

SESSION SIX

THEOLOGICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS

Session Objectives: By the end of this session, the student should . . .

- 1) Recognize the theological implications of "salvation as a free gift."
- 2) Understand what is meant by "the perseverance of the saints" in the reformed tradition
- 3) Be able to evaluate "eternal security" and "perseverance" biblically.

I. INTRODUCTION

The warnings that appear in the paraenetic sections of Hebrews can appear quite severe at times. Although we must approach our task carefully and be willing to do our exegesis fairly, the *danger* depicted in the book of Hebrews does appear quite alarming. Are the warnings aimed at true regenerate believers or only at those making a false profession? What exactly does apostasy mean? If believers are in view, does this mean that one can lose his or her salvation by committing apostasy? Indeed, can a true believer even commit apostasy from the faith? Does the NT elsewhere assure us that true believers will not turn their back on Christ? On the converse, does the NT assure us that true believers will grow in sanctification and progress in a life of holiness and faithful service to Christ? Before we can honestly engage in the exegesis of the Book of Hebrews, we must be willing to reexamine our "theological baggage" that we are bringing with us.

The classical Arminian who does not believe in eternal security may read into Hebrews what he already believes: namely, apostasy is possible and does result in loss of salvation. In fact, the Book of Hebrews may be the primary support for his theology.

The classical Calvinist is convinced that true believers will not do the kind of things being warned about in Hebrews. Therefore, for him, the warnings must apply to false professors rather than true Christians.

Are we only left with these two options? I think not!

II. ETERNAL SALVATION AS A FREE GIFT

A. Preliminary Thoughts

The past few decades have seen an uproar over the nature of the gospel. Is it enough to *only believe* or must one do more than that. Without trying to sound like they were adding works to salvation, some have argued that *belief* must be accompanied by commitment or by repentance. For example, some would argue that one must not only believe but make a

commitment to submit to the *lordship* of Jesus Christ. If one has not believed in Him and submitted to Him as Lord, then there was no true salvation.

While the term "repentance" is a biblical one, some have observed that the word does not even occur in the Gospel of John (probably the most evangelistic book we have). Is repentance something distinct from *belief* or an inherent part of it? Does it refer to a change of mind, or a change of lifestyle (including turning away from sins)?

B. The Gospel is a Free Gift

1. Salvation is distinct from works (Gal 2:16; Eph 2:8-9)
2. Faith is not a work (Rom 4:5)
3. The Gospel is offered as a "free gift" (Rom 6:23)

If salvation is a *free gift*, do we demand that people make a promise or commitment to live a certain kind of life in order to have it? If we make demands, what does this imply about who gets the credit? See 1 Cor 1:30-31.

4. Clarification

Do we have people sitting in church pews who are not Christians? Yes! Do we have people calling themselves "Christians" who have in fact never been born again? Yes! My point is not to say that anyone who claims to be a Christian actually is. The issue is how we approach the problem. Do we try to make the gospel *harder* (demand more commitment up front)? Or, do we need to clarify what the gospel is and make sure people are believing the right thing?

5. Implications

What do you say about a man who professes to being a Christian, but who is living immorally? Is there a certain range of sins that a Christian will not commit? Is there a guarantee to perseverance in faithfulness and holiness? If the Gospel is a *free gift*, can this be abused? Can a person believe only to continue in a sinful lifestyle?

Jody Dillow sets the issue before us:

"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."¹

It is precisely this issue which has given rise to Arminianism and Calvinism. How can we guard against abuse?

- a. Arminianism - by threatening loss of salvation.

¹Jody Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, 14.

- b. Calvinism - by insisting on perseverance as a "mark" of true Christianity.

RESULT: Notice what Arminianism and Calvinism have in common: neither one offers the believer an assurance that he will ultimately make it into heaven.

III. THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE SAINTS

What is the "perseverance of the saints"? Does this mean the same as "eternal security" or is something else at stake?

A. Eternal Security

The Scriptures teach that when one becomes a Christian through faith in Christ, they are a new creature (2 Cor 5:17). A divine miracle has taken place that can only be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit (Jn 3:5). The Holy Spirit *regenerates* that person, making them alive in contrast to their previous state of being "dead" (Titus 3:5-6). This is an irreversible process!

Furthermore, the Scriptures do promise eternal security.

1. Jn 5:24
2. Jn 10:27-29

CONCLUSION: True faith does bring eternal security. We cannot lose our salvation! The question is, however, can we have assurance of that? What gives us the right to assurance? On what basis can we know?

