

PERSEVERANCE: THE OTHER SIDE OF THE COIN

by J.A. Tony Tosti

"It is a faithful saying...If we deny him he also will deny us..."
(2 Tim. 2:11-13).

"But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 10:33).

Much like other doctrines that have to do with God's truth, the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints has been misunderstood, half-understood, distorted, abused, ignored and even rejected by many down through the corridor of time and up to the present day. And no wonder! The Perseverance of the Saints is a *difficult* doctrine. It is hard to grapple with intellectually. This doctrine has "nothing to do with a theoretical, tensionless and lifeless construction."¹ It requires one to walk along the knife-edge of truth; a path so narrow that even the slightest move to the left or the right will cast one into an abyss of pernicious error.

To "turn to the left" is to move in a direction that will ultimately rob the children of God of the assurance and consolation that, in the midst of the difficulties and flux of this transitory life, God *Himself* will keep them safely to the end. And it is more than that. It is to rob God of the glory that belongs to Him alone in the preservation of His weak and erring children. It is to place the credit and responsibility for preservation on the

¹ G.C. Berkouwer, Faith and Perseverance (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979), p. 23.

shoulders of the one who is least qualified and least able to see the task through to the end: the believer himself.

To "turn to the right" regarding this doctrine is to move in a direction that will tend to encourage laxity and slothfulness on the part of God's true children as they walk through this life, not to mention that it encourages that horrible attitude of taking one's salvation for granted. In addition, it is to move in a direction which does much to confirm unregenerate professors in a false sense of security regarding the matter of their salvation. And it is even more than that. It is to deny God his exclusive right as Sovereign to ordain the means of the preservation of His own.

The Perseverance of the Saints, perhaps more than any other doctrine, requires a precision in our thinking that is, apart from God's enabling, impossible to keep in its proper symmetry. It is one of those doctrines that is "hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort...to their own destruction." May God give us the grace not only to understand this important doctrine but also an ability to communicate it correctly and faithfully.

HISTORY

Although the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints was present in the teaching of our Lord and in the writings of His apostles, its crystallization into a specific formula (as we understand the term "doctrine" today) seems to have its roots in the thinking of Augustine (which becomes apparent in his

controversy with Pelagius).² Later, at the time of the Reformation, the doctrine came into its full expression as contention (that peculiar providence which leads to the further understanding of God's truth by His people) forced the issue. Interestingly enough, Jacobus Arminius (1560-1609) and his followers did not at first hold to what is known today as the "Arminian" position on the subject of Perseverance.³ However, although the conclusion was for the time being undecided as far as Arminius was concerned, it was soon settled not long after his death. The Arminian conclusion was really there all along (at least, seminally) and it was only a matter of time before it came to full fruition. By 1618, the Arminians held strongly to the position that it was possible for a true child of God totally and finally to fall from a state of grace, thereby in the end losing his salvation.

In the development, discussion and hot debate concerning the Perseverance issue, the words "total" and "final" (as they are used to describe "falling away") are key to the understanding of the statements made by the various theological camps. To fall *totally* is to fall completely from a state of grace (although not necessarily a fall from which there is no recovery) and to fall

² See William Cunningham, Historical Theology (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), Vol. I, pp. 355-358; Vol. II, p. 490.

³ "But whether or not these can or cannot through neglect abandon the principles of their being in Christ, embrace again the present world, defect from the holy doctrine once given to them, lose their good consciences, and ignore grace, would first have to be further investigated on the basis of Holy Scripture before we could be able with complete confidence to teach the same". The Remonstrance (1610).

finally is to lose one's salvation forever. The Arminians as mentioned above, concluded (*contra* Arminius) that both a *total* and final fall were possible. The Calvinists, of course, vehemently denied this and vigorously opposed this view. Although the Calvinists would allow that a believer could in fact "fall" (as into lapses of terrible sins) they would not allow that the believer could fall *totally* (i.e., grace was never completely lost) and certainly not *finally*.⁴

