

# Perseverance of Saints

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*The young reader of this article is encouraged to read first the 5<sup>th</sup> head of doctrine of the Canons of Dordt and to have it before him as he reads the article.*

## Introduction

Can one who has been saved go lost?

It often seems as though those who are saved for a while lose their salvation and perish in unbelief and wickedness of life.

Very likely, every young person who is reading this issue of *Beacon Lights* knows another young person who was baptized, grew up in a Christian home, made public confession of faith, and attended church faithfully for years, but who later left the church, renounced Christ and the Christian faith, and now lives a wicked life, without repentance. It seems as though one who once was saved has lost his or her salvation. In the language of 1 John 2:19, there are always those who “went out from us.”

It is not only a young person who struggles with the seeming falling away unto damnation of those who once were saved. It was a hard struggle of faith for me, though a minister, to hear once of the suicide of a very dear friend, for years a confessing Protestant Reformed Christian, and often an elder in the church.

These and other similar experiences in the church raise the question, “Can a saved child of God lose his salvation, and perish?”

Our own experience of our own spiritual weakness makes the question of perseverance a personal struggle. Such is the power of our temptations to sin and such is our own strong inclination to yield to the temptation, or, if we have yielded, the strong inclination to continue in the sin, that we wonder about ourselves, whom we know to have been saved, “Is it possible that I myself might fall away from Christ, abide in this falling away, and so perish finally in hell, forever separated from Jesus Christ?”

In confessing perseverance, in the 5<sup>th</sup> and last “head,” or chapter, the Canons of Dordt recognizes the temptation to doubt the perseverance of saints. “Error 7” of the rejection of errors section of Head 5 of the Canons refers to the parable of the sower, in Matthew 13, which teaches that there is a similarity between those who “believe for a time” and “true believers.” Canons, 5.8 acknowledges that so sinful and weak are true believers that “with regard to themselves” it “would undoubtedly happen” that they would backslide “and perish.”

## What Perseverance is

This same article—Canons, 5.8—confesses that “it is utterly impossible” that saved children of God lose their salvation and perish in sin and damnation.

Head 5 of the Canons confesses “the perseverance of saints.” This is the heading of the last section of the Canons. This confession is a fundamental aspect of the Reformed faith. It is also the great comfort of the Reformed believer, young as well as old.

The gospel-truth of the perseverance of saints is that every one whom God saves by regenerating him and giving him faith in Jesus will continue in this salvation to the very end of life, so that he is saved forever. This activity of persevering is a struggle for the Christian. It is not easy. One “*perseveres*” against hardships and opposition. Continuing in faith and obedience and, thus, in salvation is not like “falling off a log.” In fact, so difficult is the struggle to continue in faith and in the Christian life that 1 Peter 4:18 declares that the “righteous [are] scarcely...saved.” They *are* saved, every one, but as it seems to us ourselves “scarcely.” We barely make it to the end. So difficult is persevering in the way of salvation for the righteous in this life!

The sole reason why all the righteous, that is, those who believe in Jesus with true faith, are saved is that God *preserves* them. The *perseverance* of saints is also the *preservation* of saints. Saints persevere because God preserves them. Having begun the work of salvation in them by his Holy Spirit, he preserves in them this salvation against all temptations from without and against all the power of sin within themselves.

Perseverance is like a little boy struggling to climb Long’s Peak in Colorado. The mountain is steep, and the pathway to the top is dangerous. But the lad keeps on going, up and up, until he comes safely, if exhausted, to the top. He perseveres. But the reason he perseveres is that his strong father has his arms around the boy, propelling him by the power of the father and guiding him on the narrow path so that he never falls over the precipices. The child perseveres because father preserves.

The Canons speaks of our “perseverance in the faith” (Art. 9). We victoriously continue to believe. The Canons also speak of God’s preservation of us, and attributes our persevering to God’s preservation: “God...powerfully preserves them [all those who are ‘converted’---DJE] therein [in ‘a state of grace’—DJE], even to the end” (Art. 3).

Our perseverance is the great benefit of God’s election of us, of Christ’s death for us, and of the Holy Spirit’s saving work within us. That is, this last grand, Reformed doctrine of salvation depends upon the preceding doctrines in the Canons. That perseverance is due to all the other gracious works of God confessed by the Canons is the confession of the Canons in Article 8: “...since his counsel [of election—DJE] cannot be changed,” etc.

But perseverance is the glorious purpose and goal of the other works of God in salvation. Without perseverance as their end, the other works of salvation would be illusory, senseless, and useless. What good is election, atonement, and the regenerating work of the Spirit if those elected, atoned for, and born again perish in hell? The purpose of God in electing, atoning, and regenerating is that the elect be saved in this life and everlastingly. Since God is not a God of nonsense and failure, every one whom he elects, redeems, and regenerates he also preserves unto everlasting life.

## What Perseverance is Not

Perseverance is not that the saved child of God is perfectly delivered from sin in this life. On the contrary, every saved child of God retains a depraved nature and commits many sins. Perseverance is that sin does not *govern* the life of the child of God. Perseverance is that when he does sin, he repents (see Articles 1–3).

