

Chapter 17: Of Perseverance of the Saints

K. C. Juntunen

1 The fact of perseverance

1.1 Stated

Those whom God has accepted in the beloved, effectually called and sanctified by his Spirit, and given the precious faith of his elect unto, can neither totally nor finally fall from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved,

Up to this point the 1689 aligns pretty closely with the Westminster, and the Savoy. The next two thirds of the paragraph are very pastoral. This is a reminder that our confession isn't just a technical document for experts, and theological nerds. It's clear, and rich, and it would even be beneficial for use in daily devotions.

It continues,

seeing the gifts and callings of God are without repentance, from which source he still begets and nourishes in them faith, repentance, love, joy, hope, and all the graces of the Spirit unto immortality;¹ and though many storms and floods arise and beat against them, yet they shall never be able to take them off that foundation and rock which by faith they are fastened upon; notwithstanding, through unbelief and the temptations of Satan, the sensible sight of the light and love of God may for a time be clouded and obscured from them,² yet he is still the same, and they shall be sure to be kept by the power of God unto salvation, where they shall enjoy their purchased possession, they being engraved upon the palm of his hands, and their names having been written in the book of life from all eternity.³

1.1.1 The subjects of perseverance

Waldron notes that it uses the biblical phrase “accepted in the beloved,” rather than the modern phrase, “accepted Jesus as their Saviour¹.”

A. A. Hodge also explains “That the true doctrine is not that salvation is certain if we have once believed, but that perseverance in holiness is certain if we have truly believed,” and “the probability – of an individual’s salvation is known to him only through the fact of his perseverance in holiness.”

But I’m sure you’ve heard the doctrine of perseverance oversimplified, and, therefore, distorted by the phrase “once saved, always saved.” This really goes along with the Chuck Finney type of theology that says “I responded to an altar-call, and I’ve got my ticket punched.” It’s a sort of American revivalist theology. What’s insidious about “once saved, always saved” is that it’s sorta true, but it’s oversimplified to deceive. I’ve mentioned before how the Catholics, and the Orthodox are scandalized by the distinction between justification and sanctification. They’re offended, in part, because they think the doctrine of free, unmerited grace in justification can come without sanctification. “Once saved, always saved” really reinforces that idea. Only real Reformation theology can thoroughly answer the Catholics.

1.1.2 The significance of perseverance

And the name of this chapter can answer them by itself.

John Murray says,

The very expression, “The Perseverance of the Saints” in itself guards against every notion or suggestion to the effect that a believer is [...] secure as to his eternal salvation, quite irrespective of the extent to which he may fall into sin and backslide from faith and holiness².

What does “perseverance” mean?

Noah Webster says to persevere is “to persist in any business or enterprise undertaken; to pursue steadily any design or course commenced; not to give over or abandon what is undertaken; applied alike to good and evil³.” And he offers this further theological definition: perseverance is “continuance in a state of grace to a state of glory⁴.” The most pithy way I could put it would be to say, “perseverance means to make it to the end.”

¹Waldron. p. 256

²John Murray. *Redemption*. Location 1,787.

³<https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Persevere>

⁴<https://webstersdictionary1828.com/Dictionary/Perseverance>

We all know of people who don't persevere, don't we—folks who “deconstruct”? What our confession says here is a matter of *definition*. Unbelievers will sometimes say “hey, I was a Christian once.” But our confession, following the Scripture says those justified, and those who persevere to the end are the same people. The flip side of that, by *necessity* is that one who doesn't persevere can't possibly be one who was ever justified. So John can say,

¹⁹ 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 it might become plain that they all are not of us.
(1 John 2)

A. A. Hodge points out Session 6, canon 23 of the Council of Trent, where the Roman Catholics say, “If any one maintain that a man once justified cannot lose grace, and therefore that he who falls and sins never was truly justified, let him be accursed.” In this, they accidentally anathematize the apostle John.

But the persevering and the justified are the same group. In John 10:28-29, Jesus says:

²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.

What do we persevere in? Our confession says we persevere in “a state of grace.” What does that mean? Notice how this paragraph connects the idea of perseverance back to chapter 13 when it says “effectually called and sanctified.” It's talking about our union with Christ. The phrase “state of grace” refers to that, and everything it entails: *i.e.* repentance, sanctification, good works *etc.*

1.2 Expanded

1.2.1 The cause of perseverance

Is perseverance of ourselves?

