

Sovereign Grace, Chapter 5

Perseverance of the Saints

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One of the doctrines of sovereign grace is the perseverance of the saints. This doctrine refers to the biblical teaching which says that those whom God loved before the foundation of the world and chose in Christ, who are regenerated by the Holy Spirit and truly believe in Jesus Christ as He is presented in the Scriptures, will be preserved by God their entire lives until death, and therefore cannot lose their salvation. They are eternally saved. This does not mean that true believers cannot backslide and commit grievous sins. They sometimes do, but they cannot “totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace.”¹ “It is certain that true believers may fall into very great sins; but yet they shall be recovered and brought again to repentance.”²

God Preserves the Elect

Since the word perseverance has been misunderstood, it should be noted that believers persevere only because God preserves His people. In other words, people are ultimately saved not because of their own efforts at perseverance, but they persevere because of God’s grace. God maintains a believer’s faith, orthodoxy and repentance. The Confession of Faith emphasizes this point: “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

It is God’s covenant love, faithfulness and sovereign power which guarantee that none of God’s children will perish. If believers were left by God to their own power, they all would certainly apostatize from the faith. Thomas Ridgely writes, “God is styled ‘the preserver of men’ [Job 7:20], inasmuch as he upholds all things by the word of his power, so that independency on him is inconsistent with the idea of our being creatures; and we have no less ground to conclude that his power maintains the new creature, or that grace which took its rise from him. Should he fail or forsake us, we could not put forth the least act of grace, much less persevere in grace. When man at first came out of the hands of God, he was endowed with a greater ability to stand than any one, excepting our Saviour, has been favoured with since sin entered into the world; yet he apostatized, not from any necessity of nature, but by adhering to that temptation which he might have withstood. Then how unable is he to stand in his present state, having become weak, and, though brought into a state of grace, having been renewed and sanctified only in part, and having still the remains of corruption, which maintain a constant opposition to the principle of grace? Our perseverance in grace, therefore, cannot be owing to ourselves.”⁴

¹ Westminster Confession of Faith, XIX:1; Larger Catechism, answer to question 79.

² Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism* (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, [1855] 1993), 2:167.

³ Confession of Faith, XIX:2.

⁴ Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, 2:167.

The Arminian View

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints logically flows from the doctrines of unconditional election, irresistible grace, total depravity, and limited atonement. If God is sovereign, as the Bible teaches and Calvinists assert, then God can and will preserve those whom He set His infinite and eternal love upon. The Arminian rejects all the doctrines mentioned above, because his whole theological system rotates around the axis of the alleged free will of man. God is said to elect only those who are foreseen to voluntarily accept Christ. Christ is said to have died for all men without exception. They assert that His death has not actually secured or guaranteed the salvation of any one person, but has only made salvation possible to all. Furthermore, they teach that the gracious operation of the Holy Spirit operates equally upon all, and that the reason one person is born again and another is not is simply that one person cooperated with the Holy Spirit, while the other successfully resisted Him. The Arminian makes the Father's choice of the elect, the redemptive work of the Son, and the application of Christ's work by the Holy Spirit all contingent upon and limited by man's free will or voluntary reception of grace. Since man and not God is the one who sovereignly decides who will and who will not be saved, it logically follows that man's free will also determines who perseveres and who rejects the faith. "The Protestant Arminians also hold that it is not only possible, but also a frequent fact, that persons truly regenerate, by neglecting grace and grieving the Holy Spirit with sin, fall away totally, and at length finally, from grace into eternal reprobation. Conf. of the Remonstrants, xi. 7."⁵ The Arminian "places the cause of his perseverance, not in the hands of an all-powerful, never-changing God, but in the hands of weak sinful man."⁶

Before moving on to the scriptural and doctrinal proofs for perseverance and the objections to the doctrine, a few serious problems regarding the Arminian system should be noted. First, the Arminian scheme places man's trust and hope for perseverance and salvation *more* upon man than upon Jesus Christ. Man ultimately must look to himself for salvation. Christ did His part, but if man does not keep his own will in line and keep his own repentance up, he will be lost. The Arminian thus has reason to boast before God: "I persevered but others did not. I made the right choices. I exercised my will righteously, but others did not." In such a system God must share His glory with sinful man. Note: consistent Arminianism is nothing less than a rejection of salvation by grace alone. Second, if God is not the one who preserves His saints because such preservation would violate man's free will, then how are the saints in heaven preserved? The Arminian must admit that either God has the power to change a person's nature and will in heaven to make man incapable of sinning, or that a second fall or rebellion of man against God is possible in the eternal state. If God is capable of controlling man's will in heaven and preserving the redeemed for eternity, why is He incapable or unwilling to preserve His dear children for their short habitation on earth? Third, how is the Arminian supposed to have peace and not worry (cf. Mt. 6:25 ff.; Phil. 4:6-7) when his eternal destiny is dependent upon his weak, sinful will? Given the fact that doctrinal and ethical apostasy are quite common in our day, one would think that a self-conscious Arminian would either be wallowing in the pride of self-confidence or be a nervous wreck. "To me such a doctrine has terrors which would cause me to shrink away from it forever, and which would fill me with constant and unspeakable perplexities. To feel that I were crossing the troubled and dangerous sea of life dependent for my final

⁵ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1869] 1992), 234.

⁶ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 194.

security upon the actings of my own treacherous nature were enough to fill me with a perpetual alarm.”⁷ But take comfort, dear Christian: Arminianism is unscriptural! God’s love cannot fail.

In order to understand God’s preservation of His people one must first examine the passages which specifically teach the preservation of the saints—that none of those who belong to Christ can perish. Various doctrines which support perseverance will be examined, then the objections to perseverance will be refuted.

Passages Which Teach That God Preserves His People

Psalms 37:28. “For the Lord loves justice, and does not forsake His saints; they are preserved forever, but the descendants of the wicked shall be cut off.” Plumer writes, “God’s people are surrounded by walls of fire, by a heavenly host, by the infinite care of God. They are *kept* as the apple of God’s eye, Ps. xvii. 8.”⁸ “He will preserve them to his heavenly kingdom; that is a preservation for ever, 2 Tim. iv. 18; Ps. 12:7.”⁹

Psalms 121:3, 7-8. “He will not allow your foot to be moved; He who keeps you will not slumber.... The Lord shall preserve you from all evil; He shall preserve your soul. The Lord shall preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth, and forevermore.”

Jeremiah 32:40. “And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.” In this passage God promises that He will never leave or forsake His people. This verse proves that God works effectually in the elect. God causes His people to persevere by changing their hearts. Real Christians fear God because of the Holy Spirit’s ability to work directly upon the human heart to change it. The Holy Spirit guarantees that true believers will never depart from God. Hodge writes, “The certainty of the perseverance of the saints in grace is secured...by the constant indwelling of the Holy Ghost. He acts upon the soul in perfect accordance with the laws of its constitution as a rational and moral agent, and yet so as to secure the ultimate victory of the new spiritual principles and tendencies implanted in regeneration. John xiv. 16, 17; I John iii. 9.”¹⁰

John 17:11. “Holy Father, keep [from *tereo*, preserve] through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are.” Pink writes, “How this brings out the *value* Christ sets upon us and the deep *interest* He has in us! About to return to the Father on high, He asks the Father that He will preserve those so dear to His heart, those for whom He bled and died. He hands them over to the care of the very One who had first given them to Him. It was as though He said: I know the *Father’s* heart! *He* will take good care of them! And why was it, why is it, that we *are* so highly esteemed by Christ? Clearly not for any excellency which there is, intrinsically, in us. The answer must be, Because we are *the Father’s love gift to the Son.*”¹¹

⁷ McFetridge, *Calvinism in History*, quoted in Boettner, 194-195.

