is exegesis and the second step is biblical theology. Only after the completion of these two steps should the biblical data have been organized into a comprehensive, coherent system.

Within the first three centuries following the Apostles, theological errors arose, not from evil intentions of the Church leaders, but from their desire to find answers to everyday pastoral questions and to help people understand the text. Instead of going back to the text (existent, although hard to find) to form their theological views, they turned to the writings of previous

² Edwin Hatch, D. D., *The Influence of Greek Ideas and Usages Upon the Christian Church*, 1895, reprinted by Hendrickson Publishers, 1995, 1-2.

³ It is not certain whether the shift from conduct to belief truly occurred in the way he describes it, but this is clearly a de-emphasis of belief.

generations. Gradually, the vagueness of the early Christian works gave way to error.

As the use of the Bible faded out, theology—developed by consensus at Church Councils⁴—became increasingly dogmatic and philosophical. By the time of the invention of the printing press, theology—deeply rooted in philosophy—was already “complete.” Orthodoxy had been defined and little room was left for studies of the original text. Theologians focused their studies on the works of someone else who studied the works of someone else who studied the works of someone else (and so on) and debating the opinions expressed by their predecessors.⁵

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW OF FAITH

Faith is, indeed, the beginning and the continuing foundation of new life in Christ, but it is the faith of the Church and not Luther’s absolute confidence in personal salvation. This point is expressly made by the Council at Trent, which states that, “no one can know with the certitude of faith admitting no error, that he has obtained God’s grace;”⁶ or again: “If anyone says that man is absolved from his sins and justified because he believes with certainty that he is absolved and justified...let him be anathema.”⁷

⁴Vincent of Lerins (5th Century AD), for instance, “[had] long been engaged in what we today call an empirical inquiry, a careful sampling process, something like a poll-taking exercise. He was deliberately inquiring of many believers, especially those well-grounded in sanctity, asking this simple question: How does the whole church come to distinguish the truth of Christian faith from falsehood amid conflicted opinions?” (p. 161) “Again the answer rings clear from all he asks—an answer that has become known as the Vincentian rule: In the world-wide community of believers every care should be taken to hold fast to what has been believed everywhere, always and by all” (p. 162). Thomas C. Oden, *The Rebirth of Orthodoxy: Signs of New Life in Christianity* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc., 2003).

⁵There were occasional innovators who worked with portions of the text (e.g., Luther worked in Romans), but their students had a strong tendency to study the innovators’ work rather than follow the example in studying the Word.

⁶D802; TCT566.

⁷D824; TCT588; cf. D823; TCT587.

THE ROMAN CATHOLIC VIEW OF PERSEVERANCE

The RC Church has believed and taught that from the beginning of man's life to its consummation at the end, the work of salvation is inseparably the gracious gift of God and the free cooperation of man. Having affirmed this of man's preparation for justification, of the moment of justification itself, and of the whole life of the justified man, the RC Church at the Council of Trent affirmed this truth with regard to man's perseverance to the last moment of life. "If anyone says that without God's special help it is possible for a justified man to persevere in the justice he has received, or says that with God's special help it is impossible, let him be anathema."⁸

The key to RC's view of perseverance is based also in their view of sin. Catholicism evaluates sin according to the degree of seriousness. *Mortal* sin destroys charity in the heart and turns the Catholic away from God, necessitating the sacrament of Penance for resolution. *Venial* sin offends and wounds charity, but does not destroy it.

For a *sin* to be *mortal*, three conditions must together be met: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."⁹

Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments, corresponding to the answer of Jesus to the rich young man: "Do not kill, Do not commit adultery, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Do not defraud, Honor your father and mother." The gravity of sins is more or less great: murder is graver than theft. One must also take into account who is wronged: violence against parents is in itself graver than violence against a stranger.¹⁰

Venial sin weakens charity...[and]...merits temporal punishment. Deliberate and unrepented venial sin disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. However venial sin does not set us in direct opposition to the will and friendship of God; it does not break the covenant with God. With God's grace it is humanly repairable.¹¹

⁸D832; TCT596; cf. D806; TCT570.

