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The Fifth Heading: The Perseverance of the Saints

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Introduction

The end result of the other canons of Dort is the doctrine of perseverance. The other doctrines of grace work themselves out ultimately in the life of believers as they persevere as saints. The first canon on predestination says of the elect, “God decreed to grant them true faith in Christ, to justify them, to sanctify them, and finally, *after powerfully preserving them* in the fellowship of the Son, to glorify them” (I.7). The next canon regarding Christ’s atonement states, “It was also God’s will that Christ should cleanse them by his blood from all their sins, both original and actual, whether committed before or after their coming to faith; that he should *faithfully preserve them to the very end*; and that he should finally present them to himself, a glorious people, without spot or wrinkle” (II.8). In the third and fourth canons on human depravity and conversion, Dort affirms, “As a result (of God sovereignly regenerating the will), a ready and sincere obedience of the Spirit now begins to *prevail* where before the rebellion and resistance of the flesh were completely dominant” (III.16). So we need to address perseverance, the outcome of the other doctrines of grace.

As we address this topic, we need to be clear as to what the doctrine of perseverance is. For clarity’s sake, we will use the definition of the Westminster Confession after which this conference is named. “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” (WCF 17.1). We might think that given the heaviness and controversies of other doctrines such as election or limited atonement, perseverance of the saints may be disagreeable to some but lack the canyon-like divide of the other canons. However, it is worthy to note that Robert Bellarmine, a well-known Jesuit theologian at the time of Dort, when speaking of perseverance, “declared that this was the worst heresy of the Reformed,” believing the promotion of eternal security would lead to disobedience.¹ So, this paper will provide a brief history of this doctrine’s controversy, then Dort’s treatment of it, before considering its needed application today.

The Historical Resistance against the Doctrine of Perseverance

The doctrine of perseverance was a significant battle point of the gospel throughout history, as a brief survey demonstrates.² In the Pelagian controversies of the early church, Augustine wrote

¹ Robert W. Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation: The Pastoral Theology of the Canons of Dort* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2019), 14.

² I am indebted for this survey to John Jefferson Davis, “The Perseverance of the Saints: A History of the Doctrine”, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 34, no.2 (June 1991): 213-228.

against both the teaching that a believer can choose salvation and that a believer can lose that salvation. In his *Anti-Pelagian Writings*, he stated that, "I assert, therefore, that the perseverance by which we persevere in Christ even to the end is the gift of God."³ Augustine went on to maintain that, "when that gift of God is granted to them ... none of the saints fails to keep his perseverance in holiness even to the end."⁴ In the early church, stands were taken in favor of the doctrine of perseverance. This fact is important to keep in mind when hearing the Remonstrants' arguments and Dort's response.

Reformers such as Martin Luther and John Calvin rediscovered the grace of the gospel following the darkness of the medieval period of the Church. Luther stated his disgust that the pope "should have entirely prohibited the certainty and assurance of divine grace."⁵ As the Lutheran Formula of Concord stated, "We are rendered certain that by mere grace, without any merit of our own, we are chosen in Christ to eternal life, and that no one can pluck us out of his hands."⁶ Calvin spoke with even more clarity on this subject. Commenting on 1 John 3:9, "No one born of God commits sin, for God's nature abides in him, and he cannot sin because he is born of God." Calvin states the Apostle John "plainly declares that the Spirit continues his grace in us to the last, so that inflexible perseverance is added to newness of life."⁷ Calvin believed that the seed of the gospel "communicated when God regenerates his elect, as it is incorruptible, retains its virtue perpetually."⁸ The teachings of perseverance in the Reformation preceding the Remonstrant Controversy were echoed and propagated through on European confessions and catechisms. For instance, the Heidelberg Catechism used by the churches of the Netherlands where the Arminian controversy was situated, asks in Question 54, "What do you believe concerning 'the holy catholic church'?" then answers, "I believe that the Son of God through his Spirit and Word, out of the entire human race, from the beginning of the world to its end, gathers, protects, and preserves for himself a community chosen for eternal life and united in true faith. And of this community I am *and always will be* a living member" (emphasis mine).

