

TULIP: A FREE GRACE PERSPECTIVE

PART 5: PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

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I. INTRODUCTION

Can a person who hears the gospel of Christ, understands it, and believes in Him for eternal life be eternally secure? Can he do so regardless of the degree of spiritual success or failure throughout the rest of his life on earth? Is it possible for someone who believes in the Person and finished work of Christ alone for eternal life to subsequently fail to meet a minimum degree of required holiness or obedience with the result that such failure nullifies the effects of his faith? Will such a person go to heaven? In other words, what if a believer doesn't persevere in faith or in faithfulness until the end of his life? Will he ultimately be allowed into the kingdom?

An integral part of Calvinism and of Reformed Theology, in general, is the doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints. It is represented by the **P** in the **T U L I P** acrostic which represents the five-point Calvinistic position.¹ The Arminian side of the controversy confronts Calvinism on this point and asks, "What happens to believers who fail in their Christian life experience?" The Calvinist says that a person who fails to stay or be kept in grace by God's almighty power demonstrates that he never *truly* believed. God is not obligated to keep in grace those who are not His. So, such a person goes to hell because he is only a *professor* of the

¹ See the first four aspects of the **T U L I P** acrostic by Anthony B. Badger, "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 1: Total Depravity," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2003):35-61; "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 2: Unconditional Election," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Fall 2003):17-42; "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 3: Limited Atonement," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Spring 2004):33-56; "Tulip: A Free Grace Perspective—Part 4: Irresistible Grace," *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* (Autumn 2004):19-40.

faith, but was never a *possessor* thereof. Some who lean toward the Arminian persuasion do not think that a believer can lose his eternal salvation, but the standard Arminian position is that it is possible to fall away from the faith and *lose possession of one's eternal life*. In both Calvinism and Arminianism, the bottom line is that the disobedient or pseudo believer is not allowed into heaven and is destined to incur God's eternal wrath in hell.² The believer must, therefore, either 1) prove his faith is genuine and that his relation to Christ is real to the end of his life (per the Calvinist) or 2) he must keep the relation to Christ intact by his obedience so as not to break or relinquish that eternally saving association with Him (per the Arminian).

How can two admittedly conflicting major theological views agree on, and even insist upon, the necessity of the perseverance of the saints in holiness and obedience to the end as a qualifying factor in one's eternal destiny? R. E. O. White suggests the dynamic of the doctrine's development, saying the Bible indicates, "Final perseverance in a state of grace by no means depended entirely on the virtue of persevering" and adds that it was "Pastoral necessities [which] dictated a dual approach. Converts needed assurance, and it was given: 'He who believes has eternal life.'" He then adds, conversely, "But pastoral experience demanded also warning: 'Let any one who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.'"³ Both the *need for assurance* and the *desire for obedience* were formative factors in the development of the doctrine of perseverance as motivating forces in the development of the doctrine.

Our challenge here, in seeking the scriptural intent, is to allow that there may be other ways to understand the Bible with regard to the doctrine of perseverance (or preservation) of the saints and the resulting assurance of salvation (or lack thereof).

² C. Gordon Olson observes certain parallels between the Arminian and Calvinistic positions in this regard in that: 1) neither have complete assurance of ultimate salvation, 2) both assume there is no such thing as fruitless or carnal believers, 3) both make fear of ultimately going to hell a motivating factor for moral behavior, and 4) neither clearly understand the distinction between salvation and rewards, and both arrive at the same erroneous misinterpretations of key passages of Scripture such as 1 Tim 4:16 and Matt 24:13. (C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* [Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002], 296-98).

³ R. E. O. White, "Perseverance," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 844.

So, in keeping with an inductive study methodology, we must continually ask, what if? What if there is a third, better way to understand the teachings of the Bible that provides both a thoroughly scriptural perspective on the subject and that also sets forth an internally consistent and logical system? And what if this consistently biblical and logical system of thought allows us not only to appropriate God's promise of eternal life on the basis of faith in Christ alone, but also provides us with a solidly biblical, non-contradictory interpretation of those passages which warn Christians against disobedience. It would seem that if such a system should exist and be presented with a clear explanation, it would provide the best of both worlds by 1) providing an *absolute guarantee of eternal salvation* based on God's unequivocal promise of eternal life to those who believe in Christ alone and by 2) setting forth a series of warnings from the heavenly Father that would *aid our Christian living through His grace*.⁴ Such a system will be proposed after evaluating the Reformed and the Arminian positions.

II. THE REFORMED VIEW OF THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

The doctrine of the Perseverance of the Saints is crucial to Reformed theology and Calvinism, which teaches that election is unconditional and that faith is God's irreversible gift to the elect. Boettner, speaking of perseverance, says:

This doctrine does not stand alone but is a necessary part of the Calvinistic system of theology. The doctrines of Election and Efficacious Grace logically imply the certain salvation of those who receive these blessings. If God has chosen men absolutely and unconditionally to eternal life, and if His Spirit effectively applies to them the benefits of redemption, the inescapable conclusion is that these persons shall be saved. And, historically, this doctrine has been held by all Calvinists, and denied by practically all Arminians.⁵

⁴ That grace can be an instructor in holiness and in righteous living is seen in Titus 2:11-12, "For the grace of God appeared—bringing salvation to all men—teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires..."

⁵ Loraine Boettner, *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1977), 182.

Palmer adds the doctrine of limited atonement as another basis for the doctrine.⁶ Perseverance as a necessity is, then, the result of Calvinistic logic which uses the hypotheses of election, limited atonement, and efficacious (or irresistible) grace as a basis of its conclusions.

Steele and Thomas, under a section entitled *Perseverance of the Saints*, further state the Reformed view that “All who were chosen by God, redeemed by Christ, and given faith by the Spirit are eternally saved. They are kept in faith by the power of Almighty God and thus persevere to the end.”⁷ The key terms here might be: “given faith” and “kept in faith.” The implication is that if one were *given* faith by God and then *not kept* in that faith, this would separate the believer from the Lord positionally. Steele and Thomas continue:

The elect are not only redeemed by Christ and renewed by the Spirit; they are also *kept* in faith by the almighty power of God. All those who are spiritually united to Christ through regeneration are eternally secure in Him. Nothing can separate them from the eternal and unchangeable love of God. They have been predestined unto eternal glory and are therefore assured of heaven.