⁸ W. S. Plumer, *Psalms* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1967] 1990), 455.

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible* (McLean, VA: MacDonald Pub. Co., n.d.), 3:375.

¹⁰ A. A. Hodge, *The Confession of Faith*, 236.

¹¹ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1945] 1975), 3:119. Arminians try to circumvent this verse (v. 11) by an appeal to verse 12, which says that Judas is lost. The problem with the Arminian interpretation is that Jesus called Judas “the son of perdition” in this same prayer before the betrayal in the next chapter. In other words, Jesus identifies Judas as a reprobate before he apostatized from the visible church.

Romans 14:4. “Who are you to judge another’s servant? To his own master he stands or falls. Indeed, he will be made to stand, for God is able to make him stand.” Shedd writes, “It denotes not merely the pronouncement of a favorable judgment, but also support in that course of life and conduct which results in a favorable judgment. The ‘strong’ shall be enabled by God’s grace to stand in faith and obedience, and thereby in the final judgment.”¹²

Romans 16:25. “Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ...” “God is able to establish or strengthen believers so that they will not ‘vacillate, and depart from evangelical truth.’”¹³

1 Corinthians 10:13. “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” Hodge writes, “He has promised to preserve his people, and therefore his fidelity is concerned in not allowing them to be unduly tempted. Here, as in 1, 9, and everywhere else in Scripture, the security of believers is referred neither to the strength of the principle of grace infused into them by regeneration, not to their own firmness, but to the fidelity of God.”¹⁴

2 Corinthians 9:8. “And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, have an abundance for every good work.” “The sacred writers often appeal to the power of God as a ground of confidence to his people. Rom. 16, 25. Eph. 3, 20. Jude 24.”¹⁵

Ephesians 5:25. “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for it, that He might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that He might present it to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

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.” Note that a Christian’s confidence resides not in himself but in God. The work of grace that God has begun in Christians will be brought to completion. What God starts He completes. God can guarantee a believer’s preservation, “for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

1 Thessalonians 5:23-24. “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.” Morey writes, “The Apostle places the

Thus, it is obvious that Judas is not included in the high priestly prayer. Believers are commanded not to pray for reprobates (1 Jn. 5:16). Furthermore, in Jn. 13:18 Jesus says that Judas is not elect, or chosen to eternal life: “I do not speak concerning all of you. I know whom I have chosen; but that the Scripture may be fulfilled, ‘He who eats bread with Me has lifted his heel against Me.’” The gospel accounts shows that Judas never received God’s special grace. “Jesus answered them, ‘Did I not choose you, the twelve, and one of you is a devil’” (Jn. 6:70).

¹² William G. T. Shedd, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1879] 1980), 390.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 436

¹⁴ Charles Hodge, *I and II Corinthians* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth [1857, 58] 1978), 182.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 596.

basis of ultimate salvation upon *the covenantal faithfulness of God*. God's faithfulness was displayed when He effectually called us into union with Christ (I Cor. 1:9). And as God's faithfulness *began* our salvation by calling us, His faithfulness guarantees the ultimate *completion* of our salvation. The Apostle says that God 'will do it,' i.e. He will bring His people to complete sanctification. God's covenantal faithfulness guarantees it."¹⁶

2 Thessalonians 3:3. "But the Lord is faithful, who will establish you and guard you from the evil one."

2 Timothy 1:12. "For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless, I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day." Calvin writes, "*What I have entrusted to him*. Observe that he employs this phrase to denote eternal life; for hence we conclude, that our salvation is in the hand of God, in the same manner as there are in the hand of a depository those things which we deliver to him to keep, relying on his fidelity. If our salvation depended on ourselves, to how many dangers would it continually be exposed? But now it is well that, having been committed to such a guardian, it is out of all danger."¹⁷

2 Timothy 4:18. "And the Lord will deliver me from every evil work and preserve me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory forever and ever. Amen!"¹⁸

Hebrews 12:2. "Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith." Hughes writes, "He alone evokes and stimulates faith; and it is because he is the pioneer of our salvation (Heb. 2:10) that he is the author of our faith. Our faith, moreover, is initiated and sustained by him because he has prayed the Father that we may come to faith (Jn. 17:20 f.) and that our faith may not fail (Lk. 22:31 f.). Thus we look to him as 'the apostle and high priest of our confession' (Heb. 3:1), and we have assurance that he who has begun a good work in us will bring it to completion (Phil. 1:6)."¹⁹

1 Peter 1:4-5. "To an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time." Why do Christians have an inheritance which can never be taken away? Because believers are kept by the power of God. The heir "is guarded by God's power. What power is greater? Paul makes the same point in Romans 8:38, 39. *Nothing* is more powerful than God. Thus the heir also is utterly secure."²⁰

Jude 1. "To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ."

¹⁶ Robert A. Morey, *Studies in the Atonement* (Southbridge, MA: Crown Publications, 1989), 231.

¹⁷ John Calvin, *2 Timothy* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), 2:201.

¹⁸ "Since he has mentioned his deliverance 'from the lion's mouth,' Paul wants to state clearly to Timothy that he expects his future deliverance to be heavenward and that this, too, is true deliverance. He speaks, therefore, about the ultimate and final deliverance and, because it is such, uses *sosei* (also in LXX Ps. 21:22) as the appropriate verb. The pregnant construction *sosei eis*, 'bring safely into'..., with 'the heavenly kingdom' as the object of the preposition, implies deliverance from this world with all its evils and from death in all its aspects..." (George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], 472).

¹⁹ Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 522.

²⁰ Jay E. Adams, *Trust and Obey: A Practical Commentary on First Peter* (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1978), 14.

Jude 24. “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling, and to present you faultless before the presence of His glory with exceeding joy....” Thomas Manton writes, “*To him that is able to keep you*, it may be referred either to God, or to Christ as Mediator: *from falling, aptaistous*, that is, from total apostasy. God is able to keep us altogether from sin, if we speak of his absolute power; but he speaketh here of such a power as is engaged by promise and office. Christ, who is the guardian of believers, hath received a charge concerning them, and is to preserve them from total destruction. *And to present you faultless*. This clause showeth more clearly that Christ is intended in these expressions; for it is his office to keep the church till it be presented to the Father, and at length will present them *faultless*; it is, Eph. v. 27, ‘Without spot and blemish.’”²¹ Some may wonder: “God is able, but is He willing?” There are many passages which teach that God will keep and preserve His people—every single one of them (e.g., Jer. 32:40; Jn. 6:39; 10:28; 17:2, 11).

Passages Which Teach That Not One of the Elect Can Be Lost

Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22. “For false christs and false prophets will arise and show great signs and wonders, so as to deceive, if possible, even the elect.” The obvious implication of this passage is that it is impossible for a false prophet or false christ to deceive one of the elect. Jesus said that His “sheep hear his voice” (Jn. 10:3); they “follow him, for they know his voice” (Jn. 10:4). But “they will by no means follow a stranger, but will flee from him” (Jn. 10:5). The elect cannot fall into apostasy or any damnable heresy, for “he who is spiritual judges all things” (1 Cor. 2:15). The apostle John says that true believers will not leave the body of Christ because “you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things” (1 Jn. 2:20; cf. 2:27).