THE DOCTRINE TODAY

As was mentioned above, the debate over Perseverance turned primarily around the issue of the *certainty* of salvation; whether or not salvation can in fact be lost, and if so, whether or not it can be lost forever. But in that the major issue involved in the Perseverance controversy was that of the *certainty* of the divine purpose, the obligation of professed believers to continued faith and holiness, though being present in the formulation of the doctrine itself, never really seems to have come to the fore. The battle was over whether or not, in the light of divine faithfulness, a true believer could *totally* and *finally* fall. That was where the battle then raged. Perseverance in holiness, that necessary concomitant to the doctrine (and which was recognized to be such by all of the groups in the debate) was not the real focus of attention. Nobody seems to have had a problem with this aspect of the doctrine.

⁴ For example, see the Canons of Dort, V:4-7 and the Westminster Confession of Faith, XVII:3.

The upshot of this historical emphasis has been, therefore, that the element of human obligation has been relegated to a place of relative unimportance in today's thinking. As a matter of fact, the present-day terminology which has come to replace the theological phrase, "the Perseverance of the Saints", reflects this by its (almost conscious) omission of any reference whatsoever to the *need* to persevere. "The Security of the Believer" and "Eternal Security" are but two examples of this kind of thing. The present-day designation of the doctrine betrays a very one-sided preference for the promise of certainty and a disinterest (if not rejection altogether) of that extremely important matter of *obligation*.⁵ It is understandable that all of this could and did happen. It is, nevertheless, inexcusable. We are never given the liberty to re-work the symmetry of any biblical truth.

One supremely tragic result of this lopsided emphasis over the years has been to comfort those who need desperately to be alarmed and to give assurance to many who need to be shaken from their state of false security. A return to a healthy, fully-symmetrical emphasis on the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints would do much, not only to console those who are truly of the faith, but also to awaken those who presently dwell in "carnal slumber". And it would never allow either to take the matter of salvation for granted.

⁵ See Ernest C. Reisinger's little booklet, What Should We Think of the Carnal Christian? (Banner of Truth) for an analysis and excellent critique of this contemporary aberration of the doctrine of Perseverance. Also, John Murray, Redemption Accomplished and Applied (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1955), pp. 152-156.

It is instructive to see what messages were emphasized during the various spiritual awakenings of history. Certainly, the doctrine that shone forth as the noonday sun was the doctrine of Justification by Faith.⁶ Luther rightly said that the church stands or falls according to her understanding of this doctrine. Another message that was used and evidently honored of God during the Great Awakening was the evangelical preaching of the Law of God for the purpose of bringing conviction of sin.⁷ A third emphasis was that if a person was truly born-again, his life would demonstrate that fact and that this changed life would (must!) continue to be demonstrated throughout the remainder of his earthly sojourn. Never would a man like Jonathan Edwards pronounce another man "saved" and, therefore, "secure".⁸ Godly men of that day left the witness of the assurance of salvation where it belonged: In the hands of God alone. And they knew that this witness of the Holy Spirit in assurance is the possession only of those who

⁶ See Joseph Tracy, The Great Awakening (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1976), pp. 1,10.

⁷ Ibid., pp. 25, 71, 115-116, 123. See also, W.B. Sprague, Lectures on Revivals of Religion (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1958), pp. 98-101, 130-131.

⁸ "I remember to have heard of an individual, who was afterwards greatly distinguished for piety, going to the elder Jonathan Edwards, to whose congregation he belonged, to tell him what God had done for his soul; and after that great and good man had listened to the account of his supposed conversion, and had heard him speak with rapture of the new and delightful views which he had of spiritual objects, and when the individual was expecting that he would do nothing less than congratulate him upon having become a child of God, **he was disappointed beyond measure by simply hearing him say that what he had experienced was an encouragement to him to persevere.**" (Emphasis mine.) Sprague, op.cit., pp. 189-190. How different is the case today!

continue to walk in newness of life.

