

The Perseverance of the Saints

WCF Ch 17.1 They, whom God hath accepted in his Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by his Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

RP Testimony 17.1. Men may profess faith in Jesus Christ and have the outward appearance of being regenerate, for a time, and yet finally fall away from this profession.

2. We reject the view that, because it appears to happen in human observation, true believers can fall away and be eternally lost.

3. The Church cannot discern hypocrites so long as they continue to profess the true religion, and appear obedient to the law of God.

4. We reject the view that the Church is able to judge the hearts of men.

WCF 17.2 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.

WCF 17.3 Nevertheless, they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalency of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and, for a time, continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit, come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts, have their hearts hardened, and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.

RP Testimony 17.5 We reject the accusation that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is opposed to the believers' responsibility to pursue their own growth in holiness.

I. Though Truly Saved, the Christian may Temporarily Backslide and Commit Sin (continued)

WCF Chapter 13.2 [Sanctification is] *yet imperfect in this life.* [In this life there are abiding] *still some remnants of corruption in every part; whence ariseth a continual and irreconcilable war, the flesh lusting against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh.*

As long as the believer remains in this world his state is one of warfare. He suffers temporary reverses and may for a time appear to have lost all faith; yet if he has been once truly saved, he cannot fall away completely from grace. If once he has experienced the inner change which comes through regeneration he will sooner or later return to the fold and be saved. When he comes to himself he confesses his sins and asks forgiveness, never doubting that he is saved. His lapse into sin may have injured him severely and may have brought destruction to others; but so far as he is personally concerned it is only temporary.

Grace may at times seem to be lost to a child of God when it is indeed not so. The sun is eclipsed, but regains its former splendor. The trees lose all their leaves and fruit in winter, but has fresh buddings with the spring. Israel flees once, or even twice, before her enemies, and yet they conquer the land of promise. The Christian, too, falls many times, but is finally saved. It is unthinkable that God's elect should fail of salvation. "There is no possibility of their escaping the omnipotent power of God. so that, like Jonah, who fled from the will of God, which was to carry the message to Nineveh, yet was pursued even into the belly of the fish by the power of God until he willingly obeyed God's command, so they will eventually return to the Saviour, and after confession receive pardon for their sins and be saved."

RP Testimony 17.5 We reject the accusation that the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is opposed to the believers' responsibility to pursue their own growth in holiness.

WCF 18.3 This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be partaker of it: yet, being enabled by the Spirit to know the things which are freely given him of God, he may, without extraordinary revelation, in the right use of ordinary means, attain thereunto. And therefore it is the duty of everyone to give all diligence to make his calling and election sure, that thereby his heart may be enlarged in peace and joy in the Holy Ghost, in love and thankfulness to God, and in strength and cheerfulness in the duties of obedience, the proper fruits of this assurance; so far is it from inclining men to looseness.

II. An Outward Profession of Righteousness is Not Always a Proof that the Person is a True Christian

We have no great difficulty in disposing of those cases where apparently true believers have gone into final apostasy. Both Scripture and experience teach us that we are often mistaken in our judgment of our fellow men, that sometimes it is practically impossible for us to know for certain that they are true Christians. The tares were never wheat, and the bad fish were never good, in spite of the fact that their true nature was not at first recognized. Since Satan can so alter his appearance that he is mistaken for an angel of light (II Cor. 11:14), it is no marvel that sometimes his ministers also fashion themselves as doers of righteousness, with the most deceptive appearances of holiness, devotion, piety and zeal. Certainly an outward profession is not always a guarantee that the soul is saved. Like the Pharisees of old, they may only desire to "make a fair show in the flesh," and deceive many. Jesus warned His disciples, "there shall arise false Christs, and false prophets, and shall show great signs and wonders; so as to lead astray, if possible, even the elect," Matt. 24:24; and He quoted the prophet Isaiah to the effect that, "This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, Teaching as their doctrines the precepts of men," Mark 7:6, 7. Paul warned against those who were "false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ," II Cor. 11:13. And to the Romans he wrote, "They are not all Israel, that are of Israel: neither, because they are Abraham's seed are they all children," Rom. 9:6, 7. John mentions those who "call themselves apostles, and they are not," Rev. 2:2; and a little later he adds, "I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead," Rev. 3:1.

