

Chapter 10

The Possibility of Failure

The Reformed doctrine of perseverance not only lacks scriptural support for its view of sanctification, it also flies in the face of the numerous warnings against falling away repeated in nearly every book of the New Testament. Arminian theologians have pressed the warning passages vigorously upon their Calvinist friends, and in the judgment of this writer, with telling force. Unless it is possible for a true believer to fall away, it is difficult to see the relevance of these passages which seem to be directly applied to him by the New Testament writers.¹

It is possible that the widespread acceptance of the Reformed view of perseverance is due, in part, to the fact that certain verses which seem to support it are given more attention than those which seem to deny it. When plausible refutations of a few "problem passages" have been offered in the theology textbooks, an implication is made that the remaining passages can similarly be explained. What many are not aware of, however, is that the entire New Testament is replete with passages which argue convincingly and decisively against the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints.

The New Testament Warnings

In order to set the Experimental Predestinarian difficulty in the full glare of the New Testament witness, it will be helpful at this point to peruse a few of these so-called warning passages and sense their importance for this discussion.

Few passages have entered more frequently into the discussion of perseverance than Jn. 15:6:

If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and *dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned* (NASB).

The difficulty for the Experimental Predestinarians is that Jesus is referring to branches which are "in Me," who do not bear fruit (15:2). It seems to be possible for men "in Christ" to be unfruitful and be cast into the fire and burned.

¹ As will be argued elsewhere, the term "fall away" does not refer to falling away from eternal salvation. It refers, rather, to a failing away from the path of growth, or forfeiture of eternal reward

Speaking to the Colossians, the apostle Paul warns:

*And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach--**if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which you have heard** (Col. 1:21-23 NASB).*

There is a real danger here, a danger of not being presented before him! On the Reformed premises, there can be no real danger because all true Christians will continue in faith and will not be moved away from the hope of the gospel. Re warns them further about the danger of "not holding fast to the head" (2:19) and of being taken "captive through philosophy and empty deception" (2:8).

The salvation of the Corinthians seems to be conditioned on their holding fast:

*Now I make known to you brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, **if you hold fast the word** which I preached to you, unless ^y^o believed in vain (1 Cor. 15:1-2 NASB).*

Young Timothy is challenged to guard against the danger of "wandering from the faith":

For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang. But flee from these things, you man of God; and pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, perseverance and gentleness. Fight the good fight of faith; take hold of the eternal life to which you were called, and you made the good confession in the presence of many witnesses (1 Tim. 6: 10- 12 NASB).

Paul apparently does not feel that perseverance is the necessary and inevitable result of saving faith. Otherwise, why would he warn this regenerate man of the danger of wandering from the faith and need to exhort him to "fight the good fight"? On Experimental Predestinarian premises all true Christians will necessarily and inevitably fight the good fight, and they will not wander from the faith. They will persevere in faith up to the point of physical death.

According to James, it is possible for a true Christian to stray from the truth:

My brethren, if any among you strays from the truth, and one turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save his soul from death, and will cover a multitude of sins (Jas. 5:19-20 NASB).

The "sinner" to which James refers is evidently a Christian brother. The conditional clause implies that it is by no means inevitable that he will always be turned back.

Likewise, the apostle Peter makes it clear that true Christians can "fall":

Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure. For if you do these things, you will never fall, and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 1:1~11).

The conditional participle, "if you do" (Gk. **poiountes**), holds forth a real danger to the readers of this epistle. They might "fall" and forfeit their rich welcome into the eternal kingdom. Earlier, he suggested that they can become ineffective and unproductive" in their knowledge of Jesus Christ (1:8). In fact, he teaches the need to have certain character qualities manifested in "increasing measure" and then teaches that true Christians may not have this increasing measure of growth and are nearsighted, blind, and forgetful of their being cleansed from former sins (1:8-9). Yet according to the Experimental Predestinarians, true Christians will always have an increasing measure of growth and will never permanently fall.

The danger of falling away is repeated later in the same epistle:

His [Paul's] letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure positional But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:16-18).

Once again the danger of falling away is something real for true Christians. Ignorant and unstable people have distorted the epistles of Paul, and this act resulted in their "destruction." That the same result can come upon these "dear friends" seems to be stated when he warns them "not to be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position." Why would this warning be addressed to these "dear friends," if in fact it was not possible for them to experience this danger?

Consistent with the other passages studied, the apostle Jude affirms a similar danger:

These are men who divide you, who followed mere natural instincts and do not have the Spirit. But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for

the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life (Jude 19-21).

In contrast to the nonbelievers, who do not have the Holy Spirit and who have caused division, these "dear friends" are warned that they must keep themselves in God's love. If being kept in God's love is the necessary and inevitable result of regeneration, why are they commanded to keep themselves? Surely the command implies that they may not. And if they may not, then the Experimental Predestinarian position is fiction.

The danger of failing to abide in Him is clearly in the mind of the apostle John when he writes to his little children," i.e., his regenerate sons and daughters in the faith:

If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.... And now little children, abide in Him, so that when He appears, we may have confidence and not shrink away from Him in shame at His coming (1 Jn. 2:24-28 NASB).

We continue to abide in Him only if what we heard from the beginning abides in us. Failure to continue to abide is very real, not hypothetical, and will result in shrinking away from Him in shame at His coming.

According to the apostle, there is a danger that a Christian can "die":

Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation--but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:12-13).

It goes without saying that the possibility that a "brother" could live "according to the sinful nature" is assumed.

In the same book Paul issues another emphatic warning, a warning against the possibility of being "cut off":

*Granted. But they were broken off because of unbelief, and you stand by faith. Do not be arrogant, but be afraid For if God did not spare the natural branches, he will not spare you either. Consider therefore the kindness and sternness of God; sternness to those who fell but kindness to **you provided you continue in this kindness. otherwise, you also will be cut off** (Rom. 11:20-22).*

In no uncertain terms Paul affirms a real danger of being in some sense "cut off" if we fail to "continue in His kindness."

In this famous passage the apostle himself acknowledges the possibility of failure:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?... I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize (1 Cor. 9:24, 27).

He warns them, by inference, concerning the danger of similarly being disqualified.

In 1 Cor. 10:1-21 Paul warns the Corinthians against the danger of failure. The whole passage is instructive. As demonstrated earlier, the majority of the Israelites were born again, and yet the majority did not persevere in holiness. Consider:

So if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall. No temptation has seized you except what is common to men. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it (1 Cor. 10:12-13).

He tells them that the experience of the forefathers was intended as a warning for us (10:11). It is clear that he has Christians in view, and not mere professors in Christ, because he promises them the assistance of God in standing up to temptation.

Few verses seem to have impacted popular consciousness as frequently as Paul's famous warning about "falling from grace."

Stand firm, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of Mark my words! I, Paul tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all ... You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace (Gal. 5:14).

Marshalling his full authority as an apostle, he tells these Galatians that it is possible for true believers to fall from grace, come under the yoke of slavery, and become alienated from Christ! These strong words fly directly in the face of the Experimental Predestinarian's claim that true believers cannot fall and could never become alienated from Christ because they will persevere in faith to the end of life.

The possibility of failure to "continue" is stressed by Paul in the famous passage where he worries that he may have labored "for nothing."

Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed--not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence--continue to work out your salvation in fear and trembling... in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor for nothing (Phil. 2:12-16).

These are "dear friends" who previously have "always obeyed." They are born again. Yet there is a possibility of their failure to "continue to work out their salvation," resulting in the apostle's labor among them being "for nothing." There is nothing inevitable and necessary about their perseverance.

Can a true Christian fail to persevere and thus forfeit the prize?

Do not let anyone who delights in false humility and the worship of angels disqualify you for the prize (Col. 2:18).

A true believer can, by his life, deny the faith and become worse than an unbeliever:

If anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8).

This person who denies the faith is contrasted with the "unbeliever." Clearly, Paul is saying that a believer can be described in this way.

The love of money can cause true Christians to wander from the faith:

*People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and sinful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil Some people, eager for money, **have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs** (1 Tim. 6:9-10).*

The "people" to whom Paul refers include those who have wandered from the faith, i.e., those who have faith but are not in some way persevering in it. The result of this is many griefs. In contrast to these Christians who wander, Timothy is told to "take hold of the eternal life to which he was called" (1 Tim. 6:12).

