

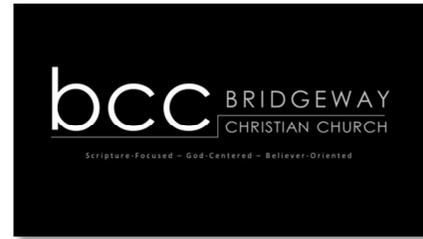
*Pastor's Papers* | Ronald H. Gann  
Theology/Doctrine

### ***Perseverance Of The Saints: Eternal Security***

Understanding The Perseverance Of The Saints

(Extracted From *The Scandal Of Sovereignty*; Ronald H. Gann [Aventine Press, 2012])

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Contemporary Christianity is not immune to folklore. It is packed full with a number of misconceptions widely embraced as factual when, in actuality, they are blatantly false. As a veteran in ministry, I have found this to be especially true even among the most seasoned saints. Like salacious gossip or a nasty rumor, these bloopers have a tendency to run amok within the Body of Christ and to take on a life of their own. We've heard them repeated so often by reputable Christians that we remain convinced they are true.

For instance, how often have we heard well-meaning Christians refer to the Millennial Kingdom of Christ as a time when “the lion will lie down with the Lamb”? For most of us, such poetical imagery seems scriptural. However, as beautiful a picture as these words convey, the reader might be surprised to learn that nowhere in the Bible are they found—the citation doesn't exist. At the very most, it's a combination of thoughts derived from only a couple of verses (Isa. 11:6 cf. 65:25).

Likewise, if we were to ask children in Sunday school or the nominal layperson in the pew how many animals of each kind Noah took into the ark prior to the Great Flood, the popular consensus would likely be “Two!” Such an answer, however, while showing a familiarity with Scripture, reveals a certain degree of ignorance. Although it is true that God instructed Noah “to bring into the ark two of all living creatures” (Gen. 6:19), it is also true that God supplemented these instructions later by telling Noah, “Take with you *seven* of every kind of clean animal, a male and its mate” (Gen. 7:2, emphasis added). Overlooked by many readers is the fact that these additional clean animals were brought aboard the ark for sustenance and sacrifice (Gen. 8:20).

Nearly all civilized people are familiar with the saying, “Cleanliness is next to godliness.” This statement implies that one of the most important things in life is hygiene or purity. Popularized in a sermon by John Wesley in 1791, many people assume that it is a scriptural proverb—but it is not so. As Warren Wiersbe points out, this expression is an archaic axiom found in Babylonian and Hebrew religious tracts and repeated in the writings of Sir Francis Bacon in 1605. But it is conspicuously missing from the Bible, and for good reason. Outward cleanliness has no connection whatsoever with godliness. Jesus was crystal-clear that men are defiled or deemed godly by what is in their hearts, not by what they eat or don't eat or by how often they wash their hands (cf. Matt. 7:18-23).

Lastly, and perhaps most notably, the maxim “God helps those who help themselves” is presumably the most oft-quoted phrase thought to be imbedded in Scripture. Yet this teaching couldn't be further from the truth. Nowhere do we find in

the Holy Writings such an anti-biblical sentiment. This proverb, according to Max Lucado, likely originated with Algernon Sydney in 1698 in an article titled *Discourses Concerning Government* but it most certainly did not originate with the Holy Spirit. Despite its conventional wisdom, it is an adage that stands in direct opposition to the teaching of Scripture. God *does* in fact help the helpless (Isa. 25:4; Rom 5:6)!

These misconceptions lead us to a more serious matter currently at large within the Church—namely, the Perseverance of the Saints. This is the controversial doctrine in Reformed Theology which teaches that those who are truly saved will persevere to the end and cannot lose their salvation. Heretofore known as the *Eternal Security Debate*, error and confusion over this doctrine abound in mass. Many liturgical Catholics, for example, believe that *mortal sins*, such as murder or blasphemy, if left unpardoned, can forfeit a Christian's eternal residence in heaven. A significant number of Protestant fundamentalists share this same conviction as well, although they take great care to avoid Catholic terminology. Whatever its religious backbone and no matter its wide acceptance among the faithful, to suggest that a genuine believer can be eternally condemned after having been eternally redeemed is to succumb to an *institutional* teaching, not a biblical one.