The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints does not maintain that all who *profess* the Christian faith are certain of heaven. It is *saints*—those who are set apart by the Spirit—who *persevere* to the end. It is *believers*—those who are given true, living faith in Christ—who are *secure* and safe in Him. Many who profess to believe fall away, but they do not fall from grace for they were never in grace. True believers do fall into temptations, and they do commit grievous sins, but these sins do not cause them to lose their salvation or separate them from Christ.⁸

R. E. O. White, commenting on the approach of Steele and Thomas, observes that it indeed “restates the Calvinist position with vigor, ignoring the NT warnings and examples [of believers’ failure to persevere in the faith] but conceding that perseverance does not apply to all who profess faith, only to those given true faith.”⁹ Thus, the teaching is that true

⁶ Edwin H. Palmer, *The Five Points of Calvinism* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1972), 71.

⁷ David N. Steele and Curtis C. Thomas, *Romans: An Interpretive Outline* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1963), 146.

⁸ Steele and Thomas, 184.

⁹ White, “Perseverance,” 845.

faith so affects the life of the true believer that perseverance to the end of life is guaranteed.

The Westminster Confession itself stands in ongoing support:

- 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.
- 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 which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.¹⁰

Grudem, in a chapter entitled “The Perseverance of the Saint (Remaining a Christian)” follows this line of thinking, saying, “The perseverance of the saints means that all those who are truly born again will be kept by God’s power and will persevere as Christians until the end of their lives, and that only those who persevere until the end have been truly born again.”¹¹ After giving this definition he says there are two parts to it.

It indicates first that there is assurance to be given to those who are truly born again, for it reminds them that God’s power will keep them as Christians until they die, and they will surely live with Christ in heaven forever. On the other hand, the second half of the definition makes it clear that continuing in the Christian life is one of the evidences that a person is truly born again.¹²

This double-sided definition seems contradictory on its face because it fails to take into account the reality of sin and carnal thoughts or actions of those who believe in Christ. It gives assurance of salvation on

¹⁰ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 17:1-2. Section 3 of Chapter 17 of this *Confession* allows for the actuality of the presence of sin in the believers life with the outcome of disgrace and temporal judgments.

¹¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 788.

¹² *Ibid.*

one hand and takes it away with the other, for who among us knows how we will fare in the Christian life tomorrow? By using the phrase, “truly born again” Grudem implies that one can be born again without being *truly* born again. How *truly* born again can a person be (or not be) who has believed in Christ alone for his eternal destiny?

However, in a seeming inconsistency, they go on to speak about present assurance. When one looks at the criteria offered as a test for one’s election, it becomes clear that one could not have absolutely kept all of them until he died.¹³

Therefore, the attempt to guarantee that believers will necessarily persevere to the end inserts a form of legalism and works into the formula for receiving actual eternal life.

So, essentially the Calvinistic view is that those who are 1) selected by God (to the exclusion of others) 2) effectually called by the Spirit (to the exclusion of others) 3) particularly redeemed by Christ (to the exclusion of others) and 4) given faith and made regenerate (to the exclusion of others) will *necessarily* be kept in grace and faith by the power of God both in this world and for eternity (to the exclusion of others). Because of this, if *true* believers stray into sin they will assuredly be restored to fellowship. Failure to be so restored would indicate that they were never *true* believers because they would not persevere to the end. Thus, such persons ought not to be so sure they possess eternal life. The Calvinist seems unaware of the difference between the doctrine of *perseverance* of the saints¹⁴ in holiness to the end of their lives (which arises from the *cooperation* of the believer with the Spirit of God who indwells him) and the doctrine of the *preservation* of the saints for eternity which rests on both the veracity of God’s promise and His power to perform His will regardless of the believer’s works or lack of them.

¹³ Norman Geisler, *Chosen But Free: A Balanced View of Divine Election*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 2001), 102.

¹⁴ Mullins defines *perseverance* as “the continuance of divine life even unto the immortal and glorified forms into which it will finally open at death” (*Christian Religion*, 387). Perhaps his definition is alright if by “the continuance in divine life” is meant the willful obedient walk of the believer. *Preservation*, on the other hand, might be defined as the act of God whereby He assuredly guards and keeps us for Himself for all eternity.

III. THE ARMINIAN VIEW OF THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

Steele and Thomas reflect what might be called the traditional Arminian view under a section entitled “Falling from Grace”:

Those who believe and are truly saved can lose their salvation by failing to keep up their faith, etc. All Arminians have not been agreed on this point; some have held that believers are eternally secure in Christ – that once a sinner is regenerated, he can never be lost.¹⁵

Enns summarizes Arminian theology showing that the view disallows assurance.

Arminians have adhered to the doctrine that believers can lose their salvation. Although Arminius himself did not clearly state that believers could be lost, his conclusions pointed in that direction...Arminius emphasized that the free will had to concur in perseverance, otherwise the believer could be lost.¹⁶

Enns goes on to explain the import and gravity of the Arminian position,

Arminianism stresses human participation and responsibility in salvation: recognition of sin, turning from sin, repentance, confession, and faith...Although the stress on human responsibilities is significant, it involves multiple conditions for salvation, this stress becomes a serious matter because the purity of salvation-by-grace-alone is then at stake.¹⁷

While Enns recognizes the problem with a multiplicity of conditions for salvation, Arminians seem to be in close proximity with Calvinists here, not recognizing the problem at all. Calvinists say these conditions (or *necessary* results) must follow regeneration to be valid (except for faith, which, to the Calvinist, is given by God as a prerequisite to regeneration). Arminians say they must accompany or precede belief in Christ. Note that both Calvinism and Arminianism require conditions for eternal life other than faith in Christ alone. Enns continues,

¹⁵ Steele and Thomas, 146.

¹⁶ Paul Enns, *Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1989), 499.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 500.

Arminianism teaches that believers may lose their salvation because the human will remains free and so may rescind its earlier faith in Christ by choosing sin. Frequently this view is based on controversial passages like Hebrews 6:4-6 and 2 Peter 2:20-22.¹⁸

If we recognize that one's regeneration is not due to the free use of his will (i.e., by the "will of man" which, according to John 1:13, is disallowed), the claim that the human free will can rescind earlier faith is manifestly false. Eternal life isn't obtained through *decisionism*, but by acceptance of the gospel as true. We are not justified by the use of our free will, we are justified by faith in God's promise of eternal life by believing in His Son. The question, then, is not whether we can, by our free will, rescind our faith, but whether we have the *ability* to rescind the fulfillment of God's promise.