In response to the Reformed teachings, the Council of Trent met in the 1540s and condemned the doctrines of grace. In the Sixth Session of the Council, the Council first condemned assurance of salvation and then, predestination. The Council of Trent stated in canon 15, "If anyone says that a man who has been reborn and justified is bound by faith to believe that he is certainly in the number of the predestined, let him be anathema." They went on to declare: "If anyone says that he has absolute and infallible certitude that he will certainly have the great gift of final perseverance, without having learned this from a special revelation: let him be anathema."⁹ Rome left room for perseverance only to those special saints given visions. Again, when reading Dort's canons, clearly, this background arc is in the delegates' minds. They see their theological foes propagating related errors with respect to perseverance. Attacks on the doctrines of grace are expected from theological viewpoints such as Catholicism. Yet those that come from within the Reformed faith are more subtle, surprising, and pernicious. Such was the case of James Arminius and the Remonstrants.

³ Philip Schaff, *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church: Vol. V, Saint Augustine: Anti-Pelagian Writings* (New York: Christian Literature Company, 1887), 526.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 529.

⁵ Julius Kostlin, *The Theology of Luther* (Philadelphia: Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 2:462.

⁶ Philip Schaff, ed., *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper, 1897), 3:14.

⁷ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 214.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ John F. Clarkson, *The Church Teaches: Documents of the Church in English Translations* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1955), 244.

With respect to perseverance, Arminius claimed to uphold it. He stated that he “never taught that a true believer can either totally or finally fall away from the faith, and perish.”¹⁰ Yet Arminius clearly questioned the importance of the doctrine of perseverance. Contrary to the truth described in the brief survey just provided, Arminius minimizes perseverance’s importance, by writing in this manner:

Is it possible for true believers to fall away totally and finally: Do some of them, in reality, totally and finally fall from the faith? The opinion which denies “that true believers and regenerate persons are either capable of falling away or actually do fall away from the faith totally and finally,” was never, from the very times of the apostles down to the present day, accounted by the church as a catholic doctrine.¹¹

Arminius further calls into question his commitment to the doctrine when he cautiously writes, “Those persons who have been grafted into Christ by true faith, and have thus been made partakers of his life-giving Spirit, possess sufficient powers to fight against Satan, sin, the world, and their own flesh and to gain the victory of those enemies – yet not without the assistance of the grace of that same Spirit.”¹² The wording ultimately puts the success of perseverance on the believer, lacking the God-centered confidence of perseverance taught by Calvinists. Furthermore, though Arminius said he had not explicitly denied the Calvinist position on perseverance, he entertained the possibility that perseverance was an error and so was not prepared to declare it true.

So the Remonstrants’ short statement on perseverance in their Article 5 reflects the uncertainty and even ambivalence of Arminius:

Those who are united to Jesus Christ by a true faith and so come to share in his life-giving Spirit have abundant power to fight against Satan, sin, the world, and their own sin and to win the victory. But whether they of themselves through neglect can lose the beginning of their being in Christ, again take up with this present world, reject the Holy Spirit once given to them, lose their good conscience, and abandon grace, must first be sought out further from the Holy Scripture before we can ourselves teach it with the full confidence of our minds.¹³

Note the emphasis on the believers having “abundant power to fight” which echoes Arminius’ expression “sufficient powers” falling short of the confidence heard in Westminster or, as we will now see, Dort, regarding God’s ability to preserve His people. Additionally, it is almost incredulous to hear learned ministers stating publicly that they need to seek out further in the Scriptures this doctrine before they can teach it with “full confidence of our minds.” Robert Godfrey, clearly writing tongue in cheek, says of this statement, “they believe that the sinner can reject grace at the beginning of grace’s contact with his life, but they are uncertain as to whether this grace can be rejected later.”¹⁴ Fortunately, the delegates at Dort, viewing this statement as duplicitous, did not lack such confidence and approved the fifth canon along with the previous ones without dissent.¹⁵ At Dort, eight years since their original statement, the Remonstrants,

¹⁰ James Arminius, *The Writings of James Arminius* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book house, 1956), 1:254.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2:501-3.