That there is something conditional in the believer's future and that he faces a danger of not persevering necessarily and inevitably to the end of life could hardly be made plainer than it is in these verses:

Here is a trustworthy saying:
If we died with him,
we will also live with him;
if we endure,
we will also reign with him;
If we disown him,
he will also disown us;
if we are faithless,
he will remain faithful,
for he cannot disown himself (2 Tim. 2:11-13).

The possibilities of failure to endure, of disowning Christ, and of being faithless are stark realities. To say that true Christians do not face these dangers seems contradictory to passages such as this.

Without question, the center of the controversy in theological discussion has swirled around the warnings of Hebrews. Perhaps no other passages of the New Testament more clearly reveal the weakness of Experimental Predestinarian exegesis. Confronted with the stark and drastic nature of these warnings, some of the most ingenious misunderstandings in the history of interpretation have been argued in order to avoid their force. It is sometimes claimed that these verses apply only to those who have professed Christ, and not to those who have really believed. This assertion will be responded to in a later chapter, but first, let us consider the warnings themselves:

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? (Heb. 2:1-3).

Notice that "we" are in danger. The author includes himself as an object of this warning. Unless there are some contextual indicators to suggest this is an "editorial" we, there is no obvious justification for concluding anything else but that truly born-again people are the subject of the warning. It is possible for these Christians to drift away and as a result receive a punishment.

The apostle exhorts his believers against the danger of a failure to enter rest::

Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it (Heb. 4:1).

It is possible that a true Christian will not enter rest. There is real danger, not hypothetical danger, here.

The warning becomes more forceful in this well-known passage:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace (Heb. 6:4-6).

These born-again people² are in danger of "falling away." That they are born again is evident from the descriptive phrases applied to them.

There is no warning in the New Testament which is more forceful and direct than this caution against sinning willfully:

If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment (Heb. 10:26-27).

But are genuine Christians the objects of this warning or mere professors in Christ who were never really born again? Several things characterize those being warned.

First, they have "received the light" (Heb. 10:32). To be "enlightened" (**photizomai**) means to be born again and to have truly and inwardly experienced the heavenly gift and the personal ministry of the Holy Spirit.³

Second, they "stood [their] ground in a great contest in the face of suffering" (10:32). These people had not only responded to the gospel, they had suffered for it and persevered in their suffering for Christ's sake.

Third, they "were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; and at other times stood side by side with those who were so treated" (10:33). The public nature of their confession of Christ resulted in public ridicule and persecution. But far from backing away, they pressed on and joined with others who were similarly treated.

Fourth, they sympathized with those in prison (10:34). Risking danger to their own lives, they visited persecuted brothers and sisters in prison, thereby publicly identifying themselves to hostile authorities as Christian sympathizers.

Fifth, they "joyfully accepted the confiscation of [their] property" (10:34). Furthermore, they accepted this confiscation for the right motives, "because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions." They were focused on

² That these readers are regenerated will be established in chapter 19.

³ This will be substantiated in chapter 19.

the eternal inheritance which the faithful will acquire.

Finally, he specifically says they have been "sanctified":

*How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant **by which he was sanctified**, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Heb. 10:29 NASB).*

Sanctification in Hebrews looks at the imputation of the justifying righteousness of Christ from the vantage point of being qualified to enter the presence of God to worship and seek help in time of need (Heb. 10:10, 14, 19). It is possible for men who have been the recipients of this sanctification to trample under foot the Son of God and insult the Spirit of grace.

Does the writer of this epistle doubt their salvation? No! What he worries about is their loss of reward. He says:

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised (Heb. 10:35).

That he does not consider them mere professors in Christ is proven by the six things he says are true of them. In addition, one does not warn professing Christians about the loss of reward but about their eternal destiny in hell. One does not tell non-Christians to persevere in the faith so that they will receive a reward. Instead, he tells them to believe the gospel.

The exegetical and theological bankruptcy of the Experimental Predestinarian position is clearly seen by the following fact. In their system of assurance a man can know he is a Christian by reflecting on the truth that (1) he has believed; (2) he has the evidences of works in his life; and (3) the internal witness of the Holy Spirit. Now in the case of these people, whom Experimental Predestinarians maintain are not really Christians at all, all three criteria of their own introspective system are fully met. These people have believed (10:35, their "confidence"); they have evidenced their belief by perseverance in trials and good works (10:32-34); and they have the inner testimony of the Spirit ("enlightened," 10:32; 6:4). If they are not Christians, then the Reformed view of assurance is false, and if they are Christians, the doctrine of the perseverance of saints is fiction.

Only a few of the many warnings of the New Testament have been considered.⁴ This lengthy presentation, however, has been necessary in order to force a consideration of the breadth of the Experimental Predestinarian problem. It cannot be dismissed by plausible exegesis of a few difficult passages. It is contradicted by the entire New Testament.

The Reformed View of the Warnings

The Reformed faith has produced some of the most outstanding Christian scholars in the history of the church. Their contribution to the theological stability and apologetic defense of Protestant Christianity has been enormous. Yet the proverb remains true: "Brilliant men confuse things brilliantly." These brilliant men are not unaware of the numerous passages which can be quoted against their position and have spilt no little amount of ink in attempts to defend their view of the warnings in the light the passages cited above.

In response to these passages which seem to imply that the true Christian is in some kind of danger, that there is something contingent about his future destiny, the Experimental Predestinarians have replied that either (1) the passages are addressed to professing but not true Christians; or (2) they are addressed to true Christians but are simply a means which God uses to guarantee that they will persevere. In this system the evidence of the reality of the faith is perseverance in holiness to the end of life. All who are saved will persevere, and those who persevere, and those alone, are the truly saved. True apostasy is only possible for those who have never entered into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

In the discussion to follow, these two pillars of the Reformed response will be analyzed.

They Are a Means of Securing Perseverance

When faced with the many passages referred to above, Calvinists commonly say they are in many instances addressed to true believers, but they are not to be understood as saying that a true Christian can lose his salvation. Rather, they are in the New Testament to secure the obedience of final perseverance which has already been decreed for those who are elect. Robert Dabney explains:

The certainty that he will not [apostatize] arises, not from the strength of a regenerated heart, but from God's secret, unchangeable purpose concerning the believer; which purpose He executes towards and in him by moral means consistent with the creature's free agency. Among these appropriate motives

⁴ Other relevant passages are: 2 Pet. 3:1-17; 2 in. 6-9; Rev. 2:7, 11-12, 17, 18-26; 3:~5, 8-12, 14-22; 12:11; 22:18-19.)

*are these very warnings of dangers and wholesome fears about apostasy. Therefore, God's application of the motives to the regenerate free agent, proves not at all that it is God's secret purpose to let him apostatize. They are a part of that plan by which God intends to ensure that he shall not.*⁵

He then cites Paul's shipwreck at sea.⁶ In this passage the apostle Paul is promised that he will not perish, but he warns the men in the boat that, unless they attend to the means of saving themselves from the storm, they will perish.

Similarly, Shedd maintains that the warnings are consistent with perseverance for two reasons:

1. The certainty of perseverance is objective in God, but it may not be subjective in man. God knows that a particular man will persevere, because God purposes that that man shall. But the man does not know this unless he has assurance of faith. Believers which do not have assurance are subject to the warnings. "But one who is assured of salvation by the witness of the Holy Spirit would not be required to be warned against apostasy, while in this state of assurance."
2. Exhortations to struggle with sin and warnings against its insidious and dangerous nature are the means employed by the Holy Spirit to secure perseverance. The decree of election includes the means as well as the end.⁷

But how can there be any warning directed to a believer who is sufficiently biblically informed about perseverance to know that falling from grace is for him an impossibility? How can something be subjectively possible for the person who knows it to be objectively impossible?