While loss of salvation is not held by all Arminians, Charles Finney, a theologian of Arminian leanings, seems absolutely confused on this matter. He says saints need not fear the loss of salvation, and then, in the same paragraph, says just the opposite. Note his contradiction:

I find no instance in the Bible in which the saints are enjoined or exhorted to fear that they shall actually be lost; but, on the contrary, this kind of fear is everywhere, in the word of God, discountenanced and rebuked, and the saints are exhorted to the utmost assurance that Christ will keep and preserve them to the end, and finally bestow on them eternal life.¹⁹ They are warned against sin and apostasy, and are informed that if they do apostatize they shall be lost. They are expressly informed that their salvation is conditioned [sic] upon their perseverance in holiness to the end. They are also called upon to watch against sin and apostasy; to fear both, lest they should be lost.²⁰

Finney tried to have it both ways. He seems to have believed that sin will not cause loss of salvation but that apostasy will. But, isn't apostasy

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Note here that the *final bestowment* of eternal life upon the saints is quite different than the biblical teaching of presently *possessing* ("having") eternal life when one believes in Christ. See John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47, et. al.).

²⁰ Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology: New Expanded Edition* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers), 546.

sin? He makes another somewhat confusing statement. The Bible, he says, “nowhere encourages, or calls upon saints to fear, that they shall not be saved, or that they shall be lost. It calls on them to fear something else, to fear to sin or apostatize, lest they be lost. But not that they shall sin and not be lost.”²¹ Finney certainly wrestles with the concepts, but seems completely unable to reconcile them. (But the problem here, Dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves). It seems that his problem of clarifying the issues employs a momentary tendency to dismiss God, in practicality, from the scene and to maintain that what God has promised is inconsequential if a believer should lapse from faith or from faithful living. Mullins observes the problematic nature of such as eternal life based on human works or endurance as held by the Arminian position.

The Christian is free to continue in grace or fall away from it. He may have God’s help if he will, but ultimately his destiny is in his own hands. If he is finally lost he, and he only, is responsible. Now this statement of the case is only partial, and fails to take account of vital teachings of Scripture and vital elements of experience. It does not recognize the fulness [sic] of divine grace. It tends to a bare moralism in which human effort is everything, and to a deism which puts God above men and apart from their struggles.²²

And such, indeed, seems to be the case within the Arminian line of thought.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 544 (while slightly confusing, the punctuation and sentence structure are true to the original source).

²² Mullins, *Christian Religion*, 433-34. Mullins, here, critical of both Calvinism and Arminianism, unfortunately fails in his solution of the matter by 1) asserting that the power of God keeps the believer secure on one hand and, then, 2) concluding that the other passages expressing real danger (referring to 1 Cor 9:27; Heb 6:4-6; Acts 2:40; Phil 2:12-13) are there as a means whereby God deals with “free moral beings, as persons, [who] can only be reached and influenced and held to the Christian ideal in this way” (pp. 435-36). Regrettably, Mullins thinks God uses the threat of hell or of becoming lost as an incentive for obedience, holiness, and perseverance. This is so even though he argues that the power of God keeps the believer. He apparently sees no contradiction, saying that, “The true doctrine of perseverance, then, is to be found by combining into a unity the groups of teachings which have been employed to support contradictory views” (434). He thinks that by combining the views a unity develops. Rather, it seems that by doing this the contradiction becomes more obvious!

IV. A SUMMARY OF THE REFORMED AND ARMINIAN VIEWS

The problems with both the Calvinist and the Arminian positions are evident.

A. PROBLEMS WITH THE REFORMED CALVINIST VIEW

1. The Reformed view questions the eternal security of the believer by imposing the requirement for a successful follow-through.

The Reformed view raises doubt in regard to God's promise of eternal life by simply believing in His Son. This problem enters through the back door, so to speak, by suggesting that a follow-through in the Christian life, *after* we have believed, *validates* our positional salvation (i.e., justification). Apart from such tenuous, subsequent validation, one cannot really be sure that he is elect, that Christ really died for him, that his faith is real, that God loves him, or that he will ultimately go to heaven. Spirituality and obedience are made requirements and, thus, necessities; but the quantity and quality of such spirituality and dedicated lifestyle is never specified. Certainly believers *should* have a sincere love for Christ and endeavor to walk with Him in good conscience, but such ought not to be made into a requisite for the assurance of salvation.²³

2. The Reformed view questions the eternal security of the believer by imposing a dependence on internal evidences.

The insistence of the presence of additional internal evidences seems to provide a liquid, subjective arena in which to evaluate one's eternal destiny. One might also ask whether it is even possible to have an internal evidence of salvation apart from the revealed promise of God. If our assurance of salvation derives from God's promise, upon what grounds may we legitimately add internal, subjective evidences? But the *Westminster Confession* includes the concept of "internal evidences" to God's

²³ For instance, the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says that those who "truly believe in the Lord Jesus, and love him in sincerity, endeavoring to walk in all good conscience before him, may in this life be certainly assured that they are in a state of grace, and may rejoice in the hope of the glory of God, which hope never shall make them ashamed." *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:1 (quoted from John H. Leith, ed., *The Creeds of the Churches: A Reader in the Christian Doctrine from the Bible to the Present*, Revised edition (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1973), 212.

promise as a co-basis for assurance. Notice that certainty is founded on more than God's promise. It reads:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, founded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, *the inward evidences of those graces* unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God; which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.²⁴

If we were to restrict our thoughts to the validity of God's promises and His faithfulness, assurance may be the expected (and also, certain) result, but the inclusion of "internal evidences" would seem to weaken, rather than strengthen, one's assurance. Isn't God's promise enough? It is true that the Spirit of God witnesses that believers are children of God in His Word (cf. Gal 4:6; Rom 5:5; 8:15-16). Wilkin explains clearly that this witness is evident to us when we pray to God, "reminding God that we are His children" and having that scripturally revealed truth confirmed back to us by the Holy Spirit.²⁵ But it is also true that believers still sin. And because sin certainly disrupts the subjective "internal evidences of those graces," it follows that with such disruption there must of necessity be a diminished *degree* of assurance. If one is "relatively sure" that he has eternal life, does he have assurance at all? This results in a "hope so" kind of faith comparable to the testimony of Asahel Nettleton, a Calvinistic, 19th century evangelical preacher who said, "The most that I have ventured to say respecting myself is, that I think it possible I may get to heaven."²⁶ Is this anything close to assurance of possessing eternal life?

Now, since we do not audibly hear the Spirit speaking to us, and since any subjective internal "feeling" that the Holy Spirit is telling us this or that must be evaluated in light of God's Word, it would seem that

²⁴ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:2 from *Creeds of the Churches*, 212-13, italics added.

²⁵ Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 70-71.

²⁶ Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism*, 296, quoting from B. Tyler and A. A. Bennett, *The Life and Labours of Asahel Nettleton* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, reprint 1975), 30.

no further reliance need be placed upon “internal evidences.” Unbelievers are able to think kindly toward their neighbors, be gentle, use self control, etc, just like believers can. Yet we would not want to give them assurance of eternal life with God simply because they are demonstrating something that mimics the fruit of the Spirit.

