

Chapter 1

Grace and Works

Introduction

No doubt there are millions who have professed the name of Christ and continue to live in such a way which gives no evidence whatsoever that their profession is real. In fact, a widely reported opinion poll survey indicated that over fifty million people in the United States claim to be born again.¹ Surely, if that many people were true "partakers of the divine nature," the impact on our country would be profound.

In the clearest possible terms the New Testament writers presented the unconditional nature of the gospel offer:

*And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes, take the water of life **without cost** (Rev. 22:17 NASB).*

*For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son **that whoever believes in Him** should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16 NASB).*

Yet explicit statements such as these are sometimes difficult to accept. Could something as important as our eternal destiny really come to us only through believing and be "without cost"? One cannot profitably speculate on the eternal destiny of many who have acted in a way that brings shame to the gospel. But this type of behavior by people who claim to be Christians certainly makes one anxious that the clearest possible presentation of the gospel be made.

Grace under Fire

There are two powerful influences which have caused this hesitation to accept the unconditional freeness of saving grace.

The Abuse of Grace

The first is the deplorable state into which Western Christianity has fallen as we move to the end of the twentieth century. This has caused many to wonder, Is the teaching of free grace healthy?

There has always been sin in the church, but the presence of the media, television evangelists, and the news and information explosion has highlighted

¹ George Gallup, Jr. and David Poling, *The Search For America's Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), p.92.

certain hypocrisy as never before. Furthermore, Western culture has become so thoroughly secularized and godless that simply living in it has resulted in many Christians getting mud on their feet. The church, instead of being a beacon of light, has often been penetrated by the very abuses which it speaks against.

A lamentable situation such as this is bound to provoke thoughtful and even angry reactions from some within the church who are understandably upset about empty professions of faith which have not resulted in any change of life.

One such reaction has recently come from the able pen of John MacArthur, pastor-teacher of Grace Community Church. Troubled by the prevalence of "cheap grace" in the church today, MacArthur has turned our attention to *The Gospel According to Jesus*, a book which he says is the product of four years of study on the subject of the definition of the gospel according to Christ.

Why does such a situation like this exist in the church today? In MacArthur's opinion it is due to the well-meaning but misinformed teaching that salvation is being offered without the necessity of accepting Christ as both Savior and Lord at the point of saving faith. He feels that many leading Bible teachers are saying "the only criterion for salvation is knowing and believing some basic facts about Christ."² The fallout of this thinking, he says, is a deficient doctrine of salvation; justification is not necessarily and inevitably linked to sanctification. People feel they can pray a prayer, receive eternal life, and then go on sinning.

The answer, MacArthur feels, is to include the notion of submission to the lordship of Christ as the antidote to a defective view of faith. This leads him into some views of the nature of saving faith and of the conditions for salvation which, to many, would seem to be an extreme reaction in the opposite direction from the "easy believism" he so vigorously attacks.

The Theology of the Reformers

The second major influence which has caused many to ask, Is free grace healthy? is a persistent theological tradition going back to John Calvin. Calvin and the Reformers who followed him told their readers and parishioners that faith alone saves, but true faith is a faith which results in a life of works. In fact, the final proof of the reality of faith is whether or not a man perseveres in good works to the end of life. Known as the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, this teaching emerged in its mature form³ during the Protestant Reformation.

²John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 17.

³Traces of this teaching can be found in 1 Clement and the Apostolic Fathers.

One has only to read Calvin's *Institutes* to see immediately that he labored under a great burden to defend the Reformation against the criticism that a faith alone, grace alone gospel would lead to moral laxity. When perusing these great volumes, the "atmosphere" is pungent with anxiety to demonstrate that the gospel of free grace will not lead to license but will, to the contrary, result in a life of holiness. However, in order to make his argument "air tight," Calvin went beyond the Scripture and taught that the gospel will necessarily and inevitably guarantee a life of holiness. This subtle change in the gospel was readily accepted by the Reformers because it completely negated the Catholic attack. When a person who claimed to be a Christian and yet was living a carnal life was set up by the Catholics as an example of the product of Reformation theology, the Reformers could now simply say he was not a Christian at all. If he was, he would not live like that. When one was in the midst of a debate which was ripping apart the fabric of Western Europe, one needed powerful arguments like this in his arsenal,