¹² James Arminius, “The Apology Against Thirty-One Defamatory Articles”, *Works*, 676.

¹³ Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, 14.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Samuel Miller, “Introductory Essay”, *The Articles of the Synod of Dort*, trans. Thomas Scott (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication), 31.

having either “sought out further” or having just become more honest, said openly to the Synod, “True believers can fall from true faith and can fall into such sins as cannot be consistent with true and justifying faith; not only is it possible for this to happen, but it even happens frequently.”¹⁶

The Calvinistic assembly at Dort had to respond.

The Approach of Dort in Defending and Promoting this Biblical Doctrine

As stated above, the fifth canon of Dort picks up where the others ended. Continuing to stress God’s grace, the assembly stated with no doubt and full exposition of the Scriptures that God’s grace is sufficient and able to preserve every believer in the face of every temptation and trial in this world. The delegates developed this doctrine through fifteen articles, which follow a natural progression that can be outlined by five headings.

I. The Demand for Perseverance (Articles 1-2)

The first two articles are introductory, explaining that sin remains in the believer, so it places upon the saint a demand. He must pursue holiness and not let sin ruin him. At regeneration, Dort teaches that the elect are liberated from the “dominion and servitude of sin,” but sin is not completely removed at the moment of conversion (V.1). Thus, in the fight against daily “sins and blemishes”, the believer is to constantly return to Christ, employing the means of grace provided by the Spirit, such as prayers, so that we rely on him rather than on the flesh in putting to death the flesh (V.2). “A believer knows that he cannot achieve perfection in this life, yet he will try because that has become the direction of his life.”¹⁷ He has a new orientation in life as a heaven-bound pilgrim; until then he is “freed from this body of death and reign with the Lamb of God in heaven.” (V.2) As Thomas Manton wrote, “We must so oppose sin, that in some sort we may kill it or extinguish it, not only scratch the face of it but seek to root it out; at least that must be our aim.”¹⁸

II. The Definition of Perseverance (Article 3)

The third article gives Dort’s definition of the doctrine:

Because of these remnants of sin dwelling in them and also because of the temptations of the world and Satan, those who have been converted could not remain standing in this grace if left to their own resources. But God is faithful, mercifully strengthening them in the grace once conferred on them and powerfully preserving them in it to the end.

Unlike the Arminians who focus on the decisions and activity of the believer, clearly, Dort’s focus in perseverance is placed on God. God is faithful to powerfully preserve believers “to the end.”

III. The Difficulty of Perseverance (Articles 4-8)

The next five articles address the continuing, difficult journey believers have in traveling from the cross to heaven. While acknowledging again the ultimate power of God in preserving believers over the weakness of the flesh, these articles honestly admit and deal with the reality of the struggles the believer has against sin. Believers can be seduced, drawn into “great and

¹⁶ Matthew Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness: An Introduction to Doctrine and Piety in the Canons of Dort* (Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2013), 157.

¹⁷ Cornelis Pronk, *Expository Sermons on the Canons of Dort* (Calgary: Free Reformed Publications, 2013), 227.

¹⁸ Thomas Manton and William G. Harris, *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton, D.D., with a Memoir of the Author* (London: J. Nisbet & Company, 1873), 12:55.

heinous sins by Satan, the world and the flesh” and even be allowed by God to fall at times, as Biblical examples such as David and Peter show (V.4). The effects of such sins are acknowledged, such as offending God, incurring guilt, grieving the Spirit, shaking one’s faith, wounding or hardening the conscience, and experiencing doubts about salvation (V.5).