3. *The Reformed view questions the reality of one’s regeneration by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone by denying that assurance is of the essence of faith.*

The above stated dubious attempt to obtain assurance by “internal witness” presents another problem. It calls into question the essence and content of faith. The *Westminster Confession* says,

This infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith, but that the true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties before he be a partaker of it [i.e., of assurance of salvation]: 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 every one 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 from inclining men to looseness.²⁷

The *Confession* seems to swerve toward the truth in the last few phrases above by indicating that obedience is the *fruit* of assurance, not *vice versa*. But if assurance is not “of the essence of faith” how does one understand his actual position before God when he believes His promise that, “Whoever believes in Him [Christ] should not perish, but have eternal life”? Is eternal life that which is promised, or is it not? If one believes the promise, does he then believe he has eternal life? If he believes he has eternal life, does he not have assurance of possessing eternal life? That “assurance is not of the essence of faith” seems internally inconsistent and logically contradictory on its face.

Interestingly, MacArthur deals with this issue. After stating that faith provides assurance for believers, he then claims that such is not complete

²⁷ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:3 from *Creeds of the Churches*, 213.

or total assurance. Rather one can have “some” assurance or a “measure of” assurance. He explains:

Calvin’s definition of faith is often quoted: “It is a firm and sure knowledge of the divine favour toward us, founded on the truth of a free promise of Christ, and revealed to our minds, and sealed on our hearts, by the Holy Spirit.” Calvin emphasized faith as *knowledge*, in contrast to the Catholic Scholastics’ idea that faith is a naïve trust antithetical to knowledge. He thus built assurance into his definition of faith.

In other words, Calvin taught that *assurance is of the essence of faith*. This means the moment someone trusts Christ for salvation, that person will have *some* sense of assurance... Hebrews 11:1 says, “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Thus it seems clear from Scripture that a measure of assurance *is* inherent in believing.²⁸

One must wonder what it is that motivates MacArthur (or anyone) to teach that believers can merely have “*some* sense of assurance” or only a “*measure* of assurance.” Who would suggest that he had *some assurance* of being married, unless he doubts the legality of the ceremony? No one doubts something when he knows it’s true. Why would anyone doubt God’s authoritative promise of eternal life? Isn’t God’s truth personified? Isn’t the lack of assurance an affront to His promise? Why is it that MacArthur doesn’t simply retain Calvin’s definition of faith and include assurance within faith’s essence? But MacArthur disagrees with Calvin and concurs with the *Westminster Confession of Faith* of 1646 and it’s teaching that “assurance is something distinct from faith.”²⁹ He says,

Later Reformed theologians, recognizing that genuine Christians often lack assurance, denied that *any* assurance is implicit in believing...The later Reformers, battling antinomian tendencies in their movement, wanted to emphasize the importance of practical evidences in the lives of believers.³⁰

²⁸ John F. MacArthur, Jr. *Faith Works: The Gospel According to the Apostles* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1993), 159, quoting John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 3:27 (reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), 1:475, italics in original.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 160.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Maybe MacArthur is attempting to continue the battle of the Reformers in the opposition to what he perceives as “antinomian tendencies.”³¹

So, once again, it would seem that the doctrine that “assurance is *not* of the essence of faith” has developed pragmatically from a desire to keep the straying sheep in line, so to speak. But are we to manufacture doctrines in an attempt to do behavior modification within those who are in the body of Christ? The real question seems to be whether *Perseverance* as a doctrine was then, or is now, derived from a correct, normal interpretation of the Bible. It seems that the later Reformers simply departed from the teachings of Calvin in regard to the relation of faith to assurance and that they did so for practical, not exegetical, reasons. As such, the dubious doctrine that “assurance is not of the essence of faith” is to be rejected because 1) logic demands it and 2) the pragmatic development in Reformation history and theology (rather than biblical exegesis) explains its existence.

There is a progressive logical connection to what the *Confession* says next.

True believers may have the assurance of their salvation divers ways shaken, diminished, and intermitted; as, by negligence in preserving of it; by falling into some special sin, which woundeth the conscience, and grieveth the Spirit; by some sudden or vehement temptation; by God’s withdrawing the light of his countenance, and suffering even such as fear him to walk in darkness and to have no light: yet are they never utterly destitute of that seed of God, and life of faith, that love of Christ

³¹ The perception that the Free Grace position is *antinomian* is widespread. It’s a designation that may be accepted if by *antinomianism* it is meant that there is no necessity to keep any law or include into the formula for obtaining eternal salvation any human effort or work of obedience which would merit God’s favor (cf. Gal 3:1-2, 10-14; Rom 3:19-26; 4:1-15, 20-21; 5:1, etc). The concept is to be rejected if *antinomianism* is understood to be loose, irreverent, or sinful. But it is grace that teaches believers to deny such things (Titus 2:11-15). The idea that the doctrine of “once saved, always saved” encourages license to sin is traditionally considered by Arminians to be a “dangerous doctrine” leading to the disregard for holy living. In the same way, Calvinists use the term and essentially say that “nomianism” (living according to God’s law) is necessary to validate possession of eternal life. They also suggest that the Free Grace position leads to a license to sin.

and the brethren, that sincerity of heart and conscience of duty, out of which, by the operation of the Spirit, this assurance may in due time be revived, and by the which, in the mean time, they are supported from utter despair.³²

Since assurance of salvation is not considered to be “of the essence of faith,” it can be “shaken, diminished, and intermitted” by negligence or by committing sin. This again causes a loss of assurance. But if this is so, one might legitimately ask, “How can a person ever be *assured* that he is ‘never utterly destitute’”? How can a person be certain that a life of faith, love, sincerity, and duty will indeed be “revived” so as to be “supported from utter despair”? Is it *possible* to be assured while one is in the midst of having his assurance shaken, diminished or intermitted?³³ Is such an assertion to be “taken by faith”? And if this secondary claim is to be taken by faith, why not take by faith God’s primary promise in the Scripture (which guarantees eternal life upon personal belief in the Savior)?

We may conclude that the Reformed position has severe biblical and logical weaknesses in presenting the doctrine of perseverance in a consistent, non-contradictory way.

B. THE PROBLEMS WITH THE ARMINIAN VIEW

1. The Arminian View fails to understand the concept of eternal life and the irrevocable nature of God’s promise.

In light of clear biblical passages (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:39-40; 10:27-28; 17:12; Rom 8:16, 29-30, 37-39; 11:29; Eph 1:13-14; 2 Tim 1:12; 2:13; 4:18; Heb 10:14; 1 Pet 1:5; 1 Jn 5:13; Jude 24-25 and others),³⁴ it

³² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 18:4 from *Creeds of the Churches*, 213.