Having successfully separated from Catholicism and established the Reformation churches, the next attack came from within. Pelagianism manifested itself in resistance by Protestants in Holland to the notion that a true Christian can never lose salvation. Convinced that certain passages, such as Heb. 6, taught that falling away from salvation was a real danger, they argued against the Calvinist doctrine of unconditional security. Once again the doctrine of perseverance in holiness was a powerful weapon to fend off this attack. Certainly the Reformers could not be accused of a doctrine which leads to license, if the doctrine guaranteed that true Christians will persevere in holiness to the end of life. When the Arminians pointed to a man who had professed Christ and had never given evidence of a godly life, the Calvinists could simply reply that according to their doctrine he was not a Christian at all. "However much [they] avoided this teaching [their doctrine of temporary faith] in their sermons, it was always around, and they could readily raise it when they needed it to explain an apostasy."⁴

This debate about eternal security has not been a brief affair. In fact, it has gone on for several hundred years and continues to some extent today. When a discussion endures that long, issues are more precisely defined, and positions harden. The very length and intensity of the debate has contributed in no small way to the traditional acceptance of opposing positions. Lest the reader doubt this point, consider the typical seminary student, the future teacher of the sheep. When a position differing from his own background or perhaps from that of the seminary which he attends is presented, he is likely to "check it out" by opening up the standard theology texts which support his view and learning the ancient arguments against his opponents. Thus, traditional arguments are passed on from book to student, from professor to pupil, and from pupil to the parishioner when he becomes

⁴ R.T. Kendall, *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), p.143.

a pastor. Pressed for time in the seminary, and without it in the church, he rarely has opportunity for original study which might challenge traditional interpretations.

The Answer to Carnality

To prevent abuse of the gospel, two widely held solutions are offered. Some, harkening back to the Colossian error, insist that the cause of the problem is that man needs more than initial salvation in Christ--a "fullness" beyond our salvation experience, a second work of grace to finish the incomplete beginning. However, some of the most notable examples of the present hypocrisy have appeared within the groups which offer such a solution and by the very leaders who teach it. The other solution, and the one which this book addresses, is the tendency to "front-load" and "back-load" the gospel.

Front loading the Gospel

Front loading the gospel means attaching various works of submission and obedience on the front end and including them in the conditions for salvation. These works are supposedly created in the heart by God. This is commonly done among those who maintain that submission to the lordship of Christ is a condition of salvation. Faith is redefined to include submission, and a man becomes a Christian not by "hearing" and "believing" but by believing and promising God he will submit his life to Christ. This is not to deny that true faith certainly involves a disposition of openness to God and cannot coexist with an attitude of determination to continue in sin. But that is not what those who teach so-called "lordship salvation" mean. Rather, their view is that a man must resolve to turn from all known sin and follow Christ absolutely. It seems that works enter through the front door, and another gospel is taught. But surely this God-created submission to lordship is a work, and works in the human heart whether from God or man do not save!

Back Loading the Gospel

A far more subtle change in the gospel, however, occurs when some back-load the gospel. Back loading the gospel means attaching various works of submission as the means for achieving the final aim of our faith, final deliverance from hell and entrance into heaven. This is what has been done in the more extreme expressions of the Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. While it is often claimed that a life of works is the necessary and inevitable result of true faith, it is also maintained by some that works are the means of achieving our final destiny. Of course, it is not always stated as blatantly as that. These works, we are told, are different than the works which the unregenerate perform to obtain merit with God. These works are the gifts of Christ and the fruits of regeneration. Calvin resisted a similar theology during the Reformation:

*The Sophists, who delight in sporting with Scripture and in empty cavils, think they have a subtle evasion when they expound **works** to mean, such as unregenerated men do literally, and by the effect of free will without the grace of Christ, and deny that these have any reference to spiritual works. Thus, according to them, man is justified by faith as well as by work, provided these are not his own works, but gifts of Christ and fruits of regeneration.*⁵