John 6:39. “This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at that last day.” Hendriksen writes, “The doctrine of *the perseverance of the saints* is taught here in unmistakable terms; first negatively, then positively. The *last day* is the judgment day; see on 5:28, 29. The idea is: the elect will be kept and guarded *to the very end*. This doctrine is also taught in 10:28; Rom. 8:29, 30, 38; 11:29; Phil. 1:6; Heb. 6:17; II Tim. 2:19; I Pet. 1:4, 5; etc In these and many other passages, Scripture teaches a counsel that cannot be changed, a calling that cannot be revoked, an inheritance that cannot be defiled, a foundation that cannot be shaken; a seal that cannot be broken, and a life that cannot perish. The doctrine of the preservation (hence, perseverance) of the saints is surely implied in the term *everlasting life*....”²² This statement of Jesus Christ could not be any clearer. He did not say that many, or some, or a few would be lost, but that *none—not one* would be lost. On that day Jesus will say, “Here am I and the children whom God has given Me” (Heb. 2:13).

John 10:27-29. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me. And I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; neither shall anyone snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of My Father’s hand.” There is no stronger passage in the whole Bible which teaches the eternal security of the believer. These sheep belong to Jesus Christ. He gives them eternal life. Since the sheep are in possession of eternal life, it is impossible for them to perish. *Many of God’s saints*

²¹ Thomas Manton, *Jude* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1658] 1989), 362.

²² William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1953), 1:235.

have backslidden, but not one has ever apostatized. Jesus promises that no one can take Christ's sheep from Him: no man, no matter how powerful; no woman, no matter how seductive or beautiful; no demon, and not even Satan himself can snatch one of Christ's own. Christ even protects us from ourselves. The *no one* is comprehensive. To argue, as Arminians do, that a true sheep can become a goat is to call Christ a liar, and is a denial of the clear teaching of Scripture. Not only are believers secure in the omnipotent hands of Jesus Christ, but believers are also protected by God the Father. It is the Father who gives the elect to the Son. He is just as interested in the believer's security as is the Son. "The 'hand of Christ' (v. 28) is beneath us, and the 'hand' of the Father is above us. Thus are we secured between the clasped hands of Omnipotence!"²³ Arminians should note that our perseverance depends not upon our hand holding Christ, but upon Christ holding us. Those who teach that man can tear himself loose from the power of Christ have dethroned God.

Inferential Proofs from Other Doctrines

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is not only explicitly taught in Scripture, but also logically proceeds from other biblical doctrines. What follows is a brief examination of some of the doctrines which have a direct relationship to God's preservation of the elect.

1. The Sovereignty of God

The many passages already considered that prove God's preservation of His people show that it is God's sovereign power which protects His sheep. If one accepts the biblical teaching regarding God's sovereignty, then one must accept the preservation of the saints or reject God's love toward the elect. Since the Bible teaches that God controls the human heart (Pr. 16:1; 19:21; 21:1; Dt. 2:30; Josh. 11:19-20; Ex. 10:1, 20; Rev. 17:17; etc) and all the circumstances and events that occur in a believer's life, then it logically follows that a believer could only apostatize from the faith if God wanted him to apostatize.

The Arminian who does not accept God's absolute control of the human heart still cannot escape from this logical dilemma, for Arminians still believe that God has a perfect foreknowledge of all events. The Arminian would admit that God knows the exact time that a Christian is going to apostatize and the specific events which will lead to the Christian's apostasy. If God loves His children infinitely more than an earthly father does or could, why would He not take a believer home before he apostatizes? Would it not be better to die of a heart attack, brain aneurysm, or car accident than spend eternity in hell? Also, why would God allow one of His beloved children to enter into a circumstance of life that He knew would lead to eternal destruction? The Arminian can only escape this argument by choosing among three different options, all of which are patently unbiblical. The first option is that God knows the future but is powerless to intervene in human affairs. This option is the old heresy of Deism. The second option is that God's knowledge is finite and bound by time. In other words, God is not responsible because He doesn't know the future. This view is so obviously heretical that no real Christian would even consider it. The third option is that God is sovereign and infallibly knows the future, but doesn't really love His children. He doesn't care if they reject the faith and go to hell. The problem with this view is that the Bible teaches that God loves His people with a perfect, infinite and eternal love. The idea that God would send His only begotten Son to suffer,

²³ Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, [1945] 1975), 2:144.

be tortured, and die an agonizing death on the cross for a person and then not even bother to protect that person (as if God was an unloving and careless Father) borders on blasphemy.

2. *God's Covenant Love for the Elect*

The Bible teaches that God's love for the elect does not change and cannot be destroyed. It is God's love for the elect which sent Jesus Christ to the cross and which guarantees that He will not allow any of His children to perish. "Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore with lovingkindness I have drawn you" (Jer. 31:3). This passage intimates "that the love is that which was from everlasting, his drawing them or bringing them into a converted state being the result of it, it follows that this everlasting love is the same as his eternal purpose or design to save them. Now, if there be such an eternal purpose relating to their salvation, it necessarily [implies] their perseverance."²⁴

The apostle Paul says that nothing created can separate the elect from God's love. This obviously includes the human will (unless one believes the unbiblical notion of an eternal pre-existence of souls). Paul wrote, "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, how shall He not with Him also freely give us all things? Who shall bring a charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.... Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?...For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, *nor any other created thing*, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom. 8:31-33, 35, 38-39). "The apostle has been comprehensive in the catalogue he gives, and the reason is to establish universality. But this concluding negation is for the purpose of leaving no loophole—no being or thing in the whole realm of created reality is excluded."²⁵ Thus the elect are totally secure. God's love for them cannot diminish, stop, or turn to hate.

One must understand that God's love is not dependent upon anything in the elect. It is a love that arises from God's own nature and is directed to an undeserving, wicked, unlovely people. "In this was love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 Jn. 4:10). The only reason "we love Him" is that "He first loved us" (1 Jn. 4:19). Paul says in Romans 8:29 that those whom God foreknew or "loved beforehand" are the ones predestined to eternal life. They are called, justified and glorified. This unbreakable chain in a believer's salvation all flows from the love and compassion of the Father. Paul speaks "of distinguishing love that predestinates to a determined end—conformity to the image of His Son. Ephesians 1:4-5 is to the same effect. God chose a people in Christ and in love predestined them unto adoption through Jesus Christ."²⁶ If God's love for the elect arises from God Himself and is eternal and immutable, it logically follows that it cannot fail. If His electing and preserving love was dependent upon anything within the creature, then salvation by grace is dead and Christians have reason to boast.

²⁴ Thomas Ridgely, *Commentary on the Larger Catechism*, 2:168.

²⁵ John Murray, *Romans* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1959), 1:334.

²⁶ John Murray, *The Atonement* (Presbyterian and Reformed, n.d.), 9-10.

3. The Doctrine of Election

The doctrine of individual election does *not* mean that certain individuals merely receive some external privileges, or that some people are likely to be saved, or that certain people who cooperate with the influence of the Spirit and persevere will be saved, but that a definite, fixed number of people are chosen to eternal life “according to the good pleasure of His will” (Eph. 1:5). “It is an election unto an end; that is, unto salvation. In working it out God endows believers with such influences as the Holy Spirit as to lead them, not only to accept Christ, but to persevere unto the end and be saved unto the uttermost.”²⁷ Those elected will be regenerated (Eph. 2:5), justified (Rom. 8:30), holy and without blame (Eph. 1:4), adopted into God’s family (Eph. 1:5) and glorified (Rom. 8:30).