The disconnect that exists among Christians over Eternal Security is relatively simple to diagnose. Some believe that if one holds to the “once saved, always saved” mantra, as Calvinists do, then one is instinctively promoting a license to sin with impunity. On the other hand, others believe that if one rejects Eternal Security, as Arminians do, then one must be required to keep their salvation by works of obedience. While honest Christians differ on the matter, both sides tend to misrepresent the other in an effort to save face. Inevitably a war of words ensues and fractures erupt within the family of faith.

A conversation about Eternity Security can be surprisingly convoluted. It has been my experience, in fact, that if five random Arminians were asked to explain their views we would, in all likelihood, get five conflicting responses. And in some respects, the same is true with Calvinists. Inasmuch as many Arminians are woefully inconsistent in their views on Eternal Security, some Reformed writers, including a crop of medieval Reformers, have been strangely circumspect in theirs. It seems that there is enough blame to go around for muddying the doctrine. That being said, rather than invest considerable time and space citing a plethora of Arminians who object to Eternal Security, and their reasons for why, or listing a smorgasbord of Calvinists who endorse it, and their reasons for why, I believe we are much better served if we address the doctrine straightforwardly.

The Reformed tradition has historically maintained that the doctrine of Perseverance is the natural consequence or outworking of predestination in which God has unconditionally chosen certain people for salvation and exonerated them of their guilt through the atonement of Christ. These elect individuals are irresistibly drawn to Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit, who then regenerates their hearts (monergistically) and convinces them of their need for salvation. It therefore stands to reason: Since God has made satisfaction for the sins of the Elect and has drawn them (or will eventually draw them) to His Son through the Spirit; *they can no longer be eternally condemned*. They must necessarily persevere as Christians unto eternal life through the help of the Holy Spirit “in order that God's purpose in election might stand”

(Rom. 9:11). To suggest otherwise, as Arminians teach, is to imply that God's foreordained decree, or "purpose in election," can be toppled.

As with Limited Atonement, the Perseverance of the Saints is an operation within the Godhead. All those who are spiritually united to Christ through the inward baptism of the Holy Spirit are eternally kept by the Father. They have been predestined unto eternal glory and are therefore assured of heaven. Christ *redeemed* His people on the cross; the Holy Spirit *renewed* them in their lifetime; and the Father *retains* them in eternity. It is wholly Trinitarian. The Westminster Confession of Faith elucidates the doctrine of Perseverance as follows:

They, whom God hath accepted in His Beloved, effectually called, and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the state of grace, but shall certainly persevere therein to the end, and be eternally saved.

This perseverance of the saints depends not upon their own free will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ, the abiding of the Spirit, and of the seed of God within them, and the nature of the covenant of grace: from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.<sup>1</sup>

Dr. Charles Hodge (1797-1878), a Presbyterian theologian and leading exponent of historical Calvinism in America during the nineteenth century, highlighted Eternal Security in his exposition on Romans 8:1. "The proposition to be established is, that there is *'no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus,'*" he wrote. "That is, [true believers] can never perish; they can never be separated from Christ as to come into condemnation."<sup>2</sup> Unpacking Romans 8 further, Hodge went on to explain:

Perseverance (of the saints), [the apostle Paul] teaches us, is due to the purpose of God, to the work of Christ, to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and to the primal source of all, the infinite, mysterious, and immutable love of God. We do not keep ourselves; we are kept by the power of God, through faith unto salvation.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Anthony Hoekema (1913-1988), former Professor of Systematic Theology at Calvin Theological Seminary, agreed with Hodge when he wrote "those who have true faith can lose that faith neither totally nor finally."<sup>4</sup> Famed hymn-writer August Toplady (1740-1778), in his provocatively titled essay *Arminianism: The Golden Idol of Freewill*, wrote: "Whom are we to thank for perseverance ... to the end? ... A child of God can soon answer this question. And he will answer it thus: 'Having obtained help of God, I continue to this day' ... Not by my own might and power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts."<sup>5</sup>

Biblical warrant for the Perseverance of the Saints is not in short supply. Going beyond the sound bites of the aforementioned Calvinists, the Bible itself takes a high view of Eternal Security. That a redeemed person cannot lose his salvation but will

persevere to the end in accord with the promises of God is the testimony of prophet and apostle alike.