Calvin would no doubt be appalled to learn that there are many in the church today and who bear his name who espouse this very sophistry! To the prosaic mind, the doctrine of perseverance in holiness sometimes seems to be expressed in a way that teaches that sanctification is a means of justification. The English Puritans often came close to this, and at least one of their luminaries, William Bradshaw (1571-1618), explicitly taught what others only implied.⁶

More recently, Arthur Pink has maintained that God requires that true Christians must "keep themselves" or risk eternal damnation.⁷ Yet he unequivocally maintains the "absolute and eternal security of the saints."⁸

He is attempting to show that God preserves His children through means--works. He quotes John Owen, that prince of the Puritan expositors, with approval, teaching that works are a means of salvation:

*But yet our own diligent endeavor is such as **indispensable means** for that end, as that without it, it will not be brought .0..... If we are in Christ, God hath given us the lives of our souls, and hath taken upon himself in His covenant, the preservation of them. But **yet** we may say, with reference unto the **means** that He hath appointed, when storms and trials arise, **unless we use our diligent endeavors, we cannot be saved.***⁹

It seems that Pink, Bradshaw, and Owen are simply being honest about their understanding of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. In their preoccupation with means they have forgotten that God has already told us what the means of salvation are and what they are not. Works are not a means, whether on the front end or on the back end. The only means necessary for obtaining salvation is faith, and faith alone:

*He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us *through* the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy*

⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 3.11.14.

⁶ See Kendall, p. 89.

⁷ Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), p. 601.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 599.

⁹ John Owen, *Hebrews*, cited by Pink, p. 600.

Spirit (*Titus. 3:5*).

The "means" are the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, and not our good works:

For it is by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

The means are one--faith. This faith is apart from any means involving works. How else can Paul say it? When Pink and his modern followers, reacting to the moral laxity in the church, back-load the gospel with means, they are flatly contradicting Paul, if words have any meaning at all. In so doing, they seem to be preaching "another gospel" (Gal. 1:9).

We might ask, "Has loading the gospel with additional means and conditions achieved any more notable moral results than those who add nothing to it?" The answer seems to be no. There is just as much moral laxity in the history of those confessions who have stressed perseverance as in those who have not. One only has to read the works of the English Puritans to see the burden these godly men felt over these same issues in their churches. This approach has been tried before without success, and it is hardly the answer to our present dilemma. Robert Dabney, an articulate proponent of this very doctrine, laments the deplorable state of the Presbyterian Church in his day (1878). The New Testament saints, he says, "did not, like so many now, sit year after year in sinful indolence, complaining of the lack of assurance, and yet indifferent to its cultivation."¹⁰

The problems of spiritual lethargy and spiritual abuse are widespread. The various proposals for correcting them have been tried before, and there seems to be no useful purpose served in continuing with the old answers such as lordship salvation and perseverance in holiness. It seems to me that these problems are rooted in some very fundamental biblical misunderstandings. Could it be that the Protestant Reformation was incomplete and that this lies at the core of a raging modern controversy concerning the freeness of God's grace? Perhaps this unfinished beginning is also a significant cause of the carnality found in many churches. Here is the key to our modern dilemma. The Reformers feared free grace and, as a result, did not take the Reformation far enough. That is, their doctrine of the saints' perseverance in holiness compromised the free grace of God. Because the doctrine of justification by faith alone was potentially vulnerable to the charge of promoting license, the Reformers simply could not let go of the notion that works played a necessary part in our final arrival in heaven. Unable to accept that a regenerate man

¹⁰ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972), p. 707.

could live a life of sin and still be saved, they included works on the back end of the gospel as the means (result?) of salvation.

If the saints must inevitably and necessarily persevere in godliness to the final hour, then the doctrine of rewards and chastisement at the judgment seat of Christ becomes murky. How can a man who has persevered in holiness be chastised? Since all who are regenerate will be rewarded anyway, perhaps many settle into spiritual dullness thinking all is well with their souls and there are no negative consequences to pay. And if the doctrine of punishment for a carnal life is vague and if the doctrine of rewards is reduced to a promise of something that everyone will get anyway, then key motivators for living the Christian life are compromised.