It is true that an elect *nation*, such as Israel, has within it those who are saved and those who do not believe, but individual election unto life means that 100% of those chosen by God will go to heaven. Paul said regarding the elect within Israel: “God has not cast away His people whom He foreknew...at the present time there is a remnant according to the election of grace.... Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were hardened” (Rom. 11:2, 5, 7). John wrote, “All that the Father gives me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out” (Jn. 6:37). To Timothy Paul wrote, “God has saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace which was given to us in Christ Jesus before time began” (2 Tim. 1:9, cf. Rom. 9:10-23; Eph. 1:3-12; Acts 13:48). Paul said that the elect are “vessels of mercy which He prepared beforehand for glory” (Rom. 9:23). The end of the elect is glory and not destruction.

4. The Work of the Holy Spirit in Believers

A study of the work of the Holy Spirit in believers will prove that those regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit cannot totally fall away and perish. A biblical understanding of regeneration leads to a biblical view of perseverance. The apostle John wrote, “Whoever has been born of God does not sin [present continuous tense]...because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9). “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world” (1 Jn. 5:4). Peter said that Christians have “been born again, not of corruptible [perishable] seed but incorruptible” (1 Pet. 1:23). If the principle of new life in the believer is imperishable, overcomes the world, and prevents him from continuing in a life of sin, then is it not logical to infer that real Christians cannot apostatize or fall short of salvation? Speaking of the Holy Spirit, John wrote, “You are of God, little children, and have overcome them, because He who is in you is greater than he who is in the world” (1 Jn. 4:4). Matthew Henry writes, “We are born of God, taught of God, anointed of God, and so secured against infectious fatal delusions. God has his chosen, who shall not be mortally seduced.... The Spirit of God dwells in you, and that Spirit is more mighty than men or devils.”²⁸

Regeneration is a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit upon a person’s heart (or whole human nature) in which the soul is made spiritually alive and permanently oriented in a God-ward direction. The spiritual life imparted in regeneration is immortal. Since regeneration is a sovereign act of the Holy Spirit upon man in which man does not cooperate (initiate by an act of the will), only the Holy Spirit can unregenerate a person. Furthermore, even if a person could

²⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939), 547.

²⁸ Matthew Henry, *Commentary* (McLean, VA: MacDonald, n.d.), 6:1082.

unregenerate himself, he never would, for the regenerate person has a heart of flesh that loves Jesus Christ. Therefore, those who argue that a real Christian can apostatize must also logically argue that the Holy Spirit takes away the heart of flesh from believers and replaces it with a heart of stone. Such a thought is absurd and wicked.

According to Scripture regeneration occurs in all those united to Christ in His life, death, and resurrection (Eph. 2:5-7). Faith and repentance naturally flow from a regenerate heart, and thus are called gifts of God in Scripture (Ac. 5:31; 11:18; Eph. 2:8; Phil. 1:29). If faith is a gift from God and does not arise autonomously in the human heart, then it logically follows that God would have to remove this faith for a believer to apostatize. The Bible declares that God will not abandon His people whom He loved beforehand (Heb. 5:13; Jn. 10:28, 29; 11:26; etc). “Similarly it follows that if a man is not saved by exercising his own [autonomously produced] faith he cannot be lost by ceasing to exercise it. Again this is not merely a logical extension without Scripture to support it, for Scripture tells us plainly that election means God’s choice of the individual and not the individual’s choice of God (Jn. 15:16); and God is not a man that He should change his mind (Num. 23:19).”²⁹

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit seals believers. “You were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, to the praise of His glory” (Eph. 1:13-14). If believers are sealed by the Holy Spirit and guaranteed an inheritance, they cannot lose their salvation. In Ephesians 4:30 Paul writes, “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” Gordon Clark writes, “He seals us ‘to the day of redemption.’ *Until* or *for* the day of redemption. Here we have the Calvinistic doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. This or that man in the pew may or may not have been sealed; but if he has been, he will not be finally lost. Regeneration is a once-for-all act. We are not saved at breakfast, lost at noon, and born again in the evening. The phrase ‘day of redemption’ in this passage is obviously not the day of our regeneration, but the day of full redemption, redemption of the body from the grave, and redemption from sin that will always affect us in our present life.”³⁰

In the epistle to the Romans Paul taught that the indwelling of the Spirit “secures not only the life of the soul, but also the ultimate and glorious life of the body.”³¹ “But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (Rom. 8:11). “Our souls shall live in happiness and glory, because they are renewed: and our bodies too shall be raised up in glory, because they are temples of the Holy Ghost. In the widest sense then it is true, that to be in the Spirit, is to be secure of life and peace.”³² To have the indwelling Spirit of God is to possess life eternal.

5. *The Efficacy of Christ’s Redemptive Work*

The Bible teaches that Christ’s redemptive work secures the salvation of His people. “You shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins” (Mt. 1:21). All the Biblical terms which describe Christ’s atoning death make impossible the Arminian idea of an indefinite conditional atonement: expiation means that all the guilt of every sin is forever

²⁹ Arthur C. Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1979), 197.

³⁰ Gordon H. Clark, *Ephesians* (Jefferson, MD: Trinity Foundation, 1985), 162.

³¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), 3:111.

³² Charles Hodge, *Romans*, 261.

removed; propitiation means that God's just wrath against sin has been permanently taken away; ransom or redemption refers to the fact that Christ paid the price in *full*; reconciliation means that the enmity between God and the sinner has been removed. The believing sinner is justified. His sins have imputed to Christ on the cross, and Christ's perfect righteousness has been imputed to him. The believer is united to Christ in His life, death and resurrection. Believers are not "under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). They are "dead to the law" (Rom. 7:4), "dead to sin" (Rom. 6:2), and "freed from sin" (Rom. 6:2). If the price has been paid in full, if all the guilt of sin is removed, and if a person is clothed with Christ's perfect righteousness, then how can he go to hell? It is clearly impossible.³³

This, however, does not mean that Christians can claim to be justified and live like the devil for union with Christ in His death and resurrection also secures their salvation from the power of sin. Believers will be sanctified. They definitely will have victory over habitual sin patterns. "Our old man was crucified with Him, that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin.... But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, you have your fruit to holiness, and the end, everlasting life" (Rom. 6:6, 22). If a believer is perfect before God on account of Christ, and also has definitive sanctification by virtue of union with Him, then obviously he cannot apostatize. "The Lord will perfect that which concerns me. Your mercy, O Lord, endures forever" (Ps. 138:8). "He shall see the travail of His soul, and be satisfied" (Isa. 53:11).