Regarding true believers, God promised through the prophet Jeremiah: “I will inspire them to fear me, *so that they will never turn away from me*” (Jer. 32:40, emphasis added). The apostle Paul taught that the “whole spirit, soul and body” of a true believer will “*be kept blameless ... The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it*” (1 Thess. 5:23-24, emphasis added). He said elsewhere that “[God] will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 1:8). The writer of Hebrews was careful to note that God “has made perfect *forever* those who are being made holy ... *that cannot be shaken*” (Heb. 10:14; 12:28, emphasis added). Peter reminded his readers that true believers are “shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation” (1 Pet. 1:5). And Jude, the Lord’s half-brother, was rather direct when he said that “those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father” are unequivocally “kept by Jesus Christ ... who is able to keep you from falling” (Jude 1:1, 24).

The truth behind the Perseverance of the Saints is inescapable. Jeremiah tells us that we will “never turn away;” Paul insists that we are “kept” eternally secure “until the end;” Hebrews teaches that we are “forever” saved at conversion—a certainty that “cannot be shaken.” Peter testifies that we are “shielded by God’s power” until the day we die. And Jude is clear-cut: Christ will “keep [us] from falling.” All of these statements point directly to the fact that, having been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, true believers “were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance ... for the day of redemption” (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30). In other words, our eternal security in Christ has been signed, sealed, and delivered.

The prophets and apostles are not without good reason in their unwavering support for Eternal Security. Jesus himself was its chief advocate. The Lord’s *Bread of Life Discourse* in John 6, his *Good Shepherd* statement in John 10, and his *High Priestly Prayer* in John 17 reveal his heart concerning the preservation of his saints.

Offending everyone within earshot in his *Bread of Life Discourse*, Jesus assured his critics, “And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day” (John 6:39). Speaking of his sheep in his *Good Shepherd* statement, the Lord said, “no one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father’s hand” (John 10:28-29). And in his *High Priestly Prayer*, Christ prayed for the eternal preservation of his followers: “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name ... I protected them and kept them safe by that name you gave me. None has been lost ... My prayer is ... that you protect them from the evil one” (John 17:11-12, 15).

In these passages we learn that Christ will lose none of those who have been chosen, elected, and predestined and given to him as a love-gift from the Father. He will positively resurrect each and every one of them, without exception or deficit, “at the last day.” Moreover, no believer can be plucked from the protective clutch of God’s embrace, no matter the extent of his rebellion or the severity of his waywardness, for true converts are preserved and kept safe from “the evil one” by the “power of [God’s] name.”

Perhaps the most striking blow to those who reject Eternal Security comes from the pen of the apostle Paul. To the Romans the apostle wrote in crisp terms:

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ...

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:35-39).

The “love of Christ” to which Paul refers in Romans 8:35-39 represents salvation. Paul rhetorically asked the Christians in Rome if any circumstance in life is powerful enough to cause a true believer to turn against Christ in a way that would cause Christ to turn his back on the believer. The clear implication is that there is no such circumstance because there is no such possibility! At issue in Paul’s question, therefore, are the power and permanence of the love of Christ for those he purchased with his own blood (Acts 20:28) and brought into the family of faith. All true believers, Paul essentially tells us, are to have confidence as we face the Day of Judgment because we are assured that the divine and indestructible love of Christ binds us eternally to him.

It is unmistakable in Scripture that God’s people, at the moment of their conversion to Christ, are awarded *eternal life* (not a temporary state of eternal life). They are *kept* by God’s power through faith and *nothing can separate them* from His love. They have been *sealed* with the Holy Spirit who is the *guarantee*, or earnest payment, for their salvation, and they are thus assured an *eternal inheritance*. It is for these very reasons that Calvinists champion Eternal Security and the Perseverance of the Saints.