Most important, however, is the fact that the motivation of gratitude for unconditional acceptance is lost. This is because in the Reformed system the most likely possibility for the continually sinning Christian is that he may not be a true Christian at all. While some advocates of this doctrine would not intend this, the practical result is often continual introspection and doubt as to whether or not one is really unconditionally loved and accepted in God's family, apart from any works at all! Yet, paradoxically, those who advocate this view say our motivation should come from gratitude. But how can gratitude emerge from the heart of one who is continually re-examining whether or not he is truly accepted?

A new Reformation may be needed in Western Christianity which sets forth the magnificent freeness of God's grace as the only sufficient motivation for godly living.

The Eternal Security of the Saints

It is obvious that the question of eternal security is inextricably involved with the question of free grace. If eternal life is truly offered "without cost" and salvation once received can never be lost, it might seem that some would take the grace of God for granted and live unfaithful lives. All motivation is lost, it is feared, to persevere in the life of faith. For the man who claims he is a Christian and who lives a sinful life, the Arminian warns him that he is in danger of losing his salvation. The English Puritans, on the other hand, simply say he never had salvation to begin with and he had better re-examine his foundations; he is in danger of hell. Only the man who perseveres in a life of good works to the final hour, they said, is truly saved.

The Reformed doctrine of the perseverance of the saints was an outgrowth of the accusations that the Reformation would logically result in moral laxity. It also provided a powerful means of refuting the Arminian teaching of conditional security. The intent of this book is to demonstrate that this doctrine is not only absent from Scripture but could, if not carefully stated, compromise the freeness of the grace of God. This is a book about the eternal security of the saints, a doctrine which the

writer feels has good scriptural support. Yet this doctrine has labored under amazing exegetical contortions at the hands of its advocates. The seeming twisting of numerous Scriptures in order to get them to align with a particular view of perseverance can only be described (if politically inclined) as "voodoo" exegesis. The history of interpretation must, of course, render the final verdict, but if one had to choose between Arminian and Calvinist interpretations of the relevant passages, the writer's opinion is that the Arminian view is eminently more successful and true to the text. Fortunately, one does not have to choose between either of those interpretations, and it will be the burden of this book to chart a third and mediating path.

This investigation will lead us into many related doctrines, such as the relationship between justification and sanctification, assurance of salvation, and the relevance of the warning passages in the New Testament. Can a true Christian commit apostasy? Does the New Testament teach the existence of the carnal Christian? In addition, we will examine all of the passages commonly brought to bear on the question of eternal security and consider both Calvinist and Arminian exegesis.

The Experimental Predestinarian

It is important at the outset of our discussion that we define our terms carefully. Some, for example, maintain that historically the doctrine of perseverance meant only that no true Christian would ever commit apostasy. While there may have been some who limited the doctrine to this mere continuation of belief, the vast majority of the Reformed confessions and the theological works definitely viewed perseverance as a perseverance in good works.

According to the Protestant creeds. From the earliest post-Reformation creeds, perseverance was always connected with a life of practical victory against sin as well as continuation of faith.¹¹

The specific occasion of the discussion of perseverance in the Canons of Dort (1619) was the controversy with the Remonstrants who denied this doctrine. The Canons make it explicitly clear that, even though a believer may lapse into carnality for a time, he will always return to repentance:

¹¹ *The Heidelberg Catechism* (1563), for example, says (Q. 127): "Since we are so weak in ourselves that we cannot stand a moment while our deadly enemies--the devil, the world, and our own flesh--assail us without ceasing, he pleased to preserve and strengthen us by the power of the Holy Spirit, that we may make firm stand against them, and not sink in this spiritual war, until we come off at last with complete victory" (*The Heidelberg Catechism*, in Schaff, 3:355). Perseverance is a complete victory in the spiritual war against sin and not just a refusal to commit apostasy. Furthermore, this perseverance is ultimately God's work, not ours. It is God who will preserve and strengthen" us.