Reformed theology teaches eternal security, but does not promise assurance of salvation.

B. The Historic Treatment of the "Perseverance of the Saints"

1. Calvin

Believers will not fall away, but will persevere in faithfulness/good works.

"we go on without interruption, and persevere to the end."²

2. The Reformed Confessions

Following the Reformation, there arose heated discussion among Protestants between Calvinists and Arminians. Those in the Reformed tradition argued that true salvation will result in (1) not committing apostasy, and (2) perseverance in good works.

Clarification: Perseverance was not merely the idea that the elect would never be lost. The other side of the coin is that the elect will persevere in a certain kind of life.

²John Calvin, *Institutes*, 2.3.9.

- a. Synod of Dort (1619)

This was an affirmation of Calvinism and a reaction to the Arminian attack on unconditioned predestination. Resulting affirmations:

 - i. A lapse into carnality is only temporary!

"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 the 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."³
 - ii. God will renew them to repentance

"[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."⁴
 - b. Westminster Confession (AD 1643-46)
 - i. This resulted in an exposition of orthodox Calvinism, stressing the sovereignty of God and election to salvation.
 - ii. Also reaffirmed what was taught about *perseverance* at the Synod of Dort.
3. Modern Affirmations of Perseverance
- a. John Murray (deceased; formerly prof. of theology at West. Seminary)
 - i. "the crucial test of true faith is endurance to the end, abiding in Christ, and continuance in his Word."⁵
 - ii. On assurance of salvation

"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."⁶
 - b. Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology*)

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

⁴Ibid., 3:593-94 (5.7).

⁵John Murray, *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Eerdmans, 1955), 152.

⁶Ibid., 155.

i. Definition of Perseverance

"Perseverance may be defined 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."⁷

Primary Support: Phil 1:6

ii. Berkhof on Assurance

"It can be enjoyed only by those who stand in the firm conviction that God will perfect the work which He has begun."⁸

Yet, perseverance in holiness is crucial:

"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."⁹

On the place of warnings, he says:

these are "instrumental in keeping believers in the way of perseverance."

Note: He lists six warnings, three of which are taken from Hebrews (Mt 24:12; Col 1:23; Heb 2:1; 3:14; 6:11; and 1 Jn 2:6).

IV. DOES THE NT SUPPORT THE REFORMED VIEW OF PERSEVERANCE?

A. The Standard Proof-texts Need Reexamination

1. Key text is Phil 1:6

Problem: The context is not dealing with sanctification, but with supporting the cause of the gospel (compare Col 1:1-12 with Phil 1:1-11).¹⁰

2. 1 Jn 3

3:6 "No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him."

⁷Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 546.

⁸Ibid., 548.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰For an excellent study on the Phil 1:6 passage, see John F. Hart, "Does Philippians 1:6 Guarantee Progressive Sanctification?" *Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society* 9:16 (Spring '96): 37-58. The author convincingly shows that this verse does not pertain to progressive sanctification.

3:9-10 "No one who is born of God **practices** sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious; any one who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother."

Note: the word "practices" is not in the Greek text! (translators added it)

Πᾶς ὁ γεγεννημένος ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ ἁμαρτίαν οὐ ποιεῖ

Comment: John has already affirmed that Christians sin (1 Jn 1:8-10; 2:1). Nothing is really said about a "continued state of sin."

3. I Jn 2:19

This is not dealing with apostates in general, but rather with false teachers who forsake the apostles.

B. Several NT Verses Imply the Possibility of "Failure" in the Christian Life

1. 1 Jn 5:16-17

Believers can sin to such an extent that God will remove them by death.

2. 1 Cor 11:29-30

Physical weakness, sickness and death can be measures of divine discipline upon sinning Christians.

3. 1 Tim 1:18-20

It is possible for believers to "shipwreck" their faith.

4. 2 Tim 1:15; 4:10

C. Conclusion

The New Testament affirms that eternal salvation is a free gift for those who will trust in Christ alone for their salvation. Doing so, they are eternally secure, and can have the assurance of salvation because of the promises of God (rather than their own faithfulness). Though the NT teaches eternal security, it does not support the idea of the perseverance of the saints as it has been traditionally taught in Reformed theology. We should be prepared to admit that Christians can turn out to be failures and that there is no guarantee of sanctification or faithfulness to the outcome of their life.