Yet believers are never allowed to go so far as to lose their adoption, justification, or commit the sin unto death and plunge into utter destruction (V.6). Rather, as the Psalmist states of the godly, “though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong” (Ps. 37:24). For as Article 7 says of God, “ ... in these falls, He preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing or being totally lost.” Believers are brought through these times of falling by being restored to God through the blood of Christ and, with this experience behind them, work ever more diligently on their salvation. Regarding the possibility of the saints ultimately falling and perishing, Dort first acknowledges, then declares,

With respect to themselves this not only easily could happen, but also undoubtedly would happen; but with respect to God it cannot possibly happen. God’s plan cannot be changed; God’s promise cannot fail; the calling according to God’s purpose cannot be revoked; the merit of Christ as well as his interceding and preserving cannot be nullified; and the sealing of the Holy Spirit can neither be invalidated nor wiped out. (V.8)

With this statement, “(W)e see the Trinitarian God at work. The Father’s plan, the Son’s provision and protection, and the Spirit’s preservation cannot and will not fail.”¹⁹ Pastors must continually be reminding their flock that their battle with sin depends ultimately not on their own ability to persevere but the love the Triune God has for the believer.²⁰

IV. The Definitiveness of Perseverance (Articles 9-13)

In the next section of this canon, Dort moves from the struggles in perseverance to the way it brings forth assurance of faith. Believers grow, coming to a place where “they firmly believe that they are and always will remain true and living members of the church, and that they have the forgiveness of sins and eternal life.” (V.9). Not only dealing with the Remonstrants but Rome, in Article 10, the delegates state that “this assurance ... is not produced by any peculiar revelation contrary to or independent of the Word of God,” which statement was against Trent’s Canon 16. Rather, this assurance issues forth from the promises of God’s Word, the sealing of the Holy Spirit’s testimony, and from the pursuit of obedience in faith by the believer. Though doubts arise, God overcomes them in the life of the believer (V.11). True assurance lead believers into humility rather than pride, lawful living rather than licentiousness, and grateful obedience rather than heartless carelessness in their fight against sin (V.12-13). The renewed conscience of believers gives them a sensitivity to the grievous nature of sin and a desire coming from God’s love for them to obey Him. As Daniel Hyde writes, “[This] doctrine is both the real source (*vera raix*; true root) and the incentive (*stimulus*) for good works.”²¹

V. The Devotion of Perseverance (Articles 14-15)

The last two short articles of the fifth canon provide the means and final incentives for perseverance that lead the Church to the devoted life. Dort states simply that, “God preserves, continues, and completes this work by the hearing and reading of the gospel, by meditation on it, by its exhortations, threats, and promises, and also by the use of the sacrament” (V.14). Here, Dort highlights that the church using the means that mark her as belonging to Christ, namely

¹⁹ Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, 337.

²⁰ Barrett, *The Grace of Godliness*, 114.

²¹ Daniel R. Hyde, *Grace Worth Fighting For: Recapturing the Vision of God’s Grace in the Canons of Dort* (Burford, UK: The Davenant Press, 2019), 315.

the preaching of the Word, the exercising of discipline according to the Word, and the administering of the visible Word of the sacraments, is God's way of working perseverance out in the life of the believer. The fifth canon ends, after acknowledging the hatred for this doctrine in the world, with a beautiful doxological statement about the church's regard for this teaching:

The bride of Christ, on the other hand, has always loved this teaching very tenderly and defended it steadfastly as a priceless treasure; and God, against whom no plan can avail, and no strength can prevail, will ensure that the church will continue to do this. To this God alone, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, be honor and glory forever. Amen (V.15).