Reformed theologian Louis Berkhof expresses a similar view:

*But these warnings regard the whole matter from the side of man and are seriously meant. They prompt self-examination, and are instrumental in keeping believers in the way of perseverance. They do not prove that any of those addressed will apostatize, but simply that the use of means is necessary to prevent them from committing this sin Compare Acts 27:22-25 with verse 3 for an illustration of this principle.*⁸

⁵ Robert L. Dabney, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878; reprinted, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), p.697.

⁶ Acts 27:22, 23, 24, 25, 31.

⁷ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1889; reprinted., Minneapolis: Klock and Klock, 1979), 2:557.

⁸ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), p. 548.

Experimental Predestinarians argue that God's perseverance of the saints is done through means. Men are not passive. God's preservation of the elect assumes that He has determined from all eternity the final destiny of His people. It also presupposes the way along which and in which believers will reach that end and includes the means which must serve the attainment of the final glory. One of the means is the preaching of the Word, which of course includes the warnings.

The advocates of perseverance argue that, just because there is a cliff along the road and that travelers are warned not to drive over it, that does not mean they won't. God warns simply because human beings require motivation. He therefore appeals to their fears to keep them on the path. But the warnings do not prove that believers can fall. On the contrary, they are God's means of ensuring that they shall not fall.

Several objections may be raised against this Calvinist view of the warnings:

The warnings lose their force. This explanation of the warning passages, obviously directed to believers, is unsatisfactory. Shank observes, "The folly of their contention is seen in the fact that, the moment a man becomes persuaded that their doctrine of unconditional security is correct, the warning passages immediately lose the very purpose and value which they claim for themselves."⁹

Berkouwer attempts to state the value of the warnings for the Christian as follows:

Anyone who would take away any of the tension, this comply earnest admonition, this many-sided warning from the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints would do the Scriptures great injury, and would cast the Church into the error of carelessness and sloth.

*The doctrine of the perseverance of the saints can never become an **a priori** guarantee in the life of believers which would enable them to get along without admonitions and warnings. Because of the nature of the relation between faith and perseverance, the whole gospel must abound with admonition. It has to speak thus, because perseverance is not something that is merely handed down to us, but it is something that comes to realization only **in the path of faith**. Therefore the most earnest and alarming admonitions cannot in themselves be taken as evidence against the doctrine of perseverance.*

To think of admonition and perseverance as opposites, as contradictories, is possible only if we misunderstand the nature of perseverance and treat it in isolation from its correlation with faith. For the correct understanding of the

⁹ Robert Shank, *Life in the Son: A Study of the Doctrine of Perseverance* (Springfield: Westcott, 1961), p. 164.

*correlation between faith and perseverance, it is precisely these admonitions that are significant, and they enable us to understand better the nature of perseverance."*¹⁰

He seems to be saying that the nature of the correlation between faith and perseverance explains the presence of the admonitions. But paradoxically, the admonitions help us understand the nature of the correlation between faith and perseverance! He is arguing in a circle although, typical of Berkouwer, his circularity is veiled in complex language. This is the point at issue. Do the admonitions "enable us to understand better the nature of perseverance," or do they help us to understand the impossibility of this Experimental Predestinarian doctrine!

But, we ask, if we have become sufficiently enlightened to understand that perseverance is inevitable and does not depend upon us in any manner or degree, how are we to become alarmed by these admonitions and warnings?

Berkouwer replies, "Faith always directs itself anew to this confidence. In this perspective it always discovers a fresh consolation, after it has allowed itself to be earnestly admonished."¹¹

So we are to be first of all alarmed by the warnings and afterwards consoled by the promise of final perseverance. Therefore, a person cannot accept all of Scripture at face value at the same time. "He must oscillate between two contradictory persuasions, both of which are supposedly equally warranted by the Scriptures."¹² A person cannot be motivated by the warnings until he has abandoned the promise that perseverance is inevitable and apostasy is impossible. And if it is inevitable that a person will heed the warnings and the Christian knows this, then how is he alarmed?

Berkouwer, like many Calvinists, appeals to irresistible grace. The warnings do not prove that the elect are in danger of apostasy, but they are necessary to prevent the elect from apostasy. The elect cannot fall because they are elect, and God keeps them from falling by giving them exhortations to which they will infallibly respond. However, since this irresistible grace is not powerful enough to keep us from some sins, how can we be confident that it is powerful enough to keep us from falling away? Of course, the grace of God is stronger than temptation, but will it inevitably overcome temptation?

It might also be asked, "How does this Calvinist response differ from the arguments commonly offered for universalism?" The universalist claims that the warnings about hell must be taken seriously by non-Christians, even though all the

¹⁰ C. G. Berkouwer, *Faith and Perseverance* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1958), p. 110.

¹¹ Berkouwer, p. 122.

¹² Shank, p. 167.

non-Christians will ultimately end up in heaven anyway! The Calvinist is saying that Christians should take the warnings seriously, even though they will all end up in heaven as well. The Calvinist is treating the warnings with no more seriousness than the universalist is treating the threats of eternal hell.

Arminian writer I. Howard Marshall criticizes Berkouwer along these same lines.¹³ Paradoxically, Marshall has a view of the relationship between faith and perseverance that is almost exactly the same as Berkouwer's. The difference is that Marshall's Arminianism allows him to take the warnings seriously, that a real danger exists. The believer perseveres by trust in God for help. If he chooses not to trust God for help, he will not persevere and will therefore lose his salvation. Berkouwer is virtually saying that the true believer always will trust God for help. But how does Berkouwer know this is true, unless he knows before he begins his exegesis that the Reformed doctrine of perseverance in holiness is fact? The Partaker also takes the warnings seriously, but he finds no contextual justification for the Arminian conclusion that these warnings threaten loss of salvation. Rather, in each instance a millennial disinheritance or a judgment in time is forecast.

It is logically contradictory. Not only do the warnings lose their force in the Experimental Predestinarian system, but this view of the warnings is logically contradictory. On the one hand, we are told that our eternal destiny is secure and that we will persevere in holiness to the final hour. On the other hand, we are told that there is no guarantee we will. Otherwise, the warnings would lose their force!

Berkouwer states this plainly. He says there is no factor in man which may determine the issue of perseverance, for "in this way the consolation of perseverance would most certainly be lost, because the final outcome would be put again in the hands of persevering man."¹⁴ Yet later, as quoted above, he has said, "the

doctrine of the perseverance of the saints can never become an a priori guarantee in the life of believers which would enable them to get along without the admonitions and warnings."¹⁵

Shank summarizes:

But if the "consolation of perseverance" is the assurance that the final outcome is not in the hands of persevering man, does not this "consolation" constitute "an a priori guarantee" of perseverance for all who embrace it? if it does not constitute such a guarantee, just what does it constitute? And if the final outcome is in no way in the hands of persevering man, then how can "the alarming admonitions" be sincere?¹⁶

¹³ I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1969), p. 206.

¹⁴ Berkouwer, p. 230.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 110.

¹⁶ Shank, p. 168.

An alarming illustration of this contradiction can be found in the famous commentary on Hebrews by Arthur Pink.¹⁷ Pink seems to border on "another gospel" in his efforts to guarantee that all true Christians will persevere in holiness to the end of life.

First of all, he refutes the Calvinist position that Heb. 10:26 refers to unregenerate professors of Christ.¹⁸ For Pink the fact that the apostle uses "we" proves that regenerate believers are in view. Now he wades in: "If it be impossible for truly regenerated people to ever perish, then why would the Holy Spirit move the apostle to so much in hypothetically describing the irremediable doom if they should apostatize."¹⁹ Good question. He now treats us to the "answer." The Christian must always be viewed from two perspectives:

1. As he exists in the purpose of God--eternally secure.
2. As he exists in himself--in need of solemn warnings and exhortations

In Heb. 10, according to Pink, we see the Christian as he exists in himself, and not in the eternal purpose of God.

We must consider the relationship between God's eternal plan and the predetermined means to bring it about:

God has eternally decreed that every regenerated soul shall get safely through to Heaven, yet He certainly has not ordained that any shall do so whether or not they use the means which He has appointed for their preservation. Christians are "kept by the power of God through faith" (I Pet 1:5) - there is the human responsibility side.²⁰

Looked at in himself, the Christian can apostatize. Such a statement is ridiculous. Look at him anyway you want. If God has ordained him to life, to life he will go.