6. *The Covenant of Redemption*

The covenant of redemption refers to the agreement made by the persons of the trinity before the creation of the universe regarding the salvation of the elect. The Father chose a people in Christ (Eph. 1:4) and agreed to give them to the Son as a reward for His obedience and suffering. The Son agreed to come to earth to meet all the legal obligations for the elect by His sinless life and sacrificial death. The Holy Spirit agreed to apply Christ's perfect work of redemption to the elect. "Christ speaks of promises made to Him before His advent, and repeatedly refers to a commission which He had received from the Father, John 5:30, 43; 6:38-40; 17:4-12. And in Rom. 5:12-21 and I Cor. 15:22 He is clearly regarded as a representative head, that is, as the head of a covenant."³⁴ Christ emphasized that He came to do the Father's will. The Bible also teaches that as the divine-human mediator He would receive a reward for His perfect obedience. "Moreover, in John 17:5 Christ claims a reward, and in John 17:6, 9, 24 (cf. also Phil. 2:9-11) He refers to His people and His future glory as a reward given Him by the Father."³⁵

The idea that the Father has promised the Son the elect as a gift renders impossible the doctrine that true believers can eternally perish. Custance writes, "The statement of the Lord

³³ "Can it be imagined, that God should accept of the righteousness of His Son, and express a well-pleas'dness in it, because by it his law is magnified and made honourable; and that he should impute it to his people, and give them faith to receive it, and plead it as their justifying righteousness; and yet, after all, suffer them to perish? Nay, where could this be justice, to punish those for whose sins Christ has made satisfaction, and God himself has discharged upon it? It is not consistent with the justice of God to punish sin twice; once in the surety, and again in those he has redeemed; which must be the case, if any for whom Christ suffered should perish eternally; for to perish eternally is the same as to be punished with everlasting destruction" (John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* [Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, (1815) 1977], 407).

³⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 266.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

Himself, 'My Father who gave them to Me' (John 10:29), is the starting point. The fact that we are the gift of the Father to the Son, a circumstance that implies we are in some special way God's possession even before we come to the Son, is constantly reaffirmed by the Lord Himself. It seems to be the starting point of his special concern in what is truly the 'Lord's Prayer' in John 17 (especially v. 6). And that we are gifts of the Father to the Son is repeated again and again in John's gospel: 6:37, 44, 65; 10:28, 29; 17:2, 6, 9, 11, 12, 24; and in many other places. No giver can make a gift of that which is not already his to give. And is it conceivable that God can give to the Son such a present unless it is given in perpetuity? Jesus said: 'This is the Father's will [the Greek here is the strong word *thelema*, meaning *intention*] who has sent Me, that of all whom He hath given Me I should *lose* nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day'" (Jn. 6:39).³⁶ "If Christ would lose some of the ones whom the Father gave Him, He would fail to accomplish God's will (John 6:32, 39)."³⁷

Additional Arguments for Perseverance

There are a number of additional reasons given in Scripture which support the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints: 1. The Bible teaches that Christians can have a full assurance of their salvation (Heb. 3:14; 6:11; 10:22; 2 Pet. 1:10).³⁸ If believers could lose their salvation at any time, Christians could never have such an assurance. 2. Scripture says that believers are united with Christ and are partakers of His Spirit. This union cannot be destroyed, for it is founded upon God's eternal, unchangeable, electing love. This union means that as long as Christ lives, believers will also live. They are part of His body. 3. God's word teaches that Christ intercedes as a high priest on behalf of His people (Jn. 17:9-26). Since Christ's intercessory prayers for the elect are always efficacious (Jn. 11:42; Heb. 7:25), not one of His own can ever be lost. 4. Jesus promised that of all who come to Him, not one would be forsaken or cast away (Jn. 6:37; Heb. 13:5, 6). 5. The illustrations and metaphors used in the Bible to describe real believers all teach permanence. "The saints, even in this world, are compared to a tree that does not wither, Ps. 1:3; to the cedars which flourish on Mount Lebanon, Ps. 92:12; to Mount Zion which cannot be moved, but which abideth forever, Ps. 125:1; and to a house built on a rock, Matt. 7:24. The Lord is with them in their old age, Is. 46:4, and is their guide even unto death, Ps. 48:14, so that they cannot be totally and finally lost."³⁹ Given the abundance of scriptural evidence in favor of God's preservation of His people, it is astounding that the doctrine is rejected by many modern evangelicals.

Objections to the Doctrine of Perseverance

1. It Leads to Carelessness, Indolence and Immorality

³⁶ Arthur Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace*, 201.

³⁷ Robert A. Morey, *Studies in the Atonement*, 234.

³⁸ 1 John 5:13, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life." The verb to know is *eidete*; second perfect active subjunctive of *oida*. This means "to know with settled intuitive knowledge" (A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker], 4:242. The strong assurance of which John speaks is incompatible with the idea that a true sheep may become a goat at any moment.

³⁹ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 200.

The obvious and most common objection to the doctrine of perseverance is that if people are taught that they cannot lose their salvation, they will lead lives characterized by immorality. People say, "If a believer cannot lose his salvation, why should he bother to attend the means of grace? Why should he work hard at self-examination and personal sanctification?" In order to answer these questions, one should first note the difference between the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and the popular fundamentalist-evangelical doctrine of "eternal security." Although many evangelicals believe that genuine Christians can lose their salvation, there are a number of people who teach that Christians cannot lose their salvation. They teach, however, that once a person "accepts Christ" he cannot lose his salvation, *no matter how he behaves*. This interpretation of eternal security arose from the dispensational teaching that a person can receive Christ as Savior while not receiving Him as Lord; that repentance is a doctrine pertaining to the old Jewish dispensation of law and does not apply to the new covenant church (which is a parenthesis in God's plan). According to this view a person who "made a decision for Christ" could live a lifestyle involving fornication, drunkenness, theft, murder, bestiality, etc, and still be guaranteed a place in heaven. This is the "carnal Christian" heresy. The apostle Paul defines a carnal person as a believer who has a sectarian spirit in the church; *not* a person who has refused to repent and submit to Christ as Lord. This view of eternal security should never be confused with the scriptural doctrine of perseverance.

The doctrine of perseverance takes very seriously all the biblical commands to watchfulness, obedience, sanctification and holiness. The Bible teaches that all those who are justified will also be sanctified. Christ not only saves His people from the guilt of sin, but also from its power. Union with Christ entails both the forgiveness of sin and a lifestyle characterized by holiness. John Murray wrote,

[I]t is utterly wrong to say that a believer is secure quite irrespective of his subsequent life of sin and unfaithfulness. The truth is that the faith of Jesus Christ is *always* *respective* of the life of holiness and fidelity. And so it is never proper to think of a believer irrespective of the fruits of faith and holiness. To say that a believer is secure whatever may be the extent of his addiction to sin in his subsequent life is to abstract faith in Christ from its very definition and it ministers to that abuse which turns the grace of God into lasciviousness. The doctrine of perseverance is the doctrine that believers *persevere*; it cannot be too strongly stressed that it is the *perseverance* of the saints. And that means that the saints, those united to Christ by the effectual call of the Father and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, will persevere unto the end. If they persevere, they endure, they continue. It is not at all that they will be saved irrespective of their perseverance or their continuance, but that they will assuredly persevere. Consequently, the security that is theirs is inseparable from their perseverance. Is this not what Jesus said? "He that endureth to the end, the same shall be saved."⁴⁰

The dispensationalist doctrine of eternal security is based on a faulty understanding of the relationship between justification and sanctification. It is argued that any requirement of holiness on the believer's part for perseverance is a mixing of faith and works to attain eternal life. Calvinists are accused of rejecting justification as a once-and-for-all act of God in favor of justification by a process that involves perseverance.⁴¹ This interpretation of the Calvinist's

⁴⁰ John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 154-155.