*By such enormous sins, however they very highly offend God, incur a deadly guilt, grieve the Holy Spirit, interrupt the exercise of faith, very grievously wound their consciences, and sometimes lose tile sense of God's **favor for a time, until on their returning into the right way by serious repentance the light of God's fatherly countenance again shines upon them.***¹²

A lapse is only an "interruption" and lasts only "for a time until." The doctrine of perseverance guarantees, not just that the believer will not apostatize but that, when he backslides,

*[God] preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration from perishing or being totally lost; and again, by his Word and Spirit, he certainly and effectually renews them to repentance to a sincere and godly sorrow for their sins, that they may seek and obtain remission in the blood of the Mediator may again experience the favor of a reconciled God, through faith adore his mercies, and henceforward more diligently work out their own salvation with fear and trembling.*¹³

When the believer falls, God "certainly and effectually" renews him to repentance so that he will more diligently work out his own salvation with fear and trembling. The assurance that God will always enable them to persevere in good works by providing a way of escape when they fall (5.11) stimulates believers to persevere in piety, patience, prayer, and in suffering (5.12) and makes them more careful to continue in the ways of the Lord (5.11).¹⁴

The Westminster Confession refers to the fact of perseverance in the following manner:

*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.*¹⁵

What did the Westminster divines mean by "fall away from the state of grace"? What did it mean to persevere in the state of grace? When we see what they contrasted perseverance with, it is clear that they did not limit it to a mere

¹² "The Canons of the Synod of Dort," in Schaff, 3:593 (5.5).

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3:593-94 (5.7).

¹⁴ The French Confession of Faith (The Gallic Confession (1559) makes it clear that the perseverance of the saints is specifically a perseverance in the "right way (Art. 21). "We believe also that faith is not given to the elect not only to introduce them into the right way, but also to make them continue in it to the end. For as it is God who hath begun the work, He will also perfect it" ("The French Confession of Faith," in Schaff, 3:371).

¹⁵ "The Westminster Confession Faith," in Schaff, 3:636 (17.1).

continuation of believing but to a perseverance in good works:

*Nevertheless they may, through the temptations of Satan and of the world, the prevalence of corruption remaining in them, and the neglect of the means of their preservation, fall into grievous sins; and for a time continue therein: whereby they incur God's displeasure, and grieve his Holy Spirit; come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts; have their hearts hardened; and their consciences wounded; hurt and scandalize others, and bring temporal judgments upon themselves.*¹⁶

What is prevented by the Holy Spirit is "final" falling, and falling is clearly a falling into grievous sins, not just apostasy. Furthermore, perseverance guarantees that such failing is only temporary and, as stated in the Canons of Dort, can last only "for a time."

According to the Reformed theologians. When we turn to the discussions of perseverance in the writings of Reformed theologians, it is likewise clear that a perseverance in fruit bearing is the meaning, and not just a perseverance in faith.¹⁷ For example, Calvin, in his discussion of perseverance and the good works which God works in us (Phil. 2:13), says that God "supplies the persevering effort until the effect is obtained." The effect is the willing and the working of His good pleasure. In fact, he says, in our perseverance in good works "we go on without interruption, and persevere even to the end."¹⁸ For Calvin, the perseverance of the saints was much more than preventing their apostasy from faith; it was a positive sanctification in good works.

In his chapter on perseverance in *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, Reformed theologian John Murray similarly insists that the doctrine of the saints' perseverance is a doctrine of perseverance in good works. "The crucial test of true faith," says Murray, "is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his Word."¹⁹ For Murray, the doctrine of perseverance is not just a teaching that the

¹⁶ Ibid., 3:637 (17.3).

¹⁷ Reformed Baptist theologian Augustus Strong says that the saints' perseverance is "the human side or aspect of that spiritual process which, as viewed from the divine side, we call sanctification." He speaks of it as "the voluntary continuance, on the part of the Christian, in faith and well-doing." In this he is correct. The Reformed doctrine of perseverance is simply another way of saying that justification and sanctification are united and that perseverance is the gradual growth in grace which occurs in the life of all those who are truly regenerate. John H. Gerstner defines the doctrine of the saints' perseverance in this way: "Theologically speaking, it refers to the fifth point of the Calvinistic doctrinal system that true Christians will continue in faith and holiness forever. Thus Jonathan Edwards finds the very definition of a Christian to be, according to John 8:31, one who continues in the Word of Christ" (John H. Gerstner, "Perseverance," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Everett F. Harrison [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960], p.403-4).