³³ Robert F. Boyd affirms that, “The doctrine of assurance is predicated in the Westminster Confession of Faith (Chapter XVIII), which teaches that although believers may have assurance of their redemption solely tried and shaken, yet they are never sorely deprived of saving faith and hence have their assurance of salvation revived and re-established by the work of the Holy Spirit...The Arminian position would predicate certainty of salvation for the present day.” (Robert F. Boyd, “Assurance” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1960], 70). Clearly both positions “predicate” the doctrine of assurance.

³⁴ Geisler considers most of these passages briefly in *Chosen But Free*, (121-25).

would seem that there is abundantly sufficient and convincing evidence that eternal life is the possession of every believer in Christ. Arminians consider these verses in their theological system, but essentially misunderstand them believing that salvation is offered conditionally, as being “conditioned upon the believer continuing in faith”³⁵ Geisler refers to Robert Shank³⁶ who lists some 85 passages from the New Testament which, he thinks, establish the doctrine of a conditional eternal security. He points out that Shank, “stresses texts which speak of ‘continuing,’ ‘abiding,’ ‘holding fast,’ etc.” and cites the example of 1 Corinthians 15:2 which says, “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you.”³⁷

2. *The Arminian view fails to understand the warning passages.*

Arminians, like Calvinists, seem so entrenched in defending their position that they fail to recognize scriptural distinctions. Largely, by assuming that certain passages put one’s eternal life in jeopardy, they tend to see only that point of view. Their point of view, and that of the Calvinist, for that matter, could be corrected by simply refusing to read meaning into the passage that is not there expressly, as determined by a normal reading of the broader context. Another asset that leads to a correct interpretation is the ability to distinguish between passages which require obedience (works, deeds, actions, or compliance with God’s commands) from those passages which set forth the reception of eternal life as a gift of God’s grace with no strings (obedience, works, etc.) attached. Doing this leads to a proper distinction of passages which speak of discipleship (which offer rewards for work or obedience) from those passages which contain God’s promise of eternal life as a gift of grace

³⁵ Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 125. Geisler also explains that “Some believers, such as Lutherans, believe salvation cannot be “lost” but it can be “rejected” (by apostasy). The net result is the same, though – once they had it; now they don’t.” (123).

³⁶ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son* (Minneapolis: Bethany House Publishers, 1989), 334-37. Additionally, it is of interest to note that on page 333 of Shank’s work he mentions the fact that Lewis Sperry Chafer’s *Systematic Theology*, Vol. III, pp. 290-312 gives 51 passages to which Chafer felt Arminians might appeal as a result of their incomplete apprehension. He includes a separate list of passages from Chafer alongside his own list of 85, some of which match or parallel Chafer’s list.

³⁷ Geisler, *Chosen But Free*, 125.

received through faith alone. For an exhaustive review of such passages consult the works of Hodges, Wilkin, Dillow, Radmacher, Vance, and Olson, among others.³⁸ Space does not permit such exhaustive work here, but some “problem passages” are mentioned below.

V. AN ALTERNATIVE FREE GRACE SOLUTION

Before proposing a Free Grace solution, several terms need clarified. After which, an internally consistent solution regarding the doctrine of perseverance of the saints will be set forth.

A. THE CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

1. Perseverance of the Saints vs. the Preservation of the saints

The difference between the *Perseverance* of the saints and the *Preservation* of believers is astronomical. These terms are often used synonymously, but doing so compounds the problem. If one wants to talk about God’s power to preserve a person who has believed in Christ for eternal life, then the term *preservation* should be used. If reference is made to the continuation of holiness, fellowship, and good works of obedience in the Christian’s life (i.e., an outworking of spirituality), then *perseverance* is the proper term. The difference is that *perseverance* focuses on the believer (his endurance, performance, relative holiness, or the measure of just thoughts or actions as opposed to unjust thoughts or actions). It looks upon the saintly or holy actions of those who are Christ’s (thus, the use of the term *saints*). The doctrine of *preservation*, on the other hand, looks to the promises of God, not the compliance of

³⁸ See Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege: Faith and Works in Tension*, revised (Dallas: Redención Viva, 1992); *Absolutely Free: A Biblical Reply to Lordship Salvation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989); Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000); Robert N. Wilkin, *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999); *The Road to Reward: Living Today in Light of Tomorrow* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 2003); Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings: A Study of Eternal Security and the Final Significance of Man* (Hayesville, NC: Schottle Publishing Co., 1992); C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism and Arminianism: An Inductive Mediate Theology of Salvation* (Cedar Knolls, NJ: Global Gospel Publishers, 2002), 235; Laurence Vance, *The Other Side of Calvinism*, Revised Edition (Pensacola, FL: Vance Publications, 2002).

man, as a basis for eternal security. It takes God at His word and rests upon His promise. It also allows for the fact that believers are often weak in their faith and sinful in their actions. It doesn't insist that a person's eternal destiny be ascertained by an examination of his thought-life or his actions. The Reformed position contradicts this, however, and maintains that:

It is utterly wrong to say that a believer is secure quite irrespective of his subsequent life of sin and unfaithfulness. The truth is that the faith of Jesus Christ is *always* *respective* of holiness and fidelity.³⁹

But one must ask if this assertion is true or biblical. The same idea is asserted by Buswell,

If God has unconditionally elected to save a people, and if He has provided atonement which makes their salvation certain, it follows by inevitable logic that those whom God has elected to eternal salvation will go on to eternal salvation. In other words, a denial of the doctrine of perseverance of the saints is a denial of the sovereign grace of God in unconditional election.⁴⁰

Buswell here equates *eternal salvation* with the *success of the saints* in the area of perseverance. For him, it seems, there is an inseparable attachment of one with the other. Horne compounds the problem suggesting that both perseverance and preservation should be understood as a *synthesis* of what Scriptures teach. He suggests, for instance, that 1 Pet 1:5 supports this idea but seems to miss the point that the "salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" depends on a continuation of faith and has to do with the judgment of Christians with regard to future rewards for obedience.⁴¹ The passage in no way deals with the determination of the place of a believer's ultimate eternal destiny. When the Calvinist or the Arminian fails to distinguish *perseverance* from *preservation* or when either equates *possession of eternal life* with a *successful*

³⁹ John Murray, *Redemption: Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 154.

⁴⁰ Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 2:146, italics added.