⁴¹ Dispensationalist author Laurence M. Vance writes, "The Calvinist demands holiness to demonstrate election, which then substantiates salvation. This makes salvation a process instead of an instantaneous act.... The Perseverance of the Saints fosters nothing but pride and envy.... The Calvinistic heresy of the Perseverance of the

position is totally off the mark. Following the Scriptures Calvinists teach that justification is a once-for-all judicial act of God which cannot be annulled and is never to be repeated. But once a person is justified, he immediately begins a lifelong process of sanctification. Sanctification and growth in holiness and perseverance do not contribute one iota to a person's salvation. However, if a person claims to be a Christian yet is not sanctified and does not persevere, then that person was never really a Christian. He was never born again or justified. He was a hypocrite, a false professor who merely had a bare intellectual assent to certain propositions but who never truly trusted in Jesus Christ for salvation. "It is not enough to *profess* Christ. You must actually and really *possess* Christ as your personal Lord and Saviour in order to be truly saved."⁴² The same Jesus who preached justification by faith alone (Jn. 5:24; Lk. 18:9-14; 23:43) also said "You shall know them by their fruits" (Mt. 7:16). Paul said, "Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: 'The Lord knows those who are his,' and, 'Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity'" (2 Tim. 2:19).

The charge that perseverance leads to carelessness and indolence shows an ignorance of the relationship between predestination and personal responsibility. God predestinates the end, but also the means to an end. Furthermore, although God is in control of "whatsoever comes to pass," man is a valid secondary agent and is fully responsible for his actions. Scripture gives many examples of godly men who were told what would happen in the future; yet these same men were exceedingly diligent in working toward that promised end. "Joshua, though he was assured that not a man should be able to stand before him, but all his enemies should be conquered by him; this did not make him secure, nor hinder him from taking all the proper precautions against his enemies; and of making use of all means to obtain a victory over them. Hezekiah, though he was assured of his restoration from his disorder; yet this did not hinder him, nor the prophet, who assured him of it, from making use of proper means for the cure of it: and though the apostle Paul had a certainty of the saving of the lives of all that were in the ship, yet he directed them to the proper means of their preservation; and told them, that except they abode

Saints has only recently surfaced among modern Fundamentalists and Evangelicals under the synonym of lordship salvation.... One of the more extreme examples of the fallacy of lordship salvation is the denial that one can be a carnal Christian.... If a man's salvation depends on his perseverance then his Total Depravity couldn't possibly become Total Inability, for then he would not be able to persevere. If a man's salvation depends on his perseverance then he could never be the subject of Unconditional Election, for salvation would be conditional. If a man's salvation depends on his perseverance, a Limited Atonement was a failure, for some of the 'elect' may not persevere long enough to benefit from it. If a man's salvation depends on his perseverance, Irresistible Grace could never have been applied, for the grace of God would prove to be resistible" (*The Other Side of Calvinism* [Pensacola, FL: Vance Pub., 1991], 335-337, 339-341). Vance totally misrepresents the Calvinistic doctrine of salvation and perseverance. No Calvinist believes that perseverance contributes to one's salvation. Repentance, perseverance and a life of godly living do not contribute one iota to salvation but are evidence that the instantaneous act of justification has already taken place. Vance also completely ignores the fact that it is God who enables a Christian to persevere. "For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). His whole argument that perseverance destroys the other four points of Calvinism is based on the faulty assumption that man perseveres by his own power and not solely because of God's grace. He also ignores the sovereignty of God. Furthermore, if one defines a carnal Christian as does the apostle Paul, who says that a carnal Christian is someone who has a sectarian spirit in the church, then Calvinists believe in such a thing as a carnal Christian. But Dr. Vance and other dispensationalists define a carnal Christian as someone who accepts Christ as Savior, but refuses to accept His lordship. They would argue that a habitual whoremonger, adulterer, sodomite, thief, murderer, or rapist who had accepted Christ still has a place in heaven. This concept of the carnal Christian the Calvinist emphatically rejects (cf. Rom. 6, 7; 1 Jn. 1:6, 2:4-6; 3:3-10, 24; 5:1-5, 18).

⁴² Robert A. Morey, *Studies in the Atonement*, 236.

in the ship they could not be saved; and taking this his advice, though shipwrecked, they all came safe to shore.”⁴³

2. It Cannot Be Reconciled with the Warnings against Apostasy

Another objection to perseverance is that since the Bible is full of warnings against apostasy and unbelief, the danger of falling away cannot be imaginary, but must be quite real. Furthermore, are there not many examples of believers who apostatized (e.g., King Saul, Judas Iscariot, Hymenaeus, Alexander, Philetus, and Demas)?

That the Bible is full of admonitions to obey and persevere and warnings against apostasy cannot be denied. There are the many “if” passages. “Then Jesus said to those Jews who believed Him, ‘If you abide in My word you are My disciples indeed’” (Jn. 8:31). “And you, who once were alienated and enemies in your mind by wicked works, yet now He has reconciled in the body of His flesh through death, to present you holy, and blameless, and irreproachable in His sight—if indeed you continue in the faith, grounded and steadfast, and are not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you heard” (Col. 1:21-23). “For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (Heb. 3:14; cf. Jn. 15:6, 7, 10, 14; Heb. 2:1-3; 1 Cor. 15:1-2).

Jesus spoke regarding those who endure for only a while (Mt. 13:21) and those who are unfruitful because of the deceitfulness of riches (Mt. 13:22). The apostle Paul said: “Do not be haughty, but fear. For if God did not spare the natural branches, He may not spare you either. Therefore consider the goodness and severity of God: on those who fall, severity; but toward you, goodness, if you continue in His goodness. Otherwise you also will be cut off” (Rom. 11:21-22). Paul said to Timothy, “by them you may wage the good warfare, having faith and a good conscience, which some having rejected, concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck” (1 Tim. 1:18-19). “Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons” (1 Tim. 4:1). In his second letter to Timothy Paul writes, “If we endure, we shall also reign with Him. If we deny Him, He also will deny us.... Hymenaeus and Philetus...have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection is already past; and they overthrow the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:12, 13, 17, 18).

The author of Hebrews also gave stern warnings. “For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted the good heavenly gift, and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, to renew them again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (Heb. 6:4-6). “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Heb. 10:26). The author spoke of the “need of endurance” (10:30). The Israelites who did not endure but disbelieved and disobeyed and thus fell in the wilderness are set forth as a warning to the new covenant church (cf. Heb. 3:16-4:6; 1 Cor. 10:1-12). After the same illustration Paul wrote, “Therefore let him who thinks he stand take heed lest he fall” (1 Cor. 10:12).

Peter warned the church of the danger of false teachers. “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction. And many will follow their destructive ways, because of whom the way of

⁴³ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, [1815] 1977), 416.

truth will be blasphemed” (2 Pet. 2:1-2). Peter even spoke of those who escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of Christ and then returned to their old ways of wickedness. He says it would have better for them if they had never known the way of righteousness (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

The Arminian simply quotes from among these and other related passages and says that it is obvious that believers can, have, and do fall away from the faith. But if real Christians can totally fall away, then are not many well-established doctrines contradicted (i.e. the atonement, God’s sovereignty, unconditional election, irresistible grace, God’s love of the elect, the covenant of redemption, etc)? The Arminian does not really consider these other doctrines a problem, for they have already twisted and perverted them to fit into their system—a system that exalts man’s free will as the ultimate determiner of salvation. What about the numerous passages which clearly teach that real believers *cannot* totally fall away? Arminians either ignore these passages or insist that they must be harmonized with the passages which they claim teach that true believers can apostatize and go to hell. The preservation and perseverance passages must be interpreted as if they are conditioned upon autonomous free human will, even though they appear unconditional. In other words, the plain sense of the preservation-perseverance passages must be altered to fit into the Arminian paradigm.