Augustine (of Hippo, 354-430) has a book on perseverance called *A Treatise On The Gift Of Perseverance (De Dono Perseverantiae)*. He wrote it close to the end of his life. It's a good Calvinist book, and my copy is from *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, published by the Catholics themselves.

Arguing against Pelagius, he says,

But why is that perseverance asked for from God if it is not given by God? Is that, too, a mocking petition, when that is asked from Him which it is known that He does not give, but, though He gives it not, is in man's power; just as that giving of thanks is a mockery, if thanks are given to God for that which He did not give nor do⁵?

He goes on to reference Cyprian's treatise on the Lord's prayer. Cyprian martyred under the Roman Emperor Valerian in the third century. He understands almost every petition in the Lord's prayer as a prayer for perseverance.

Concerning the last petition, Augustine says,

Let any one who dares, tell me whether God cannot give what He has commanded to be asked from Him. Certainly he who affirms this, I say not is a fool, but he is mad. But God commanded that His saints should say to Him in prayer, "Lead us not into temptation⁶."

Waldron goes a little further, saying "The faithfulness of God is itself at stake in the preservation of the saints and is impugned by the teaching that people can fall from grace⁷."

I liked this quote from chapter 4 of Augustine's treatise:

[...] there are three points, as you know, which the catholic Church chiefly maintains against [the Pelagians]. One of these is, that the grace of God is not given according to our merits; because even every one of the merits of the righteous is God's gift, and is conferred by God's grace⁸.

So if we obtain our perseverance by petitioning the Lord, then it is certainly an unmerited gift from him, just as the beginning graces, such as justification are. And we are called and justified by his grace, but we also persevere by his grace.

And Paul, in Philippians 1:6, can say,

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

⁵The Church Fathers. *The Ante-Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*. Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition. Location 280,823.

⁶The Church Fathers. Location 280,926.

⁷Waldron. p. 259

⁸The Church Fathers. Location 280,835.

Renihan says, “/Perseverance/ arises from the fact that God is the one at work, and he will not abandon his purpose⁹.”

1.2.2 The obstacles of perseverance

Waldron points out that the word “perseverance” carries with it a connotation of constancy in the face of difficulty, or opposition. And our confession acknowledges here the “temptations of Satan,” and, in

The latter two thirds of paragraph describes the situation. God begets in us the graces, and fruits of the Spirit which, it says, lead to immortality. But it mentions also storms, floods, unbelief, temptations of Satan, clouds, and obscurity. Paragraph 3 adds the world, and the “prevalency of corruption,” in other words: the flesh.

Trials and temptations are necessarily hard. To illustrate the persevering believer I like to compare David in Psalm 42, with King Saul. Remember paragraph 5 of the chapter on Providence? It says, “The most wise, righteous, and gracious God doth oftentimes leave for a season His own children to manifold temptations and the corruptions of their own hearts.” When the Lord would no longer answer King Saul¹⁰, he turned to a medium. He wasn’t so much grieved by losing God’s presence, but by losing God’s approval and support. He thought a witch at Endor would suffice. But in psalm 42, the psalmist is inconsolable. There’s no comfort that can replace the Lord. If his longing is as a dehydrated deer panting for water, how can he have any satisfaction in anything *but* the Lord? This is the persevering believer. We have to answer like Peter, “Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.” There’s just no alternative.

1.2.3 The assurances of perseverance

This part of our confession really ties back to the chapter 13. Back in that chapter we expanded on our struggle with sin in sanctification. This paragraph adds that trials and temptations “shall never be able to take [us] off that foundation and rock which by faith [we] are fastened upon.”

It says further that we are kept by the power of God unto salvation “where [we] shall enjoy [our] purchased possession, [being] engraved upon the palm of his hands, and [having our names] written in the book of life from all eternity.”

⁹Renihan. Location 7342.

¹⁰The case of Saul and David are not exactly parallel as a review of Chapter 5 of the 1689 will show. Saul’s case relates directly to the Lord’s dealing with the wicked in paragraph 6. David’s case relates to paragraph 5.

2 The grounds of perseverance

This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election,⁴ flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father, upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ and union with him,⁵ the oath of God,⁶ the abiding of his Spirit, and the seed of God within them,⁷ and the nature of the covenant of grace;⁸ from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.

- 4 Rom. 8:30, 9:11,16
- 5 Rom. 5:9, 10; John 14:19
- 6 Heb. 6:17–18
- 7 1 John 3:9
- 8 Jer. 32:40

2.1 Their presupposition

The confession begins the second paragraph by addressing the Arminian presupposition that we persevere on the strength of our free will. This isn't just Arminian though, is it? It's natural to humanity. Remember what Paul said to our brothers in the Galatian Church? "O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified. ² Let me ask you only this: Did you receive the Spirit by works of the law or by hearing with faith? ³ Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?"