After these fifteen articles, a "Rejection of Errors" follows with nine further clarifying statements drawing upon these articles against the Arminians' teaching.²²

The Needed Applications in Today's Theological and Ecclesiastical Setting

With Arminianism and its ill fruits so rampant in the modern church, it can be overwhelming to know best how to address it. Yet, in the spirit of Dort, we must. Knowing these five canons were aimed at ministers (pun intended), having this conference at a seminary where gospel ministers are training, and with this talk given by a professor of pastoral theology, leads to specific application to pastors regarding the doctrine of perseverance. The evil one knows that if he can strike down the shepherd, the sheep will be scattered. How does the doctrine of perseverance apply to the pastor? Three areas will be briefly addressed: pastoral burn out, pastoral apostasy, and pastoral suicide.

Pastors can continue on in the ministry for years yet feel like a dry well as they slowly burn out of energy and eventually hope. Often, they do not know where to turn or what to do. Many simply leave the ministry disillusioned. As Article 10 states so well, "If God's chosen ones in this world do not have this well-founded comfort that the victory will be theirs and this reliable guarantee of eternal glory, they would be of all people most miserable." The doctrine of grace in perseverance speaks to these situations. Pastors need to persevere. But to do so, they need refreshment in their journey, where they can be reminded again of the promises of God, the Triune love he has for all his people, including them, and their need to employ means available to them. As Dort teaches, God uses means in perseverance, pastors must learn that they need to not only minister the means of grace, but they also need to receive them.

Sadly, we are also living in an era of pastoral unfaithfulness and even apostasy. Too many popular Reformed ministers have been found guilty of abusing their power, committing adultery, or both. Shamed, they leave the pulpit only to return to the post after a short period of chastisement, clearly a wrong application of perseverance. Other ministers are abandoning their faith altogether, such as popular author and minister Josh Harris, one of the most recent preachers to deny Christ. Each of these situations should serve as a warning to us, but not only as a warning. They remind us of the other humbling side of the doctrine of perseverance. The reprobate may appear for a period of time to be believers. Yet, as Canon 5 states, "the ignorant and the hypocrites abuse" this doctrine. As the apostle John said, they went out from us because they were not one of us (1Jn. 2:19).

Finally, this doctrine must be applied to the sensitive topic of suicide. Though suicide obviously is not limited to pastors, being the second leading cause of death of those between the ages of 14 to 20, we still must acknowledge that it is occurring amongst pastors. Recent months have seen the death by suicide of ministers in Reformed denominations, and even this week a popular evangelical pastor took his own life. We need clear, hard truth spoken in loving ways.

²² The Rejection of Errors section could be included in the outline as a sixth section entitled "The Defense of Perseverance."

Suicide is sin. In the Westminster Larger Catechism answer to what sins are forbidden in the six commandment, the taking of one's own life is mentioned first. If any of these ministers took another's life, we would see the murder for what it is. But often we relegate self-murder simply as a result of mental illness and not as a failure to persevere. Because the sinful aspect is treated more shallowly than it ought to be, and perseverance is not applied more rigorously as it needs to be, we leave open a door of permissive thinking about suicide that needs to be closed. Any minister truly struggling with suicidal thoughts needs to be helped by those overseeing him, to step away from the strains and responsibility of the ministry to get the help he really needs. Pastors are to take heed of flocks so they persevere, but as Paul told the Ephesian elders there is something a minister must do first. "Take heed of yourself."

Conclusion

Robert Godfrey said, "In a profound sense, the synod saved the Reformation for the Reformed churches ... As the Reformation was a revival of a biblical Augustinianism, so the Synod of Dort stands in the great Christian heritage that rejects Pelagianism and semi-Pelagianism. It stands in the tradition of Jesus against the Pharisees, Paul against the Judaizers, Athanasius against Arius, Augustine against Pelagius, and Luther against Erasmus. Dort against the Arminians continues that great commitment."²³ In other words, the church of Christ, and the gospel that saves, will persevere to the end.

²³ Godfrey, *Saving the Reformation*, 2.