Perseverance is not that the saved child of God cannot fall into gross sin, sometimes very deeply. The life of David and the life of Peter prove otherwise. The Canons refers to “the lamentable fall of David, Peter, and other saints” (Art. 4). But perseverance is that even then the child of God does not lose the grace of his new birth and the indwelling Holy Spirit. And perseverance is that this sinning child of God will repent, and be forgiven (Art. 7).

But neither is perseverance simply the truth that all the *elect* will finally be saved. The 5<sup>th</sup> of the great doctrines of the Reformed faith in the Canons is not “the perseverance of the *elect*,” but the perseverance “of *saints*,” that is, holy ones. It is the continuing in the spiritual condition of believing and of living a holy life on the part of those in whom God has begun the work of salvation.

Persevering, therefore, is certainly not, as the enemies like to present it, that one will be saved regardless how he lives, as though one can live wickedly, continue in this wickedness without repentance and conversion, and still expect to go to heaven (see the “Conclusion” of the Canons: “. . .that it renders men carnally secure, since they are persuaded by it that nothing can hinder the salvation of the elect, let them live as they please. . .”). On the contrary, perseverance is that one *continues in faith and holiness of life, to the very end*.

## The False Doctrine Opposed

In its confession of perseverance, the Canons contends with the false doctrine that teaches that one may enjoy the beginning of God’s work of salvation, but lose this salvation and perish forever in hell. One may be saved today, but go lost tomorrow, and forever. The reason for this God-dishonoring and terrifying doctrine is that it makes perseverance the work of the sinner himself. It is a human perseverance without divine preservation. God does not preserve the saved sinner; he must preserve himself. In fact, this heresy teaches that the perseverance of saints is “a condition of the new covenant” (error 1 of the rejection of errors).

At the time that the Canons was adopted by the universal synod of the Reformed churches, those who taught this conditional, losable salvation were a definite party in the churches who were known as Arminians. Today, a majority of professing Christians in all the world believe and teach the heresy that the Canons condemn in the 5<sup>th</sup> head.

Today, despite their confession as Reformed churches, also many Reformed churches teach conditional perseverance. Like the old Arminians at Dordt, they teach that perseverance is “a condition of the new covenant,” so that many who are regenerated and believing saints can and do lose their salvation and perish forever. Among these unfaithful churches and theologians, who rebel against the 5<sup>th</sup> head of doctrine of the Canons, and thus against the gospel of grace, are

all those who teach what they call the “federal [covenant] vision.” Just as did the old Arminians, these heretics teach that perseverance is not a gracious work of God, but a “condition of the new covenant.” According to them, many baptized children of believers are born again and receive the beginnings of the new life of Christ, but refuse to persevere, with the result that they lose their salvation and are damned. The 5<sup>th</sup> head of doctrine of the Canons condemns their false doctrine and warns the Reformed churches against their heresy.

### **Biblical Basis**

The biblical basis of the doctrine of perseverance is abundant and clear. Most of the passages to which the Canons explicitly refers are in the rejection of errors section at the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> head. More than a dozen passages, many of them long, are quoted. The young person reading this article is urged to read the biblical passages in this section of the Canons. One of these passages is Romans 8:39: “No creature shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

### **Assurance of Persevering**

Perseverance is a truth of the greatest comfort to the believer. Who can sufficiently praise, or be thankful for, one’s being certain, beyond any shadow of doubt, that he will continue in the salvation God has begun in him, so as certainly to be saved eternally in the new world that is coming?

Who can do justice to the horror of the terror of living in fear that one may fall away from Christ to the devil so that his eternal future will be the damnation of hell?

Not only does God preserve his elect, saved, believing children, but also he gives them *assurance* of his preservation of them. He does not merely assure them that all saints are preserved. Of what good is this, if one does not know the preservation of himself personally? He assures them that they themselves, as saints, will persevere.

The Canons teaches this personal assurance of persevering: “Of this preservation of the elect to salvation, and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers for themselves may and do obtain assurance...” (Art. 9). Not as though believers never “struggle with various carnal doubts” (Art. 11), which doubts are always “carnal,” that is, wicked, and from which doubts they are always delivered: “the Holy Spirit again inspires them with the comfortable assurance of persevering” (Art. 11).

This assurance does not come from “any peculiar revelation... independent of the Word of God but springs from faith in God’s promises...in His Word” (Art. 10). The faith by which we are saved *is* assurance of continuing and everlasting salvation. It is assurance, not by receiving mysterious signs and having mystical experiences (the Canons’ “peculiar revelation”), but by resting on the promises of the word of God.

As the Canons state, this assurance is “solid comfort” in life and in death. Without this assurance, which is only a reality in the gospel confessed by the Canons of Dordt, we would be “of all men most miserable” (Art. 10).

One who is saved cannot go lost! Those who “went out from us,” according to 1 John 2:19, “were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.”

I who am saved by faith am assured that *I* cannot go lost! “Not in consequence of [my] own merits or strength, but of God’s free mercy” (Art. 8).

Originally published in:

Vol. 77 No. 9 September 2018