

# WCF 17: OF THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

## Introduction

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is very closely interconnected with the doctrine of Assurance, which is the subject of the very next chapter in the Confession. Indeed, it is impossible to maintain the doctrine of Assurance without first believing in the doctrine of Perseverance. *WCF 17*, thus, lays an important foundation for the next chapter.

## On the Certainty of Perseverance

*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.*<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Phil 1:6; 2 Pet 1:10; Jn 10:28–29; 1 Jn 3:9; 1 Pet 1:5, 9.*

This statement sets forth the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints in no uncertain terms. It deals with the question of whether true believers will continue in their faith and in the state of salvation till the very end. Calvinists believe that all those whom God has elected in eternity will be saved forever; with no possibility of them being lost. Arminians on the other hand believe that it is possible for truly regenerate people to totally and finally fall from grace into eternal reprobation. In fact, the Roman Catholic Church, whose doctrine is purely Arminian, declares in her authoritative statement, “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” (*Council of Trent*).

A.A. Hodge summarise the reasoning behind the Arminian view this way:

“Since neither the decree of God, nor the atonement of Christ, nor the grace of the Holy Ghost determines the certain salvation of any individual—since the application and effect of the atonement and of the renewing and sanctifying influences of the Spirit depend upon the free will of every man in his own case, it necessarily follows that the perseverance of any man in the grace once received must also depend entirely upon his own will. And since the human will is essentially fallible and capable of change,... it follows of course that the believer is at all times liable to total apostasy, and... to final perdition” (*The Confession of Faith*, pp. 233–234).

Now, many Arminians today claim that they do believe the doctrine of perseverance and the statement, “once saved, always saved,” holds true for them. Sadly, though, they fail to see how the doctrine of Perseverance is, in fact, inconsistent with every other point of Arminianism. At least, the original Arminians were more consistent than many of their present day adherents!

Before we continue, let us note:

- The name used in the original Five points of Calvinism (Canons of Dordt) is the **perseverance** of saints. This word emphasises the responsibility of every believer to continue or persevere in faith and holiness. Jesus says in Matthew 24:13, “But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.” It was used in response to the charge that the doctrine of Sovereign Grace encouraged Christians to live in sin, carelessness and lawlessness.
- Some Calvinists prefer to use the word **preservation** of saints. The emphasis here is on the fact that it is God who preserves His people from totally and finally falling away, and not they themselves. John 10:28–29 teaches this very clearly, “And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father’s hand.” It emphasises the same thing that the other points of Calvinism emphasise, namely, the sovereignty of God in salvation and the truth that salvation is all of grace from beginning to end.
- Sometimes, the name **Eternal security** is used to describe this doctrine. This phrase emphasises the comfort and assurance that true believers may enjoy, i.e., that they are secure in their salvation both in this life, and in the life to come (Rom 8:33–39).
- It is important to notice that the word ‘**Saints**’ and not ‘sinners’ is used. The word ‘saint,’ when applied to believers, in itself implies a person who is living and walking in holiness. A saint is not someone who lives continually in sin and whose life bears no marks of regeneration whatsoever. A popular teaching of many people today is the ‘Carnal Christian’ doctrine, which inevitably leads to what we would call

“perseverance of sinners.” The carnal Christian, according to leading dispensationalist Lewis Sperry Chafer, is characterised by a ‘walk’ that is on the same plane as that of the natural man. And such a “Carnal Christian,” who persists in his carnality all his life, will still be saved at the end!

## On the Basis of Perseverance

*17.2 This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the degree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father;<sup>1</sup> upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ;<sup>2</sup> the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them;<sup>3</sup> and the nature of the covenant of grace:<sup>4</sup> from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.<sup>5</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>2 Tim 2:18–19; Jer 31:3; <sup>2</sup>Heb 10:10, 14; 13:20–21; 9:12–15; Rom 8:33–39; Jn 17:11, 24; Lk 22:32; Heb 7:25; <sup>3</sup>Jn 14:16–17; 1 Jn 2:27; 3:9; <sup>4</sup>Jer 32:40; <sup>5</sup>Jn 10:28; 2 Thes 3:3; 1 Jn 2:19.

The basis of perseverance does not lie in the free will of man. Instead, the Confession gives us a fourfold ground of perseverance which is certain and infallible. They are: (a) the immutability of the eternal decree of election; (b) the merit and intercession of Christ; (c) the constant indwelling and preserving of the Holy Spirit; and (d) the provisions of the Covenant of Grace.

- a. We saw in *WCF* 3 of the Confession that God decreed the salvation of certain men, and that His decree is unchangeable and sure. Arminians cannot claim God’s eternal decree in election as a sure ground of perseverance because, for them, God’s decree is based on His foreknowledge and not His foreordination.
- b. Then in *WCF* 8, we studied the work of Christ as our Mediator and Redeemer. We saw how, through His active and passive obedience, He obtained eternal redemption for us and that He is even right now making intercessions for His people. Since the mediation of Christ cannot possibly fail, we can be sure that none of His people will ever be lost.
- c. In John 14:16, Christ says, “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you **for ever**.” The Spirit of God dwells in every true believer and, according to Christ, will never depart from us. As long as we have the Spirit of God abiding in us, we can be sure that we’ll never finally fall away from grace.
- d. In *WCF* 7, we read about God’s Covenant of Grace which He made with all His elect in Christ, and it is a sure covenant which can never be broken. Thus, all who come under this covenant cannot be lost.

## On the Possibility of Backsliding

*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;<sup>1</sup> and, for a time, continue therein:<sup>2</sup> whereby they incur God’s displeasure,<sup>3</sup> and grieve His Holy Spirit;<sup>4</sup> come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts;<sup>5</sup> have their hearts hardened,<sup>6</sup> and their consciences wounded;<sup>7</sup> hurt and scandalize others,<sup>8</sup> and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>1</sup>Mt 26:70, 72, 74; <sup>2</sup>Ps 51:title, 14; <sup>3</sup>Isa 64:5, 7,9; 2 Sam 11:27; <sup>4</sup>Eph 4:30; <sup>5</sup>Ps 51:8, 10, 12; Rev 2:4; Song 5:2–4, 6; <sup>6</sup>Isa 63:17; Mk 6:52; 16:14; <sup>7</sup>Ps 32:3–4; 51:8; <sup>8</sup>2 Sam 12:14; <sup>9</sup>Ps 89:31–32; 1 Cor 11:32.

- Though a true believer will persevere in the faith forever, it is possible for him to fall into some grievous sin, and continue in that state for a time. The doctrine of the Perseverance of Saints does not in any way teach that a true believer will never ever sin against God as long as he is in this mortal body. There are several biblical examples of saints falling into sin, e.g., Moses, David, and Peter. These all fell into some lamentable sin for a time, even though they were true believers. But how is it possible that sin could overcome those in whom the Spirit of God indwells? In other words, what are the possible reasons for a believer’s falling into sin? The Confession gives us four: (a) the temptation of the world; (b) the seduction of Satan; (c) the remaining corruption of our nature; (d) the neglect of the means of grace. Jesus told the disciples in Matthew 26:41, “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation: the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”
- What are the effects of such lapses? We are given three: (a) God is displeased and the Holy Spirit is grieved. 2 Samuel 11:27b, “But the thing that David had done displeased the LORD.” (b) The believer is, to a certain degree, deprived of their graces and comforts. Our hearts are hardened and consciences are wounded. And God may visit us with temporal judgment. (c) Others around us may be stumbled and grieved because of our sin. 2 Samuel 12:14, “Howbeit, because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of the LORD to blaspheme....”