To say that real Christians need no such warning because they cannot possibly commit that sin, is, we repeat to lose sight of the connection which God Himself has established between His predestined ends and the means whereby they are reached. The end to which God has predestined His people is their eternal bliss in Heaven, and one of the means by which that end is reached, is through their taking heed to the solemn warning He has given against that which would prevent their reaching Heaven".²¹

¹⁷ Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968), pp. 614-24.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 615.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 616.

²¹ *Ibid.*

One is reminded of the two Texas farm boys listening to the expositions of a brilliant theologian. After what appeared to be a thoroughly confusing "explanation" of an objection raised against his position, one boy turned to the other and said, "What'd he say?" And the other replied, "I think he said, 'That dog won't hunt.'" How Pink can offer this as a serious explanation of the objection to Calvinist interpretation is baffling. Apparently we are to hold two contradictory ideas in our minds at once: viewed from God's perspective, the Christian is eternally secure, but viewed from the Christians perspective, that is "in himself," he is not.

If it is true that the readers are true Christians and that they are therefore eternally secure, it is ludicrous to think that the warnings would have any significant impact.

But Pink then goes on to confuse the issue by attempting to make the warnings real and insisting that the Christian can lose his salvation if he does not heed the warnings! He warns that each of us "need to watch against... the first budding of apostasy."²² Yet earlier he insisted that the Christian is eternally secure. So viewed from the standpoint of the purpose of God, he cannot apostatize, and yet viewed from the human side, he can! One can only marvel at such a convoluted system of theology, a system which can, with a straight face, teach that a Christian both is and is not eternally secure at the same time.

Instead of calling the contradiction between God's preservation and the necessity of our perseverance a "tension," as Berkouwer does, or "differing perspectives," as Pink does, Tosti likes the word "symmetry."²³ Tosti correctly observes that the Reformed doctrine of perseverance is extremely dangerous. "It requires one to walk along the knife-edge of truth; a path so narrow that even the slightest move to the left or right will cast one into an abyss of pernicious error."²⁴ To move to the "left," he says, robs the children of God of assurance, and to move to the "right" encourages laxity and slothfulness. The antidote to these dangers is to maintain what he calls "biblical symmetry." It is, however, impossible to maintain symmetry between contradictory concepts. Our eternal security either depends solely upon God's guarantees in Scripture, or it depends upon those guarantees plus our perseverance. If both are necessary, this is not a "tension" or a "symmetry" but a contradiction. If the latter is necessary, it is a salvation by works. Only an eternal security based upon the promises of God and completely unrelated to the necessity of the believer's perseverance in holiness can possibly be reconciled with the scores of passages which state the freeness of salvation in Christ.

²² Ibid.

²³ J. A. Tony Tosti, 'Perseverance: The Other Side of the Coin,' *The Banner of Truth* 259 (April 1985):13.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

Tosti's logic, like Berkouwer's, is curious. He correctly assumes that the Bible promises eternal security on the basis of the promises of God. He then correctly assumes that the warnings are directed to true Christians. However, since Tosti and Berkouwer think the warnings imply a danger of loss of salvation, an obvious contradiction is set up. How can God promise eternal security to faith on the basis of the death of Christ and at the same time warn those He has promised that their eternal security is only secured by their faithful perseverance? They may not, in the end, be saved after all! One would normally think he is either eternally secure or he is not. Also, one would normally think that such an interpretation was open to question. Would the Bible mysteriously contradict itself in so many passages on an issue so fundamental to our Christian lives? Tosti simply leaves the contradiction open and says, "For the Scriptures, then, there is apparently no unbearable tension or opposition between the gracious faithfulness of God and the dynamic life; because it is in the thick of the dynamic of the actual struggle of life that Scripture speaks of perseverance in grace. If this is the way the Word of God treats the subject, **dare we do anything different?**"²⁵ When our minds naturally revolt at such contorted theology, Tosti reminds us that the reason for these "apparent difficulties" is that our minds are yet fallen! Of course, if this is "the way the Word of God treats the subject," we would have to bow in humble submission. Fortunately for our emotional health and our intellectual integrity the Word of God does not treat the subject in this way. It seems that a contradiction of this magnitude could only be accepted by one who has a prior agenda, a commitment to maintain the fiction of the saints' perseverance in holiness against all logic and Scripture, which teach otherwise!

At least the Arminians are consistent. There is no mysterious tension or symmetry (a.k.a. "contradiction") in their theology. The regenerate man, they say, will be saved if he perseveres, but he can lose salvation as the warnings clearly teach.

Neither is there a contradiction in the position of the Partaker. What is in view in the warnings is not a loss of justification at all but a loss of reward at the judgment seat of Christ.

To walk on Tosti's "knife-edge," however, would require a theological degree to achieve. Surely, only those with a doctor's degree in theology would ever be able to believe such contradictory things! The Bible, however, was written to the unlearned and prosaic mind.

It fails the test of human consciousness. Calvinism has often enjoyed the sanctuary of the philosopher's hall. It revels in theoretical speculation and theological argument. When one reads Calvin's *Institutes* on the subject of election and reprobation, one often feels that some of the arguments are abstract and unconvincing. Sadly, but probably consistent with the spirit of the day, when he deals with his opponents, Calvin vitriolically assails their character in direct proportion to the

²⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

weakness of his arguments. When confronted with the perplexing questions of God's justice in the face of election and reprobation, Calvin gives one strained answer after another, and then in each case, as if sensing the futility of his arguments, he falls back on the standard refrain, "Who art thou O Man who replies against God" (Rom. 9:20). Indeed, that section of his masterpiece could be appropriately renamed, "One Hundred Ways to Use Romans 9:20 To Refute Opponents of Our System."

However, in contrast to the doctrine of election, with its doctrine of perseverance, Calvinism must emerge from the halls of academia and submit itself to the test of the consciousness of men. If it is true that the warnings are to produce sincere alarm, then we must concede that it is impossible for one not to know whether he experiences sincere alarm. And it is equally impossible to be convinced that apostasy is impossible, on the one hand, and yet to be sincerely alarmed by the warnings against apostasy, on the other. Is it not ridiculous to say that men can be alarmed by warnings if they have already been consoled by the promise that they are secure? How can they be alarmed about something which could never happen to them? Calvinism fails the test of human experience.

Is it not also debatable to say that men are to hold two contradictory sets of Scriptures in their minds at the same time and switch back and forth depending upon whether their need is for consolation or admonition? They are unable, on the Experimental Predestinarian view of the warnings, to view the whole of Scripture with equal sincerity at the same time.

Suppose a believer falls into grievous sin. What happens now? If he remains unrepentant, the Experimental Predestinarian will simply say, "This proves you are not one of the elect." He will say this, even if the believer has had evidences of faith and works in his life before this for many years upon which Experimental Predestinarians formerly taught him to rely for assurance. But this of course logically requires that assurance is impossible. No one can know in advance that he will not fall into some sin which will cast doubt on his election. Furthermore, the biblical warnings never say, "look out, you may have never been converted." Instead, they encourage believers to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful" (Heb. 10:23).

It subtly redefines the basis of salvation. Those within the Reformed tradition insist that works are the results of regeneration, evidences of life. They are the "fruit," and saving faith is the "root." They are the manifestation which arises out of the essence of the new man in Christ. In this they seem to be correct. If a man is truly born again, he will necessarily and inevitably manifest initial evidence of such rebirth.²⁶ By this is meant a general openness to God and disposition of trust. However, not all Experimental Predestinarians have been content to leave the matter

²⁶ What is being argued in this book is that this manifestation is inadequate to base assurance upon and will not necessarily continue to the final hour.

there. Some seem to have made perseverance virtually a condition of salvation, and not just an evidence of it. In this they are either taking the Reformed doctrine to an unjustified extreme, or they are boldly stating what it really means.

This view of perseverance seems to have a basis in the Westminster Confession itself. The Westminster divines appear to make salvation dependent upon a life of good works. The article on assurance reads this way:

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion, grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith, founded upon (1) the divine truth of the promises of salvation, (2) the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, (3) the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God.²⁷

It is proposition 2 which opens the door for some rather extreme views of perseverance. The "promises" there are not the promises of assurance but the promises of salvation in the first proposition. The confession seems to be saying that salvation is promised only to those in whose lives works are manifest. It would not be so serious if they had only said the assurance was promised to those in whose lives works are manifest.