¹⁸ *Institutes*, 2.3.9

¹⁹ John Murray, *Redemption-Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955), p.152.

true Christian cannot commit apostasy but that he cannot "abandon himself to sin; he cannot come under the dominion of sin; he cannot be guilty of certain kinds of unfaithfulness." His whole chapter is a sustained argument that perseverance cannot be separated from a life of works. He says, "Let us appreciate the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints and recognize that we may entertain the faith of our security in Christ only as **we persevere in faith and holiness to the end.**"²⁰ For Murray, as for all the Calvinist creeds which preceded him, the doctrine of the saints' perseverance is the doctrine that those who are truly saints will persevere in faith and holiness to the final hour.

He further argues against the Arminians that such a doctrine cannot lead to antinomianism "because, by definition, it means persevering **in holiness and not in unholiness....** It not only promotes but **consists in strenuous and persevering efforts after conformity to Christ.**"²¹

The outstanding Reformed theologian of the nineteenth century Charles Hodge clearly asserts the true definition of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance:

*It must be remembered that what the Apostle argues to prove is not merely the certainty of the salvation of those that believe; **but their certain perseverance in holiness.** Salvation in sin, according to Paul's system, is a contradiction in terms. This **perseverance in holiness** is secured partly by the inward secret influence of the Spirit, and partly by all the means adapted to secure that end--instructions, ad-monitions, exhortations, warnings, the means of grace, and the dispensations of his providence.*²²

The various instructions, warnings, and exhortations in the New Testament have as their object continuance in good works and holy living, not just the prevention of apostasy.

Robert Dabney, the well-known Reformed Presbyterian theologian who lectured at Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, was equally insistent that the Reformed doctrine of the saints' perseverance was not just a teaching that true saints will not commit apostasy but that they will persevere in a life of good works. He begins his discussion with Phil. 1:6 and observes, "We have here the Apostle's plain expression of his belief in the perseverance of the truly regenerate, in a state of repentance, unto the end."²³ For Dabney, the perseverance of the saints is

²⁰ Ibid., p. 155.

²¹ Gerstner, p. 404.

²² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, 3 Vols.* (London: Jannes Clarke, n.d.; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 3:112-13.

²³ Dabney, *Lectures*, p.688.

perseverance in holiness.²⁴

Similarly, Louis Berkhof defines perseverance as "that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion."²⁵ This, of course, closely approximates the Reformed definition of sanctification. It is not just the prevention of apostasy but the growth in holiness Berkhof intends to convey in his doctrine of the saints' perseverance. Like Hodge, he argues against the Arminians' charge of antinomianism by saying:

*It is hard to see how a doctrine which assures the believer of a **perseverance in holiness** can be an incentive for sin. It would seem that **the certainty of success in the active striving for sanctification** would be the best possible stimulus to ever greater exertion.*²⁶

Like the historic creeds, Berkhof is careful to emphasize that perseverance is God's work, not ours. "It is, strictly speaking, not man but God who perseveres." He gives a formal definition of perseverance as follows: "That continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion."²⁷

So the doctrine of the saints' perseverance is a guarantee of success in the active striving for sanctification. That is why William Shedd discusses perseverance under the topic of sanctification in his *Dogmatic Theology*.²⁸ It is, in the final analysis, a perseverance in holiness and not just a preventer of apostasy.

Conclusion. This brief survey of the various confessions and theologies of the Reformed faith leads to this definition of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance:

1. All who have been justified by God's grace will never lose their justification.
2. Instead, they will persevere in a life of good works and holiness to the final hour.
3. This perseverance is the work of God in which man co-operates.
4. The amount of good works will vary, but the thrust and direction of the life will always be toward holiness.
5. When they fall into sin, their fall will only be temporary, and they will always (if they are truly regenerate) come to repentance. As Thiessen put it, they will not

²⁴ Ibid., p. 692.

²⁵ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1941), p. 546.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 548.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 546.

²⁸ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889; reprint ed., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1979), p.557.

