

Reformed Perspective

Spring 2020

The Reformed Perspective is a publication devoted to explaining the Reformed doctrine, promoting the Reformed life of the Church and believer, and combating old and new errors that threaten to disrupt the Reformed faith and life. This publication is produced by the Evangelism Committee of Crete Protestant Reformed Church of Illinois. Visit us at www.prccrete.org for more information.

SUNDAY WORSHIP SERVICES: 9:30 A.M and 5:00 P.M.

1777 E Richton Road, Crete, IL 60417

ALL SERVICES ARE LIVE STREAMED ON OUR WEBSITE.



This article is the last in a series on the Calvinistic acronym TULIP. The acronym is a convenient device to remember the Reformed, Calvinistic understanding of salvation by grace alone. The letters each stand for a significant part of that confession. T stands for total depravity. The sinner who is saved by God's grace is conceived and born dead in trespasses and sins. Of particular importance is the sinner's will in bondage under the power of sin and darkness so that he is incapable of choosing God and Christ to his salvation. U stands for unconditional election. The sinner who is saved by God's grace has been appointed to salvation by God in the eternal decree of election without any regard to the sinner's worth or worthiness. L stands for limited atonement. The salvation of the sinner by grace was accomplished by Christ at his cross where he died for the elect and them only and made perfect satisfaction for their sins as their substitute. I stands for irresistible grace. The grace of God that saves the sinner cannot be resisted by the sinner but saves him according to God's eternal decree of election and by the mighty and effectual working of the Spirit of Christ in the sinner's heart. P stands for the preservation of the saints. The elect sinner, whom God saves by grace, is preserved without fail in salvation unto everlasting life. The fact that the one who is preserved is called a saint points out that God makes the sinner holy—a saint consecrated to the glory of God—and preserves the saint in a walk of holiness unto the day of Jesus Christ. The saint whom God preserves lives consciously and deliberately in holiness by virtue of God's grace received.

The truth of the preservation of saints is rooted in the decree of election that appointed the sinner to eternal salvation. The preservation of the saints is the end of the unbreakable golden chain of salvation that begins in election and culminates in the saints' glorification in heaven. This is the teaching of the Scriptures in Romans 8:28-30 "And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to *his* purpose. For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate *to be* conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified." The passage begins with the love of God for his people in eternity according to which God predestinated them to be conformed to the image of his Son Jesus Christ and the passage ends with the glorification of the saints in heaven. God's eternal will for the salvation of his saints cannot be frustrated, annulled, or changed. All whom he predestinated to glory will be glorified. To that end he calls them, he justifies them, and he preserves them, and finally presents them without spot or wrinkle among the assembly of the elect in life eternal. Election is the

source and the guarantee of the saint's preservation. God's will is unchangeable. God's will is irresistible. God's will works all things for the eternal good of the saint.

Teaching the preservation of saints and rooting the preservation and certain glorification of the saints in the will of God, the Reformed and Calvinistic faith differs radically from the Arminian false gospel. Jacob Arminius was a minister in the Dutch Reformed churches in the Netherlands in the late 16th and early 17th century. He died in 1509. Followers of his theology received the name Arminians. Arminianism takes its starting point in the freewill of man. Man in the fall did not lose his freewill, but in his fallen state is still able to desire and choose the good, especially to desire and choose the good of salvation in Christ. God on his part offers salvation in Christ in the preaching to all who hear according to a general love for all humans and a general desire for the salvation of all human beings. This offer can be accepted or rejected by the power of man's freewill. The salvation of the sinner according to Arminianism, then, is rooted in man's will.

It is part and parcel of Arminianism that since man can receive Christ by an act of his own will, man can also turn away from Christ and perish in hell by an act of his own will. It is possible, indeed, frequently happens, that a man who was once a partaker of Christ and his salvation by an act of his own will, then by an act of his own will turns away from Christ and perishes forever. The Canons of Dordt state the Arminians' bold rejection of the preservation of saints in Head 5, rejection of errors 3, "The synod rejects the errors of those who teach that the true believers and regenerate not only can fall from justifying faith and likewise from grace and salvation wholly and to the end, but indeed often do fall from this and are lost forever." There is no grace, no comfort, and no power of God in this doctrine. It is a doctrine of man and of fear.