That they mean that salvation is to be achieved by works is confirmed in the Shorter Catechism.

Ques. 90. How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?

*Ans. That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, **and practice it in our lives.**²⁸*

Steeped as we are in the Reformed tradition which teaches salvation by grace alone, we naturally recoil at such words and wonder, "Could they really have meant this?" It appears that they did mean this. Any ambiguity here has been removed in the writings of some Experimental Predestinarians.

For example, Arthur Pink, teaches that God requires that true Christians must "keep themselves" or risk eternal damnation.²⁹ Yet he unequivocally maintains the "absolute and eternal security of the saints."³⁰

²⁷ "Westminster Confession of Faith," in Schaff, 3:638 (18:3).

²⁸ "Westminster Shorter Catechism," in Schaff, 3:696 (Q. 90). See also Schaff, Question 85, 3:694.

²⁹ Pink, *Hebrews*, p. 601.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 599.

He is attempting to show that God preserves His children through means, that is, 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 an **indispensable means** for that end, as that without it, it will not be brought about.... 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.***³¹

There is, it seems, a real danger in presenting perseverance in this manner. In his preoccupation with means to the end he in effect makes works a condition of salvation. They are the means by which the final end, bliss in heaven, is achieved. The only means to bliss in heaven known in the New Testament is faith, and faith alone. Pink has in effect added another condition beyond simple faith for becoming a Christian--persevering, positive responses to the warning passages. It serves no purpose to discuss the correlation between means and ends, God's predestination of means as well as ends, and enablement of the means. Perseverance is not part of the gospel, and when added to it, the gospel is changed.

Sensing the apparent difficulty of his position, Pink then shifts the terms. Those who apostatize are not really Christians at all; they were mere professors!³² He started his discussion by saying that Heb. 10 applies to true Christians, and now, faced with the fact that the warnings are real and that final damnation is in view, he shifts to calling them professing Christians.

He rails against the carnal security offered by "dead" preachers who have led people to believe that "guilt can nevermore rest upon them, and that no matter what sins they commit, nothing can possibly jeopardize their eternal interests."³³ Of course, if they are eternally secure in the purpose of God, which Pink believes, nothing can! He says that some Christians sin with a high hand because all they have to lose is "some millennial crown or reward." Then he declares his views even more clearly: "the blood of Christ covers no sins that have not been truly repented of and confessed to God with a broken heart."

If all he means is that, if Christians do not confess their sins, they will not be restored to fellowship with God, then all would agree. But he does not mean that. He means that a Christian who does not repent is really not a Christian at all and is "hastening to Hell as swiftly as time wings its flight."³⁴

³¹ John Owen, *Hebrews*, cited by Pink, p. 600.

³² Pink, 618.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Perhaps Mr. Pink has forgotten the promise in the book on which he wrote his commentary, "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more" (Heb. 10:17). Indeed, he seems to have forgotten the gospel itself. He would have us believe that Heb. 10:26 applies to true Christians and only to professing Christians at the same time. The only reason for shifting to the fact that they must be professing Christians is the demands of his theology.

It is interesting that an Arminian, Robert Shank, and Pink agree on this point, that salvation must be earned by attention to the means of its attainment--faithful perseverance.³⁵

One of the most blatant statements of perseverance comes from Christian Friedrich Kling. He views **adokimos**, "disapproved," as losing salvation and says:

A sound belief in the doctrine of the saints' perseverance is ever accompanied with a conviction of the possibility of failure and of the absolute necessity of using our utmost endeavor in order to final success. No experiences of Divine favor in the past, no circumstances, however advantageous, furnish such a guarantee of salvation as to warrant spiritual repose. There is no perseverance without conscious and determined persevering and the requisite effort can be put forth only under the influence alike of hope and fear. And he who apprehends no danger of being ultimately a castaway through neglect or transgression, will lack the motive necessary to urge him triumphantly to the goal.³⁶

If ever a statement of works as a condition of salvation was made, this is it. While we may be saved by faith, we are kept saved by works exactly as the Arminian maintains. Kling thinks that the Christian must be continually in fear of hell if he is to be sufficiently motivated towards a godly life.

Maurice Roberts, a contributor to the Experimental Predestinarian journal *The Banner of Truth* writes, "There are conditions to be fulfilled if Heaven is to be ours."³⁷ His condition is perseverance. This condition, however, is to be fulfilled by God's effectual work in the regenerate. But we must cooperate with God in this work. So salvation in this system is initial belief coupled with a life-long synergism of human and divine work. Only when the condition is fulfilled, can heaven be ours. But the condition of perseverance cannot be fulfilled until we have persevered. Thus, we can have no certainty of our perseverance, and hence of our salvation, until the final hour. A doctrine leading to this conclusion seems to fly in the face of the numerous biblical statements offering assurance now.

³⁵ Shank, p. 299.

³⁶ Christian Friedrich Kling, "The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians," in *Lange's* 10:210.

³⁷ Maurice Roberts, "Final Perseverance," *The Banner of Truth* 265 (October 1985):11.

It seems that Pink, Owen, Kling, and Roberts are simply being honest about the real meaning of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. Their concern about antinomianism and Scriptures which contradict their system have boxed them into a distortion of their own doctrine. They start out by saying that the warnings are the means of securing perseverance and end up by saying that it is our obedience to those warnings which finally saves us. They subtly make this shift because they are undoubtedly aware that merely warning a man will not guarantee he will obey. Thus, one needs to make his actual obedience the necessary ingredient for obtaining heaven. This indeed shuts out all possibility of anti-nomianism, and for this they are to be commended. However, the price is too high--it is another gospel!

Not only does the fear of antinomianism cause them to make this shift, but the Scriptures themselves present obedience as a means of obtaining the desired spiritual result. If the desired spiritual result is entrance into heaven, as they maintain, then it would appear that works have crept into the gospel through the back door. Faced with such passages as "if you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples"³⁸ or "if anyone does not hate his father, ... even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."³⁹ Experimental Predestinarians teach that not only are the warnings means to salvation, but hating your life, your father, and holding onto the teaching of Christ are, too. These are presented as means for the certain spiritual result--discipleship. Since in their system discipleship is to be equated with salvation itself, they are boxed into explaining how such works can be a means of obtaining salvation.

So, on the one hand, they tell us that the warnings are the means, but then, confronted by the need for an air tight case against the carnal Christian and the fact that the Bible speaks of works as a means of discipleship, they shift to saying that obedience is a means of obtaining eternal life. This is where all this confusing Calvinist double-talk about "biblical symmetry," "walking on a knife edge," "healthy tension," and "paradoxes" comes in. However, discipleship and regeneration are different, and the life of obedience, while obligatory for the Christian, is nowhere necessarily and inevitably united with regeneration as previously discussed. This double-talk simply veils the other gospel that is being presented. When others complain that this must be accepted as a "paradox,"⁴⁰ one is reminded of the man who threw dust up in the air, and as it cascaded around him, he cried, "I cannot see." The only reason for these mysterious paradoxes and tensions is a system of theology that will not allow the biblical texts to speak for themselves.

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

³⁸ Jn. 8:31.

³⁹ Lk. 14:26.

⁴⁰ E.g., John MacArthur, *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988), p. 140.;

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 Spirit (Titus 3:5).*

The divine "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 human 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). They are saying that, if one is truly a Christian, he will inevitably produce a life of works and perseverance. If he does not meet this requirement of being a Christian, then he is not a Christian at all and will not go to heaven. Furthermore, these fruits are not only evidences of regeneration, but they are actual means by which God intends to secure our ultimate arrival in heaven. However, requirements which must be met in order to secure a certain result, going to heaven, are in fact conditions necessary for the attainment of that result. And if a life of works is a necessary condition for obtaining the result of heaven, then salvation is ultimately conditioned upon works and not faith alone, and so the words of Paul have been turned upside down.