"fail to return from their backsliding in the end."²⁹

In describing the adherents of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance, some ambiguity results. Historically, this doctrine grew up in the Puritan tradition, and they called themselves "experimentalists." This is because they felt that Christ must be experienced and that, in order to ascertain whether or not one was a Christian, one must perform an experiment. He must ask, "Have I believed?" and "Are there evidences of works in my life?" If the answer to these questions was yes, he was justified in claiming that he was probably saved. Of course, the final verdict could only be rendered at the end of life when the evidence of final perseverance was compiled. They commonly employed what is called the practical syllogism:

Major Premise: *Those who have believed and give evidence of sanctification are saved.*

Minor Premise: *I have believed and have some evidences.*

Conclusion: *I am saved.*

This approach to assurance is "experimental." The hypothesis "I am saved" is being tested by an experiment.

A second distinguishing mark of those within this tradition has been a strong emphasis upon eternal predestination. In addition, these Puritan divines placed unusual emphasis on the doctrines of particular grace and limited atonement, a logical (but not exegetical!) extension of predestination. A helpful label then would include the words "experimental" and "predestination." R. T. Kendall has suggested the label "Experimental Predestinarians," which will be used throughout this book.³⁰

The Partaker

This book will discuss three basic theological approaches to the questions of security and perseverance. While labels often import connotations not shared by those designated, they are nevertheless helpful in distinguishing between positions. In this book the term "Arminian" refers to those followers of Jacobus Arminius who have held that it is possible for a true Christian to lose his salvation. For them the warning passages (e.g., Heb. 6) refer to regenerate people. The term "Calvinist" will refer to those who feel that one who is born again cannot lose his salvation and will necessarily and inevitably continue in good works until the end of life (the

²⁹ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerlosen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), p.294.

³⁰ Kendall, *English Calvinism*, p. 9.

Experimental Predestinarian"). The warning passages, according to the Experimental Predestinarian, are addressed to unregenerate people who have professed faith in Christ but who do not possess Christ in the heart. The designation for the third position will similarly be derived from a person, although this person is not mentioned by name but by his distinguishing characteristic:

*For we have become **partakers** of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end (Heb. 3:14 NASB).*

The word "Partaker" will designate the third theological approach to security. The Partaker is one who, like the Calvinist, holds to the eternal security of the Christian but, like the Arminian, believes the warning passages in the New Testament apply to true Christians. The Partaker is the Christian who perseveres in good works to the end of life. He is the faithful Christian who will reign with Christ in the coming messianic kingdom. He will be one of the servant kings. What is in danger, according to the Partaker, is not a loss of salvation but spiritual impoverishment, severe discipline in time, and a forfeiture of reward, viz., disinheritance in the future. For the Partaker the carnal Christian is not only a lamentable fact of Christian experience but is explicitly taught in the Bible as well.

A comparison and contrast between these three theological positions--the Arminian, the Experimental Predestinarian, and the Partaker--will constitute a major portion of this book. It will be helpful to state at the outset the precise distinctives of the Partaker doctrine.

The Partaker view of eternal security may be summarized as follows:

1. Those who have been born again will always³¹ give some evidence of growth in grace and spiritual interest and commitment. A man who claims he is a Christian and yet never manifests any change at all has no reason to believe he is justified (Mk. 4:5, 16-17).
2. The assurance of salvation is found only by looking outward to Christ and not by looking inward to the evidences of regeneration in the life. As the gospel promise and the beauty of the Redeemer are held before the believer's gaze, assurance is the result of such contemplation. The fruits of faith are helpful as secondary confirmations of one's regenerate state, but their absence does not necessarily invalidate a man's salvation. If a

³¹ This is true because (1) at conversion a person has repented, changed his perspective about sin and Christ and is therefore predisposed to allow Christ to change him; (2) he has been flooded with the new motivations toward godliness accompanied by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit; and (3) the parable of the soil says of the second man there was growth, a kind of fruit. But he may soon after quench the Spirit, walk by means of the flesh, and thus fail to give visible evidences of these initial inner workings. A life of sanctification will not inevitably and necessarily follow justification

believer is looking biblically and dependently to Christ, a lifestyle of sin will be psychologically, spiritually, and biblically impossible (Rom. 6:1, 11; 8:35-39; Heb. 11:1-2).