This third emphasis is nothing other than the practical application of the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. The saints surely *will* persevere; but persevere they *must*. The *certainty* of salvation and the *necessity* to persevere in faith, holiness and obedience are never to be separated. Both are to be declared with all diligence. As a result, this doctrine was truly a two-edged sword in the hands of the godly of other days. *But where is this kind of emphasis today?* Tragically, it is to be found in too few pulpits. And it is no wonder that the professing Church limps along impotently, her ranks too often being filled by so many who merely have but an empty "form of godliness," if even that.

A RETURN TO BIBLICAL SYMMETRY

Having commented briefly on the history and present state of the doctrine, it will be appropriate to notice a few salient features concerning the Perseverance of the Saints with the goal of a return to biblical symmetry in mind. In that there is no lack of evidence and argument to support that aspect of the doctrine which pertains to the *certainty* of salvation for the true believer;⁹ and because the other necessary aspect of the *need* to persevere is so lacking in widespread attention and support, what follows will deal

⁹ See, for example, the following verses: Mt. 18:12-14; Jn. 3:16; 3:36; 5:24; 6:35-40, 47; 10:27-30; 17:11,12,15; Ro. 5:8-10; 8:1,29,30,35-39; 1 Cor. 1:7-9; 10:13; 2 Cor. 4:14,17; Eph. 1:5,13,14; 4:30; Col. 3:3,4; 1 Thess. 5:23,24; 2 Ti. 4:18; Heb. 9:12,15; 10:14; 12:28; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; 1 Jn. 2:19,25; 5:4,11-13, 20; Jude 1, 24-25. And this is by no means exhaustive.

for the most part with the latter rather than the former. It is the *other* side of the Perseverance coin that needs to be re-discovered these days.

If the Church is ever to return to a right view on the subject, both *certainty* and *obligation* need to be restored to their proper place in our understanding and in our teaching. As mentioned above, it is not so much that Scripture is silent on the subject of *obligation*,¹⁰ but rather that inattention (for whatever reason) has relegated it to the theological "bone-pile". And in many cases, because of a refusal to re-think the doctrine (given the previously-mentioned background of the historical debate between Calvinist *certainty* and Arminian *uncertainty*) many individuals and commentators with a "certainty bias" come to the Scripture passages which contain some form of serious admonition to

¹⁰ Various verses of Scripture that are related (some more than others) to the need to persevere ('necessity') are as follows: Mt. 3:8-10; 5:13,20,29-30 (18:8-9); 6:14 (18:35); 7:21-23,24-27; 10:22,32-33; 13:3-23; 21:43; 24:13,45-51; 25:1-13, 14-30; 26:31-35, 56; Mk. 4:1-20,25; 8:34-38; 9:43-49,50; 13:13; 14:27-31, 50; Lk. 3:8-9; 6:43-44, 46-49; 7:23; 8:5-15,18,21; 9:26,62; 12:8-9,35-48; 13:6-9; 14:25-35; 19:26; 21:19,34-36; 22:31-31; Jn. ("believes" in the present-continuous sense) 3:15,16,18,36; 5:24; 6:35,40,47,51 ("eats"), 53-59; 7:37-39 ("believes"/"drinks"); 8:12 ("follows"); 11:25,26; 12:44; 14:12; 20:31; Jn. (other pertinent verses) 5:14; 8:31,51; 10:27-30; 14:23-24; 15:1-17; 16:1-4; Acts 11:23; 13:43; 14:22-23; 20:24,28-31; Romans ("believes") 1:16; 3:22; 4:5, (12), (18-24); Romans (other) 8:4-14,17,23-25; 11:17-24; 14:15,20-21; 1 Cor. 6:9-11; 9:23-27; 10:1-14; 15:2 ("if"); 2 Cor. 6:1-2; 11:1-3; 13:5-6; Gal. 1:6; 4:11; 5:2-4, 19-21; 6:7-9; Eph. 5:3-16; Phil. 2:12-16; 3:10-14; Col. 1:21-23 ("if"); 1 Thess. 3:5,8 ("if"), 13; 1 Ti. 1:6,18-19; 3:6; 4:1,15-16;5:15; 6:10,11-21; 2 Ti. 1:15; 2:11-13,17-19; 4:7-8, 9-15; Heb. 1:14-2:3; 3:6-4:2, 11,14("if, vv. 3:6,14"); 6:4-12; 9:28; 10:19-39; 12:1-3, 14-17, 25; Jas. 1:2-4, 12, 22-25; 2:14-26; 5:19-20; 1 Pet. 4:17-19; 5:12; 2 Pet. 1:3-11; 2:15, 20-22; 3:14-18; 1 Jn. 1:6; 2:3,4,9,15-17,23-24; 3:6,9-10, 14-15, 24; 5:2-5; 2 Jn. 8-9; 3 Jn. 11; Jude 20-23; Rev. 2:4-5, 7, 10-11, 17, 23-29; 3:2-6,11-13,16,21; 14:12; 22:11. And again, this is not an exhaustive listing.