The subtlety of the Experimental Predestinarian argument is rarely perceived. Works are not, we are told, a condition of salvation but a necessary result of saving faith. Consider the simple statement, "If you want to arrive in Los Angeles, you must drive a car." A correct understanding of the gospel offer is more like a train. The train carries us to our final destination with no participation from us. We only sit. The car requires our diligent effort.

Condition: drive a car

Result: arrival in L.A.

Now to draw the parallel with gospel, we would say, "If you want to go to heaven, you must believe."

Condition: believe

Result: arrive in heaven

The person who drives a car to Los Angeles knows, however, that driving a car involves many things: turning on the ignition, use of the brakes, turning wheels, filling up with gas, and signaling with hand signals. Now it is true that use of brakes and turning of wheels are necessary aspects of driving a car. However, if one does not use the brakes and does not turn the steering wheel, he will never achieve the intended result, arrival in Los Angeles. All understand, therefore, that these necessary aspects are really conditions of arriving in Los Angeles. They are all assumed as part of the general condition, driving a car.

But the gospel does not include all these additional items in the word "believe." "Believe" is not a general term for a life of good works, even if driving is a general term for a number of works involved in navigating with an automobile. This is the precise point at which the Reformed argument falls. To believe is to trust and includes nothing else. If anything is clear in the New Testament, whatever belief is, it is the opposite of works:

Does He then, who provides you with the Spirit and works miracles among you, do it by the works of the Law, or by hearing with faith? (Gal 3:5 NASB).

Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life (Jn. 3:14-15).

In the latter passage the Lord is equating "belief" with mere "looking." He is referring to Num. 21:8-9:

The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live: So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived.

The intent is obviously that a man shall look with the expectation of healing and with belief in God, asking for help. A non-Christian who will not believe will not be healed, even if he looks. But the point is that looking and believing are synonymous terms.

When Paul and Jesus connect faith with hearing and looking, they are trying to throw it into the strongest possible contrast with anything connected with working. Hearing and looking are receptive functions. One sees when light happens upon the eye. One hears when sound happens upon the ear. Trust does not include a life of works! It "happens" to us.

But to pick an even more lucid illustration, let us explore the parallel with physical birth. We might say, "A condition of growing old is to be born." Now on Experimental Predestinarian assumptions, there are certain kinds of results of birth which are necessary for a person to grow old, such as eating. Hunger is a possible result of being born, and satisfying hunger is a necessary condition of growing old. Furthermore, unlike breathing, eating is a result for which we are responsible. We can choose to eat or not to eat. Here we can lay down a self-evident principle: a necessary result for which we are responsible which must be present for another result to occur is no different than an additional condition for the achievement of that second result. In the analogy of physical birth, there are therefore two conditions necessary for growing old, birth and eating, the former making the latter possible and the latter making old age possible. There is no difference between a result for which we are responsible and a condition! let the reader ponder this, and he will discover that it is impossible to come up with an illustration which contradicts this fact!

Now a man who has been born physically might do a lot of things like brush his hair, shave his beard, and brush his teeth. None of these things, however, are conditions of growing old, and none of them are necessary results of birth. However, any result of birth which is a necessary condition of growing old and for which we are responsible is in fact a second condition, added to birth, for growing old.

Besides physical birth, the other human relationship which the Lord uses to describe salvation is marriage. Consider the marriage requirements in this country. If a man is to get married, he must have a blood test. Now it is clear that someone could break the law or, perhaps, some state does not require this. However, let us create a fictional world where this is always true. Then we can say the condition of getting married is a mutual commitment to do so. Furthermore, the necessary and inevitable result of that commitment is a trip to the hospital to get a blood test. In addition, getting a blood test is a condition of getting married. A necessary result is no different than a condition.

Imagine after reflecting upon the illustrations regarding marriage and birth above, you observe to a friend, "A blood test is a condition of getting married and eating is a condition of growing old." Steeped in Experimental Predestinarian ways of thinking, your friend replies, "No, that is not true. Securing a blood test is not a condition of getting married but a necessary result of a commitment to get married. Furthermore, eating is not a condition of growing old but a necessary result of birth." Your reaction would understandably be one of amazement. The blood test and eating are **both** a result **and** a condition.

Therefore, when Experimental Predestinarians use such phrases as "faith alone saves a man, but the faith that saves is not alone," they are in fact unconsciously speaking nonsense. Terminology like "faith plus works does not save, but a faith that works does" is simply saying that faith plus works saves. The cleverness of the prose serves to conceal the fact. Proverbial sayings like this have been passed

on in the theology textbooks for centuries. They seem to have explanatory power, and they certainly left opponents of the Experimental Predestinarian system speechless, but in reality they are not only empty of meaning but contradictory. They are simply ways of saying that true faith necessarily results in works, but it is the faith, not the resulting works, which saves. This, however, is quite confusing. If the works are a necessary result of the faith and if a man cannot be saved without them, then the works are, in fact, a condition of salvation. If they are not present, the man will perish. Necessary results for which we are responsible are the same as conditions.

Notice the above illustrations spoke of necessary results "for which we are responsible." There are, of course, necessary results of spiritual and physical birth for which we are not responsible. Physically we may think of such things as breathing, heartbeat, and transmission of neurons across synapses. Spiritually we may think of the creation of the new man, our death to sin, our justification, and the gift of all spiritual blessings in Christ. But there are many spiritual effects of new birth for which we are jointly responsible with God. The Reformed faith maintains, and we certainly agree, that, while salvation is a work of God, sanctification is a work of God in which believers cooperate.⁴¹ The entire responsibility for our sanctification cannot be laid upon God.⁴² He is the source, the motivator, and the One who enables, but we are the ones who must do. We do it and He strengthens (Phil. 4:13). The Bible calls the unbeliever to do one thing, believe (Acts 16:31). But the calls to the believer are to work: we are to flee fornication (1 Cor. 6:18), present our bodies as living sacrifices (Rom. 12:1), and make every effort to enter rest (Heb. 4:11), to mention just three. Yes, the warnings, the commands, and the exhortations of the New Testament make it clear that man is responsible for his sanctification. We must respond to God's promptings and appropriate the help He gives. Berkhof puts it this way, "Though man is privileged to co-operate with the Spirit of God, he can do this only in virtue of the strength which the Spirit imparts to him from day to day."⁴³

But if man must cooperate, then he must choose to do this. If he does not choose to cooperate, then he will not be sanctified. The numerous biblical illustrations of failure prove that a man may not so choose. It is therefore incorrect to say, as Berkhof does, that man deserves no credit. He certainly does deserve credit, and the Lord everywhere acknowledges that he will be rewarded for it in the future. Now if a man may not be sanctified, then he will not, according to Experimental Predestinarians, go to heaven.

Now, what shall we call this "cooperation" of man? What shall we call his decisions to pursue godliness? Could we not call them works for which he is responsible? And if we can call them that, then are they not additional works necessary to obtain heaven? If they are not done, the man will perish. If a person is responsible

⁴¹ Berkhof, *Theology*, p. 534.

⁴² G. Walters, "Sanctification, Sanctify," in *New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962), p. 1141.

⁴³ Berkhof, p. 534.

to do these works and if that person may choose not to (and both Scripture and experience confirm that he may), are not these works a condition of his salvation? If works are demanded as an essential part of the agreement which secures our final arrival in heaven, how is this different from works being a condition? Indeed, the dictionary defines a condition as "something demanded as an essential part of an agreement."⁴⁴

It is at this point that the Experimental Predestinarian often feels that the one arguing against his position does not really understand his position. "Do you not believe in mystery?" he will often say. "Are you unaware of the mysterious working of the Holy Spirit with the human will in such a way that the result can be declared God's work and not man's?" In many discussions with Experimental Predestinarian friends, there is a tendency to retreat to "mystery" when the arguments against their view become too pointed or logical.

The writer remembers teaching a seminar to a group of Reformed students, and after giving some of the illustrations above, one of the professors asked, "I still don't see why the results of regeneration are necessarily works necessary for salvation. Regardless of what you have just said, it seems to me that these works are merely evidences of true faith, and not conditions of salvation."