⁴¹ Charles M. Horne, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1984), 82. Cf. Herman Kuiper, *By Grace Alone: A Study in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), 138.

follow-through, the reader (or hearer) is led to conclude that each one is dependant on the other, and therefore, that a *successful completion* throughout one's life is a necessary requirement in a continuing process of determining a believer's eternal salvation. Thus, if we don't persevere now, God won't preserve us eternally. And if God doesn't preserve us eternally, we won't persevere now. This is simply an inclusion of human effort into the biblically supported saved-by-grace-alone-through-faith-alone-in-Christ-alone formula.

Ryrie comments on the term perseverance including the definition of the Westminster Confession. He says,

It means that believers “can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” (Westminster Confession, XVII, I). It seems to focus on the believer—it is the believer who perseveres (albeit through the decree and power of God).⁴²

Being in the “state of grace” seems to be synonymous with a positional relationship with God from all eternity and, thus, would speak of security based on God's power. However, it also seems that saying, “shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved” would indicate that security is dependent on human actions to ratify this supposed eternally secure relationship. If it is not thus ratified and validated, the relationship and possession of eternal life is shown not to exist. On this basis no one could honestly claim certain and sure knowledge of possessing eternal life (but see John 20:30-31 which refers to his whole gospel and 1 John 5:5-13 which is designed to give such knowledge and assurance).⁴³ While those who hold to the doctrine of perseverance may allow God's decree and power to shape the continuation of one's faith and Christian growth, the center of attention is still on the believer. Because of this, it is concluded that since God will cause a person to persevere, only those who are *presently* doing so can be assured of having

⁴² Charles Caldwell Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 379. The quote is actually from the *Westminster Confession*, 17, 2.

⁴³ See Hodges (*Gospel Under Siege*, 53-55, 163), where he demonstrates that the entire purpose of the First Epistle of John is to encourage an abiding fellowship with God, not to furnish a list of tests to determine whether one possesses eternal life.

eternal life at that moment. This would be the conclusion of both Calvinists and Arminians.

2. *Conditional Security Based on Works vs. Eternal Security*

Ryrie calls *eternal security* “the work of God that guarantees that the gift of salvation, once received, is forever and cannot be lost.”⁴⁴ This he asserts in contrast to the doctrine of perseverance, which focuses on the believer.

3. *Security Focuses on God*

Perhaps *eternal security* should be defined as the *fact* of a safe, eternal, unending relationship with God as Father. All who have believed in Christ alone are eternally secure. Security is real for the believer regardless of his success or failure. *Assurance* is what follows as a result of realizing this fact. *Eternal security* is different from the *assurance* of eternal salvation, because eternal security is *not* subject to vacillation or change whereas a believer may (but *need not*) develop a lack of *assurance* and doubt his security. One need not *feel* eternally secure in Christ to actually *be* secure. A believer *has* eternal life and *is*, therefore, secure in that eternal life forever. Assurance is the internal confidence in that knowledge.

4. *Assurance of Salvation*

We may be sure that *everything* God says or promises is true. *Assurance of salvation* arises from God’s veracity. It is defined by Boyd thus: “The doctrine that those who are truly saved may know without a doubt that they are saved.”⁴⁵ Demarest suggests, “Assurance of faith or assurance of salvation denotes the confidence of the believer in Christ that notwithstanding his mortal sinful condition he is irrevocably a child of God and an heir of heaven.”⁴⁶ Berkhof, however, sees assurance in both

⁴⁴ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 379.

⁴⁵ Boyd, “Assurance,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, 69. Again, though, how can one be “saved” and not be “truly saved”?

⁴⁶ B. A. Demarest, “Assurance,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 91. This article is fairly concise and to the point. In it he mentions the Roman Catholic position, as delineated at the Council of Trent, which “rejected the teaching that that a Christian may be certain he is saved” and defines the general Arminian position that “the most one can enjoy is assurance at any given moment, since a believer may apostatize and forfeit his salvation.”

objective and subjective modes saying of the *objective* mode that assurance is “the certain and undoubting conviction that Christ is all He professes to be and will do all His promises. It is generally agreed that this assurance is of the essence of faith.”⁴⁷ In his view the *subjective* mode of assurance is an “assured conviction that the individual believer has had his sins pardoned and his soul saved.”⁴⁸ “Berkhof, in alignment with this tradition [the Reformed Presbyterian position that assurance is not within essence of faith itself], seems to be saying that true assurance is of the essence of faith but that there is an additional assurance which can come on the basis of reflection.”⁴⁹ It seems that this *re-assurance*, so to speak, requires reflection, however, and, to use terms from Berkhof, a “certain and undoubting conviction” seems synonymous with “assured conviction.” In the *objective* realm, the focus is on Christ and His promises. In the *subjective* realm it is on forgiveness and eternal life. But are not these two ideas combined in the gospel? Is assurance ever possible without 1) Christ as the only object of faith and 2) the promise of eternal life being the sure result of faith in Him (as the guaranteed and irrevocable outcome)? In fact, one might ask if assurance is not, in reality, faith itself.

That “faith is the *assurance* of things hoped for, the *conviction* of things not seen” (Heb 11:1, italics added) may have provided the outline for Berkhof’s two-fold definition since, it seems, assurance and conviction are indeed the essential ideas of faith.⁵⁰ *Objectively believing* in Christ and His promises logically proceeds, upon *subjective reflection*, to the internal, joyful result of believing in Christ, and thus, the assurance of one’s salvation. Assurance of salvation and eternal life is possible for the believer. It will wane only when one focuses away from God, His promise of eternal life, and the finished work of Christ toward himself or others.

Up to this point we have 1) suggested that there is a logical and biblical problem with the doctrine of perseverance of saints (but not for the *preservation* of believers), 2) defined eternal security as a settled fact for every believer in Christ, and 3) presented the doctrine of assurance of

⁴⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1941), 507..

⁴⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 507.

⁴⁹ Dillow, *Reign of the Servant Kings*, 286.

⁵⁰ Perhaps Hebrews 11:1 is simply a form of Hebrew parallelism meant to convey one idea of faith by using two synonymous concepts.

salvation as a state of mind which naturally and logically proceeds from one's faith in Christ alone and His promise (guarantee) of eternal life. Now we might ask, "What is this 'salvation' that we are assured of?"

5. *Temporal vs. Eternal Salvation*

The terms *salvation* or *to save* must be understood by their use in a particular context. The verb *sōzō* is defined as to "save, rescue, deliver, keep safe, preserve, cure, make well."⁵¹ The noun form *sōtēria* means "salvation, deliverance, preservation, release."⁵² These terms may have 1) a temporal, physical sense, 2) a temporal, spiritual sense, or 3) an eternal, spiritual sense.