⁹Libreria Editrice Vaticana, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Ligouri, MD: Ligouri Publications, 1994), no. 1857.

¹⁰Ibid., no. 1858.

¹¹Ibid., no. 1863.

AUGUSTINE IS THE LINK BETWEEN ROMAN CATHOLIC AND REFORMED THEOLOGY

The lines of divergence between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism really have their roots in this one man, Augustine,¹² although the process of divergence was not to be made manifest fully until the convergence of two circumstances which were largely responsible for the Reformation. The first was an almost total breakdown of Christian morality in the Roman Catholic Church, and the second was the appearance of a new spirit of free inquiry and independence in every area of human endeavor, including the exploration of the true meaning of the Gospel.

In his work, *On the Gift of Perseverance*, Augustine showed that the Perseverance of the Saints, by which he meant (in modern terminology) the eternal security of the believer, is not dependent upon the good works of the individual believer which would result from his conversion, but entirely upon the constancy and unchangeableness of God's elective choice.

Calvin took the ideas set forth by Augustine and developed them even further. Instead of just touching upon the ideas of predestination, final perseverance, and the believer's security, he developed an incredible system of thought that knows few rivals. John Calvin took the concept of Augustine and filled in the unanswered voids to form his theology. He followed these ideas to their logical end. If man is not free and God must predestinate, and all are not saved, then God must be Sovereign in salvation. This tends to ignore the fact that if God willed man to be free, and thus responsible for his own damnation, this would still mean that God is Sovereign. Sovereignty and predestination are in no way essential partners.

Calvinism was developed by Theodore Beza and the Synod of Dort, which met 50 years after Calvin's death. This counsel was convened to address the teachings of Arminius. Following the

¹² It was Pope Gregory (I) the Great (540-604) who took certain aspects of Augustine's theology and made them explicit as a foundation for the exclusiveness of the Church of Rome. Augustine's theology thus became the religion of the Middle Ages and underwent but little further development. (See "Gregory I", in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, ed. S. M. Jackson, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969).

pattern provided by the Roman Catholic Church at the Council of Trent, Calvinism seated only Calvinists, declared itself orthodox, and then proceeded to persecute Arminians. The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is stated in the Westminster Confession in the following words:

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.¹³

Or in other words we believe that those who once become true Christians cannot totally fall away and be lost—that while they may fall into sin temporarily, they will eventually return and be saved.

PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS IN REFORMED THEOLOGY

This doctrine does not stand alone but is a necessary part of the Calvinistic system of theology. The doctrines of Election and Efficacious Grace logically imply the certain salvation of those who receive these blessings. If God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved. The doctrine of perseverance is articulated in the Canons of Dort, the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter XVII), the London Baptist Confession of 1689, and may also be found in other Reformed Confessions.

Calvinism (Dort) and its doctrine of “Perseverance of the Saints” teaches that once God has renewed the heart of a sinner through the application of the redemption wrought by Christ upon the cross, he will continue to be saved and show forth the fruits of that salvation. The sinner perseveres because of Christ, but he continually shows himself as one who has been changed by Christ. God has saved the individual and will sanctify him until the end when he is ultimately glorified and in heaven. Those who are saved by grace, and changed, desire to

¹³ Chapter XVII, Section 1.

show forth the fruits of that salvation. God motions the heart to good work and continues that good work to the end.

HOW MUCH PERSEVERANCE IS ENOUGH?

Inevitably, the question must be raised, “How faithfully must one persevere? Or how continuous must the good works be?” The flip side of this asks the question, “how many sins and what degree of sin must one do to doubt their justification?”

If one cannot state precisely *how much* failure is possible for a Christian, true assurance becomes impossible. There is a need for the terms to be quantified: “Could he turn away almost completely? Or ninety percent? Or fifty percent?” To put it another way, the doctrines of perseverance and assurance are incompatible.