So as Augustine argued, "It is God's Grace Both that Man Comes to Him, and that Man Does Not Depart from Him."

Renihan quotes James Durham, who says that the doctrine of free-will "overturns the Perseverance of the Saints; for if Believing depend on Free-will, then our Perseverance depends on it also, for if Mans Free-will change, he may fall back and break his neck in a manner, at the very threshold of Heaven."

2.2 Their identity

Our confession says that our perseverance depends rather on five things.

1. The immutability of the decree of election “³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.” (Romans 8:30) This is talking about predestination in the decree. Note that those predestined and those glorified are the same group. Those who persevere to glory do so because of the decree¹¹.
2. The efficacy of work of Christ

Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more **shall we be saved** by him from the wrath of God. ¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. ¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:9-11)

We’re talking about both ends of our salvation here again. Since we’re justified by his blood, we shall be saved. Christ’s work does not fail.

John 14:19 says, “¹⁹ Yet a little while and the world will see me no more, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live.”

There’s also Christ’s work of intercession. It says in Hebrews that our great high priest “continues forever.” ²⁵ Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.” And Romans 8:34 says, “³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.” So we might say that our perseverance depends on the Father’s love for his Son. Who can imagine Christ’s intercession to be ineffective?

3. The perpetuity of the indwelling spirit “²¹ And it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, ²² and who has also put his seal on us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” (2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

“⁵ He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee.” (2 Corinthians 5:5)

¹¹See chapter 3.

¹³ In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory. (Ephesians 1:13-14)

“³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” (Ephesians 4:30)

Renihan makes the point that our perseverance is a Trinitarian work¹². We’ve so far seen that it stands on the Father’s decree, the Son’s effective work, and Spirit’s indwelling.

4. The dependability of the oath of God

¹⁷ So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, ¹⁸ so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. (Hebrews 6:17-18)

5. The infallibility of the covenant of grace

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest (Jeremiah 31:31-34 ESV)

Jeremiah further says in chapter 32, verse 40: “⁴⁰ I will make with them an everlasting covenant, that I will not turn away from doing good to them. And I will put the fear of me in their hearts, that they may not turn from me.”

¹²Renihan. Location 7395.

Here we're starting to touch on our differences with the pedobaptists. They argue say the New Covenant isn't really new; it's, rather, a new administration of the Old Covenant. They say that the sign of baptism is a 1:1 update of the sign of circumcision. But Jeremiah here says that this New Covenant is "not like" the old one. He says the Lord will put the fear of him in our hearts so that we won't turn from him. Whoever is under this covenant is permanently under it.

Waldron says,

The idea that anyone who has a genuine title to the New Covenant, who really is in the New Covenant, may fail to continue and persevere in it and finally perishes is foreign to the Bible. The idea that babies of believers are in the new Covenant requires the added notion that all of them will persevere and be saved. No paedobaptist believes that. The emphatic assertion of the Scriptures is that all those ever brought into the New Covenant are finally saved¹³.

2.3 Their result

3 The difficulty with perseverance

And though they may, through the temptation of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins, and for a time continue therein,⁹ whereby they incur God's displeasure and grieve his Holy Spirit,¹⁰ come to have their graces and comforts impaired,¹¹ have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded,¹² hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves,¹³ yet shall they renew their repentance and be preserved through faith in Christ Jesus to the end.¹⁴

- 9 Matt. 26:70,72,74
- 10 Isa. 64:5,9; Eph. 4:30
- 11 Ps. 51:10,12
- 12 Ps. 32:3-4

¹³Waldron. p. 260-261

- 13 2 Sam. 12:14
- 14 Luke 22:32,61–62

3.1 The various causes of backsliding

We have the World, the flesh, and the devil mentioned here.

In Matt. 26:70,72,74 we have the world in the form of fearing men:

⁷⁰ But he denied it before them all, saying, “I do not know what you mean.” ⁷¹ And when he went out to the entrance, another servant girl saw him, and she said to the bystanders, “This man was with Jesus of Nazareth.” ⁷² And again he denied it with an oath: “I do not know the man.” ⁷³ After a little while the bystanders came up and said to Peter, “Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you.” ⁷⁴ Then he began to invoke a curse on himself and to swear, “I do not know the man.” And immediately the rooster crowed.