2 Peter 2:20-22 For if, after they have escaped the pollutions of the world through the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overcome, the latter end is worse for them than the beginning. 21 For it would have been better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them. 22 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."

Some fall away from a profession of faith, but none fall away from the saving grace of God. Those who do fall have never known the latter. They are the stony-ground hearers, who have no root in themselves, but who endure for a while; and when tribulation or persecution arises, straightway they stumble. They are then said to have given up or to have made shipwreck of that faith which they never possessed except in appearance. Some of these become sufficiently enlightened in the scheme of the doctrines of the Gospel that they are able to preach or to teach them to others, and yet are themselves entirely destitute of real saving grace. When such fall away they are no proofs, nor instances, of the final apostasy of real saints.

III. Arminian Sense of Insecurity

A consistent Arminian, with his doctrines of free will and of falling from grace, can never in this life be certain of his eternal salvation. He may, indeed, have the assurance of his present salvation, but he can have only a hope of his final salvation. He may regard his final salvation as highly probable, but he cannot know it as a certainty. He has seen many of his fellow Christians backslide and perish after making a good start. Why may not he do the same thing? So long as men remain in this world they have the remnants of the old sinful nature clinging to them; they are surrounded by the most alluring and deceptive pleasures of the world and the most subtle temptations of the Devil... If Arminianism were true, Christians would still be in very dangerous positions, with their eternal destiny suspended upon the probability that their weak, creaturely wills would continue to choose right... [The Arminian] system 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.

In regard to spiritual matters, a state of doubt is a state of misery. The assurance that Christians can never be separated from the love of God is one of the greatest comforts of the Christian life. To deny this doctrine is to destroy the grounds for any rejoicing among the saints on earth; for what kind of rejoicing can those have who believe that they may at any time be deceived and led astray? If our sense of security is based only on our changeable and wavering natures, we can never know the inward calm and peace which, should characterize the Christian.

It is not until we duly appreciate this wonderful truth, that our salvation is not suspended on our weak and wavering love to God, but rather upon His eternal and unchangeable love to us, that we can have peace and certainty in the Christian life. And only the Calvinist, who knows himself to be absolutely safe in the hands of God, can have that inward sense of peace and security, knowing that in the eternal counsels of God he has been chosen to be cleansed and glorified and that nothing can thwart that purpose.

IV. Purpose of the Scripture Warnings Against Apostasy

Matt 7:21-23 “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ 23 And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’

2 Cor 13:5 Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Do you not know yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you are disqualified.

Heb 10:26-29 For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, 27 but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries. 28 Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. 29 Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?

Arminians sometimes bring forth from the Scriptures the warnings against apostasy or falling away, which are addressed to believers, and which, it is argued, imply a possibility of their failing away. There is, of course, a sense in which it is possible for believers to fail away,---when they are viewed simply in themselves, with reference to their own powers and capacities, and apart from God's purpose or design with respect to them. And it is admitted by all that believers can fall into sin temporarily. The primary purpose of these passages, however, is to induce men to co-operate willingly with God for the accomplishment of His purposes. They are inducements which produce constant humility, watchfulness, and diligence. In the same way a parent, in order to get the willing co-operation of a child, may tell it to stay out of the way of an approaching automobile, when all the time the parent has no intention of ever letting the child get into a position where it would be injured. When God plies a soul with fears of falling it is by no means a proof that God in His secret purpose intends to permit him to fall. These fears may be the very means which God has designed to keep him from falling. Secondly, 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 these must be consistent with each other, or the Holy Spirit must contradict Himself. Plainly it is not the latter. Thirdly, these warnings are, even for believers, incitements to greater faith and prayer. Fourthly, they are designed to show man his duty rather than his ability, and his weakness rather than his strength. Fifthly, they convince men of their want of holiness and of their dependence upon God. And, sixthly, they serve as restraints on unbelievers, and leave them without excuse.