But, the Arminian will object, doesn’t the Calvinist alter the plain meaning of the passages which speak of Christians falling away? Does he not force these passages into his theological system? Before answering the Arminian objection, a few interpretive issues should be considered. First, one must consider the fact that Scripture cannot contradict Scripture. The Bible cannot teach that real believers can never totally fall away and *also* teach that genuine Christians can apostatize. Second, whenever one encounters a difficult passage, or some passages which appear to contradict other passages, one should use the clearer passages to interpret the less clear. Third, if there are passages that appear to contradict other passages, one should examine other related doctrines to determine which interpretation best harmonizes with Scripture as a whole.

If these procedures are followed, then one must accept the doctrine of the preservation of the saints and reject the Arminian notion that true believers can fall from grace. First, the passages which teach the preservation of the saints could not be clearer. When Jesus says that not one of His people can perish (Jn. 6:39; 10:27-29), how can this mean that some of His people will perish? The Arminian passages are easily explained. In fact, Scripture plainly says that those who apostatize from the faith were never really Christians to begin with (see below). Second, if real sheep could become goats and go to hell, then several crucial Christian doctrines are wrong. Even the doctrine of salvation by grace alone would have to be abandoned in favor of a synergistic method of salvation. Man would have to preserve himself through evangelical obedience.

The Scriptures explain the falling away of professing Christians not in terms of real Christians losing their salvation, but as false faith or unbelief becoming evident. John wrote, “They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out that they might be made manifest, that none of them were of us” (1 Jn. 2:19). John says that these apostates were never “of us.” They were never genuine believers. They never really belonged to Christ or the invisible church. “Their presence in the visible church was temporary, for they failed in their perseverance. If they had been members of the invisible church, they would have remained with the body of believers.”⁴⁴ John also says that

⁴⁴ Simon J. Kistemaker, *James and I-III John* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 277.

real believers have an anointing from the Holy Spirit and thus cannot be deceived by damnable heresies; they will remain in Christ (1 Jn. 2:21, 27).

When the author of Hebrews described the Israelites who apostatized in the wilderness, who did not enter the promised land because of disobedience (Heb. 4:6), he said that their problem was that they did not believe (Heb. 3:19). In the parable of the sower (Mt. 13:3-23; Mk. 4:1-20) Jesus described four types of ground unto which the good seed of the gospel fell, but it was only the good ground that produced fruit. Only the regenerated heart had true saving faith. The other three had a counterfeit faith. When Paul said that the natural branches of the olive tree were broken off (i.e. national Israel), he specifically said that they were broken off because of unbelief (Rom. 11:20). A study of the passages often quoted by Arminians reveals that those who apostatized had the benefit of external gospel privileges as members of the visible church, but they never were regenerated and never had true saving faith. In not one of the passages which discuss apostates does it say that they were regenerated, justified or adopted.

The Calvinist has never denied the possibility and the reality of people apostatizing and being excommunicated from the visible church, for the visible church is made up of genuine believers and hypocrites, of wheat and tares, of sheep and goats, of the elect and non-elect. There are many people who profess faith in Christ, are baptized, partake of the Lord's supper, sit under the preaching of the word, and outwardly reform their lives, but as time progresses prove themselves to be self-deceived hypocrites. This common occurrence, however, does not prove that genuine believers can fall away. Furthermore, since no one knows the human heart, everyone in the visible church must be treated as a genuine believer until he proves himself otherwise.

When the apostle Peter discusses false teachers who apostatize and return to the world, he does not say that Christ removed the guilt of their sins, but that they for a time "escaped the pollutions of the world" (2 Pet. 2:20). That is, they had an external reformation of behavior based on what they knew of the gospel. Peter indicates that these teachers were never really regenerate. He says, "But it has happened to them according to the true proverb: 'a dog returns to his own vomit,' and 'a sow, having washed, to her wallowing in the mire'" (2 Pet. 2:22). A dog and a pig act according to their own nature. One can wash a pig and make it clean, but a pig is a pig. It will return to wallowing in the mud—in disgusting filth—because that is what pigs do. Likewise, people who apostatize, who return to their former lifestyle, prove that they were never regenerated by the Holy Spirit because their natures were never changed. "If we could see the real motives of their hearts, we would discover that at no time were they ever activated by a true love of God. They were all this while goats, and not sheep, ravening wolves, and not gentle lambs."⁴⁵

Perhaps the Scripture most commonly used by Arminians to try to prove the apostasy of genuine believers is Hebrews 6:4-6. Although this is a difficult passage, a brief consideration of it within its context will prove that it does not support the Arminian position and contradict the rest of Scripture. The problem that the author of the book of Hebrews was dealing with involved Jews who joined the Christian assembly for a time and then returned to Pharisaical Judaism. They are said to "crucify the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame" (6:6). By going back to the Pharisaical religion these Jews totally repudiated Jesus Christ; they joined forces with those who persecuted the church—the religious leaders responsible for Christ's arrest, torture and execution. It is noteworthy that the author of Hebrews does not refer to these apostates as "us" or even as "you," but as "those." Note also that as soon as the section dealing with these

⁴⁵ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 192.

apostates ends, the writer sets up a contrast between the real and the counterfeit: “But, beloved, we are confident of better things concerning you, things that accompany salvation” (v. 9).⁴⁶

When the author says that these apostates “were once enlightened” (v. 4), he simply means that they had been instructed in gospel doctrine. They had at best an intellectual understanding of the gospel. They “tasted of the heavenly gift” (v. 4). Gill wrote, “*tasting* of it, stands opposed to eating his flesh and drinking his blood, which is proper to true believers, who feed upon him, internally receive him, and are nourished by him; while hypocrites, and formal professors, only *taste* of him, have a superficial knowledge of him, and gust [taste] for him.”⁴⁷ This interpretation becomes evident when one considers that these Jewish apostates “resorted once again to the old sacrificial system and thus demonstrated their lack of any saving faith and of any true comprehension of the role the Lord Jesus had played as the lamb of God.”⁴⁸

But what did the author mean when he said, “...and have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” (v. 4)? This likely means that these professors had the benefit of sharing in the miraculous workings of the Holy Spirit common in the church services during the first generation of believers. The Greek word “partakers” could be translated “sharers.” These false professors saw the healings, heard the prophecies, etc Pink wrote, “It should be pointed out that the Greek word for ‘partakers’ here is a different one from that used in Col. 1:12 and 2 Peter 1:4, where real Christians are in view. The word here simply means ‘companions,’ referring to what is external rather than internal.... These apostates had never been ‘born of the Spirit’ (John 3:6), still less were their bodies His ‘temples’ (I Cor. 6:19).”⁴⁹

That the author of Hebrews in this portion of Scripture does *not* teach that real Christians can totally fall away is also evident from the following. First, the church is told that it is *impossible* to renew those who fall away “again to repentance, since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (v. 6). This cannot refer to Christians who fall into grievous sins, for the New Testament gives examples of believers who fell and were restored (e.g., Peter, and the repentant Corinthian, 2 Cor. 2:5-10). It refers to professors who totally reject the doctrines of Christianity and thus call Christ a liar, an imposter. If a person was a church member, tasted the sacrament, tasted the word of God and then went back to Judaism, or Islam, or Hinduism, he would be putting Christ to an open shame. Can a real

⁴⁶ John Brown wrote of verse 9 and following: “The general meaning of this paragraph, all the parts of which are closely connected together, plainly is: ‘The reason why I have made these awful statements about apostates, is not that I consider you whom I am addressing as apostates; for your conduct proves that this is not your character, and the promise of God secures that their doom shall not be yours; but that you may be stirred up to preserving steadiness in the faith, and hope, and obedience of the truth, by a constant continuance in which alone you can, like those who have gone before you, obtain, in all their perfection, the promised blessings of the Christian salvation.’ The reason why the Apostle had stated so particularly the aggravated guilt and all but hopeless condition of apostates, was not that he considered the Hebrew Christians whom he was addressing as in a state of apostasy. No, he was persuaded better things of them—‘things accompanying salvation’” (*Hebrews* [Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, (1862) 1983], 306).