persevere and either dilute them or explain them away altogether. Their theological prejudice reduces the forceful warnings and exhortations of Scripture to mere whimpers which have no strength.

Declaring themselves to be faithful to the inerrant Word of God being "sharper than any two edged sword", they turn around in practice and attempt to dull it by striking its keen edge against their own rock-hard presuppositions. This is done, no doubt, in order to maintain "consistency". But God has not called us to theological tidiness at the expense of fidelity to the meaning and intent of His Holy Word. Scripture will not allow us to walk in a path void of theological and intellectual tension on the Perseverance matter (not to mention the many others). Scripture consoles the believer. *Scripture also warns that same believer.* The entire book of Hebrews is testimony to this fact. A man need only ask himself whether or not the various admonitions in Scripture which are given to the believer are *real* warnings in order readily to feel the force of this other side of the Perseverance coin. There is tension here! And consolation! *Warning*, then comfort! The inspired letters of the apostles cannot be faithfully reduced to a static theology; especially in regard to the doctrine of Perseverance. There is no abstract continuity spoken of in those writings. Rather, the letters are *dynamic*, dealing with the life of faith as it is to be lived in the midst of all its ups and downs. There are encouragements, to be sure. But "the roads along which these encouragements lead us are apparently flanked by abysses".¹¹ Danger ahead! Watch out! Amidst all the

¹¹ Berkouwer, op.cit. , p. 86.

consolation there are the continual warnings to keep ourselves from apostasy, unbelief, slothfulness and the like. There is danger to the right and danger to the left. And the real life of faith recognizes this fact only too well. Never does one find any confessions of the biblical writers that smack of even the slightest easy-going presumption regarding the certainty of their salvation. Surely their confidence was careful and reverent. No one ever rose higher in the heights of joyful confidence in the faithfulness of God to keep His own than did Paul. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" he exults. And yet, at the same time, this one who knew his own heart only too well would say in another place, "lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway". As Hodge has so well said, "the one state of mind is the necessary condition of the other."¹²

¹² The attitude of the Apostle Paul, as expressed in 1 Corinthians 9 and 10, is most instructive. This passage has been subjected to more attempts at "creative commentating" than one would care to number. However, Charles Hodge in his commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1974) sees well the implication of this passage. Notice how he strives to keep the doctrine of Perseverance in its proper symmetry:

"What an argument and what a reproof is this! The reckless and listless Corinthians thought they could safely indulge themselves to the very verge of sin, while this devoted apostle **considered himself as engaged in a life-struggle for his salvation.**

This same apostle, however, who evidently acted on the principle that the righteous scarcely are saved, and that the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, at other times breaks out in the most joyful assurance of salvation, and says that he was persuaded that nothing in heaven, earth or hell could ever separate him from the love of God. **The one state of mind is the necessary condition of the other. It is only those who are conscious of this constant and deadly struggle with sin, to whom this assurance is given.** In the very same breath Paul says, 'O wretched man that I am;' and, 'Thanks be to God who giveth us the victory'" (p. 169, emphases mine).