Maybe the devil is involved, because we also have Luke 22:31:

³¹ “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, ³² but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail.

One thing I like to say is that sin is not systematic. It can’t always be reduced to a single cause. When you sin you never break exactly one single commandment. And it’s impossible to fully clean up after. It’s chaotic because it’s a rebellion—a treason—against a God of order. We can’t escape the our flesh, or its corruption. We can’t escape the World or the devil, for that matter. But our confession mentions also that we may “neglect of means of [our] preservation.” What are the means of our preservation?

3.2 The tragic fruits of backsliding

1. We incur the displeasure of God Isa. 64:5,9;

⁵ You meet him who joyfully works righteousness,
those who remember you in your ways.
Behold, you were angry, and we sinned;
in our sins we have been a long time, and shall we be saved?
⁹ Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people.

Eph. 4:30 tells us, “³⁰ And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”

2. We have our graces and comforts impaired Ps. 51:10,12

¹⁰ Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew a right spirit within me.

¹¹ Cast me not away from your presence,
and take not your Holy Spirit from me.

¹² Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and uphold me with a willing spirit.

3. We have our hearts hardened, and consciences wounded Ps. 32:3–4

³ For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.

⁴ For day and night your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer.

Ps. 73:21-22

²¹ When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in
heart, ²² I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward
you.

4. We hurt and scandalize others

2 Sam. 12:14 “Nevertheless, because by this deed you have
utterly scorned the LORD, the child who is born to you shall
die.”

1 Timothy 6:1 implies that poor conduct in the respective stations of
our lives could cause the name of God to be reviled:

Let all who are under a yoke as bondservants regard their
own masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of
God and the teaching may not be reviled. ² Those who have
believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground
that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better
since those who benefit by their good service are believers
and beloved.

The same with Titus 2:5:

³ Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, ⁴ and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled.

It's not a light thing to scandalize others. Luke 17:2 says, "It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin."

It's especially shameful to be set straight by the ungodly. In John Bunyan's autobiography he mentions this episode:

26 Now therefore I went on in sin with great greediness of mind, still grudging that I could not be so satisfied with it, as I would. This did continue with me about a month, or more; but one day, as I was standing at a neighbour's shop window, and there cursing and swearing, and playing the madman, after my wonted manner, there sate within, the woman of the house, and heard me; who, though she also was a very loose and ungodly wretch, yet protested that I swore and cursed at that most fearful rate, that she was made to tremble to hear me; and told me further, that I was the ungodliest fellow for swearing, that she ever heard in all her life; and that I, by thus doing, was able to spoil all the youth in the whole town, if they come but in my company.

27 At this reproof I was silenced, and put to secret shame; and that too, as I thought, before the God of heaven;

5. We bring temporal judgments upon ourselves Remember Ananias and Sapphira.

Also 1 Corinthians 11:

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. ²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. ³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.

There's also always the consequences of our sin.

3.3 The positive resolution of backsliding

Luke 22:32,61–62

But when we fall into sin, our confession says, if we're persevering saints, we'll renew our repentance.

We can be pretty sure Ahab wasn't in the kingdom, but so how willing the Lord is to show grace to one like him. 1 Kings 21:

²⁵ (There was none who sold himself to do what was evil in the sight of the LORD like Ahab, whom Jezebel his wife incited. ²⁶ He acted very abominably in going after idols, as the Amorites had done, whom the LORD cast out before the people of Israel.) ²⁷ And when Ahab heard those words, he tore his clothes and put sackcloth on his flesh and fasted and lay in sackcloth and went about dejectedly. ²⁸ And the word of the LORD came to Elijah the Tishbite, saying, ²⁹ "Have you seen how Ahab has humbled himself before me? Because he has humbled himself before me, I will not bring the disaster in his days; but in his son's days I will bring the disaster upon his house."

I mention this episode with Ahab because it illustrates God's merciful character. We should never fear to repent and humble ourselves before the Lord. In a backslidden state, it's hard to return. There's a sense of unworthiness, and maybe that we can't *really* commit to return the way we should. That's true. We're unworthy, and we need to repent of our repentance. But observe how ready the Lord is to forgive.

1 John 1 "⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."

Psalms 32

⁵ I acknowledged my sin to you,
and I did not cover my iniquity;
I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD,"
and you forgave the iniquity of my sin.

Luke 15

²¹ And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' ²² But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe,

and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. ²³ And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. ²⁴ For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to celebrate.

The Lord has repeatedly shown his readiness to forgive.