⁴⁷ John Gill, *The Cause of God and Truth* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, [1735-37] 1978), 56.

⁴⁸ Arthur C. Custance, *The Sovereignty of Grace*, 220.

⁴⁹ Arthur Pink, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, [1954] 1981), 291. “Early apostolic history has a record of one outstanding character who believed when he heard the gospel, was baptized, attached himself to the evangelist whose preaching had convinced him...yet Simon Magus was pronounced by Peter to be still ‘in the gall of bitterness and in the bond of iniquity’ (Acts 8:9 ff., 18 ff.), and showed himself in the following decades to be the most determined opponent of apostolic Christianity” (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964], 121-122). On the day of judgment Christ will cast many into hell who made an outward profession of faith. Note that these false Christians claim to have prophesied, cast out demons, and done many wonders (Mt. 7:22), yet Christ says to these hypocrites, “I never knew you” (Mt. 7:23). They never had a saving relationship to Christ.

Christian blaspheme Jesus, spit in His face, and call Him an imposter? Certainly not! Paul wrote, “no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed” (1 Cor. 12:3). “To call him anathema is to declare and avow that he was justly crucified as an accursed person, as a public pest. This was done by these persons who went over to the Jews, in approbation of what they had done against him.”⁵⁰

Second, the illustration at the end of the section on apostasy (Heb. 6:7 ff.) confirms the interpretation that apostates were never genuine believers. The rain falling upon the earth is a figurative way of describing the word of God being taught to a group of people. These people have the benefit of sitting under the means of grace. But among those who hear the word, there are two very different responses. One group of people bears useful herbs (v. 7), while another produces thorns and briars “whose end is to be burned” (v. 8). Jesus said, “You will know them by their fruits. Do men gather grapes from thornbushes or figs from thistles? Even so, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Therefore by their fruits you will know them” (Mt. 7:16-20). The reason some people bear bad fruit is that they were never regenerate. They are bad. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6). On the other hand, those who are regenerate cannot produce bad fruit. “Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn. 3:9).

But if Christians cannot fall away or apostatize, why are there so many warnings against it?⁵¹ Although the Bible teaches that God is faithful and will preserve His people, this does not mean that God does so apart from the use of secondary causes. The warnings and threats found in the New Testament are used by the Holy Spirit to motivate believers unto a greater diligence, watchfulness, effort, and faithfulness toward God. Perseverance is perseverance in holiness and faith. Berkouwer writes, “For what is striking about the Scriptures is that the passages concerning the steadfastness of God’s faithfulness and the passages with admonitions are inseparable. We do not encounter a single passage that would allow anyone to take the immutability of the grace of God in Christ for granted.... The continuance of God’s grace cannot

⁵⁰ John Owen, *Works* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, [1850-53] 1979), 7:51.

⁵¹ One passage of Scripture often used by Arminians against the doctrine of perseverance is Rev. 3:5, “He who overcomes shall be clothed in white garments, and I will not blot out his name from the Book of Life; but I will confess his name before My Father and before His angels.” It is assumed by some that this passage teaches the possibility that God will blot out some of the names written in the book of life. This assumption, however, is not at all warranted by the text. The passage does not say that the elect can have their names removed from the book of life. It says that those who overcome will not have their names removed. Who are those who overcome? As noted in this chapter on perseverance, the Bible clearly teaches that only the elect, or real believers, will overcome or persevere. (This is also implicitly taught in the book of Revelation itself: Rev. 13:9 says that those who do not have their names written in the book of life are the only ones who worship the beast [Rev. 17:8].) If the Bible says that all true Christians will overcome and that not one can be lost, then Rev. 3:5 teaches the perseverance of the saints. John Gill wrote, “And I will not blot out his name out of the book of life” by which is meant the choice of persons to everlasting life and salvation; and this being signified by a book, and by writing names in it, shows the exact knowledge God has of his elect, the value he has for them, his remembrance of them, his love to them, and care for them; and that this election is of particular persons by name, and is sure and certain; for those whose names are written in it shall never be blotted out, they will always remain in the number of God’s elect, and can never become reprobates, or shall ever perish; because of the unchangeableness of the nature and love for God, the firmness of his purposes, the omnipotence of his arm, the death and intercession of Christ for them, their union to him, and being in him, the impossibility of their seduction by false teachers, and the security of their persons, grace, and glory in Christ” (*Exposition of the New Testament* [Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, [1809] 1979], 9:709).

be associated with taking things for granted or with passivity.”⁵² “We believe and pray knowing that our preservation depends entirely upon God’s covenantal faithfulness while, at the same time, striving for and seeking after holiness as if our perseverance depended entirely on our own faithfulness to the Lord.”⁵³ When a Christian examines the passages which speak of the fearful consequences of rejecting Christ, the torments of the lake of fire, the day of judgment, and God’s thunderbolts of wrath upon the wicked in history, he ought to be all the more diligent to make his calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10). Gill concurs: “these prohibitions of sin, and motives to holiness, are used by the Spirit of God as a means of perseverance; and so they are considered by good men. And it would be absurd and irrational to judge otherwise; for can a man believe he shall persevere to the end, and yet indulge himself in sin, as if he was resolved not to persevere? And nothing can be more stronger motives to holiness and righteousness, than the absolute and unconditional promises of God to his people; and the firm assurance given them of their being the children of God, and the redeemed of the Lamb.”⁵⁴

The warnings to persevere and work hard at sanctification serve many purposes. First, they stand as explicit warnings and condemnations to those who apostatize and are cut off from the visible church. God has seen fit to give special warnings to those who profess the true religion and then depart from it. Second, when true believers backslide and fall into grievous sins, they ought to lose all assurance of salvation. These passages regarding apostasy should strike terror into the hearts of all backsliders. These fears are not only used to keep believers from falling away, but they also serve to drive stray sheep back to the fold. Third, these threats stand as a sergeant over his troops, calling them to diligence during a time of great warfare. The Christian life is not static. The trials, temptations, tests and battles of life need such sober exhortations. Fourth, they are a call to humility and prayer. Since it is God who enables His people to persevere, one is continually cast upon Him and His promises. The fact that Christians are promised success should make them all the more sober and diligent.

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⁵² G. C. Berkhouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), 97.

⁵³ Robert A. Moray, *Studies in the Atonement*, 236.

⁵⁴ John Gill, *A Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Streamwood, IL: Primitive Baptist Library, [1815] 1977), 416. “God’s exhortations to duty are perfectly consistent with His purpose to give sufficient grace for the performance of these duties. In one place we are commanded to love the Lord our God with all our heart; in another, God says, ‘I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes.’ Now either of these must be consistent with each other, or the Holy Spirit must contradict Himself. Plainly it is not the latter” (Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, 196).