No quantifiable answers to the questions are actually possible unless one buys into the RC linear view of sin on a continuum. It is true that some believers do persist in sin for extended periods of time. But those who do, forfeit their right to rewards and not to the assurance of salvation (justification). To those of the Reformed tradition, any serious sin or unwillingness certainly *should* cause someone to contemplate carefully the question of whether he or she really loves the Lord (their equivalent to “believe/faith/trust”). And those who turn away completely (not *almost* completely, or ninety percent, or fifty percent) demonstrate that they never had true faith.

Roman Catholicism simply combined [at the Council of Trent] the two concepts into one: God justifies us through the process of our moving, by the power of God’s Spirit at work in our lives, from being unjust to becoming just. In other words, men and women are accepted before God on the basis of their cooperation with God’s grace over the course of their lives rather than on the basis of Christ’s finished work alone, received through faith alone, to the glory of God alone.¹⁴

The Catechism explains as follows: “...justification has two aspects. Moved by grace, man turns toward God and away from sin, and so accepts forgiveness and righteousness from

¹⁴Michael S. Horton, “What Still Keeps Us Apart?” in *Roman Catholicism*, John Armstrong, gen. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 257-58.

on high.”¹⁵ And, “Justification includes the remission of sins, sanctification, and the renewal of the inner man.”¹⁶

Justification has been merited for us by the Passion of Christ. It is granted to us through Baptism. It conforms us to the righteousness of God, who justifies us. It has for its goal the glory of God and of Christ and the gift of eternal life. It is the most excellent work of God's mercy.¹⁷

“Grace is the help God gives us to respond to our vocation of becoming his adopted sons.”¹⁸

“With justification, faith, hope, and charity are poured into our hearts and obedience to the divine will is granted us.”¹⁹

“Justification establishes cooperation between God's grace and man's freedom. On man's part it is expressed by the assent of faith to the Word of God, which invites him to conversion, and in the cooperation of charity with the prompting of the Holy Spirit who precedes and preserves his assent....”²⁰

CONCLUSION

Michael Eaton describes the plight of Calvinism: “Scholastic Calvinists must not assume the reality of [their faith]....[Their] awareness of sin threatens confidence about the reality of salvation.”²¹ According to Eaton, a Calvinist is worse off than an Arminian:

Is it not a fact of history that the Calvinist has tended to have less assurance of salvation than the Arminian? The Arminian is at least sure of his present salvation. As the result of the high Calvinist doctrine the Calvinist often doubts his present salvation and thus has a less contented frame of mind than his evangelical Arminian friend.²²

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2018.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 2019.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 2020.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no. 2021.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 1991.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, no. 1993.

²¹ Michael Eaton. *No Condemnation: A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), p. 20.

²² *Ibid.*

So where is the Calvinist's assurance? Is it in his perseverance? But perseverance "has died the death of a thousand qualifications."²³ The better a person knows the complete teaching of what is called "scholastic Calvinism," the more he questions his own salvation, plunging deeper and deeper into introspection. And as Eaton points out, "The introspective variety is decidedly not totally derived from the New Testament."²⁴

The one who holds to the high Augustinian doctrine of perseverance has to see "the warnings of Scripture as addressed to the danger of pseudo-salvation."²⁵ Calvinism assumes that good works are inherent in the saving faith, and therefore, "salvation and good works must stand or fall together."²⁶

In light of the data presented, "perseverance of the saints" as delineated by Calvinists is not a biblical doctrine. Biblical doctrine holds up to sound literal hermeneutics and exegesis. Since it is possible to hold to one or all points of Calvinism if they are redefined, some have stated that there is no need to "reinvent the wheel" by returning to the exegetical level, before developing a biblical theology and creating a systematic theology. However, if the conclusions of the present systematic theology are incorrect (as we have seen in the case of "perseverance"), the necessity of returning to the beginning can hardly be overstressed.

²³ Ibid., p. 27.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 25.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 38.

²⁶ Ibid.