When the Arminian talked about perseverance of saints, they admitted that the believer perseveres in Christ only by grace, but the grace of God was made effectual according to the will of man. So the Arminians taught according to the Canons of Dordt Head 5, rejection of errors 2, "That God does indeed provide the believer with sufficient power to persevere, and is ever ready to preserve these in him, if he will do his duty; but that though all things which are necessary to persevere in faith and which God will use to preserve faith are made use of, it even then ever depends on the pleasure of the will whether it will persevere or not." According to Arminianism the will of man is sovereign in salvation and perseverance, and the will of man can frustrate the willingness of God to preserve the saint.

Inasmuch as Arminians talk about the perseverance of saints they taught that perseverance is the condition of the new covenant fulfilled by the freewill of man. The Arminian could not speak about the preservation of the saints, but only could speak about the perseverance of saints, and then only as a condition for final salvation that man fulfilled by his free will, the grace of God assisting. The Canons state the Arminian view in Head 5, rejection of errors 1, "The synod rejects the errors of those who teach that the perseverance of the true believers is not a fruit of election, or a gift of God gained by the death of Jesus Christ, but a condition of the new covenant..." Not a fruit of election or the gift of grace, but a condition, is the Arminian doctrine of perseverance of saints.

Such necessarily must be the doctrine of perseverance of saints with every kind of conditionality in the covenant. If the covenant is conditional, then God's promise of the covenant, which is salvation, is bestowed on all the baptized children of the covenant head for head. According to the teachers of the conditional covenant, this promise depends for its realization on the child's act of believing as a condition of that promise. Whether that child will be in heaven depends on the child's act of persevering in that covenant faithfully to the end. There is always a nod given to divine grace. However, this grace is necessarily ineffectual, since there are those to whom the promise is given, in whom that promise will not finally issue in their everlasting salvation, but who will fall away to perdition. Such thinking is Arminianism applied to the doctrine of the covenant. The teachers of a conditional covenant, as the Arminians, cannot logically speak of the preservation of saints in the covenant, because there are covenant members in this life who will not be part of God's eternal covenant in heaven. For them, many covenant members fall away.

Rather, the doctrine of the preservation of saints must with special emphasis be applied to God's covenant of grace. The covenant of grace is the gracious relationship of fellowship and friendship that God establishes with his elect people in Christ, the head of the covenant. Speaking especially of God's covenant in the Old Testament and so of Israel's obtaining the promise of the covenant both in its Old Testament shadowy form and in the New Testament reality in Christ, the Apostle says, "But the election obtained it, and the rest were blinded." There were two kinds of Israelites in the Old Testament: those that were Israel according to the election of grace and those who were only of Israel outwardly according to the flesh. There were Israelites who according to the election of grace were members of God's covenant. There were Israelites who according to God's sovereign reprobation were merely of the outward sphere of the covenant, and no true members of the covenant at all. When those outward and carnal Israelites fell away in unbelief, apostatized from God, and perished, that was no failure of God's grace and his covenant promise. Rather, these were blinded according to God's sovereign purpose for their condemnation. For the rest, the remnant according to the election of grace, the election obtained the promise for them and preserved them in it. The covenant of God is a covenant of election in which all the elect are members and in which election is the source of their whole covenant salvation. In that salvation God preserves them to the end. The promise of God in the covenant is for the elect and them only. The promise of God does not depend on man at all, but is unconditionally fulfilled by God's grace, and infallibly issues in the everlasting salvation of all to whom God gives the promise.

Right along with the Arminians' denial of the preservation of saints, the Arminians denied that there was any possibility of the saints being certain and assured of their eternal salvation. It stands in the nature of the case that if the entrance of the saint into heaven is conditioned on the saint's act of perseverance unto the end of his life, then there is always the possibility—even on his death bed—that he would fail to meet the condition of salvation. With such a doctrine there can be no assurance. The Arminians spared no words to express their contempt of the Reformed doctrine of assurance unto eternal salvation. The Canons of Dordt Head 5, rejection of errors 6 says, "The synod rejects the errors of those who teach that the doctrine of the certainty of perseverance and of salvation, from its own character and nature, is the cause of indolence and is injurious to godliness, good morals, prayers, and other holy exercises, but that on the contrary it is praiseworthy to doubt." The practical reality of the Arminian doctrine of perseverance of saints was that assurance of salvation by saints is a bad thing. Assurance will makes saints careless and profane. Along with that thinking went the thinking that fear and doubt are the real engines of the Christian life: fear that one might fall away, fear that one has not done enough, doubt about one's eternal state are what will really makes saints work hard at the Christian life and pray more. This belief is wholly contrary to the gospel which preaches to God's people, "Fear not!"