Radmacher notes that often *temporal, physical deliverance* is in view. In the Old Testament, he says,

Often the words *save* and *salvation* refer to physical not spiritual deliverance. This is especially true in the Old Testament. People were "saved" (rescued or delivered) from enemies on the battlefield (Deut. 20:4), from the lion's mouth (Dan. 6:20), and from the wicked (Pss. 7:11; 59:2).

When the New Testament uses *save* and *salvation* to refer to physical deliverance those instances are more individual than national...A graphic example of rescue from imminent death is God sparing Paul's life in the shipwreck on his way to Rome (Acts 27:20, 31, 34). This case is of special interest in that God promised deliverance in advance (27:23-24)...In a physical sense salvation refers to being taken from danger to safety (Phil. 1:19), from disease to health (James 5:15), and from death to life (5:20).⁵³

An example of *temporal, spiritual deliverance* (related to the Christian life or discipleship) is found in Philippians 2:12 where, in context, Paul is speaking of their obedience and telling the believers in Philippi to "work out your own salvation (deliverance)." Hodges answers that, "It is clear that if the 'salvation' which Paul speaks of here refers to escape from hell, then obedient works are a *condition* for that."⁵⁴

⁵¹ Barclay M. Newman, Jr. *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 177.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2000), 5.

⁵⁴ Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, 96.

More examples could be given, but it is obvious that the uses of the terms *to save* and *salvation* depend on the context. Every time the terms are used we need not think that a heaven-or-hell issue is involved. The text may be speaking of something completely different. We ought not be so evangelically minded that we can't see straight when it comes to interpreting the meaning of a passage. When human work is involved, it would behoove us to understand the passage in the context of attaining a successful spiritual life and ultimate rewards, not the reception of eternal life as a gift resulting from faith alone in Christ alone.

Of course, there is an *eternal, spiritual deliverance* involved at the heart of God's program to deliver the world from sin and which deliverance He facilitates in his continuing work of creating the best of all possible worlds. This is the kind of salvation evangelicals are prone to think of when hearing the terms *save* and *salvation*. Passages such as John 3:16-17, Eph 2:8, and Acts 16:30-31 are undoubtedly examples of these terms in relation to one's eternal destiny. Another aspect is the deliverance from the presence of sin. Believers in Christ "will be saved from the presence of sin forever in heaven" (Rom 13:11; 1 Pet 1:9). This having been said, the point remains that when we interpret Scriptures, especially in view of terms like "save" or "salvation," we ought to consider the context and not just assume that it's a heaven-or-hell issue.

VI. THE ALTERNATIVE TO CALVINIST AND ARMINIAN VIEWS OF PERSEVERANCE

David Clotfelter suggests, in a section entitled "Preservation/Perseverance of the Saints," that the reasons we stumble over the doctrine are two: "First, it seems...that if our preservation in faith is guaranteed by God, then there should be no need for Him to warn us against falling away."⁵⁵ He goes on to say, "Second, we are troubled by the fact that people who at least appear to be Christians do at times fall away."⁵⁶ How are we, then, to reconcile the seeming disagreement between 1) passages which *guarantee* eternal life and the *preservation* for all eternity of those who believe in Christ with 2) passages which give *dire warnings* to the believer for his failure to *persevere* in holiness?

⁵⁵ David Clotfelter, *Sinners in the Hands of a Good God: Reconciling Divine Judgment and Mercy* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2004), 176.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

Rather than answer this question by inductively examining *all* the “problem passages” that might be available, it seems best (because of limited space) to present the case in a logical fashion.

Premise 1 of the Argument: All passages that teach that eternal life is obtained as a free gift of God’s grace alone—with no other condition than faith in Christ alone – are to be understood as relating to the determination of one’s eternal destiny (heaven or hell). Such passages that support this premise (John 3:16; 5:24; 6:47) teach that receiving eternal life is conditioned only on faith in Christ and that such faith—along with God’s powerful promise—prevents one from perishing. “Eternal life” is juxtaposed against “perishing” and we can rightly conclude that the passage does not refer to simple physical destruction. John 5:24 makes eternal life a present possession with no need for validation by works. Escape from judgment and a transfer from death to life is assured to anyone who, as Jesus said, “hears My word, and believes Him who sent me.” Jesus promises in John 6:47, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who believes has eternal life.” John simply knows no other condition for receiving the gift of eternal life other than an appropriation of it by faith in Christ alone.

Besides these assertions by Christ within John’s Gospel, other passages teach the same. They exclude works and place possession of eternal salvation as solely conditioned upon faith in Jesus. Paul, in Acts 16:30, advised the Philippian jailor only to believe. He teaches that the gospel is the “power of God unto salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom 1:16). He defines his gospel as that which he received through a revelation of Jesus Christ from heaven (cf. Gal 1:11-12), the very nature of which brings God’s declaration of righteousness to bear upon the one who believes it (cf. Rom 3:19–5:1). He also states that the gospel excludes any human works or effort as an avenue through which eternal salvation is attained (cf. Rom 4:4-5; 10:4; 11:6; Eph 2:8-9; Gal 3:1-14).

Of course, other passages also teach that people receive eternal life by faith alone, but the above should be sufficient in supporting the premise.

Premise 2 of the Argument: All passages that are addressed to believers that teach obedience – compliant actions, works, deeds, thoughts, intentions, motivations, or faithfulness – are to be understood as relating either 1) to their temporal deliverance in one’s present physical or spiritual life, or 2) to their future evaluation/judgment at the Bema Seat of Christ and/or to their future eternal enjoyment of rewards earned in this

life. Some biblical passages do indeed add conditions for “salvation.” But when salvation or deliverance is mentioned, one must ask, “Salvation or deliverance from what?” The term for salvation or deliverance can certainly refer to one’s eternal destiny (and that’s how the evangelicals have traditionally used it), but it can also refer to deliverance from something in this life or to a successful session at Christ’s judgment seat.

These are the “problematic passages” in relation to the perseverance issue. There is no real need that they be problematic. The problem is that traditionally, evangelicals have not properly understood the passages in their context, nor have they distinguished the terms discussed above to obtain their correct meaning. But a successful session before Christ is not foreign to the Scriptures and such successful sessions before Christ ought to certainly be conditioned upon the obedience and faithfulness of His own. After all, believers are said to have been “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (Eph 2:10). These exhortations or warnings to believers take into account that the believer will not perform/obey automatically in this regard. It places the responsibility for growth, obedience, and discipleship directly on the child of God and doesn’t rely on God’s supernatural intervention to make sure the believer perseveres.

