

Article reprinted from *CrossWay* Issue Winter 2009 No. 111

(C)opyright Church Society; material may be used for non-profit purposes provided that the source is acknowledged and the text is not altered.

PERSEVERANCE

By David Phillips

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is considered one of the core doctrines of Reformed Christianity but is rejected by the Church of Rome. It can be seen as a consequence of predestination and its practical outworking is assurance. Therefore, although theologians can and do separate out the three doctrines they nevertheless go hand in hand.

R.C. Sproul in his book 'The Heart of Reformed Theology' gives the doctrine an alternative title, 'God's Preservation of the Saints' which is helpful. The idea of the Perseverance of the Saints might be misunderstood to mean that it is those who by their own endeavours persevere whereas his alternative title reflects what the Doctrine really states that Saints persevere not because of their own efforts but because God preserves them.

But, who are the saints? Whilst we use the title 'Saint' as a mark of respect for certain believers in the past such as 'Saint Paul' and 'Saint John Chrysostom', properly speaking the title refers to all Christians. Paul refers, for example to 'the saints in Ephesus' (Eph 1.1) and he then goes on to say 'for he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us' (v4,5). He repeats the point in verse 11. So the Saints (literally 'holy ones') are those who are chosen before the creation of the world, predestined.

Perseverance is therefore an outworking of the fact of predestination. God has chosen those whom he will save and he chose them before the creation of the world. Those he has chosen are properly called saints, holy ones. It necessarily follows that those who are properly called saints will be saved, because God will preserve them, because he has chosen them. If he does not preserve them, he evidently had not chosen them and they are not properly saints. This is why perseverance and predestination cannot be separated, the former follows from the latter.

As a separate idea the doctrine of perseverance is not set out in the Anglican formularies, but it is evident as a consequence of predestination in Article 17. "Predestination to life is the everlasting purpose of God.... be called according to God's purpose by his Spirit working in due season: they through Grace obey the calling: they be justified freely: they be made sons of God by adoption: they be made like the image of his only-begotten Son Jesus Christ: they walk religiously in good works, and at length, by God's mercy, they attain to everlasting felicity." Those who are predestined at length by God's mercy attain everlasting felicity. It is not conditional on us, but only on God - His purpose, His mercy.

This all makes perfect sense, it is all very logical. If we believe in predestination (as all good Anglicans surely do) we must believe in God's preservation of those He has chosen, that is in the Perseverance of the Saints.

The problem is, however logical the doctrine, it is hard to relate to our experience.

People fall away

The first, most obvious, and painful problem is that people do seem to fall away. Once you have been a Christian for some time you are likely to know people who appeared to be strong in the faith, who gave every appearance of being a 'saint'. They may have professed to believe in predestination and have assurance, but then they turned away. When we witness this it can badly shake our own faith, and our own assurance. If it can happen to them, how can I possibly be

confident about myself?

The problem is heightened by the fact that there are Biblical passages which imply that we can fall away. The most obvious, and indeed most difficult to deal with is Hebrews 6. 4-6. This appears to describe people who are genuine Christians, they have been 'enlightened', they have become 'partakers of the Holy Spirit' have 'tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come'. But we are told that if they then fall away it is impossible for them to return. If these things were true, and God does preserve his people, how could they fall away?

There are different ways in which those who firmly uphold the doctrine of perseverance handle these words from Hebrews. One way is to argue that the writer is not describing one of the elect (a saint) but those who are part of the visible church. Another approach is to see that the writer does not say that these people do fall way, rather it is setting out what we might term a hypothetical case, in order to warn people in the strongest possible terms. This latter explanation fits with the following verse where the writer says he is confident that this does not apply to his readers. Whilst it may not be the most immediately obvious way to read the verse it does fit the context and also is consistent with the rest of Scripture. Therefore, it shows, that though the elect can 'fall' to some degree, they cannot 'fall' completely and finally.

The Westminster Confession of Faith therefore expresses it as follows:

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 (Ch 17).

There are various Scriptural passages which are drawn on to illustrate this doctrine, including the words of Jesus in John chapter 6:

All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out (v37). This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day (v39).

As stated above, Roman Catholics reject the doctrine. The Council of Trent in response to the Reformation took issue with the doctrine and as a later example John Henry Newman claimed to have once believed in the doctrine but when he had defected to Rome he rejected it. The Roman system makes believers dependent upon the Roman Church for final salvation. This does not fit comfortably with the ideas of perseverance and assurance which derive, as we see above, from our belonging to Christ, not to anything the institution is or does.

The danger of the doctrine

Roman Catholics do also rightly point out that the doctrine of perseverance can be a danger in itself. This is again addressed in relation to predestination in Article 17. The danger is two-fold, first of having an unfounded confidence. It is possible for people to believe they are saved because they have gone through certain steps but there may not be genuine repentance and faith, the idea of assurance and perseverance can compound that problem. Secondly, and more specifically what the Article addresses, people are prone to turn the doctrine into an excuse for error, immorality or idleness. If we are saved and cannot lose that salvation what is the point of good works? This is what Roman Catholics find so difficult, but we rightly protest that good works are the fruit not the grounds of salvation and the person who is genuinely converted will want to do those good works which have been prepared beforehand for us to walk in (Eph 2.10).

The danger is such that there is a Homily in the Book of Homilies called 'On declining from God'. This might be seen as implying that it is against the idea of perseverance, but again it has to be understood properly. Those who are Saints can fall, but not finally. The homily, like Hebrews 6, is

a stern warning of the danger and at the same time a spur to holy and godly living.

One of the great defenders of the reformed nature of Anglicanism was Augustus Toplady. Today Toplady is better known as a hymn writer and we have included in this issue a devotional article by Gary Townsend on one of his hymns touching on this subject. However, Toplady dealt at considerable length in his written works with the reformed character of the Church of England and on this matter of perseverance he explained at length the teaching of the English reformers. Toplady also gave a short paper on the subject which we have also included in this issue. The wonderful outworking of the fact of perseverance is the doctrine of Christian assurance. God willing we will include at least one article on assurance in the next issue.

David Phillips is General Secretary of Church Society.