3. It is possible for true Christians to fail to persevere in faith and, in remote cases, even to deny the faith altogether (Heb. 10:26, 35). While initial growth is taught in the New Testament, it is possible for a true Christian to lapse into carnality and finish his course walking as a mere man. The automatic unity between justification and sanctification maintained by the Experimental Predestinarians is not taught in Scripture.
4. The warning passages of the New Testament are intended by the New Testament writers to address regenerate people, not merely professing people, and to express real dangers to the regenerate. The danger, however, is not loss of salvation but severe divine discipline (physical death or worse) in the present time and loss of reward, and even rebuke, at the judgment seat of Christ.
5. A life of good works is the obligatory outcome of justification but is not the inevitable outcome (Rom. 8:12).
6. Those whom God has chosen before the foundations of the world and efficaciously called into saving faith and regenerated by His Holy Spirit can never fall away from salvation, but they shall be preserved in a state of salvation to the final hour and be eternally saved. This preservation is guaranteed regardless of the amount of works or lack thereof in the believer's life (Jn. 6:38-40).
7. The motive for godly living is not to be found in either fear of losing salvation (Arminian) or wondering if one is saved (Experimental Predestinarian). Rather, it is to be found, negatively, in the fear of disapproval, and, positively, in gratitude for a salvation already assured and in anticipation of hearing the Master say, "Well done!" The doctrine of eternal rewards usually has a more prominent place in spiritual inspiration toward a life of good works in the Partaker view than in that of the Arminian or Experimental Predestinarian (1 Cor. 9:24-27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Jn. 8).³²

³² John MacArthur, for example, has only one sentence devoted to the subject in his entire book on discipleship, p. 145.

A conversation recently held with an articulate exponent of the Experimental Predestinarian position revealed once again how difficult communication can sometimes be. Listening to this well-known theologian describe what he thought to be the position of those called Partakers, it was evident how thoroughly our biases and theological background can hinder our abilities to understand one another. We were discussing saving faith. In this scholar's frame of reference there were only two possibilities regarding faith--it was either mere intellectual assent or personal commitment. That there was a third possibility, reliance and inner conviction, did not seem to occur to him. Furthermore, if you did not hold to his view that faith was commitment, this, in his thinking, meant that you believed all that was necessary for salvation was that you pray a prayer or intellectually accept some facts. In addition, this meant that you actively taught that there were two optional classes of Christians, carnal or spiritual, and that it was all right to be either one!

For those who may assume that this is either the direct teaching or the logical implication of the Partaker position, please withhold judgment until you have finished these pages! Like our Experimental Predestinarian friends, we would have serious doubts about the salvation of a man who claims he is a Christian and gives little or no evidence of it in his life. We would not give assurance of salvation to such an individual. We, too, are concerned about those who seem to think they can pray a prayer and live indifferently to Christ's claims and yet maintain the fiction that they will go to heaven anyway.

There is no question that there seems to be a general lack of vitality in many parts of the Western church today. Whether or not many who profess Christ are truly regenerate, none can say with certainty. However, we can all agree that the problem of spiritual lethargy, lukewarm Christians, and even carnality is widespread and must be addressed. It may be that a major cause of this difficulty is that we have not challenged our congregations with the sobering realities of our glorious future. It is mankind's destiny to "rule and have dominion," and that destiny has yet to be fulfilled. However, if the Partaker view of perseverance is right, only those Christians who persevere in a life of good works will have a share in this future glory. For the unfaithful Christian there will be shame and profound regret when he stands before the Lord at the judgment seat of Christ.

In the Experimental Predestinarian view, all who are Christians will be rewarded, and some more than others. Thus, they have created a version of Christianity where complete commitment is optional and not necessary. All that can be lost is a higher degree of blessedness, but all will be blessed. Could it be that this happy ending has lulled many into thinking they can continue their lukewarmness with no eternal consequences to pay?

To answer this question, we must consider some foundational thoughts. It appears that some interpretive principles are at the root of much of the controversy between the Calvinist and the Arminian.

** All emphasis in quoted material are the writer's unless otherwise noted.

THE REIGN OF THE SERVANT KINGS
Chapter 1: *Grace and Works* (pages 7-23)

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