But those who misunderstand the “problem passages” seem 1) unable to cope with the possibility of failure by a believer – as though the Spirit of God somehow confines us to holiness and right actions, 2) to become prideful legalists, and 3) to miss the blessing of obeying the Lord for correct motivations as we anticipate His approval at the Bema Seat judgment.⁵⁷

The Scriptures teach that a successful session before Christ at His judgment seat is conditional in nature. For instance, Rom 14:10-12 shows the certainty of being evaluated, the success of which is

⁵⁷ Second Corinthians 5:17 is often misquoted as a proof text for automatic, certain, or assured obedience of the believer. It is literally translated, “So that, if anyone is in Christ, a new creation; the old things passed away, behold new things have come.” The verse speaks of the positional relationship of being “in Christ” and, in the context, enforces the possibility of *living* no longer for ourselves (5:15), of *viewing things* from God’s perspective (5:16) and of obediently *entering a partnership* with God in reconciling the world to Himself (5:17-18). The term “all” as in “all things become new” (KJV) is simply not supported by early Greek manuscripts.

conditioned upon how we treat a Christian brother. Second Corinthians 5:9-10 (just before 2 Cor 5:17 mentioned above) invites the attitude which pleases the Lord and shows that good deeds, rather than evil ones, are the condition for receiving rewards of compensation at His judgment seat.⁵⁸

Another passage that might be considered a “problem” is Heb 6:4-8. The reader of this passage should *not* assume the following: 1) that the six specific descriptions in vv 4-5 are anything but descriptions of the experiences of the believing Hebrew audience, 2) that repentance is synonymous with what is usually termed “saving faith,” or 3) that reference to fire or being burned (v 8) relates to hell fire and brimstone. In the analogy the believers are compared to the “*land* which drank in the rain” (i.e., were blessed by the truth of the gospel). The result of this is that they have the potential of producing useful vegetation/crops (for which they would receive a blessing from God (v 7)), or of producing worthless thorns and thistles (for which they would be in jeopardy of being cursed by God) and having their worthless crop (works) burned, consumed, destroyed, or taken away. The *land* (i.e., the believer) is not destroyed in this metaphor, however. Compare this to what Paul teaches the carnal Corinthian believers as he uses the analogy of having their worthless works burned by fire (1 Cor 3:1-14). “If any man’s *work* which he has built on it [the foundation, which is Christ Himself] *remains*, he will receive a reward. If any man’s work is *burned up*, he will *suffer loss*; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire” (3:14-15, italics added). In neither of these passages is the issue one of qualifying for eternal heaven or hell. It is an issue of rewards or loss of rewards which is *conditioned* upon perseverance, obedience, and continuation in the body of truth (i.e., “the faith,” cf. 2 Cor 13:5).

This premise just considered is not mere theological conjecture. It is the only consistent way to adequately understand Scripture and to distinguish between eternal salvation, which is by grace alone, and the conditional nature of gaining or losing rewards at Christ’s judgment seat at the initiation of the future Messianic (millennial) kingdom.

Conclusion of the Argument: *There is no contradiction in Scriptures on the matter of perseverance. God preserves* irreversibly for all eternity the one who believes in Christ, and the believer can be sure of this, based on His promise. The *believer*, though, has an *option of*

⁵⁸ See also Col 1:21-23 and Gal 6:7-10.

persevering in holiness in this present world, and may do so in accordance with the quality of his fellowship with God, his allegiance to Christ, and his willingness to be led by the Spirit of God in his Christian walk.

Perseverance, it is suggested, is a worthy goal for a successful and glorious reception of the believer at the Judgment Seat of Christ. To say that “results may vary” in the lives of Christians seems a tautology. All believers are at different levels of spirituality. To make perseverance in holiness an additional requisite for eternal salvation, or to make an evaluation of one’s works and faithfulness a requisite for assurance of possessing eternal life is to grossly confuse the issue. Interpreting scriptures that promise rewards for faithfulness or obedience at Christ’s Bema Seat judgment as requisites for receiving or being assured of one’s regeneration diminishes those passages that were written for the benefit of believers.

VII. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The P in the TULIP acrostic teaches, from the Reformed view, that the saints of God (true believers in Christ) will persevere in faith, holiness, and good works to the end of their lives. Failure to so persevere is an indication that a person was never a believer (the Calvinist view) or that he has lost or voluntarily relinquished his eternal life/salvation (the Arminian view). Calvinists do not recognize or allow an extended failure of real believers without subsequent restoration in their Christian walk. Such failures would question the existence of one’s eternal life. Lack of assurance is the result that such failure obtains. Arminians fail to recognize the veracity of God’s promise to give *eternal* life and to preserve forever the one who believes in Jesus.

Both views misunderstand the free-grace gospel passages as well as the passages which warn Christians against sin and apostasy. Both branches of theology require that the believer continue in faith and good works to the end of their lives in order to enter into heaven. Both fail to distinguish the doctrine for the *need of endurance* in the Christian life (perseverance) from the comforting fact of the believer’s *promised*

preservation, which is guaranteed to those who trust God's offer of eternal life and who believe in Christ to obtain it.⁵⁹

The result of this confusion is devastating. The first devastation is that the gospel of grace (the message that eternal life which is obtained freely by faith in Christ alone) is lost and/or confused to the point that it becomes unclear (and thus unusable). The second devastation is that this unclear "gospel" message then gives rise to fear of eternal hell rather than to peace with God, love for Him, and the assurance of eternal life which He offers in His word. The third devastation is that the biblical impetus for true holy living is completely lost because the focus is turned from the loving, gracious Savior and an anticipated joyful meeting with Him at the Bema Seat judgment to a fearful attempt to *do something* to *validate* one's possession of eternal life.

Here, a better, clearer, and more biblical way is suggested. There is no need to restrict our thoughts to only one or the other of these theological systems, neither of which adequately grasp the biblical teaching. The remedy for the Calvinist/Arminian dilemma regarding the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints is simply to understand the passages which offer eternal life as a gift to be a reference to the gospel of grace. Secondly, there is a need to understand the passages which warn the believer against sin, living according to the flesh, and apostasy to be related to God's will for us, and to our responsibility as Christians to glorify Him when we stand before His Bema Seat.

⁵⁹ Perseverance in holiness in this life will eventuate into a successful encounter with Christ at His Bema Seat judgment at which time Christ will evaluate the Christian's works/deeds. There He will issue or deny eternal rewards for faithfulness or lack thereof (cf. 2 Cor 5:10; Rom 14:10, 12; 1 Cor 9:27). It does not relate to the Great White Throne judgment where unbelievers are resurrected and cast into hell because of their lack of the Savior.