But Calvinists must stand tall and give thoughtful answers to honest questions posed by their critics. If the Elect are eternally secure with no possibility of ever losing their salvation, then how do we explain the heap of biblical passages that speak to so-called believers backsliding irreparably (e.g. Heb. 6:4-6)? How are we to handle the dozens of passages that caution believers to remain in Christ until the end lest we fall away and are amputated from “the tree of life” for all eternity (Rev. 22:14)?

The answers to these questions, as Calvinists see it, boil down to one’s definition of a Christian. Certainly there are countless people who have professed saving faith in Christ, lived morally upstanding lives before God and man, and even displayed a tremendous zeal for advancing Christ’s kingdom only to later repudiate their faith altogether and to abandon Christianity once and for all. One could argue, in fact, that such a scenario is an all-too-common occurrence in the Body of Christ. If this is the case, then, doesn’t it stand to reason that such tragedy debunks the credibility of Eternal Security and the Perseverance of the Saints? Is not the very existence of an apostate *prima facie* evidence that a redeemed sinner can lose his salvation?

On this point Arminians and Calvinists diverge radically in their answers. Whereas Arminians are convinced that a genuinely born-again Christian can fall from grace irreparably, the Calvinist maintains that those who do, *and do so lastingly*, were never truly saved in the first place—that is, regeneration was never truly experienced by them, righteousness was never actually imputed to their account, and eternal life never granted. Like Judas Iscariot (John 12:6), Demas (2 Tim. 4:10), and Diotrefes (3 John

1:9), they were only a shell of a believer, the inside of which was hallowed and void of the Spirit. Salvation, in other words, was never theirs to lose. It is these shell-like imposters who John has in mind when he wrote: “They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us” (1 John 2:19).

Our Lord’s beloved disciple warns us that some *professing* believers will openly defect from the faith. They are rank apostates. Yet John explains that the very fact that such apostates desert the company of believers, having renounced their faith and renewed their vows to the world, manifests their true spiritual state. To these imposters, apostates, and shell-like believers our Lord will one day say, “I never knew you” (Matt. 7:23). Again, because “none of them belonged to us,” they had no salvation to lose.

This is not to say that true Christians, who are sealed by the Holy Spirit and have God’s Word abiding in them, are immune to momentary lapses into apostasy. On the contrary, they can, and often do, fall into heinous sin whereby they deny the Lord with their “prodigal living” (Luke 15:13, NKJV). But the point is that, unlike legitimate apostates, genuine believers will not flounder in a state of sin permanently. As with David and Peter, each of whom fell dreadfully and drastically, prodigal sons and daughters inevitably find their way home to their Father (cf. Luke 15:11ff).

Insofar as I see it, the crux of the issue between those who oppose Eternal Security and those who champion it comes down to what one truly believes about soteriology—the doctrine of salvation. In a very real sense, to deny the doctrine of Perseverance is to come dangerously close to denying the doctrine of justification by faith. And to deny justification by faith is to deny the doctrine of salvation. And to deny the doctrine of salvation is to excommunicate oneself from the brotherhood of evangelicalism.

Protestants of all stripes confess that salvation is by grace *alone* through faith *alone* in Jesus Christ *alone*. On this point the New Testament could not be more emphatic. Ephesians 2:8-9, the seminal passage on the topic, reads as follows: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” Likewise, Romans 10:9-10 tells us “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved.”

The truth that salvation is attained *through* faith and *by* faith and *only* faith is amplified elsewhere in Scripture, such as Romans 4:5: “However, to the man who does not work [for salvation] but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.” Again, in Romans 3:22 and Romans 5:1 we read: “This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe ... Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Fallen man does not contribute one iota to his salvation. He is saved by faith alone. Even the repentance he offers and the faith he exercises are *gifts* granted to him from above. And while Arminians and Calvinists may disagree on this latter point, they are nevertheless in lockstep on the former, at least on paper. Man cannot save himself nor is he capable of producing the necessary good that God demands of him. When

judged by the holy standards of God, even “our righteous acts are like filthy rags,” as Isaiah 64:6 reminds us. In short, we do not have what it takes to save ourselves.