"...So the Corinthians, when brought to the knowledge of the gospel, thought heaven secure. Paul reminds them that they had

Surely Paul would have wondered what was going on, to see some of today's self-confident throngs as they sing "When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there."¹³ How different is the situation in the professing church today! Reverent, joyful confidence in the God of our salvation is not to be equated with today's only too-prevalent attitude of presumption regarding the matter of one's "eternal security". There are two sides to the perseverance coin.

And so, we find side-by-side in the Holy Scriptures passages which contain strong admonitions and sweet consolation; heartfelt, urgent warnings against apostasy and reverent confidence in the love of the unchanging, sovereign God of all grace. "For the Scriptures, then there is apparently no unbearable tension or

only entered on the way, **and would certainly perish unless they exercised constant self-denial...**It is not enough to begin well. It is only by constant self-denial and vigilance, that the promised reward can be obtained. This is the lesson the apostle intends to inculcate" (p. 171, emphasis mine).

"There is perpetual danger of falling. No degree of progress we may have already made, no amount of privileges which we may have enjoyed, can justify the want of caution...neither members of the church **nor the elect can be saved unless they persevere in holiness;** and they cannot persevere in holiness without continual watchfulness and effort" (p. 181, emphasis mine).

¹³ While hymns themselves are not to be blamed for the false confidence of worshippers there are some hymns of assurance which show little recognition of our constant dependence upon God. For example, the hymn "Faith of our Fathers" by Frederick William Faber (1814-1863). The chorus, "Faith of our fathers, holy faith! We will be true to thee 'till death:", would be more in keeping with the doctrine of Perseverance if we revised it to "...God keep us true to thee 'till death". The sad irony behind this hymn which was written by Faber in 1849 is that although his upbringing was Calvinistic, he was later influenced by J.H. Newman (later Cardinal Newman) while at Oxford. Faber took orders in the Church of England in 1837 and **seceded to Rome in 1845**. He became an ardent propagandist for the Roman Catholic Church. Let the hymn "Faith of our Fathers" and the life of its writer ever be a reminder to us. God keep us true to thee 'till death!

opposition between the gracious faithfulness of God and the dynamic of life; because it is in the thick of the dynamic of the actual struggle of life that Scripture speaks of perseverance in grace."¹⁴

If this is the way the Word of God treats the subject, *dare we do anything different?*

APPLICATION

This doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints has far-reaching application to the Christian life. For example, it teaches us never to take our own or anybody else's salvation for granted. Rather, it instructs us to walk humbly before God, distrustful of ourselves, desirous of clinging to Jesus Christ in nothing other and nothing more than what we have to admit is a "feeble faith." It also shows the one who would dare to preach and teach the whole counsel of God that he must not attempt to deal with his flock solely from the ivory tower of theoretical theology, but that he must also get down into the muddy pathways of everyday living with his message (as does Scripture), consoling where Scripture consoles and *warning where Scripture warns*. And while he labors to communicate the precious truth expressed in the question, "Who shall separate us from the love of God?" he must also be careful not to minimize the equally-inspired admonitions issued forth by the same loving God who is also a Consuming Fire. Where the Scripture gives assurance and consolation, let the preacher do likewise. And when the Word of God warns let him be found

¹⁴ Berkouwer, op.cit., p. 99.

faithfully doing the same.

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints teaches us that we never have a warrant to claim that we are of the faith unless we are walking (in the present-continuous sense of the word) in the path of faith. And this two-edged doctrine with its apparent difficulties reminds us of the fact that our minds (and therefore our understanding) are yet fallen. Therefore, there is good reason to walk cautiously and carefully in our attempts to understand and explain this as well as other difficult biblical doctrines. It is also a reminder that the Day is yet to come when "we shall know fully even as we are fully known". Let us look forward to it.

In the meantime, however, let us be found persevering in faith, holiness and obedience, being careful to encourage one another, seeing to it that "no one comes short of the grace of God." May God give us grace to that end!