The professor was thinking of the Reformed teaching that any evidential works are worked in the believer by God. But if we are responsible for these works and they are partly a result of our own efforts, then it is faith plus human works which are necessary for our arrival in heaven. As John Owen pointedly insists, "But yet our own diligent endeavor is such an **indispensable means** for that end, as that without it, it will not be brought about.... **Unless we use our diligent endeavors**, we cannot be saved." He was not making a careless statement when he said this. He was simply stating the real meaning of the Reformed doctrine of perseverance. If these resulting works are **all** of God, then no human work would be involved, and they might, perhaps, escape the charge of works salvation. But if the resulting works are part God's and part ours (as the Reformed faith and Scripture teach), then a man may choose not to do them as Solomon and other regenerate men in the Bible often did. If he may choose not to do them, then true faith will not necessarily result in a life of works. Even acknowledging that God through "mystery" secures the cooperation of the human will, **man is still responsible and must do good works**. This means that works **ARE** a condition of entrance into heaven whether worked in us or done by divine aid. After all, Paul did not say, "**Christ** can do all things through me," but "**I** can do all things through [Christ]." Paul does the work, and Christ "strengthens." However, in the Experimental Predestinarian view, faith itself includes this life of works for which we are responsible (i.e., driving the car to L.A~), and therefore, faith is not simple reliance and conviction but conviction plus obedience. In other words, salvation by faith is actually faith plus works.

⁴⁴ *Lexicon Webster Dictionary* s.v. "Condition," 1:211.

While we must certainly submit to the mysteries of God's providence, that doctrine does not really appear to be relevant to the discussion. The issue is quite simple. According to Experimental Predestinarians:

- (1) Perseverance in works is the means of obtaining heaven
- (2) We are responsible for doing these works
- (3) A commitment to perform these works is included within saving faith

Therefore, a works salvation is taught. If, on the other hand, perseverance in works is not necessary for final entrance into heaven and is not included within the compass of the word "faith," then the gospel of pure and free grace has been maintained.

A problem arises in regard to this doctrine in the way Experimental Predestinarians present it. Because in their view the warnings are addressed to non-Christian professors of Christ, they could be interpreted as commands to obtain salvation by works. Imagine, for example, an unregenerate church member. After observing his life for a period of time, one of the elders observes that he does not manifest the evidences of regeneration in his life. The elder, steeped in Experimental Predestinarian ways of thinking, exhorts him with the New Testament warnings to various fruits and works. Now what is the psychology of this? If the warnings are directed to the unsaved, then they are asking the unsaved to perform certain works in order to prove that they are saved! This is, of course, theologically impossible. The man's psychological response will be that he must do some works, manifest some fruits in order to obtain salvation. The warnings do not direct him to the grace of God and the gospel but to works he must do.

Consider, on the other hand, the psychological impact on the saved. If we are to assume that the warnings are addressed also to the saved and serve as means to achieve their perseverance, then a sense of law and not grace also pervades a man's consciousness. At the practical level a man who is saved is told that he must prove it to himself and others by works. When in his own or someone else's opinion he does not possess adequate works to justify the conclusion that he is saved, what does he do? He immediately begins to focus on doing good works in sufficient number to quiet his conscience and satisfy the opinions of fellow church members. For most no amount of works will be adequate, and any basis for assurance is lost.

An important distinction must be made here. As mentioned in chapter 1, everyone who is born again will necessarily manifest some fruit. What was meant was faith, a consciousness of sin, a sense of conviction or guilt, and a general sense of openness toward God. However, that is not all that is meant by "fruit" in the writings of Experimental Predestinarians. The above mentioned items "happen" to a man. The will of man is entirely passive. He receives these fruits freely, without effort, as a gift from God. This kind of fruit necessarily and inevitably flows from true faith. A

life of good works, however, does not. It should, but a believer can quench the Spirit and turn from the Lord, as many biblical illustrations prove.⁴⁵ The kind of fruits being objected to here as necessary and inevitable results of justification are the fruits of progressive sanctification. In this kind of fruit the will of man is involved and cooperates with God in their production. A continual refusal to grow in the faith will not only inhibit these fruits but will cause the believing "brother" to develop a hardness of heart (Heb. 3:8). When that happens, a man's sense of conviction, openness, and even his faith can be lost.

It makes God to be a liar. If God has decreed that His elect will finally persevere in holiness and if warnings are, a means He uses to secure that perseverance, then God is threatening His elect with a destiny He knows will never befall them. He is telling them they might lose their salvation in order to motivate them by fear (read "healthy tension" or "wholesome fear") to persevere. How can a God of truth use lies to accomplish His purpose of holiness in His elect?

Consider how Calvin interprets Paul's famous warning to the Romans:

Behold the kindness and severity of God; to those who fell severity, but to you, God's kindness, if you continue in His kindness; otherwise you also will be cut off (Rom. 11:22 NASB).

In his commentary on Romans 11 he says:

We understand now in what sense Paul threatens those with excision whom he has already asserted to have been grafted into the hope of life through God's election. For, first, though this cannot happen to the elect, they have yet need of such warnings, in order to subdue the pride of the flesh; which being strongly opposed to, their salvation, needs to be terrified with the dread of perdition. As far then, as Christians are illuminated by faith, they hear, for their assurance, that the calling of God is without repentance; but as far as, they carry about, the flesh which wantonly resists the grace of God, they are taught humility by this warning "Take heed lest thou too be cut off".⁴⁶

Calvin's "interpretation" here is not only empty, but borders on blasphemy! He is saying that, even though God moves the sinning Christian is elect and, therefore saved, God terrifies him with "the dread of perdition" to teach him humility! Lest this be considered simply an aberration of the sixteenth century, listen to Andrew Fuller as quoted approvingly by Arthur Pink:

It is necessary for those whom the Lord may know to be heirs of salvation, in certain circumstances, to be threatened with damnation, as a means of

⁴⁵ See Chapter 14.

⁴⁶ Calvin, Commentary, *Romans*.

preserving them from it."⁴⁷

So God, on the one hand, knows this Christian will never go to hell, but, on the other hand, He tells him he might go to hell if he does not respond to the warning! Thus, God is lying to this Christian, telling him something God Himself knows to be false! Experimental Predestinarians sometimes reply, "Well, God threatens the world with damnation, knowing that the elect will never experience it. Is this a lie?" The answer is that God has never promised eternal life to a man who has not accepted Christ. And the elect, prior to their acceptance of Christ, are subject to damnation. But once a man has become a child of God, born into His family, and promised that he can never lose his salvation, an entirely different ethical situation is present. Prior to becoming a Christian, the elect are damned, but after becoming Christians, they are not! It is therefore one thing to warn a non-Christian (even if he is elect) that, if he does not believe, he will perish. That is a true statement. But it is another thing for God to tell that same man, now that he is saved, that, if he does not obey, he will be damned, when God knows this man is now justified and will never be damned for his disobedience. It is true that the elect, if they do not believe (even though they surely will), will be damned. It is not true that the regenerate, if they do not obey, will be damned.

But not only do Calvin and Pink have God telling lies (in order to maintain their doctrine of perseverance), they have the poor Christian in contradictory states of mind. As far as we are "illuminated by faith," we know that the calling of God is without repentance. But in our struggle with the flesh we are to fear going to hell. So, on the one hand, we are to have a consciousness that we are eternally secure, and, on the other hand, because of our flesh we are to have a consciousness that we might go to hell. How can a person hold these two contradictory states in his mind at the same time? A consciousness of either logically and subjectively excludes the other. In psychology there is a term for the ability to maintain two different states of mind at the same time. This used to be called schizophrenia. Now it is called the Reformed doctrine of perseverance!

They Apply Only to Professing Christians

The second way in which Experimental Predestinarians respond to the problem of the warnings is to claim that they are addressed to professing and not possessing believers. As Martin Lloyd-Jones put it, "The primary purpose of the warning passages is to test our profession of faith in order that we may know whether it is true or spurious. They are given to warn us against the terrible danger of having a false profession."⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Arthur Pink, *An Exposition of the Sermon on the Mount* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1953), p. 88.

⁴⁸ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:17-39, The Final Perseverance of the Saints* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 307.