Over against this false doctrine the Reformed faith teaches the preservation of the saints. This preservation of the saints is a gift of grace given to the elect by virtue of the death, resurrection, and intercession of Christ. Preservation belongs to the whole catalogue of the gifts of salvation earned by the death of Christ. He died on the cross in order that his people not only receive the gift of salvation, but that they are preserved in that salvation unto everlasting life. Further, he was raised from the dead and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of God. There He makes continual intercession for his people that God bestow on them salvation and preserve them in that salvation. This is the teaching of Scripture in Romans 8:34, 35 "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" The questions are rhetorical. There is no one who can condemn the elect because it is Christ who died and took away their sin and guilt and thus took away any ground for their condemnation. It is Christ who died and by his perfect obedience and all his holy works and through all his suffering earned for them perfect righteousness that is freely imputed to his people by faith alone as the unassailable ground of their acquittal and salvation before God's tribunal. It is Christ who died and earned for his people his eternal Spirit by whom he indwells them and assures them of his

love. It is Christ who makes continual intercession for his people before the face of his Father in heaven so that no one can pluck them out of his hand and nothing can separate his people from his love.

Further, based on and following from the truth of the preservation of saints, the Reformed faith speaks of the perseverance of saints. Preservation of the saints emphasizes that it is God's work and gift of grace. Perseverance of the saints emphasizes that God preserves his saints as rational and moral creatures who love God, hate sin, and walk in holiness as a result of his preservation of them. God delivers his people from the dominion and slavery of sin and makes them saints by a real and internal holiness that manifests itself in their holy walk of life in obedience to God. Further, though delivered from the dominion of sin, so that sin does not reign in their heart, but Christ by his Spirit, nevertheless, the saints are not altogether delivered from the body of sin and death. From that springs daily sins and pollution adheres to the best works of saints. By these things God exercises his people unto holiness and teaches his people to fight the good fight of faith. Always their perseverance is the fruit of God's preservation. So the Canons of Dordt say in Head 5, Article 3, "But God is faithful, who, having conferred grace, mercifully confirms and powerfully preserves them therein, even to the end."

Recognizing that scripture teaches that saints often fallen into sin, the Reformed faith gives its careful explanation of these falls into sin. Believers are not so influenced by the grace of God as in some instances to deviate from the guidance of divine grace and to be seduced by and comply with the lusts of the flesh. The biblical examples are the lamentable falls of David and Peter. Yet in these falls saints cannot overcome the grace of God who according to his unchangeable purpose of election does not wholly take his Spirit away from them and does not allow them to proceed so far that they lose the grace of adoption and forfeit their state of justification. Rather, God mercifully preserves in them the incorruptible seed of regeneration and certainly renews them to repentance. The purpose of God in these falls is gracious. He purposes that they henceforward more diligently work out their salvation with fear and trembling and he renders them more careful to continue in the ways of the Lord.

The Reformed faith insists that all saints are assured of God's love for them in Christ and of the certainty of their final salvation. The Canons state this in Head 5, Article 9, "Of this preservation of the elect to salvation, and of their perseverance in the faith, true believers for themselves may and do obtain assurance according to the measure of their faith, whereby they arrive at the certain persuasion that they ever will continue true and living members of the church, and that they experience forgiveness of sins, and will at last inherit eternal life."

Rather than making the saints indolent and ungodly, the doctrine of the preservation of the saints, especially the assurance that the saints themselves have of their preservation, is the real engine of the Christian life of holiness to God. So the Canons teach in Head 5, Article 12, "This certainty of perseverance...is the real source of humility, filial reverence, true piety, patience in every tribulation, fervent prayers, constancy in suffering and in confessing the truth, and of solid rejoicing in God." When the saints consider this doctrine and live out of it the truth of the preservation of the saints serves as an incentive to the Christian life as the Canons say in Head 5, Article 12, "The consideration of this benefit should serve as an incentive to the serious and constant practice of gratitude and good works, as appears from the testimonies of Scripture and the example of saints."