I take the time to remind the reader of the basis for salvation because it is crucial to the debate before us. Arminianism teaches that the assurance of final salvation is only for those who abide and continually trust in Jesus Christ. Or as one Arminian pastor in El Paso, Texas put it: “Although God definitely promises to do his part to keep us saved to the end, this does not mean that we do not have a part to play.”<sup>6</sup> In other words, those who do not “play their part” and fail to bear fruit—because they cease to abide in Christ—the Father inevitably “cuts off” from being *in Christ* (John 15:2). Thus, according to Arminianism, one’s perseverance (and final salvation) is conditioned upon man’s continued obedience to Christ. But the reader should be cautioned: Whenever the word “obedience” is used *in relationship to salvation* it is often a code-word for *works-based* salvation.

It is at this juncture that we see the danger that Arminianism poses. By denying the doctrine of Eternal Security, among other things, Arminianism confuses Law and Gospel. This is no small error. Theodore Beza (1519-1605), Calvin’s successor in Geneva, wrote, “Ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity.”<sup>7</sup> And this is precisely the error that Arminianism makes—it mingles Law with Grace.

Writing for *Modern Reformation Magazine*, Dr. Rod Rosenblatt, Professor of Theology at Concordia University, Irvine in Irvine, California defined the issue as follows:

When God gives orders and tells us what will happen if we fail to obey those orders perfectly, it is in the category of what the Reformers, following the biblical text, called “Law.” When God promises freely, providing for us because of Christ’s righteousness the status He demands of us, this is in the category of “Gospel.” It is good news from start to finish. The Bible includes both, and the Reformers were agreed that the Scriptures clearly taught ... that the Law (whether Old or New Testament commands) was not set aside for the believer. Nevertheless, they insisted that nothing in this category of “Law” could be a means of justification or acceptance before a holy God.<sup>8</sup>

So how does the denial of Eternal Security by Arminians pervert the gospel into Law-keeping? The answer is found in the form of a follow-up question that Calvinists have historically put to their Arminian brethren: *If mankind is saved by faith alone and can contribute nothing whatsoever to his salvation, as Calvinists teach and as Arminians say they believe, then why do Arminians imply that God requires faithful obedience to maintain it? Stated differently, If a believer cannot do good works to earn salvation, then why do Arminians suggest he must do the necessary good works to keep it? Conversely, how can he do bad works to lose it?*

To these crucial questions the Reformed church has been awaiting substantive answers, not conjecture, for the better part of five hundred years. And the clock continues to tick. Yet the standard responses from the Arminian camp, when not conspicuously silent on the matter, continue to be woefully unconvincing.

Sometimes life-long Christians—even Calvinists—question their final salvation. There are times when we seem completely separated from God’s favor; when we lament that we are sinners unworthy of His blessing; and when the fruit of the Spirit is sorely lacking in our lives. But God has vowed in His Word that, no matter how spectacular our shortcomings, we belong forever to Him. Nothing—not even ourselves—can separate us from His enduring love. Even in our worst spiritual winters when our temperature toward Him is most frigid, He whispers to our spirit and reminds us that He will never grow cold toward us. Thus, when the night is far spent and the day is at hand, we can take refuge in His everlasting guarantee “that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Php. 1:6).

—Ronald H. Gann

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<sup>1</sup> The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646); 17:1-2

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans: Vol. 3*; (The Banner of Truth Trust, 1975); p. 110

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 113

<sup>4</sup> Anthony A. Hoekema, *Saved by Grace*; (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994); p. 234

<sup>5</sup> As cited at [www.ondoctrine.com/2top0101.htm](http://www.ondoctrine.com/2top0101.htm)

<sup>6</sup> Tom Brown, *Tom Brown Ministries*, as cited at [www.tbm.org/losesalvation.htm](http://www.tbm.org/losesalvation.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. by James Clark; (Focus Press, 1992); p. 41

<sup>8</sup> Rod Rosenblatt, *Modern Reformation: Reclaiming the Doctrine of Justification* (May/June 2003)