Dabney says the Arminian would conclude from his backsliding that he had fallen from grace and the Calvinist would conclude that he never had any to begin with, a fear which Dabney believes is "much more wholesome and searching than the erring Arminian's":

For this alarmed Calvinist would see, that while he had been flattering himself he was advancing heavenward, he was, in fact, all the time on the high road to hell; and so, now if he would not be damned, he must make a new beginning, and lay better foundations than his old one (not like the alarmed Arminian, merely set about repairing the same old ones).⁴⁹

Often Calvinists appeal to the wheat and the tares, the example of Judas, and the rejection of those who say "Lord, Lord" and yet He never knew them as proof that the writers of the New Testament viewed their readers as a group which was mixed, professors and not possessors. However, this approach to the warning passages is fraught with difficulties.

Differing contexts. First of all, this view ignores the differing contexts intended by the Lord's references to the wheat and tares and the New Testament house fellowships which were in the mind of the writers of the New Testament. When the Lord referred to wheat and tares, He was speaking of a theoretical situation in the church in general. When the writers of the New Testament address their readers as "saints," "brothers," "brethren," and "little children," they are speaking not to the unknown masses of Christendom at large but to their intimate friends to whom they have ministered and often led to the Lord. We must not read the present situation of large twentieth-century churches, many containing over one thousand people, most of whom are not known well by the preacher on Sunday morning, into the first-century church. These first-century churches were small, personal "table fellowships," consisting of several families who knew each other well. Participation in the Lord's supper involved, therefore, a commitment to the other families.⁵⁰ Additionally, the presence or possibility of persecution made attendance at these meetings no casual thing. Indeed, they often had to meet together secretly in order to avoid persecution. Each house fellowship was presided over by an appointed elder. So the intended audience is more intimate, definitely Christian, and known by the writers. Richard Lovelace comments:

Unlike most modern congregations the early Christian church was an integrated community centered around the worship of God and the advancement of his kingdom. Economically it was a commonwealth, which meant that its members were not being pulled apart from one another by the pursuit of individual goals of success; they were devoting everything they were and owned to the strengthening of one another and the cause of Christ.

⁴⁹ Dabney, *Lectures*, 697.

⁵⁰ Johannes, Behm, "deipnon," in TDNT, 3:801.

*Worshiping and eating together, the members were in constant communication . . . Little time or distance separated the members of this body, so there was an unhindered communication of the gifts and graces of each one to the others.*⁵¹

It is emphatically NOT the same situation a Baptist preacher in the twentieth century faces when he climbs into the pulpit before eight thousand professing Christians. We are therefore fully justified in concluding that, when a New Testament writer uses a term like "brethren," he is not thinking that some may and some may not really be brothers, but he assumes and believes that all his readers are in fact born again. He knows these people, has led some of them to the Lord, has disciplined them, and has maintained contact over the years by repeated visits and letters.

Requires unusual discrimination. But, second, if all the letters are viewed as addressed to professors and not possessors, then both wheat and tares will be required to be very discriminating in their reading of the epistle. The wheat must come to all the warnings and realize that they apply only to the tares, and the tares must realize that all the commands are only addressed to believers and that the real issue for them is to believe. Such a requirement almost guarantees that the epistles would be frequently misunderstood by their intended audience.

The writers assume regeneration. The writers rarely draw the distinction between wheat and tares in the very epistles supposedly addressed by intent to those kind of groups. In nearly every case the distinction must be read into the text and read into the author's mind. Nowhere, for example, does the writer to the Hebrews say, "How can we who claim to be Christians (and may not really be) escape if we neglect so great a salvation." The writers never qualify the warnings and never introduce the distinction which the Calvinist view specifically requires. Since the writers themselves never explicitly say that they feel their audience is a mixture and since they everywhere make statements to the effect that they are talking to genuine Christians, we have no warrant for reading into their otherwise clear statements qualifications which they themselves never make.

The issue is not the theoretical existence of wheat and tares but to whom is the writer speaking. That he can speak to wheat, tares, or both does not mean that he is. We can only discern his intended audience by studying the terms and themes he discusses in describing them. Everywhere he uses terms like "brethren," "sanctified," "holy brethren," and "children" and describes them as having believed and manifested a life of works (Heb. 10:35ff.). While it is possible that mere professing Christians are in audience, he does not seem to have (them in his thinking at all. The existence of these kinds of people in the New Testament fellowships was not an issue of conscious concern reflected in the writings of the New Testament

⁵¹ Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), p. 161.

writers. The fact that they may exist does not logically require that the writer included them in his intended audience.

But do they assume they are talking to genuine Christians and not to a group of professing Christians? Consider the book of Hebrews. Nowhere in the New Testament are the warnings more frequent, and nowhere is it more evident that the recipients of the warnings are truly saved people:

1. We are told that they have been enlightened and have tasted the good Word of God. They had an initial conversion followed by Christian experience as discussed above.
2. He calls them "holy brothers" and "partakers of the heavenly calling" (Heb. 3:1).
3. He warns that an "evil heart of unbelief" can be present in a "brother" (Heb. 3:12 NASB) and that such a person risks falling away from the living God as the born-again nation of Hebrews in the wilderness did.
4. The danger about which he warns them is not that they have not yet become Christians but that as Christians they might fall away (Heb. 3:12; Heb. 4:1).
5. He specifically says he believes they are Christians. He feels they possess the things which accompany salvation (Heb. 6:9-12). He acknowledges "the work and love" which they "have shown toward His name." On Experimental Predestinarian premises they have believed and have demonstrated the genuineness of their faith with works of love following. He does not exhort them to become Christians but, rather, he assumes they are and says, "And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the end." He says that they have "fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us."

The warnings exhort believers not to surrender a faith they already possess. I. Howard Marshall has correctly pointed out that, "if the Calvinist theory were true, the warnings would necessarily take such forms as: 'Make sure that you really were converted.' 'Beware lest what you think is an experience of salvation by faith is really nothing of the kind.'⁵² Instead, the authors of the various warning passages take the salvation of their readers for granted. These warnings, contrary to Martin Lloyd-Jones, cannot be construed as tests to find out if you are saved. They are everywhere presented to saved people, exhorting them to continue in the faith or to face some danger. They are warned against giving up a faith they already possess.

⁵² Marshall, *Kept*, p. 201.

The warnings are never presented as positive commands to begin to be a genuine believer. They are meant to challenge believers to persevere and continue in the faith which one already has. They are never told to go back to the beginning and start over by becoming true Christians, but they are warned to hold fast to true faith to the end of life. Marshall summarizes:

*The New Testament takes for granted a present experience of salvation of which the believer is conscious. Here and now he may know the experience of Christian joy and certainty. He is not called to question the reality of this experience on the grounds that it may be illusory because he was never truly converted; rather he is urged to continue to enjoy salvation through abiding in Christ and persevering in faith.*⁵³

The warnings are addressed to people under the New Covenant. Experimental Predestinarians like to view the people of God as people under the Covenant. Since those under the Old Covenant could be counted as under that covenant and yet not necessarily be born again, the same situation prevails, they say, for believers under the New Covenant. This, however, neglects a sharp biblical distinction between the Old and New Covenants. Men under the New Covenant are **ALL** regenerate: "I will put my law in their minds and will write it on their hearts"(Jer. 31:33). This covenant differs in that God declares that "they will **all** know Me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Heb. 8:7-12).

Conclusion: Why Are the Warnings Given?

Contrary to the Arminian, we do not believe they are given to raise concerns about forfeiture of one's eternal destiny. Contrary to the Calvinist, they are not the means by which professing believers are to be motivated to examine to see if they are truly regenerate. Nor are they intended to motivate true Christians to persevere by causing them to wonder if they are really saved. God has more sufficient means than fear of hell to motivate His children. Rather, the warnings are real. They are alarms about the possibility of the forfeiture of our eternal rewards and of learning at the judgment seat that our lives have been wasted.

If the Reformed view of the warnings is correct, it would seem that assurance of salvation is impossible. For the warnings to present a real danger, assurance must be doubted. It is to this problematic situation raised in Experimental Predestinarian theology that we must now turn our attention.

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

⁵³ Ibid., p. 202.

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